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W O R K I N G P A P E R 2 0 0 9 / 1 1

Things Change:
Women's and Men's Marital
Disruption Dynamics in Italy
during a Time of Social
Transformation, 1970-2003

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ABSTRACT

Separations and divorces are on the rise in Italy. Are there trendsetters, i.e., forerunners of the new trend? Who are they? By applying an event-history analysis to the 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey (“Families and Social Subjects”: the Italian variant of the Generations and Gender Survey), we found that the spread of a more flexible typology of unions started among women belonging to the middle-high social hierarchy. Moreover, a remarkable composition effect emerges: in the 1990s, women's educational shift (towards higher school completion levels) significantly contributed to the spread of the phenomenon. Beside, our findings evidence that a convergence process in the level of dissolution risk among various social strata is underway: namely, in recent decades, also women belonging to the lower social strata seem to be able to dissolve their unhappy unions. On the other hand, the trend in men's marital disruption risk appears as a change over time common to all educational groups.

Keywords: marital disruption, determinants, gender differences, educational differences, Italy, event-history analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In terms of family dynamics, Italy is customarily viewed as a traditional Catholic country, which is in part true, but even here things are now beginning to change. Probably the clearest example of this change is represented by the recent increase in marital disruption. Between 1995 and 2005, divorce increased both in absolute (+75%) and in relative terms: from 80 to 151 divorces per 1000 marriages celebrated in the same year (ISTAT 2008), a trend that will likely gain momentum in the future (Castiglione and Dalla Zuanna 2008). Despite this development, the study of the causes and consequences of union dissolution in Italy has been relatively neglected until recently (Livi Bacci and Mencarini 2009). The analysis of the correlates of marital disruption is nevertheless essential to better understand this new phase of Italian family dynamics (e.g., Vignoli and Ferro 2009).

In this context, our paper contributes to knowledge on the determinants of marital disruption in Italy by investigating the possible existence of trendsetters mainly responsible for the country's recent increase of the phenomenon. Has this evolution been driven by some population subgroups, e.g., those with higher social status? Does it appear as a result of compositional changes? Or, conversely, is the dramatic growth in marital disruption also due to a general increase of the phenomenon among all educational groups, in some to a larger extent, in others to a smaller extent? In other words, is there an increase over time in marriage dissolution within social groups as well?

Moreover, this research aims at developing the current debate by shifting the focus from women-only to a gender-specific comparison. This is particularly crucial because, since the 1970s, the change in women's and men's social roles has been intimately different in the Italian context: while women have faced a remarkable increase in higher educational enrolment and, to a lesser extent, in labour market participation, men's socio-economic position has remained quite stable. In short, we analysed the correlates of marital disruption both for women and for men, although, unfortunately, as Section 4 explains, we were unable to do this for couples.

The article consists of six sections, including this introduction. Section 2 introduces the theoretical framework of the study. Section 3 explores the peculiarities of the Italian context and justifies our research hypotheses. Section 4 presents the data, the method, and the

variables chosen to scrutinize marital disruption risk. The results are presented in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 summarises and discusses the findings.

2. THE PROCESS OF MARITAL DISRUPTION: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The intense transformations of family structures and reproductive choices that permeated Western countries in the past forty years have come to be known as the “Second Demographic Transition”. This includes, among other things, the de-institutionalisation of marriage and the spread of consensual unions, the diffusion of modern contraceptive methods, the onset first and later the persistence of very low fertility levels, and an increasing individualisation of attitudes and behaviours (van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe 1992; Sobotka 2008). One of the most visible changes in the family life in Western countries is represented by the increase in divorces. Although generalized, however, this increase has been uneven: more in some countries than in others and, within countries, more in some social groups than in others.

In general terms, a new behaviour in the population does not appear all of a sudden; rather, it emerges in certain social spheres (the so-called trendsetters, or prior adopters), and later, if “appealing”, it spreads to others (Rogers 1962; Mahajan and Peterson 1985). The speed of the diffusion process varies: slow at first, it gains momentum and then slows down again when it reaches its maximum and stabilizes. This evolution has sometimes been described as having an “S” shape (Todesco 2008). It is precisely the experience of the trendsetters that makes family dissolution socially and economically sustainable: indeed, as social acceptability increases, other types of costs (e.g., legal expenses) diminish, which, in turn, contributes to the spread of the phenomenon. Mass media, too, play an important role, as they inform new adopters about the experiences of prior adopters. New adopters can therefore infer that marriage is destined to last not “until *death*”, but, rather, “until *life* do us part”.

The work of William J. Goode (1962, 1970, 1993) has been for decades since its first formulation the most influential reference for those studying the link between marital breakdown and societal factors. He argued that, at least initially, only the most “modern” couples would have the cultural and economic means to afford a divorce. As the social

acceptability of divorce increases, the relationship between social status and divorce tends to become less significant and may even reverse its sign, so that, at the end of the process, marriage dissolution could even be more common at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

But it is especially the changing role of women that has an impact on this process: women with higher education also tend to be characterized by more "modern" attitudes, which attach less importance to the institution of marriage. Moreover, women with higher educational attainment, good prospects in the labour market, and who are therefore economically independent, are the best placed to put an end to unhappy unions (Becker 1981). In this vein, Blossfeld et al. (1995: 202) argue that women with high educational levels have a higher risk of marriage dissolution than women with lower education in those countries where divorce is still rare because "in such societies marital disruption represents a more severe violation of an established social norm". Afterward, with the rise of union breakdowns, "divorce customs become more permissive for all women and the 'liberating' impact of a woman's high educational attainment on marital disruption will decline or even disappear".

Other social scientists offer different predictions, however. Education may improve resources, such as social, cultural, economic, and cognitive skills, that together lead to a more stable relationship, either by successful partner matching or by enhancing communication skills and other channels that make a relationship function well (e.g., Amato 1996). Moreover, it can also be envisioned that people in the lower social strata have more marital strain because of greater socio-economic hardship (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006).

In short, two arguments may be developed from the literature with regard to the role of education in the spread of union dissolution. On the one side, marital breakdown may be viewed as a fashion that begins at the top of the social hierarchy. On the other, it may be suggested that divorce starts from the lowest social strata. In general, therefore, the connection between women's education and family instability is likely to be different in various societies. A positive relationship between educational attainment and divorce risk is found, for example, for the United States by Ono (1998) and for the Netherlands by Poortman and Kalmijn (2002). However, most of the research on this topic suggests a negative association for the Nordic countries (Kravdal and Noack 1989; Hoem 1997; Jalovaara 2001, 2003; Lyngstad 2004). Overall, elaborating on William J. Goode's line of reasoning, Härkönen and Dronkers (2006) found marked cross-national differences in the social structure of divorce, depending on the social, legal, and economic environment of family life.

3. THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

3.1. MARITAL DISRUPTION: NORMATIVE REGULATIONS AND TRENDS

In Italy, it is not easy to obtain a divorce, which has been legally permissible since 1970 (Law n. 898) but only after a long period of physical and legal separation between the spouses (five years, initially; three years since 1987). This is why studies on marriage dissolution in Italy normally focus on separations and not divorces (e.g., De Rose 1992; Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2008; Vignoli and Ferro 2009). True, only about 60% of separations end in a divorce, but the rest of the couples do not (normally) get together again; they simply want to spare the cost and administrative burden of a new legal formality, which is strictly necessary only if one of the partners wants to marry again.

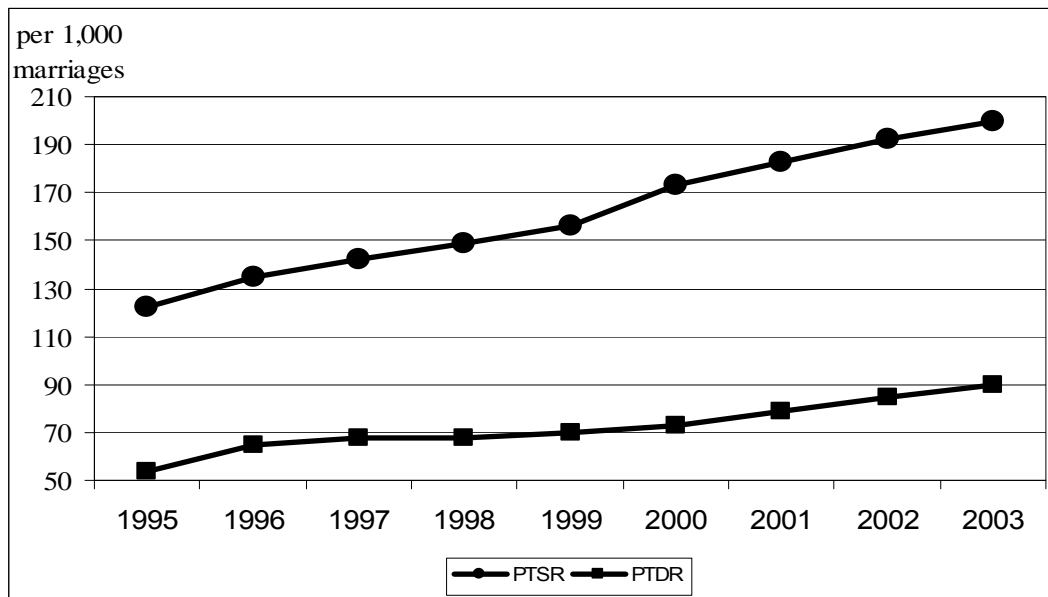
Despite these rigid normative regulations, marriage breakdown in Italy has been on the rise in the past decade. Consider, for instance, the period total (legal) separation rate (PTSR) and the period total divorce rate (PTDR) with respect to 1000 marriages for the period 1995–2003 (Figure 1).¹ Both PTSR and PTDR highlight the rise in Italian marital dissolution: between 1995 and 2003, they increased, respectively, from 122 to 200 and from 54 to 90, per 1000 marriages.

Let us now move to a longitudinal approach to describe the trend of marriage breakdown, with the help of life tables by marriage cohort, up to the cohort of 2003, net of mortality and migration. Figure 2 shows the “survival” of marriages of the cohorts 1979-80, 1983-84, 1988-89, 1993-94, and 1998-99. It is evident that in recent decades the duration of marriages markedly declined. At duration 5, for instance, only 2% of the marriages celebrated in 1979-80 were already dissolved, against 4% of those celebrated about 20 years later, in 1998-99.

This brief descriptive overview of marriage dissolution in Italy highlights an increasingly marked process, calling for a search of the leading factors which we believe to be related to changes in Italian society over recent decades.

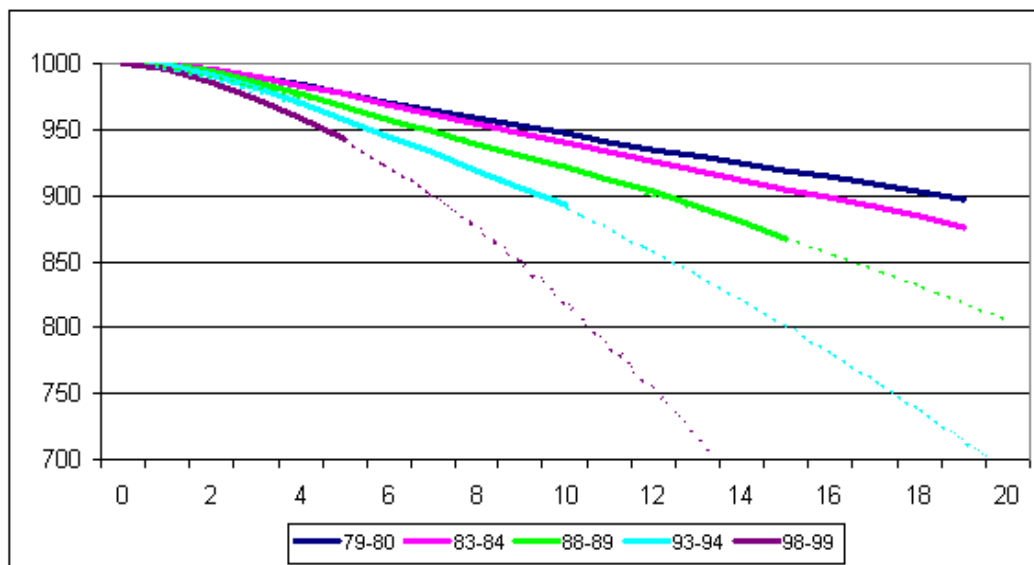
¹ PTSR and PTDR are obtained as a sum of age-specific separation rates and age-specific divorce rates, respectively. Through a simplified approach (Ferro and Salvini 2007), the age-specific separation and divorce rates are calculated as a ratio of the number of separations and divorces in a year, t , according to the duration, d , and the number of marriages d years before, which must be obtained as an average. For instance, the age-specific separation rate for the year 1982 at the duration 1 (d_1) is calculated with respect to the number of marriages (M) celebrated 1 year before; that is $s^{82,d_1} = S_{82}^{d_1} / [M_{80} + M_{81}] \cdot 0,5$. In other illustrations, a different way to compute age-specific separation rates is employed on the Italian data (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2008; ISTAT 2008) – the outcomes, however, are quite similar.

Figure 1. Trend in period total (legal) separation rate (PTSR) and period total divorce rate (PTDR), per 1000 marriages, in Italy, 1971–2005.



Source: Vignoli & Ferro (2009). Elaboration on ISTAT data, various years.

Figure 2. Duration-specific marriage survivors in Italian (legal) separation life tables, by marriage cohorts.



Source: Salvini & Ferro (2008). Elaboration on ISTAT data, various years.

Note: All marriage cohorts are observed up to 2003. The subsequent development is obtained by a simple graphical extrapolation.

3.2. DELAYED, BUT FAST, SOCIETAL CHANGE IN ITALY

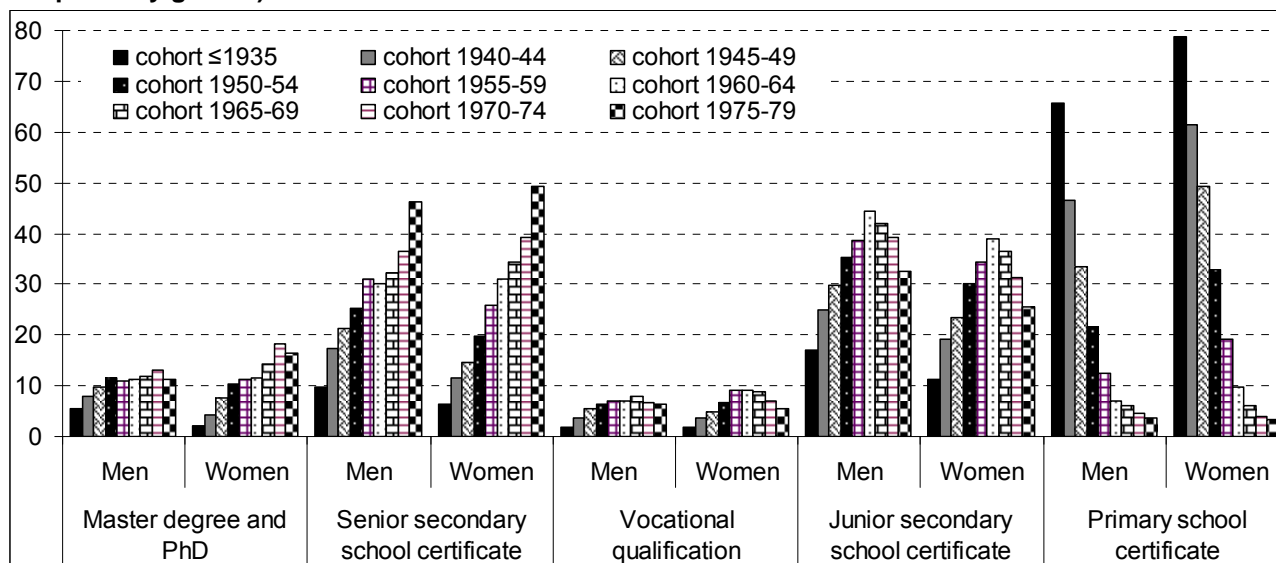
After the mid-20th century, modernization, industrialization and urbanization spread at different paces throughout Europe (Frejka 2008). This led to the expansion of the service

sector and created a renewed social stratification. More and more often, people had to be adequately educated to do their job properly: among other things, this led to the expansion of the education system, which attracted an ever increasing proportion of the young.

Not surprisingly, the timing of these processes varied greatly from country to country. Italy, in particular, experienced a series of important changes in the legislation in a very limited time-span, mainly due to the political awakening of the young in the 1960s and the strength of the feminist movement in the 1970s (Livi Bacci 2001). For instance, advertising contraceptives was legally permitted in 1969; divorce was introduced in 1970; abortion was legalized in 1977, and so on. All these societal transformations took place under the relatively preoccupied eyes of the Vatican and under governments of Catholic inspiration (De Rose et al. 2008). Women's employment, too, increased rapidly, compared to that of other European countries, although in Italy it is still low by European standards and Lisbon's EU targets. According to Eurostat data, in 1993, women's employment rate for the age group 15–64 was 35.8%, compared to an EU-15 value of 49.2%. The rate for women in Italy rose to 42.7% in 2003, but its relative position had not changed much (the EU-15 FLFP rate in the 15-64 age group had climbed to 55.5%). In parallel, men's labour market status remained quite stable: employment rate for men in the decade 1993–2003 oscillated around 68-69%. All these phenomena went together with a dramatic contraction of fertility levels, often linked to the changing status of women in Italian society (Salvini 2004; Matysiak and Vignoli 2009).

The change in women's societal role is especially illustrated by developments in their educational attainment. Today, women holding a university degree are relatively more numerous than men among persons aged 25–44. Between the academic years 1970/71 and 2005/06, the percentage of women obtaining a vocational or senior secondary school qualification – the Italian *diploma* – tripled, and today about 80% of 19-year-old women hold a diploma (ISTAT 2007). Figure 3 shows an indisputable increase in the proportion of persons aged 25 or above with a lower-secondary and upper-secondary qualification ranging from from the old to the young. It is also evident that, over time, women's level of schooling has overtaken men's educational attainment, which has remained much more stable in recent decades. Overall, the trend towards an increasing diffusion of tertiary education is easily foreseeable for the coming years (Mencarini and Vignoli 2009).

Figure 3. Population aged 25 and over, by educational level, age, and gender, 2004 (percentages computed by gender).



Source: Authors' elaboration on ISTAT data, Labour Force Survey.

3.3. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Past trends suggest a link between rising marital disruption and the increased level of education of Italian women. De Sandre (1980) was the first to show the increase in marital instability among women of high socio-economic status in the first half of the 1970s, a finding later confirmed by Corsini and Ventisette (1988) still on aggregate data, and by De Rose (1992) on micro data. Incidentally, De Rose concluded that the modest diffusion of family dissolution in Italy was to be ascribed, at least in part, to the relative backward situation of Italian women, who, with low levels of education and scarce and lower-qualified occupational activities, were basically confined to the roles of wives and mothers.

The psychological and sociological research explains why marital instability was originally higher among women of higher social status in Italy (Barbagli 1990; Barbagli and Saraceno 1998; Francescato 2002): in these social strata, the traditional image of the family was weakening, and the psychological, moral, social, and economic constraints that prevented the dissolution of an unhappy marriage were frailer than in other social groups.

In addition, the very few micro-level studies available in Italy all point to a positive gradient between marital instability and the level of education (De Rose 1992; De Rose and Rosina 1999; Arosio 2006; Vignoli and Ferro 2009). Interestingly, the effect of education on the risks of dissolution appears much weaker for men (De Rose and Di Cesare 2003).

This line of reasoning is also supported by the mechanism behind the spread of other modern family models in Italy, among which is cohabitation. In this respect, Rosina and Fraboni (2004) view the diffusion of informal unions in the Italian context as a fashion which develops from the high to the low population social strata.

On the basis of the theoretical premises of section 2 of this article and the context review outlined in this section, we formulate a set of hypotheses.

The increasing rate of marital disruption observed in Italy over recent decades might be partly explained by the growing number of persons joining higher socio-economic population strata. In other words, the increasing rate of family dissolution observed over time should appear less pronounced after we take into account personal educational attainment (a *compositional change* hypothesis).

We anticipate that, in the Italian context, the trendsetters of the spread of marital instability may be identified among the population with higher social status. In other words, we expect that the marked pace of increase in marriage disruption started first among well-educated persons and was then followed by other segments of population (a *trendsetters'* hypothesis).

We believe that the mechanisms behind the *compositional change* and *trendsetters'* hypotheses operate differently by gender. Women's changing status in the society – represented here by women's educational status – is markedly reflected in our first two hypotheses. On the contrary, we expect a much higher probability to reject the *compositional change* and *trendsetters'* hypotheses as regards the male population. This is because men's role in Italian society remained quite stable over the past decade and so did not influence very much the marital disruption pattern (*gender differences* hypothesis).

4. EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

4.1. DATA

Our data come from the Household Multipurpose Survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS), the Italian variant of the Generations and Gender Survey. This retrospective survey was conducted by the Italian National Statistical Office (ISTAT) in November 2003 on a sample of about 24,000 households and 49,451 individuals of all ages.

We focussed on the dissolution of the first marriage. We extended the concept of legal separation (see section 3) to include *de facto* separations: that is, separations not yet accompanied by a legal provision (De Rose 1992). We included *de facto* separation in the analysis because this act corresponds to the moment that marks the dissolution of marriage for all three possible categories of separated people, i.e., *de facto* separated, judicially separated and divorced.²

The study of union dissolution from a gender perspective should preferably focus on couples, but in our study we had to focus on women and men separately because cross information was generally not available (we know nothing of ex-partners, who were not interviewed). Therefore, what we could investigate were similarities or differences between women's and men's separation patterns over time. In total, we compiled data on 7,594 women and 9,635 men, of which 592 and 606, respectively, experienced (at least) a *de facto* separation.

4.2. METHOD AND VARIABLES

We adopted a life-course perspective, with our goal to model the risk of separation, applying hazard regression. We followed each woman and man from marriage until *de facto* separation or the date of the interview, whichever came first. The time-unit was the month. For the specification of baseline risk, we chose a piecewise constant function. The risks were assumed to be constant within each defined time period, but they might vary across such periods.

In order to test the research hypotheses put forward in the previous section, we considered women's and men's educational level as well as calendar time. Using information referring to the highest *educational level* ever reached, we clustered educational attainments in two main groups: low education (up to junior secondary school certificate), medium-high education (high-school qualification or higher). There could be objections on the basis that it would have been more convenient to use education as a time-varying covariate (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006a, 2006b). Nevertheless, in Italy it is relatively trouble-free to use the highest

² In many cases, however, the date of this event was missing, and we had to impute it, so as not to 'lose' these individuals. We based our imputation procedure on the distribution of lags (between *de facto* separation, legal separation and divorce) observed on women with complete information, separately by age and marital status. We later ran our event-history model both with and without imputed data: the estimated coefficients changed only marginally, but obviously proved more robust with the imputed data.

educational level, since most respondents have completed their studies by the time of marriage formation (Ongaro 2002).

Moreover, the *calendar period* was introduced in our model in order to capture the temporal change in the process of interest and to address the possible existence of trendsetters, i.e., well-educated people. We believe that the calendar period covariate may also help to capture the influence of changes in the Italian normative environment on marital dissolution intensity. Five time periods were considered in the model: before 1980, 1981–1985, 1986–1990, 1991–1995, and after 1996.

In addition to women's and men's education and calendar time, we also introduced several fixed- and time-varying covariates in order to control for possible additional confounding effects.

We considered women's and men's *birth cohorts* (1938–54, 1955–64, and 1965–83) to account for the increasing acceptance of new ways of living as couples related to increased individual autonomy in the ethical, political, and religious spheres across the generations (Lesthaeghe 1992). We expected, in fact, the youngest cohorts to present higher dissolution levels.

The *area of residence* was also included in the model to control for the well-known North–South differences in the Italian marital dissolution pattern (Ferro and Salvini 2007). Unfortunately, this information was collected at the time of the interview, which introduced the risk of performing a so-called “anticipatory analysis” (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006a, 2006b). However, Italian internal mobility has been low in recent decades and mainly confined to short-distance movements (Tomassini et al. 2003). We therefore decided to include a covariate describing the macro-region of residence: North, Centre, and South and Islands.

We also considered *parental marriage dissolution* (as a dichotomous variable). The literature provides several arguments for the positive relationship between parents' divorces and those of their offspring (for an overview, see Amato 1996 and Engelhardt et al. 2002). This may be an effect of the transmission of behaviour or, alternatively, a tendency by women and men to behave in ways considered “acceptable” by their parents (e.g., Cherlin et al. 1995; Kiernan and Cherlin 1999). This hypothesis is especially convincing in the Italian context because of a possible vertical diffusion of family patterns (e.g., Dalla Zuanna and Micheli 2004).

We then took into account the role of *children* on the risk of marital disruption. The presence of children seems to consolidate the union (White 1990; De Rose 1992; Hoem and Hoem 1992; Coppola and Di Cesare 2008). Becker et al. (1977), for instance, observe that children are marital-specific capital and, consequently, they should reduce the risk of divorce. Not only the number but also the age of the children represents an essential predictor of dissolution risk, because people may be reluctant to separate when they have a young child (e.g., Andersson 1997). We therefore distinguished between childless, parity 1 with child aged 0–6 years, parity 1 with child aged 7 years or more, parity 2 or higher with youngest child aged 0–6 years, and parity 2 or higher with youngest child aged 7 years or more.

Finally, we controlled for women’s and men’s employment status, without attempting to detect causal relationship. Here we anticipated a different effect between women and men. A woman’s employment, as a proxy of her economic independence, may possibly help her to afford the costs of a separation. A previous study for Italy revealed that, for employed women, the risk of union dissolution is higher than for non-working women, while the same condition for men ranges from no effect to a negative one (De Rose and Di Cesare 2003). In this work, we distinguished between “working” and “not working” (time-varying covariate).

5. TEMPORAL CHANGE IN SEPARATION RISKS BY GENDER

The results of our models, estimated separately for women and men, are presented in Table 1, apart from the calendar time that will be presented later. The correlates to separation risk are all in line with our expectations (see Section 4). First, a quite analogous pattern by gender emerges with regards to the effect of cohort and family background. There is an increased separation risk for the youngest cohorts, while those whose parents experienced a marital dissolution are most likely to separate themselves. Moreover, the presence of children reduces separation risk, at least while the babies are relatively young. As the children grow older, however, marriage stability does not vary much. Looking at the area of residence, the well-known North-South differential emerges clearly from our estimates.

The main difference between the factors affecting separation risk of men and women concerns the role of the socio-economic factors. Other things equal, women’s risk of separation is significantly higher for the employed and the well-educated. Women’s degree of economic autonomy is confirmed to be a factor which plays a pivotal role in the effective

chances to handle a separation. Conversely, men’s socio-economic situation does not seem to have any relevant impact on the risk of marital disruption.

Table 1: Factors affecting separation risk in Italy by gender. Outcomes from an event-history model estimated separately for women and men.

Variable	Categories	Women			Men		
		RR	St. Err.	pvalue	RR	St. Err.	pvalue
Birth cohort	1938-54 (ref.)	1			1		
	1955-64	1.70	0.184	0.000	1.41	0.171	0.005
	1965-83	2.08	0.328	0.000	1.58	0.283	0.011
Area of residence	North (ref.)	1			1		
	Centre	0.82	0.080	0.045	0.99	0.109	0.892
	South and Islands	0.60	0.054	0.000	0.68	0.069	0.000
Parental divorce	No (ref.)	1			1		
	Yes	1.89	0.321	0.000	1.91	0.429	0.004
Number and age of children	Childless (ref.)	1			1		
	1 (aged 0-6)	0.63	0.075	0.000	0.51	0.071	0.000
	1 (aged 7+)	0.85	0.123	0.260	0.69	0.108	0.016
	2 (youngest aged 0-6)	0.44	0.062	0.000	0.39	0.059	0.000
	2 (youngest aged 7+)	0.58	0.086	0.000	0.32	0.054	0.000
Employment status	Employed (ref.)	1			1		
	Not employed	1.44	0.120	0.000	0.92	0.143	0.592
Educational level	Low (ref.)	1			1		
	Medium-high	1.58	0.124	0.000	1.17	0.102	0.067
Years elapsed since marriage (baseline duration)	0-1 (ref.)	1			1		
	2-3	1.26	0.198	0.142	1.28	0.237	0.188
	4-5	1.53	0.251	0.009	1.43	0.280	0.068
	6-7	1.45	0.255	0.035	1.80	0.354	0.003
	8-10	1.66	0.303	0.005	1.67	0.354	0.016
	11-14	1.24	0.225	0.225	1.47	0.296	0.055
	15+	0.62	0.161	0.066	0.81	0.230	0.450

Source: Authors’ elaboration on FSS 2003 data. Note: Values standardised for calendar time. “Number and age of children” and “employment status” are time-varying covariates.

In order to make an in-depth analysis of the temporal change in marital dissolution pattern by gender, we present the calendar time separation risks according to a stepwise specification of the full model presented in Table 1. Specifically, several event-history models have been estimated, starting from the pure calendar time trend in separation risks, and then controlling that trend by adding our considered covariates one by one.

The increase in separation rates observed in Italy over recent decades is perfectly reflected in Figure 4a-b both for women and men. As expected, the increase is less pronounced after we control for quite a few selected covariates, all of them significantly correlated with separation risk: birth cohort, area of residence, parental divorce, number and age of children, and employment status. Among these, women and men's demographic characteristics appear to play the crucial role. The birth cohort seems to be the most effective covariate able to explain the increase in separation risks of women and men. This represents perhaps the clearest manifestation of the spread of new ideas and values regarding the family that have evidently changed the attitudes of the Italian younger generation towards a most flexible path of conjugal life. Beside these, the age and number of children also play a crucial role.

As regards our *compositional change* hypothesis, the introduction of education controls our model for socio-economic structural effect. We find that introducing people's educational level in the model, other things being equal, depresses the increasing trend in separation risk (see Figure 4a-b: Model 7). This means that the observed change in separation rates results also from an increase in the number of people joining higher social population strata, other things being equal. The *compositional change* hypothesis is therefore verified.

However, even after accounting for this socio-economic compositional change as well as the set of demographic and familial covariates, part of the temporal change in women's and men's separation risk remains substantial.

Our findings show that a quite effective women's educational composition effect was in play during the 1990s. This effect appears stronger for women than for men. Our *gender differences* hypothesis has thus some initial empirical support. Men's socio-economic role, which has remained much more stable over recent decades, does not explain an important part in the increase in separation risk.

An interaction model was fitted between the calendar period and educational attainment, in order to disentangle the process of increasing marital instability according to educational level. As a whole, the results reveal a general increase in separation intensity over time at each educational level and for both sexes (Figure 5a-b).

At the beginning of the 1970s, the introduction of the divorce law in Italy gave strong impulse to the separation risks of highly educated people, especially women. This is probably explained by the fact that at that time education represented the most valid proxy of one's

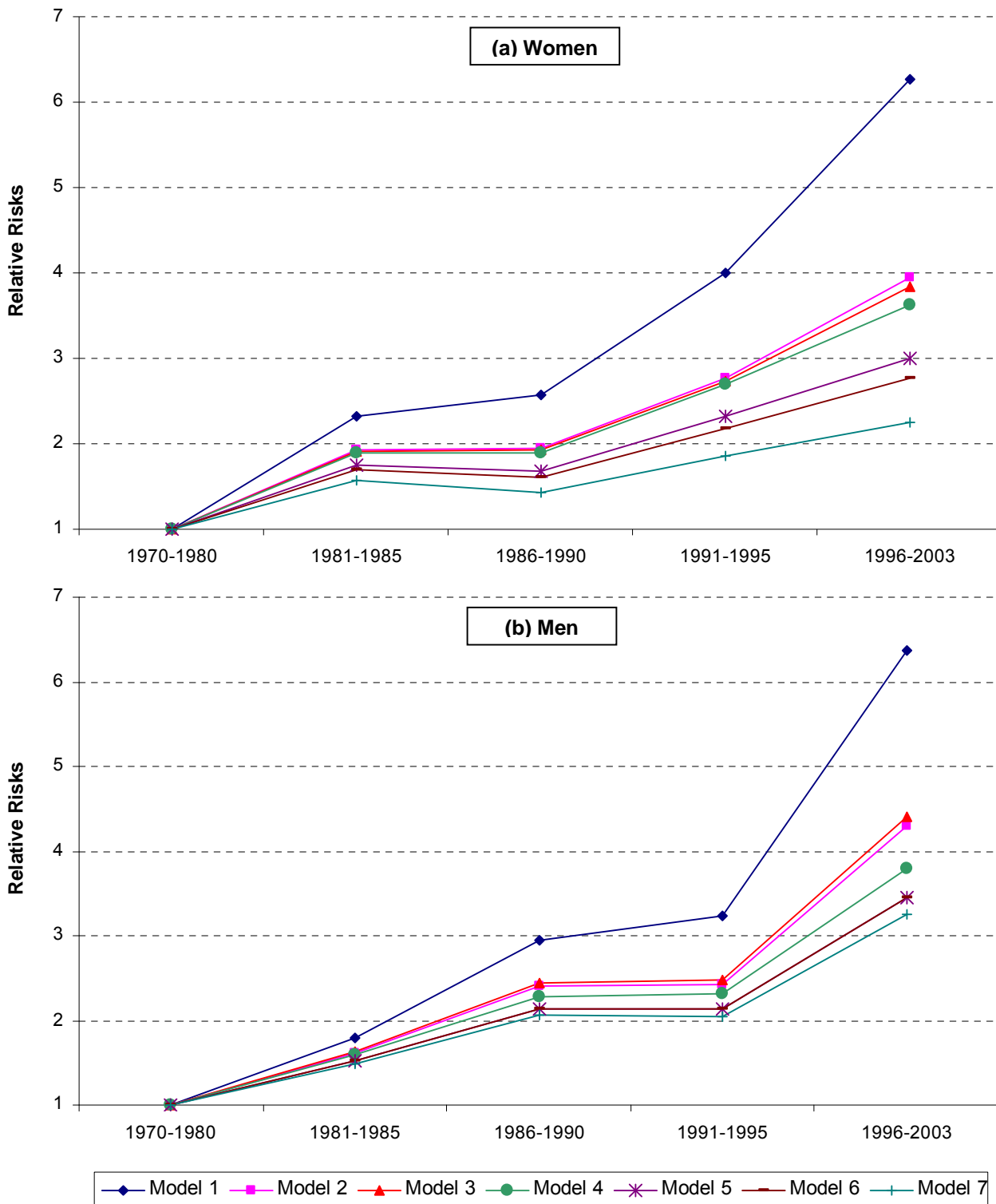
social class. Later on, those with lower education also evidenced levels of marriage disruption risks approaching those of their highly educated counterparts. The *trendsetters'* hypothesis receives here an initial validation from our analysis.

Afterwards, the pace of increase is particularly gender-specific. Women's strong increase in separation risk between 1991 and 2003 appears to be driven by women with medium-high educational standards in the period 1991–1995. Subsequently, however, the correlation (education–risk of separation) weakens. At the same time, a clear catch-up effect of low-educated women is in play. In short, we may therefore envision that, among women, the diffusion of the new behaviour began at the top of the social hierarchy, thereby corroborating the *trendsetters'* hypothesis.

Looking at the whole temporal increase for the female population (Figure 4a), the general pattern that emerges is far from the typical “S” shape predicted by the literature on the diffusion of marital instability (e.g., Todesco 2008). Disentangling the period change between population social strata (Figure 5a), a different story emerges. What we observe is, rather, the weighted sum of two different stages of the process: well-educated women have, in fact, already almost completed the “S” pattern, while their low-educated counterparts have just begun the process. The latter group, more numerous among the whole population, influences more the general pattern. The good news is that in recent decades women belonging to the lower social strata seem to be able to dissolve their unhappy unions.

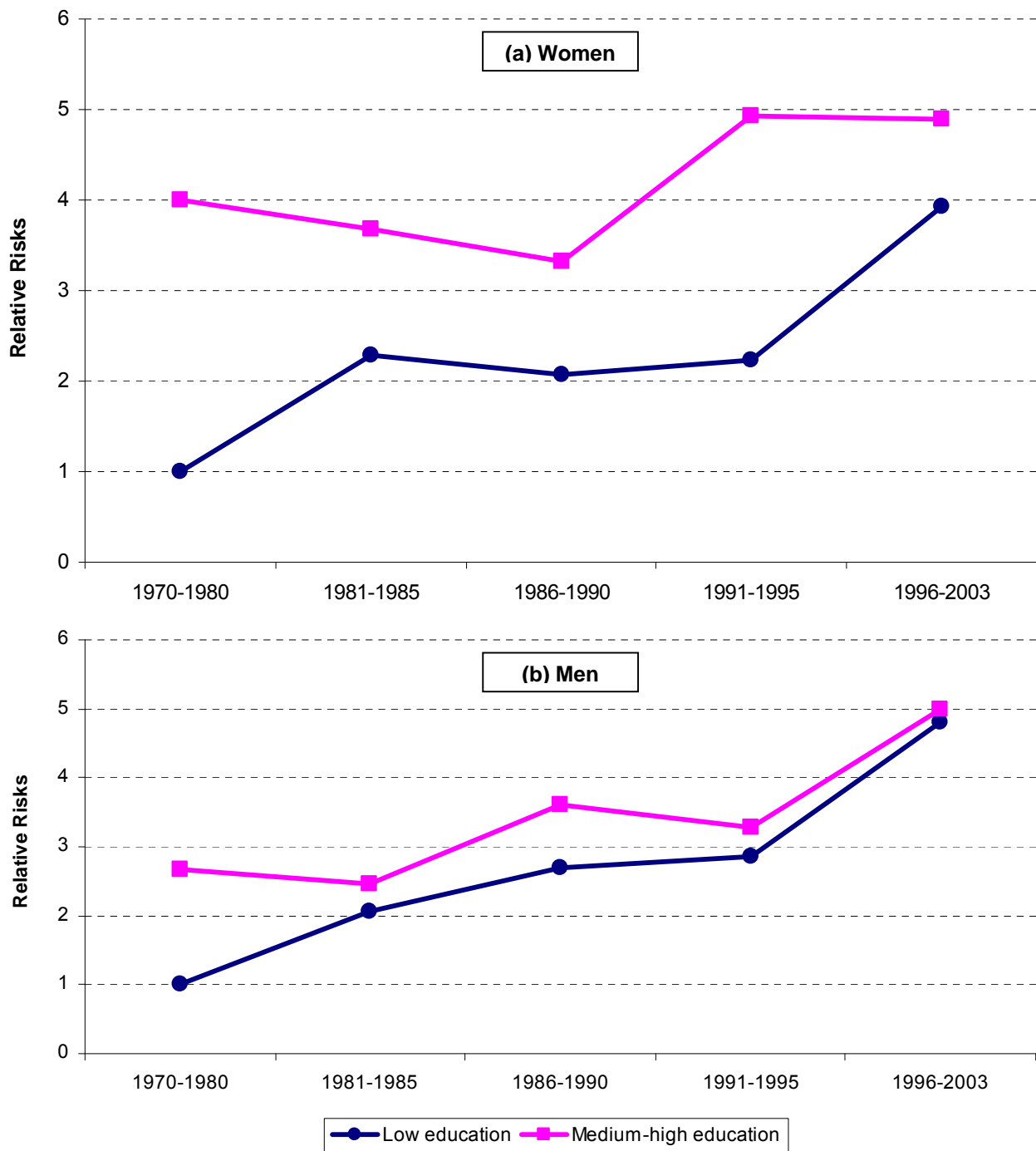
As for the male population, our outcomes highlight the observation that men's social strata appear quite similar with respect to marital disruption diffusion (Figure 5b), except perhaps in the early 1990s. Interestingly, at the time of the most relevant general increase (1995–2003), a very similar pattern between medium-high and low-educated men emerges. It can be therefore be ventured that the spread of men's marital disruption functions as an overall change over time and does not appear linked to a socio-economic compositional effect – verifying the *gender differences* hypothesis.

Figure 4. Trends in separation risk in Italy by gender, 1970–2003. Results from 7 event-history models specified as follows – **Model 1:** calendar time; **Model 2:** Model 1 + birth cohort; **Model 3:** Model 2 + area of residence; **Model 4:** Model 3 + parental divorce; **Model 5:** Model 4+ children; **Model 6:** Model 5 + employment status; **Model 7:** Model 6 + educational level.



Source: Authors' elaboration on FSS 2003 data.

Figure 5. Trends in separation risk in Italy by women's and men's educational level, 1970–2003.



Source: Authors' elaboration on FSS 2003 data.

Note: The interaction is standardized for birth cohort, area of residence, parental divorce, number and age of youngest child, and employment status.

6. DISCUSSION

The principal aim of this paper has been to contribute to the general study of the patterns of union breakdown by adding the case of Italy, which has so far received very limited attention. We looked at the temporal change in the Italian marriage separation risks, applying hazard regressions to the Italian variant of the Gender and Generations Survey, Round 1, both for women and men. Our results point to a gender-specific difference in the temporal pattern of diffusion of marital disruption.

As for the female population, we identified the pioneers of the spread of a more flexible typology of unions in the Italian context, i.e., women belonging to the middle-high social hierarchy. The positive educational gradient confirms that well-educated women are more prone to accept new forms of behaviour as well as they are able to cope with the legal and economic costs of a separation. This group of the population was characterised by a strong increase of separation risk during the early 1990s, followed by a stabilisation or, even, a reverse in the gradient in most recent years. In short, the pattern displayed by women with middle-high education corresponds to a typical “S” shape advocated in the literature on the diffusion process of a new behaviour.

With a relatively short time-lag, women with low education are catching up with the better-educated trendsetters, in a sort of “democratization” of the process of marital disruption in Italian society. As a whole, the strong increase in marriage disruption observed in Italy in the last period appears mainly due to the fact that even the less educated women – who are still the most numerous group – are now facing a marked increase in separation risk, possibly in violation of established social norms. They are facilitated in the decision to opt for a separation because the traditional and cultural setting has been already broken by their better educated counterparts. In short, a convergence process in the level of dissolution risk among various social strata is in play.

As for the male population, a different story emerges. After accounting for the socio-economic compositional change, the overall increase in men’s separation risks remains substantial, especially in the last considered period (1995–2003). In other words, the spread of men’s marital disruption appears as an overall change over time because men’s social strata results are quite similar with respect to marital disruption diffusion. We might venture to suggest that the observed increase in men’s separations depends frequently on the decisions

of their wives, who are now facing an irreversible socio-economic empowerment. Overall, alongside convergence among social strata, the change of the pattern of union dissolution let us expect also some sort of symmetry between genders.

The shift of focus from women-only to gender-specific differences is important, but our analysis has a major limitation in this respect. The study of the determinants of marital disruption should be outlined by a gender perspective because of the intrinsic dualistic nature of conjugal couple life. Looking at the determinants of conflict between partners leads to the consideration of various aspects of couple's life such as role divisions and perceptions, the sharing of duties and resources, and the different expectations from a loving and intimate bond. Moreover, the effect of gender differences on the stability of the union is also related to the social condition of the couple. It is not a straightforward task, however, to test this conceptual framework in Italy due to severe lack of appropriate data. An implication for future research is therefore to seek a richer dataset that may provide longitudinal (demographic, social, attitudinal, and economic) information that can be related to couples' marital dynamics.

A final reflection that can be drawn from our work concerns the issue of whether in Italy we can find some traces of the Second Demographic Transition with regard to the diffusion of new family models. We clearly demonstrated in this study that the development of separation risk is now on a marked rise in Italy both for women and for men, even if with different patterns of diffusion. Our narrative is in line with the view of other commentators about the contemporary spread of another innovative behaviour in Italy, such as the diffusion of cohabitation (Gabbrielli and Hoem 2009). We may therefore argue that the country is now undergoing a period of lively demographic changes and that traces of a coming Second Demographic Transition can also be observed concerning the spread of new union dynamics.

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