

## Chapter 4

# EXPLAINING THE FERTILITY DECLINE IN IRELAND

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

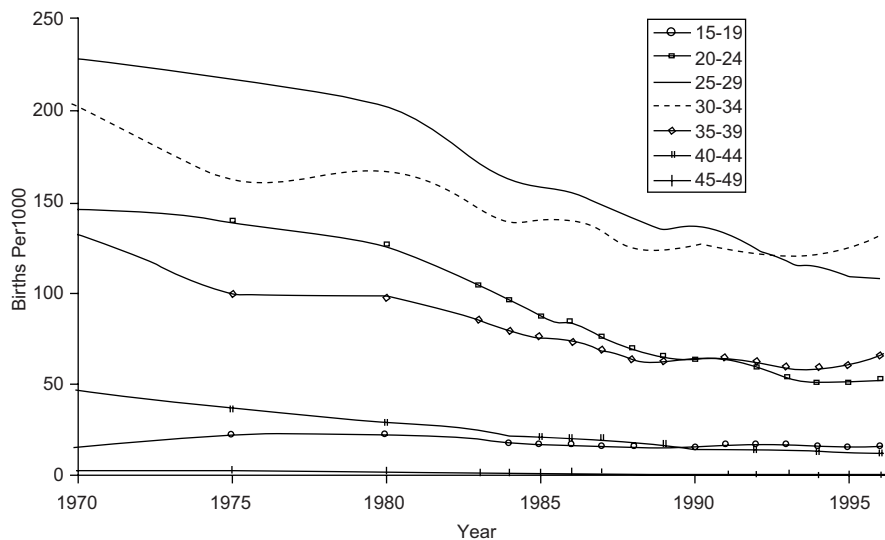
Ireland is a country that has experienced massive economic and social transformations over the last three decades of the twentieth century. During this period the country has moved from a poor agricultural country, with traditional family structures to the Celtic Tiger with the highest growth rates in Europe, an economy where although agriculture is still important, has been superseded by high technology and financial service industries. Family structures also have changed enormously with earlier marriage rates, the legalisation of divorce and of focus here sharply falling birth rates.

Traditionally Ireland has been characterised by a high fertility rate. In 1965, the total fertility rate (TFR), in Ireland was about 4 compared with an EU15 average of about 2.7 (Eurostat, 2002). In the last number of decades, as in most other western countries, the birth rate has fallen in Ireland, so that the TFR by 1995 was 1.82, rising slightly over the remainder of the last decade to 1.98 in 2000. The size of the decline in the TFR over this period was very similar to Southern European countries, but falling however from a higher base. Although Ireland, even after this decline has a high fertility rate compared with other countries in Europe, it's fertility rate is not high compared with "New World" countries such as Australia, the USA, Canada and New Zealand. In this chapter we consider some of the reasons for this decline in fertility in Ireland.

In Table 4.1 we describe some of the main demographic trends in fertility between 1965 and 2000. Part of the reason for the decline in fertility is that people are having smaller families; accounting for less than 43% of births in 1965, first and second births have risen to over 71 per cent in 2000. In 1965 over 40% of births were fourth or later children (in fact one third were fifth order or higher), while by 2000 this accounted only for about 12% of births. As Fahey (2001) acknowledges, this signifies a trend away from a distinctly Irish pattern of low marriage rates and exceptionally high marital fertility. The move away from the large traditional family is also evidenced by the rapid increase in extra-marital births observed in Ireland

from about 2% of births in 1970 rising slightly to 5% in 1980. This proportion trebled to 15% in 1990 and doubled to over 30% of total births in 2000. While data on births within cohabiting partnerships is limited, there is some evidence that many of the first births occurring outside of marriage are followed later by the marriage of the parents (see Fahey, 2001).

*Figure 4.1 Age-Specific Fertility Rate 1965-94*



Source: Recent Demographic Developments in Europe, Council of Europe (1997).

The decline in the fertility rate has occurred across all age groups (See the age specific fertility rates in figure 4.1). The biggest fall occurred during the early 1980's, with the 25-29 year old age group suffering the greatest fall. In fact by the mid-1990's the 30-34 age group had taken over as the age group with the highest fertility rate. Continuing the theme of the ageing at the age of birth we see the fertility rate of the 35-39 age-group also passing out that of the 20-24 age group which until 1990 had been higher. The remaining age groups have lower and slightly falling fertility rates, with a slight increase in the under 20 age group due to the rise in unmarried births. The shift in the order of importance of the fertility of different age groups can be seen in the increase in Table 4.1 of the mean age at first birth. Stable at 25.5 until 1985, the mean age at first birth rose by over two years in 2000 to 27.8. Comparing period with cohort effects, we see the earlier decline in mean at first birth to a low of below 25 for the cohort 45-55 before rising for later cohorts. However the rise highlighted by the period effect has been recent and so it has not been captured in the cohort effect yet.