

# **The effect of education on women's propensity to remain childless in Spain: Does the field of education matter?**

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**(Extended Abstract)**

## **1. Introduction**

The last decades of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century have witnessed important transformations in women's reproductive careers. In all Western societies there has been a pronounced trend towards a progressive postponement of major family events and a decrease in fertility levels, in most cases below replacement (Billari et al 2006). For instance, in Spain, in 2005 the mean age at first marriage and motherhood was 29.3 and 30.9 respectively for women, well above the EU-25 average. With a stable 1.2/1.3 over the past fifteen years, Spain was also of the first countries to reach levels of "lowest-low" fertility (Kohler et al. 2002). In parallel, educational advancement and an important growth in female labour participation have been notable in Spain from the 1970s until now. Access to University was extended to the emergent middle classes, and the proportion of women with a college degree has even surpassed that of men since the mid-1990s. In addition, 77.2 percent of Spanish women aged 25-34 participate nowadays in the labour market, slightly above the EU-25 average for this age group (75.7 percent) (Eurostat 2008).

A substantial component of the low national overall fertility levels is made of childlessness among the youngest cohorts across countries. Recent studies have demonstrated that, although the majority of women continue to become mothers at some point in their lives, increasing proportions of women choose to remain childless due to both reproductive choice and greater autonomy in ways not possible for previous generations (Gillispie 2003: 133), or end up being childless because they perpetually postpone having the first birth.<sup>1</sup> Research has also found that both groups of childless women tend to accumulate a high level of human capital in education or career-building paths (McAllister and Clarke 1998; Kemkes-Grottenthaler 2003). Worldwide, there is a strong link between childlessness and higher education across cohorts (Rosero-Bixby et al. 2009).

True, the increasing levels of educational attainment and labour participation among the youngest female generations are frequently used by the defenders of the economic theory of the family as main factors in the rise in delayed marriages, the decline in fertility and the emergence of childfree lifestyles. However, a study based on Sweden has recently shown that the positive association between education and childlessness is not very strong and the differences in childlessness by level of education diminish over the life course (Hoem, Neyer, and Andersson 2006). The authors, however, demonstrate that there are important differences in permanent childlessness by type of education. In fact, the field of education is shown to be more important than the educational level in Sweden. Swedish women educated in teaching and health care show a lower probability of remaining childless at each educational level than any other women. Lappegard and

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<sup>1</sup> Postponers constitute the largest single group in most analyses about childlessness (Heaton et al. 1999).

Ronsen (2005) have shown similar results in Norway. Going one step further, Neyer and Hoem (2008) have explored the question of whether these patterns of childlessness are unique to the Scandinavian institutional context or whether they also apply in Austria, a country with a different educational system, labour-market structure, and type of welfare state. They found that for most groups childlessness is higher in Austria, and for college graduates it is much higher. However, women instructed in teaching and health also have lower childlessness than other fields of education.

At an individual level, then, is the picture for women in Spain different to that presented above regarding the subject a woman has studied and its effect on childlessness? The inclusion of the field of study has proved to be both theoretically and empirically relevant for women's transition to first, second and third birth in Spain (Martín-García 2008, Martín-García and Baizán 2006). However, to the best of my knowledge, no study has been undertaken to investigate the role of the line of education on childlessness in Spain. In order to fulfil this gap, this article tries to give an answer to two specific research questions. First, do highly educated Spanish women have the same level of childlessness as less educated women? Second, are there differences among women at each educational level regarding childlessness due to their field of education? This article seeks to go beyond human capital explanations by providing a broader account of the meanings and significance of choosing certain fields of study to the women themselves. The aim is to examine in how far educational gender segregation (and particularly the selection of typical female fields of study) affects childlessness in Spain.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines a general overview of the effect of educational attainment and educational enrolment on childlessness and discusses why fields of study may be an additional explanatory variable to explain women's fertility behaviour. It also presents the main hypotheses used in the analysis. I describe the data and the methods in Section 3. The main results are presented in Section 4, and conclusions are given in the final section.