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Italian Parents: Implications of Childbearing for The Family Role-Set and *Viceversa**

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DRAFT PAPER

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Abstract

One important implication of low fertility is that women in general spend less time over the life course on childbearing and childrearing. This transformation has enabled women to participate considerably more in the job market and, although with a slow process of adaptation, it has implied a more gender-symmetric division of domestic work. However, in Italy the endurance of the traditional asymmetric organization within couples and families, favoured by the typical Italian familism, together with a poor availability of childcare services, has resulted in an extreme “dual-burden” for working women. Furthermore, as recently suggested, the absence of any changes in the traditional gender role-set within the Italian family can be an important factor in explaining lowest low fertility (MacDonald, 2000; Billari et al. 2003).

The aim of this paper is twofold: first to analyse the family role-set before and after children and therefore the consequences of childbearing for Italian mothers and fathers’ in terms of their individual time (i.e. spare time, time for paid work and time for family work), and the eventual modifications required in the gender role-set of sharing housework and childcare; second to verify the hypothesis that low gender equity in terms of time-sharing both inside and outside the household can lower the rates of having a second and a third child among dual-earner couples.

Quantitative and qualitative derived from an inter-university research project on “Low fertility in Italy: between economic constraints and value changes”. Quantitative information on about 3,300 mothers were collected during 2002. Data were gathered by means of a self-administered questionnaire, in five Italian cities (Florence, Messina, Padua, Pesaro and Udine). Specific information on women’s, and their partners’ leisure time, housework and childcare has been collected. The information is retrospective and provides insight into the dynamics of individual and family organisation over the life-course. The same information was specifically collected during the period when couples were childless, as well as after each child, with a comparative evaluation of women characteristics toward their male partner’s characteristics, and of the changes due to the birth of a child. By applying multivariate analyses, the impact of experiencing a birth on family organisation is investigated. We include information on background of both partners, job participation schedule, the economic situation of the family before and after having the child.

Descriptive results (also from qualitative sources) confirm that, even in urban contexts, not much change has taken place. Qualitatively and quantitatively, men’s involvement and gender sharing in household’s workload and childcare are still asymmetric and the burden rests mainly on the woman’s shoulders. The implications of a birth are on average negative in term of gender equality in the couple. Fatherhood tends to increase the time devoted to work, motherhood to increase time spent on childcare or housekeeping. However, a progressive adaptation towards gender equity of family organisation during the life course, including childbearing, is evident among a small proportion of dual-earning couples. Among these couples, belonging to the higher socio-economic level, women have relatively high educational level and men are more egalitarian, when white-collar workers. In these couple, the childbearing implies a more similar “revolution” of fathers’ and mothers’ time and activities. Moreover, this influences positively the probability to have another child.

Introduction

One important implication of low fertility is that women in general spend less time over their life course on childbearing and childrearing. This transformation has enabled women to participate considerably more in the job market and, although the process of adaptation is slow (Gershuny 1995, 2002), it is involving a more gender-symmetric division of domestic work.

However, in Italy the endurance of the traditional gender asymmetric organization of couples and families, favoured by the typical Italian familism, together with a poor availability of childcare services, has resulted in an extreme “dual-burden” for working women.

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to provide a description of household organization and gender roles before and after childbearing, based on a sample of working women. Secondly, we intend to assess whether there is a link between family role-set and reproductive behaviour, with a special focus on dual income couples. The hypothesis is that dual-burden women reduce their fertility unless they can rely on adequate care services (e.g. kindergartens, crèches), external help (e.g. grandparents) or their partner cooperating effectively and sharing domestic and care tasks. The results of the empirical analysis make the basis for our discussion of the possible effects of gender policies on fertility.

The data analysed here are from a survey carried out in five Italian provincial capitals (Florence, Messina, Padua, Pesaro and Udine), on a sample of over 3,300 mothers (of variable age, but all with at least one child in the third year of middle school) interviewed by a self-administered questionnaire distributed to their children at school (Mencarini and Tanturri 2003). In order to avoid including mothers in particular situations, for instance single mothers or ‘step families’, we selected only women in a stable relationship, that is, where the man is the father of all the children. To facilitate comparison of changes occurring over time, we only took into consideration those women who lived together with their partner before the birth of children, about 98% of the total number. The issues for consideration regarded the leisure time of the interviewees and their judgement of their partner’s leisure time, involvement in domestic life and childcare. For each aspect, the temporal frame of reference for the mothers was the period before the arrival of each child and the subsequent variation. The available data do not permit a detailed analysis of time use, which would only be possible with data from special time-use diaries. The data only in part grasp the dynamic nature of personal and family organization associated with changes in life course, containing certain retrospective aspects but not a complete reconstruction of family and employment histories. They do, nonetheless, offer the possibility of sketching a picture, albeit only “through the eyes of women”, of the division of labour within couples and the principal changes following the birth of children.

1. Implications of childbearing for family role-set

1.1 *A general premise: time use and the gender system*

Women and men's time use depends on phases in life course, participation in the labour market and the kind of work done; however, there is usually a strong differentiation according to gender, especially in the family environment. In fact, social norms shaped by the prevalent gender system prescribe a certain division of labour and responsibility between men and women, ensuring different rights and obligations for them (Mason 1995 and 2001).

In general, women work in the labour market more than in the past, and have reduced the amount of time they devote to unpaid work; however, they have done so less than proportionally, thereby reducing their leisure time; men have slightly increased their involvement in family tasks.

Theoretically the adjustment of family time and the role-set in the couple can be positioned along a hypothetical continuum between two antithetical models: the traditional one, where the division and specialization of family roles is along clear-cut gender lines, and a gender egalitarian one, where there is an absolute symmetry of roles in dual-income unions. The first model (the "male breadwinner", "family wage" or "Becker's specialization" model) is characterized by "families with segregated roles, with a complementary and independent organization of roles" (Micheli 2002), where the father works and the mother stays at home to look after the children. The underlying principle of this model is that the specialization of roles is more efficient, given that there is in any case a natural differentiation between men and women, which requires that the man is the "producer" and the woman is the one who carries out reproductive and care-giving functions (Becker 1981, McDonald 2000a). In the other model, sometimes known as the "cooperative negotiation" model, families have combined or symmetrical roles, with a shared organization (Micheli 2002). In the latter case, wage earnings and household and childcare are not carried out according to gender. This model does not imply exact equality between the two partners, but just that specific roles are not determined on the basis of gender. From the point of view of rationality and economic efficiency, one might imagine that within the family there will be a rational choice of components from various mixes of domestic and paid work (Gershuny 1995 and 2000).

Each member of the couple "adapts" their work supply, outside and inside the family, to take account of the decision of the partner, with various different strategies for "mutual adaptation" ("scaling-back", Becker and Moen 1999): from families with a single wage earner to couples where both work, but only one has a career, and the "constant negotiation" of the roles between partners in the different phases in the life cycle. The greater opportunities for women in the job market, and the instability of unions themselves, have made domestic specialization (Anxo and Carlin 2002) "less worthwhile". The increase of women's presence in the workforce has not, however, led to a consequent redistribution of housework and childcare, determining, besides the so-called "dual-

presence” (Bimbi 1991), a full-blown “dual-burden” as well. In the family field and in reproductive life the rules of the game seem to be determined by causes more complex than the simple principle of economic rationality.

Institutions tied to the family and parenthood change very slowly, and the adaptation of men to the presence of women in the labour market is probably possible only after a certain period of transition (“lag adaptation model”, Gershuny 1995). The causes of the difficulty – particularly of men, but often of women themselves, in changing their views on “correct” gender roles (the problem of “cognitive consonance”, Easterlin 1980; Bernhardt 1993), stem from motives ranging from rooted individual habits (male and female routines) to psychological and socialization mechanisms that inhibit male action (shift in the power balance in the couple, gender identity, peer expectations, self-esteem) and men’s difficulty in quickly developing the capacity for domestic production.

Therefore, the division of housework and caregiving tasks between men and women is everywhere influenced by both members of the couple being involved in paid work; however, all over the world, there is a persistence of the female specialization in household tasks. Only in the Scandinavian countries is there now a consolidated habit amongst males to do domestic and family activities on an equal basis (Gershuny 1995 and 2000).

1.2 Family role-set before and after children

The division of tasks within the family, particularly those that can generically be defined as “housework” and childcare, characterizes family role-set. Obviously, in couples where women do not work for the labour market, the division of labour is strongly asymmetric, so that both domestic and caring duties are prevalently or, even totally, carried out by women.

Our attention focuses above all on the family role-set of women who work and who continue to do so even after the birth of their children, therefore without “adjusting” their life times to additional family burdens by stopping work. These women are those who, in the event that their partners do not share tasks, experience the burden of the dual presence both inside and outside the family, with a consequent compression of the time they have for themselves. They make up 54% of the mothers in the sample we interviewed; they are more frequent (over 72%) amongst women with a single child and less frequent (33%) amongst women with 3 or more children.

Mothers have been classified (Bimbi and La Mendola 1999; Sartori 2002) according to the division of housework between the partners and the work outside the home in the period before the birth of their children (see graph 1): the “traditional” couple is the one where the woman does not work (a quarter of total mothers); the “dual burden” couples, where the woman works outside the home and the man does nothing (a fifth of total mothers and 25% of “always working” mothers); the “collaborative” couples (around half of the total sample and 67% of always working mothers), the ones where the woman works and the partner “helps” sometimes; the “egalitarian” couples, where

men always or often do the household tasks (only 6% of mothers and 8% of working women). Only less than 7% of the partners of women with children did housework “very often” in the year prior to the first birth, and 20% “quite often”. The sum of such percentages (that is, partners who did household tasks “often” or “very often”) falls to 15% in the groups of female respondents who have never worked, and rises to a little over 34% for women who have always worked. After the birth of children, according to what the mothers report, the participation of the fathers in housework remains unvaried in the majority of cases. However, men with a working partner (see table 1), who already did household tasks frequently before the birth of the children, increased their involvement in about 30% of cases. The increase of domestic work usually occurs after the first birth, with lower marginal increases after the second or third ones.

Marked asymmetries according to gender also characterize childcare. In the first three years of a child’s life, the mothers prevalently look after the child during the day, in almost half of the cases, with growing proportions according to the order of birth of the child. In other cases daily care is entrusted in almost equal proportions either to the grandparents or to other family members, or to baby-sitters or kindergartens.

Women also declared, irrespective of the main provider of day care, how often the father dealt with each child, in a practical sense (changing, feeding, putting to bed, getting up at night) (see table 1). This happened “often” or “very often” in about 40% of cases, for all orders of birth. This percentage rises by a few points for fathers with working partners and drops well below 30% for fathers with non-working partners, although over 10% of men have never looked after their sons, despite having a working wife. Fathers’ childcare participation shows no significant difference according to parity. It clearly tends to increase according to the fathers’ education and, in dual-income families, for the children of the successive order.

Among women who work, and who have continued to do so even after the birth of their children, we contrasted – in a logistic regression model – those with a partner who did housework with a certain frequency - symmetric couples, or at least with a tendency to being symmetrical - in relation to non-equal ones, with partners who never did housework or only on a few occasions. Both in the situation prior to and subsequent to the birth of children, the significant factors regarding the symmetry, in relation to the housework, are almost the same (see table 2). The symmetrical role-set - or at least the tendency towards such a situation - is a prerogative of more educated women (university degree, in particular, is very significant), with a partner who more frequently has an intermediate level of qualifications and a white-collar job (confirming, at least in part, the results of Grillo and Pinnelli 1999 and Micheli 2002). Men with higher-level jobs, and graduates, are less involved in household tasks. They might correspond well to Giovannini’s typology of fathers who are “involved in theory” (Giovannini 1998), that is with ideals of parity, but with very little available time; however it is difficult to say to what extent these couples are relatively more or less symmetrical in relation to the others, because there is no information about the outside paid help,

which is probably frequent amongst families with high incomes. Religion, measured by frequency of church attendance, is a significant factor. It seems to be a proxy or a kind of “altruistic” effect: all other considered factors being the same, the more religious couples are the most symmetrical, while if the women are religious, the gender roles are more traditional and asymmetric. Couples who cohabit or who cohabited before marriage are more frequently symmetrical, probably because this behaviour is already in itself a sign of a lesser adherence to traditional family values. Economic conditions do not seem in themselves to influence the division by gender of unpaid work, even though good economic conditions, or conditions that have improved after the birth of the first child, have a positive effect on symmetry. Furthermore, the symmetry of roles seems, at least in part, to be an adaptation carried out by men only because it is necessary, probably because their partners have little available time, because they work or because of the marked increase in the amount of household tasks following the birth of a child; before the birth of children, or in couples without children, if the woman has a job where she “can choose freely when to work”, this proves to be an element associated with a lesser symmetry of household tasks. Amongst the urban areas where data were collected, Messina (in Sicily, South of Italy) is the context with the most traditional and asymmetric division of household tasks (confirming a situation that is already known. See, for instance, Sartori 2002).

Figure 1: Gender role-set in the period of childlessness (%).

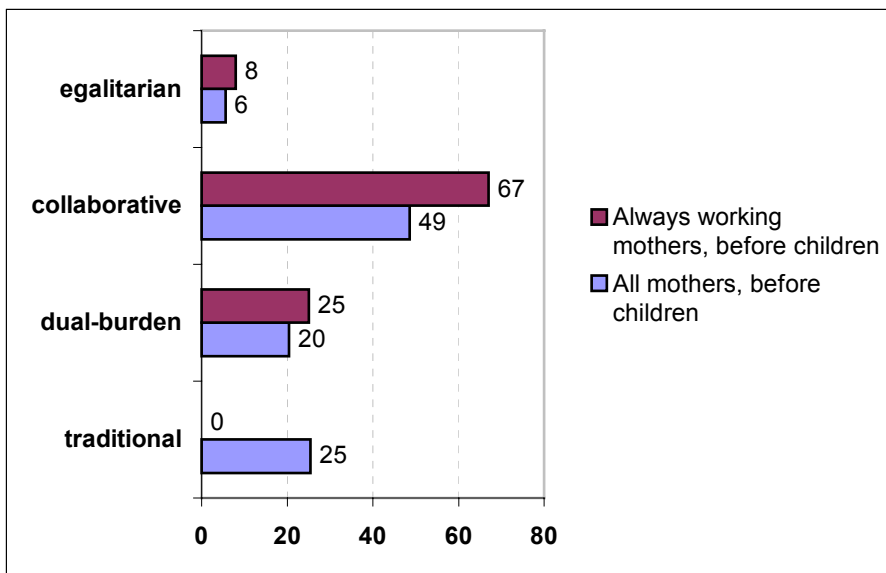


Table 1. Changes of fathers' participation to housework after a childbirth and fathers' childcare, by parity (only partners of working women):

| Fathers' participation to housework | | Parity 1 | | Parity 2 | | Parity 3 | |
|---|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Before a child | After a child birth | After 1 st | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 3 rd |
| Never or seldom (65.9%, N=1037) | + than before | 21.3 | 26.4 | 18.9 | 21.7 | 19.6 | 22.1 |
| | = as before | 60.0 | 66.2 | 65.9 | 73.6 | 71.1 | 66.1 |
| | - than before | 9.7 | 7.4 | 15.2 | 4.7 | 9.3 | 11.8 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| N | | 289 | 578 | 594 | 148 | 153 | 154 |
| Quite often or very often (34.1%, N=537) | + than before | 31.9 | 32.5 | 21.4 | 29.0 | 22.7 | 17.4 |
| | = as before | 61.0 | 60.1 | 59.0 | 63.0 | 71.0 | 67.0 |
| | - than before | 7.1 | 7.4 | 19.6 | 8.0 | 6.3 | 15.6 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| N | | 134 | 337 | 332 | 66 | 65 | 64 |
| Fathers' childcare | | Parity 1 | | Parity 2 | | Parity 3 | |
| | | 1 st child | 1 st child | 2 nd child | 1 st child | 2 nd child | 3 rd child |
| Never | | 18.2 | 11.5 | 11.7 | 13.3 | 11.2 | 9.6 |
| Sometimes | | 39.4 | 40.2 | 41.1 | 42.7 | 49.1 | 42.0 |
| Often or very often | | 42.4 | 48.3 | 47.1 | 44.0 | 39.7 | 48.4 |
| Tot | | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| N | | 457 | 951 | 955 | 224 | 223 | 223 |

Table 2. Toward a symmetric role-set. Regression analyses results for working women, before and after child birth

| | | Childless period | | After the first child | |
|--|---|---|------------|---|------------|
| Dependent Var. | | Partner housework participation: Often or very often (Y=1) 601 Seldom or never (Y=0) 1342 | | Partner housework participation: As often or very as before or increased (Y=1) 5811 Nor before nor increased (Y=0) 1191 | |
| Variables | Modalities | Coefficients | Odds ratio | Coefficients | Odds ratio |
| Intercept | | -2,01 | | -2,25 | |
| City of residence | (Ref : Messina) | | | | |
| | Florence | 0,83 *** | 2,31 | 0,94 *** | 2,56 |
| | Padua | 0,69 *** | 1,99 | 0,74 *** | 2,08 |
| | Pesaro | 0,44 ** | 1,56 | 0,60 ** | 1,81 |
| | Udine | 0,92 *** | 2,52 | 0,87 *** | 2,38 |
| Woman's education | (ref. <= Compulsory education) | 0,31 ** | 1,36 | 0,52 *** | 1,69 |
| | High school diploma | 0,72 *** | 2,06 | 0,78 *** | 2,19 |
| | Degree | | | | |
| Partner's education | (ref. <= Compulsory education) | 0,26 ** | 1,36 | 0,18 * | 1,20 |
| | High school diploma | -0,01 | 0,98 | 0,07 | 1,08 |
| | Degree | | | | |
| Woman's religious observance | (Ref. observant) Never | 0,52 *** | 1,70 | 0,61 ** | 1,85 |
| | Occasional | 0,08 | 1,09 | 0,07 | 1,07 |
| Partner's religious observance | (Ref. observant) Never | -0,57 ** | 0,57 | -0,05 ** | 0,63 |
| | Occasional | -0,47 ** | 0,62 | -0,19 | 0,82 |
| Cohabiting or ever cohabited | (ref. No) Yes | 0,18 * | 1,19 | 0,04 | 1,05 |
| Base economic conditions | (ref. Poor-Low) good or very good | 0,04 | 1,07 | | |
| | Economic condition after 1 ^o child | | | | |
| Woman's mother job participation after 1 st child | (Ref. unchanged) Improved | | | 0,15 | 1,21 |
| | Worsened | | | -0,12 * | 0,92 |
| Partner's job position | (Ref. high) white-collar or teacher | 0,24 * | 1,27 | 0,57 *** | 1,77 |
| | Other | 0,26 * | 1,31 | 0,30 ** | 1,36 |
| Working time typology | (Ref. rigid) flexible hours | 0,04 | 1,00 | 0,13 | 1,13 |
| | no job time schedule | -0,21 * | 0,68 | -0,15 | 0,84 |
| N | | 1943 | | 1772 | |

*** p <= .001 ** .001 < p <= .005 * .005 < p <= .1

1.3 *The revolution in time use after the birth of children*

The prevalently gender-asymmetric division of housework and childcare, even in dual-income couples, is inevitably reflected in the time use of the women interviewed and of their partners. In the Italian context, there has already emerged from various sources (Multipurpose Survey, Second Italian Family and Fertility Survey 1996, Social Survey in the Lombard region 2000, IARD surveys), despite by no means negligible changes, a clear-cut and persistent polarization between women's reproductive role and men's productive one.

The data of our survey highlight how almost three quarters of mothers, referring to the year prior to the arrival of the first child, had "a lot or quite a lot" of leisure time (table 3). Surprisingly, this proportion remains almost unaltered even when comparing the group of women who have never worked with those who have always worked (just two percentage points of difference). The perception of the quantity of leisure time (because this, in the absence of quantitative measures, is what we have) is greater for women who are more educated, are economically well-off, do more demanding jobs. This result might stem from a different conception of what leisure time is, for example, according to life styles; it might also arise out of the greater use of outside help, which "frees" time otherwise necessary for normal household activities. The partner's leisure time is considered by half of the childless women to be equal to their own, while the others are divided evenly between 25% of women with a partner who has less leisure time relatively and 25% with more leisure time. The women with children, on the other hand, again referring to the year prior to first birth, consider in about 50% of the cases that their partner has more leisure time than they do, in 35% that it is the same and in 15% that it is less. The consonance of time use between partners evidenced that this increases as the man's educational qualification grows.

The impact of the birth of children on the leisure time of the mothers is obviously significant: in general, for about 56% of women the time they have for themselves is "less than before", for 31% it is "much less" than before the first child. Childcaring time ends up competing with leisure time and even with time for work. Obviously, then, working women's leisure time shrinks more than anyone else's (in over 90% of cases). The contraction of time is, relative to the prior situation, more significant for the first child (see table 3 for an analysis by parity). Working women react to this situation, at least in a quarter of cases, by cutting their working hours (see table 4), especially if there is flexitime or the women can choose when to work. Even in this case, the margins for adjustment are probably limited, and indeed the negative variation is higher for the first child.

According to the interviewed women, the leisure time of their partners also tends to shrink with the birth of children (in 46% of cases). The compression of male time is in fact greater if the woman works, but above all it is higher for fathers with higher educational qualifications (see Yeung and Stafford 2003; Sayer et al. 2003) and for men who, before the arrival of children, already had little time (or who, in any case, did not have more time than their partners, see table 3

for details). In the course of family life, men's leisure time seems to affect more the time for paid work than the time for childcare. For men, more often than for women, the birth of a child (or another one) corresponds to an increase in working hours. This tendency grows in relation to children of successive orders for fathers with a higher final parity, and with a job characterized by fixed working hours. Fathers with flexible working hours experience a strong increase after the first child, with lower marginal increases for successive births and according to the final parity achieved (see table 4). The involvement of women in the job market therefore undoubtedly favours greater sharing of household and childcare duties by partners. Even for couples with a dual income, however, the gender system appears to be prevalently of a traditional kind, forcing women who, for various reasons, are not inclined to abandon the job market, to significantly reduce the time they have for themselves and for paid work (obviously when working hours are not rigid; Palomba and Sabbadini 1997; Grillo and Pinnelli 1999).

It should also be noted, confirming results that have already emerged from other studies of the situation in Italy (Bonifazi et al. 1998), that, from our data, 35% of childless women indicated lack of available time amongst the important motives for not having wanted children, and 22% for delaying. One reason women with children gave for not wanting any more was the fact that with one more child "both the infant and other children would not get enough attention". This was the case for 40% of women (43% of women who had always worked and 28% of housewife mothers).

Table 3. Changes of mothers' and fathers' leisure time after a child birth (only working women and their partners)

| | | Parity 1 | | Parity 2 | | Parity 3 | | |
|--|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Childless period | | After 1 st | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 3 rd | |
| Mothers | Childless period | After a child birth | After 1 st | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 3 rd |
| | Much or enough (74.5%, N=1283) | + than before | 0.6 | 0.1 | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0 | 1.0 |
| | | = as before | 7.0 | 4.7 | 7.6 | 8.7 | 10.0 | 10.9 |
| | | - than before | 54.7 | 60.7 | 47.9 | 62.7 | 56.3 | 30.1 |
| | | Much more - than before | 37.7 | 34.5 | 14.2 | 28.2 | 33.7 | 58.0 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | |
| | N | 363 | 741 | 740 | 179 | 179 | 179 | |
| Few or very few (25.5%, N=439) | + than before | 4.2 | 1.0 | 0.9 | 4.7 | 4.7 | 3.12 | |
| | = as before | 8.6 | 14.4 | 14.1 | 21.6 | 20.5 | 16.1 | |
| | - than before | 53.9 | 53.7 | 48.8 | 48.7 | 39.1 | 29.9 | |
| | Much more - than before | 33.3 | 30.9 | 36.2 | 24.9 | 35.7 | 50.8 | |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | |
| N | 111 | 259 | 257 | 69 | 68 | 68 | | |
| | | Parity 1 | | Parity 2 | | Parity 3 | | |
| Childless period | | After 1 st | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 3 rd | |
| Fathers | Childless period | After a child birth | After 1 st | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 3 rd |
| | More or much more than her (51%, N=814) | + than before | 5.7 | 1.4 | 2.9 | 3.1 | 1.6 | 3.3 |
| | | = as before | 60.5 | 56.9 | 49.6 | 60.7 | 55.6 | 47.2 |
| | | - than before | 33.8 | 41.7 | 47.5 | 36.22 | 42.8 | 49.5 |
| | | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| N | 240 | 460 | 458 | 112 | 111 | 114 | | |
| As much as her (37.2%, N=594) | + than before | 0.0 | 0.4 | 1.4 | 1.4 | 0.0 | x | |
| | = as before | 48.1 | 37.3 | 35.6 | 45.0 | 43.9 | 30.0 | |
| | - than before | 51.9 | 62.4 | 63.1 | 53.6 | 56.1 | 70.0 | |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | |
| | N | 152 | 367 | 364 | 75 | 75 | 72 | |
| Less or much more less than her (11.8%, N=189) | + than before | 0.0 | 1.6 | 0.6 | 4.9 | 0.0 | 2.2 | |
| | = as before | 28.1 | 31.8 | 34.9 | 39.2 | 37.6 | 34.9 | |
| | - than before | 71.9 | 66.6 | 64.5 | 55.9 | 62.4 | 62.9 | |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | |
| | N | 49 | 105 | 109 | 31 | 30 | 31 | |

Table 4. Changes after a childbirth of mothers' and fathers' working time (only always working mothers) by typology: changes

| Mothers | | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Childless period | After a child birth | Parity 1 | | Parity 2 | | Parity 3 | |
| | | After 1 st | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 3 rd |
| Rigid (65.6%, N=1026) | + than before | 7.1 | 4.3 | 7.6 | 10.3 | 9.0 | 8.5 |
| | = as before | 63.6 | 71.6 | 68.4 | 73.6 | 74.5 | 68.0 |
| | - than before | 29.3 | 24.1 | 24.0 | 16.1 | 16.5 | 23.4 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| | N | 283 | 588 | 602 | 139 | 141 | 140 |
| Flessible hours or no job time schedule (34.4%, N=539) | + than before | 9.3 | 8.3 | 13.1 | 6.5 | 4.3 | 12.5 |
| | = as before | 51.1 | 63.6 | 64.1 | 65.9 | 83.2 | 63.2 |
| | - than before | 39.6 | 28.1 | 22.8 | 27.6 | 12.5 | 24.2 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| | N | 161 | 308 | 304 | 69 | 70 | 69 |
| Fathers | | | | | | | |
| Childless period | After a child birth | Parity 1 | | Parity 2 | | Parity 3 | |
| | | After 1 st | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 1 st | After 2 nd | After 3 rd |
| Rigid (55.1%, N=164) | + than before | 12.1 | 12.8 | 23.6 | 20.6 | 23.8 | 26.0 |
| | = as before | 85.6 | 86.2 | 74.5 | 78.0 | 75.1 | 71.2 |
| | - than before | 2.3 | 1.0 | 1.8 | 1.4 | 1.1 | 2.8 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| | N | 217 | 513 | 514 | 124 | 122 | 126 |
| Flessible hours or no job time schedule (44.9%, N=697) | + than before | 22.7 | 28.4 | 18.1 | 20.4 | 14.4 | 16.2 |
| | = as before | 67.4 | 64.8 | 64.8 | 73.0 | 79.5 | 75.0 |
| | - than before | 9.9 | 6.7 | 17.1 | 6.6 | 6.1 | 8.8 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| | N | 203 | 394 | 404 | 86 | 90 | 87 |

3. Implications of family role-set for childbearing

3.1 The hypothesis of the effect of asymmetric role-set on lowest-low fertility

The classic transition model does not analyse how low fertility is linked to changes in gender relations (Presser and Das 2002). Some people have argued that the complex process of female emancipation in itself leads towards low fertility, even in post-transitional contexts, and that it is not possible to reconcile gender equality and non-low fertility (Keyfitz 1987). It is obvious that women's greater participation in the labour market is linked in general terms with lower levels of fertility, but this conclusion seems incomplete without taking into consideration the relationship between partners, the degree of existing equality, the roles inside and outside the home, and the prevalent motivation for female work (for example, whether or not women only work to solve economic problems; Matthew 1999).

It is not difficult to observe, in fact, that the developed countries with a very low fertility are the ones with a less equal gender system compared with countries where fertility is relatively higher (counterposing the countries of the South with those of Northern Europe). McDonald (2000) believes that the very low fertility may be the result above all of a hiatus that has developed in some developed countries between "high levels of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions and sustained gender inequity in family-oriented social institutions". On the one hand, in fact, even in the countries of Southern Europe, there has been an extraordinary increase in the levels of female education, to the extent that the younger cohorts of women have higher averages than those of their male peers. It follows, then, that an increasing proportion of young, educated women no longer build their social "identity" just through marriage and the family, but also want to work, to be economically independent, to have other roles than those of wife and mother (Piazza 2003). On the other hand, this growing equality outside the family has not been matched by the same tendency inside it.

If in recent decades women have been given the same opportunities as men in education, and to some extent, in the labour market as well, this has not happened within union and family relationships. Indeed, women's job opportunities can be seriously compromised by having children. This situation can in itself drive some women to reduce the number of children they have or even induce them to forego altogether (Matthew 1999).

Institutions linked to the family and parenthood have changed much slower in terms of gender equity. The family is a conservative institution (McDonald 2000a) and family organization, an important aspect of the cultural identity of a society, has remained quite stratified by gender.

All this is also coherent with a reading of the evolution of fertility in terms of economic rationality: the baby-boom era can be interpreted as a consequence of the prevalence of the "breadwinner" model, accepted both by the family and by social and economic institutions. This model was then

almost entirely eliminated from educational institutions and from the labour market. Women are educated according to the same standards as men and for the (paid) labour market, exactly as for men. However, in countries where family attitudes have remained closer to the “male bread-winner model”, where female work is limited by the lack of family support services, and where the social organization makes it difficult to combine work and family, fertility rates have plummeted (McDonald 2000b).

The Italian situation, marked by very low fertility and the strong persistence of gender asymmetry in the organization of time and family tasks, seems to perfectly exemplify the interpretative theories mentioned above, in a kind of Mediterranean model of gender inequality where, overall, women work more than men and have, in comparison to their partners, less leisure time.

3.2 Life-time and reproductive choices: the survey results

If there is a relationship, between gender asymmetry in families and low fertility, the main hypothesis to test is whether mothers who work, and at the same time experience an absence of symmetrical roles and sharing of household and caring tasks in the family, have lower fertility than working women with a less marked compression of time and with a partner who participates more in the family organization. Again, we concentrate on mothers who always work, before and after the birth of their children. Obviously the willingness of the women to work could also be seen as an exogenous variable regarding the model considered; indeed some women may work more precisely because they do not want many children.

We consider all the elements relative to the family organization and time use analysed so far: the amount of leisure time for the woman and her partner before the birth of children, and the successive variations; the participation of the partner in household tasks before the birth of the child, and the variations; the participation of the partner in childcare; variations in the working hours of both parents following the birth of children. We also include the economic condition of the family and its variations, and some background variables for each partner. Logistic regression models¹ are used to calculate the probability that mothers who have had a child will have a second one and then a third.

The results seem to verify the initial hypothesis. For mothers who have in fact always worked, the probability of having a second child (see table 5) is associated positively with what are “classic” explanatory characteristics for the Italian context, such as the religious observance of both the parents, residence in the city of Messina rather than in the cities of Central-Northern Italy, higher level of education of father (a typical proxy of income) and the improvement in the economic conditions of the family in the period following the first child (while the economic conditions of the

¹ We decided to use this simple model, because problems of censoring can be considered trivial for the group of mothers of parity 1, since they have already a first child of 13 years old. For the group of mothers of parity 2 we included in the model only mothers with the younger child of at least age 8 (about 100 cases).

couple at the start are not significant). Some variables relative to fathers' behaviour have significant effects on the probability, for working women, of having a second child. These are the increase in involvement in housework after the birth of the child (the positive variation of the participation is more important than the quantitative nature of that commitment before the birth of the children); the father's frequent involvement in everyday childcare; the adjustment of time in terms of a contraction of leisure time. Women's views about the amount of own time they have, and variations at the birth of the first child, are not statistically significant (it decreases greatly for everyone), while it is more probable that women who have not reduced their working hours following the birth of their first child will have a second child. Also statistically significant in relation to the probability of having a second child is the resort to grandparents or child or baby-sitter services, as the prevalent method for looking after children in the first 3 years. The effects on the probability of working women passing from the second to the third child (see table 6) are similar to the ones evidenced for the previous parity as regards the positive effect of active participation by fathers in looking after the child - in this case the second - in contracting his leisure time and participating in household work (at least not reducing it). Mothers who have had to cut down their working hours as a result of the second birth have less frequently had a third child. The effects of religiousness of both parents and the father's low level of education have also, *ceteris paribus*, a significantly positive effect.

Table 5. Transition to the second child of working women

| Dependent Var. | Women with at least 2 children Women with parity 1 | (Y=1) (Y=0) | 946 343 | |
|---|---|----------------|------------|--------------|
| Variables | Modalities | Coefficients | Odds ratio | Coefficients |
| Intercept | 0,22 | | | |
| City of residence | (Ref : Messina) | | | |
| | Florence | -1,12 *** | | 0,32 |
| | Padua | -0,86 *** | | 0,42 |
| | Pesaro | -0,58 ** | | 0,56 |
| | Udine | -1,02 *** | | 0,36 |
| Age | | 0,02 * | | |
| Partner's education | (ref. <= Compulsory education) | 0,02 | | 1,03 |
| | High school diploma | 0,46 ** | | 1,57 |
| | Degree | | | |
| Woman's religious observance | (Ref. observant) | | | |
| | Never | -0,41 * | | 0,66 |
| | Occasional | -0,22 | | 0,80 |
| Partner's religious observance | (Ref. observant) | | | |
| | Never | -0,38 * | | 0,68 |
| | Occasional | -0,18 | | 0,83 |
| Changes in woman working time after the 1 st child | (Ref. unchanged) | | | |
| | Increased | -0,29 | | 0,75 |
| | Decreased | -0,43 ** | | 0,65 |
| Changes in partner working time after the 1 st child | (Ref. unchanged) | | | |
| | Increased | -0,13 | | 0,87 |
| | Decreased | -0,06 | | 0,94 |
| Prevalent child-carer of 1 st child during the first 3 years | (Ref.: mother herself) | | | |
| | childcare instit. or babysitter | 0,28 * | | 1,32 |
| | grandparents or relatives | 0,30 * | | 1,36 |
| | father himself | -0,35 | | 0,69 |
| Father childcare of the 1 st child | (Ref. never) | | | |
| | sometime | 0,35 ** | | 1,42 |
| | often or very often | 0,43 ** | | 1,53 |
| Father housework participation after 1 st child birth | (Ref. unchanged) | | | |
| | Increased | 0,16 | | 1,17 |
| | Decreased | 0,04 | | 1,03 |
| Changes in father spare time after 1 st child birth. | (Ref. unchanged) | | | |
| | Increased | -0,27 | | 0,71 |
| | Decreased | 0,20 | | 1,15 |
| Changes in family economic conditions after 1 st child birth | (Ref. unchanged) | | | |
| | Improved | 0,16 | | 1,17 |
| | Worsened | -0,21 | | 0,81 |
| N | | 1289 | | |

*** p <= .001 ** .001 < p <= .005 * .005 < p <= .1

Table 6. Transition to the second child of working women

| Dependent Var. | Women with at least 3 children Women with parity 2 | (Y=1) (Y=0) | 190 790 |
|--|---|----------------|------------|
| Variables | Modalities | Coefficients | Odds Ratio |
| Intercept | | -3,5 | |
| City of residence | (Ref : Messina) | | |
| | Florence | -0,77 ** | 0,46 |
| | Padua | -0,34 * | 0,71 |
| | Pesaro | -0,38 * | 0,68 |
| | Udine | -0,51 ** | 0,60 |
| Age | | 0,08 *** | 1,03 |
| Partner's education | (Ref. <= Compulsory education) | -0,19 | 0,83 |
| | High school diploma | -0,19 | 0,83 |
| | Degree | | |
| Woman's religious observance | (Ref. observant) | | |
| | Never | -0,42 | 0,65 |
| | Occasional | -0,26 | 0,77 |
| Partner's religious observance | (Ref. observant) | | |
| | Never | -0,58 ** | 0,55 |
| | Occasional | -0,42 ** | 0,66 |
| Changes in woman working time after the 2 nd child | (Ref. unchanged) | | |
| | Increased | -0,29 | 0,74 |
| | Decreased | -0,85 ** | 0,43 |
| Prevalent child-carer of 2 nd child during the first 3 years | (Ref.: mother herself) | | |
| | childcare instit. or babysitter | -0,07 | 0,92 |
| | grandparents or relatives | -0,17 | 0,85 |
| | father himself | -0,22 | 0,79 |
| Father childcare of the 2 nd child | (Ref. never) | | |
| | sometime | -0,19 | 0,82 |
| | often or very often | -0,33 | 0,72 |
| Father housework participation after 2 nd child birth | (Ref. unchanged) | | |
| | Increased | 0,12 | 1,12 |
| | Decreased | -0,63 * | 0,53 |
| Changes in father spare time after 2 nd child birth. | (Ref. unchanged) | | |
| | Increased | -0,26 | 0,58 |
| | Decreased | -0,01 | 0,76 |
| Changes in family economic conditions after 2 nd child birth | (Ref. unchanged) | | |
| | Improved | 0,07 | 1,08 |
| | Worsened | 0,03 | 1,04 |
| N. | | 980 | |

*** p <= .001 ** .001 < p <= .005 * .005 < p <= .1

4. Effects of gender policies on fertility: possibilities and paradoxes

Our results support the hypothesis that the impossibility of reconciling work and childraising in a gender-equitable fashion is one key to interpreting the prevalent strategy of reducing fertility, as is also the case in other countries of Mediterranean Europe. The increase in female employment, the limited adaptation of men to these changes and the consequent “dual presence” of women alone, in a social context that continues to favour informal caregiving services (both for children and the elderly) and in a labour market that is deaf to new family needs, have led to what has been defined as the “stalled revolution” of lowest-low fertility (Hochschild 1989). A more balanced gender system might encourage an upturn in fertility, enabling couples to realize their desires. Structural, organizational and cultural impediments (Zanatta 2002), in Italy and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, are preventing a significant step forward towards greater gender equity. On the one hand prevailing social customs and norms favour male employment to female one, and, on the other, there is a lack of caregiving services and an inflexible labour market.

Italian social and family policies aimed at reconciling the family and work as well as promoting equal gender opportunities are extremely contradictory and piecemeal (Saraceno 2002), and have continued to promote norms with an indirectly negative influence on the position of working women (Trifiletti 1999). Italy is in last place when it comes to the position of women in the labour market (Plantega and Hansen 1999). This contrasts greatly with the Scandinavian countries, where social and family policies have for many years now been openly pursuing the goal of gender equality, making an increase in the domestic work done by fathers (now socially accepted) a priority, and encouraging women to work for the market (Casey 2002). These policies have been effective, and the burden of childraising is more equally distributed between the mother and father, and between the family and the community, in comparison with all the other Western societies.

Measures to encourage parents to achieve their desired level of fertility cannot therefore neglect policies that explicitly promote equal opportunities in the family and workplace to enhance gender equity (as recommended by the European Community, for instance in the Treaty of Amsterdam signed in 1999). It should also be noted that even policies not explicitly related to gender equality, but which affect social benefits and working hours are never quite neutral with regard to social relations between men and women in the workplace and the family. An example is given by measures to improve provisions of childcare and services for the elderly (McDonald 2000 and 2002; Gershuny 2000; Piazza 1991; Plantega and Hansen 1999; Saraceno 2002; Zanatta 2002; Gauthier 2002).

Recent studies show that the use of childcare services, more than resorting, for example, to part-time employment by the parents, seems to have a direct impact on the probability of having a further child (Baizan 2003). Measures enabling flexibility or a reduction in working hours, and rules regarding periods of voluntary leave from work and time off in order to look after family members, are highly desirable and can help families to organize their time in relation to the needs of the life cycle. However, if aimed prevalently at women, they have a negative impact on gender relations, leading to different levels of responsibility in terms of domestic tasks, effectively inhibiting the development of women's human capital and consequently the possibility of gender equity in the labour market. For instance, shorter working hours for women who opt for part-time employment means a greater share of domestic responsibilities, thereby making the division of family labour even more asymmetric (Gershuny 1995, Estes et al. 2003).

Furthermore, in the Italian labour market, part-time employment tends to lead, according to some experts (Perrons 1999, Saraceno 2002 and Censis data) to further segregation along gender lines. This results in less job security and fewer opportunities for promotion, and does not permit either a redistribution of caregiving tasks or a change in parental roles.

Gender equality in the workplace can only be achieved if there is a complementary policy regarding (non-paid) caregiving work. As long as the responsibility for providing care continues to be seen as a private matter, the unequal division of non-paid labour will inevitably entail inequality

in the labour market (Plantega and Hansen 1999). One example of this can be seen in the Netherlands, where the lack of specific care-giving policies is offset by great work flexibility (with no serious consequences in terms of salaries or career prospects). However, this has led to marked gender inequalities in the distribution of non-paid work (Veenis 1998).

The boosting of care-giving services in specific periods or situations in life – that is, when there are children, elderly or disabled people to look after – is in our view an important factor in reconciling family and work from a gender equality point of view, and also a public policy issue. The example of Great Britain seems to demonstrate that the market alone is not capable of making adequate and efficient provision (Gershuny 2000). In a society with a “high added value” of couples with a high level of education, few women are prepared to remain at home to provide care-giving services on an informal non-paid basis, and it is not hard to imagine that there are not many men who will want to take their place. The lack of child-care services in Italy is well-known, and budget problems in the state sector do not contribute to creating a favourable environment for their development; indeed, faced with an increase in social spending, the proposed solution at the local and central-government level is to give back these care-giving tasks to the family (Saraceno 2002). Obviously one cannot support the goal of greater equality between genders at the same time as one is trying to reinforce the informal child-care network (Piazza 1991). Moreover, access to and cost of kindergartens and other childcare services are often meantested, which indirectly implies a disadvantage for working mothers.

A decisive step forward in the direction of a more equitable gender system can only be achieved with the help of legislative measures that actively and directly encourage the involvement of men in domestic and care-giving tasks, for instance periods of parental leave for fathers only. Whilst these measures may initially have an essentially symbolic value, they contribute significantly to bringing about a change in mentality, which in turn can lead to a real change in behaviour.

5. Conclusions

Our results that in Italy, even in urban contexts, not much change has taken place in the family role-set. Qualitatively and quantitatively, men’s involvement and gender sharing in the household’s workload and childcare are still asymmetric and the weight rests mainly on the woman’s shoulders. The implications of a birth are on average negative in term of gender equality in the couple. Fatherhood tends to increase the time devoted to work, as opposed to an increase in time spent on childcare or housekeeping. However, a progressive adaptation towards gender equity of family organization during the life course, including childbearing, is evident among a small proportion of dual-earning couples. Among these couples, belonging to the higher socio-economic level, women have a relatively high education level and men are more egalitarian, when white-

collar workers. In these couples, childbearing implies a more similar “revolution” of fathers’ and mothers’ time and activities.

Moreover, the gender-symmetric role-set of parents increases their likelihood to have one more child. This result is very important, since this has never emerged so clearly in the Italian setting. It calls for consideration of gender issues in Italian lowest-low fertility analyses and for changes in gender attitudes in order to help fertility to be driven by specific policies for equal gender opportunities inside and outside the families or to be helped by the supply of services.

6. An undergoing further development: a coloured picture through focus groups

In the framework of the same research project, entitled *Low Italian Fertility – economic constraints and changing values*, it has been carried also a qualitative, in the same five provincial capitals (Florence, Messina, Padua, Pesaro and Udine)²: 188 working parents participated in 23 Focus Groups (see table 7).

7 focus groups regarded mother with one child, 7 mothers with three or more children, 5 fathers with one child and 4 fathers with three or more children. In total 110 mothers and 78 fathers were involved.

Potentially suitable parents were identified in the population register, according to the following criteria: age (34-45); marital status (stable married: we excluded from the sample separated and divorced people and step-families); currently employed; age of children (for parents of one child, this should have been at least 5 years old). Initially contact was established by a recruitment letter which informed the potentially interviewees about the possibility of receiving a telephone interview from the University in the following weeks. The screening took place through a quite short CATI interview where the aim of the general research, the request of participating to a sort of group of discussion, the institutions involved, the rewards for participation were carefully explained.

The rich information gathered through focus group will allow us to study in the depth our subject of analysis and to enhance and widen the dynamic of family role-set in the life course, having recourse also to male narrative.

In the discussions, the information about the gender family role-set emerged when people were asked to discuss together about four themes: 1) how modern couples have changed compared to past time; 2) what are the problems concerning every day life and family organisation; 3) the consequences for parents’ lives of the first child; 4) the opportunity-cost of a child.

² For Udine, data are only quantitative, because the focus group were carried out only on a sample of childless women, not included in this analysis.

Table 7. Focus groups survey

| | NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUPS | | | | Total focus group | NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS | | | | Total participants |
|----------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| | Women 1 child | Women 3 o more children | Men 1 child | Men 3 o more children | | Women 1 child | Women 3 o more children | Men 1 child | Men 3 o more children | |
| Florence | 2 | 2 | - | - | 4 | 21 | 19 | - | - | 40 |
| Messina | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 3 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 5 | 18 |
| Padua | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 19 | 23 | 21 | 22 | 85 |
| Pesaro | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 17 | 45 |
| Totale | 7 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 23 | 51 | 59 | 34 | 44 | 188 |

Mothers and fathers participating to focus groups belong all to dual-working and earners couples. In general, from a first descriptive analysis, it emerges that there are divergent perceptions relating to the time for oneself, for housework and the children by gender. There is not equal sharing either of childcare or of family work. Usually, the father is a support, a prop, but does not share.

We can classify women in four groups:

- 1) The “traditionalist” women: they accept and even defend the peculiarity of female role not only as mothers but also in the housekeeping. They have “high standards” of housekeeping and they consider themselves the unique repository of the “know-how”.
- 2) The “sportive” women: the family organization is mainly asymmetric and husbands do not participate to housekeeping and childcare. Those women react lowering “standards” and asking relying on external help.
- 3) The “negotiator” women: they remain the center of family organization, but they ask partners involvement and participation. Male participation is not spontaneous but continuously stimulated and negotiated.
- 4) The “equal” women: there is a small group of women experimenting gender roles equality, although they often admit that there is not perfect interchangeability of roles, but, on the contrary, husbands choose specific tasks.

In the discussions two questionable theories emerged as explanation of gender asymmetric roles: 1) men are not educated for roles-symmetry and are therefore “inadequate and hopeless” in housework and child caring (gender asymmetric family of origin example is crucial); 2) women are the main responsible because want to be considered the “queen of the house” and they believe themselves indispensable.

From the focus group on fathers, we can distinguish four typologies (as already indicated by Giovannini, 1998):

- The “involved” father (the most egalitarian ones);
- The “involved father in theory” (fathers with egalitarian principles but with very little free time from job);

- The “guest father”: it is the most frequent typology and the traditional work sharing in a dual-working couple leads to women’s “dual-burden”;
- The “delegating” father: the couple is dual-earning but the wife works much more less than the father and he felt legitimized in delegating everything regarding housework and childcare to her.

To distinguish these typologies the most important men’s characteristics are the type of job and the work-hours.

About what we have defined as the “revolution of time use after the birth of children”, from the first descriptive analysis of focus groups, we can affirm that in general there are some recurring themes on the consequences of the birth of a child (in particular, the first one):

- 1) The birth of a child can determine a difficult moment for the couple (“*parenthood as a crisis*”). The child birth has often as consequence a deterioration of couple’s love and intimacy.
- 2) The presence of a child and the consequent reorganisation of personal and family time often worsen the gender imbalance (as already shown in Romito et al 1997) .Fathers, especially according female narrative, have a less sense of parenthood responsibility. Women feel a sense of “*violation of expectations*”.
- 3) Both fathers and mothers declare that for women, in Italian context, is particularly difficult to re-conciliate working and motherhood roles. For women motherhood is considered a sort of duty, for men, fatherhood is an “optional”.

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