"A Closer Look at Fertility: a qualitative study on Albanian women in Italy"

Describing Topic

Foreign female residents in Italy are, on average, a younger population than the Italian female one and they have contributed to slowing down the decline in births number due to a significant presence at fertile age, a younger average age at childbirth and a fertility rate almost close to replacement level (1.89 children per woman in 2020). The peak in births to both foreign parents occurred in 2012, with almost 80,000 births (15% of the total). However, these numbers declined over subsequent years, dropping to below 60,000 by 2020.
The contribution of children born to both foreign parents to the overall birth rate remains crucial and in 2020 it accounted for about 14% of total births. Given the structure of the foreign population in Italy, it is not surprising that the highest number of foreign children recorded in the national registry is Romanian (14,248 born in 2020), followed by Moroccan (9,991) and Albanian (8,082), that represent also the three most numerous foreign communities in the country.

This study intends to analyse the fertility of Albanian female citizens in Italy and address in particular five research questions:

-What is the contribution of Albanian women to Italian fertility, at sub-national level, and how it has changed over time?
-What are the factors that influence fertility behaviours among Albanian female citizens, and are they comparable to those of native female citizens?
-How has migration influenced the fertility intentions of the interviewees?
- Which hypotheses explaining differential fertility among migrants (socialization, adaptation, selection, disruption) best represent the reproductive behaviours of the Albanian population in Italy?
-What childcare strategies (formal, informal, parental, etc.) are typical among Albanian female citizens in Italy?

This contribution aims to challenge simplified distinctions between reproductive behaviours considered typical of migrant and native populations. The study will also relate observed reproductive behaviours to migrants' history along the integration process within the Italian society. Particular importance in this context will be given to if and how welfare policies encompassing social, economic, and familial aspects, as well as childcare service availability, have impacted Albanian women intentions and reproductive behaviour in Italy.

Theoretical Focus
Extensive research in the field of migrant fertility has been conducted, examining the relationship between migration and family and reproductive dynamics (Landale 1997; Toulemon, Mazuy 2004; Cooke 2008; Milewski 2010).
As noted by several authors (Carling 2005, Hiller, McCaig 2007), women's participation in international migration is shaped by gender roles and norms in their country of origin, leading to different outcomes in the destination country. Furthermore, reproductive behaviour changes drastically depending on the reasons for migration: individuals seeking employment tend to prioritize work over family formation, while those migrating for family reunification are more likely to focus on family care over entering the labor market (Nedoluzhko, Andersson, 2007; Ortensi, 2015). Notably, current data reveals a dominant trend of family reunification permits among Albanian female citizens in Italy (Italian Interior Ministry, 2018), suggesting this as one of the factors explaining particularly high rates.

In an attempt to explain the differential fertility of migrant women, international literature refers to four hypotheses: socialization (Garssen, Nicolaas, 2008), adaptation (Andersson, 2004), selection (González-Ferrer, Hannemann, Castro-Martín 2016), and disruption (Milewski, 2010).
The socialization hypothesis is based on the premise that the fertility behaviour of migrants reflects the dominant one in their childhood environment and that, therefore, migrants show fertility levels similar to the residents in the country of origin. The adaptation hypothesis, on the contrary, suggests that the fertility behaviour of migrants tends over time to resemble the prevalent behaviour in the destination environment. The selection hypothesis argues that migrants are a specific group of people whose preferences are more similar to the population in the destination country than those in the country of origin. Finally, the perturbation hypothesis suggests that immediately after migration, due to the upheavals it entails, migrants show particularly low levels of fertility.
Recent research indicates that migrants are more susceptible to the risk of lacking suitable childcare options (Mussino, Ortensi 2023). This is attributed also to language barriers and administrative complexities (Frazer et al. 2020; Karoly, Gonzales 2011), which result in their comparatively limited reliance on childcare services compared to native individuals. Nevertheless, upon gaining access to these services, migrants demonstrate a preference for formal childcare arrangements over informal ones, with significant variation based on the migrants' country of origin and the nationality

of their co-parent (Mussino, Ortensi 2023).

Moreover, the reduced availability of relatives to assist with childcare drives migrant couples more towards the use of childcare services (Bergamante, Solera 2019; Chinosi 2002). But when grandparents are present, they assume the role of primary caregivers for migrant parents' children, as shown by recent studies (Del Boca et al. 2005; Trappolini et al. 2023).

In the case of Albanians in Italy, the initial waves of such migration primarily consisted of young adults. While subsequent family reunifications, bolstered by regularization programs that began in the 1990s, led to a more stable settlement, and as a result, the demographic composition of the Albanian migrant population rapidly matured, with a more balanced sex ratio and a large share of children either brought from Albania or born in Italy as the second generation (Cela et al. 2022).

Previous studies have shown that in order to overcome a process of stigmatisation and prejudice over time they have developed strategies of social mimetism and tactics of individualized and family-based assimilation ((King & Mai, 2009, Romania, 2004), leading to a process of social atomization of the Albanian population in Italy (Cela et al. 2021). This means that they have not larger networks to rely upon in case of necessity likewise other ethnic communities.

However, the presence of the Zero generation – namely parents of the first generation – have played a crucial role in sustain Albanian families also in relation to their fertility intensions and behaviour (King et al. 2014).

Data and Methods

The study adopts a mixed-methods research approach and has a twofold objective: firstly, quantitative methodology was employed to estimate the age-specific and total fertility rates of Albanian women in Italy, at a provincial level, using the ISTAT births database[1].

Secondly, this study uses qualitative methods to analyse the factors that influence fertility among these citizens.
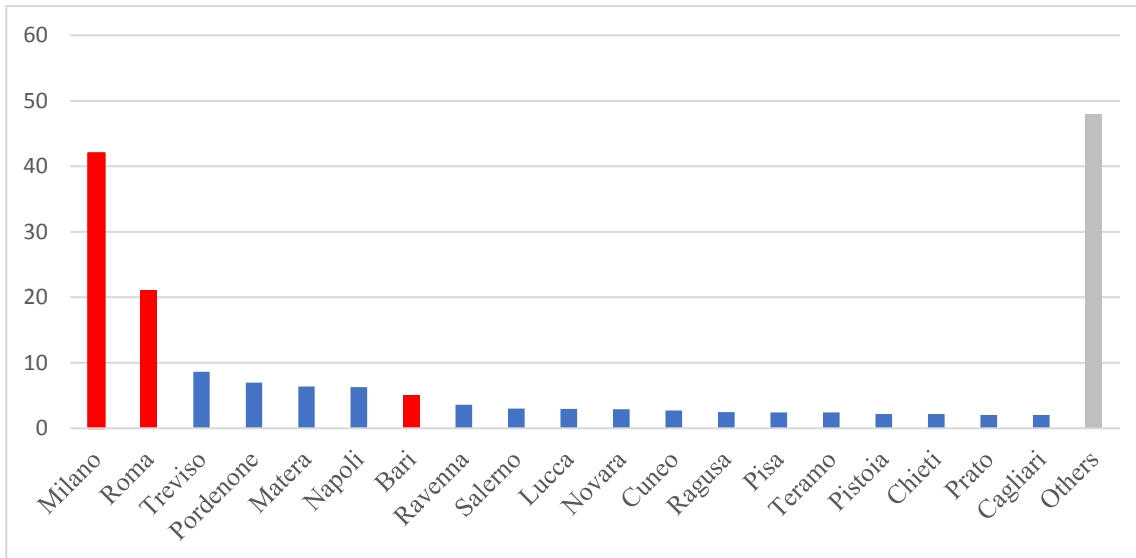
The qualitative analysis is based on a total of 30 in-depth interviews conducted with first-generation Albanian women living in Italy, aged between 18 and 49 years, who are in a relationship at the time of the interview and have at least one child. The research is conducted in the cities of Milan, Rome, and Bari. The first two cities are selected because they host a significant percentage of the total Albanian citizens residing in Italy (42% and 21% respectively). Although Bari has a lower percentage compared to the other two cities (approximately 5%), it offers a unique context for studying how proximity migration might impact fertility choices.

The thematic areas investigated by the interviews are mainly: Background information, Migration background, Relationship and family situation, Housing, economic, employment status, Short- and long-term fertility intentions and behaviour, Economic conditions and fertility intentions, Distribution of household and family assignments and responsibilities, Role of the Great Recession in shaping the family structure, Use of time and how this affects fertility intentions, Overall well-being, Impact of Covid-19 on respondents' lives.

Contacts with interviewees are primarily established through the snowball sampling method. However, to recruit a more diverse sample, contacts were made with the IDOS Research and Study Center and local NGOs.

Fig. 1 Percentage of Albanian citizens accounted in the province out of total Albanian citizens in Italy, 2021

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[1] This research was conducted as part of a curricular internship at ISTAT, carried out in the context of the EMOS (European Master in Official Statistics Workshop) programme, on "Estimating the fertility of the cohorts of women resident in Italy by citizenship in the years 2002-2020", within the framework of the doctorate in the School of Statistical Sciences, Demography curriculum, at La Sapienza University of Rome.

Source: ISTAT, 2021

Note: Provinces with % < 2 were merged into the "Others" category. Provinces in red are those selected by the authors for analysis.

Preliminary and Expected Findings

From the estimated fertility rates of Albanian citizens in Italy, we found that they have a Total Fertility Rates (TFR) of 2.1 children per woman in 2021 (ISTAT): one of the highest TFR among foreign communities in Italy, following Moroccans. Additionally, they showed a higher average number of children per woman compared to Albanian women who remained in their home country (1.4 in 2021, ISTAT).

In Figure 2, we have represented the TFRs of Albanian women at the provincial level. A certain homogeneity in fertility rates between the different Italian provinces is visible. Indeed, the descriptive results indicate fertility levels close to replacement in the northern, central and southern regions. Exceptions are some provinces reporting significantly higher rates[2], in particular those of: Cagliari, Agrigento, Gorizia, Aosta and Sondrio, and others, particularly in southern Italy and the Islands, showing remarkably low rates.

The fertility rate among Albanian female citizens in the three selected cities of Milan, Rome and Bari is approximately 2 children per woman (1.9 in Milan and Rome, 2 in Bari), exceeding both the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of native female citizens and that of foreign female citizens in the respective cities (Table 1).

Analyzing data discrepancies in Total Fertility Rates (TFR) between Albanian women in Italy and native women hints at the socialization hypothesis as a primary explanation. When comparing national-level data, the TFR for Albanians in Italy even exceeds those in Albania, making the selection hypothesis also worth considering. By further examining the intersection between the migration history and fertility of respondents, the disruption hypothesis will also be explored.

As anticipated, no variables identified in the literature as determinants of fertility are available at the provincial level and by citizenship, therefore, in-depth interviews have been used to investigate the drivers that conduct these results. Given that the Albanian community in Italy showcases unique traits, including variations in employment rates, median income, use of formal and informal childcare, and differential fertility rates compared to natives, it's likely that they also have distinct determinants influencing their fertility behaviours. Consequently, our study aims to probe the varying extents to which different factors impact their fertility within the Italian context.
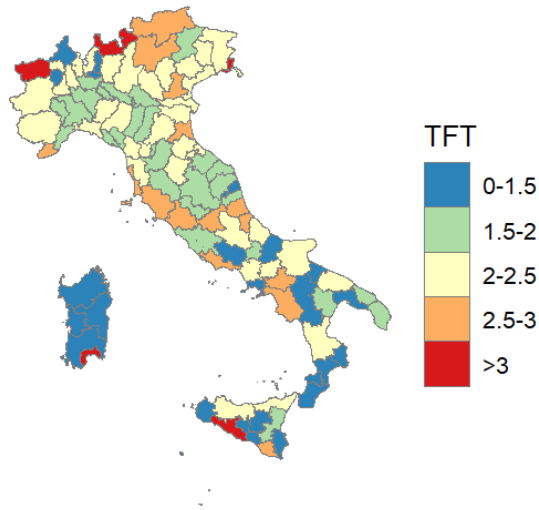
Tab. 1 TFR of Albanian, foreign and native citizens in the Italian cities of Milan, Rome and Bari, 2021

City	TFR Albanians	TFR foreigners	TFR Italian
Milan	1.91	1.64	1.24
Rome	1.93	1.43	1.18
Bari	2.04	1.90	1.22

Source: Own elaboration of ISTAT data, 2021

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[2] For the above-mentioned provinces with very high fertility peaks in 2021, these are subject to considerable variability over time due to the small size of the Albanian population.

Fig. 2 Total fertility rate, at provincial level, for the Albanian population in Italy, 2021

Source: Own elaboration of ISTAT data, 2021

References

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