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RE-EXAMINING INCOME AND FERTILITY INTENTIONS WITHIN COUPLES FROM LINKED ADMINISTRATIVE AND SURVEY DATA IN ITALY

Lucia Coppola, Eleonora Meli,
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Lucia Coppola[1] – Eleonora Meli[1] – Daniele Vignoli[2] – Agnese Vitali[3]

[1] Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat), lcoppola@istat.it; elmeli@istat.it

[2] University of Florence, daniele.vignoli@unifi.it

[3] University of Trento, agnese.vitali@unitn.it

Abstract

Objective: This study examines the role of household income, partners' relative incomes, and employment arrangements in shaping short-term fertility intentions from a couple's perspective, using Italy as a case study.

Background: How couples' economic resources shape fertility intentions remains a central question in demographic research. The "New Home Economics", the role incompatibility theory, and the "Gender Revolution" theory predict different associations between fertility intentions and couples' absolute and relative economic resources.

Method: By linking survey data on fertility intentions with administrative income records, we provide a unique couple-level perspective on both absolute and relative economic resources.

Results: The findings reveal marked differences by parity and gender. Among childless women, higher household income and greater economic independence are associated with stronger intentions to become mothers. Among mothers, however, intentions to have another child are lower in dual-earner couples than in single-breadwinner—or even jobless—couples, suggesting that work-family reconciliation and time constraints may outweigh the benefits of dual employment. By contrast, neither childless men nor fathers show systematic differences in fertility intentions by employment arrangements or the distribution of earnings within the couple. Once household income is taken into account, who earns the income matters little for men's fertility intentions.

Conclusion: Findings show that absolute and relative economic resources shape fertility intentions in distinct ways, underscore the importance of household income while challenging both the specialization hypothesis of the New Home Economics and traditional gender-role expectations.

Keywords

Couples; Female breadwinners; Fertility intentions; Income; Italy.

Introduction

Fertility decisions lie at the intersection of economic, social, and cultural factors, yet understanding the mechanisms linking couples' economic resources to childbearing remains a central challenge in demographic research. Classic microeconomic theories, such as the "New Home Economics" (Becker 1960, 1991), or sociological approaches as "role incompatibility" (Parsons 1949), emphasize the dual role of income and time allocation among partners in shaping fertility: while higher household resources can increase the demand for children (income effect), they may also increase investments in children's human and social capital, hence increase the costs associated with one's children, while leaving the demand for children constant (substitution effect). Higher economic resources also may raise the opportunity costs of childbearing, particularly for women. Moreover, these theories highlight the potential efficiency gains from gendered specialization within couples, traditionally associating higher fertility with arrangements in which men specialize in paid work and women in unpaid care. However, contemporary societies are characterized by rising gender equality and increasingly dual-earner households (Matysiak and Vignoli 2024), raising questions about the applicability of these predictions today.

In this context, examining fertility through a couple-level lens becomes essential: it is not only an individual's income and employment that shape childbearing intentions, but also the partner's economic contributions and the division of labor within the household. Yet, empirical evidence on these dynamics remains limited in many settings, and especially in Italy—a country characterized by persistently low fertility, large gaps between intended and realized fertility, and highly gendered labor-market and family arrangements. This study addresses these gaps by leveraging a unique combination of survey and register data to examine, for the first time in Italy, the association between couples' absolute and relative economic resources and fertility intentions. By accessing an unprecedent integration between a large-scale, nationally representative survey data on reproductive-age individuals with comprehensive income-register information on individual and household income, we provide novel insights into how both partners' earnings, employment patterns, and economic interdependence shape fertility plans. Our approach allows us to disentangle the effects of total household income from the relative contributions of each partner, offering a nuanced perspective on the economic determinants of fertility in a gendered and policy-relevant context.

Previous studies suggested that employment instability (Alderotti et al. 2025; Scherer and Brini 2023; Tyagi et al. 2026; UNFPA 2025; Vignoli et al. 2012) and economic uncertainty (Comolli and Vignoli 2021; Vignoli et al. 2020a, 2022; Matera et al. 2023) are important barriers to fertility. No previous study examined the association between fertility and income in Italy—largely due, until now, to lack of suitable data. This contribution aims at closing this gap. We study fertility intentions in opposite-sex couples in relation to: 1) partners' employment status, combined in a couples' perspective, distinguishing between dual-earning, jobless, male-breadwinner and female-breadwinner couples 2) couples' absolute resources, measured by the equivalised disposable household income, and 3) couples' relative resources, measured by the share of the couples' total income contributed by the woman. By taking a couple-level perspective, we are able to estimate the association of fertility intentions in relation to couples' employment patterns and each partners' economic contributions net of household income. Accounting for absolute

resources, as we do in this contribution, is necessary to properly understand which couple's employment arrangement is most likely associated with fertility intentions, as well as to properly understand the role of partners' economic (in)dependence from each other on fertility. When absolute economic resources are not accounted for, the role of couples' division of paid labour on fertility may be biased. For example, dual earning may proxy higher incomes compared to single breadwinning, while male breadwinning may proxy higher incomes compared to female breadwinning (cf. Kowalewska and Vitali, 2021).

Employment and income vary over the life course, especially for women, and especially following childbirth. One in five mothers quit employment after childbirth in Italy (Save the children, 2024) and when they remain in employment, mothers tend to work fewer hours and have lower earnings—hence lower total household incomes and contribute a smaller share of the couple's total incomes—than childless women (Casarico and Lattanzio, 2023). Also, women out-earning their partners may be a temporary phenomenon, following men's job loss before the couple returns to a dual-earner arrangement and to higher incomes as the male partner re-enters employment (Drago et al., 2005; Vitali and Arpino, 2016). Hence, for studying the association between economic resources and actual fertility, one would need to properly disentangle the permanent vs. temporary nature of income arrangements relying on longitudinal data following both members of a couple over time, data that are—despite regional-specific examples as Tuscany (Gil-Hernández et al. 2026)—unavailable for Italy. Such limitation can be overcome by examining fertility intentions, which are the best predictor for actual fertility because they follow the desire for childbearing and anticipate concrete behaviour by reflecting the combined effect of desired fertility and situational constraints (Thomson and Brandreth, 1995; Testa and Grilli, 2006). Schoen et al. (1999) highlight the strong effect on fertility behaviors of fertility intentions compared to other relevant variables, concluding that intentions are not just mere mediators of other variables' effects, but that they do also add explanatory power.

Italy has long experienced persistently low fertility levels, with one of the largest gaps in Europe between intended and realized fertility (Beaujouan and Berghammer, 2019; Miettinen and Szalma, 2014; Schwanitz et al., 2025), suggesting that many childbearing decisions are constrained. Economic barriers—such as employment instability, precarious contracts, and limited household resources—are frequently cited as key obstacles to parenthood (Vignoli et al., 2020b; UNFPA, 2025; Feltrin et al., 2026). Moreover, Italian labor markets and family structures are highly gendered: women face higher opportunity costs associated with childbearing, and their labor-force participation is often shaped by care responsibilities, while men's roles as primary earners remain socially reinforced. These structural and cultural factors make Italy an ideal case to examine how absolute household income, relative contributions of each partner, and couples' employment arrangements jointly influence fertility intentions.

Our study makes two key contributions. First, it provides the first analysis of the association between fertility intentions and partners' absolute and relative incomes in Italy. We find that household income and women's economic independence are positively and robustly linked to parenthood intentions, while intentions to have a second birth are higher in couples where one or both partners are not employed—with important implications for policy aimed at supporting

childbearing. Second, by integrating survey and register data—an underutilized resource in Italian fertility research—our study demonstrates the innovative potential of administrative data for advancing understanding of family dynamics in contexts where longitudinal data is otherwise unavailable.

Background

From specialization to gender equality

At the heart of the theoretical foundation of the relationship between economic resources and fertility lies the microeconomic model of fertility, or the "New Home Economics" (NHE) approach (Parsons, 1949; Becker, 1960, 1991). The NHE theory posits that specialization of roles among partners, i.e., a complementary division of tasks, would lead to efficiency within the family: the allocation of men's and women's time in either market or family work, based on skill complementarities, would contribute to the creation of mutual dependence between partners and to the stabilization of marriage, which would in turn result in a pre-condition for fertility (Raybould and Sear, 2021). In principle, the NHE's formulation is in itself gender neutral as utility may be maximized when either partner specializes in paid or in unpaid work. However, NHE identifies women to be most efficient as homemakers on the basis of their longstanding specialization in the private sphere of household labor. Therefore, given men's and women's assumed comparative advantages in paid and unpaid work respectively, households' utility would be maximized when men allocate their time in the labor market and women in non-market activities (i.e., housework and childcare), that is when family organization aligns with the "male breadwinner/female homemaker" family model (Riederer et al., 2019; Stanfors & Goldscheider, 2017). Consequently, NHE has usually been interpreted as supporting a gender-based division of labor (Raybould and Sear, 2021; Stanfors and Goldscheider, 2017) and as suggesting that fertility is highest for couples where the man specializes in market work and the woman specializes in home activities and childcare. Accordingly, the NHE (Becker, 1991) explains the fertility decline observed in industrialized countries since the 1960s and 70s in terms of increased female labor force participation. Indeed, while women's employment could provide families with an additional source of income which may boost couples' fertility (income effect), it could also reduce women's available time for children (opportunity costs) and originate conflicts between paid work and family responsibilities which may reduce couples' fertility (Becker, 1991; Mills et al., 2008; Raybould and Sear, 2021).

These predictions, however, rest on the assumption that childcare is primarily a maternal responsibility and that gender specialization maximizes household utility. As societies have become more gender egalitarian, this assumption has been increasingly challenged. Oppenheimer (1994) argues that the decline of the male-breadwinner model stems not only from rising women's employment but also from the deterioration of men's labor market position due to globalization, deindustrialization, and technological change (Blossfeld et al., 2006; Kalleberg, 2009), which has reduced men's ability to serve as sole providers (Ruggles, 2015; Sironi & Furstenberg, 2012). As women's earning potential converges with men's, specialization no longer necessarily maximizes

household efficiency, and its benefits diminish when either partner's capacity to fulfill a specialized role is weakened (Marynissen et al., 2020; Mills et al., 2008; Oppenheimer, 1994). This perspective also implies that the relationship between women's employment and fertility depends on broader institutional and normative contexts. Women's opportunity costs of childbearing vary according to their work and family orientations (Hakim, 2003; Vitali et al., 2009), the extent to which they are expected to combine caregiving with breadwinning (Kreyenfeld, 2010), and the availability of policies that facilitate work-family reconciliation (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008). At the same time, men's unemployment, inactivity, or low earnings are expected to reduce fertility through a negative income effect, as declining economic security undermines the feasibility of family formation (Oppenheimer, 1994).

At the macro-level, a solid body of evidence shows that the cross-national correlation between women's employment and fertility has reversed, from negative to positive, over time (Ahn and Mira, 2002; Engelhardt and Prskawetz, 2004), including in Italy (Vitali and Billari, 2017). At the micro-level, evidence is accumulating that women's lack of employment is increasingly negatively associated with the transition to parenthood (Comolli and Vignoli, 2021; Di Nallo and Lipps, 2023; Alderotti, 2022). A meta-analysis of 94 studies across Europe, North America, and Australia reveals a fundamental shift in the relationship between women's employment and fertility. Once strongly negative, this association has become largely insignificant in the 2000s–2010s and even positive in Nordic and some Western European countries, challenging traditional assumptions about work-family trade-offs and suggesting the need for a revised theoretical framework to capture evolving fertility dynamics (Matysiak and Vignoli, 2026).

Not only stable employment careers, permanent job contracts and the economic stability they appear to be preconditions for parenthood in contemporary Italy (Alderotti 2022; Alderotti al., 2021, 2025; Busetta et al., 2019; Matera et al., 2023; Modena et al. 2014; Scherer and Brini, 2023; Vignoli et al., 2012). Crucially, employment characteristics do matter for fertility for both men and women and they matter especially among medium- and low-income couples (Alderotti et al., 2021; Modena and Sabatini, 2012).

Couples' economic arrangements, gender norms, and fertility intentions

According to micro-economics models of fertility, women's and men's preferences would be differently affected by the expected costs and benefits of childbearing (e.g., Golovina et al., 2023). Consequently, employment—hence income—and fertility may be differently associated among women and men. Men's unemployment would result in a negative income effect that reduces childbearing intentions and a deviation from prescribed gender norms, while women's unemployment may result in a combined income and substitution effect: if, as for men, a reduction in women's income may hinder fertility intentions, women's unemployment may facilitate fertility by providing additional time for childbearing and childrearing (Bueno & Brinton, 2019; Busetta et al., 2019; Testa & Basten, 2014). Also, while increases in men's income are positively related to fertility, there is some evidence for Italy that, at least during the 2000s, an increase in women's wages may initially postpone the transition to first and second birth, which are however later recuperated (Rondinelli et al., 2010). In Poland, Mynarska and Brzozowska (2022), identified perceived high costs related to having children to significantly affect women's, but not men's,

childlessness intentions. Similarly, Miettinen (2010) found household income to be an important predictor of voluntary childlessness among women but not men in Finland. These considerations suggest that to adequately assess the association between economic characteristics and fertility, information on both partners' economic characteristics must be assessed, as well as both women and men's fertility preferences (Roberts et al., 2011).

Theories based on the idea of the Gender Revolution (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015) predict that fertility will be higher when gender equality in both the private and the public spheres of life is reached. Gender-egalitarian societies where a high share of partnered men and women engage in both private- and public-sphere activities would have higher fertility. At the micro-level of the couple, dual-earner couples and couples where partners contribute equally to the household's incomes are predicted to more likely report fertility intentions than other couple types (McDonald, 2000). Again, a couple-based perspective is needed: it is not just own employment and income that matters for one's fertility intentions, but also the partner's employment and income.

Employment and income, however, also have a symbolic meaning, which varies between men and women, especially in relation to the transition to parenthood. For men, being employed and a provider for the family constitutes the essence of what it means to be a man and a 'good father' (Townsend, 2002). For women, inactivity or reduced income, e.g., following a reduction in working hours, is more frequently a conscious choice than it is for men because caring for the home and children are considered to be feminine activities and because intensive motherhood embeds ideals of what being a 'good mother' means (Demantas and Myers, 2015). When social norms regarding gender-role ideologies clash with the actual couple's employment and income situation, for instance in periods when the man is unemployed or when the woman is the main or sole income provider, fertility may be postponed or forgone. Previous literature showed that in female-breadwinner couples where women are employed and men are not, as well as in couples where women are the main or sole provider of the couple's total incomes, women and men face lower subjective wellbeing (Kowalewska and Vitali, 2024), lower marital quality (Rogers and DeBoer, 2001; Coughlin and Wade, 2012; Blom and Hewitt, 2020), higher risk of union dissolution (Cooke, 2006; Ferrari et al., 2024) and men have a higher likelihood of cheating (Munsch, 2018) than other couples' configurations—all factors associated with lower likelihood of having a(n other) child. It follows that the (gendered) distribution of resources within couples may also matter for fertility intentions, beyond absolute economic resources. In particular, for both men and women in female-breadwinner couples, we may expect fertility intentions to be lower compared to other couple types. Such expectations may be particularly strong in a gender-conservative context such as Italy. Also, couples with women as main or sole income providers also hold lower disposable incomes than other couple types (Kowalewska and Vitali, 2021), a dimension that further needs to be adequately controlled for when estimating the association between incomes and fertility. Two previous studies have looked at the association between partners' relative incomes and fertility. Marynissen et al. (2020) find partners' contribution to the household income to be unrelated to the transition to parenthood in Belgium. Marynissen et al. (2022) find that first-birth hazards are highest among couples where both partners are employed and among equal-earner couples in France. The hazard of first birth is considerably lower when

only one partner is employed—irrespectively of gender—or when one partner out-earns the other, and couples with women as main earners face a lower and later hazard of transitioning to parenthood compared to couples with men as main earners.

Childless and parents

Employment, income, and the division of paid and unpaid work also evolve over the family life course, suggesting that their association with fertility intentions may differ fundamentally between the transition to parenthood and subsequent childbearing. The first birth often marks a turning point in couples' gendered organization of work and care, with women more likely than men to reduce labour market participation, experience earnings penalties, and assume greater responsibility for childcare (Kreyenfeld, 2010; Casarico and Lattanzio, 2023). Consequently, the economic and opportunity costs associated with childbearing differ substantially between childless women and mothers, whereas men's employment trajectories tend to remain more stable across the transition to parenthood. Previous research has consistently shown that the effects of employment and gender equality on fertility intentions vary by both gender and parity (e.g., Neyer et al., 2013; Lappegård et al. 2021). These considerations suggest that the role of couples' absolute and relative economic resources is also likely to differ between childless individuals and parents, making a parity-specific perspective essential for understanding how couples' economic organization shapes fertility intentions.

Research hypotheses

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, we derive three hypotheses concerning the role of couples' economic resources in shaping fertility intentions. First, consistent with the income effect emphasized by microeconomic theories of fertility, we expect higher household income to be associated with stronger intentions to have a first or an additional child (HP1). Second, because competing theoretical perspectives offer contrasting predictions regarding the organization of paid work within couples, we examine whether fertility intentions differ across employment arrangements, including dual-earner, male-breadwinner, female-breadwinner, and jobless couples and on the basis of partners' economic contribution to the overall household incomes. Hence, beyond absolute household resources, we expect the distribution of employment and earnings between partners to matter for fertility intentions, with lower intentions anticipated in female-breadwinner couples and in couples where women contribute a larger share of household income, particularly among male respondents, reflecting the persistence of traditional gender norms in the Italian context (HP2). Finally, because the transition to parenthood fundamentally reshapes the gendered division of paid and unpaid work, we expect the associations between couples' economic resources and fertility intentions to differ by parity. Specifically, we expect household income to be positively associated with fertility intentions among both childless individuals and parents. Following the first birth, individuals, especially women, face higher opportunity costs of childbearing and greater work-family constraints, making fertility intentions for an additional child more sensitive to the organization of paid work and the distribution of economic resources within the couple (HP3).

Data and method

This paper is based on a new dataset for Italy, produced by the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat) by strategically integrating two data sources: the Families, Social Subjects and Lifecycle (FSS) survey and the BDR-I (stemming from 'Banca Dati Reddituale – Integrata'), a module of the Istat's Income Statistical Register.

We gather information on fertility intentions, as well as on partners' employment status, education, and other socio-demographic controls from the Families, Social Subjects and Lifecycle (FSS) survey, providing information on a large, representative sample of adults aged 18 and over. The quality of the FSS data if of high standards, with a response rate close to 80%, which makes FSS the gold-standard data for studying families and fertility in Italy. At the time of writing, the most recent available FSS data refers to 2016. New data have been collected in 2024 but are not yet made available. FSS does not collect information on incomes. We hence combine FSS with information on incomes gathered from the BDR-I module of the Istat's Income Statistical Register which contains information on both taxable and non-taxable incomes of the entire population of Italy.

BDR refers to data from individual tax returns administered by the Ministry of Economics and Finance. BDR-I refers to the integration of such tax returns with income register estimates and other administrative sources. The integration allows measuring of all possible incomes, including those that are not taxable hence which are not reported in the BDR data, and those which are structurally absent from the BDR, e.g., spousal maintenance income, income from occasional work, income from self-employment under the flat-rate scheme. The BDR-I module provides, for each year from 2015, income variables for about 45 million individuals. This source of data is immune to self-reporting bias typical of survey data where, for example, men tend to overreport, and women to underreport their incomes (Zagorsky, 2003). This bias is crucial when studying dual-earning and female breadwinning couples because partners may lie about their actual earnings when self-reporting their incomes in social surveys so that they are not perceived as deviating from conservative male breadwinning norms (Atkinson and Boles, 1984). For example, men who reported earning about the same as their partners were shown to earn significantly less (Deutsch et al., 2003).

In this paper, we rely on personal and household incomes measured in the year 2015[1], whereas information on the respondent and the partner's employment status and on the respondent's fertility intentions are measured in the year 2016.

Data integration relies on the use of pseudonymized individual codes (SIM) generated by Istat and available for respondents in FSS and for the entire population of income recipients in BDR-I. Because in FSS these codes are available for FSS respondents but not for his/her household members, in order to properly integrate the BDR-I and FSS data sources, we also rely on the population register, which provides individual codes for all household members, allowing for retrieving partners' individual income as well as computing household equivalised disposable

[1] This is consistent with the strategy implemented in EU-SILC (i.e., the income reference period is the calendar year before the interview).

income and its related quintile—from the poorest 20% (the first), to the richest 20% (the fifth) households—with reference to the national distribution. By comparing the woman's and man's labour incomes, we compute the woman's share of the total couples' incomes. Thanks to this multi-source data integration, information on respondents' fertility intentions and partners' employment status is linked to information on own and partner's incomes. For the first time, income and fertility intentions can be jointly investigated in the Italian context.

The paper relies on an analytical sample of individuals in a cohabiting couple (married or not), from FSS data (linked to BDR-I). From the initial sample (24,753 individuals), we first select all respondents aged 18-49 years old who are living in a couple at the time of interview in 2016. For the respondent, the SIM code is available, hence his/her income variables are always known from the BDR-I source. If, according to the population register, the partner is not living in the household, the SIM code is not available, and hence his/her income is not linkable. We exclude couples for which the partner's income is not available[2]. The final analytical subsample consists of 4,337 individuals.

Our dependent variable is the intention to have a(n other) child in the next 3 years. Possible answers are: certainly not, probably not, probably yes, and certainly yes. In order to retain all information contained in the original variable, we model it as an ordinal response using ordinal logistic regression. Brant tests confirm that the parallel regression assumption holds for our main explanatory variables (results not shown, available from the authors). Normalized sample weights are applied. Fertility intentions are strongly affected by parity. Consequently, we estimate different models by parity distinguishing between childless respondents vs. parents of one child or more. Also, as gender differences in the associations between economic characteristics and fertility intentions are of interest in this paper, we estimate separate models by gender. The distributions of the main dependent and independent variables are shown in Table 1.

In our sample of partnered respondents in reproductive age, over one in two is a parent of two children, almost one in three is a parent of one child, and about 16% are childless. About 20% probably intend to have a(n other) child in the next three years, and 8% certainly do. The majority of respondents in our sample are in a dual-earner couple (52%), however male-breadwinner couples are also common, representing 39% of the sample, while residual shares of respondents (5% and 4%, respectively) are in a jobless or female-breadwinner couple. Women's contribution to the household income is skewed: in 30% of couples, women contributed 0% of the total couple's labour incomes in the year preceding the interview, and 33% contributed 1-40%. Partners contributed about the same (between 40 and 60%) in 24% of couples. The share of couples with women outearning their partners is considerably smaller, but not negligible: in about 5% of couples, women earn all the couples' labour incomes, and in 8% of couples they contribute 60-99%. All in all, women's labour incomes are lower than men's (own calculations from BDR-I, not shown in Table 1): men's mean annual labour income, net of non-recipients (9.8%), amounts to 24,463 euros in 2015, with a median income of 21,738 euros, while women's income distribution, net of non-recipients (35.7%), shows a mean of 14,545 and a median of 12,180 euros—almost half

[2] About 11% of eligible couples are excluded for this reason. The exclusion of these couples from the model does not affect significantly the estimates (not shown).

the levels for men. The distribution of the household incomes is also skewed in our sample: almost half of the respondents (46%) belong to the bottom two (poorest) quintiles of the national income distribution, 19% to the third quintile, and 35% belong to the top two (richest) quintiles.

Table 1: Distribution of main dependent and independent variables, weighted percentages (N.=4,337)

	%		%
Fertility intentions		**Couples' employment patterns**	
certainly not	50,9	Female Breadwinner	4,2
probably not	20,8	Both employed	52,0
probably yes	20,4	Male Breadwinner	38,8
certainly yes	7,9	Both jobless	5,0
Number of children		**Woman's share of couples' incomes**	
0	15,8	0%	30,4
1	30,8	<40%	33,0
2+	53,5	40-60%	24,2
Gender		>60%	7,5
man	49,9	100%	4,9
woman	50,1	**Household income (in quintiles)**	
Couple type		first (the poorest)	23,0
married	84,5	second	23,4
in consensual union	15,5	Third	19,0
Woman's age		Forth	18,8
18-29	12,3	fifth (the richest)	15,8
30-39	43,8	**Region of residence**	
40-49	43,9	North	49,0
Woman's educational level		Centre	17,9
tertiary	22,0	South and Islands	33,1
upper secondary	46,7	**Man's educational level**	
lower secondary	31,3	tertiary	15,3
		upper secondary	44,3
		lower secondary	40,4
Total	100	Total	100

We run three sets of models, separately for women and men and for childless respondents and parents. In Model 1, the main explanatory variables are the couples' absolute household incomes, in quintiles of the national equivalised disposable household income distribution (in thousand Euros). In Model 2, partners' employment arrangements is added, distinguishing between the following four couple types: both partners are employed, male-breadwinning, i.e.,

only the man is employed, female breadwinning, i.e., only the woman is employed, and both partners are jobless (i.e., inactive or unemployed). In Model 3, the main explanatory variables are the couples' absolute household incomes and partners' relative labour incomes[3], measured by the woman's share of the total couples' labour incomes, ranging from 0% (she does not contribute any labour incomes) to 100% (she contributes all of the combined couple's labour incomes).

Control variables include the following socio-demographic characteristics: whether the couple is married or in consensual union, the woman's age (18-29, 30-39, 40-49), the educational level attained by both partners (up to lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary), and geographical area of residence (North, Centre, South and Islands). For models estimated on the sample of parents, estimating the probability to intend having an additional child, we further include a control for number of children (1 vs. 2 or more).

Results

Descriptive accounts

Tables 2 and 3 report the distribution of our dependent variable, i.e., fertility intentions, by our key explanatory variables, i.e., household absolute income, couples' employment patterns and partners' relative incomes, for men and women, respectively. In each table we further distinguish between childless and parents. To ease interpretation, we also report the key results graphically in Figure 1, displaying the predicted probabilities of certainly intending to have a child in the next three years by partners' employment status and woman's share of couple's total incomes.

Descriptive results show that the share of men certainty intending to have a child in the near future is generally higher at higher household incomes (Table 2). Among women, instead, no clear gradient in household income is found (Table 3).

Childless men and women in jobless couples report the highest shares of certainly intending to have a child (28% and 42%, respectively), followed by those in dual-earner couples (21% and 28%, respectively), while childless women and men in male-breadwinner couples report the highest shares of certainly not intending to have a child (29% and 34%). Among fathers and mothers, the highest shares of respondents certainly not intending to have a child are found among and female-breadwinner couples (65% and 60%, respectively) and, for women, among dual-earners (62%). Curiously, among fathers, the highest share of certainly intending to have a child is found for those in female-breadwinner couples (7%), followed by dual-earners (6%). Among mothers, instead, the highest share of certainly intending to have another child is found among jobless and male-breadwinner couples (6%), and dual-earners (5%), while only 1% of female breadwinners certainly intend having another child.

Interestingly, in couples where women earn 100% of the total household incomes, childless men are least likely to certainly intend having a child (6%) vs. 23% when the woman earns 0% or 1-40% and vs. 21% when she earns 40-60% or 61-99%. Yet, the share of childless men reporting

[3] Results are robust to relative incomes measured using the partners' total disposable income (not shown, available

they probably intend to have a child, increases with the woman's contribution to the total household income, reaching 69% and 52% when she earns 100% and 61-99%, respectively. These apparent inconsistencies are visible also in the polarization of intentions to certainly not having children: the highest shares in this case are found among childless men in couples where she earns 0% and 100% (25% and 24%, respectively). Such polarization is visible also among fathers, but differences across couple types here are small. It is notable, however, that fathers in couples where she earns 100% of the household income report the highest share of respondents probably and certainly intending to have another child of all couples (20% and 6%, respectively). Among childless women, patterns are different. Women earning 100% of the couple's total incomes report the highest share of certainly intending to have a child (40%) and such intentions increase with the woman's economic contribution. Patterns are reversed among mothers: here, the share reporting to certainly intend to have a child decreases with the woman's economic contribution.

Table 2: Distribution of fertility intentions by key explanatory variables and by presence of children, Men, weighted values

	Childless Men				Fathers			
	Certainly not	Probably not	Probably yes	Certainly yes	Certainly not	Probably not	Probably yes	Certainly yes
Household incomes, in quintiles:								
1, poorest	17.2	9.2	55.9	17.7	56.1	24.1	15.9	3.9
2	17.7	19.5	48.3	14.5	57.1	20.2	18.3	4.4
3	23.8	13.3	45.3	17.5	53.1	24.9	17.5	4.6
4	15.6	14.2	42.7	27.6	52.4	26.5	15.3	5.8
5, richest	20.8	15.9	40.8	22.5	44.7	29.8	18.1	7.3
Couples' employment patterns:								
Female Breadwinner	28.9	3.6	47.9	19.6	65.2	12.1	16.1	6.6
Both employed	13.2	18.3	47.7	20.8	54.1	24.9	15.4	5.6
Male Breadwinner	34.0	10.0	37.2	18.8	52.0	25.2	18.7	4.1
Both jobless	24.3	0.5	47.3	27.9	56.0	20.3	19.5	4.2
Woman's share of couples' incomes:								
0%	25.2	13.6	37.7	23.4	56.1	23.2	16.8	3.8
1-40%	18.3	18.4	40.0	23.3	50.3	25.2	18.4	6.0
40-60%	17.5	14.2	47.5	20.8	54.7	25.3	15.4	4.6
>60%	13.1	14.8	51.5	20.6	53.7	26.8	14.4	5.1
100%	23.7	2.2	68.5	5.6	55.8	17.5	20.3	6.3
N.	149	113	355	162	2,156	981	684	198

Table 3: Distribution of fertility intentions by household absolute income, couples' employment patterns and partners' relative incomes by presence of children, Women, weighted values

	Childless Women				Mothers			
	Certainly no	Probably no	Probably yes	Certainly yes	Certainly no	Probably no	Probably yes	Certainly yes
Household incomes, in quintiles:								
1, poorest	26.1	14.4	35.9	23.5	61.9	21.1	14.4	2.6
2	18.9	15.1	45.2	20.7	61.4	19.6	13.2	5.8
3	26.5	7.3	38.8	27.4	58.9	15.5	18.1	7.5
4	15.0	11.6	43.3	30.1	56.7	19.2	18.3	5.8
5, richest	18.5	21.1	37.6	22.9	58.5	22.8	13.7	5.0
Couples' employment patterns:								
Female Breadwinner	18.6	21.9	49.1	10.4	60.1	26.7	12.1	1.1
Both employed	16.7	17.0	38.6	27.7	62.1	18.1	14.7	5.2
Male Breadwinner	29.0	7.3	45.2	18.4	57.4	20.2	16.8	5.6
Both jobless	19.2	31.7	7.5	41.7	56.3	20.7	16.7	6.4
Woman's share of couples' incomes:								
0%	35.6	8.6	35.6	20.1	58.8	20.4	14.2	6.6
1-40%	21.1	12.4	46.3	20.2	59.0	17.8	17.4	5.9
40-60%	10.7	21.8	42.0	25.5	63.2	17.4	16.0	3.4
>60%	24.2	11.0	28.9	35.9	61.3	19.8	14.7	4.2
100%	13.9	17.5	28.5	40.2	54.3	33.8	9.9	2.0
N.	150	109	293	183	2,437	795	633	213

Multivariable findings

Tables 4 and 5 report results from ordered logistic models estimating fertility intentions (from definitely not to definitely yes) by presence of children for men and women, respectively. Model 1 estimates fertility intentions, net of other controls, by household absolute incomes, Model 2 estimates fertility intentions by employment arrangements and household absolute income, and Model 3 by household absolute income and women's share of household income.

Results for women show that income and fertility intentions are positively associated. This result holds for both childless women and mothers. In Model 1, where we control for socio-demographic information but not for partners' employment arrangements nor relative incomes, childless women in the richest 40% households, i.e., in the fourth and fifth richest quintile of the national income distribution, are significantly more likely to intend having a (further) child compared to those in the poorest 20% households, i.e., in the first quintile (Table 5). For mothers, belonging to the second and third quintiles is significantly associated with the intention to have another child in the near future, compared to mothers in the poorest households, while mothers' fertility intentions do not significantly differ between the richest and the poorest households. In Models 2 and 3, where we add controls for partners' absolute and relative incomes, the overall

pattern remains robust. For men, instead, the association between fertility intentions and total household incomes is not statistically significant in any of our model specifications (Table 4).

Next, we examined the association between couples' employment patterns and fertility intentions, net of absolute incomes and controls variables (Model 2). Among childless women and men, employment arrangements do not show any statistical significance with fertility intentions. The differences between the four types of couples' employment arrangements that we consider – male breadwinner, female breadwinner, dual earners, jobless– are very small and none of them is statistically significant according to pairwise comparison tests (results not shown). Hence, independently of gender, once income is properly accounted for, fertility intentions of childless, partnered individuals are independent of whether both partners are employed, or whether only the man or only the woman is. Results on the association between couples' employment patterns and fertility intentions are different among parents. Among fathers, differences between couple types remain not statistically significant, but are (slightly) more visible: fathers' fertility intentions are higher when they are the breadwinner for their households. Pairwise comparisons (not shown) suggest that certainly intending to have a(nother child) is always less likely among fathers in female-breadwinner coupes (diff. male breadwinner vs. female breadwinner=.046; both employed vs. female breadwinner=.029), even fathers in jobless couples have higher fertility intentions than fathers in female-breadwinner couples (diff.=0.022); again, none of the differences are statistically significant. Among childless men, if anything, fertility intentions are lower –though not statistically significant– in both male- and female-breadwinner couples than in dual-earning couples (e.g., diff. in certainly intending to have a child=-0.007 and =-0.009, respectively). Among mothers, differences in fertility intentions across couples' employment arrangements are visible and statistically significant. According to point estimates, mothers in couples where both partners are employed have the lowest fertility intentions of all couple types. The difference is statistically significant when compared to mothers in male-breadwinner couples and even jobless couples (Table 5). There is no statistically significant difference in fertility intentions between mothers in dual-earner couples and those in female-breadwinner couples. Results are reversed –though not statistically significant– among childless women, for whom point estimates indicate higher fertility intentions when the woman is also employed, in addition to the male partner, compared to male breadwinning.

Finally, we examined the association between partners' relative earnings and fertility intentions (Model 3). Net of total household incomes, the share of income provided by the woman shows no significant association with fertility intentions among men. In other words, men's fertility intentions are unrelated to the fact that the male or the female partner is the main or sole earner in the couple and this result holds both for the transition to parenthood and for the transition to the second or higher-order births. Pairwise differences (not shown) between the various couple types are small and never statistically significant among childless men. Among fathers, differences are, again, not statistically significant, but their magnitude is somehow more visible than among childless men and, interestingly, they are of opposite sign: fathers' fertility intentions are never higher in couples where the woman contributes 0% of the couples' total income (diff. in certainly intending to have a child between couples where she contributes 100% vs. 0%=.004; 60-99% vs. 0%=.011; 40-60% vs. 0%=.009; 1-40% vs. 0%=.013). Yet, even if fathers' fertility intentions are

never higher under the male-breadwinner model, they tend to be higher when fathers are the primary earner, i.e., in couples where the woman contributes 1-40% of the total couples' incomes (e.g., diff. between couples where she contributes 40-60% vs. 1-40%=-0.004; 40-60% vs. 1-40%=-0.004; 60-99% vs.1-40%=-0.002; 100% vs. 1-40%=-0.009). For women, instead, results are considerably different. Childless women's intentions to become a mother are significantly stronger when she is the main (i.e., she earns 60% of more of the couple's total incomes) or the sole (i.e., she earns 100% of the household incomes) earner compared to when the she earns between 1-40% (Model 3 for childless women in Table 5). Fertility intentions are similar between childless women who contribute 0% and those who contribute 1-40% to the household income. Regarding the intention to have a second or higher-order child, we find evidence that, among mothers, equal earning is associated with lower fertility intentions compared to both male and female breadwinning: compared to mothers who contribute 40-60% of the total household income, mothers who contribute 0% and 100% are both more likely to intend having another child (diff.=0.032, $p<.05$ and diff.=0.047, $p<0.05$, respectively). Mothers who earn 40-60% of the household income are also significantly less likely to intend having another child compared to working mothers who contribute 1-40% to the household income (Table 5, also diff. in certainly intending to have a child=-.022, $p<0.05$) and to mothers who contributes 0% (diff=-.03, $p<0.05$).

The sign and significance of control variables is as expected. For both women and men, the woman's age is an important predictor of fertility intentions, resulting highly significant in all models. Among partnered women and men aged 40 and over, fertility intentions are reduced compared to respondents in their 30s. Partnered respondents aged between 18 and 29, instead, display a higher likelihood of intending to have a child in the near future compared to older adults, with the exception of childless men: for this group, no significant difference is found between being partnered with a woman aged 18-29 or 30-39. Among childless individuals, education does not show any statistically significant association with fertility intentions, net of other variables included in the model. Among parents, instead, having attained secondary or tertiary vs. lower education and having a partner who attained secondary or tertiary vs. lower education are associated with a higher likelihood of intending to have a first as well as an additional child. Region of residence is only marginally associated with fertility intentions: in our sample, women in Northern Italy appear to have slightly lower fertility intentions compared to women in Central Italy. Finally, the intention to have an additional child is lower among those who already have at least two children.

Table 4: Results from ordered logistic models on the probability of intending to have a child in the next three years, men with and without children

	Childless men						Fathers					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.
Couple type (ref=married)												
Consensual union	-0.42 *	0.22	-0.47 **	0.23	-0.43 *	0.22	-0.13	0.14	-0.13	0.14	-0.14	0.14
Woman's age (ref=30-39)												
18-29	0.37	0.26	0.36	0.26	0.34	0.26	1.03 ***	0.15	1.01 ***	0.15	1.03 ***	0.15
40-49	-2.46 ***	0.26	-2.46 ***	0.26	-2.48 ***	0.26	-1.44 ***	0.11	-1.43 ***	0.11	-1.44 ***	0.11
Woman's educational level (ref=lower secondary)												
upper secondary	0.63 *	0.33	0.61 *	0.33	0.66 **	0.33	0.44 ***	0.16	0.47 ***	0.16	0.44	0.16
tertiary	0.43	0.28	0.40	0.29	0.44	0.28	0.05	0.12	0.07	0.12	0.05	0.12
Man's educational level (ref=lower secondary)												
upper secondary	-0.03	0.33	-0.05	0.33	-0.08	0.34	0.49 ***	0.16	0.50 ***	0.16	0.50 ***	0.16
tertiary	-0.17	0.26	-0.18	0.26	-0.18	0.26	0.25 **	0.11	0.25 ***	0.11	0.25 **	0.11
Region of residence (ref=centre)												
North	-0.14	0.30	-0.15	0.30	-0.13	0.30	0.02	0.12	0.03	0.12	0.03	0.12
South & Islands	0.24	0.33	0.23	0.34	0.27	0.33	0.15	0.13	0.15	0.14	0.16	0.13
Household incomes, in quintiles (ref=1, poorest)												
2	-0.30	0.38	-0.16	0.39	-0.31	0.38	-0.03	0.14	-0.06	0.14	-0.02	0.14
3	0.01	0.37	0.17	0.39	0.00	0.38	0.19	0.15	0.19	0.16	0.15	0.16
4	0.27	0.37	0.37	0.39	0.32	0.40	-0.03	0.16	0.01	0.17	-0.09	0.17
5, richest	-0.03	0.36	0.06	0.39	0.02	0.40	0.26	0.18	0.29	0.19	0.21	0.19
Couples' employment patterns (ref=both employed)												
Female breadwinner			-0.33	0.47					-0.34	0.30		
Male breadwinner			-0.27	0.29					0.19	0.11		
Both jobless			0.40	0.48					-0.08	0.26		
Woman's share of couples' incomes (ref=1-40%)												
0					0.17	0.33					-0.14	0.13
40-60%					-0.02	0.27					-0.05	0.13
>60%					0.26	0.36					-0.03	0.19
100%					-0.06	0.44					-0.10	0.26
N. children (ref=1)												
2+							-1.58 ***	0.10	-1.60 ***	0.10	-1.58 ***	0.10
cut1	-2.33		-2.34		-2.26		-1.00		-0.92		-1.08	
cut2	-1.26		-1.26		-1.19		0.51		0.59		0.43	
cut3	1.26		1.27		1.33		2.58		2.67		2.51	
Sample size	339		339		339		1,845		1,845		1,845	

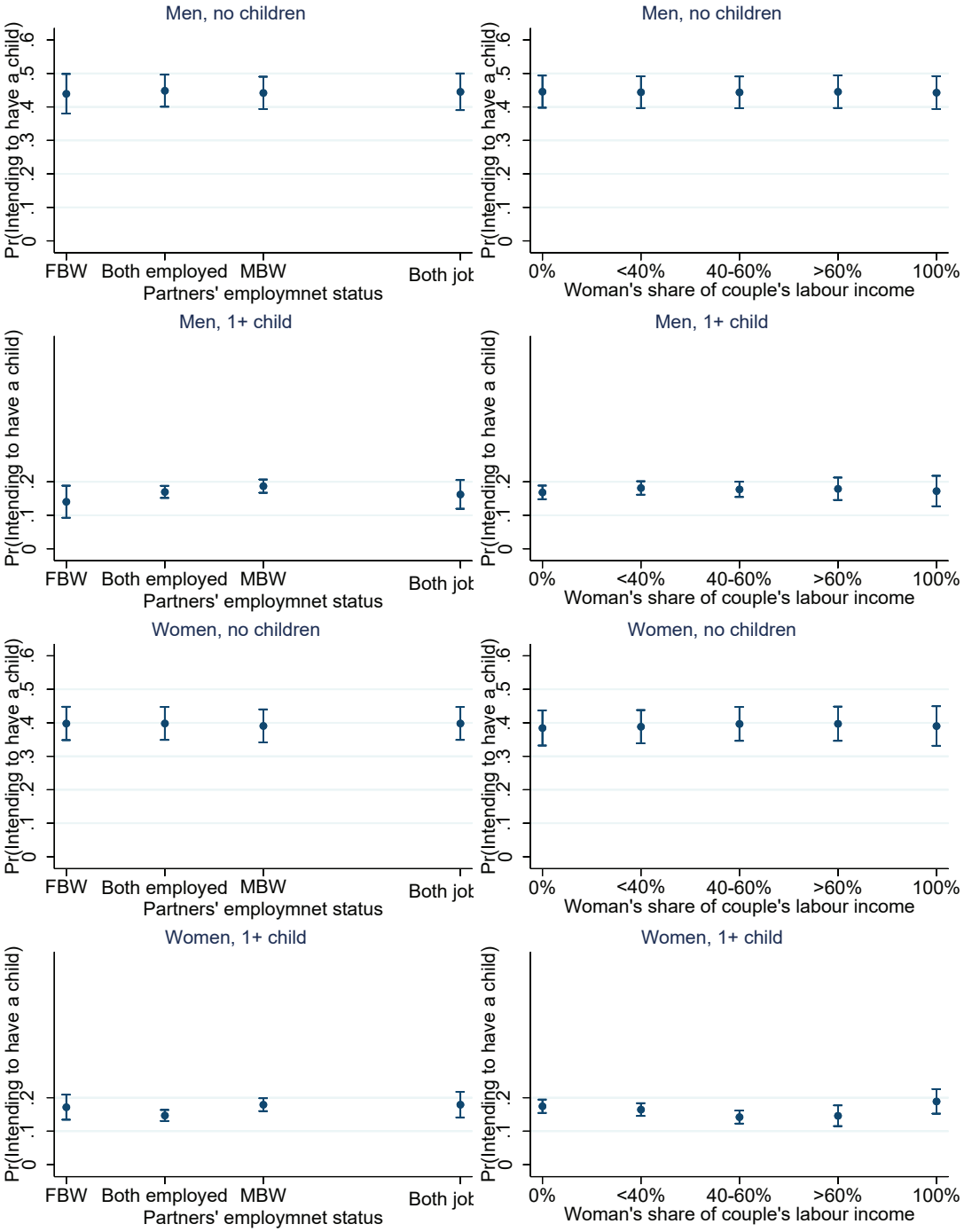
Note: *** p <.01; ** p<.05; *p<.1

Table 5: Results from ordered logistic models on the probability of intending to have a child in the next three years, women with and without children

	Childless women						Mothers					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.	Coef.	s.e.
Couple type (ref=married)												
Consensual union	-0.36	0.23	-0.43 *	0.24	-0.37	0.24	-0.07	0.14	-0.04	0.14	-0.06	0.14
Woman's age (ref=30-39)												
18-29	0.62 **	0.26	0.69 **	0.27	0.77 ***	0.27	0.86 ***	0.15	0.84 ***	0.16	0.85 ***	0.16
40-49	-2.26 ***	0.27	-2.24 ***	0.27	-2.26 ***	0.28	-1.78 ***	0.11	-1.78 ***	0.11	-1.79 ***	0.11
Woman's educational level (ref=lower secondary)												
upper secondary	0.01	0.34	-0.04	0.35	-0.02	0.35	0.31 ***	0.17	0.39 **	0.17	0.35 **	0.17
tertiary	-0.07	0.29	-0.10	0.29	-0.10	0.30	0.12	0.12	0.15	0.12	0.14	0.12
Man's educational level (ref=lower secondary)												
upper secondary	0.41	0.32	0.41	0.32	0.42	0.32	0.80 ***	0.17	0.80 ***	0.17	0.75 ***	0.17
tertiary	0.09	0.26	0.09	0.26	0.12	0.26	0.36 ***	0.12	0.37 ***	0.12	0.34 ***	0.12
Region of residence (ref=centre)												
North	-0.55 *	0.30	-0.54 *	0.30	-0.57 *	0.30	-0.23 *	0.14	-0.22	0.14	-0.24 *	0.14
South & Islands	-0.36	0.34	-0.32	0.34	-0.28	0.34	0.22	0.14	0.17	0.14	0.22	0.14
Household incomes, in quintiles (ref=1, poorest)												
2	0.22	0.38	0.21	0.38	0.42	0.39	0.24 *	0.14	0.27 *	0.14	0.19	0.14
3	0.50	0.38	0.50	0.40	0.76 *	0.40	0.43 ***	0.16	0.53 ***	0.16	0.45 **	0.16
4	0.90 **	0.37	0.84 **	0.38	1.08 ***	0.38	0.17	0.17	0.35 **	0.18	0.25	0.17
5, richest	0.60 *	0.36	0.47	0.38	0.61 *	0.37	0.06	0.19	0.26	0.20	0.13	0.20
Couples' employment patterns (ref=both employed)												
Female breadwinner			0.06	0.47					0.31	0.24		
Male breadwinner			-0.39	0.27					0.40 ***	0.12		
Both jobless			-0.01	0.62					0.41 *	0.24		
Woman's share of couples' incomes (ref=1-40%)												
0					-0.08	0.32					0.12	0.13
40-60%					0.72 ***	0.27					-0.29 **	0.14
>60%					0.70 *	0.37					-0.23	0.21
100%					0.94 *	0.50					0.30	0.23
N. children (ref=1)												
2+							-1.58 ***		-1.59 ***	0.11	-1.62 ***	0.11
cut1	-2.15		-2.33		-1.68		-0.81		-0.88		-0.50	
cut2	-1.12		-1.31		-0.63		0.51		0.45		0.82	
cut3	1.03		0.86		1.57		2.50		2.44		2.82	
Sample size	342		342		342		1,811		1,811		1,811	

Note: *** p <.01; ** p<.05; *p<.1

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of certainly intending to have a child in the next three years by partners' employment status and woman's share of couple's total incomes, men with and without children



Discussion

This contribution offers the first study on the association between economic characteristics from a couple's perspective—namely couples' absolute and relative incomes and partners' employment patterns—and fertility intentions among partnered individuals in Italy. Linking individual-level information on fertility intentions and partners' employment status at the time of interview from the Families, Social Subjects and Lifecycle survey with register data on individual- and household-level information on incomes from the Income Statistical Register, we estimated the association between couples' absolute incomes, relative incomes, and partners' employment with fertility intentions.

Our results clearly show that income is positively and robustly associated with fertility intentions in Italy: women living in higher-income households are more likely to intend becoming mothers and having an additional child, compared to their lower-income counterparts. For men, associations are never statistically significant, but point estimates suggest a similarly positive association. Couples' absolute incomes, hence, appear to favour planning a(n additional) birth, particularly among women.

Results also show that, net of the household total income, it does not matter for men's fertility intentions whether both partners are employed, only the man is employed, or only the woman is. This result suggests that, at least in the planning phase of childbearing, men do not perceive conservative gender-role arrangements as a precondition for fertility. Rather, female breadwinning, equal earning, male breadwinning and even joblessness—net of absolute incomes—are equally likely as main arena for childbearing. Similarly, men's fertility intentions appear unrelated to the woman's contribution to the total household income: a woman out-earning her partner is equally likely for fertility intentions as a man out-earning his partner, or both partners contributing equally. These results hold for both the intention to have a first child and a second or higher-order child. Among childless women, results are similar to those of men: employment and earning arrangements among partners are unrelated to fertility intentions. Female breadwinning and equal earning are associated with higher fertility intentions among childless women. Among mothers, instead, we find some evidence in support of specialization. Specialization appears to be the arrangement that may most likely lead to planning a second or higher-order birth among mothers. The intention to have an additional child in the short term is higher when the woman is unemployed or inactive and the man is employed, compared to when both partners are employed. Crucially, we find that, for women, the intention to have a higher-order birth is more likely also when she is the sole breadwinner (although this association is not statistically significant) and when none of the partners is employed. In other words, male and female breadwinning appear to be equally acceptable for mothers, as fertility intentions are higher under both breadwinning arrangements than they are for women in dual-earning couples. Interestingly, mothers' fertility intentions are always lower when they are in a dual-earner couple than in any other couple type, including couples where none of the partners is employed, suggesting that having another child is perhaps more to do with time availability than gender-role specialization. Possibly, having only one or none of the partners employed frees up time and makes childbearing plans more feasible

among parents, whereas work-family reconciliation linked to dual-earning may make childbearing plans more challenging.

Overall, our effort to incorporate the gender-specific influences of income in explaining childbearing intentions constitutes an innovation of this study compared to prior work (e.g., Matysiak and Vignoli, 2013). Our findings are novel for Italy, and challenge classical micro-level assumptions based on the "New Home Economics" approach as well as assumption based on conservative gender norms that would predict higher fertility among male-breadwinner couples with non-employed women and in dual-earner couples where men are the main earners and women contribute a smaller share of the total household incomes. Favouring a re-traditionalization of gender roles—e.g., via long and generous leave periods for mothers but not for fathers or generous monetary subsidies which, if not combined with an increased supply of childcare services, may push mothers out of the labor market—does not appear to be a stimulus to fertility in Italy. For mothers, we find that providing none (0%) of the household incomes is significantly associated with a reduced likelihood of intending to have another child compared to earning about the same (40-60%) or all (100%) of the couples' total incomes: women's economic independence appears to matter for fertility intentions. For partnered, childless women, economic independence from the male partner significantly increases the likelihood of intending to become mother in the near future. Women contributing about half of the total household income, those contributing a large share or all of the household income are significantly more likely to report intending to have a child than women who contribute less than 40%.

Rather, our findings point to the existence of incompatibilities between dual employment and fertility. Dual earning, in fact, may clash with having a larger family due to the difficulty in reconciling work with childcare in a context characterised by ungenerous support for families with children exemplified by the low share of children aged 0-2 who are in formal childcare—less than one in three (Istat, 2024). On the other hand, when one or both partners are not employed, net of absolute economic resources, parents may find it easier to reconcile work and family life, hence be more likely to report intending to have another child in the short term. Existing differences found in the associations between partners' employment arrangements and fertility intentions between childless women and mothers may depend on the fact that the preconditions for childbearing are different by parity, with stable employment for both partners and economic security being determinants for transition to parenthood, while, for the transition to a second birth, time availability becomes more important, net of absolute incomes. The fact that we only find differences by parity for women and not for men may indicate that women's fertility intentions are more responsive to time availability than men's, because women remain, by far, the main provider of care for their dependent children, even when they are employed (Istat, 2016).

Study limitations

We acknowledge some limitations of our study. The approach that we use to estimate income is not free from limitations. First, only income data provided by administrative sources are considered, meaning that undocumented income, e.g., from underground economy, is disregarded. Second, the household composition for the household income estimates is defined according to population registers, and it may not coincide with the de facto household at the interview. Second,

we cannot rule out that absence of statistically significance in some of the associations measured may be driven by a small sample size—particularly in the sample of childless men and women. For this reason, we have commented also non-significant associations between our key explanatory variables and fertility intentions, paying attention to always report whether differences were statistically significant or not. Finally, because we are interested in a couple's perspective, we only refer to a sample of partnered individuals. We do so because co-residence with a partner is an important mediator of the association between own economic characteristics and fertility but we acknowledge that the role of own income and employment may be differently associated to fertility intentions among single individuals.

Conclusions and implications

More broadly, our findings align with recent micro-level evidence documenting a profound transformation in the relationship between women's employment and fertility, challenging the explanatory power of the Beckerian model of household specialization and calling for a renewed theoretical framework (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2026). Our findings complement this emerging evidence. While household economic resources remain central to fertility intentions, we find little support for the notion that traditional specialization within couples or a return to conventional gender roles is associated with stronger fertility intentions. Once household income is taken into account, who earns the income matters relatively little for men's fertility intentions and only selectively for women's, suggesting that the economic foundations of fertility decisions are increasingly rooted in couples' overall resources rather than in a traditional gendered division of labor. At the same time, the lower fertility intentions observed among dual-earner mothers point to the persistence of work-family reconciliation constraints rather than to a renewed preference for specialization. Together, these findings highlight the continuing importance of institutional conditions that enable couples to reconcile paid work and family life.

The present paper carries substantive policy implications. Sustaining fertility in Italy requires moving beyond narrowly-focused pronatalist measures, such as financial incentives or tax breaks, which recent studies have shown to be largely ineffective (Guetto et al., 2025; Gauthier & Gietel-Basten, 2025). Instead, household income and women's economic independence emerge as key factors positively and robustly associated with fertility intentions. Among mothers, however, intentions to have an additional child are less common in dual-earner households than under specialized arrangements or even in jobless couples, highlighting persistent tensions between time availability and childbearing. Overall, our results underscore the effectiveness of structural policies that promote economic stability throughout the life course and facilitate the reconciliation of paid work and family life (Vignoli and Guetto, 2025). This does not necessarily imply a shift toward fully gender-egalitarian household roles; rather, it suggests that a stable dual-earner household with sufficient income is increasingly perceived as a prerequisite for childbearing in contemporary Italy, given labor market instability, rising costs of children, and declining real wages.

Finally, administrative data sources remain largely underutilized in family and fertility research in Italy. This study breaks new ground by pioneering the integration of purpose-designed social survey data with large-scale registers to study fertility. By demonstrating the potential of such data integration, our work not only represents a methodological innovation for Italian family

research but also opens up vast opportunities for future studies to investigate fertility and family dynamics with unprecedented precision and depth.

Data availability statement

Microdata from the 2016 Families, Social Subjects and Lifecycle (FSS) survey are not publicly available and cannot be distributed. The microdata can be accessed, upon formal request, in the form of "scientific use files" for study and research purposes. Additional information can be found at the following website: https://www.istat.it/en/analysis-and-products/microdata-files. The BDR-I (stemming from 'Banca Dati Reddituale – Integrata') microdata, a module of the Istat's Income Statistical Register which integrates data from individual tax returns administered by the Ministry of Economics and Finance with income register estimates and other administrative sources, are not currently accessible to third parties due to strict privacy constraints. Relatedly, the dataset generated during this study by integrating microdata from the FSS survey and the BDR-I module is not publicly available. The research was carried out as part of the thematic laboratory "Impact of the pandemic on life courses and intergenerational relationships (ID-227)", approved by Istat.

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