

Understanding the Demographic Winter: Exploring the Choice vs. Necessity of Delayed Parenthood and Childless Couples in Italy and Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to analyse the phenomenon of the demographic winter, that is, the sharp decline in birth rates accompanied by population aging, from a comparative perspective, through the study of two emblematic cases: Italy and Brazil. The main objective is to understand the underlying causes, the socio-economic and cultural consequences, and the political responses that have been adopted, or neglected, in these two countries.

From a methodological perspective, this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines quantitative demographic analysis with sociological and cultural perspectives. It examines key indicators of fertility and birth rates, the historical evolution of women's access to education, participation in the labour market, public policies, and the economic conditions that influence reproductive choices. The analysis is further enriched by a qualitative interview conducted with Brazilian demographer Victor Leocádio, offering expert insights to deepen the understanding of the topic.

The thesis is structured into four main parts. The first introduces the research question, the concept of demographic winter, and frames its global significance. The second part focuses on the Italian case, highlighting the link between high levels of female emancipation, the ineffectiveness of family policies, and the persistent inequality in the division of domestic labour. The third part analyses the Brazilian context, drawing attention to the ongoing demographic transition and the strong regional, cultural, and economic disparities. Finally, the fourth part offers a critical reflection on the similarities and differences between the two countries and presents several proposals for a renewed parenthood agenda that addresses current challenges related to gender equality, work-life balance, and demographic sustainability.

PART I. DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER: AN INTRODUCTION

1.1 Definition of demographic winter and research question

Choosing to pursue a thesis in demography is to try to understand societal changes through a multicultural and multifactorial approach. The analyses go beyond mere statistics and numerical data; they integrate insights from sociology, cultural studies, and even psychology to better understand human behaviour and social dynamics. The aim is to have a sharper more accurate and nuanced perspective of the reality in which one lives by studying the past to decipher the present and try to theorize a near future. Through this process, demography becomes a vital tool for understanding the complexities of contemporary life and fostering discussions about the direction our societies may take.

One of the most significant and, therefore, impossible-to-overlook phenomena of our time is the demographic winter. This event is characterized by a significant decline in birth rates, leading to population decrease and stagnant population growth. This is often accompanied by an aging population, with an increase in the proportion of older people compared to younger ones. Obviously, this phenomenon generates important and quite irreversible economic as well as social and political consequences. European demographers warned of the possibility of this population decline in industrialized countries and began talking about it about 50 years ago now, but this idea has only recently begun to make its way into public debate and the media. In fact, it is only in recent years thanks to increased coverage of the topic in newspapers, social media, and TV that the general public, at least in Western Europe, seems to have become aware that some world regions are facing an unprecedented demographic phenomenon: population aging and a decline in the total size of some national populations are occurring simultaneously.¹ Now, the gradual aging of the population is well-

¹ Kinsella, K. G., & Phillips, D. R. (2005). Global aging: The challenge of success (Vol. 60, No. 1, p. 3). Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.

known to everyone, both experts and non-experts. The rise in the elderly population will be particularly noticeable in developing countries. However, in the already industrialized nations, the most significant growth will occur among those aged eighty and older. By 2050, this group is expected to almost quadruple in number.²

By explaining what demographic winter is, one can understand why it is so important to study it and to comprehend the causes, consequences, and future challenges that the countries experiencing it will have to overcome. For the above-mentioned reason, this thesis will mainly analyse two cases of countries facing demographic winter, namely Italy and Brazil. The Italian case is more widely known due to its greater media coverage: almost every day, various newspapers delve into the topic. In contrast, Brazil's situation is less prominent in global discussions. This lack of visibility can be attributed, in part, to a Eurocentric perspective prevalent in the media industry, which often overlooks and neglects non-European contexts. As a member of the BRICS group, Brazil deserves more attention, yet it often gets overshadowed by the challenges that Western countries face, which for the reason mentioned above receive greater coverage. Furthermore, Brazil's demographic issues are further complicated by significant socio-cultural and economic inequalities within the nation. These disparities create a more nuanced and diverse experience of demographic winter, which cannot be easily generalized. The thesis will aim to explain the phenomenon of demographic winter described above within the two mentioned countries and to analyse the causes and consequences, which will present some differences based on the geographical and socio-cultural context. By comparing these cases, various challenges and potential strategies that can be employed to address the effects of demographic winter in different settings will be illustrated. The key question that will be thoroughly examined in the conclusion has a more sociological nature since it tries to address the underlying intentions and desires of individuals. Are people choosing to have fewer children or to remain childless out of personal desire, or is this choice a result of inadequate family support policies,

² Istituto Superiore di Sanità. (2012, April). L'invecchiamento della popolazione: opportunità o sfida?

economic instability, and workplace conditions that make it challenging, especially for women, to balance their careers with private and family life?

1.2 Introduction to causes and consequences

One of the significant causes of demographic winter is the trend of postponing childbirth. This shift in family planning has emerged as a notable global social issue, becoming more pronounced across most countries over the past few decades. As individuals and couples prioritize education, career development, and personal goals, the decision to delay having children has led to lower birth rates.³ In fact, over the last two to three decades, there's been a noticeable shift in when people choose to have their first child, with the average age rising by 2 to 4 years and often surpassing 30 years old in many countries. Nowadays, many couples are opting for smaller families and choosing to delay having their first child. The data indicates that the choice to have children after the age of 30 has become increasingly popular in many countries.⁴ However, it's important to note that fertility begins to decline after the age of 35, which significantly narrows the window of opportunity for many individuals to conceive. As a result, while people are delaying parenthood, the timeframe in which they can successfully have children has become more limited compared to previous decades.⁵ This trend of postponing childbirth, as previously mentioned, has significant demographic implications, particularly concerning its effects on birth and fertility rates and the overall aging of the population. When women choose to delay their first pregnancy, they face a reduced chance of having more than one or two children. This delay can also increase the risk of unintended childlessness, meaning that some women may find themselves unable to have children when they desire to do so.⁶ Moreover, the delay in childbearing can lead to a range of negative medical outcomes associated with pregnancy,

³ Šprocha, B., Tišliar, P., & Šídlo, L. (2018). A cohort perspective on the fertility postponement transition and low fertility in Central Europe. *Moravian Geographical Reports*, 26, 109-120.

⁴ Bellieni, C. (2016). The best age for pregnancy and undue pressures. *Family Reproductive Health*, 10, 104-107.

⁵ Vasić, P. (2021). Fertility postponement between social context and biological reality: The case of Serbia. *Sociológia - Slovak Sociological Review*, 53, 309-336.

⁶ Lebano, A., & Jamieson, L. (2020). Childbearing in Italy and Spain: Postponement narratives. *Population and Development Review*, 46(1), 121-144.

creating a lot of risks both for the baby and the woman. These can include an increased likelihood of caesarean sections, abortions, and complications during labour, such as prolonged preterm labour.⁷ Other health risks may involve gestational diabetes, stillbirths, hypertension, and bleeding during the third trimester. Additionally, advanced maternal age is often linked to higher rates of maternal mortality, multiple pregnancies, and low birth weight, as well as a greater incidence of genetic conditions like Down syndrome.⁸

When considering the causes of this phenomenon, it has been demonstrated that the variables can be classified as either micro-level or macro-level. Many studies suggest that micro-level factors influencing the delay in childbearing can be categorized into personal and interpersonal aspects. Among the personal factors, those that most significantly affect the postponement of childbearing include women's extended education, participation in the labour market, personality traits, fertility knowledge, individual attitudes, and preferences, as well as physical and psychological preparation.⁹ Among these indicated factors, women's further education will be better analysed and mentioned many times within the thesis as it would appear to be one of the key variables in understanding the phenomenon of declining birth rates. It is evident even if only by following the logic that the more women are educated, the greater the possibility of shaking off the sole aspirational title of 'mother' by having other desires and ambitions that could delay the age of conception of the first child, thus reducing the total number of children that the woman in question will decide to have. A consequential effect of greater female education and emancipation is active participation in the labour market, and numerous studies including a meta-analysis by Matysiak and Vignoli also point to this as one of the reasons for the demographic decline.¹⁰ This issue will also be taken up later in the thesis because it is necessary to try to answer the research question. Do women with higher education and successful

⁷ Sobotka, T., & Beaujouan, É. (2018). Late motherhood in low-fertility countries: Reproductive intentions, trends and consequences. In *Preventing age-related fertility loss*. Switzerland: Springer Publishing.

⁸ Pinheiro, R. L., Areia, A. L., Mota Pinto, A., & Donato, H. (2019). Advanced maternal age: Adverse outcomes of pregnancy: A meta-analysis. *Acta Médica Portuguesa*, 32(4), 219–226.

⁹ Safdari-Dehcheshmeh, F., Noroozi, M., Taleghani, F., & Memar, S. (2023). Factors influencing the delay in childbearing: A narrative review. *Iranian journal of nursing and midwifery research*, 28(1), 10-19.

¹⁰ Matysiak A, Vignoli D. Fertility and women's employment: A meta-analysis. *Eur J Popul* 2008;24:363-84.

careers actually want to delay having children, or is it the unstable and exclusionary work environment that forces them into making this decision? Obviously, it is impossible to generalize, and it would be a mistake to do so because each individual has different aspirations and needs but it is well known that having children is often a major obstacle in women's working lives.¹¹ The personal factors previously mentioned also include aspects such as acquired notions concerning fertility and personal attitudes, these two aspects are clearly interconnected because as it is no longer an obligation for women to be mothers, there is the possibility of choice, and this is nothing but an effect in turn of the second population transition. Thanks to this, in fact, it is the individual with his or her preferences and ideas of self-fulfilment who is at the center and who, if well-informed, freely decides to have a smaller family unit. Always connected to this topic there is the degree of psychological preparation that many women today rightly consider necessary before having a child. In fact, for many individuals now sufficient psychological maturity, typically associated with emotional stability, self-awareness, and the ability to manage stress, is a prerequisite before thinking about parenthood. This will also be a theme that will be further developed in the course of the chapters of this thesis, as it has many facets. While it can and should be considered a positive thing to question one's own mental health before having children in order to avoid causing generational trauma, it is also true that there may be a dose of low self-esteem and impostor syndrome that obstructs and hinders some couples from having children.¹² Shifting from personal to interpersonal factors, it must be explained how the latter ones focus on the woman and her relationships with the people in her surroundings, first and foremost, of course, the partner but also peers, colleagues, relatives, and close friends. It is not difficult to imagine that the first requirement is unambiguously a stable and satisfying relationship with a partner. In fact, having a supportive, emotionally available, empathetic, and reliable partner is one of the factors that

¹¹ Florian SM. Motherhood and employment among Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks: A life course approach. *J Marriage Fam* 2018;80:134-49.

¹² 32. Kearney AL, White KM. Examining the psychosocial determinants of women's decisions to delay childbearing. *Hum Reprod* 2016;31:1776-87.

has the greatest influence on a woman's choice of motherhood.¹³ Secondly, it is also quite clear that other people close to them are also a major influence, mainly for two reasons. On one hand, a good support network, both emotional and practical, made by friends and family is almost a necessity, and on the other hand, a network of friendships in which everyone has children will create a kind of social pressure on the individual to have them. An extremely interesting finding, for example, is that the moment when a childless woman is most likely to desire having children is approximately within the three years following the time when people in her social circle have children.¹⁴ After having briefly examined the micro-level factors above, attention can now be directed towards the macro-level factors, which are deeply more complex to analyse due to their interconnection with broader structural issues in society. Those factors are indeed closely linked to challenges such as the limited focus of public policies in supporting parents, the high costs that can be associated with providing a decent living for a child, and, finally, the issue of housing availability. The lack of policies that simplify and promote a balanced work-life relationship is one of the reasons why it is so difficult for women to have children without compromising their careers. Moreover, the absence of a proper structure for these policies places the burden of parenthood almost exclusively on women, as even when parental leave is available, it is almost always exclusively for women. This, in turn, prevents a fair distribution of childcare responsibilities and perpetuates an outdated and archaic heteronormative narrative that reinforces the idea that this remains the woman's role. Indeed, unfortunately, in heterosexual couples, when one partner needs to switch to part-time work to better manage and care for the family, it is almost always the woman who ends up making this choice. This can have psychologically negative consequences for women, such as increased stress from the near-total responsibility for childcare, as well as feelings of frustration due to a lack of professional fulfilment. This is why the absence of work-family policies has such a significant impact on the delicate decision of when, and even whether,

¹³ Benzies K, Tough S, Tofflemire K, Frick C, Faber A, Newburn-Cook C. Factors influencing women's decisions about timing of motherhood. *J Obstet Gynecol Neonatal Nurs* 2006;35:625-33.

¹⁴ Kotte M, Ludwig V. Intergenerational transmission of fertility intentions and behaviour in Germany: The role of contagion. *Vienna Yearb Popul Res.* 2011;9:207-26.

to have children.¹⁵ Secondly, concerning the economic aspect, the decision to postpone childbearing is driven by the choice to have children only when one has the financial means to support them. Given the precarious employment conditions and the economic insecurity faced by young people, this issue will be addressed later in the thesis when specifically discussing the Italian context, the time when a woman decides to have a child is clearly postponed.¹⁶ There is, therefore, a sense of powerlessness regarding the economic aspect, which, coupled with the lack of supportive policies implemented by the state, creates a particularly unfavourable climate. To further exacerbate the already difficult situation, there is the issue of limited access to housing. In fact, prohibitively high prices, not only for purchasing a home but also for renting, delay the possibility of becoming homeowners and, consequently, of establishing an independent family unit.¹⁷ This issue can also be attributed to extreme urbanization and the disproportionate demand for housing in large urban centres, which far exceeds the available supply. However, breaking this cycle, given the current situation, is challenging and barely possible, as it is precisely these cities that, in theory, offer higher wages and greater opportunities for economic emancipation. Thus, it can be deduced that there is a significant duality emerging from this introductory analysis. While micro-level factors are primarily concerned with personal inclinations and individual desires regarding when and how to have children, macro-level factors simultaneously reveal a harsh and complex reality in which navigating toward a consciously happy pregnancy is far from easy. The considerable uncertainties caused by unstable economies and the absence of supportive state systems, which leave significant gaps, certainly do not facilitate the desire to have more than one child at a young age. Moreover, central to this situation is the perspective offered by gender studies. Would the demographic decline still be as alarming if Italy and Brazil—

¹⁵ Brown LM. The relationship between motherhood and professional advancement: Perceptions versus reality. *Employ Relat* 2010;32: 470-494.

¹⁶ Brauner-Otto SR, Geist C. Uncertainty, doubts, and delays: Economic circumstances and childbearing expectations among emerging adults. *J Fam Econ Issues* 2018;39:88-102.

¹⁷ Mills M, Rindfuss RR, McDonald P, te Velde E. Why do people postpone parenthood? Reasons and social policy incentives. *Hum Reprod Update* 2011;17:848-60.

the two countries discussed in this thesis— were more progressive in their approach to gender roles and the sharing and distribution of domestic and family responsibilities?

Population decline is so felt now in Europe, especially in countries such as Italy, Germany, and Spain, because this phenomenon is expected to significantly affect the economic development and funding of cities and regions. This trend is already impacting over one-third of the cities in these countries. Moreover, as previously mentioned, these demographic shifts have substantial consequences for overall productivity growth and how resources are allocated among different age groups.¹⁸ Furthermore, this phenomenon also has repercussions on the structure and operation of welfare, in particular its benefits, such as retirement pensions. In fact, continuing to analyse the case of Europe, its welfare state was founded on the belief that, throughout modern economic growth, there would be a continuous and indefinite rise in both labour productivity and population. This growth was intended to support the distribution of welfare benefits to those reaching retirement age at that time. According to the above-mentioned state model, this consumption would be funded by the subsequent generation, which is expected to be larger and more productive than the preceding generations.¹⁹ There are three types of welfare state regimes: liberal, corporatist, and social democratic. Despite their differences, they all rely on financing current consumption through anticipated future revenue from a larger, more productive population. While the liberal model is the most sustainable and the social democratic model is the most costly, neither can be maintained long-term in the face of a shrinking or stagnant population, as achieving the necessary labour productivity gains would be unrealistic.²⁰ From the economic point of view, this is the main aspect to be investigated: the instability and unsustainability of the demographic winter phenomenon. In fact, it has also been shown by different studies how an aging population is likely to be less inclined to save and more focused on consumption: a smaller

¹⁸ Carbonaro, G., Leanza, E., McCann, P., & Medda, F. (2018). Demographic decline, population aging, and modern financial approaches to urban policy. *International Regional Science Review*, 41(2), 210-232.

¹⁹ Fabisiak, J., & Prokurat, S. (2012). Age management as a tool for the demographic decline in the 21st century: An overview of its characteristics. *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation (JEMI)*, 8(4), 83-96.

²⁰ Esping-Andersen G. (2007). Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism. In: Pierson C., Castles F.G., The Welfare State Reader. Polity, London.

working-age population relative to its dependents will likely lead to lower productivity levels or increased labour costs.²¹

Thus, it is evident that this rapid and tangible population aging, combined with declining fertility rates, poses a significant threat to the fiscal sustainability of public pension systems. In Italy, by 2050, the share of the population aged over 65 is expected to increase by 12.3%, a statistic that cannot be overlooked and rightly raises concern.²² As previously mentioned, these demographic changes, together with increasing longevity, are driving up the costs associated with pensions. Already in 2009, more than a decade ago, public pension expenditures in OECD countries accounted for an average of 7% of GDP, almost double the figure from 1980.²³ Further intensifying the pressure and concern is the decline in fertility rates below the replacement level, which results in a shrinking future workforce needed to finance the PAYG systems. These systems are based on mandatory contributions paid by the working-age population to finance the pensions of current retirees. For this model to function flawlessly and without issues, it should be assumed that the population is either growing or stable, with a low old-age dependency ratio. In fact, for the system to be sustainable, the population growth rate should be equal to or greater than the market interest rate. However, since the number of elderly people (those over 65) relative to the working-age population (ages 15-64) is continuously increasing within the countries that were selected for analysis, the fiscal pressure rises. Another factor to consider is the replacement rate, which is the ratio of net pension to net pre-retirement income. When these rates are disproportionately high, they risk causing inefficiencies in the labour market by encouraging early retirement, which in turn exacerbates the fiscal imbalance. In Mediterranean countries, where the average replacement rates range from 67% to 73%, the risk of fiscal unsustainability is higher, as not only are fertility rates low, but pensions are also generous compared to other fiscal systems.²⁴

²¹ Bloom D., Freeman R., Korenman S. (1987). The Labor Market Consequences of Generational Crowding. *European Journal of Population*, 131-176.

²² United Nations. (2010). *World population prospects: The 2010 revision*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations.

²³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2011). *Pensions at a glance: Retirement-income systems in OECD and G20 countries*. OECD Publishing.

²⁴ Verbič, M. (2014). Aging population and public pensions: Theory and macroeconomic evidence. *Panoeconomicus*, 61(3), 289-316.

Population aging also presents additional challenges related to welfare. In societies with a growing number of elderly individuals that are also facing a demographic winter the demand for healthcare and home care services is significantly increasing. Consequently, the risk of being unable to meet this demand becomes tragically more tangible. Another major transition related to the aging population is the epidemiological transition in emerging health issues. This shift moved from a prevalence of infectious and deficiency diseases to a dominance of chronic degenerative conditions. Especially in wealthier and industrialized countries, in fact, the global burden of disease is associated with cardio and cerebrovascular diseases, but also with neuropsychiatric disorders, including in particular depression and Alzheimer's disease.²⁵

While the economic challenges associated with the so-called demographic winter are indeed pressing, it's important to recognize that certain political factions, particularly those with conservative and right-wing ideologies, often instrumentalize these issues for their agendas. Those political parties, in fact, may promote outdated family models that no longer align with contemporary societal needs, arguing that these structures are essential for reversing the above-mentioned demographic trends. However, these models can be equally unsustainable, failing to address the complexities of modern life, such as changing gender roles, urbanization, and the increasing importance of work-life balance. This approach not only simplifies a multifaceted problem but also overlooks the potential for more progressive solutions that could better support families and individuals in today's world.²⁶

1.3 Variables

To contextualize the terminology that will be used in this thesis, it is necessary to introduce some definitions and their meanings. The first two terms that need to be explained and distinguished are birth rate and fertility rate. Those are two essential demographic indicators that offer valuable insights into population dynamics. Although they are interconnected, they measure different aspects of

²⁵ Lopez, A. D., Mathers, C. D., Ezzati, M., Jamison, D. T., & Murray, C. J. L. (Eds.). (2006). *Global burden of disease and risk factors*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

²⁶ Prijatelj-Spare, S. (2014). Sociological Analysis and Critique of the "Demographic Winter" Framing Strategy.

population growth and can provide unique information. Birth rate is defined as the number of live births occurring in a population over a specified time frame, typically one year, expressed per 1,000 individuals. To calculate this variable, the total number of live births during the period is divided by the overall population size and then multiplied by 1,000. This metric provides a clear snapshot of population growth in terms of new births.²⁷ Differently, the fertility rate measures the average number of children a woman is expected to have over her lifetime. It is calculated by aggregating the age-specific fertility rates across all reproductive ages and multiplying this figure by the duration of the reproductive span. The fertility rate is typically expressed as the number of children per woman, offering a broader perspective on reproductive behavior within a population.²⁸ Birth rates and fertility rates are both affected by a diverse variety of factors, including social, economic, cultural, and healthcare-related influences. These elements can vary considerably from one country or region to another, leading to notable differences in both variables. One of the factors that can modify the birth or fertility rates is economic development and income levels, because they play a crucial role. Typically, higher income levels and improved economic opportunities are associated with lower birth and fertility rates. For this reason, in wealthier societies, individuals often prioritize education and career advancement over starting families, leading to a shift in reproductive choices. Access to healthcare and family planning services is another important factor. The availability and affordability of healthcare resources, including contraceptives, significantly shape birth and fertility rates. When these services are effective, individuals, especially women, are empowered to make informed decisions about when and how many children to have. Furthermore, the education and empowerment of women are strongly linked to lower birth and fertility rates.²⁹

Birth and fertility rates show considerable variation across different countries and regions, influenced by the factors previously mentioned. In developing nations, these rates are often higher, which can be

²⁷ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, October 8). birth rate. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/science/birth-rate>

²⁸ Smoak, N. (2022, February 27). fertility rate. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fertility-rate>

²⁹ Roser, M. (2014). Fertility rate. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/fertility-rate>

attributed to lower educational attainment, restricted access to healthcare, and cultural practices that support larger families. On the other hand, developed countries typically experience lower birth and fertility rates. This trend is linked to higher levels of education, improved access to healthcare and family planning services, and evolving societal norms. Additionally, there are notable regional differences within countries for the same reasons, as seen in Brazil: urban areas usually report lower birth and fertility rates compared to rural and less developed ones.

Two other variables that will be named recurrently within the thesis because they help to understand the issue three-dimensionally are the female literacy rate and the female education rate. The two terms are sometimes mistakenly confused and interchanged, yet they have distinct meanings and therefore refer to different data. The first term, female literacy rate, refers to the acquisition of fundamental skills, yet often nontrivial in various regions of the world. These competencies specifically involve the ability to read and write independently. More specifically, the definition according to the World Bank Data is the percentage of females ages 15 and above who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement about their everyday life. In order to calculate this value it's not used the simple average but the weighted one, in fact, the data aggregation method applied gives a specific weight to each value, and therefore the more relevant or significant values have a greater impact on the final result. In short, this methodology allows for a more accurate representation of data by considering the relative importance of each value when calculating the overall result.³⁰ The female youth literacy rate, on the other hand, exclusively takes into account the 15-24 age group and its function is, as for the previous one, to measure progress from decade to decade by indicating the percentage of the female population in this age range who have completed primary education.³¹ However, this is a parameter that is not always very clear, as one should assume that there is a broad spectrum of literacy skills, not a binary distinction system with an Aut-Aut principle. Moreover,

³⁰ World Bank. (2024). Literacy rate, female (% of females ages 15 and above). World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.FE.ZS?view=chart>

³¹ World Bank. (2024). Youth literacy rate, female (% of females ages 15-24). World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.FE.ZS?view=chart>

everything appears to be more complex since there seem to be no rigid and well-established parameters, as there are as many as four categories of methods that States use to measure literacy rate. These four methods are: self-reported literacy declared directly by individuals, self-reported literacy declared by the head of the household, tested literacy from proficiency examinations, and indirect estimation. For the first two categories, which are based on self-declaration, there is typically no formal test, instead, the data is collected from a simple yes or no response to the question of whether the individual can read and write. Both Brazil and Italy, in measuring literacy rates, are among the countries that rely on self-reported data for their estimates. However, the types of sources used by the two countries are different: Italy uses a census while Brazil uses surveys. Concerning the last method, the indirect estimation to collect the data is based on the academic goals achieved, verifying the degree the individual has attained. The main limitation of both self-declaration methods and the educational attainment method is subjectivity. In the first two cases, the results may be compromised by the notion that everyone may have of reading and writing and, furthermore, if only one individual is to report literacy on behalf of the entire household, there may be responses that are not very mindful of the conditions of women and children since these groups are not considered the head of the household in the surveys. Likewise, since the level of literacy provided by schools is not the same in all geographical areas, the same years of study may not necessarily lead to equal results. This is why in recent years, to try to tackle the issues described above, several countries have been attempting to create standardized tests to really understand the actual basic education level and consequently to assess the literacy rate.³² The term education rate, by contrast, refers to a broader concept than literacy, as it covers a wider range of academic achievements. While it is always true that all educated individuals are literate, the opposite is not necessarily true. In fact, this parameter takes into account not only the basic ability to read and write but also the cognitive development of the individual, highlighting the ability to utilize these skills to cultivate critical thinking and to conduct a coherent,

³² Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Beltekian, D. (2018) How is literacy measured? Our World in Data.
<https://ourworldindata.org/how-is-literacy-measured>

rational, and well-organized analysis of different topics. So, when talking about educational rate, scholars are referring to a level of education that goes beyond the simple process of literacy. These two parameters will, as already announced, be repeated several times within the thesis, as the close correlation between the level of schooling and literacy of women and the demographic decline will be emphasized.

PART II. THE ITALIAN SCENARIO

2.1 A panoramic overview of Italy's demographic decline

It is undeniable that Italy is facing a period of growing and persistent demographic decline, with a continuous reduction in birth rates that is now rapidly assuming structural characteristics and already presenting profound impacts on various aspects of society.

Fertility indicators, in fact, show a gradual deterioration that takes on increasingly worrying characteristics: in 2023, the average number of children per woman fell to 1.20, down from 1.24 in 2022 and significantly lower than the 1.44 recorded in 2010. Preliminary analysis of the first seven months of 2024 indicates substantial stability of the indicator at 1.21, but the absolute number of births has contracted further by 2.1%, mainly due to the reduction of the female population of childbearing age, a phenomenon that highlights how demographic decline is self-feeding through the gradual erosion of the population's reproductive base.³³ The dramatic phenomenon of declining birth rates in Italy can be explained and justified by the volatile dynamics of the birth rate experienced in the past 70 years. In fact, Italy's population trends showed few distinct phases after World War II. Following initial post-war recovery in 1946 and a period of slowdown until 1951, the country experienced significant growth during its 'economic miracle,' leading to a parenthesis of increasing birth rates through the mid-1960s. The number of births then gradually normalized until a sharp decline began in 1974. After that, the decline was extremely severe - annual births fell from 886,000 in 1974 to 628,000 by 198 and continued dropping until reaching 526,000 in 1995. The situation worsened further when this previous low was surpassed in 2013, followed by continuous yearly decreases in births from 2014 through 2022.³⁴ Therefore, it's important to emphasize that this is not a temporary and short-term phenomenon. Still, on the contrary, the so-called demographic winter has

³³ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. (2024). *Natalità e fecondità della popolazione residente: Anno 2023*. Istat. <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Natalita-in-Italia-Anno-2023.pdf>

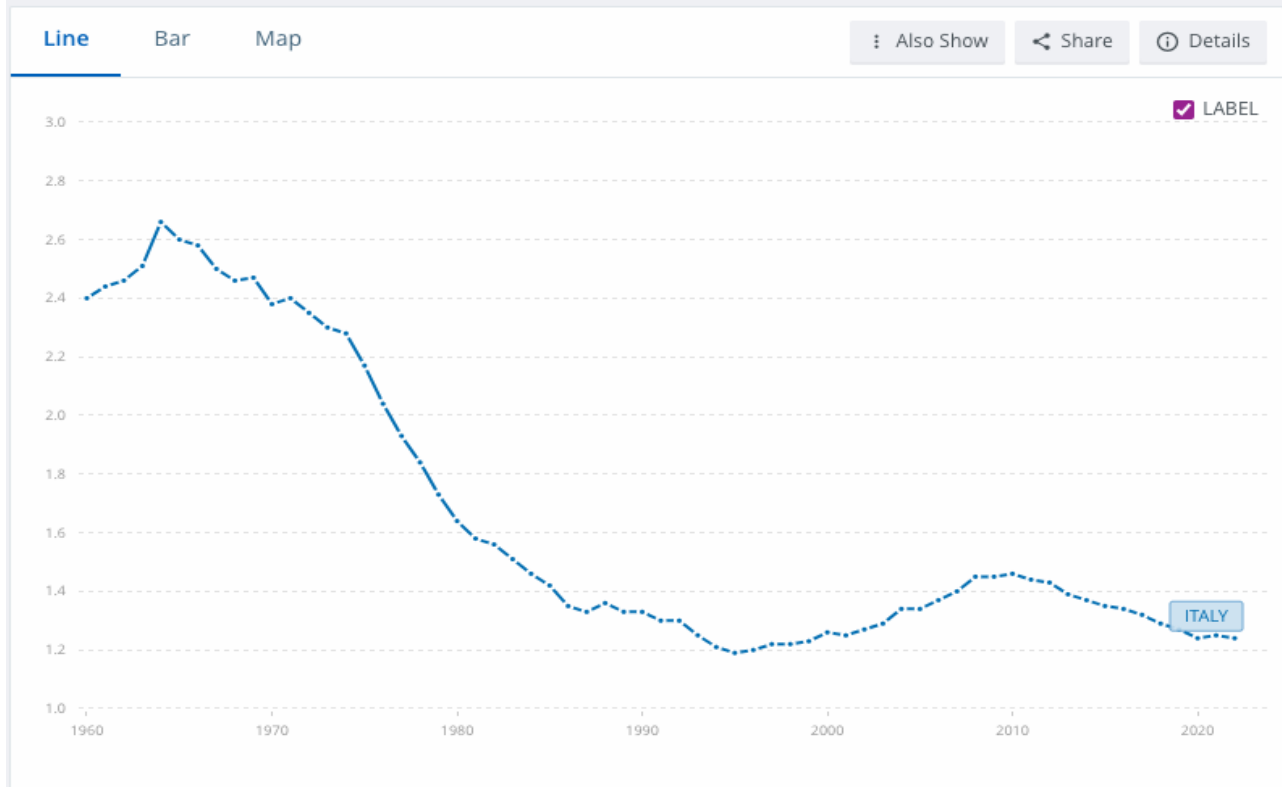
³⁴ Blangiardo, G. C. (2024). The 'demographic winter' in Italy: Crisis factors, problematic issues and policy actions. *European View*, 23(1), 14-21.

been caused by decades of constant reduction in the fertility rate, complicit in the non-existent policies of support for women, which will also be discussed in this chapter.

Fertility rate, total (births per woman) - Italy

(1) United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects: 2022 Revision; (2) Statistical databases and publications from national statistical offices; (3) Eurostat: Demographic Statistics.

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WORLD BANK³⁵

The graph above, sourced from World Bank Data, shows Italy's total fertility rate (average number of children per woman) from 1960 to 2020. As previously explained, there was a sharp decline in fertility between the 1960s and mid-1990s, dropping from approximately 2.6 to just over 1.2 children per woman. A slight recovery occurred between 2000 and 2010, followed by another decline until 2020.

³⁵ World Bank. (n.d.). *Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – Italy*. World Bank. Retrieved February 5, 2025, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=IT>

The graph thus illustrates the general trend, highlighting a significant reduction in birth rates in Italy over recent decades.

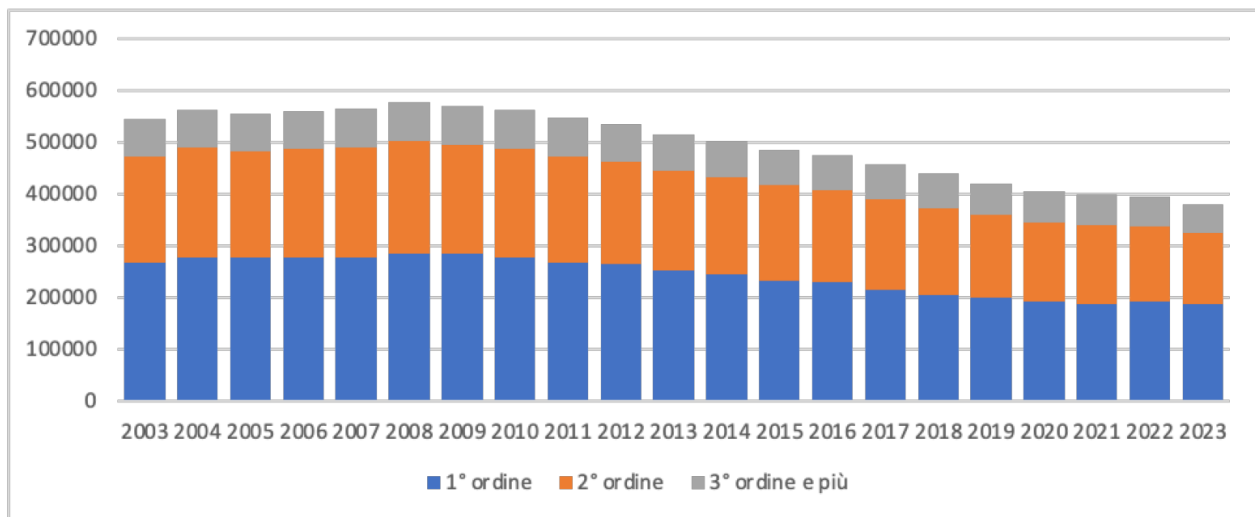
One of the unequivocal symptoms that confirms this negative fertility trend is the analysis of ISTAT's 2023 data, with first-order births recorded at 186,613, marking a 3.1% decrease compared to the previous year. This figure, returning to 2021 levels, highlights how the increase in firstborns observed in 2022 was merely a temporary fluctuation, attributable to the recovery of previously postponed reproductive plans during the pandemic. The decline in births also extends to subsequent orders, with second children decreasing by 4.5% and those of higher order by 1.7%, outlining a general downward trend affecting all areas of the country, although with varying intensity: the North records the smallest reduction (-2.8%), while the Center experiences the most significant contraction (-3.6%).

Long-term historical analysis reveals the profound and persistent nature of this negative demographic trend: since 2008, first-borns have declined by 34.4%, second-borns by 36.3%, and next-order children by 26.5%. The territorial disparities in this dynamic are particularly significant, with the Center emerging as the hardest hit area, registering a 40.6% reduction in both first and second children. The South, while showing a less intense contraction (-27.5% for first-borns and -34.5% for second-borns), does not escape the general trend of decline. These geographical data are not only related to statistics but reflect the complexity of socio-economic dynamics that differentially influence reproductive choices in different geographical areas of the country. Barriers to parenthood manifest themselves through multiple interconnected dimensions that go far beyond mere difficulties in transitioning from first to second child.³⁶ The sociological reading given within the ISTAT report identifies several determinants that are intertwined and mutually reinforcing: the prolonged stay in the family of origin, which is increasingly pronounced in the new generations; persistent job insecurity, which particularly characterizes entry into the labour market; growing difficulties in the housing market, with real estate prices and rents making housing autonomy problematic; and the

³⁶ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. (2024). *Natalità e fecondità della popolazione residente: Anno 2023*. Istat. <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Natalita-in-Italia-Anno-2023.pdf>

conscious choice to postpone parenthood for professional or personal reasons, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common, especially among women with higher levels of education - as will be analysed. Moreover, as explained in the previous chapter, statistics regarding first child births are very important for attempting to make projections about different family units. In fact, the delay in having a first child significantly reduces the probability of subsequent pregnancies, as advancing maternal age decreases the likelihood of having second or third children.

Number of births in Italy from 2003 to 2023, broken down by birth order



ISTAT 2024³⁷

The stacked bar chart above shows the number of births in Italy from 2003 to 2023, broken down by birth order: first child (blue), second child (orange), and third child or more (grey). This type of chart effectively displays both the overall birth trend over time and the internal composition of births by category. As explained in the paragraph above, there is a steady decline in births during this period, with a significant decrease starting in 2011. All categories show a reduction, though the number of

³⁷ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. (2024, February 21). Natalità e fecondità della popolazione residente – Anno 2023. *ISTAT*. <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/natalita-e-fecondita-della-popolazione-residente-anno-2023/>

first children (blue) appears relatively more stable compared to others. The decline is particularly pronounced after 2015, with a steeper drop in recent years.

Regarding the topic of firstborns and mothers' age, it is interesting to note how in Italy, the average age at childbirth continues to increase. Concerning firstborns, in 2023, the average age of new mothers reached 31.7 years, showing a significant increase compared to 1995, when it was 28 years. There is a significant gap between Italian and foreign mothers, with the former giving birth on average at 33 years and the latter at 29.7 years. This regional analysis of childbearing age across Italy unveils once again distinct geographical patterns and disparities. The Central and Northern regions demonstrate higher average ages at childbirth (32.9 and 32.6 years respectively) compared to the Southern regions (32.2 years). Sardinia stands out as a particularly noteworthy case, recording the highest average maternal age at 33.2 years. In the North, both Veneto and Lombardy share relatively high average ages of 32.7 years, while the autonomous Province of Bolzano presents an interesting exception with the lowest average age in the North at 31.9 years. Finally, in contrast, Sicily records the lowest average maternal age in the entire country at 31.7 years - a full year and a half younger than Sardinia's average.

Another factor that continues to play a significant role in the Italian demographic dynamics, even with evolving trends, is the foreign component of the population. In 2023, birth decline from at least one foreign parent continued, representing 21.3% of total births, decreasing from 82,216 in 2022 to 80,942 in 2023. Historical analysis highlights an overall decline of 27,000 units since 2012, revealing how even the immigrant population is gradually adopting reproductive patterns more similar to those of the native Italian population. A particularly significant and interesting factor is the stability in births from mixed couples (29,495), which contrasts with the decline in births from parents who are both foreign (-3.1%, from 53,079 to 51,447). This mentioned trend suggests an ongoing process of integration and a gradual alignment with the reproductive patterns of the host society. It's also interesting to underline how the territorial distribution of foreign births varies across Italy, mirroring the settlement patterns of the immigrant population. In the North, the percentage of births from at

least one foreign parent reaches 30%, in the Center it's 23.7%, while it remains significantly lower in the South (9%). Emilia-Romagna has the highest proportion of foreign-born births at 21.9%, followed by Liguria and Lombardia at 20%. This pattern underscores how migration continues to shape Italy's demographic trends, with significant regional differences that obviously reflect the varying economic opportunities of the different Italian areas.³⁸

2.2 The complex journey of Italy's educational development

As introduced in the previous chapter, women's education has been fundamental to their emancipation and the evolution of women's roles beyond traditional domestic spheres. In fact, as women gained access to higher education and built successful careers, they began to see motherhood as a choice rather than an obligation, fundamentally reshaping traditional expectations about women's roles in society.

Examining the Italian educational history and its accessibility, some significant historical developments can be revealed. An extremely interesting turning point on this timeline is the immediate post-World War II period because it marked the first democratic restructuring of the Italian school system after more than two decades of fascist rule. A symptom of this new wave of democracy was the 1948 Constitution, which represented a watershed moment for democracy, giving voice to those democratic ideologies that had been suppressed during the fascist era. This constitutional document explicitly established education as an "inalienable right" for all individuals. Moreover, in accordance with Article 3 of the Italian Constitution, the State committed itself to removing obstacles, particularly economic barriers, that might prevent individuals from fully exercising their right to education.³⁹ This commitment represented a fundamental shift from previous policies and laid the groundwork for more inclusive educational opportunities. The new constitutional framework

³⁸ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. (2024). *Natalità e fecondità della popolazione residente: Anno 2023*. Istat. <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Natalita-in-Italia-Anno-2023.pdf>

³⁹ Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana. (1947). Art. 3. Retrieved from <https://www.senato.it/istituzione/la-costituzione/principi-fondamentali/articolo-3>

recognized education not just as a privilege for the elite, but as a fundamental right necessary for personal development and social mobility. This transformation was especially significant for women, as it created legal and institutional support for their educational advancement. Obviously, it was not an immediate process, and it took a few more years before the principles regarding school and education established by the 1948 Constitution - including compulsory education extended until the age of fourteen, which was the other explicit requirement expressed in Article 34 - found full and effective implementation.⁴⁰ In fact, at the beginning, in the 1950s, Italy gradually moved towards a period marked by a stagnant school system, as the educational model remained divided into two distinct paths, designed to maintain existing social hierarchies and the dominance of the ruling classes. On one side, middle school provided access to high school, reserved for the elite; on the other, vocational training was intended for the most disadvantaged social groups.⁴¹ Obviously, there were public condemnations of this phenomenon, which had become deeply entrenched. Among these, the most renowned came during the Central Committee of the PCI in 1955, when the new head of the party's cultural division, Mario Alicata, who succeeded Emilio Sereni, emphasized how central education was to the democratic revival of the nation. On that occasion, it was decided to delegate the task of addressing educational issues to a new journalistic publication, the magazine *Riforma della Scuola*, which was founded that exact year.⁴² Thus, it was precisely in the pages of that magazine that intellectuals such as Lucio Lombardo Radice, Dina Bertoni Jovine, and Mario Alighiero Manacorda denounced the failure to implement constitutional provisions regarding educational issues. They particularly expressed concern about the high school dropout rates, pointing to an explicit selection process based on a significant differentiation of opportunities, rooted in a marked class distinction.⁴³ Towards the end of the decade covering the 1950s, Italy's economic and political landscape changed

⁴⁰ Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana. (1947). Art. 34. Retrieved from <https://www.senato.it/istituzione/la-costituzione/parte-i/titolo-ii/articolo-34>

⁴¹ Baldacci, M. (2019). *La scuola al bivio. Mercato o democrazia?* (Vol. 1, pp. 5-252). FrancoAngeli.

⁴² Meta, C. La costruzione della scuola democratica in Italia negli anni del secondo dopoguerra: un percorso accidentato. *Dagli ideali di inclusione sociale al modello "aziendalista" neoliberista*, 37-54.

⁴³ Cardoni, P. (2001). *Riforma della Scuola»: appunti per un difficile bilancio. L'educazione dell'uomo completo. Scritti in onore di Mario Alighiero Manacorda*. Milano: La Nuova Italia-RCS Libri, 226-260.

profoundly as a result of the economic boom. This mentioned phenomenon led to a reconsideration and reassessment of the role of education, paving the way for a period that scholar Baldacci associates with a "contradictory educational reformism", which, in his view, would only be concluded in 1968.⁴⁴ The early 1960s marked a turning point in Italian education, as political changes finally created the right conditions to implement what the Constitution had long promised: extending mandatory education until age 14. When Law No. 1859 came into effect on December 31, 1962, establishing a unified middle school system, it represented more than just a compromise between the Christian Democrats and Socialists: it was the culmination of years of grassroots activism, with unions and progressive groups pushing hard for educational reform.⁴⁵ The intellectual community, particularly those writing for the journal "School Reform," played a crucial role in shaping this democratic transformation. Manacorda, who had been brought on board by the Communist Party's cultural department, was especially influential in driving these changes forward. The introduction of unified middle schools was nothing short of revolutionary for Italian society. For the first time, it challenged the deeply rooted class distinctions that had long defined Italian education. Perhaps most significantly, it eliminated the early vocational training system that had effectively forced children to choose between academic studies and practical work at a very young age. Before this reform, a child's path in life was largely determined by their family's social status and economic means rather than their individual potential and aspirations.⁴⁶ This new system aimed to level the playing field, giving all children, regardless of their background, a chance at a comprehensive education. This bold reform, while significant, was part of a larger and more complex political landscape during the Center-left coalition's most dynamic period in Italian history. Historical interpretations of this Center-left era (1962-1968) remain divided. Some recent historians, following Agostino Giovagnoli's perspective, view this period - from Fanfani's first government in 1962 through Aldo Moro's three governments

⁴⁴ Baldacci, M. (2019). *La scuola al bivio. Mercato o democrazia?* (Vol. 1, pp. 5-252). FrancoAngeli.

⁴⁵ Gazzetta Ufficiale. (1963, January 30). <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1963/01/30/062U1859/sg>

⁴⁶ Angelucci, A., & Aragno, G. (2020). *Le mani sulla scuola: La crisi della libertà di insegnare e di imparare*. Castelveccchi.

with Socialist participation - as the only meaningful expansion of democratic participation during the Cold War.⁴⁷ Others, aligned with Yannis Voulgaris's interpretation, see it as a period of "missed reformism" where ambitious structural reforms were watered down to mere "corrective" measures that failed to fundamentally challenge Italy's patrimonial capitalism and industrial power structure.^{48,49} The limitations of these reforms became increasingly apparent by the mid-1960s. When it became clear that the government was pursuing a "minimalist" approach rather than fundamental change, Italy experienced its first major post-war turning point: the student protests of 1968. This movement, which had transnational cultural implications, emerged partly in response to the limitations of top-down reformism that had failed to achieve truly democratic access to education. What followed was remarkable: a series of reforms driven not by top-down government initiatives but by grassroots movements, combining student activism with workers' protests during the "Hot Autumn."⁵⁰ This period produced remarkable changes in quick succession: the establishment of state-run kindergartens in 1968⁵¹, the introduction of full-time schooling in 1971, the "150 hours" workers' education program in 1973, the Delegated Decrees of 1974, and the 1977 Law 517⁵² which abolished numerical grades and reduced selective practices in primary schools. Finally, the 1968 state kindergarten law (Law 68/444) formally acknowledged the feminist movement's revolutionary principles, including the rejection of gender-based care work and the universalization of services.⁵³ However, as feminist educator Elena Gianini Belotti pointed out, old attitudes died hard - the very Italian name "scuola

⁴⁷ Giovagnoli, A. (2016). *La Repubblica degli italiani: 1946-2016*. Gius. Laterza & Figli Spa.

⁴⁸ Vacca, G. (2018). *L'Italia contesa: comunisti e democristiani nel lungo dopoguerra (1943-1978)*. Marsilio Editori spa.

⁴⁹ Voulgaris, Y. (1998). *L'Italia del centro-sinistra, 1960-1968. (No Title)*.

⁵⁰ Trentin, B., & Liguori, G. (1999). *Autunno caldo: il secondo biennio rosso 1968-1969. (No Title)*.

⁵¹ Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito. (n.d.). I primi 50 anni della scuola dell'infanzia. <https://www.mim.gov.it/-/i-primi-50-anni-della-scuola-dell-infanzia>

⁵² Italian Government. (1977, August 18). Legge 4 agosto 1977, n. 517. Gazzetta Ufficiale. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1977/08/18/077U0517/sg>

⁵³ Italian Government. (1968, April 22). Legge 18 marzo 1968, n. 444. Gazzetta Ufficiale. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1968/04/22/068U0444/sg>

materna", which literally translates to "maternal school" rather than "children's school" revealed how deeply ingrained traditional gender roles remained in Italian society.⁵⁴

While Italy's educational reforms of the 1960s and early 1970s made significant strides, several structural challenges emerged that would ultimately limit their transformative potential. This was not exclusive to Italy, but rather mirrored wider changes occurring throughout the Western world by the late 1970s. The rise of aggressive neo-conservatism, spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, marked a decisive shift away from the social democratic compromise between capital and labour that had characterized the post-war decades. This political transformation had profound implications for education reform. In fact, the progressive left forces that had driven Italy's modernization in the 1960s found themselves increasingly marginalized, while a new educational paradigm began to become established. This shift had actually begun in the United States in the late 1960s with Jerome Bruner's structuralist approach and curriculum theories that emphasized performance and efficiency, concepts that would later align perfectly with neoliberal ideals.⁵⁵ This also influenced the European Union's approach to education, and it was clearly visible in two key initiatives. First, the 1995 *Libro Bianco su istruzione e formazione* fundamentally changed the conversation about education's purpose; instead of focusing on democratic values and personal development, it emphasized preparing students for an increasingly competitive global economy.⁵⁶ Then, in 2000, the Lisbon Strategy went even further, setting specific educational targets that treated schools more like businesses, measuring success through efficiency metrics and competitive outcomes.⁵⁷ Even with the criticism of not having fully achieved its democratic ideals, it is important to underline what Italy's school system actually achieved in the post-war period. It served two vital and crucial purposes: first, as a means to heal and reunify a nation torn apart by war, and second, as

⁵⁴ Belotti, E. G. (1991). *Dalla parte delle bambine: l'influenza dei condizionamenti sociali nella formazione del ruolo femminile nei primi anni di vita* (Vol. 45). Feltrinelli Editore.

⁵⁵ Mao, R., Chen, Z., & Hu, Y. (2024, September). Bruner's Structuralist Educational Ideas and Their Implications for Today's Education. In *2024 3rd International Conference on Science Education and Art Appreciation (SEAA 2024)* (pp. 653-659). Atlantis Press.

⁵⁶ Cresson, E. (1995). *Libro bianco su istruzione e formazione: insegnare e apprendere: verso la società conoscitiva*.

⁵⁷ Capperucci, D. (2013). *La scuola in Europa. Politiche e interventi dell'Unione europea in materia d'istruzione e formazione* (pp. 5-259). Franco Angeli.

a vehicle for emancipating future generations, especially for women. Thus, it can be stated that the system, despite its imperfections, helped transform Italy from a fragmented post-war society into a modern nation where education became a tool for social mobility and national unity.

ANNI SCOLASTICI	Scuole primarie			Scuole secondarie di primo grado			Scuole secondarie di secondo grado (b)		
	Maschi	Femmine	Maschi e femmine	Maschi	Femmine	Maschi e femmine	Maschi	Femmine	Maschi e femmine
1949/50	72,6	62,0	67,4	18,8	13,1	16,0	10,9	6,7	8,8
1950/51	86,6	73,5	80,2	20,5	14,4	17,5	10,9	6,9	8,9
1951/52	84,3	72,3	78,4	23,5	16,8	20,2	11,1	7,4	9,2
1952/53	83,8	73,5	78,8	26,6	18,5	22,6	11,2	7,6	9,4
1953/54	83,9	75,5	79,8	31,8	22,6	27,3	12,0	8,1	10,1
1954/55	83,8	76,9	80,5	33,8	23,7	28,8	13,1	8,9	11,0
1955/56	68,0	61,8	65,0	33,8	24,6	29,3	13,5	9,3	11,4
1956/57	75,6	70,4	73,1	35,2	26,0	30,7	14,6	10,0	12,4
1957/58	86,0	81,6	83,9	36,8	27,6	32,3	15,2	10,3	12,8
1958/59	97,4	91,8	94,7	31,2	23,2	27,3	18,9	12,3	15,7
1959/60	94,6	90,5	92,6	37,1	28,6	32,9	19,9	12,8	16,4
1960/61	94,6	91,2	92,9	41,8	32,4	37,2	20,7	13,4	17,1
1961/62	92,2	88,5	90,4	52,5	42,8	47,8	21,9	14,1	18,0
1962/63	89,1	87,9	88,5	47,5	46,0	46,8	23,3	14,8	19,1
1963/64	87,2	85,3	86,2	59,0	48,4	53,8	21,2	15,1	18,2
1964/65	88,9	87,7	88,3	64,4	52,5	58,6	24,7	18,1	21,5
1965/66	89,8	89,4	89,6	66,6	59,4	63,1	26,5	19,7	23,2
1966/67	91,4	90,7	91,1	62,1	54,9	58,6	30,7	22,6	26,8
1967/68	89,2	98,6	93,8	64,6	57,9	61,3	31,9	24,5	28,3
1968/69	92,1	92,3	92,2	66,3	60,5	63,5	38,4	29,8	34,2
1969/70	90,2	90,5	90,3	73,2	66,9	70,1	42,9	33,1	38,1
1970/71	93,4	93,4	93,4	78,3	72,3	75,3	45,5	34,4	40,0
1971/72	100,6	100,9	100,7	83,8	76,8	80,4	46,8	37,6	42,3
1972/73	102,2	101,8	102,0	88,0	82,3	85,2	48,3	36,5	42,5
1973/74	99,0	100,3	99,7	84,6	79,8	82,3	48,2	39,0	43,6
1974/75	103,3	103,6	103,5	90,9	86,0	88,5	50,2	41,4	45,8
1975/76	100,9	102,3	101,6	88,9	88,1	88,5	52,9	43,8	48,4
1976/77	99,0	102,7	100,8	87,2	87,6	87,4	54,1	44,1	49,2
1977/78	100,7	103,7	102,1	92,6	89,2	91,0	53,3	46,5	50,0
1978/79	100,7	103,9	102,3	89,0	89,4	89,2	51,4	44,5	48,0
1979/80	99,0	102,4	100,7	89,3	89,2	89,3	48,2	45,3	46,8
1980/81	98,7	101,9	100,2	89,5	89,0	89,3	50,0	45,9	48,0
1981/82	97,6	101,3	99,4	89,3	89,6	89,5	48,5	47,0	47,7
1982/83	97,8	101,7	99,7	91,1	91,0	91,1	48,8	47,7	48,3
1983/84	98,1	100,8	99,4	92,9	93,3	93,1	50,6	49,0	49,8
1984/85	97,8	100,6	99,2	92,9	93,7	93,3	36,9	43,9	40,4
1985/86	99,3	100,0	99,6	92,3	94,3	93,3	39,6	43,4	41,5
1986/87	100,1	99,5	99,8	94,7	95,3	95,0	40,2	44,7	42,4
1987/88	100,8	99,2	100,0	94,0	95,1	94,6	41,8	47,2	44,5
1988/89	100,7	99,3	100,0	95,9	96,6	96,2	44,1	50,2	47,1
1989/90	100,6	99,8	100,2	99,5	98,5	99,0	45,5	52,3	48,8
1990/91	102,2	101,4	101,8	100,7	99,9	100,3	48,2	54,5	51,3
1991/92	101,2	100,5	100,9	....	....	100,7	52,2	58,2	55,2
1992/93	102,6	101,8	102,2	....	....	100,7	53,8	60,4	57,0
1993/94	101,9	103,3	102,6	....	....	100,6	57,1	64,2	60,6
1994/95	102,5	103,3	102,9	....	....	99,8	59,5	67,9	63,6
1995/96	104,1	100,4	102,3	106,1	95,4	100,9	62,6	71,7	67,1
1996/97	....	....	103,6	106,1	96,3	101,3	63,8	74,9	69,2
1997/98	....	....	103,1	....	....	100,7	66,6	78,5	72,5
1998/99	....	....	101,8	....	....	100,2	65,3	76,1	70,6
1999/00	....	....	100,9	....	....	99,3	65,3	75,2	70,2
2000/01	....	....	100,5	....	....	100,9	68,3	77,9	72,8
2001/02	....	....	100,8	....	....	96,3	70,4	76,5	73,3
2002/03	....	....	99,1	....	....	101,4	72,8	79,1	75,9
2003/04	....	....	97,3	....	....	97,5	73,2	80,1	76,3
2004/05	-	-	-	....	....	100,2	73,9	81,6	77,2
2005/06	-	-	-	....	....	100,7	74,4	83,6	77,5
2006/07	-	-	-	....	....	101,4	70,9	81,8	74,3
2007/08	-	-	-	....	....	97,8	69,3	78,9	74,0
2008/09	-	-	-	....	....	97,2	67,8	77,7	72,6
2009/10	-	-	-	97,6	98,9	98,3	69,5	78,4	73,8
2010/11	-	-	-	102,2	103,2	102,7	71,9	80,7	76,2
2011/12	-	-	-	100,5	101,0	100,7	73,6	80,7	77,0
2012/13	-	-	-	99,7	100,3	100,0	73,8	81,3	77,4
2013/14	-	-	-	98,8	99,5	99,2	74,2	81,6	77,8

ISTAT⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. (n.d.). *Serie storiche* [Historical series]. Istat. Retrieved February 15, 2025, from https://seriestoriche.istat.it/index.php?id=1&no_cache=1&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcategoria%5D=7&tx_usercento_ce

The graph above offers a vivid illustration of how educational accessibility has evolved over time, using ISTAT statistics that track school enrolment rates across different educational levels and gender from 1950/51 to 2013/14. It can be seen that in primary education, enrolment rates showed a consistent upward trajectory for both genders. The early post-war period (1949/50) exhibited a substantial gender disparity, with male enrolment rates significantly exceeding those of females. However, this gap gradually narrowed over the decades, and by the 1990s, the difference had become irrelevant, indicating a substantial improvement in educational access for girls at the primary level. The transformation in middle school enrolment presents an even more dramatic narrative. During the 1950s and 1960s, enrolment rates remained relatively modest for both genders. However, it can be stated that the 1970s marked a turning point, initiating a period of substantial growth that resulted in near-universal enrolment (approximately 100%) for both males and females by the end of the study period. Once again, it is evident how the increase in female enrolment is particularly noteworthy since it represented a significant shift from historical patterns where educational opportunities for women were considerably restricted. Secondary education exhibited perhaps the most striking evolution, although enrolment rates consistently remained, unfortunately, lower than those in primary and middle schools. The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by limited participation in secondary education, with only a small fraction of the population pursuing studies at this level. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an impressive growth in enrolment rates, with both genders achieving similar levels of participation.

All this digression about the history of the Italian school system serves to explain how and why it was an instrument of great female emancipation. Compulsory education was a push to begin considering women's role as equally important as men's, even in academic settings. The obligation to finally send girls to school and allow them access not only to elementary education but also to more advanced learning was a springboard for growing ambitions and thirst for knowledge in the generations

following these reforms. The discussion of declining birth rates becomes directly relevant here, as the theme of emancipation and self-determination reemerges. By comparing the data on declining birth rates from the previous subchapter with the timeline of educational reforms, we can clearly see how the expansion of educational opportunities correlates with a decrease in birth rates, effectively supporting the theory that in a society where female education reaches very high levels, there will undeniably be a decline in the fertility rate.

Obviously, female access to university had a further decisive impact on these phenomena, intensifying even more the process of emancipation and redefinition of traditional social roles. However, it was particularly interesting to focus on the chronology of the development of compulsory schooling, because it was this, in the Italian scenario, that provided the initial impetus for profound structural change, creating a domino effect.

2.3 If the policies are inadequate, there are no improvements

It would be overly simplistic and misguided to attribute the decline in birth rates and the resulting demographic winter solely to rising education levels. As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, an intricate framework of social, economic, and cultural factors contributes to this phenomenon. Chief among these is the government's limited commitment to developing solid social policies that comprehensively support both already existing and future families. While choosing not to have children is undoubtedly a valid and personal decision, many couples find themselves forced to give up the idea of having children due to a lack of tangible state support.

A critical area requiring investment to avoid the phenomenon depicted above is early childhood services, particularly for children aged 0-3 years. Moreover, ideally, this expansion of Early Childhood Education and Care services would serve at least two vital purposes: reducing child poverty by enabling greater maternal participation in the workforce and providing children with

essential cognitive resources for social development.⁵⁹ Furthermore, accessible, high-quality public services would be particularly valuable for immigrant families as well because these kind of services represent also a crucial pathway to social integration. Despite the expansion of early childhood services across all the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Italy's coverage rate remains significantly below average. As of 2016, only seven Italian regions (Tuscany, Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, and Marche) managed to exceed the 33% coverage threshold for services targeting children aged 3-36 months—a European target that was meant to be achieved by 2010.⁶⁰ This shortfall in early childhood services exemplifies the broader challenges Italy faces in implementing comprehensive family support policies, which in turn affect demographic trends and social development. The situation has shown no signs of improvement over time. In fact, in recent years, following the economic crisis, it was observed the increasingly prevalent pattern of diminishing public service provision. The average coverage rate across Italy, considering both early childhood services and supplementary programs, dropped from 14.2% in 2010-2011 to 13% in 2012-2013. In the last 10 years, the situation has not improved as much as it should have, as despite the introduction of several measures aimed at strengthening and rebalancing the system of early childhood education services, the framework remains fragmented. Certainly, thanks to the PNRR, significant resources have been allocated to increase service provision, and as a result, the overall picture of service availability appears to show a gradual expansion of the offer. However, it is still clearly inadequate to meet the needs of the population. In the 2022/2023 academic year, the combined availability of spaces in nurseries, early childhood sections, and supplementary services (both public and private) across Italy reached a coverage rate of 30 places per 100 resident children aged 0-2 years. As mentioned previously, numerically, there is a slight improvement, but it is not sufficient to meet the needs of the citizens. Indeed, the coverage rate recorded in 2022 is still well below the new target of 45 places per 100 children set for 2030 within

⁵⁹ Naldini, M., & Saraceno, C. (2011). Conciliare famiglia e lavoro: vecchi e nuovi patti tra sessi e generazioni.

⁶⁰ Jurado-Guerrero, T., & Naldini, M. (2018). Child and family policy in Southern Europe. In *Handbook of family policy* (pp. 209-222). Edward Elgar Publishing.

the "Barcelona Targets."⁶¹ Moreover, to further explain why this apparent numerical success masks a more complex and concerning reality it is important to underline how the gradual increase in coverage rates must be viewed in the context of Italy's declining birth rates: on average, due to the falling birth rate, the resident population of children aged 0-2 years has decreased by more than 40,000 annually. This demographic decline artificially inflates the ratio between available places and potential users, creating an illusion of improved service provision when, in fact, it largely reflects the shrinking number of young children rather than a genuine expansion of early childhood education services. To sum up, this statistical paradox underscores a troubling cycle: while service availability appears to be improving on paper, the underlying demographic trends reveal a deeper social challenge that could have long-term implications for Italian society. The higher coverage rate is thus not so much a triumph of policy as it is a reflection of Italy's ongoing demographic crisis. Another problematic and concerning factor is that the private sector has experienced more substantial growth compared to public services. In fact, this gradual increase in overall coverage has been accompanied by a notable shift toward private sector dominance. In 2013, when there were 22.5 total places per 100 resident children, the public sector held a slight edge, offering 11.4 places per 100 children compared to the private sector's 11.2. However, a significant turning point came with the pandemic in 2020, which triggered a contraction in overall service provision. During this period, the private sector demonstrated greater resilience, experiencing a smaller decline (-1.1% in available places) compared to the public sector's more substantial decrease (-4.8%).⁶² By the 2022/2023 academic year, with total coverage reaching 30%, the balance had shifted definitively: private services now provide 15.7 places per 100 children, while public services offer 14.3 places. This transformation reflects broader changes in Italy's approach to early childhood education and subsequently raises important questions about accessibility, affordability, and the role of public institutions in providing essential educational

⁶¹ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. (2024, October 17). *Report sui servizi educativi per l'infanzia riferito all'anno educativo 2022/2023*. Istat.

⁶² Istituto Nazionale di Statistica. (2024, October 17). *Report sui servizi educativi per l'infanzia riferito all'anno educativo 2022/2023*. Istat.

services and family support. Another critical issue in the state management of early childhood services concerns the harsh geographical inequalities across Italy. These regional disparities show an alarming picture of uneven access to essential educational services. Analysing ISTAT's statistics it emerges that in Central Italy, private facilities more frequently establish partnerships with local municipalities, with 48.1% of private services operating under municipal agreements. The Northern regions show slightly above-average rates of public-private cooperation, with 44.8% of private nurseries and early childhood sections maintaining municipal conventions. However, the situation in the South reveals a concerning gap, where only 37.3% of private facilities have established agreements with local authorities.

In addition to the poor efficiency of the Italian childcare service, a phenomenon thoroughly explained above, another huge problem is the issue of parental leave, which still represents one of the most significant family policies in the ongoing debate about gender inequality and demographic decline affecting the country. While parental leave was implemented as a support tool allowing parents to care for their children without losing their jobs, its execution has revealed deep-rooted issues, including unequal access between men and women and limited effectiveness in promoting population growth. For the above mentioned reason, there is a need for more inclusive policies capable of incentivizing births and supporting families. In Italy, parental leave is governed by Law 53/2000 and subsequent amendments, but the system shows stark disparities between parents.⁶³ This unequal treatment directly impacts fertility rates, as current policies fail to encourage balanced participation of fathers in childcare. Though parental leave is a universal right, it's predominantly used by women, relegating fathers to a marginal role in childcare and perpetuating traditional family models. The lack of mandatory paternal leave means women alone bear the direct and indirect costs of parental leave, often in terms of career advancement and economic stability. Consequently, women are unwilling to

⁶³ Camera dei deputati. (2000). *Legge 8 marzo 2000, n. 53*. Parlamento Italiano.

interrupt their professional careers for extended periods and are obviously less likely to have more children, given insufficient social and family support.

Analysing the Italian maternity leave, it should be specified that this guarantees that this right extends to various categories of workers and that it's a mandatory work abstention period for employed women during pregnancy and postpartum. In fact, it is established by the law that this leave is considered not only as mandatory, but as an inalienable right that workers cannot renounce. In detail, women can obtain two months before the expected delivery date and three months after childbirth; however, the 2019 Budget Law introduced more flexibility, allowing women to take the entire five-month period following childbirth, if they preferred.⁶⁴ On the other hand, the mandatory paternity leave, in Italy, is a period of work leave granted to employed fathers, lasting 10 days. This leave can be taken at any time between the two months preceding the estimated delivery date and the five months following it, in the event of either the birth or perinatal death of the child.⁶⁵ It is therefore evident that there is a disparity not only at the cultural level regarding caregiving roles within Italian families. This institutionalized gap, which places the majority of the burden of family care on women, is not a system that supports young couples in realizing their desire to have a baby. This system is, in fact, wholly inadequate and outdated.

Two additional interconnected issues that highlight the government's neglect and disregard for young people and its superficial approach to resolving the demographic crisis are the precarious employment conditions faced by young people and the housing crisis. Regarding the first one, as mentioned, young generations in Italy have become the primary victims of job insecurity. In fact, they face not only a scarcity of stable employment opportunities but also suffer from inadequate policies designed to facilitate their entry into the labour market. Many young Italians find themselves forced to accept

⁶⁴ Governo Italiano. (n.d.). *Il congedo di maternità*. Famiglia e politiche familiari. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/famiglia/conciliazione-famiglia-lavoro/il-congedo-di-maternita-1/>

⁶⁵ Governo Italiano. (n.d.). *Il congedo di paternità obbligatorio*. Famiglia e politiche familiari. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/famiglia/conciliazione-famiglia-lavoro/il-congedo-di-paternita-1/#:~:text=Il%20congedo%20di%20paternit%C3%A0%20obbligatorio,di%20morte%20perinatale%20del%20bambino>

precarious working arrangements - atypical contracts, temporary positions, or self-employment scenarios that fail to provide fundamental rights such as paid vacation or sick leave. This persistent employment uncertainty extends far beyond their professional lives, significantly impacting their psychological well-being and interfering with the development of their social identity.⁶⁶ In light of this, unfortunately, the institutional response to the growing prevalence of precarious work in Italy has had limited impact. Despite the government's introduction of measures aimed at reducing job insecurity, such as the 2015 reform of fixed-term contracts, the situation has not improved significantly. Indeed, Istat labour market reports show that the percentage of precarious contracts remains high, with serious consequences for the country's economic and social stability.⁶⁷ It is therefore evident that the working conditions experienced by the new generations of Italians neither encourage nor facilitate family planning. Instead, they contribute to an environment where starting a family is increasingly seen as a difficult and uncertain choice rather than a natural and attainable one. Moreover, rising rental and housing costs, combined with job insecurity and difficulties accessing credit, have made the transition to housing independence increasingly challenging for the new generation. The housing issue in Italy has worsened in recent decades due to several factors, including rising property prices, increasing rents, and reduced public investment in social housing. In fact, according to an Ipsos Housing Monitor report, over 70% of young Italians between 25 and 34 years old consider it impossible to purchase a home in the next ten years—a percentage that has significantly increased compared to the past.⁶⁸ Another crucial and extremely important aspect concerns rentals since they represent an increasingly burdensome expense for young workers, with rates in major cities often absorbing more than 50% of monthly income.⁶⁹ The problem is more pronounced in metropolitan areas like Milan, Rome, and Florence, where gentrification and the

⁶⁶ Balduzzi, P., & Rosina, A. (2010). I giovani italiani nel quadro europeo. *La sfida del degiovanimento*, *Ricercazione*, 2(2), 201-214.

⁶⁷ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT). (2023). Rapporto annuale 2023: La situazione del Paese. ISTAT. <https://www.istat.it/storage/rapporto-annuale/2023/Rapporto-Annuale-2023.pdf>

⁶⁸ Ipsos. (2024). Prezzi delle case e caro affitti: Le sfide dei giovani in Italia – Nuovo Ipsos Housing Monitor. Ipsos. <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/prezzi-case-caro-affitti-sfide-giovani-italia-nuovo-ipsos-housing-monitor>

⁶⁹ Nardinocchi, C. (2025, February 6). Emergenza abitativa: la situazione in Italia città per città. *la Repubblica*.

proliferation of short-term rentals have reduced the supply of housing available for permanent residents.⁷⁰ Adding to these challenges is the difficulty in obtaining mortgages, as banks tend to require financial guarantees that many young people cannot provide due to job insecurity; indeed, this creates a never-ending loop. Furthermore, another alarming statistic comes from Eurostat data, which shows that in 2022, the average age at which young Italians left their parents' home was 30 years, significantly higher than the European average of 26.4 years.⁷¹

It is therefore evident that, unless political leaders—regardless of their party affiliation—make a genuine and concerted effort to address the deeply rooted and now structural issues that inhibit young people's independence, the demographic crisis will remain unresolved. Unfortunately, without concrete and long-term policies aimed at improving job stability, housing affordability, and social welfare, young Italians will continue to face significant barriers to establishing their own households and planning for the future, further exacerbating the decline in birth rates.

⁷⁰ Olagnero, M. (2018). Discorsi sull'abitare. Come e a chi parlano le nuove politiche abitative. *La Rivista delle Politiche Sociali*.

⁷¹ ANSA. (2023, September 4). In Italia i giovani escono di casa a 30 anni, sopra la media europea. ANSA. https://www.ansa.it/europa/notizie/rubriche/altrenews/2023/09/04/in-italia-i-giovani-escono-di-casa-a-30-anni-sopra-la-media-europea_76633616-3027-43f4-966b-2c1a0a81f9e1.html

PART III. THE BRAZILIAN SCENARIO

3.1 Understanding Brazilian demographic decline

Brazil has undergone a significant demographic transition in recent decades, characterized by a pronounced decline in fertility rates. Once characterized by a high birth rate, this nation has experienced such a decline that it is now below the global average. This demographic metamorphosis, intensified by economic instability, socio-cultural transformations, and exceptional circumstances such as the COVID-19 health crisis, has profound and direct effects on the country's population structure.

The Brazilian fertility rate, which in Portuguese is called Taxa de Fecundidade, has followed a particularly marked downward trajectory since the second half of the 20th century. In the historical context of the 1960s, the country still maintained a reproductive index considerably way higher than the replacement level, standing at 6.1 children per woman, but that was the beginning of the decline, as already in 1980 the fertility rate was 4. The beginning of the new millennium marked a significant turning point: in 2000, the rate reached the critical threshold of 2.1 children per woman, a value that exactly represents the level of demographic replacement. The regressive trend continued inexorably, bringing the rate down to 1.9 children per woman in 2010. The most recent surveys document a further contraction to around 1.6 children per woman, bringing Brazil into line with the demographic parameters typical of European and Asian nations characterized by low birth rates.⁷²

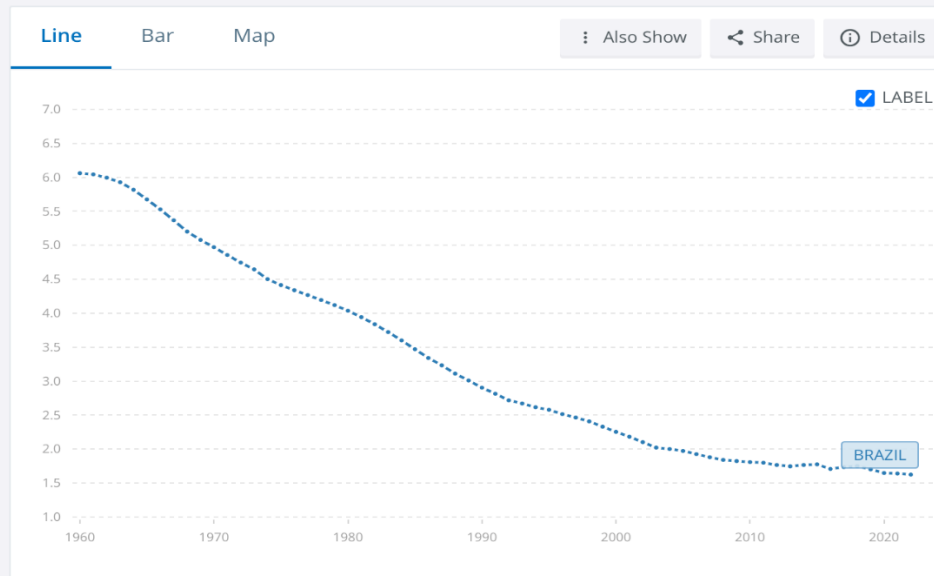
The following graph, retrieved from the World Bank website, depicts the downward curve of the Brazilian fertility rate. Visualizing this allows to grasp and better understand the systematic and progressive nature of the demographic decline, highlighting how this transformation is not just a temporary oscillation, but rather a downward trajectory characterized by persistence and regularity.

⁷² World Bank. (n.d.). *Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – Brazil*. World Bank Open Data. Retrieved March 8, 2025, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=BR>

Fertility rate, total (births per woman) - Brazil

(1) United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects: 2022 Revision; (2) Statistical databases and publications from national statistical offices; (3) Eurostat: Demographic Statistics.

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WORLD BANK⁷³

To understand this demographic phenomenon in depth, Adriana Miranda-Ribeiro, a Brazilian researcher and professor, applied the decomposition model developed by Kohler and Ortega, a sophisticated methodological approach that decomposes period fertility into three fundamental components. This model, known as the KO model, allows for a differentiated analysis of changes in fertility and offers the possibility of formulating projections of future trends based on information that is not immediately apparent in conventional demographic measurements. The KO model obviously requires time series of birth intensities and incidences. Following this analysis, the three key components identified are: the time effect, *parturição*, and quantum. The first component listed quantifies the impact of changes in the average age of fertility. In recent decades, Brazilian women have progressively postponed motherhood to later ages, a phenomenon attributable to increased levels of female education, increased labour market participation, and prioritization of economic stability. However, this postponement not only temporarily reduces the number of births,

⁷³ World Bank. (n.d.). *Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – Brazil*. World Bank Open Data. Retrieved March 8, 2025, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=BR>

but may even result in a permanent reduction if some women do not conceive before the end of their fertile years. Late motherhood in fact has significant medical as well as social implications, which can also include an increased recourse to medically assisted procreation techniques. The second factor, the parturição effect, measures the impact of changes in the composition of fertility according to birth order. In Brazil, an increasing concentration of births in the first two orders has been observed, with a drastic reduction in higher-order births. Contemporary families tend to limit themselves to one or two children, favouring qualitative investments in the education and welfare of their kids. This dramatic structural change has been inevitably stimulated by rising education costs, urbanization, and changing family aspirations. Finally, the quantum represents the pure measure of fertility, stripped of distortions caused by time and parturition effects. Quantum is a hypothetical value that indicates what the total fertility rate would be in the absence of changes in average age and parturition composition. In Brazil, a progressive decrease in the quantum has been observed, reflecting a genuine reduction in the ideal number of children desired by women. This drastic cultural evolution has been accentuated by economic instability, job insecurity, and, more recently, the uncertainty generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁴

The importance of the KO model, used by Adriana Miranda-Ribeiro in her research, lies precisely in its ability to separate these three effects, thus enabling a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the decline in fertility. In fact, while the time effect might be temporary and potentially reversible (if postponed births were recovered at a later age), the reductions due to the parturição and quantum effect tend to be more permanent, suggesting that the decline in Brazilian fertility actually represents a long-term structural change. Unfortunately, the reversibility of the time effect is also significantly limited by biological constraints related to female reproductive age. The progressive diminishment of reproductive potential with age thus transforms what might theoretically be a temporary demographic phenomenon into a permanent reduction in completed fertility for many

⁷⁴ Miranda-Ribeiro, A. (2024). Decomposição da taxa de fecundidade total do Brasil, 1980-2010. *Cadernos do Leste*, 24(24).

women who delay childbearing. In fact, the possibility of recovering from postponed births progressively decreases with advancing age, as the data show: approximately 18% of women experience conception difficulties after the age of 36, a percentage that increases dramatically to 40% after the age of 40, reaching 90% after the age of 45.⁷⁵ This inverse correlation between age and fertility implies that as the delay in first pregnancy extends, there is a corresponding diminishment in the probability of fulfilling intended reproductive “goals”. Consequently, couples, but more specifically women, who substantially defer childbearing often face a substantial discrepancy between their reproductive intentions and their ultimate fertility outcomes. The time effect is thus transformed, at least partially, into a permanent reduction in fertility when the recovery of postponed births is biologically impracticable.⁷⁶

3.2 A country with two different demographic realities

An extremely interesting factor to analyse is the one regarding geography. Indeed, the geographical distribution of childlessness shows a marked differential between urban and rural contexts, with a significant prevalence of the phenomenon in metropolitan areas. There is a positive correlation between the population density of urban centres and the incidence of childlessness among women: the more densely populated the urban area, the greater the probability that a woman decides to have fewer children or no children at all. The attractiveness of metropolitan contexts for certain segments of the rural population lies in the perception of these environments as spaces characterized by greater socio-cultural openness, pluralism of values, and reduced social control. These factors are particularly relevant for individuals whose existential aspirations diverge from the traditional family models prevalent in rural contexts. Metropolises offer social contexts in which personal fulfilment can be pursued through alternative paths to parenthood, such as advanced professional careers, diversified

⁷⁵ Leridon, H. (2004). Can assisted reproduction technology compensate for the natural decline in fertility with age? A model assessment. *Human reproduction*, 19(7), 1548-1553.

⁷⁶ Miranda-Ribeiro, A., Garcia, R. A., & Faria, T. C. D. A. B. (2019). Baixa fecundidade e adiamento do primeiro filho no Brasil. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos de População*, 36, e0080.

lifestyles, and relational models. This process of migratory self-selection contributes to the concentration of people in urban areas who are already predisposed to voluntary childlessness or a greater investment in existential spheres alternative to parenthood.⁷⁷ Understanding this phenomenon is essential for accurately interpreting the geographical differentials in lower fertility rates. This, in turn, is crucial for developing demographic and family policies that consider the complexity of the underlying causal factors shaping contemporary reproductive patterns in Brazil.

This geographical pattern explains why the First Demographic Transition manifested later in Brazil's North and Northeast regions, areas characterized by greater poverty, lower development indices, and less urbanization, compared to the country's South, where this demographic shift began in the 1960s, generally in line with European countries. Another key factor linked to declining fertility and regional disparities is income. As previously explained, the poorest areas of Brazil are concentrated in the North and Northeast, and it is precisely in these regions, where household income often falls below a quarter of the minimum wage per capita, that women historically had the highest fertility rates. Conversely, in areas where family income exceeds the national average, women tend to have fertility rates below the replacement level.⁷⁸

It is clear that Brazil is divided into two distinct areas: one consisting of developed regions that have already experienced the effects of the Second Demographic Transition, and another where only the First Demographic Transition has been completed.⁷⁹ In the more developed and wealthier regions of the country, there is a noticeable rise in cohabitation and non-traditional family structures, an increase in fertility outside of marriage, and a decline in the centrality of the family in people's lives, all of

⁷⁷ Veevers, J. E. (1979). Voluntary childlessness: A review of issues and evidence. *Marriage & Family Review*, 2(2), 1-26.

⁷⁸ Berquó, E., & Cavenaghi, S. (2005, July). Brazilian fertility regimes: profiles of women below and above replacement levels. In *XXV International Conference IUSSP. Anais... Tours, França: IUSSP*.

⁷⁹ Leocádio, V. A. (2018). Childlessness no Brasil: a contribuição das mudanças sociodemográficas para a tendência de zero filho.

which are key characteristics of the Second Demographic Transition, as theorized by Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa.⁸⁰

This regional divide in Brazil's demographic landscape underscores the complex interplay between urbanization, socioeconomic development, and fertility patterns. The coexistence of different stages of demographic transition within the same country highlights and confirms the extent to which structural inequalities shape reproductive behaviors and family dynamics.

3.3 What ties together female education, labour, and the decline in birth rates in Brazil

Over recent decades, women's increasing access to education has had a significant impact on their reproductive choices and labour market participation. It is evident that educational attainment influences the dynamics of adolescent pregnancy and the balance between professional and family life, highlighting profound ongoing social transformations. This phenomenon reflects changing gender roles and women's growing economic independence, while also revealing new challenges related to reconciling professional ambitions with domestic responsibilities. Academic achievements have become a powerful determinant of reproductive timing and outcomes. Higher levels of education correlate strongly with delayed childbearing, smaller family sizes, and more deliberate fertility planning. Women with tertiary education often prioritize establishing career foundations before transitioning to motherhood, creating new patterns of family formation that diverge significantly from traditional models. These educational and professional transitions represent a fundamental reimagining of women's social roles beyond traditional domestic spheres. However, the persistence of gendered expectations regarding childcare and household management means that many educated, working women continue to shoulder disproportionate domestic burdens, creating what can be described as the "double burden" or "second shift."

⁸⁰ Lesthaeghe, R. (2011). The "Second demographic transition": A conceptual map for the understanding of late modern demographic developments in fertility and family formation. *Historical social research/historische sozialforschung*, 179-218.

The analysis of intergenerational patterns of adolescent pregnancy in Brazil demonstrates that daughters of teenage mothers have a significantly higher likelihood of following the same reproductive trajectory. However, educational attainment has emerged as a crucial factor in breaking this cycle. Women with higher levels of education tend to postpone motherhood, as access to education enables them to acquire greater knowledge about contraceptive methods and develop professional ambitions that delay childbearing decisions during their formative years.⁸¹ Furthermore, it is undeniable how improved educational opportunities have now led to a decline in early pregnancies among every socioeconomic group, reducing the intergenerational transmission of teenage motherhood.

In addition to analysing how basic literacy and primary education have led to a decline in teenage pregnancies, which were previously very common in Brazil, the completion of secondary education and access to universities by women have significantly contributed to the overall decline in birth rates now affecting the country.

Over the past thirty years, women have reversed a long-standing disparity, now accounting for 60% of graduates in the younger cohorts. This figure highlights a significant shift in the gender composition within Brazilian universities, as, prior to the 1970s, these institutions were predominantly male-dominated. This phenomenon is the result of multiple factors, including educational and social policies. In fact, the expansion of access to higher education was largely supported by government programs such as the Programa Universidade para Todos (PROUNI)⁸² and the Fundo de Financiamento ao Estudante do Ensino Superior (FIES)⁸³, which have played a crucial role in increasing female enrolment. Moreover, the fight for women's rights has had a significant impact on promoting access to education and the need for greater gender equity in both academia and

⁸¹ da Conceição Chagas de Almeida, M., & Aquino, E. M. (2009). The role of education level in the intergenerational pattern of adolescent pregnancy in Brazil. *International perspectives on sexual and reproductive health*, 139-146.

⁸² Brazilian Secretariat for Social Communication. (n.d.). Programa Universidade para Todos (PROUNI). Government of Brazil. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.gov.br/secom/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/comunicabr/lista-de-acoes-e-programas/programa-universidade-para-todos-prouni>

⁸³ National Fund for Educational Development (FNDE). (n.d.). Fundo de Financiamento ao Estudante do Ensino Superior (FIES). Government of Brazil. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.gov.br/fnde/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/acoes-e-programas/financiamento/fies>

the labour market. In order to construct a statistical analysis to understand the gradual yet consistent increase in female access to higher education, it is essential to highlight that in the 1960s, women accounted for only 30% of university students in Brazil. Later, in the 1990s, the female participation rate increased rapidly, reaching almost 50% of enrolments. The most recent data indicate that around 60% of graduates in the younger cohorts are now women, with even higher percentages in some fields of study. In certain Brazilian states, particularly in the urban areas of the south, the proportion of female university students exceeds 65%. Furthermore, women are more likely to complete their university studies compared to men, as the dropout rate is lower among female students.⁸⁴

The increase in education has facilitated the rapid growth of female participation in the workforce, rising from 21.1% in 1970 to 45% in 1990 and to 53.1% in 2023.⁸⁵ This has consequently caused a conflict and a short circuit, as women who now pursue the same studies and professions that were once accessible only to men still find themselves bearing the full burden of managing family life. This is because, in many cases, there is no proper distribution of responsibilities within couples or family units. This work-family conflict is evaluated through four distinct indicators. The first involves the effects of work on family in terms of time, where employment reduces the hours available to dedicate to family responsibilities and activities. The second one examines how work-related stress negatively impacts one's ability to fulfil domestic responsibilities, as mental fatigue and tension from the workplace often spill over into the home environment. The third indicator focuses on the reverse relationship, analysing how family demands and responsibilities interfere with work obligations, potentially affecting performance and career advancement. Finally, the fourth addresses the lack of personal time, highlighting how the combined demands of both work and family severely limit opportunities for leisure, self-care, and personal development activities that are essential for individual well-being and life satisfaction. Women, therefore, bear the pressure of the work-family

⁸⁴ Guedes, M. D. C. (2008). A presença feminina nos cursos universitários e nas pós-graduações: desconstruindo a ideia da universidade como espaço masculino. *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, 15, 117-132.

⁸⁵ World Bank. (2025). Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (national estimate) – Brazil. The World Bank Group. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?locations=BR>

conflict more than men, with the lack of personal time emerging as the most common issue. This is primarily due to the heavier overall workload they experience, balancing both paid employment—their actual profession—and unpaid labour, which includes all aspects of family caregiving. This dual burden can help explain the greater impact on their mental health. Furthermore, highly educated women are more likely to hold positions of high responsibility and pressure, which further exacerbates and amplifies the work-family conflict.⁸⁶

It is undeniable how the increasing access of women to education and employment has profoundly reshaped Brazilian societal structures, and how the persistent imbalance in domestic responsibilities continues to create barriers to true gender equality. This dynamic, coupled with the growing difficulty of reconciling professional ambitions with family life, has contributed to declining birth rates, highlighting the urgent need for policies that support work-life balance and foster a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities.

3.4 Brazil's reform efforts: high potential, low execution

In Brazil, as in Italy, family welfare policies demonstrate an abundance of initiatives yet often suffer from outdated approaches and limited practical effectiveness. The documents addressing those kinds of policies consistently emphasize a fundamental concept: the critical importance of the family as the essential social unit and its central role in policy development frameworks. The state explicitly acknowledges its responsibility to support families through strategic policies designed to foster both autonomy and social cohesion within communities. A notable example among these initiatives is the Programa Município Amigo da Família (PMAF). According to Ordinance No. 107 of January 18, 2022, this program focuses on several interconnected priorities: encouraging the development of public policies that strengthen family bonds and relationships, enhancing the capabilities of municipal institutions responsible for implementing family-centered policies while improving coordination

⁸⁶ Griep, R. H., Toivanen, S., Van Diepen, C., Guimarães, J. M., Camelo, L. V., Juvanhol, L. L., ... & Chor, D. (2016). Work-family conflict and self-rated health: the role of gender and educational level. Baseline data from the Brazilian Longitudinal Study of Adult Health (ELSA-Brasil). *International journal of behavioral medicine*, 23, 372-382.

across different governmental levels, and fostering collaborative intergovernmental partnerships to create more effectively integrated family-focused public policy networks. This specific initiative was developed and implemented by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights (MMFDH) to encourage municipalities and local governments to actively engage in family support programs, showing an interest in bridging the gap between state administration and citizens.⁸⁷ Consequently, to ensure meaningful participation and commitment to the program's objectives, the government established the Prêmio Boas Práticas em Políticas Familiares Municipais. This prestigious award recognizes and celebrates municipalities that successfully implement effective family policies, incentivizing best practices and cultivating a culture of proactive governance in family welfare across the country. This initiative recognizes that intangible relational benefits and family social capital, cultivated through mutual relationships between genders and across generations, play a vital role in shaping individuals into well-rounded social beings. Ultimately, the priority is fostering a more just and solidarity-based social coexistence. An additional goal is to disseminate successful practices that can be effectively replicated across other municipalities, creating a multiplier effect that extends the benefits of innovative family policies throughout the country.⁸⁸

Family policies are articulated with remarkable clarity regarding their fundamental purpose by the Brazilian government, highlighting the critical importance of reinforcing family structures as the essential foundation for broader social development. There is also an increasing acknowledgment of the necessity for solidarity across generations and recognition of how family member roles continue to evolve in contemporary society. This conceptual shift holds particular relevance considering that decreasing birth rates and transformations in family composition are increasingly influenced by complex, interconnected socioeconomic factors—including poverty, domestic violence, child welfare

⁸⁷ Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos. (n.d.). Programa Município Amigo da Família. Portal Gov.br. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/navegue-por-temas/observatorio-nacional-da-familia/programa-municipio-amigo-da-familia-1>

⁸⁸ Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos. (n.d.). Prêmio Boas Práticas em Políticas Familiares Municipais. Portal Gov.br. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/navegue-por-temas/observatorio-nacional-da-familia/premio-boas-praticas-em-politicas-familiares-municipais>

concerns, and economic instability—a multifaceted reality that the Brazilian government explicitly recognizes in its policy frameworks. However, despite the theoretical emphasis on these ideals, the absence of concrete policy proposals and measurable goals remains a significant issue. Not only are there no clearly defined objectives or actionable projects, but there is also a lack of specific policy measures to ensure their implementation. Furthermore, quantitative targets are rarely identified, making it difficult to track progress or assess the effectiveness of proposed initiatives. As a result, while there appears to be a formal commitment to family policies, much of the discourse remains highly theoretical, outlining why these matter without addressing how they will be implemented in practice. Another major issue is the government's reluctance to openly address demographic decline. While it discusses family policies, it does not clearly connect them to Brazil's urgent demographic challenges, such as the falling birth rate and an aging population. This gap suggests that the issue is being overlooked rather than strategically handled, despite its serious impact on the country's long-term social and economic stability.⁸⁹ A powerful and meaningful proof of the fact that in Brazil there are many ideas that could benefit families but that in practice place all the burden on women, consequently fueling the phenomenon of declining birth rates, is the legislation regarding paternity leave. Indeed, although it was established decades ago, too little progress has been made. The right to paternity leave, in Portuguese *licença-paternidade*, was introduced into Brazilian labour legislation by Decree-Law 229/1967 (art. 473, III of the CLT)⁹⁰ to allow the father to take leave from work for one business day to register the newborn child, also ensuring the mother's rest at least for one day. Subsequently, with the Federal Constitution of 1988, the leave period was extended to five consecutive days, counted from the first business day after the child's birth. Unlike maternity leave,

⁸⁹ Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos. (2020). Políticas públicas familiares. Portal Gov.br. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2020-2/julho/POLITICASPUBLICASFAMILIARESap2.pdf>

⁹⁰ Brazil. (1967, February 28). Decree-Law No. 229, of February 28, 1967. Amends provisions of the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), approved by Decree-Law No. 5,452 of 05/01/1943, and provides other measures. *Diário Oficial da União*, February 28, 1967, p. 2423. Retrieved from <https://legislacao.presidencia.gov.br/atos/?tipo=DEL&numero=229&ano=1967&ato=dc6ETUq50MZRVTDda>

paternity leave is not a social security benefit and must be funded by the employer, as it is not included in the benefits provided for in Article 201 of the Federal Constitution or Law 8.213/1991.⁹¹

As previously mentioned, it is evident that despite numerous family welfare initiatives, the lack of concrete measures and strategic planning continues to limit their real impact, leaving many policies theoretical rather than effective. To address demographic decline, caregiving disparities, and socioeconomic challenges, it is essential to move beyond broad commitments and implement practical, results-driven interventions that provide meaningful support for families and ensure long-term social stability. A truly effective framework must translate ideals into action, prioritizing inclusive and sustainable solutions that reflect the evolving needs of modern and new families.

⁹¹ Guia Trabalhista. (n.d.). Licença paternidade. Retrieved March 14, 2025, from <https://www.guiatrabalhista.com.br/tematicas/Licenc-pater-e-ferias.htm>

PART IV. The Need for a New Parenthood Agenda

4.1 In what ways are Brazil and Italy connected?

The demographic situation in Italy and Brazil presents striking structural similarities, but at the same time, diverges profoundly in the historical, cultural, and political dynamics that have shaped the decline in birth rates in the two countries. A critical analysis of these two scenarios allows us to grasp not only the parallel trajectories of a global phenomenon, but also the specificities that determine its gravity and possible solutions.

Both countries, as analysed in the previous chapters, are now below the demographic replacement rate. Italy, with a fertility rate of 1.20 children per woman in 2023, is in an advanced stage of structural ‘demographic winter’, while Brazil has experienced an impressive decline from 6.1 children per woman in the 1960s to around 1.6 children today. In both cases, the collapse in the birth rate cannot be attributed to contingent events, but to structural and lasting transformations that have profoundly affected society.

The centrality of female emancipation represents a fundamental and transformative element in both contexts analysed. The increasingly broader access of women to higher education, coupled with their gradual assertion in the labour market, has led to a significant evolution in family patterns, leading as a direct consequence to a considerable postponement of the choice of motherhood. This demographic shift is especially evident in Italy, where data presented in earlier chapters shows that women now have their first child at an average age of 31.7 years, significantly later than previous generations. At the same time, a similar dynamic can be observed in Brazil, with an increasing tendency to postpone the first pregnancy, thus reflecting a social transformation that unites geographically and culturally distant realities.

However, despite the alarming data on this inexorable decline in the birth rate, both countries have not developed adequate reconciliation policies, and the failure to rebalance the division of domestic

labour continues to penalize women, who are forced into a ‘double presence’ of work and family that often leads them to postpone or reject motherhood.

In Italy, the choice to have no children or to delay parenthood is exacerbated by the shortcomings of a government that offers only fragmented and belated policies. Despite an ongoing debate on demographic decline, concrete structural measures are lacking, and investments from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) have not led to a real increase in early childhood services; their apparent improvement is actually the result of a declining number of children, as discussed in chapter 2.

The World Fertility Report reinforces the idea that a recovery in birth rates is unlikely and that efforts should instead focus on mitigating the effects to prevent a further worsening of the demographic winter. It states that in countries with very low fertility, such as Italy, the chances of returning to replacement level within the next thirty years are virtually nil.⁹²

A similar degree of governmental neglect on the matter is observable in Brazil, where family policies are formally articulated but prove largely ineffective in addressing the country’s actual demographic challenges. Programs such as “Município Amigo da Família” are mostly limited to statements of intent, without translating into concrete and structural measures, as previously analysed in chapter 3.

4.2 An in-depth qualitative analysis with Victor Leocádio

Intending to provide a clearer and more multidimensional picture of the topic, and to gather additional insights beyond those found in the papers, reports, and books analysed in this thesis, I decided to interview Dr. Victor Leocádio, one of the most prominent and well-known researchers on issues related to fertility and family in Brazil.

⁹² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2025). *World fertility 2024*. United Nations.

https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2025_wfr_2024_final.pdf

The first question addressed the gap between fertility desires and actual fertility in Brazil. The response, which aligned with my initial assumptions, also offered a compelling perspective on the evolving dynamics of fertility in Brazil, a topic that was already well explained in chapter 3 but that was crucial to briefly explore again. Dr. Leocádio started by examining how, during the 1970s and 1980s, Brazilian women not only had more children on average but also actively aspired to larger families, reflecting both cultural norms and socio-economic conditions of the time. He continued affirming that this scenario has changed markedly in recent decades because of the change in cultural norms and the easier access to education. However, today, a growing number of women in Brazil are having fewer children than they actually desire. Dr. Leocádio explained to me that this divergence between ideal and realized fertility suggests the presence of structural and personal constraints, ranging from economic instability to insufficient public support for families, that inhibit the fulfillment of reproductive intentions, also adding that the phenomenon is not unique to Brazil; rather, it echoes trends seen across several European countries, where similarly high fertility aspirations coexist with persistently low birth rates. He concluded by affirming that despite the continued prevalence of a desire for children, actual fertility remains extremely low, pointing to a deepening gap between aspiration and lived experience in the sphere of family formation. Subsequently, when asked about the extent to which the difficulty of balancing work and family life contributes to Brazil's low fertility rate, the researcher identified this issue as a key factor in understanding the country's demographic decline. He explained that as women attain higher levels of education, they often face increasing challenges in reconciling professional responsibilities with motherhood. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that the burden of caregiving still falls predominantly on women, creating significant obstacles for those who might otherwise wish to have more children. This imbalance, he noted, directly affects women's reproductive choices and contributes to the overall decline in fertility. Expanding on this point, Dr. Leocádio further emphasized the complex relationship between gender equality and fertility in the Brazilian context. While indicators such as female educational attainment and labour force participation have improved, these advancements have not been accompanied by

adequate institutional support to make work and motherhood genuinely compatible. Unlike in Nordic European countries, where higher levels of gender equality are often associated with policies that actively support family life, Brazil's approach remains partial and, in many cases, poorly implemented. As a consequence, the country exhibits a negative correlation between gender equality and fertility, a pattern that stands in contrast to the positive associations observed in various European contexts.

In terms of family policies, the professor observed that Brazil has historically implemented certain public measures, such as the provision of free contraceptives and broader access to healthcare, which contributed to the demographic transition and a decline in fertility. However, he stressed that current family policies are largely insufficient, and often more symbolic than truly effective. While contraception remains widely accessible, it alone cannot compensate for the lack of comprehensive strategies to support parenthood. Moreover, the illegality of abortion and the absence of structured family support policies, such as paid parental leave, childcare infrastructure, or flexible work arrangements, further weaken the country's capacity to address the ongoing fertility decline, especially when compared to, once again, Northern European models.

When asked whether Brazil might see a reversal in its fertility trends, the researcher was rather pessimistic. He expressed the belief that the country is unlikely to return to a total fertility rate (TFR) above two children per woman. Although certain subgroups, such as adolescents coming from disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds, still exhibit slightly higher fertility rates, these too are on a downward trajectory. Looking ahead, he suggested that Brazil's TFR could eventually fall below 1.5 children per woman, marking a potential entry into the "very low fertility" zone that has long characterized many countries in Europe and East Asia. Consequentially, when asked about Brazil's demographic window and the challenges posed by population aging, he explained that the so-called "demographic window", a favorable period for a country's socioeconomic development, in which the proportion of the working-age population is particularly high compared to the younger (0–14 years) and older (65+ years) age groups, is already closing. This shift is occurring because Brazil

experienced a much more rapid decline in fertility compared to European countries. Although Brazil has not yet entered a full demographic crisis, it is moving quickly toward a scenario comparable to that of countries like Italy or Japan, where aging populations and shrinking labour forces present serious long-term challenges for economic growth and social policy.

In response to a question regarding whether children should be perceived as a public good, presenting Plato's famous theory in a contemporary framework, Dr. Leocádio noted that this concept has not yet taken root in Brazilian society or policymaking. The public perception continues to frame children exclusively as a private matter. Consequently, families are often left alone to handle the full emotional, logistical, and financial burdens of raising children, with minimal structural support from the state in terms of childcare, parental leave, or economic incentives. The scholar also deeply stressed that this individualistic framing of fertility is closely tied to a broader lack of public awareness about the societal value of reproduction and population renewal. The role of children in sustaining economic systems, pension schemes, and social cohesion is rarely acknowledged in either public discourse or political debate. Furthermore, he observed that demographic issues in general are not a high priority on the national political agenda, which remains largely focused on short-term economic or institutional concerns.

Lastly, reflecting on why the demographic issue in Brazil receives so little attention, he explained that the topic remains relatively unknown, even within the country itself. In part, this is due to limited public awareness, as previously mentioned, and a generally low average level of education, which contributes to a lack of understanding of the long-term implications of demographic decline. The population, he noted, is not fully informed about the social and economic consequences of falling fertility rates, and the matter has not yet entered mainstream public debate. This lack of attention, however, is not unique to Brazil. Even in Europe, demographic concerns in Latin America tend to be overlooked, in part because academic and policy focus is disproportionately centered on Europe and Asia. Discussions around aging populations and fertility decline tend to prioritize countries like Japan, South Korea, or Italy, while similar dynamics unfolding in the Global South receive far less visibility.

The academic framed this imbalance as a reflection of broader Eurocentrism and the persistent marginalization of the Global South in international discourse.

In conclusion, the insights provided by Dr. Leocádio offered a rich and nuanced perspective that deepens the literature reviewed in the previous chapters. The interview not only confirmed several of the trends discussed earlier in the thesis but also underlined the structural and cultural barriers that hold back a possible meaningful response to this demographic change. The marginalization of the demographic question, both within Brazil and in global discussions, further underscores the necessity of bringing fertility and family policies to the forefront of national and international agendas. Finally, the main takeaway from this interview is that demographic trends cannot be dismissed or ignored, and political institutions must not turn a blind eye, whether in Brazil or in Italy. Failing to acknowledge and address these shifts will not lead to constructive outcomes, but rather to confusion and significant risks for the structural integrity of future societies.

4.3 Reimagining parenthood: policy, workplace, and cultural shifts for future families

Having long analysed and studied the phenomenon of declining birth rates and its causes in both the Italian and Brazilian contexts, it is impossible not to feel a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration toward governments which, regardless of the ruling party, show little interest in helping young people first to fulfil themselves and, secondly, to realize their aspirations regarding family life. It is evident that neither country has made meaningful progress in improving legislation and public policies aimed at supporting couples in pursuing informed, peaceful, and well-supported parenthood. One important point not to be underestimated, previously discussed in the analysis by Dr. Leocádio, is the persistent coexistence of high fertility aspirations with consistently low birth rates.

Within this framework, corporate childcare facilities represent one of the most innovative and strategic solutions for promoting a genuine work-life balance, while simultaneously addressing structural challenges such as low fertility, gender gaps in employment, and the growing need for integrated welfare systems. In fact, in a context where public policies struggle to provide widespread

and accessible early childhood services, direct involvement by companies in this area emerges not only as a response to the concrete needs of employees but also as an opportunity to radically rethink the relationship between productivity, well-being, and social support.⁹³

The first and most immediate benefit concerns the balance between private life and work. The opportunity for parents to entrust their children to a safe, welcoming facility located inside their workplace allows them to face the workday with greater peace of mind and focus, minimizing the logistical and organizational challenges of daily family management. This increased sense of calm has a direct impact on the professional performance of new parents, as it improves their ability to concentrate, reduces absenteeism, and even encourages more active and motivated participation in workplace activities.⁹⁴ Moreover, the presence of an on-site corporate childcare center helps to foster a more human and inclusive work environment, where personal and family needs are not seen as obstacles but are instead integrated into the organizational culture. In this sense, a corporate nursery is not merely a perk or an auxiliary service, it is a strategic tool of corporate welfare that promotes organizational well-being, employee retention, and a concrete shift toward more sustainable and responsible work models.

Another essential benefit, briefly mentioned above, concerns the reduction of absenteeism and the decrease in costs associated with the need to train new personnel. Employees who can rely on tangible support for their parenting responsibilities are less likely to leave their jobs, more motivated to remain within the company, and more loyal in the medium to long term. Staff retention represents a significant competitive advantage in an increasingly fluid and competitive labour market. The introduction of corporate childcare centres would therefore represent a win-win situation, benefiting both companies and employees.⁹⁵ As evidence of this, from a corporate image standpoint, offering an

⁹³ Lazzarini, N. (2024, July). Corporate childcare centres: A social, cultural, and economic opportunity. *Bicocca Research Magazine*. <https://bicoccaresearch.unimib.it/in-evidenza/asili-nido-aziendali-unopportunita-sociale-culturale-ed-economica/>

⁹⁴ Limobel Inwo. (2023, April 26). Benefits of having a nursery in the office. <https://limobelinwo.com/en/benefits-of-having-a-nursery-in-the-office/>

⁹⁵ MyPD. (2022, September 15). Workplace nurseries: How some companies balance work with onsite childcare. *My Professional Development*. <https://mypd.co.uk/workplace-nurseries-how-some-companies-balance-work-with-onsite-childcare/>

on-site nursery represents a powerful employer branding tool. Companies that invest in the well-being of their employees, especially through work-life balance policies, are perceived as more ethical, modern, and appealing. This translates into a greater ability to attract and retain talent, particularly among younger generations who are increasingly focused on the compatibility between work and personal life.

From the perspective of social justice and gender politics, the value of corporate childcare facilities becomes even more pronounced. Historically, childcare responsibilities have been delegated almost exclusively to women, reinforcing a cultural model that identifies the mother as the primary caregiver. This paradigm has had, and continues to have, concrete effects on the gender employment gap, forcing many women to scale back their professional ambitions or leave the workforce entirely. The introduction of childcare services within the workplace plays a substantial role in shifting this paradigm by enabling a more equitable distribution of caregiving duties and offering women the real possibility of not having to choose between career and motherhood. In fact, it is a measure that actively counters indirect discrimination and promotes a new model of shared parenthood.⁹⁶

Another highly relevant aspect involves the shared responsibility between the public and private sectors. At a time when public services struggle to meet the demand for nursery placements, the contribution of the private sector becomes not only desirable but necessary. However, this synergy should not become a pretext for the State to relinquish its responsibilities; rather, it should be seen as an opportunity to rethink welfare in a more flexible and integrated manner, one that enhances the active role of companies in supporting families, without abandoning the principle of universal access to services.⁹⁷ Ultimately, the implementation of corporate childcare facilities represents not only a practical response to the immediate needs of working families but also a broader opportunity to address deep-rooted social and gender inequalities. By bridging gaps left by public policy and

⁹⁶ Lazzarini, N. (2024, July). Corporate childcare centres: A social, cultural, and economic opportunity. *Bicocca Research Magazine*. <https://bicoccaresearch.unimib.it/in-evidenza/asili-nido-aziendali-unopportunita-sociale-culturale-ed-economica/>

⁹⁷ MedicoLavoro. (2022, February 23). L'asilo nido aziendale e la sua importanza. <https://medicolavoro.org/asilo-nido-aziendale/>

fostering a more inclusive, sustainable, and family-friendly work culture, businesses could become key players in redefining the future of work and well-being.

Another key way to support and encourage couples in their desire to become parents would be the creation of free, locally accessible parenting education programs. Access to these initiatives should be viewed not as a privilege but as a right, promoted and sustained by inclusive public policies and a collective commitment to social responsibility.

Among the many potential benefits of these programs, one of the most valuable is the opportunity to approach parenthood with greater awareness and preparation. These initiatives not only address the developmental needs of the child, but also encourage prospective parents to reflect on essential aspects such as time management, emotional regulation, and the dynamics of family life. By equipping parents with practical tools to foster a stable and nurturing home environment, these courses can significantly reduce the risk of stress, miscommunication, and conflict.⁹⁸ As highlighted in the first chapter of this thesis, a common reason for postponing parenthood is the sense of not feeling adequately prepared, also on a psychological level. Providing accessible educational support can help to ease such concerns, offering reassurance, clarifying expectations, and ultimately guiding couples toward more confident and informed decisions, while reducing the anxiety that often accompanies the transition to parenthood.

Another crucial aspect that should characterize these courses is the deconstruction of the traditional view of motherhood. Contrary to the widespread belief that women “instinctively” know how to raise children, these programs emphasize that caregiving is a skill that can, and, for those choosing to become parents, should be learned. This more progressive approach not only challenges outdated cultural assumptions but also legitimizes and encourages the active involvement of fathers, promoting a more equitable and fair sharing of parenting responsibilities. Parent training programs are therefore essential for promoting shared parenting, meaning a balanced distribution of caregiving

⁹⁸ Silva, B. (2024, March 12). The importance of parenting classes: Nurturing stronger families. Polk County Government. <https://www.polk-county.net/the-importance-of-parenting-classes-nurturing-stronger-families/>

responsibilities between mothers and fathers. Studies have shown that the development of parenting skills leads to stronger parent-child relationships and fosters a more positive home environment.⁹⁹ This kind of involvement represents a crucial step toward moving beyond the traditional model of the mother as the sole caregiver, helping to reduce the mental load on women and strengthening the role of fathers in both the emotional and domestic spheres.

Another often underestimated but deeply significant benefit of parenting courses would be the reduction of parental isolation. The transition to parenthood can be an emotionally intense and, at times, lonely experience, particularly for new parents who may feel overwhelmed by responsibility or disconnected from their previous social circles. Participating in parenting education groups would offer a meaningful opportunity to connect with other individuals going through similar experiences, creating shared spaces for dialogue, empathy, and mutual support. These group settings could foster a sense of belonging, helping parents realize that their struggles are not unique and that their concerns are valid, thus creating a dynamic that provides emotional relief. Moreover, the “non-judgmental environment” would be curated by qualified facilitators in order to build safe, inclusive, and respectful communities. These professionals would be able to guide discussions with sensitivity and expertise, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. In doing so, parenting courses become not just educational tools, but spaces for collective empowerment and social connection¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, corporate childcare facilities and accessible parent training programs represent two powerful and complementary solutions. The former redefines the workplace as a space that supports family life, while the latter prepares individuals, regardless of gender, to embrace the challenges of parenting with confidence, competence, and emotional readiness. Together, these two interventions challenge outdated norms, promote shared caregiving, and help dismantle the sense of isolation or inadequacy that often accompanies the decision to become a parent.

⁹⁹ Redazione. (2024, January 3). Il Parent Training: programma di educazione genitoriale. Santagostino Psiche. <https://www.santagostino.it/magazine-psiche/parent-training/>

¹⁰⁰ Silva, B. (2024, March 12). The importance of parenting classes: Nurturing stronger families. Polk County Government. <https://www.polk-county.net/the-importance-of-parenting-classes-nurturing-stronger-families/>

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis aimed to systematically and comparatively explore the phenomenon of the demographic winter, with a particular focus on the growing delay in parenthood and the increase in childless couples in the contexts of Italy and Brazil. Starting from the research question, “Understanding the Demographic Winter: Exploring the Choice vs. Necessity of Delayed Parenthood and Childless Couples in Italy and Brazil”, the main objective was to investigate the true nature of the dynamics at play: are these conscious and voluntary choices made by individuals, or decisions shaped, and in some cases imposed, by structural, cultural, economic, and institutional constraints?

The first chapter provides a theoretical and conceptual framework aimed at defining the demographic winter as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing not only demographic variables (such as declining fertility rates, population aging, and generational imbalances) but also economic, social, and cultural dimensions. It highlights how this phenomenon, although partially anticipated by demographic literature for several decades, has only recently begun to be viewed as a pressing issue, driven by increased public awareness and media visibility. The chapter also offers a nuanced analysis of the factors contributing to declining birth rates, distinguishing between micro-level (individual choices, preferences, educational and professional paths) and macro-level (public policies, access to services, housing and employment conditions, gender norms) determinants, emphasizing the complex interaction between personal aspirations and contextual constraints.

The second chapter delves into the Italian case: one of the most emblematic in Europe in terms of population aging and persistently low fertility. Through the analysis of statistical data from ISTAT and the World Bank, a structural and continuous decline in the average number of children per woman was observed, reaching 1.20 in 2023. The phenomenon of postponed motherhood emerged as particularly significant, with the average age at the birth of the first child rising to 31.7 years. The main causes identified include, on the one hand, the growing level of education and female

participation in the labour market, and on the other, the fragility of the welfare system, the shortage of childcare services, and a social organization still based on a rigid gendered division of domestic and caregiving labour. Although the expansion of education has been a key driver of emancipation, it has also resulted in increased pressure on women, who are forced to balance professional ambitions and family responsibilities without meaningful support. Public policies, as the analysis shows, appear to be fragmented and reactive, rather than structural and forward-looking.

The third chapter analysed the case of Brazil, a country that has undergone a more recent and way faster yet equally significant demographic transition. Fertility dropped from 6.1 children per woman in the 1960s to around 1.6 in the most recent data. In a national context marked by territorial and socioeconomic inequalities, differentiated dynamics can be observed between more developed urban areas, where post-traditional family models are more common and late or absent motherhood is more prevalent, and the North and Northeast regions, where the demographic transition is less advanced. In Brazil as well, women's education and their entry into the labour market have played a central role in transforming reproductive choices. However, these transformations have not been accompanied by a corresponding evolution in family policies. The interview with Dr. Leocádio confirmed that many women in Brazil express a greater desire for motherhood than the actual number of children they have, but face concrete obstacles such as economic instability, lack of childcare services, limited parental leave, and persistent gender imbalance in family and domestic care responsibilities.

The fourth chapter presents a critical synthesis of the two case studies, highlighting both commonalities and divergences. On one hand, both Italy and Brazil have experienced a significant shift in family and reproductive patterns, largely driven by the fact that, in recent decades, women have finally gained the freedom and opportunity to pursue education and professional achievements, allowing them to cultivate aspirations that go way beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother. On the other hand, it was observed that the "illusion of choice" regarding parenthood masks a reality in which decision-making freedom is heavily constrained by economic and regulatory factors. Both countries show an alarming gap between reproductive desires and actual outcomes, outlining a

scenario in which low birth rates are, at least in part, the result of constrained choices, rather than of deliberate renunciation. Although family policies do exist, they often prove to be ineffective, fragmented, or delayed. The absence of a comprehensive strategic vision that frames fertility not merely as a private matter but as a central pillar of social and economic sustainability emerges as a critical issue across both contexts.

Considering the analysis carried out, it is possible to conclude that delayed parenthood and the rise in childless couples in Italy and Brazil cannot be fully understood outside of a systemic perspective that considers the interaction between individuals and structural conditions. In both countries, a reformulation of the political agenda appears essential: there is a need for integrated and coherent policies regarding childcare services, gender-equitable parental leave, incentives for a better work-life balance, and a cultural transformation that recognizes and values the social role of parenthood. As suggested in the policy-oriented conclusions, measures such as the expansion of workplace nurseries and accessible, free parenting education programs represent a first step toward concrete support for families.

Ultimately, effectively addressing the demographic winter means recognizing that birth rates are not merely a private matter but a collective responsibility that requires political vision.

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