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Partnership and Employment Pathways to Childlessness in Spain

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The very first issue of Perspectives Demogràfiques, published in 2016 (Esteve et al., 2016) forecasted that 25% to 30% of women born in the second half of the 1970s would remain childless in Spain. Today, these cohorts have completed their reproductive years, allowing us to study the circumstances under which these women have remained permanently childless.

Using the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey, we explore how employment and relationship trajectories influence childlessness among women in Spain. This study is led by the Gender and Inequality group at the Centre for Demographic Studies, part of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

First, we describe the interconnections between partnership and labor-market trajectories to identify typical life-course pathways. These trajectories have been generated through statistical techniques that allow the identification of natural groups within a dataset, based on how strongly associated they are. Second, we assess the likelihood of remaining childless after age 40 among the different groups identified in the previous step. Finally, we examine educational differences in the patterns observed.

The results show that 28% of women born between 1962 and 1978 did not have children at the time of the survey. However, this percentage varies depending on partnership and employment trajectories, as well as educational level. The probability of being childless exceeds 50% among women who have not had a partner, especially among university-educated women, for whom the figure rises above 80%. In contrast, among women who married early, the proportion without children is below 20%

The Rise of Childlessness

Spain has one of the lowest birth rates in the world, with a growing number of women remaining childless. While some make a conscious decision not to have children, many others delay childbearing due to life circumstances and may unintentionally miss the opportunity. This postponement of motherhood is partly driven by increasing instability in partnerships and/or unfavorable labor market conditions. Many women prioritize their careers, seek financial stability, or wait for the right partner before considering motherhood. However, fertility declines sharply after age 40, making late motherhood more difficult and risky. As a result, childlessness is often the outcome of more unstable and complex life-course transitions.

Until mid.1990s, the prevalence of childlessness in Spain was not as high as in other countries. Spanish women eventually had children, even if they delayed motherhood. However, in recent years, the proportion of childless women has sharply increased. As shown in Figure 1, childlessness in Spain has more than doubled among younger cohorts born in 1975 compared to those born in 1955. Spain is now the country with the second-highest rate of permanent childlessness—only behind Japan.

The data do not indicate whether this childlessness is voluntary or involuntary. However, the literature shows a clear gap between intended and actual childbearing (Adserà & Lozano, 2021). Previous studies on fertility ideals in Spain over recent decades conclude that the desired number of children per woman has remained relatively stable since the 1990s. Desired fertility is still comparatively high—around two children per woman—despite the much lower actual fertility levels.

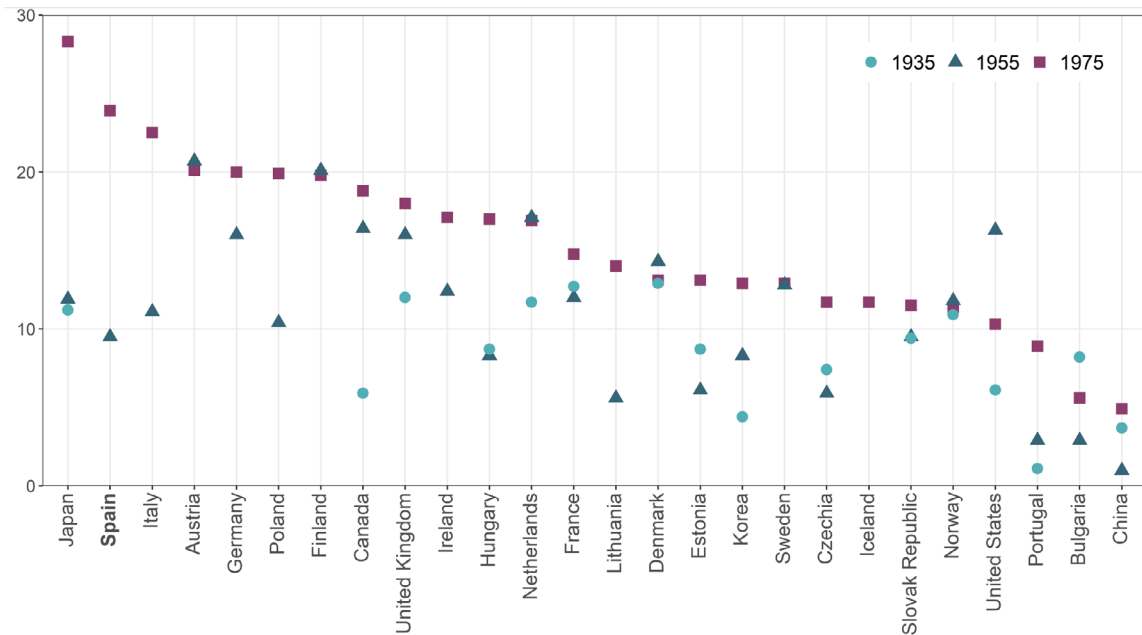


Figure 1. Percentage of women remaining permanently childless in 2024 for women born in 1935, 1955 and 1975

Source: OCDE, 2024

The interplay between work and family

We analyze whether infertility levels among women vary depending on partnership and employment trajectories. To define these trajectories, we used retrospective data from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey. We examined the employment and partnership trajectories experienced by the survey participants between the ages of 18 and 40 and grouped them using sequence analysis. In Figure 2, we show a schematic representation of the five groups identified in the analysis. The groups are represented on a dual axis: according to whether their partnership trajectory (vertical axis) is more or less stable, and whether their employment trajectory (horizontal axis) is more or less continuous. The diameter of each circle represents the size of the group (not proportionally), and the color of the circle indicates whether infertility levels are above (blue) or below (yellow) the national average.

We identified five typical trajectories:

- **T1. Early marriage and lower job status:** Women who married early and remained married during the observed period. These women have medium or low levels of labor market participation. This is the largest group, comprising about 58% of the women. It also has the lowest infertility rate, at 14.5%.

- **T2. Late marriage and higher job status:** Women who married later than the previous group and have higher employment rates. Especially those with demanding careers married at older ages and had children later. Despite this, the recorded infertility level in this group is 15.4%. This group represents 12% of the trajectories.
- **T3. Non-marital relationships and higher job status:** Women who had cohabiting relationships or multiple breakups and also show medium or high labor force participation. These women have a higher infertility rate than the first two groups (34.8%), but lower than that of single women. This group accounts for 14% of the trajectories.
- **T4. Singlehood and lower job status:** Women who spent most of their adult life single and have a low employment profile. Their infertility rate is 79.7%, and they represent 6% of the trajectories.
- **T5. Singlehood and higher job status:** Single women with a medium-to-high employment profile. Their infertility rate is 61.1%, and they represent 10% of the trajectories.

Overall, the results reveal that family trajectories diverging from the classic marriage pathway are associated with higher odds of remaining childless. In particular,

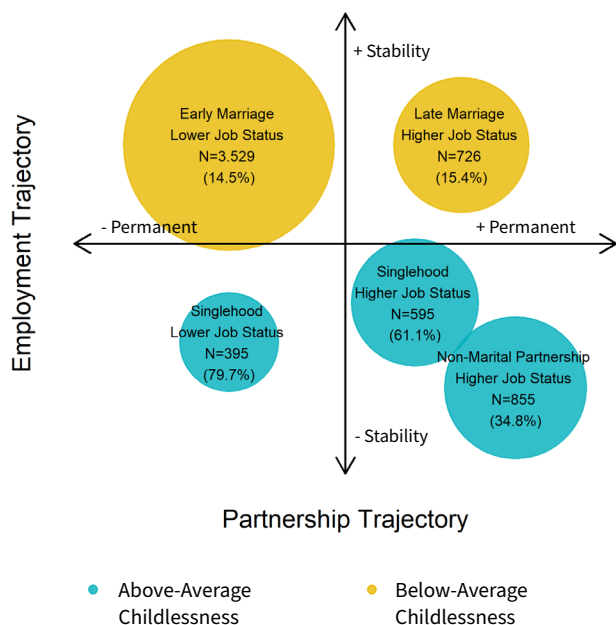


Figure 2. Groups of distinct life-course patterns among women in Spain according to partnership stability and labour market attachment. In brackets, percentage of recorded infertility in each group.

Source: Spanish Fertility Survey 2018. Retrospective data on partnership and employment histories. Women born between 1962 and 1978.

singlehood and divorce emerge as significant predictors of childlessness.

While employment alone did not strongly predict childlessness, women in unstable or singlehood trajectories with strong labor market attachment were more likely to remain childless. Additionally, within each partnership category, women with higher levels of employment attachment appeared to have an increased likelihood

of remaining childless—suggesting that labor market conditions do indeed play a role, even within stable relationships.

It is important to note that our sample includes cohorts born between 1962 and 1978. Women in Spain began entering the labor market in large numbers around the mid-1980s, and most of the cohorts in our study were still undergoing this transition.

Education differences in childlessness

Figure 3 shows the probability of being childless according to educational level for each of the five identified trajectories. The vertical dashed line indicates the proportion of childless women in the sample (28%), and **those to the right of it have a higher probability of not having children.**

There are differences by educational level across all five trajectories, although they vary in intensity and direction. Among women who married early (T1), there are barely any differences by educational level, with the most educated showing the lowest level of childlessness. These differences are slightly amplified among women who married later (T2). In this group, women with university degrees show lower levels of childlessness than women with secondary or primary education.

Educational differences become more pronounced and reverse direction in the two trajectories associated with singleness (T4 and T5) and in the cohabitation and partnership instability group (T3). In these cases, women

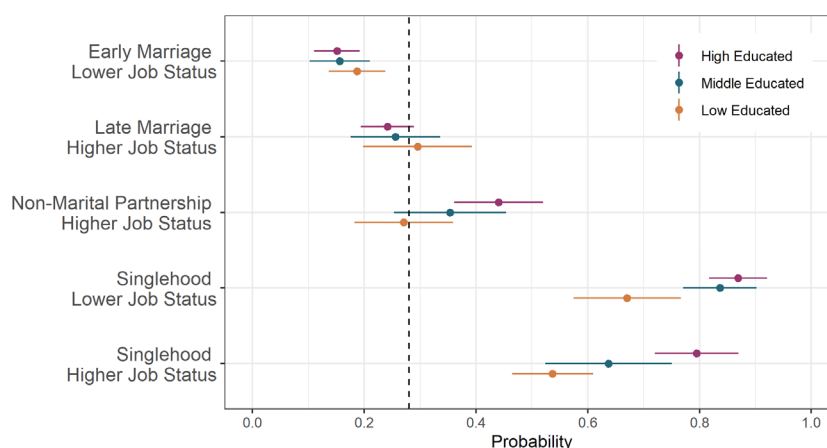


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of childlessness after the age of 40 according to educational attainment and partnership-employment trajectories

Source: Spanish Fertility Survey 2018

Nota: Results are predictive margins from logistic regression. The outcome variable is childlessness after age 40. Control variables include nationality, level of education at the interview, birth cohort, maternal age at first birth, parents divorced at interview and number of siblings. The vertical dashed bar indicates the proportion of childless women in the full sample, with all control variables at the mean of the full sample.



with medium or high education levels are more likely to remain childless than those with lower educational attainment. Among the single groups, for example, the probability of being childless rises to 80% among university-educated women.

Therefore, the effects of being single or having unstable relationships on childlessness are amplified among highly educated women. This result can be interpreted in two ways. First, from the perspective of the marriage market, finding a suitable partner to have children with may be more difficult for highly educated women and may also involve greater instability (Van Damme, 2024). Second, from the perspective of child-rearing conditions, highly educated women may prefer to have children within marriage, viewing it as a formal commitment to heavily invest in their children's future (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010; Lundberg and Pollock, 2016).

Conclusions

The study explores how childlessness levels among women over 40 vary depending on their partnership and employment trajectories in Spain. The results indicate that there is no single path to remaining childless, but rather a variety of interconnected family and work-related factors. Partnership trajectories play a more decisive role than employment, and childlessness is more common among women who have not followed a traditional marriage-based path—particularly those who remain single or experience breakups.

Education helps amplify these differences. Highly educated women tend to experience greater instability in their romantic relationships, which contributes to their likelihood of remaining childless. This may be due to the difficulty of finding a suitable partner or the preference to have children within marriage as a sign of commitment. Employment, while less influential than relationship status, also plays a role: women with a strong attachment to the labor market—especially those in non-marital or single trajectories—are more likely to remain childless.

These findings primarily reflect the experience of Spanish cohorts born before 1980, for whom marriage was the dominant family formation pattern. For those born after 1980, trends may differ—especially in a context of greater economic uncertainty and changing social norms that influence reproductive decisions. Moreover, due to data limitations, we were not able to include information on both spouses' employment trajectories, which we know can affect fertility decisions.

Although the analysis is based on Spain, the findings are relevant for low-fertility contexts more broadly. We have shown that women with less stable partnership trajectories are more likely to remain childless. The study also illustrates that focusing on a single factor to understand fertility differences—within groups and likely between countries—is insufficient. A broader perspective that combines multiple dimensions (e.g., partnership, work, education) and their interactions is necessary for a fuller understanding.

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