



Fertility in an urban context. A complex phenomenon

Moreover, the value of quality grows when we consider the idea of altruism of parents toward their children (Becker, 1981b), assuming that the utility function of parents depends not only on their own consumption, but also on the utility of their children. This concept is particularly appealing when we deal with a familistic society, as the Italian one, where the success of the sons is viewed as the success of their parents (Casacchia and Dalla Zuanna, 1999). Thus, in such a context, it seems more favourable to have a low number of children of 'high quality' than a high number of children of 'low quality'.

2. Family, Fertility and Female Participation in the Italian Context

In the introduction of this Chapter we underlined that during recent decades social and economic change has taken place simultaneously with changes in demographic behaviour. A strong upgrading in educational attainment and a feminilisation of the labour force are common trends in a variety of industrialised countries and they are related with the decrease of fertility. Nevertheless, each society maintains its own specificities.

In Italy, for example, although the female participation rates increased by about 15% between the 1970s and the 1990s, they still remain very low compared to other European countries (Chesnais, 1996; Del Boca, 1999b). Moreover, there is a great differential between rates for married and unmarried women, with only the latter approaching male participation rates. Some change is emphasised by Jensen (1995), assessing that over time, women's employment has expanded: from quitting a job when marrying, to quitting when having the first child, and finally to today's expectation that women will combine the two roles of mother and worker, interrupting employment only during maternity leaves.

Certainly the market rigidities present in the Italian institutional structure do not facilitate the conciliation of the two roles (Del Boca, 1999b; Golini, 1999). First, the fact that part-time employment is extremely rare in Italy (and often characterised by low profile engagements) is an important factor leading to the low employment rates of married women. Women need to choose between full-time jobs or no job at all (knowing that after quitting the job it is generally difficult to return; see Bernardi, 1999b), neither of which being necessarily their preferred option. Moreover, the general labour market situation may also indirectly affect fertility decision, since parents expect children will stay in the parental home for a long time, at least until they find a stable job and even later on. This has the effect of rising the cost of children.

Another source of rigidity comes from the Italian childcare sector, characterised by a very limited capacity in terms of number of children and weekly hours available, only compatible with part-time jobs (Bernardi, 1999b).

As a result of incompatibility between work and motherhood, empirical findings emphasise that if a woman continues working after having had a child, she has a lower