Differences in age-specific abortion rates between the two years may be attributable to an increasing tendency by women to delay childbirth, or to changes in the pattern of contraceptive method use among younger women, particularly in the north. The high levels of abortion among older women (those aged 35–39) in the central and northern areas may be a consequence of continued use of traditional methods of contraception.

Social and Demographic Characteristics

Census data allow us to examine the relationship of marital status, parity and education to abortion in Italy. In Italy, abortion is more common among married than unmarried women. In 1981, single women accounted for 27% of induced abortions; this figure rose to 38% by 1991. However, unmarried women terminate their pregnancies more frequently than married women: It has been estimated that 61% of conceptions among single women are terminated, compared with only 15% of pregnancies among married women.

Differences in abortion rates by marital status diminished considerably between 1981 and 1991, especially among women aged 25–29 (Figure 1, page 269). Declines in abortion rates over time were greatest among the youngest married women. While the abortion rate among married women aged 15–19 was 21 abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age in 1981, the rate was 14 per 1,000 by 1991. Declines of a similar magnitude were noted among married women aged 20–24 (from 26 per 1,000 in 1981 to 17 per 1,000 in 1991) and among single women aged 25–29, whose abortion rates declined from 25 per 1,000 in 1981 to approximately 16 per 1,000 in 1991. We attribute these changes to increases in the use of modern contraceptives among these women.

A woman’s socioeconomic status is influenced by a multitude of factors. Education often functions as a proxy for several of these variables, and appears to play a particularly strong role in determining abortion behavior. Level of education has a different impact according to age. Among adolescent women, abortion rates are highest for those with the most education. This is especially so for married women aged 15–19; the abortion rate among those with at most a primary education was 9 per 1,000, compared with a rate of approximately 16 per 1,000 among those with higher educational attainment. Among married women aged 20–39, abort-