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The long-term impact of parenthood on women and men's income in 26 European countries

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Background: Historically, women's roles were predominantly associated with motherhood, leading to significant career interruptions and lower incomes compared to men. As gender roles have evolved, as did labor policies protecting parents, it would be expected that income penalties in women and income premiums in men would attenuate, especially in the long term. This study aims to assess the association between the number of children and the income earned by women and men in older adulthood.

Methods: We used data from wave 8 of the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), which includes 43,772 participants with 50 years old or over and their partners, living in 26 European countries. Multilevel analysis was employed to estimate the association between having children and the total, employment-related, and pensions-related incomes, adjusting for sociodemographic characteristics and clustering by country.

Results: The highest median annual total income was identified for individuals living in Bismarkian (€19,000) and Scandinavian countries (€17,708), more than twice the income earned in the European remaining countries. Having had children was associated with lower total income (OR = 0.870 for 1-2 children, OR = 0.773 for 3-5 children, OR = 0.666 for more than 5 children; $p < 0.005$), and women received lower total incomes (OR = 0.694; $p < 0.001$). These patterns were also found for employment- and pensions-related incomes.

Conclusions: There is a long-term negative effect of having had children, and of the number of children, on income, both employment and pension-related, but women continue to receive about 30% lower incomes than men. The adoption of comprehensive policies stimulating a more equal gender distribution of childrearing responsibilities, while protecting parenthood, along with recognizing caregiving responsibilities in pension calculations, could mitigate these disparities and promote gender equity and better living conditions at the older ages.