

# No time to lose? Changes in partnership prerequisites to childbearing across ages

## 1 Introduction and theoretical background

The age at first parenthood has steadily increased across European countries since the 1970s (Neels et al., 2017). Among other factors, individuals tend to postpone childbearing until certain conditions are fulfilled, such as stable employment (Alderotti et al., 2021), financial security (van Wijk & Billari, 2024), secure housing (Vignoli et al., 2013) and stable partnerships (Fostik et al., 2023). Indeed, finding a suitable partner remains one of the most important prerequisites for childbearing (Sheppard, 2024), while partnership instability is associated with lower fertility intentions (Sturm et al., 2023) and a higher likelihood of remaining childless (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017).

However, waiting for the perfect conditions to have children can have consequences that directly affect individuals' fertility trajectories. Reproductive capacity, particularly among women, declines with age (Leridon & Slama, 2008; Te Velde et al., 2012). Consequently, delayed union formation has been associated with a higher risk of remaining childless (Saarela & Skirbekk, 2020), a reduced likelihood of achieving fertility aspirations (Nishikido et al., 2022), and an increased reliance on infertility treatments (Suero et al., 2025).

The age-related fecundity decline and its awareness may impose certain limits on how long individuals can postpone parenthood while striving to meet these established prerequisites. Older women, in particular, may face greater pressure to have children within a limited timeframe (Iacovou & Tavares, 2011), prompting them to accelerate certain life transitions in an effort to avoid running out of time to have a baby. Consequently, they may pursue motherhood under conditions that deviate from their ideal scenario (Wagner et al., 2019). In terms of partnership, this may involve spending less time evaluating the quality and stability of a relationship before becoming a parent, transitioning to parenthood within suboptimal partnerships, or even outside a partnership.

In this research, we aim to assess the following research question. As women approach ages at which reproductive capacity begins to decline, are they more likely to adopt a flexible approach to the partnership requirement for childbearing? Specifically, we

examine: (1) the likelihood of having a child among women who have recently entered a co-residential partnership, by age; (2) the likelihood of dissolving a co-residential partnership shortly after childbirth, by age; and (3) the likelihood of having a child while not in a partnership, by age. We further investigate cross-country variation in these patterns (clustering countries according to fertility characteristics).

## **2 Data and methods**

To answer our research question, we use the longitudinal version of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), which provides information for 32 countries during the years 2004 and 2023. This database is one of the main sources of information on the economic and living conditions of the population across EU countries. It collects information on all members of sampled households and, in its longitudinal component, follows individuals for up to four years. The survey records relationships among household members, allowing for the identification of kinship ties. It includes indicators that make it possible to identify the mother, father, and partner of individuals living in the same household.

The longitudinal design of EU-SILC enables us to examine how conditions at one point in time relate to outcomes in subsequent waves. Specifically, we examine how individuals' status in the first observation (t1) is associated with reproductive behaviors observed in the following years (t2, t3, t4). We estimate multiple logistic regression models with country fixed effects, with a focus on age-related variations. The main analysis is restricted to childless women aged between 20 and 45, as their reproductive dynamics differ from those of women with children.

## **3 Preliminary results**

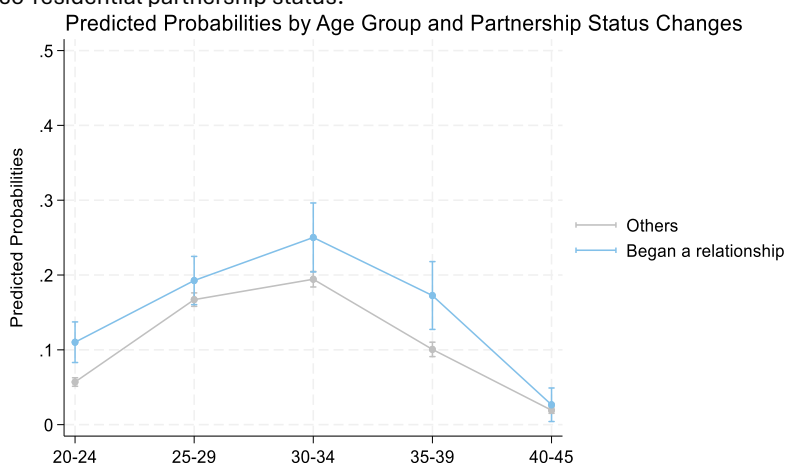
### **3.1 Women having a child shortly after initiating a co-residential partnership**

To assess whether older women are more likely than younger women to have a child shortly after initiating a co-residential partnership, we estimate the likelihood of childbirth in observations t2, t3 or t4, by age, comparing childless women who entered a co-residential partnership during the observation period with all other childless women. Figure 1 presents the predicted probabilities of childbirth by age group. Childless women who formed a co-residential partnership during the observation period are more likely to have a child than

those who did not across all ages. However, the magnitude of this difference varies substantially by age.

At ages 20-24, the difference relatively modest for both groups (PP = 0.11 vs 0.06, p-value = 0.000). At ages 25-29, the likelihood of having a child increases for both groups, but the difference narrows and becomes statistically non-significant (PP = 0.19 vs 0.17, p-value = 0.137). Among childless women aged 30-34, those who entered a partnership during the observation period are significantly more likely to have a child than their counterparts (PP = 0.25 vs 0.19, p-value = 0.021). This gap widens further at ages 35-39 (PP = 0.17 vs 0.10, p-value = 0.002), suggesting that initiating a co-residential partnership at these ages is particularly associated with childbearing in the near term. Beyond age 39, the likelihood of childbirth declines sharply for both groups, likely due to biological constraints.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of having a child within 1 to 3 years among childless women, by age group and changes in co-residential partnership status.

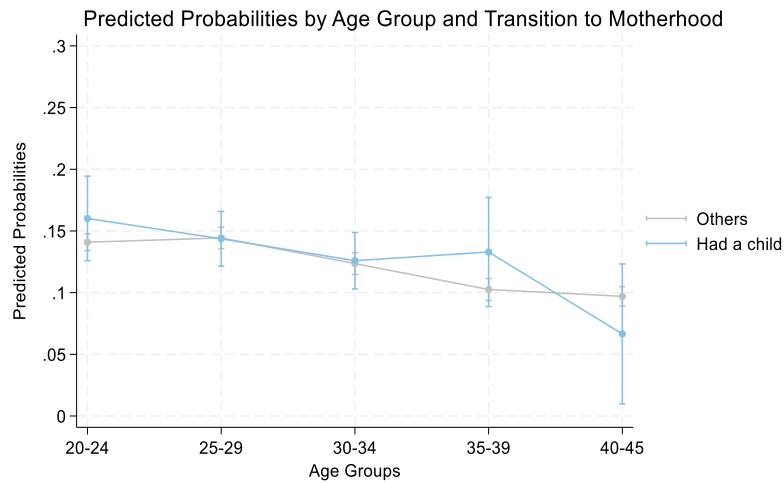


Note: Own elaboration based on the EU-SILC database, years 2004-2023. Confidence intervals at 95%.

### 3.2 Women ending a relationship after having a child

The second analysis examines the likelihood of dissolving a co-residential partnership during the observation period among women who had a first child compared to all other childless women. Figure 2 presents the predicted probabilities of dissolving a co-residential partnership for the two groups. Overall, the likelihood of union dissolution is quite similar between them, with only minor variations across age groups. Although there is a slight peak among women who had a child at ages 35-39, the difference is neither substantive nor statistically significant (PP = 0.13 vs 0.10, p-value = 0.188). At older ages, the likelihood of union dissolution among those who became mothers declines compared to their counterparts, though again the difference remains small and non-statistically significant (PP = 0.07 vs 0.1, p-value = 0.297).

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of ending co-residential unions among childless by age group and change in parity.

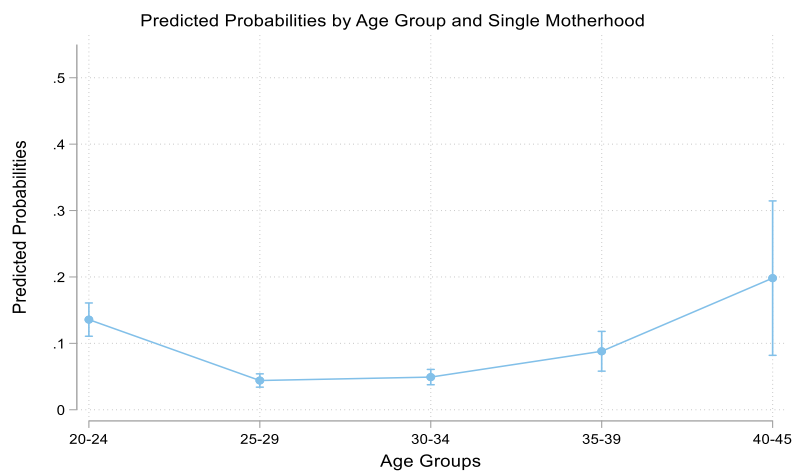


Note: Own elaboration based on the EU-SILC database, years 2004-2023. Confidence intervals at 95%.

### 3.3 Women having a child outside a co-residential partnership

Lastly, we assess the likelihood of being single at the time of childbirth among women who became mothers during the observation period. Figure 3 presents the predicted probabilities of being single at birth among childless women by age. As expected, the highest proportion of single mothers is observed among those who gave birth at ages 20–24, likely reflecting unintended births among unpartnered women. After those ages, the likelihood of being single at birth declines (PP around 0.5) but rises again at ages 35–39 (PP = 0.09), increasing further at ages 40-45 (PP = 0.20).

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of having a child without a co-residential partnership among women who had a child over the observation period, by age group.



Note: Own elaboration based on the EU-SILC database, years 2004-2023. Confidence intervals at 95%.