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Fathers' involvement in daily childcare activities in Italy: does a work-family reconciliation issue exist?

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Abstract

Aim of the paper is to show the degree of father's participation in mundane child-tending tasks and to evaluate the individual or couple's characteristics favouring this involvement, with special concern for labour market participation. Our analysis is based on a sample of fathers of pre-school-aged children from the 2003 Multipurpose Italian survey on Family and Social Actors, carried out by ISTAT. Results have confirmed that the daily childcare burden rests mainly on mothers' shoulders, although fathers have increased their involvement in the last few years. Only a small minority of fathers performs all the routine activities of childcare on a daily basis. However, father's commitment increases substantially if the mother is employed and if she works more hours. Men's working conditions influence the degree of their involvement in childrearing as well, other things being equal: similarly to what happens for women, role reconciliation can be facilitated when fathers are either white-collar workers or teachers, or work a reduced number of hours. The combination of characteristics between partners, have a clear impact in shaping gender roles with special regard to childcare.

1. Introduction

Across the world men and women have different roles in the society and within the family, according to what it is “prescribed” by the gender system that is built on beliefs, norms and practices. It is indubitable, though, that in most Western countries, female and male roles, their life style and their use of time, have changed tremendously over the last decades. The increase of female participation in the labour market has prompted a consequent change also in the gender role-set within the family. In some countries – such as the Scandinavian ones – men and women have more and more obtained similar lives, both in the job market and in the family, with a remarkable assumption of childcare and childrearing responsibilities and duties by fathers. On the contrary, in Italy the gender gap is particularly large in all stages of the life-course and in all domains, within and outside the family. According to the “global gender index gap” Italy is at the 84th place (2007 World Economic Forum data), scoring worst among all European countries (except Turkey). It comes last concerning women’s position in the labour market. Gender differences in the division of paid and unpaid labour, in fact, vary enormously across countries according to the welfare regimes, family and employment policies and the tax and benefit system, as well as social norms. Italian women still play a crucial role as carers both for the young and for the old members of the family, barely supported by their partners and by public service. There are important trigger-events behind gender differences in time use and assumption of gender roles during the life-course: the most important being the entry into parenthood. In the Italian context, the experience of parenthood implies, on average, a crystallization of gender roles, with an increase in female time devoted to housework and childcare, as well as a decrease in leisure time; and an increase of male time for paid work. Last time-use survey data showed that fathers have increased their involvement in the last two decades, but not sufficiently to change the overall picture of marked gender differences in parental roles.

The Italian case and the role of Italian fathers makes therefore a highly interesting subject of research. There are important reasons to promote – with specific policy measures and incentives – a more active role of fathers in the childrearing. First of all there is a need to alleviate the “dual burden” of large number of women overloaded by the struggle to reconsolidate working activities and family life, thereby ensuring gender equal opportunities within and outside the family. Enhancing our knowledge of Italian fathers’ behaviour in daily childcare activities, according to individual and couples characteristics, linked also to job participation, is essential in the current debate on reconciliation policies, which are largely dominated by working mothers’ issues, but could encourage men to become more committed fathers. A second concern is to promote a closer relationship between fathers and their offspring, which – according to recent psychological theories – is built mainly through the daily childcare activities. Lastly, but perhaps most important in this context, is that recent contributions in the demographic literature suggest that fathers lack of investment in childrearing is an important explanation behind low fertility. That is, those couples whereby the fathers make a strong contribution towards childrearing tend to have a higher likelihood of having more children. This is a highly important issue in Italy, where state support towards child care is poor and, yet at the same time, fertility levels are very low. Finally, whereas studies exist in other countries of fathers’ involvement in childrearing, very little is known about Italian fathers.

On the backdrop of this, we focus here on Italian fathers of pre-school children to evaluate their degree of involvement in mundane child-tending tasks and to evidence either the individual or couple’s characteristics favouring their commitment. Particular attention is devoted to both partners’ job features. Our hypothesis is that not only gender matters, but that also men’s job position and working time are associated to a different degree of father’s involvement in care activities, net of other background characteristics. We are also interested in assessing the existence of peculiar strategies adopted by certain couples (e.g. “power couples”). To do so, we include in the analysis appropriate combination of father’s and mother’s characteristics. Our analyses are based on

data on a sub-sample of fathers of pre-school-aged children, from Multipurpose Italian survey on Family and Social Actors, carried out by ISTAT in 2003.

After the outline of the theoretical framework (section 2), we describe the empirical evidence of fathers' childcare involvement in Italy and we draw our research hypotheses (section 3). Then we present descriptive findings summarised by the IFI-Index of Father Involvement (section 4). Results of analyses are shown in section 5 whereas section 6 provides concluding remarks.

2. Fatherhood and the gender role-set crisis: theoretical perspectives

The increasing prevalence of the “dual-earner” couples across Europe, instead of the traditional “male breadwinner” ones, prompts a change in the gender role-set within the family. Previous research shows nevertheless that mothers are still responsible for the majority of childcare, even if fathers are caring more than ever before in most European countries, although at different degree. In many Western countries, the burden of housework and care remains mainly on women's shoulders, in spite of their increasing participation in the labour market. Their active presence both at home and in the labour market lies behind the so-called “dual burden”. Hochschild (1989) coined the term of “stalled revolution” to describe this situation where increases in women's employment rates are not followed adequately by men's increasing responsibility for domestic chores and care.

Some theories, supporting the role of individual resource in allocation of time for childcare, have roots in economic theories. According to the “*relative resources and bargaining theory*” (Lundberg and Pollak 1996, Lundberg and Rose 2005) or “*power rule*” (Thomson 1990), the higher the job position and professional success of an individual, the greater is her/his bargaining power within the household with regard to childcare. According to this theory, roles are not predetermined by gender, but they are defined in relation to the relative earning power of each partner. Therefore, men characteristics must be taken into account, in combination with those of their spouse. Age, education and income seem to be relevant factors influencing housework and childcare division. The husbands who are older than their wives are usually less involved in domestic issues, according to Presser (2001). If both partners have a high level of education, the sharing of the domestic work is more egalitarian. Presser (1994) also shows that the time spent by men on domestic work (including childcare) is higher for those with higher level of education. It is possible that the level of education captures also an attitudinal effect since both men and women with higher level of education usually support the gender equality ideology (Brines, 1994). Hobson (1990) also argues that the power in decision-making within the family is linked to the earning power of the spouse. Presser (1994) indicates that husbands with higher income are less involved in childcare, and Geist (2005) finds that women with higher income do less domestic work. Presser (1994) shows however that when both spouses have higher incomes the total amount of housework is decreasing, thanks to outsourcing strategies. Many authors have underlined also the importance of the job position of fathers. Fathers who are successful as providers would also develop good relationships with their children (Halle and Le Menestrel 2000), but this theory seems to contrast with the finding that white-collar workers are usually those most involved in childrearing, probably because of a favourable time schedule (Smith Koslowski 2008).

The relationship between parental employment and childcare is directly relevant to questions of work–family balance. According to the approach of “*doing gender*”, both women and men, can perceive the problem of reconciliation between working activity and family differently (Lehrer and Nerlove 1986). For men working activity can be an instrument to exercise their role of “*providers*”, according to prevalent social norms. Whereas for women, social norms traditionally have prescribed the role of family *career*, and therefore time spent for remunerate work outside the family often conflicts with that spent for the family, at home. There is inconclusive empirical evidence of how

mothers' employment is associated with fathers' time with children (see studies reviewed in Craig 2008, Pailhé and Solaz 2008). Similarly, there are mixed findings on the extent to which fathers' own employment schedules are associated with their time with children, although more hours of employment generally reduces their time spent with babies (see studies cited in Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson 2004, Pailhé and Solaz 2008, Romano and Bruzzese 2006). In Europe, a higher degree of participation to childcare is found more often among more educated fathers with more children and with a working partner (Smith 2004). White-collar fathers, working in the public sector, part-time, or in a large company are more likely to dedicate substantial time to their children (Smith 2004). Some factors are therefore linked to indispensable "needs" of either larger families or dual-earner couples, others to the availability of father's time to dedicate to children.

The available free time is found to be another resource which can influence the allocation of childcare. The spouse who has more leisure available will spend more time doing housework no matter the sex. Presser (1994), Ross (1981) and Geist (2005) point out that the number of hours spent at home is increasing the time dedicated by both, husband and wife on the domestic work and childcare. On the one hand, if a mother works, father's participation to childcare can become a necessity – and therefore the degree of his involvement could be merely dependent on woman characteristics. On the other hand, it is likely that also personal characteristics of the father play an important role. In general, we can presume that more active fathers would be the younger ones, due to their more recent and egalitarian socialisation, and the more educated ones, who are usually more conscious of paternal role for children's psychological development and also more keen to a less traditional and more egalitarian gender role-set within the couple (Di Giulio and Carrozza 2003).

Furthermore, the gender division of work within the couples can be linked also to their fertility behaviour. Recent fertility theories have taken into consideration gender inequality as a possible explanation of lowest-low fertility in Southern Mediterranean countries (McDonald 2000a and 2000b; Cooke 2003). McDonald (2006) in particular, suggests that the very low fertility may be the result of a hiatus that has developed in some developed countries between "high levels of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions and sustained gender inequity in family-oriented social institutions". If in recent decades women have been given the same opportunities as men in education, and to some extent, in the labour market as well, this has not happened within union and family relationships. Indeed, women's job opportunities can be seriously compromised by having children. This situation can in itself drive many women to reduce the number of children they have or even induce them to forego children altogether (Matthews, 1999; Scisci and Vinci, 2002; Mencarini and Tanturri, 2006; Tanturri and Mencarini, 2008). It is not difficult to observe that the developed countries with a very low fertility are the ones with a less equal gender system compared with countries where fertility is relatively higher (counterpoising the countries of the Southern with those of Northern Europe). Only few recent studies have confirmed such theory with micro data analyses (see Olah 2004, on the transition to second child in Hungary and Sweden; Miller Torr and Short 2004 on US; Cooke, 2003 on Italy and Spain; Mencarini and Tanturri 2004, on Italian urban contexts; Mills *at al.* 2008 comparing Italy and the Netherlands).

More debatable is whether egalitarian men themselves are more interested in "doing family" rather than "doing gender", having higher fertility desires and behaviour, as suggested by Kaufman (2000). Purr et al. (2009) in a comparative analysis that includes adult men of eight European countries found that men with egalitarian attitudes seem to have higher fertility aspirations than their traditional counterparts. Their important result is mitigated by Westoff and Higgins (2009) showing that the sense and the size of that relationship between gender equality and male fertility desires and behaviour is verified only in few countries and it is very sensitive to the indicator used to measure and synthesise the gender egalitarianism.

3. Father childcare involvement in Italy: empirical evidence and research hypothesis

In Italy, the latest studies agree that fathers' behaviour is still predominantly shaped along the traditional gender role-set, despite an increase in women participation to the labour market (Rosina and Sabbadini 2006; Romano e Bruzzese 2007; Pinnelli, Racioppi and Terzera 2007, Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008). According to recent comparative research (Smith Koslowski 2008, Smith 2004), in 2001 only 11% of Italian fathers of children under six dedicate a substantial amount of time to their children (more than 28 hours a week), while this proportion is 57% in Denmark, 31% in Finland, 24% in Britain, 20% in Germany and 16% in France.

In Italy the experience of parenthood often implies a strong specialization of gender roles, with an increase of female time spent in housework and childcare (as well as a reduction of their time for paid work and free-time), and an increase of men's time dedicated to paid work. The effect of increasing men's working hours as consequence of fatherhood is not perceptible in other countries (Anxo et al. 2007) and it has been interpreted as a rather rational response to the reduction of their partner's labour supply (and income) that usually motherhood prompts (Istat 2006 and 2007). The commitment at home of Italian fathers seems to be rather inelastic to changes in family size and spouse's labour participation (Mills et al. 2008, Anxo et al. 2007). This often implies an overload of *dual burden* for mothers, because of the double active presence at home and in the labour market. As it is well known, the reconciliation of roles within and outside the family is more difficult for a mother than for a father. Empirical studies show that childbirth significantly increases stress levels for working women (Cromton 2004) and reduces the satisfaction of couple relationship (Coltrane 1996).

Not only do Italian fathers tend to increase their labour market participation compared to childless men in the same age groups, but also when they increase slightly the time dedicated to care, they often reduce their involvement in domestic tasks (Romano and Bruzzese 2006, Anxo et al. 2007). Moreover, time use data show that in an average week-day, Italian fathers with children under 13 dedicate only 45 minutes to children in total – and only 13 minutes looking after children and for their personal care (Istat 2007, Romano and Bruzzese 2006). Consistent with other studies, it appears that those Italian fathers that appear active, in effect tend to *skim off the cream* and privilege relational activities with children rather than the less rewarding but extremely necessary routine tasks (Istat 2007, Di Giulio and Carrozza 2003, Rosina and Sabbadini 2006, Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008). The literature shows that fathers, in general, prefer more interactive activities (e.g. playing), though occasional and not related to the essential needs of the babies. However, especially care activities are believed to foster more intimate relationship with children and to develop mutual emotional sensitivities for fathers, as for mothers (Coltrane 1996).

In sum, empirical studies suggest that in Italy fatherhood emphasises men's role of breadwinner rather than of carer and gives more importance to relational activities than purely child-minding tasks. Plausibly, traditional gender roles are still important in affecting father and mother's different behaviour in Italy, according to the theory of *doing gender* (Berk 1985, West and Zimmermann 1987), but peculiar fathers' working conditions could also have an impact on determining their scarce commitment in childbearing: e.g. long or non standard working hours, high proportion of people working on their own or in small firms, lack of reconciliation measures available for fathers, ...).

All results show that time-squeeze for Italian working mothers is relevant, and, where childcare services are not available, fathers' behaviour is so fundamental that the gender symmetric role-set of parents can even increase their likelihood to have one more child (Mencarini and Tanturri 2004, Mills *at al.* 2008). The consequence of scarce participation in childrearing of fathers can result in a real disappointment driven by a an authentic "violation of expectations" by their partners as fathers and, as a consequence of difficulties encountered after the first child, renounce to have a second child (Kalmuss et al. 1992, Romito and Saurel-Cubizolles 1998).

As already said, in this study we focus on Italian pre-school children and their involvement in daily childcare activities. We evaluate men and couples' characteristics influencing the involvement of fathers in childcare. Based on the aforementioned theoretical and empirical considerations, our main hypothesis is that not only gender matters, but that also men's job position and working time are associated to a different degree of father's involvement in care activities, net of other background characteristics. Particular attention is devoted to both partners' job features and time schedule. We are also interested in assessing whether, for fathers whose commitment in routine childbearing task is large, this is part of peculiar strategies adopted by certain couples (e.g.. "power couples"). It is important to verify in which cases more favourable working condition could act as an enabler for Italian fathers to fulfil their role as carers of their children.

In the Italian context, we also expect to find a significant effect from availability and use of external help, such as baby-sitters or a crèche, which might be particularly critical among dual earner couples – and also of the grandparents' proximity and their tangible assistance, the latter being important given the strong family ties in Italy. Moreover, we suppose a lower involvement of fathers resident in the South of Italy, compared to those resident in the Centre or the North, because of a more traditional gender role-set still present in South; and of younger fathers rather than older fathers, because those who are younger and therefore been socialised more recently – can foster more egalitarian gender role-set.

4. An index of Italian fathers' involvement in daily care activities

Our empirical analysis is based on data from the 2003 Multipurpose Italian survey on Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) on a national representative sample of private households. We select a sub-sample of 2,477 under-six- years-old children, whose parents are stable couples (either married or cohabiting).

The focus of the analysis is on fathers' participation in routine care activities, such as: 1) *helping the child to dress*, 2) *feeding the child*, 3) *changing nappies*, 4) *bathing*, 5) *putting her/him to bed*, tasks which have been traditionally performed by mothers. The Multipurpose Italian survey provides information on how frequently fathers carry out the above daily child-tending tasks (*everyday, few times a week, once a week, few times a month, few times a year, never*), with children under six years old. It is interesting to remark that the same series of questions have not been posed to mothers too: presumably this is because it is a matter of fact that mothers do perform such activities every day. Therefore, unfortunately gender differences in daily care activities are not measurable using the same data-set.

From Table 1 it is evident that the activities which fathers more frequently perform, are those of putting the child to bed. This is carried out on a daily basis respectively by 35% fathers whose child is less than three years old and by 31% of those whose child is between three and five years old. This can be considered one of the most relational activities among the routine tasks and not surprisingly it is preferred by men, together with feeding, carried out on a daily basis respectively by 28% of fathers of babies and by 26% of fathers of older children (Table 1). Conversely, one father out of four changes nappies everyday to his child under the age of three (Table 1). If there is a certain number of fathers tending their children everyday, there is also a high proportion of them who never performs specific activities, such as changing nappies (26% of fathers of younger children) or bathing (around 30% for both groups). The proportion of inactive fathers is more relevant both in the South of Italy and in the Islands and among fathers with a lower level of education (not shown in the table). No important differences among the age groups have been found.

The analysis provides interesting insights on how frequent a father performs a specific care activity, but does not allow giving a global evaluation of the father role in Italy. Therefore, we

summarise the results by one unique indicator, giving a score to each frequency, summing the score for all the activities and then standardizing the sum. The Index of Fathers Involvement (IFI) is equal to 1, when a father performs all the activities every day, and it is equal to 0, when a father never carries out any of the task. All the intermediate cases are in between. We calculated the indexes separately for children who are less than three years old and between three and five: in the second case we exclude “changing nappies” from the IFI computation, as most of older-than-three children do not use nappies any longer.

The IFI average index for the entire sample is equal to 0.62 in 2003 (Table 2). Not surprisingly it is slightly higher for children under three years old than for older children. Results show that only a small minority of fathers is involved in all the routine activities everyday, 7% with a child under three years old, and 6% with a child over three. However, minor is also the proportion of fathers who never perform any of the childcare tasks: around 4%. Comparing the same indexes calculated with the previous Multipurpose Survey carried out in 1998, there is a slight, but not negligible, increase in fathers’ involvement: in fact the average IFI index is higher (for younger children was 0.56 and for the older was 0.54) and the proportion of never active fathers has fallen from 8 to 4% (Tanturri 2006). Nevertheless, it is clear that in Italy child-care is still demanded almost completely to the mothers; even when fathers reveal some degree of participation, they merely support mothers, performing only few tasks among those essential for childrearing. If for the babies below three years old, the prominence of the mother role can be justified by biological reasons (breastfeeding, for instance), for older children the motivation is mainly cultural or linked to parents’ job-time schedule. Among this group of fathers there is a lower proportion of the extreme cases: 6% are the more active fathers and 3% are those who are absolutely inactive.

Successively, we calculate the IFI mean value by specific father or couple’s characteristics (Table 2), such as both partners’ education and type of household (dual income or male breadwinner). A first general observation is that father’s behaviour changes only slightly across categories: indeed, the maximum level above the means (0.62) is 0.68, while the minimum is 0.56. This might be a suggestion that Italian father’s behaviour is shaped predominantly by gender roles, as opposed to men’s characteristics. Consistently, the level of father involvement is higher in the Centre and North of Italy, where gender role-set is usually more balanced, and where more women are in the labour market. It would be interesting to assess whether these discrepancies persist once we control for the structural differences in these areas.

The hypothesis that younger fathers play a more important role in care activities does not seem to be confirmed by descriptive findings. Conversely, more educated fathers have a higher IFI mean value than the least educated, but there are no differences between fathers having a degree and a high school diploma. As expected, teachers or white-collars fathers seem to be the most active: in both cases these professions are characterised by more compatible working time schedules, for men, as it has already been observed in literature for women. Not surprisingly, the lowest degree of father involvement is observed among managers, industrial profession men and entrepreneurs, since these jobs are usually very demanding in terms of time and commitment. The blue-collars and self-employed, together with a residual category, show levels of involvement lower than the average. It is possible that very intense or irregular time schedules prevent them to spend much time with their babies. In these cases, it would be worth to evaluate the effect of professional position, net of other possible confounders, such as education level and number of working hours.

Fathers’ involvement changes slightly according to the mother’s professional condition. When mothers are blue-collars, fathers are the most involved in childcare, while when mothers are self-employed they are the least. At first glance, this result seems to contradict the “power rules” theory, as the less power women are those whose partner cares the most.

If we take into account combined couple characteristics, it is interesting to remark that, despite the small size of the groups, higher levels of paternal activity are registered either for those couples where both partners are highly educated or women are more educated than men (Table 2). As expected, very dissimilar is the degree of fathers’ involvement in dual-income and male-

breadwinner households: for the former group, it is possible that more active father participation is encouraged by the needs, but also by a major mother's bargaining power.

5. An analysis of fathers' involvement

In order to test our research hypotheses, we estimate four multiple linear regression models (OLS) with as dependent variables the fathers' involvement in mundane child-care activities, as measured by the Indicator of Father Involvement. In the first three models (Table 3) we consider, as covariates, only father characteristics, while in the fourth we include couple features as well (Table 6). With model 1 (Table 3) the research question we would like to answer is whether father's job position is associated to a different degree of father's involvement in care activities, net for other father's background characteristics. In model 2 (Table 3), we include also father's time schedule, to see whether the effect of job position persists. In model 3 (Table 3), we include also women's degree of labour market participation. In model 4, we consider explicitly appropriate combination of father's and mother's characteristics to evidence the peculiar strategies adopted by certain couples (e.g.. "power rules", gender role specialisation, one work-one career,...)

As covariates we include men's background characteristics (*age bracket, area of residence and education level*), fathers' employment characteristics (*professional condition, number of working hours per week*) and mother's labour market participation (*number of working hours per week*). In the fourth model, instead of father's characteristics, we encompass opportune mixture of mothers' and father's features (*age difference, combination of education level, of professional positions and working hours*). All the estimated models are controlled for *child's age and sex, number of total children in the household, external aids for childcare*, such as a baby sitter, a crèche or relatives' assistance. In general, we the explained variation is rather small, less than 9% in all the models, but most of the covariates of interest have statistically significant effect.

Results of a series of nested OLS models (Table 1) show that, among background characteristics, only education level and regional residence are associated significantly with our indicator of father involvement. As expected, the least involved fathers live in the South (-0.07 of the IFI), and are the least educated (-0.05 of the IFI), net of the other variables in the models. The magnitude of the negative effect of these variables persists in the three models, once we control for father and mother's working position. These results prove that in a more traditional context gender roles are still shaped in a less egalitarian way, even once we control for structural differences (e.g. women labour market participation). Education – as stated before – is confirmed to be a proxy for greater awareness of father's role for children well-being, but also for greater gender sensitiveness. Conversely, younger fathers do not seem to be more involved in childcare *ceteris paribus*. This finding is in contrast with the hypothesis that those who are younger – therefore who have been socialised more recently – foster more egalitarian gender role-set.

In the first model (Table 1, model 1), men's professional position seems to differentiate the paternal attitude to caring for their pre-school children. All the categories considered show a reduction of the IFI with respect to the teacher and clerk group, taken as reference category: there is a relatively ample reduction of the IFI for managers, industrial professional men and entrepreneurs (-0.09), relatively small for blue-collars (-0.02) but also for the self-employed and a residual category (- 0,04). For both self-employed and blue-collars, however, this negative effect appears to be linked to the long hours of work: indeed their association with the IFI is no more statistically significant, once we introduce the number of weekly working hours in the model (Table 1, Model 2). On the contrary, for managers the negative effect on IFI is only slightly reduced in the second model (from -0.09 to 0.07), but still persists, at the same level of significance ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that those occupation typologies that are more demanding, not only in terms of working hours, but also in terms of dedication, are the least compatible with family tasks. The reductive

effect of long working schedule is particularly evident for men working more than 50 hours a week (- 0.06, $p < 0.01$), compared to those working less than 40 hours (Table 1, Model 2).

Eventually, we include in the model female partner's occupational condition (Table 1, Model 3). As expected, where women are housewives or work very few hours, fathers are less likely to perform routine care activities. We can speculate that fathers whose wife is a housewife perform conversely more rewarding relational activities (not included in our analysis), but from this findings it is evident that most of the daily routine activities are demanded to their spouse.

If mothers work between 25 and 36 hours a week, fathers show the highest level of IFI (+ 0.07, $p < 0.01$) other things being equal, while longer working time is associated with a more modest increase (+ 0.04, $p < 0.01$) of father's participation. We wonder whether this is due to different adopted strategies (e.g. outsourcing).

With the explicit aim to highlight specific couple strategies, in the last model (Table 6, Model 4), we take into account the characteristics of both partners as covariates and in particular: the age difference between spouses, the combination of education level and the combination of working time schedules. It is immediately clear that the reduction of father's involvement among couples where both partners have a lower education level (-0.07, $p < 0.01$), with respect to the reference couple where both spouses have a high school diploma (Table 4). The reduction is more modest if women are more educated than the lowest educated men (-0.03), but the association has lower statistical significance ($p < 0.1$). A certain reduction is observed also when men are as educated as those in the reference category (high school diploma), but their partners are less educated (-0.04, $p < 0.1$). Conversely, when both partners have a degree or higher level of education, the association with the IFI is positive (+0.5, $p < 0.1$); hence this finding corroborates the hypothesis that parents having both an equal and higher level of education foster more equalitarian gender role-set.

On the contrary, the hypothesis that spouses of the same age or where the woman is older have a more symmetric role-set seems not to be confirmed by our results, at least when we control for other variables (Table 6, Model 4). Similarly having the same professional position apparently is not significantly associated with an increase in the IFI, comparing to the reference category formed by a white-collar (or teacher) man in couple with a housewife (Table 6, Model 4). If the mother is a housewife, blue collars fathers and self-employed (and residuals occupation) are less active fathers (compared to the white collars): the reduction of the index is respectively -0.04 and -0.06. Unexpectedly, if the father is a manager is also sensibly more involved in childcare (+0.08). This result would deserve an in-depth analysis to understand the strategy of this peculiar type of couples: as seen in previous analysis, managers are always the least involved in childcare and in combination with all the other categories of spouses show the lowest participation (-0.14, $p < 0.01$).

With respect to the reference couple where the man works 40-50 hours and the woman work less than 24 hours, fathers' involvement is more intense for couples in which men work less hours, regardless of women's time schedule (Table 5). However, the magnitude of the effect differs and fathers' involvement increases only slightly within couples where both spouses work less hours (0.3, $p < 0.05$) and sensibly more (+ 0.07, $p < 0.01$) if women have longer working time. The same effect in terms of magnitude is observed also for those couples where women work more than 24 hours and men as the reference category (40-50 hours). Again, it seems that – *ceteris paribus* – fathers' increase their involvement when their working time allows them to be more present at home (but the other way around might be true: those fathers who are less interested in family activities work more hours). Once they have more free time however, they perform more childcare tasks if women work more hours.

Control variables are the same in the fourth models and their effects do not seem to change much across the models (Table 3 and Table 6). Unexpectedly, the age of children is not associated to a change in men's childcare, while fathers seem to be more involved in caring for sons, rather than daughters. Having another under-6-year-old child is – as expected – associated to a major effort of the fathers. At a first sight, the hypothesis that father's participation increases with the

dimension of the offspring does not find empirical evidence. However this result should be interpreted with care, because all the information is referred to the activity of a father for a specific child in a certain age bracket. Therefore, a father having more children might share his time among all their children, and thus dedicate less time to each of them, even if in general he is more involved. It is surprising to notice that the assistance of grandparents (or other relatives) does not reduce paternal care, but rather the opposite is true: where other family members care for the baby, fathers are more active as well. It is conceivable that this is the result of a higher maternal propensity to delegate childrearing to other people, including fathers. But it is also possible that a certain “quota” of maternal time, especially in the case she works, is left to other actors – including fathers – to be substituted. No statistical significant association with father care is observed in the cases children go to a crèche or a nursery school or who are cared by a baby sitter.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the level of father’s involvement in mundane child-tending tasks. We are particularly interested to assess how father’s involvement is linked to specific father and couple’s characteristics. Essentially, the analysis has shown that the childcare burden rests mainly on women’s shoulders. Fathers’ participation is discontinuous, often limited to selected activities (e.g. putting children to bed) and frequently performed just in case of need. Fathers’ involvement in routine tasks changes according to their characteristics just slightly. Only a small minority of fathers performs all the routine activities necessary to the primary care of children on a daily basis. Nevertheless comparing our results (based on 2003 data) with those obtained with 1998 data (Tanturri 2006), it seems that the level of father’s involvement is slightly increasing.

Results confirm most previous studies findings (Di Giulio and Carrozza 2003, Smith Koslowski 2008): teachers and clerks are more likely to tending children. Managers, entrepreneurs and independent professional men are the least involved categories of fathers, contrasting with the theory of Halle and Le Menestrel (2000), according to which professional success would make fathers more active. Even when we control for men’s and women’s working hours – heavier on average for high level job position, the reduction of managers (and other similar categories) involvement still persists. Therefore it is possible that fathers having a higher position are those who invest more in their role of provider than carer, likewise to what “career women” do. Time constraints seem to affect father’s involvement in daily care activities as well, alike to what happen for the mothers. Our findings reveal that working long hours limits fathers’ participation, especially for younger babies requiring continuous care, while father’s care can be facilitated when – other things being equal – belong to specific professional category (e.g. white collar workers and teachers) or work a reduced number of hours.

The issue of work and family balance has been usually considered as a women’s problem only, but our findings confirm that this topic is relevant also for shaping father’s role. Less intense working time schedules for men seem to facilitate their participation – regardless of their spouse’s position - and, therefore, have a positive impact on gender role-set and, possibly, on fertility. If parental leave policies have contributed to encourage father’s active role (at least at theoretical level), it is possible that measures aimed at reducing working time schedules or at allowing to work part-time during the children’s first years of life, for both parents, might also represent a stimulus towards a full sharing of tending care activities and, perhaps, to have a (or another) child.

Time squeeze is not the only factor associated to a different degree of father’s activity. Also cultural attitudes have a considerable role in shaping gender roles with special regard to the care of babies. Our results confirm that more educated men are those who are more involved in routine childcare tasks, *ceteris paribus*, but the effect is even higher if both fathers and mothers are more educated. It is possible to argue that more educated couples could be the forerunners of new

behaviours, as it has been for other innovative behaviour in the past. A higher level of education might increase fathers consciousness of the importance of their role for children well being, but also their willingness to question traditional gender roles. Similarly, living in the Northern part of the country where modern values are accepted and where more egalitarian gender roles are spread, increase fathers involvement. A mechanism of social imitation would help to increase the degree of paternal participation, at least in those regions where fathers are more and more involved.

The rather limited family policies in Italian society aiming at reconciling the family and work have usually been shaped by considering working mothers, more than promoting openly equal gender opportunities or men's domestic and fathers' role. This contrasts greatly with the Scandinavian countries, where social and family policies have for many years been openly pursuing the goal of gender equality, making an increase in the domestic work done by fathers (now socially accepted) a priority, and encouraging women to work for the market (Casey 2002). These policies have been effective, and the burden of child-raising is more equally distributed between the mother and father, and between the family and the community, in comparison with all the other Western societies. The recommendations of the European Community to enhance policies that explicitly promote equal opportunities in the family and workplace to enhance gender equity seem not to have been attended in Italy. The European Community documents always talk about "parental responsibility" – and not motherly ones, and emphasise the pursuit of equality between men and women is not only necessary to compensate the disadvantage of women in job market, but also the disadvantage of men in participation on family life." The participation to family tasks is therefore seen as an advantage and as a right also for men, in terms of personal enrichment and resource for their own identity.

However, the aspect of personal rights and equal gender opportunities might not be an appealing nor very credible way of making men becoming more committed fathers – in a country whereby gender inequality is rooted in the familistic culture and welfare. Still, there are other important motivations behind improving the gender balance. It is well known that the psychological closeness between fathers and children becomes fostered through care activities. This is of paramount importance for encouraging also a positive relationship with fathers and their children as they grow up. Finally, improvements in gender equality have important benefits at the macro level, in promoting fertility desires (at least for women) and actual behaviour of the couple.

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Table 1: Routine care activities performed by fathers of children under 6, by children age class. Weighted proportions.

ACTIVITIES	Age of children	
	0-2 years old	3-5 years old
	%	%
Bathing children		
Everyday	9.9	9.4
Few times a week	30.1	24.9
Once a week	11.9	8.6
Few times a month	13.7	17.3
Few times a year	4.93	9.0
Never	29.3	30.6
Putting children to bed		
Everyday	34.9	30.7
Few times a week	42.8	43.8
Once a week	4.8	4.8
Few times a month	6.23	8.2
Few times a year	2.1	2.8
Never	9.0	9.7
Feeding children		
Everyday	27.9	25.6
Few times a week	45.8	38.2
Once a week	5.1	7.2
Few times a month	7.4	11.0
Few times a year	1.3	2.5
Never	12.5	15.4
Changing nappies		
Everyday	24.9	13.9
Few times a week	33.3	14.9
Once a week	4.9	2.2
Few times a month	7.8	7.5
Few times a year	2.7	2.7
Never	26.2	58.7
Helping children dress		
Everyday	21.9	17.4
Few times a week	43.4	41.4
Once a week	8.3	8.3
Few times a month	9.3	13.1
Few times a year	3.0	5.8
Never	14.2	13.9
Total (unweighted)	1,233	1,244
Total (weighted)	1,450,092	1,516,423

Data: 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey: Family and Social Actors.

Table 2: Index of Father Involvement (IFI) in routine care activities. Unweighted means and standard deviation. Standardized index=0 if father is not involved at all, =1 if father is completely involved.

Index of Father Involvement (IFI)			
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Deviation</i>
All the sample	2,477	0.62	0.26
Individual characteristics			
Regional Area			
North	968	0.66	0.26
Centre	427	0.63	0.24
South and Islands	1,082	0.58	0.27
Age at interview (Male)			
Less than 34	807	0.61	0.26
35-39	927	0.63	0.26
40 or more	743	0.62	0.26
Education level (Male)			
Degree	298	0.65	0.23
High school	1,035	0.65	0.26
Less than High school	1,144	0.59	0.27
Professional Condition (M)			
Managers, ind. Professional man, entrepreneurs	334	0.58	0.28
Teachers and white collars	678	0.67	0.24
Blue-collars	855	0.61	0.26
Self-employed and others	483	0.60	0.27
Professional Condition (F)			
Managers, ind. Professional man, entrepreneurs	83	0.65	0.26
Teachers and white collars	722	0.65	0.26
Blue-collars	310	0.67	0.25
Self-employed and others	432	0.59	0.27
Couple characteristics			
Education			
<i>He</i> Univ. degree, <i>She</i> Univ. degree	131	0.67	0.22
<i>He</i> Univ. degree, <i>She</i> < Univ. degree	167	0.63	0.25
<i>He</i> High school, <i>She</i> Univ. degree	151	0.68	0.27
<i>He</i> High school, <i>She</i> High school	662	0.65	0.25
<i>He</i> High school, <i>She</i> < High school	222	0.61	0.28
<i>He</i> < High school, <i>She</i> High school or >	405	0.63	0.25
<i>He</i> <High school, <i>She</i> <High school	739	0.56	0.27
Type of household			
Dual income	1,211	0.65	0.25
Male breadwinner	968	0.58	0.27

Data: 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey: Family and Social Actors.

Table 3: Nested multiple regression models (OLS) for father characteristics predicting the level of father involvement in routine child care (measured by the IFI). Italy 2003.

VARIABLES	MODEL I Father's employment typologies only		MODEL II Father's empl. typ. & working hours		MODEL III Father's empl. typ. & working hours & women labour participation	
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Intercept	0.638 ***	0.023	0.648 ***	0.023	0.686 ***	0.024
CHILD AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS						
Child's age (0-2 years old)						
3-5 years old	-0.022	0.016	-0.021	0.016	-0.016	0.016
Child's sex (Female)						
Male	0.018 *	0.010	0.017 *	0.010	0.018 *	0.010
Number of children (Two)						
One	0.031 ***	0.014	0.031 **	0.014	0.025 *	0.014
Three or more	-0.052 ***	0.017	-0.052 ***	0.017	-0.046 ***	0.017
Other 0-5-year-old children (no)	0.051 ***	0.014	0.050 ***	0.014	0.051 ***	0.014
External aids for childcare (None)						
Grand-parents or other relatives	0.032 ***	0.012	0.032 ***	0.012	0.024 **	0.012
Baby-sitter	0.021	0.023	0.023	0.023	0.008	0.023
Nursery school or Creche	0.007	0.016	0.006	0.016	0.001	0.016
FATHER'S CHARACTERISTICS						
Age (< 35 years old)						
35-39 years old	0.020 *	0.013	0.019	0.013	0.013	0.013
40 years old and more	0.019	0.014	0.016	0.014	0.010	0.014
Regional area (North)						
Centre	-0.027 **	0.015	-0.031 **	0.015	-0.030 **	0.015
South	-0.068 ***	0.011	-0.071 ***	0.011	-0.060 ***	0.012
Education level (High school)						
University degree	0.015	0.018	0.013	0.018	0.013	0.018
Less than high school	-0.050 ***	0.012	-0.049 ***	0.012	-0.047 ***	0.012
FATHER'S EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS						
Professional position (Teachers and white-collar)						
Managers, ind. Professional man, entrepreneurs	-0.092 ***	0.017	-0.075 ***	0.018	-0.077 ***	0.018
Blue-collars	-0.021 *	0.014	-0.018	0.014	-0.017	0.014
Self-employed and others	-0.044 ***	0.015	-0.025	0.016	-0.022	0.016
Number of working hours per week (<40)						
40-50	-		-0.021 *	0.012	-0.021 *	0.012
more than 50	-		-0.058 ***	0.017	-0.061 ***	0.017
MOTHER'S LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION						
Number of working hours per week (Housewife)						
24 or less	-		-		0.018	0.016
25-36	-		-		0.069 ***	0.015
36 or more	-		-		0.042 ***	0.015
Model statistics						
DF	17		19		21	
F	8.73 ***		8.50 ***		8.74 ***	
R^2	0.057		0.062		0.070	
Corrected R^2	0.050		0.054		0.062	

Significance *** ≤ 0.01 ; * $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; $0.05 < p \leq 0.1$

Data: 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey: Family and Social Actors. Reference category in parentheses.

Table 4: Results of interaction between father and mother’s education level predicting the degree of father involvement in routine child care (as measured by the IFI). Italy 2003.

MOTHER'S EDUCATION LEVEL			
FATHER'S EDUCATION LEVEL	University degree	High School	Less than high school
University degree	0.045*	n.s.	
High School	n.s.	reference	-0.037*
Less than high school	-0.028*		-0.068 ***

*Significance *** ≤ 0.01 ; * $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; $0.05 \leq p \leq 0.1$ N.S. is for "not statistically significant".*

Note: Multiple regression models (OLS) results for combined father and mother’s characteristics in table 6.

Data: 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey: Family and Social Actors.

Table 5: Results of interaction between father and mother’s weekly working hours predicting the degree of father involvement in routine child care (as measured by the IFI). Italy 2003.

MOTHER'S WORKING HOURS			
FATHER'S WORKING HOURS	> 36	36-24	< 24
> 50	n.s.	n.s.	
40-50	0.075***		reference
< 40	0.073***		0.030**

*Significance *** ≤ 0.01 ; * $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; $0.05 \leq p \leq 0.1$ N.S. is for "not statistically significant".*

Note: Multiple regression models (OLS) results for combined father and mother’s characteristics in table 6.

Data: 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey: Family and Social Actors.

Table 6: Multiple regression models (OLS) for couple's characteristics predicting the level of father involvement in routine child care (measured by the IFI). Italy 2003.

MODEL IV			
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Intercept	0.707	***	0.032
CHILD AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS			
Child's age (0-2 years old)			
3-5 years old	-0.014		0.015
Child's sex (Female)			
Male	0.018	*	0.010
Number of children (Two)			
One	0.019		0.014
Three or more	-0.043	***	0.017
Other 0-5-year-old children (no)			
	0.048	***	0.014
External aids for childcare (None)			
Grand-parents or other relatives	0.025	**	0.012
Baby-sitter	-0.002		0.023
Nursery school or Crèche	-0.001		0.015
Regional area (North)			
Centre	-0.029	**	0.015
South	-0.060	***	0.012
COUPLE CHARACTERISTICS: COMBINATION			
Age difference (He older - 1-3 years)			
Same age or she older	0.019		0.014
He older - more than 3 years	0.015		0.012
Education levels (He: High School, She: High school)			
He Univ. degree, She Univ. degree	0.045	*	0.025
He Univ. degree, She < Univ. degree	-0.015		0.023
He High school, She Univ. degree	0.028		0.023
He High school, She < High school	-0.037	*	0.020
He < High school, She High school or >	-0.028	*	0.016
He < High school, She < High school	-0.068	***	0.015
Professional positions (He: White-Collar, She: housewife)			
Same position	-0.026		0.020
He manager, she housewife	0.080	*	0.033
He blue-collar, she housewife	-0.044	**	0.019
He other, she housewife	-0.057	**	0.023
He manager, she white-collar, blue-collar or other	-0.140	***	0.026
He: white-Collar, she blue-collar or other	-0.046		0.030
He blue-collar, she manager, white-collar or other	-0.023		0.027
He other, she manager or white-collar	-0.060	**	0.029
He other, she blue-collar	0.016		0.030
Number of working hours per week (He: 40-50, She: < 24)			
He > 50, She > 36	-0.025		0.033
He > 50, She < 36	-0.015		0.021
He 40-50, She > 24	0.075	***	0.023
He < 40, She > 24	0.073	***	0.019
He < 40, She <24	0.030	**	0.015
MODEL STATISTICS			
DF	32		
F	7.06	***	
R^2	0.0846		
corrected R^2	0.0726		

Significance *** <= 0.01; * 0.01<p<=0.05; *0.05<=p<=0.1

Note: "Other" includes self-employed, social worker and the so-called "co.co.co". "White collar" includes teachers
Data: 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey: Family and Social Actors. Reference category in parentheses.