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Childbearing and Divorce among Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples in the Nordic Context

A Register-Based Analysis

Maria Ponkilainen

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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Pre-examiners

Doctor Diederik Boertien, Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics

Professor Matthijs Kalmijn, University of Groningen

Opponent

Professor Eva Jaspers, Utrecht University

Custos

Docent Elina Einiö, University of Helsinki

Supervisors

Docent Elina Einiö, University of Helsinki

Professor Mikko Myrskylä, University of Helsinki

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Abstract

Over the past decades, an increasing number of countries have legally recognized same-sex couples' family rights, with the Nordic countries among the pioneers of this development. Even though a same-sex couple with children is not a new family form per se, the growing legal and social recognition of these types of families has intensified the need to understand their family dynamics. It is, however, unclear whether the new opportunities to form a family have been equally accessible across socioeconomic groups. Furthermore, the factors underlying higher divorce risk observed among female couples, relative to male couples and different-sex couples, and how premarital cohabitation and childbearing are associated with same-sex divorce remain insufficiently understood.

This thesis analyzed, as the first study so far, the likelihood of childbearing within female same-sex legal unions and socioeconomic differences in that likelihood in Finland (sub-study I), and the other Nordic countries of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway over time by using harmonized register data (sub-study II). Female couples' childbearing was studied in comparison with married different-sex couples. The thesis also explored differences in divorce risk between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples in Finland, with a focus on the roles of the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together with the current spouse (sub-study III). This was the first time that the role of the length of premarital cohabitation was assessed for same-sex couples using register data.

Female couples' likelihood of having a biological child of either spouse during the first five years of their legal union increased in Finland and the other Nordic countries over time. For instance, Denmark experienced the strongest increase, rising from 2.5% in the first union cohort of 1989 to a peak of 64.1% in the 2012 union cohort. The increases led to a convergence of female couples' and married different-sex couples' likelihoods of having children in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway at the turn of the 2000s and 2010s. Finland witnessed a later and somewhat more modest increase, from 13.2% in the first union cohort of 2002 to a peak of 52.7% in the 2015 cohort. In Finland, female couples' likelihood of childbearing did not reach that of married different-sex couples by the end of 2021.

The analyses of childbearing by educational group revealed substantial and growing differences in childbearing among female couples, with a higher level of education associated with a greater likelihood of childbearing across the Nordic countries. In Finland, for instance, educational differences peaked in the 2011–2013 cohort, with the likelihood of childbearing at 4.0% among low-educated couples, 29.6% among medium-educated couples, and 52.1% among highly educated couples. In all the Nordic countries studied, the likelihood of childbearing differed less by income level than by educational level.

Female couples had 2.2 times the divorce risk of different-sex couples and 1.6 times that of male couples when adjusted for age, education, and nationality. Short length and absence of premarital cohabitation predicted divorce for same-sex couples, but not for different-sex

couples. Having prior children was associated with an increased divorce risk, and childbearing together was associated with a decreased divorce risk. However, prior children constituted a smaller risk to union stability in same-sex couples than in different-sex couples, whereas childbearing together did not prevent female couples from divorcing as much as different-sex couples. After adjusting for these, female couples still had 2.1 times the divorce risk of different-sex couples and 1.2 times that of male couples.

This thesis is the first to show that differences in the likelihood of childbearing between female couples and different-sex couples in legal unions have largely disappeared, reflecting how legal and social changes have supported same-sex parenthood in the Nordic countries. Yet, the findings also reveal large socioeconomic differences in childbearing among female couples, raising the question of whether the new opportunities to form a family have been equally accessible to all. Moreover, the results underline the importance of both past relationship experiences and the characteristics of the current union in understanding same-sex union instability. Overall, the thesis highlights that studying family dynamics among same-sex couples across different subgroups and institutional contexts is crucial for understanding how socioeconomic resources and other couple-level characteristics interact with the legal and social environments.

Tiivistelmä

Yhä useammat maat ovat tunnustaneet samaa sukupuolta olevien parien lailliset perheoikeudet viime vuosikymmenten aikana, ja Pohjoismaat ovat olleet tämän kehityksen edelläkävijöitä. Vaikka samaa sukupuolta olevan parin lapsiperhe ei sinänsä ole uusi perhemuoto, perheiden lisääntynyt oikeudellinen ja sosiaalinen tunnustaminen on korostanut tarvetta ymmärtää niiden perhedynamiikkaa. On kuitenkin epäselvää, ovatko lakiuudistusten tuomat uudet perheellistymisen mahdollisuudet olleet yhdenvertaisesti eri sosioekonomisten ryhmien saatavilla. Myös ne tekijät, jotka selittävät naisparien korkeampaa avioeroriskiä verrattuna miespareihin ja eri sukupuolta oleviin pareihin, sekä se, miten avioliittoa edeltävä avioliitto ja lastensaanti liittyvät samaa sukupuolta olevien parien avioerorisktiin, ovat yhä puutteellisesti ymmärrettyjä.

Tämä väitöskirja analysoi, ensimmäisenä tutkimuksena toistaiseksi, liittonsa virallistaneiden naisparien lapsensaannin todennäköisyyttä ja sen sosioekonomisia eroja ajan myötä Suomessa (osatutkimus I), sekä muissa Pohjoismaissa Ruotsissa, Tanskassa ja Norjassa harmonisoiduilla rekisteriaineistoilla (osatutkimus II). Naisparien lapsensaantia tarkastellaan suhteessa naimisissa oleviin eri sukupuolta oleviin pareihin. Lisäksi tutkimus analysoi naisparien, miesparien ja eri sukupuolta olevien parien välisiä eroja avioeroriskissä Suomessa, keskittyen virallista liittoa edeltäneen avioliiton keston, liittoa edeltäneen lastensaannin ja liitossa saatujen lasten merkitykseen eroriskissä (osatutkimus III). Tämä on ensimmäinen kerta, kun virallista liittoa edeltäneen avioliiton kestoa tutkitaan samaa sukupuolta olevilla pareilla rekisteriaineistolla.

Naisparien todennäköisyys saada vähintään yksi lapsi virallisen liiton ensimmäisen viiden vuoden aikana on kasvanut Suomessa ja muissa Pohjoismaissa. Tanskassa lapsensaannin todennäköisyyden kasvu oli voimakkainta: se nousi 2,5 prosentista vuoden 1989 liittokohortissa korkeimmilleen 64,1 prosenttiin vuoden 2012 kohortissa. Naisparien lapsensaannin kasvu johti liittonsa virallistaneiden naisparien ja eri sukupuolta olevien parien lapsensaannin todennäköisyyksien lähentymiseen Tanskassa, Ruotsissa ja Norjassa 2000- ja 2010-lukujen taitteessa. Suomessa todennäköisyyden kasvu tapahtui myöhemmin ja oli vaatimattomampaa: se nousi 13,2 prosentista vuoden 2002 liittokohortissa korkeimmilleen 52,7 prosenttiin vuoden 2015 kohortissa. Naisparien lapsensaannin todennäköisyys ei saavuttanut eri sukupuolta olevien parien lapsensaannin tasoa Suomessa vuoden 2021 loppuun mennessä.

Naisparien lapsensaannin analysointi parien koulutustason mukaan paljasti suuria ja kasvavia koulutusryhmittäisiä eroja lapsensaannissa. Korkeampi koulutus oli yhteydessä suurempaan todennäköisyyteen saada lapsi kaikissa Pohjoismaissa. Suomessa koulutuksen mukaiset erot olivat suurimmillaan vuosien 2011–2013 liittokohortissa: lapsensaannin todennäköisyys oli 4,0 prosenttia matalasti koulutetuilla pareilla, 29,6 prosenttia keskiasteen koulutuksen saaneilla pareilla ja 52,1 prosenttia korkeasti

koulutetuilla pareilla. Kaikissa tarkastelluissa Pohjoismaissa lapsensaannin todennäköisyydessä oli suurempia eroja naisparien koulutustason kuin tulotason mukaan.

Naisparien avioeroriski oli 2,2-kertainen verrattuna eri sukupuolta oleviin pareihin ja 1,6-kertainen verrattuna miespareihin, kun ikä, koulutus ja syntymähetken kansalaisuus vakioitiin. Virallista liittoa edeltävän avoliiton lyhyt kesto tai sen puuttuminen ennustivat avioeroa samaa sukupuolta olevilla pareilla, mutta eivät eri sukupuolta olevilla pareilla. Aiemmat lapset olivat yhteydessä suurempaan avioeroriskiin, kun taas yhteisen lapsen saanti oli yhteydessä matalampaan avioeroriskiin. Aiemmat lapset muodostivat pienemmän riskin samaa sukupuolta olevien parien kuin eri sukupuolta olevien parien liiton vakaudelle, kun taas yhteisen lapsen saanti ei suojannut naispareja avioerolta yhtä selkeästi kuin eri sukupuolta olevia pareja. Näiden tekijöiden vakioinnin jälkeen naisparien avioeroriski oli yhä 2,1-kertainen verrattuna eri sukupuolta oleviin pareihin ja 1,2-kertainen verrattuna miespareihin.

Tämä väitöskirja osoitti ensimmäistä kertaa, että lapsensaannin erot virallisissa liitoissa olevien naisparien ja eri sukupuolta olevien parien välillä ovat pitkälti kadonneet. Tulos kertoo siitä, että oikeudelliset ja sosiaaliset muutokset ovat tukeneet samaa sukupuolta olevien parien perheellistymistä Pohjoismaissa. Tulokset paljastivat kuitenkin myös suuria sosioekonomisia eroja naisparien lapsensaannissa, mikä herättää kysymyksen siitä, ovatko uudet mahdollisuudet olleet yhdenvertaisesti kaikkien parien saatavilla. Tulokset myös korostavat sekä aiempien parisuhdekokemusten että nykyisen liiton ominaisuuksien merkitystä samaa sukupuolta olevien parien liittojen epävakauden ymmärtämisessä. Kokonaisuudessaan väitöskirja osoittaa, että samaa sukupuolta olevien parien perhedynamiikan tarkastelu eri alaryhmissä ja institutionaalisissa konteksteissa on välttämätöntä, jotta voidaan ymmärtää, miten sosioekonomisten resurssien ja muiden paritason ominaisuuksien merkitys riippuu oikeudellisesta ja sosiaalisesta ympäristöstä.

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List of original publications

This thesis is based on the following publications:

- I Ponkilainen, M., Einiö, E., Pietiläinen, M. & Myrskylä, M. 2024. Educational differences in fertility among female same-sex couples in Finland. *Demography*, 61(6), 2053–2079. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-11687583>
- II Ponkilainen, M., Einiö, E., Kolk, M., Fallesen, P, Torvik, F., A., Andersen, M., L. & Myrskylä, M. Changing landscapes of parenthood: Childbearing among same-sex and different-sex couples in the Nordic Countries. [submitted]
- III Ponkilainen, M., Einiö, E., Kühn, M. & Myrskylä, M. 2025. Same-sex and different-sex couples' divorce risks: The role of cohabitation and childbearing. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 0, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.70027>

The publications are referred to in the text by their roman numerals.

1 Introduction

During the past decades, families have become increasingly diverse in many high-income countries (Andersson et al. 2006; Sobotka & Berghammer 2021). This can be seen as part of a wider cultural change in which the role of traditional institutions, values, and norms has diminished in guiding the life course, making room for greater individual freedom and an obligation to decide how to organize one's life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Lesthaeghe 2014). Several legislative changes have increasingly recognized the diversity in existing family arrangements and also further contributed to it by creating new opportunities to form families and live as such (Sobotka & Toulemon 2008).

Same-sex couples' rights to registered partnerships, marriages, and parenthood have been legally recognized in an increasing number of countries in the past decades (Reczek 2020; Waaldijk 2020). As of January 2026, same-sex marriage, for instance, is legal in 40 countries, 22 of which are European countries (World Population Review 2026). Along with increased legal recognition, social acceptance of sexual minorities and their families has grown (Reczek 2020), as has the number of people reporting to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Gates 2015; Twenge et al. 2024). Globally, however, countries differ substantially in whether same-sex couples can live openly in a relationship without jeopardizing their safety or position in society, let alone get married and have children. The Nordic countries along with some other countries, such as the Netherlands, have been in the vanguard of legal recognition of same-sex couples' family rights (Evertsson et al. 2020). Denmark was the first country in the world to introduce same-sex registered partnerships in 1989, followed by the other Nordic countries, with Finland last in 2002 (Andersson & Noack 2010). Also, acceptance of sexual minorities in the Nordic countries is among the highest in the world (OECD 2020). Given that the Nordic countries are often perceived as forerunners in emerging family trends (Sobotka & Berghammer 2021), it is possible that the countries are also spearheading trends in same-sex couples' family behavior.

It has been suggested that legislation and different policies related to family life have an impact on how families are formed and how they organize their everyday lives (Ryan-Flood 2009). Many same-sex couples have lived together and have had children before the legal recognition of their family rights, as they have found alternative ways to form families by making informal agreements

surrounding childbearing with friends and other couples, for instance (Folgerø 2008; Stacey 1996; Weston 1991). The legal recognition of same-sex partnerships and parenthood has, however, improved couples' access to reproduction methods and enhanced their security in everyday life and unexpected situations (Malmquist 2015; Rydström 2011), thus reducing some of the institutional barriers to forming a family. Legal changes have also had important symbolic significance as legislation signals which kinds of behavior are expected and supported (Neyer & Andersson 2008; Rydström 2011).

The institutional context of same-sex families has changed substantially in the Nordic countries within a relatively short period, and younger generations live in a different legal and social environment compared to older generations. For instance, younger adults in Finland were born after same-sex registered partnerships were made legal, whereas people in their 70s have lived through a time when homosexual acts were criminalized (Seta 2025). As a result, there are pronounced differences between generations of same-sex couples in their views on, for instance, parenthood. The perspectives of older age groups tend to reflect what the legal situation in their country was when they were in their 20s, and many of them have adopted a lifestyle that does not include children (Boertien et al. 2024; Digoix 2020; Kuosmanen 2007). Childbearing within same-sex partnerships, particularly among female couples, has become more common over time in some countries, such as in Sweden (Kolk & Andersson 2020). It has been suggested that this has been the result of improved access to means of reproduction, decreased social stigma, and earlier ages of self-acceptance and disclosure (Andersson & Noack 2010; Digoix 2020; Reczek 2020).

Even if legal changes have improved same-sex couples' opportunities to enter legal unions and have children, several individual and couple-level characteristics and circumstances may affect who can actually take advantage of these new opportunities (Moore 2011). The legal changes have opened up access to medically assisted reproduction (MAR) and adoption for same-sex couples, but these options require socioeconomic resources (Mezey 2013; Rozental & Malmquist 2015). The existing literature, however, lacks proper insights into how socioeconomic resources are associated with same-sex couples' childbearing in different institutional contexts (Rault 2020).

There are large gender differences in family dynamics among same-sex couples, as female couples rather than male couples form the majority of same-sex couples who have entered legal unions and become parents (Kolk & Andersson 2020). Female couples also experience a higher divorce risk compared to male couples and different-sex couples across several countries (Allen & Price 2020; Andersson et al. 2006; Andersson & Noack 2010; Einiö & Ponkilainen 2025; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Wiik et al. 2014; Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022). Previous studies have suggested that female couples' and male couples' different motives for entering

legal unions might be reflected in their commitment to the union and proneness to divorce (Aldén et al. 2015; Andersson et al. 2006; Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014). Nevertheless, the reasons for the elevated risk of divorce in female couples have not been fully uncovered so far.

The principal goal of this dissertation is to increase understanding of recent childbearing patterns among female couples in the institutional context of Finland (sub-study I) and the other Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway (sub-study II), as well as of the risk of divorce in female couples and male couples in Finland (sub-study III). Same-sex couples' likelihoods of childbearing and divorce are studied in comparison with different-sex couples to situate them in the broader context of family behavior. The study uses nationally representative register data provided by Statistics Finland, including all same-sex couples who registered their partnership or married in Finland in 2002–2021, and corresponding register data from the other Nordic countries. Because the Nordic register data contain few male couples who have had a child within their same-sex partnership, childbearing is studied only among female couples. Likewise, Iceland was not included in the thesis because of the low number of same-sex couples in the register data. The first aim of this study is to explore how the likelihood of having a child within female same-sex legal unions has changed in Finland and the other Nordic countries over time, with a second related aim being to assess differences in this likelihood by educational and income level. The third aim is to analyze differences in divorce risk between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples, with a focus on the role in these differences of the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together with the current spouse.

2 Same-sex couples in the Nordic context of family behavior

In recent decades, the Nordic countries, along with many other high-income countries, have witnessed major shifts in family behavior, such as fewer and later marriages, lower and delayed fertility, and increasing union instability (Lesthaeghe 2010; Sobotka & Berghammer 2021). The pace and magnitude of these changes vary across countries, cohorts, and socioeconomic groups (Lesthaeghe 2014; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008). A wide array of literature has documented, theorized, and forecasted these recent and ongoing changes, but, explicitly or implicitly, mainly in the heterosexual population. Many studies have investigated family behavior by studying women, but most often without discussing their sexual orientation or the possibility that some of these women may live in same-sex partnerships.

With increased access to legal unions and parenthood, same-sex couples' family behavior may have evolved in a different direction from that of different-sex couples, among whom traditional patterns of family formation have declined (Ophir et al. 2023). At the same time, many of the emerging less traditional family behaviors among different-sex couples, such as non-residential partnerships and lifetime childlessness (Lesthaeghe 2010), resemble the family patterns of same-sex couples in birth cohorts where their opportunities to marry and have children were limited or absent (e.g., Folgerø 2008; Stacey 2004; Weston 1991).

2.1 Union formation

Patterns of union formation have changed in the Nordic and many other countries during the past decades, as nonmarital cohabitation has become increasingly prevalent, and an increasing proportion of unions start with cohabitation rather than marriage (Hiekel 2014; Jalovaara 2012; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008). Cohabiting unions have become more similar to marriage due to their increasingly permanent nature and as they also often involve childbearing (Hiekel 2014). Cohabitation is increasingly often perceived not only as a stage in the process of forming a marriage but as an alternative to marriage (Cherlin 2020; Di Giulio et al. 2019). Cohabitation has even become normatively expected (Sobotka & Berghammer 2021), and marriage without prior cohabitation is now mainly entered

into by individuals with religious or conservative family values (Kulu & Boyle 2010; Liefbroer & Dourleijn 2006). For same-sex couples, cohabitation was long the only more committed form of partnership available before the possibility of registering their partnerships or marrying was available to them. In the era of stigma and discrimination toward same-sex relationships, moving in together might have been a strong sign of commitment, thus having a different meaning for same-sex couples compared to different-sex couples.

Marriage is a relatively new form of partnership for same-sex couples in countries where it has been legalized, while among different-sex couples, marriage has become a much less dominant context for intimate relationships, childbearing, and family life since the 1960s (Cherlin 2020; Lesthaeghe 2010; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008). In addition to declining marriage rates, couples are marrying at later ages, and more marriages end in divorce (Rahnu & Jalovaara 2023; Smock & Schwartz 2020). Even if the societal importance of marriage has declined, it still represents stability, lifelong commitment, and joint financial commitments for many (Cherlin 2020; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). Marital unions are more stable than cohabiting unions (e.g., Liefbroer & Dourleijn 2006), and marriage and childbearing remain interconnected. Although first children are increasingly born to cohabiting couples, couples who have children often eventually marry (Jónsson 2020; Rotkirch & Miettinen 2017).

Marriage is also subject to pragmatic decision-making (Sobotka & Toulemon 2008), as it comprises legal and material benefits (Bernstein et al. 2016). According to the existing literature, same-sex couples attach emotional, pragmatic, social, and political meanings to marriage: first and foremost, couples choose to marry for love, but also for other reasons, such as to access certain rights and benefits, to convey the seriousness of their relationship, or to make a political statement for equal rights (Kimport 2013; Richman 2014). In contrast, for same-sex couples who have lived together for long periods, the decision to get married may not necessarily be a step to validate the relationship as having reached a particular level of commitment but more a decision to legalize an already marriage-like relationship because doing so has become an option (Carpenter & Gates 2008). The symbolic value and practical benefits of marriage may, therefore, be different for same-sex couples than for different-sex couples, as well as for female couples compared to male couples (Bernstein et al. 2016). One of the traditional functions of marriage has been to ensure protection for children (Carpenter 2020), but this function of marriage has diminished in many countries since legal parental relationships have been recognized outside of marriage (Sobotka & Toulemon 2008). Among same-sex couples, however, a legal union has been or still is an obligatory or at least a facilitating step in accessing legal parental rights for both parents in many countries (Carpenter 2020; Kolk & Andersson 2020).

In all Nordic countries, most same-sex couples registering their partnership in the first years of the new legislation were male couples, but female couples soon exceeded the number of male couples (Rydström 2011) (for Finland, see Figure 1). The stronger increase in the number of unions formalized by women has been seen to reflect their improved opportunities to have children and, thus, their increased incentive to enter legal unions due to the attachment of legal parental rights to legally recognized same-sex unions (Andersson & Noack 2010; Bernstein et al. 2016; Kimport 2013; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Rydström 2011). In Finland in 2024, for instance, a total of 425 new same-sex marriages were registered, of which 291 were between two women and 134 between two men (Figure 1). These marriages accounted for 2% of all new marriages registered in Finland in that year (Pietiläinen & Wallenius 2025).

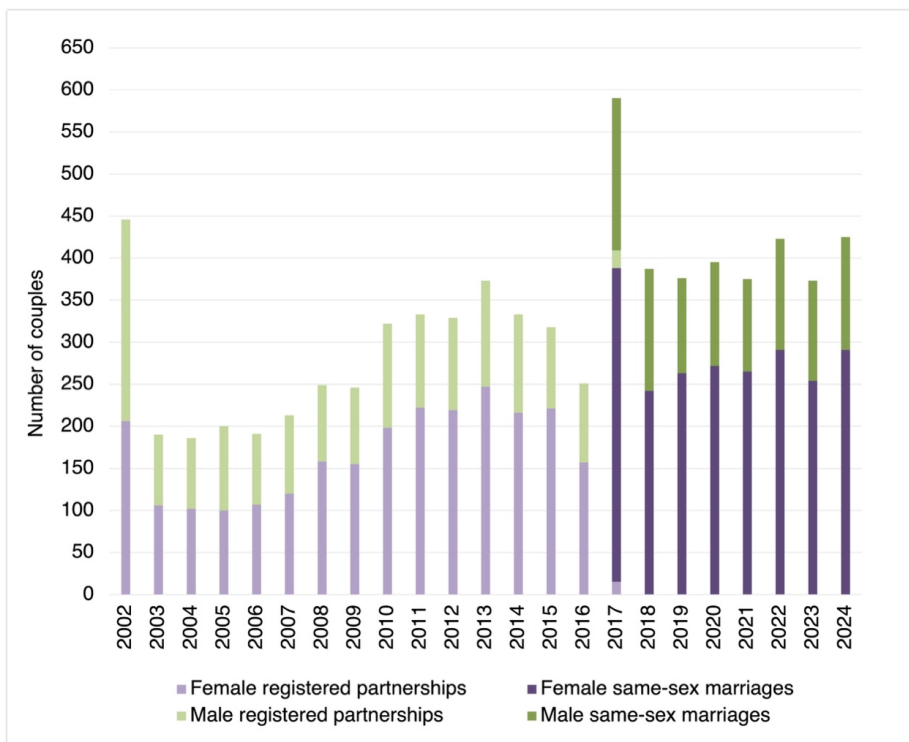


Figure 1 New same-sex registered partnerships and marriages in Finland in 2002–2024. Source: Official Statistics of Finland (OSF). (2025b). Changes in marital status. Note: Same-sex partnership registration was available between 1 March 2002 and 28 February 2017, before being replaced by same-sex marriage on 1 March 2017.

2.2 Childbearing

Across high-income countries, fertility trends of recent decades have been characterized by shifts toward low fertility levels, delayed parenthood, and increased ultimate childlessness (Lesthaeghe 2014; Sobotka & Berghammer 2021). The Nordic countries had a relatively high and stable cohort fertility rate until the 2010s, often explained by their institutional and sociocultural settings with generous family policies that facilitate gender equality and reconciling work and family (Andersson et al. 2009; Rønsen & Skrede 2010). The period of high and stable fertility rates ended with a steep decline to all-time low levels in the 2010s, with Finland experiencing the most pronounced decline (Hellstrand et al. 2021). In Finland, the total fertility rate declined from 1.87 in 2010 to 1.25 in 2024 (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) 2025a). The reasons behind the decline are complex and multifaceted. Studies have associated a range of socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural factors with the decline, including, among others, increasing labor-market insecurity, changes in patterns of union formation, and a growing interest in childfree lifestyles (Comolli et al. 2020; Golovina et al. 2024; Hellstrand et al. 2021; Jalovaara & Fasang 2017).

Childbearing is more complex for same-sex couples as compared with their different-sex peers due to biological factors as well as different legislation, norms, and practices shaping same-sex couples' opportunities to have children and share legal parenthood (Evertsson et al. 2020). Recent legal changes have, however, improved same-sex couples' access to parenthood (Kolk & Andersson 2020). Therefore, the general fertility trends described above do not necessarily capture dynamics among same-sex couples. Prior studies have indeed shown that the number of female couples who have become parents within their partnership has increased in some countries (e.g., Andersson & Noack 2010; Kolk & Andersson 2020), which seems to reflect an opposite pattern to the general decline in fertility. The number of male couples who have had children within their same-sex partnership has, however, remained low due to the limited routes to parenthood available to them (Kolk & Andersson 2020; Wiik et al. 2014).

In Finland, the decline in fertility appears to coincide with a drop in the average number of children people wish to have and an increase in the share of people who wish to remain childless (Golovina et al. 2024). It is not known to what extent these wishes reflect preferences among individuals in same-sex partnerships, but previous studies on parental desires in some other countries have shown that even though most lesbian and gay individuals would like to have children, they are slightly less likely to report a desire for parenthood than their heterosexual peers (Baiocco & Laghi 2013; Boertien et al. 2024; Hank & Wetzel 2018; Riskind & Tornello 2017; Tate et al. 2019). Also, women in same-sex couples are more likely to have unmet parental desires than women in different-sex couples (Boertien et al. 2024).

Lower parental desires among lesbian and gay individuals likely reflect their awareness of institutional barriers to having children and fear of discrimination (Boertien et al. 2024; Riskind & Tornello 2017). Some of the recent studies have shown that younger cohorts report higher desires and intentions than older cohorts, possibly reflecting improved opportunities to have children and increased social acceptance of their families (Boertien et al. 2024; Costa & Bidell 2017; Scandurra et al. 2019). A childfree lifestyle was long the norm among same-sex couples (Digoix 2020), whereas different-sex couples have faced social and normative expectations and even pressure to have children (Ashburn-Nardo 2017). Interestingly, while the pressure has started to ease for different-sex couples and stigmatization of childless individuals has reduced (Sobotka & Beaujouan 2014), it has been suggested that the new opportunities to have children within same-sex partnerships have not only made it possible for same-sex couples to fulfill their childbearing desires, but have also created new normative pressure to have children (Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz 2015).

2.3 Divorce

Mirroring the changes in the status of marriage, divorce has become more widely available and accepted in many countries (Sobotka & Berghammer 2021). This development is seen to result from cultural and normative changes and the reduction of barriers and costs associated with divorce following the liberalization of divorce laws and decreasing stigma toward divorcees (Wagner 2020).

Several European countries and the United States have witnessed substantial increases in divorce rates since the 1960s, with the Nordic countries and the countries of the former Soviet Union often considered forerunners in this trend (Kennedy & Ruggles 2014; Sandström & Garðarsdóttir 2018; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008). Divorce rates stabilized in the Nordic countries after the 1970s, and a number of other European countries have reached or surpassed them since the 1990s (Sandström & Garðarsdóttir 2018), before the rates broadly stabilized in the 2000s (Sobotka & Berghammer 2021). In more recent years, divorce rates have no longer been increasing and have even declined in many countries (McErlean 2021; Wagner 2020).

As the weakening institutional role of marriage has been perceived as one of the explanations for increasing divorce rates (Sandström & Garðarsdóttir 2018; Wagner 2020), the relatively recent institutionalization of same-sex registered partnerships and marriage could be expected to put same-sex couples in a slightly different position in this regard. Also, the different legal and normative contexts of same-sex unions may affect such couples' incentive to enter legal unions and their proneness to divorce (Aldén et al. 2015; Andersson et al. 2006; Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014). Legal and normative characteristics specific to same-sex unions may also

either encourage staying married or lower the threshold for divorce. It has been suggested, for instance, that same-sex couples who consider equal marriage rights an important political achievement might regard union dissolution as a major symbolic failure that creates pressure to make the marriage work (Balsam et al. 2017; Gahan 2018; Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020). Alternatively, same-sex couples might have more liberal attitudes toward divorce and feel less normative pressure to stay in dysfunctional relationships (Andersson et al. 2006). As they have already had to question and defy many social expectations in their lives, it may be easier for them to distance themselves from the cultural ideal of long-term monogamous relationships (Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020).

2.4 Socioeconomic differences in family behavior

Country-level patterns of marriage formation, divorce, and fertility hide substantial socioeconomic differences in family behavior. The main pattern of recent decades seems to be related to the position of individuals with low levels of education, who, it has been suggested, have become increasingly marginalized both in the labor market and in family formation (Adserà 2017; Jalovaara et al. 2019; Jalovaara & Andersson 2023). The general expansion of education has diminished the size and changed the composition of the low-educated groups in the Nordic countries, and their family behavior might partly reflect increasingly negative selection (Jalovaara et al. 2019; Kravdal & Rindfuss 2008).

Marriage rates have declined faster among individuals with lower levels of education (Jalovaara 2012; Kalmijn 2013), who also have less stable marriages than higher-educated individuals across countries (Jalovaara & Andersson 2023; Kalmijn 2013; Matysiak et al. 2014; McErlean 2021). Lower educational levels are similarly associated with higher divorce risk in same-sex couples (Kolk & Andersson 2020; Wiik et al. 2014), but there is not much evidence about the role of socioeconomic status in patterns of same-sex union formation because no data covers the characteristics of the entire population of unmarried individuals known to have an interest in having a partner of the same sex. One recent study by Manning et al. (2022) compared same-sex cohabiting couples to those in marriages to address selection into legal unions in the United States. They found that married same-sex couples had higher levels of education and income than their cohabiting peers, but the socioeconomic differences between couples were less prominent than among different-sex couples, suggesting weaker socioeconomic selection into marriage among same-sex couples (Manning et al. 2022).

Higher socioeconomic status is also increasingly associated with higher fertility among women in the Nordic countries (e.g., Jalovaara et al. 2019; Kolk 2023). This shift observed among the more recent cohorts has changed the typical educational gradient in childbearing, as highly educated women used to have higher

ages at first birth, higher levels of childlessness, and lower completed fertility than women with lower education (e.g., Adserà 2017; Berrington et al. 2015; Kravdal & Rindfuss 2008; Rindfuss et al. 1996; Andersson et al. 2009). Also, the recent decline in fertility in the Nordic countries has been more pronounced among women with low education (Comolli et al. 2020) who have more fragile labor-market positions (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson 2022) and are often in educational fields characterized by higher uncertainty (Hellstrand et al. 2024).

It has been suggested that individuals with greater socioeconomic resources can better afford costs associated with family life with children, and families in higher socioeconomic positions are also better supported by the Nordic social security systems that compensate for the lost income of a caregiver and enable combining work and family (Jalovaara et al. 2022; Kolk 2023; Lappegård 2020). While these factors may equally apply to women in same-sex and different-sex unions, the role of socioeconomic resources may be even more important for same-sex couples due to their more complex routes to parenthood (Boye & Evertsson 2021; Mamo 2007).

Before the Nordic countries granted female couples access to MAR as part of tax-funded public healthcare, couples who wanted to have a child had to seek such services in private clinics or other countries (Dahl & Andreassen 2023; Digoix 2020; Moring 2013). These options required substantial socioeconomic resources. Some couples chose instead to form extended families with men willing to act as sperm donors and/or fathers for their child (Folgerø 2008; Weston 1991), implying lower immediate costs of conception. Once female couples received access to MAR in the public healthcare sector, childbearing could in principle have become more available across socioeconomic groups. Studies have, however, shown that women in general who conceive through MAR tend to have a high socioeconomic position, even in countries where such treatments are covered by public healthcare (Brautsch et al. 2023; Goisis et al. 2020; Goisis et al. 2024). This indicates that the socioeconomic disparities relate to factors beyond financial resources (Bell 2010), such as geographical, behavioral, and cultural factors (Brautsch et al. 2023; Goisis et al. 2020). To the best of my knowledge, corresponding information regarding the usage of MAR among women in same-sex couples is not currently available.

3 Theoretical framework

This dissertation aims to provide new insights into the family dynamics of same-sex couples by applying theoretical frameworks that examine how structural circumstances and individual characteristics shape opportunities to form and maintain families across changing institutional and cultural contexts.

3.1 The second demographic transition

The second demographic transition (SDT) is a concept introduced in the mid-1980s to describe changes in family behavior observed since the 1960s, including shifts in partnership formation, fertility, and divorce (Lesthaeghe 2010; Van de Kaa 1987; Van de Kaa 2002). Since its introduction, the SDT has been used to capture a range of demographic phenomena beyond its original scope, but the concept may still be useful in understanding contemporary shifts in family behavior. At its core, the SDT proposes that family changes observed since the 1960s reflect not only changing material and structural circumstances but above all evolving ideational factors (Lesthaeghe 2014; Van de Kaa 1987; Van de Kaa 2002). Individual autonomy and the pursuit of self-realization have become increasingly central to decision-making, while the roles of traditional obligations and institutional authorities have diminished (Lesthaeghe 2014; Van de Kaa 1987).

The loosening of traditional norms around family has led to more flexible types of life-course organization and the emergence of multiple lifestyles and living arrangements (Lesthaeghe 1995; Lesthaeghe 2010). This has been accompanied by the spread of family forms other than the traditional nuclear family (Cherlin 2020; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008; Lesthaeghe 2014), reflecting increasing social acceptance of alternatives for conventional families (Cherlin 2020; Lesthaeghe 1995). According to the SDT, shifts in attitudes have occurred, with increased tolerance and recognition of diversity, respect for others' right to choose lifestyles suited to them (Lesthaeghe 2014), and destigmatization of certain behaviors, including divorce and same-sex relationships (Lesthaeghe 2020).

Ideational change and family diversification described by the SDT can be considered to have created favorable societal and cultural conditions for the legal

and social recognition of same-sex families. Countries that have been in the vanguard in relation to these features of the SDT, such as the Northern European countries (Lesthaeghe 2010), have also provided earlier and more advanced legal recognition of same-sex family rights (Evertsson et al. 2020). However, the SDT has been criticized, among other things, for overlooking structural inequalities and assuming that all individuals have the capacity and resources to pursue personal freedom and self-actualization to shape their life course (e.g., Zaidi & Morgan 2017). Same-sex couples can be seen as an example of a group whose opportunities to form a family in their preferred way have not been fully within their own control but have been constrained at the structural level.

The SDT assumed the family's role was weakening, particularly the role of the nuclear family (Lesthaeghe 2010; Van de Kaa 2002). While societal changes have made it easier for different-sex couples to deviate from the normative trajectory of family formation, the same changes have facilitated union formation and parenthood among same-sex couples (Ophir et al. 2023). For instance, the dissolution of the traditional tie between marriage and childbearing (Lesthaeghe 2010) and the redefinition of marriage as a right of self-expression and an individual choice for organizing one's family life (Cherlin 2004; Cherlin 2020) have been linked with the opening up of registered partnerships and marriage for same-sex couples (Latten & Mulder 2013; Rydström 2011). Indeed, it has been suggested that female couples' family wishes and behavior have been moving toward the nuclear family due to increased opportunities to form such a family, i.e., marry and use MAR to have children (Garwood 2016; Mamo 2007; Moring 2013).

When the SDT was formulated, it was assumed that novel family behaviors would be pioneered by highly educated individuals with advanced post-materialist values and resources to question existing social norms (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn 1988). Given that same-sex couples need to cope with heteronormative expectations and stigma related to their parenthood (Goldberg 2009; Mezey 2008), it is possible that couples with higher socioeconomic status have pioneered starting families and acting against social norms, and their goal of a lifestyle that includes children has later spread to other couples. However, it is unlikely that this explanation alone is sufficient, as structural barriers to same-sex parenthood have likely been more pronounced among those with limited socioeconomic resources.

3.2 The life-course perspective

The life-course perspective emphasizes the importance of viewing individual lives as a series of interconnected processes and transitions (Elder 1994). Individuals construct their life courses by making choices and taking actions within the opportunities and constraints of institutional and social circumstances, which vary across historical time, place, and individuals (Elder et al. 2003; Mayer 2004). In

recent decades, we have witnessed increasing pluralization and differentiation of life trajectories across individuals, as many transitions have been delayed, prolonged, and become more age-variable, and the universality of the occurrence and order of these transitions has declined (Mayer 2005).

The impact of societal changes on an individual's life depends on the timing of the change in the individual's life course (Elder 1994; Mayer 2004). Same-sex couples navigate changing legal and social landscapes during their lives, including shifts in their legal family rights, societal acceptance, and norms regarding same-sex families. Legal and other structural barriers to family formation, as well as social norms regarding living as a same-sex couple, have been reflected in their family behavior at different times (Kuusmanen 2007). The institutional context of same-sex families has changed substantially in many countries within a relatively short period, and younger generations live in a different legal and social environment compared to older generations. As a result, there are pronounced differences between generations of same-sex couples in their views on, for instance, parenthood (Boertien et al. 2024; Digoix 2020).

The transitions individuals make determine how families form and function, and thus, the processes of union formation and transition to parenthood can also be seen to shape union stability. The conditions for family formation have differed for same-sex and different-sex couples, with variation across generations, due to the changing legal and normative contexts of families. For instance, same-sex couples in earlier birth cohorts may have lived long periods in nonmarital cohabitation, as they had not yet been allowed to enter legal unions, or individuals forming same-sex unions later in their life course may have previously had children within different-sex relationships, as it was the only socially accepted context of childbearing at that time. Earlier experiences can profoundly shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors, affect their opportunities, and ultimately impact the stability of their relationships.

According to the life-course perspective, a long duration between family transitions enhances behavioral stability through acquired interests and obligations (Elder et al. 2003). Longer premarital cohabitation, for instance, is expected to decrease divorce risk as it provides partners with time to gain information about each other and test their union prospects (Brüderl & Kalter 2001). There is a stereotype of female couples as eager to commit and move in together soon after meeting (Gordon 2006), and short periods of premarital cohabitation have been speculated to be among the explanations for their higher divorce risk (Aldén et al. 2015; Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014).

3.3 Intersectionality

This dissertation uses an intersectional framework to highlight the importance of accounting for diversity among individuals in same-sex partnerships. Intersectionality refers to individuals' multiple intersecting social categories, understood as characteristics and identities (such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.), that expose individuals to different privileges and disadvantages that structure their life experiences in different contexts (Cho et al. 2013; Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1991). The intersection of multiple social categories produces unique dynamics that cannot be fully captured by analyzing a single category in isolation, as it is the interrelation of the categories that shapes individual realities (Crenshaw 1991). For instance, not all lesbian women have the same opportunities in life or face similar kinds of oppression, because those things partly depend on their other characteristics, such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Intersectionality was originally developed by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 as a critical framework for understanding how simultaneous forms of discrimination interact to create distinct experiences for Black women that are not captured by analyses focusing only on gender or only on race (Crenshaw 1989). Since its introduction, intersectionality has been applied to a wide range of sociological topics, as it provides insights into how social institutions, practices, and other phenomena are associated with social inequalities (Cho et al. 2013; Collins 2015). One of the questions to which intersectionality has been applied is how countries regulate reproduction and family formation (Cho et al. 2013). As the transition to parenthood is shaped by identities and structural positions (Moore 2011), intersectionality provides a useful approach to studying family formation among same-sex couples who need to navigate broader social structures such as legislation and cultural ideas of family (Goldberg 2009).

Research on sexual minority groups has been criticized for its emphasis on socioeconomically advantaged people, while the substantial socioeconomic diversity in this population has failed to be properly accounted for (e.g., Biblarz & Savci 2010; Reczek 2020). This might bias the estimation of the barriers such individuals encounter in their family formation and in life in general. This dissertation aims to provide a new understanding of how the interconnection of gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic position shapes family dynamics in the Nordic institutional context.

4 Summary of prior literature

This section summarizes results from previous research on same-sex couples' childbearing rates and divorce risk. The purpose of this review is to provide background to the sub-studies of the thesis, and, therefore, the focus is on register-based longitudinal studies that have been carried out in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, the following summary thematically highlights previous evidence on childbearing and divorce investigated in the sub-studies.

4.1 Childbearing within same-sex unions

The literature on same-sex couples' childbearing and parenthood has grown substantially in the 21st century, alongside social and legal advances in same-sex family rights (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013; Rault 2020). Research on same-sex couples' families has a long history in the United States, covering a wide range of topics since the 1970s (Biblarz & Savci 2010; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013; Patterson 2000; Reczek 2020), and this line of research has also become increasingly established in the Nordic countries and other European countries since the early 2000s. The field has been dominated by research on lesbian motherhood and female couples, and fewer studies have focused on gay fathers and male couples, and even fewer on the family relationships of bisexual people or other sexual and gender minority groups (Biblarz & Savci 2010; Carneiro et al. 2017). More research has, however, begun to explore the diversity of same-sex families, expanding beyond lesbian and gay identities, binary genders, and white middle-class families (Reczek 2020).

Three common features of same-sex parenthood have been found in studies carried out in the Nordic countries and in some other countries, such as the United States. First, a substantial number of children raised by same-sex couples, particularly among older cohorts of couples, were born within previous different-sex relationships (Gates 2015; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Reczek 2020). Second, the number of female couples having children has steadily increased over time (Andersson & Noack 2010; Evertsson et al. 2025; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Reczek

2020). Third, the corresponding number of male couples has remained low (Andersson & Noack 2010; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Wiik et al. 2014).

Due to the scarcity of reliable longitudinal register data, few studies have assessed the likelihood of childbearing from the start of a legal union for female couples, which is the main interest of sub-studies I and II. Noack et al. (2005) were the first to estimate rates of childbearing within same-sex unions in the Nordic context. They found that less than one per cent of the individuals in partnerships registered in Norway in 1993–2001 had become parents during the observed period, which made the authors question whether the so-called “baby boom” among same-sex couples was more myth than fact (Noack et al. 2005). Five years later, Andersson and Noack (2010) confirmed that childbearing in same-sex partnerships was relatively uncommon in Sweden and Norway during the 1990s, but that childbearing had become more common in the 2000s. Next, Wiik et al. (2014) showed that 24% of female couples and less than 3% of male couples who entered registered partnerships and marriages in Norway in 1993–2010 had a child together. So far, Kolk and Andersson (2020) have provided the most recent analysis of childbearing in same-sex unions over time among Swedish same-sex couples who entered legal unions in 1995–2008, covering their childbearing rates until 2013. They showed, in keeping with the previous studies, that childbearing was uncommon in the 1990s before it began to increase for female couples after a law granting access to second-parent adoption was implemented in 2003 (Kolk & Andersson 2020). Almost 50% of the female couples who entered legal unions in 2008, the latest marriage cohort of the study, and less than 5% of male couples who entered legal unions in 2006–2008, had a child within five years of forming a legal union (Kolk & Andersson 2020).

The picture is much less clear for different socioeconomic groups of same-sex couples (Rault 2020; Reczek 2020). Boye and Evertsson (2021) have provided the first and, so far, the only evidence of an association between socioeconomic characteristics and same-sex childbearing after the formation of a legal union in the Nordic context by analyzing female couples who entered legal unions in Sweden in 1995–2016. They found that couples were more likely to become parents if one or both partners were highly educated compared to if neither was highly educated, and couples with higher household income were more likely to become parents than those with a lower income (Boye & Evertsson 2021). Some recent studies have analyzed household earnings among female couples who have become parents in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland and found that female couples had higher household earnings than different-sex couples before birth in all four countries (Van der Vleuten et al. 2024; Evertsson et al. 2025).

4.2 Divorce risk in same-sex unions

The expanding legalization of same-sex unions has been accompanied by a greater need to understand the dynamics of same-sex divorce. The literature on same-sex family disruption has been increasing (Reczek 2020), but it has mostly focused on union dissolution in general, providing less evidence regarding divorce in legal same-sex unions (Raley & Sweeney 2020). This is likely due to scarce data on formally registered or married same-sex couples in many countries (Raley & Sweeney 2020). Most register-based studies on divorce risk among same-sex couples have been carried out in the Nordic countries.

From the very first studies of same-sex divorce in the Nordic context (Noack et al. 2005; Andersson et al. 2006), female couples have been found to experience higher divorce risk than male couples and different-sex couples. The higher divorce risk in female couples seems not to be specific to the Nordic context or to the first years of legislation allowing legal same-sex unions, as it has also been observed in later Nordic studies and in other countries, such as in the United States and Canada (Allen & Price 2020; Andersson & Noack 2010; Einiö & Ponkilainen 2025; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Wiik et al. 2014; Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022). However, a few recent studies have shown some convergence of divorce risks: same-sex couples' divorce risk has declined, and male couples have reached the divorce risk levels of different-sex couples in Sweden (Kolk & Andersson 2020) and Norway (Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022). The differences in divorce risk between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples have been shown to exist after controlling for a wide range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, such as age, marital history, and education (Andersson et al. 2006; Wiik et al. 2014).

The factors associated with divorce have been extensively studied among different-sex couples (e.g., Amato 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara 2010), but it remains unclear if these findings apply to same-sex couples (Karney & Bradbury 2020). In particular, the reasons for female couples' high divorce risk have not been fully uncovered so far. One of the possible explanations that has not been studied so far is the length of premarital cohabitation. The only previous study (Carpenter & Gates 2008) analyzing information on premarital cohabitation among same-sex couples found that female couples entered legal unions after shorter periods of cohabitation than male couples in California, but its role in their divorce risk was not part of the study design. Some other studies have speculated that shorter periods of premarital cohabitation could be linked to female couples' higher divorce risk (Aldén et al. 2015; Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014), but this has not been tested.

Given the different opportunities to have children between couple types, another interesting aspect of the difference in divorce risk is the role of children. Prior studies have found that having a prior child with someone other than the current spouse is associated with an increased divorce risk in different-sex couples (e.g., Liu 2002; Teachman 2002), and a few studies have found a similar association

in same-sex couples (Andersson & Noack 2010; Wiik et al. 2014). Andersson et al. (2006), however, found this association only in male couples, as female couples in which at least one spouse was a parent at the time of partnership registration had a lower divorce risk compared to childless couples.

Furthermore, only one study has investigated the role having children together plays in the divorce risk of same-sex couples (Wiik et al. 2014), even though it is known that different-sex couples who have at least one child together are less divorce-prone than childless couples (e.g., Hart et al. 2017; Liefbroer & Dourleijn 2006). Wiik et al. (2014) showed that female couples who had a child had a 49% lower divorce risk than childless female couples in Norway, a similar rate to different-sex couples. A small number of male couples who had a child (N=49) had a 76% higher divorce risk than their childless counterparts, but they had other characteristics associated with a higher divorce risk, as the couples were younger and, more often than childless couples, involved partners who were not Norwegian citizens (Wiik et al. 2014).

4.3 Gaps in the prior literature

The gaps identified in the prior literature regarding same-sex childbearing have served as a starting point for the first two sub-studies of this thesis. First, no prior study assesses the likelihood of childbearing after legal union formation among female couples in Finland or Denmark. Also, the previous studies for Sweden and Norway are difficult to compare because of the different years covered in the analyses and the varying lengths of the follow-up times. Moreover, it is not known how the childbearing patterns of female couples have developed in the most recent years. Thus, a comparative cross-country perspective has been lacking so far in the Nordic context. Another inadequately addressed but highly important issue is socioeconomic differences in childbearing. To my knowledge, only one study has analyzed the association between socioeconomic resources and childbearing among female couples in Sweden (Boye & Evertsson 2021), but there are no corresponding studies for other countries. Furthermore, no study has assessed changes in the association over time.

The following gaps identified in the prior literature regarding same-sex divorce have created the basis for sub-study III. First, there is no prior research on the length of premarital cohabitation among same-sex couples in the Nordic countries. Second, no prior study has investigated the association between the length of premarital cohabitation and divorce risk in same-sex couples. Third, the prior evidence on the role of previous children in divorce risk is mixed (Andersson et al. 2006; Andersson & Noack 2010; Wiik et al. 2014). Fourth, the evidence on the impact of children born within same-sex unions on divorce risk is limited to one Norwegian study (Wiik et al. 2014).

5 Same-sex couples' legal family rights

The Nordic countries have been among the first countries in the world to acknowledge same-sex couples' partnership and parenthood rights in their legislation. Once Denmark introduced same-sex registered partnerships in its legislation in 1989, the idea of the law soon spread across the Nordic countries (Rydström 2011). From then on, similar legal changes have taken place in all Nordic countries, but in a different order and in different years. In general, the legal recognition of same-sex family rights in Finland has lagged behind the other Nordic countries (Figure 2), though Finland has still been among the pioneering countries globally to adopt such legislation.

This section introduces the main legal changes related to the recognition of same-sex partnerships and parenthood rights in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, with some more detailed information regarding Finland. Iceland belongs to the same Nordic legislative context, but is not covered in this section, as the country is not studied in the thesis due to data limitations.

In practice, parental rights are broader for female couples than for male couples, whose opportunities to become parents remain more limited (Evertsson et al. 2020; Malmquist & Spånberg Ekholm 2020). In Finland, for example, male couples have a legal right to adoption and foster care, and they may engage in shared parenting arrangements with women, even though only two legal parents are recognized (Rainbow Families Finland 2019). All forms of surrogacy are prohibited in fertility clinics, while altruistic surrogacy arrangements outside of clinics and surrogacy abroad are unregulated (Rainbow Families Finland 2019).

5.1 Partnership rights

The first step in same-sex partnership rights was the introduction of registered partnerships in Denmark in 1989, followed by Norway in 1993, Sweden in 1995, and Finland in 2002 (Andersson & Noack 2010). In Finland, registered partnerships were emphasized as being separate from marriage, even though the legal rights and duties were close to those of different-sex marriage (Pylkkänen 2012). The registered partnerships only lacked the right to have a marriage ceremony, have a shared surname, jointly adopt a child, and be automatically recognized as a legal parent of a newborn child (Act on Registered Partnerships 2001).

The option to register a partnership was later replaced with marriage in the Nordic countries, and couples in registered partnerships could either continue in a registered partnership or convert it to marriage (Waaldijk 2020). Marriage became possible for same-sex couples in Norway and Sweden in 2009, in Denmark in 2012, and in Finland in 2017 (Waaldijk 2020).

The regulations concerning divorce are similar for same-sex registered partnerships and marriages and different-sex marriages in Finland. Submission of an initial divorce application by one or both spouses is followed by a reflection period of six months, after which divorce can be granted on request. If the spouses have lived separately for at least two years, divorce can be granted on request without a reflection period. (Marriage Act 1929.)

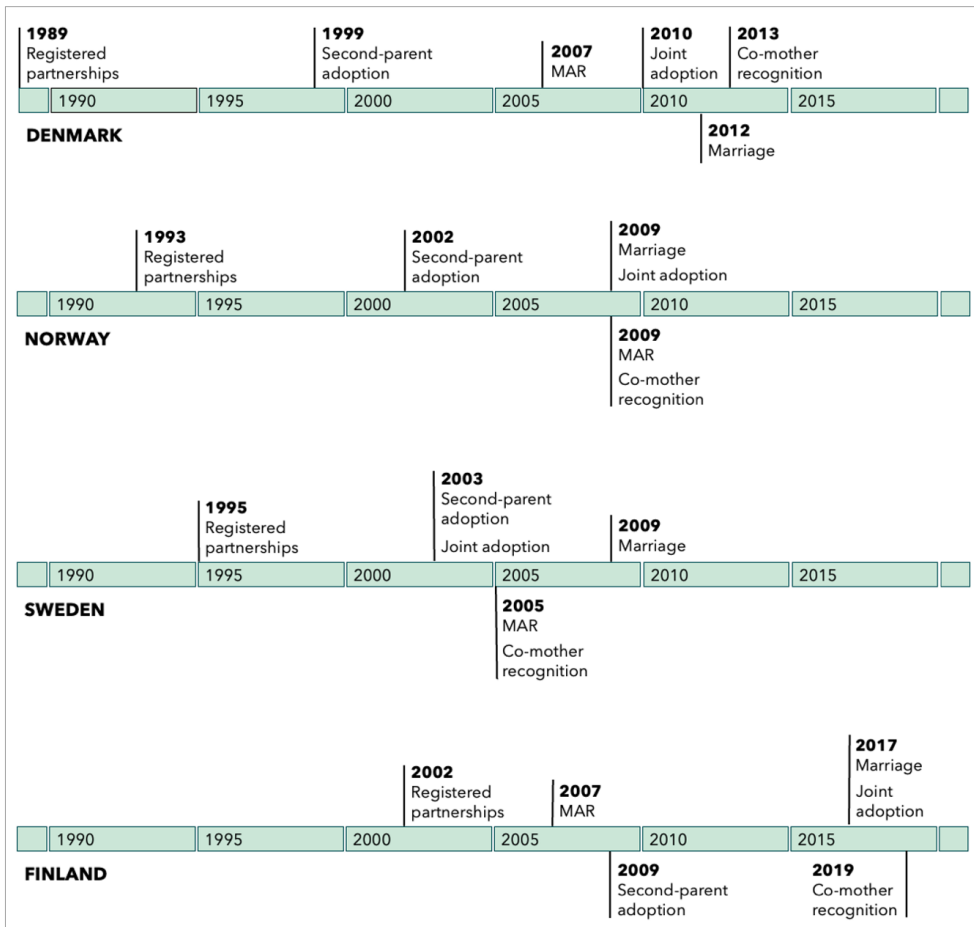


Figure 2 The legislative development of same-sex couples' family rights in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland.

5.2 Parental rights

5.2.1 Adoption

The first step in same-sex parental rights was the introduction of second-parent adoption, i.e., the right to adopt the child of one's legal spouse. Denmark was the first country to take this step in 1999 (Jeppesen de Boer & Kronborg 2011), and Finland was the last in 2009 (Valleala 2017). With these laws, it was legally and societally recognized that a child could have two parents of the same sex. The Nordic countries, except Finland, later extended the right to second-parent adoption to apply to same-sex cohabiting couples who are not in a legal union (Eeg 2017; Evertsson et al. 2020; Justitsministeriet 2008; Valleala 2017).

Sweden was the first Nordic country to introduce joint adoption rights, i.e., the right to adopt a child of whom neither spouse is a biological parent, for same-sex couples in 2007 (Ytterberg 2017). Finland, as the last Nordic country, made joint adoption possible for married same-sex couples with the introduction of same-sex marriage in 2017 (Marriage Act 1929). In practice, adoptions by same-sex couples are scarce in the Nordic countries as there are few children to adopt domestically and only a few origin countries allow children to be adopted by same-sex couples in international adoption (Digoix 2020; Malmquist & Spånberg Ekholm 2020).

5.2.2 Medically assisted reproduction

Female couples got a legally confirmed right to MAR in Finland in 2007 by way of a change to the Act on Assisted Fertility Treatments (2006). As female couples' access to MAR was unregulated in the previous version of the law, some private clinics in the capital area had already been offering treatments to female couples from 1997 (Moring 2013; Rydström 2011). In practice, the legal change in 2007 expanded the number of private clinics offering treatments for female couples, but the public healthcare sector, i.e., five university hospitals, refused to offer treatments to them, justifying the decision with insufficient resources to provide treatments with donated gametes and with the argument that female couples' infertility is due to social rather than medical reasons (Homanen 2018; Rainbow Families Finland 2019). Only after these hospitals were threatened with financial sanctions for discrimination based on sexual orientation did they start opening up their services to female couples from 2019 (Rainbow Families Finland 2019). Female couples do not get public reimbursement of the treatment costs of private clinics, like different-sex couples do, unless their infertility is due to a medical condition (Rainbow Families Finland 2024).

In Denmark too, female couples had access to MAR in private clinics before their right to MAR was regulated by law. MAR was available for female couples in Denmark until legal regulation was introduced in 1997, and again from 1999 at one private clinic in the capital (Fallesen & Jepsen 2025). MAR was prohibited for female couples by law in all clinics in Sweden until 2005 (Rozenal & Malmquist 2015; Ryan-Flood 2009), and it was also unavailable in Norway until 2009 (Jetha 2023).

The enforcement of the laws granting access to MAR for female couples in Sweden in 2005, in Denmark in 2007, and in Norway in 2009 led to the provision of MAR as part of tax-funded public healthcare. There is, however, variation in how many cycles of different treatments are offered and reimbursed and for how many children (Rozenal & Malmquist 2015). The practical availability of MAR through public healthcare also depends, for instance, on geographic location, age regulations, and the availability of donated sperm (Dahl & Andreassen 2023). MAR has been accessible to female couples in all Nordic countries regardless of their marital status.

5.2.3 Co-mother recognition

With laws allowing co-mother recognition, both women in a same-sex couple can be recognized as legal parents of their child at birth if the child is conceived via MAR (Eeg 2017; Maternity Act 2018; Social- og Boligministeriet 2024; Ytterberg 2017). Such couples do not need to undergo the second-parent adoption procedure. Sweden and Norway introduced co-mother recognition concurrently with the laws granting access to MAR in 2005 and 2009, respectively, whereas it became possible later in Denmark in 2013 and in Finland in 2019 (Evertsson et al. 2020). Co-mother recognition is possible regardless of the legal status of the partnership, and nonmarital cohabiting female couples have been able to share the legal parenthood of their child since the introduction of the laws (Eeg 2017; Maternity Act 2018; Social- og Boligministeriet 2024; Ytterberg 2017).

6 Aims of the study

This dissertation aims to analyze the likelihood of childbearing and divorce among same-sex couples in the changing institutional context of Finland. These family dynamics are examined in comparison with married different-sex couples, and in the case of childbearing, with the other Nordic countries of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. The more detailed aims of this study are as follows:

- (1) to explore changes in the likelihood of having a child within female same-sex legal unions in Finland and the other Nordic countries over time (sub-studies I and II);
- (2) to assess socioeconomic differences in the likelihood of having a child within female same-sex legal unions in Finland and the other Nordic countries over time (sub-studies I and II);
- (3) to analyze how the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together are associated with female couples' and male couples' divorce risk in Finland (sub-study III); and
- (4) to investigate how differences in the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together contribute to differences in divorce risk between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples in Finland (sub-study III).

The main interest of the first sub-study is the changes in the likelihood of having a child among female couples in Finland over time, with a focus on educational differences in relation to childbearing. The primary aim is to assess how educational level is associated with female couples' likelihood of having a child and how this association has evolved in the changing institutional environment of Finland. In addition, the study explores whether the association is explained by couples' income level. Given that MAR was not available to female couples in the public healthcare sector of Finland until the end of 2019 (Evertsson et al. 2020), this sub-study provides information on female couples' childbearing in a period when same-sex partnerships and parenthood became legally recognized, but in which same-sex

couples had to cover all the costs of MAR themselves. The study discusses the results in relation to a more widely observed behavioral change, which is that female couples with greater socioeconomic resources are increasingly moving from low-technology self-help options, such as home insemination, to purchasing more effective services provided at clinics to conceive (e.g., Garwood 2016; Mamo 2007).

The second sub-study extends the scope of sub-study I from Finland to the other Nordic countries, allowing for a comparison of whether the childbearing patterns observed in Finland resemble those observed in the other Nordic countries. The primary aim of the study is to provide a novel comparative cross-country perspective on changing childbearing patterns and socioeconomic differences in the likelihood of childbearing among female couples in the Nordic countries. The study assesses whether the childbearing behavior of female couples has been following the same pattern against a background of changing legislation in these countries and discusses how the different implementation of laws may have affected same-sex childbearing behavior. The sub-study develops a discussion on how legislative changes have enhanced female couples' opportunities to enter legal unions and have children, while, at the same time, being linked to a shift in female couples' childbearing behavior to more closely resemble that of different-sex couples.

The third sub-study moves the focus away from family formation to family disruption. This sub-study aims to investigate how the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing with someone other than the current spouse, and childbearing together with the current spouse are associated with divorce risk. The underlying aim is to assess whether differences in these characteristics explain differences in divorce risk between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples. Whereas sub-studies I and II emphasize how same-sex couples navigate changing legal and social landscapes to have children, sub-study III examines how the different legislative and normative contexts of same-sex unions may impact their divorce risk, and the roles premarital cohabitation and children play in the stability of their unions. Thus, the study discusses how earlier life events, including the trajectories of legal unions and childbearing, may influence later relationship outcomes.

7 Data and methods

7.1 Data

This dissertation is based on administrative register data from Finland (sub-studies I and III), as well as from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (sub-study II). In the data provided by Statistics Finland, Statistics Sweden, Statistics Norway, and Statistics Denmark, individuals are granted pseudonymized personal identification numbers, which are used to link them with their civil status records and information on other demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The data contain information on both partners within each couple. Same-sex couples were identified from all couples based on their civil status and legal sex.

The Finnish data included all female couples and male couples who registered their same-sex partnerships in Finland between 1 March 2002 and 28 February 2017 or married between 1 March 2017 and 31 December 2021. A total of 6,112 couples, of whom both partners were residents of Finland at the time of entering the legal union, were identified in the data. In addition, the data contained 539,860 different-sex couples who married between 1 March 2002 and 31 December 2021. Two different analytical datasets from the Finnish data were used, one in sub-studies I and II and another in sub-study III.

The dataset used in sub-studies I and II consisted of all female couples who registered their same-sex partnerships ($N=2,492$) and all different-sex couples who married ($N=399,381$) in Finland between 1 March 2002 and 31 December 2016. In addition to the Finnish dataset, sub-study II also used the data on all female couples who registered their same-sex partnerships or married and all different-sex couples who married in Denmark between 1 October 1989 and 31 December 2018, in Norway between 1 August 1993 and 31 December 2017, and in Sweden between 1 January 1995 and 31 December 2016. The periods begin on the date when registered partnerships were introduced in the country and end in the year after which there were still five years of data for a follow-up. The follow-up periods cover data until the end of 2021 in Sweden and Finland, 2022 in Norway, and 2023 in Denmark.

The analytical datasets used in sub-studies I and II were restricted according to couples' residence, union order, and age. First, couples in which either spouse was registered as living abroad at the time of the formation of the legal union were excluded. Second, couples in which either spouse had previously been in a legal

union of the same type (a previous same-sex union for same-sex couples and a previous different-sex union for different-sex couples) were excluded. Third, couples in which the youngest spouse in same-sex couples and the woman in different-sex couples was 45 years or older at the time of the formation of the legal union (sub-study I) or at the end of the year of forming the legal union (sub-study II) were excluded.

The analytical dataset for sub-study I consisted of 1,945 female couples and 260,897 different-sex couples from Finland. For the analyses, the couples were split into three union cohorts based on the year of entering a legal union: 2002–2006 (490 female couples and 88,031 different-sex couples), 2007–2011 (670 female couples and 94,335 different-sex couples), and 2012–2016 (785 female couples and 78,531 different-sex couples). In sub-study II, the analytical Nordic datasets of female couples included 11,037 couples: 3,613 couples from Denmark, 2,279 couples from Norway, 3,214 couples from Sweden, and 1,931 couples from Finland. The corresponding datasets of different-sex couples included 1,754,567 couples: 539,400 couples from Denmark, 517,546 couples from Norway, 436,724 couples from Sweden, and 260,897 couples from Finland.

The analytical dataset used in sub-study III included female couples, male couples and different-sex couples who entered legal unions in Finland between 1 January 2003 and 31 December 2020. Couples who registered their partnerships in 2002 were excluded because same-sex couples who entered legal unions in the first years of legislation might be a selected group of older and more committed couples, as many of them had waited a long time to legalize their relationship (Manning & Joyner 2019; Noack et al. 2005; Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022). Also, couples who married in 2021 were omitted from the study to ensure a follow-up period of at least one year for all couples. Among different-sex couples, couples that involved an underage partner were excluded. The analytical datasets consisted of 1,892 male couples, 3,412 female couples, and 457,867 different-sex couples.

7.2 Variables

Childbearing. The outcome of sub-studies I and II is childbearing. Childbearing was defined as the birth of the first biological child of either spouse, as measured for five years following formation of a legal union for both female and different-sex couples. The timing of the child's birth was measured with day-level precision in sub-study I, and with month-level precision in sub-study II.

Divorce. The outcome of sub-study III is divorce. Divorce was defined as the event of legal divorce, similarly for registered partnerships and marriages.

Prior children and children in common. In sub-study III, a prior child referred to an individual's biological child who was born before the observed premarital cohabitation and legal union and whose other registered parent at birth

was not the individual's current partner. This definition was applied both to same-sex and different-sex couples. Having a prior child was measured in the year of moving in together or legal union formation, whichever occurred first. In sub-studies I and II, a prior child was, in turn, defined as any biological child born to either partner before the formation of the legal union, as children born to couples before they had legalized their union could not be distinguished from children born within previous relationships due to data restrictions. In sub-study III, a child in common was defined for female couples as a biological child who was given birth to by either spouse during the observed premarital cohabitation or legal union. Among different-sex couples, a child in common referred to a child whose biological parents were the couple. Having a child together was incorporated in the analysis as a time-varying variable, based on the birth year of the couple's first biological child.

Education. In all sub-studies, the educational level of a couple was determined by categorizing couples into three educational groups according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Low education included primary and lower-secondary education or less (ISCED 0–2), medium education referred to upper-secondary education (ISCED 3–4), and high education consisted of tertiary levels (ISCED 5–8). Low education included cases where data was missing, such as education completed abroad and not recorded in the national registers (except for Sweden, where information on education completed abroad is collected). In sub-studies I and II, the educational level of a couple was defined as the highest level of education obtained by either spouse by the end of the year of the formation of the legal union. In sub-study III, the educational level was used as a time-varying control variable, as the highest level of education completed by spouses by the end of each year.

Income. In sub-study I, the income level of a couple was determined based on the combined personal taxable earnings of the spouses in the year preceding the formation of a legal union, adjusted for inflation to the year 2015. The income of the couples' parents was defined as the combined income of all parents, divided by the number of parents for whom the information was available. In sub-study II, the income level of a couple was defined similarly as in the first sub-study, but the income information was collected from the year of the formation of the legal union. Couples were grouped into income tertiles, which were formed using the combined population of female couples and different-sex couples in each country.

Premarital cohabitation. Sub-study III used information on couples' premarital cohabitation histories, which were constructed using the information on individuals' residences by dwelling unit from the last date of each calendar year since 1987. Individuals are registered at a dwelling unit based on their notification to the Population Information System of their official permanent address and the date of their move. The length of premarital cohabitation was categorized into six

groups based on how many years before a legal union a couple moved in together for the first time: 7+ years, 3–6 years, 1–2 years, moved in together in the year of entering a legal union (0 years), no premarital cohabitation, and unknown duration. The category “no premarital cohabitation” included couples who had moved in together after the year of forming a legal union or not at all during the observation period. “Unknown duration” covered couples who had not moved to Finland until the year of entering a legal union, and there is no record of their possible premarital cohabitation abroad.

7.3 Methods

7.3.1 Kaplan-Meier estimator

In sub-studies I and II, the Kaplan-Meier estimator was used to assess the cumulative probability of having at least one child within five years of registering a partnership or forming a marriage. Couples were considered under observation for having a child from the time of entering a legal union until divorce, emigration, death of either partner, or until the end of the five-year follow-up time, whichever occurred first. If a same-sex couple converted their registered partnership into a marriage during the follow-up time, the union was treated as continuing in the analysis.

The following results section presents the analyses of the likelihood of childbearing based on the Kaplan-Meier estimator from sub-study II. Sub-study I includes similar results but only for Finland and by union cohort (2002–2006, 2007–2011 and 2012–2016). All analyses in sub-study II were performed separately for each Nordic country as well as for female couples and different-sex couples. First, the likelihood of having a child in the first five years following the formation of a legal union was assessed by year of entering the legal union. Second, the likelihood of having a child was analyzed by educational group, and third, by income tertile. To ensure a sufficient number of observations for the analyses, some yearly union cohorts were combined, as shown in the figures.

7.3.2 Cox proportional hazards model

In addition to the Kaplan-Meier estimator, the Cox proportional hazards model was used in sub-study I to investigate further educational differences in childbearing among female couples while also considering the women’s ages, income levels, and their parents’ income levels. In the analysis, the first model was unadjusted, the second model was adjusted for the age of the younger woman in the couple, the third model was additionally adjusted for a continuous variable of the couple’s

income, and the fourth model was additionally adjusted for the income of both women's parents.

7.3.3 Discrete-time event history analysis

Sub-study III employed a discrete-time event history model to study the risk of divorce. For the analysis, the data were reconstructed to include one record for every year at risk of divorce from the year of entering a legal union until divorce or censoring due to death or emigration of either partner, or reaching the end of the follow-up period of 10 years or the end of 2021, whichever came first. Parameter estimates were clustered at the individual level to account for correlation in error terms among index persons contributing more than one union. The estimates derived from the discrete-time logistic model are presented as predicted probabilities.

The main analyses included three models. In Model 1, divorce risk was assessed for the interaction between couple type (female couple, male couple, or different-sex couple) and the length of premarital cohabitation, the existence of a prior child, and having a child together, all separately. Model 2 was adjusted for the interaction between couple type and control variables of partners' ages at the time of forming a legal union, educational levels, and nationalities at birth (Finnish or foreign). Model 3 was further adjusted by adding the interaction between couple type and the rest of the independent variables, i.e., length of premarital cohabitation, existence of a prior child, and having a child together. All models were adjusted for whether either spouse in a same-sex couple had previously been in a same-sex legal union, and whether either spouse in a different-sex couple had previously been in a different-sex marriage.

Because of the low number of male couples who had a child together, they were excluded from the analysis of the association between having a child together and divorce risk. Furthermore, Model 3 was run separately only for male couples, as when they were included, the variable of having a child together was dropped from the model.

Finally, differences in the divorce risk between couple types were assessed in a separate analysis, which included five steps. In the analysis, Model 1 was unadjusted. Model 2 was controlled for the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth. Model 3 added the length of premarital cohabitation, Model 4 added the existence of a prior child, and Model 5 (only for female couples and different-sex couples) added having a child together. Like the main analyses, all models included the interaction between type of couple and the variables included.

8 Results

The results in sections 8.1–8.2.2 comparing the likelihood of childbearing and socioeconomic differences in childbearing among female couples and different-sex couples in Finland and the other Nordic countries are found in sub-study II. Section 8.2.1 includes more detailed analyses of educational differences in childbearing among female couples for Finland, found in sub-study I. Otherwise, the main results of sub-study I are similar to the results from sub-study II, but for Finland alone. The results comparing differences in divorce risk between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples, and the analyses of the role of the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together in those differences presented in sections 8.3-8.3.4 are found in sub-study III.

8.1 Nordic childbearing patterns

Figure 3 shows the likelihood of having at least one child in the first five years following formation of a legal union by year of formation in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. The results indicate that childbearing has become increasingly common among female couples over time, while the likelihood of childbearing remained stable or declined among married different-sex couples in all the countries studied. The strong increases in female couples' likelihood of having a child resulted in a convergence with different-sex couples in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway at the turn of the 2000s and 2010s. At its highest, female couples' likelihood of childbearing was 64.1% in the 2012 cohort in Denmark, 59.8% in the 2009 cohort in Sweden, 54.2% in the 2012 cohort in Norway, and 52.7% in the 2015 cohort in Finland. After that, female couples' likelihood of childbearing stabilized at similar levels or slightly declined. Finland diverged from the other countries in this development, as female couples' likelihood of having a child increased later and more modestly, and it did not reach the same likelihood as different-sex couples by the end of the period studied. In general, the likelihood of having a child among female couples has been higher in Denmark and Sweden than in Norway and Finland.

Figure 3 indicates the year when each country legalized second-parent adoption, female couples' access to MAR, co-mother recognition at the child's birth, and same-sex marriage (shown as vertical lines). The results indicate a strong

increase in childbearing among female couples around the time of the introduction of legislation allowing second-parent adoption in all four countries. There also appear to be changes in childbearing following the introduction of MAR legislation in Finland (2007) and MAR and co-mothering legislation in Sweden (2005).

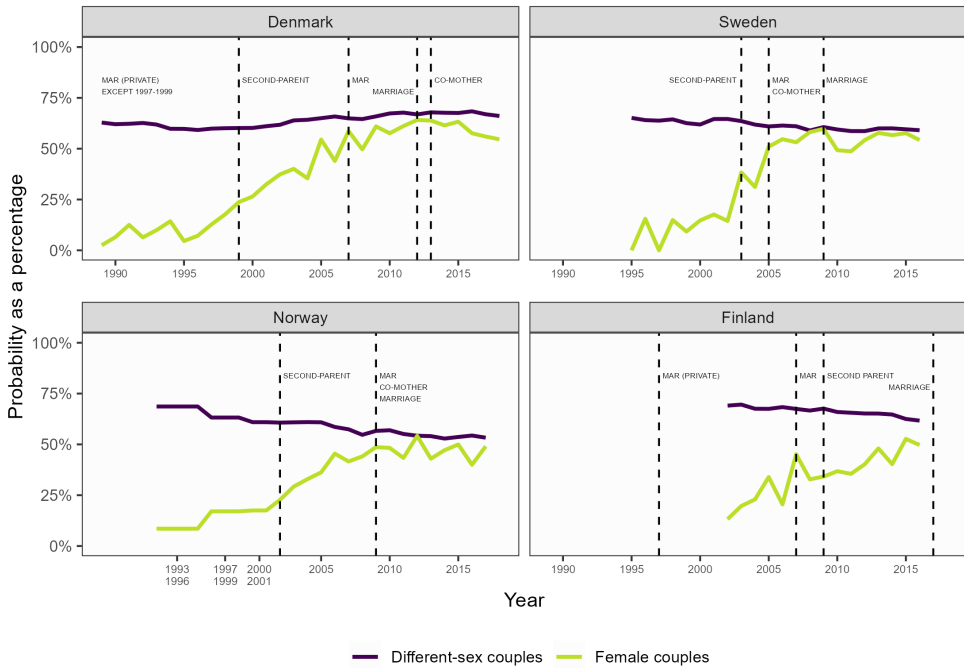


Figure 3 Probability of having at least one child in the first five years following the formation of a legal union by year of formation.

8.2 Socioeconomic differences in childbearing

8.2.1 Educational level

Figure 4 shows how the likelihood of having a child among female couples varied by highest educational level of either spouse. A higher educational level was associated with a higher likelihood of having a child in all the countries studied. An educational gradient emerged among female couples who entered legal unions in the early 2000s in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway and in the late 2000s in Finland. Larger educational differences were observed in Finland and Sweden than in Denmark and Norway.

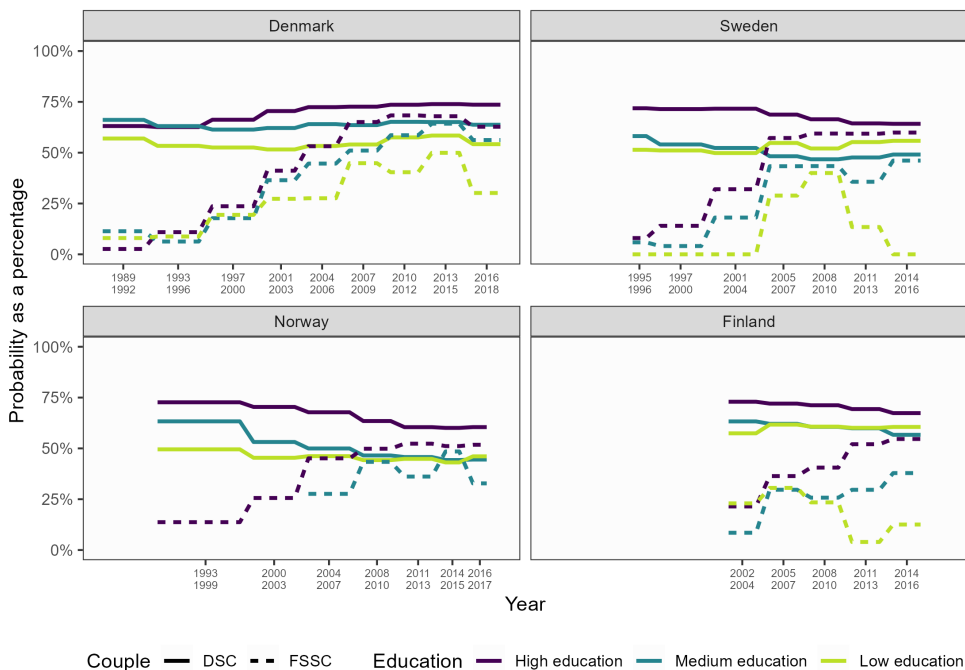


Figure 4 Probability of having at least one child in the first five years following the formation of a legal union by year of formation and the highest educational qualification completed by either spouse.

Educational differences in childbearing varied during the study period. The likelihood of having a child increased equally in all educational groups of female couples in the first years of the study period, but later, the educational groups diverged, particularly in Finland and Sweden. In Finland, the educational differences became larger over time as the likelihood of childbearing declined among low-educated couples since the late 2000s, while it continued to increase in highly educated and medium-educated couples. A similar development occurred in Sweden, where the likelihood of having a child dropped among low-educated couples who entered legal unions in the early 2010s, while the likelihood of childbearing stabilized or continued to increase in other educational groups. In Denmark, an educational gradient appeared in the early 2000s due to a more steady increase in childbearing among highly educated couples than among lower educated couples. In Norway, overall increases were rather similar for highly and medium-educated couples, but differences emerged as the likelihood declined among medium-educated couples in some union cohorts, with the largest gap observed in the 2016–2017 cohort.

Among different-sex couples, those with higher levels of education were more likely to have a child than other couples, but the likelihood of having a child

did not differ between medium-educated and low-educated couples for most of the observation period in the other countries, except in Denmark. Educational differences in childbearing among different-sex couples were more stable over time compared to female couples.

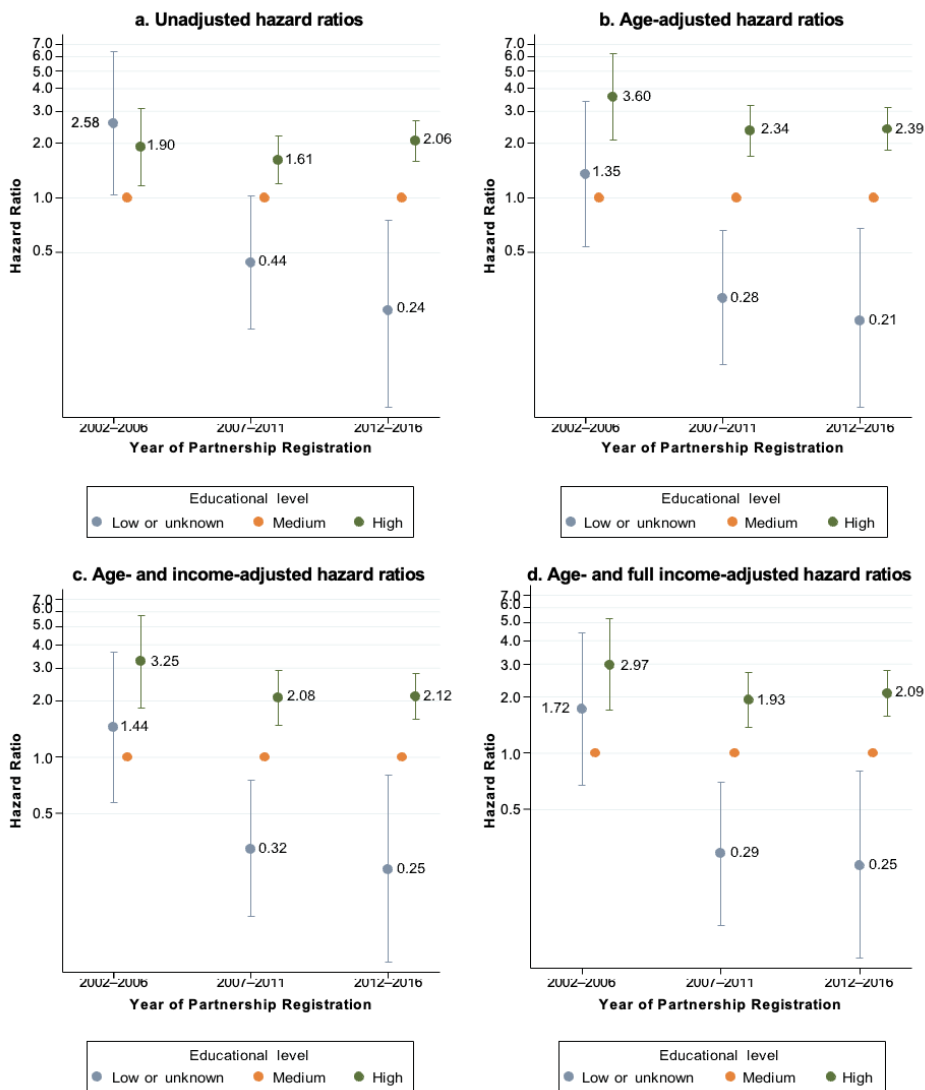


Figure 5 Hazard ratios and 95% confidence intervals for female couples' childbearing in Finland without and with adjustments, by couples' educational level and year of partnership registration in 2002–2006, 2007–2011, and 2012–2016.

Additional analyses for Finland, presented in Figure 5 from sub-study I, show the hazard ratios of having a child within the first five years of registered partnerships among female couples, without adjustments and with adjustments for the younger woman's age, the couple's income, and their parents' income. The medium education group is the reference group. The unadjusted analyses (panel a) confirmed that educational differences in childbearing among female couples in Finland became more pronounced over time, as shown in Figure 4. Figure 5 also shows that educational differences were even larger when the analyses were adjusted for the younger woman's age (panel b). Educational differences in childbearing were only marginally explained by couples' income levels, as the differences remained after female couples' income (panel c) and their parents' income (panel d) were taken into account.

8.2.2 Income level

The likelihood of having a child among female couples differed less by income level than by educational level (Figure 6), but there was some evidence of income differences in the other countries, except in Denmark. In Finland, the likelihood of having a child was about the same across income groups in the first union cohorts, before low-income couples diverged from the other couples at the turn of the 2000s and 2010s. At that time, their likelihood of having a child stabilized, while this continued to increase in higher-income groups. In Sweden, the divergence occurred around the same years, but it resulted from a decline in childbearing among low-income couples and a continued increase or stabilization in childbearing in the other income groups. In Denmark and Norway, childbearing increased steadily across all income groups over time, but in Norway, income differences existed as couples with low income appeared less likely to have children than couples with higher income over the study period.

Among different-sex couples, higher income was associated with a higher likelihood of having a child in countries other than Denmark, where the income gradient was the opposite. Also, in Sweden, the income gradient was the opposite among the two most recent union cohorts. Income differences in childbearing among different-sex couples were more stable than among female couples.

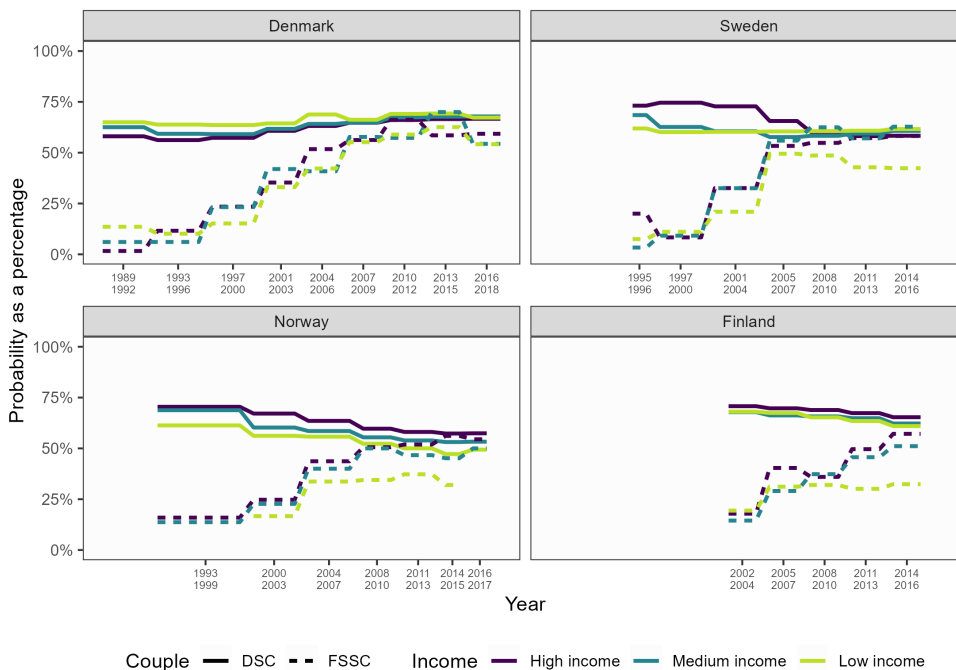


Figure 6 Probability of having at least one child in the first five years following the formation of a legal union by year of formation and income tertile.

8.3 Divorce risk

8.3.1 Differences in divorce risk among couple types

Figure 7 shows that in Finland, female couples had a higher yearly divorce risk compared to male couples and different-sex couples. In the unadjusted Model 1, the divorce risk in female couples (4.9%) was 2.2 times that of different-sex couples (2.2%) and 1.6 times that of male couples (3.1%), whereas male couples had a divorce risk 1.4 times that of different-sex couples.

When the different distributions of the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth between couple types were adjusted for (Model 2), the gaps in the divorce risk were smaller between female and male couples, but larger between them and different-sex couples. Adding the length of premarital cohabitation into the analysis (Model 3) attenuated the differences in divorce risk between same-sex and different-sex couples. Adding prior children (Model 4) and having a child together (Model 5) into the analysis affected only female couples, decreasing their divorce risk slightly.

After all adjustments, female couples still had the highest divorce risk per year (4.6%). Their divorce risk was 2.1 times that of different-sex couples (2.2%) and 1.2 times that of male couples (3.8%). The divorce risk in male couples was 1.7 times that of different-sex couples. All in all, the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together explained about one-fifth of the gap in the divorce risk between female couples and different-sex couples, whereas prior childbearing and childbearing together explained about one-third of female couples' higher divorce risk compared to male couples. In turn, the length of premarital cohabitation explained about one-fifth of male couples' higher divorce risk compared to different-sex couples.

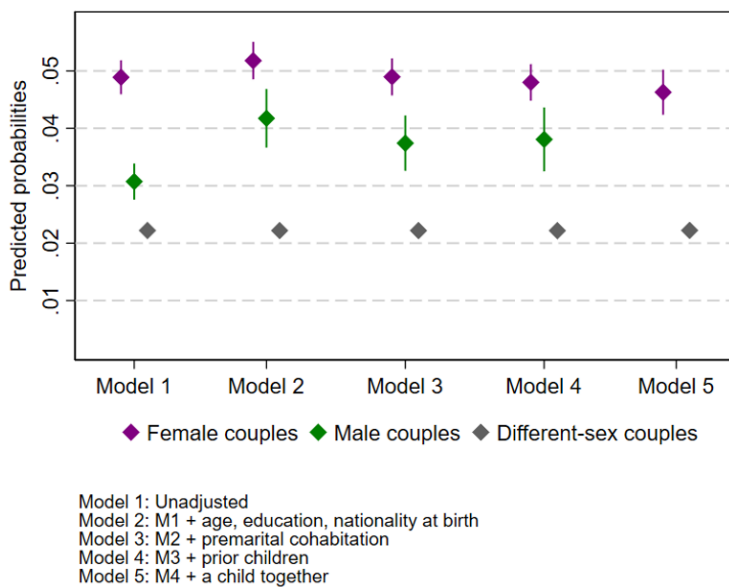


Figure 7 Yearly divorce risk for female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples who entered legal unions in Finland in 2003–2020.

8.3.2 Premarital cohabitation

Figure 8 visualizes the findings on the association between the length of premarital cohabitation and divorce risk in male couples, female couples, and different-sex couples. Short length and absence of premarital cohabitation were associated with increased divorce risk among same-sex couples, whereas there was no similar clear association for different-sex couples after taking partners' other characteristics into account.

In the unadjusted Model 1, same-sex couples who had lived together for at least seven years had the lowest divorce risk per year, while those who had moved

in together in the year of legal union had a divorce risk that was 5.1 (male couples) and 4.3 (female couples) times that. Among different-sex couples with at least seven years of premarital cohabitation, the divorce risk was about half of the risk of couples who had moved in together in the year of marriage. Same-sex couples without premarital cohabitation had the highest divorce risk, whereas divorce risk among different-sex couples in this group did not differ from that of other different-sex couples. The gradient in divorce risk by length of premarital cohabitation attenuated but remained in same-sex couples and largely disappeared among different-sex couples after controlling for the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth in Model 2. Adding prior childbearing and childbearing within the union into Model 3 further attenuated the gradient among same-sex couples slightly.

After all adjustments, same-sex couples who had lived together for at least seven years had the lowest divorce risk per year: 2.4% in male couples and 3.3% in female couples. Divorce risk in couples who had moved in together in the year of forming a legal union was about double that in both couple types. Same-sex couples with no premarital cohabitation had the highest divorce risk of all couples: 8.5% in male couples and 9.9% in female couples. The corresponding divorce risk in different-sex couples was 1.9%.

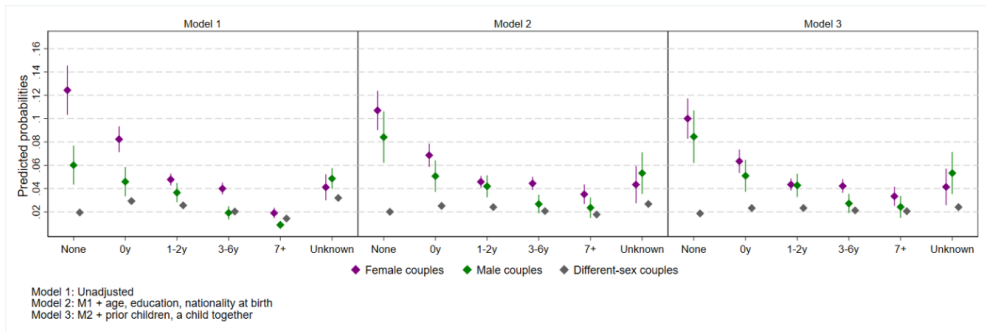


Figure 8 Yearly divorce risk by length of premarital cohabitation for female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples who entered legal unions in Finland in 2003–2020.

8.3.3 Prior children

Figure 9 shows the findings regarding the association between having prior children and divorce risk. Couples in which at least one partner had a prior child with someone other than the current partner had a higher risk of divorce than couples with no prior children, but the association was weaker among same-sex couples than different-sex couples.

In Model 1, couples with and without prior children differed in their divorce risk only among female couples and different-sex couples, and the difference was

statistically significant only among different-sex couples. The gap in divorce risk between same-sex couples with and without prior children was larger in Model 2, which was adjusted for the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth. The gap between male couples with and without prior children was not, however, statistically significant. Adding the length of premarital cohabitation and having a child together into Model 3 narrowed the gap in divorce risk between same-sex couples with and without prior children.

After all adjustments, female couples with prior children had a yearly risk of divorce of 5.3%, which was 1.3 times the risk among those without prior children (4.3%). Male couples with prior children had a 4.7% risk of divorce, 1.3 times the risk among those without prior children (3.5%), but the difference was not statistically significant. Different-sex couples who had prior children had a yearly risk of divorce of 3.1%, 1.6 times the risk among those without prior children (1.9%).

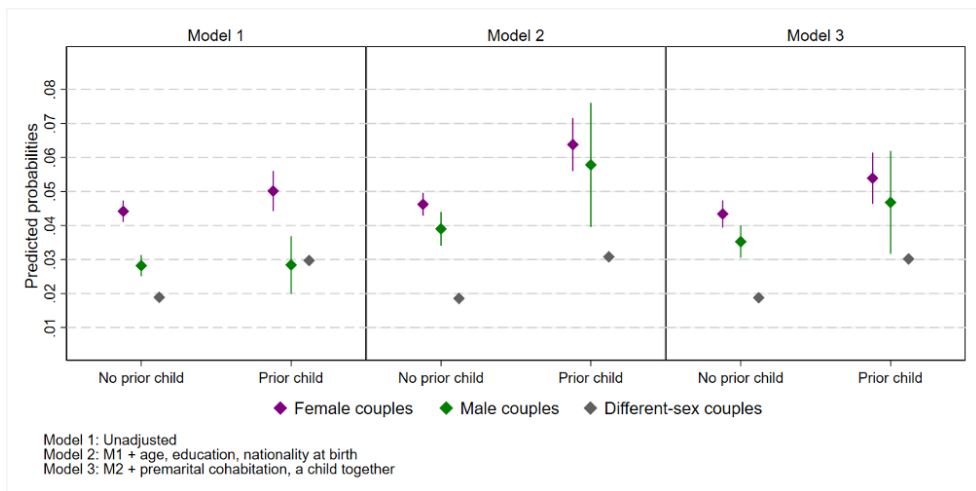


Figure 9 Yearly divorce risk by existence of prior children for female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples who entered legal unions in Finland in 2003–2020.

8.3.4 Children in common

Figure 10 shows that having a child together was associated with a lower divorce risk in both female couples and different-sex couples, but the association was less pronounced among female couples. Male couples were excluded from this part of the analysis.

In Model 1, divorce risk in childless female couples was 1.2 times the risk in couples who had a child together, whereas childless different-sex couples had a divorce risk that was 1.3 times the risk in couples who had a child. Adding the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth into Model 2 increased the gap in divorce risk between different-sex couples with and without a child. In

turn, the difference in divorce risk between female couples with and without a child attenuated when the length of premarital cohabitation and having a prior child were taken into account in Model 3.

After all adjustments, female couples without a child in common had a yearly divorce risk of 4.9%, which was not significantly different from 4.4% in couples who had a child, whereas childless different-sex couples had a divorce risk (2.9%) 1.5 times that of couples who had a child (1.9%).

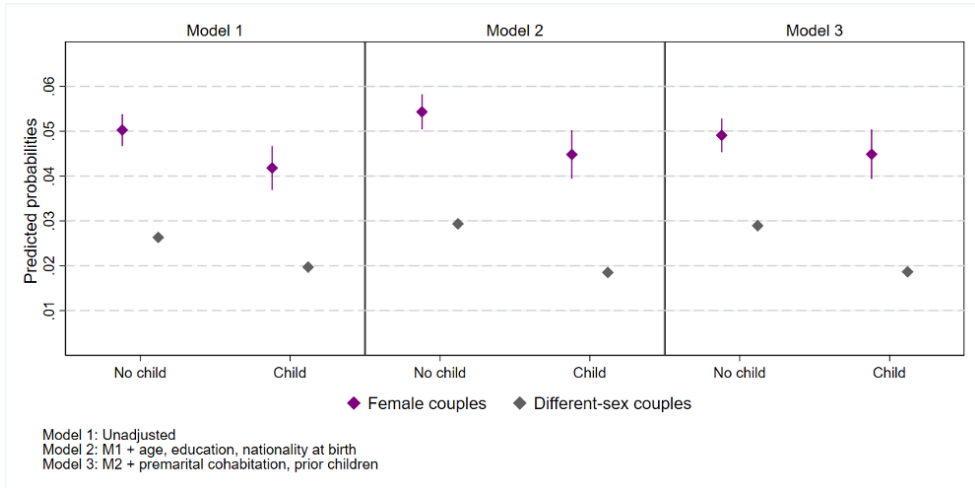


Figure 10 Yearly divorce risk by having a child together for female couples and different-sex couples who entered legal unions in Finland in 2003–2020.

9 Discussion

This thesis analyzed the likelihood of childbearing and divorce among same-sex couples in Finland, with a comparative perspective that included different-sex couples and, in terms of childbearing, the other Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The thesis provided new findings on recent changes in female couples' likelihood of childbearing within their legal same-sex unions in the Nordic context and advanced our understanding of the role of socioeconomic resources in their childbearing – a topic that is notably understudied in the current literature. Furthermore, the thesis contributed to existing knowledge about same-sex divorce patterns by providing novel insights into how the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together with the current spouse are associated with divorce risk, and how these factors contribute to differences in divorce risk between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples.

9.1 Nordic childbearing patterns

The analyses of childbearing patterns demonstrated a strong increase in female couples' likelihood of having a child within their legal union in the Nordic countries over time. The strong increases indicate that female couples' childbearing behavior has developed in an opposite direction to general childbearing patterns, as the Nordic countries have experienced a steep decline in fertility rates since the 2010s (Hellstrand et al. 2021). The increases have led to a convergence in female couples and different-sex couples' likelihood of having children after the formation of a legal union in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. The findings thereby extend the results of previous studies (e.g., Andersson & Noack 2010; Kolk & Andersson 2020) by revealing where the earlier observed increases have led over time. The increase in the likelihood of childbearing among female couples in Finland occurred later and was more modest than in the other countries studied, which is likely explained by Finland's later legislative changes and more restricted access to publicly funded MAR. All in all, the findings suggest that legal and social changes have substantially reduced female couples' barriers to parenthood in the Nordic countries. This development can be situated within broader societal changes: family formation has become less constrained by traditional norms over time, individual autonomy has

grown, and there is greater tolerance and recognition of family diversity (Lesthaeghe 2014; Van de Kaa 2002).

The increases in female couples' likelihood of childbearing stagnated among female couples who entered legal unions from the end of the 2000s in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Childbearing among female couples may have reached a saturation point, reflecting couples' improved opportunities to realize their parental intentions. However, the stagnation might also reflect increasing rates of childbearing outside legal unions as new opportunities to share legal parenthood of a child within the context of nonmarital cohabitation may have decreased the incentive for forming a legal union for parenthood-related reasons. In Finland, the law allowing the sharing of legal parenthood outside legal unions among female couples was not enforced until 2019, which could explain the observed continued increase in childbearing rates in these couples throughout the study period.

The childbearing trends of female couples have been relatively simultaneous across the Nordic countries. This could suggest that the national legal context may be less important for the behavior of female couples than wider societal change, i.e., a more supportive social environment for same-sex parenthood in the Nordic region. Legal changes in the Nordic region as a whole may also have affected female couples' behavior, given that many female couples travelled to other Nordic countries when MAR was not yet available in their home country (Dahl & Andreassen 2023; Digoix 2020). However, clear increases in the likelihood of childbearing were observed following the introduction of legislation allowing second-parent adoption in all countries, which highlights the importance of the legislative change that made same-sex parenthood legally possible.

9.2 Socioeconomic differences in childbearing in the Nordic context

9.2.1 Educational level

A higher level of education was associated with a higher likelihood of having a child among female couples in all the Nordic countries studied. The finding aligns with a previous study for Sweden (Boye & Evertsson 2021) and is novel for the other Nordic countries. The result demonstrates how the observed increases in female couples' likelihood of childbearing were not universally distributed across socioeconomic groups and hide important intersectional differences in access to parenthood. The finding emphasizes the importance of accounting for diversity among female couples, who face different opportunities and barriers to forming a family that are partly shaped by their other characteristics, such as socioeconomic status.

Several possible factors might explain the observed educational differences in the likelihood of childbearing. First, higher levels of education may help couples navigate changing medical and legal systems related to same-sex childbearing (Bell 2016; Mamo 2007; Mezey 2013; Moore 2011). The result might thus reflect previously observed educational differences in the use of MAR among women in general (Brautsch et al. 2023; Goisis et al. 2020; Goisis et al. 2024). Although all Nordic countries have, one by one, provided female couples access to MAR as part of tax-funded public healthcare, there is great variation in the practical availability of services within and between countries (Evertsson et al. 2020; Dahl & Andreassen 2023; Rozental & Malmquist 2015). Access to the treatments is regulated in the public sector, but couples with greater socioeconomic resources can circumvent such regulation by changing over to private clinics (Klemetti et al. 2007). Highly educated couples may be more accustomed to using the private sector than low-educated couples (Klemetti et al. 2007; Goisis et al. 2024), who may settle for what is provided by the public sector, possibly limiting the number and type of treatments they can access (Smith et al. 2011). Second, highly educated couples might be better positioned to pursue their parental desires in a heteronormative environment (Goldberg 2009; Mezey 2008), reflecting the ways in which higher education can facilitate the adoption of novel, norm-challenging behaviors (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn 1988). Third, low education is associated with union instability (Kolk & Andersson 2020; Wiik et al. 2014), which is again linked to a lower likelihood of trying to have a child (Jalovaara & Fasang 2017; Kravdal & Rindfuss 2008). Its effect on childbearing might be strong among female couples who must discuss and agree on several things related to childbearing (Mamo 2007), and who generally have a greater divorce risk than different-sex couples (e.g., Einiö & Ponkilainen 2025; Kolk & Andersson 2020; Zahl-Olsen & Thuen 2022).

Educational differences in the likelihood of childbearing widened over the study period as the likelihood of childbearing stagnated or started to decline among low-educated couples, particularly in Finland and Sweden. This novel finding demonstrates that although the legal recognition of same-sex parenthood has significantly improved couples' opportunities to have children, these new opportunities may not be equally accessible to all couples. It is, however, likely that educational differentiation in childbearing among female couples partly reflects a wider development in the Nordic countries, where childlessness has become more common among low-educated women in more recent cohorts (Jalovaara et al. 2019). Previous research has explained this development, among other things, as resulting from an increased emphasis on having sufficient means to sustain a family and uncertainty related to more fragile labor-market positions among low-educated individuals (Comolli et al. 2020; Hellstrand et al. 2024; Jalovaara et al. 2019).

9.2.2 Income level

The likelihood of having a child among female couples differed less by income level than by educational level. There was no income gradient in the likelihood of having a child among female couples in Denmark, whereas there was some evidence of income differences in the other Nordic countries. The differences were most pronounced among the most recent union cohorts in Finland and Sweden. Boye and Evertsson (2021) have previously found an association between higher income and a higher likelihood of having a child among female couples in Sweden, but this thesis was the first to analyze the association in other countries. The finding suggests that the provision of MAR as part of publicly funded healthcare at minimal cost may have mitigated the role of income in access to parenthood. However, it is likely that there is substantial socioeconomic selection into legal unions among female couples, and that income differences in childbearing would be more pronounced if the analyses were not limited to couples in legal unions, as previously shown for different-sex couples (Kolk 2023).

9.2.3 Socioeconomic differences in childbearing in Finland

Educational differences in the likelihood of childbearing among female couples in Finland were large when viewed in the Nordic context, and the differences widened over the study period. Finland also showed a clear income gradient in the likelihood of childbearing. Educational differences were, however, only marginally explained by couples' income levels, which seems to indicate that education has an independent role in female couples' childbearing behavior and that its influence mainly operates through mechanisms other than financial resources.

While the above-discussed possible explanations for socioeconomic differences in childbearing among female couples in the Nordic countries apply to Finland, the Finnish context also slightly differs from that of the other Nordic countries. Substantial socioeconomic differences observed for Finland likely reflect female couples' lack of access to MAR within the tax-funded public healthcare system during a period when such services were available in the other Nordic countries studied. Female couples had access to MAR only in private clinics until the end of 2019, i.e., almost the whole study period. This may partly explain the income differences observed for Finland, as the costs associated with MAR in private clinics are high, and unlike different-sex couples, female couples have not been eligible for reimbursement of these costs by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Rainbow Families Finland 2024).

The increased educational differentiation in Finland may partly mirror broader behavioral patterns in family formation observed among female couples in other contexts where MAR has been available to female couples only at their own cost. It has been argued that couples with greater socioeconomic resources have

moved from low-cost and low-technology solutions, such as home insemination with a known donor, to purchasing more effective clinic-provided services to conceive (Mamo 2007). Childbearing without known donors or involved fathers has been enabled by the provision of MAR at clinics (Donovan & Wilson 2008; Gabb 2018). It has been argued that this has become the preferred option for achieving pregnancy among female couples who increasingly opt for the nuclear family form (Garwood 2016; Mamo 2007; Moring 2013). The loosening of traditional family norms has led to more flexible types of life-course organization and the increased incidence of living arrangements beyond the nuclear family among different-sex couples (Lesthaeghe 2010; Lesthaeghe 2014; Mayer 2005), whereas female couples' family ideals appear to be moving toward the nuclear family, as their opportunities to form such families have increased (Garwood 2016; Mamo 2007; Moring 2013). However, intersectional social locations, such as socioeconomic position, affect which women can access services needed to pursue their desired family form (Rogalin & Brooks 2018).

9.3 Differences in divorce risk between couple types

Female couples had a higher yearly divorce risk compared to male couples and different-sex couples in Finland, independently of the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth, as well as the length of premarital cohabitation, the existence of prior children, and childbearing within the union. The result is in keeping with previous studies showing that female couples' higher divorce risk persists after controlling for several characteristics (e.g., Andersson et al. 2006; Wiik et al. 2014), but it is novel for demonstrating how the interplay of premarital cohabitation and childbearing contribute to their higher divorce risk. Differences in premarital cohabitation and childbearing explained about one-fifth of female couples' higher divorce risk compared to different-sex couples, whereas differences in childbearing explained about one-third of their higher divorce risk compared to male couples.

Other factors not directly observable in the data may explain the rest of the differences between couple types. One of the possible factors may be the degree of commitment to the partnership, as different processes of selection into legal unions might partly explain their divorce risk (Manning & Joyner 2019). The transitions individuals make determine how families are formed and function, and thus, the processes of forming a union may also shape union stability. Unlike different-sex couples and male couples, female couples have specific parenthood-related reasons for entering legal unions, which has been argued to result in a wider selection of more and less committed female couples into legal unions (Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014). Male couples may have less incentive to enter legal unions due to their limited opportunities to have children (Aldén et al. 2015), and therefore, it may be that only the most committed male couples do so (Lau 2012). Furthermore, given

the declining marriage rates among different-sex couples, those couples who still marry may be an increasingly selected group of more committed couples (Smock & Schwartz 2020).

Other possible explanations that are not specific to female couples but can also explain the observed higher divorce risk among male couples compared to different-sex couples include, among other things, a heteronormative environment and discrimination, which may negatively affect same-sex couples' perceived relationship quality and union stability (Otis et al. 2006). Also, societal attitudes toward divorce have become more accepting in general (Lesthaeghe 2020; Wagner 2020), and individuals in same-sex unions might have even more liberal attitudes toward divorce and feel less normative pressure to stay together (Andersson et al. 2006; Lau 2012). Having had to defy many heteronormative expectations in their lives, it might be easier for them to distance themselves from the ideal of long-term monogamous relationships (Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020).

9.4 Premarital cohabitation, childbearing, and divorce risk

Short length and absence of premarital cohabitation emerged as a clear predictor of divorce for same-sex couples, whereas there was no corresponding clear gradient for different-sex couples. This finding is novel for same-sex couples, and it highlights the importance of considering relationship trajectories in studying divorce risk. The observed stronger gradient for same-sex couples might be related to the changing legal context of same-sex unions and their incentive to enter legal unions. Same-sex couples navigate changing legal and social landscapes during their lives. The impact of societal changes on an individual's life depends on the timing of the change in the individual's life course (Elder 1994; Mayer 2004). Long-term cohabiting same-sex couples might have been waiting for the right to legalize their relationship, whereas short-term cohabiting couples might have had an incentive specific to same-sex couples, such as easing the transition to parenthood, to enter a legal union after a short period of cohabitation (Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014).

Having a prior child with a person other than the current partner predicted divorce for all couple types. The association has been previously found among same-sex couples in Denmark and Norway (Andersson & Noack 2010; Wiik et al. 2014), and, as in Norway (Wiik et al. 2014), the association was less pronounced among same-sex couples than among different-sex couples in Finland. The finding might reflect same-sex couples' flexibility with regard to family arrangements, given that they may have less pressure to conform to heteronormative nuclear family norms (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011). Also, the context of prior childbearing is often different for same-sex couples than for different-sex couples. Most prior

children of individuals in same-sex couples have been born within prior different-sex relationships (Kolk & Andersson 2020), only after which the individual has come out as gay or lesbian (Lynch & Murray 2000). Thus, childbearing within prior unions may be perceived as a common and acceptable life stage among same-sex couples.

Having a child together with the current partner was associated with a decreased divorce risk for female couples and different-sex couples. This finding aligns with the results for Norway (Wiik et al. 2014). However, unlike in Norway, the association was weaker among female couples than different-sex couples in Finland. It is possible that female couples who have a child together often have a higher socioeconomic status (Van der Vleuten et al. 2024; Evertsson et al. 2025), and thus, greater financial capacity to leave an unsatisfactory union. Female couples might also feel less normative pressure to stay together for the sake of the children. Women in same-sex couples often stay friends with their ex-partners (Juvonen 2020; Traies 2015) and are more likely than different-sex couples to share parenting responsibilities equally after divorce (Gartrell et al. 2011). Furthermore, children may create tensions between parental and other social roles (Twenge et al. 2003), and female couples may experience being a parent in a heteronormative society as an additional burden (Mezey 2008).

9.5 Strengths and limitations

The key strength of this thesis is the high-quality longitudinal register data that include all same-sex couples who have entered legal unions in Finland from the first year of legalization of registered partnerships until recent years. The data included reliable register-based information on, among other things, education and income, and, as the first study so far, the length of premarital cohabitation among same-sex couples. Importantly, the data allowed studying within-group differences among same-sex couples, which is not very common, as it requires a sufficient number of couples representing different subgroups (Festy 2007; Reczek 2020). Furthermore, the longitudinal data made it possible to follow individuals in same-sex couples over a long period of time, also accounting for life events preceding the formation of their legal union. In addition to the Finnish data, the thesis used corresponding high-quality register data from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. This kind of comparative, cross-country harmonized data is unique in research on same-sex couples.

Despite the advantages of the register data, there are also disadvantages. The data do not contain any direct information on individuals' subjective perceptions, such as their sexual orientation, gender identity, parental desires, or relationship satisfaction. Therefore, it is not possible to determine how changing legal and social environments shape same-sex couples' ideas and decisions regarding family

formation. Also, the data only cover same-sex couples who have registered their partnership or are married, which excludes a substantial segment of couples who live in nonmarital cohabiting unions or dating relationships. I am not aware of reliable estimations on what proportion of all same-sex couples register their partnership or marry in Finland or the other Nordic countries. In any case, the study covers a selected group of same-sex couples and different-sex couples who have decided to formalize their relationship. The data may represent more highly committed couples, which may be reflected in the results regarding both childbearing and divorce. For instance, the observed risk of union dissolution would likely be higher across all couple types if cohabiting couples were included.

Furthermore, there is likely large socioeconomic selection into legal unions among same-sex couples, although its extent and variation over time are difficult to estimate without knowing the characteristics of the population of unmarried same-sex couples. A recent study from the United States (Manning et al. 2022) found that married same-sex couples had higher levels of education and income than their cohabiting peers, but the differences were less prominent than those among different-sex couples. The couples analyzed in this thesis may thus have a relatively higher socioeconomic status, and the findings cannot be generalized to all same-sex couples. For instance, childbearing analyses not conditional on legal union would probably show larger differences by socioeconomic position, as among different-sex couples (e.g., Cantalini et al. 2024; Kolk 2023; Smock & Schwartz 2020).

Second, given the link between parenthood and marriage, both female couples and different-sex couples who have entered legal unions may be selected in terms of their parental intentions, or in the case of different-sex couples, in terms of their premarital childbearing. Given that legal changes have eased access to parenthood for nonmarital female couples during the study period, female couples might increasingly have children outside of legal unions. Thus, the data include an increasingly selected group of couples who have decided to enter a legal union, which affects the composition of couples in the data and the results. This may be equally true for the datasets of different-sex couples, among whom marriage rates have been declining (Smock & Schwartz 2020). This also implies that the childbearing patterns of female couples and different-sex couples after the formation of a legal union are not fully comparable, as it has been common to have a first child during cohabitation and marry later among different-sex couples (Jónsson 2020; Rotkirch & Miettinen 2017; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008), which trend has likely only become more common among female couples in the most recent union cohorts.

Hopefully, it might be possible to study same-sex cohabiting couples in future studies if they could be reliably identified in the Nordic register data. Similarly, more data sources that include information on sexual orientation are needed to better understand selection into legal unions.

9.6 Conclusions

To shed light on recent childbearing patterns among female couples in the Nordic context, this thesis demonstrated that female couples' likelihood of having a child has strongly increased in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway over time. This study was the first to show that the previously significant differences in marital childbearing patterns between female couples and different-sex couples have largely disappeared, highlighting how legal and social changes have supported same-sex parenthood in the Nordic countries. This can be seen as a success story for legislative and broader cultural and normative societal changes that have reduced inequality between the majority population and sexual minority groups.

The findings, however, revealed large socioeconomic differences in female couples' likelihood of childbearing, thus putting into question whether all couples have had equal access to the new opportunities. The results suggest that prevailing concerns about the increasingly marginalized position of low-educated women in terms of the labor market and family formation (Adserà 2017; Jalovaara et al. 2019) might also apply to women in same-sex partnerships. More research is needed on the reasons for the lower likelihood of childbearing among couples with a low socioeconomic position to gain insights into how their parental desires, if any, could be better supported. Political decision-making should aim to dismantle the obstacles that different subgroups of same-sex couples, including male couples, face in forming a family. This could be done through legislation, changes to the allocation of resources, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination.

Recent legal changes have reduced the importance of a legal union in the context of childbearing among female couples, but the family life of nonmarital same-sex couples is a notably understudied topic. More reliable data and research are needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the current patterns of union formation and childbearing among both female couples and male couples.

This study contributed to the understanding of divorce risk among same-sex couples by demonstrating how the length of premarital cohabitation, the existence of prior children, and having a child together predict divorce differently among female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples. The findings highlight the relevance of both past relationship experiences and the characteristics of the current union in understanding union instability, and the need to investigate how individual life trajectories shape the resilience and vulnerabilities of each type of union. The results underline the importance of studying within-group differences among same-sex couples, instead of only comparing them to different-sex couples as a group, to identify the most divorce-prone groups among same-sex couples. Further research is needed to understand the reasons behind female couples' elevated divorce risk, as well as to identify couples who might be at increased risk of divorce and who could benefit from external support during their partnership and in dealing with the possible negative consequences of divorce.

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