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# Dual-earner and dual-career couples in contemporary Italy

Zweiverdiener- und Doppelkarrieren-Haushalte im heutigen Italien

**Abstract**

Based on a national longitudinal data set, this essays analyses the conditions that favour the formation of dual earner, and specifically dual-career couples in Italy, i.e., in a country characterized by comparatively low women's labour force participation and intra-generational mobility. Dual-career couples include all couples in which both spouses belong to the higher occupational classes according to Erikson's and Goldthorpe's classification. Using EHA and cross-lag models, we have tested the role of women's education and occupational position in supporting their attachment to the labour market throughout the family formation years. We found that, although dual-earner couples are comparatively fewer in Italy than in other countries, dual career ones are, in relative terms, the most common kind within them. We have also explored the role of homogamous marriages in shaping the possibility that a couple develops first as a dual-earner and second as a dual-career one. The school credentials possessed and the occupations performed by the spouses do not affect their respective career mobility chances. Particularly, contrary to findings of other studies, the husband's education and occupational position has no impact on the wife's occupation, except, negatively, when he is better educated than she is. Dual career marriages seem to be more the result of original homogamous characteristics of spouses than of a reinforcing im-

**Zusammenfassung**

Auf der Grundlage eines nationalen longitudinalen Datensatzes analysiert der Beitrag die Bedingungen, die das Entstehen von Zweiverdiener-Haushalten und berufstätigen Ehepartnern in Italien begünstigen, d.h. in einem Land, das durch eine relativ geringe Partizipation von Frauen am Berufsleben und geringe Mobilität zwischen den Generationen gekennzeichnet ist. Als berufstätige Ehepartner werden auch alle Paare gefasst, bei denen beide Ehepartner höheren Berufsklassen nach der Klassifizierung von Erikson und Goldthorpe angehören. Mittels EHA und Cross-Lag-Modellen haben wir untersucht, wie die Bildung von Frauen und ihre Stellung ihrer Zugehörigkeit zum Arbeitsmarkt über die gesamte Dauer der Familienbildung bestimmen. Wir haben festgestellt, dass in Italien zwar relativ weniger Zweiverdienerhaushalte als in anderen Ländern bestehen, dass jedoch in diesem Fall in der Regel beide Ehepartner eine anspruchsvolle Laufbahn verfolgen. Weiterhin haben wir die Rolle homogamer Ehen im Hinblick darauf untersucht, dass ein Paar zunächst als Zweiverdiener-Haushalt beginnt und sich anschließend zu einer Partnerschaft entwickelt, in der beide Partner eine Karriere verfolgen. Schulbildung und Beruf der Ehegatten haben keinen Einfluss auf ihre jeweiligen Karrieremobilitätschancen. Insbesondere haben Bildung und berufliche Stellung des Ehemannes im Gegensatz zu den Ergebnissen anderer

pact of the social capital of highly educated husbands.

Studien keinen Einfluss auf die Berufstätigkeit der Ehefrau, es sei denn, im negativen Sinne, wenn der Ehemann über eine höhere Bildung verfügt als die Ehefrau. Ehen, in denen beide Ehepartner eine Karriere verfolgen, scheinen eher Ergebnis originär homogamer Merkmale der Ehepartner denn die Folge einer verstärkenden Wirkung des Sozialkapitals hoch gebildeter Ehemänner zu sein.

*Key words:* education, gender, homogamy, intra-generational mobility

*Schlagworte*: Bildung, Geschlecht, Homogamie, intragenerationale Mobilität

## Introduction

This article deals with the conditions underlying the formation of dual-earner and dual-career couples in contemporary Italy. Dual-career couples are a specific subgroup of dual-earner couples, and comprise couples in which both partners not only are in paid work, but are at the top of the occupational ladder. Adopting a class approach to the study of occupational stratification, and following the class schema developed by Robert Erikson and John Goldthorpe (1992), for the purposes of this study we consider a couple to be dual-career when both partners have an occupation belonging to class I or II; that is, to the service class (entrepreneurs, professionals, managers of large and medium-size firms) and to the higher grades of white-collar workers.

One could object that this operational definition of dual-career couples is too broad because white-collar jobs cannot properly be classified as top occupational positions. Theoretical and empirical considerations, however, can justify this decision. Although the market position (in the sense of Lockwood 1958) of higher grades of non-manual employees, in fact, is weaker than that of members of the service class, their employment relation (in the sense of Goldthorpe 1982 and Rose 2002) is pretty much the same. Members of the white-collar class are hired on the basis of a service contract and not on the basis of a labour contract or a mixed contract, which is the case, respectively, for manual workers and the lower grades of routine non-manual employees.

As we turn to the central theme of this article, it is worth noting that in Italy, as in other developed countries, the number of both dual-earner and dual-career couples has been increasing in the past decade as a result of the growth of women's participation in the labour force.[1] Yet, the activity rate of Italian women is still lower than

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1 During the period 1990–2006, the activity rate of 20-64 year old Italian women increased by 8.5 percentage points (from 45.6% to 54.1%). As for men, 79.6% of the 20–64-year-olds were in the labour market in 2006. The percentage is higher, 84.6%, for men who are married (ISTAT 2007). These male rates have been stable over the last half century (Bison

that recorded in most European Union countries.[2] Thus, the proportions of dual-earner and dual-career couples are smaller, too (Saraceno 2005), a circumstance that is particularly true for middle-aged and older cohorts.

The low rate of Italian women's labour market participation can be attributed to several factors. First, there are wide regional differences: women's employment and participation are particularly low in the South, where also men's employment is relatively low. Moreover, part-time jobs, which might help women to combine work and family responsibilities during the most demanding phases of family formation, are still comparatively scarce in Italy, though they have increased in number over the past fifteen years following a change in regulations.

Second, the familistic and undeveloped Italian welfare system does not adequately support families and women with children (Saraceno 2003). The supply of care services for children under age three is not only quite varied at the regional level, but generally among the most modest in Europe (Plantenga and Remery 2005). According to the 2003 survey *Famiglia e soggetti sociali* by the *Istituto nazionale di statistica* (ISTAT), only 15.4% of Italian children aged 0–2 attend public or private day care (Cicotti and Sabbadini 2005). This share has doubled since the early 1990s, however, following an increase in the supply of public and private services.

Third, there is still a strong asymmetry between husbands and wives in the division of domestic labour. On average, Italian married women spend 6.11 hours each day looking after the needs of the household and its members, whereas Italian married men dedicate to the same tasks only 1.19 hours (ISTAT 2003). According to comparative data on time-use, Italian men are the least collaborative among Europeans with regard to family work, and Italian working women, together with their Slovenian counterparts, have the longest workday if one counts both paid work and family work (Eurostat 2004; ISTAT 2006, ch. 4). This gender disparity in the amount of efforts expended for domestic well-being is generally stable across areas of residence, birth cohorts, and the labour market positions of both partners. Only highly educated wives in high occupational positions seem to be able to reduce the amount of time devoted daily to domestic tasks (Schizzerotto 2007). And when such a reduction is achieved, it is not because their husbands are more sensitive to gender inequalities and thus increase their own domestic commitment, but rather simply because these couples can afford to pay for household help.

Fourth, it is well known that education plays a crucial role in determining both women's chances of participating in the labour market and the continuity of their participation even in the face of family responsibilities. In Italy, however, the gender gap in education was closed only in the late 1970s – about ten years later than in most advanced European countries (see De Sandre 1991; Schizzerotto 2002). This means that only in the past thirty years could a sizeable proportion of Italian couples

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et al. 1996; ISTAT 2007). For this reason, in the following we address only the conditions affecting women's labour market participation.

2  In 2006, the activity rate of women in the 20–64 age bracket was 71.5% in the United Kingdom, 73.2% in Germany, and 80.7% in Sweden, compared to 54.1% in Italy (Eurostat 2007).

have partners who share the same level of high education. And women, in particular, had the educational characteristics that favoured their labour market attachment throughout the family formation years.

Even defined in our very broad terms, dual-career couples represent a minority of dual-earner couples in any country. In Italy, however, there are specific constrains. During the last twenty years, the development of the tertiary sector and the process of occupational upgrading have proceeded quite slowly. As a consequence, the size of the upper classes has grown at a snail's pace. Furthermore, the overall rate of intragenerational mobility is definitely lower than that recorded in most developed societies, and the career chances of women are, ceteris paribus, far smaller than those of men (Cobalti and Schizzerotto 1994; Pisati and Schizzerotto 1999, 2004; Schizzerotto 2002; Sabbadini 2004; Almalaurea 2006). For instance, fewer female than male university graduates hold a job at the level of their qualification: 43% compared to 49%. And whereas about 20% of female university graduates hold an under-qualified job, this is true for only 9% of men. These gender differences limit the possibility of forming a dual-career couple even in the broad sense indicated above. If we had used a narrower definition, including only couples in which both partners have clear upward professional mobility as a consequence of strategic professional and educational choices taken over the life course (e.g., Hiller and Dyehouse 1987; Clement and Clement 2001), then we would have been left with only a handful of couples.

The features of the Italian context summarized above allow us to critically examine the prevalent theories concerning the mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the formation of dual-earner couples and of their subgroup, dual-career couples.

## Theories and Hypothesis

In the current sociological literature, three main groups of theories aim at explaining the process of formation of dual-earner and dual-career couples and their persistence over time.[3] The preference theory of Catherine Hakim (2000) suggests that the probability of forming a dual-earner couple in contemporary advanced democratic societies sharing the value of gender equality depends mainly on wives' preferences and motivations. Some women strongly prefer to perform conjugal and parental roles, whereas others wish to invest in a professional career. When they get married, the former will leave the labour market or reduce their commitment in it, whereas the latter will continue to invest in their career.

Gary Becker's theory of optimality of specialization (1981) offers a different kind of explanation. As is well known, Becker maintains that married women's participation in the labour market depends on a rational decision, agreed upon by both partners and irrespective of their personal preferences, intended to maximize the household's economic utility and the psychological well-being of its members. In so far as the husband's human capital is higher than that of the wife and/or offers better

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3  For an overview, see also Blossfeld and Drobnič (2001), Halleröd (2005), and the introduction to this issue.

returns in the labour market, he specializes in performing market work, while she specializes in family work. Over time, this specialization becomes increasingly convenient from the point of view of the household (if, of course, nothing wrong happens to either spouse, or to their relationship).

Fabrizio Bernardi (2001) uses this approach to explain the existence of dual-career couples. According to him, husbands possessing a large amount of human capital and placed at the top of the occupational ladder can boost or even provide career opportunities for their well-educated working wives in order to improve the standard of living of the entire family.

The resource bargaining theory (Sørensen and McLanhan 1987; Blood and Wolfe 1960; McRae 1986; Brines 1993, 1994; Coltrane 2000) was developed explicitly as a critical counterpoint to Becker's thesis that the division of paid and unpaid work within couples is an altruistic and rational decision, based on a single utility function within the couple and the family. The resource bargaining theory holds that this decision represents the outcome of negotiations, which are based in the resources of power controlled by each partner. Highly educated women are able to bargain for a smaller role in family work, and possibly for using family income toward paying for part of the family work that other women do unpaid, therefore freeing up time and energy to exploit their human capital in the labour market (Brines 1994; Blossfeld and Drobnič 2001). According to this analytical perspective, the permanence of highly educated wives in the labour market does not derive from the support they receive from their equally highly qualified husbands within the framework of a single utility function – that is, the maximization of the household's economic well-being. Rather, the level of schooling of these wives offsets the potentially negative impact of having highly educated husbands who usually earn more and therefore give priority to their own career and labour market investment (see also Bielby and Bielby 1989). By remaining in the labour force, these women further enhance their human capital and reduce, even if they do not completely eliminate, the negative impact – on wages and career – of the time they invest in motherhood and family work (Hersch and Stratton 2002).

The available empirical knowledge on the Italian context offers little support both to the preference theory and to the theory of the optimality of decisions; it provides stronger support to the resource bargaining theory. Actually, one aspect of the Italian pattern of women's participation in the labour market would – at first sight – seem to support Hakim's thesis. Italian women with family responsibilities appear to be divided into two groups: those – a growing minority – who are in full-time jobs and have continuous work attachment throughout the family formation years, and those who exit the labour market once they marry, and particularly when they have a child. They seem to perfectly represent the two opposite preference categories in Hakim's theory. The incidence of the two clusters of women across geographical areas and social groups, however, casts some doubt on this theory. First, the proportion of married women in the labour market changes strongly according to the macroeconomic situation of their area of residence. Married women living in the most developed Italian regions display much higher activity rates than their counterparts residing in less developed areas, particularly in the South (ISTAT 2000; Sabbadini 2004). Of course, Hakim might rightly argue that Southern Italy does not have the

conditions she sets for the implementation of the preference theory; that is, given the scarcity of labour demand, women are not really free to choose according to their preferences. But the comparatively high incidence of working wives and mothers in the Central-North regions, where labour demand is higher and social services are more abundant, suggests that options and resources are as important as individual preferences. The strongest critique of Hakim's thesis, however, is drawn from a second phenomenon: as in countries with a higher level of activity and employment among women (see McRae 2003; Crompton 2006), within the same area of residence wives' chances of being employed and staying in employment – even after pregnancy and childbirth – strongly vary according to the level of education. The higher the school qualifications of a married woman, the greater the likelihood that she will remain employed throughout the family formation years (Lo Conte and Prati 2003). The same holds in the case of occupational position. The more advantageous the position, the greater the probability that women will remain in the labour market after marriage and childbirth. "Preferences", therefore, seem to be highly structured by individual resources.

The empirical evidence for Italy does not entirely support Becker's and Bernardi's theses either. Although it is true, that Italian women who are less educated (and thus possess a lower amount of human capital) than their partners are less likely to participate in the labour market than those who have the same level of education (Bernardi 2001), the opposite is not true. When wives are more educated than their husbands, the latter do not assume the main responsibility for unpaid household work and care. At best, wives can buy themselves out of some of it. Sharing an equal level of education and being in the labour market also does not cause a symmetrical sharing of household and care work (Romano 2005; Schizzerotto 2007). The decrease in the gender asymmetry in time spent in family work found in Italy, as in other countries (Baxter 1993; Brines 1993), among couples where women are highly educated and in the labour market, is more the result of women decreasing the time devoted to family work than of men increasing it. Further, Alessandro Rosina and Chiara Saraceno (2008), on the basis of a retrospective study on work history performed by ISTAT in 2003, found that being more educated than one's own husband in Italy does not seem to increase the chances that a woman remains in the labour market throughout the family formation years, when compared to those of a woman who is as educated as her husband. These two phenomena seem to confirm William Bielby and Denise Bielby's (1989) thesis that gender scripts, not just rational choices, are involved when couples decide on who does what. Resources and opportunities affecting women's options certainly have an impact on how women define their investments in family and work, but have very little impact on how men define theirs. And a non-traditional gender imbalance in human capital may even cause the strengthening of the traditional imbalance in family work. Finally, the high level of educational homogamy that characterizes contemporary Italy (Schizzerotto 2002), together with the low rate of career mobility and the quite strong positive relation between level of schooling and chances of both being employed and arriving at higher occupational positions, suggest that wives' opportunities of being employed mainly depend on their own educational credentials, rather than on the schooling differentials that exist between them and their partners.

These observations lead us to argue that the empirical evidence offers more grounds for the resources bargaining approach in explaining the formation of dual-earner and – even more so – dual-career couples, given the strong role played not only by actual labour market opportunities but particularly by women's education.

In this study, we test this theory by means of a set of specific hypotheses that can be summarized as follows: First, the formation of dual-earner couples strongly depends on the wife's level of schooling and the position of her occupation within social stratification. Second, family events, namely, childbirth and child-rearing, represent the main barrier to the continuity of the labour market participation of Italian wives; married working women who are highly educated and at the top of the occupational ladder are in a far better position to elude this risk than are all other working wives. Third, the work histories of Italian wives are almost completely independent of those of their husbands. Fourth, the formation of dual-career couples is not a process that starts after marriage, but before it. In other words, we hypothesize that it is the high level of homogamy with respect to education, occupation, and, even more, social origin that drives the formation of dual-career couples, and not specific joint strategies followed by wives and husbands after marriage. Before testing these hypotheses, we provide some descriptive statistics intended to give basic information on the numbers and characteristics of dual-earner and dual-career couples in contemporary Italy.

## Data, variables, and methods

The data used to assess the proportion of dual-earner and dual-career couples and to test the above hypotheses come from the 1997, 1999, and 2001 waves of the Italian Longitudinal Household Study (ILFI). This study is a perspective panel with a first retrospective wave. It is carried out on a national representative sample of about ten thousand Italian men and women aged 18 and more and belonging to about 4,900 households. Members of the panel sample are interviewed by means of Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) every two years.[4] They are asked to give detailed information about several aspects of their own and their families' lives. In the following analyses we have used information regarding (a) school participation events, (b) labour market events, (c) family events, and (d) geo-graphical mobility events.

The descriptive analyses regarding dual-earner and dual-career couples are quite simple. We pooled the data originating from the above-mentioned three waves of ILFI and identified 2,271 couples aged 18–65 in 2001. By means of a two-way cross-tabulation of labour market positions of husbands and wives of these couples, we identified dual-earner couples within them. We then constructed an occupational

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4  ILFI data originating from waves 2003 and 2005 are available at the following website: www.sociologia/ilfi/unitn.it. We did not use them because they are still in a raw form—that is, not yet ready to carry out rather complex multivariate analyses like those presented in this article.

homo/heterogamy table in order to ascertain how many dual-earner couples are also dual-career couples. It is worth mentioning that the occupational positions appearing in this table represent a collapsed version of Erikson and Goldthorpe's class schema. In accordance with our operational definition of dual-career couples, the three occupational classes are as follows: (a) I+II (i.e., service class and higher grades of non-manual employees); (b) IVab+IVc (i.e., self-employed in whatever economic sector); (c) IIIab+V+VI+VIIab (i.e., lower grades of non-manual employees, foremen, skilled and unskilled manual workers of whatever economic sector).[5]

After computing the proportions of dual-earner and dual-career couples, we studied their variations according to the school qualification level of wives. We followed this analytical strategy because, as mentioned in the introduction,[6] the large majority of Italian husbands participate in the labour market irrespective of their level of schooling, whereas this is not the case for wives.

In order to detect the mechanisms facilitating or impeding the formation of dual-earner and dual-career couples, we carried out two longitudinal analyses. The first analysis is an attempt to identify respectively the role of family events and of wives' and husbands' individual characteristics in the formation and persistence over time of dual-earner and dual-career couples. As stressed in the first and second sections of this article, the relatively small number of dual-earner and dual-career couples in Italy mainly derives from the considerably large proportion of Italian wives with work experience who leave the labour market and enter full-time homemaking after marriage and particularly after the birth of a child. To understand the characteristics and the mechanisms of this phenomenon, we selected a sample of 1,925 women from ILFI interviewees, who were married during the twentieth century and who experienced at least one occupational episode in the period lasting from two years before the marriage to ten years after it. We then carried out an Event History Analysis (EHA) on them. More precisely, we specified a piece-wise constant exponential model (Blossfeld and Rohwer 1998) of the transition from the labour market to full-time homemaking by these wives, controlling for the effects of two sets of variables: one regarding wives' characteristics and family events, the other referring to disparities between the educational and occupational status of husbands and wives. The EHA model, therefore, controls for the following for the wives: (a) birth cohort; (b) age; (c) area of residence; (d) level of education; (e) age at first job; (f) prestige score – measured on the occupational stratification scale of Antonio De Lillo and Antonio Schizzerotto (1985) – of the occupation performed; (g) economic sector of employment; (h) type of employment contract; (i) pre-marriage cohabitation; (j) pregnancy; (k) number of children younger than three years old; (l) number of children aged three to five years old; and (m) number of children aged six years or older. "Pregnancy" is a dichotomous variable, assuming the value 1 for the nine

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5    Though a bit crude, the above class schema captures the main class cleavages in the prob-
     abilities of forming dual-earner and dual-career couples. This statement is based on a set of
     Kaplan-Meier estimates of the survival times in the labour market of Italian working wives
     whose occupations were classified according to the standard seven-tier schema of Erikson
     and Goldthorpe (1992). For the sake of brevity, these analyses are not reported here.
6    See footnotes 1 and 2.

months lasting from its beginning to birth of the child. With regard to the second set of variables, the EHA model controls for (a) the difference between the husband's and the wife's level of education; (b) the difference between the husband's and the wife's occupational score; and (c) the husband's employment sector.

The variables expressing the husband's educational and occupational positions are intended to check whether the risks of leaving the labour market are higher when the husband is more educated and has a stronger occupational position – both from a symbolic and from an economic point of view – than his wife does.

All variables in the model – except birth cohort, age at first job, and experience of pre-marriage cohabitation – are, of course, time-variables. As mentioned earlier, the observation window of the EHA model starts two years before marriage in order to take into account the possibility that some couples may start negotiating and arranging their respective future economic and domestic roles before actually getting married, but in view of doing so. The observation window closes either when the wife experiences the transition to full-time homemaking or ten years after marriage. We believe that this period is an appropriate minimum time-span to allow for crucial events in the couple's life history that potentially affect wives' exit from the labour market, such as pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing.

Two more comments are needed to better understand the logic underlying our EHA model. Period effects do not appear in it because they proved to be collinear with wives' birth cohort.[7] For a similar reason, in the model husbands' educational and occupational characteristics are expressed in terms of differentials with those of their wives.

As mentioned, the analysis of the labour market behavior of married women sheds light on the variables affecting the formation and the persistence over time of dual-earner and dual-career couples, but it does not allow assessment of whether the individual careers of spouses influence each other reciprocally. In order to address this issue, we first selected a new sample (once again from the ILFI data set) made up of 1,611 couples, married during the twentieth century, whose marriage lasted at least fifteen years and in which the female spouses experienced at least one occupational episode (of whatever length) during that period. We then specified a cross-lag model in order to detect the features of possible links between the occupational histories of the spouses.

The reason we selected an observation window of fifteen, and not ten, years for this last analysis is linked to the characteristics of social mobility in Italy. Given the low level of intra-generational mobility in contemporary Italy (Pisati and Schizzerotto 1999; Schizzerotto 2002; Cuppié and Mansuy 2003; Gangl 2003), the process of career development, above all in the case of wives, takes a considerably long period of time. Fifteen years seems to be a reasonable time-span to observe possible

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7  We have specified an EHA model containing a variable expressing a period effect. In particular, we have individuated four periods – 1900–1950, 1951–1970, 1971–1977, and 1978–2001 – linked to important changes in the legislation concerning maternity and parental leaves. Unfortunately, these period effects were not significant and reduced the values of the parameters expressing the effect of wives' birth cohorts.

significant events in the careers of both spouses and to test whether husbands and wives influence each other's respective job histories.

The model we specified in order to detect the links potentially occurring between the respective occupational destination of the spouses is, like any other cross-lag model, a structural equations model, in which two variables vary over time and are allowed to influence each other. In our model, these two variables are represented, respectively, by the score on the prestige scale of the husband's occupation and the corresponding score of the wife's occupation. We recorded the score of both occupations at four points in time: at marriage and five, ten, and fifteen years later. By means of the cross-lag model, we attempted to measure (a) the strength of the relation between the occupational scores of each partner when they began their union and (b) the relation between the prestige score of the possible subsequent occupation(s) performed by a spouse (five, ten, and fifteen years after marriage) and the prestige scores of both his or her previous occupation (i.e., the occupation held at marriage and five and ten years after it) and that of his or her partner. In addition to the $4 \times 2 = 8$ occupational scores, the cross-lag model contains four variables: the level of education of each spouse (measured by means of the statutory duration in years of the qualification attained), and two latent variables expressing the social origins of each spouse, determined on the basis of the level of education and occupational position of their respective fathers.

The inclusion in the model of a variable expressing the social origins of both spouses aims at testing our fourth hypothesis, which holds that in contemporary Italy, possibly even more than in most developed countries, homogamy does not only refer to educational level and occupational positions of individuals, but also to their respective social origins.

A final technical remark about the cross-lag model refers to the measure of its goodness of fit. Instead of the usual likelihood ratio, which is strongly influenced by sample size, we used the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Schumacker and Lomax 1996).

## Differential risks for wives of leaving the labour market: The role of education and occupational position

The analysis of the labour market positions of Italian husbands and wives, aged 18–65, clearly shows that dual-earner couples represent a minority – less than two-fifths – of Italian couples (table 1). The picture changes only marginally when one takes into account employed and unemployed partners, that is to say, all couples in which both members are active. The same holds if one adds current pensioners to these two groups. The sum of these three groups barely reaches 52.3% of all couples. The reason for this result is that almost one half of these Italian wives never entered the labour market, or entered it only occasionally and for very short periods.

*Tab. 1*  Labour market positions of husbands and wives aged 18-65. Italy 2001.
          Cell percentages

| Husbands' position | Wives' position | | | | All | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Employed | Unemployed | Pensioner | Not in the labour force | | |
| Employed | 38.1 | 2.8 | 2.9 | 31.9 | 75.7 | 1,718 |
| Unemployed | 0.8 | 0.2 | – | 2.0 | 3.0 | 69 |
| Pensioner | 4.0 | 0.3 | 3.3 | 9.9 | 17.5 | 398 |
| Not in the labour force | 1.0 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 2.4 | 3.8 | 86 |
| All | 43.9 | 3.6 | 6.3 | 46.2 | 100.0 | 2,271 |

It is not surprising, then, that dual-career couples, even in our wide definition, constitute an absolutely marginal proportion of all Italian couples. As can be easily computed from the figures provided in tables 1 and 2, they amount to only one-tenth of them (11.6%). Nonetheless, they are the most frequent variety of dual-earner couples (table 2). These two results prove, though indirectly, that women who did arrive at high occupational destinations remain more frequently in the labour market, even after marriage and during the family formation process.

*Tab. 2*  Homo/heterogamy in dual-earner couples aged 18-65. Occupational classes
          of husbands and wives. Italy 2001. Cell percentages

| Husbands' classes | Wives' classes | | | All | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | I-II | IVabc | IIIab, V-VI, VIIab | | |
| I-II (Service class and routine non manual employees, higher grade) | 31.3 | 3.7 | 8.1 | 43.2 | 362 |
| IVabc (Self employed in primary, secondary and tertiary sector) | 8.0 | 10.9 | 6.1 | 24.9 | 209 |
| IIIab, V-VI, VIIab (routine non manual employees, lower grade; foremen, skilled and unskilled manual workers) | 10.2 | 2.8 | 18.9 | 31.9 | 268 |
| All | 49.5 | 17.4 | 33.1 | 100.0 | 839 |

The role of the characteristics of wives in the formation of dual-earner and dual-career couples is clearly visible when one looks at the variations in their occurrence conditional on wives' level of schooling.

Only one-fourth of couples with wives who completed compulsory education (or less) are dual-earner couples (table 3), and less than one in twenty are also dual-career (table 4). Both these shares strongly increase for couples with wives who have a higher secondary school certificate, and increase even more for those with a university degree (tables 3 and 4). It is also worth noting that the differences in the proportions of dual-career couples conditional on wives' level of schooling are much more pronounced than the corresponding proportions of dual-earner couples (tables 3 and 4).[8] In other words, while only one-third of dual-earner couples with a wife with a higher secondary school education are also dual-career couples, the same holds for almost four-fifths of dual-earner couples with a wife with a university degree.

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8  We did not carry out any comparison involving less-educated wives because, as shown in table 4, almost none of them belongs to a dual-career couple.

*Tab. 3*   Proportions of dual-earner couples, aged 18-65, by wives' level of schooling. Italy 2001. Percentages

| Wives' level of schooling | Proportions of dual earner couples | N[a] |
|---|---|---|
| Lower secondary school (or less) | 24.3 | 1,343 |
| Higher secondary school | 52.7 | 715 |
| Tertiary education | 77.0 | 213 |
| All | 38.1 | 2,271 |

(a) As it can be realised from the figures in table 1, N is the number of wives in our sample of couples who attained each level of schooling (see tab. 1).

*Tab. 4*   Proportions of dual-career couples, aged 18-65, by wives' level of schooling. Italy 2001. Percentages

| Wives' level of schooling | Proportions of dual earner couples | N[a] |
|---|---|---|
| Lower secondary school (or less) | 4.8 | 314 |
| Higher secondary school | 36.0 | 364 |
| Tertiary education | 72.7 | 161 |
| All | 31.3 | 839 |

(a) As it can be realised from the figures in table 2, N is the number of wives in our sample of dual earner couples who attained each level of schooling (see tab.2).

Furthermore, whereas in less than one-tenth (9.4%) of the Italian couples aged 18–65 there is a wife who attained a university degree, in more than three-fifths (61.2%) of the dual-career couples the wife has such a degree.

These results support and further specify our first two hypotheses, namely, that the formation of dual-earner couples depends mainly on the characteristics of the wives. These characteristics, in turn, particularly education, skew dual-earner couples toward dual-career ones through the role played by homogamous marriages, as we show in the next section. Given the strong credentialist character of the Italian labour market,[9] as well as the negative discrimination suffered by women in it, only the highly educated have access to real opportunities of reaching the service class and the higher grades of white-collar workers.

The parameters of the EHA model (table 5) confirm that wives characteristics count much more than those of their husbands in the persistence over time of dual-earner and dual-career couples.

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9   The strength of links occurring between level of education and occupational destinations in contemporary Italy, even in the case of women, has been demonstrated several times (Cobalti and Schizzerotto 1994; Schizzerotto and Cobalti 1998; Pisati and Schizzerotto 1999; Schizzerotto 2002).

*Table 5* Transition from employment to housework among Italian wives. Piece-wise constant exponential model.

| Covariates | β | σ (β) | p |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Duration:* | | | |
| 　2-4 years | -0,47 | 0,11 | 0,00 |
| 　5-6 years | -0,64 | 0,13 | 0,00 |
| 　7-8 years | -0,65 | 0,15 | 0,00 |
| 　more than 8 years | -0,34 | 0,16 | 0,03 |
| *Birth Cohort* | | | |
| 　cohort 1900-27 (ref.) | – | – | – |
| 　cohort 1928-37 | 0,15 | 0,21 | 0,46 |
| 　cohort 1938-47 | 0,29 | 0,20 | 0,15 |
| 　cohort 1948-57 | -0,12 | 0,20 | 0,57 |
| 　cohort 1948-67 | 0,08 | 0,21 | 0,70 |
| *Age* | -0,02 | 0,01 | 0,02 |
| *Age$^2$* | 0,00 | 0,00 | 0,64 |
| *Area of residence* | | | |
| 　North-Western regions (ref.) | – | – | – |
| 　North-Eastern regions | 0,21 | 0,10 | 0,03 |
| 　Centre regions | 0,06 | 0,11 | 0,58 |
| 　South regions | -0,07 | 0,12 | 0,58 |
| 　Islands | 0,29 | 0,16 | 0,07 |
| *Education* | | | |
| 　primary school (ref.) | – | – | – |
| 　lower secondary school | -0,11 | 0,10 | 0,27 |
| 　higher secondary school | -0,21 | 0,16 | 0,17 |
| 　university | -1,26 | 0,40 | 0,00 |
| *Age at first job* | -0,01 | 0,01 | 0,53 |
| *Occupational score* | -0,02 | 0,00 | 0,00 |
| *Employment sector* | | | |
| 　private sector (ref.) | – | – | – |
| 　public sector | -1,18 | 0,17 | 0,00 |
| *Employment relation* | | | |
| 　self-employed (ref.) | – | – | – |
| 　Apprenticeship | -0,07 | 0,27 | 0,79 |
| 　temporary contract | 0,28 | 0,19 | 0,13 |
| 　permanent contract | -0,16 | 0,12 | 0,18 |
| 　moonlightning | 0,40 | 0,15 | 0,01 |
| *Experience of pre-marriage cohabitation* | 0,04 | 0,38 | 0,92 |
| *Pregnancy* | 1,28 | 0,11 | 0,00 |
| *Number of children aged 0-3* | 0,32 | 0,09 | 0,00 |
| *Number of children aged 3-6* | -0,15 | 0,09 | 0,11 |
| *Number of children older than 6* | -0,57 | 0,09 | 0,00 |
| *Husband's educational differentials* | – | – | – |
| 　Husband as educated as wife (ref.) | – | – | – |
| 　Husband less educated than wife | -0,04 | 0,13 | 0,76 |
| 　Husband more educated than wife | 0,25 | 0,09 | 0,00 |
| *Difference between husband occupational score and that of wife* | 0,00 | 0,00 | 0,92 |
| *Husband working in the primary sector* | -1,46 | 0,22 | 0,00 |
| Constant | -4,04 | 0,29 | 0,00 |
| Number of subjects | 1,925 | | |
| Number of events | 744 | | |
| Number of episodes (after splitting) | 36,219 | | |
| Log likelihood | -1880,17 | | |

First, the model shows that the husband's level of schooling has a limited influence on his working wife's risks of transition to full-time homemaking. Husbands with higher education levels increase the spouse's risks of exiting the labour market. But husbands who are as educated as or less educated than their wives do not affect in any significant measure the likelihood that the latter make the transition to full-time homemaking (table 5).[10] On the contrary, working wives' school attainment strongly influences their risks of abandoning their occupation. There is a negative relationship between the education credentials of wives and the likelihood that they leave employment. The higher the level of schooling of a working wife, the lower her probability of leaving the labour market and entering full-time homemaking.

Second, the EHA model proves that the husbands' occupational score, relative to that of their wives, has no effect on the risks of the latter to leave their occupation for full-time homemaking. On the contrary, working wives' own occupational score has a dramatic negative effect on these risks. The higher the occupational position of a wife, the lower her likelihood of exiting the labour market. The employment sector of wives also plays a role: Italian wives working in the public sector have clearly stronger chances to stay longer in the labour market than those working in the private sector, as also found in studies carried out for other countries (Taniguki and Rosenfeld 2002). This is the only sector where there is a significant number of part-time jobs.

Only in the case of employment in the primary sector does the husband's position affect that of his wife: having a husband working in the primary sector (agriculture) strongly reduces a wife's risks of moving from employment to full-time homemaking. But it should be stressed that employment sector does not coincide with occupational position. Moreover, in interpreting the above result, one should take into account that (a) the economic returns of occupations in the primary sector are lower than those guaranteed by comparable occupations carried out in the secondary and tertiary sectors; (b) most wives of men working in agriculture share the same occupation of their husbands; and (c) in the rural areas there is substantial continuity between work place and home.

The type of women's employment contract does not seem to affect substantially the risk of exiting the labour market, except in the case of women in the informal economy and hence hired without a contract.

Work history has an effect on the likelihood of a wife's transition from employment to full-time homemaking. Married women who started to work at younger ages show higher risks of leaving the labour market than those who started at (relatively) older ages. This may depend on two phenomena. First, women whose work history starts at a very young age reach the minimum contributory period earlier than those who start later, and thus have the possibility (and the incentive) to retire earlier. Second, this result points once again to the role of education. Usually, women who start work for pay early are less educated than those who start later; they thus have less desirable jobs and lower incentives to remain in the labour market.

Quite interestingly, individual characteristics such as birth cohort and area of residence have almost no influence on the risks of leaving the labour market among Italian wives. Only the youngest generation of Italian wives seems to be a bit more

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10 The above results confirm both Bernardi's (2001) and Rosina and Saraceno's (2008) findings.

inclined not to leave the labour market. But no significant difference can be detected between the older cohorts of wives that we studied. By and large, also the effect of the area of residence is rather negligible. The only significant, but puzzling, difference regards wives living in the North-Eastern regions who show higher risks of exiting, although their overall activity and employment rates are also higher, as already found by Rosina and Saraceno (2008).

There is one ascriptive variable that has a remarkable influence on the risk that working wives become full-time homemakers, however: (younger) age. The relevant parameter of the model shows that the exiting risk declines in a linear fashion as age increases.[11] Once past the most critical and time-intensive phases of family formation, if a woman has succeeded in remaining in the labour market, she experiences a progressive relief from family-work demands. Therefore, the balancing act of conciliating work and family becomes somewhat easier, while work income and prospects often improve.

The above interpretation is strongly supported by the effects of family events. Becoming a mother remarkably increases the risks of leaving the labour market. Pregnancy and looking after children aged 0–2 represent tremendous obstacles to continuous labour market participation.[12] As children grow up and start to attend kindergarten and then primary school, the mothers' risks of abandoning their jobs are almost linearly reduced (table 5). This phenomenon supports the argument that the lack of childcare services for children under the age of three is one of the main constraints on the participation of Italian women in the labour market.

Taken together, all the effects of the covariates controlled for in our EHA model confirm and reinforce those of the descriptive analyses. The individual characteristics of working wives, together with family events, are much more influential on their likelihood of remaining in the labour force than the occupational position and level of education of their husbands. We can, therefore, conclude that the chances of forming dual-earner and dual-career couples are mainly conditioned by the characteristics of the wives, as well as by family demands. The higher the wives' level of education, the more advantageous their occupational position. And the lower the burden of their domestic responsibilities, the greater their opportunities to stay in the labour market and, as a consequence, to form part of a dual-earner couple which, given their own characteristics as well as those of their husbands, is also likely – because of occupational homogamy – to be a dual-career couple. Our first and second hypotheses are thus confirmed. There is some ground for confirming also the third one (the relative independence of husbands' and wives' work histories).


## Do working spouses really influence their respective careers?

The results presented in the previous section cast a heavy shadow also on the idea that the individual work histories of husbands and wives mutually influence each

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11 Actually, the squared effect of age is statistically and substantially non significant.
12 Women on maternity or parental leave are counted as being in employment.

other. In particular, they do not support Bernardi's (2001) thesis that the husband's social and human capital supports that of his wife.

The cross-lag model further confirms this picture and therefore also our third research hypothesis on the substantial independence of the respective job histories of Italian working wives and husbands. It shows that both husbands' and wives' occupational positions fifteen years after marriage are strongly influenced by their individual level of education and, above all, by the occupation that they held at marriage and five and ten years later (figure 1). On the contrary, the coefficients expressing the cross-lagged effects of the spouses' education and occupation are very small and statistically not significant. In other words, the individual occupational careers of Italian spouses forming dual-earner and dual-career couples appear to be completely independent of each other.

Figure 1    Reciprocal effects between husbands' and wive's work careers. Cross-lag model: standardised path coefficients.
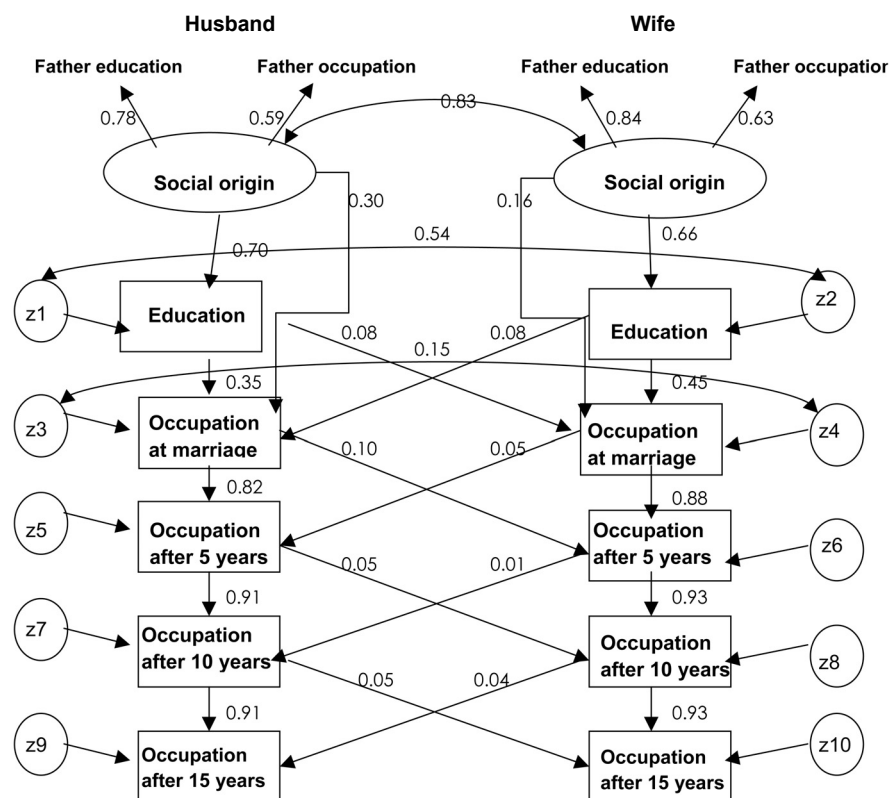


N=1,611; CFI=.972; RMSEA=.053

One could argue that this finding is far from surprising, as husbands and wives may display different abilities and commitments in the workplace. Moreover, they often are employed by different organizations, which follow different strategies in selecting their employees for promotion. Typically, women are more often employed than men in the public sector (where one's career is based mostly on seniority) and in small private enterprises (which offer fewer career opportunities). Thus, direct spousal support is unlikely. The spousal support thesis, however, assumes that the spouses of dual-career couples promote the improvement of their respective careers mainly indirectly: providing information, promoting social contacts, increasing social capital resources, and the like. Our findings, however, do not show any evidence of the presence and efficacy of this kind of indirect support, particularly from husbands to wives.

There are some quite strong relationships between the level of education and the occupation at marriage of both spouses (figure 1). These links, however, simply confirm our fourth hypothesis: in contemporary Italy, individuals choosing a partner pay close attention to the person's socio-cultural features. In other words, educational and occupational homogamy is the basic mechanism underlying the process of couple formation in Italy.

Of course, this result is not peculiar to Italy. Analyses on homo/heterogamy show that several developed countries record an increasing propensity toward educational homogamy (Blossfeld, Tim and Dasko 1998 ) and a quite strong, though stable, tendency toward occupational homogamy (Ultee and Luijkx 1990; Schizzerotto 2002).

But the cross-lag model shows a further interesting effect that seems to be much more pronounced in Italy than elsewhere and that provides strong support for our fourth hypothesis.[13] The individual characteristics of spouses that are reciprocally linked by the highest coefficient are their respective social/family origins (figure 1). Hence, it can be maintained that the high propensity to homogamy of Italian men and women extends beyond the current social and cultural features of the future spouse as an individual person, to include his/her social origin.

From the point of view of the process of the formation of dual-earner and dual-career couples, this result proves that (a) the job histories of Italian working husbands and wives are always largely, if not to say completely, independent from each other; (b) these histories may be similar in several cases simply because of the similarity of spouses' social origins, levels of education, and occupational positions when their joint history as a couple started; and (c) dual-career couples are possible only by means of the woman's human capital, with no further support from that of the husband and with the constraints imposed by gender arrangements both in the family and in the labour market.

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13 In addition to those discussed in the main text, the cross-lag model contains four parameters expressing high associations between the variables studied. These parameters refer, respectively, to the influence of social origins of both husbands and wives on their respective level of education and occupation at marriage. These effects are well known and have been documented numerous times in the literature on educational and occupational inequalities in contemporary Italy (Cobalti and Schizzerotto 1994; Schizzerotto and Cobalti 1999; Pisati 2001; Schizzerotto and Barone 2006). Yet, although interesting, they do not really matter for the topic we are dealing with in this article.

## Conclusions

By means of the analyses presented in the previous pages, and particularly by means of the EHA and cross-lag models, we have been able to go beyond what has already been well documented in the literature, particularly with respect to the Italian case: namely, the dual constraint on the formation of dual-career couples through the relatively low (although increasing) incidence of continuously dual-earner couples, on the one hand, and the low degree of intra-generational mobility, on the other. At the same time, we have shown that dual-career couples – that is, couples belonging to the higher occupational classes of Erikson and Goldthorpe's (1992) classification – are, in relative terms, the most common kind of dual-earner couples in contemporary Italy.

We also have explored in detail the role of homogamous marriages in shaping the possibility that a couple develops first as a dual-earner and then as a dual-career couple. We have shown that the proportion of dual-earner and, above all, dual-career couples increases from the lower educated (wives and couples) to the higher educated. Yet this linear increase seems to be best explained by the wives' own education than by that of their husbands. This explanation also holds when husbands are less educated than their wives. In particular, we have found that having a husband with a similar or a lower education level and a similar or a lower occupational position has no impact on the wife's chances of remaining in the labour market. Only in the case of the traditional asymmetry in education does there seems to be an impact, in so far as having a husband who is better educated than oneself reduces the chances of remaining in the labour market.

Moreover, the school credentials possessed and the occupations performed by the spouses do not affect their respective chances of career mobility. The human capital resources with which women and men enter marriage and the process of decision-making about labour market participation are not affected by those of their partners, except through the mediation of gender roles and arrangements within the household as well as within society. The similarities they may manifest in their work histories are the consequence of their original similarities, dating back to their social origins. The dissimilarities, on the other hand, are the consequence of the gender arrangements in which they are embedded. In a country with a low degree of social mobility – both inter- and intra-generational – and with a persistent high degree of gender inequality in the division of domestic labour (although not in education), marital homogamy seems to be an instrument of social immobility, rather than of new forms of social stratification and social polarization, as it seems to be the case for other countries (Hyslop 2001; Esping-Andersen 2006).

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