

Department of Political Sciences

Master's Degree in International Relations

Chair of Demography and Social Challenges

Pro-Natalist Policies in an Ageing World: A Comparative Perspective

Prof. Maria Rita Testa

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Donato Greco

CO-SUPERVISOR

Francesco Rotili

CANDIDATE

ID No. 654492

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Introduction

«This matter must be our next topic; for our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day»

(Lucius Cassius Dion, *Roman History*, LXXII, 36, 4)

Over the last years, a spectre has begun to haunt Europe: the spectre of de-natalism. Across the majority of European countries, in fact, fertility rates have started to decrease inexorably¹. This trend, combined with a sustained population ageing, has raised widespread concerns about the future sustainability of redistributive welfare systems and of liberal-democratic polities broadly meant². Within this critical context, however, countries differ notably in both the *quantum* and the *tempo* of childbearing. Mediterranean countries have been affected the most by the fertility decline³, heightening fears about the long-term viability of their socio-political structures. In particular, Italy reveals an extremely imbalanced demographic situation, driven by a substantial loss in both the quantitative and qualitative social significance of national younger cohorts (a phenomenon labelled “degiovamento” by some authors)⁴, with projected outlooks that exhibit a large consensus for scenarios of population shrinking and ageing⁵. In front of such a grim prospective, this paper seeks to unveil which institutional and policy factors could prompt a reversal of the decline or, at least, a mitigation of its most negative trends. To this end, it will be adopted a comparative approach between Italy and two continental epigons that show better fertility outcomes, namely France and Sweden. The three countries embody different welfare regimes, shaped by distinct configurations of public provisions and social expectations regarding childcaring.

The core assumption is that the main determinant of the current fertility downturn has to be identified with the structural uncertainty triggered by the growing integration of global markets, as enshrined within the framework of the “Globalization theory”⁶. Material insecurity produces binding

¹ Eurostat, *Fertility statistics*, «Population and demography», Statistics Explained, data extracted February 2025 (planned article update March 2026), acc. 16/09/2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Fertility_statistics.

² Dean Spears and Michael Geruso, *After the Spike: Population, Progress, and the Case for People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2025).

³ Byron Kotzamanis, *Fertility of nationals and foreigners in Spain, Italy, and Greece during and after the economic recession and refugee crisis*, in «Investigaciones Geográficas», no. 77/2022, pp. 57–77.

⁴ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia: Crescita, crisi e sfide*, Carocci: Rome, 2022, pp. 99ff.

⁵ Ivi, pp. 151ff.

⁶ Hans-Peter Blossfeld et al., *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005)

constraints for social actors and impedes to embark on life-long projects such as childbearing⁷, as widely demonstrated by micro-research⁸. Such uncertainty has translated into a sense of widespread pessimism that appears to be dominant among younger generations⁹. However, evidence also suggests that those measures enabling externalization and sharing of parental duties (such as the territorial density of childcare facilities and the availability of feasible paternity work leave) have an overall positive effect on fertility outcomes¹⁰, as stated by the “Gender Revolution Theory”¹¹. The aim of the present dissertation is to assess whether, within a broader context of material uncertainty, incentivizing policies in this sense is sufficient for reversing natality decline. To sum up, the research question of this dissertation is twofold. The first part of the query is: which socio-economic and political factors, within advanced European societies that have entered a stage of lowest-low fertility, shape fertility outcomes the most? By doing so, this approach partially rejects the stance of the Second Demographic Transition, which attributes low birthrates almost exclusively to cultural change¹². The second part of the question is: what is the effective magnitude (both in absolute and relative terms) of individual policies on demographic dynamics at large?

To address this topic, the thesis constructs a comparative statistical model, so to comprehend which economic and institutional elements are most strictly associated with better age-specific fertility outcomes within the three selected countries. The elaborations are based on official sources dataset, namely Eurostat for the demographic indicators and the World Bank and the OECD for the economic ones¹³. As aforementioned, the dependent variable is age-specific fertility rate, particularly for the two most fertile cohorts (namely, 25-29 and 30-34). The independent variables, instead, belong to two different categories. Those referring to the degree of gender mutualization are the proportion of children aged three or less in formal childcare (so to express overall coverage) and the duration of paternity leave. On the other hand, young adults’ economic security is expressed by individual income, women occupation rates, and the average age of exit from the parental home (a proxy for achieved economic autonomy). Methodologically, the enquiry was bisected in three stages. First,

⁷ Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *Why Demography matters*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018, pp. 145ff.

⁸ David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson, *When Work Disappears: Manufacturing Decline and the Falling Marriage Market Value of Young Men*, in «AER: Insights», vol. 1/2019, n. 2, pp. 161–178.

⁹ Bahman Zohuri and Siamak Zadeh, *Global Suicide Rate Among Youngsters Increasing Significantly*, «Online Journal of Neurology and Brain Disorders» vol.3, no. 5/2020.

¹⁰ Peter McDonald, *Gender Equity in Theories of Fertility Transition*, in «Population and Development Review» 26, no. 3/2000: pp. 427–439

¹¹ Frances Goldscheider, Eva Bernhardt and Trude Lappégård, *The Gender Revolution: A Framework for Understanding Changing Family and Demographic Behavior*, in «Population and Development Review» 41, n. 2 (06/2015).

¹² Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory: A Review and Appraisal*, «Annual Review of Sociology», n.43/2017, pp. 473–92.

¹³ *Compiled Dataset on Fertility, Family Policies, and Socioeconomic Indicators*, Unpublished dataset, LUISS Guido Carli, 30/04/2024, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Zm-mSqbK1uoLliV-FKV9ET60c3jISelH/edit?gid=240798216#gid=240798216>.

descriptive analysis has attempted to unpack cross-national distributions and expressing their core statistical characteristics through box plots. Second, bivariate associations are visualized graphically through heat-map tables, so to determine the nature of mutual proportionality. Finally, models of linear regression estimate the combined correlation of independent covariates with fertility outcomes. The software deployed to complete all the computations was R/RStudio.

The structure of the dissertation is organized as follows. The first chapter develops the theoretical framework, starting from a brief introduction regarding the nature of the most common fertility indicators and then transitioning toward an analysis of the debates concerning the two Demographic Transitions and the aforementioned academic positions. The second section regards the historical evolution of Italian demography, so to understand the profound causes of its present setting and to insert it within the broader historical moment lived in Western countries. The third part offers instead a comparative study of policy design within the three selected countries, highlighting respective differences and similarities. Finally, the fourth chapter is dedicated to the empirical analysis and comment of the results. Lastly, it must be underscored that the greatest merit for the current research lies in a project delivered last year by the present author and his research group on the same issue, which constitutes both the conceptual and the heuristic starting point of this dissertation¹⁴. The statistical analyses discussed in the paper are reproduced integrally from that study. At the end, the thesis discusses perks and limits of policy implications, sustaining that endurable fertility in post-industrial societies is likely to be fostered the most by stable arrangements that, on one hand, aim at securing material security for young adults and, on the other, expand women's autonomous opportunities through a systematic redistribution of care.

¹⁴ Pierluigi Selvaggi, Francesco Mallardo, Francesco Rotili, Simone Tistarelli, Isabella Zannoni, and Giulio Picchia. *The Role of Gender Equality in the European Fertility Crisis: A Comparative Evaluation of Family Policies Effectiveness in Italy, France, and Sweden*. University research paper, LUISS Guido Carli, 30/04/2024.

Chapter 1

The advent of demographic (post)modernity

1.1 Measuring fertility

Demography aims at establishing a scientifical enquiry on the quantitative and qualitative phenomena addressing the human population. Its study may be conducted both statically and dynamically, i.e. at a specific point in time or by forecasting possible future changes. Among its field of interest lies the analysis of population growth, determined by three pivotal elements: fertility, regarding the birth of new individuals in each society; mortality, addressing the attrition of existing individuals due to progressive decease of existing persons; and net migration, resulting as the difference between immigration and emigration flows¹. Among these factors, fertility has traditionally received the major academic attention, and not without reason. Indeed, apart for their role in fostering population growth, fertility's trends are also essential in shaping age structures of most societies, affecting consequentially other indicators such as youth and elderly dependency ratio and various related issues, like the demographic dividend². For these same reasons, this dissertation will seek to highlight the structural decline of fertility in a set of selected high-income Western countries, so to comprehend its possible outcomes and, ultimately, identify some feasible solutions.

Nevertheless, as with any social phenomenon, fertility is a multi-dimensional and complex concept, the study of which requires statistical representation through various indicators and indexes, each capturing a different aspect of the broader subject. The simplest measure to construct, yet also the most limited, is the Crude Birth Rate (CBR). It is calculated by dividing the number of demographic events under consideration (in this case, the annual number of births) by the total population at a specific time, typically estimated as the mid-year population. Then, the resulting ratio is multiplied by a constant, conventionally set at 1,000³. However, despite their simple and intuitive nature, crude rates are inadequate for in-depth analysis because not all the individuals have the same likelihood of experiencing a certain event. In this case, not everybody possesses the biological capacity for childbearing, in the same manner that not every person faces the same risk of dying within a certain year.

¹ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *Demography. The study of Human Population*, Long Groove, Waveland Press, 2015, pp. 1-6.

² Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *ivi, cit.*, p. 219.

³ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *ivi, cit.*, pp. 8-11.

In fact, for most indicators only female population is considered to elaborate such indexes, and even among them just those supposed to be effectively fecund (usually, those aged between fifteen and forty-nine). The birth rate estimated specifically for this subset of the population is known as the Fertility Rate⁴. However, neither does this indicator fully represent the actual average number of children per woman, as fecundity, after peaking at twenties, gradually declines throughout the thirties. To address this limitation, it is thus possible to compute an age-sex-specific fertility rates for each female age cohort within a given period, allowing for a more precise assessment of the likelihood of childbearing in different stages of reproductive life. Nonetheless, while this method increases measurements' accuracy, it also presents some shortcomings, making the construction of an overall fertility index cumbersome and complicating comparisons across different populations. Thus, demographers tend often to rely on a synthetic index that summarizes all age-specific fertility rates into a single figure, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), which is indeed the most widely used demographic indicator for expressing fertility within a society⁵.

In short, the Total Fertility Rate, in a similar way to the Life Expectancy index, establishes a hypothetical female cohort and then follows it throughout a series of stochastic events until the end of their reproductive years. At the end of the period, the different age stages are summed up, so obtaining the births eventually produced collectively by the cohort⁶. In other words, TFR «measures the average number of children that would be born to a hypothetical cohort of women who survive to the end of their reproductive period and who bear children at each age at the rate observed during a particular period»⁷. Another widespread fertility indicator is the Gross Reproduction Rate (GRR), which is very alike to the TFR, except for the fact that it considers only female newborns. Therefore, it measures the self-replacement capacity of women across generations. Since female babies account for approximately 48% of all live births, the GRR is typically about half the value of the TFR. Finally, another possible fertility measure should be considered when facing challenges in data collection for computing age-specific fertility rates, a frequent issue in least-developed countries. In such cases, it is possible to employ the General Fertility Rate (GFR), which is essentially a refined version of the Crude Birth Rate, where the denominator includes only women of reproductive age and not the global population⁸.

⁴ Brijesh P. Singh, Sandeep Singh, and Utpal Dhar Das, *Principle of Physics and Total Fertility Rate*, in «Journal of Scientific Research of The Banaras Hindu University» 66, no. 4/2022.

⁵ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *Demography*, cit., pp. 228-231

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Preston, Samuel H., Patrick Heuveline, and Michel Guillot. 2001. *Demography: Measuring and Modeling Population Processes*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 95, cit. in *ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

Nevertheless, these indexes do not exhaust the full range of dimensions entailed by fertility. Indeed, when assessing it, there may be used a “period prospective”, focused on analysis realized within a short period of time, usually a year, or a “cohort prospective”, a longitudinal approach aiming at evaluating the total number of children borne at the end of the reproductive life of a specific cohort of women⁹. In particular, the latter stresses out two important additional concepts, those of “tempo” and “quantum”, the first related to the age a woman decides to start her first pregnancy and the second to the number of children came to the light; both these factors can be studied through one of the two approaches, often creating inconsistent effects¹⁰. For this reason, it is useful to use other indicators, expressively designed for capturing cohort trends. One of such indexes is the Cohort Completed Fertility Rate (CCFR). This index is not tainted by the age structure, as the assessed cohort is tracked from the same starting point in time. On the other hand, the CCFR presents significant limitations that hinder its widespread use, like for instance the impossibility of estimating it until the end of a cohort reproductive cycle. While projections or surveys can be used to approximate the CCFR in advance, such methods inevitably reduce the indicator’s heuristic value¹¹.

To overcome these drawbacks, different scholars proposed forms of adjusted TFR that could grasp those tempo and quantum paths otherwise measurable only through cohort indexes. Most of these proposals aimed at encompassing properly childbearing postponement, like the Bongaarts-Feeney adjustment, which is based on the insertion of the mean age of the firstborn¹². Indeed, considering that pregnancy deferral is a common practice in industrial countries, TFR may underestimate the actual fertility of women, and it is expected for the adjusted ration to shift upward¹³. Nonetheless, most of these techniques, being based on mathematical projections, are criticized for their reliance on idealistic assumptions rather than empirical data, and so for other experts it is impossible to properly infer cohort-patterns using period indicators¹⁴. So, it goes without saying that, to construct a reliable model of fertility, is essential to evaluate the interrelations between such indexes, rather than establishing an assessment on a sole one.

The possible entanglement between the two measures has been at the centre of the work of various demographers. For instance, an important insight into the matter is offered by the seminal theory developed by Richard Easterlin in 1968. This argues that the relative size of successive birth

⁹ Evert van Imhoff, *On the Impossibility of Inferring Cohort Fertility Measures from Period Fertility Measures*, in «Demographic Research», no°5/2001, p. 24-26.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *Demography*, cit., pp. 239-244.

¹² John Bongaarts and Griffith Feeney, *On the Quantum and Tempo of Fertility*, in «Population and Development Review» 24, no. 2 (June 1998), pp. 271-291

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Evert van Imhoff, *ivi*, p. 56.

cohorts creates imbalances in the recorded TFR due to varying patterns of job opportunities and family stability¹⁵. Although the core of the theory will be deepened in the following sections, it underlines how period and longitudinal fertility shall never be considered detached when analysing long-run demographic trends. Thus, it should be noted that even the accurate measurement of fertility is far from a straightforward task. Given that each indicator entails advantages and limits, any meaningful enquiry on fertility dynamics must integrate coherently both perspectives, so acknowledging their interplay and the broader socio-economic factors that shape reproductive choices. For all these issues, a brief introduction dedicated to the inherent flaws of the demographic toolbox was necessary. However, before delving into the heart of the present dissertation it seems also mandatory to have a small recap to the Demographic Transition Theory (DTT), a theoretical framework that has long been a cornerstone within the discipline, one of the rare data-driven generalizations in social sciences¹⁶, even though is nowadays increasingly being called into question¹⁷.

1.2 The achievement of paradise: the Demographic Transition

For most of human history, population growth was all but constant and predictable. In fact, since the arising of demography as an autonomous field of study, the notion of some self-compensating mechanism between births and deaths has always been the foundation of every theoretical system¹⁸. The demographic anarchy of pre-modern societies was most famously described by one of the founding fathers of the discipline, the British philosopher Thomas Malthus. According to his 1798 *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, population growth is all than a fortune, because it would always prompt a serious shortage in agricultural supply; indeed, it must be observed that pre-industrial technologies did not allow to enhance food production at the same pace of demographic growth¹⁹. Societies were always at stake of meeting the Apocalypse's Horsemen; famine, war and pestilence did represent a constant threat for humans. The scarcity of resources in mostly young and aggressive societies almost unavoidably used to lead to a soaring of internal unrest, leading often to widespread

¹⁵ Richard A. Easterlin, *Population, Labor Force, and Long Swings in Economic Growth*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968.

¹⁶ Dudley Kirk, *Demographic Transition Theory*, in «Population Studies» 50, n. 3/1996: pp. 361–87, p. 361. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2174639>.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the literature cited in Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory: A Review and Appraisal*, «Annual Review of Sociology», n.43/2017, pp. 473–92, p. 473, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053442>.

¹⁸ Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *Why Demography matters*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018, p. 56.

¹⁹ T.S. Al-Hadithi et al., *Demographic Transition and Potential for Development: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan*, in «Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal», vol. 16, n. 10/2010.

violences²⁰. Moreover, higher population density favoured epidemic outbreaks, whose intensity was worsened by the lacking hygienic conditions and the absence of effective medical remedies²¹. It seemed that was impossible for premodern societies to escape from the “Malthusian trap”²².

However, the developments of the following two centuries disproved Malthus's assumptions: food production enhancement allowed by technological advances and the progressive improvement of sanitary conditions after industrialization permitted for the first time in human history a huge demographic growth without any kind of self-compensating mechanism²³. The changement undergone through industrialization was so deep and pervasive that for some authors it seems adequate to speak about a proper “population explosion”, at a relative pace that was unseen since the neolithic agricultural revolution²⁴. The magnitude and the prowess of changement were so important that industrialization is set as the starting point of a brand-new phase for population structure and evolution, the one depicted by the Demographic Transition Model. In brief, following a period in which decreasing mortality coexists with persistently high fertility, both rates ultimately converge again, but at low levels, in stark contrast to the demographic patterns of pre-modern societies²⁵.

The evolution assumed by the theory began to take place in North-Western Europe in the last decades of the XIX century, even though in some nations, like France, fertility started to decline already after the Napoleonic Wars²⁶. However, it was only during the Interwar Period that the new trends were systematically addressed by the academic community, since they had reached a certain degree of consolidation. The first author to tackle the issue was the Englishman Warren Thompson, who in 1929 elaborated a typology of three groups of countries distinguished by uneven levels of mortality and fertility, assuming that in those nations where fertility had already begun to decline the very dimension of population would have rapidly shrunken²⁷. In 1934, the French scholar and politician Adolphe Landry proposed an evolutionary three-stage theory about population development²⁸ that was very alike to Thompson's triatic classification, although it appears he was not

²⁰ Jack A. Goldstone, *Evolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991.

²¹ Joseph Canning and Hartmut Lehmann, *Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern and Modern Times* Routledge, Abingdon, 2017.

²² Francesco Dandolo, review of *Storia demografica d'Italia. Crescita, crisi e sfide*, di Alessandro Rosina e Roberto Impicciatore, in «Rivista economica del Mezzogiorno» (07–12 2023), pp. 3–4.

²³ T.S. Al-Hadithi et al., *Demographic Transition and Potential for Development*, cit.

²⁴ Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *Why Demography matters*, cit., p. 116-119.

²⁵ Dudley Kirk, *Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p. 361.

²⁶ Alessandro Rosina e Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d'Italia: Crescita, crisi e sfide*, Carocci: Rome, 2022, p. 29.

²⁷ Warren S. Thompson, *Population*, in «American Journal of Sociology» n°34, 1929, pp. 959–975.

²⁸ Adolphe Landry, *La Révolution démographique: Études et essais sur les problèmes de la population*, Paris: Librairie du Recueil Sirey, 1934

familiar with the latter's work²⁹. Both recognized that the sharp decline in mortality in Europe, driven by major technological and medical achievements, was subsequently followed by a diminution of fertility, albeit at different speeds, and that even more traditional populations had started to embark on the same trajectory³⁰. However, they did not elaborate a systematic theory of the new phenomena, which they regarded as the result of moral vice induced by abundance; moreover, both were moved by the fear of depopulation in most advanced countries and the consequent predominance of more prolific societies³¹.

The actual development of a coherent theoretical framework emerged thanks to the work of the Princeton-based demographer Frank W. Notestein, *The Future Population of Europe and the Soviet Union: Population Projections, 1940-1970*, published on behalf of the League of Nation (1944)³². The most typical uttering of the theory stipulates that the rutilant growth of the first transitional decades was due to the misalignment between fertility and mortality, with the former remaining at important ratios for the consistency of old traditions and customs³³. Indeed, it must be stressed that, in Malthusian populations, high natality was essential for the very survival of social groups. As Notestein himself reported:

Any society having to face the heavy mortality characteristic of the premodern era must have high fertility to survive. [...] [In such societies] religious doctrines, moral codes, laws, education, community customs, marriage habits, and family organizations are all focused toward maintaining high fertility³⁴.

Nevertheless, progressive modernization, with all its related consequences such as urbanization, secularism and individualism, would have radically changed the picture so to produce a decline of fertility without precedents in human history³⁵:

In short, under the impact of urban life, the social aim of perpetuating the family gave way progressively to that of promoting the health, education, and material welfare of the individual child; family limitation became widespread; and the end of the period of [population] growth came in sight³⁶.

Credit must go to Notestein to acknowledge both the general nature of the transition and the temporal tripartition now regarded as the very pivot of the Transition Theory, thereby setting a universal

²⁹ Dudley Kirk, *ivi*, p. 362.

³⁰ Cf. Warren S. Thompson, *Population*, cit., p. 962 and Adolphe Landry, *La révolution démographique*, cit., §§ 39-57

³¹ Dudley Kirk, *Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p. 363

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Simon Szreter, *The Idea of Demographic Transition and the Study of Fertility Change: A Critical Intellectual History*, in «Population and Development Review», 19, no. 4: 12/1993, pp. 659-701, p. 661

³⁴ Frank W. Notestein, *Population-The long view*, in Theodore W. Schultz (ed.), *Food for the World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945, pp. 36-57, p. 39-40, cit. in Simon Szreter, *ivi*, p. 662.

³⁵ Simon Szreter, *ivi*, p. 662

³⁶ Frank W. Notestein, *ivi*, p. 41, cit. in *ibidem*.

evolutionary framework to explain how countries shift from a pre- to post-industrial demographic equilibrium³⁷. This new equilibrium corresponds to the third and final phase of the Transition, following the initial stage, marked by high fertility and mortality rates, and the intermediate one of misalignment; the final part is characterized by poor levels of both indicators (although fertility was never expected to fall below the replacement rate) and by their regulation, considering how in the post-industrial world family planning has become the accepted norm³⁸. The most definitive statistical foundations of this framework were finally provided by the extensive analytical work known as the “European Fertility Project”, undertaken by Ansley J. Coale since 1963, whose results were summarized in the 1986 volume *The Decline of fertility in Europe*³⁹. Despite some differences related to the timing and pace of the transition, the nature of the demographic pattern proved identifiable in every studied society and was practically ineluctable, with remarkable regularities that have been observed even in non-European countries⁴⁰. Today, there is indeed no nation in the world that has not yet embarked on the transition: even though some countries remain at the very beginning of the process, with considerably low life expectancy, most have already entered the phase of declining fertility⁴¹. In fact, in most developing countries nowadays transition is occurring at a major speed than nineteenth-century Europe, largely due to the “more modern” technologies now available. For instance, in Southeast Asia it unfolded within the lifespan of just three generations, compared with the nearly 150 years required by Western countries⁴².

Given the scale and predictability of the phenomenon, despite the distinct social and cultural specificities shaping it across different countries, many scholars have sought to explain its fundamentals through not merely demographic factors, such as the brute decline in mortality⁴³. For instance, a stream of scholarship has attempted to explain the causes of the Transition within a micro-economic framework, portraying individuals as utility-maximisers and emphasizing the economic rationality underlying fertility decline⁴⁴. Among the most influential figures within the Neo-classical framework is the Nobel laureate Gary S. Becker, that in several works, such as *A theory of marriage*

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *Demography*, cit., pp. 56-60.

³⁹ Ansley Johnson Coale and Susan Cotts Watkins, *The Decline of Fertility in Europe*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986

⁴⁰ Dudley Kirk, *Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., pp. 365-367

⁴¹ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *ivi*, p. 56.

⁴² Achim Goerres and Pieter Vanhuysse, eds., *Global Political Demography: The Politics of Population Change* 2021, pp. 167-176, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73065-9>.

⁴³ For a concise overview on the topic, cf. Dudley Kirk, *ivi*, pp. 369-374

⁴⁴ Osea Giuntella, Lorenzo Rotunno and Luca Stella, *Globalization, Fertility, and Marital Behavior in a Lowest-Low Fertility Setting*, «Demography», 59, no. 6 (01/12/2022), pp.2135-59_p. 2138, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-10275366>.

(1973) and *A treatise on the family* (1981), described family-planning decisions through market terms, introducing notions like that of “marriage market”⁴⁵ or highlighting the role of income effects in fertility dynamics. According to his theories, the household members are incentivized to specialize in either housework or to enter the labour market so to maximize overall family utility, derived from the sum of both activities production and the expected utility from children; since Becker adopted a traditional gender-roles division, he assumed women to be more present in domestic work whereas men had better advantages in the labour market⁴⁶. A direct corollary of this position is that the growing women participation in the job system following the cultural upheavals of 1968 made it more convenient for them to marry later and have fewer children, thereby exerting negatively fertility⁴⁷. This issue will be examined in major detail later, yet for the moment it must be clarified that in contemporary advanced societies, characterized by lowest-low fertility, Becker’s assumptions are largely unproven by empirical evidence, due to the influence of new social norms and cultural contexts⁴⁸.

By intertwining the economic rationality embedded in the Neo-classical approach with institutional and cultural factors, the Australian scholar John C. Caldwell offers an insightful theorization of the Transition⁴⁹. According to his positions, the most distinctive feature of the Demographic Revolution lies in the reversal of wealth flow between parents and children. In agricultural societies, these flows typically moved from younger to older generations, given the high fungibility of rural labour; with the advent of industrialization and urban life, however, the average cost of each child began to rise, as kids required longer and more substantial educational investments for smaller families (the so-called process of “nuclearization”⁵⁰). Thus, while under the *Ancien Régime* it was economically rational to have as many children as possible, in modern times remaining childless emerges as the most logical choice, materially speaking. The ancient meaning of the term “proletarian” (from the Latin *proletarius*, derivative of *proles*, -*is*, “offspring”, literally “one whose only wealth lies in their offspring”) has so faded away. Nevertheless, Caldwell’s theorization, though interesting, has encountered significant challenges in validation and generalization, in particular in

⁴⁵ Shikha Dalmia e Peter Sicilian, “*Kids Cause Specialization: Evidence for Becker’s Household Division of Labor Hypothesis*,” «International Advances in Economic Research» 14, no. 4 (11/2008): 448–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11294-008-9171-x>.

⁴⁶ Boyan Zheng, Qiongshi Lu, e Jason Fletcher, *Estimating Causal Effects of Fertility on Life Course Outcomes: Evidence Using a Dyadic Genetic Instrumental Variable Approach*, «NBER Working Paper Series», no. 30955 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research), 02/2023, p. 5, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w30955>.

⁴⁷ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia*, cit., p. 58.

⁴⁸ Osea Giuntella, Lorenzo Rotunno and Luca Stella, *Globalization*, cit., pp. 2139–2140.

⁴⁹ See John C. Caldwell, *Toward a Restatement of Demographic Transition Theory*, «Population and Development Review» 2, no. 3–4 (1976): 321–366.

⁵⁰ Dudley Kirk, *Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p. 372.

those developing populations that have experienced a fertility decline without reproducing the nuclear family centred social structure⁵¹.

Shifting from micro-economic paradigms to macro one, the Richard Easterlin's doctrine should not be set aside. In one of his works, he draws an analogy between fertility dynamics and market ones, suggesting they are governed by the principles of supply and demand⁵². In his model, the supply of children refers to the level of natural fertility occurring in the complete absence of any self-limiting mechanisms over the course of a woman's reproductive life, whereas the demand reflects not only household preferences about ideal family size, but it also encompasses social, monetary and psychic burdens of fertility in terms of opportunity-cost⁵³. This framework has long been valued for its cultural neutrality, which makes it potentially applicable to different populations; nonetheless, its reliance on total cohort fertility analysis with predictive purposes has also attracted some criticism⁵⁴. Indeed, the same author is also famous for another contribution that, as aforementioned, is a conspicuous demonstration of how the cohort size could impact on someone's family plans and subsequently on the very cohort fertility. According to Easterlin, under fixed business and technological conditions, an individual's opportunities in the labour market depend largely on his or her cohort size. Those born into a large cohort encounter greater competition and consequently fewer opportunities, whereas on the other hand individuals from relatively small cohorts enjoy better conditions, with positive effects on both income and personal stability⁵⁵. This implies that those that face a greater "demographic burden" are likely to interpretate their future with pessimism and, as a result, have fewer children, while those endowed with broader opportunities tend to adopt a more optimistic outlook and thus have more children⁵⁶. Easterlin theory sets down a cyclical scenario, mostly confirmed by empirical evidence for not post-modern societies⁵⁷.

After assessing economic theories, the discussion will now turn to those frameworks that identify in ideational and cultural changes as the main drivers of the Transition, which nonetheless shall not be seen as completely incompatible with the market-oriented approaches⁵⁸. The frontrunner of such models has been the Belgian sociologist Ron J. Lesthaeghe, who interprets the fertility decline

⁵¹ T. E. Dow, Jr., L. Archer, S. Khasiani and J. Kekovole, *Wealth flows and fertility decline in rural Kenya, 1991-92*, in «Population and Development Review», 20 (1994), pp. 343-364, cit. in *ibidem*.

⁵² Richard A. Easterlin and Eileen M. Crimmins, *The Fertility Revolution: A Supply-Demand Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

⁵³ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *Demography*, cit., pp. 226-227.

⁵⁴ Dudley Kirk, *Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p. 371

⁵⁵ Richard A. Easterlin, *Birth and Fortune: The Impact of Numbers on Personal Welfare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 3-32).

⁵⁶ Richard A. Easterlin, *ivi*, ch. II.

⁵⁷ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *ivi*, pp. 243-244.

⁵⁸ Ron Lesthaeghe, *A Century of Demographic and Cultural Change in Western Europe: An Exploration of Underlying Dimensions*, in «Population and Development Review» 9, no. 3/1983, p. 411.

shall be seen as «part of a broader emancipation process»⁵⁹ caused by the complex interplay of several cultural factors. In his analysis, he assesses several indicators, such as the rise of non-marital cohabitation, the increase of divorce rates and above all the widespread diffusion of voluntary childlessness, to conclude that mere economicistic doctrines, like the Easterlin's two generations hypothesis, were no heuristically adequate to explain the magnitude of the evolutions: «any modelling of the formal structure of the calculus and of the decision-making process itself should be complemented by an attempt to link the outcome of choice to alterations in ideational components as well [...] a cost-benefit paradigm is necessary, but not sufficient»⁶⁰. Therefore, he links demographic transition to the spreading of post-Christian Enlightenment values, centred on individual liberty, anti-authoritarianism and secularism, noting that Transition (interpreted as a conscious childbearing postponement or limitation) started in those countries where the “bourgeois revolution” happened at first, France and the United States⁶¹. To corroborate his hypothesis, he carries out some comparative studies in some European nations characterized by stark cultural differences, like Belgium or Switzerland, noting that, despite a similar socioeconomic structure founded on industry and urbanism, the ideational gaps measured by some indexes like religiosity play the major role in defining fertility misalignments⁶². In other words, the mass wealth society placed its members on a higher scale of Maslow's hierarchy of needs⁶³, and increasingly opulent individuals almost inevitably began to seek emancipation through the pursuit of individual liberty and self-realization while rejecting excessively binding choices such as marrying or having children at early life stages⁶⁴. In short, egotistical postmodernism prevailed as the dominant social attitude, and the turning point is usually identified in the 1968 youth rebellion against traditional bourgeois norms⁶⁵. The broader cultural general shift towards postmodernism was so pervasive that ideational theorists, most notably same Lesthaeghe and his Dutch colleague Dirk van der Kaa, elaborated a brand-new theoretical system to account for it, definitely detaching from the classical one of the Transition: to them goes indeed the credit for

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ Ron Lesthaeghe, *A Century of Demographic and Cultural Change in Western Europe*, cit., p. 412.

⁶¹ Ron Lesthaeghe, *ibid.*, p. 413.

⁶² Ron Lesthaeghe, *ibid.*, pp. 420-429.

⁶³ The “hierarchy of needs” proposed by the American psychologist Abraham H. Maslow has long been regarded as a classic concept in social sciences. According to his model, physiological needs, such as adequate nutrition and stable sexual intercourse (that encompasses also desired fertility) are placed at the very bottom, followed by “safety,” “belongingness and love,” “esteem,” “self-actualization,” and, at the very top, “self-transcendence”. Cf. Abraham H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation* (Worcester: Clark University Press, 1943).

⁶⁴ Ron Lesthaeghe, *The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition*, in «Population and Development Review», no. 2/2010, vol. 36, pp. 211–251, p. 213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25699059>.

⁶⁵ For a precise historical record of the different instances that transformed social ethics in the second half of the XX century, cf. Charles S. Maier, *The Project-State and Its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023), pp. 195ff.

formulating the concept of the “Second Demographic Transition”⁶⁶, which shall now be examined in major detail.

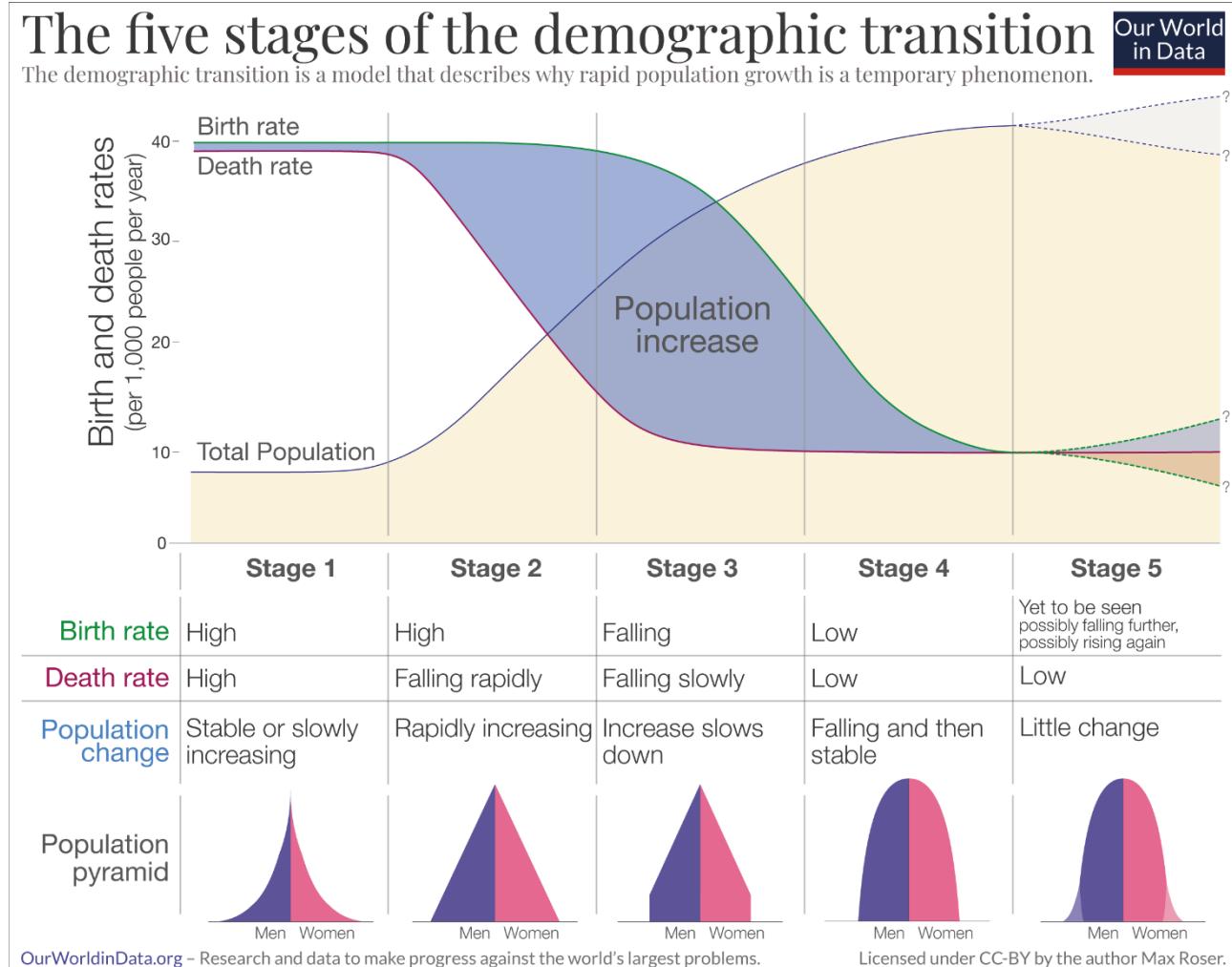


Fig 1.1: The classical model of the Demographic Transition Theory, with its typical subdivision into four stages. Source: Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/demographic-transition>⁶⁷.

⁶⁶ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory* cit., p. 474, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053442>.

⁶⁷ The chart also shows the “hypothetical” fifth stage, whose final outcome and persistence have been posing serious challenges to the validity of the model. Cf. Max Roser. *Demographic transition: Why is rapid population growth a temporary phenomenon?* in «Our World in Data», 01/06/2019. <https://ourworldindata.org/demographic-transition>, acc. 31/08/2025.

1.3 The challenge of lowest-low fertility

The need to develop an alternative framework arose from acknowledging a scenario that the Demographic Transition model could not anticipate, namely the sustained decline of fertility in advanced societies to levels well below replacement, conventionally defined in as two children per woman⁶⁸. Indeed, classical theory had assumed that the evolutionary process would culminate in a stable equilibrium where the population was viewed as stationary because of a stagnant growth resulting from joint effect of low mortality and low fertility⁶⁹. Nevertheless, the current situation in most advanced societies is well different from the forecasted conclusions. Alongside persistent sub-replacement fertility, which is driving an actual population decline, new demographic trends are emerging, such as the increasing prevalence of diverse forms of cohabitation and the disconnection between marriage and procreation⁷⁰. Yet, the primary concern of Lesthaeghe and van der Kaa was attempting to create a model that could explain the consistency of lowest-low fertility without the economic imbalances envisaged by other theories tackling the issues such as the Easterlin's one⁷¹. It goes without saying that a shrinking population faces a vast array of social challenges, including the long-term sustainability of the welfare state, especially pensions, and the impossibility of exploiting the demographic leverage for productivity boosts⁷². As aforementioned, the two scholars identified the diffusion of post-modern values as the main driver of such changes, linking them to a cultural shift towards higher Maslowian needs conceived as the ultimate stage of capitalistic development. This new attitude has far-reaching implications and is extended well beyond pure fertility trends. For instance, regarding mortality, it is reflected in the spread of a new “health culture” which is affecting life expectancy so to transform old age into a more active stage of life⁷³. Like the first Transition, this process was regarded as unavoidable for advanced market economies and was, in fact, already unfolding in different settings beyond its original ones (Northern and Western Europe)⁷⁴.

However, the heuristic and predictive value of the framework has been widely questioned. For some, it represents little more than a description of the family ethics that emerged from the first transition⁷⁵. More specifically, the consistent pattern envisaged by the theory is often pure fantasy,

⁶⁸ Strictly speaking, the replacement level depends on infant mortality rates, since its meaning refers to the number of newborns required to maintain the population at a constant size. In contexts of low mortality, two children are sufficient to replace the parents and preserve society's absolute dimension. Cf. John Craig, *Replacement Level Fertility and Future Population Growth*, in «Population Trends», no. 78/1994, pp. 20–23, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Ron Lesthaeghe, *The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition*, cit., p. 211.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ Ron Lesthaeghe, *ivi*, pp. 215 – 216.

⁷² For a brief survey of the potential negative consequences of population decline, cf. Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d'Italia*, cit., pp. 151ff.

⁷³ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *ivi*, pp. 135-137.

⁷⁴ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p. 475

⁷⁵ Jennifer Hickes Lundquist, Douglas L. Anderton & David Yaukey, *Demography*, cit., p. 280.

with increasing evidence suggesting divergences not only in OECD countries, but also within Europe itself⁷⁶. There are different outcomes predicted by the theory that have not actually materialized. Firstly, regarding the supposed abandonment of marriage as a desired life goal, it is true that nuptiality has been declining in Europe and the United States. Yet, this does not mean that it has completely vanished as a valued institution. On the contrary, some vanguard countries of the Second Transition, like the Scandinavian ones, have even witnessed a marriage revival and greater nuptial stability since the turn of the century; furthermore, in less-developed countries the age of marriage has been rising, though only to levels already reached within Europe throughout the 1970s⁷⁷. Cohabitation and other partnership arrangements are gaining major importance and acceptance, but most of the time they are just a prelude union towards marriage, even in the assumed most advanced countries⁷⁸. In this regard, the framework's assumptions are scarcely applicable outside Europe; for instance, in East Asia the main driver of divorce remains socio-economic inequality rather than a postmodern cultural shift⁷⁹. Even regarding the most concerning phenomenon addressed by the theory, namely structural sub-replacement fertility, a wide generalization is hardly viable. Although it is empirically confirmed that lowest-low fertility and voluntary childlessness are becoming a common feature also in non-European countries, their rates display remarkable national differences, without the convergence envisaged by the Second Transition; if anything, the first societies to have embarked on the post-modern shift, such as France or Sweden, are now showing some of the highest fertility rates in of Europe⁸⁰. For all these reasons, the Second Transition model, although «excellent in parts», can be reasonably criticized for failing to be a coherent universal explanatory framework; in other words, its major flaw is «to be over-stretched unreasonably to cover some phenomena better accounted for by other viewpoints»⁸¹. In brief, it seems appropriate to search for other causalities underpinning the fertility fall in some developed countries.

It is not surprising that reproductive decision-making ranks among the most complex challenges faced by an individual throughout his life, influenced by a plethora of social, economic

⁷⁶ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory*, p. 483

⁷⁷ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *ibid.*, p. 481.

⁷⁸ Patrick Heuveline and Jeffrey M. Timberlake, *The Role of Cohabitation in Family Formation: The United States in Comparative Perspective*, in «Journal of Marriage and Family» 66, no. 5/2004, pp. 1221ff. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600335>.

⁷⁹ James M. Raymo et al., *Marriage and Family in East Asia: Continuity and Change*, in «Annual Review of Sociology» 41, no. 2015: pp. 471–92, pp. 479ff. [doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112428](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112428).

⁸⁰ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *ibid.*, p. 482.

⁸¹ David Coleman, *Why We Don't Have to Believe Without Doubting in the “Second Demographic Transition”: Some Agnostic Comments*, in «Vienna Yearbook of Population Research» 2/2004: pp. 11–24, p. 11. [doi:10.1553/populationyearbook2004s11](https://doi.org/10.1553/populationyearbook2004s11).

and psychological constraints⁸². It is therefore overly reductive to link the fertility decline just to the selfish aspirations of a “tainted” generation, especially considering that as late as 2006 most of the European youth still wished an ideal family size of two children⁸³. Given this discrepancy, the task of the social scientist (and by extension the policy maker) should be to comprehend the concrete factors that frustrate young people’s aspirations and to aid them in fulfilling their goals, in order to guarantee not only demographic growth but also social inclusion⁸⁴. In this respect, there are two academic approaches that will be addressed for their heuristic potential.

The first is that argument labelled as “Globalization Theory”, which seeks in the rising economic uncertainty the main reason of the fertility decline⁸⁵. The progressive labour market casualisation, with the abandonment of the “work-for-life paradigm”, the retrenchment of established welfare systems, and growing relative inequality worsened by the price soaring of some essential goods (housing, food *etc.*) are considered a matter of fact in a vast branch of literature⁸⁶. For this doctrine, globalization is defined as the interplay between four phenomena: the increasing integration of international markets; the massive intensification of competition due to the “supply-side economics” dogmas (deregulation, liberalization and so forth); the declining price and pace of information creation and diffusion thanks to digital technologies; the growing interdependence of market, including their vulnerability to mutual shocks⁸⁷. The combined effects of these trends create an unseen level of uncertainty for modern societies, where individual consumers and suppliers have largely become mere “price-takers” in the face of global concurrence. As a result, they risk turning into mere pawns of distant and excessively dynamics global markets, whose evolutions are scarcely predictable⁸⁸. Of course, not everybody is affected by this uncertainty in the same way. A major strength of this framework lies precisely in its emphasis on the role of national institutions, such as a country’s welfare regime or educational system, unlike the Second Transition model⁸⁹. Encompassing these elements will indeed show why, even in lowest-low fertility settings, there are stark national

⁸² Maria Rita Testa, Tomáš Sobotka e Philip S. Morgan, *Reproductive decision-making: towards improved theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches*, in «Vienna Yearbook of Population Research», vol. 9/2011, pp. 1–9, p. 8–9.

⁸³ Maria Rita Testa, *Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe: evidence from the Eurobarometer 2006 survey*, in «Vienna Yearbook of Population Research», vol. 2007, pp. 357–379.

⁸⁴ Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *Why Demography matters*, cit., p 142-143.

⁸⁵ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory*, p.486. For the systematic framework of the theory, cf. Hans-Peter Blossfeld et al., *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁸⁶ For the pure demographic aspects, cf. Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *ibid.*, pp. 145ff. On the other hand, for a broader historical prospective, cf. Charles S. Maier, *The Project-State and Its Rivals* cit., pp. 360ff, whereas for the Italian case cf. Piero Craveri, *Dalla democrazia «incompiuta» alla «postdemocrazia». Percorsi storici del sistema politico italiano* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023).

⁸⁷ Hans-Peter Blossfeld et al., *Globalization*, cit., pp. 2ff.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*

⁸⁹ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *ibidem*.

discrepancies. Moreover, while the Second Transition framework is silent about inequality, the Globalization theory assigns to it considerable importance, noting that new economic forces are indeed exacerbating income differentials and undermining individual's agency in fulfilling their life goal, like forming and maintaining a family⁹⁰. It has been empirically demonstrated in fact how Western middle and working classes have been damaged by globalisation in the relative worldwide wealth distribution, above all low skilled manufacturing workers, whereas the most educated have generally improved their conditions⁹¹.

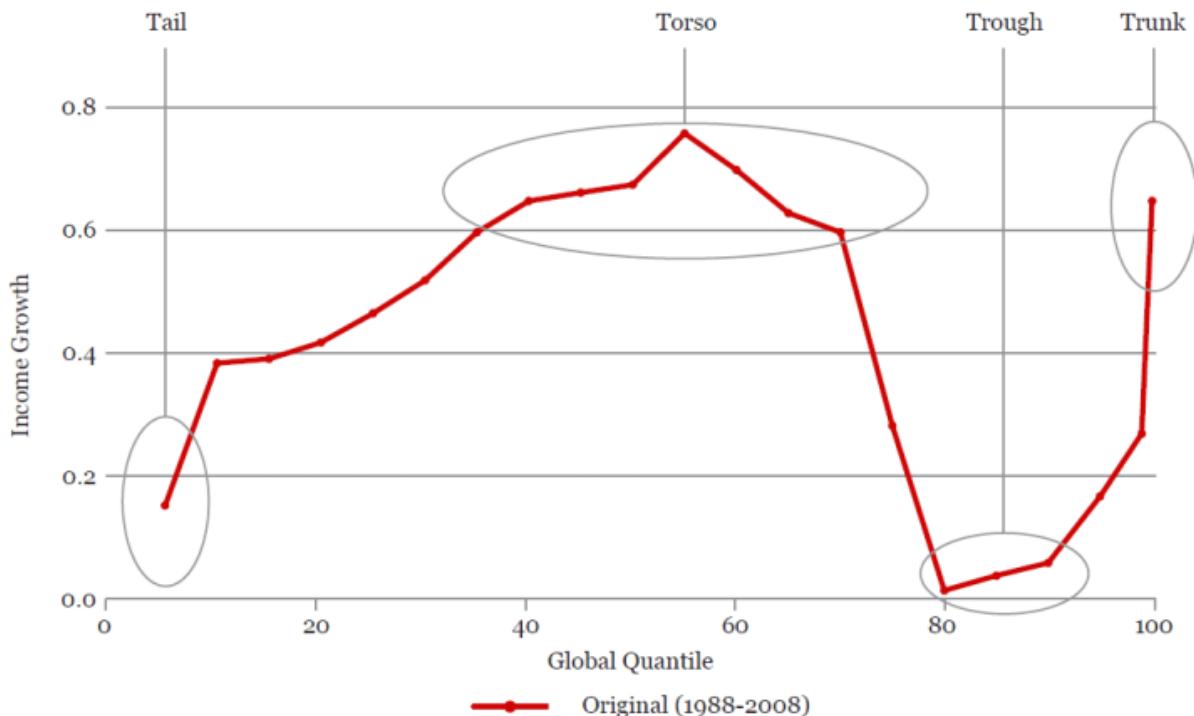


Fig 1.2: The Lakner-Milanovic Curve, also known as the “Elephant”, illustrating the evolution of global income redistribution (1988-2008). Source: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/whats-happening-to-the-world-income-distribution-the-elephant-chart-revisited/>⁹².

⁹⁰ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p.486.

⁹¹ It is possible to refer to the widely cited “Lakner-Milanovic Curve”, which shows how which social groups have been advantage or damaged by globalized economy. Cf. Christoph Lakner and Branko Milanovic, *Global Income Distribution: From the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the Great Recession*, in «The World Bank Economic Review», vol. 30/2016, n. 2, pp. 203–232.

⁹² The “torso” of the graph depicts the noteworthy rise of the global middle class, representing the remarkable development in some Asian economies (especially China), whereas the “trough” highlights the stagnation of world upper-middle class, largely composed of ordinary households in Western countries. Cf. Homi Kharas e Brina Seidel. *What's happening to the world income distribution? The elephant chart revisited*, in «Brookings», 02/04/2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/whats-happening-to-the-world-income-distribution-the-elephant-chart-revisited/>.

The connection between low fertility and precarious work conditions is not actually a recent argument in demographic research. Already in the 1980s the American sociologist William J. Wilson, using the classical Becker's model, assumed that the worsening condition of US industrial workers negatively affected the economic security of young men, especially for some minorities like the Afro-Americans. This "joblessness" led to a diminution in women's expected gains in creating a union, thus hampering total fertility⁹³. Wilson's assumptions have been tested and verified in the US, demonstrating that the trade shocks prompted by globalization have raised the fraction of unwed mothers, that of children in single-headed households or living in poverty and the ratios of behaviours induced by marginality such as addiction or suicide⁹⁴. It is not a chance that this mass of deprived and miserable workers has translated their unrest in political reactionism, animating populist and extremist movements that are currently increasing their consent in most Western countries⁹⁵. The connection between joblessness, marginality, and family crisis has been explicitly acknowledged by one of the most prominent representatives of such movements, the current US vice-president J.D. Vance, who stated that, despite its main reference to Afro-American ghettos, «Wilson's book spoke to me. I wanted to write him a letter and tell him that he had described my home perfectly»⁹⁶. In conclusion, given the central role of family resources, education and career opportunities in shaping the transition to adulthood (and therefore to parenthood), it follows logically that the economic hardships and uncertainties of a globalized world drive the less fortunate toward having fewer children⁹⁷. In a Marxian prospective, social change should not be seen as triggered by the predominance of postmodernist cultural values, but rather by the emergence of new global economic structures, rooted in financialization and the knowledge economy, of which such values constitute their perfect corollary.

Nevertheless, the argument based on rising inequality is not entirely exhaustive in accounting for the fertility crisis, which shall also be evaluated through the lens of a different framework. This one is grounded in the transformation of gender roles prompted by progressive economic modernization. Indeed, even if one were to take the assumptions of the Second Transition model as well-founded, it must be acknowledged that the striving for individual autonomy and self-

⁹³ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁹⁴ David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson, *When Work Disappears: Manufacturing Decline and the Falling Marriage Market Value of Young Men*, in «AER: Insights», vol. 1/2019, n. 2, pp. 161–178, p.163

⁹⁵ There is a vast array of political and sociological literature on the matter. For a concise overview, cf. Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018)

⁹⁶ J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper, 2016, p.144, cit.in David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson, *When Work Disappears*, cit.,p. 161.

⁹⁷ Hans-Peter Blossfeld et al., *Globalization*, cit., pp. 14ff.

actualization is not gender-neutral, since women's choices in this respect are more decisive in determining private family planning⁹⁸. It must be recalled that demographic modernity has profoundly modified lifestyles and value systems, but more particularly those of women. Notestein himself had already recognized that in societies condemned by the Malthusian trap to high fertility, every dimension of morality and law served to entrench women in their role of "angel in the house"⁹⁹. Therefore, progressive female empowerment was not the driver of the fertility decline; rather, it was the decline that transformed social constraints and enabled women to devote more time and resources to alternative and autonomous life projects, such as participation in the labor market¹⁰⁰. Thanks to modernization, women have been alleviated of the Biblical curse¹⁰¹, enabling them to attain empowerment and struggling for a more substantive gender equality. However, since high fertility was not a natural phenomenon but rather a social obligation enshrined in family ethos, for properly reshaping women's role were required «changes not only to the social-structural supports but also to the moral supports»¹⁰²; and such ethic foundations prove to be the most enduring and difficult to transform¹⁰³. Precisely because of this slow moral evolution, traditional gender roles in the private sphere persist, although contemporary women can compete with men in the labor market. This pattern is sufficiently regular that, within the framework of the "gender equity theory", a two-stage evolutionary model has been developed to explain the structural deline between public and private female empowerment and the consequent effects on fertility¹⁰⁴. During the first phase, the Becker's classical assumptions hold true: a rising female employment is negatively correlated to overall fertility, as women rationally seek to maximize household utility through engaging in paid work rather than devoting themselves exclusively on childcaring¹⁰⁵. In the second phase, however, family norms gradually adapt to the new socio-economic structure, as exemplified by two dynamics: men's growing preference for independent partners, consistent with the dual-earner model, and their increasing commitment to domestic works¹⁰⁶. During the lag phase, there occurs a reversal of Becker's assumptions: in advanced post-industrial economies, women's employment and mutualization of house duties are positively associated with the average number of children per couple; quite

⁹⁸ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p. 485.

⁹⁹ See ref. 34.

¹⁰⁰ Peter McDonald, *Gender Equity in Theories of Fertility Transition*, in «Population and Development Review» 26, no. 3/2000: pp. 427–439, p. 431. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2000.00427.x>.

¹⁰¹ Gen. 3:16 KJV: «Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee».

¹⁰² Peter McDonald, *ibidem*, p. 433.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ Frances Goldscheider, Eva Bernhardt and Trude Lappégaard, *The Gender Revolution: A Framework for Understanding Changing Family and Demographic Behavior*, in «Population and Development Review» 41, n. 2 (06/2015), pp. 207–239, pp. 210ff.

¹⁰⁵ *Ivi*, p. 211-212.

¹⁰⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 218-220.

surprisingly, the same hold true also for education¹⁰⁷. Therefore, it is not coincidence that in those societies that kept a traditional gender hierarchy despite intensive capitalistic development, like East-Asian ones, fertility reaches the lowest levels worldwide: as women gain independence over their life projects, they may choose individual self-realization over family formation if the entire burden of childrearing falls on their shoulders¹⁰⁸. In a concise formula: «When gender equity rises to high levels in individual-oriented institutions while remaining low in family-oriented institutions, fertility will fall to very low levels», and this is widely confirmed by international comparisons¹⁰⁹. In conclusion, the main contribution of these scholars lies in having outlined a feasible solution to the fertility crisis: according to them, full recovery up to replacement level, albeit at later ages than the past, will occur once the gender revolution is complete and equality is achieved in both public and private sphere¹¹⁰; in other words, despite the total fertility rate will always account for low values, completed cohort fertility will permit to maintain population at the desired size. Moreover, differently to the Second Demographic Transition model, it is grounded in measurable phenomena, such as employment or public spending on equity-focused welfare systems, rather than aleatory and abstract concepts as the cultural shift¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, pp. 207-208

¹⁰⁸ Peter McDonald, *Gender Equity in Theories of Fertility Transition*, pp. 436-438

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁰ Batool Zaidi and S. Philip Morgan, *The Second Demographic Transition Theory*, cit., p. 485.

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*.

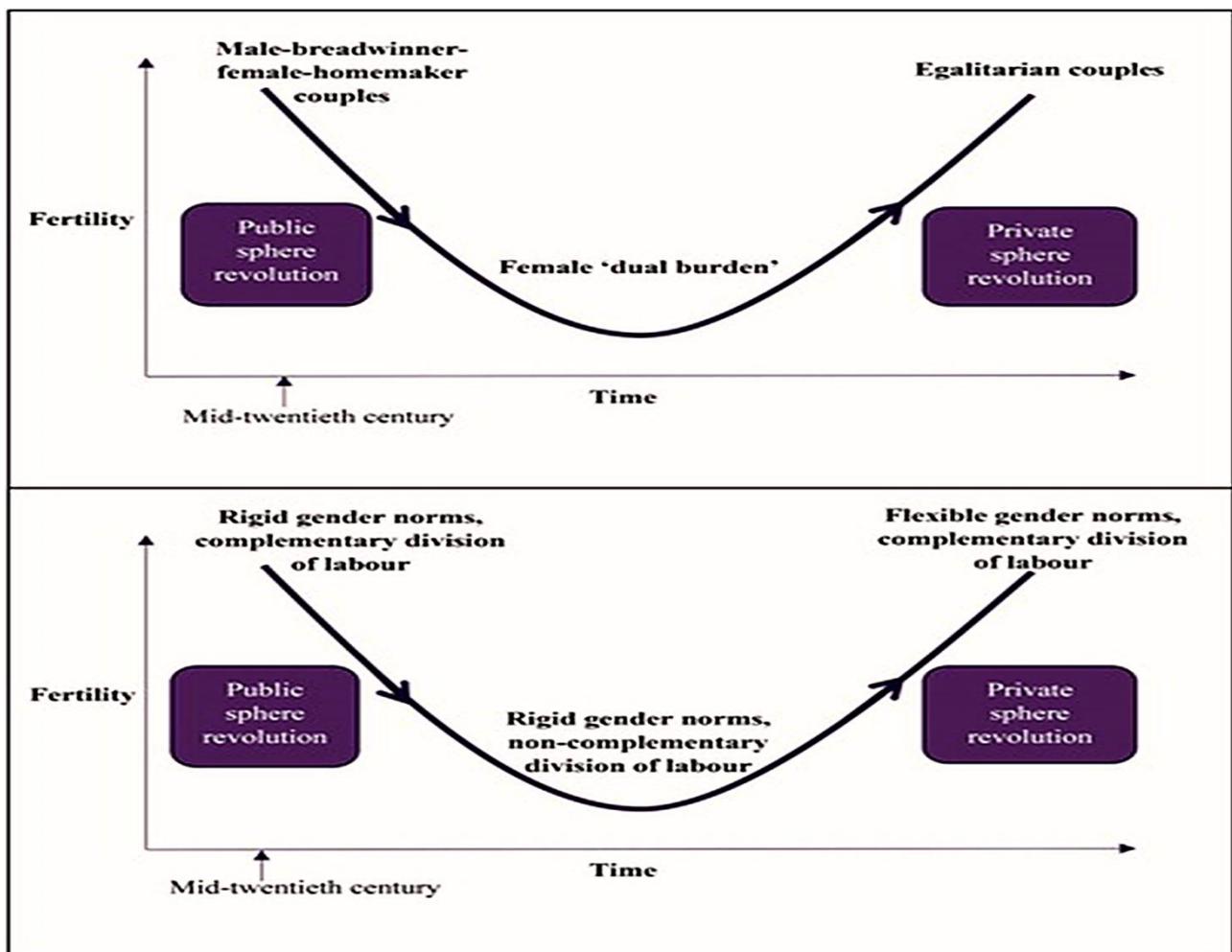


Fig 1.3: A graphical representation of the two-stage Gender Revolution. Source: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/00324728.2020.1851748?scroll=top&needAccess=true>¹¹².

To sum up, there are structural reasons underpinning the decline of fertility in some advanced countries, i.e., the social incentive setting puts systemic pressure on individual life goals. Such pressure influences in the same way every young adult entering an increasing unstable market, characterized by intense international competition and vulnerability to disruptive technologies and mutual shocks. In such prospective, current natality issues are just one side of a broader crisis of late liberalism societies and thus should be seen as contingent and possibly reversible. This tension exercises even more strength on women, that apart the shared difficulty in securing a job position still

¹¹² In this model, the gap between ideal and actual fertility stems from an incomplete transition toward full gender equality. In this regard, Mediterranean Europe and East Asia are still embedded in the “dual burden” stage. Cf. Alyce Raybould and Rebecca Sear, *Children of the (Gender) Revolution: A Theoretical and Empirical Synthesis of How Gendered Division of Labour Influences Fertility*. in «Population Studies» 75, n. 2/2020: pp. 169–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2020.1851748>.

faces in some situations traditional family-caring expectations, reflected also by less responsive public welfare policies. The ideational change towards individualistic principles did occur, but it should be seen as an intervening variable for spreading alternative lifestyles rather than the main driver of fertility crisis. Indeed, the very demographic trends of the turn of the century, that is, after that Lesthaeghe and van der Kaa theorized the Second Transition, demonstrated that overall fertility eventually recovered at the end of those cohorts' reproductive life: although the TFR remained low, replacement was nonetheless achieved¹¹³.

All this considered, it seems now appropriate to tackle the most relevant issue at the heart of this dissertation, that is, the sharp fertility decline in Italy, which is posing serious threats to social stability and public welfare sustainability. Indeed, despite lowest-low fertility being a structural condition in contemporary Europe, there are some countries, like the Mediterranean ones, who are facing major challenges, precisely because their public policies are not coherent with the problems affronted by local young adults (long-standing professional uncertainty and incomplete gender equality). For this reason, after an analysis of the most recent demographic developments in the selected country of interest, a comparative study will be deployed among a set of selected policies in different countries so to understand their possible viability in tempering fertility decline.

¹¹³ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d'Italia*, cit., pp. 87ff.

Chapter 2

The rise and fall of Italian demography

2.1 A history of modernization gone halfway

Italy, unlike the Northern European countries, entered demographic modernity (that is, began properly its Transition), at a later stage¹. Indeed, at the time of National Unity in 1861, the country still exhibited that demographic profile typical of a pre-transitional society, marked by high mortality and high fertility². Even after the First World War, in some respects like urbanization Italy continued to display considerably lower levels than other major Western states, although significant changes were already underway.³ It is not by chance that Thompson, writing in the 1920s, placed Italy in the second group of his typology, that is, those societies undergoing an incipient transformation but still marred by archaic demographic trends, like a persistent high fertility despite a rising life expectancy⁴. However, from the 1930s onwards, Italy began slowly but steadily to converge towards the same patterns observed in its neighboring countries, with a sharp decline in average natality, an increase of the proportion of urban population, and a stabilization of migration outflows⁵. Except for the latter, these outcomes ran counter to the aims of the Fascist regime, which promoted a ruralist and prolific society, in order to maintain its inherent aggressive imperialism⁶. Paradoxically, the main legacy of the Mussolini's government was to stigmatize pro-natalist policy within Italian political culture, characterizing it for long time as a dictatorial imposition rather than a mandatory responsibility for policymakers⁷. This peculiar destiny shall be deemed as a reminder that, even under a quasi-totalitarian political system, most social developments remain largely beyond control.

In any case, the true turning point was represented by the end of the Second World War and the subsequent economic miracle. Indeed, thanks to the massive industrialization undergone by the country after the Reconstruction period, life expectancy soared dramatically, whereas internal migration from South to North and from rural to metropolitan areas increased urbanization, fostering

¹ Chris Wilson, *Demographic Transition in Europe and Around the Mediterranean*, in T. Fabre and P. Sant-Cassia (eds.), *Between Europe and the Mediterranean* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 11–27, pp. 14ff.

² Alessandro Rosina e Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d'Italia: Crescita, crisi e sfide*, Carocci: Roma, 2022, p.22.

³ Ugo Giusti, *Le grandi città italiane nel primo quarto del XXmo secolo. Note statistiche*, in «Unione Statistica delle Città Italiane. Monografie e studi», n. 4; Firenze: Alfani e Venturi, 1925, pp. 6ff.

⁴ Warren S. Thompson, *Population*, in «American Journal of Sociology» n°34, 1929, pp. 959–975, pp. 963ff.

⁵ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *ivi*, pp. 39ff.

⁶ For an exhaustive insight on Fascist demographic policies, cf. Anna Treves, *Le nascite e la politica nell'Italia del Novecento*; Milan: LED, 2001, II part.

⁷ *Ivi*, introduzione.

also the process of nuclearization⁸. In other words, Italy experienced that process of economic modernization already undergone by its continental epigones that transformed a mostly agrarian and impoverished society into a collectivity of *petit bourgeoisie* living in cities. It is that evolution so blamed by the intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini with the stigmatizing label *scomparsa delle lucciole* (literally “disappearance of fireflies”), used as a metaphor for the death of the values typical of the peasant life⁹. Thanks to the economic stability that characterized Western nations up until the first oil shock¹⁰, households enjoyed improved economic conditions leading to a particular demographic contingency: the Baby Boom, that is, a temporary peak in fertility for the anticipation of the first and second child¹¹. Despite its transitory nature, the Baby Boom is still visible in the Italian demographic landscape, as the largest cohorts are still those born between the 1950s and the 1960s¹².

In demographic terms, it can be stated that postwar Italy benefited greatly of that phenomenon known as the “demographic dividend”, with perks for the labor-intensive manufacturing in Northern regions¹³. The demographic dividend corresponds to the soaring of the ratio of young adults within a society, caused by the transitional decline of fertility after a long period of high natality; this causes an imbalance in the age structure, with a sharp diminution of the dependency ratio (the proportion of the workforce population 15-65 respect to elders and children)¹⁴. It has been widely observed that this process, aside of the inherent reduction of the proportion of “unproductive people” leads to a general workforce rejuvenation, with positive effects on growth thanks to major occupation, increased efficiency, greater innovation and risk propension, all characteristics proper of youngest workers¹⁵. Although the dividend was unevenly distributed across the country, with the South being partially disadvantaged by the massive outflow of its most productive population components¹⁶, Italy was able

⁸ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *ivi*, pp. 45ff.

⁹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “*Il vuoto del potere*” ovvero “*l’articolo delle lucciole*”, in «Corriere della Sera», 1/02/1975.

¹⁰ The period between 1945 and 1973, due to some structural factors, such as financial stability ensured by the Bretton Woods regime and trade liberalization promoted by the GAPP framework, witnessed a massive economic growth in Western countries. During these years various occurred the different national “economic miracles” that prompted the biggest social mobility registered in modern times, with the progressive establishment of the model of mass consumerism. Cf. Charles S. Maier, *The Project-State and Its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023), pp. 117ff.

¹¹ For an explanation regarding the contingencies determining the unexpected fertility peak in postwar years, cf. Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia*, *cit.*, pp. 53ff.

¹² Istat. *Popolazione residente e dinamica della popolazione. Anno 2023*, 16/12/2024, p. 7. <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CENSIMENTO-E-DINAMICA-DELLA-POPOLAZIONE-2023.pdf>

¹³ Gabriele Morettini, *L’influsso dei fattori demografici sull’economia italiana. Un’analisi empirica nel periodo 1951-2001*, (Ancona: Università Politecnica delle Marche/Dipartimento di Economia, 01/01/2005, p. 17).

¹⁴ Jesús Crespo Cuaresma, Wolfgang Lutz, and Warren Sanderson, *Is the Demographic Dividend an Education Dividend?*, in «Demography» 51, no. 1 (02/2014), pp. 299–315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-013-0245-x>

¹⁵ Federico Barbiellini Amidei, Matteo Gomellini and Paolo Piselli, *Il contributo della demografia alla crescita economica: duecento anni di “storia” italiana*, in «Questioni di Economia e Finanza (Occasional Papers)», no. 431 (03/2018), p.7.

¹⁶ Gabriele Morettini, *ivi*, pp. 18-19,

to create a positive interrelation between demographic and economic growth, ultimately completing its Transition at the outset of the 1970s¹⁷.

However, these conditions were not destined to endure for long. In just a few decades, Italy has become one of the European countries exhibiting the worst demographic indicators, both in terms of natality (with a national TFR 1,20 children per woman in 2023, a well below the replacement level) and elderly dependency ratio (199,8 individuals aged 65 and over for every 100 under 14)¹⁸. In 2023 the median age reached 47.5 years, one of the highest values worldwide; apart from a few micronations, only Japan records a higher figure¹⁹. The inception of such a regression may be traced back to the 1970s, marked by a gradual slowdown in demographic development trends, culminating in their complete reversal at the end of the XX century, a structural change in the entire history of unified Italy²⁰.

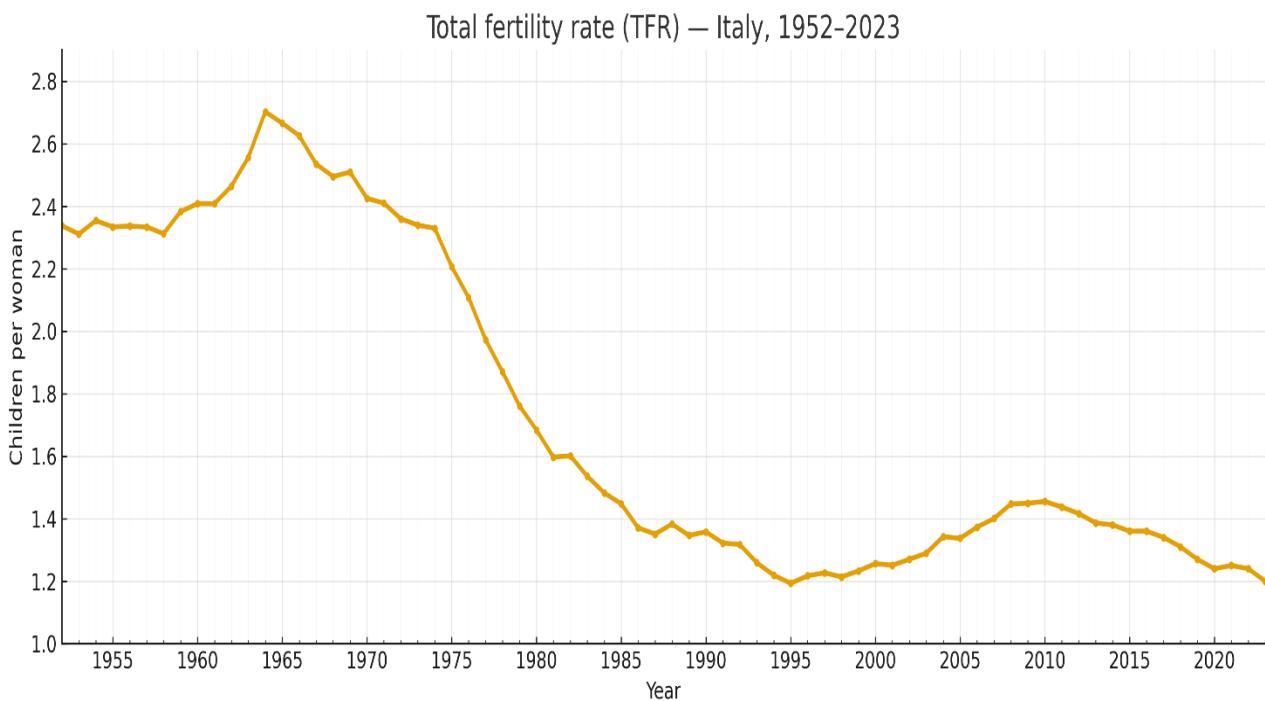


Fig 2.1: Historical trend of Italy's Total Fertility Rate from 1952 onward. Author's elaboration on ISTAT data.. Source: ISTAT, https://seriestoriche.istat.it/index.php?id=1&no_cache=1&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcatego

¹⁷ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *ivi*, p. 46.

¹⁸ Istat, *Popolazione e società. Popolazione*, 2025, acc. on 26/08/2025, <https://noi.italia.istat.it/pagina.php?id=3&categoria=3&action=show&L=0>.

¹⁹ Our World in Data, *Median Age*, acc. 26/08/2025, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/median-age?tab=table&time=2023..latest&tableFilter=countries>.

²⁰ Federico Barbiellini Amidei, Matteo Gomellini and Paolo Piselli, *Il contributo della demografia alla crescita economica*, cit., p. 16.

<https://demo.istat.it/tavole/?t=indicatori>²¹

The major cause of such upheavals has been the construction of a dysfunctional welfare state, centred on the protection of positional rents and corporativist privileges, as exemplified by the earnings-related pension system that consolidated the wealth acquired during the “glorious thirties”²². The political system of the time was indeed facing an intense social crisis triggered by sudden development²³, and the ruling class, in the impossibility of an actual governmental alternation²⁴, decided to alleviate the widespread unrest by employing a broad set of clientelist practices and covert power rebalancing called “consociativismo”²⁵. There occurred a tacit pact between the dominant parties and some sections of social society yearning for redistribution: subsidies and entitlements in change of bribes and votes²⁶. In other words, the Italian society, after the immense effort needed for the reconstruction, just decided to rest on his laurels and stopped that development trajectory that had embarked after the war; indeed, productivity in Italy stopped to increase on the threshold of the 1980s, when the incumbent cabinets at the time distorted the market through pro-demand interventions, deficit spending (so pervasive and durable so to create one of the biggest public debt in the world!), and induced currency devaluation²⁷. In short, the social mobility that characterized the glorious thirties was no more, and those generations entering the job market after that “golden age” started to grapple with increasingly precarious conditions and inadequate incomes.

²¹ Data concerning Italian TFR were extracted from two different databases: those referring to the timespan streaming from 1952 until 2014 derive from the historical series dataset, while the remaining years from the current demographic indicators. To be noted the temporary surge up to the mid-1960s, representing the “baby boom”, followed by the abrupt decline of the 1970s, only partially tempered by an ephemeral recovery at the turn of the century. Cf. ISTAT, *Indicatori demografici*: <https://demo.istat.it/tavole/?t=indicatori>, acc. 19/09/2025 and ISTAT, *Serie storiche. Popolazione e società*: https://seriestoriche.istat.it/index.php?id=1&no_cache=1&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcategoria%5D=2&tx_usercento_ce_ntofe%5Baction%5D=show&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcontroller%5D=Categoria&cHash=5dc94093f50e10c9e55a034d4c6ba123, acc. 19/09/2025.

²² Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia*, cit., pp. 68ff.

²³ Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomia delle Brigate Rosse. Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2010), cap.4.

²⁴ The Italian party system that informed the period streaming between 1946 and 1994, also known as “The First Republic”, was characterized by the impossibility of a proper alternance among the major political opponents, namely the Christian Democracy and the Communist Party, because of geopolitical constraints; this argument is the core topic of the *bipartitismo imperfetto*, cf. Giorgio Galli, *Il bipartitismo imperfetto. Comunisti e democristiani in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1966).

²⁵ Piero Craveri, *L’arte del non governo. L’inarrestabile declino della Repubblica italiana* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2016).

²⁶ Gaetano Quagliariello, “Partiti e partitocrazia in Italia,” in *La sconfitta del Moderno Principe. La partitocrazia dalle origini al crollo della prima repubblica*, a cura di Gaetano Quagliariello (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell’Immagine, 1993), pp. 1-13, pp. 8ff.

²⁷ Michele Boldrin and Matteo Fatale, *Il male dell’Italia è il capitalismo? Analisi controcorrente degli ultimi 50 anni*, in «Il Sole 24 Ore», 13/12/2021, section Res Publica/Econopoly.

Therefore, the political contingencies of the time led to the creation of an unequal and inefficient welfare system, constituting the basis of a genuine “intergenerational theft” that persisted in Italy for decades²⁸. The retirement structure, originally designed for a nation with relatively high fertility (such as Italy at the time), encouraged early exit from the labor market, with retirement levels unnaturally high due to the retributive scheme, while at the same time younger cohorts faced increasing difficulties in achieving occupational stability; this not only led to structural unemployment for older workers (partially addressed by the Dini and Fornero’s retirement reforms) but also to the widespread employment of young adults in precarious and under-skilled jobs, making Italy one of the OECD countries with the worst youth unemployment²⁹. Also, in terms of female employment Italy has consistently lagged behind its continental benchmarks, especially in the South, where traditional gender roles have proven to be resilient; situation has begun to improve only in recent years, but most Italian regions still rank among the worst in Europe on this matter³⁰

Consistently with the proposed theoretical framework, Italian fertility was inevitably bound to decline. Starting from the 1970s, where the TFR was well above the replacement level, it did nothing but to decline sharply, reaching its lowest recorded value in 1994, with only 1,19 children per woman³¹. In particular, births before thirty years collapsed, similarly to other European countries³². The scenario critically deteriorated in the South, where for the first time in history natality fell below that of the Central-Northern regions; despite the persistence of conservative cultural principles, the bleak economic outlook and lack of competitiveness drove the most qualified Southern youth to emigrate, further depressing overall fertility and undermining any prospect of endogenous development³³. Actually, there has been a phase of sensitive fertility recovery between the mid-1990s and the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis, during which with the TFR nearly achieving the value of 1.50 children per woman. However, the dynamic concerned quasi-exclusively the Central-Northern regions, both because of the rising fertility of natives and the contribution provided by foreign immigrants, which nonetheless was not decisive in reversing the secular geographic fertility gap³⁴.

²⁸ “Intergenerational theft” is the expression used by the well-known economist and activist Michele Boldrin to frame the Italian welfare, cf. EconomiaItalia, *PENSIONI: IL FURTO INTERGENERAZIONALE*, YouTube video, 26:21, 07/04/2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CNcRYdDYhk>

²⁹ Drin Drin, *Cos’è e quali sono le cause del Divario Intergenerazionale - con Piero Reichlin*, YouTube video, 15:23, 12/08/2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CNcRYdDYhk>

³⁰ Cristina Freguia, Maria Clelia Romano and Linda Laura Sabbadini, *Il lavoro delle donne tra ostacoli e opportunità. Documento di sintesi* (Roma: CNEL/ISTAT, 06/03/2025), <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/istat-cnel.pdf>

³¹ Manuela Olagnero, “*Il genitore riluttante: le molte ragioni della denatalità in Italia*,” in «Meridiana», no. 102 (2021), pp.195–210, p.198, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27111421>.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Delio Miotti, *La demografia come destino? Il futuro di un’Italia sempre più piccola, meno ricca e invariabilmente duale*, in «Rivista economica del Mezzogiorno», no. 3–4, 09–12/2019, pp. 723–737, pp. 725–726.

³⁴ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia*, cit., pp. 87ff.

The same argument holds true when cohort fertility is taken into account: while Central-Northern Italy experienced a recovery, even surpassing the threshold of 1.51 children, the “Mezzogiorno” did not show signs of improvement at all³⁵. This phenomenon should not be assessed with surprise: as anticipated by the proposed theoretical framework, in advanced economies the main drivers of fertility are, on the one hand, economic opportunities enabling young adults to fully transition into adulthood, and on the other, the diffusion of gender-equality-oriented mentality, supported by capillary public services, which allow women to reconcile work and family. There are not the ideational determinants that shape the most reproductive behaviors, because otherwise the aforementioned reversal would not have taken place. Therefore, it is to be expected that the most economically and socially vibrant regions of the country display higher natality rates.

Nevertheless, despite this small window of opportunity, Italy wasted the possibility to fully overcome its historical problems and reverse fertility trends, and the social system failed to reform so to overcome its historical criticalities³⁶. The emergence of political movements concerned with the protection of the *status quo* did not act as transformative agents; on the contrary, they often hampered change by defending existing power hierarchies and discouraging innovative reforms³⁷. The incomplete adaptation to globalization amplified the impact of the 2008 crisis on the country, which became one of the European states closest to financial default and economic collapse³⁸. The adamantine nature of such issues had pervasive effects on Italian social life and political culture. One of the most impacting is familism, which can be interpreted as a degeneration of those strong vertical bonds typical of the Mediterranean family: in the absence of properly effective public policies, households are obliged in compelling autonomously the material supports for children, most of times up until the definitive entrance in a stable job position³⁹. It must be emphasized that familism generates indeed a vicious circle: the more families rely on their own resources, the less the State is incentivized to develop adequate policies, thus further increasing the costs of childbearing for households⁴⁰. Although Italian familism has been a widely studied topic within sociological

³⁵ Marcantonio Caltabiano, Maria Castiglioni, and Alessandro Rosina, *Lowest-low fertility: Signs of a recovery in Italy?*, in «Demographic Research», vol. 21, art. 23 (06/11/2009): pp. 681–718, pp. 708ff.

³⁶ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *ivi*, p. 86.

³⁷ For instance, “Berlusconism” as a political phenomenon represented a clear watershed in Italian history, since for the first time a movement aspiring to the government was devoid of elitist-inspired pedagogical aims and did not put forward reformist recipes intended to foster convergence with the rest of Europe. Cf. Giovanni Orsina, *Il berlusconismo nella storia d’Italia* (Venezia: Marsilio), 2013.

³⁸ During the financial turmoil of 2008, the international specialized press coined an inelegant acronym (PIIGS) to identify the most financially risky countries in Europe: Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain

³⁹ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *ivi*, p. 76.

⁴⁰ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia*, *cit.*, p. 76.

research⁴¹, its effects are still visible in national family policies. For instance, structural scarcity of nurseries in Southern regions depends on the propagation of this cultural model⁴².

As aforementioned, probably the most evident outcome of this long-lasting demographic trend has been one of the most rapid population ageing worldwide. Since the last decade of the XX century, dependency ratio started to soar, and it is currently projected to overcome the peak reached on the onset of '900 (caused at that time by the high proportion of under-14) in 2041⁴³. Some scholars have introduced the notion of *degiovamento* (lit. “de-juvenation”) to explain the magnitude of the transformations; such *degiovamento* does not express itself merely on a quantitative dimension, namely in the reduction of the absolute numbers of young cohorts, but also on a qualitative one, meaning that the social and political importance of the youth has been decreasing over time⁴⁴. This imbalance is represented also by the income levels computed by age group, with most wealth concentrated within the two older ones (45-64 years old, who are the richest, and those above 65, that quite surprisingly show even higher revenues than the working population below 44 years old despite being retired)⁴⁵. The lack of opportunities in the national labor market has induced a vast portion of the most educated and skilled members of the Italian youth to expatriate, with more than a million expats between 2014 and 2024 (an underestimated figure, due to the incompliance of a conspicuous minority in enrolling to the AIRE, the Register of Italians Residing Abroad)⁴⁶. The hardships faced by youngest cohort is exemplified that the fact that Italy displays the second worse youth-NEET rate of all the European Union (16.1% in 2023), surpassed only by that of Romania⁴⁷. Even in the most recent upturn of the occupation rate in the last years, the most benefited age group was that of mature workers, whereas the bracket of 25-34 years old recorded a decline⁴⁸.

⁴¹ Consider, for instance, Edward C. Banfield's studies on amoral familism, focused on the maximization of the nuclear family's utility at the expense of the broader community. Cf. Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

⁴² Openpolis, *Italia a 3 punti dall'obiettivo del 33% sugli asili nido*, 27/08/2024, <https://www.openpolis.it/italia-a-3-punti-dalloobiettivo-del-33-sugli-asili-nido/>

⁴³ Federico Barbiellini Amidei, Matteo Gomellini and Paolo Piselli, *Il contributo della demografia alla crescita economica*, cit., p. 8.

⁴⁴ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *ivi*, pp. 99ff.

⁴⁵ Lorenzo Ruffino, *I redditi dei contribuenti italiani in cinque grafici*, in «Pagella Politica», 24/04/2023, <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/redditi-contribuenti-italiani-2022>.

⁴⁶ ISTAT, *Migrazioni interne e internazionali della popolazione residente. Anni 2023–2024. Record di espatri e di immigrazione straniera*, 20/06/2025, p. 6,

<https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Report-MIGRAZIONI-INTERNE-E-INTERNAZIONALI-DELLA-POPOLAZIONE-RESIDENTE-ANNI-2023-2024-1.pdf>

⁴⁷ ISTAT, *Resta fondamentale il livello di istruzione dei genitori per i percorsi di studio dei figli*, 17/07/2024, <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/REPORT-livelli-istruzione.pdf>

⁴⁸ ISTAT, *Occupati e disoccupati. Febbraio 2025*, 01/04/2025, https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CS_Occupati-e-disoccupati_FEBBRAIO_2025.pdf.

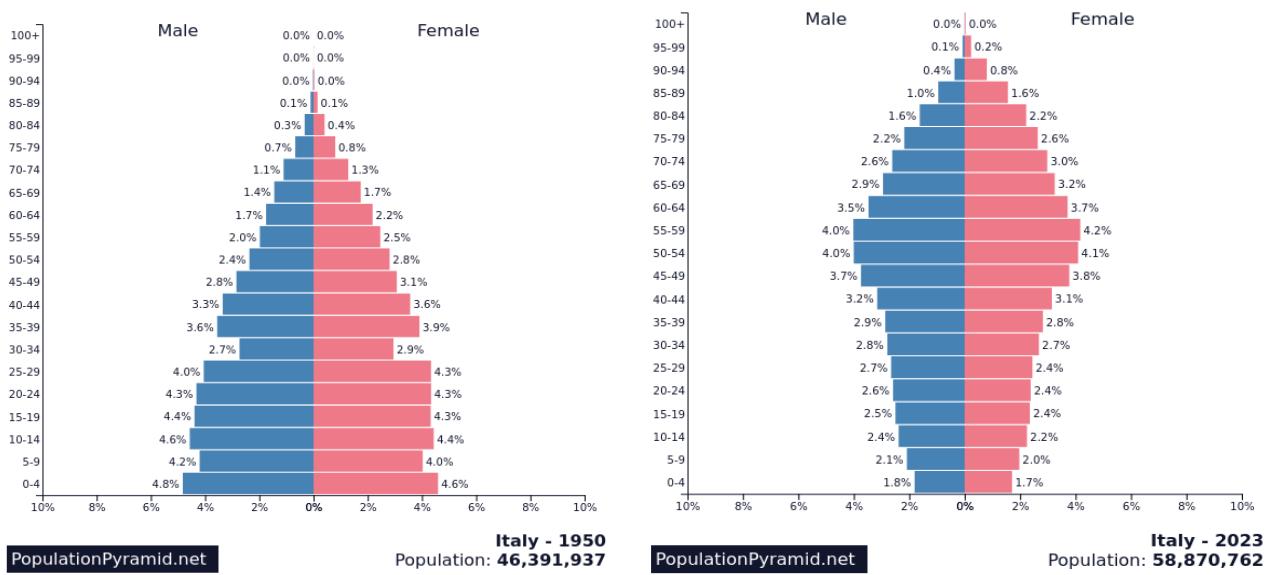


Fig 2.2: A comparison between Italy age pyramid in 1950 and 2023. Source: <https://maddmaths.simai.eu/divulgazione/rubriche/la-lente-matematica/italia-istat-piramidi/>⁴⁹

The other most serious deficiency within Italian demography is the gender gap. The Peninsula has the worse female occupation ratio of the entire European Union, with approximately half of women in work-age that is currently employed⁵⁰. Moreover, also in this respect territorial disparities play a significant role: if women employment is solidly above 60% in Central-Northern regions (a rather low figure in the European context, yet not far from the average), in the “Mezzogiorno” it barely reaches 36.9%⁵¹. The scenario becomes clearer when considering that 62.2% of inactive women are so because of the incompatibility between work and familiar duties, namely childcare and eldercare⁵². In fact, Italy is still one of the European countries with the highest proportion of male breadwinner family model (25.2%), only third to those of Romania and Greece; this model characterizes with major intensity low-educated households⁵³. Moreover, another concerning factor

⁴⁹ As in most advanced nations, the 2023 structure no longer resembles a proper pyramid. The bulge reflects the relatively large size of those cohorts born during the “baby boom” and up until the early 1970s, when the TFR fell below the replacement level. Cf. Marco Menale, *L’Italia e il continuo calo demografico: parlano le piramidi*, in «Maddmaths», 12/10/2023.

⁵⁰ Cristina Freguja, Maria Clelia Romano and Linda Laura Sabbadini, *Il lavoro delle donne tra ostacoli e opportunità*, cit., p. 3.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 4

⁵² Ivi, p. 11.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

is represented by the job abandonment rate: over one fifth of new mothers leave the workforce after childbirth, especially among the least educated and those residing in Southern regions⁵⁴. The joint lecture of these data suggests that Italy, and particularly the “Mezzogiorno”, has not completed yet the gender revolution prescribed by the gender equity theory, and this arouses as one of the major drivers of fertility decline. Again, it is not by chance that nowadays the “Mezzogiorno” is facing a concerning process of human desertification, both in rural and metropolitan areas, causing a serious weakening of social and economic relations and the rarefaction of the internal markets⁵⁵.

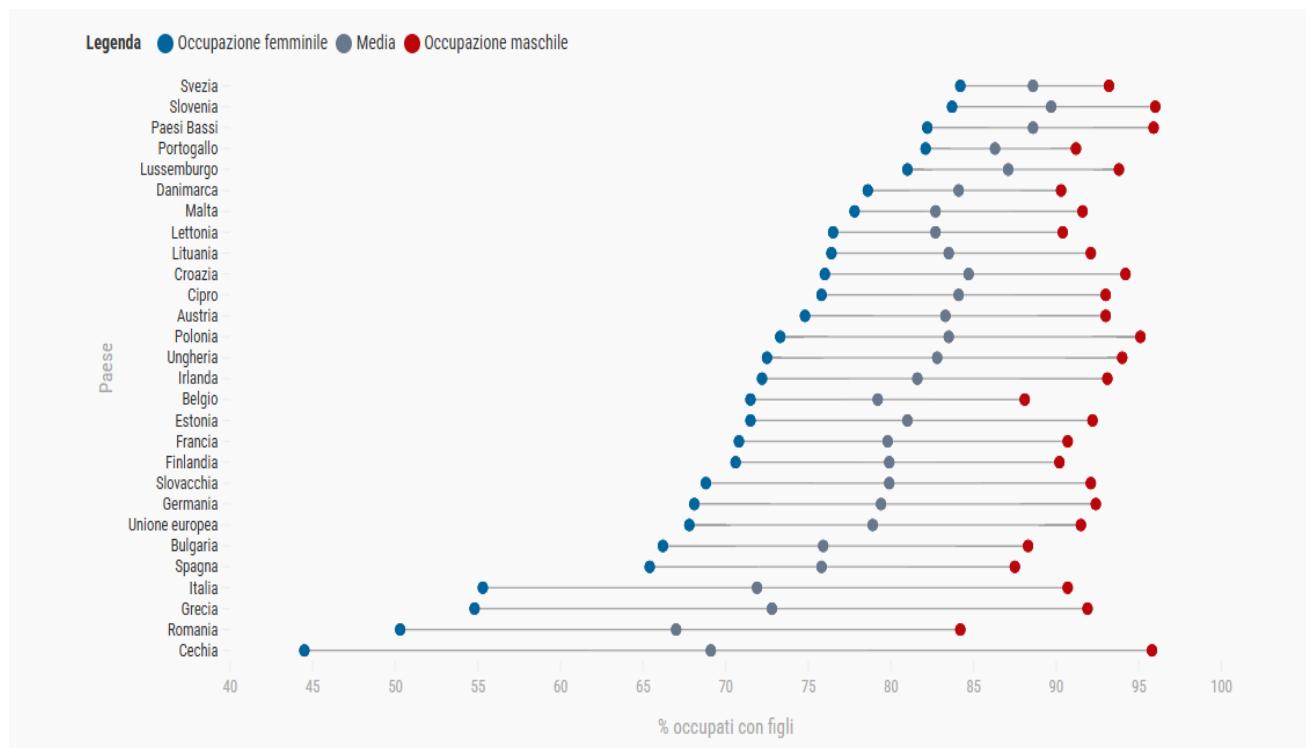


Fig 2.3: The gender employment gap within the European Union. Source: <https://www.openpolis.it/numeri/in-italia-il-divario-tra-occupati-uomini-e-donne-con-figli-e-molto-marcato/>⁵⁶

All this considered, it appears evident that the fertility crisis is just one facet of the broader socio-economic decline of the Italian republic. Yet, among the various factors behind its inexorable downturn, it can be identified as one of the most decisive, given its bidirectional relationship with all

⁵⁴ Simona Rossitto. *Una mamma su cinque lascia il lavoro dopo il primo figlio*. In «Il Sole 24 Ore», 12/05/2024, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/una-mamma-cinque-lascia-lavoro-il-primo-figlio-AF1sa4mD>

⁵⁵ Delio Miotti, *La demografia come destino?* cit., p. 727.

⁵⁶ *In Italia il divario tra occupati uomini e donne con figli è molto marcato*. «Openpolis», 04/03/2025. As the chart shows, Italy has one of the widest differences in the Continent, and the broadest by far in all Western Europe

the others: although it is itself an effect of national dysfunctions, it is the very phenomenon that reinforces them all. So, for instance, it will be impossible for the Mezzogiorno to overcome its ancient economic fragility with an aged population and a negative demographic dividend⁵⁷. Similarly, the need to foster innovation even within an aged society, given its remarkable effects on growth, raises a complex set of challenges, primarily concerning the integration of the elderly population into economic and social life⁵⁸. Given the inherent inertia of demographic dynamics, it is already evident that Italy's future will be marked by a smaller and older population, with a severe disproportion between workers and non-workers, all serious threats to the sustainability of the welfare system and to any concrete prospect of recovery⁵⁹. Indeed, if population continues to decline and productivity remains stagnant, there can be no growth. To sum up, the Italian Republic now faces the serious risk to turn into something alike to a Latin-American country at the hearth of Europe, with no real prospect of development and dominion of parasitic rent-seekers; in such a scenario, class differences will reverberate not only in education and job opportunities, but also in one of the most fundamental human behaviours: the strive to reproduce and build a family. It must be recalled that addressing demography does not involve just a material dimension, but also a moral one, given that it means to intervene in the most intimate aspects of people's lives. So, for instance, a shrinking population poses not only merely economic concerns but, more broadly, it constitutes the inception of the fading of a people; such a trend, depriving humanity of one of its unique and unrepeatable facets, should be regarded as a problem for the entire world⁶⁰, just as the death of an individual is a tragedy far beyond its absolute significance. Therefore, given that demography encompasses a vast set of challenges, it is imperative for policymakers to at least attempt to act in order to improve its related trends, notwithstanding their endurance. Modern social thought suggests thus an easy loophole to the Hamletic riddle⁶¹.

It must be stated that these issues are well known to Italian decision-makers. During the COVID pandemics in February 2021, an emergency cabinet lead by the former central banker Mario

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 732

⁵⁸ R. G. Heinze and G. Naegele, "Social Innovations in Ageing Societies," in *Challenge Social Innovation*, ed. Hans-Werner Franz, Josef Hochgerner, and Jürgen Howaldt (Berlin–Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), pp. 153–168, 158ff.

⁵⁹ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d'Italia*, cit., pp. 151ff.

⁶⁰ Such is the concluding argument of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The German philosopher, in fact, by recognizing in the cultural diversity of peoples — each irreparably shaped by its own historical, environmental, and social determinants — the true wealth of humanity as a whole, arrives at justifying the classification of genocide as a "crime against humanity," since the disappearance of a people constitutes an irreversible loss and an incalculable harm to humankind in its entirety. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York: Viking Press, 1964), epilogue.

⁶¹ "To be, or not to be, that is the question:/ Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of an outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them": positivist modernity should prompt us to abandon fatalism and to choose the latter option. Cf. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene I), 1602.

Draghi took office. In his inauguration speech, he fiercely addressed the Parliament, explicitly speaking of the necessity of a “New Reconstruction”, aimed at tackling the three major problems faced by the country in these times (and widely stressed in this dissertation): generational, gender and territorial gaps⁶². Otherwise, the technocrat had forecast a bleak future awaiting the country: the deception of what we are, the oblivion of what we have been, and the denial of what we could become»⁶³. After the fall of Draghi’s government in 2022, the incumbent cabinet led by right-wing leader Giorgia Meloni continued to place strong emphasis on the fertility crisis within her program. She renamed the Family Policies Department the “Ministry of Natality”⁶⁴ and repeatedly highlighted the topic in various public statements⁶⁵. However, despite the rhetorical efforts, many have criticized Meloni’s decision to reframe most of the measures envisaged in Draghi’s family plan, which aimed to modernize the overall welfare system in order to better support women and young adults, in line with this dissertation’s argument, for instead proposing an approach based on direct contributions⁶⁶. However, taking into account the awareness of Italian civil society and politics on the matter, as exemplified by the importance natality has acquired in the national public debate, it seems now appropriate to evaluate the policies that have been deployed to face the fertility crisis. Considering the proposed theoretical framework, particular attention will be paid to those measures which seem consistently more compliant with those natality’s determinants observed in most modern societies, such as economic certainty and gender equality. Finally, there will be adopted a comparative prospective, in order to confront Italian policies and trends with those European states that instead display better fertility outcomes.

⁶² Mario Draghi, *Il primo discorso di Mario Draghi in Parlamento: il testo completo*, in «Corriere della Sera», 17/02/2021, https://www.corriere.it/politica/21_febbraio_17/primo-discoorso-mario-draghi-parlamento-testo-completo-b368674a-7101-11eb-b26f-1b97a5632ac6.shtml.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ Currently, Ms. Eugenia Maria Roccella is in office. Cf. *Vice Presidenti, Ministri e Sottosegretari*, in «Governo Italiano», <https://www.governo.it/it/ministri-e-sottosegretari> (acc. 29/08/2025).

⁶⁵ So, for instance, speaking at the “Stati Generali della Natalità” on 12/05/2023, she claimed that « We have made natality and family an absolute priority of our action. And we have done so, quite simply, because we want Italy to once again have a future, to hope, and to believe in a better future compared to this uncertain present». Cf. **Giorgia Meloni**, *Intervento del Presidente Meloni alla terza edizione degli Stati Generali della Natalità*, in «Governo Italiano», 12/05/2023, <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/intervento-del-presidente-meloni-allla-terza-edizione-degli-stati-generalidella-natalit> (acc. 29/08/2025).

⁶⁶ Francesco Anfossi, *E Giorgia cancella il Family Act*, in «Famiglia Cristiana», 13/05/2024, <https://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/e-giorgia-cancella-il-family-act.aspx>.

2.2 From a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust

As analyzed in the first section, there is a general trend in late capitalism societies for low fertility. Consistently with the aforementioned “Globalization Theory”, such an intense decline should be interpreted as a symptom of more deep structural changes affecting the socio-economic order in Western countries, thus explaining also why classical family policies have proved to be mostly ineffective in tackling the issue⁶⁷. These changes are multi-faceted, streaming from the informative revolution due to the diffusion of digital technologies up to the rising interdependence of markets⁶⁸. In particular, those more endangered by these upheavals have been the working and the middle classes, hampered by manufacturing delocalization⁶⁹ and a progressive retrenchment of the welfare state, to the point that, for some, the very foundations of the modern social contract have been intensely questioned⁷⁰. Using a Marxist terminology, the American billionaire Warren E. Buffet already noted some years ago that «there's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning»⁷¹, therefore acknowledging the soaring inequalities because of modern globalized economy. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that nowadays the couple showing the highest fertility are the more educated ones and shaped on the dual-earner model⁷², the very opposite of the traditional assumptions of the household specialization theory. If, even more than in Caldwell times, children have essentially become a luxury, it means that fewer people can afford them.

In any case, as always Marx suggested in his historical materialism, profound transformations of the essentials of the economic model have cascading effects on all social aspects, thus leading toward a brand-new world. As noted by Pope Francis, «what we are living through is not simply an era of changes, but a change of era»⁷³. Yet, transitional periods tend to frighten people, since the unintelligibility of the future makes one feel out of control, as captured by the Shakespearian quote “time is out of joint”⁷⁴. In fact, contemporary Western societies are caught in this transition between a glorious but faded past and a yet unknown tomorrow, and not by chance this period is dominated

⁶⁷ Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *Why Demography matters*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018, p. 136

⁶⁸ Hans-Peter Blossfeld et al., *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 2ff.

⁶⁹ David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson, *When Work Disappears: Manufacturing Decline and the Falling Marriage Market Value of Young Men*, in «AER: Insights», vol. 1/2019, n. 2, pp. 161–178.

⁷⁰ Amir Paz-Fuchs, *The Social Contract Revisited: The Modern Welfare State. Overview and Critical Report* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2010), pp. 10ff.

⁷¹ Ben Stein, *In Class Warfare, Guess Which Class Is Winning*, in «New York Times», 26/11/2006.

⁷² Jan Van Bavel, *The Reversal of Gender Inequality in Education, Union Formation and Fertility in Europe*, in «Vienna Yearbook of Population Research», vol. 10, *Education and the Global Fertility Transition*, 2012, Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, pp. 127-154, pp. 144ff.

⁷³ In the original, «quella che stiamo vivendo non è semplicemente un'epoca di cambiamenti, ma è un cambiamento di epoca», cf. Pope Francis, *Discorso del Santo Padre Francesco alla Curia Romana per gli auguri di Natale*, Rome, 21/12/2019, p. 2.

⁷⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene V.

by the Spinozian *tristitia*⁷⁵. In such situations anti-natalism is not a complete novelty: throughout history, “era’s changes” have always been marked by a pessimistic outlook on life and, consequently, on childbearing. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period likewise marred by profound transformations comparable to those of today⁷⁶, a concise Latin motto summed up common-sense prospective on human life: *Conceptio Culpa, Nasci Pena, Labor Vita, Necesse Mori*⁷⁷, translatable as “Conception is guilt, birth is suffering, life is toil, death is necessary”: it appears how optimism was not within the horizon neither at that time.

These concrete drivers play the major role in explaining structural low fertility, which nonetheless is also partially caused by an ideational shift towards more hedonistic and self-centred lifestyles. Such change however does not mean that the vast majority of fecund people has now completely abandoned natality as a viable prospective in their life. It has been already noted that even post-1968 generations still idealize a family with two children⁷⁸, and the frustrating gap between intended and effective fertility should be addressed as a political problem rather than used as a pretext for blaming younger generations⁷⁹. Indeed, contemporary childbearing choices should be interpreted as diametrically different from those made at the beginning of the transition: whereas early-modern couples tended to cease natality once their desired number of children was achieved (thus practicing a passive or subtractive form of family planning), today’s households often envision their future with as few children as possible, or none at all. Therefore, they should be provided with the most favourable systemic conditions to actively realize such choices⁸⁰. Nevertheless, it does not matter how committed and efficient a social policy may be, for present-day structuralities it has become virtually impossible for advanced society to have a TFR equal or greater than 2.1 (so to grant the natural increase of the population). Within the OECD, the sole country to show a greater rate is Israel, equating in 2023 2.89 children per woman⁸¹, and mostly for the contribution of some ethnical or

⁷⁵ This is the argument of two French psychologist, who recovered the Deleuze’s elaboration of the Spinozian concept. Cf. Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit, *Les passions tristes: Souffrance psychique et crise sociale* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2006).

⁷⁶ Giulio Tremonti, *Guerra o pace* (Milano: Solferino, 28/01/2025). In this work, it is proposed a parallelism between the contemporary scenario and the XVI century but it should be noted that all the period streaming from the outbreak of the Italian wars (1494) and the treaty of Westfalia (1648) was marked by intense social and political conflicts and economic instability.

⁷⁷ This phrase is literally inscribed in the work of the Italian painter Salvator Rosa, *Human Fragility* (1656), housed at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

⁷⁸ Maria Rita Testa, *Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe: evidence from the Eurobarometer 2006 survey*, in «Vienna Yearbook of Population Research», vol. 2007, pp. 357–379.

⁷⁹ Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *Why Demography matters*, cit., p. 131.

⁸⁰ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia*, cit., p. 82-83.

⁸¹ OECD. *Fertility Rates*. OECD Data Indicators. acc. 30/08/2025, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/fertility-rates.html>.

religious minorities, such as the Arabians or the Haredim⁸². However, it is equally possible to at least intervene to the CFR so to allow fecund cohorts to have two children at the end of their reproductive cycle.

Coherently with this prospective, it goes without saying that the most effective measures for fostering fertility are actually economic policies. Allowing occupational stability, improving average education and facilitating the access to some fundamental goods and services such as housing, are all interventions that will have the collateral effects of aiding people in their family decisions. And, as discussed above, Italy is one of the European countries that show the worst systemic indicators: it has the second-to-less educated workforce within the Continent, one of the worst young employment rate and the biggest income gap between mature and neophyte workers; moreover, the majority of young adults are employed in micro and small businesses⁸³, which, nonetheless, are the ones most likely to offer lower wages due to their limited productivity⁸⁴. Considering jointly all these factors makes easy to understand the incredibly low TFR registered in the country: in 2023, it reached again the lowest threshold ever recorded (1.20), and its decline does not seem to have an end⁸⁵. It seems tautological to observe that Italian job market is not the perfect guidance towards proper family support.

Yet, intervening so to modify the deep determinants of a social system may require a conspicuous political capital and considerable time, especially in light of the durable inertia of demographic dynamics. Therefore, this dissertation will attempt to analyse the impact of pure social policies on the issue. In this regard, the gender equality framework suggest that the most effective measures are those departing from the male-breadwinner model, so to ensure a greater sharing of parental care and higher integration of women into the labour market. In this respect, the present paper will dedicate its attention to two measures perfectly embedded within the proposed prospective: the density of nurseries and other early childhood education and care services, vital for granting a positive work/life balance, and the duration and effectiveness of male parental leave, which serve as an indicator of the degree of gender equality. Finally, the last public intervention to be assessed will be the direct family transfers' amount and organization. It has already been said that the incumbent Italian government has abandoned the holistic reformative plan proposed by its predecessor, in order

⁸² Alex Weinreb, Dov Chernichovsky, and Aviv Brill. *Israel's Exceptional Fertility*. Taub Center for Social Policy Studies, December 2018, <https://www.taubcenter.org.il/en/research/israels-exceptional-fertility/>.

⁸³ *L'Italia è il Paese europeo dove si lavora per meno anni, con la crisi demografica più grave, il livello di istruzione tra i più bassi e meno giovani che si avviano al lavoro*, in «Domani», 29/08/2025.

⁸⁴ Istat. *Indicatori di disuguaglianza retributiva nelle piccole imprese. Principali risultati e nota metodologica*. 11/2018.

⁸⁵ Istat. *Natalità e fecondità della popolazione residente. Anno 2023*. Comunicato stampa, 21/10/2024, <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Natalita-in-Italia-Anno-2023.pdf>

to promote a vast array of essentially redistributive measures⁸⁶. Yet, it is well known that monetary incentives may have a temporary boost effect on the short term, but they are mostly inadequate to modify consolidated issues⁸⁷, such as the Italian ones. The analysis will be deployed using a comparative prospective, since Italy represents one of the “worst-case scenarios” within Europe. The confront will be undergone using two distinct benchmarks, namely France, the Western European country showing highest fertility at 1.64 per woman⁸⁸, and Sweden, as an instance of a more horizontal and inclusive welfare system. Considering the proposed theoretical framework, the sheer amount of direct monetary transfers it is expected to exercise little effect on fertility dynamics, whereas the two policies aimed at building a broader family-friendly and pro-natalist context are conversely expected to be more impacting on the matter.

The following chapters will be structured as follows: after a concise overview of the same set of policies in the selected countries, a statistical analysis will be conducted, so to estimate the importance of each one in the fertility choices, followed by a final discussion in light of the results. Only at that point it will be possible to evaluate whether the gender equality theory offers viable solutions to foster fertility within such a complex historical context.

⁸⁶ Paolo Riva, *Sostegno a famiglie e natalità: cosa prevede la Legge di Bilancio*, «Secondo Welfare», 22/01/2025, <https://www.secondowelfare.it/primo-welfare/natalita-famiglie-legge-bilancio-2025-meloni-giorgetti-roccella-saraceno/>.

⁸⁷ On Chi, *Can Government Financial Aid Save an Aging Society? A Systematic Review on the Effect of Financial Incentives on the Fertility Rate*, «Open Journal of Business and Management», 13 (2025), pp. 1018-1046.

⁸⁸ *Total fertility rate in Europe in 2024, by country*, in «Statista»., acc. (30/08/2025), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/612074/fertility-rates-in-european-countries/>.

Chapter 3

Context or destiny? Comparing the forces shaping fertility

3.1 More of the same: Italy's incomplete welfare

As shown in the precedent sections, Italy faces a broad set of historically rooted and structural deficiencies that characterizes its increasingly unsustainable welfare system because of the ever more pronounced “*degiovamento*.” In any case, it now appears appropriate to develop a detailed comparative analysis of the chosen policy set (number of places available in early childhood care services, the length of fathers’ parental leave, and the generosity of direct cash benefits). Starting with Italy itself, the availability of nursery places unsurprisingly lags behind other European countries: as of 2022, despite a decade-long growth trend, there are 30 places in childcare facilities for every 100 children of preschool age, with a gap of three percentage points from the objective established by the EU legislation¹. Moreover, the growth observed in recent years is not due exclusively to increased public investment (although such governmental action has indeed occurred), but also to the brute decline in the absolute number of children, caused precisely by the fertility crisis affecting the country². Furthermore, the heavy territorial disparities affecting the country are reflected also on this issue: as one would expect given the proposed theoretical framework, those zones exhibiting the less dense coverage of childcare services (namely, the southern regions and the inner areas) are also those where lower female participation in the labour market is observed³. As noted, this is linked to the informal and familistic welfare system that still characterizes the most marginal areas of the Peninsula, which generates unfavorable dynamics for the actual development of family services more consistent with continental standards: where fewer women work due to the persistence of traditional gender principles, there is also less social demand for services that support the sharing of parental care, and vice versa⁴.

Nonetheless, national decision-makers have launched a development plan aimed at increasing nationwide coverage of early childhood care. Within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Italy’s component under the broader “Next Generation EU,” more than €4.5 billion had been allocated to this area (even though later curtailed by one billion), with a particular focus on the most

¹ *Italia a 3 punti dall’obiettivo del 33% sugli asili nido*, «Openpolis», 27/08/2024, <https://www.openpolis.it/italia-a-3-punti-dalloobiettivo-del-33-sugli-asili-nido/>

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Il legame tra offerta di nidi e occupazione femminile*, «Openpolis», 04/03/2025, <https://www.openpolis.it/il-legame-tra-offerta-di-nidi-e-occupazione-femminile/>

⁴ *Ibidem*.

disadvantaged areas in this regard⁵. Nevertheless, the concrete implementation of such important aims has been fragmented and incomplete, to the extent that the Legislator was forced to lower the final target from an additional 264,000 places by the end of the plan to approximately 150,000⁶. The evident difficulties have been due largely to the administrative shortcomings of Italian “comuni” (the lowest tier of administrative government, corresponding to municipalities), which were concretely tasked with carrying out the planned investments; in particular, southern and rural municipalities have displayed the most significant structural weaknesses, despite being, in principle, the primary beneficiaries of the resources⁷. The difficulty in disbursing funds and awarding contracts rapidly was such that the legislator had to launch numerous calls for the municipalities to fully allocate the resources, the most recent of which took place in August 2025⁸, with a substantial delay relative to the initial implementation schedule. Yet, despite these repeated attempts, many projects remained underfunded or poorly designed; even the penultimate call, which closed in May 2025, resulted in allocations amounting to roughly half of the planned resources⁹. By the end of 2024, only one-fifth of all planned funding had actually been spent, and most completed projects were concentrated in the central-northern regions¹⁰, which are less in need but administratively more efficient. Ultimately, despite the considerable effort, failure to achieve the plan’s original intentions is now virtually certain: even in the most favorable scenario, the additional places would reach only about 110,000, and the European 33% target would still go unmet in Sicily and Campania, the two most populous southern regions¹¹. Furthermore, while the plan has reduced the overall territorial gap between North and South, it has simultaneously exacerbated the divide between rural and urban areas, with the former left almost untouched by the Plan, given that 96.6% of municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants still lack facilities of any sort¹².

⁵ Ufficio Parlamentare di Bilancio (UPB), *Focus n. 1/2025 “Piano asili nido e scuole dell’infanzia: stato di attuazione e obiettivi del PNRR e del PSB”*, 15/01/2025, <https://www.upbilancio.it/focus-n-1-2025-piano-asili-nido-e-scuole-dellinfanzia-stato-di-attuazione-e-obiettivi-del-pnrr-e-del-psb/>

⁶ Osservatorio sul Recovery Plan (OReP), *Riduzione obiettivi asili nido nel PNRR: da 264.000 a 150.480 posti, sfide e nuovi finanziamenti*, acc. 06/09/2025, <https://www.osservatoriorecovery.it/riduzione-obiettivi-asili-nido-nel-pnrr-da-264-000-a-150-480-posti-sfide-e-nuovi-finanziamenti/>

⁷ UPB, *Focus n. 1/2025*, cit.

⁸ *Asili nido, sbloccati 103,8 milioni per altri 164 interventi*, in «Il Sole 24 Ore», 08/08/2025, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/asili-nido-sbloccati-1038-milioni-altri-164-interventi-AH0wM46B>.

⁹ *Asili nido, anche il nuovo bando si ferma a 400 milioni su 800*, in «Il Sole 24 Ore», 14/05/2025, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/asili-nido-anche-nuovo-bando-si-ferma-400-milioni-800-AHaaMej>.

¹⁰ Monica Montella and Franco Mostacci, *Rischio flop per il Pnrr dell’infanzia*, in «Lavoce.info», 07/02/2025, <https://lavoce.info/archives/106976/rischio-flop-per-il-pnrr-dellinfanzia/>.

¹¹ UPB, *ivi*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

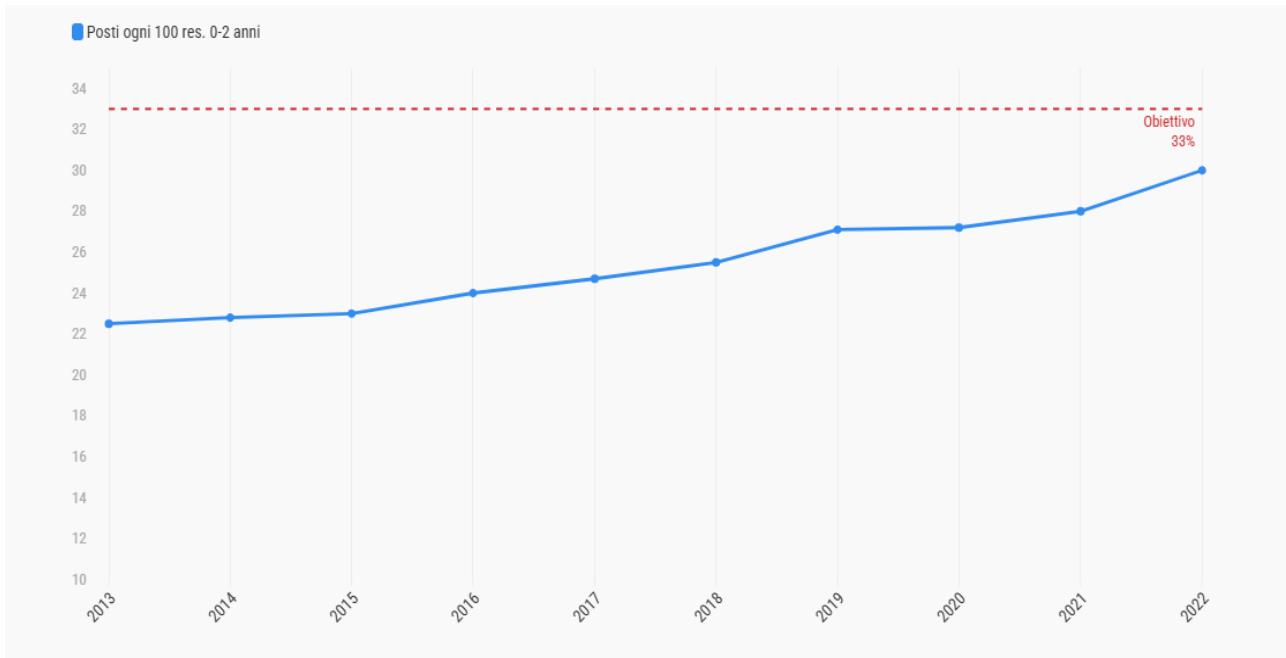


Fig 3.1: The growth of the nursery coverage in Italy, 2013–2022. Source: <https://www.openpolis.it/italia-a-3-punti-dalloobiettivo-del-33-sugli-asili-nido/>¹³

Turning to the next point, the mandatory paternity leave in Italy entitles employees to ten working days off (twenty in case of multiple birth), which may be taken anytime from two months before the presumed date of childbirth up to the end of the fifth month after the birth; fathers in leave receive an allowance equal to 100% of his salary¹⁴. It should be distinguished by parental leave, which in turn consists in an optional work-off period aimed at favoring parents' presence during childhood years¹⁵. Enshrined in national law since 2002, paternity leave equalized ten days only as a result of the development of EU law which, through the Directive 1158/2019, established this threshold as a minimum duration to which Member States has to comply¹⁶. By contrast, the most recent normative evolution in Italy has introduced compulsory sanctions for those employers who do not allow their workers to exercise this right freely¹⁷.

¹³ *Italia a 3 punti dall'obiettivo del 33% sugli asili nido*, «Openpolis», cit. To be noted that, despite the accelerating pace, effective overall coverage remains still a far achievement

¹⁴ Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, *Il congedo di paternità*, acc. 06/09/2025, <https://famiglia.governo.it/it/politiche-e-attivita/famiglia/conciliazione-famiglia-lavoro/il-congedo-di-paternita-1/>.

¹⁵ Francesco Doga et al., *Verso una genitorialità condivisa. L'esperienza delle aziende con il congedo di paternità*, «Tortuga Policy Reports», 09/2024, p. 14.

¹⁶ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, in "Official Journal of the European Union", 12/07/2019.

¹⁷ Dipartimento per le politiche della famiglia, *Il congedo di paternità*, ivi.

In any case, despite the relative novelty that the policy represents, especially in a tradition-leaning context such as Italy (it was introduced only in 2012, under the Monti cabinet), the paternity leave has enjoyed considerable uptake since its beginning, with a steadily rising trend since its inception; as of today, nearly two thirds of eligible individuals make use of it¹⁸. Nevertheless, territorial and socioeconomic disparities emerge within this topic as well: in general, take-up is higher among residents of the central-northern regions, above all among the full-time workers and employees of large firms¹⁹. By contrast, in Sicily, Campania, and Calabria the number of eligible individuals who make use of it are 39.4%, 39.1%, and 35%, respectively²⁰, a striking gap attributable both to cultural factors and, plausibly, to greater socioeconomic hardship and lower employment stability in those regions²¹. It is in fact reasonable to assume that part-time workers or those on fixed-term contracts may fear the permanent termination of their job relationship, while employees of small and medium-sized enterprises impose higher absence costs on their employers because of lacking economies of scale²². Once again, this reflects an endemic feature of Italy's socio-economic system, namely, the predominance of small and medium-sized firms which, due to their dimension, face various structural constraints, including low productivity (which inevitably weighs on wages, stagnant so far since roughly three decades) and limited investment in training and innovation²³. Nevertheless, it is likely that the persistency of the paternity leave uptake will lead to a normalization of the measure's use across all social groups²⁴. Such an outcome is suggested also by surveys and empirical analyses demonstrating strong appreciation for the leave on the part of both enterprises and employees, with imitation mechanisms that are on the way of spreading²⁵. The Italian Lawmaker, with the explicit purpose of achieving a more egalitarian society, has likewise sought to increase the share of men taking the leave by preventing the transferability of days off, particularly with respect to optional parental leave: indeed, there had occurred a trend signaling how transferred days were assigned mostly to mothers, thereby paradoxically lengthening women's absence from the workplace and aggravating the "child penalty"²⁶.

¹⁸ Francesco Doga et al., *Verso una genitorialità condivisa*, cit., p. 16.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 17.

²⁰ Greta Ubbiali, *Papà, ancora il 35% non usa il congedo di paternità obbligatorio*, in «Il Sole 24 Ore», 19/03/2025.

²¹ Francesco Doga et al., ivi, cit., p. 17.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Davide Ielmini, *Salari fermi, competitività a rischio: perché l'Italia non cresce come il resto d'Europa*, «Confartigianato Imprese», 12/07/2025, <https://www.impreseterritorio.org/it/approfondimenti/inchieste/salari-fermi-competitivita-a-rischio-perche-l-italia-non-cresce-come-il-resto-d-europa.html>

²⁴ Francesco Doga et al, *ibid*.

²⁵ *Il congedo di paternità prolungato ha funzionato bene per chi lo ha provato*, «Il Post», 26/09/2024.

²⁶ Francesco Doga et al, ivi, p. 18.

Economic factors aside, the persistence of conservative cultural elements should nonetheless be taken into account: indeed, as late as 2024, only 7.2% of Italian men aged 25-49 devote more than 50 weekly hours to parental care, a stark difference compared with 32.1% of women²⁷. Inevitably, this dynamic affects adversely female occupation: it is not a coincidence that still today a fifth of Italian women are compelled to leave their job following the birth of a child²⁸. Recalling that Italy social welfare system is heavily shaped by familism, such differences have an even greater impact than in other countries. Evidence shows how, in the Peninsula, life courses of subsequent generations are strongly shaped by the family of origin, reflecting a substantial path dependency: in particular, social inequalities are often reflected onto educational hardships for children, thereby reproducing class gaps and impeding genuine social mobility²⁹. As statistical underpinning, it is heuristically useful to note that, whereas 70% of the children of graduated parents attain the same level of education, among those from poorly educated households only 12% complete university³⁰. In the same way of the ancient tragedians' *ἄτη*, the faults of Italian parents are destined to be rebounded upon their children. By contrast, comparative evidence shows that in countries where men's parental leave is longer and culturally accepted, there are positive consequences not only in terms of gender equality, but also for the child's psychological and educational development³¹.

Finally, family economic contributions system, once highly bureaucratic and labyrinthic, has been heavily simplified since the implementation of the "Assegno Unico", a unique child benefit proposed in 2014 and introduced in 2021 that substituted all the other measures so to institutionalize a single allowance for families with universal coverage³². In essence, it constitutes a direct benefit for every family with children, calculated on a progressive, income-based scale and reaching nearly €200 per month per child for the most disadvantaged brackets³³. So far, the reform has redistributed almost €7 billion to families, with a net increase in transfers for almost 77% of beneficiaries, converting into an average increase of the disposable income of about 3%³⁴. The most benefited from the policy are those individuals who had been excluded from the beneficiary pool of previous policies because of professional or fiscal reasons, such as

²⁷ *È ancora lontana la parità nella genitorialità*, «Openpolis», 12/03/2024.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *L'origine familiare e le disparità sociali incidono sull'accesso all'università*, «Openpolis», 26/08/2025.

³⁰ *Ibidem*

³¹ *È ancora lontana la parità nella genitorialità*, cit.

³² Ufficio Parlamentare di Bilancio (UPB), *Focus tematico n. 3. L'Assegno unico universale: effetti distributivi e interazione con la riforma dell'Irpef*. 31/03/2022, p. 3,

<file:///C:/Users/FRANCESCO/Desktop/Fonti%20Tesi/Assegno%20Unico%20UPB.pdf>.

³³ Francesco Doga et al., *Verso una genitorialità condivisa*, cit., p. 25.

³⁴ UPB, *Focus tematico n. 3*, cit., p. 2.

autonomous workers or those with insufficient tax liability (the so called *incapienti*)³⁵. Households that recorded the largest gains in absolute terms are those belonging to lowest income groups (below €10,000 per year) and members of the middle class (earning between €30,000 and €40,000), who previously struggled to be entitled with other benefits because of fiscal ineligibility³⁶. Also, large households were holistically favored by the reform, given that contribution raises for each children following the second³⁷. However, in raw terms, the actual magnitude of the benefit is not so exceptional: half of beneficiaries receive an average gain of less than yearly €750 per child, while only one tenth reaches an incremental income of €2,000³⁸.

Nevertheless, the *Assegno Unico* has not, in fact, abolished all other forms of familiar economic support. It should be recalled that the incumbent majority, rather than undertaking systemic reforms of family policy, has chosen to continue down the path of direct transfers, instituting a new set of one-off bonuses and incentives that now coexist with the *Assegno Unico*³⁹. Yet, it must be acknowledged that, Draghi government excluded, virtually all the cabinets in recent years, both right and left-wing, have enacted similar policies, attesting the general unawareness of Italy's ruling class on the matter⁴⁰. Particularly, there may be cited the “Bonus mamme”, namely an exemption from social-security contributions intended exclusively for employed mothers with at least three children; according to an estimate sponsored by the financial newspaper “Il Sole 24 Ore”, at most 681,000 taxpayers will benefit from this fiscal exclusion⁴¹. Another intervention is the “Bonus Asili Nido”, an incentive designed for those who earn below €40,000 so to facilitate access to childcare services, which can also be combined with the *Assegno Unico*⁴². It should be noted that this para-Keynesian welfare (also known as *assistenzialismo*) that characterizes Italian political culture has likewise spilled over into family policy, yielding effects that are insufficient of negligible at best.

3.2: Blooms in the ashes? Overlook of the French and Swedish cases

Having deeply examined the challenges faced by Italy, it is time to turn the attention to countries that constitute virtuous examples for their natality outcomes, even though in recent years they too have experienced a rapid fall in the TFR value. Among the member states of the European Union, France

³⁵ UPB, *Focus tematico n. 3*, cit., p. 2.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 8.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 10.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 22.

³⁹ Alessandro Dowlatshahi. *Legge di bilancio e natalità: un fallimento annunciato*, in «MasterX», 08/02/2025.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Francesco Doga et al., *Verso una genitorialità condivisa*, cit., p. 26

⁴² Ivi, p. 27.

stands out as exemplary, still recording in 2022 a fertility rate close to the replacement level (namely, 1.79), thereby ranking among the most prolific countries on the continent⁴³. What is surprising is that, contrary to what one may think, most of this contribution is not due to immigrant households, whose impact is important but ultimately not decisive: indeed, France's relatively high natality still relies primarily on native women, in a unique way in Western Europe⁴⁴. To comprehend what is, by all accounts, a success of the “Hexagon” social policy, it is necessary to understand how the French welfare system is structured.

The welfare state (*État-providence* in French) is an old concept in France, as the expression was already in use during the Second Empire, albeit mostly used among rich liberals with a negative connotation⁴⁵. Throughout the second postwar period, both the preamble of the Fourth Republic Constitution and the first article of the Fifth ground-norm recognized the social and redistributive nature of the state, so identifying welfare as one of the highest public ends⁴⁶. Within such juridical framework, a robust evolution of family policies was inevitable: as early as 1967, the *ordonnances Jeanneney* identified family as one the three principal axes of governmental social policy, along with healthcare and elderly support, specifically establishing the *Caisse nationale des allocations familiales* (CNAF)⁴⁷. Public commitment in this matter was so intense that, in 1996, a constitutional reform instituted a law inspired to the budget act (yet distinct to it) whose sole purpose was to finance social security, the *Loi sur le Financement de la Sécurité Sociale* (LFSS), which made lawmakers directly accountable for spending cuttings or rises in this matter⁴⁸. Nowadays, France dedicates more than a third of its GDP to social spending, and family support policies cost 2,3% of the national product⁴⁹; for a comparison, Italy's family-related public expenditure barely exceeds 1.5% of GDP⁵⁰.

This durable commitment has in fact reflected into structurally better demographic determinants than other European countries, although, as aforementioned, a downward trend has been

⁴³ Servet Yanatma. *Europe's fertility crisis: Which countries are having the most and fewest babies?* In «Euronews», 28/09/2024, <https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/09/28/europe-fertility-crisis-which-european-country-is-having-the-fewest-babies>

⁴⁴ Sabrina Volant, Gilles Pison, and François Héran. *La France a la plus forte fécondité d'Europe. Est-ce dû aux immigrées ?*, in «Population & Sociétés», no. 568, 07/2019, p. 4.

⁴⁵ François-Xavier Merrien, *Aux origines de l'État-providence*, in «La Vie des Idées», 08/10/2019.

⁴⁶ Alain Supiot, *La « Constitution sociale » de la Ve République*, in «Revue Politique et Parlementaire», no. 1098, 24/02/2021.

⁴⁷ Frédéric Bizard. *Histoire de la protection sociale en France*. 17/03/2017. <https://www.fredericbizard.com/histoire-de-la-protection-sociale-en-france/>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Direction de la Recherche, des Études, de l'Évaluation et des Statistiques (DREES). *Les dépenses de protection sociale accélèrent en 2023 en France*, 07/05/2025. https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/communique-de-presse-jeux-de-donnees/jeux-de-donnees/241223_DATA_les-depenses-de-protection-sociale.

⁵⁰ Carlo Cignarella and Carlo Cottarelli. *La spesa pubblica per la natalità resta bassa*. «Osservatorio Conti Pubblici Italiani», 29/05/2025, <https://osservatoriocipi.unicatt.it/ocipi-pubblicazioni-la-spesa-pubblica-per-la-natalita-resta-bassa>.

observed since 2020, likely caused by the social uncertainty following the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent inflationary spiral⁵¹. Nevertheless, despite systemic high fertility (always relatively to advanced countries), also France has undergone through those demographic shifts typical of postmodern societies, with increasingly pronounced child postponement and a subsequent decline in the share of mothers aged under-30⁵². The combined effect of long-lasting phenomena and recent negative conjunctures has made popular also within the French public debate those issues frequently debated in low-fertility scenarios, such as the sustainability of the retirement system (whose reformation triggered the harsh protests and strikes that shook the country in 2023) and the fear of a vicious circle of lowering fertility due to the progressive cohort size shrinking⁵³. Finally, it should be noted that France too shows significant territorial discrepancies over this topic. For instance, the share of child population is unevenly distributed across the country: with the remarkable exception of the *Outremer* departments, all of which exhibit a very high proportion of children (roughly 20% in Mayotte), in metropolitan France most areas are experiencing a sharp ageing, especially in the South-West⁵⁴. Conversely, the zones with the most favorable ratio between elderly and young are the Paris basin, the Lyon area and the North⁵⁵.

Nonetheless, despite these imbalances the situation in the Hexagon remains, globally speaking, far better than in the majority of other continental nations, and a more detailed assessment of different policies will reveal its point of strength. Firstly, it should be noted that, although the occurrence of the partnership revolution, the overwhelming majority of children aged under six still live with their parents, with just 17% of them residing within a single-parent household⁵⁶. France displays several trends already observed in the Italian context. For instance, the burden of parental care in early childhood still appears to fall predominantly on mothers: in a 2020 survey, 55% of female employees reported that motherhood had negatively affected their work situation, compared with 27% of men colleague, and indeed women's employment rate progressively diminish as the number of children rises⁵⁷. This trend is reflected in greater reliance on part-time arrangements among mothers with young children, who, however, are often bound to undesired underemployment⁵⁸. These hardships in the job market inevitably influence living standards, considering that those households suffering unemployment or inactivity likewise face higher possibilities of marginalization. Another

⁵¹ Nicolas Grivel, Lucie Gonzalez, et al. *L'accueil du jeune enfant en 2020*. «Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance», 2021, p. 8, <file:///C:/Users/FRANCESCO/Desktop/Fonti%20Tesi/Accueil%20des%20jeunes%20enfants%202021.pdf>.

⁵² Ivi, p. 9.

⁵³ Julien Damon, *Démographie : des EPHAD ou des crèches ?*, in «Futuribles», 23/05/2024.

⁵⁴ Nicolas Grivel, Lucie Gonzalez, et al., ivi, p. 10

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

similarity with the Italian case regards the uneven distribution of childcare services across the territory. In particular, the gap that characterizes metropolitan France is not between two different macro-regions, but among urban and rural areas: the latter have less than one third of the places in nurseries compared with the former, and indeed in these zones the most widespread form of support is the individual childminder, the *assistante maternelle*⁵⁹. Indeed, it should be underscored that a distinctive feature of childcare services in France is their noteworthy diversification. In addition to the classic nursery, there are other kinds of public services with the same purpose, such as individual childminding and home-based childcare; altogether these services, which are all publicly subsidized, raise the formal coverage rate to 59.8% in all of France (60.7% in the *Métropole* alone)⁶⁰, roughly the double than in Italy. At the departmental level (again excluding the *Outremer* departments), the lowest coverage is found in the *Midi* and in Corsica, while most regions show percentages close to the national average; only in Brittany and in the *Pays de la Loire* the rates do exceed the average, with coverage achieving 7 out of 10 children⁶¹.

Examining now the relationship between the parents' economic situation and recourse to childhood services, it is observed that the most affluent and the most disadvantaged households are those that use collective childcare services the least⁶². Interestingly, a finding consistent with the proposed theoretical framework emerges, namely, the link between recourse to childcare services and household's labor-market position. Indeed, 79% of households that rely on the *assistante maternelle* and 58% of those that resort to collective services are ones in which both parents are employed⁶³, therefore confirming the positive relationship between family services and women employment. It must be noted that female occupation in France stands at 66.2% in 2024, with a gender gap of about five percentage points⁶⁴; yet, it remains well above the Italian rate, which is more than 12 points lower⁶⁵. Analogously to the broader international experience, women in France on average study more than their male peers⁶⁶, and there is a positive relationship between educational attainment and occupation, with fully 80% of university-educated women that are currently employed⁶⁷. Moreover,

⁵⁹ Nicolas Grivel, Lucie Gonzalez, et al. *L'accueil du jeune enfant en 2020*, cit., p. 18.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 25.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 28.

⁶² Ivi, pp. 50-51

⁶³ Ivi, pp. 58-59.

⁶⁴ Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), *Emploi selon le sexe et l'âge. Données annuelles de 1975 à 2024*, 27/03/2025, acc. 08/09/2025, https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2490449#figure1_radio3.

⁶⁵ Cristina Freguia, Maria Clelia Romano and Linda Laura Sabbadini, *Il lavoro delle donne tra ostacoli e opportunità. Documento di sintesi* (Roma: CNEL/ISTAT, 06/03/2025), p. 3.

⁶⁶ Audrey Baillot and Stéphanie Michel, *Femmes et hommes : regards régionaux sur l'égalité*, Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), no. 1585, 07/03/2016, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1908115>.

⁶⁷ INSEE, *Femmes et hommes, l'égalité en question*, 03/03/2022, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/6047733?sommaire=6047805>.

evidence indicates that both the female unemployment rate and reliance on part-time work are higher in rural areas⁶⁸ precisely those less well served by childcare facilities. Indeed, the only area in which there are more unemployed men than women is the Ile-de-France⁶⁹, which, besides being the most urbanized, is also one of those with the highest childcare services' density. Accordingly, in France as well one observes at least a positive relationship between employment, the coverage density of childcare services, and their utilization.

Turning now the attention to leave periods from work, it should be noted that French legal framework makes a distinction between two types: paternity leave in the strict sense (*congé de paternité*) and a shorter period defined as *congé de naissance* (leave for the birth)⁷⁰. The substantive difference, duration apart, lies in the timespan of possible use: whereas the *congé de naissance*, corresponding to a non-deferrable three-day period, may be taken only in the immediate afterwards of the child's birth, the *congé de paternité* might be taken at any time throughout the semester following the birth⁷¹. Furthermore, another stark difference regards the nature of the emoluments paid for during the work-leave period: within the *congé de naissance*, one remains on the employer's payroll, whereas under the other circumstance the employment contract is temporarily suspended, and the allowances are corresponded directly from the public social security budget⁷². A recent regulatory change occurred in 2021, namely the extension of the *congé de paternité* from 14 to 28 calendar days, consecutive and non-transferable, four of which are mandatory (in addition to the three days of the other leave)⁷³. This measure, introduced in France in 2003, has experienced slow (and yet inexorable) growth, such that today roughly 67% of fathers make use of it, scaling up to 71% when considering only those effectively eligible⁷⁴. However, in France as well there occurs differences alike those observed in Italy concerning the take-up and derived from diverse employment or contractual situations. Indeed, the leave is used to a greater extent by employees with stable contracts (91% among public-sector employees and 82% among private-sector employees), whereas the self-employed (who have however recorded the highest relative growth in the take-up rate) continue to use it in percentages lower than 50%⁷⁵, thus confirming the existing link between employment

⁶⁸ Yves Le Breton et al., *La dimension territoriale de l'accès à l'emploi des femmes*, «Observatoire des territoires», p. 18.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, *Congé de paternité : comment ça fonctionne ?*, 16/09/2024; acc. 09/09/2025, <https://www.economie.gouv.fr/entreprises/gerer-ses-ressources-humaines-et-ses-salaries/conge-de-paternite-comment-ca-fonctionne#>

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *La durée du congé paternité passe de 14 à 28 jours.* «info.gouv.fr», 17/03/2022, acc. 09/09/2025, <https://www.info.gouv.fr/actualite/la-duree-du-conge-paternite-passe-de-14-a-28-jours>.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ DREES, *Premiers jours de l'enfant : un temps de plus en plus sanctuarisé par les pères via le congé de paternité*, 07/2023, n° 1275, p. 3, <https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2023-07/ER1275.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 4.

stability, income effects, and enjoyment of the leave. Moreover, it should be emphasized that for some experts it is the monetary amount of replacement revenues, rather than the time duration, that promotes broad and socially accepted use of this legal tool⁷⁶. Taking all this into account, it remains complex to properly estimate the impact of such a policy on overall birth rates, but this is unsurprising: it has been reiterated repeatedly that in order to support fertility policies must be all-encompassing and holistic, and that the decisionmaker should aim to change systemic determinants so to achieve more egalitarian and inclusive societies, in which measures like paternity leave serve as signals of underlying social and cultural factors. It should be borne in mind, however, that, even more than gender equality, only the pursuit of a society not subject to uncertainty will once again make it possible to have prospective life plans, in which individuals can embark upon projects as long-term and decisive in a person's life as forming a family.

Finally, as far as the French economic contributions are concerned, it is necessary to distinguish between general maintenance benefits (*entretien*) and those linked to early-childhood care services (*accueil*)⁷⁷; to these common measures should then be added a vast array of special benefits, such as pensions for minors with disabilities, that will not be addressed in the current dissertation. The first category of instruments includes: family allowances (*allocations familiales*), paid from the second child onwards and with modulated amounts, according to the recipient's income and the number of children present in the nucleus; lump-sum allowances (*allocation forfaitaire*), lasting just one year and corresponded exclusively for those children who, living in a numerous household (with more than three children), continue to reside in the parental home after having reached the age of twenty; and the family supplement (*complément familial*), that is conversely directed only to large families in the lowest income strata⁷⁸. By contrast, the care-related policies are several and varied; among the many, it seems appropriate to mention the birth and adoption grant (*prime à la naissance ou à l'adoption*), equalizing to a one-off sum of about one thousand euros, paid upon the birth of the child, and the basic allowance (*Allocation de base*), a benefit computed on the basis of the beneficiary's income with the objective to assist the couple with their expenses related to the child's early education⁷⁹. Nevertheless, although more than 80% of families make use of these instruments, recent years have seen a declining dynamic in absolute terms, due precisely to the fall in births that has occurred in the very last years⁸⁰. In any case, the commitment of the French state in this matter is

⁷⁶ Caroline Zuercher, *Le congé parental favorise-t-il vraiment la natalité?*, in « 24heures », 19/01/2024.

⁷⁷ DREES, *Les prestations familiales*, in «Minima sociaux et prestations sociales», 2023, p. 264, <https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2023-09/MS2023-Fiche%2033%20-%20Les%20prestations%20familiales.pdf>

⁷⁸ Centre des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale (CLEISS), *Les prestations familiales*, acc. 09/09/2025, https://www.cleiss.fr/docs/regimes/regime_france4.html.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ DREES, *ivi*, p. 268.

remarkable, since the overall amount of public family subsidies totals more than 31 billion euros, with an average per-child contribution approaching 400 euros per month⁸¹. It emerges thereby that France, in order to obtain such noteworthy fertility outcomes for European standards, has indeed developed a strong apparatus of family-support policies ranging from monetary incentives to forms of the mutualization of care, with the acknowledgment of the strategic role played by households in the social and economic life of a country. This is also due to a politico-legal mindset which, since the founding moments of the new French democracy, has identified redistributive tasks as a duty for public institutions, and pro-family commitment as one of the principal axes of state intervention.

Turning to the third country in our analysis, namely Sweden, it is worth recalling first and foremost that the Scandinavian welfare state served for long as a genuine paradigm of the social-democratic system; indeed, people have often, although imprecisely, spoken of a “Swedish model”⁸². Substantially, Sweden grounded its social policy on “the use of big, centralized institutions and large-scale transfers, commonly provided on a universal basis (rather than being income related) with a view to reducing inequality, alleviating poverty, and insuring against social risks”⁸³. The key features of such a regime are varied: a prominent role played by public actors in shaping market processes (both to curb monopolistic tendencies and through the activity of state-owned enterprises) together with the deployment of broad, universalist redistributive programs⁸⁴. Even though class-based conflict has not been completely absent for the defining of national social policies, the country’s welfare architecture has proved to be one of the most effective and efficient worldwide, with extraordinary achievements that place Sweden among the global leaders across a wide range of indicators, from public health to educational attainment⁸⁵. Sweden’s modern welfare system firstly originated throughout the 1930s, but it was only during the post-war period that social-democratic governments fully materialized it with the construction of a true “social market economy”: a market inspired by principles of economic liberalism was considered essential for generating the resources required to fund social programs⁸⁶. It must be recalled that pre-industrial, Swedish society was still marked by intense misery due to low agricultural productivity and for this reason quickly embraced the need to build a universalistic redistributive system as soon as the surplus generated by

⁸¹ DREES, *Les prestations familiales*, cit., p. 270.

⁸² The “Swedish Model”: *Welfare For Everyone*, in «Teach Democracy», <https://teachdemocracy.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-14-3-c-the-swedish-model-welfare-for-everyone>, acc. 09/09/2025.

⁸³ Subhash Madhav Thakur, Valerie Cerra, Balázs Horváth, and Michael Keen, *Sweden’s Welfare State*, for the International Monetary Fund, 2003, p. 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Michael B. Wells and Disa Bergnehr, “*Families and Family Policies in Sweden*”, in *Handbook of Family Policies Across the Globe*, ed. Mihaela Robila, 91–108. Flushing, NY, USA: Springer, 2014, p. 92.

industrialization made it possible⁸⁷. Moreover, the extremely individualistic character of Swedish society (most likely rooted in Protestantism) should be underscored: redistribution is not conceived as a tool for mere assistance, but rather as an instrument for levelling the playing field so to afford every individual the best conditions for fulfilling their life goals⁸⁸.

Sustained by economic growth and subsequent redistribution, Sweden became rapidly one of the wealthiest nations in Europe, pioneering social policies years ahead of the Mediterranean countries; for example, already in 1974 it guaranteed to fathers a parental leave equal to that granted to mothers, decades before the vast majority of other European countries⁸⁹. This longstanding commitment translated into one of the most egalitarian societies in the world. Gender gap in labor-market participation is practically nonexistent; Sweden is among the few settings where women hold half of senior public posts and, on average, devote more time to paid work than to domestic tasks (while men's participation in housework is specularly considerable), with just 45 minutes per day estimated as the average female commitment for unpaid household duties⁹⁰. In recent years, however, this quasi-idyllic picture has been progressively marred by several issues, especially by the expansion of privatization and outsourcing, at an extent that some argue that the country cannot be classified anymore within the social-democratic model⁹¹. It is also concerning that among the private groups driving the marketization of welfare there are increasingly more powerful organized crime syndicates⁹², further evidence of the growing relevance of criminal associations within a country that has lacked adequate cultural and legal safeguards against such developments⁹³. Despite these changes, however, several core principles of Swedish social policy have endured, especially the centrality granted to the child's wellbeing⁹⁴.

This concept lies at the very heart of the Swedish welfare system. As noted, the interwar years already saw a debate aimed at establishing a robust program of family policies, prompted by an emerging fertility crisis in the Nordic country⁹⁵. The early theorization of the set of family measures with which we have become familiar with in contemporaneity (from the parental leave to public-financed family support) is owed to the Myrdal spouses, a couple of sociologists and economists that

⁸⁷ Sven Bremberg, *A Perfect 10: Why Sweden Comes Out on Top in Early Child Development Programming*, «Paediatrics & Child Health» vol. 14, no. 10 (12/2009), p. 678.

⁸⁸ Sven Bremberg, *A Perfect 10*, cit., p. 677.

⁸⁹ Michael B. Wells and Disa Bergnehr, *Families and Family Policies in Sweden*, cit., p. 93.

⁹⁰ Ivi, pp. 95-96.

⁹¹ Lisa Pelling, *How Sweden's Welfare Experiment Became a Warning to Europe*, in «Social Europe», 07/05/2025.

⁹² Clarence Frenker, *Ekobrottsmyndigheten varnar: Gängkriminella öppnar vårdcentraler*, « SVT Nyheter », 01/10/2023.

⁹³ Viktor Sunnemark, *How Gang Violence Took Hold of Sweden – in Five Charts*, « The Guardian », 30/11/2023.

⁹⁴ Socialstyrelsen, *The Swedish Social Services Work for the Best Interests of Children*, acc. 09/09/2025, <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/om-socialtjansten/other-languages/engelska/the-swedish-social-services-work-for-the-best-interests-of-children/>.

⁹⁵ Sven Bremberg, ivi, p. 677

firstly introduces such notions in the Swedish debate throughout the 1930s⁹⁶. Most of these interventions, as aforementioned, were ultimately accomplished in the 1970s. A characteristic feature of Swedish early-childhood services is decentralization. Indeed, municipalities are charged to manage the facilities and finance them with their own resources (although there exists an equalization fund between more and less affluent localities), whereas the national Legislator simply sets a general framework that serves as a reference for local policymakers⁹⁷. Moreover, beginning in the 1990s the system became more flexible through the introduction of numerous vouchers, which (by adapting to the needs of higher-income groups) expanded the opportunities of using differentiated services, such as private preschool providers, after the payment of the required tax⁹⁸. Everyone is entitled to access childcare services from the child's first birthday, and the only requirement at the national level is residence in the municipality where the application is filed; each municipality then has its own normative apposite specifying the additional administrative steps⁹⁹. The most common form of childcare, notwithstanding the voucher reform, remains the preschool (*förskolan*), which, in addition to providing care (usually open all year round), are also educational institutions with a mandatory curriculum¹⁰⁰. The longstanding commitment in this area (exemplified by the share of GDP spent on childcare services, nearly 1.5%)¹⁰¹ is translated nowadays into quasi-universal coverage. By 2019, in fact, 85.4% of children aged under-five attended a *förskolan*; considering only children aged two and above, participation exceeds 90%¹⁰². Furthermore, the system's decentralized nature is reflected in a trend which is quite the opposite to that observed in Italy and France: in Sweden, rural areas rather than large urban agglomerations are the territorial settings displaying a more capillary presence of childcare services¹⁰³. In any case, the system remains a veritable global model, for its holistic coverage, its flexible organization, and social acceptance, which is reflected in the high utilization rates. Indeed, roughly 90% of Swedish parents reported being satisfied with the service in a 2013 survey¹⁰⁴.

Regarding paternity leave, instead, it cannot not be a consolidated reality within the first country ever to have instituted it. It is estimated indeed that only 18% of fathers do not make use of

⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 678.

⁹⁷ Sven Bremberg, *A Perfect 10*, cit., p. 680.

⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 679.

⁹⁹ Nordic Co-operation, *Childcare in Sweden*, acc. 09/09/2025, <https://www.norden.org/en/info-norden/childcare-sweden>.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Susanne Garvis, *Quality Employment and Quality Public Services. Quality of Employment in Childcare. Country Report: Sweden*, for European Public Service Union, 12/2018, p. 2.

¹⁰² Eurydice, *Early Childhood Education and Care*, 27/11/2023, acc. 09/09/2025, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/sweden/early-childhood-education-and-care>.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Susanne Garvis, *ivi*, p. 5.

a leave period from work at all¹⁰⁵. Besides, it may seem that a sort of stigma attaches to men unwilling of sharing housework duties, since they are considered archaic and selfish¹⁰⁶. Swedish regulatory framework on the mattes is extremely flexible, so to grant a coverage as broad as possible and an effective mutualization of childcare responsibilities. Indeed, 240 days of leave are granted to both parents (amounting 480 for the couple as a whole) and paid at 80% of normal revenues; within this timespan, 90 days are non-transferable, so to avoid an excessive deferral to the female partner¹⁰⁷. Additionally, thanks to a reform approved in 2024 it is now possible for each parent to transfer 45 days to another person (whether related or not to the child, so to encompass also parents' friends), thus enhancing the take-up opportunities¹⁰⁸. Nowadays men accounts for 30% of total leave hours¹⁰⁹, so neither in the Scandinavian country there subsists a perfect parity. Nevertheless, there should not be ignored those underlying economic drivers that affect different take-up rates and which have been already assessed in the Italian and French cases. As in the other two countries, indeed, also in Sweden men with low income and low education, or with more precarious contractual situations (such as self-employed or fixed-term workers) make less use of the leave, with a widening discrepancy over time between the more and less educated¹¹⁰. This suggests that the usage gap is partially due to negative income effects rather than pure cultural factors. In any case, such ancient commitment is reflected into a female work participation rate with few parallels worldwide. Almost 90% of 25-64 is actively engaged within the job market, the second highest proportion in the OECD after Iceland¹¹¹. The female employment rate in the same age group solidly exceeds 80%, with an activity rate equals to 85%¹¹². It's clear that the Nordic country has set a global standard: in 2023, indeed, Sweden was among the first ten countries with the highest female employment-to-population ratios worldwide¹¹³

¹⁰⁵ Susanne Fahlén and Ann-Zofie Duvander, *Fathers Who Do Not Use Parental Leave: A Register-Based Analysis of Swedish Fathers to Children Born between 1994 and 2017* (Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate [ISF]), 04/04/2023, pp.13ff.

¹⁰⁶ Maddy Savage, *Sweden: Where Its Taboo for Dads to Skip Parental Leave*, in «BBC», 01/02/2024, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20240130-sweden-where-its-taboo-for-dads-to-skip-parental-leave>.

¹⁰⁷ Sweden.se, *Sweden Has Made It Easier to Combine a Career with a Rich Life outside of Work. Here's How.*, acc. 10/09/2025, <https://sweden.se/work-business/working-in-sweden/work-life-balance>.

¹⁰⁸ Roselyne Min, *Sweden First Pioneered Parental Leave. Now It's the First Country to Give Grandparents Paid Leave*, «Euronews», 26/09/2024, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2024/09/26/new-swedish-law-enables-government-funding-for-babysitting-grandparents>.

¹⁰⁹ Sweden.se, *ivi*.

¹¹⁰ Susanne Fahlén and Ann-Zofie Duvander, *Fathers Who Do Not Use Parental Leave*, cit., pp. 29ff.

¹¹¹ OECD, *Labour Force Participation Rate*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/labour-force-participation-rate.html>, acc. 10/09/2025.

¹¹² Statistikmyndigheten (SCB), *Women and Men in Sweden: Facts and Figures 2024*, 05/11/2024, acc. 10/09/2025, <https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/population-and-living-conditions/gender-statistics/gender-statistics/produktrelaterat/reports/women-and-men-in-sweden---facts-and-figures-2024/#Caring-for-children-6.1>.

¹¹³ Jose Sanchez, *20 Countries with the Highest Female Employment-to-Population Ratios Worldwide in 2023*, «Statista», 30/05/2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1339142/countries-highest-female-employment-rate-worldwide/>.

Finally, regarding financial subsidies for families, several categories are detectable within the Swedish legal system. It is in fact necessary to distinguish between: the typical child allowance benefit, labeled *barnbidrag*, which is paid until the child turns sixteen; the extended child allowance (*förlängt barnbidrag*), equivalent to the first but continuing to be paid even after the child's sixteenth birthday; and the allowance exclusively directed to numerous families (namely, those with two or more children), called *flerbarnstillägg*¹¹⁴. In keeping with the universalist character of Sweden's social-democratic welfare model, all parents or legal guardians of children under 16 are legally entitled to receive the allowance, provided they are officially registered in the Swedish population register¹¹⁵. The monetary amount of the first two benefits is identical, amounting to SEK 1,250 per month (approximately €120), whereas in the third category incremental supplements are provided as the number of children increases, and from the fifth child onward an additional allowance equal to the *barnbidrag* is added¹¹⁶. It is estimated that the potential major recipient of public benefits in the Nordic country is a single mother living with five or more children, who could possibly receive up to more than SEK 4,200 per month, while a nuclear household with the same number of children would receive more than SEK 3,000¹¹⁷. It should also be underscored that in Sweden, as in many other countries, in cases of divorce the non-custodial parent must pay a monthly maintenance fee to the custodial one¹¹⁸. Nevertheless, challenges still persist within this branch of Swedish social policy. For instance, the recent failure in adapting child allowances to inflation means that, at present day, just about 25% of monthly child-related expenses are effectively covered by public allowances¹¹⁹. Furthermore, the rising premiums paid to larger families have been criticized as among the principal causes of the lacking integration among households with a migration background, within a national scenario which has increasingly been framed as an emergency¹²⁰. According to some radical authors, in marginal contexts universalistic benefits can be perceived as a proper income strategy, leading to structural forms of welfare dependence and thus disincentivizing effective female employment¹²¹.

Despite these recent issues, Sweden's social incentives system has historically produced remarkable fertility outcomes within a low fertility contest. Indeed, until the pandemic crisis and the

¹¹⁴ European Commission, *Your Social Security Rights in Sweden*, 07/2024, p.7.

¹¹⁵ Nordic Co-operation, *Child Allowance in Sweden*, acc. 10/09/2025, <https://www.norden.org/en/info-norden/child-allowance-sweden>.

¹¹⁶ European Commission, *ivi*, p. 8.

¹¹⁷ Einar H. Dyvik, *Average Monthly Housing Allowance for Households with Children in Sweden in 2022, by Number of Children*, «Statista», 23/08/2024.

¹¹⁸ European Commission, *ivi*, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ *Child Allowance Hits 50-Year Low, Covering Just 25% of Costs*, «Sweden Herald», 16/04/2025, acc. 10/09/2025, <https://swedenherald.com/article/child-allowance-hits-50year-low-covering-just-25-of-costs>.

¹²⁰ Stefan Hedlund, *Sweden Looks into the Abyss*, «GIS Report», 09/02/2024

¹²¹ Leif Andersson, Malte Andersson, Johanna Deinum, and Frank Götmark, *Subsidies for Large Families in Sweden Impair Integration of Immigrants*, «Nätverket Population Matters Sweden», 04/01/2022.

inflationary turmoil of post-2020, Sweden's TFR had consistently been rather high, exceeding the replacement threshold from 1989 to 1993 and remaining just below 2.0 throughout the entire 2010s¹²². However, similarly to the French case, fertility in the Scandinavian country began to decline from 2020, reaching in 2023 its lowest levels ever¹²³ and recording the lowest number of births since 2002 in absolute terms¹²⁴. However, despite this likely conjunctural decline in Swedish births, the demographic situation in the Nordic country is absolutely incomparable to that of its Mediterranean epigones. Indeed, although marginally, Sweden's natural increase in 2024 remains positive¹²⁵. It is therefore beyond doubt that the country's pioneering action in many areas of family policy has set international best practices (indeed later emulated worldwide), precisely thanks to its positive impact on fertility dynamics in advanced societies. Therefore, the Scandinavian nation serves as a concrete example of the virtuous circle arousing from the link between gender equality, fertility, and economic and social development.

Nonetheless, even two of the most virtuous countries worldwide regarding social policy such as France and Sweden have exhibited, in these last few years, a pronounced decline in the national TFR. Whether the cause of this dropping lies in cyclical factors, such as the aforementioned economic uncertainty due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the consequent inflationary turmoil¹²⁶, or instead in longer-term phenomena like climate anxiety now gripping younger generations in postmodern societies¹²⁷, this does not alter the underlying matter of fact: even the most effective nations at supporting families are now facing a fertility crisis, with all the related disruptive consequences, streaming from the cited unsustainability of welfare systems to a feared gradual conversion of open societies toward authoritarianism¹²⁸. It seems, therefore, that systemic uncertainty constraining advanced societies in this turbulent period is the main driver of de-natalism, and that pro-family measures, though well designed and targeted, can mitigate at most such a generalized decline. After all, a hallmark of demographic modernity is a basic change in fertility projects. Before industrialization, childbirth was thought as an ineluctable event and in the early phases of the

¹²² Aaron O'Neill, *Total Fertility Rate in Children per Woman in Sweden from 1960 to 2023*, in «Statista», 22/07/2025.

¹²³ Aaron O'Neill, *Total Fertility Rate in Children per Woman in Sweden from 1960 to 2023*, cit.

¹²⁴ Statistikmyndigheten SCB, *Fertility Rate Continues to Decline in 2024*, 21/02/2025, acc. 10/09/2025, <https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/population-and-living-conditions/population-composition-and-development/population-statistics/pong/statistical-news/swedens-population-2024-population-changes2/>.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Maria Winkler-Dworak, Kryštof Zeman, and Tomáš Sobotka, *Birth Rate Decline in the Later Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Policy Interventions, Vaccination Programmes, and Economic Uncertainty*, in «Human Reproduction Open», vol.2024, no. 3/2024.

¹²⁷ Elena Bastianelli, *Climate Change Worries and Fertility Intentions: Insights from Three EU Countries*, «Journal of Marriage and Family», vol. 87, no. 2 (2025), pp. 659–675.

¹²⁸ Dean Spears and Michael Geruso, *After the Spike: Population, Progress, and the Case for People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2025).

Transition was mostly limited by subtraction (thus revealing the “passive” nature of original family planning); in post-transitional stages, however, such choices presuppose a certain degree of agency and activity¹²⁹. Putting it differently, to have a child in contemporary times is a choice to be made rather than an occurrence to be endured, and like any rational choice it requires a coherent setting of incentives¹³⁰.

Accordingly, it appears appropriate at this stage to assess the actual impact of the selected policy set on fertility outputs through a statistical study of the elected variables. Consistently with the theoretical framework, there will be estimated the effect of those measures enshrined in gender equity theory as vital to the redistribution of gender roles (namely, childcare facilities density and the duration of paternity leave) and compare them with several variables globally expressing the situation of young adult cohorts in the selected countries. As far as economic contributions are concerned, they have been taken into account principally to represent the importance of family policies for each nation’s public spending. However, a vast set of literature shows that direct subsidies are useful chiefly with respect to *tempo*, helping to anticipate childbearing among those couples that already decided to have a child, but they do not materially affect the quantum¹³¹. Methodology, data analysis and the final comment of the findings will be addressed in the following section.

¹²⁹ Alessandro Rosina e Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia: Crescita, crisi e sfide*, Carocci: Rome, 2022, p. 82-83.

¹³⁰ The Rational Choice Theory is a multidisciplinary framework used in social sciences and rooted in classical economics that interprets individual decisions as rational assessments of costs and benefits, made with the aim of maximizing personal utility. For an overview, cf. Steven L. Green, *Rational Choice Theory: An Overview* (paper presented at the Baylor University Faculty Development Seminar on Rational Choice Theory, Waco, TX, May 2002).

¹³¹ For a concise overlook of the literature on the matter, cf. Anne H. Gauthier, *The Impact of Family Policies on Fertility in Industrialized Countries: A Review of the Literature*, «Population Research and Policy Review», vol. 26 (2007): 323–346.

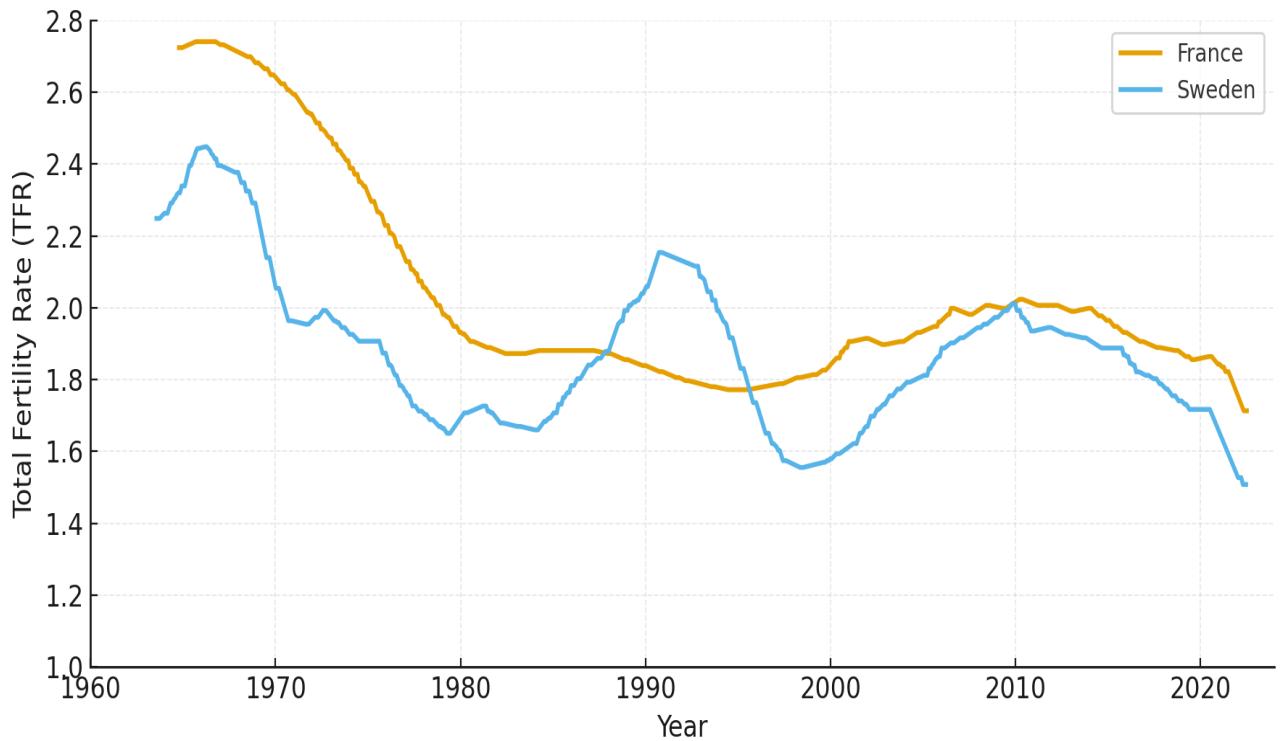


Fig. 3.2: French and Sweden TFR from 1960 until today. Source:
[https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN¹³²](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN)

¹³² World Bank, *Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – France and Sweden*, acc. 17/09/2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=FR-SE>. Despite being consistently at higher values compared to the Italian one, it is evident a slight decrease over the last years, with a remarkable downturn from 2020 onwards

Chapter 4

Fertility patterns and their drivers

Before beginning this chapter, a brief yet necessary disclaimer is in order. The following study is based on a paper carried out by the author jointly with a research group, which one year ago provided also the intellectual stimulus and the conceptual inception of the current dissertation¹. A referral to that work is thus essential both to visualize the datasets and the cognitive and methodological process that led to the statistical elaborations reported below². As already stated, the purpose is to estimate how fertility outcomes (the model's dependent variable) are affected by the set of policies enshrined in the gender equity theory and by the broader socioeconomic context, and at which extent is influenced by both. The latter factors stand as the model's independent variables. Data come from international institutional datasets (EUROSTAT for the strictly demographic component, OECD and the World Bank for the economic one) and they cover up to 2023 (included). To properly depict parental leave, the choice focused on the week-based length of paid leave for the father, isolating it from the female corresponding. For childcare facilities, the relevant factor was identified in territorial density, exemplified by the share of children aged less than 3 years enrolled in nurseries *et similia*. On the other hand, to show economic prospects a crossed comparison across several indicators (GDP per-capita, female employment rate, and average age of parental home leaving) has been deployed, which collectively reflect the degree of financial autonomy achieved by young adults and women. For the dependent variable, instead, the age-specific fertility rate was preferred over the classical TFR. The analysis focuses on the 25-29 and 30-34 age groups, traditionally the most decisive regarding fertility outcomes³.

The objective is to ultimately comprehend the impact of the encompassed metrics through a statistical study capable of detecting their mutual correlation. This will be demonstrated through the construction of graphical representations, such as heat-maps or linear regression chart, developed using the software “RStudio”. Prior to examining the possible interrelations, the dependent variable is firstly unpacked in order to evaluate the magnitude of each age-specific rate by respectively finding

¹ Pierluigi Selvaggi, Francesco Mallardo, Francesco Rotili, Simone Tistarelli, Isabella Zannoni, and Giulio Picchia. *The Role of Gender Equality in the European Fertility Crisis: A Comparative Evaluation of Family Policies Effectiveness in Italy, France, and Sweden*. University research paper, LUISS Guido Carli, 30/04/2024.

² For the datasets used in this study and their respective sources, cf. *Compiled Dataset on Fertility, Family Policies, and Socioeconomic Indicators*, Unpublished dataset, LUISS Guido Carli, 30/04/2024, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Zm-mSqbK1uoLliV-FKV9ET60c3jSeIH/edit?gid=240798216#gid=240798216>.

³ Tomas Frejka and Gérard Calot, *Cohort Reproductive Patterns in Low-Fertility Countries*, in «Population and Development Review», no. 27 (2001): pp. 103–132, pp. 120ff.

the mean, the median, and the quantiles, which were thus represented through six box plots (two for each nation). Subsequently this operation, datasets were created to translate the studied variables onto a Cartesian chart, which provides the basis for the following graphical elaborations. Finally, to compute homoscedasticity the Residual Standard Error (RSE) is taken into account.

So, the enquiry starts with the visualization of the box plots, that exemplifies on the x-axis the two age-classes and on the y-axis the fertility rate.

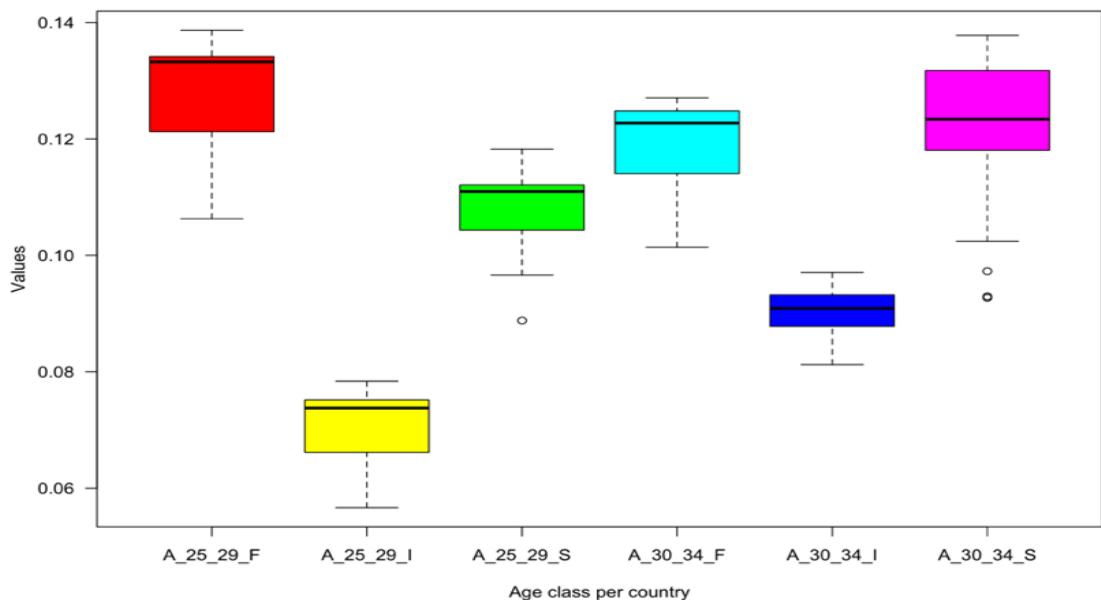


Figure 4.1: Age-specific fertility by country: boxplot of the dependent variable with mean, median, and standard deviation. Elaboration on public data. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Zm-mSqbK1uoLliV-FKV9ET60c3jISeIH/edit?gid=240798216#gid=240798216>.⁴

Unsurprisingly, Italian fertility rates for both age classes had the lowest distribution of the entire set. Within such a negative outlook, the higher outcomes are registered within the 30-34 age brackets, confirming the structural postponement caused by the systemic *degiovamento* affecting the Peninsula. However, even though the outcomes of this age group are comparatively better within the national landscape, they remain worse than those of any corresponding cohort in the other two countries. Conversely, both Sweden and France are characterized by overall higher indexes, although with some divergences. France appears to show a lower tendency to postponement, since the 25-29 age group registered the highest fertility rate. This likely reflects a positive *tempo* effect produced by the generous French social policies, which in turn exerts a favourable influence on the *quantum* effect

⁴ *Compiled Dataset on Fertility, Family Policies, and Socioeconomic Indicators*, cit. To be recalled that each colour represents a country: red and light blue for France, yellow and dark blue for Italy, and green and purple for Sweden, respectively. Furthermore, it has to be stressed that all the following figures are elaborations based on this dataset.

too. Such conclusion is indeed confirmed by official enquiries, but the most recent crisis has also been putting this reality into question⁵. On the other hand, Sweden shares a similar pattern with Italy regarding the average age at the firstborn, but its fertility is much higher for both groups. In this case, it is likely that a high level of gender equality enables a more efficient recovery in older ages, as envisaged within the gender revolution theory⁶. Contrarily to the French case, there occurs a delinking between *quantum* and *tempo*, with the former remaining at relatively high levels whereas the second is evidently postponed; such delinking seems to hamper overall *quantum* in a residual way. An interesting emerging insight regards the evident asymmetry of the distributions for every 25-29 age group. As shown by the graph, the median is always skewed towards the upper values of the arrangement, suggesting that the mean rate is always lower than the median, implying that half of women aged 25-29 are collocated at values slightly above the median, while what remains is spread more unevenly. Especially for France, this trend perpetuates also in older brackets, while Sweden's case is completely different: in the Scandinavian country there are more women in absolute terms who realizes fertility, but their relative number of children is inferior. Two evident outliers drag the mean below the median for both Swedish categories, implying the presence of two clusters who present very poor rates. These anomalies are indeed reflected in the standard deviation of this cohort, which stands as the most elevated between all the assessed age groups.

After revealing the structuralities of fertility trends in the three countries, it is now the moment to assess the correlation between the variables, so to evaluate the heuristic utility of the model. First and foremost, however, it must be recalled that correlation does not imply causation, but it just offers a descriptive analysis of the mutual relationship between different factors⁷. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that the “correlation coefficient” lies between the maximum value of 1 and the minimum of -1⁸. In order to create a graphical representation of such coefficient, the creation of a heatmap appeared to be the most intuitive choice. The deeper the red, the more negative the correlation, indicating that the two variables are in an inversely proportional relationship; conversely, greener shades denote a positive association.

⁵ Jeanne Pointet, *Un premier enfant à 29,1 ans en 2023 : un âge qui continue d'augmenter*, «Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (Insee)», 16/07/2025, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/8608134>.

⁶ Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Education, Gender Revolution, and Fertility Recovery*, in «Vienna Yearbook of Population Research» no. 15/2017: pp. 55–59.

⁷ Julia M. Rohrer, *Thinking Clearly About Correlations and Causation: Graphical Causal Models for Observational Data*, «Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science» 1, no. 1 (2018): pp. 27–42.

⁸ Patrick Schober, Christa Boer, and Lothar A. Schwarte, *Correlation Coefficients: Appropriate Use and Interpretation*, in «Anesthesia & Analgesia» 126, no. 5 (05/2018): pp. 1763–1768.

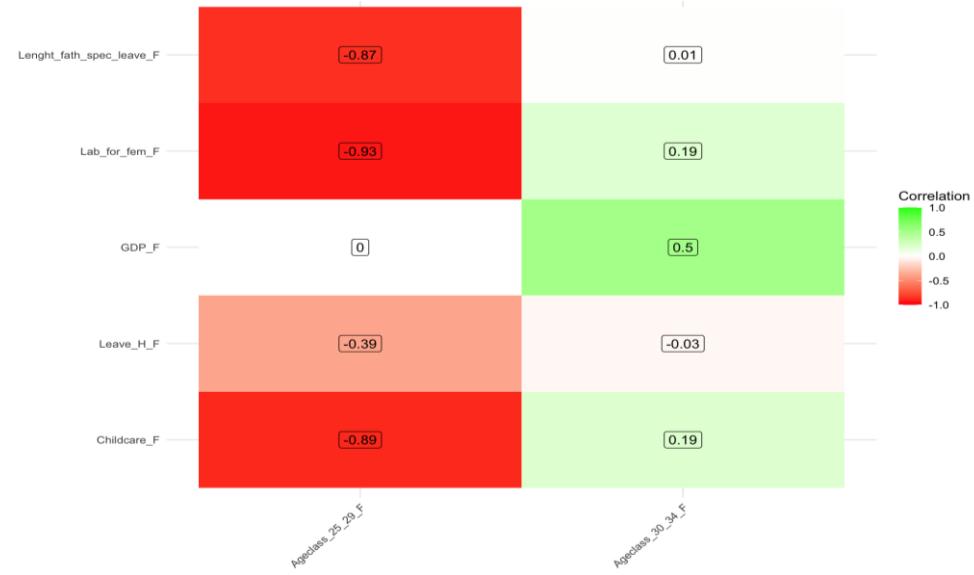


Figure 4.2. Correlation heatmap of France: the intensity of interrelations, both positive and negative, is displayed with progressively darker shades. Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Zm-mSqbK1uoLliV-FKV9ET60c3jISeIH/edit?gid=240798216#gid=240798216>.

Regarding France's heatmap, the correlation indices appear predominantly in the dark red bands, thus indicating an inversely proportional correlation between fertility outcomes in the first age group and some of the indicators (namely, children attending daycare centers, female employment rate, and duration of father's leave). By contrast, more mature women are marked by a positive relation between their fertility choices and GDP per capita. These patterns suggest that, while women aged 30–34 appear to identify income as the primary driver of childbearing and see other measures as additional enablers, younger women (25–29) are no more inclined to have children irrespective of whatever political intervention, as documented by official statistic⁹. Therefore, there is a first confirmation of the increasing importance of economic elements in promoting motherhood compared to other socio-political factors. Whether this trend is driven solely by the cultural erosion of the value of parenthood¹⁰ or, more likely, by the growing symbolic and material constraints faced by young

⁹ Sheelah Delestre, *Maternité : âge moyen de la mère à l'accouchement en France 1994–2023*, «Statista», 16/05/2024, acc. 12/09/2025, <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/672934/age-moyen-de-la-mere-a-l'accouchement-france/>.

¹⁰ Tiphaine Honnet, *À la naissance de leur premier enfant, les femmes ont 5 ans de plus qu'il y a 50 ans*, «Le Figaro», 17/07/2025.

French women¹¹, is a question that can only be answered in the future, although the present thesis argues in favour of the latter interpretation.

As far as Italy is concerned, the situation appears equivalent across both age brackets. Correlation is highly negative for many independent variables, with the noteworthy exception of GDP per capita, which is the only one to display a positive, direct relation. Notwithstanding individual income standing out as the most impactful determinant for childbearing, the correlation becomes more intense among older women, as observed in France. More than a confirmation of the necessity of economic stability, this chart seems to suggest that, against the backdrop of the attested inadequacy of Italian pro-natalist policies, income alone resists as a salient determinant for family formation among Peninsula's women.

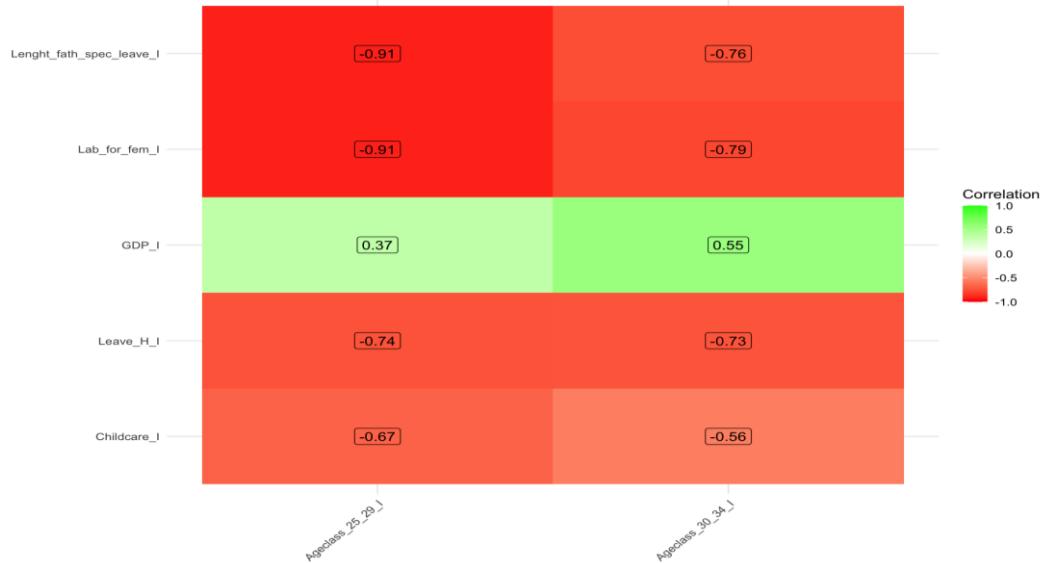


Figure 4.3: Correlation heatmap of Italy (to be read as above). Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Zm-mSqbK1uoLliV-FKV9ET60c3jISeIH/edit?gid=240798216#gid=240798216>.

Finally, the last heatmap, namely that of Sweden, the findings are somewhat counterintuitive. Indeed, among the independent variables, female employment and paternity leave's duration exhibit the most evident negative correlation, at first glance suggesting an inverse association of such factors with childbearing propensity. On the other hand, the remaining elements yield coefficients close to

¹¹ Dominique Reynié, Annamaria Parente, et al., *Le défi de la natalité. Une enquête d'opinion franco-italienne*, «Fondazione Magna Carta/Fondapol», 06/2025

zero, embodying essentially null relations for both cohorts. However, it is precisely for this occurrence that the inherent flaws of correlation should be recalled. Within a context of steady fertility decline, the graph is reflecting shared downward trends rather than a substantial causative relationship. Indeed, since natality is falling, any covariate that also moves monotonically over time will likely tend to produce mechanically negative correlations with those declining fertility rates, regardless of certainty. Therefore, also those measures that someway attenuate the decline without properly halting or reversing it may still be linked with a negative correlation in the raw data. For this reason the dissertation encompasses such a comparative prospective: the focus should be casted on the pace of the dropping and correlations stand as mere descriptive signals of a broader trend. Even at the cost of some redundancy, establishing straightforward correlations between reproductive behaviours and a single intervention is anything but simple, since a vast set of societal, personal, institutional and psychological factors all interplay together in shaping such choices, as literature globally confirms¹².

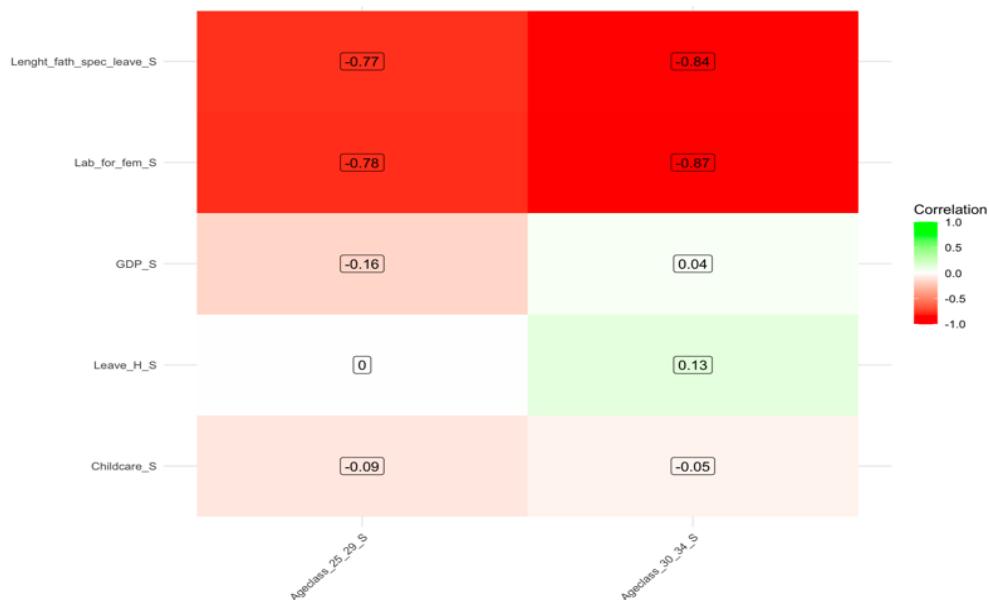


Figure 4.4: Correlation heatmap of Sweden (to be read as above). Source: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Zm-mSqbK1uoLliV-FKV9ET60c3jISelH/edit?gid=240798216#gid=240798216>.

After completing the correlation analysis, the focus will now shift to the inferential study through the construction of a linear multiple regression model showing the significance of the

¹² Sophie Mathieu, *Entre l'effet tempo et l'effet quantum: une analyse de l'effet des politiques familiales sur la fécondité dans les pays avancés*, «Sociologie et sociétés» 45, no. 1 (2013): pp. 255–276.

relationship between variables¹³. Starting from Italy, the first multiple linear regression table specifies the association between the age-specific rate in younger cohorts and the other five covariates. It emerges that only two of those covariates appear to be statistically significant, namely paternity-leave duration and female employment rate. The p-value¹⁴ for the overall F-test is incredibly small, indicating that the model is statistically significant in global terms. Such a relation in turn implies that at least one regressor is meaningfully related to natality outcomes in the 25-29 group: this kind of variation in that predictor is usually associated with non-random variation in the dependent variable. Conversely, the second model designed for older women has shown conventional significance just for two of the selected covariates, namely the paternity leave duration and individual income. Generally speaking, the F-test yields a very small p-value, indicating the overall signficancy of the model. Taking the results altogether, the Italian occurrences show us an insightful distinction between generations: if those aged 25-29 assign greater importance to those proxies for gender-role redefinition, those aged 30-34 identify in the income effect as the dominant driver of their fertility choices. Arguably, it could be that women still unsecure about their long-term work position desire sharing maternal duties to avoid jeopardizing their possible career prospects, whereas those with more solid jobs are more responsive to brute material resources. So, if in the first stages of partnership formation mutual assistance and solidarity do count, it clearly emerges the necessity of economic stability as a decisive factor for family planning in the long run.

The statistical significance of the model holds also for the younger French cohort (25-29), due to the occurrence of a little p-value. Similarly to their Italian counterparts, in the younger French age group the covariate that shows the strongest association with fertility is one embedded in gender-equality theory, namely the density of childcare facilities. In a context where families are used to a broader set of state benefits, mothers' decisions seem to depend less on social wealth and more on a feasible life-work reconciliation. The same conclusion has been confirmed also by recent nation-wide surveys: although appreciating economic contributions, French young couples seem widely to identify a different kind of pro-family policy¹⁵. Surprisingly, however, the model is not statistically significant for the older age bracket for a high p-value, indicating limited explanatory power for this

¹³ For a detailed explanation about the functioning and the possible utilizations of this statistical operation, cf. Johannes Lederer, *Fundamentals of High-Dimensional Statistics* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 37–79.

¹⁴ The “p-value” is a measure used in multiple linear regression of how surprising your result would be if there were no relationship, both for a single coefficient (t-test) or, as in this case, for the whole model (F-test). Smaller p-values mean the data look less compatible with no effect, or, in other words, it is very unlike that the obtained distribution was just due to chance. Cf. Chittaranjan Andrade, *The P Value and Statistical Significance: Misunderstandings, Explanations, Challenges, and Alternatives*, «Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine», vol. 41, no. 3/2019, pp.210–215.

¹⁵ Dominique Reynié, Annamaria Parente, et al., *Le défi de la natalité. Une enquête d'opinion franco-italienne*, cit., p. 13ff.

cohort. It is likely that factors other than those captured in this analysis may have a greater impact on fertility choices, such as an enduring partnership stability¹⁶.

Lastly, Sweden represents a slightly distinct profile. Low p-values reveal that the models are statistically significant, but their internal drives diverge from the other two occurrences. For ages 25-29, no coefficient crosses the conventional 0.05 threshold, although several come close to it (namely, childcare coverage, GDP per capita and the fathers' leave. On the other hand, within the other cohort only women occupation attains significance. Crossing the data altogether, the Swedish results once again suggest that fertility dynamics are shaped more by the broader socio-economic and cultural context than by any single policy intervention. Therefore, it seems that there is no single policy that could fix fertility decline. This is a generational challenge that requires a coherent and holistic approach driven by a vast array of mutually reinforcing measures. Among the interventions with relative more effect there are those policies incentivizing a greater degree of gender equity. That said, nonetheless, material constraints matter above all: across quite different welfare regimes such as Italy and Sweden, familiar income persists as a key determinant of fertility decisions. Comparative statistical analysis likewise shows that among more mature couples GDP per capita is the most influential predictor of birth outcomes. Accordingly, at the end of the present dissertation it emerges that economic security is, at least in Europe, the most decisive factor in young couples' fertility choices. The structural uncertainty afflicting advanced societies, with its tentacular occupational, psychological, and social ramifications, seems to be the primary driver underpinning the birth dropping. When younger generations will be once again capable of viewing the future with optimism (namely, when a new socio-political international order replaces the increasingly exhausted globalization system), there will be a recovery of the most important human investment: bringing a child into the light. In the meantime, policy priorities are clear: the measures prescribed by the gender revolution theory. Although uncapable of reversing the trend in a broader context of generalized crisis, such interventions can remarkably mitigate the decline.

¹⁶ Kuang, Bernice, Ann Berrington, Sindhu Vasireddy, and Hill Kulu. *The Changing Inter-Relationship between Partnership Dynamics and Fertility Trends in Europe and the United States: A Review*, in «Demographic Research» no.52/2025, pp.179–228, pp. 188ff.

Table 4.1: Synthesis of regression results for the selected countries (elaborated with R-Studio)

Coun.	Age group	Variable	Estim.	Std. Err.	t - value	p-value	Rsd. Std. Err.	R-squared	Adj. R-squared	F-statistic	df 1	df 2	Model p-value
Italy	25–29	(Intercept)	2.910e-01	1.064e-01	2.734	0.0194	0.0009481	0.9867	0.9807	163.3	5	11	6.186e-10
Italy	25–29	Childcare	-1.799e-05	8.256e-05	-0.2518	0.8315	0.0009481	0.9867	0.9807	163.3	5	11	6.186e-10
Italy	25–29	Leave_H	-6.001e-03	4.034e-03	-1.488	0.1649	0.0009481	0.9867	0.9807	163.3	5	11	6.186e-10
Italy	25–29	GDP	2.256e-07	1.140e-07	1.978	0.0735	0.0009481	0.9867	0.9807	163.3	5	11	6.186e-10
Italy	25–29	Lab_for_fem	-8.766e-04	3.479e-04	-2.520	0.0285	0.0009481	0.9867	0.9807	163.3	5	11	6.186e-10
Italy	25–29	Lenght_fath_spec_leave	-6.402e-03	7.185e-04	-8.910	2.31e-06	0.0009481	0.9867	0.9807	163.3	5	11	6.186e-10
Italy	30–34	(Intercept)	2.749e-01	1.603e-01	1.716	0.11422	0.001428	0.8497	0.7814	12.44	5	11	0.000319
Italy	30–34	Childcare	9.409e-05	1.243e-04	0.757	0.46503	0.001428	0.8497	0.7814	12.44	5	11	0.000319
Italy	30–34	Leave_H	-6.981e-03	6.074e-03	-1.149	0.27475	0.001428	0.8497	0.7814	12.44	5	11	0.000319
Italy	30–34	GDP	3.810e-07	1.717e-07	2.219	0.04844	0.001428	0.8497	0.7814	12.44	5	11	0.000319
Italy	30–34	Lab_for_fem	2.236e-04	5.238e-04	0.427	0.67771	0.001428	0.8497	0.7814	12.44	5	11	0.000319
Italy	30–34	Lenght_fath_spec_leave	-3.464e-03	1.082e-03	-3.202	0.00843	0.001428	0.8497	0.7814	12.44	5	11	0.000319
France	25–29	(Intercept)	2.278e-01	1.695e-01	1.344	0.2039	0.003274	0.9222	0.8898	28.44	5	12	2.935e-06
France	25–29	Childcare	-4.151e-04	1.904e-04	-2.180	0.0499	0.003274	0.9222	0.8898	28.44	5	12	2.935e-06
France	25–29	Leave_H	2.436e-03	5.316e-03	0.458	0.6549	0.003274	0.9222	0.8898	28.44	5	12	2.935e-06
France	25–29	GDP	4.184e-07	3.381e-07	1.237	0.2396	0.003274	0.9222	0.8898	28.44	5	12	2.935e-06
France	25–29	Lab_for_fem	-2.318e-03	1.165e-03	-1.990	0.0699	0.003274	0.9222	0.8898	28.44	5	12	2.935e-06
France	25–29	Lenght_fath_spec_leave	-1.495e-04	1.466e-04	-1.020	0.3280	0.003274	0.9222	0.8898	28.44	5	12	2.935e-06
France	30–34	(Intercept)	-3.722e-02	1.338e-01	-0.278	0.786	0.002584	0.3298	0.05058	1.181	5	12	0.3739
France	30–34	Childcare	-3.247e-05	1.503e-04	-0.216	0.833	0.002584	0.3298	0.05058	1.181	5	12	0.3739
France	30–34	Leave_H	4.196e-03	4.197e-03	1.000	0.337	0.002584	0.3298	0.05058	1.181	5	12	0.3739
France	30–34	GDP	5.011e-07	2.669e-07	1.877	0.085	0.002584	0.3298	0.05058	1.181	5	12	0.3739
France	30–34	Lab_for_fem	6.486e-04	9.196e-04	0.705	0.494	0.002584	0.3298	0.05058	1.181	5	12	0.3739
France	30–34	Lenght_fath_spec_leave	-8.666e-05	1.157e-04	-0.749	0.468	0.002584	0.3298	0.05058	1.181	5	12	0.3739

Sweden	25-29	(Intercept)	3.319e-01	1.013e-01	3.278	0.0112	0.004594	0.8097	0.6908	6.808	5	8	0.009242
Sweden	25-29	Childcare	-9.058e-04	4.290e-04	-2.111	0.0677	0.004594	0.8097	0.6908	6.808	5	8	0.009242
Sweden	25-29	Leave_H	6.480e-04	1.120e-03	0.5795	0.5785	0.004594	0.8097	0.6908	6.808	5	8	0.009242
Sweden	25-29	GDP	-8.821e-07	4.094e-07	-2.155	0.0633	0.004594	0.8097	0.6908	6.808	5	8	0.009242
Sweden	25-29	Lab_for_fem	-1.443e-03	1.382e-03	-1.044	0.3271	0.004594	0.8097	0.6908	6.808	5	8	0.009242
Sweden	25-29	Lenght_fath_spec_leave	-2.173e-03	1.090e-03	-1.994	0.0813	0.004594	0.8097	0.6908	6.808	5	8	0.009242
Sweden	30-34	(Intercept)	3.506e-01	8.829e-02	3.971	0.00411	0.004006	0.8258	0.7169	7.583	5	8	0.006641
Sweden	30-34	Childcare	-4.166e-04	3.741e-04	-1.114	0.29781	0.004006	0.8258	0.7169	7.583	5	8	0.006641
Sweden	30-34	Leave_H	4.571e-04	9.764e-04	0.468	0.65216	0.004006	0.8258	0.7169	7.583	5	8	0.006641
Sweden	30-34	GDP	-1.968e-07	3.570e-07	-0.551	0.59650	0.004006	0.8258	0.7169	7.583	5	8	0.006641
Sweden	30-34	Lab_for_fem	-2.311e-03	1.205e-03	-1.918	0.09143	0.004006	0.8258	0.7169	7.583	5	8	0.006641
Sweden	30-34	Lenght_fath_spec_leave	-1.375e-03	9.503e-04	-1.447	0.18600	0.004006	0.8258	0.7169	7.583	5	8	0.006641

Conclusion

«The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering».

(Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Preface)

The aim of the present dissertation was to identify the main drivers of the fertility crisis undergoing in most advanced societies, especially in Europe and East Asia. A particular attention was dedicated to the Italian case, which, confronted to other countries, represents one of the most problematic contexts in the world on this specific issue. Accordingly, a comparative study was conceived with similar yet more effective policy systems displaying more positive demographic outlooks, namely, Sweden and France, long regarded as among the most pronatalist and family-supportive Western European countries. The enquiry adopted as its theoretical framework the interplay between two influential strands within demography (the Gender Revolution Theory and the Globalization Theory) and then elaborated such insights into a multivariate statistical analysis of data deriving from of two cohorts (namely, those aged 25-29 and 30-34 years) in each selected country. The study confirms once again¹ the assumption that fertility is an inherently multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by the mutual interrelations of economic, cultural and institutional factors.

Indeed, the statistical elaborations presented in the empirical chapter confirmed the importance of those measures enshrined in the Gender Theory, such as childcare facilities and paternity work leave, in favoring the redistribution of family roles, so to alleviate women from the burden of solitary childcaring and thus fostering overall fertility. Nonetheless, their effect, although generally positive, is neither decisive nor uniform. These interventions do mitigate fertility decline, but in scenarios characterized by rising structural uncertainty they cannot properly reverse the declining trend. In fact, comparative findings underscore that, even across very different welfare systems like those of Italy and Sweden, material constraints remain the strongest determinant of fertility outcomes. National contexts show different results. In Italy, younger women appear more responsive to measures aimed at a complete redefinition of household duties, and also in France the density of childcare services plays a distinctive role for the younger cohort. However, in all three settings variables expressing overall economic autonomy (income per capita, female occupation, and parental home leaving) revealed to be the most impactful, especially in later stages of the reproductive life course.

¹ Maria Rita Testa, Tomáš Sobotka e Philip S. Morgan, *Reproductive decision-making: towards improved theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches*, in «Vienna Yearbook of Population Research», vol. 9/2011, pp. 1-9, p. 8-9.

These results suggest that there is no single policy able to tackle, once and for all, the natality crisis. Fertility dynamics require a comprehensive understanding of the broader socio-economic and cultural environment that shapes individual decisions. Pro-family measures (above all those aimed at establishing major gender equality), are necessary and yet insufficient on their own. An effective pro-natalist policy requires a holistic approach that addresses, first and foremost, the material insecurities faced by younger generations, including precarious employment, housing unaffordability, and widening inequalities². The Italian case-study is important precisely because it epitomizes the consequences of political immobilism and structural dysfunctionalities³. Pervasive youth unemployment, unrealized gender equality, and a fragmented and corporatist welfare system have jointly depressed fertility to one of the lowest levels worldwide. On the other hand, France and Sweden demonstrate that, although plentiful and universalistic family policies do attenuate the most negative effects and sustain fertility at comparatively higher levels, neither of these two well-designed welfare systems is immune to the recent downturn associated with the global uncertainty erupted after the Pandemic. Such evidence reinforces the argument that systematic insecurity, whether occupational, economic or psychological, remains the primary determinant of de-natalism. Indeed, as already stated, it seems appropriate not to regard the fertility crisis solely as a demographic anomaly. It is one of the many symptoms of that deeper malaise affecting Western societies in this historical juncture⁴. Western civilization has lost faith in the future and, in doing so, has ceased to invest in the most arduous yet fruitful undertaking: having children. It must be recalled that human progress is nothing more than the pooling of the contributions of successive generations, each striving to be better than the preceding one⁵. In a society without hope, there is no striving for improvement either.

However, as the quotation at the beginning of this section reminds us, history is not predetermined: even those crises that seem utterly destructive in the present are rooted in conjunctural factors and can ultimately be resolved. Nowadays, the abundance of information and predictions is more often the path for fatalism than a set of useful tools aimed at orientating public and private action⁶. It seems that knowledge has been reduced to that “learned ignorance” so dear to late Scholastic theologians⁷. Yet, in this way the very keystone of modernity, namely, the conative attitude

² Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basen, *Why Demography matters*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018, pp. 145ff

³ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d’Italia: Crescita, crisi e sfide*, Carocci: Rome, 2022, pp. 114ff.

⁴ Charles S. Maier, *The Project-State and Its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023), pp. 360ff.

⁵ Gregory Aldrete, *The Roman Empire – Rise and Fall of Ancient Rome / Lex Fridman Podcast #443*, YouTube video, 3:36:00, publ. 12/09/2024 in «Lex Fridman», <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyoVVSGgPjY>, acc. 30/08/2025.

⁶ David Bawden and Lyn Robinson, *Information Overload: An Overview*, in «Oxford Encyclopedia of Political Decision Making» (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷ In particular, it is worth recalling Nicholas of Cusa’s eponymous work (1440), which elaborates an epistemology of finitude and transcendence by drawing upon Ecclesiastes, a writing that, consistent with other parts of the Old Testament,

deriving from the faith in human capabilities, has been forsaken and is now almost regarded with disdain. Even so, the record of demographic achievements should be sufficient to remind to everybody which remarkable changes humankind has accomplished within the lifespan of a few generations. For instance, we have moved from a world in which many of one's children and siblings would have died to one in which childhood is regarded as the best stage in life. In this light, anti-natalism, though increasingly severe, should not be regarded as an immutable fate but as a phenomenon that can be effectively tempered thanks to consistent and forward-looking political interventions⁸. In this respect, the key challenge for present and future policymakers is to restore the conditions of confidence and stability that enable younger cohorts to view parenthood as a truly viable life project. This demands not only mere pro-family measures, but also holistic policies aimed at fostering equality and reducing precariousness. In short, the social contract that for so long underpinned the prosperity of the Western world needs to be renewed in order to be fit for this era of rapid technological, social, and anthropological change.

articulates a fatalistic view of human capacities: «Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all». (Qo. vv. 2,13-14, KJV).

⁸ Alessandro Rosina and Roberto Impicciatore, *Storia demografica d'Italia*, cit., p. 162.

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