

The determinants of childlessness among men and women in later adult life in Italy: do they differ?

Maria Letizia Tanturri

Department of Statistical Sciences – University of Padua (I)

e-mail: .tanturri@stat.unipd.it

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the association between social status and childlessness in post-transitional Italy. It investigates the determinants of childlessness among men and women in later adult life in Italy, using data on a sub sample of 30-49 years old men (7,254) from the Multipurpose Italian survey, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003. A weighted multinomial logit model is used to contrast “voluntary childless men (or women)” with other categories: the “un-voluntary childless” and fathers (or mothers). Covariates include background and early life course characteristics; family formation variables; work related features, attitudes and values. Results seem to corroborate the hypothesis that voluntary childlessness is a common behaviour among men and women, but its determinants partly differ, with particular regard to socio-economic status. In particular voluntary childlessness among men seems linked mainly to poor education, poor health and worse social status. Conversely among women the opposite is true: those with a university degree and a managerial position are more likely to be voluntary childless. Family disruption or celibacy are common cause for not having and not willing to have children for both men and women, as well as secularisation and anti-traditionalist attitudes and the residence in the North of Italy. Therefore, voluntary childlessness – whose diffusion today is still rather limited in Italy – could spread in a different way across social classes: it might become more and more common among both “power women” and “unsuccessful men”. The implications for couples’ fertility would vary according to the type of assortative mating

Keywords: *voluntary childlessness, childless men, low fertility, fertility determinants, Italy.*

1. Introduction

In the last decades, European societies have experienced a rise in (in)voluntary childlessness (Sobotka 2009; Tanturri & Mencarini 2008). Recent estimates of permanent childlessness for the

cohorts born around 1965 reveal that it has become an increasingly large group in Italy (~25%), Germany and Finland (~20%) (OECD 2011), countries characterised by different cultural and socioeconomic background.

The trends in the prevalence of definite childlessness are remarkably similar across European countries: a peak in childlessness rates for the 1880-1910 birth cohorts, a more or less continuous drop across the 1910-1945 birth cohorts, and a steady rise across the cohorts born after the Second World War (Rowland 2007). In the last decades, the spread of the phenomenon is accompanied by attitudes and values change as in many countries not having a child is now acceptable and even considered the best option (Salles et al. 2010; Rossier et al. 2011, Sobotka and Testa. 2008). The choice of remaining childless mostly is not a decision for or against parenthood but rather a process in which ambiguity plays a role. Today, countries with similar levels of completed fertility can be characterized by different proportions of childless women (e.g. Austria and Spain) (OECD 2011). The patterns suggest that the factors influencing childlessness are somewhat different from those concerned with low fertility as a whole, but a comprehensive theory of childlessness is not well-developed yet and it is not clear how childlessness is now associated with socio-economic status and how it spreads across social classes. Only in the Anglo-Saxon countries there is a long tradition in this field, while in Southern and Eastern Europe studies are few and fragmentary and they are usually focused only on women's characteristics and behaviour.

In this paper we are interested to focus on the association between social status and childlessness in post-transitional Italy, comparing men's and women's socioeconomic determinants of childlessness, in order to envisage a possible different diffusion mechanism by gender. The aims of this paper is to delineate profiles of childless men and women, distinguishing between voluntary and un-voluntary childlessness, and contrast them to fathers (and mothers), as a control group. It seems sensible to hypothesises that some variables are associated to childlessness similarly for both men and women (e.g. number of siblings), while other can affect the probability of being voluntary childless in a different way by sex. Moreover, we investigate the main reasons leading to childlessness by focussing on how voluntary childlessness can be associated with differences in value orientation, (e.g. in terms of religiosity, or traditionalism). These topics are examined using one of the Multipurpose Italian surveys, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003 in Italy.

Our findings are tied to a range of theoretical approaches, some highlighting cultural change as the main drivers behind men's and couples' preferences, thereby changing fertility patterns (Park 2005, Rowland 1998, Houseknecht 1982), other emphasising the importance of structural constraints that makes parenting more onerous both financially and in terms of opportunity costs (González & Jurado-Guerrero 2006).

2. The context

Among Italian women born in 1965 who have virtually completed their reproductive career, childlessness is the highest registered in Europe: about 25% from official data (OECD 2011). This makes Italy more similar to the Northern European model (Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, or Denmark), than to the Mediterranean one (Portugal, Spain and, in part, France), where childlessness is still rare (Toulemon, 1996).

The U-shaped time trend across Italian cohorts reproduces, with some delay, the same trend observed in many Western European nations (Frejka et al. 2001; Prioux, 1993; Rowland 1998): starting from 17% at the beginning of the century, declining to 9% immediately after World War II, and consistently higher thereafter, reaching more than 20% recently (Istat 1997, 2003). According to Sobotka (2004, chapter 5), the prevalence of childlessness in Italy is projected to increase considerably if most recent age-specific first birth probabilities remains constant: about 23 % for the cohort born in 1970 and more than a quarter of the generation born in 1975. The picture is projected to be different with only a moderate increase (17% for the cohort born in 1970 and 16% for that born in 1975) if one adjusts for tempo effects (Sobotka 2004).

It is also of interest to note that the overall level of Italian childlessness is comprised of rather heterogeneous regional trends. Whereas overall fertility was higher in the South, the remaining unmarried and childless was in fact more common. This is in contrast to the North, where overall fertility was lower, but where childlessness was less common (Santini, 1995). The situation has recently completely reversed. Therefore, these patterns indicate that most likely the causes of childlessness have changed over time.

3. Background and research questions

Childlessness may include a variety of situations, with different implications for the understanding of reproductive strategies (De Rose, 1996; Houseknecht, 1983). A first basic distinction must be drawn between men who voluntarily refuse parenthood and those who are unable to have children (Bloom & Pebley, 1982). In practice, however, the distinction is complicated. Many men delay parenthood to the point when it becomes unlikely, or impossible, in which case voluntary postponement transforms into involuntary childlessness (Rowland 1998). This brings to the fore the importance of the temporal dimension in this type of study and the useful distinction between *temporary* and *permanent* childlessness (Bloom & Pebley, 1982). Similarly, the boundary between choice and constraint may also be indistinct in many cases. For instance, failure to form a union may depend on choice (women may have lower preferences towards family life) or on circumstances (inability to find a suitable partner), or, a combination of both.

At macro level, literature detects as major factors associated with the changes in rates of childlessness trends in marriage (e.g., median age at marriage and the proportions marrying), trends in family formation (e.g., median age at the first birth and average family size), and the different role of voluntary and involuntary factors (Rowland 2007, Hakim 2005). The impact of family change (e.g. the rise of divorce rate) on childlessness remain an unexplored area of research.

It is not easy to identify the individual determinants of this behaviour: on the one hand data specifically collected to assess when remaining childless is a voluntary choice are rare and fragmentary (usually qualitative studies), on the other hand predictors do depend on the context and time, and results are not always consistent. Hakim (2005), for instance, finds that the European voluntary childless are distinctive group in terms of attitudes and values, but far less so in terms of social and economic characteristics (Hakim 2002). In other studies, however, education, social class and employment status seem to be important determinants for childlessness, irrespective of the partnership status. Usually childlessness is associated with higher levels of education (Bachu 1999; Biddlecom and Martin 2006; Keizer, Dykstra et al. 2008; Kneale and Joshi 2008), but some recent studies give controversial results: for instance in Norway and Denmark in the early cohorts highly educated women remained childless most frequently; in later cohorts, women with low education are more likely to remain childless (OECD 2011). Two studies from Hoem et al. (2006) and Neyer and Hoem (2008), cast doubt on the assumption that higher education per se must result in higher childlessness: several factors – such as the field of education and the institutional context - may influence the relationship between education and childlessness. The role of household income, too, is ambiguous: in certain studies it seems to have a markedly positive effect on voluntary childlessness (Abma & Peterson, 1995; Bloom & Pebley, 1982), whereas in others its impact is modest (Heaton & Jacobson 1999, Hakim 2005). Childless women tended to have greater gender equity within marriages, to be less traditional, non-religious, employed in professional occupations, and to have experienced marital disruption (Heaton et al. 1992; 1999, Hakim 2005, Mencarini and Tanturri 2008). Other significant factors enhancing the odds of remaining childless are being an only child, or marrying late (Kiernan 1989, Bloom & Pebley 1982, Abma & Peterson, 1995; Abma & Martinez, 2002, Murphy and Wang 2001, Mencarini and Tanturri 2006). Further research is necessary to understand whether in a post transitional society as Italy childless women are still strongly characterised by a different socioeconomic background.

Men's circumstances and attitudes are likely to form an important part of the explanation for childlessness among women (Parr 2007), but only very few studies have been dedicated to investigate the profiles of childless men and sometimes only incidentally (Perr 2007, Weston & Qu, 2001 on Australia; Kiernan 1989, McAllister and Clark, 1999 on Britain, Tanturri 2010 in Italy). Voluntary childlessness is generally higher among men than among women, in all countries (Hakim 2005). Despite the fact that childbearing generally has a bigger impact on women's lives, women seem to be more keen on having children. However, women's aspirations to become mothers might be frustrated

by men's attitudes, whilst in other cases other women's attitudes to having children tend to follow those of the reluctant men in their lives (Cannold 2004). For instance, in Italy it has been found that differences of opinion between partners are a significant reason for forgoing parenthood intentionally: (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008), even if a more recent longitudinal study (Testa, Rosina and Cavalli 2011) shows that the inhibiting effect of partners' disagreements on couple's pregnancy is relevant only among couples who have already two or more children.

Studies specifically on men show that childlessness determinants partly differ between gender, but also across countries. Family disruption or celibacy are common cause for not having and not willing to have children for both men and women, as well as secularisation and anti-traditionalist attitudes. Union formation and occupational variables are strong later life predictors of whether a man is childless, but the direction of the association is country dependent: in Britain the most educated men and those in professional occupation who were more likely to be childless (Kiernan 1989, Hakim 2005), while in Australia and in Italy the opposite is true (Parr 2007, Tanturri 2010). Similarly in Italy, voluntary childlessness among men seems linked mainly to poor education, poor health and worse social status, while among women the opposite is true (Tanturri 2010). Father's and mother's occupations, the type of schooling and birthplace are important early life-course variables predictors of whether a man is childless in later life, in Australia (Parr 2007). According to these previous findings, it seems that the spread of childlessness among men has its own determinants, therefore integrating men in the analysis on childlessness is necessary to forecast the spread of the phenomenon across social classes.

A key question is whether the same characteristics may distinguish childless men and women respectively from fathers and mothers. In addition, it seems particularly interesting to identify which are the features that voluntary childless men and women have in common. Voluntary childlessness in Italy represents a relatively new behaviour. If so childless men could be considered 'forerunners' in a context characterized by relatively high values of family life and children, low levels of gender equality within the family and also by inadequate opportunities for combining childrearing and work career. It is therefore important to understand who these men are. Do they differ in terms of background variables? Or rather in terms of entry into union? Is it the case that these men manifest less traditional value orientation?

Characteristics distinguishing Italian childless men (and the different categories among them) from fathers can only partly be hypothesized from past studies on childless women, therefore it is interesting to focus on men and compare their profiles with those of childless women. It has been found that Italian voluntary childless women, in contrast to mothers, appear to be less religious; to come from smaller families of origin; to have cohabitated at least once in life; to have entered their first union later; to have had, in the initial period of their union, unstable occupations and flexible work schedules, and little leisure time, both for themselves and for their partner (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008).

4. Data and descriptive findings

Our study is based on data from the Multipurpose Italian survey, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003 in Italy. We select a sub sample of 30-49 years old men (7,254) and women (7,580). Importantly, the cohort born around 1960s are the first Italian cohorts to experience a significant rise in permanent childlessness.

We divide the sample into three categories: 1) fathers (or mothers); 2) “Voluntary childless men” (or women), defined as those having no children at the interview and declaring that they do not want to have children in the future; 3) “Involuntary childless men” (or women) are those having no children, but willing to have in the future. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1.

Typically, prevalence of childlessness decreases with age, while voluntary childless rises, as illustrated in Figure 1 and 2. Childlessness is slightly more common among men in both age groups, while voluntary childlessness is more spread among women. Gender differences are wider in the over 40 years old group (Fig. 2)

5. Preliminary results

A weighted multinomial logit model (Greene, 2002) is used to contrast voluntary and involuntary childless men (or women) to fathers (or to mothers).

We keep into account five typologies of covariates variables:

- *early life-course characteristics*: such as parents’ level of education, parents’ professional position, number of siblings;
- *background characteristics*, e.g. age, health status, own education, geographical residence
- *family formation variables*: e.g. cohabitation, either pre-marital and permanent, divorce, permanent celibacy;
- *work related variables*: e.g. occupational status, type of position;
- *attitudes and values*: e.g. religiosity, traditional beliefs, gender-sensitiveness.

The multinomial logit models explain a large part of variability among the different typologies of men and women (pseudo R square equal to 0.41 for men and to 0.34 for women).

Celibacy (or having never been in union) is still the major cause for childlessness- no matter if voluntary or not - for both men and women, even if many singles at the interview do not exclude to have children in the future (Table 2a). Marital disruption is another factor strongly associated to childlessness in general, regardless gender (Table 2a). This result is consistent with the Italian context where parenthood is usually considered a couple decision: therefore, childlessness occurs as a sort of side-effect when couple has not been formed yet or has split.

Consistently with previous results, those coming from larger families of origin are less likely not to have children and this holds for both men and women. The effect of the family of origins social status is not univocal, but it seems that - others things being equal - having a more educated father increases the probability of being childless, regardless gender.

Childlessness among men –voluntary or not - is linked basically to unemployment or being out of the labour market for some reasons, while women with the same characteristics are more likely to be mothers (Table 2b). Conversely both men and women living in the Southern Italy have a lower probability to be childless, even when we control for traditional opinions and religious attitudes. Involuntary childlessness is more common among the youngest group than among the oldest, while for the voluntary childlessness the opposite is true, by confirming thus descriptive findings (Table 2a).

As expected, voluntary childless men are more likely to be older, living in the North of Italy, and to be only children (Table 2a). More surprisingly voluntary childlessness among men seems linked mainly to poor education, poor health and worse social status (Table 2a and 2b). Among women the opposite is true: voluntary childlessness is associated to a higher social status. *Ceteris paribus*, women with a university degree and a managerial position are more likely to be voluntary childless, and not mothers (Table 2 and 2b). In contrast with previous literature, cohabitation experiences (as a sign of adoption of non-conventional life-style) reduce the probability of being in the childless groups regardless gender.

However, the voluntary childless seems to be less traditionalist with regard to marriage (as they agree that “marriage is an old fashioned institution”), but not with regard to women’s role (as they agree that “a housewife is a self-fulfilled woman”) and this seems to hold for both men and women (Table 2b). The hypothesis that voluntary childless men and women may have a distrustful attitude towards people has not been confirmed by our findings (Table 2b). In agreement with previous literature, secularized people are more likely to be voluntary childless, but the marginal effect is higher for women than for men (Table 2b), probably because they are more select to a certain extent.

Tentative conclusions

This study tries to shed light on an unexplored research topic: male childlessness in Italy. Unfortunately our data do not allow to make any clear distinction between men who have never wanted to be parents (“early articulators”) from those who take this decision along the life-course, or, again, from those called “permanent postponers”, who go on putting off the moment to have babies in an imprecise future.

Our results – despite their limits - seem to corroborate the hypothesis that the determinants of childless among men and women partly differ. In particular voluntary childlessness among men seems

linked mainly to poor education, poor health and worse social status (e.g the unemployed). Conversely women with a university degree and a managerial position are more likely to be voluntary childless. Therefore, voluntary childlessness – whose diffusion today is still rather limited in Italy – could spread in a different way across social classes: it might become more and more common among both “power women” and “unsuccessful men”. The implications for couples’ fertility would vary according to the type of assortative mating. Not surprisingly, couples’ fragility and permanent celibacy are still important factors associated to childlessness regardless gender, as well as secularisation, anti-traditionalist attitudes and the residence in the Central and Northern Italy.

Table 1. Sample by sex, age and typologies. Three categories: involuntary childless, voluntary childlessness and fathers

	Involuntary childless men	Voluntary childless men	Fathers	Total
	absolute numbers			
30-39	1,936	74	1,777	3,787
40-49	726	110	2,631	3,467
Total	2,662	184	4,408	7,254
	Row percentages			
30-39	51	2	47	100
40-49	21	3	76	100
Total	37	3	61	100

	Involuntary childless women	Voluntary childless women	Mothers	Total
	absolute numbers			
30-39	1,297	70	2,414	3,781
40-49	580	132	3,087	3,799
Total	1,877	202	5,501	7,580
	Row percentages			
30-39	34	2	64	100
40-49	15	3	81	100
Total	25	3	73	100

Source: Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors 2003

Figure 1. Prevalence of childlessness on the sample, by age class and sex

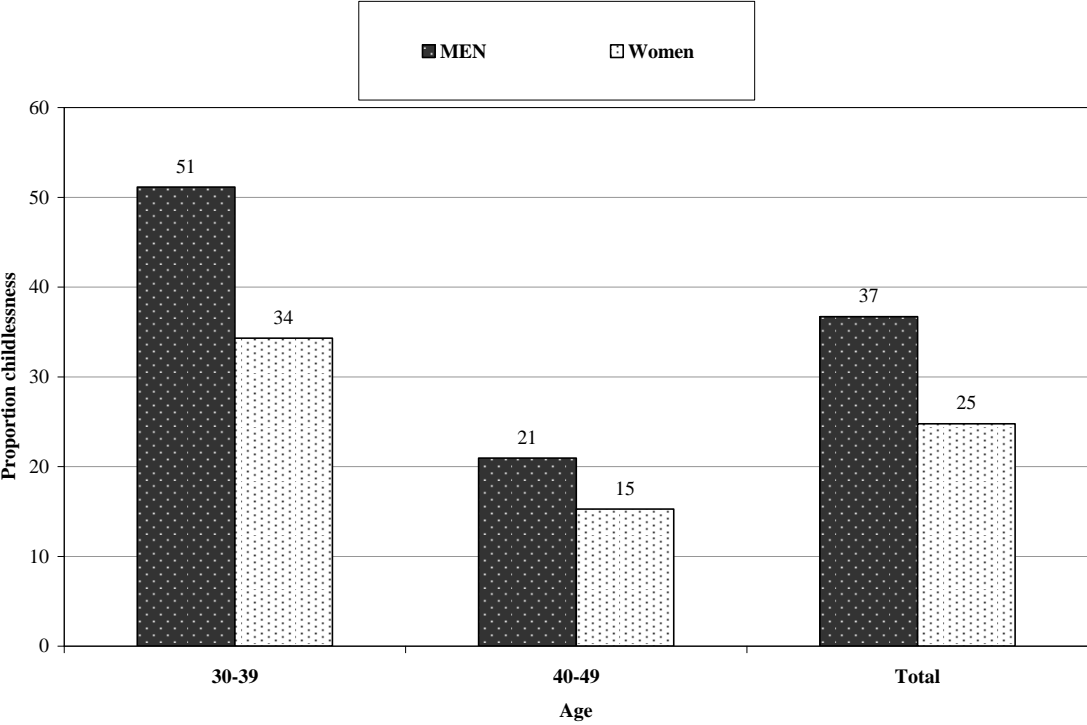


Figure 2. Prevalence of voluntary childlessness among those having no children, by age class and sex

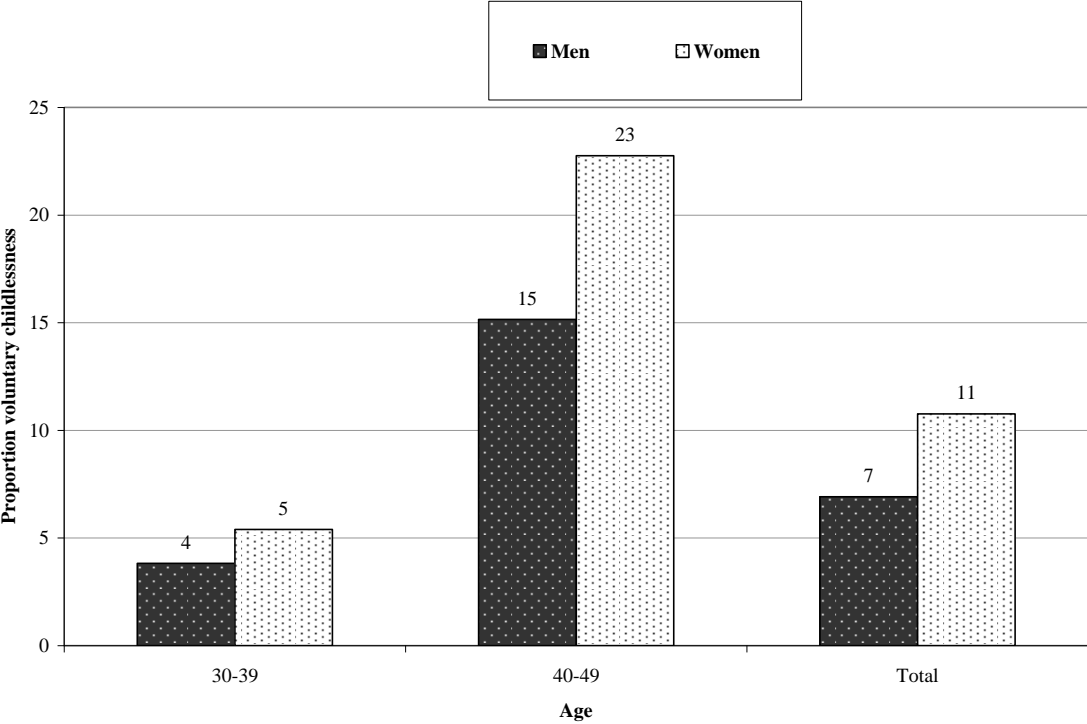


Table 2a: Results of weighted multinomial logistic regression analysis for characteristics predicting childlessness. Reference category (fathers and mothers). Baseline probability and marginal effects (continued...)

		FATHERS vs		MOTHERS vs	
		involuntary childless MEN	voluntary childless MEN	involuntary childless WOMEN	voluntary childless WOMEN
Baseline probability		0.31	0.03	0.17	0.03
		MARGINAL EFFECTS		MARGINAL EFFECTS	
EARLY LIFECOURSE CHARACTERISTICS					
Fathers' Education	High (Medium)	0.043	0.005	0.027	0.005
	No Education	-0.035	0.005	-0.080	-0.013
Mothers' Education	High (Medium)	0.027	0.004	0.006	-0.001
	No Education	-0.008	0.003	0.067	0.026
Fathers's emplyment status	manager	-0.011	-0.004	-0.004	0.004
	white collar (blue collar)	-0.026	0.002	-0.003	0.007
	other	-0.030	-0.001	-0.023	-0.002
	unemployed	-0.038	0.009	-0.015	0.004
Number of siblings	0	n.s	0.016	0.040	0.002
	1				
	2 or plus	-0.088	-0.005	-0.017	-0.004
BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS					
Age	30-39 (40-49)	0.240	-0.022	0.181	-0.048
Health Status	chronical desease (no chron. desease)	-0.076	0.066	-0.039	0.006
Geographical Area	North				
	Centre	n.s.	0.000*	0.004	-0.001
	South	-0.079	-0.015	-0.024	-0.015
Education	Univ. Degree (High School) Compulsory or less	0.053	-0.003	0.031	0.009
		-0.053	0.005	-0.058	0.003

Source: Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors 2003. All estimates are significant at 5%, with the exception of those with an * that are significant at 1%. N.s. are estimates not statistically significant.

Table 2b: Results of weighted multinomial logistic regression analysis for characteristics predicting childlessness. Reference category (fathers and mothers). Baseline probability and marginal effects (...continued)

		FATHERS vs		MOTHERS vs	
		involuntary childless MEN	voluntary childless MEN	involuntary childless WOMEN	voluntary childless WOMEN
FAMILY FORMATION					
Marital Status	never married (married)	0.713	0.071	0.587	0.152
	divorce/separated	0.359	0.014	0.148	0.049
Cohabitation	never				
	ever	-0.063	-0.014	-0.070	-0.015
Divorce	never				
	ever	-0.085	0.007	-0.023	-0.001
WORK-RELATED CHARACTERISTICS					
Current employment status	manager (white collar)	-0.007	-0.015	0.054	0.001
	blue collar	-0.008	-0.007	-0.045	-0.002
	other	-0.022	-0.009	-0.013	n.s.
	unemployed	0.058	0.008	-0.087	-0.004
Percentage of working life employed	pctlavoro	-0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000
ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS					
Agreement with these statements (vs. non agreement)	A housewife is a self-fulfilled woman	-0.021	0.002	0.002	0.012
	Marriage is an old- fashioned institution	-0.051	0.020	-0.016	0.005
	People is trustworthy	-0.016	0.005	0.010	0.008
Religious attitude	(religious) secularized	-0.022	0.017	-0.030	0.034

Source: Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors 2003. All estimates are significant at 5%, with the exception of those with an * that are significant at 1%. N.s. are estimates not statistically significant.

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ⁱ Tentative explanations for this U-shape trend can be found in Poston & Trent (1982), Houseknecht (1982) and Rowland (1998).