

Closer than expected: comparing changing family patterns in Italy and Poland

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Background and purpose of the research:

According to Neyer and Andersson (2008), in searching for determinants of family-related behaviour from a comparative perspective, countries similar in terms of some background factors should be selected. Following that suggestion, Italy and Poland have been chosen for a comparative study on family change. Research undertaken under the project 'FAMily CHange in Italy and Poland: New family patterns in Italy and Poland: Finding the Determinants of the Change' (FamChIP) aims at understanding causes of changing patterns of union formation and dissolution as well as childbearing in these two countries (<http://www.sgh.waw.pl/inne/famchip>).

Hopefully, our findings will be helpful to interpret and understand determinants of family changes in other countries too. Relying on the assumption that Italy and Poland are similar enough to be usefully compared, the study carried out under the project is governed by the following research questions:

1. Does the ongoing demographic change in family formation and dissolution result from ideational change or is it driven by emerging structural constraints?
2. What are the most important structural constraints to be accounted for ongoing family change (e.g. rising employment/income instability, rigid housing markets, institutional barriers to combining parenthood (motherhood) and paid work, etc.).

Italy and Poland were selected for this comparative analysis because the two countries share several similar traits despite their geographical distance: low fertility, delayed diffusion of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing, strong attachment to Catholic and family values, weak public support for working parents, traditional gender norms, rigid working hours. However, one should not neglect some differences in both timing and pace of family changes as well as labour market developments, especially women's labour force participation, and living conditions. These differences appear to be strong to the extent that the question arises: **are Italy and Poland similar 'enough' to be used for a comparative study on family changes which follows the framework referred?**

In this paper we will try to answer that question by applying a two-stage procedure. Firstly, we will show that Italy and Poland are distant from other members of the EU and close to each other in terms of some background variables to be selected for the comparison purpose. Next, we will present family changes in both countries referring also to their socio-economic and cultural contexts to demonstrate that similarities and differences make it possible to search for their in-dept causes needed for their understanding.

Data and methods:

For the first part of the paper, the most recent available macro data will be used (mainly Eurostat data) to evaluate not only the current situation, but also its evolution and its presumable trend for

the future. They will be supplemented by some aggregate indicators coming from the internationally comparative data such as Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) and European Social Survey (ESS).

To verify the hypothesis that Italy and Poland are similar in terms of some background factors, important for the understanding family changes, we will collect a large number of quantitative indicators for the EU countries, that span from economic (e.g. per capita income) to the gender-balance indicators (e.g. a share of women in relevant social domains, the gender pay-gap), from demographic (TFR, life expectancy) to social and cultural variables (education attainment, share of people with a given religious affiliation, family values indicators); etc. Against the background of the 27 EU countries, we should thus be in a position to assess whether Italy and Poland are indeed as close as we expect them to be, and what other countries they can be considered similar to, or, at the opposite, very distant from. As is always the case with this type of multidimensional approach, results are strongly dependent on the variables chosen. However, we will start from a very wide array of variables covering different dimensions, and progressively reduce them to “principal components”, so as to keep multidimensionality as much as possible under control.

In the second part of the paper, family changes are investigated with a focus given on some developments, which are relatively well established by now: late and less frequent marriage, a higher break-up risk (separation or divorce), more cohabitation (but not so frequent as in Nordic countries, for instance), lower and late fertility, increasing non-marital fertility, rising childlessness. These processes are overviewed taking account how they interrelate with the socio-economic status of the individuals, women’s changing position in the labour market, transformations of the labour markets themselves (increasing employment and income instability) and the values and attitudes towards family and family-related responsibilities declared by Italians and Poles. Here, both macro- and micro level data are to be used. In particular, the analysis will be carried out on micro-level longitudinal and cross-sectional internationally comparative data (GGS, ESS). These data sources will be complemented by the specific national data, mainly the Multipurpose Household Survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS 2009, Italy) and Employment, Family and Education Survey (EFES 2006, Poland).

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