

Cohabitations and marriages: a comparison from a gender perspective

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We intend to compare the two typologies of union -cohabitations vs. marriages- according to various characteristics describing the gender contract into force within the couple in the hypothesis that consensual unions are characterised by less asymmetrical gender roles.

Some considerations

One of the major demographic change investing Europe since the Seventies has been the increase in the proportion of women and men living together as a couple without formalising their union with marriage. Both if considered as a real alternative to marriage or merely as a trial period, prelude of a formalised union, informal cohabitations are often associated to changes in the status of women and to their gained independence and they seem to be an option particularly attractive for people sharing more liberal and gender-egalitarian attitudes. Many studies demonstrated that those who choose to cohabit are, on average, more liberal, less religious and more favourable to more egalitarian relations and to less traditional family roles.

What is new in our work, compared to previous studies on differences between cohabitation and marriage, is the explicit accent on gender differences and the attempt to take into account simultaneously all the dimensions of gender inequality within the couple.

Data and countries

The study is carried out on data coming from the ECHP, wave 2001. Information was taken mainly from personal file.

Using the relationship file we managed to individuate partners and to reconstruct the couples, which we used as statistical units of analysis. We excluded from the sample couples with man aged more than 55 or woman aged more than 50.

We consider first Europe as a whole (15 countries, 47869 couples, of which 13.6 % cohabiting).

Then, we grouped the 15 countries into 3 macro regions, following a clusterization obtained by previous studies (Pinnelli and Di Giulio 2003) according to levels of gender equality and the diffusion of consensual unions:

- Northern Europe: Denmark, Sweden and Finland (2162 couples, of which 41.8 % cohabiting).
- Southern Europe: Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal (15044 couples, of which 3.6% cohabiting).
- Western Europe: Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, United Kingdom, Ireland, Luxembourg, France, Austria (30663 couples, of which 16.5 cohabiting).

Hypotheses and variables

For a generic couple, a set of characteristics pointing at a more egalitarian gender system may increase the probability of being a consensual union, while when those characteristics point at a more unfair (or less favourable to women) gender balance, then the probability of being a married couple is higher.

Specifically, we consider the gender inequality between partners to be made of:

Gender differences in age, education and income;

Gender division of roles (work, household tasks, care duties)

Gender differences in the amount of available free time and in the frequency of social contacts.

The choice of the variables directly comes from the hypotheses we aim to test.

We try to include in the models at least one variable for each single aspect of gender inequality.

Moreover we add some "control" variables to take into account the influences of context, time, and social class.

Control Variables:

- **MACROREGIONS:** to take into account the influence of the context surrounding individual behaviours, we utilised the subdivision of Europe into Northern, Southern and Western Europe, and for Italy the division into Centre-North and South and Island.
- **WOMAN AGE:** we include woman age (in class) to account for the temporal dimension of the phenomenon. The diffusion of cohabitation is relatively recent in many countries, where we hypothesize it to be more widespread in the younger age class.
- **WOMAN EDUCATIONAL LEVEL and MAN INCOME:** both variables are control variable for social class. They were included in the model to assess whether higher social status lead more openness towards modern

behaviours, or whether on the contrary cohabitation may be seen as 'poor people marriage', i.e. an option preferred by less fortunate couples in terms of human and material capital.

Gender variables

- **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN AGE:**

We hypothesised a less traditional assortative mating by age (ITEMS 2-3) for cohabiting couples.

- **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION:**

We hypothesised an higher probability of cohabiting rather than being married when the woman is the more educated partner

- **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN INCOME:**

We expect higher odds of cohabitation for couples with a fairer income distribution (or more favourable to the woman) between partners.

- **WORK**

To describe the participation of the two partners to the labour market we included in the model two variables, one synthesising the extent of role specialisation within the couple (EMPLOYMENT STATUS) and one accounting for the two partners' degree of satisfaction for the main work activity performed (SATISFACTION).

Specifically, the variables used were:

- **CARE AND HOUSEHOLDS TASKS**

No information was available on the extent to which each partner perform households task or care activities. We built a variable which tell us if household tasks are perceived by women as an obstacle to work the amount of time they wish to (OBSTACLES) and one describing how partners share care duties (CARE).

- **FREE TIME AND SOCIAL CONTACTS**

Last aspect we consider of relevance in determining the gender balance within the couples regarded the amount of free time left to each partner after work, household tasks and care activities (FREE TIME) and the frequency of social contacts with friends and relatives (SOCIAL CONTACT).

We hypothesised partners in consensual unions to have a fairer sharing of free time and of social contacts than married partners.

Method

The two typologies of union were compared through means of simple logistic regressions (Dependent variable: 1= consensual union, 0=marriage)

We estimated a total of 4 models:

- Model Europe
- Model Northern Europe, Model Southern Europe, Model Western Europe

Main results:

A synthesis of main results, highlighting statistically significant associations, strength and direction of the observed relations, will follow.

Model 1: Europe

- **RESIDENCE:** residence in the Southern Europe (ref. Northern Europe) reduces significantly the probability for couple to be cohabiting rather than married; same effect but with a weaker influence is observed regarding residence in western Europe.
- **AGE:** the probability of cohabiting rather than being married decreases with age, and this effect is particularly strong as we move from age class 16-25 to age class 26-30. Moreover we observe that the probability is also significantly much lower for couples with more traditional age mating by age (same age or man older). The two variables turned out to be statistically significant and with the same effect on the probability of cohabiting for all the implemented models
- **EDUCATION:** taking as reference women educational level = high, we observe a slightly lower probability of cohabiting for couples where the woman holds a medium educational level, and a slightly higher probability for couples where the women holds a low educational level. As to gender differences in education between partner, the probability of being in a consensual union rather than in a marriage decreases if partner have the same educational level or if it is the man to be more educated, compared to the couples where the woman is the more educated partner.
- **INCOME:** higher man incomes increases the probability for a couple to be cohabiting rather than married. As to gender differences in income, we observe a significantly higher probability of cohabiting for couples in which the income distribution between partner is fair or favourable to the woman.
- **OBSTACLES:** if households tasks or care of family members do not represent an obstacle for women to

work, or to work the amount of time they wish to, the probability of cohabiting rather than be married is significantly higher.

- CARE: compared to situations in which the woman alone is responsible for the caring of children and family members, couples where neither man nor woman are involved in such tasks are more likely to be cohabiting than married.
- SATISFACTION: woman being more satisfied of her main activity increase the probability of being cohabiting rather than married compared to couples characterised by man being the most satisfied partner.
- EMPLOYMENT STATUS, FREE TIME and FREQUENCY OF MEETING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES did not enter the model

Model 2: Northern Europe

- AGE: we find the same pattern observed for Europe as a whole.
- EDUCATION: same tendencies observed for the model Europe as to gender differences in education. The probability of being cohabiting rather than married is higher the lower the woman educational level is; particularly if woman holds a low educational profile the couple is around 3.5 times more likely to be cohabiting.
- CARE: as observed in model Europe.
- SOCIAL CONTACTS: the probability of cohabiting is higher for couples with the woman meeting more often friends and relatives.
- INCOME, EMPLOYMENT STATUS, OBSTACLES, SATISFACTION AND FREE TIME did not enter the model

Model 3: Southern Europe

- AGE: again we observe the same pattern seen for Europe and for Northern Europe. But this time the decreases of $\exp(b)$ from an age class to the other are more gradual.
- EDUCATION: woman educational level is significant in predicting the probability of cohabitation rather than marriage. Particularly, if the woman holds a medium educational level the probability of cohabitation decreases compared to couples where women have a high educational level.
- INCOME: same as in model Europe
- OBSTACLES: same as in model Europe.
- CARE: if man are involved in caring of family members, the couple is more likely to be married than cohabiting, respect to couples where the woman alone is in charge of care duties. On the other hands, if neither woman nor man are involved in such tasks, then the couples is more likely to be cohabiting.
- GENDER DIFF IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYM STATUS, SATISFACTION, FREE TIME and MEETING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES did not enter the model.

Model 4: Western Europe

- The model Western Europe is very similar to the model Europe, Particularly:
 - AGE, EDUCATION, INCOME, CARE, OBSTACLES and SATISFACTION show significant associations to the probability of being married rather than cohabiting and their effects go in the same direction observed in the model Europe.
 - EMPLOYMENT STATUS, FREE TIME, and FREQUENCY OF MEETING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES did not enter the model.

Conclusions

- Assortative mating by age, educational level and income more favourable to women turned out to be positively associated to higher odds of cohabitation.
- When households tasks or care of family members do not represent an obstacle for women to work, or to work the amount of time they wish to, the probabilities of cohabiting rather than be married are significantly higher.
- As to involvement in care duties, the general pattern is that when neither man nor woman are involved in such duties the probability of being cohabiters are higher. In Southern Europe, however, if the man is involved in care activities, this reduces the probability of cohabiting rather than being married
- When significant (only Europe and Western models), woman being more satisfied for her main work activity shows a positive association with the probability of cohabiting rather than be married.
- In the model Northern Europe the material aspects related to work and income turned out to be not relevant in discriminating between marriage and cohabitation, whereas woman's quality of life appeared to be much

- more important.
- In Southern Europe cohabitation is still not widespread and not clearly defined as a modern behaviour not even clearly associated to a more egalitarian gender system

Even though every single dimension of the gender inequality does not always play a role to the same extent and in the same direction in all the observed contexts, we may assert that obtained results provide a first proof of the validity of our hypotheses. Cohabitations are often associated to reduced gender differences in age, education and income, and to situations in which households tasks and caring activities do not represent an obstacle for women to work.

Possible further developments of the study

We aim at a better exploitation of the longitudinal dimension of the ECHP.

Particularly, we will follow couples from first to last wave and we will turn our attention to the transition cohabitation->marriage, distinguishing between *stayers* and *incomers*. The intent is to assess whether the couples who experience the transition from an informal cohabitation to a formal marriage reduce their level of 'gender equality', or, conversely, whether the experience of a cohabitation stably defines egalitarian gender relations within the couple.