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Family policies in the contexts of lowest-low fertility: what can be learned from the European experience?

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Abstract

There is now no doubt that declining fertility can reach levels well below the replacement level— specialized literature considers lowest-low fertility levels of 1.3 children per woman or less, as already observed in several developed countries. What is not yet clear is how low the level of fertility can reach and whether this freefall will spread to developing countries.

In Europe, the predominant patterns were reversed in the last century and now the lower fertility occurs in the countries of the South and the East. The case of Spain is paradigmatic since it decreased from 2.8 children per woman in the 1970s, well above the European average of that time (2.1), to 1.15 children per woman in 1998, the lowest level in the world at that time.

Several studies have shown how this lowest-low fertility is linked to the increasing precariousness of work among young people (and not so young), the scarce public support for childrearing responsibilities, the difficulties of reconciling work, personal and family life, and persistent gender inequality in care work.

It is worth mentioning that this issue is very much on the global agenda. According to the population-based policies survey carried out periodically by the United Nations Population Division, 28 per cent of the world's countries and 62 per cent of countries with a fertility rate below replacement level have adopted policies aimed at increasing fertility rates.

However, experience with these policies reveals that there are no "magic recipes" to encourage fertility or to reduce the economic, social, and institutional barriers that impede the achievement of the reproductive preferences of individuals and couples.

That is why we can learn from the experience of other countries. While assessing concrete political effectiveness about fertility level is a complex task - it is difficult to isolate the effect of a specific policy from other related policies and other conditioning factors - and that not all policies are transferable from one context to another, we can learn some lessons or at least get involved in an informed debate.

Faced with this potential challenge, and bearing in mind the rapid decline of fertility in Latin America, it is convenient to ask ourselves what we can learn from European experience, as well as the limits of this experience, particularly in terms of its replication possibilities in the region.

In this sense, this presentation will review in greater detail the historical implementation of policies to increase fertility in different countries of Europe.

Although it is complex to establish a direct causal relationship between policies to support families and the level of fertility or to quantify their specific impact, due to the multiplicity of factors conditioning reproductive decisions, based on the experience of European countries that have succeeded in stabilizing their fertility rate around replacement level, in this presentation we will focus on some public policies that would potentially facilitate people to achieve their reproductive aspirations, such as:

- a) Facilitate economic and residential emancipation of young adults through active employment policies, work stabilization and housing access.
- b) Universal access to assisted reproductive health treatments in public health (in Spain, 8.6% of children born in 2015 did so with the aid of assisted reproduction techniques).
- c) Maternity and paternity leave: progress towards equality.
- d) Protection of working mothers (and fathers): in addition to legal protection.
- e) Adaptation of family legislation and public policies to the multiple family forms
- f) Universal access to quality schools for children.
- g) Policies that promote conciliation - avoiding only women and fully incorporating men - and more flexible organization of working time.
- h) Policies that promote gender equity in the public and family spheres, as well as co-responsibility in care.

In sum, policies that contribute to a more equitable redistribution of public and private responsibility for childrearing and that consider resources deployed to that end not as expenses but as investment in the future.