



Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

GGP Research Note No. 2

Gauthier, A.H.; Emery, T.

2013

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in KNAW Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Gauthier, A. H., & Emery, T. (Eds.) (2013). *GGP Research Note No. 2. Generations & Gender Programme*.
http://www.ggp-i.org/images/stories/GGP_RESEARCH_NOTE_issue2.pdf

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GGP RESEARCH NOTE

Parents' Chances of Re-partnering in a European Context

Katya Ivanova¹, Matthijs Kalmijn¹, & Wilfred Uunk²

The rise in divorce rates across Europe raises important questions about forming new marital or cohabiting unions. Finding a new partner following divorce can be important because of its potential to counteract some of the negative effects of divorce. For example, divorcees generally report lower wellbeing than married people but a new romantic partner has been shown to counteract this. Furthermore, divorce has been found to result in a decline in socioeconomic status, for women in particular, which can be offset by remarriage. The majority of divorcees do re-partner yet the likelihood and the time between divorce and new partnerships can vary greatly between individuals. Our analysis of GGP data shows that women find it harder to find a new partner than men and that this is partly due to women having custody of children from their previous relationship. By looking at five very different countries we show that there are similar patterns across Europe despite differences in custody arrangements.



Picture : Image courtesy of photostock/ FreeDigitalPhotos.net

1 - University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands: email: k.o.ivanova@uva.nl

2 - Tielburg University, The Netherlands

In this work, we examined the role which children might play in the re-partnering process in several European countries by addressing the following research questions: (1) To what extent do men and women differ in their re-partnering chances?; (2) Can gender differences in re-partnering be explained by the presence of children?; and (3) How do the custodial arrangements and the child's age affect the re-partnering chances of men and women?

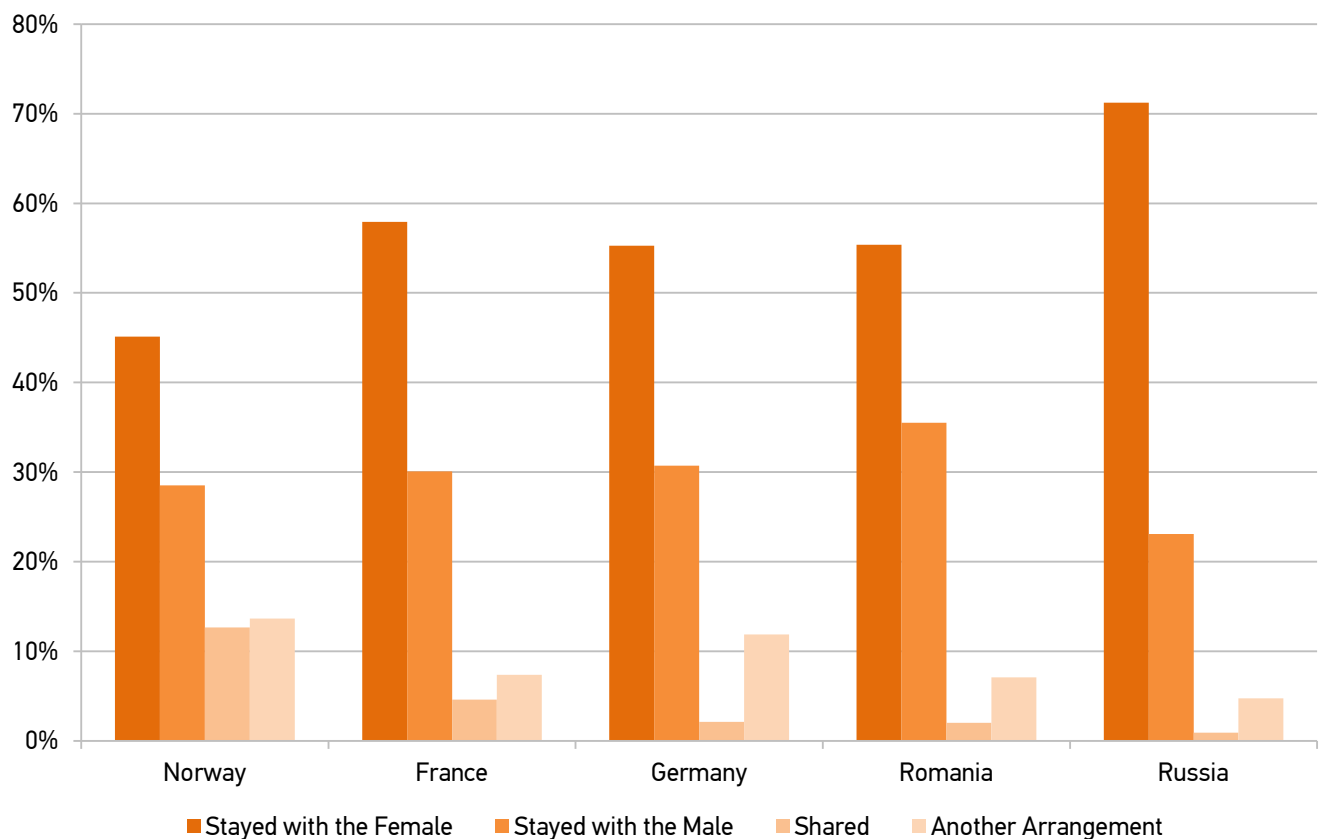
We focused on five distinct European countries: Norway, France, Germany, Romania, and the Russian Federation. These were chosen because they vary in the risk of poverty for single parents with dependent children (which can affect the financial need to re-partner), in the degree to which divorce is common in the country (which can affect the social norms about divorced parents dating), in the extent to which they provide caring support to parents with young children (e.g., public day care) and the attitudes towards using these services (which can affect the opportunities to meet new partners by allowing divorced parents the time to engage in the labour market for example).

In order to address our research questions, we used data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey. We selected respondents who reported that they were married and subsequently, separated or divorced from that marital partner. What we were interested in is if and when those participants started living with a new romantic partner after the end of their first marital unions. We excluded all respondents for whom the time between separation and moving in with a new partner was nine months or less. As one of our primary interests here was how the re-partnering process might be affected by the presence of children, we wanted to focus on participants who did in fact spend some time on the "re-partnering market". Therefore, we wanted to avoid the cases where the dissolution of the previous union was in fact precipitated by the presence of a new romantic partner.

Some descriptive results

In all countries over 40% of the participants lived with a new partner after their separation. The mean duration between separation and moving in with a new partner was similar for the five countries; roughly 4.5 - 5 years. In all countries, the vast majority of the respondents had children with their ex-partners at the time of the marital separation (from 74.4% in Romania to 85.4% in Norway). The age of the youngest biological child at the time of the marital dissolution was between seven in the Russian Federation and almost nine in France. With respect to the children's

Figure 1 - Child Custody Arrangements after separation in 5 European Countries



Source: Generations and Gender Survey, Wave 1

residence after the marital separation, in all five countries, it was predominantly the female respondents who identified that the children stayed with them after the separation.

To what extent do men and women differ in their re-partnering chances? Can gender differences in re-partnering be explained by the presence of children?

We found that women were less likely to re-partner after marital dissolution than men. Interestingly, however, our findings from the analyses for childless individuals did not provide such overwhelming evidence for the existence of a gender gap in re-partnering. We found that in all countries, except Norway, women without children were not less likely to re-partner than men without children. In other words, children are indeed an important contributor to the documented gender gap in re-partnering.

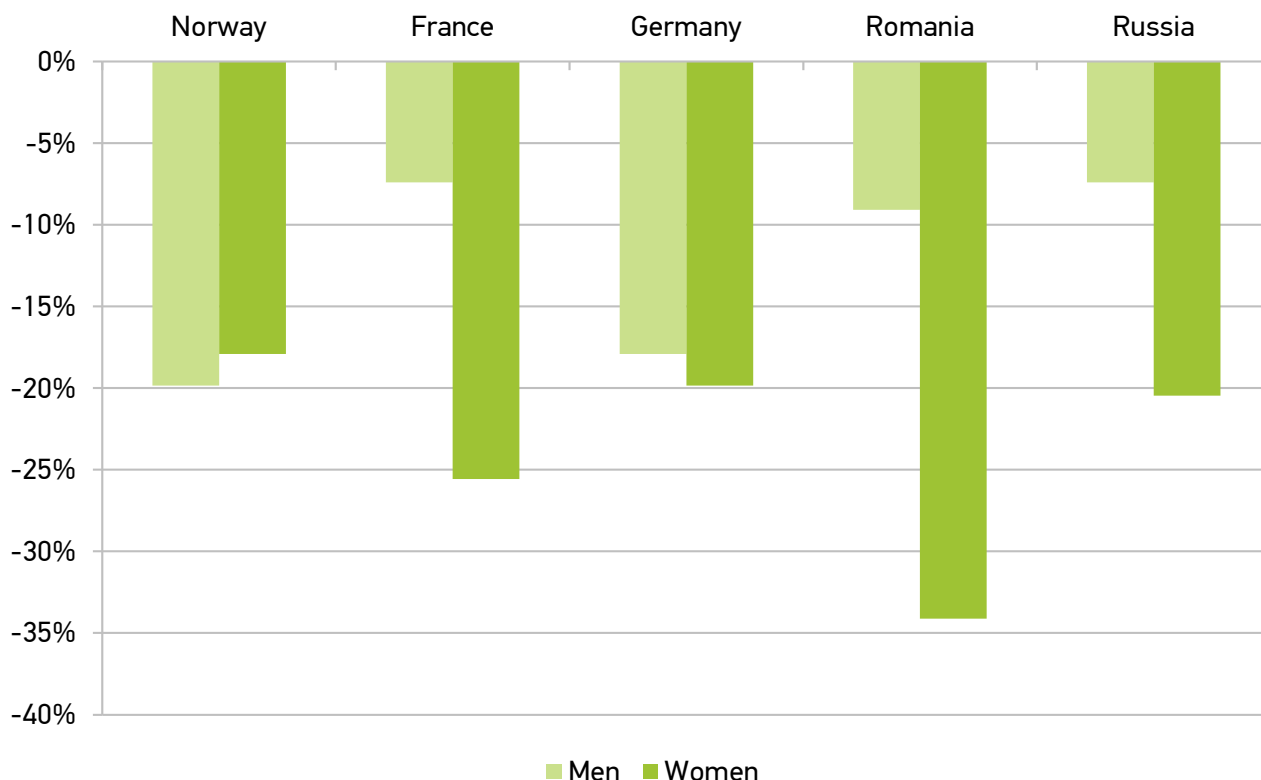
How do the custodial arrangements and the child's age affect the re-partnering chances of men and women?

In almost all countries, we saw that coresidential children decreased women's chances to start living with a new partner. The general trend was similar for men. In other words, it appeared that when we considered fathers and mothers in similar custodial situations, the differences between the genders in re-partnering were not as striking as when we simply considered their parenthood status. In fact, mother's chances to re-partner were not lower than non-mothers' when the children stayed with the ex-partner. Here, the story was somewhat different for fathers. When the children stayed with the ex-partner, fathers still had a lower likelihood to enter a new co-residential union than non-fathers.

As the child aged, people's chances to move in with a new partner increased. This is in line with previous findings that it is young children that most strongly affect the parents' re-partnering chances. We interpret this as a sign that as children age, their dependence on the parents decreases and thus, parents have more opportunities to find new partners (by for example, increasing their participation in the labour market).

Participants' background characteristics

Figure 2 - Relative Odds of Parents Repartnering compared to Non-Parents



Source: *Generations and Gender Survey, Wave 1*

With respect to people's background characteristics, we found that as men's educational level increased, so did their chance to re-partner in Norway and France. However, women's educational level had no effect anywhere. In all countries, as the respondents aged, their chances to re-partner decreased and the effect of current age was stronger for women than for men. This finding indicated stronger age discrimination for women which can pose an additional challenge on the re-partnering market, next to the effect of children. Finally, marriage duration had a positive effect on the likelihood to start living with a new partner in some countries (e.g., in Norway and Germany for men, Russia for women). This finding might indicate that some people develop a "taste" for being in a co-residential union. In other words, people get accustomed to having a live-in partner and thus actively seek out a new partner after the dissolution of their first marital union.

Bottom line

In our work, we were able to present more or less comparable analyses from five European countries with distinct institutional contexts. Yet, the story which emerged was dominated primarily by similarities in the effects rather than differences. In most countries, children were an important contributor to the gender gap in re-partnering; in most cases, mothers were less likely to re-partner than non-mothers and the trend was (mostly) similar but not significant for fathers; men and women with coresidential children had lower likelihood to begin co-residing with a new partner; and as the child aged, parents were more likely to re-partner.

What's missing?

In our work, we were able to examine and describe the post-separation behaviours of people in several European countries. However, we cannot evaluate whether parents' lower likelihood of re-partnering is due to restricted opportunities to find a new partner and reduced attractiveness to these potential partners or to an actual personal choice not to enter another co-residential union. It is also important to mention that we interpreted "re-partnering" as moving in with a new partner. In other words, it is entirely possible that the respondents had relationships after their first marital union which however were not co-residential (e.g., a "living-apart-together" arrangement).

Despite this, we have provided an overview of how important children are in the discussion of men's and women's likelihood to re-partner. What we have seen is that certain effects are universal, across contexts and more importantly, across genders. In policy terms, it becomes interesting to consider the implications of changes in some European countries custody regulations (i.e., moving toward joint custody as default) for the re-partnering of divorced men and women

This Research Note is based on the following paper

Ivanova, Katya, Matthijs Kalmijn, and Wilfred Uunk. "The Effect of Children on Men's and Women's Chances of Re-partnering in a European Context." *European Journal of Population/Revue européenne de Démographie* (2013): 1-28.

Further reading

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