

Late childbearing and perinatal health in Spain: does higher maternal education moderate the impact?

Marta Seiz

There is abundant research linking advanced maternal age with poorer perinatal health, including higher risks of low birthweight, pre-term birth, and stillbirth. Nevertheless, there remain uncertainties as to the strength of associations and the extent to which these apply to healthy women. Socioeconomic resources have proven protective against adverse birth outcomes, which raises the question of whether they also could mitigate the effects of age. This study seeks to provide an answer focusing on Spain, a lowest-low fertility country where childbearing postponement is particularly pronounced; especially among the most educated. Drawing on register data from the Spanish Birth Statistics (2007-2021; n=5,746,334 births), and using logistic regression models, it explores how different perinatal outcomes relate to maternal age measured in categories, to whether the mother has higher education, and to the interactions between both. Maternal age shows statistically significant incremental deleterious effects on perinatal health risks. Maternal education mitigates the increased probability of preterm birth associated with age for women between 35 and 44 years old, but only in the case of non-extreme prematurity. The same relation is observed for very low birthweight, but only for the age category 45-50. Similar interactive effects could be at play regarding risks of low birthweight for women aged 35-44, yet they disappear when adjusting for parity. Maternal education does not cushion the negative impact of age on stillbirth risk. These findings, entailing modest mitigation of age effects at best, call into question the assumption that marked postponement of motherhood should not entail significant risks for the offspring if adequate healthcare monitoring and sufficient maternal resources are guaranteed.