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Fertility Trends by Educational and Employment Gap between Partners: It's All the Same?

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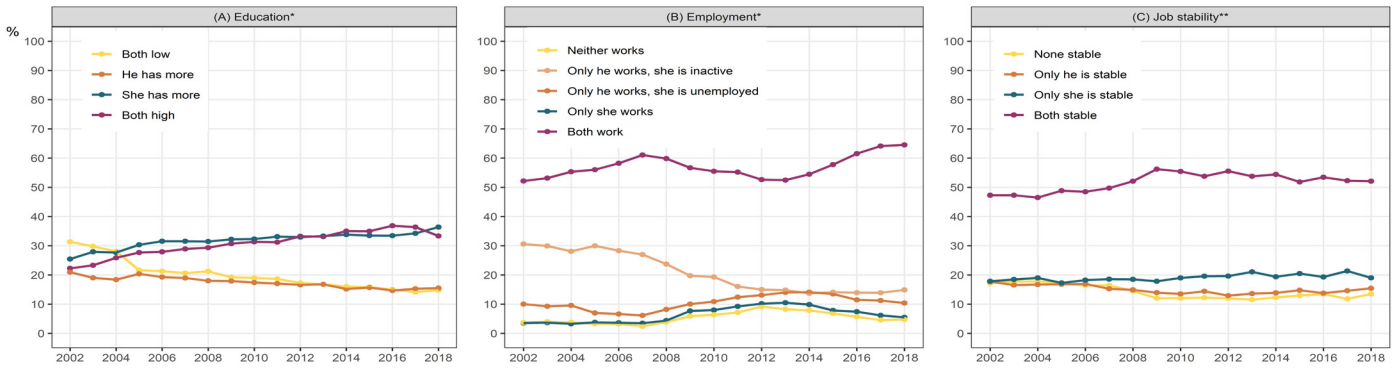
The position of women in society has changed and, with that, the composition of couples. In most societies of the developed world, women's presence in the workforce has increased, and they now have a better level of education, which is higher than that observed for the male population. As a result, there is a generalised presence of couples in which both partners work, and also more in which the woman is the only employed partner. In this issue of Perspectives Demogràfiques we explore the question of how educational and employment differences between spouses affects the fertility of couples in Spain. The results indicate that the best positioned couples (with a good education, both working, and with job stability) are those most likely to achieve the "pigeon pair". When there are differences between the spouses, we observe that, rather than education, the main factor is job stability. Hence, it is the couples where the woman has a better job than the man, and not vice versa, that more easily decide to increase the family.

EVOLUTION OF EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT INEQUALITY BETWEEN PARTNERS

The far-reaching transformations that have taken place in education and the job market in Spain over the last few decades have brought about changes in the composition of couples. In the early 1990s, the prevailing model was that in which only the man went out to work and the woman was in charge of household and care tasks. At the time, the figure for couples under 65 years of age in which the man was the only employed partner was 57.8% (García Román, 2020). Moreover, there was a predominance of couples in which both members had a low level of education although the male partner's was usually higher than the female's. The situation today is different.

Figure 1 shows how the composition of couples has varied in accordance with educational level, participation in the job market, and the characteristics of employment of the two partners. The data used are from the Labour Force Survey from 2002 to 2018, and we have selected heterosexual couples in which the woman is aged between 20 and 44 years. By educational level (Figure 1A), we observe how the number of couples in which both partners have post-secondary education or university degrees (homogamy high), and those in which the woman has a higher level of education than the man (hypogamy) has steadily grown throughout the whole period, rising from 22.2% and 25.4%, to 33.3% and 36.8%, respectively. By contrast, the number of couples in which both partners have low levels of education (homogamy low) or where the man has a higher level of education (hypergamy) has declined.

FIGURE 1. *Composition of couples according to educational level, employment, and job stability between partners. Couples in which the woman is aged between 20 and 44 years. Spain 2002-2018*



Note: **all couples; **two-income couples*
Source: *EPA, 2002-2018*

Along with the expansion of education—for everyone but especially for women—we also observe notable changes in the composition of couples in accordance with employment characteristics. Hence, although there was a slight decrease during the period of economic crisis, the couples in which both members are employed have become predominant, representing two out of three couples in the age range studied (Figure 1B). This increase has been to the detriment of couples in which the man works but not the woman, especially those where the woman is inactive (rather than being unemployed), thus representing the stricter traditional model.

Focusing on couples in which both work, we also observe the job stability of their members (Figure 1C). This third dimension enables us to analyse the characteristics of employment and to confirm that higher education in the case of the female partner does not always mean a better position in the labour market. The number of couples in which both partners enjoy job security (with employment in the public sector, or a permanent contract in the private sector) has risen from 47.3% to 52%, with a peak of 56.3% in 2009. This increase has mainly been to the detriment of couples in which only the male partner or neither partner has a stable job. The number of couples in which only the female partner has stable employment has also shown an upward trend and is calculated to be about 20%.

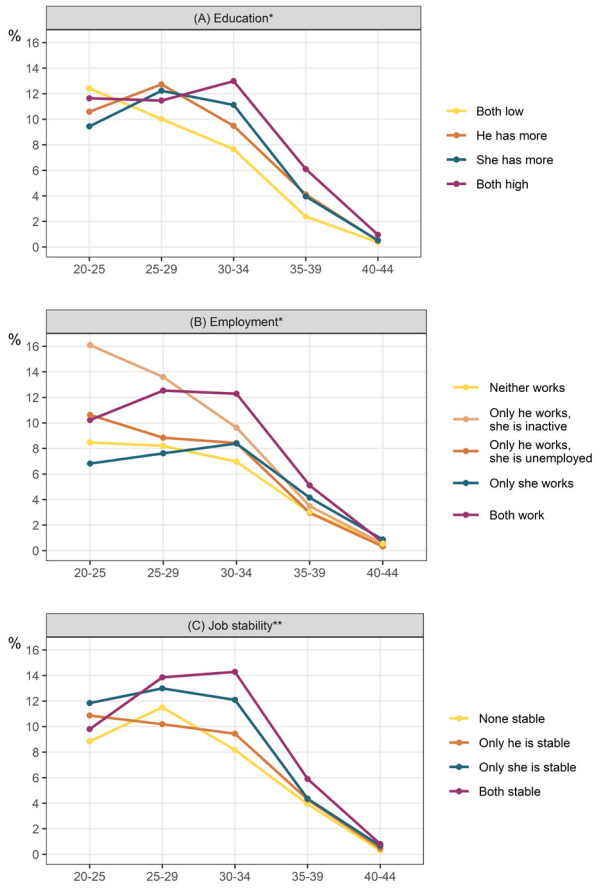
In recent decades, the reversal of the gender gap in education and the improvements in the position of women in the labour market have interfered with the evolution of fertility in Europe (Esteve et al. 2012, Van Bavel, 2012). In the following sections, we analyse the implications of this in the Spanish context and inquire whether or not the hypothesis that a more advantaged social position for women can be associated with lower levels of fertility is confirmed.

AGE AT CHILDBEARING ACCORDING TO EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PARTNERS

The investment in terms of the time necessary to attain a higher level of education has meant a delay in age of emancipation, first job, and couple formation (Billari and Kohler 2004). Figure 2 shows the age-specific fertility rates, representing the percentage of couples of each category in each age group which have had a child born in the period of observation. The timing of fertility is very similar between the types of couples, but there are notable differences especially in terms of the woman's educational level.

Figure 2A shows a clear relationship between access to education and delayed fertility. Homogamous couples of low educational level have their children at an earlier age than homogamous couples of higher educational level. However, when the woman is more educated than the man, the children tend to arrive later than in the opposite case. As for employment, in Figure 2B we observe a very similar pattern with earlier timing among couples in which the man is employed and the woman is not, and later timing among those where both partners work. At younger ages, the couples in which the man works and his partner is out of the labour market show notably greater fertility than the other typologies. Yet, the fertility levels of couples in which both partners are working and who rarely have children at early ages rise after the age of 25, although they show the highest values in later age groups. When only the female partner works, we see lower fertility between the ages of 20 and 29. This group also has the highest rate among older couples. Finally, a notable fact with regard to job stability is that, in terms of fertility, when both partners or only the female partner have job stability the fertility levels are higher and the timing is later, practically at all age groups.

FIGURE 2. *Specific fertility rates by age according to educational level, employment, and job stability between partners. Spain, 2002-2018*



Note: **all couples; **two-income couples*
Source: *EPA, 2002-2018*

FERTILITY INTENSITY ACCORDING TO EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PARTNERS

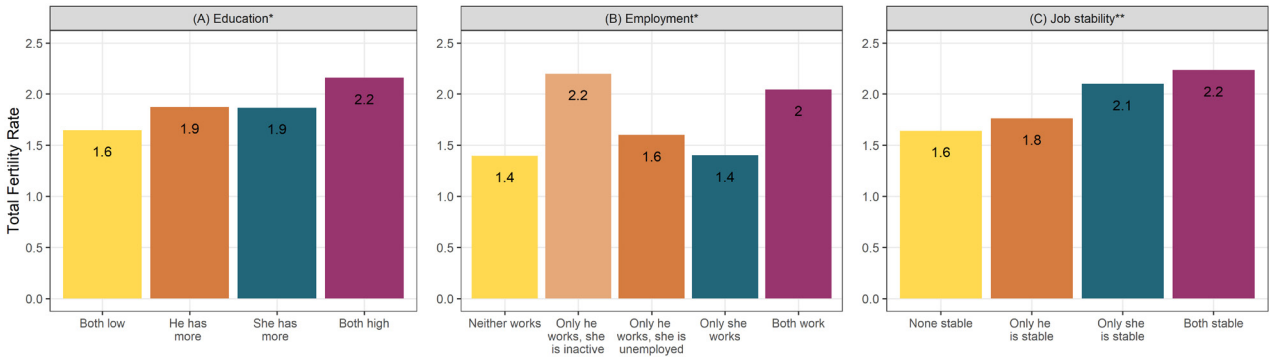
Given the ways in which the varying composition of couples leads them to have children at different ages, it is worth asking, will they have the same number of children? Will couples who start having children at an earlier age have more than those who delay motherhood and fatherhood? Or are those who postpone parenthood the ones who wait until they have sufficient economic and material resources before having the children they want?

Figure 3 represents the number of children each type of couple would have by the end of their reproductive period if we apply to each one the age-specific fertility patterns observed in Figure 2 which, in other words, means applying a synthetic (fictitious) indicator of fertility measured in the hypothetical number of children per couple. Compared to the usual fertility indicator (number of children per woman), the levels presented here are higher since they refer to the fertility of women in couples (and not the whole female population). By educational level (Figure 3A), we see, on the one hand, that couples of a lower educational level show lower fertility (1.6 children) than couples with both partners having a higher educational level. Although the latter start to reproduce at a later age, they attain the ideal of two children; 2.2 children, to be precise. Then again, we observe that, the educational position of one spouse relative to that of the other is not associated with greater or lesser fertility. These couples would present a figure of 1.9 children.

However, given the instability of the Spanish labour market a higher educational level doesn't always mean a guarantee of employability. The results based on employment show (Figure 3B), first, the duality between the "traditional" model of the family, where the man is employed and the woman is out of the labor market, and the more "egalitarian" model represented by dual-earner couples. Both types of couple present similar fertility levels, and even show a certain edge of the former (2.2 children) over the latter (2 children). Nevertheless, it is also true that the traditional model has been in decline over the last few decades and it will probably continue in this direction in the future. Second, fertility is lower when at least one spouse is in a situation of unemployment: 1.4 children when both are unemployed; 1.4 when the man is unemployed; and 1.6 when the woman is unemployed. In other words, the so-called opportunity cost of having a child or, what amounts to the same thing, the economic and labour cost of motherhood for the household economy, will be greater for couples in which only the female partner works. Hence, among hypogamous couples, the fertility would be lower.

Finally, Figure 3C shows the job stability of the partners. The results confirm that fertility is higher when both have stability (2.2 children) and lower when neither partner has job stability (1.6 children). On the other hand, however, we also observe that fertility is higher when the woman achieves job stability and the man doesn't (2.1 children) than in the reverse situation (1.8 children). While the educational advantage of one or other spouse seems, in itself, not to have any repercussions on fertility, the woman's employment advantage with regard to the man place these couples in a more propitious situation when it comes to making decisions of having a child. Furthermore, the perceived difference between couples where the male partner works and the female partner doesn't and those in which the former works and the latter is unemployed would be evidence that the woman's employment instability would be an inhibiting factor for childbearing decisions.

FIGURE 3. *Total fertility rates according to educational level, employment, and job stability between partners. Spain, 2002 – 2018*



Note: **all couples; **two-income couples*
Source: *EPA, 2002-2018*

ROLES, FERTILITY, AND FUTURE: IT'S ALL THE SAME?

Although there's nothing new about speaking of low fertility in Spain, what is new is asking about the implications, with regard to fertility, of changes in the composition of couples. Changes in the position of women in society have led couples along two paths from which it is difficult to return.

One, favoured by the reversal of the gender gap in education, has given rise to a greater number of highly educated homogamous couples and to more hypogamous couples (in which the woman's education level is higher than that of the man). The former have 0.6 children more than less educated homogamous couples. Halfway between the two are hypergamous and hypogamous couples, among which no difference in fertility is observed. The fact that women increasingly have a higher level of education than men could alter the inversely proportional relationship between level of studies and fertility. This seems to be an emerging trend which should be considered in family policies, although the increase always moves in a limited range since, hardly anyone, regardless of level of education, wants to have a lot of children; the usual is no more than 2 or 3, according to the surveys (Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014).

The second path of difficult return is the one that has led women to join the labour market, if not (yet) on an equal footing with men, though this is theoretically the case. The still minority but growing group of couples in which the female partner is the main wage earner of the household gives, as we have seen, a key role to her employment when it comes to deciding to have a child. This result points to major changes since, if it becomes consolidated in the future, it would be breaking with a trend and putting a stop to a whole theoretical tradition which, for decades, has explained low fertility by referring to women's employment. It shouldn't be forgotten that the "male breadwinner, female caregiver" model still works for some couples, although this looks as if it will become a reminder of other times.

So, is it all the same? No, it isn't. The fact that one or other partner of the couple has a higher or lower level of education, employment, or job security has an influence on reproductive patterns. If, in merely educational terms, no significant differences are observed among heterogamous couples (in which the man or woman has a higher education level than his or her partner), we find that employment does count. Nowadays, securing employment for women seems to be a key factor for maintaining or increasing fertility. Recall that this study refers to fertility with regard to couples and not fertility in general.

All of this, let's not forget, is happening in a labour situation of great economic uncertainty, as is the case in Spain, which also means that the two-income model is becoming a key piece in family functioning. If, moreover, we add to this a system of policies pertaining to family and work-life-balance which, although advanced, does not efficiently support co-responsibility in families, the situation will contribute to a breeding ground in which many couples won't be able to have the number of children they want (Bueno 2020), especially those with fewer resources.

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