Comparison of cohort abortion among those aged 20 and over in Finland

Heini Väisänen

H.E.Vaisanen@lse.ac.uk

Map of Finland (dark green)

LSE
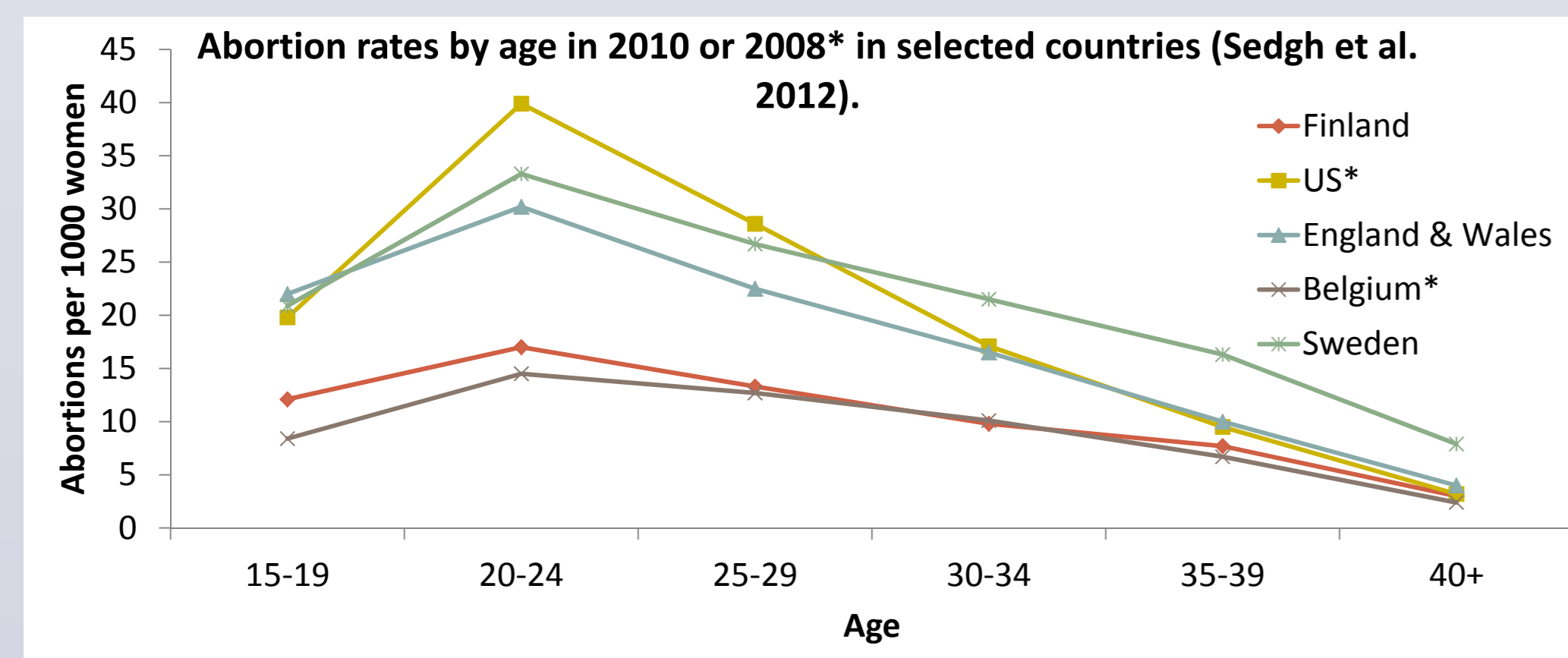
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INTRODUCTION

- Low education and high opportunity costs are associated with higher risk of abortion
- Universal access to family planning reduces induced abortions but does it reduce socioeconomic differences in abortion?
- Abortion studies often suffer from underreporting of abortions, and lack longitudinal data
- This study explores whether the association between education and abortion changed across cohorts using a unique longitudinal set of Finnish register data of three female birth cohorts focusing on abortions due to social indication

CONTEXT

- Finland provides easy access to family planning services and financial and other help to families
- A high-quality education system free of charge from primary school to higher education ensures high social mobility
- An interesting setting to study whether socioeconomic differences in abortion disappear if universal family planning is available over a long period of time
- Liberal abortion legislation (since 1970) and attitudes in Finland
- Abortion rate in Finland is comparatively low

Abortion rates by age in 2010 or 2008* in selected countries (Sedgh et al. 2012).

DATA AND METHODS

Data

- Unique nationally representative data on three female birth cohorts (1955-1959, 1965-1969 and 1975-1979) from administrative registers
- An 80% random sample women who had had an abortion (N=91,636) and a comparison group of women who had not had an abortion (N=183,272)
- Variables: education, occupational SES, place of residence, immigration status, relationship status, indication of abortion (social/medical), timing of abortions and births

Methods

- Abortion rates per 1000 women by education and cohort
- Changes in the educational inequality in abortion studied using concentration curves
- Discrete-time event history analyses controlling for other factors known to be associated with abortion behaviour run separately for the cohorts and age-groups (20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35+)

RESULTS

Figure 1. The number of first abortions due to social indication per 1000 women of the same age and education
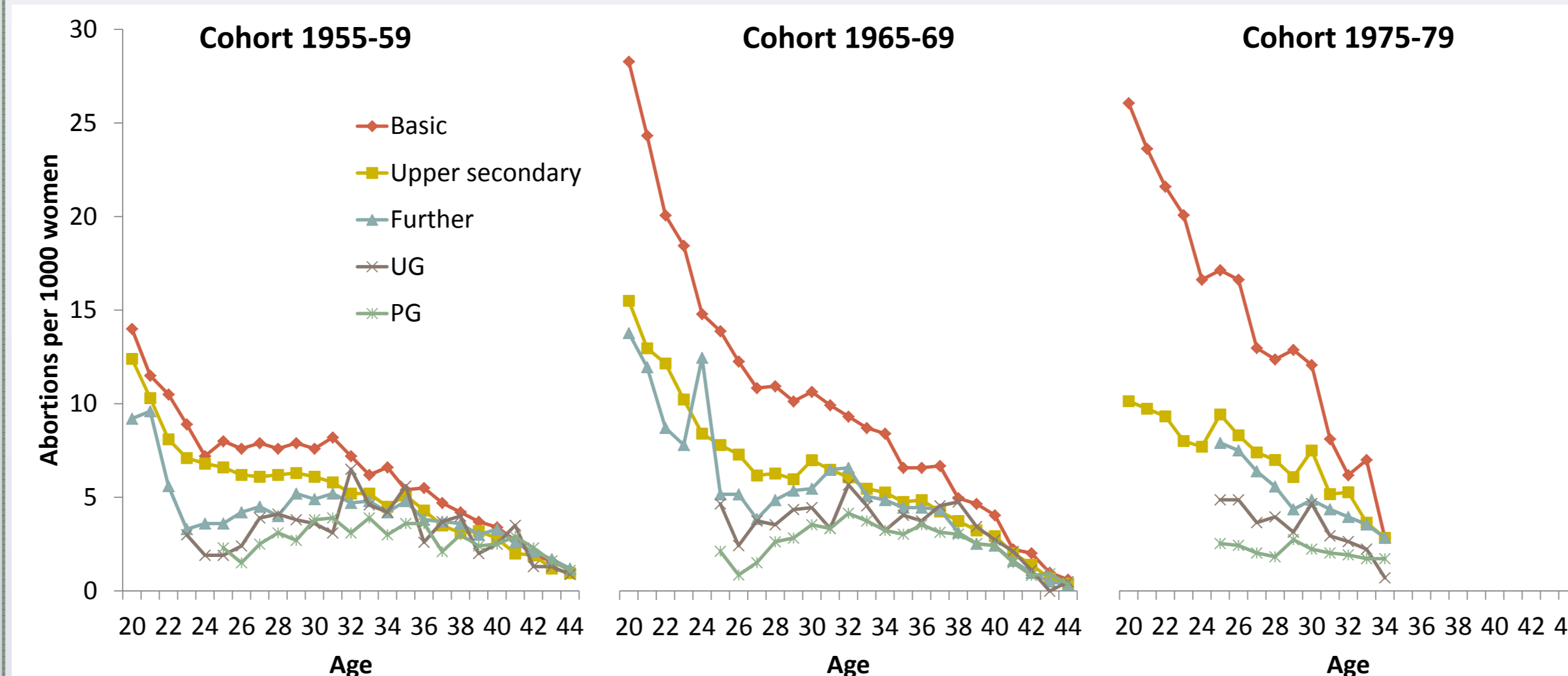

Figure 2. Concentration curves of the incidence of first abortion due to social indication against cumulative level of education by cohort
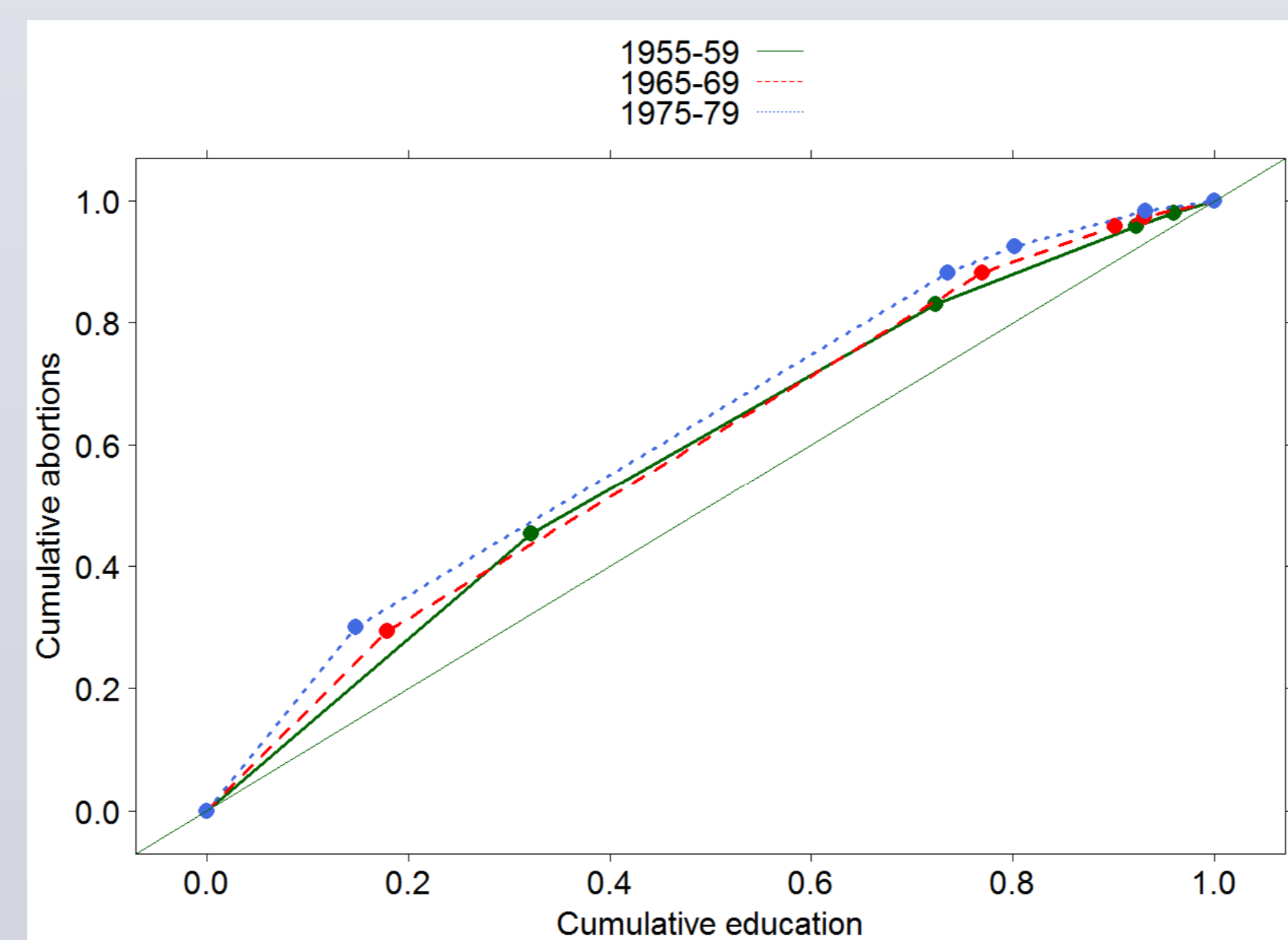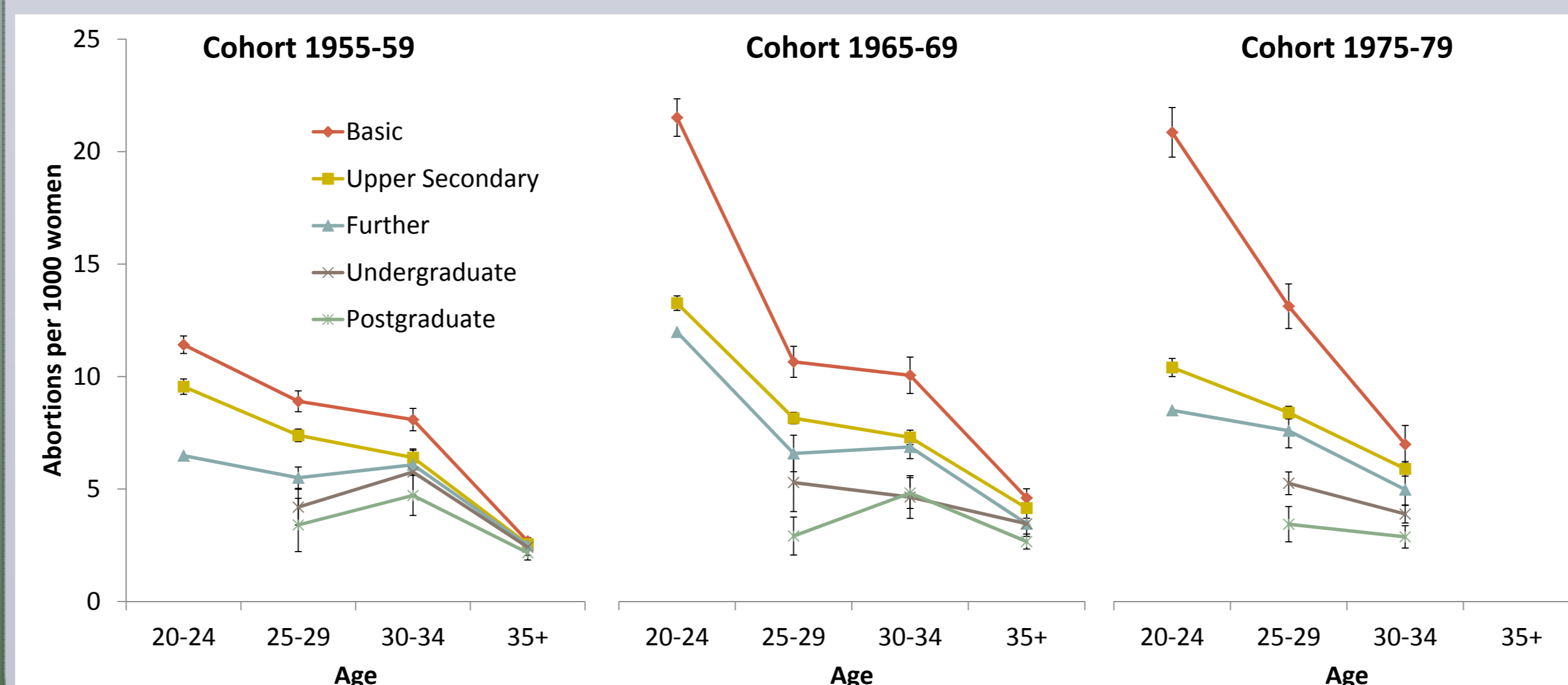

Figure 3. Probability of abortion by level of education and age per 1000 women with 95% confidence intervals based on the adjusted event-history models

RESULTS

- Figure 1 shows that women with basic education had more abortions than other women and the gap widened for later cohorts particularly among young women.
- Figure 2 shows that inequality in abortion increased: women with lower education in later cohorts had more abortions than those in previous cohorts.
- For instance, 20% of women in the low end of education distribution had 28% of abortions in the 1950s cohort, 31% of abortions in the 1960s cohort and 35% of abortions in the 1970s cohort.
- Figure 3, which is based on the event-history models, shows that the pattern persists even when age, education, SES, time since last birth, parity, relationship status, place of residence, and immigration status are controlled for.

CONCLUSIONS

- Women with basic education had the highest likelihood of abortion
- This may be due to selection into education: although it was common to have only completed basic education in the 1955-59 cohort, over time it became increasingly unusual and thus women with only basic education became a selected group.
- Women with higher education may benefit more from family planning services than women with lower education and may have lower abortion rates also due to e.g. better knowledge of pregnancy prevention through social networks
- Policies designed to reduce the costs of childbearing such as long paid parental leave and cheap and high quality nurseries may have reduced the number of abortions especially among women with higher education
- Policy interventions should be targeted to young women with low education
- Universal access to family planning services should be continued

STRENGHTS AND LIMITATIONS

- This is the first study to analyse this topic using a large, representative and reliable longitudinal dataset
- It was possible to identify abortions due to social indication, which follow different kind of decision-making process compared to abortions due to medical indication
- Limitations include lack of information not included in registers, such as personal motivations to choose abortion, partner's role in the decision, pregnancy intentions, contraceptive use, attitudes, and religious background, although these affect the likelihood of having an abortion
- Due to these limitations it was not possible to establish causal pathways to abortion