

ITALY Country Summary

Introduction and Overview

Italy has no explicit family policy, nor a social policy focus on the family as a unit. It has no coherent social policy toward family members, either. Instead, Italian social policy is directed toward certain categories of families and family members, in particular, children, pregnant women, poor families, and families with a handicapped child. In some ways, Italy's social policy is more child than family-oriented, but there is no coherence here either. Of particular interest, there is some indication that there is growing interest now in families and family policy but no significant new policies have emerged as yet.

Italy's limited and fragmented welfare state is the result of a strong Catholic tradition coupled with a weak national government, on the one hand, and strong regional governments coupled with an industrialized and affluent north on the other. The more generous family policies of the north are also the result of overall geographic and social changes, in particular, lower birthrates and much higher female labor force participation rates.

What national family policies do exist stress cash benefits for maternity and parenting but not for broader social support, and stress health and education but not personal social services; and they stress early childhood education and care, especially for the 3-6 year olds.

A 1996 Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents drawn up by the Ministry of Solidarity recommended the following guidelines:

- To develop adequate knowledge of the condition of children and adolescents.
- To reduce the gap between the North and the South with the aim of reducing child poverty, which is largely in the South.
- To promote greater attention to children as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- To increase the participation of children and adolescents in social life.
- To oppose the exploitation of children.
- To promote the development of services for children.
- To prevent child poverty.

An annual Report on the Condition of Children in Italy is published by Department of Social Affairs of the President of the Council of Ministers. The Report sets out Italy's commitment to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the condition of children in Italy with particular attention to the gap between the North and the South and to children's problems, actions taken by governments at all levels, and strategies to protect and promote children's rights.

Italy's benefits to families and children were low at 3.7 percent of GDP in 1999 compared to the EU average of 8.5 percent.

Government Agencies

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In October 2000, the Italian parliament approved a framework law "for the realisation of an integrated system of social interventions and services" (Legge quadro per la realizzazione del sistema integrato di interventi e servizi sociali). The new law replaces legislation dating from 1890 and will considerably update Italy's social services system. It redefines the role of the institutions involved and gives greater planning and management responsibilities to the regions and local bodies. The new law also corrects partially the existing structural imbalance in the allocation of public resources between "social assistance" (assistenza) and "social insurance" (previdenza). It establishes a system of social assistance which aims to help people in need throughout their lives, and which is the main basis Italy's social policies. The legislation also provides for the compulsory establishment of local networks to provide social assistance, and promotes the role of the not-for-profit sector.

Social assistance policy will be established in a National Social Plan (Piano Sociale Nazionale) that central government and the regions must draw up every three years. This plan will specify the actions that the integrated service network must carry out over the three-year period in order to guarantee standard services nationwide, avoiding geographical imbalances and inequality of access for citizens. The plan will also define: the distribution of the costs of the services among the various institutions; the criteria on which users may have to pay some of the costs; and guidelines for personnel training and professional updating. The National Social Plan will include service standards regarding: the integration of older non-self sufficient people and people with disabilities; supporting families and children; the integration of immigrants; and combating alcoholism and other forms of addiction.

All regions will develop collaborative regional social plans, while all municipalities must draw up a local social plan, including both social assistance and health care initiatives. The new law assigns importance to voluntary and not-for-profit organisations for the provision of services in partnership with the network of public structures. Private social service providers will have to be accredited and will have to guarantee quality standards in their activities.

Family policy is administered across several public agencies in Italy. At the national level, this includes the Ministries of Family and Social Solidarity, Labor and Social Security, Finances and Budget, Education, Interior, and Health. An OECD report recently observed, "family issues continue to be at best marginal in the policy-making process."¹ There is a preference for "Giving back the family its rightful responsibilities."² Over the years, the Ministry of the Family which is a subdepartment within the Ministry of Family and Social Solidarity, has instituted sometimes annual observatories and commissions on children, families, poverty, immigration, that have gathered important research and developed proposals, but very little has been implemented.

The new legislation enacted in 2000 seeks to develop a more coherent approach to child policy, however, there is the problem of vertical fragmentation that results from Italy's four-tier government: national, regional, provincial, and commune or municipal. The national government is relatively weak and most of the responsibility for child and family policies is either regional or municipal. At the national level, cash benefits—family allowances and maternity and parenting benefits—are the most significant. Tax benefits (exemptions for spouse and dependent children) are modest and of marginal importance. Social assistance is modest, discretionary, and provided

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by local, not national government. Among the services (benefits-in-kind) education, including preschool, is most important and the responsibility of the national government. Since the early 1990s, regional and municipal governments have been assuming greater responsibility for family issues. Maternal and child health services, infant and toddler care, child welfare, and related social services are largely the responsibility of regional and local governments.

Demographic and Other Social Trends

Italy has a population of 57 million (1999), less than it had in the early 1990s, and a little less than Britain and France. It has a rapidly aging population, placing it among the oldest of the OECD countries (17.4 percent aged 65 and older), and with the smallest group of children (14.6 percent of its population, slightly less than Japan).³ Ninety percent of Italy's children under age 18 live with both parents, while only 8 percent live with a lone parent. (and 90 percent of these live with their mother)—but this group is growing. Families are clearly changing, although not to the same extent as in northern Europe. Italians are most likely to have the three or more adults living a family, largely thought due to the presence of one or both grandparents. At the same time the number of one-person households have increased significantly, largely elderly widows, while large families with three or more children declined by more than 50 percent between 1961 and 1991. Childless couples now constitute 20 percent of households, and along with one-child families are the dominant group of families. Divorce and separation are rising albeit slowly and marriage rates are falling.

According to Zanatta, only about 3 percent of the child population live in institutions and that number has declined dramatically over the last 30 years. Foster family care is still unusual, however.⁴

At 1.2, Italy's fertility rate, along with Spain's, are the lowest in the world, and in northern Italy it is even lower. It has a low rate of female labor force participation, especially among women with children. (In 1994, only 44 percent of women with children were in the labor force.) And it has a high unemployment rate (12 percent nationally in the mid-1990s but 35 percent in the South). Unusual in the rest of the EU, children continue to live with their parents, even when they have completed their education and are self supporting, often until the age of 30. One-third of the 25-34 year olds still live with their parents, especially boys, and not only because of high unemployment rates or high housing costs.

Social Protection

Essentially, as one family sociologist notes, "Italian social and family policies have been of a "residual" nature...the family in Italy is still the institution to which the primary responsibility for meeting citizens' needs is entrusted."⁵ Italy is the epitome of categorical, decentralized, and targeted social policies. As a result, social policies are inconsistent across the country and firm national data are often unavailable. Moreover, economic disparities between north and south further exacerbate the problem of standard of living inequities nationwide. Philosophically, the church/state tension continues to surface in various child and family policy debates. And despite

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an explicit preference for a targeted policy strategy with a priority on the poor, Italian health and preschool education continues to stress the benefits of universalism, although current resource constraints may affect some universal services, especially health services.

Italy spent slightly more than 25 percent of GDP on social protection (excluding education) in 1999, slightly below the EU average of 27.6 percent (1999), but the proportion of social expenditures spent on families and children is less than half the EU average (1999). Family benefits were an important part of Italy's social expenditures in the 1950s, constituting about the same share of social expenditures as pensions, about 40 percent. From then on, however, family benefits declined dramatically as a portion of social expenditures while pensions doubled.

According to one Family Observatory expert, among the major problems facing Italy today, apart from the pressures of globalization and the European Monetary Unit (EMU), are the lack of infrastructures, the need for institutional reforms, the issue of federalism, the discrepancy between the north and the south of the country, the major problems of poverty, housing, education, social exclusion, the integration of immigrants, and a pattern of income distribution that is among the most unequal in the OECD countries. There is tension over whether to allocate more resources to job development or to the expansion of social protection.⁶

Children under 18 are one of the population groups with the highest rates of poverty and there is evidence that this risk is tending to increase. The risk of poverty is greater for children living with a single parent, especially if that parent is the mother; and it is almost double that rate for children living in the South. One study found that the poverty rate for lone mother families was about 35 percent in central and northern Italy, but 65 percent in the South. In a 23-country study, *Child Poverty in Rich Countries*, Italy ranks 21st with the highest child poverty rates in the group, higher than the UK but with lower rates than the US and Mexico.

Italy has recently established a means-tested guaranteed minimum income for those individuals with no earnings and no other sources of income. The regional authorities are responsible for delivering this benefit.

For more information on the social security systems, labour market regulations, collective bargaining, social and family policies, see the *International Reform Monitor*.

Child, Youth and Family Policy Regimes

Maternity, Paternity, Parental, and Family Leaves^{7 8}

Maternity Leave. National legislation established a mandatory five month paid and job-protected maternity leave for all wage earning mothers at the time of pregnancy and childbirth. The first such law was enacted in 1912 and the legislation was amended several times subsequently, to cover agricultural workers, domestic servants, and recently professional women and the self employed, by a benefit pegged to the average wage. The leave begins two months before expected childbirth and ends three months after. A cash benefit replacing 80 percent of wages is provided through the social security fund. Civil servants receive their full pay while on leave and many collective bargaining agreements require employers to top the social insurance benefit and

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pay an additional benefit covering the remaining 20 percent of wage. All full-time working mothers are also entitled to two hours a day of rest time during the first year after birth, which if taken together, can effectively shorten their work day by two hours. Mothers who work less than two hours are entitled to a rest period of one hour a day. In the case of maternal death or severe disability, the rest periods can be taken by the father.

Parental Leave. After several years of effort, a parental leave policy was enacted early in 2000 that entitles either parent to take up to 10 months leave at any time until the child is eight years old, following maternity leave. The 10-month leave is extended by an additional month if the father takes at least three months of the leave. Parental leave is a family entitlement that can be shared by both parents or used exclusively by one of the parents. During parental leave, parents receive a benefit equivalent to 30 percent of earnings. Employers receive state incentives to offer part-time employment opportunities to parents following leave. Small firms, which have to temporarily replace the workers, may receive a tax benefit.

Parents have the right to take job-protected leave, paid at 30 percent of earnings, to care for a seriously ill or disabled child under age 3.

Adoptive and foster parents of children under age 6 have the same right to the three-month leave following adoption and the optional ten-month leave after, for children under age 3. Other personal leaves are often available as well.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Over 90 percent of Italian children are enrolled in preschool programs, which is among the highest rates of enrollment in the European Union. Italy's ECEC programs are divided by age and follow a pattern fairly similar to that in France and Belgium. Compulsory primary school begins at age 6.

Scuola Materna (Preschool). Like the French Ecole Maternelle, the Scuole Materna is the Italian preschool program serving children aged 3-6, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, financed largely by the national government, free for the core school day and voluntary. About 96 percent of the cohort is enrolled. The program began as in several other countries, more than a century ago, as a private philanthropic activity carried out under religious auspices. There was little further development before 1968, when national legislation was enacted, assigning responsibility for the establishment of preschools to the Ministry of Education. With national funding, the initial priorities were for economically depressed areas and rapidly growing urban areas; but the 1970s saw an explosion of provision along with an acceleration of female labor force participation. The Materna are 10 -month programs open from about 8:30 am to 4:30, 5:00, or 6:00pm, depending on location and program. One such program in Reggio Emilia is world renowned for its quality and creativity.

Italian leaders in the field account for the explosion in demand for public preschools to five factors⁹: (a) increasing awareness of the value of a group experience for a child's social development and a child's right to have such an experience; (b) the recognition of the value of preschool as preparation for primary school; (c) smaller families and parents concern about the growing isolation of young children (e) the declining availability of qualified staff in religious

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schools; and (e) parental belief that state schools were of higher quality and more convenient because of their longer hours. Almost 60 percent of the children attend public preschools while only 19 percent are in church programs and 10 percent in private secular programs. About 1/3 of the facilities are religious while almost all the remainder are public.

Asilo Nido (Child Care Centers). The Asilo Nido is the publicly funded and largely publicly operated child care program serving children aged three months to three years, open 11 months of the year, and charging income-related fees. The program emerged out of the same history and institutions as the Scuola Materna. However, national legislation enacted in 1971 gave all mothers the right to use these programs for the under threes, but gave working mothers priority for places; other priorities now are children of lone mothers, poor mothers, and handicapped children. Yet despite these criteria for eligibility, most children who attend are from middle and upper class families.

The law decreed that the national government should play an active role in funding these facilities, employers should contribute 1 percent of payroll taxes to support them, but that regional and local governments should have responsibility for their operation. Today, regional and local governments are the responsible agencies for funding and operating the program.

The Asilo Nido began first as a social service, then became a support service for working women, and only recently has begun to be viewed as an important developmental experience for children generally. It is still not viewed in the same way as the Scuola Materne which is now universally viewed as an essential socialization and educational experience for all children.

The Asili Nidi cover the full workday and are often open 11 hours a day from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. They are designed to serve children from three months of age, but children usually begin at 9 months or 1 year, when the parental leave ends. Typically, centers serve from 30 to 60 children. Coverage is modest, nationally, at about 6 percent of the age group, but in the north in some regions such as Emilia-Romagna, coverage may reach 30 percent. All centers are public and almost all are operated under municipal auspices. Quality varies enormously, but is excellent in certain parts of the north. There is little or no family day care and most children of working mothers are still cared for by domestic servants who provide in-home care.

The Emilia-Romagna region has been in the forefront of these developments, as it has with regard to Scuola Materna, and has established an innovative system of infant and toddler care under the auspices of the public education system. Given the shortage of places, and the conviction that a group experience is important even for the very young, this region has developed part-day and part-week programs serving all caregivers of very young children, both at-home parents, grandparents, and "nannies".

According to the OECD Thematic Review, Starting Strong, a proposal has been submitted to transfer responsibility for the 0-3s from regions and municipalities to the Ministry of Education. There is also an effort to improve the sharing of knowledge and expertise between the northern and southern municipalities with regard to developing ECEC programs. Further enhancements include increasing staff training and skills, such as requiring teachers and co-ordinators to have a university degree. Other contact staff will be required to hold a 3-year, tertiary diploma.

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Child and Family Allowances

Family allowances are cash benefits provided to low-income employees and pensioners based on the presence and number of children in the family. In Italy, they are means-tested, tax-exempt, contingent on employment status, provided for children up to age 18 (with no age limit for disabled/handicapped children), and among the lowest in Europe. Originally, they were universal and a large portion of the population received them. Over the years, the number of potential beneficiaries has declined and of those receiving benefits, more than 50 percent are now old age pensioners.¹⁰ Moreover, since they are not indexed, they lost almost 40 percent of their real value between 1988 and 1996.

In the 1960s and 1970s, family allowances constituted about 5-10 percent of a workers wage for a couple with two children, but by the early 1990s were worth practically nothing. Between 1996 and the present both the number of beneficiaries has increased and the benefit level has been raised by about 20 percent, and by 25 percent in cases of families with a disabled child (or other relative). At the end of the 1990s, legislation reducing family allowances for those with income over a certain level was enacted.

A new means-tested benefit was introduced in 1999 for all families with more than three children below 18. This creates increased assistance to low-income families but also increases the financial disincentive to work, for those who qualify.¹¹

Child and Family Tax Benefits

There is a non-refundable (wastable) tax credit for children.

Other Child Conditioned Income Transfers

Survivor's Benefits are available to children. No other social insurance benefits are available. Social Assistance is discretionary, financed and delivered by municipalities, and varies greatly across the country.

Child and Adolescent Health

Italy had a universal national health service that was established in 1978, but in 1993 turned it into an income-tested alternative. However, children up to age 12 are covered by a universal service. Health planning and financing are carried out at the national level but the delivery system is managed at regional and local levels, often closely linked with personal social services. One part of the social service system is also targeted on children. There is a significant difference in access to health care and health status between the north and the south.

Youth

The situation of young people in the south is so bad that it is considered a dramatic social emergency. The unemployment rate for youth aged 15-24 is about 35 percent, almost three times the unemployment rate for the country as a whole (12 percent). Italy is noted, however, for having one of the lowest suicide rates in Europe among persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. The suicide rate of 5.3 per 100,000 in Italy is in stark contrast to Finland (20.1/1000,000).

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Notes

¹ Chris. Saraceno, Family Change and Family Policies in Italy. (forthcoming).

² Chris. Saraceno, Family Change and Family Policies in Italy. (forthcoming).

³ Anna Laura Zanatta, "Special Report' Children's Issues in Italy", in European Observatory on National Family Policies 1996.

⁴ OECD in Figures, 2000.

⁵ Anna Laura Zanatta, "Special Report' Children's Issues in Italy", in European Observatory on National Family Policies 1996.

⁶ Giovanni B. Sgritta, "Italy in 1996" in European Observatory on National Family Policies, 1996.

⁷ Work Life Research Centre, Childcare and Family Statistics: Italy. Manchester, England: retrieved July 2002 (http://www.workliferesearch.org/fw_stats_it.asp).

⁸ European Network, "Families and Work," and New Ways to Work, Parental Leaves in European Union Countries, 1998.

⁹ Alfred J. Kahn and Sheila B. Kamerman, Social Policy and the Under 3s: Six Country Case Studies. New York: CUSSW, 1994.

¹⁰ Giovanni, 1996.

¹¹ European Commission, Social Europe 1999, 2000.

Last updated July 2002