

Katarzyna Juszczak-Frelkiewicz\*  
Montserrat Simó Solsona\*\*  
Cristina López Villanueva\*\*\*

## DO WE WANT CHILDREN? ATTITUDES TOWARDS HAVING OR NOT HAVING CHILDREN: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON SPAIN AND POLAND

**ABSTRACT:** The transformations inherent to the Second Demographic Transition have evolved in intensity and timing in a differential manner in many European countries. The changes in demographic patterns are a reflection, to a large extent, of the transformations in values and attitudes towards fertility, nuptiality and forms of coexistence; transformations that act on a differential cultural, economic and political substratum in each national or regional context. Spain and Poland are two countries that have followed different processes; however, they are joined by a legal constraint, late chronology and economic recession. The aim of this paper is to analyse differences in attitudes of Spanish and Polish respondents towards having or not having children and the differences in two periods of time in both countries. In the article, fertility patterns in Poland and Spain were compared and examined in a dual perspective: firstly, considering the fertility data provided by official statistics. Secondly, from a subjective perspective considering attitudes and opinions about having or not having children. The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) is the theoretical background regarded as a driving force to understand this phenomenon. A subjective perspective on fertility was analysed on the data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in two periods of time: during rounds three (2006) and nine (2018), to capture the changes in respondents' attitudes to having or not having children. Independent samples of tests and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used in statistical analyses and were performed using SPSS. The results reflect differences in both countries. While Spain began a change in attitudes towards parenthood (having or not having children) in the early 1980s, and during the analysed period was consolidating its opinion, the starting point from Poland is more conservative, but shows an intense move towards being more flexible with new behaviour patterns.

**KEYWORDS:** attitudes to having or not having children, Poland, Spain, European Social Survey.

### Introduction

The inherent transformations to the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) have evolved differently in intensity and timing across European countries. Changes in demographic patterns are largely a reflection of the transformations in values and attitudes towards fertility, marriage and forms of cohabitation. These changes act on

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\* **Katarzyna Juszczak-Frelkiewicz** – University of Silesia in Katowice, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Sociology, Poland; e-mail: katarzyna.juszczak@us.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4908-2556>.

\*\* **Montserrat Simó Solsona** – University of Barcelona, Faculty of Economics and Business, Department of Sociology, Spain; e-mail: msimo@ub.edu; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8389-6719>.

\*\*\* **Cristina López Villanueva** – University of Barcelona, Faculty of Economics and Business, Department of Sociology, Spain; e-mail: clopez@ub.edu; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7676-0765>.

a differential cultural, economic and political substratum in each national or regional context, despite the apparent tendency towards homogeneity.

The objective of this article is to investigate the differences between respondents from Spain and Poland in the opinion about having and not having children. We compared fertility patterns in Poland and Spain and examined their differences from a dual perspective: firstly, considering the fertility data provided by official statistics such as Eurostat, the Polish Central Statistical Office (CSO) and the Spanish National Institute. Secondly, from a subjective perspective considering attitudes and opinions about having or not having children by European Social Survey respondents in two different moments, 2006 and 2018. Specifically, we analysed changes in fertility in relation to the attitudes towards having or not having children according to gender, age, marital status, education level, employment status and religion in two countries with two different fertility models and different welfare systems: Poland and Spain. Data provided by the European Social Survey (ESS) in Poland and Spain and in two points of time (2006, 2018), corresponding to a pre- and post-crisis chronology, are used to carry out the analysis.

The structure of this article is divided into several sections. Firstly, a description of the main characteristics of the fertility models in Spain and Poland is given from a historical perspective. Secondly, methodological aspects are briefly explained. Next, through ESS, the main results of key variables explaining differences in fertility models in Spain and Poland as well as attitudes towards parenthood are described. Finally, conclusions are presented.

### **Effects of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) on Spain and Poland**

Undoubtedly, one of the characteristics of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) (Lesthaeghe, Van de Kaa, 1986) is the change in fertility, which reflects transformations in attitudes (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) towards childbearing, couple formation and the composition of households and families.

Fertility changes according to the SDT premises (Van de Kaa, 1987) consist of a reduction in the number of children (below replacement level), a postponement of the age of childbearing and an increase in the number of children born to unmarried mothers that started to occur in Northern Europe from the second half of the 1960s onwards.

This evolution has developed at different speeds and intensities in European countries. Despite a certain tendency towards homogenisation in behaviour, some divergences are discernible. Countries with the lowest fertility are grouped into two distinct patterns (Billari & Kohler, 2004; Campisi et al., 2020). On the one hand, there are Southern

European countries with the lowest fertility, of which Spain is a good example. They show a late emancipation, a postponement of first births and a lower fertility recovery at older ages. On the other hand, Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland show a relatively earlier family independence and first births take place earlier than in Southern European countries with lower fertility.

Spain, together with Italy, is currently one of the countries with the lowest fertility rates in Europe and the latest age at childbearing. These changes, and this is where their interest lies, have taken place with remarkable celerity, intensity and in record time, because until 1974, Spain had very high fertility rates typical of the baby boom and a practically universal marriage rate. What has been its particular evolution? In Spain, the SDT occurred at the same time as the political transition to democracy (López-Villanueva, 2002). The Spanish constitution dates to 1978, but it was not until 1981 that the Civil Code was reformed and with it, the legal and juridical constraint was put to an end (Valiente, 1996). The new Civil Code provided a renewed framework and recognised new behaviour patterns in terms of cohabitation and filiation. In this way, equality between men and women was made explicit, and a decisive step was taken towards women's economic autonomy. Also, during this time, adultery was decriminalised and responsibilities towards motherhood and fatherhood were equalised. The divorce law implemented in 1981 was fundamental in making household formation itineraries more flexible and diversifying forms of cohabitation, and finally in legalising and decriminalising the commercialisation of contraceptives (Conde, 1982).

The new legal system was an accompaniment and stimulus to these new behaviour patterns in Spain (Alberdi, 1999). The legal corset that constrained the new practices emerging from a transformation in attitudes, values and images regarding fertility or forms of coexistence such as individualism, happiness, love, freedom or equality (Giddens, 1998; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Inglehart, 2015; Castells, 1997) delayed the implementation of the SDT in Spain.

Characteristic changes in the SDT (Van de Kaa, 1987) are observed in Poland and Spain. Since a few decades many demographic and social changes have been observed, ones which emerge especially with regard to aspects of marital and family life, intimacy and sexuality, fertility models, values and social norms, practices in religious services and labour market participation. The demographic and social changes observed in Poland, however, had a different pace and range than in other countries. After the political transformation in 1989, the population situation in Poland began to be developed by social, cultural and economic processes of different origins and characteristics. Population processes were conditioned by three directions of changes. The first was a return to modernisation trends that were distorted or even stopped during the communist era. The second direction of changes concerned the realities of the systemic transformation,

meaning institutional discontinuity, social change and economic difficulties. The third, concerned entering the path of late modernity and related axionormative changes, including the individualisation of individual life (Okólski, 2004). All these make the situation of Poland specific and comparable only to other countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Duszczyk et al., 2014). The existence of the Iron Curtain and the communist system also limited the flow of new values to Poland from Western Europe. Only after the political transformation in 1989, a strong influence of the sexual revolution in Poland was observed (Kobyliński, 2020, 28). The prevalence of modern, effective contraceptives plays a very important role as a 'technological' factor in reducing fertility in Poland (Frątczak & Balicki, 2003). Also, the most relevant determinants for limiting the number of children were the costs of raising children and an uncertain future for children (Kotowska et al., 2003). The costs of having a child are directly related to the participation of women in the labour market. Having a job by women is a condition for having more than one child (Matysiak, 2008). Research on the procreation intentions of Poles shows that the number of children they would like to have is higher than the real number they have. Unfulfilled reproductive aspirations reflect the existence of limitations in the decision to become parents. In Poland, for many years, the following barriers to having children have been indicated: the financial situation of families, difficulties in reconciling work with parental responsibilities, housing situation, costs of children (CBOS 2010). The reasons why Polish women choose not to have another child and the low birth rate contributed to the Polish government launching a family policy that would financially support families with children. Since 2016, the "500 plus" programme ([www.gov.pl](http://www.gov.pl)) has been operating in Poland, initially supporting families by allocating PLN 500 (about 110 EUR) per child. In the initial period of the programme's operation, the benefit for the first child was granted only after meeting the income criterion. However, in 2019, the programme was modified and started functioning without any income criteria – every family in Poland will receive PLN 500 for each child every month. At the beginning of the programme's operation, an increase in the birth rate was noticed, but it did not last long, as a decline was recorded since 2018. The effects of the impact of the programme in terms of improving the financial condition of households are visible throughout the country (Każmierczak-Kałużna, 2018, 2019).

During a substantial part of the 20th century, Spain had high fertility levels, achieving 3 children per woman, one of the highest in Europe. From the mid-1970s onwards, there was a dramatic fall in the synthetic fertility index, reaching an all-time low in 1998 with a value of 1.13, and then, beginning a recovery that reached its maximum value (1.44) in 2008 (Fig. 1), at the time of the outbreak of the economic crisis. The light rebound had its origins in the arrival of a foreign population with higher fertility at younger ages as well as a brake on the delay in the birth of the first child and a period

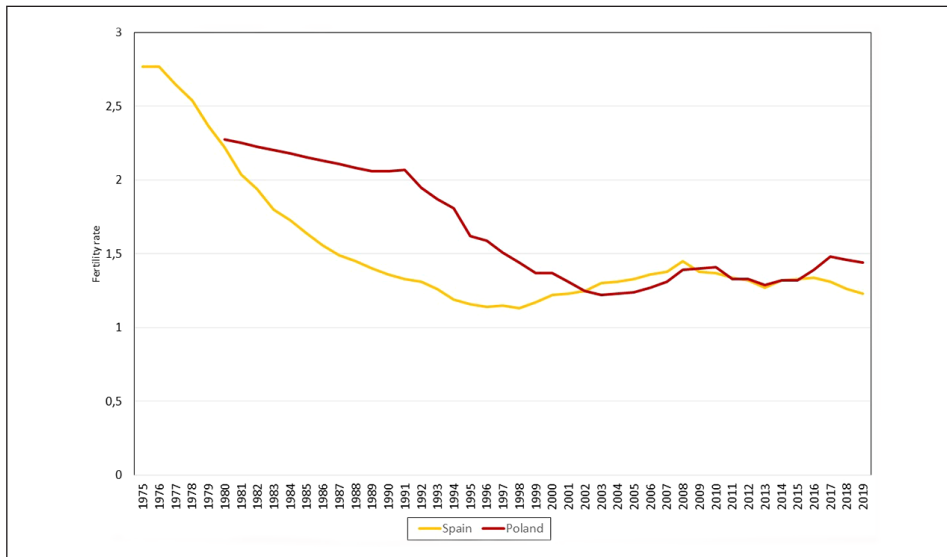


Figure 1. Total fertility rate (children per woman) in Spain and Poland from 1975 to 2019  
Source: Fertility indicators. EUROSTAT.  
Estimated Fertility Poland (1981-1990).

of economic prosperity (Castro-Martin et al., 2018). The great recession brought with it, once again, a decline in the short-term fertility indicator.

An intense decrease in the TFR in Poland and the postponement of childbearing, observed in the 1990s constitutes a new stage in the trend of long-term fertility decline in Poland (Duszczek et al., 2014; Kotowska et al., 2008, 800). The TFR dropped from 2.07 in 1989 to 1.22 children in 2003 (1.23 in 2004 and 1.24 in 2005) (Fig. 1). Within the 15-year period, Poland moved from the group of high-fertility countries to the group of lowest fertility (Kotowska et al. 2008, 800). Since 1989 – for over 30 years – in Poland there has been no replacement of generations (Szukalski, 2009, 60). In the period 2005-2010, Poland was among the 10 countries with the lowest fertility in the world (UN, 2011). In 2018, the TFR in Poland was 1.43 (CSO, 2020).

The decline in fertility in Spain is linked to a postponement of the age at childbearing from an average age at childbearing of 28.20 in 1980 to 32.25 in 2019 (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). The later reproductive calendar has had consequences on the decrease in descendants, infertility (Esteve & Treviño, 2019) and has contributed to a difficult transition to the second child (Sobotka, 2010).

The increase in the average age of getting married by Poles (CSO, 2020, 185; Kotowska, 2002) directly implies an increase in the average age of mother at childbirth, because in Poland most children are born into a marriage. In 2019, the average age of a mother giving birth to the first child was around 30 (CSO, 2020, 259) while in 1990 it was 27

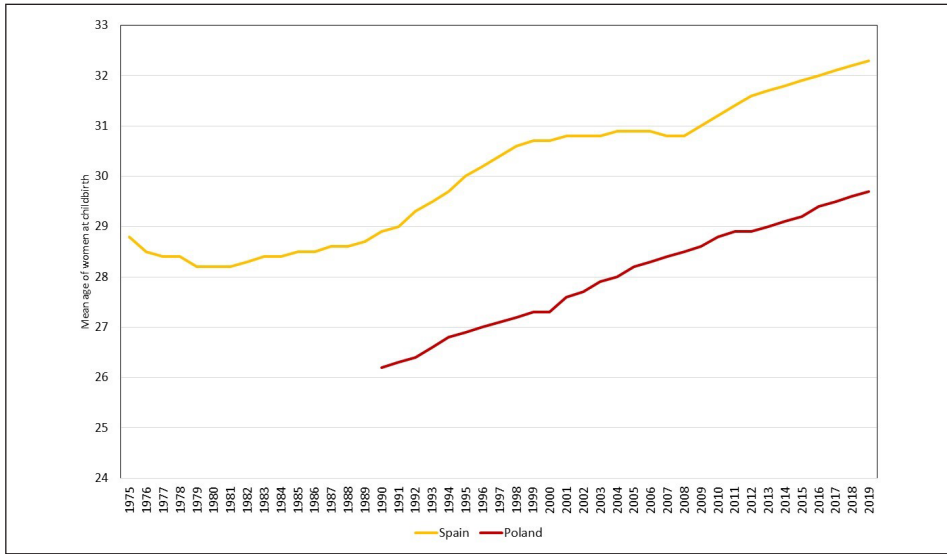


Figure 2. Mean age of childbearing (years) in Spain and Poland from 1975 to 2019  
Source: Fertility indicators. EUROSTAT.

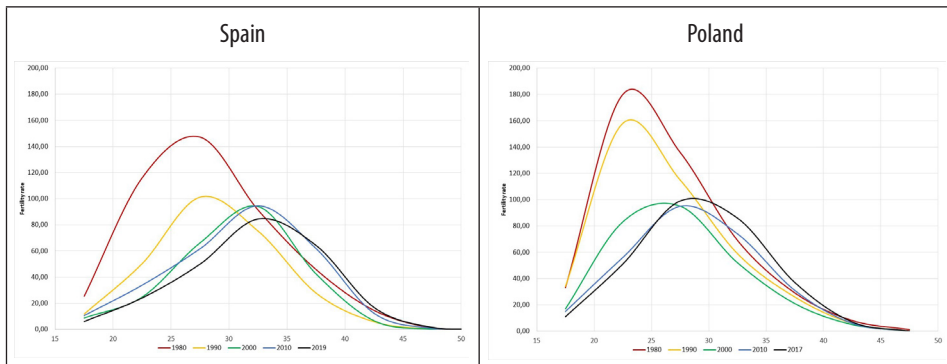


Figure 3. Fertility rates per 1000 women in age groups in Spain and Poland – 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2019.  
Source: Basic demographic indicators. Results. INE and Statistics Poland.

(stat.gov.pl) (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Although Polish women decide to have their first child earlier than Spanish women, they rarely decide to have a second child, as evidenced by the TFR. Fig. 3 shows the changes across time in Spain and Poland in age categories by women according to fertility – through the 40 years period the fertility patterns have been changed in both countries by moving women fertility to elder age categories. Significant changes have been visible in Spain since 1990 and in Poland since 2000.

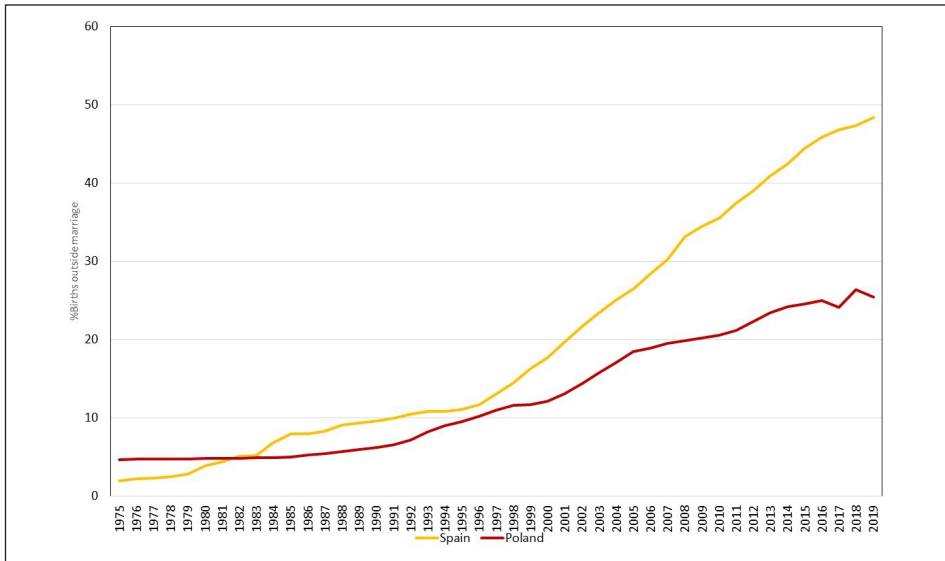


Figure 4. Births outside marriage (%) in Spain and Poland from 1975 to 2019

Source: Fertility indicators. EUROSTAT.

Figure 4 shows the phenomenon of live births outside of marriage in Spain and Poland. In both countries the phenomenon has kept increasing since late 1980s till now, but with a different speed and intensity. Especially from 1996, Spain noted a fast increase of live births out of wedlock until 2019; the tendency seems to be continuing. In turn in Poland the increase was half the size than that of Spain, but the intensity of the phenomenon seems to be continuing despite small declines in 2017 and 2019.

Attitudes towards the moment of starting a family or having children have become more flexible (Castro & García, 2013). Perceptions towards the desired number of children, the ideal age to become a mother or the fact of not having children are more tolerant than what was once considered normative.

## Methodology

The European Social Survey (Timing of life module) is the database used in this article. It was carried out in Poland and Spain during rounds three (2006) and nine (2018). In the case of Spain, total N in 2006 was 1876 interviewed persons and 1668 in 2018. In Poland, the sample was 1721 persons for 2006 and 1500 for 2018.

Independent samples of tests were conducted to compare Spain and Poland across time on several independent variables. To analyse the differences between both countries in agreement on not having children, independent samples of tests and an analysis of

variance (ANOVA) were also used. All statistical analyses were two-tailed, used a p value of 0.05 for significance, and were performed using SPSS version 25. Values in the text are presented as means and standard deviations (SD).

## Results: attitudes to having or not having children

In previous sections, we briefly described the fertility patterns in both countries, as well as explained the main social, economic and political factors that allow us to understand them. In this section, a subjective perspective on fertility was analysed. Here, the relevance of attitudes was underlined, and to this end, we analysed the positioning of respondents on the degree of agreement or disagreement regarding not having children.

Figure 5 shows the agreement level if a person chooses never to have children on a Likert scale, from 1 – strongly disapprove, to 5 – strongly approve, considering all the respondents. Spain is more condensing towards not having children. This trend is maintained over time. Fifty percent of cases rated between 3 and 4 in both 2006 and 2018. Despite this predictable stabilisation, if we focus our attention on where the first 50% of cases are located (median), over time, this has shifted towards a greater tolerance of not having children, while in 2006 it went up to 3, and in 2018 to 4.

Poland, on the other hand, takes a more conservative position on not having offspring. In 2006, 50% of the cases are between 2 and 3 on a scale of 1 to 5, with extreme

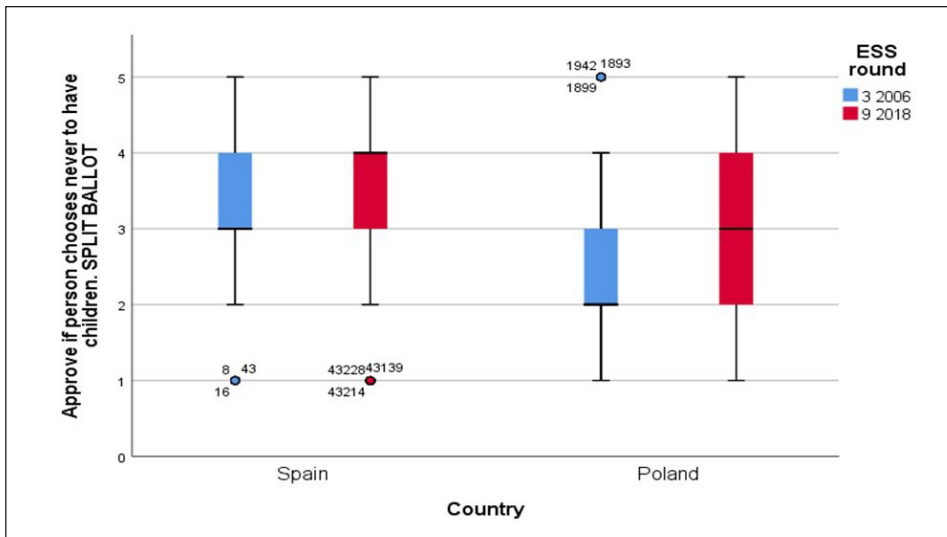


Figure 5. Agreement level if a person chooses never to have children in Spain and Poland – 2006 and 2018

Source: authors' own elaboration on data from the European Social Survey.



cases being those who totally agree with the assumption. It should also be noted that the median is as high as 2, showing that the first half of the cases strongly disagree with the statement. In 2018, there was a significant change with even more heterogeneity in the answers (greater amplitude of the box), 50% of the cases are between 2 and 4, thus showing a greater receptiveness to this attitude. In short, in 2018 Poland has a more similar opinion to Spain.

With the aim to explain in depth the different trend followed by Spain and Poland, we carried out means using a t-test or F test according to each independent variable. The following table summarises the main results by demographic factors in 2006 and 2018.

Spanish women support not having children to a greater extent than men in both rounds, 3.17 and 3.67 respectively, although only in 2018 these gender differences are statistically significant. In the case of Poland, although there are also differences between men and women, these are not statistically significant for any of the periods studied.

The analysis of the opinion on not having offspring according to age separately for men and women, showed interesting differences in behaviour patterns. The younger the age, the more agreement there is towards not having children (Esteve & Treviño, 2019). Moreover, highly supportive positions are also observed in both Spain and Poland between 40 and 49 years of age, especially in 2018 and for women.

In the case of Spain, women are much more agreeable to not having children than men, both in 2006 and 2018. This is not the case in Poland, especially in 2006, when men are more flexible than women. However, in 2018 the situation changes significantly: not only does tolerance towards not having children increase in general, but women are also more agreeable than men.

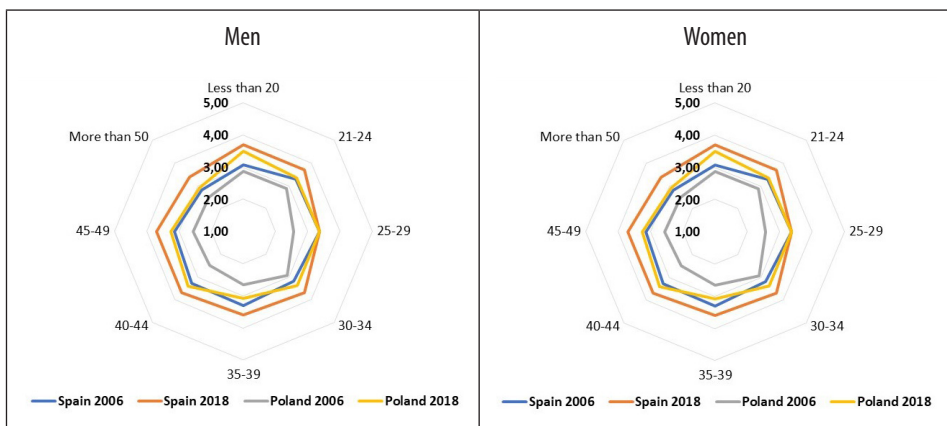


Figure 6. Agreement level if a person chooses never to have children by age and gender in Spain and Poland – 2006 and 2018

Source: authors' own elaboration on data from the European Social Survey.

Level of education also plays a key role in the respondents' opinions. In all the periods and countries analysed, the higher the level of education, the greater the agreement on not having children. Except in the case of Spanish men, those with a medium level of education are the most agreeable to not having children. On the other hand, for women, regardless of the country and time period, the higher the level of education, the more there is support of the statement.

The relationship with the labour market also determines the opinion on not having children. Both countries and in both periods have an identical pattern: those who are employed are more favourable to not having children versus those who are unemployed or inactive.

The same conclusion applies to the role of religion. In all cases, non-religious people are most likely not to have children. Besides, another common finding is that non-religious women are the most likely not to have children, reaching 4.05 points for Spain and 3.72 points for Poland, both for 2018. A higher prevalence of traditional family values in a country is related to a lower likelihood of individuals considering childlessness to be their ideal family form. (Miettinen & Szalma, 2014).

Finally, the contribution of marital status is considered. The general behaviour is that those who have never been married or have never been in a civil union are the most likely not to have offspring. In addition, it should be noted that those who are separated or divorced also highly support this idea (especially in Spain in 2018 and in Poland in 2006). Comparing men and women in the Spanish case, women always agree with this statement more frequently. In the Polish case, it should be noted that women were more tolerant from 2006 to 2018, except in the case of widowhood (see Table 1).

## Conclusions

The conducted analysis indicated differences in attitudes towards parenthood between 2006 and 2018 and showed differences between respondents from Spain and Poland. Opinions of Polish respondents changed to a greater extent than those of Spanish respondents across time. The latter were more positive about not having children than Polish respondents. Polish respondents had a more conservative starting position in this area which was changing during the analysed period.

The particularities in the evolution of the Second Demographic Transition in each of the two countries show that despite having different fertility models and different welfare systems they have shared (with different chronologies) a legal constraint and a Catholic cultural substrate that have affected demographic behaviour patterns and also attitudes towards motherhood. Spain began the process of change before Poland, which, for its part, had initiated an attitudinal transformation with a great pace.

Table 1. Agreement level of not having children (1, totally disagree to 5, totally agree) in Spain and Poland, 2006-2018

	Spain				Poland			
	2006 Mean	2018 Mean	2006 F/T	2018 F/T	2006 Mean	2018 Mean	2006 F/T	2018 F/T
<b>Gender</b>								
Male	3.08	3.53	-1.811	-2.918	2.64	3.16	0.69	0.044
Female	3.17	3.67			2.61	3.15	0.49	0.965
<b>Age</b>								
Less than 20	3.07	3.70	6.753	2.918	2.87	3.48	3.253	3.724
21-24	3.29	3.69			2.90	3.35		
25-29	3.37	3.38			2.57	3.36		
30-34	3.20	3.70			2.92	3.38		
35-39	3.31	3.58			2.66	3.07		
40-44	3.28	3.70			2.48	3.41		
45-49	3.14	3.70			2.55	3.25		
More than 50	2.81	3.38			2.51	2.91		
<b>Age</b>								
Less than 20	3.04	4.09	8.307	7.278	2.78	3.42	4.382	7.294
21-24	3.36	3.83			2.75	3.41		
25-29	3.36	3.82			2.82	3.53		
30-34	3.38	3.72			2.70	3.34		
35-39	3.35	3.93			3.02	3.29		
40-44	3.43	3.95			2.62	3.50		
45-49	3.46	3.90			2.54	3.54		
More than 50	2.90	3.42			2.42	2.86		
<b>Education level</b>								
Low qualification (at most lower secondary, isced1-2)	2.88	3.42	22.655	6.277	2.58	3.08	0.814	2.446
Medium qualification (upper secondary (iscd 3-4)	3.34	3.70			2.66	3.13		
High Qualification (tertiary, isced 5-6)	3.28	3.58			2.74	3.36		
<b>Education level</b>								
Low qualification (at most lower secondary, isced1-2)	2.97	3.47	26.927	19.04	2.45	2.85	7.280	16.096

Medium qualification (upper secondary) (iscd 3-4)	3.35	3.91	2.62	3.24
High Qualification (tertiary, isced 5-6)	3.53	3.90	2.88	3.41
<b>Main activity</b>				
Occupied	3.19	3.59	2.63	3.26
Unemployed	3.09	3.48	2.68	3.04
Inactive	2.85	3.43	2.66	3.01
<b>Main activity</b>				
Occupied	3.37	3.83	2.74	3.41
Unemployed	3.43	3.76	2.69	2.95
Inactive	2.98	3.48	2.52	2.93
<b>Religion</b>				
Roman Catholic	3.00	3.49	2.59	3.06
Other religion	2.44	2.70	2.33	2.50
No religion	3.30	3.68	3.16	3.70
<b>Religion</b>				
Roman Catholic	3.06	3.54	2.58	3.08
Other religion	2.54	3.03	2.85	3.50
No religion	3.53	4.05	3.07	3.72
<b>Civil status</b>				
Married/civil partnership	2.97	3.40	2.52	3.02
Separated/Divorced	3.00	3.80	3.07	3.34
Widowed	2.64	3.30	2.27	2.80
Never married and never in civil partnership	3.31	3.65	2.87	3.40
<b>Civil status</b>				
Married/Civil partnership	3.14	3.55	2.56	3.13
Separated/Divorced	3.25	3.81	2.78	3.40
Widowed	2.80	3.19	2.37	2.60
Never married and never in civil partnership	3.36	3.98	2.84	3.45

Significance level: \*  $P \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $P \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $P \leq 0.001$ . Source: authors' own elaboration on data from the European Social Survey.

Statistical analysis showed that: lower age, higher level of education, being occupied in the labour market, irreligiosity, never being married or in a civil union and single marital status are factors that determine to a large extent attitudes about not having children in both analysed countries. Attitudes towards having or not having children and their influence on the final number of children are a reflection of values such as individualism, happiness, love, freedom or equality. It is values, attitudes and behaviour patterns that force us to rethink the idea of motherhood and fatherhood as well as the forms of coexistence and family.

This article addresses the different positions on these issues by considering path dependency as well as key socio-demographic variables to examine how they fit into two different fertility models such as Spain and Poland.

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