

Women's employment strategies around first birth in two adverse institutional settings: A Italy–Poland comparison

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Short abstract

The goal of this study is to add to our understanding of how the country-specific factors mediate the interrelationship between women's paid work, childbearing and human capital accumulation. For this purpose we compare transition to motherhood and return to work after first birth in two countries which display several similarities as well as exhibit key differences, namely in Italy and Poland.

The two countries have been both characterized by very low fertility (below 1.4 during the last decade), strong attachment to Catholic values and to the family. Neither in Italy nor in Poland have the domestic institutions, such as labor market regulations, childcare provisions and traditional couple role-sets, adjusted to the women's increased interest in human capital investments which resulted in strong tensions between work and childrearing. On the other hand, the two countries differ in the past female labour supply developments as well as in the extent to which earned wages satisfy the material aspirations.

Piecewise linear hazard models are applied to national data in order to address our research objectives. Our findings illustrate clear cross-country differences in the compatibility between work and family, observed despite the fact that public support for working parents in both countries is equally poor and work arrangements are similarly inflexible. In Italy, paid work and motherhood clearly exclude each other. In Poland, women's employment seems to facilitate childbearing and return to work after birth is far less delayed. In a search for possible explanations for this state of affairs we refer to cross-country differences in the country contexts.

Motivation and Aim

More and more often young women educate themselves for lifelong professional careers. The increasing interest of women to invest in human capital determines women's decisions regarding the timing of first birth as well as the timing of employment re-entry after birth (e.g., Gustafsson 2001; Hotz et al. 1997; Taniguchi, 1999; Ranson, 1998). Overall, empirical research has found that the relationship between fertility and women's human capital varies largely depending on the context (e.g., Kravdal 1994, Nicoletti & Tanturri, 2008, Happel et al. 1984). It remains to be established which country-specific factors are responsible for these differences, however. Comparing possibly most similar countries that display some specific and well-recognized differences has been recommended in the literature as a meaningful strategy to this kind of purpose (Neyer and Andersson 2008).

In this paper we follow this approach. We focus on two lowest-low fertility countries that experienced strong increases in women's human capital, namely on Italy and Poland. These two countries display several similarities as well as exhibit key differences, offering a stimulating, and so far unexplored setting for a comparative analysis.

On one hand, Italy and Poland are both characterized by extremely low fertility (with TFR below 1.4 during the last decade). Many aspects of their cultures (religiosity, strong family relations, and fundamental importance of marriage) are similar. Moreover, in none of them have the domestic institutions, such as labor market regulations, childcare provisions and traditional couple role-sets, adjusted to the women's increased interest in human capital investments which resulted in strong tensions between work and family (de Rose et al. 2008, Kotowska et al 2008). On the other hand, the labor force participation of women aged 25 to 44 is much higher in Poland than in Italy, Polish first-time mothers are younger than their Italian counterparts, and the average wages in Poland are lower than in Italy leaving the material aspirations of the Poles unsatisfied to a larger extent.

The comparison of these two similar countries can facilitate our understanding of how the country-specific differences mediate the influence of women's increasing investments in human capital on the decision to have the first child and to return to work after birth.

Data and Methods

In order to address these research questions we take advantage of two recent retrospective surveys: the Household Multipurpose Survey Family and Social Subjects (FSS), corresponding to the Italian Generations and Gender Survey, and the Polish Employment, Family and Education Survey

(EFES). The Italian 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. The Polish survey was prepared at the Institute of Statistics and Demography of the Warsaw School of Economics and carried out in November and December 2006 on 3,000 women born 1966-1981. For our analysis we adopt a life-course perspective, following a common paradigm: we expect individuals to make their procreative choices intentionally, based on an evaluation, although imperfect, of the costs and benefits of reproduction. Transition to motherhood and employment entry after first birth are analysed by applying piecewise linear intensity regression models to our data.

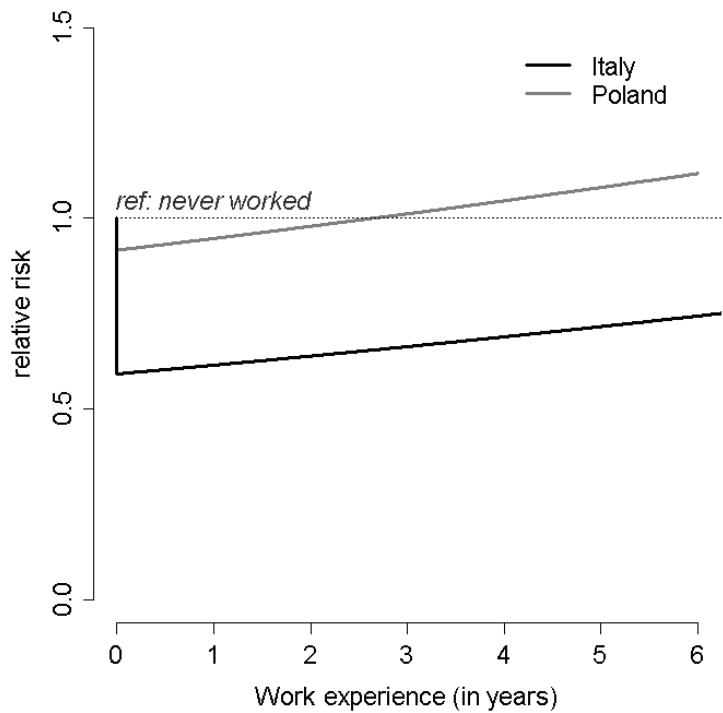
Preliminary Findings

Our empirical findings show a decline in first birth intensity at the moment women entered their first employment, compared to the period before, and an increase thereafter, as women accumulated work experience (Figure 1). The effect of work experience differs between the two analyzed countries, however. Employed women in Italy are in general more likely to defer childbearing than those out of paid work, irrespective of the human capital accumulated. In Poland, by contrast, employment hinders motherhood only in the first years since the job take-up. After women accumulate some on-the-job skills they become more likely to give birth than the non-employed.

Furthermore, already one year after first birth, women in Poland are almost 30% more likely to be back at work than in Italy. This accelerated pattern of return to work is observed in Poland also in the following months (Figure 2) despite the fact that the parental leave in Poland can be granted for three years while in Italy it is only 6 months long. In both countries, women who accumulated work experience over the life course are more likely to return to work after first birth, other things being equal.

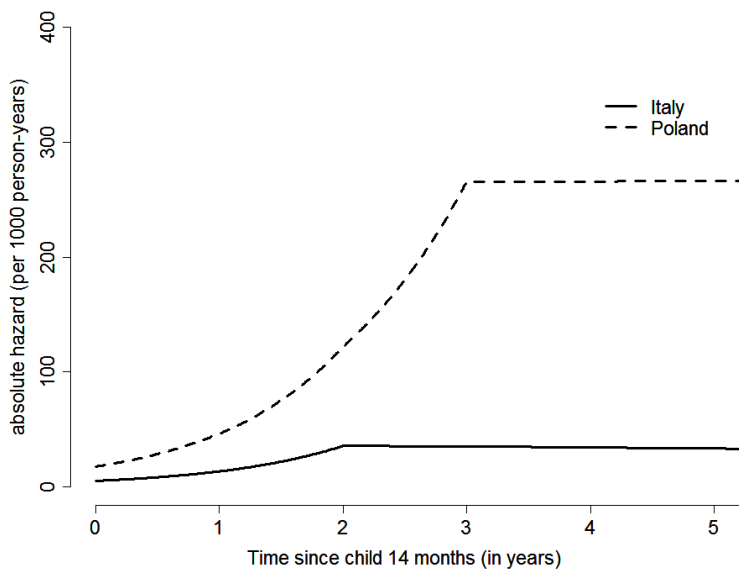
These findings illustrate clear cross-country differences in the compatibility between work and family, observed despite the fact that public support for working parents in both countries is equally poor and work arrangements are similarly inflexible. In Italy, paid work and motherhood clearly exclude each other. In Poland, women's employment seems to facilitate childbearing and return to work after birth is far less delayed. In a search for possible explanations for this state of affairs we refer to cross-country differences in the country contexts, more specifically in the economic and cultural framework. In other words, we explain our findings with a higher attachment of Polish women to the labour force, driven either by the financial necessities or the intergenerational transmission of women's roles as additional income providers.

Figure 1 – Effect of work experience on first birth risk



Note: The results are standardized for a woman's age, calendar period, a woman's social background, time since leaving education, educational level, and non-employment experience

Figure 2 – Return to work after first birth (since child is aged 14 months)



Note: The results are standardized for a woman's age, calendar period, a woman's social background, education, educational level, marital status, and non-employment experience

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