



Fertility and family issues in an enlarged Europe

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This summary is available in electronic format only

This document summarises the findings of a research report from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions on the subject of fertility and family issues. It forms part of a series of reports on quality of life in an enlarging Europe, drawing on the findings of the European Commission's Eurobarometer surveys carried out in the EU and the 13 acceding and candidate countries in Spring 2002, as well as standard EU 15 Eurobarometer studies. Examining quality of life in 28 European countries, the report provides, for the first time, an analysis of the views and experiences of the citizens of the new Europe on aspects relating to fertility levels and family size, as well as gender roles within the home and responsibility for care and household tasks.

The fertility dilemma

According to some commentators, a crisis has arisen at the foundations of European society, namely the failure of the population to reproduce itself. Fertility rates in the EU have been below replacement level for three decades. Over the next four to five years, for the first time in modern European history, the number of births will fall below the number of deaths and a natural decrease in the population will set in.

The accession of 10 new states to the EU in 2004 will do nothing to brighten this picture since their reproductive performance is even weaker than that of the existing Member States. Furthermore, European fertility compares poorly with that of its main competitor on the world stage, the United States, where the fertility rate is now 40% higher than in the EU and where population growth is projected to continue steadily for decades to come.

The EU has no competence either in population policy or family policy. It has not, therefore, adopted a formal policy position on current fertility patterns in the Union. Yet these patterns are an important emergent issue in policy debates, and as such they present the EU with a dilemma. On the one hand the fall in birth rates has caused many to worry that the EU's long-term position, both as an economic and political force in the world and as a prosperous and pleasant place to live, may be in danger.

On the other hand the right and ability of people to control their own fertility is widely supported in Europe. It is viewed as a private matter in which governments have little right to intervene. At the macro level, therefore, low fertility would seem to be, at least in the long run, bad for Europe. But at the micro level it is what individuals choose and has to be respected on that account. Both perspectives have apparent validity but they seem to demand opposite policy responses.

The main purpose of the report was to explore this dilemma, using the data on fertility provided by the survey sources at its disposal. It focused especially on a possible means of resolving the policy dilemma, interpreting low fertility not as a freely chosen option but as a consequence of increasing economic constraint. This arises particularly from the mounting cost of bringing up children and, consequently, the growing inability of families to afford the number they would like to have.

The attraction of this interpretation is that it presents the macro and micro perspectives on very low fertility as being less in conflict with each other than they first appear. Low fertility can be regarded as unwanted at the individual level as well as undesirable at the level of society. It therefore offers some hope that policy interventions aimed at easing economic constraints on childbearing would be both popular with individuals and effective in raising the birth rate.

The available data included information on how many children respondents had and on how many they considered ideal. Thus they provided a basis for examining the interaction between what people achieved and what they aspired to. The data also contained measures of satisfaction with life and satisfaction with family life. These measures enabled an assessment of whether a gap between ideal and actual family size tended to reduce people's levels of satisfaction. It

therefore made it possible to test the idea that such a gap might be an undesired feature of people's lives that policy might aim to redress.

The analysis therefore set out to do three things:

1. examine fertility outcomes in the 28 countries in the data set;
2. analyse the degree to which people's fertility outcomes matched with or deviated from their fertility ideals;
3. assess whether mismatches between ideals and reality had discernible consequences for people's satisfaction with life.

Current fertility levels in Europe

The general outlines of Europe's decline in fertility are well known and are confirmed by the present data. However, although below-replacement fertility is common to all countries in the EU 28 bar Turkey, the composition of fertility varies greatly across countries and shows a wide diversity in underlying patterns. Three behavioural elements that have a strong bearing on fertility outcomes – childlessness, average age at birth of first child, and propensity to remain single – differ widely in how they influence country-level mean fertility.

Looking across countries at the present time, those countries with the lowest fertility rates were not necessarily those with a high level of childlessness. Similarly, very low fertility at country level was only weakly linked with the propensity among women to delay the start of childbearing and with the propensity for women to remain single throughout their childbearing years.

However, one factor is strongly and consistently related to fertility outcomes at the country level, and this is the degree to which women go beyond the second child and have a third or fourth child. The most widespread component in the fall in fertility in Europe, therefore, is the decline of large families, while an increasing reluctance to have any children at all plays a role in some countries but not in others.

From the fertility behaviour of younger women as revealed by the present cross-sectional data it is difficult to say whether their eventual completed family size will be higher or lower than that of older women. Their responses to an item on fertility intentions would suggest that, if those intentions were followed through in actual behaviour, average family sizes in Europe would show a marked upward movement over the coming years. However, stated intentions cannot be taken as a reliable guide to future behaviour, so the likelihood of such an outcome is uncertain.

Fertility aspirations

Ideal family sizes have declined across the generations. In a small number of countries the mean ideal family size among young adults has fallen below two. This is partly because of an increase in the proportion of those who say that their ideal is to have no children (the incidence of 18-34 year olds who give this response is highest in Germany – at 17%). In most countries the mean ideal family size is still comfortably above two, even among young people; but it is, nevertheless, considerably smaller among younger people than among older people.

Falling family size ideals may be a consequence of other forces (such as changes in the balance between the costs and benefits of having children) or they may reflect cultural changes. But whatever their ultimate cause, there is no doubt that they have been part of the proximate causal background to the decline in fertility in Europe in recent decades.

At the same time, people's ideal family size on average is higher than that which they attain. Among the 28 countries examined here, Turkey presents the only exception to this rule, since in Turkey women's family size outcomes are considerably higher than their ideals. Some information was available from the survey data on the reasons people identified for falling short of their desired level of childbearing, but there were no corresponding data on the reasons people might have for exceeding their ideal family size. A range of economic factors – financial problems, for example, the cost of children and availability of accommodation – were the most common ones cited. But, for women in particular, two kinds of non-economic factor – their own health and problems in their relationships with their partners – also played an important role.

The importance people ascribed to economic constraints as reasons for their failure to attain ideal family size would tend to support the affordability thesis referred to earlier: that growing economic pressures restrict the number of children people feel they can have. A further piece of evidence would seem to point in the same direction: using cross-sectional age comparisons from the present survey sources as a basis for inferring trends over time, the gap between ideal and actual fertility seems have widened steadily over the past half century or so. The widening shortfall between actual and ideal fertility in the EU 15 and AC 10 would seem to support the notion that changing economic conditions have made it more difficult for women and families to achieve the number of births they would like.

Gap between fertility levels and aspirations

However, two aspects of the widening gap between ideal and actual fertility indicate that the picture is more complicated than it first appears. One is that the widening of the gap over time in the EU 15 and AC 10 is in a certain sense a statistical artefact. It arises not because more women are failing to achieve the family sizes they want but because fewer women are over-achieving the family sizes they want.

Under-attainment of fertility ideals was as common among older women in the present data set as it was among younger women. But older women had a higher incidence of over-attainment of fertility ideals than did younger women. This higher incidence almost wholly counter-balanced under-attainment in the older age groups, so that in their case the net gap between actual and ideal fertility was narrow.

Among younger women over-attainment was less common; the counter-balancing effect on under-attainment was weaker and in consequence the net gap widened. So it is the more effective avoidance of excess fertility, rather than a declining capacity to achieve ideal fertility, which is behind the widening of the ideal-actual fertility gap over time.

The second feature of the ideal-actual gap to note is that at the present time it is a function of social advantage rather than disadvantage. Below-ideal fertility is most common among the highly educated and least common among those with low educational attainment, while above-ideal fertility is most common among those with low education. Taking education as a proxy indicator for general command over resources, then a lack of resources tends not so much to restrict the number of children that women can have as weaken their capacity to limit their fertility to the level set by their own ideals.

The patterns examined here of under-attainment and over-attainment in fertility ideals are at odds with the view that the European decline in fertility has arisen because some worsening of the economic context constrains women into having fewer children. Firstly, the proportion of women whose actual number of children falls short of their ideal has shown no real increase over time (particularly in the EU 15), so cannot have contributed to the fertility decline. There has been a decrease in the proportion of women who have excess fertility, which has contributed to the fertility decline; but this is the consequence of an increase in women's control over their fertility and so can hardly be attributed to worsening economic conditions.

Secondly, the women who are most likely to have fewer children than their ideal are also those who would seem to have the greatest freedom of choice: they are generally well educated and thus have the greatest degree of control over their destinies. Among less well-off women who might be expected to face more severe economic constraints, the real problem seems to be not that they are unable to have as many children as they want but that they are less able to avoid having too many.

Impact on personal satisfaction

The findings just outlined seem to be confirmed when looking at the relationship between attaining ideal fertility and global life satisfaction. This relationship shows that having too many children is worse for life satisfaction than having too few – indeed it is only for men rather than women that having too few has any negative implications for life satisfaction at all. The picture is more uniform for satisfaction with family life, in that those with both below-ideal and above-ideal numbers of children are significantly less satisfied with family life than those whose number of children matches their ideal.

These findings support the idea that fulfilment of fertility ideals is a quality-of-life issue, as subjective well-being is negatively affected, at least in some ways and in some contexts, if people have either more or fewer children than their ideal. It would also seem that the consequences of overshooting one's fertility ideals are more negative than undershooting, though it is difficult to disentangle the precise causal connections and syndromes involved here.

It may be going too far to posit direct negative effects of either under-attainment or over-attainment of fertility ideals on subjective well-being. It may be more realistic to regard both forms of non-attainment of fertility ideals as parts of broader syndromes where a whole range of factors work together to produce both a range of fertility outcomes and a variety of levels of subjective well-being. This is particularly so with regard to excess fertility, which has the strongest negative effect on life satisfaction, but which also may be but one of a range of disadvantages that reduce people's quality of life.

Responsibility for care and tasks in the family

A second set of issues dealt with in the report has to do with role sharing within the family and people's preferences for policy actions regarding the family. There is a possibility that a high degree of role sharing within the family might encourage women to have more children, so that this second set of topics might be considered as linked to the first. However, this possibility does not seem very strong. For one thing the rise of role-sharing households in recent decades has been accompanied by a steady decline in fertility. This would suggest, not so much that role sharing is inimical to large families, as that the same cultural and economic developments which have promoted role sharing (such as the emancipation of women) have also been conducive to the decline in fertility. Looking across social categories, role sharing seems to be most accepted in better-off households where there is the greatest likelihood that women will have children below their ideal level.

In any event, the present analysis could not pursue these questions to any degree since the data in the Eurobarometer relate only to norms or beliefs and contain no information on sharing behaviour. As such, they show a widespread acceptance in Europe of the idea that child rearing is a shared responsibility of the mother and the father. Well over half of the population in every country affirms this view. In some countries, especially the Nordic ones, the overall level is about 90%. On the other hand, where there are gender-specific ideas about child rearing, mothers are expected to be responsible for carrying out the tasks. It can be concluded from these results that ideas about sharing do not amount to strong barriers to the implementation of equal opportunity policies, but are supportive of them.

Expectations regarding policy actions

When it comes to people's wishes concerning the policies they would like to see European governments introducing in order to benefit families, there is a high level of support for 'reducing unemployment'. 'Flexible working hours' was another widely supported option. Taking unemployment and flexible working hours together, it is clear that labour market policies feature very strongly in people's views on what governments should do to help families. Financial support in the form of child allowances also features highly, as do child care provisions, though it might be considered surprising that they do not top the list.

One should not, however, overstate the uniformity of these patterns as there is a great deal of variation between countries. Differing conditions account for some of this variation. For example, countries with high levels of employment are likely to focus on flexible working hours as a dominant issue, while reducing unemployment ranks highest in countries with high levels of unemployment. More broadly speaking, differences between groups of European countries tend to correspond to the welfare state regimes prevailing in each group. In countries where universal and employment-related programmes are widespread, belief in sharing is also much more prevalent.

The acceding countries show lower variance on sharing ideals than do the EU 15. When they join they will not increase heterogeneity in Europe in that respect. On the other hand the general extent of belief in the idea 'both and shared' will be lower than before. Accession will 'strengthen' the country-groups where the idea of sharing child rearing responsibilities is lower. For those areas of child rearing that are 'gendered', it is mostly the females who are expected to be responsible for them. It is also possible, however, to find some child-related tasks that are mainly ascribed to males.

Policy implications

The key policy issue raised in the report relates to the dilemma posed by low fertility in Europe. On the one hand there appears to be an emerging need for governments in Europe to take measures to try to raise the birth rate. On the other hand there is a widespread view that people should be left to decide their own childbearing levels.

The view that people would really prefer to have more children than they do have, if only the economic context for childbearing were made more favourable, offers a possible way out of this dilemma. Relying on this possibility, policy-makers might hope that if they were to improve the economic context of childbearing, people might be better enabled to pursue their preferences. In turn the birth rate might rise and quality of life, thought of in terms of people's scope to achieve their own preferences, would also be enhanced.

The analysis presented here does not offer much support for this hopeful line of thinking. This is so, first, because ideal family size has been falling over recent decades. This means that people simply want fewer children than their parents' generation did. Cultural shift is a major cause of the fertility decline. It is difficult to envisage how governments could intervene to reverse that cultural change, though governments may yet consider attempting such interventions on a wide scale.

Secondly, the fact that people's actual fertility often falls short of their ideal fertility, and that the mean shortfall between the two seems to have widened over recent decades, offers less of a basis for policy intervention than might first appear. Neither the existence of this shortfall nor its increase over time can be interpreted to show that economic constraints have increasingly intervened to deter people from reaching their ideal family sizes.

This is in part because the widening ideal-actual gap is largely a consequence of improved fertility control (fewer people now have actual family sizes which overshoot their ideals). This is a development that would be difficult to present as a consequence of increased economic constraint. In addition, the ideal-actual gap is widest among the people with the most resources. This adds to the difficulty of interpreting the gap as a manifestation of restricted choice.

Given these patterns it is difficult to envisage policy responses likely to succeed in raising the birth rate while at the same time being socially acceptable. Any attempt to revert to the weaker levels of fertility control prevalent in the past, as a way of increasing birth rate, would be politically unrealistic. There would also be difficulties with the use of public support (financial or otherwise) to help people achieve their fertility ideals.

One such difficulty is that this kind of measure might have contradictory effects. According to the estimates presented here, for every two people whose preferences appear to point towards higher levels of childbearing, there is one whose preferences point in the opposite direction. So enhancing capacity to achieve overall preferences as far as fertility is concerned would be a two-way street. Some would head towards higher fertility and others would head towards lower fertility. The balance of numbers might seem to favour overall movement upwards, since they outnumber those whose orientation is downwards. Nevertheless, the conclusion must be that that a small net gain in the direction required would be the best one could hope for, rather than the gross movement upwards that the critical state of the European birth rate now requires.

A further aspect of this difficulty is that the provision of financial support or services, such as subsidised childcare, as a means to promote births would need to be socially regressive to achieve its objectives. The people who are most likely to fall short of their fertility ideals already have a high level of resources, so that additional supports would need to be targeted at them for their impact on birth rates to be maximised. Socially regressive measures of this kind might not be politically acceptable.

There is the additional problem that, in the case of those who are already well-off, it is unclear what effect a further marginal increase in their resources might have on their willingness to have more children. Nor is it clear that an improvement in support for the less-well off would have positive effects on the birth rate. Such support might have the beneficial social effect of improving poorer people's control over their lives; but that might also improve their ability to restrict their family size to within their ideal limits, and so tend to reduce the birth rate.

As far as the EU's fertility problem is concerned, the policy conclusions of the present analysis are, therefore, largely negative. Interventions based on an affordability interpretation of the present very low levels of fertility in Europe may have a superficial appeal, but they are unlikely to get to the root of the issue.

The fundamental problem is that popular culture in Europe has turned against the ideal of the large family. Popular culture is still quite favourable towards the ideal of the small family – most people want to have children, and the two-child family is the ideal model. But they do not seem to hold that ideal strongly enough for it to over-ride other considerations: the wider the range of options available to people, the more likely it is that they will forego fulfilment of their family size ideals, modest as those ideals may be, in favour of alternatives.

So if the EU's fertility problem is to be solved, basic cultural shifts may be needed. It is not easy to see how governments could set out to achieve those shifts.

The report, *Fertility and family issues in an enlarged Europe*, is available online at www.eurofound.eu.int/publications/EF03104.htm

The other reports in the Foundation's 'Quality of life' series and accompanying summaries are available on the Foundation website at www.eurofound.eu.int/living/qual_life/index.htm

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