

# **Mind the Gender Gap: Gender Role Attitudes and Their Impact on Union Formation in Europe**

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## **Background**

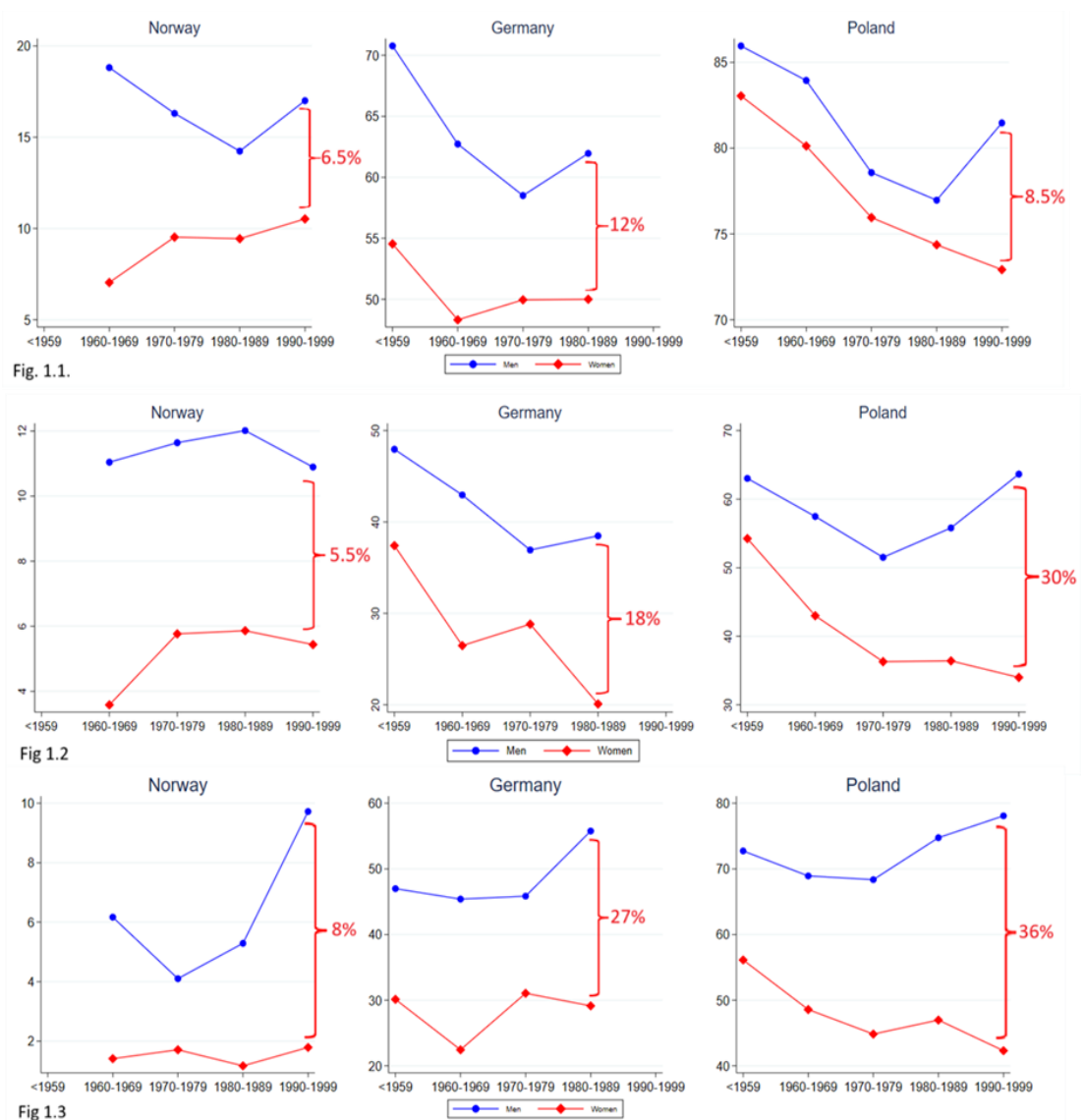
Young men and women are increasingly single (Fry & Parker, 2021; Van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022). Generally, whether one remains single or enters a partnership depends on both the desire for a relationship (Kislev, 2020) and the availability of suitable partners with preferred traits (Corti & Scherer, 2021). While some individuals actively choose singlehood, a significant proportion of singles seem to desire a partnership. Studies reveal that among those who are single, between 34% (Apostolou et al., 2023) and 56.4% (Apostolou et al., 2019) are involuntarily single (i.e. could not find a partner) with the highest rates observed among younger generations. Moreover, an overwhelming majority (85%) of singles have more favorable attitudes toward having a relationship than towards singlehood (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010). These findings suggest that the rise in singlehood is largely attributable to broader societal changes, which influence the availability of suitable partners, rather than solely to individual choice.

Men and women generally prefer partners who share similar characteristics, such as education (Jonason and Antoon, 2019; Whyte et al., 2018), race/ethnicity (Sweeney and Borden, 2009; Potârcă and Mills, 2015; ), age (Kolk 2015) or attitudes (Bleske-Rechek and Ryan, 2015; Lewis, 2016). This tendency for assortative mating (i.e., individuals choose partners similar to themselves) implies that societal changes affecting the balance of men and women with similar characteristics can influence relationship formation. For instance, since the 1970s, women's educational attainment has surpassed that of men in most European countries (De Hauw et al., 2017). This shift has led to a situation where there are more highly educated women than men, making it harder for these women to find similarly educated partners, a phenomenon known as the 'education mating squeeze' (De Hauw et al., 2014). Research has extensively focused on the consequences of this educational gender gap on partnership formation (Corti & Scherer, 2021; Esteve et al., 2012; De Hauw et al., 2017; Van Bavel et al 2018). However, the literature is missing studies that investigate the effect of the gap in gender role attitudes on union formation.

Generally, men tend to hold more traditional gender role attitudes, while women are more likely to hold egalitarian ones, with these differences expected to diminish over time as women's increased labor force participation promotes more equal roles (Ciabattari, 2001). However, evidence suggests that overall in Europe, differences in gender role attitudes have accentuated, leading to a growing gender gap in attitudes among younger generations (Shorrocks, 2018; Briselli and Gonzalez, 2024). In preliminary research, using pooled data from the Gender and Generations Survey I and II, I find that the magnitude of the gender gap in attitudes varies considerably between countries and based on the dimension of gender role attitudes. Figure 1 illustrates these findings in Norway, Germany, and Poland—countries that represent different levels of gender egalitarianism. The figure shows the proportion of men and women who hold traditional gender attitudes (y axis) regarding mothers' paid work (Fig 1.1),

importance of employment for women (Fig1.2), women's leadership abilities (Fig 1.3). The percentage is computed separately for each (available) birth cohort (x axis). The gender gap depends on the topic: it is smallest regarding mothers' employment, suggesting that men and women largely agree that a mother's work does not harm her children. However, the disagreement widens when it comes to the importance of women's employment and becomes most pronounced regarding women's leadership abilities. This suggests that while men may generally accept women working, they are less likely to see it as essential, and many hold even stronger reservations about women in leadership roles. Importantly, the gap in gender role attitudes seems to be wider among younger cohorts as the young men display more traditional attitudes than men from older cohorts. Furthermore, the gender gap in attitudes we find is considerably larger than the gender gap in educational attainment (see van Hek et al., 2016). Therefore, this gender gap in attitudes is not simply a result of differences in educational attainment and is likely to independently influence partnership formation.

Figure 1. Gap in gender role attitudes by birth cohort



Note: The figure shows the unweighted percentage of men and women (y axis) by birth cohort (x axis) endorsing traditional values in three areas, corresponding to subfigures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3: 1.1) Mothers' paid work—respondents who 'Agree' or

‘Strongly agree’ with the statement "A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works"; 1.2) Women's Employment—respondents who answered ‘Men definitely’ or ‘Men slightly’ to the question "For whom is having a job more important?"; and 1.3) Women's leadership abilities—respondents who answered ‘Men definitely’ or ‘Men slightly’ to the question "On the whole, who would make better political leaders?"

The importance of gender gaps in attitudes has been highlighted in fertility research (e.g. Bernhard and Goldscheider 2006; Miettinen et al 2011; Lappegard et al 2021). Nonetheless, these studies focused on fertility behaviours of individuals who formed a union. To the best of our knowledge, there is no research which would investigate how differences in gender role attitudes affect partnership formation. In the proposed study we fill this gap in research. Specifically, I expect that conservative men and egalitarian women face a shortage of potential partners because the rise in these groups is accompanied by a decline in potential partners with similar attitudes. In contrast, egalitarian men and conservative women will have a larger pool of potential partners. Therefore, we hypothesize that in countries and birth cohorts with larger gaps in gender attitudes: 1) conservative men and egalitarian women are less likely to enter a union, while 2) egalitarian men and conservative women are more likely to enter a union.

## **Methodology**

To address this research gap, we use data from the Gender and Generations Survey I (GGS) waves 1 and 2. The sample includes men and women aged 18 to 45 who are single in the first wave. The outcome variable of interest is whether the respondents enter a union in the second wave of the survey, which we define as a binary variable: remains single or enters a union. While previous studies (Bellani, 2017; Kalmijn, 2013) have focused primarily on unions in which individuals live together (i.e. cohabiting or married), we extend the analysis to include those in romantic relationships but living apart, a situation that is increasingly common among younger people (Liefbroer et al., 2015). We assess gender role attitudes across multiple dimensions, as these capture distinct aspects of attitudes toward gender roles (Hudde & Engelhardt, 2020). The key explanatory variable is the respondent's gender role attitude measured in the first wave, classified into three categories: traditional, neutral, or egalitarian. Additionally, we measure the gender gap in attitudes by calculating the percentage difference between women and men with traditional views, broken down by country and birth cohort. Control variables include respondent's age, education level, and employment status.

To test the relationship between gender attitudes and partnership status, we employ multilevel logistic regressions with two levels of analysis: individuals at level 1 and country-cohorts at level 2. To the hypotheses, the analysis includes a cross-level interaction between the respondent's gender attitudes and the gender attitude gap in their country-cohort. Separate models are run for men and women, as we anticipate differences between the two groups in how gender attitudes influence relationship status.

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