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Ponkilainen, Maria

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Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples' Divorce Risks: The Role of Cohabitation and Childbearing

Maria Ponkilainen[1,2] | Elina Einiö[1,3] | Mine Kühn[2,3,4] | Mikko Myrskylä[1,2,3]

[1]Helsinki Institute for Demography and Population Health, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland | [2]Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Rostock, Germany | [3]Max Planck – University of Helsinki Center for Social Inequalities in Population Health, Rostock, Germany | [4]Department of Sociology, Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands

Correspondence: Maria Ponkilainen (maria.ponkilainen@helsinki.fi)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: We investigate whether differences in the length of premarital cohabitation, children from previous unions, and childbearing in the union explain the elevated divorce risk observed in female couples when compared to their male and different-sex counterparts.

Background: The underlying mechanisms and pathways leading to the high divorce risk among same-sex couples, particularly female couples, remain poorly understood. The different legislative and normative contexts of same-sex unions may impact the roles that different factors play in their divorce risk.

Method: Using register data on same-sex and different-sex couples who entered legal unions in Finland in 2003–2020, we explore how premarital cohabitation, prior children, and childbearing together are associated with the risk of divorce.

Results: Female couples have 2.2 times the divorce risk than different-sex couples and 1.6 times than male couples when adjusted for age, education, and nationality. Limited premarital cohabitation predicts divorce in same-sex couples but not in different-sex couples. Prior children are associated with an increased divorce risk, and childbearing together is associated with a decreased divorce risk, but less so among same-sex couples than different-sex couples. After adjusting for these factors, female couples still have 2.1 times the divorce risk than different-sex couples and 1.2 times than male couples.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the importance of both past relationship experiences and current union characteristics in understanding instability in same-sex and different-sex unions, as well as the need to investigate how individual life trajectories shape the resilience and vulnerabilities of each union type.

1 | Introduction

The recent decades have witnessed important legal developments in the family rights of same-sex couples, along with growing interest in their family formation and disruption (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013; Reczek 2020; Waaldijk 2020). The expanding legalization of same-sex marriage in the 21st century has intensified the need to understand the dynamics of same-sex divorce, but so far, little is known. This is likely due to scarce data on married same-sex couples in many countries because a sufficient number of couples need to be followed over several years to get an accurate picture of their divorce risk (Manning and Joyner 2019; Zahl-Olsen and Thuen 2022).

Prior studies have shown that female couples and male couples have a higher divorce risk than different-sex couples, with the highest divorce risk among female couples across countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the United States, and Canada (Allen and Price 2020; Andersson et al. 2006; Andersson and Noack 2010; Kolk and Andersson 2020; Noack et al. 2005; Wiik et al. 2014; Zahl-Olsen and Thuen 2022). The differences in the divorce risk among female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples exist after controlling for a wide range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, such as age and education (Andersson et al. 2006; Noack et al. 2005; Wiik et al. 2014).

The mechanisms and pathways leading to divorce have been extensively studied for different-sex couples (e.g., Amato 2010; Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010), but it remains unclear if these findings apply to same-sex couples (Karney and Bradbury 2020). In particular, the reasons for the elevated risk of divorce in female couples have not yet been fully uncovered. Some prior studies have speculated, but not tested, that short periods of premarital cohabitation could be linked to the higher divorce risk among female couples (Aldén et al. 2015; Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014). Longer premarital cohabitation is expected to decrease the divorce risk as it provides partners with time to gain information about each other and their union prospects (Brüderl and Kalter 2001). In addition, women in same-sex unions are more likely than men to have children from prior relationships (Andersson et al. 2006; Wiik et al. 2014), which is associated with less stable marriages (e.g., Teachman 2008; Wiik et al. 2014). At the same time, legal access to assisted reproductive technology has enhanced female couples' access to parenthood, especially in the Nordic countries. As a result, an increasing number of female couples are now having children together (Kolk and Andersson 2020), which could be expected to decrease the divorce risk among them, as shared parenthood often strengthens relational bonds (Wiik et al. 2014).

Drawing on theoretical insights from the life course perspective, this study aims to fill the gap in understanding the reasons for the elevated divorce risk for female couples and contribute to the literature on the mechanisms and pathways leading to divorce in multiple ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to use register-based data to examine same-sex couples' premarital cohabitation and its role in the risk of divorce. By leveraging longitudinal data, we are able to investigate the duration of cohabitation, which is a core concept of the life course perspective. Second, we do not only explore characteristics, such as childbearing, within legal unions but also consider the pathways into legal unions by using longitudinal information on children born in previous relationships. This allows us to capture how life events before legal unions, such as prior children, shape union stability over time. Exploring these life course pathways provides critical insights into how relationship dynamics are influenced by union characteristics and earlier life stages. Third, by uncovering the variation in the mechanisms and pathways leading to divorce among and between female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples, this study adds depth to the understanding of relationship trajectories and the heterogeneity within these demographic groups.

Our data on same-sex couples' premarital cohabitation and children, deriving from the total population registers of Finland, are exceptional even within the Nordic context. Our analytical dataset consists of 3412 female couples and 1892 male couples who entered legal same-sex unions and 457,867 different-sex couples who entered marriages in Finland between 2003 and 2020. Finland provides an interesting context for this study because of its progressive legal recognition of same-sex family rights. This, combined with liberal attitudes toward divorce and the high prevalence of non-marital cohabitation, makes it a unique setting to explore these dynamics (Castrén et al. 2019; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). The particularly interesting role of having children together in the risk of divorce in Finland is underscored by the fact that assisted reproductive technologies were made legal for women in same-sex couples in 2007, but these technologies were available for them only at private clinics until the end of 2019 (Evertsson et al. 2020). Therefore, compared to other Nordic countries, female couples in Finland have been required to invest more in childbearing, which may have translated into a stronger selection of couples into parenthood.

2 | Background

2.1 | Legal Union Formation in the Life Course of Same-Sex Couples

Our orienting framework is the life course perspective that emphasizes the importance of viewing individual lives as a series of interconnected processes and transitions (Elder Jr. 1994). The transitions that individuals make are important determinants of how families form and function. Thus, considering the process of union formation is important when investigating the risk of divorce. Individuals make choices and take actions within the opportunities and constraints of institutional and social circumstances (Elder Jr. et al. 2003; Mayer 2004), and these circumstances are somewhat different for female couples, male couples, and different-sex couples. As a result, different couples might have different incentives to legalize unions that may reflect their commitment to the union and proneness to divorce (Aldén et al. 2015; Andersson et al. 2006; Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014).

Female couples form the majority of same-sex couples who have entered legal unions, which has been explained by the introduction of policies attaching parental rights, such as second-parent adoption, to legally recognized unions (Bernstein et al. 2016; Kolk and Andersson 2020). Because male couples' opportunities to have children are limited regardless of the legal status of

their partnership (Aldén et al. 2015), they might perceive fewer rewards from the legalization of their relationships, which, in turn, may result in the situation where only the most committed male couples do so (Lau 2012). These male couples may possess characteristics that promote union stability (Joyner et al. 2017), which might be even more common in the context of Finland where cohabitation is a common alternative to marriage.

Therefore, different selection processes into legal unions among female couples and male couples might explain part of their divorce risks (Manning and Joyner 2019). Prior studies have suggested that there could be a broader selection of both more and less committed female couples into legal unions when compared to only the most committed male couples (Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014). This suggestion can be seen as supported by male couples' higher dissolution rates of dating relationships (Joyner et al. 2017), lower rates of entering co-residential unions (Carpenter and Gates 2008; Rosenfeld 2014) and legal unions (Carpenter 2020; Rosenfeld 2014), longer periods of premarital cohabitation (Carpenter and Gates 2008), and older ages when entering legal unions (e.g., Wiik et al. 2014) compared to female couples. Also, non-residential partnerships appear as a common union type throughout the lives of gay men, whereas age increases the likelihood of being in a co-residential partnership among lesbian and heterosexual individuals (Carpenter and Gates 2008; Strohm et al. 2009).

2.2 | Marriage in the 21st Century Among Same-Sex Couples

Marriage is a relatively new form of partnership for same-sex couples in the countries where it has been legalized, but the status of marriage among different-sex couples has changed significantly since the 1960s (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Marriage rates have declined, couples are marrying at later ages, an increasing number of people never marry, and more marriages end in divorce (Rahnu and Jalovaara 2023; Smock and Schwartz 2020; Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). These demographic trends have also been evident in Finland, where the prevalence of marriage has steadily decreased, while the prevalence of non-marital cohabitation has increased, especially among younger adults (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) 2023). The divorce rates rose sharply in 1988 when the law reform easing the divorce process entered into force (Castrén et al. 2019), but the prevalence of divorce has remained fairly stable since then (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) 2022a).

With increasing flexibility in life course organization and lifestyles, marriage has become more of a choice among multiple socially accepted forms of intimate relationships (Cherlin 2020). Those different-sex couples who still marry are an increasingly selected group of more highly committed couples (Smock and Schwartz 2020). Still, marriage represents stability, lifelong commitment, and joint investments for many (Cherlin 2020; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). In addition to its symbolic value, marriage comprises emotional, legal, and material benefits (Bernstein et al. 2016). Also, one of the traditional functions of marriage has been to ensure legal and social protection for children (Carpenter 2020). Since legal parental relationships have been recognized outside of marriage, this function of marriage has diminished for different-sex couples in many countries (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Among same-sex couples, a legal union has been or still is, depending on the country, an obligatory or at least a facilitating step to access legal parental rights for both parents (Carpenter 2020; Kolk and Andersson 2020). Taken together, even if the importance of marriage has declined, it remains a strong social institution and subject to pragmatic decision-making (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008).

Once married, multiple factors can affect the perceived benefits and costs of staying in the marriage versus divorcing (Amato and Previti 2003). Some of the perceived benefits and costs might be different for same-sex couples than for different-sex couples due to the different legislative and normative contexts of these unions. Same-sex couples navigate changing legal and social landscapes during their lives, including shifts in their legal family rights and societal acceptance. The impact of an institutional and societal change on an individual's life depends on the timing of the change in the individual's life course (Elder Jr. 1994; Mayer 2004). For instance, same-sex couples in earlier birth cohorts may have lived long periods in non-marital 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 had been the only socially accepted context of childbearing at that time. These earlier experiences can profoundly shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors, affect their opportunities, and ultimately impact the stability of their future unions.

2.3 | Premarital Cohabitation and Divorce Risk

According to the life course perspective, a long duration between family transitions enhances behavioral stability through acquired interests and obligations (Elder Jr. et al. 2003). The length of time couples spend in cohabitation before getting married may provide them with more time to establish shared routines, goals, and interdependencies that enhance union stability and complicate exiting the relationship (Rosenfeld 2014). Moreover, information on the spouse obtained before marriage and union-specific capital, such as investments in common assets, skills, and children, may decrease the risk of divorce (Becker et al. 1977; Brüderl and Kalter 2001). In search-theoretic models, there is initial uncertainty about the quality of a potential relationship, and the only way to find out more about each other is to date or cohabit (Cornelius 2003). The accumulation of information often begins during dating and intensifies during premarital cohabitation (Brüderl and Kalter 2001), which provides partners with time to test their compatibility (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). Also, investments in union-specific capital often begin during premarital cohabitation and accumulate with the union duration (Becker et al. 1977; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). These previous studies do not give reason to believe that the accumulation of information and union-specific capital during premarital cohabitation would benefit individuals in same-sex and different-sex couples differently.

The association between premarital cohabitation and the divorce risk is widely studied among different-sex couples, but we are not aware of any corresponding studies of same-sex couples. The only previous study we know about that includes information

on premarital cohabitation among same-sex couples, conducted by Carpenter and Gates (2008), found that female couples entered legal unions after shorter cohabitation periods than male couples in California, but its role in their divorce risk was not assessed. In different-sex unions, having lived together before getting married was long negatively associated with subsequent union stability, but a growing body of evidence suggests that selection is primarily responsible for the negative association (Kulu and Boyle 2010; Sassler and Lichter 2020). Where cohabitation is common, couples married without prior cohabitation have become more selected, and they may possess characteristics, such as religious or conservative family values, that explain their lower divorce risk (Kulu and Boyle 2010; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006; Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010; Poortman and Mills 2012).

The role of the length of premarital cohabitation in the risk of divorce is far from being conclusive. Some studies have shown that the divorce risk decreases with the length of premarital cohabitation (Brüderl and Kalter 2001), whereas other studies have found this kind of association only when cohabitation does not exceed two or three years (e.g., Jalovaara 2013). Based on these theoretical (Becker et al. 1977; Elder Jr. et al. 2003) and empirical considerations (e.g., Brüderl and Kalter 2001; Kulu and Boyle 2010), we expect to find that short length and absence of premarital cohabitation are associated with an increased divorce risk among same-sex couples (Hypothesis 1a). Among different-sex couples, we expect this association only for short-length—not for the absence of—premarital cohabitation, as those who marry directly are a selected group (Hypothesis 1b).

H1a. *Short length and absence of premarital cohabitation are associated with an increased divorce risk among same-sex couples.*

H1b. *Short length of premarital cohabitation is associated with an increased divorce risk among different-sex couples.*

2.4 | Children Born in Previous Relationships and Divorce Risk

Unions formed between partners of whom one or both already have children with someone else often involve individuals with complex life histories and multiple family transitions (Teachman 2008). In terms of union stability, these unions might include unique challenges, such as role ambiguity, continued contact with ex-spouses, and an increased risk of conflicts (Bean et al. 2021; Liu 2002). Moreover, children from previous relationships are not seen as union-specific capital in subsequent unions, as they do not represent a similar barrier to divorce as children had together (Becker et al. 1977).

Even though the challenges related to having prior children would be similar for same-sex and different-sex couples, same-sex couples often experience less pressure to follow heteronormative nuclear family norms and are less sensitive to family complexity (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011); thus, prior children could have a lower effect on their divorce risk. Moreover, the majority of prior children of individuals in same-sex couples were born during their different-sex relationships (Kolk and Andersson 2020)—before the individual may have openly identified as gay or lesbian, for instance (Lynch and Murray 2000). Given that prior childbearing with a partner of a different sex may reflect attempts to navigate normative family expectations or uncertainty about one's sexual identity (Lynch and Murray 2000; Reczek 2020), it may be more commonly accepted as a stage of the life course of same-sex couples rather than different-sex couples.

Studies have found that having a prior child with someone other than the current spouse is associated with an increased divorce risk for different-sex couples (Liu 2002; Teachman 2008), but the findings for same-sex couples are mixed (Andersson et al. 2006; Andersson and Noack 2010; Wiik et al. 2014). Wiik et al. (2014) showed that the gap in the divorce risk between couples with and without a prior child was similar for male and female couples in Norway, and the gap was smaller among them than among different-sex couples. Andersson and Noack (2010) found that the divorce-stimulating effect of having a prior child was stronger for male couples than for female couples and different-sex couples in Denmark. Andersson et al. (2006) found the association only among male couples and different-sex couples in Norway and Sweden, as female couples with a prior child had a lower divorce risk than childless couples, but the results for same-sex couples were not statistically significant. The reasons for these inconsistent findings are unclear. One possible reason is that these studies included same-sex couples who entered registered partnerships when the institution was still new, and the small sample sizes within subgroups of same-sex couples may partly explain the non-significant findings.

In sum, the role of having a prior child in the divorce risk among same-sex couples is not clear based on the previous research. The findings of Wiik et al. (2014), however, are the most recent, cover the most years, and align with the theoretical perspectives presented above. Therefore, based on these theoretical (Becker et al. 1977; Teachman 2008; Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011) and empirical considerations (Liu 2002; Teachman 2008; Wiik et al. 2014), we expect to find that having a prior child with someone other than the current spouse predicts divorce but less strongly among same-sex couples than different-sex couples (Hypothesis 2).

H2. *Having a prior child with someone else than the current spouse predicts divorce but less strongly among same-sex couples than different-sex couples.*

2.5 | Children Born Within the Current Union and Divorce Risk

Having a child together generally implies a strong and long-term commitment to the relationship (Poortman 2007). Common children are seen as union-specific capital (Becker et al. 1977) in the form of shared interest (Steele et al. 2005) and moral obligation toward the child (Marteau 2019). Couples with children have more incentives to remain together because mothers often face a steeper financial decline upon divorce than women without children, and a parent who

will not live with the child after divorce may have less frequent contact with the child (Kalmijn 1999). Nevertheless, the union-stabilizing effect of children may be partly caused by the selection of more stable couples into parenthood (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). If a couple is uncertain about the future of their union, they might not invest in having children (Becker et al. 1977). As same-sex couples are less likely to have children than different-sex couples (e.g., Kolk and Andersson 2020), and achieving parenthood requires a high level of planning, negotiation, and resources, the selection effect might be even stronger among them (Manning and Joyner 2019; Mamo 2007).

Wiik et al. (2014) have previously shown that female couples who shared the legal parenthood of a child had a 49% lower divorce risk than childless female couples in Norway, comparable with the reduction in the divorce risk found in different-sex couples. Male couples who shared the legal parenthood of a child ($N=49$) had a 76% higher divorce risk than their childless counterparts, but they were younger and more often involved partners who did not hold Norwegian citizenship at the time of partnership formation than childless couples (Wiik et al. 2014). Different-sex couples who have at least one child together have been found to be less divorce-prone than childless couples (e.g., Hart et al. 2017; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006).

Based on these theoretical (Becker et al. 1977; Kalmijn 1999; Manning and Joyner 2019) and empirical considerations (Hart et al. 2017; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006; Wiik et al. 2014), we expect to find that having a child together with the current spouse is associated with a lower divorce risk for both female couples and different-sex couples, with the association being more pronounced among female couples due to their stronger selection into parenthood (Hypothesis 3). This hypothesis does not include male couples because the number of male couples who have a child together is too low to be included in the analysis.

H3. *Having a child together with the current spouse is associated with a lower divorce risk for both female couples and different-sex couples, with the association being more pronounced among female couples.*

Drawing from the life course perspective, the interplay between previous relationship experiences and current union characteristics is crucial for understanding union stability. Combining all the aspects in the previous sections, we expect to find that female couples' shorter length of premarital cohabitation and higher likelihood of having prior children explain a sizable part of their higher divorce risk compared to male couples, whereas female couples' shorter length of premarital cohabitation and lower likelihood of having children together explain a sizable part of their higher divorce risk compared to different-sex couples (Hypothesis 4).

H4. *Female couples' shorter length of premarital cohabitation and higher likelihood of having prior children explain a sizable part of their higher divorce risk compared to male couples, whereas female couples' shorter length of premarital cohabitation and lower likelihood of having children together explain a sizable part of their higher divorce risk compared to different-sex couples.*

2.6 | Same-Sex Couples' Family Rights in Finland

Finland introduced same-sex registered partnerships into its legislation on March 1, 2002, and same-sex marriage on March 1, 2017. The legal rights and duties of the union types are otherwise similar, but registered partnerships lack the rights to have a marriage ceremony, have a shared surname, and jointly adopt a child (Act on Registered Partnerships 2001). The option to register a partnership was ceased when same-sex marriages became legal, and couples in registered partnerships could either continue in a registered partnership or convert it to a marriage (Waaldijk 2020).

Same-sex couples' opportunities to have children have improved in Finland in recent decades. Female couples have had access to medically assisted reproduction in some private clinics since 1997 and in all private clinics since their right to such treatment was legally confirmed in 2007 (Moring 2013). They have been allowed to access more affordable public clinics since the end of 2019 (Evertsson et al. 2020). Male couples' legally recognized opportunities to have children are restricted to joint adoption, which became possible for same-sex couples in 2017 (Evertsson et al. 2020), but couples can also become parents through informal co-parenting agreements with women, for example (Moring 2013).

3 | Method

3.1 | Data

Our analyses are based on Finnish administrative register data provided by Statistics Finland. Individuals are granted anonymized personal identification numbers that are used to link their civil status records with comprehensive information on their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, children, and residence by dwelling units.

Our data include all same-sex couples who registered their partnerships between March 1, 2002, and February 28, 2017, or got married between March 1, 2017, and December 31, 2021, in Finland. A total of 6112 couples, of whom both partners were residents of Finland at the time of entering the legal union, were identified in the data. Couples were identified based on their civil status and juridical gender, as the Finnish administrative registers do not include information on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Our analyses cover same-sex couples who entered legal same-sex unions between January 1, 2003, and December 31, 2020. We excluded couples who registered their partnerships in 2002 (206 female and 237 male couples) because couples who entered legal unions in the first years of legislation have been found to be a select group of older and more committed couples, as many of them had waited a long time to legalize their relationship (Manning and Joyner 2019; Noack et al. 2005; Zahl-Olsen and Thuen 2022). Couples who got married in

2021 (261 female and 104 male couples) were dropped in order to have a follow-up period of at least 1 year for all couples. Our analytical dataset consists of 5304 same-sex couples: 3412 (64.3%) female couples and 1892 (35.7%) male couples. Among the female couples, 391 unions (11.5%) are second or higher-order same-sex legal unions for one or both partners. The share of second or higher-order unions among male couples is 132 unions (7.0%).

To locate same-sex couples in a broader context of divorce patterns in Finland, we compare their divorce risk to that of different-sex couples. We have data on 539,860 different-sex couples who got married between March 1, 2002, and December 31, 2021. If the same couple has been married more than once, we have information only on the first marriage. As with same-sex couples, our analyses cover different-sex couples who entered legal unions between January 1, 2003, and December 31, 2020. We excluded from our analytical dataset 41,941 couples who had not lived in Finland at the end of the marriage year, 23,396 couples who got married in 2002, 16,007 couples who got married in 2021, and 193 couples who involved an underage partner. In addition, we excluded 429 couples in which either or both partners had been in a same-sex registered partnership or marriage to avoid the same individuals appearing both in same-sex and different-sex datasets. Our analytical dataset includes 457,867 different-sex couples, of whom 32.7% are in higher-order marriages.

3.2 | Variables

The outcome is the event of divorce. In Finland, divorce regulations are similar for same-sex registered partnerships and marriages as well as for different-sex marriages. Submission of an initial divorce application by one or both spouses is followed by a reflection period of 6 months; after that, divorce can be granted on request. Divorce can be granted on request without a reflection period if spouses have lived separately for at least 2 years (Marriage Act 1929).

We construct cohabitation histories for couples using the information on individuals' residences by dwelling units from the last date of each calendar year since 1987. Individuals are registered in the Population Information System to the dwelling units based on notifications of their official permanent address and the date of the move. The length of premarital cohabitation is categorized into six groups based on how many years before a legal union the couple moved in together for the first time: 7+ years, 3–6 years, 1–2 years, moved in together during the year of entering a legal union ("0 years"), no premarital cohabitation, and unknown duration. For couples who moved in together in the same year they entered a legal union, the order of events is unknown—that is, they may have entered the legal union before moving in together or vice versa. The category "no premarital cohabitation" includes couples who have moved in together after the year of legal union formation or not at all during our observation period. Unknown duration refers to couples who did not move to Finland until the year of entering the legal union, and we do not have any record of their possible premarital cohabitation abroad. Premarital cohabitation is a time-invariant variable, measured at the end of the year of the legal union formation.

Among both same-sex couples and different-sex couples, a prior child refers to an individual's biological child who was born before the observed premarital cohabitation and legal union and whose other registered parent at birth is not the individual's current partner. These children might have been born within previous relationships or outside of relationships. The data cover only children whose information is registered in Finland. Having a prior child is a time-invariant variable, measured in the year of moving in together or legal union formation, depending on whichever has occurred first.

Same-sex couples who have a child together include couples in which either partner is a biological parent of a child who was born during the couple's observed premarital cohabitation or legal union. The definition applies irrespective of whether the partner of the biological parent has adopted the child through second-parent adoption. Among different-sex couples, a child had together refers to a child for whom the couple is the biological parents. Having a child together is incorporated in the analysis as a time-varying variable, based on the birth year of the couple's first biological child. Because of the low number of male couples who have a child together, the analysis on the impact of having a child together on divorce risk is only run for female couples and different-sex couples.

We adjust the analyses for a number of other variables commonly associated with the divorce risk (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). Younger age when entering marriage (Andersson and Noack 2010; Clements et al. 2004; Wiik et al. 2014), partner heterogamy in terms of nationality (Milewski and Kulu 2014; Noack et al. 2005), and lower educational levels (Andersson and Noack 2010; Jalovaara and Andersson 2023; Kolk and Andersson 2020) have been shown to predict divorce both in same-sex and different-sex unions. We include continuous variables of index persons' and their partners' ages at the time of the legal union formation, centered for the analysis. We also control for their nationalities at birth, (0) Finnish or (1) foreign. Both of these variables are time-invariant. The control variable for education is included as a time-varying variable, representing the highest educational qualifications completed by index persons and their partners by the end of each year in the legal union. Educational levels are categorized into three groups: (1) primary and lower-secondary education, (2) upper-secondary education, and (3) tertiary education.

3.3 | Analyses

We use discrete-time event-history analysis to assess the risk of divorce. Our data include one record for every year of the risk of divorce from the year of entering a legal union until the divorce or censoring due to death, emigration of either partner, or reaching the end of the follow-up period of 10 years or the end of 2021, whichever occurs first. If a couple converted their registered partnership to a marriage during the study period (1428 female couples and 946 male couples), we ignore the change and treat these as continuing unions in the analysis. Parameter estimates are clustered at the individual level to account for correlation in error terms among index persons contributing more than one union. We present the estimates derived from the discrete-time logistic model as predicted probabilities.

Our main analyses include three models. In Model 1, we assess the divorce risk for the interaction between the couple type and length of premarital cohabitation, having a child together, and the existence of a prior child, all separately. Model 2 is adjusted for the interaction between the couple type and control variables of age, education, and nationality at birth to control for differences in age, education, and nationality distributions between couple types. Model 3 is adjusted by adding to Model 2 the interaction between the couple type and the rest of the independent variables, that is, the length of premarital cohabitation, existence of a prior child, and having a child together, to analyze whether differences in the divorce risk by the length of premarital cohabitation are explained by prior childbearing or childbearing within the union, and vice versa. Because there are only a few male couples who have a child together, Model 3 is run two separate times. When male couples are included, the variable of having a child together is excluded from the model. The model is conducted separately for female couples and different-sex couples when the variable is included. All models are adjusted for whether either spouse in a same-sex couple has previously been in a same-sex legal union and whether either spouse in a different-sex couple has previously been in a different-sex marriage. To perform a sensitivity analysis, we included a dummy variable representing the first year of a legal union and a continuous variable indicating the sequence of years within the union in all analytical stages, but the results remained the same (contact the first author for results).

Finally, we analyze differences in the divorce risk between couple types. After the unadjusted model (Model 1), we control for the partners' ages, educational qualifications, and nationalities at birth (Model 2) and add the length of premarital cohabitation (Model 3), the existence of a prior child (Model 4), and having a child together (Model 5) in the analysis one at a time to isolate their individual effects on the divorce risk differences. Similar to the main analyses, all models include the interaction between the couple type and the included variables. We provide all predicted probabilities depicted in the following results section in Table A1 (for Figures 2–4) and Table A2 (for Figure 5). Statistical significance is measured at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$), and all estimates are presented with 95% confidence intervals. Stata/MP 18.0 was used to run the analyses.

To further assess the robustness of our findings, we conducted alternative analyses using Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM). CEM is often used to match women across couple types (i.e., women in same-sex couples vs. different-sex couples) who are identical on a set of observable characteristics (e.g., Boertien et al. 2024; Evertsson et al. 2025), as it can verify that the results are not driven by covariate imbalance.

4 | Results

4.1 | Couple Characteristics

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the couples in our data. Female couples had the highest risk of divorce: 40.7% of them had divorced by the end of the observation period (10 years or the end of 2021). In comparison, the corresponding risk was 26.7% for male couples and 21.6% for different-sex couples. A Kaplan–Meier survival plot illustrating the cumulative divorce risks for couple types can be found in Figure A1. The plot shows that female couples had the highest risk of divorce throughout the duration of their legal unions. After the first 3 years, for instance, their divorce risk was 11.8%, compared to 8.6% for male couples and 4.5% for different-sex couples.

Male couples differed from female couples and different-sex couples in all observed characteristics (Table 1). Men in same-sex couples were on average older than women in same-sex couples or women and men in different-sex couples. Male couples were more likely to include at least one foreign-born member compared to other couples. Also, their mean length of premarital cohabitation was longer compared to other couples. Male couples were the least likely to have a prior child with someone other than their current partner or a child together, whereas different-sex couples were the most likely to have either type of children. Male and female couples were more likely to have at least one highly educated member than different-sex couples, among whom the share of medium-educated couples was relatively larger.

Figure 1 shows the length of premarital cohabitation for male couples, female couples, and different-sex couples. Half of the female couples had lived together less than 2 years, moved in together in the same year as entering a legal union, or did not live together at all before the legal union. About half of the male couples either had lived together for at least 7 years or moved to Finland in the year of entering the legal union. Couples who had moved to Finland during that year might have lived together abroad for an unknown period. These two backgrounds were less common among other couples. Most female couples and different-sex couples had moved in together 1–2 years or 3–6 years before entering a legal union. About 8% of male couples, 7% of female couples, and 3% of different-sex couples had entered a legal union without living together first.

4.2 | Divorce Risk by the Length of Premarital Cohabitation

Figure 2 visualizes our findings on the role of the length of premarital cohabitation in the divorce risk (Hypotheses 1a and 1b). We found variation in the divorce risk depending on the length of premarital cohabitation for same-sex couples, whereas there was almost no variation for different-sex couples after Model 1. Among same-sex couples, the divorce risk was lower the longer the length of premarital cohabitation.

In the unadjusted Model 1, same-sex couples who had lived together for at least 7 years had the lowest divorce risk per year (0.9% in male couples and 1.9% in female couples), whereas those who had moved in together during the year of the legal union faced divorce risks 5.1 and 4.3 times that (4.6% for male couples and 8.2% for female couples), respectively. Among different-sex couples with at least 7 years of premarital cohabitation, the divorce risk (1.4%) was about half of the risk among couples who had moved in together during the marriage year (2.9%). Same-sex couples without premarital cohabitation experienced the highest divorce risk (6.0% in male couples and 12.4% in female couples), whereas the divorce risk among different-sex

TABLE 1 | Characteristics of male couples ($N = 1892$), female couples ($N = 3412$), and different-sex couples ($N = 457{,}867$) who entered registered partnerships or marriages in Finland in 2003–2020.

	Male couples	Female couples	Different-sex couples
Kaplan–Meier estimate of the risk of divorce in 10 years (%)	26.66	40.69	21.64
Age at entering the legal union (years, mean)			
Younger partner in SSC[a]	35.31	32.26	
Older partner in SSC	42.90	36.88	
Woman in DSC			33.73
Man in DSC			36.09
Nationality at birth (%)			
Both partners Finnish	65.61	88.28	88.50
One Finnish and one non-Finnish	24.97	7.74	7.79
Both partners non-Finnish	9.42	3.99	3.71
Educational level (%)[b]			
Primary or lower-secondary	7.67	6.01	5.29
Upper-secondary	31.85	32.24	39.59
Tertiary	60.48	61.75	55.11
Length of premarital cohabitation (years, mean)[c]	6.70	4.03	4.64
At least one partner has a prior different-sex marriage (%)	11.59	20.98	32.70
At least one partner has a prior same-sex legal union (%)	6.98	11.46	
At least one partner has a prior child (%)	11.59	24.85	34.06
Couple has a child together (%)	1.75	32.21	65.89

[a]SSC = same-sex couples, DSC = different-sex couples.
[b]Highest educational level completed by either partner by the end of the legal union formation year.
[c]Couples who have moved in together during the year of entering the legal union or earlier.

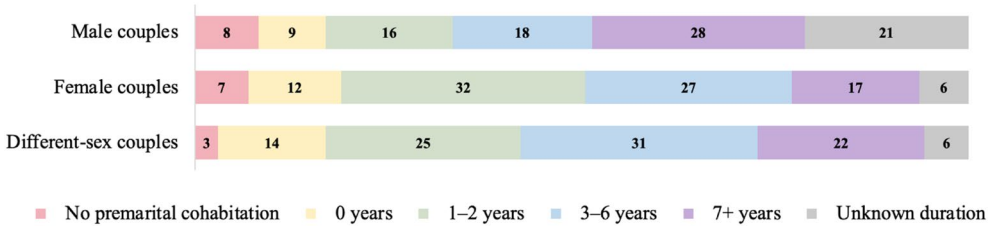

FIGURE 1 | The length of premarital cohabitation by couple type (%). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

couples in this group (2.0%) did not differ from other different-sex couples.

The gradient in divorce risk by the length of premarital cohabitation attenuated for same-sex couples after controlling for the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth, as shown in Model 2. The control variables explained part of the high divorce risk among female couples without premarital cohabitation and part of the low divorce risks among male couples and female couples with at least 7 years of premarital cohabitation. Nevertheless, same-sex couples with at least 7 years of cohabitation had the lowest divorce risks, about half of that of same-sex couples who had moved in together during the year of the legal union formation. There was no corresponding clear gradient among different-sex couples shown in Model 2.

Adding prior childbearing and childbearing within the current union in Model 3 attenuated the gradient among same-sex couples only slightly. The adjustments mainly had a decreasing impact on the divorce risk of female couples who had no premarital cohabitation or who had moved in together during the year of the legal union because of their higher likelihood of having prior children and lower likelihood of having a child together. Same-sex couples who had lived together for at least 7 years had the lowest divorce risk per year: 2.4% in male couples and 3.3% in female couples. Compared to this group, the divorce risk for couples who had moved in together during the

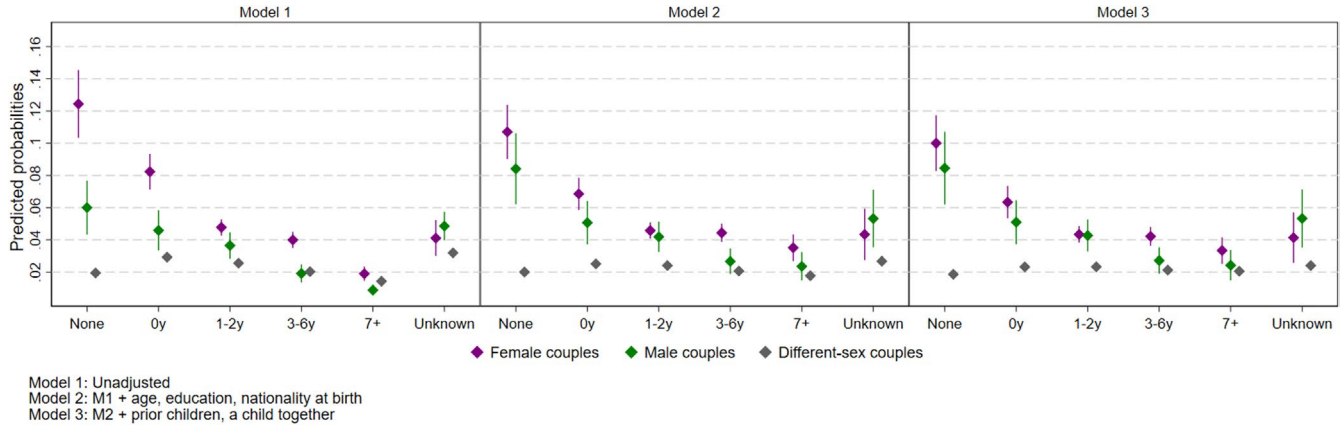

FIGURE 2 | Yearly divorce risks by the length of premarital cohabitation (95% CI). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

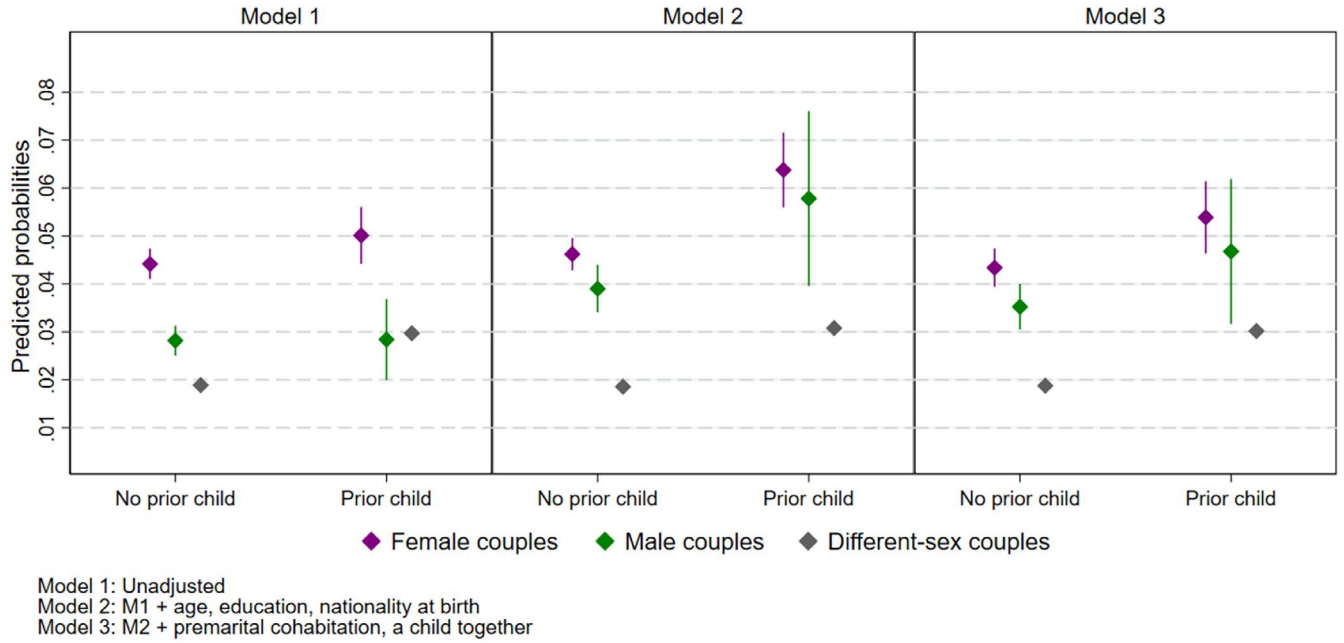

FIGURE 3 | Yearly divorce risks by the existence of prior children (95% CI). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

year of their legal union formation was about double for both male couples (5.1%) and female couples (6.3%). 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 for different-sex couples was 1.9%.

To sum up, short length and absence of premarital cohabitation were associated with increased divorce risk among same-sex couples. Thus, we found support for Hypothesis 1a. We did not find a similar clear association for different-sex couples after taking partners' other characteristics into account, even though we expected that in terms of short length in Hypothesis 1b.

4.3 | Divorce Risk for Couples With Prior Children

Figure 3 visualizes our findings regarding the association between having prior children and the risk of divorce (Hypothesis 2). Couples in which at least one partner had a prior child with a person other than their current partner had a higher risk of divorce than couples with no prior children. In Model 1, however, the groups differed only among female couples and different-sex couples, and the difference was significant only among different-sex couples. Female couples who had a prior child had a yearly divorce risk of 5.0%, compared to 4.4% for couples without a prior child. The corresponding divorce risks were 3.0% and 1.9%, respectively, among different-sex couples and about 2.8% in both groups of male couples.

Compared to Model 1, the gap in the risk of divorce between same-sex couples with and without prior children was larger in Model 2, which was adjusted for age, education, and nationality at birth. Female couples who had a prior child had a yearly risk of divorce (6.4%) 1.4 times that of those without a prior child (4.6%). Male couples with a prior child had a risk of divorce (5.8%) 1.5 times that of those without a prior child (3.9%). This difference was not statistically significant,

probably due to a low number of male couples who had a prior child. Different-sex couples who had a prior child had a yearly risk of divorce (3.1%) 1.6 times the risk among those without a prior child (1.9%).

In Model 3, adding the length of premarital cohabitation and having a child together narrowed the gap in the divorce risk between same-sex couples with and without prior children. This decrease was almost fully explained by premarital cohabitation. Having a child together only had a small, decreasing impact on the divorce risk of all female couples. Female couples with a prior child had a yearly risk of divorce (5.3%) that was 1.3 times the risk among those without a prior child (4.3%). Male couples with a prior child had a risk of divorce (4.7%) 1.3 times the risk among those without a prior child (3.5%), but the difference was not statistically significant. The results for different-sex couples did not change from Model 2.

We carried out an additional analysis in which we separated female couples and different-sex couples who had both a prior child and a child together, only one of those, or neither (Figure A2). This analysis revealed that the higher divorce risk among couples who had prior children was driven by couples who had only prior children, as couples who additionally had a child together had a lower divorce risk. Different-sex couples who had both types of children had a similar divorce risk to their childless counterparts, whereas female couples with both types of children had a higher divorce risk than childless couples, although this latter gap was not statistically significant.

Taken together, we found support for Hypothesis 2. Having a prior child with someone other than the current spouse predicted divorce, but the association was weaker among same-sex couples than different-sex couples.

4.4 | Divorce Risk for Couples Having a Child Within the Current Union

Figure 4 visualizes our findings regarding the association between having a child together and the divorce risk among female couples and different-sex couples (Hypothesis 3). Male couples were excluded from this part of the analysis. Couples who had a child within the current union had a lower yearly risk of divorce than couples who had no child. In Model 1, the divorce risk for childless female couples (5.0%) was 1.2 times the risk of couples who had a child together (4.2%), whereas childless different-sex couples had a divorce risk (2.6%) 1.3 times the risk of couples who had a child (2.0%).

Adding age, education, and nationality at birth in Model 2 increased the gap in the divorce risk between different-sex couples with and without a child but not among female couples. Female couples who did not have a child together still had a yearly divorce risk 1.2 times that of couples who had a child, whereas different-sex couples who did not have a child together had a divorce risk (2.9%) 1.5 times that of couples who had a child (1.9%).

The difference in the divorce risk between female couples with and without a child decreased when the length of premarital cohabitation and having a prior child were taken into account in Model 3. Among female couples, the length of premarital cohabitation and having a prior child had an equally decreasing impact on the divorce risk of couples without a child together. This group had a yearly divorce risk of 4.9%, which was not significantly different from 4.4% of couples who had a child together. The results for different-sex couples did not change from Model 2. Our additional analysis (Figure A2) showed that the lower divorce risk among female couples and different-sex couples who had a child together was driven by couples who had only children together and no prior children.

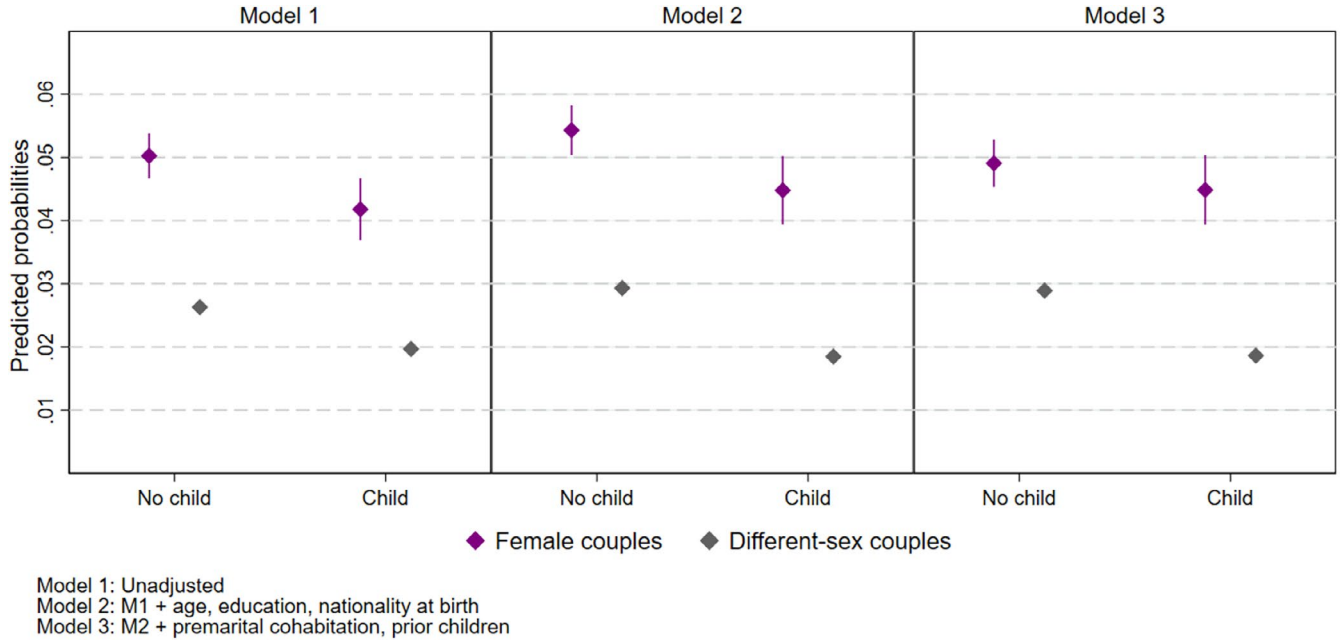

FIGURE 4 | Yearly divorce risks for female couples and different-sex couples (95% CI) who have a child together. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

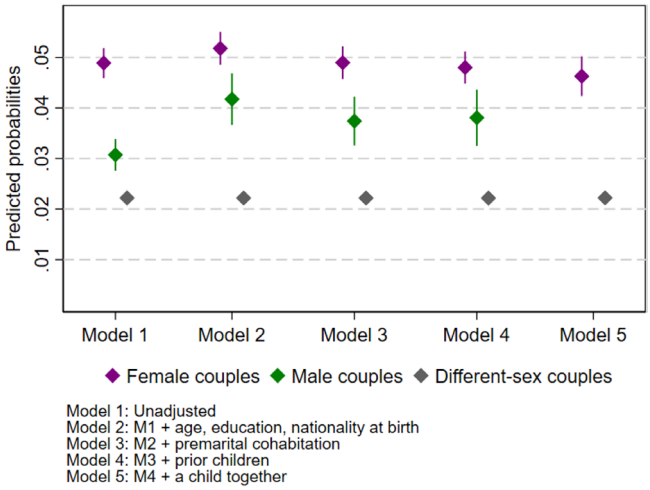

FIGURE 5 | Yearly divorce risks by couple type without and with adjustments (95% CI). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In sum, we found partial support for Hypothesis 3. Having a child together was associated with a lower divorce risk for both female couples and different-sex couples, but contrary to our expectations, the association was less pronounced among female couples than among different-sex couples.

4.5 | Differences in the Divorce Risk Between Couple Types and the Interplay of Adjustments

Figure 5 visualizes our findings regarding the roles of the length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing together in the divorce risk between couple types (Hypothesis 4). Female couples had the highest yearly divorce risk across the models. In the unadjusted Model 1, the divorce risk for 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.

After the different distributions of the partners' ages, educational levels, and nationalities at birth between the couple types were adjusted for in Model 2, the gaps in the divorce risk were smaller between female couples and male couples and larger between same-sex couples and different-sex couples. This was mainly due to the higher ages in same-sex couples. The divorce risk for female couples (5.2%) was 2.4 times that of different-sex couples (2.2%) and 1.2 times that of male couples (4.2%), whereas the divorce risk for male couples was 1.9 times that of different-sex couples.

Adding the length of premarital cohabitation in the analysis (Model 3) slightly attenuated the differences in the divorce risk between same-sex and different-sex couples. The divorce risk for female couples decreased from 5.2% in Model 2 to 4.9% in Model 3 and for male couples from 4.2% to 3.7%. This was because there were relatively more same-sex couples than different-sex couples with no premarital cohabitation, short premarital cohabitation, and unknown duration. These backgrounds were associated with the elevated divorce risk. Adding prior children (Model 4) and having a child together (Model 5) in the analysis impacted only female couples, decreasing their divorce risk further to 4.8% in Model 4 and 4.6% in Model 5.

The length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing within the union explained about one-fifth (0.6 percentage points) of the gap in the divorce risk between female couples and different-sex couples, whereas prior childbearing and childbearing within the union covered about one-third (0.3 percentage points) of female couples' higher divorce risk compared to male couples. In turn, the length of premarital cohabitation explained about one-fifth (0.4 percentage points) of male couples' higher divorce risk compared to different-sex couples. Nevertheless, female couples had the highest divorce risk per year (4.6%). The 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 for male couples was 1.7 times that of different-sex couples.

Taken together, our findings provide some support for Hypothesis 4. The length of premarital cohabitation, prior childbearing, and childbearing within the union explained about one-fifth of female couples' higher divorce risk compared to different-sex couples, whereas prior childbearing and childbearing within the union explained about one-third of their higher divorce risk compared to male couples.

4.6 | Sensitivity Analyses

In our sensitivity analyses, we used CEM to assess the robustness of our findings. These alternative results, presented in Tables A3–A7 and Figures A3–A9, closely mirror those obtained from the population-based models. We again observed gradients in the divorce risk by the length of premarital cohabitation (Figures A3 and A4), but the gradients were more pronounced for female couples and different-sex couples than in the main results (Figure 2). However, the findings on divorce risk for female couples with prior children diverged: the CEM results indicated a higher divorce risk for couples with no prior children (Figure A5), which is the opposite of the main results (Figure 3). Among male couples, there was no difference in the divorce risk between couples with and without prior children (Figure A6), whereas the main results showed a higher (although statistically non-significant) divorce risk for those with prior children (Figure 3). The findings on a lower divorce risk among couples who have a child together were qualitatively similar to the main results (Figure 4), but the association was more pronounced among female couples in Model 3 (Figure A7). Importantly, the CEM results underscore that female couples experience a higher divorce risk than other couples (Figures A8 and A9), as shown in the main results (Figure 5).

The CEM results overall align well with those from our main analyses. However, we acknowledge ongoing methodological concerns about the use of CEM, as recent literature has raised important caveats in the performance of the method (Black et al. 2022; Ripollone et al. 2020). Moreover, the matching process leads to a substantial reduction in sample size (see Table A3), which limits the interpretability and generalizability of the findings.

5 | Discussion

This study provides new knowledge on the mechanisms behind the divorce risk for legal same-sex unions by using internationally unique register data from Finland. First, we found that the duration of premarital cohabitation emerged as a strong predictor of divorce for same-sex couples, exhibiting a consistent gradient: the shorter the premarital cohabitation, the higher the risk of divorce. This finding emphasizes the importance of considering relationship trajectories. To the best of our knowledge, no prior studies have shown this gradient for same-sex couples. Interestingly, we found no corresponding gradient for different-sex couples.

Second, we found that having a prior child with a person other than the current partner predicted divorce for all couple types. This highlights how earlier life events, such as childbearing, influence current union dynamics and outcomes. Furthermore, having a child together with the current partner was associated with a decreased divorce risk for female couples, aligning with the previous findings for Norway (Wiik et al. 2014). Interestingly, our study reveals varying magnitudes in how the predictors influence the divorce risk among same-sex and different-sex couples. We found that prior children constituted a smaller threat to the union stability of same-sex couples than that of different-sex couples, whereas having a child together did not prevent female couples from divorcing as much as it did for different-sex couples. Furthermore, the differences in premarital cohabitation and childbearing explained about one-fifth of female couples' higher divorce risk compared to that of different-sex couples, whereas differences in childbearing explained about one-third of their higher divorce risk compared to that of male couples.

Our results support our first set of hypotheses in that the short length and absence of premarital cohabitation are associated with an increased divorce risk, yet only among same-sex couples. We find it plausible that longer premarital cohabitation may help to stabilize a subsequent marital union because of the partners' long-term information about each other (Brüderl and Kalter 2001) and their compatibility (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014), as well as increasing union-specific capital over time together (Becker et al. 1977). This perspective is crucial in understanding how cumulative experiences shape relational outcomes.

It is not possible to know why we found the clear gradient for same-sex couples but not for different-sex couples, but based on prior studies, the changing legal context of same-sex unions and their different incentives to enter legal unions could be part of the explanation. Long-term cohabiting same-sex couples might have been waiting for the right to register their partnership or to get married, whereas short-term cohabiting couples might have had incentives specific to same-sex couples, such as easing the transition to parenthood, to enter a legal union already after a short period of cohabitation (Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014). Further research is needed to better understand the role of premarital cohabitation in the relationship dynamics of same-sex couples.

We found, aligning with our second hypothesis, that couples in which either partner had a prior child with someone other than the current partner had a higher divorce risk than couples in which neither partner had a prior child. The relationship between the existence of prior children and the increased risk of divorce for same-sex couples has been previously found in Denmark and Norway (Andersson and Noack 2010; Wiik et al. 2014), and our study aligns with Wiik et al. (2014) in that the association was less pronounced among same-sex couples than among different-sex couples.

Unions involving children from previous relationships have been suggested to face more complex family dynamics and less clear family roles (Liu 2002; Teachman 2008). Based on that literature, our findings on the weaker association between prior childbearing and the divorce risk for same-sex couples might reflect their capacity to deal with past relationship experiences, given that same-sex couples have less pressure to obey heteronormative nuclear family norms and are less sensitive to different family arrangements (Van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011). Also, the context of prior childbearing is different from that for different-sex couples. Most prior children of individuals in same-sex couples have been born within prior different-sex relationships (Kolk and Andersson 2020), only after which the individual has often come out as gay or lesbian, for instance (Lynch and Murray 2000). Thus, childbearing within prior unions may be perceived as a common and acceptable stage of the life course among same-sex couples.

We also found partial support for our third hypothesis. Having a child together with the current spouse was associated with a decreased risk of divorce for female couples and different-sex couples. This finding aligns with the results for Norway in the only previous study exploring the association (Wiik et al. 2014). However, we found that the association was weaker among female couples than among different-sex couples even though we expected the contrary due to a stronger selection of female couples into parenthood. This finding differs from the results of Wiik et al. (2014) who found a similar association in both couple types. The difference between these countries may be explained by different study periods and contexts.

Prior literature offers possible explanations for why having a child together did not decrease the likelihood of divorce among female couples as much as it did among different-sex couples. First, female couples who have a child together often have a higher socioeconomic status (Boye and Evertsson 2021); therefore, they might have greater financial capacity to leave an unsatisfactory union. Second, we find it plausible that female couples might 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 custody of a child and parenting responsibilities equally after separating (Gartrell et al. 2011). This might give them trust that a child will have continuing contact with the other parent after divorce. Third, children may create tensions between parental and other social roles (Twenge et al. 2003), and female couples may experience an additional burden of being a parent in a heteronormative society (Mezey 2008).

Finally, we found some support for our fourth hypothesis of the length of premarital cohabitation, prior children, and having a child together being among the explanations for female couples' higher divorce risk compared to other couple types. These

characteristics explained about one-fifth of the gap in the divorce risk between female couples and different-sex couples and about one-third of the gap in the divorce risk between female couples and male couples.

Other factors not directly observable in our data may explain the rest of the differences in union stability between the couple types. One of the possible factors may be the degree of commitment to the partnership. Given the declining marriage rates among different-sex couples, those couples who still marry are an increasingly selected group of more highly committed couples, which can be reflected in their lower divorce risk (Smock and Schwartz 2020). Commitment has been suggested to be lower for female couples than different-sex and male couples due to their specific parenthood-related incentives to enter legal unions (Lau 2012; Wiik et al. 2014) but which cannot be fully captured by the variables in our data. In addition, prior research has suggested that gender plays a large role in divorce behavior, as women are generally more prone than men to initiate divorce (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006), which may stand out in the partnerships of two women. 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 the heteronormative environment and discrimination, which may affect same-sex couples' perceived relationship quality and union stability negatively (Otis et al. 2006). Also, regardless of the degree of commitment when entering the legal union, individuals in same-sex unions might have more liberal attitudes toward divorce and feel less normative pressure to stay together if a relationship turns dysfunctional (Andersson et al. 2006; Lau 2012). Once they have had to defy many heteronormative expectations in their lives, it might be easier to distance themselves from the cultural ideal of long-term monogamous relationships (Lahti and Kolehmainen 2020).

Our findings indicate that we cannot assume that factors that are known to protect union stability in different-sex unions would have the same impact on same-sex unions. Further research on same-sex couples is needed to shed more light on factors generally associated with union stability, including, for instance, the place of residence, home ownership, the age of prior and common children, and the living arrangements of prior children. Unfortunately, we were unable to assess the role of prior children's living arrangements on the risk of divorce, as children can have only one address in the Finnish population registers, and the address does not indicate how much time children actually spend in each parent's household. A large-scale survey conducted in 2018 found that about 75% of children whose parents lived separately were officially registered in their mothers' households, but many of these children regularly spent time in their other parent's household, and about 35% lived equally in both parents' households (Nieminen and Hanifi 2022).

Our results also highlight the importance of studying within-group differences among same-sex couples, instead of only comparing same-sex couples to different-sex couples as a group, to identify the most divorce-prone subgroups among same-sex couples. This was especially true in terms of the length of premarital cohabitation, and, likely, there are other differences among same-sex couples who enter legal unions with different relationship histories. For instance, comparing divorce risks between same-sex and different-sex cohabiting and married couples who are parents would bring new insights into the interplay of union formation patterns, childbearing, and union stability.

5.1 | Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of our study is the internationally unique longitudinal population register data, which include comprehensive information on all same-sex couples who have entered legal unions in Finland since the legalization of same-sex registered partnerships. Our data include, among other things, registered information on both biological motherhood and fatherhood. Moreover, we are the first study so far to analyze the length of premarital cohabitation of same-sex couples by using official records on their residence. This was possible as we constructed the cohabitation histories for couples using yearly information on individuals' residences by dwelling units since 1987. The information on individuals' residences is reliable in Finland, as 98% of people have been shown to live at the addresses recorded in the population register (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) 2022b).

Our study has limitations that are typical for research based on administrative registers. First, we must rely on the information on individuals' juridical gender and civil status to identify same-sex couples and different-sex couples. In other words, we have no information on individuals' gender identity, sexual orientation, or perceptions of their family and who belongs to it. We also do not have information on subjective relationship quality, commitment, or other unobservable confounding factors. Second, we can study the risk of union dissolution only among same-sex couples who have entered legal unions because same-sex cohabiting couples—unlike different-sex cohabiting couples—who have not entered legal unions are not inferred in the Finnish register data by Statistics Finland. Thus, our data may be more representative of more highly committed couples, which may be particularly true for different-sex couples, among whom marriage rates are declining and the prevalence of nonmarital unions is increasing.

Third, our data do not include information on the date that dating began and, therefore, we do not know the total durations of relationships. Also, we count the length of premarital cohabitation from the first year of moving in together and ignore possible gap years in cohabitation. Some couples might have resided temporarily apart due to practical reasons, such as location of work or a study place, but some couples might have had a break in their relationship before getting back together and eventually entering a legal union. Furthermore, we do not know the duration of premarital cohabitation for couples who have moved to Finland in the year of entering a legal union, and any interpretation of the findings regarding this group can only be made on a speculative note.

Finally, the length of premarital cohabitation for same-sex couples is not directly comparable to the length of premarital cohabitation for different-sex couples because same-sex couples did not have the option to register their partnerships in Finland until 2002. Therefore, some same-sex couples who moved in together before 2002—and who would have entered a legal union if it had been available—may have relatively longer periods of

premarital cohabitation as they had to wait for the opportunity to legally formalize their union. We have attenuated the effect of this condition by excluding couples who entered a legal union in 2002 from our analyses.

6 | Conclusions

This study advances the understanding of divorce mechanisms, highlighting how the length of premarital cohabitation, the existence of prior children, and having a child together predict divorce differently among female, male, and different-sex couples. The findings suggest that the interplay between previous relationship experiences and current union characteristics is crucial for understanding union stability among same-sex and different-sex couples, and they also highlight how complex relationship outcomes can be in different demographic groups. This understanding emphasizes the need to investigate how individual life trajectories contribute to the resilience and vulnerabilities of each union type over time. It is important to identify couples who might be at an increased risk of divorce and who could benefit from external support during their partnership and in dealing with the possible short- and long-term negative consequences of divorce.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study were accessed through Statistics Finland. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. More information about data availability and access can be found on the website of the respective statistical authority.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Appendix.