

The Gender Egalitarian Family Model: Empirical and Theoretical Problems

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Abstract: In the demographic literature, gender egalitarianism has become the leading prescription for successful family (re)production in highly developed countries. Recent trends bring into question the case for the gender egalitarian family model, however. Its empirical claims are dependent on the transient experience of the Nordic countries in the 1990s and 2000s as well as on an amalgamation effect in the comparative national data. Its theoretical basis is challenged by social processes including rising female childlessness and young male reaction against gender egalitarianism. A reckoning with the limitations of this family model is important for both social scientists and policymakers seeking explanations for contemporary low fertility and family decline in the advanced Western democracies.

Keywords: Fertility · Family · Gender equality · Gender revolution · Nordic

1 Introduction

It has been a decade since gender egalitarianism became the dominant explanation of successful family (re)production in highly developed countries. Led by some of the most prominent sociologists in the discipline (*Esping-Andersen* 2014; *Esping-Andersen/Billari* 2015; *Goldscheider* 2014; *Goldscheider et al.* 2015), this position argues that a “gender revolution” is generating a new “gender egalitarian equilibrium” in which women need not choose between family and work. Nowhere is this revolution more advanced than in the Nordic countries. Enabled by government policies such as generous maternity leave and state-provided daycare as well as by husbands/partners embracing childcare and domestic labor, Nordic women are said to uniquely realize the possibilities of both family and career. In short, “feminism and pronatalism work together” (*Chesnais* 1998: 96), an argument now platformed by the International Monetary Fund (*Doepke et al.* 2022).

Yet just as the gender egalitarian family model became dominant, the family in Nordic countries began a new and marked decline. In Sweden, widely considered the work-family “gold standard” (*Boling* 2015: 206), the total fertility rate (TFR) since 2017 has been consistently below the “near replacement” line of 1.8; in 2024 Sweden’s

TFR was just 1.43 (*Statistics Sweden* 2025a), a new national record low more typical of “stalled” or “incomplete” gender-revolutionized Germany (*Esping-Andersen* 2014: 141). One sees the same evidence in Sweden’s completed cohort fertility rate that sifts out large short-term fertility fluctuations for which the country is well known. Swedish women born in 1974 (age 50 in 2024) gave birth to the second-fewest number of children in sixty years (since the cohort born in 1913, second only to the 1973 cohort) while Swedish women born in 1984 (age 40 in 2024) had a cohort fertility rate of just 1.79, the lowest since the cohorts born in 1900–11 whose peak childbearing years came during the Great Depression (*Human Fertility Database*). A decline in marriage and union formation has accompanied these declines in fertility. *Cantalini et al.* (2024) show that the risk of first marriage in Sweden began falling after 2012. The likelihood of marrying in Sweden in 2021 was half the level of 2008 and around 25 percent below the prior low of 1998. The country has also witnessed a continuous decline in the risk of cohabitation formation since recording of such unions began in 2011. Most notable are the steep declines in the likelihood of Swedish parents to form either first marriages or consensual unions; by 2021 they were doing so at around half the rate or less from a decade earlier.

The story is similar across the Nordic countries.¹ In 2024 Denmark (1.47) and Norway (1.44) recorded total fertility rates only slightly higher than Sweden while Finland (1.25) was distinctly lower. Iceland’s TFR (1.56) was highest among the Nordics yet still quite low and undergoing a steep decline, being above replacement as recently as 2012. Like Sweden, Iceland and Finland both set national fertility rate record lows in 2024 with data going back to the mid-nineteenth century. Finland has fallen to “lowest low” levels measured by both period and completed cohort fertility, and in 2023 recorded its fewest number of live births since 1836 when the national population was just one-quarter its present size. Union formation in Finland has also declined markedly (*Hellstrand et al.* 2022) alongside fertility decline. Union dissolution risks in Norway have risen (*Zahl-Olsen et al.* 2023).

Such developments demand a reconsideration of the gender egalitarian argument. The relative decline of Nordic fertility and family formation rates to those of the “familialist” countries of continental Europe (*Esping-Andersen* 1999) calls into question the difference that gender egalitarianism makes. Their absolute decline casts into doubt the claim that gender egalitarianism has established a stable social equilibrium, particularly one that is in some manner demographically optimal. Such reconsideration extends to the original macro-level empirical foundation of the gender egalitarian family model argument, namely the positive correlation between fertility and female labor force participation.

This article argues that both the empirical and the theoretical case for the gender egalitarian family model are overstated. Its empirical edifice was constructed on conclusions drawn from the transient experience of the Nordic countries in the 1990s and 2000s as well as on unrecognized heterogeneity in the comparative national data. Its theoretical foundation lies in assumptions of declining plausibility as the

¹ Fertility figures in this paragraph are from national statistical databases.

twenty-first century unfolds. A reckoning with the problems of this family model is important for social scientists seeking explanations for the steep global fertility and related partnering declines of the past fifteen years (*Campisi et al. 2023; Kearney/Levine 2025; Burn-Murdoch 2025*). It is also important for policymakers, many of whom have come to believe a particular model of the family is prescriptive for solving all manner of social problems and who are now in need of at least supplementary if not alternative roadmaps for policy intervention.

2 The gender egalitarian family model

Two significant social transformations began in the advanced industrialized world in the 1970s. First, women's – particularly married women's – labor force participation rates (LFPRs) increased and the wage gap between men and women decreased. Second, fertility rates and marriage rates fell while divorce rates rose (*Mincer 1985*). After the dominance of the male breadwinner/female housewife model of the family, such changes were disorienting and led to arguments that these transformations were related. As (married) women entered the workforce, households shifted labor away from household production – including the production of children – toward market production. Rising female wages and increased specialization in market rather than household production likewise decreased the utility of marriage and increased the likelihood of divorce (*Becker 1981*). An incompatibility between female labor force participation and the family thus expressed itself prior to the 1970s as a combination of low female LFPRs, high fertility, and low divorce rates. In the 1970s and 1980s it manifested as a combination of rising female LFPRs, falling fertility, and rising divorce rates.

Scholars began to observe a surprising reversal of this relationship between household and market production in the 1990s. *Sundström and Stafford (1992)* appear to be the first to have done so in the case of Sweden. Comparing several EU countries in the early and mid-1990s, *Chesnais (1996; 1998: 96)* argued that “feminism and pronatalism work together” and cited Sweden in particular. *Esping-Andersen* was the first to offer a simple statistical analysis. Comparing 19 OECD countries with data from 1960 and 1992, he showed how the relationship between female LFPR and the fertility rate “has, literally, flip-flopped,” offering Nordic Denmark as representative of a country in which “female careers and children can become fairly compatible” (*Esping-Andersen 1999: 68*). *Ahn and Mira (2002)* found that “the cross-country correlation between female [labor force] participation rates and fertility rates has reversed its sign,” a trend led by the Nordics (and the United States). Comparing OECD country data in the years 1970 and 1996, *Brewster and Rindfuss (2000: 279)* argued likewise that, in the Nordic countries (and the United States), “women have found ways to combine work and child rearing”.

Goldscheider (2014; Goldscheider et al. 2015) has authored the dominant theory of the relationship between female market-based labor and the family. A “gender revolution” swept over Western countries beginning in the 1970s and persisting into the present. This revolution consists of two halves. In the first, gender equality

progresses in the public sphere but lags in the private. Rising female LFPR triggers falling fertility and rising divorce rates. Inegalitarian male-female relationships reinforced by the state's promotion of the male breadwinner/female housewife family model destabilize and weaken the family. In the second half of the gender revolution, gender equality advances in the private sphere. Gender egalitarianism takes hold within the family as fathers/husbands take up childcare and household labor. High female LFPR is in turn matched by high(er) fertility and marriage (or long-term cohabitation) rates. Egalitarian male-female relationships reinforced by the state's promotion of a dual-earner/dual-carer family model strengthen and stabilize the family.

While all Western countries have experienced the first half of the gender revolution, in only some – above all the Nordic countries – is the second half well under way. *Goldscheider et al.* (2015) highlight Sweden as where the second half of the gender revolution is most advanced, “strengthening families” through higher fertility and relationship stability. *Esping-Andersen and Billari* (2015) argue that a new stable pro-family “gender egalitarian equilibrium” had been reached in Scandinavia (and the Netherlands) combining both high fertility and relationship stability. *Anderson and Kohler* (2015) find a “gender-equity dividend” in Sweden and Denmark that produces “less voluntary childlessness” and “relatively high and stable fertility levels”. *De Laat and Sevilla-Sanz* (2011) argue that “any ... stimulant of men's contribution to home production will also promote both fertility and women's labor force participation” pointing to evidence from Norway and Sweden. *Boling* (2015) agrees, finding a “correlation between gender equality and fertility rates”. In a meta-analysis of research on female employment and fertility published since 1990, *Matysiak and Vignoli* (2025) find a positive relationship in the Nordic countries, France, and the Low Countries since 2000 and a mildly negative yet statistically insignificant correlation in the Anglosphere. According to *Leocádio et al.* (2025), “the literature consistently indicates a positive association at the macro level.” The boldest statement comes from *Doepke et al.* (2023) who dub the combination of female careers and family formation “a new era” based on “a new big idea,” a position that has found support from the International Monetary Fund (*Doepke et al.* 2022).

Although micro level studies give more “varied and diverse” results (*Leocádio et al.* 2025), they, too, have come to play a significant role in supporting the gender egalitarian family model. Scholars have found positive correlations between fertility, family formation, and gender egalitarian variables such as women's level of education (*Schwartz/Han* 2014), women's income (*Vitali/Arpino* 2016), men's egalitarian attitudes (*Sevilla-Sanz* 2009), and men's contributions to housework and childcare (*Carlson et al.* 2016). In defending the gender egalitarian position on family formation, *Goldscheider et al.* (2015: 218) argue micro-level studies are more significant and convincing due to criticisms that macro-level findings may be due to omitted variable bias or ecological fallacy. At the same time, micro-level correlations still depend on macro-level conditions. All the positive micro-level correlations are concentrated in the gender-egalitarian Nordic countries (and to some extent in the United States), demonstrating the importance of social context. Moreover, it

is macro-level relationships that indicate whether the second half of the gender revolution is, or even can be, generalized at a societal level.

3 Fertility

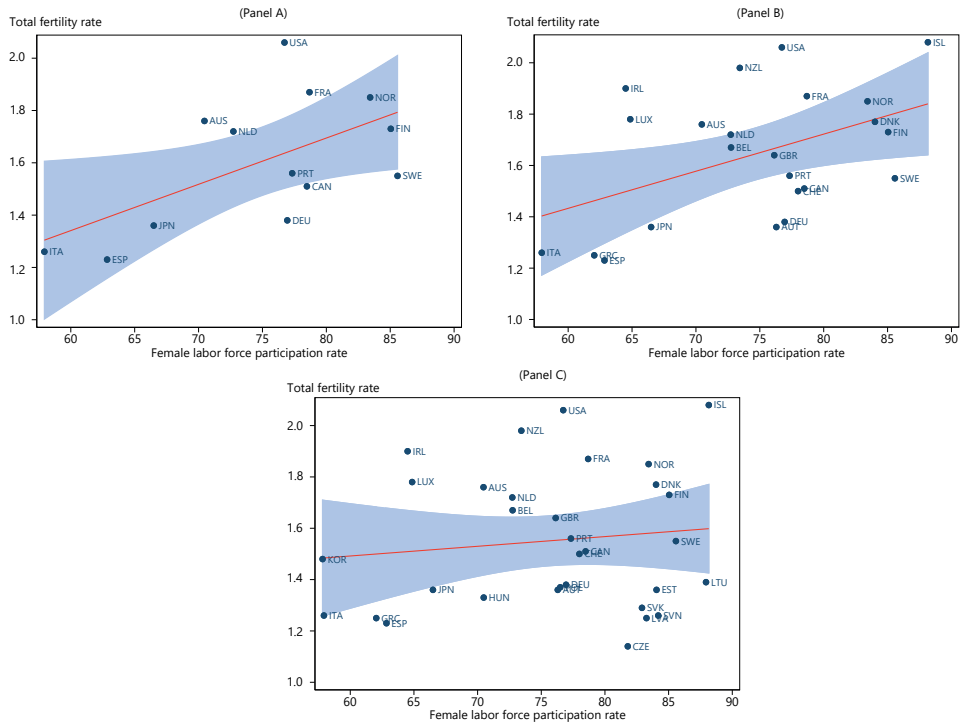
3.1 Cross-national comparisons

The earliest and foundational evidence for the gender egalitarian family model is cross-sectional national statistical relationships between fertility and various measures of the gender revolution. Consider the panels in Figure 1 based on data from the year 2000. Panel A reproduces Figure 12(b) from *Doepke et al.* (2023) that the authors use to demonstrate the positive relationship between fertility and female LFPR in the “new era.” Here we see the familiar upward sloping line strongly influenced by data points from the Nordic countries clustered at the far right end of the distribution. As the authors limit themselves to the thirteen countries for which 1980 data is also available, Panel B goes further to include data from all OECD countries (excepting Türkiye) that were members prior to 1994. With a more copious consideration of cases, the relationship weakens somewhat (adjusted R^2 declines from 0.29 to 0.18) but remains essentially the same.

Several methodological critiques of this analysis have been leveled. *Kögel* (2004) shows that OECD countries have notable heterogeneity that goes unacknowledged in a simple correlation. In particular, the female LFPRs of the Mediterranean countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain) have always been very low compared to that of the Nordics, while the magnitude of the fertility decline in the Mediterranean countries since the 1960s is very large in comparison. When this heterogeneity as well as fixed country-level effects are included in the statistical model, *Kögel* (2004) reports that, although the negative relationship between female LFPRs and fertility does weaken over time (though only for non-Nordic non-Mediterranean countries), the sign does not change. *Lesthaeghe* (2020) offers a similar critique, attributing the “flip flop” finding to the “split correlation fallacy”. He, too, demonstrates significant heterogeneity across European countries in both the timing of their post-1960 fertility decline and in their recuperation of fertility at older maternal ages. By separating countries into “early” and “late” postponers and calculating separate correlations between period fertility rates and female LFPRs for each group, the sign reversal disappears. In a study of six Western countries, *Engelhardt et al.* (2004) show that for all six there is no change in sign from the earlier to the later period (defined by country-specific breaks in the long-run slope of the regression line over the period 1960-1999/2000), although the negative relationship does weaken in all six and in the US and Sweden becomes statistically insignificant.

In short, these authors argue that the well-known “sign reversal” of the relationship between fertility and female LFPR is a statistical artifact. All three agree that country-level variation in the timing of fertility and female LFPR transitions from the early period (1950s-70s) explains the apparent positive relationship of the later period (1990s-2000s). This problem of heterogeneity is amplified by the

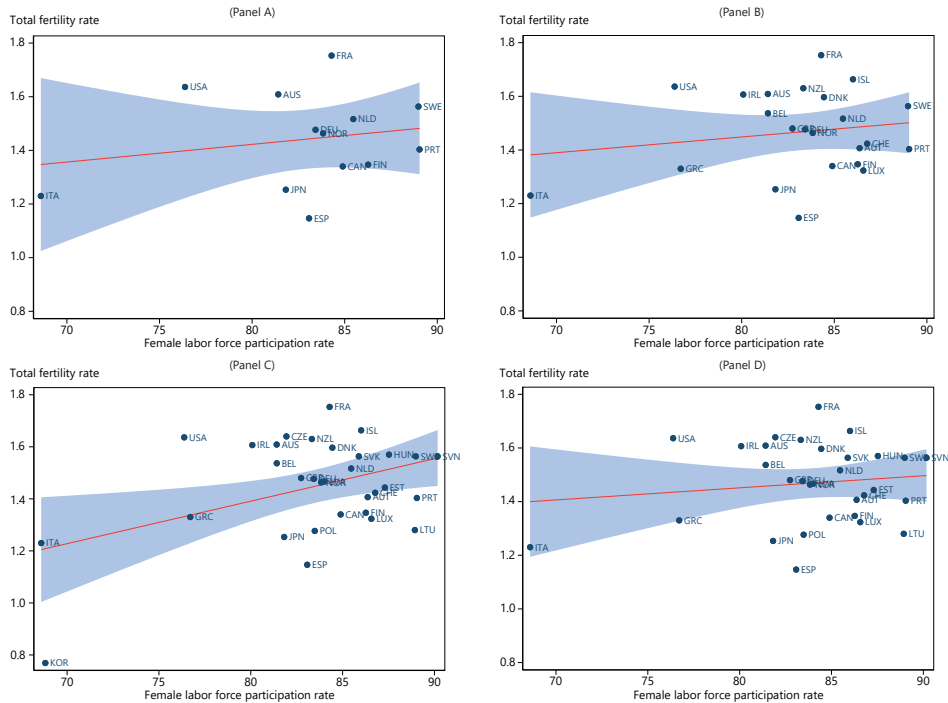
Fig. 1: Fertility and women's labor force participation across OECD countries, 2000



Note: Panel A is reproduced from *Doepeke et al.* (2023). Panel B expands the Doepeke dataset from 13 to 23 countries by including all pre-1994 OECD member countries except Türkiye. Panel C expands to 32 OECD countries, adding South Korea and the 8 post-communist OECD member countries of Central Europe. The female labor force participation rate is for women age 25-54. The blue space around the regression line is the 95% confidence interval.

Source: Own calculation based on *OECD* (2025a/b).

data displayed in Figure 1 Panel C. Expanding the number of countries from 23 to 32 OECD members (adding South Korea and the eight post-communist countries of Central Europe) eliminates any relationship between fertility and female LFPR ($p=0.50$, $R^2=0.02$). A possible objection to including these countries is that they as a group have a different institutional setting and historical experience compared to the countries of Western Europe (and presumably Japan). Thus by including them, one drowns out the positive relationship seen in Panels A and B. Of course, this is the critique in reverse leveled by the above authors. By combining what *Lesthaeghe* calls "Cluster A" (north and west Europe) and "Cluster B" (central, south, and east Europe) countries, two different groups with distinct cultural and institutional histories, a correlation is generated simply because the overall regression line "runs through the lower and upper clusters combined" (*Lesthaeghe* 2020: 7). Within clusters there is no relationship at all.

Fig. 2: Fertility and women's labor force participation across OECD countries, 2021-23

Note same as Figure 1. Panel D incorporates the same 32 countries of Panel C excepting South Korea.

Source: Own calculation based on *OECD* (2025a/b). *World Bank* (2025) was used for 2022-23 total fertility rates for Canada, Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

Even the simple positive relationship between fertility and female LFP no longer exists in contemporary data. Figure 2 repeats the analysis of Figure 1 but averaged over the years 2021-23, the three most recent years of available data at the time of writing. In both Panel A and Panel B there is no relationship between the two variables. The model fit is so poor in fact that the adjusted R-squares are negative in both cases (A: $p=0.51$, adjusted $R^2 = -0.05$; B: $p=0.44$, adjusted $R^2 = -0.02$). The same lack of relationship is found for the three years 2017-19 (not shown) indicating that this development is neither especially recent nor covid-induced. Unlike in 2000, a positive and statistically significant relationship does exist in the 32-country Panel C ($p=0.02$, adjusted $R^2=0.16$). This result is driven by a single outlier, however. South Korea is so distant from all other data points (Cook's $d=1.58$) that it pulls the left end of the regression line down. Without South Korea shown in Panel D, any relationship again disappears ($p=0.48$, adjusted $R^2 = -0.02$).

The data in Figure 2 is consistent with the critiques leveled by Kögel (2004), Engelhardt et al. (2004), and Lesthaeghe (2020). From 2000 to the present period

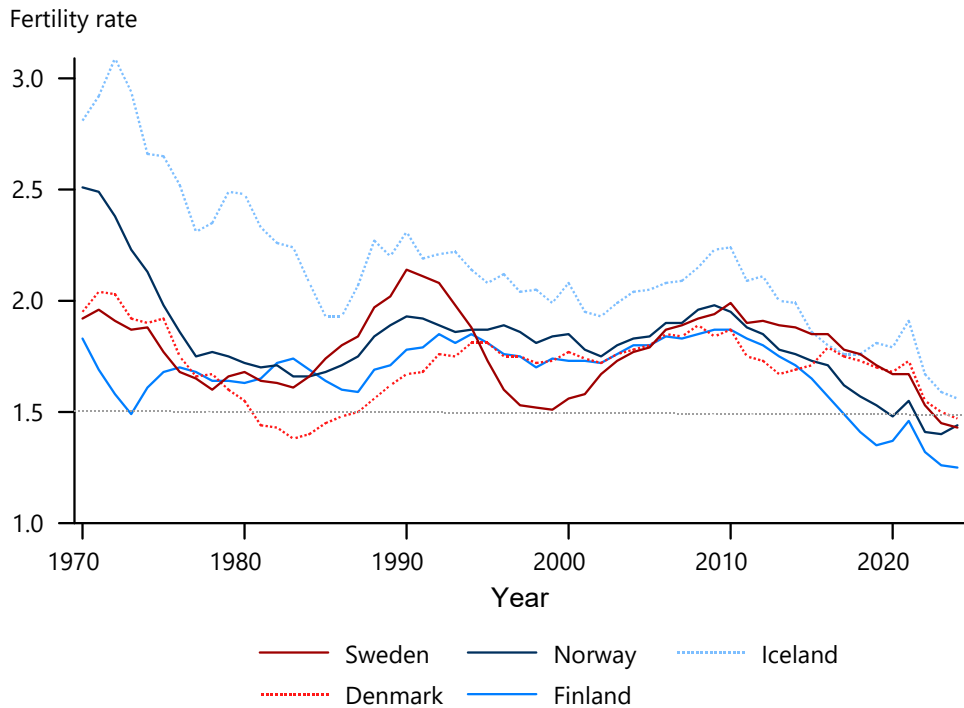
(2010s-2020s), central and southern European countries have transitioned from low to high levels of female labor force participation. No longer are rates over 80 percent peculiar to the Nordics; in fact, now nearly every OECD country exceeds that threshold. At the same time, fertility rates have markedly compressed across the OECD, falling dramatically in formerly high-fertility countries like the Nordics and the Anglosphere while rising somewhat in most of the very low-fertility countries of Continental Europe. The result is that the two clusters have become similar as low gender equality countries have “caught up” to the gender revolution leaders while, contrary to gender egalitarian expectations, fertility has fallen in general. *Doepke et al.’s* (2023) “new era” has turned out to be simply a transition period from a negative relationship between fertility and female LFPR to no relationship at all.

3.2 The Nordic countries

While cross-national comparisons have always played a significant role in supporting the case for the gender egalitarian family model, so, too, has country-specific data from the Nordic region. In fact, the model itself is derived from the Nordic experience. *Esping-Andersen* (1999) first suggested the existence of a distinct Nordic family welfare regime defined by high state spending on family services, daycare, and elder home care enabling high female labor force participation rates, (relatively) low household labor hours, and high levels of household autonomy for young adults and the elderly. This model’s viability rests on relatively robust total fertility rates “around replacement level,” generally meaning 1.8 or above (*Esping-Andersen/Billari* 2015: 4-6; *Sobotka* 2017: S23-24). While this claim was somewhat of an exaggeration,² Nordic period fertility in the 1990s and 2000s never fell below 1.5, the “very low” fertility line characteristic of countries in Central and Southern Europe as well as East Asia (*Chesnais* 1996, 1998; *McDonald* 2000: 3, 6). *Esping-Andersen* and *Billari* (2015) saw in the Nordic countries (as well as the Netherlands) “a new and dominant family equilibrium” rooted in “hegemonic gender egalitarianism”. *Goldscheider et al.* (2015: 212) did “not predict fertility oscillations” in Nordic countries completing the gender revolution; instead near-replacement fertility was secured. *Sobotka* (2017) emphasized the solid foundation of stable Nordic cohort fertility rates beneath the tumult of period fertility rates. Being “post-transitional societies,” they had reached a new equilibrium of postponed but not diminished fertility that “had stabilized close to the replacement level threshold” (*Sobotka* 2017: S37).

Nordic fertility declines since 2008-10 suggest such confidence was misplaced. Figure 3 shows that as of 2024, every Nordic country save Iceland has a period fertility rate under 1.5, demography’s traditional “low” threshold. In Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, 2024 TFRs were all-time recorded national lows. Not only the level but the pace of Nordic fertility decline is significant. Since the most recent peaks (Denmark: 2008; Iceland and Norway: 2009; Finland and Sweden: 2010), the TFR in

² *Chesnais* (1996: 732, 1998: 85) drew the Swedish total fertility rate floor at 1.6 but was quickly contradicted by the country’s sub-1.6 TFRs over the years 1997-2001.

Fig. 3: Total fertility rates for the Nordic countries, 1970-2024

Source: Own calculation based on Human Fertility Database, 1970-2024, and national statistical agencies, 2023-24.

Norway and Sweden has fallen more than 0.5 children per woman; in Finland and Iceland, more than 0.6. In relative terms, period fertility has fallen 20 percent in Denmark and around 30 percent in every other Nordic country. Excepting Sweden in the 1990s, these are extended rates of decline last experienced in the mid-1960s to early 1980s, the classic period of strong work-family conflicts that were supposedly resolved by the gender egalitarian family model.

The Swedish exception is an important one for the Nordic fertility story. From 1990 to 1999 Sweden's TFR declined by more than 0.6 children per woman in absolute terms and nearly 30 percent in relative terms. Yet it is not the fertility decline but its recuperation afterwards that is most noted. From 1999 to 2006 Sweden's fertility recovered rapidly and then stabilized above 1.8 for a decade. The immediate cause of this roller coaster ride was fertility postponement. Over the longer period 1990-2016 there was no quantum effect on Swedish fertility, only a tempo effect. Completed cohort fertility of women born in 1940 (age 50 in 1990) down to women born in 1970 (age 20 in 1990) did not change at all, remaining within a remarkably narrow band of 1.97-2.06 for thirty years. *Sobotka* (2017) concluded that excessive attention was being paid to gyrating period fertility rates, distracting from the underlying fact of stable long-term cohort fertility rates. Thanks to the Swedish experience,

Goldscheider et al. (2015: 215) confidently asserted that “young adults can wait until their early or even mid-30s to begin families” and still bear their desired two children over a lifetime.

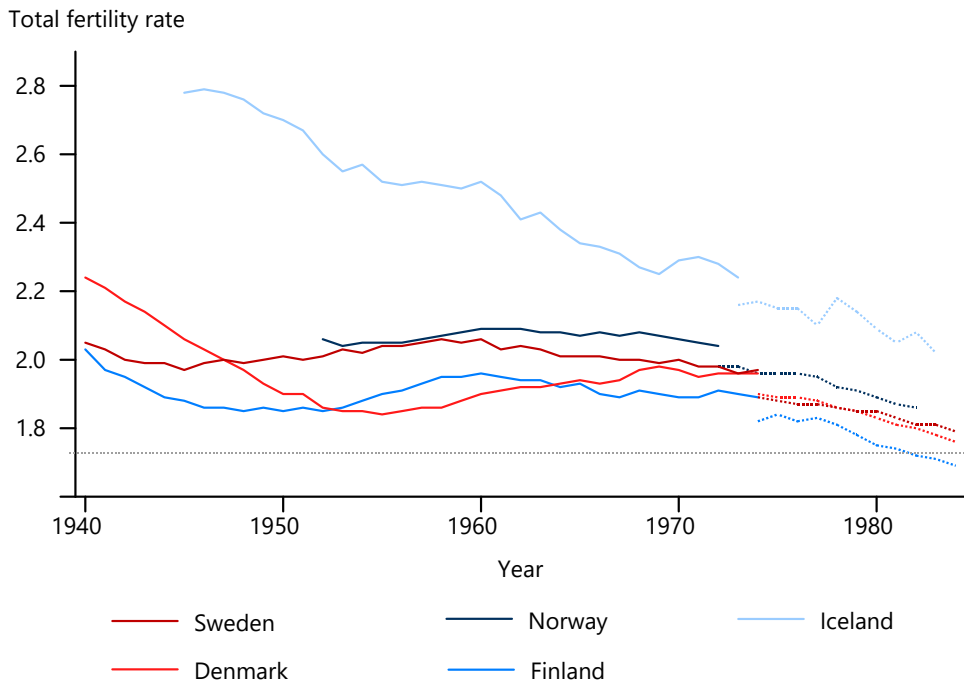
Declines in Nordic cohort fertility are particularly damaging to such optimism. Figure 4 shows completed fertility rates for annual cohorts of Nordic women born in 1940 down to 1972-74. Since the cohorts born in the early 1950s, lifetime fertility in Sweden and Norway has been generally stable while it has actually risen in Denmark and Finland. That being said, these are women who largely completed their fertility before the declines since 2008-10. The dashed lines in Figure 4 show realized fertility rates for annual cohorts of Nordic women at age 40 born since 1972-74 down to 1982-84. Especially in light of fertility postponement in the Nordic countries, these are cohorts with a significant post-2008 fertility window. The dashed lines have lower values than the solid lines simply because some women bear children after age 40, although the gap between a cohort’s true completed fertility rate and its rate at age 40 will be very small.³ With this caveat in mind, one can see a rather different pattern emerge in the recent data. Cohort fertility at age 40 is declining in all five Nordic countries. In Sweden, age 40 lifetime fertility of the 1984 cohort was the lowest since the cohort born in 1910. For Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, their latest age 40 cohort data is the lowest on record.⁴ Finland’s completed cohort fertility rate for the 1984 cohort will almost surely fall below 1.75, the demographic literature’s “very low” threshold.

More sobering still are Nordic cohort fertility projections. *Hellstrand et al.* (2021) take fertility data through 2018 for the five Nordic countries and project lifetime fertility for women born 1975-88 (women age 30-43 at the end of the dataset). Using four different forecasting models, they find that cohort fertility is likely to continue to decline slowly and then possibly stabilize in Sweden and Denmark, but decline sharply and continue to do so in Iceland, Finland and Norway. The forecasts are most stark for Finland. Using a projection method they find produces “more reasonable” results, *Hellstrand et al.* (2021) estimate that fertility for the Finnish cohorts born in the late 1980s is likely to fall to 1.6, a level typical of the German-speaking countries. According to this same projection method, they observe “the Nordic average completed fertility will decrease from 2.0 to an all-time low of 1.8”. Note that these projections do not incorporate the very steep fertility declines since 2018 and thus should be considered optimistic.

The structure of Nordic fertility decline makes a Swedish-style recuperation consistent with the gender egalitarian family model unlikely to impossible. Before the period beginning about 2010, period fertility rates for Nordic women in their 30s had never declined. This fact was key to the fertility recuperation that sustained

³ In 2024 women age 41-55 in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland added 0.043-0.05 to the overall national TFR (*Human Fertility Database*).

⁴ Age 40 cohort fertility by country, year of latest data = year of record low, and year range of available dataset: Denmark, 1984 (1901-84); Norway, 1982 (1952-82); Finland, 1984 (1924-84); Iceland, 1983 (1945-83).

Fig. 4: Completed cohort fertility rates for the Nordic countries, 1940-1984 cohorts

Note: Completed cohort data through 1974 for Sweden, Denmark, and Finland; 1973 for Iceland; and 1972 for Norway. Cohort fertility data at age 40 appears in dashed lines for cohorts 1975-84 for Sweden, Denmark, and Finland; 1974-83 for Iceland; and 1973-82 for Norway.

Source: Own calculation based on Human Fertility Database.

Nordic cohort fertility rates through the dramatic TFR declines of the 1970s-80s across all five countries and in Sweden especially in the 1990s (*Hellstrand et al.* 2021). Since 2010, however, age-specific fertility rates (ASFRs) for women age 30-34 have declined in all five countries by 13-26 percent. ASFRs have likewise declined for women age 35-39 since 2016, and since 2021 even for women age 40-44 (*Human Fertility Database*). Such declines are inconsistent with a pattern of fertility postponement and recuperation. Instead they indicate a clear quantum decline.

As there is no evidence that Nordic political and cultural commitment to gender egalitarianism has slackened since 2010 (*Hellstrand et al.* 2021), *Lesthaeghe* (2020: 14) is correct in noting this situation is "a far cry from the optimist theory based on *Esping-Andersen*['s] U-curve with fertility increases being driven by advancing gender equality." In fact, at the country level there is no such U-curve in the Nordic countries over time (*Kolk* 2019). Declining cohort fertility in particular has proven false the earlier declarations of a new equilibrium of high gender egalitarianism combined with near-replacement fertility. With hindsight it appears that the correlation was likely spurious, a product of heterogeneous timing of country-level transitions to

a common Western condition of high gender egalitarianism and low (<1.7 TFR) or possibly very low (<1.5) fertility.

4 Union formation and stability

The case for the gender egalitarian family model rests not only on fertility rates. A second, although less emphasized, empirical claim is that the model enjoys superior outcomes on union formation and stability. That is, not only are near-replacement numbers of children born to dual earner/dual carer couples, but those children are raised by two parents in stable long-lasting unions.

This would, of course, be a significant reversal from the 1970s-80s. Like low fertility, high levels of divorce and singleness are understood by family scholars as temporary manifestations of the contradictions in the male breadwinner/female housewife family model under conditions of female empowerment. *Esping-Andersen* and *Billari* (2015) are most explicit in their presentation of a multiple-equilibrium model of family formation. "High fertility and stable marriages" exist both before and after the "female revolution" because these equilibria reflect people's underlying desire for family and children. It is only during the revolution itself, when norms are disrupted and confused, that family formation fails. They present the Nordics as exemplars. In the late 1980s these countries had both the highest levels of gender equality and the highest levels of non-partnered women. In the late 2000s, however, the Nordics combined the highest levels of gender equality with moderate levels of non-partnered women. The return to union formation in the Nordic countries is offered as evidence that a new "gender egalitarian equilibrium" has emerged. *Esping-Andersen* and *Billari* (2015: 2-3) conclude that "the 'less family' trend was transitory rather than a harbinger of a new era".

Goldscheider et al. (2015) present a similar argument. The "weakening of the family" in the 1970s-80s was the product of an incomplete gender revolution. With that revolution's near-completion in countries like Sweden, a "strengthening of the family" including "greater family stability" is apparent. While the authors admit that marriage has diminished, stable cohabitation without marriage now exists as a substitute form of coupling. *Goldscheider et al.* (2015) support their claims by citing micro-level studies showing greater union formation and stability among highly educated women and gender egalitarian men in Western countries. Sweden is again the ideal setting in which "the spread of more egalitarian values on the national level and more progressive and family-supportive policies will reinforce the sharing of home tasks, which in turn will have a positive effect on fertility and family stability" (*Goldscheider et al.* 2015: 228).

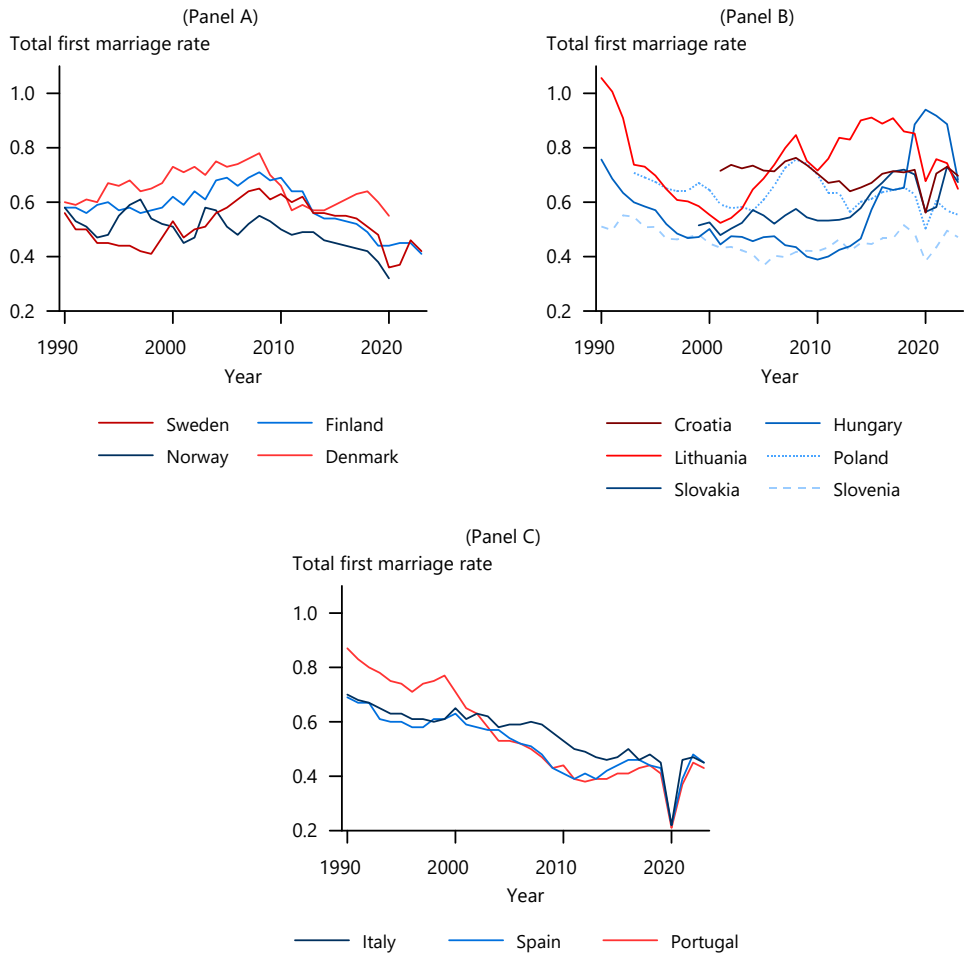
Ohlsson-Wijk et al. (2020) supply supportive data for Sweden. The country's negative trend in first-marriage formation from the mid-1960s to 1998 reversed in the 2000s and, after 2008, plateaued at levels similar to the late 1960s-early 1970s. While the fraction of ever-married women decreased for every Swedish cohort born from 1935 to the late 1960s, marriage levels increased after the 1970 cohort. *Ohlsson-Wijk et al.* (2020) also "observe a tentative recent trend break in divorce risks ...

[and] a stabilization or even decline in levels of dissolved marriages". Incorporating cohabitation as a form of union, the authors likewise find that "the overall level of union instability has also leveled off". They conclude that "the most recent trends in Swedish family dynamics may rather point towards more family stability than more family volatility" in line with the gender egalitarian family model projections.

Like the Nordic fertility story, optimism around family formation and stability is rooted in old data and trends that have reversed. The datasets used by *Ohlsson-Wijk et al.* (2020) extend only to 2016 at the latest. Using more recent data, *Cantalini et al.* (2024) show that the risk of first marriage in Sweden began declining after 2012 and steeply so after 2016. The likelihood of marrying in Sweden in 2021 was half the level of 2008 and some 25 percent less than the prior low in 1998. The country has also witnessed a continuous and marked decline in cohabitation since the state began recording such unions in 2011, with a particular decline in persons 29 years of age and older. Most notable are the steep declines in the likelihood of Swedish parents to form either first marriages or consensual unions; by 2021 they were doing so at around half the rate or less of a decade earlier. Sweden witnessed a notable post-covid marriage recovery in 2022, yet total marriages that year were still lower than in 2019, fell in 2023 and then plateaued (*Statistics Sweden* 2025b).

Union formation is also weakening in Finland. Working from Finnish register data, *Jalovaara and Andersson* (2023) find that rates of union formation (including both marriage and cohabitation) among 18-49-year-olds have been in decline since the late 2000s and, much as in Sweden, sharply so after 2016. Rate declines have been steepest for men and women age 18-34, down 10-20 percent depending on age group and sex. Rates of separation have increased, nearly doubling from around 35 dissolutions per 1000 individuals in a union in 1989 to around 60 in 2019. Much of this is caused by high levels of instability among those under 30, whose rates of breakup have risen from 70 to 140 per 1000 (ages 18-24) and 60 to 100 per 1000 (ages 25-29) since 2019. Even the oldest groups in the dataset have experienced a near-doubling of their rates of separation over the past 30 years. *Hellstrand et al.* (2022) reinforce these results, finding in Finland since the early 2000s "a long-term decline in marriage rates and increasing dissolution rates among cohabiting couples".

While cross-national data on union formation and dissolution are sparse, nevertheless some comparisons can be made. Data on total first marriage rates (TFMRs) show that Nordic declines in marriage are not peculiar to Sweden and Finland. After increasing during the late 1990s and 2000s, Panel A of Figure 5 shows that the TFMRs of all four large Nordic countries declined after 2008. In Finland, Norway and Sweden, rates have continued to fall since 2016, with Finnish and Norwegian TFMRs now well below their levels in the 1990s. This is not the case for all of Europe, however. Panel B shows rates for the six historically Catholic post-communist countries of Central Europe (CCE): Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. While the trend in both Croatia and Slovenia has been largely flat, Poland in the 2000s and Lithuania, Hungary, and Slovakia in the 2010s experienced significant increases although with more recent reversals. Rates for Southern Europe (Italy, Portugal and Spain), held up regularly in the literature as the

Fig. 5: Total first marriage rate, women ages 15-49, by country, 1990-2023 (or latest year)

Note: Annual rates are the sum of five-year age groups for women age 15-49. Cubic spline interpolation was used to fill in a small number of missing values.

Source: Own calculation based on *Eurostat* (2025a).

high-income world's principal instances of family failure, are shown in Panel C. From the mid-1990s through the early 2010s, the Nordic and CCE countries had relatively similar and high TFMRs. Since the early 2010s these two blocs have diverged, so much so that the CCE countries (excepting Slovenia) now have TFMRs that most Western European countries have not experienced since the 1980s. At the same time the Nordic countries (excepting perhaps Denmark) have TFMRs most similar to those of Southern Europe.

A different way of measuring union strength is by the living arrangements of minor children. High levels of two-parent families are indicative of stability regardless of marital status. Relative to the four large Nordic countries, Table 1 shows the United States – generally considered an exemplar of family instability (Musick/Micheltmore 2018) – has the lowest percentage of children age 0-17 living with two parents (not necessarily their biological parents) and the highest percentage of children age 0-17 living with one parent. However, US family figures are influenced notably by a large outlier group, Black non-Hispanics, having an unusually low percentage of children living with two parents and an unusually high percentage living with a single parent. If they are removed from the US figures, the percentage of American children living in two-parent households is nearly the same as in Finland while the percentage of children in single-parent households is about the same as in Sweden. In the current period, family stability is not obviously superior in the gender egalitarian Nordic countries.

Tab. 1: Children's living arrangements by country, 2024

Variable	US	US ^a	US ^b	DEN	FIN	NOR	SWE
Percent of children 0-17 living with two parents	71.2	75.5	44.5	81.7	76.4	79.9	78.4
Percent of children 0-17 living with a single parent	24.7	20.8	48.8	17.1	22.2	19.0	20.0

Note: US^a = United States except Black non-Hispanic; US^b = United States Black non-Hispanic.
Source: Own calculation based on *US Census Bureau* (2024); *Eurostat* (2025b).

5 Rethorizing family demographics

While the optimism of the gender egalitarian family model has been rooted in empirical trends of the 1990s and 2000s that have since been superseded, it is equally founded in a theory of society, gender, and human nature that also needs questioning. Generally known as "gender revolution theory" (Trimarchi/Van Bavel 2018; Raybould/Sear 2021) or "fertility-equality reversal theory" (Kolk 2019; Begall/Hiekel 2025), it relies on three foundational assumptions. The first is a conviction that human beings are biologically and psychologically conditioned to seek out sexual coupling and reproduction (Goldscheider 2014: 1042; Goldscheider et al. 2015: 230-231). A second presumes women in particular want to bear and raise children at levels adequate for population replacement (Esping-Andersen/Billari 2015: 2). A third claims that men will either acquiesce to or even embrace gender egalitarianism as the necessary price of family formation (Esping-Andersen/Billari 2015; Goldscheider et al. 2015: 217).

These assumptions drive scholars working within gender revolution theory to direct research toward socio-economic impediments to family formation and the realization of desired fertility (Spears/Geruso 2025). Shortcomings in state-provided

childcare, education, job flexibility, the tax code, full-time female employment, and the like thus emerge as signal barriers to the realization of a gender egalitarian equilibrium. State policies are oriented toward the manipulation of labor market and educational institutions so as to allow a socially optimal equilibrium to emerge. In cases of “cultural lag” where behaviors are yet to adapt to new gender egalitarian material conditions (Anderson/Kohler 2015), states can actively foster gender norm change and the second half of the gender revolution (Lammi-Taskula 2006; Kotsadam/Finseraas 2011; Unterhofer/Wrohlich 2017; Patnaik 2019).

If the assumptions of gender revolution theory are unwarranted or dubious, however, we have substantial reason to believe that the post-2010 declines in family formation and fertility are not simply struggles along the path toward a new family equilibrium. Confidence in the power of human nature to both produce male-female sexual congress and for that congress to produce near replacement numbers of children is perhaps the least persuasive of the three assumptions. Data from the United States over the period 2017-19 show that 51 percent of American women age 15-49 are using near-100 percent effective forms of contraception: abstinence; female or male surgical sterilization; or long-acting reversible contraceptives such as intrauterine devices or birth control implants (Daniels/Abma 2020). If the link between passion and reproduction first became optional through the birth control pill sixty years ago, today it is tenuous. Moreover, infertility is a growing problem across Western countries rooted in both social and biological causes. Average maternal age continues to increase. In 2023 women’s mean age at first birth was 30 years or over in fifteen OECD countries and at least 29 years in another eight (Eurostat 2025c; *Human Fertility Database*; national statistical databases). Fertility delayed is to some degree fertility foregone, especially at increasingly higher maternal ages. College-educated women in the United States (Hamilton 2021: 4), United Kingdom (Ermisch 2024: 332), and Austria (Statistics Austria 2023) – presumably those with the greatest ability to find a suitable partner and demand gender egalitarianism from him – currently have TFRs around 1.4, a level far below replacement.

Individual desire for replacement-level (or higher) fertility also plays an important role in support of the gender egalitarian family model. However, the analytic value of the concept of desired fertility is far from clear. The two-child norm is certainly strongly entrenched throughout Western countries (Sobotka/Beaujouan 2014; Hartnett/Gemmill 2020). At the same time, research shows a weak relationship between fertility ideals and achieved fertility. Casting doubt on the usefulness of data on desired fertility, Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan (2019: 47) find that “people often do not have well-defined, stable and coherent [fertility] preferences and intentions from early in life, and are not consistent in carrying through those they report in surveys.” Fertility decision-making models differentiate between a desire (“a wish to achieve an actionable goal”) and an intention (“a decision-based commitment to pursue an actionable goal with an implementation plan”), giving rise to the possibility that people who desire children may at the same time have no intention to realize that desire (Miller 2011). Using a pioneering Spanish dataset on obstacles to realizing fertility desires, Esteve *et al.* (2021) found that a combination of partnership and health reasons were more determinative than economic reasons.

This was especially true regarding a first child for which material reasons played little role at all (among women). A Pew Research survey of childless American adults found similar results (*Minkin et al.* 2024). Among those age 50 and over, the top three “major reasons” they never had children were: failing to find a suitable partner (33 percent); not wanting children (31 percent); and the ineffable “it just never happened” (39 percent). While policy interventions to “remove obstacles” to fertility due to coupling difficulties, health problems, and cultural disinterest are imaginable, they seem far less likely to bear fruit compared to marginally important material interventions in which states are well-practiced.

Finally, the premise of men’s growing commitment to gender egalitarianism should be questioned. South Korea’s extremely low fertility rate appears to be caused in part by a very large gender gap in feminist values (*Kim/Lee* 2022). Polls in the United States show the youngest cohort of men (born since the mid-1990s) is the least likely to self-identify as feminist and the most likely to claim victimization by sex discrimination (*Cox* 2023). Across the European Union, young men are spearheading “a backlash against feminism and sexual freedom” (*Off et al.* 2022). In the US, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the general political-ideological gap between men and women age 18-29 has swelled since 2010 (*Burn-Murdoch* 2024). *Evans* (2024) argues that gendered ideological polarization in Western countries is driven by a combination of an increasingly feminized public culture, young men’s downward economic mobility, and the segmentation of social media bubbles, all trends that seem unlikely to reverse in the near future.

The rise of right-wing populism in the Nordic countries offers an interesting window on male attitudes in highly gender-egalitarian societies. Voters with conservative gender attitudes are considerably more likely to support the Sweden Democrats (*Off* 2023) while in Denmark and Norway, men and supporters of right-of-center political parties exhibit “gender fatigue,” an expression of backlash permissible in highly gender-egalitarian countries (*Kjaer et al.* 2025). On the other side of the gender divide, increasing support for the Sweden Democrats has been shown to depress the fertility of highly educated women (*Comolli/Andersson* 2021) whom research shows hold the strongest gender-egalitarian attitudes (*Jakobsson/Kotsadam* 2010).

This development may not be negative for fertility over the long run. While empirical support is mixed for gender revolution theory’s claim that higher gender egalitarianism produces high fertility, there does seem to be broad support for the claim that gender egalitarianism produces higher fertility than a “non-complementary division of labor” characteristic of the female “double shift” (*Raybould/Sear* 2021). Compared to a “traditional” or complementary non-egalitarian division of labor, however, gender egalitarian attitudes are associated with lower fertility ideals, lower fertility intentions, higher childlessness, and lower realized fertility (*Knight/Brinton* 2017; *Shang/Yin* 2020; *Paul/Grönlund* 2024; *Begall/Hiekel* 2025). This is consistent with research showing higher fertility indicators among right-wing persons (*Fieder/Huber* 2018; *Arpino/Mogi* 2024) and religious persons (*Schnabel* 2021). Of course, the number of such persons is quite low in Western countries today. A shift in female attitudes toward some version of non-egalitarian gender complementarity, although

perhaps difficult to imagine, would almost surely increase fertility well above current gender egalitarian levels.

6 Conclusion

This article has shown that the case for the gender egalitarian family model has been at best overstated, at worst incorrect. On both fertility and family formation grounds, the model has not realized the claims and expectations made for it.

The case for the gender egalitarian family model has long relied upon two foundational empirical relationships. The first is the “sign reversal” or “flip-flop” in the relationship between fertility and gender equality in the OECD countries. Using comparative national data, the literature shows a negative relationship of the 1960s and 1970s turning positive in the 1990s and 2000s. The empirical basis of this claim has long been suspect, however, as critics argued the correlation was spurious. Moreover, this article shows that data from the 2010s and 2020s do not indicate a positive relationship. The second important empirical support has been the experience of the Nordic countries. Over the past 10-15 years, Nordic fertility and family formation indicators have fallen sharply with no concomitant decline in gender equality. Today at total fertility rates under 1.5, the fertility advantage of the Nordic countries relative to those of supposedly dysfunctional Central Europe has nearly disappeared.

The empirical shortcomings of the gender egalitarian family model bring into question its theoretical foundation. Gender revolution theory expects that core social processes will (and already have in Nordic countries) generate a gender-egalitarian equilibrium of families and fertility. Its assumptions and presumed causal relationships are suspect, however. Several trends among the young undermine the creation of couples in the first place. Those like the so-called “loneliness epidemic” are external to the theory, but ideological polarization along gender lines and male backlash are processes internal to the theory. The prevalence of near-100 percent effective birth control, also internal to the theory, interrupts the translation of sexual congress into fertility. The desire for near-replacement-level fertility is empirically debatable while growth in childlessness puts ever greater demographic responsibility on the smaller number of women who continue to be or become mothers.

A reckoning with the limitations of the case for the gender egalitarian family model is important for both social scientists and policymakers. A solution to the problems of low fertility and family breakdown in the wealthy democracies does not appear to have been found in the Nordic countries. This is not to say that this model of the family is not worth pursuing for deeper liberal values of gender egalitarianism, moral autonomy, and individual freedom. However, those values will have to be balanced against the simultaneous interests of both the state and society in its own reproduction.

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