FERTILITY AND FAMILY CHANGE IN SPAIN

Families in Spain: how can we make expectations come true in the 21st century?

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People of different ages wait for public transport in El Rocío, a small settlement in Almonte, Huelva, 2015. Photography by Clemente Bernad

How have families changed over the last few decades in Spain? Recently, the data from the 2021 census was made fully available to researchers, allowing them to provide an updated picture of what families are like in today's Spain. In this article, we aim to give an overview of the latest trends in partnering and parenthood, and reflect on the extent to which these match people's preferences. Finding a partner and having children are important objectives for much of the population and the extent to which people are able to achieve those goals should therefore be a concern for any society.

Partnering: later and less?

We can get a good idea of recent changes in family life by comparing the latest census taken in 2021 [1] with the 1991 census. For instance, Figure 1 shows how the percentage of people aged 30-34 living with a partner has changed over time in Spain (adding data from other censuses and household surveys for the intervening years). We can see that 75% of people aged 30 to 34 lived with a partner in 1991. Three decades later, this percentage had declined to 53%..

Additional calculations indicate that this trend is weaker at older ages. For instance, 71% of people aged 40 to 44 lived with a partner in 2021, compared to 85% of people in 1991. Hence, the trends to some extent reflect changes in timing: people partner later than they used to. This is nothing new, but the numbers in Figure 1 show that the trend seems to have gradually continued, even after the major changes that took place in the 1990s. In itself, later partnering is not an issue if it reflects people's preferences. However, as we will see later, not having a partner does seem to be one of the reasons why people are not having the number of children they would like. [2]

What are some of the obstacles to partnering that people encounter? One way Spain stands out compared to other European countries is how late everything happens in people's lives. Spanish people leave their parental home very late and also start their first relationships much later than in other countries. [3] This has also changed over time: in 1991, only 21% of people aged 30-34 lived with their parents, increasing to 31% in 2021. Leaving the parental home is an important event in people's lives, one that provides independence and can help people's personal development and self-realisation. It is an important goal that many people would like to achieve before settling down with a partner.

Finally, an important change is social acceptance of a relationship with someone of the same gender/sex. Since 2005, individuals in so-called "same-sex" couples are able to marry and also adopt children in Spain. This has been accompanied by a considerable increase in the percentage of people with a same-sex partner, growing from 0.1% of people aged 30-34 in 1991, to 1.5% in 2021. Hence, even though people are partnering later, which may partly be due to constraints related to the complications of leaving the parental home, we do see an increase in diversity. This is an indication that there are also groups in society for whom partnering according to their desires has become more accessible.

The persistently low levels of fertility in Spain

Fertility has been very low in Spain for over 35 years, with fertility rates ranging from 1.1 to 1.5 children per woman. There appeared to be something of a recovery during the economic boom of the 2000s, with fertility rates rising from 1.13 in 1998 to 1.45 in 2008. However, they dropped to very low levels again during and after the financial crisis. This suggests that economic conditions do matter in the possibilities of people fulfilling any parenthood desires they might have, as numerous studies on other countries have shown. [4] However, as the economy recovered, fertility rates kept dropping in Spain. This means that a strong economy is not a sufficiently important condition for high fertility rates.

One possibility is that preferences are changing and that there are more people who want no or only a few children. However, a recent survey in Spain showed that most Spanish people want to have children, with those not wanting children representing less than 10% of the population. Given that around a quarter of people end up not having children in Spain, this means that there is a major gap between people's desires and their achievements. In other words, people experience obstacles to having children.

What are these obstacles preventing people from fulfilling their parenthood desires? In a recent survey, a representative sample of the Spanish population was asked why they thought they did not have the number of children they would have liked. [5] [6] A large percentage stated economic reasons, but others were also related to the difficulty of reconciling work and family life. Often, such reasons were perceived to have prevented people from having a second or third child. A second major reason, which has received relatively less attention, is that people have not found the right partner to have children with. This is an important reason for people not having any children, or becoming parents later than they would have wished, leaving little room for a second or third child. Finally, people also stated health factors as playing a role, particularly at older ages. Hence, providing economic security and making it easier for people to partner by encouraging early emancipation, for instance, are options that could reduce the gap between parenthood desires and low levels of achieved fertility..

Another conclusion from these results is that people want certain conditions to be met before they have children. Indeed, it could be that such conditions have become greater over time and harder to achieve. From this perspective, it becomes important to enable people to become parents in the contexts and ways that suit their desires and standards. A clear example of this is having children within same-sex relationships. Research has shown that most people in a same-sex couple want to have children, but very few manage to become parents. [7] How could this gap between desire and actually achieving parenthood be reduced?

Figure 2 shows how the percentage of babies living with two mothers or two fathers has increased over time in Spain. The trends observed are closely related to assisted reproduction, available to women in same-sex couples through the public healthcare system. Until 2013, assisted reproduction techniques, such as IVF, were available for women through the public system regardless of whether they had a partner and whether their partner was of the same sex. Hence, the increase in same-sex parenthood between 2001 and 2011 is in line with the expectation that more same-sex relationships would result in more same-sex parents over time. However, in 2013, the Spanish Government at the time excluded single women and same-sex couples from accessing assisted reproduction through the public health system. This is reflected in the declining share of babies living with two mothers or fathers in 2014 and 2015, as shown in Figure 2. Many Autonomous Communities re-established this access in the following years, until it was once again re-established throughout Spain. This correlates with the rise in same-sex parenthood for the rest of the period.

This observation shows that there is a role for policy in adjusting to the changing context and considering how to support people who wish to become parents, but who might encounter obstacles that could be solved relatively easily by adjusting policy to a changing society.

The changing context of families for children

Another perspective from which to look at changes in families is how the composition of families with children has changed over time. Figure 3 shows with whom children aged 0 to 10 lived in 2021. Despite increasing levels of divorce, we see that most children lived with two parents. Three out of four children lived with two parents and no other adults in the household. Another 14% lived with two parents and other adults, such as grandparents or new partners that were not indicated as the parent of the child. A further 7% lived with a single mother or father, and around 5% lived with a single parent but also with their grandparents or other adults.

Let us zoom in on the proportion of children living with a single parent. Figure 4 shows how the percentage of children aged 0-10 living with a single parent increased from 7% in 1991 to 13% in 2021. An interesting observation here is that this percentage has been slowly declining since 2011. This is not because people separate less, but because people in recent cohorts are more likely to find a new partner after they separate. [8] New partners can provide economic resources to households, an important factor given that single-parent households often encounter economic difficulties. In general, people would also like to have another partner after separating. Hence, the fact that re-partnering after separation is becoming more common is an indication that in some spheres, obstacles towards forming partnerships have decreased. In other words, re-partnering after a separation is another example of how families in society are changing and adapting to family pathways that diverge from a single normative trajectory of lifelong marriage.

Conclusions

There have been important changes to what families are like in Spain. What does this say about people's chances of following their desired life trajectories? On the one hand, it is clear that there is now more freedom to be with whatever partner we choose and to have children with whom we like. For instance, it is now possible to marry a partner of the same sex and have children together in such relationships, something that was not possible two decades ago, and is still impossible in many countries around the world. In addition, we see that re-partnering after people break up is becoming more feasible and common.

On the other hand, it is also clear that there are important obstacles towards forming families. Spanish people leave their parental home very late, compared to both the past and to other countries. This delays finding a partner and having children. At the same time, many people report having fewer children than they would like, often because they have not found the right partner, do not enjoy the right economic conditions or expect reconciling work and family life to be too great an obstacle after becoming a parent.

These trends and the discussion regarding families in Spain clearly show the significance of the usual suspects that pose obstacles to people in following their desired family

trajectories: economic stability and the possibilities of reconciling work and family life. People leave the parental home late, probably due to the difficulty of attaining economic independence. In addition, many state that perceived economic constraints and the difficulty of reconciling work and family life are important reasons for their not having children.

However, we also see certain significant new trends are emerging. Finding a partner seems to play an important role in unfulfilled parenthood desires, which raises the question of how we can make it easier for people to partner, once they wish to do so. The developments observed here that indicate a trend towards “more families”, such as increases in re-partnering and same-sex parenthood, suggest that supporting people in forming relationships and having children in the constellations and contexts they desire could be one way to reduce the gap between desires and reality in Spain.

REFERENCES

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