

Policy Brief

The Recent Evolution of Fertility in Morocco: Change in Continuity

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PB - 13/24

This article aims at studying the changes in fertility rates in Morocco over time using available data from censuses and surveys conducted by High Commission for Planning (HCP), Ministry of Health, and National Observatory for Human Development (ONDH). Since 2010, fertility has shown a kind of stagnation or even a slight increase. This trend is more pronounced in urban areas, where the fertility rate for urban women was 1.8 children per woman in 2010, rose to 2.2 children per woman in 2019. In rural areas, fertility continued to decline until 2014, reaching 2.5 children per woman. It slightly increased to 2.7 children per woman in 2019.

This resurgence decreases in the age of first marriage among women. We observe decrease among both educated and less educated women, as well as among those living in urban and rural areas, with a contraceptive prevalence rate close to 70%. According to the latest available data, this new trend is one of the determining factors of fertility. Age at first marriage, has influenced couples' reproductive behavior, leading to a slight increase in fertility. Interestingly, this resurgence in fertility coincides with an expansion of girls' education, which, however, faces barriers to women's access to economic activities outside the family sphere. This situation could be the reason for the decrease in the age at first marriage and, consequently, the observed increase in fertility.

While it is too early to definitively determine whether this trend is permanent or temporary, it is certain that the current social and cultural norms of the Moroccan family institution, as well as the economic and social conditions of couples, are far from conducive to relatively high fertility. Based on the 2018 survey on population and family health, analyzing the ideal number of children desired by non-single women and their daughters, indicates an average desired number of children around 2.5 per woman.

This reversal of fertility trends is not unique to Morocco. It is observed in other Arab countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia. However, the resurgence of this phenomenon remains relatively moderate in Morocco compared to Algeria and Egypt, for instance.

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INTRODUCTION

Analyzing the total fertility rate, an indicator of fertility measurement, over time since 1960, allows us to distinguish two periods of change in the reproductive behavior of Moroccan women. The first period, from 1960 to 2010, is marked by a "classical" pattern of fertility decline, because of the economic, social, and cultural transformations the country experienced throughout this period. The second period, from 2010 to the present, shows various indicators suggesting a slight rebound in the fertility of Moroccan couples, accompanied by a decrease in the age of first marriage among women, despite the country's economic, social, and cultural progress. This reversal of fertility trends is observed in other Arab countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia.

This article aims to shed light on the resurgence of the demographic variable, one of the main components of population growth. This variable remains influenced by public population policies and constitutes a key element for age structure projections of the population. These demographic structures are at the heart of various public policies in multiple domains: health, housing, employment, education, social protection, growth, urbanization, migration, environment, etc.

The article uses data primarily from two sources: censuses and surveys. The censuses in question are conducted in 1982, 1994, 2004, and 2014. Surveys include the National Demographic Survey, conducted repeatedly by the High Commission for Planning between 2009 and 2010, the Household Panel Survey by the National Observatory for Human Development in 2019, and numerous surveys by the Ministry of Health. These include the 1961-63 Multi-Purpose Survey, the 1979 National Fertility and Family Planning Survey, the 1983-1984 National Contraceptive Prevalence Survey, the 1987 National Population and Health Survey, the 1992 and 1995 Population and Health Panel Surveys, the 1997 National Maternal and Child Health Survey, and the 2003-2004, 2011, and 2018 Population and Family Health Surveys.

1. From 1960 to 2010: A Classical Pattern of Fertility Decline

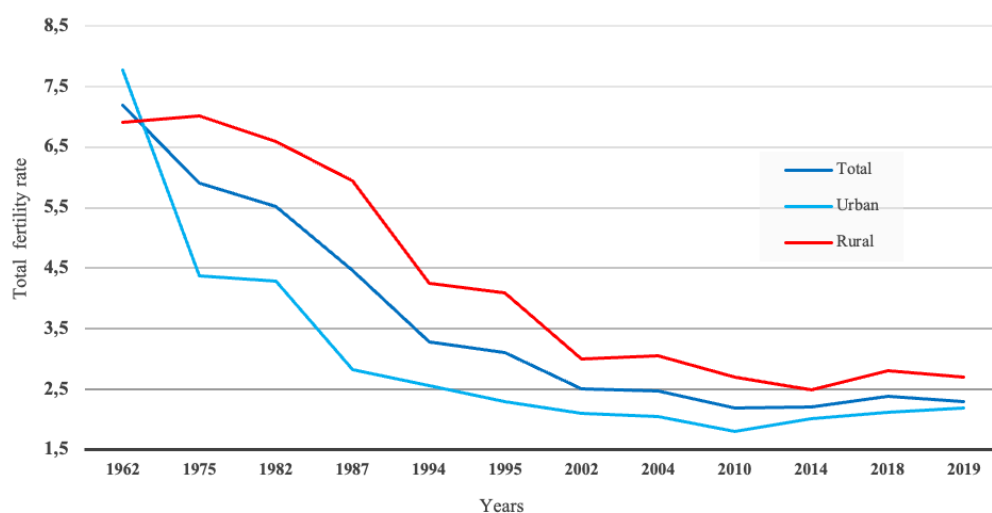
Over half a century ago, having many children was deeply ingrained in the social and cultural norms of the Moroccan family institution. The women of that era were predominantly illiterate, with their illiteracy rate being among the highest in the world. Ninety-six percent of women could neither read nor write (88% in urban areas compared to 99% in rural areas). Very few women were engaged in economic activities outside their homes. In this context, the role of women was primarily limited to reproductive activities and child-rearing (Ajbilou, 1995, CERED 2006a). Adolescent marriage was widespread. Once the first marriage was consummated, the behavior of young couples was not conducive to limiting the number of children or spacing births. Indeed, a very small proportion of women used modern contraceptive methods (no more than 8%). As a result, the total fertility rate was around 7 children per woman. This very high level indicated a reproductive behavior favorable to very high fertility.

It was not until 1970s and 1980s that the first signs of fertility decline in Morocco were recorded (Y. Courbage 1996, 2017). This decline marked the onset of the second phase of

the demographic transition,⁴ characterized by a continuous decrease in mortality, followed by the onset of fertility reduction. This reduction was a consequence of the economic, social, and cultural changes that the country experienced, which prompted Moroccan women to change their reproductive behavior (Courbage, 1996). Over the years, this change resulted in a decline in fertility rates, both in urban and rural areas.

Figure 1

Evolution of the Total Fertility Rate by Place of Residence Morocco, 1962-2019



Sources : Surveys (1962, 1975, 1987, 1995, 2002, 2010, 2018, 2019) and Censuses (1982, 1994, 2004, 2014)

The recorded reduction accelerated to the point that Repeated Demographic Survey, conducted between 2009 and 2010, and revealed that Moroccan women were having no more than 2.2 children per woman. This level is close to the generational replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman (Figure 1). The decline is particularly pronounced in urban areas. With 1.8 children per woman during this survey, urban women opted for a fertility level below the generational replacement level.

Moreover, the gap between rural and urban areas has been narrowing over the years. The average number of children per woman in rural areas was about 2.7. To catch up with the level reached in urban areas, rural fertility continued to decline, reaching 2.5 children per woman in 2014. This change in the reproductive behavior of Moroccan women is indeed the result of public authorities' commitment to controlling the demographic variable, which is considered an obstacle to the country's economic and social development. The economic and social development plans that succeeded each other from the 1960s to the

4. Demographic transition refers to the process of change over time experienced by a given population in terms of mortality and fertility phenomena. Approached through crude mortality and fertility rates, this change is characterized by the shift from a demographic regime, described as traditional, with high crude mortality and fertility rates, to another regime characterized by low levels for both demographic phenomena. In this process of demographic change, three main phases can be distinguished: "In the first phase: while fertility hardly varies, mortality declines, leading to a significant increase in the population. In the second phase, the fertility rate in turn declines, while the mortality decline continues: the population still increases, but at a slower pace. Finally, in the third phase, there is a balance between fertility and mortality, but at a low level; the population hardly increases anymore," comments D. Tabutin (1980).

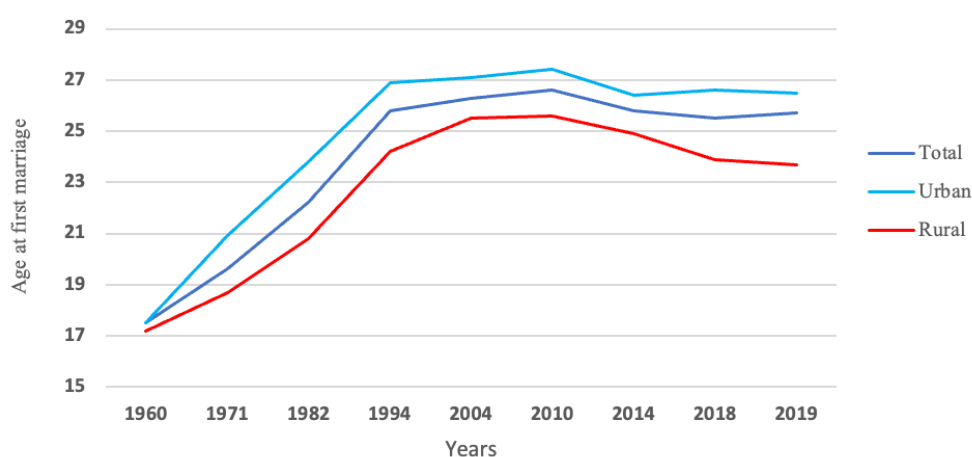
1990s certainly emphasized the consequences of high population growth on various socio-economic variables. Measures were put in place to enable women to regulate their fertility. The family planning program implemented during the 1960s, reinforced by measures taken within the framework of maternal and child health towards the end of 1980s. Morocco's commitment to the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, made reproductive health one of the priority issues of public population policies (CERED, 2004). This commitment made Morocco one of the pioneers in disseminating birth control programs (B. Gastineau and A. Adjamagbo, 2014).

These programs along with the increasing expansion of education, gradual integration of women into economic system, improvement in living standards, development of the middle class, and urbanization as a process of spreading a value system and attitudes that constitute urban life to some extent, have contributed to varying degrees to the change in the reproductive behavior of Moroccan women throughout the period between 1960 to 2010 (CERED, 2006a, Y. Courbage, 2017).

With these factors, the family institution, as a space for socialization and the transmission of norms, ways of thinking, and acting, is increasingly weakened. The power dynamics between generations are disrupted, leading to new social relationships. Entering married life is increasingly becoming a matter for couples to decide rather than families (Ajbilou, 1998). As a result, young people, both girls and boys, especially those who extend their studies to higher education, are questioning early marriage and extending their singlehood to an older age.

Figure 2

Evolution of the Age at First Marriage of Women, Morocco 1960-2019



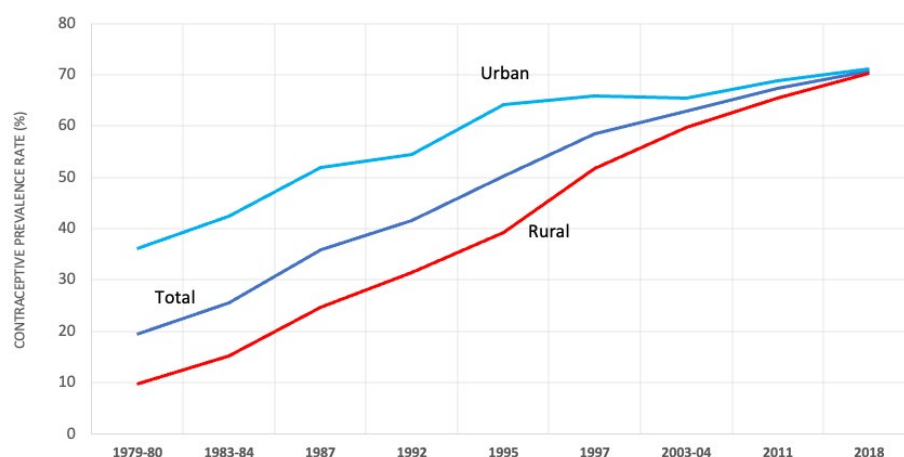
Sources : Censuses (1960, 1971, 1982, 1994, 2004, 2014) et Surveys (2010, 2018, 2019)

Throughout the period from 1960 to 2010, the age at first marriage steadily increased. As illustrated in Figure 2, the age at first marriage rose from 17.5 years in 1960 to nearly 26.6 years in 2010 for females, and from 24.4 years in 1960 to 31.4 years in 2010 for males. This increase in the age at first marriage, indicating a rise in celibacy among young women aged 15 to 29, significantly contributed to the reduction in fertility during the period from 1960 to 2010 (Ajbilou, 1991, 1995). According to Ajbilou and Duchêne (1995), delaying

the establishment of a family by young couples explained nearly two-thirds of the decline in fertility during the 1970s and 1980s. This shift was supplemented by an increase in contraceptive use, which intensified both in urban and rural areas. The contraceptive prevalence rate approached 70% in 2018 in both settings (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Evolution of Contraceptive Prevalence in Morocco, 1979-2018



Sources: Various surveys conducted on the dates indicated on the graph

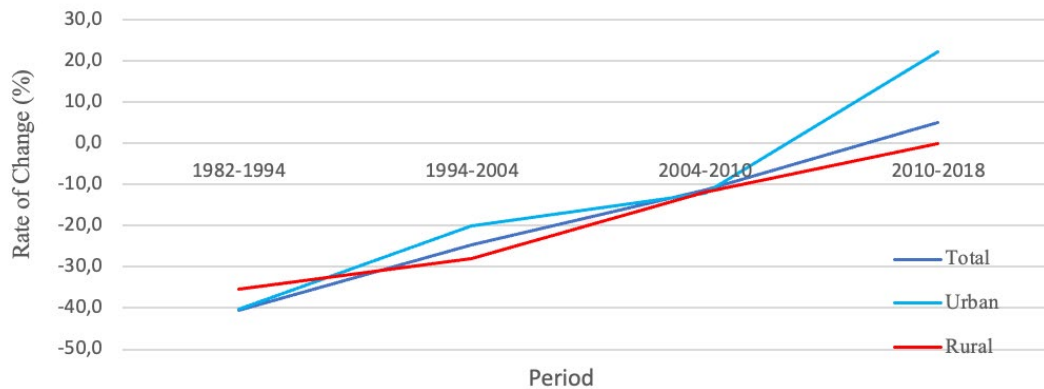
All these factors significantly contributed to creating a favorable context for reducing fertility during the period from 1960 to 2010. This context initially suggested a continuation of declining fertility, fitting perfectly within the framework of the classical pattern marking Morocco's progression through various phases of demographic transition. However, this trend changed after 2010, when reversed trends observed in both fertility and the age at first marriage.

2. From 2010 to the Present: Slight Rebound in Fertility, Accompanied by a Decrease in Age at First Marriage

Since 2010, fertility among Moroccan women appears to show a trend towards a slight rebound. The total fertility rate indicates a slight increase in the number of children born to Moroccan women, rising from 2.2 children per woman in the repeated demographic survey conducted in 2009, to 2.4 children per woman in the Ministry of Health's survey on health and family conducted in 2018, and then to 2.3 children per woman in 2019, according to the household panel survey conducted by the National Observatory for Human Development. This trend appears to be more pronounced in urban areas, as urban fertility, which had reached replacement level during the 2004 census, fell below this level to 1.8 children per woman in 2010. It then increased during the 2014 census. This increase was confirmed by the Ministry of Health's survey on health and family in 2018, and by the 2019 household panel survey (see Figures 1 and 4). According to the latter survey, the total fertility rate reached 2.3 children per woman (2.7 in rural areas and 2.2 in urban areas).

Figure 4

Rate of Change in the Total Fertility Rate by Period (in %)

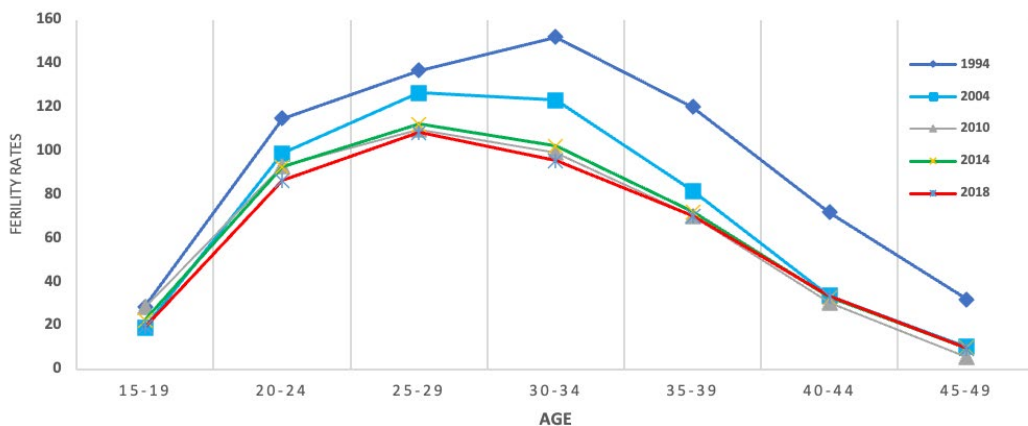


Sources : Claculated by autors

Considering the fertility structure by age group, Figure 5 confirms the fertility trends described above. There was a rapid and continuous decline in fertility rates across all age groups before 2010, followed by stagnation or occasional increases after 2010. Fertility rates by age began to show a slight increase in 2014, which was further confirmed by the survey conducted in 2018, particularly for women over 35 years old.

Figure 5

Evolution of fertility rates by age



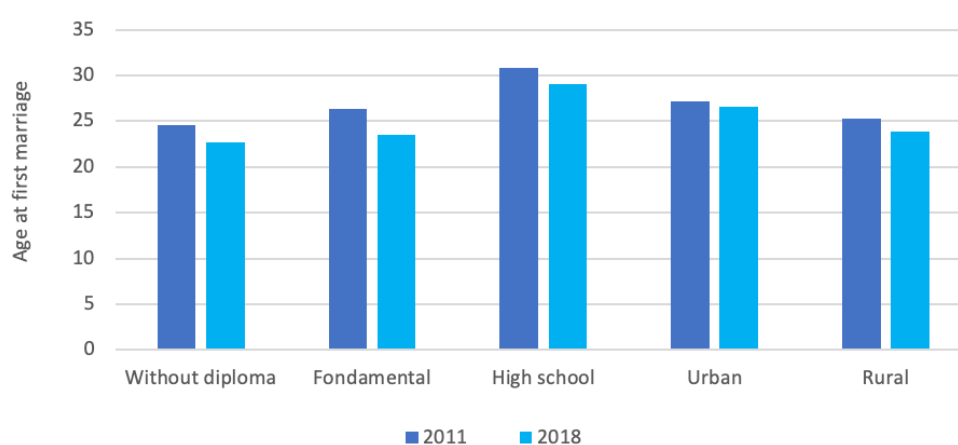
Sources: Censuses (1994, 2004, 2014), Repeated Demographic Survey (2009-2010), and Family Health Survey (2018).

Alongside this new trend in fertility among Moroccan couples, there is a noticeable and unexpected decrease in the age at first marriage, particularly among girls. Examining Figures 2 and 6, we observe a clear reduction in the age at first marriage for women since 2004. This decline is evident among both educated and less educated women, and among those living in rural as well as urban areas. The decrease could reach 2.9 years for women with a basic education level and 1.4 years for rural girls between 2011 and 2018.

With contraceptive use reaching around 70% nationally, this new trend in one of the key determinants of fertility, which is the age at first marriage, has undoubtedly influenced the reproductive behavior of couples towards increasing their fertility. This leads to a new trend in fertility, diverging from the classical pattern of decline experienced throughout the period from 1960 to 2010. This trend should draw attention from population specialists, given the impact of fertility trends on age structures of the population and their role in economic and social policies.

Figure 6

Evolution of Age at First Marriage, between 2011 and 2018, by Educational Level and Place of Residence



Sources: National Survey on Population and Family Health (2011, 2018).

It should be noted that demographic projections for the period 2014-2050, based on data from the 2014 census, are built on assumptions foreseeing a continued decline in fertility. The replacement level of generations was projected to reach around the year 2020, according to HCP (2017). However, initial signs of this replacement rate were already detected during the general population and housing census conducted in 2004.

3. A relatively moderate recovery compared to that observed in other Arab countries

The trend of fertility recovery over the past decade is not unique to Moroccan women. In recent years, other Arab countries have also experienced a significant increase in their total fertility rates (Y. Courbage, 2015). These countries include Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia.

Regarding Egypt, Courbage (2015) emphasizes a demographic reversal where fertility steadily declined until 2000 to reach 3 children per woman, followed by a notable increase, around 3.5 children per woman by 2014. This increase was observed across all population groups (A. Goujon and Z. Al Zalak, 2018). It affected women living in both urban and rural areas, those with higher education as well as those with less education, and both poor and wealthy women. The authors also noted that women are becoming mothers at younger ages. "The fertility rate increased between 2008 and 2014 at all ages, but especially among

those aged 20-24, who had the highest fertility rate in 2014, and among those aged 25-29. This is surprising because, with demographic transition, the peak fertility age in a country tends to shift to later ages. With the current pattern, an Egyptian woman would already have 2.7 children by age 32, which is more than three-quarters of the children she would have in her lifetime," consider A. Goujon and Z. Al Zalak (2018).

In Algeria, due to the absence of any form of birth control, fertility peaked in the early 1970s at 8 children per woman. The total fertility rate saw a sharp decline to reach 2.5 children per woman by 2002. However, this level did not last long, as there was a notable increase to 3 children per woman by 2019. This fertility rate places Algeria, like Egypt, significantly higher than the level reached by Morocco in 2018.

Tunisia, on the other hand, experienced a rapid decline in fertility from 7 children per woman in 1966 to 2.05 in 2001, reflecting significant changes in reproductive behavior in the country. The total fertility rate then recorded a slight increase, stabilizing at 2.2 children per woman by 2018.

It is noteworthy that the fertility transition pattern in Tunisia remains similar to that in Morocco. Egypt and Algeria, however, have a unique fertility transition pattern: an increase in the average number of children per woman before even reaching or falling below replacement level (Zahia Ouadah-Bedidi, Jacques Vallin, Ibtihel Bouchoucha, 2012).

4. A rebound in fertility amidst challenges in women's access to the labor market

Alongside these new fertility trends and changes in the age at first marriage, access to education for girls continues to grow each year. Described as a silent revolution by Marie-France Lange (2018), this expansion of education among girls spans all levels: primary, secondary, and higher education. Focusing on higher education, data from the Ministry of Higher Education for the academic year 2022-2023 indicate that female participation in university studies exceeds that of males, with a feminization rate of 53.6%. This rate specifically is 54.1% for undergraduate programs and 51.7% for Master's programs. By field of study, feminization rates vary from 51.2% for Legal and Economic Sciences to 69.3% for Education Sciences. It stands at 51.4% for Engineering Sciences, 55.1% for Humanities, 56.1% for Dental Medicine, and 58.1% for Science and Technology.

In terms of graduates, women outperform men, with the feminization rate of graduates reaching 57.0% during the academic year 2021/2022 across all fields of study. This rate was only 49% during the academic year 2007-2008. By field, some rates have seen significant changes between 2007/2008 and 2021/2022. For instance, the feminization rate in Science and Technology rose to 60.9% in 2021/2022 from 45.2% in 2007/2008. In Commerce and Management, the feminization rate increased from 64.5% to 67.5%. In Legal and Economic Sciences, women are increasingly prevalent with 56.3% in 2021/2022 compared to 51% in 2007/2008. This indicates that women are choosing to pursue higher education to obtain a degree for employment opportunities.

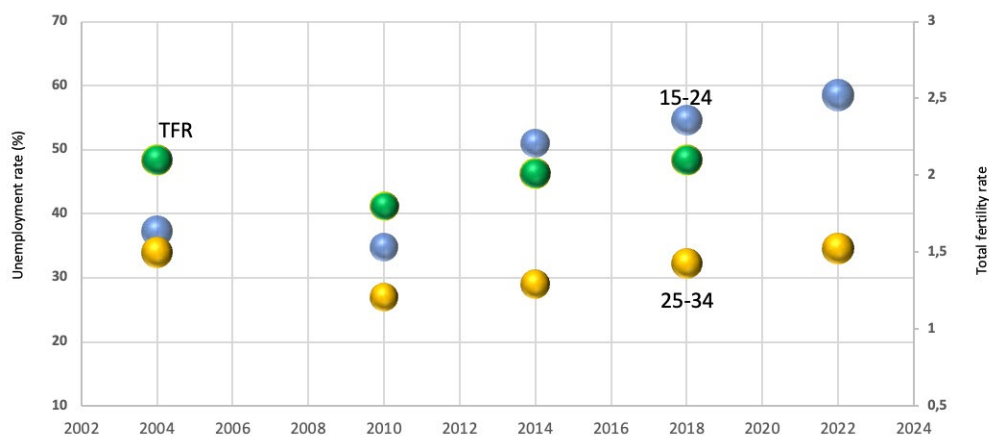
Nobody can deny the positive impact of the human capital of young girls on strengthening their status in society and, consequently, on their marital and reproductive behaviors. Education, despite being a lever for acquiring knowledge and playing a role in societal transformation, remains insufficient for the development of autonomy and independence

among Moroccan women. It is primarily their participation in the workforce, combined with the knowledge gained through expanded education, which influences their reproductive behavior towards opting for reduced fertility. We see this impact through the age at first marriage, age at first birth, and the use of contraception. A young girl engaged in economic activity outside the family sphere has more opportunities for contact with the outside world. Leaving the family sphere provides her with more independence and autonomy, leading to rational attitudes regarding her offspring and family planning (Ajbilou, 1995).

However, if Moroccan young women increasingly assert themselves by choosing to continue their studies as long as possible to secure a degree ensuring employment in the labor market and thus financial independence, public employment programs offer them fewer opportunities compared to boys. The return on investment in education for young girls, in terms of employment, faces obstacles they encounter in integrating into work outside the family sphere. Data from employment surveys conducted by the High Commission for Planning (HCP) since 2010 clearly illustrate one aspect of these difficulties (HCP, 2023). Women participate significantly less than men in economic activities and are more exposed to unemployment for extended periods (Ibourk, A. et al., Ghazi, T., 2020). Their unemployment rate continues to rise, especially among graduates over the past decade. In urban areas, it increased from 25.1% in 2010 to 33.7% in 2022. Unemployment affects young girls aged 15-24 even more, both in urban and rural areas. The unemployment rate for girls in this age group increased from 34.8% in 2010 to 58.5% in urban areas in 2022, and from 5% to 18% in rural areas. In 2022, rural girls with higher education diplomas are more exposed to unemployment than their urban counterparts, with rates of 52.4% compared to 33.8% respectively. Figure 7 shows the evolution of the unemployment rate among women aged 15-24 and 25-34 between 2004 and 2022, in relation to the synthetic fertility index. The trend in fertility evolution in relation to the unemployment rate appears to be confirmed, as difficulties in accessing the labor market among young girls, educated or not, especially in the age groups of 15-24 and 25-34, could contribute to a decline in the age at first marriage and consequently to a resurgence in fertility. A young graduate facing unemployment may therefore choose early marriage and potentially have children at a young age.

Figure 7

Evolution of the unemployment rate (%) among women aged 15-24 years and 25-34 years and the total fertility rate, urban area.



Sources: Employment surveys (2004, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2022), Repeated cross-sectional surveys (2009-2010), Population and health survey (2018), Household panel survey (2019))

This is also the case for young people who are neither in school, employment, nor training, referred to as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), who accounted for 26% in 2021. This phenomenon affects girls more than boys (38.8% for girls compared to 13.6% for boys). Due to lack of contact with the workplace, being in the NEET status indeed signifies a decreased employability and consequently exposes individuals to long-term unemployment, particularly among girls (Ibourk, A. and El Aynaoui, 2022). Therefore, they may consider marriage and having children even before securing employment.

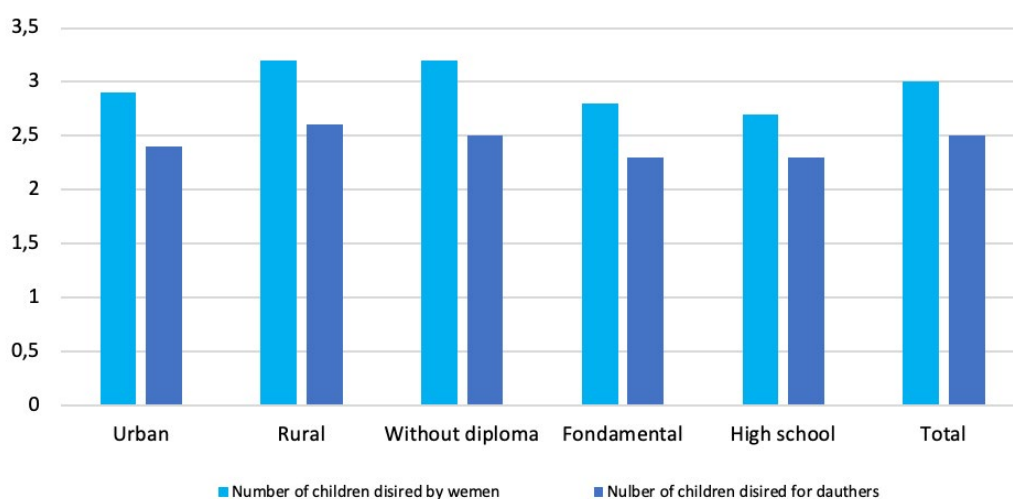
This explanation has also been put forward for cases in Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia. The resurgence in fertility rates is linked to economic conditions and the challenges women face in accessing the labor market, as emphasized by Z. Ouadah-Bedidi et al. (2012). Educated young women do not hesitate to start their families while waiting to secure employment, according to A. Goujon and Z. Al Zalak (2018).

5. Will this resurgence in fertility continue?

Addressing this new fertility trend prompts legitimate questions about the extent of this resurgence and whether we can expect relatively high fertility rates in the years to come. The results from the upcoming 2024 population and housing census, coupled with qualitative research on the reproductive behavior of Moroccan women, could help us better understand this new fertility trend in Morocco and draw clear conclusions about its motivations and magnitude.

Figure 8

Average ideal number of children desired by women and average ideal number of children desired for daughters, according to residential area and educational level of non-single women aged 15 to 49



Source: National Survey on Population and Family Health, 2018.

In contrast, it is certain that the social and cultural norms of today's Moroccan family institution, as well as the economic and social conditions of couples, are far from conducive to high fertility. The choice for a specific number of children now largely rests with the couple rather than the extended family, which was once the norm in the traditional model.

As a result, the quality of children (well-educated, achieving high levels of education, well cared for, etc.) takes precedence over quantity. Relatively high fertility rates would be outdated. This is evident from the analysis of data on the average number of children desired by non-single women and desired for their daughters in the 2018 survey. As shown in Figure 8, non-single women surveyed in 2018 expressed a desire for fewer children for their daughters compared to their desired offspring. Thus, the average number of children per woman would fluctuate around 2.5.

Conclusion

A clear trend emerges from the examination of data from censuses and surveys conducted by High Commission for Planning and Ministry of Health regarding the reproductive behavior of women in Morocco, similar to trends in other Arab countries, showing a slight increase in the average number of children per woman since 2010. We observe this increase both in urban and rural areas, which is accompanied by a decrease in the age at first marriage among women. Surprisingly, this increase coincides with an expansion of girls' education. However, this expansion faces obstacles related to women's access to economic activities outside the family sphere. This situation could be the cause of decline in the age at first marriage and, consequently, the observed increase in fertility. Educated and qualified but unemployed young women may be inclined to prioritize marriage and potentially have children at a young age. While it is too early to determine whether this trend is permanent or temporary, it certainly does not signify a return to high fertility rates, but rather an average number of children per woman that fluctuates around 2.5.

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The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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