

## SF2.5: Childlessness

### *Definitions and methodology*

The postponement of parenthood over the last decades, which can be gleaned from the declining percentage of childless women at different points over the life-cycle, has increased the probability for adults to remain childless. However, the extent to which childlessness has contributed to the decline in fertility rates is unclear. “*Definitive childlessness*” can only be assessed at the end of the reproductive period, which for women is usually between ages 45 and 49, and relevant information can be observed across different cohorts of women.

The proportion of childless women at age 30 and 40 are first presented in Chart SF2.5.A, for women born in 1950, 1955, 1960 and 1965. Following birth cohorts across the ages facilitates an assessment of the extent to which childlessness diminishes or persists. However, such information is only available for a limited number of countries.

Data on women for whom the reproductive period has ended are available for the cohort of women born in 1965 or before (Chart SF2.5.B). Chart SF2.5.C compares levels of definitive childlessness with information on completed fertility rates (SF2.1).

### *Key findings*

In all countries, the prevalence of childlessness at age 30 has significantly increased across the different cohorts of women (Chart SF2.5.A). More than half of the women born in 1970 remain childless at age 30 in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. By contrast, childlessness at age 30 concerns less than one quarter of women in the Czech Republic and Hungary. The increase in the proportion of women in their early 30s without children is also more recent in these countries. For women born in 1960, the proportion of women who are still childless at age 40 is about 30 to 50% lower than at age 30. About one in five women age 40 born either in 1960 or 1965 are childless in the Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

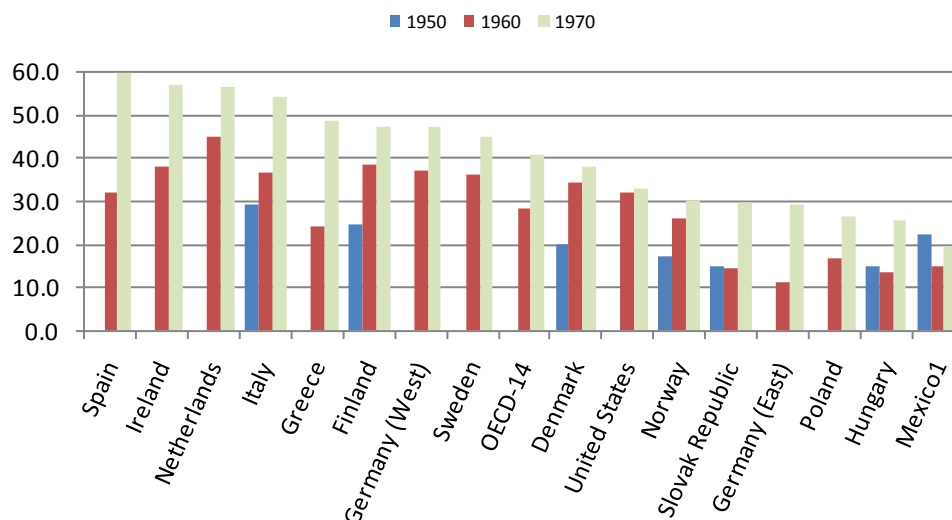
Childlessness appears to be related to educational attainment. For example, in Switzerland about 21% of all women age 40 are childless but this proportion is about 40% for women who have completed tertiary education. In France, differences are less pronounced but still significant: 15% of women born between 1945 and 1949 with tertiary education remained childless, while this was only 9% for those who had completed an intermediary level of education. Employment conditions may also matter. For example, 10% of the women born between 1955 and 1959 in Sweden who are employed as beautician or hairdresser are childless. Among women working in restaurants and hotels with similar levels of educational attainment, this proportion was 23% (Neyer and Hoem, 2005).

Chart SF2.5.B shows how the proportion of childlessness among women at the end of the reproductive period differs across countries. At above 18% on average for the cohort born in 1965, definitive childlessness among women is highest in Austria, England and Wales, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and the Netherlands. For the same cohort, definitive childlessness is below 10% in the Czech republic, Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia. Trends show that for the cohorts born after the 1920s, childlessness first decreased in most countries and started to increase for cohorts born after WWII.

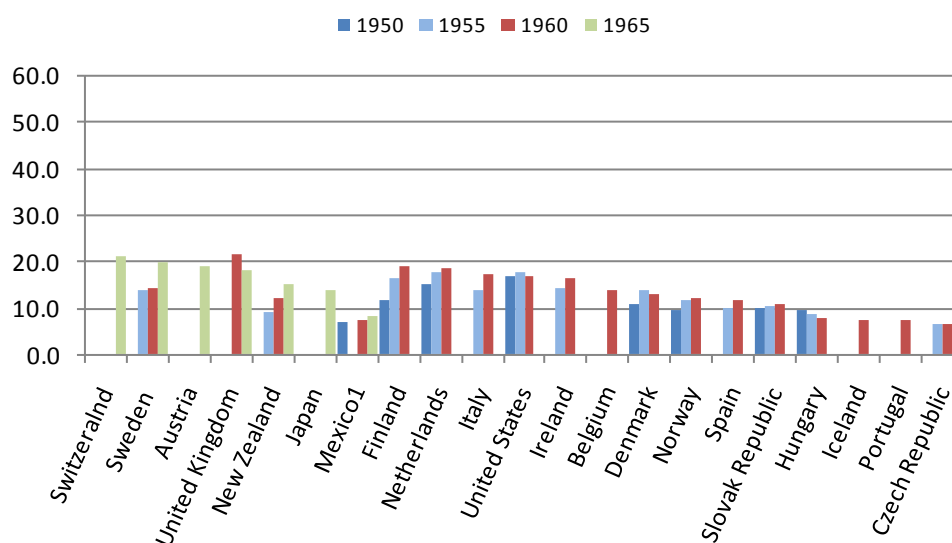
Other relevant indicators: Family size and composition (SF1.1); Fertility rates (SF2.1); Mean age of mother at first childbirth (SF2.3) and Share of births outside marriage (SF2.4)

### Chart SF2.5.A: Trends in childlessness among women by cohort

Panel A: The proportion of childless women at age 30



Panel B: The proportion of childless women at age 40



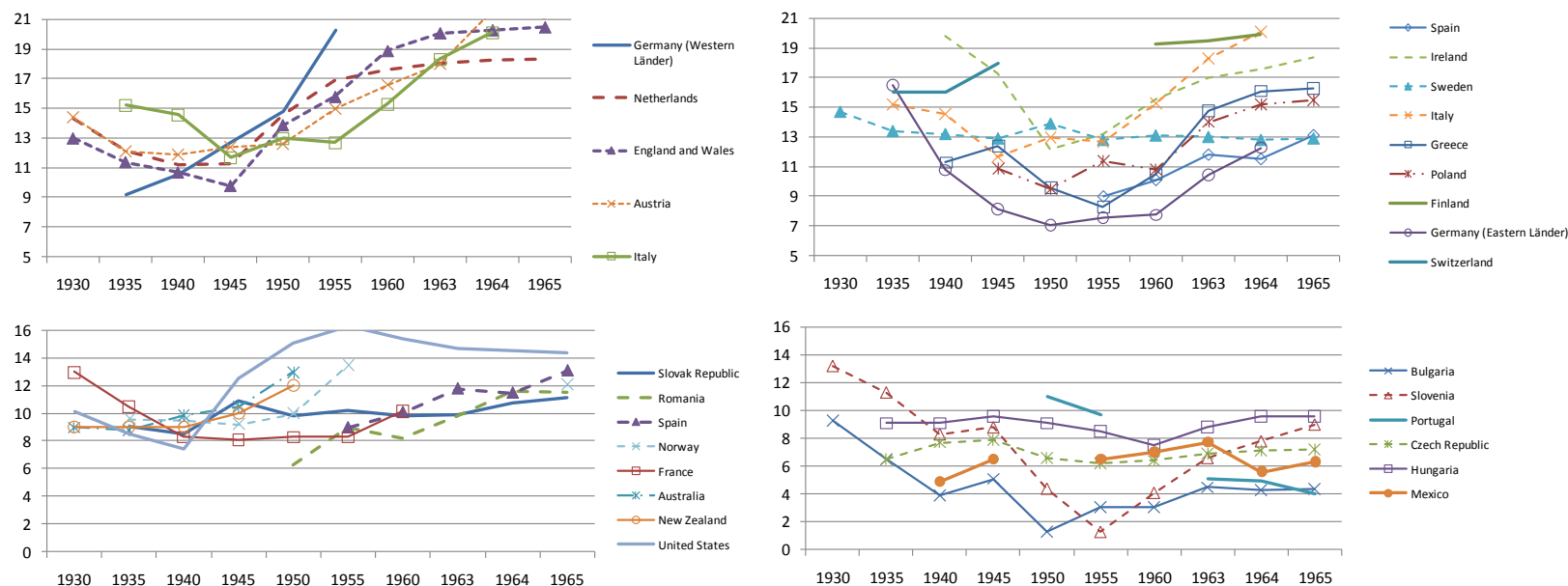
Countries are ranked in descending order of childlessness for the women born respectively in 1970 (Panel A) and 1965 (Panel B)

1 Mexico: data for women born in 1960 refers to their situation at age 36 and 37 at the moment of the survey.

Sources: Gobbi (2011); except for Portugal and the United Kingdom which has been obtained through EU New Cronos (2014); New Zealand: National Census of Population; and, Japan: National Census; percentage for non-married women.

### Chart SF2.5.B Definitive childlessness

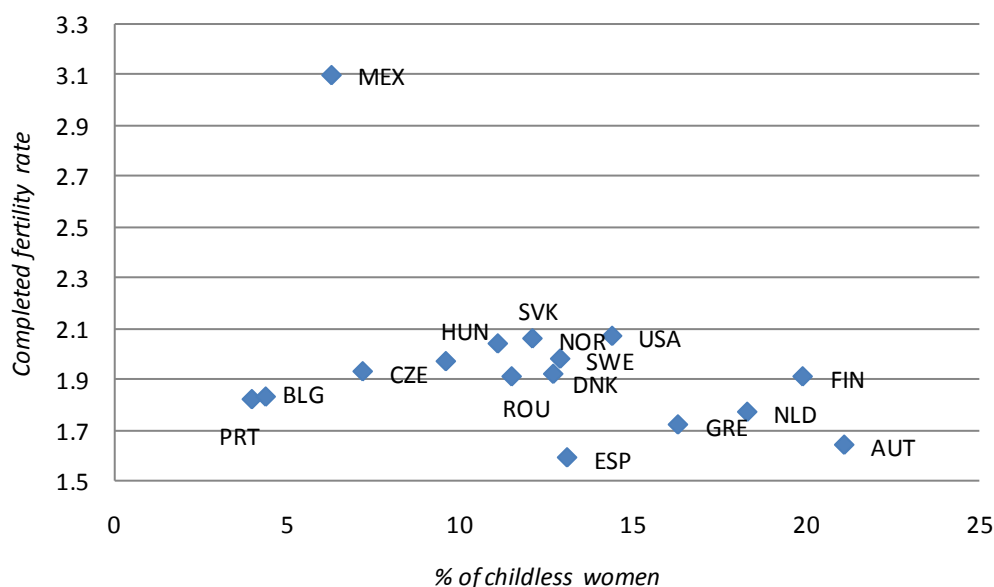
*% of definitive childless women per cohort*



Source: Observatoire Démographique Européen Project census database (2014); Gobbi (2011); Rowland (2007); (Sardon, 2006); Mexico: INEGI. XI and XII Censuses of Population and Housing and Count of Population and Housing 2005 for cohorts born before 1960. Data refers to women 45 years old. For cohorts born after 1960, Encuesta Nacional de la Dinamica Demografica 2006.

Childlessness is one of the factors explaining the differences in the completed fertility rates for a given cohort of women. Chart SF2.5.C for women born in 1965 shows that in countries with comparatively high rates of definitive childlessness (at well over 15% of the women age over 45) completed fertility rates are often below 1.8 children per woman (Finland is the exception). Spain is a country with both a low level of childlessness and low completed fertility rates for the cohort of women born in 1965, which points to a relatively high proportion of families with one child (as shown in SF1.2).

**Chart SF2.5.C: Definitive childlessness and completed fertility rates of women born in 1965**



AUT: Austria, BLG: Bulgaria, CZE: Czech Republic, DNK: Denmark; ESP: Spain, FIN: Finland, GRE: Greece, HUN: Hungary, NLD: Netherlands, MEX: Mexico; NOR: Norway, PRT: Portugal, ROU: Romania, SVK: Slovak Republic, SWE: Sweden, USA: United States.  
 Sources: As in Chart SF2.5.B.

#### *Comparability and data issues*

To consider whether or not childlessness prevails at the end of a female's reproductive life, information on women born in 1965 at the latest is required (as observed in the mid-2000s). For younger cohorts, it is impossible to discern whether childlessness is a permanent or transitory feature. Ideally, a closer look to cohort changes in the age- and parity-specific probability of having a child would allow going further in the assessment of transitory nature of childlessness and timing of births over the life course. Such rates, based on longitudinal data, are however not yet available in standardized cross-nationally comparable format.

Labour surveys provide cross-sectional and cross-national data on the percentage of women who live in a childless household. Table SF2.5.A provides such information for women age 25 to 44 years of age along five-year age groups. These data are different from data on childlessness in that not only do they include women who have never given birth, it also covers mothers whose child has grown up and left the parental home. When compared to the data on childless above, these data include an upward bias, which increases with the age of women. Thus, the decrease in the proportion of women living in a childless household from age 25 to 39 reflects the higher propensity of having children with age. The upward trend from the late 30s to age 44 is related to the propensity of children to leave the parental home.

The proportion of women under 30 living in a household without children appears to be particularly high (over 60%) in Finland, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Compared to average, this proportion remains relative high for women in their 30s in these four countries, but because of increased fertility at later ages (Chart SF2.3.C), Finland and Luxembourg are the only countries where the proportion of women in households without children falls across the four age groups (while the increase in the Netherlands for women in their early 40s is small compared to women in their late 30s). At about one-third, the proportion of women in their early 40s who live in a household without children is highest in Austria and Germany. Patterns for women in the two countries differ little from age 35 onwards: differences are related to female behaviour in their twenties, as on average Austrian women have their first child when they are about three years younger than women in Germany (SF2.3).

**Table SF2.5.A: Percentage of women in households without children, 2011<sup>1</sup>**

	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44
<b>Austria</b>	54.9	31.9	25.3	33.9
<b>Australia</b>	59	:	:	13
<b>Belgium</b>	47.9	26.9	18.1	19.6
<b>Bulgaria</b>	27.4	13.8	10.4	31
<b>Cyprus<sup>2, 3</sup></b>	39.8	18.1	11	14.6
<b>Czech Republic</b>	40.1	13.5	9.1	19.3
<b>Germany</b>	62.9	40.2	26.8	33.6
<b>Estonia</b>	33.3	21.2	13.5	21.9
<b>Finland</b>	70.5	38.1	30.3	28.8
<b>France</b>	51.3	26.4	18.1	20.6
<b>Greece</b>	49.3	27	18	24.8
<b>Hungary</b>	39.7	21.7	11.7	16.5
<b>Italy</b>	43.6	31.2	21.8	22
<b>Latvia</b>	34.7	13.5	14.3	30.5
<b>Lithuania</b>	26.5	15.4	12.3	19.3
<b>Luxembourg</b>	64.7	42.9	29.5	26.8
<b>Malta</b>	20.9	13.4	9.3	12.5
<b>Mexico</b>	22.6	13.5	14.6	27.4
<b>Netherlands</b>	67	37.1	22.4	24.3
<b>Poland</b>	30.4	14.6	8	13.2
<b>Portugal</b>	39	19.6	10.7	17.9
<b>Romania</b>	29.6	14.3	12.4	21.6
<b>Slovenia</b>	35.5	14.8	10.4	15.2
<b>Slovak Republic</b>	23.5	9.2	7.8	18.5
<b>Spain</b>	47.9	32.7	17.3	18.1
<b>Turkey</b>	13.1	6.2	6.2	16.1
<b>United Kingdom</b>	49	32.7	20.5	25.1

<sup>1</sup> Date refer to 2005 for Australia; 2009 for Mexico

<sup>2</sup> Footnote by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to "Cyprus" relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the "Cyprus issue".

<sup>3</sup> Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Commission: The Republic of Cyprus is recognized by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Sources: for Australia: ABS, Australian Social Trends; for EU countries; European Labour Force Survey, 2011; Mexico: Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica Demográfica 2009 (INEGI).

**Sources and further reading:** Gobbi, P.E. (2011) *A Model of Voluntary Childlessness*, INED Working paper; D'Addio, A.C and M. Mira d'Ercole (2005), "Trends and Determinants of Fertility Rates in OECD Countries: the Role of Policies", OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper, No. 27, Paris; Neyer G. and J. Hoem (2007), "Education and permanent childlessness: Austria vs. Sweden", in Surkyn, J., P. Deboosere and J. van Bavel, *Demographic challenges for the 21st century: a state of the art in demography*, VUBPRESS, Brussel; Rowland D. (2007), "Historical Trends in Childlessness", *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), pp. 1311-37; Sardon JP. (2006), "Recent demographic Trends in Developed Countries", *Population*, E-61(3), pp. 225-300; Sobotka T. (2005), "Childless societies? Trends and projections of childlessness in Europe and the United States", Population American Association Conference.; Observatoire Démographique Européen Project Census [http://projet.census.site.ined.fr/fr/le\\_projet\\_anr\\_census/](http://projet.census.site.ined.fr/fr/le_projet_anr_census/)