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Testa, Maria Rita

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Childless Future? An Insight from the Analysis of Childbearing Preferences in Europe

Maria Rita Testa

Abstract

The relatively low levels of ideal and ultimately intended family size manifested in some European countries (Goldstein et al. 2003; Testa, 2006) inspired a careful analysis of the childless preference in Europe based on the Eurobarometer surveys in 2001 and 2006.

The aim of the current paper is to investigate the childlessness ideal, or the intention to stay without children, and their contribution to the current levels of ideal and intended fertility in Europe.

The analysis is complemented by a comparison between childless women and women with children in respect to two relevant aspects related to childbearing and childrearing: the circumstances perceived as most important in the fertility decisions and the opinion on gender roles in family life.

Findings show that young Austrian women hold the record for the lowest fertility ideals and intentions, which are on average definitely below replacement levels. Austria is also the country with the largest diffusion of the childless preference. However, the childless option only plays a secondary role in explaining the cross-national differences and childlessness – although quite high in some countries – is still very rare as an enduring or a lifetime choice. Interestingly, childless women are not significantly different from women with children in their opinion on the relevant childbearing decision-making factors and do not show different views on issues related to gender roles in family life.

1 Introduction

Childless future? In this analysis I will try and answer this research question by studying fertility ideals, intentions and desires in Europe.

The analysis does not claim to make any forecasts and is not aimed at drawing likely scenarios for the future. It simply provides a broad overview of the current fertility preferences of young European women, which may help to gain an insight into the possible prevalence of the childlessness option in the years to come.

Some literature has shown declining ideals in the young cohorts of women in Austria and Germany (Goldstein et al. 2003). This finding has been interpreted by the existence of a strong link between the individual fertility preferences of the young generations and the regional context of fertility of the old generations. This significant positive association would have caused young Germans and Austrians to learn their preference for small families from the actual childbearing experience of their parents' generations, as demonstrated in the regional fertility of the older cohorts (Testa and Grilli, 2006).

Given that Austrian and German regional fertility levels among cohorts aged between 40 and 65 are comparably lower than those of any other country in Europe, the young Austrian and German generations also show a personal ideal family size comparably lower than any other country.

The main research question in the current paper is whether and to what extent the fall in ideals, or the low ideals, if you prefer, is driven by the diffusion of a childlessness preference. In other words, I will endeavour to investigate the contribution by the childless option towards the recent low levels of ideal and intended family sizes. If the childless preference is playing a major role, we may expect – as the main implication – a childless future to be on the cards.¹

The analysis is based on the Eurobarometer survey (EB) carried out in 25 EU member states in 2006. 18 different questions related to fertility and family issues were included in the questionnaire (see Testa 2006 for an extensive description of the data survey). Some of the questions were also asked in the previous wave of the Eurobarometer, which was carried out in 2001, and a comparison over time is possible for those variables – like the personal ideal family size – asked exactly in the same way in the two rounds.

I focus on women in the age group between 25 and –39, i.e. the prime reproductive ages. This breakdown of the sample by age class, together with the limited national samples sizes of the Eurobarometer survey, makes the country results not very robust and suggests caution in their interpretation. By contrast, findings at the aggregate level, either EU25, or EU15, or NMS10, also reported in the analysis, are more stable and reliable.²

The analysis is organized as follows. Firstly, I look at the personal ideal family size across countries and ages and over time. Secondly, I examine the ultimately intended family size across countries and over time. In both cases special emphasis is placed on the childless preference, both the prevalence of childless ideals and intentions and their contribution towards the average levels of ideal and intended family size respectively. I then study the proportion of women ending up in their reproductive career without children to individuate, within this group, those women who have deliberately chosen to be childless. Finally, I compare childless women and women at higher parities in respect to two variables: the circumstances perceived as important to decide whether or not to have children and the personal opinion on gender roles in family life.

2 Ideal family size

Family size ideals reflect values and attitudes (Hagewen and Morgan, 2005), and are strongly related to actual fertility (Schoen et al. 1999; Kohler 2001), but they are not the closest indicator of reproductive behaviour. Still, they are very informative as regards childbearing and they can be considered as an upper bound of it (van Peer, 2002), given that they are usually lower than completed fertility in economically developed countries.

1 An earlier version of this paper “Childless future? Social aspects of demographic change” was presented at the International Conference on Demographic Change held in Berlin in February 2007. I am grateful to Peter Ohly who encouraged me to write the current version.

2 The EU25 averages are weighted according to the population of each country. These figures therefore do not correspond to averages based on adding up the individual country figures. In addition, individual weightings for each country are applied. They are the inverse to the probability of being included in the sample.

In the EB 2001 and 2006 the question on ideal family size is addressed as follows: “And for you personally, what would be the ideal number of children you would like to have or would have liked to have had?”

The two-child norm is the prevalent family size model in Europe: 50% of the young female respondents aged between 25 and 39 prefer to have 2 children in the EU25 (Figure 1). Such a proportion ranges across countries from a minimum level of 33% registered in Ireland to a maximum level of 67% observed in Hungary, but also in the Czech Republic and Lithuania. Whenever the two-child ideal is not the most predominant ideal, larger families become the most widely selected option (Table 1).

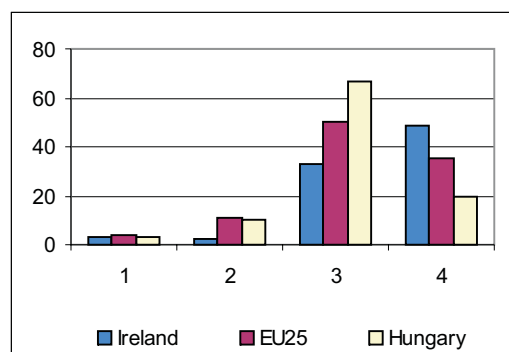


Figure 1: Distribution of personal ideal family size in EU25, Hungary and Ireland. Women aged 25-39.
Note. Ireland and Hungary are the countries where the two-child norm is, respectively, the least and the most common.

Only Austria in Europe 25 shows a mean ideal family size definitely below replacement levels among women aged between 25 and 39 (Figure 2). Italy, Spain, the Czech Republic and Malta have a preference for a 2-child family, while Germany, Luxembourg, Lithuania and Slovakia show an average ideal fertility at replacement level, i.e., 2.1 children per woman. Cyprus, Finland, Sweden, Ireland and Denmark have the highest ideals with 2.5 children or larger families. The United Kingdom and France also show such comparable high levels in the fertility preferences (Figure 2).

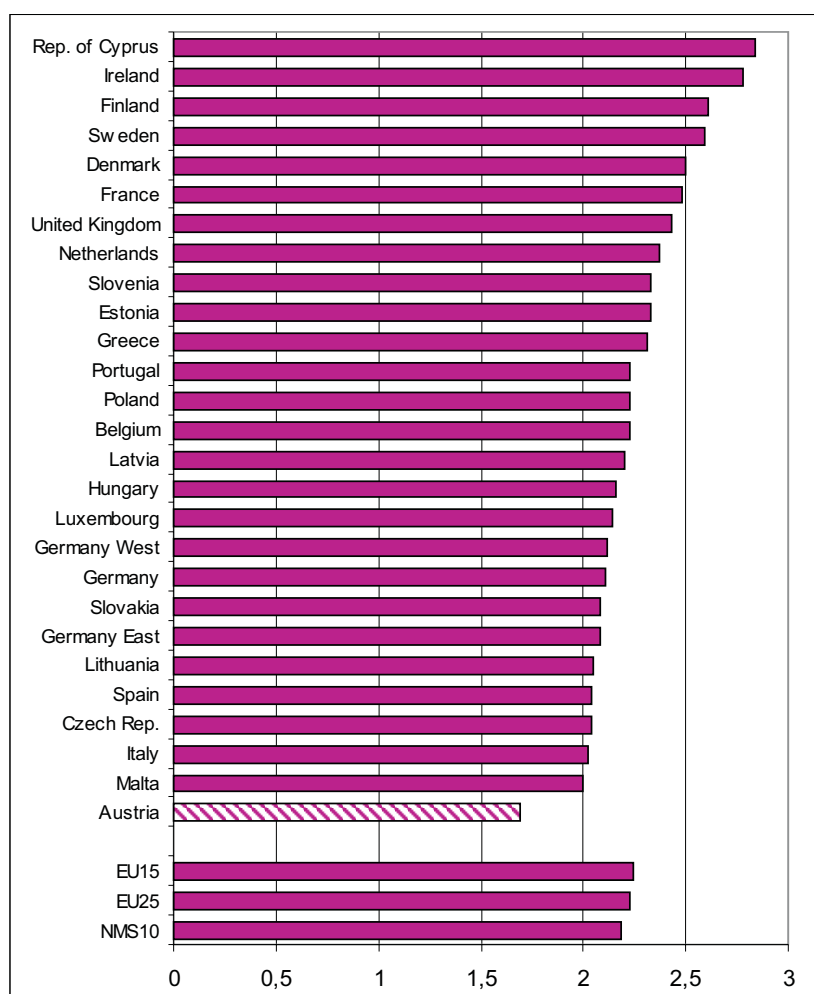


Figure 2: Mean Personal Ideal Number of Children by country. Women aged 25-39.

As argued by Hagewen and Morgan (2005), if the ideal number of children is the number that a typical family should have, the answer related to '0 children' would be rare because it is illogical. However, in the Eurobarometer questionnaire respondents are requested to report their own ideal and such an option may sound attractive for some of them. Indeed, in 2001 for the first time two different questions on family size ideals were included in the Eurobarometer questionnaire. One more general question aimed at capturing the ideal at the societal level (the ideal number of children other people want you to have, for example to guarantee your pension), and one more personal question that reflects the individuals' own ideals and attitudes.³

³ General ideal family size was worded as follows: "Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?" The question precedes that on personal ideal family size.

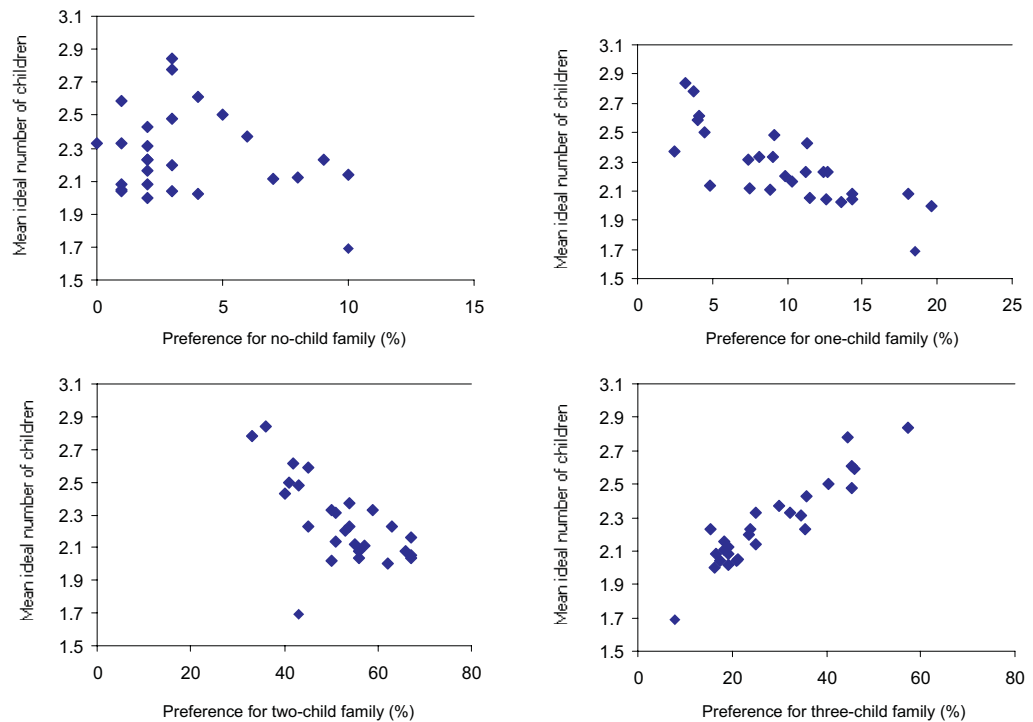
Even from a personal point of view, the preference for no children is generally very low and involves less than 10% of the young women respondents in most of the European countries. Only in Austria and Luxembourg 11% and 10% of young female respondents respectively choose such an option (Table 1).⁴

Table 1: Women with a low and a high ideal number of children by country and age group.

COUNTRIES	No child	One child	Three or more	No child	One child	Three or more
	Age 15-39			Age 55+		
Austria	11	19	8	5	15	17
Belgium	6	11	36	6	11	33
Czech Rep.	0	14	17	2	11	23
Denmark	4	4	41	2	5	58
Estonia	0	9	25	1	5	42
Finland	7	4	45	0	6	48
France	3	9	45	2	7	43
Germany	7	9	18	2	6	32
Germany East	4	14	16	3	13	20
Germany West	8	7	19	2	4	35
Greece	2	7	35	0	2	62
Hungary	4	10	18	2	10	29
Ireland	5	4	45	3	0	56
Italy	3	14	19	1	12	30
Latvia	2	10	24	2	6	33
Lithuania	0	12	21	2	4	42
Luxembourg	10	5	25	5	13	33
Malta	3	20	16	5	5	41
Netherlands	5	2	30	4	1	45
Poland	1	12	24	2	4	48
Portugal	4	13	16	2	11	30
Rep. Of Cyprus	1	3	57	1	0	79
Slovakia	1	18	19	1	3	43
Slovenia	1	8	32	2	7	37
Spain	5	13	21	4	6	48
Sweden	1	4	46	2	2	45
United Kingdom	3	11	36	3	3	37
EU15	4	10	29	2	7	38
NMS10	1	12	23	2	6	40
EU25	4	11	28	2	6	38

⁴ In West Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and Luxembourg the no-child ideal seems to be more popular than a one-child family. A piece of evidence that would support the existence of bipolarization in fertility choices.

In general, this preference is not responsible for the low ideal levels of family size or for the ranking of the countries that – in contrast – is mostly related to the indication of three or more children or one single child family (Figure 3). Indeed, I found a high positive significant association between the three-child ideal and the mean ideal family size⁵, and a strong negative correlation between the one-child ideal and the average ideals,⁶ while no significant correlation exists between the no-child ideal and the average preferred family size (Figure 3). Interestingly, the two-child norm – the most widely selected option – is negatively associated with the mean ideal family size,⁷ denoting that the prevalence of such a model does not necessarily imply a preference for large families. In contrast, countries where this norm is more predominant show a lower mean ideal family size. Austria is clearly an outlier in this respect: its low mean ideal family size is not associated with a relatively high proportion of women with a two-child preference, as in the other countries (Figure 3).



Note that the sum of the percentage for a given family model in each country is not equal to 100% because there is a residual category of people who state that there is no ideal family size or did not answer this questions. For this reason, the percentages given in Figure 3 may be slightly different from those shown in Table 2 where the proportions have been re-computed on the sub-sample of those giving a numerical answer to the question.

Figure 3: Relationship between a given ideal number of children and the mean personal ideal number of children. Women aged 25-39. Countries of EU25.

5 The correlation coefficient is equal to .9.

6 The correlation coefficient is equal to -.8.

7 The correlation coefficient is equal to -.6.

Age differences. The distribution of women with a low and high ideal number of children according to two broad age groups, 15-39 and 55 and above (Table 1), reveals that the preference for no children tends to increase among the younger cohorts compared with the older ones. The differences are relevant in several countries, for example Austria, Finland, Germany and Luxembourg. In Austria the option for one child is even more common than the preference for families with three or more children among the young generations.

In general, the mean ideals reached in 2006 by the young generations are not significantly correlated to the cross-generational differences: countries with the lower average ideals among the young cohorts in 2006 do not necessarily register a stronger decline in ideals between parents' and children's generations (Table 1).

Temporal changes. Since the question on personal ideal family size was asked using the same wording in EB 2001 and EB 2006, I compared the proportion of people indicating no child in the two rounds in order to see whether there was a temporal increase in such a preference among the young cohorts in the inter-survey period. The comparison is made for the old 15 EU countries, for which I had the data from both waves.

In Table 2 the countries are ordered according to the level of decline in the mean ideal number of children, i.e., at the top of the table are countries that experienced the strongest decline in ideals and at the bottom the countries that, in contrast, recorded an increase in mean ideal family size between the two waves. I use the grey colour to show the countries that recorded an increase in the family size ideal in the inter-survey period. Interestingly, this ordering of the countries does not correspond to that reflecting the changes in the proportion of people selecting the no-child option (last column in Table 2), suggesting that the variation in the childless preferences was not the main factor behind the change in the average ideals. In some cases, changes in the childlessness ideal and in the mean values went in the same direction rather than, as expected, in the opposite one. For example, France and Belgium registered in the period between 2001 and 2006 a decline in the proportion of the childless option and in the average ideals. By contrast, Denmark experienced in the same period an increase in the childless ideal as well as in the average ideal family size (Table 2).

Table 2: Changes in personal ideal family size. Women aged 25 to 39

COUNTRIES	2001					2006					Differences	
	None	One	Two	Three or more	Mean	None	One	Two	Three or more	Mean	Differences 2006-2001 in mean ideals	2006-2001 in the no-child preference
Spain	4	13	63	20	2.21	4	16	60	20	2.04	-0.17	0
Luxembourg	5	11	58	26	2.27	10	6	55	30	2.14	-0.13	5
Italy	4	13	57	27	2.11	4	17	59	20	2.02	-0.09	0
Austria	13	19	54	14	1.75	14	22	55	9	1.69	-0.06	1
Greece	2	6	52	40	2.36	3	8	52	37	2.31	-0.05	1
France	5	8	45	42	2.51	3	8	44	44	2.48	-0.03	-2
Belgium	11	14	49	26	2.25	9	10	45	35	2.23	-0.02	-2
United Kingdom	4	10	53	34	2.43	3	14	43	40	2.43	0	-1
Denmark	3	6	54	37	2.43	5	6	45	44	2.5	0.07	2
Sweden	2	6	57	36	2.52	1	5	48	46	2.59	0.07	-1
Finland	6	13	47	35	2.49	4	3	43	50	2.61	0.12	-2
Ireland	6	4	43	47	2.65	3	2	38	57	2.78	0.13	-3
Portugal	4	18	55	23	2.1	2	11	65	22	2.23	0.13	-2
Netherlands	15	6	49	30	2.08	6	2	57	34	2.37	0.29*	-9
Germany East	12	32	45	11	1.74	1	16	67	16	2.08	0.34*	-11
Germany	19	21	50	11	1.73	7	9	61	23	2.11	0.38*	-12
Germany West	20	18	51	11	1.73	9	8	59	25	2.12	0.39*	-11
EU15	8	14	51	27	2.17	4	12	53	31	2.24	0.08*	-4

* p<.05

At the EU15 level an increase in the ideal number of children of young women was observed over the 5-year period from 2001 to 2006. The average ideal family size went up from 2.17 to 2.24 children. Half of the 15 EU countries also experienced a temporal increase in the ideals.

At the EU15 aggregate level the no-child preference consistently decreased in the five years by four percentage points - from 8% to 4%. Spain has shown the strongest decline in the mean ideal family size, i.e. from 2.21 to 2.04 children. In general, the option for no children did not play a major role in the trend of the ideal number of children observed between the 2006 and the 2001 EB rounds.

It is worth noticing that the differences between the family size ideals in the two different EB waves were never statistically significant, with the exception of Germany, the country showing, quite surprisingly, the biggest increase in the mean ideal family size and among the highest decline in the pro-

portion of women choosing the no-child response.⁸ The German results mean that the differences between 2001 and 2006 at the EU15 level are also statistically significant.

The unexpected results from Germany. The new setting of the questionnaire's⁹ items may be partly responsible for the increase in the ideal family sizes. Unlike the 2001 survey, the section on fertility and family issues opens with a contextual question that asks respondents to indicate the solutions to the possible shortage in the work force. This preliminary question may have induced individuals to reflect about the future relevance of children for society, and consequently, to be more positive towards childbearing and large families. In Germany, however, other reasons should be found to justify such an increase in family size ideals because here the boost is huge and also statistically significant at the 5% level—unlike any other EU-15 country. This unexpected result may well be connected with some important change driven by the recent fervent debate on childbearing attitudes in the German media, which depicted childless families in a negative light. However, we should take into account that this increase in ideal fertility is not consistent with findings from other German national surveys and international surveys, and that in the EB data – as we have already pointed out – the national sample sizes are quite low, with the consequence that results may be not very realistic, especially when the samples are broken down by sex and age. In particular, the proportion of actual childlessness in West Germany seems to be largely underestimated by the 2006 EB data. This circumstance might have pushed up the values of ideal family size, given that the “no-child” ideal is an option most likely selected by childless people.¹⁰ In the inter-survey period the proportion of childless people decreased in West Germany (from 38% to 23%), but actually increased in East Germany (from 21% to 30%), while the ideal family size rose in both these regions. The variation in the proportion of childless women may not be the reason behind the increasing German ideals and additional factors should be found to comprehensively explain the unexpected German findings. Incidentally, in the case of East Germany it may be the new sample survey design that was partly responsible for the inconsistency since the sample size in the 2006 round was only 500 people compared with 1,000 in the previous wave in 2001. In agreement with the interpretation given above for the high ideals registered in West Germany, there were almost no changes in the intended number of children among women aged between 25 and 39 in West Germany from 2001 to 2006. The increase in the indicator of ultimately intended family size by around 0.3 children in 2006 compared with 2001 was entirely due to the higher actual level of fertility recorded among the respondents in the 2006 survey, while the number of additionally intended children declined slightly.

8 Actually there is another country where the differences appear to be significant, i.e. the Netherlands. However, in this country the increase in ideals does not systematically appear in each age group like in the German case.

9 The section of the EB 2006 questionnaire related to fertility items can be found in: Testa, 2006 (available at: <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/download/ReportESEMPLAgeingandFertility20061027.pdf>).

10 However, for our purpose the difference in actual childlessness between the 2001 and 2006 EB waves is more relevant than the actual level of underestimation of actual childlessness in 2006, because the increase in ideal family size is evidenced by a comparison of 2001 and 2006 EB data.

3 Ultimately intended family size

As described in the previous section, having a family with no children at all is a rather uncommon ideal in Europe. However, this result may also be due to the measurement difficulties intrinsic in the items on family size ideals. Although respondents are explicitly requested to indicate their own ideals, some of them may still interpret the question at a normative value and then refer to the number of children of an hypothetical family of reference which is most likely above the threshold of no children. By contrast, fertility intentions are considered as the most proximate determinants of reproductive behaviour (Miller and Pasta, 1995) and the lack of consistency between intended childbearing and subsequent outcome has been explained by several intervening factors: unwanted fertility, strong gender preferences, timing of fertility, sub-fecundity or infecundity, competition with other energy- or time-intensive activities (Bongaarts, 2001), partner's intentions, and other life course events (Ajzen 1985, 1991; Miller and Pasta, 1995).

For this reasons, more useful insights into the preference for no children may come from the analysis of ultimately intended family size, an indicator that is made up of two components: the offspring already born and planned offspring in the future (additionally intended). The indicator is captured in the Eurobarometer survey by the following questions: "Have you had any children? (IF YES) How many?" and "How many children do you (still) intend to have?"¹¹

The two-child family is also the most predominant model when the ultimately intended family size is analyzed. In Figure 4 I show the distribution of women aged between 25 and 39 for EU25 and for the countries where the two-child family is the most and the least common. The option for such a preference ranges between 29% in Ireland and 60% in Greece, while it is 45% at the EU level (Figure 4).

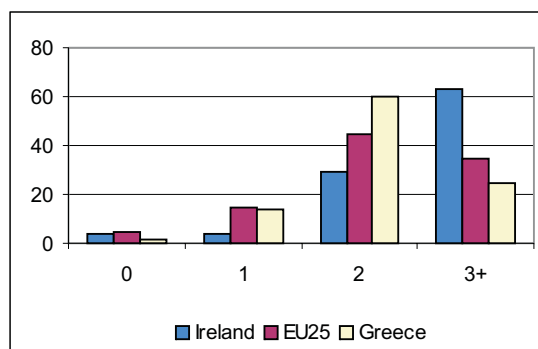


Figure 4: Distribution of ultimately intended family size in EU25, Ireland and Greece. Women aged 25-39. Note. Ireland and Greece are the countries where the two-child is, respectively, the least and the most common selected model.

The cross-national analysis reveals that Austria is at the bottom of the table of the countries showing the lowest mean ultimately intended family size of around 1.54 children. Several other countries –

11 Note that in the 2001 round the question concerning the additionally intended number of children was phrased in a slightly different way: "How many children do you (still) plan to have?"

different to the ideals – are below replacement levels, i.e. Spain, Italy, Slovakia, Germany, Malta and the Czech Republic (Figure 5). As for the ideals, Ireland, Finland and Cyprus have the highest levels of more than 2.5 children.

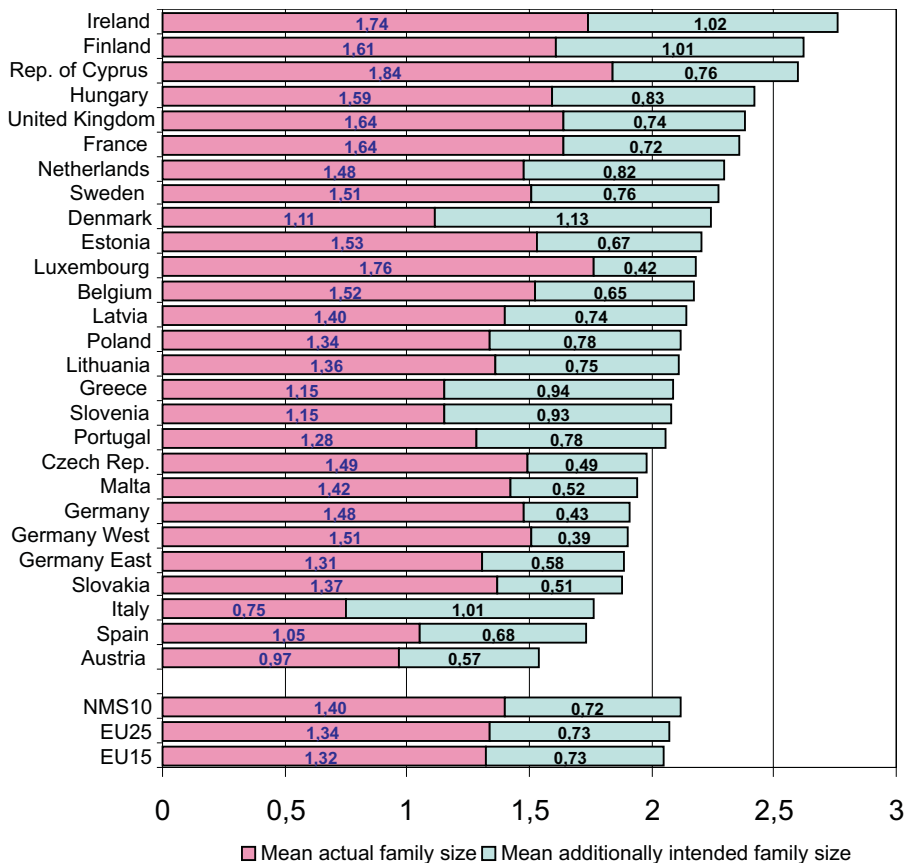


Figure 5: Mean actual plus intended number of additional children by country. Women aged 25 to 39.

Temporal change. In Table 3 the 15 countries of the old EU are listed according to the level of decrease in the ultimately intended family size over the 5-year period, i.e., at the top there are those with the highest decline and at the bottom those with the biggest increase. Countries with increasing intentions are marked in grey in order to distinguish them from countries that registered a temporal increase. Interestingly, Spain is – as in the case of ideals – the top ranking country with the strongest decline in the ultimately intended family size. Almost all the countries showing declining ideals also show declining intentions. The only exceptions are Sweden and Ireland, which do not experience any negative change in ideals while they observed a decrease in intentions, and Luxembourg and Italy with decreasing ideals but positive temporal changes in intentions. As for the ideals, a slight increase in the ultimately intended family size was registered in the EU15 over the 5-year period from 2001 to

2006. However, this increase is not due to the changes in additionally intended family size, but to the positive changes registered in actual childbearing.¹² The cross-country analysis shows that 8 out of the EU15 countries have also recorded an increase in the ultimately intended family size, but the differences between the 2001 and the 2006 mean values are not statistically significant. Germany is the only exception in this respect. I have already discussed in section 2 the possible explanations for the unexpected German results. I would only like to add here that the German temporal significant positive trend in the ultimately intended family size is imputable to the increase in actual fertility recorded in the inter-survey period rather than to changes in additionally intended family size.

Table 3: Changes in ultimately expected family size. Women aged 25 to 39

COUNTRIES	2001					2006					Differences	
	None	One	Two	Three or more	Mean	None	One	Two	Three or more	Mean	Differences 2006-2001 in the mean values	2006-2001 in the no-child preference
Spain	4	19	61	16	1.95	6	24	60	11	1.73	-0.22*	2
Austria	17	14	47	22	1.67	20	25	47	8	1.54	-0.13	3
Belgium	7	15	40	38	2.27	13	9	50	29	2.17	-0.10	6
France	0	14	45	41	2.46	5	9	45	41	2.36	-0.10	5
Sweden	11	5	43	41	2.36	4	7	49	40	2.27	-0.09	-7
Greece	1	10	63	26	2.12	2	14	61	23	2.09	-0.03	1
United Kingdom	1	16	40	43	2.40	5	16	43	36	2.38	-0.02	4
Ireland	10	8	36	45	2.77	5	5	35	56	2.76	-0.01	-6
Italy	7	16	61	16	1.71	9	20	54	17	1.76	0.05	2
Denmark	5	9	50	36	2.19	7	12	48	34	2.24	0.05	2
Portugal	4	26	52	18	1.96	4	18	53	25	2.06	0.10	1
Luxembourg	2	24	50	24	2.06	9	15	38	37	2.18	0.12	7
Germany West	10	35	42	13	1.60	9	18	49	24	1.89	0.29*	-1
Finland	6	10	37	46	2.33	6	5	42	47	2.62	0.29	0
Germany	10	36	41	13	1.59	8	21	47	24	1.90	0.31*	-2
Germany East	12	43	33	13	1.57	5	31	41	22	1.90	0.33	-6
Netherlands	17	5	48	30	1.91	6	6	54	35	2.30	0.39*	-11
EU15	7	19	47	27	2.01	7	16	50	27	2.05	0.04	0

p<.05

Temporary and permanent childlessness. In Figure 6 women who are childless and are not intending to have a child (permanently childless) have been differentiated from those women who were child-

12 Table 3 marks in bold the differences between the mean values of ultimately intended family size which are mainly due to the changes in the additionally intended family size, either because no change at all occurred in actual childbearing or because the changes in the additionally intended family size more than compensate for the variations in the opposite direction observed in actual fertility.

less at the time of the interview, but were planning to have children in the future (temporary childlessness). Figure 6 shows that in some countries the proportion of childlessness is quite widespread among women at these childbearing ages. In Italy, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Slovenia and Austria a proportion between 35% (Slovenia) and 55% (Italy) of women do not have children. However, in most of the European countries being without children is a temporary choice or a status that has to be related to the currently increasing postponement of childbearing. Indeed, only in Austria and Belgium is the proportion of women opting for definitive childlessness not irrelevant: 20% and 13% of female respondents aged between 25 and 39 selected such a response. In all the other countries the percentage is below 10% and in most of them below 5%.

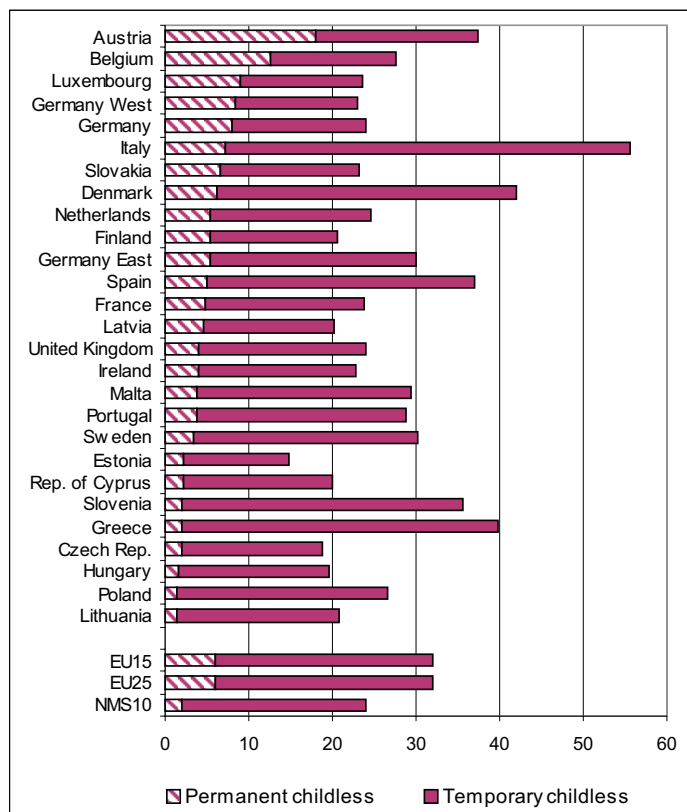


Figure 6: Permanent and temporary childless women by country. Ages 25-39.

In the EU25 the proportion of childless women, 31% of those aged between 25 and 39s, is made up of 6% of females who do not have and are not planning a child and 25% of women who at the time of the interview were childless but are planning a family in future. This distinction between temporary and permanent childlessness is relevant not only per se, but also to estimate the possible impact of actual childlessness on the level of intended and ideal family size. It is, indeed, permanent childlessness that exerts the strongest negative effects on the mean ideal and intended family size.

The no-child ideal interests only 2% of women who are temporarily childless¹³ – a percentage slightly higher than that registered among women who are already mothers equal to 1% – whereas 51% of women expected to remain permanently childless. The percentage would be equal to 11% in the overall group of those currently without children (Table 4).

Table 4: Distribution of ideal and ultimately intended family size by parity. EU25.
Women aged 25-39

A.	Ideal family size				Mean
	0	1	2	3+	
Childless	11	17	53	19	1.9
<i>Permanently Childless</i>	51	18	26	5	0.9
<i>Temporarily Childless</i>	2	17	59	22	2.1
With children	1	9	55	35	2.4
All women	4	12	54	30	2.2

B.	Ultimately Intended family size				Mean
	0	1	2	3+	
Childless	18	17	39	26	1.5
<i>Permanently Childless</i>	100	-	-	-	0
<i>Temporarily Childless</i>	0	20	48	32	1.9
With children	0	14	48	38	2.4
All women	5	15	45	35	2.1

Moreover, women who intend to remain childless show an average ideal number of children of only 0.9, and their intended family size is by definition equal to zero. In contrast, women who are temporarily childless have an ideal and intended family size of 2.1 children, a value not far away from those shown by women at higher parities who have a mean ideal family size of 2.4 children and a mean ultimately intended family size of 2.2 children (Table 4).

With this comparison I do not want to underestimate the impact of actual childlessness on the mean ideal family size, which has been found to be highly significant in previous research (Testa and Grilli, 2006). I only intend to stress that it is mainly the group of permanently childless women who push down the mean ideal and intended family size.

¹³ The same percentage is recorded among women with children, a fact suggesting that the fertility preferences of temporarily childless women are not different from those of women who have already children.

4 Desired family size

Another relevant indicator of fertility preferences is the desired family size. In the theory of the relation between fertility intentions and behaviour, desires are defined as wishes for certain results and are posed as an intermediate variable between ideals and intentions (Miller and Pasta, 1995). The analysis of desired fertility focuses on women aged between 40 and 55 who have presumably already ended their reproductive career. These female respondents are differentiated in two different groups, i.e. those who did not have and did not want children, so called *childfree*¹⁴, and those who wanted to have children at early childbearing ages but did not have any, so called unintended childless¹⁵. The EB questions used for this analysis are addressed as follows: “*Have you had any children? If yes, how many?*” and “*Thinking back to the time when you were around 20 years old, how many children did you want to have at that point for the rest of your life. We are here talking about your own biological children*”.

Thanks to the retrospective question, I am able to individuate childfree women and women who are childless by force or unintended childless women.

Countries with the highest share of lifetime childlessness are the United Kingdom (21%), Austria (20%), Italy (18%), Denmark (17%) and the Netherlands (16%) (Figure 7). Interestingly, they are also among the countries with the highest percentages of childfree women: 14% in the United Kingdom, 6% in Denmark and the Netherlands, and 5% in Germany, Italy and Austria. In all the other countries the percentage is below 5%, which denotes that ‘being childfree’ is still a very marginal phenomenon (Figure 7).

A dynamic analysis of fertility desires is not possible with the EB data since the question was repeated in 2006 by using a different question wording. Moreover, the age differences are also meaningful because women in the younger age group of 25 to 39 may still have the chance to change their opinion.

I compare women aged 25 to 39 and permanently childless women with women aged between 40 and 55 and childfree women, the two segments of childlessness that better reflect the orientation towards the no-child preference. However, it should be stressed that the two groups are not strictly comparable because in one case the question is perspective and focused on intentions and in another case the question is retrospective and focused on desires. Such a comparison may nevertheless give an approximate idea of the level of appreciation of childlessness.

14 The term is well established in the literature (see, for instance, Veevers, 1980; Houseknecht, 1987; Tanturri and Mencarini, 2004; Rosina Testa, 2007). The childfree group may be quite heterogeneous including those who never had in mind the idea of a family with children and those who came up with this idea during their life, perhaps after or due to some difficulties in reproduction (Rosina and Testa, 2007).

15 The term is used here with the aim to contrast the group of childfree women. Among the unintended childless women there may also be some who have adjusted downwards their initial fertility plans over their life course (the span between the fertility plans – age 20 – and the current age – 40 to 55 – is quite a long one). However, with the data at hand it is not possible to differentiate among these childless women those who changed their opinion at some point in life and those who have continuously had the intention to form a family but could not achieve this goal.

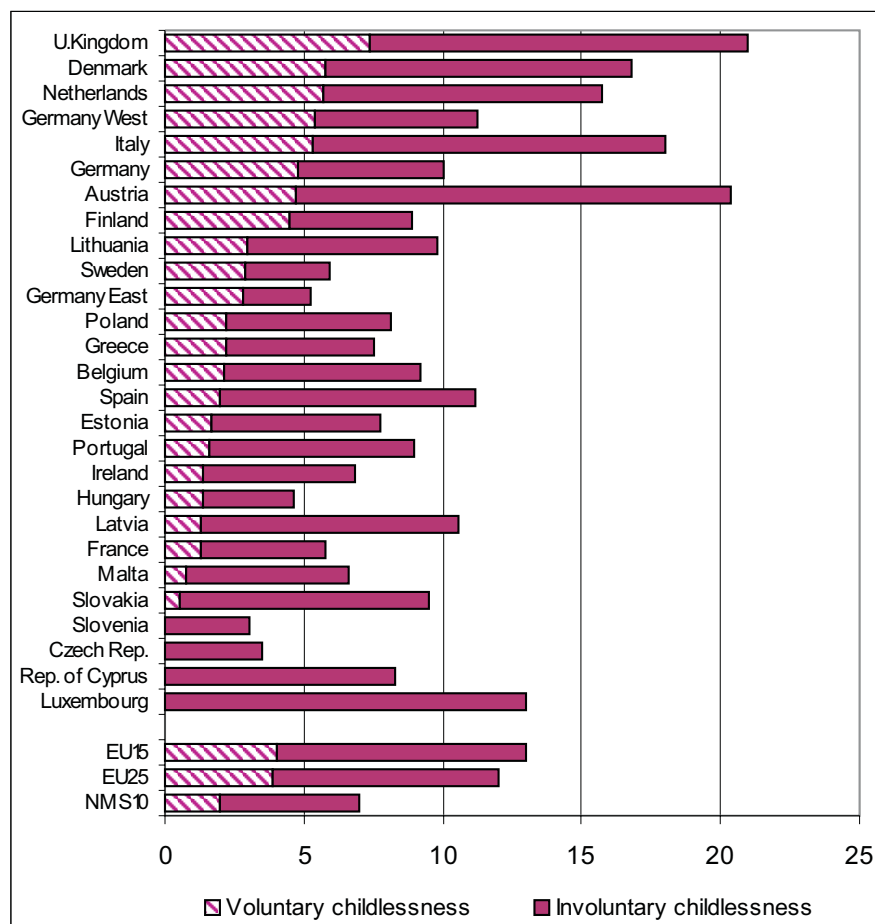


Figure 7: Voluntary and involuntary childlessness. Women aged 40-55.

In general, the proportion of women stating their intention to remain without children at the young ages of 20 to 39 is higher than the proportion of childfree women aged between 40 and 55. However, the differences are very small. In 6 countries they are either zero or they take an opposite sign, suggesting an increasing appreciation of the childless option at older ages compared with younger ages. Only Belgium, Luxembourg and Austria register a relevant increase in permanent childlessness in the young female cohorts when compared with the proportion of childfree women in the older cohorts: the differences are 11, 9 and 15 percentage points respectively, while in all the other countries they are less than 5 percentage points. Anyway, this fact does not necessarily imply an increase in the childfree preference among the young generations, as women in the young age group may well change their opinion over their life course and come up with the idea to have children, if they find the right partner, for example.¹⁶

¹⁶ Interestingly, 53% of childfree women and 48% of women permanently childless never married.

It is worth pointing out here that childlessness as a lifetime choice or at least as an enduring choice only interests a marginal proportion of women either at childbearing age or in older ages: 4% of women aged between 40- and 55 and 5% of women aged between 25 and 39 respectively in the EU25.

5 Differences between childless women and women with children

The analysis of the diffusion of a no-child preference is complemented by the examination of two relevant issues in childbearing matters: the factors perceived as preconditions in childbearing decisions and the opinion on the gender roles in family life. The purpose is to find out whether these two factors may characterize the two groups.

Relevant circumstances in childbearing decisions. The circumstances considered essential for having children may be captured in the Eurobarometer survey 2006 by the following question: "According to you, how important is each of the following in the decision on whether or not to have a(nother) child?" Respondents were required to indicate the importance of each circumstance listed in the questionnaire and read out by the interviewer, by choosing one of the four categories: "Very important", "Fairly important", "Not very important", "Not at all important", coded from 1 (very important) to 4 (not important at all).

The ten circumstances relevant in the childbearing decision that are explicitly listed in the response options of the EB questionnaire refer either to the health status of the couple, to economic conditions, i.e., financial situation, housing conditions, cost of children, and the work situation of either or both partners, to institutional factors such as the opportunity to go on parental leave or the availability of child care provision, or to the presence of a supportive partner.¹⁷ In general, the mother's health condition, the presence of a supportive partner and the health status of the father are the most relevant determinants in childbearing decisions, considered as very important by respectively 75%, 71%, and 68% of the young interviewed individuals aged between 15 and 39 (Testa, 2006).

In Table 5, I focus on female respondents aged 25 to 39 years and I show the proportions of them assessing a given factor as 'very important' for having children as well as a mean score by parity status.¹⁸

As expected, the presence of a supportive partner is more relevant among those women who already have children as compared to their childless counterparts.

Similarly, a good health condition of the mother or the father is a circumstance more often selected by those with children. This result might be due to the presence of a selection effect, because those who have already a family are bound to have more positive attitudes towards childbearing as such and are therefore more likely to select factors that are out of their control.

The working situation of the father appears equally important among childless women and women with children. Whereas all the other factors (housing conditions, financial situation, cost of children, parental leave, availability of child care provision and work of the mother) are more important to

17 See the questionnaire included in the report "Childbearing preference and family issue in Europe" (Testa, 2006) for the exact wording of the relative items.

18 Note that a lower score corresponds to an increasing importance attached to the item, since the code of the response is 1=very important, 2=quite important, 3=not important and 4=not important at all.

women without children compared with women who have already started to build a family. However, the mean scores are different only for the items related to the opportunity to go on parental leave and to the working situation of the mother, both circumstances considered more relevant by the childless group.

Table 5: Circumstances very relevant in the decision to have children by parity.
Female respondents aged 25 to 39. EU-25.

	All Women		Childless women	
	parity 0	parity 1+	Temporary	Permanent
	%			
The health of the mother	75	78	72	69
To have a supportive partner	72	73	75	69
The health of the father	65	68	67	51
The working situation of the father	61	61	62	53
The financial situation	62	58	59	47
Housing conditions	61	57	55	46
The opportunity to go on parental leave	56	55	47	56
The costs of children	52	51	49	50
Availability of child care provision	48	48	56	47
The working situation of the mother	45	40	46	39
<i>Mean scores</i>				
The health of the mother	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.4
To have a supportive partner	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.5
The health of the father	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.6
The working situation of the father	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.7
The financial situation	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.7
Housing conditions	1.6	1.6	1.5	1.7
The opportunity to go on parental leave	1.6	1.7	1.6	1.8
The costs of children	1.7	1.7	1.7	1.7
Availability of child care provision	1.7	1.7	1.7	1.7
The working situation of the mother	1.7	1.9	1.7	1.9

Note. The circumstances are ordered according to their importance in the respondents' opinion.

The comparison between permanently and temporarily childless women reveals that each of the circumstances listed in the response option appears more important to childless women who intend to start a family compared with women who want to remain childless. The only exceptions are the cost of children and the opportunity to go on parental leave, which receive more attention from the permanently childless female respondents compared with the temporary counterparts.

In general, the differences between women with and without children are very small and are never significant. Although economic conditions seem to be more important for women who are currently childless and among these, for women who do not plan to have children in the future, factors relevant to women who are already mothers are also relevant for those who do not yet have children. This evidence implies that having already started the reproductive career does not change the opinion of the

important circumstances for having children. It could well be that becoming a parent only changes the relative importance of each of these pre-requisites in respect to the others, i.e. the ranking of the preconditions in the individuals' perception. A hypothesis that, unfortunately, I cannot test with the data at hand.

Gender roles in family life. The section of EB 2006 dedicated to fertility and family issues finishes with the following question on gender roles in family life: "Here is a list of statements relating to the role of men and women when it comes to raising children. Please tell me to what extent do you agree or disagree with each of them". The responses to the different items, listed in Table 6, are coded from 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree).

Table 6: Agreement on different items related to gender roles in family life by parity.
 * Female respondents aged 25 to 39. EU25.

	All Women		Childless women	
	parity 0	parity 1+	Temporary	Permanent
	%			
A working mother can establish a just as warm a relationship with her children as a non working mother	39	41	38	38
A pre-school child is more likely to suffer if his/her mother works	16	19	16	14
All in all family life suffers when the woman has a full time job	17	22	18	12
Both men and women should contribute to the household income	49	42	51	38
Ideally, the woman should stay at home to look after the children while the man goes out to work	10	19	10	9
Family life suffers when men concentrate too much on their work	29	32	30	28
Synthetic indicator of agreement on gender equal division of childrearing tasks	20	16	19	20
<i>Mean scores</i>				
A working mother can establish a just as warm a relationship with her children as a non working mother	2.0	1.9	1.9	2.1
A pre-school child is more likely to suffer if his/her mother works	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.7
All in all family life suffers when the woman has a full time job	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.6
Both men and women should contribute to the household income	1.7	1.8	1.7	1.8
Ideally, the woman should stay at home to look after the children while the man goes out to work	3.0	2.7	3.0	2.9
Family life suffers when men concentrate too much on their work	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0

Note. * Percentages of those totally agreeing with the different items

In Table 6 I show not only the percentages of women totally agreeing with the different items but also the mean score of each item. Lower mean scores denote higher relevance of the items. The comparison between childless women and women with children did not show any relevant difference between the two groups. In general, women with children agree more often to all items, but this could be due to the fact that the items sound to them less abstract given that they have become already mothers. The only exception is the contribution of both couple members to household income, which seems to be more relevant among childless women. However, the ranking of the items by the level of agreement received by the respondents is exactly the same in the two groups of childless women and women with children denoting that the choice to be childless, either temporary or permanently, is not associated with a different specific opinion on gender roles in childrearing tasks. In previous research (Testa, 2007) I showed that higher family size ideals are significantly correlated with a more egalitarian opinion on the gender roles in family life: countries with the highest mean ideal family size also show the highest proportion of women agreeing with the items in favour of an equal division of childrearing tasks. If I compute the same indicator used in that analysis,¹⁹ I discover that women without children, especially those who do not plan to start a family in the future, tend to be more egalitarian than those with children.

6 Summary and concluding remarks

The analysis of ideal, intended and desired family size was carried out in order to assess the diffusion of the childless preference in Europe. Austria is shown as the most interesting case of study from this perspective. Austrian female generations aged between 25 and 39 have a mean ideal family size of 1.7 children and a mean intended family size of 1.5 children. These below replacement family size ideals and intentions are accompanied – and presumably determined – by the relatively high proportion of young women opting for a no-child ideal (10%) or for permanent childlessness (20%) that are higher than in any other European country. The evidence suggests that a culture of low fertility is relatively more widespread in Austria compared with the rest of Europe and that the increasing orientation towards childlessness may play quite an important role in this phenomenon.

Childless future? This is the original research question that inspired the current analysis. The Eurobarometer data showed that we are far away from this hypothetical scenario because in Europe the childless option is rare and the cross-national differences in the ideal or intended family size are mainly explained by the alternative between small families (one child) and large families (three or more children).

19 A dummy variable equals 1 if individuals agreed, totally or partially, with the three following statements: both men and women should contribute to the household income; a working mother can establish a just as warm a relationship with her children as a mother who stays at home; family life suffers when men concentrate too much on their work, and, at the same time, disagreed with the following statements: ideally, the woman should stay at home to look after the children while the man goes out to work; on the whole, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job; a pre-school child is more likely to suffer if his/her mother works. The dichotomous variable should capture the most extreme positions in the hypothetical continuum that goes from the most conservative to the most egalitarian views on gender roles.

Only in Austria do the orientations towards childlessness involve a non-marginal proportion of young women. And it is hard to foresee whether other European countries will experience such comparable levels in the years to come.

A family without children is neither a wish nor an attractive ideal for the majority of young European women. Hence, a childless future as a consequence of the diffusion of a childless lifetime choice involving more and more people is surely not on the cards. We still cannot foresee whether actual childlessness will increase as a result of increasing childbearing postponement because not all temporarily childless women – quite a high proportion in some countries – and especially not all of those who are childless and are at the oldest reproductive ages will manage to have a family with children and to reach the desired family size – apparently not very far away from that of women who have already started their reproductive career –. It is realistic to assume that quite a few of them will end up in their reproductive life without children. However, this increased share of actually childless women may then push downwards the ideals of the children's generations contributing to a future decline in mean family size ideals (Testa and Grilli, 2006).

Women without children do not show any noticeable differences in comparison with those women who have already children in their opinion on gender roles in family life and in the determinants of childbearing decisions. They tend to be more egalitarian in respect to the gender division of family tasks and they place more emphasis on the cost of children, the opportunity to go on parental leave and the working situation of the mother when requested to assess the relevance of different circumstances on childbearing decisions. These results suggest equal collaboration between the two partners in childrearing tasks and an easy combination of work and family life are the two most crucial preconditions of reproduction in the opinion of childless women.

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About the author

Maria Rita Testa, PhD in Demography at the University of Florence, Department of Statistics. Laurea cum laude in Political Sciences at the University of Rome »La Sapienza«. Since 2001: Research Scientist at the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. 1999-2001: Research Associate at the Department of Statistics, University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy. Spring 1999: Visiting Research Scientist at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Laxenburg, Austria. 1997-1999: PhD Student at the Department of Statistics »Giuseppe Parenti«, University of Florence, Italy. 1995-1997: Research Assistant at the Department of Quantitative Methods for the Social Sciences, University of Rome »La Sapienza«, Italy.

Contact: maria.rita.testa@oeaw.ac.at