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## Parental social class and home-leaving in Italy: A changing landscape with persistent inequalities

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study explores the relationship between family background and home-leaving behaviour in Italy, focusing on how parental social class influences the timing and destinations (education, cohabitation, marriage, or autonomy) of home-leaving across three cohorts of women and men born between 1939 and 1998.

**Background:** Italians tend to leave home late, and the age at which young adults leave their parental homes has been rising since the 1980s, raising concerns about shifting demographic patterns and broader societal impacts.

**Method:** Using retrospective data from the ISTAT Multipurpose Survey on Families and Social Subjects (2009 and 2016), we apply event history analysis techniques.

**Results:** The general delay in home-leaving has narrowed parental social class differences among women. However, for men, this delay is concentrated in higher social classes, leading to a widening class gap. Over time, parental social class differences in home-leaving destinations, particularly living with parents, marriage, and autonomy, have generally levelled out. Daughters from higher socioeconomic backgrounds increasingly leave home for education, while cohabitation remains uncommon. Similar trends are observed among men, though sons of agricultural workers have become less likely to stay with their parents and more likely to leave for marriage or autonomy.

**Conclusion:** The findings emphasize the ongoing influence of parental social class on home-leaving destinations, highlighting its continued role in shaping the transition to adulthood in Italy.

**Key words:** transition to adulthood, home-leaving destinations, event-history



## 1. Introduction

Sharp socioeconomic differences characterize the demographic life course (see Liefbroer & Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021, for a thorough discussion), and the decision to leave the parental home is no exception. The literature on leaving the parental home has extensively covered socioeconomic differences resulting from individuals' characteristics, such as education (e.g., Sironi et al., 2015; van der Berg & Verbakel, 2022; van der Berg, 2023), economic resources (Dykstra & Poortman, 2010; Iacovou, 2010) and occupational status (Bertolini & Goglio, 2019; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2024).

In the journey to adulthood, leaving the parental home is a significant milestone, often presenting challenges as young adults may lack the necessary resources to establish independent households due to their young age. The family of origin plays a crucial role in compensating for this shortfall. Indeed, the socioeconomic background of individuals in early adulthood is closely tied to the resources available from their family of origin. This link reflects a life trajectory shaped by resources accumulated since childhood. The family of origin provides both tangible and intangible support, which can either facilitate or hinder the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg, 2008; Osgood et al., 2005), supporting children's life choices (Aassve et al., 2002; Saraceno, 1994), and sheltering them from risks.

This study explores the timing and the destination of leaving home decisions by parental social class, examining their evolution over time. Empirically, we use event history techniques on retrospective data from the two rounds of the ISTAT Multipurpose Survey on Family and Social Subjects conducted in Italy in 2009 and 2016.

In terms of contribution to the burgeoning field of study on transition to adulthood, first, we provide a detailed account of socioeconomic differences in home-leaving timing and destinations, distinguishing between marriage, cohabitation, autonomy/independence, and education. Second, we explore whether and in which direction such socioeconomic differences have changed over time, focusing on cohorts of individuals born between the 1930s and the 1990s. We focus on the socioeconomic resources of the family of origin, measured by parental social class, rather than the individual's resources. This choice is not only based on data availability, as described in the empirical section, but also reflects the specific characteristics of the context under examination. During the first half of the 20th century, when the parents of the individuals in our sample were active in the labour market, Italy had not yet experienced significant educational expansion (Ballarino & Schadee, 2008; Barone & Guetto, 2016), which makes social class a more informative measure of parental resources than educational level. In more substantive terms, as elaborated upon, parental socioeconomic background matters for many demographic outcomes, even if one's social background as a mediating process is accounted for (see contributions from Brons et al., 2017; Liefbroer & Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021).

The focus on the Italian setting substantiates the attention to parental home-leaving destinations and their evolution over time. Italian adults have acquired a consistent delay in leaving the parental home compared to their European counterparts (Aassve, Arpino & Billari, 2013). While post-World War II cohorts benefited from a conducive economic and institutional environment that facilitated the accumulation of resources necessary to establish independent households (Fullin & Reyneri, 2015), subsequent generations—especially those born since the 1970s—faced challenges exacerbated by labour market flexibilization and soaring housing costs (e.g., Aassve, 2002; Di Stefano, 2019). Additionally, the traditional behaviour of leaving home upon marriage, deeply rooted in familial norms, has been challenged by evolving societal ideologies, notably influenced by the Second Demographic Transition since the 1960s (Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986; Lesthaeghe, 2014; Van de Kaa, 1987). As a result, alternatives such as cohabitation, studying, and solo living have become progressively more common. These shifts across economic, institutional, and cultural domains suggest an evolving relationship between parental socioeconomic backgrounds and the young adults' leaving-home behaviours.

Overall, the present study highlights the importance of shifting focus towards ascribed aspects of inequality rather than solely considering individual resources in demographic decision-making in the transition to adulthood (see Liefbroer & Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021 for a thorough discussion). Coming from a disadvantaged background often means having limited resources, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of making demographic decisions that could negatively impact other critical transitions, such as forming unions and parenthood. The timing and manner of leaving the parental home have enduring repercussions on life trajectories: an early departure often results in accelerated engagement in other life events, such as entering the job market or starting a family, potentially hindering skill development in young adults (Osgood

et al., 2005; Schwanitz, Mulder & Toulemon, 2017). Conversely, delaying departure from the parental home may postpone other significant transitions, like establishing stable partnerships or initiating parenthood, extending the transition into adult roles. Such dynamics are particularly interesting in a context such as Italy, scarcely investing in young people's life chances.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 *The influence of family resources on children's home-leaving behaviour*

The family of origin supports the individual with resources that might facilitate or hamper the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg, 2008; Osgood et al., 2005), even besides its mediating role in shaping the set of socioeconomic characteristics of their children (see contributions from Brons et al., 2017; Liefbroer & Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021). Recent literature has delineated three channels through which the family of origin shapes their children's transition out of the parental home (Billari, Hiekel & Liefbroer, 2019): stratified socialization, stratified agency, and stratified opportunity.

*Stratified socialization*, the first channel, elucidates how parental socioeconomic status (SES) influences children's ideas and aspirations regarding major demographic transitions, notably their departure from the parental home. High-SES parents impart values that prioritize self-exploration and self-realisation, thereby fostering preferences for early independence over prolonged residence within the family unit (Arnett, 2000) and for postponement of major life transitions such as marriage and parenthood (Billari, Hiekel & Liefbroer, 2019; Iacovu, 2010). These so-called "secularized" values gained traction among highly educated individuals from the 1970s, catalysing a paradigm shift in demographic behaviour known as the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 2014; Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986; Van de Kaa, 1987). Conversely, children from low-SES backgrounds tend to be socialised toward union formation, marriage, and early parenthood, alongside the pursuit of economic autonomy, often prompting early entry into the labour market.

In parallel, *stratified agency* underscores how children from high-SES backgrounds possess greater resources and capabilities to actualise their expectations and intentions. High-SES parents wield more economic resources, enhanced planning skills, and social networks, facilitating their offspring's pursuit of advantageous long-term plans, such as securing suitable accommodations or navigating setbacks (Billari, Hiekel & Liefbroer, 2019). Nevertheless, plans of high-SES children often experience postponement, echoing the "feathered nest" concept, wherein affluent parents provide a secure and comfortable environment conducive to their children's pursuits (e.g., university education) prior to committing to irreversible life transitions like marriage and parenthood (Avery, Goldscheider & Speare, 1992; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Saraceno, 2000).

Upon reviewing existing literature, studies on age at leaving home observe that children from high-SES families tend to depart later than their low-status counterparts (see also ISTAT, 2014). Angelini, Bertoni and Weber (2022) illustrate at the European level that individuals raised in a "golden nest" typically delay parental home-leaving mainly because they pursue additional years of education, although this does not entirely explain the delay. In Italy, Manacorda and Moretti (2006) confirm that the higher the parental income, the higher the probability of children's co-residence with parents, a finding corroborated by Di Stefano (2019). Such regularity, however, conceals, gender heterogeneity. A recent study by Ferraretto and Vitali (2023) indicates that among women, higher parental SES correlates with delayed home-leaving in Southern and Eastern European countries, with no discernible effect among men. The opposite results were found by Chiuri and Del Boca (2010) for Mediterranean countries: greater family resources encourage daughters to leave and sons to remain home.

When scrutinizing destinations after leaving the parental home, studies typically find that young adults from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to leave for family formation, while their high-SES counterparts often depart solo (Blaauboer & Mulder, 2010; Brons, Liefbroer & Ganzeboom, 2017; Mooyaart, Liefbroer & Billari, 2022; Schwanitz, Mulder & Toulemon, 2017). Regarding solo living, studies generally observe that children from higher parental backgrounds tend to leave home driven by aspirations for autonomy and independence (Billari, Hiekel & Liefbroer, 2019; De Jong Gierveld, Liefbroer & Beeking, 1991; Iacovu, 2010),

often during educational enrolment (Klimova Chaloupkova, 2023; Van den Berg, 2023; Van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022).

In the next paragraph, these contrasting scenarios will be better disentangled via a cohort perspective, and the importance of the macro-level context for home-leaving decisions will be explored, following the *stratified opportunity* mechanism.

## 2.2 Parental social class differences in home-leaving across cohorts: The case of Italy

The decision to leave the parental home unfolds within a defined opportunity structure, where young adults confront opportunities and constraints intricately linked to their family background. This framework, governed by the mechanism of *stratified opportunity*, underscores how the unequal distribution of structural factors shapes children's life circumstances, influencing the timing and destinations of their departure from the parental home (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; Marini, 1985). Such structural factors are economic, institutional, and cultural (Van den Berg, Kalmijn & Leopold, 2021).

The institutional and economic contexts of Italy have changed significantly over time. Cohorts born after World War II (the so-called baby boomers) experienced unprecedented economic prosperity, benefitting from full employment, a generous welfare state (Fullin & Reyneri, 2015) and accessible home ownership (often inherited or given as a gift by parents, see Mencarini & Tanturri, 2006), making it easy for them to accumulate resources to establish a new household. The situation is different for younger cohorts. The labour market deregulation that occurred in Italy in the 1980s has resulted in increased job instability and precariousness, especially for young people, hindering their chances of achieving stable employment and economic independence to establish their households (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009; Bertolini & Goglio, 2019; Di Stefano, 2019; Scherer, 2004). Rising housing costs (both prices and rents), together with the absence of housing policy, the spread of home ownership (Mencarini & Tanturri, 2006), and a rigid mortgage market, have greatly affected the leaving home decisions of the youngest cohorts (Di Stefano, 2019; Gritti & Cutuli, 2021; Modena & Rondinelli, 2016). The 2008 financial crisis, which led to a prolonged recession in Italy lasting until 2013, has further increased economic and employment uncertainty (ISTAT, 2014), with elevated young unemployment rates (Aassve, Cottini, & Vitali, 2013) coupled with lower wages for employed individuals (Aassve et al., 2002).

The contextual conditions interact with the characteristics of the welfare system. The welfare state is expected to function as a safety net, providing young adults with resources to live independently of their parents and navigate economic uncertainties (see Chiuri & Del Boca, 2010; Iacovou, 2010). The Italian welfare state is deficient in welfare assistance for young individuals, particularly concerning educational funding, housing subsidies, and financial aid (e.g., Le Blanc & Wolff, 2006). The welfare state's role is secondary to the family's (Chiuri & Del Boca, 2010; Dalla Zuanna, 2001; Dalla Zuanna & Micheli, 2004), implying that strong family bonds compensate for a weak welfare state.

To wit, such profound changes suggest an evolving relationship between parental socioeconomic backgrounds and the home-leaving behaviours of young adults.

### 2.2.1 Parental social class differences in home-leaving age: changes over time

It is well-established that structural conditions are among the reasons for the significant postponement of the age of leaving home in Italy over time (Aassve et al., 2002; Aassve, Arpino & Billari, 2013; ISTAT, 2014; Schwanitz & Mulder, 2015). In 2021, the OECD estimates that young Italians typically leave their parental home around 30, whereas young Swedes leave at approximately 19 years old (Eurostat, 2021). Over time, the age of home-leaving in Italy has followed a U-shaped pattern. For men born before 1939, the median age of home-leaving was around 26. It decreased to 24 for post-war cohorts before increasing again to 28 for those born in the 1970s and 1980s. A similar U-shaped pattern is observed for women, though they generally leave home a few years earlier than men (ISTAT, 2014).

Whether this postponement has been widespread or driven over time by a particular socioeconomic group remains an open question. On the one hand, the delay in leaving the parental home may be a behaviour adopted by children of high-SES families. Previous studies have highlighted that family resources play a significant role in leaving home decisions, mainly prolonging cohabitation with parents (the so-called "feathered nest" idea) (Di Stefano, 2019; Chiuri & Del Boca, 2008; Ferraretto & Vitali, 2023; Manacorda & Moretti, 2006). Children might extend their stay in their parental homes to improve their skills and be com-

petitive in an inefficient labor market (Vogel, 2002) or to wait for better job prospects (Barbera, Negri, Zanetti, 2010; Negri & Filandri, 2010; Reyneri, 2017). On the other hand, recent studies indicate a diminishing influence of precarious employment on home-leaving decisions, possibly due to adaptation strategies or familial support (Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2024) with families supporting their children's autonomy despite economic challenges (Barbieri & Gioachin, 2022). This suggests that children from high-SES families could leave the parental home earlier than those from low-SES families, thanks to family finances, as explained by the *stratified agency mechanism* (Billari, Hiekel & Liefbroer, 2019). The present study will try to shed light on these contrasting scenarios.

### 2.2.2 Parental social class differences in home-leaving destinations: changes over time

Examining changes in home-leaving destinations over time provides additional insights. Since the 1960s, Europe has seen new demographic patterns emerge, including cohabitation (e.g., Rosina & Fraboni, 2004), delayed childbirth, and out-of-wedlock fertility, driven by a paradigm shift towards self-realisation and personal freedom over traditional familial roles (the Second Demographic Transition, e.g., Lesthaeghe, 2010). While initially mainly observed among highly educated Northern Europeans, these changes have spread across societal strata. Italy's lag in adopting secularised behaviours (Aassve et al., 2024) is attributed to the enduring influence of the Roman Catholic Church, maintaining a normative life sequence (Marini, 1984; Sironi, Barban & Impicciatore, 2015). Postponing marriage, despite retaining a central role in the process of family formation (Guetto et al., 2016; Rosina & Fraboni, 2004; Rusconi, 2004), is increasingly accepted, especially among younger generations (Billari et al., 2006). Cohabitation and solo living gained prominence over marriage for those born after the 1970s (Di Giulio, Impicciatore & Sironi, 2019; ISTAT, 2014; Mazzucco, Mencarini & Rettaroli, 2006; Rosina & Fraboni, 2004).

High-SES individuals lead in adopting new family behaviours like cohabitation or living alone (Aassve et al., 2024; Chaloupková, 2023; Di Giulio, Impicciatore & Sironi, 2019). A recent study confirms that socioeconomic differences in these behaviours are narrowing among younger cohorts (Aassve et al., 2024). Similarly, Mooyaart, Liefbroer & Billari (2022) show that marriage loses prominence for all social groups. Still, it remains the most followed pathway for individuals of low socioeconomic backgrounds for the youngest cohorts. On the contrary, highly educated youths, over time, delay all types of family pathways, exacerbating the differences with the low-SES individuals who leave home for family formation at an earlier pace. Nonetheless, in both studies, the focus lies only on family transitions; the youngest cohort includes individuals born from the 70s onwards, missing out on those born in the mid-80s who faced recent societal and economic challenges. Given previous research, the following expectations could be formulated when considering the parental socioeconomic gradient in family-based home-leaving destinations over time.

Leaving the parental home for marriage—considered a traditional family behaviour—was historically widespread across all social strata among older cohorts. Over time, however, the rise of secularized behaviour has led to a decline in marriage, which has remained more common among individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby widening socioeconomic differences. In contrast, cohabitation initially emerged among individuals from highly educated families as part of the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 2010). This behaviour gradually diffused across all social groups (Aassve et al., 2024), narrowing social disparities. For younger cohorts, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, cohabitation may also represent a pragmatic strategy for pooling financial resources in response to Italy's increasingly precarious structural and institutional conditions.

Turning to solo transitions, prolonged co-residence with parents among post-World War II Italian cohorts is associated with educational expansion (Fullin & Reyneri, 2015; Rusconi, 2004). Initially prevalent among high-SES families, the trend of leaving home for higher education has spread across society (ISTAT, 2014). Therefore, a reduction in socioeconomic inequality in home-leaving for university studies is expected.

Expectations regarding the evolution of parental social class differences in leaving the parental home for autonomy (e.g., employment) are more complex. Historically, children from low-SES families often left the parental home out of necessity, seeking economic independence to alleviate financial strain on their families. However, with the worsening institutional and economic conditions faced by younger cohorts, it remains uncertain whether leaving home for autonomy remains a viable option for children from low-SES origins. Autonomy may now be feasible primarily for children from high-SES families, who can rely on parental support. From the perspective of the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 2010), leaving the

parental home for autonomy could be interpreted as a secularized behaviour, initially adopted by high-SES individuals and potentially spreading across all socioeconomic strata over time.

### 2.3 Parental social class and gender

The individualisation process of the Second Demographic Transition, accelerated by increasing gender equality and women's empowerment in employment and education (Aassve et al., 2024), has reshaped societal values (e.g., Lesthaeghe, 2010). Despite significant changes since the 1960s, gender-specific life paths persist. Historically, marriage was the primary pathway to adulthood and leaving the parental home for women (Furstenberg, 2008). Recent literature confirms that women typically leave home earlier than men (Chiuri & Del Boca, 2010; Del Rey, Stanek & García-Gómez, 2022; ISTAT, 2014), often to start families (Lesnard et al., 2016; Schwanitz, Mulder & Toulemon, 2017).

The literature often suggests a stronger influence of parental socioeconomic status on daughters' leaving home decisions, attributed to heightened scrutiny and guidance daughters typically receive from parents (Blaauboer & Mulder, 2010; Mitchell, 2004). Individuals from lower SES backgrounds normally uphold traditional family values favouring marriage and parenthood, while affluent families tend to have more egalitarian gender norms, resulting in reduced gender differences in leaving-home behaviours (Boyd & Pryor, 1989; Ravenara et al., 1995). However, studies reveal variability across countries, suggesting structural factors at play. For instance, in the Netherlands, parental education's effect on leaving home for first union is more substantial for women (Blaauboer & Mulder, 2010), while in Norway and countries with higher gender equality, the role of parental resources is similar for both genders (Billari, Hiekel & Liefbroer, 2019; Klimova Chaloupková, 2023). Similarly, in the United States, parental socioeconomic background influences adulthood transition trajectories for both genders, contrasting with Italy's more traditional gender roles (Sironi, Barban & Impicciatore, 2015). Further studies in Italy (Chiuri & Del Boca, 2010) and Spain (Del Rey, Stanek & García-Gómez, 2022) confirm divergent effects of parental income on daughters and sons' leaving-home timing. Studies accounting for changes over time (Aassve et al., 2024; Bertolini and Goglio, 2019) confirm a parental socioeconomic gradient in cohabitation, which is closing among the youngest cohort, leaving room for smaller gender differences. The complexity of leaving-home patterns for women, influenced by family and personal characteristics, underscores the importance of gender-specific analyses.

## 3. Data and Methods

### 3.1 Data and sample

The analyses draw upon data from the Multipurpose Survey "Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle" (FSS) conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2009 and 2016, which provides the most recent and richest data on family and demographic behaviours available for Italy. Using a multi-stage stratified sampling method, the survey selected families in 2009 and individuals in 2016 who are representative of the entire Italian population aged 18 and above.<sup>1</sup> It gathers information on individuals' social and economic conditions, including critical retrospective information essential for our research objectives.

Our sample includes individuals aged 18 or older at the time of the interview and who were younger than 70 to address selective mortality. These criteria reduced the original sample size from 68,603 to 50,356 individuals. Following recent Italian studies (e.g., Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2024), we excluded 1,174 individuals who reported leaving their parental home before age 16, who can be considered outliers. Given our focus on parental home-leaving destinations, we further excluded 411 individuals who did not report the reason for leaving their parental home. Finally, 661 cases with incomplete data on their family's social origin were excluded. For each respondent, we retain observations from 16 to the home-leaving age, or 34 for those still living with their parents (the so-called right-censored cases). The final sample includes 469,895 observations from 48,110 individuals born between 1939 and 1998.

<sup>1</sup>In 2009, all family members completed the FSS questionnaire, while in 2016 only one family member was interviewed and answered socio-demographic questions on behalf of the other members.

### 3.2 Variables

The timing of leaving the parental home is captured using the retrospective question, “In what year did you stop living with your parents for at least three months?” which allows us to determine the home-leaving age.<sup>2</sup> After leaving the parental home, the destination is reconstructed by combining information on the date of first cohabitation or marriage with the self-reported reason for leaving home. We categorise individuals as follows: (a) *living with parents* when the individual resides with parents at the time of the interview and has never stopped living with them for more than three months; (b) *leaving for cohabitation*, when the individual explicitly states leaving home to begin cohabiting with a partner or when their departure date coincides with the start of their first cohabitation; (c) *leaving for marriage*, when the individual explicitly states leaving home to begin a marriage or when their departure date coincides with the start of their first marriage; (d) *leaving for education*, when the individual left in a year when neither marriage nor cohabitation occurred and the individual states leaving for study; (e) *leaving for autonomy*, when the individual left in a year when neither marriage nor cohabitation occurred and the individual states leaving for work, or autonomy/independence. A residual category (f) *leaving for other reasons* distinguishes individuals who left home in a year when neither marriage nor cohabitation occurred and for reasons other than education, cohabitation, marriage, or autonomy (e.g., parental death or other unspecified reasons); results from such category are not shown, given its heterogeneity and small prominence in the sample. A schematic representation of the variable construction and the numerosity of each category is given in Appendix Table A2.

The parental social class is the main independent variable, which we operationalise following an occupational approach. The FSS survey captures parents’ occupational position and economic activity sector when the respondent was 14 years old, including details on the number of employees and whether the parent was an entrepreneur, freelancer, or self-employed. We use this information to create a measure of parental occupational-based social class, following a simplified version of the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) social class schema (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe, 2007; Wright, 2004). The resulting variable distinguishes between six social classes: the service class (I-II), routine non-manual (III), petit bourgeoisie (IVab), self-employed farmers (IVc), skilled and unskilled manual workers (V-VI-VIIa), and agricultural labourers (VIIb). An additional category labelled as “else” identifies individuals whose both parents were either seeking their first job, engaged in homemaking, students, unable to work, or deceased when the respondent was 14 years old. This classification follows a hierarchical structure, with the service class being part of the upper classes, routine non-manual workers, petit bourgeoisie, farmers part of the middle class, skilled and unskilled manual workers part of the working class, and farm labourers part of the lower classes. Parental social class is determined using dominance criterion, prioritising the higher value between parents. Appendix Table A1 provides the sample sizes by social class, cohort, and gender.

Using an occupational-based definition of social class is rooted in the specific context we are investigating. During the first half of the 20th century, when the parents of the individuals in our sample were active in the labour market, Italy had not yet experienced significant educational expansion (Ballarino & Schadee, 2008; Barone & Guetto, 2016). For instance, in the birth cohort of 1939–64, only 3% of the fathers in our sample held a university degree, while 88% had completed just primary or lower levels of education. Therefore, while many studies use education as a proxy for social class (e.g., Sironi, Barban & Impicciatore, 2015), this would be less informative than distinguishing by occupation. Ideally, parental resources could be measured by parental income or parental wealth, information unfortunately unavailable in our data.

To examine changes over time, we group individuals based on their birth year into four distinct cohorts: 1939–45, 1946–1964, 1965–79, and 1980–98. However, due to a limited number of individuals leaving home for education and cohabitation in the older cohorts, combining the initial two birth cohorts (1939–45 and 1946–1964) is necessary. Notably, the younger cohort consists of individuals who likely entered the labour market when deregulations were implemented (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009).

Other control variables refer to the number of siblings as a family background characteristic that might influence how parental resources are distributed. Additionally, given the significance of financial independence in the timing and pattern of leaving the parental home, we include individuals’ employment status as a control. For each year in the observation window, we compute a time-varying measure of individuals’ employment status based on retrospective information on their employment history, incorporating a 1-year lag to mitigate reverse causality.

<sup>2</sup>Respondents who stopped living with their parents and then returned to live with them must refer to the initial departure.



Descriptive statistics about the sample and an overview of the variables used in the study are presented in Table 1. There has been a notable increase in leaving for education and cohabitation among those who left home. Autonomy has also become a more prevalent experience, while a decline has been observed among those leaving the parental home for marriage.

*Table 1:* Descriptive statistics of the analytical sample (Percentages and means)

		1939–64	1965–79	1980–98	Total
Never left the parental home		2.07	10.51	56.04	18.41
Parental home-leaving destination					
	Education	2.29	6.11	17.92	5.83
	Cohabitation	4.03	16.15	26.04	11.57
	Marriage	76.97	54.93	29.25	62.22
	Autonomy	11.01	16.76	21.16	14.55
	Other reasons	5.70	6.06	5.62	5.82
Sex					
	Women	51.77	49.80	49.75	50.59
	Men	48.23	50.20	50.25	49.41
Parental social class					
	<i>I+II.</i> The service class	5.73	8.15	10.85	7.84
	<i>IIIab.</i> Routine non-manual	14.21	22.90	32.28	21.71
	<i>IVab.</i> Petit bourgeoisie	15.23	18.84	17.41	17.02
	<i>IVc.</i> Self-employed farmers	11.05	5.61	2.98	7.16
	<i>V+VI+VIIa.</i> Manual workers (skilled and unskilled)	35.54	34.86	29.17	33.72
	<i>VIIb.</i> Agricultural labourers	12.80	5.98	3.76	8.20
	Else	5.44	3.67	3.55	4.36
Number of siblings					
	None	10.89	11.82	13.94	11.97
	1–2	48.64	62.70	72.72	59.48
	3 or more	40.47	25.48	13.35	28.55
Employed (1–year lag)		47.43	41.33	28.24	41.03
Mean age		21.51	22.38	20.63	21.68

*Note:* ISTAT multipurpose survey, FSS 2009 and 2016 (weighted statistics).

### 3.3 Analytical strategy

We investigate the association between parental social class and home-leaving using event-history modelling techniques. The process time is the age of individuals and starts when respondents are 16 years old and continues until they either leave the parental home or reach the age of 34. Hence, right censoring occurs when the transition is not observed before age 34, and event-history models are well suited to account for this occurrence (Allison, 1984).

We first explore heterogeneities by parental social class and changes across cohorts in the timing of leaving home through Kaplan-Meier survival estimates. Then, we estimate discrete-time event history models to examine the role of parental social class on parental home-leaving destinations. We use a competing risks approach (multinomial logistic regressions) where the competing events include remaining with parents versus leaving home for education, cohabitation, marriage, autonomy or other reasons (Allison, 1984). Models are estimated separately for women and men while controlling for the number of siblings and time-varying individual employment situations lagged by one year. Further, age dummies are included to control for time-dependency and assess the nonlinearity of the age effect. We opt not to include parental education as a control variable due to concerns about overcontrolling bias (Grätz, 2022), given the high correlation between parental education and occupational-based social class. The standard errors of the models were corrected for clustering observations in person-period combinations. Last, to assess whether the association between parental social class and home-leaving destination has changed, we examine the interaction of parental social class with the birth cohort.

To provide a more interpretable measure of effect sizes and enable comparisons of the magnitude of interaction effects, we present Average Marginal Effects (AME) results. The AME is the difference in the probability of leaving the parental home between each parental social class and manual workers, the reference group, due to their more extensive representation in the sample. To streamline the presentation and emphasise the most relevant results, we omitted results related to leaving home for *other reasons* and the AME of individuals whose parents were not grouped in any social classes. However, all results are available in Appendix Table A3 for those interested in a more comprehensive view.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Parental social class and the timing of parental home-leaving

Figure 1 presents Kaplan-Meier survival estimates showing the age-specific transition of home-leaving by parental social classes across different birth cohorts (1980–1998, red line; 1965–1979, grey line; 1939–1964, black line), separately for women (upper panel) and men (lower panel).

The results confirm a general delay in the age of leaving home over time across both genders and parental social classes, particularly pronounced in the most recent birth cohort (1980–1988). Looking at women in the service class, only 10% of women born in 1939–1964 had not left the parental home by the age of 30, against more than 20% in the youngest cohort.

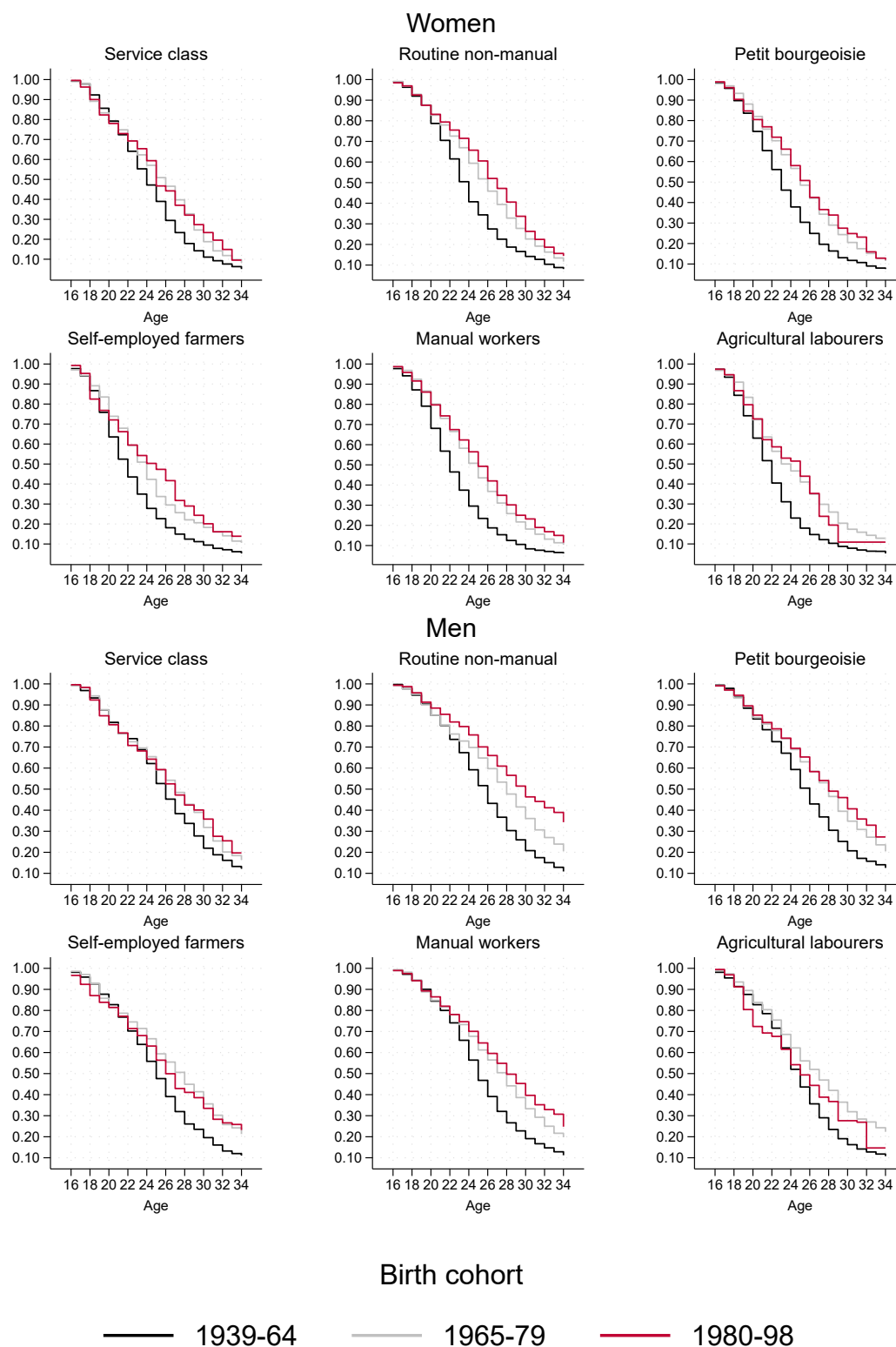
As for parental social class differences, women from higher social classes (service class, routine non-manual) delay leaving their parental home. In comparison, those from lower classes (manual workers) leave home earlier. For example, among women born between 1939 and 1964, more than 25% of daughters of the service class, routine non-manual, and petit bourgeoisie had not transitioned by age 26, against the 20% of daughters of manual workers and 15% of agricultural labourers. These percentages are, in the youngest cohort (1980–1998): 45% for the service class, 52% for routine-non manual, 42% for the petit bourgeoisie, 42% for manual workers, and 35% for agricultural labourers. It is interesting to notice that parental social class differences are less pronounced in the youngest cohort of women, given a general postponement of age at leaving home.

For men, this trend appears reversed. Among men born between 1939 and 1964, by age 26, around 45% of individuals had not left the parental home, a percentage similar across social classes (but for agricultural labourers, 35%). Parental social class differences emerge for the most recent cohort (1980–1998). While not much changes in the service class (52%), the percentages rise to more than 60% for sons of the routine non-manual class, petit bourgeoisie and manual workers, and 45% for agricultural labourers. This suggests that, for men, parental social class differences have widened over time, mainly due to the postponement of leaving the parental household for the children of higher social classes.

### 4.2 Gender differences in the social stratification of parental home-leaving

To explore parental social class differences in home-leaving destinations, Figure 2 shows the differences in probabilities (AMEs) of still residing *With Parents*, leaving home for *Education*, *Cohabitation*, *Marriage*, or *Autonomy* for each parental social class compared to the reference category (manual workers), separately for women (black dots) and men (red triangles). Detailed estimations are available in Appendix Table A3. Additionally, predicted probabilities of leaving home for each destination are depicted in Appendix Figure A1.

Figure 1: Proportion of women and men living in their parental home by birth cohorts across social classes (Kaplan-Meier survival estimates)



Source: ISTAT multipurpose survey, FSS 2009 and 2016 (weighted estimates). Note: the 1939–1964 birth cohort is larger due to fewer individuals born in those years leaving home for education and cohabitation. The graph for individuals whose both parents were either seeking their first job, engaged in homemaking, students, unable to work, or deceased when the respondent was 14 years old is not displayed.

Parental social class differences are observed for the probability of living *With Parents*. Net of age, women from higher social classes (service class, routine non-manual, and petit bourgeoisie) are more likely to live *With Parents* than daughters of manual workers. In contrast, women from self-employed farmers and agricultural labourers are less likely to do so. Among men, differences are less pronounced, with only those from the service class showing a lower probability of living *With Parents* compared to manual workers and no significant differences across other social classes.

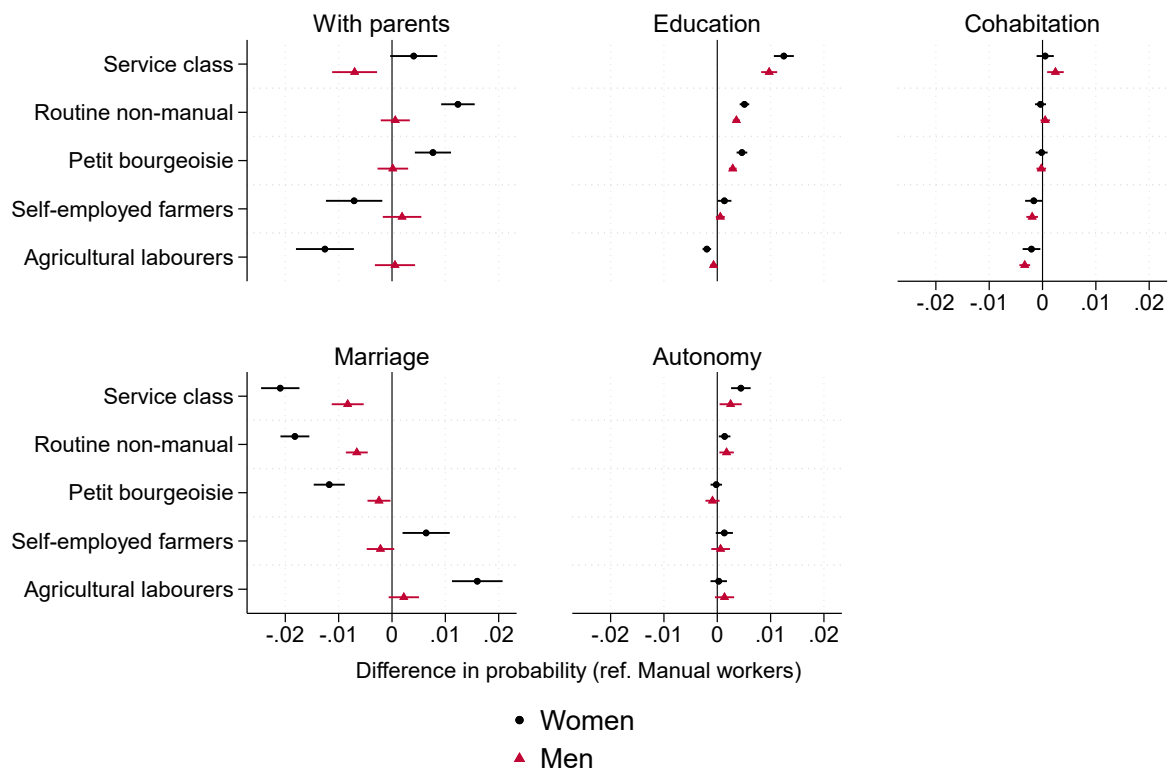
Additionally, parental social class differences are evident in the transition for *Education*: individuals from higher social classes (service class, routine non-manual, and petit bourgeoisie) are more likely to leave home for education than those from working-class backgrounds, without substantial gender differences.

For *Autonomy* and *Cohabitation*, no notable differences by gender and parental social class are observed. If any, daughters from self-employed farmers and agricultural labourers display a slightly lower propensity to leave the parental home for Cohabitation than those from manual worker backgrounds; for *Autonomy*, the likelihood is higher for both women and men from the service class and routine non-manual families than for manual working classes.

Finally, for *Marriage*, children from the service class are significantly less likely to leave the parental home compared to those from manual workers backgrounds. This pattern is also evident, though less pronounced, among daughters from routine non-manual and petit bourgeois families. Conversely, marriage emerges as a more likely destination for daughters from agricultural classes, albeit with minimal differences from the manual workers.

To sum up, the widest gender differences are in leaving the parental home for *Marriage*: women from higher-SES backgrounds are the least likely to leave home for such reasons. For all the other home-leaving behaviours, parental social class differences are far more pronounced than gender differences and will be further explored in the next section.

Figure 2: AME of parental social class on home-leaving destination

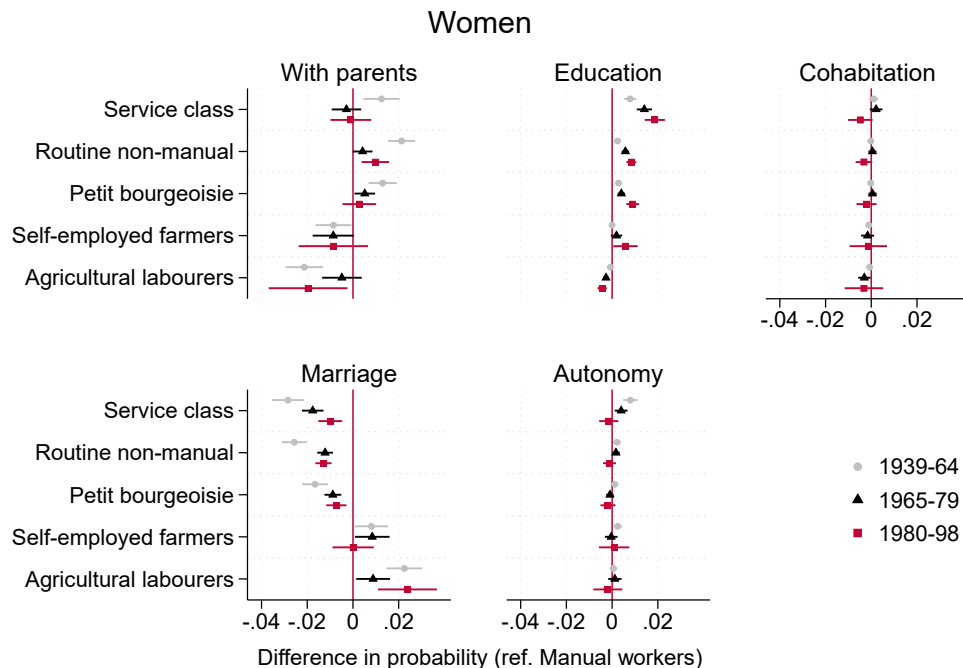


Note: AME from a discrete-time multinomial regression of home-leaving destination by parental social class, including controls for age fixed effect, birth cohort, number of siblings, and employment status (1-year lag). Standard errors are clustered within individuals. Models are estimated separately by gender. Complete estimates in Appendix Table A3, Model 2. Source: ISTAT multipurpose survey, FSS 2009 and 2016.

### 4.3 Parental social class differences and parental home-leaving: changes over time

Has the influence of social class on home-leaving destinations changed over time? This question is addressed in Figure 3 for women and Figure 4 for men. These figures present the same evidence as Figure 2, broken down by birth cohort: 1939–64 (grey dots), 1965–79 (black triangles), and 1980–98 (red squares). The corresponding predicted probabilities are provided in Appendix Figure A2.

Figure 3: AME of parental social class on home-leaving destination by birth cohorts. Women



Note: AME from a discrete-time multinomial regression of home-leaving destination by parental social class, including controls for age fixed effect, number of siblings, employment status (1-year lag) and interaction between social class and birth cohort. Standard errors are clustered within individuals. Complete estimates in Appendix Table A4. Source: ISTAT multipurpose survey, FSS 2009 and 2016.

For women (Figure 3), the results show significant changes across birth cohorts in the propensity of women from different social classes to live *With Parents*. Among older cohorts (1939–1964), women from service, routine, non-manual, and petit bourgeoisie backgrounds are more inclined to live *With Parents* than daughters from manual workers. Differences between women from higher classes and those from the working class diminishes over time. In the youngest cohort (1980–1998), only women from petit bourgeoisie families and agricultural workers display differences compared to women from manual workers families in the likelihood of living *With Parents*: a higher likelihood for the former and a lower likelihood for the latter – but the effect size is negligible.

For *Education*, in the oldest cohort (1939–64), women from service class and routine non-manual families are more likely to leave home than women from manual worker backgrounds. This trend is accentuated over time: for the younger cohorts (1980–98), all the social classes but children of agricultural workers are more likely to leave home to pursue *Education*.

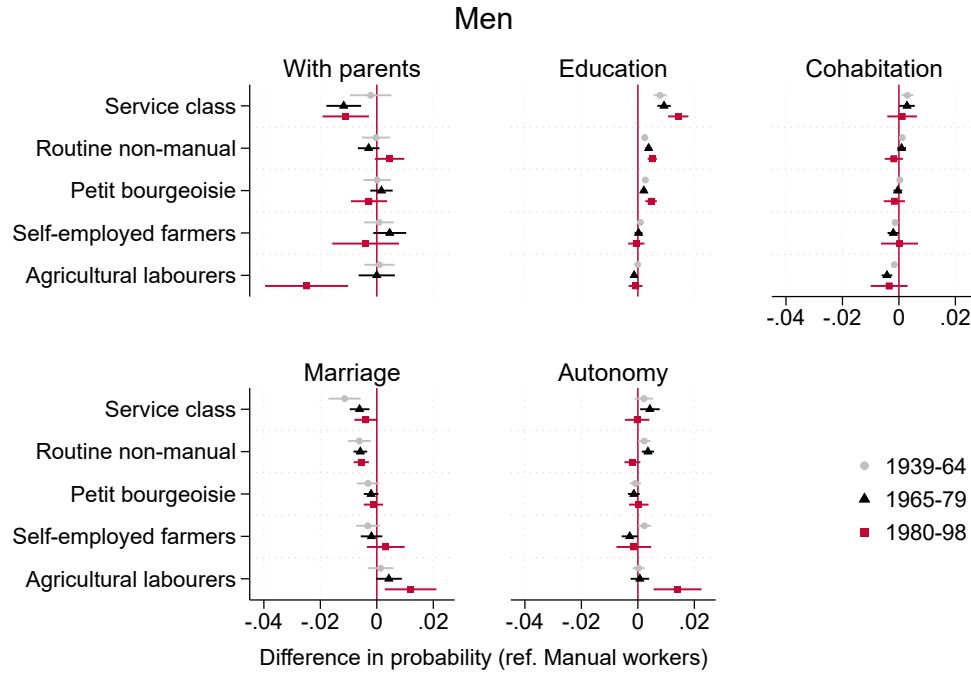
For *Cohabitation*, parental social class differences are not remarkable. Appendix Figure A2 supplements these findings by illustrating a widespread increase in cohabitation across all social classes.

Regarding *Marriage*, in the oldest cohort (1939–64), women from higher social classes (service class, routine non-manual, petit bourgeoisie) are less likely to leave home for *Marriage* compared to women from manual worker backgrounds; the contrary holds for women from agricultural classes. This trend persists across cohorts, with women from higher SES groups remaining less likely to leave home for marriage. However, the gap slightly narrows over time. Appendix Figure A2 highlights a general decline in marriage as the home-leaving destination.

Finally, concerning leaving home for *Autonomy*, parental social class differences remain minimal over time and close for the youngest cohort (i.e., between daughters from the service and routine non-manual classes and those from manual working classes).

Among men (Figure 4), we observe slightly different dynamics in the influence of social class across various birth cohorts in some cases. Specifically, children from the service class and agricultural workers become less likely to live *With Parents* over time.

Figure 4: AME of parental social class on home-leaving destination by birth cohorts. Men



Note: AME from a discrete-time multinomial regression of home-leaving destination by parental social class, including controls for age fixed effect, number of siblings, and employment status (1-year lag) and an interaction between social class and birth cohort. Standard errors are clustered within individuals. Complete estimates in Appendix Table A5. Source: ISTAT multipurpose survey, FSS 2009 and 2016.

As in the case of women, leaving home for *Education* becomes slightly more likely among the youngest cohort for the children from the service class, routine non-manual workers, and petit bourgeoisie. Parental social class differences in leaving home for *Cohabitation*, to the contrary, disappear over time.

Like women, men also experience a decline in leaving home for *Marriage* across birth cohorts. The decline in marriage cuts across social classes, reducing differences between higher and manual working classes while increasing differences between lower classes (i.e., agricultural labourers vs manual workers).

Finally, parental social class differences in leaving home for *Autonomy* remain relatively stable over time, except for agricultural classes, where children are more likely than those from manual workers families to leave home for *Autonomy* among the youngest cohorts.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

The transition of leaving the parental home is significant for life trajectories. In a context like Italy, characterized by spreading economic uncertainty, especially among young people, understanding to what extent this step into the journey to adulthood is influenced by who your parents are becomes particularly relevant.

Using retrospective data from two rounds of the Italian Multipurpose survey on Families and Social Subjects (2009 and 2016), we investigated the association between parental background—operationalized as parental social class using an occupational approach—and the timing and the type of destination for leaving

home. We also examined how these associations have evolved across birth cohorts for both women and men.

Our research confirms the prevailing trend in the Italian landscape of delayed emancipation from the family of origin, with a general postponement of age at home-leaving over time. Moreover, over time, there has been a decline in marriage as the primary destination following parental home-leaving, but cohabitation struggles to emerge as alternative union-formation behaviour. Leaving home for education has become slightly more prominent over time, reflecting broader educational expansion. Gender differences persist, with women typically leaving home earlier than men, often to form partnerships, particularly through marriage.

By exploring such trends from a stratification perspective, we found that the postponement of the age at home-leaving and the emergence of new “secularized” behaviours associated with the Second Demographic Transition have contributed to narrowing parental social class disparities, though gender differences remain.

Among women, parental social class differences in the timing of leaving home have narrowed across cohorts, as the postponement of home-leaving has become more widespread across all social groups. However, differences based on parental class remain significant when it comes to the destination after leaving home. Daughters from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are increasingly likely to leave home for non-family-related reasons, such as pursuing education. In contrast, daughters from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are still more likely to follow the traditional path of leaving home for marriage. Despite the widespread expansion of education, which has involved women across cohorts and could suggest that education is becoming a common reason for leaving home, parental social class continues to play a significant role in shaping exit pathways. This may be due to slower cultural shifts among lower social classes or more limited opportunities available to women from these backgrounds. As for cohabitation, no clear pattern has emerged, possibly because leaving home for educational purposes often precedes family formation, including cohabitation.

The pattern differs for men, with the parental class differences in the timing of home-leaving widening. The delay in leaving home is more pronounced among men from higher social classes, supporting the “feathered nest” theory, which suggests that young people extend their stay in the parental home to develop skills and remain competitive in a challenging job market (Vogel, 2002) or to wait for better job prospects (Barbera, Negri & Zanetti, 2010; Negri & Filandri, 2010). Interestingly, sons from service and agricultural backgrounds show the least behavioural change across social classes.

Our results show that the landscape of leaving the parental home has changed across cohorts, and that parental social class shapes such changes across sexes and cohorts. Two questions now arise.

First, exploring the mechanisms underpinning the persistence of these disparities across parental social classes exceeds the scope of our study, but it remains a critical area for investigation. While some interpretations suggest a slow diffusion of values linked to the Second Demographic Transition among lower social strata, others emphasize the impact of socioeconomic resources such as financial stability, housing, and social networks in shaping pathways to adulthood (e.g., Billari & Tabellini, 2010). Notably, economic uncertainties faced by younger cohorts today may amplify the importance of parental social class on home-leaving behavior. This aligns with existing studies in the Italian context, which emphasize the significant role of the family of origin in influencing various aspects of their children’s adult lives (e.g., Barbieri & Gioachin, 2022). We contend that addressing these inquiries is crucial for understanding how inequalities are formed and perpetuated.

Second, considering that leaving the parental home shapes subsequent stages of adulthood, such as income trajectories and the transition to parenthood, it is imperative to comprehend how the social stratification of home-leaving patterns may differentially impact the lives of Italian young adults. Notably, research in Italy has revealed that delaying departure from the parental home is linked to adverse economic outcomes (Billari & Tabellini, 2010), underscoring the urgency to explore whether varying socioeconomic backgrounds exacerbate unequal transitions to adulthood. This inquiry holds significant interest for both societal stakeholders and policymakers.

Future development could also build on some limitations of this study. First, our focus was limited to the first time that individuals left home and did not account for the duration of subsequent state or potential return to the parental home, where considerable heterogeneity of home-leaving trajectories could be present. Second, the use of retrospective data introduces recall bias. This is particularly relevant for non-marital transitions, as individuals may have a more precise memory of an event such as marriage with a clearly defined date but less accurate recall of the exact date they left their parental home to live alone or co-

habit. However, there is no reason to believe this should lead to a consistent under or overestimation based on parental social background. Third, we acknowledge that there may be regional variations in the timing and modalities of leaving home within Italy (e.g., Santarelli & Cottone, 2009). More importantly, the diverse social, economic, and cultural contexts across different regions may influence the association between parental background and home-leaving dynamics. Unfortunately, we could not incorporate regional differences into our analysis due to the lack of available information on where individuals lived before the interview year.

While our findings, underscoring the family of origin's influential role in the process of leaving home, align with existing literature on the Italian case (Manacorda & Moretti, 2006; Mencarini & Tanturri, 2006), they expand the literature by showing the persistence of social origin's influence on the timing and patterns of leaving home over time. In Italy, who are your parents continue to be a relevant predictor of life opportunities and experiences, demonstrating enduring stability across cohorts. As the youngest cohorts confront challenging conditions during their transition to adulthood, the role of family of origin may further exacerbate inequalities, regardless of an individual's characteristics. Overall, our findings emphasize the need to delve deeper into the role of family background as a stratifying dimension of individual life cycles and the related demographic transitions.

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study can be accessed through the website of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) upon registration and submission of a formal request. For further details, please refer to <https://www.istat.it/en/analysis-and-products/microdata-files>. The data used in this research were obtained within the Research Protocol “Aspetti socio-economici e dinamiche familiari in Italia” (Socio-economic aspects and family dynamics in Italy), formalized between ISTAT and a network of universities (the state Universities of Bari, Florence, and Padua and Bocconi University in Milan).

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# Information in German

## Deutscher Titel

Soziale Herkunft und der Auszug aus dem Elternhaus in Italien: Sozialer Wandel und anhaltende Ungleichheiten

## Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Diese Studie untersucht den Zusammenhang zwischen familiärem Hintergrund und dem Auszug aus dem Elternhaus in Italien und fokussiert sich dabei auf die Frage, wie der soziale Status der Eltern den Zeitpunkt und den Anlass (weiterführende Bildung, Gründung einer nichtehelichen Lebensgemeinschaft, Heirat, Gründung eines eigenständigen Haushalts) des Auszugs von Frauen und Männern, dreier Kohorten der Jahrgänge 1939–1998 beeinflusst.

**Hintergrund:** In Italien verlassen junge Erwachsene das Elternhaus tendenziell spät, und das Alter, in dem dieser Übergang erfolgt, ist seit den 1980er Jahren gestiegen. Diese Entwicklung wirft Fragen nach veränderten demografischen Mustern und deren breiteren gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen auf.

**Methode:** Die retrospektiven Daten der ISTAT Mehrzweckerhebung Haushalte und soziale Rollen (2009 und 2016) werden mit ereignisanalytischen Methoden ausgewertet.

**Ergebnisse:** Der allgemeine Wandel hin zu einem höheren Auszugsalter hat die sozialen Unterschiede bei Frauen verringert. Bei Männern hingegen konzentriert sich dieser Trend auf die höheren sozialen Schichten, was zu einer Vergrößerung sozialer Unterschiede führt. Über die Zeit hinweg haben sich Herkunftsunterschiede bezüglich der beobachteten Zielzustände, insbesondere im Hinblick auf den Verbleib im elterlichen Haushalt, des Auszugs anlässlich einer Heirat sowie den Auszug in einen eigenständigen Haushalt ohne Partner tendenziell nivelliert. Töchter aus höheren sozioökonomischen Schichten ziehen zunehmend für Bildungszwecke aus, während der Übergang in eine nichteheliche Lebensgemeinschaft weiterhin selten bleibt. Ähnliche Trends zeigen sich bei Männern, wobei jedoch Söhne von Landarbeitern seltener im elterlichen Haushalt verbleiben und häufiger anlässlich ihrer Ehe oder zur Gründung eines eigenständigen Haushaltes ohne Partner ausziehen.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Die Ergebnisse unterstreichen den anhaltenden Einfluss der sozialen Herkunft auf den Auszug aus dem Elternhaus und verdeutlichen deren Bedeutung für den Übergang ins Erwachsenenalter in Italien.

**Schlagwörter:** Übergang in das Erwachsenenalter, Auszug aus dem Elternhaus, Ereignisanalyse

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