

Fertility recuperation throughout the 1990s: a study among Belgian women of the 1960-65 birth cohorts who postponed fertility to a considerable extent

Context and relevance

The decline of period total fertility rates (PTFRs) below replacement level has become a structural characteristic of post war fertility. This decline was partly the result of the postponement of childbearing (Bongaarts & Feeney, 1998). However, the recuperation of future PTFRs depends on (a) further developments with respect to the timing of fertility, and (b) to what extent postponed births are actually realised at older ages (Lesthaeghe & Willems, 1999). This paper focuses on the second issue by investigating the mechanisms behind the fertility recuperation among female birth cohorts who broke new grounds with respect to fertility postponement in Belgium.

Research question

Since the mid-1960s the Belgian fertility regime has changed profoundly. Period total fertility rates dropped below replacement level and period mean ages at first birth kept rising. However, patterns at the aggregate level are not necessarily an accurate representation of what happens at the individual level. Using data from the 1991 census, Neels (2006) reconstructed birth order specific fertility patterns between 1960 and 1990. It turned out that women of the 1960-65 birth cohorts were among the first to postpone their lower order births to a considerable extent. The breakdown of fertility schedules by educational level and labour force participation further revealed that the postponement of first and second order births was largely driven by the democratization of education, the vast increase in both educational attainment and labour force participation, and the concomitant adoption of well established fertility schedules already found among women of older birth cohorts with similar levels of education. This implies that the postponement of lower order births was not an innovative feature of the last decades of the 20th century. In fact, highly educated women during the early 1920s already postponed their childbearing because of their labour force participation. However, because cohort fertility profiles were reconstructed on the basis of the 1991 census, the patterns behind the fertility recuperation among the 1960-65 birth cohorts remained hidden (ibidem).

In this paper we extend the observation window by an additional 10 years, using data from the 1991 and 2001 census. For the 1960-65 female birth cohorts, aged 25-29 years in completed years in 1990, we use data from the 1991 census in a prospective research design to study fertility recuperation between 1991 and 2001. The impact of educational attainment, labour force participation, and housing characteristics will be investigated from a birth-order specific framework.

1) Education

So far an extensive body of research has documented a general shift toward late childbearing among highly educated women. It remains unclear, however, whether their behaviour reflects further postponement to older ages, or will result in a substantial reduction of completed fertility. Some research suggests that higher educated women proceed to motherhood faster than their lower educated counterparts

after they have finished their education (Lappegard & Ronsen, 2005). Yet, others point out in the direction of further postponement among higher educated women (Van Bavel & De Wachter, 2007). It is further frequently assumed that highly educated women will have smaller families at the end of their reproductive careers, because the time left to realise a(nother) birth is highly curtailed by the shift toward late childbearing. Yet, evidence from Belgian fertility research surprisingly suggests that the realisation of a third birth is primarily a matter of highly educated women (Neels, 2006). In 1991, most women of the 1960-65 birth cohorts will have completed their education. What impact will it have on their subsequent fertility recuperation?

2) Labour force participation

Although most studies at the individual level corroborate the finding that working women generally postpone their childbearing, the connection between fertility and female labour force participation appears to be very complex. For example, recent analysis for Flanders suggests that motherhood is typically postponed among three groups of women: unemployed women, women with very busy jobs, and women with an ordinary job they fear to lose. Regional characteristics also appear to play a role: fertility postponement is more pronounced in districts with high gender inequality and high female unemployment (Van Bavel & De Wachter, 2007). The above implies that female labour force participation and fertility behaviour do not stand in a one to one relationship. Different aspects of the working career may bear a different impact on fertility. The matter is complicated even further if we distinguish between births of a different order. This paper tries to answer these questions by investigating the impact of different aspects of the working career.

3) Housing characteristics

The relationship between housing and fertility has rarely been explored in most demographic research. Nevertheless, since the 1980s a series of studies have been carried out to disentangle the complex relationship between housing and family formation. Mulder (2006) argues that the relationship is two-sided. On the one hand, demographic behaviour may influence housing. On the other hand, housing may influence demographic behaviour. This last issue will receive further attention in this paper. For instance, housing may influence fertility behaviour indirectly through leaving the parental home. If it is the norm to form families in housing separate from the parental home, and people postpone nest leaving, it follows that families are formed later, which may in turn have implications on the number of children ultimately being born. There might also be a direct influence of housing on fertility. Some studies indicate that childbearing follows after a move to home-ownership. At the same time, the costs of home-ownership might compete with childbearing, resulting in lower fertility (*ibidem*). This study takes three housing characteristics into account (tenure, type and quality of a dwelling) and explores the relationship with childbearing. It is expected that the relationship is strongest with respect to higher order births. However, the close connection between housing and fertility requires careful consideration.

Data and method

This paper uses anonymized individual level data drawn from the 1991 and 2001 census. The analyses are carried out within the framework of a monograph about changing patterns of nuptiality and fertility behaviour in Belgium. From the 1991

census we extract information about parity and independent variables for the 1960-65 female birth cohorts at the onset of their fertility recuperation. Information about birth occurrence is subsequently reconstructed from the 2001 census. Hence, a prospective research design opens up to carry out event-history analyses on more than 400.000 women. Finally, the exhaustive character of the census data makes detailed analysis possible on a level that cannot be reached when using survey data.

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