

Infertility, pregnancy loss, and live births: Complexity of reproductive events varies by women's age and education

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The likelihood and frequency of pregnancy loss and of periods of infertility may be increasing as women's age at births keeps increasing in Europe. Most demographic and sociological fertility research has studied fertility barriers such as miscarriage, abortion and infertility in isolation. Moreover, studies linking fertility barriers to reproductive outcomes are rare. This study examines the quantity and complexity of reproductive barriers and its interrelation with the number of live births over a specified time period. First, we describe what women aged 15-17, 25-27 and 35-37 are to expect over about a decade, that is until they are 25-27, 35-37 and 45-47 years. Secondly, we study social group differences in observed patterns, for now focusing on level of education. We use a subsample of 1,655 female respondents of the German family panel pairfam who participated in 11 waves. Of all women 5.3% reported at least one abortion, 8.8% had at least one miscarriage and 28.5% had experienced infertility. Women in the oldest age group have the highest average quantity (0.60) and complexity (0.55) of adverse reproductive events. Moreover, women in this group who do not give birth in the observation period have on average 0.55 adverse reproductive events. Results from multinomial regression show that women in their late reproductive years are at the highest risk of experiencing only adverse reproductive events, but no birth, and they have the lowest risk of having a live birth and no adverse events. Overall this study contributes to our understanding of the complexity of fertility careers and the reproductive load borne by women at different ages, which is often not visible and neglected in research and public discourse. The study also adds to our understanding of the causes of the fertility gap observed in aging societies.