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Research Article

Italy:
Delayed adaptation of social institutions
to changes in family behaviour

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**Italy:
Delayed adaptation of social institutions
to changes in family behaviour**

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Anna Laura Zanatta³

Abstract

Considering its very low fertility and high age at childbearing, Italy stands alone in the European context and can hardly be compared with other countries, even those in the Southern region. The fertility decline occurred without any radical change in family formation. Individuals still choose (religious) marriage for leaving their parental home and rates of marital dissolution and subsequent step-family formation are low. Marriage is being postponed and fewer people marry. The behaviours of young people are particularly alarming. There is a delay in all life cycle stages: end of education, entry into the labour market, exit from the parental family, entry into union, and managing an independent household. Changes in family formation and childbearing are constrained and slowed down by a substantial delay (or even failure) with which the institutional and cultural framework has adapted to changes in economic and social conditions, in particular to the growth of the service sector, the increase in female employment and the female level of education. In a Catholic country that has been led for almost half a century by a political party with a Catholic ideology, the paucity of attention to childhood and youth seems incomprehensible. Social policies focus on marriage-based families already formed and on the phases of life related to pregnancy, delivery, and the first months of a newborn's life, while forming a family and childbearing choices are considered private affairs and neglected.

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1. Introduction

The Italian demographic panorama is dominated by very low fertility, very high levels of life expectation, a negative sign of natural increase, and a positive balance between immigrants and emigrants, with persistent regional variability (Table 1). These features contribute to transforming the traditional image of Italian society, characterised by large families, a high attachment to childbearing, with a long experience of emigration toward richer and more industrialized countries.

Table 1: Recent demographic indicators by geographic area, Italy, 2005

	Period TFR (2004)	e ₀ M	e ₀ F	Birth rate (x1000 in.)	Mortality rate (x1000 in.)	Natural balance ^(a)	Migration balance ^(b)
Italy	1.33	77.6	83.2	9.7	9.8	-0.1	5.2
North	1.32	77.7	83.5	9.6	10.2	-0.6	8.3
Centre	1.28	78.1	83.5	9.4	10.4	-1.0	7.9
South- Islands	1.35	77.2	82.7	10.1	9.0	1.1	0.1

Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

a Birth rate – Mortality rate.

b $[(\text{Total Immigrants} - \text{Total Emigrants}) / \text{Total Pop.}] * 1000$.

Indeed, ‘zero population growth’ considered desirable by many political parties after the Second World War is now a reality. Only thanks to a positive migration balance Italy’s population is not yet decreasing. If we compare the total population of 1990 with that of 1 January 2005 (Table 2), we conclude that not much has changed. However, the composition of the population has changed entirely in terms of age and sex, and the proportion of the aged population has recently exceeded that of young people. Projections for the near future forecast a decline in the Italian population: Even though a recovery in fertility is hypothesized, a population decrease will be observed as well as an increase in aging (Figure 1).

These prospects are valid, despite the expectation of a net annual addition of 120,000 migrants. The phenomenon of immigration to Italy, though relatively recent, has now become crucial for the future of the population. According to official data⁴ (Caritas /Migrantes 2006), 3,035,144 foreigners lived in Italy on 31 December 2005, constituting an increase of 9% compared to the previous year, and a 126% increase

⁴ Official data refer to an estimation on the basis of resident population by ISTAT and other information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior Affairs.

compared to 2000. The foreign population represents 5.2% of the total population, but the whole impact of migrants on Italian demography is difficult to assess, mainly because the life span spent in our country by most foreigners has been relatively brief.

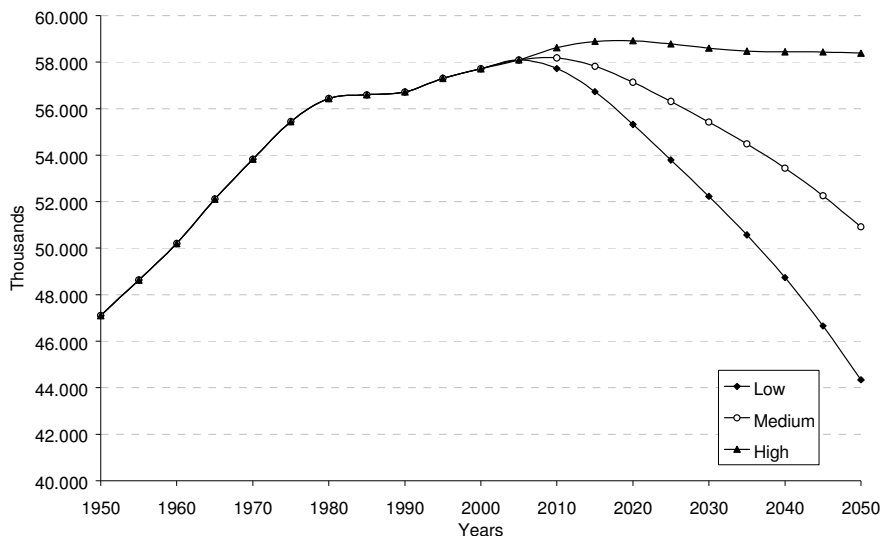
Table 2: Population size and structure indicators, 1990-2005

	Population size (thousands)	Population structure (%)			Aging ratio (P_{65+}/P_{0-14})*100	Annual growth rate 1990-2005
		0-14	15-64	65 and over		
1,1,1990	56,719	16.8	68.5	14.7	87.6	-
1,1,2005 (a)	58,093	14.2	66.4	19.5	137.7	1.6 x 1000

Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.
(a) estimates.

No more than 50,000 foreigners have lived in Italy for more than 10 years. Nevertheless, we will speculate on the impact of migration on the population structure, which is rejuvenated by foreigners who are relatively young (Figure 2), and its impact on the number of births. Figure 3 shows a strong increase in the share of births due to foreign (resident) population on the total number of births (8.7% in 2004). However, the impact on the Italian fertility level appears insignificant: In 2004, the PTFR – calculated on the total resident population – was 1.33, while that of Italian citizens only was 1.26. At the same time caution is suggested while looking for the effect of migration on fertility, for different reasons. First, we expect foreign women and couples, even those from high fertility countries, to change their childbearing behaviour to that of the Italian model. Second, the first reason for immigration is the search for employment, even among women, and it is hard to reconcile this attitude with childbearing. Third, thus far the relative size of the foreign population is not large enough to produce appreciable effects on total fertility. Fourth, the ethnic composition is very heterogeneous, i.e., consisting of many different nationalities and distinctive cultural and religious groups with different social and demographic structures and norms of behaviour, all of them living in the same country. As we look at estimated fertility indicators by nationality (Table 3), we notice, e.g., that while the mean age at childbearing among foreigners is lower than 30, regardless of the country of origin (the only exception being Peruvian women), the fertility levels differ very much among nationalities, and in some cases – e.g., the Philippines and Peruvian – are close to the Italian level.

Figure 1: Italian population (in thousands) and percentage of people aged 60+by projection scenario, 1950-2050



% 60+	2005	2015	2025	2035	2045
Low	25.6	29.9	36.0	43.4	46.7
Medium	25.6	29.3	34.4	40.3	41.7
High	25.6	28.8	32.9	37.6	37.3

Source: ONU, 2005.

Note: Low variant: recovery of fertility to 1,35 through the years 2040-45,

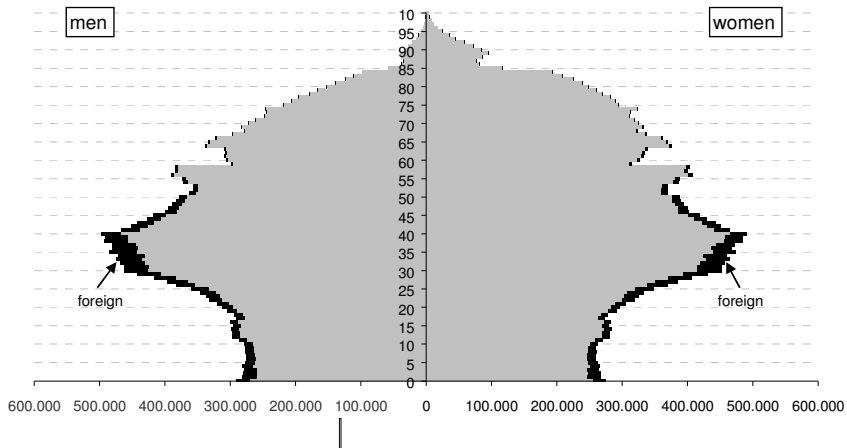
Medium variant: recovery of fertility to 1,85 through the years 2040-45,

High variant: recovery of fertility to 2,35 through the years 2040-45,

Net flow of 120,000 immigrants per year is hypothesized.

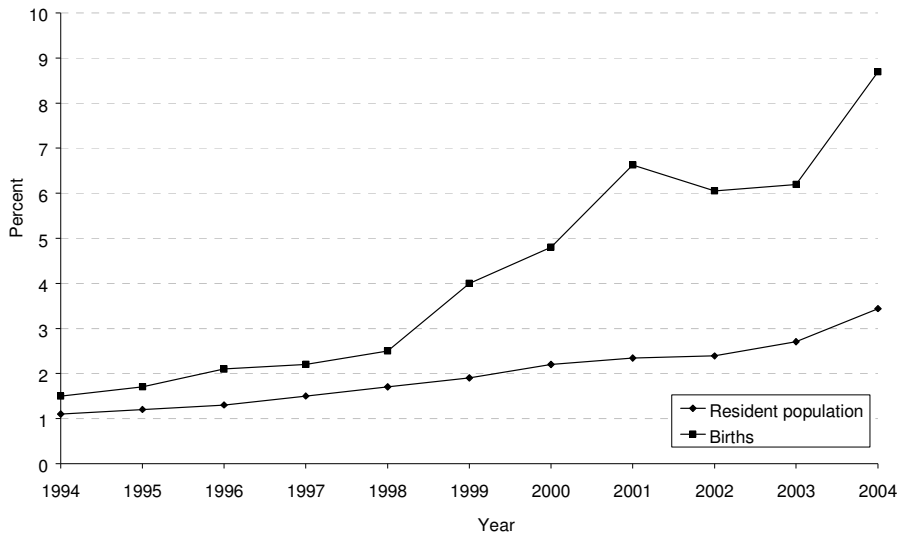
For the time being, trends in childbearing, even the most recent, have to be explained within the framework of the Italian population and society, with its culture, institutional, and economic structures, and the ambiguous net of relationships between family and the Welfare State. In the rest of the paper, we aim to illustrate at least the main aspects related to low fertility in Italy, starting with a detailed description of recent childbearing trends.

Figure 2: Age structure of Italian population, including foreigners, 1 January 2005



Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

Figure 3: Percentage of foreigners out of total resident population and out of total births



Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

Table 3: Fertility of foreign women, ten most represented countries of citizenship, 1999

Country of citizenship	% of female population (age 15-49 out of a total of 10 countries)	Mean age at childbearing	TFR observed in Italy (a)	TFR observed in the country of origin (b)
Morocco	19.9	27.5	3.4	3.4
Philippines	17.5	28.9	1.2	3.6
Albania	16.1	25.7	2.7	2.6
Romania	8.7	27.0	1.6	1.3
China	8.5	28.1	2.4	1.8
Peru	7.6	30.2	1.2	3.0
Poland	7.1	26.9	1.8	1.5
Tunisia	5.6	26.5	3.3	2.3
Brazil	5.5	27.1	1.6	2.3
Egypt	3.4	27.0	3.4	3.4

Source: ISTAT, Annual Report 2002.

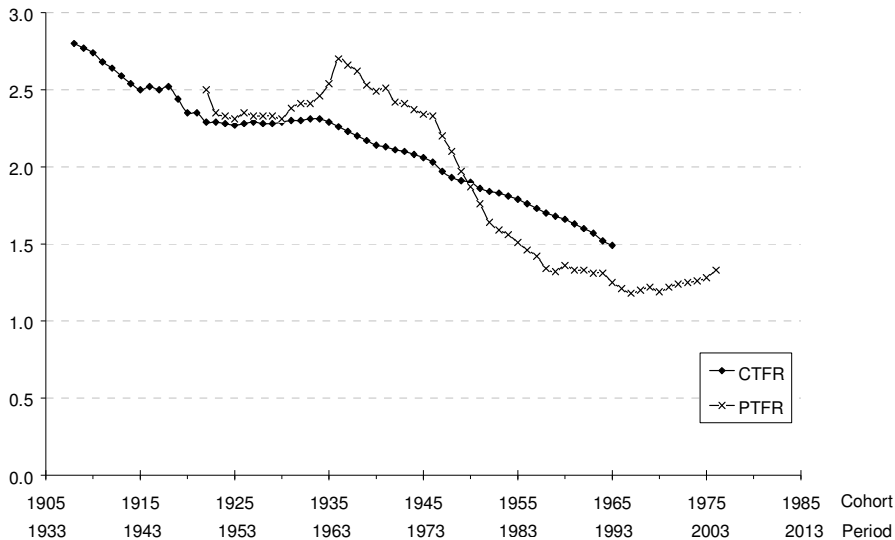
(a) Estimated.

(b) ONU, 1995-2000.

2. A profile of low fertility

The decline of fertility is depicted in Figure 4. The Period Total Fertility Rate (PTFR) fell below 2 children per woman in 1977, below 1.5 in 1984, and below 1.3 in 1993. In the following decade, the PTFR was relatively stable around 1.25. It is only in very recent years that we notice a slight increase in the level, which is, however, hardly interpretable as a convincing sign of recovery in childbearing, mainly if we read these data together with the continuous drop in completed fertility of female cohorts, from 2.28 children per woman in the 1935 cohort to 1.49 for the 1965 cohort.

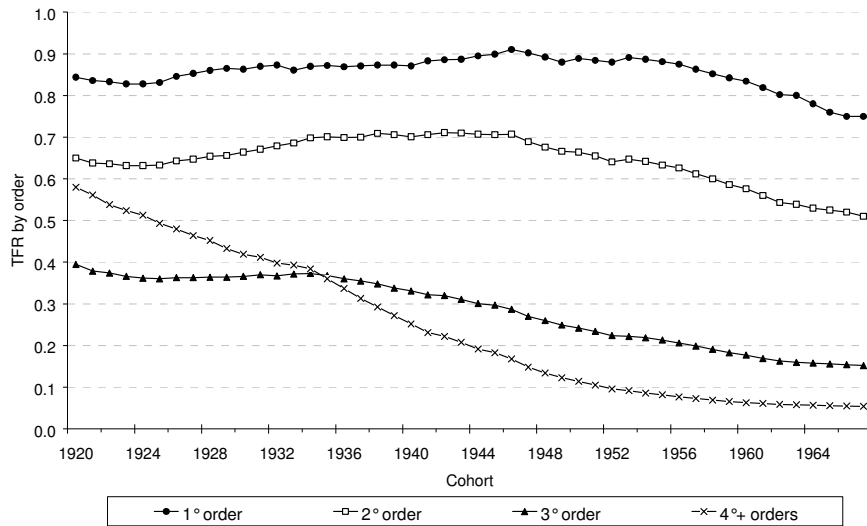
The main features of this decline can be summarized as follows: first, a steady decrease in the propensity to have a third or higher-order child and a more recent declining propensity to have a second child; and second, the progressive delay in timing fertility, starting with the postponement of first childbirth, accelerating the decrease in period fertility levels.

Figure 4: Period (PTFR) and cohort (CTFR) total fertility rate, Italy

Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

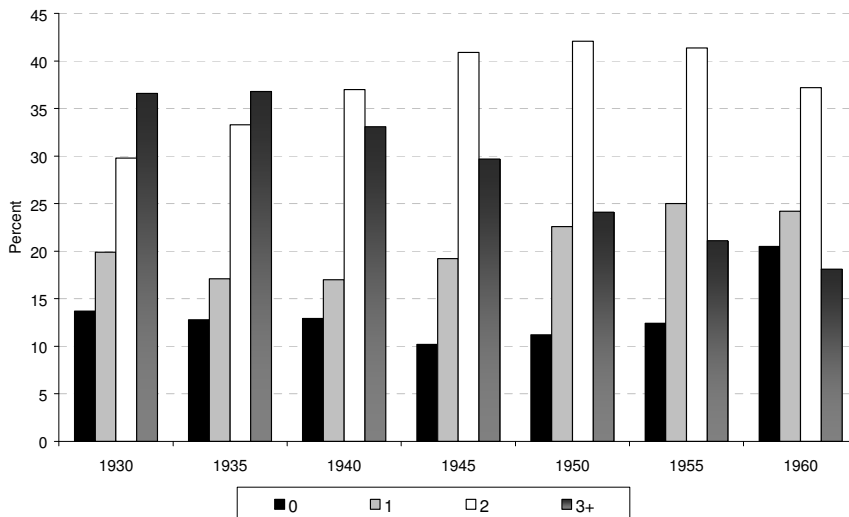
Figure 5 shows the dramatic decrease of third and higher-order total fertility rates, but also a change in second-order fertility intensity due to cohorts of the 1950s and younger cohorts. The youngest female generation of reproductive age even began to refrain from having a first child. Indeed, the percentage of childless women is increasing: For the 1945 birth cohort, it stood at a mere 10.2% while it reached 20% in the 1965 birth cohort. As a result, the distribution of women by number of children born has changed significantly (Figure 6): Women born between 1930 and 1950 experienced a decline in childlessness and an affirmation of the two-child-family-model. This model is progressively becoming less attractive for subsequent cohorts. In the 1960 cohort, women with two children (37.2%) are outnumbered by the sum of mothers of an only child (20.5%) and of childless women (24.2%); the figure for large families - namely those with three or more children - stands at a mere 18.1%.

Figure 5: TFR by order and cohort



Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

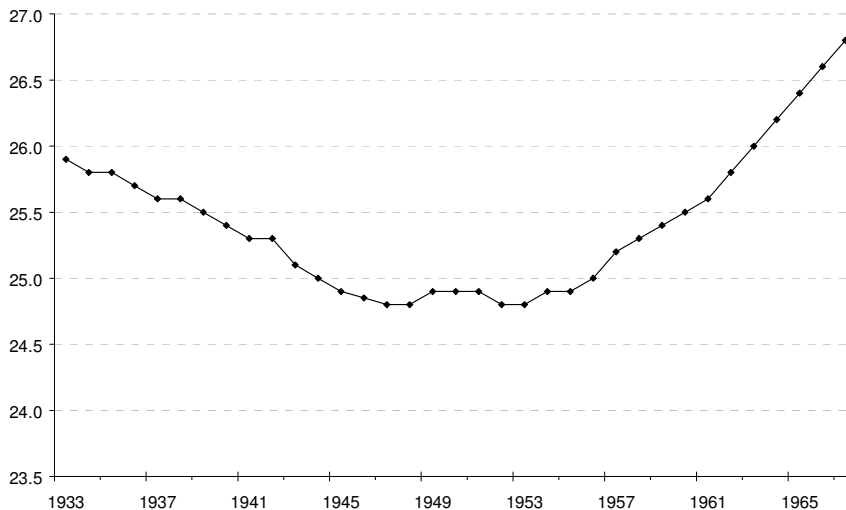
Figure 6: Distribution of women by number of children ever born (%), 1930-60 cohorts



Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

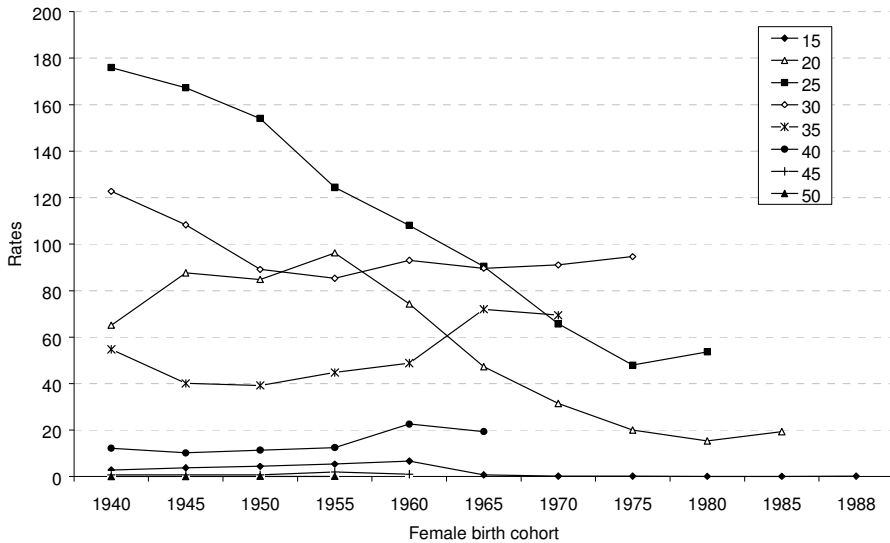
Figures of childbearing intensity have to be read together with the delay in the timing of fertility that we have been observing since the 1955 birth cohort (Figure 7). In the female cohorts born in the late 1960s, the mean age at first childbirth is almost 27 and the proportion of women with a first child before age 25 is declining with subsequent birth cohorts owing to a sharp decline in early-age specific fertility rates by cohort. Figure 8 clearly shows the decline in the level of fertility rates at ages 20 and 25. A steady progress of childbearing postponement is evident among the cohorts of the mid-1950s and of the 1960s. Figure 9 depicts the differences in cumulated cohort fertility, separately for first birth and second-order births, between women born in the years 1960–1980 and women of the 1950 reference cohort. At age 30, Italian women born in 1965 had on average .20 fewer first and second-order children than the 1950 cohort. The difference in fertility level with respect to the reference cohort widens for younger women. At age 25, Italian women born in 1970 had .33 fewer first children, and it is likely that this difference further widened as the cohort reached its late 20s. The graphs also reveal the extent to which differences in fertility levels across cohorts are due to fertility postponement (Billari and Kohler 2002). The Italian 1960 cohort ‘lagged’ behind the 1950 reference cohort and had on average about .13 fewer first births at age 26. When this cohort reached the late 20s and early 30s, however, the gap narrowed and fertility for first births partially recuperated; a similar pattern is observed for second-order fertility.

Figure 7: Mean age at first child by birth cohort



Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

Figure 8: Age-specific fertility rates by cohort, 1940–1980



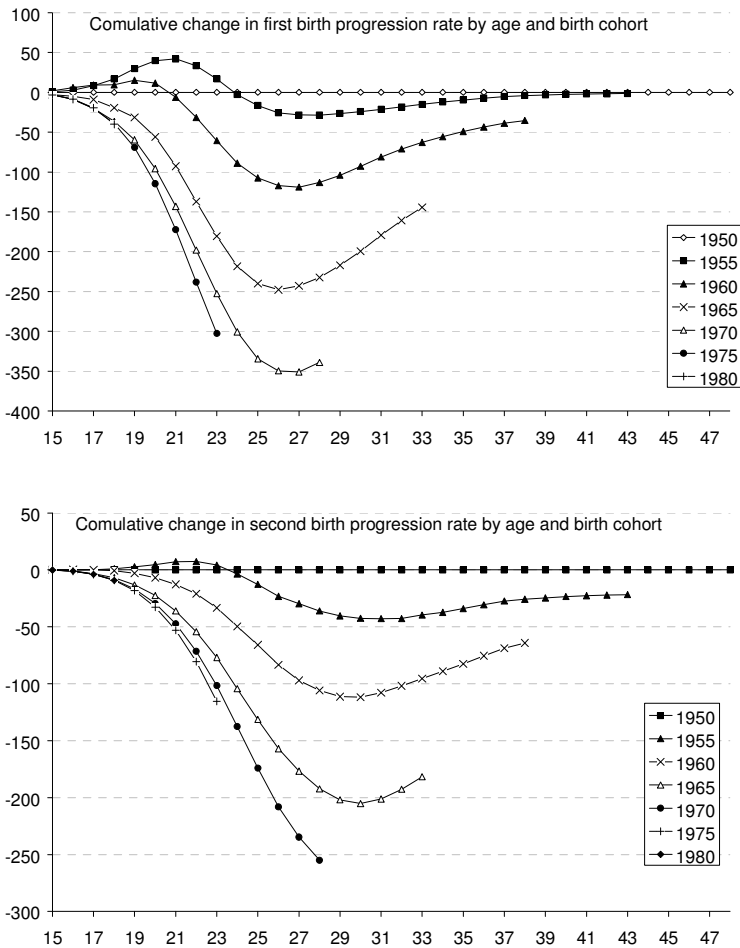
Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

The recovery in fertility after age 30 among cohorts born since the end of the 1960s helps to explain the slight increase in period fertility recently observed and also suggests that a ‘new’ behaviour is emerging, characterised by childbearing postponement and recuperation. In the near future, we do expect fertility to remain under the replacement level. In addition, it will be very important to understand the behaviours and intentions of the younger generations, namely those born in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Apparently their fertility is no longer declining compared to the 1975 cohort. They are succeeding in having at least one child and possibly two (Rosina 2004).

A further aspect that should be mentioned with regard to the alarming trends and features of Italian fertility is its geographical heterogeneity. Differences in the level and timing of fertility still exist among regions. In the Centre and in the North there are higher levels of childlessness, more one-child families, and the highest mean age at childbearing, but a certain stability in trends. In the South, there is a prevalence of two-child families and a relatively higher proportion of numerous families (Barbagli et al. 2003). However, a deep convergence in fertility levels between the regions can be observed in recent years (Figure 10). One can argue that the fast decline of the total fertility level in the South will result in a further decline in fertility at the national level.

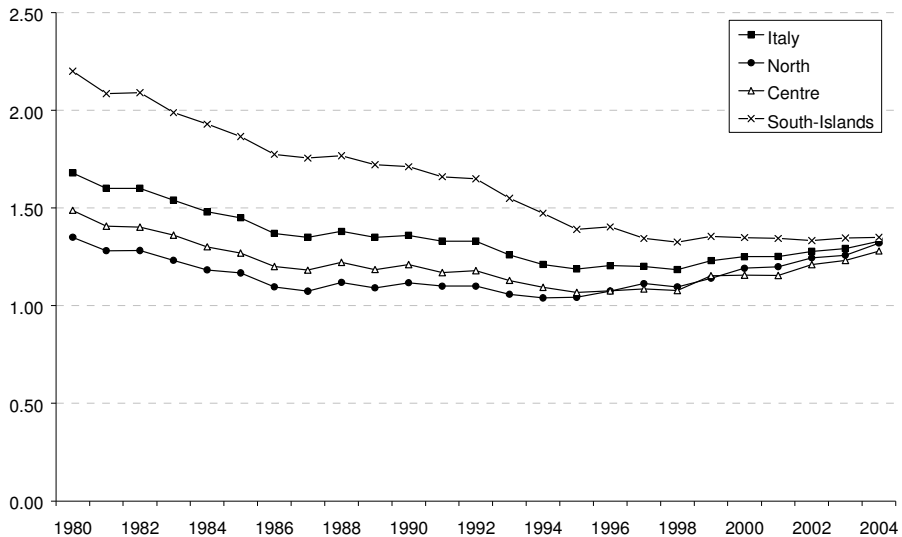
This is because the higher fertility in the South has, up to now, been ‘propping up’ the national fertility.

Figure 9: Cumulated fertility by birth cohort



Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

Figure 10: PTFR by geographic area , Italy, 1980-2004



Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

3. The proximate determinants of fertility

The decline of fertility has occurred without any radical change in family formation. The majority of households are still formed by (married) couples with or without children. Any other forms of ‘modern’ living arrangements were practically nonexistent until the early 1990s due to the slow diffusion of informal unions, marital dissolution, and subsequent step-family formation. Some incipient signs of change in household distribution by typology can be observed in the very last decade (Table 4): The percentage of childless singles and couples is increasing - also due, importantly, to population ageing - as well as the share of informal unions of the total number of couples and the percentage of step families after divorce. The most important change, however, is the decline of marriage (Table 5). The number of marriages reached its lowest level in 2003 (4.5 marriages per 1000 inhabitants). The first marriage rate per 1000 women younger than 50 years of age decreased from 1000 in 1961 to 580 in 2001, while the mean age at first marriage reached 27.0 at the end of the 1990s. An interesting trend is that the percentage of marriages celebrated by civil rite, quite insignificant until

the early 1970s, reached the value of 28.7% in 2003. The delay in marriage is related to the behaviour of recent cohorts, and this is affected by delayed leaving of the parental home and the consequent higher age at marriage compared to earlier generations (Figure 11): The median age of leaving the parental home and that of marriage has been increasing ever since the 1954-58 birth cohort, both for males and females.

Table 4: Households in Italy, 1994-2003

year	Single	With 5 members or more	Extended households	Couples with children	Couples without children	Lone mothers/fathers	Informal unions (out of 100 couples)	Step Families
1994-1995	21.1	8.4	5.1	62.4	26.7	10.9	1.8	4.1
1996-1997	20.8	7.9	5.3	61.2	27.8	11.0	2.0	3.5
1998-1999	22.2	7.7	5.5	60.8	28.1	11.1	2.4	3.9
2000-2001	23.9	7.1	5.1	60.2	27.8	12.0	3.1	4.3
2002-2003	25.3	6.8	5.3	58.9	29.2	11.9	3.9	4.8

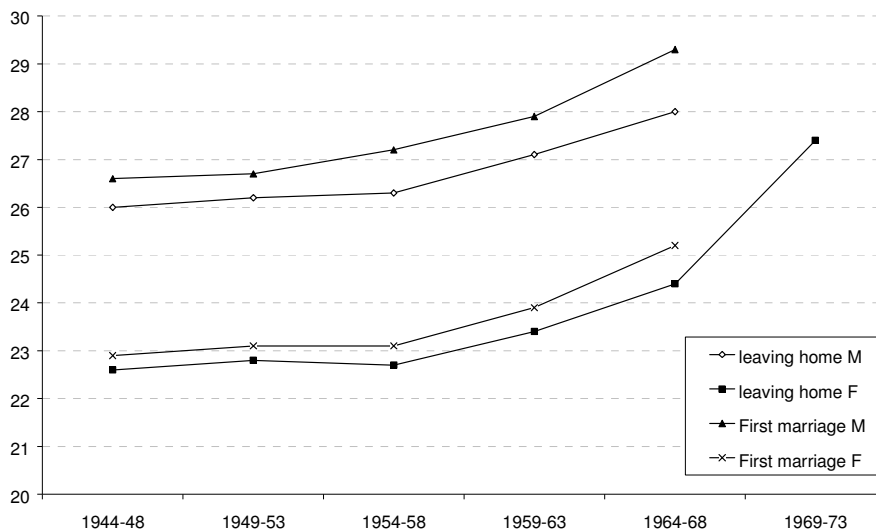
Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

Table 5: Marriage indicators, Italy, 1961-2003

Year	Number	Per 1000 inhabitants	% by civil rite	First Marriage Rate (women <50)	Mean age at female first marriage
1961	397461	7.9	1.6	1000	24.7
1971	404464	7.5	3.9	1003	23.9
1981	316953	5.6	12.7	760	23.8
1991	312061	5.5	17.5	670	25.7
1993	302230	5.3	17.9	660	26.0
1995	290009	5.1	20.0	630	26.6
1997	277738	4.8	20.7	600	27.0
1999	280330	4.9	23.0	600	27.0
2001	264026	4.6	27.1	580	
2003	257880	4.5	28.7		

Source: Our elaborations of ISTAT data.

Figure 11: Median age at leaving parental home and marriage by gender and cohorts



Source: Barbagli et al, 2003.

Uncompleted Second Demographic Transition has been recalled as one of the reasons why fertility is so low in Italy compared to Central and Northern European countries, namely because non-marital fertility has not replaced the decline and delay in marital fertility (De Sandre 2000). Although increasing, the share of births out of wedlock is not higher than 14% and the great majority of children are still born to married couples.

It can be argued that the Second Contraceptive Revolution (Leridon 1987) has yet to take effect in Italy, which is another puzzling feature of the Italian paradox in family behaviours. The very low fertility level has been reached by means of theoretically low-effective contraceptive devices (Table 6). Until the end of the 1970s, 58% of married women aged 18-44 relied on the method of coitus interruptus; in 1996 the same was true for 34% of married women and 12% of singles, and, while the younger cohorts increasingly rely on modern contraception, male-coitus-related methods - namely the use of condoms and withdrawal - are still more popular than the pill, especially among married and cohabitant couples (Dalla Zuanna et al. 2005). Notwithstanding, the number of induced abortions, which was relatively high at the beginning of the fertility

transition, reaching 200,000 per year at the end of the 1970s, steadily declined in the following 20 years, between 1983 and 2003 falling from 17.2 to 9.6 per 1000 married women aged 15-49. In this period, all age-specific abortion rates declined, with the exception of the fertility rate of women younger than 20 years of age, which is relatively stable around 5-6%. In 2004, however, the gross rate of abortion slightly increased (9.9 abortions per 1000 women at ages 15-49) mainly due to the foreign immigrant population, which, on the whole, shows an abortion rate equal to 35.5 per 1000 (ISTAT 2006).

To conclude, instead of being responsible for the decline of fertility, Italian birth control behaviour can be viewed as resulting from a lack of modernity, which, as we discuss in the following sections, is viewed as a main cause of the current depressed childbearing level.

Table 6: Women (%) by contraceptive method used (1979–1996)

	Natural methods	Withdrawal	Condom	IUD	Pill	Others	Total	Women's age	N, of women
1979 married	9	58	13	4	13	3	100	18-44	4,493
1996 couples	6	34	25	9	24	2	100	20-49	1,750
1996 singles	2	12	32	3	51	1	100	20-49	558

Source: Dalla Zuanna et al, 2005.

4. Explaining low fertility in Italy: micro and macro determinants

The determinants of fertility decline in Italy have been explored thoroughly (Ongaro 2002; Salvini 2004) and can easily be reconciled with the socio-economic and cultural changes that occurred in Western industrialized countries after the Second World War. Economic approaches⁵ (Bernhardt 1993) as well as the cultural explanations⁶ (Van de Kaa 1987) are consistent with the empirical analysis of the individual life histories of Italian women. In a recent paper (Kertzer et al. 2006), a comprehensive overview of the most prominent explanations of low fertility in Italy and an analysis of panel longitudinal survey data have been presented as parts of a project on Explaining Low Fertility in Italy. The individual data analysis of the transition to first and second child

⁵ Economic approaches focus on increased female autonomy, the entry of an increasing number of women into the labour force, and calculations of the direct and indirect costs of childbearing (Bernhardt 1993).

⁶ Cultural explanations, namely the diffusion of individualism and secularization, have been incorporated into the Second Demographic Transition theory for a better understanding of the persistent decline of fertility and its relationship with family changes (Van de Kaa 1987)

largely confirms that both the main factors chosen -- the economic approach (woman's labour-force participation) and the secularization one (married in a civil union) -- play a significant and strong role in delaying or even discouraging women to have a (further) child, with all the other characteristics controlled for. Also, the predictive meaning of these two factors does not prevent the regional and cohort effects being meaningful. Younger cohorts, namely women born between 1961 and 1970, have lower rates of transition to a first and second child compared to earlier generations. Women living in the South of Italy, i.e., those regions with a lower rate of female labour-force participation and a lower percentage of civil marriages out of total unions, show a higher risk of having children and shorter birth intervals than their counterparts of Central Italy and the country's North.

Once the two levels of observation -- individuals and residential units -- have been integrated into a proper multilevel modelling framework (Bernardi and Gabrielli 2006), the role played by women's work and religiosity is confirmed at both levels: Being in a religious marriage increases a woman's propensity to enter motherhood and to have a second birth earlier, while being employed depresses both transitions. The inclusion of the contextual level variables does not modify the effect of individual characteristics, but the regional random effects are statistically significant, indicating that the intercept of the individual model varies over contexts. Also contextual factors have a significant effect, though they impact on the timing of second birth and on first birth in different ways: Living in a suburban or a non-urban area increases the probability to become a parent but it has no effect on the second child; living in an area where female employment is common considerably depresses the likelihood to become a mother and to have a second child earlier. The level of religiosity has no effect on first birth, while time-to-second-child is significantly shortened in contexts where attending Catholic Mass is more widespread.

These results are in line with a previous multilevel analysis on total expected fertility of Italian women aged 20-49 in the mid-1990s (Borra et al. 1999) based on a set of micro variables (age, marital status, education, the number of siblings, employment status of both partners, religious attendance, type of union) and three macro indicators derived from a synthesis of macro variables through a principal components analysis (1st component: degree of economic and social development, labelled as 'modernisation', 2nd: level of urbanisation, 3rd: secularisation). The individual variables' effects were as expected. But much more interesting was the possibility to see the contextual effects at the municipality level. As usual, those in the southern regions (along with some regions of the North-East, such as Friuli Venezia Giulia) have a context that raises fertility. The opposite applies to the northwest, some central regions and in Sardinia.

However, these results do not help to explain the striking contradiction in the relationship between very recent childbearing trends and macro-economic and cultural differences observable at the regional level. Since one of the most notable features of recent trends in Italian fertility is a tendency toward convergence of fertility rates between the North and the South, this is not accompanied by any convergence in women activity rates and in the spread of secularized behaviours. In a more detailed analysis, some regional specificities emerge, such as the case of Basilicata, situated in the South: In 2003, the total fertility rate stood at 1.20, i.e., it was below the national average, but the female labour-force participation rate was among the lowest in Italy, with only 46% of women aged 25-34 in the labour force, and only 9% of marriages celebrated outside church (Kertzel et al. 2006).

Even more difficult to reconcile are results observed at the micro level as well as the national lowest low level of fertility and low female labour-force participation rate with the perception of Italy as one of the most traditional, Catholic, and family-oriented countries among the Western societies.

Several studies have aimed to understand and to explain the particular position of Italy in comparison to other European countries. De Rose and Racioppi (2001) found that the analysis of the individual determinants of Voluntary Low Fertility (VLF: choice of having 0 or 1 child at most) benefits integration with contextual conditions influencing individual choices and the decision-making process. Women with homogenous individual and family characteristics have different fertility expectations based on their country of origin, just because their respective countries differ demographically, socially, economically or culturally, as well as in terms of their gender system. VLF decreases in those contexts where the welfare state is more supportive to women and families and where there is a more balanced gender system.

Moreover, with a focus on Southern Europe, we compared Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal, using a multivariate approach (De Rose and Racioppi 2004). The four countries are similar in many respects – they have reached the lowest level of fertility worldwide within a very short time; the marriage rates have decreased, divorces and cohabitations are not yet common, but there are differences in socio-economic indicators. From this analysis we conclude that Southern Europe has a homogeneous demographic system but is relatively heterogeneous with regard to other societal characteristics. Yet, the closeness between Italy and Spain with respect to socio-economic and cultural variables that affect sexual, family, and reproductive behaviours (e.g., the strong association between age at first sexual intercourse and religious attendance) becomes clear.

As an important source of variability among countries, the different level of institutional support to family and fertility is usually examined. Accordingly, fertility is expected to be higher in those countries where the government offers programs that

make women's work and childbearing more compatible (Rindfuss et al. 2003). Again, the case of Italy appears as contradictory. The provision of publicly funded childcare, maternity leave, and tax benefits are all better in Italy than what is available in the USA or UK, yet there the level of fertility is significantly higher. Not surprisingly, Engelhardt and Prskawetz (2004), looking at trends in OECD countries over time, conclude: "Trends in the variables that would be representative for the role incompatibility hypothesis and the ease in combining work and child-rearing...cannot be related to the trends in fertility."

In conclusion, all of these factors, though playing an important role in the explanation of the decline in Italian fertility, are not sufficient to understand its persistence at such a low level. Many scholars are exploring different paths of research that, on the whole, support the fundamental idea that the peculiar interaction between economic and structural changes and the nature of family ties in Italy leads to a different development of fertility and household dynamics with respect to those included in the Second Demographic Transition (Billari and Wilson 2001; Micheli 2004). In the following, we argue that the substantial delay (or even failure) with which society has adapted to changes in individual attitudes and behaviours and in the quality of the relationships between genders and among generations is forcing men and women toward a very low fertility level.

5. Societal conditions impacting fertility and family

What is peculiar in Italy is the speed with which post-war social and economic changes have taken place, namely concerning the growth of the service sector, rising female employment, and the increase in the level of education. The change has been very fast (within two or three decades), but the social structure has remained static in many respects as regards the organisation of the family, the school system, and women's time schedule of work. "In the last 40 years, Italian families have changed: the typical middle-class family with the husband as breadwinner and the wife totally devoted to the home, with a clear separation of the social tasks of the spouses, has quickly vanished (...). Italian society has been more reluctant than elsewhere to adapt to the pressures of economic and cultural change." (Dalla Zuanna 2004). This is a fundamental key to understanding why the level of fertility remains so low and why no clear sign of a reverse trend is yet observed, despite the fact that the ideal number of children is always definitely higher than effective fertility. The 1996 Fertility and Family Survey shows an almost entirely generalised desire to have children: 98% of the 20–29-year-olds interviewed declared that they wanted children. On average, the desired number of children is 2.1 and the desire to have children remains unaltered even in more recent

generations and even for women who have made large investments into their education and want to achieve their career aspirations.

Many distinctive interrelated aspects need to be discussed when referring to the ‘failed societal adaptation’.

5.1 Lack of labour market flexibility

Women and young people face an inflexible labour market and, in an adult male dominated society, adjustments have been taking place very slowly and reluctantly, despite greater investment in human capital through enrolment in education. The data in Table 7 show an increase in the proportion of people aged 15 or above with a university or a higher-secondary degree, both comparing younger versus older ages and comparing women versus men. Moreover, if one compares trends of the number of university graduates per 100 individuals above age 25 by gender (Figure 12), it is evident that women obtained better results than their male counterparts and that the gap is increasing among the younger student cohorts.

Table 7: Population aged 15 and over by educational level, age and gender, 2004 (percentage composition by gender)

Age groups	University doctorate, degree and diploma		Senior secondary school certificate		Vocational qualification		Junior secondary school certificate		Primary school certificate	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
25–29	11.3	16.4	46.1	49.3	6.3	5.4	32.6	25.7	3.7	3.2
30–34	13.0	18.4	36.4	39.1	6.8	7.0	39.3	31.4	4.5	4.1
35–39	11.8	14.2	32.2	34.5	7.8	8.8	42.0	36.5	6.2	6.0
40–44	11.3	11.5	30.1	30.9	7.0	9.1	44.5	39.0	7.1	9.6
45–49	11.0	11.2	30.9	25.9	6.9	9.1	38.5	34.4	12.6	19.3
50–54	11.5	10.4	25.1	19.7	6.5	6.7	35.4	30.2	21.5	33.0
55–59	9.7	7.7	21.3	14.6	5.6	5.0	29.8	23.3	33.6	49.4
60–64	7.9	4.4	17.3	11.5	3.5	3.5	24.8	19.1	46.4	61.5
65+	5.5	2.2	9.8	6.3	1.9	1.7	17.0	11.2	65.7	78.7
Total	8.7	8.4	27.3	25.1	5.4	5.3	35.3	27.9	23.3	33.3

Source: ISTAT, Labour Force Survey, 2004.

Figure 12: University graduates per 100 individuals age 25 and over by gender and school year



Source: ISTAT, Labour Force Survey, 2004.

Nevertheless, the labour market is more favourable to men than it is to women, even among university graduates. In fact, whatever the educational level, the employment rate is higher for men than it is for women (Table 8). Employment rates for Italy, including a comparison with the EU, show a persistent disadvantage of Italian women and a high level of unemployment among young people. The figures in Table 9 highlight the peculiarity of the Italian employment system: Compared to the average of European men, Italian employment rates are higher in the middle age groups and much lower in the young and in the elderly age groups; the gender gap in Italy is comparatively higher than in all European Union countries, especially for younger and older age groups. The disadvantage of women is documented also by professional segregation (Table 10). Women who work 'at the top' as managers or politicians constitute a minority and they are highly underrepresented in that category, while they prevail in the executive categories of the tertiary sector. Gender inequalities in income are also documented. Women earn 30% less than men on average and the gender gap is significant also when controlling for job characteristics, though decreasing by level of qualification (Addis 2006; OD&M 2006). However, this does not discourage young

women who, instead of staying home and dedicating themselves to childbearing, prefer to invest in education and professional training; this leads to a further delay in family formation. Employed women, especially those married and with children, face a very rigid working-life organisation, mainly with regard to time schedules of work, making it difficult for many of them to reconcile work activities with family life. Despite a relatively generous maternity leave programme (see below), many working women complain about the lack of flexibility in time organisation (ISTAT 2004). Not surprisingly, then, among working mothers the activity rate of those aged 25-34 and 35-44 steadily decreases with the number of children, while no such change is observed for men (Table 11). One form of flexibility, namely part-time work options, has been introduced recently. Italian workers, however, both male and female, take advantage of this opportunity to a lesser degree than the rest of the EU (Table 12). In countries such as Italy, where the option of part-time work is still very limited, its effect on fertility may be ambiguous. The results of a recent comparative study (Del Boca et al. 2004) using European Community Household Panel data (ECHP) show that, when controlling for all personal, family, and available environmental contexts, Italian women still work significantly less than women in France and the UK. If Italian women had access to the same number of part-time positions as women in the UK, their participation would increase by 52.5% and the fertility rates would decrease by 2.8%. In a country where part-time work is rare, married women are forced to choose between not working and working full-time. The growing availability of a third option would change the available set of choices: If unemployed women chose to work part-time, their fertility rates might decline. By contrast, if full-time working women chose to reduce their working schedule, their fertility might increase. The net effect on fertility depends on the magnitude of these different flows.

Women, however, look at part-time employment as an important resource to reconcile work activity with the family (Del Boca 2002). In 2003, around 70% of part-time working mothers declared to have chosen this form of employment in order to be in a better position to take care of their children.

Table 8: Employment rates by educational level and gender, 2004

Educational level	Males	Females
Primary school	25.6	8.0
Junior secondary school	61.0	33.3
Vocational qualification	76.7	55.9
High school	69.4	53.7
University	78.4	70.6
Total	57.4	34.3

Source: ISTAT, Labour Force Survey, 2004.

Table 9: Employment rates by gender and age in Italy and EU, 2002

Age groups	EU			Italy		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
15-19	25.7	21.2	23.5	11.6	6.9	9.3
20-24	61.0	52.1	56.6	46.7	33.4	40.0
25-29	80.9	67.2	74.1	71.6	52.1	61.9
30-34	88.4	68.3	78.5	86.5	58.3	72.5
35-39	89.9	68.8	79.4	91.5	58.4	75.1
40-44	89.5	70.3	80.0	91.8	57.0	74.5
45-49	88.4	68.6	78.5	91.5	54.0	72.7
50-54	83.0	60.4	71.6	81.3	42.4	61.7
55-59	66.0	43.9	54.8	53.1	26.3	39.4
60-64	32.8	16.3	24.3	29.3	8.1	18.3
65+	5.5	2.1	3.5	6.1	1.3	3.3

Source: ISTAT, Ministero per le Pari Opportunità (2004)- "Come cambia la vita delle donne", Eurostat, Labour Force Survey.

Table 10: Professional composition of employed men and women, 2004

Professions	Absolute numbers (in thousands)		
	Males	Females	Total
Members of legislative bodies, managers & entrepreneurs	808	255	1063
Intellectual, scientific & highly specialized professions	1238	1023	2261
Intermediate professions technical experts	2335	2057	4392
Administrative & management executives	1038	1493	2531
Sales and household services	1637	1883	3520
Craftsmen, skilled workers & farmers	3597	672	4269
Plant & machinery operators, industrial assembly-line workers	1651	398	2049
Non-skilled workers	1064	997	2061
Armed Forces	253	5	258
Total (in thousands)	13622	8783	22405

Source: Labour Force Survey 2004 (ISTAT,2006).

Table 11: Employment rates of parents aged 25-64 by number of children, gender and age, average 2004 (percentage values)

Number of children	Males				Females			
	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
One child	92.8	94.9	88.3	43.3	55.1	66.3	52.0	19.8
Two children	90.9	94.1	89.9	52.6	38.9	54.4	50.6	25.0
Three children	84.6	90.7	87.5	55.5	25.9	37.5	40.0	23.3
Total	91.8	94.0	88.9	47.9	46.7	55.5	49.6	21.6

Source: Elaboration on ISTAT data (Labour Force Survey 2004).

Table 12: Percentage of part-time employed in Italy and in the EU by age groups and gender, 2002

Age groups	Italy		EU	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
25-34	4.2	17.5	4.7	26.7
35-44	2.5	19.8	3.4	36.8
45-54	2.7	13.5	3.8	33.6
55-64	3.5	16.7	6.0	33.1

Source: ISTAT, Ministero per le Pari Opportunità (2004)- "Come cambia la vita delle donne".

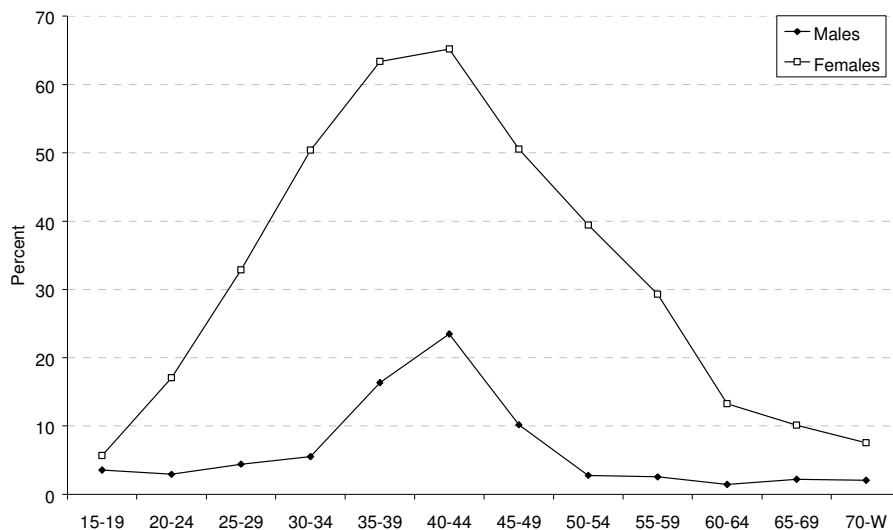
5.2 An unbalanced gender system

Women have to cope with an unbalanced gender system in the family. Combining work activities with childbearing and other family duties, including taking care of elderly relatives, is entirely left to women's adaptability. McDonald (2000) suggested that fertility has fallen especially in societies and social groups where the public gender system has evolved evenly, while the private gender system (i.e. of the couple) has remained attached to more traditional asymmetries. In Italy, too, during the last 40 years, the public gender system changed in an even sense: Women now have access to any profession, they achieve a higher educational level than men, and, when employed, they work almost as hard as men, especially before entering motherhood. At the same time, however, the couple's sharing of housework is heavily unbalanced – not only when the woman is a housewife (in the traditional logic of 'job sharing'), but even when she works full-time. Women need to and want to work in order to avoid an income reduction as well as a loss of role and identity. At the same time, spending long

hours on household chores, without any significant help from the husband, contributes to making low fertility more than a choice.

The very low percentage (14%) of employed fathers out of the total number of parents taking parental leave is a good indicator of the low engagement of male partners in family duties. Moreover, the percentage of exits from the labour market due to family issues is greatly differentiated by gender (Figure 13). Over 60% of women but less than 20% of men do so at ages 40-44. The youngest male cohorts appear to be more available to take care of their children and 52% of them declare to be interested in taking parental leave, provided that their employer allows them to do so.

Figure 13: Exit from labour market because of family duties by gender and age, 2001-02



Source: Centra M. (2003), *Modelli di mobilità: ciclo vitale e partecipazione al mercato del lavoro* in Battistoni L, Op, Cit.

A low level of fathers' involvement in child care is another distinctive feature of the Italian gender system. No more than 25% of fathers of children less than 5 years of age are involved in the care of them. Again, the younger couples (i.e. unions formed in the 1990s) appear to be more egalitarian, with the respective male partners being much more collaborative (ISTAT 2005). Using Fertility and Family Surveys data in different

countries, including Italy, Pinnelli and Di Giulio (2003) estimated that couples with relatively small gender differences with respect to age, education, and work involvement have the highest fertility. At the individual level, the fact that a married working woman receives some help from the husband when looking after their children or performing household chores has some significant and positive impacts on the risk and timing of second or third births (Mencarini and Tanturri 2004; Cooke 2003) and also affects her fertility intentions (Pinnelli and Fiori 2006).

5.3 The ‘delay syndrome’

Another distinctive feature of the Italian situation is the rigidity with which individual and contextual factors affect the various stages of the life cycle: end of education, entry into the labour market, exit from the family, entry into union, and formation of an independent household. Closely related to this rigidity, and simultaneously a cause and an effect, are the ‘costs’ of leaving the parental home. Of 100 young people aged 18-34, the fraction of those living in the parental home increased between 1993 and 2003, both for males and females, from 62.8% to 66.3% and from 48% to 52.9%, respectively. Various explanations have been given, such as the high cost of housing and young adult unemployment (Saraceno 2000). None of these are convincing, because also the fraction of young Italian adults living with parents and in full-time employment is rising, from 47.7% to 53.4% among males and from 34.2% to 37.4% among females (Table 13). Moreover, young adults admit that they like to live in the parental home, where they typically pay almost nothing for their upkeep, have their mother doing all their cooking and washing, and can spend money on cars, vacations, and discos instead (Sgritta 2001; Palomba 2001).

Compared to other countries, young people in Italy do not show any of the flexibilities of young people in other European countries when they leave the family home to go and live on their own, to study, to work, and above all to live with their partner and have children (Billari and Rosina 2004). The delay in forming a family at a relatively late age may lead, for various reasons, to not having children at all or to reduced fertility due to being strongly accustomed to a certain lifestyle (Livi Bacci and Salvini 2000).

Table 13: Young people (18-34) not in union, living with their parents, by gender and condition

Year	Employed	Searching for a job	Housewife ⁽¹⁾	Student	Other
Male					
1993	47.7	22.1	-	25.3	4.9
2003	53.4	16.3	-	26.1	4.2
Female					
1993	34.2	22.4	6.0	36.0	1.4
2003	37.4	19.1	2.5	39.3	1.8

Source: Indagine multiscopo sulle famiglie "Aspetti della vita quotidiana" Year 2000, ISTAT 2005.

(1) This includes not active young people caring after the house.

5.4 Too much family

The last social collective process which, we believe, helps to maintain the gap between desired and actual fertility in Italy is the persistence of strong ties between parents and children. Parents invest a lot in their (only) child and a very high cost-value is attributed to these children, which in Italy is shouldered entirely by the family. Not having a second or third child seems to be resulting from the fear of lowering the child's quality of life, who is highly protected by its parents. Moreover, as the children's prospects of social mobility have been low or nonexistent for a long time, Italian families show little enthusiasm to push their children 'out of the family nest'. In Italy, proximity parameters between children and parents are strong: Young adults leave home later and later and, when they go, they often reside nearby, and visits between parents and children are very frequent (Dalla Zuanna 2004). The persistent proximity between parents and children favours intense exchanges of all kinds between the generations: Parents support children until they leave the parental home and help them financially in buying a flat or a house and in organising the very expensive (religious) marriage ceremony; they also are expected to become good grandparents; children in turn will ensure emotional and material sustenance for their parents when they become elderly.

The consequence of these factors is that young people in general seem to live in a context that is characterised by strong family ties, and it does not favour independent life choices. This may also help to explain why the welfare system is ungenerous with families that have children: In a society centred on family ties, there is little room for the state. A very instructive example is the use of childcare services. In Italy, the vast majority of children aged 3-5 attend nursery school, a proportion as high as, or higher than, that found in many other European countries with higher female labour-force participation rates. However, according to ISTAT data collected in 1998, only 8% of

Italian children aged 0-2 went to public day care and, in 2002, 56% of all women then in the work force who had given birth between July 2000 and June 2001 had their babies cared for by the babies' grandparents while they were out to work. Thus, the lack of public services offering child care is partly due to a low demand for these services owing to a strong cultural bias against the practice to send the smallest children outside the home.

Families tend to solve their tensions by themselves; therefore, institutions are not particularly pressed to intervene. Given this strong orientation towards the 'private value' of children, it is difficult to recognize their 'collective value' (Livi Bacci 2001).

5.5 Too much Church and too little religiosity

The causal link between Catholicism and marital and reproductive behaviour is not easy to establish. On the one hand, is the function of the Church in public life as a cultural and political institution; on the other, the influence of religious feelings and the set of values on private affairs. Despite the large influence on public life exerted by the Catholic Church through the dominant political party, the *Democrazia Cristiana*, through the end of the 1980s, many liberal laws were approved by a large and diverse parliamentary majority during the 1970s: a divorce law in 1970, a law passed in 1971 permitting contraceptive advertising, a reform of norms regulating family relationships in 1975, and a law legalising abortion in 1978. In many cases, the political battles were very hard.

During the 1990s, *Democrazia Cristiana* was swept away by corruption scandals; other minor Catholic parties were founded on the left and right of the political spectrum but their political power cannot be compared to that of the previous period. Nevertheless, the influence of the Catholic Church on public issues is still notable. For example, a law on medically-assisted reproduction approved by the Italian Parliament in 2003 contains significant restrictions based on Catholic principles: The intervention is permitted only for married couples without resorting to any outside sperm or ovule donors. Also, the current discussion on the legal status of informal unions is strongly influenced by the Catholic parties. In general, public life and the institutional setting are constantly influenced by the Catholic ethical viewpoint.

The same contradiction is evident when we look at individual behaviour. In the mid-1990s, 97% of people aged 18 and older declared themselves to have been baptized into the Catholic Church; however, no more than half of them regularly participated in religious rites. The participation is even lower among young people, especially men (Table 14). As far as family life is concerned, Italian people are far from following the prescriptions of the Church, neither on sexual and contraceptive behaviour (as

mentioned above) nor on spousal behaviour. Separation and divorce are continuously increasing as well as informal unions, especially among the youngest generations. Similarly with respect to fertility: Expectations and ideals are influenced by religious principles, but actual choices and behaviours are impacted much less so (Dalla Zuanna 2004). The persistent influence of the Church at a political level contributes to delays in the spreading of modern behaviours, which might lead to an institutional and cultural context favourable to childbearing.

Table 14: Persons aged 6 and over by frequency of attendance at a place of worship and by age and gender (per 100 persons of the same age and sex) - Year 2003

Age group	Once a week (at least)		Never	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
6-13	59.5	63.8	7.7	5.7
14-17	30.9	43.9	15.3	12.3
18-19	19.3	29.7	23.5	13.5
20-24	13.7	25.7	27.3	16.8
25-34	16.3	27.8	23.3	15.0
35-44	18.9	33.5	21.0	12.2
45-54	21.9	41.3	19.2	9.8
55-59	25.1	48.2	17.9	7.9
60-64	32.0	55.0	15.6	7.2
65-74	38.3	59.8	15.6	7.4
75 +	36.8	48.7	21.4	19.0
Total	27.1	42.9	19.0	11.6

Source: Indagine multiscopo sulle famiglie "Aspetti della vita quotidiana" Year 2003, ISTAT 2005.

6. Family policies

Fertility trends have been clear for a number of years and demographers have tried to draw attention to them. However, public concern for policy reform is very recent, and strongly related to the fear of the consequences of low fertility, namely the crisis of the pension system and in the context of growing foreign immigration.

The two preceding governments (1996-2001; 2001-2006) and the present one have directly addressed this question, but the overall context is still unfavourable in terms of persuading women and men to have the number of children consistent with their desires

and ideals. First, compared to other European countries public transfers to families and children are not generous. Second, the societal context in which children are raised is not child-friendly in terms of time use, mobility, and public spaces. Third, the need of women and mothers (and fathers) to reconcile their activities inside and outside the family is largely unmet. Fourth, the late transition to adulthood in Italy heavily depends on the functioning of the education system, that of the labour market, and housing arrangements.

A brief description of the main measures currently effective follows.

6.1 Financial support

6.1.1 Indirect financial support

Working people are allowed fiscal deductions for both children and other dependent relatives, including the no-income marital partner; until 1998, the rate of deduction was higher for the spouse (namely the wife) than for children, thus discouraging married women from entering the labour market. Since 1998, the rate of deduction for children has been substantially increased, matching the level for spouses.

6.1.2 Direct financial support

There is no generalized form of income transfer to the family. All transfers are linked to the family and the individual's income.

Family allowance, is granted only to employed, unemployed, and retired people with very low income; the amount depends on the number of family members and the family situation (it is higher for a single-parent family or for a family member with a handicap).

Maternity allowance of 250 Euro per month for 5 months, established in 1999, which is given to the mother whose family income is relatively low (lower than 25,800 Euros annually). It is now given also to foreign women.

Family allowance for three or more children, is 103 Euro per month granted to large families with an income close to the poverty threshold.

6.2 Social policies favourable to work-family reconciliation

6.2.1 Maternal leave

Maternal leave is compulsory and lasts 5 months, to be taken prior to or after delivery, depending on the woman's choice. In exceptional cases, it can be granted to the father instead of the mother. The woman has the right to maintain her job and she receives no less than 80% of her salary (paid by social security). This measure was introduced in 1971 only for employed women; in 1987 it was extended to self-employed women and in 1990 to highly skilled professionals (lawyers, medical doctors, architects; etc.); more recently it was extended also for women with a temporary job.

6.2.2 Parental leave

According to a recent law (8 March 2000 n. 53), parental leave is voluntary and provides the right for fathers as well as mothers to stay home for 6 months each until the child reaches the age of 8; the job is preserved and they receive 30% of the salary (80%-100% if they work in the public sector). Law no. 53 provides the father with the legal right by choice to take care of his child, even when his spouse (or partner) is a housewife or is self-employed. Employers receive some fiscal benefits if parental leave (especially for male employees) is not discouraged. Some positive effects of this law on fathers' participation in childcare have already been observed.

6.3 Flexibility of the labour market

Both the law mentioned above and the more comprehensive law on work flexibility, passed in 2003, introduced many fiscal and monetary incentives to employers who allow for some forms of flexibility such as part-time employment, flexible working hours, shift work, job sharing, and remote work. These possibilities have not been proposed to directly affect childbearing but they could be family friendly, if used not only in the employers' interest, but also in the interest of workers and their family.

6.4 Child care services

As observed above, social service provisions for families with young children are largely insufficient. There are very few kindergartens for infants aged 0-2 (in 2000,

only 7.4% of children aged 0-2 attended kindergartens, and attendance concentrated mostly in the northern-central regions). In 2002, the government approved and partially financed a number of projects for kindergartners in many private workplaces. The service is fee-paying, and the charge depends on parental income. In larger cities, such as Rome, the kindergarten calendar starts on 1 September and ends on 30 June, offering a full day of service, from 7:00 to 18:00.

The supply of private and public schools for children aged 3-5 is much broader. In the school year 2000-01, 100% of children aged 3-5 attended school. The organisational model of the public childcare schools may vary from town to town and, partly, from school to school. The service is free of charge; a contribution can be required for the school canteen and transport. The opening date is established by the regional school calendar and the closing date is usually 30 June. In the larger cities, parents can choose between two timetables: morning classes — from Monday to Friday, 8:00 - 13:20 — and full time classes — from Monday to Friday, 8:00 - 17:00.

6.5 Policies of the present and recent past concerning population and family

The poor development of family policies in Italy captured by the *Mediterranean Model* – whose features have been depicted in the present chapter – can be explained by historical, political, and ideological reasons:

A very long tradition of strong family ties, weak public institutions, and territorial differences;

A family model with traditional and patriarchal relationships some of which continue to this day;

The experience of fascism: For the first and only time in Italy, during the 1930s and early 1940s, explicit demographic and family policies were pursued to increase the birth rate, to strengthen the authority of the ‘husband – father’, and to subordinate the family to the political objectives and to the principles of the regime;

The strong belief (only recently weakened due to awareness-raising campaigns of demographers) that Italy was already over-populated and that therefore a policy aimed at an elevated birth rate was not needed.

The lack of an explicit family policy in Republican and democratic Italy ever since the war can be partly explained by citing the fascist heritage and the need to distance oneself from its demographic policy objectives. Moreover, it is worth adding the post-war conflict concerning family values among the political and cultural forces that has been lasting to date (Saraceno 2003), with the Catholic Church and the Catholic-inspired party, *Democrazia Cristiana*, aiming at protecting the unity of the family on the one side; and the Marxist-inspired political forces (Communist and Socialist Parties)

and the anti-clerical-liberal-oriented forces aiming at promoting individual freedom and rights (radical and liberal parties) on the other.

Moreover, one should take into account that until the 1960s, many services for children and the elderly were directly or indirectly managed by the Catholic Church, which sought to keep control over this field, thus hampering the development of public services.

However, in the 1970s, there was a brief period when public social services for women and families were being developed. This was the period of rising female employment, of the feminist movement, of some local left wing administrations, of the left-centre wing governments. In the late 1970s, the Catholic Party and the Communist Party briefly compromised on some issues (the so-called 'historical compromise'). During this period, the state nursery schools for 3-5 -year- olds was instituted (1969), together with the municipal kindergartens for children up to 3 years of age (1971). Other important issues of this period were measures concerning compulsory and optional maternal leave for employed women (1971), the divorce law (1970), the new family legislation (1975) establishing legal equality between husband and wife and between legitimate and extra-marital children, the institution of family-planning services (1975), a law on equal gender opportunities in the workplace, which to a certain extent allows even fathers to receive optional leave (1977), a law introducing the legalization of abortion (1978); and the institution of the national health system (1978).

With these measures, the period of expanding public services in Italy came to an end. In the 1980s, the crisis of the Welfare State began, a financial and structural crisis that continues to date.

6.6 A short overview of the major political parties' position on fertility issues and policies

The policymakers' awareness of the importance of policies supporting families, especially those with children, is relatively recent and dates back to the second half of the 1980s. Only in this period did political parties start considering enacting laws to deal with family behaviour. Such laws would also aim at supporting fertility, but through different modalities and tools, according to the different ideological trends.

To sum up, we can highlight four main objectives:

- a) supporting families through social services, mainly aimed at children and the elderly;
- b) supporting reconciliation between family and working commitments and supporting gender equality;
- c) an opposition to abortion, and support of maternity;

d) the reform of the family tax system, aimed at reducing taxes for families with children.

The first two objectives have been promoted by left-wing parties and left-wing local administrations; the remainder have been advanced by the *Democrazia Cristiana* and by right-wing parties, e.g., the Italian Social Movement (MSI), according to the various declarations made by the political parties on family issues.

During the electoral campaigns of 1994, 1996 and 2001, family policies gained importance in the programmes of the party coalition (left-centre camp and right-centre camp) and the issue of supporting fertility assumed higher prominence in both camps.

In these years, family support was one of the main issues in the political debate. According to the right-centre camp to be achieved by financial help and reduced taxes for families with children. The left-centre camp demanded financial support for families as well as the introduction of measures aimed at reconciling family with working commitments, such as a wider application of parental leave (following a European Union regulation issued in 1996) and the development of services for children.

Another topic of interest was the recognition of unmarried heterosexual and homosexual couples, strongly opposed by the right-centre parties. The left-centre coalition widely agrees on the need of these unions to be recognized, even if a distinction between heterosexual unions and homosexual unions is highly recommended.

What can be seen as the very first family policy in the recent period dates back to the first “Ulivo” government (left-centre coalition, 1996-2001). A great number of interventions were made in the social service management system, in the field of financial support for families, and to reconcile family and working commitments.

Among the initiatives supporting fertility and introduced by the right-centre government (2001-06), a bonus of 1000 Euro for any second or higher-order birth was introduced. This option was not available in 2004 and 2005 owing to a lack of funding, but was re-introduced in 2006 for first order births.

The newly elected government (in office since April 2006) headed by a left-centre coalition promises a great wealth of measures to establish a net of citizenship rights that are individual and family-centred⁷. The main objectives are:

To promote two types of basic freedoms for young people: becoming independent from their parents and being able to start their own family.

To support women’s right to work, without renouncing maternity.

To reconcile work and family life.

To solve the housing problem.

These are some of the measures suggested by the government:

⁷ See www.unioneweb.it/wp-content/uploads/documents/programma_def_unione.pdf.

6.6.1 To reconcile work with personal and family life

- To promote the option of paternal and maternal leave.
To increase the amount of income from parental leave.
To integrate current income with an anticipation of the end-of-job alimony.

6.6.2 Educational services for children and families

Increase national and regional public resources to establish a network of high-quality educational and integrated services for children, aimed at promoting the development and health of children and in supporting parents' reconciliation of work with child care and education.

Increase the accessibility of kindergartens to all families who request a place in such an institution, through means-tested subsidies.

6.6.3 Investing in the future: an allowance for each child, a deposit account for each young boy or girl

Two measures aimed at supporting each newborn and each young boy or girl nearing independence:

The first measure aims to recognize the social value of motherhood and paternity, giving each child an income that provides financial help for the family until the child reaches age 18. It is an *allowance supporting family responsibilities* and represents an addition to the family income. This allowance increases with the number of family members, irrespective of the parents' working conditions. The support is mainly aimed at low and average income families.

The second measure provides a principal for each newborn and can be used at the age of 18. The idea is that the state opens an individual deposit account for each newborn, increasing it with annual contributions (even with the support of the family) until he/she is 18 years old. At this age, the young person may use the money to pay university fees, to pay for professional training or to invest into company start-up activities. The principal will be repaid at no interest. Similar deposit accounts are opened for children who were younger than 17 years of age at the time when the law was issued.

6.6.4 Solving the housing problem

Provide the option of loans for the first home of young couples and establish a special bond fund, designed to facilitate repayment of the loans.

7. Conclusion

The main idea we aimed to develop in this paper is that the very low fertility level in Italy is strongly related to the delayed and limited diffusion of modern family and partnership behaviours, which are in turn slowed by the lagged adaptation of Italy's institutions to social change. The *Italian story*, in fact, is a story in which cultural, economic, and religious forces have interacted to produce an environment in which bearing only one or two children is the outcome for most couples, even though fertility intentions might have been considerably higher. The numerous obstacles for the young in entering adult life and, at the same time, society's reluctance to accept new forms of living arrangements alternative to marriage make people delay or renounce entering a union and forming a new household. Also, the gender system, which apparently favours maintaining a traditional family system, is not compatible with a situation in which more and more women reach a higher level of human capital and are increasingly stimulated to enter the labour market, even as a consequence of population ageing.

In a society where it is the family which is expected to find the resources it needs (both material and immaterial), and where both men and women are expected to participate in the labour force, social policies are scarcely adequate to support families with children and to promote further fertility. The main effort is addressed to give financial support, even if the amount is very low and limited to a minority of very low income families. Other interventions, which may be useful in the process of role reconciliation, such as childcare public services, increased labour market flexibility, a convincing promotion of more equal gender roles, and male involvement in family care, are woefully inadequate.

Recent significant legislative innovations, such as the reform of the school system and of universities, and the measures aimed at enhancing the flexibility of the labour market will certainly have some impact on families and young people's behaviours, but the direction this will take is questionable. A once only (*una tantum*) financial support to childbearing is likely to have only a short-time effect, however it demonstrates the concern for persistently low fertility in Italy. Finally, the lack of a serious discussion on recognizing the right to informal and homosexual unions (except for a very recent bill introduced in February 2007 to be discussed in the Parliament), on the approval of the restrictive law on medically-assisted reproduction, and the recurrent attacks by the

Catholic parties on laws legalizing divorce and abortion are aspects that confirm the extent to which Italian society still resists the diffusion of individual and family behaviours that could be consistent with a childbearing recovery.

Some signs of modern behaviour, both in partnership and contraception, can be seen in the cohorts born after the mid-1960s. Among these cohorts, cohabitation is spreading, civil marriages are more common, sexual relationships are more egalitarian and they increasingly rely on modern contraception. The younger cohorts also witness postponement and recuperation of childbearing, but it is questionable whether a definitive rise in fertility can be expected if the framework of societal and policy conditions remains unchanged. Without a serious effort by Italy's political parties to dismantle at least some of the barriers for the young and for women, fertility will remain low for a long time.

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