

Article

Why don't women have all the children they say they want?

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Alicia Adserà, Princeton University; Mariona Lozano, Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics, UAB

Spain has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world (1.3 children per woman in 2019) and has one of the highest proportions of childless women in Europe. Spanish women's mean age at first birth (31 years) is also one of the highest. However, on average, women continue to state that they want around two children. Hence, there is a gap between desired and achieved fertility. The main drivers of this gap are adverse labour-market conditions, difficulties in leaving the parental home, increased instability for couples, and lack of support to ease work-family balance.

Key points

- 1 Spain has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, and women on average postpone their first birth beyond age 30.
- 2 The fertility rate is 1.3 (2019), but average desired fertility hovers around two children. Around 19% of women aged 45 and older are childless. In most European countries, fertility is higher and childlessness less prevalent. In Sweden, for example, the fertility rate is 1.7 and only 13% of women over age 45 are childless.
- 3 Couples in Spain have a hard time setting up their lives before moving into parenthood. Reasons for not achieving the desired number of children vary by age, but economic circumstances and delayed partnership formation are at the top of the list.
- 4 Young adults have a hard time establishing economic independence. Spain has among the highest rates of youth unemployment and temporary work in Europe.
- 5 Partnership formation is delayed in part due to economic instability and changing expectations about relationships. Rising rates of cohabitation, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births have changed the traditional life cycle.
- 6 Compared to other European countries, Spain lacks generous public policies to support families, and companies lack good work-family balance policies.

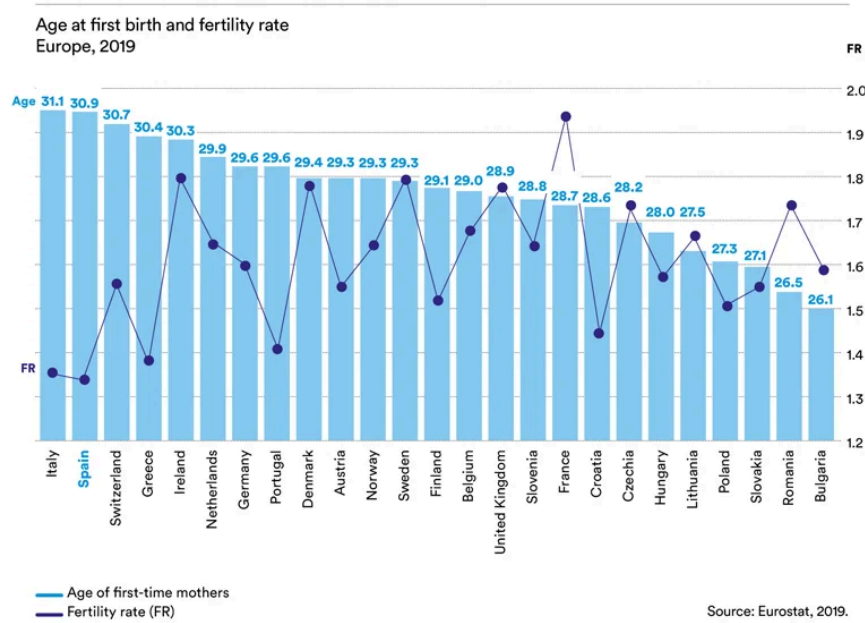
Economic conditions appear prominently when Spanish women are asked about the main reason that they have fallen short of their fertility plans

Spain has one of the largest gaps between desired and achieved fertility in Europe

In recent decades, fertility rates in Europe have fallen below replacement level (2.1 children per woman). In most European countries, the current fertility rate is between 1.4 and 1.9 children per woman. However, the number of children that women state they would like to have remains around two in most countries, and it has been constant over time.

Causes for this gap between desired and actual fertility are diverse, but insufficient family-friendly policies, increased uncertainty in the labour market, and couples' greater instability are some of the main factors that explain why many women decide to postpone motherhood. In Spain, in particular, the economic and institutional environment pushes for an even further postponement of this decision, beyond the age of 30. Spain, together with Italy, has the lowest fertility rate in Europe and the highest mean age at first birth among women. The low birth rate in Spain is a structural problem. Today, 20 years after the previous fertility survey was published, the new Spanish fertility survey conducted in 2018 offers an opportunity to understand these trends better.

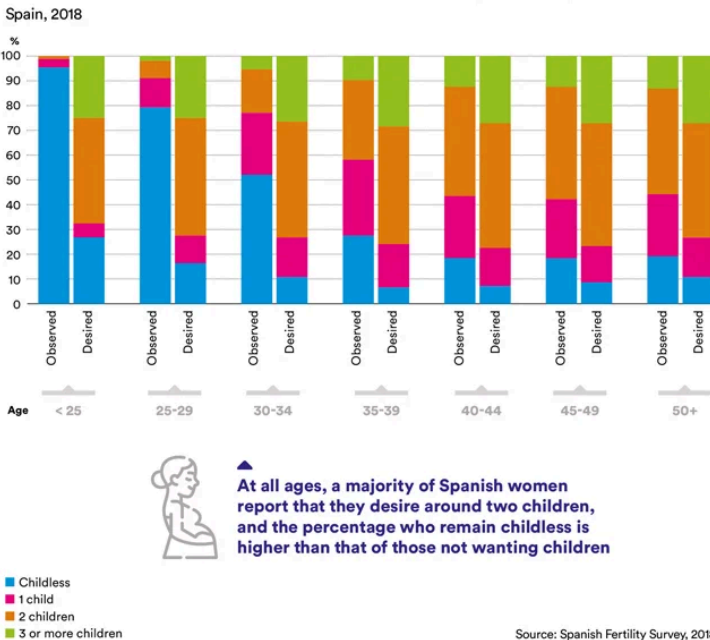
Figure 1. Spain and Italy are the European countries with the lowest fertility rate, and women in these countries transition to motherhood at older ages



The low fertility rate in Spain has consequences at both individual and societal levels. On the one hand, Spain is projected to be one of the world's oldest countries by 2050 according to United Nations estimates. The share of individuals 65 and over is projected to be 36.8% in 2050, only surpassed by Japan (37.7%) and South Korea (38.1%). On the other hand, the gap between desired and achieved fertility shows that women are not having the children they would like to have, pointing to personal frustration and unfulfilled expectations.

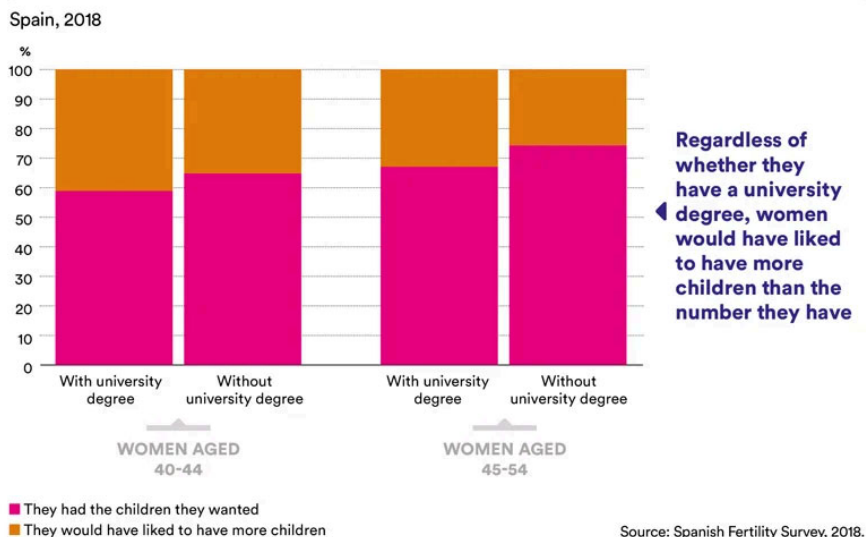
At all ages, a majority of Spanish women report a desired number of around two children, and this does not vary much by educational attainment (see figure 3). Around 35% of women who are past the prime years for fertility, regardless of whether they have a university degree, would have liked to have more children than the number they have. The gap between intended and actual fertility has been widening in Europe and the US over recent decades, and it is the largest in Southern Europe. Couples are having a hard time getting their lives in order before they move toward parenthood.

Figure 2. Distribution of observed and desired number of children per woman by age



At all ages, a majority of Spanish women report that they desire around two children, and the percentage who remain childless is higher than that of those not wanting children

Figure 3. Percentage of women over age 40 who did not achieve desired number of children, with and without a university degree



I. Mediators of the gap: Why are women not reaching their fertility goals?

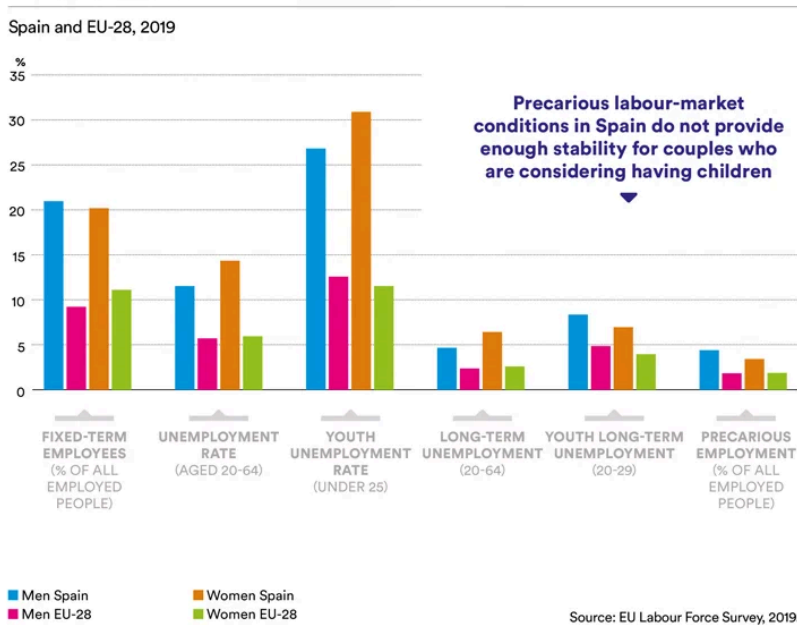
A direct determinant of low fertility is a high share of childlessness. Around 19% of women aged 45 and older are childless. The share is above the European average but below that of countries such as Italy, the UK, and the Netherlands, which have shares closer to 20%. All other mediators of the gap directly point to the delay in achieving stability in different spheres of life: leaving the parental home, finding stable employment and entering into a stable partnership. These obstacles that women face eventually result in lower fertility, in part because, with the postponement, both fecundity and the time left for women to conceive decrease.

Economic uncertainty

Acquiring economic independence, which is a pre-condition for a stable partnership and parenthood in most cases, is a first barrier that young couples encounter. Youth unemployment and the share of temporary work in Spain are among the highest in Europe. This instability affects not only the least educated, but also adults with a university education who take time to find jobs that match their higher aspirations. This has been an important driver of low fertility in Spain for several decades.

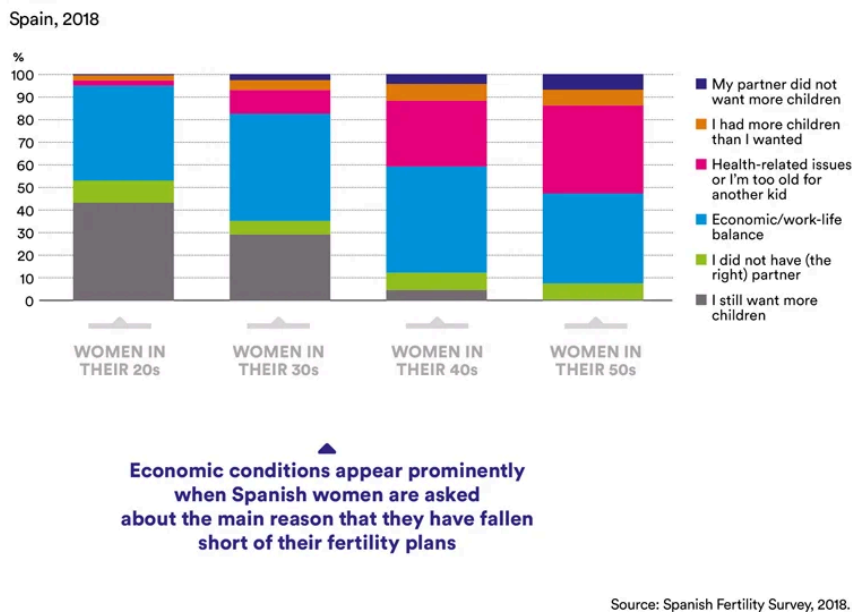
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Figure 4. Spain and EU-28 averages for labour indicators, including share of fixed-term employees, unemployment rate and youth unemployment rate



Precarious labour-market conditions in Spain do not provide enough stability for couples who are considering having children

Figure 5. Reasons reported by women for not having had the number of children they wanted



Economic conditions appear prominently when Spanish women are asked about the main reason that they have fallen short of their fertility plans

The average age for leaving the parental home is one of the highest in Europe (29 years old), and a large share of young adults still live with their parents

Moreover, past studies have shown that while unemployment has fluctuated in Spain according to specific circumstances, precarious working conditions seem to be more structural, and their prevalence has increased continuously from generation to generation, regardless of the economic context. Thus, delays in family formation are also reflecting the rise of precariousness that younger generations are experiencing.

Economic conditions appear prominently when women are asked about the main reason that they have fallen short of their fertility plans, and this has been the case for the last two decades in Spain.

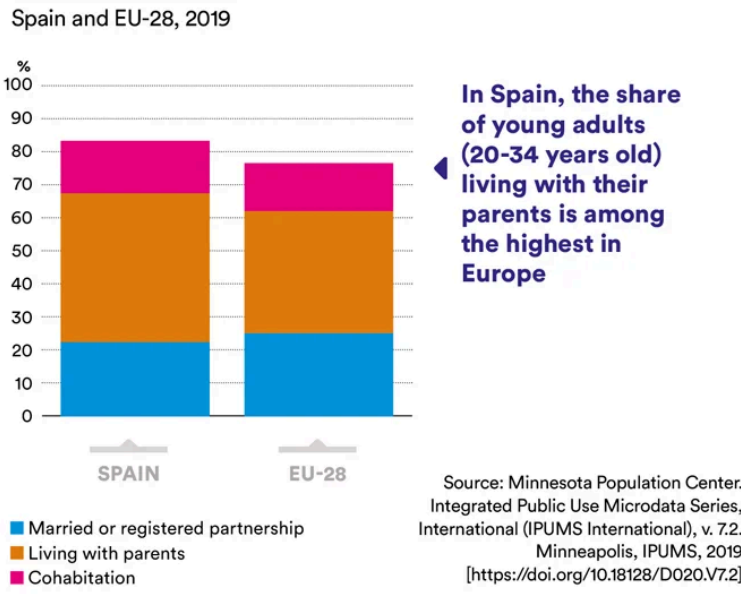
Delay in partnership formation and leaving the parental home

The process of union formation has undergone a major transformation during recent years in most European countries. Reasons behind these changes have been the massive entry of women into university education, the acceptance of premarital cohabitation or long-term cohabitation as a substitute for marriage, and new opportunities for finding a partner in educational or employment settings. At the same time, increases in economic uncertainty have made leaving the parental home more difficult and exacerbated the delay in establishing a long-term relationship. Rising housing costs have also contributed.

In Spain, the average age for leaving the parental home is one of the highest in Europe (29 years old), and a large share of young adults still live with their parents. In the EU-28, the average age for leaving home is below 25 in France and Germany and below 20 in Sweden and Finland.

As shown in figure 5, the delay in finding a stable partner or the “right partner” with whom to have children is among the top reasons cited for the gap between desired and actual fertility. The literature on transitions to adulthood has documented extensively the relationship between fertility and moving out of the parental home and being in a stable partnership. Additionally, changing expectations for relationships also delay partnership formation. Increased levels of education, greater social acceptance of civil unions understood as a test period before a major commitment, increased divorce rates and second marriages, as well as extended social acceptance of homosexual unions, have broadened the range of relationship types.

Figure 6. Distribution of living arrangements for young adults (20-34 years old)



Weak support for young working families

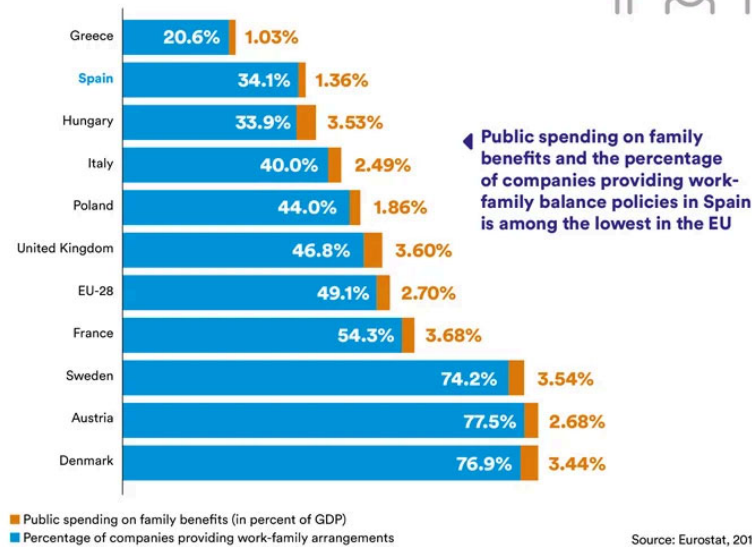
Compared to other countries in Europe, support for young adults with children is limited. The Nordic countries and France, for example, spent twice as much on family benefits (as a percentage of GDP) through the public sector in 2015 as Spain did. In addition, time schedules in Spain often imply long hours in the workplace during times when children are at home.

The share of companies in Spain that provide work-family balance policies – that is, allowing workers to accumulate hours for time off (full or half days) and offering flex-time – is among the lowest in the European Union and well below the 50% mark. While in countries such as Denmark, Austria and Sweden over 75% of private companies offer work-family balance policies, only around 35% of Spanish companies do. This is probably related to the structure of the Spanish economy, with a large share of small companies that are financially unable to provide such benefits.

Figure 7. Percentage of companies offering work-family balance policies and public spending on family benefits (as a share of GDP)



In percentage of GDP for Spain and selected countries in Europe



Finally, women in Spain are still responsible for the bulk of domestic work, and gender equality at home is still incomplete.

2. Conclusion

In Spain, long delays in key life transitions, such as leaving the parental home, partnership formation and acquiring employment stability, lead women to postpone having children, which in turn reduces the number of children they ultimately have.

Low fertility has strong implications for the sustainability of the welfare state. Couples are having a hard time “getting everything in place” before moving towards parenthood. Policies that have tried to increase fertility via short-term cash transfers have not been successful and have only affected the timing of births temporarily. Changes in work-family balance, contributions of men to household chores that reduce the “second shift” that many women face when they get home after work, and improvements in the labour market seem key to encouraging fertility.

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