

Submission

Extended abstract for the *European Population Conference*

3^d and 6th June 2026

Bologna, Italy

Previously used title: Economic Cycle and Second Childbirth: A Couple-Level Perspective

Edited title: Are Dual-Earner Couples a Requirement for Second Births?
The Contrasting Evolutions of Italy and Spain

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Extended abstract (refined)

This study investigates the interplay between couple-level employment configurations and second childbirth probabilities, emphasising the gendered dimensions of labour market instability. In contexts marked by entrenched gender roles and familialistic welfare regimes — such as Italy and Spain — the transition to a second childbirth offers some insights into how employment stability shapes family expansion. Utilising longitudinal data from the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) spanning 2004 to 2023, we examine how each partner's employment type — distinguishing between permanent and temporary contracts — shapes second childbirth probabilities, and how contextual female labour force participation rates (LFPR) moderate these relationships.

Our analytical strategy applies logistic regression event history models to track second childbirth outcomes across all couple-level employment pairings, controlling for individual sociodemographic and economic characteristics. The primary aim is to disentangle whether and how each partner's labour market situation differentially shapes second-birth transitions, and to examine how the normative and institutional environment — captured through regional female LFPR — moderates these patterns. Additional models track temporal change in the

effects of employment configurations, household income, and women's inactivity across four sub-periods (2004–2007, 2008–2015, 2016–2019, 2020–2023). Prior work has highlighted how employment instability is a key determinant of fertility postponement or decline (Kreyenfeld, Andersson and Pailhé 2012; Comolli 2017). Particularly relevant is Baizán's (2009) argument that precarious employment, especially when coupled with low institutional support and rigid gender norms, depresses higher-order birth probabilities in Southern Europe more than in other regions.

Findings reveal a cross-national divergence. In Spain, dual permanent employment is the configuration most strongly associated with second-birth transitions, and any deviation from it — whether through male or female instability — reduces the likelihood of progression. Male instability carries a stronger negative effect than female instability: male unemployment sharply depresses second-birth probabilities, more so than female unemployment. Women's temporary contracts are more detrimental than women's unemployment, consistent with the greater uncertainty they generate about future income and career trajectories. These patterns confirm that in Spain, stable employment for both partners — and particularly for the male partner — is a central condition for family expansion, reflecting the enduring salience of male-breadwinner expectations.

Italy presents a different picture. Here, dual permanent employment also emerges as the most fertility-enhancing configuration. However, male instability — whether unemployment or temporary employment — does not exert a significant negative effect on second births in Italy. Women's temporary employment, by contrast, is the principal form of instability associated with lower second-birth probabilities, and women's unemployment is more detrimental than temporary employment — the reverse of the Spanish pattern. These results reflect the persistent cultural legitimacy of the homemaker model in Italy and structural constraints — such as weak childcare provision — that make labour market withdrawal a pragmatic strategy for family expansion. The Italian pattern is thus characterised by a persistent familialistic logic in which women's employment status, rather than male breadwinning, is the primary driver of second-birth transitions.

Household income is consistently and negatively associated with second births in both countries, a gradient that remains structurally stable across all periods examined. Women's own income, by contrast, shows weak and inconsistent effects in both countries, suggesting that it is the stability and predictability of employment — not current earnings — that drives fertility decision-making. Women's inactivity does not systematically increase second-birth probabilities relative to dual permanent couples in either country or time period, pointing to

the absence of a robust homemaker advantage once employment configurations are fully accounted for.

Adding regional female LFPR further underscores the diverging trajectories of the two countries. In Spain, higher female LFPR is positively and significantly associated with second-birth probabilities among dual-permanent couples, consistent with a dual-earner fertility regime in which a more gender-egalitarian institutional context amplifies the fertility advantage of employment stability; this association does not extend to other configurations. In Italy, by contrast, higher female LFPR does not strengthen the fertility advantage of dual-earner couples; rather, it benefits couples with weaker labour-market attachment and is negatively associated with the male-breadwinner configuration, suggesting that rising gender-egalitarian norms are eroding rather than reinforcing the fertility advantage of traditional arrangements.

Taken together, the findings highlight context-dependent and gendered patterns in how employment configurations shape second-birth outcomes. In Spain, male labour market instability continues to carry greater symbolic and material weight in household fertility strategies, and stable dual employment is particularly consequential in higher-participation contexts. In Italy, women's employment status — and particularly their withdrawal from the labour market — remains the primary driver of second-birth transitions, pointing to the persistence of an incomplete gender revolution and a familialistic logic that is only slowly eroding under the influence of rising female labour force participation. This research contributes to the fertility and labour market literature by reinforcing the need to analyse fertility behaviour at the couple level and by highlighting the diverging institutional and normative trajectories of Southern European countries. Policy implications underscore the need for targeted family and labour reforms — particularly through expanded childcare provision, employment stabilisation, and work–family reconciliation measures sensitive to the persisting gendered asymmetries in both countries.

References

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