The Role of Educational Expansion in the Rise of Non-marital Childbearing in Croatia: A Decomposition Analysis

Research shows that individuals with lower educational attainment are more likely to have children outside marriage. However, as rates of non-marital childbearing have risen at the population level, they have coincided with expansions in education. Studies suggest that while the low-educated continue to have the highest proportion of births outside marriage, their declining numbers restrain their contribution to the observed growth in non-marital childbearing. Against this backdrop, our study delves into non-marital childbearing among first-time parents in Croatia, aiming to answer the following question: What portion of the rise in non-marital childbearing can be attributed to shifts in the educational composition of first-time mothers and fathers, as opposed to changes in education-specific rates? Drawing on vital statistics data from the mid-1980s onward, we examine the proportion of first children born outside marriage across low, medium, and high educational strata. Applying a decomposition analysis, we scrutinise the components of the overall increase in non-marital childbearing over four successive periods: pre-1990, 1990s, 2000s, and post-2010. Our findings, in line with broader trends, reveal an upward trajectory in non-marital childbearing across all educational groups. The most notable contribution to the overall rise in non-marital childbearing stems from rate changes among the medium-educated. On the whole, increases in education-specific rates fully explain the rise of non-marital childbearing among first-time parents in Croatia; the total compositional effect is found to work in the opposite direction. This indicates that the increase in non-marital childbearing resulting from behavioural changes was to an extent counteracted by educational expansion. The paper advances our understanding of the relationship between education and non-marital childbearing by providing context-specific information from Croatia.

Keywords: non-marital childbearing, educational expansion, decomposition analysis, Croatia