

Changing linkages between gender role attitudes and fertility in the selected European countries during 1990-2017

Introduction

At present, fertility is low and unstable in many developed countries. There were some signs of a recovery in fertility in the Nordic nations and some countries in other regions, including Lithuania (Frejka 2010), but the trend did not last and was replaced again by declining fertility. The latter fertility decline has been observed particularly in the Nordic countries, which were previously considered relatively high fertility, with rates stable and close to the replacement level (Nordic Council of Ministers 2020).

Fundamental fertility changes and persistently low fertility rates are increasingly being interpreted employing concepts of gender equality, gender equity and gender revolution. From this perspective, a decline in fertility is observed together with the erosion of traditional gender roles in many developed countries. But an increase in fertility can be expected after transiting to egalitarian gender roles (McDonald 2000a, 2000b, 2013; Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegard 2015). As many researchers emphasize despite the increasing number and diversity of studies, the links between the dimensions of fertility and gender equality at various levels are inconsistent (Goldscheider, Olah and Puur 2010; Neyer, Lappegard and Vignoli 2013; Brinton and Lee 2016).

The aim of this paper is to describe the changing linkages between gender role attitudes and fertility in Lithuania, Sweden, Estonia, Austria, France and Italy during 1990-2017.

Theoretical background

According to McDonald (2000a, 2000b), models of gender role and fertility are related to the moral imperatives of family, while changes in fertility pattern require social, structural, and moral changes. The importance of normative context is reflected in a multi-equilibrium perspective that is illustrated by the U-shaped relation between fertility and normative approaches to gender roles (Esping-Andersen, Billari 2015). Societies move from a stable equilibrium under which the model of male breadwinner and female housewife dominates, and the fertility rate is near the replacement level, to a new stable equilibrium based on the normative dominance of gender egalitarianism, when the birth rate rises again. Societies move between these equilibria through a period of multiple equilibria when alternative normative regimes may emerge because of the uncertainty and normative confusion of gender roles and identities relating to family life. However, egalitarian attitudes spread and increasingly transform into behavior as the transition to a new equilibrium continues (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015).

The primary markers of progress in the two-part gender revolution or transition to a new equilibrium are the attitudes to gender roles that shape the basis of models reflecting different gender

roles (Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegard 2015). The new gender structure that emerges in the course of a gender revolution requires the generation and adoption of new behavioral patterns, starting from changes in attitudes. Attitudes toward gender roles include beliefs and concepts relating to the social roles of men and women in the private and public spheres (Davis and Greenstein 2009) or structural possibilities and constructs (Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegard 2015).

Based on the above-mentioned ideas a hypothesis that is being tested in this study is formulated: *changing linkage between gender role attitudes and childbearing are related to changing prevailing attitudes toward gender roles.*

Data and methods

Selection of surveys and variables. The selection of data for analysis was focused toward quantitative, international and comparable surveys. Based on these criteria, five international sample surveys and nine data sets covering the period from 1990 to 2017 were selected – Population Policy Acceptance 2004, Generations and Gender 2006, European Values 1990, 1999, 2008 and 2017, International Social Survey Programme 1994 and 2012, and European Social Survey 2010.

Selection of countries. Lithuania differs from other post-Soviet or European countries in a somewhat controversial context. Lithuanian women are the most educated in European Union (Eurostat 2021a), meanwhile, the gender employment gap between men and women is the lowest (Eurostat 2021b). However, based on the Gender Equality Index compiled by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2020), Lithuania ranks 22nd. Due to such controversies, the links between fertility and gender roles in Lithuania are analysed in comparison to other countries representing different fertility, normative, cultural, social, political and gender equality context. The countries selected for the comparison with Lithuania are Sweden, Estonia, Austria, France and Italy, with different reasons for choosing these nations. There is no single criterion that can typologically both reveal the specific features of these countries and cover them all, which is why a combination of different types has been chosen:

- Sweden is often described as the most egalitarian country of the countries studied here, having a developed social democratic welfare system (Lohmann and Zagel 2016).
- Lithuania and Estonia do not reflect classical types of welfare states unless they form a new and separate type of post-Soviet Eastern European countries (Fenger 2007). Alternatively, as Aidukaitė, Bogdanova and Guogis (2012:7) suggest, Lithuania can be described as a post-communist welfare or “minimal welfare” state. Estonia, differs from the Baltic countries in terms of being liberal and historically a Protestant country (Panova and Buber-Ennsner 2016). Lithuania, meanwhile, differs because of its Catholicism, maintaining a familialistic trajectory (Fux 2008).
- France is distinct because of its liberalism, long-term progressive family policies, optional familialism (Leitner 2014) and progress in terms of demographic processes.

- Austria is representative of a conservative, Catholic country that maintains a familialistic trajectory in which strong secularization and a robust welfare system is developed in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity (Fux 2008) or explicit familialism (Leitner 2014).

- Italy was chosen because of its long-term context of low fertility, an underdeveloped welfare system and a familialistic orientation – relating to the significant effect that the traditional family structure has to fertility (Fux 2008).

Data analysis. This study analyzes 25-to-44-year-olds. The variables selected for the analysis reflect different dimensions of gender equality, in order to assess the general approach, changing cluster configurations and changes in the countries.

The analysis is based on two main methods:

- K-means cluster analysis method is used for analyzing gender role attitudes. Only questions that are statistically significant after the initial cluster analysis are included in the final analysis. In all cases, individuals are classified into one of three clusters to reflect the three gender-role models – traditional, intermediate-transitional and egalitarian. This is done based on the values of the means of the cluster centers of each variable within the cluster. The lowest mean signifies the most traditional cluster, whereas the highest – the most egalitarian.

- Logistic regression. The relationship between clusters, representing different attitudes toward gender roles and childbearing across countries and at the country level, are analyzed separately with the use of binary logistic regression.

Results

The results of analysis reveal some inconsistent tendencies over the course of period analysed both in case of gender roles change and the link between fertility and gender roles attitudes clusters.

Based on the results of the cluster analysis, differences between clusters representing various models on gender role attitudes increased over the course of the period analyzed. Despite the general trend that countries have become increasingly egalitarian, the divergence between them has been also increasing. Overall, Lithuania remained the most traditional country in terms of attitudes toward gender roles on average over the analysis period. Lithuania was not only the most traditional of those analyzed, but its pace toward egalitarianism was also the slowest. Estonia occupied intermediate positions throughout the period, with most people usually belonging to the transitional cluster. The most egalitarian country over the whole period analyzed was Sweden, followed by France. Sweden has therefore not only been the most egalitarian nation, but its pace of change toward egalitarianism has also been the highest.

The findings reveal a relatively similar pattern of the link between clusters representing attitudes toward gender roles and fertility when analyzing all countries combined. As those who support the most egalitarian gender role attitudes are from 1.2 to 3 times less likely to have children compared with those who support the most traditional attitudes. But the results of country specific analysis sometimes differ from the general trend, allowing the hypothesis to be partially supported. In Austria, France and Italy, belonging to a cluster that represents different gender role attitudes is usually significant, following a tendency that is in line with the general trend whereby those holding the most traditional gender role attitudes are the most likely to have children compared to those, who express the most egalitarian gender role attitudes. In some countries, such as Sweden and Estonia, there are very few significant effects of any gender role attitudes (cluster) on fertility. Lithuania differs from the general trends as sometimes the highest chance that someone will have a child is observed among those who belong to the intermediate/transitional cluster. However, when statistical significance is not considered, Sweden also stands out as a country where those supporting not the most traditional attitudes to gender roles are more likely to have children. Because of this, the alternative trend to the general one seems to be emerging in Lithuania and Sweden, as the results of the analysis in some cases suggest that those who have not expressed the most traditional views on gender roles are more likely to have children.

Observed inconsistencies and signs of alternative emerging trends of links between fertility and gender role attitudes calls for more detailed analysis. One of the important aspects that requires more attention – the changing effect of gender roles attitudes that can be affected by different sociodemographic characteristics. Another aspect – different pace of countries towards egalitarianism. In order to better understand the differences of transition to egalitarianism based on gender roles, it could be useful to explore the possibilities to conduct a qualitative study in some countries and use a mixed-method design to analyze different aspects of the female or gender revolution that influence change the most.

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