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Childless by choice or constraint? Profiles of childless women in selected Italian cities

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ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at obtaining insights into childlessness in Italy. After addressing theoretical issues and presenting the prevalence of childlessness, we outline different profiles of childless women, using data from an *ad-hoc* survey carried out in five Italian cities in 2002. Subsequently we examine individual characteristics and reasons associated with childlessness. We find that as many as a third of the interviewees, who live with a partner and do not suffer from any particular physical impediment, never tried to have children. These "voluntarily" childless women, in contrast to mothers, appear to be less religious and to have less religious partners; they tend to come from smaller families of origin; to have cohabitated at least once in life; to have entered their first union later; to have had, in the initial period of their union, unstable occupations and flexible work schedules, and little leisure time, both for themselves and for their partner.

In several other cases, childlessness is the unintended outcome of delayed decision to have a child or the result of adverse external circumstances, particularly fragility of partnership.

Keywords: *childlessness, low fertility, Italy.*

1. Introduction

Permanent childlessness is on the rise in Europe, and not only in the main Northern and Continental European countries, but also in Italy, where increasing numbers of women are forgoing motherhood (Frejka & Calot, 2001; Sardon, 2002). Understandably, research on this topic is relatively underdeveloped in Italy, where, up to just a few years ago, childlessness appeared to be essentially "physiological", i.e. mainly caused by permanent celibacy and sterility.

As permanent childlessness increases in more recent cohorts, the question arises whether, besides the traditional physiological causes of infertility, "modern" motivations are emerging too. Unfortunately this topic cannot be investigated with a representative survey, as yet: therefore, we will draw extensively on the data of an *ad hoc* survey carried out in five Italian cities in 2002, which also permits comparisons with a control group of mothers from the same cities.

The aim of our paper is basically threefold. In the urban areas selected for our study, we intend to: (a) assess the prevalence of voluntary childlessness, (b) delineate profiles of childless women in contrast to women with children, and (c) investigate the reasons leading to childlessness. Unless otherwise stated, childlessness in this paper refers to *permanent* childlessness, i.e. being without children at the end of the reproductive period.

2. Trends of childlessness in Italy

A comparative examination of the prevalence of childlessness is useful for better understanding the peculiarity of the Italian situation and its rapid change. Figure 1 shows cohort completed fertility and levels of childlessness in the European Union for the cohorts of 1940, 1950, and 1960. Not surprisingly, the two variables vary inversely, but the negative correlation attenuates

for more recent cohorts, and this implies that countries, with similar levels of fertility, may nowadays be characterized by different proportions of childless women.

In Italy, among the women born in 1960, who have virtually completed their reproductive career, childlessness is relatively high (15%, Figure 2), which makes it closer to the northern European model (Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, or Denmark), than to the Mediterranean one (Portugal, Spain and, in part, France), where childlessness is still rare (Toulemon, 1996). The U-shaped time trend across Italian cohorts reproduces, with some delay, the trend observed in the main Western European nations (Frejka et al. 2001; Prioux, 1993): from 17% at the beginning of the century, down to 9% immediately after World War II, and consistently up thereafter, to more than 20% recently, according to Istat estimates (Istat 1997; Figure 3).

Global levels of childlessness in Italy derive from rather heterogeneous trends within regions. In the past, remaining (unmarried and) childless was a much more common condition in the South - as an alternative to numerous offspring - than elsewhere in Italy, where single children where frequent (Santini, 1995). The situation has recently reversed, as Figure 3[2] suggests: trends in childlessness are more or less flat in the South, as in Sicily for instance (a relatively more traditional, and less economically developed area), but rapidly on the rise in the North (in Friuli Venezia Giulia, for instance) and in the Center (Tuscany), which is a further indication that the causes of childlessness have probably evolved over time.

3. Definitions, explanations, and hypotheses on childlessness in Italy

Childlessness may include a variety of situations, with different implications for the understanding of reproductive strategies (De Rose, 1996; Housecknecht, 1983). A first basic distinction must be drawn between women who voluntarily refuse motherhood and those who are

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[2] These are three of five regions, the capital cities of which were considered for the survey. Those not shown in the Figure (Marche in Central Italy and Veneto in Northern Italy) conform to the general trend.

unable to have children (voluntary vs. involuntary childlessness; Bloom & Pebley, 1982). In practice, however, the distinction is complicate because some women delay pregnancy to the point when it becomes unlikely, or impossible, so that voluntary postponement transforms into involuntary childlessness. This brings to the fore the importance of the temporal dimension in this type of study (Bloom & Pebley, 1982).

Similarly, the boundary between choice and constraint may also be indistinct in many cases. For instance, failure to form a union may depend on choice (women may have little propensity towards family life), on circumstances (inability to find a suitable partner, for instance), or, more frequently, on the balance between the two, with normally unknown weights.

We argue that the increase in permanent childlessness might have a more important role for the Italian low fertility, than has been attributed to it. To our knowledge, no general theory has yet been put forth to try to understand the recent rise in childlessness in Italy. In part, the underlying reasons may coincide with those that determine low fertility (Kohler et al., 2002) and late childbearing (Ongaro, 2004), i.e. increases of both direct and indirect costs of children (De Santis & Livi Bacci, 2001), familism (Dalla Zuanna, 2001), lack of gender equity in the division of domestic tasks and childcare (Ongaro, 2002), etc. In part, however, there may be specific reasons why increasing proportions of women (and couples) do not even have one child, who would at least satisfy the urge for reproduction which is arguably instinctive in the human race (Foster, 2000). In particular, a more careful evaluation of the reasons behind voluntary childlessness would be relevant, in the Italian context where the consensus of the majority of literature is that almost any woman desires to have at least one child (De Sandre et al. 1997; 1999).

A possible explanation is that costs of childlessness have reduced over time, whereas the benefits have increased. Childbearing, for instance, is no longer essential for the definition of female identity, and does not imply any loss of status, in part, because its increase causes, in turn, a reduction in social sanctions and greater social acceptance (Bonazzi, 2001). Conversely, children

increasingly compete with other sources of fulfillment, like career and social relationships (Piazza, 2003). In the same vein, partnership has assumed a value of its own in the life of a couple, possibly supplanting parenthood (Ariès, 1980).

Several of the profound societal changes that have taken place, such as increased female education and participation in the labor market, have most certainly increased the benefits of childlessness, because childless women do not need to (at least temporarily) withdraw from the labour market, and do not have to struggle to combine external with domestic work (Huinink, 2001). Both these costs are becoming increasingly burdensome in Italy where the job market is highly inflexible (Del Boca, 1997), public childcare services inadequate (Saraceno, 1998) and the "gender contract" still largely modeled on traditional patterns (McDonald, 2000). Furthermore, the high value attributed to children - a fundamental component of Italian familism – results in high psychological pressure for supporting them in the manner society requires, that might cause a feeling of inadequacy on part of the potential parents (Dalla Zuanna, 2001). Italy, as other Southern European Catholic countries, should be ideally more pronatalist orientated than Northern Countries. However, the latter "are stronger in practical state support for parenthood. The harsh realities of today's situation means that tangible help has more pronatalist force than rhetoric" (Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995) or, we might add, than religion. All the above factors are hypothesized to directly affect voluntary childlessness, but also to provide incentives for delaying childbearing that might eventually result in involuntary childlessness. Therefore, questions aimed at uncovering the causes of childlessness in different groups of women have been included in our survey, to ascertain the impact of each different factor.

Characteristics that distinguish childless women (and the different categories among these) from mothers can only partly be hypothesized from previous literature on Italian fertility. Although a 1996 Italian Fertility and Family Survey provided some micro-data on childlessness, such data were not relative to the cohorts born at the end of 1950s, where the increase in voluntary childlessness

was first recorded. The 1996 sample included women at the end of their reproductive life, born in the late 1940s or the beginning of 1950s, who reported a childlessness rate of only 10% (5.5% for married women). The survey suggested that childlessness, rather than a deliberate choice, was in fact the outcome of a series of life circumstances. In fact, the proportion of long-married women (with 15 or more years of marriage) resulting voluntarily childless was estimated at only 1.5% on the basis of a set of questions regarding sterility, fertility intentions, and individual wishes (Bonarini et al., 1999). Moreover, 85% of married women without children did express a desire for offspring (Sorvillo & Marsili, 1999). The intention to remain childless, from negligible at very young ages, tended to increase with age, but did not exceed 7% even at 40, i.e. towards the end of the reproductive life, with percentages ranging between 1%, for married women and 10% for cohabiting women. The general idea from that survey was that basically all women in union wanted at least one child. We saw earlier that this may no longer be true for younger cohorts, e.g. recent data from 2001 Eurobarometer show that 6% of women aged 20 to 34 would like to remain childless (Goldstein et alii, 2003).

The general postponement of childbearing can account for only a part of the rise in childlessness. Data from the 1996 Family and Fertility Survey on about 600 couples showed that the childless often belong either to a group with a high socio-economic level, where women have executive jobs and the couple is able to afford external assistance for housework, or to a group of medium socio-economic level, where partners share domestic tasks and women have a clerical job[3] (Pinnelli & Di Manno, 1999).

In quantitative studies from large samples in other developed countries, a number of predictors of voluntary childlessness have been identified, although these vary according to contexts

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[3] Actually the effect of gender role-set has been, sometimes, proved positive on the probability to have one more child (Mencarini and Tanturri, 2004), but probably among more egalitarian childless couples this effect is counterbalanced by non-traditional values.

and time, and results are not always consistent. For instance, from early studies, intentionally childless women in the United States tended to have more equal marriages, to be less traditional, non-religious, more highly educated, urban, employed in professional occupations, and to have experienced marital disruption (Abma & Peterson, 1995; Abma & Martinez, 2002). In other recent studies, however, urban residence did not emerge as a significant factor (Heaton & Jacobson, 1999). The role of household income, too, is ambiguous: in certain studies it seems to have a markedly positive effect (Abma & Peterson, 1995; Bloom & Pebley, 1982), whereas in others its impact is modest (Heaton & Jacobson, 1999). Kiernan (1989) identified other significant factors enhancing the odds of remaining childless, such as being an only child, or marrying late (see also Bloom & Pebley, 1982).

We will show below that all the individual characteristics mentioned above do differ between childless women and mothers in Italy - or, at least, so it seems from our survey data.

4. Our survey

Our survey was conducted in 2002 (April to November) on a sample of 859 childless women, residing in five provincial capitals: Padua and Udine (in the North of Italy), Florence and Pesaro (in the Center) and Messina (in the South). The main purpose of the survey was to obtain insights into childlessness, with a special focus on the background of women, and on the reasons for, and different paths leading to, childlessness. All respondents were aged between 40 and 44, an age range that we deemed old enough to provide information on permanent childlessness, but also sufficiently young to recall the details on reproductive choices with relatively little memory bias. Also, these are the first Italian cohorts to experience a significant rise in childlessness.

We decided to focus on the urban context because this is where new lifestyles and less traditional demographic behaviors emerge, both in general and in this specific case (Livi Bacci, 1999). The survey was administered to a sample randomly extracted from council registers, so as to

reflect the distribution by marital status of childless women in the selected age bracket, in each city[4]. The towns for this survey were not selected randomly, however: they are the places where the research groups involved in the project are located. This choice facilitated both access to the city population registers and interpretation of the results. The selection criterion, on the other hand, does not seem to be correlated to childlessness, since these towns do not differ systematically from others in the same region with respect to childlessness, cohabitation rates, or any other of the main socio-demographic indicators we were interested in. All in all, we expect that our non-randomly selected towns can be interpreted as sufficiently representative of the Italian urban context of childlessness. Whether we are right or wrong, however, is a question that only a representative national survey could answer, and, as mentioned in the beginning, this is still missing.

The survey suffered from only a small refusal rate (approximately 8%), which is below what one would expect from a telephone (CATI) interview on such an intimate and private sphere. Indeed, the item-non-responses on the key questions regarding voluntary childlessness are particularly negligible. However, retrospective cross-sectional surveys present typical shortcomings. Answers may be biased by the interviewee's ability to remember past events, the social desirability of certain answers, and the need to justify previous decisions the true causes of which may in fact differ from those reported in the survey (ex-post rationalization).

The questionnaire has been structured to distinguish between different profiles of childless women: those who have never been in a union, those who have continued to delay motherhood to the point of definitively forgoing it, those who have experienced constrictions of various kinds (physical impediment, economic difficulties, unstable union, and so on), and, finally, those who voluntarily forego motherhood. The questionnaire is divided into various sections. After requesting information about personal and family background, questions shift on the working life and on the

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[4] We discarded 24% of the originally sampled women because they were not childless, despite what was reported in the council registers.

steps towards independence. The third section focuses on experiences of union, devoting particular attention to the characteristics of the first union and the first partner. Women who have never cohabited or married have been asked about their reasons for remaining single. It should be noted that in the Italian context having a stable partnership – in most cases a marriage – is still considered a necessary prerequisite for having a child. Therefore, it has been decided not to ask any questions on reproductive choices of women who have never entered a union. Women however who have had at least one stable partnership in their life have been asked whether they had ever tried to have children and, if not, why. We also asked women whether they would have changed their behaviour, if the State had provided generous family support, in order to verify a possible role for policies. Conversely, women who did try to have children were asked whether they had delayed pregnancy, for how long, and why.

The answers of these childless women have also been examined in a sort of case-control analysis, using data on about 1100 mothers in the same age group, gathered in a parallel survey conducted in the same five Italian provincial capitals within the same research project. Mothers were interviewed by a self-administered questionnaire distributed to their children at school.

5. Paths to childlessness

The flow chart in Figure 4 illustrates the frequency of the profiles that emerged from the survey, showing the different paths leading to childlessness. Slightly more than one third of women are childless because they never married or cohabited. It should be noted that 9% of our women stated that a rejection of motherhood was the basis for never forming a union. The remaining 544 interviewees can be divided into two groups: those who were in a union at the moment of the interview (402) and those who had been in the past (142). Three quarters of the current unions are marriages, and the balance cohabitations. Of the women who have had a stable relationship, more than half (53%) had never tried to have a child. This group can be classed as voluntarily childless,

with the exception of 30 cases (3% of the whole sample) in which physical impediments would have made a pregnancy highly problematic.

Of the women who tried to have a child during their first union, more than half (59%) stated that they did not start trying immediately after the beginning of the union, although only a few remember precisely when they started trying to conceive. This could depend on the difficulty of remembering a moment in life that is less specific than others, such as one's wedding day or the birth of a child. Or, it may indicate that the moment in which a couple considers themselves ready to become parents is the result of a long and complex decision-making process for which it is difficult to pinpoint a specific moment of resolution. Two thirds of women who had tried to have children no longer considered themselves able to do so at the moment of the interview. Of the 86 women who regarded themselves as still being in their childbearing years, three quarters had not definitively decided to forgo motherhood despite their age (8% of the whole sample). This group could therefore be classed as temporarily childless.

Table 1 reports the distribution of the different typologies of women in relation to their marital status, in each city. In Messina and Pesaro (the more traditional environments), where almost half of the interviewees had never been in a union, childlessness is still mainly linked to this cause. The situation in Padua is fairly balanced, whereas in Florence and Udine (the more secularized context) there is a predominance of women in union who have never tried to have children.

6. Childless women: a world apart?

A central aim of this paper is to identify the characteristics that may be important in predicting the probability of remaining childless. In order to achieve this aim, we compared the childless women sample to a sample of mothers, who live in the same cities and are of the same age, in a sort of case-control study. As shown above, childlessness can be the outcome of a set of

conditions: (a) being always single, (b) cohabitating or being married but voluntarily childless, (c) cohabitating or being married but having delayed motherhood. Knowledge of the determinants of these outcomes is therefore crucial for our understanding of childlessness.

6.1. Method

The combined data set with mothers and childless women contains information from two independent random samples extracted from populations of different size. Our sampling strategy for both surveys can be considered "choice based"; i.e. the selection probabilities are known because the size of each group - mothers and childless women - in the population is known. Therefore, a discrete choice model can be consistently estimated by weighted maximum likelihood (Manski & Lerman, 1997; Manski &MacFadden, 1981; Imbens, 1992). Data are thus weighted to reflect the true proportions of childless women and mothers in the reference population in each city.

Our analysis develops in three steps. First, women who have never entered a union – either marriage or cohabitation – are compared to all women who have lived in a stable partnership, either with or without children. A weighted *logit* model is used to assess the effect of women's background characteristics on the probability of being single. The assumption here is that women who have never experienced a stable partnership may form a selected group, with characteristic traits. Moreover, permanent celibacy was one of the major reasons of childlessness for an extended time and therefore it seems useful to investigate its determinants. In the second step, the focus is exclusively on women ever-in-union, under the assumption that the lack of a stable partner is still a barrier to childbearing, at least in a relatively traditional context as Italy. We need a separate model here, because some potential covariates of childlessness among women in union refer to partner and union characteristics, and such variables, obviously, are not available for single women. A weighted multinomial *logit* model (Greene, 2002) is used to contrast mothers from two categories of childless women: those who did and those who did not try to have children. Among the latter, however, we distinguished those with physical impairments, and we included them among the involuntarily

childless, because our aim is to highlight the characteristics of the women who preferred to remain childless. The residual group of involuntarily childless women includes also postponers, temporarily childless (i.e. women who might still have a child in the near future) and infertile women: this is therefore a rather heterogeneous group, whose common trait is the fact that they never discarded the option of having children, some time in their life.

In the final part of the analysis, we calculate the unconditional probabilities of being in a certain state given certain characteristics, that are associated with the different outcomes of childlessness is not only dependent upon the multinomial *logit*, but also on the probability predicted from the first step logit model (having ever been in union or not).

Let X represent the set of covariates; Y_s women who have always been single; Y_u women who have ever entered a union; Y_v voluntarily childless women; Y_i involuntarily childless women; and Y_m mothers; the probability of being an ever-single among childless women is estimated using the logit model: $P(Y_s|X)$. Conversely, for those ever in union, the probability of being in a certain status (e.g. voluntarily childless) is $P(Y_v|X,Y_u)$, which is conditional on ever forming a union. The unconditional probability of being voluntarily childless, denoted $P(Y_v|X)$, is obtained as the product of the conditional probability for the probability of not being single $P(Y_v|X)=P(Y_v|X,Y_u)*P(Y_u|X)$, where $P(Y_u|X)=1-P(Y_s|X)$. Similarly, the unconditional probability of being involuntarily childless, is $P(Y_i|X)=P(Y_i|X,Y_u)*P(Y_u|X)$, and that of being a mother is $P(Y_m|X)=P(Y_m|X,Y_u)*P(Y_u|X)$.

6.2 Variables and descriptive analysis

The variables included in the models are listed in Table 2. The present condition of women is certainly a result of their background, but also of their previous life-course. We therefore exclude from the models all current information, referring only to the time of the survey[5], and we

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[5] The sole exception to this principle is residence: only information on the current residence of women is available, but since house-moves in Italy are relatively rare and mostly short-range (Istat, 2003) the bias we are introducing should be minor.

concentrate our attention on both unalterable individual background characteristics - such as number of siblings - and characteristics related to the formative years. For women ever in union, information on couple and partner, referring specifically to the initial period of the first cohabitation and marriage, have been included.

We considered as fixed the highest level of education: although this is in principle changeable at various stages of one's life, in practice this is a relatively rare event. Women are divided in three groups: (a) those who stopped at the compulsory education level, that is eight years of study in total[6]; (b) women with at least a high school diploma (13 years of schooling); (c) women with a university degree or a higher level of education. Religion is asked in terms of attendance at religious services, of any religion, when the woman was aged 25. Regularly observant women went to Church (or other service) at least once a week; the occasionally observant went only rarely, or on special occasions, like Christmas or Easter; and the non-observant never attended religious service of any kind.

Information on economic conditions refers to the overall situation of their first period of life of the couple, and is dichotomized in two classes: good or poor. Partner background characteristics – e.g. number of siblings – are classified with the same procedures used for women. Partner religious attendance was related to the first period of the union. Similarly, judgment of leisure time and details on work activities, refer to the initial period of union for both partners. Women's leisure time is dichotomized in "little or very little" or "sufficient or very much". The amount of partner leisure time is asked of women in comparison to their own. The information on occupational characteristics distinguishes, for both partners, between a fixed-term position and a permanent one, and, separately, between a fixed or a flexible work schedule. All men worked at the beginning of the union, while for women we needed to create an extra class for those not belonging to the labour force.

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[6] Actually, only very few women have no education at all or only elementary school (5 years).

Table 2, with its column percentages, highlights a few differences between the four groups. For instance, single childless women and mothers are more often religious, whereas more than half of voluntarily childless women are entirely non-observant. Also, childless women in general, but particularly those voluntarily childless, are more educated. Other noteworthy factors are: both mothers and the involuntarily childless more frequently come from large families; among women in a union, the partners of the voluntarily childless do not generally attend religious services; age at first union for mothers is far lower than for childless women; and it was more common for mothers to have a permanent or fixed work activity during their first period of cohabitation or marriage. Therefore, our preliminary analysis suggests that voluntarily childless women and mothers form two very distinct groups, both in terms of individual background and of characteristics of the partner and the couple. Involuntarily childless women, on the other hand, appear to be a less characterized group.

6.3 Empirical findings

Table 3 shows the results of the first *logit* model. The factors typically associated with voluntary childlessness can well delineate the profile of women who have never entered a stable partnership in comparison to the other women: the single are more likely to have never attended religious services, and to have a higher level of education. One possible explanation might be that highly educated women are self-selected from backgrounds in which little emphasis is given to marriage as a source of personal fulfillment. Or, these women may be more receptive to alternative values and to new cultural orientations, such as those emphasizing autonomy and individualism. In addition, this category may have less economic incentive (or need) to enter a union. Similarly, women who did not attend any religious services at the age of 25 might be less influenced by the ethical imperative of forming a family. Characteristics of one's family origins are influential as well. Indeed, it seems that women who experienced childhood in a large family (having two or more siblings) have a higher propensity of forming their own family compared to only children. Not

surprisingly, these women are less easily found in Udine, rather than Padua or Pesaro, where less institutionalized forms of partnership are still uncommon. As a consequence, most women in these towns, where cohabitation is not an easily accepted alternative, opt either to marry or to remain single, and this tends inflates the proportion of women who never entered a stable union.

Table 4 presents the results of the multinomial logistic model for characteristics predicting childlessness, among only women ever in union. The first column represents the effects of the independent variables on the probability of being voluntarily childless against the probability of being a mother. The third column shows the effects of the same covariates on the probability of being involuntarily childless against the probability of being a mother.

As a synthesis, Table 5 shows the unconditional baseline probability estimated for a reference woman in each category. The reference woman resides in Udine, has no religious affiliation, a high level of education, has consistently worked, and has one sibling. Ever-in-union reference women have also a non-religious partner with one sibling, entered their first union late (after 30), and have cohabitated. In the first period of the union, the couple's economic condition was good, women had much or enough leisure time (but less than their partner), both partners worked with a fixed-term contract, but the woman had a flexible work schedule. Unconditional marginal effects have been reported for each of the variables.

Our results confirm that voluntarily childless women are a peculiar group. As expected, religious observance is once again an important element of distinction: women who did not attend religious functions at the age of 25 are more likely to be voluntarily childless, and the partner's religiousness has a similar, and even stronger, effect. It is conceivable that less religious individuals are less sensitive to the pronatalist pressure implicit in the catholic religion. Here, women's education does not appear to be a good predictor of voluntary childlessness, and its apparent effect vanishes once factors relating to other couple characteristics (e.g. cohabitation, age of first union, leisure time, type of position) are included in the model. Voluntarily childless women seem to be

less likely to come from large families, and their partner too is more likely to be an only child. This finding seems to confirm to some extent the intergenerational transmission of fertility behavior (Micheli, 1999; Murphy and Wang, 2001). The fact that a woman has always worked in her life does not appear to be relevant, *ceteris paribus*, for predicting childlessness. Conversely, a woman's type of position and work schedule in the first period of her union life seems to have a relevant role. Women who previously had a precarious position and a flexible work schedule are more likely to forgo maternity, other things being equal, while the partner's labor situation does not emerge as statistically significant.

Forming one's first union late is perhaps the best single predictor of the chances of remaining childless, both voluntarily and involuntarily. The experience of cohabitation, followed by marriage or not, increases the probability of intentionally choosing childlessness: this probably depends not only on the greater fragility of this form of union (De Sandre, Rettaroli & Salvini, 1997), but also on its meaning in Italy, which denotes a kind of aversion against long term constraints, and a sort of refusal of traditional families. It is also possible that this subgroup be selected for non-traditional reference values, for multi-faceted and less family-oriented expectations, or for a preference for a more individualistic life style. Economic conditions, contrary to some previous findings, do not seem to have a role in predicting voluntary childlessness.

Women who recall having little or very little leisure time in the first period of union seem more likely to forgo motherhood. On the contrary, women perceiving that their partner had, in the past, more leisure time are less likely to be voluntarily childless. This finding suggests that motherhood is (rightly) perceived as a very time absorbing activity, and that at least one of the partners (but preferably the mother) must have some time to divert from "leisure" to parenthood.

Results for involuntary childlessness probably reflect the heterogeneous, and intermediate, nature of this group. In fact, for some basic characteristics the profile of these women seems to be more similar to the profile of those with children, like religious affiliation, number of siblings and

tendency not to cohabitate. Regarding other factors, however, there are similarities to the voluntarily childless women concerning amount of leisure time and the typology of participation in the labor market.

7. Why are women childless? Exploring reasons provided in the survey

Reproductive behavior can be determined by conscious reproductive choices, influenced by both social norms and individual values, or by external constraints. In our survey, we asked childless women to give their reasons for not having children. These explanations, although *a posteriori* and therefore susceptible to problems of ex-post rationalization, should well reflect the individual system of values of the interviewed women.

Reasons and perceived constraints have been asked separately of the three groups of childless women: those who have never been married or cohabitated, those who have been in a union but never tried to have children, and those in union who did try to procreate, but did not succeed. Women were asked whether a certain reason has been relevant or not for their partnership and reproductive choices. Consequently, the reasons offered are not mutually exclusive and a series of feasible causes might arise, given that women were not obligated to state just one prevalent reason for being childless.

For the first group of women (those who have never married or cohabitated) our area of interest is whether not forming a union is the result of a non-desire for children or of the impossibility of establishing a stable partnership. The majority of women (54%) indicated that a major factor for not having married or cohabitated was due to a weakness in their relationship with their partner. But more than 40% of the same single women also affirmed that they did not want to lose their freedom and, in 9% of cases, also stated that it was pointless to enter a union in light of the very fact that they did not want children. Therefore, these are the only single women who specifically reject the role of wife/live-in partner or mother (or, in few instances, both) and who can

therefore be classed as voluntarily childless. Further reason is found in a lack of consensus between the woman and her partner about marrying or cohabitating: 26% of women would have liked to form a stable union, but their partner did not. Only 1 woman in 10 cites not having, at the time, sufficient financial means as a reason for not marrying or cohabitating. And only 1 woman in 20 names incompatibility with work as a reason for forgoing a partnership.

As for women who never tried to have children, or postponed too long the pursuit of motherhood, a different series of questions has been adopted to ascertain the reasons behind their choices (Table 6). The questions concern costs of a child (financial and opportunity costs), specific couple situations, and instability, as well as other constraints such as health or aging problems. Out of the 15 potential reasons provided, 13 are the same for these two groups of women.

According to table 6, most interviewees measure costs indirectly: in terms of time (35% of voluntary childless women and 23% of postponers) or of personal sacrifice (30% and 16% respectively) rather than in financial terms (the direct cost of a child is cited as important by only 16% of voluntary women and 13% of postponers).

The fear to be obliged to change one's life style ("giving up too many things") seems to be substantial (16 to 30%). This response may reflect an orientation towards individualism, whereby motherhood is difficult to reconcile with other personal aspirations, and the desire to maintain a certain standard of living. Alternatively, it might simply be attributable to the fact that Italian women are generally expected to carry most of the burden of looking after children, a condition that frequently leads to a worsening of their status and the loss of rights and positions within the couple and in society (McDonald, 2000). In fact, the potential conflict between reproduction and the demands of the labor market also emerges rather clearly. Forgoing work entailed negative economic consequences, and both those engaged in a simple job necessary to make ends meet (22% of voluntary childless women and 10% of postponers) or in a professional career (28% and 16%

respectively) did not want to stop working. In fewer cases (15% of voluntarily childless women and 6% of postponers) it was apparently the partner's career that would have been hindered by a child.

Reasons relating to relationship problems seem to be highly relevant. More than 15% of postponers, and one third of the voluntarily childless, claim that their union was too weak to contemplate offspring. Sometimes, early breakdown of partnership prevented the couple from trying to have a child (5-18% of postponers-voluntarily childless). Periodic intervals of separation from the partner, for work or study reasons, further deterred couples from procreation (9-18%). Differences of opinion between partners are a further significant reason for forgoing or delaying motherhood (23-32%). Where disagreement exists, it was slightly more frequent – according to what these women reported - for the man to be reluctant.

Only voluntarily childless women have been asked to state whether they did not try to have a child because they felt that, as a couple, the partners were too old. This seems a plausible and definitive reason for not having children, caused probably by late union formation. This fact, in Italy, is correlated to the general progressive spread of the late transition to adulthood (Kohler et al. 2002) and is a consequence of a longer period spent in completing one's education and a further delay in entering the labor market.

Other factors related to temporary or voluntary childlessness are health problems of partners with 12% of postponers, but only 5% of voluntarily childless citing this reason. In addition, 15% of the postponers, and 13% of the voluntarily childless, also stated that they are involved in helping other family members with health problems. This, too, may be considered a consequence of the postponement syndrome: the more women delay partnership and motherhood, the more they have to cope with elderly, physically hampered parents or relatives.

Results seem to indicate that childlessness determined by deliberate choice, or by postponement seems to have many factors in common, although, not surprisingly, costs and constraints are perceived more by voluntarily childless women. In fact, the main reason (in 64% of

cases) for delaying motherhood is that the couple simply wanted to live for a period without children. This behavior is fairly widespread and is undoubtedly an indication that being in a union has a value *per se* and is not primarily directed towards procreation.

Moreover, results further suggest that the deliberate refusal of maternity or its delay is frequently the result of placing other priorities first, such as the importance of personal self-fulfillment through couple relationship and work activity, as well as the unwillingness to accept the sacrifices that childbearing necessarily implies. In many cases, however, it is also the result of some constraints, such as the lack of time and couple instability. Childlessness seems to be very rarely related to mere financial constraints.

Within this framework, what circumstances or policies could favor a different attitude towards parenthood? In order to investigate this socially relevant problem, we asked the interviewees who had never sought to have children whether they would have reconsidered their decisions under various hypothetical scenarios of family-friendly policies. The answers, provided by childless women at the end of their reproductive life, are fully hypothetical, given that their age makes their childlessness a virtually unchangeable condition. Replies, therefore, can be perceived as representing a further confirmation of former ex-post rationalization for voluntary childlessness. The replies (Figure 5) seem to indicate that the proposed measures, although generous, would have reoriented the choices of only a small minority of interviewees (the percentage is between 10 and 20% for different policies). The measures that were deemed more beneficial from a theoretical perspective were fully paid maternity leave for three years from birth, and the availability of reasonably priced full-time kindergartens and nursery schools with flexible opening hours. Child grants, instead, proved less attractive.

As expected, reactions to the proposed measures vary between subgroups (Castiglioni, 2004). Voluntarily childless women that indicated reasons related to the weakness of their relationship, late age, or the pursuit of career, would not have modified their choice even in light of

hypothetical and generous policies. On the contrary, almost half of voluntarily childless women that cited costs (both direct or indirect) or lack of time for raising a child as important reasons for forgoing maternity, stated that they might have changed their choice in the presence of the measures proposed. Contrary to what is customarily believed, this seems to indicate that there may be a non trivial proportion of childless women who would react positively to family-friendly policies, particularly in terms of measures that help reconcile childbearing with work.

8. Concluding remarks

Macro evidence has shown a rapid increase in the prevalence of permanent childlessness across cohorts in Italy, starting from those born since the end of the 1950s, which raises new questions on the possible determinants of the phenomenon and its importance in explaining the current low fertility levels. Our findings, although limited to selected Italian urban areas, reveal that childlessness is a complex issue. The lack of a stable partnership (either a marriage or cohabitation) is surely an important cause for forgoing maternity, but so is voluntary childlessness: approximately one third of the whole sample has never tried to have children, despite being in a union and free from physical impediments. In these cases, child-related benefits are perceived as insufficient to compensate for the high costs involved in parenthood, which are certainly financial in nature, but above all regard time and personal sacrifices.

Childlessness is also, frequently, the product of life circumstances, over which the respondents have had relatively little control, union fragility ranking first. This might be considered a modern cause of infertility, which does not, however, denote an intentional behavior.

Our results confirm that voluntarily childless women, in the specific urban context examined, are a distinct group in contrast to mothers. As expected, these women appear to be less religious and to have less religious partners. Moreover, childless women tend to come from smaller families of origin, to have cohabitated at least once in life, and to have entered their first union

(either marriage or cohabitation) later. "Our" voluntarily childless are not characterized by any particular economic status; rather, their working conditions are peculiar: in the initial period of their union, they had unstable occupations and flexible work schedules, and little leisure time, both for themselves and for their partner.

Lastly, we have also delineated a residual, and therefore heterogeneous, group of involuntarily childless women, including the infertile, the temporarily childless and the long-term postponers. This category can be seen as a sort of "gray" area that would require an in-depth study to determine the mechanisms that transform initial postponement into definitive childlessness. These women, in fact, were less characterized by specific elements, although they did reveal how different the paths can be that lead to childlessness.

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FIGURES AND TABLES
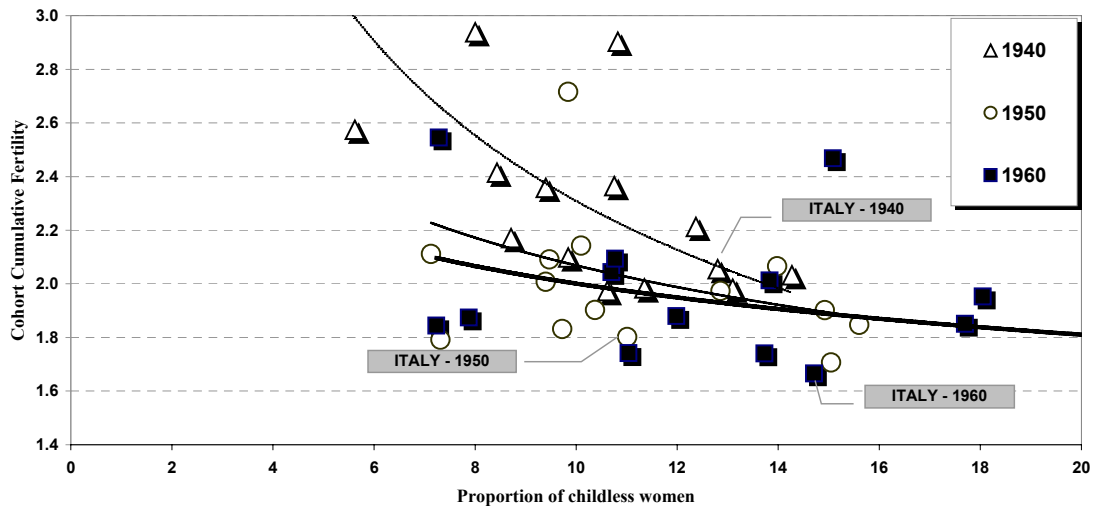
Figure 1. Relationship Between the Proportion of Childless Women and the Cohort Cumulative Fertility. European countries. Cohorts: 1940, 1950 and 1960 (Source: Eurostat – New Chronos)
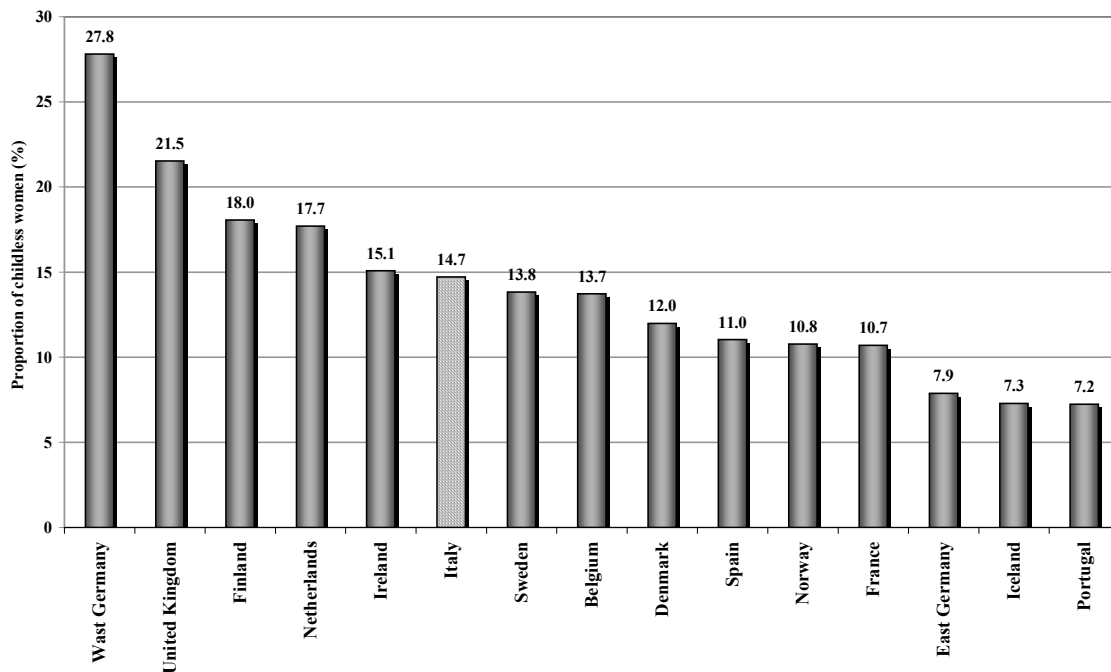
Figure 2. The Proportion of Childless Women in the 1960 Cohort in some European Nations (Source: Eurostat – New Chronos)
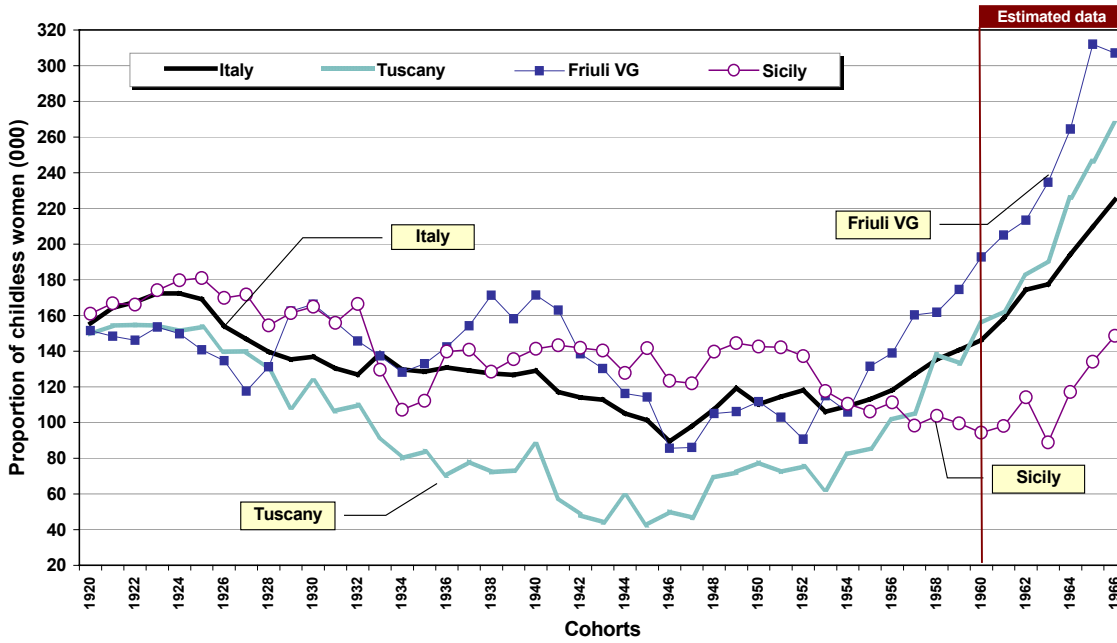
Figure 3. Trends in Completed Fertility by Generation in Italy, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Sicily and Tuscany. Cohorts: 1920–1966 (Source: ISTAT)
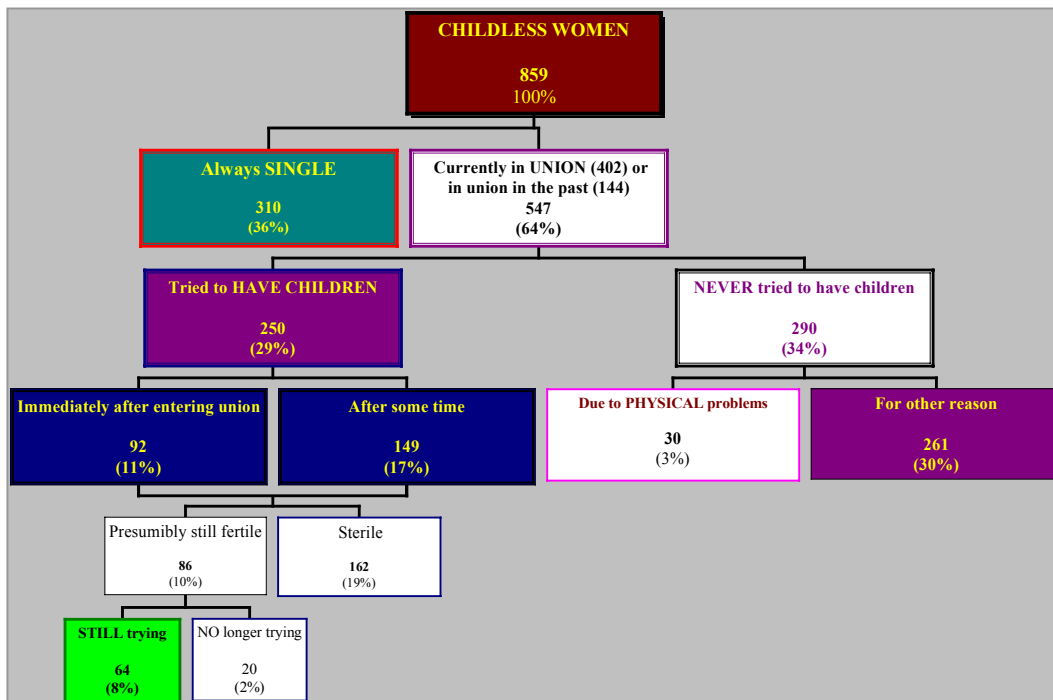
Figure 4. Profiles of Childless Women Interviewed in the Five Cities

Table 1. Typologies of Childless Women by City of Residence

	City of residence					
Typology of woman	Florence	Messina	Padua	Pesaro	Udine	**Total**
	Absolute data					
In union, never tried to have children	81	35	70	39	65	**290**
In union, tried to have children	55	58	50	29	58	**250**
Never entered in union	55	86	72	66	31	**310**
Total	191	179	192	134	154	**850**
	Percentage data					
In union, never tried to have children	42.4	19.6	36.5	29.1	42.2	**34.1**
In union, tried to have children	28.8	32.4	26.0	21.6	37.7	**29.4**
Never entered in union	28.8	48.0	37.5	49.3	20.1	**36.5**
Total	100	100	100	100	100	**100**

Table 2. Distribution of Variables Included in the Model, by Typology of Woman

Variables	Single childless	Voluntary childless	Involuntary childless	Mothers
City				
Udine (ref.)	10.1	21.8	23.6	17.0
Padua	23.2	25.0	19.6	19.8
Florence	17.7	29.3	21.4	18.0
Pesaro	21.3	13.5	11.8	14.6
Messina	27.7	10.4	23.6	30.6
Religious observance at age 25				
never	30.3	51.6	23.9	13.6
occasionally	25.8	31.1	35.7	37.4
regularly	43.9	17.3	40.4	49.0
Education				
university degree or more	22.7	33.8	25.7	20.7
high school diploma	47.4	55.8	53.2	52.7
compulsory school	29.9	10.4	21.1	26.6
Never worked	7.7	3.4	7.5	9.6
N. of siblings				
0	9.3	12.7	16.8	8.9
1	43.6	45.4	31.1	33.4
2 or more	47.1	41.9	52.1	57.7
Partner's religious observance				
never		77.4	44.8	32.8
occasionally		16.1	27.9	38.2
regularly		6.5	24.3	29.0
Partner's siblings				
0		13.8	13.9	7.8
1		46.8	35.7	35.1
2 or more		40.4	50.4	57.1
Age at first union		27.3	26.1	62.9
below 25		28.1	33.6	32.7
26-30		44.6	40.3	4.4
above 30				
Poor economic condition		34.6	40.0	34.5
Did not cohabit during first union		53.1	76.0	88.4
Woman's leisure time little or very little		30	30	26.1
Partner's leisure time				
more than woman		25.4	25.0	52.6
as much as woman		50.4	47.5	15.2
less than woman		24.2	27.5	32.2
Woman's type of position				
permanent job		25.4	25.7	59.8
did not work		13.1	17.5	26.1
fixed work schedule		21.5	18.9	44.8
Partner with permanent job		86.9	91.8	83.8

Note. A union here is cohabitation or marriage. Economic and job variables refer to the first period of the first union, that for mothers corresponds to the childless period.

Table 3. Results of Logistic Regression Analysis[7] for Characteristics Predicting women who have never entered a union versus women who have.

Covariates	Women never in union		Wald Test	
	Coef.	S.E.	Chi2	d.f.
City (Udine)			7.02 *	4
Padua	0.497 *	0.340		
Florence	-0.007	0.368		
Pesaro	0.720 **	0.353		
Messina	0.374	0.355		
Religious observance (non observant)			16.41 ***	2
regularly	-0.771 ***	0.243		
occasionally observant	-1.024 ***	0.267		
Education (degree)			3.24 *	2
compulsory school	-0.434	0.294		
high school diploma	-0.381 *	0.233		
Work experience (ever worked)				
never worked	0.004	0.408	0	1
N. Siblings (1)				
0	-0.197	0.355	3.73 *	2
2 or more	-0.418 **	0.216		
Constant	-2.023	0.367		
LR Chi2 (11)	29.72			

*** p <= .001   **   p <= .005   *   p <= .1

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[7] Marginal effects are reported on the 1st column of table 5.

Table 4. Results of Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis[8] for Characteristics Predicting Childlessness

Covariates	Voluntary childlessness		Involuntary childlessness		Wald Test	
Mothers versus						
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Chi2	d.f.
City (Udine)					19.93 **	8
Padua	-0.256	0.387	-0.541 *	0.359		
Florence	-0.435	0.376	-0.669 *	0.362		
Pesaro	-0.453	0.456	-0.891 **	0.424		
Messina	-1.624 ***	0.507	-1.370 ***	0.384		
Religious observance (non observant)					5.07	4
regularly observant	-0.863 **	0.424	-0.028	0.393		
occasionally observant	-0.513 *	0.349	0.030	0.360		
Education (degree)					5.26	4
compulsory school	-0.429	0.462	0.201	0.379		
high school diploma	0.338	0.307	0.451	0.303		
Work experience (ever worked)					0.22	2
never worked	-0.095	0.725	0.211	0.506		
N. Siblings (1)					12.48 **	4
0	-0.293	0.429	0.545	0.381		
2 or more	-0.854 **	0.295	-0.276	0.275		
Partner's religious observance (non observant)					13.5 ***	4
regularly	-1.379 **	0.546	-0.382	0.388		
occasionally observant	-1.115 **	0.375	-0.619 **	0.328		
Partner's N. of siblings (1)					5.75	4
0	0.655 *	0.431	0.843 **	0.405		
2 or more	-0.045	0.296	0.067	0.269		
Age at first union (above 30)					125.27 ***	4
below 25	-3.121 ***	0.354	-3.172 ***	0.333		
26-30	-2.479 ***	0.353	-2.352 ***	0.323		
Economic condition (good)					3.92	2
poor	0.241	0.285	0.495 **	0.253		
Cohabited during first union (ever)					14.96 ***	2
never	-1.108 ***	0.292	-0.376	0.303		
Leisure time (much or enough)					2.96	2
few or very few	0.481 *	0.308	0.326	0.274		
Partner's leisure time (more than her)					50.77 ***	4
less than her	1.874 ***	0.387	1.727 ***	0.337		
As much as her	1.726 ***	0.331	1.455 ***	0.300		
Type of position (fixed-term)					92.29 ***	4
permanent	-2.175 ***	0.327	-2.091 ***	0.304		
did not work	-1.885 ***	0.412	-1.944 ***	0.357		
Working time (flexible)					14.68 ***	2
fixed	-0.838 **	0.329	-1.051 ***	0.317		
Partner's type of position (fixed-term)					7.44 **	2
permanent	0.527	0.437	1.188 **	0.444		
Constant	1.890 **	0.645	-0.153	0.667		
LR Chi2 (52)	605.81 ***					

*** p <= .001   **   p <= .005   *   p <= .1

[8] The unconditional marginal effects - dependent on this model and also on the first logit model - are reported on table 5.
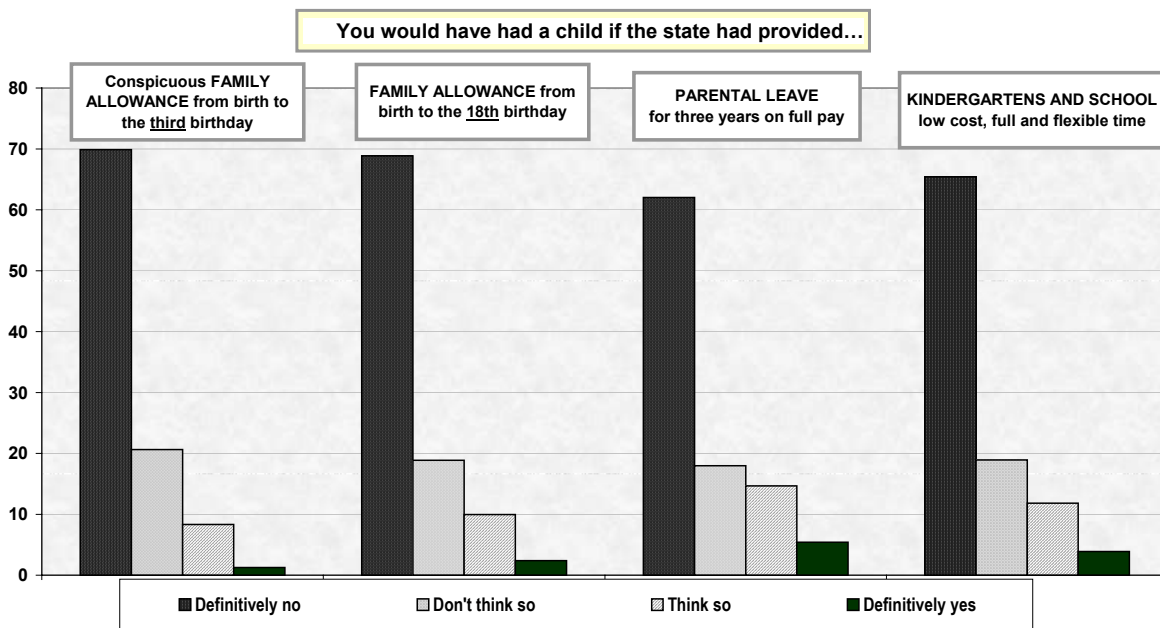
Table 5: Summary of Results. Unconditional Baseline Probability and Marginal Effects.

	Never in union	Ever in union		
		Voluntary Childless	Involuntary Childless	Mothers
		Unconditional baseline probability		
Reference women	0.117	0.690	0.089	0.104
		Unconditional marginal effects		
City (Udine)				
Padua	0.026	-0.005	-0.012	0.007
Florence	0.000	-0.003	-0.010	0.014
Pesaro	0.041	-0.009	-0.018	0.010
Messina	0.018	-0.013	-0.022	0.028
Religious observance (non observant)				
regularly observant	-0.034	-0.003	0.004	0.013
occasionally observant	-0.042	0.001	0.006	0.009
Education (degree)				
compulsory school	-0.018	-0.001	0.006	0.002
high school diploma	-0.017	0.005	0.010	-0.009
Work experience (ever worked)				
never worked	0.000	-0.001	0.004	-0.003
N. Siblings (1)				
0	-0.008	-0.001	0.013	-0.009
2 or more	-0.019	-0.006	-0.002	0.016
Partner's religious observance (non observant)				
regularly	-	-0.010	-0.006	0.016
occasionally observant	-	-0.009	-0.010	0.019
Partner's N. of siblings (1)				
0	-	0.007	0.022	-0.029
2 or more	-	0.000	0.001	-0.001
Age at first union (above 30)				
below 25	-	-0.048	-0.100	0.148
26-30	-	-0.018	-0.034	0.052
Economic condition (good)				
poor	-	0.002	0.010	-0.012
Cohabited during first union (ever)				
never	-	-0.015	-0.007	0.023
Leisure time (much or enough)				
few or very few	-	0.005	0.006	-0.011
Partner's leisure time (more than her)				
less than her	-	0.033	0.058	-0.091
As much as her	-	0.022	0.035	-0.057
Type of position (fixed-term)				
permanent	-	-0.026	-0.050	0.076
did not work	-	-0.012	-0.025	0.037
Working time (flexible)				
fixed	-	-0.007	-0.018	0.025
Partner's type of position (fixed-term)				
permanent	-	0.004	0.015	-0.019

Table 6. Motivations for Never Having Cohabited or Married ("postponer" women) and for Never Having Tried to Have Children ("Voluntary" Childless Women). Percentage of Indication of the Motivation as Important.

MOTIVATIONS	Postponers	Voluntary childless
Economic costs and other constraints		
It was too costly to have a child	13.2	16.2
She would have had to sacrifice too many things	16.3	30.2
They would not have had enough time to look after a child properly	22.6	35.1
Job or career's related motivations		
She needed to work to make ends meet and with a child it would have been impossible to continue	10.1	21.5
With a child she would have had to make job sacrifices (job important not only economically)	15.8	27.5
With a child her husband/partner would have had to make job-career sacrifices	5.7	14.7
Couple's situations or instability		
She and her partner wanted to live together for a while without children	63.9	-
She and her husband/partner often lived apart for study or work reasons	8.8	17.8
The relationship as a couple was not all that strong	14.6	34.3
The relationship ended soon after the beginning of marriage/cohabitation	5.0	17.7
She would have like a child, but her husband/partner did not	12.7	17.0
Her husband/partner would have liked a child, but she did not	10.7	14.7
Health/aging problems		
She and/or her husband/partner had serious health problems	12.0	4.9
They felt she was too old to have a child	-	12.8
They had to look after relatives with serious health problems	14.6	13.2

Figure 5. Reactions of Voluntary Childless to Possible Family-friendly Policies.