

Is the Two-Children Norm Still Holding in Ultra-Low Fertility Societies? Insights from South Korea, Spain and Uruguay

Ignacio Pardo, Wanda Cabella, Teresa Castro-Martín, Seungwan Kim, Teresa Martín-García

Background

Sub-replacement fertility has become a normal feature of the demographic landscape across much of the world and is projected to become the global norm in the near future. Moreover, *lowest-low fertility* (TFR<1.3), once considered an exceptional and transitory phenomenon, now characterizes more than 30 countries and territories (United Nations, 2025). Initially observed in the 1990s in parts of Southern Europe, Eastern Europe and East Asia, ultra-low fertility has since spread to other regions, including Northern and Western Europe (e.g., Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Poland), as well as to Latin America (e.g., Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Uruguay) and North America (Canada). While it remains uncertain whether this trend represents a plausible future for current low-fertility societies, examining the features of some forerunner countries might provide valuable insights into the structural, cultural, and policy factors that influence whether a society crosses or not the ultra-low threshold. A key research question is whether reproductive ideals and aspirations remain unchanged within an ultra-low fertility context.

Reproductive ideals reflect not only individual aspirations but also collective norms concerning childbearing. In most post-industrial societies, the average ideal number of children has remained remarkably stable –at around two children per woman– even as actual fertility has fallen well below replacement levels (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014). However, a growing body of evidence indicates a subtle yet significant shift, with an increasing proportion of young adults now expressing uncertainty or indifference about having children. This trend was first documented in the early 2000s in Austria and Germany (Goldstein, Lutz & Testa, 2003) and has since been observed in Italy (Luppi et al., 2024), the United States (Hartnett & Gemmill, 2020; Bozick, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024), Finland (Golovina et al., 2024), Sweden (Neyer, Lai & Andersson, 2024), and Canada (Laplante & Blouim, 2024). These developments raise relevant questions about whether younger generations may be re-considering the importance of having children amid broader transformations in values, gender relations, economic uncertainty, and life-course priorities. They also suggest that even when the average ideal family size appears relatively stable, reproductive preferences may be becoming more diversified across subgroups and age cohorts. Scholars have hypothesized that uncertainty and pessimism about the future play a role in these trends (Comolli, 2023; Vignoli et al., 2020, Ivanova & Balbo, 2024). Yet these shifts could also indicate that deeper cultural changes, possibly involving a redefinition of the meaning and salience of parenthood, may be underway.

Against this backdrop, the present study compares reproductive ideals and intentions –which capture different but interrelated dimensions of reproductive decision-making– in three markedly different societies experiencing ultra-low fertility: South Korea, Spain, and Uruguay. South Korea currently holds the world’s lowest fertility rate (TFR 0.72) and is characterized by a sharp decline in marriage, marked birth postponement, high opportunity costs of motherhood, and entrenched gender inequalities (Yoon, 2016; Tan, 2023). Spain (TFR 1.12) has sustained very low fertility for decades, a situation reflecting persistent economic and institutional barriers (Castro et al., 2018). Uruguay, in contrast, has only recently reached ultra-low fertility levels (TFR 1.27), providing a valuable case for exploring how rapidly post-transitional reproductive regimes unfold outside the better-studied

European and East-Asian contexts (Cabella et al., 2024; Cabella & Velazquez, 2025; ECLAC, 2025; Pardo et al., 2025).

Different paths to ultra-low fertility and societal contexts

Despite some broad similarities in the global trends underlying declining fertility, the specific paths leading to ultra-low fertility vary across societies.

In **South Korea**, where fertility remains tightly linked to marriage, the main drivers of lowest-low fertility have evolved over time: from married women having later and fewer children to more women choosing not to marry and, more recently, to fewer women having children even if married (Hwang, 2023). Public discourse has adopted terms like “marriage strike” and “baby strike” to describe this phenomenon. South Korea’s ultra-low fertility is the product of a complex interplay between a conservative patriarchal family system, intensive parenting norms, a hyper-competitive education system, a gender-segregated labor market, long and inflexible work schedules, and deeply gendered expectations surrounding marriage and care (Raymo et al., 2015; Yoo & Sobotka, 2018; Brinton & Oh, 2019; Cheng, 2020; Kim & Luke, 2020; Kim, 2023; Yoon & Park, 2025).

Spain, traditionally perceived as a society with conservative family values and practices, has markedly challenged this stereotype in recent decades. Empirical data reveal a sharp increase in SDT-related behaviors, such as cohabitation, divorce, and non-marital childbearing. Since 2022, more births have occurred outside marriage than within it, signaling a decisive shift in family formation norms. Spain also stands out in the European context for its sustained “lowest-low” and “latest-late” fertility patterns (Castro-Martín & Martín-García, 2013; Esteve et al., 2021). The total fertility rate (TFR) has remained below 1.5 for nearly four decades (since 1987), hovering around 1.3 since 2011 and declining further to 1.12 in 2023. These persistently low levels are driven by a very late age of childbearing, increased rates of childlessness, and low progression to a second child. These trends are, in turn, closely tied to persistent labour-market precariousness, low wages, unaffordable housing, and limited institutional support for childrearing (Bueno & Brinton, 2019). The lack of a stable partnership is also frequently reported by women as a primary reason for delaying or forgoing motherhood (Lozano et al., 2024).

Uruguay has only recently –and largely unexpectedly– joined the group of ultra-low fertility countries. Its TFR, historically low for the Latin American context, fell below replacement level in 2005, remained around 1.9 for a decade, began a steady decline after 2016, and reached a historical low of 1.27 in 2023. This rapid decline has been driven by both the postponement of first births – especially among adolescent and young women– and a lower likelihood among recent cohorts to have a second child (Cabella et al., 2024). A sharp drop in adolescent fertility has been a decisive contributor to the recent decline (Cabella, Nathan & Pardo, 2019), although reproduction at early ages persists among less advantaged social groups. The historical reduction in family size ideals confirms the diffusion of the two-child norm across recent generations and social classes (Casterline & Mendoza, 2009). Yet, in contrast to most European and Asian settings, fertility control is not uniformly achieved, and differences by socioeconomic status remain substantial. Consequently, the country exhibits a dual pattern where unintended fertility (leading some women to exceed their ideal family size) and unrealized fertility (reflecting constraints on those who would like to have more children) coexist (Pardo & Cabella, 2018; Pardo et al., 2025).

Data and methods

This study focuses on women and men under 45 years of age in these three countries. We analyze personal reproductive ideals and intentions using recent, comparable surveys: the *South Korean*

Family and Fertility Survey (2021), the Spanish Fertility Survey (2018), and the Uruguayan Generations and Gender Survey (2022). First, we examine mean ideal family size (by gender, age group and educational status), childlessness ideals (particularly among young women and men), short-term childbearing intentions (by parity), and opinions whether having a(nother) child would improve or worsen various aspects of life, such as personal time, personal fulfillment, employment opportunities, and financial situation (by gender). Second, we estimate statistical models separately for women and men to identify factors associated with fertility ideals and intentions. We use generalized linear Poisson models to examine the ideal number of children, and binary logistic regression models to assess intentions to have a(nother) child within the next 3 (2 in South Korea) years. We include the following covariates: age, parity, partnership status (including LAT partnerships), educational level, employment status, number of siblings, and gender role attitudes.

Preliminary results

Fig.1. Evolution of TFR 1960-2022

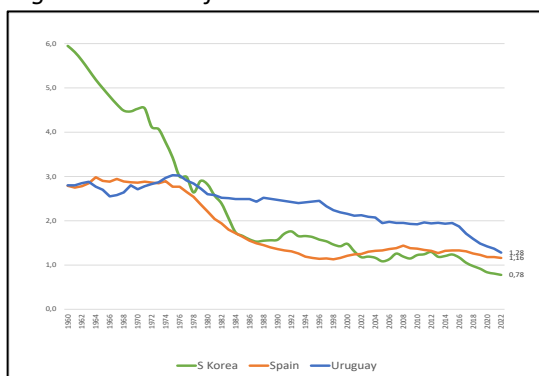
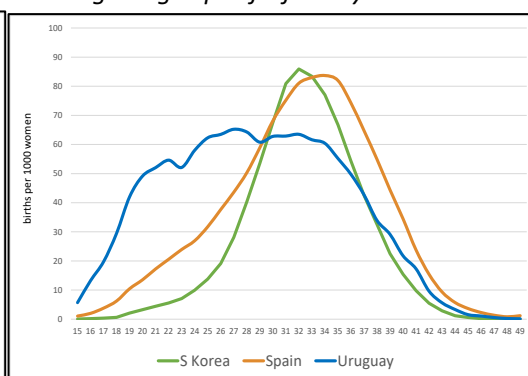
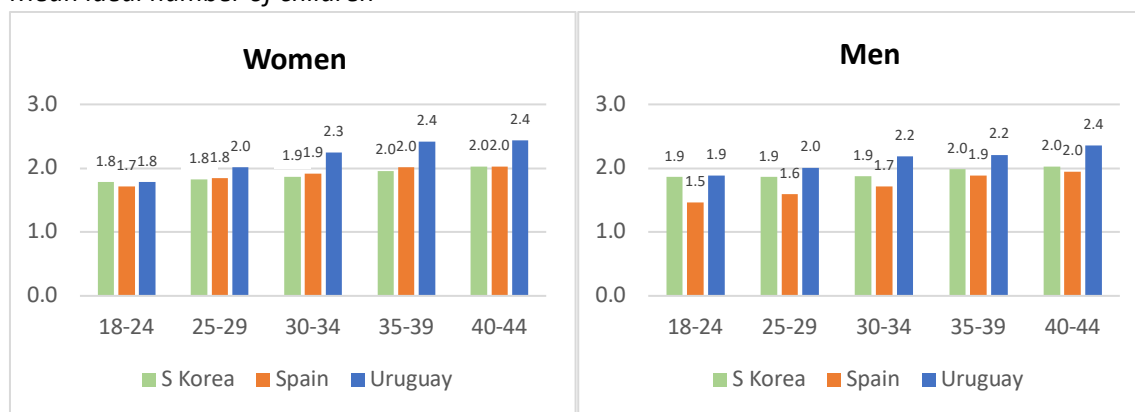


Fig.2. Age-specific fertility rates 2022



Mean ideal number of children

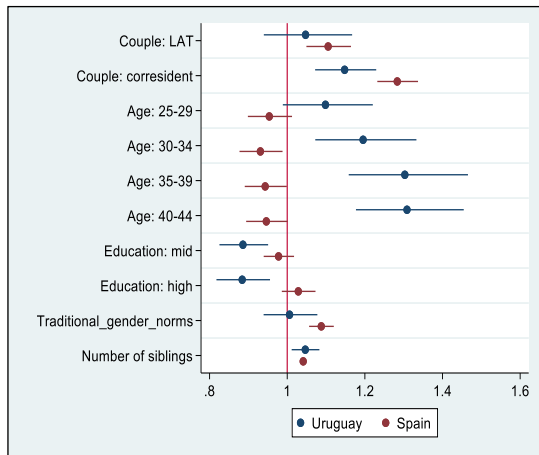


- Uruguayan women and men report a higher personal ideal number of children than their Spanish and South Korean counterparts.
- Young women and men report lower ideal family size than older cohorts.
- In Uruguay, the higher fertility ideals reported by older age groups might reflect the normative expectations of generations that experienced their reproductive lives in a context of relatively high fertility (the TFR reached two children only in 2004). In contrast, Spanish and South Korean women have lived through a scenario of very low fertility for decades. This seems to have influenced lower fertility ideals among younger cohorts, possibly in line with the low fertility trap hypothesis (Lutz et al., 2006), as well as stable reproductive expectations at later ages, which may also be linked to the late age at first birth and high rates of ART use, particularly in Spain.

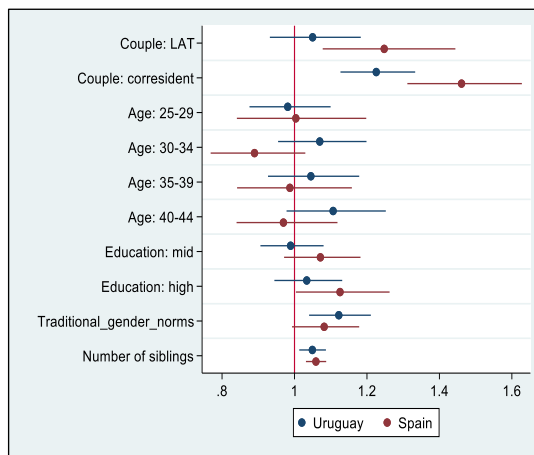
- A surprising finding is that, in Spain, a high proportion of young adults aged 18-24 (26% among women and 32% among men) report childlessness as their ideal family size. This has not been observed in previous surveys. This proportion is much lower in South Korea and Uruguay, suggesting different cultural and normative pressures. However, about one-fifth of young respondents report one child as their ideal family size in both South Korea and Uruguay.

Generalized linear Poisson regression – ideal number of children

Women

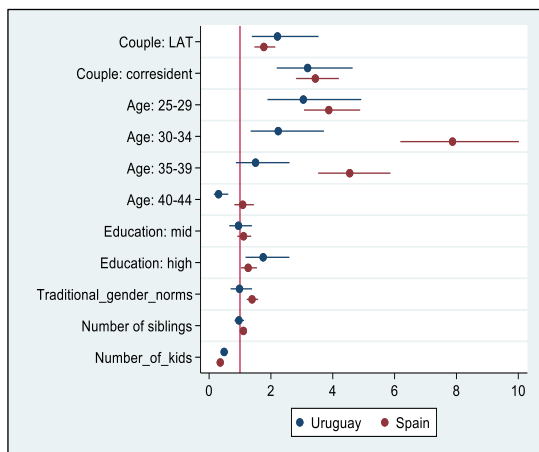


Men

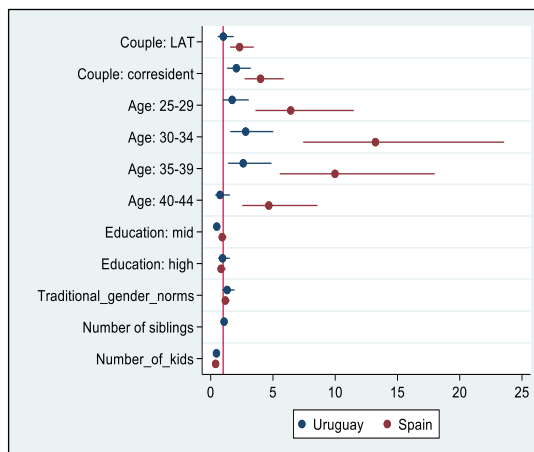


Logistic binary regression – Short-term fertility intentions

Women



Men



Having a partner, especially a co-resident partner, increases both reproductive ideals and intentions in Uruguay and Spain, with a more pronounced effect in Spain. The reversal of the gender gap in education that Western societies have experienced since the end of the 20th century may have it more challenging to find a partner who meets individual expectations. The results also confirm that the ideal number of children increases with age for Uruguayan women. Additionally, there is a higher intensity of intentions to have a(nother) child within the next 3 years among older age groups of women and men in Spain, reflecting the intense postponement of parenthood and the greater use of assisted reproductive techniques in this country. We also observe a negative gradient of education for Uruguayan women regarding the ideal number of children (the less educated continue to desire more children), but it is women with university studies who show higher short-term fertility intentions. The effect of education on reproductive ideals is not significant for Uruguayan men, but has a positive impact on university-educated men in Spain.