

Still Neglected Italian Family Policies? Historical Trends and Latest Changes in the Lowest-Low Fertility Era

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"Italian family policies have historically been weak. The fragmentation of benefits, coupled with a dualistic system based on labour market participation and the male breadwinner model, has resulted in an inadequate public support system for families. While the weakness of family policies can be attributed to a broader welfare state model common in Southern Europe, it is also evident that several dynamics are currently shaping the definition and renewal of Italian family policies.

One of the main drivers of the current discussion on transforming family policies is the persistence of the decline in fertility rates in Italy. The significant reduction in births raises concerns about the adequacy of policies related to family and parenting, prompting calls for radical changes. Inspired by leading countries such as France and Sweden—both having the highest fertility rates in Europe and comprehensive family policy systems that offer cash benefits and in-kind services while promoting gender equality—Italy is attempting to revise its policies. The introduction of the Single and Universal Allowance (AUU – Assegno Unico e Universale) represents an effort to address the historical disparity among different types of workers, reduce the fragmentation of family cash benefits, and directly support children's well-being. It is important to underline that the AUU has been implemented during a period of severe declining in birth rates, and in times of an increasing reduction in the number of young people, that threatens the social and economic sustainability of the entire welfare state, particularly the pension system.

All in all, the recent public measures aimed at supporting parents and families - also including the introduction and expansion of compulsory paternity leave - reflect a commitment that remains ambiguous. Family policies are still underfunded and predominantly focused on cash benefits, continuing to pursue the historical trends. For instance, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza – PNRR) comprises a review of children's services and calls for strengthening kindergartens, but its innovative potential has been significantly recalibrated recently, mainly with the cut of the number of places envisaged initially foreseen in the document. Thus, the question arises: Is the Italian family policy system truly undergoing a transformation, and if so, which factors push the change and in what direction?

The main challenge should be that of transforming a system historically based on male breadwinner model, dualistic logic, and policy fragmentation into one that meets contemporary family needs, promotes greater gender equality, and facilitates better work-life balance. For this reason, it is crucial to consider whether the goal of certain policies is merely to increase the Italian fertility rate or to ensure a welfare state that also emphasizes equal opportunities. Through a literature review, this paper aims to explore the historical

evolution of Italian family policies to determine whether they are indeed undergoing a transformation and how much the persistent and worsening fertility decline is influencing recent public measures for families, children, and parents. Despite evidence of ongoing change, recent trends demonstrate that significant improvements are needed to build a family policy system focused on equal opportunities. Moreover, it is important to reflect on whether family policies' process of transformation results from a new framework or the traditional reparative approach of the Italian welfare state.

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