

# Parental socioeconomic status and age at leaving home in Europe: Exploring regional differences

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## Abstract

Leaving the parental home is a milestone in young people's transition to adulthood. The timing of leaving home varies greatly across European countries; however, evidence on the association between parental socioeconomic status (SES) and the age at leaving home in a comparative perspective is mixed, and subnational variation has received little attention. The module on the timing of life events included in Round 3 (2006) and 9 (2018) of the European Social Survey offers the opportunity to study how parental SES is associated with the age at leaving home, and how this association varies at the national and regional level for a sample of respondents born between the 1950s and the 1980s in 175 regions across 29 European countries. Results from three-level linear regression models indicate that a high parental SES postpones women's age at leaving home in most Southern and Eastern European countries, where state support to young people is low and family ties are strong, whereas the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home is less clear-cut in Western and Nordic countries. Between-country variation in the association between parental SES and the age at home-leaving prevails over within-country variation, suggesting that the role of the parental background is country-specific and that other unobserved factors may explain within-country heterogeneity.

## KEYWORDS

Europe, leaving home, multilevel models, parental socioeconomic status, regions, transition to adulthood

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Leaving the parental home is a major life course event that occurs during the transition to adulthood. Although it does not necessarily imply the achievement of economic independence, it can be considered a marker of residential (or 'spatial') independence from one's parents (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). In the European context, the timing of events that mark one's passage towards adult

life has been shown to be socially stratified, with young adults coming from advantaged backgrounds being more likely to delay partnership formation and childbearing (Billari et al., 2019; Brons et al., 2017; Mooyaart et al., 2022). However, findings on the association between parental socioeconomic status (SES) and the timing of leaving home are mixed, with some studies arguing that youth with a high parental SES leave the parental home earlier than those with low parental SES (Billari et al., 2019), some showing the opposite (Angelini et al., 2022),

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and some others pointing to the relevance of the country context, the destination after leaving home (e.g., to live alone, with a partner, with unrelated household members), and age (Aassve et al., 2002; Iacovou, 2010; Schwanitz et al., 2017; Sironi et al., 2015).

In this paper, we add a new potential source of heterogeneity in the social stratification of leaving home behaviours, which has been explored so far by a limited number of studies: within-country differences. The aim of this study is to analyse whether and how the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home differs according to the national and regional context. Specifically, it exploits retrospective data on a sample of individuals living in 175 regions across 29 European countries, born between the 1950s and the 1980s, and uses multilevel linear regression models with individuals nested into countries and regions within countries. Multilevel models enable to test whether the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home varies between and within countries, considering that individuals living in the same area are exposed to similar labour and housing markets, but also to similar cultural characteristics such as family practices and norms, that may vary widely even within the same country (Reher, 1998).

This study contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it enhances our knowledge about the social stratification of the age at leaving home, something relevant for our understanding of current—and, possibly, future—patterns of family formation in Europe, as home-leaving represents the stepping stone for starting one's own family (Esteve et al., 2020). Second, it studies for the first time how the social gradient of leaving home varies not only between a large set of European countries, but also within countries. Particularly, this analysis relies on a large sample of respondents living in Europe, overcoming the limitation of focusing on a small set of countries.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 | Leaving home and parental SES

In the literature on social stratification, it is well established that the family background shapes children's educational and occupational outcomes (Furstenberg, 2010). As families provide their children with economic and cultural resources, they play an important role in their demographic decisions as well.

Two contradictory hypotheses about the relationship between parental SES and timing of leaving home have been put forward by the literature. These hypotheses rely on the assumption that parenting styles differ between high- and low-SES parents. According to the 'feathered nest' hypothesis, high-SES parents may delay their children's independence because they live in comfortable houses, where young adult children can enjoy high levels of privacy as if they were living on their own (Avery et al., 1992; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). This hypothesis was confirmed in a comparative framework by Angelini et al. (2022): using data on older cohorts (1936–1956) and constructing an index to measure SES composed of

both characteristics of the dwelling and occupation of the parents, the authors show that individuals growing up in high-SES households leave their parents' home later than lower-SES individuals. On the contrary, the 'socialisation hypothesis' posits that high-SES parents may encourage their children to explore possibilities and delay nonreversible transitions such as marriage and childbearing, and to anticipate transitions which lead to independence and autonomy (Arnett, 2000). Accordingly, the offspring of high-SES parents may be more likely to leave the parental home early to attend university and/or live on their own. This hypothesis finds empirical support in Billari et al. (2019) who showed that in Austria, France, and Bulgaria young adults with high-SES parents (obtained combined information on parents' education and occupation) are more likely to intend leaving the parental home early to live independently rather than to form their own families, and they are more able than those with low-SES parents to realise this intention. Indeed, across Europe, a high socioeconomic background increases the probability to live alone after having left home (Klimova Chaloupkova, 2023) and decreases the chance to follow traditional family trajectories (Mooyaart et al., 2022). In line with the socialisation hypothesis, Iacovou (2010) findings suggest that higher parental incomes decrease the likelihood to leave at younger ages to live with a partner. However, leaving home 'early' or 'late' can only be defined in relation to the context where the transition is experienced, as median ages at leaving home vary greatly in Europe, along with the consequences associated with an early or late transition (Aassve et al., 2007).

Given the well-established fact that women tend to leave the parental home and to engage in family formation before men, leading to considerable divergence in trajectories during the transition to adulthood (Lesnard et al., 2016; Schwanitz, 2017), the association between parental SES and home-leaving ages might be shaped by gender as well. Surprisingly, previous studies found little evidence of gender differences in the association between parental SES and home-leaving decisions, when one or more destinations are included (Angelini et al., 2022; Billari et al., 2019; Klimova Chaloupkova, 2023; Schwanitz et al., 2017). Analyses will be conducted separately by gender to account for the diversity between women's and men's life courses. No specific hypothesis is formulated on the overall association between parental SES and the age at leaving home, as we expect it to be shaped by the country context.

### 2.2 | Leaving home and between-country variation

While the age at leaving the parental home has remained rather stable across birth cohorts (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010), European countries are characterised by a strong variation in home-leaving ages (Van den Berg et al., 2021), which takes place along a North/South divide, in line with the long-standing 'earliest-early' versus 'latest-late' pattern in the transition to adulthood (Billari, 2004). This divide is commonly explained by long-standing institutional and cultural differences in family structure and family ties. Welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996) shape the

association between parental SES and home-leaving ages in that young adults living in countries where public support is available to them (e.g., in form of tuition-free education, subsidised rents, grants, or unemployment benefits) can be assumed to be less reliant on their parents' resources. The nature and the strength of intergenerational relations, at the core of Reher's work (1998), integrated in various ways into the welfare regime framework (see e.g., Saraceno & Keck, 2010) and later revisited by other authors (Mönkediek & Bras, 2014), are fundamental to explain the emotional and material support from parents to their young adult children, because parents often compensate for a welfare state devoting few resources to young adults directly.

In Nordic countries (i.e., Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Denmark), the state deliberately intervenes to support young adults' access to tertiary education and residential independence, and ensures a smooth entry into the labour market, considerably reducing the uncertainties in the transition to adulthood and the reliance on parental resources. This is consistent with the weak family ties characterising Northern European societies, which favour young people's independence from their families (Reher, 1998). In Mediterranean countries (i.e., Italy, Spain and Portugal), characterised by dual labour markets and a welfare state focused on the provision of cash benefits (especially pensions), vertical relationships between generations are emphasised: young adults are expected to stay in the parental homes and to rely on their parents' economic resources for longer periods compared to other countries, traditionally until the first marriage (Iacovou, 2001), which is strongly linked with the achievement of economic stability (Reher, 1998).

A West-East distinction emerges instead from Hajnal (1965), who argues that to the East of the imaginary line running from Trieste to St. Petersburg marriage tends to be early and universal and does not imply an exit from the parental home. Eastern Europe constitutes a heterogeneous group of countries, which underwent profound transformations especially in the period between the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991) and their entry in the European Union (2004–2013). According to Fenger (2007), the postcommunist countries of Central and Eastern Europe do not fit into the classic welfare regime framework, forming distinct typologies (see Table 1). What brings these countries together is the overall low level of state support for young adults, the traditional values concerning religion and gender roles, and family closeness. As a result, it has been shown that leaving home early in these countries may increase the risk of poverty for young adults irrespective of their family background, prolonging their stay in the parental home (Schwanitz et al., 2017). Baltic countries (i.e., Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) partially differentiate themselves from this group, as, similarly to Nordic countries, they exhibit weak family ties and young adults' independence is valued (Reher, 1998). Lastly, Western European countries display a wide variety of welfare models, ranging from the liberal Anglo-Saxon one, to the corporatist model characterising Austria, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and to the unique French model. The level of state support provided to young people varies from one

country to another (Thévenon, 2015), but intergenerational obligations are less strong compared to Southern and Eastern Europe, enrolment in higher education is often associated with home-leaving, and it is quite common to live alone before forming one's own family (Iacovou, 2001). This broad classification of countries into distinct combinations of institutional and cultural factors is not exhaustive: France, for instance, does not fit into the categories illustrated above, as social aids cover a substantial proportion of the young adult population and housing benefits are widely available to young people, but familism is quite strong (Thévenon, 2015).

Institutional and cultural factors summarised here and in Table 1 are thus strongly intertwined: the countries characterised by high state support are also those where family ties are weaker, while those where family ties are stronger see a lower level of state support to young people. In line with previous studies (Aassve et al., 2002; Iacovou, 2010; Schwanitz et al., 2017; Sironi et al., 2015), we expect that the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home depends on the country. Hypotheses about the direction of this association (H1, H2) are presented in the table below (Table 2).

### 2.3 | Leaving home and within-country variation

Contrarily to country-level factors, regional-level factors have received little attention in the studies related to home-leaving. To date, studies on regional patterns of the transition to adulthood have been conducted on single countries (Bertogg, 2020; Hillmert, 2005; Holdsworth, 1998; Vitali, 2010), while one study on the age deadline for leaving home has been conducted in a comparative European perspective (Aassve et al., 2013). Many structural and cultural factors that affect young adults' entry into adult life may vary widely within a single country: the number of available jobs, housing prices, the proximity to universities, family structure, but also parental norms and expectations (Vitali, 2010). This means that a similar parental socioeconomic background may be attached to different economic possibilities or to different expectations about offspring's home-leaving decisions within the same country. Incorporating the subnational level in the studies on the transition to adulthood might prove particularly interesting, as family structure, norms, and ties have been found to vary substantially between European regions (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2012; Mönkediek & Bras, 2014), along with fertility levels (Campisi et al., 2020).

While some regional-level factors fluctuate considerably over time depending on the economic cycle, and therefore cannot be used to explain the timing of leaving home across our sample, long-term differences in institutional arrangements, economic productivity, and family culture at the subnational level can be traced. In countries such as France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, the strength of family ties differs in the North compared to the South, shaping home-leaving patterns accordingly (Holdsworth, 1998; Reher, 1998). Different institutional arrangements or the presence of different language groups in federal

**TABLE 1** Characteristics of the countries included in the sample.

Country	Welfare regime <sup>a</sup>	Public financial support to young adults <sup>b</sup>	% of public spending on tertiary education <sup>c</sup>	Family ties <sup>d</sup>
Austria	Corporatist	Low	Above average	Mixed
Belgium	Corporatist	Low	Above average	Mixed
Bulgaria	Postcommunist European	Absent	Below average	Strong
Switzerland	Corporatist	Absent	Above average	Mixed
Cyprus	Mediterranean	Absent	Below average	-
Czech Republic	Postcommunist European	Low	-	Mixed
Germany	Corporatist	Low	Below average	Mixed
Denmark	Social-democratic	High	Above average	Weak
Estonia	Former-USSR	Low	Above average	Weak
Spain	Mediterranean	Low	Below average	Strong
Finland	Social-democratic	High	Above average	Weak
France	Corporatist	High	Below average	Mixed
Croatia	Postcommunist European	Absent	-	Strong
Hungary	Postcommunist European	Low	Below average	-
Ireland	Liberal/corporatist	High	Below average	-
Iceland	Social-democratic	High	Above average	Weak
Italy	Mediterranean	Low	Below average	Strong
Lithuania	Former-USSR	Absent	Above average	Weak
Latvia	Former-USSR	Absent	Below average	Weak
Montenegro	-	-	-	-
Netherlands	Corporatist	High	Above average	Mixed
Norway	Social-democratic	High	Above average	Weak
Poland	Postcommunist European	Low	Below average	Strong
Portugal	Mediterranean	Low	Below average	Strong
Serbia	-	-	Below average	-
Sweden	Social-democratic	High	Above average	Weak
Slovenia	-	Low	Below average	-
Slovakia	Postcommunist European	Low	Below average	-
United Kingdom	Liberal	High	Above average	Weak

Note: '-' indicates no information is available in the indicated sources; public financial support to young adults refers to the proportion of inactive (NEET/not in training) young adults receiving housing benefits (Thevenon, 2015, pp. 25–26); 'mixed' in family ties refers to countries with high regional variance in the strength of family ties (Mönkediek & Bras, 2014).

Sources: <sup>a</sup>Esping-Andersen, 1990; Fenger, 2007; Ferrera, 1996; <sup>b</sup>Thevenon, 2015; <sup>c</sup>Eurostat (EDUC\_UOE\_FINE06), average 2012–2015; <sup>d</sup>Mönkediek & Bras, 2014; Reher, 1998.

**TABLE 2** Overview of the hypotheses.

Welfare/family ties	Parental SES
Generous/weak (Northern and Western countries)	(H1) Negative/null association: The higher parental SES, the earlier young adults leave home/the age at leaving home is independent from parental SES
Low/strong (Southern and Eastern countries)	(H2) Positive association: The higher parental SES, the later young adults leave home

Abbreviation: SES, socioeconomic status.

countries or unitary states may also mark important economic and cultural differences that can influence trends in the transition to adulthood, as discussed for Switzerland by Bertogg (2020). Southern and Eastern European countries display more conservative family norms compared to the rest of Europe, but within-country differences can be noticed, for example, in Spain and in Belgium, where Andalusia and Wallonia are, respectively, more conservative than the rest of the country (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2012). Regional-level differences may also be driven by historical events such as the division between Eastern and Western Germany (1949–1990), which marks differences in economic conditions as well as in family culture that are reflected in the transition to adulthood (Hillmert, 2005). It should be noted that most previous studies have operationalized the regional dimension using Eurostat's Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification (Aassve et al., 2013; Campisi et al., 2020; Jappens & Van Bavel, 2012; Mönkediek & Bras, 2014) or modifications thereof (Holdsworth, 1998). However, as discussed above, 'regions' can refer to either larger (Hillmert, 2005; Reher, 1998) or smaller geographical areas (cantons in the Swiss case for Bertogg, 2020; provinces and municipalities in Spain for Vitali, 2010); when data are available at a fine-grained level, distinguishing between urban and rural areas or even among neighbourhoods of the same city might prove ideal.

Having high-SES parents may thus have a different meaning within the same country, and lead to distinct home-leaving patterns that deviate from the country-level associations presented in H1 and H2. The following hypothesis (H3) is thus formulated: *within the same country, the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home is heterogeneous.*

### 3 | METHODS

#### 3.1 | Data and sample

The European Social Survey (ESS) represents a key source of comparable cross-sectional microdata in the European context. The rotating module on the timing of life, proposed in Round 3 (2006) and in Round 9 (2018), was designed to gather information about the actual timing of life events (ESS Round 3, 2006; ESS Round 9, 2018). Information about the timing of events has been collected retrospectively, making it possible to reconstruct respondents' life courses, and, in particular, their trajectories during the transition to adulthood (Billari et al., 2021).

In total, 92,238 individuals aged 15 and over, born between the 1900s and the 2000s and living in 31 European countries<sup>1</sup>, answered the two survey rounds. Crucially, the ESS includes information at the regional (i.e., subnational) level, which can be used to study the variability of phenomena at a fine-grained level. The region of

residence in the two rounds<sup>2</sup> is harmonised by the authors to a single variable corresponding to the 2016 version of NUTS regions, that is, the standard subdivision of European countries used for statistical purposes, corresponding here to that adopted in Round 9. When this is not possible because of boundary shifts between the NUTS classification adopted in the two rounds, regions are harmonised to those present in Round 3. In this paper, European regions correspond to NUTS-2 regions, or NUTS-1 when these are not available (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and the United Kingdom). Russia and Ukraine are dropped from the analysis since their regions do not belong to the NUTS system. The final number of countries included in the analysis amounts to 29, that of regions to 175 (see Table 3). Crucially, regions refer to individuals' current place of residence, as no information is available on the region of birth.

The analytical sample consists of individuals who left the parental home (82.8% of the starting sample), not living in Russia or Ukraine (95.2%), and born after 1950 and before 1990. Those born before 1950 (25.7%) are dropped because their life course during the early adulthood was heavily influenced by the experience of the Second World War and cannot be compared with that of later cohorts; those born in or after 1990 (9.7%) are dropped as well, as they may not have experienced the event by the time of the interview. Additionally, we exclude individuals leaving home before the age of 15 (3.2%) or after the age of 45 (0.4%), as such early or late ages are rare and can be considered very unlikely in the European context.

After listwise deletion of missing cases on the selected variables, and after dropping respondents living in regions with less than 10 individuals (36 individuals in total), the final sample consists of 47,343 respondents, 21,454 men and 25,889 women. The number of observations within each region ranges from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 1862, with an average value of 320 observations per region; each country counts a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 9093 individuals, 1633 on average (weighted values).

#### 3.2 | Dependent variable

The dependent variable is the age at leaving the parental home. The timing of home-leaving is measured by the following item: 'In what year did you first leave your parent(s) for two months or more to start living separately from them?'. This definition refers to a transition that could be either temporary or permanent, but it is not possible to distinguish between the two. The age at leaving home is calculated as the difference between the year at leaving home and the year of birth. This paper studies the age at the first event of leaving home, hence considers it a non-repeatable event; more generally, however, home-leaving is defined as a process 'involving multiple departures and returns' (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>In Round 3, the variable is country-specific and amounts to either NUTS-1, 2 or 3, while in Round 9 one variable per NUTS level indicates the region of residence. However, NUTS-2 or 3 are not available for some countries (see the ESS website for details).

<sup>1</sup>Considering countries present in only one round or in both rounds.

**TABLE 3** Overview of the countries and regions used in the analysis (weighted).

Country	Country Code	ESS Round	Level	NUTS Version	No. of regions	N
Austria	AT	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	9	480
Belgium	BE	3 + 9	NUTS-1	2016	3	1172
Bulgaria	BG	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	6	573
Switzerland	CH	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	7	891
Cyprus	CY	3 + 9	NUTS-1	2016	1	88
Czech Republic	CZ	9	NUTS-2	2016	8	573
Germany	DE	3 + 9	NUTS-1	2016	16	9093
Denmark	DK	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	5	601
Estonia	EE	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	1	137
Spain	ES	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	17	4767
Finland	FI	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	4	588
France	FR	3 + 9	NUTS-1	2013	8	7259
Croatia	HR	9	NUTS-2	2013	2	213
Hungary	HU	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	7	1328
Ireland	IE	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2013	2	584
Iceland	IS	9	NUTS-2	2016	1	20
Italy	IT	9	NUTS-1	2016	5	2997
Lithuania	LT	9	NUTS-1	2016	1	162
Latvia	LV	9	NUTS-2	2016	1	110
Montenegro	ME	9	NUTS-1	2016	1	27
Netherlands	NL	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	12	1905
Norway	NO	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	7	562
Poland	PL	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2013	16	3367
Portugal	PT	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	5	973
Serbia	RS	9	NUTS-2	2016	4	310
Sweden	SE	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	8	1036
Slovenia	SI	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	2	200
Slovakia	SK	3 + 9	NUTS-2	2016	4	530
United Kingdom	UK	3 + 9	NUTS-1	2016	12	6799
<b>Total</b>					<b>175</b>	<b>47,343</b>

Note: NUTS-2 Hungarian regions of HU11 and HU12 are merged into the NUTS-1 region HU1. In Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Montenegro, NUTS-1 regions correspond to the whole country.

Abbreviation: NUTS, Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics.

### 3.3 | Independent variable and controls

The main predictor is parental SES. Because the ESS provides information about the highest level of education attained by the respondent's mother and father, as well as about their employment status and occupation when the respondent was aged 14, the choice was made to exploit all variables and to construct an index, following

previous studies (Billari et al., 2019; Brons et al., 2017) and in contrast to those drawing exclusively upon parental education (Klimova Chaloupkova, 2023; Schwanitz et al., 2017). The benefit of this approach is that it incorporates all available information about mothers' and fathers' status during childhood, hence before individuals leave home, and that results can be cross-checked with parental education or occupation separately.

In Round 3 and 9, parental education and occupation have been measured using different scales. Specifically, parental education is measured in 1-digit ISCED 1997 levels in Round 3, and in 3-digits ISCED 2011 levels in Round 9. We harmonise the variables measuring parental education in the two rounds into 1-digit ISCED 1997 levels, obtaining a variable with four categories: less than lower secondary (ISCED 0–1), lower secondary (ISCED 2), upper secondary and postsecondary non tertiary (ISCED 3–4), tertiary (ISCED 5–6). We exploit information about parental employment status and occupation when the respondent was aged 14 to create a variable indicating whether mother and father were working or absent (1), employed/self-employed in a routine or semi-routine occupation (2), intermediate occupation (3), or managerial occupation (4). A Principal Component Analysis reveals that the four variables measuring mother's and father's education and occupation form one factor explaining 59% of the variance, with factor loadings ranging from 0.64 to 0.87. Thereby, we create an index of parental SES by averaging the four variables (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.76$ ); if information on one (or more) variable(s) is missing, the index is calculated by combining the remaining variables. The index is then standardised. Respondents' own level of education could not be included in the model, as it is measured *ex post* and could have been achieved after the individual has left the parental home.

The models presented below control for birth cohort (10-year groups), area of residence, and ESS round. Because the region, as well as the area of residence, refers to the place where respondents are living at the time of the interview, it is assumed that the transition was experienced in the same region where the respondent is living at the time of interview. The area of residence refers to respondents' descriptions of the area they live in, and is dichotomised into an urban/rural variable. This control is added since the regional level may not capture possible heterogeneities between respondents living in the same region: ideally, local characteristics measured at the municipality level shall be measured (Vitali, 2010). In practice, no existing data simultaneously collects information on one's life course transitions, parental SES, and detailed geographical location at the cross-national scale. In this paper, we therefore use information on NUTS-2 or NUTS-1 regions combined with information on the urbanity/rurality of the place of residence. Analyses are conducted separately on women and men.

### 3.4 | Analytical strategy

Given that the aim of the present paper is to analyse whether and how the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home differs according to the national and regional context, three-level linear regression models are used, with individuals at level 1, regions at level 2, and countries at level 3. Multilevel regression models account for the fact that observations within the same region or country are not independent from each other; they thus estimate a different intercept, and, possibly, a different slope for every region and country in the sample. As a result, the intercept (and the slope) varies around an overall mean (also called 'grand' mean). Residual

error terms express the deviation of the specific observation from the group mean at the different levels, and they are assumed to follow a normal distribution with zero mean and a variance to be estimated (Snijders & Bosker, 2011).

Two features of the ESS make it an ideal setting for the application of multilevel regression analysis: its hierarchical structure composed of individuals nested into regions and countries, and its wide comparative dimension. The regional level is taken into account for both the theoretical reasons exposed above and for statistical reasons, as this strategy allows to overcome the limitations in the estimation of the country effects associated with a small number of countries (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016). The sample size, considering both the number of observations within each region and the number of regions, is big enough to get accurate estimates of the random effects (Grilli & Rampichini, 2018).

Considering the three-level structure and the sample size, a random intercept model (M1) and a random slope model (M2) are estimated. While random intercept models account for the fact that, net of explanatory variables, the age at leaving home varies widely from country to country and from region to region, a random slope is introduced on the parental SES variable to understand whether its relationship with the age at leaving the parental home is context-dependent. The intercept as well as the slope on parental SES are random at levels 2 and 3, as we have theoretical expectations on both between- and within-country variation (Snijders & Bosker, 2011). Because the size of the country-specific random slope differs considerably from that of the random effect at the regional level, we plot the two components in separate maps. A detailed description of the models is provided in the Supporting Information: Appendix.

To assess how well the models fit our data, Likelihood Ratio Tests (LR) are conducted. Likelihood Ratio Tests are used to compare nested models—that is, models differing only in their random part—fitted by maximum likelihood and assess the significance of random-effect components: they test the null hypothesis of no significant differences between the models by performing a chi square test to compare the difference of the deviances (Snijders & Bosker, 2011). Specifically, three-level random intercept models (with individuals *I* nested into regions *R* and countries *C*, IRC in Table 5) are compared with the corresponding two-level models (either individuals nested into regions, IR, or into countries, IC), while three-level models with random slopes on regions and countries are compared with the corresponding random intercept models as well as with three-level models with random slopes on regions (RC vs. R in Table 5) or on countries only (RC vs. C). We conduct robustness checks with alternative model and sample specifications.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Descriptive results

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis, weighted using sampling weights provided by the ESS.

**TABLE 4** Descriptive statistics (weighted).

Variable	Mean/ proportion	SD	Min	Max	Obs.
Age at leaving home	21.74	4.29	15	45	47,343
Parental SES (standardised)	0.00	1.00	-1.70	2.38	47,343
Gender					
Men	0.47	0.50	0	1	47,343
Women	0.53	0.50	0	1	47,343
Area of residence					
Rural	0.71	0.46	0	1	47,343
Urban	0.29	0.46	0	1	47,343
Birth cohort					
1950s	0.27	0.44	0	1	47,343
1960s	0.30	0.46	0	1	47,343
1970s	0.25	0.43	0	1	47,343
1980s	0.17	0.38	0	1	47,343
ESS round					
Round 3	0.42	0.49	0	1	47,343
Round 9	0.58	0.49	0	1	47,343
Age	45.74	11.65	17	70	47,343
Year of birth	1968	10.72	1950	1989	47,343
Year left the parental home	1989	11.46	1965	2019	47,343

The median age at leaving the parental home in the sample is 21. Figure 1 shows how this value changes according to gender and to the geographical context. The median age progressively increases going from North to South: while the lowest value (18) can be found among women in certain regions of the Nordic countries (Iceland, Norway, Sweden), men in Central Italy leave the parental home at the oldest median age in Europe (27). In each country, women leave the parental home slightly earlier than men, with a difference that amounts to a maximum of four years. Country borders mark relevant differences in the median age at leaving home, but these differences are more nuanced among Continental countries. Among women and men alike, within-country heterogeneity is remarkable in Spain, as documented in previous studies (Vitali, 2010), as well as in Eastern European countries such as Poland.

Further descriptive statistics on the age at leaving home such as the mean, the standard deviation, and the interquartile range are presented by country and gender in the Appendix (Supporting Information: Table A1). These additional statistics confirm what maps in Figure 1 intuitively suggest: home-leaving ages are most dispersed in Southern and Eastern European countries, as indicated by the high values of the standard deviation and of the interquartile range, and least dispersed in Northern and Western countries. As pointed out by

previous research based on older cohorts (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010), the median age at leaving home has not changed remarkably across cohorts and gender: it oscillates between 21 and 22 for men, and between 20 and 21 for women for all the birth cohorts analysed here. This justifies our analytical strategy, where we use the birth cohort as a control variable, instead of stratifying the analysis by cohort or groups thereof, as our interest lies in contextual variations.

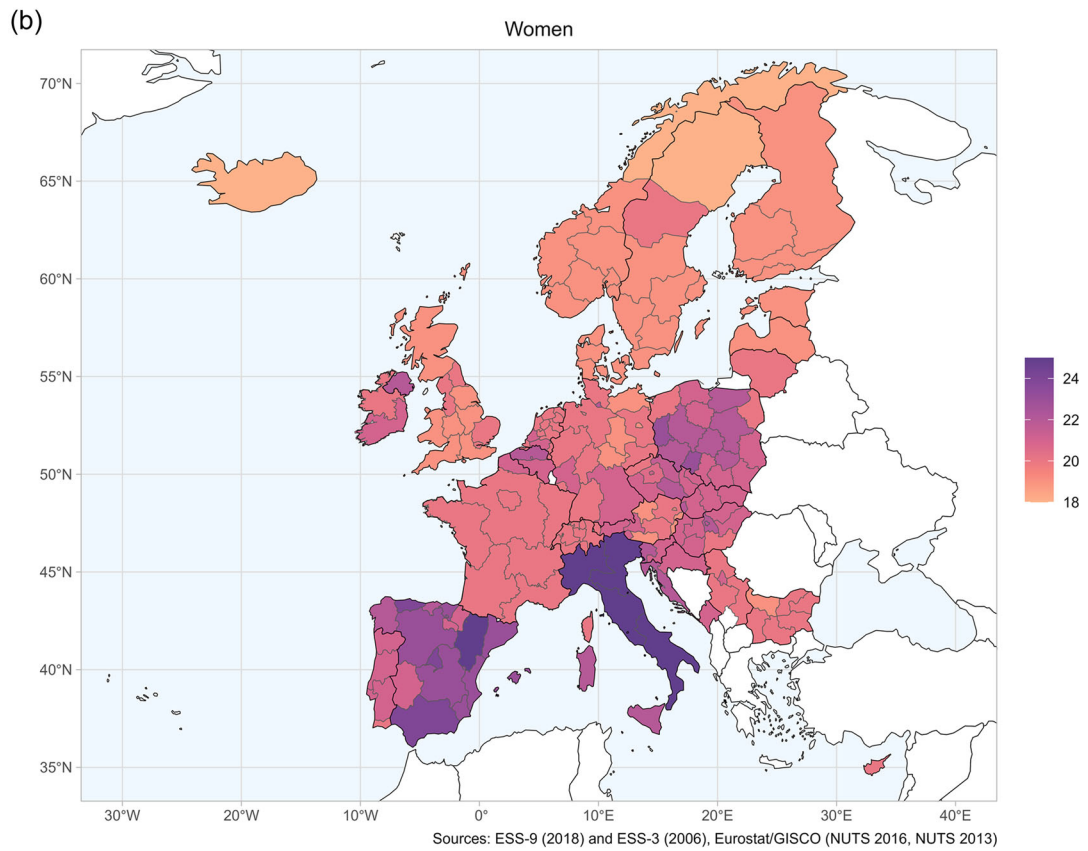
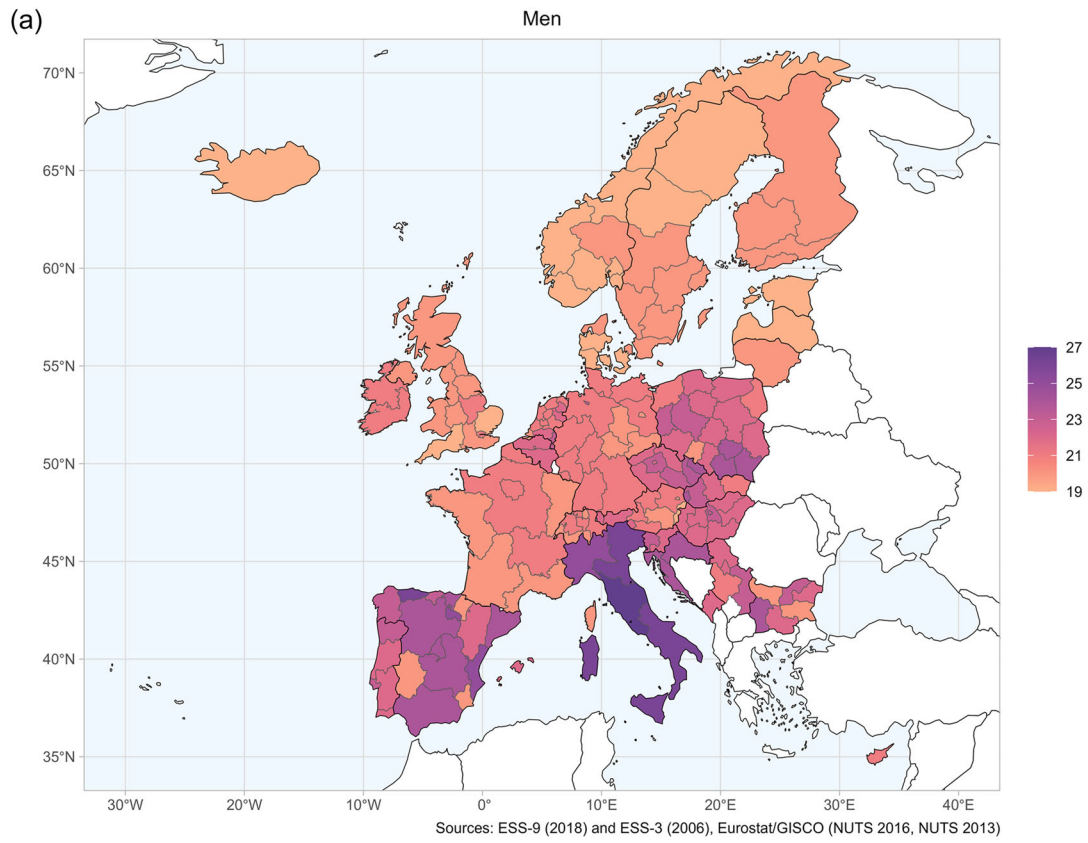
## 4.2 | Multilevel analysis

Results from three-level linear regression models are shown in Table 5.

Before running models M1 and M2, an empty model was run to estimate the proportion of variability in the outcome variable that lies between regions and countries. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient calculated on the empty model shows that 10.71% of the total variance is due to between-countries variance, and 11.45% to between-regions, within-country variance. The same output can be interpreted as a measure of similarity among individuals in the same country and in the same region.

The first model (M1) includes the predictor, that is, the standardised measure of parental SES, and all the available control variables (birth cohort, area of residence and ESS round). The





**FIGURE 1** Age at leaving home (median values), by NUTS region and gender (weighted). NUTS, Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics.

**TABLE 5** Three-level random-intercept and random slope linear regression models.

	M1: Random intercept				M2: Random slope			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
Age at leaving home								
Fixed-effect parameters								
Parental SES (standardised)	-0.0388	(0.0328)	0.224***	(0.0266)	0.0518	(0.0829)	0.291***	(0.0730)
Birth cohort (ref: 1950s)								
1960s	0.244**	(0.0761)	0.235***	(0.0623)	0.248**	(0.0759)	0.221***	(0.0621)
1970s	0.263**	(0.0805)	0.235***	(0.0659)	0.267***	(0.0804)	0.210**	(0.0658)
1980s	-0.531***	(0.0916)	-0.465***	(0.0746)	-0.536***	(0.0915)	-0.475***	(0.0744)
Area of residence (ref: rural)								
Urban	0.0770	(0.0642)	0.231***	(0.0534)	0.0627	(0.0642)	0.191***	(0.0534)
ESS round (ref: round 3)								
ESS round 9	0.473***	(0.0639)	0.379***	(0.0533)	0.489***	(0.0639)	0.394***	(0.0533)
Constant	21.671***	(0.2897)	20.633***	(0.2644)	21.64***	(0.293)	20.63***	(0.265)
Random-effect parameters								
Intercept variance, Country level	2.249***	(0.610)	1.891***	(0.512)	2.299***	(0.623)	1.901***	(0.515)
Intercept variance, Regional level	0.088***	(0.033)	0.105***	(0.027)	0.071**	(0.031)	0.092**	(0.026)
Residual variance	17.341***	(0.168)	14.062***	(0.124)	17.214***	(0.167)	13.961***	(0.123)
Slope variance: PSES, country level								
Slope variance: PSES, regional level					0.148***	(0.053)	0.129***	(0.039)
Intercept-slope								
Covariance, country level					0.237	(0.136)	0.156	(0.106)
Intercept-slope								
Covariance, regional level					0.018	(0.020)	0.011	(0.014)
LR test: IRC versus IR (intercept)	226.47***		260.00***					
LR test: IRC versus IC (intercept)	13.75***		42.99***					
LR test: M2 versus M1								
LR test: RC versus R (slope)					90.24***		136.65***	
LR test: RC versus C (slope)					39.06***		54.81***	
Observations	21,454		25,889		21,454		25,889	

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

intercept is random both at the region and country levels. Among men, parental SES is not associated with the age at home-leaving, as the coefficient is not statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.0388$ ,  $p = 0.236$ ). Among women, the age at home-leaving increases with parental SES: more specifically, an increase by 1 SD in parental SES is associated, on average, with an increase by 0.224 years (corresponding to 82 days, about 3 months) in the age at leaving home; the overall difference in the age at which women leave the parental home between those with low-SES and high-SES parents amounts to 1 year. While living in an urban region does not affect the timing of home-leaving for men, it delays it by 0.231 years for women. The

constant confirms that, in line with our expectations, women tend to leave the parental home earlier than men. Between-country variance is larger than within-country variance for both men and women, although to a different extent: within-country variance is larger for women than for men (0.105 vs. 0.088). LR tests reported in Table 5 comparing the three-level random intercept model with two-level models—including only the regional or only the country level—confirm the relevance of considering the hierarchical structure proposed here.

The second model (M2) corresponds to M1, with the exception that the slope of parental SES ( $\beta = 0.0518$ ,  $p = 0.532$  for men;

$\beta = 0.291$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for women) is allowed to vary across countries and regions within countries. Results of the LR test comparing this model with the previous one (M1) show that adding the random slope to the model significantly improves its fit (LR  $\chi^2(4) = 90.24$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for men, LR  $\chi^2(4) = 136.65$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for women); the residual variance decreases only slightly in M2 compared to M1. The variance of the intercept is larger at the country level compared to the regional level; similarly, the variance of the slope is larger at the country than at the regional level (0.129 vs. 0.0013 for women). This is in line with the nonsignificant results of LR tests comparing M2 to a three-level model where the coefficient of parental SES is random only at the country level, suggesting that the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home varies substantially between countries, but not within.

After having estimated M2 separately on women and men, random slopes are obtained for each country and plotted (Figure 2): they correspond to the grand slope (that reported in Table 5) plus the random effect computed at the country level (see the Supporting Information: Appendix for details). Random slopes represent the country-specific association between the predictor and the outcome variable: a positive sign indicates that, in a given country, a higher parental SES is associated with later home-leaving ages compared to lower parental SES, while a negative sign indicates that having high-SES parents encourage children to leave the parental home comparatively earlier. A positive relationship between the two variables is indicated by the colour violet, green indicates a negative relationship, and grey a null one.

Overall, the relationship is in line with the average slope, though with considerable geographical variation and gender differences. Among men (Figure 2a), negative or null coefficients prevail in Western and Northern Europe including the Baltic countries, while positive coefficients are more diffused in Southern and Eastern European states, with the exception of Iceland, Cyprus, Portugal, and Montenegro. As far as women are concerned (Figure 2b), positive coefficients in line with the average slope (0.291) are predominant, with the exceptions of France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, displaying negative/null coefficients in the range from  $-0.25$  to  $-0.02$ . Nordic countries present positive coefficients, between 0.12 and 0.32 for Denmark and Iceland respectively, with Norway displaying the lowest one (0.06). Coefficients are above the average in most countries of Southern and Eastern Europe: in Croatia, an increase of 1 SD in parental SES delays home-leaving by 1.22 years, by 0.88 years in Serbia and by 0.60 years in Italy. With a coefficient of 0.08, Spain clearly differentiates itself from this group of countries.

Lastly, the random effect at the regional level is plotted separately (Figure 3). This value should be interpreted as the region-specific deviation from a country's slope (illustrated in Figure 2).

The magnitude of between-regions, within-countries, random effects is low, according to the small regional-level variance and to LR tests presented in Table 5. Among men (Figure 3a), the variation goes from  $-0.2$  to  $+0.3$ , signalling that some regions slightly differentiate

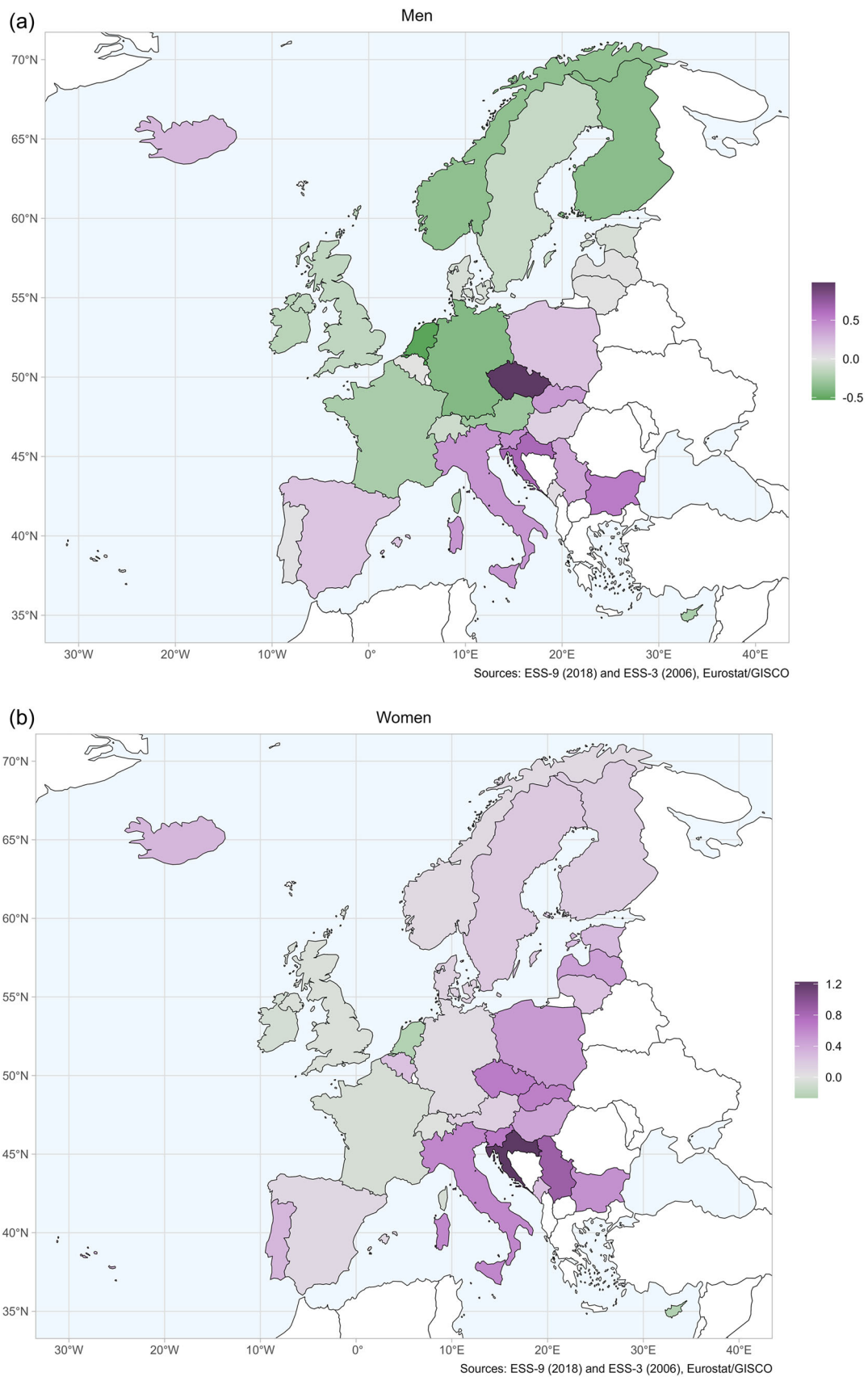
themselves from the rest of the country. In the northernmost regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, a high parental SES anticipates young men's exit from the parental home compared to the national average, as it happens, for example, in Bavaria, North-Eastern Italy, southern France, and northern Spain; heterogeneity characterises the regions of Eastern countries. Among women (Figure 3b), the variation is minor (between  $-0.05$  and  $0.08$ ), but some patterns can be recognised: a high parental SES encourages young women to leave home earlier in Eastern, but not in Western Germany, or again in the northernmost regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and in the Italian isles compared to the rest of the country. On the contrary, women from advantaged backgrounds markedly delay their exit in the capital regions of Hungary and Bulgaria, in Northern Portugal, in the Austrian region of Tyrol, and in the Belgian Flemish region.

### 4.3 | Robustness checks

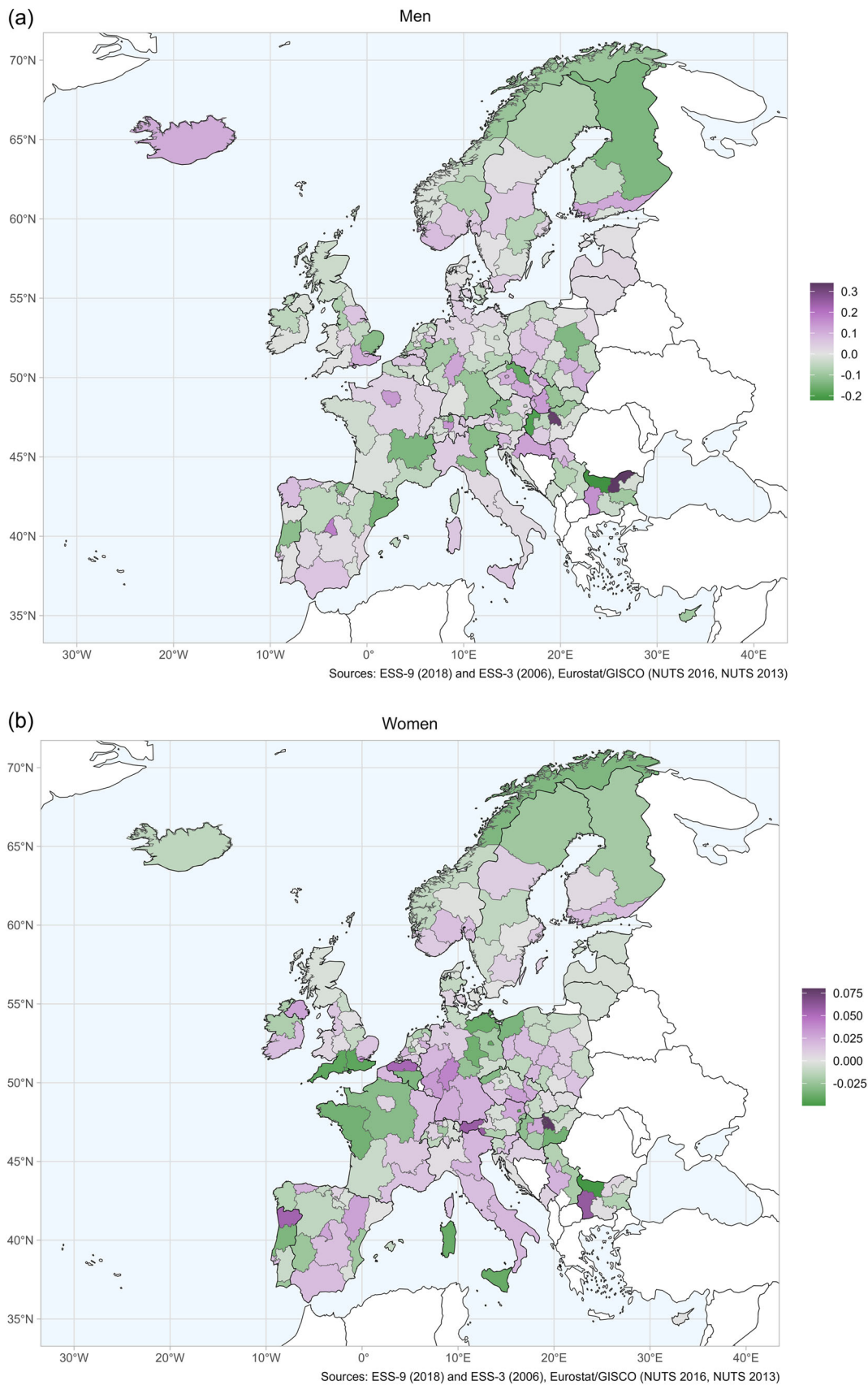
As a robustness check, the random intercept model (M1) is estimated using as predictor the highest level of education between mother and father. Results (see Supporting Information: Table A2, Appendix) go in the same direction of those discussed in the previous section: while for men the coefficient of parental education is statistically different from zero only in the case of tertiary education and has a negative sign, for women every level of parental education is statistically different from zero and has a positive sign. Having tertiary educated parents delays home-leaving for women by roughly 5 months ( $\beta = 0.451$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), while it anticipates home-leaving for men ( $\beta = -0.207$ ,  $p = 0.040$ ) by 3 months and a half compared to those with lower educated parents. Our main estimates as well as the random effects do not change substantially from those presented in Table 5 when using the highest level of parental occupation; excluding from the sample those migrants who left the parental home before arriving in the country of current residence; using a two-level model with country fixed effects; or excluding countries constituted by only one region (Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania and Montenegro). Results are not presented for brevity reasons.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This analysis aimed at exploring how parental SES is associated with the age at leaving the parental home, and how this association differs according to the national and regional context. ESS retrospective data allow to reconstruct the age at leaving home for a sample of people born between the 1950s and the 1980s in 29 countries and 175 regions in Europe. Compared to previous research (Angelini et al., 2022; Billari et al., 2019; Iacovou, 2010; Schwanitz et al., 2017; Sironi et al., 2015), this study deepens our understanding of the association between parental SES and age at leaving home over space, that is, countries and regions, and addresses the relevance of the context when studying young people's life courses.



**FIGURE 2** Random slope of parental SES on the age at leaving home, by country and gender. Estimates retrieved from M2, Table 5.



**FIGURE 3** Random effect of parental SES on the age at leaving home, by NUTS region and gender. Estimates retrieved from M2, Table 5. NUTS, Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics; SES, socioeconomic status.

Descriptive results show that the age at leaving home considerably varies within countries and between men and women, suggesting that the country-level of analysis may not be sufficiently deep to investigate diversity in the timing of home-leaving. Regional variation is high not only in Spain, a country that has been widely investigated by the existing literature (Holdsworth, 1998; Vitali, 2010), but also in Eastern European countries. In contrast to previous studies, such as Billari et al. (2019), the parental socioeconomic background is associated with women's age at leaving home, but not men's. Because the aim of this paper is not to test differences between women and men, which could be attributed to a mix of parental and individual preferences and expectations concerning educational choices, living arrangements, support within the household, and timing of family formation, the following discussion relates to women only.

The decomposition of region-specific random slopes into country-level random slopes and regional-level random effects allows to test our hypotheses on the association between parental SES and the age at leaving home at the country level. Our first hypothesis (H1), *the higher parental SES, the earlier young adults leave home/the age at leaving home is independent from parental SES in countries characterised by high levels of state support to young people and weak family ties*, is dismissed, as among women a higher parental SES is not homogeneously associated with earlier home-leaving in Northern and Western countries. Negative or null coefficients in line with the proposed hypothesis are prevalent in most Western countries (the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Ireland), but not in Northern Europe, where the average association is positive. This finding, although unexpected, is in line with previous research (Klimova Chaloupkova, 2023; Schwanitz et al., 2017), suggesting that even in countries where leaving home is easier and occurs earlier than in the rest of Europe, the offspring of high-SES parents tend to stay longer in the parental home.

Among women, a higher parental SES delays home-leaving in most Southern and Eastern European countries, with positive and above the average coefficients in countries such as Croatia and Serbia; with a coefficient close to zero, Spain deviates from this pattern. This result is in line with our second hypothesis (H2): *the higher parental SES, the later young adults leave home in countries characterised by low levels of state support to young people and strong family ties*. In this group of countries, having high SES parents could thus 'protect' women from an early exit from the parental home (the 'feathered nest' hypothesis). Here, leaving home too early could lead to a deterioration of young people's economic situation (Aassve et al., 2007; Schwanitz et al., 2017), thereby postponing the event even among young adults with an advantaged socioeconomic background, similarly to what has been found for Italy by previous research (Sironi et al., 2015). However, a postponement of home-leaving among women with high parental SES in Southern and Eastern European countries hints at a postponement of family formation and may contribute to explain low fertility levels in these countries (Esteve et al., 2020). This result might also be explained by the fact that these

countries are characterised by a high reliance on family care, that is mainly provided by women (Saraceno & Keck, 2010).

The decomposition of the slope variance, along with tests comparing three-level models with random slopes on regions and countries with three-level models with random slopes on countries only, rejects our third hypothesis (H3) that *within the same country, the association between parental SES and the timing of home-leaving is heterogeneous*. Region-specific effects are little when compared to the overall variation attributed to the country, suggesting that the association between parental SES and home-leaving ages is predominantly driven by long-standing institutional and cultural differences between countries. However, some of the variation observed between regions reflects well-established patterns, such as differences between Eastern and Western Germany (Hillmert, 2005). Our results are consistent with findings by Aassve et al. (2013) showing that country differences are more important than regional effects in shaping the variation in age deadlines for leaving the parental home. Hence, only a minor fraction of the variation in the age at leaving home observed at the regional level can be attributed to the parental background; other unobserved factors may explain within-region heterogeneity.

This study suffers from some limitations. First, the analysis could be refined by introducing the destination of leaving home, checking whether the effect of parental SES differs among young people who leave the parental home to cohabit with a spouse or partner, or to live alone, something which cannot be done here for sample size issues. The inclusion of the destination, similarly to what has been done by Klimova Chaloupkova (2023) for solo living, might shed light on the gendered pattern revealed by the present paper. Second, the regional level in the analysis refers to the region of current residence and not to the region of residence when leaving home, and corresponds to a large geographical area, especially in the countries where only NUTS-1 regions are available. Due to data limitations, we hence cannot consider possible internal migration movements over the life course. This is particularly problematic in the countries characterised by high internal migration intensities, that is, those in Northern and Western Europe (Bell et al., 2015). Third, due to the retrospective nature of the data, this paper cannot consider contextual-level characteristics as explanatory variables in the multilevel regression model; in other words, we are unable to reconstruct the regional- and country-level characteristics at the time of leaving home for respondents who experience the event at different points in time and that could potentially explain a fraction of region- and country-level variance.

Despite these shortcomings, we believe that studies on the transition to adulthood may benefit from a further integration of the context, going beyond the usual North/South, East/West divides: as this paper has shown, these groups are far from being homogenous. The role played by parental SES on leaving home decisions in Spain deserves further investigation, as it differentiates itself from Italy and Portugal, but also in Nordic countries, where it has been proven that an advantaged background delays to some extent women's exit from the parental home (Klimova Chaloupkova, 2023; Schwanitz et al., 2017); little is known about young adults' choices and opportunities

in Eastern European countries. Future research could benefit from the use of longitudinal or register data on specific cohorts to study at a fine-grained level which economic and cultural factors may facilitate or hinder young people's exit from the parental home and thus explain a portion of within-country variation. From a policy perspective, our findings suggest that policies enacted at the regional (or lower) level may not change substantially young adults' opportunities of becoming independent from their parents, because opportunities and constraints linked to the family background are shaped by country-level characteristics. In addition, this study has shown how women's transition to an independent living is socially stratified in most countries of Southern and Eastern Europe: to be successful, national-level policies aiming at contrasting low fertility rates in these countries should take a life course approach, considering also the steps preceding the decision to have a child (Esteve et al., 2020).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway at doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018 (Round 9, 2018) and at doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS3-2006 (Round 3, 2006).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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