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Non-marital fertility in the European Economic Area

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Summary: One of the elements of the second demographic transition has been a strong decline in the general level of fertility. This decline has occurred in all countries of the European Economic Area, apparently irrespective of factors such as economic development, employment opportunities, religion, education, social protection and female labour participation. The increase in non-marital fertility, coinciding with an overall fertility decline, has shown a less consistent pattern. The changing patterns and trends of non-marital fertility are not always in line with other elements of the second demographic transition. Tradition seems to play an important role in explaining the differences between neighbouring countries.

Keywords: (Non-marital) fertility, fertility trends, Europe, European Economic Area, second demographic transition, demographic comparison

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1960s, demographic behaviour in Europe has strongly changed. The contraceptive pill had a direct impact on the norms governing sexual and reproductive behaviour and, consequently, on demographic trends. According to Van de Kaa (1997), the introduction of this effective contraceptive was the main cause of the chain of events that he and Lesthaeghe had earlier identified as the *'second demographic transition'* (Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa, 1986). This transition involved three major shifts in fertility and family behaviour, (1) changes in contraceptive behaviour, (2) changes in the level and pattern of fertility, and (3) changes in the timing, frequency, type and stability of unions. The *first* demographic transition took place by the end of the nineteenth century and was characterised by a shift from comparatively high birth and death rates towards a situation with much lower births and death rates.

The various developments that are part of the second demographic transition are related to social, cultural, economic, political and technological developments, such as the emancipation of women, changing moral standards with respect to sexuality and the family, increased prosperity, welfare provisions, fiscal policies and regulations and practices with respect to contraception and abortion. The fact that the fertility decrease has occurred more or less simultaneously in countries showing large differences in levels of economic development, unemployment, social security and female labour participation makes this phenomenon difficult to account for. A study of national patterns does not bring the explanation of the general decline any closer: the drop in fertility has taken place in sub-populations differing widely with respect to religion, level of education, social status and economic prosperity.

Van de Kaa (1987) gives an outline of the full sequence of changes in family formation that lead to lower fertility, identifying, at the time, four groups of European countries and suggesting - with the exception of the fourth, remaining group - a rough geographical pattern. In the first group, mostly consisting of Northern and Western European countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Switzerland) the second demographic transition was already well advanced, having led to

gross birth rates between 10 and 12 per 1000 population. In the second group, made up of the Southern European countries Greece, Malta, Portugal, Spain and Yugoslavia, the crude birth rate had fallen to between 12 and 16 per 1000 population and would almost certainly continue to fall. In the third group of six Eastern European countries (the – than - German Democratic Republic, Poland, former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) the transition had a different shape, due to the strongly differing political developments after World War II. The fourth group, having high birth rates, covered the remaining countries which, for a variety of cultural and historical reasons, were all late in completing the first demographic transition (Iceland, Ireland, Albania and Turkey).

The issue of convergence versus divergence with respect to demographic trends in Europe is still discussed by demographers. Kuijsten (1996), among others, postulates that, even though similar trends have been observed in many countries, between-country differences in family and fertility behaviour will not disappear due to differences in the economic, institutional and cultural context. Van de Kaa (1997), on the other hand, argues that differences between European countries can mainly be attributed to variations in the pace of change and that the basic pattern of change is similar across countries. Hence, differences between countries will become smaller. In fertility-related variables, such as non-marital fertility, however, future variations are likely to be more volatile than fertility rates per se, and not necessarily unidirectional (Van de Kaa, 1994).

Since the 1980s, cohabitation has increasingly become an alternative to marriage, at least temporarily. As a result, non-marital fertility has risen. Van de Kaa (1994) calls it a paradox that contraception contributed greatly to the increase in non-marital fertility, while marital fertility has decreased. In this process, the characteristics of non-marital fertility have changed. In earlier years, it concerned for the greater part unwanted childbirth among young, unmarried women. Today, parents are often cohabiting without being married, and most of their illegitimate children are desired.

This article focuses on trends and backgrounds of non-marital fertility in the European Economic Area[1] (EEA). The main issue to be examined concerns

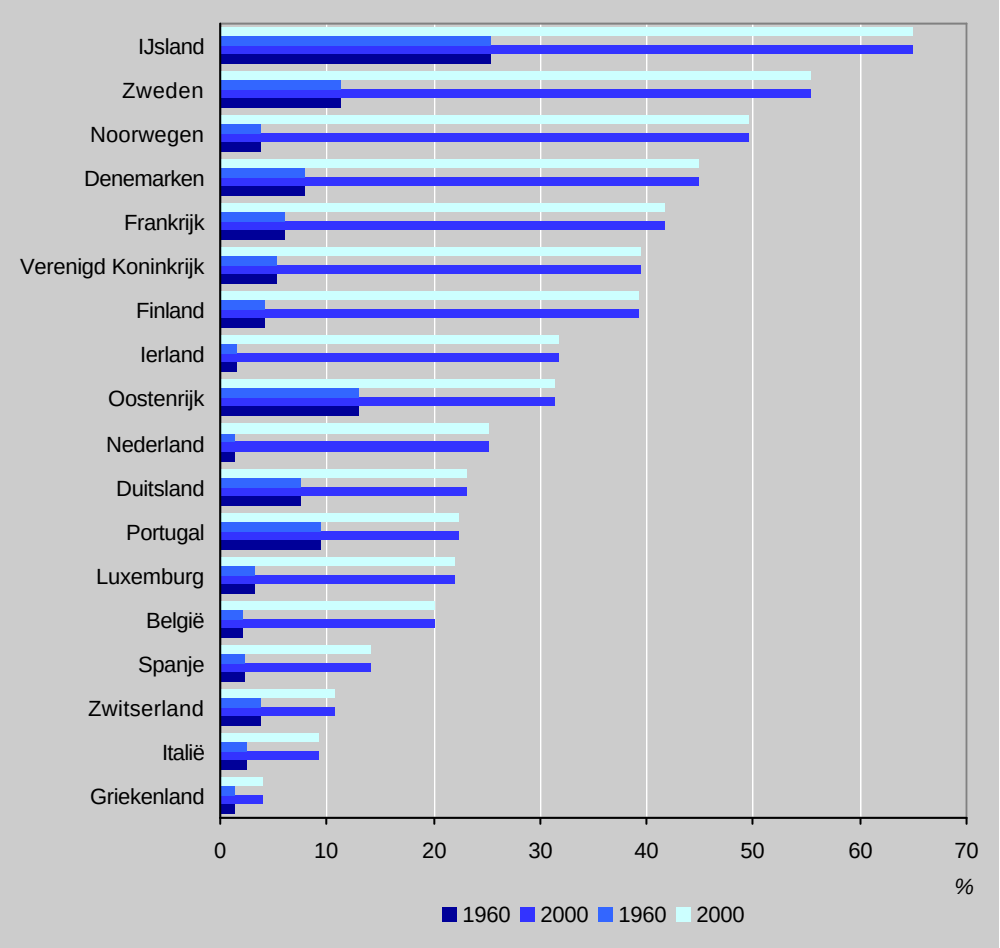
[1] The European Economic Area (EEA) consists of the 15 EU-countries plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. This article also describes the development of non-marital fertility in Switzerland.

the question whether the trends of non-martial fertility move in the same direction and are of the same order of magnitude, or whether tradition exerts a major influence beyond the second demographic transition.

2. Developments in the European Economic Area

In the European Economic Area, the annual number of illegitimate children has more than tripled between the early 1960s and the mid-1990s. At the moment, the number of out of wedlock births in the EEA amounts to over a million each year. The percentage of non-marital births increased from 5.1 to 26.4 between 1960 and 2000. This increase is the result of a growing number of births among unmarried women and the declining number of births among married women.

1. Percentage of non-marital births, 1960 and 2000 [1)]



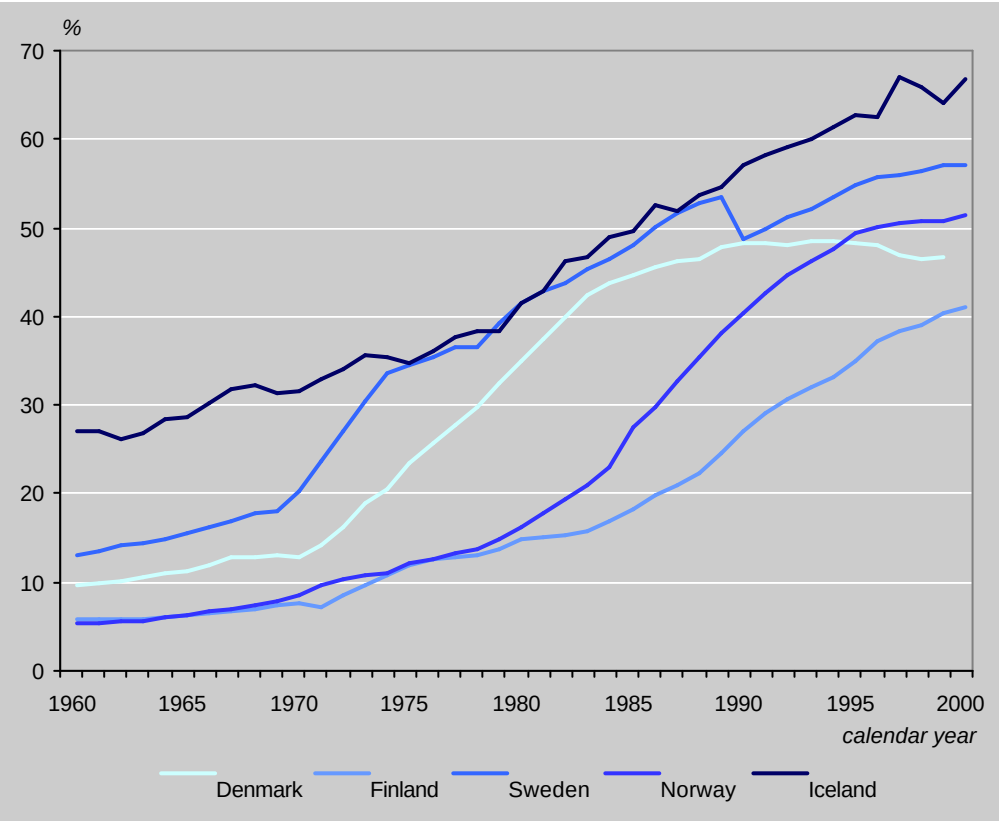
[1)] The Belgian data refer to 1996, the Spanish, French and Italian data to1997.

2.1 Scandinavian countries

Sweden, Denmark and Iceland were trendsetters with respect to non-marital fertility. In Sweden and Denmark, the increase in the share of non-marital births in total fertility started some five to ten years earlier than in most other EEA-countries. Iceland shows a traditionally high level of non-marital fertility. In Denmark, the increase has come to an end in the late 1980s. (See figure 2). In Sweden and Iceland however, it still continues. In Sweden (55% in 2000) and Iceland (65% in 2000), the majority of all children are now born out of wedlock.

In the early 1960s, already a quarter of all newborn babies in Iceland had an unmarried mother. The situation in Norway and Finland was, in that period, not yet different from most other European countries. These two Scandinavian countries showed a significant increase in the numbers of non-marital births in the 1980s. At present, about half of all newborn Norwegian children have an unmarried mother. In Finland this applies to more than one in three children.

2. Percentage non-marital live births of total live births, Northern Europe, 1960-2000



Contraceptives are relatively easy to obtain in Scandinavian countries, and much attention is paid to sex education. Except in Iceland, this has contributed to a low level of fertility among teenagers. Non-marital fertility in the Nordic countries is normally a conscious choice of cohabiting couples. The majority of illegitimate children live in a two-parent family (Hall, 1995). In Sweden, for example, nine out of ten children born in 1995-1997 were born within consensual unions.

Tomasson (1976) explains the demographic situation in the Nordic countries in the light of historical characteristics. The high numbers of illegitimate births in these countries would be related to the rather weak impact of Christian values with respect to marriage. Particularly in Iceland, Christianization had hardly influenced the relevant pre-Christian traditions.

Another contributing factor may have been the non-existence of tax benefits for 'traditional families'. The tax system of Sweden, for example, has been fully individualised, offering no special benefits to married couples (The Economist, 1995).

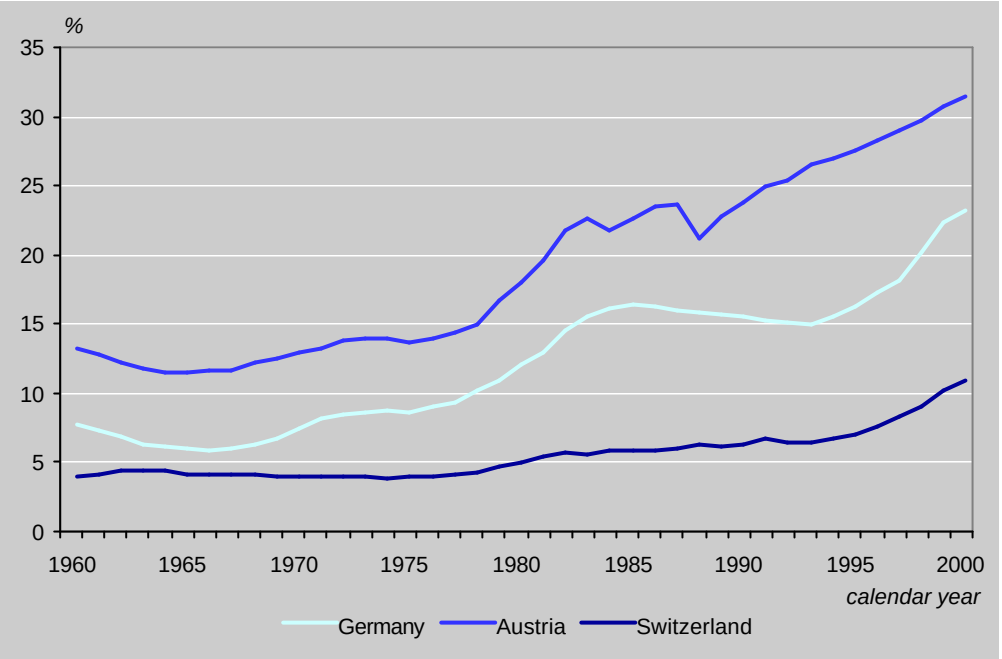
Although the Scandinavian countries are clearly leaders in non-marital fertility, on the whole showing upward trends earlier than other European countries, there are some historical exceptions. About a century ago, the proportions of illegitimate births in Central European countries like Saxony, Bavaria, Austria and Hungary exceeded those in most Scandinavian countries (Statistisches Landesamt des Königreichs Bayern, 1909).

2.2. Austria, Germany and Switzerland

The strongest increase in non-marital fertility in Central Europe occurred in the second half of the 1970s, about half a decade later than in Northern Europe. Compared to most other European countries, non-marital fertility has been traditionally high in this part of Europe. The increase in the numbers of illegitimate births however has been relatively modest.

Within Central Europe, some remarkable differences in level as well as in trend can be observed. (See figure 3). For the whole period, the numbers of illegitimate births in Germany represent the totals for East and West Germany.

3. Percentage non-marital live births of total live births, Central Europe, 1960-2000



In 1960, Austrian illegitimate fertility was highest of all EEA-countries, with the exception of Iceland. In 2000, the share of illegitimate births in Austria (31%) was just above the EEA-average (25%). According to Moors and Palomba (1995), Austria combines a high level of non-marital fertility with traditional behaviour regarding other demographic aspects. Kytir and Münz (1986) emphasise historical backgrounds. Traditions with respect to succession would be of crucial importance: in regions in which the so-called 'Anerbenrecht' was practised, only heritable children could usually afford to marry, and even they would have to wait until transfer of the property. Up to that moment, the heritable son and his future bride lived on the parents' farm. Under these circumstances, illegitimate births were accepted and often even welcomed. Moreover, the majority of the *non-heritable* children in these regions never got married. Therefore, the number of unmarried mothers among this group was proportionally high. In regions in which 'Realteilung' (the sharing of the patrimonial estate) was in force, the opportunities to be self-supporting were more favourable. Illegitimate births were rather uncommon in this situation. Remarkably, these historical geographical patterns can still be observed, even though legal and economical circumstances have long since changed.

The modernisation of life styles has played a less important role in Austria, as witnessed by the fact that unmarried mothers are not common among the social avant-garde, but rather among the farming population and lower classes (Münz, 1986).

In Germany, the proportion of non-marital births in total fertility tripled from 8% in 1960 to 23% in 2000. Similar developments have taken place in other Central European countries. Because of the opposite trends of marital and non-marital fertility, the percentage of out of wedlock births in Austria and Switzerland has more than doubled since the second half of the 1970s. This trend is hardly spectacular by European standards: in the EEA as a whole, the percentage of non-marital births has shown a three- to fourfold increase during the same period.

The decline in non-marital fertility in Germany in the 1960s and the early 1970s may be attributed to improved sex education and the increased use of contraceptives. The number of out of wedlock births in Germany started to decline in the late 1980s and the level of non-marital fertility is now comparable to that of the Netherlands. In contrast to the individualised tax system of Sweden, the German system 'rewards' marriage (The Economist, 1995). It is plausible that these different policies have some effect, but the extent of this effect is neither quantifiable nor direct. After the German reunification the differences in the share of illegitimate fertility between former East and West Germany had not yet diminished. On the contrary, the differences in non-marital fertility between East and West have even increased after the unification. In the part of Germany constituting the former German Democratic Republic some 50% of birth were illegitimate in 1999 (Konietzka and Keyenfeld, 2001), which is more than three times the share of non-marital fertility in the western part of the country. Dorbritz (1995) explains the high percentage in the eastern part of Germany by pointing at the effects of the political system on social behaviour: due to a comprehensive social security system before the unification, marriage had lost much of its importance. Moreover, crèches admitted children of unmarried mothers with priority, possibly giving an unintentional stimulus to extra-marital childbirth (Pohl et al., 1992). Furthermore, unmarried mothers enjoyed a privileged position as far as regulations regarding maternity leave were concerned (Konietzka and Keyenfeld, 2001).

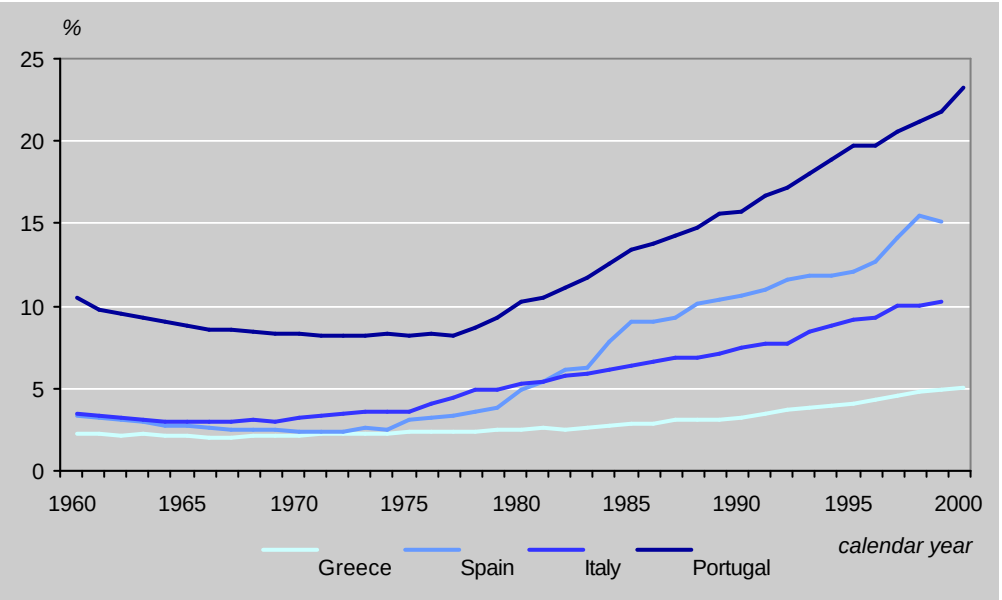
The situation in Switzerland differs strongly from that in Germany and Austria. In Switzerland, non-marital fertility is still uncommon. In 2000 11% of all newborn children had an unmarried mother, comparable with the figure for Europe in the early 1980s. The number of children born out of wedlock in Switzerland almost doubled between 1960 (3.6 thousand) and 2000 (6.9 thousand). This slow increase by European standards is rather similar to that observed in Southern Europe.

In Switzerland - as in most Southern European countries - traditional Roman Catholic values still prevail. The majority of unmarried couples decide to marry before their child is born, but often after conception. This practice has a long history as well. At the start of the nineteenth century, more than half of all first children in the Principality of Neuchâtel were fathered before marriage. The share of non-marital births in overall fertility, however, was just one percent (Kok, 1991).

2.3. Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece

The level of non-marital fertility in the Southern European countries is still relatively low (See figure 4). The lowest ratio of illegitimacy is recorded in Greece (4% in 2000), the highest in Potugal (22%). The doubling of the share in Portugal since the 1960s is, however, partly due to a halving of the total number of births. The absolute *number* of Portuguese children born out of wedlock has fallen during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Since then, the annual number has increased. Elsewhere in this part of Europe the strong decrease in birth rates has influenced the share of illegitimate births in a similar manner.

4. Percentage non-marital live births of total live births, Southern Europe, 1960-2000



It is likely that cultural factors play a major role in keeping the levels of non-marital fertility relatively low in Southern Europe. According to Bosveld (1996), the tradition of strong family values has been preserved in these

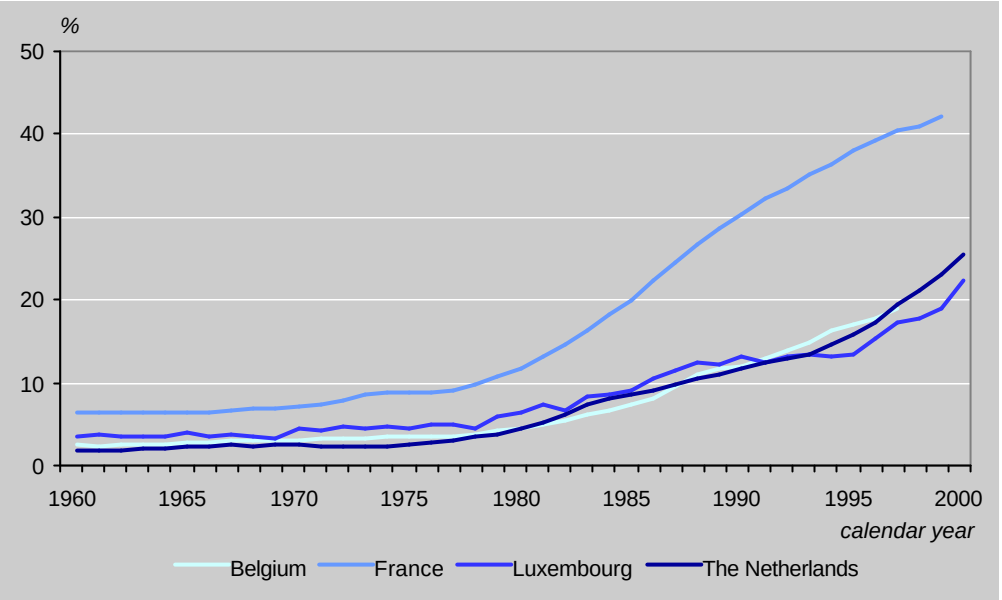
countries, probably under the influence of Catholicism. Cohabitation, for example, is still fairly uncommon in Italy and Portugal, and divorces are much less frequent than elsewhere in Europe. Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna (1994) observe that the developments with respect to cohabitation and non-marital fertility in Italy clearly deviate from those in Northern and Central Europe. Even the northern part of Italy, with an economy comparable to that of Sweden, France, the Netherlands and Germany, still shows this more traditional pattern.

2.4. Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and France

Levels and trends of non-marital fertility in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands are very similar. (See figure 5). The share of children born out of wedlock in these countries (some 20% in 2000) is well below that of the Northern European countries and even below the EEA-average (30% in 2000). As early as 1987 Masui noticed the development from rejection and stigmatisation of illegitimacy to tolerance and acceptance (Masui, 1987). This development is reflected in the strong increase in the number of legal acknowledgements. In the three Benelux countries, teenage fertility has declined very strongly (Eurostat, 1996).

Although the levels of non-marital fertility in the Netherlands and Belgium are quite similar, demographic behaviour in the two countries is rather different in some respects. For example, in the Netherlands cohabitation is more common than in Belgium, although its rate of non-marital childbearing is lower than might be anticipated from its level of cohabitation (Kiernan, 1999). In the Netherlands marriage is no longer the main reason for leaving home, whereas in Belgium it is still quite common to leave home and marry. In the latter country, postponement of first marriage has so far not resulted in a strong increase in living alone or in unmarried cohabitation, like in the Netherlands (De Beer and Deven, 2000). However, in the Netherlands it is quite common for cohabiting couples to marry before their first child is born. As a consequence, the higher level of cohabitation in the Netherlands is, so far, not reflected in a higher level of non-marital fertility.

5. Percentage non-marital births of total live births, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and France, 1960-2000

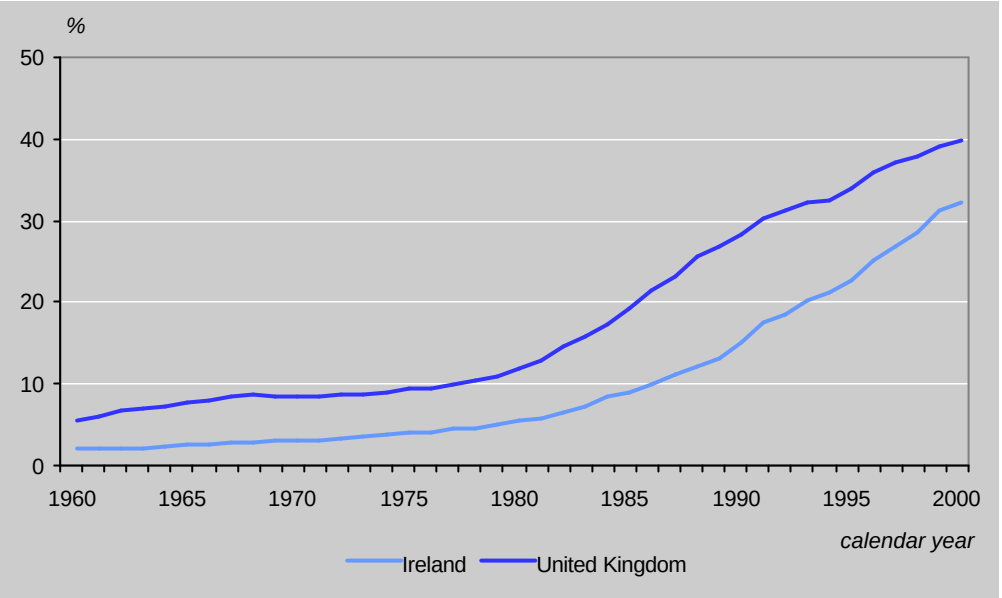


In comparison with the Benelux countries, the percentage of non-marital births is high in France, and it has shown a strong increase in the past decades. In 1999 its share (42%) was almost seven times as large as in 1960. According to Bosveld (1996), France appears to be the only European country displaying a demographic behaviour with respect to cohabitation and non-marital fertility that is comparable to that in the Nordic countries. It also offers similar opportunities to combine work and family. Leridon (1990) points out that the strong increase in the number of non-marital births is the result of the growing number of unmarried cohabiting couples as well as the increasing fertility of this group.

2.5. United Kingdom and Ireland

The level of non-marital fertility in the United Kingdom is some 40% above the EEA-average. In 1998 more than one out of three newborn babies had an unmarried mother. (See figure 6). Non-marital fertility in the United Kingdom has increased rather strongly compared to other European countries, particularly in the 1980s.

6. Percentage non-marital live births of total live births, United Kingdom and Ireland, 1960-2000



Only a small majority of the illegitimate children born in England and Wales are part of a family with cohabiting parents (Hall, 1995). Moreover, teenage fertility is relatively high in comparison with other European countries. The number of children per thousand teenage women has not changed much in the UK since the second half of the 1970s, whereas it has strongly decreased in most other EEA-countries (Eurostat, 1996). In 1996, in the UK, some 23 children were born per 1,000 teenagers, which is six times as high as the level in the Netherlands.

Although the level of non-marital fertility in the UK does not differ much from that in France, there is a considerable difference in causative factors. Lelièvre considers the high British level of teenage fertility as an indication of the worsening of social and economic circumstances in the UK (Lelièvre, 1994). In this context, sex education has received insufficient attention, which may be partly due to a comparatively low participation in education of children aged 16 or above (lower than in Spain, Italy, France or Germany). Also, the legal opportunities to have an abortion have been restricted in the UK.

In Ireland, the percentage of non-marital births has increased from less than 2 to 32 between 1960 and 2000. This share is slightly above the EEA-average, despite the influence of Catholicism in Ireland. The increase has been particularly strong since the end of the 1980s, and has not only been caused by an increase in the absolute number of non-marital births. Since the total number of births decreased, the *share* of non-marital births has increased

more strongly than the absolute number. In Ireland, there are strict regulations regarding the provision of contraceptives. Furthermore, abortion is strictly illegal, except in the situation that a woman's life is in danger (United Nations, 2001).

3. Discussion

In 1985, Höpflinger published an analysis of illegitimacy rates as a proportion of marital fertility rates, showing that most of the increase in Northern and Western European countries reflected increases in sizes of the populations at risk, consisting of never-married, divorced and widowed women. Older women appeared more likely than younger ones to bear an out-of-wedlock child (Höpflinger, 1985). Clearly, the situation has changed significantly since then.

The large proportion of out of wedlock births in the Nordic countries would appear to be related to a comparatively weak impact of Christian values on marriage. High levels of non-marital fertility are also found in Central Europe, especially in Austria. The level in Switzerland, however, bears a much closer resemblance to the situation in Southern Europe. With the exception of this country, Central Europe resembles Southern Europe in trend rather than in the level of non-marital fertility: over the past decades, the change in the proportion of out of wedlock births has been relatively modest in these countries. In Southern Europe, traditional family values are still dominant, which contributes to the low level of non-marital fertility.

Within the European countries, a pattern of transition can be discerned, although it is by no means clear-cut. Broadly speaking, many of the characteristic changes brought about by the second demographic transition have started in the Nordic countries, subsequently spreading southward via Western Europe. As regards non-marital fertility, however, the developments as well as their backgrounds are clearly more diverse. The trends and patterns discussed in this article show that one cannot speak of a uniform 'transition', spreading from north to south, nor can the situation be sufficiently explained by pointing at the differing traditional (historical and cultural) contexts. For example, fiscal and social policies, although not usually intended to influence or constitute a family policy, have an important impact on non-marital fertility.

Although the developments with respect to non-marital fertility show some similarity within Europe, the differences between countries are much more striking than has been the case with the overall decline in fertility. Some of these differences are remarkable in view of the supposedly prevailing moral values. For example, Austria has a high level of non-marital fertility in comparison to Switzerland, yet has a relatively traditional fertility-regulating behaviour. Another example concerns the historically low numbers of illegitimate births in the Netherlands, which may be somewhat surprising in a country widely supporting liberal attitudes. It may therefore be concluded that tradition continues to play an important role in explaining the differences in non-marital fertility between European countries.

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