

Rethinking Reform: What the AUU Tells Us About Gender, Childcare, and the Italian Welfare System

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Submitted to Central European University - Private University

Undergraduate Department

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, Politics and Economics

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Vienna, Austria

2025

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Vienna, May 26 2025

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Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my supervisor, Professor Anil Duman; my dear parents for funding my studies, and D. for his patience and constant support.

Abstract

The introduction in 2022 of the Assegno Unico Universale (Universal Child Allowance) marked a shift for the direction of social policy in Italy... or did it? This thesis investigates whether the Assegno Unico Universale represents a paradigmatic shift in the Italian family policy or merely a technical recalibration within an enduring logic of supported familialism. While the AUU was widely celebrated for its universality, administrative simplification, and its potential to increase female labor market participation, this thesis argues that such optimism is misplaced. Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed by Saraceno (2016) and Hall (1993), the analysis reveals that the AUU does not defamilialise care, decommodify services, or structurally challenge gender inequalities in caregiving. Rather, it reinforces the private responsibility of families, particularly women, for unpaid care work, offering financial transfers instead of substantive institutional reform.

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Introduction

This thesis critically examines the role of the Assegno Unico Universale (Universal Child Allowance), a cash-based, means-tested family allowance introduced in Italy in 2022. Framed by policymakers and some scholars as a transformative step toward a more modern and inclusive welfare system, the AUU replaced a patchwork of fragmented family benefits with a single, income-based monthly allowance. Celebrated for its simplicity, broader coverage, and universality, the reform has been hailed as a path-changing moment for Italian social policy. However, this thesis challenges that interpretation.

The central research question guiding this study is the following: Does the AUU represent a paradigm shift in Italian family policy, or does it reproduce the logic of supported familialism that has long characterized the country's welfare model? Specifically, the thesis investigates whether the AUU has the potential to structurally support women's labor market participation or whether it reinforces existing patterns of unpaid caregiving, particularly among mothers.

Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Saraceno (2016) and Hall (1993), the thesis argues that the AUU does not constitute a break with Italy's traditional welfare paradigm, instead, it remains embedded in a model of supported familialism. While the AUU expands the scope of redistribution, it does not redirect the welfare structure towards defamilialisation, which is essential for achieving gender equality in the labor market, mainly through early-childhood care services.

To make this argument, the thesis is structured in three main chapters. After a short overview of the existing literature on the topic of family policies, Chapter 1 explores the Italian work–care dilemma, analyzing the persistent gap in female labor force participation and the systemic underinvestment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Chapter 2 traces the development of the Italian family policy from the early 2000s to the introduction of the AUU, situating the reform within a broader historical context of fragmented, unstable, and ideologically contested policymaking. The third and final chapter critically discusses the AUU's design and implementation, applying Saraceno's framework of familialism

and Hall's evaluation of policy impact, to argue that the reform represents a (possible) change in direction but not in paradigm.

It is important to acknowledge that policy reforms do not operate in isolation. Gender norms, labor market structures, class inequalities, and cultural expectations all shape how policies are designed, implemented, and experienced. Nevertheless, social policies are structuring forces. They define the conditions under which individuals navigate work and care, and they either reinforce or challenge the distribution of responsibility between the state, the market, and the family. This thesis contributes to the ongoing debate over whether Italy is progressing toward a more egalitarian, defamilialised welfare model or remains anchored in a logic that assigns care responsibilities to women and to the private sphere. Its core contribution lies in offering a comprehensive analysis and further critical interpretation of the Assegno Unico Universale (AUU) that challenges the prevailing celebratory narratives found in much of the existing literature. Unlike most mainstream accounts that frame the AUU as a progressive breakthrough, this thesis interrogates its design and impact through a novel gender-sensitive analytical framework, by applying Saraceno's typology of familialism and Hall's theory of policy change.

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ECEC and familialism in the literature and methodology

Over the past two decades, family policy has moved to the centre of welfare debates across Europe (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015). States have sought to respond to demographic decline, gender inequality, and labor market transformation by investing in policies aimed at improving work–life reconciliation. In welfare literature, the role of family, and therefore family policies, are widely considered one of the main indicators for labelling welfare systems. Esping-Andersen (1990) famously divided capitalist welfare states into three regimes: liberal, social-democratic, and conservative. Italy, under this framework, falls within the conservative (or corporatist) model, characterised by a reliance on the family as the primary provider of welfare, a low level of decommodification, and selective social insurance tied to past contributions. However, this tripartite model has been criticized for not adequately capturing the distinctiveness of Southern European or Mediterranean welfare regimes, and for not showcasing significant awareness of the gendered division of labour (Arts and Gelissen, 2000). Several scholars (Ferrera , 1996; Bonoli, 1997; Leibfried, 1992) argue that Mediterranean countries like Italy, Spain, and Greece should be considered a category of their own due to shared features such as selective, contribution-based welfare provisions, a strong influence of Catholic values (except in Greece), and a high degree of familialism. In these countries, women often lack equal social rights resulting in labor market structures that are not designed to support dual-earner households, but rather a single breadwinner model (Lewis, 1992). The family is viewed as the central unit of care and economic support, and state intervention occurs only when the family fails to achieve economic sustenance (Arts and Gelissen, 2000). Thévenon (2011) goes as far as classifying countries only through the support governments display for working parents. There is the “dual-earner carer model” (Fraser , 1994), “primary caregiver model”, “primary earner model”, and a fourth model characterized by long parental leave, weak public childcare, and high maternal unemployment rate: the “breadwinner” model (i.e. the case of Italy). The “dual-earner carer model” is highly adopted in northern European countries, which present a significant degree of defamilialisation (Saraceno and Keck, 2013). Defamilialisation (Saraceno, 2016;

Esping-Andersen, 1990) describes the extent to which individuals can access and rely on resources outside the family, either through the market or through the state, e.g. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. These services are crucial in allowing individuals to participate more actively in socio-economic life, while limiting private responsibilities for childcare, which have historically been gendered, as highlighted by the work of Nancy Folbre and Jane Jenson (2017, 2015, 2009).

A growing body of literature highlights that the effects of family policy on women's labor force participation depend critically on the type of support provided. Gehringer and Klasen (2017) distinguish between policies that generate a substitution effect, encouraging labor market entry by facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life, and those that generate a pure income effect, which can discourage employment by reducing the financial necessity to work. Their findings show that daycare services and well-compensated parental leave are positively associated with women's full-time employment, particularly in younger and prime working-age cohorts, while cash allowances such as family benefits tend to reduce full-time participation and shift women into part-time roles or out of the workforce altogether. Ferragina (2020) goes as far as comparing 230 different national case studies to understand the impact magnitude of family policy on women's labour force participation. In his findings, the positive impact of ECEC services on women's labor force participation is well-documented. Additionally, scholars such as Baker, Gruber and Milligan (2008), and Olivetti and Petrongolo (2017) have shown that affordable, high-quality childcare is the strongest cause for increased maternal employment. As Bonoli (2013) highlights, having mothers in paid work not only requires but also legitimizes having children in early education services.

By contrast, the Italian welfare system has strong ties with the concept of familialism. According to Saraceno (1997, 2008, 2016), familialism refers to systems that rely on family solidarity, gendered and intergenerational, to provide unpaid care and economic support, either by default (due to lack of public services), through legal obligations, or via financial transfers (supported familialism). According to Sarceno (2016), Italy is mostly a case of supported familialism, a case where policies help families to

uphold their caring responsibilities either through cash transfers or tax cuts, thus, early childcare remains in the private sphere in Italy, significantly affecting women's employment.

As shown by multiple studies (Saraceno 2016; Maestripieri et al., 2023; Andreella et al., 2024), Italy invests less in family services than most OECD countries, using cash transfer as a default support mechanism. Even if the Italian case represents a complicated interplay of different political, cultural and social factors, using the conclusions of notable scholars in the field such as Naldini, Bonoli, Ferrara, Ferragina and Saraceno, low ECEC investment is identified to be the prominent reason for Italy's low female labour force participation. This suggests a policy trend of defamilialisation is necessary. However, when we analyze to the policies implemented from the 90s until the present, as done by Kazepov and Ranci (2017), Dalla Zuanna and McDonald (2024), Riva (2016) and Rosina and Luppi (2022), it becomes clear that, regardless of the composition of the government, Italy has never truly prioritized defamilialisation as a policy goal.

The room for policy improvement is substantial; Brilli, Del Boca, and Pronzato (2016) estimate that a 10% increase in childcare coverage is associated with a 13% increase in female labor force participation in Italy. Despite these conclusions, Italy's policy focus has remained on familialistic cash allowance mechanisms, as embodied in the AUU, that have been praised by many (Rosina and Luppi, 2022; Dalla Zuanna and McDonald, 2024) for being a revolutionary policy in Italy. While the existing literature offers a comprehensive analysis of the Italian welfare state, few studies have examined the AUU's policy design and limitations. Most studies praise the policy for its design, however, this thesis aims to present a different perspective by evaluating whether the AUU reinforces or dismantles Italy's persistent familism occurrence (Saraceno 2016), and whether it constitutes a second-order policy change (Hall, 1993), or a deeper paradigm shift in Italian welfare policy.

The methodology of this thesis is based on content analysis of secondary literature and desk research, supported by descriptive statistics on women's labor market participation rates, ECEC coverage rates, and public expenditure data. This analysis will trace the evolution of family policy in Italy and conclude

whether the Assegno Unico Universale (AUU) represents a genuine shift toward defamilialisation or merely repackages longstanding familialist paradigm assumptions in faux-revolutionary policy forms.

By applying a rigorous theoretical framework to a contemporary policy reform, this thesis contributes to a growing literature on gender, care, and welfare transformation in Southern Europe. It adds clarity to the debate on whether cash-based reforms can promote gender equality and provides a critical lens for evaluating future family policies in Italy and beyond.

Chapter 1- The Italian Work-Care Dilemma: Low Female

Employment and ECEC Deficits

The persistent underrepresentation of women in the Italian labor market is one of the country's most notable socio-economic challenges. This phenomenon is not merely a labor market anomaly but the result of a complex interaction between cultural expectations, institutional design, and inadequate public support for care responsibilities. In particular, Italy's historically low investment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services has left many families, especially mothers, with few viable options for reconciling paid work with caregiving duties. As a result, traditional gender roles prevent them from entering or re-entering the labour force when a child joins the family unit.

This chapter offers an overview of the context in which the Assegno Unico Universale (AUU) was introduced in Italy. It focuses on two interrelated challenges: Italy's persistently low women's labor force participation and the longstanding underdevelopment of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. These two core issues, especially when located in the broader context of the European Union, highlight a gender and socio-economic deficiency that has only now started to be addressed through policy.

1.1 Italian female labour force participation: the persistent gap

Historically and globally, women's labor market participation has been significantly lower than men's (Ortiz-Ospina, Tzvetkova, and Roser 2018). In the EU, women's employment remains less stable than men's, often due to the undervaluation of care-related work, both formal and informal, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities. Women continue to experience occupational segregation, with over 30% of employed women in the EU working in education, human health, and social work activities according to the EIGE 2024 report: labor sectors that are most vulnerable during economic downturn. This sectoral vulnerability was particularly evident during periods of fiscal austerity (Leon and Pavolini, 2014), such as the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 pandemic, where governments typically implemented cuts to social investment to address economic crisis.

Nevertheless, while many developed countries, particularly EU and OECD members, have shown moderate convergence in women's labour force participation rates over time, this has not been the case for Italy.

Italy consistently ranks among the countries with the lowest levels of female labor force participation in the European Union. As reported by the World Bank Data Portal and illustrated in Figure 1, women's labor force participation in Italy has stagnated over the past two decades, increasing only from 46.2 percent to 57.6 percent, remaining significantly below that of other comparably developed European countries. This contrasts sharply, especially when compared to Spain, a country with a historically similar welfare model (Ferragina 1996; Leon and Pavolini, 2014), and where participation grew from 51% to over 70% in the same period.

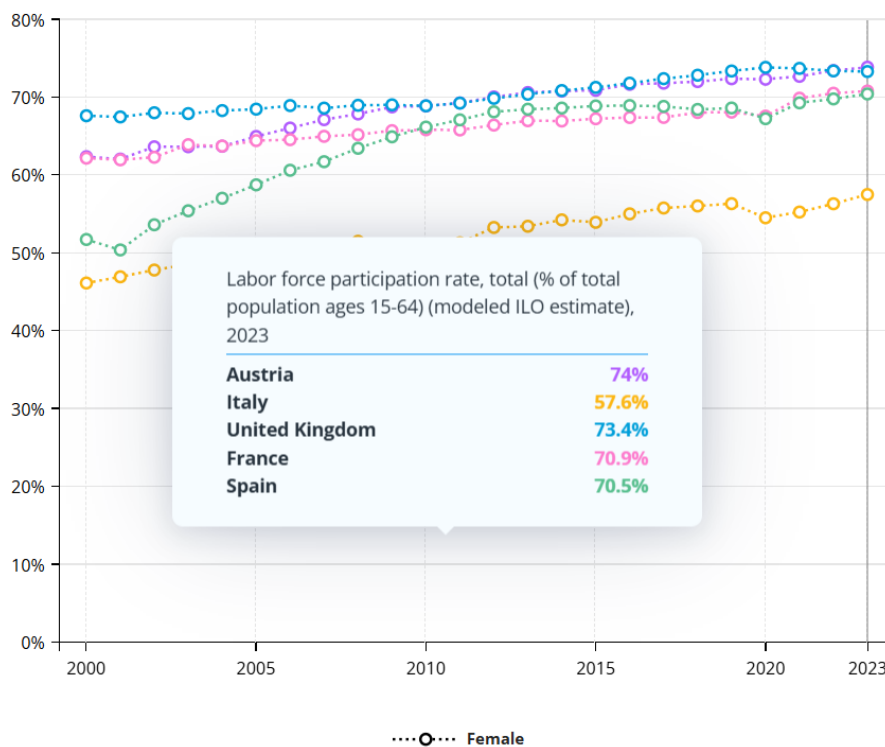


Figure 1: Labor force participation rate, total (% of total population ages 15-64) (modeled ILO estimate), World Bank Group General Data Portal

Additionally, these aggregate trends cover up the significant internal disparities within Italy. Regional differences are particularly stark: women in the North and Center are far more likely to be employed than those in the South and Islands, where participation rates often fall below 40% (Andreella et al., 2024),

and below 35% for mothers with nursery-school age children (Maestripieri et al., 2023). The regions of Sicily, Calabria and Campania are even estimated to have one third of working-age women employed (J. Reljic and F. Zezza, 2025).

Motherhood further exacerbates these disparities. While female employment rates prior to childbirth approach those of men, the transition to motherhood is associated with a sharp drop in labor participation (Bianchi and Milkie, 2010). Italy registers one of the largest gender employment gaps between men and women with and without children: in 2021, the gap was 28.9 percentage points for women with children compared to 12.6 percentage points for childless women (EUROSTAT, 2021). This trend is not present for men, who are more likely to be employed after becoming fathers, as it is evident from Figure 2. As Saraceno (2015) highlights, this labor market disadvantage is closely linked to the unequal distribution of family responsibilities. This dynamic reflects a welfare model deeply shaped by familialism. In Italy, this often means relying on female relatives, as well as grandparents, to provide childcare during the early years (ages 0 to 2), before compulsory education begins. When these familial caregivers are unavailable, the responsibility often falls on the mother, discouraging or delaying her re-entry into the labour market. According to Pailhé et al. (2019), Italy is one of the European countries with the lowest levels of equity in sharing childcare responsibilities between mothers and fathers. These trends of divergence between genders, and within women with and without children, are absent or much less pronounced in countries that prioritize defamilialisation policies, such as Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, as shown in Figure 2.

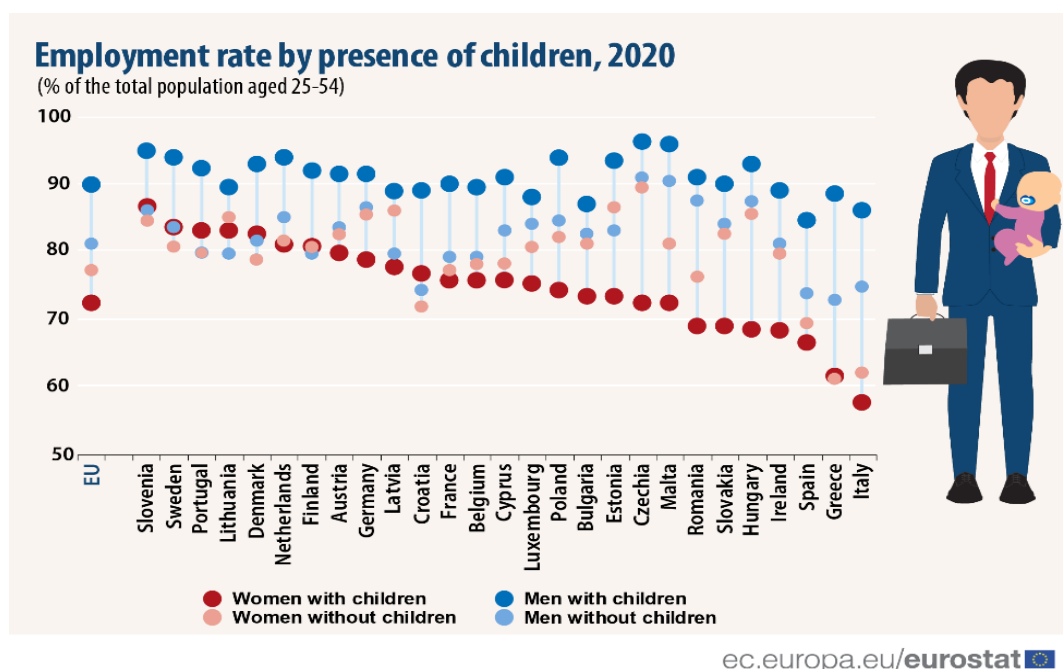


Figure 2: *Employment rate by presence of children, (% of the total population aged 25-54) 2020, Eurostat*

Moreover, Italy differs from many other EU countries in how women participate in the labor force. As Maestripieri et al. (2023) explain, Italian women tend to either work full-time or not at all, with few high-quality part-time or flexible work options. When part-time work is available, it is often low-paid and precarious, further discouraging participation, particularly among mothers or older women. Overall, Italy shows a concerning gender gap in childcare responsibilities when compared to other countries with similar levels of development or simply by EU standards.

1.2 Childcare provision in Italy: Gaps and Inequality

Among the many structural barriers to female employment, the lack of accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare stands out as particularly consequential. Extensive research has demonstrated the positive effect of public childcare services on women's labor force participation (Asai et al., 2023; Grigoli et al., 2018; Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017; Sikirić, 2021; Ferragina 2023; Gehringer and Klasen, 2015), especially after adjusting for affordability, diffusion, and accessibility (Ferragina, 2019). In a large comparative study of over 230 European national cases, Ferragina (2020) found that early childhood policies were not only key predictors of female employment but also the primary drivers of variation across countries.

ECEC is often cited as a cornerstone of gender-equal welfare systems because of its potential to break the historically entrenched binary between caregiving and paid work. Maestripieri et al. (2023) argue that in Southern Europe, it is only recently that policies have started to question the traditional view of mothers and workers as separate roles, aiming instead to support women in balancing both responsibilities. Social investment strategies in family policy, especially those aimed at defamilialisation, that focus on expanding public services rather than relying on informal care, seek to reduce this tension.

One of the most striking features of the Italian case is the historically low level of investment in social services, especially in ECEC. Lower social expenditure on family and childcare policies has been a consistent feature of Italian policymaking compared to all other welfare regimes over the past two decades (Saraceno and Keck, 2011). Italy's public childcare system continues to underperform by both international and national standards. The coverage rate for children aged 0–2 years is only 27.2%, below the EU target of 33%, and significantly behind peer countries such as Spain (57.4%) and France (50.8%) (ISTAT, 2020). In this case, similarly to women's employment in the previous chapter, these national averages obscure deeper regional inequalities: in 2019, North-East and Central Italy had a level of coverage above the European target (with 34.5% and 35.3% respectively), and North-West Italy is getting closer to the target (31.4%), while the South and the Islands are still far from the target (with 14.5% and 15.75% respectively) (Andreella et al. 2024).

Percent of children aged between 0 and 2 enrolled in ECEC services and percent of children aged between 3 and 5 enrolled in pre-primary education and primary schools, 2020 or latest available

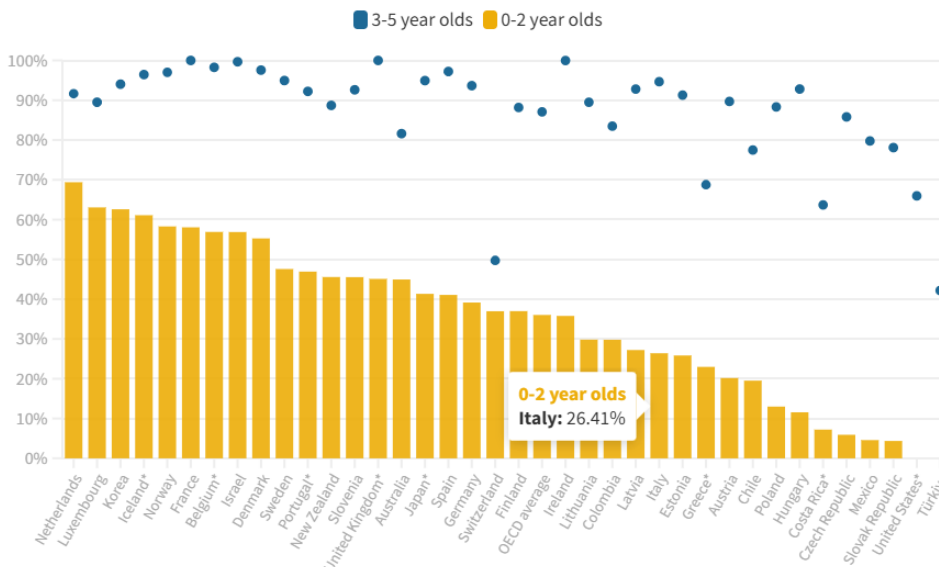


Figure 3: Percent of children aged between 0 and 2 enrolled in ECEC services and percent of children aged between 3 and 5 enrolled in pre-primary education and primary schools, 2020 or latest available. Source: [OECD Family Database Indicator PF3.2](#).

This fragmented landscape reflects the decentralized nature of Italian ECEC, which is defined as a “Social Service” and not as an “Educational Service” and is primarily funded and administered at the regional or municipal level. Without strong national coordination, outcomes are dependent on local governance capacity (Andreella et al., 2024). Wealthier regions in the North are often able to provide robust public childcare systems, while more vulnerable regions in the South rely on informal solutions, typically grandparents or migrant domestic workers (León & Pavolini, 2014). In some areas, municipal funds cover as much as 63% of the cost of care provision, leaving services exposed to local budget constraints (León & Pavolini, 2014).

The empirical literature confirms how transformative ECEC can be for the Italian case (Reljic and Zezza 2025). Del Boca and Vuri (2007) estimate that ECEC coverage must reach at least 40% to meaningfully influence maternal employment decisions. Brilli et al. (2016), as mentioned before, find that a 10% increase in childcare availability correlates with a 13% rise in women’s labor force participation in Italy. The comparative studies reviewed by Ferragina (2019) show that the strongest positive return of ECEC on women’s labor force participation tend to occur in conservative or Mediterranean countries.

Additionally, through the study of Andreella et al. (2024) it is possible to assess the impact of ECEC on women's employment throughout Italian regions, as well as the correlation between childcare coverage and labour force participation in Italy.

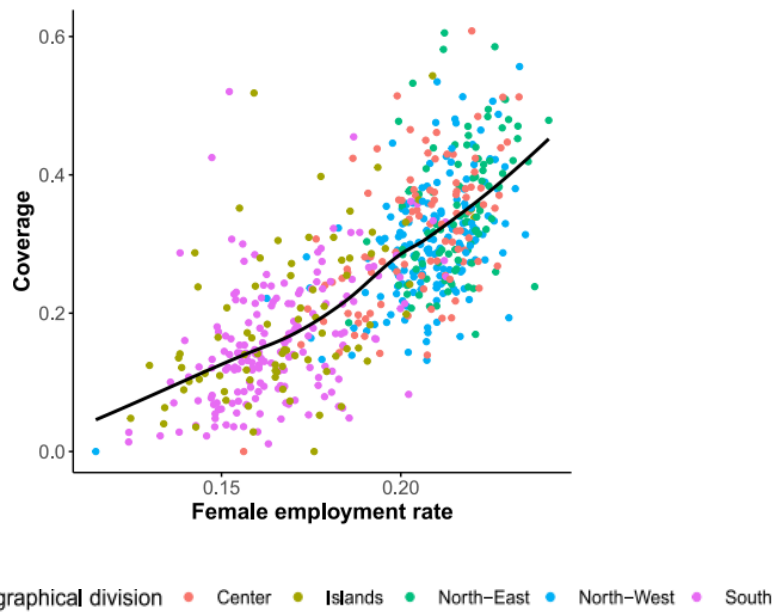


Figure 4: Scatter plots between coverage and the female employment rate. Black line represent a fitted local polynomial regression. Source: Andreella et al. (2024)

Despite this evidence, public investment in ECEC remains limited and inconsistent. Italy continues to exhibit the hallmarks of supported familialism: the state offers modest financial support to families, but caregiving remains largely a private responsibility. Policies have often been shaped by maternalistic frames that frame care as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities, rather than as a collective social investment (Riva, 2016). In this context, the dual role of “mother and worker” has yet to be fully reconciled, and the goal of defamilialisation remains far from realized (Maestripieri et al., 2023).

Chapter 2- A New Era? The Assegno Unico Universale and its Political Framing

Historically, Italian family policies have been subject to frequent political reshaping, resulting in a fragmented and inconsistent outcome. Left-center and right-center governments showcased through the years different understandings of the role of social investment, caring responsibilities, and family policies. The introduction of the Assegno Unico Universale (AUU) in 2021 aimed to simplify this landscape by consolidating a range of family benefits into a single, monthly, means-tested payment. Presented as a universal and streamlined measure, the AUU marked what some viewed as a major shift in Italy's family policy framework.

2.1 Family policy development in Italy

Throughout the early 2000s, Italy's family policy framework was marked by low public investment, reliance on fragmented cash transfers, insufficient investment in early childhood services, and a persistent adherence to familialistic norms. The dominant model of "familialism by default" (Saraceno, 2016) limited state involvement and promoted a reactive rather than proactive approach to addressing gender and care inequalities.

Some of the most notable policy innovations were introduced at the turn of the millennium. For example, Law 258/1997 laid the foundation for the dialogue regarding children rights and quality of life as well as parental support (Riva 2015), while Law 53/2000 and Legislative Decree 151/2001 consolidated entitlements to maternity and parental leave, marking the first formal recognition of the need to reconcile work and family life. These reforms reflected the acknowledgment of the state's role in promoting child well-being and supporting caregiving burdens. Despite these acknowledgements, progress was slow and inconsistent.

The early 2000s saw alternating political majorities that led to fragmented policy-making. The Berlusconi-led center-right government (2001-2006) adopted a welfare community approach in which informal

family networks, rather than the state, were envisioned as the appropriate source of support (Maestripieri et al, 2023). This reflected a re-traditionalization of welfare thinking, where public childcare support was minimal and the role of women remained largely centered in the domestic sphere (Gori 2005).

In 2007, a renewed effort came with the ‘Special Plan for Nursery Schools’ by the centre-left government of the time, aiming to address regional imbalances and expand access to early education. This plan would be financed by regional governments and municipalities, though it ultimately did not manage to meet the 33% Barcelona European Council target for childcare coverage (age 0-2) agreed by EU nations (Riva, 2015). In the meantime, the “White Paper on the Future of the Welfare State”, issued by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Welfare in 2009 explicitly displayed the familialistic principles that were shaping the social policy of Italy at the time. It not only stressed the need to rely on informal association and voluntary work sector for welfare provisions, framing state intervention as “too paternalistic”, but it also strongly centralized the role of the family, emphasizing the role of motherhood and the value of grandparent as providers of unpaid work and income supporters (Ministero del Lavoro, della Salute e delle Politiche Sociali, 2009, p. 52). The value of intergenerational solidarity for care was also emphasized in the “Italy 2020: Programme of action for the inclusion of women in the labour market” presented that same year (Riva, 2015).

When new systems such as the ‘Integrated 0–6 System’ were introduced between 2014 and 2018, they were piecemeal, focused on educational alignment rather than on universal service provision. The Birth Allowance (Bonus Bebè) in 2014, as well as various family tax deductions, remained income-based, employment-dependent, and often difficult to access (Maestripieri et al., 2023). These developments resulted as particularly unreliable programmes for non-citizens or families in precarious employment circumstances (Dalla Zuna & McDonald, 2022; Rosina & Luppi, 2023). Unfortunately, the new programmes were poorly coordinated, offered only short-term relief, and left the core issue of the lack of early childcare provision unaddressed.

In 2021, The AUU was introduced against this backdrop as a way to unify this patchwork of policies into a single, coherent measure. Framed as “universal,” it promised to streamline the system and reduce inequality of access, marking, at least discursively, a significant shift in Italy’s approach to family support.

2.2 The design and political framing of the AUU

In 2021, Law No. 230 replaced previous family policies by introducing the Assegno Unico Universale (AUU), in English: Single Universal Allowance, for families with dependent children, which came into effect in March 2022. It replaced all existing child-related allowances and tax deductions with a single monthly cash benefit. According to the legislative text, its objectives were to “promote the birth rate, support parenthood, and encourage employment, particularly for women” (Italy, Law No. 46 of April 1, 2021).

According to the official report from the Ministry of Finance, the policy is defined by three key features: universality, singularity, and progressiveness. The AUU is universal in nature, covering families regardless of employment status (employed, self-employed, or unemployed), as long as they meet basic residency and citizenship criteria. The benefit is granted from the seventh month of pregnancy until the child turns 21, or indefinitely in the case of children with disabilities. Additionally, it is extended to non-citizens as long as they have been living in Italy for 6 months with a residence or working permit, a significant jump from the 10-year mark of previous policies. As the name suggests, the AUU replaces and absorbs a range of overlapping family benefits, aiming to simplify the system rather than add another layer of complexity. From there the “singularity” of the policy. Finally, the AUU is calculated progressively, based on the family ISEE (Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator). In 2023, the maximum benefit per child was around €189.20 per month for low-income households, while the minimum stood at roughly €54. Additional bonuses are provided for large families, households with two working parents, young mothers, and children with disabilities (Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze 2025).

These three aspects and the overall design of the policy appear to be quite progressive compared to the historical legacy of Italian family policies. Exceptionally, the reform passed with unanimous approval in

Parliament, but the political dynamics surrounding its adoption reveal a more ambiguous reality. The AUU emerged from the convergence of three separate legislative proposals: one by the center-left (Delrio, PD), and two by center-right parties (Gelmini, FI and Locatelli, Lega). While Delrio's proposal framed the reform in terms of child well-being and equity, the other two emphasized natality and the protection of the "traditional family" (Madama and Mercuri, 2023).

This cross-party support reflects what Madama and Mercuri (2023) call a textbook case of "ambiguous agreement", a political compromise where parties with divergent ideologies endorse the same reform for different and often conflicting reasons. Center-left parties viewed the AUU as a redistributive and inclusive measure aligned with European social investment logic. Center-right parties, in contrast, celebrated its pro-natalist appeal and symbolic affirmation of fetal rights, since the benefits begin at the seventh month of pregnancy. This consensus, while politically expedient, reveals the AUU's lack of structural ambition.

These differing approaches are not new, as historically left-center coalitions and right-center coalitions had very different views on what should be covered by family policies and what their final aim of it should be, and the AUU is no exception. Through the 2000s and 2010s, center-left coalitions were trying to move the policy design to more closely resemble the EU model (Graziano and Madama, 2011), by considering gender equality in the family and in the labour market the core goal behind implementation of formal childcare and improved working conditions (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008). On the other hand, reforms proposed by the right-center coalition were deeply embedded in a familialistic framework, by prioritizing the subsidiarity potential of the family and workplace-based flexibility regarding childcare needs of employees (Gori, 2005).

The AUU consensus reflects Italy's long-standing difficulty in reaching structural reform. As Riva (2015) notes, frequent changes in governing coalitions have historically undermined continuity in family policy. Instrumental goals, target populations, and policy narratives often shifted according to partisan

alignment. The AUU's passage without a single opposing vote was thus politically extraordinary, but not necessarily an indication of deep ideological agreement.

While the AUU undoubtedly simplifies and broadens access to family support, it remains a cash-based intervention, continuing Italy's tradition of prioritizing monetary allowances over investment in services. It does not substantially address the country's chronic shortage of ECEC infrastructure, nor does it relieve the care burdens that continue to fall disproportionately on women.

Chapter 3 - Discussion: The “real” value of the AUU

While the AUU is framed by the current literature as a groundbreaking reform for the Italian welfare landscape, a closer examination reveals that it constitutes a change in policy path, but not a true change in policy paradigm. Its significance lies in its form, unifying fragmented benefits into a single, universal measure, but its content remains embedded in the same logic that has long characterized Italian family policy: supported familialism. In other words, the AUU does not represent a step towards defamilialisation, empirically, a welfare form that would pave the way for an increase in female labour force participation. The distinction between formal innovation and structural continuity is crucial to understanding the limitations of the AUU in advancing gender equity. After analyzing how the AUU has been framed in the current literature, I will use theories from Saraceno (2016) and Hall (1993), to explain how the framing has been mistakenly praised as path-changing, while making nearly zero progress towards defamilialisation.

3.1 Change in direction...

The Assegno Unico Universale (AUU), implemented in 2022, has been widely interpreted as a significant shift in Italy’s approach to family policy. While it is too early to assess its full impact empirically, scholars and policymakers have already framed the AUU as a major innovation within a welfare state traditionally characterized by fragmented measures, conditionality, and familialist assumptions.

In fact, the AUU’s relevance becomes especially clear when contextualized against Italy’s reputation in the welfare literature. Only a few years before the AUU reform, Kazepov and Ranci (2017) identified Italy as an “extreme adverse case for social investment policies”. As scholars such as Bonoli (2013), León and Pavolini (2014), and Ferrera (1996) have noted, Southern European welfare systems tend to differ structurally and ideologically from their Northern counterparts, and they are relatively new to social investment policies. Italy, alongside other Southern European countries, has long been characterized by weak service provision and underdeveloped family policy, so to be defined a “frozen landscape” by Leon

and Pavolini (2014) and Naldini and Saraceno (2008). In this context, any movement toward universalism, simplification, and inclusiveness is indeed noteworthy.

What sets the AUU apart from its predecessors is not only its technical design, but the policy discourse and normative shift it appears to signal, by reframing longstanding assumptions about the family, gender, and the role of children in society. Maestripieri et al. (2023) highlight how, while past Italian family policies implicitly framed women exclusively as caregivers, the AUU introduces language that also recognizes women as workers, whose labor market participation is seen as valuable and legitimate. On the same note, it also contains a new explicit understanding of the value of children: they are no longer considered a private family cost but a public good and long-term societal investment. As Rosina and Luppi (2023) put it, children are redefined as a form of human capital, resources whose development benefits not only individual families but society as a whole.

Moreover, the AUU broadens inclusion in a historically exclusive system. Dalla Zuanna and McDonald (2023) point out that the new benefit extends to immigrants: a significant share of the Italian population that was often excluded from earlier measures due to residency requirements or bureaucratic complexity. The AUU is also more responsive to the needs of Italy's middle class, a demographic frequently overlooked in previous policies due to the distortive effects of the ISEE (Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator) calculation system. Additionally, it is not only designed to support families with young children but also to provide assistance for childrearing in later ages (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008).

The three defining characteristics of the AUU, universality, singularity, and proportionality, are frequently cited as indicators of its innovative potential, representing a meaningful break from a history of targeted, exclusionary, and employment-bound benefits.

Some literature even argues that its universal and proportional design helps avoiding the Matthew effect (Rigney 2010), defined as the phenomenon in which social investment does not manage to level out inequalities in a society because policies benefit people in advantageous positions, seen in many countries

(Abrassart and Bonoli, 2014; Van Lancker and Ghysels, 2012) when a social investment is poorly designed.

Finally, Madama and Mercuri (2023) go as far as saying that the AUU as part of a new trajectory of social investment in Italy, groundbreaking and “revolutionary”. They define this policy explicitly as a “rupture from the long-lasting familialism by default” (p. 475). Della Zuanna and Mc Donald as well as Rosina and Luppi, present extended research on why this policy should be framed as a change of direction for Italian policymaking: a historical change that breaks the legacy of pre-existing policies and interrupts “path dependency”. Rosina and Luppi say that since it has some characteristics similar to redistribution, it does not only aim at diminishing poverty, but also to support the familial responsibilities” (p.174).

Taken together, these claims highlight the AUU’s symbolic and institutional significance. However, as the following chapter will explore, whether the AUU truly marks a paradigm shift, or whether it remains constrained by the same familialist logic it seeks to overcome, is a matter of critical debate.

3.2 ...But not a change in paradigm

While the Assegno Unico Universale (AUU) has been widely celebrated as a major innovation in Italy’s family policy, I argue that it does not constitute a true paradigm shift, but rather a path change that simplifies existing benefits without transforming the foundational assumptions of Italian welfare. The AUU remains embedded in a model of supported familialism, and by relying on cash transfers over service provision, it ultimately reinforces, rather than challenges, the gendered division of labor and the centrality of the family in social reproduction.

It may seem counterintuitive to claim that a social policy can be harmful. However, as many scholars in the welfare field argue, poorly designed or ideologically co-opted policies can entrench existing inequalities or delay necessary reforms. As Kazepov and Ranci (2017) write, promoting policies of social investment without structural social requirements prevents them from meeting their goals. Social policies are not neutral instruments; they carry normative visions of society and gender roles. When a policy like

the AUU is praised as a progressive step forward without addressing its structural limitations, it risks masking the persistence of familialist ideology through the illusion of transformation.

In her 2016 article talking about forms of familialism, Saraceno provides an important theoretical framework through which we can determine the real impact of the AUU. She expands her analysis from Orloff's (1993) understanding of welfare state typologies by situating policies along two critical axes: decommodification, the extent to which individuals can access resources independently of market participation, and defamilialisation, the degree to which individuals, especially women, can live independently of family-based obligations, particularly in relation to caregiving. These concepts are operationalized through a typology of policy regimes, ranging from familialism by default, in which families are solely responsible for caregiving with no state or market support, to supported familialism, where financial transfers help families maintain their caregiving roles, to defamilialisation through the market or through public services. These regimes coexist in varying degrees within every welfare system, but their balance reveals the system's dominant orientation.

Originally, from the assessment of Saraceno (2016) and Saraceno and Keck (2011), Italy emerges as a textbook case of “familialism by default”: children are financially tied to their family and extended family beyond 18 years old, and the state offers little alternative care services, leaving families, usually women, responsible for meeting care needs. Throughout the years with some of the incremental reforms cited in Chapter 2.1, Italy had moved closer to a model of “supported familialism”, mostly through minor allowances, an increase in paid maternity and paternity leave, and tax credits for dependent children. This approach offers families some public support but stops short of fundamentally altering the care dynamic or reducing familial obligations.

Within this context, the recent introduction of the AUU has been framed as a movement towards the Northern countries' logic of defamilialisation, mostly due to its universal design and partial aim of “promoting female labour force participation”. However, such interpretations are analytically superficial and overlook the deeper continuities in Italy's care regime. When examined through Saraceno's typology

of familism, the AUU does not represent a genuine departure from familist principles; rather, it constitutes a reformulation that preserves their core features. Crucially, the AUU does not challenge the normative assumption that care is primarily a private, family-based responsibility, nor does it initiate a meaningful redistribution of caregiving duties (either between the family and the state, or among members within the family itself).

This limitation is particularly evident in the absence of complementary investments in ECEC, which, as discussed in Chapter 1.2 and widely recognized in the literature, is a critical determinant of women's labor market participation. Without the expansion of high-quality, accessible ECEC services, the AUU fails to alleviate the structural burdens that disproportionately fall on women under the male-breadwinner model. In this sense, the AUU does not advance along either axis of defamilialisation or decommodification. It offers financial support but leaves intact the institutional arrangements that privatize care, thereby reinforcing rather than transforming the familist paradigm. At best, the AUU may be seen as facilitating a partial commodification of care by encouraging families to purchase services in the private market, but without the structural support or public infrastructure necessary to make such choices viable or equitable.

As a result, the AUU consolidates the state's reliance on the family as the primary site of care, while offering limited relief in the form of cash benefits. This approach not only reproduces traditional gendered divisions of labor but also fails to acknowledge or address them explicitly. Instead of framing work–family reconciliation as a collective, societal issue requiring institutional intervention, the AUU repositions it as a private concern, effectively delegating the task of translating financial support into workable care arrangements back onto families. This shift reinforces a policy logic in which women remain the default caregivers and the structural causes of gender inequality are left unexamined and unchallenged. As such, the AUU exemplifies a technocratic adjustment within the bounds of supported familism, rather than a transformative intervention aimed at achieving gender equity or genuine defamilialisation.

To further highlight why the AUU policy does not represent a shift in paradigm, I will rely on Hall's (1993) theory regarding the "three order of policy change". Hall identifies three orders of change that a policy can bring: the "first-order change" is a technical adjustment of policy instruments without altering overall goals; the "second-order" change involves a change in the instrument themselves, within the same overarching framework; while the "third-order" change that requires rethinking goals, assumption and logic of a policy. The third one is what Hall defines as a change in policy paradigm, that usually it is not merely technocratic but involves political struggle, shifting authority, and rethinking of the role of the state. When using this framework to analyze the AUU, the policy seems to fit seamlessly the first two change orders. The AUU has characteristics of a first-order change because it changes the settings of existing instruments: it replaces multiple fragmented policies into one single, standardized and progressive allowance. Additionally, it also fulfils the characteristics of a second-order change, as it changes the instruments themselves: instead of a mix of instruments, the AUU is unified. When considering whether it fits the third-order change, many aspects of the policy fail to satisfy the criteria. On the surface, the AUU has been framed as aligning with the universalist logic of Northern European welfare states, by being inclusive and reframing the role of children as a social responsibility. Nevertheless, it remains a cash-base measure that does not challenge the status quo and does not decommodify care or defamilialize caregiving. It appears as a pragmatics streamlining of previous patchwork familialist policy rather than a reconceptualization of family support and duties, which remain in the logic of supported familialism.

To further confirm this, according to Hall's theory, third-order change typically emerges from periods of crisis and policy failure, and it is accompanied by intense political contestation and pluralist pressures. But as explained in Chapter 2, the AUU implementation was not only approved uniformly by the entire parliamentary body, but it was also a case "ambiguous agreement". This lack of ideological confrontation and the absence of a power shift among political actors suggest that the AUU was not a paradigmatic rupture. A policy aimed at changing paradigms will not be framed and understood differently by different parties. This showcases its limited impact and its limited daring.

In conclusion, the AUU ultimately preserves the country's longstanding model of supported familialism rather than initiating a true paradigm shift toward defamilialisation. By maintaining care as a primarily private, family-based responsibility and relying on cash transfers without expanding public childcare services, the AUU fails to address the structural barriers limiting women's labor force participation. Consequently, although it may provide some financial relief to families, the AUU's impact on increasing female employment is likely to remain limited, as it does not fundamentally challenge gendered caregiving roles or redistribute care responsibilities beyond the family.

Conclusion

The AUU was introduced with ambitious promises: to support families, raise birth rates, and encourage women's labor market participation. Its political and administrative appeal of simplicity, universality, and inclusiveness has been widely praised. Yet, as this thesis has shown, its real impact is far more limited. The AUU is a technical reorganization of existing benefits that leaves Italy's care architecture and the gendered assumptions embedded within it fundamentally unchanged. What the AUU offers in redistributive logic, it lacks in structural vision. It provides families with some financial relief but delegates the responsibility of turning money into workable care solutions back onto them. Without investing in public childcare or addressing the unequal distribution of unpaid work, such a policy cannot meaningfully alter women's relationship to the labor market. It is, in short, a familialist solution to a problem caused by familialism.

Yet, discarding the AUU entirely would be too simple. Its broad coverage, relative accessibility, and non-exclusion of migrants mark a departure from past patterns of fragmented, exclusionary support. As Pacifico (2021) notes, it is a policy with "many winners and few losers." It may not be transformative, but it does open institutional space where more ambitious reforms could be imagined. Its introduction in a post-crisis context also matters. Unlike previous moments of austerity, this reform did not reduce the welfare state, but it opted for a recalibration (Pierson, 1998). This makes the AUU not a missed opportunity, but a partial one.

Whether it becomes a stepping stone or a dead end depends on what comes next. If it is followed by genuine investment in care services, it could mark the beginning of a shift. If not, it will remain another example of how Italy's welfare politics continues to rely on women's unpaid labor, only now, slightly better compensated.

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