

relatively high fertility rates (OECD, 2005b). Clearly, the degree of incompatibility between paid work and having children has diminished, but there are substantial cross-country differences: combining childrearing and being in employment is most incompatible in the Mediterranean countries, some central European countries, Japan and Korea.

With birth rates in excess of 1.75 per woman and with two-thirds of women in employment, it seems that Nordic countries and Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States have the best outcomes. Sometimes the compatibility of paid work and childrearing is due to the existence of comprehensive public support systems (as in Nordic countries), or largely related to parents making use of flexible workplace practices. In general, since female labour market aspirations have changed, all policies which enhance female labour force participation also help countries to have fertility rates that are close to those needed to assure the future stability of their populations.

2.3.3. A widening gap between desired and observed fertility rates

Changes in work and living environments and life styles have contributed to men and women postponing parenthood, and having fewer children than previous generations. However, to what extent does this reflect their preferences rather than constraints imposed by, for example, labour market insecurity, education and housing costs, and difficulties in reconciling work and family life. Indications about the potential role of these constraints on women's childbearing decisions can be derived from answers to questions about the "desired" or "ideal" numbers of children provided from opinion surveys. While interpreting answers to these questions is not straightforward, the evidence summarised in Chart 2.4 highlights a number of consistent patterns:⁵

- Women generally have fewer children than they desire. Exceptions to this pattern – in Turkey (in all years) and Mexico and Korea (in 1980s) – are limited to countries that are (or were) characterised by lower per capita income and lower diffusion of contraceptive methods.
- The gap between desired and observed fertility rates is higher in countries where fertility rates are lowest. Some of the OECD countries where fertility rates are lowest (Japan, Italy and Spain) in 2000 recorded the largest gaps between desired and actual fertility rate, while countries with higher fertility rates (France and the United States) show smaller gaps.
- The gaps between desired and actual fertility rates have increased over the past ten to twenty years. On average, across the countries for which data are available in each of the three years shown, the gap between desired and actual fertility rates grew from 1980 to 1990 and from 1990 to 2000.