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# His and/or hers? A cross-national perspective on the gendered nature of couples' employment preconditions for parenthood

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### *Abstract*

This study examines cross-national variation in the gendered nature of couples' employment preconditions for parenthood across five Western and Northern European countries. Using harmonized longitudinal register data from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and survey data from the UK, we analyze how partners' relative employment and income positions influence the transition to a first birth. Discrete-time hazard models reveal that dual breadwinner couples with relatively equal wages have the highest probability of becoming parents across all countries studied. However, substantial country-level differences exist in the gendered nature of employment and earnings positions associated to the transition to parenthood, with male breadwinner couples being more likely to enter parenthood than female breadwinner couples in Denmark, Finland and Norway, while in the UK, female breadwinner couples showed higher first birth probabilities compared to male breadwinner couples. Regarding wages, female main earners have higher first birth probabilities compared to male main earners in Belgium, Denmark, and the UK, while Finland and Norway show no gendered associations between earnings and the transition to parenthood. The findings confirm the decreasing importance of male breadwinning as a primary precondition for parenthood and suggest that institutional and normative contexts shape the relationship between couples' economic arrangements and fertility decisions. Importantly, the employment positions from which couples enter parenthood shape their subsequent employment trajectories and economic well-being, making these findings policy-relevant for understanding long-term consequences for gender equality and family welfare across European contexts.

### *Keywords*

Entry into parenthood, employment preconditions, gender, couples, cross-national perspective

### **Statements and declarations**

#### *Competing Interests*

The authors declare no competing or conflicting interests.

#### *Authors' contributions*

Leen Marynissen and Jonas Wood are responsible for the study conception and design. Data preparation was performed by Leen Marynissen, Peter Fallesen, Júlia Mikolai, Julia Hellstrand and Janna Bergsvik. Data collection and analysis were performed by Leen Marynissen. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Leen Marynissen and Jonas Wood and all authors commented on, edited and critically reviewed previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### *Data availability*

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the national statistical offices of Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and Finland, and the UK Longitudinal Household Study, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data. Hence, these data are not publicly available.

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preconditions for parenthood**

1. Introduction

Time availability, employment, and income security for both men and women – individually and as couples – are crucial preconditions for parenthood. This is particularly true for high-income countries where dual-earner households are most prevalent (Alderotti et al., 2021; Begall, 2013; Jalovaara & Miettinen, 2013; Marynissen et al., 2020; Vignoli et al., 2012; Wang & Tan, 2024; Zhou & Kan, 2019). This challenges the traditional assumption that male employment and income security, and female time availability are the primary requirements for family formation. Several factors may explain this shift: the financial necessity of dual incomes amid rising living costs (especially housing), the availability of work-family reconciliation policies (such as formal childcare and income-compensating parental leave) that reduce childrearing opportunity costs, and evolving gender norms regarding labour force participation that increasingly favour dual-earner household arrangements. However, two central gaps of knowledge limit our understanding of the gendered nature of employment- and income-related preconditions for the transition to parenthood. First, few studies consider partners' relative positions. A large body of existing research on the employment- or income-fertility link considers men and women separately (Bogusz, Matysiak, & Kreyenfeld, 2024; Hart, 2015; Pailhé & Solaz, 2012; van Wijk, 2024; Vikat, 2004), whereas only a handful of studies address partners' relative employment and income positions (Comolli, 2021; Marynissen, 2022; Vignoli, Drefahl, & De Santis, 2012; Wang & Tan, 2024).

Second, existing studies focus on a single context. Cross-national comparisons are scarce (Schmitt, 2012a, 2012b), which hampers our understanding of the degree to which the economic preconditions to parenthood are gendered and potentially masks possible context-contingencies.

This study makes three key contributions to the existing literature. First, it represents the first comparative analysis of cross-national differences in gendered employment preconditions for childbearing. While previous research has examined the relationship between partners' labour market positions and transitions to parenthood across various countries (Begall, 2013; Jalovaara & Miettinen, 2013; Marynissen et al., 2020; Vignoli et al., 2012), comparing results from these studies is difficult due to variations in research designs, samples, and data quality. Our study employs standardized data and methodology, allowing us to test identical hypotheses using consistent research designs, assumptions, and interpretations across all countries studied. Second, we focus on examining how couples' employment preconditions for parenthood vary by context. Recent empirical findings showing positive associations between employment/wages and parenthood transitions for both men and women are frequently attributed to contextual factors such as the financial necessity of female employment in uncertain labour markets, the ability to outsource childcare when effective work-family policies exist (or even financial incentives to have a high income before childbirth in case of income-related replacement benefits during parental leave) and evolving gender norms. While comprehensively testing how these contextual factors moderate gendered economic preconditions for parenthood exceeds this study's scope, our findings provide an important initial assessment of cross-national variations in how labour market preconditions for parenthood are gendered among opposite-sex couples. Third,

determining whether parenthood transitions depend on partners' relative labor market positions requires comparing their employment and earnings directly. Most research examines men and women separately, while couple-level studies typically analyze each partner's absolute rather than their relative position (Begall, 2013; Inanc, 2015; Jalovaara & Miettinen, 2013; Landaud, 2019; Pailhé & Solaz, 2012; Schmitt, 2012b; Vignoli et al., 2012). Our study addresses this gap by analyzing partners' relative positions, allowing the direct testing of within-household gender dynamics. Though our observed associations likely reflect both selection effects and causal relationships, they have important policy implications by revealing which contexts produce specific employment-parenthood patterns and given how couples' economic positions at parenthood influence subsequent life trajectories for both parents' employment division (Begall & Grunow, 2015; Wood & Marynissen, 2019) and children's outcomes (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2010; Han & Zhang, 2022).

We build our analysis on harmonized longitudinal register data from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Belgium and high-quality longitudinal survey data for the UK, and analyse the employment and wage positions of both partners in opposite-sex couples using discrete-time hazard models. The studied countries have documented differences in gendered economic preconditions for parenthood, including institutional support for gender equality (e.g., (de)genderizing parental leave and childcare policies) (I Dobrotić et al., 2024; Saxonberg, 2013), cultural parenting norms (Sundsbo & Sihvonen, 2018), and gender-based labour market disparities (EIGE, 2024). Our cross-national comparison of gender dynamics in both gender-equality frontrunner countries and countries with moderate gender equality positions offers valuable insights for policymakers in the

studied nations and in countries experiencing growing female labor force participation and dual-earner households.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

### *The transition to parenthood and partners' relative employment and income positions*

Commonly discussed preconditions for family formation include sufficient available time for childrearing, as well as employment and income security to meet current and future costs related to childrearing given aspired living standards. In addition to these considerations, which are routinely discussed in micro-economic theories of fertility in function of efficient investments of time and resources, the available literature suggests that linkages between the transition to parenthood and employment or income positions should also be interpreted in terms of normative prescriptions concerning the appropriate sequencing of key life transitions and the timing of parenthood (Oppenheimer, 1994; Robert-Bobée & Mazuy, 2005). Whereas marriage before parenthood has been documented as a strong normative pressure during much of the twentieth century, it is likely that increasing labour market insecurity and the rise of the dual breadwinner model have entailed normative prescriptions highlighting the appropriateness of establishing secure labour market positions before entering parenthood. Despite the destandardisation of life courses in Europe and other high income countries, and notwithstanding variation between population subgroups (Kreyenfeld & Andersson, 2014; Wood & Neels, 2017; Wood, Van den Berg, & Neels, 2017), the dominant pattern in young adulthood in Northern and Western European countries is to first establish a stable foothold in the labour market and financial situation, and subsequently become a parent (Kreyenfeld, Andersson, & Pailhé, 2012).

The decision to enter parenthood or postpone this transition depends both on the degree to which classic micro-economic preconditions to parenthood are met in terms of time-availability and economic security, and whether one is able to conform to dominant norms regarding the preconditions to parenthood. Despite this complementarity between neo-classical micro-economic and ideational theories as explanations for transitions to parenthood, contradictions between the two frameworks appear when adopting a within-household gender perspective. Both the micro-economic and a normative perspective can be applied to the question of whether it matters if the male or female partner provides the employment and income security required for opposite-sex couples to make the transition to parenthood, with contrasting hypotheses. Gary Becker's New Home Economics theory (Becker, 1991), assumes that couples maximise their joint utility by securing employment and income stability whilst realising fertility intentions. It is noteworthy that that couples' division of labour is assumed to depend solely on the maximisation of their shared utility (i.e. maximisation of satisfaction at the couple-level). Whilst the assumption of efficient and path-dependent specialisation between partners originating from biological differences (e.g. pregnancy and breastfeeding) entailed male breadwinner and female carer specialisation did resonate with the dominance of male breadwinner female carer households in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the theory is, in essence, gender neutral. The source of economic security in terms of employment and income, whether it stems from both partners equally or not, is believed to hinge solely on the strategy that optimizes economic stability and time availability. Similarly, micro-economic bargaining models assume that couples aim to maximise utility through their division of labour, albeit through processes of bargaining in which the partner with the highest employability and

income potential – regardless of gender – has the greatest bargaining power to outsource unpaid labour to the other partner, thereby assuming that unpaid labour is considered unpleasant (Blood Jr & Wolfe, 1960; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). Furthermore, Oppenheimer’s career uncertainty hypothesis also assumes that the linkage between labour market positions and the transition to parenthood is not gendered, as both men’s and women’s unstable careers of low wages signal uncertainty, which impedes union formation and the transition to parenthood. Particularly in dual earner societies with high labour market uncertainty relying on one partner’s labour market outcomes can be risky (Oppenheimer, 1994). Following these theories, we hypothesise that *the employment and income preconditions to first childbearing are not gendered* (hypothesis 1).

However, couples are likely to not only act based on economic rationality but also based on gendered moral prescriptions regarding the roles that fathers and mothers are expected to take up, in which women are assumed to bear most of the burden of unpaid work and caregiving responsibilities, whereas men are still assumed to be primary breadwinners and secondary carers (Duncan & Edwards, 1997). The expectation that couples not only act in an economically rational manner, but also take into account gender norms, has been labelled “gendered moral rationality”. This gendered moral rationality may imply that the economic prerequisites for initiating parenthood are gendered in nature. Consequently, based on ideational frameworks on the linkage between labour market positions and the transition to parenthood, but also persisting gendered normative expectations concerning the role of fathers as primary earners and mothers as primary carers, *we expect that the larger the male contribution to the couples’ employment and income position, the more likely the transition to parenthood* (hypothesis 2).

### *Cross-national variation between Northern and Western European countries*

Both in micro-economic accounts and ideational theories of fertility, first birth transitions are assumed not to occur in isolation of the societal context. Consequently, the degree to which employment and income preconditions for the transition to parenthood are gendered might vary between countries. We discuss three major contextual features shaping men and women's normative framework and opportunity structures in the five countries considered in this study: societal norms, labour markets, and work-family reconciliation policies.

First, egalitarian gender norms<sup>1</sup> at the country-level might imply that the relative distribution of partners' employment and income positions is less important as long as household levels of employment and income security are considered sufficient to make the transition to parenthood (i.e. hypothesis 1 would hold). Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland and Norway are typically considered more egalitarian contexts where partners are more likely to share responsibility in both performing paid work and caregiving, and this is a stronger societal norm in comparison to other (Western) European countries (Lammi-Taskula et al., 2011; Saxonberg, 2013; Sundsbo & Sihvonen, 2018). In contrast, Belgium and the UK, while varying in specific gender equality indicators, are characterized by less egalitarian gender norms overall, suggesting that partners' relative employment and/or income may shape the transition to parenthood more strongly in these contexts (i.e., it is more likely hypothesis 2 will hold).

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<sup>1</sup> i.e., "the belief that men and women should attain a certain degree of equality within both public and private realms of society, and that women's status should not depend on their reproductive behaviour" McDaniel, A. E. (2008). Measuring Gender Egalitarianism: The Attitudinal Difference Between Men and Women. *International Journal of Sociology*, 38(1), 58-80. <https://doi.org/10.2753/IJS0020-7659380103>

Second, gender inequality in the labour market - including gender pay gaps, occupational segregation and part-time employment patterns – shapes women’s economic opportunities and opportunity costs of childbearing. Across our study countries, substantial variation exists in these indicators. Belgium has the smallest gender wage gap in our sample and among the smallest in Europe, followed by Norway, and Denmark (all below the EU 27 average) (OECD, 2022). In contrast, the UK and Finland face substantially larger gender wage gaps with Finland showing the highest rate at 17.5%, followed by the UK at 14% (OECD, 2022). Regarding women’s representation in powerful employment positions, Nordic countries and Belgium rank substantially higher than OECD averages, while the UK lags behind (EIGE, 2024; OECD, 2023b). Part-time employment patterns also vary considerably. The highest levels of female part-time employment are found in the UK and Belgium, followed by Norway and Denmark, while Finland shows relatively lower levels of female part-time employment (OECD, 2023a). These patterns reveal that gender equality in labour markets does not follow simple regional groupings. Finland, despite its Nordic welfare model, shows higher gender wage gaps and distinct employment patterns compared to other Nordic countries, while Belgium demonstrates relatively high gender equality in wages despite higher part-time employment rates. Countries with greater gender equality in labour markets may be more likely to support gender-equal labour market preconditions for parenthood (hypothesis 1), while those with persistent gender inequalities may continue to favour male breadwinner arrangements (hypothesis 2).

Third, work-family reconciliation policies are key in shaping gender dynamics in couples’ labour market-parenthood link as these have the potential to help mitigate opportunity

costs and potentially have a signalling function regarding gender equality in breadwinner and caregiving responsibilities. Especially in countries where parental leave compensation is tied to earnings prior to birth, policies directly strengthen the norm of having a stable foothold in the labour market before entering parenthood and incentivize having high income prior to becoming a parent. Nordic countries generally offer comprehensive work-family policies, but with important variation. Norway and Denmark feature long, well-paid parental leave with significant father's quotas that encourage parental involvement, alongside high-quality, affordable childcare (Lammi-Taskula et al., 2011). Finland, while offering generous parental leave, shows lower fathers' leave uptake and lower childcare enrolment rates, suggesting less actual gender equality despite formal policy generosity. Belgium and the UK offer more limited family policies compared to most Nordic countries. While formal childcare coverage is relatively high in Belgium, the extent to which it is affordable and accessible strongly differs by parents' socioeconomic positions (Biegel, Wood, & Neels, 2021; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012). In addition, Belgian parental leave is less accessible with strict employment-related eligibility criteria, more limited in time, and low-paid compared to parental leave policies in Nordic countries (Fusulier & Mortelmans, 2021; Marynissen, Wood, & Neels, 2021). The UK represents a market-based approach with costly childcare, limited parental leave uptake, and minimal support for combining work and childcare (Khoudja & Platt, 2018; Kowalewska, 2023; Misra, Budig, & Moller, 2007). Employed women are entitled to a one-year maternity leave but partly funded childcare is only available for children aged 3 or over. As a result, mothers tend to adjust their working patterns and many women work part-time (Khoudja & Platt, 2018; Kowalewska, 2023). Based on these policy differences, we expect less gendered couple-level employment preconditions for parenthood in

countries with comprehensive, accessible work-family policies (supporting hypothesis 1), and more traditional gender arrangements in countries with limited policy support (supporting hypothesis 2).

Identifying the potential moderating effect of the aforementioned contextual factors on the gendered nature of the preconditions to parenthood lies beyond the scope of this study. Yet, based on these cross-country differences in gender norms, labour market equality, and work-family policies – recognizing that countries show complex, sometimes contradictory patterns across these dimensions – we expect that *the degree to which the labour market preconditions for parenthood are gendered within couples varies across the countries studied* (hypothesis 3).

#### *Selective entry into unions*

It is important to note that our analysis focuses on men and women who are already in a coresidential union, which might be a selective group both in terms of their relative labour market positions and their fertility decisions. While individuals with a strong desire to have children may more quickly or often enter a union compared to ‘less childbearing-prone’ individuals, economic factors that influence fertility decisions – such as partners’ employment and wages – may also play a crucial role in union formation itself (Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991; Oppenheimer, 2003). Traditionally, higher socioeconomic resources have been more important for men’s than women’s success on the partnership market (Sassler & Lichter, 2020). In modern (gender egalitarian) societies, labour force participation and higher education and income levels encourage union formation for men and women alike (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2015; Sassler & Lichter, 2020; Wiik, 2009).

Socioeconomically disadvantaged men and women have become more likely to be unpartnered (De Hauw, Grow, & Van Bavel, 2017) and childless (Guzzo & Hayford, 2020; Jalovaara et al., 2019), pointing to increasing socioeconomic selection (also among women in gender egalitarian countries). Furthermore, individuals with more egalitarian gender role attitudes may be more likely to form unions with partners who have similar earnings potential, while those with more traditional attitudes may select partners who fit conventional breadwinner-caregiver arrangements. Hence, gendered patterns in partnership selection may thus not only affect who forms unions, but also lead to self-selection into specific types of unions characterized by particular gender dynamics and economic arrangements (Schwartz & Han, 2014).

Furthermore, this selectivity may vary across countries due to differences in labour market structures, gender norms and policy contexts. In more gender-egalitarian contexts, both men's and women's economic resources may facilitate union formation, potentially resulting in samples with couples where both partners have strong labour market positions and more egalitarian arrangements. In contexts where traditional gendered selection patterns persist more strongly, male economic resources may remain more decisive for union formation and traditional breadwinner arrangements may be more prevalent among couples who form unions. Although this study makes no attempts to address this selectivity, it should be taken into consideration that these compositional differences in who forms unions and what type of unions could partially explain the cross-national variation we observe in how partners' relative labour market positions relate to entry into parenthood. The association between economic arrangements and fertility among couples may therefore reflect not only direct effects of partners' relative employment positions on childbearing decisions, but also indirect effects operating through the selection processes

that determine which individuals successfully form unions, and the union types they move into in different country contexts (Andersson, 2000; Perelli-Harris & Lyons-Amos, 2016).

### 3. Data & Methods

We use pooled population-wide individual-level data from population registers of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Norway, and data from the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) to study cross-country variation in the association between partners' relative labour market positions and the transition to parenthood. These data were collected through a data-call in the EAPS working group on register-based fertility research<sup>2</sup>. In response, using a code template, researchers from the study countries in this paper provided aggregated tables<sup>3</sup> with information on couples' employment, wages, and the transition to parenthood. While complying with privacy regulations regarding the use of register data (e.g., cell counts higher than a certain threshold in tables shared), this method of data collection allows to achieve model estimates identical to those of discrete-time hazard models based on individual-level data. These data cover the period 2009-2022 (with small variations in the observation period between countries, see table 1).<sup>4</sup> We selected all nulliparous women, aged 18 to 45 years, who have a co-resident partner and for whom we have information on their migrant origin, activity status, and wages.

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<sup>2</sup> More information available on: <https://www.eaps.nl/page/register-based-fertility-research>

<sup>3</sup> i.e., person-period files collapsed over all indicators used in the models. This approach is similar to the use of event-occurrence tables in previous research: Kulu, H., Hannemann, T., Pailhé, A., Neels, K., Krapf, S., González-Ferrer, A., & Andersson, G. (2017). Fertility by birth order among the descendants of immigrants in selected European countries. *Population and Development Review*, 43(1), 31-60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12037>

<sup>4</sup> The observation period differs slightly between countries depending on in which years information on couples' employment and income was available at the time of the data call.

*Table 1 Sample characteristics and the distribution of couple-years (column percentages) over the categories of couples' employment-wage constellation by country*

|                                        | DENMARK   | FINLAND   | NORWAY    | UK        | BELGIUM   |
|----------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Period                                 | 2010-2019 | 2010-2019 | 2009-2019 | 2009-2020 | 2016-2022 |
| Couples                                | 391,635   | 577,697   | 377,038   | 4,095     | 353,768   |
| Couple-years                           | 1,156,493 | 2,556,429 | 1,168,220 | 11,810    | 962,578   |
| <b>Employment – wage constellation</b> |           |           |           |           |           |
| Jobless couple                         | 8.5       | 8.19      | 5.27      | 5.13      | 1.31      |
| Male breadwinnerD                      | 17.42     | 13.87     | 15.58     | 17.09     | 6.27      |
| Female breadwinner                     | 11.27     | 11.46     | 6.82      | 4.93      | 4.25      |
| Dual breadwinner, equal earners        | 29.31     | 32.92     | 37.56     | 33.84     | 60.23     |
| Dual breadwinner, male main earner     | 23.62     | 24.3      | 27.3      | 27.22     | 20.24     |
| Dual breadwinner, female main earner   | 9.88      | 9.25      | 7.46      | 11.79     | 7.7       |

*Source: Longitudinal microdata population registers of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the UKHLS, calculations by authors*

### *First birth*

The transition to parenthood is measured as conception leading to a first birth, i.e., the event of having a first birth (dummy) predated by one year<sup>5</sup>. Exposure to the risk of having a first birth is operationalised by age of the female partner in years. This is a categorical variable with four categories: 18-25, 26-30, 31-35, and 36-45.

### *Employment-wage constellation*

The main independent variable of interest is a combination of partners' employment status and their relative wages. Employment status was measured as partners' activity status in the last week of the calendar year in Belgium and Finland. In Denmark, employment is measured as individuals' main activity status throughout the calendar year. For Norway, partners' employment status is defined by having an annual earned income below (not employed) or at least as high as the social security basic amount (~9,000 euros in 2015) (employed). In the UK, employment reflects individuals' main activity status at the time

<sup>5</sup> Sensitivity analyses with the event of having a first birth predated by two and three years were also performed, and the results were similar.

of the interview. Employment includes both employment and self-employment. Inactivity and unemployment are labelled as ‘not employed’. Despite differences in the operationalisation of employment, there are no indications that this would affect the representation of within-household gender equality in the division of paid work. Partners’ wages include partners’ income from labour in the calendar year considered. Partners’ relative wages are calculated as the ratio of the female partner’s wage and the sum of both partners’ wages. Subsequently, this ratio is divided into three categories: equal earners (female partner earns between 40% and 60% of the household wage), male main earners (female partner earns less than 40% of the household wage), and female main earners (female partner earns more than 60% of the household wage). The variable combining information on employment status and relative income distinguishes six categories: (I) Jobless couple - both partners not employed, (II) Male breadwinner - only male employment, (III) Female breadwinner - only female employment, (IV) Dual breadwinner (both employed), equal earners, (V) Dual breadwinner, male main earner, (VI) Dual breadwinner, female main earner. Table 1 shows the distribution of couple-years over the categories of couples’ employment-wage constellation in the five countries considered. For example, it shows that in all countries and across breadwinner types, the share of person-years where both partners are employed and have equal wages is largest (ranging from 29.3 per cent in Denmark to 60.2 per cent in Belgium)<sup>6</sup>. Table A1 in the Appendix additionally shows the distribution of couple years over the categories of all covariates, as well as crude first birth rates by country and first birth rates by partners’

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<sup>6</sup> The high percentage of dual breadwinner, equal earner couples in Belgium is partly an artefact of the fact that information on income is only available in deciles in the Belgian data. Subsequent categorisation of partners’ relative wages into three categories (male main earner, equal earners, female main earner) based on decile differences results in a broader “equal earner” category compared to countries with more detailed income information. This methodological difference should be considered when interpreting cross-national comparisons of income inequality within couples.

employment and relative wages, in the five countries considered. The birth rate for example indicates that among dual breadwinner, equal earner couples, the crude birth rate (i.e., ratio of the number of births to the number of person years) varies from 0.09 in the UK to 0.19 in Norway.

### *Control variables*

To study the gender division of employment and income in relation to parenthood, rather than whether couples' financial resources suffice to make this transition, we control for couples' household wages. Household wages were calculated as the sum of both partners' wages and divided into terciles. Furthermore, as the timing of the transition to parenthood is strongly associated with women's level of education<sup>7</sup> (Neels et al., 2017; Ní Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2012), and women's level of education is also likely to influence partners' relative employment and wage position, we control for the female partner's level of education. This categorical variable distinguishes between (I) Enrolment in education, (II) Low level of education (ISCED 0-4), (III) High level of education (ISCED 5-6), and (IV) Unknown. Finally, as differences in the within-household gender division of paid work as well as variation in the timing of first births by migration background have been repeatedly documented (Hushek, de Valk, & Liefbroer, 2011; Kulu et al., 2019), we also control for partners' migrant origin. This dummy variable has a value of 1 if at least one partner was not born in their current country of residence.

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<sup>7</sup> Women with a higher level of education typically postpone the transition to parenthood to later ages.

### *Models*

We pool the data of all five countries and estimate discrete-time hazard models (logit link function) to model the conditional probability of conception leading to a first birth. Model 1 includes the age of the female partner ( $A_{ti}$ ), country ( $C_i$ ), couples' employment-wage constellation ( $EW_{ti}$ ), and the interaction between country and couples' employment-wage constellation ( $C_i * EW_{ti}$ ) to analyse cross-country variation in the gross effect of partners' relative labour market positions (see Equation 1). To examine whether the gendered pattern persists net of key compositional factors, Model 2 additionally includes couples' household wages ( $HHW_{ti}$ ), the female partners' level of education ( $E_{ti}$ ), and the dummy indicating whether at least one partner was not born in their current country of residence ( $F_i$ ). Since research has documented substantial cross-country variation in the association between income, education, and migration background on the one hand and the transition to parenthood on the other, we allow the effects of these covariates to vary by country by including the interaction of country with each of these variables ( $C_i * HHW_{ti}$ ), ( $C_i * E_{ti}$ ), and ( $C_i * F_i$ ). We estimate average marginal effects (AME) of the employment-wage constellation to interpret our results.

$$\text{Logit}(\text{Conception}_{ti}) = a + b_1 * A_{ti} + b_2 * C_i + b_3 * EW_i + b_4 * (C_i * EW_{ti})$$

(eq.1)

## 4. Results

### *Partners' relative labour market positions and entry into parenthood*

Figure 1 presents the average marginal effects (AME) of couples' employment-wage constellations on the transition to parenthood across the five countries.<sup>8</sup> Model comparison confirms that including the interaction between country and couples' employment-wage constellation significantly improves the model fit ( $\Delta$  -2LL: 2454.12, df: 20, p-value: 0.000), indicating that the association between couples' employment-wage constellation and entry into parenthood varies substantially across countries. While the AMEs highlight how associations between couples' employment-wage constellations and first birth probabilities vary across countries, the average marginal predicted probabilities (AMPPs) of the reference category (dual breadwinners with equal wages) provide important context. These predicted probabilities differ substantially between countries — ranging from 9.2 per cent in the UK to 16.1 per cent in Belgium (Model 1) — and reflect broader country-level differences in fertility behaviour, union formation, or other structural conditions. These baseline differences help interpret the relative magnitude of the AMEs in each national context.<sup>9</sup>

Examining the gross effects of couples' employment-wage constellation (Model 1), we find that dual breadwinners with equal wages are most likely to make the transition to parenthood in all countries. This group is followed by other dual breadwinner couples — both male and female main earners. At the other end of the spectrum, jobless couples are

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<sup>8</sup> Full tables including the estimates for all covariates are available in the Appendix (Table A2).

<sup>9</sup> For a more straightforward examination of cross-national variation in the predicted probabilities of conception leading to a first birth, including the country effect, see Figure 2 in appendix. This figure shows the average marginal predicted probabilities of conception leading to a first birth by couples' employment-wage constellation and country.

the least likely to enter parenthood, while male and female breadwinner couples occupy an intermediate position. Overall, these results indicate that gender inequality yields lower probabilities of having a first birth compared to the most equal couple constellation (i.e., both employed, equal earners). This holds for couple-level gender inequality in both employment and wages, and in both directions (i.e., both gender inequality in favour of the male and female partner yield lower odds of having a first birth).

Importantly, the degree to which higher gender inequality goes hand in hand with lower probabilities of having a first birth differs between countries. This holds for within-couple gender differences in both employment and wages. With respect to employment, we observe clearly gendered patterns in all countries except Belgium. In Denmark, Finland and Norway, we find stronger negative associations in case of only female employment, and less negative associations in case of only male employment. The pattern is reversed in the UK where male breadwinner couples are less likely to have a first birth than female breadwinner couples. With respect to within-couple gender differences in wages among dual earner couples, both male and female main earners have similar, lower probabilities of having a first birth compared to equal earners in Finland and Norway. In contrast, more strongly gendered patterns are found in Belgium, Denmark and the UK, where male main earner couples are less likely to enter parenthood than female main earner couples.

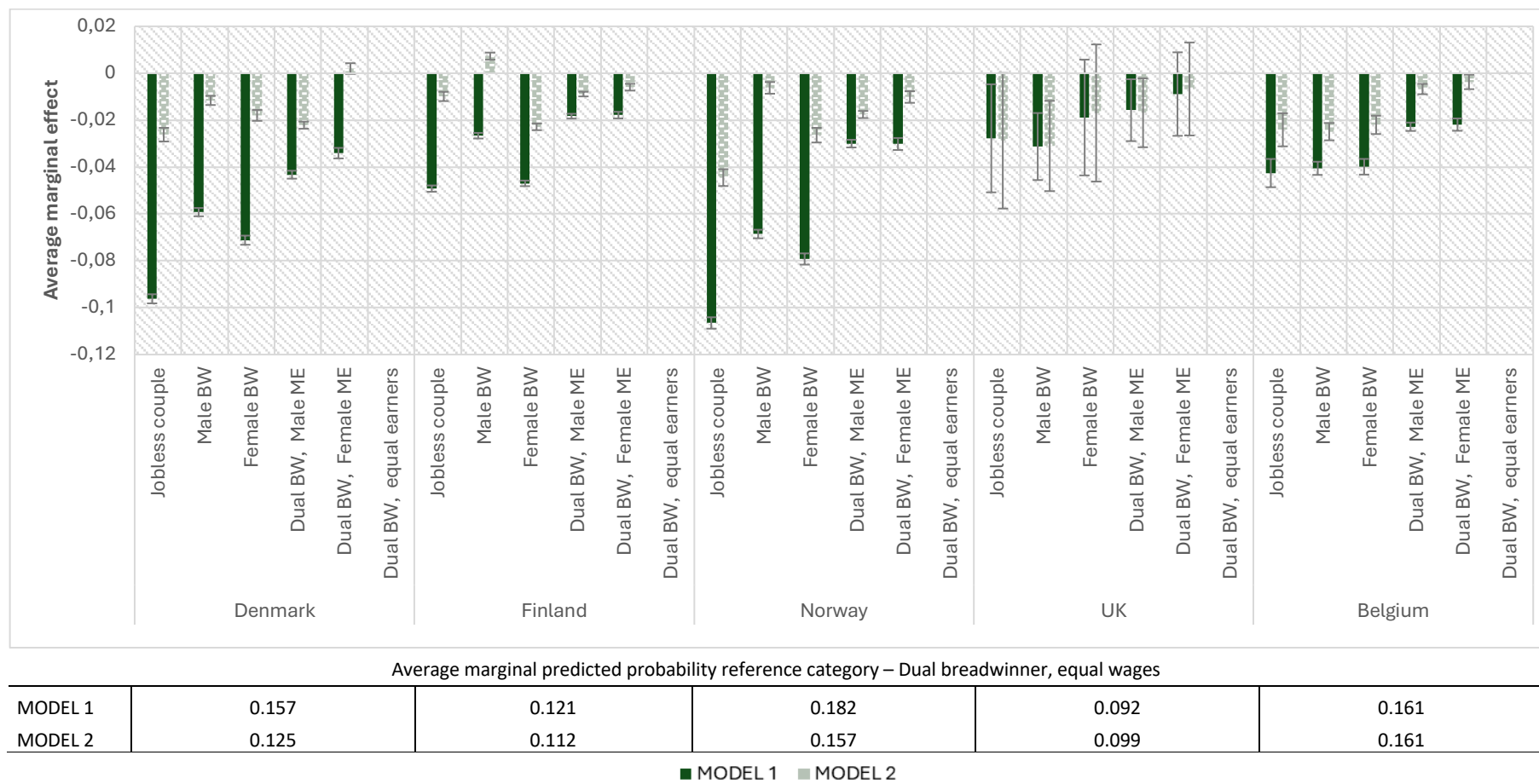
To examine whether the gendered pattern persists net of key compositional factors, hence controlling for the educational level of the female partner, whether any partner was not born in their country of residence, and household wages (Figure 1, Model 2), all effect sizes are strongly reduced. In several countries, gender unequal wage divisions no longer

translate into markedly lower first birth probabilities compared to the most equal couple constellation. For example, in Belgium and Denmark, dual breadwinner, male main earner couples have first birth probabilities that are very similar to those of equal-earner couples. In Finland, male breadwinner couples show even higher predicted first birth probabilities than those in dual breadwinner, equal earner couples. These findings suggest that part of the negative association between gender inequality and first births may be attributable to differences in education and household income across couple types, rather than to gender dynamics alone.<sup>10</sup> With respect to within-couple gender differences in employment, the adjusted AME (Model 2) are less negative, but the gendered patterns become more pronounced in most countries. A similar pattern is observed for wage constellations: although the AMEs become less negative after adjustment, the contrast between male and female main earners increases in all countries except Belgium.

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<sup>10</sup> Whereas model 2 controlled for education, origin, and household wages, we only mention education and household wages here. Sensitivity analyses where we subsequently controlled for these variables point out that in models only controlling for partners' country of birth, the odds ratios remain largely unaltered. This suggests that the negative association between gender inequality and the transition to parenthood is not or only limitedly related to differences in migrant origin between couples with different employment and relative wage constellations.

Figure 1 Average marginal effects of couples' employment-wage constellation by country, logit models of conception leading to a first birth, model 1 & model 2



Notes: [1] Employment-wage constellations: BW (breadwinner), ME (main earner). [2] Control variables: MODEL 1 controls for age female partner, MODEL 2 controls for age female partner, household wages education female partner, foreign country of birth either partner. Source: Longitudinal microdata population registers of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the UKHLS, calculations by authors

## 5. Conclusion

Employment and income are important preconditions for parenthood (Begall, 2013; Jalovaara & Miettinen, 2013; Vignoli, Drefahl, & De Santis, 2012). However, our understanding of the gendered nature of this association is limited because most studies consider women and men separately rather than analysing how couples' relative economic arrangements influence fertility decisions. Moreover, cross-national comparisons of couples' labour market preconditions for parenthood are scarce, constraining our understanding of how institutional and normative contexts shape couples' labour market preconditions for parenthood. To address these gaps in the literature, this paper examined the importance of whether the male or female partner meets employment- and income-related conditions for the transition to parenthood across five Western and Northern European countries.

Couples with the most egalitarian economic arrangement – both partners employed with relatively equal wages – had the highest probability of having a first birth in all five countries studied. This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of both partners' economic contributions and previous studies on the association between both partners' labour market positions and the transition to parenthood in Finland, Italy, Belgium and France (Jalovaara & Miettinen, 2013; Marynissen, 2022; Marynissen et al., 2020; Oppenheimer, 1994; Vignoli, Drefahl, & De Santis, 2012). Our results suggest that institutional and normative contexts in these countries support dual earner arrangements as optimal for family formation, challenging traditional assumptions about male breadwinning as a primary precondition for parenthood. This is important from a policy perspective because couples' pre-birth

employment positions condition their employment strategies after the transition to parenthood with further repercussions regarding risks of social exclusion and poverty (Begall & Grunow, 2015; Wood et al., 2017). This finding is also relevant for other (e.g., Southern or Eastern) European countries that remain characterized by more traditional contexts regarding couples' employment positions and the transition to parenthood.

A core implication of our main finding of highest first birth probabilities in dual, equal earner couples, is that gender inequality yields lower probabilities of entry into parenthood. However, substantial differences exist depending on whether employment or wages are considered, and across countries. Regarding employment, we found gendered associations in all countries except Belgium. In Denmark, Finland, and Norway, male breadwinner couples were more likely to transition to parenthood than female breadwinner couples (hypothesis 2), suggesting that traditional gendered expectations about male breadwinning may persist despite these countries' high levels of gender equality and extensive family policies. In contrast, the UK showed the opposite pattern, with female breadwinner couples more likely to transition to parenthood than male breadwinner couples. Similarly, Zhou and Kan (2019) found a weakening positive relationship between the traditional gender division of labour (i.e., the male breadwinner model) and fertility in the UK, suggesting changing gender role expectations and the increasing importance of women's economic position in the family. It might be worth considering employment related eligibility criteria for family policies such as childcare or parental leave (benefits) (Dobrotić et al., 2024), and the primary importance of female rather than male access to such policies as a potential explanation.

Our findings regarding gender inequality in wages reveal an even more striking departure from traditional expectations. In three of our five countries (Belgium, Denmark and the UK), female main earner couples were more likely to transition to parenthood than couples where men were the main earners – directly contradicting traditional breadwinner models (and both hypotheses 1 and 2). Finland and Norway showed no gendered income effects, suggesting gender-neutral income preconditions for parenthood in these contexts (hypothesis 1). These patterns indicate that women’s income has become an increasingly important prerequisite for family formation, rather than an opportunity cost that discourages childbearing. This shift appears particularly pronounced in countries with extensive family policies and work-family reconciliation measures that depend on women’s prior employment or income contributions. These findings align with recent research documenting the growing importance of women’s income as a precondition for parenthood in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and the UK (van Wijk, 2024; van Wijk & Billari, 2024; van Wijk, de Valk, & Liefbroer, 2021).

These results fundamentally challenge the assumption that higher male contributions to households’ economic resources consistently increase couples’ likelihood of becoming parents. Instead, they suggest that institutional and normative contexts increasingly shape whether traditional male breadwinner arrangements facilitate or hinder family formation. By adopting a couple-level and comparative approach, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gender equality in partners’ employment and wages has become increasingly relevant for family formation in contemporary societies (Oláh, 2011).

In addition to these contributions, we identify several limitations and corresponding paths for future research. First, while this study provides important descriptive evidence on couple-level gender differences in employment and wages and their association with the transition to parenthood across five Western European countries with varying institutional contexts, our findings should be interpreted within the context of selective union formation processes that may vary across countries. The associations we observe reflect both the direct effect of couples' employment and wage positions on childbearing decisions, and the indirect effects of selective entry into coresidential unions. A crucial next step would be to adopt research designs that can disentangle both. Second, our standardized cross-national research design enhances the comparability but required concessions regarding data granularity. Variables such as age were recoded into broad categories, and the measurement of employment was limited to being employed versus unemployed. More refined indicators such as working hours or some indication of employment intensity may provide additional insights into how gender equality in couples' labour market positions affects the transition to parenthood. Third, expanding the geographical scope to include Southern and Eastern European countries would provide a more comprehensive understanding of context-contingencies of the couple-level employment-parenthood link. Finally, we suggest that empirically testing potential explanations for the cross-country variation in the associations found, e.g. the role of normative and institutional contexts, may yield relevant paths for future research.

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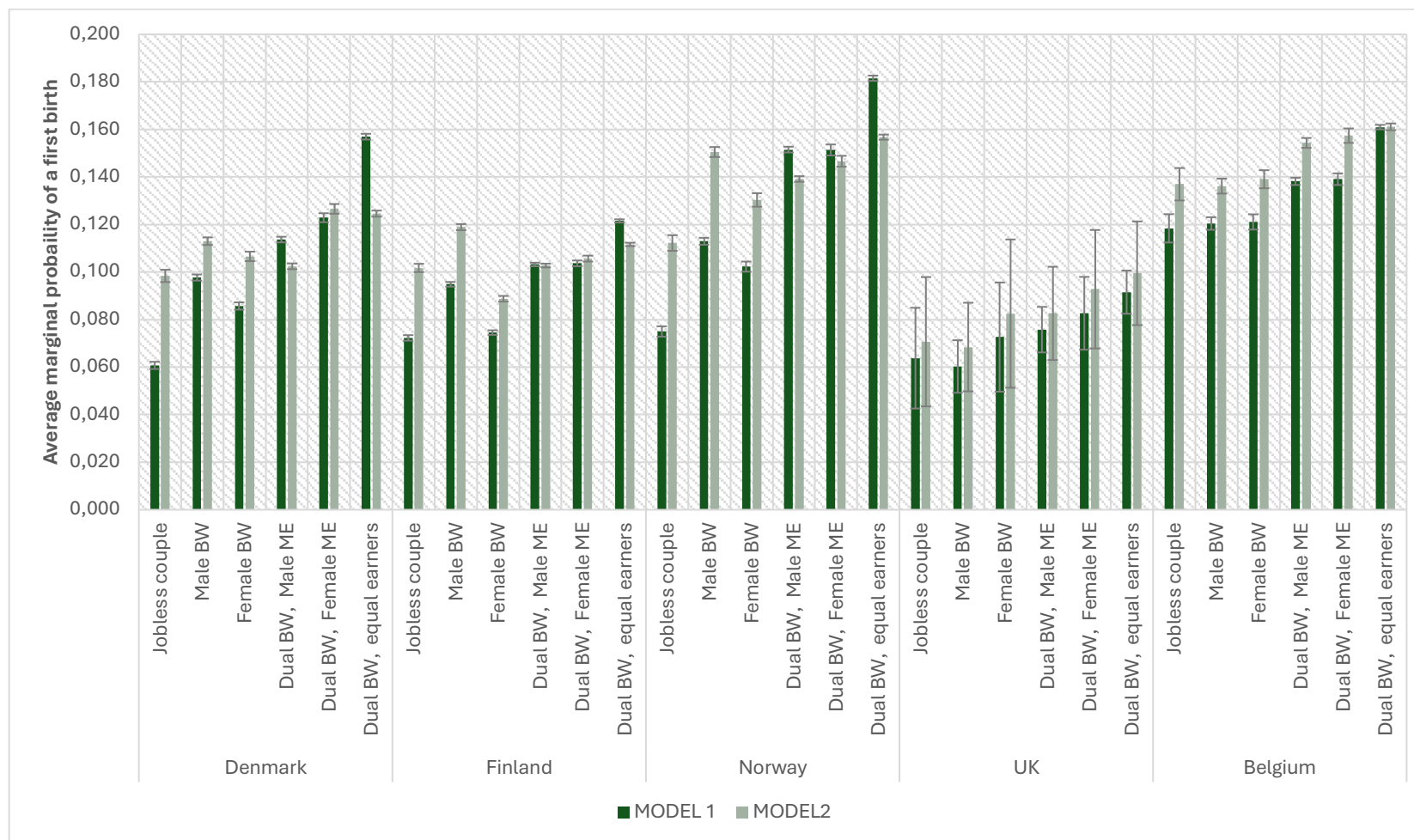
## Appendix

*Table A1 Distribution of couple years over the categories of all covariates & crude first birth rates by country*

|                                                  | Distribution couple-years (col. percentages) |      |      |      |      | Crude birth rates (#births/#couple-years) |      |      |      |      |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|-------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                                                  | DK                                           | FI   | NO   | UK   | BE   | DK                                        | FI   | NO   | UK   | BE   |
| <b>Age female partner</b>                        |                                              |      |      |      |      |                                           |      |      |      |      |
| 18-25                                            | 36.8                                         | 37.8 | 29.3 | 17.0 | 16.1 | 0.08                                      | 0.13 | 0.05 | 0.15 | 0.08 |
| 26-30                                            | 31.1                                         | 28.5 | 34.0 | 25.5 | 41.5 | 0.14                                      | 0.20 | 0.09 | 0.21 | 0.18 |
| 31-35                                            | 14.5                                         | 15.7 | 18.0 | 21.9 | 19.3 | 0.14                                      | 0.20 | 0.08 | 0.19 | 0.17 |
| 36-45                                            | 17.5                                         | 18.0 | 18.7 | 35.6 | 23.1 | 0.04                                      | 0.06 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| <b>Employment – wage constellation</b>           |                                              |      |      |      |      |                                           |      |      |      |      |
| Jobless couple                                   | 8.5                                          | 8.2  | 5.3  | 5.1  | 1.3  | 0.06                                      | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.05 | 0.11 |
| Male breadwinner                                 | 17.4                                         | 13.9 | 15.6 | 17.1 | 6.3  | 0.10                                      | 0.09 | 0.11 | 0.05 | 0.12 |
| Female breadwinner                               | 11.3                                         | 11.5 | 6.8  | 4.9  | 4.3  | 0.08                                      | 0.07 | 0.10 | 0.06 | 0.12 |
| Dual breadwinner, equal earners                  | 29.3                                         | 32.9 | 37.6 | 33.8 | 60.2 | 0.16                                      | 0.12 | 0.19 | 0.09 | 0.17 |
| Dual breadwinner, male main earner               | 23.6                                         | 24.3 | 27.3 | 27.2 | 20.2 | 0.11                                      | 0.10 | 0.15 | 0.07 | 0.14 |
| Dual breadwinner, female main earner             | 9.9                                          | 9.3  | 7.5  | 11.8 | 7.7  | 0.12                                      | 0.10 | 0.16 | 0.07 | 0.14 |
| <b>Household wages (terciles)</b>                |                                              |      |      |      |      |                                           |      |      |      |      |
| Low                                              | 33.2                                         | 33.3 | 33.4 | 33.3 | 39.2 | 0.06                                      | 0.07 | 0.10 | 0.06 | 0.13 |
| Middle                                           | 33.4                                         | 33.3 | 33.3 | 33.4 | 29.9 | 0.12                                      | 0.11 | 0.15 | 0.07 | 0.17 |
| High                                             | 33.4                                         | 33.3 | 33.3 | 33.3 | 30.9 | 0.17                                      | 0.13 | 0.21 | 0.08 | 0.17 |
| <b>Education female partner</b>                  |                                              |      |      |      |      |                                           |      |      |      |      |
| Enrolled                                         | 1.3                                          | 23.0 | 10.6 | 0.3  | 1.6  | 0.06                                      | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.10 | 0.12 |
| Low                                              | 58.8                                         | 37.2 | 35.7 | 47.7 | 25.7 | 0.09                                      | 0.10 | 0.13 | 0.06 | 0.12 |
| High                                             | 37.8                                         | 36.0 | 48.0 | 45.9 | 39.6 | 0.16                                      | 0.13 | 0.19 | 0.08 | 0.17 |
| Unknown                                          | 2.1                                          | 3.9  | 5.7  | 6.2  | 33.1 | 0.08                                      | 0.12 | 0.14 | 0.05 | 0.16 |
| <b>Foreign country of birth (either partner)</b> |                                              |      |      |      |      |                                           |      |      |      |      |
| No                                               | 80.6                                         | 87.2 | 63.7 | 58.8 | 84.6 | 0.12                                      | 0.10 | 0.16 | 0.08 | 0.16 |
| Yes                                              | 19.4                                         | 12.8 | 36.3 | 41.2 | 15.4 | 0.10                                      | 0.11 | 0.14 | 0.06 | 0.14 |

Source: Longitudinal microdata population registers of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the UKHLS, calculations by authors

Figure 2 Average marginal probabilities of conception leading to a first birth by couples' employment-wage constellation and country, model 1 & model 2



Notes: [1] Employment-wage constellations: BW (breadwinner), ME (main earner). [2] Control variables: MODEL 1 controls for age female partner, MODEL 2 controls for age female partner, household wages education female partner, foreign country of birth either partner. Source: Longitudinal microdata population registers of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the UKHLS, calculations by authors

Table A2 Logit models of conception leading to a first birth, Models 1-2

|                                                                             | MODEL 1 |          |       | MODEL 2 |          |       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------|-------|---------|----------|-------|
|                                                                             | OR      | Std.Err. | Sig.  | OR      | Std.Err. | Sig.  |
| <b>Age female partner (ref. 18-25)</b>                                      |         |          |       |         |          |       |
| 26-30                                                                       | 1.713   | 0.006    | 0.000 | 1.324   | 0.005    | 0.000 |
| 31-35                                                                       | 1.679   | 0.006    | 0.000 | 1.219   | 0.005    | 0.000 |
| 36-45                                                                       | 0.387   | 0.002    | 0.000 | 0.281   | 0.002    | 0.000 |
| <b>Country (ref. Norway)</b>                                                |         |          |       |         |          |       |
| Denmark                                                                     | 0.835   | 0.005    | 0.000 | 0.581   | 0.008    | 0.000 |
| Finland                                                                     | 0.616   | 0.003    | 0.000 | 0.662   | 0.008    | 0.000 |
| UK                                                                          | 0.446   | 0.025    | 0.000 | 0.736   | 0.081    | 0.005 |
| Belgium                                                                     | 0.861   | 0.005    | 0.000 | 1.152   | 0.015    | 0.000 |
| <b>Employment-wage constellation (ref. Dual breadwinner, equal earners)</b> |         |          |       |         |          |       |
| Jobless couple                                                              | 0.358   | 0.006    | 0.000 | 0.670   | 0.012    | 0.000 |
| Male breadwinner                                                            | 0.566   | 0.005    | 0.000 | 0.951   | 0.010    | 0.000 |
| Female breadwinner                                                          | 0.506   | 0.006    | 0.000 | 0.799   | 0.011    | 0.000 |
| Dual breadwinner, male main earner                                          | 0.800   | 0.005    | 0.000 | 0.864   | 0.006    | 0.000 |
| Dual breadwinner, female main earner                                        | 0.799   | 0.008    | 0.000 | 0.921   | 0.010    | 0.000 |
| <b>Country * Employment-wage constellation</b>                              |         |          |       |         |          |       |
| Denmark * Jobless couple                                                    | 0.952   | 0.021    | 0.027 | 1.132   | 0.028    | 0.000 |
| Denmark * Male breadwinner                                                  | 1.015   | 0.013    | 0.223 | 0.936   | 0.013    | 0.000 |
| Denmark * Female breadwinner                                                | 0.982   | 0.017    | 0.287 | 1.041   | 0.020    | 0.034 |
| Denmark * Dual breadwinner, male main earner                                | 0.854   | 0.009    | 0.000 | 0.919   | 0.010    | 0.000 |
| Denmark * Dual breadwinner, female main earner                              | 0.935   | 0.014    | 0.000 | 1.107   | 0.017    | 0.000 |
| Finland * Jobless couple                                                    | 1.559   | 0.030    | 0.000 | 1.342   | 0.029    | 0.000 |
| Finland * Male breadwinner                                                  | 1.331   | 0.015    | 0.000 | 1.132   | 0.015    | 0.000 |
| Finland * Female breadwinner                                                | 1.141   | 0.017    | 0.000 | 0.964   | 0.016    | 0.030 |
| Finland * Dual breadwinner, male main earner                                | 1.036   | 0.009    | 0.000 | 1.052   | 0.009    | 0.000 |
| Finland * Dual breadwinner, female main earner                              | 1.042   | 0.013    | 0.001 | 1.019   | 0.013    | 0.146 |
| UK * Jobless couple                                                         | 1.878   | 0.361    | 0.001 | 1.022   | 0.217    | 0.917 |
| UK * Male breadwinner                                                       | 1.117   | 0.129    | 0.338 | 0.695   | 0.092    | 0.006 |
| UK * Female breadwinner                                                     | 1.532   | 0.284    | 0.021 | 1.016   | 0.198    | 0.936 |
| UK * Dual breadwinner, male main earner                                     | 1.014   | 0.092    | 0.880 | 0.940   | 0.086    | 0.502 |
| UK * Dual breadwinner, female main earner                                   | 1.117   | 0.133    | 0.354 | 1.004   | 0.121    | 0.975 |
| Belgium * Jobless couple                                                    | 1.938   | 0.066    | 0.000 | 1.228   | 0.044    | 0.000 |
| Belgium * Male breadwinner                                                  | 1.250   | 0.020    | 0.000 | 0.859   | 0.016    | 0.000 |
| Belgium * Female breadwinner                                                | 1.409   | 0.029    | 0.000 | 1.048   | 0.023    | 0.034 |
| Belgium * Dual breadwinner, male main earner                                | 1.039   | 0.010    | 0.000 | 1.098   | 0.012    | 0.000 |
| Belgium * Dual breadwinner, female main earner                              | 1.049   | 0.016    | 0.002 | 1.055   | 0.017    | 0.001 |

Table A2. Continued

|                                                            | OR    | Std.Err.  | Sig.  | OR    | Std.Err.  | Sig.  |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| <b>Education female partner (ref. Low)</b>                 |       |           |       |       |           |       |
| Enrolled in education                                      |       |           |       | 0.542 | 0.007     | 0.000 |
| High                                                       |       |           |       | 1.197 | 0.007     | 0.000 |
| Unkown                                                     |       |           |       | 1.113 | 0.015     | 0.000 |
| <b>Country * Education female partner</b>                  |       |           |       |       |           |       |
| Denmark * Enrolled                                         |       |           |       | 1.470 | 0.055     | 0.000 |
| Denmark * High                                             |       |           |       | 1.141 | 0.010     | 0.000 |
| Denmark * Unknown                                          |       |           |       | 0.897 | 0.026     | 0.000 |
| Finland * Enrolled                                         |       |           |       | 1.246 | 0.018     | 0.000 |
| Finland * High                                             |       |           |       | 1.026 | 0.008     | 0.001 |
| Finland * Unknown                                          |       |           |       | 1.122 | 0.020     | 0.000 |
| UK * Enrolled                                              |       |           |       | 2.994 | 1.851     | 0.076 |
| UK * High                                                  |       |           |       | 0.851 | 0.069     | 0.047 |
| UK * Unknown                                               |       |           |       | 0.891 | 0.166     | 0.538 |
| Belgium * Enrolled                                         |       |           |       | 1.977 | 0.062     | 0.000 |
| Belgium * High                                             |       |           |       | 0.981 | 0.010     | 0.055 |
| Belgium * Unknown                                          |       |           |       | 0.945 | 0.015     | 0.000 |
| <b>Foreign country of birth (either partner)</b>           |       |           |       | 1.010 | 0.006     | 0.113 |
| <b>Country * Foreign country of birth (either partner)</b> |       |           |       |       |           |       |
| Denmark * foreign                                          |       |           |       | 0.840 | 0.009     | 0.000 |
| Finland * foreign                                          |       |           |       | 1.136 | 0.011     | 0.000 |
| UK * foreign                                               |       |           |       | 1.013 | 0.082     | 0.870 |
| Belgium * foreign                                          |       |           |       | 1.076 | 0.011     | 0.000 |
| <b>Household wages (terciles, ref. Low)</b>                |       |           |       |       |           |       |
| Middle                                                     |       |           |       | 1.349 | 0.012     | 0.000 |
| High                                                       |       |           |       | 1.890 | 0.017     | 0.000 |
| <b>Country * Household wages</b>                           |       |           |       |       |           |       |
| Denmark * Middle                                           |       |           |       | 1.277 | 0.016     | 0.000 |
| Denmark * High                                             |       |           |       | 1.341 | 0.018     | 0.000 |
| Finland * Middle                                           |       |           |       | 0.995 | 0.011     | 0.649 |
| Finland * High                                             |       |           |       | 0.868 | 0.010     | 0.000 |
| UK * Middle                                                |       |           |       | 0.726 | 0.078     | 0.003 |
| UK * High                                                  |       |           |       | 0.625 | 0.070     | 0.000 |
| Belgium * Middle                                           |       |           |       | 0.868 | 0.010     | 0.000 |
| Belgium * High                                             |       |           |       | 0.715 | 0.009     | 0.000 |
| <b>Constant</b>                                            | 0.187 | 0.001     | 0.000 | 0.133 | 0.001     | 0.000 |
| N                                                          |       | 5,828,861 |       |       | 5,828,861 |       |
| -2LL                                                       |       | 4144788   |       |       | 4102342   |       |
| df                                                         |       | 33        |       |       | 63        |       |

Source: Longitudinal microdata population registers of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the UKHLS, calculations by authors