The trend for highly-educated women to have fewer children isn't seen among those who are religious, new analysis suggests.

According to the study, birth rates declines sharply for non-religious women with higher-level qualifications in Britain and France, while practicing religious women who are similarly educated maintain high fertility levels.

Researchers believe this can be attributed to lifestyle differences and the perceived cost and benefits of having a larger family among women from different religious groups.

This could include closer social ties among members of the same religious community, resulting in more support for families.

Statistics analyzed as part of the study show women who were not religious were less likely to become mothers compared to those who said they were religious, or practiced a religion in both countries.

Those who reported no religious affiliation had the least number of children (1.8 on average in Britain and 1.9 in France), whereas practicing Catholic women had the most, on average 2.5 in Britain and 2.4 in France.

The study examined the relationship between religion, educational attainment and completed family size in Britain and France for women born from the 1920s to the 1960s.

The study, published in the journal Population, by Dr. Nitzan Peri-Rotem from the University of Exeter, uses data from the British Household Panel Survey from 2010 and the French Generations and Gender Survey.

Among religiously unaffiliated women, there is an average gap of nearly one child between the least and most educated groups. On the other hand, among women with a greater religious commitment, these differences are considerably smaller or insignificant.

In Britain, non-religious women who only attended secondary school had on average 2.3 children, and the most educated women—who had attended college or university, had 1.6. Among practicing Protestant women this was 2.2 children among the least educated to 2.1 for the most.

In France religious women who attended college or university had on average 2.6 children on average compared to 2.3 children for the least educated, and 2.1 children for those who didn't progress beyond the end of secondary school. Non-religious women with the highest levels of education had 1.5 children, compared to 2.5 for those with the lowest
levels.

Dr. Peri-Rotem said: "In Britain and France women who are more educated are less likely to have children, and have fewer of them overall. However, this is not the case for those who are religious. These patterns can be explained by variations in the perceived costs and value of children among different religious groups. Family life and children are highly valued by religious communities, and women who are more religious receive more support when seeking to expand their families.

"Our research shows religion can play an important part in understanding variations in the relationship between education and the birth rate in Britain and France. The relationship between education and fertility outcomes is not uniform across religious groups, and for practicing religious women higher education can go hand in hand with a higher birth rate."

Provided by University of Exeter

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