

SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY

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Every two years the AISP scientific board – Italian Association for Population Studies – a division of the SIS, Italian Statistical Society, publishes a Report on the Italian population, on its dynamics and, where possible, from an international point of view. The most recent volume, published in 2013, deals with various aspects linked to reproduction, that is to say those phenomena closely related to conception and having children, and to how such phenomena have changed over the last 30 years.

When discussing human reproduction there are many factors to be considered that are partly biological/physical-medical and partly behavioural. These factors have a direct effect on a population's fertility levels, in the sense that any variation in them leads to a modification in the number of conceptions and births or in women's chances of having children.

The report concentrates on 5 particular aspects which correspond to the first five chapters of the book:

1. *The biology of reproduction*
2. *Sexuality*
3. *Living as a couple*
4. *Contraception*
5. *Abortions*

In demography they are also known as *intermediate fertility variables*, because they in turn are influenced by individual and family conditions and by the social, economic and institutional context, which are often cited as being responsible for the low fertility in Italy, but whose effect is not direct but rather mediated by “intermediate” biological and behavioural factors.

In this book, therefore, we have not dealt with explaining the latest reasons why fertility has become lower in Italy, or why the levels remain so low – the economic crisis, young people entering adult life at a later age and the unbalanced gender system. Rather we have reconstructed the changes that have taken place in the mechanisms that form the basis of reproduction itself and that directly influence its results. Obviously these results are not always positive and it may happen that a strong desire for parenthood will not be satisfied: for this reason the sixth and final chapter deals with the actions taken by couples in order to have children that go beyond their physiological limitations, such as adopting them or resorting to medically assisted procreation.

In 2010, Italian women had an average of 1.4 children, just as in 1985, a bit less than in 1980 and slightly more compared to ten years ago.

However, in the face of a substantial stability in the number of children per woman, the demographic characteristics of the parents have changed significantly (table 1).

Table 1 - How Italian parents changed. 1980-2010

Calendar year	1980	1990	2000	2010
Total Fertility Rate	1.68	1.36	1.26	1.41
Mean age at birth	27.5	28.9	30.4	31.3
Mothers aged less than 30 (%)	70	60	46	40
Fathers aged less than 35 (%)	78	73	56	42
Births out of marriage (%)	4	6	12	25
Births to a foreign parent (%)	---	2	7	19
Births to both foreign parents (%)	---	1	5	14
Births in the South of Italy (%)	46	45	40	34

Source: see *AISP 2013 Report*, p.10

In thirty years, the average age of mothers at birth has increased by almost four years. Mothers aged less than 30 decreased from 70% to 40%, fathers aged less than 35 from 78% to 42%. In addition, in 2010 one in four children was the child of unmarried parents (compared to just one in twenty-five in 1980), and nearly one child in five has at least one foreign parent (virtually none in 1980).

How can these important changes of moods and timing to become parents in Italy be interwoven with the dynamics of biological and behavioral components?

In Italy the biology of reproduction has remained substantially unchanged. The data gathered make it very clear that from 1980 to the present day, the median age of menarche and that of menopause have not changed, and they are around 12 years of age and 50-51 respectively.

The levels of fecundability and sterility have remained more or less constant over time. Infertile Italian couples are not more than 5% of the total, but they grow in number with age, and are more than 10% when the woman is 35 years old, 25% when the woman is 40 years old, approaching or surpassing 50% when the woman is 45 years old.

As a result, the growing problems of infertility experienced by Italian couples would not be so much due to physiological changes, but to the delayed time when couples try to conceive a child.

Other behaviours, however, have changed visibly. In the meantime, contrary to what is often suggested in the *media* about a presumed and growing indifference of Italians towards «sex», the frequency of sexual relations has increased, albeit only slightly, from 1980 to the present day. This increase is due not only to young people starting sex earlier (table 2), but also and above all to the different behaviour of women. Among the most recent female generations, it is to be noted that women have anticipated the age of the first time they have intercourse and are more aware than ever of sexual pleasure as an important factor in the quality of their relationships. Women are having more sexual partners during their lives but there is still a double standard in sexual behaviour between men and women, with the former declaring a higher average number of sexual intercourse per month that is higher than the latter (7.6 vs 6.7).

Table 2 – Age at first sexual intercourse by gender in developed countries

Birth cohort	1950		1970		1987	
	Median Age				% first sex at age less than 16	
Country	W	M	W	M	W	M
<i>Northern Europe</i>						
Denmark	18.3	18.2	16.7	17.4	-	-
Norway	18.8	18.8	17.5	18.1	-	-
Sweden	-	-	-	-	30.9	25.3
Finland	19.0	18.2	18.0	18.0	31.1	23.0
<i>Western Europe</i>						
United Kingdom	19.5	18.3	17.4	17.1	38.9	33.3
France	18.9	17.9	17.6	17.4	18.3	26.1
West Germany *	18.6	18.4	17.7	17.7	33.5	22.5
<i>Southern Europe</i>						
Italy	20.6	18.6	19.4	18.4	20.5	27.2
Spain	20.1	18.5	19.1	18.2	14.8	18.0
<i>Eastern Europe</i>						
Czech Republic	18.4	18.4	17.8	17.2	17.2	19.4
Poland	20.9	20.0	19.6	19.7	9.2	20.9
Latvia	20.8	19.0	18.5	18.2	14.1	21.8
Russia	-	-	-	-	16.4	40.9
<i>Other non European</i>						
Australia	18.0	18.0	17.0	17.0	-	-
Canada	19.2	-	-	-	24.0	24.7
USA	19.1	18.6	17.6	17.1	26.8	25.3

*Germany for 1987 birth cohort

Source: see AISP Report, p. 48

There have also been many changes in the means of contraception used, both by married and unmarried couples, in order to avoid unwanted pregnancies. While in the 1980s the use of *coitus interruptus* as a contraceptive method was widespread among married couples and there was little use of contraceptive coverage among unmarried people, the new millennium has changed Italy too – later compared to other industrialized countries – and *coitus interruptus* has gradually decreased, giving way to more technologically advanced and safer methods (table 3). Young people in particular are using more condoms than before – also thanks to a very effective campaign for raising awareness about the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and of HIV – and also the Pill, or hormonal contraception is more common, among couples with children too.

Table 3 – Contraception methods in Europe

	Italy 2006	Spain 2006	Greece 2001	France 2004-05	UK 2008-09	USA 2006-08
	(% of women)					
Coitus interruptus	29	3	38	1	6	6
Fertility awareness	5	2	2	1	2	2
Condom	27	38	44	9	27	15
Pill	30	26	6	54	28	23
IUD	5	10	5	30	8	7
Sterilization	2	20	..	5*	29	42
Other	2	1	5		6	5.8
Total	100	100	100	100	106**	100

Source: see AISP Report, p. 85

More efficient and widespread contraception has led to a drastic reduction in the number of abortions in order to avoid unplanned births compared to other European countries: the abortion rate per 1,000 women was equal to 7.9 in 2010 against 17.9 in France (2009); 20.8 in Sweden; 17.5 in UK; 21.2 in Hungary). However, some alarm bells are still ringing. In the first place, even if there are relatively few teenage pregnancies, they have not decreased as much over time as could be wished for. In second place,

there is a high abortion rate among foreign women, four times higher compared to their Italian peers, and especially among those from Eastern Europe and China, where abortions have been used historically as a direct method for birth control.

There is one last point to be made. Although Italy has now reached European standards regarding the use of contraception and currently has one of the lowest abortion rates in Europe, something which remains peculiarly Italian is the persistent low fertility level and birth postponement. The average age of women at the first and second births has gone up in all European countries, but in Italy this change has been extraordinarily rapid and intense; among those countries that limit births Italy has the highest fertility rate among the over-forties. When people wait too long, however, it becomes more difficult to conceive, and when children do not arrive naturally, people are increasingly turning towards adoption and medically assisted conception. In Italy there is a very high level of applications for adoption (table 4) as well as for medically assisted reproduction (from 46,000 applications in 2005 to 70,000 in 2010). However, Italian laws being quite restrictive, the number of treatments and their success rate are lower than in many other European countries (table 5).

Table 4 – Adoption of children in Europe
(last available year around 2008-2011)

Adoptions per 1000 in.	
Belgium	4.0
Denmark	9.1
France	3.0
Germany	1.5
Italy	6.7
The Netherlands	4.2
Spain	6.7
Sweden	10.0

Source: see AISP Report, p. 135

Table 5 – Medically Assisted Reproduction in Europe. Year 2008

	Treatments per 1,000,000 in.	% birth from MAR out of total live births
Belgium	2,687	3.9
Denmark	2,450	4.6
Finland	1,698	3.1
Germany	780	1.7
Iceland	2,333	3.7
Italy	798	1.3
The Netherlands	1,290	2.4
Norway	1,778	n.d.
Portugal	525	1.3
Slovenia	1,853	4.4
Sweden	1,751	3.3
United Kingdom	825	1.9

Source: see AISP Report, p.126

To summarize, there are two clear messages that emerge from this volume: the first involves immigrant women. There are signs that, in the medium and long term, the conjugal and reproductive behaviour of the «new Italians» will converge with that of those who have lived in Italy for several generations. In the meantime, however, there are clear differences. Foreign women have slightly more children than Italian women, especially if they come from countries with a high level of fertility.

Furthermore, foreign women have children at a younger age, use less contraception and have less expertise in using it, with the result that foreign women have far more

abortions, especially those from Eastern Europe and China, where abortions have been used historically as a direct method for birth control. They also have a higher rate of miscarriage than Italian women and these factors point to problems among these two ethnic groups, or are perhaps even a cry for help. There needs to be more help and resources available in order to improve the sexual and reproductive life of foreign women.

The second clear message to come out from this study concerns the risks run by women and couples in leaving it too late to try for children, risks of which we should be aware both as individuals and as a community. At the age of thirty sterility begins to increase, fecundity decreases and there is a higher risk of miscarriage: medically assisted procreation techniques are much more effective if problems of infertility are dealt with sooner rather than later. The possibility of adopting a child is also restricted by the age of the potential parents. Obviously many couples are forced to try and have a child at a later age not by choice but because of external constraints, for example because of problems at work or at home. This work does not aim to deal with these reasons in depth since they require strong political interventions and institutional answers. Here we wanted to provide strong scientific elements in order to support couples and young people so that should the idea make headway of having children at the most fertile age possible, it might lead to a push «from below» towards more effective measures for combining studies, work and parenthood.

Reference: De Rose A. & Dalla Zuanna (eds), *Rapporto sulla popolazione. Sessualità e riproduzione nell'Italia contemporanea*, AISP-SIS (Italian Association for Population Studies), Il Mulino, Bologna, 2013, pp.155