

VID Colloquium

Reversing the Reversal? The Cross-Country Correlation between Female Labour Market Participation and Fertility Revisited

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Numerous studies have found that the cross-country relationship between period Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and Female Labour Force Participation rate (FLFP) in rich OECD countries reversed from negative to positive in the 1980s. We revisit this relationship, using recent data until 2012 and covering a wider set of countries than most of the previous studies, incorporating also many countries from Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, we refine the analyses by considering a more suitable indicator of female labour force participation of women in prime childbearing ages (focusing on ages 25-39 or 25-44 rather than 15-64) and considering the TFR – FLFP correlation within broad, more homogenous geographical regions (both at the country level as well as for smaller NUTS2 regions). We also address possible tempo distortions in period fertility measures by reconstructing and analysing the series of cohort fertility and female labour force participation. Using the refined period measures we confirm that the correlation between TFR and FLFP reversed from negative to positive in the mid-1980s but we also show that after peaking in the mid-1990s it underwent a continuous decline and even became slightly negative by 2012. This “disappearance” of the positive correlation is explained by a broad convergence towards relatively high levels of female labour force participation, which now stands around 80% in most countries. However, we do not find any consistent pattern across time and space in the association between TFR and FLFP when we divide the countries into four broad regions, regardless of the fact whether our analytical units are countries or regions. Finally, turning to a cohort analysis and using the commonly used set of rich OECD countries, we were able to recreate the reversal in the TFR-FLFP association from negative to positive, occurring for the women born around 1960. However, the positive correlation is much weaker than that reported in period analyses, suggesting that tempo effects have contributed to the reported strength in the TFR-FLFP association in the past decades.

About the presenter

Anna Matysiak is a researcher at the Vienna Institute of Demography and an Assistant Professor at the Warsaw School of Economics, Institute of Statistics and Demography. She has received her PhD in 2009 at the Warsaw School of Economics. Her research interests cover family dynamics and its interrelationships with socio-economic position of individuals, their quality of life, gender role attitudes and the institutional context of the country. She has mostly published on the effects on the interdependencies between women’s labour force participation and family formation/ dissolution, work-family conflict, consequences of childbearing on subjective well-being and diffusion of new family forms (e.g. cohabitation).