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The second demographic transition and family structure transformations in developing societies

ABSTRACT

Objective: this reflection article examines whether Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory — developed to explain sub-replacement fertility and diversifying family forms in Northwestern Europe — adequately describes family change in developing societies, using the Maghreb as a critical test case. Methodology: the study combines a critical synthesis of SDT theory and its major appraisals with publicly available fertility statistics for Algeria and Tunisia (World Bank World Development Indicators; INED, Population et Sociétés), treating both as primary material for conceptual and descriptive analysis rather than for causal statistical testing. Main findings: Algeria's total fertility rate fell from roughly 8.1 children per woman in 1970 to about 2.2 by the early 2000s, then rose again to nearly 2.9 by 2010 before declining once more after 2017 — a non-monotonic trajectory that SDT's unilinear, irreversible model does not anticipate; Tunisia shows a parallel, though not identical, decline-rebound-decline pattern. Applications: the argument speaks to demography, family sociology, and population policy in the Global South, cautioning against importing European-derived stage theories without adaptation. Novelty: by tracing the Maghreb's fertility "roller coaster" against SDT's core predictions, the article extends existing critiques of SDT's Eurocentrism with a concrete, numerically documented developing-region case rarely centered in the theoretical literature.

Keywords: second demographic transition; fertility rebound; family structure; Maghreb; developing societies; demographic theory.

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La segunda transición demográfica y las transformaciones de la estructura familiar en las sociedades en desarrollo

RESUMEN

Objetivo: este artículo de reflexión examina si la teoría de la Segunda Transición Demográfica (STD) —desarrollada para explicar la fecundidad por debajo del reemplazo y la diversificación de las formas familiares en el noroeste de Europa— describe adecuadamente el cambio familiar en las sociedades en desarrollo, utilizando el Magreb como caso crítico de prueba.

Metodología: el estudio combina una síntesis crítica de la teoría de la STD y sus principales evaluaciones con estadísticas de fecundidad de acceso público para Argelia y Túnez (Indicadores del Desarrollo Mundial del Banco Mundial; INED, Population et Sociétés), tratando ambas fuentes como material primario para el análisis conceptual y descriptivo y no para pruebas estadísticas causales. Hallazgos principales: la tasa global de fecundidad de Argelia cayó de aproximadamente 8,1 hijos por mujer en 1970 a cerca de 2,2 a principios de la década de 2000, para luego repuntar a casi 2,9 en 2010 y volver a descender después de 2017 —una trayectoria no monótona que el modelo unilineal e irreversible de la STD no anticipa—; Túnez muestra un patrón paralelo, aunque no idéntico, de descenso-repunte-descenso. Aplicaciones: el argumento interesa a la demografía, la sociología de la familia y la política de población en el Sur Global, y advierte contra la importación de teorías de etapas de origen europeo sin adaptación. Novedad/originalidad: al trazar la "montaña rusa" de fecundidad del Magreb frente a las predicciones centrales de la STD, el artículo extiende las críticas existentes al eurocentrismo de la teoría con un caso concreto y numéricamente documentado de una región en desarrollo raramente situado en el centro de la literatura teórica.

Palabras clave: segunda transición demográfica; repunte de la fecundidad; estructura familiar; Magreb; sociedades en desarrollo; teoría demográfica.

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A segunda transição demográfica e as transformações na estrutura familiar nas sociedades em desenvolvimento

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este artigo reflexivo examina se a teoria da Segunda Transição Demográfica (STD) — desenvolvida para explicar a fecundidade abaixo do nível de substituição e a diversificação das formas familiares no noroeste da Europa — descreve adequadamente a mudança familiar nas sociedades em desenvolvimento, utilizando o Magrebe como um estudo de caso crítico. Metodologia: O estudo combina uma síntese crítica da teoria da STD e das suas principais avaliações com estatísticas de fertilidade publicamente disponíveis para a Argélia e a Tunísia (Indicadores de Desenvolvimento Mundial do Banco Mundial; INED, População e Sociedades), tratando ambas as fontes como material primário para análise conceptual e descritiva, e não para testes estatísticos causais. Principais conclusões: A taxa de fecundidade total da Argélia desceu de aproximadamente 8,1 filhos por mulher em 1970 para cerca de 2,2 no início da década de 2000, recuperando para quase 2,9 em 2010 e voltando a declinar após 2017 — uma trajetória não monotónica que o modelo unilinear e irreversível da teoria dos estádios não prevê. A Tunísia apresenta um padrão paralelo, embora não idêntico, de declínio-recuperação-declínio. Aplicações: O argumento é relevante para a demografia, a sociologia da família e as políticas populacionais no Sul Global, e alerta para os riscos da importação de teorias de estádios de origem europeia sem adaptação. Inovação/originalidade: Ao traçar a trajetória da fecundidade no Magreb em contraposição às principais previsões da teoria dos estágios, o artigo amplia as críticas existentes ao eurocentrismo da teoria com um caso concreto e numericamente documentado de uma região em desenvolvimento raramente abordada na literatura teórica.

Palavras-chave: segunda transição demográfica; aumento da fecundidade; estrutura familiar; Magrebe; sociedades em desenvolvimento; teoria demográfica.

INTRODUCTION

Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk van de Kaa first proposed the idea of a "second" demographic transition in a 1986 Dutch-language chapter, initially posed as a question; a year later, van de Kaa's own English-language exposition for the Population Reference Bureau became the theory's seminal and most-cited statement (Lesthaeghe & van de Kaa, 1986, as discussed in Zaidi & Morgan, 2017; Van de Kaa, 1987). The story they told was linear and, in their own account, essentially irreversible: marriage would keep weakening, cohabitation would keep spreading, fertility would keep falling toward and below replacement level, and each of these trends would feed the others as individualist, self-actualizing values replaced the family-centered norms of an earlier era (van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 2010). It went on to become, in Zaidi and Morgan's (2017) description, a population researcher's default "go-to" concept and theoretical framework for studying family and fertility change, and it has since been exported far beyond the handful of Belgian and Dutch populations it was built to explain — to the United States (Lesthaeghe & Neidert, 2006), to Latin America (Esteve et al., 2012), to Russia (Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011), and, more tentatively, to large parts of Asia and Africa (Lesthaeghe, 2014).

This article asks a narrower and, for a Global South readership, more consequential question: what happens to the theory's predictive core — a unilinear, irreversible slide toward ever-lower fertility and ever-more-diverse family forms — when it meets a developing society whose demographic history has already, empirically, run in the opposite direction? Algeria offers an unusually clean test. Its total fertility rate fell from one of the highest recorded levels in the world, roughly 8.1 children per woman at the end of the 1960s baby boom, to about 2.2 by the early 2000s — a decline steep enough that demographers at the time treated Algeria as a textbook case of rapid fertility transition (Ouadah-Bedidi & Vallin, 2000). What SDT theory does not anticipate is what happened next: rather than continuing downward through and below replacement level, as the theory's logic requires, Algerian fertility reversed course and climbed back to nearly 2.9 children per woman by 2010, a rebound so unexpected that the demographers who had documented the original decline titled their follow-up study, without irony, "Unexpected developments in Maghrebian fertility" (Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2012).

The central claim of this article is that the Maghreb's fertility trajectory — decline, rebound, and renewed decline, rather than a single irreversible slide — is not a curious local exception to be footnoted and set aside, but a direct empirical challenge to the developmental logic that sits at the heart of SDT theory. This is not a new criticism in the abstract: Zaidi and Morgan's (2017) systematic review already argues that SDT's claim to describe a single, universal, irreversible "end stage" of family change does not survive contact with the diversity of actual national trajectories. What this article adds is a concrete, numerically documented case — one directly relevant to readers in the Maghreb and the wider Arab world — that makes the abstract critique tangible: a society can complete most of the demographic moves the SDT associates with modernity (rapid fertility decline, rising age at marriage, urbanization, rising female education) and then partially reverse them, for reasons that have more to do with marriage-market dynamics and family-level bargaining than with any renewed embrace of "traditional" values (Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2012).

Two qualifications frame the argument that follows. First, this article does not claim that no version of demographic transition theory applies to developing societies; the classical demographic transition — declining mortality followed, with a lag, by declining fertility — remains broadly descriptive of most of the twentieth-century Global South, including Algeria and Tunisia. What is in question is specifically the second transition's stronger, more theory-laden claims about irreversibility and ideational convergence toward a single Western endpoint. Second, the Maghreb case is used here as an illustrative and falsifying instance, not as a representative sample from which to generalize to all developing societies; other regions

— parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance — show still different trajectories that would require separate treatment.

The remainder of the article proceeds in two steps. The next section reviews SDT theory's core claims and situates them against the broader empirical record of family change in developing societies, drawing on Table 1 for the Maghreb's specific fertility numbers. The following section then argues, using Figure 1's visualization of Algeria's and Tunisia's fertility trajectories, that the Maghreb pattern is better explained by marriage-market and family-bargaining dynamics than by the ideational mechanism SDT proposes, and considers what this implies for applying demographic transition theory to developing societies more broadly. A final section draws conclusions and notes the limits of a synthesis built on secondary and official statistical sources rather than original survey data.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC

Theoretical and Empirical Background

The second demographic transition: core claims

Van de Kaa (1987) described the SDT as a shift from a first transition, in which fertility fell from high to moderate levels while marriage remained close to universal, to a second, more radical transformation in which the institution of marriage itself weakens: cohabitation rises, divorce becomes common, childbearing separates from marriage, and fertility settles below the replacement level of roughly 2.1 children per woman. The driving mechanism, in van de Kaa's (1987) and Lesthaeghe's (2010) telling, is ideational rather than economic — a "Maslowian drift" toward higher-order needs of individual autonomy and self-actualization that becomes possible once a population's material needs are broadly satisfied, displacing the more altruistic, family- and child-centered norms that had organized the first transition. Crucially, the theory as originally stated treats this shift as a one-directional developmental sequence: societies move through recognizable phases toward a common end state, approximated by the most secular, most individualist populations of Northwestern Europe (Lesthaeghe, 1995, cited in Zaidi & Morgan, 2017).

As the concept gained influence, its geographic reach expanded well beyond the cases that motivated it. Lesthaeghe and Neidert (2006) argued that regional variation within the United States fit the SDT's logic once local secularization and educational differences were taken into account. Esteve, Lesthaeghe, and López-Gay (2012) documented a genuine "cohabitation boom" across Latin America between 1970 and 2007, a trend they read as broadly consistent with SDT expectations even though Latin American fertility and marriage patterns had followed a very different historical starting point than Western Europe's. Perelli-Harris and Gerber (2011), studying non-marital childbearing in Russia, found rising rates of births outside marriage that superficially resembled the SDT pattern, but argued the underlying mechanism looked more like a "pattern of disadvantage" tied to economic hardship than a value-driven embrace of individual autonomy — an early signal that the theory's ideational mechanism does not travel as easily as its descriptive vocabulary.

Family theory in the Global South before SDT

Long before SDT was proposed, a separate and largely economic tradition had already developed a theory of family change specific to agrarian and developing societies. Caldwell's (1976) theory of intergenerational wealth flows argued that in societies where children remain net economic contributors to the household — providing labor, old-age security, and support to the wider kin network — high fertility is not a failure of rationality but a locally optimal family strategy; fertility falls only when structural change (mass schooling, urban wage labor, weakened extended-family obligations) reverses the direction of wealth flow so that children become net economic costs rather than net contributors. Caldwell's framework, unlike SDT,

makes no claim about a common ideational endpoint: it predicts that fertility decline in a developing society will track the pace of structural change in family economic organization, and says nothing about whether that decline must continue past replacement level or must be accompanied by a broader disengagement from marriage as an institution.

This distinction matters directly for interpreting family change in the Maghreb and comparable settings. McDonald (2000) offers a related corrective specific to gender: he distinguishes equity within family-oriented institutions (marriage, household division of labor) from equity within individual-oriented institutions (education, labor markets), and argues that very low fertility emerges specifically where the second advances rapidly while the first lags — women gain full access to education and employment but not to equivalent bargaining power within marriage and the household. Goldscheider et al. (2015) develop a parallel argument they present explicitly as an alternative to SDT: family change reflects "two halves" of a gender revolution, the first (women's entry into paid work) producing the falling fertility and rising union instability that SDT documents, the second (men's entry into unpaid domestic and care work) still incomplete in most societies, including the wealthy Western ones SDT was built on. Neither McDonald (2000) nor Goldscheider et al. (2015) requires ideational convergence toward Western individualism as the engine of change; both instead point to the uneven pace of institutional adaptation as the more proximate cause. A further complication for exporting SDT concerns the specific institutional marker the theory treats as diagnostic: the weakening of marriage itself as the necessary context for childbearing. Cherlin (2004) documents this weakening for the United States under the label of the deinstitutionalization of marriage — a decline in the social norms that once made marriage the default, prescribed context for sex, cohabitation, and childrearing, evident in the rising prevalence and social acceptability of cohabiting unions, non-marital births, and same-sex partnerships. This is arguably the single clearest empirical marker separating SDT's second transition from a first transition in which fertility falls while marriage remains close to universal. Bongaarts and Watkins (1996), reviewing fertility transitions across 69 developing countries, add a further caution relevant here: they show that fertility decline in the developing world has historically spread more through social diffusion — the transmission of contraceptive knowledge and small-family norms through social networks that can operate largely independently of, and faster than, the underlying socioeconomic development SDT's ideational account presupposes — than through the value-driven, autonomy-seeking mechanism SDT proposes for Europe. Where fertility decline is diffusion-driven rather than value-driven, there is no theoretical reason to expect the accompanying deinstitutionalization of marriage that Cherlin (2004) documents for the United States, and, as the following discussion shows, the Maghreb largely bears this out: marriage there has remained the near-universal, non-optional context for childbearing throughout the region's fertility decline, rebound, and renewed decline alike.

The Maghreb as a critical case

The Maghreb's demographic history offers an unusually well-documented setting in which to weigh these competing accounts against each other, thanks to a sustained body of work by Ouadah-Bedidi, Vallin, and their collaborators at France's Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED). At the end of the 1960s, fertility in Algeria peaked at roughly 8.1 children per woman, driven by a post-independence marriage boom in which the war-interrupted generation married and had children earlier than either the preceding or following cohorts (Ouadah-Bedidi & Vallin, 2000). What followed was one of the most rapid fertility declines documented anywhere in the world: by the early 2000s, Algerian fertility had fallen to around 2.2 children per woman, alongside comparable declines in Tunisia and Morocco, all attributed to a familiar bundle of structural changes — mass female schooling, rising female age at first marriage, urbanization, and, in Tunisia's case, an unusually early and assertive state family-planning policy (Ouadah-Bedidi & Vallin, 2000; Karim et al., 2022).

It is what happened after the decline that breaks most cleanly with SDT's expectations. Rather than continuing downward through replacement level as the theory's irreversibility claim would predict, Algerian fertility reversed course, climbing back to nearly 2.9 children per woman by 2010 (Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2012). Ouadah-Bedidi and Vallin (2013), examining the discrepancy between Algeria's population policy and its actual demographic outcomes, trace the rebound primarily to a fall in the female age at marriage during the 1990s and 2000s and a surge in the number of marriages contracted during that decade — almost the reverse of the rising-age-at-marriage mechanism that SDT treats as a one-way ratchet. Tunisia's trajectory tells a related but not identical story: fertility appeared to plateau near replacement level around 1999, then experienced its own partial rebound to about 2.4 children per woman in the mid-2010s, before falling sharply again to a historic low of 1.58 by 2023 (Ouadah-Bedidi, Bouchoucha, & Abdellatif, 2026). Table 1 summarizes both countries' trajectories at four comparable points in time.

Table 1

Total fertility rate trajectories, Algeria and Tunisia, 1970-2023 (children per woman)

Country	~1970	~2000-2002	~2010-2015	2023	Trajectory shape
Algeria	8.1	2.2	2.9	2.77	Decline → rebound → renewed decline (post-2017)
Tunisia	6.5	2.1	2.4	1.58	Decline → plateau/rebound → sharp renewed decline

Note. Figures are approximate, rounded to one decimal; see text for exact sourcing per period. Compiled from Ouadah-Bedidi & Vallin (2000, 2013), Ouadah-Bedidi et al. (2012, 2026), and World Bank (2024).

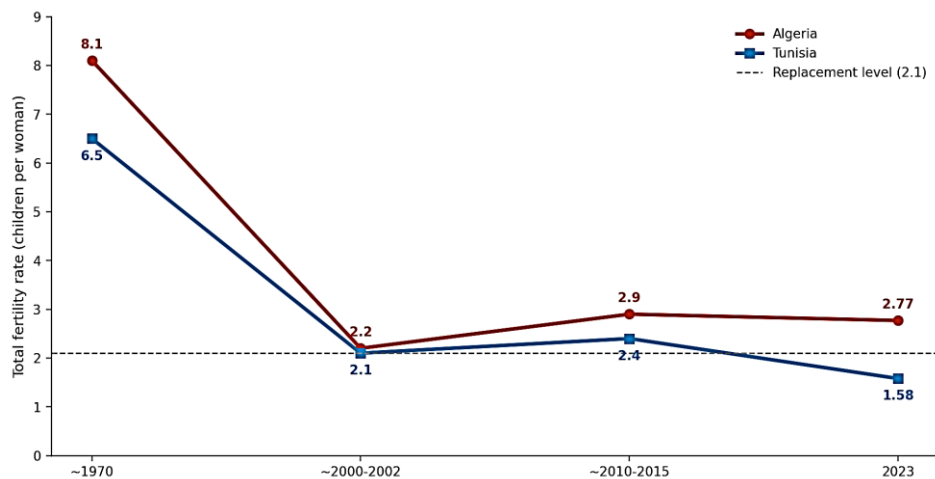
Two features of this record are difficult to reconcile with SDT as originally formulated. First, the direction of change is not monotonic: both countries decline, partially reverse, and decline again within a fifty-year window, a pattern SDT's developmental-stage logic has no natural place for, since the theory treats each stage as a one-way step toward the next. Second, the mechanism behind the Algerian rebound specifically — falling age at marriage and a marriage boom — is the structural opposite of what SDT identifies as the marker of advancing transition, namely rising age at marriage tied to greater individual autonomy in partner choice (Lesthaeghe, 2010). If rising marriage age indicates SDT progress, a period of falling marriage age accompanying rising fertility should, by the theory's own logic, indicate reversion toward the first transition rather than a variant expression of the second — yet Algeria in the 2000s was simultaneously urbanizing further, expanding female education further, and integrating further into global economic and cultural circuits, the very conditions SDT treats as its ideational engine.

The Maghreb Against SDT's Predictions

Building on the theoretical and empirical material reviewed above, this section argues that the Maghreb's fertility trajectory is better explained by marriage-market and family-bargaining dynamics specific to developing economies than by SDT's ideational mechanism, and draws out what this implies for applying demographic transition theory to the Global South more broadly.

Figure 1

Total fertility rate trajectories, Algeria and Tunisia, 1970-2023.



Note. Author-constructed chart from the data in Table 1 (Ouadah-Bedidi & Vallin, 2000, 2013; Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2012, 2026; World Bank, 2024). Dashed line marks replacement-level fertility (2.1 children per woman).

Figure 1 makes the non-monotonic shape of both trajectories visually explicit. If SDT's ideational mechanism were doing the causal work its proponents claim, the curve should look roughly like a slope: continuing decline as postmodern values spread, with perhaps a temporary plateau but no sustained reversal. What the data instead show, for both Algeria and Tunisia, is closer to a shallow "W": rapid decline, partial rebound, and renewed decline, each turn occurring within a period too short for a whole generation's worth of ideational change to plausibly explain it.

The Algerian case is the more instructive because its own investigators have identified a specific, testable mechanism for the rebound: a fall in female age at first marriage during the 1990s and 2000s, driven in large part by an unusually severe housing shortage and youth unemployment crisis that had, through the 1980s, been delaying marriage for reasons of economic necessity rather than value change (Ouadah-Bedidi & Vallin, 2013). As housing policy and the broader economy shifted in the 2000s — partly on the back of hydrocarbon revenues — marriage became more attainable again for young couples who had wanted it earlier, producing both a marriage boom and, mechanically, a fertility rebound among the cohorts who married younger than their immediate predecessors. This account fits comfortably within Caldwell's (1976) older framework: family formation timing responded to the changing economic calculus facing young households, not to a shift in underlying values about marriage or childbearing as institutions. Nothing in this story requires positing a "Maslowian drift" toward individual autonomy, still less its reversal; it requires only that a structural constraint (housing, employment) eased for a decade and then, per the renewed decline documented after 2017, tightened again or was offset by other pressures (Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2026).

McDonald's (2000) gender-equity framework supplies a second, complementary piece of the puzzle, one that speaks directly to family structure rather than only to fertility counts. Across the Maghreb, women's access to education and, increasingly, employment has expanded rapidly — precisely the kind of change in individual-oriented institutions that SDT treats as its central engine. But the household- and marriage-oriented institutions that McDonald (2000) distinguishes from these — inheritance rules, the domestic division of labor, the social expectation that marriage remains the near-universal, non-optional context for childbearing

— have changed far more slowly, if at all, across the region (Karim et al., 2022). On McDonald's (2000) account, this uneven pace between the two institutional tracks, rather than any wholesale rejection or embrace of Western individualism, is what should be expected to produce non-monotonic and locally specific fertility patterns: fertility falls when women's new individual-oriented opportunities collide with unchanged family-oriented expectations, and can partially recover when family-level bargains — over marriage timing, household formation, or the division of paid and unpaid labor — are renegotiated in ways that temporarily ease that collision, without requiring any broader shift in whether marriage itself remains central to family life.

This reframing carries a direct implication for how demographic transition theory should be applied — or not applied — to developing societies more broadly, including Algeria's neighbors and comparable contexts elsewhere in the Global South. SDT's stronger claims — irreversibility, ideational convergence toward a single Western endpoint, the weakening of marriage as an institution per se — do not travel well to a setting in which marriage remains, as it does across the Maghreb, the near-universal and largely non-optional context for childbearing (Karim et al., 2022): non-marital fertility remains rare in the region even where fertility itself has fallen sharply, precisely the kind of "wrong" pattern combination that Zaidi and Morgan (2017) identify as recurring wherever SDT is tested outside its original Northwestern European setting. What does travel, and what the Maghreb data actively confirm, is the much older and more modest claim embedded in Caldwell's (1976) framework: fertility responds, sometimes non-monotonically, to structural shifts in the economic and institutional position of the family, without any requirement that those shifts move in a single direction or converge on a particular cultural endpoint.

A further implication concerns policy and public discourse rather than theory alone. Because the Algerian rebound was, at the time, genuinely startling to demographers who had assumed the first decline was the whole story (Ouadah-Bedidi et al., 2012), it illustrates a risk that recurs whenever a single-country demographic trend is extrapolated forward as though it were a fixed trajectory: population projections, housing policy, and education planning built on the assumption of continuing decline can be overtaken within a decade by a reversal rooted in ordinary economic conditions rather than in any deep cultural shift. The more general lesson for family sociology and population studies in developing societies is methodological as much as theoretical: fertility and family-structure trends should be read against the specific economic and institutional conditions of marriage formation in each setting, rather than assimilated by default to a stage in an imported, linear developmental script.

CONCLUSIONS

Algeria's total fertility rate fell from roughly 8.1 children per woman in 1970 to about 2.2 by the early 2000s, then climbed back to nearly 2.9 by 2010, before declining again after 2017; Tunisia's trajectory shows a parallel, if not identical, decline-rebound-decline shape, reaching a historic low of 1.58 children per woman by 2023. Neither pattern fits the unilinear, irreversible slide toward sub-replacement fertility and weakening marriage that Second Demographic Transition theory predicts as the near-inevitable consequence of ideational modernization.

The more defensible explanation, developed through Caldwell's (1976) wealth-flows framework and McDonald's (2000) gender-equity distinction, treats the Maghreb's fertility movements as responses to shifting economic conditions surrounding marriage formation — housing availability, youth employment, the uneven pace of change between women's individual-oriented and family-oriented institutional positions — rather than as evidence of a one-way ideational drift toward Western individualism. This does not make SDT theory worthless outside Europe; several of its descriptive observations, particularly around rising female education and urbanization, hold across the Maghreb as elsewhere. It does mean that

SDT's stronger causal and directional claims should not be imported into developing-society contexts without the kind of country-specific empirical scrutiny that Ouadah-Bedidi, Vallin, and their collaborators have applied to Algeria and Tunisia.

For a discipline built substantially on European and North American cases, the Maghreb's documented fertility "roller coaster" is a useful corrective: family and fertility change in developing societies need not run in one direction, and theories built to explain the trajectory of one region should be tested, not assumed, when applied to another.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a reflection article, this work synthesizes existing demographic theory and publicly available official statistics rather than presenting new primary survey data, and the interpretation offered here — that marriage-market and family-bargaining dynamics better explain the Maghreb's fertility trajectory than SDT's ideational mechanism — draws on the causal account proposed by Ouadah-Bedidi and Vallin's own research rather than on independent statistical testing conducted for this article. The two-country focus on Algeria and Tunisia, chosen for the quality and continuity of available demographic documentation, cannot be assumed to generalize to Morocco, Libya, or Mauritania, whose trajectories Karim et al. (2022) show departing from both the Algerian and Tunisian patterns in their own ways, nor to sub-Saharan African or South Asian developing contexts with different marriage systems. Future research could test the marriage-market mechanism proposed here more directly through cohort-level nuptiality data linking housing and labor-market conditions to marriage timing across the region, and could extend the comparison to additional developing countries to assess how general the non-monotonic pattern documented here for the Maghreb actually is.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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