

# **The future of fertility in Latin America: What can a comparison with Southern Europe contribute to understanding contemporary Latin American fertility change?**

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## **1. Introduction**

Fertility decline in developing countries and fertility decline in developed countries typically occupy two quite separate arenas in demographic research and literature. Whilst work in the former arena focuses on the determinants and trajectories of national or regional declines in total fertility rates from high or moderate levels to lower levels and towards replacement, that in the latter is generally more concerned with the patterns, causes and implications of *below* replacement fertility—in particular, with the rapid, pronounced and now prolonged fall to ‘lowest-low’ fertility in Southern and Eastern Europe and now also in East Asia. With the salience of a simplistic ‘developed/developing’ dichotomy becoming ever more questionable, however, it is worth asking ‘what next?’ for countries for which the relevance of the ‘rapid decline from high to moderate fertility’ perspective is now much diminished, but which have not yet made much of an appearance in the arena of ‘low fertility’ research and theorizing. If analysis of these countries’ fertility trajectories is to remain useful and relevant, it will require thinking beyond the existing dichotomies and perhaps exchanging ideas between the two perspectives.

One region in which there are many such countries occupying this middle ground, both economically and demographically speaking, is Latin America, (heterogeneous as its constituent countries are) where total fertility rates (TFRs) above three children per woman are now found in only four countries (Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia and Paraguay) and another four countries have TFRs below two children per woman (Cuba, Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2011). While levels and rates of change differ widely across the region, all Latin American countries have experienced – and continue to experience – declines in their total fertility, bringing many of them into or close to the realm of ‘low fertility’. Rather than closing the book on such countries, declaring their ‘demographic transitions’ to be over, this paper has as its point of departure the proposition that we must ask what trajectory fertility change will take next and, importantly, what its principal driving forces will be.

## **2. Research questions and theoretical basis**

There are strong cultural affinities between the Latin American countries and the Southern European countries, especially Spain and Italy, arising from their long-standing historical linkages. Religion is often the first such similarity to spring to mind, but hand-in-hand with this are similarities in values and attitudes relating to families,

relationships and gender roles. Since it is these very values and attitudes that are so often drawn upon in attempts to explain the very low fertility of Southern Europe (Dalla Zuanna, 2001; Dalla Zuanna & Micheli, 2005; Livi-Bacci, 2001; McDonald, 2000a, 2000b; Reher, 2004), a reasonable hypothesis might be that Latin American countries may in the future follow similar fertility trajectories to those of Southern Europe rather than taking paths resembling those of the other European countries, or of North America, for example. Hence, this aim of this paper is to investigate the degree of empirical support for (or, alternatively, evidence against) the hypothesis that the future of fertility in Latin America will resemble the current lowest-low fertility scenarios found in Southern Europe. The paper is part of a broader exploration of the questions “to what extent are the factors given as explanations for sustained very low fertility in Southern Europe also prevalent or emergent in Latin America?” and “what is the relevance of these characteristics for the future trajectories of fertility rates in Latin America?”.

In particular, the paper focuses on the concept of ‘familism’—drawing on the argument that a strong culturally-embedded sense of obligation to family, with sharply gender-delineated roles in family duties, when placed in a newly-emerging setting of increased gender equity in the public sphere (education, labour force participation), leads to postponement of and/or withdrawal from childbearing. This argument has often been applied to the Mediterranean case (e.g. by the authors cited in the previous paragraph), but here its applicability to Latin America is explored.

### **3. Data and Methods**

Data from the Latinobarómetro, Eurobarometer and World Values Surveys are analysed to investigate how values and attitudes indicative of ‘familism’ and associated aspects of religiosity, gender dynamics etc. are related to fertility outcomes (both timing and quantum) at the individual level. Specifically, do those women with higher scores on these dimensions have fewer children? Do they start childbearing later? Do they have lower probabilities of progressing to a second or subsequent child after having had a first child? (In the absence of a suitable dependent variable indicating the number of children ever borne by a survey respondent in the Latinobarómetro, values are modelled on the basis of similar data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, LAPOP).

Relationships between societal-level contextual variables linked to familism and national fertility outcomes are also examined. There is a wide diversity of such variables suggested by the literature on Southern Europe, including: the availability of rental housing or proportions owning their own homes; maternity and paternity provisions in labour law; proportions of women (and specifically women with young children) in the labour force; relative proportions of national welfare budgets assigned to youth versus to older people; proportions of welfare budgets assigned as direct transfers to families versus public services; measures of household division of labour amongst couples; proportions of young people living with parents, and the average age at leaving the parental home; proportions of young people, specifically unmarried young people, living with housemates, or living alone; proportions of older people living with their adult offspring; frequency of visits or other contact with kin; measures of trust in kin

and non-kin; measures of values indicative of so-called ‘post-materialism’ (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004; Van de Kaa, 2001). Clearly, reliable and comparable data are not available for all of these variables in many countries of Latin America, but where available their levels and trends are compared with those of Southern Europe. Similarly, a diversity of potential dependent variables arises from the theoretical background (not only period and cohort fertility measures, but also intermediate outcomes such as mean age at first marriage, proportions marrying, divorcing, having religious or civil wedding ceremonies, proportions cohabiting; proportions of all births taking place outside of marriage, etc.), but in practice the analysis is tightly limited by the availability of national data on each of these measures across the region.

#### **4. Preliminary Results and Discussion**

Early examinations of the data on both the national and individual levels suggest that the ‘paradoxical’ combination of strong family values with a retreat from family-building may well come to characterise some Latin American countries as social change in other spheres brings greater opportunities for women in roles beyond childbearing. Likely candidates for future low fertility include Uruguay, Cuba, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Costa Rica. This aligns with recent observations by Rosero-Bixby et al (2009) that the nature of fertility decline is changing across Latin America, with postponement and even childlessness becoming increasingly visible, especially amongst the most highly-educated.

Of course, merely finding that similar cultural characteristics exist and similar social changes are taking place in the two regions is not the same as saying that they will necessarily follow the same course – “societies’ own historical trajectories, different in each case, will also contribute to the specific contours of the present and the future” (Reher, 2004, p. 68). Contextual factors vary; politics, economics, history, religion, even geography and biology interact; chance and path dependency could lead to entirely different scenarios despite the presence of the same ‘inputs’. As Rosero-Bixby et al (2009) emphasize, for example, the significant socioeconomic inequality characteristic of many of the Latin American countries may well present a barrier that prevents value changes spreading through countries in the same way that they spread in Southern Europe. The prevalence of ‘familistic’ values and attitudes in conjunction with an increasing mismatch between levels of gender equity in the various spheres of life cannot, then, be interpreted as a fail-safe predictor of forthcoming very low fertility, but it does present a plausible hypothesis to be borne in mind when thinking about the demographic future of the region.

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