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Diverging Family Trajectories and Social Inequality

Three Generations of Women in Buenos Aires

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Abstract

Family change in Latin America has often been described as a transition from traditional to modern forms, yet growing evidence suggests that family trajectories have diversified in socially unequal ways. Using retrospective life-history data from the 2019 Survey of Demographic and Reproductive Events (EDER), this study examines women's union and fertility trajectories in the City of Buenos Aires across three birth cohorts (1948–52, 1968–72, and 1978–82). Reconstructing complete sequences of partnership formation, dissolution, and childbearing, we identify four empirically grounded trajectory types—Classical, Catholic, Modern, and Fragile—using cluster analysis. Results show that family change has not followed a uniform or linear path. While modernization has expanded delayed fertility and stable nonmarital unions among more educated women, fragile trajectories marked by early childbearing, union instability, and multipartner fertility have also grown, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged women. These patterns are strongly stratified by education, labor-market informality, and childhood living conditions, and they display clear intergenerational continuity through parental education, co-residence, and family structure. Overall, the findings highlight how modernization and fragility have unfolded as parallel processes in Buenos Aires, producing divergent family trajectories that both reflect and reproduce social inequality.

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, family life in Latin America has undergone profound transformations. Marriage has declined, cohabitation and union instability have risen, and motherhood is increasingly delayed among the middle and upper classes while remaining early and unplanned among the poor. These shifts have not produced a homogeneous process of “modernization,” but rather a new stratification of family trajectories, where stability and fragility coexist within the same urban societies. Buenos Aires, one of the most modernized and educationally advanced cities in the region, offers a revealing case for understanding how family change interacts with inequality.

In this paper, we examine the evolution of family trajectories across three generations of women born between 1948 and 1982 in the city of Buenos Aires, drawing on a retrospective survey conducted in 2019.¹ By reconstructing complete life histories of union formation and childbearing, we identify four enduring types of family trajectories, that we dub *Classical*, *Catholic*, *Modern*, and *Fragile*.² We then analyze the socioeconomic profiles associated with each type and document how these profiles vary across cohorts and across generations. This approach moves beyond cross-sectional family indicators to capture the dynamic and intergenerational processes through which advantage and disadvantage are transmitted.

Our analysis situates Buenos Aires within both an international and a regional comparative frame. While in Northern Europe family diversification was buffered by welfare states and gender-equality policies, in Latin America these changes unfolded amid persistent inequality and limited institutional support (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Martin, 2002; Perelli-Harris & Gassen, 2012; Sánchez Gassen & Perelli-Harris, 2015). We build on this literature to argue that in Buenos Aires, family fragility functions not merely as a consequence of poverty but as a mechanism of social reproduction: it both reflects and reinforces cumulative disadvantage across generations.

These patterns resonate with the “diverging destinies” framework proposed by McLanahan (2004), which emphasizes how family change in advanced societies has amplified inequality in children’s life chances. Family stability has become increasingly class-differentiated, with higher-educated women delaying and planning fertility within stable unions, while disadvantaged women experience earlier and more fragile family formation. Although originally developed in the U.S.

¹ Throughout the paper, we use several closely related expressions—such as “family trajectories,” “union and fertility trajectories,” “life-course profiles,” and “union and fertility dynamics”—to refer to women’s longitudinal histories of union formation, dissolution, and childbearing. These terms emphasize different analytic facets (e.g., a life-course versus demographic focus), but they all denote the same underlying construct: the sequencing and timing of key family events over the life course.

² The labels Classical, Catholic, Modern, and Fragile are heuristic and descriptive, intended to summarize dominant patterns rather than to imply homogeneous or normative categories.

context, this perspective has been extended to Europe and other high-income settings (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; McLanahan & Jacobsen, 2014; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015) and provides a useful lens for interpreting Latin American family change, where early union formation, cohabitation, and nonmarital fertility remain strongly class-differentiated (Esteve, Castro-Martín, & Castro Torres, 2022; Esteve & Flórez-Paredes, 2018).

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it offers one of the few intergenerational analyses of family trajectories in Argentina. Second, it integrates typological and cohort-based methods to link micro-level life courses with macro-structural change. Finally, it advances the concept of reproduction of fragility, showing how unstable family structures, early unions, and weak educational attainment coalesce into durable patterns of inequality.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews theoretical perspectives on family change and intergenerational reproduction. Section 3 provides some geographical and historical context. Section 4 describes the data, variables, and analytical strategy, including the construction of the family trajectory typology. Section 5 presents the empirical results, focusing on cohort differences and intergenerational linkages. Section 6 discusses these findings in comparative and policy perspective, and Section 7 concludes by discussing how these trajectories reproduce social inequality in Argentina.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Family Change and the Rise of Stratified Modernity

Over the past half century, family systems around the world have undergone profound transformations. In industrial societies, the transition from the “male breadwinner model” toward diverse partnership forms and gender roles has been described as part of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT). This transition entailed delayed marriage, declining fertility, rising cohabitation, and a growing emphasis on individual autonomy. These shifts were not merely demographic but reflected broader cultural changes—secularization, women’s educational expansion, and new ideals of self-realization (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa, 1986; Lesthaeghe, 2010; Lesthaeghe, 2014; van de Kaa 1987).

However, the SDT has unfolded unevenly across contexts. In Northern and Western Europe, family diversification was supported by welfare institutions and gender equality policies that stabilized nontraditional families. In contrast, in Southern Europe and Latin America, the same demographic shifts took place under weaker state protection and greater socioeconomic inequality, resulting in uneven or stratified family change (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Martin, 2002; Perelli-Harris & Gassen, 2012; Sánchez Gassen & Perelli-Harris, 2015).

In Latin America, the long-term pattern combines fertility decline, delayed marriage, and the persistence of informal unions (Esteve et al., 2022). These trends coexist with rising educational attainment among women and a widening gap between those who can delay or plan family formation and those whose early fertility and instability reflect structural constraints. Argentina—and especially the City of Buenos Aires—stands at the leading edge of this transformation: early urbanization, high female schooling, and secular norms produced early signs of family modernization, yet chronic macroeconomic volatility and persistent labor-market informality prevented the institutional stabilization of new family forms. As a result, the demographic features associated with modernization—cohabitation, delayed fertility, nonmarriage—did not evolve into the stable, low-risk patterns observed in Europe. Instead, they emerged alongside widening socioeconomic disparities, contributing to the region’s own version of “diverging destinies.”

2.2 Intergenerational Reproduction of Fragility

Beyond describing aggregate change, our study focuses on the intergenerational transmission of family fragility—the ways in which inequality in family structure, stability, and resources perpetuates across generations. In the Diverging Destinies and Fragile Families traditions, fragility is typically characterized by early and nonmarital childbearing, unstable unions, multipartner fertility, and weak or inconsistent paternal involvement—conditions that constrain parental resources and accumulate across generations (McLanahan, 2004). Life-course and stratification theories converge on this point: families are not only outcomes of social processes but mechanisms that reproduce them (Mare, 2011; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). The early family environment—its stability, socioeconomic conditions, and parental behavior—shapes children’s developmental trajectories and, in turn, the families they later form.

We adopt a life-course approach, emphasizing temporal sequences rather than static states. Following the life-course tradition (Elder, 1998), we treat family formation not as a set of isolated events but as sequences shaped by timing, transitions, and cumulative advantage or disadvantage. Life-course approaches highlight how early circumstances constrain later choices, and how individual biographies are embedded in historical time—a key consideration given our cohort design. A woman’s partnership and fertility trajectory—the age at first birth, the number of partners, union stability—reflects both her structural position and her accumulated life experience. These trajectories, in turn, shape the developmental environments of the next generation. In this sense, family fragility is both a cause and a consequence of social inequality.

Crucially, we view these patterns as emerging from underlying, often unobserved individual characteristics or “types”—latent traits such as future orientation, relational stability, and the internalization of social norms. These traits interact with structural opportunities to produce observable outcomes. A dynamic model would include selection into types, feedback from early life experiences, and

assortative matching between partners, generating correlated trajectories across domains of family, education, and work. While such a model is beyond our empirical scope, our descriptive approach allows us to reverse engineer its traces: stable versus fragile trajectories can be interpreted as empirical manifestations of latent heterogeneity in preferences, constraints, and opportunities.

Across the three Buenos Aires cohorts, we therefore expect both continuity and divergence. Modernization and educational expansion should have increased the prevalence of stable, “modern” trajectories among the middle and upper strata, while persistent economic volatility and weak institutions likely sustained fragile pathways among the vulnerable. In this sense, family change in Buenos Aires illustrates a dual dynamic: the spread of modern family ideals alongside the reproduction of structural fragility—two processes that intertwine but do not converge.

2.3 From Framework to Empirical Strategy

Building on this framework, our empirical approach operationalizes family fragility as a composite indicator summarizing the observed trajectories of women across key dimensions of union and fertility behavior. Rather than analyzing isolated cross-sectional statuses, we treat each woman’s life as a sequence of events that together reflect her structural position and behavioral “type”. To capture these underlying patterns, we later construct a typology of trajectories using cluster analysis, grouping women with similar life-course profiles into analytically meaningful types. We do that using four indicators that capture the markers of family fragility.

1. **Teen birth** (before age 20), capturing early fertility and limited opportunity accumulation;
2. **Never-married motherhood**, reflecting institutional detachment from formal union structures;
3. **Multipartner fertility**, a marker of instability and relational turnover;
4. **High parity** (three or more children), associated with cumulative economic strain.

Each of these variables has both a structural and a behavioral interpretation. Structurally, they signal socioeconomic constraint and institutional weakness; behaviorally, they proxy unobserved dimensions such as foresight, relational stability, and access to social capital.

Our analysis then situates these trajectories across three successive cohorts of Buenos Aires women (born 1948–52, 1968–72, 1978–82), linking observed differences to the city’s evolving economic and cultural environments. This life-course perspective allows us to explore how modernization and fragility

coexisted, and how early-life conditions, transmitted through family of origin, continue to shape the formation of families in contemporary Argentina.

3. Context and Cohort Definition

The three cohorts of Buenos Aires women analyzed in this study were born between 1948–52, 1968–72, and 1978–82, spanning the second half of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first. Each came of age under distinct economic, political, and cultural circumstances that shaped their opportunities for education, employment, and family formation.

Cohort 1 (born 1948–52) reached adulthood during the 1960s and 1970s, when Argentina experienced industrial expansion, male-breadwinner norms, and restrictive family institutions. Marriage was nearly universal, divorce was illegal, and gender roles were rigidly defined. This cohort thus embodies the “classical” family regime: early marriage, high fertility, and low union dissolution, supported by relatively stable formal employment and strong gender specialization.

Cohort 2 (born 1968–72) spent their adolescence during the transition to democracy and entered adulthood amid the neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s. The legalization of divorce in 1987 and the expansion of women’s education and employment opened new possibilities for partnership and motherhood, yet economic volatility and precarious labor markets undermined family stability. As a transitional generation, their trajectories reflect a mixture of emerging modern aspirations and the more traditional norms and expectations learned in their families of origin—producing patterns that sit between the classical and contemporary regimes.

Cohort 3 (born 1978–82) came of age amid chronic crisis and social transformation—growing informality, the 2001 economic collapse, and the subsequent wave of rights-based reforms (sexual and reproductive health law in 2002, the normalization of divorce, and later same-sex marriage). For these women, delayed fertility and diverse union forms coexist with heightened fragility among the poor. Their trajectories reflect a bifurcation of family destinies: increasing stability among the educated and persistent fragility among the vulnerable.

Together, these cohorts allow us to trace how Buenos Aires moved from a near-universal marriage regime to a plural and stratified family system. The city’s long-standing urbanization and educational advantages positioned it at the forefront of Latin American modernization, yet recurrent crises and weak welfare support have preserved deep social divides. Examining these three cohorts therefore provides a unique window onto how modernization and fragility intertwined over time within an urban, middle-income context.

4. Data and Methods

4.1 Data Source and Sample

We use data from the *Encuesta de Desarrollo Económico y Recursos* (EDER CABA), a retrospective life-history survey—the first of its kind—conducted in 2019 in the City of Buenos Aires. The survey was designed following the methodological framework of the *Encuesta Demográfica Retrospectiva de México* (EDER Mexico), adapting its structure to the Argentine urban context (Giacoponello, 2023). It collects retrospective information on education, employment, family of origin, and family formation throughout the life course. Unlike administrative sources, which are constrained to specific events or time windows, retrospective surveys provide a more comprehensive representation of life courses by capturing informal unions, cohabitation episodes, and childbearing sequences that are typically absent from official records. This structure enables the recovery of multi-decade family trajectories within a single cross-sectional design, thereby facilitating the analysis of long-term behavioral patterns and intergenerational mobility.

As with any retrospective data source, potential recall bias constitutes an inherent limitation. Nevertheless, the EDER follows international best practices in life-history data collection, employing anchoring techniques and cross-module validation to minimize measurement error. Internal consistency checks within the Buenos Aires dataset likewise suggest high reliability in the sequencing and dating of major life events.

EDER's retrospective design is well-suited to life-course analysis; however, it poses a substantive data-structure challenge. The survey records, for each calendar year, each respondent's status with respect to every partner and every child—including partners no longer present and children not yet born—so individuals with complex family histories can generate multiple person-year records. To make the dataset analytically tractable and to highlight trajectories rather than annual states, we reconstructed each woman's complete sequence of union formation, dissolution, and childbearing and collapsed it into a single “trajectory observation” summarizing cumulative family experience. This transformation, detailed in Appendix A, yields cross-sectional trajectory profiles consistent with comparative life-course approaches that emphasize sequencing and timing as foundations for understanding social inequality (Elder, 1998; Bernardi, Huinink, & Settersten, 2019).

4.2 Building a Typology of Family Trajectories

To classify completed family trajectories, we represent each woman i with a vector of four binary indicators j :

$$y_i = (y_{i1}, y_{i2}, y_{i3}, y_{i4}) \in \{0,1\}^4,$$

where $y_{i1} = 1$ indicates teen birth (before age 20), $y_{i2} = 1$ indicates never-married motherhood, $y_{i3} = 1$ represents multipartner fertility, and $y_{i4} = 1$ indicates high parity (three or more children). Each component captures both structural constraints and behavioral tendencies, proxied by observable outcomes. In combination, they approximate the latent heterogeneity—what we term “types”—underlying stable versus fragile family trajectories.

To define typologies, we use cluster analysis. Cluster analysis is an unsupervised classification technique that groups observations—here, women’s life-course profiles—into distinct categories based on their similarity. Unlike predefined typologies, clusters emerge empirically from patterns in the data. Women assigned to the same cluster share similar configurations of union and fertility variables, while women in different clusters exhibit different combinations.

Because our indicators are categorical, we use the *k-modes algorithm*, which measures similarity using *Hamming distance*—the number of mismatched indicators between two profiles (Huang, 1997). The algorithm identifies a set of k cluster “modes”—the most common combination of indicator values in each group—and assigns each woman to the cluster whose mode is closest to her profile.

This approach allows us to uncover latent family-trajectory types directly from the data, without imposing a priori categories. The resulting groups provide an interpretable typology that captures meaningful heterogeneity in women’s life-course pathways and serves as the basis for subsequent socioeconomic and intergenerational analyses.

We stack the four fragility indicators for all women into an $N \times 4$ matrix and apply *k-modes clustering* with $k = 4$.³ The algorithm identifies four modal patterns—one for each cluster—formalized as

$$Type_k = (m_{k1}, m_{k2}, m_{k3}, y_{k4}) \in \{0,1\}^4,$$

where each m_{kj} is the most frequent value of indicator j among women assigned to cluster k . Each woman is then assigned to the cluster whose modal vector is closest to her own indicator profile, where closeness is evaluated by counting the number of indicator mismatches (the Hamming distance). This procedure partitions the sample into four empirically derived trajectory profiles, to which we assign illustrative labels—explained below—to facilitate interpretation.

Obviously, not all women within a given cluster display the exact same configuration of the four fragility indicators. The modal vector represents the most frequent pattern within each group, but there is meaningful variation around these

³ We set $K=4$ to maximize the number of observations per cluster—given the limited sample of women with children ($N=490$)—while preserving within-cluster homogeneity. Alternative solutions with $K=6-10$ yield substantively similar patterns, supporting the robustness of the four-type typology. See Appendix B for more detail.

modes. In principle, the four binary indicators generate sixteen possible profiles; the clustering procedure reduces this full set of combinations into four empirically coherent types. Appendix C reports the average value of each indicator by cluster—illustrating, for example, that the Fragile group exhibits high mean levels of all four markers, while the Classical group shows consistently low means. These distributions clarify that the modal vectors summarize central tendencies rather than define deterministic categories, and that each trajectory type encompasses internal heterogeneity consistent with real-life diversity in women’s union and fertility pathways.

The modal values for each of these four types are:

- $Type_1 (Classic) = (0, 0, 0, 0) = (no\ MPF, married, low\ parity, no\ TB)$
- $Type_2 (Modern) = (0, 1, 0, 0) = (no\ MPF, never\ married, low\ parity, no\ TB)$
- $Type_3 (Catholic) = (0, 0, 1, 0) = (no\ MPF, married, high\ parity, no\ TB)$
- $Type_4 (Fragile) = (1, 1, 1, 1) = (MPF, never\ married, high\ parity, TB)$

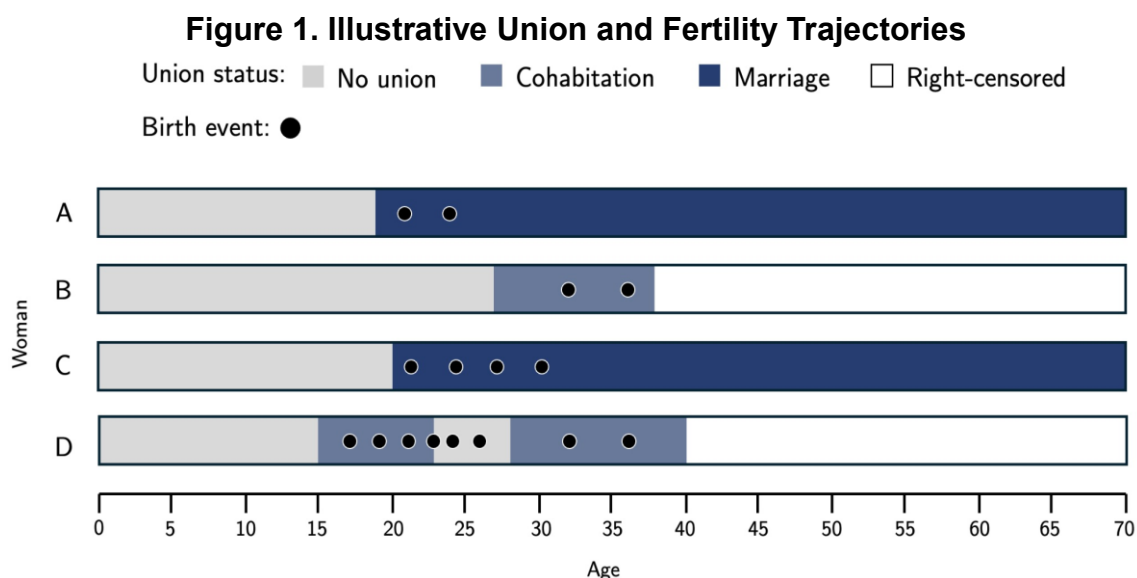
The illustrative labels summarize dominant features of each trajectory type. They are not analytical categories but heuristic descriptors that convey some tentative social meaning of the modal patterns emerging from the clustering procedure, that approximate some historically recognizable ways of forming families in Buenos Aires and some broader regional contexts.

- **Classical** refers to women who follow a traditional, stable, marriage-centered trajectory: early and enduring union, two or three children, and very low fragility indicators. This label captures the normative family model prevailing in Cohort 1.
- **Catholic** designates a profile similar to the Classical one but distinguished by high parity and the continued centrality of marriage as an institution. The label signals the historical association in Argentina between Catholic normative frameworks, early stable unions, and larger family size.⁴
- **Modern** describes trajectories marked by later family formation, the decoupling of couplehood from marriage, and low fragility. These women are typically highly educated, form stable cohabiting unions, and have one or two children at older ages. This label registers the emergence of the post-transition, autonomy-centered model of family life.
- **Fragile** identifies trajectories combining early fertility, union instability, multipartner fertility, and high cumulative fragility. The label aligns with the

⁴ Stronger religious commitment is associated with more traditional family norms and higher fertility ideals, though its effect on realized fertility is generally modest and shaped by education and institutional context (Philipov & Berghammer, 2007; Peri-Rotem, 2016). In Argentina, Catholicism has operated mainly as a cultural and institutional framework shaping marriage-centered family patterns (Torrado, 2003; Mallimaci & Giménez Béliveau, 2007). Accordingly, the “Catholic” trajectory identified here refers to this historically embedded normative context rather than to individual religiosity per se

comparative literature on “fragile families,” emphasizing instability, weak institutional anchoring, and constrained opportunity sets in early life.

To illustrate how union and fertility dynamics unfold across the life course, Figure 1 presents four stylized trajectories—Woman A through Woman D—each representative of one of the main types identified in our clustering.



Notes: The white segment at the right end of some trajectories denotes right-censoring, indicating ages that had not yet been reached at the time of the survey. Black dots mark the age at each birth, so the timing of fertility events is related to the underlying union history.

Woman A (Classical) follows the standardized sequence characteristic of older cohorts: she marries early, remains in a stable union without divorce, and has two children in her twenties. By midlife, her trajectory reflects long-term marital continuity and moderate fertility—features that defined the dominant family model in mid-century Argentina.

Woman B (Modern) never marries. Instead, she forms a long-term cohabiting union in her late twenties, within which she has two children in her thirties. Her trajectory exemplifies the decoupling of partnership from marriage and the postponement of childbearing observed among younger, more educated women—one of the hallmarks of the Modern profile.

Woman C (Catholic) enters a stable marriage at young adult ages and experiences no teen birth, but she has four children, illustrating the high-parity pattern historically associated with culturally religious family norms. Her path resembles the Classical model in stability yet differs in its sustained and planned fertility.

Woman D (Fragile) embodies the configuration of risks that define the Fragile profile. She becomes a mother in her mid-teens, never marries, experiences multiple cohabiting unions, and has children with more than one partner. Across her life course, she accumulates all four components of our fragility index—teen

birth, multipartner fertility, high parity, and pronounced union instability—mirroring the complex and often constrained pathways found among women facing early disadvantage.

These stylized cases encapsulate the diversity of family trajectories that emerge from the EDER retrospective data, providing an intuitive map of the four types analyzed in the sections that follow.

4.3 Analytical Strategy

As we just saw, for each woman we reconstruct her complete life-course sequence of union formation, union dissolution, and childbearing, which form the basis of our trajectory typology. We then link these trajectories to a set of socioeconomic characteristics measured over the life course, including educational attainment, employment histories (share of adult years in paid work), exposure to informality (share of working years outside the formal sector), and substandard housing conditions.

We examine how these socioeconomic profiles and some additional life-course markers (such as age at first union) differ across the four family-trajectory types and across the components of fragility. Particular emphasis is placed on cohort patterns, allowing us to trace how women's trajectories and associated life conditions evolve across historical time and to situate the rise of “modern” and “fragile” regimes in their broader socioeconomic and generational context.

We also examine intergenerational linkages by relating women's adult trajectories to characteristics of their families of origin, including parental education (separately for mother and father), the main household breadwinner when the respondent was age 14, and years of co-residence with each parent up to age 19. These measures approximate both the material and relational dimensions of the early family environment—parental resources, role models, and stability. Although we cannot fully reconstruct parents' trajectories, the observed associations between early family context and adult fragility patterns illuminate how family stability—or its absence—propagates across generations. Combining a dynamic life-course approach with a generational comparative design moves us beyond static correlations, highlighting the temporal mechanisms of social reproduction.

Because the dataset does not include child-level outcomes, we cannot analyze downstream correlations of women's trajectories. However, the descriptive regularities documented below provide a foundation for future work linking adult trajectories to intergenerational outcomes.

5. Results

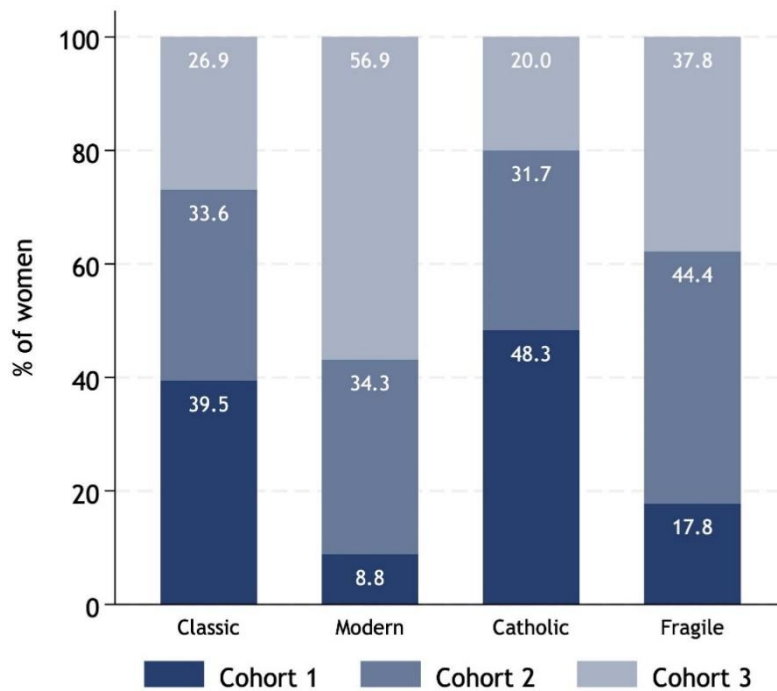
This section presents how women's family trajectories in Buenos Aires unfold, diversify, and become socially differentiated across cohorts. We begin by documenting how the prevalence and composition of the four types vary across birth cohorts, revealing broad shifts in union formation and fertility that underpin the emergence of "modern" and "fragile" family profiles. We then examine the social stratification of these trajectories, linking each type to distinct patterns of education, employment, informality, and living conditions. Finally, we explore intergenerational processes by relating women's adult trajectories to characteristics of their families of origin, thereby assessing whether early-life resources, residential arrangements, and parental role models map onto the reproduction of stability or fragility across generations. Together, these analyses provide a comprehensive portrait of how family trajectories are patterned, socially embedded, and transmitted over time.

5.1 Family Change Across Generations

Family trajectories in Buenos Aires have shifted markedly across generations, reflecting broad changes in union formation, fertility timing, and women's educational opportunities. To trace these transformations, we examine how key life-course markers—union stability, the incidence and timing of marriage and cohabitation, parity, age at first birth, and educational attainment—vary across cohorts. Education is included because rising schooling levels are an important feature of the changing socioeconomic landscape in which unions and childbearing unfold. Taken together, these indicators reveal whether younger cohorts follow more modern, more fragile, or more polarized pathways than the women who came before them.

Figure 2 shows how the four trajectory types are distributed across cohorts, revealing both continuity and marked change in family formation over time. The *Catholic* profile is heavily concentrated among women in the oldest cohort, consistent with the prominence of stable marriage and high parity during the mid-20th century. By contrast, the *Modern* type expands sharply across cohorts and becomes the modal pattern among the youngest women, reflecting the rise of cohabitation, nonmarriage, and postponed fertility. Importantly, cohort change does not simply trace a linear shift from "traditional" to "modern" trajectories: the *Fragile* profile also increases in prevalence across successive cohorts, indicating that the diversification of family life includes a growing share of early and unstable trajectories. The *Classical* profile remains comparatively stable in size, showing no strong cohort gradient. Taken together, these patterns confirm that the typology captures meaningful historical transformations in the sequencing of unions and births, while also highlighting the coexistence of modernizing and fragile pathways in the urban demographic landscape.

Figure 2. Types of Women Trajectories, by Cohort



Family structure shifted across cohorts in ways consistent with the demographic-transition. Marriage is postponed—most women in the youngest cohort marry at ages 26–30, whereas the oldest cohort marries predominantly before 25, with the middle cohort displaying a transitional pattern (50% before 25 and nearly 30% at 26–30; Figure 3, Panel A). Nonmarriage rises sharply (from less than 10% in the first cohort to 34% in the middle cohort and more than 50% in the younger cohort), while multiple marriages remain uncommon in all cohorts (Figure 3, Panel B). Mirroring the retreat from marriage, cohabitation spreads: the share who never cohabited falls from roughly 75% (oldest cohort 1) to about 25% (younger cohort). Cohort 2 splits between having none and one cohabitation—again indicating a shift from marriage-first to cohabitation-first union formation (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Marriage Patterns, by Cohort

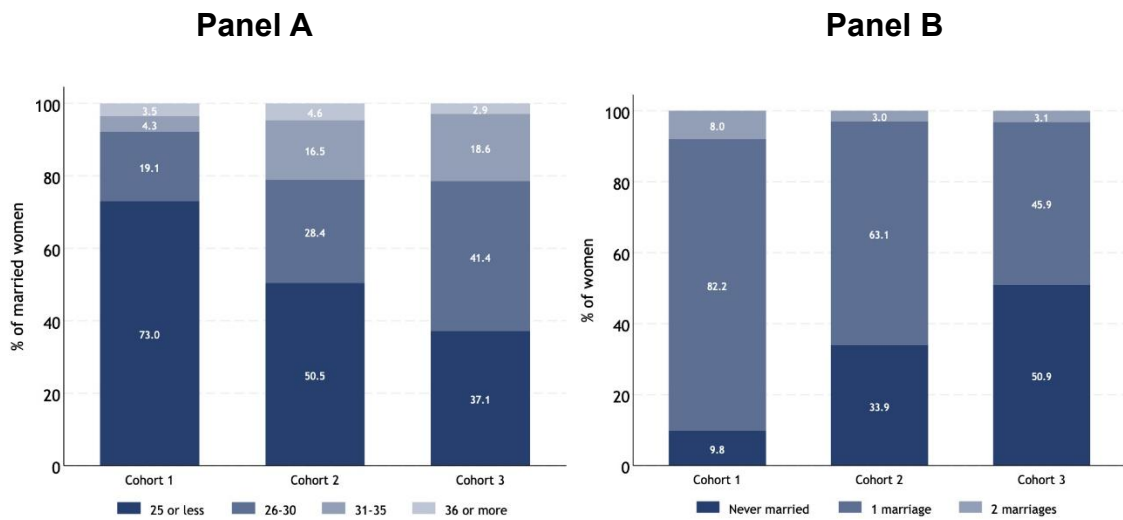
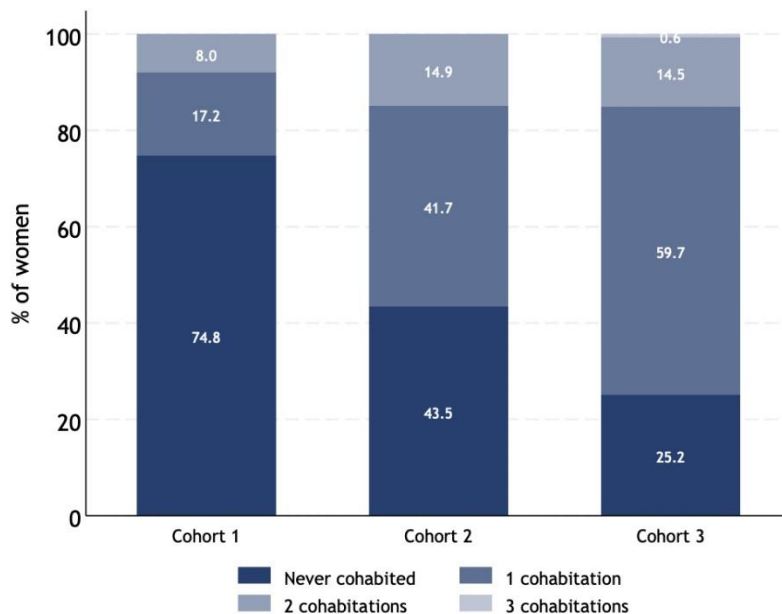
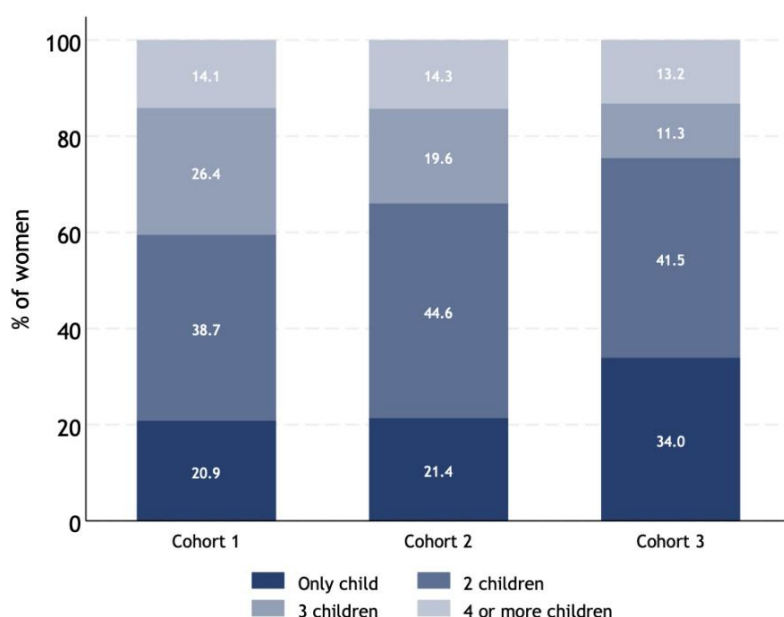


Figure 4. Cohabitation, by Cohort



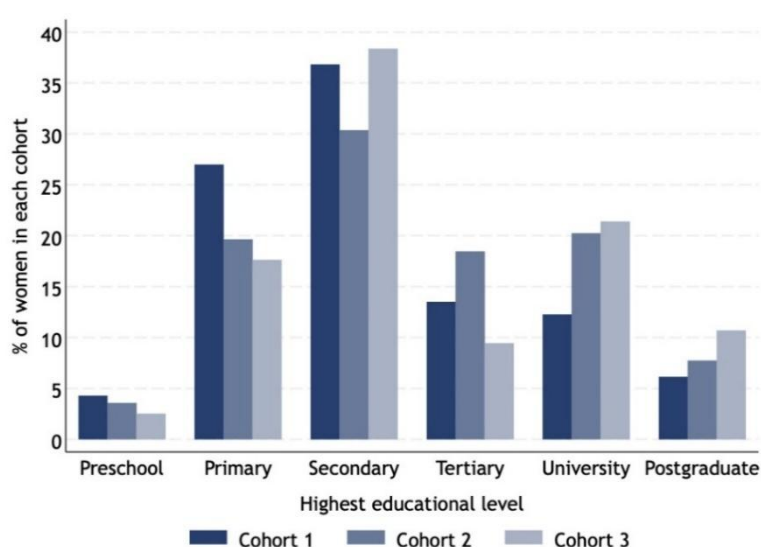
Parity patterns also evolve in line with a low-fertility transition. Two children is the most common family size in every cohort, but one-child families expand in the youngest cohort (from near 20% in Cohorts 1–2 to more than 30% in the younger cohort), while three-plus births decline substantially (Figure 5). Read together with later and less marriage and the spreading of cohabitation, these parity shifts indicate not only postponement but a reconfiguration of completed family size among younger women.

Figure 5. Number of Children, by Cohort



A clear educational gradient accompanies these cohort shifts. The oldest cohort shows very low university/postgraduate attainment and a large share with only primary schooling—patterns consistent with the socio-economic and cultural constraints on women’s education at the time (Figure 6). By contrast, cohorts 2 and 3 exhibit substantial growth in tertiary attainment, signaling sustained progress in women’s schooling as social norms evolved and policies expanded access (Figure 6). This expansion in education provides context for the cohort reallocation of family trajectories documented above.

Figure 6. Highest Level Education, by Cohort



The relatively high percentage of women in cohort 2 who completed tertiary non-university education is noteworthy (Figure 6). Strategic decisions based on

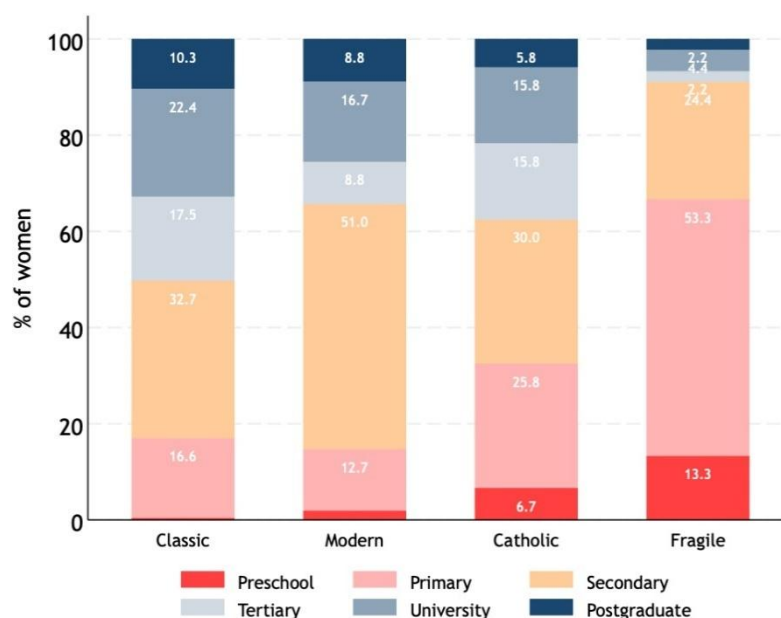
employment opportunities and labor market demands in that period could have influenced the preference for obtaining tertiary degrees. It is possible that the existence of professions traditionally accessible to women at that time, such as teaching and nursing, played a role in this trend, suggesting a transitional phase until, by the later cohort, university education became more common.

5.2 Socioeconomic Stratification of Family Trajectories

This section examines the social stratification of fragility. Family fragility is not randomly distributed; it tends to concentrate among specific groups (those with lower education, informal employment, lower incomes) and in particular generations. Selection and constraint operate jointly: the same characteristics that sort women into these groups also shape their likelihood of following fragile trajectories.

A pronounced educational gradient underpins the distribution of trajectory types. Less-fragile profiles (Classical and, to a lesser extent, Modern and Catholic) are weighted toward mid-to-high attainment—tertiary, university, and postgraduate—while the Fragile profile concentrates at the lowest schooling levels (Figure 7). Among Fragile women, only about 10% complete more than secondary school, and a majority (53.3%) have at most primary education. By contrast, in the Classical profile over 50% exceed secondary; 17.5% complete tertiary and 22.4% complete university.

Figure 7. Highest Level of Education, by Cluster



This gradient is consistent with a life-course mechanism in which schooling and family formation mutually shape one another. Higher educational attainment is associated with later first births and fewer children. Women who completed primary or less have their first child in their twenties, whereas women with a

university degree or higher tend to have their first birth in their thirties (Figure 8). Likewise, women with low educational attainment (preschool or primary) have more children on average—particularly those who completed only preschool. By contrast, for schooling above secondary, parity (conditional on having any births) does not differ meaningfully (Figure 9). These patterns are consistent with both constraint and selection: early childbearing can constrain subsequent schooling, while preexisting disadvantages and preferences may also select some women into earlier and higher-parity trajectories.

Figure 8. Age at First Child, by Education

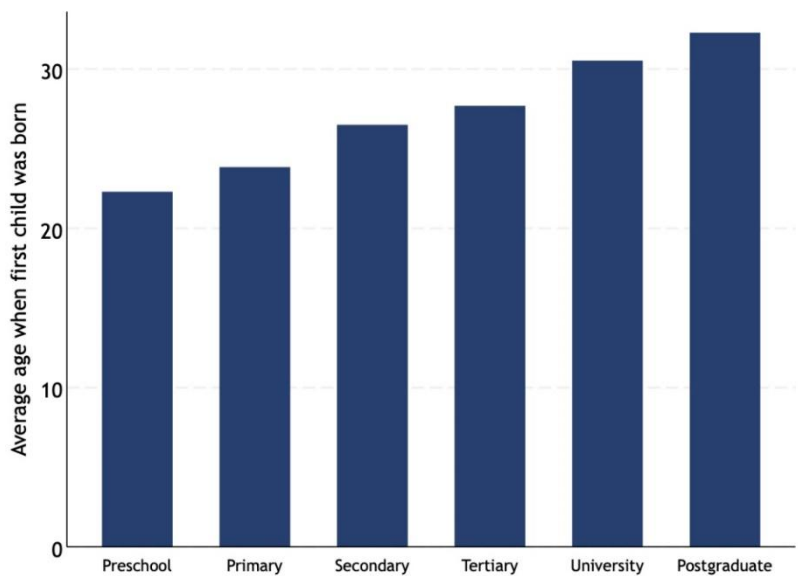
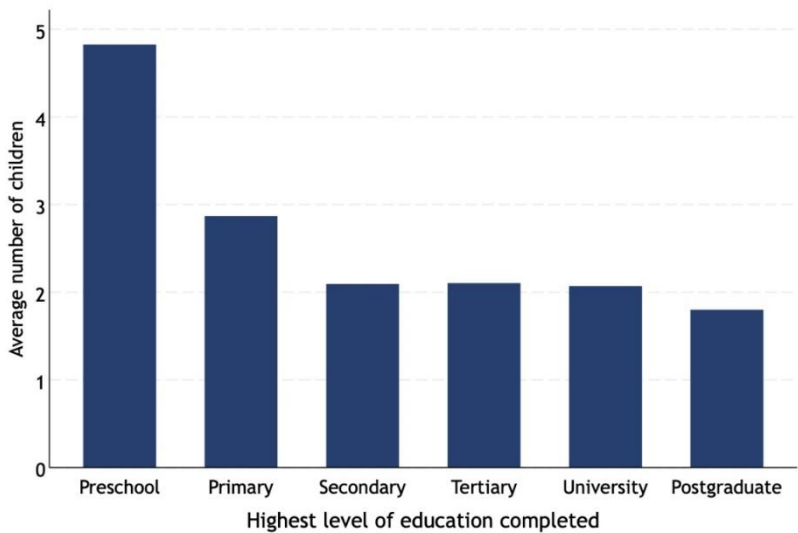


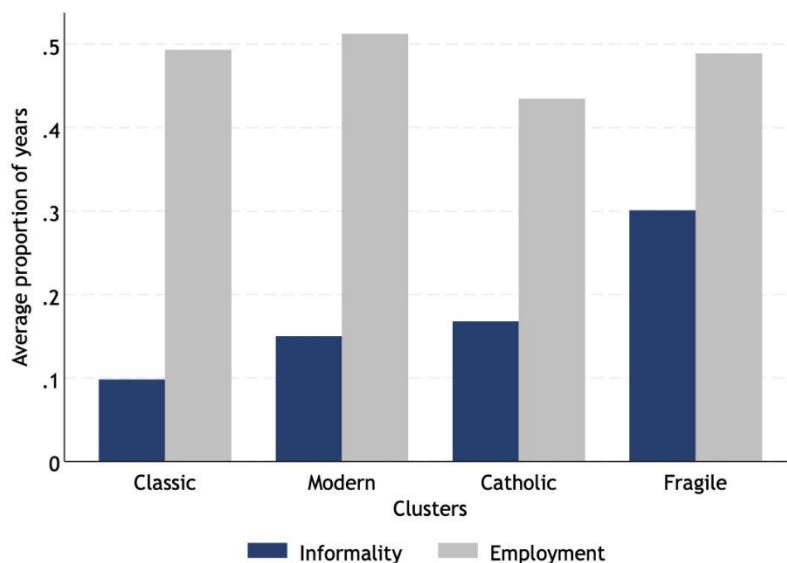
Figure 9. Average number of Children, by Education



Employment participation is high across the fragility spectrum: on average, women have been employed for about half of their adult lives, regardless of

fragility level (Figure 10).⁵ However, exposure to informality rises sharply with fragility: Classical women (low fragility) spent roughly 10% of their adult lives in informal work, compared with about 30% among Fragile women. This pattern indicates that fragility is not linked to nonparticipation; instead, more-fragile women are more likely to work in precarious (informal) employment, which in turn reinforces economic vulnerability and family instability (Berniell et al., 2021; Berniell et al., 2023; OECD, 2024).

Figure 10. Proportion of Life Years Employed and Informal Employment, by Cluster



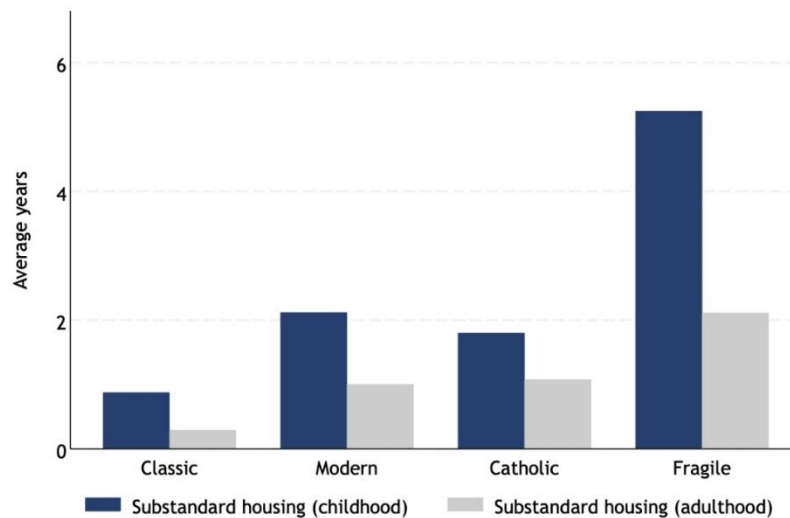
Beyond education and employment, household conditions are a salient indicator of socioeconomic status: the quality of the dwelling—especially in childhood—shapes health, schooling, and partnership transitions, thereby conditioning later life-course trajectories (Leventhal & Newman, 2010; Solari & Mare, 2012). To summarize residential deprivation, we compute years spent in substandard housing during childhood (ages 0–12) and adulthood (21–40) (Figure 11).⁶ Family fragility is strongly associated with this exposure, particularly in childhood. Classical women spent, on average, less than one year in substandard housing in childhood and likewise under one year in adulthood; Modern and Catholic women average about two childhood years; Fragile women average over five

⁵ To ensure comparability across cohorts, we report proportions of life years (e.g., share of adult life in employment; share of working life in informal jobs) rather than raw years. This standardization mitigates right-censoring for younger respondents who have not yet completed their working lives—particularly in the youngest cohort, where some women were age 37 at the time of the survey.

⁶ A dwelling is classified as substandard if it is precarious (e.g., shacks, single rooms in tenements, premises not built for housing, mobile homes) or falls into “Type B” housing, defined by at least one of the following deficits: (i) dirt/loose-brick/other non-durable flooring (i.e., not ceramic, tile, marble, wood, carpet, cement, or fixed brick); (ii) no piped water inside the dwelling; or (iii) no flush toilet.

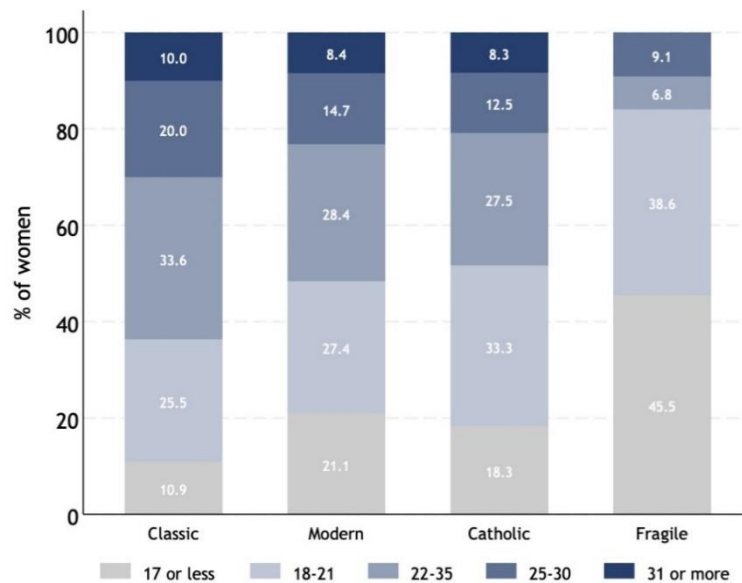
childhood years and about two adult years—a marked contrast with the other types.

Figure 11. Average Years Living in Substandard Housing, by Cluster



Finally, age at home-leaving—defined here as the first year the respondent no longer co-resides with both parents—also aligns with the fragility typology. Most women in the Fragile profile leave the parental home before age 17, with a substantial share departing between 18 and 21. By contrast, the other three profiles show a more even distribution of departure ages, and Classical women leave latest on average (Figure 12). This timing pattern is consistent with pathways linking early home-leaving to a higher probability of living in poverty, lower educational attainment, and earlier union formation and parenthood, whereas later departures align with the more stable partnerships and later fertility timing characteristic of the Classical profile (Aassve et al., 2007; White & Lacy, 1997; Goldscheider et al., 2015).

Figure 12. Age at Leaving the Parental Home, by Cluster

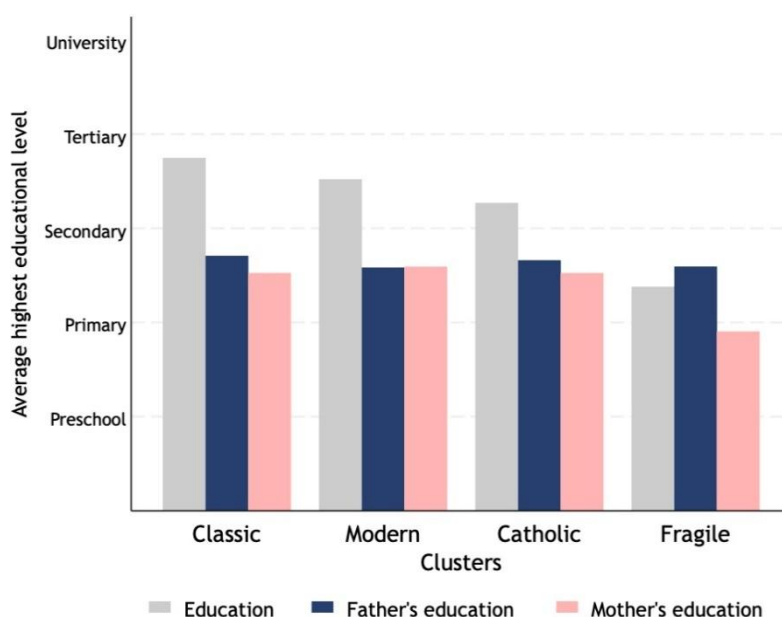


5.3 Family of Origin and the Intergenerational Transmission of Fragility

Family fragility can be transmitted across generations as early family contexts—parental resources, role models, and union stability—shape the timing and sequencing of children’s later unions and childbearing (Amato & Patterson, 2017; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Wolfinger, 2005). In this section, we relate adult outcomes to family-of-origin characteristics to assess whether women exposed to more disadvantaged or unstable origins are more likely to follow fragile adult trajectories, as captured by our typology.

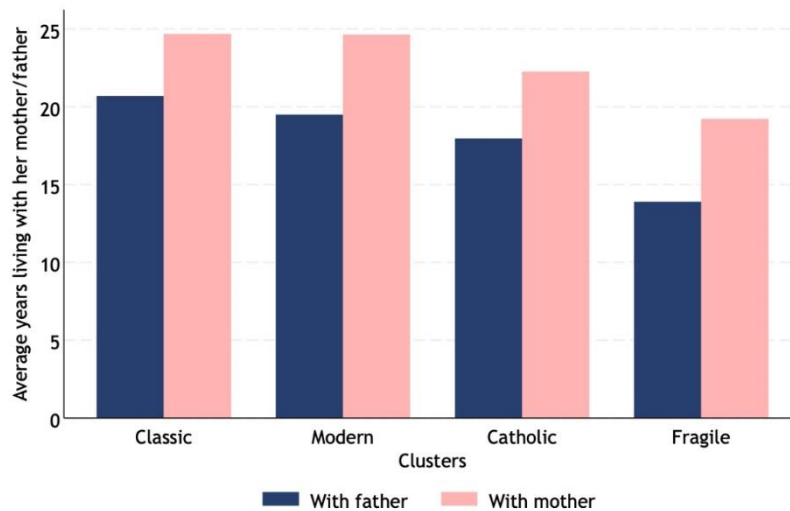
Educational mobility differs systematically by trajectory type (Figure 13). Women in the Classical, Modern, and Catholic profiles typically surpass the schooling of both parents, indicating clear upward mobility from the family of origin. Mobility is most pronounced in the Classical profile, where parental attainment is concentrated around the upper-secondary level while daughters, on average, reach substantially higher levels of schooling beyond secondary education. In the Modern and Catholic profiles, the gap is more modest. By contrast, women in the Fragile profile exhibit more limited mobility: they attain more schooling than their mothers but do not surpass their fathers, consistent with persistent intergenerational constraints. Parental schooling is broadly similar for mothers and fathers in the first three profiles, whereas in the Fragile profile fathers’ attainment is clearly higher—approximately one full level above that of mothers. Taken together, the typology indicates unequal opportunities for intergenerational mobility: fragility constrains upward movement, whereas less-fragile trajectories allow larger gains.

Figure 13. Intergenerational Transmission of Education, by Cluster



Another dimension concerns co-residence with parents, which captures characteristics of the household in which women grew up, with distinct mechanisms on the mother's and father's sides: maternal co-residence often reflects continuity of caregiving and day-to-day supervision, while paternal co-residence is more tightly linked to household resources, role modeling, and residential stability (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Carlson, M., 2006; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). Consistent with this interpretation, co-residence patterns differ by type. As we see in Figure 14, Classical and Modern women co-reside with their mothers to roughly age 25 on average. In the Catholic profile, maternal co-residence ends earlier—around age 22—a pattern consistent with earlier union entry that supports higher completed fertility, the defining feature of this type. In the Fragile group, maternal co-residence ends much earlier, around age 16.

Figure 14. Years Living with Parents, by Cluster



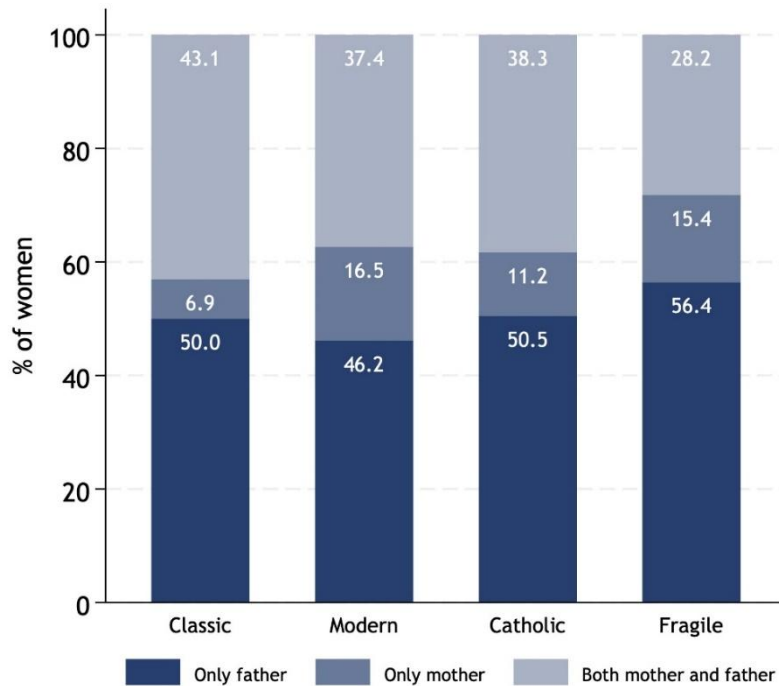
For fathers, co-residence is shorter across all types: Catholic women average about 20 years of paternal co-residence, Classical and Modern slightly under 20, and Fragile women fewer than 15. These patterns are consistent with a pathway in which reduced paternal co-residence is associated with more constrained resources and stability in the family of origin, aligning with the higher fragility observed in adulthood for the Fragile profile.

Because parental economic roles may shape both material resources and gender norms transmitted to children, we examine whether having a mother as the main breadwinner during adolescence varies across trajectory types (Figure 15). Mother-as-breadwinner is more prevalent in the Modern and Fragile profiles than in the Classical profile, with the Catholic profile occupying an intermediate position. This indicator reflects two distinct—though not mutually exclusive—origin dynamics. In some cases, it signals family-of-origin fragility, such as paternal absence or unstable paternal earnings, conditions closely associated with the Fragile profile. In others, it reflects a household with a strong, economically active mother and more gender-egalitarian norms, a configuration more consistent with Modern trajectories.⁷ Although we cannot establish causality, this dual interpretation helps explain why mother-as-breadwinner appears in both profiles, capturing the inheritance of both instability and autonomy.⁸

⁷ Our interpretation that mother-as-breadwinner can signal a more gender-egalitarian, autonomy-oriented family culture is consistent with studies showing that parental education, resources, and attitudes shape children's entry into cohabitation, timing of marriage, and delayed parenthood—key dimensions of 'modern' life-course patterns (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Barber, 2000; Mooyaart & Liefbroer, 2016).

⁸ Although we do not report this result—our analysis centers on the cluster-based typology rather than individual indicators—women whose first birth occurred before age 20 co-resided with their father for fewer years than women without a teenage pregnancy did. This association may reflect both selection processes (e.g., socioeconomic disadvantage or family conflict) and

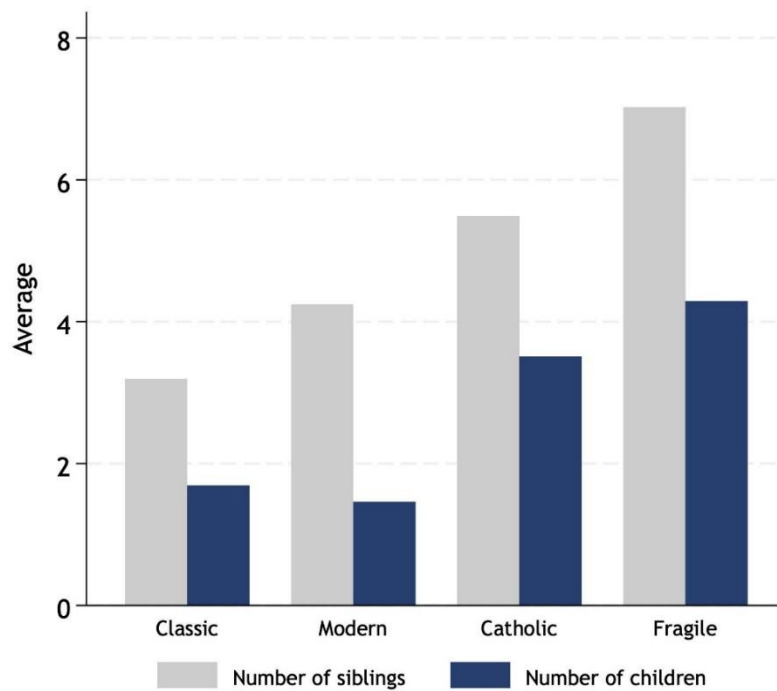
Figure 15. Main Breadwinner at 14, by Cluster



The typology also points to intergenerational transmission of fertility patterns (Figure 16). Women in the Classical and Modern profiles average about two children, whereas Catholic and Fragile women average close to four. Although this pattern is partly mechanical—high parity (≥ 3) is one of the clustering indicators—the same ordering appears among mothers: mothers of Fragile women average about seven children, while mothers of Classical women average around three. Consistent with the demographic transition, fertility is lower among daughters than among their mothers across all types.

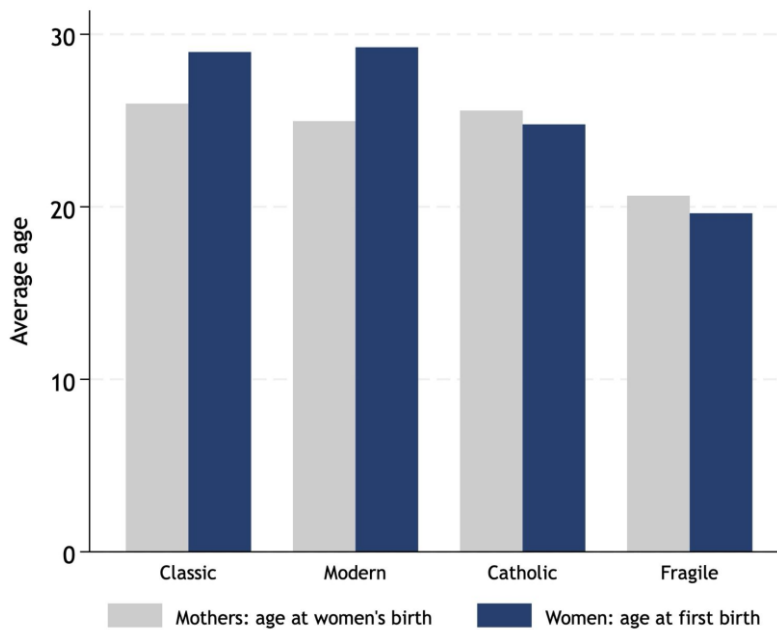
mechanisms related to paternal absence, such as reduced supervision, guidance, or role modeling, which may increase the risk of early pregnancy.

Figure 16. Intergenerational Transmission of Parity, by Cluster



Age at first birth also shows intergenerational, cluster-specific patterning (Figure 17). Classical and Modern women typically have their first child near age 30, whereas their mothers did so shortly after 25, indicating postponement across generations. Catholic women have first births around age 25—consistent with higher completed parity achieved through earlier initiation without teen childbearing—mirroring their mothers. Fragile women have the earliest first births (on average, around age 20), and their mothers' first births occur at similarly young ages, suggesting strong intergenerational continuity in early family formation. Taken together, these patterns indicate that both quantum (number of children) and tempo (timing of first birth) are linked across generations in ways that align with the fragility typology.

Figure 17. Age at First Child, by Cluster



6. Discussion

This study shows that family change in Buenos Aires is best understood not as a linear transition from traditional to modern forms but as the emergence of divergent family trajectories shaped by both structural constraints and individual selection processes. The coexistence of Classical, Catholic, Modern, and Fragile pathways underscores the heterogeneity of family formation even within an urban, educationally advantaged context. While modernization expanded educational attainment, supported later fertility, and consolidated stable nonmarital unions among the middle and upper strata, the same period saw the intensification of fragility—marked by early childbearing, union instability, and multipartner fertility—among women exposed to persistent socioeconomic disadvantage.

These findings resonate with international scholarship on diverging destinies, yet the Buenos Aires case points to a distinctive configuration of mechanisms. Unlike Northern European settings—where cohabitation and delayed marriage became institutionalized within stable labor markets, generous welfare states, and legal protections for nonmarital unions (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014)—Argentine modernization unfolded under chronic macroeconomic volatility and pervasive labor-market informality. These conditions plausibly limited the institutional supports that might otherwise stabilize new family forms (Esteve et al., 2022). As a result, cohabitation and nonmarriage do not carry the protective features observed in high-income countries; instead, they coexist with heightened vulnerability among the poor. And compared to Latin America more

broadly, Buenos Aires displays a distinctive combination of high female education and early demographic modernization on the one hand, and persistent economic instability and informality on the other—yielding a pattern in which autonomy-driven and fragile trajectories expand in parallel.

The intergenerational patterns further suggest that fragility is not merely episodic but embedded in family systems through differences in parental resources, residential stability, and gendered role structures. These mechanisms likely combine selection and constraint: households with fewer resources transmit both material limitations and relational instability, while more advantaged households reproduce the norms and capacities associated with modern, low-fragility trajectories. The analyses cannot identify causal pathways, but they nonetheless illuminate the channels through which inequality is reproduced over time and across domains of life.

Together, these insights call for revisiting Latin American family research beyond simple binaries of “traditional” versus “modern” and toward frameworks that recognize the stratified institutionalization of new family forms. In Buenos Aires, demographic modernization has not unfolded in a uniform or linear fashion: the same behaviors that signal autonomy and stability among the advantaged can generate fragility among the disadvantaged when economic uncertainty, uneven gender norms, and weak institutional supports shape the conditions under which unions are formed, maintained, and dissolved.

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided a life-course and intergenerational account of women’s family trajectories in Buenos Aires across three cohorts. By reconstructing full sequences of union formation, dissolution, and fertility, and by identifying four empirically grounded trajectory types, we show that family change in the city has been neither uniform nor linear. Instead, modernization has produced coexisting pathways of autonomy and fragility, with Classical and Modern trajectories anchored among the better educated and Fragile trajectories concentrated among women exposed to persistent socioeconomic disadvantage.

The findings reveal how shared demographic shifts—postponement of fertility, rising cohabitation, and declining marriage—can yield divergent lived experiences depending on the institutional and economic contexts in which they unfold. In Buenos Aires, recurrent macroeconomic instability, informality, and uneven access to social protections have prevented new family forms from becoming uniformly stable. As a result, the behavioral markers of modernization function as low-risk choices for some women and high-risk transitions for others, reinforcing the city’s broader patterns of social inequality.

These patterns carry important policy implications. When family diversification unfolds in contexts of economic insecurity and weak institutional support, new family forms are more likely to amplify inequality rather than mitigate it. Policies that stabilize employment, expand access to affordable childcare, strengthen income supports, and extend legal and social protections to children and parents in nonmarital families may reduce the unequal risks associated with contemporary family trajectories. In this sense, family policy and social policy are inseparable from the processes that shape family stability and fragility.

Our analysis also highlights the importance of considering the family of origin when studying contemporary family trajectories. Differences in parental education, residential stability, and gendered role structures help illuminate the processes through which stability and fragility become embedded and transmitted across generations. While the observational nature of our data limits causal claims, the patterns documented here underscore the need to understand family behavior as the product of both selection and constraint—shaped by individual characteristics, early-life environments, and structural opportunity.

Future research should investigate how men's trajectories align with or diverge from the patterns observed among women, explore longitudinal consequences for children, and assess how policy innovations—such as childcare expansion, income supports, or legal recognition of nonmarital unions—may alter the stability of different family pathways. Ultimately, the results invite a rethinking of family change in Latin America: modernization and fragility are not sequential stages, but parallel processes that jointly shape women's lives in ways that reflect, and reproduce, the region's enduring inequalities.

Appendix A: Modification of the database

The main limitation of the original EDER dataset is that it records, for each calendar year, a woman's status with respect to each of her partners and each of her children. Consequently, women with multiple partners or multiple children generate more than one person-year record.

Table A1 illustrates this for a woman with two children and two partners (one marriage, one cohabitation). In the left panel, the second partner is still reported in 1998 even though the woman was married to the first partner and had no relationship with the second in that year. In the right panel, two records appear for each year because both children are reported, including years prior to their births.

This unconventional structure complicates analysis. To address it, we reshaped the data into a cross-sectional format with one observation per woman that summarizes her entire life trajectory. Table A2 shows the resulting structure.

Table A1. Illustration of the database problem

Spouse database				Children database			
ID	N° spouse	Marital status	Retro Year	ID	N° child	Year of birth	Retro Year
111	1	Marriage	1998	111	1	1999	1998
111	2	(No data)	1998	111	2	2010	1998
111	...	...	...	111	...	...	...
111	1	Divorce	2001	111	1	1999	2001
111	2	(No data)	2001	111	2	2010	2001
111	...	...	...	111	...	...	...
111	1	Divorce	2008	111	1	1999	2008
111	2	Cohabitation	2008	111	2	2010	2008

Table A2 - Illustration of the solution (cross-section format)

ID	Marriage ₁	Year marriage ₁	Divorce ₁	Year Divorce ₁	Cohabitation ₂	Year Cohabitation ₂	Child 1	Year birth child 1	Child 2	Year birth child 2
111	1	1998	1	2001	1	2008	1	1999	1	2010

Appendix B: Number of clusters selection

The k-modes algorithm requires pre-specifying the number of clusters K . There is an inherent trade-off: as K increases, within-cluster homogeneity typically improves while cluster sizes shrink. Because no single K is objectively correct, we rely on the k-modes objective (cost) function, which summarizes within-cluster dissimilarity; decreases in this value indicate higher partition quality. We evaluate this cost for $K \in \{2, \dots, 16\}$, where the upper bound corresponds to the full set of theoretically feasible combinations implied by the four categorical indicators.

Figure B1 reports cost-function values for $K \in \{2, \dots, 16\}$. The cost curve displays local minima at $K = 4, 6, 11, 13$, and 16 , indicating comparatively good partitions. We set $K = 4$ to maximize the number of observations per cluster—given the limited sample of women with children ($N=490$)—while preserving within-cluster homogeneity. In addition, $K = 4$ yields the largest marginal reduction in dissimilarity, corresponding to the steepest decline in the cost function relative to the other local minima.

For robustness, we also fit k-modes solutions at $K \in \{6, 11, 13\}$ —values flagged as alternative local minima by the cost function—to verify whether the four core types (Classical, Modern, Catholic, Fragile) persist. At $K = 16$, the exercise is redundant, because the partition exhausts all theoretically admissible combinations of the four categorical variables. For $K = 6$, the four substantive profiles remain; Table B1 reports the resulting groups. At $K = 11$ and $K = 13$, although the four main typologies still appear, several clusters are empty or duplicative, indicating that the sample cannot be meaningfully partitioned into that many groups and that the underlying structure likely contains fewer distinct family patterns.

Figure B1. Cost function for optimal K

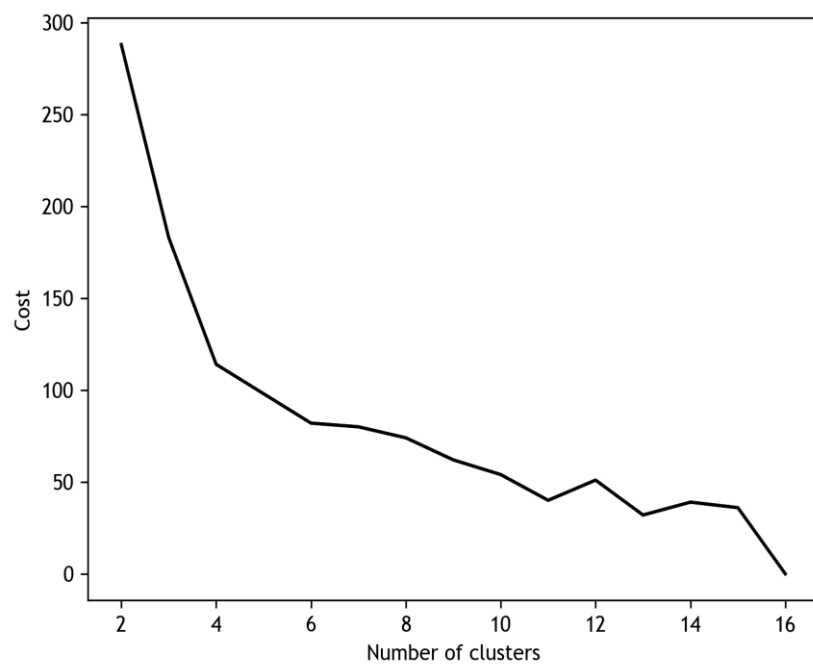


Table B1. Clusters with K=6

Cluster	Multipartner Fertility	Never Married	Many Children	Teen Birth	Fragility Index	Obs.	Type of trajectory
1	0	0	0	0	0	205	Classic
2	1	0	0	0	1	47	
3	0	1	0	0	1	91	Modern
4	0	0	1	0	1	102	Catholic
5	1	1	1	0	3	16	
6	1	1	1	1	4	29	Fragile
Total						490	

Appendix C: Family Fragility Index

To show the heterogeneity within cluster that comes from reducing the sixteen possible profiles stemming from the four binary indicators to four clusters, Table C1 reports the mean of each indicator by cluster and presents a sum of these cluster-specific means, which we call the (average) Family Fragility Index (FFI).

Table C1. Family Fragility Index

	Multipartner Fertility	Never Married	Teenage Birth	Many Children	FFI
Classic	0,081	0,000	0,036	0,000	0,117
Modern	0,108	1,000	0,020	0,000	1,128
Catholic	0,150	0,133	0,067	1,000	1,350
Fragile	0,889	0,800	0,644	0,933	3,266

Notes: The table reports the mean of each variable by cluster and the corresponding Family Fragility Index (FFI), computed as the sum of the cluster-specific means.

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