

New kind of inequality and partnership dynamics behind declining birth rates

Starting in 2010, birth rates have been declining strongly in the Nordic countries. In Finland, the total fertility rate has dropped by up to one fourth, from being among the highest to below average in the EU, and much below the population replacement level. The population is ageing more rapidly and will decrease unless an increase in population numbers caused by immigration will suffice as a counterforce.

Birth rates have now also been dropping in older age groups – between ages 30 and 40 –, which means that this is not simply a matter of people postponing having children to later in life. While the decline is most considerable when it comes to first children, it applies to any number of children. This reveals that many reasons underpin this issue: different factors partly affect the birth of the first-born and subsequent children.

Finland has exceptional childlessness rates. Already at this point, one third of men and one fifth of women in their forties have no children.

New type of social inequality

In the past, lifetime childlessness was more prevalent among highly educated women in Nordic countries. However, childlessness has increased among less educated women but not among highly educated women. By now, a larger share of less educated end up childless compared to highly educated women. In fact, the link between education and childlessness among women is now similar with the long prevalent pattern among men.

In the Nordic countries, highly educated people currently do well at integrating their careers with starting a family. The downside to all this is the increasingly prevalent social inequality: the barriers to starting a family are concentrated on less educated men and women.

Partnership dynamics reflect on having children

An important key to understanding this development lies in understanding the new dynamics in cohabiting unions and marriages. The majority of the people who have ended up childless have never lived with a partner or have a history of short cohabitations. For many couples, the plans of a second or third child will never be realised as the partnership comes to an end before this.

Will social and public policy help?

The comparably high birth rates in the Nordic countries have been considered as an indication of the capacity of social and public policy to support people in reconciling work and family life, and increasing or maintaining birth rates. However, birth rates are now dropping, and it has become apparent that those with low education have fallen behind.

Providing support to families with children can be used to increase welfare in families and possibly influencing those undecided about whether or not to have a(nother) child. But for those without a partner to have a child, the benefits granted to families with children are fairly insignificant. What should be done?

Partnerships have been considered to fall outside the area of influence of social and public policy. They are often seen as part of people's private lives, and indeed no romance will be sparked by a political decision. It is nonetheless crucial for family formation that a romance will be accompanied with strong commitment and trust in the future. For example, having a job is strongly associated with all stages of family formation: entering into cohabitations and marriages, staying in the partnership, and having children. Those with longer-term unemployment are less likely to move in with their partner or marry, and more likely to separate. Fewer children are born under such circumstances.

Not just family policy but also policy that supports starting a family

When the aim is to support people with starting a family, the approaches used in family policy, such as child benefits, parental leaves or day care, are insufficient. The target group also covers those presently without a family. The social and public policy influencing family formation must be perceived widely, particularly in today's Nordic countries, where starting a family will rarely be prevented by work and career plans, and much more often by fragmented or missing employment and partnership histories.

New project under the Academy of Finland

A new project funded by the Academy of Finland and led by Marika Jalovaara, 'Falling Fertility and the Inequalities Involved' (NEFER), explores the causes that underlie the dramatic and unexpected drop in fertility rates in the Nordic countries and the social and gender-related inequalities related to changing family dynamics. NEFER is a part of the INVEST research flagship of the University of Turku and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.

[Falling Fertility and the Inequalities Involved \(NEFER\)](#)

[INVEST – Eriarvoistumisen, interventioiden ja hyvinvointiyhteiskunnan tutkimuksen hanke](#)



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Updated: 9 Oct 2019