

More Italian Women Are Choosing to Have No Children

A Precarious Jobs Market and Dearth of Child-Care Are Factors in Turn Away From Motherhood

By

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Updated April 22, 2014 9:40 a.m. ET



Gabriella Marino, left, found that after she got a steady job, the urge to have children never arrived. Massimo Mastroiillo/LUZphoto for The Wall Street Journal

MILAN— Fiorella Fiori took her mother aside years ago to break the news: She planned to never have children. Despite pressure from family and friends, she has stuck to her guns even after marrying.

"I just didn't want children," she said. "The idea is shocking to most of my friends. And my mom keeps on reminding me that I'm 40 and I can't wait forever."

Ms. Fiori, from Sardinia, is part of a trend toward childlessness that is gaining momentum here.

Italy's birthrate has been far below replacement rate for years. But now more couples with precarious jobs, low salaries and a late start together are opting to have no children at all. A quarter of Italian women end their childbearing years without children, compared with 14% in the U.S. and 10% in France.



The protracted economic crisis has worsened obstacles Italian women have long faced in starting a family—from lack of child-care centers to less-than-helpful partners. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation

and Development, the rate of childlessness among Italian women born in 1965—those turning 50 next year—is nearly 10 percentage points higher than it is among those born in 1960.

Italy's difficult job market is a leading factor. With unemployment high, many young people can secure nothing but short-term contracts of less than a year. About 60% of those with such work go on to another temporary contract when the first one ends, and one in five remains jobless, according to the statistical institute Istat.

This pattern puts a huge dent in earning power, causing many Italians to linger in their parents' home well into adulthood. About half of all Italians between 24 and 35 still live with their parents, compared with 14% in the U.S.

Young Italians "remain daughters and sons for a large part of their reproductive life," said Filomena Racioppi, a demographer at La Sapienza University in Rome.

Partly as a result, the average age when Italian women have their first child rose to 31.4 years in 2012—nearly six years older than North American women—from less than 30 in 1995.

Another reason for the later start is that more Italian women in their 20s and 30s are getting university degrees. By the time they finish and find a secure job, they are often reluctant to sacrifice those gains for children—a phenomenon demographers call "the safety trap."

Gabriella Marino, a 43-year-old from Naples, put off even thinking about having children until she found a stable job, and once she did, the urge for children didn't materialize. "We're now used to being just a couple," she said of herself and her husband. "We have the freedom to do whatever we want and I don't want to change that now."

Italian women often find it daunting to balance work against the traditionally demanding expectations for mothers in Italy. Surveys consistently find that Italian men help less at home than their counterparts in other countries do, and that Italian mothers are painstaking in their approach to child care, to the point of hand-washing and ironing baby clothes.

Thanks in part to the persistence of traditional gender roles, only half of Italian mothers work, according to the OECD, compared with 74% in France.

A dearth of preschool centers in the country often means that working mothers have to leave their children with grandparents, who look after around 68% of all children under 10. But retirement ages are rising, steadily squeezing this source of cheap child care.

The high level of childlessness deepens Italy's perilous demographic crisis. The country already has around 150 over-65s for every 100 people under 14, and the younger generation isn't earning enough to cover pensions for the larger numbers of retirees. That will rise to 263 elders for every 100 young people by 2050, according to Istat.

All this is creating real anxiety in a country still characterized by tight family ties. Despite the rising number of women shunning childbearing, the social stigma of not having children remains particularly strong.

Roberta Federici, who is in a stable relationship but lacks a secure job, created a support group of other women who, like her, opted out of motherhood and felt criticized for it. "I was never attracted to children," said Ms. Federici, who found some of her friends stopped talking with her because they "just couldn't understand me."

Italy's trend toward childlessness has left a raft of would-be grandparents yearning for little ones. Ida Farina, the mother of two women in their 30s who have decided against having children, tries to focus on her niece's children to make up for the gap she feels not having her own grandkids. But she still finds it difficult to accept.

"I feel so sorry about it," she says. "I feel I'll die without passing on the few things I've learned in my life. I'm waiting. Maybe things will change."

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