1 Introduction

Germany’s completed fertility rates are among the lowest in Europe. The total number of children born to West German women of the 1965 birth cohort is estimated to be 1.5 children per woman. A Swedish or French woman of the same cohort will have given birth to almost 2 children during her lifetime (Council of Europe 2004). Germany’s low fertility in part is manifest in a high proportion of childlessness. Even though childlessness is advancing in many European countries (Dorbritz and Ruckdeschel 2007), Germany stands out with exceptionally high figures. More than 20 percent of the West German female cohort of 1960 are remaining childless at the end of their reproductive life (Konietzka and Kreyenfeld 2007).

The causes of low fertility and high childlessness are manifold. Most attention probably has been paid to women’s changing role in society. Educational opportunities and gender equality have become central elements of the value system of modern societies. The upsurge in gender equality has been accompanied by a rapid decline in fertility. Women’s rising education and labor market orientation, thus, have been regarded as central factors that have suppressed birth rates in industrialized countries (Becker 1993; Joshi 1998). According to Hirschman (1994: 222), a “negative relationship between women’s education and fertility, both at the individual and aggregate level”, is one of the most consistent empirical findings.

Comparative welfare state research, however, has viewed this issue from a different perspective (Gauthier 1996; Gornick et al. 1998; Esping-Andersen 1999). Several authors pointed out that in the past there indeed has been a strong correlation between increasing female employment and declining fertility. Nowadays, however, it is the very countries that successfully modernized their gender systems that also have higher fertility

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levels (McDonald 2000; Brewster and Rindfuss 2000; Ahn and Mira 2002). Castles (2003) even speaks of a world ‘upside down’, meaning that countries that are unable to integrate women with children into the labor market are also losing out in their fertility development.

The central argument in this context is that social policies play a crucial role in shaping fertility behavior. Fertility choices are discouraged in societies that promote gender equality in the labor market but do not provide the opportunity to combine work and family life. In Germany, the incompatibility between work and family life is very pronounced. Thus, one should expect that the educational status of women makes a large contribution towards explaining German fertility differences.

This paper provides an overview of the relationship between education and fertility in Germany. We focus on the behavior of women living in the former West Germany. We exclude foreigners from the analysis because the behavior of this group would require a separate investigation (Anderson and Scott 2005). We do not analyze fertility behavior in the East German states for the following reasons. Since unification, period fertility rates have declined rapidly in this region and the age at first birth has skyrocketed. While there were only small differences in the age at childbearing between highly educated and lowly educated women before unification, these differences have increased after unification. The increase, however, was not the same for all birth cohorts. The cohorts born around 1968 show particularly odd patterns. The lowly educated women mostly had a child before unification and, thus, at young ages. More highly educated women had children after unification, mostly at very high ages. This contributed to very pronounced educational differences in the fertility behavior of the ‘unification cohorts’ (Huinink and Kreyenfeld 2006; Kreyenfeld 2004, 2006). Given the particular demographic situation in East Germany, one would need a separate investigation of its fertility pattern.

In the following section, we develop our main research hypothesis. Section 3 describes the data set. Section 4 displays summary fertility measures and section 5 provides the results of our multivariate analysis.

2 Education and Fertility

2.1 Theoretical Considerations

The standard economic approach is the most prominent theoretical concept of investigating the relationship between education and fertility. Education is seen as an investment in individual human capital which increases the worker’s productivity and enhances his or her wages. The new home eco-