Wittgenstein Centre
FOR DEMOGRAPHY AND GLOBAL HUMAN CAPITAL

No time to lose? Changes in partnership prerequisites to childbearing across ages

Cristina Suero [1]
Eva Beaujouan [1]

1 University of Vienna; Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna)

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Menaggio, September 15-17, 2025

Intro: Prerequisites for childbearing and postponement

- The age at first parenthood has steadily increased in European countries since the 1970s (Neels et al., 2017).
- Individuals tend to **postpone childbearing until certain conditions are met**, such as stable employment (Alderotti et al., 2021), financial security (van Wijk & Billari, 2024), secure housing (Vignoli et al., 2013) and **stable partnerships** (Fostik et al., 2023).
  - **Finding a suitable partner** remains one of the most important **prerequisites** for childbearing (Sheppard, 2024).
  - **Partnership instability** is associated with lower fertility intentions (Sturm et al., 2023) and a higher likelihood of remaining childless (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017).

Intro: More obstacles to childbearing with age

- **Reproductive capacity declines with age**, especially among women (Leridon & Slama, 2008; Te Velde et al., 2012).
- And the **normative upper age limit** to having a first child persists even if it has increased in most European countries (on average 43 years old for women) (Lazzari et al. 2022)

- Postponing key transitions to adulthood has been linked to a higher likelihood of remaining childless (Saarela & Skirbekk, 2020; Beaujouan and Neels, 2025), a lower probability of achieving fertility intentions (Nishikido et al., 2022; Beaujouan et al. 2019), and a greater reliance on infertility treatments (Suero et al., 2025).

Intro: Foregoing the prerequisites for parenthood at higher reproductive ages?

- **Older women may experience greater pressure to have children** within a limited timeframe (Iacovou & Tavares, 2011), prompting them to accelerate certain life transitions in an effort to avoid running out of time to have a baby.
- We already know that:
  - Birth intervals become shorter with age (Compans et al. 2023)
  - More first births take place fast in partnerships started after age 32 in France (Compans and Beaujouan 2020)
- In terms of partnership, this may involve spending less time evaluating the quality and stability of a relationship before becoming a parent, transitioning to parenthood within suboptimal partnerships, or even outside a partnership.

Hypotheses

1. Older childless women may feel compelled to shorten the period of relationship assessment—or even bypass partnership altogether— before childbearing, driven by the perception that time is running out to achieve their fertility goals (Hypothesis 1).

    a) Older women may be more likely than younger women to **have a child shortly after entering a co-residential partnership** (Hypothesis 1A).
    b) Older women may be more likely than younger women to **experience union dissolution shortly after having a child** (Hypothesis 1B).
    c) Older women may be more likely than younger women to **have a child outside of a co-residential partnership** (Hypothesis 1C).

2. In countries **where fertility is generally postponed, older women will demonstrate greater flexibility** in partnership prerequisites for childbearing compared to countries where early childbearing is more common (Hypothesis 2).

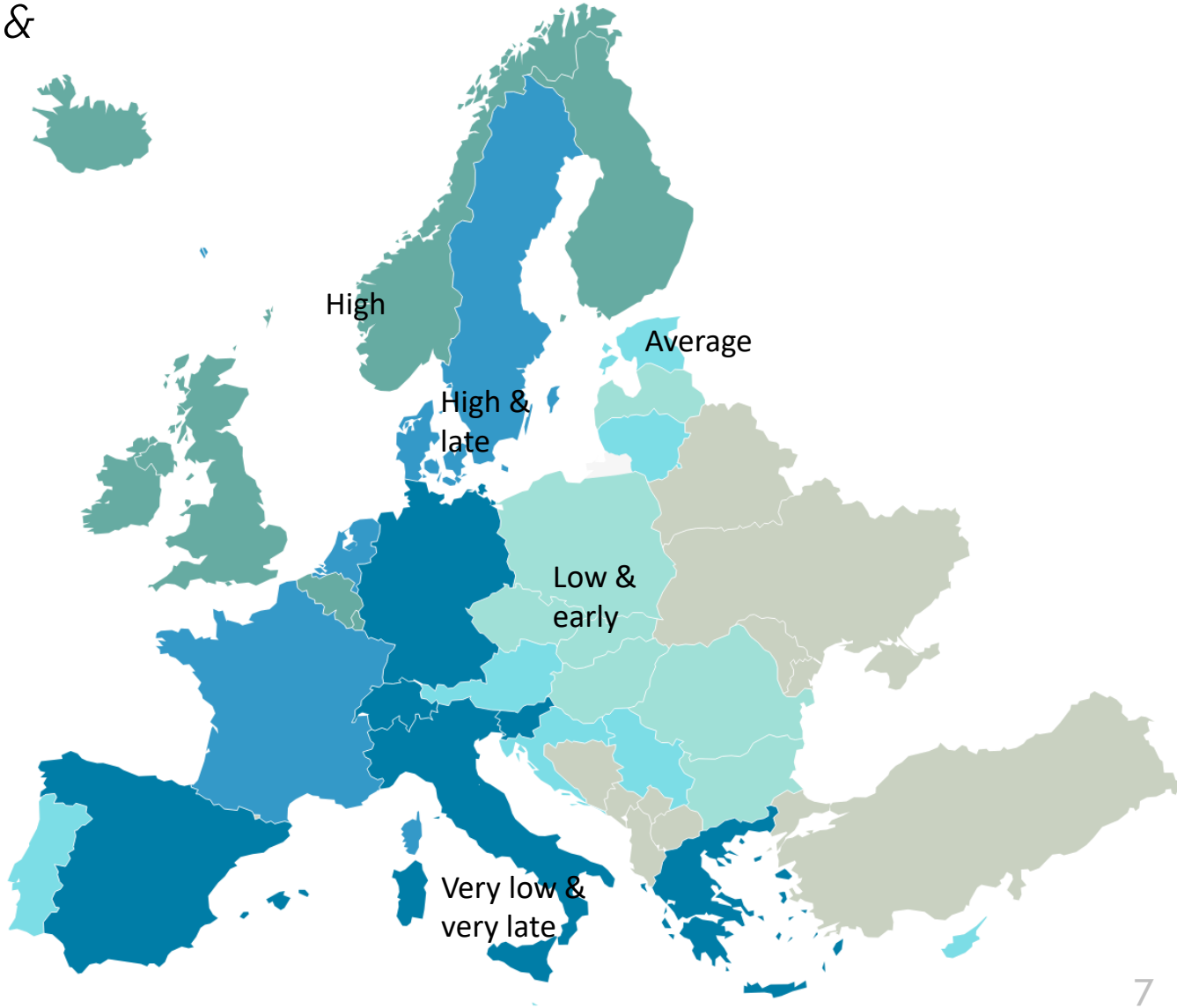
Data and Methods

- Database: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (**EUSILC**) – longitudinal component, 2004-2023
  - Information about the household composition and relationship between its members for 4 observations (4 years).
- We analyse how the situation in the first observation (t1) is connected to the behaviours observed in the three subsequent years (observations t2, t3, and t4)
- 5-year age groups 20-24… + 40-45
- Pooling different countries, we observe **variations across space** (clustering countries according to fertility characteristics).

Data and Methods: country clusters

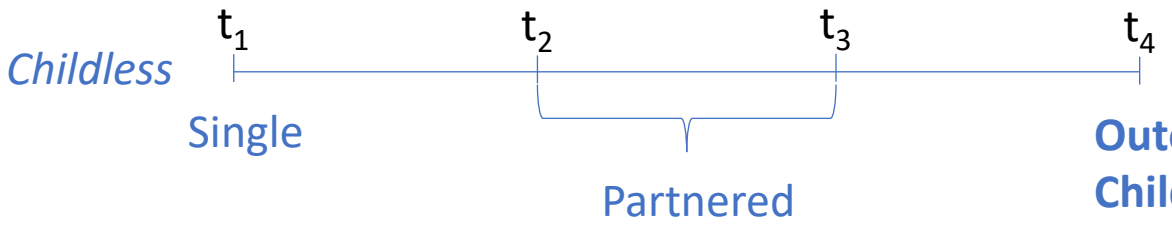
Cluster analysis using TFR and MA1B in 2004 & 2019

1. Average fertility level and timing
2. Low and early fertility
3. "High" fertility and average timing
4. "High" and late fertility
5. Very low and very late fertility



Data and Methods: calculations by age group

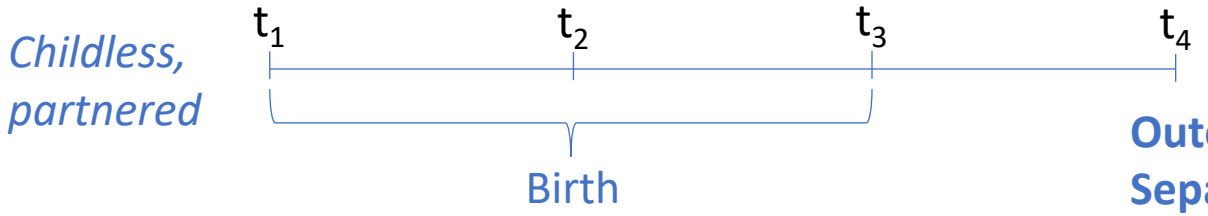
1. Predicted probability of **having a child quickly in a new union**



Outcome:
Child vs no child

Benchmark = child vs no child in any partnership situation

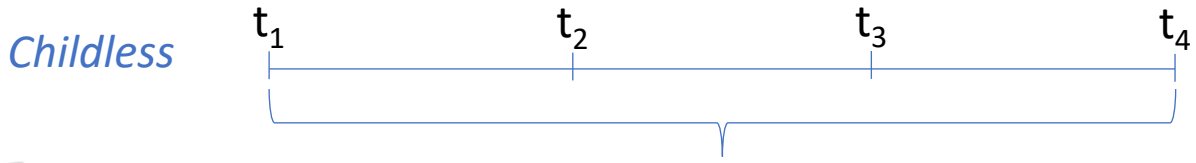
2. Predicted probability of **experiencing a union dissolution quickly after the birth**



Outcome:
Separated vs not separated

Benchmark = separation vs no separation if no birth

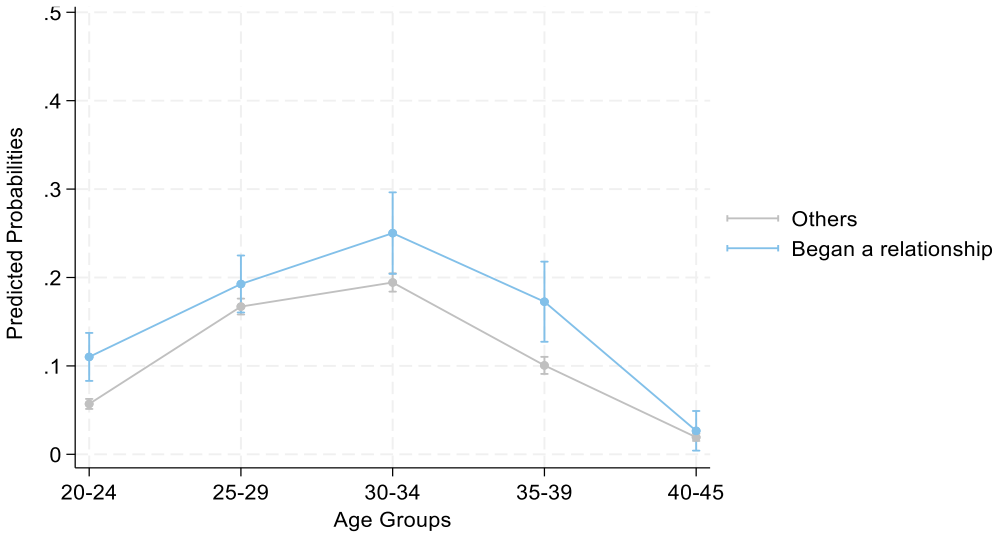
3. Predicted probability of **childbirth outside a union**



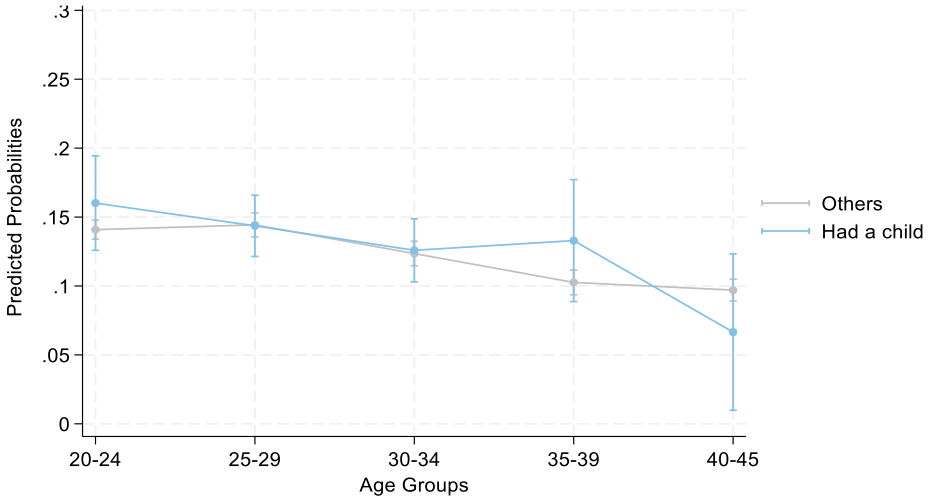
Birth
Outcome: outside vs in a union

Results. General overview of the three analyses

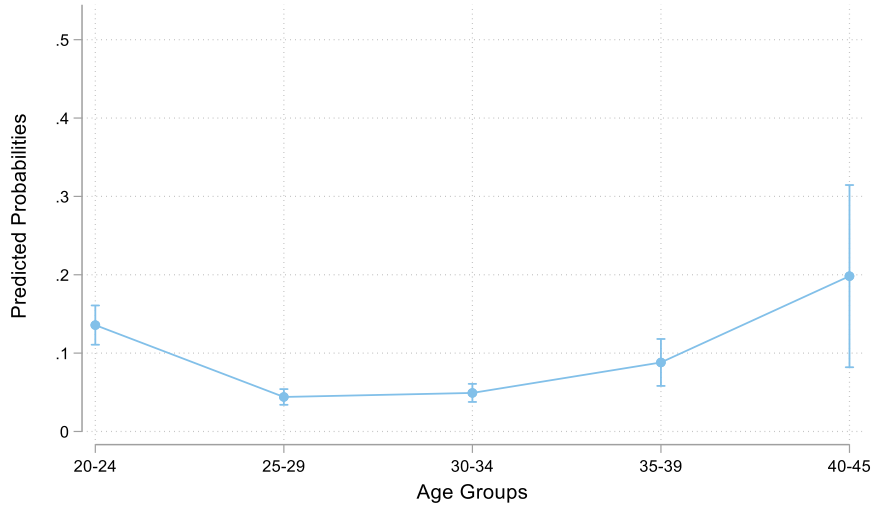
Predicted probabilities of having a child quickly after union formation (H1A)



Predicted probabilities of ending a relationship quickly after birth (H1B)



Among those with a birth, predicted probability of being single at birth (H1C)

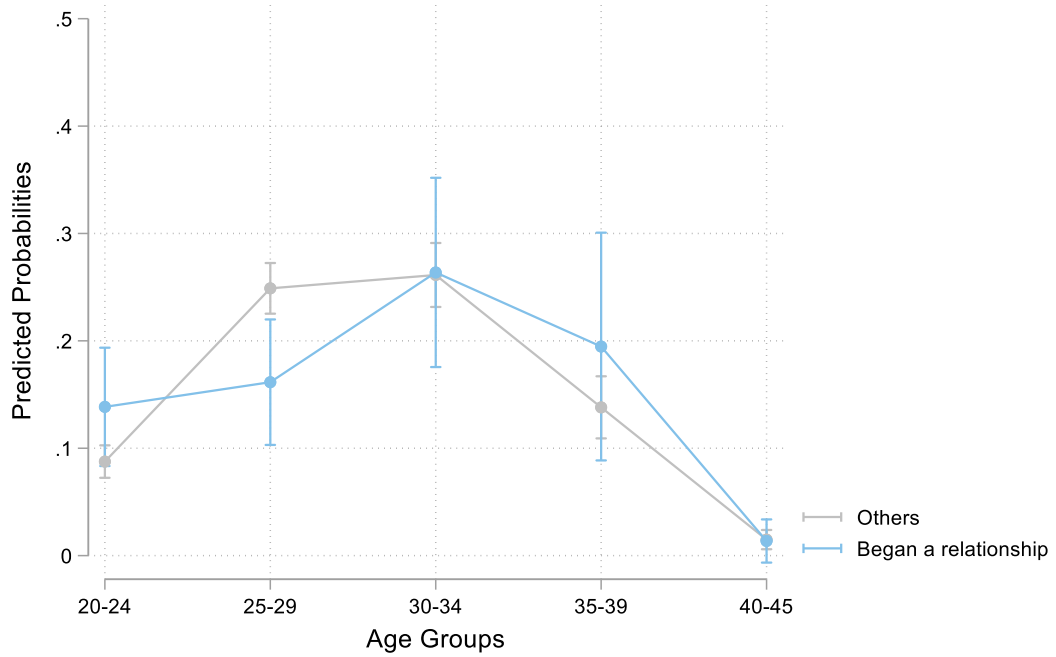


Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. All countries, years 2004-2023.

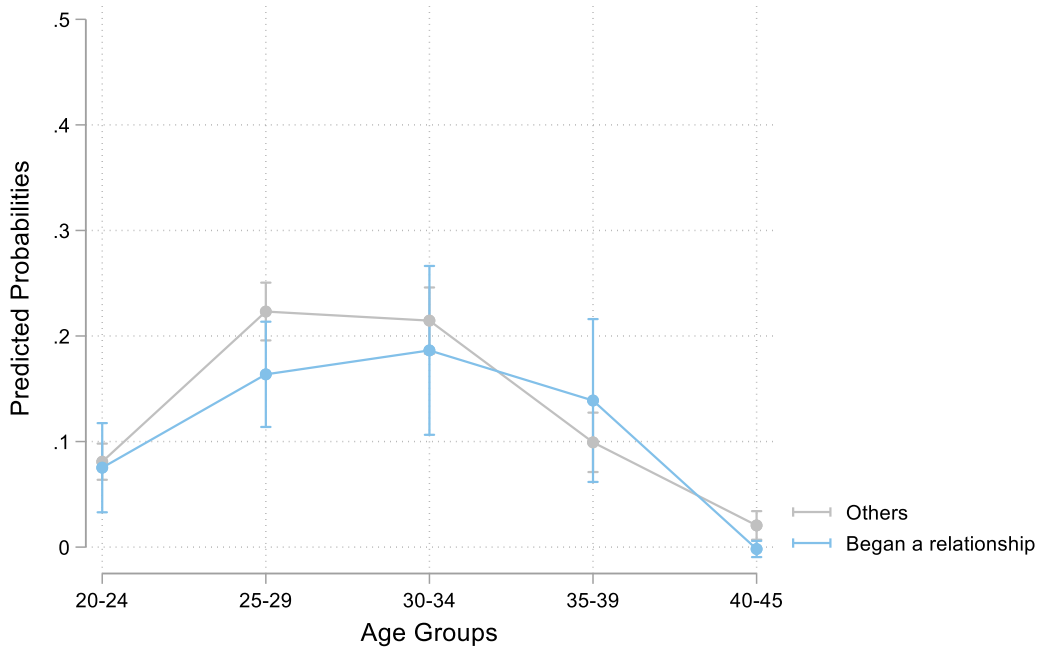
Results. Having a child shortly after starting co-residing, by country cluster

Predicted probabilities of having a first child in t_2, t_3, or t_4, among childless women, by age and by changes in union status.

Cluster: **High fertility, average timing** (Belgium, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, UK)



Cluster: **High & late fertility** (Denmark, France, Netherlands, Sweden)

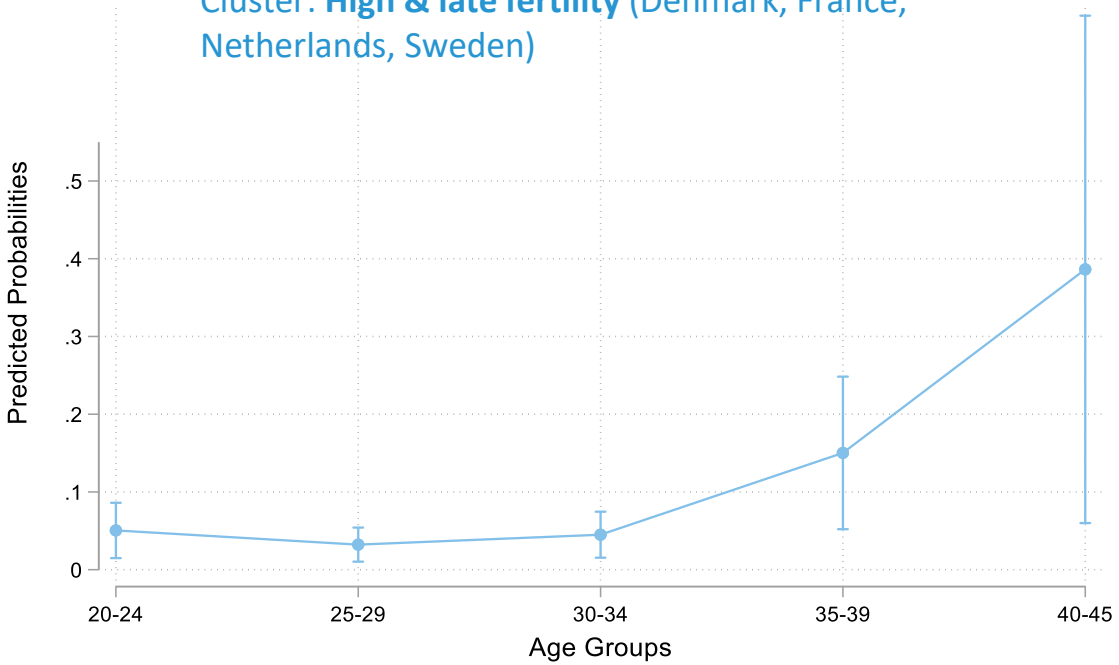


Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. All countries, years 2004-2023.

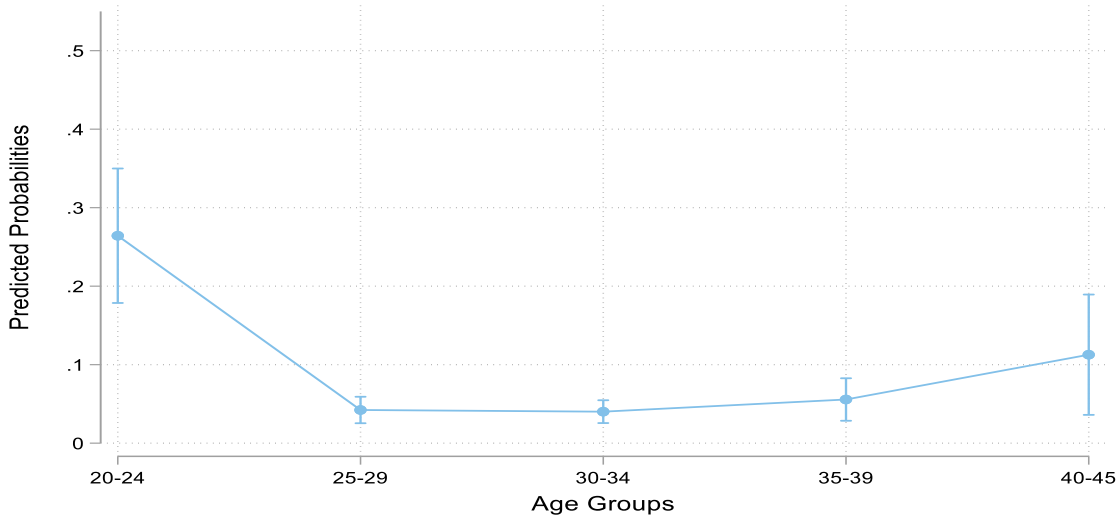
Results. Having a child outside a co-residential union, by country

Predicted probabilities of having a child outside a co-residential union among women who had a child during the observation period.

Cluster: **High & late fertility** (Denmark, France, Netherlands, Sweden)



Cluster: **Very low & very late fertility** (Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland)



Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. All countries, years 2004-2023.

Review of results

- We observe that older women are more likely to have a first child shortly after entering a co-residential union, particularly those aged 35–39 (H1A).
  - This effect is driven by high-fertility countries, but does not necessarily appear in late-fertility countries (H2).
- We find no evidence that older women are more likely to experience union dissolution after the birth of a child (H1B).
- The likelihood of having a child without a co-resident partner increases steadily with age and is especially high among women aged 40–45 (H1C).
  - This effect is more evident in countries characterized by later fertility patterns (H2).

➢ We identified a potential adaptation process that involves relaxing the prerequisites for having children at older reproductive ages.

Thank you!

Cristina Suero
cristina.suero.garcia@univie.ac.at

Eva Beaujouan
eva.beaujouan@univie.ac.at

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dataexplorer.wittgensteincentre.org

Data and Methods: indicators

1. Among childless single women at t_1 who enter a co-residential union in t_2 or t_3, we estimate the **likelihood of having a first child in t_2, t_3, or t_4**, by age group. We compare it to the likelihood of having a child among all other childless women (our benchmark).

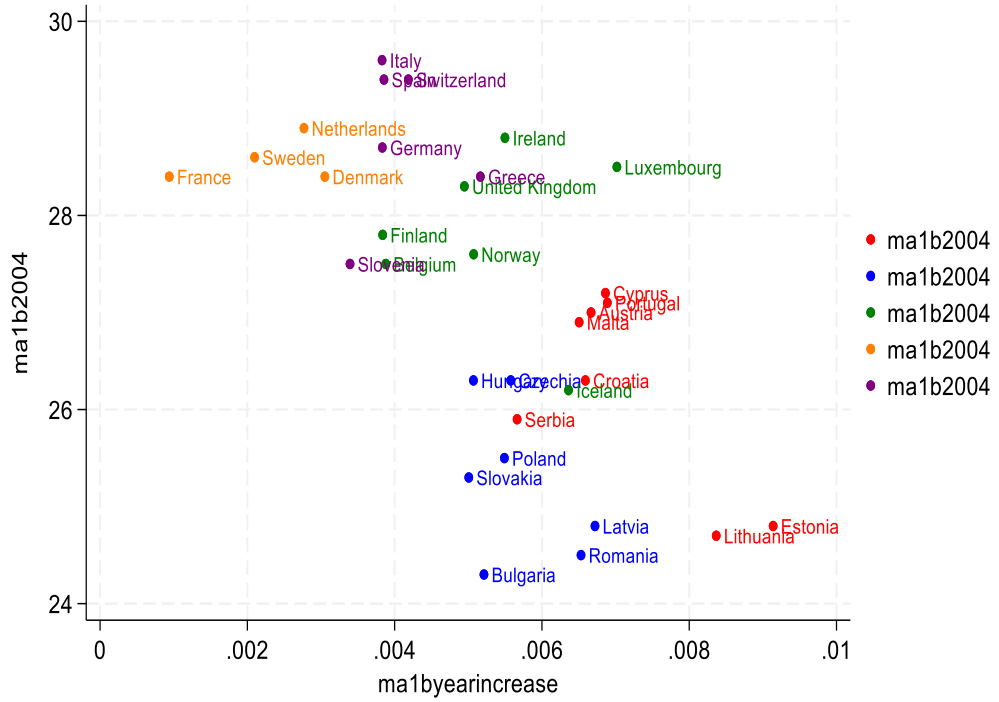
2. Among childless women who had a child within a co-residential union in t_1, t_2, or t_3, we estimate the **likelihood of experiencing a union dissolution in t_2, t_3, or t_4**, by age group. We compare it to the likelihood of separation among childless women who did not have a child over the observation period (our benchmark).

3. Among women childless before t1 who had a child during the observation period, we assess the likelihood that this child was born while the woman did not have a co-resident partner, by age.

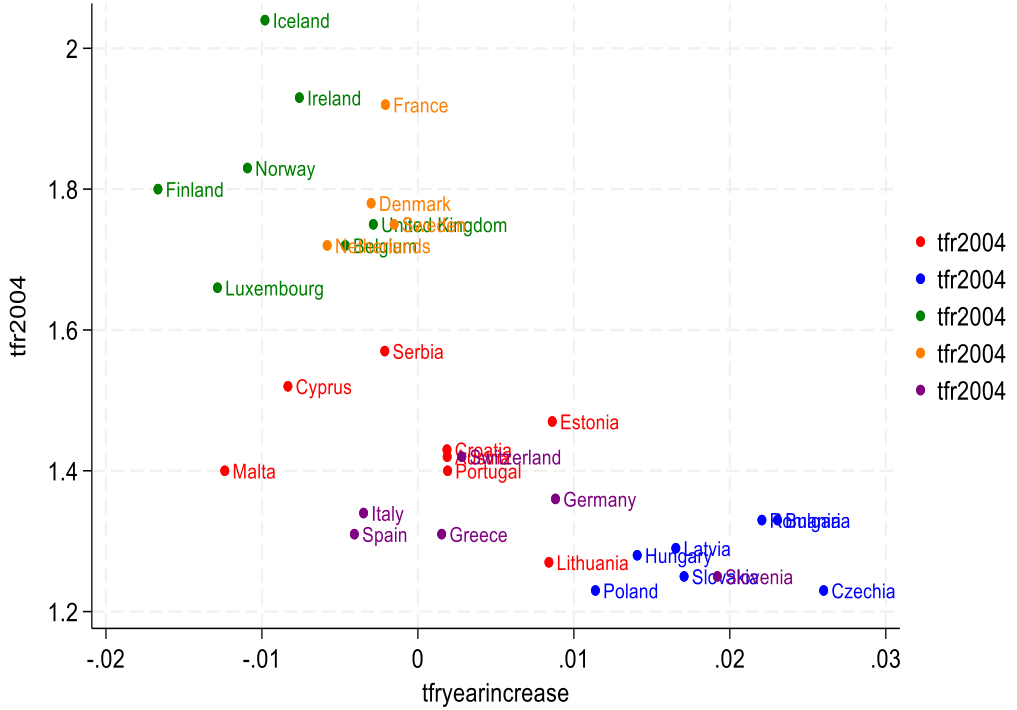
Appendix 1. Clusters

Cluster analysis using fertility characteristics

MA1B2004, MA1B2019-2004 (year increases)



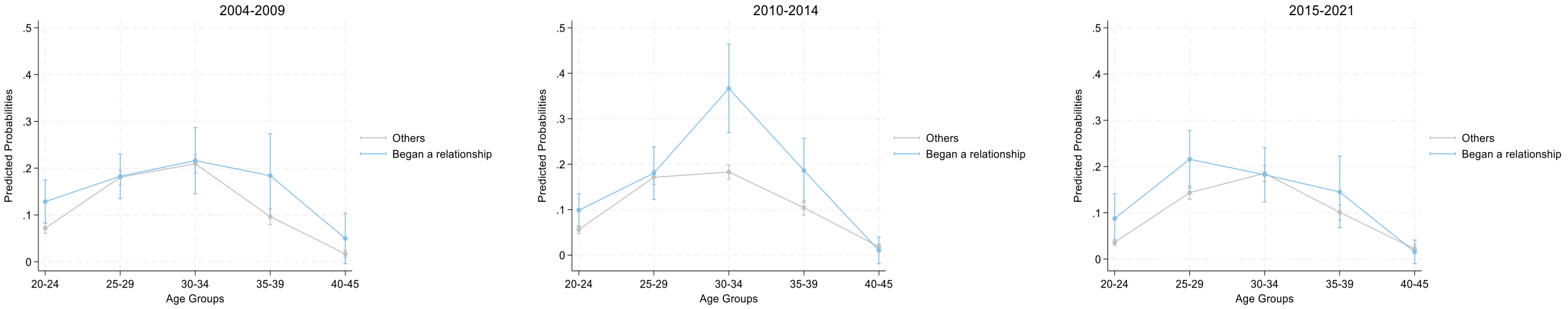
TFR2004, TFR2019-2004 (year increases)



Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. Years 2004-2023.

Appendix 2. Full results

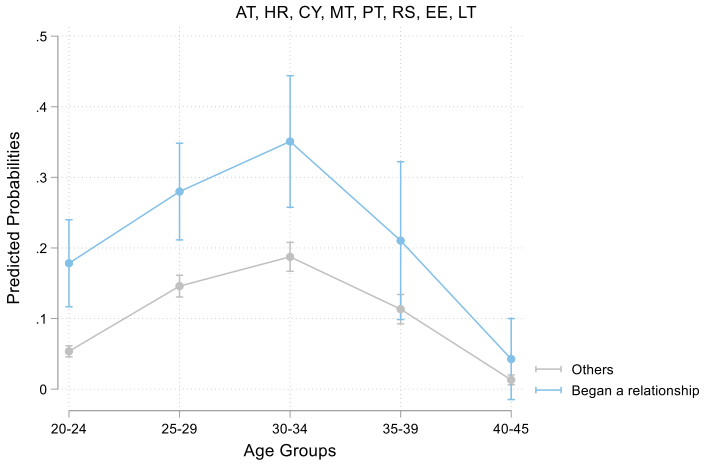
H1A. All time periods

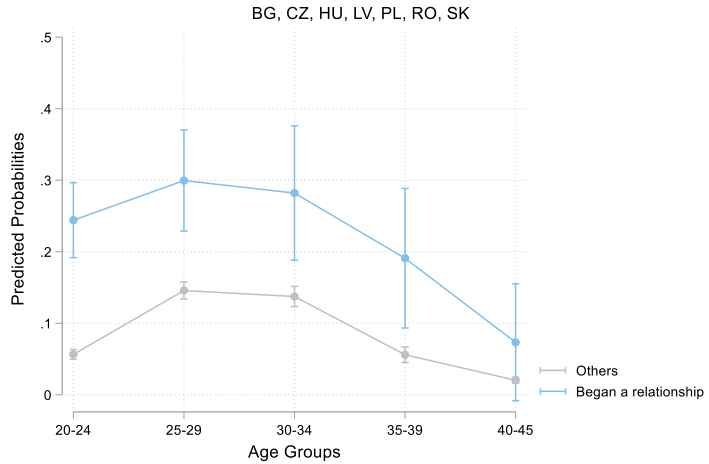


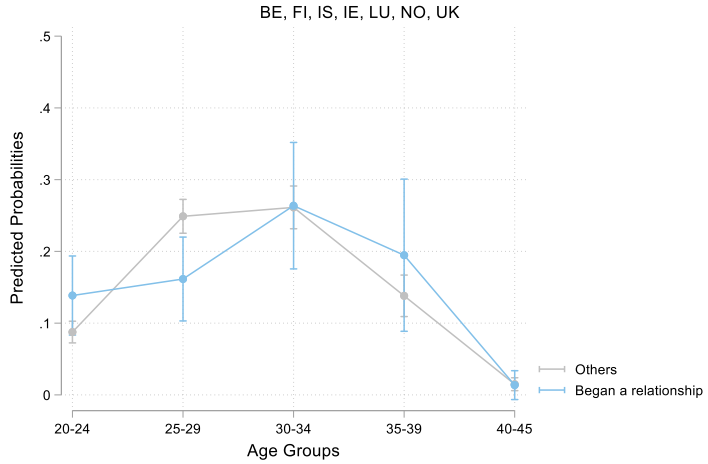
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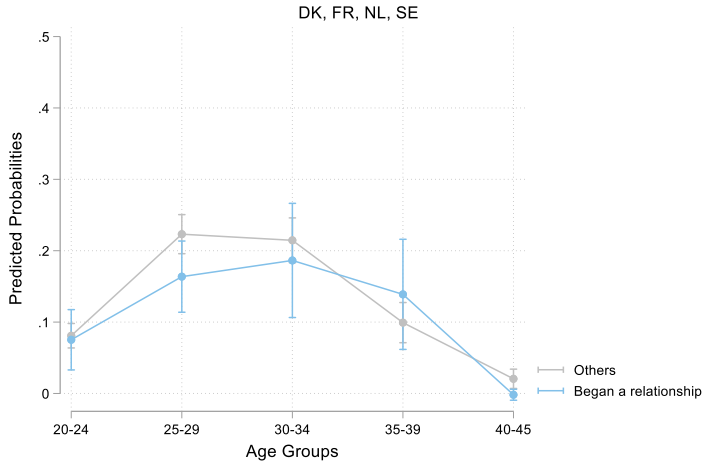
Appendix 2. Full results

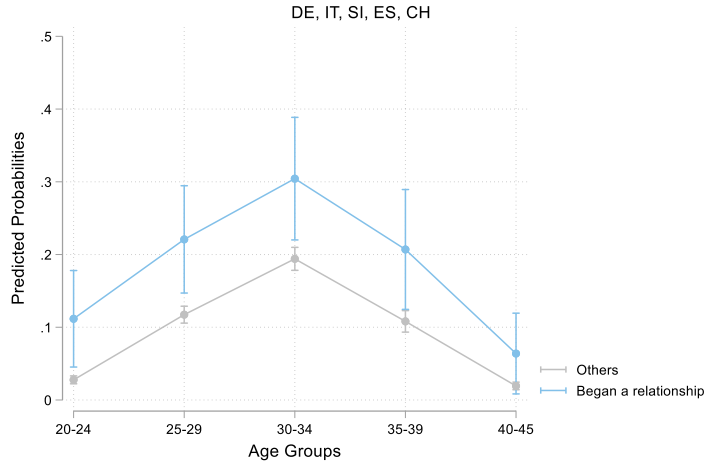
H1A. All clusters







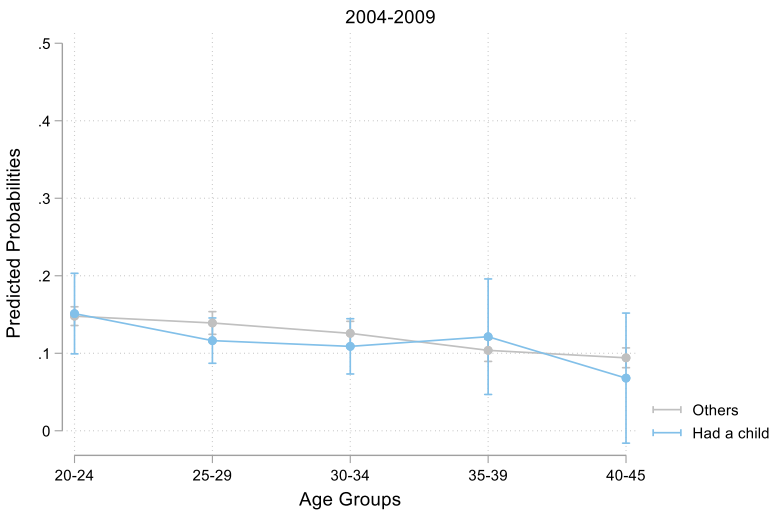


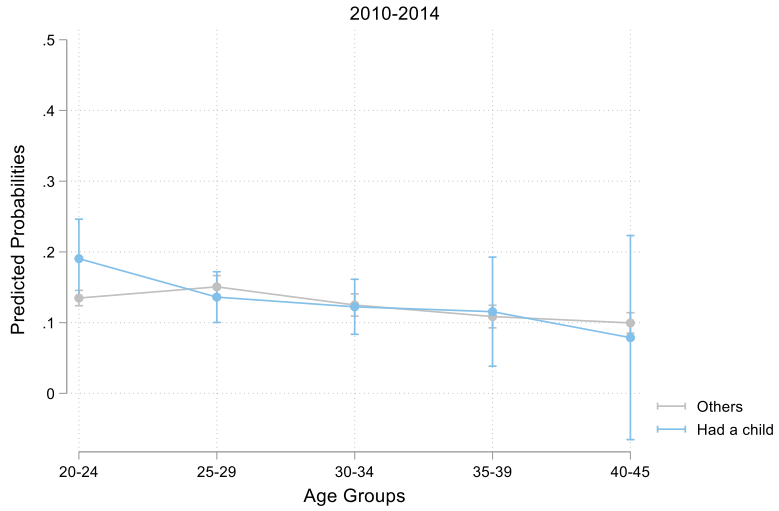


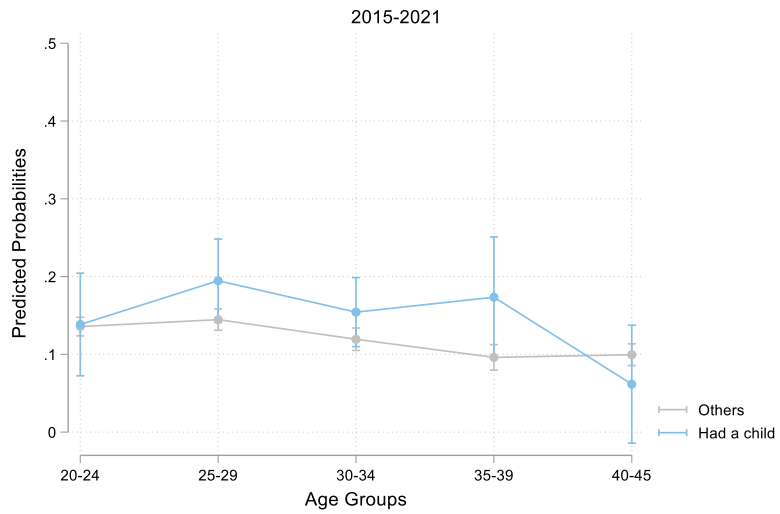
Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. Years 2004-2023.

Appendix 2. Full results

H1B. All time periods



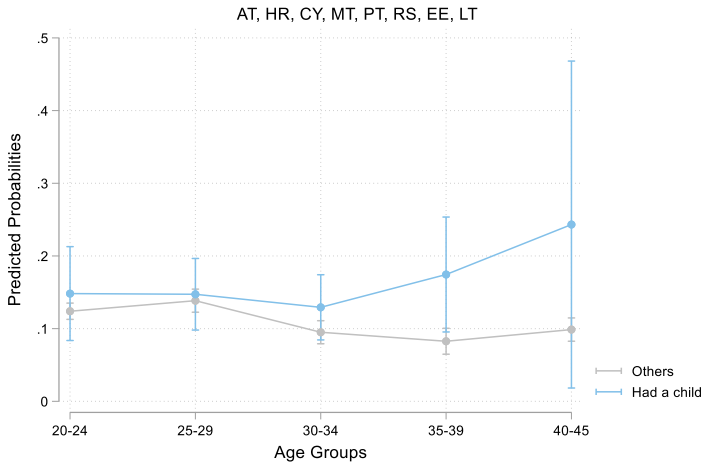


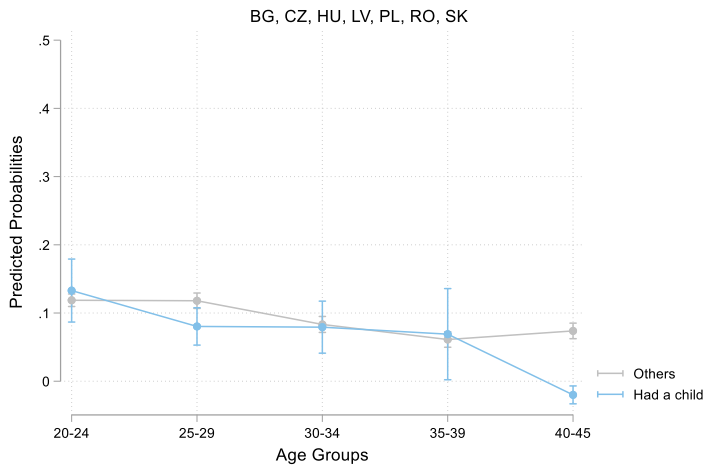


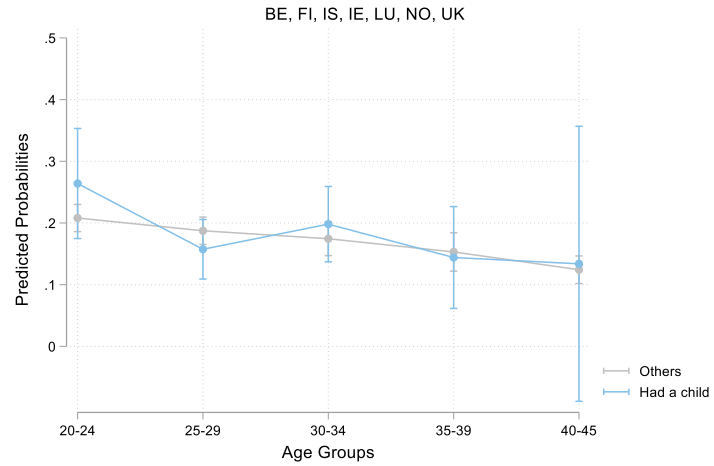
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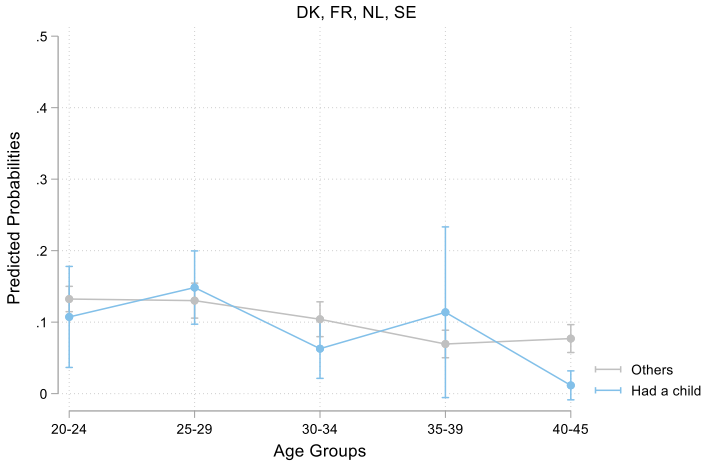
Appendix 2. Full results

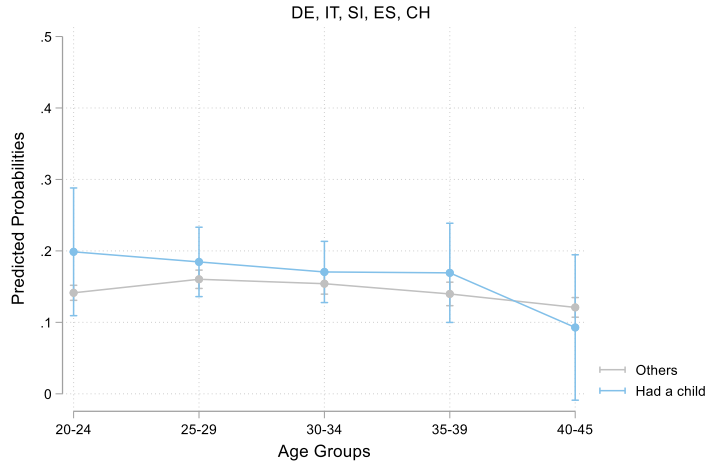
H1B. All clusters







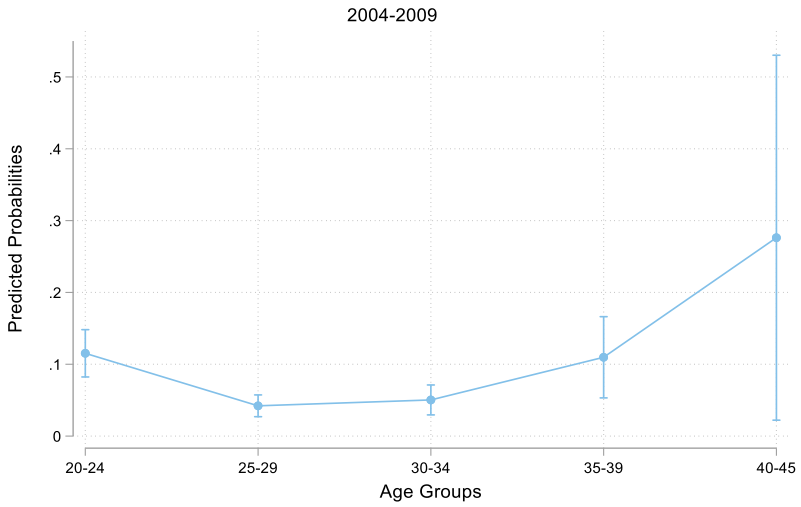


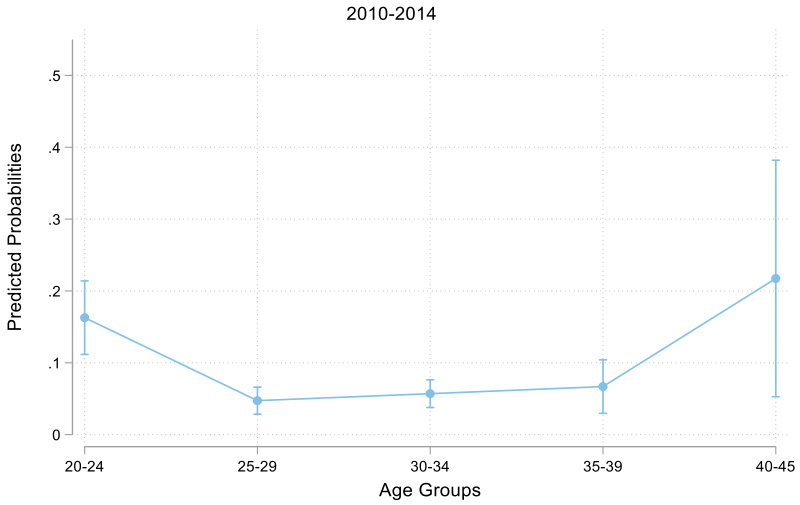


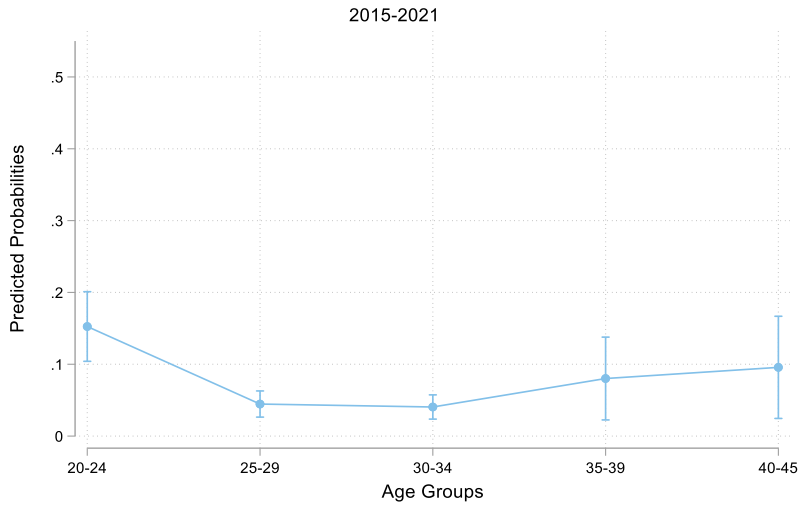
Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. Years 2004-2023.

Appendix 2. Full results

H1C. All time periods



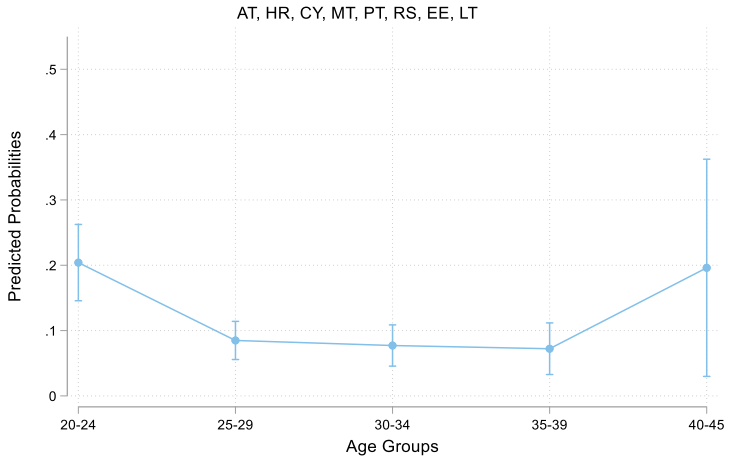


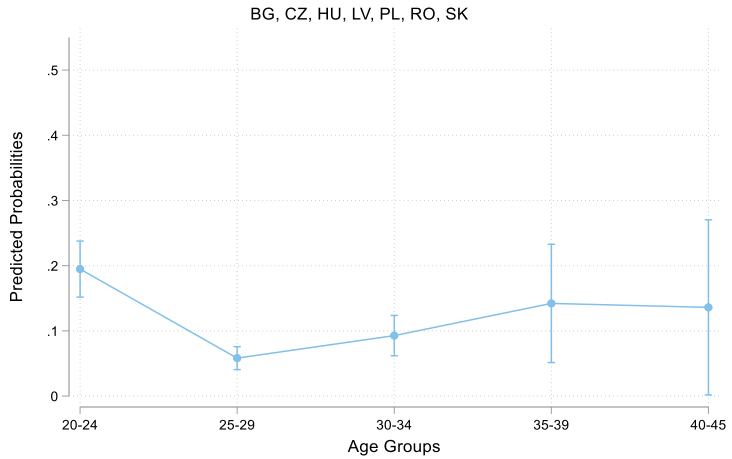


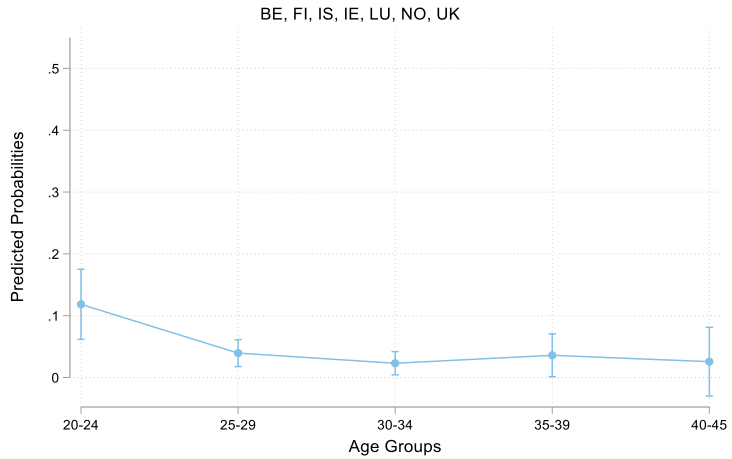
Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. Years 2004-2023.

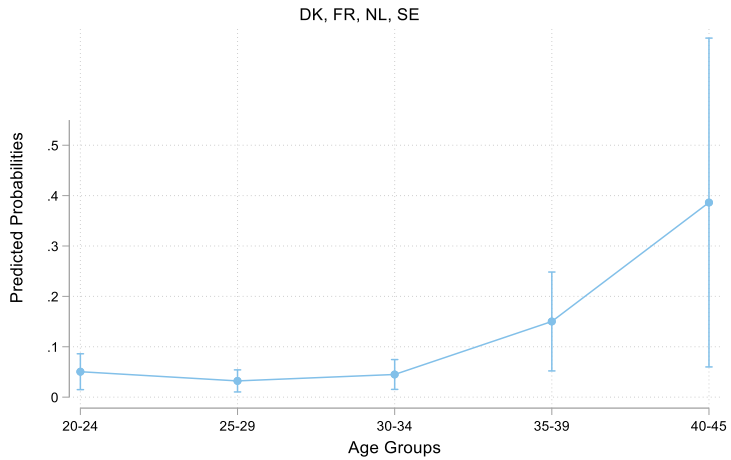
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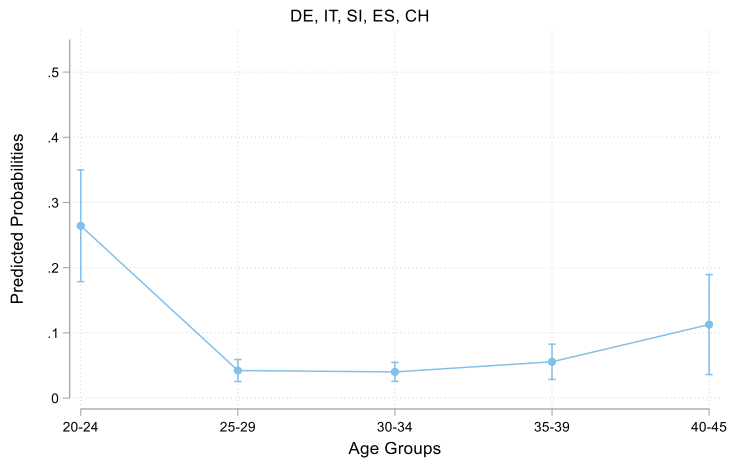
H1C. All clusters









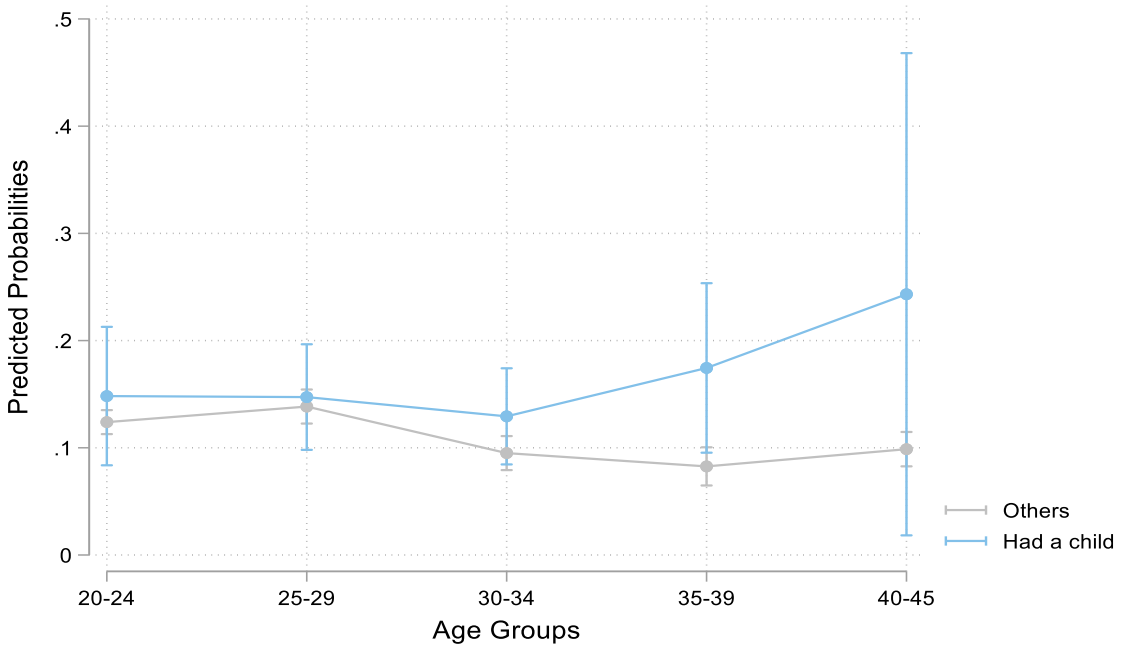


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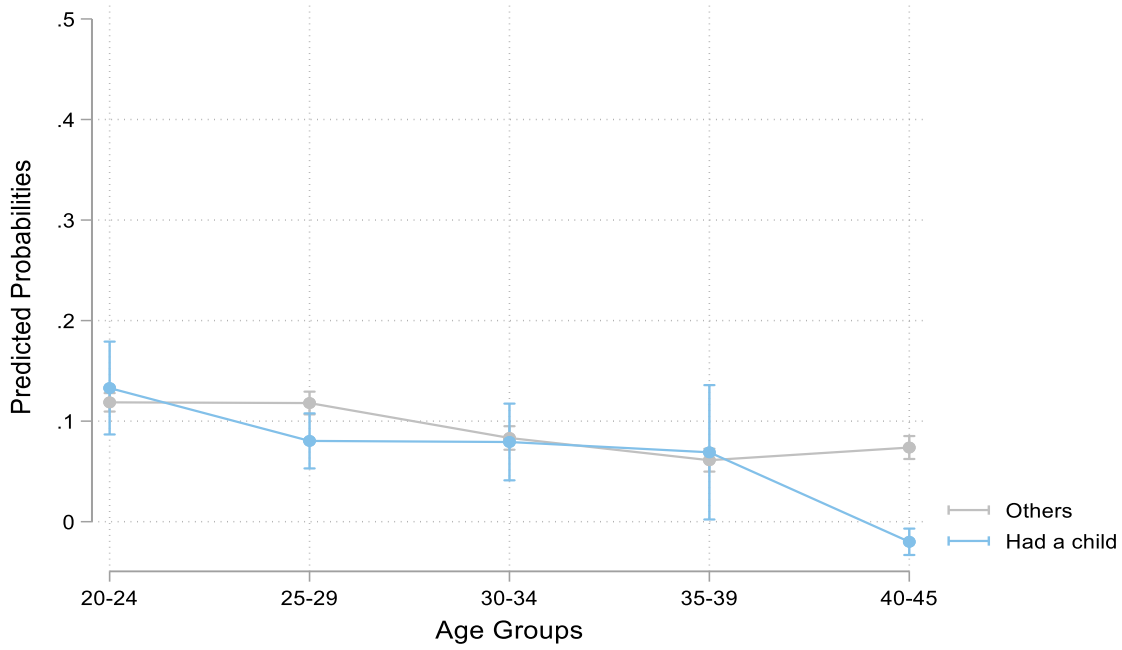
4. Results. Stop co-residing with a partner shortly after child, by country

Predicted probabilities of experiencing a union dissolution in t_2, t_3, or t_4, by age group and by changes in parity.

Cluster: **Average fertility level and timing** (Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Serbia)



Cluster: **Very low and early fertility** (Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia)



Own elaboration based on EU-SILC data. All countries, years 2004-2023.