

Population Review

Volume 52, Number 1, 2013

Type: Article pp.110-128

Voluntary Childlessness in Southern Europe: The Case of Spain

Author: Marta Seiz

Affiliation: Centre for Human and Social Sciences (CCHS), Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), Spain

Corresponding author/address: Marta Seiz, Centre for Human and Social Sciences (CCHS), Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), C/ Albasanz 26-28, Madrid 28037, Spain;

E-mail: marta.seiz@cchs.csic.es

Abstract

Many post-industrial societies have seen not only a decline in fertility rates and a postponement of first births, but also an increase in voluntary childlessness. While Spain is no exception, the issue of why some women in this country choose to forego motherhood has received little attention. Drawing on the Spanish Survey on Fertility and Values (2006), this study analyzes the weight in the decision of three groups of variables having proven crucial for fertility behaviour. Individual socioeconomic circumstances related to the costs of motherhood, the delay in economic independence and union formation, and attitudinal work and family orientations prove all important; which indicates Spain's resemblance to other Western societies. Still, the particularly manifest relevance of a delayed transition to adulthood brings the Spanish case especially close to the Italian one; raising further questions on the fine line separating chosen from accepted childlessness in Southern Europe.

Keywords

Fertility, childlessness, Spain, Southern Europe, costs of motherhood, delayed transition to adulthood

Note: This paper is part of Special Collection 4, which can be found here: <http://populationreview.com/special-collection-4/>

© 2013 Sociological Demography Press

Introduction

Along with a substantial decline in fertility rates and a postponement of first births, the past decades have witnessed an increase in permanent childlessness in Western societies. The traditionally family oriented Southern European states are no exception. Both the scope and the speed of the transformation have been particularly dramatic in Spain and Italy; which were the first countries to reach lowest-low fertility levels in the 1990s (Kohler et al. 2002). Despite a certain reversal of the trend, current rates are still far below those required for population replacement (Caltabiano et al. 2009; Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2010).

Among the main factors having promoted this scenario is an increase in the mean age at first birth (Bernardi and Requena 2003). This, in turn, can be related to particular characteristics of the Southern European context –e.g. difficult youth access to the labour and housing markets, and cultural norms showing tolerance towards prolonged co-residence with parents –that favour late transitions to adulthood and the postponement of union formation (Baizán 2001; Consejo Económico y Social 2002; Modena and Rondinelli 2011).

As reproductive capacity declines with age, the delay of motherhood has not only resulted in a decrease in average fertility rates, but also in an increase in the number of women who remain childless (González and Jurado-Guerrero 2006). A similar trend has been observed in other Western countries (Hakim 2000). However, while the delay of childbearing and its close relation to reduced fertility in Southern Europe has received a good deal of attention (Kohler et al. 2002; Billari and Kohler 2004; Baizán 2006), less heed has been paid to voluntary childlessness as another manifestation of the new tides of sociodemographic change. A pertinent question is whether the same determinants leading women in the region to have fewer and later births also influence the decision not to have any children whatsoever.

Recent work on voluntary childlessness in Italy reveals it is largely connected to emergent non-traditional value orientations –as reflected in its association with a lack of religious affiliation, cohabitation, non-family-related priorities, and the belief that motherhood entails too many sacrifices–, although certain occupational and union-related aspects also prove of weight (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). Attitudinal variables might also be significantly linked to voluntary childlessness in Spanish society; given the deep-going changes it has experienced regarding the conception of the family, the role of women, and the centrality of the reproductive dimension in the latter's lifecourse (Alberdi 1999; Castro-Martín 2007). At the end of the day, nevertheless, the extent to which this is so and Spain resembles Italy –and other Western societies (Gillespie 1999; Park 2005)– in this respect remains an empirical question. In fact, knowledge on why some Spanish women choose to forego childbearing is remarkably scarce. Studies on childlessness more generally have dealt to some degree with its voluntary dimension (MacInness 2006; Devolder and Merino Tejada 2007), yet they leave the question of its immediate determinants largely unanswered.

In particular, it is not clear whether it is fundamentally value-related aspects or situational ones that exert the greatest influence on the decision to remain childless. Beyond the potential importance of an attitudinal transformation, contextual and individual variables of a more material nature could also prove relevant. The latter seems a realistic possibility given the harsh constraints that the Spanish labour and housing markets –which hardly facilitate the transition to adulthood, union formation, economic stability, or the reconciliation of work and family life – place on fertility behaviour. Indeed, both the postponement of childbearing and the number of

children individuals eventually have are influenced by such variables (Kohler et al. 2002). A key issue is the extent to which these factors also play a role in the decision to forego motherhood altogether.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is threefold: first, it seeks to fill a gap in the literature regarding the voluntary dimension of childlessness in Spain. Secondly, it will examine the relative influence on the phenomenon of three groups of variables whose significance for other types of fertility behaviour has been established –namely that of individual socioeconomic circumstances posing obstacles to motherhood or its reconciliation with employment; of the delay in the transition to adulthood and union formation; and of attitudinal work and family orientations. Finally, it will relate its findings to existing knowledge on the Italian case and other countries. The ultimate purpose is to discuss whether the determinants of childlessness as a deliberate reproductive choice found in the analysis are distinct for Spain, similar or different to those identified for Italy, or in line with those obtained for other European societies beyond those commonly categorized as “Southern” or “Mediterranean”.

Voluntary childlessness as a preference-based lifestyle choice

The academic literature on voluntary childlessness has been to date comparatively scant. Notwithstanding, a number of studies have looked into its societal and individual-level determinants. Concerning the former, emphasis has been placed on the importance of advances in contraception, the greater education and work opportunities women benefit from, and the growing rates of female employment participation (Park 2005). Simultaneously, the importance of cultural changes has been underscored. Couple relations are no longer fundamentally based on traditional grounds such as procreation and child rearing, but rather on freedom of choice and the benefits individuals derive from the relationship (Alberdi 1999; Gillespie 1999). Similarly, social norms that made family dedication the ultimate goal for women have become more relaxed, which is believed to have facilitated the adoption of diverse decisions in terms of lifestyle and fertility (Hakim 2000; Park 2005). As noted, the emergence of new value orientations appears as one of the main factors underlying voluntary childlessness in Italy (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). Since Spanish society has experienced a perhaps even more substantial transformation in this sense, it is plausible that similar claims could be made for this country.

At the individual level, studies have found associations between certain characteristics of women and their probability of choosing not to have children. First, across a range of institutionally diverse countries, voluntary childlessness has been reported to be most widespread among women with a high education level, as well as among those holding well-remunerated and highly qualified jobs (Gillespie 1999; Hakim 2000; MacInness 2006, Neyer and Hoem 2008). None of this seems surprising, since motherhood entails high labour-market-related opportunity costs for such women. Those with higher education, moreover, are comparatively less likely to hold traditional, family-oriented values. Regarding partnership status, some authors have noted a greater incidence of the phenomenon among unmarried women (Jacobson and Heaton 1991), while others have found it equally prevalent among single and married women (Gillespie 1999). Further work has also shown that those opting for this reproductive choice are less likely to have or have had a couple relationship (MacInness 2006). In the Italian case, the experience of cohabitation is positively related to the probability of voluntary childlessness (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008).

This said, and despite the fact that voluntary childlessness has apparently become more common, it remains a minority behaviour. Its frequency of occurrence neither mirrors the increase in women's employment and education opportunities (Park 2005), nor the evolution of individual preferences regarding the ideal number of children (for an illustration of the Spanish case, see Meil 2001). This begs the question of why a limited group of women with the aforementioned characteristics make a conscious and final decision not to have children while the majority does not.

One possible explanation is offered by the theoretical framework proposed by Hakim (2000, 2003). According to the latter, underlying the heterogeneity of women's employment and fertility behaviour is the diversity of their preferences, which are claimed to have room to materialize into distinct choices thanks to the profound transformations undergone by post-industrial societies. To some extent, there is empirical evidence supporting the validity of preference theory for explaining voluntary childlessness. The phenomenon has been found to be associated with an unwillingness to lose the personal autonomy, the economic advantages and the lifestyle characteristic of a life without children. Other relevant variables are a strong prioritization of careers and couple relationships as opposed to the experience of motherhood, and even an open rejection of the latter and its related responsibilities (Gillespie 1999; Hakim 2003; Park 2005). It has also been observed that women who decide to forego childbearing hold less traditional values (Baber and Dreyer 1986) and are religious to a lesser extent than others (Heaton et al. 1992). Such has also proven to be the case in Italy specifically (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008) and, given the contextual similarities between the two countries, is a possibility worth examining for Spain as well.

Situational barriers to motherhood: Their potential role

While preference-based explanations may be appropriate for understanding why certain women decide not to have children, it is unclear to what degree other less explored variables are also relevant. In fact, one of the most common criticisms directed towards preference theory is targeted against the assumption that all women have room for making preference-guided choices; regardless of the situational context they are immersed in (Crompton and Harris 1998). Preferences themselves are not exclusively guided by attitudes; neither do they emerge and materialize in a vacuum. Contextual constraints influence the rational calculus individuals make concerning their lifestyle, and, by extension, their fertility behaviour. The empirical literature on the socioeconomic determinants of fertility (Kohler et al. 2002; Bernardi and Requena 2003; Billari and Kohler 2004; Baizán 2006) supports this contention.

Acknowledgedly, previous work on Italy (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008) has linked voluntary childlessness to attitudinal variables rather than to situational ones. In the case of Spain, however, there are reasons to believe that attention should be paid to the latter. Since the wish not to have children does not seem particularly widespread in Spanish society –the gap between desired and actual fertility is largest among women who have one child or none (Meil 2001; Bernardi and Requena 2003)– it is plausible that voluntary childlessness is related to those socioeconomic constraints that lead other women to delay childbearing or limit their number of children.

Researchers have identified a number of variables characteristic of the recent Spanish context – and extensive to the Italian one (see Billari et al. 2002; Modena and Rondinelli 2011) – that bear a clear association with low fertility rates and the postponement of motherhood. Among them is

the lack of employment security. The labour market entry difficulties faced by young adults along with high levels of precarious employment generate uncertainty, which frequently leads them to postpone childbearing and might even make them forego it entirely. Such aspects also affect the timing and number of births indirectly by delaying economic emancipation and union formation. Housing access difficulties have similar effects (Kohler et al. 2002). The question is whether the variables noted also influence the decision not to have children at all. Unstable economic prospects could encourage some individuals to give up childbearing; especially in a context of delayed emancipation and union formation where the time available for reaching a position favourable to parenthood might be relatively limited by biological constraints.

Another feature of the Southern European region having proven decisive for fertility outcomes is the difficulty to reconcile employment and family life. There is evidence suggesting that conciliation predicaments constitute the main obstacle to having the first child in Spain; especially for the highest educated women (Bernardi and Requena 2003). Labour market and public institutions offer little support to families, and the distribution of housework is generally far from egalitarian. Since such factors have large potential to result in the postponement of childbearing or a reduction in the number of births (Alberdi 1999; Baizán 2006), they might also influence the choice to renounce motherhood entirely. In Italy, economic conditions do not appear of particular relevance for predicting voluntary childlessness. The latter seems to be primarily related to non-traditional attitudes resulting in a non-prioritization of family-building. This notwithstanding, the potential significance of conflicts between employment and family demands is not dismissed either. The decision to forego motherhood, moreover, appears associated with a difficult labour market entry and with late, weak or unstable unions. It has consequently been suggested that childlessness by choice may not be easily distinguishable in practice from childlessness by postponement (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). This makes it particularly interesting to examine the Spanish case, as it will shed further light on the consequences of the particular socioeconomic circumstances affecting young adults in Southern Europe.

Socioeconomic constraints, lifecourse characteristics or attitudinal orientations? Three hypotheses to be put to test

In summary, in view of the existing knowledge gaps regarding the determinants of voluntary childlessness in Spain, it appears important to analyze the degree to which different variables affect the phenomenon. Accordingly, in subsequent sections and building on previous research on the various dimensions of female fertility decisions, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H1: *Voluntary childlessness in Spain is fundamentally linked to individual socioeconomic characteristics associated with a high opportunity cost of motherhood or difficult to combine with childbearing; such as those related to women's education, her own and her partners' employment situation, and the domestic distribution of labour.*

H2: *Voluntary childlessness in Spain is primarily connected to individuals' lifecourse characteristics; particularly those related to the delay in the transition to adulthood and union formation.*

H3: *Voluntary childlessness in Spain is essentially a product of personal preferences and attitudes with regard to family and work.*

The factors referred to in Hypotheses 1 and 2 could be sorted under a single category of individual socioeconomic characteristics related to the Southern European structural background. They are namely linked to a societal context which hardly favours young adults' economic autonomy; which presents women with employment and education opportunities that are very different from those of previous generations; where the institutional support for motherhood is evidently lacking; and where a traditional division of labour is still relatively prevalent. The variables alluded to in Hypothesis 3, in contrast, are strictly personal and attitudinal characteristics. This does not mean they are not themselves influenced by the social settings in which they arise. As previously argued, preferences are always to some degree endogenous to context. Ultimately, however, they are not the sole and direct product of structural incentives and constraints.

Considering the aforementioned, it is interesting to analyze the relative importance of the first group of situational variables compared to the second group of attitudinal ones. In previous work on childlessness a differentiation has been made between active and more passive choices (Gillespie 1999); distinguishing between those decisions based on purely individual motives and those significantly influenced by external circumstances. Bearing this distinction in mind is central, as it is not always easy to disentangle choice-driven behaviour from that resulting from externally imposed constraints (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). Consequently, if situational variables proved more important than personal attitudes for the decision to remain childless, a discussion on whether voluntary childlessness is always so voluntary after all would be pertinent.

Data and methods

The analysis draws on an initial sample of 2,645 women aged 36-50 years from the Spanish Survey on Fertility and Values ("Encuesta de Fecundidad y Valores en la España del Siglo XXI"; Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 2006). The reasons for focussing on this age range are manifold. The upper limit has been chosen taking into account the necessity to include women having made their reproductive decisions recently; given the study's interest in variables related to the socioeconomic context of recent decades. At the same time, it is important to maximize the number of women relatively close to the end of their fertile lives so that the decision to bear children or not –which constitutes the dependent variable– is as definitive as possible; otherwise there is a risk that a temporary wish not to have children –which might be observed among younger women– is mistaken for a more permanent phenomenon. It seems thus most adequate to focus on women having completed or being close to completing their childbearing years. Women within the aforementioned age range are usually considered to meet this criterion, although the highest educated might constitute an exception given their tendency to have their first child at later ages (Bernardi and Requena 2003). At any rate, raising the sample's lower limit to ages at which virtually no women have births (e.g. 45 years) would entail an excessive loss of data units; which would be problematic considering the minority nature of the phenomenon under study.

Besides descriptive statistics, binomial logistic regression is used as the main data analysis technique; on account of the qualitative and dichotomous nature of the dependent variable. Respondents are regarded as voluntarily childless if they simultaneously fulfil all the following criteria: i) they have never had any biological children born live; ii) they have never adopted; iii) they have never had any foster children in their care; iv) they are not and have never been

pregnant; v) they have never made use of Assisted Reproductive Technology; and vi) they do not wish to have any children in the future.

The analysis has been conducted in several steps: initially, the bivariate associations between the dependent variable and the main covariates of interest have been examined, in order to get a preliminary glimpse of causal relationships that might be at play. Subsequently, the covariates corresponding to each hypothesis have been gradually incorporated into multivariate regression models. All variables having reached a p-value equal to or lower than 0.25 as well as those theoretically important to control for are included in a full model that pays heed to the three categories of explanations. A core model incorporating only those variables significant at the 0.1 level or lower –and essential controls– is also tested to check whether results are maintained. The rationale behind keeping the number of covariates as low as possible is the following: first, sample size makes it advisable –while the starting point is a total of 2,645 women, once all relevant variables are included the figure goes down to around 1,600. Secondly, there are comparatively few observations –a mere 132– for one of the two categories of the dependent variable; namely that corresponding to voluntarily childless women. Thus, considering the recommendation to have, for each explanatory variable, at least 10 cases corresponding to the least represented category of the dependent one (Peduzzi et al. 1996), it seems wisest not to include more than 13 variables in the core model. The more general advice to have around 15 observations per covariate when performing logistic regression, in order to achieve greater coefficient stability (DeMaris 1992), encourages parsimony as well.

As noted, the first set of covariates is the socioeconomic characteristics associated with a high opportunity cost of motherhood, or otherwise difficult to combine with childbearing. The study looks into the potential influence on voluntary childlessness of education level, high occupational status, working time, and employment stability. The characteristics of both respondents and their partners are considered. In addition, the possible impact of a large perceived distance between the ideal and the actual intra-household division of labour is examined, as there is no information on what the latter looks like in reality. The control variables introduced are year of birth, civil status –coded as married versus not married; since marriage is likely to be the preferred setting for childbearing for the considered cohort– and whether respondents have partners who explicitly declare they do not wish to have children.

The second group of covariates has to do with respondents' life course characteristics; namely with their transitions out of the parental home and into the co-residential unions within which childbearing typically occurs. In particular, attention is paid to the significance of economic autonomy and its timing, as well as to that of co-residential union history. In the latter respect, it is examined whether the dependent variable is associated with the fact of never having been in a co-residential union –either a marital or a consensual one–, as well as with a union stability index. This index has been built by combining the total number of unions and their average duration; both weighted by their inverse standard deviations. A negative sign has been placed before the former variable so that a high value of the index corresponds to greater stability. Those cases where respondents have never entered a union –that is, those where both the total number of unions and union duration are equal to 0– have been coded in a way that assigns them the lowest possible value; as they could theoretically be regarded as an extreme case of relationship instability. In fact, never entering any kind of co-residential union could be a consequence of –inter alia– a very unstable relationship history. At any rate, the theoretical effect on childbearing intentions of not being married or cohabiting should plausibly be more similar to that of having many and short union periods than to that of, for instance, being in a

long-lasting, consolidated union. An alternative would have been to perform regressions including this index only on those women who have been in at least one co-residential union. However, this would entail a loss of data that seems advisable to avoid given the limited representation of voluntarily childless women in the sample. A new control variable –whether the women had a partner, either co-residential or not, at the time of the survey– is also introduced at this stage.

Finally, attention is directed towards attitudinal work and family orientations. The models include a covariate measuring whether respondents show high commitment to paid employment. Its construction is based on an original variable about the division of work and family responsibilities that the surveyed women would ideally choose. Those who would rather devote themselves exclusively to paid employment and delegate all domestic and family responsibilities to their partners; those who would prefer to stand for the lion's share of the couple's market work; and those who would opt for a strictly egalitarian distribution of labour are classified as highly work-oriented. Regarding respondents' attitudes towards family specifically, it is examined whether beliefs about the need to give greater importance to family life in the future bear any relation to voluntary childlessness. Finally, a religiosity variable and a question on whether respondents regard children as an obstacle to women's careers are included as controls. The correct specification of the models is checked by performing the Hosmer-Lemeshow Goodness-of-Fit test.

Findings

Of the 2,645 women constituting the initial sample, only 132 –5% of the estimated population– can be regarded as voluntarily childless according to the criteria formulated. The phenomenon becomes more prevalent with age, although differences are not dramatic. Within the age range 36-40, voluntarily childless women add up to 3.6% of the total. Among those aged 41-45 years the proportion rises to slightly over 5%, and it constitutes 6.8% for those aged 46-50. Most of these women (81%) are not married, as many as 58% are in fact partnerless, and a substantial proportion (51%) of those who are in a couple relationship have partners who do not wish to have children.

Regarding the profile of the voluntarily childless women, it can be observed that the proportion of respondents with higher education is greater among them (42%) than among those who either have had or would like to have children (20%). Nevertheless, voluntary childlessness does not appear concentrated within the subsample of women having completed higher education –as shown in Figure 1, the share of such women who have secondary or high school-level education is even larger. While any conclusions based on bivariate associations must of course be drawn with extreme caution, this might be suggestive of voluntary childlessness in Spain not being primarily related to attitudinal orientations characteristic of those in the highest education strata, but rather to situational constraints also experienced by other women.

As shown in Table 1, most of the voluntarily childless are employed, and more than one-third hold jobs with high occupational status. Both full-time work and employment stability are most frequent among them. In sum, if attention is paid to their employment attributes, the portrait of a work-committed woman with a strong foothold in the labour market easily comes to mind.

Figure 1. Prevalence of voluntary childlessness by education level among Spanish women aged 36-50 (2006)

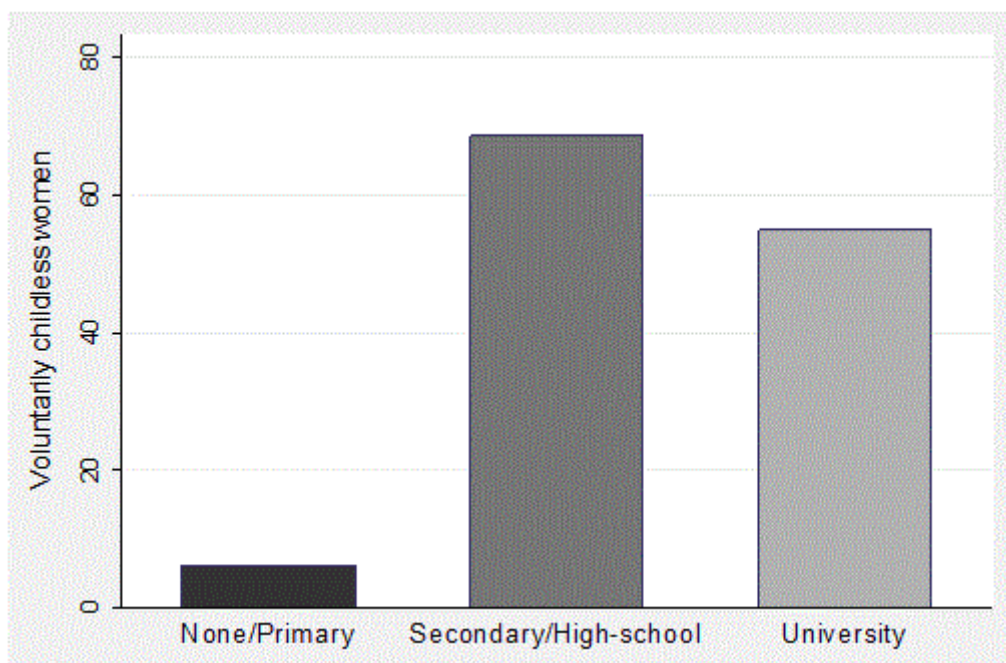


Table 1. Employment situation of the analyzed women and –when applicable– their partners

*Percentages calculated only for those respondents or partners who are employed

	Voluntarily childless women	Women with children or childbearing intentions
<i>All sampled women</i>		
Not employed	36%	46%
Part-time employed	23%	22%
Full-time employed	41%	32%
High occupational status*	36%	22%
Stable employment*	64%	49%
<i>Partnered women in the sample</i>		
Partner not employed	39%	13%
Partner part-time employed	3%	7%
Partner full-time employed	58%	80%
Partner with high occupational status	44%	24%
Partner with stable employment	70%	65%

When focus is placed on the employment characteristics of the partners –for those women who have them– an interesting picture emerges. On the one hand, the proportion of voluntarily childless women whose partner is not employed is three times as high as that corresponding to the rest of the partnered women in the sample. In addition, less than 60% of the voluntarily childless’ partners work full-time. On the other hand, the proportion of partners who hold jobs with high occupational status and have employment stability, respectively, is greater within the group of voluntarily childless respondents. Such findings indicate that those voluntarily childless women who are in a couple relationship have either partners with a solid employment position or non-employed ones. It could be that both variables influence some women’s –or perhaps rather some couples’– decision not to have children, since both the lack of two income sources and the kind of values and lifestyle associated with high occupational status may work in this direction. This is nonetheless a possibility that can hardly be substantiated without resorting to multivariate analysis.

Regarding lifecourse characteristics, the voluntarily childless women analyzed also exhibit some remarkable features. The majority have left the parental home, although a far from negligible proportion –45%– has not. This figure is visibly higher than that corresponding to those classified as actual and potential childbearers, for which it lies at around 10%. For those voluntarily childless women having indeed left their home of origin, the mean age at which they did so was 27.5 years. For the rest of the female population having made such a transition, it occurred on average four years earlier. The voluntarily childless appear thus to make their transitions to adulthood comparatively late.

The union histories of such women –summarized in Table 2– are likely to be connected to such a delay. Most of the voluntarily childless women analyzed have only been in one co-residential union, and almost half –46%– have been in none. The percentage of respondents never having been in a marital or consensual union is substantially lower among those who either have had or would like to have children. Moreover, those classified as voluntarily childless who have entered some kind of co-residential union have first done so at an average age of 30, while the equivalent figure for the rest of the sample is 24 years. The former’s unions have an average duration of 10 years; while in the latter case it amounts to almost 18 years. Differently put, those

Table 2. Co-residential union history characteristics of Spanish women aged between 36 and 50 years (2006)

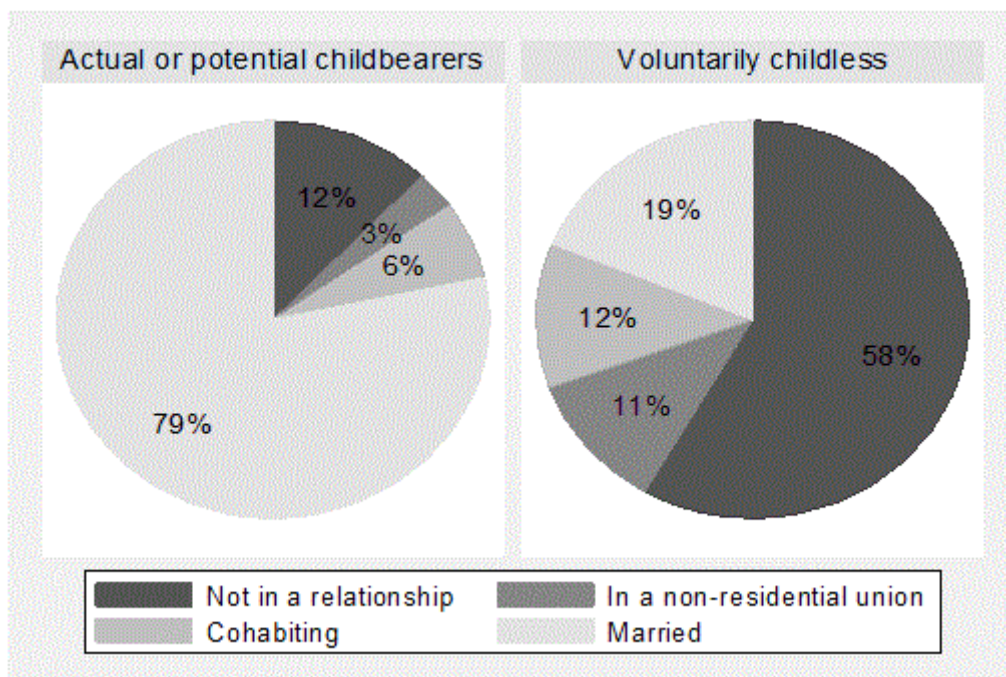
	Voluntarily childless women	Women with children or childbearing intentions
<i>All sampled women</i>		
Have never been in a co-residential union	46%	4%
<i>Women who have at least once been in a co-residential union</i>		
Mean age of entry into first union	30 years	24 years
Average number of unions	1.1	1.2
Average duration of unions	10 years	18 years

women who decide to remain childless tend to establish co-residential unions to a lesser degree and later in life than those who do not forego childbearing.

Manifestations of such trends are the clear differences regarding partnership status between the women classified as voluntarily childless and those who have or wish to have children, as shown in Figure 2. The majority of women assigned to the former group were not in a couple relationship at the time of the survey. Of those who were, not even 20% were married. This proportion contrasts sharply with that corresponding to the category of actual or potential mothers, which is virtually four times higher. Cohabitation and non-residential unions, in turn, appear noticeably more common among women who do not have children and do not wish to have them either.

The fact that women who wish to remain childless are often partnerless, or otherwise engaged in shorter and less formalized unions, could give rise to different interpretations of its association with voluntary childlessness. On the one hand, the delay in union formation and its related consequences –for instance, a sense of lack of stability– might plausibly make some women more reluctant to start a family. On the other hand, both the desire not to have children and particular relationship trajectories could be a product of specific underlying value orientations. Before looking further into the matter by means of regression analysis, it might be useful to get a glimpse of the attitudinal characteristics of these women as compared to the rest of the sample.

Figure 2. Civil status of Spanish women aged 36-50 and opting for different reproductive choices (2006)



As reflected in Table 3, the majority of the voluntarily childless respondents can be regarded as non-traditional inasmuch as they consider marriage an outdated institution. This is consistent with the low frequency of marriage within this group. In addition, 86% of the voluntarily childless show a high degree of attitudinal work commitment. Their attitudinal orientation towards the family, however, does not appear necessarily low for that matter. As many as 81%

of the voluntarily childless respondents consider that family life should be given greater importance in the future.

Their decision to forego motherhood might thus be related to their perception of the difficulties that individuals who start a family are faced with in contemporary Spain. It should be noted that a large proportion regard children as an obstacle to women's careers; although the figure is not exceedingly far from the 64% corresponding to the rest of the estimated population. An interesting observation is that 77% of the voluntarily childless classify themselves as belonging to a religion, although this does not necessarily mean they are active practitioners.

Table 3. Attitudinal characteristics regarding work and family of Spanish women aged 36-50 (2006)

	Voluntarily childless women	Women with children or childbearing intentions
Consider marriage an outdated institution	52%	35%
Strong orientation to paid work	86%	74%
Believe that more importance should be given to family life in the future	81%	91%
Regard children as an obstacle to women's professional careers	71%	64%
Regard themselves as belonging to a religion	77%	92%

It is time to move from description to a multivariate analysis that simultaneously contemplates the different types of variables with explanatory potential. In bivariate regressions, most show either a significant association with the dependent variable or a p-value below 0.25. Their gradual inclusion in the regression model, however, yields a more nuanced picture. When it is only individual socioeconomic characteristics that are considered, both education and occupation traits show significant associations with the dependent variable at a 95% confidence level. Women's education appears positively related to the probability of voluntary childlessness. This is particularly true for university studies, but having completed secondary-level or high-school education seems important too. In addition, having a partner who works over 35 hours per week decreases the probability of foregoing motherhood. The latter increases, however, if the partner holds a highly qualified job. Regarding control variables, married women appear less likely to opt for childlessness. Older women and those with partners who explicitly declare they do not wish to have children, in turn, are significantly more likely to do so. Finally, it is worth noting that respondents' perceived distance between their ideal and actual division of labour does not exhibit any significant association with the probability of voluntary childlessness. Neither do the conditions in terms of job stability of the surveyed women and – when applicable – their partners.

When lifecourse variables are incorporated, the picture changes only slightly as the women's education level loses its significance. In addition, most variables related to the transition to adulthood and into unions appear important predictors of the probability of opting for

childlessness. Women who have never been in a co-residential union are significantly more likely to make this choice. So are those who make late transitions out of the parental home. Union stability –in terms of both a lesser number and a greater duration of relationships– is negatively associated with the intention of remaining childless. Not having a partner, in contrast, increases the probability of voluntary childlessness.

Table 4. Final joint multivariate models on the association between main covariates and the probability of voluntary childlessness

(*) p-value ≤ 0.1; * p-value ≤ 0.05; ** p-value ≤ 0.01; ***p-value ≤ 0.001

Voluntary childlessness	Final full model		Final core model	
	Coefficient	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Odds ratio
<i>Sociodemographic variables that may influence the opportunity cost of motherhood (H1)</i>				
University-level education	.33	1.40	-.08	.93
Secondary/high school studies	.46	1.58		
Works > 35h/week	.45	1.57		
Employment stability	-.64(*)	.53(*)	-.28	.76
Has a partner working > 35h/week	-1.04(*)	.35(*)	-.86(*)	.43(*)
Has a partner with high occupational status	1.62**	5.05**	1.47**	4.37**
Has a partner with employment stability	.31	1.36		
<i>Lifecourse-related variables: transition to adulthood and union history (H2)</i>				
Age at leaving parental home	.08***	1.09***	.08***	1.08***
Never in co-residential union	1.40**	4.06***	1.42**	4.15**
Union stability	-.79**	.45**	-.83***	.44***
Not currently in a relationship	.97*	2.63*	.89*	2.43*
<i>Attitudinal variables: value-orientation towards work and family (H3)</i>				
Regards children as an obstacle to women's careers	.61(*)	1.84(*)	.55 (*)	1.73(*)
Paid work-oriented	.15	1.17		
Believes greater attention should be given to family life	-.08	.92		
Considers herself religious	-1.05*	.35*	-1.10**	.33**
<i>Control variables</i>				
Married	-1.10(*)	.33(*)	-1.09(*)	.34(*)
Year of birth	-.10**	.91**	-.10**	.90**
Has a partner who does not wish children	4.22***	67.80***	4.24***	69.51***
Constant	188.12*		198.92**	

The introduction of attitudinal variables does not substantially alter these findings, although some covariates –having a full-time working partner and being married– lose their significance at the 0.05 level. Nevertheless, since they still show a p-value below 0.1 and the total number of variables in the full model is fairly large with respect to sample size, it seems most reasonable not to dismiss their significance. This could also be valid for the negative relationship between employment stability and the probability of choosing childlessness, which now becomes apparent at a significance level only slightly above 0.1. Concerning attitudes, neither work nor family orientation, at least as operationalized, seem to play any generally prominent role in the decision. However, religiosity –which could be a measure of family-related traditionalism– decreases the probability of this choice. Regarding children as an obstacle to women’s careers, in contrast, makes it more likely, although the association in this model is only statistically significant at the 0.1 level. When the Hosmer-Lemeshow test was performed, all models showed p-values well above 0.05, which is indicative of good fit. Table 4 –where both the final full model and a slimmer core model are presented– summarizes the main findings.

The only noteworthy difference between the models is that women’s employment stability is definitely not significant in the core one. This means that the main results are very robust to the inclusion of a greater or a lesser number of variables. Both coefficients and odds ratios are presented in Table 4 in order to facilitate the interpretation of findings. A word of caution, nonetheless, is in place regarding the remarkably high odds ratios –and to a lesser degree, also coefficients– obtained for a particular covariate; namely the fact of having a partner who has stated a wish not to have children. Although it might be tempting to assume that such large odds ratios must stem from a high degree of correlation between this covariate and the dependent variable, such is not really the case –it roughly amounts to 0.2. However, a related and not unusual explanation for exceedingly high odds ratios is that the probability of event for one of the groups represented by the covariate’s categories is particularly low. This is what actually happens with this variable as a result of both the structure of the data and the relatively small number of women who can be classified as voluntarily childless. Women who do not have a partner who refuses to have children are comparatively speaking fairly unlikely to opt for childlessness –the great majority (95%) either has children or would like to have them. Consequently, the odds ratios and coefficients reported for this variable should most probably not be taken at their face value. This said, there seems to be no related reason to worry about the consistency of the rest of the findings. Most remain visibly robust even after trying to exclude the aforementioned covariate from the models.

Conclusions and discussion

This article has analyzed the relative importance of three groups of factors in explaining why some women in Spain decide to remain childless. The purpose was to expand the scarce literature on the topic, as well as to establish comparisons with what we know about the phenomenon in Italy and other European states beyond the Southern context.

The first hypothesis formulated focused on the influence of socioeconomic variables associated with the costs of motherhood. As seems the case regarding Italy, there appears to be no evident relation in Spain between women’s own occupational characteristics and the decision to become or not a mother. It is interesting to note that the economic support of a partner (or the lack thereof) could be playing a more important role. Women with full-time working partners are namely more likely to have children or to declare they would like to. Of course, given the data’s cross-sectional nature, reverse causality or sheer endogeneity can hardly be ruled out –

individuals with family-building ambitions might be more careful to choose partners who can provide adequate financial support. Still, it also seems plausible in contemporary Spain –where two salaries are increasingly needed to sustain a family– that women who cannot rely on a partners' economic contribution give up childbearing more readily.

Interestingly, however, when the partner holds a job with high status, the probability of voluntary childlessness increases. Further research should investigate whether this is linked to a perception of the difficulty of combining such jobs –often associated with harsh schedules– with family responsibilities. Underlying selection mechanisms may otherwise be at play here too. Women who opt for childlessness may have unobserved features that also make them more prone to select partners with a high qualification profile. At the same time, women's own education level does not appear to play the significant role that could be theoretically expected. The latter, nonetheless, has also been noted for countries as contextually different, in institutional and socioeconomic terms, as Austria, Sweden and Greece, where the field of education seems a much better predictor of permanent childlessness (Neyer and Hoem 2008; Bagavos 2010). It could be the case in Spain as well, yet the data did not permit such a comparison.

Regarding the second hypothesis –on the importance of lifecourse-related characteristics– key similarities with the Italian case are observed. The formation of late and unstable unions as well as delayed economic independence are associated with a greater probability of voluntary childlessness in both countries. For Spanish women, so is the fact of never having entered a union and the lack of a partner. Consequently, the delays in the transition to adulthood and into unions that are distinctive of Southern Europe deserve attention if we are to understand voluntary childlessness in the region specifically. To what degree such factors are equally significant in other settings is difficult to assess due to the lack of comparable studies focusing on this issue. Nevertheless, since late transitions to adulthood are, in the European context, defining features of the so-called Mediterranean regimes, related variables could reasonably be expected to have at least less relative weight elsewhere.

Finally, it seems as though attitudinal orientations –the seemingly main predictors of voluntary childlessness in Italy, and also central in other Western countries– are also to some extent related to the phenomenon in Spain. Non-traditional values –captured by the lack of religious affiliation or the choice of relationship options different than marriage– are positively linked to the probability of remaining voluntarily childless. Work and family orientations measured in a way that lies closer to preference theory's conceptualization (Hakim 2000) do not seem fully as relevant, yet this could be a matter of operationalization. At the same time, the perception of children as an obstacle to a career seems to make some Spanish women more likely to relinquish motherhood. Nevertheless, this could be both a subjective issue and the reflection of objective situational conditions.

To sum up, all the hypotheses obtain to varying degrees empirical support. From a comparative perspective and in the light of earlier research, it could be interpreted as a sign of Spain's resemblance to other Western societies –and not just to the proximate Italian case– regarding the determinants of voluntary childlessness. This said, the very manifest relevance of factors linked to a delayed transition to adulthood in the two Southern European countries –together with the distinctive frequency of such delays in the Mediterranean region– suggests that the latter may show some specificity also in this respect. A tentative implication –which further research

should explore– would be that the fine line separating voluntary and involuntary (yet perhaps accepted) childlessness might be particularly tenuous in the Southern context.

Acknowledgements

This work is part of a project financed by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) within the program Ayudas a la Investigación Modalidad A, 2009-2010 and the project CSO2009-11883, financed by the Plan Nacional I+D+I (Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación). It has also been made possible by a predoctoral JAE research training scholarship from the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).

References

- Alberdi, I. (1999). *La nueva familia española*. Madrid: Taurus.
- Baber, K. M. and A. S. Dreyer. (1986). "Gender-Role Orientations in Older Child-Free and Expectant Couples." *Sex Roles* 14: 501-512.
- Bagavos, C. (2010). "Education and Childlessness: the Relationship between Educational Field, Educational Level, Employment and Childlessness among Greek Women Born in 1955-1959." *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research* 2010 (8): 51-75.
- Baizán, P. (2001). "Transition to Adulthood in Spain," (pp. 279-312) in *Transitions to Adulthood in Europe*, edited by M. Corijn and E. Klijzing. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Baizán, P. (2006). "El efecto del empleo, el paro y los contratos temporales en la baja fecundidad española de los años 1990." *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* 115 (6): 223-253.
- Bernardi, F. and M. Requena. (2003). "La caída de la fecundidad y el déficit de natalidad en España." *Revista Española de Sociología* 3: 29-50.
- Billari, F. C., M. Castiglioni, T. Castro Martín, F. Michielin, and F. Ongaro. (2002). "Household and Union Formation in a Mediterranean Fashion: Italy and Spain," (pp. 17-41) in *Dynamics of Fertility and Partnership in Europe: Insights and Lessons from Comparative Research, Vol II*, edited by E. Klijzing and M. Corijn. Geneva: United Nations.
- Billari, F. C., and H. P. Kohler. (2004). "Patterns of Low and Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe." *Population Studies* 58 (2): 161-176.
- Caltabiano, M., M. Castiglioni, and A. Rosina. (2009). "Lowest-Low Fertility: Signs of a Recovery in Italy?" *Demographic Research* 21 (23): 681-718.
- Castro Martín, T. (2007). "Maternidad sin matrimonio. Nueva vía de formación de familias en España." *Documentos de trabajo No. 16/2007*. Bilbao: Fundación BBVA. (Available online at http://www.fbbva.es/TLFU/dat/dt_16_maternidad.pdf, last accessed 13 February 2012)
- Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. (2006). *Encuesta de Fecundidad y Valores en la España del Siglo XXI*.
- Consejo Económico y Social. (2002). "La emancipación de los jóvenes y la situación de la vivienda en España." *Informe No. 2/2002*. Madrid: Colección Informes CES.
- Crompton, R., and F. Harris. (1998). "Explaining Women's Employment Patterns: 'Orientations to Work Revisited'." *The British Journal of Sociology* 49 (1): 118-136.
- DeMaris, A. (1992). *Logit Modeling. Practical Applications*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Devolder, D., and M. Merino Tejada. (2007). "Evolución reciente de la infecundidad y la fecundidad total: España en el contexto europeo," (pp. 139-198) in *La Constitución Familiar en España*, edited by A. Cabré Pla. Bilbao: Fundación BBVA.
- Gillespie, R. (1999). "Voluntary Childlessness in the United Kingdom." *Reproductive Health Matters* 7 (13): 43-53.
- González, M. J., and T. Jurado-Guerrero. (2006). "Remaining Childless in Affluent Economies: A Comparison of France, West Germany, Italy and Spain, 1994-2001." *European Journal of Population* 22 (4): 317-352.
- Hakim, C. (2000). *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hakim, C. (2003). "A New Approach to Explaining Fertility Patterns: Preference Theory." *Population and Development Review* 20 (3): 349-374.
- Heaton, T.B., C. K. Jacobsson, and X.N. Fu. (1992). "Religiosity of Married Couples and Childlessness." *Review of Religious Research* 33: 244-255.
- Hosmer, D. W., and S. Lemeshow. (1989). *Applied Logistic Regression*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Spanish National Institute for Statistics). (2010). *Indicadores Demográficos Básicos, Natalidad y Fecundidad*.
- Jacobson, C. K., and T. B. Heaton. (1991). "Voluntary Childlessness Among American Men and Women in the Late 1980's." *Social Biology* 30 (1-2): 79-93.
- Kohler, H. P., F. C. Billari, and J. A. Ortega. (2002). "The Emergence of Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe during the 1990s." *Population and Development Review* 28 (4): 641-680.
- MacInnes, J. (2006). "Voluntary Childlessness, Fertility "Plans" and the "Demand" for Children: Evidence from Eurobarometer Surveys." *Papers de Demografia* 287: 1-53.
- Meil Landwerlin, G. (2001). "Aspectos demográficos de la familia en España." *Revista de educación* 325: 113-128.
- Modena, F., and C. Rondinelli. (2011). "Leaving Home and Housing Costs. The Experience of Italian Youth Emancipation." *Working Paper No. 1/ 2011*. Trento: University of Trento, Department of Economics.
- Neyer, G., and J. M. Hoem. (2008). "Education and Permanent Childlessness: Austria vs. Sweden; a Research Note," (pp. 91-114) in *Demographic Challenges for the 21st Century. A State of the Art in Demography*, edited by J. Surkyn, J. Van Bavel and P. Deboosere. Brussels: VUB/Academia Press.

Park, K. (2005). "Choosing Childlessness: Weber's Typology of Action and Motives of the Voluntary Childless." *Sociological Inquiry* 75 (3): 372-402.

Peduzzi, P., J. Concato, E. Kemper, and T.R. Holford. (1996). "A Simulation Study of the Number of Events per Variable in Logistic Regression." *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* 49 (12): 1373-1379.

Tanturri, M.L., and L. Mencarini. (2008). "Childless or Childfree? Paths to Voluntary Childlessness in Italy." *Population and Development Review* 34 (1): 51-77.