FERTILITY AND FAMILY CHANGE IN SPAIN

# Fertility dynamics and their socioeconomic determinants in Spain

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Close-up of a mother holding her baby's legs with her hand. Photography by Adobe Stock

Spain has one of the lowest fertility levels in Europe and one of the highest average ages of motherhood. Despite the observed low fertility, individuals' preferences regarding family size have remained fairly constant over time, at an average of around two children, with no significant differences between social and geographic contexts. This means that many people do not achieve their desired number. Concerns over the decline in birth rates have been at the centre of the Spanish public debate, with expressions such as "demographic winter" used to describe the alarming situation in terms of fertility. This chapter aims to provide a more up-to-date and less worrisome picture of Spanish fertility and its socioeconomic determinants, shifting the focus from the aggregate perspective to an individual right-centred approach. In Spain, individuals lack adequate conditions for having children; political, social and institutional systems have failed to establish contexts for parents that are compatible with having their desired number of children and a satisfactory career path, especially for mothers. Low and late fertility can have significant consequences for well-being at the individual level, as fulfilling fertility desires is an important component of an individual's well-being and reproductive rights.

## Introduction

In addition to mortality and migration, fertility constitutes a key pillar of demographic change. Both its determinants and consequences span the micro-, macro- and meso-levels. [1] At the macro- and meso-level, fertility can be seen as an indicator of a society's health: a long-lasting low/lowest-low fertility rate is worrisome given that: (1) it affects a country's economic sustainability and (2) it may indicate the lack of an effective link between female employment, childbearing and public policy. [2] At the micro-level, the study of fertility is related to people's well-being and satisfaction. [3] In several countries, women fail to achieve their desired number of children, the so-called 'fertility gap'. Therefore, studying fertility over time provides a powerful and complex tool for understanding social dynamics at different levels.

## Fertility trends and theories

In the 1960s, almost all advanced societies experienced declining fertility rates, mostly measured with varying corrections of the total fertility rate (TFR). [4] Specifically, the TFR in Europe fell, on average, from 2.6 children per woman in 1960 to 1.37 children per woman in the 1990s. Several countries, including Spain, experienced so-called 'lowest-low' fertility: a fertility level below the population replacement level. Two theories emerged as the most widely accepted interpretations of these fertility trends. In the first, Gary Beker's New Home Economics (1981) postulated that spouses divide their tasks in a complementary way, for example, one partner working full-time in the labour market and the other, typically the woman, working full-time in the home. According to this model, the mass entry of women into the labour market raises the opportunity cost of having children, as women have less time to spend on household chores and leisure. Leaving the labour market to care for children is too expensive, therefore women postpone or forgo their fertility. In the second, the second demographic transition (SDT) theory (Lesthaeghe, 1995) argues that low fertility levels are a direct consequence of transformations in societal values, for instance, post-modern values which emphasise individualism and self-realisation over family-building (Figure 1).

Yet, starting in the 2000s, the TFR has been steadily rising in most countries with low and lowest-low fertility rates, exceeding 1.3 children per woman. [5] [6] Women have transitioned to first birth at a later age, yet the interval between first and second birth has shortened, which is crucial for avoiding lowest-low fertility. In other words, the TFR tempo effect due to postponed parenthood has disappeared, and the fertility rate has risen again among the most recent cohorts. Furthermore, the early 2000s saw the initial negative relationship between fertility and female labour force participation become positive, especially in those countries with high levels of female participation in the labour force accompanied by gender equality policies aimed at, for example, greater involvement of fathers in childcare.

Neither the SDT nor the New Home Economics framework anticipated this new trend in rising fertility. Specifically, both failed to predict this return to fertility (at least in their

classical formulations). Scholars thus subsequently developed a new framework: the gender revolution theory. [7] [8] Crucial to this theory is that the mass entry of women into education and the labour market has challenged both institutions and the *traditional family.* [9] According to this framework, we can divide the gender revolution into two stages. In the first stage, women entered the labour market while still having major responsibilities in the home. Thus, while working, they added a "second shift" on top of household chores, leading to low fertility [10] and high childlessness levels. [11] In the second stage, both institutions (at the macro-level) and partners (at the micro-level) adapt to women's new role, as the welfare state now promotes policies to provide higher childcare coverage, the involvement of the father, higher childcare benefits and longer maternity and paternity leaves. [12] In addition, men participate in the division of unpaid work, taking up more paternity leave and helping out with childcare and housework. Therefore, fertility rises while childlessness returns to its "usual" levels, i.e. around 15% of the entire population.

Although gender revolution theory provides an important framework, it fails to account for the recent fertility declines in the forerunner countries (e.g. Sweden and Norway). Additionally, in several countries, including Spain, the gender revolution theory does not provide a complete explanation of fertility dynamics. Fertility outcomes are moderated by several variables, such as economic recession at the macro-level; education or genetics at the micro-level; and social capital or the labour market at the meso-level. Thus, there is a pressing need to examine and consider additional factors to understand and analyse changing fertility dynamics.

## Demographic determinants of Spanish fertility fluctuations

Spain is an interesting case as it represents a country with particularly low and late fertility levels. Spain has experienced consistently low TFRs and a high average age for first-time mothers over the past 30 years. The TFR declined from 1.31 in 1992 to 1.12 in 2022 (INE), while the average age of women at first childbirth rose from 27.5 years to 32.6 years within the same period. Many women today are either not having children or choosing to have them later in life. The number of women giving birth in their 40s has surged by 30% over the last decade, with 1 in every 8 births in 2022 involving a mother aged 40 or older (INE, 2022).

Although the public debate has taken an alarmist approach to fertility decline, it is useful to analyse fertility determinants to understand these trends properly. First, one important driver of population dynamics is represented by the changing composition of the population over time. In other words, if the number of women of reproductive age in 2000 was lower than in 1950, there would be a physiological decline in natality levels 28 years later. [13] It is crucial to acknowledge this mechanism when analysing long fertility time series. The public debate has often used the high fertility levels in the 1960s as a benchmark for the subsequent fertility trends (see Figure 1). However, this distorts the perception of fertility dynamics, given that the population of women of reproductive age in the 1950s who went on to have children in the 1960s and 1970s was exceptionally large due to the phenomenon

of the baby boom.

Focussing on more recent trends in the TFR, we observe that after a continuous drop in fertility, the Spanish TFR started to recover after 1995, reaching its peak in 2008 (Figure 1). An element to consider here is that the TFR is inherently biased by the tempo effect. In other words, if women of reproductive age delay their entry into motherhood, the TFR will decrease at first and rise again later on. Focusing on Figure 1, we see this dynamic in the trend of the Spanish TFR between 1990 and 2005. Specifically, in 1995, Spanish fertility reached its historical minimum of 1.2 children per woman. Such a decrease was accompanied by a sustained increase in age at first birth, from 27 (INE) to 31 for women of Spanish nationality (Figure 2).

Once those women who were supposed to be mothers at 27 started to have their children later, at 31, the TFR recovered slightly, reaching its peak in 2008. This phenomenon is also known as fertility catch-up, meaning that although there is a fertility decline, this is not only due to a lower number of births (quantum) but also to a shift in the timing (tempo) of these births. In other words, women are having children, but at later ages. Of course, having children later also implies a lower chance of achieving the desired number of children, as the period for making important reproductive decisions is shorter than in the past.

Furthermore, another phenomenon that plays a role in shaping fertility is migration. Migrants, specifically migrant women, might have a different demographic profile and fertility schedule than the Spanish population, leading to changes in the total population structure, thus indirectly impacting on birth levels. Figure 3 shows the Spanish TFR [14] against the trend in the number of women of reproductive age by country of birth between 2002 and 2022. Focussing on the line that describes women born abroad aged 15-49, we notice that this population increased substantially between 2000 and 2008, contributing to the rise in the TFR (Figure 3) and stabilisation of the age at first birth of around 31 years in the same period (Figure 2). The mechanism behind these trends is that the migrant population had more children per woman and started to have children at younger ages, lowering the overall Spanish average age at motherhood.

After 2008, the Spanish TFR started to decline again, to levels below 1.2 children per woman in 2020 (Figure 3). This decline can be attributed to the rising age at motherhood for both Spanish and non-Spanish women (Figure 2) and stabilisation of the number of women from a migratory background at reproductive age (Figure 3). Furthermore, the increasing age of motherhood directly impacts on the chances of having families with three children or more and is linked to involuntary childlessness, [15] shifting the focus on the transition to the first child rather than on the second or higher parities.

## Structural determinants of Spanish fertility fluctuations

The most challenging aspect of analysing the demographic determinants of fertility fluctuations is understanding the socioeconomic factors that prompt women to repeatedly defer their entry into motherhood. From a sociological perspective, it is possible to consider the influence of social norms and the perceived decline in the significance of parenthood as an identity among younger generations. In other words, younger generations show less interest in becoming parents. However, this thesis is not supported by empirical evidence, as the desired number of children has remained relatively stable at approximately two. [16] Moreover, data from the Spanish Fertility Survey (2018) indicate that the primary reasons for not having children despite a desire to do so are either lack of a partner or structural constraints such as inadequate housing, employment issues, or lack of economic stability (author's own data).

Several factors have been identified to explain this trend. First, the Spanish labour market is characterised by temporary contracts and high levels of insecurity, which are negatively correlated with fertility intentions and childbirth. [17] Women in Spain face a significant motherhood penalty that adversely affects their earnings, career progression and professional aspirations. Research shows that 10 years after childbirth, a persistent gender gap in wages and promotions remains evident, largely attributed to motherhood. Additionally, women in Spain are still the primary caregivers and bear responsibility for most of the unpaid work, which creates additional challenges for working mothers in balancing their professional and personal lives. [18] [19] [20]

Secondly, Spain is considered a family-oriented country, meaning the family is regarded as the main entity responsible for an individual's well-being. [21] In this context, childcare preferences and family policies are shaped by the interplay of cultural values, family structures and public policy, which may hinder the development of comprehensive family and childcare support systems. While the availability of formal childcare services positively impacts on women's fertility decisions, there is a shortage of public early childcare, [22] and private options are often prohibitively expensive. Furthermore, long working hours and the low proportion of companies offering flexible schedules for parents exacerbate work-family conflicts. As a result, informal carers such as grandparents play a crucial role in providing flexibility within a rigid childcare system.

These dynamics impact on all women, from the disadvantaged to the highly educated. Although women in Spain have achieved greater levels of education, this progress has not translated into better jobs, higher wages, or a more equitable distribution of unpaid labour in the home. For highly educated women, this creates two possible scenarios. On one hand, they can delay motherhood as long as possible, which decreases the likelihood of having a first or second child, while on the other, because education is associated with higher income and more stable employment, highly educated women may be able to shorten the time between their first and second children, increasing the likelihood of having a second child.

## Conclusions

The trend in fertility in Spain shows intriguing fluctuations that may be attributed to demographic phenomena, such as shifts in the demographic structure of women of reproductive age, and structural factors, including a challenging job market and a perception of instability in the life stage at which reproductive decisions must be made. This chapter presents a concise analysis of the most recent trends and potential demographic and structural constraints that may influence these fertility dynamics.

A substantial body of literature has been devoted to investigating the potential factors contributing to delayed, reduced and forgone fertility. In response to these developments, governments across Europe and other Western countries are implementing measures to address these trends. However, as some researchers have observed [23] public policies have rarely adopted a “person-centred, inclusive, rights-based and gender-sensitive” approach, which helps explain the fact that people living in these countries, on average, have fewer children than they desire. In examining the international context, it is evident that institutions that facilitate a more harmonious balance between family and work responsibilities are vital in enabling women and couples to have their desired number of children. In light of the importance of gender equality and work-family balance in reducing the number of children that couples choose to forego, it is essential to continue monitoring the potential positive effects of certain changes introduced in recent years, such as the introduction of universal paternity leave equal to that of women.

Nevertheless, while work-family balance policies are undoubtedly a valuable addition to the existing framework, they appear insufficient as a standalone solution. Furthermore, discussions on fertility must encompass an analysis of the circumstances under which individuals have to realise their family plans, to avoid potential unfulfilled aspirations. In this regard, addressing fertility also requires research into the underlying issues, including the influence of the labour market and independent access to housing for young people. Young people must be made a priority in society. Their rights to education, expression and affordable, readily available housing, as well as access to the labour market, must be guaranteed. Public policies that empower youth will also address the fertility situation and result in a society where having one or two children is not a privilege but a free choice.

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