

A Retreat from Parenthood within Partnerships: An Emerging Trend in Northern Europe

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Introduction

The postponement of first births to later ages is a well-known phenomenon in the Western context (Balbo et al. 2012), but whether and how this tendency interacts with developments in the domain of partnerships across various socio-economic and cultural contexts is not clear. On one hand, having a partner has been associated with a higher probability of becoming a parent (Holland 2017; Saarela & Skirbekk 2019); on the other hand, postponing or foregoing fertility within unions is a primary reason for the decline in fertility from 2000 to 2018 in Finland (Hellstrand et al. 2022). Inspired by a recent study (Rahnu & Jalovaara 2023) suggesting that the link between partnership formation and childbearing has been eroding in Finland, this study aims establishing whether the same tendency occurs in countries with a similar demographic profile in Northern Europe.

Theoretical background

The study derives theoretical insights from two frameworks that conceptualize the change in family and fertility patterns over time. The life course approach, which focuses on the timing, incidence, and sequencing of events related to family formation (Billari & Liefbroer 2010; Van Winkle 2017), and the second demographic transition (SDT), which predicted sustained sub-replacement fertility accompanied by increasing flexibility of partnerships and family forms, and a tendency to postpone family formation (Lesthaeghe 2020). Monitoring the regional features of family change among more recent cohorts is still essential for improving the understanding of demographic mechanisms contributing to late and foregone childbearing.

Research questions

How is the timing and incidence of first partnership formation and first birth changing (Q1) and how is family dynamics within a first partnership – the timing and incidence of first birth vs separation – changing (Q2) across cohorts born in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s in Sweden, Finland, Norway and Estonia.

Data and method

The study employs event-history methodology and the GGS2020 data collected in Sweden (2021), Finland (2020), Norway (2020), and Estonia (2021 pilot and 2022 main survey combined), covering native women born in 1961–2002. We combine visual analysis of cumulative incidence functions, based on one minus Kaplan-Meier estimator, and piecewise

constant regressions (not presented here). For the analysis of family dynamics within partnership the competing events are estimated jointly, using the Stata module *stcompet*.

Preliminary results

Figure 1 (left column) illustrates that forming a first co-residential partnership is a common event experienced during young adulthood. By age 26, 75% of women have entered their first partnership in all the countries studied (slightly less in Norway), whereas by age 30, 83% of women in Norway (from the 1960s cohort) and up to 92% in Estonia (from the 1990s cohort) have done so. While the timing and incidence of forming a partnership are remarkably stable across cohorts, first parenthood, in contrast, is delayed (Figure 1 right column). The delay is most extensive among Estonian women, who had still a relatively young first birth schedule among those born in the 1960s, but the continuous delay of first parenthood among more recent cohorts is also characteristic to other countries in the Nordic region. As a consequence, childlessness increases across cohorts. The proportion of women who are childless at age 40 among the 1960s cohort compared to those born in the 1980s rises from 14% to 18% in Sweden, from 14% to 26% in Finland, from 10% to 18% in Norway, and from 12% to 16% in Estonia.

Only among Estonian women born in the 1960s does the first birth occur close to the age of forming a first partnership. Yet, the investigation of family dynamics within the first partnership reveals that becoming a parent is still a common experience after the formation of the first partnership among women born in the 1960s in all countries (Figure 2). However, among more recent cohorts, it becomes increasingly common to separate instead, particularly in Finland and Sweden, where there is a 50/50 chance of separating or proceeding to parenthood within five years of the formation of the first partnership. Among the early 1990s cohort in Finland, the chances of separating are already higher than the chances of becoming a parent.

Conclusion

These observations suggest that, while the pattern of forming first co-residential partnership remains stable, the tendency to delay the first birth weakens the behavioral link between entering a first partnership and becoming a parent. A retreat from parenthood within partnership seems to be a common pattern in the Nordic region. The study puts forward an argument that although a retreat from parenthood within partnerships is possibly an unintended consequence of changing age norms, this phenomenon could constitute a limitation for fertility recovery in coming decades (Rahnu & Jalovaara 2023), particularly among lower SES groups for whom delayed childbearing does not translate into improved labor market position.

References

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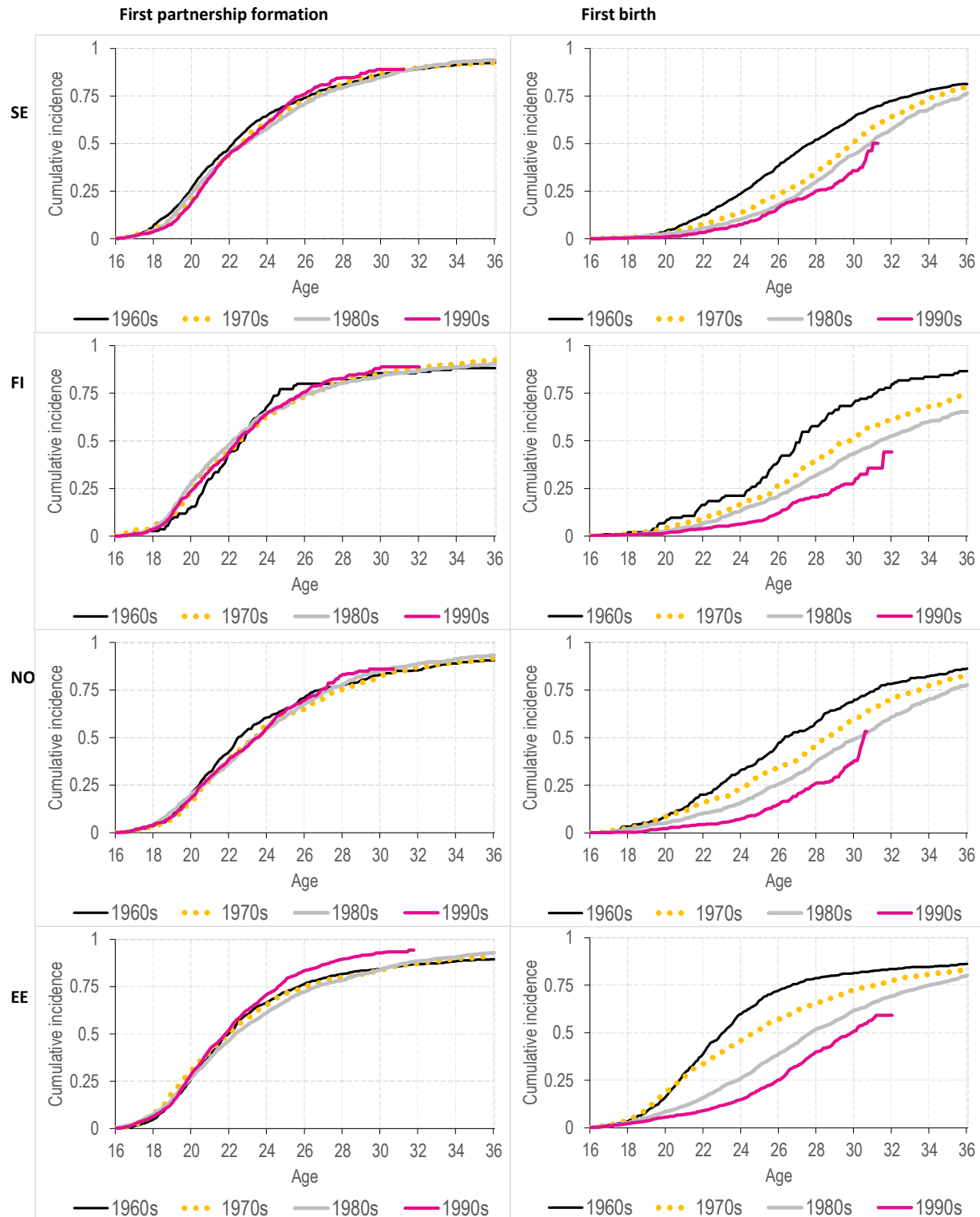


Fig 1. Timing and occurrence of first partnership formation (marital or non-marital cohabitation) and first birth, women born in the 1960s to 1990s in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Estonia.

Note: Entering risk set at age 16, single, childless; Censoring at event (first birth at left, first partnership formation at right), at age 36, year of interview, or death, whichever first.

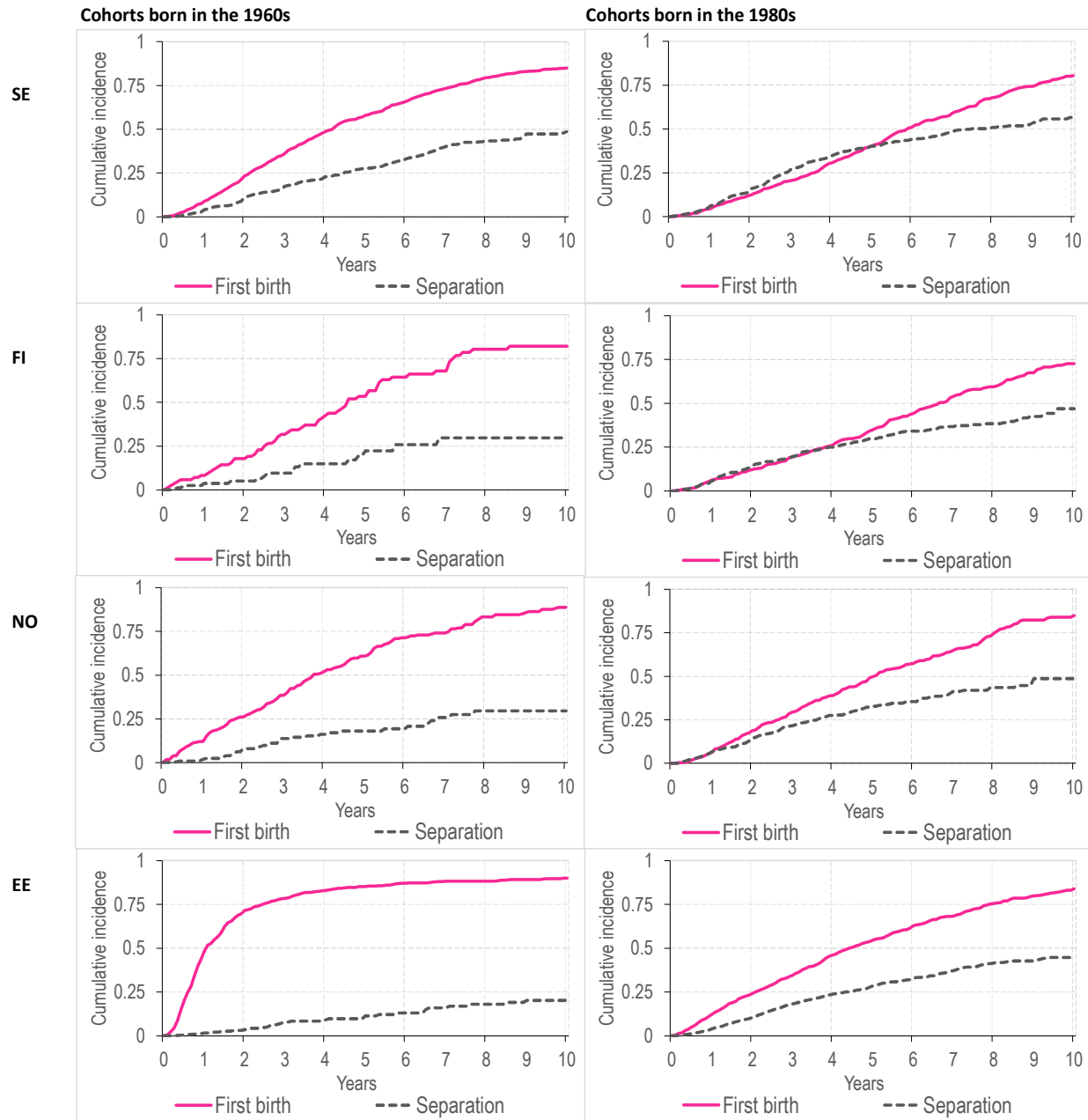


Fig 2. Dynamics within first partnership: first birth or separation, women born in the 1960s and 1980s in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Estonia.

Note: Entering risk set at first partnership formation, childless; Censoring at event (first birth or separation), 10 years since partnership formation, year of interview, or death, whichever first. Competing pathways are calculated jointly.

Source: GGS2020, own calculation.