The Fertility Postponement Transition from a Cohort Perspective

Josh Goldstein, Michaela Kreyenfeld, and Liat Raz-Yurovich

Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research

Oct 15, 2011

EAPS extended abstract

The changing timing of childbearing is a major feature of modern demographic change in advanced industrial societies. Beginning in the 1970s, ages at first birth around the world began to rise from an average of about age 25 to around age 30 today. In this paper, we suggest that a cohort-based explanation of life course change may be responsible for the major features of the postponement transition.

The hypothesis that we wish to explore is whether fertility postponement in the 1970s and afterwards was the consequence of changes in gender attitudes among young women that began at least a decade earlier, when they were still school girls. We plan to combine analysis of gender attitudes in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s with the life course reconstruction of cohorts schoooling, work, partnership and fertility. The analysis will be largely descriptive, with some cohort/period models being used to see whether cohort or period explanations appear most appropriate.

Our hope is to incorporate gender and cohort analysis in a new way to add to the existing explanations of fertility change. There are at least three relevant strands of the literature on fertility postponement and low fertility. The first, embodied most recently by Bongaarts and Feeney (1998), emphasizes the period nature of postponement. The "Period Paramount" (Ni Bholcrain 1992) approach is not without its merits, but would seem to us better suited for explaining short term variation rather than broad _transitions_ such as that from younger to older ages of childbearing. A major theory of social demographic change -- the Second Demographic Transition -- emphasizes changing values and post-materialism, but rarely includes a specific analysis of gender. To our minds, it is the changing attitudes about women's work and lives that are at the center of explaining fertility change. Finally, McDonald and others emphasized the incongruence between female economic ambitions and family institutions as the principle reason for very low fertility. Our contribution here will be to add empirical evidence and a cohort perspective to the role of attitudes of gender equality and their consequences on the female life course and the timing of births.

Research Plan

The paper aims to be largely descriptive, with life-course accounts by cohort across a number of countries. Our focus will be on looking at gender-attitude changes by cohort (if possible at a fairly young age), followed by life course measures of educational attainment, work, and age at first birth. Partnership may

also be included. At a minimum we plan to include the United States and Germany as examples of countries that have completed and are still undergoing the postponement transition. However, we would also like to include a wide range of countries from Japan to Scandinavia to the Mediterranean.

Among the research questions we aim to answer are:

1. How is the onset of the postponement transition related to changes in attitudes earlier in life: e.g., did the young women of the 70s already have a different gender-role orientation when they were young (e.g., in early 60s?)

2. What does this process mean for the end of postponement? Can it explain the recent slow-down of postponement among younger women and the continuation among older women according to recent period measurements?

3. How do institutions mediate changes in life orientation for women, labor force participation, and timing of childbearing? Here we hope to take advantage of institutional contrasts between countries, for example, between the United States and Germany.