

On the Determinants of Marital Disruption in Italy by Gender: Who Are the Trendsetters of the Recent Spread of the Phenomenon?

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ABSTRACT

Separations and divorces are on the rise in Italy. Are there trendsetters, i.e. forerunners of the new trend? Who are they? By applying an event-history analysis to a 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey (“Families and Social Subjects”: the Italian version of the Gender and Generation Survey), we find that marriage breakdown is more frequent among women from high social strata, while, for men, no definite gradient emerges from our analysis. Besides, a remarkable composition effect emerges: in the ‘90s, women’s educational shift (towards higher school completion levels) has significantly contributed to the spread of the phenomenon.

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1 – INTRODUCTION

In terms of family dynamics, Italy is customarily viewed as a catholic and traditional country, which is in part true, but even here things are now beginning to change. Probably the most clear example of this change is represented by the recent increase in marital disruption. Between 1995 and 2005, divorce increased both in absolute (+75%) and in relative terms: from 80 to 151 divorces per 1000 marriages celebrated in the same year (Istat, 2008), a trend that will likely get momentum in the future (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna, 2008).

Despite this development, the study of the causes and consequences of union dissolution in Italy has been relatively neglected, until recently (Livi Bacci and Mencarini, Eds., 2009). In particular the analysis of the correlates of marital disruption is essential to better understand this new phase of Italian family dynamic. This paper contributes to the knowledge on the determinants of marital disruption in Italy by investigating the possible existence of trendsetters mainly responsible for the country's recent increase in marital dissolution. In other words: has this evolution been driven by some population subgroups, e.g. those with higher social standards? Does it appear as a result of compositional changes?

Moreover, this research contributes to the current debate shifting the focus from women only to a gender-specific comparison. Namely, we analyse the correlates of marital disruption both for women and for men, although, unfortunately, as Section 4 explains, we could not do this for couples.

The article consists of six Sections, including this introduction. Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework of the study. Section 3 explores the peculiarities of the Italian context and justifies our research objectives. Section 4 presents the data, the method, and the variables used to scrutinize marital disruption risk. The results are presented in Section 5, followed by Section 6, which summarises and discusses the findings.

2 – THE DIFFUSION OF MARITAL DISRUPTION: THE ROLE OF MODERNIZATION AND EDUCATION

2.1 – FOREWARD

In general terms, a new behaviour in the population does not appear all of a sudden: rather, it emerges in certain social spheres (the so-called trendsetters, or prior adopters), and later, if

"appealing", it spreads on to others (Rogers, 1962; Mahajan, Peterson, 1985). The speed of the diffusion process varies: slow at first, it gains momentum and then slows down again, when it reaches its maximum and stabilizes. This evolution has sometimes been described as having an "S" shape (Todesco, 2008).

It is precisely the experience of the trendsetters that makes family dissolution socially and economically sustainable: indeed, as social acceptability increases, other types of costs (e.g. legal expenses) diminish, which, in turn, contributes to the spread of the phenomenon. Mass-media, too, play an important role, as they inform new adopters about the experiences of prior adopters. New adopters can therefore elaborate that wedding is destined to last not "until *death*", but, rather, "until *life* do us part". The group of trendsetters may be represented by more or by less educated people depending on the context. In other words, as we elaborate below, the process of diffusion of marital instability may be essentially driven by some population subgroups with higher or lower social standards.

2.2 – WHO ARE THE TRENDSETTERS?

The profound transformations of family structures and reproductive choices that permeated the Western countries in the past forty years has come to be known as the "Second Demographic Transition". This includes, among other things, the de-institutionalization of marriage and the spread of consensual unions, the diffusion of modern contraceptive methods, the onset first and later the persistence of very low fertility levels, and an increasing individualization of attitudes and behaviours (Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1992; Sobotka, 2008). One of the most visible changes in the family life in Western countries is represented by the increase in divorces. Although generalized, however, this increase has been uneven: more in some countries than in others and, within countries, more in some social groups than in others. To the best of our knowledge, William J. Goode (1962, 1970, 1993) was the first to posit a link between marital breakdown and societal factors: at least initially, only the most "modern" couples would have the cultural and economic means to afford a divorce. As the social acceptability of divorce increases, the relationship between social status and divorce tends to become less significant and may even reverse its sign, so that, at the end of the process, marriage dissolution could even be more common at the bottom of the social hierarchy. All in all, this implies marked cross-national differences in the social structure of

divorce, depending on the social, legal, and economic environment of family life (Härkönen and Dronkers, 2006).

But it is especially the changing role of women that impacts on this process: women with higher education also tend to be characterized by more "modern" attitudes, which attach less importance to the institution of marriage. Moreover, women with educational attainment, good perspectives in the labor market and therefore economically independent, are those who are best placed to put an end to unhappy unions (Becker, 1981). In this vein, Blossfeld and colleagues (1995: 202), argue that women with high educational level have a higher risk of marriage dissolution than women with lower education in those countries where divorce is still rare because *"in such societies marital disruption represents a more severe violation of an established social norm"*. Afterward, with the rise of union breakdowns, *"divorce customs become more permissive for all women and the 'liberating' impact of a woman's high educational attainment on marital disruption will decline or even disappear"*.

Other social scientists come to different predictions, however. Education may improve resources, such as social, cultural, economic, and cognitive skills, that altogether lead to a more stable relationship, either by successful partner matching or by enhancing communication skills and other channels that make a relationship well-functioning (e.g., Amato, 1996). Moreover, it can also be envisioned that people in the lower social strata have more marital strain because of greater socio-economic hardship (Härkönen and Dronkers, 2006). This line of reasoning may be used, for instance, to try to explain the expansion of cohabitation in Poland (Matysiak, 2009).

In general, therefore, the connection between women's education and family instability is likely to be different in different societies. A positive relationship between educational attainment and divorce risk was found, for example, for the United States by Ono (1998) and for the Netherlands by Poortman and Kalmijn (2002). However, most of the research on this topic suggests a negative association for the Nordic countries (Kravdal and Noack 1989; Hoem 1997; Jalovaara 2001, 2003; Lyngstad 2004). Support for cross-national differences is also provided by Blossfeld et al. (1995), showing the strongest positive effects in Italy with respect to Germany and Sweden. Comparative differences were also found in Härkönen and Dronkers (2006).

To summarize, two hypotheses may be developed from the literature with regard to the role of education in the spread of union dissolution. The first views divorce as a process that

expands from the top to the bottom of the social hierarchy. The alternative view suggests that divorce starts from the lowest social strata.

3 – THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

3.1 – MARITAL DISRUPTION: NORMATIVE REGULATIONS AND TRENDS

In Italy, it is not so easy to obtain a divorce, which is legally admitted only since 1970 (Law n. 898), and only after a long period of physical and legal separation between the spouses (five years, initially; three years since 1987). This is why the studies on marriage dissolution in Italy normally focus on separations, and not divorces (e.g. De Rose, 1992; Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2008; Vignoli and Ferro, 2009). True, only about 60% of separations end in a divorce, but the rest of the couples do not (normally) get together again: they simply want to spare the cost and administrative burden of a new legal passage, which is strictly necessary only if one of the partners wants to marry again.

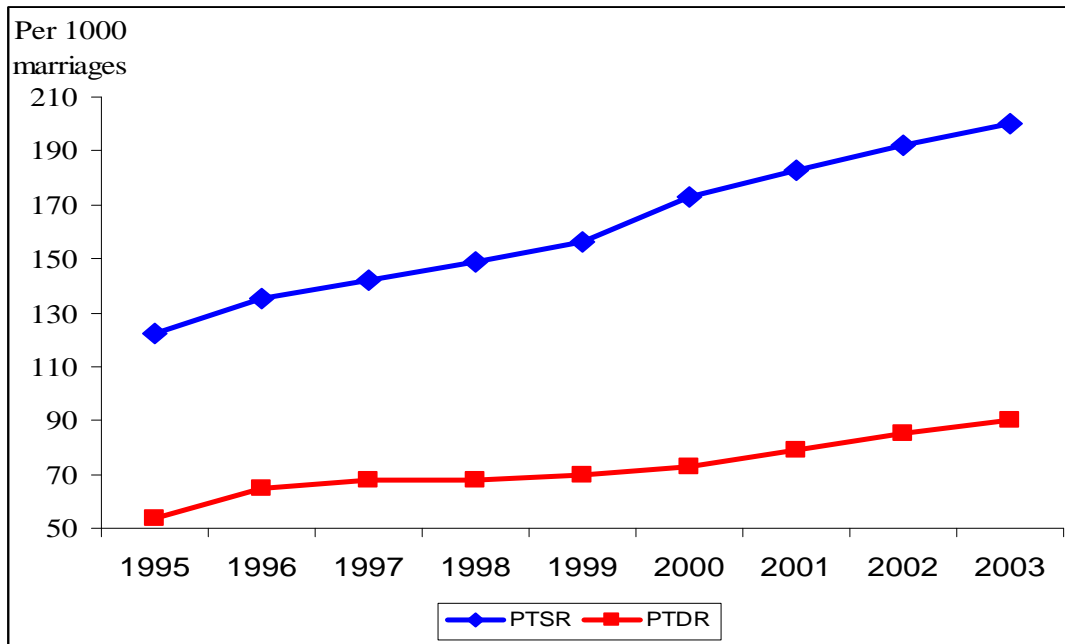
Despite these rigid normative regulations, marriage breakdown in Italy has been on the rise in the last decade. Consider for instance the Period Total (legal) Separation Rate (PTSR) and the Period Total Divorce Rate (PTDR) with respect to 1000 marriages for the period 1995–2003 (Figure 1)¹. Both PTSR and PTDR highlight the rise in Italian marital dissolution: between 1995 and 2003 they increased, respectively, from 122 to 200 and from 54 to 90, per 1000 marriages.

Let us now move to a longitudinal approach to the study of marriage breakdown, with the help of life-tables by marriage cohort, up to the cohort of 2003, net of mortality and migration. Figure 2 shows the "survival" of marriages of the cohorts 1979-80, 1983-84, 1988-89, 1993-94, and 1998-99. It is evident that in the last decades the duration of marriages markedly declined. At duration 5, for instance, only 2% of the marriages celebrated in 1979-80 were already dissolved, against 4% of those celebrated ten year later, in 1998-99.

¹ PTSR and PTDR are obtained as a sum of age-specific separation rates and age-specific divorce rates respectively. Through a simplified approach (Ferro and Salvini 2007), the age-specific separation and divorce rates are calculated as a ratio of the number of separations and divorces in a year, t , according to the duration, d , and the number of marriages d years before, which must be obtained as an average. For instance, the age-specific separation rate for the year 1982 at the duration 1 (d_1) is calculated with respect to the number of marriages (M) celebrated 1 year before; that is $S^{82,d_1} = S_{82}^{d_1} / [M_{80} + M_{81}] \cdot 0,5$.

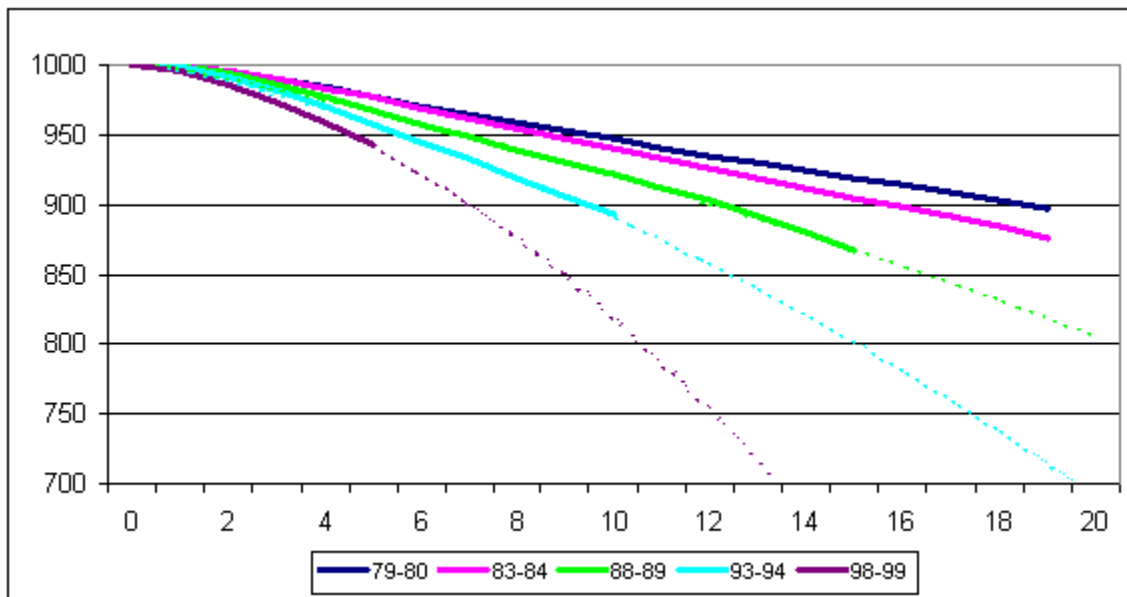
This brief descriptive overview of the marriage dissolution in the Italian context highlights an increasing extent of the process, calling for a search of its leading factors.

Figure 1: Trend in Period Total (legal) Separation Rate (PTSR) and Period Total Divorce Rate (PTDR), per 1000 marriages, in Italy, 1971-2005.



Source: Vignoli & Ferro (2009). Elaboration on Istat data, various years.

Figure 2: Duration-specific marriage survivors in Italian (legal) separation life-tables, by marriage cohorts.



Source: Salvini & Ferro (2008). Elaboration on Istat data, various years.

Note: All marriage cohorts are observed up to 2003. The subsequent development is obtained by extrapolation.

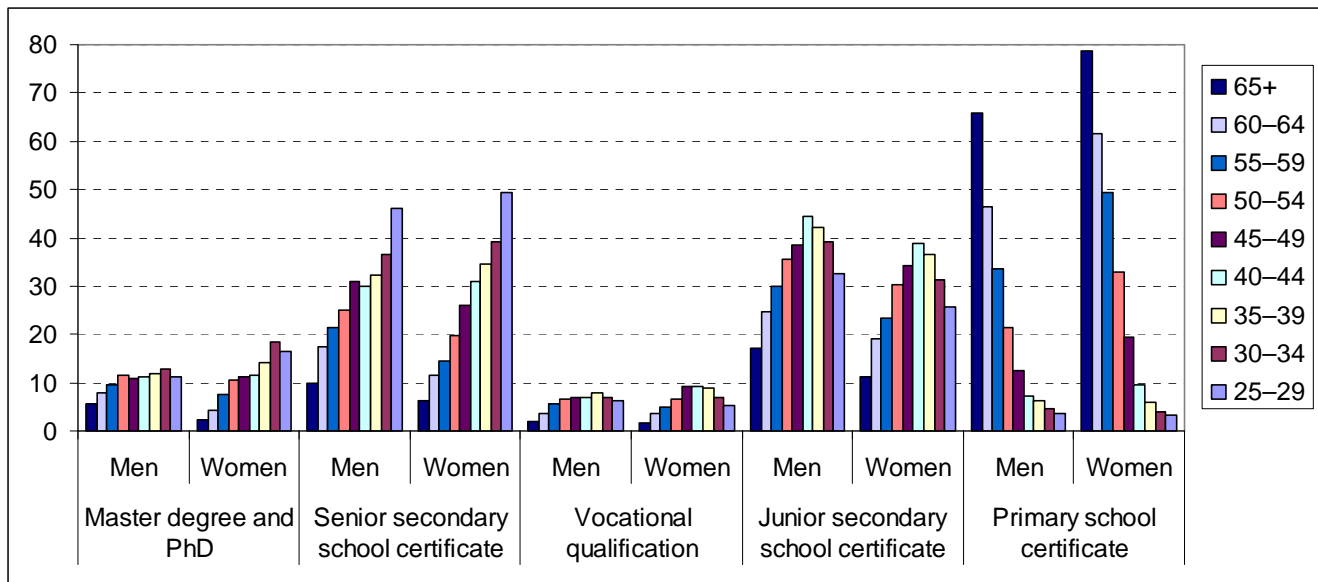
3.2 – THE DELAYED, BUT FAST, SOCIETAL CHANGE IN ITALY

After the mid-20th century, modernization, industrialization and urbanization spread, at different pace, everywhere in Europe (Frejka, 2008). This have led to the expansion of the service sector and of various social strata. More and more often people had to be adequately educated to do their job properly: this led to the expansion of the education system, which attracted an ever increasing proportion of the young.

Not surprisingly, the timing of these processes varied greatly from country to country. Italy, in particular, experienced a series of important changes in the legislation in a very limited time-span, mainly due to the political awakening of the young in the 1960s and the strength of the feminist movement in the 1970s (Livi Bacci, 2001). For instance, advertising contraceptives was legally permitted in 1969; divorce was introduced in 1970; abortion was legalized in 1977, etc. All this took place under the relatively preoccupied eyes of the Vatican and with governments of Catholic inspiration (De Rose et al., 2008). Female employment, too, has increased rapidly, as compared to what has happened in other European countries. All these phenomena went together with a dramatic contraction of fertility levels which has also been often linked to the changing status of women in the Italian society (Salvini, 2004).

Today higher educated women are more numerous than men among people aged 25-44. Between the academic years 1970/71 and 2005/06 the percentage of women obtaining a vocational or senior secondary school qualification – the Italian *diploma* – tripled and today about 80% of 19 years old girls hold a diploma (Istat, 2007). Figure 3 shows an indisputable increase in the proportion of people aged 25 or above with a lower-secondary and upper-secondary qualification from the old to the young. It also resulted evident that over time women's schooling overcame the men's one which remained much more stable in the last decades. All in all, the trend towards an increasing diffusion of tertiary education is also easily foreseeable for the coming years (Mencarini and Vignoli, 2009).

Figure 3 – Population aged 25 and more according to educational level, age and gender, 2004 (percentages computed by gender)



Source: Own elaboration on Istat data, Labour Force Survey.

3.3 – RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Past trends suggest a link between the rising marital disruption and the increased level of education of the Italian women. De Sandre (1980) was the first to show the increase in marital instability among women of high socio-economic status in the first half of the 1970s, a finding later confirmed by Corsini and Ventisette (1988) on aggregate data, and by De Rose (1992) on micro data. Incidentally, De Rose concluded that the modest diffusion of family dissolution in Italy was to be ascribed, at least in part, to the relative backward situation of the Italian women, who, with low levels of education and scarce and scarcely qualified occupational activities, were basically confined to the role of wives and mothers.

Barbagli (1990) and Barbagli and Saraceno (1998) explain why marital instability was originally higher among women of higher social status: in these social strata the traditional image of the Italian family was weakening, and the psychological, moral, social, and economic constraints that prevented the dissolution of an unhappy marriage were frailer than in other social groups. Recently, however, this attitude has emerged also among intermediate social classes (Istat, 2001), in a sort of “democratization” of the process (Barbagli, 1990). In addition, the very few micro-level studies available in Italy all point to a positive gradient between marital instability and the level of education (De Rose, 1992; De Rose and Rosina,

1999; Arosio, 2006; Vignoli and Ferro, 2009). Moreover, the effect of education on the risks of dissolution appears much weaker for men (De Rose and Di Cesare, 2003).

This kind of reasoning is also supported by the mechanism behind the spread of other modern family models in Italy, among which cohabitation. In this respect, Rosina and Fraboni (2004) view the diffusion of informal unions in the Italian context as a process which develops from the high to the low population social strata.

Based on the theoretical considerations of Section II and the context review outlined in this Section we formulate a set of hypotheses.

The increasing rate of marital disruption that has been observed in Italy over the recent decades is largely explained by the growing number of people that were joining the higher socio-economic population strata. In other words, the increasing rate of family dissolution observed over time should appear less pronounced after we take into account people's educational attainment (**Hypothesis 1**).

We anticipate that in the Italian context the diffusion mechanism functions as a fashion that expanded from the top of the social hierarchy to the bottom: the trendsetters of the spread of marital instability may therefore be identified among the population with higher social standards. In other words, we expect that the marked pace of increase in the disruption started first among well-educated people, then followed by the other segments of population (**Hypothesis 2**).

We believe that the mechanisms behind hypotheses 1 and 2 act differently by gender. Women's changing status in the society – represented here by women's educational status – is markedly reflected in our first two hypotheses. On the contrary, we expect a much higher probability to reject hypotheses 1 and 2 as it regards the male population. This is because men's role in Italian society remained quite stable over the last decade and so it did not influence very much the marital disruption pattern (**Hypothesis 3**).

4 – EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

4.1 – DATA

Our data come from the Household Multipurpose Survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS), the Italian variant of the Generations and Gender Survey. This retrospective survey was

conducted by the Italian National Statistical Office (Istat) in November 2003 on a sample of about 24,000 households and 49,451 individuals of all ages.

The event of interest to us is the dissolution of the first marriage. We extend the concept of legal separation (see section 3) to include *de facto* separations: that is, separations not yet accompanied by a legal provision (De Rose 1992). We include *de facto* separation in the analysis because this act corresponds to the moment that marks the dissolution of marriage for all of the three possible categories of separated people, i.e. *de facto* separated, judicially separated and divorced².

The study of union dissolution from a gender perspective should preferably focus on couples, but in our study we had to focus on women and men separately, because cross information was generally not available (we know nothing of ex-partners, who were not interviewed). Therefore, what we could investigate are similarities or differences between women and men's separation patterns over time. Overall we have data on 7,594 women and 9,635 men, of which 592 and 606, respectively, experienced (at least) a *de facto* separation.

4.2 – METHOD AND VARIABLES

We adopt a life-course perspective and our goal is to model the risk of separation: to this end we apply hazard regression. We follow each woman and man from marriage until *de facto* separation or the date of the interview, whichever comes first. The time-unit is the month. For the specification of the baseline risk, a piecewise constant function is chosen. The risks are assumed to be constant within each defined time period, but they may vary across such periods.

In order to test the research hypotheses put forward in the previous Section we consider women's and men's educational level and calendar time.

Using information referring to the highest *educational level* ever reached, we clustered educational attainments in two main groups: low education (no schooling and primary school), medium-high education (high-school qualification or higher). There could be objections on the basis that it would have been more convenient to use education as a time-varying covariate

² In many cases, however, the date of this event was missing, and we had to impute it, so as not to "lose" these individuals. We based our imputation procedure on the distribution of lags (between *de facto* separation, legal separation and divorce) observed on women with complete information, separately by age and marital status. We later ran our history model used both with and without imputed data: the estimated coefficients changed only marginally, but obviously proved more robust with the imputed data.

(Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006a, 2006b). Nevertheless, in Italy it is relatively trouble-free to use the highest educational level, since most respondents have completed their studies by the time of union formation. (Ongaro 2002).

Moreover, the *calendar period* is introduced in our model in order to capture the temporal change in the process of interest and to address the possible existence of trendsetters, i.e. well-educated people. We believe that the calendar period covariate may also help to capture the influence of changes in the Italian normative environment on marital dissolution intensity. Five time periods are considered in the model: before 1980, 1981-1985, 1986-1990, 1991-1995, and after 1996.

Beyond women and men's education and calendar time, we also introduce several fixed- and time-varying covariates, in order to control for possible additional confounding effects.

We consider women and men's *birth cohorts* (1938–54, 1955–64, and 1965–83) to account for the increasing acceptance of new ways of living as a couple relates to increased individual autonomy in the ethical, political, and religious spheres across the generations (Lesthaeghe, 1992). We expect, in fact, the youngest cohorts to present higher dissolution levels.

The *area of residence* is also included in the model to control for the well-known north–south differences in the Italian marital dissolution pattern (Ferro and Salvini 2007). Unfortunately, this information was collected at the time of the interview, which introduces the risk of performing a so-called “anticipatory analysis” (Hoem and Kreyenfeld, 2006a; 2006b). However, Italian internal mobility has been low in the last decades and was mainly confined to short distance movements (Tomassini et al., 2003). We therefore decided to include a covariate describing the macro-region of residence: North, Centre, and South and Islands.

We also consider *parental marriage dissolution* (as dichotomous variable). The literature provides several arguments for the positive relationship between parents' divorces and those of their offspring (for an overview, see Amato, 1996, and Engelhardt et al., 2002). This can be an effect of the transmission of behaviour or, alternatively, a tendency by women and men to behave in ways considered “acceptable” by their parents (e.g. Cherlin et al. 1995; Kiernan and Cherlin 1999). This hypothesis is especially convincing in the Italian context because of a possible vertical diffusion of family patterns (e.g. Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, 2004).

Then we take into account the role of *children* on the risk of marital disruption. The presence of children seems to consolidate the union (White 1990; De Rose 1992; Hoem and

Hoem 1992; Coppola and Di Cesare 2008). Becker et al. (1977), for instance, observe that children are marital-specific capital and, consequently, they should reduce the risk of divorce. Not only the number but also the age of the children represent an essential predictor of dissolution risk, because people may be reluctant to separate when they have a young child (e.g. Andersson 1997). We therefore distinguished between childless, parity 1 with child aged 0–6 years, parity 1 with child aged 7 years or more, parity 2 or higher with youngest child aged 0–6 years, and parity 2 or higher with youngest child aged 7 years or more.

Finally, we control for women and men's employment status. Here we anticipate a different effect between women and men. Woman's employment, as a proxy of her economic independence, may likely help people afford the costs of a separation. A previous study for Italy revealed that for employed women the risk of union dissolution is higher than for non-working women, while the same condition for men range from no effect to a negative one (De Rose and Di Cesare, 2003). As for the employment status specification (time-varying), we distinguish between "working" and "not working".

5 – TEMPORAL CHANGE IN SEPARATION RISKS BY GENDER

The results of our model are presented in Table 1, apart from the calendar time that will be presented later on. The correlates to women's separation risk are all in line with our expectations (see Section 4), and corroborate recent findings (Vignoli and Ferro, 2009). What is more, we are able to highlight similarities and differences between women and men. The results show that the "basic" determinants of separation risks – related to the demographic factors, to the area of residence and to the family background – are quite analogous by gender. There is an increase of separation risks for the youngest cohorts. The presence of children reduce this risk, at least until the babies are relatively young. As the children grow older, however, marriage stability does not vary much. Looking at the area of residence, the well-known North-South differential emerges clearly from our estimates both for women and men. People whose parents experienced a marital dissolution are most likely to separate themselves.

The main difference between the factors affecting separation risk of men and women concerns the role of the socio-economic factors. Other things equal, women's risk of separation is significantly higher for the employed and the well-educated. Women's degree of

economic autonomy is confirmed to be a factor which plays a pivotal role in the effective chances to handle a separation. Conversely, men’s socio-economic situation does not seem to have any relevant impact on the risk of marital disruption.

Table 1: Factors affecting separation risk in Italy by gender. Outcomes from an event history model estimated separately for women and men.

Variable	Categories	Women			Men		
		RR	St. Err.	pvalue	RR	St. Err.	pvalue
Birth cohort	1938-54 (ref.)	1			1		
	1955-64	1.70	0.184	0.000	1.41	0.171	0.005
	1965-83	2.08	0.328	0.000	1.58	0.283	0.011
Area of residence	North (ref.)	1			1		
	Centre	0.82	0.080	0.045	0.99	0.109	0.892
	South and Islands	0.60	0.054	0.000	0.68	0.069	0.000
Parental divorce	No (ref.)	1			1		
	Yes	1.89	0.321	0.000	1.91	0.429	0.004
Number and age of children	Childless (ref.)	1			1		
	1 (aged 0-6)	0.63	0.075	0.000	0.51	0.071	0.000
	1 (aged 7+)	0.85	0.123	0.260	0.69	0.108	0.016
	2 (youngest aged 0-6)	0.44	0.062	0.000	0.39	0.059	0.000
	2 (youngest aged 7+)	0.58	0.086	0.000	0.32	0.054	0.000
Employment status	Employed (ref.)	1			1		
	Not employed	1.44	0.120	0.000	0.92	0.143	0.592
Educational level	Low (ref.)	1			1		
	Medium-high	1.58	0.124	0.000	1.17	0.102	0.067
Years elapsed since marriage (baseline duration)	0-1 (ref.)	1			1		
	2-3	1.26	0.198	0.142	1.28	0.237	0.188
	4-5	1.53	0.251	0.009	1.43	0.280	0.068
	6-7	1.45	0.255	0.035	1.80	0.354	0.003
	8-10	1.66	0.303	0.005	1.67	0.354	0.016
	11-14	1.24	0.225	0.225	1.47	0.296	0.055
	15+	0.62	0.161	0.066	0.81	0.230	0.450

Source: Own elaboration on FSS 2003 data. Note: Values standardised for calendar time. “Number and age of children” and “employment status” are time-varying covariate.

In order to get an in-dept inspection on the temporal change in the marital dissolution pattern by gender, we now present the calendar time separation risks according to a stepwise specification of the full model presented in Table 1. The increase in separation rates that was observed in Italy over the recent decades is perfectly reflected in Figure 3a-b both for women and men. As expected, the increase is less pronounced after we control for quite a few selected covariates, all of them significantly correlated with the separation risk: birth cohort, area of residence, parental divorce, number and age of children, and employment status. Among these, women and men’s demographic characteristics appear to play the crucial role. The birth cohort seems to be the most effective covariate able to explain the increase in

separation risks of women and men. This represents perhaps the clearest manifestation of the spread of new ideas and values regarding the family that have evidently changed the attitudes of the Italian younger generation towards a most flexible path of conjugal life. Next best covariate is the number of children combined with the age of the youngest child.

As regards our **Hypothesis 1**, the introduction of education controls our model for compositional change. We find that introducing people's educational level in the model depresses the increasing trend in separation risk (see again Figure 3a-b). This means that the observed change in separation rates results also from an increase in the number of people joining higher social population strata, other things being equal. Our first hypothesis is therefore verified.

Our findings show that a quite effective women's educational composition effect is at play during the '90s. This effect appears stronger than the men's one. Our **Hypothesis 3** has therefore here a first empirical support. Men's role, which remained much more stable over the last decades, does not explain an important part in the increase in separation risk. Interestingly, even after accounting for this socio-economic compositional change, the overall increase in men's separation risk remains, in fact, substantial, especially in the very last decade (1995-2003).

An interaction model is fitted between the calendar period and educational attainment, in order to disentangle the process of increasing marital instability according to one's educational level. This allows us to assess our **hypotheses 2 and 3**. As a whole, the results reveal a general increase in separation intensity over time at each educational level and for both sexes (Figure 4a-b). The pace of increase shows differences for various population profiles, however. As for the female population, the strong increase in separation risk between 1990 and 2003 appears to be driven by women with medium-high educational standards in the period 1990-1995. Subsequently, however, the correlation (education - risk of separation) weakens. At the same time, a catch-up effect of low-educated women is into play. For the female population we may therefore envision that the diffusion process functioned as a development from the top of the social hierarchy (the pioneer) to the bottom.

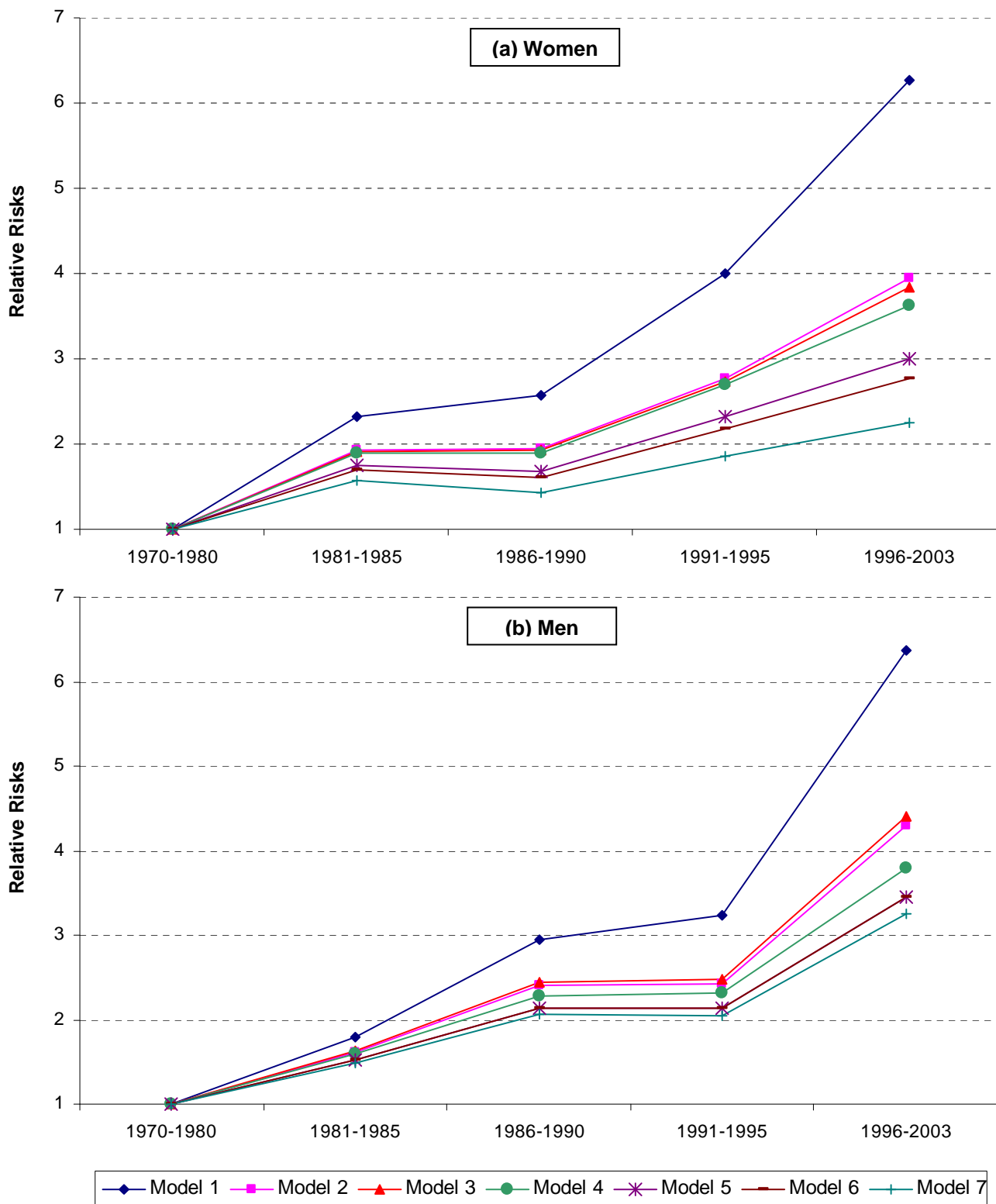
Looking at the whole temporal increase for the female population (Figure 3a), the general pattern that emerges, however (Figure 4a), is far from the typical "S" shape predicted by the literature on the diffusion of marital instability (e.g. Todesco, 2008). What we observe is, rather, the weighed sum of two different stages of the diffusion process: the well-educated

women have, in fact, already almost completed the “S” pattern, while their low-educated counterparts have just began the process. The latter group, more numerous, influences more the general pattern.

As for the male population, our outcomes highlight that all men’s social strata appear quite similar with respect to marital disruption diffusion (Figure 4b), except, perhaps, in the early ’90s. Interestingly, at the time of the most relevant general increase (1995-2003) a very similar pattern between medium-high and low-educated men emerges. It can be therefore ventured that the spread of men’s marital disruption functions as an overall change over time and does not appear linked to a socio-economic compositional effect.

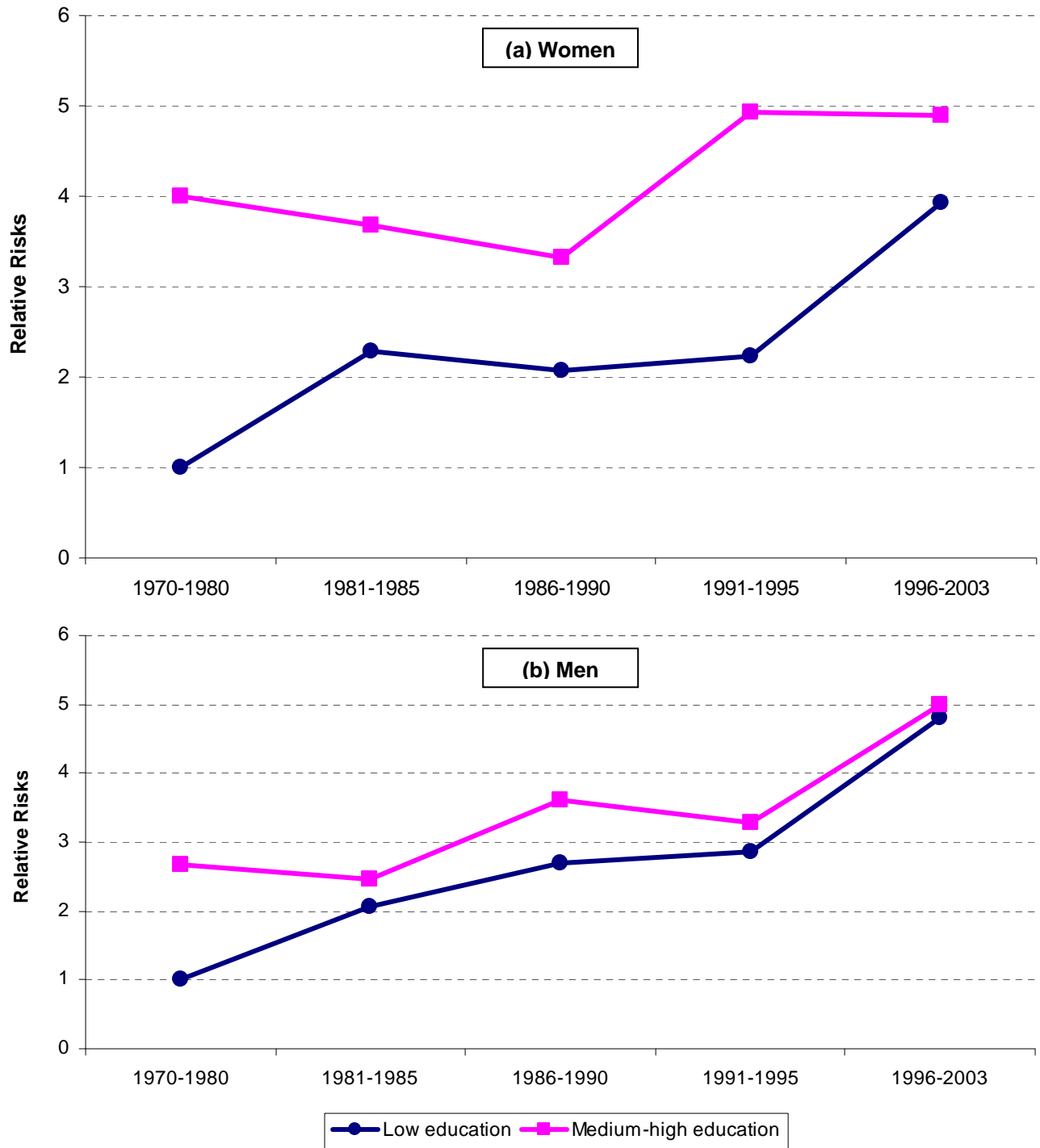
In short, both our **hypotheses 2** and **3** are corroborated by our data.

Figure 3: Trends in separation risk in Italy by gender, 1970-2003. Results from 7 event history models specified as follows – **Model 1:** calendar time; **Model 2:** Model 1 + birth cohort; **Model 3:** Model 2 + area of residence; **Model 4:** Model 3 + parental divorce; **Model 5:** Model 4+ children; **Model 6:** Model 5 + employment status; **Model 7:** Model 6 + educational level.



Source: Own elaboration on FSS 2003 data.

Figure 4: Trends in separation risk in Italy by women and men's educational level, 1970-2003.



Source: Own elaboration on FSS 2003 data.

Note: The interaction is standardized for birth cohort, area of residence, parental divorce, number and age of youngest child, employment status.

6 – DISCUSSION

The principal aim of this paper was to contribute to the general study of the union breakdown pattern adding the case of Italy, which has so far received very limited attention. We looked at the temporal change in the Italian marriage separation risks applying hazard regressions to the Italian variant of the Gender and Generations Survey, Round 1, both for women and men. Our results point to a gender-specific difference in the temporal pattern of diffusion of marital disruption.

As for the female population, we identified the pioneers of the spread of a more flexible typology of unions in the Italian context, i.e. women belonging to the middle-high social hierarchy. The positive educational gradient confirms that well-educated women are more prone to accept new forms of behaviour as well as they are able to cope the legal and economic costs of a separation. This group of population was characterised by a strong increase of separation risk during the early '90, followed by a stabilisation or, even, a reverse in the gradient in most recent years. In short, the pattern displayed by women with middle-high education corresponds to a typical “S” shape advocated in the literature on the diffusion process of a new behaviour. With a relatively short time-lag, women with low education are catching-up the better-educated trendsetters. As a whole, the strong increase of marriage disruption observed in the country in the last period appears mainly due to the fact that even the less educated women – who are the most numerous group – are now facing a marked increase in the separation risk possibly in violation of established social norms. They are facilitated in the decision to opt for a separation because the traditional and cultural setting has been already broken by their better educated counterparts.

As for the male population, a different story emerges. After accounting for the socio-economic compositional change, the overall increase in men's separation risks remains substantial, especially in the last considered period (1995-2003). In other words, the spread of men's marital disruption appears as an overall change over time because men's social strata result quite similar with respect to marital disruption diffusion. We might formulate the hypothesis that the observed increase in men's separations depends basically on the decisions of their wives who are now facing an irreversible socio-economic empowerment.

The shift of the focus from women only to the gender-specific differences is important, but our analysis has a major limitation in this respect. The study of the determinants of marital

disruption should be outlined by a gender perspective because of the intrinsic dualistic nature of conjugal couple life. Looking at the determinants of conflict between partners leads to the consideration of various aspects of couple's life such as role divisions and perceptions, the sharing of duties and resources, and the different expectations from a loving and intimate bond. Moreover, the effect of gender differences on the stability of the union is also related to the social condition of the couple. It is not straightforward to test this conceptual framework in Italy due to the lack of proper data, however. Implication for future research is thus to seek for a richer dataset that may provide longitudinal (demographic, social, attitudinal, and economic) information that can be related to couples' marital dynamics.

A final reflection concerns the issue of whether in Italy we can find some traces of the "Second Demographic Transition" with regard to the diffusion of new family models. We clearly proved that separation risk development is now on the marked rise in the country both for women and for men, even if with different pattern of temporal diffusion. Our narrative is in line with the view of other commentators about the spread of another innovative behaviour in Italy, such as the diffusion of cohabitation (Gabbrielli and Hoem, 2009). We may therefore venture that the country is now undergoing a time of lively demographic changes and that traces of a coming Second Demographic Transition can be set up.

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