



Is It All About Happiness?

The latest evidence on wellbeing and
childbearing decisions in Europe

Key messages:

- › Policies and services aimed at promoting work-life balance should sustain the wellbeing of parents, in particular mothers.
- › Wellbeing following the first child is a key element leading to the progression to the second birth. This parity should constitute the main target for family and fertility policies.
- › Securing stable employment and decent housing at younger ages for men and women are necessary measures for the onset of childbearing and to close the gap between desired and realised fertility intentions in Europe.
- › Norms enforcing the uptake of parental leave by both men and women are necessary in order to increase the wellbeing of parents.

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Introduction

Conventional wisdom arguably suggests that parenting is satisfying for parents: Individuals in early to mid-adulthood often claim to look forward to entering parenthood and having children. Even in highly developed societies where childbearing has become optional, financially expensive and is often associated with considerable trade-offs in terms of professional careers and pursuing other goals in life, parenthood has remained an important aspect of adult life. In sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom about the effect of parenthood on happiness, scientific studies (by psychologists, economists and demographers) have questioned the notion that children and childrearing increase the subjective wellbeing (SWB) of their parents and have shown that parenting may be much less rewarding in terms of SWB than expected.

In trying to answer the question whether children bring happiness in life, recent studies have flipped the most often asked question about contemporary fertility trends in developed countries (Kohler and Mencarini, 2016) by provocatively asking why fertility is not even lower than it is, especially in light of the claims that parenthood is not necessarily related to better SWB of the parents.

This field of research has gained popularity and a substantial body of research is now available on the topic. Accordingly, more and more, policymakers are becoming aware of the importance of ensuring individuals' wellbeing through concrete policy measures, among them the EU Work-Life Balance Directive.

In Europe, the project SWELL-FER (Subjective Well Being and Fertility) provides an academic reference on the topic. From 2013 to 2019, a team of eminent scholars led by Letizia Mencarini (Associate Professor at Bocconi University) examined subjective wellbeing and demographic behaviours, with a particular focus on fertility in advanced societies, across time and space.¹ Overall, the results from the project confirm a two-way relationship between wellbeing and fertility: Whereas a higher wellbeing does favour reproduction, at least in low fertility societies, parenthood does not necessarily bring happiness. In the latter case, it depends on gender and where people live. The whole idea of the project is that the effects of fertility on individuals' SWB may be diverse depending on individual, couple and country contextual factors, and therefore family policies might be very relevant.

The final event of this project took place in Brussels, 23rd of March 2019, in the form of a High Level Expert Meeting.

In collaboration with Population Europe, the event included participation by key experts from science, policymaking and civil society organisations: Arnstein **Aassve** (Professor of Demography and Director of PhD in Public Policy and Administration, Bocconi University), Tanya **Basarab** (Research and Youth Policy Officer, EU-CoE Youth Partnership), Ingrid **Bellander Todino** (Deputy Head of Unit Gender Equality, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, European Commission), Teresa **Castro Martin** (Senior Research Professor at the Spanish National Research Council), Annemie **Drieskens**, (President of COFACE – Families Europe), Andreas **Edel** (Executive Secretary, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research / Population Europe), Francesca **Galizia** (Member of the Italian Parliament), Kinga **Joó**, (Member at the European Economic and Social Committee and Vice President of the Hungarian Association of Large Families), Letizia **Mencarini** (Associate Professor of Demography at Bocconi University), Martina **Prpic** and Rosamund **Shreeves** (Policy Analysts at the European Parliament, Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services, Directorate Members' Research Service, Citizens' Policies Unit), Anna **Rotkirch** (Research Professor and Director of the Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto) and Daniela **Vono de Vilhena** (Research Scientist, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research / Population Europe). The following sections describe the key aspects presented and discussed at the Expert Meeting.

The puzzle of wellbeing and fertility

Subjective wellbeing, intended here as a broad category covering both positive and negative feelings and expressions of happiness, on the one hand, and cognitive assessments about life satisfaction on the other hand, may not necessarily lead to the decision to have children. The reasons for this vary, but two main aspects are highlighted by researchers. First, individuals do not act based only on their current wellbeing, but also base their decisions on the so-called affective forecasts, i.e. their predictions about their own emotional reactions to future events. When people decide to have a child, they anticipate a future event and, therefore, positive or negative consequences for their satisfaction in the future. For example, unhappy couples could decide to have a child with the expectation that it will improve their wellbeing and their relationship.

Second, for some, children may threaten their life satisfaction. For these individuals, high levels of wellbeing tend to mean lower fertility due to competing priorities and aversion to change of lifestyle. However, the few studies that have analysed subjective wellbeing as a determinant of fer-

tility support the idea that, for both for women and men, individual wellbeing is an important goal to be reached before individuals make the decision to have children (Mencarini et al., 2018).

At our Expert Meeting, participants highlighted the importance of institutional settings as a mediator to the relationship between individual wellbeing and childbearing. In particular, great concern was raised on the gap between the number of children Europeans declare to want versus the number of children they actually have. The importance of specific welfare policies that would contribute to avoid these unmet fertility desires among the population, namely work-life balance (WLB) measures and securing job stability at younger ages, were stressed. In this respect, Bellander Todino argued that a change in perceptions and attitudes among Europeans on WLB is needed: 'Men are far beyond women in having a positive attitude towards WLB, and this can change fast by enforcing laws.' The adoption of the new EU Work-Life Balance Directive (adopted on 13 June 2019), which set minimum rules on family and carers' leave, is a key step in this direction. Regarding the young population, Basarab stressed: 'Security is still very important for young people. Because transitions to adulthood are not linear anymore, it creates lots of insecurity in all domains of life.'

Having the first child is not the same as having the second or the third

The way individuals make important life course decisions is derived to a great extent from the quest for happiness. This implies that it also depends on what stage individuals are in their lives. Research has shown that the reasons behind the decision to have the first child are different than deciding to have additional children, and that the quest for happiness may have different meanings. For example, for most people, having a partner, economic security and adequate housing are essential to having a first child. Becoming a parent is for most individuals an important life goal and may be a strong marker of personal success, thereby leading to social recognition and feelings of pride, esteem and satisfaction.

The experience of raising this first child will be, in turn, key in the decision of pursuing additional children. Having a second child is a question of quantity where the decision very likely is a function of having become a parent already and importantly, its aftermath. The experience of becoming a parent is one of the most significant events in shaping an individual's life course and, reasonably, fertility inten-

tions and expectations are modified by the experience of parenting itself, in particular after the 'revolutionary' experience of having the first child. The onset of parenthood increases family commitment, reducing time for work and leisure, and possibly, at least in the short term, also decreases individuals' overall satisfaction with life (Le Moglie et al., 2015).

A large body of studies suggests that there is a decline in individuals' subjective wellbeing – either happiness or life satisfaction – once parenthood begins. The effect of childbirth on wellbeing depends, however, on parents' socio-economic characteristics; the life course stage in which childbirth happens; and where they live and its context. In addition, parents who have a difficult time with their first child experience lower wellbeing and would, as a result, negatively revise their fertility expectations or intentions. Meanwhile, a positive experience with a first child should, it might be reasoned, lead to a positive revision (Luppi and Mencarini, 2018).

Why is this relevant in terms of policymaking? Because the fundamental driver for low fertility in advanced societies lies exactly in the lack of progression from the first to the second child, where wellbeing matters the most. In our meeting, the challenges for securing wellbeing after childbearing were heavily discussed. Apart from the necessity of WLB policies at the governmental level, participants highlighted the central role played by employers and partners in guaranteeing real societal change. As mentioned by Drieskens, societies should take a holistic approach, offering parents the support they need at the time they need it. Parents should have trust in their employers and flexibility so that they can change their behaviours, and fathers should take up more responsibilities at home. Aassve argued that female empowerment is often understood as women prioritising working life and 'becoming like men', while the necessary change is men becoming more similar to women in family life. Joó stressed the importance of respecting local traditions at the European level in terms of implementation of the EU Directive on WLB, while Galizia questioned it: 'In the last 20 years, Italy left fertility decisions up to families in a system that does not support families at all. There is a big difference in what people want and the extent to which they realise their intentions. Young people are now arriving to the labour market very late and all transitions in the life course are postponed. We need policies for a real and sustainable change.'

The unanswered question: Why does fertility in Nordic countries keep falling?

Years of research on the relationship between wellbeing and childbearing has proved a direct link between both elements. However, a real trend challenges academics nowadays: The fall in fertility rates in European Nordic countries, particularly in Finland, Norway and Sweden. Nordic countries are the global champions in securing gender equality, high female labour force participation and offer great welfare policies on WLB. When exploring the mechanisms beyond this trend, WLB was again mentioned by the participants in our meeting, in this case focusing on how to promote a real culture of work-life balance: 'It is urgent to create norms enforcing the uptake of parental leave by both men and women and to raise awareness among employees about it', Castro affirmed.

Rotkirch noted that fertility has been falling in Nordic countries besides increases in gender equality and economic growth. For Finland, postponement is the key issue, and the reasons for postponing the onset of childbearing versus having a second child differs a lot. She mentioned good practices developed in cooperation with health services on family planning empowering women and men to become parents. According to her observations, there is a need to acknowledge how to plan a career in combination with having kids among those who wish to enter parenthood. For those wishing to have more kids, the costs of housing seems to be an important determinant for individuals' decisions.

Policy Recommendations

- Policies and services aimed at promoting work-life balance should sustain the wellbeing of parents, in particular mothers. Thus, it should be promoted and implemented by countries.
- Wellbeing following the first child is a key element leading to the progression to the second birth. This parity should constitute the main target for family and fertility policies.
- Securing stable employment and decent housing at younger ages for men and women are necessary measures for the onset of childbearing and to close the gap between desired and realised fertility intentions in Europe.
- Norms enforcing the uptake of parental leave by both men and women are necessary in order to increase the wellbeing of parents. It is also necessary to raise awareness among employees about it.

Footnote:

¹ Same sex couples were not considered in this research due to lack of data.

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