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# Examining the Gender Equality–Fertility Paradox in Three Nordic Countries

KATIA BEGALL  AND NICOLE HIEKEL 

*The accelerating fertility decline in the most gender-equal countries of the world seemingly contradicts the central tenet of macro-level theories that predict high fertility in the presence of gender equality. We offer a comprehensive assessment of the individual behavior from which these trends aggregate. We link attitudes toward gender roles and fertility intentions in three Nordic countries.*

*Using recent data (2020–2022) and a multidimensional instrument on gender equality attitudes from the Generations and Gender Programme for Denmark, Finland, and Norway on  $n = 13,184$  women and men, we identify three attitude profiles of which one is situated beyond the “non-egalitarian–egalitarian continuum.” The profiles are clearly associated with fertility intentions for childless individuals. We further provide evidence for two theoretical mechanisms that intervene between gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions.*

*Gender-equal societies with a favorable opportunity structure for people to have the children they want may still face challenges associated with low fertility: Fertility intentions are lowest among egalitarians, that is, the largest population in these countries. While realizing a satisfying division of household labor with their partner enhances fertility intentions among egalitarians more than in the other groups, they do not necessarily prioritize parenthood as their main life objective.*

## Introduction

The Nordic fertility regime has come under scrutiny at the start of the 21st century (Andersson 2004; Andersson et al. 2009). The Nordic countries (Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland) have long maintained relatively high and stable cohort fertility rates. This stability has been largely attributed to the institutional and sociocultural contexts of these

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countries, which support gender equality in the labor market and the family (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006; Rønsen and Skrede 2010). However, since 2010, the total fertility rates (TFR) of the Nordic countries have been steadily dropping (Rønsen and Skrede 2010). Postponed births are unlikely to be recuperated since fertility dropped significantly in the 30–39 age groups, while growth in the 40+ age group was minimal. As a result of these developments, the TFR for the Nordic countries in 2020 converged to the low EU average (i.e., 1.5 children per woman). All Nordic countries experienced a further decline in the TFR in 2023, with Norway (1.40) and Finland (1.26) setting new lows (statistical offices of the Nordic countries).

The postponement of first births, rising childlessness, and slower parity progression in the most gender-equal countries contradict the core prediction of *fertility-equality reversal theories* (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015; McDonald 2000), which expect higher fertility in more gender-equal societies. These theories argue that fertility depends on whether women and men perceive the opportunity structure as favorable to reconcile their public and private roles and achieve a satisfying division of labor. Gender equality at the contextual level manifests in the level of support—through norms and policies—for gender equality in the labor market and within the family. In the first phase of the gender revolution, women increasingly participate in the labor market. At the micro-level, this shift leads to several behavioral changes. Women's growing employment opportunities lead to delayed marriage and parenthood as women prioritize career development and personal aspirations. The growth of dual-earner households and women's increased bargaining power in relationships challenge traditional gender roles and require couples to renegotiate work and family life. The second phase focuses on shifting men's roles. Sharing unpaid labor more equally eases the burden on women and promotes gender equality at home. Couples would feel more capable of balancing work and family life, reducing women's opportunity costs of childbearing and ultimately may make them more inclined to have (more) children. In short, gender equality reversal theories predict that in a context of high gender equality, an equitable sharing of paid and unpaid labor is considered fairer, individuals experience more support but also more societal pressure to adopt gender egalitarian practices and, finally, both women and men are more likely to have children.

An important assumption underlying these theories is that the compatibility of public and private roles in gender-equal contexts contributes to an increase in fertility across the entire population. Fertility-equality reversal theories assume a strong, stable desire for having children across all stages of the gender revolution. They argue that a favorable opportunity structure, like high gender equality, allows more people to act on this desire.

We argue that the assumption that all women and men respond to more contextual gender equality (and thus decreasing opportunity costs

of having children) in the same way is oversimplifying the macro–micro–macro association underlying the gender equality–fertility nexus. Fertility desires and the value placed on gender equality in the public and private roles may vary greatly *within* populations.

According to the *second demographic transition* (SDT) theory (Lesthaeghe 2020; Lesthaeghe 2010; Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986), a relevant factor to understand such differences is value change. The SDT postulates that the spread of greater gender equality within countries may go hand in hand with a decline in the preference for having children among, both, women and men adhering to egalitarian gender role attitudes. This is because egalitarian attitudes toward women’s and men’s roles correlate with values that put greater emphasis on self-fulfillment and individualism. For individuals adhering to these values, family formation may become just one potential life goal that competes with many other potential life goals, such as having a fulfilling partner relationship, achieving education and employment goals, and having plenty of leisure time.

In more gender-equal contexts, many individuals adopt egalitarian attitudes, a “drip-down effect” well established in the literature (Boehnke 2011; Hofstede 2001). Still, substantial heterogeneity in gender role attitudes may exist even in a context of high gender equality (Grunow, Begall, and Buchler 2018). These, in turn, might be differently associated with fertility behavior. If individuals with egalitarian attitudes view parenthood as less important, low fertility intentions and fewer births may occur even in societies with strong work-family policies and high gender equality.

The Nordic countries under investigation (Denmark, Finland, Norway) have made significant progress toward the goal of achieving gender equality. Thus, these countries represent a homogeneous study context for which it may be expected that the juxtapositions of the different micro-level mechanisms linking gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions are particularly salient. This is because people anticipate whether their attitudes are norm-compliant or norm-deviant, which affects whether their attitudes are translated into behaviors. Regardless of what they actually do, Scandinavians with egalitarian attitudes have a reasonable opportunity structure for putting gender–egalitarian work and care arrangements into practice. Therefore, the desired and the lived experiences of Scandinavians are more likely to converge than would have been the case in the same context historically or in a contemporary society with lower levels of gender equality.

In this study, we delve deeper into the mechanisms connecting attitudes toward gender equality and fertility intentions within a context of relatively high gender equality and, consequently, a substantial diffusion of egalitarian gender-role attitudes at the individual level. We posit that while both macro-theoretical frameworks emphasize that fertility trends are driven by the societal diffusion of gender equality over time and space, they rely on different individual-level mechanisms that may reinforce or

counteract each other in their link to fertility intentions when not explicitly addressed.

We thus formulate the following first research question as follows:

*RQ1:* How are individual gender equality attitudes associated with fertility intentions and how do these associations vary by (a) gender and (b) parenthood status?

We also consider the theoretical micro-level mechanisms invoked by fertility-equality reversal theories on the one hand and the SDT paradigm on the other. We therefore ask:

*RQ2a:* Does the extent to which individuals are achieving a satisfying division of labor explain why and how gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions are associated at the individual level?

*RQ2b:* Does the extent to which individuals see parenthood as a life goal explain why and how gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions are associated at the individual level?

We use recent survey data from the 2020–2022 data collection of the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS II) in Denmark, Finland, and Norway. We select  $n = 13,184$  women and men aged 18–50, of whom 6,827 are childless and 6,357 have at least one child at the time of the interview. Among the unique features of the data are that they include rich measures of individuals' gender equality attitudes that reflect the public and the private roles of both women and men and therefore address multiple dimensions of gender equality.

Our study enhances the understanding of the gender-equality fertility nexus in contemporary low fertility contexts. First, we integrate gender equality–fertility reversal theories with the heuristics of the SDT, both of which rely on distinct micro-level mechanisms linking gender role attitudes to fertility behavior. This empirical application of theoretical considerations allows us to better comprehend the coexistence of widespread societal gender equality and low fertility rates in the Nordic countries.

Second, we analytically acknowledge that the progress in gender equality attitudes toward greater equality is not uniform or linear across whole populations or all life domains. Abandoning the measurement of gender equality attitudes along a continuum with two endpoints—gender–non-egalitarian and gender-egalitarian—we instead seek to capture these attitudes in their multidimensionality. We gather *profiles* of gender equality attitudes that include combinations of the roles assigned to women and men in the public and private spheres and link them to intentions to have a (an additional) child. By doing so, we move beyond the non-egalitarian-egalitarian continuum that most fertility research has relied upon to date

(Billari, Philipov, and Testa 2009; Miettinen, Gietel-Basten, and Rotkirch 2011; Puur et al. 2008; Westoff and Higgins 2009).

Finally, we address population heterogeneity, making an analytical distinction between childless individuals and parents. This is important for examining the individual-level predictions implied by the SDT framework about the emergence of conflicting life goals and shifting patterns of preferences for having children, which might influence childless individuals more than parents, who have already decided to have children.

## Theoretical background

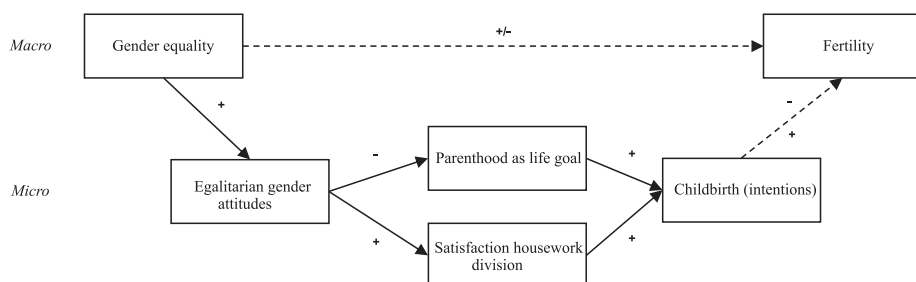
### Macro-level theories addressing the gender equality–fertility nexus

In high-income countries, gender equality is seen as a key factor driving fertility (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015; McDonald 2000). Fertility research has been shaped by two strands of macro-level theories linking gender equality and fertility.

Fertility-equality reversal theories argue that how public and private roles are assigned to men and women through norms, institutions, and policies, shape their opportunities to experience role compatibility or role conflict by having (many) children. Gender equity theory (McDonald 2000) states that the costs of fertility rise when women gain access to public roles typically occupied by men (i.e., pursuing higher education, participating in the labor force, and holding leadership positions) but private roles like housework and childcare) remain unequal.

Gender equity theory's link between opportunity structures and fertility is supported by gender revolution theory, which emphasizes how couples' interactions with their environment affect fertility. Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård (2015) argue that gender equality in a society is achieved in two stages. The first stage is driven by women's increased participation in higher education, the labor market, and male-dominated occupations (Ridgeway, 2009, 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). However, persistent gender-essentialist norms about femininity, masculinity, and parenthood continue to discourage men from engaging in the private sphere. The second stage is reached when men and women equally share private roles. Although it has been observed that the Nordic countries have made the most progress in the gender revolution, they still have not achieved full gender equality (Lappegård, Neyer, and Vignoli 2021).

The SDT paradigm (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986) emerged to explain new demographic behaviors in partnerships and families. The SDT suggests that gender equality spreads along with value shifts, making family formation compete with other life goals like autonomy, self-realization, and individualism, even in societies that support work-family reconciliation. Fertility-equality reversal theories assume stable preferences for

**FIGURE 1** Conceptual model of macro–micro mechanisms of the gender equality–fertility relationship derived from macro frameworks

having children, shaped by opportunity structures. In contrast, SDT argues that family formation preferences are changing. The Nordic countries are considered the forerunners from which changes in demographic patterns, such as later marriage, lower fertility, and higher levels of unmarried cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage, spread to other European countries in the decades following the 1960s. Changes in values and attitudes were considered the drivers of changes in family and fertility patterns in postindustrial societies (Batool and Morgan 2017; Lesthaeghe 2010). Both theories agree that as women gain access to higher education and the labor force, they become less dependent on men for support and social status, leading to more egalitarian relationships and the reduction of gendered roles within the family. However, changes in people's inclinations to uphold "traditional" family values, including the decision about whether to have (many) children, serve as the key argument linking value changes to new fertility behaviors. SDT predicts that as individualism and self-actualization spread, people will opt for "less family" (van de Kaa 2001).

While both fertility-equality reversal theories and the SDT paradigm link gender equality and fertility at the population level, they rely on different, even contradictory assumptions about the relationship between attitudes toward gender equality and fertility at the individual level (see Figure 1). Our analysis suggests that attitudes toward gender equality shape perceptions of the opportunity costs of childbearing, linked to household division of labor and the value placed on having children.

### Capturing the mechanisms of the gender equality–fertility nexus at the micro-level

The gender equality–fertility nexus remains theoretically debated and empirically uncertain (Raybould and Sear 2021). The relevant literature reports conflicting findings regarding the relationship between gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions. In several European countries, attitudes favoring gender equality are positively linked to women's—but



not men’s—intentions to have a first child (Philipov 2009). According to Philipov (2008) and Torr and Short (2004), gender equality attitudes do not correlate with the chances of having a higher order birth. Westoff and Higgins (2009), using a different measure of gender ideology, observed a negative association between gender ideology and fertility intentions; while Puur et al. (2008), studying just men, found a positive association. In Finland, Miettinen, Gietel-Basten, and Rotkirch (2011) found that fertility intentions were lower among, both, the most non-egalitarian and egalitarian men, with more ambiguous correlations among women. In a study of European and Baltic countries, Lappegård, Neyer, and Vignoli (2021) found that some of the different dimensions of attitudes toward gender equality (public sphere, maternal employment, and the father’s role in the family) were associated with more variation in women’s than in men’s fertility intentions, with fertility intentions generally being lower among women with more egalitarian gender attitudes.

Conflicting findings partly stem from the challenges in generalizing results across different populations, contexts, and stages of the cultural and demographic transition processes. First, people may anticipate norm deviation or compliance based on their gender equality attitudes, linking their attitudes to behavior depending on how well these align with their country’s institutional and cultural context, level of diffusion of gender equality, and phase of fertility transition. Second, whether a person is female rather than male, or childless rather than a parent, may alter the meaning of the individual’s particular gender equality attitudes (Neyer, Lappegård, and Vignoli 2013). As levels of gender equality are relatively high in Scandinavia, women and men in these countries who have egalitarian gender attitudes have a reasonable opportunity structure for aligning their desired reality with their lived reality. For this reason, we have chosen to study these associations not only stratified by gender and parenthood status but also in a homogeneous context characterized by relatively high levels of gender equality and advancement based on demographic indicators of the SDT.

A lack of a clear conceptualization and operationalization of gender equality attitudes also contributes to the inconsistencies in prior research. One problem is that different studies use different sets and types of questions addressing various aspects of gender equality. Another problem is the tendency to frame gender roles along a one-dimensional continuum with “traditional” and “egalitarian” endpoints (Davis and Greenstein 2009). This conceptualization disregards the possibility that individuals may hold ambivalent or conflicting views about different aspects of gender equality (i.e., multidimensionality in gender attitudes). Moreover, when developing theoretical arguments about how fertility outcomes are related to gender equality attitudes, what it means for individuals to have attitudes that lie between the non-egalitarian and egalitarian endpoints of a one-dimensional continuum remains unclear. Thus, we build upon a body of



work that has emerged in the past decade that uses a multidimensional conceptualization of gender attitudes (Barth and Trübner 2018; Begall, Grunow, and Buchler 2023; Brinton and Lee 2016; Grunow, Begall, and Buchler 2018; Kleinschrot, Berth, and Bujard 2023; Knight and Brinton 2017; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019; Sievers and Warner 2022; van Damme and Pavlopoulos 2022). Our approach profiles respondents' attitudes instead of averaging gender equality attitude components into scales. While the extent to which the relationship between aggregated gender attitude profiles and contextual conditions explains TFR variation has been examined in macro-level analyses of fertility using this multidimensional conceptualization (Brinton and Lee 2016; Han and Brinton 2022), micro-level applications have not been reported in the literature.

The findings of these studies demonstrate that a substantial group of people in contemporary, postindustrialized countries exhibit some degree of ambivalence toward gender relations, even though sizeable shares of the population (30–40 percent) hold egalitarian views on gender relations (a so-called unidimensional view). An ambivalent pattern, reflecting the stalled gender revolution, combines gender-essentialist beliefs on family roles with egalitarian views on gender equality in public roles (e.g., women's employment and access to power) (Begall, Grunow, and Buchler 2023). Another general result reported in this body of research is that the share of respondents who hold non-egalitarian or traditional views on all aspects of gender equality is small (5–10 percent). We formulate assumptions regarding the association between gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions for egalitarian, non-egalitarian, and ambivalent profiles based on these prior studies, but note that the inductive character of the analytical techniques means that we may find additional or different profiles.

## Hypotheses

How are various gender equality attitudes at the intersection of public and private gender roles connected to fertility intentions? Non-gender-egalitarian attitudes prioritize men's authority in public roles and women's authority in family responsibilities. Men who share these ideas concur that childrearing belongs to the sphere of women, while women who subscribe to the idea of gender essentialism view parenting as a vital element of their gender identity. Non-egalitarianism, which upholds distinct gendered roles for men and women, often aligns with a strong emphasis on parenthood as a key life goal. An adherence to gender-separate spheres implies the absence of work-life conflicts or double burdens for women. Therefore, both women and men who hold such beliefs may anticipate relatively modest opportunity costs as a result of having children. Importantly, people endorsing non-egalitarian attitudes toward gender equality may not strive to realize nor be especially satisfied with an egalitarian division of labor in the

household. Intentions to have a(nother) child are expected to be highest for, both, women and men who hold non-egalitarian gender equality attitudes relative to the other gender equality profiles (*Hypothesis 1*).

People with egalitarian attitudes believe women and men are equally suited for public and family roles, creating a direct contrast to non-egalitarian attitudes. According to the theory of gender-equality fertility reversal, people who hold egalitarian views are more likely to encounter structural obstacles to achieving the levels of gender equality they envision for themselves, even in a context of relatively high gender equality. For individuals with egalitarian beliefs, the opportunity costs of having children are high, making a balanced division of family roles a prerequisite for parenthood. According to the SDT, which places a strong focus on greater self-actualization and individualism, women and men holding egalitarian gender attitudes may be more inclined to view parenthood as one of many life goals that compete with one another, or that may even be mutually exclusive. Unlike gender-equality fertility reversal theories, which assume stable fertility preferences, SDT suggests that low fertility intentions in this group stem from weaker preferences for family formation. As a result, we expect that both women and men who hold egalitarian views on gender equality are less likely to intend to have a(nother) child than their counterparts with non-egalitarian gender equality attitude profiles (*Hypothesis 2*).

Ambiguous gender role attitudes, consistent with the “stalled revolution” concept, suggest that men and women are equally suited for public roles, while family roles are seen as more central for women. The implications of holding ambivalent gender equality attitudes for fertility intentions are not immediately apparent. There are two possible associations. On the one hand, ambiguous gender equality attitudes have their roots in “choice feminism,” and the earlier trope of “superwoman” (Newell 1993) which is associated with the belief that women can have it all: that is, that women can have a fulfilling life in the public realm (the successful worker, the female leader) while also taking on the main responsibility for their family (the fully devoted mother). No matter how realistic such beliefs are, individuals who hold these gender equality attitudes may have fertility intentions similar to those of individuals with non-egalitarian gender equality attitudes (*Hypothesis 3a*). Alternatively, ambivalent gender role attitudes may result in the experience of a double burden and the notion that women cannot have it all. The perception that taking on public roles is incompatible with being a devoted mother points to a perceived or predicted conflict between women’s roles in the family and the public sphere. For this reason, the fertility intentions of respondents with ambivalent gender equality attitudes may be more comparable to those of egalitarian respondents (*Hypothesis 3b*).

## Accounting for theoretical mechanisms

We intend to capture the expectation, put forward by the SDT paradigm, that in countries at advanced stages of the SDT, a lower orientation toward parenthood as a life goal may emerge as identities other than being a parent become more accessible. We assume that people with egalitarian gender beliefs are more likely to have a lower orientation toward parenthood as a life goal, which may help to explain the adverse relationship between these attitudes and fertility intentions. For people with non-egalitarian attitudes about gender equality, the opposite may be true (see Hypothesis 3a).

In order to capture the expectation advanced by *gender equality–fertility reversal theories* that the recuperation of fertility in high-equality contexts is achieved through the combination of achieving a satisfying division of labor in private life and women's full participation in public roles, we account for the intervening effect of the level of satisfaction with the household division of labor on the gender equality attitude–fertility relationship. Rather than egalitarian role-sharing, we posit that satisfaction with complementary roles in nongender–egalitarian couples may help explain their higher fertility intentions (Raybould and Sears, 2021). By contrast, the potential double burden implied by having ambivalent attitudes toward gender equality may be manifested through lower levels of satisfaction with the division of housework, which could lead to lower fertility intentions (see Hypothesis 3b).

## Considering heterogeneity by gender and parental status

Gender equality may influence women's and men's intentions to have (more) children in distinct ways. When women assign family roles to women and public roles to both women and men, they—unlike men who do the same—face the opportunity costs of having children. This is particularly significant, given that, women's work-care patterns are much more variable than men's, who typically maintain full-time employment throughout all life stages (Bünning and Pollmann-Schult 2015). As a result, women's attitudes toward gender equality in public and private roles may have a greater impact on their fertility intentions than those of men.

Additionally, gender equality may exert different effects on childless individuals and parents regarding having (more) children. According to the SDT, this may be partly due to the fact that as gender equality becomes more prevalent, both women and men develop preferences for life goals and lifestyles that often conflict with family formation. The dampening effect of stronger gender egalitarianism on fertility intentions may be particularly apparent in the group of people who do not yet have children. Consequently, we expect that attitudes toward gender equality will have a stronger effect on the fertility intentions of childless women and men compared to those of parents. Furthermore, the stratification by parental

status sheds light on how beliefs about gender equality influence various drivers of fertility decline to differing extents. This insight is particularly valuable given that childlessness is currently contributing more to the decline in fertility than parity progression in the Nordic countries.

## Data and methods

### Sample

We analyze data from the 2020–2022 data collection of the Generations and Gender Survey Programme (GGPII) from Denmark, Finland, and Norway to test our theoretical expectations. Our analytical sample adheres to the restrictions defined by the dependent variable of fertility intentions. These intentions are recorded among women aged 18 to 50 and among men with a female partner in that age group who are fertile and whose partner (if any) is fertile. We also limit the age of male respondents without partners to 50 years. After enforcing the age restriction, our analytical sample initially consists of 14,861 respondents which is reduced to 13,184 respondents after applying listwise deletion for missing values on all relevant variables.

### Measurements

The question “Do you intend to have a/another child during the next three years?” is used as the basis for our dependent variable: fertility intentions. Responses are scored on a five-point scale with a separate category for respondents currently expecting a child. We recode the original answer categories into a dichotomous measure: *probably yes*, *definitely yes*, and *currently expecting a child* coded as one; and *definitely not*, *probably not*, and *unsure* coded as zero. Among the respondents expecting a child at the time of the interview (451), we include only intended pregnancies (388).

Examining fertility intentions rather than actual fertility behavior has both strengths and limitations. On the favorable side, fertility intentions reveal personal motivations and aspirations, capture the attitudinal influences on reproductive plans, and offer early indicators of future fertility trends. They provide insights into why individuals prioritize or deprioritize parenthood at a given moment in their lives. Additionally, intentions help to identify perceived barriers and facilitators to achieving fertility goals, aiding policymakers in anticipating demographic shifts and planning tailored interventions. However, limitations include discrepancies between intentions and actual behavior due to unforeseen life events, economic conditions, and relationship dynamics. Social desirability bias might also lead individuals to overstate their intentions. Furthermore, fertility intentions are dynamic and can change over time, an aspect not captured without conducting longitudinal studies. Currently, no panel data exist that combine the

multidimensional measurements of gender equality attitudes and fertility outcomes. Our approach emphasizes attitudinal factors that may not be immediately evident in actual fertility behavior, providing a nuanced view of how societal norms and personal beliefs interact to influence reproductive decisions.

The main predictors are gender attitude profiles derived from response patterns to four statements regarding perceptions of public and private roles<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) On the whole, who would make better political leaders, men or women?
- (2) For whom is having a job more important, men or women?
- (3) For whom is looking after the home and children more important, men or women?
- (4) Who is better at caring for small children, men or women?

Response categories include “men definitely,” “men slightly,” “both sexes equally,” “women slightly,” and “women definitely” (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix for distribution of responses). We recode these responses into dichotomous measures, with one indicating an egalitarian or gender-atypical attitude. Respondents who allocate public roles (political leaders and jobs) to both sexes equally, or rate these roles as “slightly” or “definitely” more important for women, are coded as one. Conversely, those who rate public roles as “slightly” or “definitely” more important for men are coded as zero. The coding is reversed for the two items referring to the family domain. We merge the gender-atypical and egalitarian answers because of the small number of gender-atypical responses (4 percent on the statement regarding political leadership, <1 percent for the other three statements), which impedes the analysis of gender-atypical attitudes as a separate category.

We operationalize the *importance of parenthood as a life goal* with the statement “A woman/man needs children to be fulfilled,” directed at respondents based on their self-reported sex. Responses are rated on a Likert scale from one to five, with five indicating the strongest level of agreement. To capture potential conflicts in the reconciliation of public and private roles, we use the question “How satisfied are you with the division of household tasks between you and your partner?” on a scale from zero (*not satisfied at all*) to 10 (*very satisfied*). To include respondents without a partner in this analysis, we assign them the sample average score (7.8) and include a dummy variable indicating partnership status in all analyses. Both variables are rescaled from zero to one to facilitate interpretation.

We include several relevant sociodemographic control variables when modeling fertility intentions, including respondent’s sex, age at interview (in years), number of children, age of the youngest child, partnership status

(single, dating, cohabiting, or married), migration status (first-generation migrant vs. all others), highest educational level as measured by International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011) (eight categories), employment status (differentiating between not employed, part-time (<36 hours per week) work, and full-time (36 + hours per week) work, and country of residence (Denmark, Finland, Norway) (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

## Analytical approach

First, we identify attitude profiles based on the four statements regarding public and private roles using latent class analysis (LCA). LCA classifies cases into profiles (i.e., “classes”; Lazarsfeld, Henry, and Anderson 1968) based on responses to a set of categorical indicators. We estimate models with up to five classes without additional covariates. The preferred three-class model is chosen based on the lowest adjusted Bayesian information criterion value in conjunction with the likelihood ratio test (see Table A2 in the Online Appendix for model fit statistics; Nylund, Asparouhov, and Muthén 2007). We account for missing values using full information maximum likelihood, assuming missingness at random. We examine bivariate residuals to detect violations of the local independence assumption but find no significant values.

In the next step, we estimate a series of models to examine class differences in fertility intentions, the importance of parenthood as a life goal, and satisfaction with the division of household labor using the Bolck–Croon–Hagenaars (BCH) method (Bolck, Croon, and Hagenaars 2017). This three-step BCH method is recommended for estimating the effects of latent class membership on distal outcomes because it avoids shifts in the latent class structure (which can occur in a one-step approach) and accounts for measurement uncertainty in the latent class assignment by using weights that reflect the measurement error (Nylund-Gibson, Grimm, and Masyn 2019). We utilize the manual BCH approach in Mplus 7.31 (Muthén and Muthén 2012) following Asparouhov and Muthén’s (2019) procedure. Indirect effects are calculated based on the method outlined by McLarnon and O’Neill (2018) for assessing mediation effects, particularly when latent class membership might interact with the mediating variable to influence the distal outcome. Such an interaction could bias indirect effects if calculated traditionally. In all analyses, we apply country-equilibrated weights to adjust for unequal sample sizes across the three countries.

## Results

The LCA reveals three distinct profiles of attitudes toward gender equality: two profiles corresponding to the endpoints of the non-egalitarian–

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of all variables in the analysis by parity and by gender equality attitude class

	Parity 0 % / Mean (SD)	Parity 1+ % / Mean (SD)	Non-egalitarian (10%) % / Mean (SD)	Public-private ambivalent (19%) % / Mean (SD)	Egalitarian (71%) % / Mean (SD)
Intention to have a child within 3 years (probably) yes (0/1)	27% 0.16 (0.23)	16% 0.24 (0.25)	25% 0.32 (0.29)	20% 0.24 (0.24)	22% 0.17 (0.23)
Importance of parenthood as a life goal (0-1)	0.78 (0.13)	0.78 (0.18)	0.77 (0.16)	0.78 (0.16)	0.79 (0.16)
Satisfaction with housework division (0-1)	56% 28.64 (7.72)	61% 39.61 (6.33)	39% 33.50 (8.67)	43% 34.36 (8.89)	65% 33.81 (8.99)
Female (0/1)					
Age at interview (18–50)					
Partnership status					
No partner (0/1)	44%	9%	31%	26%	27%
Dating (0/1)	15%	5%	9%	10%	10%
Cohabiting (0/1)	31%	26%	29%	28%	29%
Married (0/1)	10%	61%	31%	37%	33%
Parity					
No child (0/1)	100%		55%	48%	53%
One child (0/1)		28%	14%	13%	13%
Two children (0/1)		50%	17%	27%	24%
Three children or more		22%	14%	12%	10%

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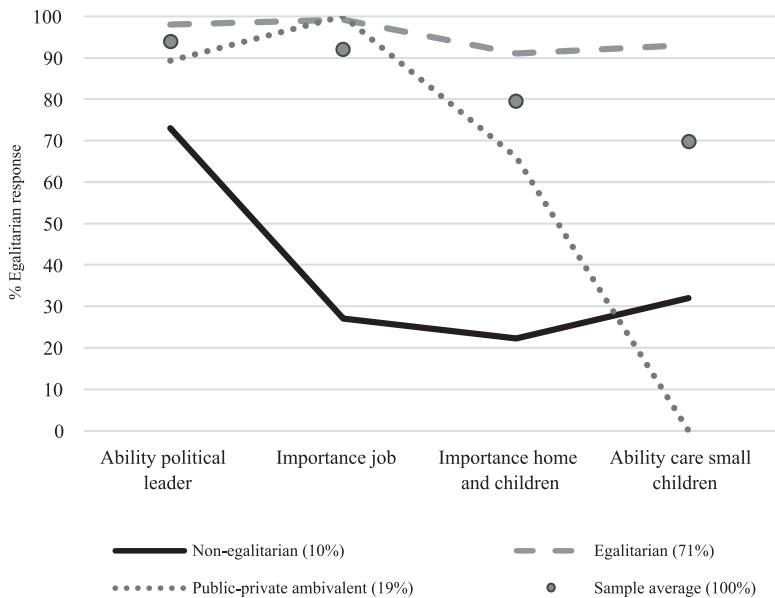


TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Parity 0 % / Mean (SD)	Parity 1+ % / Mean (SD)	Non-egalitarian (10%) % / Mean (SD)	Public–private ambivalent (19%) % / Mean (SD)	Egalitarian (71%) % / Mean (SD)
Age of youngest child (0–33)		7.52 (5.59)	7.13 (5.52)	7.28 (5.41)	7.71 (5.68)
Education (ISCED) (0–8)	4.56 (1.88)	5.39 (1.75)	4.66 (1.95)	4.76 (1.86)	5.05 (1.84)
Employment status					
Not employed (0/1)	29%	14%	22%	22%	22%
Part-time (0/1)	24%	17%	21%	19%	21%
Full-time (0/1)	48%	69%	57%	60%	58%
Not born in country (reference: native born) (0/1)	10%	10%	10%	12%	9%
Country					
Norway (0/1)	33%	33%	43%	39%	30%
Denmark (0/1)	33%	33%	21%	27%	37%
Finland (0/1)	34%	33%	37%	35%	33%
Observations	6,827	6,357	1,350	2,434	9,398

NOTE: Country-equilibrated weights applied.  
SOURCE: Generations and Gender Surveys Round II (2020–2022) for Denmark, Finland, and Norway.

**FIGURE 2** Conditional probability of egalitarian or gender-atypical responses to gender attitude items per class



SOURCE: Generations and Gender Surveys Round II (2020–2022) for Denmark, Finland, and Norway;  $N = 13,184$ . Country-equilibrated weights applied.

egalitarian continuum and one multidimensional profile. Figure 2 displays the conditional probabilities of egalitarian (or gender-atypical) responses for the four statements within each class, along with the sample average for comparison (indicated by gray dots). The first profile, the largest at 71 percent of the sample, is labeled *egalitarian*. It is characterized by a response pattern where both public and private roles are rated as equally important or capable for women and men. As shown by the long-dashed line in Figure 2, the probability of an egalitarian response approaches 100 percent across all four items and is consistently higher than the other two profiles and the sample average. The second profile, which constitutes 10 percent of the sample, is labeled *non-egalitarian*. Here, public roles are rated more important for men while family roles are rated more important for women. The solid line in Figure 2 indicates that the probability of an egalitarian response is lowest for this profile and consistently falls below the sample average across all items. The third profile, accounting for 19 percent of the sample, is labeled *public-private ambivalent*. This profile shows equal ratings for the importance of public roles for both men and women but rates family roles—especially the ability to care for young children—higher for women. This is illustrated by the short-dashed line in Figure 2. Overall, the class pattern aligns with our expectations and corroborates findings from previous studies.

We present the sociodemographic composition of the entire sample and by gender equality attitude classes before moving on to the multivariate analyses (Table 1). Approximately one-quarter of the childless respondents intend to have a child within the next three years, in comparison to about one-sixth of respondents who have at least one child. The differences between gender equality classes appear relatively small, with non-egalitarian individuals exhibiting higher fertility intentions than those with a public–private ambivalent or egalitarian attitude. These bivariate differences by class do of course not yet account for relevant factors such as parity, partnership status, education, or gender.

The *importance of parenthood as a life goal* varies substantively among gender equality attitude classes. Respondents classified as egalitarian have lower scores (0.17) than those in the non-egalitarian (0.32) and public–private ambivalent (0.24) attitude profiles. There is minimal variation in *satisfaction with the division of housework* across gender equality attitude profiles; however, the high average value of 0.78 indicates that respondents generally express satisfaction with how housework tasks are divided. Notably, parents place greater importance on parenthood than childless respondents.

The most significant compositional differences among classes concerning sociodemographic covariates are related to sex, education, parental status, and parity. Women are overrepresented in the egalitarian class and underrepresented in the non-egalitarian and the public–private ambivalent classes. Respondents from the non-egalitarian and public–private ambivalent class tend to have lower educational attainment compared to egalitarian respondents. Approximately half of the sample is childless, but this proportion decreases to 44 percent among the respondents in the public–private ambivalent class and increases to 53 percent among non-egalitarian respondents. Among those with children, about one-quarter have two children, however, this share is lower (18 percent) among the non-egalitarian respondents and higher (28 percent) among public–private ambivalent respondents. For parity one and parity three (or more), the differences between the classes are minor, but non-egalitarian respondents are slightly more likely to have three or more children. The differences in partnership status mirror the patterns observed for parity, with non-egalitarian respondents being somewhat more likely to be single and less likely to be married, while public–private ambivalent respondents are, somewhat, less likely to be single and more likely to be married, compared to the egalitarian class and the overall sample average.

Our second step of analyses comprises tests of our theoretical expectations about how gender equality attitude profiles relate to fertility intentions. In a first set of models, we compare the fertility intentions between the gender equality attitude classes adjusted for the sociodemographic covariates. The BCH method, used to estimate effects of latent class membership on distal outcomes, produces class-specific means (without

covariate controls) or class-specific intercepts (with additional covariate controls). We assess equality of means and intercepts using an omnibus test and pairwise comparisons (see Table 2). Since decisions about becoming a parent differ from those about having additional children, we stratify all analyses by parity (0 vs. 1+ children). To test for heterogeneous effects by gender, we use a Wald test to examine differences in fertility intentions between women and men across classes in our model.

Table 2 reports how fertility intentions differ between classes. Our first hypothesis predicts that respondents with a non-egalitarian gender attitude profile are more likely to plan to have children than those with an egalitarian profile. Two competing hypotheses have been developed about the ambivalent profile. Equality tests of class-specific intercepts reveal significant differences between classes at parity zero, controlling for the effects of sociodemographic control variables, which partially align with our expectations. Among childless respondents, those with the non-egalitarian attitudes show the highest likelihood of intending to have a first child (35 percent) followed by the public-private ambivalent class (27 percent), and those with egalitarian attitudes, who are least likely to intend to become a parent within three years (26 percent). Among respondents with one or more children, fertility intentions are lower overall: with about 16 percent planning to have another child within three years among egalitarian and ambivalent respondents and only slightly higher intentions among non-egalitarians. Thus, for the respondents without children, the findings support the first and the second hypothesis. For the competing hypotheses regarding public-private ambivalent attitudes, results show no significant difference in fertility intentions between childless respondents in this class and those with egalitarian attitudes. This result supports Hypothesis 3b.

The differences in fertility intentions between classes do not vary by gender. Figure 3 shows that among childless respondents, men generally have lower fertility intentions than women across all classes (results for respondents with children not shown).

In conclusion, gender equality attitude profiles are closely linked to fertility intentions, generally aligning with our theoretical predictions. For the respondents without children, these associations are statistically supported. For the parents, all associations are statistically insignificant.

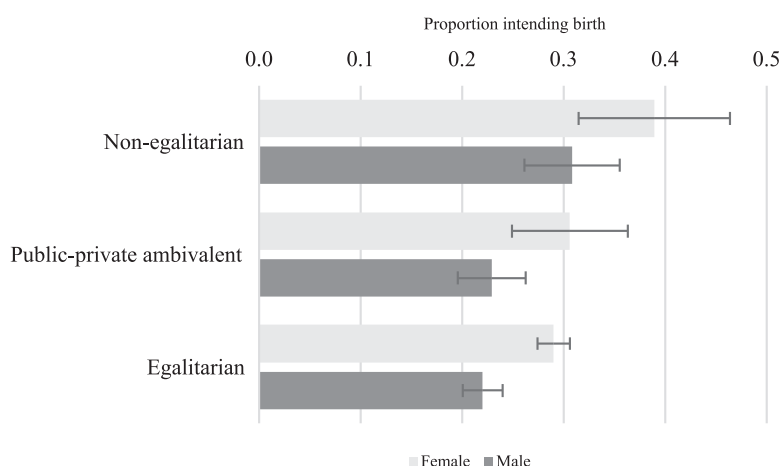
After identifying the general associations between gender equality attitude profiles and fertility, we estimate models that include *parenthood as a life goal* and *satisfaction with household work* as additional predictors of fertility intentions. We examine mean differences between gender equality attitude classes as well as how each class is associated with fertility intentions. Significant slope differences indicate an interaction based on class membership. The results speak to the theorized mechanisms between gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions.

**TABLE 2** Differences in fertility intentions, parenthood as a life goal, and satisfaction with housework by gender attitude class membership probability stratified by parity

		Non-egalitarian		Public-private ambivalent		Egalitarian		Global Wald test		Non-egalitarian vs. Public-private ambivalent		Non-egalitarian vs. Egalitarian		Public-private ambivalent vs. Egalitarian		Gender difference	
		M		M		M		$\chi^2$ (df)		z		z		z		$\chi^2$ (df)	
Parity 0	Fertility intentions <sup>a,b</sup>	0.35		0.27		0.26		16.93 (2)***		2.95*		4.11***		0.68		0.05 (2)	
	Parenthood as a life goal	0.30		0.21		0.13		182.03 (2)***		5.12***		11.14***		7.64***		7.37 (2)*	
	Satisfaction household division	0.78		0.78		0.79		4.72 (2)†		−0.66		−1.89		−1.28		2.06 (2)	
<i>Fertility intentions regressed on<sup>b</sup> B (SE)</i>																	
Parity 1 +	Parenthood as a life goal (slope)	0.36 (0.05)		0.37 (0.07)		0.28 (0.03)		3.36 (2)		−0.15		1.41		1.32		4.28 (2)	
	Satisfaction household division (slope)	−0.27 (0.20)		0.06 (0.17)		0.15 (0.06)		4.07 (2)		−1.19		−1.97*		−0.45		8.11 (2)*	
		M		M		M		$\chi^2$ (df)		z		z		z		$\chi^2$ (df)	
Parity 1 +	Fertility intentions <sup>a,b</sup>	0.19		0.16		0.16		2.31 (2)		1.23		1.52		0.15		0.22 (2)	
	Parenthood as a life goal	0.34		0.27		0.21		87.56 (2)***		3.80***		7.81***		5.53***		2.21 (2)	
	Satisfaction household division	0.74		0.76		0.79		27.25 (2)***		−1.56		−4.11***		−3.55***		13.57 (2)***	
<i>Fertility intentions regressed on<sup>b</sup> B (SE)</i>																	
Parity 1 +	Parenthood as a life goal (slope)	0.11 (0.05)		−0.02 (0.05)		0.03 (0.02)		3.01 (2)		1.68†		1.45		−0.92		4.32 (2)	
	Satisfaction household division (slope)	0.12 (0.09)		0.04 (0.06)		0.10 (0.03)		0.67 (2)		0.63		0.21		−0.79		1.01 (2)	

NOTE:†  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .  
SOURCE: Generations and Gender Surveys Round II (2020–2022) for Denmark, Finland, and Norway;  $N = 13,184$ . Country-equilibrated weights applied.  
<sup>a</sup> Fertility intention controlled for gender, age, partnership status, education, employment status, migration background, number of children, age of the youngest child, and country of residence. (See Table A3 in the Online Appendix for estimates.)  
<sup>b</sup> Intercept differences between classes refer to all control variables set at their (parity-specific) grand mean.  
B (SE): b-coefficient and standard error; df: Degrees of freedom.

**FIGURE 3 Fertility intentions among childless respondents across gender equality attitude classes by gender (error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals)**



NOTE: Fertility intentions are controlled for age, partnership status, education, employment status, migration background, and country of residence. (See Table A3 for estimates.)

SOURCE: Generations and Gender Surveys Round II (2020–2022) for Denmark, Finland, and Norway;  $N = 6,827$ . Country-equilibrated weights applied.

Table 2 shows that respondents in the non-egalitarian attitude class assign the highest importance to parenthood, followed by those in the public-private ambivalent class. The egalitarian respondents are least likely to consider parenthood an important life goal. This pattern holds for both childless respondents and parents. Notably, mean values in the non-egalitarian and ambivalent classes show less variation by parity, but differences between classes are not significant. Regarding satisfaction with the division of housework, mean differences across classes are small and significant only among parents. Egalitarian parents report slightly higher satisfaction than the other two classes (0.79 vs. 0.74 and 0.77).

We also assess to what extent the class-specific means differ by gender. A closer look at two significant gender differences shows that class-based differences in the importance of parenthood are larger for men than for women, as men score higher on this measure, particularly in the non-egalitarian class. The general pattern, however, is similar for women and men (results not shown).

Table 2 presents class-specific estimates of the effects of viewing parenthood as a life goal and satisfaction with housework on fertility intentions (i.e., slopes). These results show that among the childless respondents, placing a higher importance on parenthood as a life goal significantly and positively predicts higher fertility intentions to the same degree in all three classes. These mean differences suggest that the importance of parenthood may act as an intervening factor, partially explaining the link between

gender equality and fertility intentions in childless respondents. Figure 4 confirms this by showing class differences in these relationships (indirect effects) relative to the egalitarian class (see panel a). The gap in fertility intentions between the non-egalitarian and the egalitarian class narrows from nine percentage points to four.

Regarding satisfaction with housework division, the results show differential associations between classes in the effect on fertility intentions. In the non-egalitarian class and the public–private ambivalent class, the effect is not significant, while in the egalitarian class, it is positive (see Table 2, slopes). Interestingly, satisfaction with household division shows a negative (though not statistically significant) effect on fertility intentions among childless respondents.

These associations do not result in significant indirect effects (see Figure 4, panel b), but the significant interaction between class membership and the level of satisfaction with the division of housework at parity zero warrants closer attention. Given the gender differences in this relationship, Figure 5 displays class-specific fertility intentions at low (10th percentile) and high (90th percentile) levels of housework satisfaction, broken down by gender (Table A4 in the Online Appendix provides coefficient estimates). Importantly, at high levels of satisfaction with housework division, fertility intentions do not differ across classes for either men (panel b) or women (panel a). Another notable finding is that the interaction between class membership and housework satisfaction on fertility intentions is similar for men and women in the non-egalitarian class (negative slope) and the egalitarian class (positive slope). However, in the public–private ambivalent class contrasting patterns emerge: among men, those with ambivalent attitudes are more likely to intend to have a child as their satisfaction with housework division increases, while this pattern does not hold for women, similar to those in the non-egalitarian class.

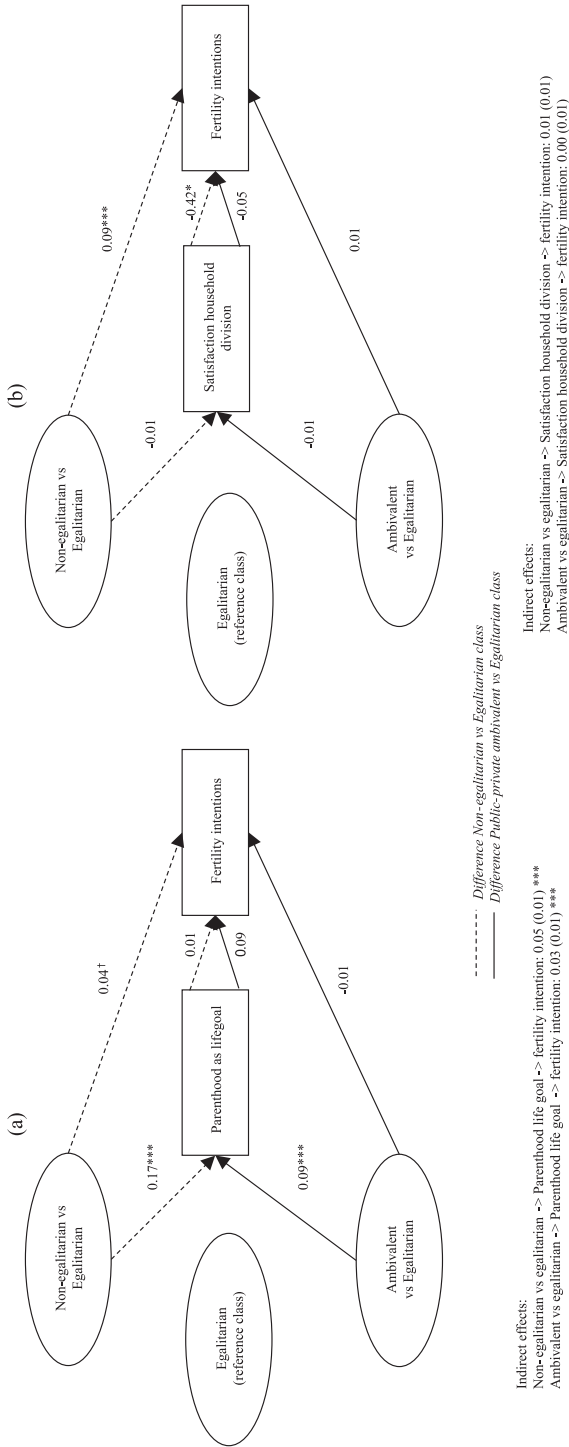
### Robustness checks and additional analyses

We conduct a number of additional analyses and robustness checks that are reported in the Online Appendix. We run country-specific LCA results to ensure that pooling data from the three countries does not obscure important differences in gender equality attitudes across countries. We find that the three-class solution is preferred in all countries and that the class patterns and sizes are substantively similar (Tables A6 and A7 in the Online Appendix). We also test for significance and compare class-specific country slopes in predicting fertility intentions to see if class-based differences vary by country, finding that these effects are not significant (Table A8 in the Online Appendix).

We repeat the LCA without gender-atypical answers on gender equality attitude items (excluding  $n = 948$ ) to verify that coding these responses



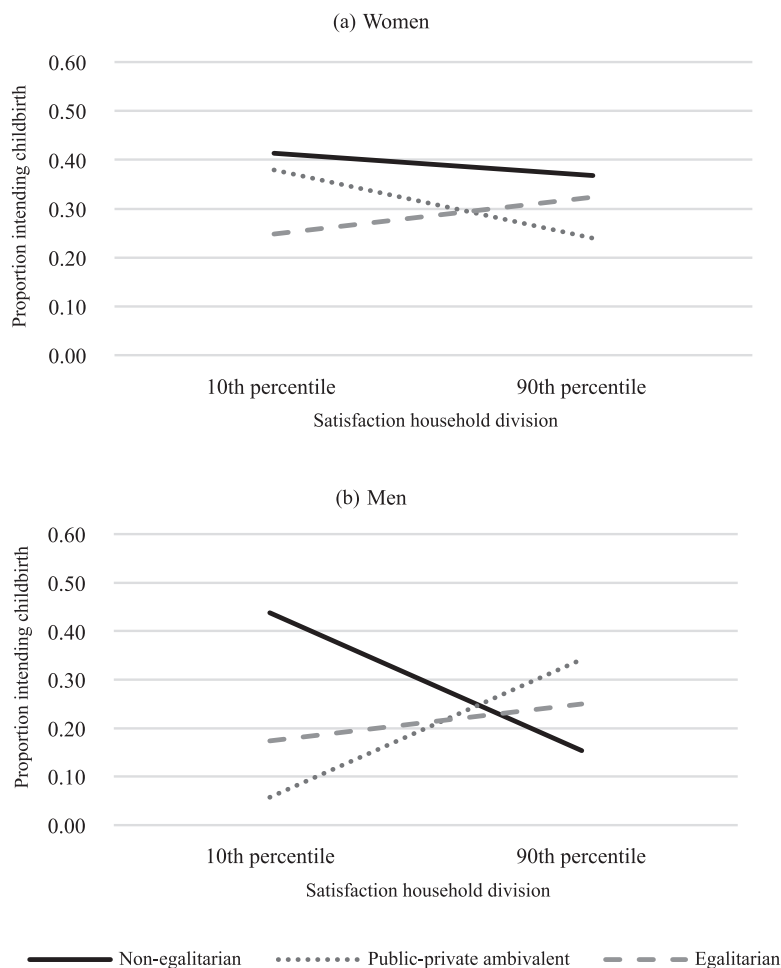
FIGURE 4 Differences between classes of childless respondents in the association of the importance of parenthood and satisfaction with household division with fertility intentions



NOTE: Indirect effects refer to class differences in total natural indirect effects.

SOURCE: Generations and Gender Surveys Round II (2020–2022) for Denmark, Finland, and Norway:  $N = 6,827$ . Country-equilibrated weights applied. Fertility intentions are controlled for gender, age, partnership status, education, employment status, migration background, and country of residence. (See Table A3 for estimates.)

**FIGURE 5** Fertility intentions of childless respondents at low and high levels of satisfaction with the division of housework by gender



NOTE: Fertility intentions controlled for gender, age, partnership status, education, employment status, migration background, and country of residence. Intercept differences between classes refer to all control variables set at their (parity-specific) grand mean.  
SOURCE: Generations and Gender Surveys Round II (2020–2022) for Denmark, Finland, and Norway;  $N = 6,827$ . Country-equilibrated weights applied.

as egalitarian does not affect the results. We find that the class pattern and distribution do not change (Table A9 in the Online Appendix).

We also analyze a variable capturing general fertility intentions, not tied to a specific time frame (intention to have a(nother) child at all). Here, we differentiate between respondents who definitively intend to have (more) children (coded as one) and all other responses (coded as zero). We report the estimates in Table A5 in the Online Appendix. These results indicate a smaller difference in fertility intentions (six percentage

points) between the non-egalitarian and the egalitarian class, while the non-egalitarian and public-private ambivalent classes show no significant differences. In contrast, results for short-term intentions show greater similarity between the public-private ambivalent and egalitarian class. The results concerning the importance of parenthood as a life goal, satisfaction with the division of housework, and class membership are substantively similar.

We also run sensitivity checks, including limiting the age range from 25 to 40 years, excluding employment and partnership status from fertility intentions covariates, and stratifying the analyses by partnership status. Our results remain robust to these changes in the model specification (Table A10 in the Online Appendix).

## Conclusion

In this study, we provide a comprehensive analysis of the micro-level associations between attitudes toward gender equality and fertility intentions in three Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway). These countries have recently experienced a decline in fertility, spurring renewed scholarly interest in cultural explanations for low fertility. We propose that even in highly gender-equal contexts like the Nordic countries, egalitarian couples may pursue diverse life goals that can compete with parenthood. Their comparatively lower emphasis on parenthood, relative to their non-egalitarian counterparts, contributes to their lower fertility intentions.

Using recent data and newly developed measures of gender equality attitudes, we employed LCA to identify three distinct profiles of these attitudes. The profiles align with those in previous studies using a multidimensional conceptualization of gender equality attitudes (Begall, Grunow, and Buchler 2023). Consistent with the idea that dominant societal values (here gender equality) influence individual attitudes and behavior (here gender role attitudes) (Hofstede 2001), a substantial portion of our sample (~70 percent) fell within the *egalitarian* profile while only a small minority was *non-egalitarian*.

Additionally, we identified an ambivalent profile (~20 percent) that combines egalitarian views on public roles with support for gendered roles within the family. This profile challenges the traditional linear model of gender attitudes, which assumes that individuals adopt a consistent stance on gender equality across public and private domains. Instead, the ambivalent profile suggests that attitudes toward gender roles can be domain-specific, with individuals potentially holding conflicting views across public and private contexts. Thus, individuals with public-private ambivalent attitudes cannot be situated on a simple continuum ranging from non-egalitarian to egalitarian.

The least prevalent profile (~10 percent), which we labeled as *non-egalitarian*, reflects gendered role assignments, with male-oriented public roles and female-oriented private roles. While others have referred to individuals with these attitudes as traditionalists, we avoid this term, as it tends to historicize the male breadwinner/female homemaker model (Janssens 1997).

Our findings highlight substantial heterogeneity in individual gender role attitudes, even in contexts with high diffusion of gender equality. Among our relatively young sample in these highly gender-equal Nordic societies, the presence of ambivalent gender role attitudes among one in five individuals underscores the complexity beyond the binary egalitarian-non-egalitarian concept of gender role attitudes. This is particularly significant given the stalled gender revolution and other current discourses about gender and fertility.

We find that uneven progress on the different dimensions of gender equality—and potential ambivalence regarding public and private roles—has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the analyses of gender and fertility. Survey instruments often used to gauge gender role attitudes originated in the 1970s–1980s and tend to reflect outdated norms that implicitly position men's roles as the fixed standard, primarily probing on women's rights and responsibilities (Baber and Tucker 2006). New items, such as those from GGP Round II, offer clearer alignment with current discourses on gender and parenthood.

Our analysis of fertility intentions indicates that, among men and women without children, gender equality attitudes significantly correlate with fertility intentions. Those holding non-egalitarian gender role attitudes show the highest intentions to have children, whereas egalitarian individuals show the lowest. Respondents with ambivalent gender equality attitudes report fertility intentions similar to egalitarians when it comes to first births.

For parents, we find no association between attitude profiles and intentions for additional children, in line with previous findings that factors influencing first births, such as educational attainment, may not hold explanatory power at higher orders (Balbo, Billari, and Mills 2013). This homogeneity among parents, likely due to selection and/or adaptation processes, aligns with our expectation that parenthood becomes more uniformly prioritized among those who have already transitioned to it.

To further explore the relationship between gender equality attitudes and fertility intentions, we examined the importance of parenthood as a life goal and satisfaction with the division of unpaid work. For childless respondents, lower prioritization of parenthood as a life goal among egalitarians partially explains their lower fertility intentions compared to the non-egalitarian class. Notably, among egalitarian parents, the importance of parenthood is higher than among their childless counterparts, indicating greater heterogeneity in life goals within this group. While we cannot distin-

guish whether this difference arises from adaptation or selection processes, it aligns with the SDT paradigm predictions that evolving values surrounding parenthood contribute to fertility trends.

Our findings also support the micro-mechanisms proposed by gender-equality fertility reversal theories, which emphasize the impact of the household labor division and the “double burden” of work and care. Although most respondents express satisfaction with the division of housework, this satisfaction only translates into higher fertility intentions for a child among egalitarian women and men. Conversely, among non-egalitarians, greater satisfaction with the division of housework correlates with *lower* intentions for a first child. This supports the view that achieving a satisfying (and perceived fair) division of unpaid labor is particularly crucial for childbearing intentions among egalitarian respondents.

Choosing to focus on fertility intentions rather than realized fertility warrants some discussion. Realization of intended births is not available to us given the cross-sectional nature of our data, but once longitudinal data in the form of the next wave of the GGS II are available our findings should be compared to actual fertility behavior. Since we conceptualize fertility decisions as planned, purposeful behavior, it is worth noting though that actual fertility behavior would also be an imperfect proxy, in particular if partnership behavior and age norms differ between groups of interest as is the case for gender attitudes. Higher rates of postponement among egalitarians may result in foregoing births involuntarily more often, thus overestimating the impact of gender attitudes on fertility. Combining information on intentions and behavior and studying realized intentions (Billari, Philipov, and Testa 2009), therefore seems a fruitful direction for future research once data availability allows for this.

In choosing to focus on short-term intentions (within three years) rather than lifetime desires, we aimed to capture individuals' immediate reproductive plans, closely tied to their current attitudes and circumstances. Short-term intentions offer greater relevance in the Nordic context, where delayed childbearing significantly impacts fertility rates. However, we acknowledge that this choice may underrepresent long-term fertility desires among young respondents who may intend to have children later. Our robustness checks, however, show consistent patterns of lower fertility intentions among egalitarians, regardless of intention time frame. Indeed, our results consistently show lower intentions for parenthood, be it short-term or long-term, between the egalitarian and the non-egalitarian respondents. The ambivalent group's intention aligns more with the egalitarian group for short-term intentions for a first birth but with non-egalitarians for general childbearing. While this is in line with our theoretical reasoning about a (anticipated) double burden in this group as well as their expected higher family orientation compared to the egalitarian

group, we believe this group will have to be further examined in future research.

Finally, while our cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations, this study offers a starting point for future longitudinal research to examine realized fertility behaviors. Further research may also benefit from qualitative approaches to explore how individuals with varying gender equality attitudes navigate competing life goals.

The fertility decline in the Nordic countries and the association between gender attitudes and fertility likely reflect forces beyond the scope of this study. Despite high gender equality in the Nordic countries, reconciliation of public and private roles remains incomplete. Recent growth in populist movements within the Nordic region could also signal cultural shifts potentially impacting fertility among egalitarian people by heightening societal pessimism (Ivanova and Balbo 2024).

Despite these limitations, our findings have several implications for understanding the gender equality–fertility nexus in the Nordic context. A substantial segment of the childless Nordic population reports satisfaction with household task division but does not necessarily prioritize parenthood as a primary life goal. These views are most prevalent among individuals with egalitarian gender role attitudes. This partly explains the relatively low fertility intentions reported by these groups. Notably, these individuals constitute the largest segment of the study population.

Assuming individuals realize their fertility intentions, these findings elucidate why low (and declining) fertility rates are observed in a context of high (and growing) diffusion of gender equality. Those with the highest fertility intentions—those typically holding non-egalitarian gender role attitudes—form the smallest segment of the population. Their relatively small population share diminishes their impact on national fertility trends. Additionally, low educated men, who are overrepresented in this group, encounter various structural and preference-driven constraints in the partner market, while, particularly for men partner status predicts the transition to parenthood.

Conversely, the low fertility aspirations among individuals with the most egalitarian attitudes may explain low fertility rates in gender-equal societies, which are not rooted in the nature of the opportunity structure of parenthood. Even if parenthood is made compatible with other life aspects, gender-equal societies may still face challenges due to continuously delayed first births and the resultant low fertility rates. While gender equality enhances the feasibility of combining parenthood and career, those embracing egalitarian gender role attitudes may prioritize other life goals, implying that the continued spread of gender egalitarian attitudes may not lead to rising fertility rates.

## Author contributions

N.H. and K.B. equally contributed to the design of the research, the performance of the research, the analysis of the data, and the writing of the paper.

## Acknowledgments

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## Data availability statement

This paper uses data from the second round of GGS (see Gauthier, A. H., et al. (2023). “Data Brief: The Generations and Gender Survey second round (GGS-II),” GGP Technical Paper Series, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10220746>) or visit the GGP website (<https://www.ggp-i.org/>) for methodological details.

Replication materials can be found at <https://osf.io/dnbp5/> [note to editors: we are currently setting up the online repository on OSF that will be published before the paper is published]

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## Note

1 A fifth statement included in the data collection, “*For whom is a university education more important, men or women?*”, was not con-

sidered due to a lack of variance (i.e., in the countries we studied, virtually everyone responded “both sexes equally”).

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