

## *Enrollment in Education and Timing of First Child in the Netherlands*

As in many European countries, period fertility levels in the Netherlands declined since 2010, from 1,8 to 1,59 in 2018. At first, this was considered a temporary effect due to 'the great recession' of 2008. Women were expected to catch up again after the period of economic downturn. With low fertility rates persisting even though the economic situation improved, the question arises whether more structural changes have taken place, possibly leading to lower cohort fertility in younger cohorts. Fertility figures suggest that probably the main reason for the low TFR in the Netherlands is that young women are delaying motherhood: birthrates dropped primarily in first births of women in their twenties and lower thirties. In older women the birth rate is still rising. This pattern corresponds to the situation in the late 1960's and 1970's when younger women delayed having children, but caught up again later.

In order to get more insight into this process of delayed parenthood, this paper focuses on the potential reasons for young women to do so. For one, changes in the labor market may play an important role. Compared to ten years ago, it takes longer for young people to land a steady job. Results from the Dutch Labour Force Survey show that the age at which more than 50 percent of young people have a permanent position shifted from 24 to 27 years old between 2008 and 2018. Instead, more people have flexible contracts. This goes along with greater job and income insecurity. In a recent survey, more than 90 percent of respondents indicated that having a sufficiently high income was a very important precondition for starting a family. Research by Chkalova and Van Gaalen (2017) shows that women in flexible jobs less often have a first child within a year than the ones in steady jobs. Also, lower educated men and women in flexible jobs less often start a relationship, often an important precondition for having children. It has, therefore, been suggested that the increasing flexibility of the Dutch labor market is the main reason for the observed postponement of motherhood.

However, educational levels are also still rising in the Netherlands. Especially women spend more time in education. Nowadays, a larger share of young women than of young man is higher educated. Rising levels of education have been shown to be an important factor in the rising ages at first birth in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and of the low fertility rates during that time (Beets, Dourleijn, Liefbroer and Henkens, 2001). Women spent more time in education and delayed having children until after finishing school, but also after gaining some work experience first. Here, it is assessed whether the still rising educational levels are also an important factor in the recent delays.

For this, several cohorts of recent graduates are followed through time. Registrative information on socio-economic status at the beginning and end of a year is looked at to determine if someone has graduated. Women are considered to have left education when in year  $t$  they are still enrolled in education, but no longer are in both years  $t+1$  and  $t+2$ . For this selection of women, birth dates of their first child are looked up in the register. It is then first of all verified whether the mean age at graduation has indeed gone up. Next, it is determined whether for cohorts that graduated in the early 2000's the timing of the first births is similar to that of cohorts that finished school after 2010. Also, differences between higher and lower educated are considered.