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***Gender equality as a solution for the Italian demographic winter: a tale of two
neighboring countries.***

Prof. Maria Rita Testa
Supervisor

Prof. Giacomo Sillari
Co-Supervisor

ID 653852
Candidate

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Abstract

Declining fertility rates present critical challenges for societies, such as aging populations, labor shortages, and increased demands on welfare systems. Addressing these demographic issues requires an understanding of how family policies, particularly those related to childcare, interact with cultural norms to shape reproductive choices. This study explores the dynamics between gender norms, institutional support, and fertility rates in France and Italy—two countries with similar contexts but significantly different cultural attitudes toward family roles. The research finds that France’s relatively high fertility rates are supported by comprehensive childcare systems and cultural norms that favor dual-earner households and women’s labor force participation. In contrast, Italy’s low fertility rates are linked to more traditional gender expectations, limited formal childcare options, and a greater reliance on informal care.

Through the frameworks of Gender Systems, Social Role and Gendering Welfare States theories, this study reveals how cultural perceptions of gender roles affect the creation and the success of family policies. The findings indicate that while economic measures such as subsidized childcare can reduce the opportunity costs of childbearing and increase fertility rates, their design and impact is heavily moderated by the societal context. In France, where progressive gender norms support policies that balance work and family life, such interventions have proven effective. Conversely, in Italy, where traditional gender roles and a lack of robust childcare infrastructure prevail, these policies are less present and have limited success. Furthermore, regional disparities within Italy highlight how local cultural attitudes further shape policy effectiveness.

This research underscores that economic incentives must be complemented by efforts to shift societal norms to maximize their impact. By integrating economic and cultural dimensions of gender roles, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of fertility dynamics and emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive policy design. These insights are essential for developing strategies that support both gender equality and demographic issues in Europe.

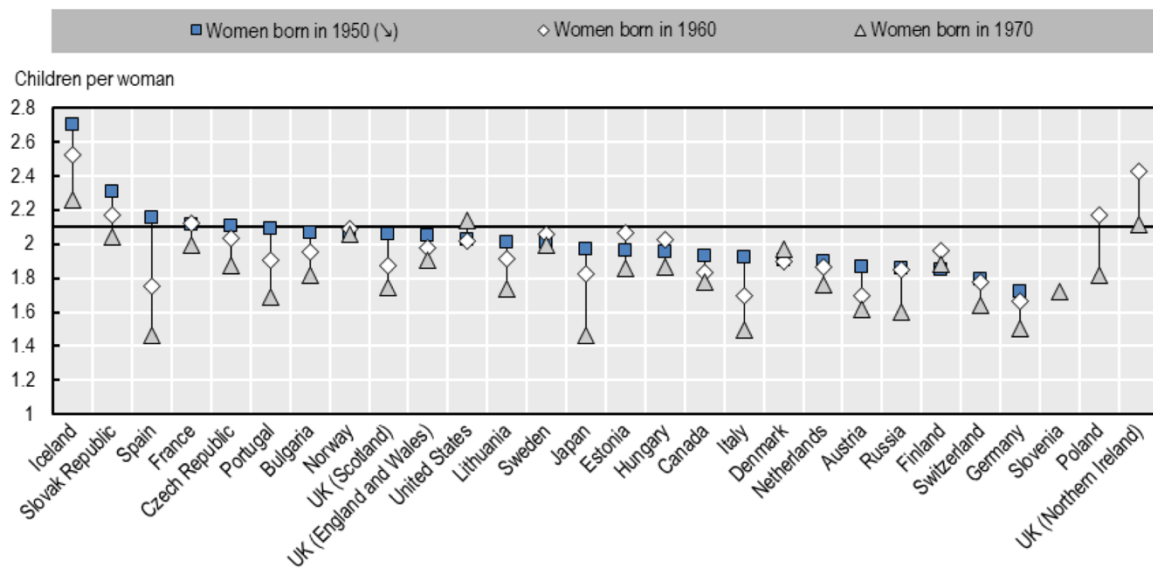
Chapter 1: Introduction

Fertility rates and reproductive choices are central issues in demography with profound implications for society. Declining fertility rates present significant challenges, including an aging population, economic strain, and burdens on social welfare systems. With fewer young people entering the workforce, countries face the risk of labor shortages and decreased productivity. Additionally, an aging population places pressure on healthcare and pension systems as there are fewer contributors to support these services. To address declining fertility rates, policymakers have implemented various strategies, including subsidized childcare programs aimed at alleviating the financial burden of raising children and supporting parents in managing work and family duties.

Childcare is a crucial consideration for parents when deciding whether to have children. The cost of childcare includes both direct expenses, such as daycare fees, and the opportunity cost of reduced income if a parent, typically the mother, stays home to provide care. Subsidized childcare can reduce this financial burden, thereby facilitating female labor force participation, which has been linked to increased fertility rates (Oshio, 2019; Dimai, 2023). Much of the literature supports the notion that policies aimed at reducing the financial burden of parenting can positively influence fertility rates. However, the impact of such policies varies significantly across countries, reflecting differences in cultural contexts and social norms. For instance, countries like France, with relatively high fertility rates, demonstrate more effective outcomes from subsidized childcare policies than countries like Italy, which has among the lowest Total Fertility Rates (TFR) in Europe.

Figure 1 illustrates that France's completed cohort fertility for women born in 1950, 1960, and 1970 remains consistently higher than that of the same cohorts in Italy, with Italy experiencing a much steeper decline across these generations.

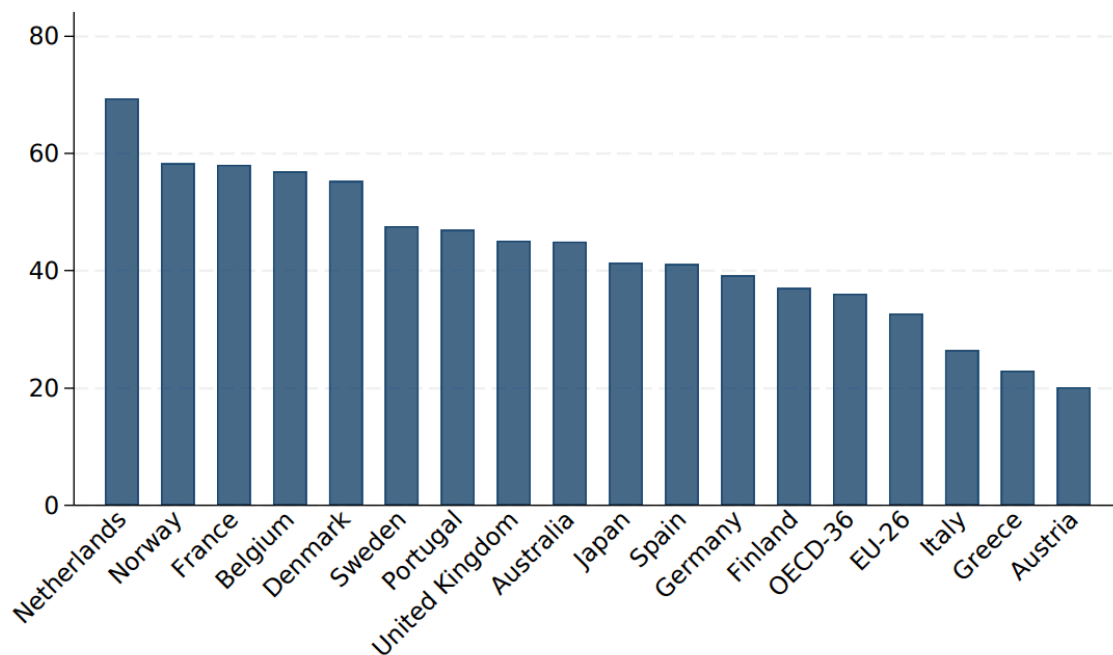
Figure 1. Completed cohort fertility (children per woman) for women born in 1950, 1960, and 1970 or latest available



Source: OECD Family Database (2023), p.3.

Research indicates that the effectiveness of childcare subsidies in influencing fertility rates is closely intertwined with cultural factors. France and Italy provide compelling case studies to examine this relationship, as both countries share similar economic and geographic contexts but have markedly different cultural attitudes towards fertility and family roles, particularly the role of women in the family. Notably, France's higher TFR is accompanied by high childcare services enrollment rates, while Italy's lower TFR correlates with much lower childcare enrollment figures, as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Enrolment in childcare services in selected OECD countries for 0-2 years old



Source: Carta et al. (2023), p. 56.

Understanding the cultural factors that influence the design and impact of these policies is essential for devising tailored interventions to address the complex demographic challenges faced by culturally diverse societies like France and Italy. Therefore, this dissertation is guided by the following research question: ‘How do gender norms and perceptions of women’s roles shape family policy and influence women’s opportunities to have children in these two European countries?’ (**RQ**).

This research aims to contribute to the literature by examining the motivations behind childcare subsidy policies in France and Italy and analyzing how these policies have shifted societal views on mothers’ employment and childcare culture in each country. By focusing on these cultural dimensions, the study seeks to uncover the underlying reasons why different childcare policies yield varying results in similar economic contexts.

The significance of this research lies in addressing a critical gap in demographic and policy studies: the inconsistency in fertility rates and the varying effectiveness of childcare policies across different cultural settings. While economic theories provide a framework for understanding fertility decisions, they often overlook the deep-seated cultural factors that shape

parenting expectations and gender roles. By bridging the gap between economic and cultural explanations, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how and why childcare policies succeed or fail in different cultural contexts. This insight is crucial for designing policies that are not only economically sound but also culturally sensitive, ultimately contributing to more effective strategies for addressing declining fertility rates.

In pursuing this analysis, this paper employs Gender Systems, Social Role and Gendering Welfare States theories to examine how societal norms around gender roles and family responsibilities affect fertility outcomes. These theoretical frameworks help ground the study in established debates on how gender norms and policies influence reproductive choices. Through a comparative case study of France and Italy, the research offers a practical perspective for policymakers seeking to understand fertility trends and develop culturally tailored family policies that promote gender equality and improve work-life balance.

By integrating these perspectives, this dissertation provides a comprehensive framework for understanding fertility dynamics in European countries and offers practical guidance for crafting policies that are both effective and equitable in addressing demographic challenges.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Fertility decisions are complex and influenced by a range of both monetary and non-monetary factors. Brini (2020) categorizes these factors into external influences, such as societal norms and policies, and internal influences, including family values and gender roles. External factors that shape fertility choices include environmental quality and social relationships (De Rose et al., 2018) and the uncertainty caused by economic shocks (Aassve et al., 2021).

With the advancement of women's rights and their increased participation in the workforce, there is a growing need to support women in achieving a better work-life balance, particularly when traditional gender roles as mothers are still expected (Goldin, 2006; McGinn & Oh, 2017). Goldin (2006) discusses how transformations in women's roles over the past century have led to higher educational attainment and greater participation in the labor market. However, this shift has not been matched by an equivalent change in societal expectations or the division of domestic responsibilities, which still largely fall on women. McGinn and Oh (2017) further argue that without supportive structures like flexible work arrangements and accessible childcare, women face significant stress and barriers to career advancement while balancing professional and family roles. Bianchi and Milkie (2010) add that the persistence of traditional expectations creates a "second shift" for working mothers, who are burdened with both professional and household duties. Addressing these disparities is critical for gender equality, enhancing women's overall well-being and career prospects, and potentially improving fertility rates by allowing women to balance work and family life without having to choose between them.

Societal attitudes towards fertility also play a significant role, as highlighted by Mussino (2022). Stable pro-fertility policies, like daycare subsidies, can help counter economic instability and signal societal support for having children, though their impact varies by country. Since the mid-1980s, subsidizing daycare has been linked to higher female labor force participation and increased fertility rates (Oshio, 2019). However, the effectiveness of such policies depends on the welfare system of the country. Research indicates that in familialistic systems like Italy's, the impact of daycare subsidies may be limited (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008), pointing to the need for nuanced policy considerations.

Internal factors influencing fertility decisions include personal preferences, values, norms, and overall life satisfaction (Mussino et al., 2021; Luppi & Mencarini, 2018). Assessing the costs

of parenthood purely in monetary terms overlooks the significant time investment required. Comparative studies of time use in Italy and France show that the time costs of parenthood are higher in Italy, especially for women, despite Italy's lower Total Fertility Rate (TFR) compared to France (Pailhé et al., 2019; Zannella & De Rose, 2019). In this context, childcare subsidies are essential in alleviating both financial and time pressures on families. Asdente (2023) explores the complex relationship between female education, female labor force participation (FLFP), and fertility rates, concluding that higher education and FLFP can positively impact fertility intentions in countries with gender-equitable policies. Promoting female education and labor force participation is seen as key to addressing Europe's demographic challenges.

Kreyenfeld (2002) introduces the issue of self-selection, suggesting that families who recently had children often have favorable characteristics for parenthood, such as stability in relationships, finances, and housing. Therefore, while childcare subsidies positively affect fertility, non-monetary factors like female employment play a larger role. This suggests that policies focusing solely on daycare costs may have limited effects, emphasizing the need to address broader socio-economic and cultural factors that influence family planning (Dimai, 2023).

The theory behind the fertility effects of subsidized childcare includes concepts rooted in "work-family balance" and economic theories of fertility. Subsidized childcare aims to lower the opportunity cost of childbearing by reducing income loss due to decreased labor force participation, particularly for women, who often bear the primary responsibility for childcare. Additionally, accessible and affordable childcare facilities can increase labor force participation for both parents, boosting household income and economic growth. By easing the financial burden of childcare, such policies may encourage individuals or couples to have more children or start their families earlier.

In societies where dual-earner families are the norm, subsidized childcare supports family structures by enabling both parents to pursue careers while ensuring quality care and early education for their children. These policies interact with social norms and expectations around gender roles and family responsibilities, influencing fertility decisions. Scholars like Esping-Andersen (2019), Becker (1993), Gauthier (2007), and Hakim (2007) have examined how policy interventions shape fertility behaviors within different socio-cultural contexts, offering insights from economics, sociology, and demography.

The literature indicates that while policies aimed at reducing the financial burden of parenting can positively influence fertility rates, their impact is often limited (Dimai, 2023). Reducing the conflict between labor force participation and childbearing, alongside improvements in childcare accessibility, quality, and affordability, could raise fertility rates (Rindfuss & Brewster, 1996). However, how perceptions of gender roles shape the effectiveness of such policies is crucial to understand.

Theories like Gender Systems Theory and Social Role Theory provide a comprehensive understanding of how societal norms and structures influence fertility outcomes. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) and McDonald (2000) argue that in societies with supportive gender equality policies—such as parental leave and subsidized childcare—fertility rates are often higher due to reduced conflict between career and family life for women. Conversely, in societies with traditional gender roles and limited institutional support, women often face tough choices between career and family, resulting in lower fertility rates.

Social Role Theory, as discussed by Eagly and Wood (1999), suggests that societal expectations around gender roles shape fertility choices. This theory explains how policies that favor maternity leave over paternity leave reinforce traditional gender roles, affecting women's career opportunities and fertility decisions. Hilgeman and Butts (2009) further argue that welfare regimes supporting gender role fluidity, such as those with paternity leave and subsidized childcare, can promote shared parenting and potentially increase fertility rates.

In line with these theories, Menniti et al. (2015) provide evidence that social norms are more influential in smaller towns, where traditional behaviors persist and women invest more time in family work than men. This aligns with the “cultural hypothesis,” which suggests that social norms are shaped by the presence of others and that the population size of a place of residence is influential (Menniti et al., 2015).

On the other hand, Saraceno (2015) critically examines the social investment approach to welfare policy from a gender perspective, arguing that it only partially addresses gender issues. While it promotes women's labor market participation and public investment in early childhood education, it remains tied to a “universal breadwinner” model that prioritizes paid work and fails to promote a balanced sharing of paid work and caregiving between men and women. Saraceno calls for a more holistic model that values both paid work and unpaid care, addressing deeper gender imbalances in both the labor market and family life.

These studies collectively highlight that both structural support and cultural attitudes significantly shape fertility patterns, underscoring the impact of gender norms in both private and public spheres. However, a gap in the literature exists: many comparative case studies (Matysiak & Vignoli 2008; Neyer & Andersson, 2008; Del Boca et al., 2008) focus on contrasting Northern and Southern European countries, where distinct contexts limit the transferability of policy insights. This research addresses this gap by examining two similar European countries, offering a more practical perspective for policymakers and enhancing the understanding of fertility trends applicable to a broader range of European contexts.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks are essential for understanding the multifaceted factors influencing fertility decisions. While rational choice theories, such as the new home economics theory, focus on fertility decisions as rational processes where parents weigh economic costs, benefits, and individual preferences (Gauthier, 2007), they may not capture the full complexity of such decisions. For example, according to neoclassical economic theory, fertility decisions are driven by a utility-maximizing process where policies that lower childcare costs or increase income are expected to encourage higher fertility rates (Becker, 1993; Cigno, 1991).

However, this economic approach does not fully explain the varying impact of different policies across different countries but with similar economic contexts. Gender system theory and social role theory provide a broader perspective by highlighting how social norms, gender roles and expectations influence fertility decisions beyond the mere economic aspect, and how policies can help fill the gender gap, thus creating a more favorable environment for childbearing.

3.1 Gender Systems Theory

Gender Systems Theory offers a framework for understanding how societal norms and institutional structures shape gender roles, affecting behaviors, expectations, and demographic outcomes such as fertility decisions. The theory argues that gender is not just an individual identity or biological characteristic, but a deeply embedded social structure that organizes power relations and access to resources (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). It focuses on how macro-level institutional arrangements, including labor markets, family policies, and welfare regimes, either reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles.

This theory is particularly useful in explaining fertility rate differences across societies with similar economic conditions. It emphasizes the interaction between gender norms and state support, suggesting that where policies promote gender equality—such as paid parental leave, state-funded childcare, and employment protections—women face fewer obstacles in balancing work and family life (McDonald, 2000). These measures ease the conflict between career and childbearing, creating conditions that sustain or even encourage higher fertility rates.

In contrast, societies with limited institutional support and persistent traditional gender norms create significant difficulties for women in reconciling employment and motherhood. Without adequate childcare, flexible work arrangements, or policies promoting shared parenting, the burden of unpaid domestic labor disproportionately falls on women, contributing to lower fertility rates. Such contexts demonstrate how restrictive gender norms act as structural barriers to gender equality and demographic sustainability.

McDonald (2000) argues that fertility rates decline in societies where gender parity is only partially achieved, such as when women gain access to education and employment but family and labor policies have not adapted to support their dual roles. This creates a ‘gender equity paradox’, where labor market advances are not matched by equivalent family policy changes, leading to declining fertility. This paradox is evident in rigid labor markets that penalize career interruptions due to motherhood, and informal childcare systems that remain the primary support.

Gender Systems Theory also highlights cultural and ideological shifts in gender relations. Even when formal policies support gender equality, deep-seated cultural expectations may pressure women to prioritize caregiving over career ambitions. The persistence of models like the male-breadwinner paradigm can subtly discourage dual-earner households and reinforce gendered divisions of labor, negatively affecting fertility rates.

By combining structural and cultural perspectives, Gender Systems Theory offers a comprehensive view of how gender norms and institutional arrangements shape fertility trends. It underscores that policy changes alone may not suffice; cultural transformations are also necessary to achieve true gender equality in both domestic and professional spheres.

3.2 Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory, developed by Eagly and Wood (1999), explores how societal expectations shape gender roles and behaviors. The theory posits that men and women internalize culturally prescribed roles based on historical labor divisions, which influence their aspirations, choices, and interactions. In the context of fertility and family policies, Social Role Theory explains how deeply embedded gender and caregiving norms shape reproductive behavior and labor market participation.

At its core, the theory argues that gender roles are social constructs rather than reflections of biological differences, shaped by historical divisions of labor. Traditional gender roles have positioned men as primary economic providers and women as caregivers, a division that still influences contemporary work-family dynamics. Despite increased female participation in education and the labor market, societal expectations around caregiving persist in some contexts, influencing fertility decisions and employment patterns.

Social Role Theory suggests that state policies can either reinforce or challenge these traditional roles. Maternity leave, for instance, while crucial for supporting working mothers, may reinforce the idea that child-rearing is a woman's responsibility if not accompanied by paternity leave (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Policies encouraging fathers' participation in childcare, such as non-transferable paternity leave, can help redistribute household responsibilities, reducing the gendered burden of child-rearing and mitigating work-family conflicts.

In societies with dominant traditional gender roles, women may feel social pressure to prioritize family over career, leading to lower labor force participation after childbirth. This is especially evident where part-time work is the primary option for mothers, reinforcing the expectation that women adjust their work lives to caregiving. In more egalitarian societies, where both men and women are expected to participate in both labor and domestic spheres, fertility rates tend to be higher as the burden of work and family life is more evenly distributed (Hilgeman & Butts, 2009).

Social Role Theory also emphasizes the role of symbolic and psychological factors in fertility decisions. Societal norms dictate gender roles and influence individual self-concept and aspirations. When policies signal that motherhood and professional success are incompatible, women may internalize these messages and align their fertility decisions with societal expectations rather than personal preferences. This is particularly evident in cultures where career advancement depends on uninterrupted labor market participation, discouraging women from taking breaks for child-rearing.

Thus, Social Role Theory underscores the importance of institutional policies and cultural expectations in shaping fertility trends. Achieving gender equality in family and labor market participation requires not only policy interventions but also broader shifts in societal norms.

When caregiving is seen as a shared responsibility—both at the household level and in policy design—fertility rates are more likely to stabilize.

3.3 Gendering Welfare States

The theory of Gendering Welfare States examines how welfare state structures and policies are gendered, influencing and being influenced by the distinct roles assigned to men and women. It argues that welfare states are not neutral; they play a critical role in either perpetuating or challenging gender inequalities.

Diane Sainsbury's Gendering Welfare States advocates for incorporating gender as a fundamental category in welfare state research, arguing that policies often affect men and women differently, particularly in areas such as social rights, employment, and caregiving (Sainsbury, 1994). Ann Shola Orloff builds on this by highlighting the mutual relationship between systems of social provision and gender relations. She examines how welfare states can either reinforce traditional gender roles or promote gender equality through policies that support working mothers, such as childcare services and parental leave (Orloff, 2009).

A central theme in this theory is the recognition of women's dual roles as both workers and caregivers. "Women-friendly" welfare states implement policies that support women's participation in the labor market while recognizing their caregiving responsibilities, such as subsidized childcare and flexible working hours. In countries with a deeply-rooted culture of the gendered division of labor, these measures aim to reduce gender disparities in both the public and private spheres.

The theory critiques the male-breadwinner model, which assumes a traditional family structure with a male provider and female homemaker. This model often marginalizes women in the labor market and reinforces economic dependence. Orloff advocates for policies that support diverse family forms, rethinking social insurance, tax policies, and employment regulations to promote women's economic autonomy.

In summary, the "Gendering Welfare States" theory calls for a gender-sensitive re-examination of welfare state structures, emphasizing the need for policies that address the distinct challenges faced by men and women. By doing so, welfare states can move towards genuine gender

equality, both in the labor market and within the household. France's welfare state seems to find inspiration in these concepts, as further analysed in chapter 5.

3.4 Conclusion

By incorporating Gender Systems Theory, Social Role Theory, and the theory of Gendered Welfare States, this research is grounded in established theoretical frameworks that explore how gender norms and policies shape fertility decisions. These theories offer a comprehensive understanding of how societal norms—both structural and cultural—affect reproductive behavior and demographic trends. They provide insight into the evolving gender norms in different societies and how institutional policies either reinforce or challenge these norms, influencing fertility rates.

This thesis investigates the influence of gender norms and institutional policies on fertility rates, analyzing how varying levels of gender equity and support systems affect reproductive choices through work-life balance and childcare responsibilities across different cultural contexts. This research thus hypothesizes the following:

HP: It is expected that in countries with higher Total Fertility Rates (TFR), such as France, gender norms and perceptions of women's roles are more egalitarian, leading to family policies that better support women's rights, employment, and access to childcare. In contrast, in countries with lower TFR, like Italy, more traditional gender norms prevail, resulting in family policies that provide less support for gender equality and limit women's opportunities to balance work and family life, thereby reducing their opportunities to have children.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Research Design

France and Italy share several similarities as adjacent Western European nations with languages and cultures derived from Latin roots. These countries have comparable cultural traditions, social identities, lifestyles, and religious beliefs (Hettinger, 2008). Both nations are rooted in a “familialism” model, which emphasizes the role of the family in social welfare, reflecting Mediterranean welfare characteristics (Flaquer, 2000). The selection of these two countries aims to overcome the conventional comparison between Northern and Southern European countries, which often differ on many dimensions, to provide a more focused analysis. By choosing similar neighboring countries, this study can derive more concrete and applicable implications for policymakers.

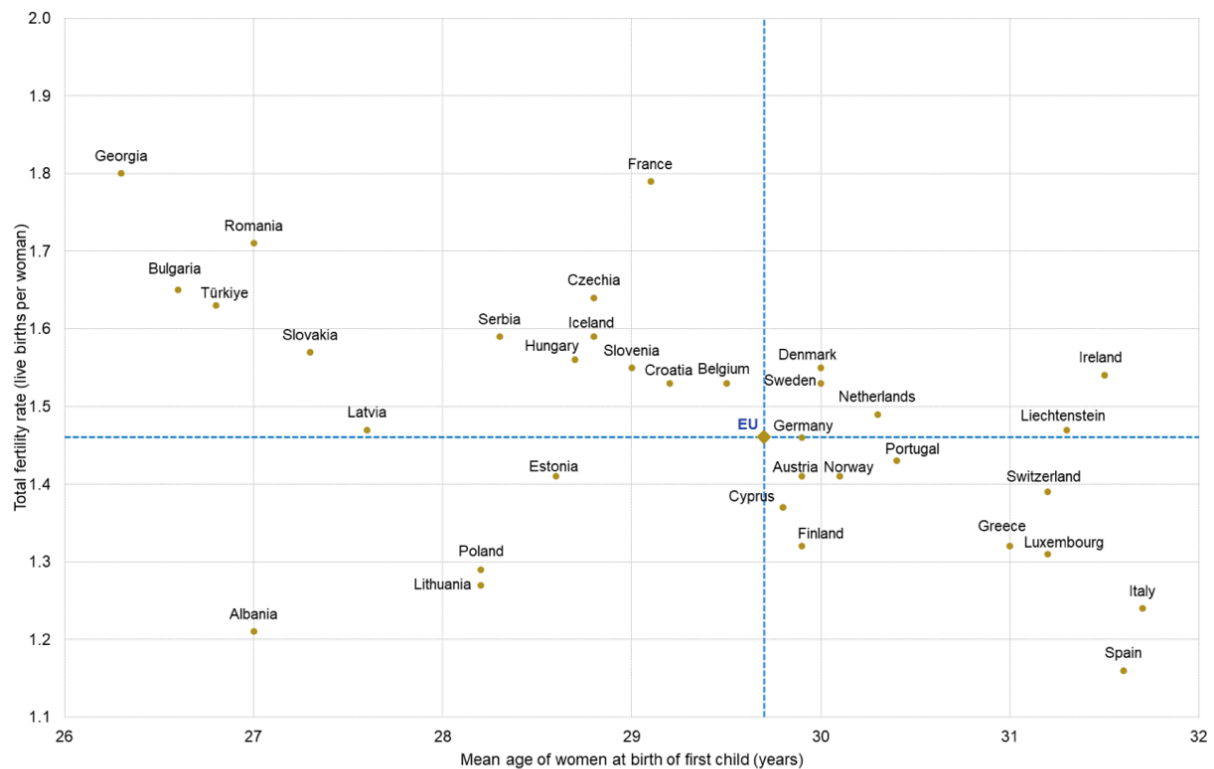
Moreover, due to their proximity, France and Italy have shared numerous historical experiences (Hettinger, 2008). As members of the European Union, they share a common market, laws, and currency, and participate in a borderless area. Both countries were also signatories of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, making them among the earliest members of the future European Union (Publications Office of the European Union, 2017). These shared characteristics provide a controlled backdrop against which to examine their differing fertility trends.

However, despite these similarities, the Total Fertility Rates (TFRs) of France and Italy differ significantly. France stands out as one of the European countries with the highest TFRs, albeit declining, positioned around 1.8 live births per woman at an average age of slightly above 29 years, as shown in Fig 3. Italy, on the other hand, is closer to Spain, with a TFR slightly above 1.2 and a mean age of first childbirth for women nearing 32 years. To understand these differences, this case study analyzes how differing cultural norms, gender perceptions, female employment patterns, and childcare provisions influence fertility choices through the lenses of the theoretical framework. Perceptions of gender roles are especially relevant as they not only shape the reception of policies, but the policies themselves.

These theoretical frameworks help explain why, despite similar cultural and historical contexts, the two countries exhibit divergent fertility rates. Thus, the case study serves as evidence of how social norms, gender roles, and institutional support systems interact to shape

demographic outcomes, providing valuable insights for policymakers looking to address fertility trends.

Figure 3. Total fertility rate and the mean age of women at birth of first child, 2022



Note: the axes do not start at 0.

Source: Eurostat (2024).

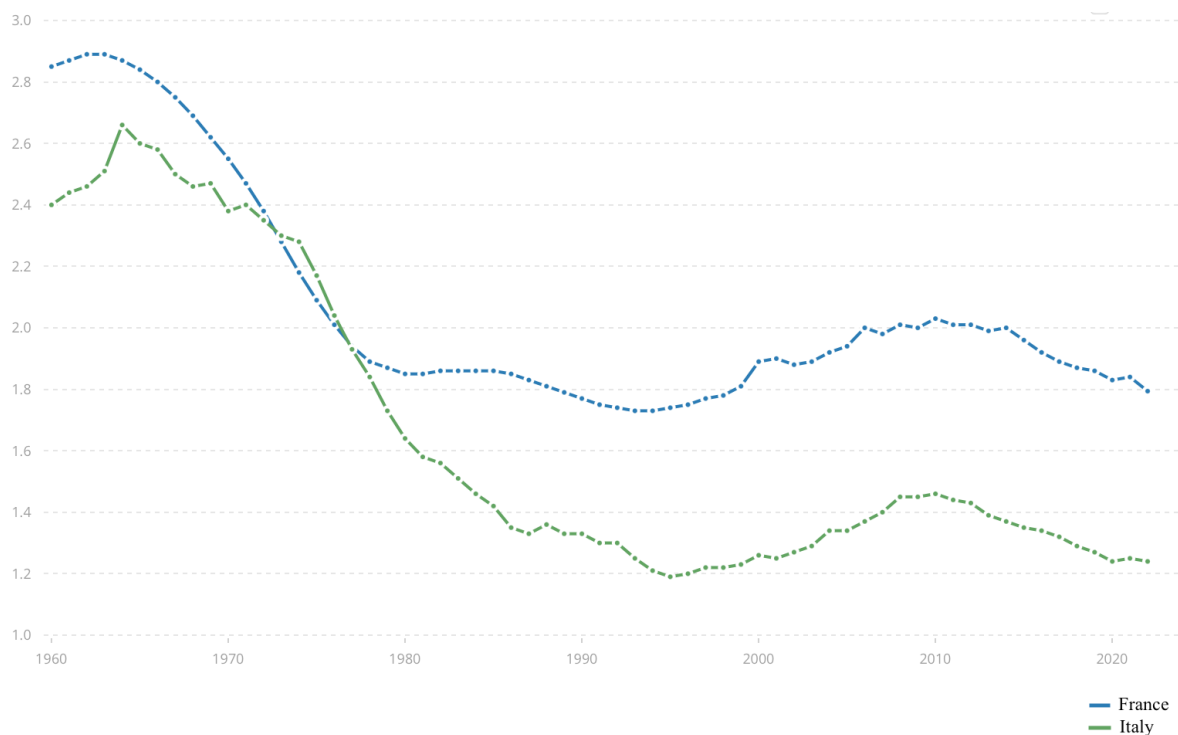
4.2 Data Collection and Sources

Data regarding total fertility rates, childcare provision and employment rates were gathered from official websites of the European Union such as Eurostat and the European Institute for Gender Equality, international databases such as the OECD, along with country-specific information channels. For France, INSEE, or Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (the National institute of statistics and economic studies), Ined, or Institut national d'études démographiques (French Institute for Demographic Studies), and official websites of the French Republic (Service-Public.fr). For Italy, ISTAT (the Italian National Institute of Statistics) and official websites of the Italian government (governo.it) and ministries such as the ministry of Work and Social Policy (lavoro.gov.it).

Secondary data was gathered from previous academic publications. Qualitative information regarding cultural attitudes towards women and family of the two countries was entirely gathered from previous published academic research.

Most of the data used for the purposes of this research concerns the most recent years available, as the current decline in fertility rates across Western countries stands as one of the priorities of political agendas. As shown in Fig. 4, in 1972-1972 the trends of France and Italy cross paths for one first time, to then converge once again between 1976 and 1977. After 1977, the trends take different paths. Albeit experiencing similar trends due to the similar historical experiences of the two neighboring countries throughout the years (both before and after the 1970s), Italy's trend experienced a steeper decline than that of France, resulting this country's fertility trends remaining constantly below the French ones.

Figure 4. Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – France, Italy; 1960-2022



Source: United Nations Population Division (2024).

To understand the divergent paths of France and Italy's fertility and employment trends after 1976-1977, it is essential to examine the policy changes and welfare state transformations that occurred in France during this period.

In the late 1970s, France faced a labor shortage and a rising demand for skilled female workers in sectors such as education, healthcare, and administration. To support women's participation in the workforce, the government established community-funded daycare centers in response to growing demands for expanded childcare options. These demands were driven by the women's movement advocating for labor equality, as well as by major trade unions. This period marked a shift in family policies from unpaid private care to publicly funded childcare, promoting a "working mother" model (Letablier, 2003). A significant policy change was the elimination of the "Single Salary Allowance," which had previously encouraged women to stay at home. Its removal signaled a new direction in supporting mothers' employment (Letablier, 2003).

Building on these early changes, the early 1980s saw further expansion of childcare facilities due to increased funding from local authorities and the National Family Allowance Fund (CNAF). This expansion enabled more women to enter the workforce by providing accessible childcare options, reinforcing the shift towards a dual-income family model. As a result, the availability of childcare and supportive policies contributed to a relatively stable fertility rate of around 1.80 children per woman from 1975 onward. These developments underscore the significant impact of government policy on both employment and fertility trends in France, contrasting sharply with Italy's trajectory during the same period (Thevenon, 2016).

4.3 Analytical Framework

This research employs a comparative case study method to analyze how cultural perceptions of women's roles influence female employment and childcare provision in each country. The study anticipates that, in France, a combination of less traditional views on women's roles—such as the societal acceptance and support for working mothers and the dual-earner family model—will lead to more favorable family policies, particularly with increased childcare provision. However, this trend is not necessarily driven by feminist ideology. Instead, the government's support often arises from the expectation that women should balance both caregiving and professional responsibilities (Saraceno, 2015).

It must however be noted that France's fertility rates, although still higher than those of Italy, are declining as well. Despite this, the reduction of fertility rates is a general trend affecting all Western countries. This research puts aside this general trend to offer one possible solution to the fertility crisis in Italy: in a country with so little social norms and government policies to

support mothers, thinking about the French example can really make a change. Therefore, this paper does not seek to offer a solution for the general decline in fertility rates in different countries (including France), but rather tries to *fill the gap* between countries such as Italy and countries such as France.

4.4 Limitations and alternative explanations

While this study focuses on gender perceptions and their effects on policy and fertility choices in France and Italy, it is important to acknowledge that this is just one aspect of a multifaceted issue. The research is grounded in theories such as Gender Systems Theory and Social Role Theory, and it draws on existing literature and empirical evidence to build its arguments, focusing on the two case studies in order to support its main argument. However, other factors also influence fertility decisions, such as economic conditions and the cost of living crisis, psychological impacts of crises like COVID-19, the evolving labor and housing markets. However, these factors are generally common to neighboring countries and may be considered amongst the reasons for the general fall in fertility rates which is also hitting France. Despite this, as abovementioned, the focus of this paper is on how similar countries made different policies, stemming from two different cultures and perceptions of gender roles: it is therefore significant to look at the differences between the two countries (therefore look vertically) rather than the trends over time of each (therefore look horizontally) (please refer to Fig. 4).

Moreover, despite similarities in the two countries, it is undeniable that they present certain differences. A more comprehensive analysis would incorporate these broader socio-economic and environmental variables to provide a fuller picture of fertility trends. Future research might expand on these areas to consider how diminishing generational wealth and shifting economic realities shape people's decisions regarding family planning and lifestyle choices in each country. Further indicators that may affect fertility rates are analyzed in chapter 7.

Chapter 5. Case study: France

France distinguishes itself from most other European countries thanks to its relatively high and stable fertility rates, leading European charts since the early 2000s (Chemin, 2015; and Bamat, 2013). Presently, France boasts the highest fertility rate in Europe, with a Total Fertility Rate of around 1.79 live births per woman, notably surpassing the European average of roughly 1.46 children per woman (Eurostat, 2022).

5.1 A progressive culture within family policy

France operates a system of explicit and institutionalized family policy that involves the legal recognition of the family as a social institution playing a major role in the maintenance of social cohesion (Letablier, 2003). Children are viewed as integral to the nation - they are regarded as a 'common good' and a source of national wealth - which in turn mandates reciprocal obligations from the state. Therefore, childcare has been positioned as a state responsibility and a matter of public concern, gradually emerging as a focal point within family policy. This has engendered widespread public acceptance of state involvement in family matters, prompting the development of proactive family policies (Chemin, 2015).

Since the 1990s, France has actively encouraged mothers to engage in employment and remain in the workforce, making childcare support a priority on the political agenda. This emphasis extends beyond the financial aspects of raising children to encompass broader values, including educational norms for children, early socialization, the significance of paid work and family life, and gender equality (Letablier, 2003). Consequently, the concept of early and collective socialization is widely embraced in France, with public opinion supporting the idea of children being cared for by individuals other than their parents while the parents are at work (Letablier, 2003; and Fagnani, 2006).

The strong state involvement in family policy aligns with Gendering Welfare States Theory: France's model, unlike more familialistic welfare states such as Italy, actively promotes policies that support dual-earner families, reducing gender inequality in employment and caregiving responsibilities.

Furthermore, France has a well-established and clear family policy managed by government agencies and documented in official annual reports. Legally, the family is recognized as a key institution essential for maintaining social cohesion; and the designation of a Minister (Ministre Délégué chargé de l'Enfance, de la Jeunesse et des Familles) dedicated to family matters

underscores the high priority given to this area (Fagnani, 2006). Contrary to societal norms in some other countries, working women in France are not stigmatized as 'bad mothers' (Chemin, 2015); especially because in France the evolving role of women and the values of autonomy and equality have taken on greater significance compared to the traditional values of motherhood since the 1980s (Letablier, 2003). This shift can be understood through Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which suggests that changing economic and policy conditions influence gender norms. In France, policies that normalize women's workforce participation have contributed to the widespread acceptance of dual-earner households, reshaping traditional gender roles.

By embracing flexible models and implementing a wide array of childcare arrangements to facilitate the balance between work and family life, France has successfully boosted the employment rate of mothers, thereby positively influencing fertility decisions (Chemin, 2015; and Fagnani, 2006). This policy approach illustrates how state intervention can shape gender roles in a way that diverges from traditional caregiving expectations, fostering a more gender-equal division of labor.

5.2 Government policies for female and mothers' employment

Since the 1970s, France has significantly reformed its family policies to accommodate changing family dynamics and the increasing number of working mothers, demonstrating a long-standing commitment to ensuring a fair work-life balance for women. One of the earliest changes was the gradual reduction and eventual elimination of the "Single Salary Allowance" by 1978. This policy, also known as the "Housewife's Allowance," was originally intended to encourage women to remain full-time mothers and homemakers, thereby enhancing child well-being and boosting fertility rates. As a result, maternal participation in the workforce remained limited until the mid-1960s (Letablier, 2003).

In response to a severe labor shortage and growing demand for qualified female workers in sectors like education, healthcare, social services, administration, and banking in the late 1970s, France introduced community-funded nurseries to support women's workforce participation. This shift was driven by increased demands from couples for expanded public childcare services and social support. These demands were further amplified by the women's movement, which advocated for equality in the labor market, and by major trade unions, creating momentum for significant changes in family policy. As a result, France began to adopt the

"working mother" model, transitioning from unpaid private caregiving to publicly funded childcare (Letablier, 2003).

The early 1980s marked a significant expansion of these efforts, particularly under Socialist administrations that increased funding from local authorities and the National Family Allowance Fund (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales, CNAF) for the construction of nurseries. This funding boost enabled many mothers with young children to enter the workforce, leading to substantial growth in childcare capacity. From 1981 to 1996, the number of childcare places in nurseries increased by an average of 6,400 per year, reaching 201,000 by 1999. By 2002, approximately 9% of children under three were enrolled in public nurseries, while others were cared for by their mothers, registered childminders, or relatives (Letablier, 2003). The consistent increase in childcare availability has continued into recent years, reaching 430,000 places in 2023 and enabling 57.2% of children aged 0 to 3 to attend nurseries (European Commission, 2022).

The expansion of childcare services has not only facilitated women's entry into the workforce but also positively influenced fertility rates. This policy approach helps explain why France has maintained relatively high fertility rates among cohorts born since the 1950s (Thevenon, 2016). From 1975 onward, the total fertility rate has remained relatively stable at around 1.80 children per woman (Thevenon, 2016).

As a result of these policies, more mothers have joined the workforce, making France one of the European countries with the highest employment rates for women with children. In 2022, 86.5% of women aged 25-49 with one child were employed, and 86.7% of those with two children were also in the workforce (INSEE Recensements de la population, 2022). Notably, the employment rate for women without children was only slightly higher, at 88.2% (INSEE Recensements de la population, 2022). With these advancements in family structures and gender roles, France now ranks among the European countries with the highest proportion of dual-earner families (Letablier, 2003).

Overall, France's approach to family policy reflects a long-standing commitment to supporting both children's well-being and mothers' participation in the workforce through comprehensive, interventionist policies. This commitment is particularly evident in the widespread use of government-financed early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities, such as crèches.

By providing robust childcare options, France has created an environment where mothers can remain active in the labor market, a central element of family policy since the 1970s.

5.3 The Childcare System

France's extensive and enduring family policies significantly contribute to maintaining fertility stability, though quantifying their exact impact remains challenging. The country offers a wide range of policy measures for families regardless of marital status, number of children, or parental employment. Among these, childcare services are a critical factor influencing fertility rates. France's childcare policies include mandatory public schooling from age three and various support mechanisms for younger children. Substantial public investment (Boeri and Van Ours, 2021), resulted in full school attendance for children aged 3 to 6 by 2020, with 57.2% of those under three enrolled (European Commission, 2022). Despite efforts to increase enrollment, France already shows high participation rates, making it a leader in public childcare within the EU (Thevenon, 2008; Fagnani, 2008).

Cultural factors also influence how childcare policies affect fertility rates. French cultural norms have supported effective family policies, leading to favorable fertility outcomes. The combination of contemporary family values and robust government policies creates an environment that supports work-life balance and provides high-quality childcare, positively influencing fertility choices (Chemin, 2015; Fagnani, 2010; Thevenon, 2016).

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a core component of family policy, reflecting a commitment to supporting working parents and fostering child development. The ECEC system includes a variety of facilities, with crèches (nurseries) being central, providing care from birth until primary school. There is consensus among the public and policymakers that childcare services influence family planning decisions, and the French government believes improved childcare will boost fertility. However, a gap remains between the desired and actual number of children, with access to childcare often cited as a limiting factor. The government, therefore, continues to prioritize childcare and work-life balance to impact fertility rates positively (Letablier, 2003).

Since the 1980s, childcare slots in public nurseries have steadily increased. Other flexible childcare options include personalized childcare, subsidies for in-home care, hiring accredited childminders, and workplace nurseries.

Early childhood care facilities in France are mainly managed by local authorities or associations (Direction Générale des Finances Publiques & Direction Générale des Collectivités locales, 2024). France offers a wide range of early childhood education services, such as crèches collectives (municipal nurseries), crèches familiales (home-based care), parental crèches (run by parents), and microcrèches (small groups of children up to 11) (Freschi et al., 2018).

For children aged 3 to 6, ECEC services include écoles maternelles (preschools) and gardes périscolaires (before/after school care). Écoles maternelles, established in 1880, enrolled 99% of children by 2018 and are integrated into the national education system, overseen by municipalities (Freschi et al., 2018). According to the Social Action and Families Code, a portion of places must be reserved for low-income families (Direction Générale des Finances Publiques & Direction Générale des Collectivités locales, 2024).

The French government plays a crucial role in financing and regulating these facilities. Significant funding from the Caisse des Allocations Familiales (Caf), the "Family Allowance Fund," supports childcare costs. Some crèches are directly funded by Caf, where fees are set nationally based on family resources. Others are not government-funded, and parents receive direct bonuses. This funding helps ensure affordability and accessibility for a wide range of families (Caisse des Allocations Familiales, 2024).

Fig. 5 shows the theoretical childcare capacity per 100 children under 3 by employment zone. According to the Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, employment zones offer a more suitable framework for localized analysis of theoretical childcare capacity. An employment zone is a region where the majority of people live and work, and where businesses can find most of the labor force needed to fill open positions. The creation of employment zones offers a geographic segmentation appropriate for regional labor market research. As of January 1, 2020, these zones, totaling 305 (excluding Mayotte), enable a more precise analysis aligned with professional activity patterns (Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2021).

Since 2014, the median coverage rate by employment zone has increased by 3.6 points nationwide and by 3.5 points in metropolitan France. Coverage ranges from 3.0% (in the West Guyane employment zone in French Guiana) or 31.2% (in the Bastia employment zone in metropolitan France) to 94.7% (in the Château-Gontier employment zone in Mayenne). The average coverage is improving more rapidly in the least covered zones, with a 5.3-point increase compared to 3.6 points in the 50 most covered zones. The dispersion indicator, which compares the 50 best-equipped zones to the 50 least-equipped ones, was 2.0 in 2019 and 1.8 in metropolitan France, showing overall stability over the period (Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2021).

Figure 5. Theoretical Childcare Capacity per 100 Children Under 3 Years Old, by Employment Zone; Mainland France

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Theoretical capacity for childcare provision by median formal childcare arrangements in the employment area.	59,2	59,4	61,4	61,1	61,3	62,7
Theoretical capacity for childcare provision by average formal childcare arrangements in the 50 best-equipped employment areas (1).	76,3	76,1	78,1	75,9	79,1	79,9
Theoretical capacity for childcare provision by average formal childcare arrangements in the 50 least-equipped employment areas (2).	40,0	41,1	42,3	44,1	43,6	45,6
Territorial dispersion (1)/(2)	1.9	1,9	1,8	1,7	1,8	1,8

Source: Author's elaboration of Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance (2021), p.30.

Overall, the French ECEC framework demonstrates a comprehensive and supportive approach to early childhood care, emphasizing the government's commitment to facilitating work-life balance for parents while ensuring that children benefit from high-quality early education and care. By prioritizing the affordability and accessibility of childcare, France's policy framework

enables women to remain in the workforce while maintaining fertility levels, further illustrating the intersection of welfare state policies and gender role transformation.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, France stands out in Europe for its proactive and comprehensive approach to family and childcare policies, which have significantly contributed to its relatively high fertility rates compared to other European nations. The French model emphasizes the idea of children as a "common good," with strong public investment in childcare and a cultural acceptance of state involvement in family matters. This framework has fostered an environment where working parents, especially mothers, can balance work and family life more effectively. By offering a diverse range of childcare options and significant support for female labor force participation, France has managed to maintain high fertility rates despite the broader European trend of declining birthrates.

The chapter demonstrates that France's family policy, which aims not only to reduce the direct costs of childbearing but also to make work and family life more compatible, has played a central role in its success. The shift toward a "working mother" model, reinforced by substantial public spending on childcare development, enables more women to enter and remain in the workforce while raising children. This policy evolution since the 1970s, which has seen a move from restricting women to traditional caregiving roles to promoting gender equality and economic independence, underscores the country's commitment to supporting women's professional and familial aspirations.

From a theoretical perspective, France's approach aligns with both Gender Systems theory and the Gendered Welfare State theory. Gender Systems theory emphasizes how institutional frameworks, such as childcare policies and employment protections, shape gender roles and influence fertility decisions: France's family policies effectively support gender equality by enabling women to participate equally in the workforce while also fulfilling their caregiving roles. These measures, coupled with a cultural acceptance of women's dual roles as both workers and caregivers, contribute to the country's relatively high fertility rates.

Additionally, the Gendered Welfare State theory underscores how welfare state policies, specifically those designed to support working mothers, have helped France move away from the traditional male-breadwinner model toward a more gender-equal system. France's policies,

such as subsidized childcare, parental leave, and flexible working hours, illustrate a commitment to reducing gender disparities in both the labor market and the domestic sphere, reflecting a more inclusive and equitable approach to family life.

In light of these findings, the research hypothesis holds true: In countries with higher Total Fertility Rates (TFR), such as France, gender norms are more egalitarian, and family policies better support women's rights, employment, and access to childcare. France's successful integration of these policies shows how gender norms and institutional support interact to create a favorable environment for childbearing, reinforcing the importance of well-designed family policies in influencing fertility outcomes.

Chapter 6. Case study: Italy

6.1 Cultural Context and Gender Norms

Italy's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) stood at 1.24 in 2022, as reported by Eurostat, falling below the European average (Eurostat, 2021), and shows a steep decline in fertility rates amongst cohorts as seen in Fig.1.

Within Italian couples, domestic responsibilities are still heavily skewed towards women: women's time spent on housework is disproportionately higher than men's, and mothers dedicate twice as much time to childcare as fathers (Menniti et al., 2015). However, regional divisions and the demographic size of the couple's residence have proven to significantly affect male and female time allocation to household chores and childcare. Indeed, in Southern regions and smaller urban centers, male contributions are lower than in Northern areas and larger cities, resulting in a heavier dual burden for women. Interestingly, for childcare, the observed regional differences among Italian macro-regions were significant only for men, suggesting less stereotyped gender behaviors among fathers in Northern Italy; whereas in smaller towns social pressure to maintain traditional gender roles remains strong (Menniti et al., 2015).

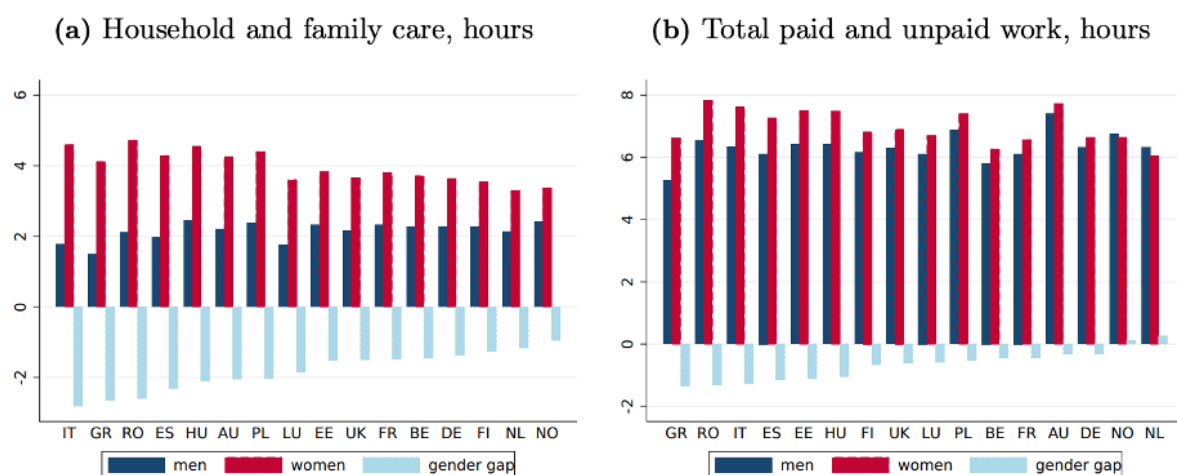
The persistence of these gendered divisions of labor align with Gender Systems Theory (McDonald, 2000). In Italy, despite progress in gender equality in education and employment, household responsibilities remain disproportionately assigned to women, creating a system where female labor force participation is constrained by social expectations of caregiving.

In terms of motherhood, this is often perceived as a female task, hindering women's professional advancement as they are still largely viewed as the primary caregivers within the family (Gender Systems Theory). This imbalance arises from a deeply rooted cultural framework that discourages shared caregiving responsibilities, reinforcing the idea that a woman's primary role is within the household rather than in the workforce. According to an IPSOS report redacted for the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, about 53% of interviewees believe that women with small children should not participate in the workforce, while 44% think that even if they do work, women should remain primarily responsible for family care. Additionally, roughly a third of the population believes that motherhood is the only path to a woman's complete fulfilment (IPSOS, 2018).

Stereotypes about gender roles within the household are particularly entrenched among younger people, those with lower levels of education, and those living in Central and Southern Italy (Aloè et al., 2024). According to a 2018 ISTAT survey, regional differences are evident, with adherence to traditional gender stereotypes more prevalent in the South than in the North. For instance, in the Northeast, 27.1% of respondents believe women are more suited than men to handle domestic tasks, compared to 35.2% in the South (ISTAT, 2018).

Similarly, 27.7% in the Northeast think that success in paid work is more crucial for men than for women, whereas 35.1% in the South agree (ISTAT, 2018). The application of the patriarchy index to Italy further confirms the persistent North-South divide: while patriarchal views remain strong throughout the country, they are becoming less dominant in the North and Central regions, whereas in the South, these traditional views are still widespread and prevailing. (Aloè et al., 2024). Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) provides a framework to understand these regional disparities by explaining how societal expectations shape gender roles. In Italy, traditional social structures reinforce the belief that caregiving and household work are inherently female responsibilities, while men are expected to be primary earners. The strength of these roles varies regionally, with Southern Italy maintaining more rigid expectations compared to the North, where women's workforce participation is more widely accepted.

Figure 6. Time use, domestic and total (paid and unpaid) work by gender, between 2008-2015.

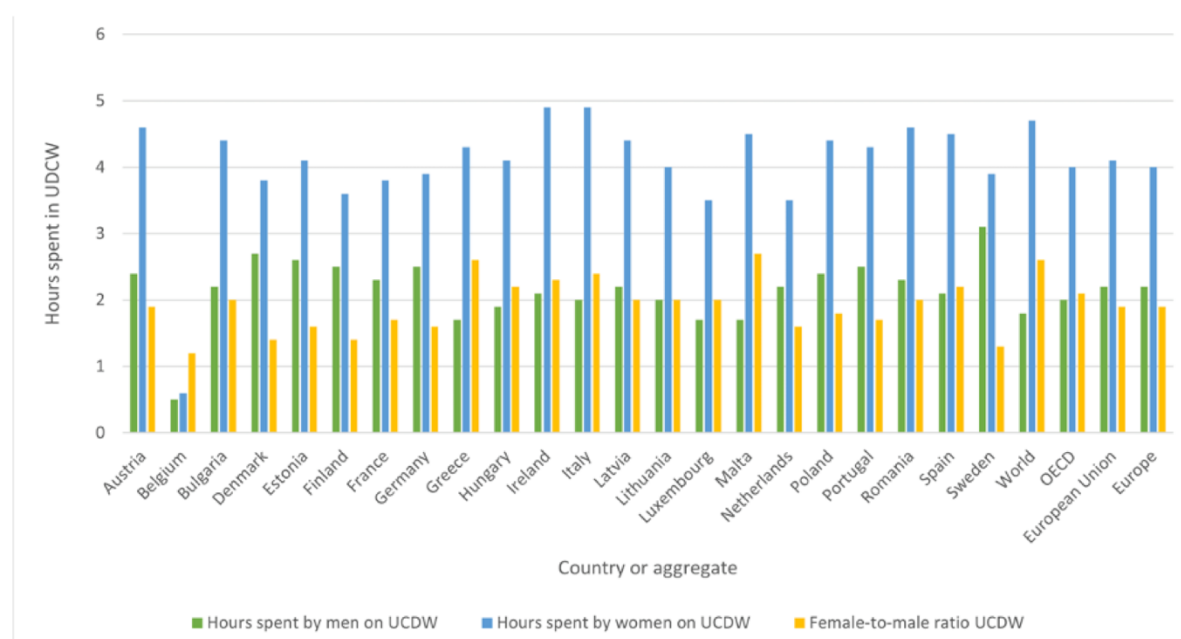


Source: Carta et al. (2023), p. 14.

Figure 6. shows the gender gap in hours spent on household tasks and family care and in total paid and unpaid work, respectively. Regarding household and family care, Italy position itself

as the country with the highest gender gap, whereas France is the 6th country with the lowest gap. In terms of unpaid work, Italy is the third country with the highest gender gap, after Greece and Romania. France has a similar position to household and family care, as the 5th country with the least gender gap.

Figure 7. Hours spent on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (UCDW) by men and women in the EU, 2023.



Source: Asdente, 2023, p. 131.

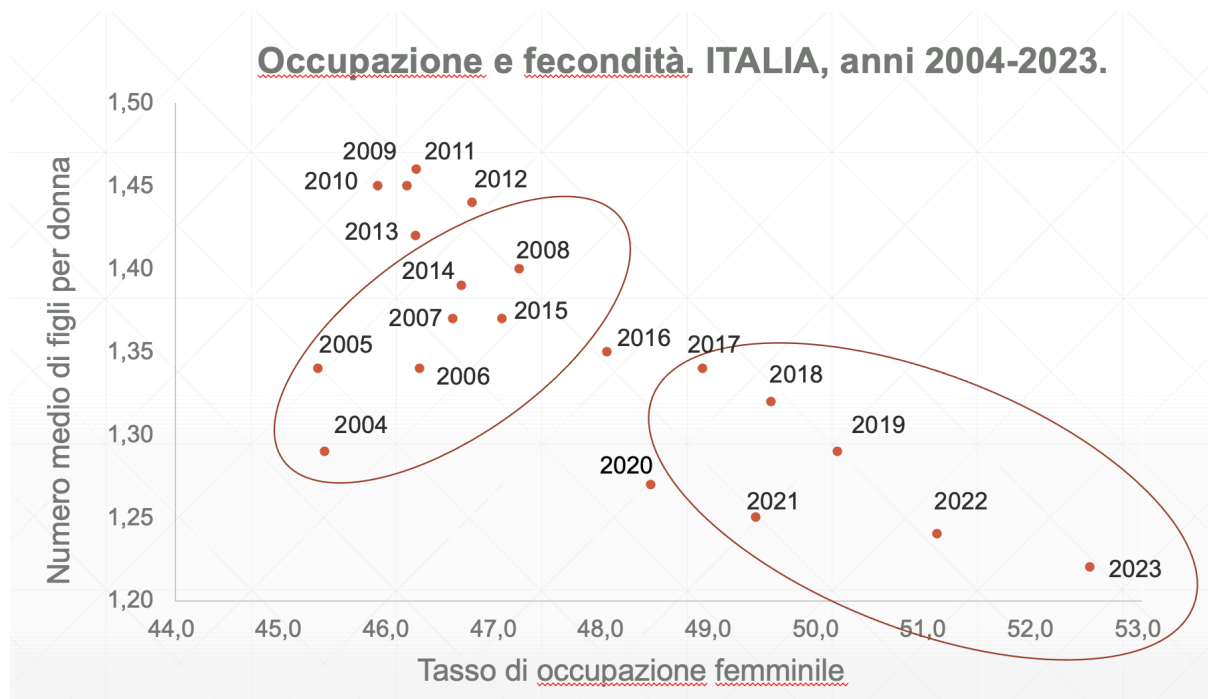
As highlighted in Fig. 7, the gender gap in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work for France and Italy are still similar in 2023, showing that the Covid-19 pandemic did not have a strong effect on the gendered division of unpaid labor. This may be due to the fact that the higher male participation in household work and care was only temporary and limited to the lockdown. This gender gap can be understood through the Gendering Welfare States Theory (Orloff, 2009), which argues that welfare policies either reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles. Italy's familialistic welfare model provides limited state support for childcare and work-life balance, effectively pushing the responsibility of care onto families and, by extension, onto women. Unlike France, which offers stronger public childcare services and parental leave policies, Italy's lack of institutional support perpetuates the reliance on traditional caregiving structures.

These figures are especially relevant to the issue of female workforce participation: because this engagement in household duties demands a significant investment of time and energy, constituting a full-time job, women cannot explore opportunities for paid employment beyond the confines of their domestic sphere (Gianesini, 2013). Moreover, the societal expectation for women to prioritize their roles as caregivers is further underscored in childcare practices, where mothers or grandparents commonly assume the responsibility for the upbringing and well-being of children. This reliance on familial support for childcare often results in lower expenditures on formal childcare services, as families opt for the familiar home-based care arrangements (Gianesini, 2013). Gendering Welfare States Theory further explains how Italy's weak institutional support for working mothers limits their career advancement and reinforces gender inequalities in the labor market. With policies that assume a male breadwinner model and fail to provide sufficient public childcare and parental leave, the burden of unpaid domestic work remains disproportionately high for women, discouraging female employment and leading to lower fertility rates.

Consequently, the intricate interplay between traditional gender roles and entrenched societal expectations regarding caregiving perpetuates a system wherein women's participation in the labor force is limited by deeply rooted cultural norms that prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional pursuits, resulting in a lower female labor force participation, especially for mothers.

6.2 Employment and Gender Gaps

Figure 8. Employment and fertility. Italy, 2023.



Source: Testa, 2024.

Fig. 8 shows how recent years have seen a *reversal* of the relationship between the variables of level of female employment and the mean number of children per woman: while in the years grouped in the circle on the left x and y have a *positive* causal relationship, the years on the right side show a *reverse* causal relationship. From this graph it can be concluded that after 2017, a progressively higher rate of female employment led to a progressively lower mean number of children per woman: the statistics show that in Italy, women are often led to choose between working and/or pursuing a career and having children, and that this pattern is becoming more and more common as time goes by.

Indeed, the gap in workforce participation between mothers and non-mothers in Italy is very significant, with the employment rate for women aged 25-49 with at least one child between 0 and 5 years old of around 50% and the employment rate for women in the same age frame with no children of 70% in the second quarters of 2019 and 2020 (ISTAT, 2021). The phenomena explained below provides a more detailed picture of female employment in Italy and its consequences on fertility rates.

Women are predominantly employed in the tertiary or services sector due to several interconnected factors. One key reason is the sector's offering of part-time employment opportunities (Thevenon, 2013), which align with women's often multifaceted roles as caregivers and homemakers, thereby allowing them to balance work with family responsibilities more easily. Additionally, the lower entry barriers and diverse range of roles within the services sector provide women with accessible employment options suited to their skills and educational backgrounds (Carta et al., 2023). Societal norms, which have traditionally steered women towards service-oriented roles, further contribute to their representation in this sector (Social Role Theory). However, despite the importance of the tertiary sector for female employment, the expansion of this sector in Italy has been relatively limited, contrasting with most OECD countries where it plays a major role in female employment (Thevenon, 2013). This discrepancy underscores the challenges faced by women in Italy in accessing employment opportunities and highlights the need for policy measures to promote the growth of the services sector and enhance female participation in the workforce.

Differently from France, not only are working mothers frequently stigmatized as deviating from expectations of ideal motherhood, but a work-life balance in Italy has not yet been achieved. Mothers leaving their job due to the impossibility of engaging in both caretaking and paid work are numerous, as reported by numerous Italian newspapers. Some employed mothers are even denied flexible employment arrangements and in other instances are even asked to leave their job (Za et al., 2023).

According to INAPP, with the birth of a child, 18% of women between the ages of 18 and 49 stop working. The reconciliation of work and caregiving responsibilities (in 52% of cases), non-renewal of contracts or termination (29%), and considerations of opportunity and economic feasibility (19%) underpin this departure from the workforce. Educational attainment provides some protection, but only to a certain extent: the most educated women remain in the labor market (65% of those with a university degree), yet over 16% cease working (both university graduates and high school graduates), compared to 21% of mothers with only a secondary school diploma (Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, 2023).

The current landscape of employment still experiences the consequences of the highly regulated Italian labor market during the 1970s and 1980s. While providing stability for full-

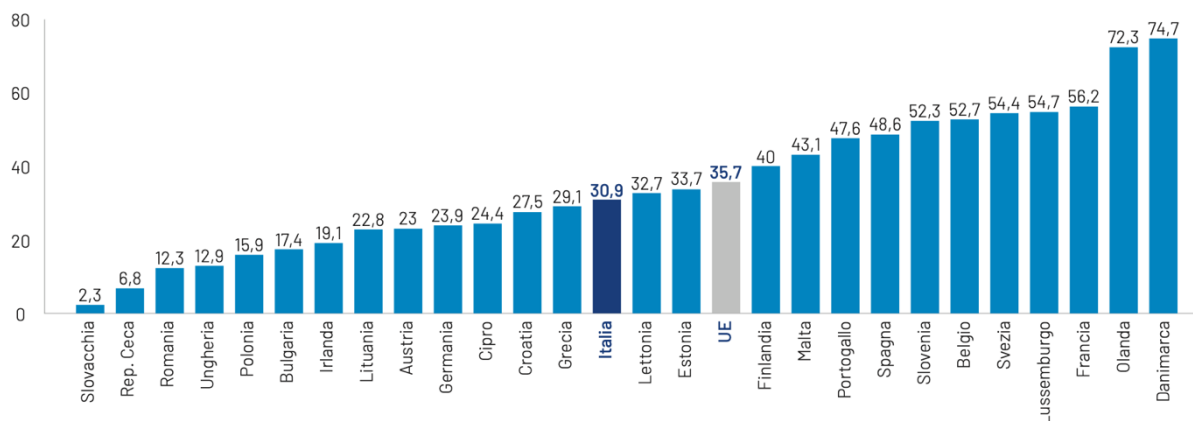
time workers, this strong regulation hindered the entry of newcomers, particularly those in search of temporary or part-time positions. Consequently, this environment gave rise to smaller, less regulated family enterprises, which often relied on informal or irregular employment arrangements, especially for women. These practices led to significant disparities in terms of income, job security, and the ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009).

The Italian tax policy known as "detrazione per coniuge a carico," introduced in 1986, provides a tax deduction for low-income households where one spouse earns less than €2,800 annually (Carta et al., 2023). While initially intended to support families with a single male breadwinner and a stay-at-home wife, this policy has unintentionally become a barrier to female employment. The tax deduction discourages the second earner, typically the woman, from seeking work because earning above the €2,800 threshold results in the loss of this benefit. Although the Italian safety net system has evolved to support low-income households more broadly, this outdated tax policy still creates a disincentive for women to enter or remain in the workforce, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's economic participation.

6.3 Childcare Availability and Informal Care

The country faces a shortage of childcare facilities, with an average of 25.5 and 26.9 places available in public and private early childhood education services per 100 children aged 0-2 years in 2018-19 and 2019-20, respectively. Notably, there are significant regional discrepancies, with southern regions (13.3 and 14.5) and islands (13.8 and 15.7) exhibiting fewer places (Milan et al., 2022, p. 9). Unfortunately, data availability for childcare facility provision in Italy is limited to children aged 0-2 years and does not account for 3 year olds like in France. Consequently, in 2018, the enrolment rate for children under three stood at 25.5% (Carta et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). This figure is significantly lower than France, and well below the EU target of 33% set in 2002 (Carta et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). As shown in Fig. 9, the situation has not significantly improved in 2022, with only 30,9% of children attending early childhood services, below the EU average and well behind France (56,2%).

Figure 9. Percentage of children attending early childhood services in Europe, 2022.



Source; Ferrera et al. (2024)

On top of this shortage in supply, Italy also differs in its lack of demand. Indeed, as stated in an ISTAT report of 2023, despite a higher availability of nurseries (+1,780 spots) following the pandemic, enrolment requests are still mostly unfulfilled, particularly in the South (66.4% of public nurseries and 48.7% of private nurseries) (ISTAT, 2023). Moreover, poorer households face disadvantages in terms of service accessibility because of the high cost of fees and the lack of nurseries in some parts of the nation (ISTAT, 2023). These figures are especially relevant to the Italian case, as it shows that even if places in nurseries were to be increased, enrolment rates might still be low, accounting for socio-cultural factors influencing parent's choices.

Furthermore, compulsory schooling in Italy begins at the age of 6 and lasts until 16 (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2018), unlike France, where it commences three years earlier. This, coupled with the other factors abovementioned, reduces incentives for families to enroll children under 6 in childcare facilities.

There have been recent policy efforts aimed at supporting families, such as the “Bonus asilo nido”, an economic bonus from the government to families with a child between 0-3 years old, to support their daycare expenses and varies based on tax brackets (Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, 2024). However, this policy confirms the lack of recognition of mothers' difficulties: this policy does not address the difficulties for women in terms of work-life balance.

6.3.1 Informal Care: the Role of Grandparents

Recognizing the role of grandparents in Italy is crucial due to the limited availability of formal childcare support and notable demographic trends such as delayed fertility and increased life expectancy. Grandparents are often relied upon for childcare, especially in regions with scarce public services. Factors influencing grandparents' involvement include their employment status, health, age, and socio-economic conditions. Socio-economic status plays a significant role, as wealthier and more educated grandparents are more likely to provide non-residential childcare, potentially due to having similarly positioned offspring who require childcare support while working. There is also a regional variation, with higher levels of grandparental involvement in childcare in Northern and Central Italy, partly due to lower female employment rates in the South. Grandparents are more involved when grandchildren are between three and five years old, as mothers often use extended maternity leave during the child's first year. As the retirement age rises, the availability of grandparental care may decrease, posing challenges for families who rely on this low-cost childcare. Policymakers should consider the balancing act between encouraging extended workforce participation among older adults and the need for informal childcare support. As grandparents are becoming older when they take on these caregiving roles, the potential strain of this responsibility, especially when health does not improve with life expectancy, should be a focus for future research (Zamberletti et al., 2018).

The role of grandparents in childcare is particularly prominent in Italy, especially within the context of a "Mediterranean welfare regime" where the family is considered the primary provider of care for children and the elderly. Indeed, despite the growing availability of paid domestic workers, Italian families often prefer relying on grandparents for childcare. This is evident in the high percentage of children cared for by grandparents; in 1998, 43.7% of children under the age of three and 42.8% of those between three and five were looked after by grandparents. A decade later, the reliance on grandparents had increased even further, with 67.8% of children aged 0–2 and 70.5% of those aged 3–5 being cared for by them more than once a week. This trend is partly due to the limited availability of public childcare services and the increasing involvement of women in the labor market, which makes it challenging for families to balance work and childcare. Furthermore, while paid babysitting is an option, it is not as commonly used as in other countries, and families often combine different childcare solutions, involving both grandparents and paid nannies or babysitters, depending on circumstances and trust levels. Thus, the reliance on grandparents remains a crucial component

of the childcare system in Italy, supplementing or even reducing the need for paid domestic care (Sarti, 2010).

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, Italy's persistently low fertility rates and childcare challenges are deeply influenced by cultural and institutional factors, particularly the enduring traditional gender roles that continue to shape family dynamics and workforce participation. Despite efforts to improve childcare provision, regional disparities and structural issues such as a highly regulated labor market and insufficient work-life balance policies continue to hinder progress. These problems are compounded by the lack of recognition of the dual role of mothers as both caregivers and workers within Italy's welfare state.

The design of Italy's welfare policies reflects these deeply embedded gendered roles, and without a shift in this framework, fertility rates are unlikely to improve. These issues can be framed within broader theoretical debates, showing how gender expectations and the failure to address women's dual responsibilities in family and labor spheres (Gendered Welfare State theory) are key contributors to the country's demographic challenges. Italy's policies, which fail to adequately support working mothers, contrast sharply with those of countries like France, where more progressive, gender-sensitive policies enable women to balance work and family life more effectively. It would be utopian to expect gender roles to shift (i.e. for society to not see women mainly as mothers and caregivers), but exactly because of this culture expecting women to hold a career and have children it is necessary to recognize their dual role and design policies accordingly.

Until Italy's welfare state evolves to acknowledge and address the dual role of mothers—by providing better support for both their employment and caregiving responsibilities—its fertility rates are unlikely to see significant improvement. The lack of such recognition, alongside the continued reinforcement of traditional gender roles, ensures that Italy's demographic challenges will persist, ultimately underscoring the critical need for policy reform aimed at achieving greater gender equality and work-life balance.

Chapter 7. France & Italy in comparison: other indicators

7.1 Female tertiary educational attainment

Another indicator to be considered in order to better understand fertility tendencies in both countries is female educational attainment. It is beneficial for this paper to consider tertiary education attainment, as it is the most influential on fertility choices, as it is usually obtained around childbearing age and thus influences fertility choices more significantly.

France's tertiary educational attainment rate was 56% for women in 2024 (OECD, 2024a), whereas Italy's stood at 37% (OECD, 2024b), showing a *positive* causal relationship between this variable and TFR.

If we apply the general assumption that higher educational attainment leads women to engage in childbearing later (Schoen et al., 1999) and thus eventually have less (or no) children, this assumption does not find confirmation in the abovementioned data, as it should result in a *negative* causal relationship between tertiary educational attainment and fertility rates.

Therefore, how can we account for higher tertiary educational attainment and TFRs in France? As found by Testa (2014), France belongs to a cluster group of countries which are defined as “Nordic”, with the highest level of ultimately intended family size. In this study, it is confirmed that in countries where egalitarian gender roles in both family and labor markets help balance the high opportunity cost of childbearing for highly educated women, there is a *positive* relationship between women's education levels and their lifetime fertility intentions (Testa, 2014). Given that France has both a high tertiary educational attainment and TFR, the findings presented by Testa stand as a valuable explanation for the positive causal relationship between the two variables. Furthermore, this theory confirms the hypothesis set out in this paper, since France is indeed characterized by more progressive and egalitarian government policies both for childcare and female employment (Thevenon, 2016), and thus confirming the hypothesis for Italy as well.

However, tertiary education attainment has not been included in the case studies as it is not a straightforward indicator due to the high amount of graduates leaving some European countries, also known as the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon. For example, it has been recorded that

in 2019, 122,000 Italians were officially registered as living abroad, but actual emigration figures are estimated to be 2.6 times higher than the recorded numbers (Anelli, 2023).

If we consider only the female tertiary education attainment indicator, it may appear to confirm the hypothesis of this paper. However, the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon must be taken into account, as many recent university graduates leave the country. This outflow suggests that the reported figures should be adjusted for an accurate analysis of fertility choices. Consequently, while female tertiary education attainment may support the hypothesis, it should not be considered a primary indicator, given that the actual percentages are significantly lower due to the impact of brain drain, which notably affects Italy.

7.2 Share of foreign-born residents

Another alternative explanation for the higher French fertility rate could be the presence of migrant population, which is higher than Italy’s. In 2021, 10.3% of the French population was foreign or of foreign origin (INED, 2021), whereas Italy’s statistics only present 8.8% (EpiCentro – Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2021). Indeed, some research supports the idea that migrants from high-fertility regions who settle in low-fertility countries generally have more children than the native population of their new home (Milewski, 2010), this might be connected to the fact that migrant women tend to maintain the fertility patterns and choices typical of their country of origin (Coleman, 1994; Garssen and Nicolaas, 2008). In other words, it can be concluded that if a country has a higher rate of foreign-born residents, it is more likely to have higher fertility rates, just as in the French and Italian case, where France has a higher TFR and also share of foreign population, whereas Italy shows the reverse (lower TFR, lower share of migrant population).

However, as shown by Pailhé (2017), fertility patterns strongly differ amongst country of origin. In its analysis of fertility patterns of first, second and third-generation migrants in France, this paper challenges the idea of the expected cultural distance effect (where greater cultural distance leads to higher fertility). For instance, women of Turkish descent tend to have their first child earlier and exhibit higher first and second birth rates, supporting the general hypothesis. However, this pattern does not apply universally. Women of Southeast Asian descent have lower and more delayed fertility than other daughters of immigrants. Similarly, second-generation individuals from Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa tend to postpone

childbirth, while descendants of Maghreb immigrants show a fertility timeline increasingly aligned with French norms (Pailhé, 2017).

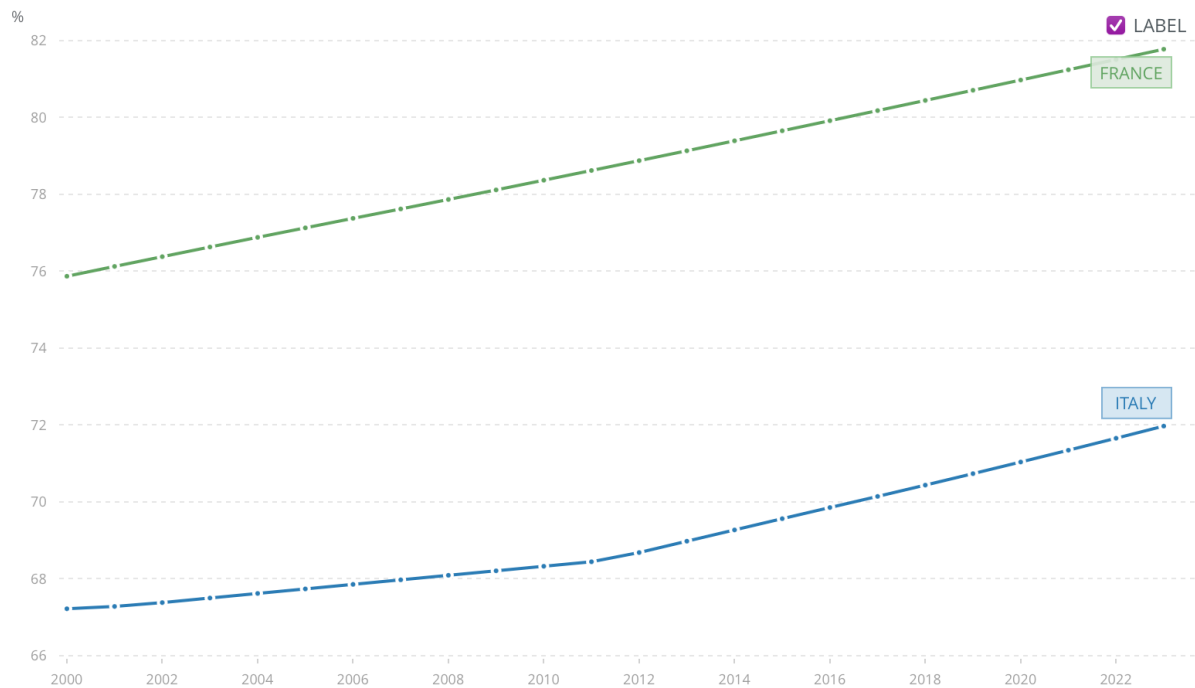
Given the intricate nature of fertility patterns amongst migrant women in Europe, the analysis of this indicator cannot merely rely upon the general “migrant share” of Italy and France, but requires to look into the countries of origin of migrant women, how long they have been in the country for (to account for their eventual adaptation to and integration with the European lifestyle) and even then, fertility patterns of a certain country of origin cannot be generalized and might differ between country of destination.

As a consequence, the indicator of migrant share of the population is only considered a *possible* alternative explanation but which finds no straightforward confirmation in data, as it would result in a superficial analysis. Further research could delve into to what extent the share of foreign-born population *actually* influences fertility rates (and whether there is a generalizable pattern).

7.3 Urbanization

Due to a wide variety of phenomena, urbanization rates and thus a higher percentage of people living in cities is usually associated with lower fertility rates (Riederer & Beaujouan, 2023; Rodrigo-Comino et al., 2021). If taken individually, the rise in urbanization rates and decline in TFR is common to both countries. However, when compared, it is clear that France has a higher urbanization rate compared to that of Italy.

Figure 10. Urban population (% of total population) – France, Italy; 2000-2023



Source: World Bank Open Data, 2024

As shown in Fig. 10, France's share of urban population has been higher than that of Italy since 2000 (just as its fertility rates have been). This causes for an anomaly in the general rule of urbanization, where Italy, despite being less urbanized, shows a lower fertility rate, which, on the other hand, is usually associated with high urbanization rates.

So, why does a less urbanized country present lower fertility rates? It therefore seems appropriate to not include urbanization as one of the main reasons for lower fertility rates in Italy. The reason for this 'anomaly' can therefore be found in, for example, a lack of childcare facilities: due to the lower urbanization rates, there are more families which need to travel large distances to find a childcare facility, and thus are pushed to rely on informal childcare, and in case this is not available, women have to give up on their jobs, which altogether acts as a deterrent to have children. This topic is further expanded in chapter 6.3.

In conclusion, the effect of urbanization on fertility rates, although finding a confirmation when the countries are taken individually, it does not hold when a comparison is made: it can be stated that urbanization rates support the hypothesis of this paper.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined various indicators that could explain differences in fertility rates between France and Italy. However, these indicators cannot be included in the case studies, as they are neither straightforward nor generalizable and involve more complex dynamics than initially assumed.

For example, while female tertiary educational attainment appears relevant, its impact is distorted by the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon, which significantly alters national statistics. Similarly, the share of foreign-born residents is not a reliable explanatory factor, as fertility patterns vary widely depending on migrants’ country of origin, length of stay, and level of integration. Urbanization, too, does not follow a clear-cut pattern, as Italy, despite being less urbanized, exhibits lower fertility rates, suggesting that additional factors—such as childcare accessibility—must be considered.

Given these complexities, these indicators do not provide universally applicable explanations and are therefore unsuitable for direct inclusion in the case studies. A more in-depth, context-specific approach is needed to fully understand fertility trends in France and Italy.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Integration of Findings

This chapter integrates the findings from previous chapters to provide a comprehensive understanding of how employment, family culture, and childcare systems collectively influence fertility decisions in France and Italy. The comparative analysis of these two countries highlights how the interplay between cultural norms, policy frameworks, and economic factors shapes family planning choices and the effectiveness of childcare policies.

In France, the relatively high fertility rate is closely linked to a well-developed and accessible childcare system, coupled with cultural norms that support dual-earner families and working mothers (Letablier, 2003; Fagnani, 2006). France's family policies, including extensive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provisions, have enabled women to maintain employment while raising children, reducing the opportunity cost of motherhood. This has contributed to France's relatively stable Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of around 1.8 live births per woman, despite fluctuations over time (Thevenon, 2016; European Commission, 2022). The integration of childcare into family policy reflects a societal consensus that children are a 'common good,' which encourages shared responsibility between the state and families (Chemin, 2015). As a result, cultural norms in France have evolved to accept state involvement in family affairs, alleviating the burden of childcare and promoting gender equality in both the private and public spheres (Fagnani, 2010).

In contrast, Italy's significantly lower fertility rate (TFR of around 1.24 in 2022) is deeply affected by entrenched gender norms and a lack of comprehensive childcare services (Eurostat, 2021). Italian family culture remains heavily influenced by traditional gender roles, where women are often expected to prioritize caregiving over professional pursuits (Menniti et al., 2015; Aloè et al., 2024). This is particularly pronounced in Southern Italy and smaller urban centers, where social pressures to adhere to traditional roles remain strong (Menniti et al., 2015). Additionally, the lack of adequate formal childcare services, coupled with a reliance on informal care, such as grandparents, further limits women's ability to participate fully in the workforce (Zamberletti et al., 2018). Consequently, the high cost and scarcity of formal childcare services, along with rigid societal expectations, contribute to the low enrollment rates in early childhood education and care services, and subsequently, to lower fertility rates (Carta et al., 2023; OECD, 2023).

The comparison between France and Italy illustrates that family policies alone, such as subsidized childcare, are not sufficient to boost fertility rates. The effectiveness of these policies is significantly mediated by the cultural context in which they are implemented. In France, a cultural acceptance of dual-earner households and proactive family policies create an environment that facilitates higher fertility rates. In Italy, however, cultural resistance to gender equality and limited policy support for childcare hinder the effectiveness of similar interventions (Dimai, 2023; Saraceno, 2015).

These findings align with theoretical perspectives on fertility and family policy. Gender Systems Theory helps explain how deeply ingrained societal norms influence reproductive choices, reinforcing traditional gender roles in Italy while allowing for greater female labor force participation in France (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Social Role Theory further supports the notion that individuals conform to expected gender roles, which in turn impacts policy effectiveness (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Additionally, economic theories of fertility, such as Becker's (1993) New Home Economics framework, emphasize the role of opportunity costs in childbearing decisions. In France, lower opportunity costs due to subsidized childcare and work-family balance measures encourage higher fertility rates, whereas in Italy, the high opportunity costs discourage family expansion.

While other indicators, such as female tertiary educational attainment, migration, and urbanization, were considered in the analysis, they were ultimately not included as primary explanatory factors due to their complex and non-straightforward relationship with fertility rates. For instance, the impact of higher education on fertility is complicated by phenomena such as brain drain, which distorts national statistics. Similarly, while migration may contribute to fertility differences, fertility patterns among migrant women vary significantly depending on country of origin, integration level, and duration of stay. Urbanization, too, does not follow a clear-cut pattern, as Italy, despite being less urbanized, has lower fertility rates, indicating that other factors, such as childcare accessibility, play a more decisive role. Given these complexities, these indicators require a more in-depth, independent analysis and were therefore excluded from the main case study findings.

The evidence therefore supports the hypothesis that in France, where the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is higher, there is a robust family policy framework that enables women to stay in the workforce. This is complemented by higher enrollment rates in Early Childhood Education and

Care (ECEC), a less gendered division of household labor and care, and higher rates of women remaining in the workforce.

8.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this research have several implications for family and childcare policies, not only in Italy and France but potentially for other European countries facing similar demographic challenges.

As mentioned earlier, Italy's lower fertility rates can be attributed to cultural norms that emphasize traditional gender roles and an inadequate childcare infrastructure that fails to support working mothers (Aloè et al., 2024; Menniti et al., 2015). Gender Systems Theory and Social Role Theory help explain these patterns, as they illustrate how rigid gender expectations and societal norms limit women's economic participation and discourage shared caregiving responsibilities (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Additionally, economic theories of fertility highlight the role of opportunity costs, demonstrating that in Italy, the high financial and career-related costs of childbearing discourage family expansion (Becker, 1993).

To address these challenges, policymakers should prioritize the expansion of formal childcare services, particularly in underserved regions such as Southern Italy (ISTAT, 2023). Additionally, policies that actively promote gender equality in both the home and the workplace are essential. This could include initiatives such as incentivizing paternal leave, promoting flexible working arrangements, and implementing targeted campaigns to shift societal perceptions of gender roles and caregiving responsibilities (Gianesini, 2013). Reforming outdated tax policies, such as the "detrazione per coniuge a carico," which discourages secondary earners (typically women) from entering the workforce, would also be crucial in dismantling barriers to female employment (Carta et al., 2023). Without addressing these cultural and economic barriers simultaneously, childcare policies alone may not be sufficient to significantly improve Italy's fertility rate.

France's proactive family policies provide a useful model for other countries aiming to balance work and family life effectively (Chemin, 2015). However, there is still room for improvement. As recent trends indicate a slight decline in fertility rates, possibly due to factors such as the psychological impact of global warming or economic instability (Saraceno, 2015), France

could consider enhancing its support for families dealing with these modern challenges. Further investment in high-quality childcare, continued efforts to reduce gender gaps in household labor, and policies aimed at supporting mental health and environmental stability could help sustain or even increase fertility rates in the future (Thevenon, 2016). Future policies could take a step further in gender equality and focus more on greater male involvement in childcare, overcoming current policies which stem from the idea of the mother as the primary caregiver (Saraceno, 2015); thus reducing not only the opportunity costs of childbearing for women—mainly having to engage in a ‘double workload,’ both at home and outside—but also ultimately improving women’s physical and mental health (Frankenhaeuser, 1991; McGovern et al., 2011; Juratovac & Zauszniewski, 2014).

For other European countries experiencing declining fertility rates, this research highlights the importance of culturally tailored policies. Countries with more traditional gender norms may need to adopt multi-faceted strategies that include cultural, social, and economic interventions to promote gender equality, reduce the burden of unpaid care work, and encourage higher fertility rates (Hakim, 2007; Cunningham, 2007). This could involve greater public investment in childcare, promotion of gender-equitable parental leave policies, and public awareness campaigns that challenge traditional gender norms.

8.3 Contributions to the Field

This research contributes to the field of demography and social policy by providing a nuanced understanding of how cultural contexts mediate the effectiveness of family policies, particularly those related to childcare and fertility (Oshio, 2019; Dimai, 2023). The comparative analysis of France and Italy underscores that while economic incentives such as childcare subsidies can positively impact fertility rates, their success is highly contingent upon the broader cultural and societal framework (Esping-Andersen, 2019; Gauthier, 2007).

By bridging the gap between economic theories of fertility and cultural perceptions of gender roles, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how and why different childcare policies yield varying results in similar contexts. The findings suggest that policies should be economically sound and culturally (gender) sensitive to address declining fertility rates effectively. This insight is crucial for designing policies that consider not just the direct financial costs of childcare but also the deeply ingrained cultural norms that influence family planning decisions (Becker, 1993; Cigno, 1991).

Moreover, this research highlights the critical role of gender norms in shaping family and fertility choices. The integration of Gender Systems Theory and Social Role Theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how societal expectations around gender roles and family responsibilities (in)directly affect fertility outcomes (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). This approach offers valuable insights for policymakers, sociologists, and economists aiming to address the complex demographic challenges posed by low fertility rates in Europe.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of an integrated approach to family policy that simultaneously addresses economic, cultural, and gender-related factors. By doing so, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of fertility dynamics and offers practical guidance for crafting policies that are both effective and equitable.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight the intricate relationship between family policies, cultural norms, and fertility rates in France and Italy, emphasizing the need for nuanced and culturally tailored interventions to address demographic challenges. While economic measures, such as subsidized childcare, can alleviate the financial burdens of parenthood and support female labor force participation, their effectiveness and design largely depends on the underlying societal attitudes towards gender roles. In France, progressive norms that support dual-earner households and state involvement in family policy have contributed to higher fertility rates. This cultural acceptance enables policies like subsidized childcare to reduce the opportunity costs of childbearing effectively, creating an environment conducive to both career advancement and family life for women.

In contrast, Italy's persistently low fertility rates are shaped by traditional gender expectations, limited formal childcare infrastructure, and a reliance on informal care networks, such as grandparents. These factors, coupled with entrenched cultural norms that prioritize women's roles as primary caregivers, restrict the design, implementation and effectiveness of similar policy measures and contribute to a gender imbalance in both domestic and professional spheres. The regional disparities within Italy further illustrate how local cultural contexts influence the success of policy interventions, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate for addressing fertility issues.

This research underscores that policies designed to boost fertility rates must go beyond economic incentives and address the cultural and social dimensions that shape family dynamics. Efforts to promote gender equality, such as addressing working mothers' difficulties and eventually encouraging male involvement in caregiving, reforming tax policies that disincentivize female employment, and expanding access to affordable, high-quality childcare, are crucial for fostering an environment that supports both work and family life. Moreover, the study's comparative analysis offers valuable insights for policymakers across Europe, indicating that a holistic approach—one that integrates economic, cultural, and gender-sensitive strategies—is vital for crafting effective family policies. The implications of this research go beyond Italy's need for policies inspired by gender equality: it is found that France's policies, albeit an example of an effective solution to low fertility rates, is still inspired by gender norms where women are expected to engage both in paid and unpaid labour, which might lead to deteriorating physical and mental health, as highlighted by a wide range of

literature. If policymakers want to further reduce the opportunity costs associated with childbearing, a more egalitarian view of gender roles cannot be overlooked.

In conclusion,

gender equality is one *very* valuable path towards overcoming the demographic winter.

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