



Demographic Research a free, expedited, online journal
of peer-reviewed research and commentary
in the population sciences published by the
Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research
Konrad-Zuse Str. 1, D-18057 Rostock · GERMANY
www.demographic-research.org

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

**VOLUME 24, ARTICLE 9 PAGES 217-224
PUBLISHED 02 FEBRUARY 2011**

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol24/9/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2011.24.9

Reflexion

**Should governments in Europe be more
aggressive in pushing for gender equality
to raise fertility? The second “YES”**

Livia Sz. Oláh

This publication is part of the Special Collection “Rostock debate on
demographic change”, organized by Guest Editor Laura Bernardi.

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Should governments in Europe be more aggressive in pushing for gender equality to raise fertility?

The second “YES”¹

Livia Sz. Oláh²

Abstract

This paper is based on my contribution to a debate, organized by MPIDR, on the question displayed in the title above. I was asked to present arguments for the “yes”-response (together with Laurent Toulemon, and arguing against the “no”-side represented by Gerda Neyer and Dimiter Philipov). As pointed out in the paper, the most important theoretical reasoning relevant for this question is the gender equity theory. A number of studies provide sound empirical support to it, as discussed in the paper in details, and thereby also a rationale for a positive impact of increased gender equality on fertility. As the dual-earner family is here to stay, and given the well-known negative consequences of long-term very low fertility for a society, pushing for gender equality seems to be a reasonable strategy to be considered aiming for sustainable societal development.

¹ This is the second of two “yes” positions taken from the “Rostock Debate on Demographic Change” held at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research on 21 February 2006.

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A “yes” to the question

There are strong theoretical and empirical reasons for answering “yes” to the debate question. This paper aims to outline the most important ones. According to the gender equity theory, the very low fertility levels displayed in many countries of the developed world in recent decades are the result of the discrepancy between a high level of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions, such as the educational system and the labor market, and a low or at best moderate level of gender equity in family-oriented institutions; most importantly the family itself (McDonald 2000a, 2000b). In modern societies, women’s opportunities are nearly equivalent to those of men in education and paid employment. However, these opportunities become severely limited when women have children, as domestic tasks multiply and the women end up doing nearly all of the household work and child care themselves. They will then choose to restrict the number of children they have to an extent that leaves a society’s fertility at a very low level in the long run.

As argued by McDonald, the more traditional a society’s family system is, the greater is the lack of agreement between the social institutions in terms of the level of gender equity, and the lower is fertility, as modern and highly effective contraceptives have increasingly made childbearing a choice for women. In fact, there seems to be a strong correlation between attitudes towards traditional gender roles in a society and birth rates (OECD 2005). Based on the results of an opinion poll on attitudes towards gender equality³ conducted in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the countries involved can be sorted into two main categories: (i) those with strongly or moderately favorable attitudes toward gender equality, and (ii) those with less favorable attitudes. Comparatively high fertility (TFR of 1.5 and above) is found in countries in the first group (Northern Europe, North America), while birth rates are low (TFR below 1.4) in the second group (Southern Europe, Central-Eastern Europe), where almost half of the respondents favored traditional gender roles. This indicates that, in modern societies, negative attitudes towards gender equality make it difficult for men and women to combine family life with education and gainful employment, and this reduces fertility, as suggested in the gender equity theory. But let us take a closer look at the family itself to see whether gender equality influences fertility at the micro level.

In a study based on data extracted from the Swedish Family and Fertility Survey covering the period between the 1970s and early 1990s, I showed that the propensity to have the second child was 15% higher in families in which the father took parental leave with the first child, than in families in which only the mother used the leave (Oláh 2003). Considering fathers’ parental leave use as a direct measure of gender equality,

³ People were asked whether they agreed with the statement: “A man’s job is to earn money, a woman’s job is to look after the home and family” (OECD 2005).

while controlling for a number of factors previously shown to influence fertility⁴, this finding suggests that a higher level of gender equality in couple relationships may increase fertility, as argued by McDonald. Given the relatively small sample size, it was not possible to draw conclusions based on the length of the leave taken by the fathers in my study, unlike in a more recent article based on Swedish register data focusing on the 1990s⁵ (Duvander and Andersson 2006). In line with my findings, the latter analysis showed a higher propensity to have a second and a third child in families with more engaged fathers, than in families in which the father did not take parental leave with the previous child. In fact, the intensity to have a next child increased as the share of paternity leave increased across the groups, up to a level of 25% of the father's income being covered by the parental benefit in the two years following a birth. For the latter group, the intensity declined, which may reflect the negative impact of this non-normative gender role behavior given that child care is still considered to be mainly the domain of women.

The level of gender equality in the family is also connected to education, as more highly educated women are better at bargaining about the division of domestic responsibilities than are less educated women (Roman 1999). This suggests that childbearing propensity is also higher for the more highly educated, and this is the pattern shown in my study⁶ (Oláh 2003). Highly educated parents are more likely to share child care responsibilities more equally, as has been demonstrated in other studies (Sundström and Duvander 2002, Nyman and Petterson 2002). The results of these studies showed that (i) among low-earning couples, who also often have less education, fathers are less likely to use parental leave; (ii) more educated mothers have a stronger work orientation, and are more inclined to return to paid work earlier, which would increase the portion of parental leave used by the father; and (iii) fathers, who are more likely to be highly educated themselves if the mother is highly educated, given the quite high level of educational homogamy for couples in Sweden, perform better in the bargaining process at work regarding their use of parental leave⁷, as they are less vulnerable to the negative reactions of employers and workmates.

⁴ I have controlled for the following factors: the woman's age (relative age at first birth, defined as her age compared to the average for women with the same education), union order as fixed covariates, and marital status, policy period, educational attainment and employment status as time-varying covariates. Age of the first child was the time variable.

⁵ Here information on the percentage of the father's income covered by the parental benefit was used to give an indication of the length of the leave the father took with the child.

⁶ Remember that factors known to influence fertility behavior have been controlled for (see footnote 2).

⁷ The bargaining process at the workplace regarding fathers' uptake of parental leave has hardly been studied directly. An important exception is a study by Haas and Hwang (2000) on 200 Swedish enterprises. They have found that employer's/company management's attitudes regarding male employees' parental leave use have been related to the individual employee, i.e., whether he has been seen as a valuable resource for the enterprise, in about one-third of the companies studied. Such requests from highly educated men, unlike those from employees in lower positions, have been positively met, especially upon agreement of the employee's

One may argue, of course, that the higher second-birth intensities for the more highly educated mothers in Sweden were simply the result of their being more efficient in using the so-called speed premium⁸ by spacing the next birth within the interval that makes them eligible for it. However, no important educational differentials were found in the reaction to the speed premium by women and men born in Sweden in a recent study (Andersson, Duvander, and Hoem 2006). Both the rapidity in the adaptation to the new policy and the magnitude in the change of birth-spacing behavior was very much the same across educational groups. Moreover, findings indicating a positive relationship between educational attainment and fertility were shown even for other contexts and time periods (see Rindfuss and Parnell 1989 for the US for the later 1970s, Hoem and Hoem 1989 for Sweden for the 1970s and 1980s, Kravdal 1992 for Norway and the US for the 1970s and 1980s), which lends further support to the gender equality argument⁹.

As discussed in connection with education, the division of household work is an important aspect of gender equality which has been shown to influence fertility. In my analysis based on data extracted from the Hungarian Family and Fertility Survey, I found the highest propensity to have a second child among couples who shared domestic tasks equally, followed by couples in which the woman did most of the work in the home, but the man also helped (Oláh 2003)¹⁰. This is interesting because Hungary scored high on traditional gender role attitudes¹¹ in the ISSP opinion poll discussed before, and because men in Hungary were not expected to engage in household work (OECD 2005). Similar results were also shown for other countries with respect to couples sharing housework and child care tasks (see Torr and Short 2004 for the US, Cooke 2004 for Germany, and Cooke 2003 for Italy). Thus, the argument that the more egalitarian division of domestic responsibilities is likely to increase fertility seems to have sound empirical support.

A further aspect which is relevant to the question of our debate is the number of children young couples wish to have, compared to their achieved fertility. The average desired fertility is around two children for most European countries, according to the

availability online and for meetings. In other companies (i.e., the rest of the sample), attitudes towards fathers' uptake of parental leave were either generally negative or neutral.

⁸ For further details about the speed-premium see Hoem (1993).

⁹ In fact, Kravdal mentioned specifically in his comments regarding the positive relationship between mothers' education and the third-birth rate in Norway and the US by the later part of the 1970s and the 1980s that "a higher level of participation in child care and domestic duties on the part of well-educated fathers... may have promoted a positive effect of education" (Kravdal 1992:475), but the data did not allow him to follow up on this aspect.

¹⁰ In the model, I have controlled for the mother's age at first birth (using relative age as in the Swedish analysis), marital status, policy period, educational level and employment status; the age of the first child was the time variable.

¹¹ As in the Swedish findings, couples who behaved deviantly, with the man doing most of the household work, had the lowest second birth intensity across the groups.

recent wave of the Population Policy Acceptance Study (PPAS). With the exception of Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, less than 10% of women (and 12% of men) prefer to remain childless in European societies. Having one child only is not a popular option either, except in Austria¹² where more than 30% of male and female respondents prefer to have small families (Federal Institute for Population Research and Robert Bosch Foundation 2005). Hence, if fertility desires were realized, Europe would not have a problem with long-term below-replacement fertility—but it does. This indicates that there are obstacles to the realization of people’s fertility desires, and the low level of gender equality in the family is likely to be such an obstacle.

Summing up the reasons why I respond with a “yes” to the question posed in this debate, it should be noted that the dual-earner family is here to stay, and thus it should be possible to make it easier for both men and women to reconcile family and paid work. Pushing for gender equality seems to be the way to increase fertility rates from the current extremely low levels, as low fertility also has implications for the economy and for society. The consequence of low fertility in the long run is a declining, and, at the same time, aging population. This in turn may lead to sharp falls in labor supply in the near future, which will suppress economic growth and thereby jeopardize the future of the welfare state. Therefore, we should act, while we still can, to stop this from happening.

¹² Also, in Cyprus every fourth respondents would opt for a one-child family, but nearly half of the respondents want three or more children.

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Oláh: Rostock Debate, second YES: European governments must be more aggressive for gender equality