

**Gender, Economic Conditions, and Social Norms:
Does Context Matter for Fertility Intentions?**

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Abstract: This paper explores the impact of the economic, social, and cultural environment on women's and men's fertility intentions to have a(nother) child in the near future across the regions of eight European countries. We apply a multi-level logistic regression to data of the Generations and Gender Survey. Our results show that contextual factors do matter and that there exist substantial gender and regional differences in fertility intentions among both childless and parents. The findings further suggest the need to distinguish between macro-level factors which signal *economic insecurity* and those which signal *economic opportunity* if one wants to grasp the effect of economic circumstances on fertility intentions. As regards social and cultural factors our study underlines the positive relationship between a high-fertility surrounding and mothers' and fathers' intentions to consider another child. Cultural and social contextual factors may to some extent even outweigh the effects of macro-economic circumstances on fertility intentions.

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years the Total Fertility Rate in countries of the current European Union has been well below replacement level, hovering between 1.5 and 1.65. Some countries have experienced fertility levels below 1.5 TFR for almost 40 years, others have only recently faced a drop of their TFR to low or even lowest-low levels (TFR 1.4 or lower). However, the general development towards low fertility in Europe masks the huge diversity of fertility levels among sub-national regions in Europe.

This paper therefore explores whether regional contextual factors affect fertility intentions. If so, this is an indication that these factors may also shape the pattern of fertility differentials across European regions. For, fertility intentions represent a potent predictor of subsequent fertility behavior, although positive fertility intentions tend to partly overestimate fertility realizations (e.g., Westoff and Ryder, 1977).

Since there exist notable social and economic differences between women and men in Europe, we furthermore investigate whether contextual factors influence women's and men's fertility intentions differently.

Abridged theoretical assumptions

Our paper starts from the assumption that due to the economic and social gender differences in Europe, individual and contextual factors affecting women's and men's fertility intentions must be viewed from a gender perspective. In particular, individual factors like employment, care, education, marital status and the like may mean something different for women and for men, for childless women/men and for mothers/fathers. Likewise, contextual factors like regional level of unemployment, of female or male employment rates, of childcare provisions, or the gender distribution of (unpaid) work and care may have different meanings for women and men, for childless women/men and for mothers/fathers with one or with more children resp. Following gender theory of employment, agency, recognition and redistribution of (home and care) work (Orloff 1993; Korpi 2000; Hobson/Fahlén 2009; Frazer 1997), we therefore investigate the impact of three individual-level aspects on the fertility intentions of women and men: (1) the possibility to maintain one's own household, (2) the possibility to maintain one's agency, and (3) the gender distribution of work and care. On the contextual level, we distinguish between economic, cultural, and socio-political factors and explore the effects (a) of regional indicators of economic insecurity, (b) of the changes of women's economic position, (c) of the erosion of men's breadwinner role, (d) of the changes of men's private roles, (e) of the state care support, and (f) of social norms regarding fertility on the fertility intentions of childless women/men and

parents. In contrast to most demographic research, we thus acknowledge that (1) the economic, cultural, and socio-political circumstances comprise several dimensions which may work gender- and parity-specific on fertility intentions.

Data and method

We make use of the first wave of the Generations and Gender Surveys of Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, and Russia, and study the impact of the respondent's intention to have or not to have a child within three years (as of the interview date) for childless women, childless men, one-child mothers and fathers, and two-child mothers and fathers separately, using multi-level logistic regression. We limit our sample to women and men who live in a union. As covariates on the individual level we include indicators of her/his activity status, the partner's employment status, her/his educational level, union status, the economic pressure of the household, the man's participation in household work, as well as the number of children, and the age of the youngest child (the latter two only in our analyses of the childbearing intentions of parents). Our contextual variables comprise regional female labor-force participation rate, male labor-force participation rate, regional unemployment rate, regional total fertility rate, regional childcare coverage, and an indicator of gender equality at the regional level. The regional indicators are derived from the regional statistics of Eurostat, from national statistical offices, or calculated from GGS-data. They are on the level of NUTS 2 (sub-state regions) and reflect the economic and social situation in the respondent's region during the year or in the year prior to the collection of the GGS-data. The regional indicators were linked to the region in which a person interviewed in the GGS lived at the time of the interview.

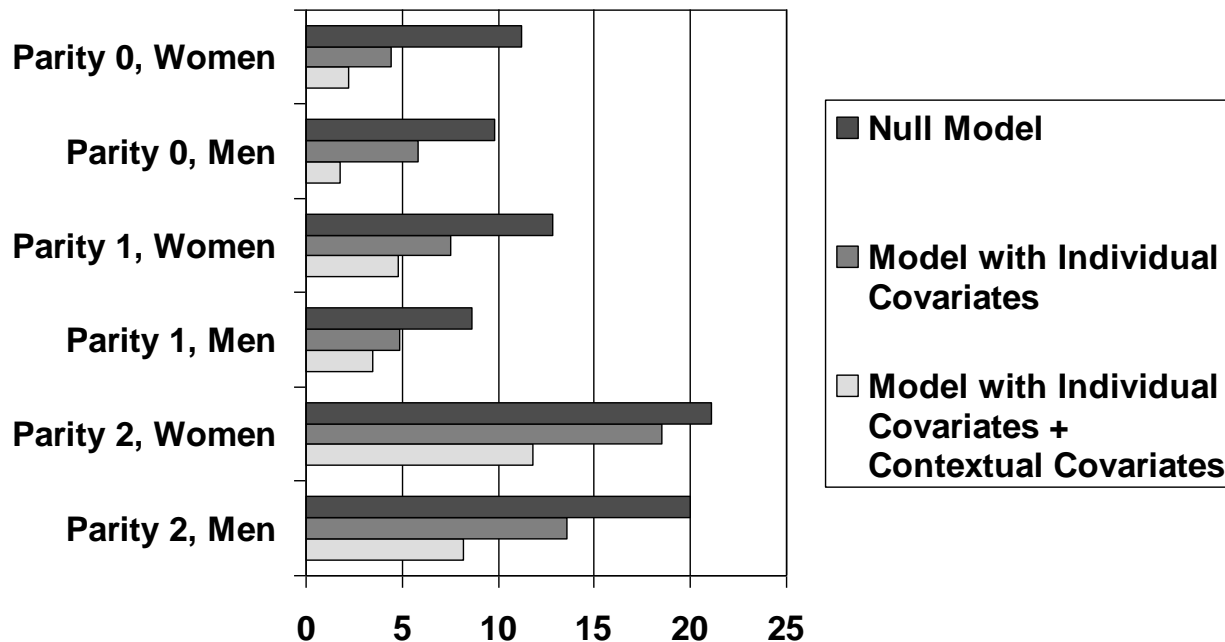
First and partial results:

Our first exploratory results show that contextual factors do matter and that there exist substantial gender and regional differences as regards the fertility intentions of all groups of women and men which we study. As far as a person's own economic and private circumstances and their impact on her/his short-term fertility intentions are concerned, we find a clear divide along gender and parity lines. Childless women's and childless men's economic status seems to exert a decisive impact on her/his decision to consider a child. Economically active childless women and men are more prone to consider a child than those who are not. The same applies to the impact which their household's financial means play on their childbearing intentions. Once parents, the situation changes, revealing that "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) becomes more influential in fertility decisions. For women with (one and with two) children, their own employment now reduces their intention to have another child, while their partner's employment is still a major pre-condition in their consideration to have another child in the near

future. For fathers, being employed exerts a positive effect on their intention to have another child, while their partner's employment reduces such intentions or becomes insignificant. These findings confirm previous findings by other researchers (and predictions by gender theories) that having a child increases economic and social gender cleavages.

Turning to the impact of the regional context in which a person lives on her/his intentions to have a child in the next three years (as of the GGS-survey), we find that the regional indicators explain a large part of the variation in short-term fertility intentions across Europe (Figure 1). Among childless women and childless men, only about 2% of the regional variation remains unexplained (after controlling for individual and regional characteristics in our analysis). There exists a greater regional heterogeneity among one-child and two-child parents with respect to their intentions to have a(nother) child in the near future, and the differences are somewhat greater among women than among men. Nevertheless, including regional indicators which capture economic and cultural conditions in the region in which the respondent lives, leaves only about 4%-5% of the variation in childbearing intentions among one-child men and one-child women and about 8% to 11% among two-child fathers and two-child mothers unexplained.

Figure 1: Regional variation in fertility intentions



If we look at the regional factors which impact childbearing intentions most, our analysis renders some surprising results (Table 1). Although we assumed that a high female labor-force participation rate, a low male labor-force participation rate, and a high unemployment rate in the region in which a respondent lives lower her/his intentions to have a(nother) child for all groups of women and men which we study, the results are neither as clear-cut as nor always in the direction which we expected. For childless women and one-child mothers, higher unemployment and higher female-labor force participation rates in their environment reduce their intentions to have a(nother) child. This coincides with the effects which childless women's and mothers' activity status and their assessment of their financial situations have on their childbearing intentions. Looking at men, we find by contrast, that the economic circumstances in the region affect only childless men's fertility intentions. As expected, the higher the unemployment rate in the region, the lower childless men's intentions to have a child in the near future. Quite surprisingly, however, high male labor-force participation in the region also seems to depress childless men's intentions to become a father (although with a relatively small magnitude). For fathers, the economic circumstances in the region do not seem to exert an influence on their further childbearing intentions.

Table 1. Regional factors affecting fertility intentions by gender and parity

	Women			Men		
	Childless	One-child mothers	Two-child mothers	Childless	One-child fathers	Two-child fathers
Employment rate	0,95*	0,98*	0,99	0,92	0,99	1,03*
Unemployment rate	0,98	0,97*	1,02	0,93*	1,01	1,11*
Total fertility rate	0,78	7,21*	10,46*	1,05	3,21*	3,50*

Note: * significant at 0.05 level

These gendered and parity-specific patterns underline our theoretical assumptions that contextual factors have different implications for women and for men, for mothers and for fathers. But the patterns also call into questions assumptions about the meaning of economic contextual factors. Our findings clearly show that it is necessary to distinguish between the level of unemployment in a region and the level of women's and men's labor-force participation in that region. While unemployment may be regarded as an indicator of *economic uncertainty*, women's and men's labor-force participation rates are indicators of *economic opportunity*. It goes against common demographic and economic assumptions that *both* of these indicators are inversely related to the intentions to become a parent (and for women also to consider a second child) in the near future. We explain this ostensible contradiction with the tightening of women's and men's economic situations. While high unemployment in a region poses a threat to women's and men's possibility to sustain a living, high labor-force participation rates may signal the possibility to have employment and thus bear the promise of economic security. It seems that women and men do not want to endanger this by becoming a parent or (for women) having another child.

As regards social and cultural factor, our first exploratory examination with selected indicators for gender equality and fertility norms showed that in the eight countries which we study women are still the ones who do most of the household work. The lack of regional variation in men's contribution to household work was quite surprising, since we expected that the inclusion of Norway (a country generally considered as a country of advanced gender equality) and the possibility to distinguish between urban and rural regions would render some variation in this gender-equality measure.

In contrast to “our” gender-equality indicator, we found a very pronounced effect of the childbearing norm in a region on parents’ fertility intentions. Parents and in particular one-child mothers (and one-child fathers) who live in a high-fertility region are more prone to consider having another child in the near future than parents who live in a low-fertility region. The fertility surrounding seems to exert a stronger effect on parents’ fertility intentions than the economic circumstances in the region do. Further investigations with more refined indicators for gender aspects and for fertility norms are planned for the final paper.