

The main whys and wherefores of childlessness in Spain

Albert Esteve and Rocío Treviño, *Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics*

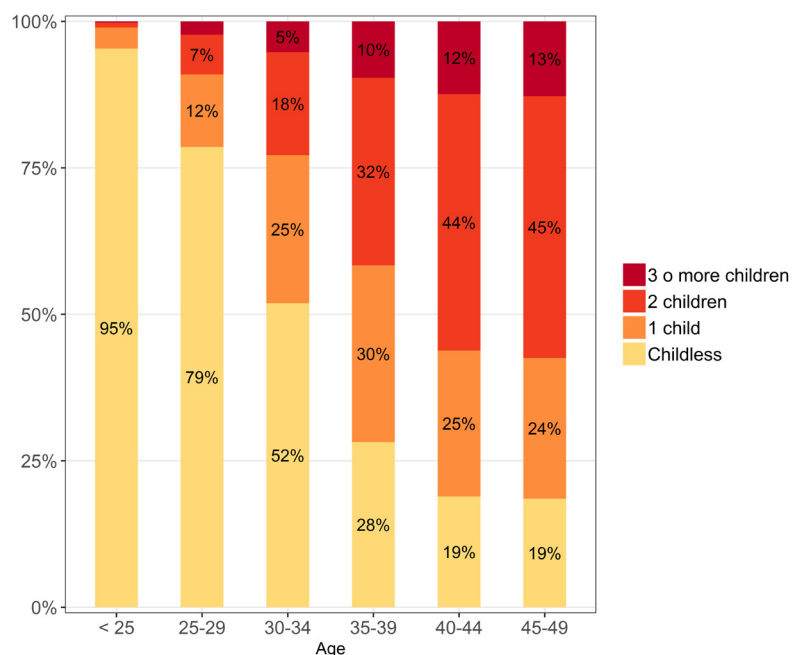
The Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) has just published the microdata of the 2018 Fertility Survey. In a country that sets demographic records its publication has filled a void of more than two decades since the last survey was carried out in 1999. The figures for life expectancy in Spain are among of the highest in the world and those for fertility are among the lowest. The convergence of these two trends directly influences the structure of the population, curtailing its natural growth and increasing its average age. In such a situation, any attempt to restore fertility requires a sound diagnosis of the underlying causes. In this number of *Perspectives Demogràfiques*, we present the first results of the Fertility Survey and explore the causes of the low fertility rates, paying particular attention to women who have not had children (childlessness). The results show that more than half the women who are not mothers wished to have children and that there are several reasons, which vary over the life cycle, that have made this impossible.

In demographic questions, Spain is a country of records. It combines the world's highest life expectancy rates with fertility rates that are among the lowest (Castro-Martín and Martín García, 2016). Since the 1990s, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR)—a summary of the fertility of women of reproductive age at a certain point or in a specific year—has been lower than 1.5 children per woman, and as low as 1.3 in 2017 (INEbase). Spain's low fertility rates appear together with greatly delayed maternity or paternity, which is largely the result of equally belated emancipation¹. More than half the country's population (61.2%) aged between 18 and 34 was living with parents in 2017. This figure contrasts with that of 19.2% in Denmark and 36.2% in France among people in the same age range (EU_SILC, 2017²). The current levels of fertility could be reflecting a temporary postponement of maternity owing to a period of crisis or change in reproductive patterns, but their prolongation over time has direct implications for the final descent of generations, which is to say the average number of children born to a cohort of women or men. The completed fertility for generations born in Spain in the mid-1970s is 1.4 children per woman, an average that is lower than that for the Scandinavian countries, the United Kingdom, and France, which show final descent figures that are close to the replacement level of 2.1 per woman (Sobotka, 2017).

(IN)FERTILITY: BETWEEN WISHES AND REALITY

As shown in an earlier number of this publication (Esteve, Devolder, and Domingo, 2016), behind the low fertility rates of Spanish women one finds high levels of childlessness or, in other words, large numbers of women who are not mothers. The childlessness of

FIGURE 1. Distribution of number of children per woman by age



Source: 2018 Fertility Survey.

¹ <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database?node_code=ilc_lvps09



generations increased from 11% for women born in 1945 to 20% for those born in 1965 and most probably rises to 25% for those born in 1975. One in every four women of this latter generation will not be a mother. This level of childlessness is also a record. Among the twenty countries of the world singled out for their low fertility rates in a report of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Spain stood out, coming after Japan, as the country with the second highest childlessness rates for the generation of women born in 1974³. Esteve, Devolder, and Domingo (2016) postulated five probable causes of the high childlessness rates, but the relative importance of each one could not be established owing to a lack of data. However, it is now possible to estimate this, thanks to the publication of the 2018 Fertility Survey, which was carried out by the National Statistics Institute (INE) with a sample of 14,556 women and 2,619 men. Nineteen years after the previous Fertility Survey (1999), the INE has now published this study which asks, among other questions, why women (and men) do not have children. We shall present below the first findings in this regard. We examine the values of fertility, compare desired fertility with observed fertility and, in accordance with their age, analyse the reasons given by childless women for not having children.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of women by age and number of children at the time the survey was carried out. This graph makes no distinction between women born in Spain and those born abroad. The fertility of the former is slightly lower than that of the latter (1.53 children per woman versus 1.70). The proportion of childless women drops rapidly until they reach the age of 40, after which the differences stabilise. Neither is there variation in the distribution, in terms of children, among those women who are mothers. More than half the women aged between 30 and 34 are not mothers and, by the age of 40, almost 20% are childless. By generations, the women aged between 45 and 49 in 2018 correspond with those born between 1969 and 1973. In this group, 19% are childless (Figure 1) and their completed fertility would end up being 1.6 children per woman. Taken as a whole, the data corroborate late age at the birth of the first child, with 52% of women aged between 30 and 34 appearing as childless (54.9% among Spanish-born women and 38.4% among foreign-born women), and high childlessness levels, with 19% of women being childless after the age of 40.

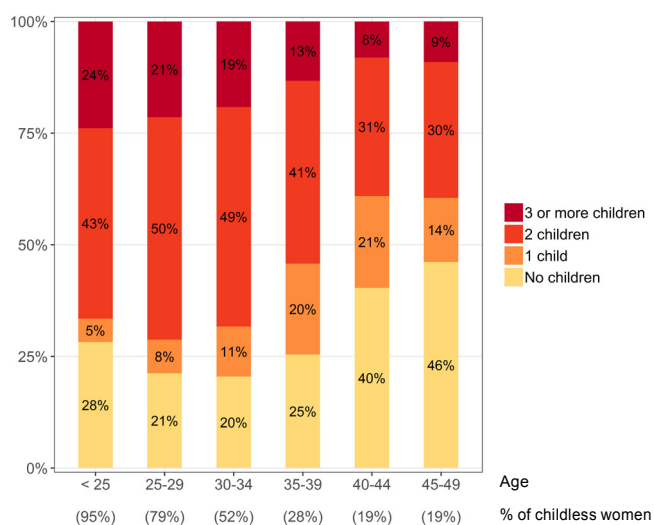
Observed and desired fertility do not tend to coincide. In countries showing low fertility rates, desired fertility tends to be higher than observed fertility and this is stable over time. While fertility has dropped, the desired number of children—around two per woman—has remained stable over recent decades in Europe

(Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014). And the percentage of the young adult population indicating that there is no desire for children in their ideal of the family is situated at less than 5%, according to the latest Eurobarometer surveys (Miettineney Szalma, 2014).

Figure 2 shows the distribution by age of women who are childless and not pregnant in accordance with the number of children they would like to have. The data pertain to women from different generations observed at different ages. From a study of these figures we can draw two significant conclusions. First, independently of age, most childless women would like, or would have liked to be a mother at some point in their life. Among younger childless women aged between 25 and 29 (79%), 21% does not want to have children and more than 70% would like to have two or more children. At later ages, and as the percentage of childless women falls, the presence of women who do not want to have children increases, but their proportion in the population as a whole remains steady, at around 20%. The second conclusion is that, among childless women over forty years of age and therefore with not much time left to reclaim their fertility, most would have liked to have children. For women aged between 45 and 49, namely those born between 1969 and 1973, only 46% did not want to have children, while 39% would have liked to have two or more, and more than 14% one child. If childless women from this generation (19% of the total) had had the children they wanted, their infertility figures would have been 8.7%, or less than half the percentage that was observed.

And what would the final descent of this generation of women have been if the 54% of women who were not mothers, even though they

FIGURE 2. Desired fertility. Women who are childless and not pregnant



Source: 2018 Fertility Survey.

³ UNFPA (2018) *The Power of Choice: Reproductive Rights and Demographic Transition* https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_PUB_2018_EN_SWP.pdf

wanted to be, had had the number of children they desired? The result would have been 1.8 children per woman or 0.2 children more than what was observed. With 1.8 children per woman, the final descent of Spanish women would be greater than that for women of the same generation born in Canada (1.73) and Holland (1.74), similar to the final descent for women in Finland (1.82), and with a figure of only 0.09 less than that for Swedish women (1.89)⁴. Several factors, which vary and accumulate over the life cycle of women (and men), stand in the way of materialisation of the desired reproductive potential in Spain.

THE MAIN WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF (IN)FERTILITY

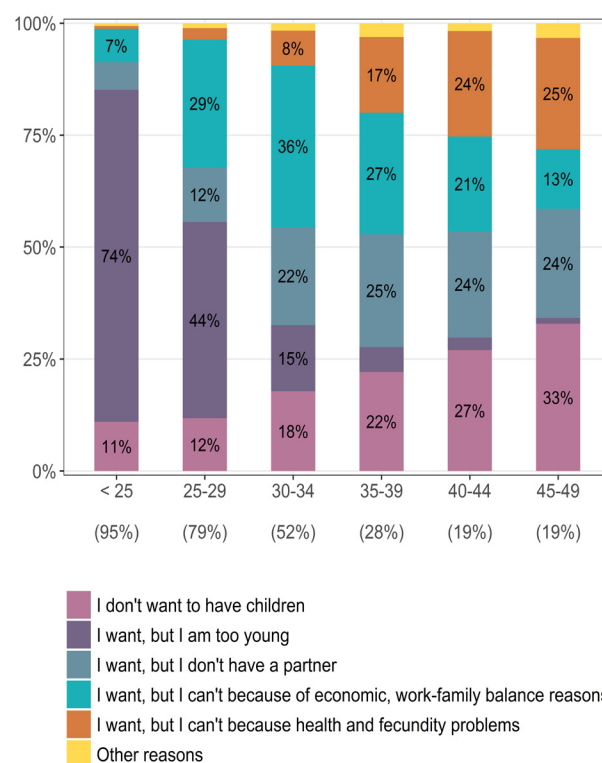
The 2018 Fertility Survey asked women who were childless (and not pregnant) why they did not want to have children. Figure 3 shows the distribution by age of reasons for not having children in this group of women. The answers come under six main headings (Esteve, Devolder and Domingo, 2016): (i) I don't want to be a mother; (ii) I want to be a mother but I'm still too young or I want to keep studying; (iii) problems related with a partner; (iv) I want children but don't have economic and job security or the right work-life balance; (v) I want children but can't get pregnant or I'm too old; (vi) other.

Among women who are younger than 25, the majority of which have not had children, a very small percentage gives reasons for their childlessness that are external to the domain of personal decision. Most are not contemplating maternity because "it's not the right time" (74%), either because they consider that they are too young to be mothers or because they think that maternity and studying are incompatible. Some (12%) say they do not want to be mothers, and less than 14% give reasons related with partners, the job market, or housing.

After the age of 25 the reasons change, and circumstances outside the realm of personal choice are prominent among 43% of women aged between 25 and 29, and they become a major factor for the majority of women after this age. The proportion of these women who do not want to be mothers remains below 12%, with youth and studies representing 44% of the reasons given for not being mothers, in addition to others related with partners (12%), and work or economic factors (29%). These add up to a percentage close to that appearing for "it's not the right time" (because of youth or studies). These categories gain even greater impetus for women aged between 30 and 34 when the percentage of those who do not want to have children also

rises (18%). The reasons related with youth and studies do not disappear although now their relevance is reduced by more than half. One in every five childless women cites issues related with her partner, but economic and job reasons, and work-life balance now appear as the most significant explanations given (36%). The percentage of women who do not want to have children rises to 17%, and there now appears another 7% of women who are childless because of health issues. After the age of 35, the smaller presence of reasons related with the sphere of work is compensated for by the greater number of women who do not want to have children because of health issues, thus giving rise to this particular combination of reasons leading to preclusion of a first pregnancy. After 40, the reasons given for not having children stabilise. Reality and desire are now a better fit and there is a considerable increase in the percentage of women who do not want to have children, which rises to 33% of the total in the group aged from 45 to 49, thus tripling the figure obtained for the group aged from 25 to 29, when the choice of not being mothers started to be conditioned by circumstances that were adverse for maternity rather than it being a matter of personal decision. After the age of 40, 25% of the women adduce health reasons for not being mothers.

FIGURE 3. Reasons for not having children. Women who are childless and not pregnant



Source: 2018 Fertility Survey.

⁴ See Note 3



IS THERE ANY CHANCE OF RECOVERING FERTILITY?

It is well known that fertility in Spain is low and that it has been stagnant at a rate of less than 1.5 children per woman for three decades. Nevertheless, this perceived notion that low fertility is the result of the fact that a considerable number of men and women have been unable to satisfy their desire to have children because of several kinds of causes has now been made more than clear by the 2018 Fertility Survey. The survey shows that, for cohorts born between 1969 and 1973, there is a gap between the fertility that actually existed and that which might have been, and this is estimated at 0.2 children per woman. It also reveals that more than half the women in this generation who wanted to have children could not do so. If their reproductive aspirations had been accomplished, the final descent of this generation would have been more than 1.8 children per woman, a figure that is quite close to that for Scandinavian women.

Moreover, the survey has brought to light the causes underlying this low fertility and the main reasons why women have not had children. There are several explanations and these change throughout the reproductive lifetime. The reasons why the younger women do not have children are more in the domain of personal decisions but, as they approach the age of thirty and move beyond it, other reasons connected with institutional factors appear and, still later, issues related with health. After this age, most women want to be mothers but they cannot always have the children they would like to have. The move to having the first child is hindered by causes related with insufficient economic resources, employment, and the difficulty of

finding a balance between work and family life. The time required for overcoming these obstacles means postponing the decision of having children until ages when the biological chances of carrying a pregnancy to term are dwindling. One in four women who are childless at the age of 40 cites difficulties in getting pregnant. Finally, not having a partner, or not having the right partner, is a further factor to be borne in mind since this affects approximately one in five women who are childless after the age of 35.

In conclusion, unequal opportunities with regard to fertility have an influence in the age range of 25 to 39. When public policies are implemented, they should give priority to this group because of the importance given to employment and economic factors in this regard. Improving the levels and conditions for emancipation of young people would be a previous step in this direction. The decision not to have children is no spur-of-the-moment matter but the result of a process of achieving personal stability and, in the majority of cases, conjugal security. The influence of the fit between production and reproduction depends on individual biographies, especially those of women and, to some extent, the institutional context involved and, accordingly, frustrating family plans. Institutional inertia anchored in the past constitutes a stumbling block with regard to satisfying the desires of women and also for society as a whole. If low fertility is a very old trend in Spain and shared by other developed countries, the high levels of infertility observed in this country draw attention to the mismatch between the new gender order and the institutional framework of this particular welfare state

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Editors

Andreu Domingo and Albert Esteve (Centre for Demographic Studies)

Please address correspondence to:

Albert Esteve
aesteve@ced.uab.cat

Credits

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Contact

Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics.
Carrer de Ca n'Altayó, Edifici E2
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
08193 Bellaterra / Barcelona
Spain
Telephone: +34 93 5813060
Email: demog@ced.uab.cat
Web page: www.ced.uab.cat

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Universitat Autònoma
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