

Compensating for the Absent Father? How single and partnered MAR mothers differ in income and proximity to parents, evidence from Belgium

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Short Abstract

Medically assisted reproduction (MAR) has pushed the limits of conception in later ages. An increasing number of single women in their late 30s to early 40s have also been using MAR to fulfill motherhood intentions alone, becoming 'solo mothers.' Fertility treatments require sufficient resources and substantial preparation, but single women face the additional hurdle of not having a partner to support them through childbearing and childrearing. Qualitative research shows that many 'solo mothers' are financially stable and seek support from family and friends before childbirth. Similarly, studies on other single mothers find that they seek child-rearing help from their own mothers. This study therefore investigates whether income and availability of parental support compensate for the lack of a co-parent among single mothers who conceived via MAR, using Belgian birth records (2010-2019) linked to population registers and tax declarations. Through logistic regression, we model the correlation of pre-birth personal income and proximity to parents on having a first child via MAR, by partnership status and co-parent declaration. We compare to partnered MAR mothers two types of single MAR mothers: single MAR mothers who did not declare a co-parent for her child (likely 'solo mothers') and single MAR mothers who declared a co-parent (possibly indicating a recent breakup). We hypothesize that 'solo mothers' compensate for the absent co-parent through high income and living near parents. Meanwhile, 'single MAR mothers with co-parent' may receive child-rearing support from the co-parent and have less need for compensating strategies. Initial results on mothers' income support our hypotheses. Above-average pre-birth income (at least 25,000 EUR/yr) increases the likelihood of having a first child via MAR as a 'solo mother,' compared to being a partnered mother. Meanwhile, there is a negative relationship between income and being a 'single MAR mother with co-parent' versus being partnered, except for the highest income group (at least 35,000 EUR/yr), suggesting in-group heterogeneity to be further explored. Information on women's residential proximity to her parents will be provided by Statistics Belgium in the coming months. This research is part of the non-marital childbearing dynamics (NMCD) project.