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# Pathways into childlessness

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## The impact of education, work history and partnership history on remaining childless

**Childlessness has received a great deal of media attention in recent years. Most attention has been paid to the relationship between education, work and having children. Other dimensions have been largely neglected. This study focuses on relationship histories alongside issues such as education and employment. The research results suggest that policy changes are required.**

photo: Wim de Jonge

### Life course approach

Although the literature seems to assume that the decision to have children or to remain childless is a conscious one (except in cases of infertility), recent studies suggest that the decision to remain childless is more implicit than previously thought; it is much more often the result of behaviour and circumstances relating to education, work and union formation. In order to examine whether this is indeed the case, people's life courses are studied with the aid of data gathered as part of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, a large-scale representative panel survey into family ties.

### Differences between men and women

This study addresses the life courses of both men and women as the life paths that lead to childlessness are believed to differ for men and women. This may be attributed not only to the fact that the biological fertility of women follows a different course from that of men but also to the fact that women encounter greater obstacles in their efforts to combine caring duties with a job.

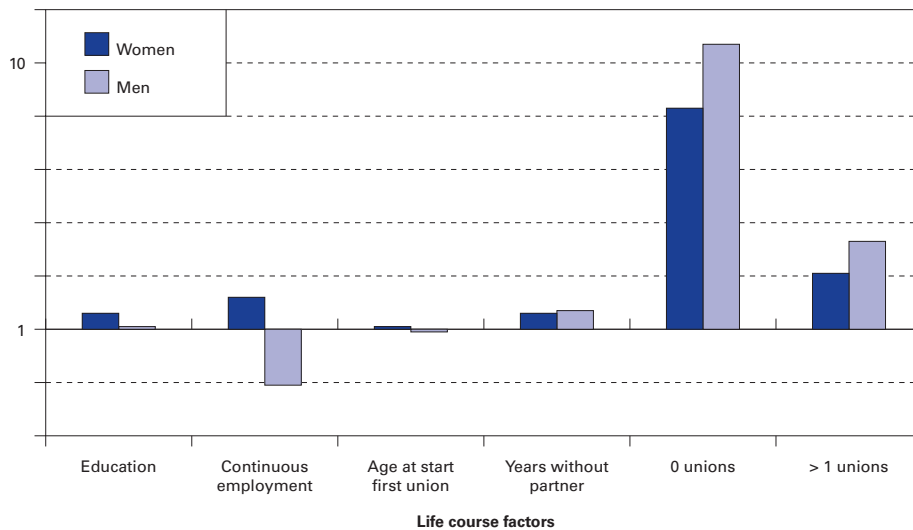
As expected, the research results show up differences between men and women in the life paths that lead to a childless existence. Highly educated women are more likely to remain childless than women with a lower level of education. Each additional year of education increases the probability that women will remain childless by 14 percent. Education was found to have no significant effect among men. Whereas women who do not interrupt their



careers have a 31 percent *higher* likelihood of remaining childless, this likelihood is 38 percent *lower* among men. So while a stable, uninterrupted career appears to be a requisite among men, the research results suggest the opposite for women.

In comparison with people's educational history and employment history, their relationship history was found to have the greatest influen-

The likelihood to remain childless: The influence of various life course factors (logarithmic scale)



**LITERATURE:**

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ce on the probability of remaining childless. Women who have never had a partner are almost seven times as likely to remain childless as women who have or have had a partner. Men without a partner were even 12 times as likely to remain childless, suggesting that men’s chances are lower of having a child from a short relationship than women’s. Men who have been in several relationships are more than twice as likely to remain childless than men who have had one relationship only. This probability is much lower among women. This suggests that the likelihood of remaining childless among men is determined by who crosses their path in love life. Women are more inclined to take advantage of a new relationship to embark on parenthood.

That said, men and women do not differ in every respect. Both men and women are more likely to remain childless if they have been single for several years. Each year without a partner increases their likelihood of remaining childless by about 16 percent. Among both men and women the age at the time of the first union was not found to influence the probability of remaining childless.

**Policy**

Government policy in the Netherlands in the past ten years has sought to make it easier for women to combine a job with family duties. This policy does not seem to have been very effective, however. For whereas most children in the Netherlands are born to working mothers, the percentage of childless couples has not declined. Women who feel that a career cannot be combined with children, for example, often delay entering into a serious relationship as this could result in them having children. Men tend to focus initially on building a stable career and on finding a partner, and only then want children to make the picture complete. Education, work and relationships cannot be seen in isolation and their effects should therefore be studied jointly rather than separately in order to gain more insight into the prevalence of childlessness these days. The research results suggest that it is time for policy changes with respect to childlessness.

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