

### The Research Problem/ Question

The drop in fertility rate in Italy occurred suddenly.<sup>1</sup> In 1970, the average number of children per Italian woman was 2.42; by 1980 this had fallen to 1.64, then in 1995 it reached its lowest point with 1.18, and in 2000 the rate was 1.26. In 2010 the fertility rate was 1.4, and the projected fertility rate for 2012 is 1.4. This establishes Italy as having the 201<sup>st</sup> lowest fertility rate out of 222 nations. This decrease in the number of children has already shifted the age demographic of the nation: 1 in every 5 people living in Italy is over the age of 65 (20.4% elderly). In 1950, this ratio was 7.9 persons under the age of 65 to every person over the age of 65, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics. This ratio is projected to continue to decrease and overall population is expected to decline because women are reproducing at well below the population replacement rate. The increase in the number of the dependent and retired to the working population will put enormous strain on Italy's society and economy in the future.

The persistently low fertility rate in Italy is interesting because it was not predicted by any population forecast. One of the primary reasons this drop in Italian fertility rate was, and still is, surprising is because of Italy's history of traditional "family values" i.e. a domestic mother, working father, and many children in a nuclear family situation. Italy is a nation in which the concept of a traditional family has been a well established cultural norm, reinforced by centuries of adherence to the traditional structure, and reinforced by powerful Italian institutions.

Powerful Italian cultural and social institutions have advocated these large families and distinct gender roles. Italy's unique historical and cultural ties to the Catholic Church are well

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<sup>1</sup> The number of children that would be born to a woman if she were to live to the end of her childbearing years and bear children in accordance with current age-specific fertility rates

established, with the papacy located in the heart of Rome and 80% of the population identifying as Roman Catholic. The church has long condemned the use of any form of contraception. The Catholic Church is not the only historical institution that has advocated for large families and the traditional family structure. Mussolini's fascist regime, which controlled Italy from 1925–1943 also pushed for traditional gender roles, large families, and against the use of contraception.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that the Italian Fertility rate is dramatically lower than that of Northern Europe and other developed societies with access to the same reproductive choices. In order for the dramatic change in fertility rate to have occurred, women had to reject the traditional societal attitudes towards contraception and family planning. It can be argued that the change in Italy's fertility rate was in reaction against the traditional family structure and the prominent social and cultural institutions that have advocated for it throughout Italy's history.

All of this information aggregates to make the change in fertility to--at the lowest--1.18 children per woman on average even more shocking. It is a surprising trend that has still not been fully explained. Therefore, I will seek to explain what has caused the change in fertility rate in Italy?

### CONTEXT

This question must be examined within the context of existing scholarly work on this topic. The existing research on the topic of Italy's changing fertility rate draws a distinct connection between the increase in Female Labor Force Participation Rate and a decrease in the number of children desired or considered practical by Italian women and families.<sup>3</sup> Female

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<sup>2</sup> Birnbaum, Lucia Chiavola *Liberazione della donna: Feminism in Italy* (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1986)

<sup>3</sup> Percentage of women employed or actively seeking employment

Labor Force Participation rate has steadily increased across the same time period in which fertility rate has declined.

Scholars cite issues particular to the Italian Labor Structure that make it difficult for women to participate in the waged workforce while also having children. Some of these include: the lack of part-time employment opportunities, difficulty in re-entry to the workforce after childbirth, low access to childcare services, and the opportunity cost (foregone wages) of having a child.<sup>4</sup> These factors are unique to Italy and have shaped the argument of scholars that the labor market in Italy is not conducive to women having a large number of children. Therefore an increase in female participation in the labor market has led to, and will continue to lead to, a low fertility rates unless there are changes to the labor market structure.

The majority of the studies conducted and theories produced to explain the persistently low Fertility Rate in Italy since 1970 glaze over the fact that an increase of women in the workforce and a lowering of the importance placed on having a large family is an important and distinct cultural shift. There was a shift in Italian societal values in which women chose to place more value on involvement of women in the workforce, and they allowed this participation to influence decision making in regards to procreation. Through this shift, Italian women chose to place less value on a large, traditional (one might even say “Italian”) family: something shocking in a culture so deeply rooted in the traditional family structure.

Existing studies have neglected to delve into the qualitative factors that influence an individual’s decision as to whether or not and/or how many children to have. The decision whether or not to reproduce and/or how many children to have is not solely economic: it is emotional and reflects the values of Italian women, their families, and the society as a whole.

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<sup>4</sup> Del Boca, Daniela. "Why Are Fertility and Participation Rates so Low in Italy (and Southern Europe)?" *The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America* (2003): n. pag. Web.

The idea that the declining Fertility Rate is due to female labor force participation alone is overly simplistic. This is the context in which I will examine this topic, and the gap which my research will seek to fill.

My research will demonstrate that a cultural shift in values lies the root of Italy's current persistently low fertility rate. Certain cultural attitudes related to children, marriage, and the family are specific to Italy, and I will examine these unique factors to determine why the values of society changed, and therefore why the fertility rate may have declined as a result. I hypothesize that a shift in cultural values across time has caused the very low fertility in Italy. I reject that the increase in women in the workforce is the sole cause of the low Fertility Rate, but instead will argue that this change reflects the same shift in cultural values.

### METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the question "what has caused the change in fertility rate in Italy?" I will demonstrate that there has been a meaningful and lasting shift in cultural values that has led to this decline. I will seek first to do this by examining and establishing the traditional Italian culture and familial structure. I will focus particularly on the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to emphasize the change that societal values underwent around 1970 that led to a drop in the fertility rate. I will use scholarly texts, excerpts from papal declarations, and fascist publications to show the traditional family ideology and pro-natalist attitudes that permeated Italian culture. I will also use this section to establish the historical and societal significance of the "Traditional Family Structure" as it relates to Italy.

Secondly, I will examine texts from the time period during which the fertility rate in Italy began to dramatically decline. I will analyze texts related to the Italian feminist movement to

bolster my argument about there being a meaningful cultural shift. I will also examine legislation that was passed directly preceding and during the time period in which fertility steadily declined. I will focus particularly on legislation related to women and reproduction. For example, the legalization of birth control in Italy in 1970 and the legalization of abortion in 1978. By virtue of Italy's democratically structured government, changes in these laws are able to serve as a reflection of the values of Italy and its people during the time period which fertility decreased.

I will further analyze the change in fertility rate as the result of a meaningful cultural shift by investigating how Italian women view the traditional family structure as a limiting force, and thus the decision to have fewer children can be interpreted as reaction against the societal forces which had been at work. This argument can also be bolstered through an examination of Italian feminist texts, but I believe that it can be best furthered by interpretation of existing studies and interviews (such as the Brown University study *Explaining Low Fertility in Italy*), analysis of existing survey data, and also by conducting interviews with Italian women while I am abroad in order to hear their personal stories and perspectives on issues related to fertility and family structure in Italy.

I plan to conduct interviews with and distribute a survey to women in three groups. The first group will consist of women who were of average childbearing age before the change in fertility rate occurred. Since these women are aged 65 and above, they will most likely be the most difficult to access. I believe these women can serve to represent participation in a more traditional Italian family structure. I will use their feedback to provide insight into this and as a contrast to information gathered from the other two groups I plan to examine.

The second group interests me the most: women who were of the Mean Age at First Child Birth between 1990 and 1997.<sup>5</sup> This group of women, aged from approximately 44 to 50 years old, will be particularly valuable to study. These cohorts, on average, were raised in much larger families than the families which, as adults, they chose to create for themselves. For example, in 1995 the Mean Age at First Child Birth in Italy was 28.0. The average 28 year old woman in 1995 would have a family size of 1.18 children; however, she would have been born in 1967 and thus would have grown up in a family of 2.54 children, on average. I wish to glean the attitudes of this cohort of women towards questions of the traditional family structure versus personal autonomy. I would also like to ask them about their experiences as mothers, daughters, and sisters since they chose to have much different families for themselves than the ones in which they were raised.

The third group will consist of women who are close to the current Mean Age at First Child Birth (30.2), ideally women between ages 30 and 35. I want to be able to gauge their perspective on these same issues in order to determine if the change in fertility rate results from a lasting cultural shift that is unlikely to change in the near future.

Throughout my qualitative examination of the change in fertility rate, I will use quantitative data to aid in explaining the overall change in fertility rate. For the scope of my quantitative data I plan to examine the time period from 1970 (Fertility Rate 2.43) until 2010 (Fertility Rate 1.4). I chose this scope because this is the time period across which the fertility rate in Italy changed consistently and dramatically. Also, 1970 was the year in which oral contraception was legalized in Italy, making it the first year in which women had access to legal and reliable methods of family planning and therefore were able to consciously control the number of children to have. I will analyze factors that are able to be expressed numerically

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<sup>5</sup> Defined as the average completed year of age of women when their first child is born

across time that reflect a cultural shift in attitudes towards the traditional family structure and institutions that supported this cultural norm. Some examples of such factors are the use of contraception by Italian women, rates of abortion, marriage rates, and indicators of religiosity in Italian society. This data will shed light on the Italian societal attitude towards the traditional family structure and lend explanatory power to the change in fertility rate.

The final way in which I will seek to answer the question of what has caused changing fertility rate in Italy is by examining the effect of immigration on fertility rate. Fertility rate has slowly increased over the past decade and a half from its lowest point in 1995 to the current rate of 1.4. This change must be reconciled with the idea that a meaningful and lasting shift in Italian culture has occurred to cause the change in Fertility Rate. Many population experts attribute the rise in fertility rates to the influx of immigrants to Italy in the past decade.<sup>6</sup> By demonstrating that the immigrant population on Italy is responsible for the small increase in birth rate that has occurred within the past fifteen years, I will be able to emphasize that a shift in *Italian* cultural values, not just the material conditions of the labor market, has led to a change, and lasting decrease in Fertility Rate in Italy.

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<sup>6</sup> *Replacement Migration: Is a Solution to Declining and Ageing Populations?* Rep. N.p.: United Nations Population Division of the Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 2000. Print.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Existing scholarly work supports the idea that non-economic factors have played a significant role in the change in the fertility rate in Italy. Other arguments, such as the Second Demographic Transition, have been presented to explain the change in Fertility Rate in Italy. This theory emphasizes choices related to marriage and motherhood amongst Italian women as tied to ideational changes. This supports my hypothesis that fertility changes can be seen as a result of a large cultural shift which values personal development and views traditional institutions with skepticism. Changing patterns in family structure “can therefore be seen, at least at first, as an expression of non-conformist attitude, protest against authority, and a way of manifesting one’s freedom against conventions.”<sup>7</sup>

I also have preliminary quantitative support for my hypothesis. Marriage Rate has been consistently decreasing in Italy during the same time period as the change in Fertility Rate.<sup>8</sup> More so than other Western and Eastern European countries, in Italy the vast majority of childbearing is still contained within the marital union; therefore, the two are deeply related. Marriage rate in Italy fell from 7.4 in 1970 to 3.8 in 2010. These rates only measure traditional, heterosexual marriages and do not include statistics for civil unions that are heterosexual or homosexual; therefore, the statistics reflect only “traditional marriages.” As well as leading to fewer children being born, the decrease in marriages shows a rejection of the traditional family structure in Italy, which I hypothesize is the reason for the decline in fertility rate.

Analysis of Survey Data from Euro-barometer 3: European Men and Women, 1975, charted below, also supports the hypothesis that the change in fertility rate results from a shift in cultural values against (and in reaction to) the traditional family structure and culture in Italy.

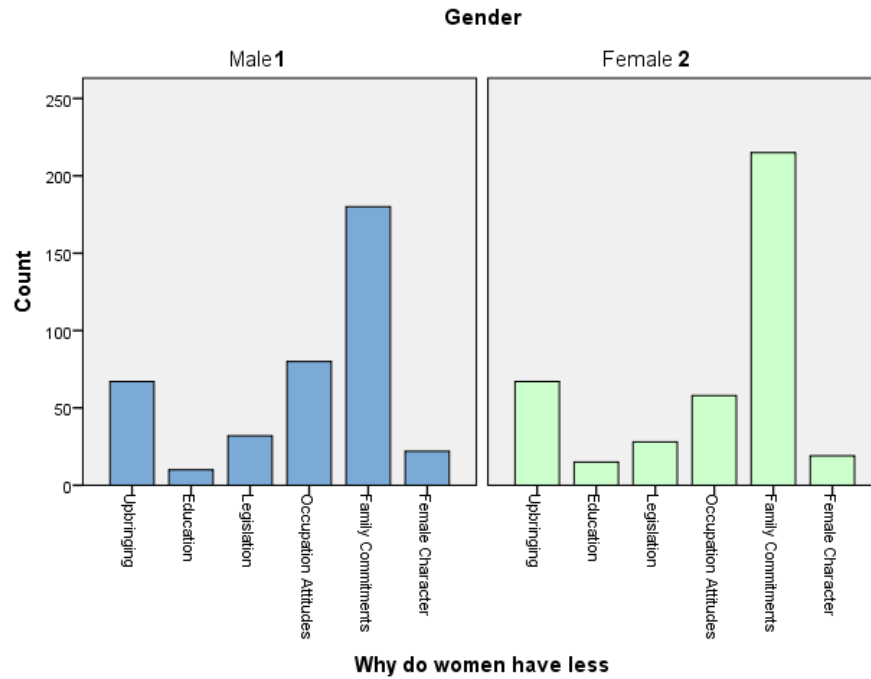
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<sup>7</sup> Rosina, Alessandro. "Is Marriage Losing Its Centrality in Italy?" *Demographic Research* 11.6 (2004): 149-72. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Marriages per 1,000 total population



### Why do Women have Fewer Opportunities?



In response to this question, surveyed women cited “Family Commitments” to answer the question “why do women have fewer opportunities?” more than double the amount of any of the other possible limiting factors. This shows that during the time period when fertility rate first began its rapid decline, educational and occupational limitations were viewed by both men and women as having much less of an effect on women’s opportunities than Family Commitments. This challenges the idea that the change in fertility rate results from women’s increased access to education and participation in the work force, as it has been argued in many studies. Instead, this data emphasizes that Italians, women in particular, perceived the confines of the traditional family as a limitation to women. This knowledge and expression of the perceived restrictions stemming from female family obligations supports the argument that the cultural shift was reactionary against this traditional structure and the institutions which advocated it.

Findings related to Italy's NET Migration rate and the reproductive behaviors of immigrants support my hypothesis that a meaningful cultural shift has led to the change in Fertility Rate. These findings can also help to explain the slight increase in Fertility Rate during the past 10-15 years, because Italy's NET Migration has increased drastically in the past decade:

**Net Migration Rate** (Source: CIA World Factbook)

| Country      | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <u>Italy</u> | 1.74 | 1.73 | 1.73 | 2.07 | 2.07 | 2.07 | 2.06 | 2.06 | 2.06 | 2.06 | 2.07 | 4.86 | 4.67 |

In 1995 (Fertility Rate 1.18) immigrant women were responsible for 1.9% of all births, while in 2008 (Fertility Rate 1.42) they were responsible for 12.7% of all births, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics. Immigrant women and families in Italy live and work in the same conditions as Italian women and families. They face the same, if not more, lack of part-time employment opportunities, difficult re-entry to the workforce, and incredibly low access to childcare, yet immigrants within Italy still reproduce at a higher rate than Italian women. This is because these immigrants are not ethnically Italian. Their attitude towards children and families is culturally different. Although they are subject to the same, if not harsher, material conditions, these women reproduce in different patterns than Italian women: thus emphasizing that the change in Fertility Rate is rooted in a cultural shift, of which the increase in Female Labor Force Participation Rate is an effect: and not a cause.

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