Fertility Intentions and their Realization among Italian Mothers

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the fertility intentions and subsequent outcomes of Italian mothers, as well as to highlight which are the factors that inhibit positive fertility intentions' realization. The study of fertility behaviour is a critical matter in Italy, where the total fertility rates well below replacement level. Moreover, a better understanding of the issues involved makes it possible to develop effective family policies.

In the last decades fertility rates have dropped in most European countries and particularly in Italy, where sub-replacement fertility does not appear to be a transient phenomenon. For many years, Italy has had one of the lowest birth rates in the world. According to recent estimates, in 2007 an average of 1.34 children was born to each woman of fertile age. At the same time, most women still consider two to be the expected number of children and this norm concerning family size seems to be quite steady over time, this opinion even being shared by the youngest cohorts (Istat, 2006). From a macro-level perspective, comparing data on intentions with the actual Italian fertility rate we can conclude that there are persistent constraints inhibiting the desired fertility realization. In addition, the obstacles in reaching the expected family size are not affecting the decision to have the first child so much, but rather the choice to have further children.

Therefore it is important to wonder on the one hand: how many children would Italians like to have? What reasons can be recognised for not having children? On the other hand: what are the difficulties that exist to pass from the expected fertility to the realised one? To what extent does realised fertility depend on fertility intentions? What is the impact of socio-demographic factors on the realisation of positive fertility intentions?

Data and Methods

In order to investigate fertility intentions and subsequent behaviour in the short run deterministic record linkage techniques were applied to link the *Birth Sample Survey* with the births recorded in the *Resident Population Registry* during the subsequent four years. In other words, record linkage techniques make it possible to circumvent a lack of panel data.

The *Birth Sample Survey* that was carried out by Istat in 2002. The population studied is made up of living births enrolled in the Population Registry during the second half of the year 2000 and the first half of 2001. This survey offers the possibility to collect contextual characteristics surrounding the birth (as mothers are interviewed directly), such as the women's participation in the labour market, the primary care-giver for the child, and the sharing of roles for domestic tasks. Mothers were interviewed around one and a half years after the childbirth. This interval is when generally fertility intentions' take shape and the work/family reconciliation is the most difficult. A short form questionnaire was administered on the entire sample (around 50,000 mothers), while a long one was given to one third of the sample. The long form questionnaire was made up of four sections: household context and the delivery, mother's employment before and after childbearing, childcare and the sharing of household chores and, lastly, home and socio-economic conditions. Fertility intentions were measured only in the long form; each respondent was asked to indicate whether she intended to have further children. If the answer was yes it was asked how many additional children she would like to have and when would be the latest she would like to deliver her last child. Otherwise it was asked for the main reason why she did not want to have additional children. In other words, fertility intentions were measured using a yes/no question with no measurement of the intensity in desire.

The second data source is the Resident Population Register the register data individual sheets retrieve only basic information on births, parents and the head of the household. Hence, the combination of the mother's name, surname and birth date is used as a unique identifier. As an indicator of record linkage goodness we computed the percentage of births that occurred in the nine months following the interview from women who had declared to be pregnant. The linkage procedure slightly underestimated the number of occurred births. At the same time, more refined analyses by women's socio-demographic characteristics show a fair (i.e. not biased) distribution of the matched/unmatched cases among the categories considered.

The study of the transition from *n* to *n+1* children at micro level is provided by computing Kaplan-Meier survival curves by fertility intentions and parity (the number of times a woman has given birth). Next, a piece-wise constant exponential model was used, with a view to identifying the percentage of success in the fulfilment of positive fertility intentions on the part of mothers who have one child only at the time of the interview and the factors which favour this process.

Preliminary results

1 - Fertility intentions among Italian mothers

Despite the sharp drop in fertility, the expected number of children remains quite stable for women of various ages: both women born from the 1970s onwards - who have just started their reproductive career -, and women born before the 1960s - who have almost completed it -, wish to have at least two children. The expected number of children appears slightly higher for the older generations. Thus, according to the expectations expressed by Italian mothers, the family model still dominant seems to involve two children: this preference, in fact, was expressed by 63% of mothers . Almost 24%, however, intend to have 3 children. About 9% of one-child mothers, on the other hand, declared that they do not want further children.

The breakdown of the number of expected children by mothers' age highlights the dual nature of this indicator which is a combination of past reproductive experience and expectations for the future. For younger mothers, the future fertility component is more important than the children they have already had. As age progresses, the share of achieved fertility becomes more important

and the indicator tends to coincide with the number of children actually had. It may be that, in the case of older women, the intention to have no more children may sometimes be the expression of a reality, as the limit of fertile age is approaching, rather than a precise family project.

The fact of already having reached the desired family size is the main reason expressed by women who do not want to have further children, especially if the family is composed of two or more children. Nonetheless, the influence of motivations not deriving from individual preferences as to the desired ideal number of children and, in particular, of those relating to the costs of childrearing and to the mothers' age itself does not play a marginal role, especially in the case of women with low parity. Indeed, women with only one child cite a greater number of reasons in explaining their decision not to have any more.

2 – Fertility intentions and subsequent behaviour

We have computed the percentage of women progressing to have an additional child within 12, 24, 36 and 46 months after interview time according to parity and fertility intentions at interview time. The results, based on Kaplan-Meier survival curves, highlight the central role played by fertility intentions in determining the subsequent outcome. An intention not to have more children is almost always fulfilled, which is consistent with previous studies. Indeed, we find that 36.4% of respondents with positive fertility intentions had an additional child within 48 months, whereas this percentage is significantly lower (4.4%) for women with negative intentions.

The number of children already born at interview time is also related to the percentage of women who, having previously expressed this intention, actually have further children. The lower the parity, the higher the percentage of women who have an additional child within 46 months. The predictive power of positive fertility intentions further increases if we control for parity: indeed, the percentage of success in the transition from the first to the second child among those who expressed positive fertility intentions is about 40%, but it falls to a little over 20% in the case of those who had already had two or more children at the time of the interview.

A piece-wise exponential model was ran in order to test the importance of fertility intentions in the transition to higher parity, controlling for age, parity achieved, level of education, citizenship and respondent's macro area of residence. The results have provided unequivocal demonstration of the extreme importance of intentions: the probability of having a child in the 46 months subsequent to the interview is over 5.3 times greater for those with positive fertility intentions than for those who feel that they have already reached their expected family size, and it is the variable with the greatest impact in determining future reproductive behaviour. Moreover, the presence of fertility intentions in the model therefore overshadows the possible influence of the other variables, so it was decided to do without women who had expressed the intention not to have any more children and limit the rest of the study to the transition from the first to the second child in women stating that they wanted more. This will make it possible both to evaluate the rationality of the reproductive plans expressed and to identify the factors which most encourage or hinder the achievement of expressed reproductive plans. We have therefore estimated a piece-wise constant exponential model in order to study the transition to second birth controlling for the tempo (when would be the latest the woman would like to deliver her last child) and the quantum (the distance between expected and actually had family size) of positive fertility intentions, age class, level of education, citizenship, area of residence, housing condition, working schedule, type of partnership and partner involvement in housework and child caring activities. Results show that the transition to the second child reflects the reproductive projects expressed in relation both to the tempo and to the quantum; the probability of progressing to higher parity significantly decreases as age increases; the macro geographical area of residence, on the other hand, does not influences the transition towards the second child. Moreover, all those factors which might contribute in generating a sense of security (economic and

other) in the couple facilitate the transition to the second child: couples where both partners have high educational qualifications (and therefore higher potential earnings) are more likely to succeed than couples in which both partners have a low level of education; living in one's own house has a positive influence on the probability of achieving the stated reproductive goals. The presence of two earners, i.e. the fact that the woman also has a job, acts in the same direction. It therefore seems that the elements which together determine a sense of security and economic stability favour the transition to the second child. The fact of being married is accompanied by a significantly greater likelihood of transition to the second child, compared to cohabiting women: this may be related to the perception of the couple's stability and the importance attributed to the institution of marriage in this sense in Italian culture. Concerning gender roles, the results of the estimated model suggest that it is not so much the receiving of help in general with housework so much as a greater involvement of the partner in these tasks that affects the achievement of reproductive plans. If the partner has become more helpful after the birth of the first child, the probability of transition to higher parity increases significantly.