

## Timing of the first birth in the Spanish cohorts: evidences from the "Fecundidad, familia y valores 2006" survey

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### Background\*

Spain's total fertility rate has more than halved since 1975, when it was 2.8, to the present 1.3 (the lowest rate on record, 1.2, was reached in 1995). At the same time, the mean age at first childbirth has grown continually, seriously hindering any sustained recovery of fertility. Since the 1970s and early 1980s, the mean age at first birth has risen in Spain by four years (25.3 in 1975 to 29.3 in 2004) and by 2.1 years for age at childbearing (28.8 in 1975 to 30.9 in 2004). Yet, postponement of the childbearing calendar occurred most swiftly in the 1990s, with age at first childbirth increasing by 2.2 years in that decade alone. Moreover, this has been a consistent trend, with mothers' age at first birth rising even in the years when fertility rates – for first-order births almost exclusively – turned slightly upward. Furthermore, the gap between the average age at first childbirth and age at childbearing has been steadily closing; an indication that the period devoted to reproduction has narrowed.

Cohort fertility, in turn, has declined uninterruptedly among the cohorts subsequent to 1941, from 2.6 for women born in that year to 1.6 for those born in 1965, the last cohort considered: i.e., a decline of one birth in 24 cohorts. Based on their age at childbearing, the 1941-55 cohorts had their children in the 1970s and early 1980s, but their lower fertility was greatly attenuated and therefore not reflected in the period rates because age at motherhood had not yet begun to climb and in fact had dipped slightly. Consequently, the shift to earlier motherhood, as recorded in Spain in the 1970s, had inflated the period rates with respect to cohort rates. For the successive cohorts a sharp process of delayed maternity is observed. The first-order fertility figures show that, with the sole exception of 1980, the rates for women up to the age of 26 are higher in the 1960 cohort than in any subsequent group. After that age, although fertility is higher in each cohort than in the one preceding it, such heightened intensity is attained at increasingly later ages. The cumulative progression rate to first birth declines for all cohorts after 1960, regardless of the age considered. Hence, according to cumulative fertility data, 85.6% of the women born in 1960 had been mothers by age 35, while the figure for the 1965 cohort dips to 80.5%. The figures for the age of 32, in turn show that 80.3% of the women in the 1960 cohort were mothers. By contrast, only 72.4% and 60.4%, respectively, of those born in 1965 and 1970 had children by that age: i.e., there is a 20-point difference between the first and last cohorts. This evidence supports the hypothesis that the delay in first childbirth is not fully offset by higher intensities at later ages and a further decline in the youngest cohort fertility is predictable.

### Research outline

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\* This paragraph includes figures already illustrated in the research article: Margarita Delgado, Gerardo Meil, Francisco Zamora López, "Spain: Short on children and short on family policies", *DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH*, VOLUME 19, ARTICLE 27, PAGES 1059-1104, Special Collection 7: Childbearing Trends and Policies in Europe <http://www.demographic-research.org/special/7/> to which one can refer for further details.

The aim of the paper is to contribute in explaining the postponement of entering childbearing. The focus is on comparison between the elderly female cohorts 1941-55 and the youngest ones, born after 1970. Both are contrasted to an intermediate birth cohorts group, namely those women born in 1956-1970, who lived their reproductive experience in a crucial historical period in Spain, following the transition to democracy and the beginning of the social-economic development.

The main purpose of this study is to show how the increase in the female human capital and the increasing involvement in the labour market affect the individual decisions of building a family, throughout entering a (formal) union and conceiving a first child, and how much these effects are changed across cohorts.

## **Data and Methods**

For our analysis we use data from the survey "Fecundidad, familia y valores 2006" held in Spain in that year on a sample of over 9,700 women older than 15. It is the most recent and totally unexplored source of information for studying fertility and family behaviour in Spain. It collected, among others, detailed individual life history related to partnership, childbearing and employment spells. It also includes information on contraceptive experience and educational level, as well as and on values, opinions and religious attitudes, which are also items of interest for explaining differences in timing of fertility among cohorts.

As the main object of this study is on transition to first birth, a duration data analysis approach has been followed. In the first part of the empirical work, we performed a non-parametric analysis of time to first child conception, comparing the Kaplan-Meier survival curves among different group of women, according to individual characteristics. In the second part, we applied a semi-parametric hazard regression analysis (Cox's model) to model the process of family building, that is of entering a first union and, using partnership as intermediate behaviour, of conceiving a first birth. The focus is on the effect of employment status on transition to childbearing, controlling for: level of education and timing of exit from the school system, type of union (marriage or cohabitation), age at first union, religiosity and political orientation. One model has been performed for any of the three main group of birth cohorts (1941-55, 1956-70, 1971-80).

## **Results**

The postponement of family building process doesn't seem to come to an end in Spain. The comparison among cohorts shows an increasing delay of timing of the first birth, linked to a change in strategy of union formation and partnership behaviour.

The role played by female involvement in the labour market is important and complex, and changes across cohorts. Our results suggest that being employed is a condition not necessarily in contrast with starting a union and conceiving a child, but the search for a stable employment and lack of flexibility into the labour market delay the timing of family formation.