

First-time Mothers after 40: An Emerging Phenomenon Where Diverse Life Paths Converge

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the transition to motherhood after the age of 40 in a low-fertility country, focusing on identifying the profile of these women and the causes of their delayed transition. Over the past decades, Spain has experienced a sharp decline in fertility, alongside a significant postponement of the reproductive calendar and an increase in the number of women reaching the end of their reproductive period childless. While the total number of births in Spain fell by 19.4% between 2000 and 2023, the number of births to mothers aged 40 and over increased by 240%. This increase has been more pronounced among first-time mothers, highlighting the lengthening of the transition to motherhood and the emergence of a new sociological and demographic phenomenon.

To conduct this study, we used the 2018 Fertility Survey from the Spanish National Statistics Institute. The analysis was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, we applied multichannel sequence analysis to reconstruct women's employment and partnership trajectories from ages 18 to 40 on a monthly basis, allowing us to identify the profiles of women who reached age 40 without children. In the second stage, we applied discrete-time survival models to examine the likelihood of having a child between ages 40 and 45 for these childless women's profiles.

Our findings highlight, first, the heterogeneity of employment and family trajectories leading to the postponement of motherhood; and second, the key role of the timing of leaving the parental home and the age at union formation as the main factors behind a late transition to motherhood.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to analyze the transition to motherhood after 40 in a low-fertility country, focusing on the role played by employment and family trajectories. This objective requires, first, identifying the profiles of women who turn 40 without children, and second, examining the factors associated with having a child after 40.

Over the past decades, Spain, like many other developed countries, has experienced a sharp decline in fertility, together with a significant postponement of the reproductive calendar (Billari et al., 2007; Beaujouan, 2020; Setz et al., 2025) and an increase in the number of women who complete their reproductive period without having children (Beaujouan et al., 2023; del Rey et al., 2022, 2025). While the total number of births in Spain fell by 19.4% between 2000 and 2023, from 397,632 to 320,656 according to data from the *Movimiento Natural de la Población*, the number of births to mothers aged 40 and over increased by 240%, rising from 10,163 to 34,604. As a result, their share of total births grew from just 2.6% to almost 11%. At the same time, fertility rates among women aged 35 and older have risen substantially.

Within the broader group of late fertility, first-time mothers stand out as the category that has grown the most since 2000, now accounting for around 40% of births among women aged 40 and over. Against this backdrop, two research questions arise: *What are the factors that lead women to postpone motherhood until after the age of 40? And who are the women who decide to have their first child after turning 40?*

Theoretical framework

Late fertility, or childbearing after the age of 40, can be explained from several theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, a number of theoretical perspectives based on ideational and value changes suggest that fertility at older ages may be a desired outcome, as posited by the theory of the Second Demographic Transition (Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995) or by Preference Theory (Hakim, 2003). On the other hand, the life-course perspective allows for the study of reproductive behavior as a sequence of transitions that interact with other life domains, such as education, employment, and partnership formation (Mayer, 2009). From this perspective, various studies have shown that the difficulties faced by many young people throughout their life course lead to the postponement of reproductive decisions (González & Jurado, 2006; Mills et al., 2011; Neels et al., 2017; Alderotti et al., 2021; Matysiak et al., 2021; Neels et al., 2024). This, in turn, results in childbearing taking place at increasingly advanced ages or, in some cases, not taking place at all. In this regard, partnership and family trajectories, as well as employment trajectories, are highlighted as two key aspects influencing reproductive decisions.

Data

To carry out this study, we used the 2018 Fertility Survey conducted by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*). This is a retrospective survey based on a sample of 14,555 women. From this dataset, we selected women aged 40 and over who had not had any children by the age of 40 ($N = 1,977$). For this group of women, we reconstructed their partnership and employment trajectories from ages 18 to 40, and subsequently observed their fertility outcomes between ages 40 and 45.

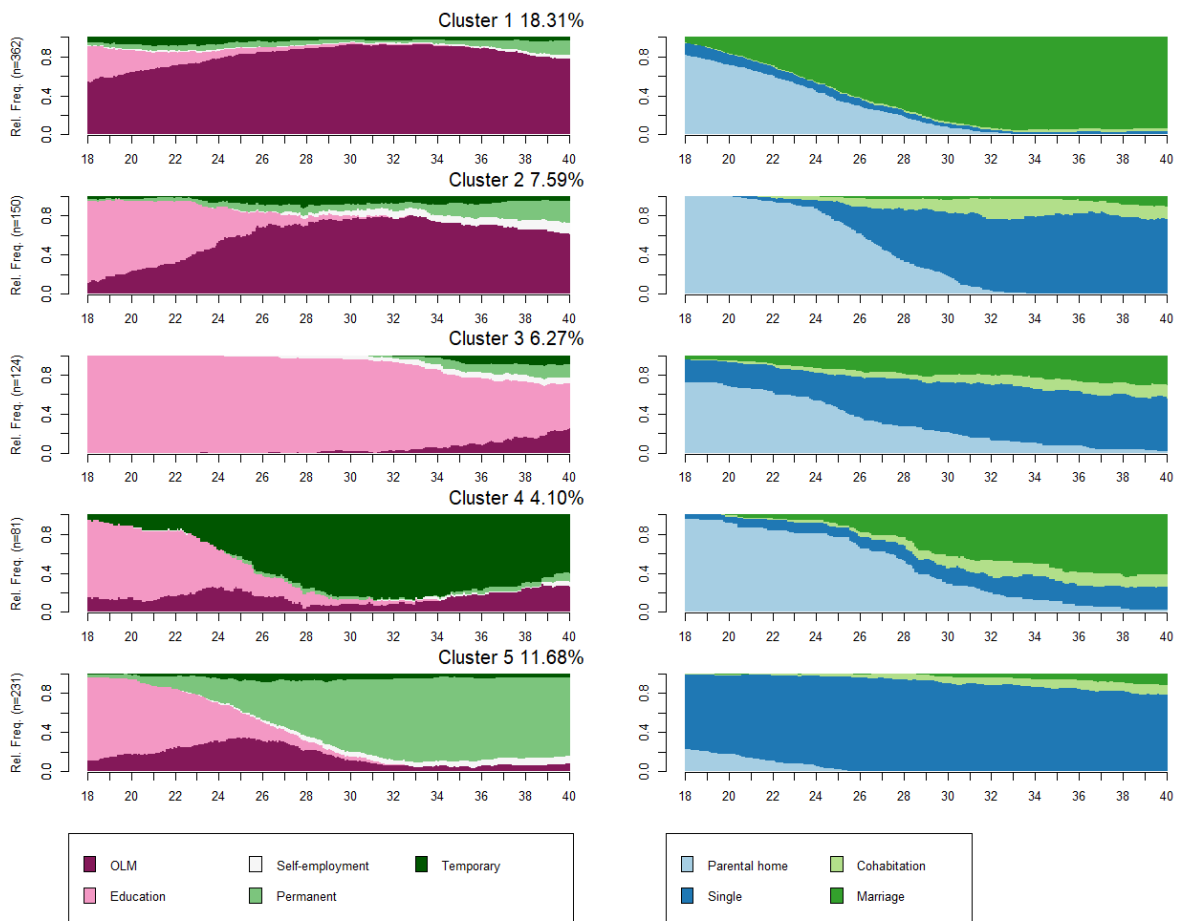
Methods

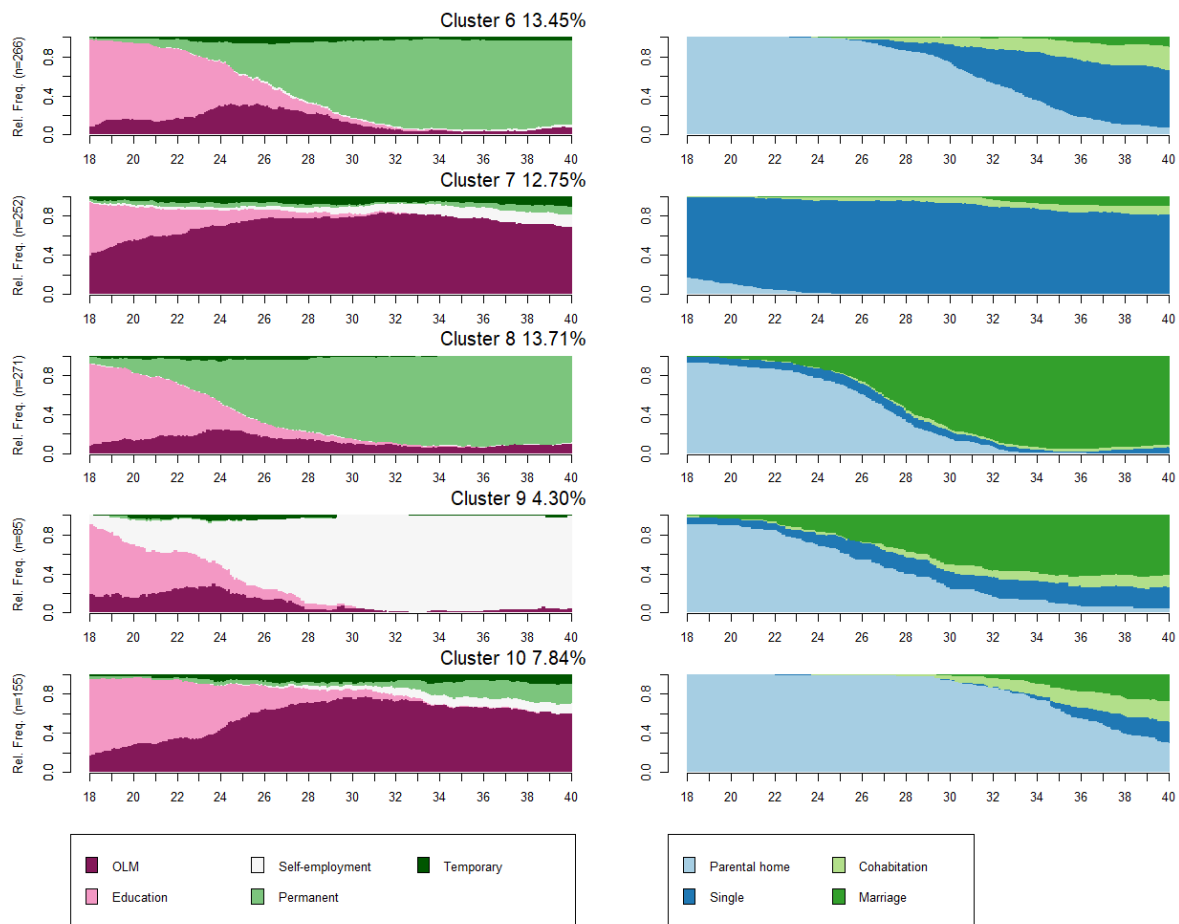
We conducted the analysis in two stages. In the first stage, using sequence analysis, we reconstructed monthly employment and partnership trajectories from ages 18 to 40 through a *multichannel sequence analysis*, which allowed us to identify ten clusters or profiles of women who reached the age of 40 without children. In the second stage, we applied *discrete-time survival models* to analyze the probability of having a child between ages 40 and 45 for each of these profiles of childless women.

Preliminary findings

The results of the clusters combining employment and family trajectories reveal, first, the heterogeneity of life-course patterns that lead to the postponement of the transition to motherhood (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ten work-family clusters (18 to 40 years old).





The ten clusters obtained allow us to highlight that childlessness at age 40 is likely the result of several different mechanisms. In some cases, it stems from difficulties in forming a stable partnership or from the absence of one altogether (Clusters 3 – students & single, 5 – permanent employment & single, 6 – permanent employment & living in the parental home, 7 – out of the labor market & single, and 10 – out of the labor market & living in the parental home). In other cases, it is associated with the inability to achieve adequate employment conditions (Clusters 1 – out of the labor market & married, 2 – out of the labor market & single, 3 – students & single/partnered, 7 – out of the labor market & single, and 10 – out of the labor market & living in the parental home), or even with a combination of both circumstances (Clusters 3, 7, and 10).

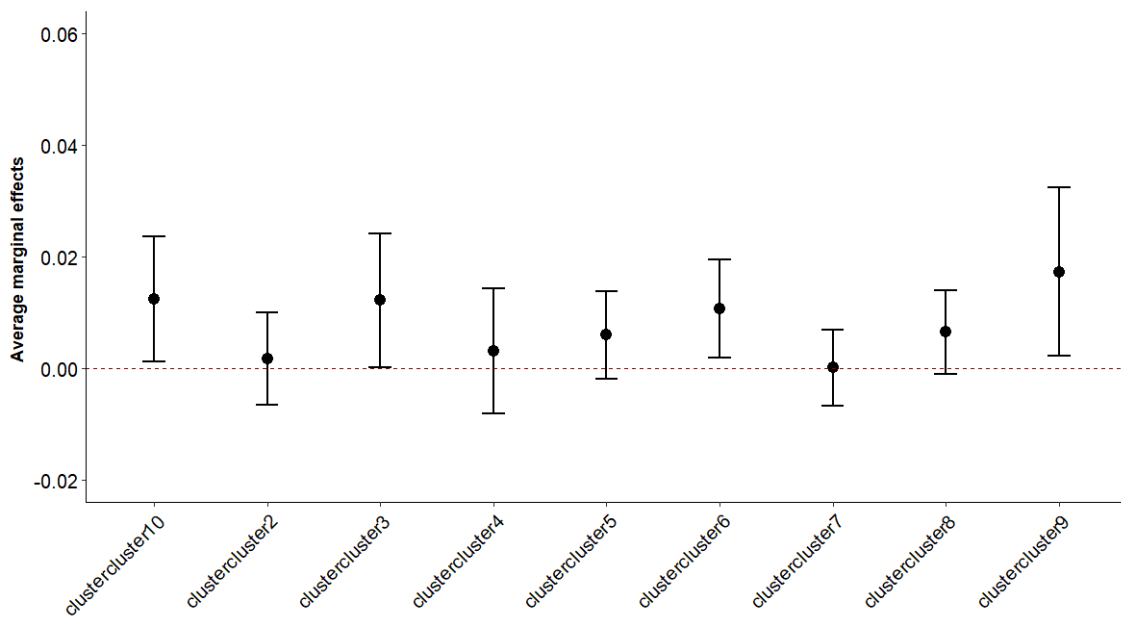
However, the results also point to the absence of children among women who enjoy apparently adequate employment and family conditions (Clusters 4 – temporary employment & married, 8 – permanent employment & married, and 9 – self-employed & married). These cases draw attention to situations in which the absence of children may reflect a conscious decision not to have them, or alternatively, biological constraints that make childbearing impossible.

In the second stage, we analyzed the probability of having a first child after the age of 40, using as the main explanatory variable the clusters defined by the combination of partnership and employment trajectories (Figure 2). The results highlight the importance of timing in the transitions from leaving the parental home, forming a partnership, and entering or remaining in the labor market. Taking as a reference the profile of married

women who have not participated in the labor market for most of the period (Cluster 1), three profiles show a higher probability of having a first child after age 40:

- Cluster 6: *Very late departure from the parental home and permanent employment*. These women leave the parental home late, remain single for an extended period, and form a union at a very late age. They are likely to have prioritized their professional careers over family life, which leads them to have children after age 40.
- Cluster 10: *Very late departure from the parental home and no participation in the labor market*. In this case, although there is no apparent incompatibility between work and family life, late motherhood may be related to the difficulties associated with leaving the parental home and forming a partnership, where the absence of employment could play a key role in delaying independence.
- Cluster 9: *Self-employed and married women*. Here, the particular characteristics of self-employment appear to be the main factor contributing to the postponement of motherhood.

Figure 2. AME of first birth after 40 years old. Discrete-time regression model



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