



DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

VOLUME 48, ARTICLE 29, PAGES 849–866

PUBLISHED 23 MAY 2023

<https://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol48/29/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2023.48.29

Summary

Introduction to the Special Collection on the new roles of women and men and implications for families and societies

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This publication is part of the Special Collection on The New Roles of Women and Men and Implications for Families and Societies, organized by Guest Editors Livia Sz. Oláh, Rudolf Richter, and Irena E. Kotowska.

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Introduction to the Special Collection on the new roles of women and men and implications for families and societies

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

This is the introduction to a special collection of articles produced within a large-scale collaborative research project, FamiliesAndSocieties, funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme in 2013–2017.

OBJECTIVE

The special collection addresses (1) the gendered outcomes of employment for fertility, well-being, and partnership stability, and (2) the new role of men in various socioeconomic positions and its implications for family life.

METHODS

International micro-level datasets (ESS, GGS) are analyzed in two comparative studies, while four country-case studies rely on country-specific datasets. The Swedish study also involves analyses of interview narratives of parental couples.

CONTRIBUTION

The articles highlight the evolving importance of economic uncertainty in fertility decisions and well-being, especially as related to limited changes in the role of breadwinner for men, and the role of policy context for women, including regarding links between women's employment and divorce. The results indicate that women have entered the public sphere to stay, but this only strengthens families if accompanied by relevant policy support. Renewed ideals of mothers being the primary carers of their children are found to hinder the realization of new fatherhood aspirations, while a clear socioeconomic gradient in men's family involvement in both first and post-divorce relationships may further enhance social inequalities.

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1. Rationale for the Special Collection

In the past decades increasingly diverse family biographies in affluent societies have been paralleled by the expansion of women's role as economic provider for the family, and lately by men's growing involvement in family tasks, especially childcare. The mid-20th century dominance of the nuclear family, comprising married couples with children born to them at relatively young ages, has given place to a previously unprecedented range of family configurations with widening entry ages and diverging duration patterns (Smock and Schwartz 2020; Van Winkle 2018). The transformation from a manufacturing to a service economy in post-industrial societies has facilitated women's labour force engagement beyond marriage and motherhood, reinforced more recently by the reversal in the gender gap in education so that the number and proportion of highly educated women exceeds that of men (Van Bavel, Schwartz, and Esteve 2018). These processes, underpinned by the spread of gender equality ideals, in turn have fostered men's desire for greater involvement with their children (McGill 2014). The changes in women's and men's social roles have been so important that the literature refers to them as the 'gender revolution' (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015) and the 'female revolution' (Esping-Andersen 2009; Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015).

Since the 1990s, labour market developments characterized by growing economic uncertainty, employment instability, and precariousness have increasingly influenced the dynamics of family relationships and reinforced changes in gender roles. Relying on a single male earner is no longer a viable path for forming a thriving family. At the same time there is an increasing recognition that both parents being involved with their children furthers couple understanding as well as parent-child bonding and strengthens the family. Indeed, the awareness that gender and family changes are interconnected has greatly increased in contemporary family scholarship (for a recent overview see Oláh, Vignoli, and Kotowska 2021). This Special Collection seeks to shed more light on this interplay that has taken place over the past two decades. In particular, it focuses on the one hand on how the gendered effects of employment shape family patterns, and on the other on the importance of societal, labour market, and policy contexts for emerging new fatherhood. The two comparative and four country-case studies included build on the research carried out in the large-scale collaborative project FamiliesAndSocieties (www.familiesandsocieties.eu) in the European Union Seventh Framework Programme, in work package 3, which has the same title as this Special Collection.

The main contribution of this research is that it addresses family and gender role changes in the context of uncertainty, which has intensified since the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2008. Competitive global markets, and the neoliberal turn in discourse and policy, are reflected in the rising levels of fixed-term and precarious employment. These macro structures are mirrored in perceptions of insecurity in both employment and

unstable futures which shape individual decisions to start a family. As highlighted by Comolli et al. (2021) and Matysiak et al. (2021), since the early 2010s immediate structural factors have been less likely to explain fertility developments in Europe, whereas perceptions of uncertainty play an increasingly important role (Vignoli et al. 2020). Changes in partnership dynamics, seen in decreasing union formation and increasing family instability, especially among the less-educated (Jalovaara and Andersson 2023; Oláh, Vignoli, and Kotowska 2021), have accompanied a decline in childbearing, with a weakening and in some contexts reversal of the female educational gradient in divorce (Matysiak et al. 2014). The articles in this Special Collection provide the first evidence of how evolving gender roles play out in family changes under conditions of national and global insecurity.

2. Contents of this Special Collection

2.1 Gendered employment outcomes and family patterns

The first three studies in this Special Collection with both cross-country and country-specific perspectives highlight how economic uncertainty influences women's and men's first childbearing intentions, their life satisfaction vis-a-vis the changing rewards of childrearing across the parental life-cycle, and the context-specific links between women's employment and divorce. The research shows that change in the perception of men's main role as breadwinner is relatively limited, while women's labour market participation is becoming increasingly commonplace, with uneven gender-role changes shaping family patterns under the constraints of structural and normative conditions.

Fahlén and Oláh (2018) address the interdependence of economic uncertainty, short-term childbearing intentions, and institutional context, based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) waves 2004/2005 and 2010/2011. The intentions of childless women and men to have a child within the next three years are analyzed in ten countries, representing five welfare-state regimes, before the economic crisis and in the aftermath. The macro-level results indicate a negative association between increasing societal economic uncertainty related to increasing unemployment rates and decreasing employment protection, and the intentions to enter parenthood, especially among men. At the micro-level, the study reveals the continued importance of men's labour market position for family formation, with unemployment being most detrimental, independent of welfare regime type and business cycle. Women's perceived job security matters only at young ages and mostly in post-socialist and familialistic welfare regimes, but hardly at all in liberal regimes. Unemployment also seems to matter little, except at more mature ages in post-socialist countries.

By contrast, a constrained income situation is related to the lowest motherhood intentions at younger ages in liberal, conservative, and post-socialist welfare regimes, but only before the economic crisis. A comfortable financial situation is associated with enhanced fatherhood intentions among younger men, while perceived income security has little importance for women's and men's parenthood decisions at higher ages across contexts in the aftermath of the crisis. The findings thus strengthen the salience of employment situation and economic security for men in the family-building process, and suggest their increasing importance for young women's first childbearing. This is in line with recent research suggesting that whereas women's employment has long been seen as the main reason for low fertility rates in high-income countries (for an overview of the relevant literature see Balbo, Billari, and Mills 2013), it has become less of a hindrance to motherhood beyond gender-traditional societies due to various policy measures introduced to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities (Oshio 2019).

Hanappi and Lipps (2019) investigate the possibility that in Switzerland, parenthood, especially caring for a new-born or infant, moderates the influence of perceived job insecurity and unemployment on well-being for both women and men, based on data from the Swiss Household Panel 2000–2016. They thus focus on fertility behaviour, unlike intentions as in the study discussed above, and do so in the context of weak employment protection and reconciliation policies. The issue of well-being also gains significance in times of increasing uncertainty. The results confirm previous research showing that job insecurity and unemployment decrease well-being (De Witte 2005; Sverke et al. 2010), although less so if the partner is working. The latter finding applies to men and women alike, which suggests that female employment has become an accepted and even increasingly necessary feature of family life in Switzerland, a country long considered as one of the last bastions of the male breadwinner family model.

Entering parenthood and raising a young child seems to mitigate the negative effect of job insecurity on well-being for both men and women, but less so when the child is older or when there are two or more children to care for in the family (see also Kohler and Mencarini 2016). The authors point out that subjective well-being should not be interpreted as a driving force of fertility behaviour, even if job insecurity increases across social strata and postponed childbearing in high-status groups with a higher level of well-being after birth may contribute to a delay of parenthood in the society as a whole, as high-income countries demonstrated along the second demographic transition.

Women's role, increasingly enriched by their presence in the labour force, raises the question of its implications for marriage stability. Using harmonized data from the Generations and Gender Surveys, Vignoli et al. (2018) study this issue in four European countries with varying levels of female employment, divorce prevalence, and state support for families and single mothers. After controlling for selection and endogeneity

mechanisms, they find that women's employment increases marital disruption in Italy and Poland, where divorce remained relatively rare but women's economic activity levels differ greatly. In Poland the (full-time) dual-earner family model prevailed until 1989, followed by a revival of the male breadwinner model, putting women's paid work engagement at a medium level by European standards. In Italy female labour force participation has remained low, despite a pronounced increase in younger cohorts. However, these differences in female economic activity levels seem to matter less than prevailing traditional family norms and relatively weak state support for single mothers.

The elevated divorce risks of employed women in Italy and Poland are in line with traditional microeconomic perspectives, according to which women's employment destabilizes marriage by facilitating divorce when there is conflict in the relationship, as employed women are better able to cope with family breakdown (Becker 1991; Kalmijn and Poortman 2006; Schoen et al. 2002). By contrast, the impact of women's employment on divorce appears to be negligible in Hungary and Germany, where divorce has become less selective for women even though female economic activity patterns have developed differently in the two countries. In Hungary, like in Poland, the (full-time) dual-earner family model dominated until the late 1980s, with women's employment declining substantially thereafter. Yet Hungary represents a more favourable setting for reconciling work and family, and places less economic pressure on women to be economically active, given the comparatively generous state support for single mothers. In Germany, with a medium level of women's economic activity and high female part-time employment, state support for single mothers is relatively high and reduces women's dependence on their labour market position after separation. The results indicate that women's employment does not necessarily increase the risk of divorce, and female earnings can have a stabilizing effect on the family budget and hence the marriage (Oppenheimer 1997; Stevenson and Wolfers 2007).

The three studies discussed above point to the mostly positive implications of women's new role as economic providers with respect to family life, including childbearing, well-being, and family stability. Little change has been seen in the importance of male breadwinning, in line with a recent meta-analysis (Alderotti et al. 2021) that does not include post-socialist welfare regimes, unlike the study by Fahlén and Oláh (2018) in this Special Collection. The latter article considers subjective measures of employment uncertainty, which Alderotti et al. (2021) specify as an avenue for future research. The meta-analysis also points to the importance of including partner's characteristics in the analyses, which resembles the findings of Hanappi and Lipps (2019) with respect to the partner's labour market position influencing own well-being as part of the employment-uncertainty-parenting nexus. The Vignoli et al. (2018) study complements the literature on how much context matters for women's employment

stabilizing or destabilizing marriage (Cooke et al. 2013; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015), thus facilitating informed policy-making.

2.2 The new father

The second part of the Special Collection consists of three country-case studies that address the concept of new fatherhood and its realization by illuminating the mechanisms at play in Sweden and the United Kingdom and pathways of post-divorce fatherhood in Belgium. Previous research has highlighted the spread of involved fatherhood aspirations in high-income countries in recent decades and their usually beneficial implications for family life (Altintas and Sullivan 2017; Fox, Pascall, and Warren 2009; Goldscheider, Oláh, and Puur 2010). At the same time, partnership dissolution and new family formation after a break-up at reproductive ages have become quite common and also influence children's life chances, requiring a closer look at men's ability and willingness to invest in their new family in order to better understand recent and future challenges to societal sustainability (McLanahan 2004; Shafer and James 2013; Thomson 2014).

Based on the Swedish Young Adult Panel Study wave 2009 with a partner questionnaire, Evertsson, Boye, and Erman (2018) analyze the sharing of parental leave and its implications for the long-term division of childcare among heterosexual first-time parents, and the reasoning regarding the division of leave as highlighted in qualitative interviews with middle-class parent couples. The quantitative results reveal that the men who use the most parental leave are those who state that they want to stay at home for a long period and who want to share the leave equally with their partner.

The qualitative interviews indicate that ideals of equal parenting, engaged fatherhood, and gender equality can lead to couples dividing leave equally (which is 13 months with 80% income replacement, and can be used on a part-time basis). These couples want both parents to have the same experience of and knowledge about the child, and the fathers want to practice new fatherhood by building a close relationship with the baby and being an equally important parent as the mother. They view Swedish family policies and institutions as cornerstones facilitating their relatively gender-equal lives. However, in some couples, who also stress the importance of gender equality – which highlights the strength of the equality discourse in Sweden – ideals of intensive mothering, often embraced by both parents, counteract an equal sharing of the leave. They consider the first year in the child's life as a special period to be shared only with the mother.

The length of the father's parental leave emerges as a strong indicator of gender equality in the actual sharing of childcare when both parents return to work. The study indicates that both mothers and fathers have a lot to gain from dividing childcare and paid

work more gender-equally when children are small, and children also benefit from having two parents to turn to for comfort and from developing a long-term relationship with both parents. The results also point to the importance for the actual division of leave of parents' gender norms and attitudes (Boehnke 2011; Knight and Brinton 2017) and parenting norms (Verniers, Bonnot, and Assilaméhou-Kunz 2022), which should be taken into account when considering future developments towards more-or-less gender-equal parenting and its implications for family life. It should be mentioned that the journal's editorial board selected Evertsson, Boye, and Erman's 2018 article for the prestigious award of Editor's Choice.

Henz (2019) addresses fathers' involvement with children in the UK context based on time-use data (UKTUS) for 2000–2001 and 2014–2015, highlighting socioeconomic differences in active fathering measured by occupation. Only first marriages with two parents and their children are included in the analyses, taking into account childcare specified as either a primary or secondary activity, which gives a more accurate picture of fathers' family engagement. While fathers' time with children appears to be stable over time at the aggregate level, the analysis reveals a possible weakening of family cohesion as seen in the decreasing time fathers spent with their partner and children, which may be related to the more challenging economic and labour market situation in recent times compared to the first years of the 2000s. Increasing economic uncertainty may have constrained both the time parents spend with children and their ability to engage.

The findings show reduced involvement of low-status fathers over time, mixed results for high-status fathers, and continuing divergence between high- and lower-status fathers regarding their engagement with their children. The latter aspect contributes to sustained social inequalities with respect to the resources available to children, in line with previous research (McLanahan 2004). High-status fathers appear to specialize in interactive childcare, although with a decreasing rate of participation, whereas they are more likely to engage in physical care at the weekend but for a shorter time than in the early 2000s. This suggests a stalling in the transformation of the paternal role and of the progress towards gender equality in the home, despite increases in both the number of people with higher-status jobs and mothers' labour force participation. The stalling of the gender revolution has been previously noted in the US context, with a focus on female and male economic activity and related aspects (England 2010; England, Levine and Mishel 2020), and in Poland, regarding women's reduced labour income, increasing time in unpaid work, and increasing economic inactivity (Chłoń-Domińczak et al. 2022). Sullivan, Gershuny, and Robinson (2018) offer a feasible explanation that questions the pessimistic interpretation when there is no setback for gender equality in the home. However, Henz (2019) shows, for the first time, stalling trends with respect to men's role in the family, related to increased economic uncertainty or other forces. This suggests

that the issue of stalling deserves more attention, given its importance for future family life.

Schnor, Vanassche, and Van Bavel (2017) study socioeconomic differences in post-divorce fatherhood in Belgium, based on data from the Divorce In Flanders survey and taking into account the education-specific repartnering and fertility patterns highlighted in earlier research (Pasteels and Mortelmans 2017; Shafer and James 2013). They focus on whether after the dissolution of their first marriage, men with certain educational attainments are more likely to enter a new partnership with a childless woman or a woman with children, and to have common children. The findings reveal that stepfathers are often low-educated men with limited economic capacity and willingness to invest in their new families as they lack a biological bond, and that they seldom have common offspring with their new female partner. As the break-up rates are high, their repartnering offers only temporary episodes of fatherhood. With respect to their first marriage, low-educated stepfathers are more likely to be childless or non-resident biological fathers than more-educated men.

By contrast, high-educated men are more likely to be exclusively resident biological fathers and to avoid complex family configurations. They avoid responsibility for non-biological children by residing with the children from their first marriage or repartnering and having children with childless women. The study therefore highlights that after the breakup of a first marriage, men's repartnering patterns are determined by education – given its related economic position – in addition to childbearing. The education-specific pathways of post-divorce fatherhood in turn reinforce social inequalities, with implications for the children's life chances. This conclusion resembles that by Henz (2019) above, who focuses on intact partnerships. Both studies support the concerns voiced by McLanahan (2004) regarding outcomes for children, in so much as men's socioeconomic position shapes their engagement with the children they live with.

The insights provided by the studies in this section of the Special Collection further the understanding of men's changing family role and contribute to this growing field of scholarship (see, e.g., Day and Lamb 2003, Hobson 2002, and Schoppe-Sullivan and Fagan 2020 for an overview of recent research). The study by Evertsson, Boye, and Erman (2018) on Sweden highlights that the ideals of intensive mothering that are gaining increasing importance in affluent societies (Budds 2012; Ennis 2014) can constrain new fatherhood, even among middle-class parents, and in a country with substantial policies promoting gender equality in general and paternal engagement from the very beginning of a child's life in particular. The article by Henz (2019) points to the complexity of emerging active fatherhood, because focusing only on certain aspects of engagement with children (time spent or participation in childcare, or disregarding childcare as a secondary activity) can lead to misinterpretation regarding the progress of the gender revolution. Together with the study by Schnor, Vanassche, and Van Bavel (2017), this piece also

draws attention to the continued importance of men's socioeconomic position in enabling or constraining their involvement with children and the prospects of new fatherhood.

3. Concluding remarks

To understand the everyday reality of modern societies, families should be recognized as dynamic entities, characterized by increasingly complex decision-making regarding transitions over the family life course and the organization of family life. Women and men engage in earning as well as caring activities; hence paid work and family lives increasingly influence each other, reinforced by increasing employment instability and precariousness related to labour market changes. Policy-making at the supranational (EU) level and in the different European countries aims to increasingly facilitate the combination of market and family roles for all adults by developing policy measures such as parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and formal childcare provision (Hantrais and Letablier 2014; Lewis 2018). Such support is a necessary condition for women's new role as economic providers for their families, which was firmly established in the 2000s. However, the studies in this Special Collection reveal that the 'female revolution' (Esping-Andersen 2009; Esping-Andersen, and Billari 2015) does not reduce the importance for contemporary families of men as breadwinners. General economic trends and the specific impact of the Global Financial Crisis have strengthened perceptions of insecurity, with negative implications for family life as regards childbearing, well-being, and cohesion. The specific policy context matters, as it may reduce some of the associated uncertainty.

The studies presented here show that advancement in men's new role as caring parents, which constitutes the second phase of the gender revolution (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015), is more limited and more fragile than changes in the female role. At the EU level, Directive 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and Council, grounded in substantial research, aims to provide support for new fatherhood. This work-life balance directive, in force since August 2022, establishes paternity leave as an ordinary policy measure in the member states, making at least two out of the minimum of four months' parental leave non-transferable and thereby acknowledging and enabling fathers' family engagement. However, labour market developments that challenge the financial security of families may delay or hinder the spread of the new male role before men's contribution to childcare and domestic tasks matches that of women in paid work. Articles in this Special Collection (see even Jalovaara and Andersson 2023) show that as social inequality increases the gender revolution can stall, which in turn can jeopardize families' prosperity.

Avenues for further research that are not covered in this Special Collection should also be highlighted. In recent decades the reversal of the gender gap in education has been an important aspect of changing gender roles. It is less clear whether it will halt or reinforce the social polarization of family life, while possibly supporting the new male role given that educational homogamy and hypogamy (that is, a more-educated woman and a less-educated man) dominate couple formation. Resilience to economic uncertainty needs to be studied specifically, as men usually out-earn their female partner in the latter type of couple (Van Bavel, Schwartz, and Esteve 2018).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is another phenomenon that has substantially impacted family dynamics, in particular roller-coaster fertility and delayed births in the short term (e.g., Aassve et al. 2020; Plach et al. 2023; Settersten et al. 2020; Sobotka et al. 2023). Future research needs to address the lasting effects of the pandemic shock, including changing conditions for partnership and parenthood transitions. These conditions are shaped by economic decline and growing economic uncertainty related to labour market developments during and after the pandemic; for example, rapidly increasing online work arrangements (for an overview see Bearson, Kenney, and Zysman 2021). A re-traditionalization of gendered patterns of childcare and employment has been expected due to the pandemic, but is not supported by the research evidence (Zartler, Suwada, and Kreyenfeld 2022), indicating that the gender revolution may stall but is not reversing.

Perceptions of economic uncertainty and their implications for family life are also of interest for research on new gender roles under conditions of economic instability, preferably relying on couple information, which is seldom available. The perspective of couples needs to be strengthened. Furthermore, research needs to address the new sources of economic uncertainty imposed by technological developments such as digitalization and automation, and their implications for family life. For example, a recent study by Matysiak, Bellani, and Bogusz (2023) shows that fertility may be sensitive to changes in labour market prospects related to the increasing adoption of robots in production, which alters demand for qualifications and skills and increases uncertainty, especially among less-educated/skilled workers. As reliance on Artificial Intelligence escalates across various sectors of the economy (Furman and Seamans 2019; Wirtz, Weyerer, and Geyer 2019), labour market restructuring at a previously unprecedented scale may follow, bringing new uncertainty and challenges for women and men, families and societies.

4. Acknowledgments

The research leading to these articles received funding from the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) under grant agreement no. 320116 for the

research project FamiliesAndSocieties. Rudolf Richter and Irena E. Kotowska were co-leaders of work package 3 (WP3) on The New Roles Of Women And Men And Implications For Families And Societies, in which the results presented in this Special Collection were produced. Livia Sz. Oláh was the project coordinator and contributed to the research in WP3. This research has greatly benefited from comments from the Advisory Board; invaluable feedback especially from Frances K. Goldscheider, Fred Deven, Chiara Saraceno, and Mary C. Brinton is gratefully acknowledged.

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