

## 1. Introduction

Recent advances in longitudinal data and sequence analysis have strengthened the study of fertility within a life-course framework, which views demographic behaviour as part of interconnected individual trajectories. Within this perspective, reproductive intentions are conceived as dynamic states shaped by past experiences, current circumstances, and expectations about the future (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013).

While this perspective has been widely applied in Northern Europe, evidence from Southern Europe remains limited, particularly regarding how employment and partnership histories jointly shape fertility intentions among childless women. Spain offers a particularly informative case, marked by persistently low fertility (TFR 1.25 in 2018) despite higher intended family sizes (1.7). Strong structural constraints—such as high youth unemployment and delayed residential independence—generate unstable and fragmented life courses that challenge the conventional sequencing of adulthood transitions.

This study addresses key gaps in the literature by focusing exclusively on childless women and distinguishing between stages of adulthood, thereby enhancing analytical specificity. In Spain, the lack of longitudinal data has so far hindered the study of how life-course dynamics influence reproductive intentions; we overcome this by reconstructing work and family trajectories. The Spanish context, characterized by strong structural constraints compared with Northern Europe, provides a critical setting to analyse how opportunities and uncertainties shape the planning of motherhood. Studying intentions offers early insight into future fertility outcomes, and the mechanisms identified in this very low-fertility context can inform research in other similar countries.

Building on this rationale, the study addresses the following question: How do distinct work and family trajectories influence first-birth intentions across different stages of adulthood in Spain? Specifically, it characterizes and classifies life-course trajectories and compares patterns across three adulthood stages (25–29, 32–37, 40–45) by applying multichannel sequence analysis, and—considering these trajectories—analyses the probability of intending a first child in each age group using logistic regression models.

## 2. Theoretical focus

This study combines the life-course approach (Elder, 1994; Huinink & Kohli, 2014) and the Theory of Conjunctural Action (TCA) to analyse fertility intentions as processes embedded in individual trajectories (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013). The life-course perspective highlights how fertility decisions unfold alongside transitions in education, work, and partnership, shaped by time, context, and agency. The TCA complements this view by conceptualising intentions as context-dependent cognitive states that arise from the interaction between structural conditions and internalised schemas. Together, these frameworks provide a coherent lens for examining how women's employment and family trajectories relate to first-birth intentions across adulthood. Rather than tracing individual revisions of intentions, the study focuses on how different life-course stages and accumulated experiences shape the level and direction of reproductive intentions, offering a dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of fertility decision-making in very low-fertility settings.

Age constitutes a central determinant of reproductive intentions, following a pattern that is neither linear nor uniform across the life course. Bein et al. (2023) describe a slightly curvilinear evolution, whereby intentions are high in early adulthood but gradually revised downward as individuals confront increasing biological constraints. Consequently, optimism at younger ages often gives way to more realistic expectations in the mid-thirties and a marked decline around forty, when the feasibility of motherhood is perceived as increasingly limited.

Partnership also emerges as a key factor shaping reproductive intentions, particularly beyond early adulthood. Research shows that forming a stable, co-residential relationship tends to reinforce

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intentions to have children, whereas the absence of a partner or unstable relationships are associated with their decline. Sturm et al. (2023) further demonstrate that in post-traditional Southern European contexts, such as Italy, the positive association between partnership and intentions is evident up to a certain age, after which it weakens and may no longer play a decisive role.

Employment conditions exert an equally relevant, though more ambiguous, influence—especially for women navigating diverse career paths. Spéder & Bálint (2024) highlight that the transition into the labour market can lead to the downward revision of earlier optimistic intentions, as young adults begin to face the practical and economic costs associated with family formation. Stability in employment supports the realisation of intended fertility, while insecurity, unemployment or low earnings heighten uncertainty and often result in postponement.

### 3. Data & Methods

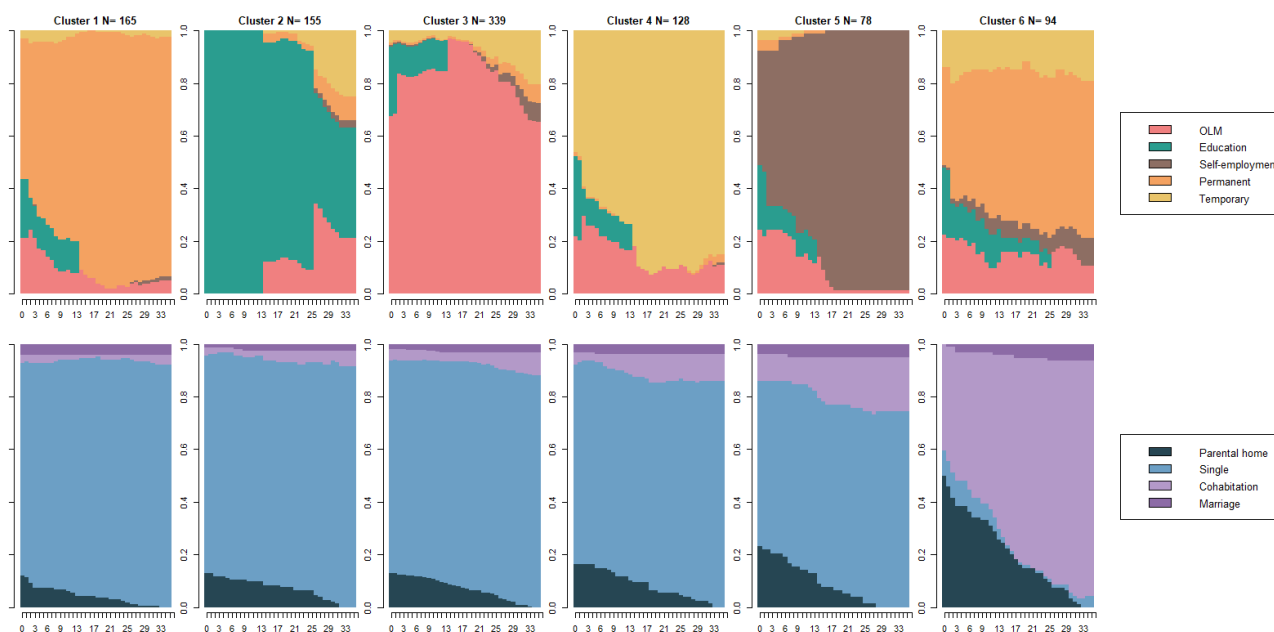
Microdata from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey were used, comprising a total sample of 2,197 childless women. Three age groups were defined to capture key life-course stages and align with educational and biological considerations: 25–29, when many women complete higher education and begin their careers; 32–37, considering the average age of first birth in Spain; and 40–45, where biological constraints are more salient. The dependant variable, short-term fertility intentions were measured through the survey item: “Do you intend to have children in the next three years?” Responses were coded dichotomously (yes/no).

A two-step analytical approach was applied. First, we applied multichannel sequence analysis, which examines multiple life domains simultaneously, capturing the timing and co-occurrence of work and family events over time. For the three age groups, sequences were constructed in monthly intervals over the three years preceding the interview, matching the dependent variable measuring short-term first-birth intentions. A six-cluster solution was selected based on standard quality indicators.

Second, logistic regression models estimated the probability of intending a first birth for each cluster. Two models were run: one including the clusters and another controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, family background, and attitudes towards gender, family, and religion. This approach allowed assessment of both the direct association between life-course trajectories and fertility intentions and the mediating effects of contextual and individual factors, consistent with the TCA.

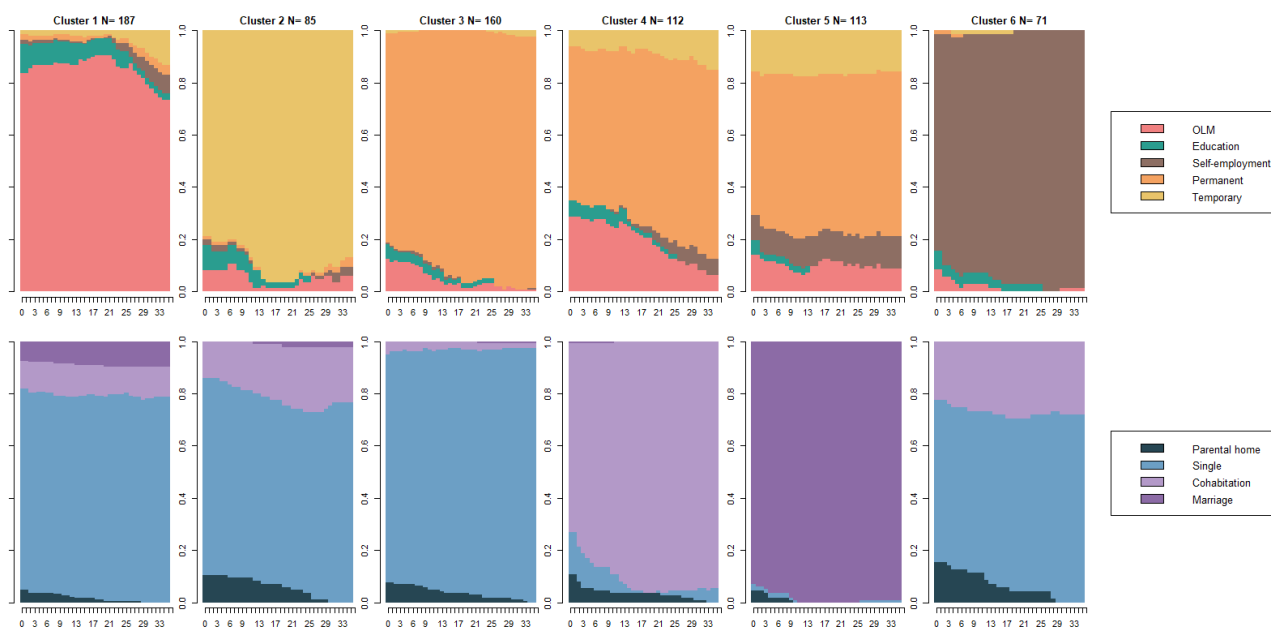
### 4. Results

**Fig. 1** Cluster solution for childless women aged 25-29 in Spain (N=959).



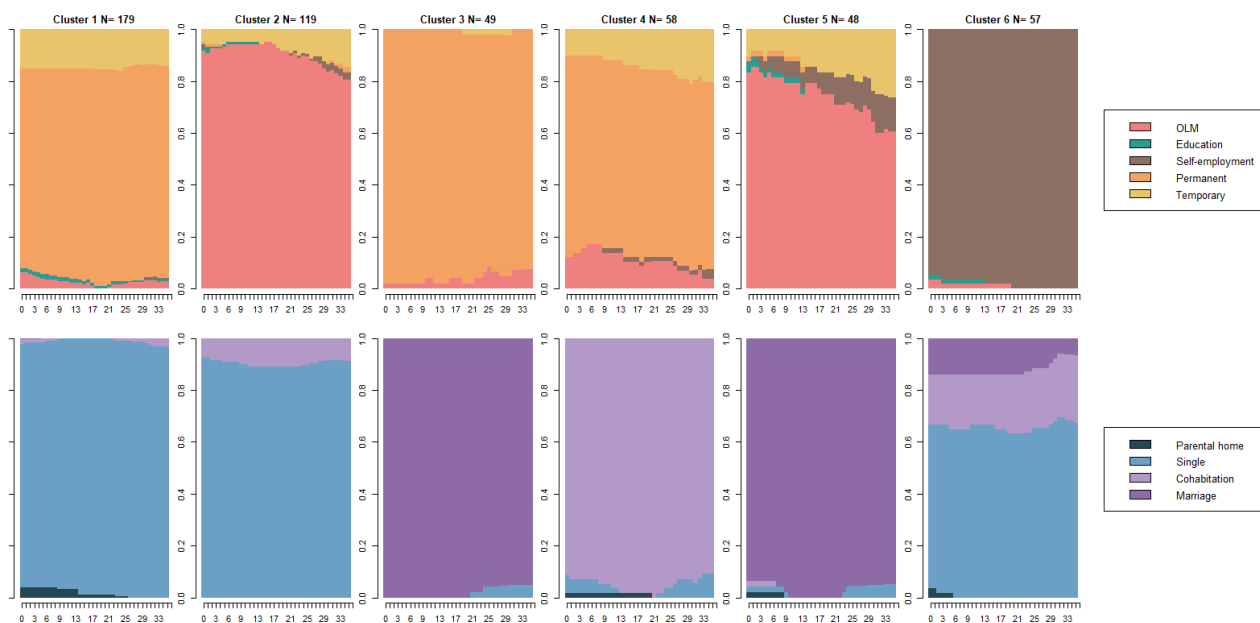
Source: Fertility survey (Spanish Statistical Office, 2018).

**Fig. 2** Cluster solution for childless women aged 32-37 in Spain (N=728).



Source: Fertility survey (Spanish Statistical Office, 2018).

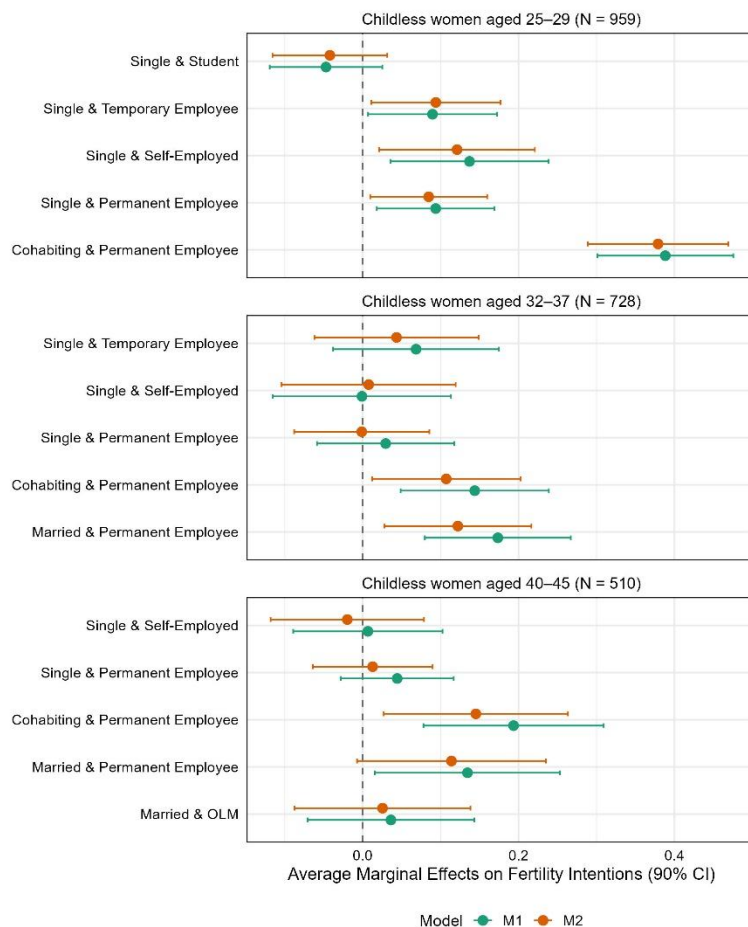
**Fig. 3** Cluster solution for childless women aged 40-45 in Spain (N=510).



Source: Fertility survey (Spanish Statistical Office, 2018).

Across the three age groups of childless women, Figures 1–3 reveal distinct life-course patterns. At ages 25–29, employment is varied while most women are single; by 32–37, careers stabilise around permanent contracts and partnerships diversify. Among those aged 40–45, employment remains steady, but family arrangements are even more heterogeneous. Overall, younger women navigate transitions between education, work, and parental home-leaving, middle-aged women consolidate careers and unions, and older women combine stable employment with diverse family arrangements.

**Fig. 4** Average marginal effects of labour and family trajectory on fertility intentions for childless women.



Source: Fertility survey (Spanish Statistical Office, 2018)

Among women aged 25–29, all trajectories except the non-employed (student) cluster show statistically significant probabilities of intending a first child (Figure 4). Permanently employed or self-employed women, particularly those cohabiting, display the highest likelihoods, whereas temporary employees present lower ones. In the 32–37 group, partnership status becomes decisive: women in unions with permanent employment, especially married women, show the strongest intentions, whereas employment alone is insufficient. For women aged 40–45, both married and cohabiting women with permanent jobs form significant clusters, but cohabiting women display the highest probabilities. The consistency of results across M1 and M2 (model with control variables) underscores the robustness of the observed associations.

Overall, the results show that stable employment supports fertility intentions in early adulthood, while partnership stability becomes crucial later on. This shift reflects how reproductive planning evolves through accumulated experiences and changing life-course constraints, illustrating the dynamic interplay between structure, timing, and agency in very low-fertility contexts.

## References

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