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The Breaking-Down  
of Marriage in Italy:  
Trends and Trendsetters

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# The Breaking-Down of Marriage in Italy: Trends and Trendsetters

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## Abstract

During the last decades, since the mid-1970s, marriage has lost much of its centrality in Southern European Countries, such as Italy and Spain. However, the general incidence of consensual unions and marital disruption is still low compared to general European standards. Some scholars argue that the long tradition of a rigid familistic system in such countries will lay the phenomenon at very low levels. But our results reject a static picture of the Italian context and, despite persisting geographical differences, they confirm a rising breaking-down of marriage. Overall, our work places Italy at a crucial stage, in which the trends indicate a strong increase in divorce and consensual unions, and the new behaviours are no longer confined to certain trendsetters. Spain and Italy seem to be moving together in the European context.

## 1. A delayed, but not negligible, diffusion of new family patterns in Italy

For a long time Western countries were dominated by a rigid family pattern and marriage was the foundation of society. But, from the beginning of the 1960s, Europe has been experiencing a rapid transformation in the patterns of union formation and dissolution. In line with the Second Demographic Transition theory (Lesthaeghe 1992; Sobotka 2008), the trend has been everywhere the same: cohabitation has increased outdistancing direct marriage and the number of unhappy marriages ending in divorce has risen. However, there has been a lot of cross-country variation in the intensity and the pace of the change. This process is most advanced in Nordic European countries where cohabitation is viewed as an accepted alternative to marriage and where more than half of marriages end in divorce, followed by Western, and Central and Eastern

European countries (e.g. Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006). The laggard cluster is Southern Europe, where we observe a delayed diffusion of new family behaviours (Hantrais 2005). Nonetheless, even in Mediterranean Europe, things are now beginning to change because of an accelerated diffusion of informal union (Domínguez et al. 2007) and marital disruption (Vignoli and Ferro 2009; Bernardi and Martínez-Pastor 2011).

Traces of changing behaviours in Italy and Spain towards more secularised standards of union formation and dissolution are now self-evident (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Solsona et al. 1999; Flaquer and Garriga 2009; Vignoli et al. 2011). Despite selected recent insights, however, the current phase of the Italian union pattern remains unclear. Mainly, to the best of our knowledge, what is still missing is a general picture that brings together both cohabitation and marriage disruption dynamics. Moreover, the general diffusion of these phenomena varies by period, region, and social class. It is therefore crucial to understand whether the new behaviours started first among certain groups of the population and then spread to others. Have informal unions and family dissolutions followed the same trend over the calendar period? Has this evolution been driven by some population subgroups? Have the new behaviours spread from the prior adopters to other segments of the population? Is the group of pioneers similar between consensual unions and marital dissolution?

Our work focuses on Italy, a country that, notwithstanding its long tradition of a rigid familistic system, is now experiencing a new family demography regime (De Rose and Vignoli 2012). The objective of this chapter is twofold. First, by examining trends in both consensual unions and marital disruption, we aim to assess whether a rising breaking-down of marriages and a growing flexibility of unions are taking place. Second, we want to highlight the role of potential trendsetters in the new behaviours. In particular our target is to identify the latter among better educated people and the population residing in the North-Central Italian regions. In the literature, in fact, educational attainment – generally recognized as a proxy of one's cultural and social status – has been considered one of the most important explanatory variables in studying the variation in union formation and dissolution. At the same time, it is logical to expect that the well-established tradition of behavioural differentials between the North and the South of the country persist in union formation and dissolution as well; generally speaking, these differentials are normally explained by the differences in the

economic and cultural background of these macro-areas (Dalla Zuanna and Righi 1999; Kertzer et al. 2008).

Although this chapter is Italy-centred, we trace the Italian tale within a broader perspective, comparing its specificity to other European countries making use of secondary data and available literature. In particular, meeting the philosophy of the book to which this chapter belongs, we compare, when possible, cohabitation and marriage dissolution dynamics in Italy and Spain.

## **2. The diffusion of union disruption and cohabitation**

### *2.1 The role of trendsetters*

In general terms, a new behaviour in the population does not appear all of a sudden; rather, it emerges among certain population sub-groups first (the so-called trendsetters, or forerunners), and later, if "appealing", it spreads to others (Livi Bacci 1986). Two major explanations of the ongoing transformation of union formation and dissolution have been formulated in the literature, the first refers to ideational change (Lesthaeghe 1992) and the second to the pattern of disadvantage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010).

The first explanation presupposes the ongoing change to have been driven by the highest social strata – i.e., only couples from the highest social strata would have the intellectual and economic means to contest traditional family ties by choosing non-marital cohabitation instead of marriage. Likewise, being well-equipped in financial and intellectual resources they may easily choose to dissolve an unsatisfactory union. By contrast, the proponents of the second hypothesis see the reasons behind the increase in the incidence of cohabitation and divorce in the increase of structural constraints to family formation, such as legal or economic ones, which can affect the behaviours of the less educated members of the society particularly strongly. These people may be more likely to choose cohabitation instead of marriage to avoid an expensive marriage ceremony or may be less attractive in the marriage market due to their low economic position. Moreover, people belonging to the lower social strata of the population may experience stronger marital strain because of greater socioeconomic hardship that in turn may lead to a marriage breakdown.

A large body of empirical studies has been conducted with the aim of investigating the causes behind the growing incidence of cohabitation and divorce and to test the validity of the two competing hypotheses. Educational attainment, considered as a measure of individual social status, earning potential, labour market performance and intellectual abilities, but also as a marker of individual autonomy and independence of social norms, is one of the major explanatory variables used to study the variation in union formation and dissolution and to test the cited theories.

With regard to the diffusion of marital instability within a society, the publication of William J. Goode (1962) can be considered the keystone reference. He argued that, at least initially, only the most "modern" couples would have the cultural and economic means to afford a divorce. As the social acceptability of divorce increases, the relationship between social status and divorce tends to become less significant and may even reverse its sign, so that, at the end of the process, marriage dissolution could be even more common at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Goode's hypothesis on the changing educational gradient in marital disruption attracted the attention of researchers, who tried to verify its validity. For instance, Blossfeld et al. (1995) compared educational differences in divorce in Sweden, West Germany, and Italy; that is, three countries that represent "different stages in the development and differentiation of socially accepted living arrangements and different levels of divorce rates" (p. 202). Using data stemming from the Fertility and Family Survey (FFS) program, they found a positive educational gradient in the three countries. The magnitude of this effect was shown to be highest in Italy and lowest in Sweden. The authors noted that their study provided evidence for a decline in the "liberating" impact of women's higher educational attainment on marital disruption that comes with an increase in access to divorce. A crucial contribution to the debate on the educational gradient in marital disruption was made by Härkönen and Dronkers (2006). They examined the relationship between female educational attainment and the risk of divorce across marriage cohorts in 16 European countries using FFS data. They found a cross-country variation in the educational gradient in divorce. They found evidence of a shift toward a more negative educational gradient of divorce in 9 out of 17 countries, and demonstrated that this shift was mainly driven by social changes toward more unconventional family types and less marriage-centred family institutions. In an effort

to provide some general conclusions on this complex topic, Matysiak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of all published longitudinal research on the impact of women's educational attainment on marital disruption in Europe. They found an incontrovertible weakening in the positive educational gradient on divorce risks. The change in the educational gradient was indeed happening in parallel to an increase in access to divorce, as the direct (i.e., financial) and indirect (i.e., social acceptance) costs of divorce were weakening.

With regard to the effect of women's educational attainment level on the adoption of cohabitation, Becker's theory implies that women's growing economic independence should reduce the benefits of all types of unions, at least as long as they are based on a traditional gender division of work within the family. Furthermore, since cohabitation is often coupled with less rigid gender role expectations, higher educated women should be more interested in adopting this type of arrangement. In sum, there are negative and positive effects of the educational attainment level on the adoption rate of cohabitation and the outcome of these competing forces is an empirical question (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). But, like the diffusion of marital disruption, educational differentials seem to vanish with the transition of societies from low to high incidences of cohabitation.

Empirical studies on cohabitation show that this type of union was originally practiced most often by the disadvantaged members of society (even in such countries as Sweden –Hoem 1992), but the educational gradient started to change during the last three decades (Kiernan 2002). In Spain, Baizàn and colleagues (2003, p.164) illustrate “a positive gradient in the effect of educational level” for informal union, consistent with a highest level of independence, autonomy and unconventional behaviour among young people with an high educational level. This pattern is also corroborated by others (Dominguez et al. 2007). But in other societies, where the spread of cohabitation is more pronounced, educational attainment has even been noted to lose its differential impact on union formation in countries. This is the case of Norway, France or Britain, where consensual unions started to be practiced relatively early and have already spread from their precursors to other social strata (*ibidem*).

## *2.2 The Italian setting: literature review*

De Sandre (1980) was the first to show the increase in marital instability among women of high socio-economic status in the first half of the 1970s, a finding later confirmed, among others, by De Rose (1992) on micro data. Incidentally, De Rose concluded that the modest diffusion of family dissolution in Italy was to be ascribed, at least in part, to the relative backward situation of Italian women, who, with low levels of education and scarce and lower-qualified occupational activities, were basically confined to the roles of wives and mothers. The psychological and sociological research explains why marital instability was originally higher among better educated women in Italy (Barbagli and Saraceno 1998; Francescato 2002): in these social strata, the traditional image of the family was weakening, and the psychological, moral, social, and economic constraints that prevented the dissolution of an unhappy marriage were frailer than in other social groups. In addition, the very few micro-level studies available in Italy all point to a positive gradient between marital instability and the level of education (Vignoli and Ferro 2009), although a recent analysis highlights signs of a changing gradient of education from positive to negative (Salvini and Vignoli 2011).

As regards cohabitation, the phenomenon is still considered by most Italians as a temporary phase before marriage and not as a permanent alternative to it (Gabrielli and Hoem 2010). This could facilitate its acceptance among parents of the youngest generation, but it would still encounter mental inertia because of the preponderance of marriage. So far, consensual unions have been entered mostly by a selective group of the Italian population, namely by secularized, educated, and working young people in the country's northern urban areas (Di Giulio and Rosina 2007). This line of reasoning is also supported by Rosina and Fraboni (2004) that see the diffusion of informal unions in the Italian context as a fashion developing from the high to the low population social strata. At the beginning of the diffusion process, in fact, women with higher educational attainment levels tend to be more liberal and would therefore be more inclined towards adopting new living arrangements.

Another question that has attracted our attention is the well-established differentials between the North and the South of the country. Such important geographical differences make the Italian case an especially fruitful one for the theoretical exploration of their impact on demographic behaviours. In particular, the

strong pattern of local differences mostly persists nowadays and are normally explained by the differences in economic and cultural history, particularly looking at the north-south gradient (Kertzer et al., 2008). Generally speaking, this is the product of the fragmentation of the Italian peninsula into several separate states, speaking different languages, until Italian unification in 1861 (Dalla Zuanna and Righi 1999). Gabrielli and Hoem (2010) have paid particular attention to the geographical pattern and have shown once again that the recent increase in consensual unions appears mainly in Northern and Central Italy and not in the South, where non-marital unions still remain quite rare. In this sense, Schröder (2004) explains that “despite [the observation that] women in two different Italian regions [may] show similar behaviour, namely cohabitation, their attitude differs towards this behaviour: the Northern woman prefers to cohabit because she likes it; the Southern [woman] chooses cohabitation as a result of economic constraints”. Italy, therefore, displays at least two different settings for new union forms.

In short, previous works focused mainly on the role of education for the spread of marital instability (e.g., Salvini and Vignoli 2011) and the role of the geographical area for the spread of cohabitation (Gabrielli and Hoem 2010). In this chapter we aim to bring together these findings in search of a common line of reasoning behind the changing union pattern in Italy.

### **3. Data**

The *macro* data comes from the National Institute of Statistics (since now only Istat). Marriage, legal separations<sup>1</sup>, and divorce are formally registered at all times by law. Istat publishes macro-data on these events periodically. Other episodes of union formation, such as consensual unions, are not collected in official registers and thus can be studied through sample surveys only. The same applies to another important marker of the breakdown: “*de facto*” separation. This represents a marriage dissolution not yet

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy, it is not easy to get a divorce, which has been legally permissible since 1970 (Law n. 898) but only after a long period of physical and legal separation between the spouses (five years, initially; three years since 1987).



accompanied by a legal provision, which means, in practice, moving apart due to marital discord. Again the only way to study this issue is through sample surveys.

The *micro* data about cohabitation or “de facto” separation were taken from the Italian variant of the Gender and Generations Survey (namely, the Italian Household Multipurpose Survey “Family and Social Subjects” – since now only FSS-GGS) carried out in November 2003<sup>2</sup>. It represented the most representative and detailed survey in Italy when the present contribution was edited. Such data have a net random sample of 10,960 Italian women aged 18 and more at interview, and they contain retrospective information on employment, partnership, and fertility histories.

#### **4. Trends in union formation and dissolution dynamics in Italy**

Italy was characterized by a very rigid union dynamic pattern until the mid-1970s. According to the Istat macro-data, from the mid-1970s the rate of Italian marriages starts a period of progressive decline. In the same period, a postponement in the age at marriage occurred as well. Then, during the 1980s we can observe a series of changes, although the country preserved some peculiarities such as a low diffusion of marital disruptions and a slow pace of diffusion of cohabitation (FSS-GGS source). During the 1990s and especially since 2000, things have changed illustrating a much more complex family formation pattern, an increase of separations and divorces, and a not-negligible diffusion of cohabitations. We confine our next description mainly to the most recent period (2000-2008) as it is the one that highlights the most evident (and somehow unexpected) signs of change.

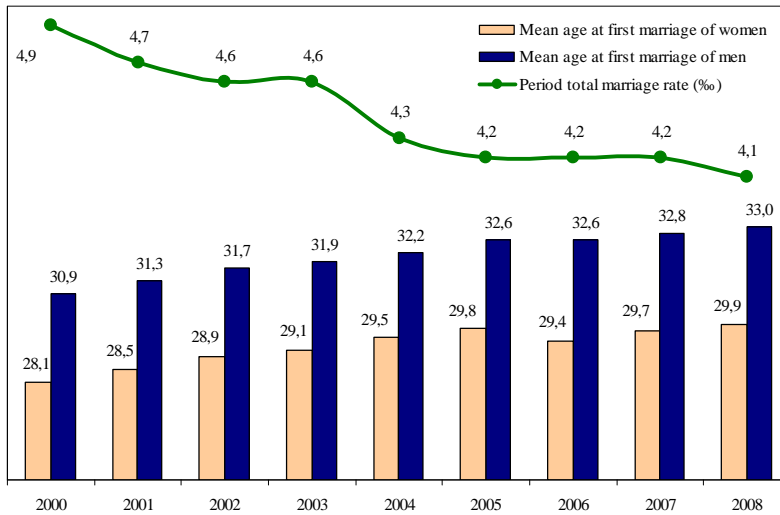
*Marriage.* Around 250 thousands of marriages were celebrated in 2008 (Figure 1). In the same year, the mean age at first marriage rose to 30 years for women and 33 years for men. Union formation also underwent qualitative changes (not only quantitative ones). Among other indicators, we observe an increase of civil marriages (from about 27% in 2000 to about 37% in 2008), second marriages (from about 10% to about 14%) and mixed couples (from 7% to 10%) (Vignoli et al. 2011). Therefore, there is evidence that “significant transformations are evidently underway” (Dominguez et el.

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<sup>2</sup> For a description of the Italian survey, see ISTAT (2006).

2007: p.6). For instance, in a ten-year period (1995-2005), the percentage of extra-marital births doubled in Spain and Italy (from 11.1% to 26.8% and from 8.1% to 17.3% respectively).

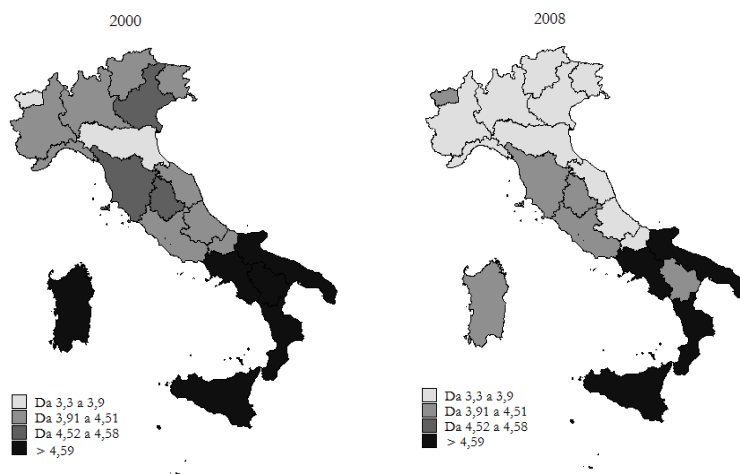
Figure 1: Trend in marital union and mean age at first marriage by sex in Italy, 2000-2008.



Source: own elaboration based on Istat data. [www.demo.istat.it](http://www.demo.istat.it).

The general downward trend of marriages is a widespread phenomenon in Italy, but territorial differentials are persisting. Generally speaking they suggest a clear North-South gradient. To date, people get married more in the South (4.9‰ inhabitants in 2008) than in the North (3.6‰ inhabitants) and in the Centre (4‰ inhabitants). Territorial differentials amplified when comparing regions (Figure 2). In 2008, the total marital rate ranges between the minimum of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (3.3 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants) to the maximum of Campania (5.5 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants).

Figure 2: Period Total Marital Rate by Italian regions, 2000 and 2008.

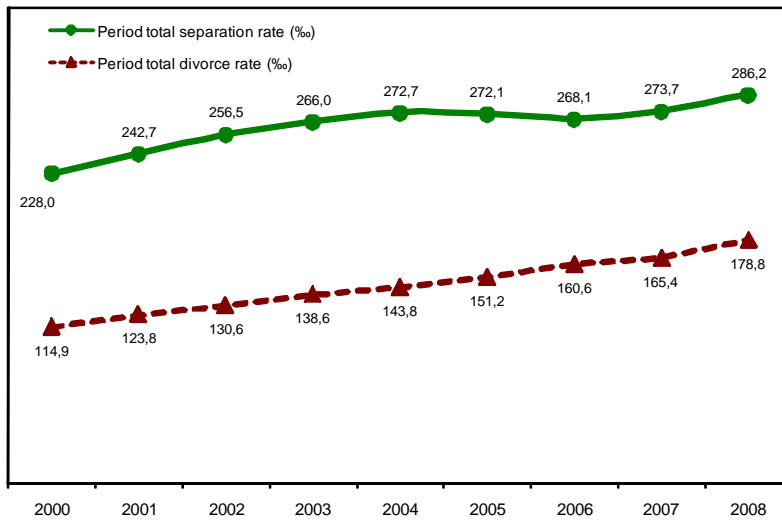


Source: Vignoli et al. 2011.

*Marital dissolution.* The comparative analysis among European countries in Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006) show at least four different patterns in union dissolution: “high and rising” in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland); “medium and rising” in Western Europe (France, Former West Germany, Austria); “medium and fairly stable” in Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Latvia etc.); “low and rising” in Southern Europe (Spain, Italy). Among the last group, about 3% of all unions contracted by women born between 1953 and 1957 dissolved within five years. Considering the women cohort 1963-67, the same indicator rose to about 5% in Italy and 7% in Spain (*ibidem*).

According to Istat macro-data, the Period Total Divorce Rate (computed as a sum of age-specific divorce rates), with respect to a hypothetical (synthetic) cohort of 1,000 marriages, highlights the rise in Italian marital dissolution since the beginning of the 1990s (Vignoli et al. 2011). From 2000 to 2008, it increases from around 115 (divorces every 1,000 marriages) to 180 respectively (Figure 3). However, as mentioned above (§3), divorce is not the sole event related to Italian marital disruption. Only 40% of legal separations end up in divorce: the counterpart (60%) is not necessarily driven to a re-union. In 2008, legal separations represented 30% of marital unions (Figure 3).

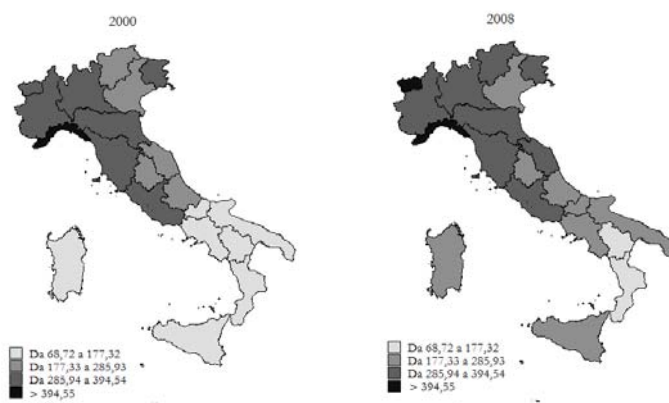
Figure 3: Trends in divorce and (legal) separation in Italy, 2000-2008



Source: [www.demo.istat.it](http://www.demo.istat.it).

Differentials between the North and the South of the country persist in union dissolution as well (Figure 4). Legal separations are generally more frequent in the North and in specific Central regions (such as Lazio and Tuscany) than in the South. In the North we observe the same level of marital dissolution as in the North-Centre European countries (30-40 separations every 100 marriages).

Figure 4: Period Total (Legal) Separation Rate by Italian regions, 2000 and 2008.



Source: Vignoli et al. 2011.

*Consensual union.* Dominguez. et al. (2007) illustrate the proportion of women in reproductive ages that were cohabiting at the time of the 2000 census round in

several European countries. Italy and Spain remain at the lower end of the classification: only 3% of Italian women and 4.5% of Spanish women aged 15-49 were in a non-marital union in 2001. In contrast, in Northern European countries cohabitation was higher than 15%. In the period 2004-2008, Kasearu and Kutsar (2010) observe a similar sharp contrast between Nordic countries (which displayed the proportion of women aged 18-25 who were cohabiting higher than 21%) and Southern Europe (which displayed quotas below 10%).

Nevertheless, according to the FSS-GGS survey, consensual unions are also increasing in Italy. However, some people perceive cohabitation as a specific step in their life-course prior to marriage; only part of informal unions remains unmarried for the rest of their lives. In Table 2, the trend of first union by type and calendar period shows the prevalence of direct marriages (close to  $\frac{3}{4}$  in the last observed period). However, the growing presence of pre-marital consensual unions and consensual unions is evident even though it is residual in comparison with other European countries: the former increases from 6.5% to 11% and the latter from 2.3% to 15.4% from 1980-85 to 1995-2003 respectively.

The Italian North-South gradient is also evident in the case of pre-marital consensual unions and cohabitations (Table 1).

Table 1: Type of First Union by Calendar Period and Macro-area in Italy, 1980-2003.

Period and area of residence at union formation	Marital union	Pre-marital cohabitation	Consensual union	Total in first union	
				%	Respondents
1980-1984	91.2	6.5	2.3	100.0	1,534
1985-1989	88.1	8.4	3.5	100.0	1,386
1990-1994	83.4	10.8	5.8	100.0	1,448
1995-2003	73.7	11.0	15.4	100.0	2,205
<i>total</i>	<i>82.9</i>	<i>9.4</i>	<i>7.7</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>6,573</i>
North	88.4	6.5	5.1	100.0	2,415
Centre	92.0	4.0	4.0	100.0	1,822
South	94.6	3.8	1.6	100.0	2,336
<i>total</i>	<i>82.9</i>	<i>9.4</i>	<i>7.7</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>6,573</i>

*Source: own elaboration based on the 2003 FSS-GGS data*

The increased incidence of cohabitation would correspond with an anticipation of their cadence as well (Vignoli et al. 2011). The percentage distribution of first consensual unions for women in the period 1980-90 shows a peak at the age 25-30 years old. In the next calendar period, the peak seems to be anticipated at the previous age class of 20-25 years old.

## **5. The spread of cohabitation and marital disruption in Italy: who are the trendsetters?**

### *5.1. Method and Variables*

Using FSS-GGS data (see §3), our analysis considers retrospective longitudinal histories of women aged 18+ that cover the risk-period 1980-2003<sup>3</sup>. Duration is expressed in terms of age, and respondents are (right) censored at the age of interview if they had not experienced the events of interest by the time of survey. We run sets of Cox event-history models, namely for the following transitions: (1) entry into first non-marital union; (2) entry into *de facto* separation after marriage (only for married women). Note that similarly to De Rose (1992), we concentrated on *de facto* separation because this act corresponds to the same life-step for all three possible categories of separated people, i.e., *de facto* separated, judicially separated and divorced<sup>4</sup>. The determinants we include in the analysis are the same in both transitions in order to obtain comparable results (for a synthetic picture see Appendix Table 1). Some of them are included in the models as time-varying (TV) using episode-splitting methods.

In order to address the possible existence of trends and trendsetters (see §2), we considered women's educational attainment, their macro-area of residence as well as calendar period. We estimate different models using the interaction among these variables. Using information referring to the highest educational level ever reached and the time when it was achieved, we clustered educational attainment in four main groups:

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<sup>3</sup> Among our respondents, 4,926 women had not experienced a first union (yet), 1,112 had experienced a consensual union and 754 women had experienced a *de facto* separation after marriage.

<sup>4</sup> In many cases, however, the date of this event was missing, and we had to impute it, so as not to 'lose' these individuals. We based our imputation procedure on the distribution of lags (between *de facto* separation, legal separation and divorce) observed on women and men with complete information, separately by age and marital status. We recovered, in this way, 28.7% and 30.1% of women's and men's *de facto* separations, respectively. We later ran our event-history model both with and without imputed

still in education<sup>5</sup>, low education (up to junior secondary school certificate), medium education (high-school qualification), high education (university degree or higher). Although possible objections about the fact that educational attainment can change over the lifecourse (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006), in Italy it is relatively trouble-free to use the highest educational level, since the vast majority of people have completed their studies by the time of marriage formation (Ongaro 2002).

Crucial to our study is the place of residence as well. According to the size of our sample, we operationalize region to be one of three ‘macro-areas’ in the country overall (North, Centre, and South); these are an aggregation of the 20 administrative regions in Italy. Unfortunately, this information was collected at the time of the interview, which introduced the risk of performing a so-called “anticipatory analysis” thus the procedures that seek to explain current behaviour by future outcomes (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006). However, Italian internal mobility has been low in recent decades and mainly confined to short-distance movements (Gabielli et al. 2007).

Moreover, the calendar period was introduced in our model in order to capture the temporal change in the phenomenon of interest. Four time periods were considered in the model: 1980–1985, 1986–1990, 1991–1995, and 1996–2003.

In addition to the previous variables, we also introduced additional fixed- and time-varying covariates in order to control for possible confounding effects. We considered women’s birth cohorts (1920–1955, 1955–64, and 1965–85) to account for the increasing acceptance of new ways of living such as couples related to increased individual autonomy in the ethical, political, and religious spheres across the generations (Lesthaeghe 1992). We expected, in fact, the youngest cohorts to present higher cohabitation and dissolution levels.

We controlled for women’s employment status, distinguishing between “working” and “not working” (time-varying covariate). Previous studies revealed that, for Italian employed women, the risk of consensual union and union dissolution is higher than for non-working women (De Rose and Di Cesare 2003; Di Giulio and Rosina 2007). Moreover, women with higher educational attainment, good prospects in

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data: the estimated coefficients changed only marginally, but obviously proved more robust with the imputed data.

<sup>5</sup> We consider the state “still in education” when the respondents assume an age that precedes the one assert to reach the highest educational level.

the labour market, and who are therefore economically independent are the best placed to start an informal union or put an end to unhappy unions (Becker 1981). In any case, women's employment status should not be interpreted in causal terms; it serves here as control variables, used to partly remove the contribution of economic situation from the effect of educational attainment on cohabitation and separation risks.

Among the origin family background, we consider mother's and father's level of education. The parents' educational level should be understood as an indicator of the socio-economic level of the household. We coded these variables as dichotomous ones that consider if each parent has reached respectively a high educational level (or university degree). The effects of parental education are not fully understood (Billari and Ongaro 1999; Corijn and Klijzing 2001). On the one hand, education may reflect exposure to more liberal attitudes, with a consequential acceptance of new union behaviours. On the other hand, highly educated parents have higher ambitions for their children, and look at cohabitations and/or family disruptions as a potential deviation from these aspirations.

We also consider two variables about the family of origin. First, we consider if the respondent was living in a single or a two-parent family at the age of 15. This is a time-fixed dichotomous covariate that is expected to have a possible effect due to the absence of at least one parent, as in the case of divorce, separation, or the death of one of the parents. This hypothesis is especially convincing in Italy because of a possible vertical diffusion of family patterns (e.g., Dalla Zuanna and Micheli 2004). Second, we control for the influence of the number of siblings of the woman. A greater number of siblings might be expected to proxy a family background in which familiar socialization, traditional roles and/or larger family sizes are valued. In other words the number of siblings evidences those women who came from larger and, likely, traditional families.

In the end, we took into account the role of children in the risk of marital disruption. In particular, not only the number but also the age of the children represents an essential predictor of dissolution risk (Andersson 1997). We therefore distinguished between childless, parity 1 with child aged 0–6 years, parity 1 with child aged 7 years or more, parity 2 or higher with youngest child aged 0–6 years, and parity 2 or higher with youngest child aged 7 years or more. Previous analyses have shown that the presence of



children reduces separation risk, at least while the children are relatively young (Salvini and Vignoli 2011).

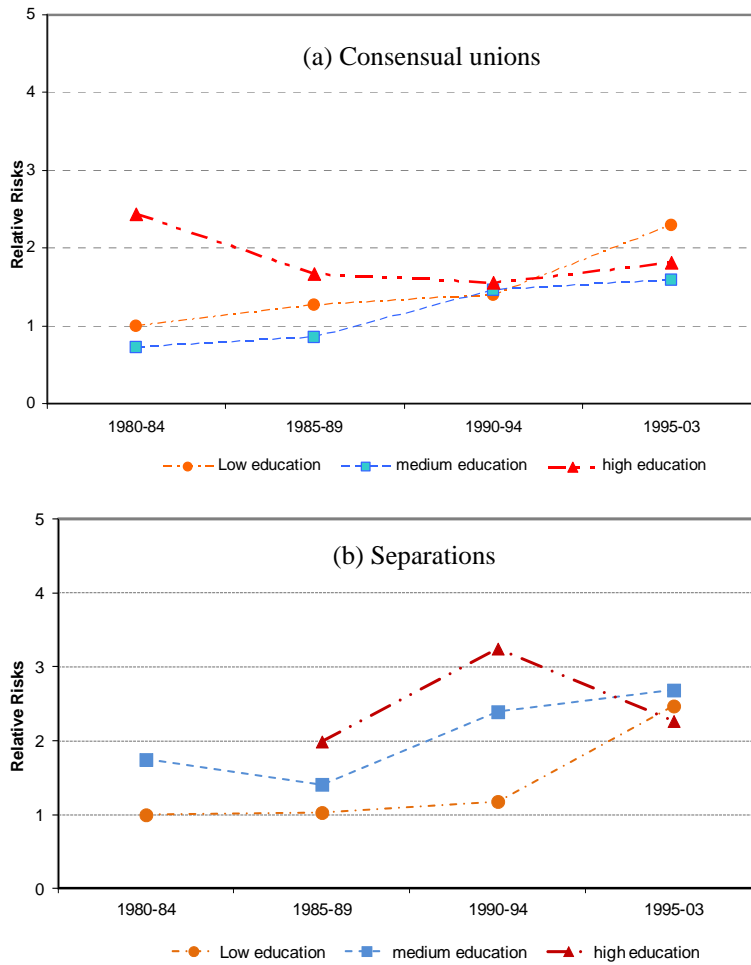
Our analyses do not show any particular surprising risk patterns for our control variables, so we confine our findings to Appendix Table 2, in terms of relative risks, standard errors and p-values. Thus, in the next sections we focus our attention on the trends over calendar periods and check the diffusion process of a more flexible typology of Italian unions looking, in particular, at women's educational gradient and geographical pattern. To hedge against compositional effects we have standardized all analyses with respect to the determinants considered above.

### *5.2. Calendar period and education combined; calendar period and area of residence combined*

In the first interaction, we investigate the existence of trendsetters among the women with an higher educational level. Figure 5a shows the trends in (standardized) risks of entry into first cohabitation by educational level. As we can see, we could consider highly educated women (namely those with a university degree) as trendsetters in the period 1980-84. It does not appear to be so in the following periods where the low-medium educated women catch up with the trendsetters. In the last observed period after 1995 the relative risk of entry into consensual union seems to be highest among the lowest educated women (up to junior secondary school certificate).

Figure 5b shows the trends in (standardized) risks of entry into *de facto* separation by educational level. Again, highly educated women appear as the trendsetters. Then, in the period 1985-89 – 1990-94 the medium educated women tend to follow the trendsetters. Finally, with another time-lag, in the period 1990-94 – 1995-2003 the lowest educated women catch up with their counterparts.

Figure 5: Trends in Standardized Relative Risks of Consensual Unions (a) and *de facto* Separations (b) by Women’s Educational Level.



Note 1: Data on separation risks among the highly educated in the period 1980-84 are not shown due to the few cases corresponding to this combination.  
 Source: own elaboration based on the 2003 FSS-GGS data.

Interestingly, in most recent years our data illustrate a levelling-off in educational differentials, even suggesting a changing gradient of education from positive to negative<sup>6</sup>.

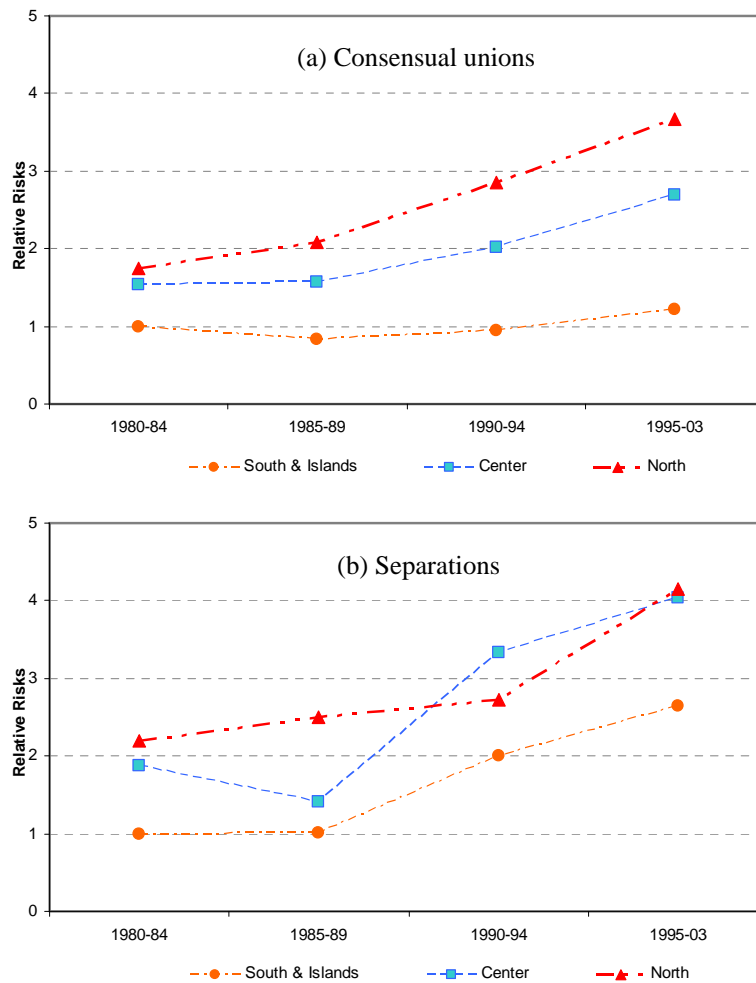
We now focus on the geographical pattern and, in particular, on the North-South gradient. With regards to consensual (Figure 6a) unions by geographical pattern, we

<sup>6</sup> Highly educated women who do marry are possibly a self-selected group with unobserved characteristics (e.g., their commitment to the institution of marriage) that might also make them less likely to divorce later on (Bernardi and Martínez-Pastor 2010). This fact may interfere with the observed decline in the effect of education on marriage dissolution (and even in cohabitation). Here we aim to provide a general picture of the breaking-down of marriage in Italy, and accounting for possible self-selection into marriage among highly educated women is far beyond the scope of this chapter.

observe an increasing divergence by macro area. In the South of Italy cohabitation is reluctant to increase over the four periods considered. On the other hand, the growing presence of informal unions is evident both in the Northern regions and in the Central regions even though the second group has not caught up with the first yet.

We observe a different geographical pattern for marital dissolution (Figure 6b).

Figure 6: Trends in Standardized Relative Risks of Consensual Unions (a) and *de facto* Separations (b) by Macro-area of Residence.



Source: own elaboration based on the 2003 FSS-GGS data

Here, after the first two considered periods (respectively 1980-84 and 1985-90), during the 1990s we observe an increasing relative risk in Southern regions. Thus, the North-South gradient still persists but is not sharply growing. Moreover, in the same

period women in the Central regions have reached the same level as those in the Northern ones.

In synthesis, the relative risks stratified by educational attainment over time show the existence of better educated trendsetters among women for both cohabitation and separation; even if they can be more clearly identified for the latter transition. Differently, the geographical pattern displays a divergent North-South behaviour in consensual union and a persisting (but not increasing) difference in marital dissolution.

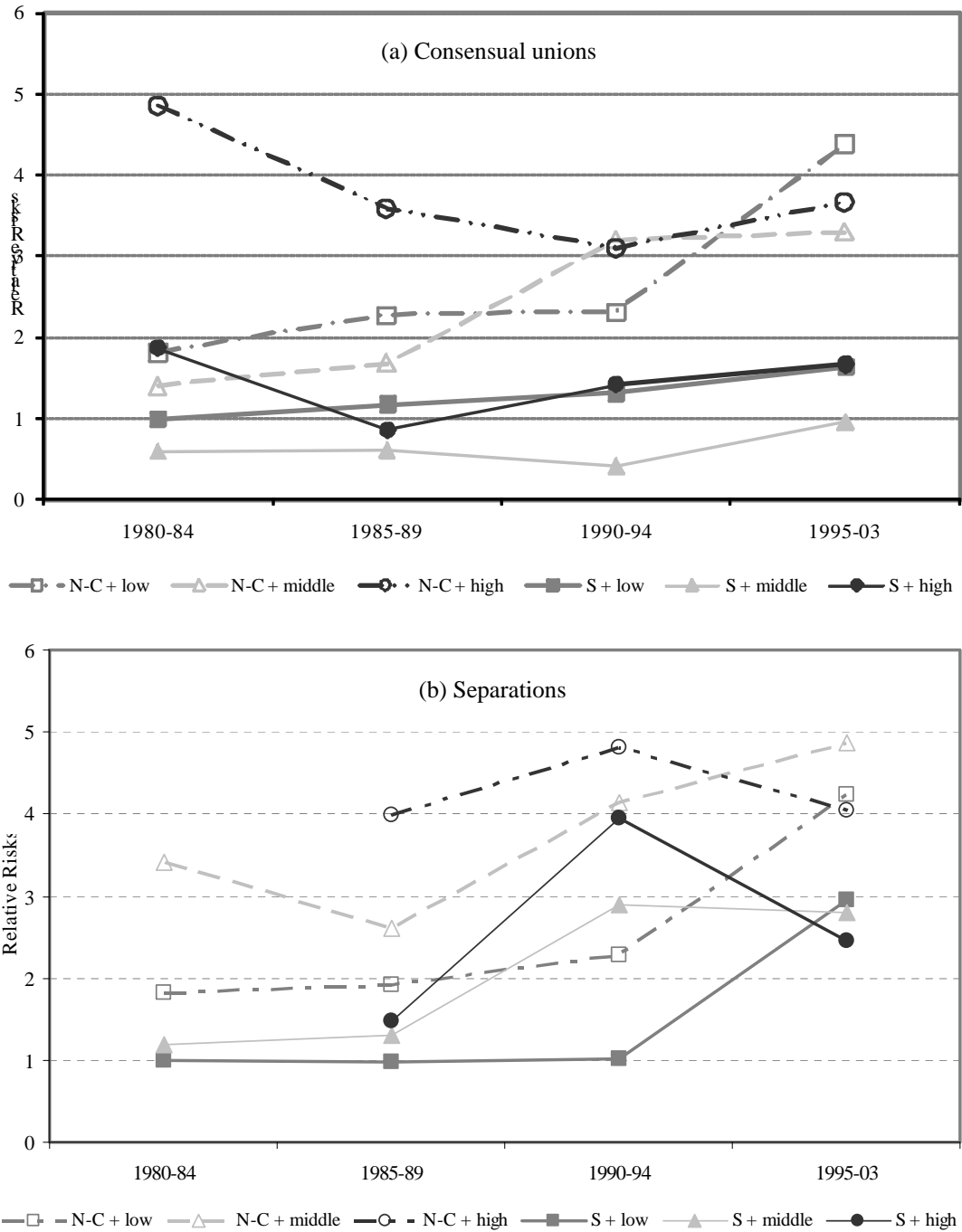
### *5.3. Calendar period, education, and area of residence combined*

In order to get a deeper insight into the combination of period, education, and area of residence, our last interaction considers the three gradients jointly<sup>7</sup>. In the transition to cohabitation (Figure 7a), generally speaking, we observe consistently lower values in the South than the Centre-North with the exception of trendsetters (better educated women) in the period 1980-84. Thus, the territorial gradient persists considering educational attainment as well. Moreover, we can observe, in the later periods more clearly than the previous ones, the existence of at least two different types of informal unions in the South (see §2.1) leading to a U-shape pattern. In particular, it seems that cohabitation in the “upper” social classes (namely highly educated women) and in the “lower” social classes (namely low educated women) co-exist at the same level. The medium educated women display the lowest relative risks, somehow confirming Schröder’s (2004) findings that exclude the middle social class at the beginning of the diffusion process. In the Northern regions, the diffusion of informal unions develops then from the high to the low population social strata. In the last observed period (1995-2003), there is no significant difference among northern women by educational attainment; in parallel a potential catch up of the high- and medium-educated women of the South can also be advocated.

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<sup>7</sup> In this case we decide to merge Northern and Central regions because a not shown (but available on request) analysis did not provide a clear different pattern between these two macro-areas.

Figure 7: Trends in Standardized Relative Risks of Consensual Unions (a) and *de facto* Separations (b) by Women's Educational Level and Macro-area of Residence.



Note 1: Northern and Central regions (N-C); Southern regions (S); low educated women (low); middle educated women (middle); high educated women (high).

Note 2: Data on separation risks among highly educated in the period 1980-84 are not shown due to the few cases corresponding to this combination.

Source: own elaboration based on the 2003 FSS-GGS data.

Looking at the transition to separation, the outcomes of the interaction (Figure 7b) essentially stratify the pattern observed in Figure 5b between Central-Northern and Southern regions. Overall, the temporal pattern is confirmed –the process starts first among the better-educated and then spreads among the medium-educated followed by the low-educated. Such general patterns display elevated risks in the Centre-North of Italy and downsized risks in the South of Italy for each educational group. Interestingly, in the most recent period, the educational differences disappear also in the South.

## **6. Concluding discussion**

During the last decades, since the mid-1970s, marriage has lost much of its centrality in Southern European Countries, such as Italy and Spain. However, the general incidence of consensual unions and marital disruption is still low compared to general European standards. Some scholars explain this state of affairs arguing that Italy, along with several other European countries, such as Spain and Portugal, can be grouped into a so-called “Southern or Mediterranean model”, characterized by a very low level of social protection and strong family ties (e.g., Reher 1998). These countries are classified as “traditional” in term of values because of the dominance of the Roman Catholic influence. Moreover, weak state support to the family is also a peculiarity of Southern countries (Dominguez et al. 2007). In light of these specificities some social scientists advocate the claim that the adoption of cohabitation and marital dissolution among Italians will remain at lower levels than the rest of Europe (e.g., Reher 1998). In line with this assumption, the differences among social groups are anticipated to persist over time as the diffusion process by social strata is stagnant (e.g., Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). But the family demography picture of Southern Europe is changing, and other researchers argue that Italy, as well as Spain, are just late-comers in the diffusion of “new” family patterns (e.g., Barbagli et al. 2003). Thus, the diffusion process of consensual unions and marital disruptions within these countries is occurring as it did for the other European countries, but it is temporally lagged.

Our chapter contributes to this general discussion. Our results clearly refuse the static picture of the Italian context with respect to the diffusion of “new” family patterns. They also contest assumptions about a persisting and blocked diffusion of new

behaviours among broad groups of the population. And they pose a challenge to the fact that Italy will not reach the levels displayed by the rest of Europe in terms of incidence of cohabitation and marriage disruption. Italy is not the only Southern country that is today experiencing a time of lively family demography changes. According to the literature we located, Spain also contradicts such a static picture (Bernardi and Martínez-Pastor 2011; Baizàn et al. 2003; Domínguez et al. 2007). Thus, in a comparative prospective Spain and Italy seem to be moving together in the European context.

In particular, our analyses confirm a rising breaking-down of marriage in Italy towards a growing flexibility of unions. Our results suggest the existence of trendsetters among the best educated women as regards the spread of marital dissolution. Well-educated women were characterized by high separation risks at the beginning of the diffusion of the process. With a relatively short time-lag, women with lower education are catching up with the better-educated trendsetters in a sort of “democratization” of the process of marital disruption in Italian society. However, the whole pattern masks sub-national differences. Italy displays at least two different settings for new union patterns: the “innovative” North and the “traditional” South. Our findings point to a clear levelling-off of educational differentials in recent years as regards the diffusion of separations, but the incidence of that phenomenon is amplified among Central-Northern regions. Thus, the synthetic picture shows (since now) a dual-level process.

The picture is more complex looking at the diffusion of cohabitation. In the Centre-North the mechanism is similar to the one of separations: the trendsetter role is undoubtedly evident with a consequent spread of consensual unions to the other social strata. The same does not seem to occur in the South where informal unions are reluctant to increase. What is more, we could observe two different patterns in the spread of cohabitations: the first from the top and the second from the bottom of the social hierarchy; while those lying in-between seem to be the most resistant group. Our study provides some more evidence for the scholarly issues about the different reasons to cohabit (Schröder 2004). Factors related to high a socio-cultural condition or background, such as high educational level, female employment, parents’ acceptance and support, favoured the relatively high diffusion of informal unions. By contrast, the spread of cohabitation should also be strongly related in low social strata where low

cultural (and educational) background, precarious living conditions, job insecurity and the absence of parental support presumably exist. According to our results, both the “ideational change” hypothesis and “pattern of disadvantage” hypothesis seem to be at play in parallel in the Southern Italian regions.

Overall, our chapter places Italy at a crucial stage, in which the trends indicate a strong increase in divorce and consensual unions, and the new behaviours are no longer confined to certain trendsetters. We have also shown that the positive educational gradient of marital disruption and cohabitation (e.g., the well-educated being at a higher risk than their counterparts) is vanishing. On the basis of our findings we might anticipate that the educational gradient will turn from positive to negative in Italy, with a progressive eradication of the cultural, economic, and legal barriers to marital disruption and cohabitation. But the key question for the future is also about the South: will the “Southern model” –a *la Reher*– survive in “Southern Italy”? Given the marked rise in marital breakdown and cohabitation experienced everywhere in Italy over the most recent years, it will be necessary to replicate the analysis for the first decade of the XXI Century in order to take a fresh look at the patterns illustrated in this contribution.

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## Appendix tables

**Appendix Table 1 – List of variables included in the models. Italian women, 1980-2003**

Variables	Types	Time of observation	Additional description
Calendar Period	Time varying	1980-2003	
Birth cohort	Time fixed	1920-1985	<1955/1955-64/1965+
Macro area of residence	Time fixed	At birth	North/Centre/South *
Own educational level	Time varying	Year highest degree	
Occupational status	Time varying	Age 18 and more	
Not living with both parents	Time fixed	Age 15	Death/divorce/separation
Number of siblings	Time fixed	At interview	
Father's education	Time fixed	At interview	Highest level reached
Mother's education	Time fixed	At interview	Highest level reached
Number of young children	Time varying	1980-2003	Age and number of children

\* Northern regions: Valle d'Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, Veneto, Friuli, Trentino, Lombardia.

Central regions: Emilia Romagna, Toscana, Marche, Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzo.

Southern regions: Molise, Puglia, Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Sicilia, Sardegna.

**Appendix Table 2 - Determinants of consensual union and marital dissolution. Cox model. Italian women, 1980-2003.**

Variables	Consensual union			Marital dissolution		
	Haz. Ratio	Std. Err.	p-value	Haz. Ratio	Std. Err.	p-value
Calendar period (ref. 1980-84)						
1985-89	1.06	0.132	n.s.	1.03	0.155	n.s.
1990-94	1.37	0.188	**	1.51	0.219	***
1995-2003	1.75	0.262	***	2.09	0.311	***
Birth cohort (ref. <1955)						
1955-1964	1.22	0.200	n.s.	1.47	0.172	***
1965+	1.17	0.242	n.s.	1.64	0.269	***
Macro-region of residence (ref. South)						
North	2.75	0.235	***	1.65	0.152	***
Centre	2.05	0.190	***	1.55	0.172	***
Educational attainment (ref. Completed high)						
In education	0.43	0.049	***	2.50	0.581	***
Completed low	0.77	0.055	***	1.22	0.169	**
Completed middle	1.02	0.114	n.s.	1.32	0.111	***
Occupational status (ref. Unemployed) - TV						
Employed	1.35	0.097	***	1.42	0.120	***
Parents lived together when the respondent was 15 (ref.: yes)						
No	2.35	0.305	***	1.95	0.529	***
Number of siblings (ref.: 0-1)						
2+	1.40	0.088	***	1.03	0.079	n.s.
Mother's high level of education (ref. No)						
Yes	0.93	0.180	n.s.	1.97	0.477	***
Father's high level of education (ref. No)						
Yes	1.35	0.196	**	1.89	0.304	***
Number of young children (ref. None)						
1 (0-6)	-	-	-	0.60	0.073	***
1 (7+)	-	-	-	0.85	0.121	n.s.
2+ (0-6)	-	-	-	0.42	0.060	***
2+ (7+)	-	-	-	0.63	0.094	***

Note: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. TV: time-varying.  
Source: Own elaboration on the 2003 FSS-GGS data

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