

# **Mothers' Work, Reconciliation Issues, and Fertility Desires**

## **Evidence from an Experimental Program**

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### **1. Introduction**

Italy, like other Southern European countries, continues to be marked by low female participation in the labor market and low fertility rates. The most widely accepted explanation, supported by extensive literature, points to the lack of work-life balance policies that enable women to work, earn a second income, and have children. This evidence aligns with other important factors. Women are becoming increasingly educated (both in general and more so than men), which raises their career ambitions. For parents, the desire to focus on the quality of their children's upbringing (better schools, extracurricular activities, etc.) may often outweigh the desire for larger families.

The research on the impact of such policies on employment and fertility is predominantly non-experimental or quasi-experimental in nature. In this paper, we examine the effects of an experimental program called "Equilibri," which targets mothers with minor children who have either stopped or reduced their work activity following childbirth. The program is designed for a group of women in the middle range of human capital distribution: those who have previously been employed and wish to improve their career prospects. These women differ from those at the lower end (who have never worked) and from women at the upper end (whose income allows them to purchase services from the market).

The primary objective of the program is to improve these women's employment situations while increasing the time dedicated to their children's educational activities. Additionally, during the program's planning and evaluation stages, we decided to explore whether better work-life balance could also influence fertility desires. The program was implemented in Piedmont, a region in northwestern Italy, and was funded by a local foundation. The evaluation, conducted using a randomized control trial, demonstrated that "Equilibri" had a positive impact on employment, the quality time spent with children, and children's behavior. Furthermore, a greater proportion of women in the treatment group expressed a desire to have another child.

### **2. The program**

Equilibri is a program designed for mothers of children under 18 who have reduced or stopped working due to maternity. The primary need of the beneficiaries is to find employment or improve their job situation, achieving a new "equilibrium" where work and family life become more

compatible. Additionally, the program aims to replace, at least in part, the time mothers spend with their children with quality activities that benefit the children's development.

The program operates in three different areas of the Piedmont region in Italy, with consistent goals and similar methods across all locations: in a mountainous region (Val di Susa), a suburban area (Settimo), and the small city of Biella. The primary service offered to all women in the program is the support of a case manager. The first step involves an introductory meeting where the woman discusses her specific personal circumstances. The case manager's role is to work with the participant to identify activities that will help her improve her situation and move toward her goals.

### **3. Data and methods**

Data was collected at two points in time: at the time of the woman's enrollment in the program, and 9-10 months later. Women interested in the program had to fill out a Doodle form to access it. The form could be completed by the women themselves or, if they needed support, at the institution where the program would be conducted. This short questionnaire collected basic information: work situation, number and age of children, presence of a partner, economic situation, personal contacts, and consent to participate in the evaluation study. Some of this information was part of the eligibility requirements for participation in the program: the woman had to have at least one minor child and a family economic situation indicator (ISEE) of less than 30,000 euros. For the latter requirement, they were asked to attach the relevant certification. A final question concerned the perceived level of stress due to balancing family commitments and potential work commitments.

Approximately 480 women signed up for the program between March 2023 and October 2023. The second interviews, conducted by telephone by a survey agency, took place between December 2023 and early September 2024. At present, 302 women have responded to the second questionnaire.

The second questionnaire included questions about the potential outcomes of the program and the mechanisms through which it may have worked. The first group of questions concerned the work situation: whether the woman works, how many hours a week, if she has taken part in professional courses in the last nine months, whether she likes her job, whether she thinks it is compatible with her family commitments, whether she thinks it is an occupation that helps her grow professionally, and some personal beliefs. The second group of questions concerned the children, particularly their time out of school and their well-being: five questions, taken from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, investigated their well-being in terms of peer relationships. A final group of questions generally concerned overall life satisfaction, the level of perceived stress, the time dedicated to oneself, and the possible desire for more children.

The women in our sample have an average age between 39 and 40. Approximately half have an educational qualification equivalent to a secondary school diploma, approximately 20% have a university degree, and the remainder have less than a diploma. Half of them were working when they enrolled in the program. On average, they have 1.67 children, with the youngest child being 6 years old. Two-thirds live with a partner. On a scale from 1 to 10, the perceived level of stress for these women is 7. The ISEE level is divided into two classes (up to 15,000; between 15,000 and 30,000 euros): 35% of the women have an income indicator in the higher class.

Program enrollment remained open between March and October 2023. Every Friday, newly enrolled women were randomized between the treatment and control groups within each of the three territories. On Monday, the women selected for the treatment group were invited to start the program; the women in the control group were told that they would be contacted later. Nine months after this phone call, the women were contacted by the survey agency for the interview and, regardless of the interview outcome, control women were subsequently invited by the organization to join the program. We find balance between treated and controls in terms of observable characteristics.

To evaluate the impact of the program, we estimate the following equation:

$$y_{k,i} = \alpha_k + \beta_k * Equilibri_i + X_i' \gamma_k + u_{k,i}$$

Where  $y$  represents the outcome variables  $k$ ,  $Equilibri$  is a dummy variable equal to 1 if the woman is assigned to the treatment right after her enrollment, and  $X$  represents the vector of control variables at the time of enrollment (age, level of education, number and age of children, presence of a partner, employment status, level of stress, level of income indicator, and territory). The term  $u$  denotes the usual error. We estimate a linear probability model, with robust standard errors, and use randomization inference.

#### 4. Preliminary results

We observe a positive impact on all work dimensions, although not all coefficients are precisely estimated. Notably, the percentage of women who enjoy their work increases from 58.4% to 68.2%, and the percentage who find the balance between work and family sustainable rises from 15.6% to 29.4%. The subgroup analysis reveals interesting heterogeneities: the probability of working increases more for those who were unemployed at the time of enrollment (+12.5 percentage points) and for those finding family and work commitments more sustainable (+30 percentage points). For less educated women, generally in less prestigious jobs, we observe a significant positive impact of the program on job satisfaction (+36.9 percentage points). For women who were already employed and/or have tertiary education, the most notable change is an increase in hours worked, by 2.5-3 hours per week.

What mechanisms underlie these changes that may be linked to the program? We find an increase in the proportion of women who attended a professional course in the last 9 months (from 8.4% to 17.7%), and an increase in their children participating in at least one extracurricular activity (from 64.8% to 71.6%). Regarding personal beliefs, there is an increase in the proportion of women who agree with the statement “what women really want is home and children,” rising from 32.4% to 42.1%. This change is theoretically unexpected and may not explain the increase in labor supply.

The increase in participation in professional courses is larger for women who were not previously employed (+10.6 percentage points) and those with tertiary education (+9.7 percentage points). The increase in children's participation in extracurricular activities is more pronounced for children of previously unemployed women (+10.7 percentage points). The impact on the opinion about home and children is larger among women who were already working (+15.5 percentage points).

We also find other changes in these women's lives. Generally, they report higher stress levels (with the percentage of those feeling very stressed rising from 40.9% to 49.8%) and a greater willingness to have another child (the desire increases from 9.7% to 16.1%). The increase in stress is driven by women who were previously unemployed (+16.9 percentage points) and those with tertiary education (+12.1 percentage points), the two groups for whom we observe more work, and a higher probability of attending a professional course of at least 30 hours. The desire to have another child appears to be driven by more educated women (+8.1 percentage points) and those already working at the time of enrollment (+12.1 percentage points), who are the ones with increased work hours (income effect?) and higher agreement with the statement “what women really want is home and children.” Finally, we observe greater overall life satisfaction among women who were not working before the program (+13.5 p.p.).

## **5. Further developments**

We explored, through mediation analysis, whether the hypothesized mechanisms indeed explain the observed changes. In our regression model, we included both the treatment variable and the hypothesized mechanisms. We find that the positive effect of participation in the program on work is partly explained by the increased participation of children in extracurricular activities, while participation in professional courses does not show a significant relationship. Increased life satisfaction appears to be due to greater participation in the labor market. The desire to have another child does not seem to depend on greater labor market participation, increased life satisfaction, or greater adherence to the statement "What women really want is a home and children." Finally, the increased participation in extracurricular activities by the children of treated women appears to have reduced problems with peers in preschool-aged children.