

European Population Conference 2026

Childbearing Without a Partner in Spain: Growing Diversity in Pathways and Subsequent Trajectories

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Introduction

Most European countries have undergone profound normative and social transformations in the family context of childbearing. Among the most salient shifts is the rise in unpartnered childbearing. This trend reflects both changing social norms and a broader dissociation between reproduction and conjugality, i.e., motherhood without a co-residential partner and motherhood without sex. This dissociation underscores the growing salience of individual choice in accessing motherhood outside a conjugal relationship, enabled by technological, legal, social, and cultural developments that have made such family projects legitimate and feasible.

As a result, unpartnered mothers have become not only more numerous but also more heterogeneous –not just in their sociodemographic profiles, but also with regard to pregnancy intendedness, affective ties with the child’s father, and the use of medically assisted reproduction. This diversification in unpartnered childbearing pathways carries important implications for future fertility trends and for the reproduction of social inequalities.

In 2022, Spain crossed a historical threshold: for the first time, the number of nonmarital births exceeded that of marital births. Most of the observed increase in nonmarital fertility is attributable to the expansion of cohabitation and the growing share of births within cohabiting unions. However, birth statistics also indicate a notable rise in the proportion of births to women not co-residing with a partner.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Spain has also experienced a substantial increase in its immigrant population (Portes et al., 2016). Accordingly, we take women’s migrant background into account when analyzing unpartnered motherhood and subsequent partnering trajectories, under the assumption that migration histories and reproductive norms may shape these behaviors.

In this paper, we aim to examine the following aspects:

- a) The prevalence of unpartnered childbearing (measured as the share of unpartnered mothers among all mothers) and the probability of entering a partnership after solo motherhood. We define unpartnered childbearing as referring to mothers who are unmarried and not cohabiting with a partner at the time of birth. A more restricted definition excludes those who start living with a partner within the child’s first year of life.
- b) The predictors of unpartnered motherhood, with particular attention to the role of education and country of origin. Based on previous evidence (Musni & Schnor 2025), we

expect growing diversity in both the pathways to and the experiences of single motherhood.

c) The predictors of subsequent partnering among women who experienced unpartnered childbearing.

Data

We use retrospective data from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey, conducted by the Spanish National Statistical Institute, to classify mothers according to their partnership status at the time of childbirth. The survey also provides information on their subsequent partnership trajectories, as well as their main sociodemographic characteristics and economic conditions (see sample description in Table 1).

We employ logistic regression models to estimate (i) the probability of being unpartnered at the time of childbirth and (ii) the probability of forming a partnership afterwards. Additionally, we use event history models to analyze partnership trajectories following unpartnered motherhood.

Table 1. Sample description, mothers in Spain by partner status at birth, 2018

	Partnered	Unpartnered
Age at childbirth		
<19	2.3	13.7
19-25	19.8	41.2
26-30	35.4	21.3
31-35	31.7	14.1
36-40	9.6	7.5
41+	1.1	2.3
Country of birth		
Spain	82.7	59.8
Abroad	17.3	40.2
Educational attainment		
Low	28.2	41.5
Secondary	40.0	45.8
Tertiary	31.8	12.7
N	7128	978

Source: Spanish Fertility Survey 2018

Preliminary results

- Data from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey indicates that 13.5% of childbearing in Spain occurs among unpartnered mothers. This proportion falls to 11% when excluding mothers who began cohabiting or married within the child's first year, whom we assume were in a LAT partnership at the time of conception and childbirth.
- Regarding the predictors of unpartnered motherhood (see Fig.1.), we observe a clear U-shaped age pattern, with higher prevalence at very young and very late maternal ages. This age pattern holds across educational and origin groups. We also observe a clear educational gradient: unpartnered childbearing is most prevalent among women with lower levels of education. Unpartnered motherhood is also more common among

foreign-born mothers. The effect of education varies slightly by origin: while higher education generally reduces the likelihood of unpartnered childbearing, this protective effect is stronger for native mothers than for migrants (see Fig. 2).

- Retrospective histories show that 60% of these unpartnered mothers formed a partnership between the child’s birth and the time of the survey interview. Younger mothers and migrant origin mothers are more likely to partner after unpartnered childbirth (regression results not shown). The educational gradient in partnering after single motherhood differs markedly between native and foreign-born mothers (see Fig. 3). For native mothers, the probability of forming a partnership decreases with education, suggesting that higher-educated single mothers may be more selective in choosing a partner, prioritize career or personal autonomy, or perceive fewer social or economic pressures to enter a new union. In contrast, among foreign-born single mothers, the probability of forming a partnership increases with education, which may reflect better integration into the host country’s partner market, or adherence to cultural norms valuing partnership.

Figure 1. Predictors of unpartnered motherhood (logistic regression)

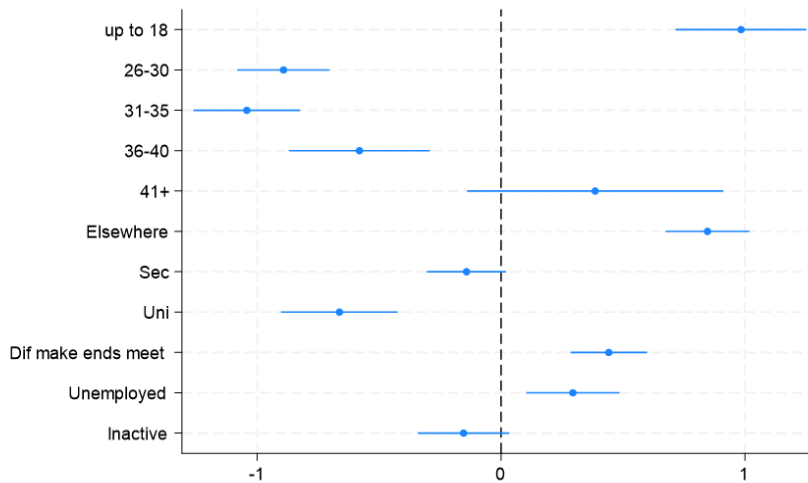


Figure 2. Probability of unpartnered motherhood by education and country of birth

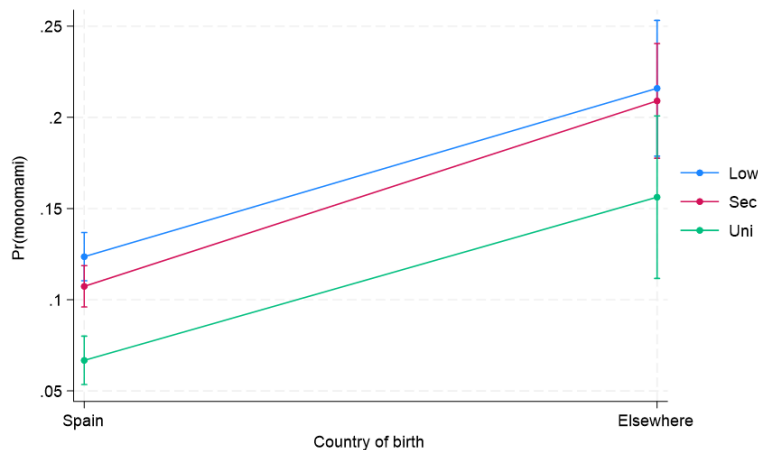
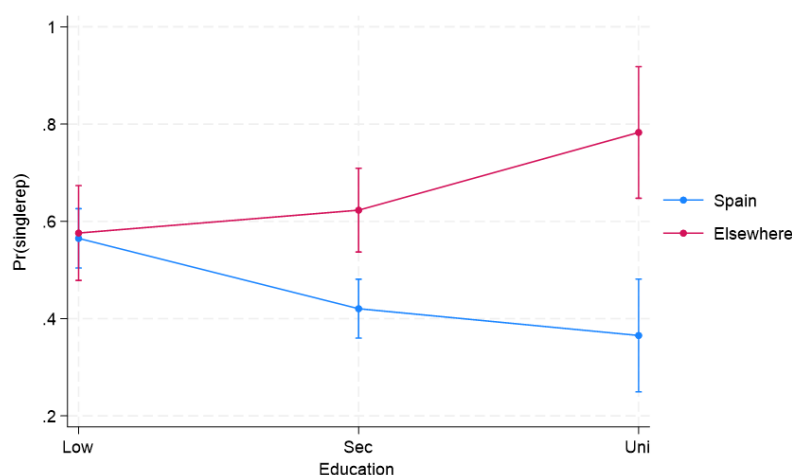


Figure 3. Probability of partnering* after unpartnered childbearing by education and origin



* Analysis restricted to partnering after the first year of the child (results robust for all partnering)

Discussion

Single motherhood has traditionally been associated with social exclusion and vulnerability. However, the growing diversity in pathways to and experiences of single motherhood, as well as subsequent partnership trajectories, suggests that this association is no longer clear-cut. This complexity is further amplified by international migration, which introduces new forms and meanings of unpartnered childbearing shaped by migration trajectories and reproductive norms. Our results highlight sociodemographic diversification among unpartnered mothers. This diversification is necessarily associated with intendedness of unpartnered motherhood: women under 25 are more likely to experience an unplanned birth, and women over 35 are more likely to have an intended birth, as advancing age increases the risk of permanent involuntary childlessness. The diversification may also imply heterogeneous consequences of experiencing motherhood without a partner, with effects that could be more or less disadvantageous depending on factors such as educational level, occupational status, family support, and life course stage.

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