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**Should governments in Europe be
much more aggressive in pushing for
gender equality to raise fertility?
YES**

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Should Governments in Europe be Much More Aggressive in Pushing for Gender Equality to Raise Fertility?¹

YES

By:

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There are strong theoretical and empirical underpinnings for answering YES to the debate question which I intend to outline here.

According to the gender equity theory, the very low fertility levels displayed in many countries of the developed world in the last decades are the result of the incoherence between a high level of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions such as the educational system and the labor market and a low or at best moderate level of gender equity in family-oriented institutions, most importantly the family itself (McDonald 2000a, 2000b). In modern societies, women's opportunities are nearly equivalent with those of men in education and paid employment. These opportunities however, become severely limited by having children as also domestic tasks multiply and women end up doing nearly all household work and childcare themselves. They will choose then to restrict the number of children they have to an extent which leaves fertility at a very low level in a society in the long run.

¹ This paper is accepted for publication after a peer-review process. It is currently in press by Demographic Research

As argued by McDonald, the more traditional a society's family system is, the greater is the incoherence between the social institutions in terms of the level of gender equity, and the lower is fertility, as modern and highly effective contraceptives made childbearing increasingly a choice of women. In fact, there seems to be a strong correlation between attitudes towards traditional gender roles in a society and birth rates (OECD 2005). Based on the results of an opinion poll on attitudes towards gender equality² conducted in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the countries involved can be sorted into two main categories: (i) those with strongly or moderately in favor toward gender equality and (ii) those with less favorable attitudes. Countries in the first group (Northern Europe, North-America) display comparatively high fertility (TFR of 1.5 and above), while birth rates are low (TFR below 1.4) in the other group (Southern Europe, Central-Eastern Europe) where almost half of the respondents favored traditional gender roles. This indicates that in modern societies, negative attitudes towards gender equality make it difficult for men and women to combine family life with education and gainful employment and this reduces fertility, as suggested in the gender equity theory. But let us take a closer look at the family itself to see whether gender equality influences fertility at the micro level.

In a study based on data extracted from the Swedish Family and Fertility Survey covering the period between the 1970s and early 1990s, I showed that the propensity to have the second child was 15 per cent higher in families where the father took parental leave with the first child compared to couples where only the mother used the leave (Oláh 2003). Considering father's parental-leave use as a direct measure of gender equality,

² People were asked whether they agreed with the statement: "A man's job is to earn money, a woman's job is to look after the home and family" (OECD 2005).

while controlling for a number of factors previously shown to influence fertility³, this finding suggests that a higher level of gender equality in couple relationships may increase fertility, as argued by McDonald. Given the relatively small sample size, it was not possible to distinguish by the length of the leave used by the fathers in my study, unlike in a more recent report based on Swedish register data focusing on the 1990s⁴ (Duvander and Andersson 2004). Similarly to my findings, the latter analysis showed higher propensity to have a second and a third child in families with more engaged fathers compared to couples where the father did not take parental leave with the previous child. In fact, the intensity to have a next child increased as the share of paternity leave increased across the groups up to a level of 25% of the father's income being covered by the parental benefit in the two years following a birth. For the latter group the intensity declined which may reflect the negative impact of this non-normative gender-role behavior given that childcare is still considered to be mainly women's domain.

The level of gender equality in the family is also connected to education as more highly educated women manage better in the bargaining about the division of domestic responsibilities than do less educated women (Roman 1999). This suggests that childbearing propensity is also higher for the more highly educated, and this is the pattern shown in my study⁵ (Oláh 2003). Highly educated parents are more likely to share childcare responsibilities more equally as has been demonstrated in other studies (Sundström and Duvander 2002, Nyman and Petterson 2003). Their results showed that

³ I have controlled for the following factors: the woman's age (relative age at first birth, defined as her age compared to the average for women with the same education), union order as fixed covariates, and marital status, policy period, educational attainment and employment status as time-varying covariates. Age of the first child was the time variable.

⁴ Here information on the percentage of the father's income covered by the parental benefit was used giving indication regarding the length of the leave the father took with the child.

⁵ Remember that factors known to influence fertility behavior have been controlled for (see footnote 2).

(i) fathers are less likely to use parental leave among low earner couples who are also more often low educated, (ii) more educated mothers have stronger work orientation and are more inclined to return to paid work earlier which would increase the length of the parental leave used by the father, and (iii) fathers, who are more likely to be highly educated themselves if the mother is highly educated, given the quite high level of educational homogamy for couples in Sweden, manage better in the bargaining process at work regarding their use of parental leave⁶ as they are less vulnerable to the negative reactions from the employer and workmates.

One may argue of course that the higher second-birth intensities for the more highly educated mothers in Sweden were simply the result of them being more efficient in using the so-called speed-premium⁷ by spacing the next birth within the interval that makes them eligible for it. However, no important educational differentials were found in the reaction to the speed-premium by women and men born in Sweden in a recent study (Andersson et al. 2006). Both the rapidity in the adaptation to the new policy and the magnitude in the change of birth-spacing behavior was very much the same across educational groups. Moreover, findings indicating a positive relation between educational attainment and fertility were shown even for other contexts and time periods (see Rindfuss and Parnell 1989 for the US for the later 1970s, Hoem and Hoem 1989 for

⁶ The bargaining process at the workplace regarding fathers' uptake of parental leave has hardly been studied directly. An important exception is a study by Haas and Hwang (2000) on 200 Swedish enterprises. They have found that employer's / company management's attitudes regarding male employees' parental-leave use have been related to the individual employee, i.e. whether he has been seen as a valuable resource for the enterprise, in about one-third of the companies studied. Such requests from highly educated men, unlike those from employees in lower positions, have been positively met, especially upon agreement on the employee's availability online and for meetings. In other companies (i.e. the rest of the sample), attitudes towards fathers' uptake of parental leave were either generally negative or neutral.

⁷ For further details about the speed-premium see Hoem (1993).

Sweden for the 1970s and 1980s, Kravdal 1992 for Norway and the US for the 1970s and 1980s) which give further support for the gender equality argument⁸.

As discussed in connection with education, the division of household work is an important aspect of gender equality which was shown to influence fertility. In my analysis based on data extracted from the Hungarian Family and Fertility Survey I found the highest propensity to have a second child for couples who shared domestic tasks equally, followed by couples where the woman did most in the home but the man also helped (Oláh 2003)⁹. This is interesting as Hungary scored high on traditional gender-role attitudes¹⁰ in the ISSP opinion poll discussed before, and men were not expected to engage in household work in Hungary (OECD 2005). Similar results were shown also for other countries with respect to couples sharing housework and childcare tasks (see Torr and Short 2004 for the US, Cooke 2004 for Germany, and Cooke 2003 for Italy). Thus, the argument that the more egalitarian division of domestic responsibilities is likely to increase fertility seems to have sound empirical support.

A further aspect which is relevant to the question of our debate is the number of children young couples wish to have compared to their achieved fertility. The average desired fertility is around two children for most European countries according to the recent wave of the Population Policy Acceptance Study (PPAS). With the exception of Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, less than 10 per cent of women (and 12 per cent

⁸ In fact, Kravdal mentioned specifically in his comments regarding the positive relationship between mothers' education and the third-birth rate in Norway and the US by the later part of the 1970s and the 1980s that "a higher level of participation in child care and domestic duties on the part of well-educated fathers... may have promoted a positive effect of education" (Kravdal 1992:475), but the data did not allow him to follow up on this aspect.

⁹ In the model, I have controlled for the mother's age at first birth (using relative age as in the Swedish analysis), marital status, policy period, educational level and employment status; the age of the first child was the time variable.

¹⁰ Similarly to Swedish findings, couples who behaved deviantly with the man doing most of the household work had the lowest second-birth intensity across the groups.

of men) prefer to remain childless in European societies. Having one child only is not a popular option either but in Austria¹¹ where more than 30 per cent of male and female respondents prefer to have small families (Federal Inst. for Population Research and Robert Bosch Foundation 2005). Hence, if fertility desires would be realized, Europe would not have a problem with long-term below-replacement fertility, but she has. This indicates that there are obstacles for people's fertility desires being realized, and the low level of gender equality in the family is likely to be such an obstacle.

Summing up the arguments to answer 'YES' to the question in this debate: the dual-earner family is here to stay, thus it should be made possible to reconcile family and paid work for both women and men. Pushing for gender equality seems to be the way to increase fertility rates from the current extremely low levels, which also have implications for the economy in our societies. The consequence of low fertility in the long run is a declining and at the same time ageing population. This in turn may lead to sharp falls in labor supply in the near future, which will suppress economic growth and thereby jeopardize the future of the welfare state. Therefore we should act, while we still can, to avoid this.

¹¹ Also in Cypem every fourth respondents would opt for a one-child family, but nearly half of the respondents desire three or more children there.

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