

# Employment and Fertility Careers in Italy: the Gender-Specific Effect within Couples

Daniele Vignoli and Silvana Salvini

*Department of Statistics "G. Parenti", University of Florence*  
[vignoli@ds.unifi.it](mailto:vignoli@ds.unifi.it) – [salvini@ds.unifi.it](mailto:salvini@ds.unifi.it)

## 1 – Introduction and Objective

Institutional support for working women has generally been rather poor in Italy. The limited part-time employment opportunities have additionally supported the prevalence of the male breadwinner/female carer model. Although no effective political actions have been taken so far to ease the incompatibility between motherhood and work, the dual earner model is becoming more and more established, and in some regions is now competing with the sole male breadwinner model. The contrast generated by women's increasing desire to participate in paid employment and the traditional family-oriented welfare state, requires adjustments to be made in several spheres of women's life. One strategy resulted in reducing the number of children, as reflected in contemporary low levels of fertility (McDonald 2000, 2002). It has been argued that not only has the conflict between being a mother and pursuing work career resulted in the very low fertility levels registered today, but it has also been influential in Italy lagging behind other European countries in terms of women's employment rates.

The degree of compatibility between the role of mother and the role of worker has to be regarded as a key feature when discussing the Italian lowest-low fertility. Most recent Italian data clearly support this statement: Women's (aged 35-44) labour force participation stands at 83.0% for single women; it decreases to 75.4% for women with partner; it further declines to 56.9% for those women in couples with one or two children; and it drops to 40.5% for women in couples with three or more children (Canali et al., 2007). Besides, the gender system prevailing in a society is deeply related to the way these aspects are managed within the couple. It affects, for instance, the possibility of combining paid work for mothers with young children and men's contribution to childcare and housework (Baizan, 2004, 2005). From this perspective, it is significant to analyse the labour force status of each partner within the couple, as fertility and labour force options are closely related.

The Italian pattern is remarkably interesting and deserves special attention. The main processes underlying recent changes in family formation are driven to extremes (Rosina and Sabbadini, 2006). In fact, while experiencing very low fertility rates and marked delays in the major transition events into adulthood – especially the entry into the first union - Italian society lies on a very traditional framework if compared to other countries of the Western World. The great value given to the family and the important role played by the institution of marriage produce direct effects: few informal cohabitations, out-of-wedlock births and family dissolutions, even if all these phenomena are currently increasing.

This research examines the effects of women's labour market participation on reproductive behaviours in Italy, from a couple-level perspective. Few studies, in fact, have

been focusing on the couple-level, although for most parent, employment decisions are negotiated within the context of heterosexual couples, where gender difference is created and maintained (Singley & Hynes, 2005). Particularly, this paper aims at investigating the impact of both members' labour force status on fertility outcomes.

In addition, the hypothesis of "Self Selection" (Kreyenfeld, 2002) in contemporary Italian fertility development is tested. Namely, because the intensity of second and third birth concerns the selected group of women who already have one child, it can be advocated that this group has shown a preference for motherhood and committed to a child-oriented "life plan". In order to investigate the "self-selection" hypothesis we will proceed by estimating the transition to the first, second and third child jointly, including a common unobserved heterogeneity factor (similarly to Kravdal, 2001 and Kreyenfeld, 2002).

## **2 – Analytical framework**

The study is based on a retrospective survey conducted in Italy by the Italian National Statistical Office (ISTAT) "Families and Social Subjects" (FSS) 2003. This retrospective survey covered 24,000 households, for an amount of about 50,000 individuals. It included partnership, fertility and employment histories for each member of the family.

Job information allowed a detailed work history reconstruction of both members of the couple, and working time schedule data exemplified the qualitative aspects that may help to understand couples' fertility choices.

At the outset women's chances to give birth to first, second and third births are studied separately through an event history model. Fourth and higher births order are ignored due to their small number. The follow-up is the time elapsed since age 15, and up to age 45 in the first birth model; from previous birth, and up to age 45 in second and third birth models. Time to pregnancy (and not to birth) is measured in order to look closely at employment status at the time the woman got pregnant. For the specification of these baseline hazard durations we use a piecewise linear spline (also known as a generalized Gompertz formulation), instead of the more common piecewise constant specification. A linear spline is a flexible form of representing the effect of a continuous independent variable.

At a second step of the analysis, in order to investigate the hypothesis of self-selection, a simultaneous-equations model estimates jointly the three fertility equations, and a person-specific heterogeneity term is included in each equation.

Finally, we also want to make out the mutual effects of participation in paid work and fertility decisions from spurious association due to joint determination. We therefore need to address the issue of the possible endogeneity of the processes of entering/exiting the labour market and the fertility – norms and values concerning the attachment to labour force participation and to family building as well as the extent to which the roles of mother and worker are incompatible may determine both fertility and work decisions. In countries where the conflict between family and work is highest, such as the Italian context, it is very likely that women jointly determine their behaviour in the two domains. The chosen modelling strategy to count for this situation is to employ a joint multiprocess model of fertility and labour market participation. Namely, a heterogeneity component is included in each parallel equations, and the possible correlation between these heterogeneity factors allows to account for the existence of endogeneity between fertility and paid work.

### 3 – Preliminary findings

As expected, the analysis proves that women's permanent or temporary employment has a strong negative impact on fertility outcomes. One of the main findings is therefore the confirmation of serious difficulties in combining motherhood and career. This negative impact on fertility is particularly pronounced in permanently employed women. The strong conflict between motherhood and work may be generated by women being polarized between full-time working and not-working, which can be a factor underlying Italian low fertility rates.

Women working with temporary jobs are much less likely to postpone the first childbirth than not-working women; this finding is in line with contemporary literature (Blossfeld et al., 2005; for Italy: Bernardi and Nanio, 2005; Salvini and Ferro, 2006) that shows how temporary employment is amongst the primary forces behind the postponement of childbearing in Europe.

Moreover, the results proved that in a "male-breadwinner context" like Italy, the male partner earning potential (measured on his position in the labour market) fosters fertility, regardless of the modality of work. This result is consistent with author's expectations. It shows that women's employment and childbearing decisions are also determined by a series of external opportunities and constraints. The possibility of high income generated by the labour market status of the partner can, for example, persuade women to take leave from work for the period of delivery and care. However, this finding appear irrespective to the typology of man's work – i.e. both temporary and permanent jobs display a rather similar pattern. In other words, couples postpone parenthood until the man has established a position in the labour market, no matter if this position is not yet stable. This outcome, thus, is in line with the traditional micro-economic interpretation that emphasis the husband's breadwinner capacity and, on the contrary, do not provide evidence that Italian low fertility may reflect growing uncertainties in male employment careers.

After controlling for a common unobserved heterogeneity factor in each fertility transition, the significant (negative) impact of women's employment on the probability of second and third birth is stronger. The interpretation of these results, in line with Kravdal (2001) and Kreyenfeld (2002), refers to the "self-selection hypothesis". Namely, women giving birth to the second, and afterward to the third child, have already shown a preference toward motherhood during the life-course. This "selection effect" may particularly concern the role played by women's employment on the probability of second and third birth under structural and/or institutional constraints. Namely, women who choose to set up a family in a not family-friendly institutional context such as the Italian one, should either have low career ambitions or a high family orientation. Thus, the impact of women's work on Italian fertility development appears even more negative when it is not mitigated by women's orientation toward childbearing.

Looking closely at the impact of employment careers from a couple-level interaction, single-earner couples are still the most suitable environment to give birth to a child, maximising on one hand, men's income security and on the other, women's time availability at home. In general, although no clear political action is taken in order to help women to combine motherhood and career, dual-earner couples are steadily increasing in the country. A special attention is paid to the gender-specific combination of men with permanent jobs and women with temporary jobs. This case is associated with a positive and significant influence on second-order fertility risk.

Among dual-earner couples, therefore, does the increase of gendered uncertain employment correspond to a roll-back to the male-breadwinner model that sustains

parenthood, when the conciliation between motherhood and career is not supported by the institutions?

## Main References

- AAVV (2007), Rapporto sulla popolazione. L'Italia all'inizio del XXI secolo. Il Mulino, Bologna.
- BAIZAN P. (2004), "Couples' career and fertility. An event history analysis of the ECHP samples of Denmark, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom", paper presentato at the second international conference EPUNET and GSOEP, Berlin, 24-26 June 2004.
- BAIZAN P. (2005), "Couples' career and fertility. An event history analysis of the ECHP samples of Denmark, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom", paper presented at the XXV International Population Conference, Tours (France), 18-23 July 2005.
- BERNARDI F. & NANIO T. (2005), Globalization and the transition to adulthood in Italy, in H-P. BLOSSFELD, KLIZING, M. MILLS, AND K. KURZ (eds.), *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 349-374.
- BLOSSFELD H-P., KLIZING, MILLS M. & KURZ K. (2005), *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 349-374.
- CANALI C., CRIALESI R., DALLA ZUANNA G., SABBADINI L.L. & VECCHIATO T. (2007), *La Famiglia in Italia. Dossier Statistico*, Conferenza Nazionale della Famiglia, Florence 2 4-26 May 2007.
- DALLA ZUANNA G. (2001), "The banquet of Aeolus: a familistic interpretation of Italy's lowest low fertility", *Demographic Research*, Max Plank Institute for Demographic Research, Rostock, 4(5): 133-162.
- HAKIM C. (2000), *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HAKIM C. (2000), *A New Approach to Explaining Fertility Patterns: Preference Theory*, *Population and Development Review* 29(3): 349-374.
- KRAVDAL, Ø. (2002), *The High Fertility of College Educated Women in Norway. An Artefact of the Separate Modelling of Each Parity Transition*, *Demographic Research* 5, 185-216.
- KREYENFELD, M. (2002), Time-squeeze, partner effect or self-selection? An investigation into the positive effect of women's education on second birth risks in West Germany, *Demographic Research* 7, 15-48.
- LILLARD LA., BRIAN MJ. & WHITE LJ. (1995), *Premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital dissolution: a matter of self-selection*, *Demography* 32(3): 437-457.
- MATYSIAK A. & VIGNOLI D. (2006), *Fertility and Women's Employment: A Meta-Analysis*, Working Paper 2006-011, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research.
- MCDONALD P. (2000), *Gender equity, social institutions and the future of fertility*, *Journal of Population Research* 17(1): 1-16.
- MCDONALD P. (2002), Sustaining fertility through public policy: the range of options, *Population*, 57(3): 417-446.
- SALVINI S. & FERRO I. (2006), Un difficile equilibrio: i giovani tra flessibilità del mercato del lavoro e scelte familiari, *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Atti dei Convegni Lincei* 224, Convegno Famiglie, nascite e politiche sociali, Rome, 28-29 aprile 2005, pp. 159-183.