

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

Few children in Europe: A deliberate choice or a compromise?



Policy implications of **REPRO** (Reproductive Decision-Making in a Macro-Micro Perspective), an EU-funded research project on the antecedents and outcomes of fertility intentions

Finalized project

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INTRODUCTION

Policy context

Modern contraceptives make it easy for individuals and couples not to have children. However, those who do want to have children might face social, economic, cultural, psychological and other obstacles both at the individual and social level which prevent them from fulfilling their desires. This creates a gap between people's wishes and behaviour with regard to fertility. Unravelling this mismatch is of key relevance for society and science.

Key findings

The REPRO challenge was to investigate the fertility decision-making in an integrated micro-macro framework. The key findings suggest that fertility decisions are influenced by the normative pressure of relatives and friends as well as by personal attitudes towards having a child which are especially important when the decision concerns the first child. In addition, several factors related to partnership, education, employment and housing conditions impede people to take and usefully implement their fertility decisions. Their relevance depends on the respective country and context.

Course of action

The REPRO team found that policies aimed at improving women's work-life balance are the most relevant type of intervention for helping couples to successfully construct and realise their fertility intentions. Policy makers should, however, be aware that such measures may face normative resistance in communities that view parenthood mainly as a task of mothers.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

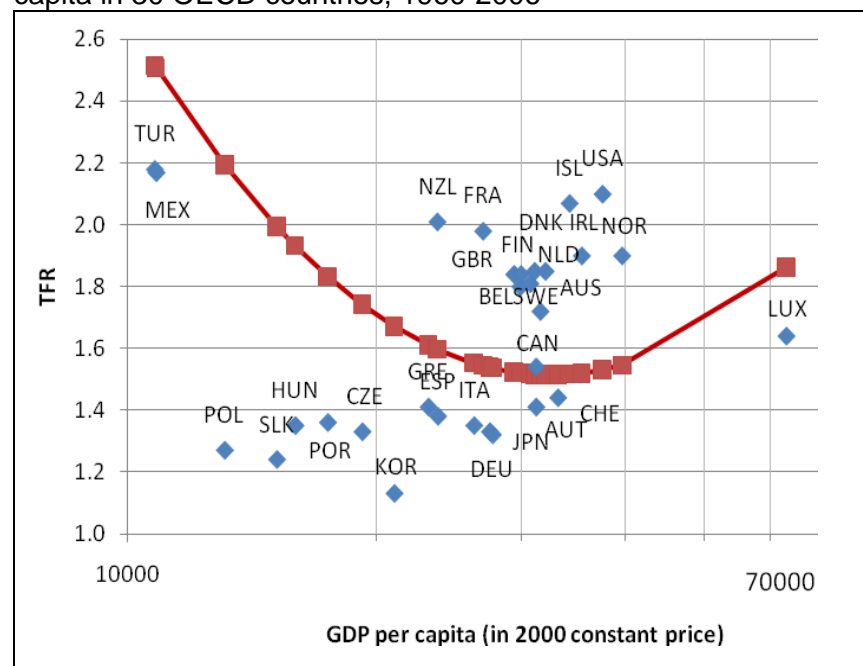
Positive relationship between GDP and fertility

Economic development leads to higher fertility rates

A comparative analysis of 30 OECD countries showed that economic development has a negative impact on period fertility rates when the country's GDP per capita is relatively low. However, the relationship reverses when societies have reached a certain level of GDP per capita. The turning point is estimated to be a GDP per capita value of around 32,600 US dollars in purchasing power parity.

A break-down of the GDP into different components pointed out that fertility rates co-vary with the increase in female employment rates. Hence, the positive effect of the GDP on fertility is likely to be small if there are no policies in place to help women reconcile work and family life. A graphic depicting the link between period fertility rates and GDP per capita in the OECD countries during the period 1960-2006 shows an inverse J pattern.

Figure 1 – Relationship between period fertility level and GDP per capita in 30 OECD countries, 1960-2006



Determinants of fertility intentions

The Theory of Planned Behaviour as a key to understanding fertility intentions

The REPRO team used the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as a key to understanding how fertility intentions develop. The theory considers intentions as an immediate forerunner of the corresponding behaviour and as being formulated under the immediate impact of three groups of factors: (a) personal positive and negative attitudes towards the behaviour, i.e. having a child, (b) subjective norms, i.e. perceived social pressure to engage or not to engage in the behaviour, and (c) perceived behavioural control, i.e. the ability to perform the behaviour, which may depend, for example, on the availability of housing, income or other resources.

A comparative analysis of eight European countries revealed that these three groups all influence the construction of intentions while their relative importance varies by age and parity. The decision to have a first child is mainly driven by positive outcomes of having a child and by perceived normative pressure from friends and relatives. The decision to have a second child is cognitively more complex and involves the weighing up of several additional factors (perceived behaviour control). Importantly, perceptions of control also influence the realisation of intentions if the intentions are uncertain.

Housing conditions are a crucial control factor

People view having a child as a costly endeavour, which, however, adds to the satisfaction and certainty of their lives. Partnership situation and housing conditions are important control factors for developing the intention to have a child.

The couple is a decision-making unit

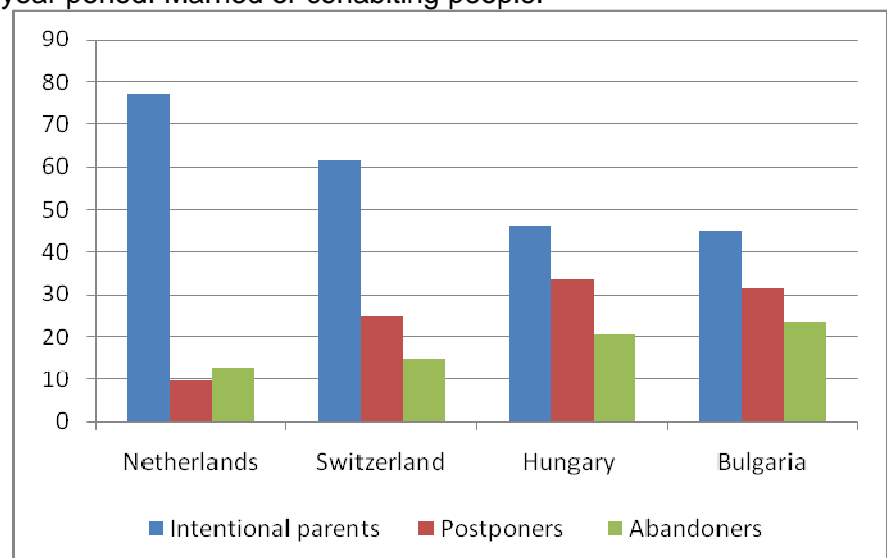
Men were found to be of paramount importance in the fertility decision-making process. Moreover, in some countries with scarce childcare services such as Italy, the (expected) support of the partners' mothers was also a crucial factor for the partners' joint decision to have a second child.

The number of people who realise their fertility intentions varies across countries

The link between fertility intentions and behaviour

The proportion of women and men who meet their short-term fertility intentions varies significantly across countries. A comparative analysis of four countries showed that in the Netherlands and in Switzerland the shares of people in partnership who said they intended to have a child within the next three years and actually managed to have one are 77% and 61% respectively. The percentages of this group of *intentional parents* are much lower in Bulgaria (45%) and Hungary (46%) (Fig.2).

Figure 2 – Shares of people who intended to have a child within the next two years and did or did not have a child in the subsequent two-year period. Married or cohabiting people.



Failure to realise fertility intentions causes involuntary postponement

Fertility intentions change over time

Motherhood and full-time employment are considered to be incompatible

People who did not realise their fertility intentions either *postponed* or *abandoned* them. In the Netherlands and in Switzerland, the shares of these two categories are rather small: 9.8% and 24.8%, respectively, for *postponers*, and 12.9% and 14.8% for *abandoners*. By contrast, in Bulgaria and Hungary, one-third of all respondents are *postponers* and more than one-fifth are *abandoners* (Fig.2).

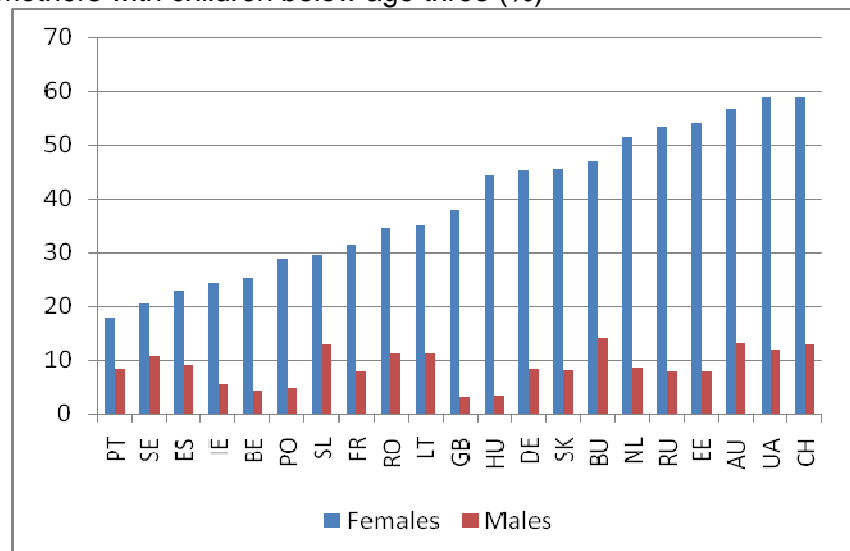
The observed patterns are predominantly rooted in the pace of social change and the unprecedented transformations in the cultural system and institutional structures of the former communist countries. Postponing childbearing is the result of a series of failures to realise fertility intentions (involuntary postponement) rather than a delay caused by the individuals' deliberate decision to have children at older ages (voluntary postponement). Obstacles to realising planned fertility are mainly related to partnership, education, employment and housing.

Many people change their childbearing intentions over time. We found that people with conditional, uncertain or ambivalent intentions are particularly vulnerable. This group might be more responsive to policy interventions.

The normative context of fertility

In Europe, parenting is still predominantly considered the task of mothers. A comparative analysis of 21 European countries documented that most Europeans think it is not good that women who have children under age three work full time. Norms for men and women differ very strongly: only a small share of all respondents criticises that fathers of children below age three have a full-time job (Fig. 3).

Figure 3 – Disapproval of having a full-time job for fathers and mothers with children below age three (%)



Disapproval of mothers having children below age three and working full time is highest in the Ukraine, Estonia and Bulgaria. Interestingly, similarly high shares are observed in countries such as Switzerland, Austria and the Netherlands where the norms relating to other aspects of childbearing behaviour are much less strict.

Highly educated, less religious individuals and those who value personal autonomy highly are less likely to disapprove of mothers working full time. However, even in modern times, childbearing norms have been remarkably persistent.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

How have policy measures influenced fertility?

In recent decades, policy support for families with children has grown in most European countries. The main source of cross-country variation are the level of support provided to parents with children under three and the extent to which parental leave entitlements and childcare services complement each other. Irrespective of the mix of measures introduced, they all modified the timing of childbearing: well-designed policies allowed couples to realise their childbearing plans earlier. Policies improving women's opportunities to reconcile work and family life proved to be the most effective measure for sustaining fertility levels.

Measures improving the work-life balance are most effective

Combining motherhood and employment could be facilitated by measures which not only make it easier for mothers to do paid work but also more attractive to be a parent. However, policies supporting working mothers may face normative resistance in countries where combining motherhood with full-time employment is strongly disapproved. Policy makers should be aware of the strength of these norms. Changing them is a long-term project, which might be facilitated by the following measures:

- Show that it is actually feasible to combine motherhood and gainful employment
- Improve the coverage and quality of existing childcare
- Provide convincing evidence that childcare is not harmful for children
- Strengthen fathers' involvement in childcare
- Implement gender equality measures which increase women's possibilities to make their own decisions

Pre-requisites for efficient family-friendly policies

Moreover, efficient family-friendly policies should be:

- Tailored to the country's needs
 - Policies, which may work in one country do not necessarily work well in another country
- Durable
 - Frequent changes increase uncertainty, which hinders people to formulate their childbearing plans
 - Child-bearing and childrearing practices can only be changed gradually

- Coherent
 - Offer a coherent package of measures: Encouraging people to have children at earlier ages by warning about the problems of late parenthood should be accompanied by housing policies which improve access to affordable accommodation and measures, which improve young people's integration into the labour market
- Comprehensive
 - Financial incentives affect the timing of fertility but not necessarily the number of children people have
 - The availability of childcare structures affects both the timing and the total number of children people have
- Differentiated in order to reach all socio-economic groups
 - Home-care cash benefits are helpful to low income groups and inactive parents
 - Part-time jobs are an advantage for highly educated and working parents
- Targeted to both women and men, as childbearing decisions are made by the couple
- Oriented towards the positive aspects, both material and emotional, of having children by downsizing the constraints of having children.
- Attentive to create a climate of economic security which enables individuals to make childbearing plans in the short and medium-term future.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

REPRO (Reproductive Decision-Making in a Macro-Micro Perspective) was a research project aimed at improving our understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of fertility decisions of contemporary Europeans.

The main objectives of the project were to:

- 1) Map cross-national variation in fertility, cultural, economic and policy-related indicators (macro level)
- 2) Investigate the determinants of fertility intentions at the micro level
- 3) Analyse the determinants of fertility behaviour at the micro level
- 4) Assess the impact of contextual factors on individual-level reproductive decision making (macro-micro level)
- 5) Draw policy-relevant conclusions

Methodology

The REPRO project tackled fertility as a macro-micro issue. In a macro-micro model of fertility, fertility rates depend on the macro-level conditions prevailing in a society. However, these conditions do not directly affect fertility but rather impinge on the fertility decision-making processes of individuals and couples. Actually having a child is the outcome of this decision-making process. A society's fertility rates are the macro-level result of the myriad of fertility decisions made by individuals and couples.

Data

The REPRO studies are based on data from the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS), the European Social Survey (ESS), the Eurobarometer survey and qualitative surveys. The qualitative data were collected in a series of comparable in-depth interviews. The respondents were mostly middle-class city dwellers in their late 20s and early 30s. The interviews were made in seven European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Switzerland.

New Databases

The REPRO partners initiated the compilation of the Human Fertility Database (HFD), which contains fertility data on various countries. All the data have the same structure and thus permit the direct construction of indices, which users may utilise for their specific purposes. The HFD is available online:

www.humanfertility.org

In addition, a macro-level database on fertility, family policies and workplace practices was elaborated. It contains information on fertility trends, contextual indicators on household structure and living arrangements along with detailed information on the policy support received by families in order to compensate the economic costs of children and/or of combining work and family life. It also includes some aggregated indicators on labour-market and poverty outcomes. The information was derived from various sources and international databases, above all from the OECD family database. The database is available at:

<http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/repro/databases.html>

PROJECT IDENTITY**Project name**

Reproductive Decision-Making in a Macro-Micro Perspective (REPRO)

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Website

www.repro-project.org

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Further readings

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