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**Jesús García-Gómez** | [jesusgg1@usal.es](mailto:jesusgg1@usal.es)

**Silvia Loi** | [loi@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:loi@demogr.mpg.de)

**Natalie Nitsche** | [nitsche@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:nitsche@demogr.mpg.de)

This working paper has been approved for release by: Joshua Wilde ([wilde@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:wilde@demogr.mpg.de)),  
Deputy Head of the Laboratory of Fertility and Well-Being.

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# **Want but won't: a research note on the gap between fertility desires and intentions in Spain**

Jesús García-Gómez<sup>1,2</sup>, Silvia Loi<sup>2</sup>, Natalie Nitsche<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Salamanca.

<sup>2</sup>Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research.

<sup>3</sup>Goethe University Frankfurt.

Corresponding authors: Jesús García-Gómez [jesusgg1@usal.es](mailto:jesusgg1@usal.es), Natalie Nitsche  
[nitsche@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:nitsche@demogr.mpg.de)

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## Abstract

Underachieving ones' desired number of children is a hallmark of very low fertility societies. While previous research analyzed the gap between fertility motivations and fertility outcomes, little is known about the gap between fertility desires and fertility intentions. However, investigating why and when people who desire more children don't intend or stop intending to have them can broaden our understanding of the underlying reasons for low fertility. In this research note, we analyzed data from the Spanish Fertility Survey (2018), and show that less than one-third of Spanish women have achieved their desired number of children by age 33, and less than half by age 40. Among both childless women and mothers who desire more children, sizable proportions abandon their fertility intentions before concluding their reproductive life. Ages 38-39 surface as a critical turning point. Thus, ages 34-39 are a crucial and "squeezed" life phase for the realization of first and subsequent fertility desires in Spain. However, the factors associated with desiring more children, but no longer intending to have them, vary between childless women and mothers. Partnerships are relevant for both groups, but socioeconomic aspects are linked to abandoned intentions among childless women only.

## Keywords

Fertility gap, fertility desires, fertility intentions, low fertility, Spain.

## **Introduction**

During the 1990s, many European countries reached the so-called “lowest-low fertility” level (Total Fertility Rate (TFR) below 1.3) (Kohler et al., 2002). Despite a general increase in the TFR at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Goldstein et al., 2009), fertility has remained low ever since, with some cross-country variability. However, over the same period, the ideal number of children has remained stable at around two children per woman across Europe (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014). As a result, there is a macro-level fertility gap (i.e., a difference between the desired number of children and the actual number of children) in Europe that differs in size between countries, and is larger in southern countries (Beaujouan & Berghammer, 2019).

Demographers have relied on two theoretical frameworks to study why some people underachieve their desired number of children. Both the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) and the Traits-Desires-Intentions-Behavior model (T-D-I-B) (Miller, 2011; Miller & Pasta, 1995) emphasize the central role played by fertility intentions (Brinton, 2016). While fertility desires express wishes or ideals, fertility intentions are more closely aligned with actual behavior. That is because in formulating intentions, individuals bring together their desires and the circumstances in which they will implement specific plans to attain their desires (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013; Brinton et al., 2018; Philipov & Bernardi, 2011).

Following the T-D-I-B model, the fertility gap between the desired and the actual number of children can be subdivided into two additive gaps: the first is the “desired-intended gap,” a gap between desires and intentions; while the second is the “intended-actual gap,” a gap between intentions and actual behavior. Most recent research has focused on the “intended-actual gap.” These studies typically use longitudinal data to analyze the extent

to which fertility intentions, which are measured at time  $t_0$ , are realized at time  $t+1$ . This strand of research has provided knowledge on the factors influencing the realization of fertility intentions (Beaujouan et al., 2019; Spéder & Kapitány, 2009); the importance of the time-frame, with short-term fertility intentions being more likely to be realized than long-term ones (Dommermuth et al., 2015); the role played by the national context (Kapitány et al., 2013); and the existence of marked gender differences in the effects of explanatory variables (Beaujouan et al., 2019; Spéder & Kapitány, 2009).

While studies on the “desired-intended gap” are lacking, they could complement the aforementioned research. There are at least three relevant reasons for studying the “desired-intended gap”. First, since negative fertility intentions are a predictor of contraceptive behavior (Régnier-Loilier & Vignoli, 2011), individuals who desire to have children but do not intend to have them may not realize their desired fertility. Second, since fertility desires do not fully explain the variability in fertility levels across European countries (Brinton, 2016), understanding the link between fertility desires and fertility intentions is of utmost importance. Third, from a methodological standpoint, since desires and intentions are measured at the same time, results do not reflect changes in desires or intentions over time.

We use the Spanish Fertility Survey (2018) to study the “desired-intended gap”. Spain’s TFR (1.2) and mean age of women at first birth (31.7 years) make Spain an extreme case of very low and very late fertility. Not surprisingly, the fertility gap tops Europe’s rankings (Beaujouan & Berghammer, 2019), and the contributions of women older than 35 (30.3%) and older than 40 (6.1%) to the TFR are large (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2017). To date, however, the lack of fertility surveys, either cross-sectional or longitudinal, have inhibited research on the factors underlying this late and low fertility pattern (Esteve & Treviño, 2019). In this context, we aim to answer two main questions: 1) How do the

desired-achieved gap and the desired-intended gap vary by age and parity? 2) Focusing on the desired-intended gap, what factors are linked to intending versus not intending to have a(nother) child among women who have not yet achieved their desired number of children?

## **Data and Methods**

We use the Spanish Fertility Survey, which was conducted by the Spanish Statistical Office in 2018. This cross-sectional survey includes rich information regarding fertility desires and intentions, as well as variables related to the respondents' fertility and partnership histories and socioeconomic characteristics. First, to analyze the desired-achieved fertility gap and the desired-intended gap, we restrict the sample to women born in Spain who were aged 18 to 55 in 2018 (12,808 observations). We show the sizes of these gaps (Figure 1), and discuss how they vary by age and parity. Second, focusing on the fertility intentions of women who have not yet achieved their desired fertility level, we further restrict the sample to women aged 34 to 45 who are childless or have one child only (1,712 observations).

To study the associations of different factors with the fertility intentions of women who still desire more children, we run four linear probability models, with different sets of controls, separately for childless women and mothers of one child. Logistic regression models return the same results (not shown). We distinguish women by parity because the birth of the first child entails a qualitatively different transition than the births of subsequent children (Miller, 2007). Moreover, women's fertility intentions appear to be formulated differently contingent on parity (Dommermuth et al., 2011). We divided the

sample into women aged 34 to 39 and women aged 40 to 45. As the results were consistent, we merged the two groups.

Since the wording of some questions differs depending on the number of children of the interviewees, we use two survey questions to identify fertility desires. For childless women, the question reads: “*Would you have liked, or would you like to have children? How many?*” For mothers, the question reads: “*How many children in total would you have desired or desire to have?*” Both questions fall into the “Desires” category of the T-D-I-B model. After consultation with Spanish researchers in the field, we are convinced that the meaning of the two questions is equivalent. To identify fertility intentions, we use the following questions: “*Do you intend to have one or more children in the next 3 years? And after the next 3 years, do you intend to have one or more children?*”

As the outcome, we use a binary variable indicating whether the woman intends or does not intend to have a(nother) child ever. Results do not vary when restricting the time span of the intention to the next three years. Model 1 controls for two-year age groups and partnership status: without a partner (reference); with a partner, living apart; with a partner, living together, further sub-divided into having a highly unequal, unequal, or equal distribution of housework. We define a highly unequal distribution of housework as a difference in the partners’ contributions of 40% or higher, an unequal distribution as a difference of between 10% and 40%, and an equal distribution as a difference of less than 10%. Model 2 adds controls for educational attainment, labor status, household income per person, square meters of the home per person, and age at leaving the parental home. Model 3 adds two variables related to fertility *desires* and three variables related to *traits*: the desired number of children, the ideal age at first birth; religiosity; agreement or disagreement with the statement: “women should prioritize their families over their careers;” and the number of siblings. Model 4 controls for grandparents’ help with

childcare, and is only included for women who already have one child. Descriptive statistics for the sample analyzed in these models can be found in Table 1 of the Appendix.

## **Results**

Figure 1 displays the desired-achieved gap and the desired-intended gap by age and parity. Only around 25% of women under age 30 have achieved their desired number of children (most of whom are childless women who desire to stay childless). More than half of women in every age group up to age 40 have not achieved their desired number of children, and about 40% of women over age 45 have fewer children than their desired number. These three figures illustrate the high proportions of Spanish women who have finished their reproductive life without achieving their desired number of children. Moreover, most mothers who have achieved their desired number of children did so during their mid- to late thirties.

The share of women who desire a(nother) child but do not intend to have any (more) children is low among women under age 33 (around 7%), but increases sharply at higher ages, to 16.5% for women aged 34 to 35, 29.7% for women aged 38 to 39, and around 40% for women older than 42. This share is especially high among childless women and mothers of one child who are in their mid- to late thirties. While most of these women who are under age 38 still intend to have the desired child(ren) that they lack, the opposite is the case for the women who are over age 38.

Table 1 shows the model results for childless women, which confirm the negative relationship between increasing age and the probability of intending to have a first child. Specifically, the probability of still intending a first birth drops markedly at ages 38-39 (Model 1). This result holds after including the control variables.



Partnership status is also significantly associated with fertility intentions. Partnered women who do not live with their partner have the highest probability of intending a first birth. Women who live with their partner and have a highly unequal distribution of housework have the lowest probability of intending a first birth. This association is, however, much reduced and loses statistical significance after controlling for socioeconomic factors (Model 2). Unemployed women who are seeking employment, women with a higher household income, and women who live in a bigger apartment have a higher probability of intending to have a child.

Leaving the parental home before age 25 is associated with an 11% lower probability of intending a first birth. Moreover, women who desire two children have an 8% higher probability of intending a first birth compared to those desiring only one child. Citing an ideal age at first birth above 31 is associated with a 13% higher probability of intending to have a child. Although no clear relationships are observed for personal characteristics such as religiosity or the number of siblings, women who think that “Women should prioritize their families over their careers” are more likely to intend to have a child.

Table 2 shows model results for mothers of one child who desire more children. Again, age seems to be the most important predictor for intending another pregnancy, and ages 38-39 emerge as the critical turning point at which the probability of intending to have another child drops 27% below that of women aged 34-35.

Women with a co-residential partner have a higher probability of intending to have another child. No clear relationships are found for socioeconomic variables and personal characteristics. Finally, women who are helped by the grandparents most days of the week in caring for their existing child are 9% more likely to intend to have another child than women without grandparental help.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Our study examined the desired-achieved and desired-intended fertility gaps in Spain, and generated three key findings. First, we show that a large proportion of Spanish women are falling short of achieving their desired number of children. This is the case for women of all age groups, including childless women and mothers of one child. It thus seems promising to extend the debate around low fertility in Spain to the progression from parity one to two.

Our second and most important finding is that the desired-intended gap is small until the mid-thirties, but increases very quickly and steeply in the late thirties and early forties. Among women who have not yet achieved their desired number of children, the proportion who no longer intend to have children doubles between the ages of 34-35 (27.8%) and 38-39 (55.2%), and further rises to 71.3% at ages 40-41. As our data are cross-sectional, we are unable to observe changes in individual women's intentions over time. Nonetheless, these patterns suggest that it is during the late thirties and early forties when large proportions of women who have not yet achieved their desired number of children shift from *intending* to *not intending* to have (any more) children. These sizeable age group differences in intentions are unlikely to be due to birth cohort differences, because these women were born within a time window of less than 10 years. Our findings thus indicate that in Spain, the realization of women's desired number of children tends to be squeezed into the age bracket of roughly 33 to 39, despite extensive and age-unlimited access to assisted reproductive technology (Brigham et al., 2013; Calhaz-Jorge et al., 2017). Further research on perceived age limits to childbearing and the pressures women likely experience in attempting to finalize their desired family size in their mid- to late thirties is needed.

Finally, we show that among childless women aged 34+, favorable financial and housing conditions, along with having a non-residential partner and specific fertility desires and values, are associated with intending to pursue their desired number of children. This is in line with prior research (Bueno & García-Román, 2020). Interestingly, as predicted by the gender equity theory (McDonald, 2000; see Brinton et al., 2018 for further discussion), a highly unequal distribution of housework reduces the probability that women intend to have their desired number of children. The predictors for intending to transition to parity 2 among mothers are, however, different. Here, only age and partnership status emerge as important. Moreover, as Rutigliano and Lozano (2022) showed, receiving intensive help from grandparents with the first child increases the likelihood of intending to have more children.

We conclude that in societies where the gap between the desired and the actual number of children is large and the transition to parenthood is late, women may be left with a small time window in their life course to realize their fertility desires. In the Spanish case, ages 38-39 emerge as a critical turning point when the proportion of women still desiring to have children, but no longer intending to have them, increases sharply. This could be related to the existence of social age deadlines for childbearing for women. Specifically, in Spain, half of the population thinks that 40 is the age when women should not consider having any more children (Billari et al., 2011). We have identified factors that are linked the fertility intentions of childless women and/or mothers of one child who have not achieved their desired number of children. These findings seem to imply the need for policies aimed at stimulating childbearing, such as promoting gender equality in the housework distribution, providing affordable housing, increasing access to high-quality childcare, stimulating the public debate on fecundity and childbearing at older ages, and supporting partnership formation. However, our results are purely cross-sectional, and

could be subject to selection effects, underscoring the need for further studies and data collection.

Table 1. Intention to have desired children. *Linear probability* models. Parity 0.  
 Dependent variable: intend to have children ever. Reference category: no.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Age, 2-year groups. R.C. 34-35</b>			
36-37	-0.014	0.006	-0.002
38-39	-0.226***	-0.202***	-0.193***
40-41	-0.403***	-0.377***	-0.361***
42-43	-0.545***	-0.526***	-0.509***
44-45	-0.633***	-0.585***	-0.567***
<b>Partnership status. R.C. No partner</b>			
Partner, living apart	0.123**	0.115*	0.127**
P., l. together, housework very unequally dis.	-0.133**	-0.064	-0.045
P., l. together, housework unequally dis.	0.021	0.04	0.06
P., l. together, housework equally dis.	0.014	0.002	0.009
<b>Educational attainment. R.C. Elementary</b>			
Secondary		0.052	0.041
University		0.067	0.061
<b>Labor status. R.C. Unemployed, not seeking employment</b>			
Unemployed, seeking employment		0.225***	0.234***
Employed		0.159**	0.061**
<b>Household income per person, Quartiles. R.C. 0-563</b>			
564-875		0.053	0.053
876-1334		0.001	0.007
>1334		0.105*	0.102*
<b>Square meters of the home per person. R.C.</b>			
<b>0-25</b>			
26-40		0.152***	0.149***
>40		0.189***	0.182***
<b>Age when left the parental home. R.C. Never left the parental home</b>			
After 30		-0.032	-0.039
25-30		-0.016	-0.026
Before 25		-0.1**	-0.108*
<b>Desired number of children. R.C. 1</b>			
2			0.086*
3 or more			0.018
<b>Ideal age at first birth. R.C. 18-26</b>			
27-30			0.023
31 or older			0.134**
<b>Number of siblings. R.C 0</b>			
1			0.026
2			0.024
3 or more			0.019
<b>Religiosity. R.C. No</b>			
Yes			-0.01

**"Women should prioritize their families over their careers". R.C Do not agree**

Agree			0.092*
<b>Constant</b>	0.816***	0.426***	0.29**

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*Note:* \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Source: Fertility Survey (FS 2018).

Table 2. Intention to have desired children. *Linear probability* models. Parity 1.  
 Dependent variable: intend to have children ever. Reference category: no.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Age, 2-year groups. R.C. 34-35</b>				
36-37	-0.075	-0.069	-0.078	-0.078
38-39	-0.270***	-0.264***	-0.278***	-0.268***
40-41	-0.431***	-0.429***	-0.446***	-0.434***
42-43	-0.600***	-0.607***	-0.615***	-0.598***
44-45	-0.687***	-0.683***	-0.687***	-0.662***
<b>Partnership status. R.C. No partner</b>				
Partner, living apart	0.045	0.069	0.085	0.084
P., l. tog., hw. very unequally dis.	0.128**	0.129**	0.136**	0.143**
P., l. tog., hw. unequally dis.	0.190***	0.176**	0.184**	0.199***
P., l. tog.r, hw. equally dis.	0.179***	0.166**	0.166**	0.181**
<b>Educational attainment. R.C. Elementary</b>				
Secondary		-0.006	-0.009	-0.008
University		0.07	0.06	0.059
<b>Labor status. R.C. Unemployed, not seeking employment</b>				
Unemployed, seeking employ.		0.059	0.072	0.073
Employed		0.001	0.01	-0.009
<b>Household income per person, Quartiles. R.C. 0-563</b>				
564-875		-0.053	-0.043	-0.045
876-1334		-0.022	-0.020	-0.022
>1334		0.105	0.094	0.09
<b>Square meters of the home per person. R.C. 0-25</b>				
26-40		0.032	0.024	0.024
>40		0.031	0.018	0.026
<b>Age when left the parental home. R.C. Never left the parental home</b>				
After 30		0.162*	0.176**	0.163*
25-30		0.087	0.098†	0.089
Before 25		0.044	0.045	0.045
<b>Desired number of children. R.C. 2</b>				
3 or more			0.062†	0.065†
<b>Ideal age at first birth. R.C. 18-26</b>				
27-30			-0.043	-0.041
31 or older			0.043	0.036
<b>Number of siblings. R.C 0</b>				
1			-0.074	-0.073
2			-0.071	-0.066
3 or more			-0.102	-0.096
<b>Religiosity. R.C. No</b>				
Yes			0.028	0.029
<b>"Women should prioritize their families over their careers". R.C Do not agree</b>				
Agree			0.007	0.008

**Days per week grandparents help with childcare. R.C. 0**

*1-3				0.024
*4-7				0.091*
<b>Constant</b>	0.626***	0.513***	0.564***	0.532***

*Note:* † p < 0.1. \* p < 0.05. \*\* p < 0.01. \*\*\* p < 0.001. Source: Fertility Survey (FS 2018).



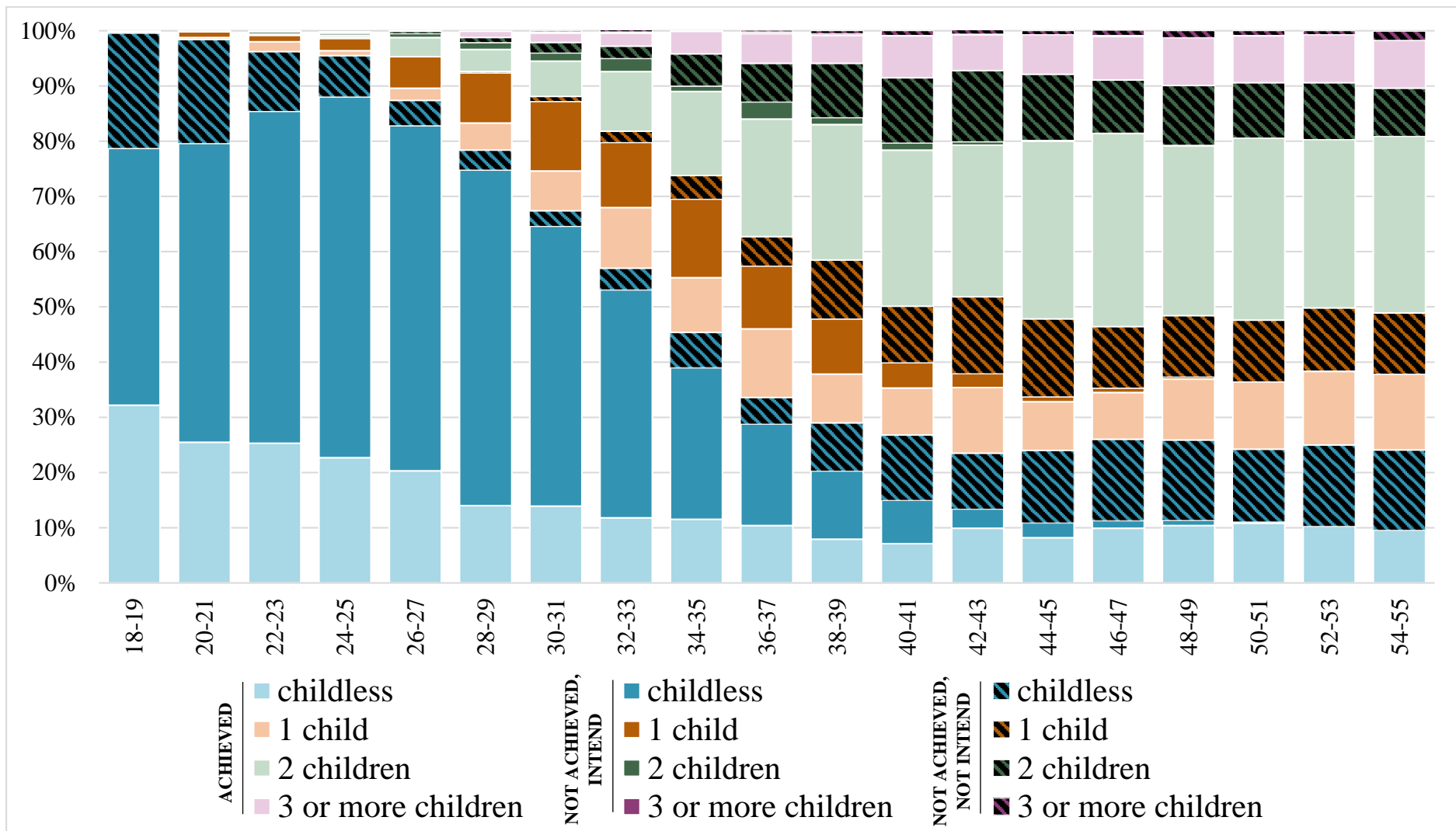


Figure 1. Spanish women by n° of children, having achieved the desired number of children, intend to have children, and age. N = 12,808.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by parity (0 and 1) and intention to have children. Vertical percentages.

	Parity 0		Parity 1		Total
	Intend to have children, ever				
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
<b>Partnership status</b>					
No partner	32.4	30.2	8.6	18.7	23.8
Partner, living apart	19.2	9.6	3.0	5.9	10.2
P., l. tog., house. highly unequally dis.	14.8	25.4	39.8	40.3	29.0
P., l. together, housework unequally dis.	12.8	12.6	23.7	16.1	15.6
P., l. together, housework equally dis.	20.8	22.2	25.0	18.9	21.4
<b>Educational attainment</b>					
Elementary	9.4	19.9	14.5	19.5	15.8
Secondary	38.4	39.4	39.5	47.3	41.3
University	52.2	40.7	46.1	33.1	42.9
<b>Labor status</b>					
Unemployed, not seeking employment	4.2	14.0	10.2	13.0	10.2
Unemployed, seeking employment	14.6	12.4	13.8	12.1	13.2
Employed	81.2	73.7	76.0	74.9	76.6
<b>Household income per person,</b>					
<b>Quartiles</b>					
0-563	19.4	33.4	30.6	31.8	28.4
264-875	28.6	27.5	33.9	41.2	32.7
876-1334	21.8	21.7	27.6	21.9	22.8
>1334	30.2	17.4	7.9	5.1	16.1
<b>Square meters of the home per person</b>					
0-25	12.0	29.7	24.7	27.2	23.0
26-40	28.2	27.7	59.9	52.4	40.4
41 and more	59.8	42.6	15.5	20.4	36.7
<b>Days per week grandparents help with childcare</b>					
0			40.5	60.1	52.4
1 to 3			28.6	22.9	25.2
4 to 7			30.9	17.0	22.5
<b>Years since left the parental home</b>					
Never left the parental home	21.0	19.5	6.3	10.8	15.2
0-5	12.4	4.1	6.9	1.9	6.4
6 to 10	27.2	15.8	41.1	14.0	23.1
11 to 15	23.6	24.5	27.6	31.6	26.8
16 or more	15.8	36.2	18.1	41.6	28.5
<b>Desired number of children</b>					
1	23.8	29.7	0.0	0.0	14.5
2	59.0	48.5	68.1	73.0	61.8

3 or more	17.2	21.7	31.9	27.0	23.7
<b>Ideal age at first birth</b>					
18-26	13.4	24.7	24.3	29.1	22.5
27-30	53.0	58.4	58.9	56.9	56.5
31 or older	33.6	16.9	16.8	14.0	21.0
<b>Number of siblings</b>					
0	9.2	6.2	9.9	6.4	7.8
1	44.2	37.1	42.1	34.4	39.3
2	27.0	29.3	29.3	28.7	28.4
3 or more	19.6	27.5	18.8	30.6	24.5
<b>Religiosity</b>					
No	42.4	35.7	29.9	29.3	34.9
Yes	57.6	64.3	70.1	70.7	65.1
<b>"Women should prioritize their families over their careers"</b>					
Do not agree	80.6	81.0	76.3	73.9	78.1
Agree	19.4	19.0	23.7	26.1	21.9
<b>Age, 2-year groups</b>					
34-35	33.4	8.9	28.3	5.5	18.6
36-37	23.8	7.1	24.3	7.2	15.1
38-39	18.6	14.9	24.7	17.0	18.3
40-41	13.4	22.9	12.8	18.3	17.1
42-43	6.2	20.6	7.2	26.3	15.6
44-45	4.6	25.6	2.6	25.7	15.4
<b>N (Women)</b>	500	437	304	471	1712