

Having Children in Italy: From Intentions to Realizations

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Abstract Today Italy displays persistent very low fertility, while the vast majority of women desire two children. The natural implication is that some sorts of constraints that strongly limit Italian fertility realizations should exist. Why there is such a gap between intentions and behavior in Italy? In this paper our aim is twofold: firstly we want to analyze the different profiles of individuals according to their fertility intentions and their expected modifications in the employment status; secondly we aim at highlighting the profiles of those couples who do not realize their intended fertility projects.

Keywords: Fertility and family, Fertility Intentions, Fertility Realizations, Work-Family Balance, Italy

1 Italian fertility: a persistent gap between intentions and realizations

Today Italy displays persistent very low fertility and represents one of the industrialized countries with the lowest average number of children per woman in the World (slightly higher than 1.4). On the other hand, the vast majority of women still desire two children (Vignoli and Régnier-Loilier, 2009). The natural implication is that

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some sorts of constraints that strongly limit Italian fertility realizations should exist. Why is there such a gap between intentions and behavior in Italy? At the heart of the explanation we believe that the most crucial role is played by the strong conflict between fertility and women's employment, with respect to labor market structures, family policies and prevailing gender ideology. In Italy work arrangements are rigid, part-time jobs are scarce, barriers to entry in the labor market are very high, and public childcare provision is weak, with the exception of arrangements for children 0-2 (Matysiak and Vignoli, 2008). In Italy, therefore, single-earner, male-breadwinner couples are still seen as the most suitable environment for childbearing and childrearing (Vignoli and Salvini, 2008). Finally, the attitude toward working mothers is very traditional, and the gender division of tasks is heavily asymmetric at the advantage of men (Mencarini and Tanturri, 2006).

Within this framework, in recent years globalization led to an expansion of choices and opportunities for a professional career, opening up new options for satisfying personal self-fulfillment. This process also resulted in greater competition in the labor market, and, consequently, in higher employment instability and income insecurity (Salvini and Ferro, 2007; Mills and Blossfeld, 2005). Overall, these new dynamics may result in an increased general uncertainty in individuals' life expectation, permeating both the reproductive and the employment sphere, that could have amplified the gap between intended and observed births.

The aim of this paper is twofold: firstly we want to analyze the different profiles of individuals according to their fertility intentions and their expected modifications in the employment status; secondly we aim at highlighting the profiles of those couples who do not realize their intended fertility projects.

The study is based on the Italian Gender and Generation Surveys and its corresponding follow-up survey (2003, round 1 – 2007, round 2). The Italian variant of the GGS is a retrospective survey conducted by the Italian National Statistical Office (Istat) called "Family and Social Subjects" in 2003 – GGS-FSS (2003). Its follow-up survey was jointly conducted by Istat and the Ministry of Labor in 2007.

2 Background

Applying the "Theory of Planned Behaviours" of Ajzen (1991) to family and fertility research, it may be argued that the *observed* reproductive behavior does not depend solely on individual characteristics, but also on fertility *intentions* (e.g., Ongaro, 1982; Palomba, 1991; De Sandre et al., 1997; Sorvillo and Marsili, 1999; Goldstein et al., 2004; Testa and Grilli, 2006; Mills et al., 2008; Billari et al 2009). Fertility intentions can be *positive* or *negative*: the former define the desire to have a(nother) child, while the latter the desire to not have a(nother) child. The literature on the correspondence between fertility intentions and subsequent outcomes is not very abundant, especially due to severe lack of appropriate longitudinal data. However, to the best of our knowledge, documented findings all point to a general statement: negative fertility intentions are a well-functioning predictor of subsequent fertility behavior, while positive fertility intentions tend to systematically overestimate fertility realizations (Westoff and Ryder, 1977; Symeonidou, 2000; Toulemon and Testa, 2005; Testa and Toulemon, 2006; Rinesi, 2009). Many factors have been found in the literature to

increase (or decrease) the gap between positive fertility intentions and their subsequent realization (or, conversely, non-realization). Some of them are demographic, others are socio-economic, others are more closely related to the couple role-set (e.g., Thomson, 1997; Symeonidou, 2000; Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan, 2003; Testa and Toulemon, 2006; Rinesi, 2009).

3 On the link between work-family balance and fertility intentions in Italy: some research results

A dominant male-breadwinner family model, accompanied by tax and state benefits for families that favor one-earner couples, combined with a lack of available and affordable institutionalized childcare makes it difficult for women to reconcile work and parenthood. Using European Community Household Survey data for Italy and Spain, Cooke (2003) concludes that a substantial involvement of fathers in care activities with the first child facilitates the transition to the second child among young couples. Using data from a survey conducted in five urban areas (Udine, Padua, Florence, Pesaro and Messina), also Mencarini and Tanturri (2004) found a higher likelihood of having a second child among working women if the father increased his involvement in housework after a first birth, and if the mother did not reduce her working hours after the first child.

Using data stemming from GGS-FSS (2003), Salvini et al. (2009) analyzed the link between reproductive intentions of men and women in couple and their employment situation. Their analyses suggest the important role played by the perception of the future prospects of the actual job in determining reproductive intentions. The plan to have a(n)other child seems to be highly dependent on one's actual financial situation, in a context where the general perception of economic insecurity is becoming more and more widespread. Furthermore, they found that, when the re-conciliation of the roles of mother and worker is facilitated by a collaborative partner, also fertility intentions are higher. In this respect, an important finding in the literature is that an unequal division of household labor impacts women's fertility intentions in a significant way when they already bear a heavy load (Mills et al., 2008). This pattern is particularly salient for working women in Italy. An important implication is that not only women's own behavior, but also that of their partners affects fertility intentions. Despite women across many Western countries now achieve high levels of education and participate in the labor market, women's role and the division of household labor within the family has remained relatively constant. Thus, the rise in female labor force participation has not been followed by an equal rise in men taking part in household duties and chores.

The issue of gender imbalance and fertility intentions (and its potential realizations) is of particular interest in Italy. The Italian context is characterized by the fact that the domestic institutions are particularly adverse to the work-family balance and to childbearing and childrearing in general (Livi Bacci and Salvini 2000; McDonald, 2000; Mencarini and Tanturri, 2004; Matysiak and Vignoli, 2009), possibly leading low fertility intentions.

The most pronounced example concerns lack of public and subsidized childcare services. Combined with a rather prevalent 'male-breadwinner' model reinforces a highly unequal division of household labor. Mills et al. found (2008) that an

asymmetrical division of household labor prompt women, and especially working women or mothers, to adjust their fertility intentions. This in turn means the reduction of fertility. Those with higher education showed higher fertility intentions, which we relate to a stronger bargaining power of women and the tendency of more highly educated couples to equally divide housework or possibly to outsource it. Raymo et al. (2010) examined also the relationships between intergenerational proximity and fertility intentions and the extent to which these relationships depend on family circumstances related to the costs of childrearing. Interactive models provided some evidence that relationships between intergenerational residential proximity and fertility intentions depend on women's employment circumstances, but not among women in standard employment but rather among those who were not working or were in non-standard employment.

4 Fertility and employment plans of Italians: An analysis of the GGS-FSS (2003)

Bearing in mind that we want to analyze the different profiles of individuals according to their fertility intentions combined with their expected modifications in the employment status, we focus our attention on married and unmarried couples aged 20-45. To this aim we apply a multinomial logistic regression model in which the dependent variable combines fertility and job intentions in a four option response starting from absolute stability in both situations (*"In the next three years I do not intend to have a child and I do not intend to change my job"*), passing through a partial modification of fertility (*"In the next three years I intend to have a child and I do not intend to change my job"*) or work intentions (*"In the next three years I do not intend to have a child, but I intend to change my job"*), to a substantial change in both analyzed aspects (*"In the next three years I intend to have a child and I intend to change my job"*). In the estimated model our reference group is the category which is characterized by a non-changeable situation concerning both aspects. We carried out the analysis, whose results are shown in the Table 1, separately for women and men who were working at the moment of the interview.

As expected, having one or more children, makes the intention to desire a child in the following three years more unlikely, irrespective to the intention of changing work, both for men and women. Conversely, the intention of changing job (keeping not wanting children constant) is more likely for men with children than for men who have not.

As regards the type of union, for cohabiting couples the intention of changing the current work situation is more likely, holding constant the intention of not desiring a child. This could be a result that proves a low degree of stability about occupational status.

Considering the area of residence, the intention to have a child, but not to change one's own job, is more likely to occur both for women and men who live in the South regions of Italy. At the same time, for women who live in the same regions, it is less likely to plan to change their job without thinking to have a child, than for women who live in the Northern part of Italy.

Table 1: Factors influencing fertility and work intentions in the next three years. Results of a multinomial logistic regression (for couples aged 20–45) – Relative Risk Ratio (RRR)^a..

	No intention of having a child but intention of changing job		Intention of having a child but no intention of changing job		Intention of having a child and of changing job	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
<i>Area of residence</i>						
North	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Centre	0.751	0.794	1.059	1.000	1.212	1.122
South	0.569	1.013	1.672	1.841	1.461	1.653
<i>Education</i>						
High	ref.	ref.	ref.	Ref.	ref.	ref.
Medium	2.222	0.798	0.695	1.007	0.490	0.571
Low	2.540	0.767	0.468	0.998	0.333	0.740
<i>Job status</i>						
Open-ended job	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Temporary job	2.254	1.883	1.200	1.035	1.769	2.390
Self-employed	0.755	0.709	0.969	1.368	0.977	0.674
<i>Type of union</i>						
Married	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Cohabiting	1.772	1.709	0.893	0.916	1.208	1.541
<i>Number of children</i>						
0	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
1	0.949	3.428	0.219	0.322	0.228	0.362
2+	1.047	2.731	0.018	0.033	0.023	0.028
<i>Education (partner)</i>						
High	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Medium	0.628	0.857	0.860	0.711	0.789	0.500
Low	0.681	0.951	0.660	0.532	0.892	0.369
<i>Partner's employment status</i>						
Employed	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Not employed	1.130	0.840	0.621	1.094	0.611	0.885
<i>Proximity from house of at least one of the couple's mothers</i>						
Less than 1 km	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Same municipality	0.941	0.811	0.661	0.878	0.767	0.699
Elsewhere	0.986	1.143	0.719	0.967	1.068	1.683
<i>Perception about employment situation</i>						
Good /quite good	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Not so good/ not good	4.122	4.180	0.812	0.894	3.293	3.812

^a The results are controlled for age; **RRR** values in **bold** are statistically **significant** ($p < 0.10$).

Source: Own elaboration on GGS-FSS (2003).

Referring to education, the lower the women's level of education, the lower the relative risk ratios to change both studied aspects. Concerning the job status, then, the joint intention of modifying one's job and having a child is more likely for males than for females. A temporary work also makes the intention of changing one's job more likely, while keeping the intention of not desiring a child constant.

Regarding the level of education of the partner, the male intentions of having a child decreases when the women's educational qualification is low, irrespective to the intention to change work. For women, a partner with medium education (compared to a partner with a higher education) has a negative effect on the intention of changing job, *ceteris paribus* the intention of non wanting children.

Concerning residential proximity of mothers (and "mothers in law"), the increase in the distance from at least one of the couple's mothers is negatively correlated with fertility projects for women, considering that they do not intend to change job over the following three years.

Having a negative perception of one's job stability makes wanting to change job obviously more probable (keeping not wanting children a constant); at the same time, it makes change in both situations more likely to occur. In fact, we could think that this negative perception combines with the economical aspects, which seems intimately related with the intention to have children and change job.

5 Realizations *versus* intentions: Preliminary findings and research agenda

We now present a first look at the findings of the Italian GGS-FSS follow-up survey. The question we ask is - in 2007 about three years after the first round of GGS, how many respondents have had a child, irrespective of the birth order? The proportion is about 15% which is quite consistent with another study covering Italy that was based on a different data source (see Rinesi, 2009).

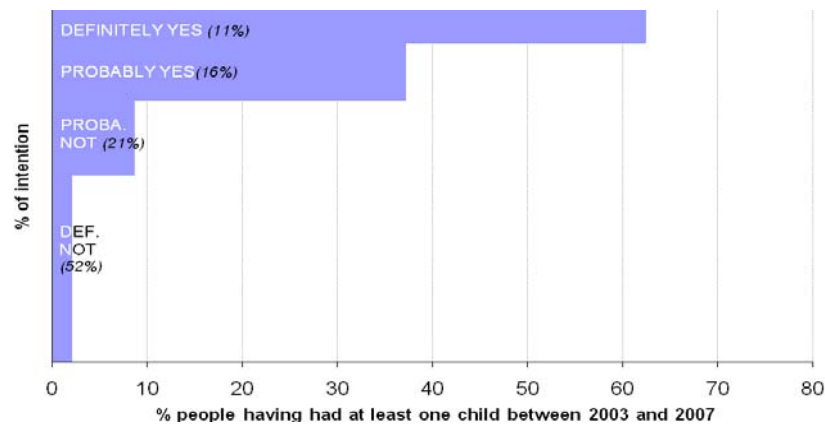
Figure 1 illustrates that the link between intentions and realizations is particularly strong at the extremes: the stronger the intention to have – or not have – children, the greater – the lower – the observed proportion of respondents who realize this intention. In particular, we find that negative fertility intentions are a potent predictor of subsequent fertility behavior. In fact, the highest proportion of persons who actually realized their intentions is found among those who initially stated that they definitely did not intend to have any (or any more) children. That is, almost all respondent reporting that they did *not* intend to have another child, indeed did not when observed in 2007. On the contrary, positive fertility intentions overestimate fertility realizations: 36% of respondents who firmly intended to have a child in the following three years did not achieve their goal.

Interestingly, then, even among those in the "probably not" category of fertility intentions (21%), only 9% violated this expectation by having a child. In other words, people appear quite realistic about their future negative fertility expectations.

Our research will continue scrutinizing, from a gender perspective, which are the main constraints to the realization of fertility projects in Italy. Are they mainly demographic factors? Are they factors related to the economic characteristics (such as periods of unemployment or precarious jobs)? Are they factors related to the couple

role-set? Or, are they dependent on the family network? Are they, instead, factors more related to individuals' attitudes instead of material constraints? These questions will drive our research agenda towards the aim to highlight the profiles of those couples who do not realize their intended fertility projects. This line of reasoning provides valuable input to policy makers wishing to lift the constraints to fertility realization.

Figure 1. Proportion of men or women who had at least one child, according to initial intentions.



Source: Vignoli and Regnier-Loilier (2010). Calculations based on GGS-FSS (round 1 and 2).

6 References

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