

# Childbearing outside marriage in Western Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

Across Europe more and more children are being born outside first marriage, the conventional locus for the transition to parenthood. This paper examines this development for Western European nations using in the main data from the UN ECE European Family and Fertility Surveys. We commence with an overview, based on vital registration data, on the level of non-marital childbearing across Western European nations and how this has changed over the last two decades. Our in depth analysis is confined to nine countries that encompass nations with somewhat different cultural and demographic regimes. For these nations we examine the partnership context of first birth in terms of whether the transition to motherhood was made prior to entry into any union; within a first cohabiting union; within first marriage; or after a first partnership had ended. As well as examining the extent of these types of behaviour across nations we also ascertain whether within nations there is variation in such behaviours with respect to age at first birth, educational level, religious observance and family background. Having set the scene we focus in on the women who had a non-marital birth. For women who had a child prior to any partnership we track them and estimate the extent to which they subsequently enter a partnership and also how long they spend as solo mothers, as well as examining whether these behaviours vary according to background characteristics. For the set of women who had their non-marital birth within a cohabiting union we estimate the extent to which they legalise their union and whether this tendency varied according to background factors. We complete our analysis with an assessment of the relative risk of dissolution according to whether the transition to motherhood was made within a cohabiting or a marital union.

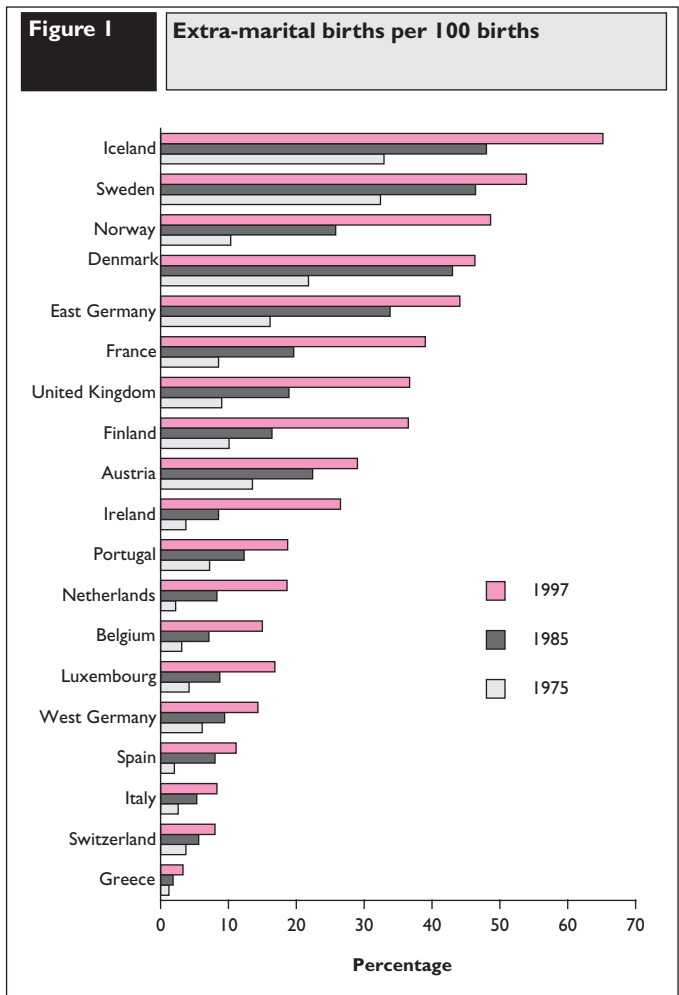
**Across most European states in recent decades there have been significant increases in childbearing outside marriage. This article examines the extent to which women have their first child in one of four settings: prior to any partnership; in their first cohabiting partnership; in first marriage; and after a first partnership. Temporal changes in these behaviours and variation according to background characteristics of the women are also examined. For the women who had a child outside any partnership, we examine the extent to which they go on to form partnerships and how long after the birth this happens. For those who had their first child within a cohabiting union, we examine the extent to which they marry and how long after the birth this occurs. Finally, we investigate whether children born within cohabiting unions that do and do not convert into marriages are more or less likely than those born within marriage to see their parents separate.**

### THE RISE OF NON-MARITAL CHILDBEARING

In recent decades across most European states there have been noteworthy increases in the proportions of births occurring outside of legal marriage but there continues to be marked variation in the extent of non-marital childbearing across nations. As we see in Figure 1 at one extreme are the Nordic countries where well over 40 per cent of births in 1997 were outside marriage and at the other extreme are the southern European countries of Italy and Greece where, along with Switzerland, 10 per cent or fewer births occurred outside marriage. Between these two extremes two broad groupings can be discerned. A set of countries with ratios between 10 and 20 per cent including the geographically close Benelux countries and West Germany and a set with 25 per cent or more which encompasses Ireland (which has experienced one of the most notable changes - up from 8 per cent in 1985 to 27 per cent in 1997), the United Kingdom and France (with remarkably similar trends) and Austria and Finland. In 1975, only 5 of the 19 countries represented here had non-marital birth ratios of more than 10 per cent, in 1985 this had increased to 10 and by 1997 stood at 16. In 1975, Sweden and Iceland were dramatic outliers, with 1 in 3 births already being born outside of marriage, this is much less the case today. We recognise that these comparisons of trends over time and space using the non-marital birth ratio (non-marital births/all live births) are unlikely to be as robust as comparisons based on non-marital birth rates (non-marital births/number of unmarried women aged 15-49) which take into account the population at risk. Unfortunately, data on non-marital birth rates are not as readily available as the ratio data which are easier to calculate and simpler to understand.

One of the important engines behind the rise in non-marital childbearing is the rise in cohabitation that has occurred, particularly since the beginning of the 1980s, in many European countries. However, there is a good deal of diversity across European states in the incidence of cohabitation. Cohabitation is strikingly most common in the Nordic countries and France, relatively rare in Southern European countries and Ireland, with the remainder of the West European countries falling between these two extremes (for a detailed analysis of recent trends in cohabitation in Western Europe see Kiernan, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. Across Europe levels of cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage tend to be in accord, with countries with high levels of cohabitation having higher rates of non-marital childbearing and vice versa. However, there are exceptions. Britain and Ireland have higher levels of childbearing outside marriage than one would expect from cohabitation estimates alone and the Netherlands and West Germany have lower rates of non-marital childbearing than might be anticipated from their levels of cohabitation.

In the remainder of the paper we use data from the ECE Fertility and Family Surveys and in the case of Britain the British Household Panel Survey to investigate the transition to non-marital childbearing in nine West European countries which includes two Nordic countries: Sweden and Norway, two Southern European countries: Italy and Spain three Middle European countries Switzerland, West Germany and Austria and two North Western European: France and Great Britain. This selection broadly encompasses the four levels of non-marital childbearing highlighted in Figure 1 and it also includes the four largest countries in terms of population in Western Europe: Germany, Britain, France and Italy.



**Table 1** UN ECE Fertility and Family Surveys and BHPs: year of interview, and number of women in sample aged 20-40 years

Country	Year	Age range	Total sample	Women aged 20-45** Fertility and Family Surveys
Norway	1988/89	20-43 *	5,758	4,510
Sweden	1992/93	23-43 *	5,741	3,811
Austria	1996	20-54	6,429	3,863
Switzerland	1994/95	20-49	6,076	3,460
West Germany	1992	20-39	5,096	3,058
France	1994	20-49	5,050	2,747
Italy	1995/96	20-49	6,082	4,311
Spain	1994/95	18-49	6,037	3,406
<b>British Household Panel Survey</b>				
Great Britain	1992	16-97	9,459	2,537

\* Specific cohorts - see text.  
\*\* exceptions Norway, Sweden and West Germany -see text.

## Technical Box one

### EUROPEAN FERTILITY AND FAMILY SURVEYS

The European Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) 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, have participated in this enterprise and here we make use of data from a range of Western European countries. These countries along with the dates of interview the age range of the respondents and sample sizes are shown in Table 1. With the exception of Norway the surveys took place in the first half of the 1990s. The timing and elapsed time for some of the surveys needs to be borne in mind when making comparisons.

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>2</sup> and technical matters relating to the individual countries can be found in the available Standard Country Reports. As yet only a limited number of countries have produced these reports but these include at the time of writing four of the countries included in our analysis (Sweden, Norway, France and Austria<sup>3</sup>). The Fertility and Family Surveys included a full partnership and birth history. The partnership history incorporated dates of marriages and any other co-residential heterosexual intimate relationships. 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 which did not participate in the FFS we make use of data collected in the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which collected a retrospective partnership and fertility history in Wave 2, carried out in 1992<sup>4</sup>. The BHPS includes men and women aged 16 and over and for our comparative analyses the sample was restricted to those women aged 20 to 45 in 1992, a total of 2537. 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 age range of the samples in the different countries varied which presented some difficulties. Germany had the most age restricted sample, only including persons in the 20–39 age range. Limiting our analyses to this age range would have precluded the two oldest cohorts in the Swedish and Norwegian samples and all the other countries allowed us to include women aged 20–45 years. To maximise the amount of information included in our analysis for the widest range of countries we included women in the 20–45 age range whilst recognising that this has implications for interpretation of the German data. 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.

**Table 2** Percentage of women with different partnership contexts at first birth according to age of woman

Country	Before any partnership	In first cohabiting union	In first marriage	After first ended	% with first birth by survey
Norway*					
25–29	12	28	53	8	68
35–39	13	7	75	4	91
20–45	12	18	65	5	62
Sweden**					
25–29	6	53	23	19	66
35–39	6	53	30	12	92
20–45	7	51	29	13	74
Austria					
25–29	21	29	47	3	70
35–39	20	20	53	7	91
20–45	20	22	53	5	73
Switzerland					
25–29	4	8	78	10	45
35–39	5	8	76	11	83
20–45	5	7	77	11	66
West Germany					
25–29	11	17	64	8	38
35–39	11	8	73	8	75
20–39	10	13	70	7	45
France					
25–29	9	46	35	10	65
35–39	10	22	63	6	92
20–45	9	28	54	8	74
Great Britain					
25–29	15	17	59	8	54
35–39	4	4	82	9	80
20–45	9	9	75	8	65
Italy					
25–29	4	5	90	1	36
35–39	5	3	90	1	83
20–45	5	3	90	1	61
Spain					
25–29	8	6	85	–	47
35–39	4	3	92	1	92
20–45	5	3	90	1	65

\* Norway 1950 and 1960 cohorts 35–39 and 25–29.

\*\* Sweden 1954 and 1964 cohorts: 35–39 and 25–29 equivalent.

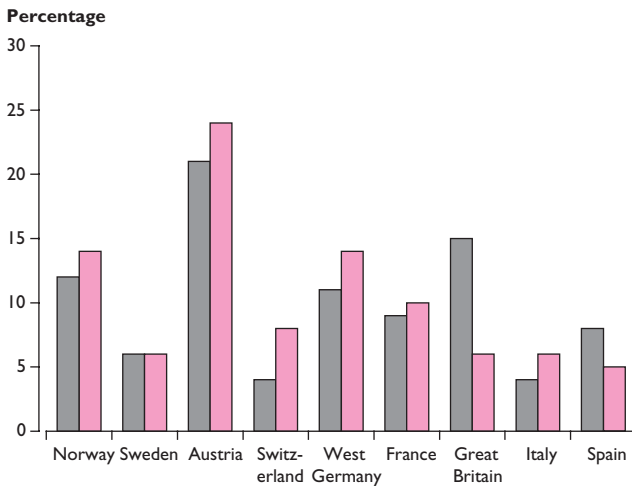
### PARTNERSHIP CONTEXT OF FIRST BIRTH

We commence our analysis with an examination of the partnership context of first birth. Table 2 shows the proportions of women in the various countries who made the transition to motherhood in one of four settings:

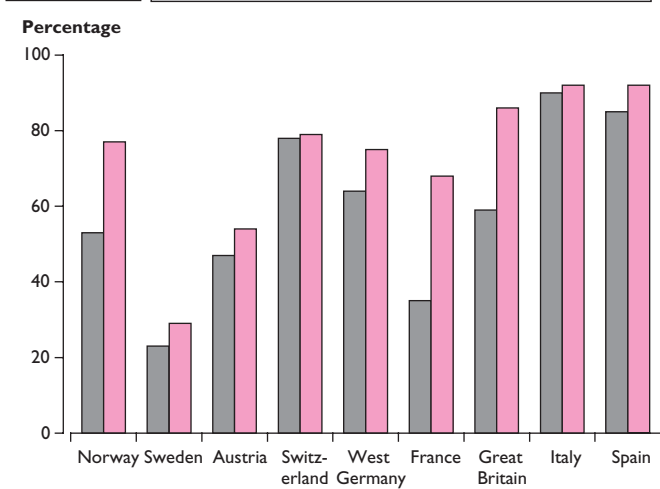
- before they had any co-residential partnership;
- within their first partnership which was a cohabitation;
- within first marriage
- and post their first partnership (either a cohabitation or a marriage).

To provide a perspective on the variation in the popularity of motherhood the final column gives the proportions of women in the different countries who had had a first birth. To ascertain whether within a given country there has been any temporal change in behaviour, in Figure 2 we show the proportions of women aged 25–29 who had a child in different contexts and the analogous proportions found amongst women currently aged 35–39 but only including the births that they had had 10 years or more prior to the survey date. This

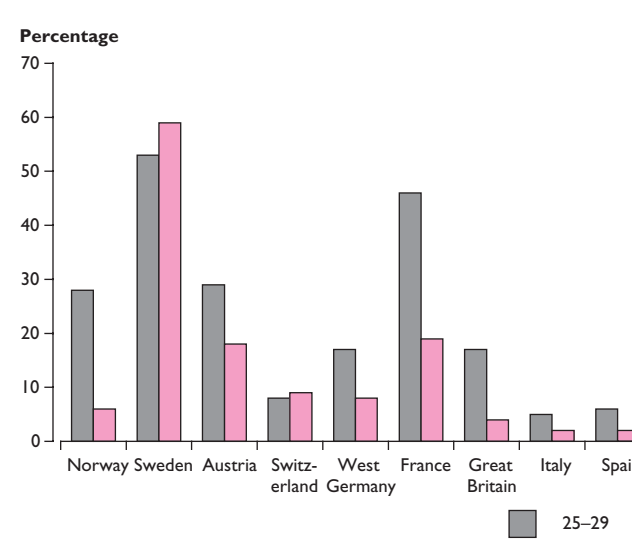
**Figure 2a** Percentage with a first birth prior to any partnership amongst women aged 25–29 at the time of the survey and those aged 35–39 at the survey when they were aged 25–29



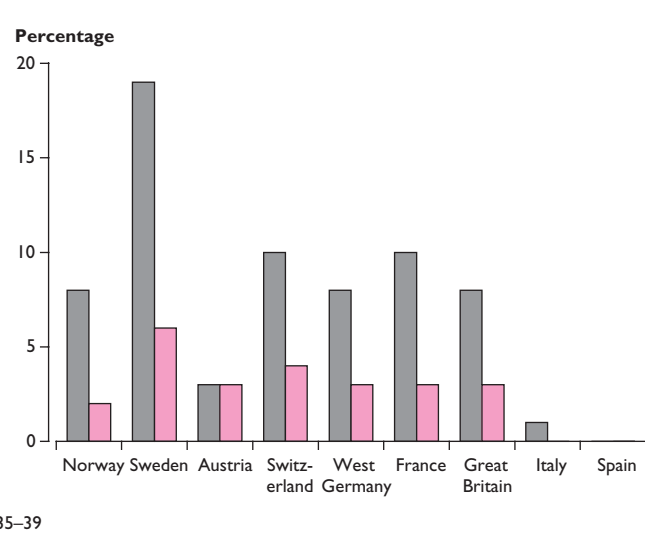
**Figure 2c** Percentage who had their first child within first marriage amongst women who were aged 25–29 at the time of the survey and amongst those who were aged 35–39 at the survey when they were aged 25–29



**Figure 2b** Percentage who had their first child within their first cohabiting union amongst women aged 25–29 at the time of the survey and those aged 35–39 at the survey when they were aged 25–29



**Figure 2d** Percentage who had their first child after a first partnership had ended amongst women aged 25–29 at the time of the survey and those aged 35–39 at the survey when they were aged 25–29



allows us to make a more direct comparison between two different cohorts at a similar stage in their life course which is more rigorous than a cross-sectional comparison between those currently aged 25–29 and 35–39, which in the absence of life–history data is often the only comparison that can be made.

In Spain and Italy and to a lesser extent Switzerland it is clearly apparent that first marriage is the pre-eminent context for first births and there has been little change in the extent of marital births in the latter two countries. In the remainder of the countries the picture is less clear cut (Figure 2c).

It is clearly the case for almost all these European countries that it is normative to become a mother in one’s first partnership. With the exception of Sweden, ten per cent or less in the most recent cohort of women (those aged 25–29 years) who were mothers had their first child after their first partnership had ended. Although, as we see in Figure 2d there is evidence of an upward trend in this type of behaviour in many of the countries.

Having a child prior to a partnership is a minor practice in many countries including countries with high levels of non-marital childbearing and countries with low levels (Table 2). For example, the overall proportion of women who had a child prior to any union was only 7 per cent in Sweden and 9 per cent in France. The extent of out of partnership births is somewhat higher in Norway and notably higher in Austria, but Austria is a special case which has a long history of marriage following on from a first birth<sup>5</sup>. One also sees from Figure 2a that in most countries the proportions of births born prior to a first partnership have hardly changed over recent cohorts, and the general direction in most countries has been for the proportion if anything to decrease. The major exception to this trend is Great Britain where the proportion has more than doubled, going from 6 to 15 per cent.

In most countries the proportions having their first child in a first partnership be it a cohabitation or a marriage has changed little over the two cohorts shown in Figure 2; the exceptions are Sweden where there has been a movement towards having a first child post first partnership up from 6 to 19 per cent of first births, and Britain where there has been

a striking increase in the proportions of women having a child pre-partnership. In most countries there has been movement away from having a child within marriage to having a child within a cohabiting union but the proportions of women having a child outside a partnership *per se* has exhibited little change.

### CHARACTERISTICS ACCORDING TO TYPE OF FIRST PARTNERSHIP

We proceed to examine whether the propensity to have a first child in different partnership contexts varies according to age at first birth and a range of background characteristics. What follows is a straightforward description of variation according to background characteristics for women across the whole range of reproductive ages included in the samples, as the main aim here is to examine similarities and differences across countries in these domains.

#### Age at first birth

Table 3 shows the average age at first birth amongst women according to the partnership context of their first birth. It is clear from this table, and not unsurprising to find, that the group of women who had their first child after a first partnership had ended had the highest mean age at first birth, being around 27 years in most of the countries. At the other end of the spectrum, namely having a child prior to any co-residential partnership, in most countries these women have the youngest average age at childbearing. In most cases this falls within the 20/21 age range which is typically some 2 years younger on average than that observed for women who have their first child within their first partnership.

**Table 3** Average age at first birth according to partnership context of first birth women aged 20–45 years

Country	Before any partnership	In first cohabiting union	In first marriage	After first partnership ended	All mothers	Number in sample
Norway*	20.7	22.2	23.4	26.9	23.1	2,590
Sweden*	20.6	22.9	24.5	26.8	23.7	2,812
Austria	21.0	22.1	23.3	26.7	22.7	2,758
Switzerland	20.1	24.9	25.4	28.9	25.5	2,198
West Germany**	20.4	23.9	24.1	26.9	23.9	1,247
France	21.3	23.3	23.0	26.7	23.2	2,049
Great Britain	19.1	21.4	23.7	27.6	23.5	1,629
Italy	22.4	24.0	24.2	29.1	24.1	2,457
Spain	21.3	23.2	24.0	26.9	23.9	2,243

\* Norway and Sweden specific cohorts.

\*\* West Germany age range 20–39.

The story is less clear cut when we compare the average ages of first birth amongst those who were in cohabiting and marital unions. Any comparison or interpretation is of course complicated by the fact that in countries where there have been recent increases in the propensity to have children in cohabiting unions as opposed to marital unions, other things being equal, women who have children within a cohabiting union are likely to be selected for relative youthfulness. From Table 3 we see that in most countries cohabiting women have their first child on average at a younger age than those in marital unions: the extreme example is Great Britain where there is a 2.3 year difference in the average age at birth, but we also observe the same tendency in Sweden, Norway and Austria where there is more than one year's difference in the average age at first birth for these two groups of women. We recollect from Table 2 that

**Table 4** Percentage having a first child in different contexts according to educational level: women aged 20–45 years

Country	Before any partnership		In first cohabiting union		In first marriage		After first partnership ended		Percentage Graduates
	Non Graduate	Graduate	Non Graduate	Graduate	Non Graduate	Graduate	Non Graduate	Graduate	
Norway*	15	8	18	17	62	69	4	6	41
Sweden*	8	5	56	40	24	38	12	16	35
Austria	20	20	21	22	54	53	5	4	18
Switzerland	5	3	6	10	79	70	10	16	12
West Germany**	10	13	13	14	71	63	7	10	12
France	10	5	29	20	54	62	7	13	15
Great Britain	10	3	10	6	74	78	6	13	23
Italy	5	7	3	4	91	87	1	2	9
Spain	5	3	3	4	90	89	1	3	12

\*Norway and Sweden specific cohorts.

\*\* West Germany age range 20–39.

in Sweden there had been little change over recent cohorts in the extent to which women were having their first child in cohabiting unions as compared with marital unions but this was less the case in Britain and Norway where there have been marked increases over time in the proportions having a child in a cohabiting union. In most of the other countries the tendency is for cohabiting women to have their first child at a younger age than married women as in Spain and Switzerland, but in the case of Italy, West Germany and France there are only small differences between these two groups of women, and in France cohabiting women on average have their first child at an older age than their married peers.

### BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS

The FFS surveys only included a limited amount of background information on the respondents but we were able to examine three pertinent dimensions namely: variation according to educational level; religious observance and experience of parental separation. Not all countries obtained information on all these dimensions.

#### Educational level

For all countries we had some information on educational level coded into three levels. This was a relatively crude categorisation in which level three broadly encompassed the graduate or equivalent group; level two a middle group with secondary level education and level 1 pre-secondary education. In Table 4 we have divided the women into two educational groups; graduates or equivalent and non-graduates. We note from the final column of Table 4 that proportion of graduate or equivalent women is highly variable across nations with a low of 9 per cent in Italy and a high of 41 per cent in Norway.

In some countries there is a weak relationship between educational level and the context of first birth; for example in Austria, West Germany and Italy. In the remainder of the countries there are indications that non-graduates are more likely than their graduate contemporaries to have a child before any partnership and in several countries non-graduates are more likely than graduates to have their first child in their first partnership. In Sweden marital childbearing is more frequent amongst the graduate group, which is also the case in France and Great Britain. The lack of generalisable patterns across nations with respect to educational level may be real, but given the crudeness of the measure, the variation in educational participation rates both across nations and cohorts, we cannot be sure that this is the case.

## Religion

Turning to religion, in Table 5 we divided the women into two groups those who in response to the question on how often they attended a religious service reported that they practically never did versus the rest. This is current religious observance rather than childhood or observance prior to motherhood so we cannot say with any certainty whether the more secular women were more likely to have a child in a certain context or that having had a child, for example, outside marriage affected their level of religious observance. It is clearly apparent in all the countries that those who became mothers within marriage were more religious than their counterparts who had their first child in other contexts.

**Table 5** Percentage having a first child in different contexts according to church attendance: women aged 20–45 years

Country	Before any partnership		In first cohabiting union		In first marriage		After first partnership ended		Percentage reporting none
	Some	None	Some	None	Some	None	Some	None	
Norway*	11	12	11	21	74	60	4	6	63
Sweden*	6	7	42	56	40	23	12	14	62
Switzerland	4	6	4	9	85	69	7	15	35
West Germany**	8	13	11	16	76	60	5	11	38
Great Britain	7	10	6	12	80	69	8	8	43
Italy	4	9	3	6	92	82	1	3	9
Spain	4	5	2	4	92	88	1	2	47

\* Norway and Sweden specific cohorts.

\*\* West Germany age range 20–39.

This question not asked in France or Austria.

## Parental Divorce

The final background factor that we examined was whether the women had experienced parental separation or divorce during childhood. There is evidence for Great Britain and the United States that children who experience parental divorce are more likely to cohabit and have a child outside of marriage<sup>6–8</sup>. Many of the FFS surveys included a question on whether the parents of the respondents had ever separated or divorced and the age at which it occurred. Norway did not include this question and the British Household Panel Survey did not distinguish between dissolution due to death and dissolution due to divorce. The proportion of

**Table 6** Percentage having a first child in different contexts according to experience or not of parental divorce in childhood: women aged 20–45 years

Country	Before any partnership		In first cohabiting union		In first marriage		After first partnership ended		Percentage parental divorce
	Parental divorce		Parental divorce		Parental divorce		Parental divorce		
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	
Sweden*	10	6	51	51	21	30	19	13	13
Austria	18	20	27	20	41	56	13	4	11
Switzerland	8	4	13	6	63	80	15	10	10
West Germany**	13	9	20	12	54	72	13	6	10
France	14	8	41	25	35	60	9	7	12
Italy	2	5	10	3	77	91	12	1	2
Spain	8	5	10	3	73	91	6	1	3

\* Sweden specific cohorts.

\*\* West Germany age range 20–39.

This question was not asked in Norway or Great Britain.

women who had experienced parental separation or divorce during childhood varied across the countries being very low in Italy and Spain at 2–3 per cent and notably higher in France and Sweden at 12–13 per cent and in the remainder of the countries it was around 10 per cent. There are some notable similarities and differences to be observed in Table 6. In all countries women who did not experience a parental divorce were more likely than those that did to have their first child within their first marital partnership. Conversely, in all countries except Sweden where having a child within a cohabiting union is the majority practice, those who experienced parental divorce during childhood were more likely to have a child within a cohabiting union than those women without such an experience. Women who experienced parental divorce were also significantly more likely than those without such an experience to have their first child post first partnership. There are some differences across nations with respect to the propensity to have a child prior to any union. In the southern European countries of Spain and Italy, where having a child outside a union is rare, differences according to experience of parental divorce are small. In Austria where such behaviour is more prevalent, and with its own unique history in this realm, there is also little difference in the propensity of women to become mothers prior to any co-residential partnership according to whether they had experienced the dissolution of their parent's marriage. In the remainder of the countries women who experienced parental divorce during childhood, as has been found to be the case in the USA and Great Britain, are more likely to have a child prior to any partnership.

## CHILD OUTSIDE A PARTNERSHIP

Having provided a broad overview of the partnership context of first birth across a range of European nations we change focus to a more detailed consideration of the group of women who had their first child prior to living with any partner. We showed above that they tended on average to be younger at first birth than women who became mothers within their first partnership. Now, we pose a number of questions relating to what happens after the birth of the child in terms of partnership formation. To what extent do these mothers cohabit, marry or continue to live without a partner and amongst those that enter a partnership how long after the birth does this occur? Initially we provide some simple descriptive statistics on this issue and then we proceed to examine the issue using life table techniques.

### Type of first partnership

Table 7 shows simple descriptive statistics on the proportions of women who had not entered a partnership by the time of the survey; the proportions who had entered a cohabiting union subdivided into those which had and had not subsequently been converted into marriages; and finally the proportions who had married without cohabiting after the birth of their child. Unfortunately we have no information on whether the mother married the putative father of the child. In most countries the majority of women, more than 70 per cent, who had a child on their own had subsequently cohabited or married. Sweden had the lowest proportions of never-partnered mothers at 12 per cent, most of the other countries were clustered in the 15–24 per cent range with France as an outlier where 45 per cent of the solo mothers reported not having entered a union by the time they were interviewed for the survey. Amongst those who entered a union the majority practice was to cohabit rather than to marry directly. The exceptions to this were the two southern European countries of Spain and Italy where 2 out of 3 of the mothers who had a child on their own married. Amongst those who commenced their first partnership via a cohabitation some went on to marry that partner. So the ultimate proportions of women who married after having a baby on their own was not insubstantial in several countries. In 5 out of the 10 countries the proportion was over 50 per cent and, with the exception of France with a low of 28 per cent, the remaining 3 countries were in the 38–45 per cent range.

**Table 7** Type of first partnership following birth of first child amongst women aged 20–45 years who had their first child prior to any partnership (per cent)

Country	No partnership by time of survey	Cohabited no marriage by time of survey	Cohabited and married	Married directly	Number in sample (=100%)
Norway*	17	26	20	37	313
Sweden*	12	49	28	10	192
Austria	21	36	18	25	574
Switzerland	16	21	36	27	110
West Germany**	29	26	19	26	128
France	45	27	14	14	185
Great Britain	24	20	20	35	143
Italy	23	4	9	64	124
Spain	15	16	4	65	107

\* Norway and Sweden specific cohorts.

\*\* West Germany age range 20–39.

### Duration to first partnership

For the women who had had a baby prior to any partnership we used life table techniques to estimate the duration from the time the baby was born to the time of entry into a partnership if this had occurred or the date of interview if there had been no partnership. The first column in Table 8 shows the median duration to first partnership for women in the various countries. We note that the spread is quite wide with the shortest durations to be seen in Norway and Britain with median durations of around 2.5 years and the longest durations of around 6 years to be seen in France and West Germany. Table 8 also shows the proportions of women having formed a partnership by the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of their child. In most countries the proportions leaving solo motherhood by the time their child was one year old was in the 20 to 30 per cent range. By the time their child was 5 years old typically more than 1 in 2 of the mothers had cohabited or married.

### Factors affecting entry into partnership

We were also interested in whether the propensity to enter a partnership varied according to age at first birth, educational level, church attendance and experience of family disruption in childhood.

Table 9 provides a summary of the relative risks of forming a partnership after giving birth prior to any partnership taking into

**Table 8** Duration in months to first partnership amongst women aged 20–45 years who had their first child prior to any partnership: life table estimates

Country	Median duration to partnership (months)	Percentage entered a partnership within 12 months	Percentage entered a partnership within 2 years	Entered a partnership within 5 years
Norway*	28	30	45	69
Sweden*	40	29	37	63
Austria	53	17	31	55
Switzerland	44	28	37	60
West Germany**	74	14	32	42
France	71	22	34	46
Great Britain	32	29	46	65
Italy	61	30	35	51
Spain	48	27	37	59

\* Norway and Sweden specific cohorts.

\*\* West Germany age range 20–39.

## Technical box two

Proportional hazard models estimated by Cox partial likelihood method were used for this analysis. These models are appropriate ones to use when the outcome variable is the duration of time until an event occurs, in this instance entry into a partnership, and when there is censoring at the time of the interview. For the analysis, age at first birth was subdivided into four categories: under age 20; 20–24; 25–29 and 30 or older and the reference category was the teenage group. The education variable had three categories representing low, medium and high levels of education and the reference group was the highest level. The religion variable and whether there was experience of parental divorce were dichotomous variables and the reference categories were respectively attendance at church and no experience of parental divorce during childhood. A series of analyses were performed: the first only included age at first birth in the model, the second included the set of co-variables relating to religion, education and parental divorce and a third one included both age at first birth and the co-variables. Our results are given in terms of relative risk ratios, namely the excess risk for a particular group compared with the reference group.

account all the factors. Our analyses showed that there was little variation within and across nations in the risk of forming a partnership according to attendance at church. The possible exception was Sweden where there were indications that those who never attended church were more likely to enter a partnership than their counterparts who attended church. With respect to educational level and experience of parental divorce there was also little variation within and between nations with women with high levels of education and no experience of parental divorce being as likely to enter a partnership as those with lower levels of education and experience of parental divorce. Italy was the exception in that women with lower levels of education were less likely to form a partnership than the more highly educated women. However, there was some evidence for Sweden, Norway, Austria, France and Italy that those who had their children at a young age were more likely to form a partnership than those who had their first child at an older age. In Switzerland, Spain, West Germany and Great Britain there was a weaker association between age at first birth and propensity to enter a post-birth partnership.

### CHILD WITHIN A COHABITING UNION

The set of non-marital births includes not only those born outside a union but those born within cohabiting unions. Here we examine this latter group and enquire to what extent these unions convert into marriages or to put it in older day parlance, to what extent are children born outside a marital union legitimated by the subsequent marriage of their parents?

Figure 3 provides life table estimates of the proportions of women who had legalised their union by 1, 3 and 5 years after the birth of their baby. It is apparent from Figure 3 that there is some variation across nations in the extent to which cohabiting unions are converted into marriages. France and Great Britain exhibit the lowest proportions at around one-third and the highest set includes Switzerland, Austria, Italy and Sweden with around 70 per cent or more having married. We can also examine the pace at which the cohabiting unions were converted

Table 9

Relative risks from a Cox proportional hazard model on partnership formation after having a child outside a union for women aged 20–45

	Norway	Sweden	Austria	Switzerland	West Germany	France	Great Britain	Italy	Spain
Parental divorce	N/a	1.21	1.14	1.1	0.97	1.04	N/a	0.29	0.38 *
No religion	0.86	1.41 +	N/a	0.94	0.72	N/a	1.03	0.99	0.78
Education level 1	N/a	1.02	0.83	1.03	0.83	2.00	1.36	0.29**	1.50
Education level 2	1.13	0.91	1.02	1.30	0.45	1.71	0.93	0.38 *	0.92
Age at first birth 20–24	0.70**	0.53**	0.83 +	1.37	0.99	0.50 **	0.81	0.66	0.63 +
Age at first birth 25–29	0.55 *	0.41**	0.72 +	1.49	0.26 +	0.12***	0.18 +	0.35**	0.98
Age at first birth 30 or older	0.35 *	0.45 +	0.56 +	1.14	0.39	0.16 **	-	0.35**	0.29 +
No. in sample	308	192	561	96	113	176	133	108	107

+ = significant at the .10 level, \* significant at the .05 level, \*\* significant at the .01 level \*\*\* significant at 0.01 level

into marriages. By the first anniversary of the birth of the child, between 17 and 39 per cent of the women had married, with most countries lying in the 17 to 21 per cent range. The pace of conversion gathered speed in the first few years after the birth and then slowed down. For example, in many countries the proportions of women marrying between the first and third anniversary of the birth of their baby almost doubles but between the third and fifth anniversary the pace of conversion to marriage slows down.

We also examined, again using proportional hazard models, whether the risk of converting a cohabitation to a marriage varied according to age at first birth, church attendance, educational level and experience of

parental divorce. The effects of these variables varied across nations (Table 10). In Austria women who had experienced a parental divorce and had had their first child within a cohabiting union were less likely to legalise that union than those who had not experienced parental divorce during childhood. In Sweden and Norway the non-attendees at church were less likely to convert their union into a marriage and in France there was some evidence that those who had their children at a younger age were more likely to convert their unions into marriages compared with those who became mothers at older ages. In Norway, West Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain there was little statistical difference in the risk of converting a cohabiting union into a marriage according to the background variables. In the remaining countries the story was more mixed.

Why do women choose to marry rather than continue to cohabit or what is the trigger for marriage are questions to which we as yet have few answers. The FFS did not collect information on why people chose to marry rather than to continue to cohabit after they had a child. However, there is some relevant information collected in a 1993 Eurobarometer Survey carried out in the then 12 member states of the European Union. In this survey respondents were asked about their level of agreement to a list of 11 reasons for getting married<sup>9</sup>. The top response related to committing oneself to being faithful to your partner, with 62 per cent completely agreeing with this statement, and the next important reason, with 51 per cent in complete agreement, 'it was the best way to guarantee the rights of the children,' and in third place was 'to prove to other person that you really love him/her' with 41 per cent completely agreeing with this statement. Thus one might infer that commitment and the rights of children are important elements in the impetus to marry. These are responses for all groups but the ordering of the importance of the responses did not vary significantly according to gender, marital status or a past history of cohabitation. Similarly, in a recent British study<sup>10</sup> the two main reasons given for marrying amongst those who had cohabited with their future spouse were to do with strengthening the relationship and children.

## PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION

In a previous study<sup>1</sup> we have shown that across all the nations included in this study there was little difference in the risk of breakdown of first partnerships amongst cohabitants who subsequently married and those couples who married directly, but there were substantially higher rates of dissolution to be seen amongst those partnerships that remained as cohabitations. We were also interested in whether this was the case for fertile unions. In other words, to what extent are children born into cohabiting unions as compared with those born to married parents more

Figure 3

Percentage married by 1, 3 and 5 years after having a first birth in a cohabiting union

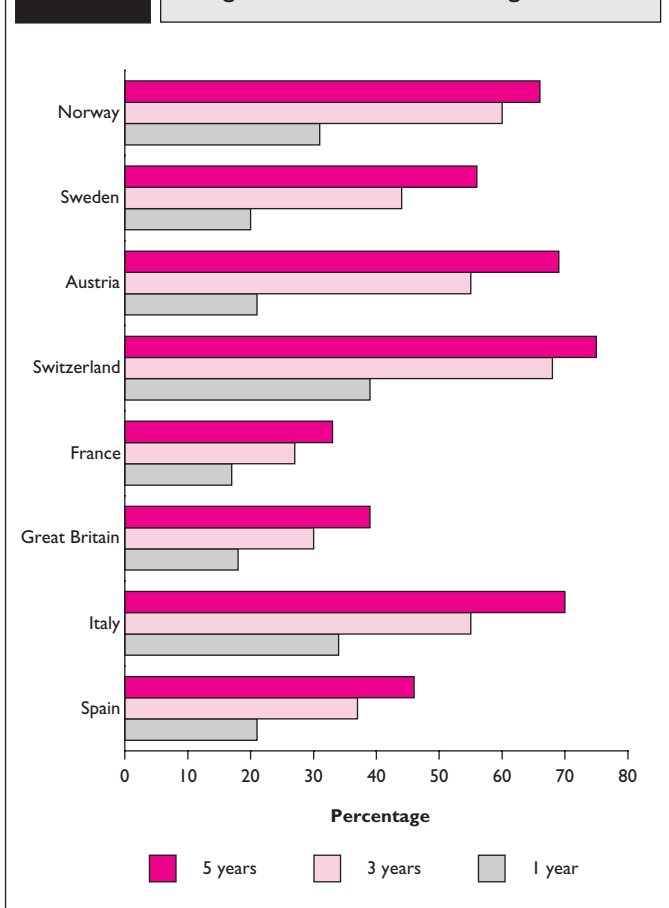


Table 10

Relative risks from a Cox proportional hazard model on marriage formation after having a child within a cohabiting union for women aged 20–45

	Norway	Sweden	Austria	Switzerland	West Germany	France	Great Britain	Italy	Spain
Parental divorce	N/a	0.92	0.67**	0.70	0.91	0.89	N/a	0.99	0.92
No religion	0.58 ***	0.81**	N/a	0.96	1.45 +	N/a	0.85	0.72	0.66
Education level 1	N/a	0.73**	0.82	1.08	1.28	1.13	0.73	1.57 ***	0.87
Education level 2	1.05	0.86 *	0.87	1.05	1.02	1.39	1.34	1.34 ***	1.11
Age at first birth 20–24	1.01	1.28**	0.99	1.03	0.85	0.60 **	0.89	0.33 *	3.25*
Age at first birth 25–29	0.77	1.15	1.0	1.54	0.67	0.26***	0.31	0.82	0.75
Age at first birth 30 or older	1.19	1.47 *	0.44 *	0.78	0.46	0.17***	0.38	0.52	0.67
No in sample	454	1,422	597	131	152	558	101	70	67

+ = significant at the .10 level, \* significant at the .05 level, \*\* significant at the .01 level \*\*\* significant at 001 level

or less likely to see the separation of their parents, and does parental marriage after birth make any difference? We used life table analysis to estimate the survival probabilities of partnerships where the clock starts with the birth of the child not with the onset of the union. Life tables were estimated for women who had a marital birth and amongst those who had a non-marital birth, marriage was included as a time varying covariate. Table 11 shows the proportions of unions surviving 3 and 5 years after the birth of their first child for all marital unions and cohabiting unions and for the two subsets of cohabiting unions, those that had converted into marriages by the time of the survey and those that had not.

In all the countries included in our analysis children born within marriage were less likely to see their parents separate than those born in a cohabiting union. Within the set of cohabiting unions those that had not been converted into marriages were the most fragile, with at least 1 in 5 of these unions having dissolved by the time the child was 5 years old. Amongst children born within marriage or cohabiting unions that subsequently converted to marriages there was little difference in the chances of them seeing the break-up of their parents marriage by their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday in Sweden, Norway, Austria and West Germany; with less than 1 in 10 of these children having experienced parental separation. However, in France and Switzerland and more noticeably in Great Britain children born into marital unions were more likely to see their parents remain together until their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday than those children born into a cohabiting union that converted into a marriage. In Italy and Spain the numbers of dissolutions occurring to converted unions were too small for reliable estimates to be made.

## CONCLUSION

Across the European countries studied here there are marked commonalities and differences in the extent, context and outcomes to non-marital childbearing. The norm is undoubtedly to become a mother within first partnership but in many countries the trend has been for more and more women to make the transition to motherhood within a de facto union rather than a de jure one. The increases in non-marital childbearing in the majority of European countries arise from women having babies within a cohabiting union rather than on their own and, with the notable exception of Great Britain, there is little evidence of a movement to solo motherhood. Even solo mothers do not eschew entering unions, as a substantial majority do subsequently form partnerships. However, within Europe there remain marked differences in the level of non-marital childbearing and the saliency of marriage as the context for having children. Marriage is still a pre-eminent setting for having a child in the Southern European countries and the Middle European countries of Switzerland and West Germany but this is much less the case in the Nordic countries, with

Table 11

Life-table estimates of percentage of unions surviving 3 and 5 years after the birth of first child amongst women aged 20–45 years according to type of first partnership.

Country	% surviving 36 months	% surviving 60 months	Number in the risk set
Norway*			
Married	97	94	1,677
Cohabitation	87	82	456
cohabited/married	98	95	131
cohabited only	79	71	325
Sweden*			
Married	96	93	817
Cohabitation	90	84	1,424
cohabited/married	97	94	493
cohabited only	84	75	931
Austria			
Married	97	94	2,161
Cohabitation	92	86	670
cohabited/married	98	96	246
cohabited only	86	71	424
Switzerland			
Married	97	95	2,191
Cohabitation	82	73	166
cohabited/married	95	86	65
cohabited only	64	53	101
West Germany**			
Married	95	91	873
Cohabitation	92	85	161
cohabited/married	97	91	45
cohabited only	89	80	116
France			
Married	92	86	1,348
Cohabitation	82	73	594
cohabited/married	86	77	103
cohabited only	81	71	491
Great Britain			
Married	96	92	1,242
Cohabitation	71	57	149
cohabited/married	90	75	43
cohabited only	61	48	106
Italy			
Married	99	98	2,677
Cohabitation	95	91	90
cohabited/married	-	-	31
cohabited only	93	82	59
Spain			
Married	99	98	1,540
Cohabitation	79	67	74
cohabited/married	-	-	16
cohabited only	71	51	58

\* Norway and Sweden specific cohorts.

\*\* West Germany age range 20–39.

Sweden being the only country with more first births born within cohabiting unions than marital unions, with France moving rapidly towards joining this set. In general, across most European nations children are less likely to see their parents split up if they are born to married parents than to cohabiting parents. In sum, this paper has highlighted that there is not just one but several European perspectives on non-marital childbearing behaviour.

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## Key findings

- Across Europe there have been noticeable increases in the level of childbearing outside of marriage. However, there continues to be a marked variation across nations in the importance of marriage as the context within which children are born.
- Across Europe, increases in childbearing outside marriage arise in the main from children being born within cohabiting unions.
- Except for Britain, there is little evidence that women are more likely to have a baby on their own compared with the recent past. The majority of solo mothers also go on to cohabit or marry.
- Most women become mothers in their first partnership (either formed through cohabitation or marriage), although there is an increasing tendency for first births to occur in later partnerships.
- In general children are less likely to see the separation of their parents if they are born to married than to cohabiting parents.