Employment around the first birth in two adverse institutional settings: Evidence from Italy and Poland

Anna Matysiak and Daniele Vignoli

Working Paper 2010: 3
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by

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Abstract: This paper analyses women’s employment behaviours around the first birth in Italy and Poland. These two countries have much in common as far as their cultural and institutional frameworks are concerned. However, they also display key differences that allow us to better investigate how the country-specific factors mediate women’s employment behaviours around the first birth. Our findings reveal substantial differences in women’s behaviours across educational groups and between the two countries. We conclude that conditions for combining work and family, although important, are not the only determinant of women’s fertility and employment decisions, and that other country-specific factors are also highly influential.

Keywords: Women’s employment, first childbirth, Italy, Poland, event history analysis

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Introduction

The labour market participation rates of women are lower than those of men everywhere in Europe. This fact has been often attributed to the disproportionate participation of women and men in childbearing and childrearing. While the gender gap in employment is country-specific, it is often larger in countries with lower fertility than it is in countries with higher birth rates. The economic theory of fertility and of women’s labour supply attributes this phenomenon to cross-country differences in the opportunity costs of childbearing, such as the income lost during the non-participation period, but also future earnings foregone due to non-accumulation and depreciation of human capital (Gustafsson 2001; Walker 1995). These costs are larger in countries with rigid labour markets and a pronounced insider-outsider divide, and in countries that lack safety nets and family policies oriented towards supporting the successful balancing of motherhood and paid work (Esping-Andersen 1999; Matysiak/Vignoli 2008).

Recent micro-level research has, however, challenged conventional wisdom on fertility and women’s labour supply by showing that, in some countries, employed women are more likely to give birth to a child, even if there are strong institutional barriers to combining work and family. This evidence mainly comes from the post-socialist countries (Robert/Bukodi 2005; Matysiak 2009a; see also Kreyenfeld 2009 for a more general discussion), and suggests that, in some country contexts, women’s employment may function as a precondition to childbearing. These findings call for a deeper investigation into how the country-specific factors mediate the interrelationship between childbearing and women’s labour supply.

Comparing highly similar countries that also display some specific and well-recognised differences has recently been recommended by Gerda Neyer and Gunnar Andersson (2008) as a meaningful strategy for analysing the influence of country-
specific factors on the studied phenomena. In this paper, we follow this approach by comparing Italy and Poland. On the one hand, these two low-fertility countries have much in common as far as their cultural and institutional frameworks are concerned. Religiosity, strong family ties, the fundamental importance of marriage, rigid labour markets, as well as institutional lags impeding the combining of work and family are perhaps the most important factors uniting Italy and Poland. Both countries are also characterised by low levels of employment among women. However, the labour force participation of women aged 25 to 44 is much higher in Poland than in Italy, which might be seen as an indicator of the greater determination of Polish women to participate in economic activity.

In our study, we focus on women’s employment at a certain stage in a woman’s life course; namely, around the first birth. We find that particular stage in a woman’s life course to be important for two reasons. First, strong work-family tensions may lead to fertility postponement, and, as a result, to lower family size or even childlessness. Second, difficulties with (re-)entering the labour market after first childbirth may seriously discourage further childbearing. The paper thus sets out to investigate how employment influences the transition to motherhood in the two analysed countries, as well as how having a small child influences a woman’s decision to enter employment. Our study provides further evidence that conditions for combining work and family, although important, are not the only determinant of women’s fertility and employment decisions, as other country-specific factors are also highly influential.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the context in which Italian and Polish women make their employment and reproductive choices. The macro-level developments in first-order fertility and women’s labour supply in the two countries are presented in the next step. In the following section, we present the results
of our empirical investigation into employment around periods of childbearing in Italy
and Poland. The paper concludes with a summary and a discussion of the findings.

2. Italian and Polish context

Italy and Poland represent an opportunity for comparison that has, as yet, been largely
unexplored. There are strong similarities between these two societies that set them apart
from much of the rest of Europe, including the still-low rates of cohabitation, non-
marital childbearing and marital disruption (Hantrais 2005). The delayed diffusion of
new family behaviours is often linked to the pressure imposed by the Catholic values
prevalent in the two countries (De Rose et al. 2008; Kotowska et al. 2008). Only
recently have the countries started to experience a slight weakening of ties with the
Church. This process is particularly visible among the younger generations, and is
manifested in an increase in separation and divorce (Vignoli/Ferro 2009), as well as in
cohabitation (Matysiak 2009b).

Additionally, both societies are characterised by strong attachment to the family
and strong intergenerational ties (Dalla Zuanna/Micheli 2004; Rai et al. 2008;
Stankuniene/Maslaukaite, 2008). Parents support their children after the latter leave the
parental home by helping them to establish an independent household, by organising a
marriage ceremony, and by later providing care for their children. In turn, they receive
financial and emotional support in their old age (De Rose et al. 2008).

Strong involvement of family members in providing care and support to each
other, as well as the commonly shared conviction that families are the most relevant
source of social aid, have left very little room for state intervention. Weak public
support provided to working parents leads to strong conflicts between work and family
that seem to be particularly pronounced in Poland. The availability of public childcare
for the youngest children, aged 0-2, is very low in both countries. In addition, the supply of childcare facilities for pre-schoolers is far from sufficient in Poland (Table 1). Instead of using public childcare facilities, mothers can make use of maternity and parental leave entitlements. In both countries, these entitlements are offered to all working mothers irrespective of their work record, but Poland is much more generous than Italy in terms of leave duration. In Italy, a five-month maternity leave is followed by an optional parental leave of six months, which gives mothers the opportunity to stay at home with the child for up to 11 months without forfeiting their work contract. In Poland, by contrast, a mother can stay home for almost 3.5 years by opting for a three-year parental leave after taking a 16-week maternity leave\(^1\). In both countries, the parental leave can be taken by mothers as well as fathers until the child is eight years old. In the great majority of cases, it is taken by mothers directly after the maternity leave. While the financial compensation during maternity leaves is rather high (80% in Italy and 100% in Poland), the parental leave benefits are rather low (see Table 1). Moreover, in Poland, only mothers who meet certain income criteria are entitled to a parental leave benefit. For those mothers who decide to work, family members constitute an important source of childcare. The Eurostat survey “Reconciliation between work and family life” has shown that around 40% of working mothers receive help from other family members\(^2\).

The work-family tensions are further exacerbated by rigid working hours, strong barriers to labour market entry, as well as the relatively high degree of uncertainty of employment contracts. These are reflected in low numbers of part-time jobs, high unemployment rates, and the prevalence of temporary contracts among the youth,\(^1\) These regulations were in force until the end of 2007. Since the beginning of 2008, some changes have been introduced into the parental leave system. We do not refer to them in this paper because the data we use in our empirical investigation was collected in 2006.
\(^2\) For more information about the survey see Eurostat (2005).
relative to many other European countries (Table 1). Again, the rigidity of working hours, as well as job instability, seems to be higher in Poland than in Italy.

Finally, the attitudes toward working mothers in both of the analysed countries are very traditional, and the gender division of tasks is heavily asymmetric (e.g., Mencarini/Tanturri 2006; Muszyńska 2007; Philipov 2008). The view that women should withdraw from the labour market when children are young also prevails in Poland, despite the fact that the state ideology strongly encouraged the labour force participation of women during the socialist period. Even during that era, women were perceived to be the main homemakers and care providers, while also being expected to work in the market (Siemieńska 1997).

### TABLE 1: Contextual indicators, Italy and Poland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ITALY</th>
<th>POLAND</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Childcare provision a)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children aged 0-2</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children aged 3-6</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental leave b)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>36 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit</td>
<td>30% of monthly earnings in private sector, and 80-100% in public sector</td>
<td>means-tested, flat rate at the around 15% of the average wage in the national economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proportion of working mothers with children up to age 14 who receive childcare support from kin c)</strong></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labour market structures d)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% part-time employed (aged 25-49 in 2006)</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>youth unemployment in 2006</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% temporarily employed (aged 15-24 in 2006)</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Macro-level developments in first-order fertility and women’s labour supply

Despite the strong position of the Catholic Church, the attachment to the family, and the prevalence of traditional family forms, Italy and Poland have experienced a marked decline in childbearing, and are currently among the European countries with the lowest fertility levels. Younger generations increasingly opt for late entry to parenthood, and the proportion of childless adults has increased substantially in both of these countries.

The process of fertility postponement is illustrated in Figures 1a-b, which display the cohort first birth age-specific fertility rates. Note that the time series for Italy are shorter than for Poland because of the data limitations. In Italy, the postponement is observed starting with the cohorts born in the mid-1960s. Figure 1a clearly shows the decline in the first birth rates at ages 20-25, and an increase thereafter. In Poland, the same processes started later, with cohorts born in the 1970s (Figure 1b). As a result of these changes, the mean age at first delivery in Italy increased from 25 in the early 1970s, to 29 in 2007. In Poland, it rose from 23.3 in 1989 to 25.8 in 2007.

Women not only delay the transition to motherhood; they also increasingly remain childless. In Italy, the proportion of childless women rose from 10% among the 1955 cohort, to 20% among the 1965 cohort (Figure 2). In Poland, this process started slightly later, with the percentage of women who had no children jumping five percentage points from 1960 to 1965 cohort, to 15.4% for the latter cohort.

Source: Observatoire Démographique Européen.
Note: the indicators for Poland for the years 2004-2007 are computed by Krzysztof Tymicki based on the Polish Birth Register.

FIGURE 2: First birth total cohort fertility rate (CTFR1), birth cohorts 1922-1967 for Italy, and 1938-1967 for Poland

Source: Observatoire Démographique Européen.
Note: The data for Italy for the generations 1960-1967 are provided in De Rose et al. (2008). The indicators for Poland for the years 2004-2007 are computed by Krzysztof Tymicki based on the Polish Birth Register.
The massive fertility postponement and increased childlessness observed in the two countries have often been linked in the literature to the strong tensions between fertility and women’s work. Interestingly, despite the fact that the conditions for combining work and family are generally considered to be poor in both countries, Italy and Poland display substantial differences in the current level of women’s labour force participation (Figure 3). Even larger differences emerge when past developments in women’s economic activity are taken into account. Italy has been always described as a country with low levels of employment among women (e.g., Salvini 2004). Currently the employment rate of females aged 25-44 stands at 61%, which is around 11 percentage points lower than the EU average. It is notable, however, that in the early 1970s the proportion of women employed was half as large, which points to a considerable increase. Single-earner, male-breadwinner couples are still seen as the most suitable environment for childbearing and childrearing in this country (Vignoli/Salvini 2008).

In contrast to Italy, the economic activity of women in Poland was already high in the 1960s, when over 60% of women aged 25-44 participated in the labour force. By the end of the 1980s, nearly 80% of Polish women were working. This high level involvement of women in economic activity was the result of the country’s labour-intensive economy, low productivity and low wage policies; as well as the communist ideology that sought to achieve full employment. The conflict between paid work and childbearing was generally low at that time, thanks to the strong job guarantees, the right-to-a-job ideology, and public childcare provision. The situation changed dramatically after the centrally planned economy had been replaced by the capitalist system. Employment was no longer guaranteed, job security ceased, public childcare deteriorated, and the importance of education in earning a good income and achieving
personal success rose substantially. As a result, a strong increase in work-family tensions was seen, and the employment rate of women aged 25 to 44 fell by around 12 percentage points at the beginning of the 1990s, and did not subsequently recover. Currently, Poland is among the countries with the lowest employment rates for women in Europe, with a rate that is only slightly higher than that of Italy (68.1% versus 60.9% in 2008). Interestingly, young women in Poland have not responded to the growth in work-family tensions by reducing their economic activity, which remained high relative to Italy.

FIGURE 3: Labour force participation and employment rates (LFPR and EMPR) of Italian and Polish women aged 25-44, 1970-2007

![Labour force participation and employment rates](image)

Note: All persons who were economically active before 1989 were employed, hence LFPR equals to EMPR.
4. Employment around the first birth in Italy and Poland: Empirical investigation

4.1. Data and sample selected

In our empirical investigation, we made use of retrospective data stemming from the Household Multipurpose Survey Family and Social Subjects (FSS), corresponding to the Italian Generations and Gender Survey, and the Polish Employment, Family and Education Survey (EFES). The Italian survey was conducted by the Italian National Statistical Office (Istat) in November 2003 on a sample of about 24,000 households and 49,451 individuals of all ages. The Polish survey was prepared at the Institute of Statistics and Demography of the Warsaw School of Economics, and was carried out in November and December 2006 on 3,000 women born 1966-1981.

We were interested in comparing Italy and Poland after the onset of fertility postponement. For this reason, we selected for Poland the cohorts born between 1970 and 1981. These women were aged eight to 19 in 1989, which means that most started their reproductive careers under the new political and economic conditions (see also Figure 1b). Using the same cohorts for Italy would mean following the Italian women for a period that is three years shorter than the period for Poland. For this reason, we chose for Italy cohorts born in the years 1967-1978. As a result, in both cases the analysed women were aged 25-40 at the time of the interview. Women who reported having twins at the first or second delivery were excluded from our samples. The Polish final sample includes 2,300 respondents (i.e., cohorts 1970-1981), while the Italian sample includes 4,238 respondents (i.e., cohorts 1967-1978).

4.2. Employment before the first birth

In the first step, we modelled the transition to the first birth. To this end, a piecewise linear intensity regression was applied. Each woman was observed from the age of 15
until first conception (measured seven months prior to birth) or the date of the interview. Our main explanatory covariates were women’s employment status, as well as woman’s educational attainment. Additionally, we standardised for the educational level of woman’s parents. Women who had finished their education were classified into three groups: low, medium and high. The first category consists of women who completed only compulsory education (eight years in both countries), as well as those who continued with basic vocational education, which lasts three years in Italy and two years in Poland. The medium-educated are those who completed at least four years of education at the upper-secondary level, as well as those who were enrolled in post-secondary, but non-tertiary, education. Women who received a bachelor’s or a master’s degree were classified as high-educated.

Our findings clearly demonstrate that the role of women’s employment for childbearing is substantially different in Italy than in Poland. While employed women in Italy are less likely to give birth to a first child, no significant differences between the employed and non-employed women are observed in Poland (Table 2). Our findings therefore suggest that employed women in Italy are in general more likely to defer childbearing than their Polish counterparts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2: First birth risk by employment status, Italy (cohorts 1967-1978) and Poland (cohorts 1970-1981)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment status</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment (ref=non-employment)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance level of coefficients: *=10% ; **=5% ; ***=1%. The results are standardised by calendar period, as well as by women’s and parents’ education.
However, this general effect of employment on first birth risk hides differences in the role of employment between various educational groups (Figures 4-5). After interacting educational level with women’s employment status, we find that tertiary-educated women stand out from this general pattern. In contrast to low- and medium-educated women, they are more likely to conceive their first child if they have a paid job. This means that, for this group of women, finding a job is an important precondition for becoming a mother. This effect can be observed in both countries analysed, but it is more pronounced in Poland. In contrast to the high-educated, the medium- and the low-educated women in Italy are more likely to conceive their first child while out of employment. In Poland, no significant differences between employed and non-employed women in these two educational groups are observed.

**FIGURE 4:** First birth risk by employment status and educational attainment, Italy (cohorts 1967-1978). Piecewise linear intensity regression.

Note: Significance level of coefficients: *=10% ; **=5% ; ***=1%. The results are standardised by calendar period and the educational level of the woman’s parents.
4.3. Employment after first birth

In the second step, we addressed the timing of women’s employment entry after the first birth. The most straightforward solution to this problem would be to apply event history techniques in observing a woman from childbirth onwards. This approach was not appropriate in our case, as women on parental leave were coded as employed in the Italian dataset. Consequently, it was not possible for us to know the date when they decided to finish parental leave and to re-enter paid work. Given that mothers in Italy can be out of paid employment no longer than 11 months following birth without losing their work contract, we decided to observe each woman starting with the first birthday of the first child. Descriptive event-history analysis techniques were employed. The resulting Kaplan-Meier estimates of survival curves were corrected by the proportions of women at work one year after the first birth.

Although employment seems to hinder transition to motherhood in Italy, but not in Poland, Italian mothers resume employment after their first birth more quickly than
Polish women. Half of Italian mothers, but only one-third of Polish mothers, were working one year after the birth. This difference in entry rates can be due to differences in parental leave regulations. In fact, it turns out that the intensity of employment entry in Poland starts to exceed that of Italy after the child reaches 3.5 years of age, which is precisely the time when parental leave expires (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6: Proportion of women not in employment 12 months after the first birth, by women’s employment status at conception. Kaplan-Meier survival curve estimates.

It turns out, however, that the intensity of employment entry in Italy strongly depends on whether a woman was employed at least for some time before the first conception (Figure 7), which points to a strong polarisation in behaviours. Almost 90% of Italian women who had some work experience entered employment one year after giving birth. Of those women who had never worked before they conceived, no more than 10% were employed one year after first birth, and only 20% were on the job three years later. Such a degree of strong polarisation was not observed in Poland, although
women with some work experience were found to be more likely to enter paid work after childbirth than those who had never worked.

FIGURE 7: Proportion of women not in employment 12 months after the first birth, by women’s employment status at conception. Kaplan-Meier survival curve estimates.

Disentangling the survival curves by women’s educational attainment gives us a deeper insight into the cross-country differences in the patterns of employment entry after the first birth. It turns out that high-educated women in Poland are nearly as likely to enter employment as their Italian counterparts. This means that they attach more importance to the accumulation of on-the-job skills than lower-educated women, and that their employment prospects are affected least by the parental leave regulations. By contrast, the low- and medium-educated women in Poland seem to make use of the parental leave to a much larger extent, and to enter employment much later than similarly educated women in Italy. It is notable, however, that the proportion of mothers
who entered employment after the first birth in Poland following the expiry of the parental leave is similar to the proportion found for Italy.

FIGURE 8: Proportion of women not in employment 12 months after the first birth, by women’s educational attainment. Kaplan-Meier survival curve estimates.

5. Concluding discussion

In this paper, we looked at women’s employment transitions around the first birth in Italy and Poland. Two important conclusions can be drawn from our study. First, we found important educational differentials in the way women’s employment affects the transition to motherhood, as well as in the intensity of employment entry after first birth, with tertiary-educated women displaying visibly different behaviours from low- and medium-educated women. Second, we also established clear cross-country differences in women’s employment transitions around the first birth for women with low and medium education. These differences were apparent despite the fact that one of the common features of these two countries is low public support for
working parents, and the consequent tensions between work and family. The paper therefore demonstrates that conditions for combining work and family, although important, are not the only determinant of women’s decisions regarding work and family. What also matters are other country-specific factors related to the cultural or economic frameworks, as well as women’s attitudes regarding work and family. Below we briefly summarise and interpret these findings in greater detail.

First, we found that in both countries tertiary-educated women are more likely to conceive their first child if they are employed. It therefore seems that, for this group of women, finding a job is an important precondition for becoming a mother. These women also tend to (re-)enter employment quickly relative to low- and medium-educated women. The intensity of employment entry is similar in both of the countries analysed, despite the fact that parental leave is much longer in Poland than in Italy. Thus, it is clear that employment is an important life goal for tertiary-educated women in both countries, and that they seek to combine having a career with motherhood, despite the difficulties they are very likely to encounter.

For medium- and low-educated women, the findings were different. In Italy, employed women in this educational group were found to be less likely to enter motherhood. In Poland, employment does not seem to affect the first birth intensity. Interestingly, low- and medium-educated women in Italy tend to (re-)enter employment more quickly after childbirth than in Poland. We attribute this finding to the differences in parental leave regulations, which allow mothers in Poland to stay at home around 2.5 years longer than in Italy without forfeiting their work contract. It is notable, however, that the intensity of employment entry in Poland increases by the end of the parental leave, and that the proportion of mothers in Poland who have entered work after their leave has expired approaches that of Italy. This means that Polish women are not more
likely to abandon their jobs than Italian women; instead, Polish women make use of their more generous parental leave entitlements and try to enter employment, despite the possible depreciation of their human capital during the career break.

Finally, our study revealed a strong polarisation pattern between working and non-working women in Italy: namely, we found that nearly all women who accumulated some work experience before first conception re-entered paid work, often as early as one year after childbirth. By contrast, women who had never worked before first conception were more likely to remain out of the labour market after becoming mothers. This polarisation pattern had already been found in Italy by other researchers (e.g., Saurel-Cubizolles et al. 1999; Gutiérrez-Domènech 2004), although only for the older cohorts. For Poland, the difference in the intensity of employment entry for women with some work experience and the intensity for never working women is also visible, but it is far less pronounced than in Italy.

Overall, our results suggest that, despite similarly poor public support for working parents in Italy and Poland, paid employment and motherhood tend to be more often combined in the latter country. The most plausible explanation for this finding is that Polish women are much more attached to the labour force, and perceive market work to be more compatible with childbearing than Italian females. This explanation is consistent with other research confirming the strong determination of Polish women to participate in the labour force (Kotowska/Sztanderska 2007; Matysiak/Steinmetz 2008; Matysiak/Mynarska 2009). Future comparative research is needed to investigate the reasons behind the cross-country differences in women’s attachment to the labour market.
Acknowledgement

This research was conducted while Anna Matysiak and Daniele Vignoli were staying at the SUDA - Demography Unit of the Department of Sociology of Stockholm University. The authors are grateful to Jan Hoem and the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research for providing financial support.
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