



Daniela Del Boca

# The impact of Covid-19 on Italy's gender gap

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### About this publication

In this paper we analyse the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the gender gap in Italy. Italy was the first European country to report coronavirus cases. The number of cases increased rapidly and severe measures were implemented to contain the virus. The severity of the measures impacted the gender gap along several dimensions: labour market arrangements, school closures, the division of labour within the household, as well as gender violence. We collected data in 2019 and 2020 in order to explore links between labour market arrangements and the division of labour within the family. Our data suggest that women spend significantly more hours doing housework or childcare than their partners. The division of labour within the household appears to be strongly affected by gender norms, rooted in Italian culture. These results indicate that longer mandatory paternal leave could help significantly to address the gender imbalance within the family.

### About the author

**Daniela Del Boca** is Professor of Economics at the University of Turin and a Fellow of the Collegio Carlo Alberto. Obtained her PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, She is also a Fellow of CEPR, CESIFO and IZA and a member of HCEO. From 2012 to 2020 she was a board member of the Compagnia di San Paolo and a member of the Scientific Council of Confindustria. Her main interests are labour economics and the economics of the family. She is associate editor of the Journal of Human Capital and the Review of Economics of the Household. Since 2000 she has been Director of CHILD and since 2020 Scientific Director of the Impact Evaluation Unit of Collegio Carlo Alberto. In 2007 she was awarded the Order of Merit by the President of the Republic of Italy and in 2021 she won the Tarantelli Prize for her work in labour economics.

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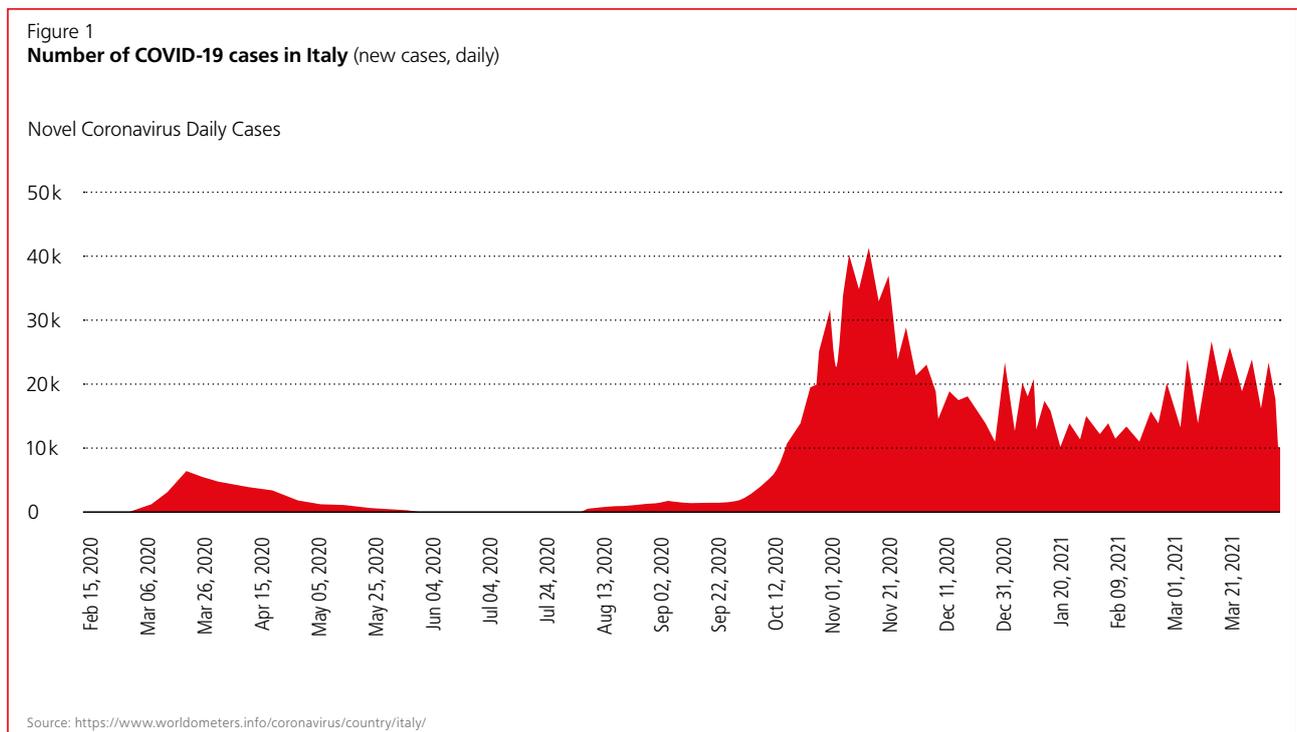
# 1

## INTRODUCTION

In early March 2020, the Italian government imposed drastic measures to contain the growing epidemic, including lockdowns on activities and public services and prohibition of all movement by individuals unless justified for work, health or some other urgent necessity. As a consequence, the transmission of Covid-19 declined significantly in the summer of 2020 and the measures were suspended. In October 2020, however, the number of cases started to increase again and the virus began to spread more widely than in the spring. In fact, in mid-November 2020 reported cases were six times higher than during the first wave. New measures were adopted to limit the impact from the newly spreading pandemic, although they were much less strict than those adopted to contain the first wave.

Figure 2 summarises the stringency test index for the same period observed in Figure 1, indicating the severity of the measures adopted by the Italian government during the first and second waves. The stringency test is a composite measure of several policies adopted by governments, including social distancing, workplace closures, school closures and travel bans.

At the end of December 2020, vaccines became available, and were administered first to health care personnel and then, after a few months, to the large majority of the Italian population. In 2021, the availability of vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca) significantly reduced the case fatality rate. A state of emergency, which allows the government to take emergency measures by decree, was in place from the beginning of February 2020 through 31 March 2022.



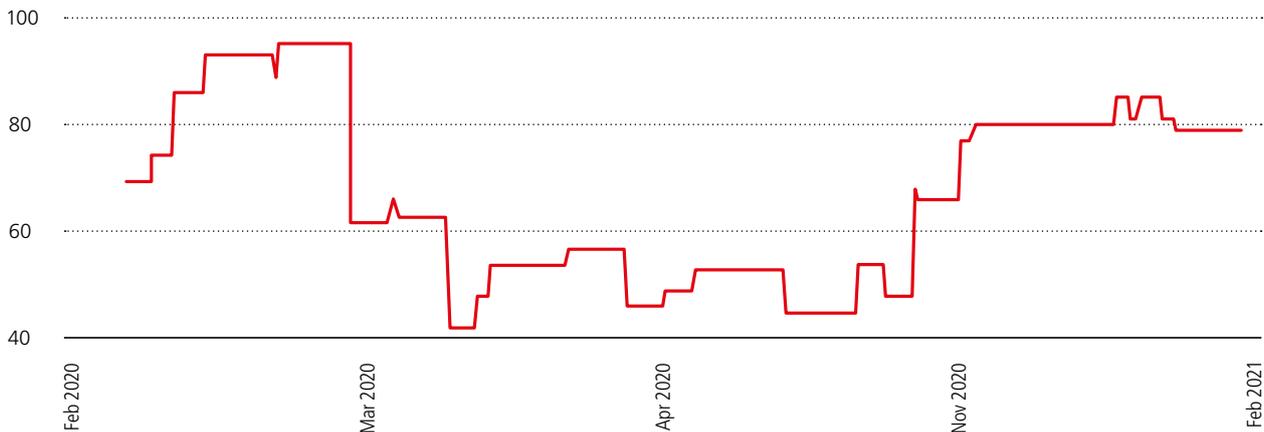
The main impacts of the measures adopted to reduce spread of the virus (limiting personal contacts, travel restrictions, school and business closures, and stay-at-home orders) had a significant impact on individual mobility, labour market participation and children's school access.

The impact on mobility was greater for women and older cohorts. This is largely because women carry an unequal share of the burden of caring for children when schools are closed. Stay-at-home orders indeed have a greater impact on women's mobility, especially for those aged 25 to 44, as this age cohort is more likely to have young children (Caselli et al. 2021). Implementation of mandatory social distancing also substantially reduced the availability of care from grandparents, further increasing the burden on parents already caused by school and childcare facility closures.

In the labour market, the severe anti-Covid measures forced both women and men to adapt to new work arrangements, including working from home, working longer hours, or not working at all. In the education system the social distancing measures entailed school closures for several months, impacting parents' home life and responsibilities, as well as children's cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. During 2020, school closures amounted to 103 days in Italy against an average of 50 to 55 in other European countries.

Figure 2  
**Stringency test index**  
 Oxford COVID-19 Response Tracker

Stringency Index



Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index>

## 2

## COVID-19 AND GENDER INEQUALITY

The restrictive measures adopted by governments to reduce the spread of the virus had a substantial impact on male and female labour market participation.

Whereas past economic crises had a greater negative effect on men (disproportionately employed in manufacturing), Covid-19 negatively impacted women's working conditions more than those of men. The economic sectors most affected by mobility restrictions include hotels and restaurants, non-food and non-pharmaceutical retail, and artistic and leisure services, which are strongly feminised sectors. For these reasons, the literature broadly agrees that the Covid-19 pandemic can also be regarded as a 'she-cession', disproportionately affecting women, who now increasingly face a higher likelihood of poverty (Alon et al. 2020; Barbieri et al. 2020; Bonaccini et al. 2021).

Women are overrepresented in sectors defined as essential and in occupations that cannot be performed from home (OECD 2021). In addition, women tend to be overrepresented in service industries, such as retail, tourism and hospitality, which were subject either to lockdowns or to tight restrictions for some time. Women are also more likely than men to be employed in the informal sector, receiving compensation in cash with no official oversight and having no eligibility for benefits, such as furlough schemes (European Parliament 2021).<sup>1</sup>

To mitigate the pandemic's effect on the labour market, the Italian government proactively implemented two aggressive policies: a ban on layoffs and extension of a pre-existing furlough scheme (Barbieri et al. 2020). The Italian government introduced the Cura Italia emergency package, which was the earliest financial response to the Covid-19 outbreak and aimed to support the Italian health-care system, as well as individual citizens and businesses. The measure includes funds to strengthen the Italian health-care system and civil protection measures to preserve jobs and support the incomes of laid-off workers and the self-employed. It also in-

cludes other measures to support businesses, including tax deferrals and postponement of utility bill payments, as well as measures to support the supply of credit.

Italy is particularly interesting in this context as the labour market is strongly heterogeneous, with well-known substantial and persistent regional disparities. Industrial activity is concentrated in the north and centre of the country, while the food industry and tourism are concentrated mainly in the south. Even before 2020 Italy ranked among the weakest OECD countries regarding employment, unemployment and underemployment (OECD 2020), reflecting a persistently wide gender employment gap and a remarkably low female labour force participation rate. Not only did women disproportionately lose employment at the onset of the pandemic, they also encountered greater obstacles to re-entering the labour force in the period between the first two waves of Covid-19, in summer 2020 and throughout 2021. Women have also frequently been made redundant because of the impossibility of adapting female-dominated sectors to remote working (Profeta, 2021). According to Fiaschi and Tealdi (2022), the Covid-19 pandemic has had asymmetric effects across categories of person, defined on the basis of gender, age and geographic area. In particular, the pandemic disproportionately affected women, particularly those living in large households in the north and centre of Italy. These findings stem both from the presence of young children, which imposes strong constraints on female labour force participation, and from the inferior labour market opportunities in the south of Italy, which leads to strong self-selection of women in the labour market.

In the years prior to the pandemic, the Italian female employment rate was already among the lowest in Europe. From the onset of the pandemic, this rate decreased from 50.1 per cent in December 2019 to 47.9 per cent in December 2020, while the male employment rate decreased from 67.9 per cent in 2019 to 66.4 per cent in 2020, even though women have a higher educational attainment than men (64.5 per cent of Italian women have secondary school qualifications as against 59.8 per cent of men, while 22.4 per cent of women have higher education degrees as against 16.8 per cent of men). At the end of 2021, the employment rate for men was substantially higher than that of women (67.5 per cent vs 50.5 per cent, respectively) (ISTAT 2021). The male inactivity rate went from 25.3 per cent to 27.0 per cent to 26.0 per cent and the female one from 43.7 per cent to 46.0 per cent to

<sup>1</sup> In Italy, 49.5 per cent of restaurants are registered and managed by women, along with 48.9 per cent of bars and 0.9 per cent of canteens and catering operations. Some 52 per cent of all workers in the restaurant industry are women. Both in Italy and worldwide, more than 64 per cent of retail sector workers are women. Also, over 30 per cent of women work part-time and are employed primarily in the informal economy, characterised by fewer labour rights or health protections (Eurostat 2021).

44.1 per cent, indicating the difficulties women have in combining labour market work and non-work while children's access to schools is intermittent.

Moreover, women were already more likely to work part-time and to interrupt work activities after having a child. Women tend to have less attachment to the labour market than men, with interrupted careers because of childbearing and potentially relatively lower earnings over their lifetimes. These interruptions are likely to contribute to gender pension gaps. Indeed, while 24.4 per cent of Italian women belong to the lowest quintile in the pension income distribution, only 15.2 per cent of men are in this quintile (ISTAT 2021). Women tend to live longer than men, meaning they need to save more, and they are likely to spend a larger part of their retirement in widowhood. With fewer available resources and higher life expectancies, women's financial security after retirement is potentially more at risk than that of men. Women's pensions are substantially lower than those of men, by 27 per cent on average across the EU, but by more than 40 per cent in some European countries (Angelici et al. 2020).

# 3

## COVID-19, SCHOOL CLOSURES AND HOUSEWORK

Closure of schools and childcare centres compelled parents to combine jobs in order to increase the time available for childcare and to help children with distance schooling and homework. The extra childcare needs play an important role in explaining the increased gender employment gap since the onset of the pandemic, supporting early conjectures about the impact of the crisis on gender inequality.

On the supply side, women with children became less able to participate in the labour market due to the impossibility of using formal (schools and nurseries) and informal (grandparents and babysitters) childcare. While 57 per cent of jobs lost by men since January 2020 were filled again by the second half of the year, this percentage is only 36 per cent for jobs lost by women (ISTAT 2021).

Italian society is characterised by a large imbalance in the division of family work between women and men; thus, the additional burden has fallen disproportionately on women. In fact, more Italian working women than men increased time dedicated to housework and childcare responsibilities during the pandemic.

To explore the link between working arrangements and division of work within the household, we collected survey data

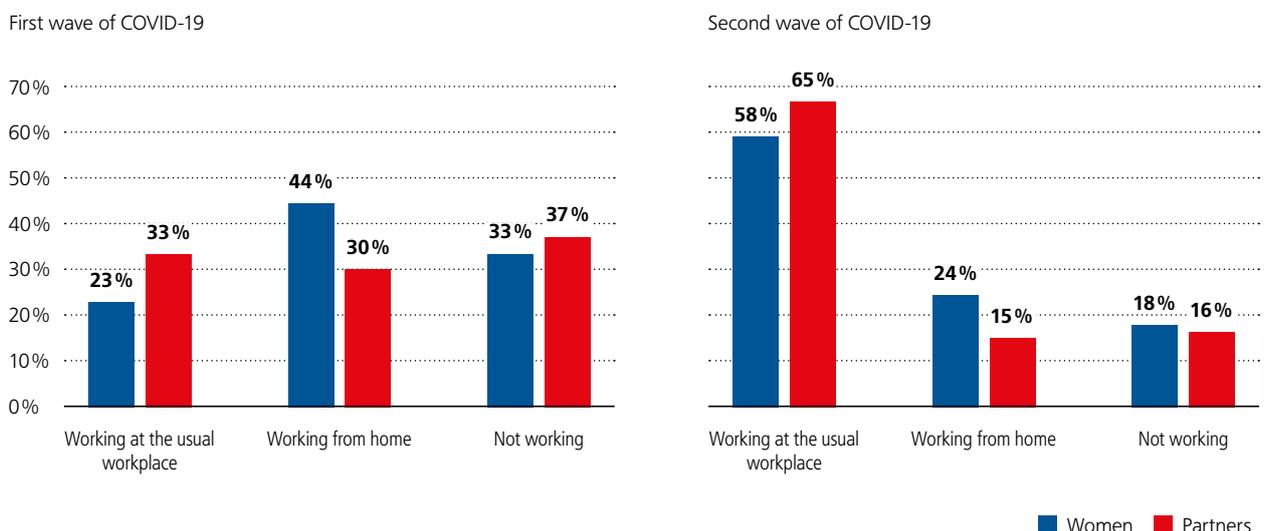
for three periods. The first data were collected in April 2019, the second in April 2020, and the third in November 2020 from a representative sample of 1,249 Italian working women. We analyse the effects of the first and second waves of Covid-19 on working arrangements, housework and childcare (Del Boca et al. 2020; Del Boca et al. 2021).

Figure 3 shows the working arrangements of women and their partners during the three periods analysed. Given the less strict measures adopted in the second wave, more people remained at their usual workplace, while fewer worked from home or stopped working.

Figure 4 shows hours of housework, childcare and hours dedicated to helping children in distance learning by both women and men before and after the onset of the pandemic and in the two waves.

The distribution of daily hours of housework during the two waves of Covid-19 shows that, as a consequence of the less restrictive measures implemented during the second wave, both women and their partners dedicated less time to housework during the second wave than the first, but women always spent more time than men on housework. Both

Figure 3  
Working arrangements during the first and second waves of Covid-19



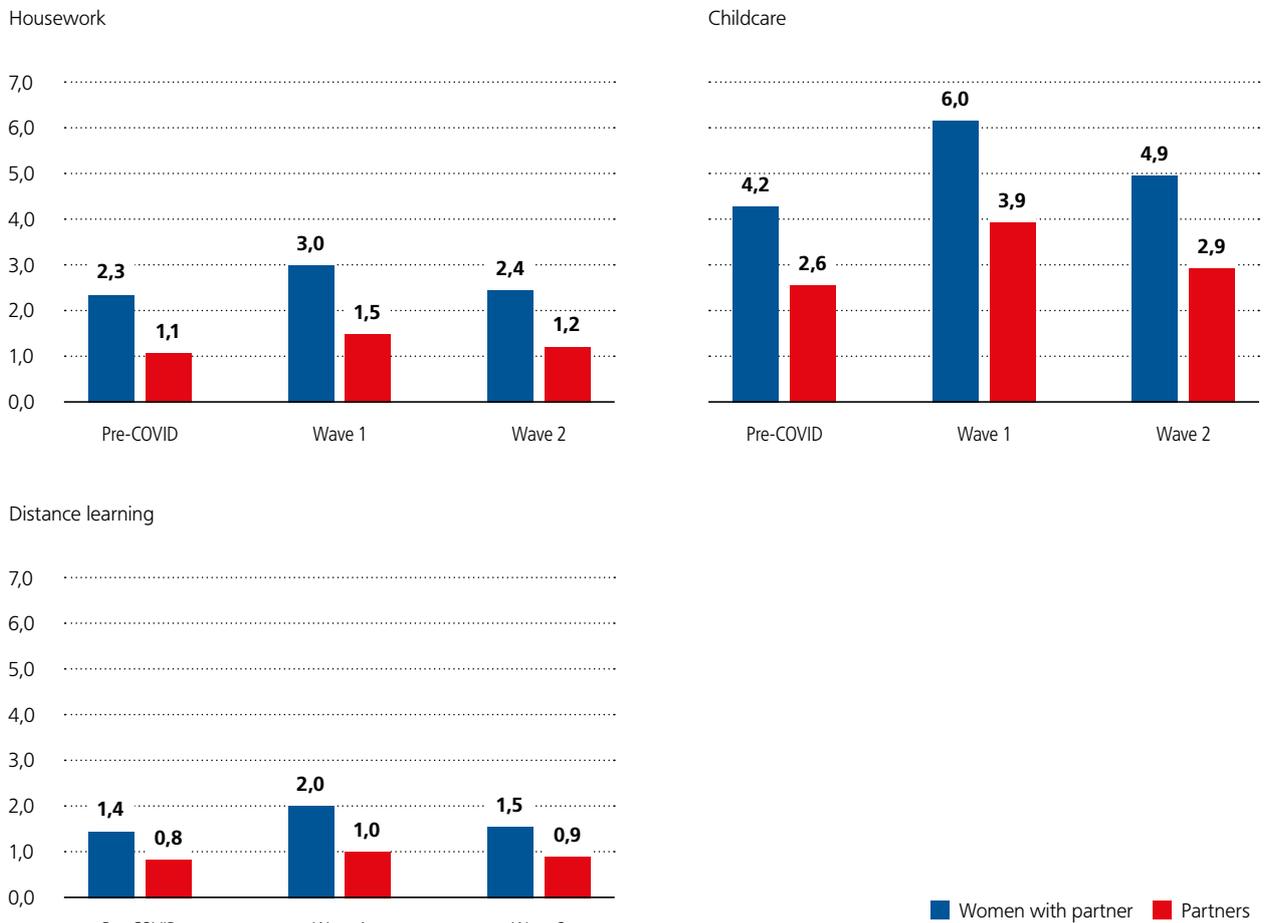
Source: Del Boca et al. 2021.

women and men spent less time taking care of their children during the first wave than during the second wave, but women typically spent more hours per day on childcare and helping children with distance learning.

Turning to how women's and men's time spent on housework and childcare vary across different working arrangements for both partners, in almost all possible combinations of working arrangements, women spend significantly more

hours working at home than their partners. Women spend more time than men in family work in symmetric situations as well, that is, when both partners work at their usual workplace and when both partners work from home (Del Boca et al. 2021). This indicates the strength and persistence of gender norms within the Italian family.

Figure 4  
Hours of housework, childcare, and hours devoted to children's distance learning before the emergency and during the first two waves of Covid-19



Source: Del Boca et al. 2021.

# 4

## COVID-19 AND GENDER VIOLENCE

The measures adopted to decrease the rate of contagion, such as lockdowns and social distancing, had an indirect impact on violence against women. This is defined by experts and policymakers as the 'shadow pandemic', as violence intensified during the Covid-19 crisis.

As reported in the media and Italian statistics, women are more likely to be murdered by their partner, ex-partner or a male family member. The pandemic led to more cases of violence against women, among other things because of the greater unemployment and precariousness. This resulted in less independence and autonomy for women, less social interaction, and greater tensions deriving from forced cohabitation and closure of schools.

Gender-based violence, often committed by men, is deeply connected to the presence of gender stereotypes deeply rooted in Italian culture. As crisis and uncertainty at the individual and family levels increased during lockdowns, more episodes of violence occurred within the family (Angelucci and Heath 2020). Women often had to remain locked indoors, limiting their ability to seek help. The cumulative effect of these psychological, social, economic and individual factors is a substantial decrease in women's freedom and autonomy, followed, from an economic point of view, by increased levels of female poverty.

During the first lockdown in March and April 2020, calls reporting violence on the 1522 hotline increased by 73 per cent compared with the same period in 2019. This trend continued and reached a peak in June 2020, with a percentage increase in hotline calls of 120 per cent compared with the same period in 2019 (Lundin et al. 2021; Bellizzi et al. 2020). The situation for women who were already living in violent households also worsened, as reported in recent studies. In fact, in 2020 over two-thirds of calls to anti-violence centres were made by women who had already called in the past (Di Cristofaro and Rossillo 2021).

School closures increased stress levels in the home because of changes in family dynamics and parents bearing additional school-related and teaching responsibilities for their children. In fact, the percentage increase in domestic violence incidents was greater for couples with children. However, increased family stress may also stem from worries over greater social isolation stemming from lockdowns. In Italy, as in other EU member states, the pandemic has highlighted structural issues in violence against women and the protection of victims.

## 5

# CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

One of the most important policies discussed in the public debate aimed at reducing the gender gap in Italy concerns the supply of childcare for children aged 0–3, which is substantially lower than in the rest of Europe (25 per cent in Italy compared with 59 per cent in France, 42 per cent in Spain and 35 per cent in Germany).

The main objective is to increase the supply of early childcare (age 0–3) and to increase full-time options for childcare (age 3–5) with more even distribution across regions. If early childcare were more widespread and evenly distributed across regions, it would certainly be important to make it easier to combine work and child bearing. However, a larger supply of childcare does not appear to be enough to address the gender imbalance within the family that is clear from the data and policy discussions.

Our results show that the division of labour within the household is difficult to change, because women perform more work in the family than men, even when both women and men have the same working arrangements (both work from home or both work in the labour market). It seems that only other policies pushing for cultural change in parents' roles could reverse the current situation.

Research carried out in other European countries which have experimented with longer paternity leave has shown that introduction of such a policy induces a shift toward a more egalitarian gender model (Farré et al. 2022; Eckber et al. 2013; Dunatchik and Özcan 2020).

Our results for Italy indicate that longer paternity leave would be important to involve men for longer periods and more directly in household activities. Implementation of longer mandatory paternity leave (now 10 days in Italy) could potentially help to re-balance women's workload (at home and in the labour market) and could shift Italian gender norms from the traditional family structure to more egalitarian role models.

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Front cover: picture alliance/Westend61

Design concept: [www.bergsee-blau.de](http://www.bergsee-blau.de)

Layout: [www.stetzer.net](http://www.stetzer.net)

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