

THE WELLBEING OF SINGLE PARENTS IN ITALY BEFORE AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, Italian society has been experiencing great transformations in its family demography, partly bridging the gap with other Western European countries in terms of the diffusion of “new” family forms (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna, 2009; De Rose and Vignoli, 2011). Marriage does not represent anymore the unique context for childbearing, non-marital unions are becoming more and more popular not only as a prelude to marriage, unsatisfied partners increasingly opt for divorce, and re-partnering is becoming more common, even in presence of children from the previous union (Pirani *et al.*, 2021). An important consequence of these changes is the strong increase of children experiencing the dissolution of their parents’ union and being raised in a non-intact family, namely a household where either the mother or the father is absent.

In this paper, we first describe the recent evolution of Italian families and their characteristics, with a special focus on single parents, considering both those living with their children and those without them. In doing so, we discuss the risks of economic deprivation and social exclusion to which these households are exposed, and that make them particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of the recent COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Many theoretical and empirical studies on the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic have highlighted the difficult situation faced by working women with children, in terms of increasing unpaid work burden and the related difficulties in reconciling work and family duties (Power, 2020; Profeta, 2020). However, the specific situation of single parents, which are, in most cases, single mothers, has been scarcely considered, especially in the Italian context. To fill this gap in the literature, we present the first results of an *ad hoc* survey aimed at evaluating the consequences of the pandemic on the wellbeing and living conditions of single parents in Italy. Data collection occurred in April 2021 and targeted single parents by taking the variety of family situations in which they are involved into account. We present results concerning the psychological and economic wellbeing of a sample of 715 single parents before and after the pandemic.

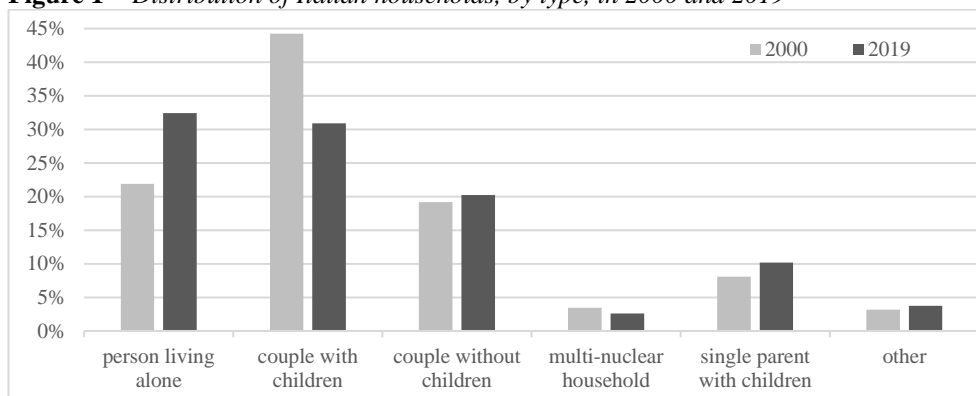
2. Italian families and their characteristics

2.1. Two decades of increasing family complexity

In 2019 Italy counted almost 25.7 million households, with an increase of more than 4 million units compared to the beginning of the new Millennium. Such fast and extraordinary growth in less than 20 years reflects the “exceptionalism” of Italian demography in recent decades (Billari and Tomassini, 2021).

This quantitative change has been accompanied by even more relevant qualitative transformations (Pirani *et al.*, 2021). For instance, if in the early 2000s the so-called “traditional” families – namely couples with at least one child – represented the 44% of Italian households (Figure 1), nowadays they are slightly above a third of the total. This decrease is similar to the one recorded in Southern and Eastern European countries, but more marked compared to that of Northern Europe (Eurofound, 2019).

Figure 1 – Distribution of Italian households, by type, in 2000 and 2019



Source: Author's elaborations on the surveys on *Aspects of Daily Life*, ISTAT, 2000 and 2019.

A second major transformation compared with the beginning of the new Millennium refers to the substantial increase in single-person households, which in 2019 account for about one-third of Italian households (about 8.6 million), and to which the largest part of the overall increase in the total number of households can be ascribed to. This sharp increase is largely due to adults who remain alone after union dissolution, whereas widowhood impacts less than in the past, and mainly at very old ages.

The increasing trend in union dissolution has also induced an increase in the number and percentage of single-parent households, which shifted from less than 1.8 million in 2000 to approximately 2.6 million in 2019, 10% of the total number of households. Interestingly, also those in which a single father lives with at least one child are on the rise (from 350 thousand in the early 2000s to almost 514 thousand households in 2019),

although the large majority of single-parent households (about 80%) continue to be composed by single mothers and one or more children.

It is worthwhile to recall that the distribution of household types is not homogeneous across Italian territories. North-western regions and, to a lesser extent, those of the North-East and the Center, record a higher-than-average number of single-persons, single parents, and childless couples, with values close to those of Northern and Central European countries; on the contrary, in the South and Islands the couple with at least one child continues to represent the most widespread type of household, despite the sharp decline recorded in the period considered (from 50% in 2000 to 36% in 2019). This is the result of the different paces of family changes that still characterize the North and South of the country.

2.2. After a union dissolution: the characteristics of single parents with cohabiting and non-cohabiting children

A relevant change in contemporary Italian families is the continuous increase of persons experiencing the dissolution of a union even in presence of (young) children, resulting in an increasing share of single parents either cohabiting or not cohabiting with their children. To have a more detailed insight on this population segment, the focus of this paper, we selected households with a young-adult reference person, i.e. a person aged between 25 and 54.

Among single parents with at least one cohabiting child (first column in Table 1), the proportion of women is strongly overrepresented (83%), and in the vast majority of cases, this living arrangement is the result of a union (cohabitation or marriage) breakdown. 44% of single parents live with two children, who are minor children in 70% of cases.

Single-parent households are only one side of the coin, however, as single-living is one of the possible outcomes following the dissolution of a union with children. In fact, about one-quarter of people who live alone, in the 25-54 age group, have at least one child with whom they do not live. Their characteristics are shown in the last column of Table 1. In this case, the gender proportions are reversed – two out of three are men – and the large majority come from a separation or a divorce (note that if the previous union which originated the child was a non-marital one, even stable and long-lasting, the person's marital status is "single"). The territorial distribution shows a larger prevalence in Northern regions. In a similar way to the group of single parents living with their children, 46% of single parents without cohabiting children has 2 or more children, often of very young age (21% in pre-scholar age and 25% between 6 and 13 years old).

Table 1 – Characteristics of single parents with cohabiting and non-cohabiting children in Italy, reference person aged 25-54.

		Single parents with cohabiting children (2019)	Single parents with non-cohabiting children (2016)
Gender	male	16.9	66.0
	female	83.1	34.0
Marital status	single	26.2	19.3
	separated/divorced	65.9	77.2
	widowed	7.9	3.5
Area of residence	north	43.9	48.8
	center	20.3	26.4
	south/islands	35.9	24.8
Number of children	1	55.9	54.4
	>=2	44.1	45.7
Age of the youngest child	0-5	15.8	21.1
	6-13	35.2	24.9
	14-17	18.9	13.4
	>=18	30.1	40.6

Source: Authors' elaborations on Aspects of Daily Life (2019) and Family and Social Subjects (2016) surveys.

2.3. The wellbeing of single parents with cohabiting and non-cohabiting children before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

The increasing complexity of Italian families is not only relevant from a demographic point of view, but it also entails important consequences in terms of social inequalities (McLanahan, 2004). Previous studies showed that different family arrangements are associated with different risks of poverty and economic deprivation of individuals and their family, and may have important implications also for their overall wellbeing. For instance, it is well-known that divorce is associated with strong reductions in household income, especially for women who end up living with and caring for the children (Aassve *et al.*, 2007). Single-parent households are, in fact, one of the types with the highest risks of poverty and social exclusion, in Italy and elsewhere (Bozzon *et al.*, 2015; Pirani *et al.*, 2021). More generally, the living arrangement has been found to be associated with individuals' wellbeing (Vignoli *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, a recent study (Waldvogel and Ehlert, 2016) found that fathers who live apart from their minor children, for instance after a separation or divorce, generally report lower psychological wellbeing than men living with children in the same household. The absence of one of the parents, parental stress, and loss of economic resources can produce negative consequences also for children, for instance in terms of educational outcomes (Guetto and Panichella, 2019).

All in all, considering current increasing trends in union dissolutions even in presence of young child(ren), and given that these transformations are progressively spreading to more socioeconomically disadvantaged social groups (Pirani, 2019), it is of paramount importance to understand the characteristics of these families. This is truer in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic can be thought as a multiplier of previously existing stress factors for parents who experienced union dissolution. As far as the custodial parents, usually mothers, lockdowns and other government restrictions, especially the closure of childcare services and schools, increased their already high burden of housework and childcare. More in general, the suspension of many non-essential working activities may have caused additional economic stress to individuals who already faced the direct and indirect costs of separation. Last but not least, the pandemic and its responses may have increased the above-mentioned risks of psychological distress and social exclusion, also due to reduced contacts with the non-cohabiting children during the lockdown periods. To this aim, in what follows we provide some preliminary results of an *ad hoc* study on the consequences of the pandemic for single parents with and without cohabiting children.

3. Data

In this study, we used a web-based survey to obtain primary data on Italian single parents with cohabiting and non-cohabiting children, considering the consequences of the pandemic on their lives (*SParWell*). We collected information on respondents' socioeconomic situation, sociodemographic characteristics, and several dimensions of wellbeing. Whenever possible, we adopted the same wordings of questions already asked by ISTAT within the nationally-representative survey Aspects of Daily Life (ADL) carried out in 2019 (see next section). Specifically, we created a questionnaire addressed to the members of an organization named GenGle (<https://gengle.it/>), which aims to connect single parents' families all over Italy and foster the development of support networks among them. The questionnaire was disseminated through the organization's social media channels and their newsletter, reaching thousands of individuals. The data collection phase lasted one month (April 2021) and resulted in 871 responses. Among these, we considered a target of respondents with one or more children conceived with the same partner¹, who experienced the breakup of the relationship (either marriage or cohabitation) with the other parent before 2020, namely

¹ We acknowledge that individuals with children originated in multiple unions (or multiple partners) may represent a significant group in this population segment. Nevertheless, they would have added further complexity in an already heterogeneous scenario, especially when considering parent-child relationships.

before the beginning of the pandemic. We ended up with an analytical sample of 715 individuals, whose characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 – Summary statistics of the *SParWell* sample (percentages)

		Sample composition (%)
Gender	male	21.1
	female	78.9
Age group	<40	12.0
	40-45	30.4
	46-50	33.0
	>50	24.6
Area of residence	north	57.5
	center	34.4
	south/islands	7.8
	abroad	0.3
Educational level	lower secondary (ISCED 0-2)	6.3
	upper secondary (ISCED 3-4)	43.4
	tertiary (ISCED 5+)	50.3

Source: Author's elaborations.

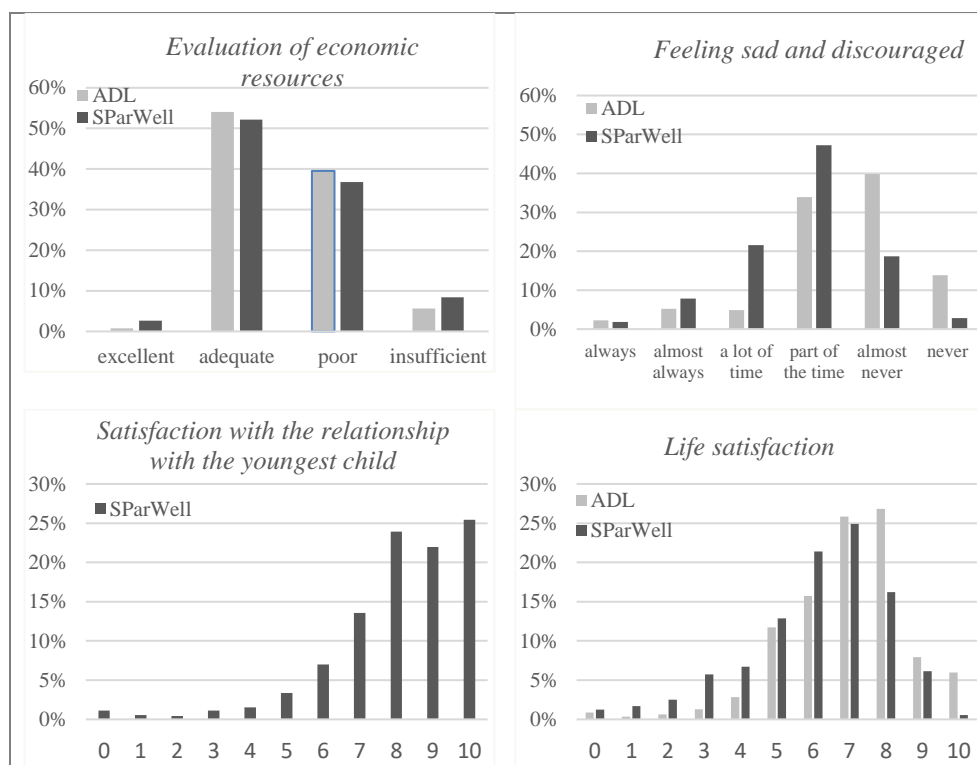
Beyond the usual advantages provided by web surveys, e.g. low costs and high efficiency, there are two specific reasons why we employed this method of data collection. First, in a period of social distancing, face-to-face interviews were not an option. Second, and more general, obtaining a random sample of our target population is not easy, especially as far as the sub-group of parents with non-cohabiting children. On the other hand, we realize that web surveys are exposed to important issues of sampling bias. However, apart from the strong over-representation of highly educated individuals (half of the respondents achieved tertiary education), which is typical of this method of data collection (Duffy *et al.* 2005), the sample characteristics in terms of sex, age, and area of residence are in line with the distributions in the target population at the national level. In fact, 79% of the respondents are women, and the majority reside in the North of Italy (58%). The sample is rather young, 12% of respondents are aged less than 40, 30% between 40 and 45, 33% between 46 and 50, and 25% more than 50.

4. Results

In this section, we present the main descriptive results of the *SParWell* survey, concerning single parents' wellbeing across several dimensions (Figure 2). The answers provided by our respondents are compared with those of the same target population collected within the ADL survey carried out by ISTAT in 2019. The latter is a useful

benchmark, as it is a nationally-representative survey carried out just before the COVID-19 pandemic².

Figure 2 – Single parents’ wellbeing, percentage distributions



Source: Author’s elaborations on Aspects of Daily Life (2019) and SPaWell surveys

Starting from respondents’ evaluations of their own economic resources, almost half of the SPaWell sample judges them as poor or insufficient. This is not surprising, as we mentioned how the economic conditions of single-parent households are usually worse than those reported in other living arrangements. Moreover, the distribution we obtained is very much in line with that of the ADL survey for this type of household. The situation is markedly different when it comes to non-economic dimensions of wellbeing. In fact, almost half of our respondents felt sad and discouraged for at least part of the time during the four weeks preceding the survey (approximately March/April 2021), with an additional 32% who declared to have felt sad and discouraged for most of the time. The

² It should be noted, however, that in the ADL survey only single parents with cohabiting children are considered, due to a lack of information to identify non-cohabiting children.

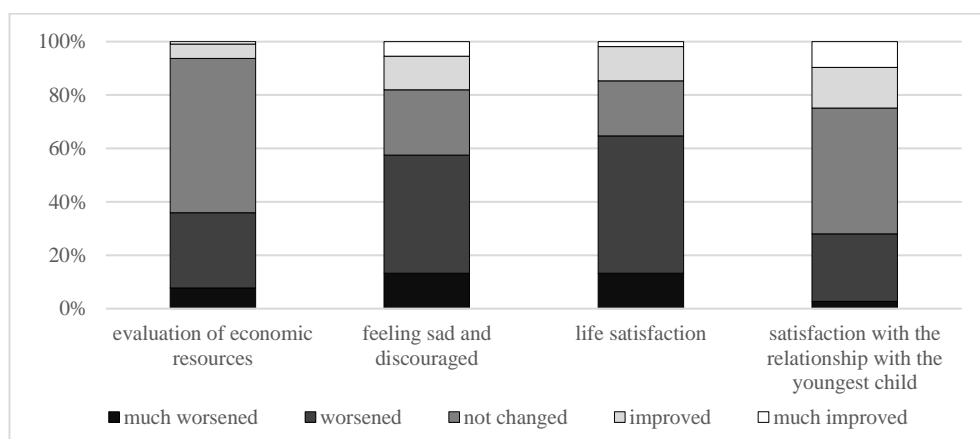
same figures are 34% and 12% in the ADL survey. Similar differences between *SParWell* and ADL data are found for overall life satisfaction. The distribution in our data is still left-skewed (mean and median equal to 6), but the share of respondents with high levels (i.e., 8 or more) of life satisfaction is much lower compared to the ADL survey. A last dimension of wellbeing considered is the satisfaction with the relationship with the youngest (or only) child, which was not asked in the ADL survey. In this case, we detect higher levels of satisfaction (mean and median equal to 8).

Although indirect, the comparison between ours and ADL data suggests that whereas the economic situation of single parents remains difficult, it did not deteriorate substantially due to the pandemic and its responses. On the other hand, non-economic and more subjective measures of wellbeing worsened a lot. Our next results shown in Figure 3 provide more direct evidence on this point. We asked the respondents to compare their current situation concerning the same dimensions of wellbeing analyzed above with their situation before the pandemic outbreak (approximately January 2020). As far as the economic resources, around 60% of our respondents declared that their situation did not change. For approximately one-third of the sample the situation worsened, but only to some extent. On the contrary, the emotional situation and overall life satisfaction deteriorated for approximately 60% and 65% of the sample, respectively. More positive changes concerned, instead, respondents' perception of the quality of the relationship with their youngest child: Whereas for a quarter of our sample the relationship improved after the pandemic, for another quarter it deteriorated. Thus, lockdowns and restrictions to mobility seem not to have impacted, on average, on parent-child relationship in our target population, at least as far as the youngest child is concerned.

In addition to the results shown in Figures 2 and 3, we explored possible heterogeneity in wellbeing, before and after the pandemic, by gender and partnership status. All the reported bivariate associations between gender and the different measures of wellbeing are statistically significant at least at the 5% level. Our data suggest that single-parent women have less wellbeing than single-parent men, especially when measured through subjective, non-economic measures – e.g., only 19% of women declared to have never or almost never felt sad or discouraged in the four weeks before the survey, against 32% among their male counterparts. This difference can be attributed to a stronger negative impact of the pandemic among female single parents. In fact, the emotional situation worsened for 60% of sampled women, against 48% of men. Considering that 96% of single-parent women in our sample cohabit with their youngest child, against only 4% of single-parent men, these differences may be reasonably attributed to the impact of the pandemic on women's unpaid work burden. In support of this interpretation, women reported a substantial worsening of their relationship with their youngest child. Whereas only for a tiny minority of men and women the relationship worsened *a lot*, it did worsen for 29% of women, against only 13% of men.

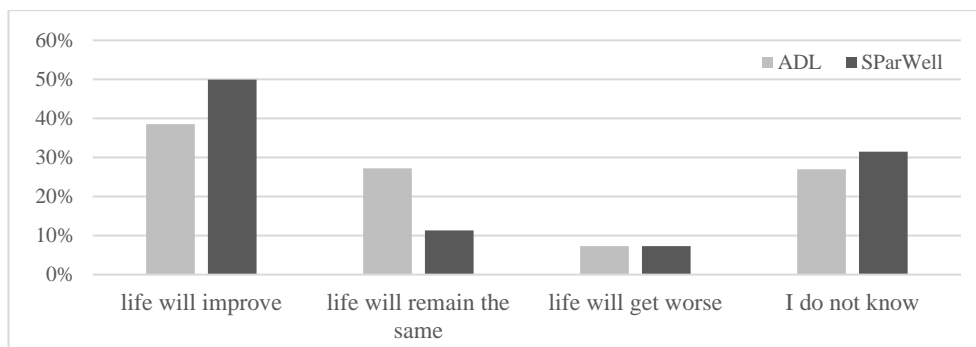
Our sample is composed of single parents who experienced union dissolution before January 2020; however, they might have found a new cohabiting partner in the meanwhile. This occurred to 43 respondents, the 6% of the sample. Respondents who currently cohabit with a new partner are substantially more satisfied with their life than their unpartnered counterparts, the average scores being 7.1 and 6, respectively. It is plausible that having found a new partner just before or during the pandemic might have reduced its negative consequences in terms of increasing unpaid work burden and feelings of social isolation. Whereas 66% of single parents who did not find a new partner report a worsening of their overall life satisfaction compared to January 2020, the same figure for newly partnered ones is 51%.

Figure 3 – Changes in single parents' wellbeing after the pandemic, percentage distribution



Source: Author's elaborations on SParWell survey

Finally, we asked the respondents whether they think their life will improve, remain the same, or get worse in the next three years. Results are presented in Figure 4 and compared with the ones obtained through the 2019 ADL survey. The share of single parents with an optimistic outlook is much higher in our sample. This suggests that the worsening of wellbeing that we previously outlined can be considered as a direct effect of the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, respondents think their personal situation will improve as soon as the emergency will be resolved.

Figure 4 – Single parents' expectations for the 3 next years, percentage distributions

Source: Author's elaborations on *Aspects of Daily Life* (2019) and *SParWell* surveys

5. Conclusions

The diffusion of non-marital unions and couple instability in Italy in the last two decades has produced an increase in the share of single parents. We discussed the risks of economic deprivation and social exclusion experienced by this type of family, which make them particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, we presented the main results from a survey we carried out in April 2021, *SParWell*, on a sample of single parents with cohabiting and non-cohabiting children. The survey has been carried out with the support of an Italian association (*GenGle*) aiming to connect single parents' families all over the country and to foster support networks among them.

The main results suggest that single parents did not suffer excessively from an economic point of view: This may be due to the already very difficult economic conditions of these families, and partly to the positive selection of our sample. However, our respondents declared a strong decline in psychological wellbeing. This may be connected with increasing difficulties in work-family reconciliation, as the situation especially deteriorated for single mothers, whereas the negative effects of the pandemic seem weaker among single parents who found a new partner during the pandemic. In addition, whereas the relationship with the youngest child did not substantially worsen among our respondents, it did deteriorate among women, which is suggestive as virtually all of them are cohabiting with their children, whereas their male counterparts are not.

Notwithstanding data suggest an important worsening of the wellbeing of single parents due to the pandemic, our respondents remain optimistic toward the future. The pandemic has exacerbated some of the distressing factors of Italian single parents. Some emergency measures have been introduced to support families' income and facilitate work-family life conciliation. However, policies designed on "traditional" families (i.e.

couples with children) may not be suitable to sustain the economic and psychological wellbeing of single-parent families. Their specific social risks – e.g., single income, reduced support from the partner for childbearing, lower-quality parent-child relationships, especially for the non-custodial parent, – require more incisive and targeted policies for the future, even beyond the pandemic.

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SUMMARY

The wellbeing of single parents in Italy before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

In the last two decades, the Italian society has been experiencing great transformations in its family demography, with an impressive spreading of out-of-wedlock childbearing, non-marital unions, and marital separations. Among the consequences of these changes, an increasing share of children experience the dissolution of their parents' union and are raised in a non-intact family, i.e. a household where either the mother or the father is absent. After a brief description of the recent evolution of Italian families and their characteristics, in this paper we focus on single parents, considering both those living with their children and without them. Our study exploits data from an *ad hoc* survey carried out in April 2021, on a sample of single parents with cohabiting and non-cohabiting children, to evaluating the consequences of the recent COVID-19 pandemic outbreak on the economic and psychological wellbeing of single parents in Italy. Our results suggest that single parents' (low) satisfaction for their economic resources did not change dramatically, also due to their pre-existing economic difficulties, but a substantial decline in psychological wellbeing has been detected, especially among women. Nevertheless, respondents remain optimistic in their expectations for the future.

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