



***The changing face of motherhood in Western Europe:  
Italy***

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## 1.1 Italy

### 1.1.1 Introduction

Modern Italy is heavily influenced by its religious and cultural heritage. The traditional family model and the mother's role within it remains the ideal. Matters concerning the family and the duties of motherhood are for the most part considered a private affair, with which the state should not interfere. Italy was recently judged to be the 21<sup>st</sup> best place in the world to be a mother.<sup>1</sup> The ranking, which is relatively low compared to other western European countries, has been blamed on low levels of female participation in the workforce, lack of family services and the low prevalence of contraceptives.

### 1.1.2 Historical perspectives

The values of the Catholic Church, including the veneration of the Madonna, have long informed the concept of motherhood in Italy. A traditional family structure is still the norm today, where the parents are married, the father is the main breadwinner and the mother is responsible for the day-to-day running of the house and care of the children.

The fascist era in Italy was a period of extensive state intervention in family policy. From 1922 to 1943 the regime under Mussolini declared that the place of a woman was in the home. In order to ensure that the Italian nation was strong and capable of expanding into new territory, the mothers of Italy were tasked with giving birth to plenty of healthy babies. Mussolini's government criminalised abortion and the dissemination of birth control information. In addition, civil codes were promulgated between 1939 and 1942 that restricted women's participation in the workforce. A sense of pride and prestige in being a *casalingua*, or housewife, continued after World War Two as Italy tried to recapture a semblance of normality.<sup>2</sup> During the 1950s, though, pressure also began to mount for the provision of an alternative to this traditional role as women began to want more choice in how they lived their lives.

Like much of the rest of Europe, the youth of Italy underwent a political awakening in the 1960s and began to demand changes in society and a break from the conservative 1950s. This, along with the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, meant that issues concerning the emancipation of women were high on the political agenda. Huge changes were seen over

these two decades. The advertising of contraceptives was legally permitted in 1969, divorce was introduced in 1970 and abortion within the first trimester of pregnancy was legalized in 1978.<sup>3</sup> Family rights legislation was introduced in 1975 that promoted the equality of women in the family and shared responsibility over children between the mother and father.<sup>4</sup>

The expectation of various forms of government initiative directed towards helping mothers continues up to the present day, although it is tempered by the understanding that family life is primarily the responsibility of the family members themselves. The stereotypical *Mamma*, who is completely devoted to looking after her children well into their mid-30s, remains. Changes, however, can be seen as rising costs and the desire to provide the very best for one's children means that today's families are getting smaller. In addition, a new generation of well educated Italian women are questioning whether they have the time or support to have children and so are forced to make a choice between having a career and having a family.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1.3 Demographics of motherhood

Italy was, together with Spain, the first country to reach the so called 'lowest-low' fertility rate in the early 1990s when levels dropped to below 1.3 children per woman.<sup>6</sup> By 2009, the fertility rate had crept up to 1.4, but this is still far from achieving the natural population replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman.<sup>7</sup> The children that are currently being born are for the most part being raised in traditional household arrangements. Only 16% of births were out of wedlock in 2008, which was well below the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) average of 36%. The vast majority of parents then remain together as their child grows up, with 92.1% of 0 to 14 year-olds living with both their mother and their father in the same household in 2007. In the same year 6.8% of this age group lived with just their mother, and just 1.0% with only their father. The divorce rate in 2008 stood at 0.9 per 1,000 of the population – one of the lowest in Europe. Mothers, however, are having children at a later stage. In 2008 the mean age of mothers at the birth of their first child was 29.8, a figure which increased by nearly 5 years since 1970. Compared to the rest of Europe, only Germany and the UK has older first time mothers.

<sup>3</sup> Human capital and entry into motherhood in Italy.

[http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011\\_06.pdf](http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011_06.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> O'Reilly, A. (Ed) (2010), *Encyclopedia of Motherhood, Volume 2*, USA, SAGE publications Inc

<sup>5</sup> See for example an article from 2008 in 'ItalyMag', <http://www.italymag.co.uk/italy/health/motherhood-worries-italian-women>

<sup>6</sup> Rondinelli, C., Aassve, A. & Billari, F.C. (2006) *Income and childbearing decision: Evidence from Italy*.

[http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/iser\\_working\\_papers/2006-06.pdf](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/iser_working_papers/2006-06.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> OECD Family Database [www.oecd.org/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database)

<sup>1</sup> Save the Children (2011) *State of the World's Mothers 2011*.

<sup>2</sup> O'Reilly, Andrea (Ed) (2010) *Encyclopedia of Motherhood, Volume 2*, USA, SAGE publications Inc

Employment among women with children is low. A half (50%) of mothers with at least one child below the age of 15 were employed in 2008. This percentage is lower than for the entire female cohort aged 25 to 49, of which 62% were employed in that year. Both figures are among the lowest in Europe, suggesting that motherhood is not the only factor that contributes towards female unemployment. An Italian mother's active role in raising her children lasts longer than in many other European countries. In 2001, 51.1% of 20 to 34 year-olds lived with their parents, which is one of the highest proportions out of all the OECD countries. At the other end of the scale are the Scandinavian countries where, for example, only 7.6% of Danish 20 to 34 year-olds lived with their parents.<sup>8</sup>

#### 1.1.4 Defining 'motherhood' (*maternità*) in the Italian context

Modern Italian motherhood is an interesting mixture of change and stasis. On the one hand women are giving birth later and having smaller families. On the other hand, traditional gender roles and ideas about family life remain. How has it come about that Italy has one of the lowest birth rates in Europe but also a low maternal employment rate and the ongoing dominance of traditional family structures?

Conservative values are strong in Italy. A large proportion (97.31%) of the Italian population is Catholic and 45% of Italians say they attend a religious service at least once a week. By contrast, in the UK only 27% of adults they attend religious services on a weekly basis.<sup>9</sup> A large proportion of the Italian population is, therefore, exposed on a regular basis to Christian teachings that emphasize the centrality and importance of the family in one's life. Cohabitation rates are, as a result, low – 3.0% of 20 to 34 year-olds are unmarried and live with their partner, compared with 28.6% and 28.3% of the same age group cohabiting with their partner in Denmark and Finland respectively. In addition, in 2010 first marriages represented over 80% of all marriages in Italy. The average duration of an Italian marriage is over 15 years, which is longer than in all other European countries apart from Slovenia and Spain. In 2007, 83.9% of Italian children lived with their two married parents.<sup>10</sup> Italy appears to be bucking the trend seen across much of Europe where serial monogamy is becoming the norm. Divorce rates are rising though, and in 2007 21% of births were outside of marriage, compared with 5% in 1980.

It is worth noting that these divorce figures are still markedly lower than most of Europe. If an Italian couple move in together and begin a family it is very likely that

they will already be married and that it will be their first marriage.

Moving away from the Church and looking to the state one can see further reasons for the lasting nature of the orthodox family model. Ever since the Fascist era, which saw extensive natalistic legislation, a general lack of family policies has been an ongoing feature of post-war Italy. The family therefore has come to be thought of as a private affair, shaped by local attitudes which are often subject to Church authority, and not something to be manipulated and interfered with by the state. Indeed, a wider Mediterranean political attitude exists which sees the state as having a residual responsibility towards the family while relatives are the ones ultimately responsible for providing support.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, necessity encourages the continued existence of the traditional family model as family members rely on each other for support, for example in the form of providing childcare. On the other hand, lack of state directives focused on the family means that it is conservative institutions such as the Catholic Church that dominate public discussions on how an Italian family should function.

Why is it then that Italian families are shrinking in size? It seems that another longstanding expectation placed on mothers, and indeed fathers, is that they should provide 'the very best' for their children. 'The very best' has become increasingly more expensive, as well as time consuming, meaning that families cannot afford to provide this for more than one or two children. Anecdotal evidence from media publications supports this idea. Bettina, an Italian mother of one, told BBC News that "People prefer to just have one so they can give the child everything – the best schools, the best clothes, the best everything". Francesco and Natalia also have one child and said, "She's five but we're not planning any more. It's not just the money, it's too difficult for schools, services and everything like this".<sup>12</sup>

This obligation to provide for one's children continues past their teenage years. As noted earlier, in 2010 over a half of Italians aged 20 to 34 lived in the parental home.<sup>13</sup> Even when children have left home, there is an expectation that their parents will support them in various ways. It is the norm that parents will contribute money and time towards helping their children establish an independent household, as well as to organising their marriage ceremony and later providing care for their grandchildren.<sup>14</sup> It is then expected that, in return,

<sup>11</sup> Bimbi, F. (1997) Lone Mothers in Italy: a Hidden and Embarrassing Issue in a Familist Welfare Regime', in Lewis, J.E (Ed), *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regime*.

<sup>12</sup> BBC news (2003) Italy baby-cash aims to boost births. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3155324.stm>

<sup>13</sup> OECD Family Database [www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database)

<sup>14</sup> Vignoli, D. (2011) *Human capital and entry into motherhood in Italy*. [http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011\\_06.pdf](http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011_06.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> OECD Family Database [www.oecd.org/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/it-italy/rel-religion>

<sup>10</sup> OECD (2011), Families are changing, Figure 1.3.

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/34/47701118.pdf>

children will give financial and emotional support to their parents in their old age, again underlining the central role the family, as opposed to the state, plays in providing support.

The Italian government has launched initiatives in recent years in an attempt to combat the dwindling fertility rate. In 2003 it was announced that a cash bonus would be paid to families on the birth of their second child.<sup>15</sup> Marco Follini, leader of the Union of Christian Democrats, announced that "... helping families to have more children if they want to is a duty for our country and workforce." The qualification of the government initiative that families should have more children only 'if they want to', reinforces the enduring private nature of matters concerning the family. The cash incentive, however, did little to encourage births as the fertility rate crept up to only 1.4 in 2010 (compared with 1.3 in the 1990s). The government's failings in the provision of other services seemed to actively dissuade women from having more children. Maura Mitziti, a population researcher, pointed out that in Italy,

*"We have a tradition of bad services – crèches, kindergarten, even timings of schools and shops... and of course lots of bureaucracy. We need the value of equal opportunities to be recognised and people to recognise the value of work-life balance."<sup>16</sup>*

Despite the ongoing prevalence of traditionalism in family matters, it appears that Italian mothers today have new expectations concerning provision of better childcare services. Indeed, the conventional view of women finding fulfilment in motherhood alone is coming into question. In interviews with Italian women conducted by the Doxa Research Institute in 2008, 40% of respondents believed that having children was a daily struggle and 39% had reservations about becoming a mother at all.<sup>17</sup> A more complex definition of Italian motherhood seems to be emerging, and with it new demands from mothers themselves.

### 1.1.5 Motherhood and Employment

A look at the relationship between motherhood and employment reveals more about the hopes and expectations of Italian mothers today. Maternal employment is still very low by European standards, but it can be argued that this is not because mothers do not want to work as there are ongoing calls for government provisions to help Italian mothers achieve a better home-work life balance.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly a half (48%) of Italian mothers with children aged 0 to 16 are in paid work, the third lowest figure out of the OECD 26.<sup>19</sup> It is not just among Italian mothers that we see low employment rates but among Italian women in general. In 2010, 46.1% of the female population aged 15 to 64 was employed.<sup>20</sup> Markedly lower employment rates among the 50+ cohort, and the fact that youth employment has fallen drastically as a result of the economic recession, go some way to explaining the low figure. Low levels of employment cannot be linked solely to being a mother and seem to be more broadly to do with being a woman.

Certain aspects of the Italian working world can be seen as specifically impeding mothers from participating in it. Part-time jobs are few and often less secure than full time employment, while public provision of child care is limited, especially for very young children.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, part time work accounts for just 9% of total employment, compared with, for example, the UK which has a part time employment rate of 25%.<sup>22</sup> It is, therefore, difficult for Italian mothers to re-enter the workforce and even if they do, to then strike a balance between their work and home-life. Maternity leave provision is reasonably generous by European standards. Italian mothers are offered 5 months leave at 100% pay with the option of a further 6 months at 30%. Paid paternity leave can also be taken for 3 months at 80% of total pay, suggesting that couples are encouraged to share the responsibility of looking after their newborn baby.

Generous maternity leave provision, however, does not seem to be all that reassuring for working women. The age of first time mothers in Italy, as we have noted, is 29 – one of the highest figures in Europe. In part this can be linked to women in employment wanting to increase their 'human capital'. By obtaining enough work experience and qualifications prior to having a child, they can ensure that they will be able to re-enter the workforce later.<sup>23</sup> This conflict between work and child birth is strongest among those who have a low or medium level of education, who often find they have to make a choice between the two.<sup>24</sup> It has been a longstanding trend that Italian women 'opt-in or opt-out' when it comes to employment and remain

<sup>15</sup> BBC (2003) Italy baby-cash aims to boost births  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3155324.stm>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.italymag.co.uk/italy/health/motherhood-worries-italian-women>

<sup>18</sup> Matysiak, A. & Vignoli, D. (2009), *Finding the "right moment" for the first baby to come: A comparison between Italy and Poland*, Max Planck

Institute of Demographic Research.

<http://www.demogr.mpg.de/papers/working/wp-2009-011.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> OECD (2011), *Families are changing*, Figure 1.3.

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/34/47701118.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> OECD, Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, Employment Data.

[http://www.oecd.org/document/30/0,3746,en\\_2649\\_39023495\\_432194\\_86\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/30/0,3746,en_2649_39023495_432194_86_1_1_1_1,00.html)

<sup>21</sup> *Human capital and entry into motherhood in Italy*.

[http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011\\_06.pdf](http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011_06.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.emplaw.co.uk/lawguide?startpage=data/20033221.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Matysiak and Vignoli, (2009) Op Cit.

<sup>24</sup> *Human capital and entry into motherhood in Italy*. Op Cit

lifelong housewives or lifelong workers.<sup>25</sup> Discontinuous careers have, however, increased over the last decade. Women with a tertiary level education are more likely to become pregnant when they are employed compared with women who have lower levels of education as a larger proportion of them are in more secure jobs with employers who are willing to accommodate them if they start a family.<sup>26</sup> It remains the case that many highly educated women are still choosing to opt-out of having a family. In 2008, 50% of women between the ages of 25 to 49 with a tertiary level education lived in households without children.<sup>27</sup> This is the highest figure in Europe apart from Germany, which also sees 50% of tertiary educated women living in childless homes.

### 1.1.6 Childcare

An opt-in or opt-out pattern for women's participation in the workforce can partly be explained by the nature of childcare provision in Italy. Formal childcare in Italy has a reputation for high quality and is supported by generous public subsidies.<sup>28</sup> Such provision, however, is limited and a large proportion of Italian families use informal means of care instead.

Care for very young children in Italy is characteristically provided by informal, often familial sources. Almost all infants below the age of 1 year are cared for by their parents who make use of their parental leave allowance.<sup>29</sup> For children between the ages of 1 and 3, 27% are cared for at home by their parents, while 48% are looked after by relatives or other means of informal care (e.g. by an unpaid babysitter) and 15% are cared for by a child minder in the home.<sup>30</sup> Only 7.5% of children aged 1 to 3 are enrolled in an *asilo nido* (nursery school) which offers all-day care for children for 11 months of the year. A lack of state subsidisation and the limited extent of provision explain the low level of formal childcare use for infants. Childcare for very young children is only partly subsidised, meaning parents pay fees that are set by their municipality and are often calculated according to household income.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, formal childcare coverage for infants in Italy

is 6%, whereas a country such as Denmark has coverage of 55%.<sup>32</sup>

As children get older formal childcare becomes much more widely available and used. Most (98%) of children attend a *scuola dell'infanzia* (preschool) from the age of 3. By the age of 5 to 6 years, attendance has risen to over 100% (the figure is over 100% because children of non-registered foreigners are included).<sup>33</sup> *Scuole dell'infanzia* operate during the academic year and vary in their opening hours. In most cases, however, they are open from 8.30am to 4.30pm. Childcare for children over 3 is completely state subsidised and parents only need to pay for some additional expenses such as midday meals.<sup>34</sup> Once children reach the age of 6 they begin compulsory schooling at a *scuole elementare* (primary school).

There have been efforts to reform the provision of childcare in Italy. A government decree in 2004 aimed to further diversify the providers of *scuola dell'infanzia* to meet the varying needs of families.<sup>35</sup> Such efforts to overcome the rigidity of childcare provision can be seen as evidence of an increasing acceptance of a variety of family models and lifestyles in Italy and a growing sense of state obligation when it comes to childcare solutions.

### 1.1.7 Values and popular representations

Despite varying lifestyle options becoming increasingly available to Italian women, the *Madonna* and her selfless maternal love, along with the quintessential Italian *Mamma* who devotes herself to nurturing her children, and in particular her adored son, remain enduring images of Italian motherhood.

An expectation that mothers should dedicate time and energy to raising their children is reflected in a 2008 Doxa Research Institute study that found Italian mother's number one concern was whether they were raising their children 'well'.<sup>36</sup> A part of what constitutes 'good' childrearing is also the ability 'to give the child everything'.<sup>37</sup> This primary concern with the quality of maternal care reveals a lot about the priorities of many Italian mothers, and suggests that other concerns such as their work life would be subjugated and assessed in terms of how they can enhance what a mother can provide for her child.

<sup>25</sup> Solera, C. (2008) *Combining Marriage and Children with paid work: Changes across cohorts in Italy and Great Britain*, ESRC. <http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/iser/2008-22.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> *Human capital and entry into motherhood in Italy*. [Can be found at: [http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011\\_06.pdf](http://eprints.unifi.it/archive/00002263/01/wp2011_06.pdf)]

<sup>27</sup> OECD (2011), *Families are changing*. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/34/47701118.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Del Boca, D, Locatelli, M. & Vuri, D, (2005) *Child-Care Choices by Working Mothers: The Case of Italy*, *Review of Economics of the Household*, 3(4).

<sup>29</sup> OECD (2006), *Starting Strong II, Early childhood education and care: Italy* <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/15/62/37423597.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> OECD (2006) Op Cit.

<sup>31</sup> Eurostat (2009) *Reconciliation between work, private and family life in the European Union*.

<sup>32</sup> Del Boca, D., Pasqua, S. & Pronzato, C. (2006) *The impact of institutions on motherhood and work*, *Institute for Social and Economic Research*. [http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/iser\\_working\\_papers/2006-55.pdf](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/iser_working_papers/2006-55.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II, Early childhood education and care: Italy*. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/15/62/37423597.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Eurostat (2009) *Reconciliation between work, private and family life in the European Union*.

<sup>35</sup> OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*, Op Cit.

<sup>36</sup> Article from *ItalyMag*, 06.05.2008, *Motherhood worries for Italian women*. <http://www.italymag.co.uk/italy/health/motherhood-worries-italian-women> ]

<sup>37</sup> BBC news (2003) *Italy baby-cash aims to boost births*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3155324.stm>

Alongside the image of the Italian *Mamma* sits the stereotype of the Italian ‘mamma’s boy’ (*mammone*). Italian mothers continue with their duties of providing care for their children for much longer than a lot of their European counterparts. In 2005, more than 80% of Italian men aged 18 to 30 lived with their parents.<sup>38</sup> A look at household income suggests that parents are proactive in keeping their children at home. Households with a higher income are more likely to have adult children living in it, suggesting that rather than parents choosing to assist their children financially so that they can move out, they use their extra income to ‘bribe’ them to stay in the family home. It may in part be financial constraints which mean young Italians are unable to move out of their parents’ home, but evidence suggests that parents themselves actively encourage their children to continue living with them.

Recent years have seen multiple new interpretations emerging around what it means to be an Italian mother. The options and choices now open to Italian women are large, leading to increased freedom but also to increased confusion about what constitutes being a mother in the modern day.<sup>39</sup> An article in *L’Espresso* in 2010 argued passionately that women should not get married as it would only result in them being cornered into taking on the traditional duties of a wife (and later a mother) while their husbands exempted themselves from doing any sort of domestic work.<sup>40</sup> There is also pressure to further increase female participation in the labour market, both for the sake of gender equality and for the sake of national well-being and economic growth.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand there is evidence of apprehension among women who try to strike a work-home life balance when they become parents. An Italian mother described in her blog the heartache and jealousy she felt when she handed her toddler over to staff at her local nursery who then took on the maternal duties that she felt she should be responsible for.<sup>42</sup> Italian mothers are gaining more opportunities to

shape their lives in the ways that they want to, but it is not without anxiety that they do so.

### 1.1.8 Single motherhood

In 2007, 6.8% of Italian children aged 0 to 14 lived in a household with just their mother and not their father.<sup>43</sup> This is one of the lowest figures in Europe, with a country such as the UK at the other end of the scale seeing 27.6% of the same age group of children living with just their mother. Italy is very similar in this respect to Greece, Spain and Portugal. The low numbers of single mothers in all of these countries can be explained by low non-marital fertility levels, low divorce rates and high co-residence (i.e. mothers who are no longer with their children’s father often live with another family member).<sup>44</sup> In part due to the small numbers of single mothers in Italy, and in part because they do not appear to be a particularly vulnerable or disadvantaged group, single motherhood does not feature significantly on the national political agenda.<sup>45</sup> Any formal provision that single parents families do receive comes from local authorities, and are most often in the form of means-tested financial assistance that exists for ‘families in difficulty’, rather than specifically for single mothers.

### 1.1.9 Motherhood and sports

A large majority (84%) of Italians believe that more time should be devoted to sport in the school curriculum, compared to an EU25 average of 77%.<sup>46</sup> A similarly large majority (88%) think that sport represents a sufficiently attractive alternative to indoor activities such as watching TV or playing video games, a figure which is more or less in line with the EU25 average of 86%. Mothers’ own attitudes towards their children’s participation in sport, and the extent to which they actively encourage it, has received less scholarly attention. Some work has been done to analyse the relationship between mothers’ family backgrounds and their children’s health. One study found that a mother’s educational level is significant in determining whether their teenage child was obese or not, whereas a parent’s age and the type of employment they were in did not correlate with their children being overweight.<sup>47</sup> Another more recent study found that children and adolescents whose parents had a middle or high level of education were 80% more likely to partake in

<sup>38</sup> Manacorda, M. & Moretti, E. (2005) Why do most Italian Young Men Live with their Parents? Intergenerational Transfers and Household Structure, *CEPR Discussion Paper No. 5116*. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=781247>

<sup>39</sup> This theme is explored in Laura Beneditti’s (2007) *Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy*, University of Toronto Press. In her final chapter, ‘Mothers without children’ Beneditti explores how motherhood today has become separate from the biological process of birthing a child, and now options such as adoption, surrogacy, women in nurturing professions such as mentoring or teaching and lesbian motherhood further complicate the concept of the maternal.

<sup>40</sup> *L’Espresso*, (2010) *Ragazze non sposatevi*. <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio/ragazze-non-sposatevi/2120268>

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, an article in *Corriere Della Sera* 19.10.11, *La crescita? Più donne che lavorano (e tanti figli)*.

[http://www.corriere.it/cronache/11\\_ottobre\\_19/la-crescita-piu-donne-che-lavorano-e-tanti-figli-barbara-stefanelli\\_0e4a48de-fa12-11e0-81c3-3aee3ebb3883.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/cronache/11_ottobre_19/la-crescita-piu-donne-che-lavorano-e-tanti-figli-barbara-stefanelli_0e4a48de-fa12-11e0-81c3-3aee3ebb3883.shtml)

<sup>42</sup> Blog entry from *Scusatemesonmamma.wordpress.com* <http://scusatemesonmamma.wordpress.com>

<sup>43</sup> OECD Family Database, [www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database)

<sup>44</sup> Gonzalez, L. (2008) *A Decomposition of the Incidence of Single Mothers in Europe*, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, [http://www.econ.upf.edu/~gonzalez/Research\\_archivos/November\\_2008.pdf](http://www.econ.upf.edu/~gonzalez/Research_archivos/November_2008.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Bimbi, (1997) Lone Mothers in Italy: a Hidden and Embarrassing Issue in a Familist Welfare Regime, in Lewis (Ed) *Op Cit*.

<sup>46</sup> Eurobarometer (2004) *The Citizens of the European Union and Sport*, [http://ec.europa.eu/sport/documents/publications/ebs\\_213\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/sport/documents/publications/ebs_213_report_en.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> De Vito, E., La Torre, G., Langiano, E., Berardi, D. & Ricciardi, G. (1993) Overweight and obesity amongst secondary school children in central Italy, *European Journal of Epidemiology*, 15(7).



moderate or vigorous physical activity than those whose parents had a low level of education.<sup>48</sup> This trend can in part be linked to the fact that parents with a higher level of education were likely to be in better paid jobs and so could afford to send their children to sports clubs. It remains the case, however, that detailed evidence which uncovers the role parents' play in determining their children's participation in sport is lacking.

## 1.2 Italian national survey

### 1.2.1 Introduction

A survey was conducted of a representative sample of 1,010 Italian mothers to explore what it meant to be a mother in modern-day Italy. The respondents were between the ages of 16 and 55 years old, with the majority (79%) falling within the age range of 25 to 44 years old.

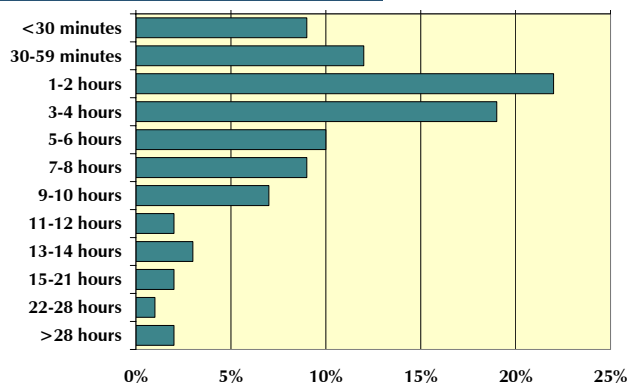
The large majority (94%) of the mothers surveyed had either 1 or 2 children, while just 5% had 3 children and less than 1% had 4 or more. Mothers had to have at least one dependent child between the age of 0 and 16 to qualify as eligible for the survey. It must be acknowledged that many Italian families have children above the age of 16 that live in the parental household and can be classed as 'dependents'. The age of 16, however, was deemed to be suitable cut-off point, as almost all children are still dependent upon their parents at this age and have not begun to make the transition into adulthood. The majority of respondents had children well below this cut off age – 70% had a youngest child below the age of 7 while 48% had a child below the age of 3.

The majority of respondents were in some sort of formal employment – 46% were employed full time, while 30% worked part time.

### 1.2.2 Current free time and 'me time'

Figure 1 shows our respondents' perceptions of how much time they had in a week to 'devote purely to themselves without any obligation to do something for other people'.

Figure 1. 'Me time' in an average week



<sup>48</sup> Federico, B., Falese, L. & Capell, G. (2009) Socio-economic inequalities in physical activity practice among Italian children and adolescents: a cross-sectional study, *Journal of Public Health*, 17(6).

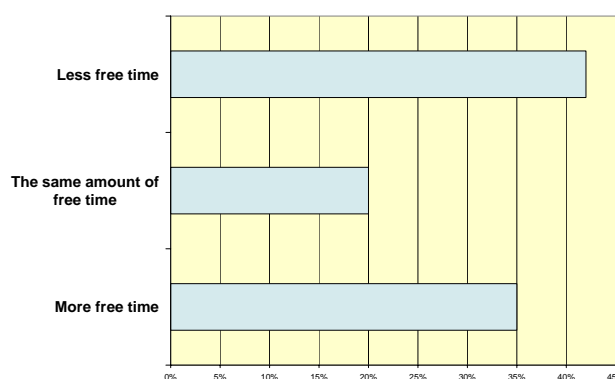
### Italian mothers have only about 40 minutes per day of free time to themselves.

Nearly a quarter (22%) said that they had between 1 and 2 hours of 'me time' in an average week. The second most frequent answer (19%) indicated that they had between 3 and 4 hours spare, while 10% had 5 to 6 hours to themselves. On average, the mothers we surveyed had 4.8 hours of free time in a week.

### 1.2.3 Generational comparisons

How then, did the amount of free time contemporary mothers have compare to the amount their own mothers experienced during the same life stage? The answers of the mothers we surveyed are presented in Figure 2.

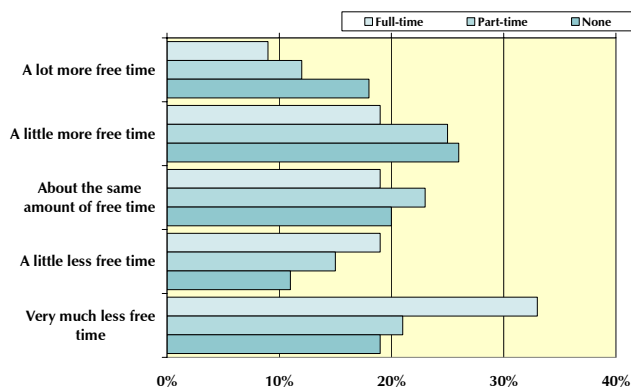
Figure 2. Free time compared to own mother at the same life stage



Over two fifths (42%) reported that they now have less free time than their own mothers did, 20% did not think there was a perceivable amount of difference between their own free time and their mothers, while 35% thought they had more free time.

The division of opinion seen in Figure 2 can, to an extent, be explained when the data are broken down according to employment status, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Free time compared to own mother by employment status



Of the mothers who reported they had 'very much less free time' to themselves, 33% were in full time employment, 21% were in part time jobs, and 19% did not

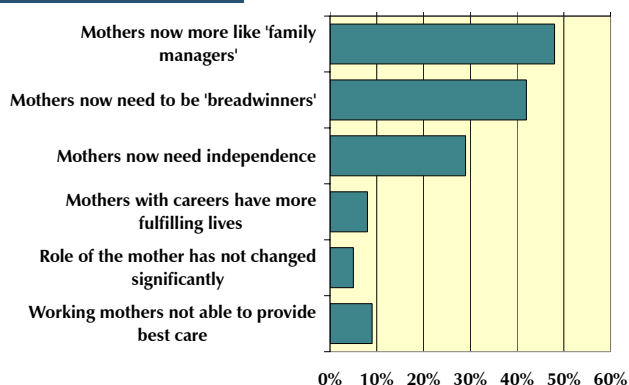
work outside of the home. At the other end of the scale, of respondents who believed they have 'a lot more free time', 9% were full time employed, 12% worked part time, and 18% were not in work. It appears that mothers who have chosen to continue with careers when they have had children are faced with a difficult balancing act between their work and home-life. In order to fulfil their responsibilities both at home and at work, working mothers have to sacrifice time they would have spent on themselves so that they are able to cope with their heavy workload.

**The amount of Italian mothers' free time has decreased since the previous generation, especially for working mothers.**

### 1.2.4 Perceptions of change

The survey then looked to explore more broadly the ways in which motherhood had changed between this generation and the last. The findings are illustrated in Figure 4. Again the theme of employment surfaces, with 42% of mothers saying that 'mothers today need to be 'breadwinners' in the family much more than in [their] own mother's day'.

**Figure 4. Differences between being a mother now and being a mother a generation ago**



It is interesting to note that 46% of our respondents are employed full time, while 42% agreed with the statement about women being breadwinners. That is to say, there are more mothers who work full time, than there are mothers who agree with the idea that nowadays women have to be 'breadwinners'. It can be suggested that this disparity points to the fact that some working mothers do not feel a 'need' to bring in an income for the family and maybe work simply because they want to.

The most frequently agreed with statement was that 'mothers today are more like 'family managers' than the traditional 'housewife' of [their] mother's day' (48%). As was shown in Figure 2 above, more mothers think they have less free time than their own mothers had than think the opposite. Demands that modern day mothers have on their time have increased their workload and also often seen their duties extending outside of the home in the

form of formal employment. This means that their role can no longer be encapsulated by the traditional idea of the 'housewife' and that they must take on a 'managerial' role within the home so that it can be run effectively alongside their other commitments.

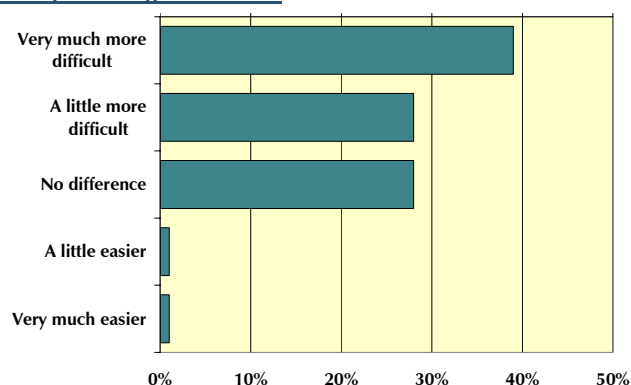
**Italian mothers now see themselves as family managers and breadwinners.**

Over a quarter (29%) of respondents agreed that 'mothers today feel that they need the independence to pursue their own interests more than my own mother did'. This is not, however, synonymous with women wanting to be freer to enter the world of work. Only 8% of those surveyed thought that mothers with jobs and careers led more fulfilling lives than their stay-at-home counterparts. In addition 9% of mothers thought going to work had a negative impact on one's home life, and that a working mother was not able to provide the best care for her children.

### 1.2.5 Impact of economic downturn

When asked what the impact of the recent economic downturn had been on their ability to be a 'good' mother, the answers were largely negative as can be seen in Figure 5. Well over a third (39%) of mothers thought that it was now 'very much more difficult' to be a 'good' mother and a further 28% believed that the economic conditions have made being a 'good' mother 'a little more difficult'. A further 28% of mothers registered ambivalence towards the economic downturn and thought it had made 'no difference' to their mothering capabilities. Only a very small minority (2%) of mothers went as far as to say that their lives had in fact been made either 'a little' or 'very much' easier by the economic conditions.

**Figure 5. Impact of the current economic climate on one's ability to be a 'good' mother**

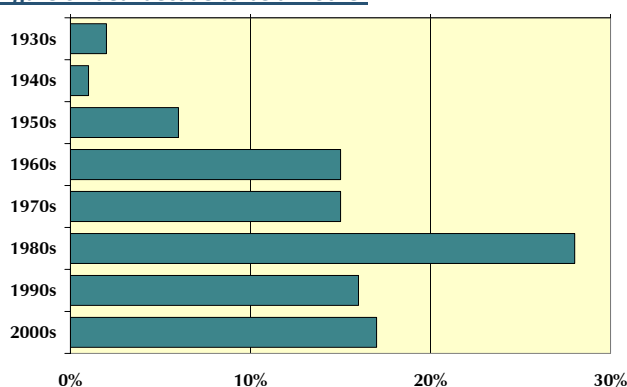


**A majority of Italian mothers think that the current economic conditions have made it harder to be a good mother.**

### 1.2.6 Ideal decades

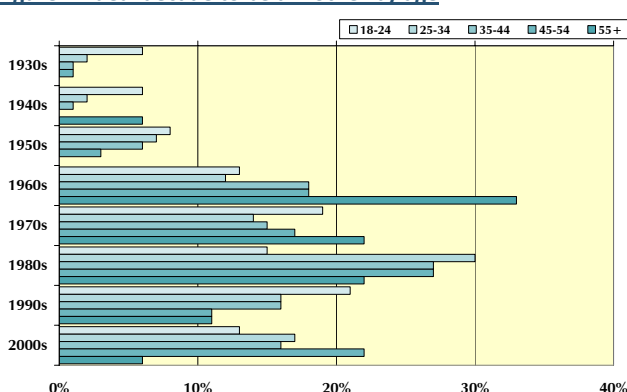
Despite the current economic climate having a negative impact on most of our respondents, 17% of mothers still felt that out of the last 80 years the 2000s was the best decade to in which to be a mother. Figure 6 illustrates the answers to the question of which decade our respondents, in their capacities as mothers, would go back to if they had a time machine. After most frequently chosen decade of the 2000s was the 1980s (28%), followed by the 2000s (17%) and the 1990s (16%). Less than one in six (15%) of mothers would return to the 1970s, and another 15% to the 1960s.

Figure 6. Ideal decade to be a mother



These overall findings do not reflect the preferences of specific age groups though, as can be seen in Figure 7. It appears that many mothers opt for the decade in which they have presumably happy memories of their own childhood and their own mothers. A third (33%) of the 55+ group thought that the 1960s was the ideal decade in which to be a mother, whereas 30% of the 25 to 34 age group opted for the 1980s, and 21% of 16 to 24 year-olds chose the 1990s.

Figure 7. Ideal decade to be a mother by age

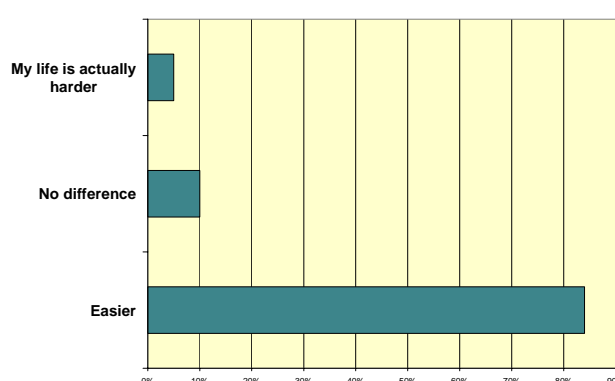


Many Italian mothers would prefer to return to the decade in which they were growing up as children.

#### 1.2.6.1 Labour saving devices and impact on time-use

Despite the 2000s not being the most popular decade to be a mother, the large majority of our respondents thought that the labour saving devices and products which are available to them today, and had not been available to their own mothers or grandmothers, had made their lives easier. In fact, 84% of the mothers surveyed thought that their lives had been made ‘much easier’ or ‘a little easier’ by using such products. Only 10% thought that labour-saving devices had made no difference and 5% said that their lives are in fact more difficult compared to their own mother or grandmother. These findings are illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Extent to which labour saving devices have made life easier

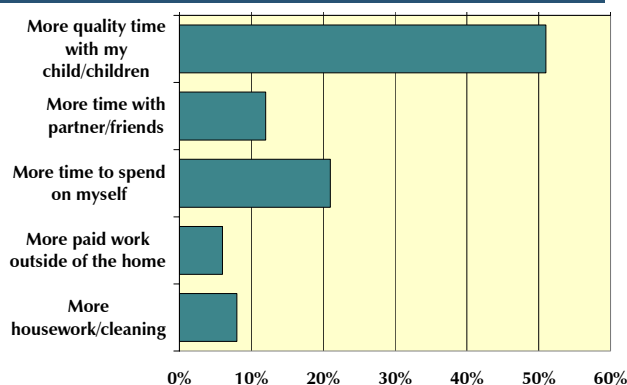


A clearer picture emerges when the group that said their lives are ‘actually harder’ is broken down according to employment status. Of those who agreed with the statement, 7% were in full time employment, 5% worked part time and 2% did not work. Mothers who work may use labour saving devices, but it seems that the additional pressure of having a job means that these products are a necessity that enables them to cope with all their responsibilities. Rather than making life easier, they perhaps make these mothers’ daily lives possible.

Figure 9 shows how mothers spend the time they save by making use of labour-saving devices and products. Most (51%) use this freed up time to spend more quality time with their children. The second most prevalent answer was that mothers opt to spend more time on themselves (21%), while 12% use the time to be with their partner or their friends and 14% use the time to do more work outside of the home.

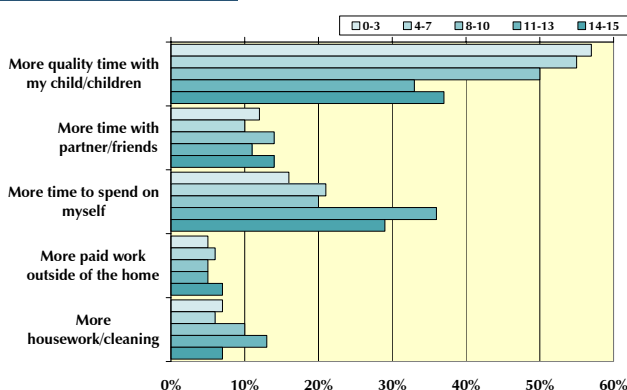
Labour-saving devices and products allow Italian mothers to spend more quality time with their children.

Figure 9. How time freed up by labour saving devices is spent



Further nuances are revealed with regard to how mothers choose to use this extra time when the data are broken down according to the age of the mother's youngest child, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. How time freed up by labour saving devices is spent by age of youngest child



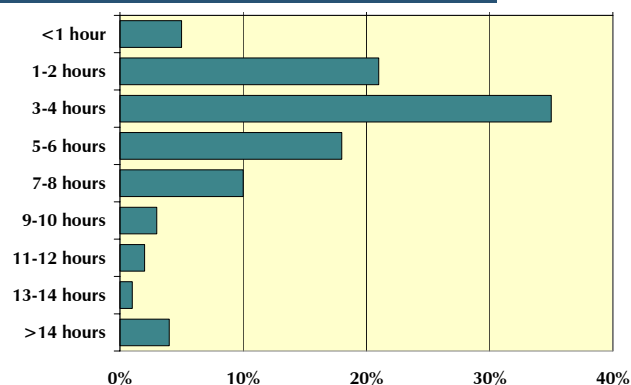
Out of those whose youngest child is below the age of 3 years, 57% chose to spend more quality time with their children. The same is true for 33% of parents whose youngest child is between the age of 11 and 13. When looking at the mothers who would opt for more time to themselves, 36% of those with a youngest child aged between 11 and 13 spend freed up time on themselves while 16% of those whose child was below the age of 3 would do so. It seems, then, that mothers of very young children feel a greater need to spend quality time with their children, and most of them will spend any extra time they can glean working to fulfil this need.

### 1.2.7 Time with children

Figure 11 shows the amount of time in a day mothers were actively engaged with their children. Spending 'active' time with one's child includes activities such as reading, writing, playing, washing or dressing.

**Italian mothers spend, on average, nearly five hours a day in reading, playing, dressing and other activities with their children.**

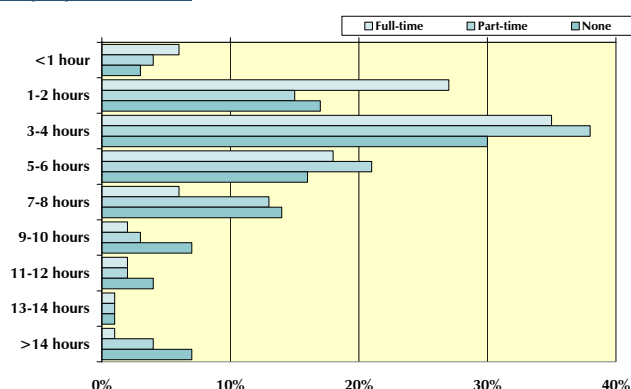
Figure 11. Active time spent with children in a day



Overall, 35% of respondents said they spend between 3 and 4 hours of active time with their children in an average day. 21% said they spend between 1 and 2 hours, and 18% reported spending 5 to 6 hours. The average across the Italian sample was 4.7 hours per day.

Figure 12 illustrates the amount of 'active' time Italian mothers spend with their children in a day according to their employment status.

Figure 12. Active time spent with children in a day by employment status



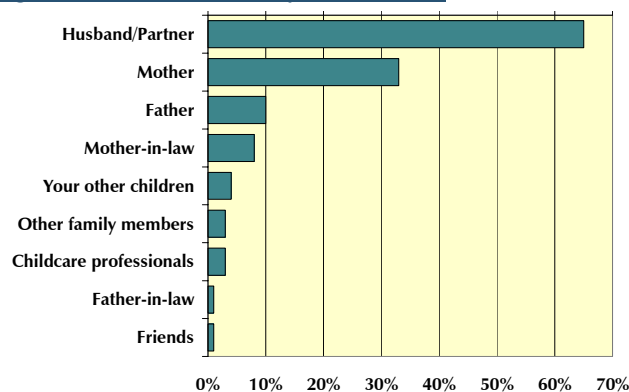
When looking at the group of mothers who said they spend between 1 and 2 hours of active time with their children, mothers that worked full time accounted for a large proportion of this group. Indeed, 27% of full time mothers said they were able to spend between 1 and 2 hours, while 15% of part time working mothers, and 17% of mothers who do not work, reported the same. For all of our respondents, whatever their employment status, spending between 3 and 4 hours was the most common response (35% of full time working mothers, 38% of part time workers, and 30% of those not in work). It was mothers who did not work who displayed the most variation in the amount of active time they spent. 7% of non-working mothers said they spend more than 14 hours of active time day with their children and another 7% spend between 9 and 10 hours (1% and 2% of full time working mothers reported the same expenditure of time respectively).

## 1.2.8 Help in the home

### 1.2.8.1 Childcare

Figure 13 shows who is the main source of help with childcare to Italian mothers.

Figure 13. Main source of help with childcare

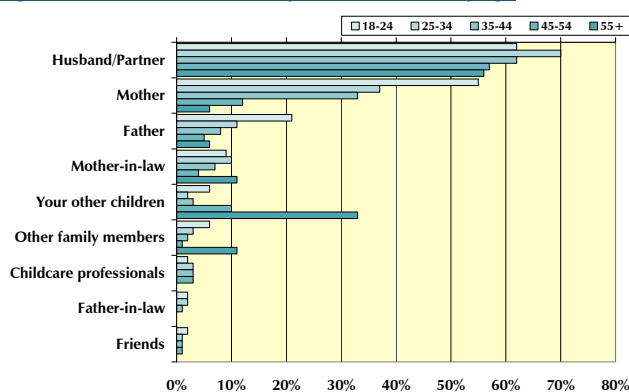


The majority of mothers said that their husband or partner was the one who helped most with childcare (65%). There was also a substantial proportion who said that their own mother was the one who provided the most help (33%). A smaller minority (10%) indicated that their own father was a main source of help.

**Husbands or partners are the main source of help with childcare, followed by the mother's own mother.**

When the data are broken down according to the age of the respondent, as can be seen in Figure 14, some interesting variations are evident.

Figure 14. Main source of help with childcare by age



A third (33%) of mothers over the age of 55 said that their other children were their main source of help. It can be assumed that most mothers of this age will have children in their teenage years who are therefore capable and mature enough to be relied to help with the care of their siblings.

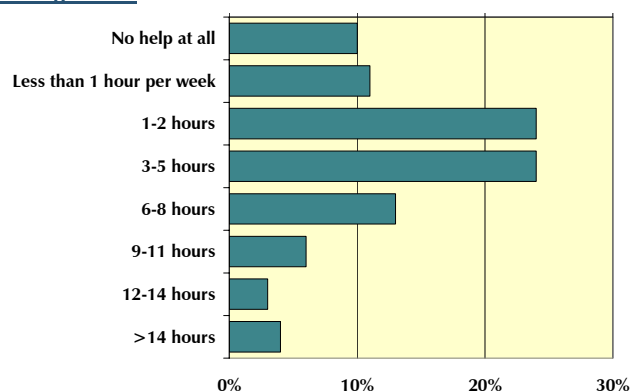
Looking to mothers who rely on their extended family to help with childcare, it can be seen that 55% of 18 to 24 year-old mothers cited their own mother as their main

source of help, while 21% of the same age group said their own father took on this role. Out of all those aged between 25 and 34, 37% answered that they relied mostly on their mother and 11% on their father. By the time mothers were aged between 35 and 44, 33% said their mothers were their main source of help and 8% their fathers. The younger the mother, the more reliant she is on help from her extended family in raising her children. In particular, there is a markedly greater emphasis on the role of a mother's own father in helping with childcare when she is younger. As a mother gets older, her children are more likely to be in school, meaning the amount of time they need caring for diminishes. Such factors mean the role of the extended family becomes less critical for many older mothers.

### 1.2.8.2 Domestic work

The mothers we surveyed were asked how much time, in an average week, their partners helped them with domestic duties such as household chores and childminding. Figure 15 illustrates their responses.

Figure 15. Help from your partner in the home during an average week



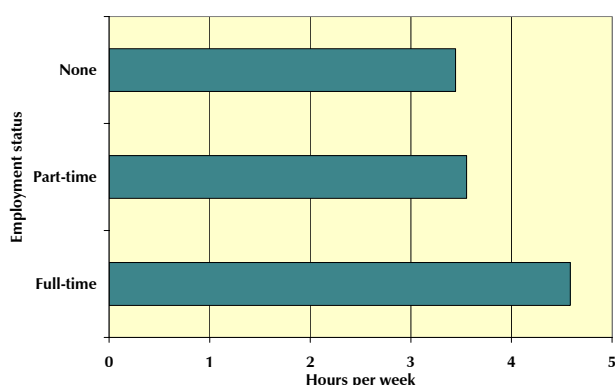
Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents said that their partner helped them for between 1 and 2 hours a week, while a further 24% reported they had 3 to 5 hours of help. The average is 4.07 hours per week.

**Italian mothers receive just four hours of help per week with domestic chores and childcare from their husbands or partners.**

Figure 16 shows the results of the question broken down according to the mother's employment status. It appears that mothers who also have jobs do receive more help from their partners than their non-working counterparts. This means that working mothers then have enough support to be able to cope with the demands placed on them both in the world of work and the domestic sphere. A significant proportion of unemployed mothers (17%), however, reported that they received no help at all, compared to 6% of full time working mothers and 10% of part time workers. It seems to be the case that many stay-at-home mothers accept full responsibility for the running

of the home, while it falls to her partner to go to work and support the home financially.

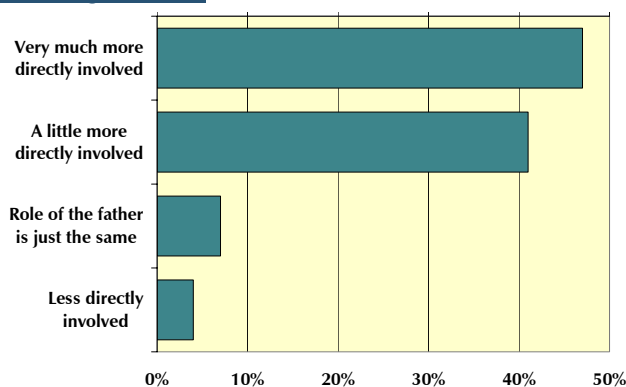
**Figure 16. Help from partner in the home during an average week by employment status**



### 1.2.9 Role of the father

To what extent then were Italian fathers more involved in childcare than in previous generations? The responses from the sample of mothers are shown in Figure 17.

**Figure 17. Involvement of fathers in childcare compared to previous generations**



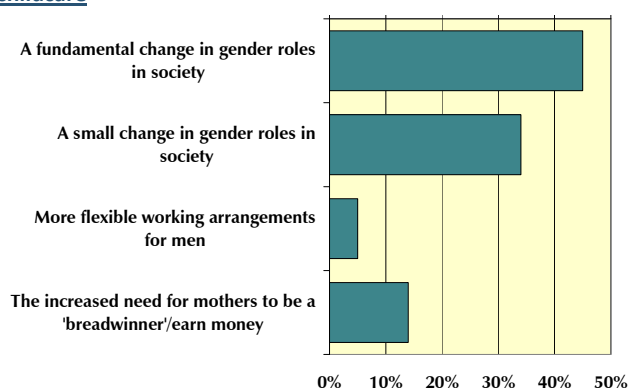
Nearly a half (47%) of respondents thought that fathers were now much more directly involved, while 41% said they were a little more involved. Only 7% did not think there had been any changes in the role of the father and his level of involvement with his children compared to previous generations, and 4% answered that fathers were in fact now less involved.

**Italian fathers are now much more involved in childcare than in previous generations.**

The general consensus, then, is that fathers are playing more active roles in their children’s lives, the reasons for which are given in Figure 18. Here we can see that 45% of mothers felt that a ‘fundamental’ change in gender roles was responsible for this increased fatherly involvement. A further 34% also thought a change in gender roles was the causal factor, although they only noted a ‘small change’ in this area. Only 5% of those questioned said that an

increase in flexible working arrangements for men had allowed them to spend more time with their children.

**Figure 18. Reason for increase in father's involvement in childcare**

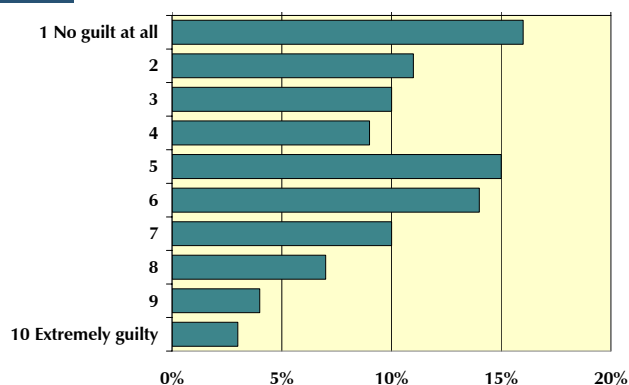


**A substantial change in gender roles in Italian society is responsible for the increased involvement of fathers in the care of their children.**

### 1.2.10 Maternal Guilt

The levels of guilt experienced by Italian mothers regarding their work/home life balance are illustrated in Figure 19.

**Figure 19. Level of guilt about your paid work/ home life balance**

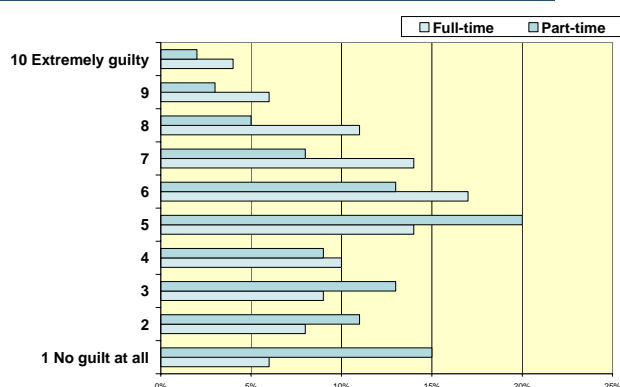


The average level of guilt felt by Italian mothers is 4.6 out of 10. Of those surveyed, 15% said they feel a level of guilt that could be described as 5 out of 10 while 16% of the said that they feel no guilt at all about the balance between their paid work and their home life.

**The majority of Italian mothers experience at least a degree of guilt concerning about their work/home life balance.**

The levels of guilt felt by part time and full time working mothers are illustrated in Figure 20.

**Figure 20. Level of guilt about home- work life balance by whether mother is in full time or part time employment**

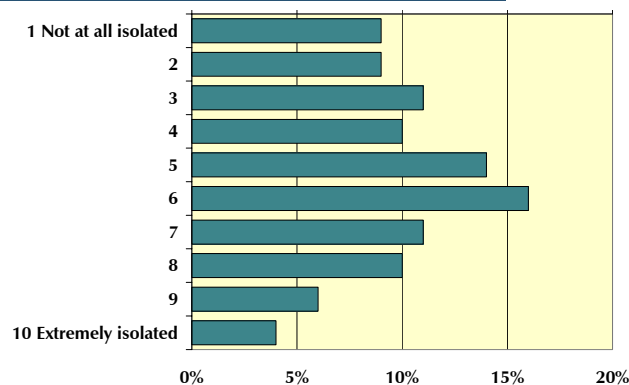


From Figure 20 we can see that 15% of part time working mothers felt no guilt at all, while only 6% of full time working mothers said the same. Over a half (52%) of mothers who work full time reported levels of guilt rated at 6 or above, which was also true for 31% of part time working mothers. It seems that it is full time working mothers then, who feel most guilty about the amount of time they are able to commit to their work and their home lives.

### 1.2.11 Maternal isolation

Overall Italian mothers experience moderate levels of isolation and lack of support, as can be seen in Figure 21.

**Figure 21. Perceived levels of isolation and support**



The average rating given was 5.2 out of 10. The most common ranking given by Italian mothers was 6 out of 10 (16%). It is the case, however, that 53% of mothers registered feelings of isolation between 0 and 5, while 47% reported levels of between 5 and 10. This means a slightly larger number of our respondents tended towards feeling 'not all isolated' and 'fully supported', as opposed to feeling 'extremely isolated' and 'totally unsupported'.

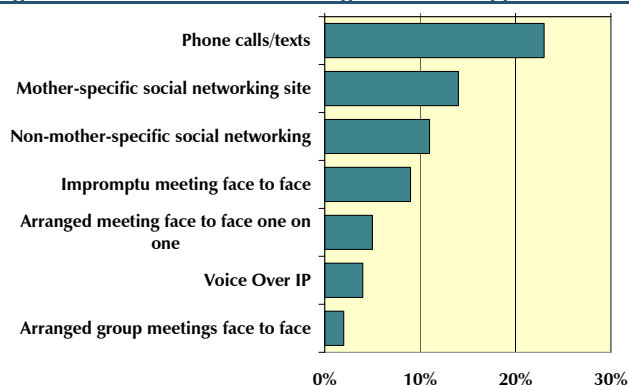
**Most Italian mothers experience a degree of isolation and lack of support.**

### 1.2.12 Support and advice

Figure 22 shows the means by which mothers communicate with their support network. Nearly a quarter

(23%) used phone calls and texts as their main means of keeping in touch.

**Figure 22. Means of communicating with one's support network**



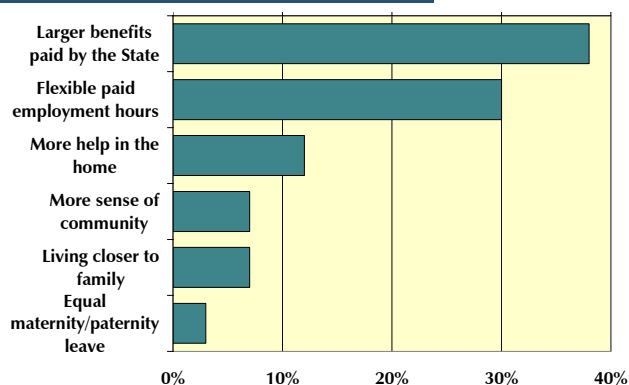
Modern technology also appears to be playing a significant role in the lives of a number of the mothers surveyed – 14% reported that they used online social networking sites that are specifically aimed at mothers as their main means of communicating with their support network. A further 11% used non-specific (in that they are not purely aimed at mothers) online social networking sites as their main means of communication.

A notably low number of mothers said that they communicated with their support network by meeting in person. Only 9% reported that impromptu face to face meetings were the main way in which they made contact with their support network and a further 2% said they relied mainly on having pre-arranged face to face meetings.

### 1.2.13 Improving the quality of life

The mothers we surveyed were asked what they would change in order to most improve their quality of life as a mother. The results can be seen in Figure 23.

**Figure 23. Improving mothers' quality of life**



The most common response expressed a desire for the state to pay out larger benefits (38%). This was followed by 30% of respondents saying they wanted more flexibility in paid employment hours. One in eight (12%) wanted more help in the home, while 7% yearned for a greater sense of community and another 7% wanted to live closer

to their family. The least frequent response saw 3% of the mothers we surveyed saying they wanted equal maternity and paternity leave to be introduced.

**Italian mothers want the state to increase benefits and enable more flexible working arrangements.**

It seems, then, that most mothers would like change to take place at a legislative level, either by altering workplace regulations or increasing the size of the welfare state. Only a small number wanted change on a relational level, by living closer to family or a living somewhere where there was a stronger ‘sense of community’.

**1.2.14 Sport**

The large majority of Italian mothers believe that it is important for their child to participate in sport, as can be seen in Figure 24. Of the mothers we surveyed, 42% thought that it is ‘absolutely essential’ for their children to participate in sports for the sake of their development and well being. In addition, 37% thought that their child’s participation in sports was ‘very important’ and 15% thought it was ‘important’. Only 3% thought that sport was ‘not particularly important compared with other activities’.

**Figure 24. Importance of sport for your child's development and well being**

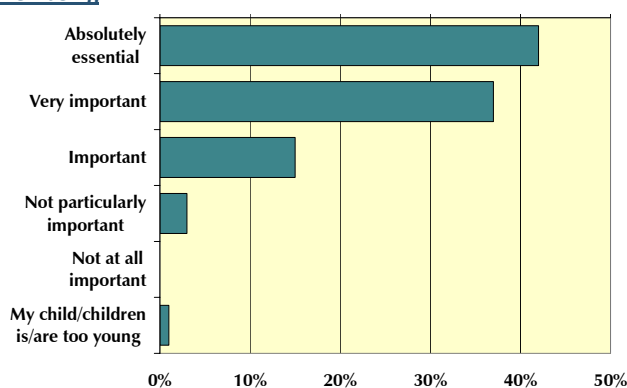
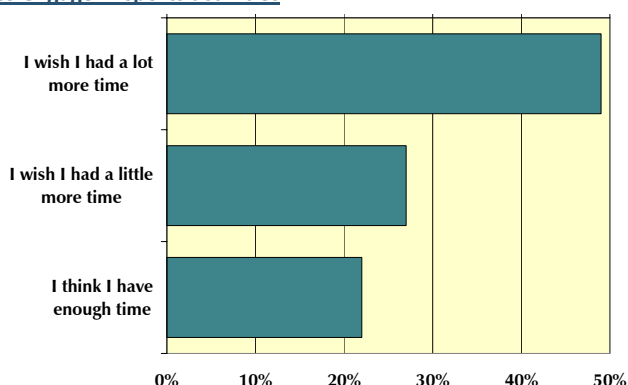


Figure 25 shows how satisfied the mothers are with the amount of time they were able to contribute towards supporting their child’s participation in sports.

**Figure 25. Satisfaction with time available to enable your child to engage in sports activities**

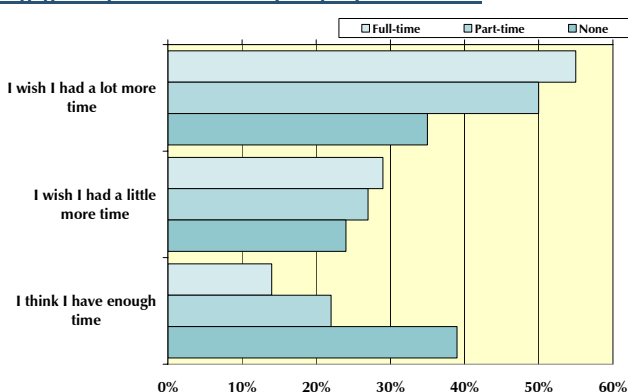


Almost a half (49%) wished they had ‘a lot more time’ to dedicate to their child’s sporting endeavours while 27% wished for ‘a little more time’. Nearly a quarter (22%) of respondents, on the other hand, said that they had enough time available.

**Italian mothers overwhelmingly take the view that participation in sport is important for their children’s well-being and development. Many, however, wish that they had more time to encourage this.**

A more complex picture emerges when one looks at responses according to the employment status of our mothers, as can be seen in Figure 26. Here we can see that 55% of full time working mothers wished for a lot more time whereas 35% of stay-at-home mothers expressed such a desire. Of unemployed mothers, 39% thought that, on the contrary, they had enough time available, whereas only 14% of full time working mothers agreed. It is full time working mothers then, who find they are most dissatisfied with the amount of time they can dedicate to supporting their child’s participation in sports.

**Figure 26. Satisfaction with time available to enable child to engage in sports activities by employment status**

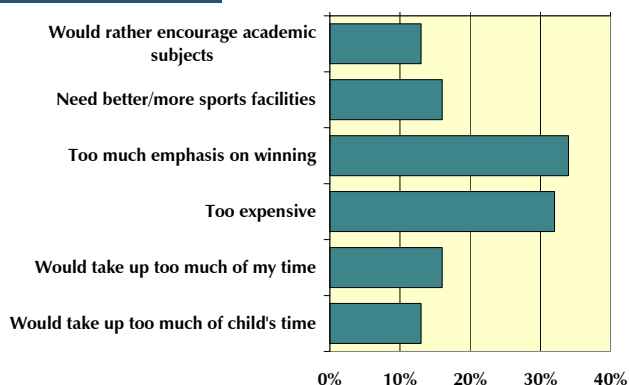


Although Figure 24 showed that 94% of mothers thought sport was important for their child’s development, Figure



27 reveals that a small minority of respondents had some reservations about the nature of children’s sports.

**Figure 27. Factors that make children participating in sport relatively unimportant**



Over a third (34%) of these mothers thought that there was too much emphasis placed on winning in children’s sports. The high financial cost of children’s sports also contributed to mothers deeming it a relatively unimportant activity (32%). Only 16% said that they would encourage their children to participate in sports further if only there were better sports facilities available. A further 16% thought sports were a relatively unimportant factor of ensuring child well-being because they take up too much of the mother’s time. The least frequently cited options were that mothers would rather encourage their child’s academic success (13%) and that sports participation took up too much of the children’s time (13%).