

Wanting to stay in education is 'NOT main reason why women delay having children'

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Studies have suggested that over recent decades, UK women have postponed motherhood largely because they want to go onto college or university to gain qualifications or fulfil educational aspirations before starting a family. New research from the University of Oxford in the UK and the Universities of Groningen and Wageningen in the Netherlands sheds new light on this theory, however, showing that the role of education is much smaller in delaying motherhood than previously believed. The researchers found that in the UK, a woman's family background was the major factor rather than education. The full findings are published in the journal, *Demography*.

The average age of first-time mothers increased by as many as four to five years at the end of the 20th century throughout Europe and the United States, as compared with the end of the Second World War. Educational attainment for women also increased over the same period, says the paper. The researchers used nationally representative data from the Office of National Statistics for cohorts of women born in the UK between 1944 and 1967 to track patterns of educational enrolment to see how they influence [reproductive behaviour](#). The researchers also compared the fertility histories of more than 2,700 female twins from the largest adult twin register in the United Kingdom (set up in 1992), which acts as a controlled trial because this isolates the effects of different levels of [education](#) between siblings in pairs of twins who share so many other characteristics.

Significantly, their model calculates that for every extra year of

educational enrolment after the age of 12, a woman delayed [motherhood](#) by an average of six months. However, strikingly, they also find that the main influence on whether a woman postpones having children is largely associated with her [family background](#). The paper concludes that [family environment](#), a combination of a woman's social, economic and genetic factors, is significant, with education alone contributing to only 1.5 months of the total six-month delay.

Lead author Dr Felix Tropf, from the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford, said: 'Our research casts doubt on previous studies that claim a strong link between educational expansion for women and the postponement of motherhood. We find that both education and a woman's fertility choices seem to be mostly influenced by her family background, instead of education influencing fertility behaviour directly. For example, families provide social and financial support, and pass on genes affecting reproductive behaviour. A large part of the observed association between education and age at first birth in other studies can actually be explained by the family environment. In isolation, education has a much smaller effect. We hope this important finding that a large part of the link between educational enrolment and fertility postponement is not causal but spurious may inform those forecasting future fertility trends or shaping family policy.'

The paper highlights that the average age of women when they left education rose steadily throughout the 20th century, however, the age of first-time mothers did not follow the same pattern but formed a U-shape instead. New mothers were still relatively young after World War Two during the so-called 'baby boom' but were also generally becoming more highly educated, says the paper. Only from the 1960s did women start to delay motherhood; this development coincided with the introduction of the contraceptive Pill, notes the research. Cohorts born after the 1960s postponed motherhood by around 2.7 years, on average, compared with women born at the end of the Second World War, but longer educational

enrolment only accounts for 6% of this delay, says the research.

More information: Education, Fertility Postponement and Causality, *Demography*, 9 January 2017.

Provided by University of Oxford

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