

Fertility in the highly developed countries: continuing postponement and regional diversity in fertility trends and policy responses

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The shift from a large to a small family size in the richer countries around the world represents one of the most remarkable social transformations of the last century. Today most countries in Europe, East Asia and North America record period and cohort fertility rates that are well below two births per woman. However, there is a wide diversity in low fertility; some countries in Europe and East Asia have experienced extended periods of ultra-low fertility, with period total fertility rates falling below 1.3. Reproduction is being shifted to ever later ages and this “postponement transition” contributes to period fertility declines to extreme low levels.

How are fertility rates evolving across the highly developed countries in Europe, East Asia, North America, Australia and New Zealand? What are the key drivers of the shift to low fertility rates? Have fertility preferences changed as dramatically as the actual fertility rates? What distinguishes countries with low fertility from those with very low fertility? Are there reasons to be seriously worried about the likely long-term consequences of very low fertility? These are the key questions addressed in this talk.

I discuss a remarkable emergence and persistence of a two-child family norm across countries and social groups. Desired family size in many low fertility countries is considerably higher than the actual family size, indicating that very low fertility is not explained by very low reproductive preferences. At the same time, persistent low fertility suggests highly effective birth control, which is also manifested through very low rates of teenage pregnancies and fertility rates in most countries.

The talk pays special attention to broader regional differences in fertility patterns and parity composition, which varies also in the groups of countries with very low fertility. I discuss the dynamics of period fertility in the course of the “postponement transition” when period and cohort fertility rates often diverge and when period fertility rates often show strong fluctuations. These fluctuations are often driven by changes in the timing of births more than by the underlying shifts in family size and contribute to unexpected changes and reversals in period fertility. The talk also reviews social status differentials in fertility and the influence of migrants on fertility. I highlight the diversity of changes in education gradients in fertility, ranging from a convergence among women in the Nordic countries up to widening differentials in some countries in Eastern and southeastern Europe. Countries with lower social inequalities and with family policies that allow easier combination of career and parenthood tend to have lower education gradient in fertility and higher fertility among the highly educated women.

To gain understanding of fertility diversity between regions, I discuss some of the key factors identified as the drivers of low and delayed fertility: economic uncertainty and the precarious labour market position of young adults, gender inequalities, family change and family instability, and changes in values and preferences concerning children and family life. I review some of the ongoing debates on low fertility, especially on the effects of gender equality and economic development on fertility.

Finally, I summarise key findings and discuss the likely future fertility trends. Very low fertility (at or below 1.5 children per woman) is not an inevitable consequence of high economic and social development and women's economic emancipation. Perhaps counterintuitively, most countries that combine economic prosperity, high levels of gender equality and women's employment, a diversity of family choices, as well as widespread access to modern contraception and abortion, retain moderately low fertility. Moreover, very low fertility is not irreversible: women and men in low-fertility countries most often aspire to have two children and their reproductive desires can be supported by a variety of policies promoting family-friendly conditions and support for the combination of work and family life, especially for women.

I argue that fertility trends among the highly educated men and women and their ability to realise their reproductive plans are key for the future of fertility in the highly developed countries. Overall, the governments and policy-makers should move away from a simplistic focus on achieving specific fertility levels or population targets and instead design policies that are effective in accommodating to the ongoing demographic change, but also support well-being, health, human capital, prosperity and happiness in their societies. Long-term consequences of low fertility for population trends cannot be studied in isolation from migration, which has increased in importance. Policies should also take into account past migration and address the likely future migration trends. I also discuss the likely impact of the postponement transition in the emerging post-transitional countries: there, the shift towards delayed reproduction will be supported by long-term expansion of higher education and is likely to push the period fertility rates in these countries well below the corresponding cohort indicators of family size for several decades.

Selected papers, presentations and materials that will be covered

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Zeman, Kryštof, Éva Beaujouan, Zuzanna Brzozowska, and Tomáš Sobotka. 2018. "Cohort fertility decline in low fertility countries: Decomposition using parity progression ratios", *Demographic Research* 38(25): 651-690.