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Sweden: Combining childbearing and gender equality

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Abstract

Sweden is the forerunner of the Second Demographic Transition. Fertility trends have fluctuated greatly since the 1960s, and the 1990s showed both European-highest and lowest-ever-in-Sweden levels, while the cohort pattern has been relatively stable. Period fluctuations have been accompanied by a postponement of entering committed partnerships and parenthood as well as an increasing instability of family relationships. The awareness and the availability of effective contraceptives have been extensive since the mid-1970s, the year the liberal abortion law was introduced. Post-modern values are dominant in this highly secularized society, but ideal family size is among the highest in the European Union, and childlessness has remained at a relatively low level. Ethnic diversification has increased over time, with about one-fifth of the population having a 'foreign background' in the early 2000s. The level of female labor-force participation is the highest in Europe (although mothers of pre-schoolers often work part-time), and young women are just as highly educated as men. Family policies, based on the principle of equality across social groups and gender, seem to play an important role in keeping fertility relatively high. In combination with other factors, family policies also play a role in the fluctuations of fertility rates, as eligibility to parental-leave and benefits as well as the availability of public childcare are linked to parents' labor-force attachment.

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