

Joanna Leśniak, Monika Mynarska

## **Is it the Ring or the Relationship: Gendered Links between Relationship Context and Fertility Intentions**

Extended abstract for the European Population Conference 2026

### **Topic and Motivation**

In Poland, cohabitation and LAT (living-apart-together) unions have become increasingly visible in the landscape of intimate relationships. While the literature variously frames cohabitation as a “trial union”, a transitional step toward marriage, or a durable alternative of it, the Polish case combines the growing diversity of union forms with the still-salient normativity of marriage as the preferred context for family formation. Against this backdrop, we ask how formal status of relationship and subjective satisfaction with its quality jointly relate to short-term childbearing intentions among childless adults, and whether these associations differ for women and men.

Our approach to cohabitation integrates following perspectives: (a) Second Demographic Transition which links union diversification to individualization and the waning centrality of marriage (Lesthaeghe, 2010, 2020; Van de Kaa, 2001); (b) model of cohabitation diffusion proposed by Kathleen Kiernan (2002), that traces the stages through which cohabitation moves from marginal and deviant to trial, then alternative and eventually a substitute for marriage; (c) relationship quality and development—beyond formal status—as a factor that shapes partnership trajectories and fertility planning.

Anchored in this theoretical framework, we examine how the formal status of a relationship and its subjectively assessed quality are linked to fertility plans in Poland, with a focus on childbearing intentions as a key stage in the decision-making process that precedes behavior (Miller, 2011). Accordingly, our first research question asks whether formal relationship status—i.e., being married, cohabiting, in a LAT union, or single—differentiates childbearing plans of childless individuals. In a second step, restricting the analysis to partnered individuals, we ask whether childbearing intentions are associated not only with formal status but also with the quality of the relationship.

### **Data**

Analyses focus on childless adults aged 18–40, residing in Poland. The survey was administered via an online questionnaire in March 2025, fielded by an external

Accorp/Pollster agency, certified by the Polish Association of Market and Opinion Researchers. The sample was drawn from an online panel (stratified random sampling), covering 1,930 respondents (1,057 women and 873 men). All analyses were conducted separately for women and men to capture any gendered patterns.

## **Methods**

Childbearing intentions over a three-year perspective were measured using two items related to an intensity of planning and probability of having a child in the given time frame. The answers to these questions were averaged into a continuous index ranging 0-10, with higher scores indicating stronger intentions. As for the relationship type, we distinguish between: (1) marriage; (2) cohabitation; (3) LAT (living apart together); and (4) individuals who were not in a relationship (single). Relationship satisfaction was measured by a single global item, with the 0-10 scale, following the approach applied in the Generations and Gender Survey (Kreidl & Hubatková, 2023; Van Damme & Dykstra, 2018). Covariates, like age, education and municipality size were also included in analyses.

We estimate multiple regression models predicting the intensity of childbearing intentions. Model 1 includes relationship type and socio-demographic controls in the full sample. Model 2 restricts to partnered respondents and adds relationship satisfaction. Finally, we estimate a model predicting relationship satisfaction based on the relationship type. We estimated all models separately for women and men.

## **Findings**

Among women, marriage was associated with significantly stronger childbearing intentions than cohabitation. No significant difference was found between cohabitation and LAT, with single women showing the lowest propensity to plan motherhood.

For men, there were no significant differences in childbearing intentions between married or cohabiting respondents. In contrast, both LAT and single individuals report significantly weaker intentions, underscoring the centrality of co-residence for men.

When we excluded singles from analyses and added relationship satisfaction to the model, the pattern by union type remained unchanged: among women, childbearing intention for married was higher than for cohabiting; among men, co-residence was more important for child planning than formal status of their relationship. Relationship satisfaction turned out to be a non-significant predictor of childbearing intentions for either gender, although effects are marginal (trend-level) in both cases. However, zero-order correlations showed a weak but significant association between satisfaction and intentions only among men.

Predicting satisfaction from union type revealed no significant difference among women across marriage, cohabitation and LAT. Among men, marriage is associated with higher satisfaction than cohabitation, and LAT is associated with lower satisfaction than cohabitation. This result suggests that legal formalization maps more strongly onto men's subjective evaluation of the relationship than women's.

## Conclusion

These findings point to gender-differentiated pathways linking union context to fertility plans. For women, the institutional features of marriage (legal commitment, social recognition, and perhaps clearer expectations regarding shared resources) remain salient for childbearing intentions regarding first child. For men, what matters is co-residence itself, likely because daily partnership routines, shared housing, the capacity to provide for a prospective family, and practical coordination serve as readiness signals.

## References

- Kiernan, K. (2002). Cohabitation in Western Europe: Trends, issues and implications. In A. Booth, A. Crouter, N. S. Landale (Eds.), *Just living together: Implications of cohabitation on families, children and social policy* (pp. 3–31). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kreidl, M., & Hubatková, B. (2023). Partnership satisfaction in Czechia during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Demographic Research*, 49(24), 635–650.  
<https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2023.49.24>
- Lesthaeghe, R. (2010). The unfolding story of the second demographic transition. *Population and Development Review*, 36(2), 211–251. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2010.00328.x>
- Lesthaeghe, R. (2020). The second demographic transition, 1986–2020: Sub-replacement fertility and rising cohabitation—a global update. *Genus*, 76(1), 1–38. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-020-00077-4>
- Miller, W. B. (2011). Differences between fertility desires and intentions: Implications for theory, research and policy. *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, 9: 75–98.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41342806>
- Van Damme, M., & Dykstra, P. (2018). Spousal resources and relationship quality in eight European countries. *Community, Work & Family*, 21(5), 541–563.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1526776>
- Van de Kaa, D. J. (2001). Postmodern fertility preferences: From changing value orientation to new behavior. *Population and Development Review*, 27, 290–331.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3115262>