



**The value of marriage and fertility:
A blueprint for a structural approach**

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The value of marriage and fertility: A blueprint for a structural approach*

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Abstract

Fertility has declined almost everywhere, yet the pattern of decline differs sharply across countries, education groups, and family forms. We argue that this heterogeneity is best understood through the value of marriage, that is, the surplus generated by partnership relative to outside options. This surplus depends on preferences, the organization of work and childcare, bargaining positions, marriage market opportunities, social norms, and public policy. Children therefore do not simply enter utility; they reshape both the gains from partnership and the way these gains are shared over time. Collective models enriched with marriage markets and limited commitment provide a coherent framework for analyzing these mechanisms jointly. This perspective shows how similar fertility outcomes can emerge from very different underlying forces, such as high maternal career costs in one context and fragile unions with limited commitment in another. It also highlights why structural models are essential for counterfactual policy analysis: they help isolate whether observed fertility patterns reflect changes in childcare burdens, bargaining positions, or marriage-market conditions, and how these mechanisms interact.

Keywords: Value of marriage, fertility decisions, limited commitment, bargaining and intrahousehold allocation.

JEL codes: J12, J13, D13, C61

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1 Introduction

Fertility is one of the central decisions in family life. Apart from a relation to a plethora of psychological and biological factors, fertility is associated with a variety of economic factors. It shapes labor supply, savings, housing choices, investments in children, and the distribution of resources over the life cycle. For that reason it has long occupied a central place in economics, from the pioneering work of [Becker \(1960, 1981\)](#) to broader syntheses such as [Galor \(2012\)](#), [Greenwood, Guner, and Vandenbroucke \(2017\)](#), [Doepke, Hannusch, Kindermann, and Tertilt \(2023\)](#) and [Gobbi, Hannusch, and Rossi \(2026\)](#). Yet the current fertility landscape involves mechanisms that are difficult to analyze jointly without an explicit household perspective. Fertility differs sharply across countries with comparable income levels, across education groups within countries, and across family forms. At the same time, marriage has become less universal, cohabitation more common, and divorce more prevalent in many settings.

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter shows that fertility declines go together with shifts in marriage, divorce, and union formation, and that desired fertility co-moves with attitudes toward marriage, gender roles, and single parenthood. The household and macroeconomic literature, for its part, shows that the allocation of time and expenditure within families differs enormously across couples and contexts ([Greenwood, Seshadri, and Yorukoglu, 2005](#); [Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2012](#); [Hazan and Zoabi, 2015](#); [Lise and Yamada, 2019](#); [Capéau, Cherchye, Decancq, Decoster, Maniquet, Nys, Périlleux, Ramaekers, Rongé, Schokkaert, and Vermeulen, 2020](#)). Taken together, these findings point toward a view of fertility in which partnership, bargaining, and household organization are part of the phenomenon itself.

Our main proposition in this chapter is that the *value of marriage* is a useful organizing concept for understanding fertility. By this, we mean the individual's share of the marital surplus, that is, the advantage a partner obtains from being in the relationship relative to being single or, in more complex environments, relative to the option of remarrying. This surplus is inherently multidimensional: it may reflect improved consumption possibilities, access to joint household production, insurance against shocks, emotional or social benefits, or advantages arising from specialization. For example, a partner may benefit from shared housing and pooled income, from reduced exposure to labor market risk, or from complementarities in childcare that cannot be replicated outside the union.

Fertility decisions are usually embedded in long-term relationships, and the gains from forming and sustaining such relationships depend on more than the direct utility from children alone. Forming a household creates value because partners can pool resources, share housing, specialize in market and non-market activities, and invest jointly in children. But this value also depends on what each partner wants, on what each can credibly claim inside the relationship, and on what each could attain outside it. Children are central to this process. They may increase the gains from partnership, yet they also alter the distribution of time, income, and future opportunities within the couple. In that sense, fertility is linked not only to the level of marital surplus but also to its division.

This is the perspective we develop in this chapter. Our contribution is not to provide another broad catalogue of fertility determinants. Rather, we argue that structural models of household decision making offer a disciplined way to bring together mechanisms that are

too often studied in isolation. Preferences over children, opportunity costs, the division of childcare, bargaining, separation risk, social norms, and public policy all matter for fertility. The advantage of a structural approach is that it forces these elements into a common framework and makes it possible to study both their separate roles and their interaction. In our view, this is precisely where the household literature can make a distinctive contribution to fertility research. Many of the necessary tools already exist, but they have not yet been used systematically to explain the observed heterogeneity in fertility behavior.

This perspective complements a large and highly productive fertility literature. Becker's quantity-quality framework, the emphasis on the opportunity cost of women's time, and more recent career-family models remain essential reference points; see, for example, [Becker \(1981\)](#), [Becker and Barro \(1988\)](#), [Miller \(2011\)](#), [Adda, Dustmann, and Stevens \(2017\)](#) and [Jakobsen, Jørgensen, and Low \(2025\)](#). Recent work has also widened the lens to childlessness, family institutions, and the broad fertility transition ([Gobbi, 2013](#); [Baudin, de la Croix, and Gobbi, 2015](#); [Gobbi, Hannusch, and Rossi, 2026](#)). But many of the empirical patterns that motivate current research are difficult to interpret without taking disagreement and intrahousehold allocation seriously. Fertility is often a joint decision. The consequences of childbearing for careers and time use are very different for mothers and fathers. And whether children can be combined with work depends not only on wages and prices, but also on who is expected to adjust when children arrive. Recent work makes exactly this point by showing that fertility may be limited by disagreement, by the difficulty of sustaining future childcare arrangements, and by the way institutions and norms shape bargaining inside the household ([Doepke and Kindermann, 2019](#); [Jayachandran and Voena, 2026](#)).

The household economics literature provides a natural language for these issues. Collective models treat the household as a group of individuals with potentially different preferences who nevertheless make coordinated Pareto efficient decisions ([Chiappori, 1988, 1992](#); [Browning, Chiappori, and Weiss, 2014](#)). Over the last decades, these models have been used to study labor supply, consumption, savings, and welfare measurement. Among many influential contributions are [Browning, Bourguignon, Chiappori, and Lechene \(1994\)](#), [Blundell, Chiappori, and Meghir \(2005\)](#), [Chiappori, Fortin, and Lacroix \(2002\)](#), [Mazzocco \(2007\)](#), [Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen \(2011\)](#), [Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen \(2012\)](#), and [Browning, Chiappori, and Lewbel \(2013\)](#). Seminal work by [Lundberg and Pollak \(1993, 1994, 1996\)](#) and [Lundberg, Pollak, and Wales \(1997\)](#) demonstrated that intrahousehold allocations respond to bargaining positions and control over resources, providing foundational support for models that depart from the unitary framework and recognize that partners may have distinct preferences and bargaining power. Related work has extended the same toolkit to children, resource shares, and poverty measurement within families ([Dunbar, Lewbel, and Pendakur, 2013](#); [Lechene, Pendakur, and Wolf, 2022](#)). They also generated a rich identification literature that opens the black box of intrahousehold allocation ([Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2026](#)). This toolkit is especially attractive for fertility because childbearing cannot be separated from labor supply, time allocation, household production, and the sharing of child-related costs. Once these margins are modeled jointly, fertility becomes part of a broader system of household decisions rather than an isolated choice.

An important element in these structural models is the intertemporal dimension of fertility decisions, in particular when commitment is limited. Full commitment would require spouses to write and enforce complete contingent contracts about future childcare, labor

supply, savings, and the response to shocks. This is difficult to reconcile with most institutional settings and with the instability of many relationships. As emphasized by [Chiappori and Mazzocco \(2017\)](#) and [Theloudis, Velilla, Chiappori, Giménez-Nadal, and Molina \(2025\)](#), limited commitment allows earlier plans to be revised when circumstances change. This matters directly for fertility. The arrival of a child changes future time demands, career paths (including accrued pension rights), and the value of remaining together. The same issue also arises in recent fertility models in which childbirth depends on whether future childcare arrangements can credibly be sustained. Fertility decisions are therefore inseparable from commitment problems.

Marriage market conditions reinforce this argument. Marriage is less universal than it once was, cohabitation has expanded, and the possibility of separation is more salient. These changes affect the outside options of both partners and therefore influence both matching and bargaining. They also affect the incentives to invest in education, earnings capacity, and other traits that matter inside and outside a relationship. A broad structural literature has studied these links through matching models, schooling decisions, and labor supply choices ([Choo and Siow, 2006](#); [Chiappori, Iyigun, and Weiss, 2009](#); [Chiappori, 2017](#); [Chiappori, Costa Dias, and Meghir, 2018](#)). More recent work on homogamy, reproductive capital, match quality, and marital sorting makes the connection even more concrete by showing that the environment shapes both matching patterns and household surplus ([Ciscato, Galichon, and Goussé, 2020](#); [Cherchye, De Rock, Surana, and Vermeulen, 2020](#); [Low, 2024](#); [Browning, Cherchye, Demuynck, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2025](#); [Chiappori, Costa Dias, Meghir, and Zhang, 2025](#)). A growing literature has begun to integrate marriage formation and fertility choices explicitly, highlighting how matching frictions, social norms, and changing partnership markets shape fertility outcomes ([Caucutt, Guner, and Knowles, 2002](#); [Greenwood, Guner, and Knowles, 2003](#); [Myong, Park, and Yi, 2021](#); [Kennes and Knowles, 2024](#); [Kitao and Nakakuni, 2026](#)). The fertility implications need not go in one direction. Better outside options may reduce the value of a given relationship and lower fertility. But they may also support fertility if stronger bargaining positions, more equal career prospects, or better institutions make parenthood easier to combine with work and partnership. A structural framework is useful precisely because it allows these opposing channels to be studied within one model.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the empirical material that motivates the analysis. Section 3 introduces the key ingredients of a structural model centered on the value of marriage, with particular attention to preferences, household production, bargaining, marriage markets, and limited commitment. Section 4 concludes by outlining a research agenda. Throughout, we keep the discussion close to models that are already used in frontier research, but we privilege intuition over formal detail.

2 Empirical facts

The empirical motivation for our approach is broad, but the underlying message is simple. Fertility does not evolve in isolation. It varies strongly across countries and groups, while family formation, divorce, labor supply, norms, and the allocation of time within households are all changing as well. The purpose of the evidence presented in this section is therefore

not to attach a causal interpretation to each individual correlation. It is to show that fertility is embedded in a broader household system in which several margins move together.

A first well-known fact is the enormous heterogeneity in fertility levels and trends documented in Figures 1 and 2. The figures show the total fertility rates, measured by births per woman, for the countries in the world in 1980 and 2023. As the figures show, fertility differs sharply across countries. While many advanced economies have already spent decades below replacement levels, this is not the case for most African countries, a few countries in South America and some Central and South Asian countries. The figures also show large differences in the evolution of fertility over time, both over the full period and in more recent decades. These differences are not confined to the traditional contrast between high- and low-income countries. They are also visible among countries with similar levels of development, including large emerging economies such as those in the BRICS, suggesting a role for differences in labor market institutions, childcare systems, and family norms. The object to be explained is therefore not a single global fertility trend, but persistent and evolving heterogeneity across contexts.

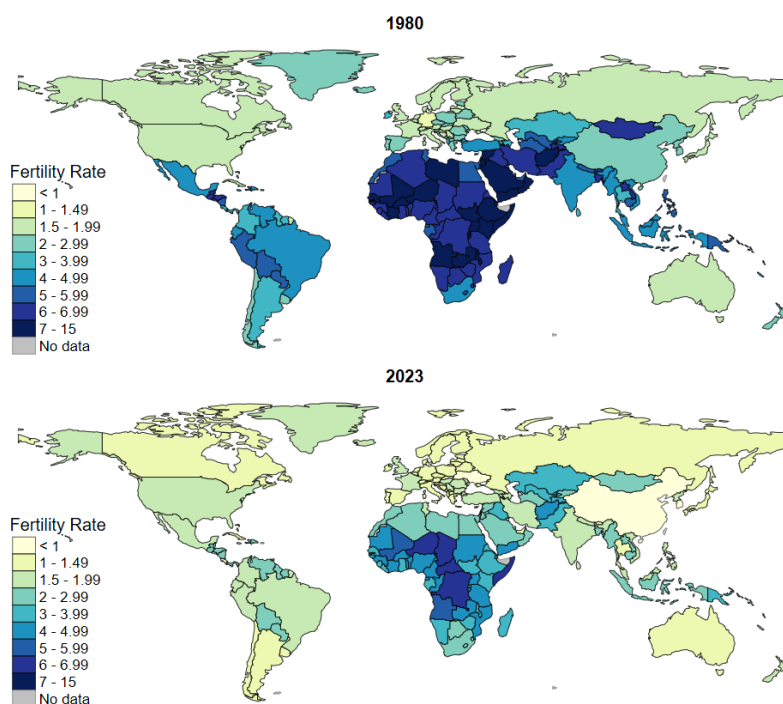


Figure 1: Total fertility rate in 1980 and 2023. *Source:* World Bank.

A related development is that fertility trends co-move with changes in family structure. Figures 3 and 4 show that marriage rates have declined and divorce rates have increased globally, while the fraction of women living in a union, either marriage or cohabitation, has remained broadly stable (Asia and South America) or declined (Europe, North America, but also in Africa). Taken together, these patterns suggest that what has changed is not simply whether individuals live with a partner, but the nature and stability of the union itself. This already points to the relevance of the value of marriage. If long-term partnership provides insurance, specialization gains, and a stable environment for raising children, then changes

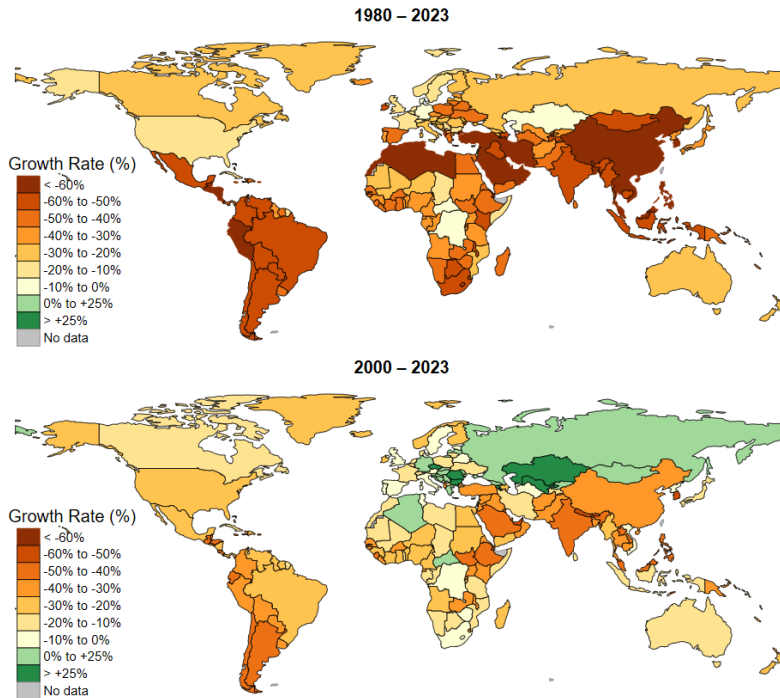


Figure 2: Changes in total fertility rate between 1980 and 2023 (top) and between 2000 and 2023 (bottom). *Source:* World Bank.

in these gains, or in the character of the relationship, should affect fertility. At the same time, the effects need not be monotonic. Rising female wages, changing norms, and more supportive public policies may make partnership less necessary for economic survival, while also making it more attractive as a cooperative arrangement between equals. A structural framework is useful precisely because it can discipline these potentially opposing channels.

A third piece of evidence is that fertility decisions are embedded in beliefs and norms. To document this, we use World Values Survey data on the ideal number of children for men and women, combined with country fixed-effect regressions that relate desired fertility to attitudes toward family structure, marriage, work, and gender roles. The variables we consider include whether children need both a father and a mother, whether marriage is an outdated institution, whether both partners should contribute to household income, whether being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay, and attitudes toward single parenthood.

Figure 5 shows substantial cross-country heterogeneity in the ideal number of children, but also a striking correlation between men’s and women’s reported ideals within countries. This common pattern should not, however, be read as evidence that the underlying determinants of fertility preferences are the same for both genders. The regression results in Table 1 point in a more nuanced direction. For both women (Panel A) and men (Panel B), desired fertility is higher in environments where respondents agree that children need both a father and a mother (column 1), and lower where marriage is more often viewed as an outdated institution (column 2).¹ At the same time, the correlates of desired fertility with

¹The questions asked for the variables “ideal number of children”, “child needs a father and a mother”, and “marriage is outdated” are respectively: “What do you think is the ideal size of the family – how many

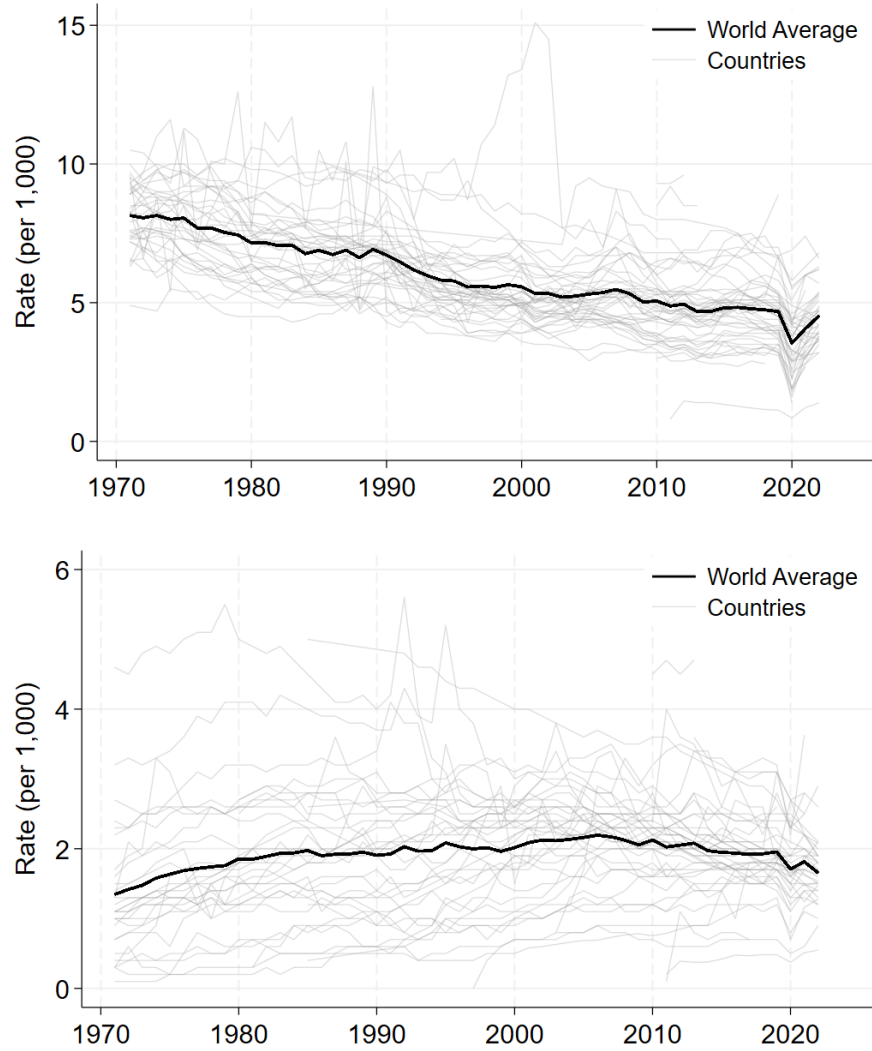


Figure 3: Global trends in marriage and divorce per 1000 people over time, 1970-2022.
Source: OECD.

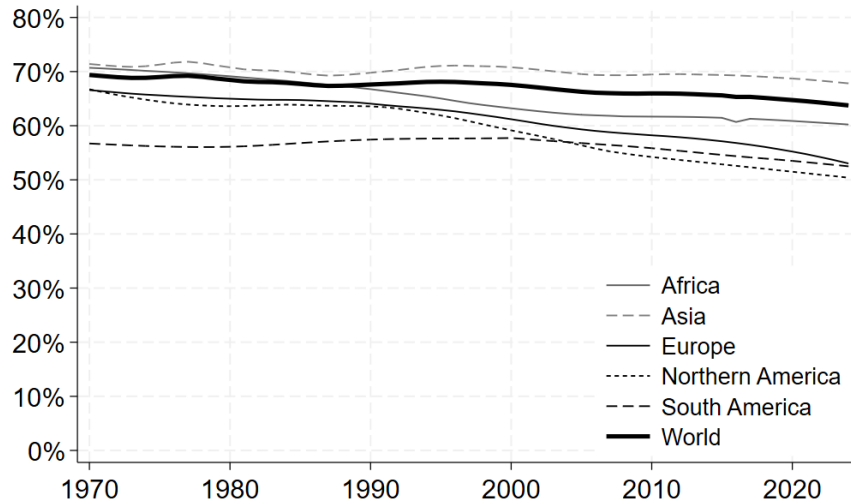


Figure 4: Share of women aged 15-49 who are married or in a union, 1970-2022. *Source:* <https://ourworldindata.org/marriages-and-divorces>.

other variables differ in magnitude and significance by gender. For women, desired fertility is positively associated with the view that both partners should contribute to household income (column 3), and negatively associated with accepting childbearing outside a couple (column 4). For men, desired fertility is positively associated with the belief that being a housewife is as fulfilling as working for pay (column 5).² These patterns suggest that desired fertility is closely related to norms regarding household roles, the organization of family life, and the distribution of responsibilities within the household. They also indicate that the prospect of single parenthood matters, especially from the perspective of women.

The structural message is not that norms should replace economics. Rather, norms should enter the model as factors that shift preferences, constraints, and bargaining positions. They may affect the utility derived from children, the social acceptability of divorce or single parenthood, the expected allocation of childcare, or the career costs associated with parenthood. In this sense, norms shape outside options, influence the expected division of labor within the household, and therefore enter directly into the value of marriage.

As a final piece of motivation we want to note that the cost of children cannot be reduced to money alone. Children also require time, and the allocation of this time differs sharply across households and across countries. This is now widely recognized in the fertility literature, which increasingly points to parental time use as a central margin for future structural work. At the same time, the available descriptive evidence remains limited because there are still very few datasets that jointly contain detailed information on individual expenditures

children, if any?”, “If someone says a child needs a home with both a father and a mother to grow up happily, would you tend to agree or disagree?”, and “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? (READ OUT): “Marriage is an out-dated institution.”

²The questions for these three variables in the WVS are respectively: “Both the husband and wife should contribute to household income.”, “If a woman wants to have a child as a single parent but she doesn’t want to have a stable relationship with a man, do you approve or disapprove?”, and “Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.”

Table 1: Country fixed effects regressions for ideal number of children

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Dependent Variable: Ideal Number of Children</i>					
A. Women					
Child needs a father and a mother	0.890*** (0.327)				
Marriage is outdated		-1.636*** (0.523)			
Both should contribute to hh income			1.028** (0.418)		
Woman is single parent				-0.358** (0.165)	
Housewife is as fulfilling as working					0.652 (0.438)
Dep. var. mean	2.728	2.728	2.739	2.737	2.734
R^2	0.924	0.924	0.981	0.970	0.975
B. Men					
Child needs a father and a mother	1.215** (0.461)				
Marriage is outdated		-1.427** (0.658)			
Both should contribute to hh income			0.565 (0.485)		
Woman is single parent				-0.256 (0.184)	
Housewife is as fulfilling as working					0.712* (0.396)
Dep. var. mean	2.726	2.724	2.752	2.747	2.748
R^2	0.911	0.909	0.978	0.973	0.978
Observations	151	154	129	129	131

Note: Country FEs in all the regressions. Robust SEs in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Source: World Values Survey.

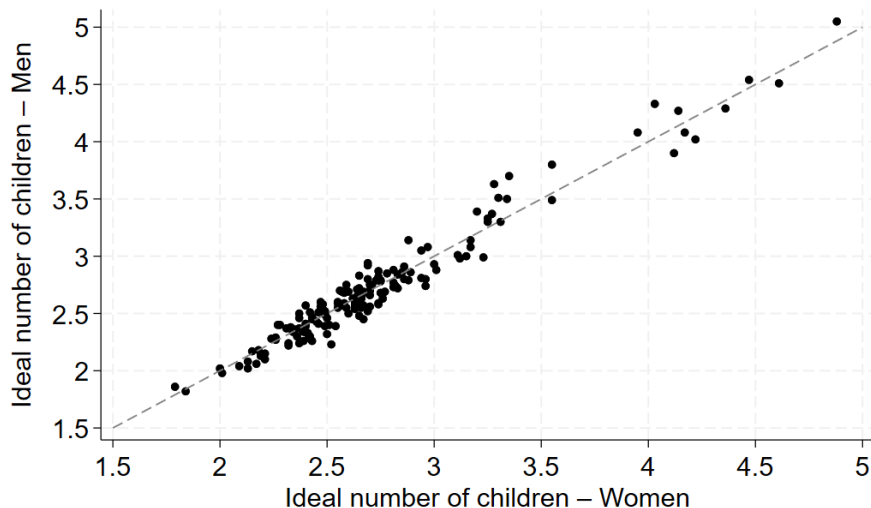


Figure 5: Correlation between ideal number of children for men and women, countries worldwide from 1981–2023. *Source*: World Values Survey.

and individual time use, and thus make it possible to study the trade-off between money and time directly. For that reason, we do not attempt a systematic global review here. Instead, we rely on a small set of particularly informative studies, including the Dutch LISS data in [Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen \(2012\)](#), the Danish evidence discussed by [Browning and Gørtz \(2012\)](#), the Belgian MEqIn data in [Capéau, Cherchye, Decancq, Decoster, Maniquet, Nys, Périlleux, Ramaekers, Rongé, Schokkaert, and Vermeulen \(2020\)](#), and the Japanese data analyzed by [Lise and Yamada \(2019\)](#). Taken together, these studies show that the monetary and time costs of children are distributed very unequally within households, and that this distribution varies substantially across contexts. For a more detailed overview of these datasets and the patterns they reveal, we refer to [Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen \(2026\)](#).

For fertility analysis, this point is essential. Fertility decisions concern future streams of time-intensive obligations, not just current consumption. The expected burden of childcare interacts with labor market returns (including accrued pension rights), childcare institutions, parental leave arrangements, and the extent to which future allocations inside the household can be sustained. A couple may agree that a child is desirable under an equal division of care, yet that agreement may become fragile if future shocks or weak commitment make such an arrangement difficult to maintain. This is why models with limited commitment are more than a technical refinement: they speak directly to the empirical reality that the costs of children unfold over time and are distributed unevenly across partners.

Taken together, these four empirical facts show that the same observed fertility pattern may reflect very different combinations of preferences, constraints, bargaining conditions, and outside options. A decline in fertility may reflect weaker preferences for children, but it may also arise from higher career costs, more unequal expected childcare burdens, weaker commitment inside the household, or changes in marriage market opportunities. Conversely, similar marriage or cohabitation patterns may be associated with very different fertility

choices depending on whether partnership provides insurance, whether childcare can be outsourced, or whether future specialization is sustainable. This observational equivalence is important. Descriptive evidence can tell us which margins move together, but it does not by itself reveal which mechanism is doing the work. This is one of the main reasons why a structural framework is useful. It allows the researcher to map the same observed fertility pattern into different underlying channels and to assess which explanation is most consistent with the broader set of household outcomes.

3 A structural framework centered on the value of marriage

We now turn to the conceptual core of the chapter. Our aim is not to present the most general model available in the household literature, nor to reproduce its technical detail. Rather, we want to isolate the key ingredients of a structural framework that can speak to fertility through the value of marriage. In our view, the natural starting point is an intertemporal collective model in which partners make joint decisions but cannot always commit fully to future arrangements. At its core, the value of marriage measures how much surplus each partner derives from the relationship relative to life outside it, taking into account the economic, time use, and relational channels through which partnership creates advantages.

3.1 Why an intertemporal collective model with limited commitment?

Before outlining the specific ingredients of the framework, it is useful to explain why an intertemporal collective model with limited commitment provides the right analytical foundation. The first reason is that fertility is inherently forward-looking. Having a child does not only affect current well-being. It also changes the future allocation of time, labor supply, human capital accumulation, and the organization of life within the household. A fertility decision therefore has to be understood as part of a sequence of choices whose consequences unfold over time. This makes an intertemporal framework indispensable. The same point is central in recent fertility research, where the interaction between career costs, childcare, and dynamic household behavior has become increasingly prominent ([Doepke and Kindermann, 2019](#); [Low, 2024](#)).

The second reason is that fertility is usually a joint decision. Partners may differ in their preferences over children, over the timing of births, and over the way the costs of children should be shared. They may also anticipate different consequences of parenthood for their own careers, leisure, and bargaining position. This is why the collective approach provides a natural starting point. It allows the household to be modeled as a group of individuals with distinct preferences who nevertheless make decisions together ([Chiappori, 1988, 1992](#); [Browning and Chiappori, 1998](#); [Browning, Chiappori, and Weiss, 2014](#)). In related work, these models have already proved useful for studying labor supply, consumption, intrahousehold allocation, and welfare measurement ([Browning, Bourguignon, Chiappori, and](#)

Lechene, 1994; Blundell, Chiappori, and Meghir, 2005; Mazzocco, 2007; Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2011, 2012; Browning, Chiappori, and Lewbel, 2013).

These two ingredients already take us a long way, but they are still not sufficient if the model assumes full commitment. In the context of fertility, many relevant arrangements concern the future: who will reduce labor supply, who will provide childcare, how specialization inside the household will evolve, and how the gains from partnership will be shared once a child arrives. A full-commitment model assumes that such arrangements can be fixed in advance and enforced in all future states of the world. This is often too strong. Wages change, career opportunities evolve, outside options improve or deteriorate, and the value of remaining together may itself shift over time.

Limited commitment captures this idea in a parsimonious way. It does not mean that households fail to coordinate, nor that cooperation collapses whenever circumstances change. Rather, it means that future allocations must remain acceptable to both partners as time passes and new information arrives. Earlier plans can therefore be revised when one partner no longer finds them sustainable. In the context of fertility, this is especially relevant because childbirth changes the future distribution of time costs and career costs in ways that may not be fully predictable or fully contractible when the decision is taken. This logic is central to the intertemporal household framework reviewed by Chiappori and Mazzocco (2017) and to influential applications such as Voena (2015), Lise and Yamada (2019), and De Rock, Kovaleva, and Potoms (2025). It is also closely related to recent fertility models in which the possibility of renegotiation is a key determinant of childbearing (Doepke and Kindermann, 2019).

Taken together, these considerations motivate the use of an intertemporal collective model with limited commitment as the benchmark for our analysis. Such a framework treats fertility as a forward-looking household decision, allows partners to have different preferences and different stakes in the outcome, and recognizes that the future allocation of the costs and benefits of children may not be fully enforceable *ex ante*. It also provides a natural language for thinking about bargaining, household production, marriage market opportunities, and policy. The remainder of this section develops these ingredients in a way that stays close to existing structural work while keeping the discussion at an intuitive level.

3.2 Key building blocks of the model

To make the discussion more concrete, it is useful to describe the structural framework in a somewhat more explicit way. Consider a household formed by two partners, indexed by $i \in \{1, 2\}$, who make decisions over consumption, labor supply, childcare, savings, and fertility over time. The relevant object is an expected lifetime utility. For each partner i , we may write this as

$$V_t^i = \mathbb{E}_t \sum_{s=t}^T \beta^{s-t} u^i(c_s^i, \ell_s^i, n_s, x_s; \theta^i),$$

where c_s^i denotes private consumption, ℓ_s^i private leisure, n_s characteristics of children such as their number, age, development, education and health, and x_s a broader vector of household conditions, such as public consumption and housing. The parameter vector θ^i captures partner-specific preferences. This formulation is deliberately general. Its role is simply

to make clear that fertility enters household behavior through several channels at once. Children may generate direct utility, but they also affect time use, consumption possibilities, specialization, and future household organization.

At this point, several of the mechanisms discussed earlier can already be located within the model. Preferences over children, family life, maternal and paternal roles, or desired family size enter through the period utility functions $u^i(\cdot)$. Social norms may enter there as well, for example by shifting the utility attached to parenthood, the disutility from maternal employment, or the acceptability of divorce and single parenthood. This way of bringing norms into preferences is common in both the fertility and household literatures (Baudin, Gobbi, and De Rock, 2023; Gobbi, Hannusch, and Rossi, 2026; Jayachandran and Voena, 2026). But norms need not operate only through preferences. They may also affect constraints, outside options, and bargaining positions, a point to which we return below.

Household choices are subject to a set of intertemporal constraints. A stylized budget constraint can be written as

$$a_{t+1} = (1 + r_t)a_t + y_t^1 + y_t^2 - p_t^c c_t - p_t^x x_t - p_t^k k_t,$$

where a_t denotes assets, y_t^i labor and nonlabor income, k_t child-related expenditures such as childcare, schooling, or other goods and services, and p_t^c , p_t^x and p_t^k market prices for respectively private consumption, public consumption and child-related expenditures. Time is constrained as well. Each partner allocates time across market work, childcare, domestic production, and leisure:

$$h_t^i + \tau_t^i + d_t^i + \ell_t^i = 1,$$

where an individual's time endowment is normalized to one, and h_t^i , τ_t^i , d_t^i , and ℓ_t^i denote market work, childcare time, time spent on domestic production, and leisure, respectively. These constraints are central for fertility analysis because the arrival of a child changes not only the demand for goods, but also the demand for time. This is precisely where career costs, specialization, and gender asymmetries emerge. It is also the reason why time use evidence is so informative in this area (Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2012; Browning and Gørtz, 2012; Lise and Yamada, 2019; Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2026).

A further key ingredient is household production. Children require both time and market goods, and the effective services generated for them depend on how these inputs are combined. One may think of a children-related household production function of the form

$$n_t^* = H(\tau_t^1, \tau_t^2, k_t; \phi_t),$$

where ϕ_t summarizes technology, institutions, or access to childcare, while n_t^* is the subset of the child characteristics n_t that are affected by the arguments in $H(\cdot)$; think of their development, education, or health. This is a useful place to incorporate public policy. Subsidized childcare, parental leave provisions, school schedules, and tax systems all modify either the price of market inputs k_t , the returns to labor supply, or the productivity of parental time inside the home. In this way, policy changes can affect fertility through both the level and the composition of the cost of children. This also connects naturally to the older quantity-quality tradition, but in a setting where the quality margin may increasingly reflect time-intensive parental investments rather than monetary expenditures alone (Becker, 1981; Chiappori, Salanié, and Weiss, 2017; Agostinelli, Doepke, Sorrenti, and Zilibotti, 2025).

The collective dimension of the model enters through the way decisions are made jointly. In the most common formulation, household choices are Pareto efficient conditional on the prevailing bargaining position of each partner. At date t , the household solves a program of the form

$$\max_{\{c_t^i, \ell_t^i, d_t^i, h_t^i, \tau_t^i, k_t, a_{t+1}, x_t, n_t^0\}} \mu_t V_t^1 + (1 - \mu_t) V_t^2,$$

where $\mu_t \in [0, 1]$ is the bargaining weight and where n_t^0 are the child characteristics not affected by the arguments in the household production technology (think of number of children, and timing of births). This representation is useful because it separates two conceptually distinct objects: preferences and bargaining. Preferences describe what each partner values. Bargaining determines how much weight each partner receives in the joint decision process. Many of the mechanisms emphasized in this chapter operate precisely by shifting one or both of these objects. Wages, assets, divorce laws, social norms, and the expected distribution of childcare all potentially matter for the bargaining position of the partners (Chiappori, Fortin, and Lacroix, 2002; Attanasio and Lechene, 2014; Voena, 2015; Jayachandran and Voena, 2026).

This is where limited commitment becomes particularly important. In a full-commitment model, the bargaining problem is solved once and for all at the start of the relationship, and future allocations remain enforceable even after shocks or changes in outside options. In a limited-commitment model, future decisions must satisfy participation constraints of the form

$$V_t^i \geq \bar{V}_t^i \quad \text{for } i = 1, 2,$$

where \bar{V}_t^i denotes the continuation value of the relevant outside option. This outside option may depend on divorce laws, labor market conditions, assets, remarriage prospects, child custody arrangements, and social norms. If one of these participation constraints becomes binding, the household allocation must be renegotiated. Bargaining weights therefore become time-varying. This feature is especially relevant for fertility because having a child changes future outside options, career trajectories, and the value of remaining together. A fertility decision taken today is therefore shaped by expectations about whether future arrangements regarding childcare and labor supply will remain sustainable (Mazzocco, 2007; Chiappori and Mazzocco, 2017; Lise and Yamada, 2019; Theloudis, Velilla, Chiappori, Giménez-Nadal, and Molina, 2025).

This framework also makes it easier to locate the role of marriage markets. Matching and marriage market conditions matter because they shape outside options and, more broadly, the gains from partnership. A foundational language for these questions is provided by transferable-utility matching models (Choo and Siow, 2006; Chiappori, 2017). In that tradition, schooling, labor supply, and the value of marriage are jointly determined (Chiappori, Iyigun, and Weiss, 2009; Chiappori, Costa Dias, and Meghir, 2018). More recent work shows how homogamy, reproductive capital, match quality, and marital sorting respond to the broader environment (Ciscato, Galichon, and Goussé, 2020; Cherchye, De Rock, Surana, and Vermeulen, 2020; Low, 2024; Browning, Cherchye, Demuyne, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2025; Chiappori, Costa Dias, Meghir, and Zhang, 2025). In this sense, fertility is connected not only to what happens inside the household, but also to the environment in which households form, bargain, and possibly dissolve.

The advantage of writing the model in this way is that it makes explicit both where the relevant mechanisms enter and which observables are informative about them. Some factors primarily shift preferences. Others operate through the budget set, the time constraint, or the household production technology. Still others act through bargaining power or outside options. Preference heterogeneity may show up in fertility timing, desired family size, or the division of childcare. Bargaining may be reflected in labor supply responses, expenditure patterns, or the way households react to reforms that shift outside options. Household production enters through the joint use of market expenditures and parental time, while limited commitment becomes relevant when shocks or institutional changes lead to renegotiation of earlier plans. This does not imply that every parameter is easily identified in every application, but it does show why richer household data are valuable for both estimation and counterfactual analysis.

3.3 How this framework is useful

Once the main ingredients of the model are made explicit, its relevance for fertility analysis becomes easier to see. The purpose of the framework is not to impose unnecessary technical structure on the data. It is to organize mechanisms that are otherwise difficult to disentangle. The value of marriage depends on preferences, constraints, household production, bargaining, and outside options. Fertility depends on that value because a child changes both the total gains from partnership and the way those gains are distributed over time. A structural model provides a coherent language for analyzing these interactions.

This is particularly important for counterfactual analysis, and therefore for policy. A policy change often operates through several channels at once, and reduced-form evidence does not always reveal which of these channels is quantitatively most important. Consider childcare subsidies. They reduce the direct market cost of children, but they may also increase maternal labor supply, change the relative value of time spent at home, alter bargaining positions within the household, and affect the sustainability of fertility-related agreements between partners. Divorce reform offers another example. It changes outside options directly, but it may also alter specialization incentives, savings behavior, and the perceived risk associated with childbearing. Similar arguments apply to parental leave, housing policy, labor market institutions, and tax reforms. Recent work on collateral constraints and child support illustrates the point especially clearly: changes in housing collateral or in child-support enforcement may alter marriage, bargaining, and fertility at the same time ([Tannenbaum, 2020](#); [Lafortune and Low, 2023](#)).

A structural framework is useful in this context because each of these interventions can be represented as a change in a well-defined part of the model. Childcare policy may shift the budget set or the household production technology. Labor market reforms may affect wages and therefore both constraints and bargaining positions. Norm changes may enter through preferences, participation constraints, or the social value attached to alternative family forms. Marriage market shifts may alter the distribution of match quality and the continuation values associated with separation and remarriage. Once these channels are made explicit, counterfactuals become much more informative. One can ask not only whether a policy affects fertility, but also whether it does so mainly by changing the direct cost of children, the expected division of care, the bargaining position of women and men, or the

outside options available to each partner. This is, in our view, one of the main reasons why structural models are especially valuable in fertility research.

It also clarifies why different classes of models are useful for different questions, and why no single specification should be treated as canonical. Static collective models are helpful when the main objective is to understand contemporaneous allocations of time and goods within the household. Dynamic models with commitment are useful when forward-looking behavior matters but renegotiation is not central. Dynamic models with limited commitment become particularly valuable once fertility is linked to future childcare, labor supply, and marital stability. Which version is appropriate ultimately depends on the mechanism of interest. In some settings, it may be enough to model fertility jointly with labor supply and childcare time. In others, one may need to include housing, savings, uncertainty, or endogenous marriage and divorce. The objective is therefore not to estimate the most elaborate model possible, but to select the structural ingredients that are needed for the question at hand.

For this reason, we see the value of marriage not as a metaphor, but as a practical organizing concept. It summarizes the gains from partnership relative to outside options, while making clear that these gains depend on preferences, household production, bargaining, institutions, and the marriage market. A model built around this idea is well suited to quantify the relative importance of the different forces that shape fertility behavior and, just as importantly, to evaluate how policy or social change modify the incentives to have children.

4 Conclusion

We have argued that fertility decisions are inseparable from household behavior, and that this has important consequences for both empirical and theoretical work. Fertility research in economics has already made substantial progress, and recent contributions have brought in many of the mechanisms that matter for family life, including bargaining, childcare, norms, and policy. At the same time, the household economics literature has developed a particularly rich set of models for studying how individuals make joint decisions when preferences differ, when time and goods are allocated within the family, and when future arrangements may not be fully enforceable. Our view is that these tools have not yet been used to their full potential in fertility research. This is especially relevant in a context characterized by diverse family forms, changing marriage markets, more flexible divorce regimes, persistent gender asymmetries in time use, and substantial cross-country variation in institutions and norms.

The perspective developed in this chapter is that a structural approach centered on the value of marriage provides a natural way to organize these issues. By the value of marriage, we mean the surplus generated by partnership relative to outside options. This surplus is shaped by preferences over children and family life, by the organization of household production, by labor market opportunities, by social norms and public policies, and by the bargaining process within the household. Children in turn affect this surplus because they alter time allocation, career paths, specialization patterns, and the sustainability of future arrangements. Fertility is therefore linked both to the level of the gains from partnership and to the way these gains are expected to be shared. From this perspective, the value of

marriage is not an auxiliary concept. It is a useful organizing device for understanding why fertility differs across countries, across family forms, and over time.

This perspective also clarifies where the household literature can make a distinctive contribution. The collective approach has shown how to model decisions when partners have distinct preferences and when time, goods, and bargaining all matter jointly. Dynamic models with limited commitment extend this logic in a direction that is especially relevant for fertility. Childbearing changes the future allocation of childcare, labor supply, and human capital accumulation, and these future arrangements may not be fully enforceable. Likewise, work on marriage markets, marital instability, and assortative matching makes clear that the gains from partnership are themselves shaped by the broader environment in which households form and evolve. A structural framework is valuable because it allows these different margins to be studied within one coherent model and because it creates a common language for thinking about fertility, household organization, and policy.

For empirical work, the agenda is substantial, but it is inseparable from the available data. Existing structural models can be taken to more institutional settings and brought to a wider set of outcomes, including divorce reforms, childcare policy, parental leave, housing constraints, and changing marriage market conditions. A particularly important margin is time use. The household literature has shown that time allocation carries crucial information about specialization, bargaining, and the effective cost of children ([Cherchye, De Rock, and Vermeulen, 2026](#)), yet this remains underexploited in fertility research even though the tension between careers and family life is often central to both the empirical facts and the policy debate. More broadly, progress will depend on richer information about the joint allocation of time and money within households. Datasets that combine fertility histories, labor market outcomes, childcare arrangements, detailed expenditure information, and attitudinal measures remain rare, especially in longitudinal form, but they are precisely what is needed to distinguish between preference heterogeneity, bargaining effects, household production, and commitment problems. In that sense, the development of richer linked surveys and the systematic use of administrative and panel data should be seen as a complement to model building rather than as a separate enterprise. Recent work on child-related public goods and on the relationship between household allocations and child outcomes illustrates the potential of this broader empirical agenda ([Chiappori, Meghir, and Okuyama, 2024](#); [Cherchye, Chiappori, De Rock, Ringdal, and Vermeulen, 2025](#)).

The theoretical agenda is equally important. Dynamic collective models with limited commitment remain underused in fertility analysis, despite the fact that they are well suited to the central issues at stake. More work is needed on the joint determination of fertility, marriage, separation, and labor supply, as well as on family forms that do not fit the traditional benchmark of stable marriage. Cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, blended families, and same-sex households all raise questions that are difficult to address without a framework that combines matching, bargaining, and household production. There is also substantial room to incorporate macroeconomic uncertainty, housing markets, and changing policy regimes more explicitly into fertility models. A further challenge is to treat norms in a less reduced-form way. In many applications, norms are introduced as fixed shifters of preferences or constraints. Yet norms may themselves evolve with policy, technology, and social interaction, and they may do so differently for men and women. Bringing these developments into structural models would considerably enrich the analysis of fertility behavior.

One particularly promising direction concerns family forms that fall outside the traditional benchmark of stable marriage. In many countries, fertility increasingly occurs within cohabiting unions, after separation, or in more complex family arrangements involving stepchildren and multiple partnerships over the life cycle. These settings are not simply variants of the standard model. They raise distinct questions about commitment, the enforceability of childcare arrangements, the role of legal institutions, and the relevance of biological versus social parenthood for household decision making. Structural fertility research has only begun to address these issues. Extending the existing household toolkit to cohabitation, nonmarital fertility, blended families, and same-sex households would substantially broaden the empirical relevance of the approach developed in this chapter.

A related point concerns the broader relevance of this approach. Structural models are sometimes perceived as too technical for a wide interdisciplinary audience. We do not think this is an inherent feature of the approach itself. The substantive questions are straightforward: who wants children, who bears the associated costs, which future arrangements can be sustained, and how do institutions and norms affect the gains from family life? What structural models contribute is a disciplined way of linking these questions to one another. They force the researcher to be explicit about preferences, constraints, outside options, and equilibrium responses, and they provide a coherent language for counterfactual analysis. For that reason, their usefulness is not limited to economics. They can also be valuable for demographers, sociologists, and policy researchers interested in understanding how family behavior responds to changes in institutions and social environments.

Taken together, the message of this chapter is that the next step in fertility research is not necessarily to introduce entirely new mechanisms, but to use the available structural toolkit more systematically and in closer contact with the richness of contemporary family life. The empirical literature has documented the importance of bargaining, norms, family policy, childcare burdens, and heterogeneous family forms. The household literature has developed models that are well suited to analyze these forces jointly. Connecting these two literatures more systematically should improve not only our understanding of fertility behavior, but also the evaluation of policies that affect family life, gender inequality, and long-run demographic change.

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