

The one-child family in Europe: a cross-country comparison

Introduction

The fertility decline across Europe has been well documented (Philipov and Kohler 2001; Frejka et al. 2008; Coale and Watkins 2017). Accompanying this transition is the increase in one and zero child families. However, this process is not uniform across the region and it cannot be explained by fertility decline alone. As pointed out by Breton & Prioux (2009) there is a great diversity in the prevalence of one-child families in Europe, despite the somewhat homogeneity in the increase of childless women and the low levels of fertility.

However, even as most countries in Europe present below-replacement fertility, the majority of women still say that their preferred number of children is two. This persistency of a two-child ideal, as discussed by Sobotka and Beaujouan (2014) is linked to a desire to fit the social norm and to the still existing negative stereotypes about only-children being spoiled or socially maladjusted.

In societies with below-replacement fertility and an aversion for only-children, one would expect that most women would either have two-children to fulfil their desire to have a family while still fitting in with the two-child norm, or to forgo having children altogether and remain childless. However, this is not what is observed in many European countries, where only-child families are becoming increasingly prevalent despite the prejudices and the two-child ideal.

With that in mind, this paper hopes to explore the main factors that lead women to not progress to a second birth and how does this vary within Europe. Is this simply a matter of fertility decline and postponement of first births that prevents women from having their desired second child? What is the role of union status in this fertility outcome? Are fertility preferences being met and are they changing over time? Can cultural views on the importance of family and children explain some of the observed regional variation? Moreover, do the women having only-children present the same characteristics and are they part of the same socioeconomic group across all countries?

Only-children are still severely understudied in the social sciences. As their prevalence grows not only in Europe, but across the globe, it becomes increasingly important to understand what has been leading to this increase and what are their possible demographic and socioeconomic consequences. This paper hopes to contribute to this field by expanding on previous research and adding a cross-country comparison, which will be important to help understand what are the factors behind the heterogeneity in the region in regards to only-child families.

Methods and Data

The main data source for this research will be the Genders and Generations Survey (GGS), conducted in the 2000s. This dataset currently has two waves, covering 16 countries in wave 1 and 12 countries in wave 2. It has a panel design, collecting information on the same people at 3-year intervals (between waves). They are all cross-nationally comparable and can be combined with other data sources such as the Family and Fertility Survey (FFS) and the GGP Contextual Database.

The FFS were conducted in the 1990s and cover 23 countries, with 9 of those appearing in both waves of the GGS, and can be used as a “third wave” in this study. Other data sources, such as the European Value Survey (EVS), will be used as complements for better contextualizing the values and attitudes of each country in regards to family and fertility.

Descriptive statistics will be used in first instance to explore the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of these women. This will allow us to see any preliminary links between variables and identify possible relevant groups for more detailed research. Then, a multivariate analysis will be used to test the relationship between the relevant variables and the outcome of having only one child.

To look at the possible factors that are leading women to not progress to a second birth in Europe, a logistic model similar to that used by Breton and Prioux (2009) will be constructed. The dependent variable is binary indicating whether the respondent has or not had a second child within ten years of the first birth. For this model, women aged 25 or older who have had a first child will be considered (leading to a sample of around five thousand women for each country).

By using women who have not yet finished their reproductive period in this analysis we are assuming that either i) women who have not had a second child 10 years after the first will stop at one; ii) or, even if they do, that first child will have already lived most of its infancy as an only-child, being comparable to one in behaviour. Qualitatively speaking, it may be argued that what matters most to distinguish an only-child from a child with siblings is whether or not they have lived with other children of similar age in the same household during their formative years. Another argument is that being economically and/or emotionally dependent on the same people during childhood, even if they don't live together, may have more of an impact than simply sharing a household, as they would still have to share attention and resources from their guardians. In the same vein, it is also possible to argue that a large age gap between siblings may lead to a quasi-only-child experience, as these siblings wouldn't have to “compete” with each other in the same way. Previous literature looking at only-children argues that they are comparable to first-borns in terms of academic performance. This is explained by the way resources are allocated among siblings in a household (Blake, 1981; Chen, 2015). In a lot of researches focused on understanding personality differences between only-children and children with siblings, time spent with parents seems to be a big factor (Jefferies, 2001). Therefore, some children with siblings may also live this “only-child experience” depending on the specific family and household dynamics of each culture or even socioeconomic strata within the same society.

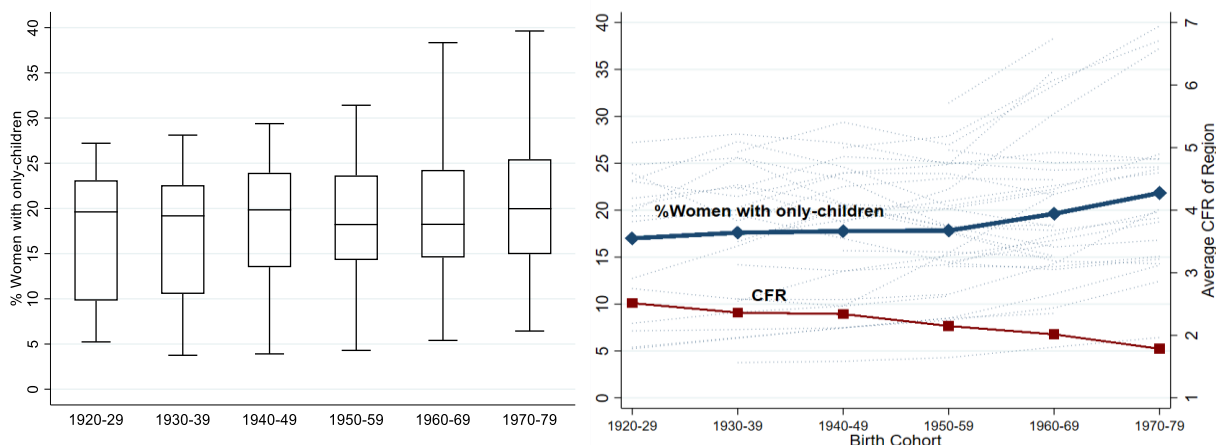
The independent variables were chosen based on the previous literature on the subject. The main demographic variables are age at first birth and being in a relationship for the last 10 years, which serve to test the impact of postponement. The independent variables also include highest educational level, religion and realised fertility intention to indicate personal characteristics of the mother that could be affecting their desired number of children. In addition, answers to questions on opinions on family (such as “a woman should try to marry and have a child” and “a woman has to

have children in order to be fulfilled”) and on traditional family values (such as “marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended”) will be used to create an index on family values, that will serve as a proxy for cultural characteristics affecting realised fertility.

Preliminary look and expected results

Based on preliminary and descriptive analysis from census and other survey data, we can see the overall proportion of women between 40 to 59 years old (considered to have finished their reproductive period, but are not old enough for any significant mortality selection) with an only-child has been steadily increasing in Europe for the last few decades, especially since the 1950-59 birth cohort. This increase is, as expected, accompanied by a fall in the Cohort Fertility Rate (CFR). Figure 1 also shows the great diversity in the prevalence of women with an only-child in the region, with an increase in distance between the outliers over the cohorts:

Figure 1. Proportion of women aged 40-59 with an only-child and cohort fertility rate across Europe, by 10-year birth cohorts



Note: The averages were constructed based on 33 countries.

Source: based on data from IPUMS-I, Cohort Fertility and Educational Database (CFE) and Human Fertility Database (HFD).

Specifically countries from Central and Eastern Europe present the greatest variation, between Russia with 39.6% and Albania with 6.4% in the most recent cohort. The political regime change around 1989 in the sub-region has affected it in many ways, including their fertility trajectories and family dynamics. Despite the interest in the literature in understanding the rapid fall of fertility in the region, there is still a great debate over the factors associated with this transformation and with possibly unrealised fertility intentions for women in these countries. One hypothesis to explain the high prevalence of only-children in the region is linked to the strong family values attached to the culture of these countries. Women that didn't necessarily want to have children, will still have one child, as this is what is expected of them, but they will not go further than one. Another possibility is that fertility postponement or the social crisis after regime change has lead women to have less children. However, these don't explain why the proportion of only-children was high even before 1989 in certain countries. Countries in CEE are also not homogeneous, which could explain why not

all countries in the region follow the same trends in only-child families. For example, they have different religious backgrounds and the job market structures (Sobotka, 2003/4).

Based on previous research on fertility decline, we hypothesise that demographic characteristics such as late age at first birth and not being in a union after the first birth will have important effects for not progressing to a second birth for all countries. However, as discussed by Choi and Monden (2017), the average socioeconomic status of the mothers of only-children in the country are also linked to their prevalence. Therefore, we also expect that cultural and economic characteristics will be the most important to explain the variations in the prevalences between countries.

Final remarks

The preliminary look points to a great diversity in the prevalence of only-child families in Europe. Moreover, there's also variation in the trends over time, with some countries maintaining a somewhat constant proportion of women who finish their reproductive period with an only-child and other presenting a very rapid increase over the cohorts.

This paper will explore these variations by looking at the characteristics of the women having an only-child in 16 European countries with the use primarily of GGS data. It will seek to identify the main demographic, social and cultural factors that lead women to this fertility outcome and whether these are constant throughout all countries in the region or whether the drivers of only-child families vary by context. The results will help us better understand the differences between intended and realised fertility and the differences and similarities between different European contexts.

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