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*Research Article*

**Things change:**

**Women's and men's marital disruption  
dynamics in Italy during a time of social  
transformations, 1970–2003**

**Silvana Salvini**

**Daniele Vignoli**

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**Things change:  
Women's and men's marital disruption dynamics in Italy  
during a time of social transformations, 1970–2003**

**Silvana Salvini**

**Daniele Vignoli<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

We study women's and men's marital disruption in Italy between 1970 and 2003. By applying an event-history analysis to the 2003 Italian variant of the Generations and Gender Survey we found that the spread of marital disruption started among middle-highly educated women. Then in recent years it appears that less educated women have also been able to dissolve their unhappy unions. Overall we can see the beginning of a reversed educational gradient from positive to negative. In contrast the trend in men's marital disruption risk appears as a change over time common to all educational groups, although with persisting educational differentials.

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## **1. Introduction**

In terms of family dynamics Italy is customarily viewed as a traditional Catholic country, which is true in part, 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 2007 the absolute number of divorces increased by 87%. This rapid change is also visible in an upsurge in the Period Total Divorce Rate: While in 1995 a hypothetical (synthetic) cohort of 1000 marriages experienced on average 80 divorces, this value more than doubled in 2007 rising to 165 (Istat 2009), a trend that will likely gain momentum in the future (Castiglioni 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 (e.g., Livi Bacci and Mencarini 2009). The analysis of the determinants of marital disruption is nevertheless essential to better understand this new phase of Italian family dynamics (Salvini 2009). This paper follows the work of Vignoli and Ferro (2009) that studied the basic correlates of women's marital disruption, with at least two new additions.

First, we want to contribute to the knowledge on the determinants of marital disruption in Italy by investigating the possible existence of trendsetters that might be mainly responsible for the recent increase of the phenomenon. Has this evolution been driven by some population subgroups, e.g., those with a higher educational attainment? 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 lesser extent? In other words, is there an increase over time in marriage dissolution within social groups as well?

Secondly, 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 very different in Italy: 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. Social change and marital disruption: Theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence**

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 persistence of 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 family life in Western countries is represented by the increase in divorce. 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 (e.g., Todesco 2008). It is precisely the experience of the trendsetters that makes family dissolution socially and economically sustainable. Indeed, as social acceptability increases, some types of costs (e.g., legal expenses) diminish, which, in turn, contributes to the spread of the phenomenon. Mass media also 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 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.

Education can be considered as one of the most potent proxies of one's social status. In this respect the role of education is twofold. Firstly, it represents a valid marker of individual labour market performance and prospects as well as salary. Secondly, education is also an indicator of cognitive skills and the ability to solve problems. It is therefore not surprising that educational attainment is considered as a crucial factor that influences differences in marital disruption dynamics.

It is especially the changing role of women that has an impact on the relationship education-marital dissolution. Women with higher education tend to be characterized by more ‘modern’ attitudes, which are often linked to a lower attachment to the institution of marriage. Moreover, women with higher educational attainment and good prospects in the labour market, who are therefore economically independent, seem the best placed to put an end to a union (e.g., Becker 1981; Ruggles 1997). In this vein Blossfeld et al. (1995:202) argue that in those countries where divorce is still rare women with high educational levels have a higher risk of marriage dissolution than women with lower education because “in such societies marital disruption represents a more severe violation of an established social norm”.

Subsequently, as the rise of union breakdowns comes into play, “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” (Blossfeld et al. 1995: 202). The gradient, therefore, may change from positive to negative. The highly educated women may in fact have more 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). At the same time it is also possible that people in the lower social strata have more marital strain because of greater socio-economic hardship (e.g., Härkönen and Dronkers 2006).

Overall empirical evidences suggest that the connection between women’s education and marriage instability is likely to be different in different contexts, ranging from positive, to no effects, to even negative ones. For example, a positive relationship between women’s educational attainment and divorce risk is found for the Netherlands by Poortman and Kalmijn (2002) and for Italy (e.g., De Rose 1992, Vignoli and Ferro 2009). On the other hand in Australia Bracher et al. (1993) found no relation between women’s education and divorce. Most of the research on this topic suggests a negative association for the Nordic countries (Kravdal and Noack 1989), also when the husband’s education is controlled for (Jalovaara 2001, 2003; Lyngstad 2004). Interestingly in Poland the divorced seem to be predominantly the low educated (Styrc 2010).

In some cases the correlation between women’s educational attainment and marital disruption also changes over time. A relatively limited body of literature has explicitly addressed this issue and the resulting outcomes display fragmented evidence. In line with Blossfeld et al. (1995) a change in the educational gradient of divorce, for example, was found by Chan and Halpin (2005) for the United Kingdom and by Hoem (1997) for Sweden, where the correlation between women’s education and union breakdown has changed over time from positive to negative. For the United States education and marital disruption has long been inversely related (Castro-Martin and

Bumpass 1989) and the negative educational gradient persisted over time (Teachman's 2002) with growing differentials (Martin 2006).

Altogether the variation of association between women's educational attainment and marriage dissolution over space and time challenges per se Becker's theory, because it suggests that economically independent women are not always the most likely to dissolve an unhappy union (e.g., Oppenheimer 1997).

To the best of our knowledge the association between men's education and marital disruption is much clearer, generally illustrating a negative relationship or, at a minimum, an insignificant one. For example, a negative gradient emerged in Norway (Lyngstad 2004), in the United States (Ono 1998), and in the Netherlands (Poortman and Kalmijn 2002), while no significant correlation has been found so far for Italy (De Rose and Di Cesare 2003), for Finland (Jalovaara 2001), and for Australia (Bracher et al. 1993). Adopting a couples' perspective, Jalovaara (2003) illustrated that, when the economic situation is controlled for, one should expect the effects of educational attainment to show a symmetric pattern between partners. In Norway, however, a country where gender inequality is relatively low, Lyngstad (2004) found that the effect of the wife's education level is stronger than the corresponding effect of the husband's education.

To summarise, empirical evidences send conflicting messages as regards the association between the wife's education and marital dissolution, illustrating differences over time and space. On the other hand documented findings converge in suggesting a negative relationship between husband's education and separation. Against this background we now proceed to reviewing the Italian context in order to develop a set of hypotheses on the connection between women's and men's educational attainment and marital disruption dynamics in Italy.

### **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 898/1970), but only after a long period of physical and legal separation between the spouses (five years, initially, three years since 1987). For this reason 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). For instance, of the total number of legal separations obtained in 1995, only 60% ended in a divorce during the following decade. The rest of the couples do not (normally) get together

again but 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 remarry.

Beside these rigid normative regulations Italy still displays one of the lowest levels of marriage dissolution in Europe; a crude divorce rate of 0.8 dissolutions per 1000 inhabitants in 2007, while neighbouring France has 2.2 and the Eu-27 1.5 (Istat 2008a). However marriage breakdown in Italy has been on the rise in the past decade. Consider, for instance, the Period Total (Legal) Separation Rate and the Period Total Divorce Rate for the period 1995–2007 with respect to a hypothetical (synthetic) cohort of 1000 marriages (Table 1). According to Istat data both measures highlight the rise in Italian marital dissolution. Between 1995 and 2007 they increased, respectively, from 158 to 274 and from 80 to 165, per 1000 marriages. Overall it is not worth mentioning the important North–South gradient in the spread of marriage dissolution in the country. Southern regions have the lowest separation rates, while the northern ones display levels of marriage dissolution close to those observed in Central and Northern Europe (Istat 2008a).

In short, this brief descriptive overview of marriage dissolution in Italy highlights the increasing extent of the phenomenon and calls for an investigation into the leading factors, which we believe to be related to changes in Italian society over recent decades.

**Table 1: Trends in separations and divorces and period total (legal) separation and divorce rate, per 1000 marriages, in Italy, 1995–2007**

Years	Separations		Divorces	
	Number	Per 1.000 marriages	Number	Per 1.000 marriages
1995	52,323	158.4	27,038	79.7
1996	57,538	175.4	32,717	96.9
1997	60,281	185.6	33,342	99.8
1998	62,737	195.1	33,510	100.9
1999	64,915	203.9	34,341	104.2
2000	71,969	228	37,573	114.9
2001	75,890	242.7	40,051	123.8
2002	79,642	256.5	41,835	130.6
2003	81,744	266	43,856	138.6
2004	83,179	272.7	45,097	143.8
2005	82,291	272.1	47,036	151.2
2006	80,407	268.1	49,534	160.6
2007	81,359	273.7	50,669	165.4

Source: Istat, various years ([www.istat.it](http://www.istat.it)).

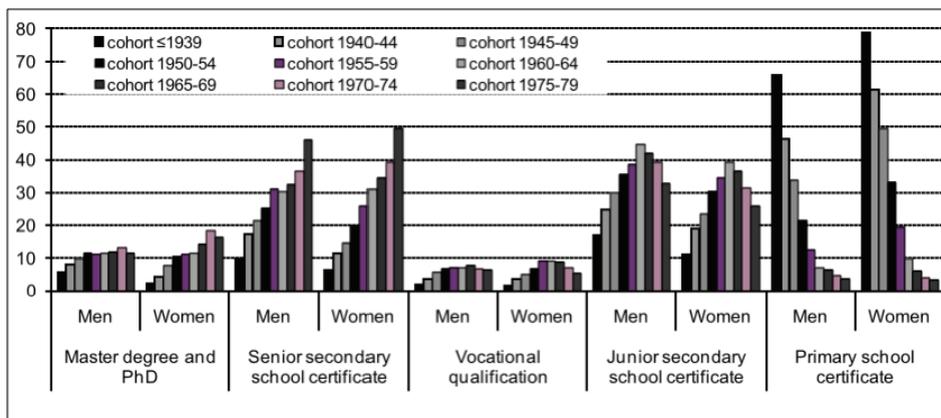
### 3.2. Delayed but fast societal change in Italy

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. Increasingly people had to be adequately educated to do their job properly, among other things this led to the expansion of educational systems, which attracted large proportions of young people.

Italy experienced a series of important changes, in society in general and in legislation in particular, 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, and abortion was legalized in 1978. 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 also increased rapidly compared to that of other European countries, although in Italy it is still low by European standards and Lisbon's EU targets (an employment rate for women of over 60% by 2010). 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 Female Labour Force Participation Rate in the 15-64 age group had climbed to 55.5%). By comparison men's labour market status remained quite stable: The 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 2010).

The change in women's societal role is especially illustrated by developments in their educational attainment. Today more women than men in the age group 25–44 have a university degree. 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 2008b). Figure 1 shows an indisputable increase in the proportion of persons aged 25 or above with a lower-secondary and upper-secondary qualification ranging 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 1: 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 could be 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 women's positive gradient between marital instability and the level of education (De Rose 1992; De Rose and Rosina 1999; Arosio 2006; Vignoli and Ferro

2009; Todesco 2010). 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 (see Section 2) 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 (compositional change hypothesis).

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

We have already underlined that the spread of education has been gender-specific. The increase of women's education over generations has been remarkable, while men's educational levels were already relatively high in the 1970s and have remained stable through the most recent generations. We therefore believe that the mechanisms behind the compositional change and trendsetters' hypotheses operate differently by gender. Women's changing status in society – represented here by women's educational status – is markedly reflected in our first two hypotheses. Conversely we expect a much higher probability of rejecting the compositional change and trendsetters' hypotheses as regards the male population (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 composed of 49,451 individuals of all ages.

We focussed on the dissolution of the first marriage<sup>2</sup>, considering de facto separations as a marker of the breakdown. De facto separation represents a marriage dissolution not yet accompanied by a legal provision that means, in practice, moving apart due to marital discord. Similarly to De Rose (1992), we concentrated on de facto separation because this act corresponds to the same life-step for all three possible categories of separated people, i.e., de facto separated, judicially separated, and divorced. 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 in women and men with complete information, separately by age and marital status. In this way we recovered, 28.7% and 30.1% of women’s and men’s de facto separations, respectively. 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.

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 about 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.

## **4.2. Method and variables**

In this study we applied a continuous event-history model, namely the common semi-parametric Cox proportional hazard model. We followed each woman and man from marriage until de facto separation or the date of the interview, whichever came first. Each transition considered in the analysis – the event of interest and the time-varying covariates – is measured using the month as the time-unit.

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 women who had finished their education into three groups: low (compulsory education and basic vocational education), medium (at least four years of education at the upper-secondary level), and high (bachelor’s or a master’s degree). Someone may object that education should be considered a time-varying covariate (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006a, 2006b). Nevertheless in Italy it is relatively trouble-free to use the highest educational

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper we looked at the dissolution of marriages and not cohabitation. This is because in the period 1970-2003 consensual unions were still very few, especially as an alternative to marriage (Rosina 2007).

level, since the vast majority of people 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. The focus on period trends allows us to pinpoint accurately changes in calendar time that are harder to locate following a cohort approach (e.g., Ní Bhrolcháin 1992). The calendar period covariate may also help to capture the influence of changes in the Italian normative environment on marital dissolution intensity. Six time periods were considered in the model: before 1980, 1981–1985, 1986–1990, 1991–1995, 1996–2000, and 2001–2003.

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 the youngest cohorts to present higher dissolution levels.

The area of residence was also included in the model to control for the already mentioned marked North–South differences in the Italian marital dissolution pattern (e.g., 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, Wolf, and Rosina 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 when the respondent was aged 18 (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, Trappe, and Dronkers 2002). This may be an effect of the transmission of behaviours 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 Italy 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 in the risk of marital disruption. The presence of children seems to consolidate the union (White 1990; De Rose 1992; Hoem and Hoem 1992). Becker, Landes, and Michael (1977), for instance, observe that children are marital-specific capital and consequently should reduce the risk of divorce. Note that some sort of selection can also be in play, people may be disinclined to

conceive a child when they are at the brink of separation or divorce (Coppola and Di Cesare 2008). Overall 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, distinguishing between "working" and "not working" (time-varying covariate). Acknowledging the detailed employment history offered by the used dataset, we built women's and men's labour market career, splitting for every "employment" and "non employment" spell up to the seventh episode. Note that the direction of the link between employment and divorce is unclear. In line with the argument of Rogers (1999) for the US context, we believe that women whose marriages are unhappy may, in some cases, decide to enter the labour market because of their need to cope with a divorce which, they sense, is approaching. We explicitly took into account this possibility in our analytical strategy, re-classifying as "not working" women who started to work only one year before the separation. This correction does not affect our estimates, which we tested both with and without this assumption. We anticipated a different effect between women and men. For instance, 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). Even for Norway, Lyngstad (2004) showed a negative effect on the divorce rate of the husband's income and a positive effect on the divorce rate from the wife's income. To this end we consider marital disruption differentials by employment status, but we do not aim to detect causal relationship. Women's and men's employment status serve here as control variables, used to partly remove the contribution of economic situation from the effect of educational attainment on separation risks.

The overall composition of the female and male study populations is presented in the Appendix (Table A1), which contains occurrences (de facto separations) and exposure times (marriage-months) by each of the variables used in the modelling procedure. Respondents with missing values on the variable "parental marriage dissolution" were retained in the sample (less than 4% of cases for both sexes), and the additional modality "missing" was created for that covariate. In total we compiled data on 7,594 women and 9,635 men, of which 797 and 606 respectively experienced (at least) a de facto separation.

## 5. Temporal change in separation risks by gender

The results of our models, estimated separately for women and men, are shown in Table 2 in terms of relative risks, their standard errors, and p-values.<sup>3</sup> 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 children are relatively young. Interestingly however, as for one-child families, when the children grow older marriage stability does not vary much. Looking at the area of residence the well-known North-to-South differential is clearly confirmed from our estimates.

The main difference between the factors affecting the separation risk of men and women concerns the role of socio-economic factors. All else being equal, women's risk of separation is significantly higher for the employed and the more educated. Our findings seem therefore to be in line with the argument that the degree of economic autonomy plays a potent role in the effective chances to handle a separation for women. However it is imperative to recognise that the casual link may work in the opposite direction. Women whose marriages are unhappy may in fact try to enter the labour market because they are about to separate or divorce. By contrast employed and well educated men do not significantly differ from their counterparts.

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 2. Specifically, several Cox 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 reflected in Figure 2a-b both for women and men. As expected, the temporal increase in separation risks (controlled for cohort effect) is less pronounced after we include in the model specification quite a few selected covariates, all of them significantly correlated with separation risks: area of residence, parental divorce, number and age of children, and employment status.

As regards our compositional change hypothesis, the introduction of education controls our model for socio-economic structural effect. We find that introducing

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<sup>3</sup> The model for women differs slightly to the one presented in Vignoli and Ferro (2009), essentially because of a different specification of women's employment status (here dichotomized) and the absence of control for parent's education. The latter covariate did not show any significant effect in the early study however. We choose this alternative specification in order to enlarge our selected sample: we did not exclude, in fact, cases with missing values (quite a few) on the type of contracts had over the life course and on the parent's educational level.

people's educational level in the model, *ceteris paribus*, depresses the increasing trend in separation risk (see Figure 2a-b, Model 6, which corresponds to the final model presented in Table 2). 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 supported by our empirical investigation. 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 separation risk remains substantial, especially for men.

Our findings show that a 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 empirical support. Men's socio-economic role, which has remained much more stable over recent decades, does not explain an important part in the separation risk dynamic. It can 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.

Looking at the whole temporal increase of dissolution risks for the female and male populations (Figure 2a-b), the general pattern that emerges is not far from the typical "S" shape predicted by the literature on the diffusion of marital instability (see Section 2). The speed of the diffusion of marital disruption appears slow at first, it gains momentum, and then slows down again when it reaches its maximum and stabilizes. This suggests that the new behaviour emerged first in certain social spheres, and later it spread out to others when considered acceptable. In this respect an interaction model was fitted between the calendar period and educational attainment, in order to disentangle marital instability dynamics according to educational level (Figure 3a-b for the trends in relative risks; Table 3 for the values of relative risks and their corresponding p-values; Table A1 for the descriptive figures).

At the beginning of the 1970s the introduction of the divorce law gave strong impulse to the incidence of separation everywhere in Italy (Barbagli and Saraceno 1998), especially for highly educated women (De Sandre 1980; Corsini and Ventisette 1988). At that time, in fact, education represented the most valid proxy of one's social class. Later on those with lower education also evidenced rising levels of marriage disruption risks. The trendsetters' hypothesis receives here an initial validation from our analysis.

**Table 2: Factors affecting separation risk in Italy by gender. Outcomes from an event-history model estimated separately for women and men**

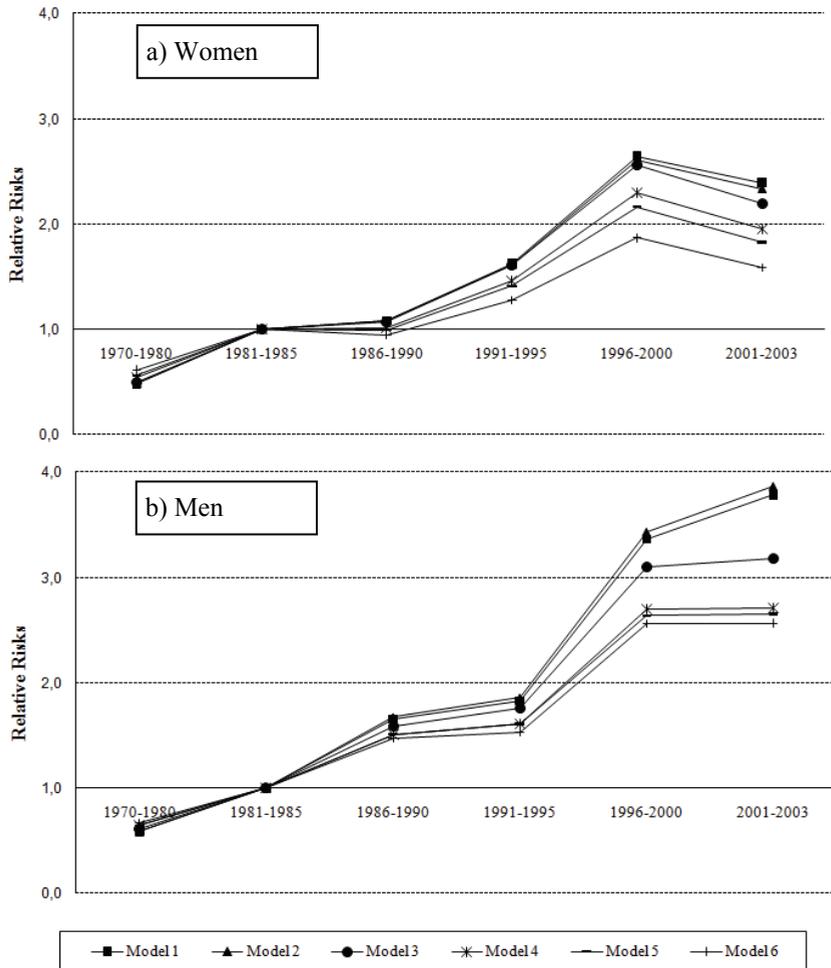
Variable	Categories	Women			Men		
		RR	St. Err.	p-value	RR	St. Err.	p-value
Birth cohort							
	1938-54 (ref.)	1			1		
	1955-64	1.52	0.178	0.000	1.24	0.165	0.099
	1965-83	1.86	0.321	0.000	1.37	0.267	0.097
Calendar time*							
	1970-1980	0.48	0.287	0.006	0.67	0.347	0.078
	1981-1985 (ref.)	1			1		
	1986-1990	1.08	0.281	0.019	1.47	0.480	0.000
	1991-1995	1.62	0.390	0.000	1.53	0.524	0.000
	1996-2000	2.64	0.607	0.000	2.56	0.904	0.000
	2001-2003	2.39	0.464	0.001	2.56	0.962	0.000
Area of residence							
	North (ref.)	1			1		
	Centre	0.82	0.080	0.044	0.97	0.107	0.766
	South and Islands	0.59	0.053	0.000	0.67	0.067	0.000
Parental divorce							
	No (ref.)	1			1		
	Yes	1.89	0.321	0.000	1.92	0.431	0.004
Number and age of children*							
	Childless (ref.)	1			1		
	1 (aged 0-6)	0.60	0.071	0.000	0.51	0.070	0.000
	1 (aged 7+)	0.89	0.131	0.442	0.73	0.115	0.045
	2 (youngest aged 0-6)	0.43	0.060	0.000	0.38	0.057	0.000
	2 (youngest aged 7+)	0.65	0.100	0.005	0.37	0.065	0.000
Employment status*							
	Not employed (ref.)	1			1		
	Employed	1.41	0.117	0.000	0.86	0.135	0.350
Educational level							
	Low (ref.)	1			1		
	Medium	1.65	0.212	0.000	1.61	0.213	0.000
	High	1.52	0.125	0.000	1.03	0.098	0.764

Source: Authors' elaboration on FSS 2003 data.

\*Time-varying covariates.

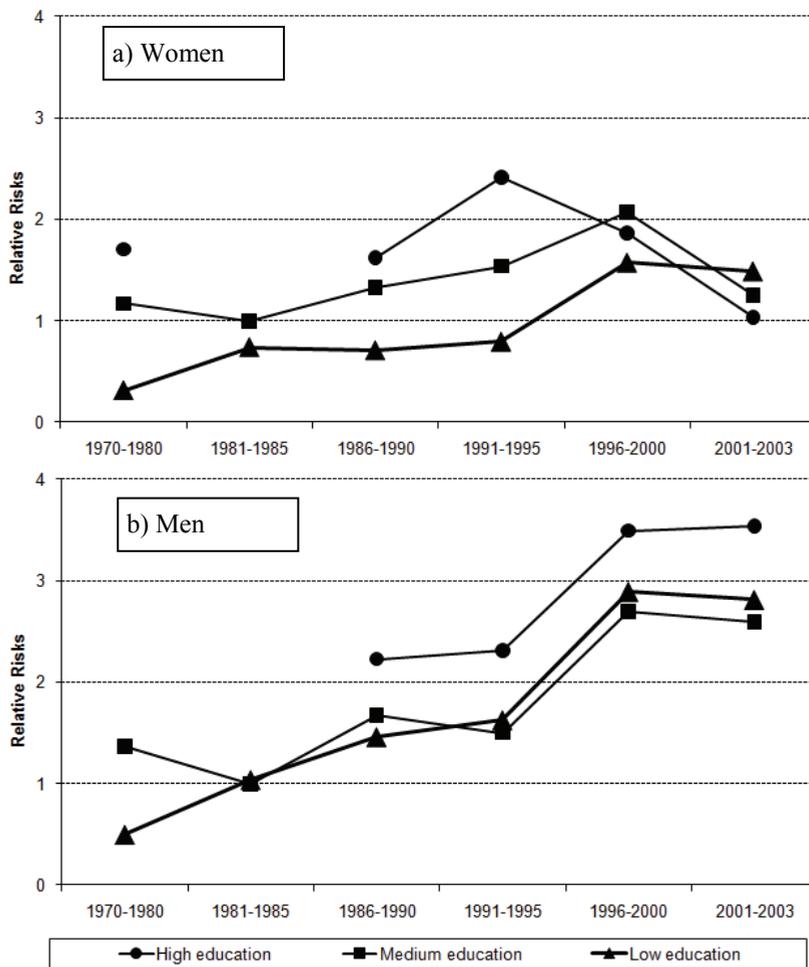
From this time the pace of increase has been particularly gender-specific. Women's increase in separation risk appears first to be driven by women with high educational standards. Subsequently during the 1990s a clear catch-up effect of medium- and low-educated women is in play, together with a slow-down in the pace of increase of dissolution risks for high educated women, together resulting in a weakening of educational differentials. This means that in recent years women belonging to the lower social strata also seem to have been able to dissolve their unhappy marriages. In the last period, then, we can observe a beginning of a reversed educational gradient from positive to negative. Overall the new behaviour began at the top of the social hierarchy, thereby supporting the trendsetters' hypothesis. As for the male population, our outcomes highlight that low- and medium-educated people appear quite similar with respect to marital disruption diffusion, while well-educated (trendsetters) men display a systematic higher separation risk (Figure 3b; Table 3). Interestingly, also at the time of the most relevant general increase (1996–2003), men's educational differentials remained stable.

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



Source: Authors' elaboration on FSS 2003 data.

**Figure 3: Trends in separation intensities in Italy by women’s and men’s educational level, 1970–2003. Relative risks, by interaction between calendar period and women’s and men’s educational level**



Source: Authors' elaboration on FSS 2003 data.  $LR > \chi^2_9$  (0.95) both for women's and men's model.  
 Note: The interaction is controlled for birth cohort, area of residence, parental divorce, number and age of youngest child, and employment status. Some dots for the "High education" modality are not shown due to the small-scale sample (less than 10 occurrences).

**Table 3: Separation intensities in Italy by women's and men's educational level, 1970–2003. Relative risks (and p-values), by interaction between calendar period and women's and men's educational level**

	Calendar period					
	1970-1980	1981-1985	1986-1990	1991-1995	1996-2000	2001-2003
<b>Women's education</b>						
Low	0.31 (0.300)	0.74 (0.000)	0.71 (0.000)	0.79 (0.000)	1.57 (0.000)	1.49 (0.000)
Medium	1.20 (0.000)	1	1.32 (0.000)	1.54 (0.000)	2.07 (0.000)	1.25 (0.000)
High	1.70 (0.000)	1.90 (0.000)	1.62 (0.000)	2.41 (0.001)	1.86 (0.000)	1.04 (0.001)
<b>Men's education</b>						
Low	0.50 (0.155)	1.04 (0.002)	1.46 (0.003)	1.63 (0.000)	2.89 (0.000)	2.81 (0.000)
Medium	1.37 (0.494)	1	1.67 (0.158)	1.50 (0.265)	2.70 (0.004)	2.59 (0.008)
High	1.33 (0.753)	1.74 (0.133)	2.23 (0.015)	2.31 (0.005)	3.49 (0.001)	3.54 (0.000)

*Source:* Authors' elaboration on FSS 2003 data.  $LR > \chi^2_9$  (0.95) both for women's and men's model.

*Note:* The interaction is controlled 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 is 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 temporal change in Italian marriage separation risks, applying hazard models to the Istat survey Family and Social Subject, namely to the Italian variant of the Gender and Generations Survey, Round 1, both for women and men.

Overall we clearly illustrated that the development of separation risk is now on a marked rise in Italy for both genders. The general temporal pattern seems to suggest an “S” shape: The speed of the diffusion of marital disruption appears slow at first, later tends to increase rapidly, and then slows down when it reaches its maximum. This suggests that the new behaviour emerged first in certain population strata, and later it spread out to others when considered suitable enough. 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 (Gabielli and Hoem 2010). We may therefore argue that the country is now undergoing a period of lively demographic changes and that traces of the Second Demographic Transition can also be observed concerning the spread of a more flexible union pattern.

Furthermore our results point to a gender-specific difference in the temporal pattern of diffusion of marital disruption by educational level. As for the female population, we identified the pioneers of the spread of marital disruption in Italy, i.e., women holding higher education. The positive educational gradient seems to suggest that well-educated women are more prone to accept new forms of behaviour, as they are able to cope with the legal and socio-economic costs of a separation. This segment of the population was characterised by a strong increase of separation risk during the early 1990s, followed by a stabilisation and decline in more recent years. Even in Italy, as for other European societies, we can therefore observe in recent years the potential beginning of a negative gradient between women's education and marriage dissolution. With the lowering of the socio-economic costs of separations, it may be said that higher education may lead to a more stable relationship due to successful partner matching or to the improvement of communication skills and other channels that make a well functioning relationship.

With a relatively short time-lag women with lower 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. Their decision to opt for a separation is facilitated because the traditional and cultural setting has already been violated by their better educated counterparts. In short, a convergence process in the level of dissolution risk among various social strata is in play. The fact that the association between women's education and divorce over time is mutable questions in itself the validity of Becker's theory for the Italian context.

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 (1996–2003). The spread of men's marital disruption appears more as an overall change over time because men's social strata have been quite similar with respect to marital disruption diffusion, with educational differentials that have remained relatively stable over time.

All in all, the change of the pattern of union dissolution let us also expect some sort of symmetry between genders. In Italy it is well-established that people tend to marry a partner with similar education, namely a homogamy educational pattern in marriages can be observed (e.g., Arosio 2006). If such pattern also applies in the future this will lead to the presence of many more homogeneous couples in term of educational attainment. At the same time, if women's and men's social roles become increasingly similar, the education-marriage link disruption will not differ between partners. Altogether these processes will lead to marital disruption dynamics that are increasingly similar between genders.

Today's Italy is still far from this situation and even if the shift of focus from women-only to gender-specific differences is important, our analysis has a major limitation due to the lack of couple's data. In fact 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 a couple's life such as role division and perception, the sharing of duties and resources, and the different expectations from a loving and intimate bond. However it is not a straightforward task, to test this conceptual framework in Italy due to a severe lack of appropriate data. The drawback of our study has possibly led to an overestimation of the correlation between women's socio-economic situation and marriage dissolution risk. The role of women's economic and social status may in fact be mitigated when the partner's characteristics and the gender arrangements of the couple is considered (e.g., Sayer and Bianchi 2000). Future research should therefore be conducted using richer datasets that provide longitudinal (demographic, social, attitudinal, and economic) information that can be related to couples' marital dynamics.

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1: Transition to separation in Italy: Women- and men-months observed in marriages (exposures) and separations (occurrences) recorded in the study population according to selected characteristics**

	WOMEN				MEN				
	Exposures		Occurrences		Exposures		Occurrences		
	Abs. Val.	%	Abs. Val.	%	Abs. Val.	%	Abs. Val.	%	
Birth cohort									
1938 – 1954	1887440	64.32	278	34.88	1559585	68.55	264	43.56	
1955 – 1964	746678	25.45	316	39.65	545786	23.99	230	37.95	
1965 – 1983	300309	10.23	203	25.47	169764	7.46	112	18.48	
Calendar period									
1970-1980	584105	19.91	66	8.28	351443	15.45	36	5.94	
1981-1985	360489	12.28	78	9.79	274281	12.06	43	7.10	
1986-1990	434429	14.80	94	11.79	346699	15.24	81	13.37	
1991-1995	506021	17.24	150	18.82	415167	18.25	97	16.01	
1996-2000	567655	19.34	252	31.62	477289	20.98	186	30.69	
2001-2003	481728	16.42	157	19.70	410256	18.03	163	26.90	
Region of residence									
North	1220135	41.58	436	54.71	963367	42.34	301	49.67	
Centre	558385	19.03	156	19.57	411451	18.08	127	20.96	
South and Island	1155907	39.39	205	25.72	900317	39.57	178	29.37	
Parent's divorce									
No	2872795	97.90	729	91.47	2231630	98.09	544	89.77	
Yes	52308	1.78	41	5.14	31599	1.39	41	6.77	
Missing	9323	0.32	27	3.39	11905	0.52	21	3.47	
Educational level									
Low	1998165	68.09	360	45.17	1440995	63.34	321	52.97	
Medium	753680	25.68	348	43.66	664274	29.20	203	33.50	
High	182581	6.22	89	11.17	169867	7.47	82	13.53	
Employment status									
Not employed	1460476	49.77	252	31.62	239428	10.52	53	8.75	
Employed	1473951	50.23	545	68.38	2035707	89.48	553	91.25	

**Table A1: Transition to separation in Italy (Continued)**

	WOMEN				MEN			
	Exposures		Occurrences		Exposures		Occurrences	
	Abs.		Abs.		Abs.		Abs.	
	Val.	%	Val.	%	Val.	%	Val.	%
Number of children								
Childless	387074	13.19	203	25.47	338370	14.87	182	30.03
1 (aged 0-6)	468377	15.96	156	19.57	399467	17.56	104	17.16
1 (aged 7+)	387281	13.20	140	17.57	303511	13.34	112	18.48
2+ (youngest aged 0-6)	603330	20.56	114	14.30	480404	21.12	97	16.01
2+ (youngest aged 7+)	1088364	37.09	184	23.09	753384	33.11	111	18.32
Calendar period*Education								
1970-1980 - Low education	473168	16.12	31	3.89	260737	11.46	18	2.97
1981-1985 - Low education	259231	8.83	43	5.40	183167	8.05	26	4.29
1986-1990 - Low education	297096	10.12	47	5.90	221343	9.73	43	7.10
1991-1995 - Low education	328880	11.21	55	6.90	255516	11.23	53	8.75
1996-2000 - Low education	352511	12.01	111	13.93	283684	12.47	100	16.50
2001-2003 - Low education	287279	9.79	73	9.16	236546	10.40	81	13.37
1970-1980 - Medium education	90452	3.08	26	3.26	74034	3.25	15	2.48
1981-1985 - Medium education	81446	2.78	32	4.02	72734	3.20	11	1.82
1986-1990 - Medium education	110740	3.77	35	4.39	99994	4.40	27	4.46
1991-1995 - Medium education	142405	4.85	70	8.78	126784	5.57	28	4.62
1996-2000 - Medium education	173176	5.90	117	14.68	153160	6.73	64	10.56
2000-2001 - Medium education	155461	5.30	68	8.53	137568	6.05	58	9.57
1970-1980 - High education	20485	0.70	9	1.13	16672	0.73	3	0.50
1981-1985 - High education	19812	0.68	3	0.38	18380	0.81	6	0.99
1986-1990 - High education	26592	0.91	12	1.51	25362	1.11	11	1.82
1991-1995 - High education	34736	1.18	25	3.14	32866	1.44	16	2.64
1996-2000 - High education	41968	1.43	24	3.01	40444	1.78	22	3.63
2000-2001 - High education	38988	1.33	16	2.01	36142	1.59	24	3.96
Total	2934426		797		2275135		606	

