

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE AND CHILDCARE USE IN ITALY

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Introduction

Italian persistent low fertility is a well-known phenomenon, however still attractive in the demographic scientific literature. Why Italy has experienced such a strong fertility decline, similarly to some but in contrast with other European countries, still remains a challenging question. In particular, the difficulties in reconciling work and family, besides greater economic uncertainty for young couples, have become central when trying to understand the gap between realized and desired number of children. The increase of female labour force participation, greater opportunity-costs for mothers to take care of their young children on a full-time basis, the rigidity of the labour market (especially with regard to flexible and part-time jobs, and to the possibility to re-enter after a longer parental leave) are often pointed at as significant determinants when investigating low fertility. In such a context the availability of childcare services reaches clearly the top of the agenda regarding the set-up of friendlier family policies.

If public childcare for children aged 3-5 is well developed in Italy and used by 95 percent of children, the opposite may be stated for the availability of childcare services for children below age 3 used only by 6 percent (Del Boca, Locatelli, and Vuri, 2005). Public childcare for children aged 0-3 is characterized by high levels of heterogeneity across regions (Del Boca and Vuri, 2006). The access to public childcare strongly depends on family size, income and composition, thus, due to the heavy unbalance between supply and demand, in practice it is available only for low income families. Private childcare, on the other side, is less widespread than the public one, its cost is much higher and represents a significant economic burden for families. Moreover, together with availability, childcare use depends on the hours of care offered, which of course, affect the opportunity-costs for mothers. As a result, the taking care of young children is still largely delegated to families (e.g. grand-parents or other relatives, baby-sitters, other forms of self-organized childcare), compromising, among others, an easier reconciliation between work and family.

Aim and data

In the current research we focus on the socio-economic profile of families with respect to the use of childcare services. The aim is to investigate whether socio-economic differences, that may proxy also for cultural differences, influence the use of childcare.

We focus both on children aged 0-5, i.e. in pre-compulsory education, and children aged 0-3, for whom there is a limited availability of public childcare facilities.

In the first step we would like to see whether and how the use/not use of childcare services varies with respect to parents' education, employment status, general economic situation, the availability of alternative not paid childcare (e.g. grand-parents, other relatives), number of children already born, place of residence. Such an analysis should help us verify e.g. to what extent the use of paid childcare is linked to the couple's economic well-being, whether it is preferred by double-earning families or couples with higher education, and whether a generalised socio-cultural reluctance hampers the demand for such services.

In the second step we focus on how families manage children's time on a week basis, i.e., to what extent they use paid childcare, are helped by grand-parents or other relatives, or take care themselves of their children. In this case we are able to better distinguish not only

between those who use and do not use external childcare services, but also how children's time is allocated between different forms of childcare.

In the final step we are concerned about children aged 0-3, since in Italy this is the most critical age, in which the lack of childcare services, on the one hand, and the children needs, on the other, clearly compromise mothers' possibility to reconcile work and family. In particular, we want to analyse how the number of hours of childcare use varies with respect to the couple's socio-economic characteristics.

In the research we use the EU-SILC database for Italy for the year 2004 and focus on households with children aged 0-5.

The EU-SILC (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions) is an instrument aiming at collecting timely and comparable cross-sectional and longitudinal multidimensional microdata on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions. This instrument is anchored in the European Statistical System (ESS).

The instrument aims to provide two types of data:

- Cross-sectional data pertaining to a given time or a certain time period with variables on income, poverty, social exclusion and other living conditions
- Longitudinal data pertaining to individual and household-level changes over time, observed periodically, typically over a four year period.

The EU-SILC in Italy was launched in 2004, collecting cross-sectional as well as longitudinal data (families remain in the sample for a period of 4 years). The Italian EU-SILC is representative at regional level.

The survey is conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) at household and individual level. Social exclusion and housing condition information is collected at household level while labour, education and health information is obtained for persons aged 16 and over. The core of the instrument, income at very detailed component level, is mainly collected at individual level, but a few components are included in the household part of SILC.

The sample is based on 28000 households (78000 persons) included in 800 Italian sub regional divisions (communes).

A section on childcare for all children aged less than 13 years is included in the family register questionnaire with information on the type of childcare used (formal or informal) and the number of hours of childcare use per week. Despite the amount of information is limited (e.g. we cannot distinguish between public and private paid childcare), it is enough for the purpose of the current research.

Preliminary and expected results

Preliminary analysis has confirmed the gap in childcare use according to the age of the child. The younger the child, the fewer formal childcare is used. Such a result depends clearly on the availability (spread) of childcare services, but also on their enrolment fees. Therefore, the family's employment status and economic situation influences the decision to use formal childcare. Furthermore, besides the economic dimension, cultural influence plays also a role. Different attitudes towards the use of formal childcare determine regional heterogeneity, which does not distinguish necessarily only the typical North-South divide, but also bigger versus smaller urban areas. In smaller and/or more traditional contexts the use of informal childcare is more widespread not only because of a limited childcare supply, but also because of a minor childcare demand. In this case, the time spent in formal childcare is limited and families prefer themselves, grand-parents or other relatives look after their children. On the contrary, contexts where female labour force participation is higher and where social networks (e.g. grand-parents, relatives, other friends with small children) are more difficult to reach, the demand for formal childcare is higher, but hampered by a lower supply. These areas might be the target of friendlier family policies helping to reconcile family and work,

and maybe in the medium-long run favouring to fill in the gap between the realized and desired number of children.

Basic Bibliography

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