

# Cohabitation in Western Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

In the recent past marriage heralded the start of a first union for most couples in Europe. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s marriage rates in most European countries have declined and one of the important engines behind the decline is the rise in cohabitation that has occurred, particularly since the beginning of the 1980s, in many European countries. This study examines the incidence of cohabiting unions across all the EC nations in 1996 using Eurobarometer data. Further, it uses recently available data from the European Fertility and Family Surveys to examine: the extent to which men and women are not forming partnerships and how this has changed over time; the number of partnerships experienced; type of first partnership in terms of whether it commences with marriage or cohabitation and if the latter whether it converts into a marriage; and the duration of different types of cohabiting unions. It also includes an examination of the risk of breakdown amongst first unions that commence with cohabitation or marriage and the variation in type of first union according to background characteristics, including educational attainment, religious observance and experience of parental divorce in childhood.

## INCIDENCE OF COHABITATION

To get a perspective on the incidence of cohabitation across the European Community we used data from a series of Eurobarometer Surveys carried out in 1996 across the 15 member states. Eurobarometer Surveys are primarily opinion surveys covering a range of topics relevant to the European Union and carried out under the auspices of the administration of the European Union. The 1996 survey had relatively large samples per country typically in the range 3-6000 respondents depending on the size of the population of the particular country. These surveys contain basic demographic information on the

## SUMMARY

**This article examines for a range of European countries: the extent to which men and women are not forming partnerships and how this has changed over time; the number of partnerships experienced; type of first partnership in terms of whether it commences with marriage or cohabitation and, if the latter, whether it converts into marriage; as well as the duration of different types of cohabiting unions. It also includes an examination of the risk of breakdown amongst first unions that commence with cohabitation or marriage and the variations in type of first union according to background characteristics, including: educational attainment, religious observance and experience of parental divorce in childhood.**

respondents including information on marital status that includes as one of the categories "living as married". The other categories being the more conventional ones of single, married, divorced, separated and widowed. There may be under reporting of cohabiting unions in the Eurobarometer data. For example when we compared data from the 1995/96 General Household Survey with the British data in Table 1 we found that the proportions cohabiting as reported in the GHS were higher than those reported in the Eurobarometer data 19, 18 and 10 per cent respectively in the case of the women and 12, 21 and 13 in the case of the men. A more general comparison of the marital status distributions between the two data sets showed that the proportions in the single and separated/divorced and widowed group were in accord but that the proportions married were higher and proportions cohabiting were lower in the Eurobarometer data as compared with the GHS data. This suggests that in more general surveys cohabiting couples may be counted as married either reporting themselves as married or the interviewer making an assumption about their marital status. Moreover, the meaning of cohabitation and the willingness to describe one self as "living as married" may vary across nations. The marital status distributions from these Eurobarometer surveys may well not be as accurate as those obtained in dedicated family and fertility surveys but they probably reflect the relative position of different European countries in these developments.

Table 1 shows for the 15 European Community countries the proportions of men and women aged 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34 years who were cohabiting at the time of the survey in 1996. The positioning of the countries generally holds across age groups and the sexes. Across the 15 member states, overall 11 per cent of men and women aged 20-24 reported that they were living as married, 13 per cent of those aged 25-29 years and 10 per cent of the those aged 30-34 years. Only 2.6 per cent of teenagers and 7 per cent of those age 35-39 years reported that they were cohabiting. In these data we cannot differentiate between cohabitations that occur amongst the never-married and those who cohabit after a marriage has broken up, but assume that at the younger ages the former is likely to be the most prevalent. Across European states there is a good deal of diversity in the incidence of cohabitation. Cohabitation is strikingly most common in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and France also has relatively high

proportions cohabiting. For example, in these four countries around 30 per cent of women aged 25-29 years were cohabiting. There is also a middle group of countries which includes the Netherlands and Belgium, Great Britain, West and East Germany, and Austria with levels of cohabitation between 8 and 16 per cent amongst the group of women aged 25-29. At the other extreme is the group of Southern European countries and Ireland, where cohabitation is seemingly much rarer with around 3 per cent or less cohabiting.

Within countries the peak ages of cohabitation for both men and women are the twenties and in many countries the proportions cohabiting in the early twenties and late twenties are broadly similar. The proportions in cohabiting unions is typically lower in the thirties. In a period of rising cohabitation it would be expected that younger people would be more likely to cohabit than older people. However the data for Sweden and Denmark, where cohabiting unions have been long-standing, suggest that the drop in the extent of cohabiting unions beyond the twenties may be real rather than transitory. Moreover, we note that in most EU countries cohabitation is a minor practice amongst people in their twenties and even more so in the thirties.

## MARITAL STATUS DISTRIBUTIONS

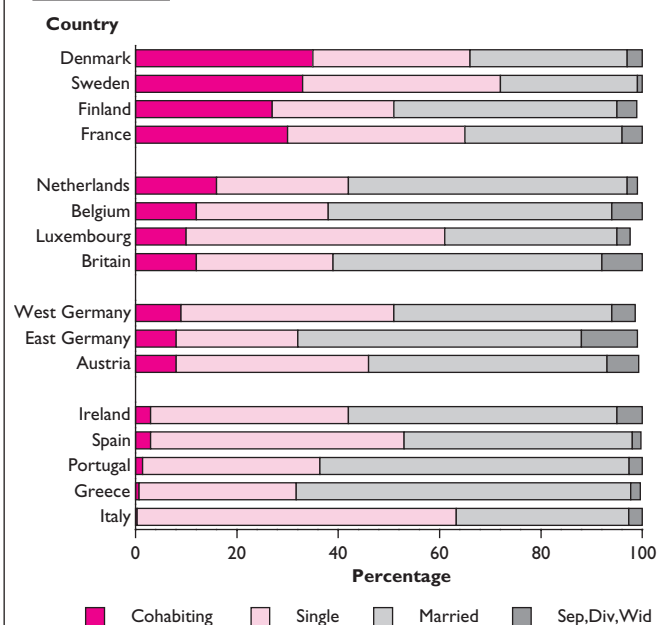
If men and women are not in cohabiting unions are they in marital unions? Figure 1 shows the proportions of women aged 25-29 years in the 15 countries who were cohabiting, single, married or separated/divorced/widowed. It is clear from these data that there is a good deal of variation in the proportions of women in marital unions. The Southern European countries of Greece and Portugal where over 60 per cent of women in their late 20s are married exemplify one extreme. However, within the set of southern European countries there is a remarkable difference in the behaviour of Italian and Spanish women as compared with the Portuguese and Greek women: over 60 per cent of the Italian women are single and 50 per cent of Spanish women are single compared with around one in three of the Portuguese and Greek women. It would seem that not only are men and women in Spain and Italy avoiding parenthood they are also not forming partnerships either, at least in their twenties. In the Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland as well as in France, broadly speaking, the proportions in

**Table 1** Percentage cohabiting according to age group and sex in 1996

Country	Women			Men		
	20-24	25-29	30-34	20-24	25-29	30-34
Denmark	45	35	19	43	43	23
Sweden	39	33	22	24	39	31
Finland	28	27	16	23	29	14
France	25	30	19	13	24	27
Netherlands	17	16	8	10	23	13
Belgium	15	12	7	6	16	8
Luxembourg	10	10	-	2	2	4
Britain	13	12	7	11	16	9
W. Germany	16	9	7	10	15	11
E. Germany	13	8	4	7	11	7
Austria	10	8	9	1	10	7
Ireland	2	3	4	3	6	3
Spain	3	3	3	1	2	4
Portugal	3	1	1	1	-	2
Greece	1	1	1	2	2	-
Italy	-	-	4	-	-	3
All countries	14	13	9	9	14	11

Source: Analysis of Eurobarometer No 44 1996.

**Figure 1** Marital Status Distribution of women aged 25-29 in 1996



the three main marital status groups are similar at around one third. Marriage is seemingly most popular in the western European countries: notably in Great Britain, Ireland the Netherlands and Belgium.

## UNION FORMATION : EVIDENCE FROM THE EUROPEAN FERTILITY AND FAMILY SURVEYS

The cross-sectional information from the Eurobarometer Surveys indicates that there is a good deal of intra-European diversity in the extent of cohabiting unions, marital unions and being single. We proceed to examine partnership behaviour in more detail using data from the European Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) which were carried out in the main in the first half of the 1990s under the auspices of the UN Economic Commission for Europe. Over twenty countries, not including Britain, participated in this enterprise and here we make use of data from the Western European countries currently available for analysis. These countries along with the dates of interview and the age range of the respondents are shown in Table 2. With the exception of Norway and Finland the surveys took place in the first half of the 1990s. The timing and elapsed time for some of the surveys need to be borne in mind when making comparisons. The sample sizes for all countries were in excess of 5,000. In the following analyses the countries have been sub-divided into three sets: the Nordic one includes Norway, Finland and Sweden; the Western European set includes Austria, Switzerland France and Germany (we further subdivide Germany into East and West given its different history for much of the post-war period); and the Southern European set including Italy and Spain. The FFS data sets include a core of questions common to all countries and others that were asked in some countries but not others. All these countries included men and women in their samples and with the exception of Norway and Sweden information was collected on men and women in the same age range. These two countries had a different strategy. Instead of collecting information on all ages within a given range they focused in on a series of birth cohorts. In Sweden the cohorts were a sample of women born in 1949, 1954, 1959, 1964 and 1969 and men born in 1949, 1959 and 1964, and in Norway the birth years for women were 1945, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965 and 1968 and for men 1945 and 1960. Details on the questionnaire can be found in Fertility and Family Surveys Questionnaire and Codebook.<sup>1</sup> The Fertility and Family Surveys included a full partnership history that incorporated dates of marriages and any other co-residential heterosexual intimate relationships for both male and female respondents. The question pertaining to non-marital partnerships was as follows “have you ever lived in the same household with someone with whom you had an intimate relationship but did not marry?” For comparisons with Britain we make use of data collected in the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which collected a retrospective partnership history in Wave 2, carried out in 1992. The BHPS includes men and women aged 16 and over and for these analyses we restricted the sample to those aged 20 to 39 in 1992 (3699 men and women). The BHPS definition of a partnership differed from that of the FFS in that a time constraint was placed on the partnership. The question was “have you ever lived as a couple for three months or more?”. An examination of the FFS data showed that only a negligible proportion of partnerships were reported as lasting less than 3 months (around 5 in 1000 cases). The FFS data come from standard recode files supplied by the individual countries to the Population Activities Unit at the UN Economic Commission for Europe.

## NEVER-PARTNERED

Our examination of the Eurobarometer data highlighted the marked variations in the proportions single across European nations. However, reporting oneself as single does not necessarily carry the implication of never having been in a union. Single as a civil status means never-

**Table 2** UN ECE Fertility and Family Surveys and BHPS: year of interview and age range

Country	Year	Age range
<b>Fertility and Family Surveys</b>		
Norway	1988/89	20–43 *
Finland	1989/90	22–51
Sweden	1992/93	23–43 *
France	1994	20–49
Austria	1996	20–54
Switzerland	1994/95	20–49
Germany	1992	20–39
Italy	1995/96	20–49
Spain	1994/95	18–49
<b>British Household Panel Survey</b>		
Great Britain	1992	16–97

\* Specific cohorts – see text.

**Table 3** Percentage of men and women never-partnered

	Women		Men	
	25–29	30–34	25–29	30–34
Sweden*	10	4	18	10
Norway**	11	5	20	-
Finland	9	5	7	3
France	11	7	29	13
Austria	17	6	35	18
Switzerland	15	6	32	10
West Germany	33	15	55	28
East Germany	15	7	29	10
Great Britain	16	6	22	13
Spain	32	12	52	20
Italy	47	17	76	35

\*Sweden 1959 and 1964 cohorts \*\* Norway 1955 and 1960 cohorts.

married but in common usage it has come increasingly to mean being currently without a partner and used by the separated and divorced as well as the never married to describe their partnership status. The partnership histories allowed us to isolate men and women who reported having never lived together with a partner of the opposite sex.

Table 3 shows the proportions of men and women in the age groups 25–29 and 30–34 years who had never been in a co-residential partnership at the time of the surveys. As would be expected the proportions never partnered declines with age and is typically higher amongst men than women. A profile that replicates the patterns found in marital histories. Let us focus in on women aged 25–29 years to highlight the variation across these European nations in the proportions who had never partnered. It is apparent that the variation is quite marked; from lows in the Nordic countries of around 10 per cent and highs of 30 per cent or more in Spain, West Germany and Italy. British women are most similar to their Swiss and Austrian counterparts.

However, that is not to say that the never partnered are not in intimate relationships. The FFS also tried to capture information on non-co-residential partnerships by asking those in non co-residential unions whether they were “currently having an intimate relationship with

someone who lives in a separate household". The responses showed that between a third and one half of the never-partnered reported that they were in intimate non-co-residential partnerships. There was also a general tendency for higher proportions of the never-partnered currently in their twenties compared with those in their thirties to report they were in an intimate relationship with someone who lived elsewhere.

It is apparent that there are marked differences in the extent to which Europeans have never been in a partnership in their late 20s. The next question posed was whether there has been a decline in the propensity to form partnerships over time. To this end we compared the estimated proportions of women who had never had a co-residential partnership by the time they were aged 25. Figure 2 shows the proportions never partnered by age 25 amongst those who were aged 25-29 at the time of the survey and amongst those ten years older, those aged 35-39 at the time of the survey. An examination of the lower part of the graph shows that in all the countries from Switzerland down to Sweden the proportions never partnered by age 25 has changed very little over the decade encompassed by the two age groups 25-29 and 35-39. This implies that the marked change in the never-married population observed in many northern and west European countries is less to do with the avoidance of partnerships and more to do with the replacement of marital unions by cohabiting unions. The countries where there has seemingly been a marked decline in the proportions of women forming partnerships by age 25 are the two Southern European countries of Spain and Italy and West Germany and there has been a somewhat lesser decline in East Germany and Britain.

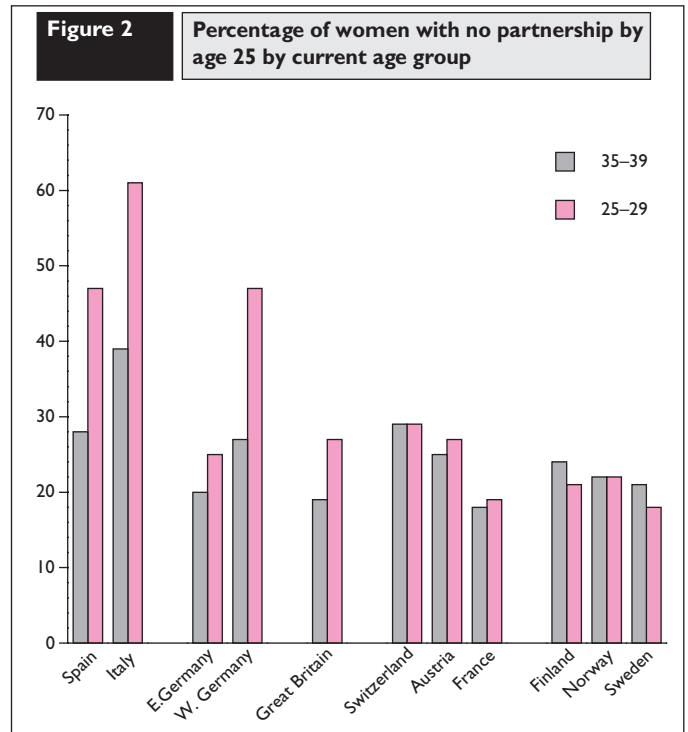
**NUMBER OF PARTNERSHIPS**

With the rise in divorce that has occurred in many European countries in recent decades men and women are likely to have several partnerships over their life. Figure 3 shows the number of partnerships, including marriages and cohabitations, reported by women aged 35-39 years at the time of the survey. It is noticeable that partnership turnover is not extensive; the majority of women have only had one partnership, in the 70-80 per cent range in most countries and higher still at around 90 per cent in the two southern European countries. Only a tiny proportion have had three or more partnerships. The Swedes had the highest proportions with three or more partners at 6 per cent closely followed by Great Britain and West Germany with 5 per cent and Italy and Spain had the lowest levels at 1 per cent or less. In the rest of the countries between 2 and 4 per cent had had three or more partnerships.

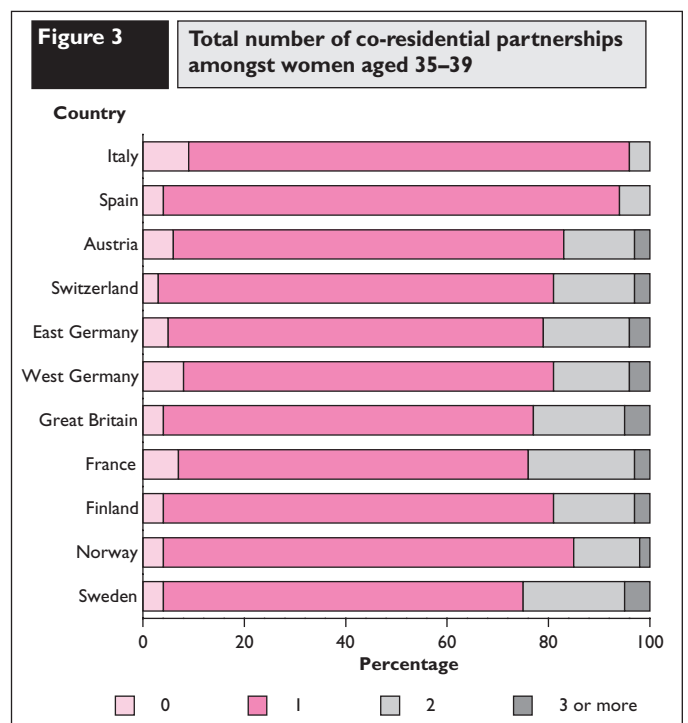
**TYPE OF FIRST PARTNERSHIP**

We now focus in on the women who have ever had a partnership and examine type of first partnership according to type of first union: namely whether the respondents married directly with no cohabitation, whether they cohabited and then married and thirdly whether they cohabited and it dissolved or was continuing at the time of the interview.

It is clearly apparent from Table 4 that for a majority of women in the Southern European countries marriage still heralds the start of a first partnership whereas this is only the case for a minority in the Nordic and Western European nations. In these latter two groups of nations, cohabitation typically initiates a first union and one quarter to one half of first partnerships are pre-marital cohabitations. We also note that the proportions marrying directly are higher in Britain than in the rest of the non-southern European countries. Other unions that commenced with a cohabitation are either continuing or have dissolved and the extent of dissolution will be discussed below.



These data have provided us with a summary picture of the current situation but how has the picture changed over time. In Table 5 we compare the proportions of women aged 25-29 at the time of the survey with those aged 35-39 in order to assess the extent to which the probability of marrying directly has changed over time. It is clear that not marrying directly was already well established and at a very low level amongst the older generation of Swedish women. However, we see noticeable declines in some of the other countries. For example, in Norway the proportions marrying directly was 10 per cent amongst those aged 25-29 years (cohort 1960) but had been of the order of 42 per cent amongst the generation born ten years earlier (cohort 1950).



Similarly in France we see a marked decline from 50 per cent in the earlier generation to 13 per cent amongst the younger one, and in West Germany a decline from 45 per cent to 19 per cent over the two generations and in Great Britain from 72 per cent to 36 per cent. A somewhat slower pace of change is to be seen in the other countries such as Switzerland and Austria. In the Southern countries with over 70 per cent marrying directly we see signs of change in Spain, but this is less the case in Italy. These data highlight not only the diversity across European nations but also the differential pace of change across nations.

### DURATION OF COHABITING UNIONS

How long do first partnerships that commenced with cohabitation last? This is in fact not a very easy question to answer. Cohabitations can cease either through the couple marrying or the partnership ending. Moreover, any estimate of the duration of cohabitation unions needs to take into account exit through marriage, exit through dissolution and for those that continue censoring at the time of the interview. Here, we examine this issue in a number of ways. Table 6 shows the median duration for cohabitations that converted into marriage and those that dissolved. The duration of pre-marital cohabitation is simply the difference in months between the onset of first partnership and marriage with that partner and the second measure is the difference between the start and end of the cohabiting union. Again to assist comparison the data are shown for women in the age range 20 to 39 years. The median duration of pre-marital cohabitation shows some variability across nations with the longest median duration, of four years, to be seen in Sweden, intermediate levels in Austria and Switzerland, 26 and 22 months respectively, and the rest of the nations, including Britain, where durations are clustered in the 15-20 month range. With the exception of Sweden pre-marital cohabitation is short-lived, under two years on average. However, these data may not necessarily reflect the recent position particularly in countries where cohabitation has continued to increase and marrying directly has become less common and this is likely to be most marked in countries such as Norway and Finland where the surveys were carried out in the late 1980s. Unions that had dissolved by the time of the survey were on average of a longer duration than those that converted into marriages, lasting around 2 years or more in most countries. Britain and Norway stand out as seemingly having particularly short-lived cohabiting unions with a median duration of well under two years to dissolution.

These data on average duration of pre-marital cohabitation and average duration to dissolution relate to closed intervals and are readily calculated. However, to address the question how long do cohabitations last which takes into account unions that are ongoing we used life table analysis to estimate survival times to the end of cohabitation be it through marriage or dissolution. The median survival times for each country are shown in the third column of Table 6. Sweden and East Germany have the longest average durations at over 4 years, France is approaching four years whilst the remainder of the countries have median durations of three years or under. Britain with a median duration of 28 months is similar to a cluster of countries that includes Norway, Finland and Switzerland.

### DISSOLUTION OF UNIONS

Several studies have found there to be a higher probability of divorce amongst those who cohabit prior to marriage as compared with those who marry directly.<sup>2-4</sup> In a recent study we showed for a British cohort that if one refined the type of first partnership as we have done in this analysis to distinguish first cohabiting unions that led to marriage from those that had not then the relative risk of partnership breakdown of those who cohabited or married directly were similar. We explored this

**Table 4** Type of first partnership (%) amongst women with a first partnership and aged 20–39 at the time of the survey

	Married directly	Cohabited and Married	Cohabited
Sweden (92/3)*	8	36	57
Norway (88/9)**	33	31	35
Finland (89/90)***	21	46	33
France (94)	27	26	46
Austria (96)	24	36	40
Switzerland (94/5)	23	48	28
West Germany (92)	30	32	38
East Germany (92)	20	25	55
Great Britain (92)	49	26	25
Italy (95/6)	88	7	5
Spain (94/5)	85	6	9

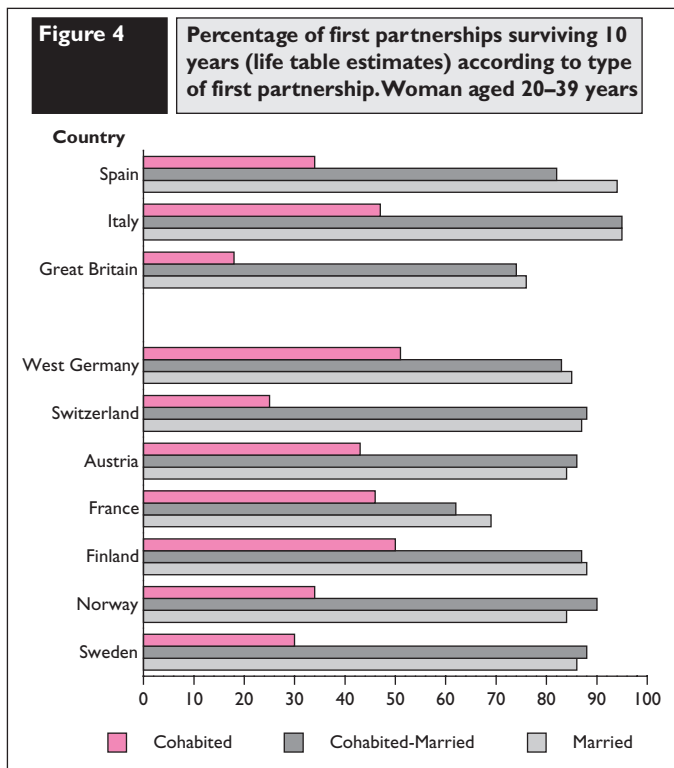
\*Sweden cohorts \*\*Norway cohorts \*\*\*Finland age group 22–39.

**Table 5** Percentage of women marrying directly amongst those who had had a first partnership according to current age group.

Country	Age Group	
	25–29	35–39
Sweden	8	10
Norway	10	42
Finland	17	31
France	13	50
Austria	21	33
Switzerland	19	31
West Germany	19	45
East Germany	19	24
Great Britain	37	72
Italy	87	92
Spain	81	91

**Table 6** Median duration of cohabitation in months by type of first union amongst women aged 20–39

Country	Pre-marital Cohabitation	Cohabitation that dissolved	Life table median duration of cohabitation
Sweden	48	29	51
Norway	19	19	27
Finland	17	29	28
France	20	36	44
Austria	26	36	37
Switzerland	22	27	28
West Germany	19	30	32
East Germany	15	31	55
Great Britain	17	19	28
Italy	19.5	28	25
Spain	20	28	33



issue using the FFS data for ten European countries as well the BHPS data set. Life tables were constructed which provided estimates of the survival rates of the three types of union at various durations from the start of the partnership. Figure 4 shows the proportions intact at the 10th anniversary. It is clear from Figure 4 that proportions dissolved at these various durations were similar for those who cohabited prior to marriage and those who married directly. For example, in Sweden by the 10th anniversary of the start of the partnership 86 per cent of those that had started as a marriage continued and the analogous proportion for marriages that were preceded by a period of cohabitation was 88 per cent. Overall, there is little evidence in these data to suggest that marriages that commence with cohabitation with no prior partnerships have a higher rate of dissolution in the first ten years than those that commence with marriage. However, it is clearly apparent from these data that the most fragile partnerships are cohabitations that do not convert into marriages; in all the countries (with the exception of East Germany) 1 in 2 or less had survived 10 years. There were a cluster of countries where 40-50 per cent had survived; including West Germany, Finland, Spain, France and Austria; a cluster in the 30-40 per cent range including Norway, Spain, Sweden; and Switzerland and Britain had the lowest survival rates at 25 per cent and 18 per cent respectively. It is a well established finding that the younger the partners are at the start of the partnership the higher rate of breakdown<sup>6,7</sup> and if different kinds of partnerships are more common at younger ages this may explain some of the differences in the rate of dissolution for different types of first partnership. To examine this issue we used hazard models to estimate the duration of the union either to dissolution or being censored at the date of interview. The results are reported in terms of relative risk ratios (Table 7). The first column shows the risk without taking into account age at first partnership and the second column takes this into account. The reference category is the group who married directly. It is clear that, with the exception of Spain, the relative risk of partnership dissolution was not statistically greater amongst those who had cohabited prior to first marriage compared with those who married directly. The highest dissolution rates as expected are amongst those first partnerships that did not convert to a marriage. Controlling for age at first partnership made little difference to the findings.

**Table 7** Relative risk of partnership dissolution according to type of first partnership for women aged 20–39 years. Model 2 with controls for age at first partnership

Country	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Sweden</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	0.88	0.88
Cohabited	7.73***	7.81***
<b>Norway</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	0.70**	0.71**
Cohabited	8.23***	8.69***
<b>Finland</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	0.97	0.89
Cohabited	4.91***	4.35***
<b>France</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	1.20	1.15
Cohabited	2.27***	2.01**
<b>Austria</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	0.89	0.87
Cohabited	5.12***	4.58***
<b>Switzerland</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	1.01	1.03
Cohabited	12.3***	12.9***
<b>West Germany</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	1.21	1.15
Cohabited	4.14***	3.83***
<b>East Germany</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	1.08	1.07
Cohabited	1.63***	1.55***
<b>Great Britain</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	1.08	1.07
Cohabited	10.5***	10.2***
<b>Italy</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	1.52	1.48
Cohabited	19.1**	16.8***
<b>Spain</b>		
Married directly	1.00	1.00
Cohabited-married	2.59***	2.52***
Cohabited	18.71***	16.5***

\*\* p< 0.01 \*\*\* p< 0.0005.

The evidence from the other European countries and our analysis for Britain using two separate data sets suggests that in considering the role of pre-marital cohabitation in subsequent divorce that it is important to distinguish those who had more than one partnership prior to marriage and those that did not. The heightened probability of pre-marital cohabitants to divorce that has been observed in other studies may arise from the subset of cohabitants who have experienced partnership turnover prior to marriage. Moreover, in this analysis we are likely to have captured the majority of partnership dissolutions amongst these women as our earlier examination on number of partnerships showed that the majority of those who had experienced a partnership dissolution by their late thirties had only one such experience.

## SUB-GROUP DIFFERENCES

So far we have examined cross-national variation in union formation behaviour but there are also likely to be distinct variations within nations and between sub-groups of the population. The FFS surveys only included a limited amount of background information on the respondents but we were able to examine three important dimensions namely: variation according to educational level: religious observance and experience of parental separation.

Table 8 shows the proportions who married directly according to level of education divided into three levels. This is a relatively crude categorisation: with level 3 broadly encompassing the graduate group; level 2 a middle group with secondary education and level 1 pre-secondary education. The proportions in these 3 educational groups varies across nations. Perusal of these data show that there are no simple observations to be made or a generalisable pattern to be seen. In some countries there is little association between educational level and propensity to marry directly as opposed to commencing with a cohabitation.<sup>4</sup> In others, there is some evidence that those with the lowest level are more likely to marry directly and in others there is a curvilinear relationship with the least educated and the most educated being more likely to marry directly. This inconsistency in findings in relation to education has been noted by Carmichael in his extensive review of the literature on cohabitation. Moreover, he points to the research findings for various countries that show educational participation rather than level of educational qualifications having a greater impact on the propensity to cohabit.

Turning to religion, Table 9 shows the proportions of women who in response to a question on how often they attended a religious service reported that they "practically never did". From the last column we see that there was some variation in the proportions who responded in this way, for example non-attendance was rare in Italy and more common in East Germany and Sweden. However, within a given country we see that the proportions who married directly were more likely to be attendees at church than their contemporaries who had commenced their first partnership with a cohabitation. Across Europe cohabitation appears to be associated with the more secular groups within a population.

The final background factor examined is one that is pertinent to changing patterns of union formation, namely whether there has been experience of parental separation or divorce. There is evidence for Great Britain and the USA<sup>8-11</sup> that children who experience parental divorce are more likely to cohabit and have children outside of marriage. Many of the Fertility and Family Surveys included a question on whether the parents of the respondents had ever separated or divorced and the age at which this occurred. Table 10 shows the proportions of women who had ever cohabited according to whether they had experienced parental divorce during childhood. It is clear that in all these countries, the proportions ever-cohabiting is invariably higher amongst those who experienced parental divorce during childhood than amongst those who did not. This is the case in Northern European, Western European and Southern European countries and one also notes that in countries where cohabitation is normative such as Sweden and in countries where cohabitation is relatively rare such as Italy, it is still the case that if women experienced the separation of their parents they were more likely to cohabit. All these differences were statistically significant at the 5 per cent level or less. As well as examining differences according to whether the women had ever-cohabited we also focused in on first partnership and examined the extent to which children from such backgrounds were more or less likely to commence their first partnership via cohabitation or a marriage. Table 10 shows that those women who experienced parental separation in childhood were less likely to marry directly than their

**Table 8** Percentage of women who married directly according to level of education: amongst sample with a first partnership and currently aged 25-29 years or equivalent

Country	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Sweden	14	8	6
Norway	-	31	23
Finland	14	16	19
France	19	11	9
Austria	25	19	17
Switzerland	45	16	19
West Germany	27	14	12
East Germany	23	20	17
Great Britain*	40	43	27
Italy	89	85	92
Spain	85	79	66

\* Great Britain not directly comparable Level 1 is no qualifications level 2 intermediate level including GCSE to A Levels or equivalent 3 higher and degree level qualifications.

**Table 9** Percentage women aged 20 to 39 reporting they practically never attend religious services according to type of first partnership

Country	Married directly	Cohabited and married	Cohabited only	Total
Sweden	38	61	73	66
Norway	51	71	78	62
Finland	22	33	43	34
Switzerland	24	41	55	41
West Germany	28	43	44	39
East Germany	68	80	78	77
Great Britain	41	47	56	46
Italy	8	9	28	9
Spain	50	65	74	53

France and Austria did not include this question.

**Table 10** Per cent ever-cohabited and per cent first partnership a direct marriage by experience of parental separation or divorce at age 16 or under amongst women aged 20-39 at the time of the survey.

Country	Per cent Ever Cohabited		Per cent Married Directly		Per cent with Parental Divorce
	Parental Yes	Divorce No	Parental Yes	Divorce No	
Sweden	61	50	3	8	15
Finland *	46	26	16	21	9
France	55	41	15	30	18
Austria	64	49	9	27	15
Switzerland	34	23	16	24	15
West Germany	46	33	21	31	16
East Germany	49	31	16	21	21
Italy	15	3	67	89	4
Spain	17	6	68	86	6

Finland did not ask age at parental divorce. Norway did not include a question on parental divorce. BHPS has no comparable question.

contemporaries without such an experience. This preference for cohabiting amongst children who experienced a parental separation or divorce may well represent reluctance on the part of these young people to make a permanent commitment, such as that enshrined in legal marriage. Alternatively, given the experience of parental separation they may want to be more certain about committing to a permanent relationship and may take longer in the search for their ideal partner or in testing the strength of the relationship via cohabitation before committing to marriage. The consistency of the association between parental separation and cohabitation across nations suggests that this finding might be added to the litany of robust associations with respect to contemporary demographic behaviour.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This analysis of recently available data on union status and formation has shown there to be marked variation in the ways couples are forming partnerships across European nations. In Southern European countries marriage is still the pre-eminent marker for entry into first union; whereas in most West and Northern European countries cohabitation has eclipsed marriage as the marker for first partnership. In many Western and Northern European countries, with Britain being one of the exceptions, there is little evidence that the propensity to become a couple has declined, as cohabitation has simply replaced some of the marriages of yesteryear. In the main in most countries cohabiting unions still tend to be short-lived either converting into marriages or dissolving. We found little evidence that pre-marital cohabitants in their first union are more likely to experience marital breakdown than those who marry directly. Pre-marital cohabitation may be an effective way of selecting out partnerships with an enhanced risk of breakdown. The most fragile partnerships were cohabiting unions that had not converted into marriage. We also showed that children who experienced parental divorce and the more secular groups in a population are more prone to cohabit. Undoubtedly, the evidence from this and other studies show that most European countries are experiencing changes in the ways that men and women become couples, but whether countries are on a trajectory to an ultimate destination where marriage and cohabitation are largely indistinguishable or even where cohabitation overtakes marriage as the dominant form of union awaits the future.

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## Key findings

- In most West and Northern European countries cohabitation has eclipsed marriage as the marker for first partnership whereas in Southern Europe it continues to be marriage.
- In many Western and Northern European countries, with Britain being one of the exceptions, there is little evidence that the propensity to become a couple has declined, as cohabitation has simply replaced some of the marriages of yesteryear.
- In most countries cohabiting unions still tend to be short-lived either converting into marriages or dissolving.
- Across all nations, couples who cohabit before marrying their first partner are no more likely to divorce than those who marry without cohabiting. The most fragile partnerships are cohabiting unions that do not convert into marriages.
- Across all nations children who experienced parental divorce and the more secular groups in a population were more prone to cohabit

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