

The decline of family size ideals and the Great Recession in Europe

The number of children individuals would like to have, or would have liked to have had, also known as personal ideal family size, has been stable in the EU-15 as a whole in the past decade (Figure 1). This is not surprising, given that childbearing ideals reflect preferences at cultural and normative level and do not change very easily over time and through the individuals' life course.

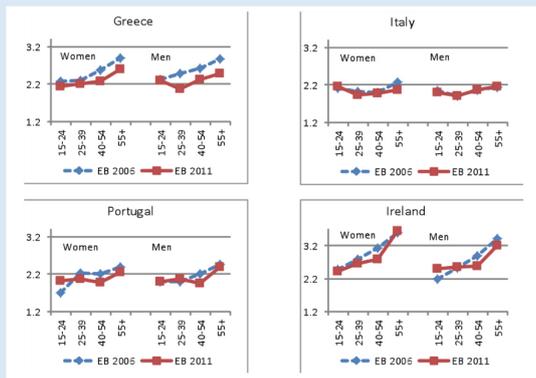
This aggregate uniformity hides, however, substantial cross-country differences. Over the past five years (2006-2011), a sharp decline in the ideal family size has indeed been observed in Greece, one of the European countries most severely affected by the recent economic crisis. Elsewhere, the decrease has been either of a smaller magnitude (United Kingdom) or has affected only specific subgroups, e.g. men, or women, or certain age groups (Portugal, Belgium, Finland, France, Malta and Sweden; Testa, 2012).

Ten years of fertility preferences

Temporal trends in childbearing preferences are examined using three rounds of Eurobarometer data collected in 2001, 2006 and 2011. In each of the three waves questions on fertility and fertility intentions are administered to interviewed people: around 1,000 individuals aged 15 or above in each of the Member States, overall 15 in 2001, and 27 in 2006 and 2011. Question wording is almost identical, which allows comparison across countries and over time. Reported ideal family sizes have been far from uniform across countries. Unlike in Greece, in Italy the mean ideal family size observed in 2011 almost overlaps that recorded in 2006 in each of the broad age groups considered, signaling a substantial stability over time (Figure 2). In Portugal and Ireland only people in certain ages, especially between 40 and 54, reported a decrease in their family size ideals. In both countries the decline of the *general* ideal family size (i.e. the ideal number of children for a family in general, which reflects the preferences at the normative level) is stronger than the decline in *personal* ideal family size (which reflects the individuals' own preferences).

Greece and Italy

Figure 2 - Ideal number of children in Europe (selected countries, 2006, 2011)



Source: own elaborations on Eurobarometer surveys (2001, 2006, 2011)

In Greece, family size ideals decline while actual family size remains constant: this results in a reduction of the discrepancy between ideal and actual fertility of about 0.2-0.4 children depending on the age group considered. Ideal fertility has traditionally been higher than actual fertility, which can be used as an argument for the introduction of measures aimed at supporting families with children. As the gap between the two declines, one might argue that policy interventions in favour of families are no longer desirable. But the opposite conclusion is, in our opinion more convincing: the abrupt decline in an otherwise stable indicator may pave the way to a further reduction of fertility, which is surely not what southern Europe needs now. What about Italy? The strong stability of ideals suggests little change in the ideal family size as well as in the ideal-actual fertility gap in the coming years. Whether the young interviewed people will continue to report the same ideal number of children in periods of rising taxation and increasing unemployment and uncertainty is a question that cannot be answered yet, but Eurobarometer will help us monitor the Italians' childbearing preferences in the years to come.

Read more Testa, M.R. 2012. Family sizes in Europe: Evidence from the 2011 Eurobarometer survey. [European Demographic Research Paper N. 2](#) . Vienna Institute of Demography, Austrian Academy of Sciences