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# Population & Policy

COMPACT

## MISSION NOT ACCOMPLISHED?

New Evidence on Parenthood in Europe

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### Key messages:

- European countries have redoubled their efforts to support families. However, divergent birth rate trends suggest that no “magic formula” has been found.
- A common characteristic among countries with stable or even increasing birth rates is a high degree of female labour force participation.
- More could be done to slow down the “Rush-hour of Life”, the period when starting a family overlaps with career development.
- Policies might include on-the-job training programmes following parental leave to facilitate the return to the labour market.

## LOW FERTILITY – THE FUTURE DESTINY OF EUROPE?

OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES, THE FERTILITY RATE IN EUROPE HAS DECLINED from 2.67 in 1970 to 1.69 in 2009, i.e. below the level where one generation is numerically replaced by the next (see Figure 1). Some countries even sunk to “lowest-low” levels of less than 1.3 children per woman. Since life expectancy increased at the same time as child-bearing decreased, the population in most European countries is rapidly ageing. Demographers have shown that even higher migration inflows and a new baby-boom will not substantially change this picture over the next decades. Moreover, it needs to be considered that the rate of undesired childlessness is increasing and demographic forecasts indicate that 15-25 percent of all women living in Europe today will not become mothers at all.

However, new studies show that there has been a slight upward trend in fertility in some of the countries that had declining levels of child-bearing (Goldstein et al., 2009; Myrskylä et al., 2009; Luci and Thévenon, 2011). According to this research, the relationship between economic development and fertility might actually change at different levels of development. Traditionally, fertility declines with increasing wealth, but once a country has reached a certain level of wealth the number of births begins to increase again. This analysis is complicated, though, by the economic recession in Europe after 2008/2009, which halted increases in birth rates across OECD countries.

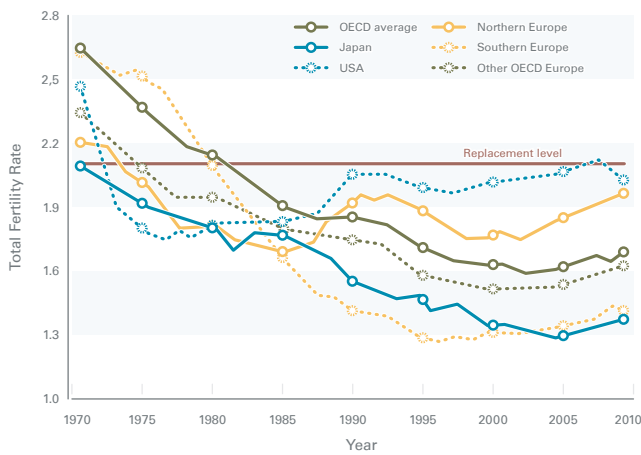


Figure 1. Total fertility rates; trends: 1970-2010  
Source: OECD Family Database (2010)

It would be premature, however, to assume that fertility rates mainly depend on economic prosperity. There is a “higher fertility” area of Europe where fertility rates have never fallen below 1.6,

including the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries, as well as Iceland and Ireland. Another group of European states comprises the “lower fertility” area, namely the German-speaking countries and Southern Europe, along with Central and Eastern Europe. The case of Germany is particularly striking: Despite sustaining one of Europe’s strongest economies with an elaborated system of public support for families, the share of children in the total population is still one of the lowest in Europe. The most recent numbers provided by the national statistical office indicate that the share of population under age 18 even declined from 18.8 percent in 2000 to 16.5 percent in 2010 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2011).

In response to low fertility, most European states redoubled their dedication to family policy efforts. The “magic formula”, however, has not been found – and perhaps never will be. Although policies might not influence the expectation of gaining a higher quality of life and happiness through parenthood, they can contribute to decreasing the associated opportunity costs. Policies matter because they shape the environment in which each individual’s wishes and hopes for a family can flourish or fade.

## HOW DO FAMILIES WORK?

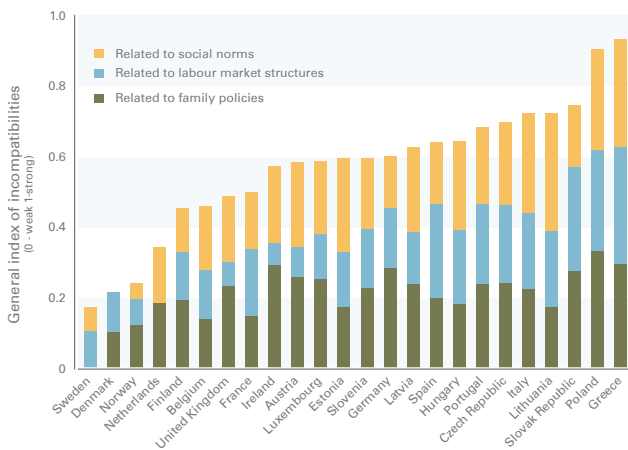
ALL OECD COUNTRIES with stable or even slightly increasing birth rates have one feature in common: A high degree of female labour force participation. This is a complete reversal of the relationship between childbearing and women’s participation in paid employment 30 years ago. Today the majority of women no longer wants nor accepts the either/or decision between having a career and children.



Figure 2. The association between employment and fertility rates  
Source: OECD Family database (2010)

Over the last decades, considerable progress has been made with policy innovations that ease the combination of both career and family – for mothers and fathers alike. Examples include financial support during parental leave, support for part-time employment and provision of a better infrastructure for childcare facilities and all-day child education. To better measure the difficulties surrounding childbearing, demographers have recently developed indices to quantify the intensity of the institutional and cultural incompatibilities between work and care. They were built on data that measured public support for working parents, barriers to labour market entry and opportunities for flexible working hours, as well as general social acceptance of mother's involvement in paid employment.

Figure 3 shows the overall ranking of European countries according to the incompatibility of work and care index. As might be expected, the Nordic countries perform best, whereas the strongest tension between employment and childcare occurs in Southern as well as in Central and Eastern European countries. However, a closer look at the impact of the various indices suggests that different countries have different areas in which intervention is needed.



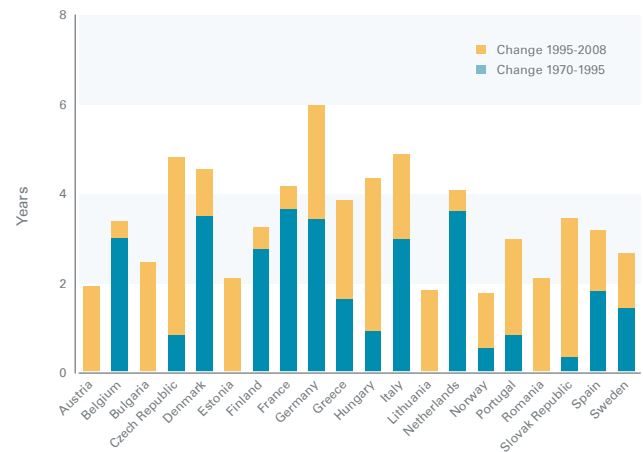
**Figure 3.** Incompatibilities between work and family across Europe  
Source: Matysiak (2011)

New family forms appear to have no straightforward effects on the fertility rate. In recent decades, attitudes towards family and partnerships have substantially changed. There has been a rise in single-person households, a decline in marriage rates, and new forms of family-building and cohabitation. Today in France, Norway and Sweden, more than half of all births are to unmarried parents. Interestingly, these are also the countries where fertility rates are comparatively high. However, evaluating these trends adequately and from a cross-country perspective requires adapted and more

detailed data. For example, existing statistics of union formation are not sufficiently accurate: Many mothers who are counted as “single” are in fact cohabiting, many cohabiting couples decide to get married once they are expecting a child, and many divorced women might have another child that they did not initially intend to have with a new partner (Sobotka, 2011).

## FAMILY – DELAYED, NOT DISCARDED

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH SUGGESTS that the so-called “postponement of childbearing” is one of the main factors driving low fertility. The mean age at first birth in most European countries (except the Scandinavian states) now lies between the ages of 25 and 30 – an increase of 3 to 5 years since 1970. Figure 4 depicts the overall postponement of first childbirth across Europe between 1970 and 2009.



**Figure 4.** The postponement of the first childbirth across Europe  
(For 2008, data refers to 2007 for Italy; 2006 for Belgium and France; 2005 for Denmark. Data for 1970 is not available for Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania and Romania)  
Source: OECD Family Database (2010)

The postponement of childbearing influences the number of children a couple intends to have, as the remaining reproductive time span decreases. Although progress in gynaecological and reproductive medicine allows for motherhood later in life than in previous generations, recent research shows that attitudes about the appropriate age for motherhood still lag behind medical progress. In a majority of European countries, the prevailing opinion is that women should stop having children at the latest when they reach

40 years of age, even though this generally precedes the biological limit (Billari et al., 2010).

One of the main reasons for postponement of childbearing is the so-called "Rush-hour of Life": The period of life when family-building takes place, when individuals are in their 30s and 40s, overlaps with the most crucial stage in their career development. In a common European and globalised economy, young and middle-aged couples are exposed to a more competitive labour market that demands more schedule flexibility, regional mobility and international work experience at an early point in one's career. Thus, the decision to have a child is often accompanied by the postponement of career opportunities, or vice versa. The existence of a "Rush-hour of Life" during reproductive periods of the life-course is not moderated by the fact that most people today enjoy a longer life expectancy, although this should allow for more time flexibility in career development, more opportunities for life-long learning and more career chances later in life.

An appropriate response to the career risks of parenthood has not yet been found, in particular for those who have to invest more resources into advanced education and early career development. Aside from part-time and telecommuting job arrangements, the return of mothers and fathers after parental leave could be better supported by employers, e.g. by offering special on-the-job-training opportunities, career development plans for couples with kids, learning arrangements to stay updated even during a childrearing period, etc. Even though some examples of these policies can be found in most European countries, they are the rare exceptions. The "Establishment Survey on Working Time and Work-Life Balance" shows that on average in 21 EU countries, only 22 percent of firms offer training programmes to reintegrate staff returning from parental leave. At the same time, 74 percent of German respondents that had taken parental leave in the past 10 years, named post-leave training as one of the most desired services sought from employers (Klenner, 2004).

There are states with stable fertility rates and indications of upward trends in birth rates in some countries; therefore, low fertility does not seem to be a destiny from which modern societies are unable to escape at the end of the day. Due to the efforts of family policies over the past decades, having children does not prohibit women from participating in the labour market in most European states. Parents, however, often face the risk of falling behind in their careers. This is evident amongst the well-educated who tend to postpone childbearing or to reduce the number of children they have. Thus, more efforts should be undertaken to further adapt the job market to the reality of modern life-courses.

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