

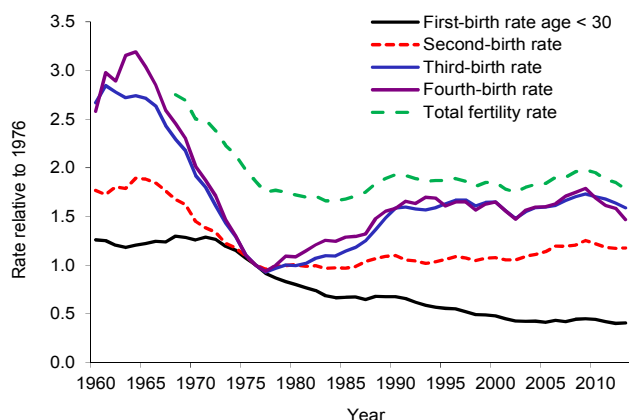
Not so low fertility in Norway — A result of affluence, liberal values, gender-equality ideals and the welfare state

Policy Brief No. 13

In Norway, fertility began declining in the mid-1960s, driven by the strong expansion of education, especially for women, later and fewer marriages, and the wide acceptance of new contraceptive technologies. Norwegian fertility levels never fell below 1.6 births per woman, however, and have been fairly stable between 1.75 and 2.00 births per woman since around 1990. The total fertility rate over 2000–2013 period averaged 1.86 births per woman, not much below the “replacement level” of 2.08 births per woman.

Women born in 1968, the youngest age group that has completed childbearing, had 2.03 children on average. Only 13 per cent of these women remained childless, and 83 per cent of those who became mothers had at least two children.

Parity-specific birth rates, controlling for age and time since last birth, and total fertility rate in Norway, using 1976 as the reference year



Why has fertility in Norway remained at consistently higher levels than in most other developed countries? Norway's advantaged economic position is probably one reason. There is little income insecurity for individual families, and the State is generous with parents, not least with respect to daycare and parental leave arrangements that make it easier for parents to combine work and family responsibilities.

Widely shared liberal social values also probably play a role. Although there has been a massive retreat from marriage — including later marriage, a growing proportion who never marry and rising divorce rates — this has been compensated by a rise in informal cohabitation, and many cohabitants have

children. In 2014, cohabiting mothers accounted for 44 per cent of all births, and single mothers accounted for an additional 13 per cent.

Government support for families with children

The Norwegian Government offers several benefits to families that probably make it easier to have children and reduce the financial risks of raising a family. Parental leave at the birth of a child is long and well compensated. It currently stands at 49 weeks with full wage compensation or 59 weeks with 80 per cent compensation. At least 10 weeks of parental leave is reserved for each parent.

Norwegians also have relatively good access to part-time work, which means that parents who cannot or do not wish to work full-time can earn some income. About 40 per cent of Norwegian women aged 15–64 work part-time, which is somewhat higher than the European average.

Eighty per cent of children aged 1–2 and 97 per cent of children aged 3–5 are in public or private childcare centres, which are open during usual working hours every day. Centre-based childcare is subsidized directly by keeping prices low and indirectly through tax deductions. Since 1998, a cash-for-care benefit of more than US\$ 9,000 has been offered to families with a child between 1 and 2 years old who cannot find or do not want a place in centre-based childcare. The Government also pays families an annual allowance of about US\$ 1,500 per child, plus an extra allowance and special tax benefits for single parents.

School-age children are kept in school throughout the day, including lunch breaks and afterschool care, making it easier for parents to combine work and child-rearing. Finally, the average work week — at 37.5 hours — is among the shortest in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, implying that parents who work are still able to spend considerable time with their children.

Given childcare support for working parents, it is not surprising that the employment rate for Norwegian women aged 15–64 is one of the highest in Europe. A comparative study of birth rates in Norwegian municipalities also concluded that the provision of daycare has a substantial positive effect on fertility.

Other factors that may affect fertility

Norway's per capita gross domestic product is one of the highest in the world. There is low income inequality, very few are considered poor and unemployment, including youth unemployment, tends to be low. Low unemployment and low anxiety about a potential drop in income are likely to play a role in enhancing fertility.

In the home, Norwegian fathers tend to contribute more to childcare and housework than fathers in many other countries. If fathers are happy to make this contribution and if their involvement makes child-rearing more of a pleasure and less of a burden for mothers, then it could have a positive effect on fertility. By reserving part of parental leave for fathers (currently 10 weeks), the Government hopes to encourage their participation in child-rearing.

The relatively high fertility among cohabiting couples reflects the same conditions that stimulate fertility in the population in general. In addition, it is possible that factors that tend to depress fertility among cohabitants compared to married couples are weaker in Norway than in many other countries. There is probably less social pressure to restrict childbearing to formal marriages and fewer stigmas associated with single parenthood, given Norway's generally liberal values. Besides, women may not fear being left alone with the economic and emotional burdens of child-rearing because they earn their own wages, they can usually count on child support from the father even if they are living apart, and the Government provides special support to single mothers.

High-quality university education is largely free in Norway, and educational loans are readily available. Thus, parents do not have to worry about the costs of higher education when deciding how many children to have. The flexibility of Norway's system of higher education may also promote fertility because it is relatively easy for students to leave and later re-enter schooling and to complete their education even if they have a child.

Housing prices may affect fertility because couples are likely to want to establish a home before having children. Homes are expensive in Norway, but it is possible to borrow up to

85 per cent of the purchase price. Also, because of a tax deduction, 28 per cent of the mortgage interest is essentially paid by the State.

Can Norway's experience offer lessons for other countries?

To the extent that population ageing or decline has adverse social or economic effects, countries that are experiencing extremely low fertility might want to look at government policies in Norway that support families, even though these policies were not formulated with the explicit intention of stimulating fertility. However, governments with more limited financial resources would find it difficult to emulate Norway's generous programmes. In addition, it would be important to assess whether the costs of such schemes would exceed the benefits, and both are very difficult to measure.

Family-friendly policies in Norway also reflect a larger set of cultural values. The Government's willingness to prioritize spending on families is based on widely shared ideals about public responsibility for individual well-being and gender equality. Such social values are arguably more difficult to introduce into a new setting than specific policies and programmes.

NOTES

This policy brief was prepared as background material for the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Policy Responses to Low Fertility. It can be found online at <http://esa.un.org/PopPolicy/publications.aspx>. Queries can be sent to PopPolicy@un.org.

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The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or the East-West Center.

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