

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postponement or limitation? Mechanisms of reproductive intentions in Mexico City’s lowest-low fertility context

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ABSTRACT This study examines the mechanisms shaping reproductive intentions in Mexico City, a distinctive lowest-low fertility context characterised by fertility limitation without systematic postponement. As a critical case combining very low fertility (quantum) with stable timing (tempo), it challenges conventional demographic accounts that inherently link fertility decline to postponement. Based on 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews with nulliparous and parity-one women aged 25–49, this qualitative research explores how these mechanisms are associated with intentions to postpone or limit childbearing; how these orientations are interrelated; and under what circumstances sustained postponement becomes associated with the intention to limit childbearing. The findings identify four mechanisms: *individualism and self-fulfilment*; *structural uncertainty*; *parenting and care*; and *partner dynamics*. While the intention to postpone childbearing is heavily driven by *individualism and self-fulfilment*, the decision to limit reproduction is largely driven by the contemporary crisis of *parenting and care*. *Partner dynamics* and *structural uncertainty* operate transversally across the two orientations. This study demonstrates the inherent dynamism of women’s reproductive intentions, which are frequently marked by ambivalence and periods of indecision across the life course.

KEYWORDS Reproductive intentions • Postponement and limitation • Lowest-low fertility • Qualitative methods • Mexico City

Introduction

Lowest-low fertility has generated significant public concern due to its potential demographic and social consequences (UNFPA, 2025). Media outlets are replete with headlines alluding to a “demographic crisis”, “depopulation” and a record decline in birth rates. Beyond these alarmist narratives, this context reveals the tensions and contradictions between cultural ideals of motherhood and contemporary structural or ideational limitations. Within this scenario, examining reproductive intentions becomes highly relevant to understanding how women navigate their lives amid shifting expectations and systemic uncertainties (Yopo, 2025, 2023; Sobotka, 2004).

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While the literature has identified individualisation, economic uncertainty, intensive parenting and gender equality as key drivers of reproductive intentions, these factors have largely been examined through the lens of postponement in the Global North (Yopo, 2023). This leaves significant analytical gaps regarding contexts where postponement is not the dominant mechanism (Spoorenberg and Skirbekk, 2025; Safdari-Dehcheshmeh et al., 2023) but is instead intertwined with profound ambivalence and uncertainties that also lead to definitive intentions to limit reproduction.

Reproductive intentions are understood as dynamic and provisional stances involving ongoing negotiations between expectations for the future and the often constraining realities of current circumstances (Yopo, 2025; Martin, 2020; Pardo 2019; Vignoli et al., 2013; Sobotka et al., 2011; Liefbroer, 2009). Women's reproductive intentions are frequently characterised by contradictions and ambivalence throughout their lives. While the boundaries between postponing and limiting motherhood are often blurred, this paper argues that maintaining an analytical distinction between the two orientations is important to reveal how specific underlying mechanisms exert different pressures on each.

Using the case of Mexico City, this research seeks to answer the following questions: What mechanisms underlie the orientations towards postponing and limiting childbearing, distinguishing between those specific to each stance and those operating transversally across the two orientations? How do these orientations interrelate? And, under what circumstances does sustained postponement become associated with the intention to limit childbearing?

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 women aged 25 to 49, divided into two groups: (a) parity-one women with no immediate intention of having further children and (b) nulliparous women intending to remain childless. The inclusion of both groups enhances our understanding of how reproductive intentions are oriented in a context where motherhood remains both a deeply rooted experience and a powerful social expectation.

Mexico City was selected as a case study for several reasons. First, the city's population has lowest-low fertility rates but without a corresponding tendency towards systematic postponement, and thus has a unique profile characterised by a marked reduction in fertility (quantum) without a substantial shift in timing (tempo). In addition, the city has a highly educated population, pioneering reproductive health legislation and comparatively high female labour force participation. However, these advances coexist with persistent socio-economic inequalities and fragile work-life balance policies, rendering Mexico City an ideal setting to explore women's reproductive intentions.

Through an iterative enquiry systematically articulating the participants' narratives with literature-driven drivers, this study reveals four primary empirical mechanisms underlying reproductive intentions: (1) individualism and self-fulfilment; (2) structural factors and uncertainty; (3) parenting and care; and (4) the partner's affective engagement or disengagement. Rather than operating uniformly, these mechanisms function through distinct logics and varying degrees of relevance depending on the orientation, expressed at the time of the interview, towards postponement or limitation.

Following this introduction, the article is structured into five subsequent sections. The second section reviews the theoretical approaches to analysing reproductive intentions,

while the third section contextualises Mexico City as the empirical setting. The fourth section outlines the qualitative methodology, detailing the analytical strategies employed. The fifth section presents the empirical findings. The sixth and final section discusses these results in relation to the broader analytical and theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical approaches to analysing reproductive intentions and their key drivers

Reproductive behaviour is increasingly analysed using complementary frameworks that bridge the gap between macro-level demographic outcomes, such as fertility rates and replacement levels, and micro-level ideational processes (Safdari-Dehcheshmeh et al., 2023). While demographic trends provide a solid foundation for studying reproductive behaviour, the ideational dimension remains insufficiently explored, particularly in the Mexican context. One of the primary approaches to analysing these shifts is to examine them through the lens of intentions (Sturm et al., 2023; Gatta et al., 2022; Sten Hartnett and Gemmill, 2020; Pardo, 2019; Sobotka and Beaujoan, 2018). In this study, reproductive intentions are conceptualised as the core analytical category, representing provisional positions and dynamic action plans regarding future reproductive planning (Martin, 2020; Liefbroer, 2009). Unlike static desires or abstract ideals, intentions entail a constant process of negotiation between an individual's future expectations and their current, often restrictive, life circumstances (Sobotka et al., 2017, 2011; Tanturri et al., 2015; Vignoli, et al., 2013).

Beyond postponement: Ambivalence and the intent to limit in unequal societies

The analysis of reproductive intentions has been shown to be a valuable tool, given its dual capacity to address both the timing (tempo) and the intensity (quantum) of reproduction. Conventionally, the postponement of motherhood has been recognised as a decisive factor in fertility decline, particularly in societies with low and lowest-low fertility (Sobotka, 2017; Mills et al., 2011; Billari et al., 2009). The term postponement is used to denote the overall increase in the average age of women at the birth of their first child (Nathan and Pardo, 2019). However, recent evidence has challenged the assumption that a later start to parenthood is the sole factor contributing to the decline in family size. In many developing contexts, a sharp decrease in the total fertility rate has been observed, even though the average age at first birth has remained relatively stable. This suggests that fertility decline is not necessarily a universal correlate of postponement (Spoorenberg and Skirbekk, 2025).

Closely linked to these trends, the study of childlessness and reproductive limitation has gained relevance, reflecting the rising proportion of nulliparous women globally (CELADE, 2025; Tanturri et al., 2015). In this paper, we argue that the distinction between the timing of motherhood (postponement) and the limitation of family size (childlessness) is

often permeable. In unequal societies, a sustained strategy of postponement that persists over time often leads to intentional limitation, as individuals find themselves in a permanent state of ambivalence (Yopo, 2025). Although the literature distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary childlessness (Tanturri, 2010; Shaw, 2010; Tanturri and Mencarini, 2008; Hakim, 2005), we argue that the mechanisms underlying the intentions to postpone reproduction versus to limit childbearing have not been comprehensively examined, and that the boundaries between the factors driving these intentions remain unclear.

This research adopts a qualitative perspective to explore the interaction between micro, meso and macro dimensions of reproductive intentions. Within this framework, intentions are defined as an analytical concept that connects individual agency with perceived structural and institutional constraints (Vignoli et al., 2013). From this perspective, intentions are understood to be dynamic and to change over time due to continuous recalibration in response to institutional and economic barriers or changes in the personal environment (Safdari-Dehcheshmeh et al., 2023; Pardo, 2019; Philipov and Bernardi, 2012).

In the literature, reproductive intentions have been approached from various theoretical perspectives, with a range of analytical pillars being cited to account for these dynamics, such as individualisation and economic uncertainty; equality in gender roles and partnerships; and intensive parenting and a shift in the value of children (CELADE, 2025; Yopo and Abufhele, 2024; Pardo, 2019; Sobotka and Beaujoan, 2018; Vignoli et al., 2013). These frameworks offer insights into how women reconfigure their expectations based on the constant interaction of structural, situational, institutional and relational factors (Martin, 2020; Bernardi et al., 2015).

Key drivers of reproductive intentions

Individualism and economic uncertainty

Individualisation is one of the most prominent theoretical frameworks for explaining contemporary shifts in reproductive intentions (Yopo and Abufhele, 2024; Yopo, 2023). According to this framework, the pursuit of personal fulfilment is increasingly superseding traditional mandates centred on the institutional value of the family (Van de Kaa, 2001). This perspective posits that there has been a broader shift towards postmodern values, which have weakened longstanding social mandates surrounding gender and family (Yopo, 2025). Consequently, raising children is no longer perceived as an inescapable social obligation, but rather as an individual choice.

This transition is deeply rooted in the de-standardisation of the life course, a process wherein socially established transitions and their traditional sequencing have become increasingly fluid (Yopo, 2023). As the rigid boundaries of the life course dissolve, individuals find themselves needing to construct *choice biographies*, in which their reproductive decisions are increasingly asynchronous with their personal projects and professional milestones (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

However, this shift highlights a fundamental paradox of agency. While women may perceive postponing motherhood as an exercise in autonomy, they often fall into the trap

of reflexive modernity, that is, they experience a conflict between the pursuit of self-fulfilment and the internalised demands of the labour market, which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) refer to as *the self-obligation to standardise one's existence*. In contemporary society, personal advancement is contingent upon meeting stringent professional and educational standards (Yopo, 2025). Consequently, prioritising achieving institutional success and a consumption-based lifestyle over having a large family encourages not only the postponement of motherhood or the intention to remain childless, but also, more significantly, the complex and shifting interplay of the two orientations across the life course.

While these ideational shifts are fundamental to the theoretical models explaining below-replacement fertility, most notably the second demographic transition (SDT) theory (Lesthaeghe, 2010), their expression in Latin America remains inseparable from the region's profound structural inequalities (CEPAL, 2025). Research on highly educated women in this context has consistently identified narratives that prioritise individualism and professional aspirations to avoid compromising future goals (Yopo, 2022; Mandujano-Salazar, 2021; Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, 2021; Escobar and Sanhueza, 2018; Chacón Onetto and Tapia Ladino, 2017). However, the tension between the desire for autonomy and the external pressure to standardise one's life manifests as profound ambivalence regarding reproductive intentions. We argue that narratives of self-fulfilment are insufficient to capture the complexity of intentions in the Latin American context. Instead, both postponement and limitation may function as biographical tactics or responses to systemic contradictions and structural instability (Yopo, 2023).

Economic uncertainty is tightly linked with the paradoxes of individualisation and the pursuit of self-fulfilment. While individuals strive to construct choice biographies, the feasibility of these personal projects remains fundamentally constrained by the prevailing labour market conditions (Fiori et al., 2013; Adsera, 2011; Begall and Mills, 2011). Recent studies have argued that the pronounced fertility decline observed in post-transitional societies is increasingly driven by a permanent state of uncertainty, rather than by transitory crises (Alderotti et al., 2021). In this context, the self-obligation to standardise (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) becomes a burdensome requirement, as individuals feel compelled to achieve a degree of economic security that the current volatile market rarely guarantees.

Studies conducted in European contexts have found that structural volatility influences reproductive intentions through a gendered risk management lens. As demonstrated by Sobotka et al. (2011) and Fiori et al. (2013), women with higher education often postpone motherhood to safeguard their career progression against potential economic shocks. In Latin America, these dynamics are further exacerbated by persistent socioeconomic inequalities, which explain the profound heterogeneity in reproductive timing across social strata. Within the region, the interplay of labour informality and weak social protection systems results in a fragmented reproductive landscape and heterogeneity in the timing of childbearing, given that economic crises do not affect all groups equally (Yopo, 2023; Castro et al., 2022).

Despite these regional specificities, contemporary Latin American scholarship has mainly focused on the reproductive intentions of professional women, overemphasising ideational explanations at the expense of structural ones. This narrow focus has largely overlooked how precarious social conditions operate across diverse socioeconomic groups, directly conditioning the decision to have children or to remain childless.

Equality in gender roles and partnerships

Education constitutes a fundamental mechanism through which women gain the autonomy necessary to negotiate partnership agreements on more equitable terms (Sobotka, 2017). According to the gender revolution theory (Goldscheider et al., 2015), changes in reproductive intentions respond to increased opportunity costs of motherhood. While this model predicts that greater equality in the home and shared responsibility for childcare lead to higher birth rates, the revolution is considered incomplete due to men's limited participation in domestic and caregiving tasks (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Even in contexts where a more equitable division of household labour has been achieved, parenthood does not necessarily emerge as a central life objective. Begall and Hiekel (2025) illustrate this point in their study of three Nordic countries, finding that egalitarian couples who reported having a satisfactory domestic arrangement did not prioritise parenthood above other life goals.

The applicability of this framework to the Latin American context has been widely debated. Unlike in Europe, the labour force participation of Latin American women remains low, and is often driven not by the individual pursuit of autonomy, but rather by the need to contribute to the household income (CEPAL, 2025). Moreover, the intersection of socioeconomic inequalities and the persistence of traditional gender roles complicate the relationship between gender equality and reproductive behaviour (Cherlin, 2016), as in Latin American case.

Recent evidence suggests that while gender equality may incentivise motherhood from a theoretical perspective, the actual burden of care work and the lack of shared responsibility for childcare between partners encourage the postponement of motherhood and even ambivalence towards it. As women ascend professional hierarchies, they are forced to evaluate their individual capacity to manage simultaneous roles within the context of fragile care programs and policies (Real and Aguilera, 2026; Escobar and Sanhueza, 2018; Chacon Onetto and Tapia Ladino, 2017; Zicavo, 2013).

The centrality of the partner in women's reproductive intentions is further highlighted by the increasing gender equality in social roles. In the Latin American context, the significance attributed to conjugal partnerships frequently appears paradoxical, given the persistent financial and symbolic absence of men in childcare, not only in economic terms, but also in emotional and material conditions (Yopo-Díaz and Fuentes-Landeta, 2024; Yopo, 2023). Qualitative evidence from the region indicates that this failure of men to accept joint responsibility for childcare, in conjunction with a lack of economic stability, constitutes a significant barrier that leads to the systematic postponement of motherhood (Yopo and Abufhele, 2024).

Additionally, the quality of a partnership may be undermined by coercive dynamics. Although this line of enquiry is still in its early stages, specific research indicates that various forms of gender-based violence, including reproductive coercion by a male partner, can severely hinder a woman's ability to engage in effective family planning, with profound repercussions for her reproductive agency and long-term intentions (Pardo, 2019). While a woman's family network may function as a stabilising factor in the face of economic uncertainty, her partnership may follow an oscillating pattern in which the relationship veers between being a desired source of stability and a site of structural inequality and conflict (Yopo and Abufhele, 2024).

Intensive parenting and shifts in the value of children

Another key driver women's reproductive intentions mentioned in the literature is the rise of intensive parenting and the increased cost of raising children. This phenomenon highlights the tensions between the pursuit of self-fulfilment, structural uncertainty and gender equality gaps. It has been hypothesised that the transition to an intensive parenting model has not only contributed to the postponement of the optimal timing for motherhood, but has also significantly redefined the standards for being considered a *good mother* (Yopo, 2025, 2023). In low fertility contexts, children acquire immense symbolic and emotional value. In a model of childcare reinforced by expert knowledge, educational institutions and the media, parents are expected to make disproportionate investments of resources and time in their children (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

Under this paradigm, motherhood is constructed based on the capacity to respond to elevated parenting standards, with the perception of being unprepared or the fear of failing to provide the required quality of care outweighing the mere desire to have a child (Yopo, 2025). In Latin America, this model has generated acute tensions as it collides with fragile public support systems and pervasive gender inequalities in childcare responsibilities. Despite its cultural centrality, the practice of motherhood has become exceedingly costly in precarious environments (Zicavo, 2013). The demands of new approaches to childcare, such as *respectful* or *positive parenting*, require a level of dedication that clashes with long working hours, the accelerated pace of everyday life and the institutional instability in the region (Yopo, 2025; Sanhueza, 2005). Consequently, contemporary parenting is characterised by structural ambivalence rooted in the contradiction between having nominal reproductive freedom and dealing with overwhelming care demands (Real and Aguilera, 2026). This suggests that reproductive intentions are not merely autonomous choices, but are instead defensive responses to a society that imposes high childcare standards within a framework of profound institutional weakness (Yopo, 2025).

Despite their relevance, the factors identified in the literature often overlook the nuances of intentions to postpone or limit childbearing, as well as the potential links between the two. This theoretical gap underscores the need for an analytical framework that examines how these mechanisms are interconnected, and how their meanings vary depending on women's reproductive trajectories. Consequently, a qualitative and situated approach can contribute substantially to the discussion on the underlying drivers of these intentions.

Lowest-low fertility: The case of Mexico City

Mexico City has experienced one of the most pronounced fertility declines in Mexico and Latin America, a pattern that becomes even clearer when examined through the lens of completed cohort fertility (CCF), rather than period measures. [Figure 1](#) combines cohort fertility trajectories with the age distribution of fertility to highlight both quantum and tempo dynamics across Mexican states. The upper panel shows a sustained cohort fertility decline across all states, from high fertility to near or below replacement level fertility. However, within this broader transition, Mexico City stands out for the earliness and the intensity of this decline, with cohorts born in the late 1960s already reaching below replacement level fertility and more recent cohorts approaching lowest-low levels. Whereas the fertility declines in most states are gradually converging towards sub-replacement level fertility, the fertility decline in the capital has been both earlier and deeper, resulting in a stable lowest-low fertility regime (CCF $\approx$ 1.3–1.5). This places the city among the urban regions in Latin America with the lowest fertility, making it more comparable to cities in southern and western Europe than to the rest of Mexico ([Pardo et al. 2025](#); [Pardo et al., 2020](#); [Sobotka 2004](#); [Kohler et al., 2002](#)).

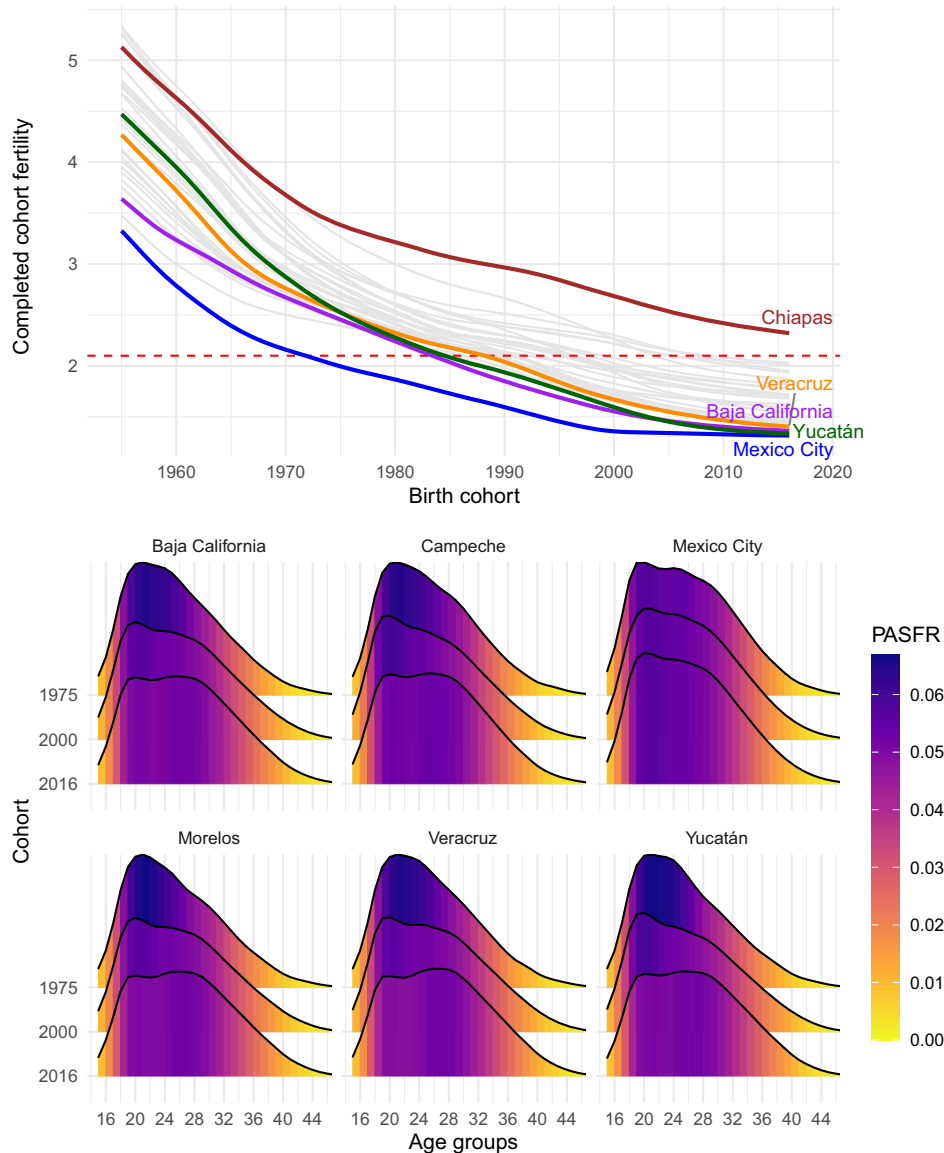
The lower panel of [Figure 1](#) complements this cohort perspective by examining the proportional age-specific fertility rates (PASFR) by birth cohort (1975, 2000 and 2016) in six states. In most of these states, fertility schedules shift gradually towards older ages, indicating the postponement of childbearing alongside a fertility decline. The distributions become flatter and more spread into ages 25–34, consistent with typical late transition patterns. In contrast, Mexico City displays a compressed and stable age pattern, with the highest density consistently concentrated around age 21 across cohorts, even as fertility declines overall. This indicates that the transition in Mexico City has been driven primarily by quantum reduction rather than a change in tempo, thus distinguishing it from the patterns in other states in which postponement and parity limitation operate together. While fertility decline is observed in all states, the mechanisms underlying the decline differ substantially ([Spoorenberg and Skirbekk, 2025](#)), with Mexico City representing a case in which lowest-low fertility is achieved without significant shifts in the timing of childbearing.

Parity progression ratios estimated using data from the National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID) further indicate that the fertility decline in Mexico City is associated with fertility limitation after the birth of the first child. While the possibility of progressing to a second birth remains relatively high nationally, it is consistently lower in Mexico City, reflecting a tendency towards having one child only, and reinforcing the city's low fertility profile.¹

Unlike lowest-low fertility contexts in Europe, Mexico City combines very low fertility with relatively stable ages at union formation and links between partnership formation and childbearing, suggesting continuity in family-oriented reproductive trajectories ([Esteve and Florez-Paredes, 2018](#); [Esteve et al., 2012](#); [Fussell and Palloni, 2004](#)). At the same time, women in Mexico City continue to face significant constraints in reconciling employment

¹ See supplementary [Figure S.1](#) (available online at <https://doi.org/10.1553/p-e9c3-f87p>).

Figure 1 Cohort fertility declines and age patterns in six states of Mexico with lowest-low fertility



Note: Single-year age-specific fertility rates were smoothed using the calibrated spline method (Schmertmann, 2014), and cohort measures were estimated following the approach proposed by Schmertmann (2024)
Source: Demographic conciliation (CONAPO, 2023) and population projections (CONAPO, 2024)

and family life due to limited work–family policies, labour informality and gender inequalities, despite having relatively high levels of educational attainment and economic participation. Although Mexico City has expanded public care services and recognised care as a constitutional right, institutional support remains insufficient to alleviate tensions between work, care and reproduction. Consequently, in Mexico City, women’s reproductive intentions are shaped simultaneously by a strong family orientation and structural uncertainty, in a pattern that diverges from the classic expectation of the SDT theory of women having delayed unions and individualised fertility trajectories (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Taken together, these demographic patterns position Mexico City as an urban setting that represents an exceptional case for conducting a qualitative study of the mechanisms underlying reproductive intentions.

Data and methods

This is a qualitative study² that examines the mechanisms underlying reproductive intentions based on the narratives of nulliparous and low-parity women in Mexico City. To achieve this aim, 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with women aged 25–49 years,³ divided into two groups according to the following criteria at the time of recruitment:

- (a) Parity-one women who expressed no immediate intention of having further children; and
- (b) Nulliparous women who stated their intention to remain childless.

Data collection and instruments

The interviews, which were conducted between February and May 2025, were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, while guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.⁴ Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interview, and no remuneration was provided for the interview.

Two semi-structured interview guides were developed following an abductive strategy (Reichert, 2014). The core dimensions of these interview guides, which were operationalised based on a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on the key drivers of reproductive intentions outlined in the theoretical framework, were: (1) sociodemographic profile; (2) labour conditions; (3) romantic and partnership history; (4) family values;

2 The current investigation constitutes a component of more extensive research, which had the objective of *identifying the socioeconomic, familial and individual factors that influence reproductive decision-making processes among women aged 25 to 49 years in Mexico City*.

3 We consider 25 years as the lower limit of the selected age range since the modal age at fertility in Mexico City is 21 years (CONAPO, 2023, 2024).

4 The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted by the two authors to ensure collaborative reflexivity. Having a shared gender facilitated the rapport during sensitive discussions. Data management involved the use of alphanumeric coding, password-protected storage and read-only transcriptions by an assistant under confidentiality agreements (PAHO, 2016).

(5) pregnancy history; (6) reproductive intentions and perceptions of motherhood; (7) contraception; and (8) access to social programs. The instruments were validated and refined through a pilot phase to ensure thematic depth and consistency (see [Supplementary material section S1](#)).

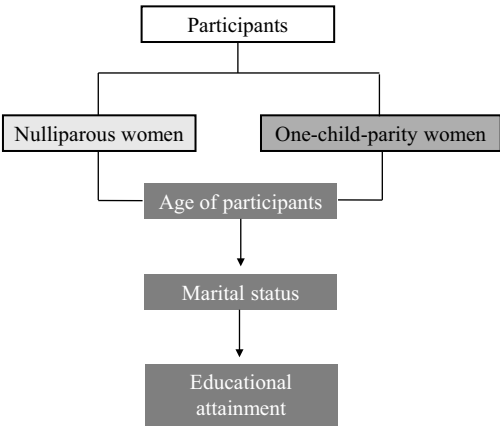
Qualitative sampling

A qualitative, non-representative sampling design was employed based on the principle of maximum variation. Rather than adhering to *a priori* numerical criteria, the sample size was adjusted inductively to encompass a broad spectrum of women’s experiences ([Rapley, 2014](#); [Patton, 2002](#)). This approach allowed us to capture the complexity of reproductive intentions ([Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014](#); [Patton, 2002](#)).

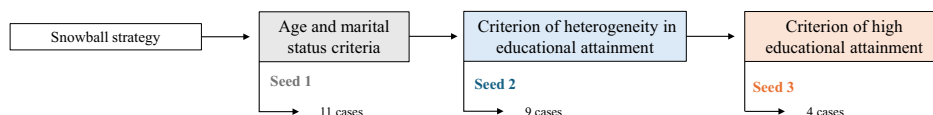
While the initial recruitment was based on parity – i.e. the recruitment of nulliparous women or women with one child only with no current reproductive intentions – the sampling was refined during fieldwork using a three-stage iterative approach. This process enabled the progressive incorporation of three axes of heterogeneity that were crucial for capturing the fluidity and dynamism of reproductive intentions. Moreover, it enabled robust comparisons to account for the complexity of reproductive decision-making in the specific context of Mexico City.

As shown in [Figure 2](#), age was prioritised to capture the potential transformation of reproductive trajectories at different stages of the life course ([Liefbroer, 2005](#)). Marital status was emphasised after initial interviews revealed that partnership arrangements are often fundamental to reproductive negotiations ([Real and Aguilera, 2026](#); [Yopo, 2023](#)). Finally, educational attainment was included not only as a factor influencing women’s financial circumstances ([Sobotka, 2017](#)), but also as a core dimension of their autonomy and individualisation processes ([Yopo and Abufhele, 2024](#)).

Figure 2 Qualitative sampling process



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 3 Snowball strategy

Source: Own elaboration

The snowball technique was implemented to select participants at each sampling stage. This approach relies on chain-referral sampling to identify initial participants (seeds), through whom new respondents meeting the research-relevant characteristics are accessed (Moser and Korstjens, 2018; Rapley, 2014). This technique was particularly effective for recruiting women from hard-to-reach populations, and, given the sensitive topics, for tapping into networks of trust. Consequently, the strategy utilised three distinct nodes to ensure diversity and mitigate recruitment bias, as shown in Figure 3. Recruitment continued until *meaning saturation* was achieved (Hennink et al., 2019).

*Seed 1 (Iztapalapa district)*⁵: The first seed was established in a working-class commercial setting, starting in a local market and extending to neighbourhood residents. Selected for its feasibility and pre-existing networks, this node captured a diverse range of ages and marital statuses. However, educational attainment was predominantly concentrated at undergraduate level.

*Seed 2 (Magdalena Contreras district)*⁶: To address the educational bias of the first seed, a second node was initiated in a peripheral neighbourhood. This cluster proved the most heterogeneous in terms of educational attainment, which ranged from secondary to undergraduate levels. It also introduced distinct demographic patterns, such as younger ages at first birth.

Seed 3 (Academic network): The final stage focused on specifically recruiting women with higher educational qualifications (postgraduate level).⁷

Analytical strategy

Thematic-interpretative analysis was used as an analytical strategy for the qualitative information collected, with a focus on identifying recurring patterns to deepen our understanding of participants' meanings, experiences and perspectives (Naeem et al., 2023). This analytical process was supported by ATLAS.ti 25 software and followed a rigorous three-stage coding procedure (Saldaña, 2016). First, *line-by-line* analysis of the transcripts was conducted to identify descriptive data and preliminary codes. Second, *axial coding* was performed by grouping the initial codes into broader themes. This stage also allowed for the

⁵ Mexico City is divided into 16 districts (*Alcaldías* in Spanish), each of which has its own government.

⁶ Women with whom one of the authors had previously collaborated on a different project in 2022–2023.

⁷ A professional contact within an academic institution served as the seed, ensuring that the sample achieved the necessary breadth of educational backgrounds.

classification of participants according to their stated reproductive intentions – i.e. to postpone or limit childbearing – at the time of the interview. Third, *selective coding* followed a two-part process to bridge the empirical findings with the theoretical frameworks:

(a) Code co-occurrence matrices were created to identify how inductive codes overlapped within narrative segments. This facilitated the synthesis of inductive data, which were subsequently triangulated with the theoretical dimensions. Thus, four underlying mechanisms of reproductive intentions were constructed, which guided the analysis. These mechanisms juxtaposed structural, familial and individual dimensions: (1) *individualism and self-fulfilment*; (2) *structural factors and uncertainty*; (3) *parenting and care*; and (4) *the partner's affective engagement or disengagement* ([Supplementary material section S2](#)).

(b) Code-document co-occurrence analysis was also conducted. This technique was used to map the distribution and frequency of the four emerging mechanisms across individual interviews, enabling the identification of specific patterns of association and the grouping of the narratives. The analysis indicated that, regardless of their parity (nulliparous or parity-one), the participants expressed an intention to either postpone or limit childbearing at the time of the interview. Consequently, the analysis was conducted by distinguishing between these two orientations in order to find transversal patterns, interrelationships or differences between them.

Sankey diagrams were generated to visualise the results and illustrate the interplay between emergent mechanisms and reproductive intentions. In these diagrams, each intention group – i.e. postponement or limitation – is represented as a distinct node connected by flows to its corresponding analytical mechanism. The width of these flows indicates the narrative strength or frequency of each dimension in the dataset.⁸

Results

Characterisation of the women interviewed according to their reproductive intentions

Drawing on the narratives of the 26 participants, two main reproductive orientations are identified: the intention to postpone and the intention to limit childbearing.

Intention to postpone: This group comprises nine childless (nulliparous) women, all with high educational attainment (undergraduate or postgraduate level). While they are relatively homogeneous in terms of their educational level, the group is diverse in terms of age (25–45 years) and marital status, reflecting different life stages. The participants are in various relationship situations, including single, cohabiting and living apart together, but none are married at the time of the interview.

Intention to limit: This group comprises 17 women with two distinct experiences: those who are mothers and those who are not. However, at the time of the interviews,

8 ATLAS.ti 25 enables the normalisation of the degree of narrative association in order to make better comparisons between groups.

they converge on the explicit intention to limit reproduction to avoid either having a second child or becoming a mother. This divergence in parity results in a highly heterogeneous group in terms of age, educational attainment and marital status. Notably, the women with one child entered motherhood at young ages (between 17 and 26 years) and have the lowest levels of education. The women in this group have a range of marital statuses, and some have experienced a change in their marital status between having their first child and the time of the interview (Table 1).

Mechanisms underlying reproductive intentions

After identifying the participants' explicit reproductive intentions, we explore how these orientations intersect with the four key analytical mechanisms that emerge from the analysis. This section details the complexities of these relationships.

The Sankey diagram in Figure 4 reveals that parenting and care, structural factors and uncertainty and individualism and self-fulfilment constitute the most substantial narrative flows explaining reproductive intentions, regardless of parity. This suggests that the perceived demands of childcare, economic conditions and individual aspirations are the primary concerns that structure the participants' accounts. However, a comparative analysis of the two groups reveals significant differences in how these mechanisms are prioritised.

For the postponing group, the narrative is primarily articulated through the mechanism of individualism and self-fulfilment, which constitutes the most frequent discourse. This is closely followed by the mechanism of structural factors and uncertainty. Notably, in this group, the partner's affective dynamic is driven by cohesion rather than conflict, given that the partner's affective engagement appears more than twice as frequently as the partner's disengagement. Conversely, narratives surrounding parenting are less prominent in explaining the intention to delay motherhood (Figure 4).

In contrast, the mechanism of parenting and care emerges as the dominant narrative mechanism for the group with an explicit intention to limit reproduction. This finding is particularly noteworthy given the heterogeneous composition of this group, which includes both parity-one and nulliparous women. While it was anticipated that this mechanism would be particularly salient for mothers, for whom childcare constitutes a direct, lived experience, it is noteworthy that the perceived demands of childcare also serve as a primary driver for women without children. While the mechanism of the partner's affective engagement remains relevant, it is anchored in narratives of affective disengagement. This indicates that relationship deterioration or the lack of a committed partner is a decisive factor in the intention to limit reproduction. The frequencies of the mechanisms of individualism and self-fulfilment and structural factors and uncertainty are comparable, suggesting a balanced configuration in which no single driver establishes itself as hegemonic (Figure 4).

To understand the internal logic of these findings, the following subsections provide a detailed analysis of each reproductive intentions group – i.e. postponement and limitation – and of how the four identified mechanisms and their constitutive elements operate and interact, highlighting both the unique characteristics and the commonalities of the two groups.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewed women according to their reproductive intentions

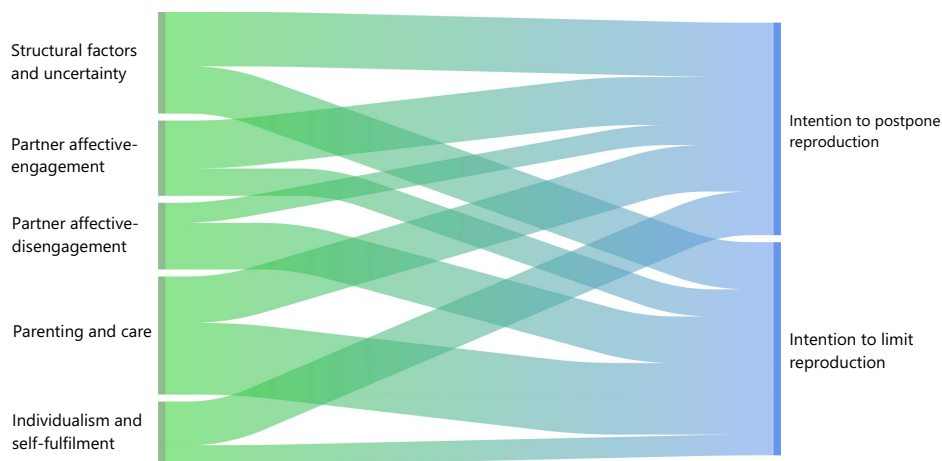
Participant	Age (in years)	Parity	Current marital status	Marital status at childbirth	Age at first birth (in years)	Educational attainment
<i>Intention to limit childbearing</i>						
S1	46	One child	Cohabiting	Cohabiting	46	High school
A2	29	One child	Single	Single	29	Undergraduate/graduate
G6	47	Childless	Married		47	Undergraduate/graduate
J7	25	Childless	Single		25	Undergraduate/graduate
P8	26	One child	Single	Single	26	Secondary
M9	26	One child	Single	Cohabiting	26	High school
T10	37	One child	Married	Married	37	High school
A11	36	One child	Single	Cohabiting	36	Undergraduate/graduate
V17	29	One child	Single	Married	29	High school
P12	39	Childless	Single		39	Undergraduate/graduate
J16	33	Childless	Single		33	Undergraduate/graduate
L19	34	One child	Cohabiting	Single	34	High school
Q23	43	Onechild	Cohabiting	Cohabiting	43	Undergraduate/graduate
M15	31	One child	Cohabiting	Cohabiting	31	Undergraduate/graduate
I18	28	One child	Single	Cohabiting	28	High school
D17	36	One child	Living apart together	Cohabiting	36	Undergraduate/graduate
S24	45	Childless	Single			Undergraduate/graduate
<i>Intention to postpone childbearing</i>						
E3	25	Childless	Cohabiting			Undergraduate/graduate
K4	25	Childless	Single			Undergraduate/graduate
N5	25	Childless	Single			Undergraduate/graduate
C22	25	Childless	Single			Undergraduate/graduate

(table continues)

Table 1. (*continued*)

Participant	Age (in years)	Parity	Current marital status	Marital status at childbirth	Age at first birth (in years)	Educational attainment
T14	36	Childless	Cohabiting			Undergraduate/graduate
I15	34	Childless	Cohabiting			Undergraduate/graduate
B21	32	Childless	Living apart together			Undergraduate/graduate
E26	39	Childless	Living apart together			Undergraduate/graduate
S25	45	Childless	Single			Undergraduate/graduate

Source: Own elaboration

Figure 4 Mechanisms underlying the intention to limit or postpone childbearing

Source: Own elaboration with information from interviews

The postponement orientation: Analytical mechanisms and narratives

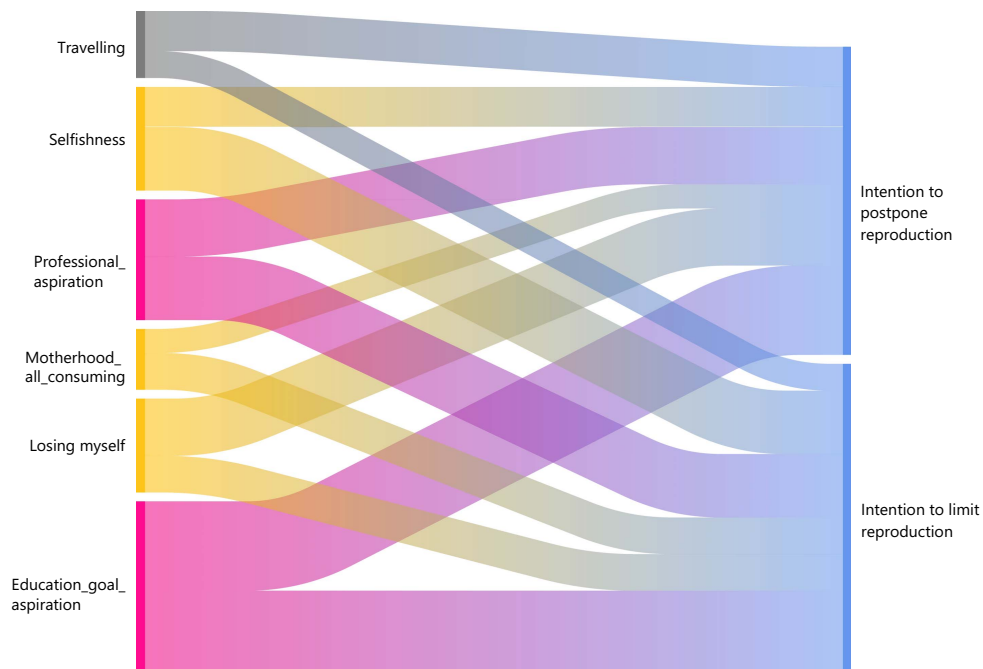
The group oriented towards postponing reproduction has a remarkably homogeneous profile, consisting entirely of highly educated, nulliparous women. Within the narratives of these women, the mechanism of individualism and self-fulfilment emerges as the dominant discourse, exhibiting a significantly higher narrative density than the other factors. As illustrated in the Sankey diagram (Figure 5), the intention to delay childbearing is underpinned by a threefold anchor of motivations that collectively shape the participants' reproductive outlook.

The first dimension of this anchor relates to professional and educational aspirations, which constitute the dominant discourse for delaying motherhood. This is exemplified by N5, who emphasises the necessity of reaching a specific career milestone before considering family formation: “[...] I want to focus on my studies, on finishing my degree, and well... I'm the kind of person who feels that before moving in with someone or even thinking about having children, I need to feel like I'm at a different professional level. [...] My plan is to grow professionally first, to finish my degree” (N5, 25 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

Second, the preservation of identity emerges as a critical factor, with motherhood being perceived as a potential threat to the self. Participants express a profound fear of identity erosion, as seen in the account of B21: “Yes, that's what I want – I mean, not to lose myself, not to lose who I am, not to just be someone's mum” (B21, 32 years old, living apart together, undergraduate/graduate). This concern is often coupled with a perceived lack of readiness, a feeling intimately linked to the potential loss of personal autonomy and living space.

Finally, the intention to postpone is driven by a desire for leisure, consumption and self-care. These narratives prioritise a period of having freedom and pursuing personal interests,

Figure 5. Elements associated with individualism and self-fulfilment underlying reproductive intentions according to limit and postpone childbearing



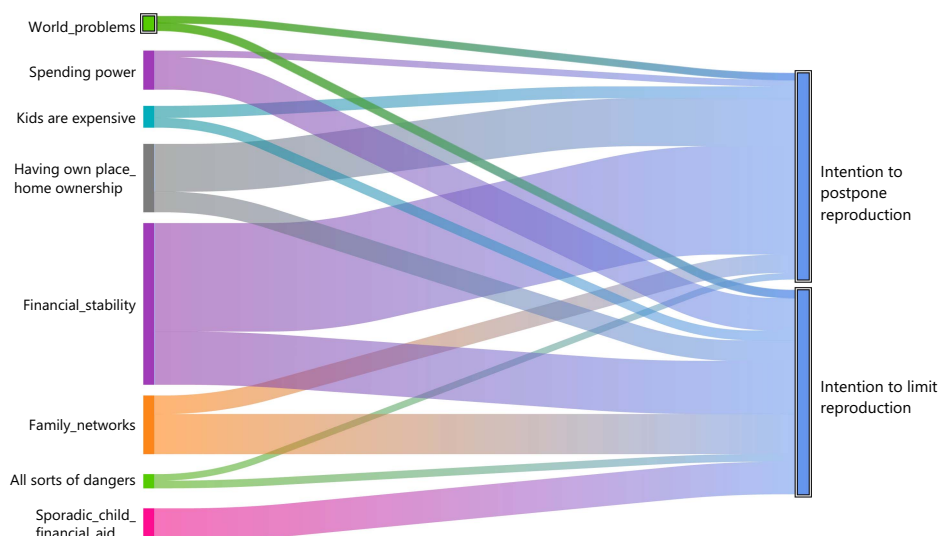
Source: Own elaboration with information from interviews

such as travel and self-exploration, which are viewed as incompatible with the demands of parenting:

“No, no, no, no. What I don’t like is that, while I understand that biologically we are the givers of life, that doesn’t make us exclusively incubators. I think we also have specific projects: you are a researcher, and I am training to do the same. I want to travel; I want to do things. No, I really don’t like being pigeonholed into that role . . .” (T14, 36 years old, cohabiting undergraduate/graduate).

The second key mechanism shaping the narratives of the participants in this group is that of structural factors and uncertainty. Within this framework, financial stability and dual-income security are essential prerequisites for childbearing. Participants continually evaluate their economic standing, postponing parenthood until they establish a solid financial base. This stability is fundamentally associated with the ability to provide and, importantly, to secure independent housing that is conducive to childrearing (Figure 6). Such milestones are expected to materialise in the medium term, particularly among younger women, as evidenced by E3, who intends to delay motherhood until these conditions are met: *“I have a small plot of land; I’m still paying for it, and I want to build at least two or three rooms in the next few years – I’m eager to start already, you know? So, I tell myself*

Figure 6. Elements associated with structural factors and uncertainty underlying reproductive intentions according to limit and postpone childbearing



Source: Own elaboration with information from interviews

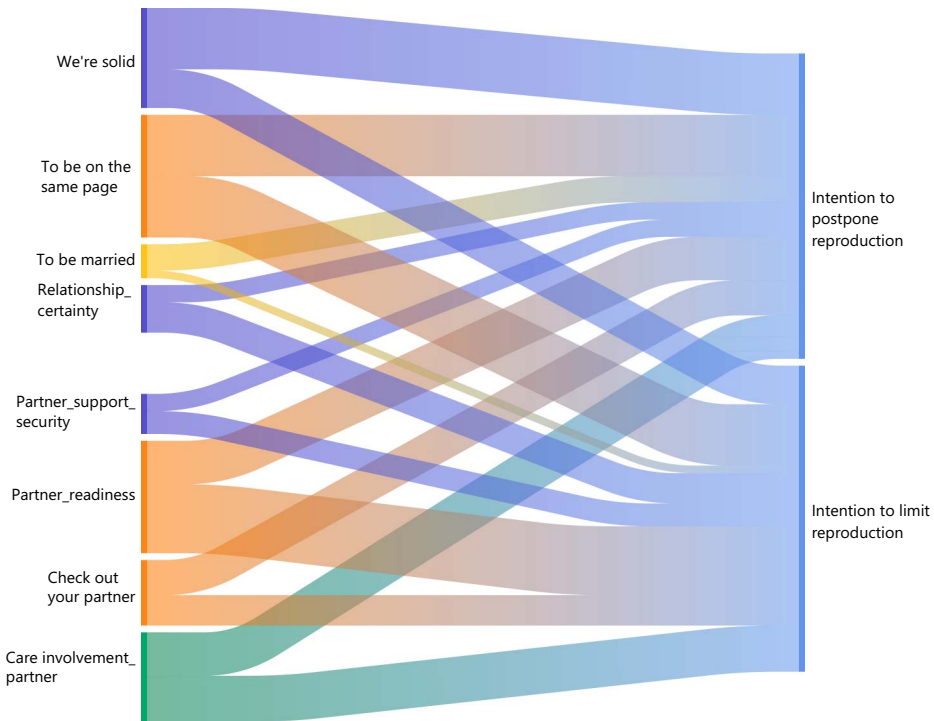
that by the time I'm 30 I'll be a bit more stable, because I'm working toward that. Once I have something stable, something of my own, I think I'd feel more secure about . . . [having a child]" (E3, 25 years old, cohabiting, undergraduate/graduate).

Furthermore, the high cost of raising children emerges as a prevalent narrative element; this perception is grounded in the observation of the experiences of women within their social circles and rigorous assessments of their own economic capabilities. As C22 states: *"I feel like no . . . It's fine; people should have them [children] when they really want to – when they can actually afford them"* (C22, 25 years, single, undergraduate/graduate).

In a subset of narratives, broader social issues further influence the participants' reproductive intentions. Factors such as insecurity, the perception of structural violence, demographic growth and natural resource scarcity are identified as elements that exacerbate indecision, reinforcing the inclination to postpone childbearing, as I15 explains: *"Well, what I'm saying . . . is about the conditions the world is in. You know, there's less and less water, we're practically destroying the planet and all those things, right? I wouldn't want a child of mine to lack these resources in the future, so[. . .]"* (I15, 34 years old, cohabiting, undergraduate/graduate).

Regarding the mechanism of the partner's affective engagement, narratives oriented towards postponement reveal that finding a suitable partner is a fundamental project that must be consolidated before childbearing. These accounts offer a series of checklists detailing the requirements a relationship must fulfil before the participant is willing to become a mother. Expressions such as *"to be on the same page"* and *"we're solid"* highlight that alignment in life goals and the perceived solidity of the bond are essential conditions for

Figure 7. Elements associated with the partner's affective engagement underlying reproductive intentions according to limit and postpone childbearing



Source: Own elaboration with information from interviews

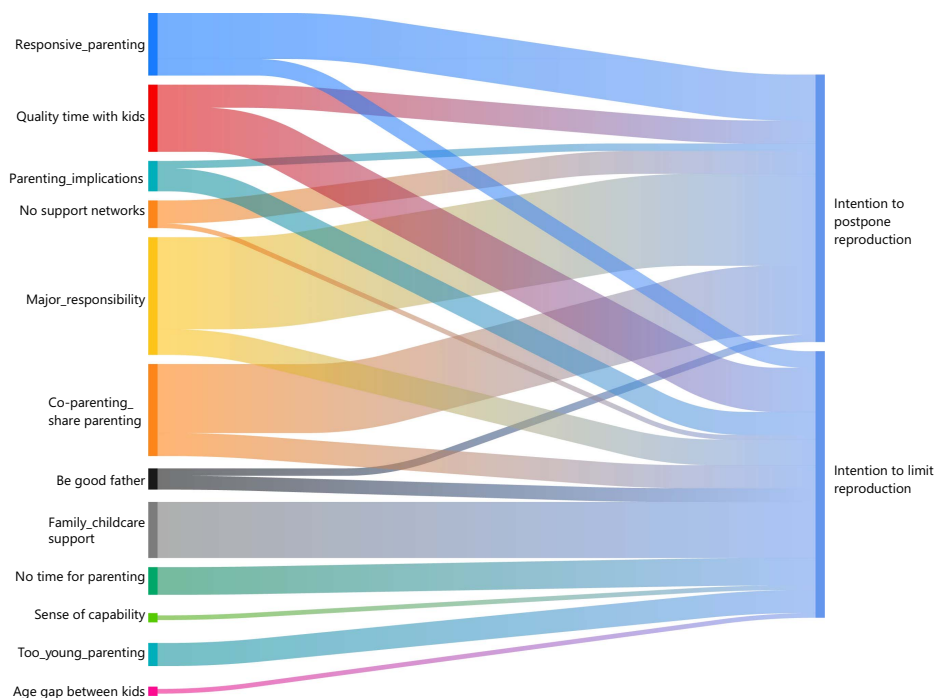
transitioning to motherhood. Rather than merely partnering, these women seek to explicitly verify the depth and the stability of the connection (Figure 7).

Furthermore, the expressions “*partner readiness*” and “*care involvement*” reflect an active assessment of the potential for equitable care distribution. Moreover, the expression “*check out your partner*” reinforces the need to establish the relationship’s viability in the face of future domestic tensions. These dynamics are exemplified in K4’s account:

“I would really like both of us to take responsibility for the house and the baby. I’d like someone who fulfils his role as a father and within the home. I don’t want him to stop working, but I need him to take responsibility for the tasks that women usually do, because they aren’t just our obligations – they are theirs too; I would like it to be very shared between the two of us, very egalitarian” (K4, 25 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

While the mechanism of parenting and care is less prevalent in the postponement narratives, many participants note that observing the experiences of sisters, colleagues and friends has significantly shaped their decisions. Witnessing the substantial personal

Figure 8 Elements associated with parenting and care underlying reproductive intentions according to limit and postpone childbearing



Source: Own elaboration with information from interviews

investments and sacrifices demanded by motherhood reinforces their intention to delay childbearing (Figure 8), as suggested by E3's account:

"Yeah, a lot of things I see at the call centre [where she works] with colleagues who are almost 30 – many of them don't have children because they know, and we realise, just how huge the responsibility of raising a child is, and everything you lose. Because the truth is, you shouldn't romanticise it [motherhood]; you really do lose a lot, and you give everything to a human being you have to protect until they're about 20" (E3, 25 years old, cohabiting, undergraduate/graduate).

The limitation orientation: Analytical mechanisms and narratives

In contrast to the homogeneity of the postponement group, the limitation group is characterised by marked diversity in terms of age, marital status and educational attainment. This category encompasses two distinct trajectories: parity-one women with no intention of having further births and childless women who express the intention not to pursue motherhood. Despite these differing backgrounds, the women following both orientations converge in their explicit determination not to have (further) children at the time of the interviews.

This intrinsic heterogeneity yields a wide range of narratives across the four underlying mechanisms, revealing the complex nuances and differentiated perspectives that define this group of women.

The mechanism of parenting and care emerges as the most frequent in the narratives of this group. For parity-one women, family support has been pivotal for childrearing, particularly for those navigating motherhood as a single parent without financial or logistical contributions from the father. Consequently, having a second child is often viewed as a potential risk that may overburden existing support networks. These women also express significant concern that the task of raising children could become untenable if such assistance is withdrawn (Figure 8).

“Uh-huh, she is very close to my mum. And when I had to start working and all, well, she was the one who took care of her the most. Well, in fact, since she was little, she [mother] was the one who took care of her, in terms of being with her and so on. But up until now, she [daughter] sleeps with my mum. Not with me. Now it really is like the girl [daughter] is more my mum’s than mine [laughs]” (L19, 34 years old, cohabiting, high school).

“Look, okay, at the start when my baby was born, my mum used to support me; my mum actually stayed for a whole year straight to help me with my daughter. I just feel like another child would be so much extra work for her [mother]” (M15, 31 years old, cohabiting, undergraduate/graduate).

For childless women, the absence of family networks – whether due to having elderly parents, currently fragmented relationships or experiences of childhood parental abandonment – often leads to a profound fear of becoming a mother without a support system. Under such conditions, these participants explicitly prefer to remain childless.

The quality of the maternal bond and the escalating temporal demands of childrearing are also mentioned in the narratives. Among parity-one women, there is a persistent narrative emphasising the importance of devoting exclusive emotional resources and attention to their existing child. Thus, limiting reproduction serves as a strategy to uphold the standards of intensive and responsive parenting. This is evident in the narratives of P12 and V17:

“I think that nowadays it is not only that they have limits [children], but also that they get a lot of [...] emotional and even psychological attention, which our generations perhaps did not, it was not something indispensable, but now I do believe that children get a lot of attention in this sense [...]” (P12, 39 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

“Well, I think he’s fine [son], financially speaking, but when it comes to time, it’s just . . . no. It’s not the amount of time I’d like to give my son, because work really does take up so much time” (V17, 29 years old, five-year-old son, single).

For the women interviewed who intend to remain nulliparous, parenting is linked to a particular lifestyle characterised by high demands and constant dedication as an imperative

to childrearing: *“I think that, basically, the whole idea of not having children has more to do with not wanting to be responsible for anyone else. There’s the caregiving part, sure, but I also feel it’s about time – like, right now my life is good, and I like living the way I do. I’ve lived, I’ve enjoyed it”* (E24, 45 years, single, undergraduate/graduate).

Among parity-one women, the experience of early motherhood is associated with the perception of having a completed reproductive cycle, which offers the prospect of reclaiming their autonomy as their children grow older (Figure 8). However, this decision also reflects a deliberate desire to avoid repeating the adverse circumstances of their first transition to motherhood, which may include parental abandonment, material deprivation or economic instability, as I18 states:

“Yeah, because, well, deep down I didn’t want to [have a child]. But anyway, I said, ‘Right, I’ve already messed up once by terminating the other pregnancy, [and] well, it’s not a game, is it?’ so I decided to have this child [first child]. I mean, deep down I did know that I didn’t [want to]. I didn’t have the capacity at that age to have or raise someone, or financial stability or the stability with my partner. So I said, ‘Well, that’s it, just with one and no more” (I18, 28 years old, single, high school).

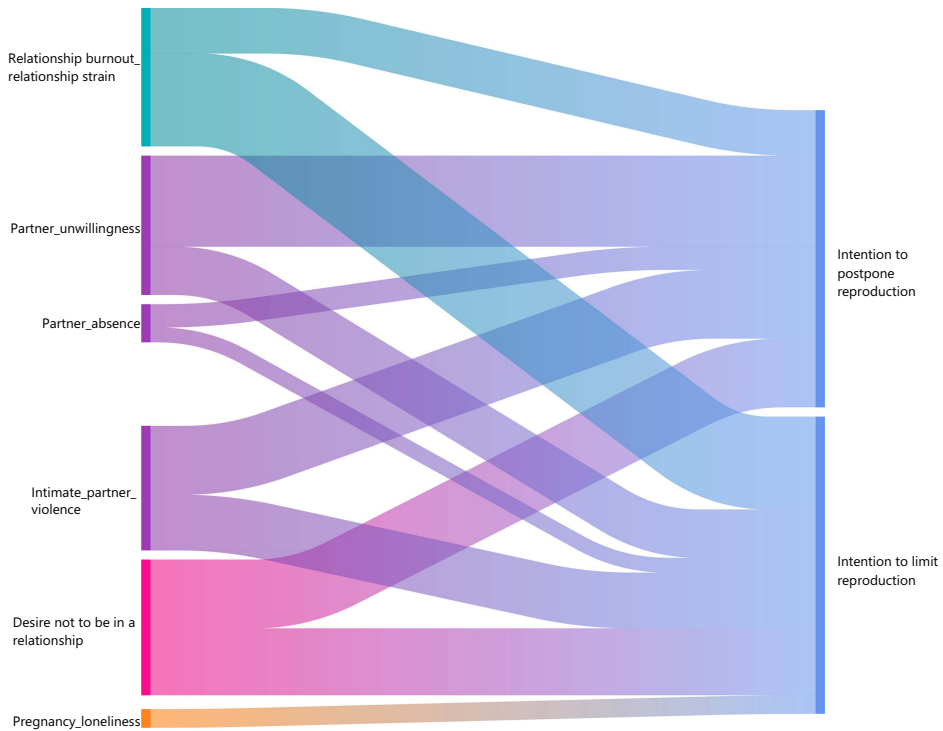
In contrast, for some childless women, the postponement of motherhood has gradually transitioned into a definitive intention to limit childbearing as they grow older, as G5 explains: *“[. . .] and I used to say, ‘Well, between 35 and 38, I think you’re at a point where you can decide. If I choose to have a baby, because that was my idea too, it’s because I’m going to be with them most of the time’ [. . .]. So, I thought, well, if my body is saying no, I mean, if at some point it said, ‘This isn’t for you’, then so be it. I’m not going to force something that isn’t meant to be”* (G5, 47 years old, married, undergraduate/graduate).

The second narrative mechanism identified in this group is the partner’s affective disengagement. Most of women who have experienced unplanned pregnancies also report previous cohabiting relationships characterised by violence, abuse, infidelity and alcohol and substance misuse (Figure 9). These experiences have prompted profoundly affective disengagement from the first child’s father and a subsequent reluctance to form new partner relationships. The intention to limit childbearing is linked to a refusal to relive such relationship conditions, as A11 states:

“We were a couple for over 16 years – and the relationship was already very worn out. [. . .] the relationship had settled into a place where we just didn’t trust each other anymore. We separated. There were infidelities, mistreatment and financial disorder. There was no sense of fairness in the relationship, no equality, the kind that is fair and that I now understand should be essential and important. I’ve no interest in repeating that whole saga with someone else” (A11, 36 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

Moreover, several of the women who have a child and have never married or cohabited report that their intention to limit childbearing is due to the impossibility of establishing a relationship with a partner other than the biological father of the first child. As M9 explains:

Figure 9 Elements associated with the partner's affective disengagement underlying reproductive intentions according to limit and postpone childbearing



Source: Own elaboration with information from interviews

“Because, up to a point, I wouldn’t want V [daughter] to have siblings from another dad. The simple fact is . . . maybe it’s wrong, because I’m sort of projecting myself onto V [daughter], in that I don’t want her to end up like me. I wouldn’t want her, in the future, to feel pushed out by a baby” (M9, 26 years old, single, high school).

Several of the nulliparous women also suggest that their previous experiences of emotional disconnection and a lack of commitment have reduced their desire to form new partnerships (Figure 9). Perceiving the formation of an ideal bond as practically unattainable, these women often embrace singlehood and, by extension, a definitive intention to limit childbearing. *“No, I don’t see myself with a partner to have children, I don’t see with someone who would take on that commitment. So, I made plans with my friends for our life in old age . . . Because most of my friends are single and don’t have children”* (S24, 45 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

The mechanisms of structural factors and uncertainty and individualism and self-fulfilment are less present in the narratives of women whose intentions are oriented towards limitation (Figures 5 and 6). Within this group, financial stability is associated with the intention to limit reproduction in two ways. For parity-one women, the financial

responsibility of covering children's needs, given their low purchasing power, emerges as a central factor motivating their decision not to have a second child, as suggested by P8: *"Honestly, I couldn't have another child because I just don't have the money"* (26 years old, single, high school). Furthermore, raising children entails increasing expenditures on consumer goods, recreation and leisure, which tend to rise as they age, as S1 states: *"[...], now you have to fulfil all those demands your children place on you, which means having more money to pay for those little extras [clothes, going to certain places], so they can fit in wherever they are, with their friends from secondary school, high school or university"* (S1, 46 years old, cohabiting, high school).

For nulliparous women, the lack of financial stability also permeates the intention to limit childbearing, albeit mediated by the mechanism of postponement (Figure 6). The wait for an "ideal" moment of financial security often extends until the intention gradually transforms into a definitive limitation, a trend that is particularly evident among older women, as S24's account illustrates:

"So then, with G, who was my second partner, I don't think so either [become mother] ... we were both barely just, like, entering that stage of financial and work stability, so no. I mean, no, neither of us could take on a responsibility like that [kids]. And with A [third partner] I did tell him, 'I don't want to have children'. I mean ... I said, 'Well, A can have whatever babies he wants, but not with me'" (S24, 45 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

Conversely, for younger women, the intention to limit reproduction is associated with a pessimistic outlook on the future (Figure 6). In their narratives, the lack of clarity regarding how to achieve the financial stability required for motherhood leads to shifting positions that alternate between considering future parenthood and explicitly rejecting childbearing. For example, some women report that barriers to accessing housing discourage them from wanting to have a second child. This issue is of particular concern for single mothers, for whom the financial burden and logistical challenges of finding housing near their family support networks can make renting or owning a home difficult. This is further evidenced by the testimony of A2. Housing concerns are absent from the narratives of nulliparous women, who either live with their parents or have already secured their own housing.

"I'm not always going to live in a room, right, because she [daughter] and I also need space for the two of us [...]. I have thought about having something of my own. It is expensive, there are no more places nearby, everything is very expensive, they impose many requirements. I don't know, it's complicated to think about having another child" (A2, 29 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

Finally, the mechanism of individualism and self-fulfilment influences the decision to limit reproduction, with distinct differences based on parity (Figure 5). For parity-one women, whose educational or professional aspirations were often disrupted by their transition to motherhood, having a second child is perceived as a factor that would exacerbate their existing difficulties and further hinder their personal plans, as D17 suggests:

“It was very complicated, to be honest, because I lived near Metro Muzquiz, and my university was in the centre of Tlalpan, so it was a daily commute of over two hours. But on top of that, studying Philosophy is so complicated that I’d get home at about 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening, absolutely shattered, with loads of activities, loads of reading, homework, assignments, you know? So, I had to find the strength from somewhere to be with my daughter for a bit, a proper bit of time, just a while . . . that was the hard part” (D17, 36 years old, living apart together, undergraduate/graduate).

For nulliparous women, particularly those of older ages, prolonged postponement is the strategy that has enabled them to achieve their professional and academic goals. After years of maintaining this dynamic, the intention to postpone gradually transitions into a definitive intention to limit childbearing, as J16’s account indicates: *“I was about 23, and I did my master’s at the time, and like all these plans . . . they just weren’t going through my head. And then one day I turned 30 and I said, ‘Do I really not want children?’ And I said, ‘No, no, no, I don’t want to, no’, and that passed”* (J16, 33 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

Selfishness is a further element within the individualism and self-fulfilment mechanism (Figure 5). Parity-one women often perceive the intention to limit their number of children as potentially selfish, as it stems from a desire to prioritise professional growth, which may have been constrained by the birth of their first child, but also by a reluctance to compromise their only child’s well-being through the sacrifices that rearing a second would entail. *“Either way, at first it seemed selfish, but it could be selfish on both sides. I didn’t want that part of [my] professional growth to be cut short, but on top of that, I didn’t want to be the peripheral mother either. The provider, and the one who leaves him at nursery for 10 hours”* (Q23, 43 years old, cohabiting, undergraduate/graduate).

Among nulliparous women, selfishness relates to the intention to remain childless, which is attributable to a perceived lack of affinity with children and the belief that they lack the necessary childrearing skills. However, as illustrated in J16’s account, this intention is not entirely free from the weight of social expectations:

“For example, I’ve never felt that affinity with children . . . I mean, like . . . maybe because of my background, but it’s like I just don’t have the patience for them; they really drive me mad. Um, it’s like I don’t understand them, so I say to myself, ‘I don’t know, what I’d do’, you know? So, I say, ‘I’d do my best’, but the truth is I find them maddening. Or that I don’t understand their needs properly, and I’m not that interested either, sadly” (J16, 33 years old, single, undergraduate/graduate).

Discussion

The present study examined four mechanisms underlying reproductive intentions based on the narratives of nulliparous and low-parity women in Mexico City: *individualism and*

self-fulfilment; structural factors and uncertainty; parenting and care; and the partner's affective engagement or disengagement. By distinguishing between the intention to postpone and to limit childbearing based on the predominant orientation of each narrative, this study demonstrates the inherent dynamism of women's reproductive intentions, which are frequently marked by ambivalence and periods of indecision across the life course (Yopo and Abufhele, 2024; Safdari-Dehcheshmeh et al., 2023; Pardo, 2019). Even if the boundaries between postponement and limitation frequently appear porous, preserving this analytical distinction remains essential. It enables a rigorous qualitative examination of the factors associated with each orientation, uncovering their points of convergence and advancing the debate on reproductive behaviour in Latin America, a region where empirical research remains limited and overly focused on postponement alone (Yopo, 2023).

In this regional context, our study of the reproductive intentions of women in Mexico City provides crucial qualitative evidence. The reproductive profile of the city's population defies standard western pathways, displaying lowest-low fertility (quantum) without a corresponding postponement of childbearing (tempo). Therefore, examining the reproductive behaviour of women living in this urban setting is very useful for theorising divergent reproductive intentions beyond the dominant European trend (Spoorenberg and Skirbekk, 2025).

Postponement and limitation: Underlying mechanisms of reproductive intentions

Through an iterative process of empirical enquiry systematically articulating the participants' narratives with literature-driven factors, this study argues that the underlying mechanisms of reproductive intentions do not operate uniformly, revealing both stance-specific and transversal dynamics. While the intention to postpone childbearing is heavily driven by *individualism and self-fulfilment*, the intention to limit reproduction is largely motivated by the contemporary crisis of *parenting and care* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

For nulliparous women intending to postpone motherhood, narratives centred around *individualisation and self-fulfilment* challenge the notion of reproductive autonomy, shifting the debate away from motherhood as a social destiny and towards motherhood as a reflexive but contested choice (Yopo, 2025). While these women are exercising their reproductive rights within a city that pioneered abortion decriminalisation and advances in sexual and reproductive health⁹ (GIRE, 2025), their accounts reveal a profound tension of agency. Postponement emerges as a reflection of unconstrained personal freedom, but also as an ambivalent stance produced by the self-obligation to standardise one's existence (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). The diversification of life projects, flexible trajectories and fulfilling lifestyles are inextricably bound to the precarious demands of the labour market required to sustain them. This structural entrapment exposes a crucial paradox: the autonomy to choose when to become a mother is constrained within highly unequal contexts that render the structural demands of individualisation practically unattainable, consistent with other qualitative findings in the region (Yopo, 2025, 2024).

9 According to data from the Ministry of Health, 277,268 people with gestational capacity had free access to an abortion in one of the city's clinics from 2007 to June 2024 (GIRE, 2025).

Conversely, *parenting and care* emerge as the primary mechanism underlying the intention to limit reproduction, exposing a sustainability crisis within contemporary care models. For parity-one women, the intensive demands of these standards transform the prospect of having a second child into an overwhelming burden, as having an additional dependent implies experiencing even more pressure to fulfil exhausting care criteria. Crucially, this mechanism operates with equal restrictive power among nulliparous participants, for whom the anticipated pressures of childrearing guide their explicit intention to remain childless at the time of the interview. The intention to limit reproduction reflects an unsustainable childrearing model that forces women to negotiate the limits of their own autonomy and disincentivises motherhood, as other studies have suggested (Yopo, 2025).

A central contribution of this study is our finding that the *partner relationship* acts as a crucial transversal mechanism across the two orientations, reflecting the high symbolic value of family formation in Mexico City (Esteve et al., 2012; Fussell and Palloni, 2004). Regional studies have contradictory views on the role of the partner in postponement: although having a companion for procreation is valued, the male partner's failure to provide childcare and financial support disincentivises motherhood (Yopo and Abufhele, 2024; Yopo-Díaz and Fuentes-Landeta, 2024).

Along these lines, our findings demonstrate that partner dynamics operate through opposing relational logics. For women with the intention to postpone childbearing, partnership dynamics often follow an oscillating pattern. While a stable union is desirable, it is also perceived as a potential source of inequality and conflict due to persistent gender imbalances. The prospect of having a supportive relationship acts as a potential incentive for future childbearing, making the partner's affective commitment and active involvement in unpaid domestic and care work non-negotiable conditions anchored in the demand for gender equality (Rentería-Castañeda, 2016). When a partner who meets these standards is unavailable, postponement becomes the only viable strategy (Mills et al., 2011).

In sharp contrast, the intention to limit reproduction is underpinned by a logic of affective disengagement. For parity-one women, experiences of relationship conflict and dissolution, compounded by experiences of limited economic contributions by previous partners and widespread gender-based violence, are the primary drivers of the decision to limit further childbearing. In Mexico City, violence against women, particularly against younger women, is both widespread and persistent (Pérez-Amador and Cuevas, 2023). According to the National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relationships, four out of 10 women have experienced partner violence over the course of their relationships, with nearly 20% reporting such episodes within the last year (INEGI, 2022).

While these adverse partner dynamics have traditionally been examined in order to understand the postponement of motherhood (Real and Aguilera, 2026; Yopo-Díaz and Fuentes-Landeta, 2024), our qualitative evidence indicates that for parity-one women, these factors not only result in postponement, but also act as impediments to having a second child. Adding to the complex nature of this mechanism, a distinct dynamic occurs among nulliparous women intending to limit reproduction. For this specific group, the intention to remain childless appears to be underpinned by mutual affection and a definitive commitment not to have children with their partner, consistent with research on double income, no kids partnerships in Latin America (Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, 2021;

Rodríguez et al., 2019). Reproductive intentions must be examined alongside union formation patterns, as motherhood and partnership remain deeply intertwined events in the Mexican context.

Answering the question regarding shared key drivers, we find that the mechanism of *structural factors and uncertainty* operates transversally across the two intentions, albeit through distinct expressions. The circumstances under which sustained postponement becomes closely associated with the intention to limit childbearing appear to be strongly linked to the intensification of uncertainty over time. The narratives of younger women oriented towards postponement do not reflect a definitive rejection of motherhood, but rather a strong ambivalence, with economic instability being perceived as a risk to be actively managed. Among older women, this interrelationship tends to be even stronger, with their narratives indicating that economic uncertainty is no longer seen as a manageable risk, and instead becomes a structural certainty that reinforces their intention to limit childbearing. For parity-one women, this structural uncertainty is further compounded by the pressure they feel to meet intensive social expectations at different stages of the child's life. This critical intersection of economic uncertainty and parenting expectations permeates these women's intentions to limit reproduction, and offers a path for future analytical exploration.

The ambivalence and contradictions in women's reproductive intentions are situated within an equally ambivalent urban context. On the one hand, Mexico City has higher levels of female education and labour force participation than the rest of the country and pioneering legislation on sexual and reproductive rights. However, these advances are accompanied by persistent gender inequalities and fragile work–life balance policies. While initiatives to address shared caregiving responsibilities have recently been implemented,¹⁰ it is still too early to discuss whether these interventions will actively influence reproductive intentions.

Furthermore, there is a notable discrepancy between the city's demographic reality and prevailing population policies. This is evidenced by a weak institutional debate regarding fertility shifts, a discussion that is largely driven by international organisations (UNFPA, 2025) rather than by local political agendas. Current reproductive health programs remain predominantly focused on adolescent pregnancy (Government of Mexico, 2025). Furthermore, the indicators established for the recent National Population Programme 2026–2030 (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2026) face the critical challenge of integrating the linkages between fertility, unpaid care work, housing access and gender equality, which is essential for comprehensively addressing the broader demographic complexities of Mexico City. This mismatch suggests that institutional frameworks have yet to align with the contemporary reproductive landscape, in which the challenge lies in balancing rights-based approaches with the structural support necessary to sustain diverse reproductive projects in the country. Our study provides a critical empirical framework to address this debate.

The findings of this study also contribute to the regional debate on how reproductive intentions are methodologically addressed in traditional surveys (Pardo, 2019).

10 For example, the creation of the Units of Transformation and Organization for Inclusion and Social Harmony [Unidades de Transformación y Organización para la Inclusión y Armonía Social] (Utopías) (ONU-Habitat, 2025) and the presentation of the Law on the Public Care System.

While Mexico's ENADID is the primary instrument for capturing these intentions, its single-response model fails to grasp the interdependent nature of reproductive decision-making (INEGI, 2023). The four mechanisms identified in this study support the claim that the category of "other" should be explored in greater detail (Pardo, 2019). This, in turn, prompts reflection on the adequacy of the current categories and the need to rethink them – a task for which qualitative research offers fundamental insights.

Although it is focused on Mexico City, this research provides a valuable framework for comparative qualitative studies across regions with diverse demographic profiles. Additionally, by demonstrating that partner dynamics fundamentally shape reproductive intentions, these findings lay the groundwork for a dyadic perspective. Incorporating men's narratives into subsequent studies will offer a crucial complementary understanding of reproductive intentions. This study did not consider the institutional mechanisms or social care programs introduced in Mexico City in recent years, due to their recent implementation. However, we believe that this is a crucial topic for future research, given the central role of the incompatibility of childcare with other spheres of women's lives.

Supplementary materials

Available online at <https://doi.org/10.1553/p-e9c3-f87p>

Supplementary file 1. Figure S.1, Scripts for semi-structured in-depth interviews (S1), Analytical dimensions identified in the in-depth interviews (S2), Project description (S3).



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the women who participated in our research for their openness and trust in sharing their stories. We are also grateful to Paula Licea Camacho and Vanessa Nava Nava for their invaluable support in identifying and connecting with the participants for this study.

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