

EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN FERTILITY RATES IN POST-WAR ITALY

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ABSTRACT

SUSANNA MAE RYCHLAK: Explaining the Decline in Fertility Rates in
Post-War Italy

(Under the direction of Dr. Susan Grayzel)

The aim of this thesis is to examine the decline in fertility rate in post-war Italy and identify its causes. Fertility rate in Italy dropped dramatically across 1970-2010 in a stark departure from the nation's previous reproductive patterns. This has led to an increasingly aging population, and holds important implications for Italy's future.

This study demonstrates that there has been a meaningful shift in cultural values that has led to fertility decline in Italy since 1970. In order to provide historical context for the importance of this cultural shift, the thesis first presents the Italian culture and familial structure of the twentieth century. Scholarly writings, fascist policies, and Church teachings are used to demonstrate the traditional family ideology and pro-natalist attitudes that permeated Italian culture in the first half of the twentieth century.

Following this, the thesis delves into a more comprehensive study of the 1960s and 1970s, the decades that mark the beginning of fertility decline in Italy. It thus examines the Italian women's movement and the changes it spearheaded. Feminist texts, changes in legislation, and popular survey data are employed to reveal shifting values taking place during this time period. This evidence illuminates Italian women's changing attitudes towards family and gender relations and indicates that the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the creation of new cultural values that would in turn influence Italian women's choices across the next four decades.

The thesis then provides an analysis of three factors in contemporary Italian society and their relationship to fertility rate. An investigation of Italian women's new attitudes and behaviors in the realms of labor force participation, marriage, and division of unpaid labor help to demonstrate the underlying causes of fertility decline: devaluation of the traditional family structure. An exploration of continued structural barriers for women in these areas demonstrates the ideological mismatch that has pushed Italian women into an either/or relationship between a traditional family and personal autonomy. Therefore, changing patterns in these realms are shown to spring from the same cause that this thesis postulates has led to fertility decline in Italy: a meaningful shift in cultural values.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO FERTILITY DECLINE

PROBLEM

The drop in fertility rate in Italy occurred suddenly.¹ In 1970, the average number of children per Italian woman was 2.42; by 1980 this had fallen to 1.64, then in 1995 it reached its lowest point with 1.18, and in 2000 the rate was 1.26. In 2010 the fertility rate was 1.4. The projected Italian fertility rate for 2014 is 1.42, establishing Italy as having the 205th lowest fertility rate out of 231 nations.²

It is notable that the Italian fertility rate is dramatically lower than that of Northern Europe and other developed societies with access to the same reproductive choices across the same time period. Italy's declining fertility rate across the past four decades has puzzled demographers and scholars alike due in large part to Italy's history of familism and Catholicism. The Catholic Church has long advocated families with many children; therefore, it is surprising that Italy, where 88% of the population still self identifies as Roman Catholic, has achieved one of the lowest fertility rates in the world.³ An apt comparison is Ireland, which shares a familistic and Catholic heritage similar to

¹ The number of children that would be born to a woman if she were to live to the end of her childbearing years and bear children in accordance with current age-specific fertility rates

² "Total Fertility Rate in Italy." *CIA World Factbook*. 2014.

³ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *European Values Survey 2008*.

that of Italy. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Italy had consistently higher rates of fertility than Ireland; however the lowest fertility rate ever achieved in Ireland was 1.9 children per woman in 1994.⁴ This rate is 61% higher than Italy's lowest fertility rate in 1995, and the lowest point of Irish fertility is still 35% higher than Italy's current fertility rate.

This decrease in the number of children has already shifted the age demographics within the nation. Today, 1 in every 5 people living in Italy is over the age of 65, meaning around 20% of the population is elderly. In 1950, this ratio was 7.9 persons under the age of 65 to every person over the age of 65.⁵ The increase in the number of the dependent and retired to the working population will put enormous strain on Italy's society and economy in the future. Indeed, in 2013, Italian deaths outstripped births, with 10.01 deaths per 1,000 population and only 8.94 births.⁶ This ratio of elderly to non-elderly Italians is projected to continue to decrease and overall population is expected to decline because Italian women are reproducing at well below the population replacement rate of 2.1.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The low fertility rate in Italy is not only important because it represents a drastic change from Italy's past, but also because of its implications for the nation's future. Because fertility rate has consistently been below the replacement rate for several decades, there will be an increasing number of retirees dependent on a smaller group of workers in the labor force. This will put a massive strain on individual Italians as well as

⁴ "Total Fertility Rate in Ireland." *CIA World Factbook* 2014.

⁵ "World Development Indicators." *Age dependency ratio, Italy*. World Bank.

⁶ "World Development Indicators." *Total Birth Rate, Italy*. World Bank.

the nation's economy in the near future. The importance of the effects of the change in fertility rate in Italy has led to scholarly research as to why the change in fertility rate in Italy has occurred.

The existing research on the topic of the change in fertility rates in Italy draws a distinct connection between the increase in female labor force participation in Italy since the late 1960s and a decrease in the number of children desired or considered practical by Italian women and families. For example, in "*Why are fertility and participation rates so low in Italy (and Southern Europe?)*," Daniela Del Boca demonstrates that both levels of female higher education and female labor force participation rate have increased across the same four decades in which fertility rate in Italy has declined.⁷ She outlines the nature of the Italian labor market and the factors that encourage working women to have few or no children. For example, few part time employment opportunities, expensive childcare, and difficult re-entry after a period of leave shape the argument that the labor market in Italy is not economically conducive to having a large number of children. Her article argues that an increase in female participation in the labor market has led to Italy's fertility decline.

In "*Lowest-Low Fertility: Signs of Recovery in Italy?*" Marcantonio Caltabiano, Maria Castiglioni, and Alessandro Rosina also link education and female labor force participation to fertility.⁸ This study attributes high levels of female higher education with the propensity of women to remain childless in Italy. The authors correlate increases in female education to female involvement in the workforce in Italy. They cite

⁷ Del Boca, Daniela. "Why Are Fertility and Participation Rates so Low in Italy (and Southern Europe)?" *The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America* (2003).

⁸ Caltabiano, Marcantonio, Maria Castiglioni, and Alessandro Rosina. "Lowest-low Fertility: Signs of a Recovery in Italy?" *Demographic Research* 21.23 (2009): 682-716.

the primary motivation for many Italian women to postpone pregnancy as the desire to attain a stable lifestyle and economic security prior to procreating. As a result, they argue, increases in female education and economic autonomy have led to lowered fertility because educated Italian women are choosing to postpone or forego childbearing.

Scholars and demographers have also presented young Italians' dependence on their parents as a cause of low fertility. Several studies have emphasized the way in which these relationships have contributed to the low fertility rate. For example, Massimo Livi-Bacci in "Too Few Children and too Much Family" demonstrates that young Italians are waiting to move out of their parental homes until much older ages than in the past.⁹ This increased time of cohabitation between parents and adult children results in these children making the transition into marriage and parenthood at a delayed rate. Leaving the parental home later in life, he argues, causes Italian youth to begin the steps to adulthood, including fertility choices, later in life and decreases the level of fertility in the nation.

In "Italy: Delayed Adaptation of Social Institutions to Changes in Family Behavior," Alessandra De Rose, Filomena Racioppi, and Anna Laura Zanatta cite the specific societal barriers for young people and women in Italy as limiting forces on fertility.¹⁰ This article examines how the current social and economic conditions of Italian young adults serve to postpone *all steps* of family formation: i.e. leaving the parental home, marriage, and fertility. Del Boca's work emphasizes these factors as barriers to working women's fertility, but De Rose et al. take this a step further.¹¹ This

⁹ Livi-Bacci, Massimo. "Too Few Children Too Much Family." *Daedalus* 130.3 (2001): 139-55.

¹⁰ De Rose, Alessandra, Filomena Racioppi, and Anna Laura Zanatta. "Italy: Delayed Adaptation of Social Institutions to Changes in Family Behaviour." *Demographic Research* 19 (2008): 665-704.

¹¹ Del Boca, "Why Are Fertility and Participation Rates so Low in Italy (and Southern Europe)?"

study takes an integrated view of the ways in which Italian labor market and social institutions not only influence fertility negatively once unions are formed, but also delay the age at which Italians are choosing to enter into marriage.

Existing research has presented the correlation between increases in female labor force participation rate, higher levels of female education, delayed departure from the parental home, and the fertility rate in Italy. These elements aggregate to delay the age at which Italian women choose to have children, and they limit the number of children Italian families deem practical. Scholars have stressed the ways in which these factors wield influence primarily through economic avenues.

The low fertility rate in Italy has been seen by other scholars and demographers as a cultural shift as opposed to an economic one. Existing scholarly work also shows support for the idea that it is not solely economic choices and the decrease in material convenience of childbearing that have led to the change in fertility rate in Italy.

Alessandro Rosina and Romina Fraboni in “Is Marriage Losing its Centrality in Italy?” put forth a theory of Second Demographic Transition as a contributing factor to the decrease in fertility rate in Italy.¹² They underline that choices related to marriage and motherhood among Italian women are tied to ideational changes. They argue that fertility changes, therefore are a result of a large cultural shift in which Italian individuals choose to value personal development and view traditional institutions with skepticism.¹³

In “Childless or Childfree? Paths to Voluntary Childlessness in Italy,” Maria Letizia Tanturri and Letizia Mencarini argue that the decline in Fertility Rate in Italy is

¹² Rosina, Alessandro, and Romina Fraboni. "Is Marriage Losing Its Centrality in Italy?" *Demographic Research* 11.6 (2004): 149-72.

¹³ *Ibid.*. 151.

primarily an effect of the voluntary choice of women to have fewer or no children.¹⁴

This study analyzes surveys carried out in five major urban areas of Italy and emphasizes that Italian women have fewer children as the result of an active choice not to procreate. Tanturri and Mencarini assert that it is not purely difficult economic conditions associated with having children that have changed Italian women's behavior, but instead that there has been a change in the attitude of Italian women.

The answers gleaned from the survey questions indicate that Italian women who remain voluntarily childless, specifically in urban areas, behave in sharp contrast to the traditional idea of Italian motherhood. These women are less religious, more likely to cohabitate before marriage, and participate in other non-conformist behavior. Well-educated women, then, according to survey results, find fulfillment in sources outside of the family and childbearing and may even see parenthood as an obstacle to personal achievement.

Ester Rizzi, Maya Judd, Michael White, Laura Bernardi, and David Kertzer in "Familistic Attitudes, Dual Burden and Fertility Intentions in Italy" apply the cross-national demographic, Second Demographic Transition ("SDT"), to the Italian case.¹⁵ They utilize a gendered definition and perspective of SDT taken from Eva Bernhardt's "Is the Second Demographic Transition a Useful Concept for Demography?"¹⁶ This theory of SDT is characterized by an asymmetry in gender role obligations, and partially as a consequence, an increase in divorce and cohabitation. In the second phase of this

¹⁴ Tanturri, Maria L., and Letizia Mencarini. "Childless or Childfree? Paths to Voluntary Childlessness in Italy." *Population and Development Review* 34.1 (2008): 51-77.

¹⁵ Rizzi, Ester, Maya Judd, Michael White, Laura Bernardi, and David Kertzer. "Familistic Attitudes, Dual Burden and Fertility Intentions in Italy." Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America. Louisiana, New Orleans. 3 Apr. 2008. Lecture.

¹⁶ Bernhardt, Eva. "Is the Second Demographic Transition a Useful Concept for Demography?" Vienna Yearbook of Population Research (2004): 25-28. Print.

transition, Bernhardt says, “partnership and parenthood become strong positive options for both men and women, which would imply less fragile male-female relationships and the possibility of increasing fertility levels.”¹⁷ The findings of this study indicate that Italy could be in the midst of an incomplete Second Demographic Transition. As Italian women increase their role in the workforce they are still faced with the expectation to assume the traditional roles of housekeeping and childbearing, yet find it increasingly difficult to fulfill both. The study concludes that an increase in gender equality, particularly within Italian households, could significantly change fertility rates in the future if the nation were to follow Bernhardt’s predicted trajectory of Second Demographic Transition.

Scholars who have studied the change in fertility rate in Italy seem to have divided themselves into two camps: those who support economic determinants of family formation and those who support cultural determinants of family formation in Italy. In “Italy’s Path to Very Low Fertility: The Adequacy of Economic and Second Demographic Transition Theories,” David Kertzer, Michael J. White, Laura Bernardi, and Guiseppe Gabrielli examine both of these perspectives and evaluate their explanatory power for the low fertility rate in Italy.¹⁸

Kertzer, et al. assert that female involvement in the workforce is an incomplete explanation for the change in fertility rate in Italy. They argue that although it has been adequately proven that working women in Italy delay marriage, delay childbirth, and have fewer children overall, there must be further explanations as to why working women

¹⁷ Rizzi, Judd, White, Bernardi, Kertzer. "Familistic Attitudes, Dual Burden and Fertility Intentions in Italy," 3.

¹⁸ Kertzer, David I., Michael J. White, Laura Bernardi, and Guiseppe Gabrielli. "Italy's Path to Very Low Fertility: The Adequacy of Economic and Second Demographic Transition Theories." *European Journal of Population* 25 (2008): 89-115.

in Italy have children at a lower rate than women in other developed countries where there has yet to be shown any greater government support for reconciling women's work and fertility. This study emphasizes the incompleteness of using Female Labor Force Participation as the sole or primary factor in the change in fertility rate in Italy.

The authors also view fertility decline framed as Second Demographic Transition as flawed. They argue that this cross-national theory inadequately addresses the unique nature of the Italian case because the SDT is theorized to be the result of increased individualization and secularization. Although there has been increased individualization in Italy as shown through increases in divorce, cohabitation, and secularization, these changes have not been to the degree of other developed nations, and certainly not to the degree that would explain Italy having the lowest fertility rate among them. Indeed, in "Is Marriage Losing its Centrality in Italy?" Rosina and Fraboni conclude that, although there has been an increase in cohabitation in Italy, it is not the result of a rejection of marriage but instead cohabitation is used as a precursor to marriage.¹⁹ In comparison to most other Western societies, Italy is still very traditional, making SDT difficult to apply to the Italian case, especially in a cross-country comparison.

The ultimate conclusion of Kertzer, et al's study, however, underscores that although cross-culturally the Female Labor Force Participation argument and SDT theories seem to be weak, within the parameter of Italy they still have merit. The authors believe that the influence of these factors could lend more explanatory power to the Italian case if Italy's specific economic and cultural context, for example issues such as gender equity, were placed at the forefront. The study ends with an acknowledgment that theories explaining the low fertility rate in Italy through Female Labor Force

¹⁹ Rosina and Fraboni, "Is Marriage Losing Its Centrality in Italy?"

Participation Rate and Second Demographic Transition are not incorrect, but they are, however, incomplete.

LACUNA

The majority of the studies conducted and theories produced to explain the persistently low Fertility Rate in Italy since 1970 glaze over the fact that an increase of women in the workforce and a diminished importance on having a large family is an important and distinct cultural shift. The decision whether to reproduce and/or how many children to have is not solely economic, nor is it merely the result of an overarching, bodiless demographic evolution. Fertility choices are emotional, personal, and reflect the values of Italian women, their families, and the society as a whole.

This thesis seeks to move beyond solely economic explanations of fertility decline as well as cultural explanations that point solely to Second Demographic Transition. The following chapters explore the shifting societal, institutional, economic, and cultural forces at work across the past four decades specific to Italy and the role that these factors have played in fertility decline.

The time period from 1970 to 2010 gave rise to a new field of choices for Italian women and allowed them to embrace new roles beyond that of wife and mother to which they had largely been confined during the first half of the twentieth century. This new set of options allowed women to emerge as individual actors in the Italian economy, but the Italian labor market has remained inflexible and unsupportive of women taking time off to raise children, and attitudes about housework have continued to place the burden of unpaid labor on women. Therefore, the past four decades have also witnessed an

increasing disconnect between women's attitudes about childbearing/raising and the realities as well as economic necessities of individuals and families in contemporary Italy. From this, there has been a meaningful shift in cultural values in which Italians, particularly women, have chosen to place diminished importance on the traditional family structure and higher value on personal autonomy.

This examination of fertility decline in Italy will complicate existing theories by demonstrating that the economic determinants of fertility choices are the *result* of a meaningful cultural shift in Italy. The thesis seeks to prove that these changing cultural attitudes serve as the root cause of fertility decline.

METHODOLOGY

This study primarily examines the time period from 1970 (fertility rate 2.43) until 2010 (fertility rate 1.4) in Italy. This period of time encompasses the years across which the fertility rate in Italy changed consistently and dramatically. Additionally, 1970 marks the year in which contraception was legalized in Italy, making it the first year in which women had access to legal and reliable methods of family planning. Thus, since 1970 Italian women have had the ability to control more consciously the number of children they wish to produce.

This study demonstrates that there has been a meaningful and lasting shift in cultural values that has led to fertility decline in Italy since 1970. In order to set the stage for the importance of this cultural shift, the thesis presents the traditional Italian culture

and familial structure of the twentieth century. This is done through an examination of the role and influence of the fascist state and the Catholic Church on Italian family and fertility. Scholarly writings, fascist policies, and Church teachings are used to demonstrate the traditional family ideology and pro-natalist attitudes that permeated Italian culture in the first half of the twentieth century.

Following this, the thesis delves into a more comprehensive study of the 1960s and 1970s, the decades that mark the beginning of fertility decline in Italy. It thus examines the Italian women's movement and the changes it spearheaded. Feminist texts, changes in legislation, and popular survey data are employed to reveal shifting values taking place during this time period. This evidence illuminates Italian women's changing attitudes towards family and gender relations and indicates that the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the creation of new cultural values that would in turn influence Italian women's choices across the next four decades.

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CHAPTER II

SETTING THE STAGE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fertility decline in Italy has been particularly surprising because of Italy's historically family-centric culture. Early twentieth century Italy was characterized by couples' adherence to the traditional family structure, meaning a domestic mother, working father, and many children in a nuclear family situation. Additionally, two of the most powerful institutions in twentieth century Italy, the Catholic Church and Mussolini's Fascist regime, reinforced familistic attitudes and promoted natalism.

Benito Mussolini led the Fascist Party that governed Italy from 1925 until 1943. Throughout his rule, Mussolini maintained a vested interest in increasing the Italian population. He believed that the nation's strength derived from its number of inhabitants, stating in his 1927 Ascension Day speech: "national demographic strength provides a subsidiary but fundamental evidence of nations' political as well as economic and civic strength."¹ The government sought to fend off the forces of secularization and individualism that Mussolini perceived had led other European nations to low fertility in

¹ Arianna Caporali & Antonio Golini. "Births and Fertility in Interwar Italy: Trends, Images, Policies and Perception." *Population Review* (2010), 33.

the early twentieth century.² In Fascist Italy, the ideal family was large and “had a patriarchal structure based on the values of motherhood and fatherhood: the fascist woman was a stay-at-home mother-wife faithful to the fascist cult of homeland.”³ Mussolini’s government enacted a series of pro-natalist policies across his regime in order to achieve this goal. Pro-natalist policies in fascist Italy fell into two categories: measures that rewarded and encouraged procreation and those that punished individuals who did not meet the government’s fertility standards.

In order to encourage large families, the state enacted policies that promoted maternal and infant health, gave large families government subsidies and tax exemptions, and created a new holiday: Day of the Mother and Child.⁴ Punitive measures took the form of newly created policies such a “bachelor tax” that unmarried men were required to pay to the state. Other punitive measures excluded Italian women from the workforce in order to encourage them to embrace roles as solely wives and mothers. In 1923 women were eliminated from competing in public service sector of employment, and, in 1938, the government mandated that non-state offices could have no more than 10% female employees.⁵ More directly, Mussolini’s regime attempted to manipulate women’s choices and push them towards fertility by making abortion and the distribution of contraception (or even information regarding contraception) illegal in 1927. In 1930 the state further penalized women who engaged in non-productive behaviors by re-categorizing abortion and contraception as “crimes against the race.”⁶

² Ibid., 34.

³ Caporali & Antonio Golini. "Births and Fertility in Interwar Italy: Trends, Images, Policies and Perception." 39.

⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Ibid., 37.

II Duce found an ally for his policies promoting traditional gender roles and natalism in the Catholic Church. Italy has strong historical and cultural ties to the Catholic Church, with the papacy located in the heart of Rome and the overwhelming majority of the Italian population identifying as Catholic. Therefore, attitudes that were shared between the Church and the government in the early twentieth century wielded great societal influence. Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has condemned abortion and the use of any form of contraception, and the papacy celebrated their illegalization by Mussolini.⁷ Additionally, Catholic theology during this time echoed the state's views on women's roles in society. Pope Pius XI, head of the Catholic Church from 1922 to 1939, described women's work outside of the home as a perversion of the family, and he urged women to assume solely the role of a wife and mother.⁸ Although the Italian Fascist State would not meet its goal of an average of six children per woman, fertility rates in Italy remained high compared to other European counterparts throughout the duration of fascist rule.

DECADES OF CHANGE

Emerging from the Second World War and the cloud of fascism, the Italian family of the mid twentieth century remained rooted in tradition and maintained relative consistency in fertility patterns. In the two and a half decades after the fall of fascism, the end of the war, and the creation of the Italian Republic there were small fluctuations in total fertility rate from year-to-year, but overall it held at relatively consistent rate: an

⁷ Jeff Pratt , "Catholic Culture." *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. Comp. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. 129-42), 134.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

average of 2.47 women per child.⁹ Aspects of what would be considered the “traditional Italian family” were still very prevalent. Catholic culture remained incredibly influential in post-war Italy, especially within the realm of the family. Jeff Pratt addresses this in his article “Catholic Culture,” stating: “The [Catholic] Church has consistently stressed the special quality of relations within the family, and these teachings, which became an important theme in post-war political life, were widely shared. They represent the basic axioms which generated judgments about how people behave in the personal domain.”¹⁰

The teachings of the Church regarding the family continued to stress the importance of the traditional family structure, specifically the role of the woman primarily and solely as wife and mother, a patriarchal household with the father as the clear head of house, many children, and an absolute prohibition on birth control. In 1946, Pope Pius XII reiterated his predecessor in his description of the ideal role of Catholic women: “Every woman is destined to be a mother [...] For true women, all of life’s problems are understood in terms of the family [...] Equality with men, outside the home where she is queen, subjects the woman to the same burdens the man has.”¹¹ The function and importance of women from the perspective of the Catholic Church was solely through their relationships to “the family,” i.e., with their husbands and children.

In the post-war years, female labor force participation rate across the Italian peninsula continued to stagnate behind other European and Western nations. As women in other nations made strides in the workforce, Italian women remained overwhelmingly

⁹ "World Development Indicators." *Total Fertility Rate, Italy*. World Bank.

¹⁰ Pratt, "Catholic Culture." 145.

¹¹ Anna Maria Mozzoni. "Feminism as Eighteenth-Century Individualism." *Sex and Power: The Rise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden, and Italy*. By Donald B. Meyer. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1987), 141.

confined to the home. Similar to the Catholic Church, the Italian legal system during this time viewed women not as individual actors, but through their relationships to men.

Continued gender inequality in the Italian legal and familial infrastructure gave rise to the Italian feminist movement in the late 1960s. Similar women's movements occurred in United States and in other European nations; however, Italian feminism was a case all its own because it illuminated the specific challenges, prejudices, and obstacles that Italian women of this time faced. A close examination of the Italian case reveals that this women's movement was born from drastic and continued gender inequality particularly within the family. Women began to agitate for change in the nature of relationships between husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and the overall family structure. One finds this reflected in the language and demands of feminist texts, legislative reform, and ultimately changing family and fertility patterns.

The language employed during the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrates a demand for changing a culture hostile to women. Rhetoric such as "opposition," "autonomy of women," and "liberation" emphasize that the women's movement not only viewed itself as fighting for female equality, but also against many social and cultural institutions that maintained Italy's patriarchal societal infrastructure.¹² The message of the feminist movement of this time period held vast cultural implications. In a nation that had across the twentieth century consistently reinforced the concept of a traditional, patriarchal family as the norm, new ideas began rapidly to spread. In her work *Liberazione della donna*, Luca Chiavola Birnbaum denotes the particular way that Italian feminists confronted this culture: "the word culture was employed in rejection of

¹² Lucia C. Birnbaum, *Liberazione Della Donna: Feminism in Italy*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1986), 82

patriarchal, bourgeois, and masculine culture and in affirmation of a new way to make culture with self determination and self management of women.”¹³ Italian women of the 1960s and 1970s increasingly shunned the traditional sources of authority and the way in which their culture demanded women behave.

Feminist publications from this time period emphasized the connection between patriarchy within society and inequality inside of the family. Writings such as Carla Lonzi’s widely influential work *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Let’s Spit on Hegel) circulated in the streets of Rome and Milan in the 1970s, and presented the nature and structure of the Italian family as significant impediments to female progress. She asserted that “Marriage is an institution that subordinates women to male destiny”¹⁴ and further expanded that “The family is the capstone of the patriarchal system, founded not only on the economic interest but also on the psychological needs of men.”¹⁵ Lonzi’s writings were widely read, and they spurred further exploration of the status of Italian women within the family.

Feminist texts of this time also explored the inherent patriarchal nature of maternity and motherhood. The manifesto of *Rivolta Femminile* (Female Revolt), a Rome based feminist group founded in 1970, argues that the time that a woman enters into motherhood is the time she loses her individual freedom. The manifesto outlines the flawed ideology at the root of the Italian family to make its case:

Woman’s first reason for resentment against society lies in being forced to face maternity as a dilemma. We denounce the unnatural

¹³ Ibid., 82.

¹⁴ Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, (1970), 12 (As cited in Birnbaum, *Liberazione Della Donna*, 84).

¹⁵ Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, 33 (As cited in Birnbaum, *Liberazione Della Donna*, 85).

state of maternity paid for at the cost of exclusion. [...] We do not wish to think about motherhood all our lives or to continue to be unwitting instruments of patriarchal power. Woman is fed up with bringing up a son who will turn into a bad lover¹⁶

Lonzi (who was a member of *Rivolta Femminile*) also addresses the constraints of motherhood and goes on to clarify the ways in which the feminist movement views maternity as a type of “forced self sacrifice.” She writes, “We are not responsible for giving birth to humanity in our slavery. It is not the son that made us into slaves, but the father.”¹⁷ Thus, her opposition to maternity does not stem from a rejection of motherhood or maternal love, but instead from an opposition to patriarchal familial structure. She emphasizes that although woman has been tasked with the responsibility to repopulate the world, that women should no longer be responsible to trade in their freedom for motherhood, and that this choice has been forced upon women through the male dominated structure of the Italian family. In addition to the burden of maternity, the writings of *Rivolta Femminile* emphasize that the patriarchal structure of the family has enslaved women to housework and limits the ability of women to enter the waged workforce.

It could be argued that the writing of feminist manifestos represented the most extreme verbalization of women’s protest of their cultural inequality; however, statements that might seem inflammatory were especially valid in the Italian case. Even though women had been granted the right to vote in 1946 in return for their contributions to the war and resistance effort, many patriarchal and blatantly unequal laws bled over from the fascist penal code onto the books of the newly created Italian Republic.

¹⁶ Rivolta Femminile, *Manifesto* (1970) (As Cited in: Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp. *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell (1991), 39.

¹⁷ Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (As cited in Bono & Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, 50).

Statements equating marriage with women's subordination were justifiable in a society where until 1968 a simple testimony by a husband that his wife was committing adultery would lead to her imprisonment for a year, but a similar act by a husband held no punishment.¹⁸ Equality of spouses within marriage was not established until 1975 in Italy.¹⁹ Also, divorce was nearly impossible in Italy at this time, so for both parties there was no possibility to regain freedom if marital relations turned sour.

Additionally, in the early and mid 1960s the Italian legal code ensured that women had little or no access to birth control or abortion. The inability of Italian women to control their own fertility choices left them in a subjugated position within society and the family. Although individual women may not have labeled themselves as feminists, there was an undeniable dissemination of feminist consciousness. The issues upon which the majority of feminist texts focused: desire to make their own choices about sexuality and motherhood, and constraints of the traditional family structure did not fall on deaf ears. Soon Italian women's demands would lead instances of tangible reform. The year 1968 would mark a turning point for Italian women, and, ultimately, the fertility patterns of the nation for the next four decades.

The modification of Italian individual and familial life during this time period was not limited to evolution of individuals' opinions, ideas, and values. The late 1960s and 1970s marked a crucial time for the modification of Italian legislation. These changes, spurred by the women's movement, can be seen as both the consequence of and a catalyst for the roots of modern Italian cultural values.²⁰ Essential to gauging the effectiveness and widespread nature of the Italian women's movement during this time are three

¹⁸ Guardian News Service. "Adultery Law Voided in Italy." *The Milwaukee Journal* 29 Dec. 1968: 3.

¹⁹ Birnbaum, *Liberazione Della Donna*, 114.

²⁰ Chiara Saraceno. "The Italian Family from the 1960s to the Present." *Modern Italy* 9.1 (2004), 48.

particularly significant pieces of legislation passed between 1968 and 1978. These reforms: the legalization of divorce, the legalization of birth control, and the legalization of abortion, reflected the success of the women's movement and aided women's societal advancement across the peninsula. Understanding the circumstances that led to the enactment of these laws, their implementation, and, in two cases, their challenge through public referendum, further reveals shifting societal and cultural values during this time period.

The first of these pieces of legislation passed by the Italian government was the legalization of divorce. This reform took place in 1970, the year in which total fertility rate in Italy began its rapid decline. The divorce bill, as approved by the Italian parliament in 1970, allowed for consensual divorce without requiring a reason to be stated.²¹ This was a direct challenge to traditional Church teachings that held marriage as a sacred union unable to be dissolved. Again, Birnbaum notes, "The right of divorce, gained much earlier in Protestant countries, marked a momentous change in Italy."²² Immediately following the bill's passage, the conservative Christian Democrats, with the support of the Church, mobilized to repeal the law through a popular referendum. On May 12, 1974, 90 percent of the Italian population flocked to the polls to cast its vote on the divorce law. Participants in the referendum upheld the new divorce law with 60 percent of voters supporting it, in what would be called an "earthquake vote" for Italy.²³

The divorce referendum sheds a spotlight on an even more important issue than the upholding of the legislation. The referendum results reveal the changing values of

²¹ This "no blame" provision is counterbalanced by a minimum legal separation of five years, since the law's passage this time has been reduced to three years.

²² Birnbaum, *Liberazione Della Donna*, 103.

²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

Italians in general and Italian women in particular. In a departure from even a few decades prior to 1974, the Italian population made known that it would not unquestioningly follow Church authority on issues of the family.²⁴ In “Feminism as Eighteenth-Century Individualism,” Anna Maria Mozzoni suggests that this time period marked a growing consciousness among Italian women in the absence of fascist ideology and in the waning influence of the Catholic Church on the individual. She states, “The victory of the prodivorce voters in the 1974 referendum registered, for the first time in the history of united Italy, the voice of people no longer under tutelage [...] women had unquestionably determined the result and had listened only to themselves.”²⁵ Women were rising up as independent agents and autonomous voters for the first time, and these changes manifested themselves in both legislation and societal practice.

Similar to the case of divorce, the two most powerful institutions in twentieth century Italy, the Catholic Church and the Fascist regime, had long denounced birth control. At its formation in 1946, the Italian Republic maintained prohibitions on the distribution of contraception and access to information about it, and Italian women remained unable to access legal birth control.²⁶ In 1964, the Italian Supreme Court rejected the legalization of contraception in a case that was brought before it, claiming that birth control was a violation of public morals.²⁷ Six years later, in 1970, a case against birth control clinics that had been illegally established by activists in Rome and Milan came before the Italian Supreme Court again. This time, however, the court

²⁴ Ibid., 115.

²⁵ Anna Maria Mozzoni. "Feminism as Eighteenth-Century Individualism," 149.

²⁶ Luigi DeMarchi and Maria Louisa Zardini. "Bringing Contraception to Italy." *Pathfinder in Italy*, (2008), 39.

²⁷ Ibid., 40.

reversed its ruling, allowing dissemination of contraceptive information in Italy and its legal and public availability for the first time.²⁸

Women now possessed the ability to control their own fertility for the first time in Italy's history. The emergence and growing strength of the women's movement during the six-year interim between the two above court cases is indicative of a changing society. The court's about-face from interpreting birth control as an immoral vice to referencing its prohibition as an antiquated piece of fascist legislation was a shift mirrored by the populous. The Church, however, had not changed its insistence that the purpose of all sexual acts should be procreation. In his 1968 *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI condemned "any action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible."²⁹ From 1970 onward, however, Italy would witness a steady decline in total fertility rate to one of the lowest in the world; a feat that would not have been possible without the rejection of some Catholic teachings and the embracing of contraception.

The final piece of legislation that was passed during this time period is perhaps the most revealing of Italy's changing society and cultural values. The criminalization of abortion in Italy dated back to Italy's first modern penal code, adopted in 1889, but the consciousness of abortion as a crime existed in the peninsula long before its unification. Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1532 declared abortion to be homicide, and the Catholic Church long asserted its view of abortion as a mortal sin. After being codified in 1889, the criminal nature of abortion was reasserted in the 1930 *Codice Rocco* (Rocco

²⁸ Ibid., 41.

²⁹ Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae: Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Paul VI on the Regulation of Births*. (Encyclicals of Holy Father of Paul VI, 1968, www.vatican.va).

Code) penal code of the Fascist regime, and the prohibition on abortion continued to stand as law after creation of the Italian Republic in 1946.³⁰

Comprehending the combination of Roman, Fascist, and Christian traditions in the view of abortion as a criminal act is essential to understanding why its legalization marks such a stark transformation in Italian legislation and society. The debate and public discourse surrounding the legalization of abortion marked and solidified the recognition of women as individual agents in Italian society. In “Debates and Controversies on Abortion in Italy,” Mariana Calloni states: “The debate on abortion also permitted the emergence of new female identities, the recognition of the centrality of women as a political subject, and the affirmation of feminism as a public discourse.”³¹

In 1978, responding to the demands of the women’s movement, the Italian legislature passed *Norme per la Tutela Sociale della Maternità e sull’Interruzione Volontaria della Gravidanza* (Norms for the Social Protection of Motherhood and about the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy).³² This legislation did not completely decriminalize abortion in all cases, but it marked a significant change in the existing criminal code in that it allowed for a number of circumstances that permitted legal abortion. As soon as it was constitutionally permissible, groups opposed to the legalization of abortion proposed popular referendums to nullify the legislation and restrict abortion to cases where it was “therapeutically necessary.” This “necessity” would have to be determined by physicians, and not by individual women seeking abortions. The Catholic Church and conservative political parties were the primary

³⁰ Calloni, “Debates and Controversies on Abortion in Italy,” 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

³² *Ibid.*, 190.

forces behind this referendum, and they poured vast resources into attempts to persuade the public to overturn the law.³³

With a 79% voter turnout, the Italian electorate overwhelmingly upheld the legislation on the legalization of abortion, with 60% voting against the law's overturn and only 32% for it (7.7% of ballots were blank on this issue or invalid³⁴).³⁵ Moreover, the referendum to repeal the legalization of abortion began on May 17, a mere four days after an assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. The threat on this pope, widely beloved and respected by the Italian people, and who had directly pleaded with the Italian people to support the referendum, could still not tip the scale for repeal. This demonstrated the ways in which the women's movement, secularization, and new cultural values of individualism were emerging as a stronger influence than more traditional societal institutions within Italy.

Rates of abortion in Italy during this time, and in the decades to follow, remained comparatively low; however, "the right of a woman to her own body as the capstone of her liberation"³⁶ was a widely disseminated idea that had taken root and now had tangible consequences. There was a new consciousness in the Italian electorate, and a new set of cultural values that not only steered votes, but societal practices. Women emerged as not only capable of acting as independent agents, but also demanding of autonomy. These referendums demonstrated that when presented with a choice, Italian women were rejecting the constraints of the traditional family structure.

³³ Calloni, "Debates and Controversies on Abortion in Italy," 192.

³⁴ Multiple referendums were voted on this day; therefore it is not abnormal to see such a high percentage of blank votes. Voters had the option to vote on certain issues while choosing to abstain from voting on other referendums.

³⁵ Calloni, "Debates and Controversies on Abortion in Italy," 199.

³⁶ Birnbaum, *Liberazione Della Donna*, 104.

Although a tempting interpretation, Italian feminism should not be viewed as a fringe movement. Birnbaum notes, “Only a minority of Italy’s twenty-seven million women walked in feminist demonstrations, but they drew the attention of a wide audience.”³⁷ In the 1960s and 1970s there is evidence to suggest a new female consciousness emerging across the peninsula as seen in new laws and in attitudes.

For example, an examination of several Europe-wide surveys conducted during the 1970s presents compelling evidence to suggest that Italian women’s attitudes towards their role in society, particularly within the scope of the family, were shifting within female population as a whole.³⁸ “Euro-barometer 3: European Men and Women,” which was conducted in 1975, asked: “What do you think is the main reason women have less opportunity [than men of the same age to succeed in life in Italy?]” Italian women responded to this question by selecting “family commitments” at more than twice the rate of any of the other options presented (38.9%; in comparison to the Europe-wide average response of 32.3% to this question).³⁹

³⁷ Birnbaum, *Liberazione Della Donna*, 114.

³⁸ The surveys referenced are Eurobarometer surveys, which were conducted and published by the European Commission. Eurobarometer reports have been carried out by the Public Opinion Analysis sector of the European Commission since 1973 to monitor the evolution of public opinion.

³⁹ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Euro-barometer 3: European Men and Women*. 1975.

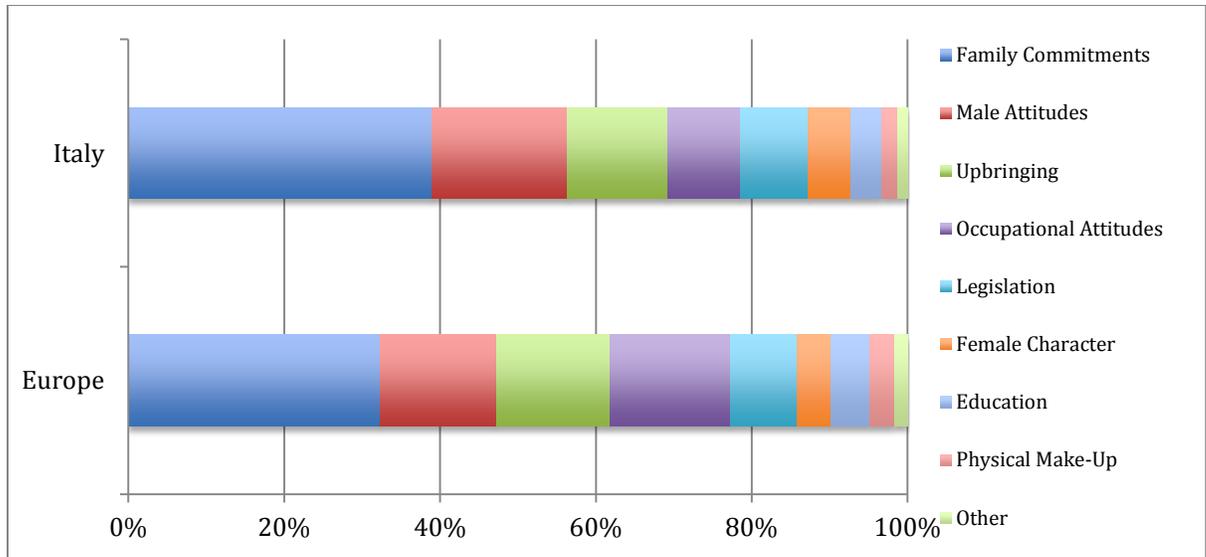


Figure 1: “Why do women have less?” - Euro-barometer 3: European Men and Women, 1975⁴⁰

Italian women’s responses to this question demonstrate that during the time of the women’s movement and when fertility rate first began to decline, Italian women recognized that the confines of the traditional family structure led to personal limitations for women. Additionally, women cited male attitudes [towards women] as the second most limiting factor in Italy. In contrast, women cited educational limitations and limitations deriving from the inherent female nature as having a much lower influence on their unequal place in society. Thus, the unequal family structure and the male chauvinism highlighted within feminist texts find echoes in the female population during this time period.

Another enlightening indicator comes from responses to a question that was posed to respondents as a part of a slightly later Eurobarometer survey in 1977. Male and female participants answered the question, “Do you believe that the majority of women would like to see fewer differences between the respective roles of men and women in

⁴⁰ *Euro-barometer 3: European Men and Women*. 1975.

society?” as follows. Italians overwhelmingly responded that women would prefer to have fewer differences from men, with 85% of respondents stating yes (compared to the 81% Europe-wide average). This group then answered whether they believed that men would prefer to have fewer differences between the sexes in Italy. Over 72% of Italians believed that men would *not* like to see fewer differences—nearly a 10% higher rate than the average for all European countries surveyed.

It is possible to interpret these suggestive responses in several ways. The first and most obvious being that one may infer that during this time, Italian men and women perceived women as having a very strong desire for greater equality, and therefore having high dissatisfaction with the current state of gender relations on the peninsula. Additionally, it can be interpreted that Italian men and women overwhelmingly believed that men did *not* want the status of women to become more equal, and therefore perceived men as having a high rate of satisfaction in the state of gender roles and relations. Overall, this indicates a cultural environment that was favorable to men and one that was unfavorable to women—a status quo to which these respondents were acutely aware.⁴²

There is also evidence that suggests Italian housewives were the unhappiest of all of their European counterparts. Responses to questions regarding life as a housewife applied to a large swath of the women in 1977 Italy. During this time only 29% of Italian women worked in the waged labor force, therefore, housewives’ responses demonstrate attitudes of the largest portion of the female population.⁴³ When women who described

⁴² European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Eurobarometer 8: Men, Women, and Work Roles in Europe*. 1977.

⁴³ “Labor Force Participation Rate for Women in Italy.” U.S. Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics. *International Comparisons of Annual Labor Force Statistics*.

themselves as “housewives” ranked their satisfaction on a scale from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 11 (very satisfied) Italy produced the second highest percentage of women who labeled themselves as “completely dissatisfied” (8.1% compared to Europe-wide 3.4%) Italy further saw the lowest number of women who categorized themselves as “very satisfied” in their role as housewives (19% compared to 31.4% Europe-average). The 1977 results reveal that less than half of all Italian housewives ranked their personal satisfaction as above a six on the aforementioned scale, while the average satisfaction of housewives for all European countries surveyed above this level constituted 69.8%.⁴⁴ Italian housewives, the most populous female occupation in 1977 Italy, were comparatively very dissatisfied with their lives.

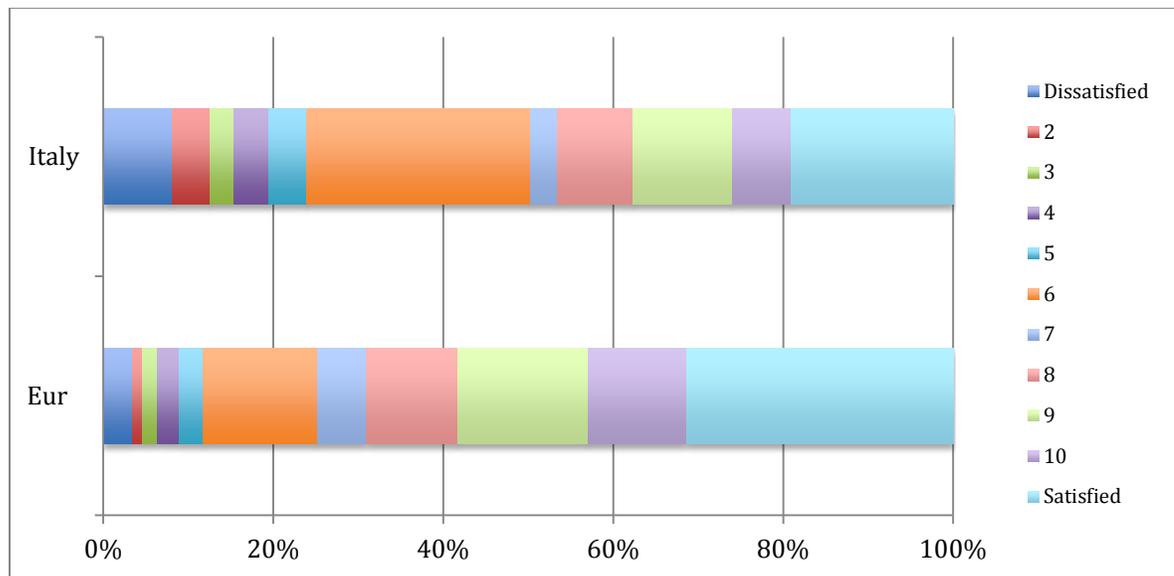


Figure 2: Housewife Satisfaction - Eurobarometer 8: Men, Women, and Work Roles in Europe, 1977⁴⁵

Italian women’s responses to these surveys suggest that they saw the constraints of the traditional family structure as having a directly limiting force on their personal

⁴⁴ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Eurobarometer 8: Men, Women, and Work Roles in Europe*. 1977.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

autonomy and, in many cases, quality of life. Additionally, women professed a desire to change the cultural landscape so they could achieve a more equal status, while men, in general, were still opposed to increased equality. Finally, Italian women who were homemakers professed high rates of dissatisfaction. The entrenched social and familial inequalities criticized by the Italian feminist movement, therefore were concerns echoed by women across the peninsula. Italian women of this time identified the traditional, patriarchal family structure as a limitation and a burden: one that they were increasingly disinclined to bear.

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed Italians beginning to shake off ideological influences that had previously determined familial and societal roles. In this new space, aided by the feminist movement, Italian women found a voice to pinpoint and change the some of the patriarchal qualities that continued to pervade the realms of family life and female sexuality. Women finally achieved the ability to control their role in marriage and family through divorce, and availability of legal contraception and safe abortion meant that Italian women had the opportunity to control their sexuality and fertility for the first time. The upholding of legalized divorce and abortion through popular referendum further demonstrated that these legal changes reflected shifting Italian societal values. Therefore, new pieces of legislation in the 1970s provided women a new set of choices to match their new ideologies.

The effects of this change in consciousness can be seen in the changing family and fertility practices of Italian women in the following four decades. Discussing the new Italian society and new Italian women that emerged from this tumultuous time period in her qualitative study *Journeys Among Women*, Judith Hellman observes that the

changing attitudes towards girls and boys are most indicative of society's transformation of consciousness. She notes a loosening link between sexuality and family creation, arguing that Italian youth view access to family planning, contraception, and safe abortion as basic rights. In addition to this, she emphasizes the incredible power that the women's movement had on public acceptance and normalization of women working outside of the home. In addition to this changing perception, she finds that "mothers of young women entering the workforce support their daughters' hopes of finding a job before they marry [...] both for reasons of personal autonomy and for reasons of personal and family 'insurance.'"⁴⁶ The Italian society that emerged at the end of the 1970s was markedly different to the one that had entered it.

⁴⁶ Hellman, Judith Adler. *Journeys among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 207.

CHAPTER III

A CHANGED CULTURE

THE MODERN ITALIAN WOMAN

Antonella lives in the small hilltop town of Perugia in central Italy. Originally from Naples, her passion for literature and journalism led her from her hometown university to a PhD from Yale in Italian language and literature. Returning to Italy, she worked as a journalist for a few years, but soon chose to marry and settle down in her husband's hometown of Perugia when she was in her early 30s. She still writes freelance for several newspapers, but her primary job now is instructing American students studying abroad about contemporary Italy. She teaches only a few classes a day, giving her the time and flexibility to cook homemade meals (which are a source of immense pride for her), clean, check in on her husband's parents who live nearby, and attend to her young daughter. Like many women of her generation, she has only one child: Valentina, to whom she gave birth when she was 36.¹

Antonella's biography reads similarly to that of many Italian women of her generation. With a 25 percent rate of higher education and a labor force participation rate of 47 percent, the modern Italian woman looks and behaves very differently from her pre-1970 counterpart. If she chooses to marry it is, on average, when she is 30 or over, and if

¹ Valoroso, Antonella. Personal interview. 1 Oct 2013.

she chooses to have children, she does not normally give birth for the first time until she is almost 31. Finally, in a drastic departure from traditional practices, and as the result of a steady decline in fertility, the modern Italian woman, on average, has 1.4 children.²

The Italian populace and those who govern it are acutely aware of the current state of low fertility and the looming problems that accompany this trend. The economic and societal impact of the graying population is a source of anxiety not only for individuals, but also for the Italian state. Indicators of replacement anxiety permeate daily life for Italian men and women. The small city of Laviano in the South of Italy, which faces an incredibly low number of children born each year and a stagnating primary school system, began offering 10,000 euros to any woman, Italian native or immigrant, who bore a child in the town and enrolled it in the first grade.³ Official state publications throughout Italy encouraging women to have more children and at a younger age are not difficult to find.

Government agencies utilize modern media outreach such as digital videos to promote the idea of increasing fertility to Italian women. For example, there is a YouTube series from September 2008 in which the head of the Italian Gynecological and Obstetrical Society (SIGO), Giorgio Vittori, urges Italian women to conserve their fertility, and to be aware that the longer they wait to bear children, the more difficult fertility will be. SIGO publications have been steadily shifting across the past three decades from outreach that promotes sexual responsibility through education about sexually transmitted diseases, responsible use of contraception, and health and wellbeing

² Italian National Institute of Statistics. *Demographic Indicators Year 2010*. Comp. Marco Marsili. (2011).

³ Shorto, Russell. "No Babies?" *New York Times*, 29 June 2008. Web.

during pregnancy towards an approach that aggressively advocates fertility.⁴ In this digital video series, Vittori warns women that prioritizing their career could put them in a situation where they are unable to conceive by the time they reach their personal goals. He states, “It is important to know that at 37 years old you may very well have a great job, a beautiful home, a great *trousseau*, but remember that the available oocytes are very, very few. Remember it, think ahead.”⁵ Through publications such as this, the Italian government reveals a vested interest in educating women about their fertility, but places a heightened emphasis on prioritizing their ability to procreate.⁶

Within Italy many overlapping voices contribute to the discourse of Italian’s reproductive anxiety. Although these narratives pinpoint the same issues, their origins, perspectives, and solutions clash. Many contemporary Italian women and feminist thinkers take issue with the alarmist discourse surrounding low fertility. The state’s narrative often blames women for their seeming unwillingness to have children and insinuates that fertility decline stems from women’s laziness and reluctance to take on the responsibility. Rebutting this, women assert that low fertility rate is a social problem, and represents “a further example of the failures of neoliberal and misogynist policies.”⁷

These women acknowledge the connection between Italian women’s diminished desire to have children and the drop in Italy’s fertility rate; however, their perspective diverges from that of the state by arguing that Italian institutions and practices have failed to evolve in a way that allows women to both have children and an autonomous lifestyle.

⁴ Milena Marchesi, "Reproducing Italians: Contested Biopolitics in the Age of 'Replacement Anxiety.'" *Anthropology & Medicine* 19.2 (2012), 180.

⁵ Marchesi, "Reproducing Italians: Contested Biopolitics in the Age of 'Replacement Anxiety,'" 176

⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

Although modern Italian women have more options for individual success than their pre-1970 counterparts, they are forced into perceived dichotomous decisions due to ideological societal barriers that make it incredibly difficult for them to achieve an education, a career, and a family. From this perspective, Italy's particular societal infrastructure is implicated for the role that it plays in maintaining the inability to reconcile individual autonomy and fertility.

The voice of the contemporary Italian woman facing these struggles can be heard through sources such as the popular blog *The 27th hour (La 27ora)*.⁸ The blog's name derives from a well-known Italian study that added up the combination of unpaid and paid labor completed each day by Italian women only to find that it would take 27 hours. The articles that appear on *The 27th Hour* are written by Italian women and reveal modern cultural and societal conditions that have given rise to a new slew of women's issues. *The 27th Hour*'s description immediately pinpoints many of the unique challenges faced by Italian women:

“The 27th hour is a **blog for women**: it tells the stories and ideas of those chasing a **balance between work (whether in the office or at home), family, themselves** [...] Stretching a public-private border that is becoming more flexible. Multitasking, by choice and /or by force. Career prospects and desire for motherhood; parents bringing up children, and children who care for aging parents [...] These are daily negotiations that generate common doubts and personal solutions. Here we try to offer and exchange news, tips, reflections and serious reading. Chasing a free society where everyone can grow in mutual respect.”⁹

⁸ *La 27ora* is published as a part of *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy's oldest and most well-established newspapers with an online readership of 1.6 million daily.

⁹ "27ora." *La 27ORA: Le Donne Che Sopravvivono Tra Casa E Lavoro*. Web. <http://27esimaora.corriere.it/>.

The blog and its affiliated articles emphasize the difficult daily dichotomies that Italian women face, such as: balancing career and motherhood, caring for children and caring for parents, and work in the home and work in their careers.

Articles such as “Letter to a Child who will Never Be Born” and “No Kids and No Regrets: The Debate on a Full Life” address the difficulties of maintaining a career and/or a home along with having children; however, in contrast to the state’s oft implied stance, they do not view low fertility rate as a result of women’s laziness or unwillingness of to accept the responsibilities of motherhood. Instead, the authors target institutional barriers that have forced them to choose between career and family, children and autonomy.

This chapter will examine the relationships between the Italian fertility rate and the new set of choices that Italian women, couples, and society have faced across the past four decades. The following sections will outline shifting societal conditions as well as stagnant ideological infrastructures in Italy that have framed women’s fertility choices since 1970. An examination of female participation in the work force, changing marriage patterns, and the gendered division of unpaid labor will help to reveal what has caused Italian women to choose different options than in the past. The causes and results of these new choices will demonstrate evidence of a meaningful shift in cultural values that has resulted in Italy’s fertility decline.

EDUCATION, LABOR, AND NEW SET OF CHOICES

Several distinct circumstances connect the increase in the education of women and female labor force participation in Italy and the decline in the number of children

desired or considered practical by Italian women and families. Italian women have steadily achieved higher levels of education across the past four decades and have served a resultingly greater role in the Italian workforce.¹⁰ These factors have undergone significant augmentation across the same time period in which fertility rate has decreased. Existing literature on Italy's fertility decline has drawn correlations between increase in female employment, education, and decline in fertility rate. Many of the studies, however, attribute these increases in education and employment as mere causes of low fertility when they can be viewed more accurately as effects of the same cultural shift in values that has caused it.

Emerging from the transformative decade of the 1970s, female rates of higher education and labor force participation rate steadily grew in Italy. In 1970, the year that marked the beginning of its dramatic fertility decline, 26.4% of Italian women engaged in paid labor outside of the home. This number was low, but at the time was comparable to European counterparts. By 1975, female participation in the paid labor market had increased marginally to 26.8%.¹¹ During these years the women's movement gained momentum, and Italian institutions enacted important female-friendly reforms such as the legalization of divorce, birth control, and abortion.

During this time of changing societal attitudes and legal structures towards family and children, there was also a demonstrated shift in Italian women's view of work outside of the home. These shifting labor patterns indicate that the increase in female labor force participation was born from the same forces that shaped the new face of the

¹⁰ Del Boca, Daniela. "Why Are Fertility and Participation Rates so Low in Italy (and Southern Europe)?" *The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America* (2003).

¹¹ United States. Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *International Comparisons of Annual Labor Force Statistics. 1970-2012. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.*

Italian family. In “Lowest-Low Fertility. Signs of Recovery in Italy?” Marcantonio Caltabiano, Maria Castiglioni, and Alessandro Rosina note the developing friction between work and family for women of this time period. They asseverate that for these women, “higher personal expectations, developed alongside of greater levels education, contrasted with a more traditional environment (i.e. with regard to family patterns, gender roles, and work time management) and may have ultimately polarized work and family.”¹² These forces developed in tandem as effects of changing societal values. Although there has been scholarly and analytical proof of the connection between female labor force participation rate and declining fertility rate, both issues emerge from women’s rejection of the traditional family structure.

Surveys conducted by Eurobarometer in 1975 and 1983 reveal Italian men and women’s shifting attitudes towards women in the workforce. Although barely a quarter of women engaged in paid labor outside of the home in 1975 (TFR 2.17), when asked the question “Would you prefer to be in paid employment or not?” 67.65% of women responded that they would like to work outside of the home. This was countered, however, by 55.6% of women responding that their husbands would prefer for them to *not* be in paid employment.¹³ In 1983 (TFR 1.51), the total female labor force participation rate in Italy had climbed only 3.7 percentage points to 30.5% of women.¹⁴ However, there is evidence that women’s attitudes towards individual participation in the labor force had grown more receptive. In 1983, 83.5% of women responded that they would prefer to work in paid employment, with 42.6% of women responding that their

¹² Del Boca, “Why Are Fertility and Participation Rates so Low in Italy (and Southern Europe)?”

¹³ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Euro-barometer 3: European Men and Women*. 1975.

¹⁴ “Labor Force Participation Rate for Women in Italy.” U.S. Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics. International Comparisons of Annual Labor Force Statistics.

husbands would prefer for them *not* to work outside of the home.¹⁵ This shift indicates that women increasingly desired to participate in the labor market, which reflects a growing desire for independence and individual achievement. This is contrasted by a large percentage of married men would like for their wives to remain jobless even if their wives wished enter into the waged workforce. These responses reveal that the traditional family structure imposed, or at least sought to impose, limitations on women's autonomy.

Italian women not only expressed a strong desire to participate in the paid workforce in the early years of fertility decline, they were also actively regretful when they chose to forego employment. In surveys across the 1970s, Italian women consistently expressed regret for not working at a much higher rate than the average responses of their European compatriots.¹⁶ In 1983, only two other nations fell within 10 percentage points of women who "often" regret not working, these being Greece with 34.5% and France with 25.6%. When combined, Italy possessed the highest percentage of women who "often regret" and "sometimes regret" not working (57.1%). Additionally, Italy possessed the *lowest* percentage of women surveyed who *never* regret forgoing employment, i.e. across the population there was, compared to European peers, a very high percentage of Italian women who wished that they would have worked.

When asked about their reasons for not working, this same group of regretful women revealed even more about the evolving Italian family. Their responses echo those of 1975's question on the limitation of female opportunities, referenced in Chapter 1. On the 1983 survey, 52.6% of respondents cited either "family responsibilities" or that their

¹⁵ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Eurobarometer 19: Gender Roles in the European Community*. 1983.

¹⁶ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Euro-barometer 3: European Men and Women*. 1975; European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Eurobarometer 8: Men, Women, and Work Roles in Europe*. 1977.

husbands would prefer that they do not work as the reason they chose to forego employment. Compare this to the mere 16.7% of Italian women who cited their nonworking status as the result of being unable to find suitable employment.¹⁷ This reinforces the idea that Italian women viewed the traditional family structure as a limiting force when presented with the option to participate in waged labor.

Yet, the idea that the declining fertility rate is due to labor force participation alone is overly simplistic. The decision whether to reproduce and/or how many children to have is not only an economic one: it is an emotional one. When someone decides this, it reflects the values of the individual, couple, family, and the society as a whole. Therefore, a more accurate depiction of women's increase in education and labor participation's effect on fertility rate can be made by acknowledging that during the time period in which fertility declined, women faced a new set of choices. From this field of choices: the opportunity to graduate college, to have a high paying job, and/or to have a large, traditional family all emerged as valid. Individuals thus began to make decisions based on a new set of values that placed women's autonomy at the forefront. The women's movement that helped dismantle much of the patriarchal infrastructure of the Italian legal code also helped to bring about the idea that work outside of the home was normal and acceptable for Italian women.¹⁸

Nonetheless, Italian women's choices remain constrained by the particularities of the Italian workforce. Existing research draws many connections that are specific to Italy between why women in the workforce are less likely to have multiple (or any) children, these being: the lack of part-time employment opportunities, difficulty in re-entry to the

¹⁷ *Eurobarometer 19: Gender Roles in the European Community*. 1983.

¹⁸ Hellman, Judith Adler. *Journeys among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities*. New York: Oxford UP (1987), 207.

workforce, incredibly low access to childcare, and the opportunity cost (foregone wages) of having a child. These factors create a particular set of institutional limitations to women in the Italian workforce, and shape the argument that the labor market in Italy is not conducive to having a large number of children.

In Italy, women dominate university-level education, with one in four women having attained university-level higher education, compared to only one in six men.¹⁹ Women represent 59% of all graduates from Italian universities, which would seem to indicate that they are the prime candidates for jobs.²⁰ Although women continue to advance in education, Italian young people in general, and women in particular, face many obstacles within the current labor market structure. Youth unemployment in Italy currently sits at a staggering 37-year high of almost 42% for Italians between ages 15 and 24.²¹ Young people often delay family formation until they are gainfully employed and able to leave home; a feat more easily said than done in the nation that, if one finds a job, pays the lowest starting wages of any European Union country.²² These dire economic realities affect Italian women even more harshly if they choose to have children.

Italian women see a direct correlation between departing the workforce, even under mandated maternity leave, and career stagnation. Italian law mandates that women take five months of maternity leave with 80% salary; however, in 2011 74% of Italian working mothers stated that taking this maternity leave had a negative impact on their

¹⁹ "Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators: ITALY." *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*. Directorate for Education and Skills. 2012.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Silvera, Ian. "Italy's Youth Unemployment at 42% as Jobless Rate Hits 37-Year High." *International Business Times*. 8 Jan. 2014.

²² Shorto, "No Babies."

careers, in contrast to the 54% Europe-wide average.²³ This can be attributed to the fact that pay during maternity leave is not financed by the state or aided by tax revenue: instead employers are required to pay working mothers during maternity leave, and there is evidence that they do so reluctantly.²⁴

Until the practice was outlawed in 2012, employers often mandated that women pre-sign a resignation letter that would become effective if they were to become pregnant.²⁵ Although pregnancy clauses have since been made illegal, nearly 9% of Italian working mothers state they have been fired from a job due to pregnancy.²⁶ Italian women are more hesitant to become mothers while in the workforce because they know they will be perceived as a burden to their employer, and their job could be placed at risk.²⁷ Additionally, Italy also has one of the best retirement plans in the world, with qualified workers making 75-80% of what they earned once retired.²⁸ If women choose to leave the workforce for an extended period of time in order to give birth to and raise one or multiple children, they run the risk of losing the opportunity for wage growth, promotions, and ultimately a larger pension.

As Italian women achieve higher levels of education and jobs become scarce, it is not surprising that working women are increasingly unwilling to forgo their career in order to have children. It is starkly apparent that the economic penalties that working

²³ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Eurobarometer 75.1 EP: Women in the European Union*. 2011.

²⁴ "Family Policy in the US, Japan, Germany, Italy and France: Parental Leave, Child Benefits/Family Allowances, Child Care, Marriage/Cohabitation, and Divorce" | Work-Family. 11 Nov. 2013.

²⁵ Zampano, Giada. "'Mancession' Pushes Italian Women Back Into Workforce." *The Wall Street Journal*. Nov. 2013.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "Family Policy in the US, Japan, Germany, Italy and France: Parental Leave, Child Benefits/Family Allowances, Child Care, Marriage/Cohabitation, and Divorce."

²⁸ Shanahan, Angela. "Italy, Land of Earthquakes and Elderly Nonnas." *An Abysmal Birth Rate Means Italians May Die Out*. 25 July 2009.

mothers face in Italy are life-long. Since the 1970s women have had greater opportunity to serve as independent agents in the Italian economy, and participation in the workforce has emerged as a valid option. However, as shown, many aspects of the labor market have failed to evolve in a way that allows for this as well as family formation. This inflexible labor market structure pushes modern Italian women towards dichotomous choices: family or career. Unlike in the past, modern Italian women frequently choose to devalue the traditional family structure and instead prioritize their career and autonomy.

The particularities of the Italian labor market have influenced the fertility patterns of employed women; however, when fertility reached its lowest point in 1995, female labor force participation rate in Italy was only 35.7%. Italy currently has the second lowest female labor force participation rate of the European Union, second only to Malta, yet it has reached one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. Only 47% of Italian women engage in paid labor, compared to the OECD²⁹ average of 60%.³⁰ This indicates the inability of purely economic factors such as female labor force participation rate and the labor market structure to fully explain the decline in fertility rate across the last four decades in Italy.

In a piece in the *New York Times* in 2008 examining the phenomenon of dramatic fertility decline in southern Italy, Russel Shorto states “The changing role of women, with greater opportunities for education and employment, the advent of modern birth control and a new ability to tailor a lifestyle — has been a tension between forces that, in

²⁹ OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations: Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, South, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States.

³⁰ OECD Better Life Index: Italy." *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*. 2013.

many places, have not been reconciled.”³¹ This echoes the voices of the women writers of *The 27th Hour* who frame the life and lifestyle choices of Italian women as a “negotiation.” Italian women have choices, but often, due to personal and individual advancement coupled with institutional stagnation, these choices become trade-offs. For Italian women even the *myth* of “having it all” does not exist.

MARRIAGE’S STEADY DECLINE

In addition to changing patterns in Italian women’s attitudes and engagement in work outside the home, the past four decades have marked significant changes within Italy’s domestic sphere. A less studied, but equally suggestive trend can be found in the marriage rate, which has declined in tandem with fertility rate in Italy. The average number of marriages per 1,000 citizens has fallen from 7.4 per year in 1970 to 3.8 in 2010.³² The marriage rate’s decline across the same time period as the decline in fertility is significant because marriage is the well established basis of the traditional family structure. In 2010, of all children born in Italy, over 78% were born to married women. Comparatively, the overall European rate for this year was much lower, with only 62% of children born to married parents. More so than other European countries, in Italy the majority of childbearing is contained within the marital union, and the two are deeply related.³³

³¹ Shorto, “No Babies?”

³² These marriage rate statistics include statistics reflecting traditional, heterosexual marriages and do not include statistics for civil unions that are heterosexual or homosexual.

³³ European Union. European Commission. Eurostat. *Live births outside marriage, 1960-2011*.

In “Is Marriage losing its Centrality in Italy?” Alessandro Rosina and Romina Fraboni denote the unique importance of marriage in Italy: “Unlike other western countries, marriage in Italy seems to still have a crucial role at least as far as three fundamental aspects are concerned: leaving the parental home; union formation; and reproduction.”³⁴ Therefore, marriage and reproduction remain crucially linked in the Italian case. In order to have a more complete understanding of the declining fertility rate, it is necessary to investigate the transformation of marriage within the country. Together they reflect the new attitude towards the Italian family, and the rise of new cultural values.

In addition to a decrease in the overall number of marriages, the way that Italians are choosing to celebrate marriages reflects a shifting attitude towards the traditional family structure within the country. Since 1970 there has been a sharp decline in marriages carried out through religious ceremonies and an increase in percentage of those carried out through civil proceedings. Due to the Lateran Accords of 1929 between the Italian government and the Catholic Church (and upheld in 2013), Catholic marriages conducted in Italy are automatically granted civil validity.³⁵ Therefore, if a couple chooses to marry in a Catholic ceremony, the marriage is automatically recognized by the state. Catholic weddings, however, are increasingly unpopular, with 86% of the drop in total marriage rate in Italy able to be attributed to the decline in marriages carried out through religious ceremonies.³⁶ Comparatively, the percentage of civil ceremonies has increased across the same time period in which marriage rate and fertility rate have

³⁴ Rosina, Alessandro, and Romina Fraboni. "Is Marriage Losing Its Centrality in Italy?" *Demographic Research* 11.6 (2004), 151.

³⁵ "The Lateran Treaties: A Step in Vatican Policy." *Foreign Affairs*. 1 July 1929.

³⁶ Italy. Italian National Institute of Statistics. *Marriages in Italy*. 2011.

declined. The percentage of marriages celebrated by civil rite was insignificant until the early years of the 1970s,³⁷ but in 2011 these marriages represented 39% of all unions.³⁸

The decrease in number of marriages, specifically those carried out through religious ceremonies, represents the waning influence of Catholicism on individual behavior, and through this, a rejection of the traditional family model. Although over 80% of the peninsula self-identifies as Catholic, the rise in civic, non-religious ceremonies indicates that church teachings have ever less influence on Italian's behaviors. Rejection of church doctrine, particularly of that related to family formation choices, reflect Italian's shifting values that have led to the decline in fertility rate.

Italians are not only consistently getting married at lower rates, but they are increasingly entering into marital unions later in life. The mean age at first marriage for women in Italy has steadily increased from 23.9 in 1970 to 31 in 2011, and the median age at first marriage has reached 34 for Italian men.³⁹ The rising age at first marriage has had a significant impact on fertility rate because both male and female Italians tend to remain in their parental home until they marry. This increasing in age at first marriage has extended the time of cohabitation between parents and adult children. This results in young Italians transitioning into marriage and parenthood later in life than they did in previous decades.⁴⁰ Leaving the parental home at a late-in-life time causes Italian youth to begin the steps to adulthood, including fertility choices, at a delayed rate. The resulting postponement of childbirth due to later marriage can contribute to low fertility

³⁷ De Rose, Alessandra, Filomena Racioppi, and Anna Laura Zanatta. "Italy: Delayed Adaptation of Social Institutions to Changes in Family Behaviour." *Demographic Research* 19 (2008), 677.

³⁸ *Marriages in Italy*. 2011.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Livi-Bacci, Massimio. "Too Few Children Too Much Family." *Daedalus* 130.3 (2001), 147.

rate for the nation as a whole because it limits window of fertility for women, and it can also reduce their opportunity to have multiple children.⁴¹

Building on this, children born outside of wedlock are the rarity in Italy. In 2010 “births where the mother’s marital status at the time of birth is other than married” accounted for 21.5% of all live births.⁴² In comparison to the 33.8% rate of its Catholic counterpart Ireland and the 38.3% rate of the European Union on average, Italy remains a distinct outlier.⁴³ Single motherhood is a cultural taboo in Italy with only 32.8% of the population approving of bearing a child outside of a stable relationship. In contrast, single motherhood has a 40% rate of acceptance in Ireland and a 46% approval rate in the European Union as a whole.⁴⁴ The low rate of social approval and practice of single motherhood or reproduction outside of marriage works to constrain fertility to couples in a marital union. Therefore, marital status is a large determinant of fertility patterns among Italians. Thus, marriage rate’s decline has played an important role in Italy reaching its incredibly low fertility rate.

The effects of marriage decline and postponement on fertility are clear; however, the *causes* of this decrease in marriage have been influential to fertility decline as well. Factors such as reaching educational goals and procuring stable employment have been cited as motivations for postponing or forgoing marriage altogether. Highly educated women, a rapidly increasing category in Italy, often have a lower economic incentive to enter into a union. Some women place higher value on individualism than on marriage in

⁴¹ Caltabiano, Marcantonio, Maria Castiglioni, and Alessandro Rosina. "Lowest-low Fertility: Signs of a Recovery in Italy?" *Demographic Research* 21.23 (2009), 697.

⁴² European Union. European Commission. Eurostat. *Live births outside marriage, 1960-2011*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *European Values Survey 2008*. 2008.

terms of personal fulfillment.⁴⁵ This complicates the motivation for marriage postponement (or decision not to marry altogether) by demonstrating that education and employment are not simply inconveniences that push back the ideal date to marry, but instead are expressions of women's desire to obtain autonomy. Similar to the increase in female labor force participation rate, marriage decline in Italy is a manifestation of a shift in values towards individual fulfillment and against the traditional family structure, which has led to the decline in fertility rate.

A large-scale survey of women in Italy revealed that over 40% of unmarried, childless women were hesitant to enter into a marital union because they feared losing their freedom. In contrast, only 10% of these women cited financial difficulties as a barrier to marriage, and only 5% replied that they were averse to marriage because of incompatibility with their careers.⁴⁶ Rosina and Fraboni argue that the declining marriage rate reflects Italians' increasingly individualistic desires, asserting that changing marriage patterns can be seen "as an expression of non-conformist attitude, protest against authority, and a way of manifesting one's freedom against conventions."⁴⁷ In contrast to their pre-1970 counterparts, modern Italians are increasingly willing to forgo traditional marriage practices, the foundation of the traditional family structure, in order to obtain and maintain autonomy. The evidence indicates that it is not necessarily the process of obtaining an education or maintaining a career that serves as a barrier to marriage. Instead the importance of obtaining autonomy *through* these processes is of the highest importance, and entry into marriage can threaten this.

⁴⁵ Tanturri, Maria L., and Letizia Mencarini. "Childless or Childfree? Paths to Voluntary Childlessness in Italy." *Population and Development Review* 34.1 (2008), 63.

⁴⁶ Tanturri & Mencarini, "Childless or Childfree? Paths to Voluntary Childlessness in Italy." 67.

⁴⁷ Rosina & Fraboni, "Is Marriage Losing Its Centrality in Italy?" 151.

Although there were important reforms to family law in the decades leading up to rapid fertility decline, the legal infrastructure of marriage in Italy still makes divorce very difficult. Therefore, under a new values system, marriage becomes less desirable, particularly in terms of maintaining personal autonomy. Therefore, it would be logical that this set of circumstances would lead to a decline in marriage rates alongside fertility decline. As explored in Chapter 1, divorce was not obtainable in Italy until 1970. Its legalization marked a triumph of the woman's movement and opened a new array of family choices for the Italian populace. The depletion in risk associated with marriage through the possibility of divorce could have led to an increase in marriages within Italy; however, this has not been the case.

Even though divorce has been legal in Italy for the past four decades, rates of divorce are still comparatively low. Italy's crude divorce rate in 2009 was 0.9, less than half the rate of the Europe-wide average.⁴⁸ Much of this can be accounted for by the difficulty of obtaining a divorce in Italy. The way that the divorce process is structured is meant to reinforce a set of traditional family values within the country.⁴⁹ Even when both parties seek divorce, dissolution of an unhappy union within Italy is particularly lengthy. After a divorce is requested, the couple must appear before the court for a "compulsory attempt to reconcile." From the time of this hearing, there is a mandatory separation period of three years during which the couple is still legally married before a judge can grant the divorce. If one spouse contests the divorce, the process becomes even more arduous and elongated. The attempt to reconcile followed by three years of separation remain in place, but the dissenting party must prove a reason that the divorce should be

⁴⁸ European Union. European Commission. Eurostat. *Crude Divorce Rate*. 2009.

⁴⁹ Todesco, Lorenzo. "A Matter of Number, Age or Marriage? Children and Marital Dissolution in Italy." *Population Research and Policy Review* 30.2 (2011), 320.

granted. The examples of such requirements listed in the statute on divorce are: the other spouse has been sentenced to life or more than 15 years in prison by a definitive judgment; the spouse has been sentenced for killing the child or trying to kill the other spouse or the child; the foreign spouse got the annulment of the marriage abroad or got married again abroad; or one of the spouses has officially changed sex.⁵⁰ The Italian government has ensured individuals must prove extreme circumstances and endure years of bureaucracy in order to free themselves from an unhappy union.

This de-romanticized view of traditional marriage and rising pragmatism is not only expressed through statistical trends, but also in the voices of Italian women. One post on the women's issue blog *The 27th Hour*, "Forever? No. Just as long as you behave yourself" gives an insight into how modern Italian women perceive the constraints of the modern marriage legal structure, and encourages a different form of "insurance" for Italian women. The premise of this post is to promote the benefits of entering into a civil union as opposed to entering into marriage. Civil unions in Italy allow heterosexual couples to enter into a municipal agreement that affords them certain rights as a couple such as allocation of housing and authority in a medical emergency. Unlike marriage, this type of union allows for a party to more easily regain legal independence if a partner begins to treat him or her badly or the partnership is no longer happy. The author denotes the way in which the Italian marriage system intertwines "family vines" and if one party seeks to withdraw, or even if both parties seek to withdraw, the results are rarely even, and are often economically and emotionally unfavorable to women.⁵¹

⁵⁰ European Union. European Commission. European Judicial Network. *Divorce in Italy*.

⁵¹ Biccocchi, Julie. "Per Sempre? No, Solo Finchè Ti Comporterai Bene." (Forever? No, Only if you Behave Yourself) *La 27Ora*. 1 Feb. 2014.

The post goes on to urge Italian women to remember that “economic independence is in fact the only weapon with which women can defend the dignity and self-determination and, above all, with which they can expect to be treated as equals — Even in love, let us not forget.”⁵² This perspective is echoed in another 27th *Hour* post, “Divorce Italian Style. Why it is important (for everyone) that women work” written by a divorce attorney who advises, “if you have a daughter, teach them, yes, to keep the house in order, but spur her above all else to be economically independent... *For a woman, there is no better insurance.*”⁵³ These ominous warnings take on more weight when the author presents that upon becoming divorced, Italian women with young children in Italy have almost a 16% chance of becoming impoverished.⁵⁴ The high propensity for married Italian women to sacrifice employment in order to engage in unpaid labor in the household can have dire economic effects when these women become divorced.⁵⁵

The difficulty of obtaining a divorce, whether contested or by mutual consent, lends explanatory power as to why Italians are marrying at lower rates and entering into marital unions at increasingly older ages. Although citing the difficulty of divorce as a barrier to marriage is a distinctly un-romanticized view of this choice made by Italian young people, when placed alongside other factors that contribute to low marriage rates, a clearer picture of the values of Italians in relation to family formation emerges. The desire to reach a high level of education, career stability, and difficulty in dissolving an unhappy union clearly influence marriage choices. Late departure from parental home

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Silvia Sacchi, Maria. “Divorzio All’italiana. Ecco Perché è Bene (per Tutti) Che Le Donne Lavorino.” (Divorce Italian Style. Why it is important (for everyone) that women work.) *La 27Ora*. 3 Oct. 2013.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

and delays in family formation, particularly in Italy where childbearing is often constrained to marital unions, further contribute to a lower fertility rate.

As the desire and demand for personal autonomy has risen, Italians have increasingly weighed the practicality and permanence of marriage. This is manifested in changing marriage patterns: rising age at first marriage, decline in the percentage of marriages with religious ceremonies, and a decrease in the number of marriages altogether. These shifts indicate a growing devaluation of the traditional family structure. The trend of a rising desire for autonomy and a decrease in importance placed on traditional institutions has manifested itself in new family patterns both in marriage and fertility.

HOUSEWORK AS UNPAID LABOR

As examined, there have been important shifts in both public and domestic behavior of Italians alongside fertility decline. In the cases of female labor force participation rate and marriage rate, the rising desire for autonomy and decline in influence of the concept of the traditional family have been shown to wield influence on choices related to employment, marriage, and fertility. Although attitudes and behaviors in these realms have been evolving across the past four decades, in Italy, gender relations within the family, particularly in terms of household labor, remain persistently antiquated. The burden of unpaid labor tips unfavorably on Italian women, and this asymmetric gender relationship has played a significant role in the decline of fertility rate in Italy.

More so than any other Western European country, a distinct aspect of the 1970s Italian women's movement was the demand for wages for housework. This movement was an effort to address the problem of *doppio lavoro* ("double work") in which all Italian women, even women who engaged in paid labor, continued to shoulder the overwhelming responsibility of home maintenance and family care.⁵⁶ This cornerstone of the traditional family structure had long been recognized as a problem. The high rates of dissatisfaction among Italian (nonworking) housewives indicated by survey data in Chapter 1 reinforce this. Unfortunately, equality of labor in the home has not evolved or equalized at the same rate of paid labor for women. In "Italy's Path to Very Low Fertility," David Kertzer recognizes the way in which "very low fertility in advanced countries today is the outcome of a conflict or inconsistency between high levels of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions and sustained gender inequity in family-oriented social institutions."⁵⁷ The continuance of the uneven burden of unpaid labor placed on women and the problem of *doppio lavoro* lie at the root of housework's influence on fertility in Italy.

In "Italy: Delayed adaptation of social institutions to changes in family behavior," Alessandra De Rose, Filomena Raciopi, and Anna Laura Zanatta lay the foundation for the complexity of the state of gender relations outside of and within the Italian household across the time period in which fertility has declined:

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 higher educational level than men, and when employed they work almost as hard as men, especially

⁵⁶ Birnbaum, Lucia C. *Liberazione Della Donna: Feminism in Italy*. (1986), 133.

⁵⁷ Kertzer, David I., Michael J. White, Laura Bernardi, and Guiseppa Gabrielli. "Italy's Path to Very Low Fertility: The Adequacy of Economic and Second Demographic Transition Theories." *European Journal of Population* 25 (2008), 113.

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.⁵⁹

The mismatch between women's advancement in public spheres such as education and employment is counteracted by ongoing asymmetric gender roles in the home. If a woman wishes to maintain a manageable work-life balance, often the solution is to limit fertility.

As a part of the 2011 Eurobarometer survey "Women in the European Union," when asked what would best enable a balance in private life and working life, 40% of Italians responded with "encouraging a better balance between women and men in the sharing of domestic tasks and care of children and dependents."⁶⁰ Italians chose this response at a rate nearly 10% higher than the European average. They also did so more than the other provided options: a more flexible work atmosphere and easier access to childcare outside of the home. This is particularly demonstrative of the effect that unequal household responsibilities between Italian men and women has played in fertility decline. Lack of a flexible labor market structure and low access to and significant cost of childcare services have been two of the most heavily cited reasons for female labor force participation's influence on fertility decline in Italy. From these survey responses, however, Italian women reveal ways in which inequality in unpaid household labor intertwine with paid labor and fertility. These women demonstrate an awareness of the

⁵⁹ De Rose, Alessandra, Filomena Racioppi, and Anna Laura Zanatta. "Italy: Delayed Adaptation of Social Institutions to Changes in Family Behaviour." *Demographic Research* 19 (2008), 688.

⁶⁰ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *Eurobarometer 75.1 EP Women in the European Union*. 2011.

immensely unequal distribution of responsibilities within households, and recognize that this inequality wields substantial influence on fertility choices.

Housework seems like a relatively straightforward concept; however, before understanding the role that it plays in Italian in fertility decline, it is necessary to address the specific nature of housework and maintenance of the household in Italy. Housework in Italy encompasses daily domestic chores such as cooking meals for the family, doing laundry, and cleaning the home. To a westernized reader these seem like straightforward tasks; however, the style and standard of living in Italy ensure that these are significant undertakings. For example, even in 2013, less than half of households (45.3%) had a dishwasher, meaning that in most Italian households all dishes were hand washed.⁶¹ Additionally, only around 4% of Italian households have a dryer, making laundry a time consuming and labor-intensive process.⁶²

Italy's food culture, although a source of pride for the nation, results in hours of additional work for women daily. Shopping is generally an everyday activity due to Italians' taste for exceptionally fresh food and the small size of household refrigerators. The tradition of cooking from scratch has maintained its strength into the twenty-first century, but shopping for and preparing these meals is a time consuming burden: one that falls disproportionately on women.⁶³

On average, Italian women spend 326 minutes (5.4 hours) per day on domestic work, whereas men, on average, spend only 103 minutes (1.7 hours) participating in

⁶¹ Latza Nadeau, Barbie. "Italy's Statistics Make It Look Like a Third World." *The Daily Beast*. 6 Jan. 2013.

⁶² Lee, Alexander P. "Giving Up the Dryer." *The New York Times*. 25 Oct. 2009.

⁶³ Tindara Addabbo,, Antonella Caiumi, and Anna Maccagen. "Unpaid Work, Well-Being, and the Allocation of Time in Italy." *Gender Inequalities, Households and the Production of Well-being in Modern Europe*. (2010), 136.

unpaid labor daily. This places Italy as having one of the lowest levels of male participation in domestic work, and one of the highest disparities in household responsibilities of all developed countries.⁶⁴

Beyond household maintenance, housework in the Italian case encompasses care for dependents, which can include children as well as the parents of both spouses. In the decades before rapid fertility decline, cohabitation and close relationships between generations were actually favorable towards reproduction because grandparents were able to aid mothers in care for children. With increasing gaps between generations, however, a more common scenario in modern Italy is that instead of being able to lend a hand in childcare, aging parents are in need of care by their offspring during the same time that these individuals (generally women) are responsible for caring for a very young child.⁶⁵

Modern Italian women are finding themselves as a part of a “sandwich generation,” engaging in care on two fronts on top of their already busy lives.⁶⁶ Interdependence between generations and the responsibilities of adult children are particularly pronounced within Italy. This is partially due to adult children’s propensity to remain in the same town (often in the same neighborhood) as their parents, but also due to deeply entrenched cultural norms. As a part of the 2008 European Values Survey, 89% of Italian respondents indicated that it is a child’s responsibility to care for their aging parents.⁶⁷ This mindset may be one of the few things that allows for a livable standard of care for the huge number of graying Italians, who have a life expectancy of

⁶⁴ "OECD Better Life Index: Italy." *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*. 2013.

⁶⁵ Shorto, Russell. "No Babies?" *New York Times*. 29 June 2008.

⁶⁶ Di Novi, Cinzia. "Quanto Costa Occuparsi Dei Genitori Anziani?" (What Does it Cost to Care for Aging Parents?) *La 27Ora*. 09 July 2013.

⁶⁷ European Union. European Commission. Public Opinion Analysis Sector. *European Values Survey 2008*. 2008.

83 years. Italy operates on a welfare model for elderly care, but because of the small percentage of GDP channeled towards this issue, care for aging parents “fundamentally rests on the shoulders of the family, in particular on the daughter.”⁶⁸ The burden of household and dependent care being placed primarily on women has created an environment that is hostile to large families, because women’s time is consistently spread too thin.

Even in an Italian household where the woman does not participate in the paid workforce, and the couple does not have children, the woman will spend almost 6 hours more per week doing unwaged work activities than her husband does in paid and unpaid labor combined. This labor gap only becomes wider and more burdensome on women when they are engaged in labor outside of the home and/or have children. Married women without children who take part in paid labor still spend on average 12 hours more per week on unpaid labor than their husbands. In dual-income households the presence of children increases the amount of time spent by women on unpaid labor by 26%: a substantial rise in an already a significantly unequal division of responsibilities.⁶⁹

Italian husbands generally suffer no loss in available leisure time nor increase in hours devoted to unpaid work when a child is born.⁷⁰ This minimal change in a husband’s domestic undertakings upon fatherhood is supported by the fact that new fathers make up only 14% of Italians seeking parental leave, even though they would be entitled to 3 months away from work making 80% of their salary.⁷¹ This pattern of behavior demonstrates an underlying assumption that women will absorb the extra labor

⁶⁸ Di Novi, "Quanto Costa Occuparsi Dei Genitori Anziani?"

⁶⁹ Addabbo, Caiumi, & Maccagen. "Unpaid Work, Well-Being, and the Allocation of Time in Italy," 135.

⁷⁰ Addabbo, Caiumi, & Maccagen. "Unpaid Work, Well-Being, and the Allocation of Time in Italy," 135.

⁷¹ De Rose, Racioppi, & Zanatta. "Italy: Delayed Adaptation of Social Institutions to Changes in Family Behaviour." 688.

associated with child rearing. Within the family, therefore, Italian women's hesitancy to have children in order to maintain a degree of independence and free time is understandable. Of all of the categories of unpaid labor, the number of children within a marriage is arguably the most easily controlled.

Studies of Italy have shown that the more a woman works (both in paid and unpaid labor) the less likely she is to want more children. Faced with heavy burdens at home and huge amounts of time devoted to unpaid labor, Italian women are hesitant to increase their workload by having children. There is evidence, however, that more egalitarian gender roles within the household create an environment more favorable towards fertility. Households in which unpaid labor is shared more evenly between spouses tend to have more children than homes in which women who do more than seventy-five percent of the housework and child-care.⁷² Such households in Italy, however, are few and far between.

Ideologically, through decades of reinforcement, Italian women believe that it is their responsibility to shoulder housework, just as men believe it is not their role. Social reproduction and household well-being depend on the current, unequal system in which men's ability to participate in the labor force is supplemented by women's work in the domestic sphere, even when women engage in paid labor as well.⁷³ Increasingly, however, women are not willing to burden themselves with additional children in order to comply with what would be seen as traditional reproductive patterns *along* with this responsibility to sustain her home, husband and, potentially, aging parents.⁷⁴ Lowered fertility, therefore, is partially an effect of the persistence of traditional gender roles

⁷² Shorto, "No Babies?"

⁷³ Addabbo, Caiumi, & Maccagen. "Unpaid Work, Well-Being, and the Allocation of Time in Italy." 136

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

within the home and modern Italian women's unwillingness to further increase their share of this unequal burden through childbearing.

Implications

Three factors that are as much about attitudes as economics help to illuminate the societal institutions and individual attitudes that have shaped the choices modern Italian women make. When examined together, conditions surrounding modern female participation in the waged workforce, entry into marriage, and gendered division of unpaid labor reveal shifting cultural values within a an often rigid ideological and institutional infrastructure that, in turn, has led to low fertility in Italy.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

This examination of the decline in fertility rate in Italy has sought to complicate the existing research in the field through examining the particularities of the Italian case. Relationships among marriage, female labor force participation rate, gender relations, and familial responsibilities have been previously examined for their causal relationship to fertility decline, as demonstrated in the introduction. This study, however, has specifically focused on these factors as a manifestation of the same force driving low fertility in Italy, this being: a meaningful shift in cultural values, particularly those of Italian women, in which the traditional family structure is viewed as less favorable within a new field of choices. Instead of presenting the shift in Italian fertility patterns as the natural result of a larger set of driving economic forces, this study sheds light on the way in which Italian individuals, specifically women, have made the choice to have fewer children. Data has been used to reveal the cultural changes at the root of this mindset and the societal structures encourage its continuation.

Chapter 1 presented the time period across which there was significant female-friendly progress in legislation that affected Italian women. For the first time, women had access to legalized divorce, birth control, and abortion. This decade, from the late 1960s to late 1970s, marked the first time in which Italian women were able to control

their own fertility as single women or within marriage. The Italian feminist movement played a large role in helping women to gain these advances within the Italian legal structure, and the demands of the Italian women's movement shed light on to the specific conditions of life as an Italian woman during this time period. Feminist writings and Eurobarometer survey data reveal that women desired to be more active in the paid workforce and that they perceived the Italian family structure led to personal limitations. This was a decade of change that not only represented a manifestation of Italian women's changing desires and expectations, but also served as a catalyst for further changes in societal values. New choices were available to Italian women, and alongside declining fertility, the next four decades would mark shifts in marriage age and rates, women in the paid workforce, and gender relations across the peninsula.

The first factor examined is the one most cited by existing research to have caused fertility decline in Italy: the increase in female labor force participation rate across the same time period as fertility decline. Data was presented to bolster the view that instead of being seen as a cause of fertility decline, increase in female participation in the Italian workforce, similar to fertility decline, represents a rejection of the traditional family structure. Across the past four decades Italian women have reached higher levels of education and have engaged in paid labor at higher rate, but this alone cannot account for fertility decline. With a female labor force participation rate of only 38.2%, Italy is amongst the lowest in all of Europe. Therefore reconciling the argument of this increase in female paid labor with one of the lowest fertility rates in the entire world becomes more complicated. The conditions of the Italian labor market (such as difficulty in re-entry after motherhood and limited access to childcare) present women with a set of

institutionalized challenges if they wish to have a family and a career. Since the decade of change, women have increasingly put their autonomy at the forefront, resulting in fewer children and higher employment. This bolsters the argument that female paid labor participation, like fertility decline, is better categorized as an effect of changing values and choices of the Italian society.

Building on this, the relationship between marriage and fertility and the shifts in both since 1970 were examined. Marriage patterns in Italy have been shifting across the same time period as fertility decline in Italy, and can account for fertility decline while also being demonstrative of new societal values. The transformation of Italian marriage represents a morphing of the Italian family structure. The decline in marriage rate in Italy was shown to influence fertility because childbearing overwhelmingly occurs within marital unions within the country, so fewer marriages leads to fewer children. Additionally, the propensity for Italians to enter into marriage later in life can limit the number of children able to be had by a couple because they have fewer fertile years at their disposal.

The causes of the decline in marriage rate, however, support the assertion that a meaningful shift in cultural values has occurred in Italy. Survey data and blog posts from *The 27th Hour* reveal the way in which delaying marriage or forgoing marriage altogether is a manifestation of women's desire for autonomy. The difficult and lengthy process of obtaining divorce also lends explanatory power to why Italians tend to marry at increasingly older ages. Un-romanticized practicality has been shown in many cases to trump sentimentalized notions of marriage and traditional marriage patterns across the peninsula. The connection between marriage and fertility in Italy has been firmly

established, and it has been pinpointed previously as a cause and effect relationship. This study, however, emphasizes that changing marriage patterns are characteristic of a new set of values in Italy that places the individual at the forefront. Therefore, the trend of modern Italians to postpone or forgo marriage demonstrates that conforming to the traditional family model has become increasingly less important when weighed against autonomy.

Italian women's perspective on marriage as meaning a loss of personal freedom is made more clear through a deeper examination of gender roles within marital unions. The subsequent section, "Housework as Unpaid Labor," reveals the way in which the ideological attitude of Italians towards unpaid labor places an incredibly heavy burden on women. Data reveal that even without children and without engaging in paid labor, the unequal balance of household responsibilities in Italian homes ensures that women have less weekly leisure time than men. Care for dependents, food preparation, laundry, cleaning, shopping, and a wide array of other responsibilities have been shown to fall solely on women. From this deeply entrenched societal practice, women are placed at a crossroads where choosing to engage in paid labor or choosing to have children increases the amount of time they spend on labor by a significant amount. Through this, the idea that forgoing marriage or, within marriage, forgoing children is a choice that stems from increasingly individualized attitudes is made more clear. This is not to say that Italian women are selfish or more demanding of independence than women of other nations, but to emphasize that the specific societal infrastructure of Italy in many instances pushes women into starkly dichotomous choices.

Throughout each factor examined in this study there is evidence of stagnation of female-friendly progress that was initiated in the 1970s. As demonstrated, evolving opinions, desires, and actions of women are mismatched with institutions, ideologies, and deeply entrenched cultural norms that are not evolving at the same rate. Female labor force participation rates are still low, and women still face many barriers to having equal participation alongside men. Roles within marriage remain uneven, there has been little advancement in gendered household responsibilities, and divorce is difficult to obtain.

Increasingly, Italian women wish to engage in paid labor, but recognize the extreme difficulty of having both a job and a child. Ideologically, Italian women believe that they are responsible for all housework, but they are increasingly unwilling to burden themselves with additional children in order to comply with what would be seen as traditional reproductive patterns *along* with this. What Italian women cannot do, or at least what they perceive they cannot do, is to change the ideological and institutional infrastructure of the country. Individual women cannot choose for society to view household division of labor differently. They cannot decide that re-entry to the workforce would/should become easier. They cannot decide that access to childcare will become easier or less expensive. What individual women can do, however, is control their own personal level of education, personal involvement in the workforce, marital status, and number of children.

When examining fertility decline, the difficulties of maintaining career and family, and the particularities of the Italian infrastructure must be acknowledged; however, depicting fertility decline as a trend of a structural nature or the natural effect of some vast process denies individuals agency and voice. Therefore, fertility decline, along with

the shifting factors this study has examined alongside it, do not represent a series of causes and effects. Instead, these shifts reveal changing values among individuals, families, and ultimately society as a whole. This conclusion acknowledges the intricacies of Italian society and reflects the complexities inherent in choices related to family formation.

The findings of this research open up the possibility for additional examination of the cultural causes and implications of fertility decline. In addition to this, further study of the particular societal constraints faced by Italian women could help to discover ways in which implementation of changes in labor market structure or encouragement of equal household responsibilities could help Italy to avoid a population crisis. Research that acknowledges the specific nature of fertility decline in Italy as opposed to a cross-cultural approach is more likely to achieve comprehensive solutions and effective results. Additionally, due to the immediacy of demographic changes in Italy, continual examination of this topic is necessary to stay abreast of developments in Italian society and fertility.

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