



DATI ALLA MANO

I Podcast

CHILDREN DESIRED, CHILDREN BORN, CHILDREN NOT HAD

In Italy, it is now well known, fewer and fewer children are being born. We are a long way from the baby boom numbers of the 1950s and 1960s... but what are the desires, or rather the intentions, of people in Italy regarding having children?

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla mano, a podcast by Istat, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a public communication project.

In this episode, we will talk about children, those people would like to have and those who are, in the end, actually born. In other words we will talk about the gap between intentions and actual outcomes in the reproductive field.

It is called the fertility rate and it tells us the average number of children per woman. In our country, it reached an all-time low in 2024, namely 1.18. To be clear, to ensure generational replacement, to ensure that the population size remains as it is and does not decrease, 2.1 children per woman are needed.

But let's look at some other data: the age at which the first child is born – who then perhaps remains the only one, given that currently most couples with children have only one child – the average age at the birth of the first child, as I was saying, is always higher. But to understand how much reproductive habits have changed, we need to look back: for women born in 1947, the average age at first birth was below 25 years; for those born in 1975, it had risen to 30.0 years. The latest available data tell us that in 2024, for women, the average age for the first child is almost 32 years old. But there is a difference between what happens and what is desired. Let me explain: Istat conducts a survey on Families and Social Subjects and this survey detects fertility intentions, meaning it asks people if they intend to have a child in the next three years; it also asks if the intention is longer-term, meaning if they intend to have a child in the future, not necessarily within a defined timeframe. But the data tells us that what is desired is by no means guaranteed to happen, quite the opposite. Incidentally, the primary survey on fertility intentions is part of the National Statistical Programme, which is the set of surveys and statistical works considered essential for the country. But why is this data so important?

I asked **Eleonora Meli**, a researcher who has been working on this subject for years.

Cristiana. Hello Eleonora, welcome.

Eleonora. Hello, thank you.

C. Can you explain why data on fertility intentions are important?

E. Because they tell us many things. First, people's idea of forming a family. Then, the answers allow us to verify any obstacles to the realisation of their plans.

C. Well, this is important.

E. It is important for defining policies to support parenthood and it is particularly important in a country facing profound demographic change.

C. Italy's profile.

E. Indeed.

C. But let's move on to the data, what do they tell us?

E. They tell us that the percentage of people aged between 18 and 49 who intend to have a child within the next three years has decreased compared to about twenty years ago. Consider that in 2003 it was one in four people, now it is just over one in five.

C. And do we know why?

E. Partly because within the considered population – that is, the one conventionally indicated as being of reproductive age between 18 and 49 – the proportion of people who are at least 45 years old has increased, so it is likely that they have already completed their reproductive plans. But certainly, the number of people who do not intend to have children – or other children – even in the future is significant.

C. Can we quantify them?

E. There are over ten and a half million

C And what about those who, on the other hand, plan to have a child within three years?

E. Around four and a half million, but, as we well know, there is a difference between what one intends to achieve and what is actually achieved. And we cannot expect 4.5 million children in the three years considered, also because both men and women are responding.

C. I understand. But in any case, in your opinion, how feasible are these intentions?

E. It's hard to say, but we have the example of women who, in 2016, stated they wanted a child within the next three years.

C. And what happened?

E. What happened was that less than half actually gave birth to a child in those three years.

C. But perhaps some had a child later?

E. A small percentage did, around 7 per cent... it's true that in the meantime we had the pandemic, and this certainly did not facilitate the realisation of their plans. In any case, we have observed that female graduates – all other conditions being equal – are almost twice as likely to realise their maternity plans compared to those with only an elementary school leaving certificate.

C. Can we say that education protects one's life plans?

E. In this case, yes, also because it improves employment opportunities, and employed women are more likely to realise their intentions to have children.

C. Listen, how do younger people see themselves in the future? With children? Without?

E. I would say essentially with children, given that almost 82% of those aged between 18 and 24 expect to have children not immediately but in the future. Obviously, when you are young, it is easy to imagine the future, especially if what you imagine is not to be realised soon; then you have to deal with the real context.

C. However, the intentions of younger people make us understand that family and children are still part of the models, they are still rooted in the collective imagination.

E. Certainly

C. And what about when you get a little older?

E. The numbers decrease. If we consider young people between 25 and 34, the proportion of those who intend to have a child in the future drops to just under half.

C. But instead, for what reasons do people decide not to have a child, or do they give up on having one even if they wish to?

E. Well, of those ten and a half million people who do not intend to have children, neither within three years nor in the future, only 5.5 per cent state that a child is not part of their life plans – and this is, in any case, a percentage in line with what was found in 2016. Then, just under a third believe they have already reached the desired number of children. However, more than half – 62.2% – declared that they gave up due to the difficulties they encountered in pursuing their desired family size.

C. A significant percentage

D. Yes, indeed, that's more than six and a half million people.

C. But what difficulties are they referring to?

E. In one out of three cases, the reason for giving up is **economic reasons**. Then, subsequently, some mention their age, others the need to care for elderly parents, some believe they do not have **adequate working conditions**, - so we are talking about fixed-term contracts or insufficient pay or the inability to reconcile work-life balance; finally, there are also those who, quite simply, do not have a **partner** stable (8.6%).

C. And do men and women experience these difficulties in the same way?

E. Not exactly. Let's take men aged between 25 and 34: more than half report economic reasons as an obstacle, while for their female peers, the issue is often work: almost one in four believes they do not have sufficient guarantees to have a child.

C. in fact, it is more common for women to have precarious working conditions...

E. And it is women – particularly the youngest, but overall they make up 49.9% – it is women, I was saying, who believe that the arrival of a child within three years could worsen their job opportunities, while almost 60% of men do not foresee repercussions on their professional life... but more than a third think that their partner's working conditions could worsen with the arrival of a child.

C. ...A significant gap between what women fear and what men imagine. But we have talked about the difficulties people believe are behind the decision to forgo having children or having more children. But what do they think could be helpful instead?

E. Firstly, **economic support**, followed by **childcare services** – these were particularly highlighted by younger people and especially by residents of the islands, where the shortage of nurseries is more severe.

C. Other support measures considered necessary?

E. **Housing policies** – meaning the possibility of having subsidised rents or mortgages – and these measures were particularly highlighted by residents of the Centre and by those living in metropolitan areas where property prices are more severe. Then we find employment policies, indicated by a fifth of respondents, and finally **work-life balance policies**, particularly requested by those living in the North.

C. Interesting. But returning to the desire to have a child, are there gender differences?

E. Yes, among those who do not yet have children, the percentage of those intending to have one within three years is higher among women than men.

However, among those who are already parents, the situation is reversed: among men who already have one child, about a third want another. Women who desire a second child, on the other hand, are just over a quarter.

C. I imagine they experienced the impact of the first differently. If the experience was more demanding for mothers, it's natural that they are also the most cautious when planning a second maternity.

E. and the awareness of an unbalanced burden probably also contributes to postponing it, motherhood.

C ...and explains the increase in the average age at first birth. By the way, does this also happen in other European countries?

E. Well, as you already mentioned, in Italy it's almost 32 years old, and the same happens in Spain, while in France and Germany it remains just under 30, even if only slightly; in Portugal and the Netherlands it's just over 30... to find significantly younger ages, we have to go to Bulgaria and Romania, where the first birth occurs around 27 years old.

C. But postponing the birth of a child, in the end, risks turning into a renunciation. And to think that having children used to be an expected stage of adult life.

E. Today, however, it is a conscious choice. Also, because contraception is accessible and widely used, it is more difficult for a child to “just happen” as it could have fifty or sixty years ago.

C. Right. Let's remind our listeners that the contraceptive pill has been marketed in Europe since 1961 and has been legal in Italy since 1971. Among other things, several aspects related to reproductive health have changed in recent decades... including the progressive decrease in voluntary terminations of pregnancy.

E. Reproductive behaviours are undergoing significant transformation, and various factors contribute to this.

C. However, in the past it was also more difficult for a woman to decide not to have children, if only because of social stigma.

E. But social pressure has not entirely disappeared: women aged between 25 and 34 report often being encouraged by parents and friends to have children more than their peers are.

C. And this gives us food for thought. Eleonora, thank you for your clarity and for all the data you have presented to us.

E. Thank you, and until next time.

So, we have seen that the desire to have children has not disappeared from our radar. However, there are some difficulties between intentions and realisations: economic ones in the first place, age for those who procrastinate, the need to care for elderly parents, and inadequate working conditions. We have also seen that for women, education improves the possibility of achieving their plans to become mothers.

I am Cristiana Conti and this was Dati alla mano, a podcast by the Italian National Institute of Statistics.

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Are there any topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at the address datiallamano@istat.it

Eleonora Meli, Ginevra Di Giorgio, Nicolò Marchesini, Manuela Bartolotta, and Sara Maulo collaborated on this episode