

Why do people have more children in the north of Europe than in the south?

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Auteur

1. Gilles Pison

[Gilles Pison est un-e adhérent-e de The Conversation](#)

Anthropologue et démographe, professeur au Muséum national d'histoire naturelle et chercheur associé à l'INED, Muséum national d'histoire naturelle (MNHN)

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Fertility is generally high in Northern Europe and low in Southern Europe. [Emma Bauso/Pexels](#)

In Europe, each woman gives birth to an [average of 1.6 children](#). However, this average conceals considerable variations from one country to another. Women in Spain, who have 1.26 children, are among the least fertile in Europe, while women in France, with 1.84 children, are at the [top end of the spectrum](#). But how does fertility vary within Europe, and what explains these differences from one country to another?

High fertility in Northern Europe, low fertility in the south

Fertility is generally high in Northern Europe and low in the south (Figure 1). This north-south divide was already visible 30 years ago (figure 2), suggesting that deep-rooted mechanisms are at play rather than cyclical economic factors.

One of the first mechanisms is family policy, which all European countries have. These policies aim to help families with children and enable parents (particularly mothers) to work, be it through allowances, parental leave after childbirth, and [care services for young children](#).

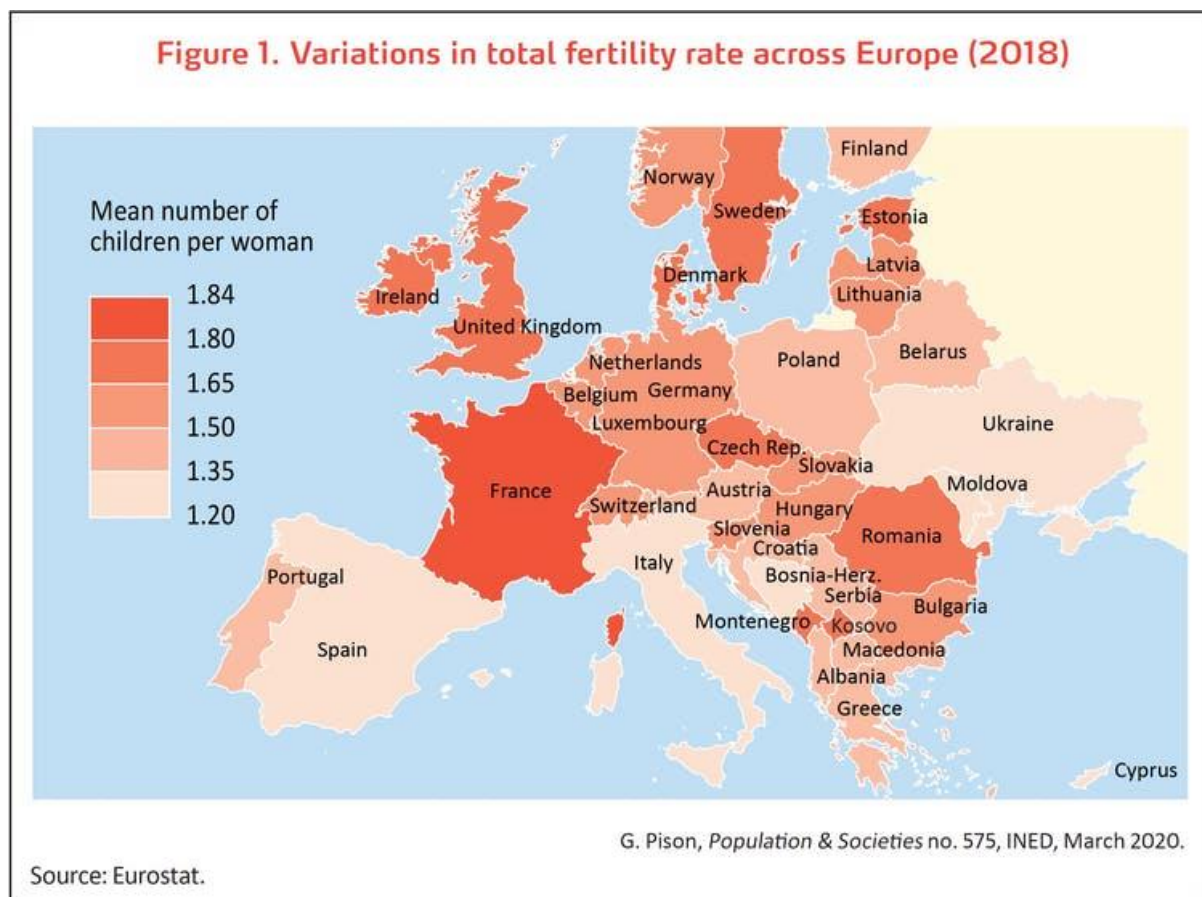


Figure 1. Variations in total fertility rate across Europe (2018). [Figure taken from Gilles Pison, 2020](#), Author provided

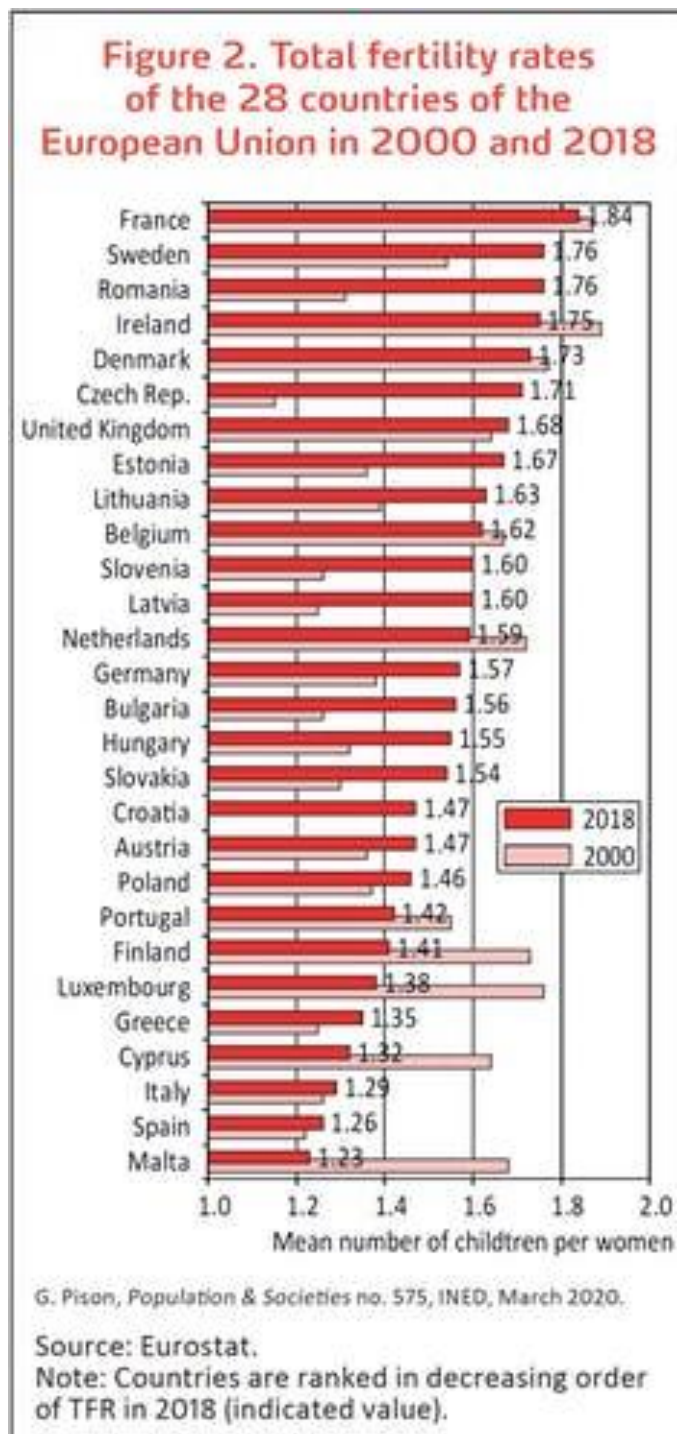


Figure 2. Total fertility rates of the 28 countries of the European Union in 2000 and 2018.
[Taken from G. Pison, 2020](#), Author provided

Investment in services and financing varies between countries, however, representing around 1.5% of total GDP in 2015 in the countries of southern Europe and more than twice as much in those of the north, [around 3.5%](#).

The expenses associated with parental leave are much higher in the countries of the north – not so much because of the length of parental leave, which can be long in southern countries, but because of the amount of pay, which is significantly lower in the south than in the north.

The childcare offer is also much more developed in the north, and the proportion of young children taken care of by formal childcare services, i.e. other than by the family or relatives, [is much greater](#).

Would the Nordic countries be natalist?

Does the significant support given to families by the countries of the north mean that they are birth-prone? The family policy in their case is not intended to increase the number of births, but rather to [enable parents to balance work and family](#).

These countries seek in particular to promote the work of women. Women's labour-force participation rates there may be the highest in Europe, if not the world, but they are still lower than men's. And state policy aims to reduce these gaps and ultimately achieve gender equality in the labour market.

The idea was widespread a few decades ago that for more births to occur, women had to stay at home. Actually, it is in the countries where women work the most that they have the most children. The female employment rates are the highest in Northern Europe and the lowest in Southern Europe, and it is in the north that women have the most children, and not the other way around.

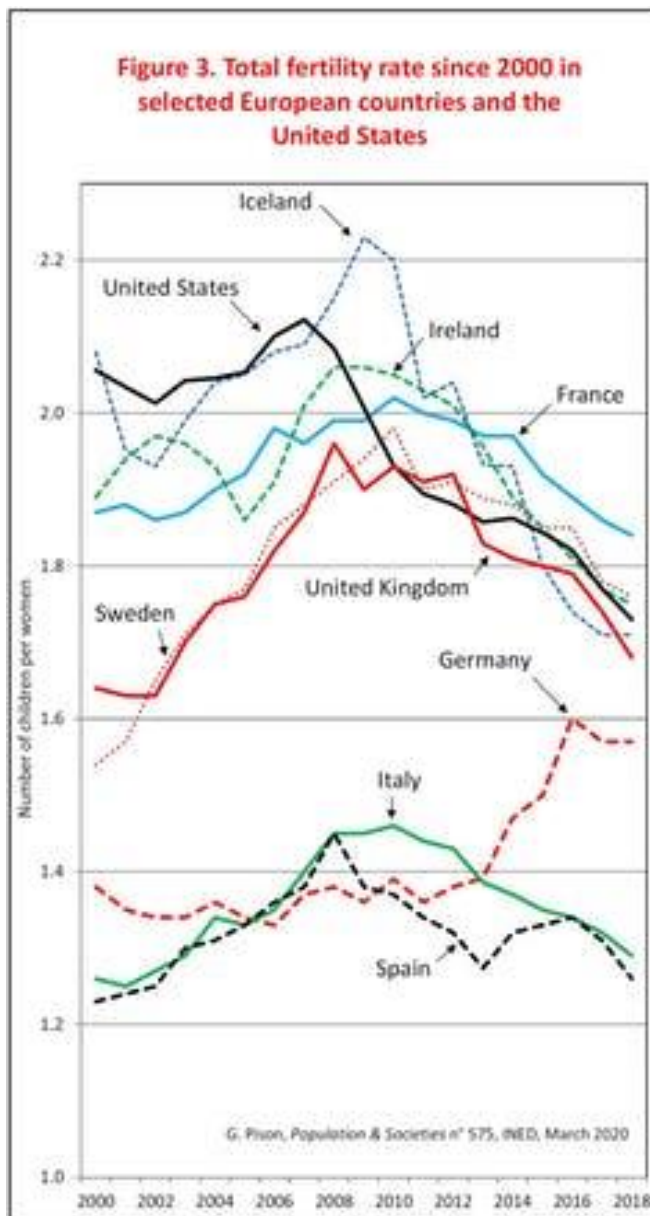
Inequalities between men and women: less marked in the north than in the south

More generally, what seems to matter is the status of women in relation to men. It is more unfavorable in the south: inequalities between men and women are more marked both at work and in the private sphere. For example, [task-sharing among couples is lower](#).

Without day-long childcare, it is often challenging for both parents to hold a job, and one of the parents may have to stop working. Men do not plan to take care of their newborn baby beyond a few days, and women do not want a stay-at-home mom life like their mothers or grandmothers; moreover, couples need to maintain two incomes to maintain their standard of living.

This is true both in Europe and in [many countries elsewhere](#). Couples therefore delay the arrival of a child if it is not possible for them to reconcile work and family. By postponing childbirth, some couples ultimately give up on it.

Family policies in Northern European countries do not aim to support fertility, as mentioned above. Rather, their relatively high fertility is one of the indirect consequences, not necessarily intended initially, of policies aimed at [promoting equality between women and men](#).



Total fertility rate since 2000 in selected European countries and the United States. [Figure taken from Gilles Pison, 2020](#), Author provided

The 2007–2008 financial crisis and the subsequent decline in fertility

Fertility has remained relatively high in Northern European countries throughout the past three decades, but the fertility rate has fluctuated. It was on the rise in the early 2000s, then the trend reversed and the indicator fell sharply after 2008 (figure 3). This reversal is linked to the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

The economic recession and the rise in unemployment resulting from the crisis indeed made the future more uncertain. Some couples postponed their plans to have children in the hope that better days will come.

The decrease in the [total fertility rate \(TFR\)](#) in recent years has varied according to the country. In the United States, between the start of the crisis in 2007 and 2018, the TFR fell by 23%, from 2.12 children per woman to just 1.73 (figure 3). In the United Kingdom, it fell from 1.96 in 2008 to 1.68 in 2018, a drop of 17%. While France is no exception, the [decrease has been smaller](#) – less than 8% between 2008 and 2018 – and began later as the effects of the economic recession hit the country more slowly. The shock of the crisis and the effects of unemployment were probably dampened by generous social and family policies in France.

The Covid-19 health crisis will be an opportunity to once again verify the cushioning role of family policy. The pandemic and the resulting economic crisis may indeed lead to a decline in births and the TFR. If so, will the decline be uniform in Europe, or more pronounced in countries with already the lowest fertility? The answer will come in a few months, when the children conceived during the crisis are born.

*This text is adapted from an article published by the author in *Population & Societies*, no. 575, [“France: the highest fertility in Europe”](#), March 2020.*

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Partenaires



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