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The rising marital disruption in Italy and its correlates

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ABSTRACT

Most of our knowledge on divorce pertains to the USA and Northern Europe, while demographic studies from Southern Europe are relatively scarce. This study looks at this knowledge gap through an analysis of the correlates to recent rising marital instability in Italy. We use a recent survey — the 2003 Italian Gender and Generation Survey – which captures recent trend on marital disruption, also among relatively young cohort. Event history techniques are employed. Results show that beside the expected correlation of marital disruption with women's birth cohort and socio-economic status, other correlates, more closely linked to Italian peculiarities, may also be identified. The explanatory role of religious values and the complex legal procedure to obtain a divorce can be, in this sense, alluded to.

1. Marital dissolution in Italy: a renewed attention

Most of our knowledge on divorce pertains to the USA and Northern Europe, while demographic studies from Southern Europe are relatively scarce. This is typically due to the fact that couple instability in Southern Europe is still low by current standards in the developed countries. Nonetheless, marital disruption in Italy, though still not very common (Barbagli 1990; Barbagli and Saraceno 1997, 1998; De Rose 1999; De Rose and Rosina 1999; Maggioni 1990, 1997; Zanatta 1997), is now on the marked rise. Between 1995 and 2005, the incidence of divorce has risen both in absolute terms (+75%), and in terms of rates, with the cross sectional total divorce rate passing from 80 to 151 divorces per 1000 (Istat 2007).

This analysis of Italian marital break up started to be considered "statistically" interesting at the end of the first decade of application of the law on divorce, approved in 1970 (De Rose 2006). De Rose (1992) herself, was among the first to (1992) study marital instability using data from the retrospective survey Family Structure and Behaviour Survey (Istat 1983). She demonstrated that women most exposed to the risk of marital disruption were those who married young, with at most one child, with higher education, full-time jobs, and residing in large towns in the north-west of Italy. After this first pioneering study, however, the analysis of individual pathways leading to divorce, as a step in a woman's life-course, did not develop consistently. This is the knowledge gap that our study intends to fill: what are the socio-demographic correlates to marital instability? Are they still the same as 20 years ago (De Rose 1992)? How did improvements in women's labour market participation and empowerment impact on marriage breakdown? In order to answer these questions, we use a recent large-scale Istat survey, "Families and social subjects" (that also constitutes the Italian part of the Gender and Generation Survey), on which we apply hazard regression.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides a theoretical insight on the possible correlates to Italian marital disruption. Then, a section is devoted to the data

description and the model specification. Afterwards, the determinants of marital disruption in Italy are then scrutinized through hazard models, followed by the last section where the outcomes of the study are summarised and discussed.

2. Marital disruption in Italy and its correlates: theory and hypotheses

There is a general agreement that the connection between new demographic behaviours and changing values lies at the core of the recent demographic history of Europe, characterized by the diversification of family formation and childbearing patterns (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986; van de Kaa 1987). According to the theory of the «ideational shifts» (Preston 1986), the diffusion of the new forms of life as a couple has to be related to the increased individual autonomy in the ethical, political and religious sphere or, in other words, to the change in the scale of subjective values across the generations. The cultural dimension, therefore, has influenced the degree of acceptance and experimentation of the various forms of union among the youngest cohorts of women, who, we expect, should present higher dissolution levels.

Beside the general revolution in costumes and habits, we believe that the behaviour of younger women has also been influenced by the change in the Italian divorce normative setting. From 1865 to 1970, under the Civil Code, marriage could only end with the death of one of the partners. With Law n. 898 of 1 December 1970, divorce was introduced in Italy. Five years later, in1975, the possibility was introduced of requesting judicial separation without the consent of both parties. Another reform, of 1 August 1978, introduced stronger economic protection to the weakest partner. Since 1987, three years of separation, instead of five as formerly, are enough to apply for a divorce. In line with De Rose and Di Cesare (2003), we hypothesize that the introduction of more liberal norms to obtain a divorce have a positive effect on risk of marital dissolution.

The still low levels of Italian marital disruption is often linked to the pressure made by Catholic moral (Sgritta 1993). We expect, in this sense, a more widespread presence of separations among women who are not practising Catholics. In order to test this hypothesis, we focus on the characteristics of the marriage that are believed to be a valid marker of individual values, and of the propensity to accept the possibility of a union dissolution. In this sense, the decision to cohabit before marriage, or to celebrate wedding in the registry office instead of in church, are both signs of discontinuity scarce religious attachment.

As for pre-marital cohabitation, two different theoretical expectations may come to one's mind. On the one side, one could argue that pre-marital cohabitation helps in stabilising subsequent married relationships. Those women who cohabit will gain more information about their spouse than those who do not live together; and only cohabiting couples who find themselves to be well suited would be expected to decide to marry: unsuccessful partnerships are thus 'weeded out'. On the other side, it may be the case that a pre-marital cohabitation may be a manifestation of secularised values and conviction leading to an increasing dissolution risk. We expect a positive association between pre-marital cohabitation and marital dissolution in Italy. Starting the union with cohabitation possibly followed by marriage, instead of a direct marriage, has a strong effect on union instability. According to Hoem and Hoem (1992), direct marriage might progressively become a manifestation of particular religious or other convictions and, as a consequence, a lower and decreasing dissolution risks for this cluster of women is to be expected. In line with Lillard et al. (1995), we believe that there might be unobserved differences across individuals, such as attitudes and values, which make those who are most likely to cohabit before marriage also most likely to end their marriage.

The literature provides several arguments on the positive relationship between parents' and offspring's divorce (for an overview, see Engelhardt et al. 2002). This can be an effect of transmission of behaviour, or, alternatively, a tendency of people to behave in an "acceptable way" for her parents (e.g. Cherlin et al. 1995; Berrington and Diamond 1999; Kiernan and Cherlin 1999). It may also be the case that children of early divorcees get more information on how the divorce process can be handled (Lyngstad 2004). We therefore expect a strong positive correlation between parents' and offspring's divorce in Italy. This hypothesis is particularly convincing in the Italian context because of a possible vertical diffusion of family patterns. According to the literature, in fact, Italy shares with other southern European countries the "strong" family model (Reher 1998). Micheli (2000) and Dalla Zuanna (2001) emphasize the role of familism in shaping family and fertility choices.

An additional aspect concerning family background is the parent's educational level. Again, we expect a positive matching between divorce risk and family background. Hoem and Hoem (1992) suggested that there may be something in upper and middle classes that makes dissolution an acceptable possibility when a union does not function as desired. Highly educated parents may even facilitate a divorce (Lyngstad 2004), e.g. if their divorcing daughter's own income is not enough to afford legal assistance during the separation process, or to establish a new household.

The impact of childbearing on union dissolution is also important, although the evidence is mixed. The presence of children seems to consolidate the union (White 1990; De Rose 1992; Hoem and Hoem 1992; Goode 1993; Tzeng and Mare 1995; Weise and Willis 1997; Berrington and Diamond 1999; Jalovaara 2001; Coppola and Di Cesare 2008). Becker et al. (1977), for instance, observe that children are marital-specific capital, and, consequently, they should reduce the risk of divorce. True, a few studies about the United Kingdom have documented that during the 1990s children have had a de-stabilizing effect on unions (Boheim and Ermisch 1999; Chan and Halpin 2001). Here, however, we view a child as a sign of family harmony, associated with a low dissolution risk.

Women's labour-force participation is normally associated with, and supposed to cause, higher family dissolution rates. Becker et al. (1977) and Becker (1981) argued that highly educated men tend to marry highly educated women and less educated men tend to marry less educated women. In this framework, union formation is viewed as a process where actors compete to find the best partner, where "best" here means "with the highest education". However, the sign of the link between women's education and divorce risk can also be the opposite one. A wife with higher education has better labour market prospects and earnings potential than a wife with low education: therefore, she will also "specialize" less in family specific activities (household chores), and will have less to lose from marriage breakdown. Thus, the influence of education on the risk of divorce is theoretically ambiguous.

More in general, the connection between women's education and family instability is likely to be somewhat different in different societies. A positive relationship between educational attainment and divorce risk was found, for example, for the United States, by Ono (1998), and for the Netherlands, by Poortman and Kalmijn (2002). On the contrary, most of the research on this topic investigated the Nordic countries verified a negative association (Kravdal and Noack 1989; Hoem 1997, Jalovaara 2001, 2003; Lyngstad 2004). A negative association was also observed in Italy (De Rose 1992).

Women's employment increases their independence and, thereby, the risk of marital disruption: by overthrowing traditional marriage norms; by facilitating divorce in case of conflicts in the relationship — giving women a higher economic ability to cope with family breakdown; or by taking women away from their traditional responsibilities at home, which in turn generates conflict between the spouses (Ross and Sawhill 1975; Moore and Waite 1981; Spitze and South 1985; Heckert et al. 1998; Ono 1998; Oláh 2001). Even in Sweden, where

the female labour-force participation is high, wives who work full-time have higher rates of first-marriage disruptions (Hoem and Hoem 1992; Trussell et al. 1992). An Australian study also reported higher rates of marital disruption for employed wives (Bracher et al. 1993). Throughout a recent analysis based on Swedish registered data for the period 1981-1998, Liu and Vikat (2004: 14) affirm: '*we found strong support for the independence effect hypothesis, as the divorce risk increased linearly with the share of the wife's income in the couple's total income*'. The findings of Liu and Vikat are consistent with those of Jalovaara (2003) for Finland, another "modern" country with respect to female autonomy. However, if documented findings view women's work as a pivotal aspect that destabilizes marriages (Spitze 1988), less consistent is the evidence referring to the effect of wives' income and the income ratio on the risk on marital disruption (e.g. Greenstein 1990, 1995; Oppenheimer 1997; Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Liu and Vikat 2004).

As for Italy, De Sandre (1980) was the first to discover the higher marital instability women with high socio-economic status, in the first half of 1970s. This finding was later confirmed by Corsini and Ventisette (1988), still on aggregate data, and by De Rose (1992: 89), on micro data. She concluded: '*the scarcity of diffusion of the model corresponding to a high divorce rate in Italy can certainly be explained, at least in part, for the time it is taking for even the most basic aspects of the changing status of the women (such as high standards of education, qualified occupational activities, a greater independence from the roles of mother and wife) to manifest themselves*'. It is worth reminding that Italy has a relatively low female labour force participation rate (FLFP). In 1990, the FLFP rate for the central age group 25-54 was 54%, compared to a EU-15 mean rate of 64%. According to OECD Employment Outlook (2005), nowadays Italy's FLFP rate has risen, to 64% in 2004, but its relative position has not changed much, because the EU-15 FLFP rate in the 25- 54 age group had climbed to 76% in the meantime.

A country like Italy, then, with low female employment rates and a low acceptance of marital dissolution, should be at an early stage in the process of diffusion of the new family patterns. Women's socio-economic status is expected to be a potent explanatory factor of marriage breakdown in the Italian context. It is natural to expect that the higher the economic status of the woman is, the more likely it is that she will separate. Women with a secure salary may easily afford the expense of establishing separate homes and other financial difficulties related to the dissolution of the marriage as well as better face the potential of a "new start." Moreover, a positive correlation between education and divorce in Italy is also hypothesised, assuming that women's educational attainment represents a valid marker of a qualified type of job as well as her wage. In short, we expect the impact of women's socio-economic status on marital disruption to be particularly relevant in the Italian context, where tradition dominates both in terms of gender roles and gender ideology. We are aware that the influence of the independence effect may be mitigated when the gender ideology within the couple is considered. We shell return on this issue in the final discussion.


3. Data description and model specification

The study uses recent micro data, known as "Families and Social Subjects" (FSS) 2003. This Istat survey also constitutes the Italian part of the Gender and Generation Survey (GGS). The FSS 2003 is a retrospective survey, conducted in November 2003, with the aim of studying the effects of various background characteristics on the intensity of marital dissolution.

In this research, the event of interest is a separation happening to a woman in her first marriage. In Italy marriage breakdown is better indicated by spousal (formal) separation,

which actually breaks all links between the partners. A divorce is only necessary if one wants to get married again: in this cases (only about 60% of the separations), a divorce is pronounced, but no sooner than three years after separation. Therefore, it is separations, and not divorces, which are normally considered in the study of marital conflict (Figure 1) (De Rose 1992). This is what we will do, too, except that we will extend our analysis so as to also include *de facto* separations, i.e. separations not yet accompanied by a legal provision. We analyse *de facto* separation, also because this is the moment that marks the dissolution of marriage for all of the three possible categories of separated people: de facto separated, judicial separated and divorced.

Figure 1: **Trend in separations, divorces and marriages (Italy, 1971-2005).**
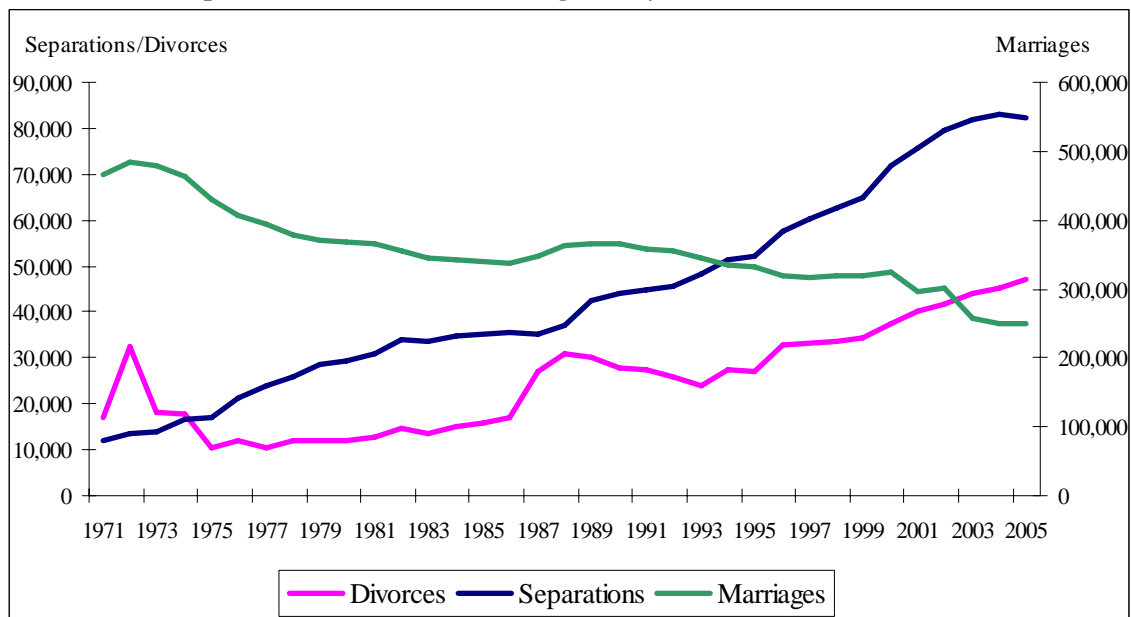
Source: Own elaboration on Istat data (http://www.istat.it: accessed 07/10/07)

The analysis is conducted with a life-course perspective, and an event history model is employed to measure the hazard of separation. This is possible due to the design of the questionnaire which contains sections on the job and fertility histories. Woman's separation risk is defined as the probability of experiencing *de facto* separation, given her individual characteristics. For the specification of the baseline hazard, a piecewise constant function is chosen. The risks are assumed to be constant within each defined time interval, but they may vary across such intervals. The baseline duration is recorded by the month, which is also used as a time unit for the other time-varying events that we use as independent variables.

In order to account for the research hypothesis ventured in the previous section, the following variable are used to specify the hazard model. As for the birth cohort, we introduced into the model the following birth cohort: 1938–1954; 1955–1964; 1965–1983. Note that the last cohort has never been studied before, to the best of our knowledge. Moreover, a time-varying covariate is included in the model, so as to capture the influence of changes in the Italian normative environment on marital dissolution intensity. Two time periods are considered in the model: up to March 1987 and later.

The area of residence is also included in the model, so as to control for the well-known North-South differences in the Italian marital dissolution pattern (Ferro and Salvini, forthcoming). Unfortunately, this information is collected at the time of the interview, which introduces the risk of performing a so-called "anticipatory analysis" (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006[a], 2006[b]). However, Italian internal mobility has been low in the last decades, and mainly

on short distances only (Tomassini et al. 2003; Salvini and Schifini 2005). Hence, we decided to include a covariate describing the macro-region of residence (North; Centre; South and Islands).

In order to measure the woman's religiosity we tested the impact of the rite of wedding (a dichotomous variable to see whether the wedding was celebrated in the registry office or in the church) and the experience of a pre-marital cohabitation (also a dichotomous one). Other variables of interest in studying the pattern of separation are those related with the family background[1]. In this paper, we consider the educational level (low or medium-high) of women's parents and a dichotomous variable referring to the parental marriage dissolution. We also considered family size, with a time-dependent variable: no children; one child; two children; three or more children.

Finally, we included women's socio-economic status in the model, which is measured in terms of educational attainment and labour market participation. Using the information referring to the highest educational level ever reached, educational attainments are clustered in three groups, namely low education (no schooling and primary school); medium education (high school qualification); high education (degree qualification and higher education). It could be objected that it would have been more convenient to use education as time-varying covariate (Hoem 1996; Hoem et al. 2001). Nevertheless, the inclusion of the highest level of education ever reached is justified by the peculiar Italian pattern of family formation. People normally tend to form a family only after completing their educational and training period (Ongaro 2002). Thus, it is relatively trouble-free to use the highest educational level, since most respondents have completed their studies before the time of union formation and especially before marital disruption. In terms of women's economic independence, our dataset does not provide information about income. So wife's employment status[2] is used as a proxy of her economic autonomy. As for job specification, it is possible to disentangle the time-varying covariate referring to the employment status of women according to the change in the type of job over time (not working; working with temporary job; working with permanent job)[3]. Permanent job represents a very heterogeneous group that also includes self-employed people. Unfortunately, it is not possible to disentangle this particular group during the life course, as detailed information is available only on the first and the current job. "Not working" is also a broad classification that includes both unemployed and inactive women.

The analysis focuses on the possible influence of women's work on marital instability. Our aim is, however, merely to verify a possible association between the two phenomena. The direction of the causal link between employment and divorce is, if fact, unclear. Women whose marriage is unhappy, may, in some cases, decide to enter the labour market because of their needs to cope with a divorce which, they sense, is approaching. Indeed, if a woman starts a job just prior to a separation, the separation is probably the underlying cause of her new labour activity. Therefore, just as De Rose (1992) did, we classify as unoccupied those women who started to work only one year before the separation[4].

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[1] It would have been interesting to test parental religiosity, but this information was not collected in the survey.

[2] As in extensive literature (for an overview see Matysiak and Vignoli, forthcoming[a,b]), job history and fertility could be interrelated. The inclusion of both dimensions in the same statistical model is therefore problematic. However, a separate analysis of the two aspects reveals that the influence on marital dissolution is the same whether the two variables are inserted together or not.

[3] It would have been interesting to use women's working hours instead of the type of contract. The former variable, however, was not collected in a dynamic perspective in the survey, which make impossible using it within an event history framework.

[4] This decision resulted in 71 changes of work status (9% of cases). Apparently, it does not affect our estimates, which we tried both with and without this restrictive assumptions. However, for the theoretical reasons discussed in the text, we decided to preserve this option.

Unfortunately, we do not have information on the former partner, whose characteristics, therefore, we cannot investigate, or use as correlates. We therefore use a sub-sample of 7,594 women of which 427 experienced a de-facto separation. As it is well-established within an event history framework, the best strategy to describe the used sample is to look at exposure and occurrences. The overall composition of our sample is presented in Table 1, which includes events (separations) and exposure time (women-months observed in marriages) by each of the variables used in the modelling procedure.

Table 1: **Progression to separation in Italy: exposure (in woman's person-months) and events in the study population. Istat Multipurpose survey FSS 2003.**

Covariates	Women-months observed in marriages		Separations	
	Abs. Val.	%	Abs. Val.	%
Birth cohort				
1938 – 1954	1,247,920	64.1	143	33.5
1955 – 1964	506,697	26.0	185	43.3
1965 – 1983	192,114	9.9	99	23.2
Calendar period				
Before 1987	722,590	37.12	89	20.84
After 1987	1,224,141	62.88	338	79.16
Region of residence				
North	990,927	50.9	261	61.1
Centre	390,506	20.1	77	18.0
South and Island	565,299	29.0	89	20.8
Mother's educational level				
Medium-high	189,769	9.7	67	15.7
Low	1,756,963	90.3	360	84.3
Father's educational level				
Medium-high	258,749	13.3	88	20.6
Low	1,687,983	86.7	339	79.4
Parent's divorce				
No	1,909,194	97.9	398	93.2
Yes	37,338	1.9	29	4.7
Pre-marital cohabitation				
No	1,875,795	96.4	377	88.3
Yes	70,937	3.6	50	11.7
Rite of wedding				
Civil	169,265	8.7	82	19.2
Religious	1,777,466	91.3	345	80.8
Educational level				
High	157,106	8.1	44	10.3
Medium	574,515	29.5	189	44.3
Low	1,215,110	62.4	194	45.4
Employment status				
No work	588,829	30.2	67	15.7
Temporary job	297,464	15.3	85	19.9
Permanent job	1,060,439	54.5	275	64.4
Number of children				
No child	258,552	13.3	60	14.1
1 child	611,542	31.4	190	44.5
2 children	772,783	39.7	136	31.9
3 or more children	303,854	15.6	41	9.6
Total	1,946,732		427	

4. The correlates of marriage dissolution in Italy

The determinants of separation intensity are presented in Table 2. The model parameters, produced as maximum-likelihood estimates, are shown in the form of relative risks, together with their standard errors and p-values[5].

The birth cohort of women was included to account for the patterns of temporal increase in separation risks for the youngest cohorts. The trend may reflect the greater diffusion and acceptance of a more flexible typology of union amongst the new generations, giving their exposition to the general revolution of ideals and norms governing the social living patterns. The distance between the older and the younger cohort is, in fact, remarkable. Namely, the hazard of separation is three times as high for the cohorts of women born between 1965 and 1983 as for those born between 1938 and 1954. This represents perhaps the most evident manifestation of the ideational and cultural transformation as well as the spreading of new ideas and values regarding the family which have evidently changed the attitudes of Italian younger generation towards conjugal life. Moreover, we also considered the variable *period* in order to explicitly take into account the introduction of the reform of 1987, making divorce easier and quicker. Indeed, the risk of marital dissolution rises by about 40% after 1987.

Looking at the area of residence, the well known North-South differential emerges clearly from our estimates. In comparison with the women who live in the North, the hazard of a separation decreases by 21% in the Centre, and by 36% in the *Mezzogiorno*. In Italy, therefore, the socio-economic and cultural condition of the environment in which the woman lives, still constitutes a potent factor in determining the value of the hazard of separation.

Considering the women's family background, the study focuses first on parents' education. The results of the analysis show that women with well-educated parents do not present a risk of separation significantly higher than the others. Conversely, those who experienced a parental dissolution are most likely to separate themselves. Namely women with divorced parents may perceive from their parents the approval of her own divorce more than the others.

As for the characteristics of marriage, the couples who experienced a pre-marital cohabitation are more likely to end up in a divorce: the hazard which is about 79% higher. We are not claiming that premarital cohabitation *causes* divorce. It may well be that there are unobserved differences between individuals, such as attitudes and values, which make both cohabitation and divorce more likely. We also considered whether the marriage was celebrated with a religious or a civil rite. Civil marriages are more likely to experience a breakdown than religious ones (i.e., a hazard which is higher by 65%). In this sense, individuals who choose civil marriages may be characterised by more secularised values.

The presence of one child increases the instability of Italian families, while having two or more children do not display any significant effect. Therefore, our estimates for the effect of children are partly inconsistent with both theoretical expectations and the results of most empirical work: one child destabilizes the marriage, while two or more do not make it more stable, which is consistent with the descriptive information of Table 1. We shall return to this anomalous, but robust result in the discussion.

Finally, the personal socio-economic situation of a woman, measured here through her labour market position and her education level, are both pivotal aspects in determining the hazard of separation. Women in employment, either temporary or permanent, have roughly twice the odds of a separation of non-working women. This result confirms our hypothesis: the absence of union stability is closely related to the new forms of behaviour and habits

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[5] We also fitted several model with interaction terms, which, however, proved negligible (results not shown here).

accessible to women. Also the influence of women's education acts in the expected direction and corroborates further the findings related to women's employment status. The model outcomes demonstrate that the dissolution risk increases with the woman's educational level: by 31%, passing from low to high education. This result show that the lack of education appear to be an obstacle for any women whishing to separate from her husband.

Table 2: **Determinants of marriage dissolution risk in Italy as a result of an event history model for the event "de facto separation". Istat Multipurpose survey FFS 2003.**

	Relative Risk	Standard error	P-value
Years elapsed since marriage (baseline duration)			
0-1	1.00		
2-3	1.06	0.247	0.796
4-5	1.29	0.304	0.272
6-7	1.27	0.313	0.340
8-10	1.67	0.408	0.037
11-14	1.61	0.364	0.036
15+	0.85	0.279	0.614
Cohort			
1938 - 1954	1.00		
1955 - 1964	2.12	0.291	0.000
1965 - 1983	2.97	0.548	0.000
Calendar period*			
Before 1987	1.00		
After 1987	1.38	0.217	0.043
Region of residence			
North	1.00		
Centre	0.79	0.103	0.074
South and Islands	0.64	0.082	0.000
Mother's educational level			
Low	1.00		
Medium-high	1.25	0.227	0.225
Father's educational level			
Low	1.00		
Medium-high	1.21	0.201	0.240
Parents' divorce			
No	1.00		
Yes	1.55	0.362	0.058
Pre-marital cohabitation			
No	1.00		
Yes	1.82	0.302	0.000
Marriage rite			
Religious	1.00		
Civil	1.68	0.224	0.000
Number of children*			
No child	1.00		
1 child	1.54	0.256	0.010
2 children	0.98	0.184	0.928
3 or more children	1.05	0.249	0.822
Educational level			
Low	1.00		
Medium	1.11	0.206	0.580
High	1.31	0.144	0.013
Employment status*			
No work	1.00		
Temporary job	1.89	0.318	0.000
Permanent job	1.92	0.268	0.000

*Time-varying covariate

5. Discussion

This study wants to contribute to our understanding of general patterns of divorce, through an analysis of the correlates to recent rising marital instability in Italy through a large-scale sample – stemming from the 2003 Italian Gender and Generation Survey. The latter survey allow to capture recent trend on marital disruption, also among relatively young cohorts.

As expected, our findings demonstrate that women born in the most recent decades run a higher risk of marital separation. Women's employment status has a very strong positive impact on marital disruption, stronger than all the other characteristics considered in the analysis. Employed women (both temporary and permanent workers) risk divorce almost twice as much as those who do not work . This may be interpreted as a result of a strong independence effect, according to which having an earning produces a higher income and, therefore, lowers the wife's constraint to stay in an unhappy marriage. Thus, women's degree of economic autonomy is one factor which plays a pivotal role in the effective possibilities to handle a separation. The changing behaviour of women has not been matched by the necessary changes needed in a relationship. If the woman is out of the home for many hours, it represents a destabilising element to the traditional couple's role-set. Education too is an important variable: separations are more frequent for women with a degree. Education may be related with better economic prospects that reduce the relative benefits of specializing within marriage and will help women's gain economic independence offering them more qualified job opportunities.

The impact of women's birth cohort and socio-economic status on marital instability accords with the study's research hypothesis. However, these outcomes appear similar also for different welfare regimes. So, the arguments that the marked rise in Italian family instability is a reaction to the spread of new ideas, attitudes and value orientation among the new generation - as well as to increased employment and independence among women - may not be exhaustive. Other correlates to marital dissolution, more closely linked to Italian peculiarities, may also be identified.

The explanatory role of religious values can be alluded to. This may be partly captured by the effect of the rite of wedding and the pre-marital cohabitation—both phenomena have risen markedly during the 1990s. Namely, our results suggest that those who married with a civil rite or experienced a cohabitation before marriage, may be selected towards more secularised values, exhibiting higher family dissolution risk. Incidentally, this finding also confirms that Catholic values still play a significant role in the determining of marital customs in Italy.

Another peculiarity of the Italian society is embedded in the relatively complex legal procedure which is required to obtain a divorce. Our analysis has shown that the 1987 law gave impulse to union dissolution by simplifying and accelerating the procedure to get divorced. We may therefore suppose that the still relatively low levels of separation in Italy are linked to the complex normative climate. A further simplification of the present law might give further increase to divorce among people wishing to end an unhappy marriage.

The surprising finding of this paper is that the first child destabilizes marriage. We believe that this result is robust and a similar patterns were also found by Chan and Halpin (2001) for UK. Critical questions, however, remain to be answered. Have attitudes towards children changed in the most recent cohorts? Has the role and situation of women changed so much that motherhood has become more difficult, at least in relative terms? Is it that having the first child emphasises arguments among spouses in unhappy marriages, instead of representing a stabilizing element? Is it that divorce has become so acceptable for younger cohorts that it is being resorted to in response to any familial stress (and while children may indeed be

'marriage-specific capital', they are an expensive and sometimes stressful investment)? Unfortunately, we cannot answer these questions with our data, in particular because we miss the "couple perspective" for separated women.

Moreover, the absence of a "couple perspective" had also lead to a possible overestimation of the impact of women's employment. Namely, the influence of the independence effect may be mitigated when the gender ideology within the couple is considered (Sayer and Bianchi 2000). In a modern society the gender ideology has became more egalitarian and, as a consequence, also the role of both partners in the labour market. Therefore, equal income of both partners should stabilize rather than destabilize marriage. It must, however, be said that men and women's role in the labour market are still far from being considered egalitarian In Italy. So we believe that our results are credible, even if probably partly biased towards an overestimation of the correlation between women's socio-economic status and marital dissolution risk. Furthermore, Sayer and Bianchi (2000) also stress that measurement of marital commitment and happiness are better predictors of marital dissolution than measures of economic independence. Wife's labour market participation may only measure the role of wife's economic independence in ending bad marriages, and not in all existing marriages.

To conclude, we are aware that many variables employed in our study might be questioned arising selection and/or endogeneity problems. However, we mainly aim at providing a general descriptive framework on the possible correlates of Italian marital instability which suggest useful line and impulse for further research. All in all, implications for future research is to seek for richer dataset that may provide longitudinal measures of couples' marital satisfaction as well as couples' gender roles and ideology. It is therefore necessary to build data bases which allow a recovering of family events as results of life as a couple.

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