tion rates tend to decline as the level of education increases. For example, the rate among married women aged 25–29 was 24.8 per 1,000 for those with the least education, compared with 10 per 1,000 among the most educated women. Although less distinct, the trend among nonmarried women was similar. Among both married and unmarried women aged 40 and older, women with less education evidence lower abortion rates than women with higher levels of education. However, this may result from a cohort effect: We speculate that the choice to terminate the pregnancy may represent a symbol of emancipation among older women, for whom the family context has been characterized by the use of traditional contraceptive methods (e.g., withdrawal) and a traditional division of gender roles.

**Repeat Abortions**

Available 1991 data indicate that approximately 30% of abortions documented in Italy are repeat abortions (defined as those obtained by married women who report having had a prior pregnancy terminated through abortion). Table 4 indicates that the likelihood of a repeat abortion increases with parity. Among women with no children, the highest level of repeat abortion is found in the central region of Lazio, where 21% of abortions to married women were repeat procedures. The southern regions of Molise and Calabria registered the lowest level of repeat abortions, about 5% in each.

Levels of repeat abortion were slightly higher among women with one child; this proportion was lowest in the northern region of Veneto (15%) and the island of Sardegna (14%) and highest in the southern region of Puglia (29%). Among women with two or more children, repeat abortion was most frequent in the southern regions, ranging from 29% in Abruzzo to 53% in Puglia. Repeat abortion remained relatively uncommon among higher parity women in the northern region of Veneto (17%), while in other northern and central regions, this proportion ranged from 26% (in Marches) to 33% (in Tuscany).

Low levels of modern contraceptive use may contribute to elevated rates of repeat abortions among higher parity women in southern Italy. Unfortunately, data documenting the extent of induced abortion and contraceptive use are limited mostly to results from ad-hoc or irregular surveys of limited geographic scope. Furthermore, reliable country-wide data on levels of abortion do not include information on women’s use of contraceptive methods. Data currently being analyzed from the 1996 Italian Fertility and Family Survey should be useful in further examining the links between contraception, fertility and reproductive behavior, and abortion.

**Discussion**

Regional differences in abortion rates in Italy are likely related to religious and cultural factors. An association between less conservative attitudes and religious beliefs and positive attitudes toward abortion is suggested by regional differences in support for the 1981 referendum. In regions where more traditional values and attitudes prevail, such as Sicily and Sardegna, the percentage of voters in favor of repeal was much higher than the national average, while voters in central and northwestern regions were mostly in favor of the existing law.

While we cannot assume a direct causal link between abortion and political behavior, it may be that common religious and cultural factors influence the two phenomena, clustering in regions with similar patterns. For example, higher levels of abortion can generally be found in the industrialized and secularized areas of the country (the northwestern and central regions of Piedmont, Liguria, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany), where women are more likely to participate in the work force and to have less traditional roles. The level of abortion appears to be lower in the southern part of the country (with the exception of Puglia and Molise), regions that are characterized by higher fertility and traditional family attitudes. Cultural factors may be salient in the northeastern region of Friuli, for example, where strong migration flows associated with modernization and cultural assimilation are correlated with relatively high abortion rates.

Recent attitudinal studies in Italy tend to confirm the influence of sociocultural and demographic factors on the level of abortions. For example, there is an inverse relationship between marital status and abortion rates, while there is a direct relationship between the frequency of civil weddings (a proxy for low religiosity) and the level of abortions.

Despite the decrease in abortion rates during the 1980s, a continued reduction in the number of abortions among Italian women is desired. Improvements in communicating information about effective contraception and in the development of adequate reproductive health care facilities appear necessary in order to reduce the extent of abortion in Italy.

**References**


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