Repartnering after marital dissolution: does the context play a role?

Silvia Meggiolaro, Fausta Ongaro
Department of Statistics,
University of Padova,
Italy

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Department of Statistical Sciences

University of Padova

Italy

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE STATISTICHE

Final Version (2008-05-06)

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1. Introduction

In Italy, the phenomenon of marital disruption is relatively recent and still not very common (Istat 2007). This is probably due to cultural and normative factors, which make separation costly, from both emotional and economic points of view. In Italy, indeed, the "sacredness" of the first marriage is still important (Rosina and Fraboni 2004). In addition, divorce was introduced by law only in 1970, and only since 1987 has the time required to request a divorce after legal separation been reduced from 5 years to 3. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Italy unions after the first marriage are not very common, even when the end of the first union is a choice and is experienced by relatively young individuals (in about 2003, couples at their second union, including those after widowhood, represented 5% of all couples, Istat 2006). However, marital dissolution is rapidly increasing (Istat 2007), indicating that new couples (cohabitations or remarriages) after the first marriage may also be more common.

This paper aims at analysing factors influencing repartnering[1] among Italian women who dissolved their first marriage. The international literature is rich of studies on this topic (Hunt 1966, Thornton 1977, Wu and Schimmele 2005). It has been shown that repartnering may be influenced both by demographic factors (i.e., age of the woman at separation, children born during the first marriage) and by socio-economic characteristics (woman's education and her working condition). In any case, the literature cannot always explain why some factors (e.g., presence of children, woman's human capital) show mixed effects, and which mechanisms actually explain these results. This paper aims at analysing in depth the determinants of repartnering, in order to shed light on its mechanisms in separated women in a very special situation: that of a country, such as Italy, which is undergoing a phase of transition from traditional to modern family behaviour. Few earlier studies about repartnering in Italy are based on data of the second half of the 1990s (Rettaroli 2002, Angeli and De Rose 2003), and in that time limitations in both sample sizes and variables were present. The availability of data from the survey "Family and Social Subjects" (FFS), conducted in Italy in 2003,

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[1] The term "repartnering" is used here to cover both remarriage and cohabitation after a *de facto* separation.

has overcome most of those problems, so the effects of some factors may be better understood (i.e., woman's working condition and the characteristics of children born during the previous marriage are now defined more clearly).

Available data have also allowed us to verify whether there is a contextual effect connected with the level of diffusion of marital instability and, more generally, with the social acceptance level of non-conventional family behaviour. The basic hypothesis is that, in the first phases of the diffusion of marital instability, decisions made by potential partners are strongly influenced by the psychological and social costs connected with the choice of innovative family behaviour, which are less pressing in the following phases, when separations are more common. North-South differences, due to the different phases of the Second Demographic Transition through which they go (Gesano, Ongaro and Rosina 2007), may be useful for this control. As regards marital instability, separations are more common and thus probably more socially accepted in the North of Italy than in the South, which is characterised by more traditional family behaviour (De Rose 1992, Rettaroli 1997). As a consequence, we should find different factors influencing repartnering in the North and South; in particular, demographic factors are expected to be more important in the South than in the North, confirming that the choices are also influenced by social costs.

The following part of the paper is organised as follows: section 2 discusses factors influencing the formation of new unions among separated women, in the light of explanations, hypotheses and empirical results in the literature; section 3 describes data, methods and variables used; section 4 provides the results of multivariate regression models, as regards first Italy as a whole unit, and then the North and the Centre-South. The last section (5) presents some concluding comments.

2. Background and hypotheses

The most frequently quoted theory of union formation is that of Becker (1991). This economic theory rests on the centrality of a strong division of labour between men and women. An efficient marriage is one in which each partner "specialises": the woman in home production and the man in non-home matters. Thus, women who invest in human capital are more economically independent, and their reduced dependence on men's earning capabilities[2] gives them the option to abstain from or delay union formation (or even to leave an unsatisfactory relationship).

However, the economic theory has been questioned. Some authors maintain that women with greater personal resources are becoming more desirable in the partner market (Oppenheimer 1988) and that marriages characterised by high "specialisation" of partners are apt to face risks[3] (and so these marriages are less desirable; Oppenheimer 1994). According to these authors, Becker's theory is effective in a traditional union market, in which the interests of a female caregiver and of a male breadwinner converge (Oppenheimer 1997a). On the opposite side, in modern Western societies, where traditional gender roles are outdated or weakened, strategies of evaluation of union opportunities have changed. Women who have invested less in human capital may be induced to anticipate entry into a union, but it is not so certain that they are the most "attractive" for possible male partners.

The validity of Becker's theory is generally supported in regression analyses of marriage formation with a macro-approach (Lesthaeghe and Surkin 1988, Pinnelli 1999). However, when attention concentrates on individual behaviour, mixed results are found.

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[2] The "independence hypothesis" of Becker (1991).
[3] For example, there are risks connected with unemployment or illness of one partner.

There are indeed some studies at a micro-level which – consistently with Becker's approach - find an association between a high educational level[4] and delayed first marriage, as regards women (Blossfeld and De Rose 1992). Conversely, other studies do not provide any support for the independence hypothesis (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991, Hoem and Rennermalm 1986, Goldscheider, Turcotte and Kopp 2001).

Mixed results have also been found with regard to second unions. Some authors show that a second union may be used as a strategy to overcome some of the negative consequences of separation for women with fewer economic resources (Duncan and Hoffman 1985, De Graaf and Kalmijn 2003). Others prove that women with cultural and economic resources, who are more independent and have more choices, may be less motivated to enter into a new union (Chiswick and Lehrer 1990). Yet others suggest that this greater capability to determine their own future may allow them to overcome the fears and doubts associated with previous negative experiences more easily, and freely choose a new union (Oppenheimer 1997b, Bernhardt 2000).

In fact, in the case of second-union formation, the conditions in which the decision to form a couple is reached changes considerably with respect to the first union (De Graaf and Kalmijn 2003, De Jong Gierveld 2004).

First of all, separated women are selected in comparison with unmarried women, as regards the fact that they chose to marry. From this point of view, on one hand they show that they have (or had) some propensity to invest in a firm couple relationship, and this may make the independence hypothesis less discriminatory than among unmarried women. On the other hand, separated women have undergone their marriage dissolution, a stressful event which causes emotional and economic difficulties. These are as strong as the efforts women invested in their previous marriage (Jarvis and Jenkins 1999, Smock, Manning and Gupta 1999). Women with fewer economic resources are presumed to be more interested in forming a new couple; vice versa women less conditioned by economic constraints are presumed to be able to choose more freely when and how to form a new union, or at least to postpone repartnering. This is consistent with the independence hypothesis.

Nevertheless, this last behaviour may be contrasted by other individual action strategies not connected with usefulness: greater personal resources also mean greater capacity to recover from the stress of separation, so that, among women with such resources, there may be some better able to reconstruct a new life - for example, by being willing to form a new union sooner (in contrast with the independence hypothesis).

In view of these preliminary remarks, hypotheses regarding the effect which a woman's personal resources may have on the probability of repartnering are difficult to express clearly, especially in a situation such as the Italian one, which is undergoing a gradual but geographically differentiated phase of transition from traditional to modern family behaviour.

In addition, many separated women have already had some children during the previous marriage. It is a commonly held belief that the presence of dependent children born in a previous marriage is a barrier to repartnering, especially if they are several children. Potential partners may be less interested in partnering women with dependent children, because of the fear of handling complex relationships. Similar reflections may be expressed by separated mothers themselves, as they fear conflicts with their children in the case of repartnering. Separated women who have already had some children may also be less interested in a second union, because their need for motherhood have already been satisfied in the first marriage. However, the international literature shows mixed effects: some studies on the determinants of second unions show the negative impact of children born during the previous union on a woman's repartnering (Bumpass, Sweet and Martin 1990, Lampard and Peggs 1999, Bernhardt 2000); others do not support this hypothesis. Some authors even note that the number of children from the first marriage has little or no effect (see, for example, studies cited by Schmiege, Richiards and Zvonkovic 2001). In some cases, a positive

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[4] In any case, study of the effect of education would need more attention; researches on the impact of education on various demographic behaviour does focus on level of education, but it is also important to take the field and type of education into account (Hoem, Neyer and Andersson 2006).

effect may be observed (see Glick and Lin 1986), but this may be spurious, due to the fact that the woman's economic status is not controlled for. In the present paper, the effect of the presence of children is examined both considering their age (this aspect has not been adequately examined in the literature) and netting out the potential spurious effect connected with a woman's economic condition (women's education and working condition are taken into account here).

Lastly, mechanisms of repartnering may be influenced by the cultural and normative situation in which individuals act. Our hypothesis is that the decisions of potential partners are influenced by the level of social acceptance of new family forms. With respect to following phases, in the first phases of the diffusion of marital instability, the low social acceptance level of separation influences repartnering, not only by reducing the risk of a second union among separated women, but also by changing this risk according to some of their characteristics. In particular, in a similar context, potential male partners (mainly unmarried) are presumed to prefer separated women who are more similar to unmarried women, independently of their propensity for repartnering. On one hand, these unions weaken the social and psychological costs connected with the choice of non-conventional unions (e.g., potential conflicts due to resistance by the family of origin – parents tend to discurage their offspring to adopt new family behaviours); on the other, they reduce the risk of crisis for the traditional male identity usually associated with this type of context.

Italy's geographical differences offer interesting opportunities to verify this hypothesis. The South is more traditional than the North: the latter is, indeed, the precursor of non-conventional family and individual behaviours (e.g., cohabitations and non-marital births); moreover, in the North, gender differences in the private sphere are less strong than in the South (Pinnelli and Fiori 2007). Differences are observed also as regards marital instability diffusion. In the North, separations are more widespread and less socially disregarded than in the South (De Rose 1992, Rettaroli 1997). Therefore we suppose that, in the South, the psychological and social costs of a man entering a union with a separated woman are higher than in the North. As a consequence, in the South, men are presumed to prefer separated women with fewer ties with their previous marriage; in the North these aspects are probably less important.

3. Data and methods

3.1. The sample

Data come from the survey "Family and Social Subjects" (FFS) conducted in Italy by Istat in November 2003. The survey considered a representative sample at national level of about 20,000 families, and collected much social and family information about every member of the families.

For women over the age of 15, the survey collected retrospective data on couple and reproductive biography. As the year of all marriages is known, and the years of the beginning of all consensual unions are also reported, all series of unions of interviewed women can be reconstructed.

For each marital dissolution, the reason of dissolution (widowhood or separation) is known. In the case of separation, up to three dates at most are obtained (the years of *de facto* separation, legal separation, and divorce). The date of *de facto* separation was chosen among the available dates marking the end of the first marriage. There were several reasons for this choice: a) *de facto* separation is usually the first event that marks the end of the first marriage; b) since it means the end of cohabitation of partners, it may be considered the onset of the period at risk of experiencing a new (at least consensual) union; c) any other following date would have reduced the sample to be analysed (e.g., using the date of legal separation, women who, at the time of the interview, had not experienced other phases apart from *de facto* separation would not be included in the sample). In

this way, altogether, women whose marriages had broken up at the moment of the interview totalled 1150: 173 of them were only *de facto* separated, 419 legally separated and 558 divorced. Women over 70 at the interview[5] were not included, reducing the sample to 1086, of whom 155 were only *de facto* separated, 408 legally separated, and 523 divorced.

One problem was that, in some cases, the date of legal separation and/or of divorce was available, but not the year of *de facto* separation. As, where calculable, the time between *de facto* and legal separation was quite short (on average 1.78 years) and not very variable (the two events happen in the same year for 45%, and at a distance of one year for 23%), in the 253 cases where only the year of legal separation was known, the year of *de facto* separation was estimated with a probabilistic imputation[6] method (Rubin 1987). As the great variability of time between *de facto* separation and divorce, the (217) women who provided only the date of divorce were not included. This may have some bias consequences only on the descriptive results, which do not take into account the composition of the sample according to the entry into divorce, but not on the results of the regression models, where this aspect is controlled for[7].

The final number of separated women considered for our analyses is thus 869[8]. Of these, 209 (almost 24%) had entered into a second union (marriage or cohabitation) by the time of the interview (independently of the fact that the second union had been dissolved or was proceeding): cohabitation for 61% (128 women); cohabitation followed by marriage for 30% (62 women); only 9% (19 women) remarried directly.

3.2. Method

Event history analysis techniques were used to analyse the determinants of the second union, taking into account the joint effect of a set of covariates,. The dependent variable was the hazard of entering into an union after the break-up of the first marriage[9]. In particular, the model used was the piecewise constant exponential model (Blossfeld and Rohwer 2002). This is based on split points on the time axis. Considering L time periods, the transition rate from origin state j to destination state k (in this case the entry into a second union for separated women) is:

$$r_{jk}(t) = \exp\left\{\alpha_l^{(jk)} + \beta^{(jk)} X^{(jk)}\right\}.$$

For each transition (j,k), $\alpha_l^{(jk)}$ is a constant coefficient associated with the lth time period. $X^{(jk)}$ is a (row) vector of covariates, and $\beta^{(jk)}$ is an associated vector of coefficients assumed not to vary across time periods. Thus, the model assumes that the hazard is constant not over the whole range of time, but within certain specified intervals of time: in this case, they are expressed in number of years since the end of the first marriage (four time periods were considered: up to two years; 3-5; 6-10; 11 and more). The probability of repartnering may then vary across time periods. Conversely, the covariates are assumed to have the same effects in each period, so the model is a proportional hazard model.

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[5] This choice is justified by two reasons: first, to avoid considering not very reliable retrospective data of older women; second, to avoid considering women of a birth cohort living in a period when separations were a very uncommon phenomenon and thus repartnering processes were very selected.

[6] The imputation takes into accounts some demographic and social characteristics of the woman (birth cohort, education, geographical area of residence) and some features connected with reproductive and couple history (year of first marriage, having experienced or not a divorce, children at time of interview, year of legal separation).

[7] In any case, some analyses, not reported here for reasons of space, do not contradict the hypothesis that there is a random selection of the sample of divorced women, for whom the date of *de facto* separation is not known.

[8] From now on, we refer to *de facto* separation simply as separation and women who experienced (at least) a *de facto* separation are simply called separated.

[9] Women who have not experienced repartnering are censored at the time of interview.

3.3. Covariates

Covariates used in the models may be grouped into four categories: woman's personal resources; her preferences and values; ties with her first marriage; historical and geographical context.

a) Woman's personal resources are represented by age at separation, education, and working condition. The woman's age at separation is grouped into three categories. According to the literature, entry into a new union is expected to be negatively associated with age at separation. Working condition and education are often used in the literature to express woman's human capital. Education, measured by the educational level at the time of interview[10], is classified into two categories (middle-high, low) which distinguish whether women have or do not have an educational level equal to or higher than high school. Working condition is measured according to employment status (working/not working), without specifying either type or level of work. For this aspect, the variable is not strictly a measure of the woman's human capital, but rather an indicator of her economic independence. Unlike previous Italian studies on the determinants of repartnering, it is here used as a time-varying covariate[11], so women's occupational status before the entry into a new union is more precisely observed.

b) As observed about first unions, the decision to enter into a second union may also be connected with personal values and preferences (Oppenheimer 1988, Lestaeghe and Moors 1996). Some studies suggest that religion influences individual behaviour in terms of second union formation, with a restraint effect on the formation of new unions, although its cultural importance changes according to country (Angeli and De Rose 2003). In this case, information about religiosity was not used, because the only available data regarded religious practice (church attendance) at the interview. As religious practices are sensitive to the events of an individual's course of life and do not only influence them, a proxy of religiosity was chosen: the first marriage ceremony (civil or religious). Women who had a civil marriage were expected to be more prone to form a new union compared with women who had a religious marriage.

c) Two variables were chosen to measure a woman's ties with her previous marriage: the children born during it and whether she got divorced or not. Children are those living at the time of the separation and are grouped according to number (0, 1, 2, or more) and age (up to 5; 6 or more) at the time of their mother's separation. The variable used to measure the presence of legal ties with the previous marriage is time-varying, and records whether divorce took place or not[12]. According to the hypotheses made in section 2, both covariates are expected to have a negative association with repartnering, especially in the South of Italy.

d) Historical background was controlled for by the woman's birth cohort (before or after 1960). More recent cohorts are expected to be more prone to form second unions. As regards the effect of geographic context, first, North, Centre and South are distinguished; then, as a similar propensity to second unions is observed in the Centre and South, these two areas were grouped and contextual analyses were carried out distinguishing only North and Centre-South. As noted in section 2, repartnering is presumed to be less common in the South.

Table 1 lists the distributions of the variables used in the models.

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[10] Since educational history usually ends before marriage, this approximation is irrelevant for correct interpretation of results.

[11] This means that, using retrospective data about occupational history, changes in the working condition of the woman in the period of risk of entering into a union are taken into account.

[12] It should be noted that divorce is the necessary step to experience a second marriage.

Table 1 *Characteristics of the separated women (percentages).*

Characteristics	%	Characteristics	%
Age at separation		**Working condition at separation**	
Less than 25	10.8	Working	65.9
25-29	21.8	**Region of residence**	
30-34	22.8	North	54.0
35-39	19.2	Centre	19.9
40-44	13.6	South	26.1
More than 45 (but less than 70)	11.8	**Education**	
Birth Cohort		High (university)	11.0
Until 1950	20.8	Middle (high school)	32.5
1950-1960	35.4	Low (junior school or less)	56.5
1960-1970	32.6	**Divorced**	
1970 and after	11.2	Yes	35.4
Number and age of children at separation		**Marriage ceremony**	
No children	25.6	Religious	79.9
1 child under 6	19.1	Civil	20.1
1 child over 6	18.1	**Second union**	
2 or more, with at least one under 6	13.7	Yes	24.1
2 or more children, all over 6 years	23.5		
N° of cases (Total = 100)		**869**	

4. Results

4.1. Italy

Table 2 lists the estimates of the coefficients for the regression model, describing the risk of entry into a second union for the whole sample of separated Italian women.

The time elapsing from separation negatively influences the chance of entering into a second union. In particular, the trend is non-monotonic, and the risk is only slightly greater between 3 and 5 years after separation.

The effect of a woman's personal resources is weak. Only age at separation which, consistent with the literature (Angeli and De Rose 2003) is negatively associated with repartnering, shows a very significant effect. The other variables connected with resources (education, working condition) do not seem to have a significant influence on the propensity to form a new couple. So the independence hypothesis does not find confirmation. This result had also been found in previous Italian studies, although their samples are not completely comparable (Rettaroli 2002, Angeli and De Rose 2003), and working condition was not considered as a time-varying variable.

Variables describing a woman's ties with her previous marriage are also important. Children, with at least one of pre-school age, decreases the chances of entering into a second union; having only one child, or more than one but all over 6, does not influence repartnering. Children probably make the social network and the new family structure particularly complex, and are thus problematic for the formation of a new union. These results only partly confirm those in the Italian literature. They are in line with the findings of Angeli and De Rose (2003), although that study only considered children under 13. Instead, Rettaroli (2002) showed the lower risk of repartnering of women who were already mothers of both one and two or more children, in comparison with childless women, but that study did not refer to the children's age.

As expected, undergoing divorce is closely connected with entry into a second union: a divorce is probably obtained more often by women whose intention to form a new couple is stronger – a fact

which may be legalised through a second marriage (only possible after divorce).

The ceremony of the first marriage (as a values and preferences indicator) is not significant either. It is probably not a very sensitive measure of preferences or religiosity. There may be, indeed, some kind of selection among women whose first marriage was religious: separated women probably have less intense religious feelings than those who do not undergo dissolution of their first marriage. Consequently, it may be difficult to discern their level of religiosity from that of separated women whose first marriage was civil.

Lastly, as presumed, there is a contextual effect, both historical and geographic. Repartnering is more common among more recent cohorts, and this shows that the propensity to form second unions is increasing across time. Women living in the North are also more prone to repartner (they are almost twice ($exp(0.64) = 1.90$) as likely to begin a new union than those from the South). Women from the Centre do not show significant differences with respect to women living in the South.

Table 2. *Factors influencing entry into a second union for women undergoing first marital dissolution; piecewise constant exponential model.* **Italy.**

	Coefficients
Period 1: < 2 years	-4.23***
Period 2: between 3 and 5 years	-4.09***
Period 3: between 6 and 10 years	-4.47***
Period 4: > 10 years	-5.03***
Age at separation (*ref: more than 35*)	
Under 29	1.29***
30-34	0.63***
Education (*ref: low*)	
High	0.07
Working situation ‡ (*ref: no*)	
Working	-0.25
Marriage ceremony (*ref: civil*)	
Religious	0.01
Children at separation (*ref: no children*)	
1 child under 6 years	-0.29
1 child over 6 years	0.01
2 or more children, with at least one under 6 years	-0.87***
2 or more children, all over 6 years	-0.17
Divorce ‡ (*ref: no*)	
Yes	0.54***
Birth cohort (*ref: after 1960*)	
Until 1960	-0.49***
Region of residence (*ref: South*)	
North	0.64***
Centre	0.23

‡ Time-varying variables.
* = $p < .10$, ** = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .01$

4.2. North and South

This section describes the results of an analysis distinguishing Italy into North and Centre-South (Table 3). Considering the results of Table 2, separating regions of the Centre from those of the North and grouping Centre with South seems to be more appropriate.

Results show that the entry into a second union is influenced by the area of residence.

The effects of the time elapsing from separation to a second union are different in the two geographical areas. The trend is non-monotonic in the North (as observed in the national model), but is a monotonic decreasing function in the Centre and South.

The effect of birth cohort is in the same direction in the two geographical areas, although it is less significant in the Centre-South than in the North. Changes in behaviour during the cohorts are therefore slower in the Centre-South.

Women's resources have different effects in the North and Centre-South. As regards the woman's age at separation, the effect is dichotomised for those living in the Centre or South (women who separated when they were under 29 have a greater risk of repartnering). Instead, in the North the effect of age is more gradual. As regards working condition, a different effect is noted between North and Centre-South. In the North, employed women are less likely to enter into a second union than not working women, thus confirming the independence hypothesis. The opposite happens in the Centre-South, where working condition does not influence repartnering. In both North and Centre-South, education is not significant.

As expected, a woman's ties with her previous marriage show different effects in the North and Centre-South. In the North, these variables have not effects on repartnering. Conversely, in the South, the most significant variables are those representing a woman's ties with her previous marriage. The probability of entering into a second union is limited by the presence of children, particularly if there are more than one of them or if they are of pre-school age. Divorced women also have greater probabilities of repartnering.

Table 3. *Factors influencing entry into a second union for women undergoing first marital dissolution; piecewise constant exponential model.* **North and Centre-South**.

	North	Centre-South
	Coefficients	*Coefficients*
Period 1: < 2 years	**-4.02*****	**-3.29*****
Period 2: between 3 and 5 years	**-3.74*****	**-3.41*****
Period 3: between 6 and 10 years	**-4.03*****	**-3.99*****
Period 4: > 10 years	**-4.58*****	**-4.53*****
Age at separation (*ref: more than 35*)		
Under 29	**1.72*****	**0.68***
30-34	**1.00*****	-0.05
Education (*ref: low*)		
High	0.19	-0.17
Working situation ‡ (*ref: no*)		
Working	**-0.43****	0.09
Marriage ceremony (*ref: civil*)		
Religious	-0.06	0.08
Children at separation (*ref: no children*)		
1 child under 6 years	-0.05	**-0.83****
1 child under 6 years	0.22	-0.42
2 or more children, with at least one under 6 years	-0.50	**-1.69*****
2 or more children, all over 6 years	-0.24	**-1.02****
Divorce ‡ (*ref: no*)		
Yes	0.35	**0.94*****
Birth cohort (*ref: after 1960*)		
Until 1960	**-0.52*****	**-0.52***

‡ Time-varying variables.
* = $p < .10$, ** = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .01$

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper represents the first empirical study which examines in depth the determinants of repartnering in Italy. As in Italy marital instability is a recent phenomenon, but one which is also

rapidly growing, this analysis sheds some light on the mechanisms of the formation of second unions in a developed country which is going through great changes in family behaviour.

What kinds of women have a higher propensity to form new unions after separation? What is the role of some predictors which are considered traditionally important in the international literature as women's demographic and socio-economic characteristics?

We show here that determinants of repartnering differ according to area of residence. In the North of Italy, separated women with a higher risk of entering into a second union are relatively young (until 34 at separation) and non-working; in the South, where the propensity to repartner is lower than in the North, second unions are made more frequently by young women (under 30), divorcees and women without children or, at most, with a not very young child.

Net of geographical area, the probability of repartnering is increasing over generations. It is unclear whether this depends on the fact that women "learn" to experience new family forms over time, or instead, on the fact that greater social acceptance of this type of choice over time supports the formation of new couples after their first marital dissolution. In any case, results indicate important changes in family behaviour in the future, and their consequences for the Italian social context should be taken into account by family policy-makers in the next few years.

This study also confirms the hypothesis that the mechanisms of repartnering depend, at least in the growth phase of the phenomenon, on the level of marital instability diffusion. Differences in Italy between the North, the precursor of non-conventional family behaviour (cohabitation, separations, non-marital births), and the South, with more traditional family models, offer the possibility of checking this assumption.

Our results confirm the hypothesis that the demographic characteristics of separated women decrease their influence as marital instability and consequently its social acceptance increase. In the first phases of low social acceptance of the phenomenon, separated women with greater probability of entering into a new union are indeed those with characteristics similar to those of unmarried women. Instead, in a context where the phenomenon is more widespread, and thus probably viewed as less adverse, these characteristics do not influence the risk of entering into a second union.

Available data do not allow to clarify the role of potential partners' preferences. Social norms in a traditional social and family context may induce women who have not already experienced divorce or who have children, to have a lower propensity to enter into a second union. In fact, the result probably depends on male preferences which, in the supply and demand of the union market, are more prone to prefer separated women with fewer ties with their previous marriage. This choice does reduce the psychological and social costs for (prevalently unmarried) men who form unions with separated women: in a traditional context, they are forced to face adverse situations (e.g., resistance on the part of the family of origin) and to reconsider their (traditional) male identity.

Unexpectedly, one of the socio-economic variables – working condition – also has different effects according to territorial context. The common theories accounting for different propensities of entering into a union according to a woman's human capital do not explain why, in the more secularised North, working separated women are less prone to form second unions in comparison with non-working ones, and why, instead, in the more traditional South, women's participation in the labour market does not influence the risk of repartnering.

These differences may be connected with individual heterogeneity components, which available data do not completely control, between women of the North and South. For example, it may be that women's work in the South is averagely more temporary and less well paid than in the North, so that having a job or not does not influence female family behaviour.

Another potential explanation regards cultural differences in the territorial context. The differences between North and South may be explained by considering the different freedom of choice in living arrangements after separation. The lack of data on interaction of preferences between potential male partners and women does not allow us in-depth study of the mechanism: however, the result is consistent with the hypothesis, for the South of Italy, of relatively passive women as regards living arrangements after separation, and of men whose preferences are not influenced by a woman's

economic condition. In the North, where gender differences in the private sphere are less strong and non-conventional family forms are more socially acceptable than in the South, separated women have greater chances to enforce their preferences. Those women who have the best chances, because they are not influenced by economic restrictions, show that they prefer the single condition – except the choice of other forms of couple relationships, e.g. LAT (Living Apart Together). In this way, repartnering is more common among women with fewer economic resources and, probably, with more propensity to invest in a new life together.

The lack of data on the norms, values and preferences of separated women and their potential male partners do not allow us to go beyond these conclusions. The value of this paper focuses on the role that the cultural context may play on orientating separated women towards repartnering, showing how different effects of the same covariates may be the result of the same mechanism when it acts in different contexts. It is hoped that further studies will be able to study in depth dynamics in progress concerning the hypotheses which have been empirically confirmed here and verify some suggestions which have been considered to explain unexpected results. Lastly, it will be interesting to verify if determinants noted in the North of Italy are open to further changes connected with a subsequent phase, characterised by new arrangements of family behaviour in Italian society.

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