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# Childbearing age norms in Europe in times of fertility postponement

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# Childbearing postponement

- Rising mean age at first birth ([Frejka and Sardon 2006](#))
- Substantial increase in the proportion of births occurring at advanced reproductive ages (35+ and 40+) ([Prioux 2005](#)) - Mostly first births
- Larger increases among women than among men ([Beaujouan 2020](#))
- Pursuit of education, economic uncertainty, relationship pathways and erosion of the traditional family model, changes in values, ...

*We examine whether childbearing age norms have changed in parallel with fertility behaviours in 21 European countries*



# Childbearing age norms

- Ideas shared within a society about the best/acceptable age to have children
  - Ideal age to become a parent
  - Upper age limit for childbearing
- In addition to biological barriers (La Rochebrochard et al., 2003; Sartorius and Nieschlag, 2010 )
- Obstacles for fertility recuperation at older ages (Billari et al. 2011)



# Previous research

- Ideal age norms older for men than for women and earlier than the observed mean age at first birth (Liefbroer and Merz 2009; Paksi and Szalma 2009)
- Consensus around upper age limits for parenthood (stronger for motherhood) (Billari et al. 2011)
- Considerable cross-country variation
- Limited knowledge of how social norms have changed (Van Bavel and Nitsche 2013; Kim and Cho 2021)



1. Have norms become less strict? In what way?

Change in age norms: ideal start and upper age limit

- Degree of consensus
- Heterogeneity
- Actual age values

**H1.** Age norms have become less strict over time

- Weaker consensus
- Increased heterogeneity
- Later age norms

**H2.** Gender convergence in age norms

# Data sources

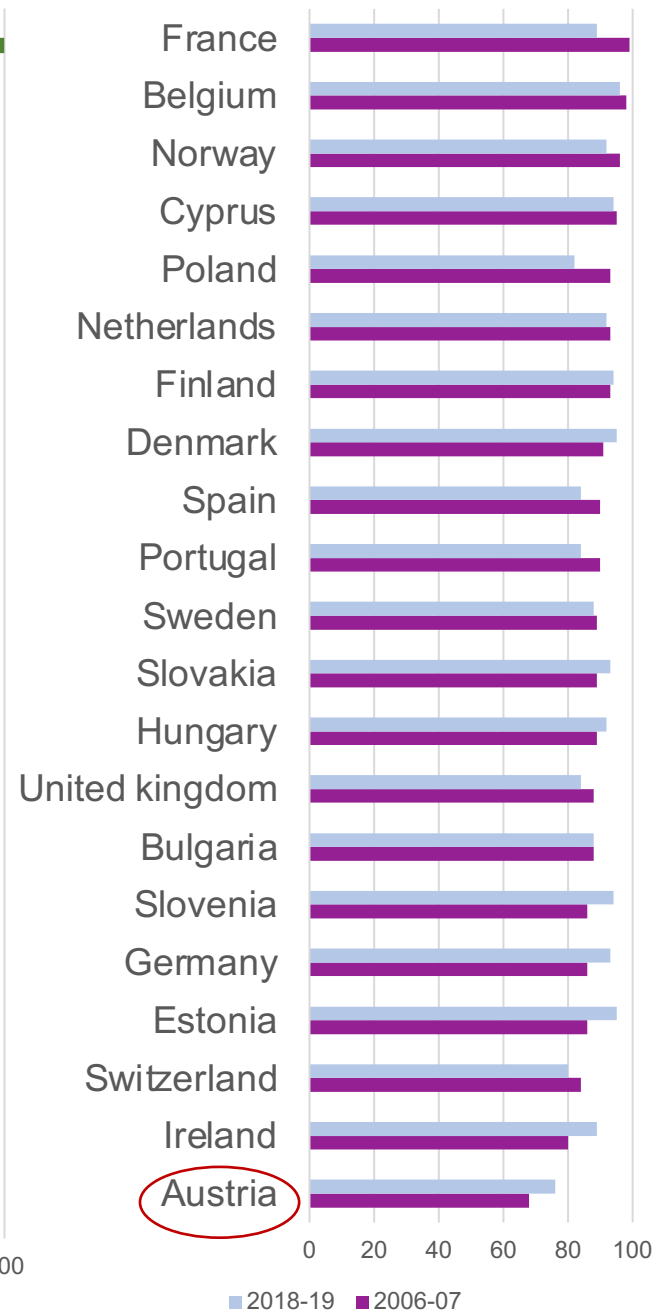
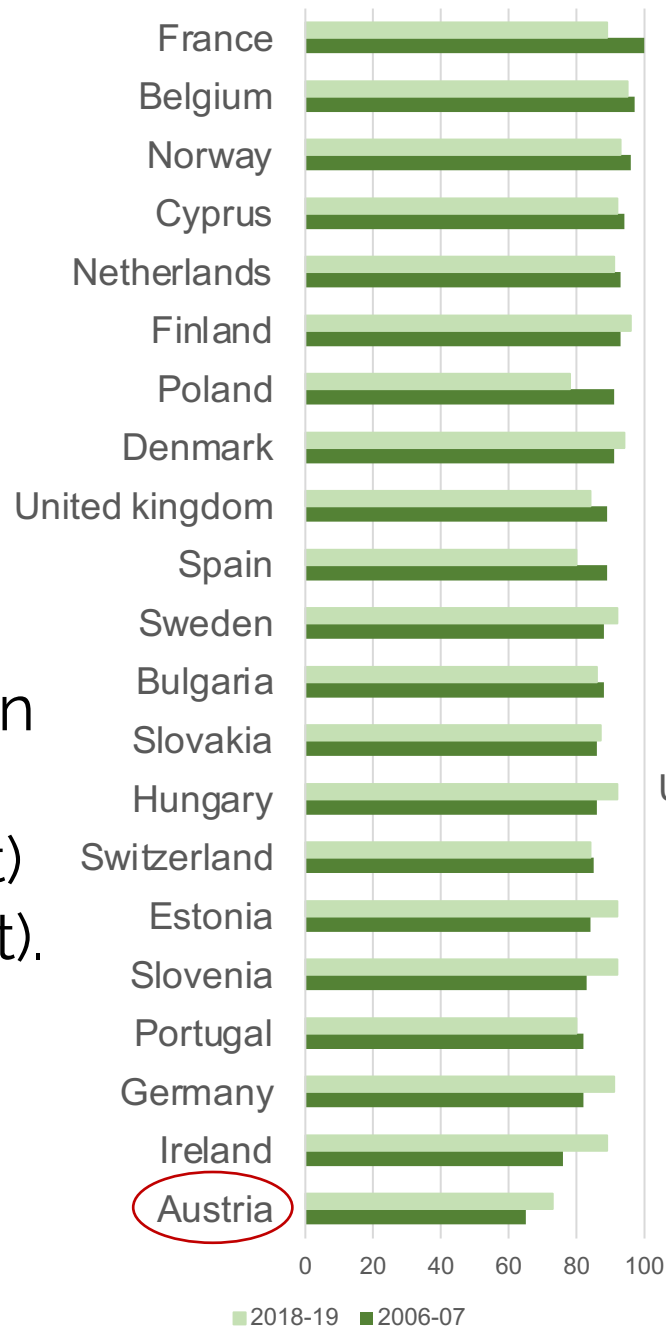
- **European Social Survey (ESS)** 2006-07 and 2018-19 (Rounds 3 and 9) – 21 countries, men and women
  1. *What is the ideal age for a girl or woman (a boy or a man) to become a mother (father)?*
  2. *After what age would you say a woman (man) is too old to consider having any more children?*



# Normative consensus: Ideal age to become parent

**F1**. Share acknowledging an ideal age at first birth for **men** (left) and **women** (right).

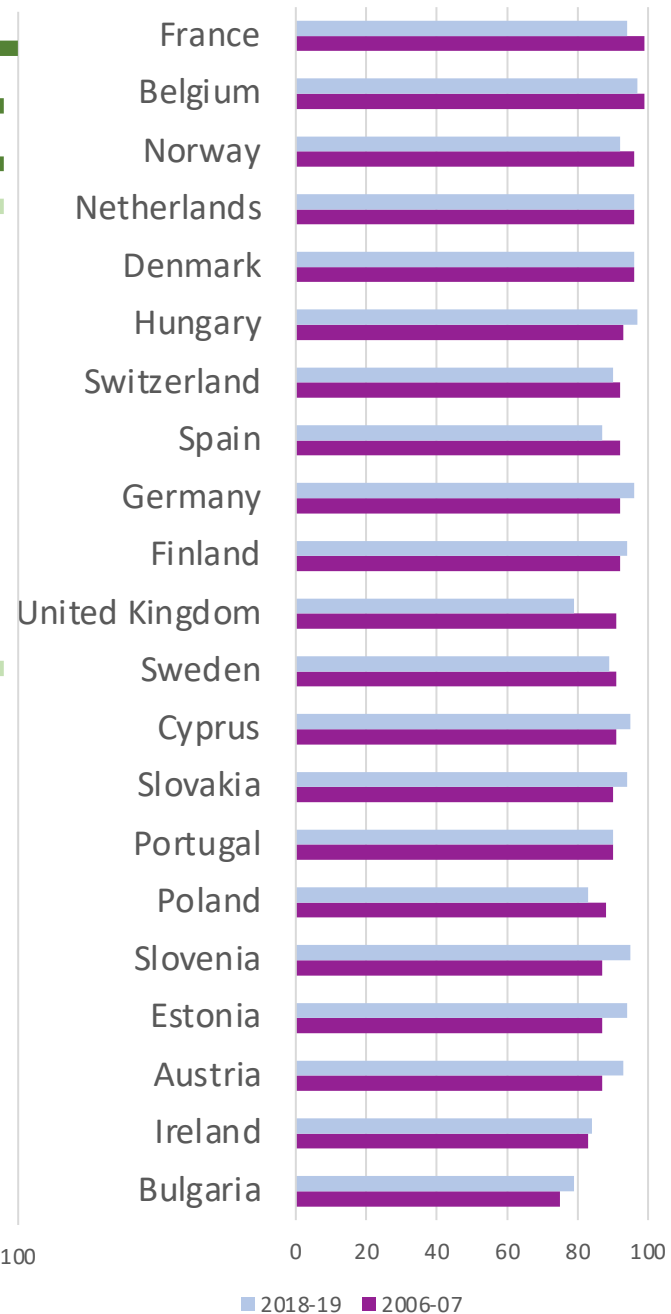
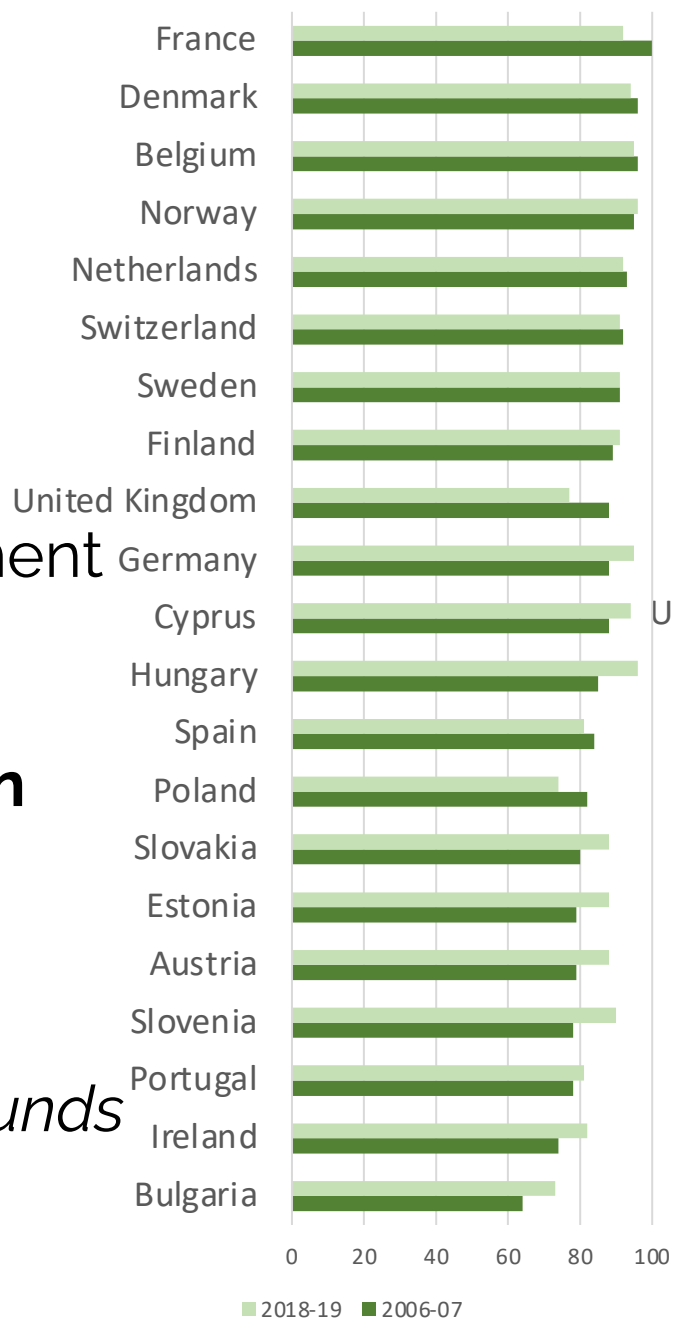
*Data: European Social Survey (Rounds 3 & 9)*



# Normative consensus: Upper age limits

**F2.Acknowledgment** of an upper age deadline for childbearing, **men** (left) and **women** (right).

*Data : European Social Survey (Rounds 3 & 9)*





# Heterogeneity

## Ideal age to become a parent

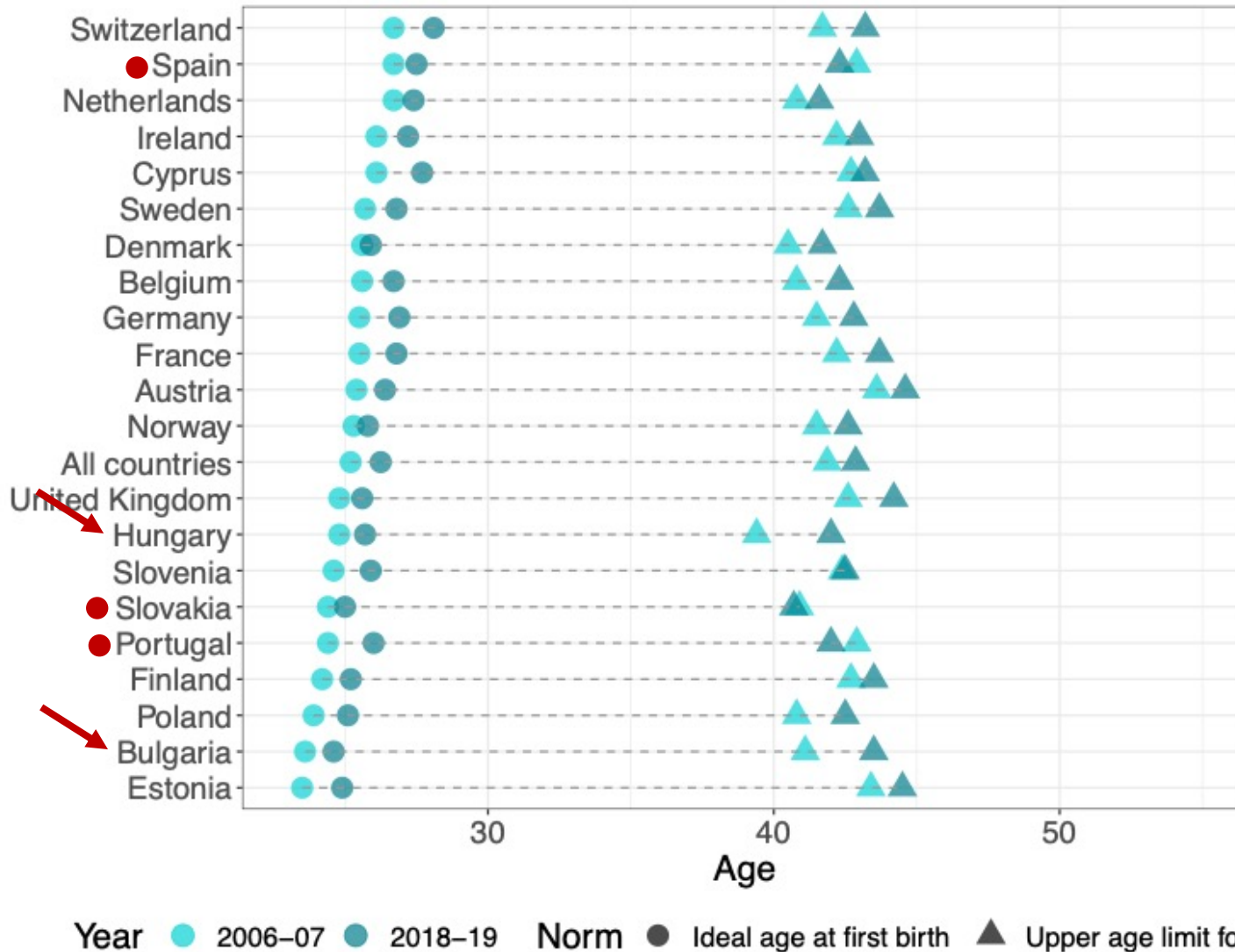
- No change
  - 50% of observations fall within a range of 3-5 years

## Upper age limits for childbearing

- Expanded for women
  - 50% of observations fall within a range of 4.9 years (in 2006-07) or 5.6 years (in 2018-19)
- Narrowed for men
  - 50% of observations fall within a range of 8.8 years (in 2006-07) or 7.3 years (in 2018-19)



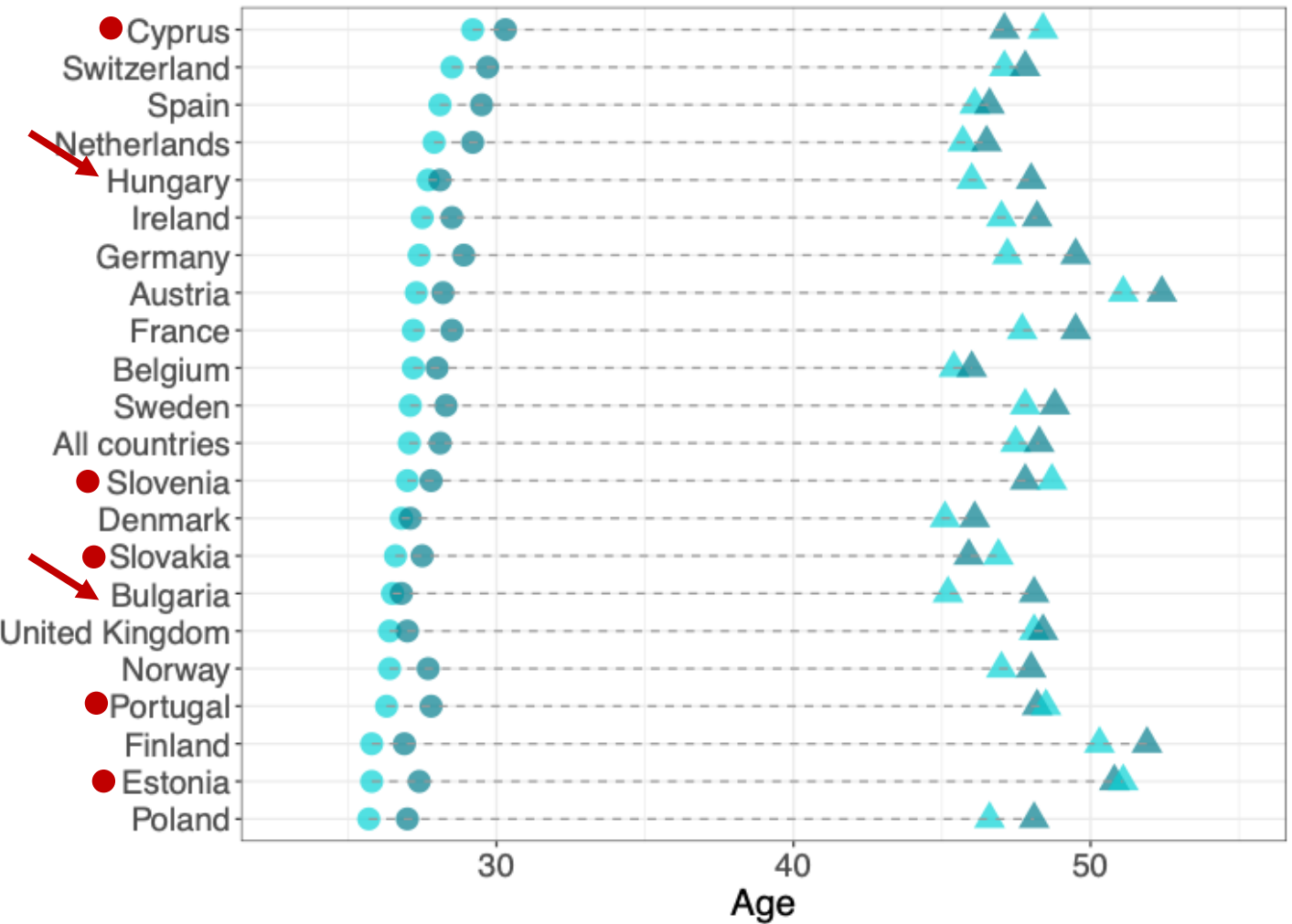
# Shift to later age norms for women...



**F3.**  
Change  
in the  
perceived  
reproductive  
window for  
**motherhood.**

*Data:*  
*European  
Social Survey  
(Rounds 3 & 9)*

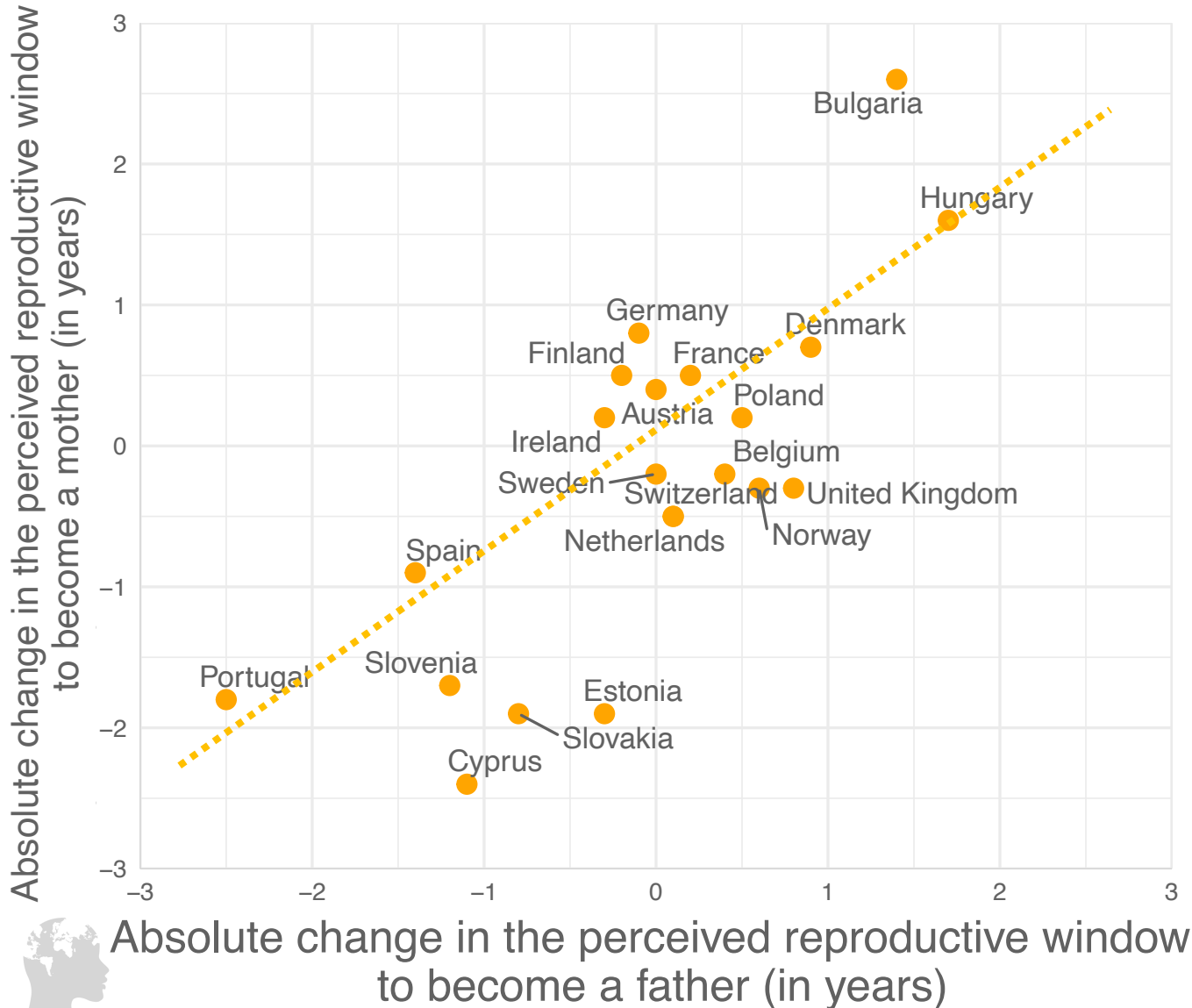
# ...and men



**F4.**  
 Change  
 in the  
 perceived  
 reproductive  
 window for  
 fatherhood.  
*Data:*  
*European  
 Social Survey  
 (Rounds 3 & 9)*

Year ● 2006-07 ● 2018-19 Norm ● Ideal age at first birth ▲ Upper age limit for childbearing

# Similar change in upper age limit for men and women



**F5.** Change in the perceived reproductive window for fatherhood and motherhood. *Data: European Social Survey (Rounds 3 & 9)*



2. What drives the change in age norms?

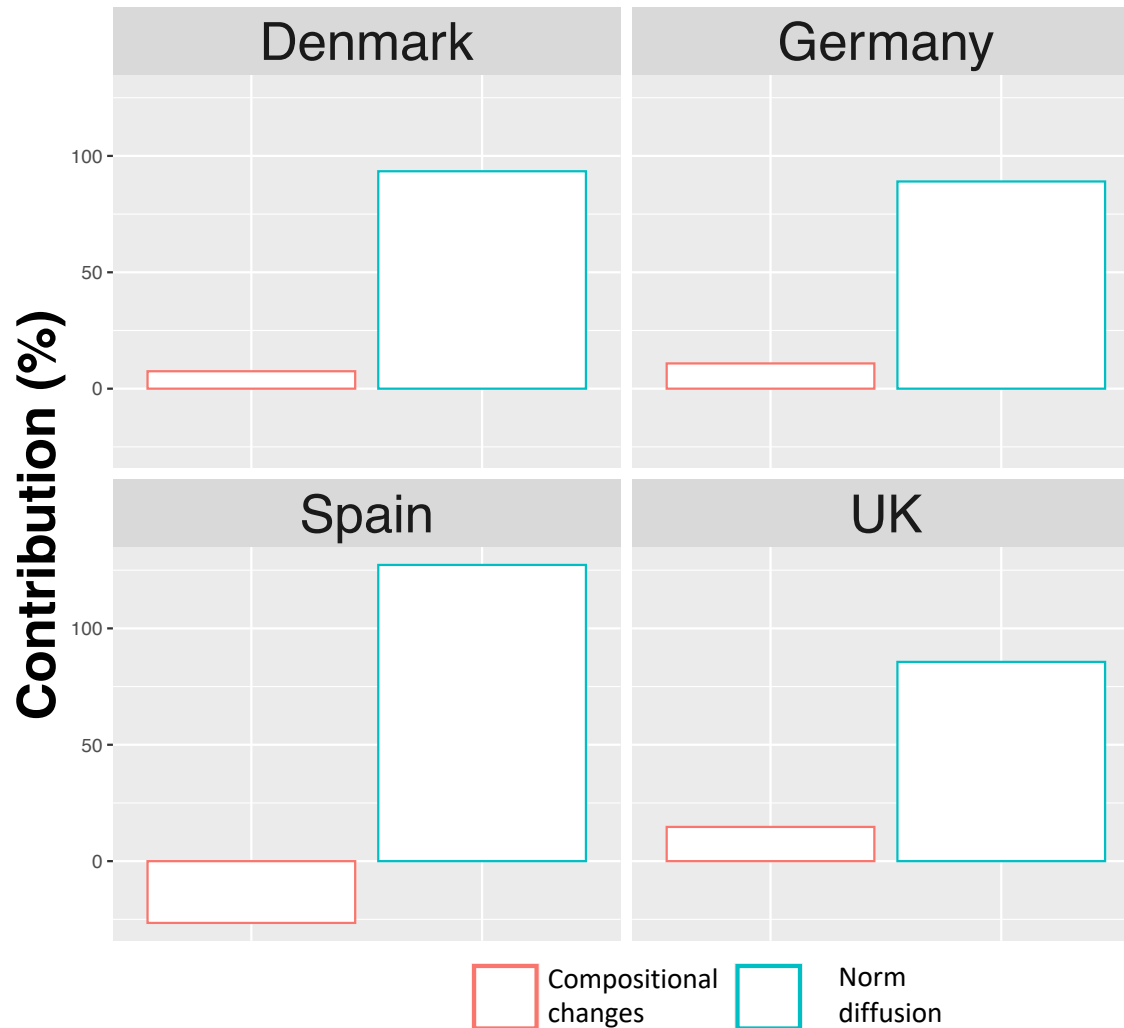
Compositional changes vs norm diffusion process

**H3.** Both composition and behaviour effects explain the change in age norms

### **Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition**

Education, economic situation, relationship status, childbearing postponement, religiosity

# Small contribution from compositional changes



**F6.**Percentage contribution of compositional changes and norm diffusion processes to the increase in the upper age limit for the childbearing of **women** between 2006–07 and 2018–19 .

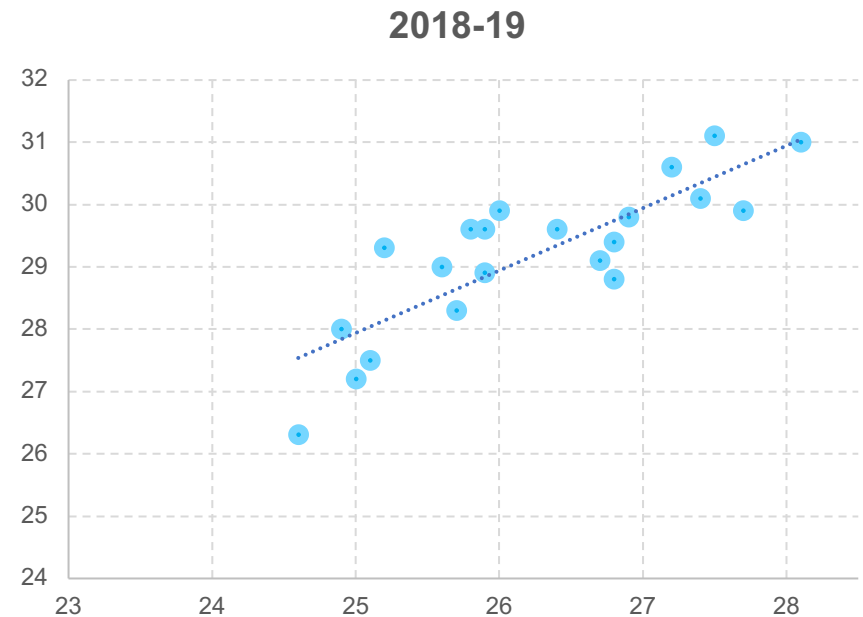
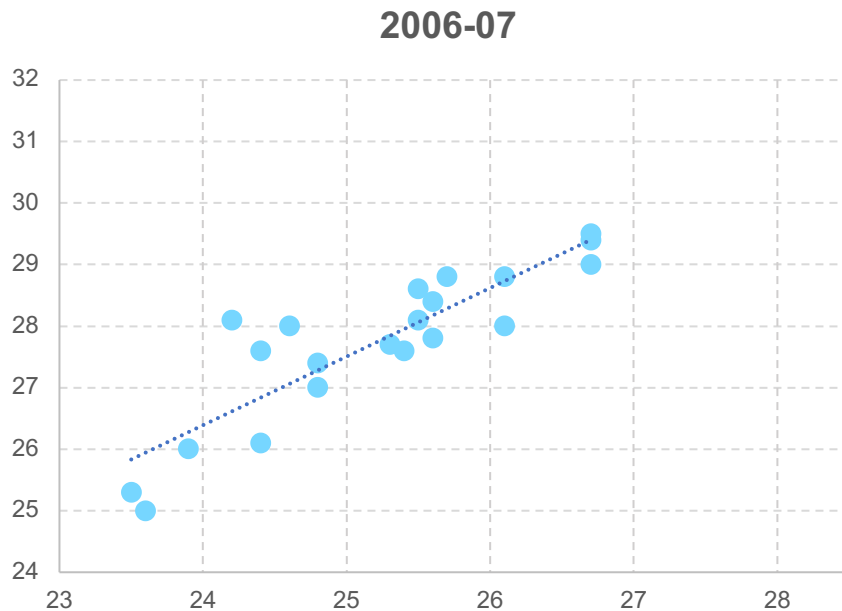


Data: European Social Survey (Rounds 3 & 9)

3. Is there an association between the shift in age norms and changes in fertility behaviours?

**H4.** Positive association between norms and behaviours

# Strong association between age norms and their actual timing at each point in time...



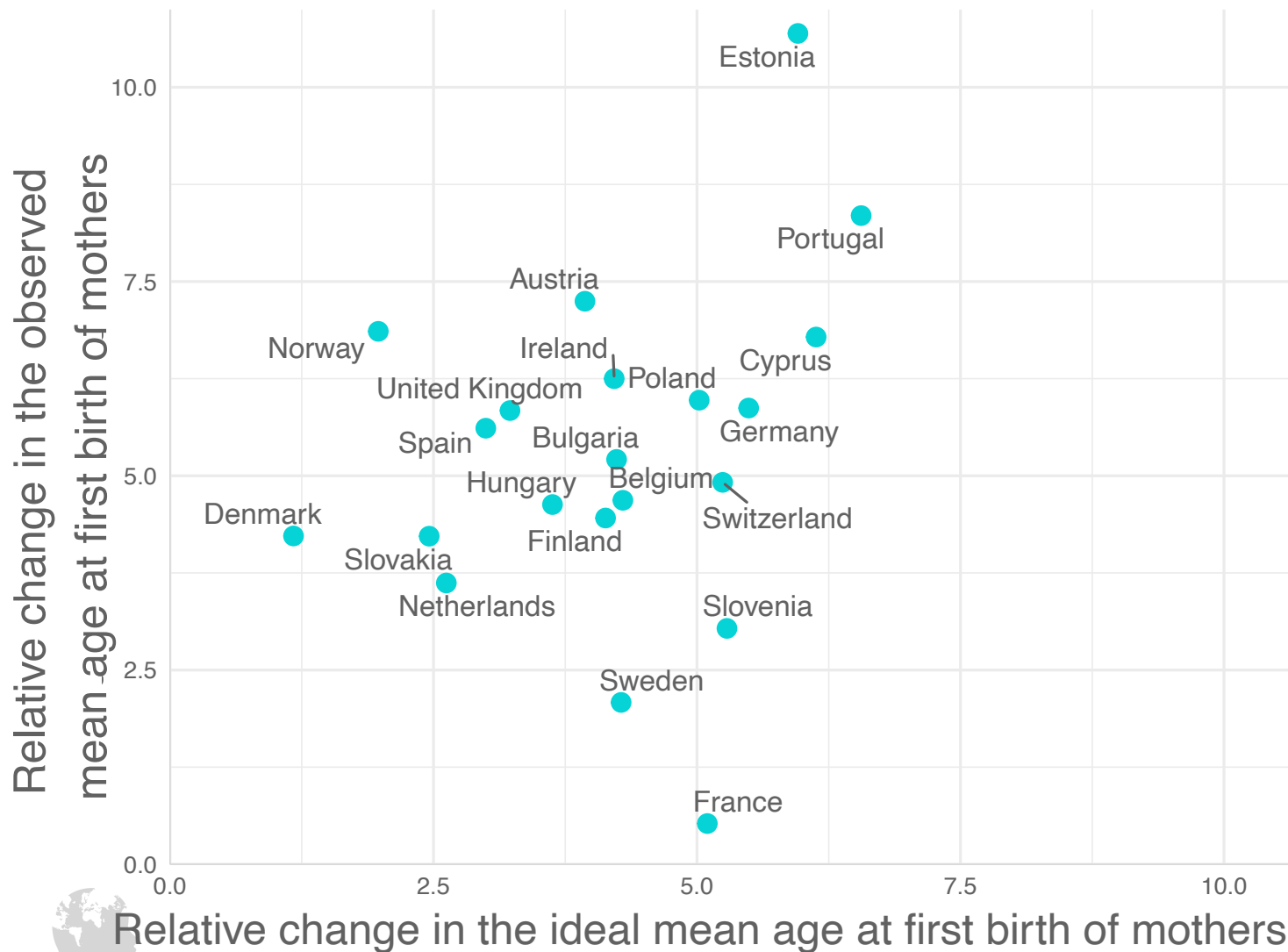
**F7.** Observed and ideal mean age at first birth of **women**, 2006-07 and 2018-19.

*Data: European Social Survey (Rounds 3 & 9), Eurostat.*





...but loose association between the change in norms and the age of entry into parenthood



**F8.**  
Relative increase in observed mean age at first birth vs ideal mean age at first, **motherhood.**

*Data:*  
*European Social Survey (Rounds 3 & 9), Eurostat.*



# Summary of results

<b>H1.</b> Age norms have become less strict over time	<b>Partially supported</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More acknowledged</li><li>• Later upper age limits</li></ul>
<b>H2.</b> Gender convergence in age norms	<b>Partially supported</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Growing consensus on the existence of an age deadline for men</li><li>• Less heterogeneous responses for men than in the past</li></ul>
<b>H3.</b> Both composition and behaviour effects explain the change in age norms	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Norm diffusion processes explained most of the change in age norms</li></ul>
<b>H4.</b> Positive association between norms and behaviours	<b>Not supported</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Weak association between changing norms and fertility behaviours</li></ul>



Thank you!



**Acknowledgement:**

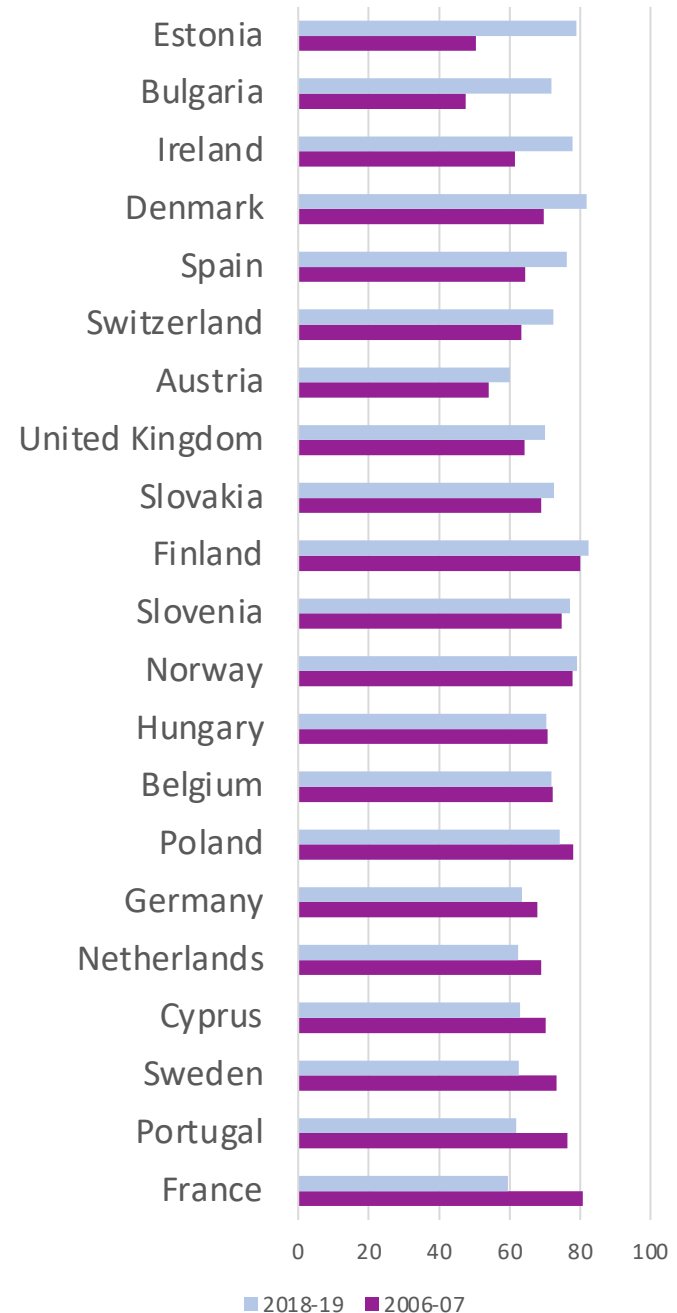
This research was supported by funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant Agreement No 101001410)



# Mismatch between ideals and behaviours

**F9.** Share of respondents perceiving an ideal age at first birth for **motherhood** lower than the one observed.

*Data sources:  
European Social  
Survey (Rounds 3 &  
9), Eurostat.*



# Education is the most salient compositional factor

**F7.**Percentage contribution of the explanatory variables to the explained portion of the difference in the upper age deadline for the childbearing of **women**.

*Data : European Social Survey (Rounds 3 & 9)*

