

IF AND WHEN TO HAVE A CHILD: HOW FERTILITY PREFERENCES ARE STRATIFIED BY AGE GROUP IN ITALY

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Abstract Only few studies analyze the intentions to be childfree in the Italian context. What has been ignored is how these intentions are formed, i.e., the determinants of the intentions to be childfree. The objective of this study is twofold. First, it aims at understanding the association between age and the intentions to have (or not have) a child, second, it analyzes the intended age at last child, which allows to understand when respondents ideally would like to end their reproductive lives – a measure which may signal their awareness of age-related limits to childbearing. Through the survey Family and Social Subjects (2016), it is shown that fertility intentions are stratified by age group in Italy. More precisely, older individuals, who are currently childless, are more likely to adjust their fertility intentions downward compared to younger counterparts, possibly as a control strategy to cope with the failure of having a child. Gender differences are found in the intended age at last child: men at the end of their time window to conceive report that it is ideally better to have children at a younger age, while women at the end of their reproductive lives report the opposite. Future research should investigate these associations using a life-course perspective in order to provide a more informative and complete picture.

In the last decades, the demographic and sociological literature has been dominated by the discussion on fertility decline. The main objective of these studies was to understand the reasons behind low and lowest-low fertility levels. Less attention has been addressed to the increase in childlessness. More precisely, little do we know about the intentions to be childless, i.e., how the determinants of voluntary childlessness are formed (Brini, 2019).

Italy is an interesting country in terms of fertility patterns and characteristics: it is a forerunner of lowest-low fertility since the 1990s (Kohler et al., 2002), as well as one of the countries with the highest age at birth of first child among Western societies (Eurostat, 2023), and with a quite high share of childless individuals (Tanturri, 2012). The paradox is that Italy displays very low fertility levels and a high share of childlessness even though it is characterized by a quite traditional family system and traditional gender roles (Livi-Bacci, 2001; Tanturri et al., 2015). Studies that investigated the reasons behind the Italian fertility trends have explained them as a consequence of weak family-friendly policies (Brini, 2020), and the increasing postponement of important life events by young Italians, such as leaving the parental home, and forming a stable union (Livi-Bacci, 2001), to such an extent that the Italian transition to adulthood is defined as «latest-late» (Billari et al., 2002; Billari, 2004). Thus, given the relevance of the time dimension, it seems necessary to better explore how fertility intentions change at different stages of life in the Italian context.

This contribution asks: are fertility intentions and the intentions to remain childless stratified by age? If so, how? The aim of this contribution is twofold: first, it aims at investigating the relationship between the intentions to be childfree and age, thus contributing to the literature on voluntary childlessness and its determinants in the Italian context; second, it provides insights on the intended age at last child, which allows to understand when couples want to end their reproductive lives and their awareness of age-related limits to childbearing, addressing the time dimension of fertility intentions.

Through the Multipurpose Household Survey on «Family and Social Subjects» conducted by the Italian National Statistical Office (Istat) in 2016, the research questions are addressed. This dataset is widely used to understand childlessness and fertility intentions in Italy (see, e.g. Testa et al., 2011; Tanturri, 2012; Mencarini et al., 2015; Tocchioni, 2018) as it contains information about the structure and characteristics of Italian families, and it includes a section specifically addressing fertility intentions and preferences.

Two are the dependent variables being used: one measures the preferences to have or not to have children in the future, while the other refers to the age by which respondents want to have their last child, which refers to the question «*By what age to you intend to have your*

last child at the latest?». For both, the main predictor is age, available in the survey as age groups. The sample is composed of men and women aged between 18 to 49.

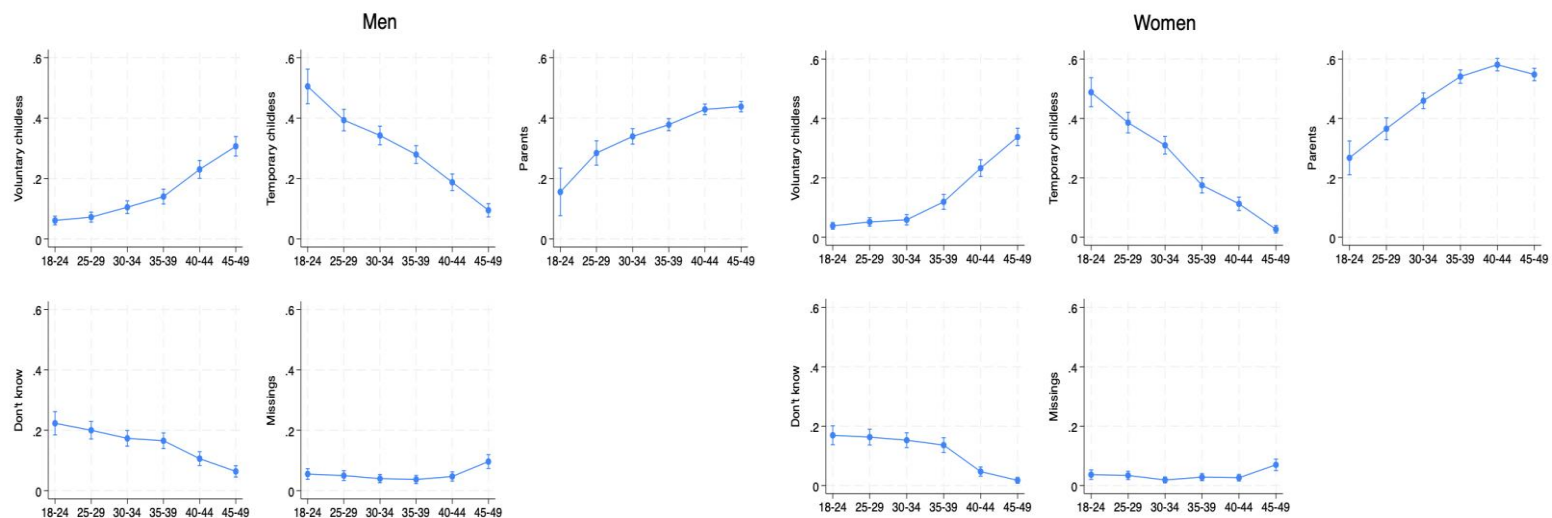
For each dependent variable, separate models are estimated for men and women, because of the different mechanisms that affect childbearing decisions of men and women.

With regard to the relationship between childlessness and age, older individuals, who are currently childless, are expected to be more likely to adjust their fertility intentions downward compared to younger counterparts, meaning that older individuals who still do not have any child are expected to report more often than younger individuals that they do not want children in future. In fact, as predicted by Heckhausen's (1999) Life-Span Theory of control, individuals, throughout their lives, set some goals and use control strategies to meet these goals, or, if realizing them turn out to be impossible, they try to minimize the consequences of the failure of these goals. In the case of the intentions to have a child, individuals who have reached the (biological and social) age limit to conceive, so that it is very unlikely that the goal to have a child will be attained, adopt secondary control strategies, adjusting their fertility intentions downward (Heckhausen, 1999; Liefbroer, 2009).

These expectations are confirmed by the results, as shown in Figure 1 below. In fact, the predicted probability of being voluntary childless increases with age both for men and women, thus confirming that individuals might adopt control strategies to cope with the failure of their goal, i.e. having a child.

Figure 1 - Predicted probabilities of being voluntary childless, temporary childless, parents, or not knowing at each age group by gender, net of controls¹, with 95% CIs; N=5,792 for men; N=5,794 for women.

¹ Controlling for the level of education, employment status, relationship status, citizenship, and macro region of residence.



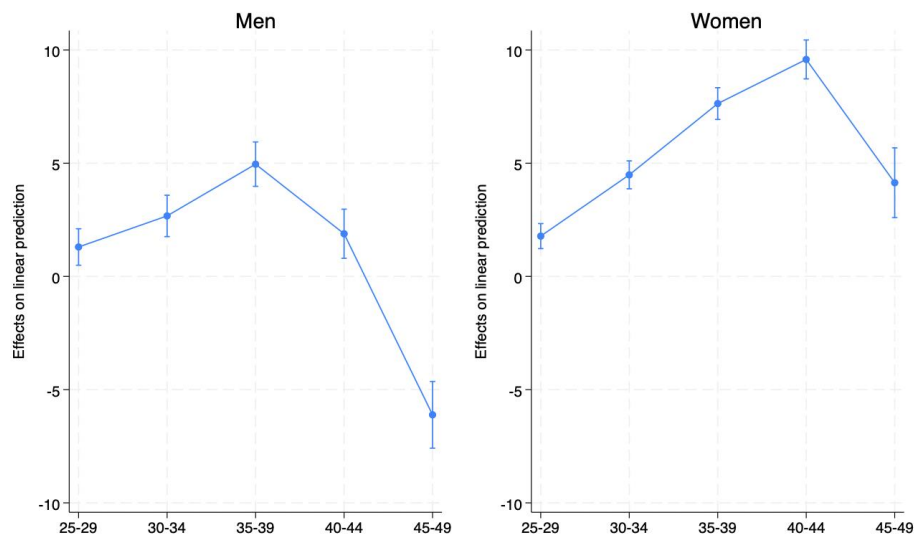
Note: 'Voluntary childless' refers to individuals who are currently childless and report that they do not want children neither in the short- nor in the long-term; 'temporary childless' refers to individuals who are currently childless and report that they to want children either in the short- or the long-term.

With regard to the intended age at last child, it is expected a positive relationship between individuals' age and the age at which they want to have their last child, until they enter into advanced parental age (from 35 years for women and from 40 years for men), when the relationship reverses. The change in the direction of this association is explained by the fact that young individuals are at the beginning of their reproductive life and they are more likely to intend to have their last child later in their lives, while those at the end of their time window to conceive, who are defining their short-term intentions, are more aware of the biological and social age deadlines to childbearing (or they might be already experiencing fecundity issues) and thus at this point, the intended age at last child is expected to decrease (Heckhausen et al., 2001; Philipov, 2011). Moreover, this relationship is expected to be stronger for women than for men, because of the earlier biological and higher normative age constraints that women experience compared to men.

As shown in Figure 2, these expectations are only partially confirmed. In fact, for men, as predicted, there is a positive association between age and the intended age at last child, but this relationship started to decrease at age 40 and it turns negative for the last age group (45-49 years old). This means that men at the end of their reproductive life tend to indicate an ideal age at last child that is younger than their own, thus reporting what they would ideally do if they could go back in time. This also means that people at the end of their reproductive life think that it is ideally better to have children at a younger age, and this could

be related to fecundity issues or to the physical commitment required for childrearing, which becomes more difficult with advancing age. For women, the intended age at last child never turns negative, even though the strength of the association starts to decrease for the last age group (45-49 years old). This could mean that, as highlighted by Heckhausen et al. (2001), women at the end of their reproductive lives are either not affected at all by the faster ticking of their «biological clock» (which is however very unlikely given the age) or they are intensifying their attempts to have a child in the short period, as a response to the approaching biological and social age limits.

Figure 2 – Average marginal effects of age on the intended age at last child by gender, controlling for the other variables², with 95% CIs; N=1,810 for men and N=1,673 for women.



To conclude, age is shown to be an important predictor of both the intentions to be childless and the intended age at last child. These results also highlight that in order to understand the fertility decision-making process, it is necessary to consider fertility intentions as dynamic and that they can and do change at different stages of life. Our results have implications for policy, as they show that men and, especially, women may be unaware of fecundability issues linked to age at birth. At least in the case of Italy, couples appear to be striving to recuperate postponed fertility at later ages.

² Controlling for the level of education, employment status, relationship status, the number of children, citizenship, and macro region of residence.

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