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The ambivalent childbearing motivations among young adults

ANNE GAUTHIER, MONIKA MYNARSKA & NURSEL ALKOÇ

Across Europe and many other parts of the world, people are having fewer children than in the past. This long-lasting trend suggests that something deeper is changing: not just economic conditions, but also how people think and feel about becoming parents. New research using data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) sheds light on this shift: many people today feel conflicted about having children. They can see the benefits, but their concerns often weigh more heavily. Based on this ambivalence, a strong rebound in fertility rates seems unlikely in the near future.

Over the past few decades, fertility rates in developed countries have dropped significantly. In countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the average number of children per woman fell from 1.70 in 2000 to 1.43 in 2023. At the same time, more people are remaining childless. In some countries, more than one in five adults will never have children at all. These changes are often linked to structural factors such as the rising cost of housing, job insecurity, and the challenges of balancing work and family life. However, these practical barriers are only part of the story. People's attitudes toward parenthood itself also appear to be changing.

To better understand how people think about having children, we used data from the GGS, a large international study on family life, relationships, and personal values. The aim was to explore how people weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks of becoming a parent.

The role of motivations in fertility decisions

Deciding whether or not to have children is complex. People must consider their financial situation, housing, career plans, personal values, and social expectations. According to psychologist Warren Miller, this decision is shaped by "childbearing motiva-

Noot voor abonnees/lezers: dit is een eenmalige uitgave van Demos in het Engels. Volgende nummers zullen gewoon in het Nederlands verschijnen.
Note for readers: this is a one-time issue in English. Subsequent issues of Demos will be published in Dutch.

tions" that develop early in life and are influenced by upbringing, culture, and personal experiences. Over time, these childbearing motivations shape both what people want and what they plan to do. A key idea in this theory is the difference between positive and negative motivations. Positive motivations include the expected rewards of parenthood, such as emotional fulfillment and a sense of purpose. Negative motivations focus on challenges like financial strain, reduced freedom, career difficulties, and stress. People are more likely to have children when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs and when their circumstances allow it. When concerns are stronger, they may delay or avoid parenthood.

Measuring motivations

The survey data used in this study are particularly valuable because the surveys directly measure both types of motivation. In four countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, and Norway) survey participants in the GGS-II answered a set of questions designed to capture how strongly they felt about the benefits and drawbacks of parenthood. These responses were combined into two scales: one for positive motivation and one for negative motivation. By comparing the two, we could group people into four broad categories: those who are clearly in favour of having children (pro-natal), those who are clearly against it (anti-natal), those who feel indifferent, and those who have mixed feelings (ambivalent).

Young adults are ambivalent about parenthood

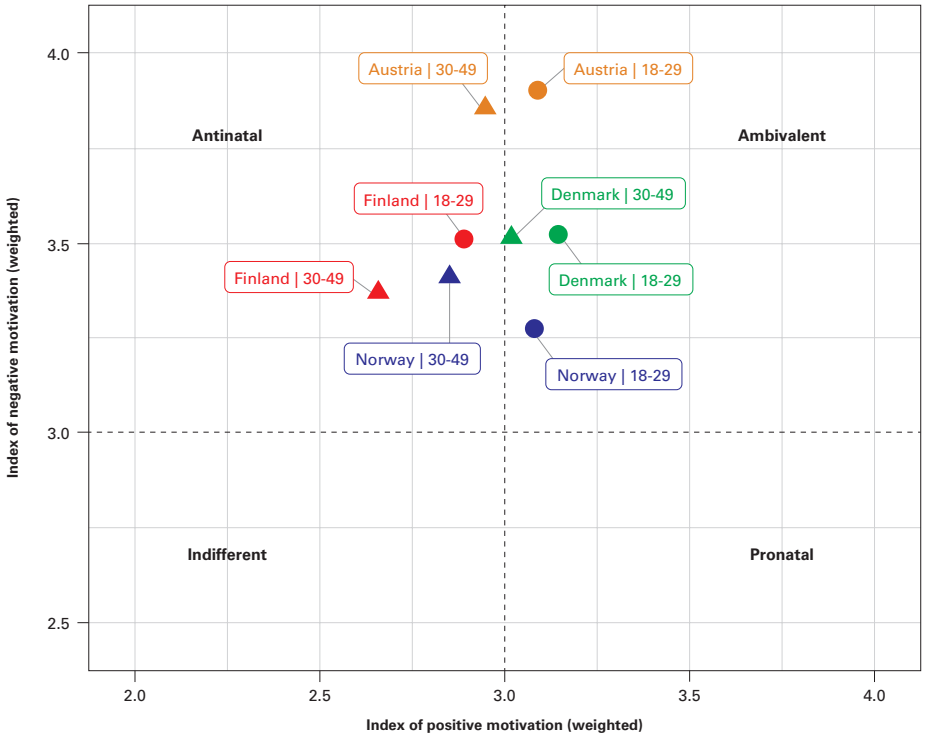
The results reveal a striking pattern. While 'older' childless adults (aged 30–49) predominantly fall into the 'anti-natal' category, the younger groups (aged 18–29) lean more toward the 'ambivalent' one. This means the younger adults recognise some of the positive aspects of parenthood, but their concerns are slightly stronger. In other words, it is not that young people do not see any value in having children – they do – but their worries tend to outweigh the perceived benefits.

This finding challenges a common assumption that low fertility rates are mainly driven by structural obstacles that prevent people from having the children that they would want to have. Instead, it suggests that many people are hesitant. They may like the idea of having a family, but feel held back by practical or emotional concerns. This ongoing tension can lead to the postponement of childbearing, and in some cases, to remaining childless altogether.

While the overall pattern is similar across countries, there are some differences. For example, in Finland, both very young and young adults appear to lean more toward negative motivations than positive ones. This places them closer to the "anti-natalist" category, where concerns clearly outweigh perceived benefits. Although the reasons for this are not yet fully understood, it may help explain why Finland currently has one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe.

Taken together, these findings point to a broader cultural shift. Parenthood is no longer seen as an obvious or automatic life step for many people. Instead, it is a choice that comes with both appealing and challenging aspects. As long as concerns about cost, stress, and lifestyle changes remain strong, and as long as these concerns outweigh the perceived rewards, fertility rates are likely to stay low.

Plot of positive and negative childbearing motivations among childless individuals by two age groups in Austria, Denmark, Finland and Norway, 2020-2022



Note: Each point shows the average level of positive and negative motivations to have children among childless respondents aged 18-49, separately by country and age group. Both indices are based on multiple survey questions rated from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important). The figure displays the central range of the scales for clarity.

Source: Generations and Gender Survey (GGS-II), own calculation. The data were collected between 2020 and 2022.

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Do classical concert halls need to worry about ageing audiences?

MATTHIJS KALMIJN & KÈNE HENKENS

Research into age and generational effects vis-à-vis classical concert attendance in the Netherlands since 1979 shows that concert attendance increases with age. Concert attendance has also declined across generations, but this decline appears to be levelling off among recent generations.

For decades, there have been reports in the national media warning that the ageing concert audience poses a potential threat to the survival of classical music. These pessimistic reports are counterbalanced by optimistic voices that view ageing against the backdrop of a growing target group of healthy, active and affluent senior citizens. The driving forces behind the ageing of concert audiences, however, are rarely investigated. The ageing of concert audiences can be explained by two factors that are not mutually exclusive. The first emphasises age differences: as people get older, they have more time, financial resources and appreciation for classical music, and as a result, concert attendance increases. The second explanation emphasises generational differences: older generations grew up with classical music and were already concertgoers in their youth and continue to do so into old age, whereas younger generations have different cultural preferences, a wider range of music to choose from, and are said to show a declining interest in classical music. We have compiled a dataset on classical music concert attendance between 1979 and 2022 to investigate these two mechanisms behind the ageing trend.

Analysis of these figures showed that concert attendance in the Netherlands remained fairly constant during the period from 1979 to 2022, with approximately 15-20 per cent of respondents attending one or more concerts annually. However, the audience is undeniably ageing. Whereas at the turn of the century, the proportion of older people in concert halls was less than 25 per cent, today almost 60 per cent of the audience is aged 65 or over. Both age and generational differences are key factors in this trend. Attendance at classical music concerts increases with age and peaks around the age of 75-80; 25 per cent of this age group attends classical concerts. After the age of 80, concert attendance declines significantly. Those born between 1935 and 1954 are the most frequent visitors, with subsequent generations attending less and less often. It is worth noting that the decline across generations is levelling off somewhat.

The generations also show different age profiles (see figure). The older generations show a sharp increase with age, but also a rapid and early decline: attendance begins to decline around the age of 65 among the cohorts born between 1925 and 1934. For middle generations, the decline begins much later, after the age of 75-80, which clearly illustrates the rise of more active older people. The youngest generations, on the other hand, show a flatter pattern of increase with age, but these generations are still too young to see whether their participation will continue to increase into old age, as we saw with the generations that preceded them.

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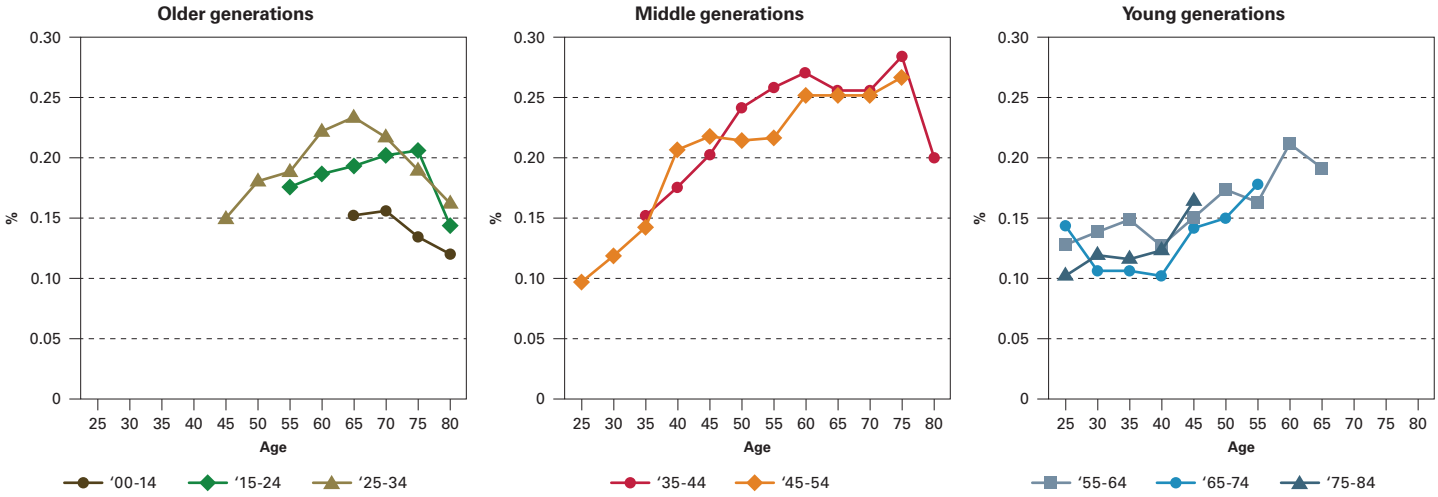
Frequency of classical concert attendance by age and generation (proportion of people who attend a concert once a year or more often), the Netherlands, 1979-2022



Note: Older generations = born between 1900 and 1934; middle generations = born between 1935 and 1954; younger generations = born between 1955 and 1984. N = 95,124 persons aged 25 and older.

Data source: An integrated harmonized survey data set, 1979–2022. See SocArXiv papers: https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/ ev57t

Why early language choices matter for immigrant children's education

STEFANO CELLINI

Growing up in a household where the language of instruction is not spoken daily can make the first school years more challenging. In the Netherlands, frequent use of Dutch at home helps immigrant children perform better in school — especially in language tests — and improves their chances of entering higher education.

The Netherlands is known for its early tracking educational system. Around age 12, children take a standardized test that plays a decisive role in determining their secondary-school track. Small differences in performance at this stage can have long-lasting consequences for educational careers, and children with a migration background often underperform at this key exam, particularly in the language domain. For children growing up in immigrant families, exposure to Dutch at home varies widely. Some parents mostly speak their language of origin, others use Dutch regularly, and many combine both. But how much does home exposure to the instruction language actually matter for immigrant children's school careers?

By linking harmonized immigrant surveys, school administrative data, and population registers from Statistics Netherlands (for details, see sources below the figure), we examine how home language environment during primary school years relates to children's education. The surveys include information on how often parents speak Dutch with their children. We combine these data with children's standardized test scores at the end of primary school and subsequent enrollment in higher education. We present findings for more than three thousand children with a migrant background who completed primary school between 2006 and 2017.

The figure reports the differences in children's test performance (as score percentiles) and higher education enrollment (in percentage points) across different language exposure frequencies at home. Children whose surveyed parent never speaks in Dutch to them fare worse in literacy tests, barely ranking above the 30th percentile; children regularly communicating in Dutch with parents reach the 40th percentile on average. The overall exit scores mainly reflect the literacy-related rankings, since mathematics scores are generally unaffected by language exposure.

Does this early gap persist? We find that those who grew up with more Dutch at home are indeed more likely to be enrolled in higher education, either vocational or academic. Only 18 percent of children with non-Dutch speaking parents during their childhood managed to access higher education of some form by the age of 18, in contrast to 25 percent of their peers with frequent Dutch-speaking parents.

These findings have broader relevance for countries with early tracking education systems, such as Germany, Austria and Belgium. In such systems, unequal opportunities to be exposed to the language of instruction at home before the moment of tracking can shape educational pathways and, ultimately, later life chances. Our results suggest that there may be value in initiatives that support immigrant parents in using the destination language with their children, or that encourage bilingual practices within families. This does not imply abandoning heritage languages; rather, it highlights the importance of ensuring that the language of schooling is part of everyday family life.

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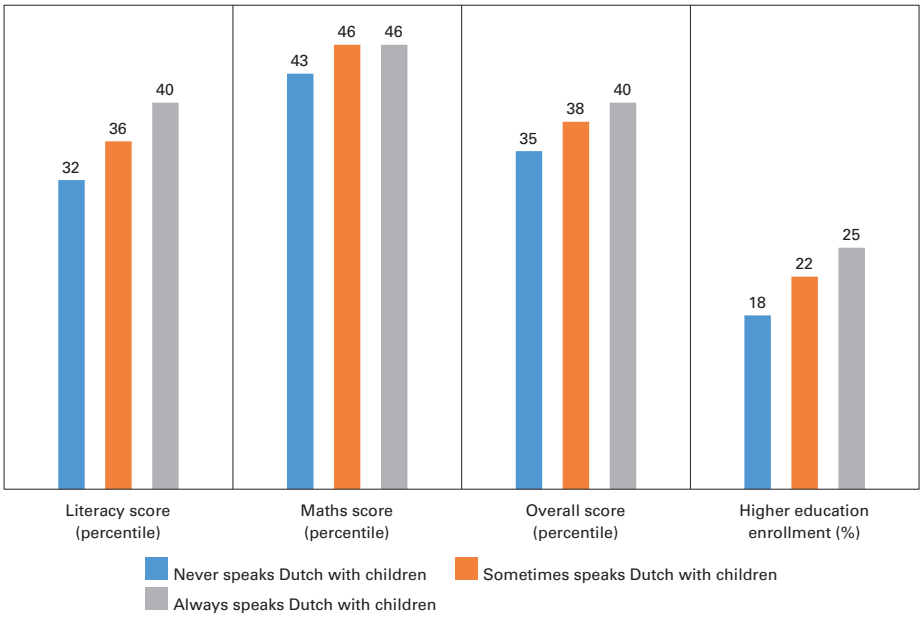
Immigrant children's scores in literacy, mathematics and overall in primary school and higher education enrollment by parental usage of Dutch, the Netherlands, 2006-2017



Notes: Exact wording survey questions on Dutch usage at home "How often do you speak Dutch with your children?". The percentiles denote the children's rank in various tests.

Sources: Statistics Netherlands microdata, Leefsituatie Allochtone Stedelingen survey (LAS 2004-2005), Survey Integratie Minderheden (SIM 2006, 2011, 2015) and the Survey Integratie Nieuwe Groepen (SING 2009).

Understanding the brain drain in left-behind regions

BECKY ARNOLD & LEO VAN WISSEN

Many rural regions are facing a brain drain as their promising young adults move to urban areas seeking economic opportunities. What motivates people to move? Our research reveals that many adults from ages 30 years and older prioritise social conditions when choosing where to settle down.

Many rural regions across Europe are suffering from depopulation. This is particularly true of 'left behind' regions, which also suffer from low regional development. This depopulation has multiple causes. Firstly, these regions experience net outwards migration – people leave in search of higher standards of living and expanded economic opportunities. This effect is particularly strong for the young and highly educated. Secondly, rural regions often have older populations resulting in few births and many deaths, which also decreases the total population.

This depopulation affects regions in several ways. Because younger people are more likely to leave, the average age in these regions increases. The resulting 'ageing' population is unbalanced with many retirees and few working age adults. This reduces the region's tax income and places a high burden on health and social care. Also, these regions suffer from a so-called 'brain drain' because the young and talented tend to leave. This further hampers innovation and economic development, making the region even less attractive, resulting in a vicious cycle.

To examine the above stated effects we conducted a case study in Norway by making use of data from the Norwegian population register. We assess Norwegian regions by three scores: (1) an economic score, based on e.g. employment rates and innovation scores; (2) a social score, using indicators as crime rates and life satisfaction; and (3) a living environment score, with indicators such as air pollution and number of hospitals. These three scores are then analysed in combination with data from the Norwegian population register on which regions people have moved to and from. This analysis reveals moving priorities for people with different characteristics like age, gender and education, and these priorities sum to 100 percent. For example, a person that cares mostly about economic development when assessing if a region is attractive or not, but is less concerned with social development and even less with living environment may have an economic priority of 70 percent a social priority of 20 percent, and a living environment priority of 10 percent.

The figure on the right shows how on average people's priorities change with age. Unsurprisingly, economic priorities dominate among young adults (age 20-30), however, once people have typically established careers and are looking to settle down, the social dimension dominates. The living environment dimension is also relatively highly prioritised at ages 30 and older, but social concerns dominate.

This is good news for left behind regions. They may never be able to compete with cities like Oslo or Bergen in terms of economic performance, but by concentrating on policies which improve social and living conditions they can compete for working age adults from their early 30s. Attracting such people to the region reduces depopulation, brain drain, and population ageing.

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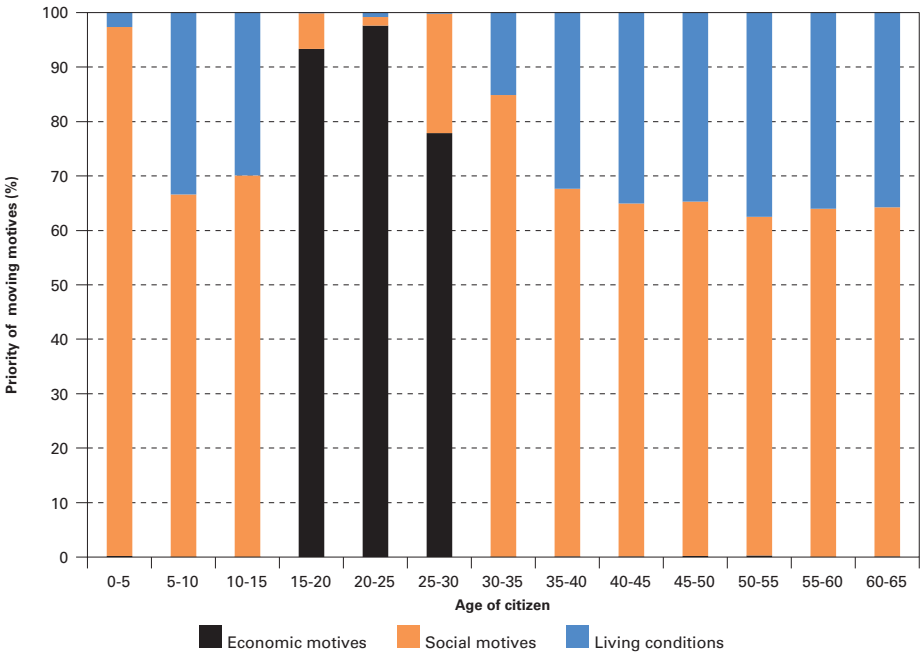
Revealed motives for moving to another place by citizens of Norway (by age groups), 2010-2020



Note: This analysis considers the movements of people of all ages, however individuals below 15 years old typically do not make migration decisions. In these cases the calculated priorities relate to the decisions of the parents of these individuals. For example, parents with children ≤ 5 years old are motivated almost exclusively by social conditions.

Source data: Eurostat and OECD data linked with Norwegian Population Register data .

The growing number of financially vulnerable immigrant retirees

JELLE LÖSSBROEK & KOEN VELDMAN

Across Western countries, the number of older immigrants (foreign-born people aged 65+) has increased rapidly and is projected to keep increasing. Considering that many 'fall through the cracks' in pension systems designed for native-born citizens, more research on this cohort is imperative.

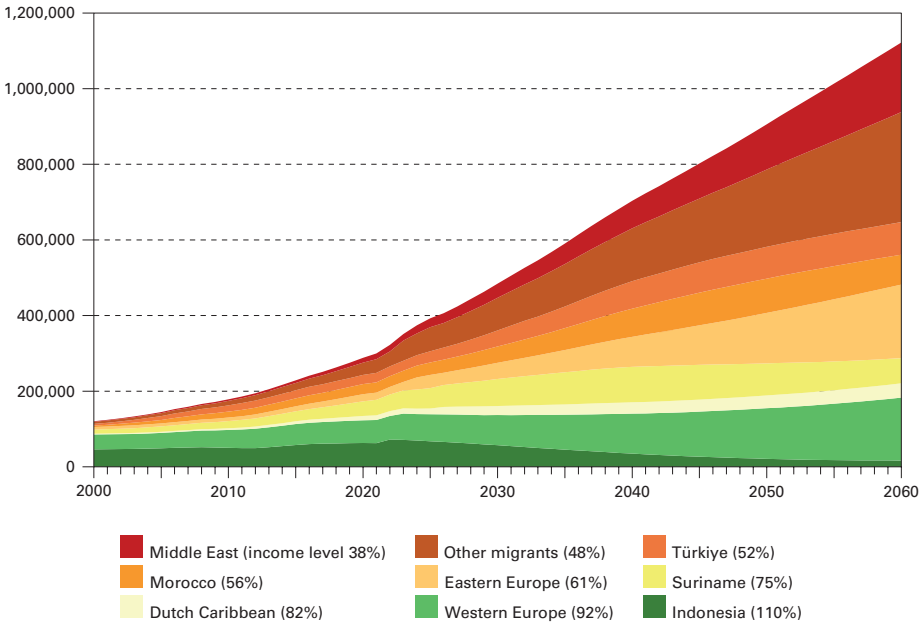
Across Western Europe, immigrants generally receive lower pension incomes than native-born citizens. In the Netherlands, immigrants from former colonies (Indonesia, Dutch Caribbean, Suriname) and Western Europe have on average higher retirement incomes than labour immigrants from Eastern Europe, Morocco or Türkiye, who in turn receive more than immigrants from other regions, particularly 'refugee countries'. The figure below illustrates this pattern, showing immigrants' retirement incomes relative to those of the native-born, ranking from comparable (green) to less than half (red). These retirement incomes combine public pensions (first pillar), occupational pensions (second pillar), individual saving provisions (third pillar) and pensions from abroad. Importantly, the fastest growth in numbers is expected among the groups with currently the lowest retirement incomes, whereas the number of the groups with comparable incomes, Indonesian and Western European immigrants, remains relatively stable. This means that the share of potentially vulnerable groups of immigrants increases.

What explains this 'immigrant pension gap'? First, institutional policies determine access to public pensions, a main income source for many retirees. Given immigrants' irregular work trajectories, public pension systems based on residence (like in the Netherlands) are more favourable than systems based on years worked or pre-retirement income. Compared to other residence-based systems, the pension income in the Netherlands is comparatively high, but it requires an exceptionally high 50 years of residence for a full public pension. Among immigrants, refugees often arrive at older ages and thus receive the lowest public pensions.

Second, socioeconomic factors often result in lower occupational pensions for immigrants: their shorter contribution period is exacerbated by labour market obstacles such as language barriers, a lack of educational credentials, discrimination, and concentration in sectors with weaker pension coverage. These vulnerabilities also limit opportunities to save privately for retirement. Western European immigrants can often partially compensate lower public and occupational pensions with retirement income from their country of origin, but this is uncommon among other immigrant groups.

Third, sociocultural factors affect immigrants' private retirement savings. Many immigrants send remittances to family abroad, which reduces their savings capacity. Additionally, immigrants are often less aware of their accumulated pension income rights and options to improve them, and corrective action is therefore lacking. Lower levels of trust in financial institutions and traditions of informal saving further reduce voluntary participation in pension institutions. Retirees living below the social minimum could in many countries apply for means-tested welfare benefits, yet non-use of these facilities is a persistent issue, especially among immigrants, due to sociocultural factors. On the other hand, sociocultural factors can also form an informal safety net, as many retired immigrants receive financial and non-financial help from their family and social network.

Actual (2000-2025) and projected (2026-2060) number of immigrants aged 65 and older in the Netherlands by region of origin and current retirement income level



Notes: Colours indicate immigrant groups and current retirement income levels among immigrants relative to those of Dutch natives (income level of Dutch natives is 100%). These retirement incomes are a combination of public pension (first pillar), occupational pensions (second pillar), individual contractual savings (third pillar) and income from abroad. The colours are based on the income levels of these groups in 2020 relative to the income of those born in the Netherlands and whose parents were also born there. For clusters of countries, the weighted average was used for the countries available in the data.

Source: Statistics Netherlands Statline, Lössbroek et al. (2025).

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Why queer pathways to parenthood matter

MAAIKE VAN DER VLEUTEN

Becoming a parent is increasingly possible for sexual minorities, but not always attainable. A new project examines the different paths to parenthood for sexual minorities, and the obstacles that still stand in their way.

Over the past decades, the legalization of same-sex unions and more liberal attitudes toward sexual minorities have contributed to an increase in same-sex couples raising children. Yet becoming a parent is still far from straightforward for many sexual minorities. Unlike heterosexual couples, same-sex couples usually cannot have children without external help. Many must rely on fertility treatments, adoption, or co-parenting arrangements. These processes are often expensive, legally complex, and emotionally demanding. These challenges are especially strong for male same-sex couples, who more often depend on highly regulated and socially contested routes such as surrogacy or adoption.

The figure below illustrates this using register data from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. It shows that the number of female same-sex couples with children has increased over time, with visible rises following the opening of fertility clinics to lesbian couples in Sweden (2005) and Denmark (2007). At the same time, the absolute numbers remain limited: the figure only includes couples who became parents, meaning that parenthood among female couples remains relatively uncommon. For male same-sex couples, the numbers remain very small, with little or no growth over time. In Finland, there were too few male couples with children to include in the figure at all.

The rarity and challenges of parenthood among same-sex couples raise a fundamental question: who is able to become a parent and under what conditions? A new project will address this by comparing same-sex couples who do and do not become parents. This makes it possible to examine, for example, whether access to parenthood depends on having sufficient financial resources, since for many same-sex couples becoming a parent involves long and costly routes. We can also explore the role of legal conditions, such as whether couples have access to fertility clinics or surrogacy. These patterns will be examined using population register data from the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

Next, the project focuses more on the personal pathways to parenthood by examining who wants to have children, and what happens when people try to make that wish a reality. A new nationally representative survey will follow sexual minorities over time to study how desires to have children turn into intentions, attempts, and eventually parenthood—or why they sometimes do not. This includes questions about experiences of discrimination along the road to parenthood and the role of support—or lack of support—from family, friends, and institutions.

These insights are relevant for researchers studying contemporary family formation and for policymakers aiming to reduce inequalities in access to parenthood, especially amid growing backlash against LGBTQ+ rights.

The Queer Pathways to Parenthood (QPATHS) project is funded by an ERC starting grant (2026-2031).

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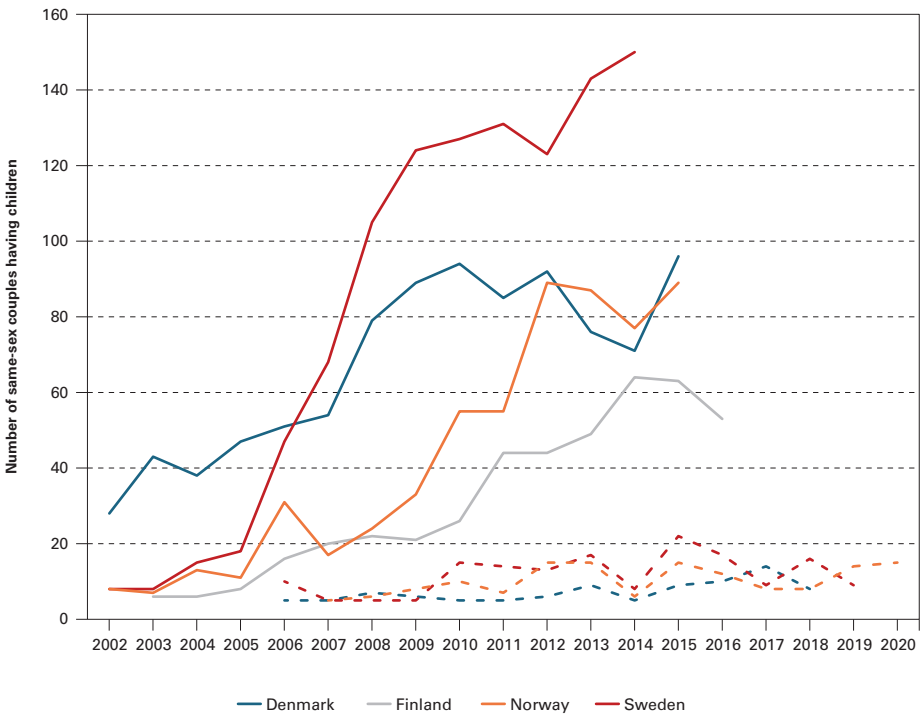
The number of male (long-dashed lines) and female (solid lines) same-sex couples with children in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, 2002-2020



Data source: Register data from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

Parenthood and persistence of employment gaps across Europe

JASPER BOSMA, JULIA ROKOS & ROSA GLIJN

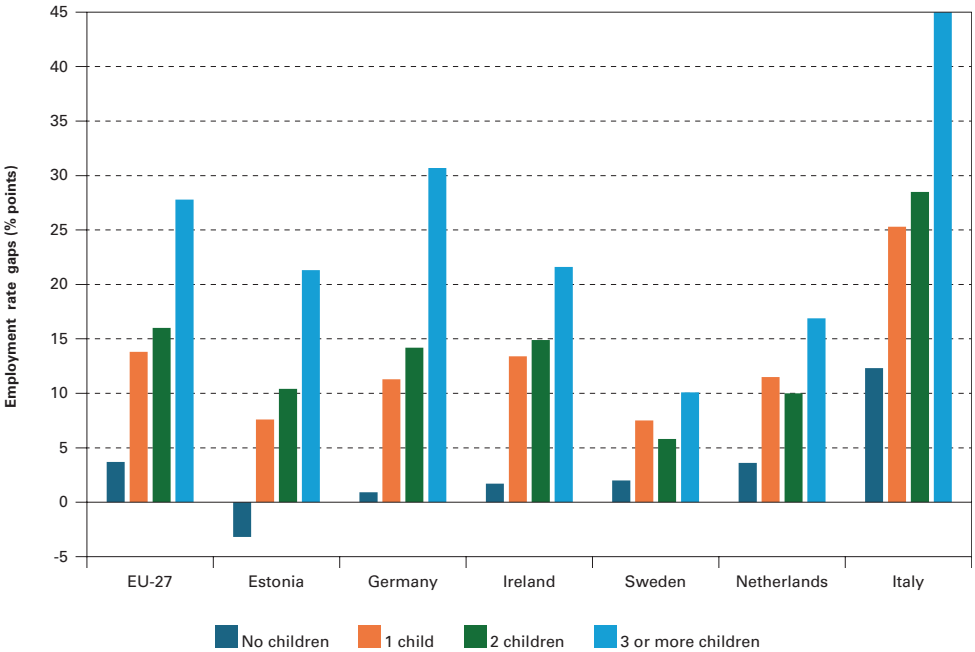
Over the past few decades, women's positions in most European labour markets have improved considerably. Among childless women and men, the employment gaps are now modest in most countries. However, Eurostat data show that among parents, a substantial gender gap in employment rates is persistent.

Childbirth has traditionally served as a turning point in women's professional careers. Women's reduced involvement in paid work after childbirth has far-reaching consequences for their lifelong financial position and independence. After time away from work, returning can be difficult and the missed experience limits career development. This increases the risk of later periods of nonemployment. Women's improved labour market positions in most EU countries could pave the way for a more equal division of parental roles, potentially limiting women's reduced or nonemployment after childbirth. However, the extent to which this is the case also depends on prevailing gender norms and work-family policies, which differ widely between countries. Therefore, we examine the gap in employment rates between women and men with and without children in a selection of EU countries.

That childbirth remains an important driver for gender differences in employment rates becomes clear from the figure below. The columns reflect the gaps in employment rates between women and men aged 25-54 in 2024, by number of children. Higher values reflect greater percentage-point differences in the advantage of men. In most countries, the employment gap is modest among the childless. The EU average is 4 percentage points, albeit much larger in Italy (12% pt.) and negative in Estonia (-3% pt.), where childless women work more often than their male counterparts. Among parents, the gaps are much larger, and some notable differences emerge. In Germany and Ireland, the differences among the childless are small, but considerably larger among parents. In the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent in Sweden, the gap among people without children is slightly larger, but differs less from the gap among parents.

The figure suggests that most of the unpaid work associated with childcare is still done by women. Gender norms, work-family policies, and labour market circumstances may explain between-country differences. For instance, Italy remains characterised by the male breadwinner model, supporting a gendered division between care and paid work. In the Netherlands, the accessibility of part-time work has resulted in a one-and-a-half earner model. This facilitates the combination of childrearing and paid work, but still comes with long-term career trade-offs as mothers work fewer hours. Sweden has extensive and comparatively gender-equal parental leave and childcare policies, facilitating a dual earner/dual carer model. Still, even there, a substantial employment gap after childbirth remains. Previous research suggests that although gender norms in general have become more egalitarian, becoming a parent re-instates more traditional behaviour among mothers and fathers. As a result, despite growing gender equality in labour markets, childbirth remains a major source of differences in women's and men's employment, even in favourable contexts.

Gaps in employment rates (in percentage points) between women and men aged 25-54 by number of children, 2024



Source: Eurostat (2024).

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