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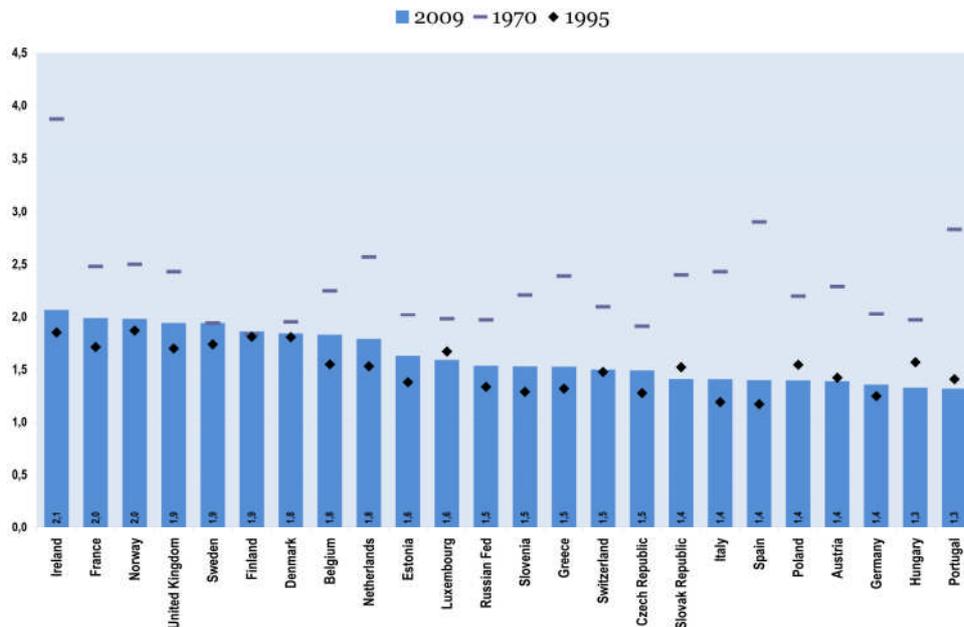
Flexibility at work, the win-win solution Why do many Europeans have less children than they intend to?

1st March 2012

Introduction

The last 'Policy Brief' issued by Population Europe shows that, even though most European countries have redoubled their efforts to support families, divergent resulting birth rate trends suggest that no 'magic formula' has been found. ¹

Change in total fertility rates 1970-2009 ²



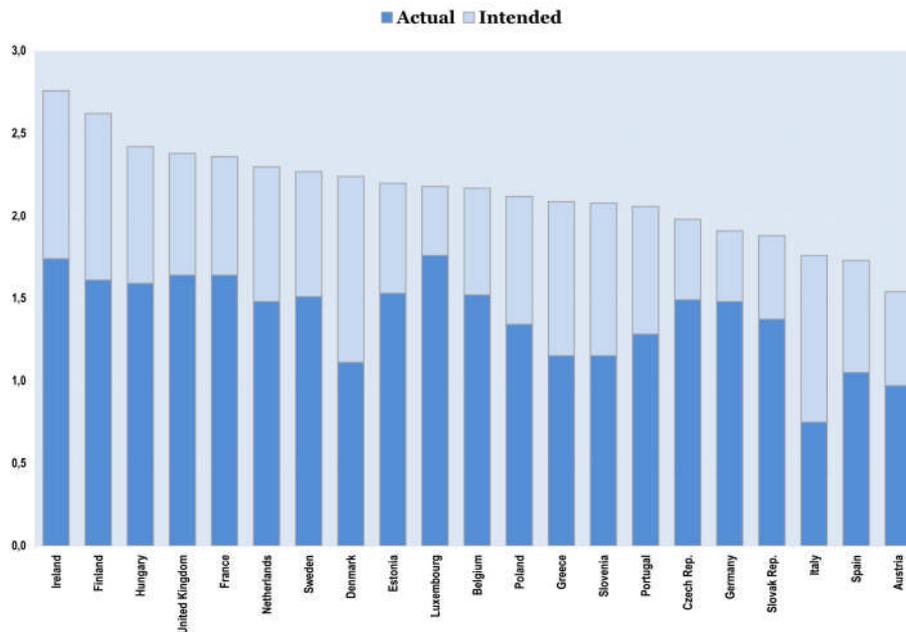
¹ Francesco C. Billari et al., 'Mission Not Accomplished? - New Evidence on Parenthood in Europe' (Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Sciences on behalf of the collaborative network 'Population Europe', 2012).

Available at <http://www.thefamilywatch.org/doc/doc-0288-es.php>.

² OECD, 'Doing Better for Families' (2011).

First of all, we need to recall, as the report does, that “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. 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.”³

Actual and ultimately intended number of children of women age 25-39⁴



In a deeper analysis, Sobotka also shows that “the intertwined fears of low fertility and decreasing population are closely related to yet another pair of stylised facts: first, women and men across Europe wish to have more children than they actually achieve by the end of their reproductive lives. Second, this ‘gap’ between intentions and actual behaviour leaves plenty of scope for effective policy action. Such policies would help eliminating some of the obstacles that prevent individuals from having the desired number of children, addressing structural and institutional constraints which are frequently perceived as rationales for policy action. Policies that would help people realise their unfulfilled ‘demand’ for children appear to be a win-win strategy, presumably increasing the happiness of the prospective parents and at the same time helping to increase fertility rates in a country without interfering with individual preferences.”⁵

Does prosperity (and migration) mean a higher fertility rate?

It is true that data show how there has been a slight upward trend in fertility in some of the countries that had declining levels of child-bearing before. As Luci and Thévenon have explained recently, “fertility has started rising again in the richest countries against a backdrop of continued economic development. In other words, the negative relationship – a higher standard of living associated with lower fertility – generally becomes positive after a certain level of development has been reached.”⁶

³ Francesco C. Billari et al., ‘Mission Not Accomplished? - New Evidence on Parenthood in Europe’ (Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Sciences on behalf of the collaborative network ‘Population Europe’, 2012).

⁴ OECD, ‘Doing Better for ...’

⁵ Tomáš Sobotka, ‘Reproductive Decision-Making in a Macro-Micro Perspective (REPRO) - Synthesis and Policy Implications’ (‘European Demographic Research Papers’ – Vienna Institute of Demography, 2011).

Available at http://www.oecw.ac.at/vid/download/edrp_1_11.pdf.

⁶ Angela Luci and Olivier Thévenon, ‘Does economic development explain the fertility rebound in OECD countries?’ (‘Population & Societies’ - Institut National d’Etudes Démographiques, 09-2011).

Available at http://www.ined.fr/fichier/t_publication/1551/publi_pdf2_pesa481.pdf.

But if we look beneath the surface, we realize that it would be premature to assume economic prosperity is the direct cause. “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.”⁷

Even migration, though it has played a significant role in different countries and was at some stage considered by some as an explanation for it, doesn’t last for long as a fertility driving force. “Our analysis suggests that although migration played the expected effect of increasing fertility in some countries, this effect was not large, although it helped to push Greek and Italian TFR slightly above the lowest-low threshold around 2005. In Spain, the one country where we were able to look at trends in the fertility of the native-born, we saw that fertility was also increasing among the native born.”⁸

Two Competing Careers or a ‘Win-Win Solution’

Thanks to the most recent inputs, we know now that free choices have more to do with the labour market conditions. “In most of the richest countries, the fertility rebound is associated with high female employment. In other words, achieving a satisfactory work-life balance is a key factor in this trend. The mass entry of women into the labour force is one of the major social changes observed in most OECD countries in recent decades. At the same time, the link between female employment and fertility has changed. While in the early 1980s fertility was highest in countries with the lowest female employment rates, the reverse is true today. The Scandinavian countries –all with a high level of economic development– are a good illustration of this new situation, with female employment rates (in the 25-54 age group) of above 80% and high fertility. The countries of southern and eastern Europe, on the other hand, illustrate the opposite situation, with low female employment rates and low fertility. These are countries with income levels below the OECD average.”⁹

But this is nothing new. “Mothers have always worked. Throughout all of history, mothers have given birth to children, nourished and nurtured family members, and laboured on the family farm or enterprise... The possibility for one adult to work away from the home depended on the commitment of another adult to maintain the home and care for the children. This model of mutual trust and complementarity is mainly based on interdependence and appreciation for mutually advantageous contributions.”¹⁰

Consequently, “the long period of time when experts only talked about ‘work-life conflict’ is now in the distant past. These days, it is becoming increasingly common to hear about ‘synergies’ between the two worlds, and ‘win-win solutions’ are starting to be identified.”¹¹

Slow Down the ‘Rush-hour of Life’

If there is no flexibility to make fertility possible, this ‘postponement of childbearing’ arises as “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. The postponement of childbearing influences the number of children a couple intends to have, as the remaining reproductive time span decreases.”¹²

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

⁷ Francesco C. Billari et al., ‘Mission Not Accomplished?...

⁸ Joshua R. Goldstein et al., ‘The End of ‘Lowest-Low’ Fertility?’ (Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, 2009). Available at <http://www.demogr.mpg.de/papers/working/wp-2009-029.pdf>.

⁹ Angela Luci and Olivier Thévenon, ‘Does economic development...’

¹⁰ J. Stevens, J. de Bergeyck and A. C. de Liedekerke, ‘Realities of Mothers in Europe’ (MMMEurope, 2011).

¹¹ N. Chinchilla and C. León, ‘Diez años de conciliación en España’, (International Center for Work and Family – The Family Watch, 2011).

¹² Francesco C. Billari et al., ‘Mission Not Accomplished?...

‘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.”¹³

It could be said, therefore, that prolonging the educational period (so that women could have children without losing their chances to get a decent job in the future) should be part of the solution to this problem. Many European women would find other ways that, after years of hard work to assure a job, it is already too late to become a mother and have the children they intended. I am afraid that quite a few of them have to spend half of their lifetime from there on taking care of their pets or their garden, instead of enjoying the children (and grandchildren) to whom that effort was initially targeted.

In fact, “policies in many countries often remain tailored to the male-breadwinner model, providing a long period of parental leave (in effect, a maternal leave) of up to three or even four years, which facilitates long-term withdrawal of women from the labour market. For a mother with two or three children, this may add up to six or nine years of uninterrupted stay out of work, with a very difficult return thereafter. Often there are no, or only limited, facilities for couples who do not wish to follow that pathway but lack the resources to pay for a private child care: public child care for children below age 3 is frequently very limited or of a low quality, possibilities for a shorter and better-paid parental leave are nonexistent, and part-time work opportunities or flexible working practices are unavailable. This is an area that can and should be directly addressed by public policies.”¹⁴

The present recession we are going through makes even more difficult this situation. It is not easy to find a job in conditions which make it possible to become a mother. On the contrary, presence requirements, low salaries and mobility (even need to migrate to another country) are increased.

Some Recommendations

As I got the chance to explain in the Expert Group Meeting organized by United Nations in New York, June 2011, I believe that specific recommendations for policy makers and practitioners should then include identifying employee preferences and supporting their choices, promoting social recognition for family-friendly attitudes and decisions, removing prejudices and stigmas which counteract their effect, demonstrating the benefits of a family-friendly company, for managers, for employees, and for clients, and teaching companies how to evaluate the effectiveness of work-family initiatives.¹⁵

Finally, I feel that Family Enrichment courses (such as those developed by IFFD) can become a key instrument to promote reconciliation between work and family life. Some background guidelines that should be included for this purpose are the following:¹⁶

- Reconciliation means choosing, and choosing means dismissing and learning to prioritize. We shouldn't be worried by what we have to leave aside if what we gain by it fits our overall life project better.
- Success at work shouldn't just mean prestige, but being able to integrate our job into the whole of our lives. True self-esteem means feeling helpful to others, more than just being praised by them.
- Part of this integration will often include negotiation to replace 'presence control' with 'goal direction', and learning how to 'change roles' when arriving home, leaving all worries and burdens outside the door.

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¹³ Francesco C. Billari et al., 'Mission Not Accomplished?...?'

¹⁴ Tomáš Sobotka, 'Reproductive Decision-Making...?'

¹⁵ Cfr. 'Work family balance: the importance of family-focused solutions: challenges, opportunities and recommendations' (Expert Group Meeting on 'Assessing family policies: Confronting family poverty and social exclusion & ensuring work-family balance', United Nations, 1-3 June 2011).

Available at <http://social.un.org/index/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=q-6XifuIWSA%3d&tabid=1555>.

¹⁶ Cfr. Nuria Chinchilla and Maruja Moragas, 'Masters of our destiny' (Eunsa, 2008).