

Second Demographic Transition Invades Italy

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Keywords: Second Demographic Transition, Italy, Multipurpose Survey, cohabitation, divorce, education, female labour force participation.

1. Introduction

The underlying idea of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) is that in Western societies, spearheaded by the Nordic ones, the centrality of the family is declining, being replaced by support for more liberal demographic behaviours, such as divorce, cohabitation and non-marital childbearing (Van de Kaa 1987). These new demographic behaviours are viewed as progressive independence of individuals who give growing importance to self-realization and their psychological well-being and to their personal freedom of expression (Van de Kaa 1987). The rise of individualism and secularization has, accordingly, led to shifts in the moral code, enabling major changes in family behaviour (Lesthaeghe & van de Kaa, 1986; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 2006). The source of this ideational change is, however, often elusive (Ruggles, 2012), and has generally been interpreted in terms of diffusion processes of ideas and attitudes (Casterline, 2001). Increasing female economic empowerment is also seen as an important driver for the emergence of new family behaviour (Lesthaeghe 2010), though this view is disputed by some (Oppenheimer 1994).

Italy has for many been viewed as the antidote to those broad demographic trends, a society where the family has remained pivotal, intergenerational co-residence remaining prevalent and where traditional attitudes towards demographic behaviour has prevailed. Italy belongs to the so-called “Southern or Mediterranean model”, characterized by a very low level of social protection and by strong family ties (e.g., Reher, 1998; Viazzo, 2003). These countries are consequently classified as “traditional” in terms of value orientations, a feature not least caused by the prevalent role of the Roman Catholic Church (Caltabiano et al., 2006; Vignoli and Salvini 2012). In light of these characteristics, some have argued that the adoption of new “innovative” family behaviours, as observed in so many other countries, may not materialize in Italy - or at least - not reach the same levels as seen elsewhere (e.g., Reher, 1998; Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003).

Despite those familistic features, however, Italy did stand out as one of the first examples where fertility declined to unprecedented levels, giving rise to the term lowest-low fertility (Kohler et al., 2002), a pattern followed by a tremendous postponement of childbearing. Today the mean age of childbearing among Italian women stands at 32 years and the Total Fertility Rate is 1.34. The contrast with the Nordic countries is startling, where new demographic behaviour is followed by “healthy” fertility rates. However, recent trends suggest that the other Second Demographic Transition indicators, such as cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbearing and divorce, are now changing rapidly, suggesting that young Italians are moving closer to the behaviour of their Nordic counterparts (Pirani and Vignoli 2016; Vignoli et al. 2016). This article offers a general overview about the diffusion of new

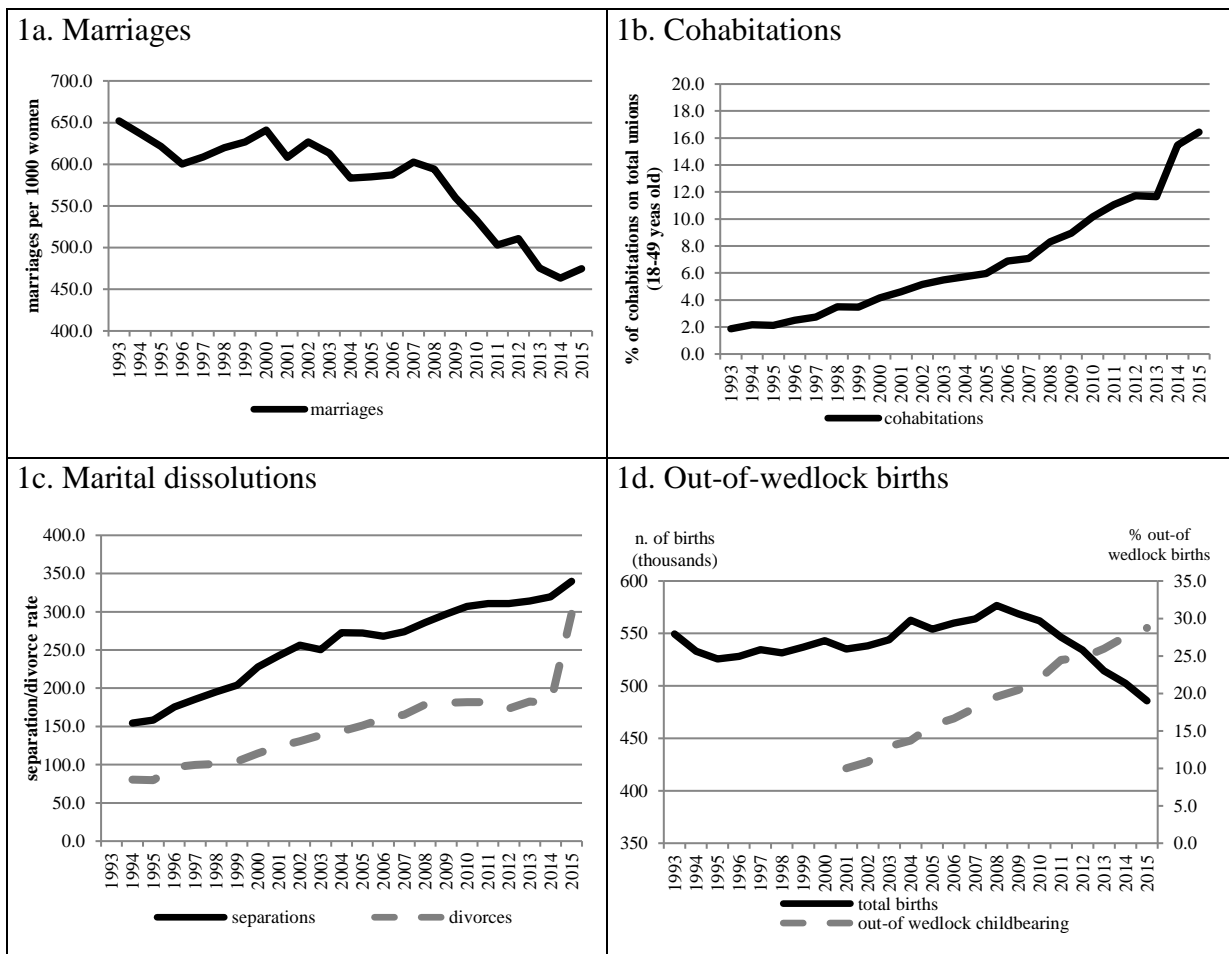
family-related behaviours in Italy, contesting the widely held view that Italy is a homogeneous family-oriented country.

Recent trends in Italy

From the Italian Statistical Office (ISTAT), we document recent trends of family behaviours. Figure 1 shows the trends in main family behaviours of the last 20 years. Although marriage continues to be central and popular among Italian couples, figures show clearly that it is no longer the unique way to form a relationship. The decline began slowly and with an irregular pace in the late 90s, but in 2008 the marriage rate started an unexpected and fast decline, likely intensified by the Great Recession (Figure 1a). From about 600 marriages every 1000 women registered in 2008, we passed to less than 500 in 2015. In addition, during the last two decades the incidence of marriages made through a civil ceremony (among all marriages) increased from less than 20% to about 47% (they were only 2% in early 1970s). A non-religious marriage clearly represents a secularized choice, suggesting that traditional attitudes and norms imposed through the Roman Catholic Church are weakening. Simultaneously, non-marital unions have become popular among young Italians (Figure 1b). Twenty years ago, only 2 out of 100 couples were living in a non-marital union. Today almost 20% of Italians choose this form of family arrangement, at least for a part of their relationship, and this percentage is 6 points higher in the Northern regions of Italy. Whereas the level in 2015 is still modest compared to that of Nordic countries, the rising trend is remarkable. These changes are mirrored also by the percentage of out of wedlock childbearing, which has tripled in the 15 years (Figure 1c). Currently, about one third of children are born in non-marital unions. This increase is even more dramatic considering the constant reduction in the absolute number of new born children (again Figure 1c, left-hand axis). The rising “flexibility” of union patterns are even more visible looking at marriage dissolutions. Whereas about 80 marriages out of 1000 concluded with a divorce at the beginning of 90s, the divorce rate has risen to 297 in 2015 (Figure 1d). This value is somewhat overestimated due to a recent change in the divorce law that has reduced the time needed to file divorce proceedings after the legal separation is made, producing an anticipation of a relevant quota of the divorces which would have been recorded in the subsequent years. Indeed, data concerning legal separation rates illustrate a clear increasing trend in marital disruption during the last 20 years.

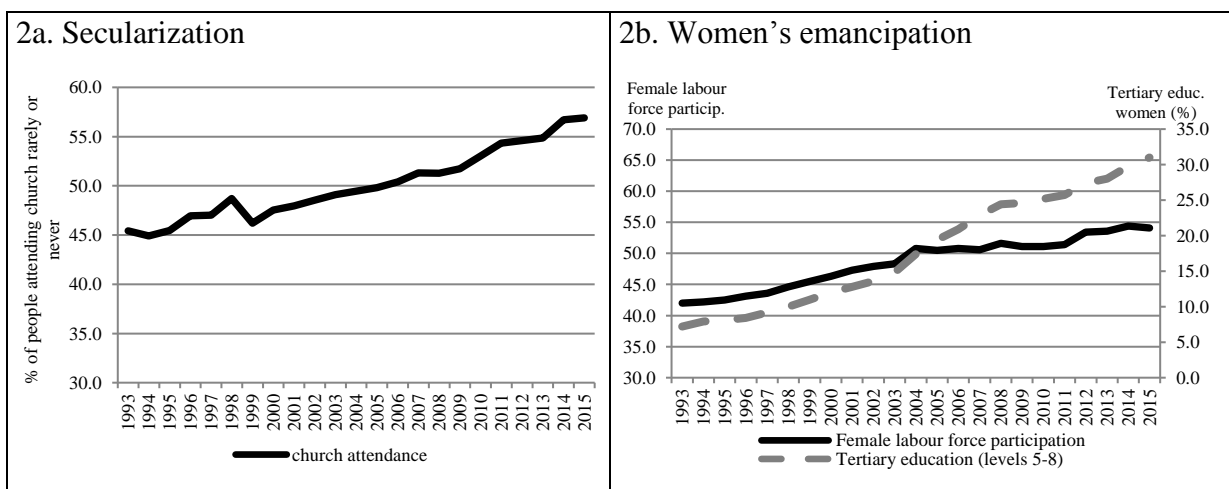
Proponents of the Second Demographic Transition interpret these changes as a pattern of progress driven by processes such as emancipation from traditional social norms. In fact, the changes in family behaviours of Italians are occurring together with deep modifications also in the cultural and economic context. First, even in a Catholic-oriented country like Italy, it is emblematic that secularization (here approximated by the percentage of people attending church rarely or never, Figure 2a) is progressing year on year. In addition, in line with the trend of other European countries, an ever larger share of Italian women pursued higher education (31.7% of women aged 25-34 are currently tertiary educated, relative to the 20% of 10 years ago or the 7% of the early ‘90s, Figure 2b). Finally, also women’s labor market attachment is rising in a remarkable fashion (again Figure 2b, left-hand axis).

Figure 1: Trends in family behaviours: Italy, 1993-2015.



Source: Own processing of National Statistical Office data

Figure 2: Trends in secularization and women's emancipation: Italy, 1993-2015.



Source: Own processing of National Statistical Office data

Data and method

The analysis is based on retrospective data stemming from the 2016 Household Multipurpose Survey of Family and Social Subjects (FSS). The 2016 FSS survey was conducted by Istat, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, with a sample of about 32,000 individuals of all ages. Each individual was randomly selected from municipal registry lists, according to a sampling design aimed at constituting a statistically representative sample of the resident population. The overall response rate of the survey was greater than 80%. The 2016 FSS survey contains a wealth of information about individuals' and families' daily lives, including fertility, partnership, education and employment histories recorded with the precision of the month. This survey offers a unique – and timely – opportunity to explore trends and correlates of the diffusion of new family-related behaviours in Italy.

Preliminary conclusion

Given aggregate data from Istat, there is little doubt that recent trends in demographic behaviour in Italy are dramatic. With the 2016 Household Multipurpose Survey of Family and Social Subjects (FSS), we will be able to document the driving forces behind these trends. We will be able to document age differences in these trends and answer to what extent the younger cohort is the generating force. If this is the case, it is indeed possible that Italy is about to make a leap jump towards a faster and progressive process of the Second Demographic Transition. Other than facilitating insights into the extent these changes are ideational (secularization and weakening of norms), we will also be able to understand structural drivers, which would include changes in women's rates of tertiary education, labour market participation and occupations. At the same time, we will be able to hold these patterns up against the hypothesis of patterns of disadvantage (Perelli-Harris and Gerber, 2011; Perelli-Harris et al, 2010). This is an important aspect, not least because several of the rapid changes in family behaviour took place in the aftermath of the economic recession. As such, it is possible that economic hardship and increased uncertainty, which struck the younger generation particularly hard, is initializing a new path of demographic behaviour consistent with the Second Demographic Transition idea.

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