

# **Silver splitters in Italy: determinants of divorce risk in later life**

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## **Introduction**

In Italy, union dissolution has become more and more frequent notwithstanding the two stages' process (separation followed by divorce). The processes of unions' formation and dissolution has changed throughout the life course of individuals, not only in relation to the postponement of the family formation at first union, but also because, marital instability and the formation of new couples are emerging even in later stages of the life course. The international literature has coined the term "gray divorces" to refer to marital instability in old age. Scholars often uses the term silver splitters to refer to people who split up or divorce after age 50 (Brown and Lin, 2012).

The significant increase in gray divorces (silver splitters) inevitably affects the formation of new families in which at least one partner has previously been married, especially in terms of the rise in second marriages. A limited, but increasing, number of studies have addressed the phenomenon in the Italian context (Vignoli, Alderotti and Tomassini, 2024; Tomassini and Vignoli, 2023).

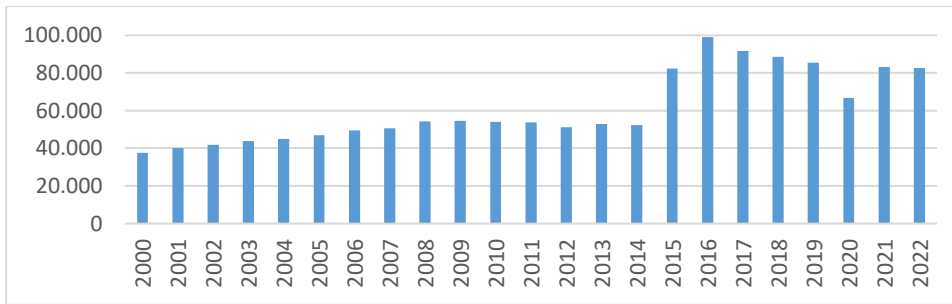
## **Background**

Since the 1960s, beginning in Northern Europe and later spreading to the rest of Europe, changes in family dynamics have gradually emerged due to profound cultural and macroeconomic shifts. On the one hand, according to the Second Demographic Transition theory, the rise of individualism, autonomy, and self-realization among younger generations has led to the introduction of new family behaviors and different patterns of family formation. On the other hand, macroeconomic changes - such as industrialization, tertiarization, and globalization - have triggered shifts in the labor market, including increased female participation and a redefined role for women within couples.

Not only do younger generations tend to adopt new behaviors when forming families, marked by de-standardization in terms of both timing and structure, but also older generations - particularly in cases of separations, divorces, and reconstituted families - who, in the later stages of the individual life cycle, are increasingly embracing non-traditional behaviors.

Since the 2000s marital instability has been on the rise in Italy (Figure 1). In 2015, the number of divorces saw a sharp increase (+57.5% in just one year) due to significant legal changes, introducing of the so-called 'fast-track divorce' law, which altered the rules regarding the dissolution and cessation of civil effects of marriage. The pandemic also affected marital instability. In 2020, the total number of divorces was 66,662 (a 22% decrease compared to 2019, and 33% fewer than in 2016, which had the highest number of divorces with over 99,071). However, it's important to note that, due to the long processing times still affecting these proceedings, the cases processed by the courts in 2020 concerned divorces (and separations) that had been initiated in previous years (pre-pandemic). Therefore, the sharp decline in divorces (and separations) observed in 2020 should not necessarily be interpreted as a reduction in marital instability but it could be attributed to a reduced functioning of the courts and civil registry offices

Figure 1 – Divorces in Italy – Years 2000-2022 (absolute values)



Source: Istat, Divorces

The postponement of all stages of individuals' lives and the life cycle of unions has led over time to a gradual increase in the age at which divorces occur: in 2000 26% of divorces involved men aged 50 and over, in 2021 this percentage is 56%; women who divorced from 50 years and after in 2000 were 18% and became 43% in 2021 (Figure 2a).

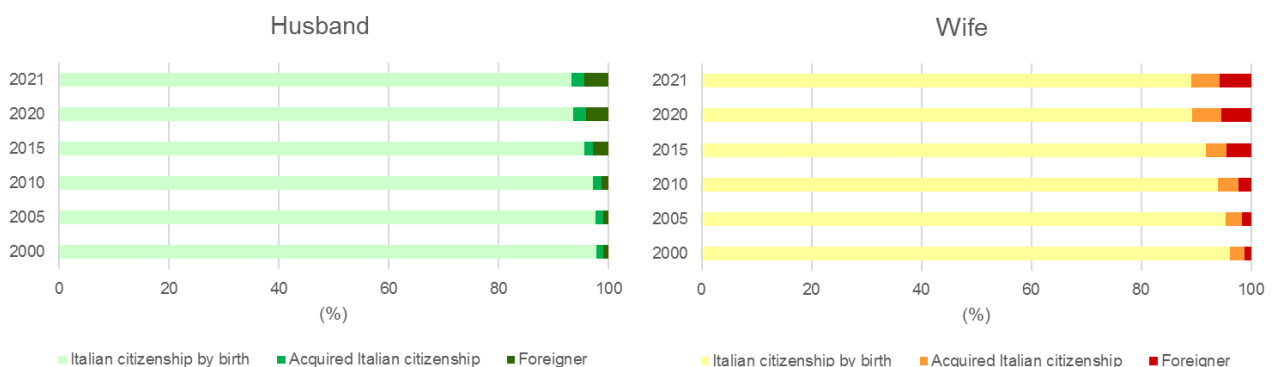
At the same time the process of migrants' integration has led to an increase in citizenship acquisitions. The opportunity is offered to focus attention on the "new citizens," who represent a segment of the population that is not well-known but possesses characteristics and needs potentially different from both the native population and foreign citizens [Strozza, Conti, and Tucci, 2021]. The presence of this new segment is growing also in people who decide to divorce (Figure 2b).

Figure 2 – Divorces by age groups of the spouses (a) and by citizenship (b) – Years 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2000, 2020 and 2021 (percentage values)

(a)



(b)



Source: Istat, Divorces

## **Aims, data and methods**

The general idea is to study the risk of divorce in selected years in Italy considering the different characteristics of the spouses, the marriage cohort and the place of residence information.

To properly study the phenomenon of marital dissolution, individual and longitudinal data are needed to track the whole history of each marriage's partners being exposed to the risk of divorce. These data would be preferable to adopt a more comprehensive multivariate approach and explicitly evaluate the role of any single factor on separation risk and to keep marriage selection effects under control. At present, only sample survey data on households allows this type of analysis in Italy; such data can also provide a lot of interesting information (for instance about gender roles, opinions, and attitudes and so on). However, the relatively low number of events observed in Italy - compared to societies in which divorce is more widespread and has taken place over a longer time - the lack of an adequate couple-perspective in sampling design, and the low frequency of these surveys - due to their costs and respondents' burden - do not make sample surveys the optimal solution.

The increased relevance of the use and management of administrative data sources in the production of official statistics in Italy, has given more impulse to the register-based approach. Here, we make use the Italian Population Register (Registro Base degli Individui - RBI) that, since 2016, represents the backbone of the Integrated Register System (IRS) for producing social statistics. Each individual who is a usually resident person living in a private or institutional household can be tracked across years with a micro-level integration performed by means of a unique identifier stable over time (SIM code). Once the micro-level integration is performed by means of a unique identifier (SIM code) for each individual, it will be possible to ascertain a change in their marital status (from married to divorced) and build in marital dissolution indicators that refer to their available characteristics.

RBI information would be integrated with elaboration on ISTAT "Acquisitions of citizenship". These estimates came from a database built on the basis of the 2011 individual census data, together with the data on the type of acquisition from Ministry of Interior and the data of the new micro-demographic accounting information system.

We then estimate the risk of divorce focusing on adults aged 50 and older as well as separately for those who are in middle age (aged 50–64) and older adulthood (aged 65 and older). We divided the number of people who divorced in the past 12 months by the number of people at risk of divorce during the past 12 months. We consider and compare three different periods: 2019 (pre-pandemic), 2020 (pandemic) and 2022 (most recent data).

As demographic characteristics we consider, besides the age, the sex, the citizenship (distinguished between the one at birth and the current one), the level of education and the place of residence. Furthermore, we have the opportunity to use the information about marital/civil union duration.

We will apply logistic regression models to examine how demographic characteristics (age, gender, citizenship), economic resources (education), territorial dimensions (place of usual residence, municipality typology) and marital characteristics (marriage duration) are related to divorcing in the past 12 months (=1) vs remaining married (=0).

## **Acknowledgements**

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