

Family Policies and Birth Rates: Evidence and Challenges for European Countries

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ABSTRACT

Demographic changes in Europe include declining birth rates, increasing life expectancy and – as a consequence – ageing and shrinking populations. These developments affect all countries in the European Union, although to very different extents. Interest is therefore growing in the relationship between family policies and fertility, in other words, whether and how family policies – for example, cash benefits for families or childcare facilities – affect fertility behaviour and what reforms may help couples to realise their child-bearing preferences. Overall, research shows that this relationship is very complex and there have been a number of contradictory findings. It became evident, however, that there can be a positive correlation between female employment and fertility if policies improving the work–life balance are implemented, such as cash benefits, well-paid parental leaves and state childcare facilities. Against this background, this paper focuses on family policies in four very different European countries – Sweden, Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic – and compares them in the context of demographic developments.

1. FAMILY POLICIES IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENTS

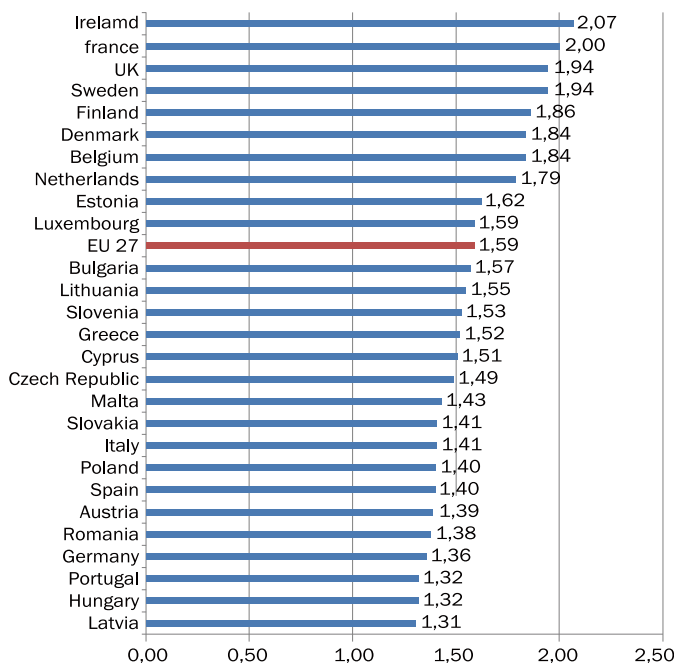
While not all European countries have implemented specific »family policies« or designated »family ministries«, all of them have developed policies to support families. Their measures are varied and include, for example, family allowances, public childcare facilities, parental leaves and tax exemptions for dependent children. Generally, one can distinguish between three types of family policy instruments: cash benefits, services and tax breaks¹ for families (OECD 2011). These policies pursue distinct aims, which differ across countries and also in their importance over time. These aims are primarily institutional, demographic, economic, socio-political, gender equality-related and child welfare-related (Kaufmann 2000; Blum/Rille-Pfeiffer 2010).

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¹ As data from the OECD family database show, tax exemptions only play a decisive role in a few countries (especially Germany, but also France and Belgium). Furthermore, data on tax exemptions cannot be derived from national statistics, but rest on estimates by the tax authorities. Therefore, in Section 3, tax exemptions are not compared across the four selected countries.

In recent years, *demographic* concerns have gained importance within family policymaking in many European countries. This has taken place against the background of a number of demographic challenges facing all European countries, although to very different extents. As Figure 1 shows, total fertility rates in Europe range between 1.31 in Latvia and 2.07 in Ireland, while the average of the 27 member countries of the European Union lies at 1.59. However, no country achieved the net reproduction rate of 2.1 for average children per woman in 2009. Searching for country clustering in *Figure 1*, it can be seen that Eastern European countries (for example, Latvia, Hungary, Romania), Southern European countries (for example, Portugal, Spain, Italy) and the German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria) show particularly low birth rates², while in the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), the United Kingdom, France and Ireland the rates are fairly high.

Figure 1: Total fertility rates, 2009



Source: Eurostat.

The birth rate decline is related to other demographic changes, such as the postponement of family formation to a later age and an increased proportion of childlessness. Another feature of demographic change in industrialised countries is increased life expectancy, which in Germany, for example, currently stands at 82.59 years for women and 77.51 years for men. Together, decreased birth rates and increased life expectancy lead to ageing populations, which is reflected in a shrinking workforce and a growing number of retirees. As this is putting the economy and social insurance systems under pressure, policymakers and researchers in many European countries have intensified their interest in the relationship between family policy and fertility.

Comparative studies have shown a decisive gap between the *desired* and the *actual* number of children for many European countries. In a *Eurobarometer* public opinion survey of 2006, individuals were asked: »And for you personally, what would be the ideal number of children you would like to have or would have liked to have had?« The results showed that within the EU the »mean ideal family size, either general or personal, is above 2 children in each broad age group, for men as for women« (Testa 2006: 19). While in Germany, for example, low fertility parallels a comparatively low desired number of children (that is, 2.11 for women aged 25 to 39), the Southern European countries in particular showed a large gap, between high desired numbers of children and low actual birth rates. This has been traced back, among other things, to the comparatively low public policy support for families in these countries.

However, it would be misleading to view the gap between desired and actual number of children as a »window of opportunity« for public policies (Gauthier 2007: 328), since many reasons for this gap are not policy-related at all. The 2006 *Eurobarometer* showed that, most frequently, respondents stated that not having fulfilled their childbearing desires was related to health problems on the part of one of the partners or to

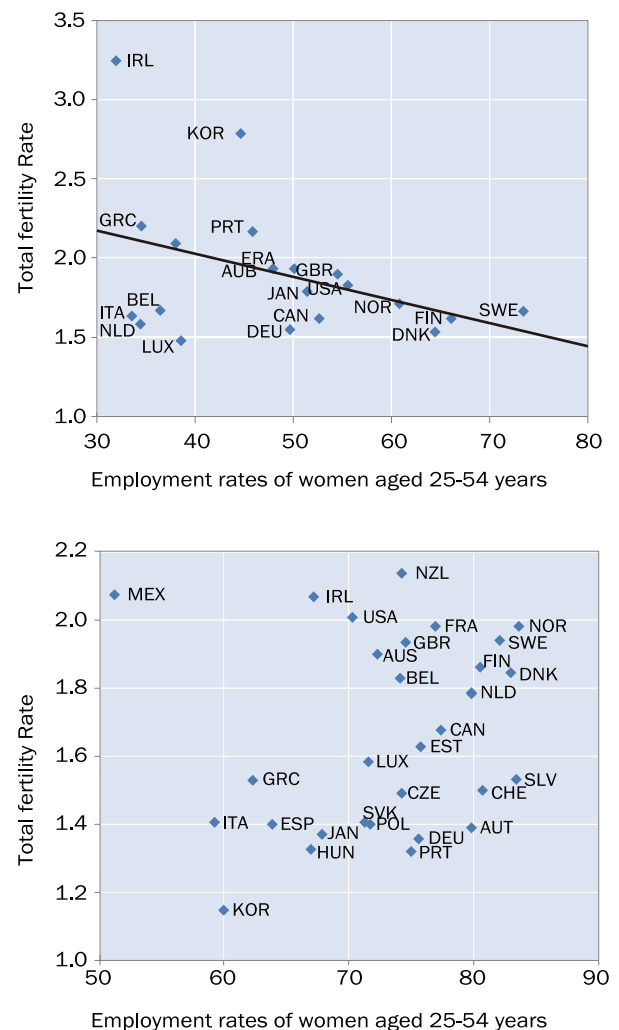
² In this paper, the total fertility rate (TFR) is used to compare the number of births between countries.

the absence of the right partner (Testa 2006: 13). At the same time, surveys show that the cost of children, the availability of parental leaves and childcare – which can very much be influenced by public policies – also play a role in decision-making on whether or not to have a child (Testa 2006). This shows that public policies towards families can be relevant for their demographic behaviour. However, this relationship is very complex and mostly indirect.

Correspondingly, previous research into this relationship has yielded contradictory findings. For example, some studies identified a significant positive effect on fertility rates of cash benefits for families, while others found an insignificant positive effect and yet others were ambivalent (Bujard 2011: 5). A cross-national study of 21 OECD countries conducted by Castles (2003) proved a significant positive correlation between fertility and formal childcare facilities for under-three year olds. Results for the effects of parental leave regulations on fertility are inconclusive (Bujard 2011: 5), while some authors have shown that very long parental leaves may even have a negative impact on birth rates (D’Addio/D’Ercole 2005).

Against that background, there are a few proven points with regard to the complex relationship between family policies and fertility. One which has been frequently cited is the positive correlation between female labour force participation and fertility: in other words, countries characterised by high female employment rates overall also show high birth rates. Interestingly, this correlation was still negative in the 1970s, as illustrated in Figure 2. The situation in 1980, on the left side, still shows a clearly negative correlation between female employment and fertility. The countries with the highest percentage of women in the labour market – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – were in the lowest range of total fertility rates, and vice versa (for example, Ireland, Greece). In contrast, in 2009, Denmark, Finland and Sweden – like many other countries – combined high female employment rates with high birth rates.

Figure 2: Cross-country Relations Between Female Employment and Fertility in 1980 and 2009



Source: OECD Family Database.

At the same time, the cross-country relationship is not as clear as in 1980: Many other countries – for example, Mexico, Ireland, Italy and Hungary – do not combine both and exhibit low figures for total fertility rates or for women’s employment rates.

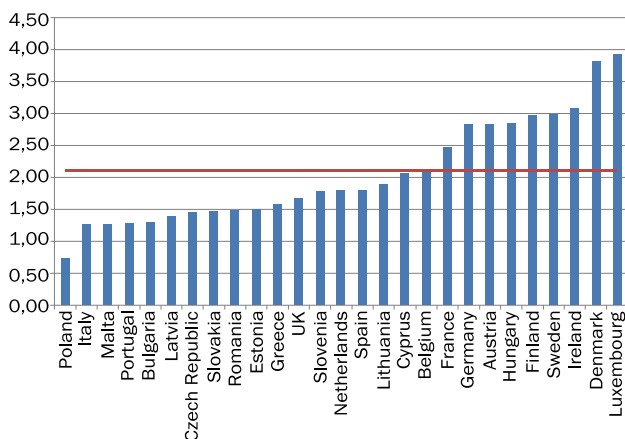
Many authors have cited this reversed overall relationship between female employment and fertility as evidence of public policy impact on fertility (Gauthier 2007: 330): It seems that especially the Nordic countries – for example, Sweden – have managed to reverse the negative impact of female employment on child-

bearing behaviour into a positive one through family policies and particularly those directed at the reconciliation of work and family life, such as well-paid parental leaves and public childcare facilities.

2. FAMILY POLICIES ACROSS EUROPE

Since the European Union has no direct competences with regard to social and family policies, responsibilities lie with the member states. Against this background, European countries implemented very different family policies, which has been proposed as a decisive explanatory factor as regards their different demographic situations. *Figure 3* gives a first impression of this family policy variety. It portrays EU countries' functional expenditure on families as a percentage of GDP in 2008. Family policy expenditure ranges from only 0.73 per cent of GDP in Poland to 3.92 per cent in Luxembourg. The average of the 27 EU countries lies at 2.1 per cent of GDP. Germany spends 2.82 per cent of GDP on families and thus ranges in the upper third.

Figure 3: Expenditure on families in the EU-27 (2008)



Source: Eurostat, ESSPROS³ (functional expenditure as a percentage of GDP).

In terms of possible patterns in expenditure on families, some geographical clusters can be identified. Of the 18 countries below the EU average, 15 are in either Eastern or Southern Europe. The nine countries

above the EU average, except Hungary and Ireland, are all either continental European (France, Germany, Austria, Luxembourg) or Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark).

This pattern corresponds to the traditional country typologies, which have been identified by comparative welfare state and family policy research in an effort to group countries and allow for systematic comparisons. About two decades ago, Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990) published his famous distinction of *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. These are: the liberal (for example, the United Kingdom), the conservative (for example, Germany) and the social democratic (for example, Sweden) types of welfare state. Correspondingly, Gauthier (2002), for example, in a country-comparative study identified four family policy regimes. According to this, the social democratic type – for example, Denmark, Finland and Sweden – is characterised by universal state support for families and a strong commitment to gender equality. It provides only medium-level cash benefits to parents, but a high level of childcare facilities plus well-paid parental leaves. The conservative type – for example Germany, Austria and Ireland – on the other hand, is characterised by employment-related state support and a more traditional approach to gender. It provides medium to high cash support (see Figure 3), but only limited childcare facilities. Family policies under the liberal regime – for example, the United Kingdom – provide only low-level, needs-oriented support for parents and rely strongly on the private sector, for example for childcare. Finally, family policies in Southern European countries – for example Italy, Portugal and Spain – are characterised by low-level support, in terms of both cash benefits and services, plus a high mix of universal and private benefits. Since the EU accession of the Eastern European countries, comparative welfare state research has debated how to deal with them in typological terms: some researchers see them as a distinct, post-socialist welfare regime in of their own, others claim that they will each develop into one of

³ Available at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/social_protection/data/database

Esping-Andersen's three worlds of welfare capitalism and others still declare that neither will be the case (see Blum et al. 2010).

These traditional typologies – be it Esping-Andersen's three worlds of welfare capitalism or the similar classical differentiation of family policy systems – have been subject to growing criticism in recent years, for example, because they do not include or, arguably, have wrongly categorised particular countries. Most importantly, however, they depict the situation in the early 1990s, while in the meantime European welfare states have changed dramatically, not least in terms of family policies. Therefore, these typologies contain ideal types to which actual country cases may never have fully corresponded and certainly are doing so less and less, due to policy reforms and perhaps processes of welfare state convergence. At the same time, as Figure 3 shows, there still are some geographical country patterns at least in terms of expenditure levels: the Southern and Eastern European countries overall spend decisively less on families than the Nordic and continental countries. Section 3, therefore, looks at four countries from these four regions: Sweden, Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic. These countries were chosen because they come, at least traditionally, fairly close to the family policy ideal types described above. They also represent more mature (Sweden, Germany) and less expenditure-intensive (Italy and the Czech Republic) welfare states. Since only a brief description of each country's family policy can be given, we focus on only three instruments: family allowances, parental leave regulations and public childcare facilities. While a number of also important measures may thereby be neglected, these three are the most important ones and provide a good picture of the family policy framework.

3. FOCUS ON FOUR COUNTRIES

3.1 Sweden

As Figure 1 shows, Sweden had – with 1.94 – the fourth

highest birth rate in Europe in 2009. Life expectancy at birth in 2009 was also well above the European average, at 83.5 years for women and 79.4 years for men (European Commission 2010). Combined with significant immigration, the EU's *Demography Report 2010* therefore expects that Sweden will experience further population growth of almost 8 per cent until 2050 (ibid.: 163). The employment rate of women aged 25–49 stood at 79.8 per cent in 2008, as compared to the OECD average of 71.9 (OECD Family Database).

As described in Section 2, Sweden's family policy has been characterised as social democratic, marked by its focus on work–life balance, universal medium-level cash benefits and a high level of services. Accordingly, the child/family allowance is paid universally and not means-tested, but only amounts to about 115 euros⁴ per month for the first child plus increasing supplements for any further child (MISSOC 2011).

In Sweden, parental leave is construed as an income replacement and provides strong incentives for fathers to take it up. It lasts 480 days, 60 days being reserved for the mother and 60 for the father, while the rest may be taken by either parent (Moss 2011: 228). Out of this period, 390 days are paid at 80 per cent of earnings (with an income limit of about 47,340 euros per year); the remaining 90 days are paid flat-rate at about 20 euros per day.

In line with the Nordic welfare tradition, Sweden offers clearly above average childcare provision, regarding both quantity and quality (Plantenga/Remery 2009). According to EU-SILC data for 2006, there are childcare places for 45 per cent of under three year-olds and for 92 per cent of children between the age of three and mandatory school age.

All in all, Swedish family policy has evolved into a role model for other European countries. As Figure 3 shows, it is not even significantly more costly than its counterparts, for example, in Germany or Austria, and at the same time, it is described as much more »successful« and »effective«, for example, regarding fertility behaviour, but also child poverty rates and

⁴ In January 2012, 1 euro equalled 8,173 renminbi.

work–life balance. Therefore, as becomes evident in the next section, German family policy reforms – and those in other countries – have followed this example.

3.2 Germany

In 2009, Germany, with 1.36, registered the fourth lowest birth rate across Europe (Figure 1). Life expectancy at birth, on the other hand, was above the EU average in 2009, at 82.8 years for women and 77.8 years for men (European Commission 2011). While Germany has experienced high immigration rates during recent decades, net migration has now turned negative. The EU *Demography Report 2010* therefore expects that Germany's population will shrink by almost 10 per cent by 2050 (ibid.: 121). In 2008, the employment rate of women aged 25 to 49 was 76.8 per cent (OECD Family Database).

German family policy has been described as conservative, supporting fairly traditional gender roles (for example, low female employment) and rather distributing high cash benefits to families than services such as childcare.

The child/family allowance is paid on a universal basis and not means-tested. It does not vary by age, but by number of children: 184 euros per month are paid for the first and second children, 190 for the third and 215 for the fourth and subsequent children (MISSOC 2011).

Until 2006, parental leave in Germany was in line with its traditional, rather conservative family policy framework. It comprised a long leave of three years, two of them accompanied by a fairly low flat-rate payment of 300 euros per month. It thus gave fathers no incentive to take parental leave and supported long career breaks for mothers. The 2007 reform of this parental leave was inspired by the Swedish example: nowadays, parental benefit is paid for only twelve months to one parent, while two additional »partner months« are paid to the other parent (usually the father). As in Sweden, it is also construed as an income replacement of 67 per cent of the parent's last earnings; there is, however, a minimum of 300 euros (mainly for formerly non-employed parents) and also a maximum of 1,800 euros per month (Moss 2011:

118). However, the introduction of a so-called childcare allowance is being envisaged from 2013: an amount of 100 euros per month (and even 150 euros from 2014) would be paid to parents who care for their 1- and 2-year-old children at home and do not make use of institutional childcare facilities.

Traditionally and still around the year 2000, Germany offered very low childcare rates for children under the age of three, while almost all children above that age attended Kindergarten until they entered school. In recent years, however, there have been huge efforts to increase childcare facilities, mainly with the aim of improving reconciliation between work and family life. In 2006, Germany offered childcare places for 18 per cent of 0–2 year-olds and 93 per cent of children between the age of three and mandatory school age (EU-SILC). By 2011, the childcare rate for under three-year-olds had risen to 25.2 per cent, although with major regional differences, especially between western and eastern Germany (Federal Statistical Office 2011).

The reforms in parental leave and childcare facilities show that German family policies still have »conservative roots«, but have changed decisively and are on the way towards a more »Nordic« type, focusing on the reconciliation of work and family life.

3.3 Italy

At 1.41 in 2009, Italy's birth rate is among the lowest in Europe. At the same time, life expectancy at birth is above the EU average, at 84.5 per cent for women and 79.1 per cent for men (European Commission 2011). On the assumption that immigration to Italy remains significant, the EU *Demography Report 2010* expects the population to remain more or less constant (ibid.: 133). In 2008, the employment rate of 25- to 49-year-old women was, at 61.1 per cent, clearly below the OECD average of 71.9 per cent (OECD Family Database).

Italian family policies have been described as offering only limited support to families, in terms of both cash benefits and services, while designing this employment-related and with a mixture of universal and private benefits. Against this background, the

child/family allowance in Italy is employment-related and means-tested. It varies by number of children, but not by age. As the amount of benefit is in inverse relation to family income, for instance a family with four members and medium-range annual income of about 26,500 euros would receive a monthly benefit of 127.25 euros (MISSOC 2011).

In Italy, six months of parental leave are available for mothers and the same for fathers. If fathers take the also available paternity leave, they are entitled to one month of additional parental leave (Moss 2011: 151). This paternity leave is not statutory, however. It is available for employed fathers, paid at 80 per cent of last earnings, but only under special circumstances (for example, death or severe illness of the mother and the child left being in sole care of the father). Parental leave is accompanied by an income-related payment of only 30 per cent of last earnings, while maternity leave – like paternity leave – is paid at 80 per cent of last earnings.

While Italy's family cash benefits and leave regulations largely correspond to the Southern European welfare state as described above, its childcare facilities are comparatively expansive. According to the EU-SILC data for 2006, Italy offered childcare places to 26 per cent of under threes. For the age group between three and school age, 90 per cent of children were using formal childcare services.

3.4 Czech Republic

At 1.49 in 2009 (*Figure 1*), the birth rate in the Czech Republic was higher than those of Germany or Italy, but significantly lower than that of Sweden. In contrast to the three other countries, life expectancy at birth lay below the EU average, at 80.5 years for women and 74.2 years for men (European Commission 2011). Combined with significant immigration, the EU *Demography Report 2010* expects the population to shrink only slightly by 2050 (*ibid.*: 117). The employment rate of women aged 25 to 49 stood at 73.6 per cent in 2008.

All in all, the Eastern European welfare states are very diverse. Although they share a common, post-socialist heritage, individually they have developed in social democratic, conservative, liberal or other directions (Blum et al. 2010). Family policies in the Czech Republic »are a prime example of variations in the mixture of social conservative [...] and social democratic systems« (Ripka/Mareš 2009: 110).

The child/family allowance is means-tested and set at a fixed amount by age: for children under the age of six, 21 euros are paid per month, for children aged six to 15, the allowance amounts to 25 euros and for children aged 15 to 26, it amounts to 29 euros (MISSOC 2011).

In the Czech Republic, both parents have an individual entitlement to three years of parental leave. However, only one parent is entitled to the benefit, with three options (Moss 2011: 83). First, there is a period of nine months paid at 310 euros per month, available to all parents and extendible to 48 months, but at only 155 euros per month. The two other options are only available to parents entitled to maternity benefit.⁵ These offer 36 months paid at 310 euros or 24 months paid at 465 euros. In conclusion, the Czech parental leave system leaves many choices to parents, but relies on fairly long leaves and – compared to Sweden and Germany – rather low flat-rate benefits.

As the EU-SILC data show, public childcare facilities in the Czech Republic are among the least developed in Europe: only 2 per cent of 0–2 year-olds used formal childcare services in 2006, and 67 per cent of children between the age of three and mandatory school age.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There is increasing interest in the relationship between family policies and fertility, against the background of demographic changes affecting all European countries, although to very different extents.

As discussed in Section 1, the research on family

⁵ Apart from students, only employees who contributed to sickness insurance for at least 270 days during the past two years are eligible for maternity benefit (Moss 2011: 82).

policy and fertility is – at least to date – far from conclusive. Therefore, the case studies of the demographic situations and family policies in the four countries – Sweden, Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic – cannot provide any firm conclusions on the relationship between these two. However, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the general consensus within comparative research: the positive impact of cash and in-kind benefits on fertility, and the positive correlation between high female employment and high birth rates, if work–life balance policies are in place. The Swedish case offers an example of the assumption that the »wide availability of reconciliation facilities in the Nordic countries supports fertility decisions« (Plantenga/Remery 2009: 25–26).

The effects of family policies become visible over the long term; the effects of policy reform cannot be seen quickly. This applies in particular to their impact on fertility. For example, as Bujard (2011: 36) points out, people draw their knowledge of family policy conditions primarily from the media, as well as the experiences of relatives, friends and neighbours. Therefore, it is quite a while before policy changes are perceived or lead to changes in behaviour.

From 2002, however, birth rates in many countries have started to rise again (OECD 2011: 20). For example, Eurostat data show that the birth rate in Sweden has risen significantly from 1.57 in 2001 to 1.98 in 2010, in Germany slightly from 1.35 to 1.39, in Italy from 1.25 to 1.41 and in the Czech Republic decisively from 1.14 to 1.49. The case of the Czech Republic in particular, where work–life balance policies are comparatively low, provides a counter-example to the joint appearance of high female employment and high fertility. There is a significant correlation in cross-national comparisons, but it does not apply to all countries. Birth rates not only in the Czech Republic, but in virtually all post-socialist countries declined sharply in the early 1990s, then remained at a very low level for some time, before

starting to rise again during the first decade of the new millennium.⁶

Germany has followed the Swedish example in its family policy reforms, wishing to improve work–life balance for parents, to enable female employment and if possible to increase birth rates. However, with such a complex and long-term relationship, fertility behaviour has not yet changed significantly. As discussed in Section 1, in all countries there is a gap between people’s desired and actual number of children. Therefore, policies towards the reconciliation of work and family life are only one among many and yet a decisive determinant in enabling people to realise their individual childbearing preferences.

⁶ Furthermore, the total fertility rate (TFR) is fairly sensitive to the timing of births, for example, the postponement of first births to a later age (cf. OECD 2011).

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