Fertility Ideals Among Migrant Women in Europe: Cross-Country and Migrant Generational Differences

Carmen Friedrich[1] and Nadja Milewski[1]

Background

While previous research on migrant fertility has predominantly focused on reproductive behavior, variation in the ideational dimension between natives and migrants, as well as across migrant generations, has received comparatively little attention (Milewski & Mussino, 2018; Ng, 2024). Fertility ideals, being less constrained by structural or economic factors than actual behavior, may provide a more accurate measure of the extent to which migrants align with the fertility norms of the destination country. Evidence suggests that immigrants tend to adapt their fertility behavior to that of the host population, with initial differences often diminishing once socioeconomic factors are accounted for (e.g., Kulu et al., 2019). This raises the question of whether similar adaptation processes can be observed in fertility ideals, or whether any apparent "adaptation" may instead partly result (unintentionally) from migration-related obstacles to childbearing. Moreover, although the influence of societal context is increasingly recognized in fertility research, cross-country comparative studies on migrant populations remain scarce (for examples, see Kulu et al., 2024; Milewski, 2011; Mussino & Cantalini, 2022), and no study to date has systematically examined migrants' fertility ideals across different national contexts.

Building on theoretical considerations on migrant fertility, specifically the adaptation and selection hypotheses (Adsera & Ferrer, 2015; Kulu et al., 2019), and comparative integration context theory (Crul & Schneider, 2010; Crul et al., 2012), this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does the ideal number of children of migrant women differ across European countries of destination? (2) How does it vary between first- and second-generation migrant women? We analyze two different hypothetical fertility indicators: the personal and general ideal number of children. General ideal fertility is defined as a societal norm regarding fertility that pertains to the entire society, whereas personal fertility ideals represent an individual's own desired number of children (Testa, 2012).

Data and methods

We use data from the Generations and Gender Survey Round II (GGS-II, 2020-2024) for seven European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and the UK). In the GGS-II, respondents aged 18-49 were asked about their ideal number of children (General ideal: "Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?"; Personal ideal: "For you

[1]BiB, Federal Institute for Population Research, Wiesbaden, Germany

personally, what would be the ideal number of children you would like to have or would have liked to have had?"). We estimate Poisson regression models with the personal and, respectively, the general ideal number of children as the dependent variable. Country of residence is the independent variable, with Austria—where native women report the lowest personal and general ideal number of children—used as the reference category. To control for compositional differences between migrant-generation groups across countries, the models adjust for age, number of siblings, number of children, union status, education, and religiosity. For second-generation migrants, models additionally adjust for parent's region of origin, and for first-generation migrants, models further adjust for time since migration, age at migration, and region of origin. All models are estimated separately for three groups: (1) First-generation migrant women, i.e., foreign-born women who migrated at age 15 or older (n=3,238). (2) Second-generation migrant women, i.e., women born in the country of residence with at least one foreign-born parent, or foreign-born women who migrated before age 15 (n = 4,532). (3) Native women (=comparison group), i.e., women who themselves and both of their parents were born in the country of residence (n=22,876).

Descriptive findings

Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of the personal and general ideal number of children across countries and by migrant status. Across all groups and countries, fewer than 10% of respondents indicate that having no children is their personal ideal. Among natives, 50% or more report two children as their personal ideal, with an even higher percentage for the general ideal. Two children are also the most common ideal among migrants. However, overall, migrant women more frequently report a personal or general ideal of three or more children. About 35% of first- or second-generation migrants consider three or more children the general ideal family size, compared with 27% of natives. For personal ideals, 36% of first-generation migrants and 40% of second-generation migrants state three or more children, compared with 33% of natives. Thus, second-generation migrants more often report three or more children as their personal ideal than first-generation migrants, a pattern observed in most countries except Austria, France, and the UK. Norway has the highest share of natives reporting three or more children for both personal and general ideals. A similar pattern is observed among second-generation migrants, but not among first-generation migrants. Although the percentages of second-generation migrants differ from those of natives, their distribution across countries closely mirrors the native pattern, with the exception of France. First-generation migrants, in contrast, do not exhibit this similarity.

Figure 1: Distribution (in %) of personal ideal number of children by migrant status and country. Women aged 18-49. GGS-II.

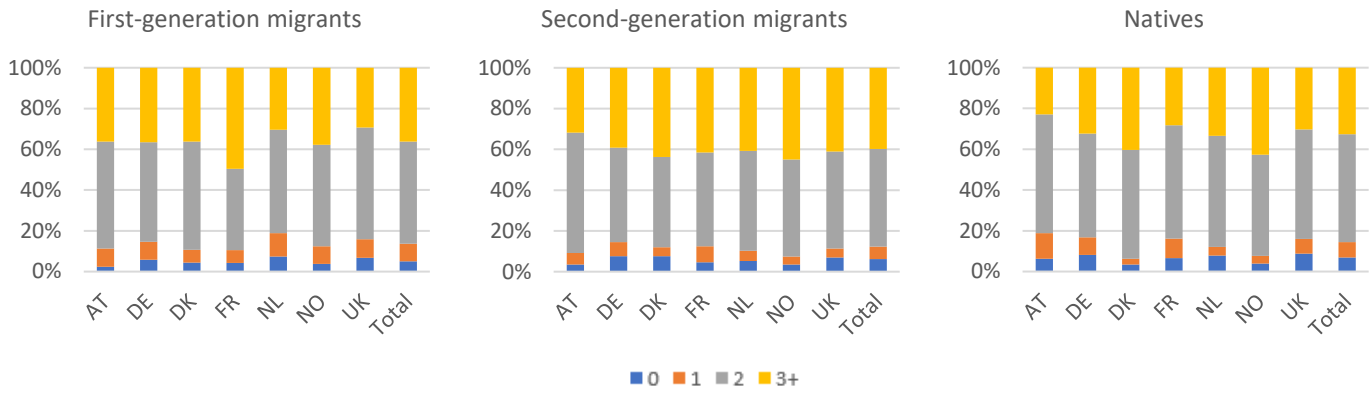
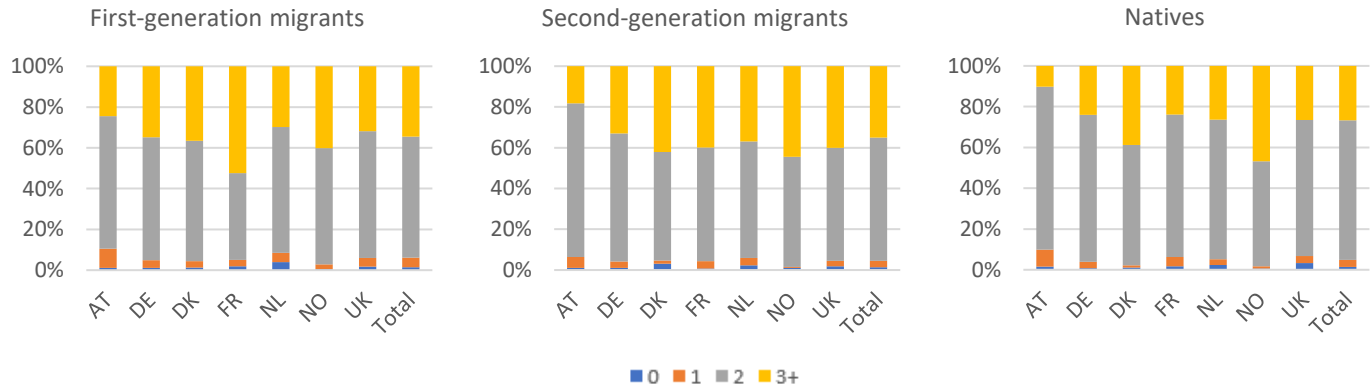


Figure 2: Distribution (in %) of general ideal number of children by migrant status and country. Women aged 18-49. GGS-II.



Multivariable results

Table 1 shows the results from the Poisson regression models, with Model 0 including no controls and Model 1 including all controls described above. For the personal ideal number of children, no statistically significant country effects are observed in Model 1 among first- and second-generation migrants, and some effects even run in the opposite direction compared with natives. For the general ideal number of children, however, Model 1 shows statistically significant effects for Germany and Norway among first-generation migrants, and for all countries among second-generation migrants, following a similar country pattern as natives. These findings are in line with classic assimilation theories for migrant generations and support the adaptation hypothesis. Moreover, they show that the comparative integration context is crucial for migrant integration, particularly for second-generation migrants who were socialized in the country of residence. However, this pattern is observed only for the general ideal number of children. This suggests that the general ideal may be more strongly influenced by societal norms and context—present in media, public discourse, or social networks—than the personal ideal. Migrants may internalize this societal ideal, even if their personal ideal remains unchanged. As previous research shows that migrants adapt their fertility behavior to that of the host

population, it is possible that this adaptation occurs more at the intentional level (concrete plans) than at the ideal level (aspirations without constraints) or migrants may often face difficulties in realizing their childbearing desires. In further analyses, we will examine the role of gender (including men) and of non-numeric responses to questions on fertility ideals ("don't know" or refusals).

Table 1: Poisson regression models. Women aged 18-49. GGS-II.

Dependent variable: personal ideal number of children						
	First-generation migrants		Second-generation migrants		Natives	
	Model 0	Model 1	Model 0	Model 1	Model 0	Model 1
Country of residence (ref.=Austria)						
Germany	-0.005	-0.004	0.024	0.048	0.063**	0.081***
	(0.039)	(0.042)	(0.037)	(0.040)	(0.019)	(0.020)
Denmark	-0.001	0.003	0.037	0.036	0.159***	0.114***
	(0.053)	(0.059)	(0.049)	(0.052)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Norway	-0.014	-0.021	0.073	0.032	0.169***	0.115***
	(0.055)	(0.057)	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Netherlands	-0.058	-0.064	0.055	0.015	0.084***	0.053*
	(0.056)	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.053)	(0.023)	(0.024)
France	0.110*	-0.021	0.058	-0.025	0.043+	0.017
	(0.049)	(0.058)	(0.042)	(0.047)	(0.023)	(0.024)
UK	-0.081+	-0.064	0.049	0.044	0.054*	0.033
	(0.046)	(0.049)	(0.047)	(0.050)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Dependent variable: general ideal number of children						
	First-generation migrants		Second-generation migrants		Natives	
	Model 0	Model 1	Model 0	Model 1	Model 0	Model 1
Country of residence (ref.=Austria)						
Germany	0.094*	0.099*	0.107**	0.123**	0.108***	0.112***
	(0.039)	(0.042)	(0.038)	(0.041)	(0.019)	(0.020)
Denmark	0.096+	0.092	0.136**	0.144**	0.191***	0.167***
	(0.053)	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.052)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Norway	0.125*	0.129*	0.178**	0.166**	0.242***	0.212***
	(0.054)	(0.057)	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Netherlands	0.049	0.042	0.130**	0.118*	0.114***	0.100***
	(0.056)	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.053)	(0.024)	(0.024)
France	0.192***	0.080	0.151***	0.103*	0.094***	0.078***
	(0.050)	(0.058)	(0.043)	(0.048)	(0.023)	(0.024)
UK	0.069	0.076	0.144*	0.145**	0.113***	0.105***
	(0.045)	(0.049)	(0.048)	(0.050)	(0.024)	(0.024)

Significance levels: +p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

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