

Breaking Barriers or Persisting Traditions? Fertility Histories, Occupational Achievements, and Intergenerational Mobility of Italian Women

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Abstract: Women and men share comparable levels of intergenerational social mobility in all Western economies, except for Southern European countries, where women's life chances appear less determined by their family background. This is puzzling given Southern European's persistent familism, lack of institutional support for mothers, and the strong influence of social origin. We examine the role of women's social class of origin on occupational achievements across birth cohorts in Italy, focusing on the close link between fertility dynamics and social mobility opportunities. By leveraging nationally representative retrospective data, we observed that middle- and working-class women experienced upgraded occupational achievements across birth cohorts in conjunction with educational expansion. Conversely, upper-class women exhibited consistently lower occupational achievements, especially those becoming mothers at a comparatively younger age, facing a higher risk of intergenerational downward mobility. Notably, the poorer labor market achievements of recent generations of upper-class women compared to the previous generations already emerged at labor market entry, suggesting that adverse self-selection mechanisms in early motherhood might be largely responsible for Italian women's greater overall relative mobility. In Italy, women's higher social mobility than men's more likely reflects persistent traditional work-family choices among the better-off than a signal of growing equality of opportunity.

Keywords: intergenerational mobility; gender; fertility; perverse fluidity; selectivity

Replication Package: Access to the microdata is granted free of charge upon formal request for 'scientific use files' by members of a recognized research institution, as indicated on the following website: <https://www.istat.it/en/analysis-and-products/microdata-files>. Replication codes have been made public at: https://osf.io/7qey4/?view_only=.

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
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NARROWING gender gaps in educational attainment and employment opportunities have contributed to increasing women's intergenerational social mobility (Breen and Pollak 2010; Breen 2019; Buchmann and DiPrete 2006). This is true in terms of absolute mobility, which refers to the total observed changes in the distribution of social classes across generations and measures the proportion of individuals whose social class is different from that of their parents (Torche 2015). Indeed, women have benefited from the structural growth of white-collar clerical jobs (Breen 2019). But what about relative mobility, namely, the different chances of individuals of different class origins to reach a certain social class, net of structural occupational transformations? And thus, are women's opportunities in the labor market becoming more meritocratic and less dependent on circumstances related to their parental social class? Evidence from Western countries remains mixed. In the United States (Hout 2018), Scandinavia, and Continental Europe (Bukodi and

Paskov 2020), levels of relative mobility are converging for men and women. In Southern European countries (Italy, Cyprus, Greece, Spain, and Portugal), on the other hand, women's relative mobility is rising compared to that of men over birth cohorts (Bukodi and Paskov 2020; Marqués-Perales and Gómez-Espino 2023).

To explain aggregate gender-specific mobility patterns across birth cohorts, different but not necessarily competing microlevel mechanisms have been proposed. The *meritocratic* thesis suggests that women are more socially mobile because of their greater participation in tertiary education and consequent upward mobility (Bukodi et al. 2015; Sturgis and Buscha 2015). Greater women's intergenerational mobility may also result from gender-specific *intragenerational* dynamics driven by *structural constraints* or *personal preferences* that are linked to motherhood and fertility-related dynamics (Connolly and Gregory 2008; Goldthorpe and Mills 2008). Indeed, in this contribution we contend that women's fertility and social mobility dynamics are closely related. First, due to the persistent gendered division of unpaid labor and childcare, motherhood often entails enduring labor market penalties (Kleven et al. 2019), especially at the early stages of a woman's career (Herr 2016) and in contexts where efficient policies for balancing work and family are missing. In response to such a penalty, or in anticipation of it, women tend to be overrepresented in sectors and jobs providing work–family balance, yet at the expense of wages, occupational level, and opportunities for career growth. Second, due to their greater economic security guaranteed by their background and advantageous position in the mating market, upper-class women may be particularly prone to prefer less remunerative but “family-friendly” jobs and contracts (Breen and Pollak 2010; Corti and Scherer 2021; Yavorsky et al. 2023). Nevertheless, (some) women may have a greater likelihood of experiencing *intragenerational* downward mobility during the family formation phase, with a consequent positive influence on the overall *intergenerational* mobility rates of women overall.

Can these mechanisms explain the declining impact of social origin across birth cohorts of Italian women? We consider Italy a suitable case to test these mechanisms because it is part of the Southern European cluster of countries characterized by higher relative mobility for women than for men (although Italy has never been analyzed in comparative studies on gender differences in social mobility—see Bukodi and Paskov 2020), but ranks as one of the most economically unequal societies in Europe. In particular, the Italian context features a strong influence of social origin (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016) and extreme rigidity in *intragenerational* mobility (Barone et al. 2011). In addition, Italian society is characterized by a general lack of policies and services that sustain families with children and promote work–family balance. Together with persisting traditional gender norms that consider the man the main household breadwinner (a historically rooted family configuration in the Italian context; see Mancini 2023), these institutional features render Italy a familialistic country—satisfaction of social needs depends heavily on the family institution, and thus, on women's reproductive work (Naldini and Saraceno 2008). Gender inequalities in the division of work and in labor market outcomes are thus particularly evident in Italy (Pacelli et al. 2013), a circumstance that warrants a more in-depth examination of women's standing in the labor market in this country.

By leveraging nationally representative retrospective data, we provide a comprehensive analysis of women's occupational achievements across birth cohorts, throughout their careers, and according to their fertility history. We begin by discussing the literature on aggregate mobility patterns across birth cohorts and how social origin manages to reproduce advantages and disadvantages, especially in the Italian context. This section is followed by a review of the theoretical microlevel mechanisms that are expected to contribute to women's higher social mobility. The data, sample, and operationalization of the variables are presented in advance, whereas we address the analytical strategies and methodological choices step by step.

Women's Social Mobility over Birth Cohorts

Gender differences in *relative* mobility patterns, and thus the strength of social origin in shaping their life opportunities net of structural transformations, are a central issue in the sociology of stratification. Some studies have observed no substantial gender discrepancies in the extent and trends of relative mobility across cohorts (see Bukodi and Paskov 2020 for Nordic countries and Continental Europe, and Hout 2018 for the United States). Other works, however, have identified greater social fluidity and, therefore, a lower impact from social origin among women (Bukodi et al. 2019 for Britain; Bukodi and Paskov 2020 for Southern Europe; and for less recent evidence, see Li and Singelmann 1998 for the United States, Sweden, and Germany and Wong 1995 for Eastern European countries).

The understanding of aggregate dynamics of relative mobility requires a consideration of how class of origin affects life chances at the microlevel and according to contextual features. Parental background is associated with an individual's attainment through an indirect path capturing origin-related differences in educational attainments and returns and a direct path where parental resources directly condition life achievements over and above educational titles (Hout and DiPrete 2006; Torche 2011). Better-off parents strategically deploy economic, cultural, and social resources to retain or enhance their family's advantages across generations through well-documented compensatory and boosting mechanisms (Barbieri and Gioachin 2022; Engzell and Wilmers 2021; Friedman and Laurison 2019; Goldthorpe 2007; Gugushvili et al. 2017). Although the educational expansion during the 1970s likely increased *intergenerational* mobility opportunities by reducing the indirect influence of social origin on occupational attainment (Barone and Guetto 2020; Bloome et al. 2018; Breen 2010, 2019; Pfeffer and Hertel 2015), social background remains a significant direct determinant of labor market achievements, especially in Southern Europe (Bernardi and Gil-Hernández 2021; Bonomi Bezzo et al. 2023; Breen and Müller 2020).

In the Italian context, the *intergenerational* dynamics must be understood in relation to the high degree of *intragenerational* rigidity. The Italian economy features a strictly regulated labor and product market (Gangl 2003; Nicoletti and Scarpetta 2003) dominated by micro and small firms, which are often family run. As such, competitive strategies are based on reducing labor costs, and firms generally exhibit a flat internal hierarchy, limited investment in training and technology, and

a low propensity for creating new skilled jobs (Cutuli and Guetto 2013). Career progression in Italy is also constrained by formal requirements and bureaucratic procedures (Maurizio Pisati and Antonio Schizzerotto 1999), with slow turnover in the public sector (likely female-dominated) and career advancement often based on seniority rather than merit. This rigid setting prevents employee demotion and limits downward flows but also reduces the chances of overall upward mobility and recovery from a suboptimal initial job allocation. Thus, unequal labor market allocations upon labor market entry persist (or worse, are exacerbated) throughout workers' careers (Passaretta et al. 2018-08; Raitano and Vona 2018). An additional issue is that Italy experienced selective flexibilization at the beginning of the new century (Barbieri and Scherer 2009) and young workers and women were progressively subjected to increasingly precarious contractual arrangements (i.e., fixed-term contracts and collaborations or involuntary part-time work). Under these conditions, the influence of social origin on labor market success has been exacerbated (Barbieri and Gioachin 2022).

The overall rigidity that characterizes the Italian labor context seems at odds with the finding of increasing *intergenerational* mobility for women over birth cohorts in Southern European countries (Bukodi and Paskov 2020; Marqués-Perales and Gómez-Espino 2023). Figure 1 displays aggregate cohort-specific estimates of *intergenerational* relative mobility in Italy at different career stages, separately for men and women. The data employed and precise measurement strategies are discussed in the subsequent section, before the main analyses. The normalized coefficients from the UNIDIFF models (the log-multiplicative uniform difference model; see Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) can be interpreted as the strength of the association between the parental and own social position (measured with the six-class European Socio-economic Classification [ESeC] by Rose and Harrison 2007) and applying a standardized scale ranging from 0 to 1.¹ Men exhibited a slight decrease in the *intergenerational* association for birth cohorts that experienced educational expansion (especially starting from the cohort of men born between 1951 and 1960). Subsequently, their trend remained stable overall, especially when compared to the trend for women. The decrease in the origin–destination association for women born in the 1950s was substantial and has continued over subsequent birth cohorts, although it slowed down for women born after the 1970s. Finally, no relevant differences were evident in origin–destination associations between the start of one's career, five years after the entrance, and the average of the first 15 career years, thus mirroring the well-documented *intragenerational* rigidity typical of the Italian case.

What Drives Women's Greater Social Mobility?

To explain the greater fluidity observed over birth cohorts of Italian women, in line with the findings for other Southern European countries, we consider microlevel dynamics that may have affected the influence of social origin on women's occupational opportunities. Specifically, we discuss two different (and yet possibly coexisting) sets of mechanisms that we refer to as (i) increased meritocracy and (ii) perverse fluidity.

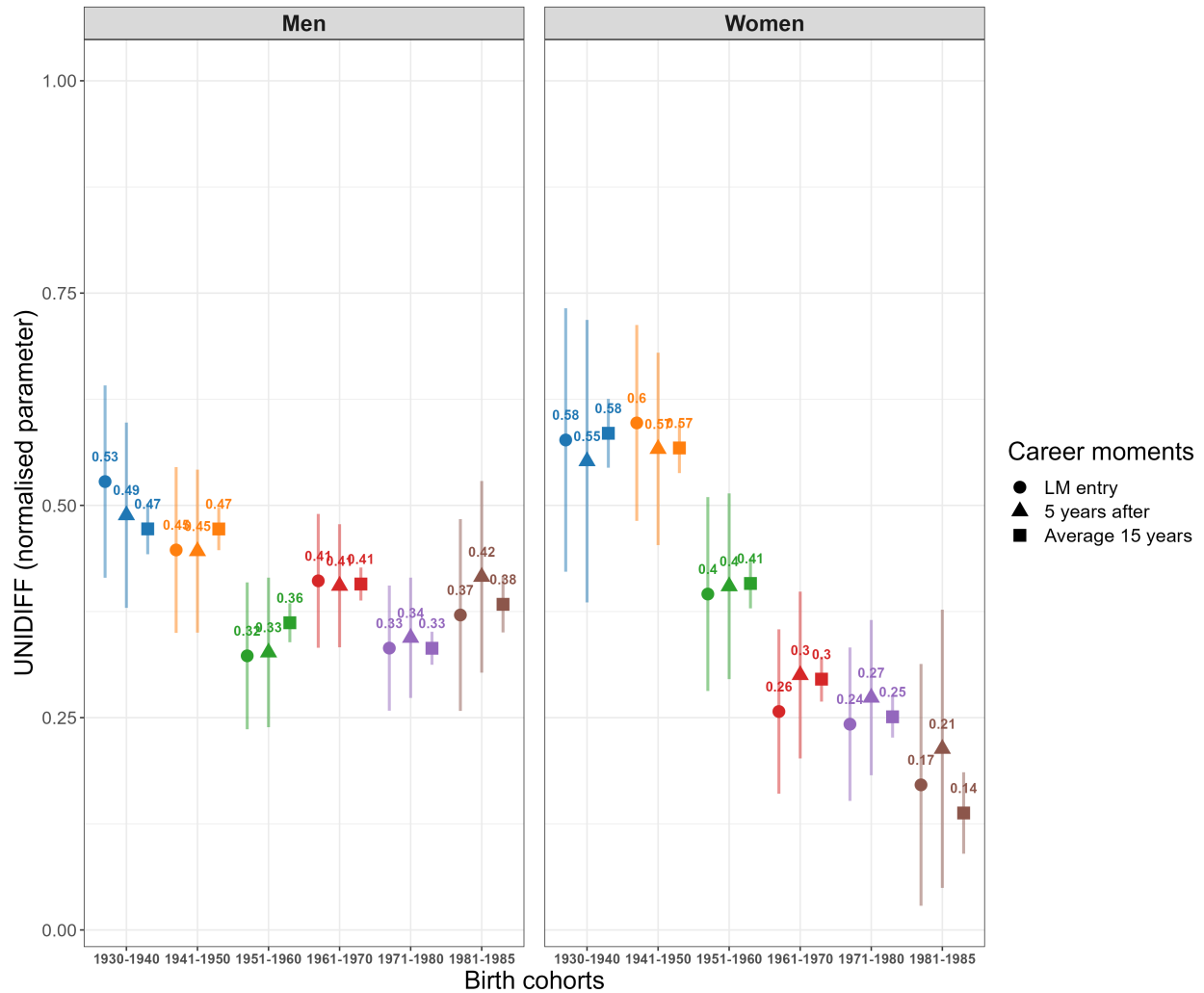


Figure 1: Intergenerational relative mobility in Italy by gender, career years, and birth cohort. UNIDIFF normalized parameter. Source: ISTAT Multipurpose Household Survey (2016). Controls: age at labor market (LM) entry and career years (also squared) for the models using all 15 years. N men: 7,012; N women: 5,931.

More Meritocracy for Women

The first plausible explanation for the increased likelihood of women’s mobility over birth cohorts is the greater meritocracy in occupational achievement resulting from the weakening association between social origin and educational attainment (Breen 2010; Breen and Jonsson 2007). This mobility-enhancing mechanism has resulted from the process of educational expansion, a process which has characterized virtually all Western societies since the 1970s. Social mobility studies have associated this structural transformation with an increase in intergenerational mobility due to a decrease in the association between origin and achievements in the labor market (Bukodi et al. 2015; Sturgis and Buscha 2015). Focusing on the United States, Bloome and colleagues (2018) demonstrated that educational expansion reduced

intergenerational income persistence because college completion represents an opportunity for low-income children to become high-income adults. However, other studies pointed out that this trend did not entirely counteract the parallel increase in the *intergenerational* persistence of educational inequality and rising educational returns (see also Pfeffer and Hertel 2015). In the context of Italy, Barone and Guetto (2020) argued that a reduction in the effect of social origin did occur but was confined to the period of extensive educational expansion during the 1970s. In the years that followed, stagnation occurred in the equality of occupational opportunities, thus suggesting a meritocratic effect limited in time.

Perverse Fluidity: The Motherhood Penalty

However, the origin–destination association may be lower for women than for men because of gender-specific constraints encountered by women over their careers—this is a scenario that scholars refer to as “perverse fluidity” (Connolly and Gregory 2008; Goldthorpe and Mills 2008).

The literature has extensively demonstrated that childbirth and related work interruptions are likely to lead to labor market penalties for mothers but not for fathers (Machado and Jaspers 2023; Mari and Cutuli 2021; Musick et al. 2020; Weisshaar 2018). The mechanisms underlying this finding range from the interruption of human capital accumulation and skill depreciation (Abendroth et al. 2014) to employer discrimination against mothers (Correll et al. 2007), and are particularly severe in the early stages of a woman’s career (Herr 2016). In contrast, motherhood postponement may reduce or even nullify the motherhood penalty (Amuedo-Dorantes and Kimmel 2005) and increase cumulative career earnings (Miller 2011). The occurrence of a pronounced career penalty after the birth of a child is particularly common in Italy (Pacelli et al. 2013), embodying the traditional gendered division of paid and care work that characterizes this social context (Naldini and Saraceno 2008). Short paternity leave in Italy (Del Boca and Saraceno 2005) and scarce public childcare services (Pacelli et al. 2013; Scherer and Pavolini 2023) are not only detrimental to mothers’ careers, but are also indicative of a culture that supports the traditional norm of mothers as primary caregivers. The lack of institutional work-family balance tends to drive women’s—and particularly mothers’—preferences for flexible contractual arrangements, with part-time jobs being a primary example. Although part-time employment can help mothers remain engaged in the labor market (Barbieri et al. 2019), it can also lead to women falling down the economic and social ladder, as part-time employment is often coupled with downward mobility (Bygren and Gahler 2012; Hipp et al. 2015).

Accordingly, and in line with the existing evidence (Jarvis and Song 2017), the experience of downward *intragenerational* mobility (following childbirth), due in particular to frequent and significant occupational transitions, may translate into downward *intergenerational* mobility and, thus, greater mobility and lower influence of social origin overall. In principle, all women from all social strata are likely to suffer from the motherhood penalty and labor market downgrading after childbirth. However, in *intergenerational* terms, a “floor effect” can be expected for lower-class women who cannot experience a further deterioration in

their social standing, whereas middle- and upper-class women can experience a downgrading relative to their social origin. This aligns with existing evidence that motherhood has harsher consequences for more educated (upper-class) women who have more to lose (England et al. 2016). If this scenario holds true, we should find that fertility dynamics throughout the career are more strongly associated with the *intergenerational* (downward) mobility of middle- and upper-class women.

It should be noted that fertility-related career disadvantages may occur for women even before childbirth (Zamberlan and Barbieri 2023); this is because the motherhood penalty may be the result of voluntary or involuntary selection mechanisms that differentiate between ‘family-oriented’ and ‘career-oriented’ women.² Accordingly, some mothers and mothers-to-be may differ substantially (in observed and unobserved characteristics) from childless women and from women who postpone their first child in terms of type of work, occupational attainment, and, ultimately, *intergenerational* mobility dynamics.

Perverse Fluidity: Not Exploited Advantages

Finally, we narrow the focus on women from more advantaged social backgrounds, who are generally advantaged in the labor market due to greater parental resources and higher-quality social ties. Although the economically secure background of upper-class mothers (or mothers-to-be) could be leveraged to outsource care needs and mitigate labor market penalties following childbirth, it may also act as a disincentive for well-off women to enter the labor market and, in particular, to invest in a continuous and rewarding career.

First, having a better-off family of origin reduces the need to seek labor-derived income, quite unlike the situation for women from the lower classes. Second, daughters of families of higher social backgrounds are likely to enter a mating market populated by men from a similar background, which represents a further disincentive to fully commit to paid employment (Ermisch et al. 2005). The disincentive for upper-class women to invest in their career may be particularly pronounced when alternatives are available, namely, when they start a family. In such a case, we would expect that more ‘family-oriented’ upper-class women, who would have the motivational and material means to maintain a high level of occupational achievement, would opt for a lower level of work commitment and thus be likely to experience a downgrading in the labor market relative to their social origin. In other words, if all women from an advantaged social background are potentially at risk of experiencing downward *intergenerational* mobility, we would expect this risk to be even higher for the subgroup of women who have children, especially if they do so relatively early in their career. In support of this, the empirical research seems to confirm the role of personal preferences towards the family to explain why upper-class women would not exploit their background-related advantages to excel in the labor market (Bukodi et al. 2019; Bukodi and Paskov 2020; Yavorsky et al. 2023). In sum, the choice to step back from a career-oriented path, however remaining in the labor market, can lead to lower occupational achievements (compared to other upper-class women), downward *intergenerational* mobility, and thus greater overall mobility for women.

Contribution Summarized

To achieve an exhaustive examination of the aggregate social mobility patterns of Italian women, we empirically tested the microlevel mechanisms discussed above. Accordingly, we considered the joint role of *intragenerational* dynamics—in particular, fertility occurrence and its timing—and *intergenerational* social mobility. Hence, we comprehensively analyzed the occupational attainments of Italian women during their initial careers (first 15 years) and across birth cohorts, enabling us to descriptively evaluate the influence of educational expansion. Table 1 summarizes the various mechanisms and related expectations. Given the prominent role expected of fertility dynamics, we considered the occupational and mobility achievements of Italian women from different origin classes associated with different histories of realized fertility.

Data and Core Measures

We provide novel evidence for the Italian context by relying on the 2016 wave of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) Multipurpose Survey on Households: Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle.³ This dataset comprises a representative sample of more than 32,000 individuals who were asked to retrospectively describe their life histories in several domains. On the basis of these descriptions, we reconstructed individuals' employment, family, and fertility histories. We selected women (and men) born between 1930 and 1985 who entered the labor market aged 16 to 35. We followed individuals from their formal labor market entry and right-censored observations at the 15th year after their entrance into the labor market, regardless of their employment status during those 15 years.⁴

In this section, we present the core measures of social origin and occupational achievement employed, leaving the description of the empirical strategies as well as of control and moderating variables to the beginning of each section of results. Tables S1 and S2 in the *Online Supplement* display the stepwise selection criteria and the numerosity of the analytic subsamples. All the analyses employed the available cross-sectional sample weights to increase generalizability and correct for sampling error.

We operationalized social class of origin following the ESeC (Rose and Harrison 2007) and adopted the dominance criterion for the class of origin, thus taking the highest parental occupational class when the respondent was 14 if both parents were employed (Erikson 1984). We used a six-class scheme (managers and professionals, high-grade blue- and white-collar occupations, small-scale entrepreneurs, lower-grade white-collar occupations, lower-grade blue-collar occupations, and routine occupations) for the UNIDIFF models presented in Figure 1. Subsequent multivariate analyses were based on a more parsimonious classification according to three categories: service class (managers and professionals), middle class (high-grade blue- and white-collar workers plus small-scale entrepreneurs), and working class (lower-grade blue- and white-collar workers plus routine occupations). This classification reduction allowed us to minimize measurement errors due to recall bias (Houseworth and Fisher 2020) while maximizing the differences

Table 1: Summary of the mechanisms contributing to greater social fluidity for women over birth cohorts.

Mechanism	Explanation	Population of interest	Intragenerational mobility consequence	Intergenerational mobility consequence
Increased meritocracy	Educational expansion weakened the origin–education association, with a consequent increase in occupational returns based on merit	All women who can experience upward mobility, i.e., those from the working and middle classes	None	Lower effect of social origin and increase in the likelihood of upward mobility for working- and middle-class women
Perverse fluidity: motherhood penalty	Childbirth and related career interruptions negatively affect career progression	Mothers (to be) who can experience downward mobility, i.e., those from the middle and upper classes	Downward mobility around the time of childbirth or throughout the career	Downward mobility for middle- and upper-class mothers (to be)
Perverse fluidity: not exploited advantages	Their advantaged background of origin disincentives upper-class women to invest in the labor market, especially if they (are willing to) have children	Upper-class mothers (to be)	Downward mobility around the time of childbirth or throughout the career	Downward mobility for upper-class mothers (to be)

between macro classes and enhancing the readability of the results. Naturally, parental class does not entirely capture the effect of family background (Hällsten and Thaning 2022; Karlson and Birkelund 2022). However, we contend that parental class best captures origin-related resources and mechanisms with respect to the offspring's occupational achievements (Thaning 2021). In all multivariate analyses, we also controlled for parental education (again following the dominance criterion) to circumscribe the influence of the parental class.

Occupational attainment was measured in two ways. The UNIDIFF models (Figure 1) were based on the six-class ESeC scheme also for the class of destination, whereas the three-class scheme was employed in the multivariate analyses. We further employed the International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI) (Ganzeboom et al. 1992) as a metric measure of occupational attainment. This score is derived from

the International Standard Classification of Occupations and hierarchically orders occupations according to their mediating role in maximizing the education–income relationship, ranging from 16 (e.g., cleaners, laborers) to 90 (e.g., CEO, doctors, judges). We retained only valid cases with positive ISEI scores, thereby setting individuals outside the labor market as "missing." Figure 1 provided a comparison between men and women to establish the motivation for the current research. The next analyses focused on the microlevel dynamics underlying the observed social mobility of women across cohorts and were thus performed on the female subsample. Table S3 in the *Online Supplement* reports the descriptive statistics for the analytical sample used in subsequent analyses and split by birth cohorts.

Women's Occupational Attainments across Birth Cohorts

We begin by investigating women's occupational achievements over their careers, across birth cohorts, and according to their class of origin by conducting a latent growth curve analysis of achieved ISEI by employing multilevel random models (Halaby 2003). This approach exploits the nested structure of the data by jointly considering time-varying and time-constant information as well as their interaction.

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{ji} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{origin}_i + \beta_2 \text{cohort}_i + (\beta_3 \text{car}_{ji} + \beta_4 \text{car}2_{ji}) + \\
 & \beta_5 \text{origin}_i * \text{cohort}_i + \\
 & \beta_6 \text{origin}_i * (\text{car}_{ji} * \text{car}2_{ji}) + \\
 & \beta_7 \text{cohort}_i * (\text{car}_{ji} * \text{car}2_{ji}) + \\
 & \beta_8 \text{origin}_i * \text{cohort}_i * (\text{car}_{ji} * \text{car}2_{ji}) + \\
 & \beta_n \text{controls}_{i/ji} + (\mu_{0i} + \mu_{3i} + \varepsilon_{ji})
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

As shown in Equation 1, the occupational status score at each career step Y_{ji} is obtained through the three-way interaction between social origin (origin_i), birth cohort (cohort_i), and career development (car_{ji}) as well as its square ($\text{car}2_{ji}$). We set the career counter as a random slope (μ_{3i}) to allow for individual-specific heterogeneity in the growth path (Cheng 2014). Control variables are specified in the vector ($\text{controls}_{i/ji}$) and include time-constant characteristics such as parental education, place of birth, age of entry into the labor market (and its square), geographical location and citizenship, and time-varying features such as family status (single, cohabitating, married, separated/divorced), number of children, and a timer counting the years since the first childbirth. The results remain virtually identical with the inclusion of the social class of the partner (information that is not available retrospectively but only for the year 2016, which is why it is excluded from the core analyses) and with the exclusion of control variables (see also Cantalini and Ballarino 2023 for statistical equivalence between models with and without time-varying fertility indicators).

We contrast the *total effect of social origin* (TESO) with the *direct effect of social origin* (DESO). DESO captures the influence of social origin net of origin-related educational differences; its model builds on Equation 1 and further includes a

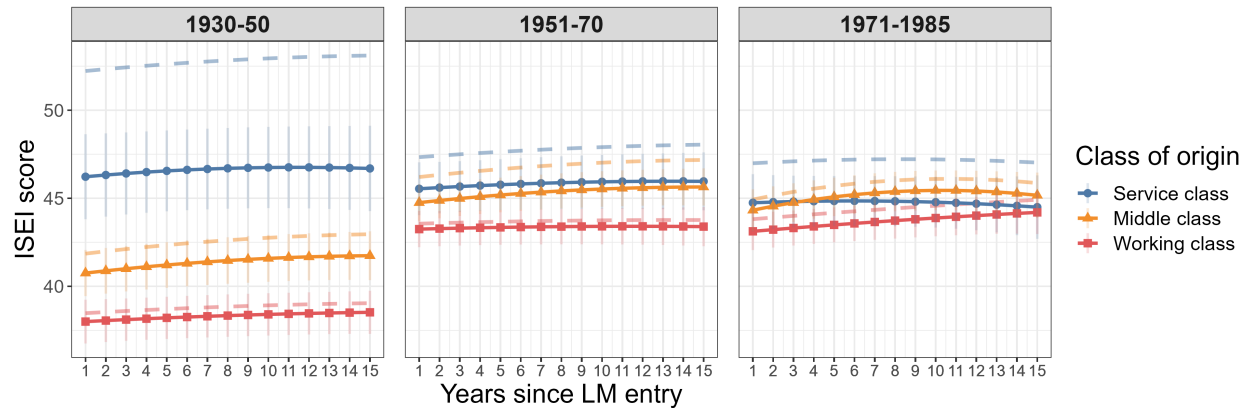


Figure 2: ISEI attainment over career by class of origin. Growth curves by birth cohort. Source: ISTAT Multipurpose Household Survey (2016). Note: predicted TESO in dashed lines. N: 5,775, women only.

vector (edu_i) capturing the highest educational title obtained by differentiating individuals not attaining a title and those attaining lower secondary education, upper secondary education, a lower tertiary degree, and a master's degree or higher. We allow for the impact of education to vary throughout a career by including an interaction term between education and the career counter: $edu_i * (car_{ji} * car2_{ji})$. Because female labor market participation, especially in less recent birth cohorts, is primarily dependent on educational achievement, we devote more attention to the interpretation of DESO estimates (which are more conservative) to grasp the influence of social origin among women with relatively similar probability of employment.

Figure 2 presents the predicted growth curves of ISEI attainment over the first 15 years of the career for women from different classes of origin and birth cohorts. The curves are rather flat, indicating overall *intragenerational* immobility. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the scarcity of mobility opportunities in Italy after one's first job. However, this result is at odds with the literature pointing to the motherhood penalty as an explanation for the gender gap in occupational attainment and gender differences in social mobility, as we observed nearly no downgrading over women's careers at later stages. However, it is important to note that the presented growth curves are based on the occupational attainments of women in employment, suggesting stability over their careers only for those remaining in employment. More variability over women's careers is, in fact, visible when examining different outcomes, such as career breaks and the likelihood of entering a voluntary or involuntary part-time contract (results are presented in Figure S2 of the *Online Supplement*).

Focusing on the *intergenerational* differences between the DESO estimates (solid lines), we observe an occupational upgrade for middle- and working-class women in the 1930 to 1950 and the 1951 to 1970 birth cohorts. This finding accords with the scenario of increasing meritocracy among women (from the middle and lower classes). Moreover, the lack of changes in the subsequent birth cohort supports

the thesis that occupational upgrading only characterizes cohorts benefiting from educational expansion.

By contrast, we observed a slight but progressive occupational downgrade for higher-class women over cohorts, providing some empirical support for the perverse fluidity scenario associated with not-exploited advantages. This result is complemented by that of an increasing proportion of service-class women voluntarily opting for part-time contracts over birth cohorts (see Figure S2 in the *Online Supplement*). The concomitant upgrading of the lower classes and downgrading of the upper-class of women leads to a progressive reduction and disappearance of the origin-related gap in ISEI over cohorts. Crucially, both the upgrading and downgrading trends are only observed in differences *between* cohorts, but not *within* cohorts, over careers. The entry ISEI levels demonstrate that middle- and working-class women in the 1951 to 1970 cohort entered the labor market at already higher levels compared to the previous cohort. By contrast, upper-class women appear to have always started their careers with slightly lower ISEI levels than the older cohort, potentially indicating the existence of class-specific selectivity patterns already at labor market entry.

A comparison of the DESO and TESO estimates (the latter are indicated by dashed lines) reveals relevant differences only among service-class women. This indicates that a large portion of upper-class women's greater occupational achievements can be explained by their higher educational levels, especially in the oldest birth cohort (≈ 10 ISEI points of difference between DESO and TESO estimates). The gap between DESO and TESO decreases over birth cohorts, in parallel with educational expansion and reduced inequality in educational opportunities, although it remains slightly visible in the youngest cohort for the service class.

Fertility Histories and Social Mobility

To evaluate the role of fertility histories, here understood as a potentially relevant intragenerational dynamic, on women's occupational attainment and mobility opportunities, we distinguish women according to their realized fertility histories. In particular, women are distinguished into (1) childless (no realized fertility), (2) early mothers, and (3) late mothers, with early and late mothers defined according to whether their first child was born before or after the cohort-specific median age (1930 to 1940: 26; 1941 to 1950: 25; 1951 to 1960: 25; 1961 to 1970: 28; 1971 to 1980: 30; 1981 to 1985: 27).⁵

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{ji} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{origin}_i + \beta_2 \text{cohort}_i + \beta_3 \text{fertilitygroup}_i + \\
 & (\beta_4 \text{car}_{ji} + \beta_5 \text{car}2_{ji}) + \\
 & \beta_6 \text{origin}_i * \text{cohort}_i + \\
 & \beta_7 \text{origin}_i * \text{fertilitygroup}_i + \\
 & \beta_7 \text{cohort}_i * \text{fertilitygroup}_i + \\
 & \beta_8 \text{origin}_i * \text{cohort}_i * \text{fertilitygroup}_i + \\
 & \beta_n \text{controls}_{i/ji} + (\mu_{0i} + \mu_{3i} + \varepsilon_{ji})
 \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

As formalized in Equation 2 (for brevity, education and its interaction with career are omitted), we include an additional vector ($fertilitygroup_i$) in the interaction with origin and cohort. We further include in the vector controls a time constant dummy indicator capturing women who were already mothers at the labor market entry. Considering the overall career immobility presented in Figure 2, we now estimate the average achievement over the first 15 years of career to provide more straightforward estimates (see Figure S3 in the *Online Supplement* for growth curves).

Figure 3 illustrates how the previously observed upgrading across cohorts for middle- and working-class women occurs among all fertility groups, which is particularly true for late mothers. In contrast, the downgrading for upper-class women is localized among early mothers, the group with the lowest average occupational attainment that experienced an average decrease of more than six/seven ISEI points, perhaps indicating more 'family-oriented' choices.

We further extend the previous picture by considering the directional mobility opportunities of women of different classes of origin, fertility groups, and birth cohorts. Starting from Equation 2, we model the probability of ending up in (i) the service class versus all others, (ii) the middle class versus all others, and (iii) the working class versus all others. We employ linear probability models that account for educational mediation and present predicted probabilities.

Figure 4 illustrates that even though upper-class women remained relatively less likely to enter the working class across birth cohorts, they were equally likely as middle- and working-class women to enter the middle class. We observed a substantial increase in the probability of upper-class women to enter the working class only among the group of early mothers. Strikingly, when examining the chances of entering (or remaining in) the service class, upper-class women seem to overall be at an advantage compared to women of other origin classes, but their advantage entirely disappeared in the youngest cohort (1971 to 1985) within the group of early mothers. In the more recent birth cohort, the probability of women of any class to enter the service class if they had a child at a comparatively early age was approximately 0.1. This finding indicates that almost all upper-class early mothers experienced *intergenerational downward mobility*, as they did not manage to preserve their class of origin and conserve ascriptive advantages.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study endeavored to elucidate the microlevel mechanisms behind women's aggregate levels and trends in social mobility. We make three original contributions to the literature on gender differences in social mobility. First, we investigated social mobility trends over birth cohorts of women in Italy, a Southern European context that has generally been overlooked in the literature on gender differences in social mobility. Second, our data spanned birth cohorts born both before and after the peak of educational expansion, and thus, we were able to descriptively account for changes in social mobility driven strictly by educational expansion from those due to alternative mechanisms. Third, we provided an empirical account of the microlevel mechanisms underlying women's social mobility across birth cohorts by examining whether increased meritocracy for lower classes or fertility-related

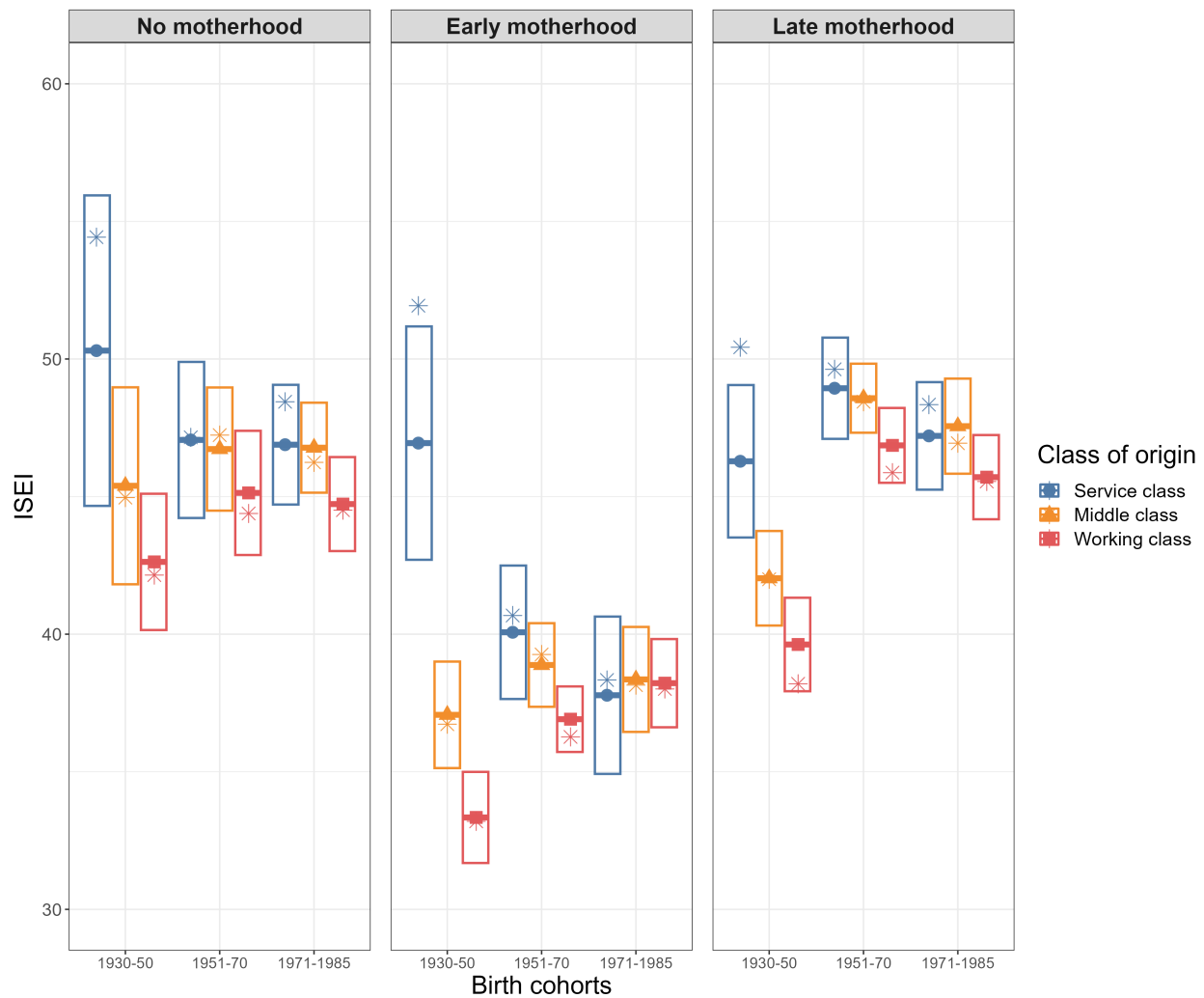


Figure 3: Women’s average ISEI attainment over career by class of origin. Growth curves (average estimates for the first 15 years of career) by cohort and fertility group. Source: ISTAT Multipurpose Household Survey (2016). Notes: asterisks indicate TESO estimates. N: 5,775, women only.

dynamics and adverse selection contribute to explaining the higher social fluidity observed for women. These mechanisms are of crucial importance not only for the stratification and social mobility literature but also for our understanding of gender inequalities in the labor market.

We observed greater social mobility for Italian women over birth cohorts related to two concomitant trends. First, we confirmed the presence of occupational upgrading for middle- and working-class women born between 1930 and 1970, in line with the thesis of increased meritocracy during educational expansion, followed by overall stagnation (Barone and Guetto 2020). Concomitantly, a progressive occupational downgrading of upper-class women was observed, in line with the perverse fluidity scenario. This downgrading mostly characterized the group of

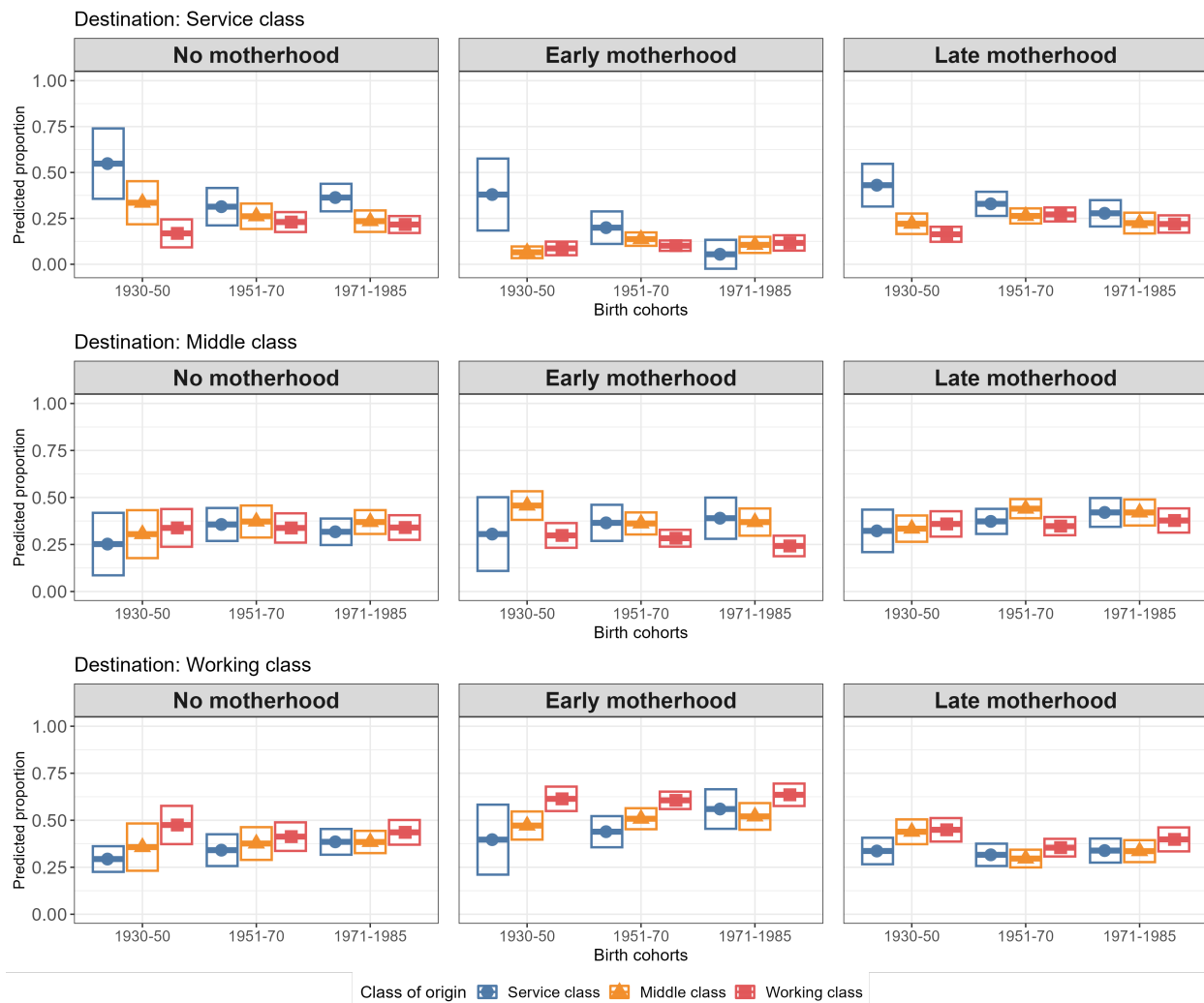


Figure 4: Women’s predicted probabilities of entering the service, middle, and working class by class of origin. Estimates by cohort and fertility group. Source: ISTAT Multipurpose Household Survey (2016). N: 5,775, women only.

upper-class women who experienced their first childbirth at a relatively young age. Most interestingly, this was not the result of downward *intragenerational* mobility (and, concomitantly, downward *intergenerational* mobility) potentially driven by a motherhood penalty over the career. Rather, it seems to point to an increasingly negative selection (in terms of work-related characteristics and unobserved factors, among which personal preferences may play a relevant role) of upper-class women experiencing early motherhood, which is reflected in poorer occupational attainments and a greater risk of downward class mobility already at labor market entry. This finding suggests that one of the major drivers of the greater aggregate social fluidity of Italian women compared to men lies in upper-class women (and among them especially early mothers) not exploiting their origin-related advantages to

Table 2: Main results of the mechanisms contributing to greater social fluidity for women over birth cohorts.

Mechanism	Empirical findings
Increased meritocracy	Confirmed across birth cohorts for working- and middle-class women who experienced educational expansion
Perverse fluidity: motherhood penalty	Not confirmed: no evidence of downward intragenerational mobility for women who have children and remain in employment
Perverse fluidity: not exploited advantages	Confirmed: upper-class women who transition to motherhood at a comparatively early age show an intergenerational downgrading already at labor market entry

secure themselves a high labor market position, or at least to maintain the same occupational level as their parents. Therefore, greater women's social mobility is not only indicative of greater equality of opportunity and meritocracy. Rather, we observed the persistent relevance of traditional gender norms and behaviors within the group of upper-class early mothers, who exhibited lower occupational attainment and a much higher risk of downward mobility than we would expect considering their social origin. Table 2 summarizes the empirical findings for the different social mobility mechanisms tested in this study.

In the social context of this investigation, characterized by a generalized lack of institutional support for women's (especially mothers') employment (Naldini and Saraceno 2008), our results further speak to the literature on the role of institutions (or lack thereof) in the labor market participation of women belonging to different classes (e.g., Mandel 2012). Italy is part of a cluster of countries with historically strong family ties (Reher 2005) and features a welfare state that delegates much of the responsibility of caring for the young, old, and unwell to the family (Esping-Andersen 2012). Under these circumstances, families often rely on the multigenerational transfer of care from grandparents to sustain maternal employment, especially when a second (female) income is the only hedge against poverty. Instead, upper-class women who become mothers comparatively early have the choice to opt out of an intense labor market commitment to meet family needs. Considering their wealthier family backgrounds, the lower labor market returns of upper-class women are perhaps less critical for the economic well-being of their households.

One question remaining unanswered by this contribution is who constitutes (also nowadays) the group of early mothers, especially among service-class women. The data employed in this study were limited in terms of the number and quality of available measures, partly because of their retrospective nature. Nevertheless, it would be extremely relevant to expressly explore women's attitudes toward work and the family, their origins, their connections with mobility dynamics, and the role of their partners' labor market performance to incentivize or hinder women's

employment participation and career advancement over and above compositional factors. Similarly, further research could examine the importance of the social class of a woman's mother when it comes to women's intergenerational mobility (Jayet 2023; Thaning and Hällsten 2020). Unfortunately, maternal occupational data were often missing for older birth cohorts, primarily due to the lower labor market participation of women at that time. Moreover, different measures of labor market attainment could provide further insights into labor market outcomes for women from different classes of origin across birth cohorts. The absence of personal income information in the data prevented us from performing a more nuanced analysis; however, future studies could rely on different data sources to further expand our understanding of how women of different classes of origin have fared in the labor market over time. Overall, little is still known about gender differences in the mechanisms driving social mobility and the contextual influence of different institutional settings. To better understand the extent to which the findings of this study can be generalized to other contexts, or rather, if they are peculiar to Southern European countries or only Italy, comparative research is a relevant means of further extending our knowledge of gender differences in social mobility.

Notes

- ¹ The UNIDIFF model, also known as the log-multiplicative layer effect model (Xie 1992), represents an extension of constant social fluidity models. UNIDIFF allows for the study of differences in intergenerational class mobility across layers defined by, for example, birth cohorts and can be defined as a log-linear function of a three-way contingency table (origin by destination by cohort) or as a multinomial logit at the individual level. Normalized coefficients are based on odds ratios and are obtained for each cohort by using the Stata command *udiff* (Jann and Seiler 2019) at the individual level. Similar results are obtained by estimating intergenerational elasticity and rank–rank slope (Figure S1 in the *Online Supplement*) by using the ISEI as a measure of occupational status (Ganzeboom et al. 1992).
- ² It is important to recognize that preferences for work and/or family are much more nuanced than these two contrasting categories and may have an institutional origin—as may be the case, in particular, in a familialistic welfare state such as Italy.
- ³ Additional information, metadata, and a toy dataset can be found at the following website: <https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/236643> (version in Italian available at: <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/256707>). Unfortunately, the full dataset is not publicly available and cannot be distributed for reproduction purposes. Access to the microdata is granted free of charge upon formal request for 'scientific use files' by members of a recognized research institution, as indicated on the following website: <https://www.istat.it/en/analysis-and-products/microdata-files>. Replication codes have been made public at: https://osf.io/7qey4/?view_only=.
- ⁴ Notably, the retrospective employment sample is available only for individuals who have entered the labor market at least once. This restriction implies a positive selection among the female sample, especially for the older birth cohorts. Nevertheless, given the strict focus of social mobility research on individuals achieving an occupational position, this selection issue has never been considered problematic.

5 Women experiencing childbirth at exactly the median age are classified as early mothers. We rely on age rather than on career years because this avoids restricting the analytic sample to women who enter the labor market when they are still childless, and class of origin (and educational attainment) is likely to correlate with the age at which women enter the labor market. Thus, net of women's age at the transition to motherhood, this event is likely to occur at systematically different career moments for women of different classes.

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