

# Formal Childcare as an Option to Employed Parents to Reconcile Work and Family. The case of France, Italy, and Spain

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*Marija Mamolo, Vienna Institute of Demography*

*Lucia Coppola, Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT)*

*Mariachiara Di Cesare, Universidad de Concepción, Chile*

## Introduction

Early childhood education and care services certainly contribute to the holistic development of children. However, the availability and accessibility of formal childcare services represent an option for employed parents, especially mothers, to reconcile family and work.

The increasing female labour force participation, which has characterized Western countries in the last decades, has emphasized the relevance of family policies aiming at supporting parents, and in turn the country's level of fertility. In fact, even if till the mid of 1980s an inverse relationship between fertility and employment has been noticed across OECD countries, recent evidence shows a change in this relationship, from negative to positive (e.g. Ahn and Mira, 2002; Brewster and Rindfuss, 2000): countries, as Italy, are witness of low female labour force participation but also of low levels of fertility. This is possibly due to the absence of suitable family policies, as the availability of childcare services. In contrast, other countries characterised by a supporting well-fare state system, as Sweden and France, show high levels of female labour force participation as well as fertility.

Three European countries have been selected for this study: Italy, France, and Spain. In fact, these three countries are characterized by different fertility and employment profiles which are partly affected by different social policies on childcare services and parental leave. Also for France, Italy and Spain it is confirmed for recent years that where the TFR is higher, it is higher also the female employment rate (Figure 1 and Figure 2). While France with a TFR of 2.0 (2006) has a female employment rate of 60% in 2007, Italy and Spain are characterized by a TFR of 1.32 (2005) and 1.38 (2007) and a female employment rate of 46.4 and 54.7 respectively. Besides this, Spain with a female employment rate 8 points higher than Italy and a similar TFR, has been showing in the last years a slightly faster increase in the TFR than Italy.

Figure 1 – Total fertility rate – France, Italy, and Spain 1960-2006

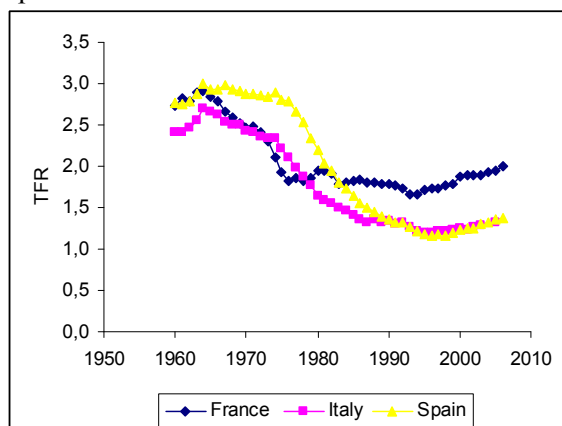
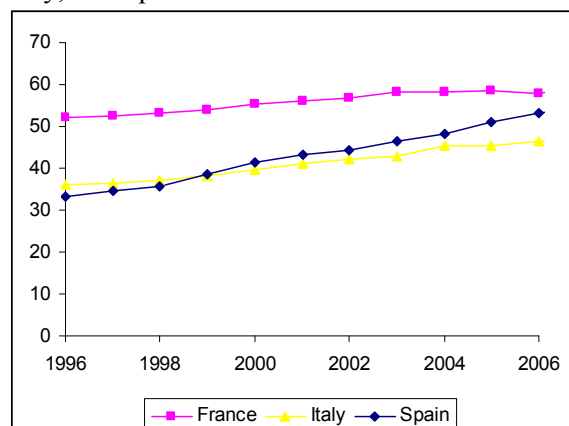


Figure 2 – Female employment rate - France, Italy, and Spain 1996-2006



Source: Demographic Yearbook 2003 & Eurostat 2008

For what concerns childcare services, the three countries are characterized by public pre-school services, provided for free to children aged 3 years and more. This is not the case for children below the age of 3. For them families have to rely on the generosity of legislation (maternity and parental leave) and the accessibility and availability of formal childcare. France, Italy and Spain represent thus different policy examples regarding the provision of childcare.

If Spain looks closer to Italy in relation to the fertility profile, it is not the case for what concerns maternity and parental leave (Table 1). France and Spain seem to be more generous with families considering that the effective parental leave (weighted by level of payment) is 48 weeks versus 24 weeks of the Italian case, even if Italian women enjoy a longer period of maternity leave (22 versus 16 weeks).

Childcare services for children aged less than 3 years have different coverage rates (Table 2). The worst situation is experienced by Italian families who rely only on a 6% coverage rate, followed by Spain with 10%, while in the case of France the level increases to 43%.

Table 1 – Maternity leave and parental leave

	Leave regulation			Total parental leave	Payment	Effective leave weighted by level of payment
	Maternity leave	Payment	Parental leave			
<b>France</b>	16 weeks	100% with max € 61.11 per day	36 months (including maternity leave)	36 months	0 (€460/month for second or later children)	48 weeks
<b>Spain</b>	16 weeks	100%	36 months (including maternity leave)	36 months	0	48 weeks
<b>Italy</b>	22 weeks	Min 80%	10 months until child is 8	11 months	30%	24 weeks

Source: Childcare in a changing world, 2004

Table 2 – Available childcare data for France, Italy and Spain

	Childcare facilities				Pre-primary/Primary school				Total cc facilities based on available statistics
	Age	Facility	Opening hours	Estimated coverage	Age	Facility	Opening hours	Estimated coverage	Estimated coverage rate
<b>Italy</b>	3m-3 1,5-3	Crèches Playgroups	Part/full-time, 10-11 m part-time, 8-9 m	6% 0.3%					6%
<b>France</b>	0-3 0-6 0-6	Collective, family and parental crèches Independent child minders Nurseries	Full-day, all year (family crèches unknown) Variable Variable	9.1% 20.9% 0.9%	2-6		8.30-16.30 during the week and on Saturday morning, closed on Wednesday term-time	11.6%	43%
<b>Spain</b>					0-3	Preschool		10.2%	10%

Source: Childcare in a changing world, 2004

### Aim and data

France, Italy and Spain clearly differ in the social action oriented to help families and women in the care of their toddlers. On the basis of this evidence, the aim of the current paper is to investigate the main household's socio-economic factors affecting the use of formal

childcare in France, Italy, and Spain considering that formal childcare is an important means to reconcile family, work and parenthood (especially motherhood). We use the 2006 EU-SILC data for France, Italy, and Spain and select children aged 0-3. For each of the three countries we run a logistic model based on the dependent variable "use of formal childcare" (Yes/No). *Formal childcare* is defined as the attendance of pre-school/day-care centre implying an economic contribution.

### **Preliminary results**

We introduce various covariates in the regression models in order to investigate the relation between the use of formal childcare and child's and household's socio-economic characteristics. We control for the mother's age. Furthermore, we include both parents' educational level and the employment status. We assume that more educated parents might prefer using formal childcare because they might appreciate more the opportunity of socialization and the relationship with teachers (Del Boca, Locatelli, and Vuri, 2005; Del Boca and Vuri, 2006). As far as the employment is concerned, we consider for the mother whether employed full-time, part-time or inactive, while for the father we distinguish only between employed and inactive. Part-time employed mothers might be less likely to rely on formal childcare as for having more time to spend with the children. The same is expected if the mother is inactive: e.g. women might have decided to quit the labour market, at least for a while, in order to take care of their young children. Eventually, we also consider the child's age: we expect that the younger is the child, the less parents use formal childcare services, for an aversion to leave the child when extremely young. Moreover, we consider two dimensions of the household composition that might be associated with the preference or not of using formal childcare: the presence in the household of at least another young child (say 0-5 years old) and of at least another adult (say 18 years old and over), apart from the child's parents. Both might lower the probability of using formal childcare. We also include in the model the household equivalised disposable income as a measure of the household economic well-being. Considering the deciles of the national household income distribution, we define as "low income households" those who have an income lower than the third decile, as "medium income households" those in between the third and the seventh decile, and as "high income households" those who have an income higher than the seventh decile.

The preliminary results show that there are some differences between the three countries (Table 3). In all the three countries the child's age is positively related to the probability of using formal childcare. The presence of other adults in the household lowers significantly the probability of using childcare only in Spain and France, but it is not significant for Italy. Among the parents' characteristics, mother's education plays a significant role in Italy and Spain: more educated mothers are more likely to use formal childcare for their children. Furthermore, in all the three countries employed mothers, full- or part-time, are also more likely to take advantage of formal childcare in comparison to not employed mothers. Father's education is positively related to the use of formal childcare in France. As regards the household income, the covariate is significant only for France: in comparison to the medium income households worse-off families are more likely to use formal childcare, while better-off families are less likely.

These preliminary results would suggest that in France the use of formal childcare is significantly determined by household characteristics, namely parents' employment and income, given a major availability of different types of childcare services. In Italy and Spain it is mainly mother's characteristics which shape the use of formal childcare, being particularly important for working mothers. Here the use of formal childcare is quite often hampered by the service availability rather than by household's characteristics and needs, without offering to families adequate alternatives.

Further research will try to compare the use of different childcare strategies in the countries considered and to link the use of these strategies to the household's socio-economic characteristics. In Italy, e.g., informal childcare given by relatives represents an important means of family-work reconciliation, especially in regions where the formal childcare availability does not fulfil families' needs and where female labour force participation is higher. In France, on the contrary, different types of childcare solutions are available, which allow not to delegate completely to families the taking care of children, and do not represent a second choice strategy because of lack of better services.

Table 3 – Logistic regression results on the use of formal childcare

	FRANCE		ITALY		SPAIN	
	Odds ratio	Sign.	Odds ratio	Sign.	Odds ratio	Sign.
<i>Other child 0-5 years (No=Ref)</i>						
Yes	0.871		0.964		1.120	
<i>Other adults &gt; 18 years (No=Ref)</i>						
Yes	0.510	*	1.043		0.473	***
<i>HH income (Medium (4-7 dec.=Ref)</i>						
High /8-10 dec.)	0.825	*	1.014		0.950	
Low(1-3 dec.)	1.404	**	1.091		1.303	
<i>Child's age</i>	3.029	***	3.994	***	4.362	***
<i>Mother's age</i>	1.035	**	1.017		1.000	
<i>Father's education (compulsory school=Ref)</i>						
secondary/university	1.239	*	1.070		0.899	
<i>Mother's education (compulsory school=Ref)</i>						
secondary/university	1.178		1.310	**	1.266	**
<i>Father's occupation (Employed=Ref)</i>						
Inactive	0.527	**	0.908		0.895	
<i>Mother's occupation (Inactive=Ref)</i>						
Part-time	2.347	**	2.124	***	3.075	**
Full-time	2.476	***	1.733		3.594	***

Significant at level: (\*\*\*) p<0.01; (\*\*) p<0.05; (\*) p<0.1

## References

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