

Diverging partnership trajectories in contemporary Spain: Educational attainment and gender attitudes at play

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Extended abstract

Background

A pronounced decline in fertility has occurred in nearly every country across the globe, attracting extensive scholarly attention. The most influential theoretical frameworks explaining sustained fertility declines -the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986) and the New Home Economics (Becker, 1981)- highlight the expansion of women's education as a central driver of this process. However, emerging demographic phenomena, such as fertility recoveries and reversals of the educational gradient (Jalovaara et al., 2019), have redirected research attention toward the role of gender equality in promoting fertility (Raybould & Sear, 2020). Drawing on the Gender Revolution framework (England, 2010), scholars posit a U-shaped relationship between gender equality and fertility (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). This framework suggests that the persistent negative gradient between education and fertility in societies at an incomplete stage of the gender revolution results from the higher costs of childbearing for highly educated women, whose labour market attachment and egalitarian ideals are stronger.

Moreover, in transitional societies, highly educated women often face greater difficulties finding suitable partners (Van Bavel, 2012) due to mismatches in educational attainment and gender attitudes between men and women. These disparities can produce a "marriage squeeze" (Schoen, 1983), leading to higher rates of singlehood among highly educated women and lower-educated men, with important implications for fertility patterns. Previous studies have shown that the negative educational gradient in singlehood and fertility among women persists in less gender-egalitarian contexts, whereas in more gender-egalitarian societies, this pattern has reversed (Reher & Requena, 2019). Research on the relationship between gender role attitudes and fertility has produced inconsistent findings (e.g., Arpino et al., 2015), and recent work emphasizes the importance of viewing gender attitudes as a multidimensional construct, rather than a simple continuum from traditional to egalitarian (Lappegard et al., 2021). This study examines how educational attainment and gender attitudes shape partnership trajectories and transitions to parenthood in contexts where institutional change and men's adaptation to evolving gender roles have lagged behind. By addressing the multidimensionality of gender attitudes and jointly analysing educational and attitudinal influences for both women and men, this study advances our understanding of how gender, education, and partnership dynamics intersect to shape contemporary fertility patterns.

Data and methods

The empirical analysis draws on data from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey (SFS), conducted by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE). The survey provides retrospective information on partnership, employment, and fertility histories for 14,556 women and 2,619

men aged 18 to 55, enabling a life-course approach. It also includes measures of fertility intentions, reasons for not having children, and gender role attitudes. Since the focus is on the association between partnership trajectories and the transition to parenthood, the analytical sample is restricted to women and men 45 to 55, that is, those observed at the end of their reproductive years. Individuals with missing information on key variables and respondents in same-sex unions were excluded. The final sample comprises 6,122 women and 1,023 men born between 1962 and 1974.

The key variables include partnership trajectories, transition to parenthood, educational attainment, and gender role attitudes. Partnership trajectories were constructed from information on the years respondents reported forming or dissolving unions between ages 18 and 45. Transition to parenthood was measured as a dichotomous variable, indicating whether respondents had experienced childbearing by the end of their reproductive years. Educational attainment was based on the highest qualification obtained by age 45, distinguishing between those with tertiary and non-tertiary education. Gender role attitudes were measured through a multidimensional index following the approach of Grunow, Begall, and Büchler (2018).

Analytical strategy

The analytical strategy unfolds in three main stages. First, a typology of partnership trajectories was developed through the combined application of sequence and cluster analysis techniques. In the second stage, logistic regression models were estimated to assess the association between partnership trajectories and the probability of transitioning to parenthood. Next, a Latent Class Analysis (LCA) was conducted to verify whether the five dominant gender attitude profiles identified in previous research were valid for our sample. Finally, multinomial regression models were estimated to examine variations in partnership trajectories by educational attainment and gender role attitudes, separately for women and men.

Preliminary results

Preliminary analyses identified eight main partnership trajectories among Spanish women and men born between 1962 and 1974. Table 1 reveals the continued predominance of traditional marriage as the main partnership pattern in this cohort, encompassing 66.8% of the sample. Beyond these marriage-related trajectories, singlehood accounts for 10.6% of women and 14.1% of men, indicating a growing segment of the population that has not formed a coresidential union by midlife.

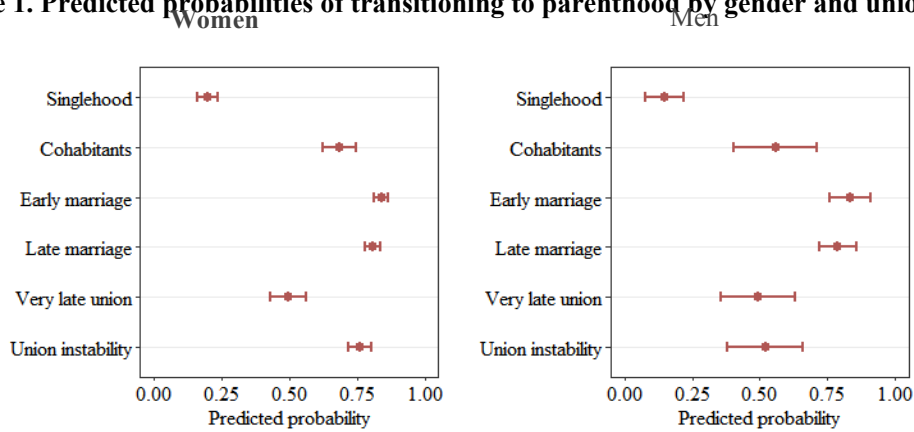
Table 1. Distribution of partnership trajectories by gender

	Singlehood	Cohabitants	Early marriage	Late marriage	Very late union	Union dissolution	Shorter-life unions	Multip. unions
Women								
N° observations	648	280	1955	2261	297	282	242	157
Percentage	10.6	4.6	31.9	36.9	4.8	4.6	4.0	2.6
Men								
N° observations	144	58	155	508	81	30	26	21
Percentage	14.1	5.7	15.2	49.6	7.9	3.0	2.5	2.0

Note: Observations and frequencies of Partnership trajectories derived from sequence analysis.

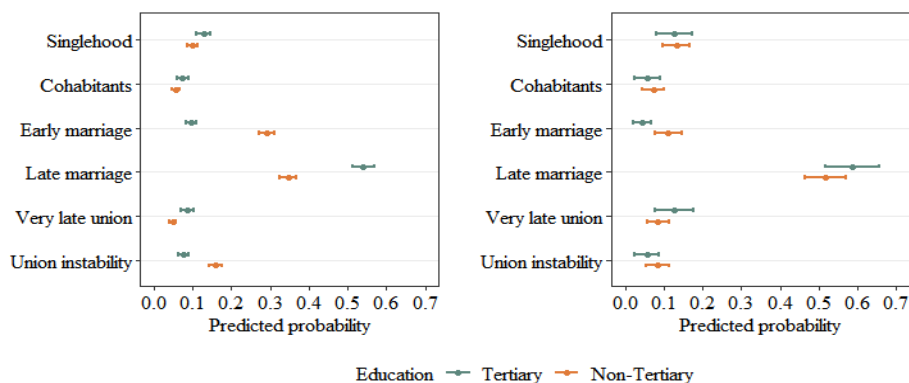
The likelihood of transitioning to parenthood is strongly shaped by these partnership trajectories. The probability of becoming a parent decline sharply among both women and men who form unions late in adulthood or remain permanently single. Among men, lower parenthood rates are also observed in the union instability cluster (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of transitioning to parenthood by gender and union



Experiencing different partnership trajectories—and consequently, the likelihood of transitioning to parenthood—varies by respondents’ educational attainment (Figure 2) and gender role attitudes (Figure 3). The predicted values indicate a tempo effect of education on the timing of union formation among women: those with tertiary degrees show higher probabilities of belonging to the late marriage (55%) and very late union (10%) clusters. Among men, over half are classified within the late marriage cluster across educational levels, suggesting a broadly shared postponement of union formation. Regarding permanent singlehood, a positive educational gradient emerges among women, with those holding tertiary degrees being more likely to remain single. In contrast, this pattern is not observed among men, challenging the notion that lower-educated men are more likely to be marginalized in the partnering market (Hudde & Engelhardt, 2023; Jalovaara & Andersson, 2023; Trimarchi & Van Bavel, 2017).

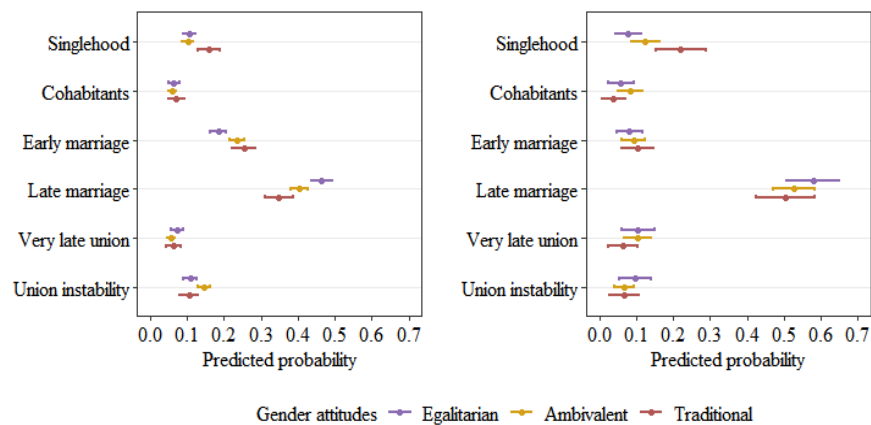
Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of partnership trajectories by educational attainment



Regarding gender role attitudes, egalitarian women display higher probabilities of late marriage and lower probabilities of early marriage, reinforcing the patterns observed by educational

attainment. However, somewhat unexpectedly, traditional women—who represent 12% of the female sample—also exhibit an elevated likelihood of remaining single (18%). Among men, traditional gender attitudes are strongly associated with singlehood, reaching 23%, compared to less than 10% among egalitarian men. These findings suggest that, for men, gender attitudes—rather than education—constitute a key determinant of union formation.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of partnership trajectories by gender attitudes profiles



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