

If I Could Turn Back Time: Motherhood Regret and Fertility Intentions in Italy

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Extended abstract

1. *Background and motivation*

Parenthood is often idealized as a natural and fulfilling stage of life, yet the realities of parenting do not always align with societal expectations. The pivotal work of Orna Donath (2015) “Regretting Motherhood” brought attention to a phenomenon that social taboos had long silenced. Donath’s research revealed that some mothers, reflecting on their experiences, feel they would have been better off remaining child-free. These women often report being pressured into motherhood by pervasive social norms and expectations (see also Moore & Abetz, 2019).

Qualitative studies indicate that parental regret stems from a sense that parenting requires excessive sacrifices, disrupts personal identity, and fails to provide the fulfillment often promised (Matley, 2020; Moore & Abetz, 2019). Lévesque et al. (2020) similarly highlight the disconnect between the societal narrative surrounding parenthood and the lived experiences of parents who feel unsuited to the role. Quantitative estimates suggest that up to one in nine parents may experience regret about having children (Meil et al., 2023; Piotrowski, 2021). Despite growing recognition of this issue as a significant social phenomenon, research on parental regret remains limited globally and within specific cultural contexts.

In the Italian context, parental regret has received minimal scholarly attention. The strong cultural emphasis on family and motherhood in Italy, inflated especially among traditional values strata of the society, may reinforce societal taboos that discourage discussions of regret, leaving a significant gap in quantitative and qualitative studies. Additionally, little is known about how experiences of regret intersect with delayed parenthood and fertility trajectories. The experience of parental regret, particularly motherhood regret, may significantly shape future fertility intentions, potentially leading to a reconsideration of plans for additional children or a complete cessation of further childbearing aspirations.

This study investigates the relationship between motherhood regret among one-child mothers and their fertility intentions over the next three years in the Italian context. It also explores how this relationship varies by age at first birth, as age may simultaneously influence both future reproductive plans and the extent of regret associated with the transition to motherhood. Particular attention is given to the moderating role of individual gender role attitudes, as the meaning and costs of regretting motherhood may differ according to women’s normative beliefs about gender and motherhood.

2. *Data and methods*

The data used for this study come from the FORTIES (Fertility Over Forties) project, which investigated fertility and motherhood experiences in later life. A web survey (CAWI – Computer Assisted Web Interview) was administered in 2024 to a sample of approximately 1000 women aged 20-34, and 2200 women aged 35 and older – all childless at age 35. The survey explored various aspects of the transition to motherhood in Italy, including personal and socio-economic characteristics, direct and indirect experiences, and fertility intentions. Particular attention was given to contextual factors, such as societal pressure on motherhood, to distinguish between women’s personal beliefs and social norms regarding fertility. The survey included a module on maternal well-being, addressing topics such as attitudes, opinions, and experiences of life changes following the birth of the first child, the mental workload associated with childrearing, and parental regret.

The key outcome explored here is the intention to have children in the next three years, measured as a continuous variable on a self-anchoring scale ranging from 1 to 10. Our key independent variable is motherhood regret, measured using a scale adapted from the Parenthood Regret Scale (Piotrowski, et al., 2023), which includes both cognitive and emotional aspects of regret. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with 8 statements listed in Table 1. Responses were collected on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). Items were then aggregated in a synthetic measure, the Total Parental Regret (TPR) score. It’s important to note that the section of the interview concerning parental regret was administered after investigating respondents’ fertility intentions.

We explore the correlation between the two self-reported measures – fertility intentions and motherhood regret – by fitting an OLS model which controls for the characteristics of the mother (educational level, occupational status, age at the interview, civil and partnership status, and area of residence), the characteristics of the first child (gender, age at the interview, and health status), and the type of recruitment. First, we fit the model on the whole sample of mothers of one child. Then, we conduct separate analyses by maternal age subgroup (first child before/over 35). In an extended version of the model, we include a variable capturing mothers’ attitudes toward gender roles to control for individual predisposition toward traditional versus egalitarian values.

Table 1. Adapted Parenthood Regret Scale

Item	Scale
1. Without a child, my life would be better	1–10
2. If I could choose again whether to have a child, I would choose not to	1–10
3. I feel sad when I think about what kind of life I could have had if I hadn’t had a child	1–10
4. I should have prevented having a child while it was still possible	1–10
5. Having a child was a bad decision	1–10
6. I regret my decision to have a child	1–10
7. Sometimes I am so tired that I regret having had a child	1–10
8. Sometimes I miss the life I had before having a child	1–10

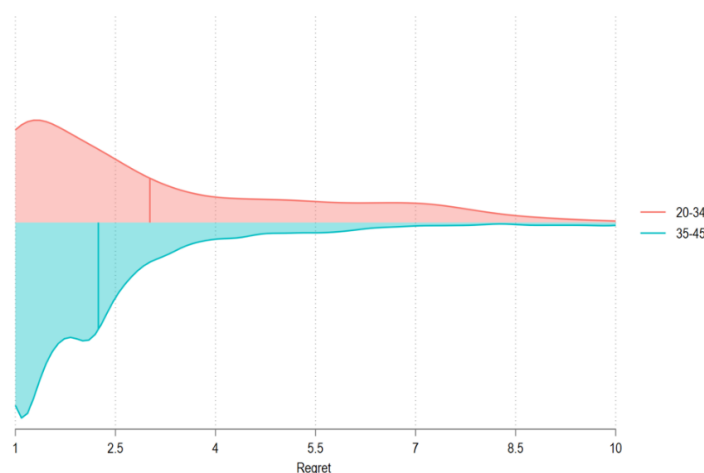
Source: Adapted from Piotrowski, et al. (2023).

3. Results

Descriptive findings suggest that the level of regret is generally low, with an overall median TPR score for the sample equal to 1.88. However, a comparison by age group (Figure 1) reveals that women aged 20-34 report a higher median TPR of 2.13, compared to a median of 1.75 among those aged 35-45. Analyzing the regret scale, which demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.894), younger women (aged 20-34) tend to express generally lower levels of regret compared to women aged 35-45. Specifically, mean item scores suggest that as age increases, feelings associated with wanting to turn back time (“I wish I could turn back time”) and the perception of lost opportunities in life (“I miss my previous life”) become more pronounced. Older mothers report experiencing feelings of “having made a bad decision” and “persistent fatigue” compared to the younger group.

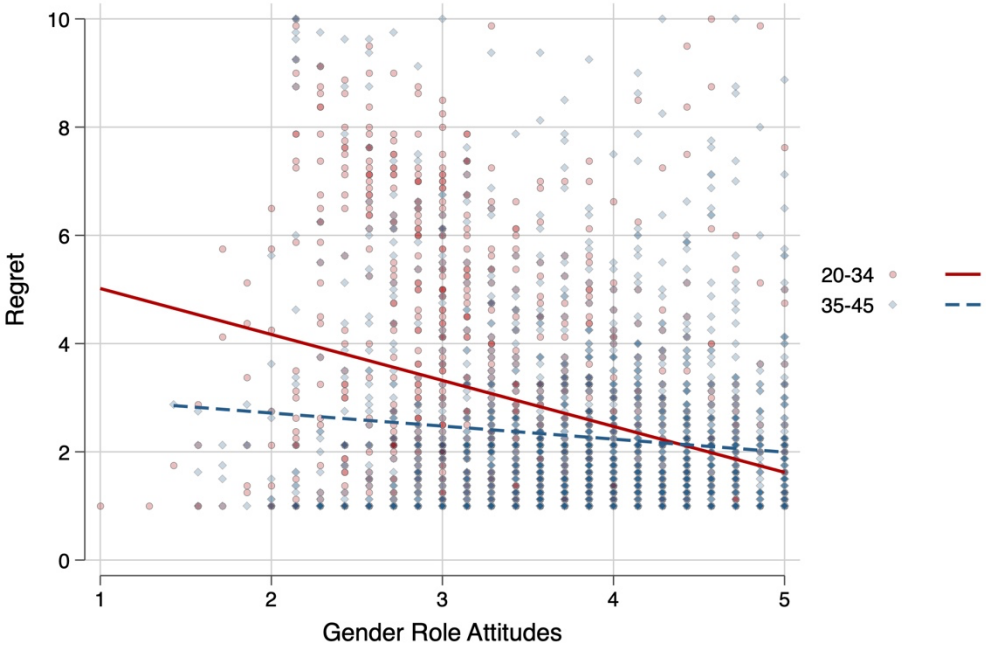
As postulated in this paper, regret levels appear to be correlated with gender role attitudes. The relationship between the two is negative, indicating that more egalitarian women tend to report lower levels of maternal regret, but the strength of this association varies by age of the mother. Figure 2 suggests that women who had their first child at younger ages tend to regret less, on average, to having become mothers when they are less tied to traditional gender role beliefs and are instead more egalitarian (reporting higher values on the gender role scale).

Figure 1. Distribution of the Total Parental Regret score by age group.



Source: FORTIES data (2024)

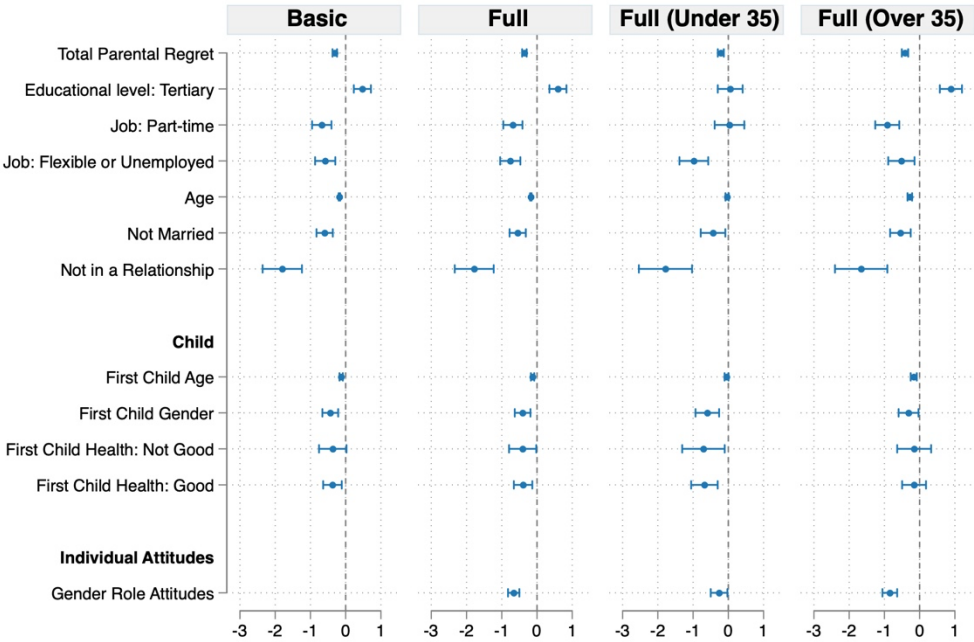
Figure 2. Scatterplot and linear fit of Total Parental Regret scores against gender role values by age group.



Source: FORTIES data (2024)

Preliminary findings from the OLS models reveal a significant negative association between motherhood regret and fertility intentions, with notable differences across age groups (Figure 3), suggesting a link between negative emotional experiences and future reproductive choices. Such an association seems to be stronger among older (35+) mothers. Importantly, the inclusion of controls for gender role attitudes does not alter the results, as overall TPR remains consistently and negatively associated with fertility intentions over the next three years.

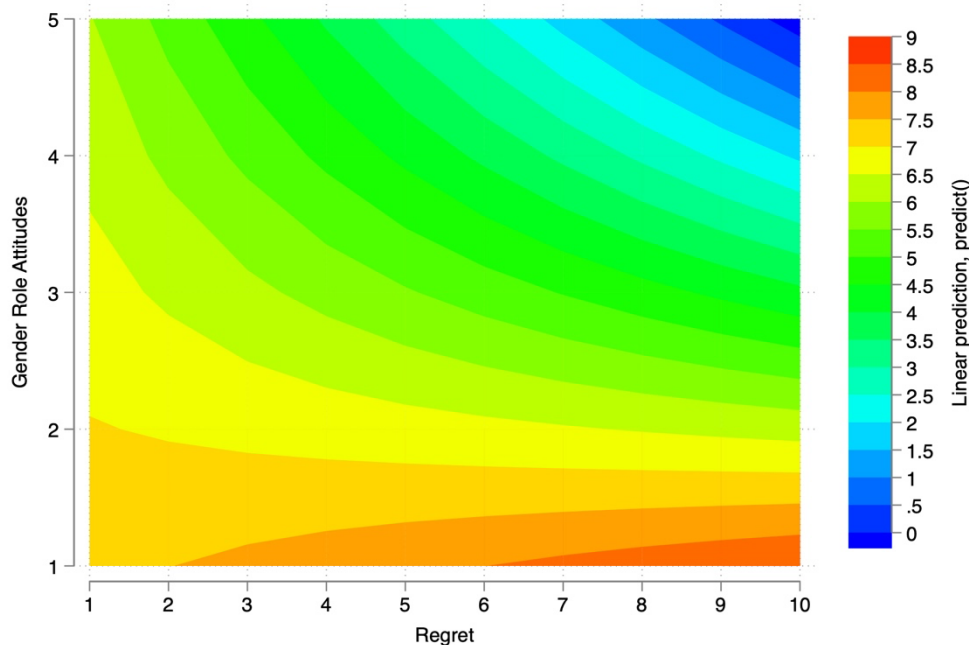
Figure 3. Estimates of maternal regret among Italian mothers (whole sample vs. by age group)



Source: FORTIES data (2024).

Finally, as a third step, we introduce an interaction term between gender role attitudes and regret. This contour plot shows predicted fertility intentions across the two dimensions for the total sample: warmer colors indicate higher predicted fertility intentions, while colder colors indicate lower predicted values. Figure 4 shows two main patterns. First, mothers with traditional gender role attitudes generally report higher fertility intentions than more egalitarian mothers. Second, intentions decline more rapidly as regret increases for egalitarian mothers: for them, even medium levels of regret are enough to reduce fertility intentions close to zero. By contrast, traditional mothers maintain high and consistent fertility intentions even when they report elevated levels of parental regret.

Figure 4. Contour plot of predicted fertility intentions by gender role values and Total Parental Regret score.



Source: FORTIES data (2024).

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