

# THE RISE OF COHABITATION AND CHILDBEARING OUTSIDE MARRIAGE IN WESTERN EUROPE†

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## ABSTRACT

In many western European nations there have been dramatic recent rises in unmarried cohabitation and having children outside marriage. Here we examine the extent and depth of these changes across nations. Our analysis includes an examination of type of first partnership, duration of cohabiting unions, characteristics of cohabitants, and dissolution risks of different types of unions. We also examine the partnership context within which children are born, the extent to which children born to cohabiting parents see the marriage of their parents, as well as the variation in dissolution probabilities associated with different partnership histories. The analysis shows that there is not one but several European perspectives on the rise of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In many western European nations few developments in family life have been quite as dramatic as the recent rises in unmarried cohabitation and having children outside of marriage. Although cohabitation is often regarded as a recent development it includes a range of living arrangements some of which are novel whilst others are more traditional. Prior to the 1970s, cohabiting unions were largely statistically invisible and may well have been socially invisible outside of the local community or milieu. In some European countries there were sub-groups of the population who were more prone to cohabitation than others: the poor; those whose marriages had broken-up but were unable to obtain a divorce; certain groups of rural dwellers; and groups who were ideologically opposed to marriage.

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Although there are few statistical data on how common cohabitation was in the past there is evidence from parish register data for Britain, that stable, non-marital procreative unions in earlier periods, going back several centuries, often attained the status of legal marriage (Laslett *et al*). Moreover, cohabitation after a marriage breaks down and between marriages is unlikely to be a recent development as common sense alone would suggest that in periods when divorces were less easy to obtain people might well choose to cohabit. Charles Booth in his studies of the labouring population in London noted that those who were most likely to be cohabiting were older formerly married persons. He noted that ‘more license is granted by public opinion to the evasion of laws of marriage by those who have found it a failure, than is allowed to those who relations to each other have not yet assumed a permanent form’ (C. Booth, 1902 quoted in Gillis, 1985). Similarly in other European countries there are a number of historical sources from around the beginning of the twentieth century, which suggest that the phenomenon was sufficiently visible to attract some comment. In Sweden according to Trost (Trost, 1988) there were two types of cohabitation: one known as ‘marriage of conscience’ practised by a group of intellectuals as a protest against the fact that only church marriages were permitted at that time (their protests led to the introduction of civil marriage in 1909) and the second known as ‘Stockholm marriages’ which were found amongst poor people who could not afford to marry. These unions were probably akin to the to those observed in poorer sections of British, French and German urban society (on Britain see R. Roberts, 1929, on France see Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991, and Germany, see Abrams, 1993).

*A. A new form of cohabitation*

It is likely that cohabitation following marital breakdown persisted throughout the twentieth century, and post-marital cohabitation was the most prevalent form of cohabitation in the 1950s and 1960s. For example in Britain amongst women marrying in the latter half of the 1960s only 6 per cent of never married women reported having lived with their husband prior to marriage compared with one in four women who were re-marrying (*General Household Survey, 1989*). Moreover, with the growth in divorce that has occurred across European nations ‘post-marital’ cohabitation has become even more prevalent with the divorced cohabiting either in preference to, or as a prelude to, remarriage.

Whether the poor continued to enter into informal unions is unknown, although in France there is some evidence that this continued to be the case (see Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991). However, given the growing popularity of marriage and in particular youthful marriage that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, it is likely that informal unions

amongst single people were rare during these decades. A so-called golden age of marriage prevailed in western European nations from the 1950s up to the early 1970s (Festy, 1980), when marriage was youthful and almost universal. This pattern of marriage receded during the 1970s. Marriage rates declined and the average age at marriage increased, and this situation continues unabated to the present time. It is a new type of cohabitation that is implicated in the marriage bust that has occurred across European nations. A form of cohabitation that came to the fore in the 1970s and has escalated during the 1980s and 1990s, whereby young people live together as a prelude to, or as an alternative to marriage.

*B. A partnership transition?*

It has been suggested by several scholars that many European societies may be going through a transition in the way that men and women become couples or partners (see Prinz, 1995, for a review). Most scholars draw on the experience of the Swedish population, which is the nation that has gone furthest in these developments, from which a number of stages can be identified (Hoem and Hoem, 1988). Simplifying, in the first stage cohabitation emerges as a deviant or avant-garde phenomenon practised by a small group of the single population, whilst the great majority of the population marry directly. In the second stage cohabitation functions as either a prelude or a probationary period where the strength of the relationship may be tested prior to committing to marriage and is predominantly a childless phase. In the third stage cohabitation becomes socially acceptable as an alternative to marriage and becoming a parent is no longer restricted to marriage. Finally, in the fourth stage, cohabitation and marriage become indistinguishable with children being born and reared within both, and the partnership transition could be said to be complete. Sweden and Denmark are countries that have made the transition to this fourth stage. These stages may vary in duration, but once a society has reached a particular stage it is unlikely that there will be a return to an earlier stage. Also, once a certain stage has been reached all the previous types of cohabiting unions can co-exist. Such stages also have parallels at the level of the individual. At any given time cohabitation may have different meanings for the men and women involved (Manting, 1996), for example, it may be viewed as an alternative to being single, or as a precursor to marriage, or a substitute for marriage. Moreover, how a couple perceives their cohabitation may change over time and the perception may also vary between the partners. Dissecting cohabitation in this way highlights the diversity of the phenomenon and suggests that more so than marriage it is a process rather than an event. Additionally, the inconstancy of cohabitation poses challenges for the analysis as well as our understanding of this development in family life.

In this paper we examine data on cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage for a range of European countries to ascertain the extent and depth of these changes.

## 2. THE RISE OF COHABITATION

Until recently, European wide data on cohabitation tended to be scarce and generally emanated from *ad hoc* surveys which made comparative analyses problematic, as sample sizes, coverage and definitions can vary. However, during the 1990s more information from standardized questionnaires became available from Eurostat (the Statistical Office of the European Communities) and from a series of Fertility and Family Surveys carried out in the main in the first half of the 1990s under the auspices of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) (United Nations, 1992).

### A. *The incidence of cohabitation*

Our analysis of data from Eurobarometer Surveys carried out in the fifteen member States of the European Union in 1996 provides a perspective on the incidence of cohabiting and marital unions across a range of nations (Kiernan, 2000). Eurobarometer surveys are primarily opinion surveys covering a range of topics relevant to the European Union which contain some very basic demographic information on the respondents including information on marital status in which 'living as married' is one of the categories; the others being the more conventional ones of single, married, divorced, separated and widowed. Such marital status distributions are not as accurate as those obtained in dedicated family and fertility surveys but they probably reflect the relative position of different European countries in these categories (European Commission, 1996).

Figure 1 shows the proportions of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine years in the fifteen European Union countries who were cohabiting, married, single or separated/divorced/widowed at the time of the survey in 1996. In these data never-married and post-marital cohabitants cannot be differentiated but it is reasonable to assume that at these younger ages the former is likely to be the most prevalent. It is clear from Figure 1 that there is a good deal of diversity across European states in the incidence of cohabitation. Cohabitation is strikingly most common in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and France also has relatively high proportions cohabiting. There is also a middle group of countries, which includes The Netherlands and Belgium, Great Britain, West and East Germany, and Austria with mid-levels of cohabitation. At the other extreme is the set of Southern European countries and Ireland, where cohabitation is seemingly much rarer with only a tiny minority cohabiting.

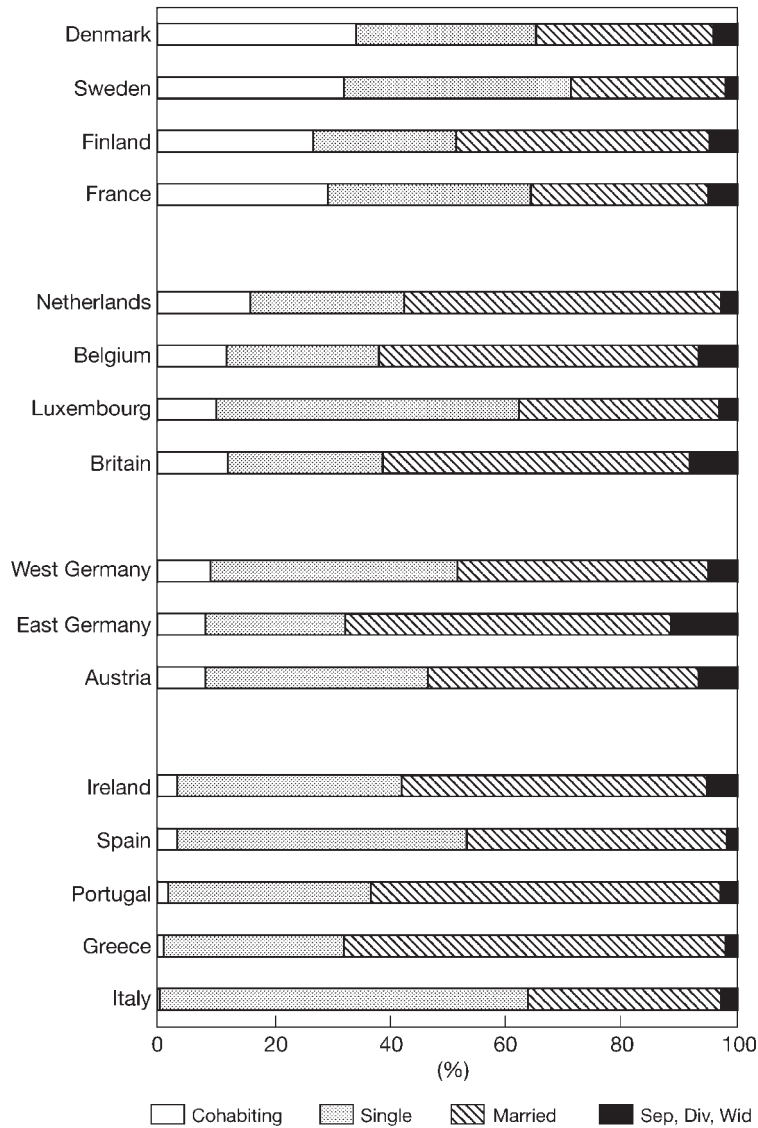


Figure 1: Marital status distribution of women aged 25–29 in 1996.

### *B. Type of first partnership*

The UN ECE Fertility and Family surveys carried out in the main during the first half of the 1990s included a full partnership history that incorporated dates of marriages and any other co-residential heterosexual intimate relationships. Such histories permit more in-depth examinations of partnership formation and dissolution than can be gleaned from vital registration data or cross-sectional surveys that only

Table 1: Type of first partnership amongst women with a first partnership according to age group at the time of the survey

Age group	25–29			35–39		
	Married directly	Cohabited and married	Cohabited	Married directly	Cohabited and married	Cohabited
Sweden (1)	7	41	52	8	62	30
Norway (2)	24	40	35	62	30	7
Finland	17	43	40	31	46	23
France	21	34	45	55	33	12
Great Britain	37	33	31	72	18	10
Austria	19	41	40	30	42	28
Switzerland	19	44	37	30	52	18
West Germany	16	38	46	38	33	29
East Germany	15	35	50	21	26	53
Spain	80	8	12	91	4	5
Italy	86	8	6	91	5	4

(1) Sweden birth cohorts 54 and 64 (2) Norway birth cohorts 50 and 60.

include current status information. Great Britain did not participate in this programme so for Britain we have used data from the partnership and fertility histories collected in the British Household Panel Survey (Buck *et al.*, 1994).

We have used these data to examine cohabitation patterns across a range of European nations. From Table 1, which shows for two recent cohorts of women the proportions who entered their first partnership at marriage, we see that in many European nations there have been large increases in the proportions of couples cohabiting, and nowadays cohabitation rather than marriage marks the formation of a union. It is clear from these data that the younger women, those aged 25 to 29, were much less likely to have commenced their first partnership at marriage compared with the older women. There are marked reductions to be seen in the proportions of women who married directly without cohabiting in most countries. For example, in France one in two of the older women but only one in five of the younger women married directly; a pattern that is repeated across many of the nations. The main exceptions are Sweden and the southern European countries. In Sweden cohabiting rather than marrying was already well established amongst the older women whereas in Italy and Spain there are indications of a rise in cohabitation. However, in the latter two countries for the majority of women marriage still heralds the start of first partnership, which is in contrast with the Scandinavian and western European nations where it is a minority practice.

In many European countries cohabiting unions have simply replaced the marriages of yesteryear, in that compared with the recent past there has been little change in the proportions of men and women who have formed a residential partnership by their mid-twenties, whereas in other countries, most noticeably the southern European states,

Table 2: Proportions (derived from life-table analysis) of first cohabiting unions that had converted to marriages or dissolved by 2 and 5 years of start of union by age of woman

	Married		Dissolved	
	2 years	5 years	2 years	5 years
Sweden				
1964*	8	34	16	37
1954	19	44	10	24
Norway				
1960*	27	56	16	35
1950	64	81	8	29
Finland				
25–29	33	60	11	31
35–39	45	66	8	21
France				
25–29	37	63	9	31
35–39	58	78	6	17
Great Britain				
25–29	34	58	14	36
35–39	29	50	21	41
Austria				
25–29	26	54	7	26
35–39	31	50	6	18
Switzerland				
25–29	36	67	14	38
35–39	37	70	9	26
West Germany				
25–29	30	57	14	36
35–39	32	51	7	17
East Germany				
25–29	26	42	8	27
35–39	20	26	6	15

\*Birth cohorts.

cohabitation is only part of the story in the decline in marriage rates (Kiernan, 1999a, Billeria, 2000). Here, young people have been spending longer periods of time as solos than in the recent past; living with their parents (in the main), on their own or sharing with others. (European Commission, 1998).

### C. Duration of cohabiting unions

In many countries cohabitation has eclipsed marriage as the marker for entry into first union but subsequently many of these unions convert into marriages and others dissolve. Life table estimates of the proportions of cohabitations that had converted into marriages or dissolved by five years for a range of European countries which are shown in Table 2 suggest that there is some variation in the propensity to marry across nations and age groups. Sweden exhibits the lowest conversion to marriage with only one in three cohabitations having become marriages within five years of the start of the partnership, whereas in most other countries one in two cohabitations had converted into marriages by the fifth anniversary of the union. In several countries there are indications

Table 3: Proportions married directly according to some church attendance versus none amongst women who had a partnership and were aged 20–39 years at the time of the survey

	Some attendance at church	Never attends church	% Reporting never attended church
Sweden	12	4	66
Norway	50	23	67
Finland	25	14	35
Great Britain*	59	41	45
Switzerland	31	14	41
West Germany	32	16	43
East Germany	23	14	77
Spain	90	80	53
Italy	90	81	9

France and Austria did not include this question. Great Britain nearest equivalent data used.

of a decline in the propensity to marry over time, most noticeably in Norway and France (particularly in the early years of the union), whereas in other countries there is little sign of change, for example, West Germany. Turning to the extent to which cohabiting unions dissolve, Table 2 shows that in most countries amongst those aged twenty-five to twenty-nine years, between one-quarter and one-third had dissolved by the fifth anniversary of the start of the union.

#### *D. Who cohabits?*

As well as cross-national variation in union formation behaviour there is also variation within nations and between subgroups of the population. There is now robust evidence that in most nations younger generations are more prone to cohabit than were older generations, and growing evidence that the more secular members of a society and those who had experienced parental divorce during childhood are also more likely to cohabit. There is also evidence that those residing in metropolitan areas are more prone to cohabit. Being in full-time education also tends to inhibit union formation but the association between level of educational qualifications and employment status with cohabitation is less clear cut and tends to vary across nations (see Carmichael, 1995, for a review).

Drawing on data collected in the UN ECE Family and Fertility Surveys we examined two of the factors associated with the propensity to cohabit, namely religious observance and experience of parental divorce. Table 3 shows the proportions of women under age forty who married directly according to whether they attended church on some occasions versus those who reported that they practically never did. From the last column we see that there was some variation in the proportions responding in this way, with non-attendance being rare in Italy and more common in East Germany and Sweden. However, within a given country we see that those who married directly were more likely to attend church than their contemporaries who had commenced their



Table 4: Per cent married directly by experience of parental separation or divorce at age 16 or under amongst women aged 20–39 years at the time of the survey

	Parental Yes	Divorce No	% with parental divorce
Sweden	3	7	14
Finland*	16	21	8
France	20	37	15
Austria	8	25	13
Switzerland	16	24	14
West Germany	17	26	14
East Germany	12	18	21
Spain	67	86	6
Italy	65	88	4

Finland did not ask age at parental divorce. Norway and Great Britain did not include a question on parental divorce.

first partnership with cohabitation. Thus, across Europe cohabitation appears to be associated with the more secular groups within a population and other research has also shown this to be the case when cohabitation was rare as well as when cohabitation became more popular (Lesthaeghe and Moors, 1996).

The other background factor examined was whether there had been experience of parental separation or divorce. There is evidence for the USA and Great Britain (eg Thornton, 1991 (USA) and Kiernan, 1992) that children who experience parental divorce are more likely to cohabit and have children outside of marriage. The UN ECE Fertility and Family Surveys included a question on whether the parents of the respondents had ever separated or divorced and the age at which this happened, which allowed us to examine whether this was the case in other European countries. Table 4 shows the proportions of women who had married directly according to whether they had experienced parental divorce during childhood. It is clear that in all these countries the proportions marrying directly is invariably higher amongst those who did not experience parental divorce during childhood than amongst those who did. This applies in northern European, western European and southern European countries and in countries where marrying directly is rare and cohabitation normative as in Sweden and in countries where marrying directly is normative and cohabitation is relatively rare such as Italy. The preference for cohabiting amongst children who experienced a parental separation or divorce may well represent reluctance on the part of young people with such an experience to make a permanent commitment, such as that enshrined in legal marriage. Alternatively, given the experience of parental separation they may want to be more certain about committing to a permanent relationship and may take longer in the search for their ideal partner or in testing the strength of the relationship via cohabitation before committing to marriage.

Table 5: Relative risk of marital dissolution in first marriage (which is a first partnership) according to whether woman cohabited prior to marriage or not amongst women aged 20 to 39 years at the time of the survey. Relative risks derived from Cox models. Model 1 has no controls, Model 2 includes controls for age at first marriage, church attendance and experience of parental divorce

	Model 1	Model 2
Sweden	1.40	1.58*
Norway (a)	0.90	0.95
Finland	1.14	1.16
France (a)	1.52**	1.63**
Austria (a)	1.23	1.24
Switzerland	1.41*	1.28*
West Germany	1.62**	1.42**
East Germany	1.32*	1.38*

Norway had no information on parental divorce and France and Austria had no question on religion.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.0001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*  $p < 0.05$ .

### 3. PARTNERSHIP DISSOLUTION

Across Europe, divorce has increased since the late 1960s and early 1970s up into the 1980s since when rates have tended to stabilize, but there continues to be cross-national variation in the extent of divorce (Council of Europe, 1999). Moreover, with the rise in cohabitation data on divorce are increasingly likely to be underestimates of the extent partnership breakdown. We have examined the issue of partnership dissolution using the data from the partnership histories collected in the FFS for those countries that had medium to high levels of cohabitation. A central interest was an assessment of the relative fragility of the different types of first union: direct marriage, cohabitations that converted into marriage, and cohabiting unions that had not converted into a marriage by the time of the survey.

#### A. Pre-marital cohabitation and marital dissolution

The data were analysed taking into account competing risks. We addressed a number of questions. Firstly, we enquired whether marriages were more likely to breakdown if they are preceded by a period of cohabitation. Cox proportional hazard models were used with the survival time being the duration of marriage to dissolution or censoring at the time of the survey. Whether cohabitation preceded marriage or not was treated as a fixed co-variate. We also included a control for age at first marriage and two background factors; namely whether parental divorce had been experienced during childhood and whether the respondent was or not a non or infrequent attendee at church. The first column in Table 5 shows the relative risks of marriage breakdown for those who cohabited prior to marriage relative to those who married directly, column 2 includes a control for age at first marriage, experience of parental divorce and whether the woman attended church or not. In some countries there is evidence that those who cohabit prior to

Table 6: Relative risk of marital dissolution in first marriage (which is a first partnership) according to whether woman cohabited prior to marriage and duration of cohabitation prior to marriage amongst women aged 20 to 39 years at the time of the survey. Relative risks derived from Cox models

	France	Switzerland	Austria	West Germany	East Germany	Sweden
Duration of Cohabitation						
None	0.60*	0.65*	0.69+	0.72	0.89	0.71
1–6 months (reference category)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
7–12 months	0.78	1.08	0.68	1.66	1.29	1.33
13–24 months	0.74	0.84	1.11	1.17	1.25	1.10
25–36 months	1.24	0.94	0.53+	0.97	1.53	0.96
37–60 months	1.11	0.60	0.80	1.10	1.32	1.07
61 or more months	0.66	1.17	0.61	1.28	0.67	0.72

\*  $p < 0.05$  +  $p < 0.10$ .

marriage compared with those that don't have a higher risk of marital dissolution (France, Germany and Sweden) and other countries this is less the case (Norway, Finland, Austria, Switzerland).

### B. Duration of pre-marital cohabitation and marital dissolution

A subsidiary enquiry was whether length of cohabitation prior to marriage had any bearing on dissolution risks. For example, short duration cohabitations may have different impacts than longer periods of cohabitation, in that short cohabitations may be more likely to include people with a greater commitment to marriage than those who cohabit more long term. Table 6 shows for a selection of countries the relative risks of marital dissolution according to duration of pre-marital cohabitation. The reference category is those who cohabited for one to six months prior to marriage. The evidence from this analysis suggests that in these countries there is little variation in the relative risk of marital breakdown according to length of pre-marital cohabitation.

### C. Type of first partnership and partnership dissolution

The second question addressed was to what extent the risk of breakdown varied across our three different types of first union. In this analysis the clock starts at onset of first partnership and marriage is included as a time varying co-variate and the two states of married are distinguished namely: married at start of partnership, and married later or not married by the time of the survey. Age at first partnership and the two background factors, parental divorce and degree of religious observance were also included in the analysis. Table 7 shows the relative risk of partnership breakdown for the three types of designated first partnership. Model 1 provides the gross risk and Model 2 includes controls for age at first partnership, church attendance and experience of parental divorce. It is clear that across all the countries continuing

Table 7: Relative risk of partnership dissolution according to type of first partnership for women aged 20 to 39 years at the time of the survey. Relative risks derived from Cox proportional hazard models with marriage included as a time varying co-variate. Model 1 no controls. Model 2 controls for age at first partnership, church attendance and experience of parental divorce

	Married directly	Model 1		Married directly	Model 2	
		Cohabited-married	Cohabitation only		Cohabited-married	Cohabitation only
Sweden	1.00	1.61*	4.48***	1.00	1.50+	3.96***
Norway (a)	1.00	0.86	5.28***	1.00	0.85	4.92***
Finland	1.00	1.02	3.22***	1.00	1.12	3.44***
France (a)	1.00	1.47**	5.77***	1.00	1.49**	6.04***
Austria (a)	1.00	1.11	3.50***	1.00	1.01	3.08***
Switzerland	1.00	1.30+	6.06***	1.00	1.11	4.84***
West Germany	1.00	1.59**	3.18***	1.00	1.38*	3.07***
East Germany	1.00	1.35*	1.44**	1.00	1.35*	1.55***

Norway had no information on parental divorce and France and Austria had no question on religion.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.0001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*  $p < 0.05$  +  $p < 0.10$ .

cohabiting unions had the highest risk of breakdown, with a level of risk that was substantially higher than that observed for direct marriages and converted unions. The story for unions that had converted into marriages was more varied. Focusing on Model 2 in Table 7 we see evidence of an elevated risk of breakdown for these unions in France, West and East Germany and to a lesser extent in Sweden, whilst in remaining countries there is little difference in the risk of dissolution of converted unions compared with direct marriages. From these analyses there is robust cross-national evidence that cohabiting unions that had not converted to marriages were the most fragile unions but that the role of pre-marital cohabitation in union dissolution may be more variable across nations.

#### 4. THE RISE OF NON-MARITAL CHILDBEARING

Alongside the rise in cohabitation there have been striking increases in the levels of non-marital childbearing, two developments that are intimately related. It is clear from Figure 2 that in recent decades across most European states there have been noteworthy increases in the proportions of births occurring outside of legal marriage, but there also continues to be marked variation in the extent of non-marital childbearing across nations. As we see in Figure 2 at one extreme are the Nordic countries where well over 40 per cent of births in 1997 were outside marriage and at the other extreme are the southern European countries of Italy and Greece where, along with Switzerland, 10 per cent or fewer births occurred outside marriage. Between these two extremes two broad groupings can be discerned. A set of countries with ratios between 10 and 20 per cent including the geographically close Benelux countries and West Germany and a set with 25 per cent or

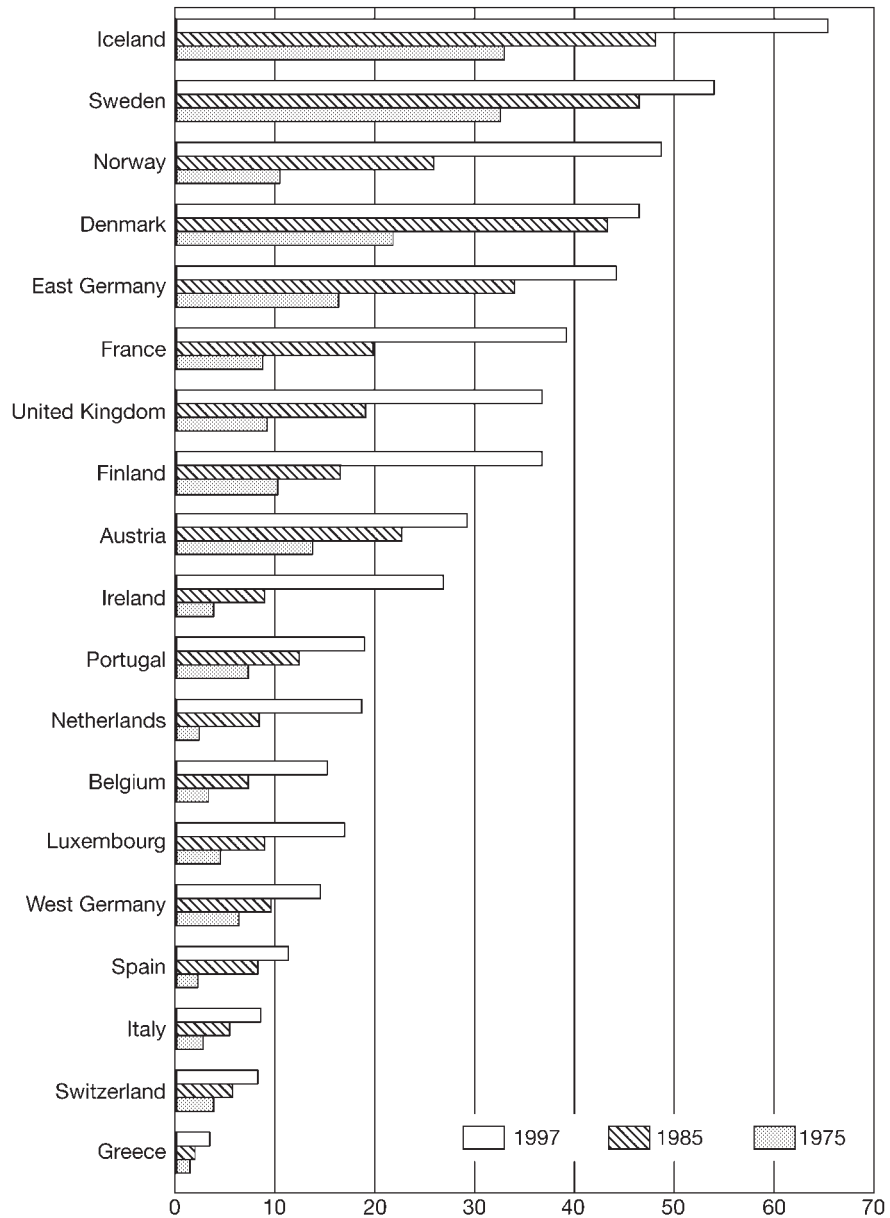


Figure 2: Extra-marital births per 100 births.

more which encompasses Ireland (which has experienced one of the most notable changes—up from 8 per cent in 1985 to 27 per cent in 1997), the United Kingdom and France (with remarkably similar trends) and Austria and Finland. In 1975, only five of the nineteen

European countries represented here had non-marital birth ratios of more than 10 per cent, in 1985 this had increased to ten and by 1997 stood at sixteen. In 1975, Sweden and Iceland were dramatic outliers, with one in three births already being born outside of marriage. This is much less the case today.

Undoubtedly, an important engine driving the rise in non-marital childbearing is the rise in cohabitation that has occurred, particularly since the beginning of the 1980s, in many European countries. However, as we saw earlier there is a good deal of diversity across European states in the incidence of cohabitation. In Europe levels of cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage tend to be in accord, with countries with high levels of cohabitation having higher rates of non-marital childbearing and vice versa. However, there are exceptions. Britain and Ireland have higher levels of childbearing outside marriage than one would expect from cohabitation estimates alone and the Netherlands and West Germany have lower rates of non-marital childbearing than might be anticipated from their levels of cohabitation. This suggests that norms about marriage being the conventional setting for having children may be stronger in some countries than others.

#### *A. Partnership context of first birth*

The union and fertility histories collected in the UN ECE FFS surveys allowed us to examine the partnership context of first birth. Table 8 shows the proportions of women in the various countries who made the transition to motherhood in one of four settings: before they had any co-residential partnership; within their first partnership which was a cohabitation; within first marriage; and after their first partnership (either a cohabitation or a marriage).

There are a number of findings that stand out. It is clearly the case for almost all these European countries that it is normative to become a mother in the first partnership. Having a child prior to a partnership is a minor practice in many countries including countries with high levels of non-marital childbearing and countries with low levels (Table 8). For example, the overall proportion of women who had a child prior to any union was only 7 per cent in Sweden and 6 per cent in France. The extent of out of partnership births is somewhat higher in Norway and notably higher in Austria, but Austria is a special case which has a long history of marriage following on from a first birth (Prinz, 1995). There is also evidence not shown here (Kiernan, 1999b) that the proportions of births occurring prior to a first partnership have hardly changed over recent cohorts, and the general direction in most countries has been for the proportion if anything to decrease. The major exception to this trend is Great Britain where the proportion has more than doubled. In Spain and Italy and to a lesser extent Switzerland first marriage continues to be the pre-eminent context for first births

Table 8: Percentage of women with different partnership contexts at first birth according to age of woman

	Before any partnership	In first cohabiting union	In first marriage	After first partnership ended	% with first birth by survey
Norway*					
25–29	12	28	53	8	68
35–39	13	7	75	4	91
20–45	12	18	65	5	62
Sweden**					
25–29	6	53	23	19	66
35–39	6	53	30	12	92
20–45	7	51	29	13	74
Austria					
25–29	21	29	47	3	70
35–39	20	20	53	7	91
20–45	20	22	53	5	73
Switzerland					
25–29	4	8	78	10	45
35–39	5	8	76	11	83
20–45	5	7	77	11	66
West Germany					
25–29	11	17	64	8	38
35–39	11	8	73	8	75
20–39	10	13	70	7	45
France					
25–29	9	22	62	7	56
35–39	5	11	80	4	91
20–45	6	14	74	6	71
Great Britain					
25–29	15	17	59	8	54
35–39	4	4	82	9	80
20–45	9	9	75	8	65
Italy					
25–29	4	5	90	1	36
35–39	5	3	90	1	83
20–45	5	3	90	1	61
Spain					
25–29	8	6	85	–	47
35–39	4	3	92	1	92
20–45	5	3	90	1	65

Sweden 1954 and 1964 cohorts: 35–39 and 25–29 equivalent. Norway\*\* 1950 and 1960 cohorts 35–39 and 25–29.

whereas, in the remaining countries the picture is less clear cut. However, in most of the countries there is a discernible movement away from having a child within marriage to having a child within a cohabiting union.

#### *B. Characteristics according to type of first partnership*

Table 9 shows the average age at first birth amongst women according to the partnership context of their first birth. It is clear from this table,

Table 9: Average age at first birth according to partnership context of first birth women aged 20–45 years

	Before any partnership	In first cohabiting union	In first marriage	After first partnership ended	All mothers	Number in sample
Norway*	20.7	22.2	23.4	26.9	23.1	2590
Sweden*	20.6	22.9	24.5	26.8	23.7	2812
Austria	21.0	22.1	23.3	26.7	22.7	2758
Switzerland	20.1	24.9	25.4	28.9	25.5	2198
West Germany**	20.4	23.9	24.1	26.9	23.9	1247
France	20.3	23.2	23.8	27.4	23.7	2502
Great Britain	19.1	21.4	23.7	27.6	23.5	1629
Italy	22.4	24.0	24.2	29.1	24.1	2457
Spain	21.3	23.2	24.0	26.9	23.9	2243

\* Norway and Sweden specific cohorts, \*\*West Germany age range 20–39.

and not unsurprising to find, that the group of women who have their first child after a first partnership had ended have the highest mean age at first birth, being around twenty-seven years in most of the countries. At the other end of the spectrum having a child prior to any co-residential partnership, in most countries these women have the youngest average age at childbearing, and in most cases this falls within the twenty to twenty-one age range which is typically some two years younger on average than that observed for women who have their first child within their first partnership.

The story is less clear cut when we compare the average ages of first birth amongst those who were in cohabiting and marital unions. Any comparison or interpretation is of course complicated by the fact that in countries where there have been recent increases in the propensity to have children in cohabiting unions as opposed to marital unions, other things being equal, women who have children within a cohabiting union are likely to be selected for relative youthfulness. From Table 9 we see that in most countries cohabiting women have their first child on average at a younger age than those in marital unions: the extreme example is Great Britain where there is a 2.3 year difference in the average age at birth, but we also observe the same tendency in Sweden, Norway and Austria where there is more than one year's difference in the average age at first birth for these two groups of women. We recollect from Table 8 that in Sweden there had been little change over recent cohorts in the extent to which women were having their first child in cohabiting unions as compared with marital unions but this was less the case in Britain and Norway where there have been marked increases over time in the proportions having a child in a cohabiting union. In most of the other countries the tendency is for cohabiting women to have their first child at a younger age than married women as in Spain and Switzerland but in the case of Italy, West Germany and France there are only small differences between these two groups of women.



Table 10: Proportions marrying and life-table estimates of duration to marriage amongst women aged 20–45 years who had their first child in a cohabiting union

	Proportions married	% married within 12 months	% married within 3 years	% married within 5 years	Number in sample
Norway*	57	31	60	66	457
Sweden*	69	20	44	56	1425
Austria	73	21	55	69	606
Switzerland	78	39	68	75	151
West Germany**	56	27	49	55	162
France	47	25	33	45	565
Great Britain	36	18	30	39	150
Italy	70	34	55	70	86
Spain	45	21	37	46	67

Norway and Sweden specific cohorts, \*\*West Germany age range 20–39.

### C. Child within a cohabiting union

The totality of non-marital births includes children born outside a union and those born within cohabiting unions. Mothers who have children on their own subsequently form partnerships. For example, in most of the European countries in our study between 20 and 30 per cent of the mothers had partnered by the time the child was age one, and by the time the child was age five years typically one in two of the mothers had entered a marital or cohabiting union. Mothers who have a child within a cohabiting union also marry. Here we examine the extent to which these unions convert into marriages or to put it in older day parlance, to what extent are children born outside a marital union legitimated by the subsequent marriage of their parents?

Table 10 shows life table estimates of the proportions of women who had legalized their union by one, three and five years after the birth of their baby. It is apparent that there is some variation across nations in the extent to which cohabiting unions are converted into marriages. Great Britain exhibits the lowest proportion at around one-third and the high conversion set includes Switzerland, Austria, Italy and Sweden with around 70 per cent or more having married. We can also examine the pace at which the cohabiting unions were converted into marriages. By the first anniversary of the birth of the child, between 17 and 39 per cent of the women had married and the pace of conversion tends to gather speed in the first few years after the birth and then slows down. For example, in many countries the proportions of women marrying between the first and third anniversary of the birth of their baby almost doubled but between the third and fifth anniversary the pace of conversion to marriage slows down.

Why do women choose to marry rather than continue to cohabit or what is the trigger for marriage are questions to which we as yet have few answers. The UN ECE FFS did not collect information on why

people chose to marry rather than to continue to cohabit after they had a child. However, some relevant information was collected in a 1993 Eurobarometer Survey carried out in the then twelve member states of the European Union. In this survey respondents were asked about their level of agreement to a list of eleven reasons for getting married (Malpas and Lambert, 1993). The top response related to committing oneself to being faithful to your partner, with 62 per cent completely agreeing with this statement, and the next important reason, with 51 per cent in complete agreement, 'it was the best way to guarantee the rights of the children', and in third place was 'to prove to other person that you really love him/her' with 41 per cent completely agreeing with this statement. Thus one might infer that commitment and the rights of children are important elements in the impetus to marry. These are responses for all groups but the ordering of the importance of the responses did not vary significantly according to gender, marital status or a past history of cohabitation. Similarly, in a recent British study (Haskey, 1999) the two main reasons given for marrying amongst those who had cohabited with their future spouse were to do with strengthening the relationship and with children.

#### *D. Parental Separation*

The final topic we explored was whether children born into cohabiting unions as compared with those born to married parents were more or less likely to see the separation of their parents, and did parental marriage after the birth make any difference? We used life table analysis to estimate the survival probabilities of partnerships where the clock started with the birth of the child not with the onset of the union. Life tables were estimated for women who had a marital birth and amongst those who had a non-marital birth, marriage was included as a time varying covariate. Table 11 shows the proportions of unions surviving three and five years after the birth of their first child for all marital unions and cohabiting unions and for the two subsets of cohabiting unions, those that had converted into marriages by the time of the survey and those that had not.

In all the countries included in our analysis children born within marriage were less likely to see their parents separate than those born in a cohabiting union. Within the set of cohabiting unions those that had not been converted into marriages were the most fragile, with at least one in five of these unions having dissolved by the time the child was five years old. Amongst children born within marriage or cohabiting unions that subsequently converted to marriages there was little difference in the chances of them seeing the break-up of their parents marriage by their fifth birthday in Sweden, Norway, Austria and West Germany; with fewer than one in ten of these children having experienced parental separation. However, in Switzerland and more noticeably in

Table 11: Life-table estimates of percentage of unions surviving 3 and 5 years after the birth of first child amongst women aged 20–45 years according to type of first partnership

	% surviving 36 months	% surviving 60 months	Number in the risk set
Norway*			
Married	97	94	1677
Cohabitation	87	82	456
-cohabited/married	98	95	131
-cohabited only	79	71	325
Sweden*			
Married	96	93	817
Cohabitation	90	84	1424
-cohabited/married	97	94	493
-cohabited only	84	75	931
Austria			
Married	97	94	2161
Cohabitation	92	86	670
-cohabited/married	98	96	246
-cohabited only	86	71	424
Switzerland			
Married	97	95	2191
Cohabitation	82	73	166
-cohabited/married	95	86	65
-cohabited only	64	53	101
West Germany**			
Married	95	91	873
Cohabitation	92	85	161
-cohabited/married	97	91	45
-cohabited only	89	80	116
France			
Married	97	95	1522
Cohabitation	85	78	258
-cohabited/married	94	90	90
-cohabited only	81	70	168
Great Britain			
Married	96	92	1242
Cohabitation	71	57	149
-cohabited/married	90	75	43
-cohabited only	61	48	106
Italy			
Married	99	98	2677
Cohabitation	95	91	90
-cohabited/married	–	–	31
-cohabited only	93	82	59
Spain			
Married	99	98	1540
Cohabitation	79	67	74
-cohabited/married	–	–	16
-cohabited only	71	51	58

Norway and Sweden specific cohorts, \*\*West Germany age range 20–39.

Great Britain children born into marital unions were more likely to see their parents remain together until their fifth birthday than those children born into a cohabiting union that converted into a marriage.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Comparative data on union and fertility behaviour has shown there to be marked variation across European nations in the ways men and women are forming partnerships and the extent to which children are born within and outside marriage. In southern European countries marriage is still the pre-eminent marker for entry into first union; whereas in most western and northern European countries cohabitation has eclipsed marriage as the marker for first partnership, and in the Nordic countries there is evidence that long-term cohabitation has become more prevalent. Within Europe there continues to be marked differences in the level of non-marital childbearing and the saliency of marriage as the context for having children. Marriage continues to be the pre-eminent setting for having a child in the southern European countries and the Middle European countries of Switzerland and West Germany but this is much less the case in the Nordic countries, with Sweden being the only country with more first births born within cohabiting unions than marital unions. The rise in cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage raises important questions about the hegemony of legal marriage and the assumptions on which our public policies are built and as we see in the other papers in this volume different European countries have responded in different ways to these developments. As yet, one might conclude that there is not just one but several European perspectives on cohabitation and non-marital childbearing.

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