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Italy: Delayed adaptation of social institutions to changes in family behaviour

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VOLUME 19 - ARTICLE 19
PAGES 665 - 704

Date Received: 14 Aug 2006

Date Published: 1 Jul 2008

<http://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol19/19/>

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Abstract

Considering its very low fertility and high age at childbearing, Italy stands alone in the European context and can hardly be compared with other countries, even those in the Southern region. The fertility decline occurred without any radical change in family formation. Individuals still choose (religious) marriage for leaving their parental home and rates of marital dissolution and subsequent step-family formation are low. Marriage is being postponed and fewer people marry. The behaviours of young people are particularly alarming. There is a delay in all life cycle stages: end of education, entry into the labour market, exit from the parental family, entry into union, and managing an independent household. Changes in family formation and childbearing are constrained and slowed down by a substantial delay (or even failure) with which the institutional and cultural framework has adapted to changes in economic and social conditions, in particular to the growth of the service sector, the increase in female employment and the female level of education. In a Catholic country that has been led for almost half a century by a political party with a Catholic ideology, the paucity of attention to childhood and youth seems incomprehensible. Social policies focus on marriage-based families already formed and on the phases of life related to pregnancy, delivery, and the first months of a newborn's life, while forming a family and childbearing choices are considered private affairs and neglected.

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Keywords

[adaptations](#), [childbearing](#), [Europe](#), [family](#), [fertility](#), [Italy](#)






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