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Population & Societies

French fertility is the highest in Europe. Because of its immigrants?

Version
française

Sabrina Volant*, Gilles Pison**, and François Héran***

With a total fertility rate of 1.9 children per woman in 2017, France is close to replacement level. Is this due to the presence of immigrants, as is often claimed? Using new data from the latest annual census surveys, Sabrina Volant, Gilles Pison, and François Héran estimate the contribution of immigrant women to French fertility and compare the situation in France with that of its European neighbours.

With 1.88 children per woman in 2017, France has the highest fertility in the European Union, the Europe-wide average being 1.59 [1, 2].⁽¹⁾ Is the relatively high fertility in France due to immigration? This widely held opinion often reflects a fear that native French people will be outnumbered by foreigners, thus threatening the country's national identity. We will leave aside the ideological aspects of this question and focus on the facts.

A large contribution to births, a limited impact on fertility

According to the French census, around 1 in 5 births (19%) in 2017 were to immigrant mothers (143,000 out of 760,000) (see Box 1 for the definition of “immigrant”); in 2009, the proportion was just 16% (Table). The contribution of immigrant women to births in France is thus increasing, and this fact deserves to be highlighted. But what is their contribution to the total fertility rate (see Box 2 for the definition)?

Surprising though it may seem, immigration has a strong impact on births but a limited impact on fertility. This can be illustrated by a fictitious example [3].

Table. Distribution of births in France to immigrant and non-immigrant mothers (%)

	Year				
	2009	2014	2015*	2016*	2017*
Immigrant mother	16.0	17.8	18.0	18.8	18.8
Native-born mother (non-immigrant)	84.0	82.2	82.0	81.2	81.2
Overall	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

* Provisional data.
Coverage: France, excluding Mayotte.
Source: INSEE, 2010 and 2015 population censuses and 2016–2018 annual census surveys.

Imagine 75 non-immigrant (native) women and 25 immigrant women with an identical average of 2 children per woman in both groups. The immigrant women will account for 25% of births, but without changing the fertility rate. Their contribution is due simply to their representing 25% of mothers. This is because the number of births is the product of two independent factors: the number of women of reproductive age and their propensity to have children. It is mistaken to believe that immigrant women's contribution to their host country's fertility rate is proportional to the number of babies they have.

Now let's imagine another fictitious country where 99% of women have two children, while a 1% minority have seven. This minute proportion of large families would have a very limited effect on the

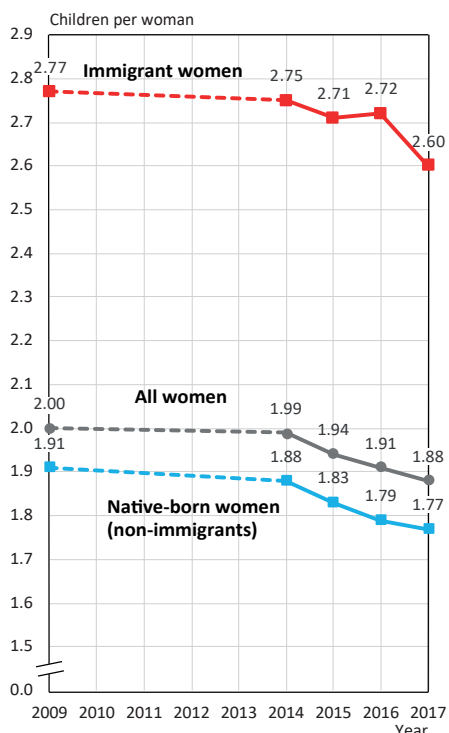
(1) This article provides an update on a previous article published in *Population & Societies* in 2007 [3].

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Figure 1. Total fertility rates of immigrant and native-born women in France



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Coverage: France, excluding Mayotte.

Note: Provisional estimates for 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Source: INSEE, 2010 and 2015 population censuses and 2016–2018 annual census surveys.

national fertility rate, raising it by just 0.05 children from 2.00 to 2.05. For immigrant women to have a strong impact on the fertility rate and not simply on the number of births, they must represent a large proportion of mothers, and their fertility must also be much higher than the average.

Immigrant mothers' contribution to the French fertility rate: +0.1 children per woman

What is the situation in France? Census data show that in 2017, native-born and immigrant women had 1.8 and 2.6 children, respectively, or a difference of 0.8 children. For the population as a whole, the fertility rate in France was close to 1.9. This means that immigrant mothers added slightly more than 0.1 children to the national rate.⁽²⁾ Given that they account for 19% of births, why then is their contribution so small? It is because immigrant women represented only 12% of the female population of childbearing age.⁽³⁾

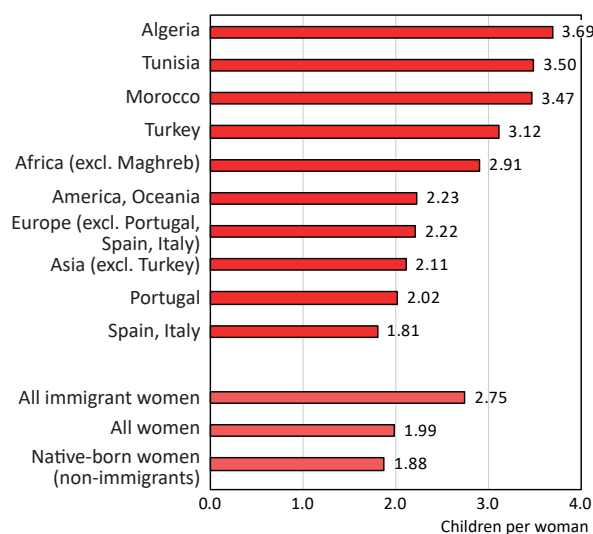
Between 2009 and 2014, the proportion of immigrant women in the female population of reproductive age increased from 10.6% to 11.7%, as did the share of

Box 1. How is an "immigrant" defined?

In France, an immigrant is defined as a person born abroad to non-French parents and whose habitual residence is in France. Those who acquire French nationality after arrival are still counted as immigrants. Under this definition, recommended by the United Nations, women born French abroad to expatriate parents are not immigrants. For Eurostat, on the other hand, an immigrant is a person born outside the country, whatever his or her nationality at birth, so these women are included in its immigration statistics. This second definition is used for the European comparisons shown in Figure 4. For the other figures, the INSEE definition is used, so foreign-born women with French nationality at birth are excluded.

Note that, by definition, daughters of immigrants who were born in France, also known as the second generation, are counted as natives and are not included among immigrant women.

Figure 2. Total fertility rate of immigrant women by country of birth (2014)



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Coverage: France, excluding Mayotte.

Source: INSEE, 2015 population census.

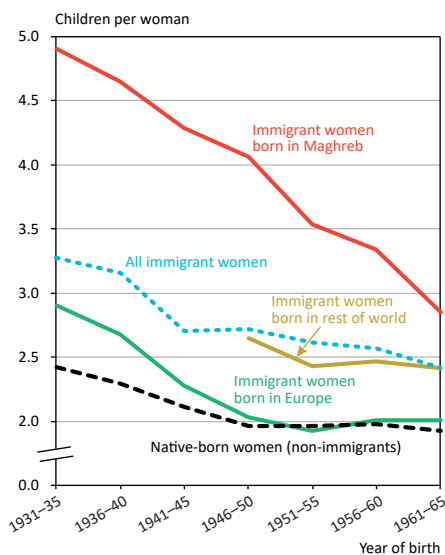
births to immigrant women (Table), and the contribution of immigrant women to the French fertility rate rose from 0.09 to 0.11 children (Figure 1). This is a moderate increase. In 2009, immigrant women increased the country's fertility by around 5%;

(2) +0.1 children does not mean an increase of 0.1%, which would be just 1 in 1,000.

(3) By definition, daughters of immigrants born in France are counted as natives and are not included among immigrant women (see Box 1). Their fertility is similar to that of the other native-born women.

Box 2. How do we measure the completed fertility of immigrant women?

Figure 3. Completed fertility by place of birth and birth cohort: strong convergence between immigrant and native-born women



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Source : INSEE, Masson [5].

The census confirms a strong tendency among migrant women to wait until they reach France before bearing their first child. A period of low fertility is thus followed by a phase of high fertility [4]. From the dates of birth of children counted in the census (own-children method), we can deduce that the total fertility rate of immigrant women does not exceed 1 child per woman before they arrive in France and that it rises very sharply in the year that follows, to around 4, before falling back again.

The total fertility rate measures the completed fertility that would be reached in a given year if all women experienced, throughout their reproductive life, the fertility rates observed for all ages in that year.^(a) It is therefore very sensitive to effects of timing and geography. By estimating period fertility solely on the basis of births occurring in France and after a wave of recent arrivals, we overestimate immigrant fertility because we ignore their low fertility prior to arrival and the return to normal observed after several years in the country. By focusing on recent arrivals, the period indicator assumes that immigrant women will continue to behave like new arrivals throughout their reproductive life; it is as if we measured road traffic density simply by observing the cars queuing at a tollgate without considering the fast-flowing traffic on either side. In other words, women’s entire childbearing trajectory should be taken into account in all populations using a “completed fertility” indicator (total number of births at the end of reproductive life) rather than the total fertility rate.

According to the 2011 Family and Housing survey, immigrant women born between 1961 and 1965 had 2.42 children over their reproductive lifetime [5] (Figure 3). This figure varies by country of origin, between a low of 2.00 for European women and a high of 2.85 for Maghrebi women. The completed fertility of immigrant women is higher than that of natives, but the difference has halved with respect to that observed among women born in the years

1931–1935 (Figure 3). Detailed examination of the fertility of successive birth cohorts reveals a clear overall trend towards convergence of behaviours, both across immigrant groups and with respect to the rest of the population.

(a) INED’s website features an animation that shows how the total fertility rate is calculated.

https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/videos/animation-measuring-fertility/

since 2014, they have raised it by around 6%. Note that between 2014 and 2017—most markedly in 2017—fertility fell not only among native women but also among immigrant women, although their contribution to French fertility remained stable.⁽⁴⁾

Maghrebi immigrants have the highest fertility rate

Immigrant fertility varies by country of birth. With around 3.5 children per woman, immigrant women from the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) have the highest fertility rate (Figure 2). Those born in sub-Saharan Africa or Turkey have around 3 children (2.91

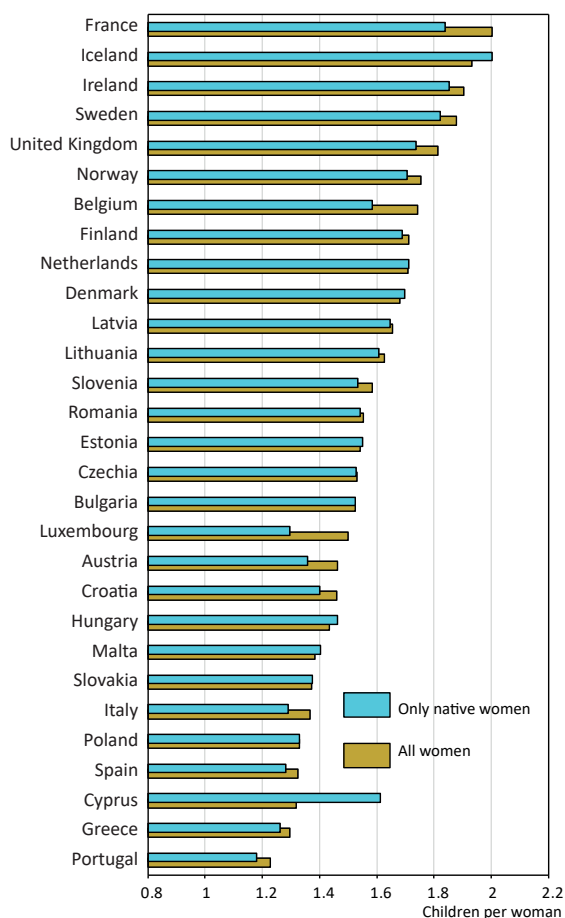
and 3.12, respectively). The fertility of immigrant women born in the other world regions is similar to the national average at around 2 children per woman. These fertility levels do not necessarily reflect those of the countries of origin. Turkey, for example, has a fertility rate of close to 2 children per woman, similar to that of the rest of Asia,⁽⁵⁾ while Maghrebi fertility does not exceed 3 children per woman.⁽⁶⁾ The fertility of European women, for their part, is higher than in their country of origin, whereas that of sub-Saharan African women is well below the levels in their home countries. These differences should be put in perspective, however, as all these fertility rates are calculated solely for births that take place in France, and many migrant women wait until they have arrived in France before starting a family. Their fertility is thus overestimated if the calculation does not include their low fertility both before migration and after the childbearing peak in the first years after arrival (Box 2).

(4) For the years 2015, 2016, and 2017, the data are provisional; the final figures may be slightly different.

(5) 2.1 children per woman in 2014 in Turkey and 2.2 in the whole of Asia, according to the United Nations [6].

(6) 3.0 children per woman in Algeria, 2.5 in Morocco, and 2.2 in Tunisia in 2014, according to the United Nations [6].

Figure 4. Total fertility rate of all women and of native-born women only in European countries (2014)



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Source: Eurostat.

Notes: Native-born women are those born in the country (including for France). As Eurostat does not give statistics by country of birth for Germany, it is not included in the list.

Immigrant women’s contribution to national fertility rates: European comparisons

How does France compare with the other European countries? In half of them, as in France, the presence of immigrant women raises fertility rates (Figure 4). But in a quarter of European countries, their numbers are too small to influence these rates, as is the case in most of the former communist countries of Central or Eastern Europe (Baltic countries, Poland, Czechia, Romania, Bulgaria). The Netherlands is in a category

of its own: although the proportion of immigrant women is high, they do not raise the country’s fertility rate because their fertility is very similar to that of natives. There are even countries, such as Iceland and Denmark, where immigrant women tend to lower national rates rather than increase them.

French fertility rates top the rankings in Europe not so much for reasons of immigration, but rather because fertility among native-born women is high. It is this phenomenon that needs to be accounted for. Part of the explanation lies in the widely supported pro-family policies implemented consistently in France over the last 75 years. But that’s another story.

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Abstract

Immigrant mothers account for 19% of all births in France today. The total fertility rate of immigrant women is higher than that of native-born French women (2.6 children versus 1.8 in 2017), but as only a minority of women are concerned, their births increase the French fertility rate by just 0.1 children, from 1.8 to 1.9 children per woman in 2017. With or without immigrants, fertility in France is among the highest in Europe.

Keywords

Births, fertility, immigrant women, native-born women, France, European comparisons.