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# SOME FEATURES OF RECENT DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN SWEDEN

by

**Britta Hoem**

Stockholms Universitet
Demografiska avdelningen
S-106 91 Stockholm

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# Some features of recent demographic trends in Sweden

**by Britta Hoem, Statistics Sweden, Stockholm**[1]

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## Introduction

During the late 1980s, the total fertility rate grew rapidly in Sweden (Figure 1) and in 1990, Sweden had the highest fertility level in Europe. This was quite a new situation for this country, which since long has been known for piloting modern demographic behaviour and for having a low fertility level. Politicians, demographers, economists, and the general public wanted to learn how that could happen in this country, where labour force participation rates for women are at an international high, where gender equality has come further than in most other countries, where cohabitation is more wide-spread than anywhere else, and where dissolution rates are among the higher ones too. Was it because of the favourable economic situation with full employment and so on, was it due to our generous family policies, or was the reason perhaps more of a reaction to the postponement of childbearing that Sweden had experienced since the mid-1970s like most other Western countries? Another question asked was whether Sweden remained a forerunner of trends to come, which would mean that other countries could expect the same development in the near future.

Such considerations motivated the new survey called *Family and working life*, where the fieldwork started in late 1992. Many countries were planning family surveys at the same time in order to get a better understanding of demographic behaviour, and comparative projects were on the books as well[2]. There was a lot of interest in including Sweden in these international comparisons.

Since the early 1990s, the situation is quite different, however, both as regards the fertility level and economic circumstances. The

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[1] I am grateful to Jan M. Hoem for editorial advice.

[2] Sweden is a member in the European Fertility and Family Surveys project, undertaken by the Population Activities Unit of the Economic Commission for Europe. A standard recode file will be available through the ECE.

Swedish unemployment rate has been at a record high and the total fertility level has fallen to 1.72 (1995). The new fertility decrease has not come to an end yet and few demographers are willing to guess how fertility will develop even in the short run.

The purpose of this paper is to present some results from the Swedish survey of 1992. Our account is based on four reports published in Swedish in 1995.[3]

## Data

The 1992 survey on the *Family and working life* has a wide framework designed for life-course analysis. The sample consists of eight cohorts, namely, women born in 1949, 1954, 1959, 1964 and 1969, and men born in 1949, 1959 and 1964. The unorthodox selection of single-year birth cohorts was made to get a sample well fitted for life-course analysis and to facilitate the identification of period effects.

Almost 5 000 women and men were interviewed (Table 1). The nonresponse rate was about 22 per cent. That is about the same level as in other surveys carried out by face-to-face interviews by Statistics Sweden. The nonresponse rate was somewhat higher for men than for women, it was higher for unmarried and divorced women and men than for the married, it was higher in densely populated areas like Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö and for people with a low income than for other groups.

The survey contained questions on a number of aspects of the life course and covered the following features:

Childhood and adolescence,
childbearing history (incl. adoptions),
childbearing plans for the future,
history of union formation and disruption,
attitudes towards abortions and divorces etc., and
employment and educational history.
Some questions were also put to the respondent's partner.[4]

## First union formation

Marriage rates fell dramatically in the second half of the 1960s. Simultaneously, nonmarital cohabitation grew tremendously. Al-

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[3] Britta Hoem: "Kvinnors och mäns liv", Demografiska rapporter, 1995:2, volumes 1-4, Statistics Sweden, Stockholm.

[4] Such responses were collected on a mail-back questionnaire.

ready in cohorts born in the late 1930s, every third woman reported that her first union was consensual. (This information is from the fertility survey of 1981.) Sweden was a forerunner in this development, and consensual unions remain much more common in Sweden than anywhere else in the Western world, though levels in the other Nordic countries have come rather close, especially in Denmark.

During the 1970s, when nonmarital cohabitation grew very rapidly in popularity, first unions were also entered at progressively younger ages. Forty per cent of women born in 1959 had entered a union before the end of the year in which they turned 19 (that is, before the end of 1978), while only about 30 per cent had done so among women born ten years earlier (in 1949). See Figure 2.

This pattern reflects a general acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation, which rapidly became a very attractive alternative for young people. Instead of just going steady they could live together without all the public promises about the future connected to a marriage. For many young people in Sweden, to start living together with a partner probably is not a very decisive step. Sometimes the partners involved perhaps do not even consider it as their definitive choice. To split up is a realistic possibility which for some has become a natural step in the process of finding a partner. Many young women and men who have moved together when they were still teenagers, would probably not have entered the union if it had been necessary to marry at the same time.

In the cohorts born since 1959, there has been a new postponement in union formation, however, with the effect that the youngest cohort of women (born in 1969) has pretty much the same pattern as women born 20 years earlier.

Does that mean that young people deliberately started to postpone union formation again during the 1980s because their general attitudes to union formation had changed? This is unlikely, because the decrease is mostly explained by the fact that teenagers today spend more time in school than they ever did before, and schoolchildren engage in union formation less often than others.[5] An intensity-regression analysis of union formation among teenagers tells us that there has been almost no decrease at all in union forma-

[5] Students generally have a lower propensity to enter a union than those who have completed their education. Among teenagers, "students" are pupils in the Swedish "gymnasium" (secondary school). As the proportion of men and women who remain in school has increased, the compound result is a reduced tendency to start a union already as a teenager. The modern Swedish gymnasium encompasses both the usual academic programs for ages 16 through 19 and all vocational-training programs for youngsters at ages about 16 to 18. (For our cohorts, the vocational gymnasium normally took two years. In recent years, vocational programs have been extended to three years, which means that almost all children currently are in school until June of the year in which they turn 19. This extension did not affect our respondent cohorts.)

tion tendencies between women born in 1959 and women born in 1969 when educational activity is taken into consideration . Our findings concerning teenagers' union-formation propensity can be summarised as follows:

The propensity to enter a (marital or nonmarital) union as a teenager

has increased over the cohorts, and has then levelled off,
is higher for those who are pregnant (but that happens to very few teenagers in Sweden today),
is higher for teenagers with a father from the working-class (esp. for women),
is lower for teenagers whose mother worked as a white-collar employee,
is higher for those who have many siblings,
is higher for those who have lived with just one of the parents most of their childhood,
is lower for pupils and students, and
is lower for teenagers with at least one religiously active parent.

Few of these results are surprising. Note, however, that there are social differences in union formation even when we include educational activity in our model. One reason is, I think, that a person's behaviour at a certain age is determined not only by current circumstances but also by his or hers plans for the future. Such plans probably are very different by social background.

## Younger cohorts spend more time taking education

As we see in Figure 3, there has been a strong increase over the cohorts in the proportion who are students at the gymnasium level, that is up to age 18 or 19. Among women and men born in 1949, about half were full-time students in January the year they turned 17, as compared to more than 80 per cent of women and men born fifteen years later. This development is mostly a consequence of changes in the Swedish school system. Almost all children in our younger cohorts spent two or three years in the gymnasium after compulsory school, which starts in the year the child turns seven and takes nine years. Notice that very little has happened to the proportions who take education at higher ages. Most people believe that the younger generations study more often at the post-gymnasium level than before, but until the early 1990s this was not the case for Sweden. Later, the situation has improved somewhat,

probably caused by Sweden's bad economic situation, which makes further education a realistic alternative to unemployment for many youngsters.

In our first cohort, teenagers from a working-class background took the gymnasium less often than teenagers whose parents were white-collar employees (Figure 4). Today, the gymnasium has become almost compulsory irrespective of social background. Other patterns have remained very stable, however. Young people from the working class choose vocational programs in the gymnasium more often than others, while those who come from a more favourable background more often enter an academic-stream gymnasium program which better prepares them for further education. Important remaining social differences in educational attainment after age 18 continue to influence union-formation behaviour.

## No lifelong consensual unions

What happens then to the first nonmarital union? This is illustrated in Figure 5, which shows union status for up to five years after entry in a first consensual union. For the oldest cohort (born in 1949) it was relatively common to marry rather quickly. Among women and men in younger cohorts, consensual unions did not last for ever either, but in these cohorts it was much more common to split up than to marry. First unions have progressively tended to be disrupted, often after very soon and before a child is born. In fact, as many as every fourth woman born in 1969 had experienced a separation before age 23 (Figure 6). Every third woman who had ever entered a union, had experienced a separation by age 23. This is a real increase from older cohorts.

## Marriage - the second step in union formation

Even if cohabitation has become very common in Sweden today, so far most people have married sooner or later, at least if they have not moved apart relatively shortly after union formation. Marriage is especially common among those who have children. To become a parent still very often means that people marry, either before or after the child is born.[6] Those who had at least one religiously active parent, also married to a greater extent than others. Note, though, that many youngsters enter nonmarital unions even if they have a religious background.

When consensual unions are so prevalent, then why do people marry? Those who had married relatively recently before the inter-

[6] Most Swedish men and women are unmarried when they become parents for the first time. About half of the men and women born in 1949 were married when they got their first child as compared to only three out of ten in the younger cohorts. (In this connection I have made the comparison for those who had their first child before October of the year when they when they the turned 28.)

view were asked why they did marry. The most common answer was that they wanted to show their surroundings that their relation was serious. Evidently, it is very common to regard marriage as a natural second step in the union-formation process.

## The first birth is delayed

Even if our younger cohorts have entered their first unions at quite young ages, they have postponed their childbearing. Already in the mid-1980s, demographers argued that to enter a union does not mean that you want to have children right away any more, and that is of course even more true today. Figure 7 shows the per cent childless among men and women, by age. About half of all women born in 1949 were childless in October of the year they turned 23, as compared to three out of four born twenty years later. It is now very unusual to have a child as a teenager in Sweden.

Note also that the curves in the diagram converge as we come to higher ages, which means that the number of women who remain childless does not differ much between the cohorts. People compensate at higher ages for their low fertility at younger ages. At least so far we have no signs of a noticeable increase in the number of women who are childless at age 40, say. This may change in the future, for the risk that a woman remains childless involuntarily is increased if she postpones childbearing to ever higher ages.

## Why do young people postpone parenthood?

To postpone childbearing is not just a Swedish phenomenon, it occurs in most Western countries. But <u>why</u> do young people delay parenthood? It is very hard to give a complete answer to that question even when with all the information that we have about union formation, childbearing, and employment and other activity status month by month. It is often argued that childbearing is postponed as a consequence of prolonged time in education and by the necessity to get established in the labour market, and mainly because of changes in women's job situation. As we mentioned above, however, young men and women have not spent more time taking education after age 18-19 now than earlier, so this argument does not fit the Swedish pattern well. Furthermore, it was not all that hard to establish oneself firmly in the labour market, at least not during most of the 1980's, and for most women and men it did not take so long. This does not disprove the employment argument, however, for moving into parenthood is not just a question of having some job first. Other aspects are also very important, such as having a relatively high salary, landing a sufficiently interesting job, and so on. More economic research is needed to settle this issue.

## Young people want to do "other things" before becoming a parent

The picture is made more complex by the attitudinal changes that have occurred. Some attitudinal aspects have been picked up in the family survey. It shows that most young women and men want to have children sooner or later (Table 2). Those who were childless at interview but who answered that they planned to have children later, were asked why they had postponed childbearing. The most common answer, irrespective of the respondent's age, was that they just wanted to do something else before they became parents, not that they needed to get established in the labour market or had some other economic reason (Table 3).

## Early union dissolutions lead to postponed parenthood

Beside the preference for "other activities", it was relatively common to answer that there was no suitable partner available for the moment, even among those who were in their late twenties. This may have been one of the consequences of the strong increase in union disruption among young, childless women and men, a development which in itself may have lead to postponed childbearing. To illuminate this pattern, we use Figure 8 to compare the initiation of childbearing in two cohorts, namely women and men born 1949 and 1964. (Remember that these two cohorts had about the same age at union formation.) The diagram shows what has happened to those who started their first union before age 23 (which was true for 75 per cent of the female respondents and 50 per cent of the men).

Somewhat more than sixty per cent of the women born in 1949 had become a mother within the first four to five years of their first union, as compared to just about half as many among women born in 1964. For men the difference is about the same. What is even more remarkable is that more than every third woman in the 1964 cohort had separated within the first five years of the union, as compared to fourteen per cent among women born in 1949. So, even if there is this strong decrease in the number of families who have at least one child, there is a much smaller difference in the per cent of intact families who are still childless after five years. Obviously, it takes some time to get established in a firm family relationship too. This may be a contributory explanation to the postponement of childbearing, and it may be as important as getting established in the labour marked.

## Differences between women's and men's employment patterns arise when the first child is born

Sweden is well known as a country where gender equality has come further than in most other countries and where women's and

men's lives have become more and more similar to each other. This does not preclude vast differences in behaviour in reality.

Up to age 33, life for women born in 1959 had a very varied activity pattern. Note how women move back and forth between part-time and full-time work (see Figure 9). It is easy to see how strongly their working lives are affected by their family situation. After a child is born, they are full-time housewives for a while, and they frequently go into part-time work when they return to their paid jobs. (In Figure 9, household work covers both those who are on parental leave and any more traditional housewives.)

For men at the same ages, their activity patterns were dominated by just three activities: studies, military service, and full time employment. A man's employment pattern is influenced when he becomes a parent too, but unlike women, men's employment patterns become less varied. Since 1974, Swedish men have had the same right as women have had to stay at home for some months and to work at reduced working hours (with a corresponding reduction in pay) to take care of children, and almost as many women as men are gainfully employed, but traditional gender-based work-patterns have largely remained nevertheless.

## A mother's level of education is the decisive factor in the father's use of parental leave

For all children reported in the survey, respondents were asked if the father had taken any parental leave. About every forth child born during the period 1985-90 had a father who had taken out at least one month of parental leave. For both a woman and a man, the higher the level of education she or he has, the more common it is that the father uses at least this much parental leave. Since there is a strong connection between women's and men's levels of education, the question is, however, whether it is the woman's or the man's educational level which is the stronger determinant of the father's parental leave.

For children whose parents lived together at interview, it is possible to examine how the father's use of parental leave varies when both parents' educational levels are taken into consideration. It then turns out that it is the woman's educational level which is the determining factor. The effect of the fathers educational level disappears almost entirely when the woman's level of education is controlled for at the same time. The woman's educational level retains its powerful influence on the father's leave-taking behaviour.

How can we understand this? Is it possible that women need to be given stronger motives to allow fathers to participate and not just fathers that must be exhorted to take parental leave? In any case, a new law that took force as of 1 January 1995 reserves one

month of the total parental leave for the father (and one month for the mother). Its main purpose was to strongly encourage fathers to take more active responsibility for their own small children.

## Concluding remarks

In this report we have summarised some important findings from the 1992 survey *Family and Working Life.* It shows that just about all women and men in Sweden have had children or expect to have children in the future. The normal expectation is to have at least two children. Despite women's high labour-force participation, gender-role patterns are quite traditional in Swedish families. It is mostly the woman who stays at home during the parental leave, and if one partner takes out reduced working hours when the children are small, it is invariably the woman who does so.

One noticeable change from our older to our younger cohorts is the strong increase in first unions that are disrupted. This is probably a consequence of the large number of couples that form at young ages. Most first-time cohabitants remain childless and many of those who dissolve their first union, enter a new union quite quickly after the disruption. Presumably, this pattern is an element among those that lead to a postponement of the entry into parenthood. It takes time to establish a relationship that is durable enough that the partners feel confident in having children.

During the second half of the 1980s, Sweden had a very favourable economic situation and a heated labour market. There was very little unemployment and quite easy to find a job for a young person. Since the early 1990s, the situation has been radically different. Unemployment is at a record high and welfare services have suffered severe cut-backs. The benefit level of parental leave has been cut to 70% of the parent's normal wage, and child benefits have been reduced as well. To what extent this has repercussions that contribute to the strong recent fertility decline in Sweden, is a pressing question.

## Table 1. Number of interviews and nonresponse rate by sex and year of birth

| Cohort/(age in 1992) | Number of interviews | Nonresponse rate (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Women** | | |
| 1969 (23 years) | 667 | 22 |
| 1964 (28 years) | 643 | 24 |
| 1959 (33 years) | 679 | 20 |
| 1954 (38 years) | 659 | 22 |
| 1949 (43 years) | 670 | 20 |
| All women | 3 317 | 22 |
| **Men** | | |
| 1964 (28 years) | 638 | 25 |
| 1959 (33 years) | 381 | 23 |
| 1949 (43 years) | 647 | 23 |
| All men | 1 666 | 23 |
| **Total** | 4 984 | 22 |

## Table 2. Plans of future childbearing among childless women and men

| | Number of persons | Childen in the future? (per cent) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Yes | Perhaps | Probably not | Absolutely not | No answ.* | Total |
| **Women** | | | | | | | |
| 1969 (23 years) | *455* | 93 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| 1964 (28 years) | *214* | 83 | 11 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| 1959 (33 years) | *102* | 50 | 28 | 11 | 6 | 5 | 100 |
| 1954 (38 years) | *62* | 8 | 19 | 45 | 23 | 5 | 100 |
| 1949 (43 years) | *60* | 8 | 10 | 20 | 48 | 13 | 100 |
| **Men** | | | | | | | |
| 1964 (28 years) | *309* | 81 | 13 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 100 |
| 1959 (33 years) | *87* | 55 | 25 | 14 | 3 | 1 | 100 |
| 1949 (43 years) | *93* | 10 | 27 | 36 | 19 | 9 | 100 |

* The group with no recorded answer also includes respondents who were not asked this question, usually because they said they were too old to have children.

**Table 3. Main reasons given for not having had children so far. Only respondents who expect to have a child in the future**

| | Number of persons | Main reason (per cent) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No partner | Educ./ work | Other things | Not succeeded so far | Other reasons | Total |
| **Women** | | | | | | | |
| 1969 (23 years) | *420* | 12 | 26 | 56 | 2 | 4 | 100 |
| 1964 (28 years) | *178* | 2+ | 19 | 52 | 6 | 4 | 100 |
| 1959 (33 years) | *51* | 24 | 8 | 41 | 14 | 14 | 100 |
| **Men** | | | | | | | |
| 1964 (28 years) | *250* | 24 | 13 | 49 | 5 | 8 | 100 |
| 1959 (33 years) | *48* | 29 | 10 | 42 | 13 | 6 | 100 |
| **Respondents aged 28, by co-residential status** | | | | | | | |
| **In consensual or marital union** | | | | | | | |
| Women | *94* | 1 | 25 | 64 | 9 | 2 | 100 |
| Men | *125* | 4 | 16 | 60 | 9 | 11 | 100 |
| **Not in a co-residential union** | | | | | | | |
| Women | *84* | 41 | 13 | 38 | 2 | 6 | 100 |
| Men | *125* | 44 | 10 | 38 | 2 | 6 | 100 |

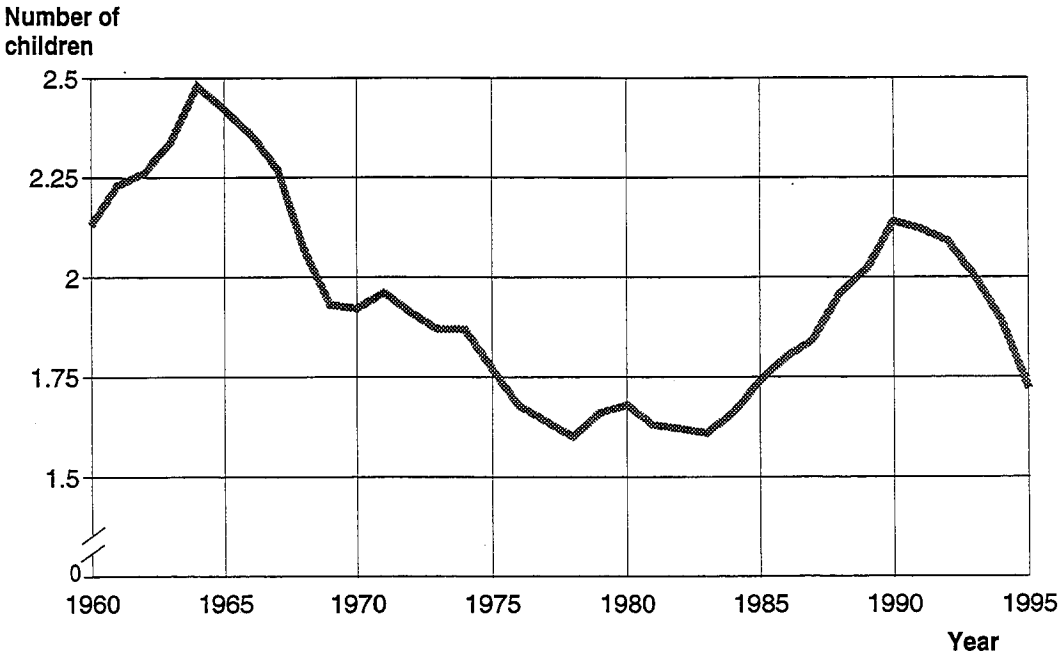


**Figure 1. Total Fertility Rate for Sweden, 1960-1995.**

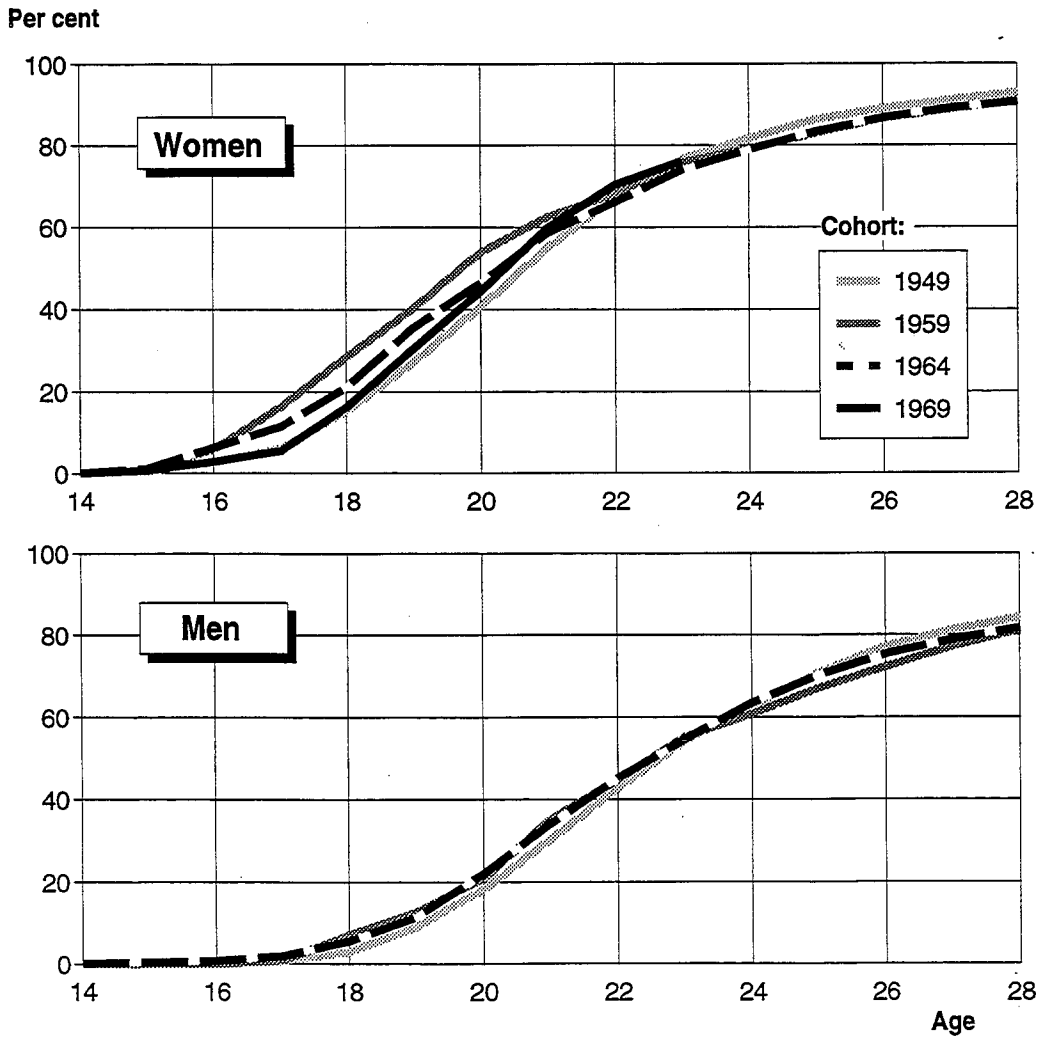


**Figure 2. Per cent who have ever entered a (marital or nonmarital) union among women and men, separately, in selected birth cohorts, by age.**

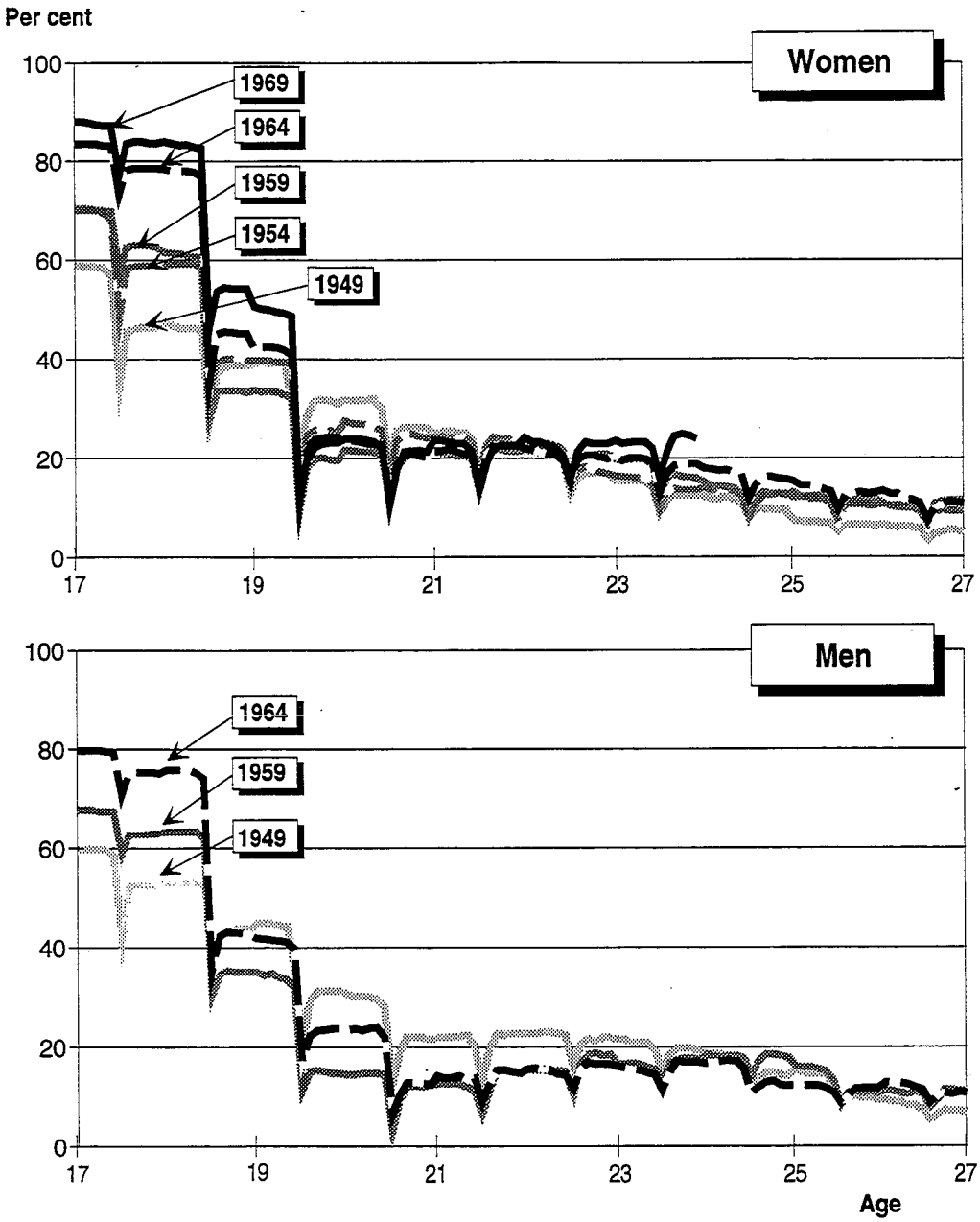


**Figure 3. Per cent taking education among women and men, separately, by age and birth cohort.**

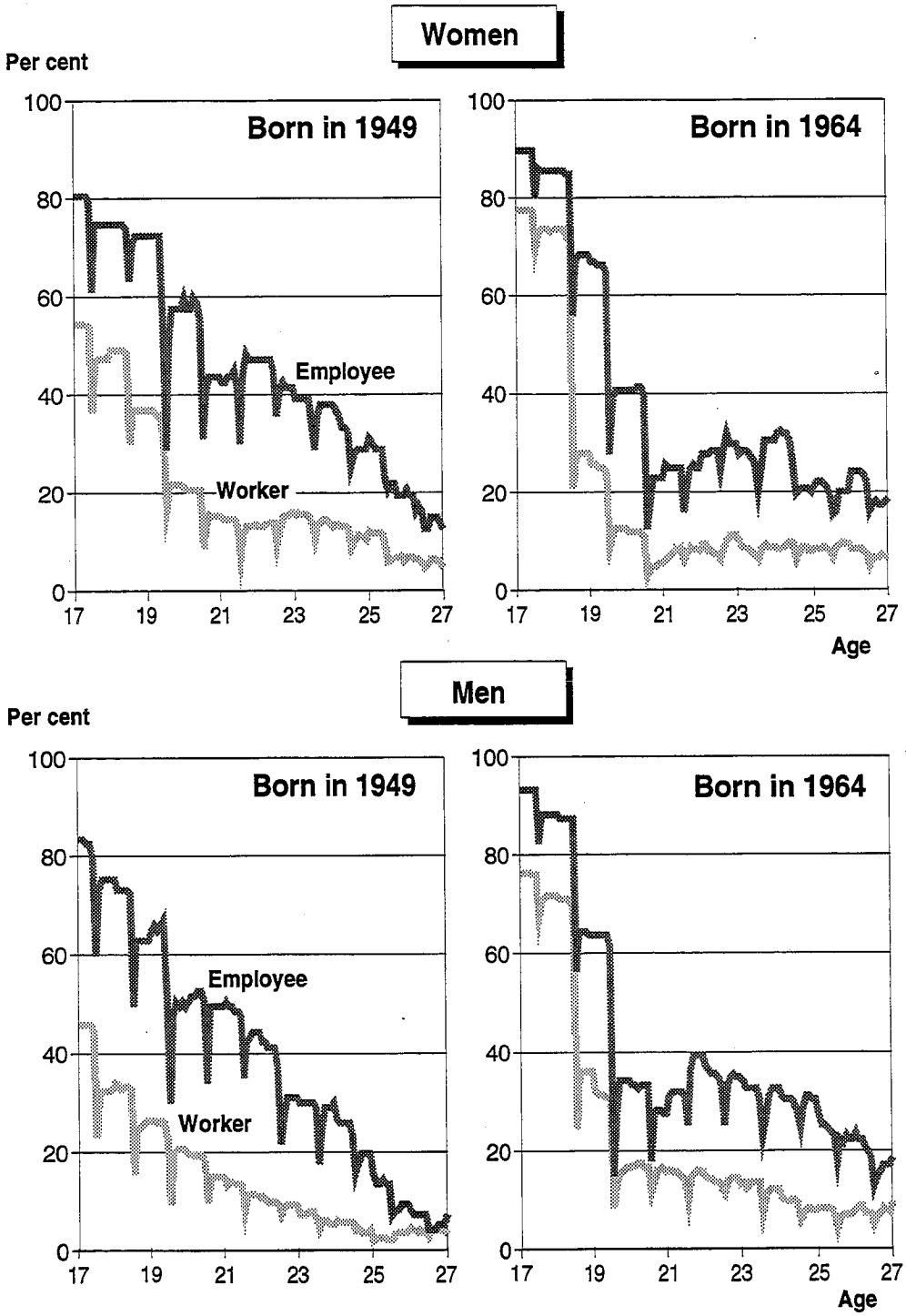


**Figure 4. Per cent taking education among women and men, separately, by age and social background, for selected birth cohorts.**

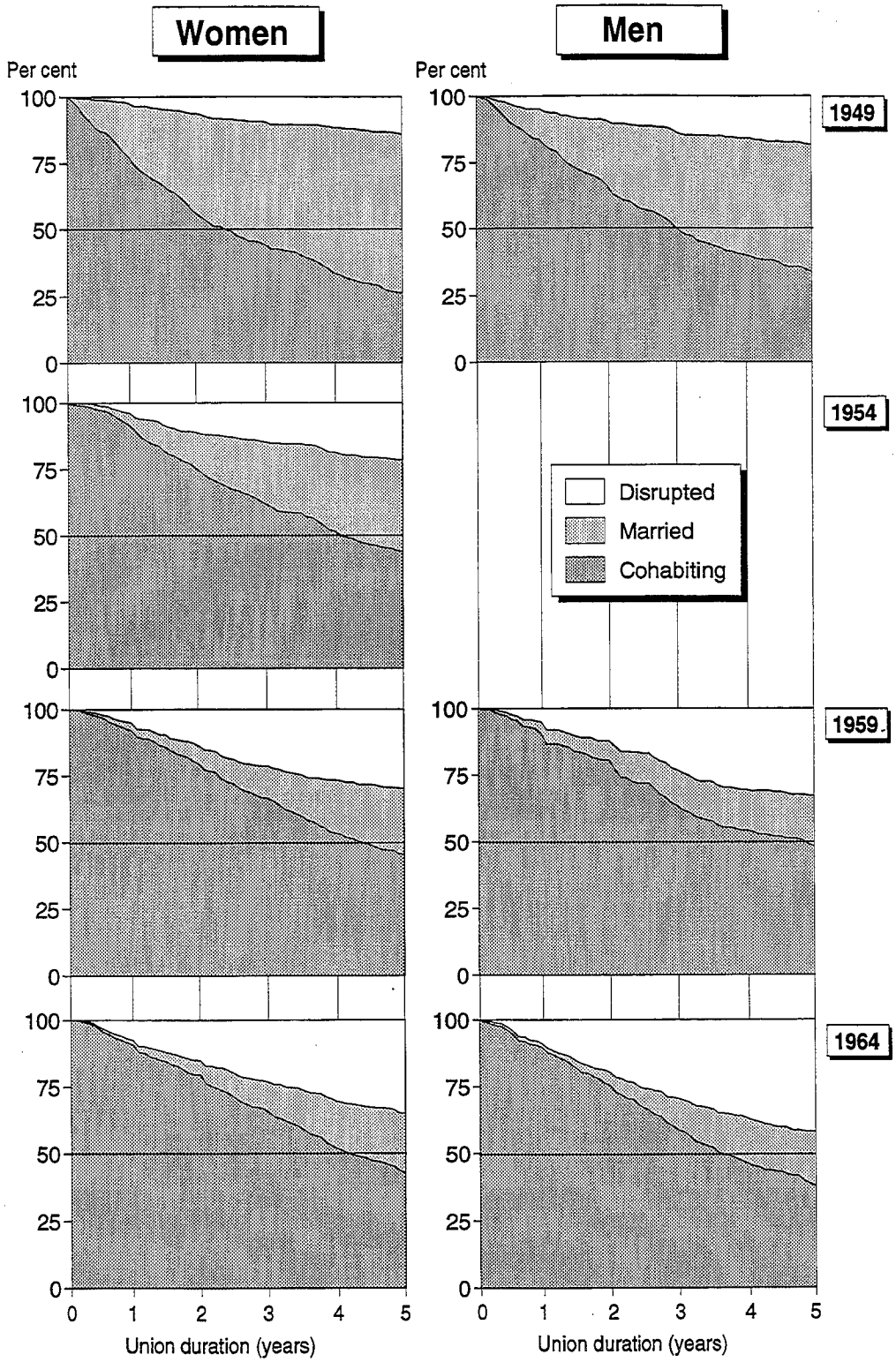


**Figure 5. Distribution over union statuses, by union duration, for first unions that started as consensual unions, in selected birth cohorts.**

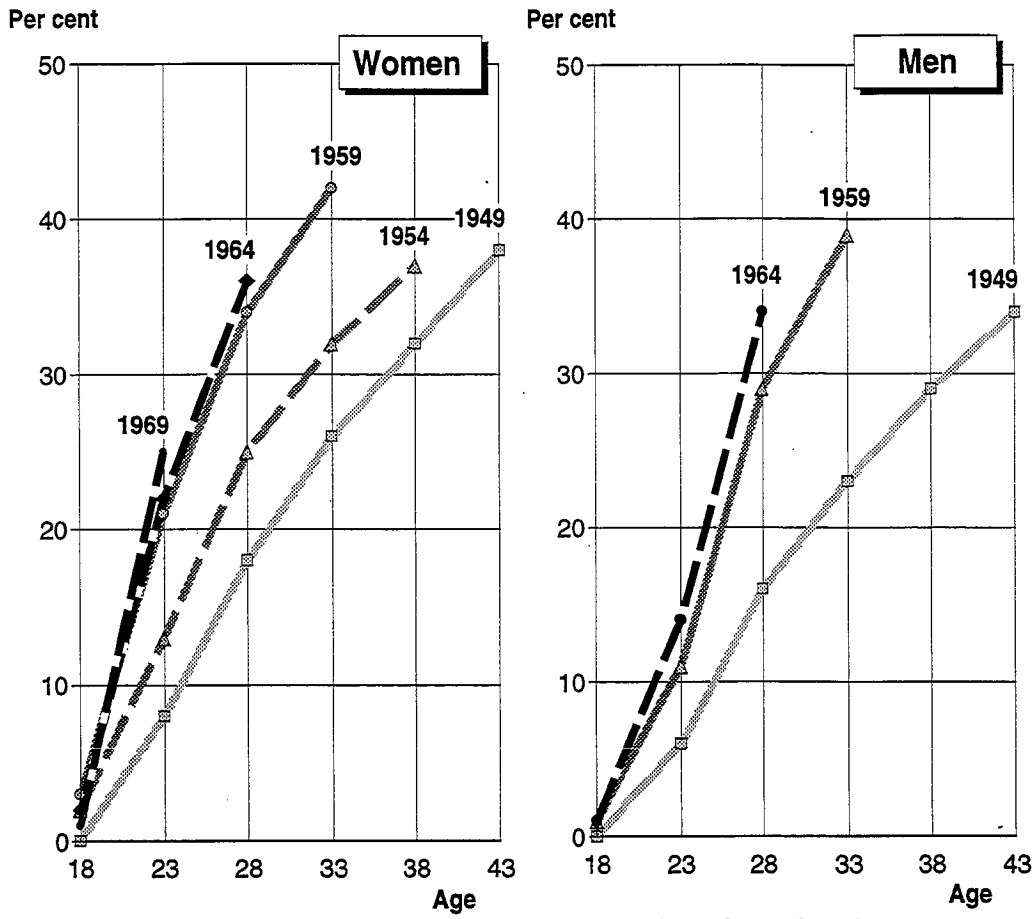


**Figure 6. Per cent who have ever experienced a union disruption, by age, sex, and cohort.**

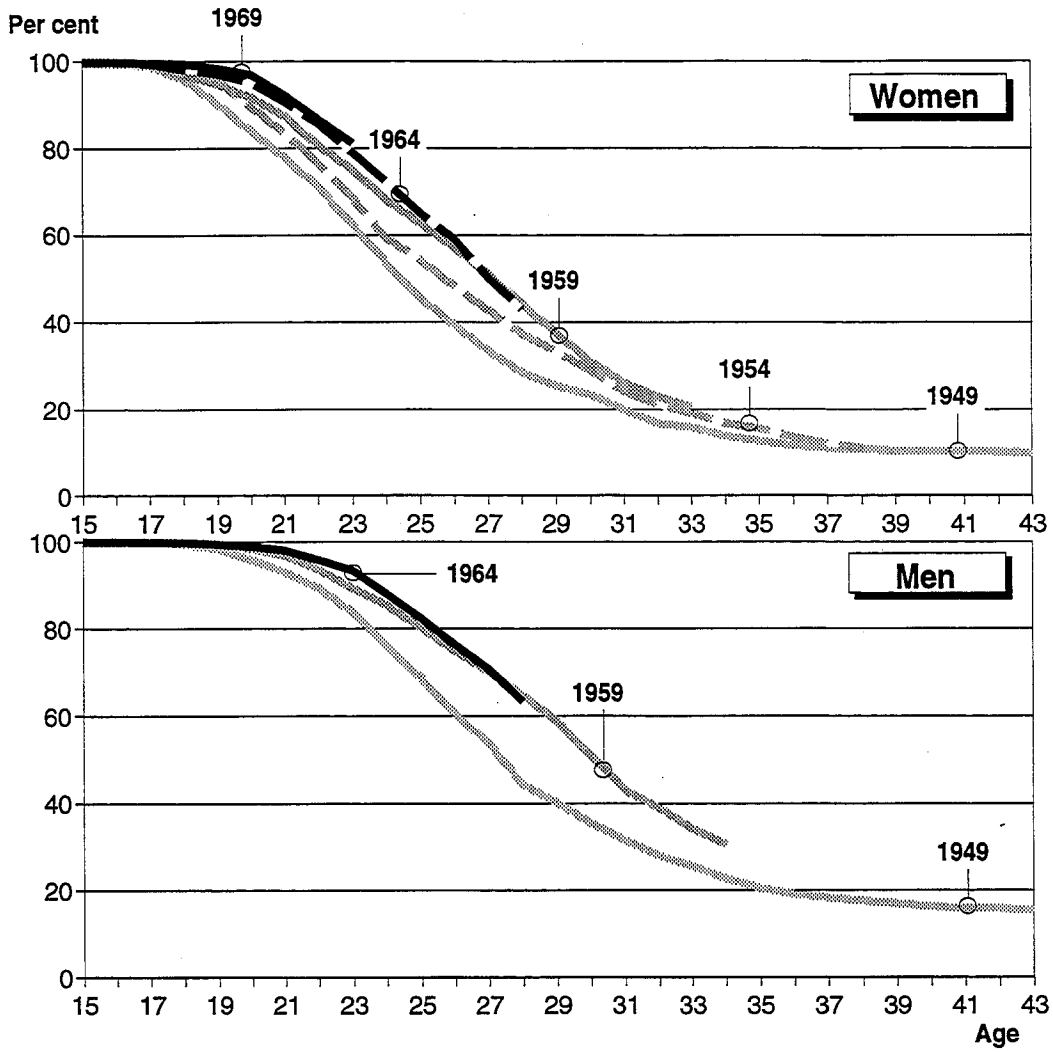


**Figure 7. Per cent childless, by sex, age, and cohort.**

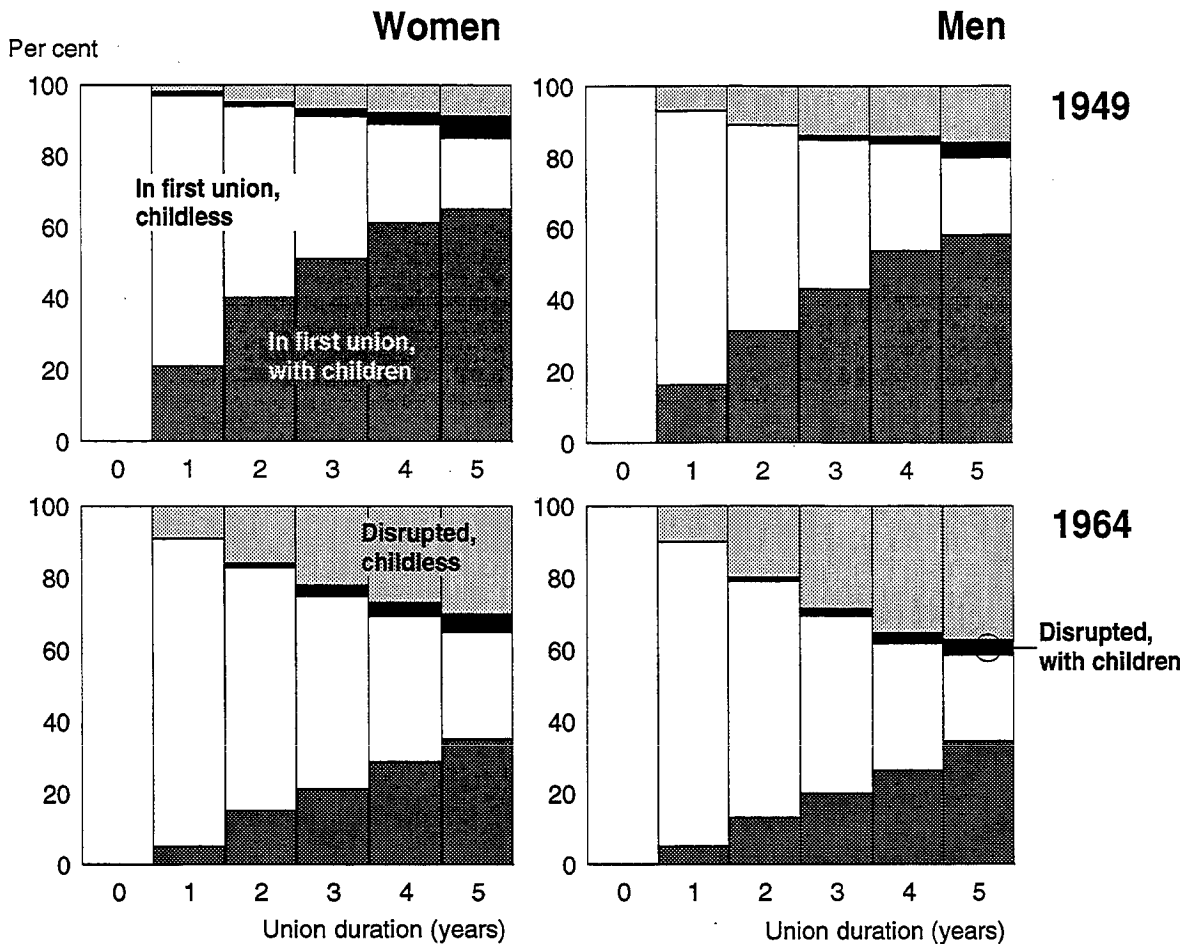


**Figure 8. Distribution over union and parenthood status, by union duration, for all first unions in selected birth cohorts, separately for women and men.**

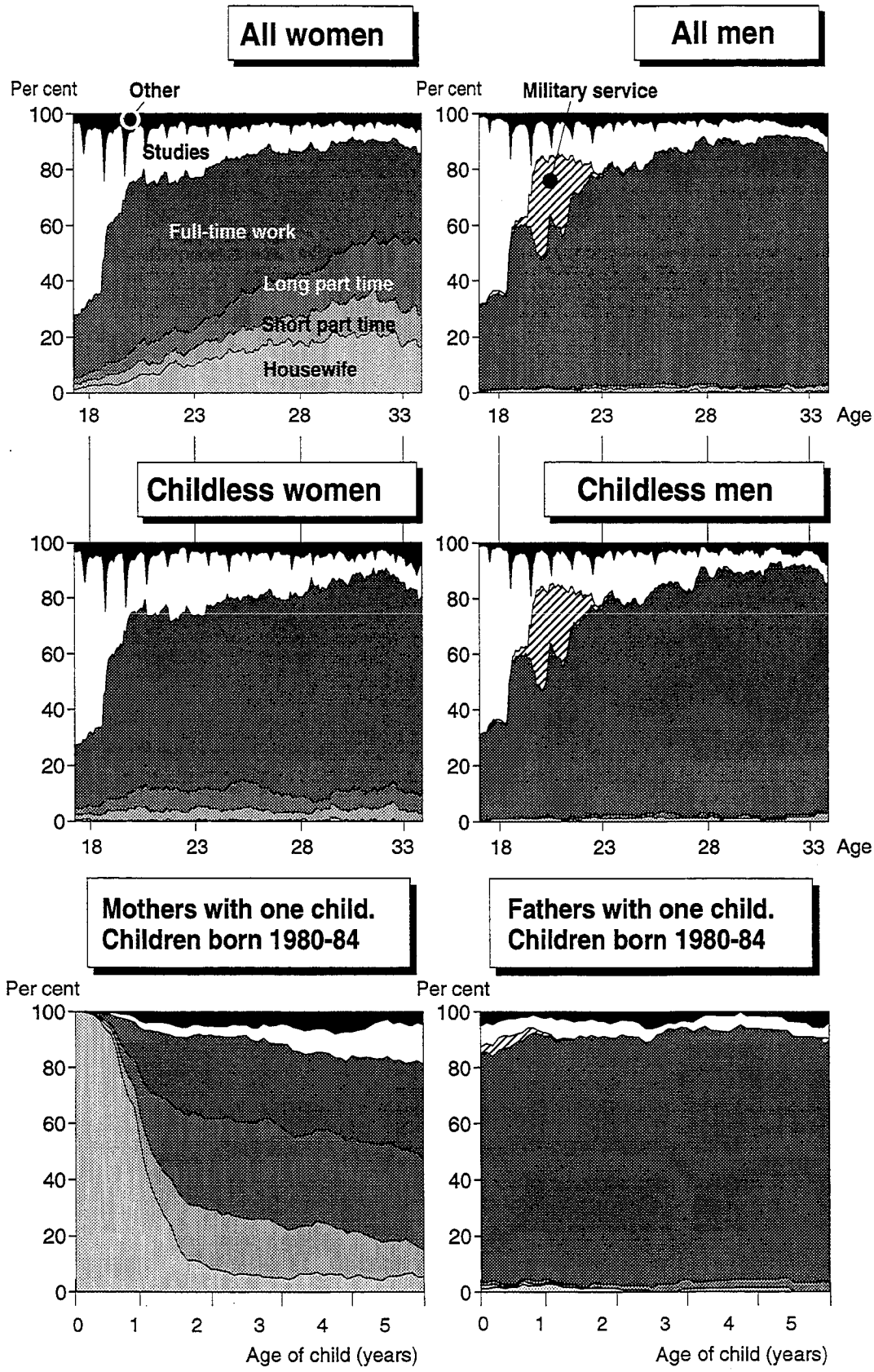


**Figure 9. Distribution by employment status, month by month, separately for women and men. First panel: All women and men born in 1959, at ages 17-34. Second panel: Childless women and men born in 1959, at ages 17-34. Third panel: All mothers and fathers of firstborn children born in 1980-1984, by age of child.**