

**FIRST UNION ENTRIES. THE CHOICE BETWEEN COHABITATION AND MARRIAGE AMONG WOMEN IN ITALY AND SPAIN**

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**Short abstract** (200 words aprox.)

In Spain and Italy cohabitation has not acquired the same role that it has had in Northern Europe, but the prevalence of cohabiting couples in both countries is not longer marginal. Moreover, the nature of cohabiting couples is also diverse: cohabitation is a temporal alternative that generally ends with the formalization of the union (marriage).

Within a western context of changes in union formation patterns, the study of the choice between marriage and cohabitation as first unions becomes of great importance. Is it accurate to talk about a shared pattern of union formation in Mediterranean countries like Italy and Spain? The purpose of this paper is to examine the choice between cohabitation and marriage (timing, incidence and determinants) as a first union using a life course comparative approach. For the analysis of the timing and prevalence, cumulative incidence curves are calculated by birth cohorts and regions; while for the determinants of first partnership formation are estimated two semi-parametric competing-risks models (one for each country) considering birth cohort, parental divorce, educational attainment, employment, leaving the parental home and birth of a child (last three time related) as independent variables.

***Introduction***

The diffusion of consensual unions registered during the last decades constitutes one of the most important characteristics of demographic change on the familiar sphere experienced

by modern societies since the so called “Golden Age of Marriage”. Before 1960, consensual unions were marginal phenomena. Nowadays, most part of Europeans (especially the youngest) has lived in cohabitation at some point of the life course (Heuveline & Timberlake 2005, Sobotka & Toulemon 2008). Still, there are also great differences in the extent and meaning of cohabitation among European countries (Prinz 1995, Kiernan 2001).

Marriage, which was once part of the expected progression into adulthood, has lost much of its centrality in structuring women’s and men’s adult lives. Nowadays cohabitation provides an increasingly common alternative to marriage and it is replacing marriage as the first step of the life in couple (Kiernan 2001, Smock & Manning 2004). Over the last fifty years cohabitation has gained in importance (with different tempo and levels) all over Europe, becoming more and more an option for partnering.

Although Southern European countries are usually portrayed as traditional in their family patterns, except for their lowest-low fertility, it is important to note that some changes have been taking place recently. For instance, non-marital fertility, a behavior that has been typically linked to the second demographic transition, can no longer be labeled as minor in Spain or Italy: in 2009, 34.5% of all births in Spain and 21.2% in Italy took place outside marriage.

Cohabitation in Italy and Spain certainly has not acquired the same role that it has had in Northern Europe. Some authors attribute the rising proportion of currently non-partnered at a “crisis in union formation” (Miret & Cabré 2005). Nonetheless, family transformations, especially those linked to consensual unions, have been going on in Italy and Spain since the 1990s, but were not accompanied by a clear diffusion period, as occurred in a number of other European countries. In fact, surveys carried out in the 1980’s and the 1990’s in these countries show a late and slow spread of cohabitation (Muñoz & Recaño 2011). However, during the last decade the prevalence cohabitation within the life-course is not longer marginal, especially for Spain: by 2006, 12.7% of women over 15 years old have lived at least once in a consensual union. The rate for Italy is almost six points lower; by 2003 was around 6.9%. Thus, cohabitation is progressing into a mainstream behavior among young people in Spain and Italy, even though in the latter is observed to a lesser degree.

The recent increase in consensual unions involves major changes regarding population and family issues (Manting 1996, Mills 2000, Heuveline and Timberlake 2005). As mentioned before, among European countries it has been identified a considerable heterogeneity that has been related to substantial differences in both the incidence and the meaning of cohabitations (Kiernan 1999, Liefbroer & Dourleijn 2006). Unlike Northern Europe, where cohabitations have been configured as definitive alternatives to marriage, in the South the literature has treated such unions as a phenomenon characterized by a very small scale, and only practiced by a specific group of people (Prinz 1995, Pinelli & De Rose 1995, Tobío 2001, Baizán et al. 2003, Rosina & Fraboni, 2004, García Pereiro 2011a).

Even if the evolution of the proportion of cohabiting women is increasing over time, there are some differences that should be necessarily highlighted. In this sense, before the nineties, consensual unions were not so much practiced and were defined by a post-marital status (a typical union of divorced, separated or widowed women). Conversely, after the nineties it is possible to identify a clear turning point which is due to the diffusion of cohabitation among younger and still single women (García Pereiro 2011b, Garcia Pereiro et al. 2012).

When considering the constitution of first partnerships, two transitions are possible: 1) from single to married; 2) from single to cohabiter. Previous analysis confirmed the spread of cohabitation as a first union both in Spain and Italy, illustrated by the increase of women who have chosen to enter partnership via cohabitation instead of marriage (Castiglioni & Dalla Zuanna 2009). Although for the Spanish case is just since the beginning of the new millennium that cohabitation in the younger cohorts finally competes with marriage as an alternative to enter first union (García Pereiro 2011b).

This paper compares union dynamics in Spain and Italy. The central aim is to study the patterns of first union formation in both countries by describing the incidence and timing and evaluating the most important factors and settings that determine possible differences between both countries regarding the choice between cohabitation and marriage (Köeppen 2011).

### *Theoretical background*

Union formation dynamics within individual life courses are strongly associated to other biographical transitions and trajectories. In fact, entering a co-residential union either cohabitation or marriage is correlated to several characteristics that regards not only individual aspects but also some background attributes (both partner and parents).

The central position of the marital institution has experienced a significant decline in both Italy and Spain. Currently, cohabiting unions have gained importance in first union formation patterns and have rapidly spread, especially among young adults (De Sandre et al. 1997, Schröder 2005, Di Giulio & Rosina 2007, Domínguez 2011, García Pereiro 2011b).

In this sense, the role of younger generations has been essential to the progressive acceptance and effective configuration of alternative forms of union. Young adults support and adopt more frequently living arrangements diverse from marriage, such as remaining single or cohabit (Thornton & Young-DeMarco 2001).

Previous research has proved that the spread of cohabitation is defined by a strong age component, becoming a common choice between younger partners. Also in Southern Europe cohabitation remains linked to age, given that younger people are more likely to live in cohabitation rather than marriage (De Sandre et al. 1997, Barbagli et al. 2003, Castro & Domínguez 2008, Miret 2007, Domínguez 2011, Muñoz & Recaño 2011, García Pereiro, 2011).

In Italy and Spain the increase in cohabitation has taken place at a slower pace than in other European countries also due to the strong influence of the Catholic Church on family matters. Although, the secularization process accelerated since the mid 1990s has been crucial for the widespread of cohabiting unions in both Mediterranean countries (Castro Martín 1999 & 2003, Dalla Zuanna et al. 2005, Caltabiano et al. 2005, Muñoz & Recaño 2011).

More specifically, several studies have demonstrated that women with a religious affiliation have a more positive attitude towards marriage because the Catholic morality does not allow for premarital cohabitation; while more secular women show much higher rates of cohabitation (De Sandre & Dalla Zuanna 1999, De Rose & Rosina 1999, Dalla Zuanna et al. 2005, Castiglioni 2004, Caltabiano et al. 2005; Di Giulio & Rosina 2007).

It has been stated by the literature that at the beginning of the diffusion process, entering cohabitation instead of marriage has been motivated by cultural modernization regarding new values and social changes. Thus, women with a higher level of education have decided more often to form a non marital union than women with a lower educational level (Baizán et al. 2003, Rossi 2003, Rosina & Fraboni 2004, Castro et al. 2008). The associated interpretation is that the more educated assess differently independence and autonomy and tend to practice less conservative behaviors more often than those with lower levels of educational attainment.

Following this autonomy hypothesis for union formation, another two life course events have been part of the explanations attributed to the choice of entering first union by cohabiting or getting married. The first one is based on the acquisition of residential independency, while the second is economic and linked to the own incorporation on labor market activities.

As part of a wider Southern European trend, in Italy and Spain young people stay in their parental homes for an exceptionally long period and, when they leave, the reason is mainly marriage (Billari et al. 2000, Baizán et al. 2003, Ongaro 2003, De Rose et al. 2008). Based on the former seems logic to expect that those who live with their parents are more likely to get married -moving out of the parental home to do so- than those who have lived or are already living independently, who are more prone to start life couple within cohabitation (Liefbroer et al. 1994, Domínguez 2011).

The increased autonomy and the cultural and economic independence of women might reduce the convenience of getting married. The findings of previous studies confirm that cohabitation is more frequent among women who have gained a certain degree of independence from an economic point of view– thus among those who have been or are employed (Grillo & Pinelli 1999, Billari et al. 2000, Castro & Domínguez 2008).

Undoubtedly, one of the most decisive factors affecting both pre and post union formation processes is the conception of a child. When considering jointly fertility and union formation in Southern Europe, marriage remains the most suitable environment for bearing children. In Spain and Italy marriage and childbirth have been highly interrelated events (Guerrero & Naldini 1997, Baizán et al. 2003, Barbagli et al. 2003): if a couple have children

is more likely to be a married than a cohabiting one. Therefore, a pre-union birth has a stronger impact on direct marriage intensities than on entry into cohabitation.

Individual characteristics not solely constitute the determinants of first union entries; also parents' attributes influence the choice between marriage and cohabitation. Parental actions are also lived by their children and in this way constitute situations that have an impact on future life course decisions.

Parental separation can affect value orientations which in turn change family-oriented behaviors. In effect, according to the literature women who have experienced parental marital disruption are more likely to choose cohabitation, believing less in marriage as a long-lasting institution (Amato & DeBoer 2001, Axinn & Thornton 1996, Ongaro & Mazzucco 2009).

The several determinants stated at this point certainly do not constitute all the aspects linked to union formation choices in Spain and Italy. Along with social, economic, demographic and cultural factors, Italy and Spain are also characterized by specific legislative frameworks which could act impeding or favoring the decision to live within marriage or cohabitation. In Italy, unlike Spain, partners are unable to formally establish a civil union. For individuals living in cohabitation in Italy there is no available a form to legalize their relationship while unmarried, denying them to enjoy some rights within couple life. On the contrary, the Spanish legislation counts with three different forms for transforming a free union in a civil one (even if these forms vary among regions): a declaration of will to create such a union, its constitution in a public document or the correspondent registration on the institution established for this purpose. Literature on the subject (Barela 2010, García 2007) clearly identifies greater openness of the Spanish legislation by considering and recognizing diverse family forms, while in Italy is undeniable the legal importance given to the marital relationship.

Given the higher proportion of first cohabitations in Spain since the 1990s and considering the effective existence of a most favorable legal context in which some legal rights are common for both married and unmarried couples; it would be logic to expect superior cohabitation incidence in Spain than in Italy.

### ***Data and methods***

The Southern European model of demographic behaviors regarding family and couple issues is characterized by the share of some general patterns like: lowest low fertility (Kohler et al. 2002), latest late transition to adulthood (Billari 2004), late union formation and predominance of marriage among first unions (Baizán et al. 2003). Italy and Spain have undergone all the above mentioned trends, nevertheless, it would be interesting to corroborate (or not) if such similarities are also observed in more specific demographic behaviors such as the first entry into different types of co-residential partnerships (cohabitation and marriage).

Despite recent changes on divorce rates, cohabiting couples and births outside marriage, Southern Europe remains portrayed as “traditional” in family and union formation patterns. The central aim is to explore recent developments in union formation in two Mediterranean countries such as Spain and Italy. More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to examine the timing and the factors influencing first union formation using a life course comparative approach.

The event history analysis methodology offers several advantages. It takes the transformation and the dynamics of empirical phenomena into account; it gives information about prior history that might help to improve the explanatory and prognostic capacity of statistical models; it permits the reconstruction of a continuous process; and it allows for investigating complex interrelated processes (Blossfeld et al. 1989).

In this research are investigated the effects of certain covariates such as education, employment or childbearing (among others) by focusing the analytical framework on the life course perspective. Event history analysis techniques are used to analyze individuals, their positions and status changes over a particular length of time. A competing-risk framework is used to study direct marriage versus non-marital cohabitation, given that the occurrence of one of these events impedes the occurrence of the other -being both first order events. How entering first cohabitation and/or first marriage are affected by other events such as childbearing, educational attainment or employment? Have these effects changed over the last decades? Cross-sectional data cannot answer these questions. By using

the life course analysis, it is possible to reconstruct the biographic embedding of marriage or cohabitation into the individual life course (Köeppen 2011:7).

To be married or to live in a cohabiting union means the same in Spain and Italy? The following work will shed some lights on its differences and similarities by closely analyzing the contextual impacts on union formation, examining its timing and incidence in women's life courses and interpreting some key factors that influence the decision enter couple life via marriage or cohabitation.

For the analysis of the timing and incidence, failure curves due to direct marriage or cohabitation (Köeppen 2011, Cleves, M. et al. 2010, Coviello & Boggess 2004) are calculated for both countries and also by birth cohorts and regions; while for the determinants of first partnership formation are estimated two semi-parametric competing-risks models -one for each country- (Pintilie 2007, Fine and Gray 1999). The objective is to study women's propensity to enter cohabitation or marriage treated as competing-life-course-events considering birth cohorts, parental divorce, educational attainment, employment, leaving the parental home and the birth of a child (some of them time-related) as independent variables. By using the life-course approach are identified family background and life experiences which affect the timing and type of first-partnerships in Spain and Italy.

Standard survival analyses measure the time span from some time origin until the occurrence of the event of interest. However, in recent first union formation processes, more than one type of event plays a role (not only marriage but also cohabitation). Another event may substantially change the risk of the event of interest to occur: in this sense, when the entry into first unions is studied (as in the study of every first order event), the occurrence of direct marriage prevents entering first union directly via cohabitation. Within the scheme of first union analysis one failure time regarding first entry into cohabitation can be single out as the event of interest, while entry into marriage is taken as a competing risk. Thus, the focus is on the probability of failing from the cause of interest (cohabitation) in the presence of competing risks (marriage) considering those subjects that have not failed (that have not enter into their first union by turning 35 years old) as right-censored.

In the case of Spain, data is drawn from the Survey on Fertility, Family and Values (Encuesta de fecundidad, Familia y Valores) conducted in 2006 by the Spanish Center for



Sociological Studies (CIS). For Italy, data come from the Household Multipurpose Survey Family and Social Subjects (Indagine Multiscopo sulle Famiglie e Soggetti Sociali) carry out in 2003. Both surveys ask similar questions about union histories and socio-demographic variables of interest so it is possible to introduce same variables in the analyses. Information on union histories is monthly given, but the lost of cases due to missing month of union formation was important, thus data was analyzed yearly. Given that the scope is on the study of first unions only, the observation window for censored cases (women who have not entered their first union) was limited to 35 years old.

Two semi-parametric competing risks models were constructed considering the time elapsed (women's age in years) since the single state which begins at 15 years old until the entry into first marriage or cohabitation. Given that the study treats only first unions, time at risk is stopped at 35 years old or the surveys date, whichever occurred sooner.

The models group several covariates which were built following the exactly same logic and that were common to both datasets. The analyses reported here use measures of both constant and time-related (García Pereiro et al. 2012) women's characteristics and activities. Despite the limitations of both datasets, an effort was made in order to include in the analyses characteristics that reflect as much as possible women's situations at the period when they were exposed to the risk of entering their first union.

The disaggregation of birth cohorts into five groups allows the examination of historical changes. The oldest cohorts are those of women born before 1950, who entered union when cohabitation was almost inexistent. The central generations are constituted by those born between 1951-1960 and 1961-1970, while the younger ones (1971-1980, 1981-1990) provide information of union dynamics of relatively young women. The last one is an incomplete cohort in which the oldest women had reached only 22 years old in Italy and 25 in Spain by the time of the surveys. Since this only provides information regarding the early adulthood, models exclude it to avoid distortions in the results.

To test for the effects of the independence or autonomy hypothesis is used time-related information of women's residential independency and work experience. The first dummy measures whether women have lived independently (out of the parental home) or not at least once before entering first union via marriage or cohabitation. While the last

constitutes an indicator of human capital accumulation in the labor market and captures the opportunities women face in the labor market and their attachment and achievements (Baizán et al. 2003, Turcotte & Goldscheider 1998). The variable groups two categories: 1.- for those who had never entered the labor market and those who had not worked before entering first union; and 2.- for women who had had a job previous to the change of their union status or were employed by that time.

As is common practice, the level of women's education was introduced as an approximate measure of socio-economic status. Unfortunately, in the datasets complete educational histories were not registered, it only contains the highest educational attainment reached at the moment of the interview and the date when this level was attained. The analysis distinguishes between women who achieved university education against those who achieved a lower level.

Regarding fertility behaviors, the pregnancy/birth status (time-related) captures both conception/birth before and after first union entries. It was divided in three categories: 1.- if a woman does not have children at all or she had them two years after entering the first union (childless); 2.- if a woman had a child before entering the first union (already had a child); and 3.- if the child was born one year before, one year after or the year in which the formation of the union occurred (pregnancy/birth).

Other control covariates are the measures of parental divorce and religiosity, both time-constant. The first is the only covariate on the analysis that refers to the family background, computing if women have experienced or not the dissolution of their parents' union. The second one, are religious beliefs a dummy variable in which categories can take only two values depending on the self-consideration of the religious status of respondents, understanding religiosity (more or less religiously involved) as opposed to secularization.

The number of siblings and the foreign born status were initially included in the models but their inclusion did not substantially improve the fit of the model, or had a significant impact on the coefficients and were, therefore, dropped out from the final specification.

After excluding cases with missing values on the main variables and some necessary data cleaning, was obtained a sample of 9,302 women in Spain and 22,181 in Italy who were

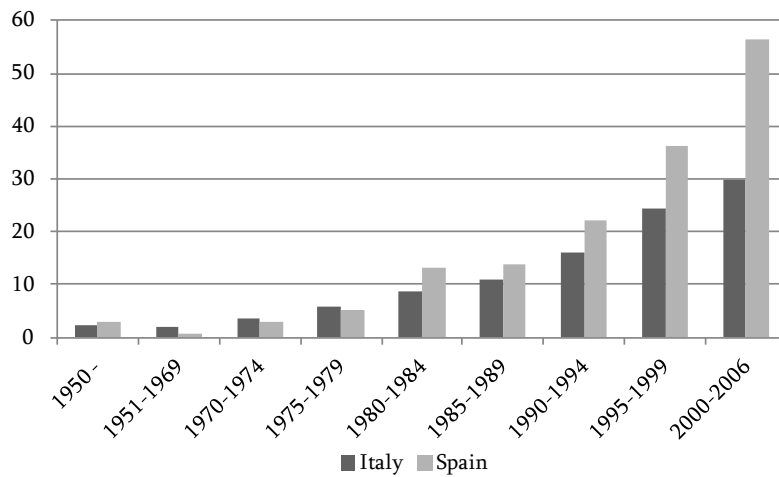
single over 15 years old and under the risk entering first union (cohabitation or marriage). Models were run excluding the 1981-1990 generation (an incomplete cohort) in order to avoid distortions in the results.

**Results**

*Unions started as cohabitation: a period perspective.*

By exploring the proportion of cohabitations within first unions by calendar year of union formation (Figure 1) it is possible to study not only the evolution of such unions in the Southern European countries under observation but also which part of these changes is due to unions that have been started as cohabitations instead of direct marriages.

**Figure 1. Spain and Italy. Proportion of cohabitations as first unions by cohort of the union (year of union formation).**



**Note:** Last period for Italy 2000-2003.

**Source:** Own elaboration EFFV2006 and Multiscopo 2003.

As observed in Figure 1, the proportion of first unions began as non-marital cohabitation has increased over time even if it was not until the second half of the 80's that was over 11% in both countries. Ten years after, the values had grown to 24% in Italy and 36% in Spain.

Until the end of 1980 decade the proportions show not significant differences between these countries, but since 1990 the gap between them has augmented, showing a more consolidated spread of first non-marital cohabitations in Spain: first unions started as cohabitation are much more frequent in Spain than in Italy. In this sense, the preference for cohabitation in the first has experienced larger transformations after the 90's. While direct marriages represented 78% in the initial five years of the 1990 decade, at the beginning of

the first millennium marriages lost its primacy. For the first time in Spain, most part of first unions formed in 2000-2006 (56.6%) were initiated as cohabitations and not as marriages contrary to what has been observed on the previous years.

In Italy, the percentage of consensual unions thus far is not higher than the one reached by direct marriages within first unions. The last period under study (2000-2003) shows a 70% rate for direct marriage, but should also be considered that constitutes a shorter period of observation with respect to the previous ones. It could be expected that more recent data will show a trend similar to the one observed for Spain, in which cohabitations gain importance towards marriages.

#### *Entering first union: Marriage or cohabitation?*

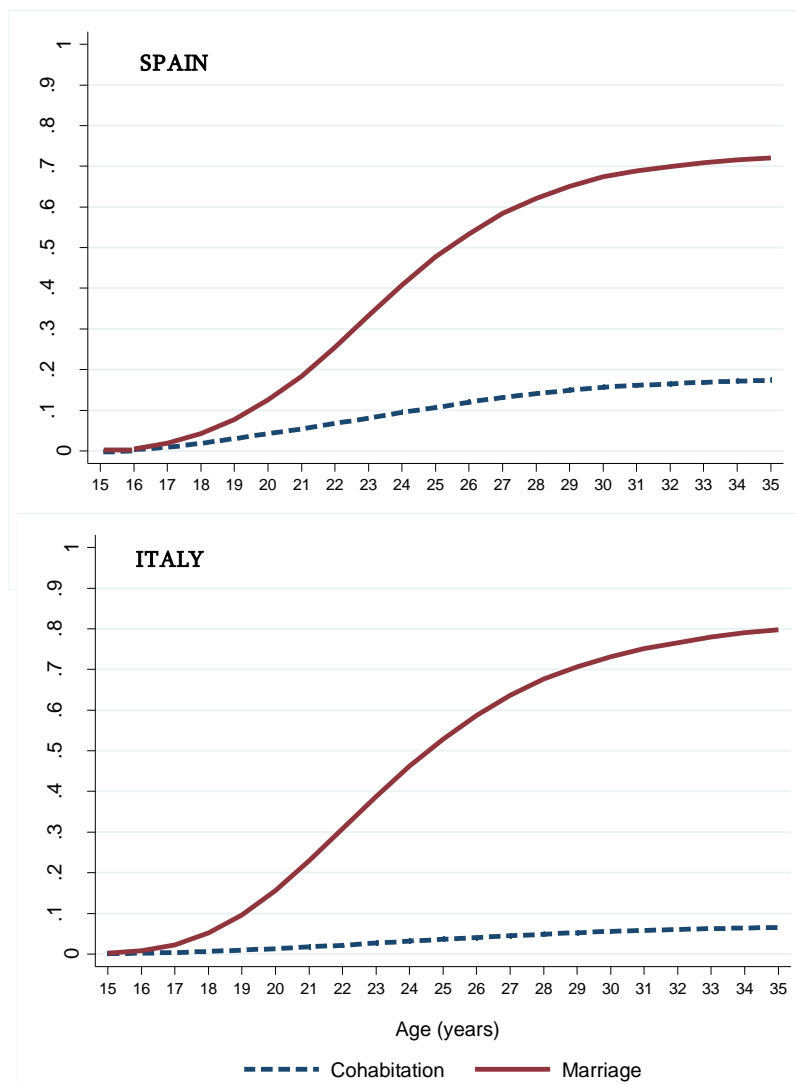
Even if is not the common approach to study first union entries, if treated as first order events, cohabitation and marriage are clearly mutually exclusive because the occurrence of one precludes occurrence of the other. Within such framework the most appropriate estimate is the cumulative incidence curve that takes proper account of the possibility that women over 15 years old are at risk not only for the event of primary interest (here: cohabitation), but can also be removed from possible cohabitation because of competing events (here: marriage). This curve is a function of both the cohabitation and marriage sub-hazard rates and as such is affected by changes in either one.

As stated before, literature confirms an increasing cohabitation trend in both countries, even if the diffusion process of consensual unions seems to be in a more advanced stage in Spain than in Italy. It has been observed a raising proportion of women in Spain that initiate their first unions not as marriages but as cohabitations (García Pereiro 2011b, García Pereiro et al. 2012). In Italy consensual unions have increased as well since the nineties (Rosina & Fraboni 2004, Di Giulio & Rosina 2007, Gabrielli & Hoem 2010), but have not reached so far the magnitude already gained in Spain.

Figure 2 shows the cumulative incidences curves for Spain and Italy regarding the entry into first union via marriage and cohabitation. The respective curves for Spain illustrate that around 71% of all women get married directly, 19% choose to start couple life cohabiting and 10% have not enter their first union by their 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. The corresponding figures

for Italy demonstrate half of the Spanish cohabitation incidence (8%) and a nine points higher rate for direct marriage (80%), while the percentage of women who have not experienced any type of first union is pretty much similar (around 12%). Besides, women who started their first union as marriage in Spain were slightly older than those who get married directly in Italy.

**Figure 2. Cumulative incidence of cohabitation and marriage (first unions). Spain (n=9,302) and Italy (n=22,181).**

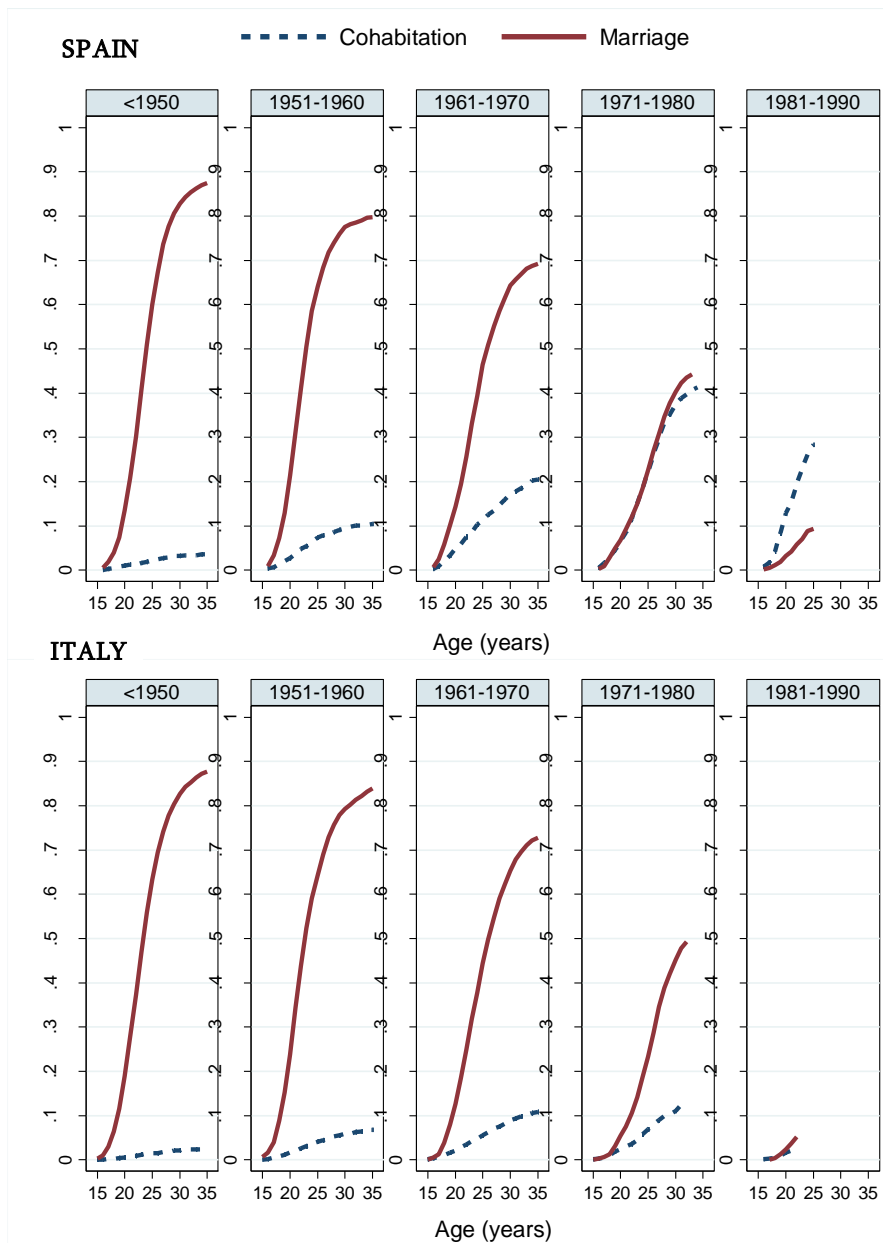


**Source:** Own elaboration EFFV2006 and Multiscopo 2003.

The diffusion process of consensual unions in Spain evidences itself in a more advanced stage. Probably influencing such result is the recognition of almost complete equation of rights and duties for marital and non-marital unions in this country, which has not been established yet in Italy.

The changes in first union formation choices over birth cohorts in both Mediterranean countries are displayed in Figure 3. From the figure it is evident that in Spain women born before 1960 behaved very similarly at first union formation than did women in Italy. Around 80% of all women born between 1951 and 1960 have been married directly, 10% did cohabit and around 10% have not entered a first union at all by turning 35 years old.

**Figure 3. Cumulative incidence of cohabitation and marriage (first unions) by birth cohorts. Spain (n=9,302) and Italy (n=22,181).**

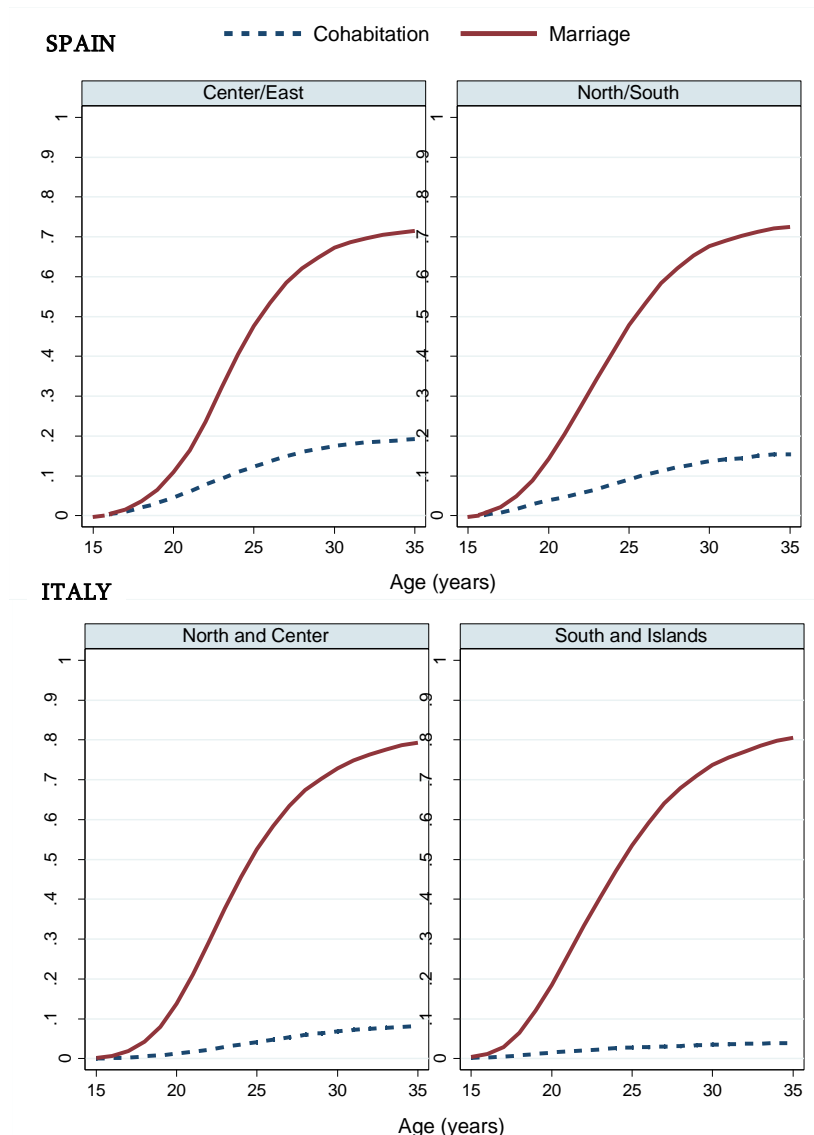


**Source:** Own elaboration EFFV2006 and Multiscopo 2003.

On the contrary, for younger generations, remarkable differences are found. Systematically, women born after the 1960 experienced lower marriage and higher cohabitation incidence

in Spain if compared to Italy. Moreover, the crossover in the 1971-80 generation is more pronounced in the first. The difference between the incidence of women who entered marriage (44%) and cohabitation (42%) is only two points in Spain (which confirms what has already been shown previously for the calendar perspective); while in Italy the gap remains wider with a 50% incidence for direct marriage and 12% for cohabitation. In Spain, youngest women experience direct marriages almost as frequently as they enter in non-marital cohabitation.

**Figure 4. Cumulative incidence of cohabitation and marriage (first unions) by regions. Spain (n=9,302) and Italy (n=22,181).**



**Source:** Own elaboration EFFV2006 and Multiscopo 2003.

It has been demonstrated that the decision to enter first union through marriage or cohabitation varies between Italy and Spain -also when considering birth cohorts, but even

inside the boundaries of each country it is found some internal heterogeneity that transfer to the phenomenon a greater range of variation. In this section are contrasted differences and similarities on first union choices based on the internal regional division of both Spain and Italy; considering that previous studies have proved that socio-demographic behaviors in both countries have followed a clear regional evolution (García Pereiro et al. 2012, De Rose & Vignoli 2011, Castiglioni & Dalla Zuanna 2009, Billari & Kohler 2002, Castro-Martín 1992).

The cumulative incidence curves of direct marriage and first cohabitation were estimated distinguishing by regional division in both countries (Figure 4). In general, cohabitations as first unions are more frequent in Spain than in Italy showing also lower prevalence for marriage.

In the Spanish case there is a slightly higher incidence of first cohabitations in the Center/East (20%) if compared to the North/South (15%). In Italy instead the North/Center regions show more than twice the cohabitation incidence (10%) of the South and Islands (4%). The internal differences are greater in Italy than in Spain, which could be interpreted as another sign of the lag between countries regarding the diffusion of first cohabitations.

#### *Determinants of the choice between marriage and cohabitation*

In this section it is considered the transition from the single state to first union, where direct marriage and the constitution of the first consensual union are treated as competing risks. As before, the observation window was established following women's age at union formation between starting at 15 and stopping at 35 years old. Throughout the analysis several socio-demographic variables are included in the semi-parametric competing risk models estimated as significant factors that affect partnership decisions and behaviors (Table 1).

Over the birth cohorts under observation, the incidence of entering cohabitation as first union has been increasing in both countries. The sub-hazard of entering cohabitation quadrupled for Italian women born between 1971 and 1980 compared to women from the birth cohorts of the first group (<1950). But the increase for women in Spain is even more spectacular, being eight times higher for the last cohort if compared to the reference category. As a parallel process, it is observed a drastic decrease in direct marriage incidences



among generations which is pretty much similar in both Spain and Italy. Marriage sub-hazards in these Mediterranean countries are 57% lower for respondents born between 1971 and 1980 relative to women born before 1950.

As expected, more secular women have a significantly higher cohabitation sub-hazard than religious ones. This evidences that those who choose cohabitation will probably be women showing a less strong attachment to traditional behaviors, the support for cohabitation is superior in Italy (SHR 2.19) than in Spain (SHR 1.62). On the contrary, the negative impact of secularization on direct marriage incidence is much more significant in Spain (35%) than in Italy (15%).

Less traditional living arrangements such as cohabitation are expected to spread among people with higher education to all other social groups (Köeppen 2011, Sobotka 2004). This effect should be more pronounced in the starting years of the diffusion process: in the years when cohabitation started to increase and in the forerunners cohorts in both countries. As already demonstrated for other European countries by Köeppen (2011), afterwards it spread to all other social groups differences have probably become less strong. This could be the reason for the no significant results showed by the educational attainment covariate. Thus, a disaggregated analysis by births cohorts or calendar period of union formation is necessary to establish the role of more educated women on the spread of first unions started as cohabitation.

When considering first partnership formation in Southern European countries, the family-independence obtained by women who have left parental home before entering union have an important impact on cohabitation sub-hazards: its incidence doubles in Spain and is 1,79 times higher in Italy relative to women who left parental home in order to enter first union. For the analysis of marriage choice, the incidence is at least 50% lower because in both countries the timings of marriage and leaving the parental home are highly associated.

The last autonomy dummy regards the economic independence gained by women in the labor market, a covariate that seems to have different meanings on cohabitations and marriages in Spain and Italy. In the Spanish case, the results are in line with the findings of other studies that highlight the growing importance of both women's and men's economic resources for union formation (Pinelli & De Rose 1995, Clarkberg 1999, Sweeney 2002). In

fact, both marriage and cohabitation incidences are higher for women who have been or were employed before starting couple life if compared to women that by the time have never entered the labor market. Nevertheless, first union formation incidence in the first group is superior for cohabitation (2.08) than for direct marriage (1.26).

**Table 1. Competing risks regression analysis of the transition from single to cohabitation or marriage among women in Spain and Italy.**

COVARIATES	Event of interest=cohabitation Competing event=marriage COHABITATION (SHR)		Event of interest=marriage Competing event=cohabitation MARRIAGE (SHR)	
	SPAIN	ITALY	SPAIN	ITALY
	<b>Birth cohort</b> (<1950)			
1951-1960	2.27 **	2.86 **	1.16 **	1.19 **
1961-1970	4.07 **	4.26 **	0.82 **	0.80 **
1971-1980	8.04 **	4.98 **	0.43 **	0.43 **
<b>Not religious</b>	1.62 **	2.19 **	0.65 **	0.85 **
<b>University education</b>	1.07	1.07	0.65	0.64
<b>Have lived independently</b>	2.01 **	1.79 **	0.44 **	0.33 **
<b>Ever employed bef. union</b>	2.08 **	0.84 *	1.26 *	0.66 **
<b>Pregnancy/birth status</b> (Without children)				
Pregnancy/child	0.63 **	0.72 **	1.53 **	1.59 **
Already have a child	0.92 *	1.01 *	0.29 **	0.33 **
<b>Parental divorce</b>	1.98 **	2.19 **	0.79 *	0.89 *
<b>n</b>	7897	1184	7897	15109
<b>Event of interest (failures)</b>	1218	20091	5521	20091
<b>Log pseudolikelihood</b>	-9521.95	-11204.05	-46176.66	-137668.61

\*p<0.05 \*\*p<0.001

In contrast to Spain, entering a first union in Italy does not go along with an employment position. Either cohabitation or marriage sub-hazards decrease for women with a certain degree of experience on labor market activities, but is even lower for marriage (34%) than for cohabitation (16%). The possible explanations behind the observed sub-hazards could rely, on one hand, on the role of men's economic position within the couple (Goldscheider & Waite 1991); or on the importance of the family economic networks that are activated in order to favor union formation and are mostly given by the parents of the couple (Berrington & Diamond 2000, Rosina & Micheli 2006, Di Giulio & Rosina 2007).

As shown in Table 1, the incidence of entering a first union by direct marriage increases in 1,5 times after the conception of a child if compared to women that do not have children.

For women who already had a child, the intensity of first union formation is much stronger for cohabitation than for direct marriage. With the increase in non-marital cohabitations and out-of-wedlock births in both countries (García Pereiro et al. 2012), the social and cultural pressure to give birth within marriage has surely been reduced. However, these results confirm the prevailing existence of an interrelation between marriage and childbearing in both Italy and Spain.

The background characteristic accounting for parental divorce shows that women who experienced it have higher cohabitation incidence if compared to women who come from intact families. The incidence is slightly higher in Italy with a positive effect of 2.19, while the sub-hazard for Spain is 1.98. Conversely, women that lived with both parents tend to chose marriage over cohabitation as first union.

### *Discussion*

Literature has found very similar developments over time in Italy and Spain when analyzing some demographic patterns. In both countries the transition to adulthood has been delayed due to the age increase observed in other transitions: at leaving school, at having the first job, at first union formation and also at the first birth. At the same time marriage rates have been decreasing and non-marital births have been experienced a continuous growth.

Both Mediterranean countries have also in common the existence of strong family ties that play a central role on young adults' transition to adulthood as well as on union formation decisions, and welfare states that provide very limited support to youth and families. But even within this context consensual unions are growing and becoming an alternative to marriage for young women, especially in Spain. Undoubtedly, in the past two decades these countries have been immersed on an ongoing development of significant changes on the living arrangements sphere, in general, and, more specifically, on an underway process of diffusion of cohabitation.

But despite these similarities, women in Spain differ from women in Italy in their union formation behavior in several ways. The empirical evidences found indicate a more consolidated spread of cohabitation as the starting choice of entering couple life in Spain. The main differences detected -relative to Italy - were the higher share of first unions started as cohabitations after the nineties, the superior cohabitation and the lower direct

marriage incidences observed during women's life courses, the pronounced crossover among young cohorts characterized by an almost negligible difference for women who entered marriage or cohabitation and, finally, the smoother regional heterogeneity regarding first union entries. In Italy, conversely, marriage remains a still popular choice even for younger generations and the important differences on the incidence of first cohabitations among regions could be read as typical features of one of the initial phases of consensual unions' diffusion process.

This paper also contributes to the understanding of the transitional dynamics of first union formation in Italy and Spain by identifying the socio-demographic profiles of women that, eventually, entry into marriage or cohabitation. The results of the competing risks regressions illustrate a pretty much similar pattern of effects for both countries. On one hand, it has been demonstrated how belonging to the youngest cohorts, having secular beliefs, have left parental home before entering union, and experienced parental union dissolution are positively linked to the incidence of cohabitation; while this transition is negatively affected by the presence of children, especially, by the conception/birth of a child. On the other hand, the direct marital choice is more frequent among older, more religious women who left parental home in order to get married, have not experienced parental union dissolution and had a pre-marital birth. In spite of the increasing proportion of out-of wedlock births in the last decades, pregnancy and motherhood are still stronger connected to marriage both in Spain and Italy.

Entering first union in Spain seems to go along with a women's more stable economic position. But it is a determinant factor even more significant for women choosing cohabitation instead of marriage. Contrary to Spain, first union entries in Italy do not imply any kind of women's employment stability. Further analyses on the subject will provide some lights on the possible explanations establishing the part played by men's economic position or parental economic support in starting couple life cohabiting.

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