

Marriage or cohabitation: First union formation in the Czech Republic

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Throughout the whole period of the 1970s to 1980s, nearly all Czech women got married (96-97%) and they did so at a very young age (average female age at first marriage was within 21.4 and 21.8 years). Furthermore, over half of women were pregnant at their wedding. In the 1990s, the situation dramatically changed. According to the results from net nuptiality tables from the year 2000 only 75 % of women would ever get married. Especially strong was the reduction of nuptiality intensity of singles below age 25. While under nuptiality conditions in 1989 only 15 % of the 25-years old women are single, in 2000 it is over 60 % (based on calculations from net nuptiality tables). The average age at first marriage rose to 26.5 years for women in 2000, which is an increase by 4.6 years since 1989. Against the background of this development, the intriguing issue is the place of cohabitation in the lives of young adults. The goal of the study is to gain insight into these questions:

- In the 1970s and 1980s in time of prevailing patterns of universal and early nuptiality, what was the position of cohabitation as *first* union of young adults?
- In the 1990s, did cohabitation compensate for the decline in first marriages? Is there a general postponement of first union formation?

Two other questions investigate the selection process to start *first* union by cohabitation or direct marriage:

- How does the first union of young adults start - by cohabitation or direct marriage? What is the selection process into direct marriage or into cohabitation?
- How do women's past life experiences (parental divorce, number of siblings and childhood spent in town or village) or the experiences in other life domains (employment career and education) influence the selection process into cohabitation or direct marriage?

In the same time period, the social and economic development of the Czech society underwent tremendous changes – from the state-socialism in the 1970s and 1980s to an emerging democracy and market economy in the 1990s. Undoubtedly, the institutional changes on the labor market and educational system altered the character of young adults' life course. In this context, we specifically investigate the effects of woman's education and employment on first union formation.

In the view of neoclassical economic theories, a *woman's high economic independence* reduces a woman's gains from marriage and thus a high level of educational attainment should lead to a lower marriage rate (Becker 1981). Moreover, lower opportunity costs of unmarried cohabitation would make this living arrangement especially attractive for better-educated women. And higher educated young adults might attach a greater value to independence and autonomy than young adults with low educational attainment, so they marry later and start their partnership career by cohabitation (Liefbroer 1991). Findings for France (Leridon and Toulemon 1995), and the Netherlands (Liefbroer 1991, Manting 1994) seem to support this conclusion. Contrary to Becker's (1981) economic theory of marriage, other findings report that more educated women do not marry less (Berrington and Diamond 2000, Oppenheimer 1994). As concerns cohabiting unions, they often involve a less long-term commitment and less investment than marriage. Thus, less educated individuals tend to substitute cohabitation for marriage, while those with greater school accumulation are more likely to marry (Thornton et al. 1995).

As concerns the Czech context, the first hypothesis is based on the theoretical consideration that young people have more space for fulfillment of individual goals and life styles, for traveling, education, and self-realization in work (as expressed in Rabusic 1996). These possibilities were accessible especially for young adults with higher education and economic resources. Furthermore, those with higher education are more confronted with the life-styles of young people in Western Europe. This line of hypothesis would be supported if *transition to cohabitation for women with a higher education were higher than among women with a lower education*.

The second hypothesis stresses the role of the economic hardship that some young people are facing. Young people with low education face higher uncertainties on the labor market - difficulties with finding a stable job, higher risk of unemployment – and this might be the objection to direct marriage. Even if they are willing to get married and would prefer to do it at an early age (as is shown in some family surveys e.g. Fialová et al. 2000), they might not have enough economic resources to do so at the time they would like. This way of reasoning is leading to the conclusion *that woman's lower education is connected to lower marriage intensity and to higher intensity to move into cohabitation*.

Using a life course approach we identify past and current life experiences, which affect the *timing* and *type* of first-partnership formation. For this purpose we use the Czech Fertility and Family Survey of 1997 with life histories of 1735 women. We apply hazard regression techniques to estimate competing risks of first union formation – either by cohabitation or by direct marriage - as a function of an underlying risk modified by a vector of covariates (Manting 1994, Berrington and Diamond 2000). Among these covariates we include a woman's age, her educational (enrolment in education and level of education) and employment (participation and experience in the labor market) characteristics and her past life experiences (divorce of parents, leaving parental home, number of siblings). Special emphasis is given to the effect of pregnancy and the birth of the first child.

While for the period 1970-1989 we find very stable patterns of early union formation, mostly by marriage (then around 75 % of first unions), there is a general postponement and diversification of forms of first union formation in the period of 1990-1997. An important finding is that in the 1990s the emergence of cohabiting unions is not fully substituting for the observed decline in first marriages. Thus, there is a general delay of first union formation. The character of first union formation has changed and the results show a growing preference for cohabitation in the 1990s as a first step in the partnership career of young women. In the period 1990-1997, women not living in a union had a 60 % (for period 1994-97) to 80 % (for period 1990-93) higher probability to move into cohabitation than women in the same situation in the 1970s and 1980s (controlled for woman's educational and employment characteristics and her past life experiences). Furthermore, in the period 1990-1997 the risk of direct marriage was 31 to 64 % lower (relative risk 0,69 for period 1990-93 and 0,36 for period 1994-97) than in the previous period.

In the 1970s and 1980s the choice between cohabitation and marriage as the start of first union was strongly influenced by the public policies favoring marital unions. It concerned some policy measures that created a pressure on and motivation for young couples to get married – young *married* couples had better chances to get a flat in the system of housing distribution and they were eligible for the newly-wed loans guaranteed by the state. Both of these motivations did not exist in the 1990s.

The results do not show that highly educated women would tend more to start their first partnership by cohabitation than other women do – neither in the time of low prevalence of cohabitation among young adults in the period before 1990 nor in the 1990s. These women have higher risks to get directly married than other women do. Therefore, this finding disproves the hypothesis that highly educated women were the first to adopt new family behavior in the course of recent demographic change – at least as concerns the adoption of consensual unions.

The employment position of a woman had in general a weaker association with cohabitation than with marriage. In both periods cohabitation was formed to a greater extent by women in an unstable position on the labor market (no employment and/or no experience). By contrast, these women had a lower transition to direct marriage. The increasing prevalence of cohabitation among these women may represent one type of response to the increasing uncertainties at an earlier adult age.

The dynamics in the fertility career were of paramount importance for first union formation. In the time of low use of contraceptives in the 1970s and 1980s, first-child conception outside a union was very common. And marriages were the more socially accepted form of the first partnership of young adults, especially when the female partner was pregnant. Highly educated women were more prone to direct marriages even without the 'push-factor' of anticipated motherhood and they were more following the sequence of events: *marriage – pregnancy – first childbirth*.

To conclude, throughout the 1990s cohabitation has been on increase and the appearance of cohabitation in lives of young adults had a strong relation to the decline of nuptiality intensity during the 1990s. There is a general postponement and diversification of forms of first union formation in comparison with the early and universal pattern of union formation of the 1970s and 1980s.

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