

# What about Men? Male Fertility in Spain



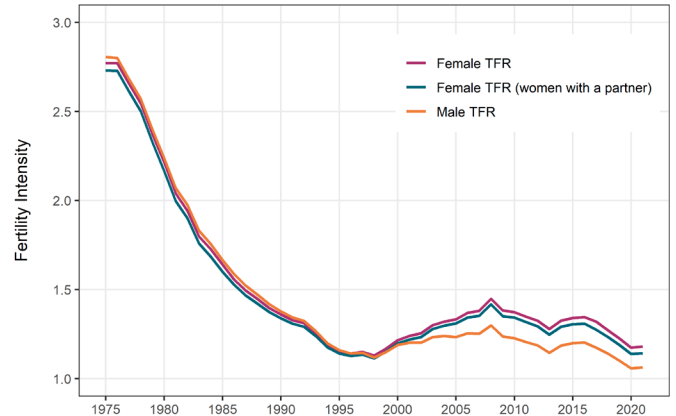
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Declining fertility in Spain has been one of the demographic phenomena which, owing to its speed, intensity, and relevance, has received most attention in recent years. Fertility fell from 2.8 children per woman in 1976 to 1.1 in 1998. Nevertheless, fertility studies have focused on the female aspect without comment on what was happening with the male dimension because it was thought to be irrelevant. In this number of Perspectives Demogràfiques, produced by the Centre for Demographic Studies (CED) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), we introduce men into fertility analysis using both the male Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and classification of first-time fathers. The results lead us to conclude first, that male and female fertility in the twenty-first century shows greater decline among males, although the evolution is comparable; second, that the reason for the difference may be found in an imbalance between the sexes where, at reproductive ages, men outnumber women; and, third, that among men, it is not the level of education that determines the differences in fertility but access to the labour market.

## Lower fertility worldwide, both male and female

In the quarter of a century from 1976 to 1998, constructing indicators on women at reproductive age or men at the same stage of life shows similar results (Figure 1). As with women, the male TFR plunged equally from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1990s from 2.8 to 1.1 children per man. In brief, this was a downwards trend that was independent of the sex of reference. Accordingly, the absence of specifics on male reproductive behaviour, and the fact that it was only analysed in relation to female patterns and limited to noting the greater age range of male fertility and of age at paternity, was not too noticeable. However, the beginning of the new century brought a change of scene because male fertility is now clearly lower than female fertility. This situation has gone unnoticed because the indicator has only been published in relation to women.



**Figure 1.** Intensity of fertility according to sex of parent

**Source:** Authors, drawing on Vital Registers and Municipal Register of Inhabitants

Hence, owing to structural effects like the contribution of migration, the TFR showed a slight increase to reach, in 2008, almost 1.5 children per woman, while remaining below 1.3 children per man. The downwards trend after the great recession saw a fall in fertility in 2013 to 1.3 children per woman and a figure of 1.15 for men. Thereafter, the smallness of the figures has made it necessary to add one decimal place to maintain the sensitivity of the indicator. The gap between the sexes has persisted so far this century and has included a very

slight recovery in 2014 and 2016 when the female SIF reached a modest 1.34 but the male TFR was a scant 1.20. The most recent data to have been published, for 2021, show the lowest paternity values in the past fifty years, with 1.06 children per man. This situation does not apply to women since the female SIF of 1.18 for 2021 was a little higher than the figure of 1.13 for 1998.

## Intensity of fertility: paternity versus maternity

Why has this gap occurred? We can begin by discarding some apparent causes. In order to do so, we will first analyse whether the difference is due to the increased number of women who have had children without an officially registered male partner. In order to test this, we calculated the TFR only among women who registered their maternity along with the father's paternity. The figure is lower than that previously calculated but explains very little of the difference with the male TFR (Figure 1). It should be noted, however, that the characteristics of fathers are recorded only in cases of births with a mother at their side. Neither can we affirm that the phenomenon of motherhood without a registered father

would be characteristic of the twenty-first century, or that this would have become more widespread over time. It has been a minority but significant factor throughout the whole period. We can simply observe, anecdotally and pending confirmation when we have definitive data, that the slight increase in female TFR between 2020 and 2021 (from 1.17 to 1.28) occurred with births for mothers who weren't accompanied by a father because the TFR of women with a male partner remained constant at 1.14.

A second reason for the difference in fertility between women and men might be found in the imbalance of numbers in the marriage market. Hence, as Schoumaker (2019: 469) notes, differences in the number of men and women at these ages are among the factors shaping a population pyramid that "... reflects (past) fertility and mortality conditions and sex ratio at birth, as well as international migration. In some cases, excess male mortality or sex-selective migration may lead to large sex imbalances at reproductive ages ...". In this regard, it was already foreseen that the sudden steep drop in the birth rate that occurred in Spain from 1976 onwards would mean a deficit of women in relation to men who could be potential fathers of their children, which is to say, men that were two or

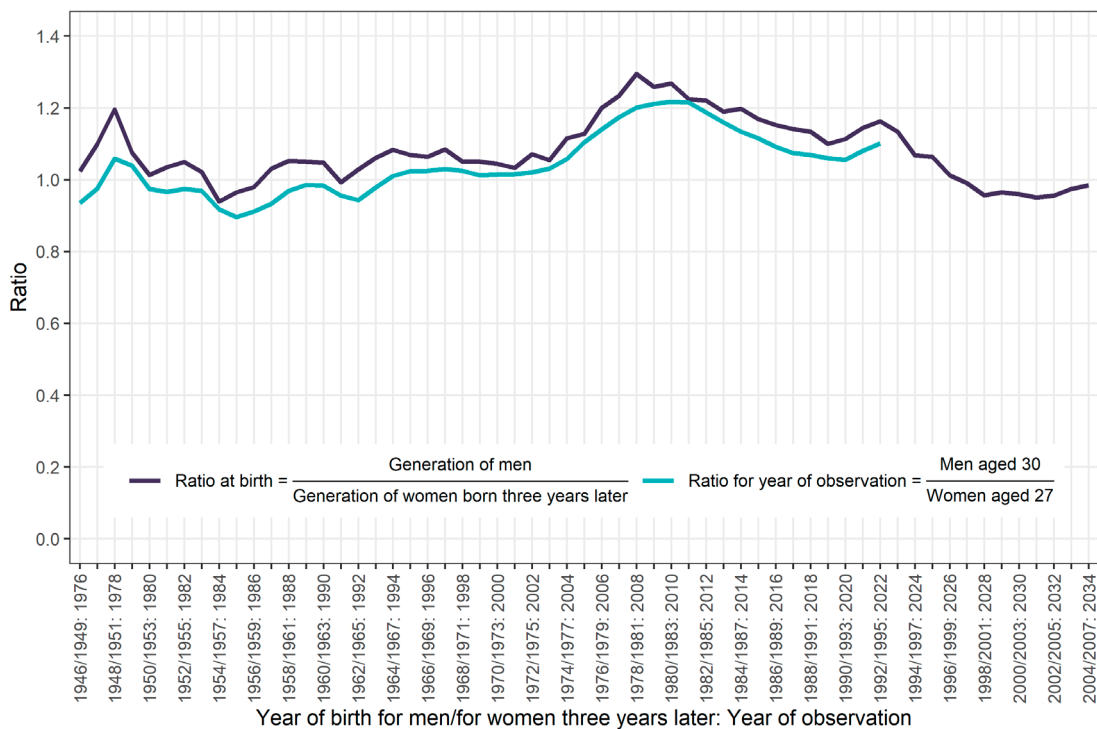


Figure 2. Ratio at birth and in year of observation

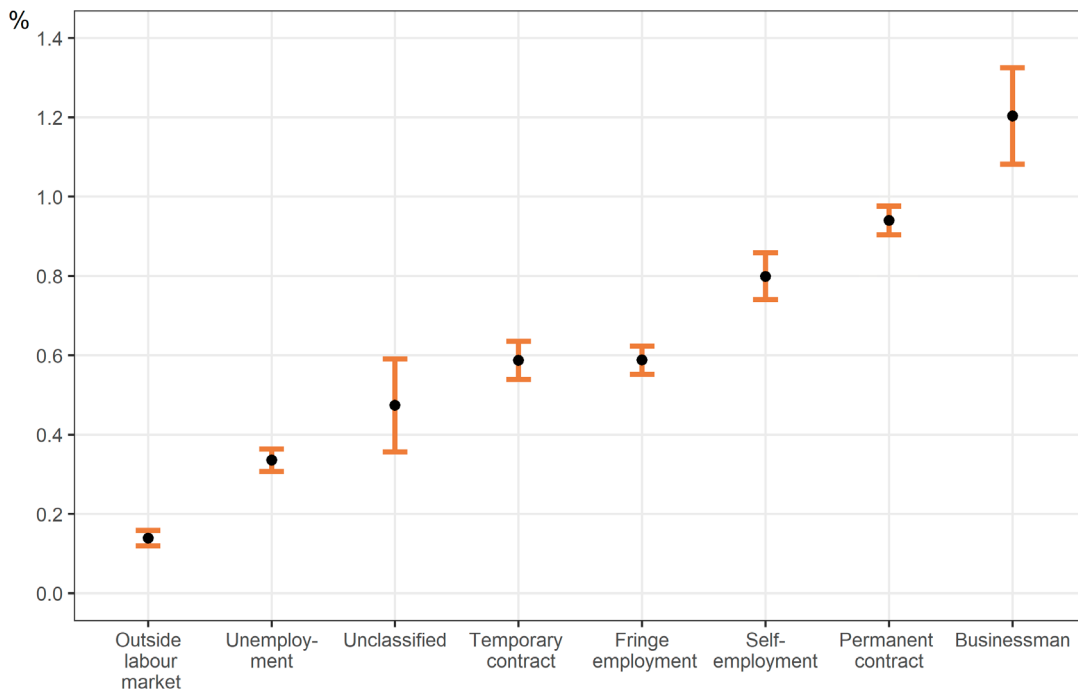
Source: Authors, drawing on Vital Registers and Municipal Register of Inhabitants

three years older than them (Cabr , 1997). When calculating the ratio at birth between males born in a certain year and females born three years later, one sees that this stays at around one to one among births of males between 1946 and 1973 and females born between 1949 and 1976 (Figure 2). However, after that, the ratio tended to an imbalance that rose to a maximum of 1.3 when comparing males born in 1978 with women born in 1981. This imbalance is not expected to be modified until the male generations born in 1996 and those women born in 1999 reach their reproductive period. When estimating the point at which this tension should appear (i.e., on average, thirty years later with regard to the birth of males) we find that this should start showing its effects in 2003, reaching a maximum in 2008 and continuing thus until about 2026. For the moment, its onset and maximum are associated with the distance in TFR according to sex (Figure 1) although the remission that should have occurred in the decade starting in 2009 is not so visible, as the distance between the number of children per man and per woman remained unchanged during all this time.

In addition to the ratio at birth, the ratio can also be skewed by mortality or sex-selective migration. We therefore complement the relation with that recorded in the Municipal Register of Inhabitants between men aged 30 and women aged 27 (Figure 2). With this, we found that the trend remains the same, so we assume that these factors have not had a significant influence on our indicators.

### Characteristics of first fatherhood

The administrative records do not offer many variables and we have the additional difficulty of also having to find denominators for the rates which, so far, have only been comprised by the population according to age and sex. In order to overcome these methodological limitations, we shall use an alternative data source, namely the Labour Force Survey (LFS). This reports men in the household who have no offspring, between one quarter and the following one, recording whether they remain childless or whether they have a first child, and thereby calculating the probability of being a first-time father according to educational level and employment circumstances.



**Figure 3.** Employment activity and first-time fatherhood (probability and confidence interval)

**Source:** Authors drawing on the Labour Force Survey

**Note:** Controlled for age, period of observation, and migratory situation

Although educational level says hardly anything about the phenomenon of first-time fatherhood, the labour market clearly makes a difference (Figure 3). The greater the involvement in paid employment, the greater the probability of fatherhood.

A third of the males analysed had, at some point, been out of the labour market and the probability of becoming fathers in this employment situation was almost nil. Almost a quarter of the men looked for work but without success, and these circumstances, too, were highly adverse for first-time fatherhood. Slightly more than 40% of the men were in fringe employment or jobs with a temporary contract and their probability of fatherhood differed little from that of the above groups. In sum, having a job is not sufficient for paternity. The job must be stable. In other words, the struggle against employment insecurity would improve the possibilities of fatherhood and, thus, the birth rate.

The real effect on birth rate depends on both population structure (how many) and behaviour in each employment category. The highest incidence is found among businessmen but their numbers are too small to have a real impact on birth rate. The next highest possibilities for fatherhood appear among men with a permanent contract and therefore job stability, a situation that about 33% of the men observed have

enjoyed at some point. Finally, the third position in terms of intensity of paternity is occupied by self-employed men although their numbers are also too small (about 8%) for their fertility to affect the birth rate in general.

## Conclusions: the mismatch of the marriage market and the effect of the labour market

To conclude, we would say that, among the strictly demographic reasons that explain the fact that the male TFR is lower than the female TFR, the most notable one is the greater number of men by comparison with women at significant reproductive ages, an imbalance that has been caused by the declining birth rate that began during the second half of the 1970s. This discrepancy was not compensated by the differential migration of women, although there may have been migration attracted by the demand of the marriage market.

In relation to the behaviour of male fertility, it is essential to bear in mind the context connected with the labour market because a stronger link with paid work means greater male fertility. In other words, the difficulties of finding a job in the labour market are taking a toll in terms of exclusion from reproduction.

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