



Brief Report: Unmet Fertility Desires: Evidence from a Lowest-Low Fertility Context

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Abstract

Italy holds one of the lowest fertility levels and the highest mean age at first birth in Europe, with previous studies pointing to a large gap between achieved and desired fertility. Nevertheless, micro-level evidence on the magnitude of the gap throughout reproductive ages and on the reasons for underachieving remains limited. In this study, we aimed at (1) quantifying the desired-realized fertility gap, i.e., the discrepancy between the desired and actual number of children, among women and men in reproductive age; (2) measuring the “fertility timing gap”, i.e., the discrepancy between the desired and actual age at first birth; (3) describing the reasons for underachieving one’s fertility desires. We used primary data collected through an online survey administered in 2025 on a representative sample (based on quotas) of 6009 heterosexual individuals aged 25–49 living in Italy. Our results showed that large proportions of men and women in reproductive age have not (yet) achieved their desired number of children. At ages 45–49, unrealized fertility corresponded to 0.8 children for men and 0.7 for women. We also found a substantial gap between the desired and actual age at first childbirth, especially among respondents who became parents after age 35. Age- and health-related factors, economic- and work-related factors, insufficient family policies, and inadequate housing conditions were the most commonly reported reasons for underachieving. Results suggest that structural interventions enhancing young people’s economic and housing security and work-family reconciliation are pivotal to enable people to achieve their fertility aspirations.

Keywords Desired-realized fertility gap · Fertility timing gap · Fertility desires · Italy · Unrealized fertility

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Introduction and Background

The inability to reach one's desired fertility aspirations—becoming a parent, having another child, or avoiding parenthood or another pregnancy—has been recently recognized by the United Nations Population Fund as “the real fertility crisis” (UNFPA, 2025). Nevertheless, empirical evidence on the gap between desired and realized fertility remains hampered by data requirements (Yeatman & Smith-Greenaway, 2025). Existing studies have matched the mean desired number of children expressed by a representative sample of women from a given cohort during their younger youth with the actual mean number of children for women of the same cohort at the end of the reproductive life (Beaujouan & Berghammer, 2019). Other studies have measured desires retrospectively (Lozano et al., 2024; UNFPA, 2025). Only few studies for selected countries with longitudinal data on fertility were able to follow individuals over time to observe the realization of one's fertility desires (e.g., Berrington & Pattaro, 2014, for the United Kingdom). Also, we have a limited knowledge of the desired-realized fertility gap among men (Yeatman & Smith-Greenaway, 2025).

Although under- and over-achieving one's fertility aspirations may coexist in both low- and high-fertility societies, in low and lowest-low fertility contexts such as Italy, unmet fertility aspirations mainly relate to unrealized fertility, i.e., having fewer children than desired or being involuntary childless (Beaujouan & Berghammer, 2019; UNFPA, 2025). Surprisingly, up-to-date micro-level evidence on the extent of the desired-realized fertility gap and on the reasons for unrealized fertility remains limited for Italy, despite holding one of the lowest fertility levels (1.18 children per women in 2024, source: Istat, 2025) and the highest mean age at first birth in Europe (31.8 years in 2023, source: Eurostat, 2025a, retrieved 28/01/2026). Past research demonstrated that employment instability, economic uncertainty and housing costs are associated with having no or fewer children (Castagnaro et al., 2025; Vignoli et al., 2020) and that youth finds it ideal to become parents before reaching age 30, with women holding earlier ideal ages than men (Lazzari et al., 2025; Schwanitz et al., 2025). The latest publicly available nationally representative survey aimed at studying fertility desires and behaviors in Italy dates back to 2016, lacks questions that allow to study unrealized fertility comprehensively (i.e., quantum, timing, and reasons), and fails to measure having had more children than desired, thereby limiting our understanding of the fertility trends being currently observed.

This research brief sheds light on the mismatch between fertility aspirations and achieved fertility among women and, importantly, men in Italy. It contributes to the expanding literature on unrealized fertility by developing a set of survey questions explicitly designed for this purpose and by collecting primary data on Italy. We measure the desired-realized fertility gap among individuals in reproductive age alongside—for the first time—the “fertility timing gap”, i.e., the difference between the desired and actual timing of parenthood, and describe the reasons for underachieving one's fertility desires.

Data and Methods

The WelFerPoli Survey

To investigate fertility aspirations and their realization, we collected primary data within the project “Wellbeing and Fertility Policies” (*WelFerPoli*). After receiving ethical approval, the *WelFerPoli* survey was administered online by SWG S.p.A., an established company in the field of market and opinion research, between April and May 2025 on a sample of 6009 heterosexual women and men aged 25–49 living in Italy. Respondents belong to an online panel owned by the survey company, which has been largely used for research purposes (see Section A in the Online Supplement). A quota sampling strategy ensures the representativeness of the sample in terms of age group, gender, educational level, employment status, marital status, and region of residence (see Section B, Table S1 in the Online Supplement).

The survey overcomes (some of) the limitations of other commonly used data sources available to study fertility preferences in Italy. The latest publicly available “Families, social subjects and life cycle” survey, administered by the Italian Institute of Statistics, dates back to 2016 and lacks information on the desired number of children from respondents who do not intend to have a child in the short-term as well as on the reasons for not achieving one’s desired fertility. The survey “Rapporto Giovani” administered by Istituto Toniolo¹ (Luppi et al., 2025), instead, only focuses on respondents aged 18–34, hence failing to collect reasons for unmet fertility aspirations more prevalent among older respondents, e.g., infertility.

Measures

The *WelFerPoli* Survey measured the desired-realized fertility gap in 2025 in the age range 25–49, when 91% of all live births occur.² Childless respondents were asked the following question: “Disregarding possible obstacles or limiting factors, would you like, or would have liked, to become a parent, ideally, over your lifetime?”. Childless respondents who answered positively to the previous question and parents were also asked: “Disregarding possible obstacles or limiting factors, how many children would you like, or would have liked, to have, ideally, over your lifetime?”. We measured the *desired-realized fertility gap* as the difference between the number of children individuals have and the number they ideally desire(d). Both items were measured at the time of interview and hence allowed to quantify, for each age group, the share of respondents who achieved their fertility aspirations and those who under- and over-achieved by age group.

Among parents, we also measured the *fertility timing gap* as the difference between the age at first childbirth and the corresponding desired age, in this way identifying the share of respondents who achieved their desired timing, the early-achievers, and the late-achievers. The desired age at first child was asked to parents and childless individuals expecting the first child through the following question: “Ideally, at what

¹ More information on the website: <https://www.rapportogiovani.it/>.

² Authors’ calculation based on ISTAT data for 2023 (<https://demo.istat.it/>).

age would you have liked to have had your first child?” and aimed at capturing the desires of respondents with regard to an event that has already happened; the desired age was expressed in age groups. A comparable question was also asked to childless respondents who desire to become parents: “Ideally, at what age would you like to become a parent, or would you have liked to become one?”. Hence, for childless respondents, we could measure the timing gap as the difference between the desired age at parenthood and their age at the interview.

To understand the reasons hindering the realization of fertility aspirations, we further asked respondents to indicate the three main reasons why they have not (yet) achieved their desired number of children, selecting from a predefined list with an open-ended “other” option. Similarly, we asked respondents who had more children than desired to indicate the three main reasons underlying it. Detailed information on the survey and the sample, including the exact wording of the questions and response categories, as well as descriptive statistics of the main variables, can be found in the Online Supplement (Sections C and D).

Analytical Approach

We conducted descriptive analyses to examine the desired-realized fertility gap and the fertility timing gap, among individuals of reproductive age in Italy. We further explored the reported reasons for the observed gap among individuals who have not (yet) reached their desired number of children. We do not present the reasons for having more children than desired due to the small sample size (results available on demand). Because “don’t know” is a meaningful answer when analyzing fertility desires, we retained it in the analyses but we excluded it from the computation of the mean desired number of children. We also present results on the percentage of respondents who prefer not to answer the question on the reasons for unrealized fertility. All descriptive analyses in this research brief are stratified by gender and 5-year age groups, to account for gender differences and age-related changes in fertility desires and outcomes.

Results

Figure 1 reports the gendered distribution of the desired-realized fertility gap by (a) age group and (b) number of children. At all ages, more than half of male respondents were underachievers. Until age 39, unrealized fertility was more common among women than men: 65.2% of women aged 25–29 and 67.1% of those aged 30–34 have not yet reached their desired number of children. In the 45–49 age group, i.e., towards the end of their reproductive lives, 53.4% of women and 55.3% of men declared to have fewer children than desired. Even though we expected the desired-realized fertility gap to decrease with age as more respondents enter parenthood, and, eventually, higher-order births, we did not find a clear age trend.

Among childless individuals, 71.1% had parenthood aspirations and desired to have one or more children, whereas 28.9% answered “probably not” or “certainly not” regarding their wish to become parents. When asked about their desired number

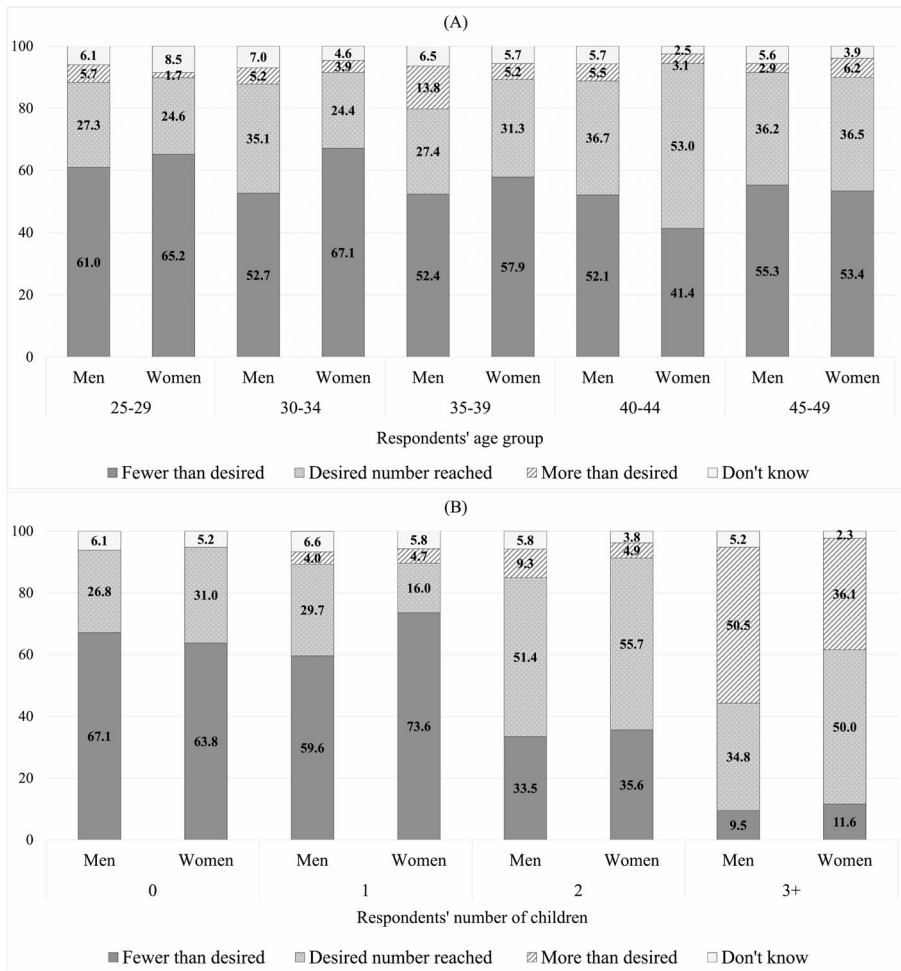


Fig. 1 Distribution of the desired-realized fertility gap by (A) age group and (B) number of children. Note. Sample of 2979 men and 3030 women; “Don’t know” refers to the desired number of children

of children, 5.7% answered “don’t know”, despite maintaining a desire for parenthood. Unrealized fertility becomes less common as the number of children increases. Among women with one child, 73.6% indicated to have fewer children than desired, and so did 33.5% and 35.6% of men and women with two children. Having more children than desired is experienced by a small—yet non-negligible—share of the sample, particularly among men aged 35–39 (13.8%) and among parents of three or more children (50.5% of fathers and 36.1% of mothers).

Figure 2 compares the realized and desired number of children by gender and age group. The mean desired number of children consistently exceeded the actual mean number of children across all age groups, indicating a persistent mismatch between fertility desires and their realization. Even though this gap tends to narrow at older ages for both men and women, at ages 45–49 the gap between realized and desired

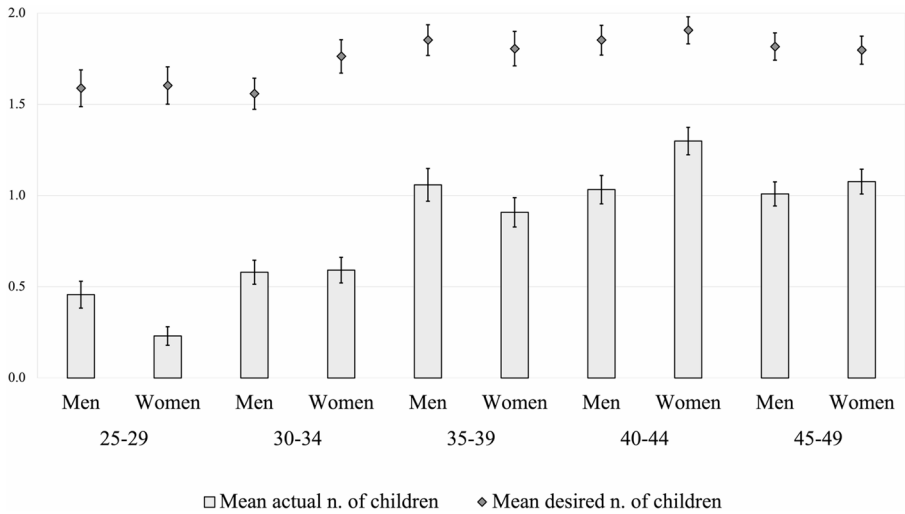


Fig. 2 Mean actual and desired number of children by age group and gender. *Note.* Sample of 2797 men and 2884 women; 328 respondents who answered “Don’t know” to the question asking about desired fertility were excluded from means calculations

fertility corresponded to 0.8 children for men and 0.7 for women, suggesting that unmet fertility desires endure throughout individuals’ reproductive life. The desired number of children hovered around 1.8 among individuals aged 35+, whereas it was slightly lower among younger respondents aged 20–29.

Figure 3A shows the distribution of the fertility timing gap on the sample of parents by respondents’ age at first child and gender. Respondents who had their first child in their late 20s (age 25–29) were those with the smallest gap between their desired and actual age at first birth: in this age group, 73.0% of women and 55.3% of men became parents at the age they deemed ideal.

The share of early-achiever parents (i.e., who had their first child earlier than desired) was highest among respondents who experienced first parenthood between ages 15–24, amounting to 66.3% of women and 89.2% of men, then considerably reduced among respondents with higher ages at first birth: it was less than 2% in the age group 35–39. About one third of men who became fathers at age 25–29 also declared to be early-achievers, signaling that men in our sample expressed a preference to become parents later compared to women. In contrast, the share of late-achiever parents, who had their first child later than desired, increased with age at first birth, especially among women: it went from 65.2% in the 30–34 age group up to 96.2%–100% among mothers who had their first child in their 40s.

Across all age groups, 46.6% of childless respondents with parenting desires would have liked to have already had children, pointing to a substantial timing gap also within this subgroup. Figure 3B shows that childless respondents indicated higher desired ages at first birth than parents, with small gender differences. At age 35–39, 33.0% of childless men and 20.7% of childless women reported a desire to become parents by age 39, whereas about 59.5% of men and 68.6% of women in the same age group reported that they would have liked to have children earlier in life. This share

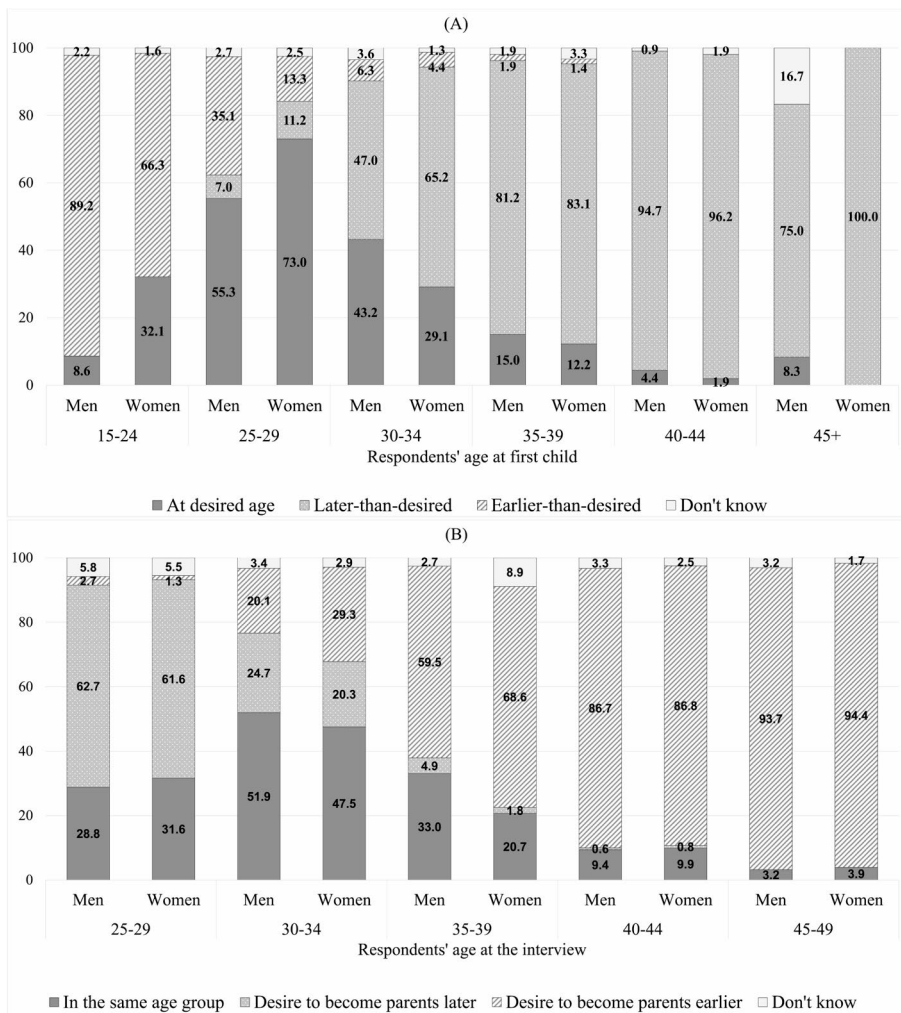


Fig. 3 Distribution of the fertility timing gap by (A) respondents' age at first child and gender for parents, and by (B) age at interview and gender for childless respondents. *Note.* Sample of 1544 fathers and 1554 mothers (a); sample of 1051 childless men and 1018 childless women who expressed the desire to become parents (b)

increased to 93.7% of men and 94.4% of women aged 45–49 at the time of interview, among whom we also observed a small, although non-negligible (about 4%), proportion of women and men still wishing to become parents at their current age.

Figures 4 and 5 report the reasons for underachieving fertility desires among parents and childless individuals, respectively. Among parents, age- and health-related factors emerged as the most frequently mentioned reasons (Panel A), followed by economic and work-related factors, lack of adequate family policies (encompassing difficulties in balancing work and family life and lack of childcare services), family burden or lack of family support (such as not receiving help from the partner and/or

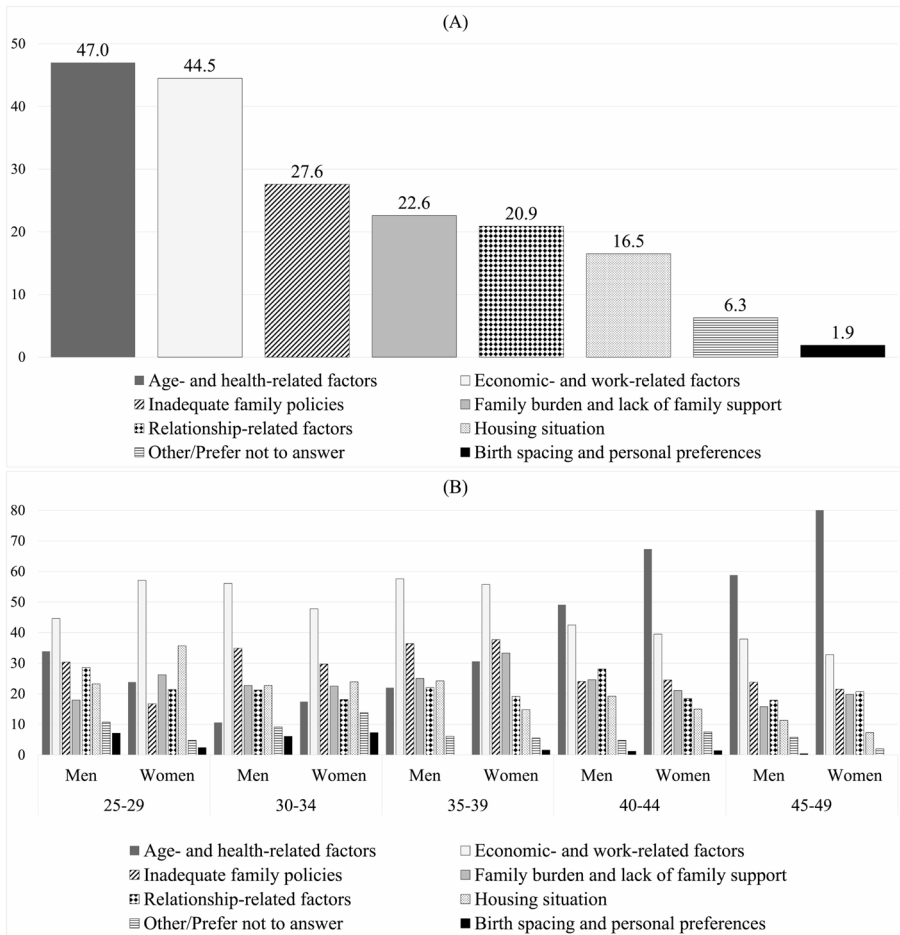


Fig. 4 Reasons for underachieving one’s desired number of children **(A)** among parents and **(B)** by parents’ age group and gender. *Note.* Sample of 661 fathers and 757 mothers who have not (yet) achieved the desired number of children; reasons are grouped as follow: *age- and health-related factors* include no longer/not yet the right age, health reasons, and infertility issues; *economic- and work-related factors* include economic reasons and precarious working conditions; *inadequate family policies* includes work-life balance issues and lack of childcare services; *family burden and lack of family support* include no help from parents, no help from partner, and care for other children or relatives; *relationship-related factors* include the absence of a (right) partner, disagreements with partner, relationship crisis or separation, and late union formation; *birth spacing and personal preferences* include childbearing postponement due to the desire to space births and for other personal preferences, such as wanting to achieve other life goals or for specific life circumstances like family losses or lack of time

parents, and caring for other children and/or relatives), relationship-related factors (such as lack of a partner, union breakup or poor relationship quality), and housing constraints.

We found substantial variation across age groups (Panel B): age and health-related factors were, by far, the most important obstacles to reach one’s fertility aspirations reported by parents aged 40–49, whereas they were less often mentioned by young

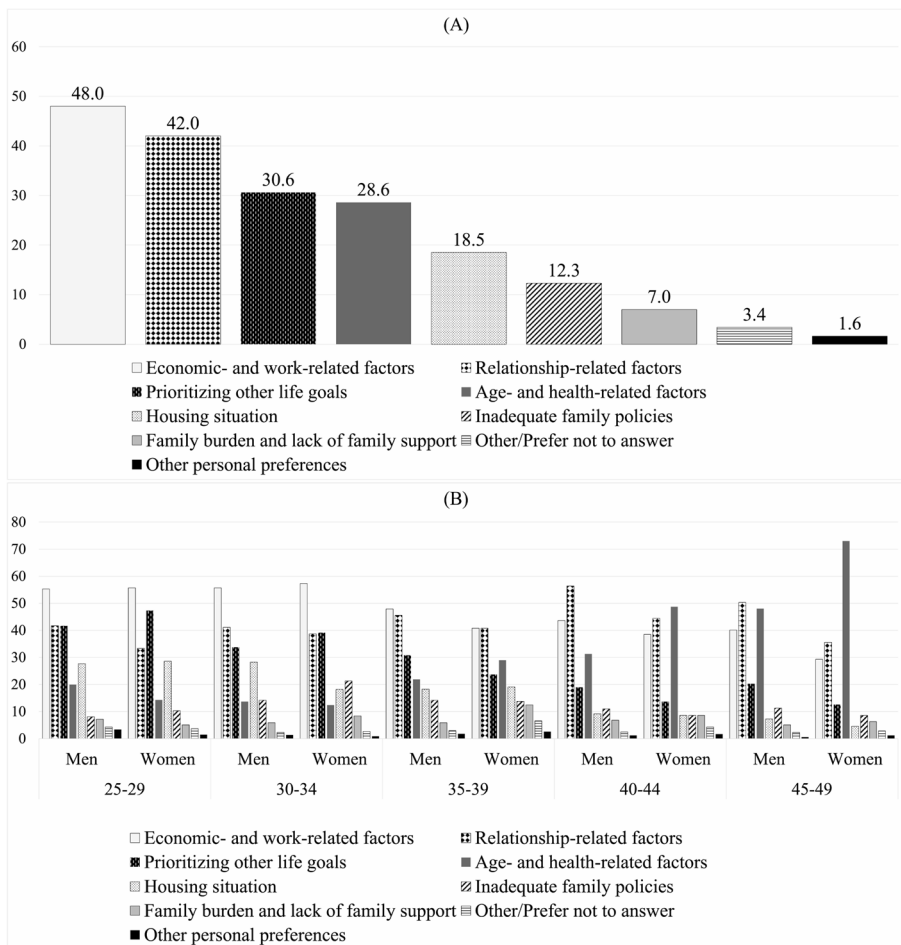


Fig. 5 Reasons for underachieving one's desired number of children (A) among childless individuals and (B) by age group and gender of childless individuals. *Note.* Sample of 963 childless men and 941 childless women who have not (yet) achieved the desired number of children; reasons are grouped as follows: *economic- and work-related factors* include economic reasons and precarious working conditions; *relationship-related factors* include the absence of a (right) partner, and disagreements with partner; *age- and health-related factors* include no longer/not yet the right age, health reasons, and infertility issues; *inadequate family policies* includes work-life balance issues and lack of childcare services; *family burden and lack of family support* include no help from parents, no help from partner, and care for other children or relatives; *other personal preferences* include not feeling ready to take on the parenting role and worries about the current and/or future situation

parents—likely signaling a planned delay or desire to postpone childbearing. At younger ages, economic- and work-related factors were the top-reported reasons. The housing situation was also a relevant factor for not having (yet) achieved the desired family size in the youngest age groups: it was mentioned by 35.7% of women in the age group 25–29 and by 23.9% in the age group 30–34.

Overall, men and women in the 30–34 age group—i.e., the range containing the mean age at first birth in Italy—most often cited structural factors (economic- and

work-related factors, inadequate housing, and lack of policies) among the reasons for underachieving. In the age group 35–39, family burden and lack of family support—such as not receiving help from the partner and/or parents, and caring for other children and/or relatives—represented the third most cited reason for having fewer children than desired, indicated by 33.3% of women and 25.0% of men.

Among childless men and women (Fig. 5), economic- and work-related factors and relationship-related factors were the two top-reported reasons, mentioned by 48.0% and 42.0% of the respondents, respectively (Panel A). Economic reasons were mentioned by more than half of male and female respondents below age 35, representing the first most common reported reason for not having had children, whereas relationship factors were prevalent at all ages and especially among men over 35 (Panel B). The willingness to prioritize other life goals was the third most commonly reported reason for underachieving among respondents who, at the time of survey, were childless, followed by age- and health-related factors. Among younger individuals (aged 25–34), the prioritization of other life goals represented the second most common reason for not having children (yet), particularly among women, partly signaling a conscious postponement of parenthood at this life stage. In the same age group, the housing situation constituted another relevant reason for underachieving, mentioned by 27.7% of men and 28.6% of women aged 25–29, and by 28.3% of men and 18.2% of women aged 30–34. Economic- and work-related reasons remained relevant also after age 35, mentioned by 43.6% of childless men and 38.5% of childless women aged 40–44, and, respectively, by 40.1% and 29.3% of childless men and women aged 45–49. For these age groups, age- and health-related factors stood out as the most frequently mentioned reasons among women.

Although results on overachieving are not shown due to the small sample size ($N=315$), the most frequently reported reasons include unplanned pregnancies or twin births, as well as the partner's desire to have another child.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results in this brief report reveal a substantial mismatch between actual and desired fertility in Italy. Notably, even though fertility desires averaged 1.8 children in our sample of men and women aged 25–49 in 2025—hence, below the widespread 2-child norm and the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman—they exceeded by far the fertility rate recorded in 2024, equal to 1.18. More than 50% of men and women in our sample had fewer children than desired, a proportion which remained stable even in the age range 45–49, i.e., when the probability of a conception leading to a live birth (even via Medically Assisted Reproduction) is very low. Moreover, among parents who had their first child after age 30, when most births in contemporary Italy occur, the large majority reported having postponed the first child beyond their desired age, thus signaling the existence of a strong “fertility timing gap”. Similarly, most childless respondents aged 35+ desired to have become parents at an earlier age.

Regarding the reasons for unrealized fertility, economic and work-related factors, insufficient family policies, and inadequate housing conditions emerged as the

most commonly reported barriers, especially among younger respondents. Age- and health-related factors were often mentioned by respondents aged 40 or more, especially among women. With the exception of insufficient family policies—which were mentioned primarily by parents—these constraints similarly affected parents and childless respondents, thereby hindering both the transition to parenthood and the progression to higher-order parities.

Our conclusion on the existence of a large fertility gap in Italy is likely to apply to other low fertility countries as well. The finding that more than 50% of Italian men and women end their reproductive years wishing they had more children closely aligns with recent evidence on 10 low fertility countries across Europe and South America (Lazzari & Beaujouan, 2026). The prevalent reporting of economic- and work-related factors and other structural reasons for underachieving one's fertility desires is also likely to apply to other Western European countries. Since 2010, Western Europe has experienced a generalized and persistent wave of fertility decline. Although this trend continues to puzzle demographers, recent evidence highlighted the increasing cost of living, particularly in childrearing-related expenses like housing (Eurostat, 2025b), as well as the rising income prerequisites to family formation (Van Wijk & Billari, 2024).

Other results on fertility desires are shared by fewer low-fertility countries. Evidence from Finland, for instance, shows a higher prevalence of childfree individuals among younger cohorts than among earlier cohorts (Golovina et al., 2024). Consistently, our survey indicates that the average desired number of children is lower among young adults. However, the proportion of respondents who do not consider parenthood as part of their life project remains low, suggesting that lower fertility desires do not necessarily imply a rejection of parenthood. Regarding our results on the timing gap, Italy holds the highest mean maternal age at first birth and one of the highest shares of births to mothers aged 40+ in Europe (Eurostat, 2025a), hence we expect that the gap between desired and actual timing of first birth may be larger than in other contexts.

Our study shares a fundamental limitation of previous ones on similar data focusing on people in reproductive age (e.g., Lozano et al., 2024): we cannot observe whether fertility desires will be realized in the future. Apparent underachievement at younger ages could indicate temporary delays or intentional postponement rather than unmet fertility preferences. Similarly, we cannot account for changes in fertility desires that could naturally occur over the life course and we cannot rule out that respondents, especially those approaching the end of their reproductive window, may have revised their preferences in accordance with realized fertility. Finally, we cannot assess whether reasons for underachieving desired fertility remained stable across respondents' life courses, or at which stages particular reasons became most relevant. Such limitations can only be overcome with longitudinal data, which is unavailable for Italy. These limitations notwithstanding, our results suggest that a vast majority of Italians in reproductive age face barriers and obstacles to reach their desired number of children, and/or to do so at the time of their choosing. Many of the barriers to the realization of fertility desires can be removed or reduced by policy intervention (UNFPA, 2025).

In the current Italian political debate, very low fertility is often explained by changing preferences and “*a cultural approach that is generally hostile to the family*”, as Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni claimed at the Budapest Demographic Summit (Meloni, 2023: 985). Given this interpretation, the recent Italian policy response to very low fertility has been to make childbearing more “appealing” through financial incentives such as the General Family Allowance for all children under 18, introduced in 2022, or the recently-introduced “baby bonus”, a lump-sum transfer of 1000€ granted at each childbirth. Our results suggest that such policy measures are unlikely to succeed as they fail to address the structural barriers that are central to understanding Italy’s persistently lowest-low fertility, beyond explanations that emphasize changing individual preferences linked to weaker family norms and rising individualism. Rather than focusing narrowly on fertility as an isolated policy goal, effective interventions should target the broader structural conditions that shape childbearing decisions. Addressing labor market and housing insecurity, promoting young adults’ economic independence—policy objectives that are valuable in their own right—are more likely to facilitate family formation and make it compatible with individuals’ well-being than pro-natalist strategies centered on one-off financial bonuses (Gauthier & Gietel-Basten, 2025; Vignoli & Guetto, 2025).

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-026-10013-7>.

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Data Availability The dataset is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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