

The Day After Mother's Day: Whatever Happened to La Mamma?

Judith Harris (May 08, 2016)



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ROME -- In terms of mothering, few countries beat Italy, land where "La Mamma" traditionally ruled the roost. All the stranger, therefore, that on Mother's Day May 8, the question under debate was whatever happened to maternity in Italy, where, as statistics demonstrate, the empty cradle is becoming ever more the norm. Just 10 years ago the Italian woman gave birth to 1.9 children, whereas the latest figures show a median birth rate of just under 1.3 children.

The mothering rate of foreign women residing in Italy is notably higher, at just under 2%. Still, despite this foreign input, so to speak, the number of babies born in Italy just two years ago has dropped by an extraordinary number. The year 2013 had brought 514,000 new babies, but last year,



only 478,000. The national decline in the birth rate actually dates back to a sharp decline in the birth rate in the mid-1980s, meaning that the number of women in what is today's typical maternity age group, from 30 to 34 years old, has itself shrunk, from 2.26 million in 2005 to under 1.8 million today.

The reasons are multiple. First, over time the traditional young Italian woman's desire to get settled into marriage has been supplanted, partly thanks to her advancement in education. Today's young women desire to be settled into a good job well before she contemplates marriage. The lagging economy is another component. University demographic specialists here say that just 46% of Italian women hold down jobs. This shrinks down to 20% in the deep South. By contrast, elsewhere in Europe two-thirds of women work.

As usual, the sagging economy is a factor, and many couples feel they simply cannot afford a family or, if they have one, no more than one child while the median age for giving birth the first time has risen to 31.5, up from 29 years old in 1995. As journalist Maria Novella De Luca wrote for the Mother's Day edition of *La Repubblica*, "In reality, girls want children, even two or three, but in our country the gap between the desire for maternity and the possibility of achieving it is ever greater."

Other reasons behind the decline in having children include the lack of state welfare provisions for maternity care. A proposal to permit a 15-day paternity leave that would allow daddies to help out with family chores when there is a new baby languishes in Parliament. Many companies are hostile to their employees who get pregnant because the bosses consider pregnancy a needless waste of money; one university study alleges that 9% of employed women were fired as a result of pregnancy.

Indeed, women who work tend to lose their jobs when a baby arrives, and within two years of giving birth one woman out of four is unemployed. Curious that in her analysis, Senate Vice President Valeria Fedeli, urging more attention to jobs for women, refers to "girls" (*ragazze*). With one child almost 59% of women manage to keep their jobs but when there are two children, the figure drops to 54% and, with three, to under 41%. Male employment remains stable at the same time despite the number of children. Women -- including this journalist -- turn to part-time work when children arrive.

Cultural factors play a role, says Professor Barbara Mapelli of the Bicocca University. There is the notion that parents must give "everything" to a child, or not have one. "Today's women live a contradiction: on the one hand objective obstacles to maternity exist," while on the other hand women are subject to extreme emphasis on the importance of having a baby. Others recognize that most Italian husbands are less than cooperative about helping out with child care. "They may give a half hour more than in the past," synthesizes the prominent sociologist Chiara Saraceno.

The "Mothers' Index" prepared by the Save the Children association analyzed factors in Italy such as birth rate, the sharing of work in running the family, the presence of childcare centers and services for young children, and early schooling. The result was the the most child-friendly region in Italy is the Trentino Alto Adige, following by the Valle D'Aosta, Emilia Romagna, Lombardy, Tuscany and the rest of the North. The least child friendly: the South, with Calabria the caboose.

And yet the Italian mother matters. No less than 8 million Italian mothers between the ages of 25 and 64 support children between 15 and 25 who are economically dependent upon them, the largest number in all Europe.

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