

# Population & Societies

## Unemployment delays parenthood in France

Version  
française

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Fertility seems to be less affected by the economic crisis in France than in most other developed countries. Is French fertility behaviour immune to the effects of unemployment? Analysing data from the ERFI survey (the French variant of the Generations and Gender Survey), which interviewed respondents three times between 2005 and 2011, Ariane Pailhé and Arnaud Loilier, show that unemployment does in fact influence fertility intentions and their realization.

Contrary to the situation in other European countries, French fertility seems to be largely unaffected by the current economic climate.[1, 2] The sharp rise in unemployment among the under-35s since the start of the crisis in 2008 [3] has not brought down the total fertility rate, which stood at 1.98 children per woman in metropolitan France in 2014, only marginally below its 2008 level (2.01). Does this mean that unemployment has no impact on childbearing behaviour? Using data from the French version of the European Generations and Gender Survey (known as ERFI), for which respondents were interviewed three times in 2005, 2008 and 2011 (Box), the influence of an unemployment spell on fertility can be analysed.

### Intentions are more often realized for a second child

Among persons of reproductive age in 2005, 30% said they would like to have a child in the next three years. This was more often the case for respondents who already had one child, among whom the proportion wanting a child was 51% (28% “in the next 3 years” and 23% “probably in the next 3 years”) versus 13% among parents of two children and 36% among childless persons (Figure 1). Some of the childless respondents did not live with a partner, had only recently formed a

union, were still students or didn't have a job. For people in these situations, the desire to become a parent is rarely an immediate one, and they have no definite plans for their future. Conversely, among parents of two or more children, some had already reached their desired family size, and 83% had no plans for more births in the future. In a country like France where the two-child family model is predominant, [4] it is no surprise that parents of one child have proportionally the strongest intentions to have another child in the near future. Repeat interviews with the same respondents made it possible to observe whether those who reported wanting a child in 2005 actually went on to do so in the following years. Fertility intentions are a good predictor of behaviour, especially among persons saying they do not want a child. For example, only 4% of the persons who reported in 2005 that they did not want a child in the future (sum of “No” and “Probably not” responses) actually conceived a child in the three following years, and the proportion had risen to 8% three years later. Among persons wishing to have a child, intentions were realized more frequently by those wanting a child “in the next 3 years”, with 50% of respondents in this

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category conceiving a child between 2005 and 2008, versus one-third of those whose desire was less definite (“Probably in the next 3 years”), and less than one-tenth of those who wanted a child, but “later”.

Taking account of the number of children already born when respondents expressed their wishes, parents of one child more frequently realized their intentions: 55% of those who answered “Yes, in the next 3 years” and 48% of those who answered “Yes, probably in the next 3 years” started a second pregnancy between 2005 and 2008. These proportions are 64% and 51%, respectively if the observation period is extended to 2011 (Figure 1). For parents who already had a child in 2005, most of the conditions for parenthood defined by couples (no longer in education, an independent dwelling, a stable relationship) had already been satisfied. So the second birth is more straightforward and less dependent on achieving the right conditions than the first. It depends more on other factors identified in other studies, [5] notably the preferred interval between births (slightly less than four years on average between the first two children).

### The childless unemployed are less likely to want a child...

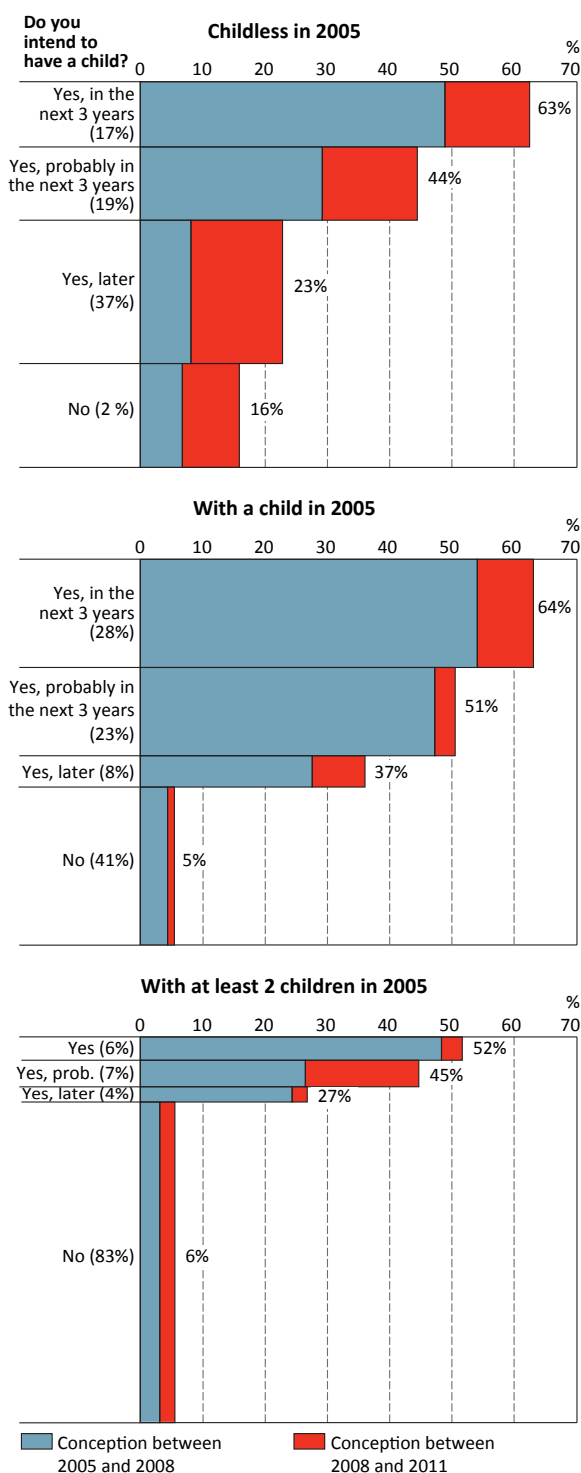
Among childless persons, those who are unemployed less frequently want a child in the near future than those who have a job: in 2005, 24% of unemployed men and 38% of unemployed women reported wanting a child within three years, versus 43% and 53%, respectively, among persons in employment (Figure 2). A smaller proportion of unemployed people live with a partner than people in work (14% of men and 33% of women, versus 38% and 45%, respectively). And for those in a couple, it is considered essential for at least one partner to have a stable job before starting a family.

For parents of one child, however, there is no significant difference between the unemployed and the employed. Respondents in this category were older, were generally already in a union, and the partner could earn income from work, thereby reducing uncertainty about the future. More generally, unemployment takes different forms at different periods of the life cycle: while childless unemployed people have more often never worked, those with children usually have work experience that entitles them to unemployment benefit and makes the future less insecure.

### ... and less frequently realize their intentions

After three or six years, people wishing to have a child less often start a pregnancy if they have been unemployed. A quarter of the men and women who were childless in 2005 who had never been unemployed<sup>(1)</sup> had started a

Figure 1. Proportion of persons who conceived a child between 2005 and 2011 by intentions expressed in 2005



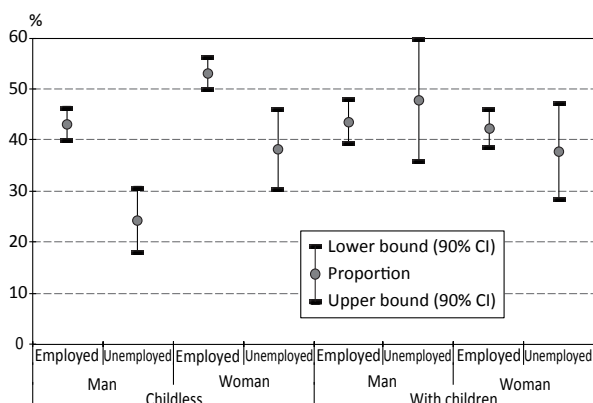
(A. Pailhé, A. Régner-Loillier, *Population & Societies* n° 528, INED, December 2015)

Source: INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1-3, 2005-2011.

Coverage: Persons of reproductive age in 2005 and who took part in all three waves.

Interpretation (example for “Childless in 2005”): The height of the bands gives the breakdown of childless persons by their intention to have a child in 2005 (17% want a child “in the next 3 years”); the width gives, according to reported intentions, the proportion of persons who conceived a child (49% of those wanting a child in the next 3 years had one between 2005 and 2008, 63% between 2005 and 2011).

**Figure 2. Proportion of persons reporting the intention to have a child in the next 3 years by employment status in 2005**



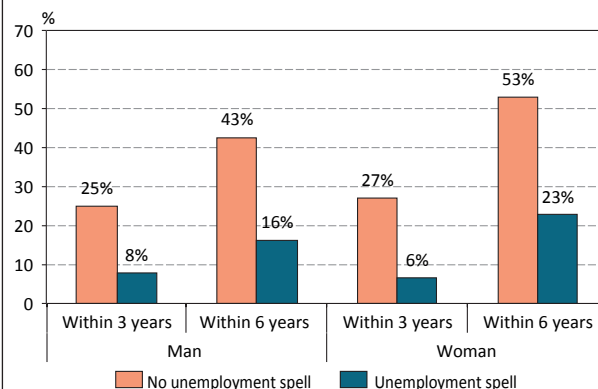
(A. Pailhé, A. Régnier-Lolier, *Population & Societies* n° 528, INED, December 2015)

**Source:** INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1, 2005.

**Coverage:** Economically active persons (in employment or not) of reproductive age in 2005.

**Interpretation:** 43% of men with a job in 2005 wanted a child in the next 3 years (sum of “yes” and “yes, probably” responses).

**Figure 3. Proportion of childless men and women who started a pregnancy by unemployment history**



(A. Pailhé, A. Régnier-Lolier, *Population & Societies* n° 528, INED, December 2015)

**Source:** INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1-3, 2005-2011.

**Coverage:** Childless persons in 2005 who reported wanting a child.

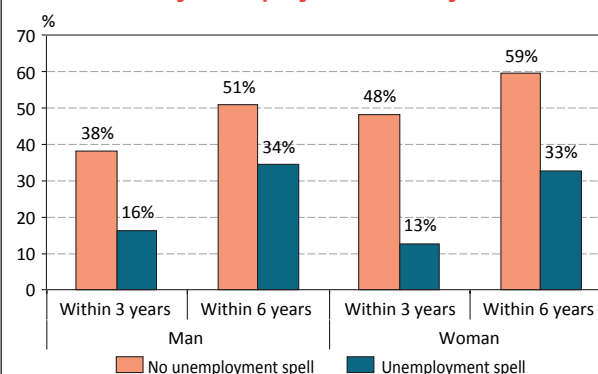
**Interpretation:** Among men who wanted a first child in 2005, and who experienced unemployment between 2005 and 2008, 8% conceived a child (after being unemployed) (Kaplan-Meier estimation method).

first pregnancy three years later, versus just 8% of men and 6% of women with experience of one or more unemployment spells (Figure 3). After six years, the proportions were 43% and 16%, respectively, for men, and 53% and 23% for women.

However, starting a family does not depend exclusively on employment status, but on a range of factors such as age, conjugal status, level of education, religious practice, migration background or strength of desire to have a child. Once all these factors have been taken into account,<sup>(2)</sup> the link between unemployment experience and fertility timing is confirmed for women. For men, the effect of unemployment is indirect: unemployed men’s lower propensity to have a child is explained by their delayed entry into union, a stable relationship being a precondition for starting a family. A steady job and income make it possible to set up home with one’s partner. Being unemployed has less effect on union formation for women, showing that the male breadwinner model is still a reality.

People who already had a child in 2005 are more likely to have another child than childless people, although employment status still has a strong effect: 51% of men and 59% of women who had never been unemployed had had a second pregnancy six years later, versus one-third of men and women with experience of unemployment (Figure 4). But once all the above-

**Figure 4. Proportion of men and women with children who started a pregnancy by unemployment history**



(A. Pailhé, A. Régnier-Lolier, *Population & Societies* n° 528, INED, December 2015)

**Source:** INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1-3, 2005-2011.

**Coverage:** Persons with a child(ren) who reported wanting a child in 2005.

**Interpretation:** 38% of fathers with no spells of unemployment who reported wanting a child in 2005 went on to have a child within 3 years (Kaplan-Meier estimation method).

mentioned factors affecting fertility are taken into account, the effect of unemployment on the birth of another child (most often the second) is no longer significant, for either men or women. Here, the rationale is very different. Having a second child is very frequent in France (the ideal family has at least two children) and the decision depends mainly (but not solely) on the desired spacing between births. Moreover, the birth of a second child is also highly dependent on the mother’s age, not only because fecundity decreases with age, but also because of strong social norms about the “right age” for having children.

(1) Or, if they have had a child, after this child was conceived.

(2) Model of the monthly probability of starting a pregnancy over the six observation years (Cox model; results not shown here). See [6] for further details.

### The “Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles” survey (ERFI)

The ERFI survey, the French component of the Generations and Gender programme, was conducted by INED and INSEE in metropolitan France between 2005 and 2011. A total of 10,079 men and women aged 18-79 were interviewed at the end of 2005, then contacted again three and six years later (end of 2008 and end of 2011). Out of this total, 6,879 persons took part in at least one other survey wave (wave 2 and/or wave 3). It was thus possible to study the influence of an unemployment spell since the first interview on the realization of their fertility intentions.

Only persons still of reproductive age (i.e. aged below 45 at the time of the first survey wave) are taken into account here. As well as collecting descriptive information (sex, age, conjugal status, employment status, etc.), the questionnaire administered in the first wave (2005) included two main questions on fertility intentions: “We are going to talk about your fertility intentions. Do you want to have a child in the next three years? No / probably not / Yes, probably / Yes / Don’t know” and if “No” or “Probably not”, “Do you nevertheless intend to adopt or have a child later? No / probably not / Yes, probably / Yes / Don’t know”. On the basis of these questions, four main situations are considered:

- the person intends to have a child within three years (answered “Yes” to the first question);
- the person probably intends to have a child within three years (answered “Yes, probably” to the first question);
- the person intends to have a child later (answered “Yes” or “Yes, probably” or “Don’t know” to the first question);
- the person does not wish to have a child either now or in the future (answered “No” or “Probably not” to the second question).

The data collected in 2008 and 2011 enable us to see both whether the respondents had experienced one or more unemployment spells since 2005 (and to date them) and to know whether they had had a child (and at what date). The partner’s employment history is not known, however, so the effects of unemployment experienced by one or other partner cannot be studied.

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### The long-term effects of the crisis are limited

The current context of economic crisis raises the question of the long-term effect of unemployment on fertility. As already observed under more favourable economic conditions in the early 2000s, unemployed people are less likely to become parents. [7] Studies

conducted in earlier periods show that the fertility decline observed at times of high unemployment is temporary, and often followed by an upturn in births when the economic situation improves.[8] Moreover, as yet, unemployment does not seem to affect the childbearing plans of persons who already have a child. In a country where the two-child model is strongly anchored, and where welfare policies limit the financial risks of parenthood, the effect of unemployment on completed fertility is probably quite limited.

#### References

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#### Abstract

Men and women less frequently report wanting a first child in the near future if they are unemployed. Moreover, for those who do want to become parents, experience of unemployment delays the first birth. This postponement can be explained by delayed union formation for men, and by the desire to find a stable job for women. By contrast, unemployment does not affect the childbearing plans of persons who are already parents.



# Population & Societies

## Allez les filles, au travail !\*

Valeria Solesin\*\*

A sociologist and demographer, Valeria Solesin was a PhD student at the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and at the Institut de Démographie of Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (IDUP). Funded by the Caisse nationale des allocations familiales (CNAF), her doctoral research focused on the transition from first to second child in France and Italy. Valeria Solesin was killed in the Paris terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015. In tribute to Valeria, and as an expression of our sympathy to her family and colleagues, her first article, published in Neodemos<sup>(1)</sup> in 2013, is reproduced here.

Female labour force participation in Europe has been promoted since the 1990s via the European Employment Strategy (EES). The European Union aims to encourage women to remain in employment throughout the life cycle, especially during periods when they are considered to be at risk, such as in early motherhood. While the number of women in the labour force has increased greatly in the European Union, there are still major disparities between countries. All the countries of northern Europe have high female employment rates combined with consistently high fertility. By contrast, the countries of southern Europe are characterized by low female employment rates and low fertility (OECD, 2011).

This contrast is also visible between France and Italy. In 2011 the labour force participation rate of women aged 20-64 was 65% in France, versus 50% in Italy, while the total fertility rate stood at 2 children per woman in France, and barely 1.4 in Italy. (ISTAT, 2012).

Yet these two countries have quite similar demographic profiles, with a population of around 60 million (not counting the French overseas territories) and a comparable life expectancy at birth. They also share a number of cultural traits, such as the Catholic religion,

and geographical features, with 515 km of shared borders. Last, the two countries' labour markets also have certain similarities. Both are quite rigid, although in Italy it is workers in the "traditional" sectors of economic activity (such as industry) who enjoy the greatest protection.

In the light of this information, how can we explain the large disparities in terms of fertility and female employment between these two European neighbours? Perhaps the traditional gender division of roles persists more strongly in Italy than in France.

### Who should work? Opinions in France and Italy

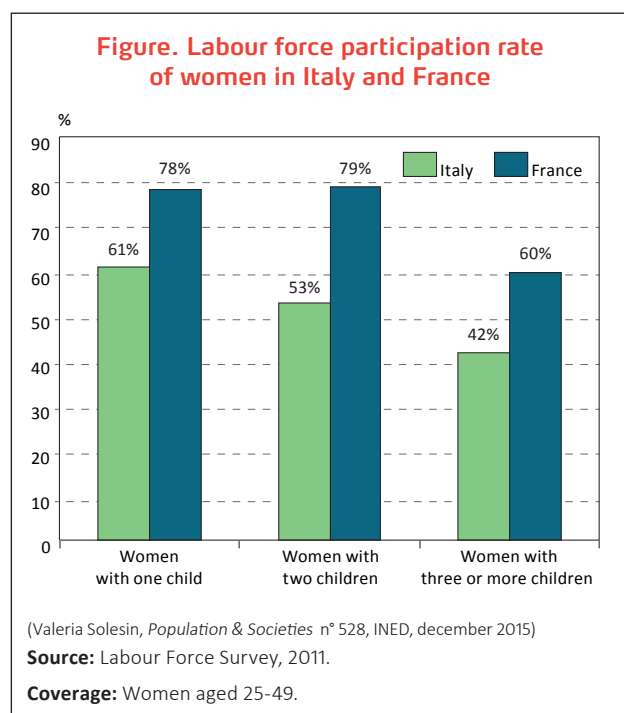
Data from the 2008 European Values Study reveal sharply contrasting opinions on women's labour force participation in France and Italy. In response to the affirmation that "A pre-school child is likely to suffer if

\* "Go to work girls!" Title in French in the original Italian version.

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(1) Neodemos (<http://www.neodemos.info/allez-les-filles-autravail-2/>). The article has also been republished in N-IUSSP (<http://www.niussp.org/2015/11/18/allez-les-filles-au-travail/>).





his or her mother works”, 76% of Italian women “strongly agree” or “agree”, versus just 41% of French women. Moreover, in response to the statement “A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work” Italians reveal a more traditional attitude than their trans-Alpine neighbours. Just 19% “strongly agree”, compared with 61% among French men and women.

So Italians still tend to consider that women with preschool children should not go out to work. In France, on the other hand, women are encouraged to work at all stages of the life cycle, even when they have small children. This suggests that in Italy, women’s labour force participation may depend more strongly than in France on the ages of their children and their number.

### Who are the working women in France and in Italy?

According to data from the 2011 Labour Force Survey conducted in both countries, the employment rate of childless women is always higher than that of women with children. In Italy, there are large contrasts, since at

ages 15-49, 76% of childless women are in employment, versus 55% of mothers. In France, the percentages are 81% and 74%, respectively.

Moreover, women’s labour force participation in Italy decreases as the number of children increases. In France, on the other hand, it varies very little when there are one or two children in the household. In both countries, however, having three children or more is a serious obstacle to women’s employment. In Italy, at ages 25-49, only 42% of women with three or more children are in work, versus 60% in France.

While Italians tend to think that young mothers should not work, the employment rate of women with preschool children (55%) is quite similar to that of women with no children below age six (61%). In France, by contrast, while women’s employment is largely supported throughout the life cycle, their employment rate falls sharply when they have young children (66% for women with one or more children below age 6, versus 80% for those with no preschool children). This is linked to that fact that France has implemented measures to reconcile work and family life which enable women (and men) to take parental leave to look after small children.

### In conclusion

At a time when women’s employment is being encouraged in Europe, it is important to take account of the impact of childbearing on their labour force participation. Italy is aiming to reach the target of 60% female labour force participation laid down by the Treaty of Lisbon. In France, a country with a better record in this area, women’s employment still depends on the number of children in the household and their age. For this reason, a more equal gender division of paid employment and of household tasks should be encouraged in both countries.

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