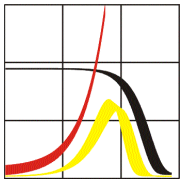

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Pathways to Stepfamily Formation in Europe: Results from the FFS

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Abstract

Increasing proportions of couples are making childbearing decisions in stepfamilies but there has been no general comparative picture across European countries on stepfamily formation. The present paper aims to fill this gap and provides a comparison of European countries using macro-level indicators that describe union formation and dissolution and childbearing. We use the individual-level data files (standard recode files) of Fertility and Family Surveys from 19 European countries. Our results highlight the different pathways to a stepfamily in Europe, and show that in most European countries a considerable proportion of women form a stepfamily in childbearing ages, which needs to be considered in studies of fertility.

Introduction

Changing family structures together with greater instability of marriages in most industrialized countries have changed the content of the notion of a stepfamily. Pre-marital childbearing and consensual unions are no longer an exception to families in the traditional sense, and childbearing is not restricted to one marital or consensual union (Kiernan 1999a, 1999b). This is of importance in relation to the concept of completed fertility over one's life course, since union disruption and formation of higher-order unions typically occur during one's reproductive years. To take into account these changes in family structures, the term *stepfamily* that was formerly restricted to marriages only, needs to be extended to include consensual unions involving a child of only one partner. This definition of stepfamilies takes into account the fact that an increasing proportion of higher-order unions are consensual unions.

A demographic study of stepfamily fertility integrates research on higher-order unions with the research on higher-order parity progression. While the increasing prevalence of higher-order unions is a characteristic of modern European societies, there has been a considerable decline in higher-order parity progression that in parts of Europe has resulted in 'lowest low' fertility (Kohler et al. 2001). Hence, it is of importance to understand the consequences of these opposite trends for European societies.

Recently, a stream of empirical demographic research on stepfamily fertility in various countries (Toulemon & Lapierre-Adamcyk 1995, Thomson 1997, Toulemon 1997, 2001, Vikat et al. 1999, Buber & Prskawetz 2000, Thomson, Hoem, and Godecker 2000, Thomson & Godecker 2000, Henz 2002, and Thomson et al. 2002) has highlighted the importance of stepfamily fertility as an important research topic. Several studies have demonstrated the *union commitment effect* on fertility, that is, a birth risk is elevated if a couple does not have shared children (Vikat et al. 1999, Buber & Prskawetz 2000, Thomson et al. 2002), which is one of the driving forces of fertility in unions where either partner already has children from a previous union. In addition to the union commitment effect, the first child to a couple may also be motivated by the *parenthood effect*, that is the desire of the childless partner to become a parent.

However, there has been no general comparative picture across European countries on stepfamily formation. The present paper aims to fill this gap and provides a comparison of European countries

using macro-level indicators that describe union formation and dissolution and childbearing. We also demonstrate the possibilities that an international effort like the Fertility and Family Surveys in the Countries of the ECE Region (FFS) provides to answer these questions. In this respect, our study proceeds in the spirit of the paper by Billari et al. (2001) who use information from different life domains for a cross-European comparison of home leaving, and Andersson & Philipov (2002) who provide a broader comparison across FFS countries, including some indicators relevant for stepfamily formation.

Several ways of grouping European countries by demographic trends of fertility, divorce and marriage rates, prevalence of cohabitation and household structure have been presented in the literature. These include the studies by van de Kaa 1987, Hoffmann-Nowotny & Fux 1991, Höpflinger 1991, Monnier & Rychtarikova 1992, Haskey 1993, Kuijsten 1995, Coleman 1996, and Kiernan 1996. In North and West European countries, with Sweden and Denmark as forerunners, postponement of marriage and childbearing and increasing prevalence of consensual unions have been observed first. Southern Europe followed this demographic pattern with some time lag while in Eastern Europe this demographic change did not take place until the 1990s. However, in the former socialist countries the transition towards low fertility and postponement of marriage and childbearing proceeded at a much faster pace as in other European countries. Nevertheless, in discussions about the convergence of European demographic trends it has been emphasized that in spite of certain similarity in the aggregate-level trends, many differences in demographic behavior between countries are likely to persist (Coleman 1996).

In this study, we suggest a grouping of European countries by patterns of combined union and childbearing careers. In particular, it is important that we are able to base such a description on full-scale life course information on consensual unions, because indicators of formal marriage are decreasingly reflecting the underlying union dynamics. The objectives of this article are

- to study the diversity of stepfamily formation among selected European countries, and more precisely, to find out the share of women of selected cohorts who experience stepfamily formation while still at reproductive ages;

- to study the different pathways in terms of women's union and childbearing careers that can lead to stepfamily formation;

- to group the studied European countries by the cohort incidence of stepfamily formation and by the patterning of union and childbearing careers that lead to it.

Data and method

Our study is based on the 1990s round of the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) in Europe. We have used the individual-level data files (standard recode files) available at the Population Activities Unit of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UN ECE PAU), including in our study all the countries for which the internationally comparable FFS data was available. These countries are Austria, Belgium (representing Flanders), the Czech Republic, Estonia (native population only[1]), Finland, France, East Germany, West Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia (data on native population used[1]), Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal (only data on entry into first unions available), Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Our approach in this article is to describe the outcomes of union and childbearing careers by certain age in a given birth cohort. The words *union* and *partnership* are used as synonyms, denoting a coresidential union of married or unmarried partners, as defined in the FFS questionnaires (UN ECE PAU). According to the definition used in the FFS, the start of a union is set equal to the time point when a couple moves together and similarly the end of a union is the date at which the couple moves apart. Our data do not allow to discriminate between unions formed with the same partner as in a previous union, thus some of the higher-order unions may be repeated unions with the same partner. In childbearing histories we count any child born to the respondent before any union formation or between unions to be a pre-union child. We may thereby overestimate the number of stepchildren since the partner with whom the union is formed may be the biological father of a pre-union child.

We choose the cohort approach to ensure consistency between the different life course stages we use in the comparison between countries. We consider that the sequence of life course events is often

[1] Estonian data was available only for the native population. For Latvia we decided to use only data for ethnic Latvians to enhance comparability of these two populations whose behavioral patterns are close to each other. Both Estonia and Latvia have a large Russian-speaking community that makes up almost a third of the population in Estonia and about a half in Latvia. We know from previous research that the demographic behavior of the native-born and immigrant (Russian-speaking) population differs in those countries (Bondarskaya 1994, Katus 1990, Vikat 1994).

pre-determined, e.g., only those who have dissolved their first union can enter a second union. Our intention is not, however, to study the intensities of transitions from one status to another, but to focus on the probabilities of certain experiences in a life course. Though we base our calculations on individual level data, we are interested in macro-level differences of the experience of specific life course events (cf. Billari et al. 2001).

We use data for the cohort born in 1952–1959 in our comparisons. The choice of this cohort was based on optimizing the following considerations: the age the respondents had reached by the FFS interview, the country variation in the timing of the FFS surveys, sufficient number of observations for statistical power, and a consistent reference in time. The youngest members of this cohort reached age 30 in 1989, so we have complete observations for this cohort in almost all countries by that age, and we observe most part of the cohort until age 35 (Table 1, Figure 1). For a description of change over time, the indicators were also calculated for three smaller cohorts, born in 1952–1955, 1956–1959, and 1960–1964, respectively. For the youngest cohort, the upper age limit for the experience of an event needed to be restricted to age 30 because of right-censoring at the interview.

The countries involved in our study had used samples that covered all birth cohorts within a specified range of years, with the exception of Sweden and Norway where the samples focused on certain years of birth (Table 1). To compare with the cohort 1952–1959, we used data on cohorts born in 1950, 1955, and 1960 from Norway, and on cohorts born in 1949, 1954, and 1959 from Sweden. All the calculations were made both for men and women, but we present the indicators for women only since answers on the number of pre-union children of men respondents are often unreliable (Rendall et al. 1999, Buber and Prskawetz 2000).

In our calculations, we specified certain life course experiences as non-repeatable events and estimated survivor functions based on survival probabilities in single-year age-groups, using Stata software (StataCorp. 2001). For the comparative analysis of results we selected cutpoints at ages 20, 25, 30 and 35; for presentation, we chose cutpoints that best described the event in question. The survival functions were estimated using the Kaplan-Meier estimator.

To describe the contribution of the processes of union formation and dissolution in the route to stepfamilies we use percentages of women in a cohort who have formed or dissolved a partnership of certain order by certain age. Alternatively, we also calculate *union progression ratios* that are defined similarly to the parity progression ratios used in fertility research. For instance, the union

progression ratio from first to second union gives the number of second unions in relation to the number of first unions experienced by the specific cohort under consideration. Alternatively we use a dissolution-based union progression ratio which gives the number of second unions in relation to the number of dissolutions of first unions experienced by the specific cohort under consideration.

To describe the prevalence of stepfamilies, we define life events in terms of entering a union when there are pre-union children: (1) entry into a union when the woman already has pre-union children (regardless whether the man has pre-union children), and (2) entry into a union when either the woman or the man has pre-union children. We calculated both these events for (a) entry into any union as well as separately for (b) lifetime first and (c) second unions (very few unions of third and higher order were observed in the data). To have some idea on whether the pre-union children could have been conceived with the same partner with whom the union was later formed, we also calculated one of these indicators (entry into first union when the respondent already has pre-union children) by considering only those pre-union children that were born more than twelve months before the union started.

Presentation of results

We present our results in four steps. As the first step, we start with a cross-country comparison of union formation and dissolution that can be understood as a measure of the potential for stepfamilies. We calculate the percentage of women (out of the initial cohort of women born in 1952 to 1959) who have entered their first, second and third partnership by certain age. Alternatively, we also calculate a union progression ratio that gives the proportion of those who form a second union among those who have formed at least one union. Similarly, we calculate the percentage of women who have experienced dissolution of the first and second partnership up to selected ages for the initial cohort of women born in 1952 to 1959 and alternatively for women who have formed a first and a second union. Since the number of children born in the first union and the probability of entering a second union after the first dissolves may depend on the type of union (cohabitation versus marriage), we also present the percentage of first unions that were cohabitation throughout. The potential of stepfamilies can then be associated with the prevalence of any union dissolution and the formation of any higher order union. By distinguishing union formation and dissolution by age of the respondent we aim to gain more insight whether, and in which countries, early partnership formation is associated with higher prevalence of union dissolution and higher order union formation.

We describe the entry into first partnership along the two dimensions of the quantum and the tempo of entering a first partnership. We think of the quantum as the proportion of all women in a cohort who ever enter a partnership within reproductive ages and use the percentage of women having entered a first partnership by age 35 as an approximate measure. The tempo is presented by the proportion of a cohort who had entered first partnership by age 20.

In the second step we discuss childbearing histories in relation to union formation histories. We present the experience of union formation when having pre-union children both as the percentage of all those who enter the first or the second union and as the percentage of the entire cohort. Since the pattern of differences between countries varied whether we considered pre-union children at first or at second union formation we summarized the results on pre-union children by considering all unions, including the rare (by age 35) third and higher order unions.

By introducing information on the children of the male partner of the female respondent, we move to the third step. We measure the percentages of first and second unions and all unions regardless of order where either the respondent or her partner had children at union formation. Because of lacking information on partner's children, these indicators are not computed for Belgium, Estonia, Norway, and Sweden.

We conclude the presentation of our results in the fourth step by comparing the indicators across the following birth cohorts: 1952–1955, 1956–1959 and 1960–1964. These comparisons will help to highlight any change over time in the pattern of stepfamily formation. Based on our findings we then propose a typology of countries that reflects different pathways to stepfamilies.

To make the country comparison across the various indicators as well as across cohorts easier we proceed from a grouping of countries based on geographical location and social system: Northern Europe (Finland, Norway, Sweden), Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, West Germany, Switzerland), Southern Europe (Italy, Portugal, Spain), and former socialist countries (Czech Republic, East Germany, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia – note that our data pertains to the time before the social and economic transition in those countries). We present our results in bar charts where we either order the countries within these groups by the studied indicator (Figures 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8) or present them in an overall order (Figures 5 and 11).

Results

Partnerships

First partnership

In the North and West European countries, the percentage of the initial cohort of women who had entered their first partnership by age 35 (Figure 2) ranged from 93% (France and Switzerland) to 96% (Belgium). West Germany was an exception with only 87%. Within this group of countries there was a clear difference in the tempo of entering the first partnership. While in Sweden, Austria and France about 35% to 40% of all women had entered their first partnership by age 20, these numbers ranged between 26% and 29% in Finland, Norway, Belgium and West Germany. The lowest tempo of entering a first union could be observed in Switzerland with only 15% of the initial cohort having entered a first union by age 20.

In the southern European countries of Italy and Spain women entered their first partnership at later ages. While a catch up effect of partnership formation was observed in Spain with about 94% of all women having entered first partnership by age 35, the later start translated also into a lower quantum of first partnerships in the case of Italy. Portugal did not follow this southern European pattern of first partnership formation: the tempo and quantum of first partnership formation in Portugal was among the highest observed in our set of countries.

Within the former socialist countries we could distinguish three groups. In Lithuania and Poland the tempo and quantum of first partnerships were the lowest. About one fifth of the initial cohort had entered a first partnership by age 20 and about 90% by age 35. In Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia women had entered their first partnership earlier, and by age 35 they reached the highest percentages of those who had entered a partnership (from 96% to 97%) among the countries involved in our study. Hungarian women entered their first partnership the earliest, 46% of the cohort by age 20. Estonia, Latvia, and East Germany lie in between with values close to those of the West European countries.

North European countries have the highest share of women who had experienced dissolution of a first union, at any of the measured age cutpoints (Figure 3). Sweden clearly stood out with already 18% of all women having experienced a first dissolution by age 25 and 35% by age 35. The dissolution of first partnerships was less prevalent in countries of Western Europe, at lower ages in particular (except Switzerland which stays close to Norway and Finland). In Austria and France

where entry into first partnership at lower ages was comparable to Sweden, only about 9% and 7%, respectively, of the initial cohort experienced a first dissolution by age 25. However, up to age 35, already about 20% of the initial cohort of women experienced first dissolution in most West European countries, except Belgium. In Belgium where entry into first partnership was late but the proportions of women who experienced first partnership by age 35 were high, the experience of dissolution was the lowest in the studied West European countries, 4% by age 25 and 13% by age 35. In South European countries we observed the lowest share of women with a union dissolution experience, 6% by age 35 in Italy and 8% in Spain[2]. Later entry and lower prevalence of first partnerships in those countries are likely to have contributed to this.

Among the former socialist countries, the picture of union dissolution was somewhat different from the one on entering the partnership. In Latvia and Estonia, about one third of all women in the initial cohort had experienced a first dissolution by age 35, which is clearly higher than in the other studied former socialist countries and at about the same level as in Sweden. While Lithuania and Poland were both characterized by relatively late entry into partnership and a relatively low percentage of women who had entered a partnership by age 35, a much larger percentage of Lithuanian women had gone through a union dissolution (21%) than in Poland (8%). In the Czech Republic, East Germany and Hungary we observed percentages of women with dissolution experience that are in the size order of those observed in West European countries, while in Slovenia where the indicators of entry into first partnership were close to the mentioned three countries, the percentage of women with dissolution experience was almost as low as in Poland.

Second partnership

As stepfamilies are mostly associated with higher-order unions we are interested whether the experience of a first dissolution acts as a predictor for the formation of second unions. Our results confirm such a conjecture. We observed the highest percentage of women experiencing a second union by age 35 in Sweden where 27% of the initial cohort had entered a second union by age 35 (Figure 4), followed by Estonia (24%) and Latvia (19%). Norway, Switzerland, Finland and Austria – countries where the first dissolution experience was high – had also a relatively high percentage of the initial cohort that experience a second union (15% to 17%). In the remaining West European countries these numbers were lower and they were lowest for Belgium (Belgium also had the lowest

[2] Portugal is missing in Figure 3 since we have only data on first partnerships in this country and therefore lack any information on first dissolution and higher order partnership formation.

share of first dissolution experience among the studied West European countries) where only 7% of all women experienced a second union by age 35. The prevalence of second partnerships was almost negligible in Italy, Spain and Poland with at most 4% of all women having experienced a second union by age 35 (in Spain). Again, these are the countries where we observed the lowest experience of first dissolution. In the Czech Republic, East Germany and Hungary the experience of second partnerships was in the order of West European countries. In Lithuania, a comparable dissolution rate like in the Western countries, however, did not translate into corresponding numbers of the prevalence of second partnerships. Only about 8% of the initial cohort experienced a second union by age 35 though almost 21% of all women experienced a first dissolution by age 35. On the other hand, in Slovenia and Poland a lower dissolution rate of first partnerships translated into lower prevalence of second union formation.

If we group the countries according to second partnerships experienced by age 35 we arrive at a different classification as the one we started off (Figure 5). Sweden is clearly the country with the highest prevalence of second unions and is followed by Estonia and Latvia. South European countries (Italy and Spain) and Poland have the lowest prevalence of second unions. In between, the remaining North, West European countries and former socialist countries form two groups.

Viewed from a different angle, we may also consider a union progression ratio (Table 2) that gives the proportion of those who form a second union among those who have formed at least one union (first column, Table 2), or alternatively relate the former number to the share of the initial cohort who has experienced a first dissolution (second column, Table 2). Applying the first definition of the union progression ratio does not change the general picture of second union experience. However, restricting the denominator to only those who have experienced a first dissolution slightly changes the country classification. Sweden still stands out with 77% of all first dissolutions being followed by a second union by age 35. West and East Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia come next with 68% to 73% of first dissolutions being followed by a second union. The classification of the remaining countries is not influenced by this alternative measure of union progression.

The percentage of first unions that were cohabitation throughout shows some positive correlation with the experience of second unions (Figure 6). On the background of this overall pattern we note that in Latvia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic a medium level of second-union experience was reached while only very few first unions were cohabitation throughout in those countries.

Third partnership

The share of women who experienced a third partnership by age 35 exceeded the 5% mark only in the case of Sweden. For the remaining North and West European countries about 1% to 3% of the initial cohort of women experienced a third union with Belgium being again an outlier with only 0.6%. Similarly low and almost negligible numbers as in Belgium were observed in Italy, Spain and Poland. In the former socialist countries only 1% to 2% of women had experienced a third union by age 35. The pattern across countries of the prevalence of third unions therefore follows closely the pattern we already observed in case of second partnerships.

Summary

Women in the North European countries experience more partnerships. In West European countries (except Belgium) and most of the former socialist countries (except Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia) we observed a lower number of unions, but the share of women who enter a second union is still relevant for the potential of stepfamily formation (Figure 5). Among those countries, Latvia and Estonia stand out for their high first dissolution rates and high prevalence of second unions. The lowest number of higher-order unions, and a negligible potential for stepfamilies in this respect, was observed in South European countries, and in Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, and Belgium.

Childbearing

Pre-union children at first union formation

The highest proportion of women who had children when they formed their first union, 32%, was observed in East Germany (Figure 7). Slovenia and Austria followed next with 13%. In all the other studied countries the share of women with at least one child at first union formation was below 10%. In Belgium, Italy and Spain this share was the lowest, below 3%.

The extraordinarily high percentage of first unions with pre-union children in East Germany warranted us to take a closer look at the timing of the birth of the pre-union children in relation to the starting time of the first union. About half of the children born before the first union were born within twelve months before the union, and this share does not show much variation among the countries with a sizable proportion of pre-first-union children. It is indeed likely that a considerable proportion of the children born within the twelve-month period that immediately preceded union formation are biological children of both partners who form the union (for East Germany, see Huinink and Konietzka 2000). However, even after we restrict the definition of pre-union children

to children who were born more than twelve months before union, East Germany still stands out and the relative differences between countries in the percentage of women with pre-union children or partner's children do not change notably.

For most countries (the exceptions were Belgium, Estonia, Norway, and Sweden) it was possible to consider also the contribution of pre-union children of the male partner, that is, the first unions of the woman where the man did and the woman did not have pre-union children. The unions where both of them had pre-union children were already captured by considering the pre-union children of the woman, in which case we did not differentiate by whether her partner also had pre-union children or not. In Finland, France, Switzerland, Latvia, and Hungary, the share of first unions with pre-union children more than doubled when we considered children of both partners (Figure 7). It has to be borne in mind, though, that the union order is that of the woman's, and it can be assumed that many of the men who have children enter their second or higher order union with the respondent. When we consider also the man's pre-union children in the overall comparison, Finland and Latvia move up to the countries with a relatively high share of pre-first-union children. The lowest shares of pre-first-union children are in Italy and Spain, and Poland, Lithuania and Hungary in the socialist countries.

Pre-union children at second union formation

The whole group of the former socialist countries had higher proportion of women who had children at their second union formation (Figure 8). It ranged from 65% in Slovenia to 85% in Latvia. Among the other countries, the variation did not follow our country grouping in any systematic manner. The proportion of women with children at second union formation ranged from 42% in Sweden to 61% in Spain, with Switzerland as an outlier with 29%.

Considering the contribution of man's pre-union children, that is, second unions of the woman where the man did and the woman did not have children at union formation, did not essentially alter the picture (Figure 8). In Finland and Switzerland, considering those unions increased the proportion of woman's second unions starting with pre-union children from 48% to 59%, and from 29% to 38%, respectively. In other countries that contribution was smaller.

Since there was quite some variation in the experience of second unions between the countries, we also studied a combined measure of the experience of a second union with pre-union children by age 35 (Table 3, Figure 9). Every fifth Estonian woman of the 1952–1959 cohort entered a second union

by age 35 while having children prior to that union, and that proportion was almost as high, 17%, in Latvia. The Czech Republic and East Germany came next with 13% and 12%, respectively, and Sweden also had a relatively high level of 11%.

The type of the first dissolved union is generally associated with the share of women who have children when they enter a second union (Figure 10). The higher the percentage of first unions that were cohabitations throughout the lower the percentage of women who have children when they enter a second union. Estonia and Switzerland deviate from this pattern. In Estonia, a relatively high share of non-marital unions is accompanied with a very high share (83%) of women with children at entry into second union, while in Switzerland where non-marital unions make up about the same share of dissolved first unions, only 29% of women have children when they enter a second union. Interestingly, the catholic countries do not form a pattern.

Pre-union children at any union formation

The experience of entering any union with pre-union children was highest in East Germany, 38% (Figure 11). The bulk of these cases were first unions with prior children. A high share of first unions with pre-union children also contributes to the relatively high share of overall union experience with pre-union children in Austria, 19%.

The experience of union formation with prior children is also high in Estonia and Latvia, 23% and 20%, respectively, but the large majority of those cases are women who enter a second union having children from their first union. In the other former socialist countries except Poland, and in Norway and Sweden, the share of women who experience union formation with own pre-union children is within the range from 12% to 17%.

Summary

Altogether we could distinguish six patterns in union and childbearing careers. One dividing line was that between the two social systems that prevailed in Europe during the reproductive ages of our cohorts. All the former socialist countries were characterized by a universal prevalence of pre-union children – more than 70% of women who enter a second union already had a child (Figure 12). However, there was considerable variation in dissolution and repartnering rates between those countries, and we can distinguish three groups among them. The highest experience of a stepfamily before age 35 of all countries was reached in Estonia and Latvia where the high prevalence of children in first unions was accompanied with relatively high rates of separation and repartnering

(*first pattern*). The Czech Republic, East Germany and Hungary constitute an intermediate group (*second pattern*), while Poland and Lithuania (*third pattern*) form a group with very few second unions and very few stepfamilies.

In all the studied Western countries women were less likely to have had children in the eventually dissolved first unions, compared to the former socialist countries of central and eastern Europe. With respect to second union experience, we could also distinguish three groups among the Western countries. Sweden represents a group of its own (*fourth pattern*). Union and childbearing histories are only loosely connected there, since there were no children in most dissolved first unions while dissolution as well as repartnering are frequent. West European countries (except Belgium) together with Finland and Norway also displayed a loose connection between union and childbearing histories, but they are far from the second-union experience of Swedish women (*fifth pattern*). Southern Europe and Belgium constitute a group of very low prevalence of second unions and they have the lowest prevalence of stepfamilies among all the studied countries (*sixth pattern*).

Change over time (birth cohorts)

To visualize the change in the prevalence of second unions starting with pre-union children across cohorts we present the same kind of plots like in Figure 12 for three consecutive birth cohorts: 1952–1955, 1956–1959 and 1960–1964 and for ages 30 and 35 (Figure 13). We observe second partnerships that have been formed by age 30 for all three cohorts, while second partnerships by age 35 could be obtained for the first two cohorts only.

A comparison across the first two cohorts indicates that in North European countries the share of women who have formed a second partnership by age 30 has increased over time while the share of women with pre union children among those who formed a second union has decreased (Figure 14). For West European countries there is not much variation across the cohorts in terms of the formation of second partnerships (position change on the horizontal axis in the figures). However, we observe a trend towards a decrease of partnerships with pre-union children among those second partnerships and it is most pronounced in Austria, Belgium and Switzerland. For South European countries (Italy and Spain) and most of the former socialist countries there is again not much variation across cohorts in terms of second partnership formation. However for Spain, and most former socialist countries, the Czech Republic in particular, we observed an increase in women with children among those who entered their second partnership.

We may conclude that over cohorts, the relation between birth and union histories has become less closely related for North European and partly also for West European countries. In these countries, the experiences of a higher order union became more frequent while pre-union children at second union formation became less frequent. In most South European countries and the former socialist countries childbearing remained to be strongly connected to first unions. Across cohorts, there was a slight increase in the experiences of forming a second union with pre-union children in most studied countries (Table 4). However, in four out of the five West European countries, Austria, Belgium, France and Switzerland, there was a decrease.

Discussion

A life history survey like the FFS is very useful in presenting the patterns of demographic life courses and comparing them across countries and cohorts. With very little variation, the definition of a coresidential partnership was comparable across the countries and that permitted us to compare the indicators combined from union and birth histories. However, also various problems emerged, like those of the differences in the time the surveys were taken, and the cohorts involved in the surveys. From the point of view of our study, it was also a shortcoming that children could not explicitly be linked to certain partnerships. It is possible that some of the pre-union children at first union formation are biological children of both partners. This is the reason why we had to stick to the description of the prevalence of stepfamilies mainly by referring to second partnerships (see Figure 12). Again, we may overestimate the share of women who enter their second partnership with pre-union children since part of these pre-union children may already be biological children of the partner with whom the second union was formed. However, the bias may be much less as compared to first partnerships. As the sequencing of demographic events (such as the birth of children and union formation) becomes more complex over time surveys need to be adjusted to capture these more complicated biographies and to obtain more clear cut results on questions like the prevalence of stepfamilies as considered in this paper.

In all the former socialist countries we observed that most of the women who formed a second union had children. This means that children were born also in a large proportion of eventually dissolved first unions. At least two known explanations to such pattern could be pointed out. First, in the socialist countries partners had a motivation to marry and have children relatively early, confirming to the prevailing norms (see, e.g., Wendt 1997) and motivated by various benefits given to families

with children (Klinger 1991), housing in particular, and, second, once in a partnership, erratic contraceptive supplies and contraceptive nonuse contributed to the number of unintended births (David 1999). In Western countries, in Sweden in particular, a first union did not necessarily reach a level of mutual commitment where the partners consider having children. The cohorts observed in this study already carried the postponement of childbearing, a trend prevailing in Europe starting from the late 1960s. In addition, the factors that lead to the eventual breakdown of a first union may have contributed to the general instability of that union so that the partners did not want to have any children together. Our finding about the decreasing proportion of women in Western countries who have children when they enter a second union is consistent with the well documented trend of postponing childbearing, in that there are fewer unions with children among the eventually dissolved first unions.

In addition to the above discussed distinction between countries of different social systems, our results also reflected differentials in second-union experience determined by first-union dissolution and repartnering. Sweden with its historical tradition of non-marital cohabitation has been pointed out as a forerunner in many demographic trends, and the pattern of high prevalence of consensual unions, in particular those not converted to marriage at any stage, and high dissolution and repartnering rates showed up distinctly in our results too. Despite the fact that the dissolved first unions of Swedish women were among the least likely to have offspring, Sweden was still among the countries with high stepfamily experience. Among the former socialist countries, Estonia and Latvia had union formation and dissolution indicators pretty close to Sweden, and when accompanied with the childbearing context of the socialist system there, it resulted in the highest stepfamily experience among our observed countries.

Second-union experience in the former socialist countries of Central Europe (the Czech Republic, East Germany, and Hungary), Western Europe and in Finland and Norway was pretty much the same, but the three former socialist countries had high stepfamily experience since most of the women in second unions had children from first unions. Notably, women in these three former socialist countries had the same stepfamily experience as in Sweden, though the underlying patterns of demographic behavior were largely different. Countries with the lowest prevalence of second unions – Lithuania, Poland, Italy, Spain, and Belgium – all share a relatively strong influence of the Catholic Church.

Our results highlight the different pathways to a stepfamily in Europe, and show that in most European countries a considerable proportion of women enter a stepfamily in childbearing ages, which needs to be considered in studies of fertility.

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Figure 14 Change from cohort 1952–1955 to 1956-1959 in the country position by women's experience of second unions and the percentage of second unions with pre-union children.
Corresponds to change from plot D to plot E in Figure 13.

Table 1 Year of FFS interviews and the range of included birth cohorts.

Country	Abbreviation	Year of interview	Birth cohorts included
Norway	NOR	1988–89	1945/50/55/60/65/68
Finland	FIN	1989–90	1938–67
Poland	POL	1991	1934–74
Belgium	BEL	1991–92	1951–70
Germany	GER	1992	1952–72
Hungary	HUN	1992–93	1951–74
Sweden	SWE	1992–93	1949/54/59/64/69
France	FRA	1994	1944–73
Estonia	EST	1994	1924–73
Lithuania	LIT	1994–95	1944–77
Slovenia	SLO	1994–95	1949–80
Switzerland	SUI	1994–95	1944–74
Latvia	LAT	1995	1945–77
Spain	SPA	1995	1945–77
Austria	AUT	1995–96	1941–76
Italy	ITA	1995–96	1946–75
Portugal	POR	1997	1947–82
Czech Republic	CZE	1997	1952–82

Note: If surveys of women and men differed in time or cohort composition this table pertains to the survey on women.

Table 2 Indicators of progression from first to second union by age 35 for the 1952-1959 birth cohort.

		Proportion of those who enter second union among those who enter the first	Proportion of those who enter second union among those who dissolve the first
North	FIN	0.17	0.67
	NOR	0.18	0.66
	SWE	0.28	0.77
West	AUT	0.16	0.64
	BEL	0.07	0.53
	FRA	0.13	0.61
	GER_W	0.16	0.68
	SUI	0.17	0.63
South	ITA	0.02	0.37
	SPA	0.04	0.48
Former socialist countries	CZE	0.16	0.71
	GER_E	0.16	0.67
	HUN	0.15	0.61
	POL	0.04	0.43
	SLO	0.08	0.69
	EST	0.25	0.73
	LAT	0.21	0.62
	LIT	0.09	0.40

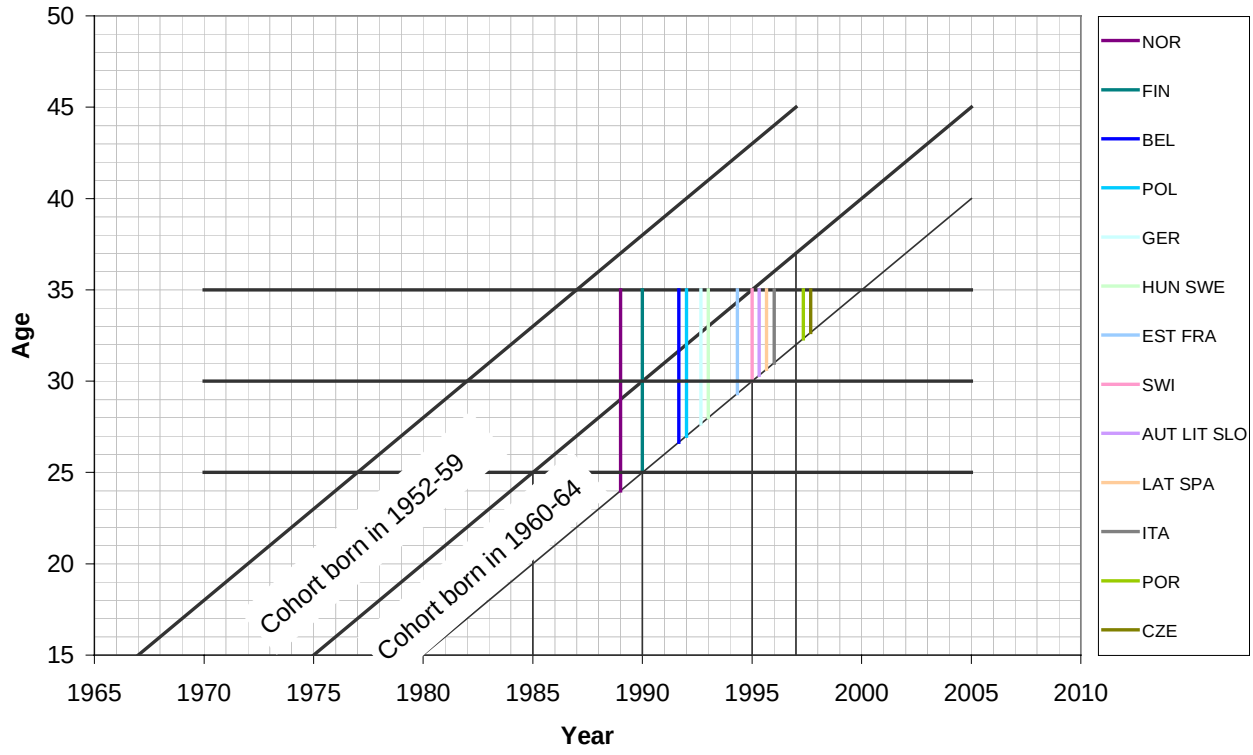
Table 3 Percentage of women from the entire cohort who had experienced a second union formation by age 35 where the woman already had own pre-union children, birth cohort 1952–1959 (data presented in the map in Figure 9).

North	FIN	7.6
	NOR	9.1
	SWE	11.4
West	AUT	7.8
	BEL	4.2
	FRA	7.3
	GER_W	6.1
	SUI	4.7
South	ITA	1.1
	SPA	2.4
Former socialist countries	CZE	12.6
	GER_E	12.1
	HUN	9.8
	POL	2.6
	SLO	5.1
	EST	19.5
	LAT	16.8
	LIT	7.0

Table 4 Percentage of women from the entire cohort who had experienced a second union formation by age 35 where the woman already had own pre-union children, birth cohorts 1952–1955 and 1956–1959.

		Cohort born in 1952–1955	Cohort born in 1956–1959
North	FIN	7.4	7.6
	NOR	7.8	9.1
	SWE	11.5	12.0
West	AUT	9.2	6.4
	BEL	5.0	3.3
	FRA	7.7	6.9
	GER_W	5.9	6.5
	SUI	5.6	3.8
South	ITA	0.9	1.2
	SPA	1.7	3.1
Former socialist countries	CZE	9.5	14.8
	GER_E	11.6	12.5
	HUN	9.9	9.5
	POL	2.6	2.7
	SLO	4.7	5.7
	EST	18.1	21.1
	LAT	16.0	17.4
	LIT	7.3	6.7

Figure 1 The cohort-age range covered for each country in our study.



Note: The colored vertical lines are plotted at the date of interview

Figure 2 Percentage of women who have entered their first union by age 20 and by age 35, birth cohort 1952–1959.

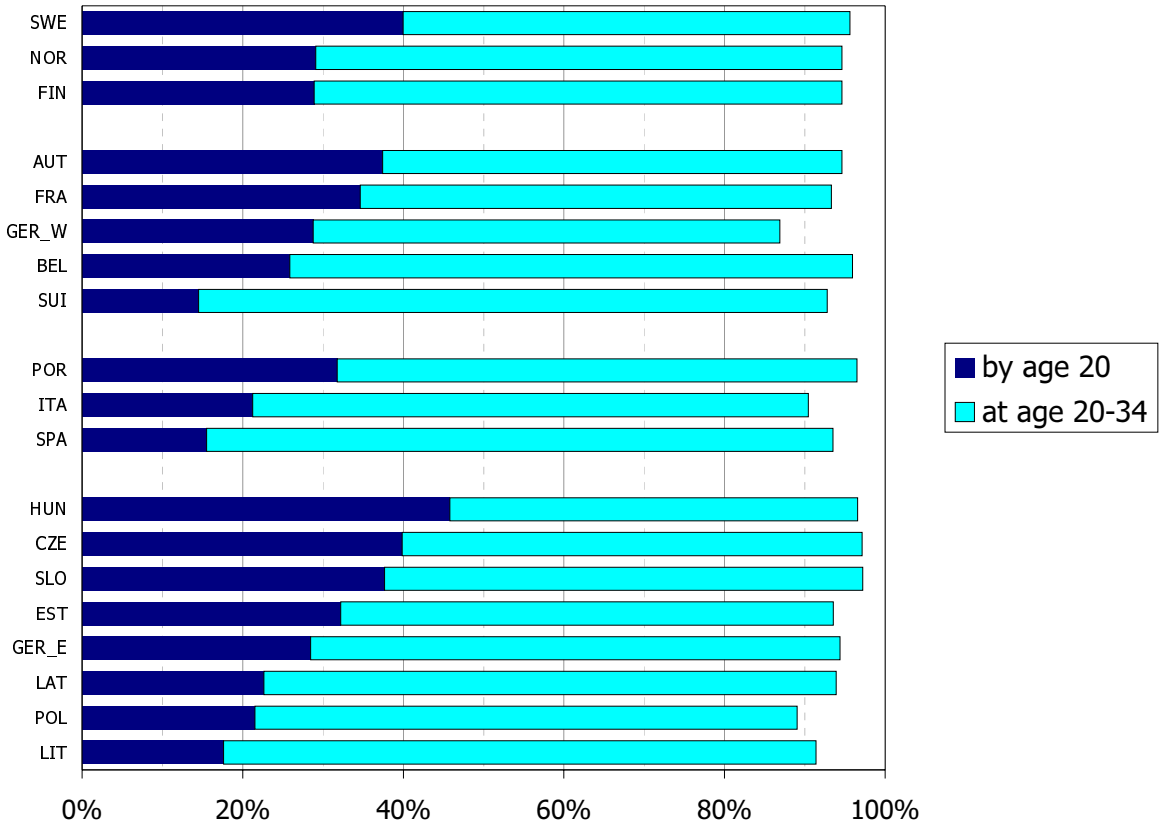


Figure 3 Percentage of women who have dissolved their first union by age 25 and by age 35, birth cohort 1952–1959.

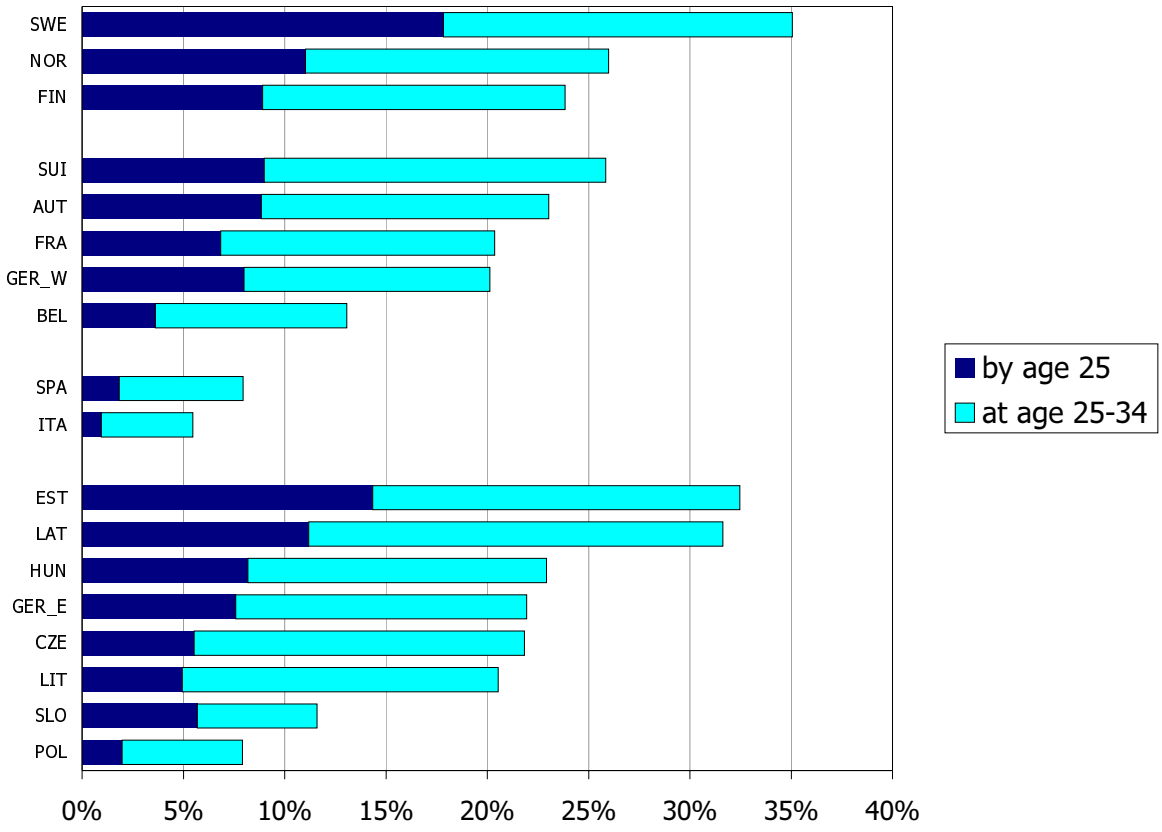


Figure 4 Percentage of women who have entered a second union by age 25 and by age 35, birth cohort 1952–1959.

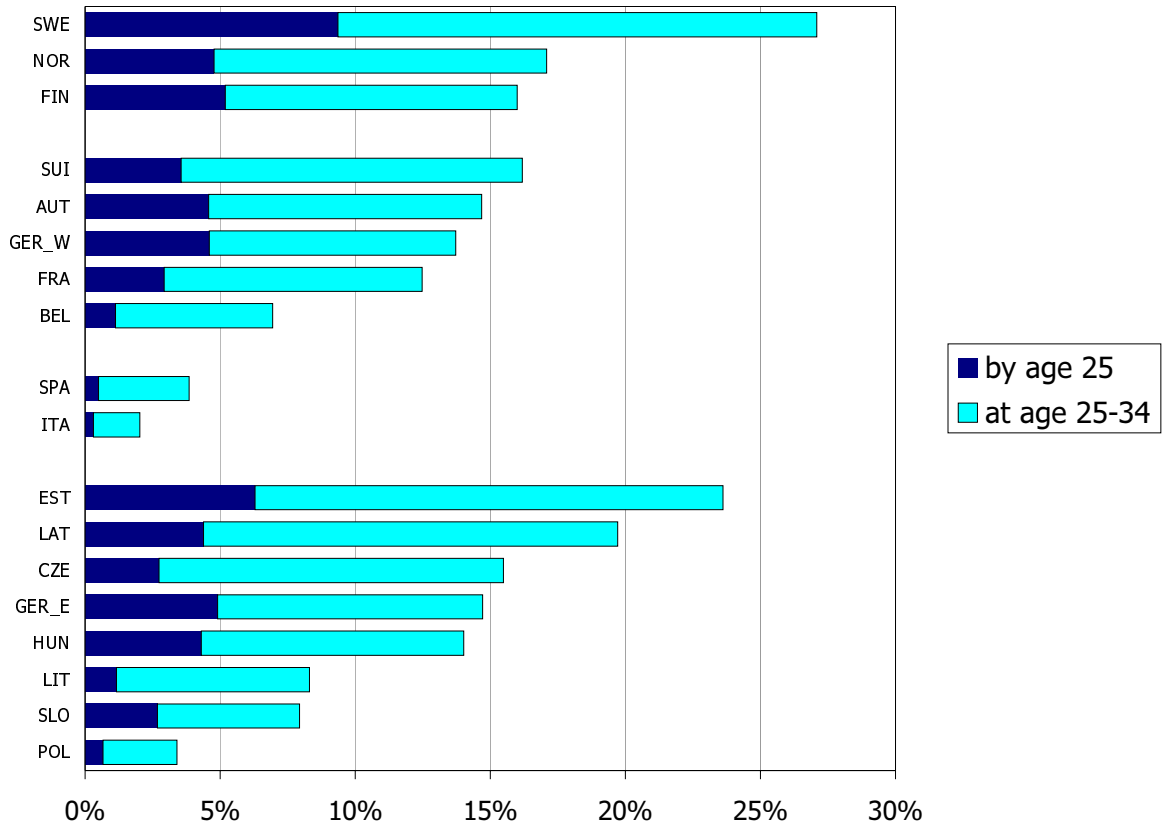


Figure 5 Cumulative union history experience of women born in 1952–1959.

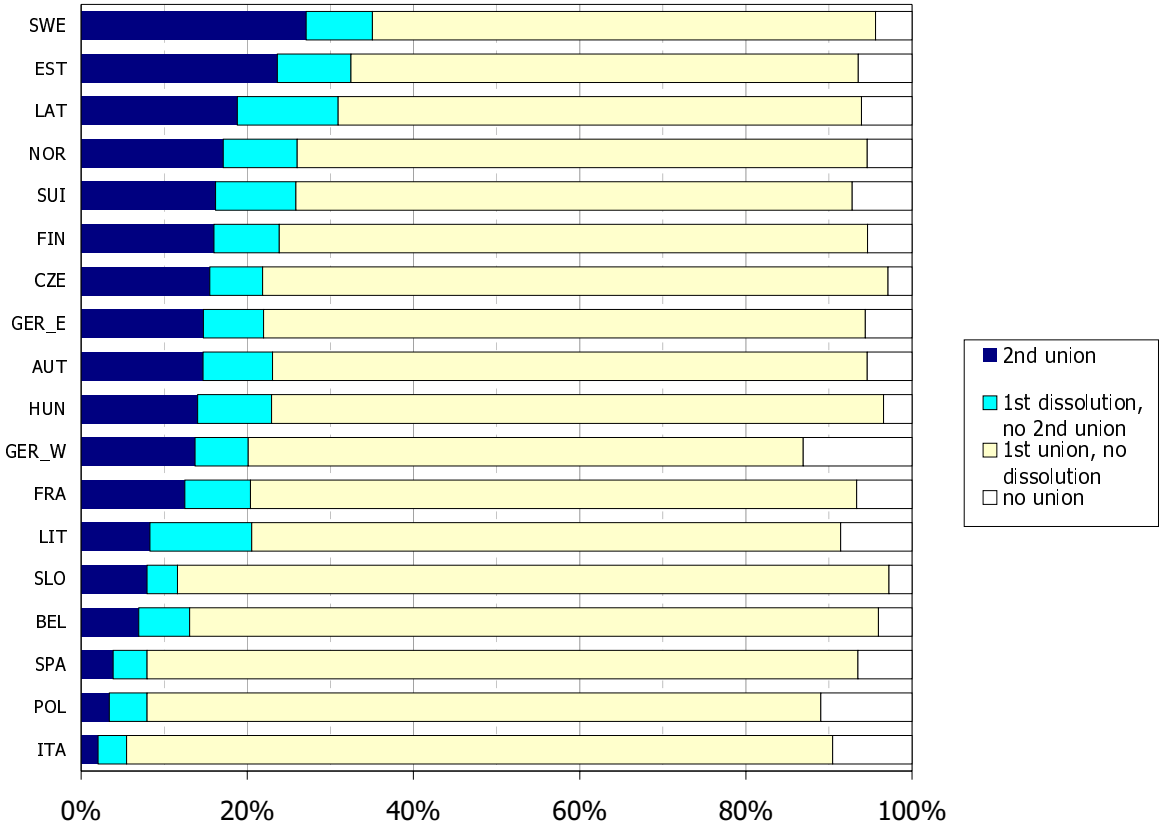


Figure 6 Plot of countries by the percentage of dissolved first unions that were cohabitation throughout and the percentage of women who enter a second union by age 35, birth cohort 1952–1959.

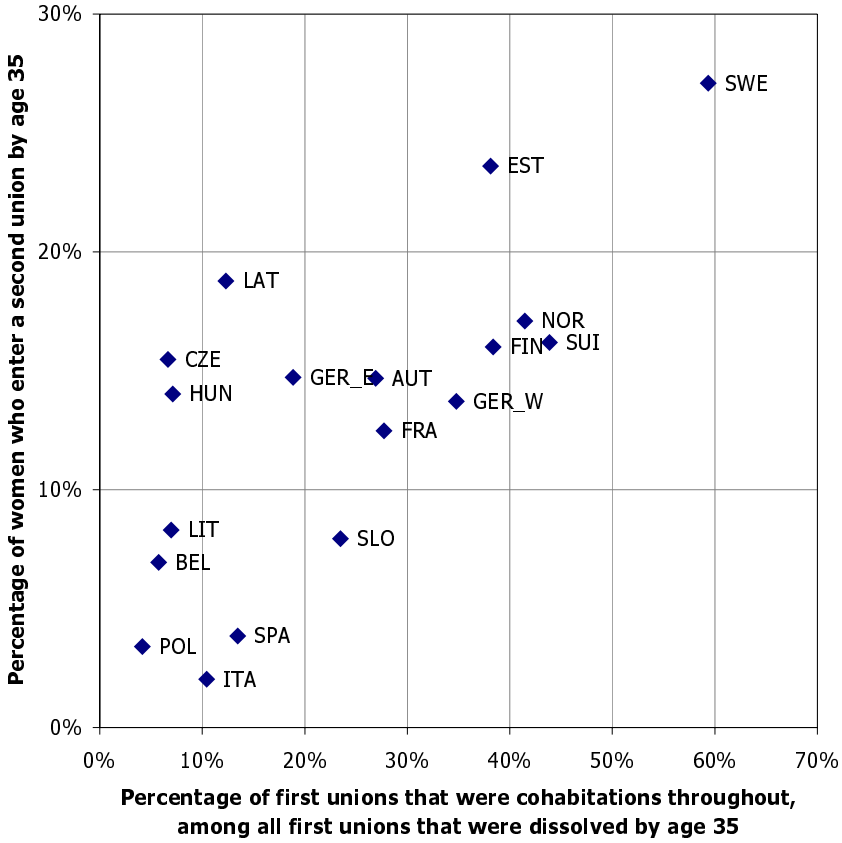
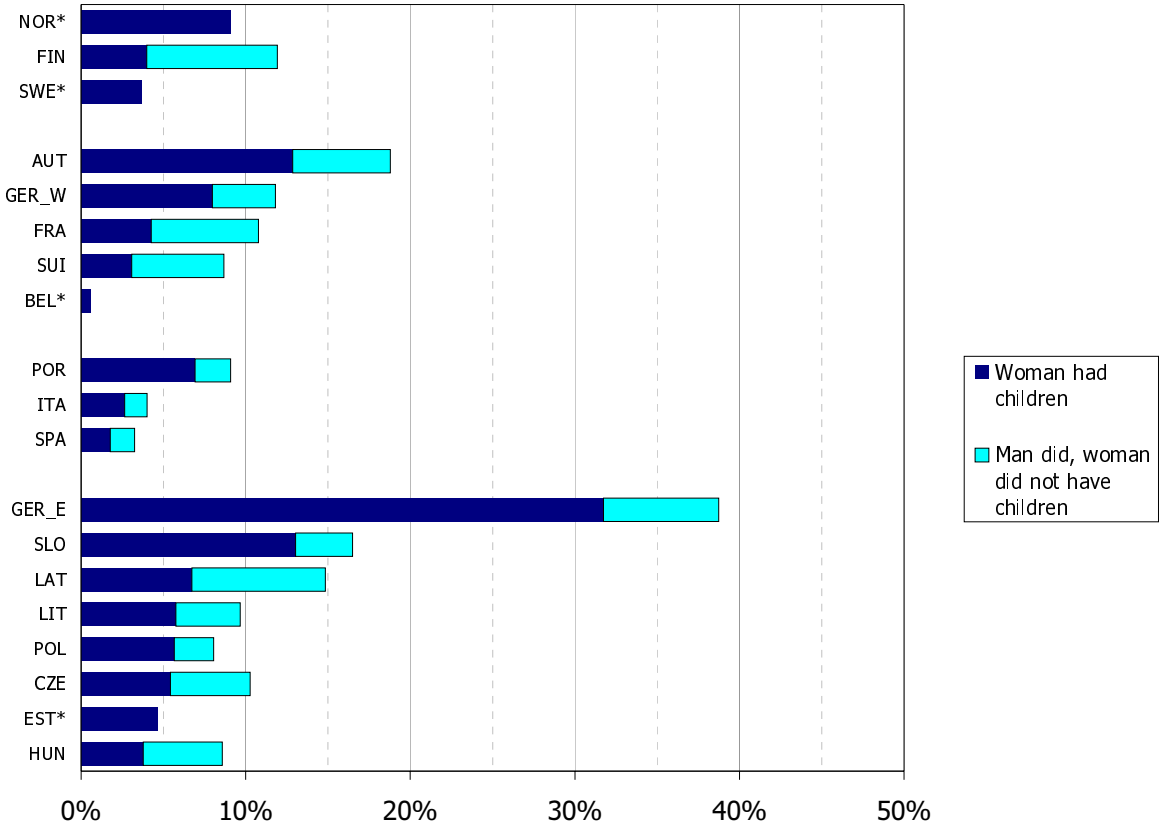
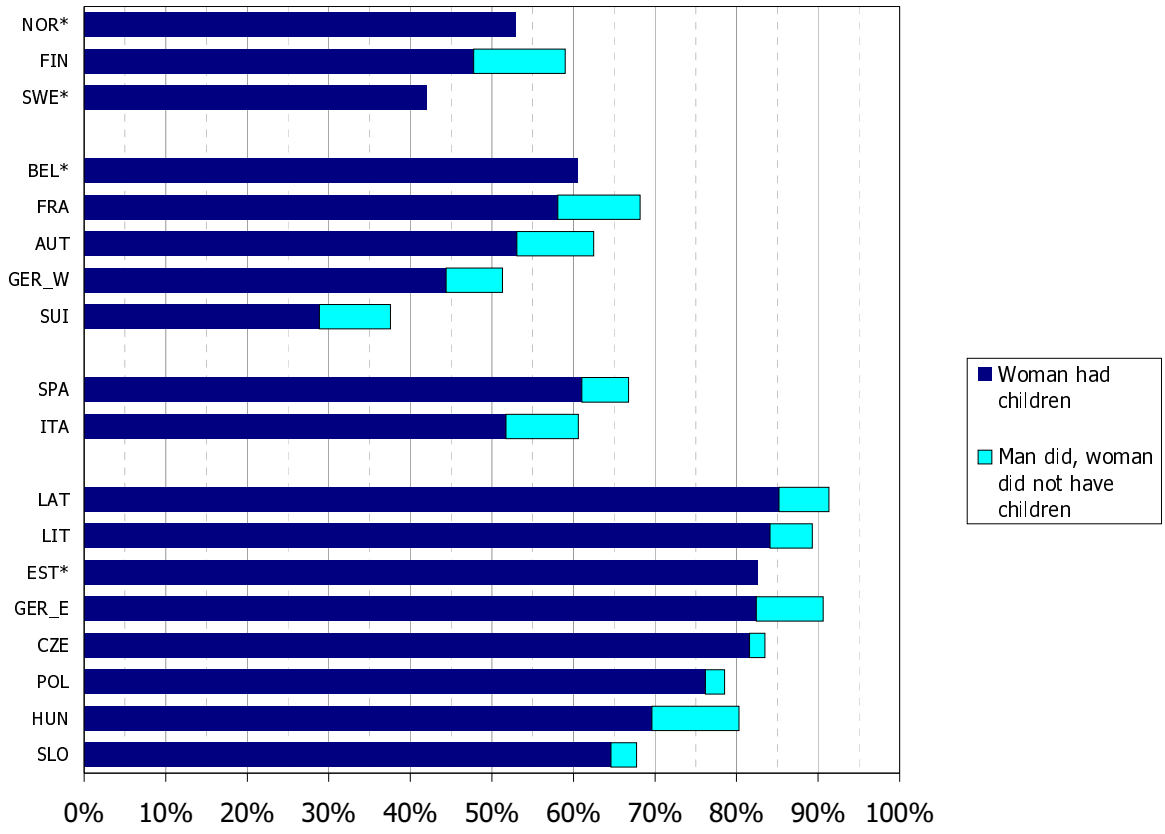


Figure 7 Percentage of women's first unions with own and partner's pre-union children at union formation. First unions up to age 35, birth cohort 1952–1959.



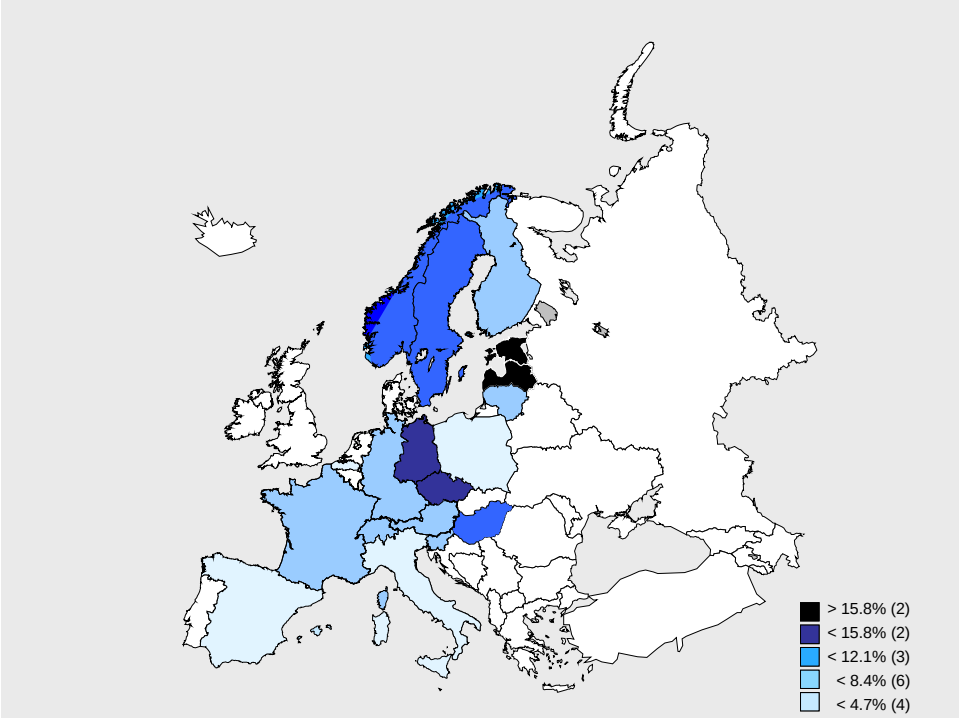
* Information on partner's pre-union children not available.

Figure 8 Percentage of women's second unions with own and partner's pre-union children at union formation. Second unions up to age 35, birth cohort 1952–1959.



* Information on partner's pre-union children not available.

Figure 9 Map of studied countries by the experience of a second union formation by age 35 where the woman already had own pre-union children, birth cohort 1952-1959 (data from Table 3).



Footnote: The cutpoints for the differently colored country groups were obtained by dividing the distance between the maximum and minimum value into five equal pieces.

Figure 10 Plot of countries by the percentage of dissolved first unions that were cohabitations throughout and the percentage of women's second unions with pre-union children at union formation, birth cohort 1952–1959.

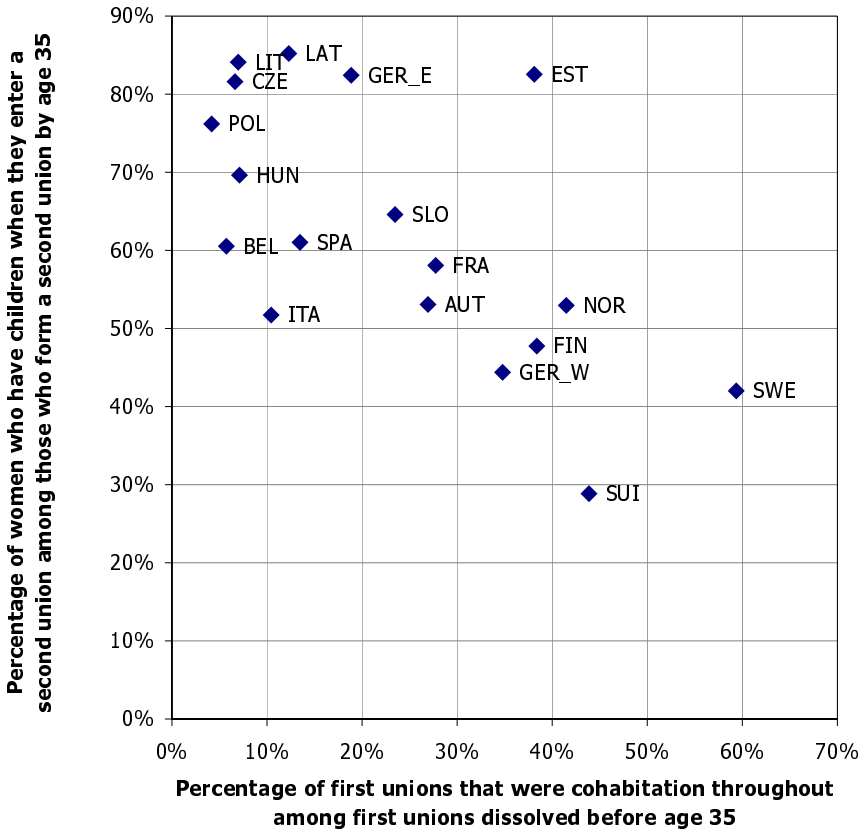


Figure 11 Experience of any union formation by age 35 where the woman already had own pre-union children and the contribution of first unions to this, birth cohort 1952–1959.

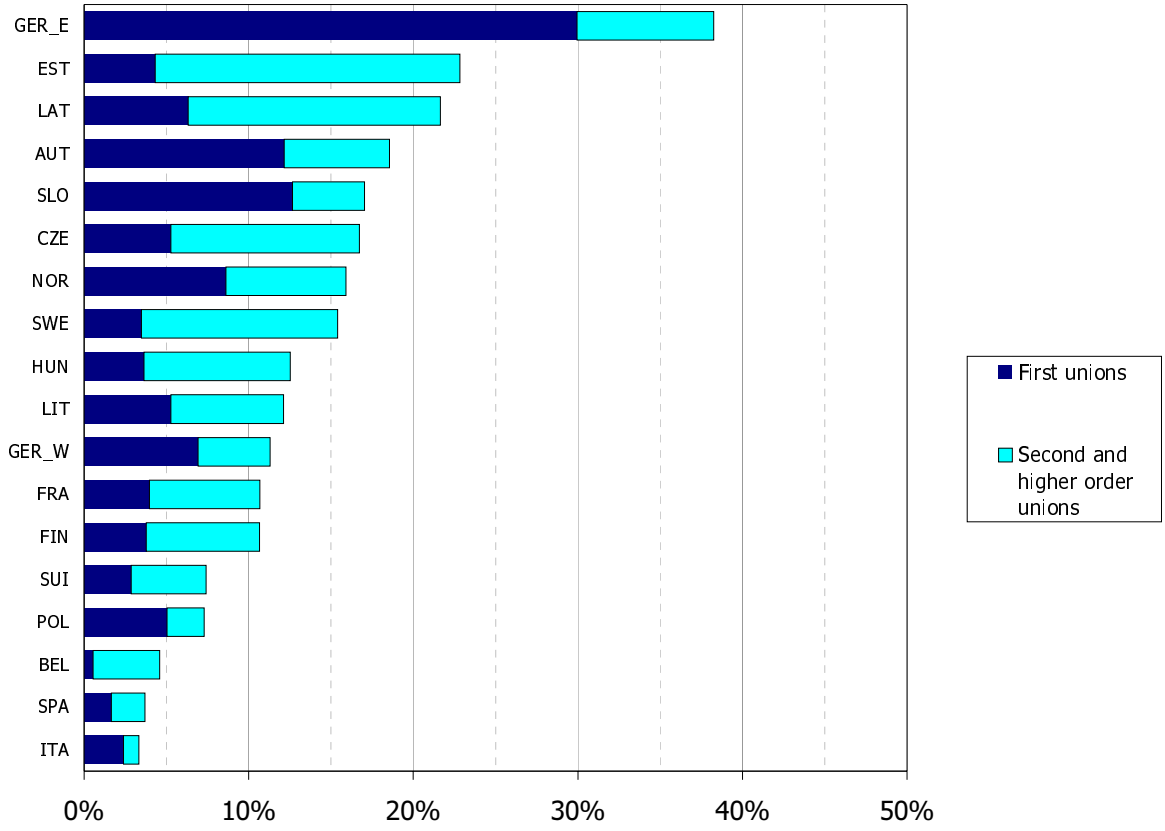


Figure 12 Plot of countries by the percentage of women with pre-union children at second union formation of all second unions formed before age 35, and the percentage of women who enter a second union by age 35, birth cohort 1952–1959.

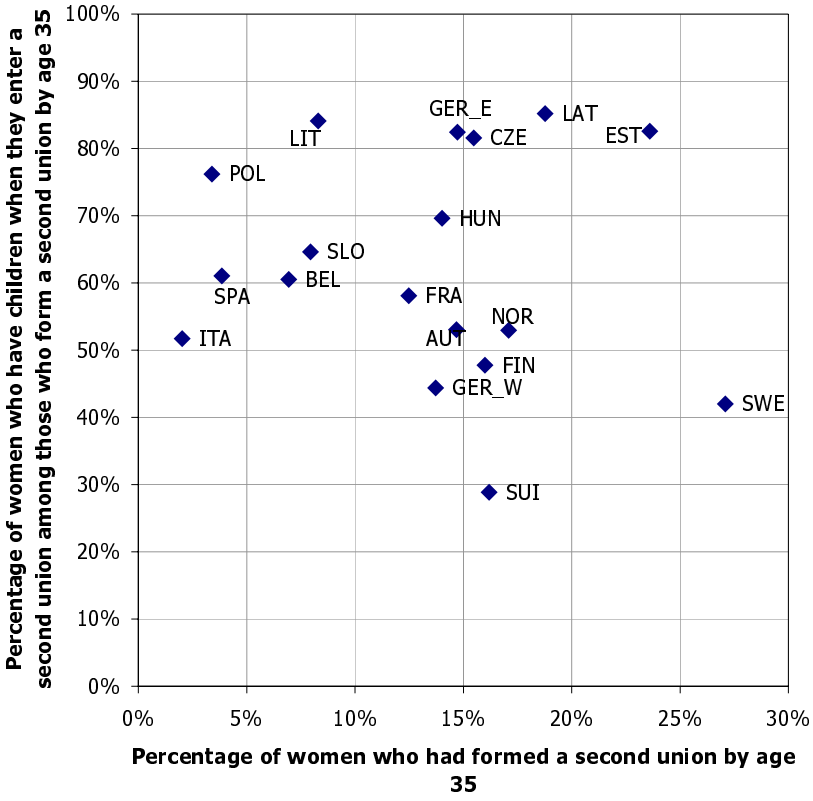
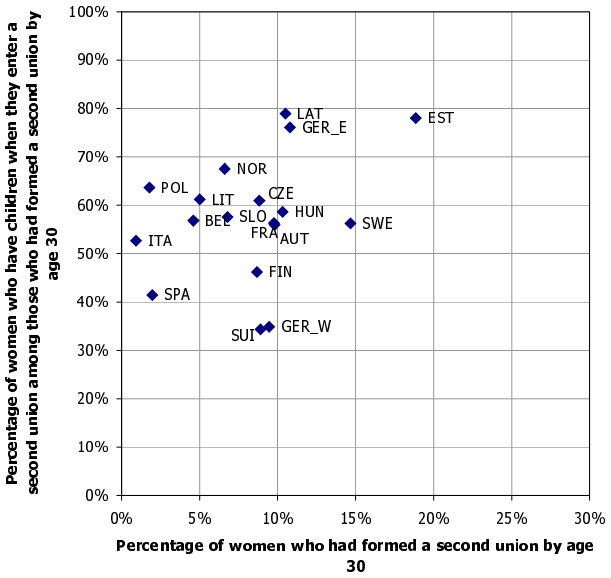
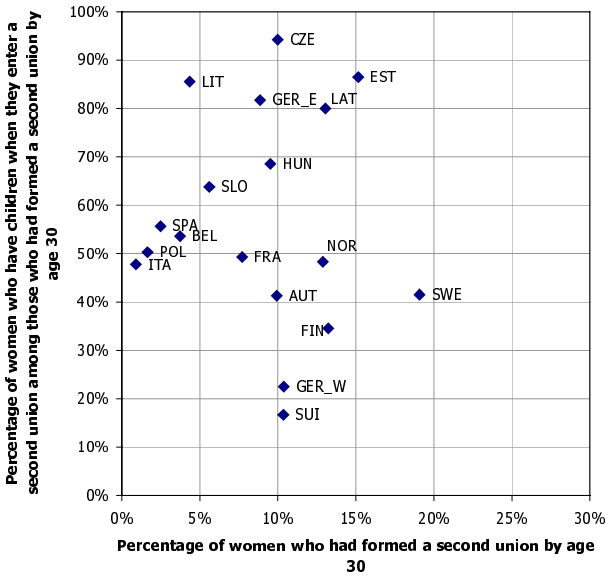


Figure 13 Plot of countries by the percentage of women with pre-union children at second union formation of all second unions formed before age 30 / by age 35, and the percentage of women who enter a second union by age 30 / by age 35, birth cohort 1952–1955, 1956-59, 1960-64.

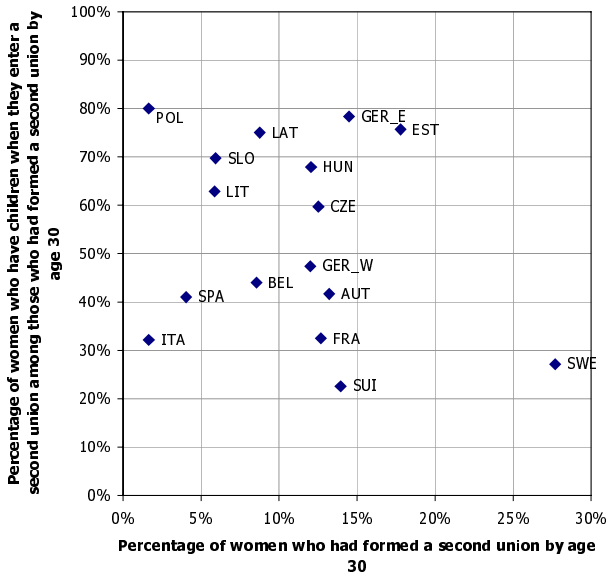
A Cohort born in 1952–1955, by age 30



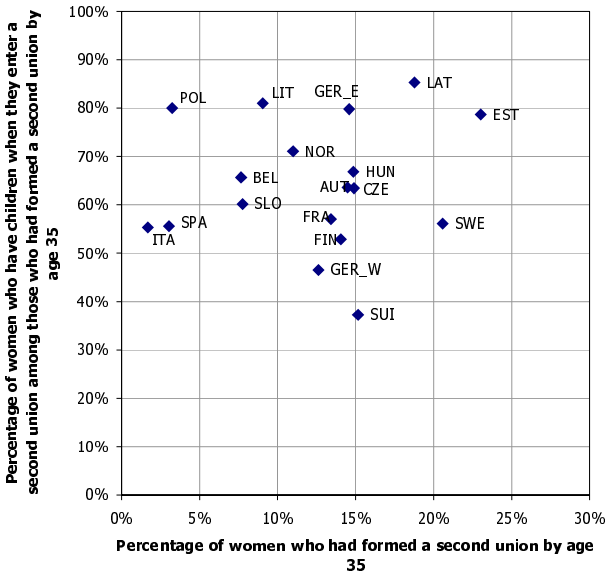
B Cohort born in 1956–1959, by age 30



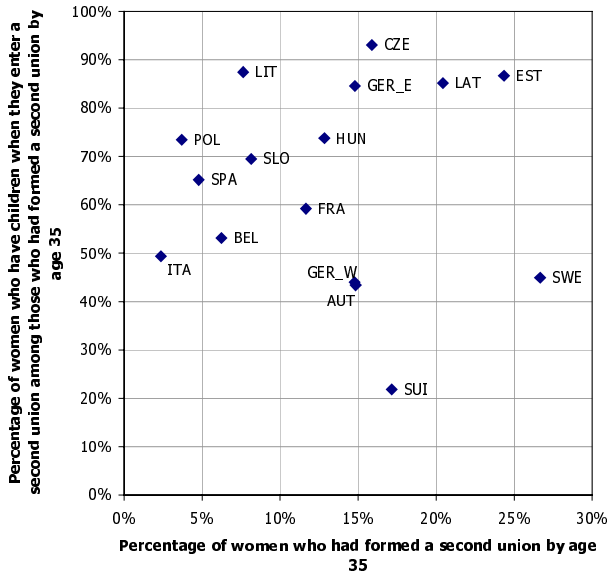
C Cohort born in 1960–1964, by age 30



D Cohort born in 1952–1955, by age 35



E Cohort born in 1956–1959, by age35



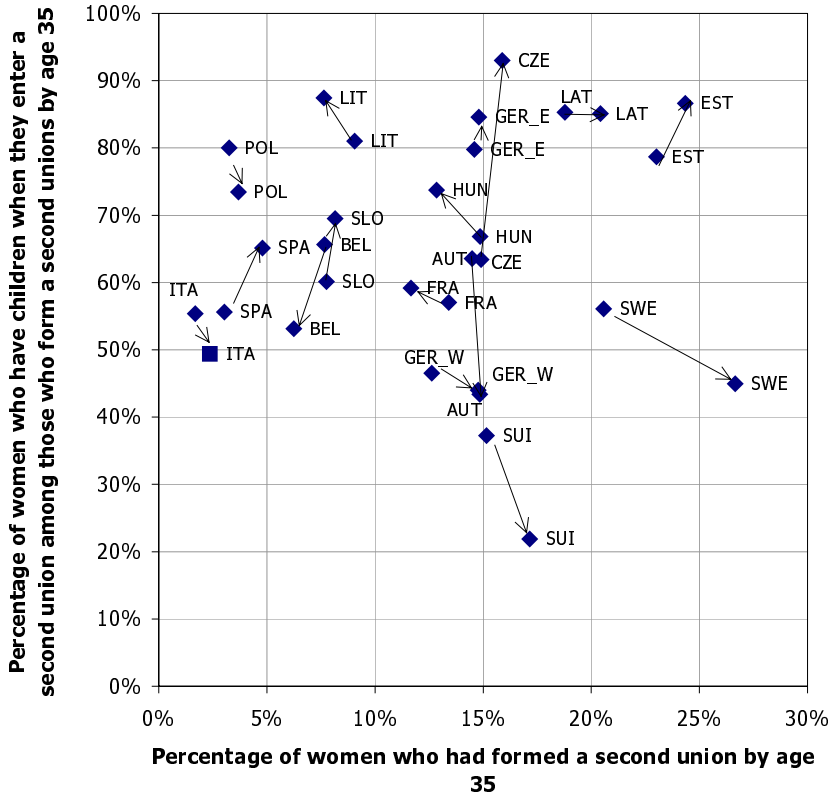
Notes:

Finland is missing from graphs C and E because of the earlier time of the survey: the 1956–1959 cohort could not be observed until age 35 and the 1960–1964 cohort was not observed until age 30.

Norway is represented by the 1950 cohort in graphs A and D and the 1955 cohort in graph B; not represented in graphs C and E because of the early time point of the survey.

Sweden is represented by the 1949 cohort in graphs A and D, the 1954 cohort in graphs B and E, and the 1959 cohort in graph C.

Figure 14 Change from cohort 1952–1955 to 1956-1959 in the country position by women's experience of second unions and the percentage of second unions with pre-union children.
Corresponds to change from plot D to plot E in Figure 13.



Note: Because of earlier time point of the survey, the 1956–1959 cohort could not be observed until age 35 in Finland, the same applies to the 1955 and 1960 cohorts in Norway.