

The pan-European decline in birth rates and its corollary, below replacement fertility, give the impression that there are uniform driving forces at play. Europe, however, is not a homogeneous cultural entity. Despite shared history, open borders, and relentless efforts to achieve political and economic unity, Europe remains divided and heterogeneous. There is now ample evidence to show that comparable fertility rates are a product of widely disparate traditions and modes of conduct. In light of these findings and in a bid to draw on the accomplishments of anthropological demography, this paper presents results from two ethnographic studies exploring female middle-class attitudes towards having children and experiences of family formation in Athens and London. Through an investigation of similar analytic categories in each, including motherhood, gender, identity, personhood and the self, it reveals a range of differences between how Athenians and Londoners approach childbearing. These variations are not of degree but rather of character. While in Athens, for example, motherhood is essential to being a 'complete' Greek woman and childlessness is shameful, among white, British, middle-class females living in London, becoming a mother entails a loss of identity, status and independence, and being 'childfree' is acceptable. Key to shaping the two groups of informants' impressions and practices in this regard is the socio-economic context in which they live. In comparison to London, childcare facilities in Athens are scarce and the provision of state support for families is minimal. However, middle-class Athenian grandparents, unlike their counterparts in London, play a crucial role in helping look after their grandchildren. The print media is another important influence on reproduction. Consequently, this study also explores the degree of correspondence between each group of informants' narrative accounts of childbearing with Greek and British newspapers' discourse on the reasons for low fertility and issues pertinent to it.