Equity and Family Policies for Sustainable Development: Evaluating the Impact of the E-Family Program (2021-2025)

Luana La Bara *luana.la.bara@uniroma2.it*
Faculty of Economics/Department of Management and Law
"Tor Vergata" University of Rome
50 Cracovia St., 00133 Rome, Italy

Gioia Maurizi *gioia.maurizi@uniroma2.it*
Faculty of Economics/Department of Management and Law
"Tor Vergata" University of Rome
50 Cracovia St., 00133 Rome, Italy

Gloria Fiorani *fiorani@economia.uniroma2.it*
Faculty of Economics/Department of Management and Law
"Tor Vergata" University of Rome
50 Cracovia St., 00133 Rome, Italy

Abstract

This study examines the E-Family Program (2021–2025) in the Lazio Region (Italy), financed by the ESF+, as an initiative supporting families and work-life balance. The research integrates ISTAT demographic data (2020–2023), policy documentation, and primary survey data to evaluate the program's effectiveness in promoting social equity and demographic sustainability. A specific focus is placed on Municipality IV of Rome, a context directly known and experienced by the authors. This local case was chosen not only for its demographic and socio-economic characteristics but also because of the authors' direct engagement with the territory. Several local nursery schools, recognizing the importance of the topic, voluntarily collaborated in distributing the survey, enabling the collection of exploratory data. The findings reveal structural barriers and funding limitations that constrain the program's impact, particularly in terms of equitable access to services and support for working mothers. While the E-Family initiative aligns with EU priorities, its current form appears insufficient to reverse the decline in fertility or ensure inclusive access to early childhood services. Future research could replicate and scale this analysis, offering more targeted policy insights for improving family support across Italian regions.

Keywords: Welfare State, Equity, Sustainable Development, European Social Fund Plus, Social Inclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is the European Union's primary instrument for investing in human capital and supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, a set of twenty principles introduced in 2017 with the Gothenburg Summit. With a budget of approximately €142.7 billion for 2021-2027, the ESF+ was established on 30 June 2021, and it advances EU policies related to employment, social affairs, education, and skills development, including structural reforms in these areas. It is a result of four previously distinct funding instruments: the European Social Fund (ESF), the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), the Youth Employment Initiative, and the European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI).

The ESF+ addresses the socio-economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reversed gains in labour market participation, strained educational and healthcare systems, and increased inequalities.

The ESF+ operates under a shared management framework, where European Union Member States are primarily responsible for implementing funded programs. The European Commission plays a supervisory role to ensure that funds are utilized effectively and in alignment with European priorities. The funding is distributed through two main components: the shared management component, which accounts for most of the budget, and the EaSI component, managed directly by the Commission. Moreover, ESF+ is focused on 11 specific objectives aimed at strengthening Europe’s social dimension, based on the European Pillar of Social Rights, thus also supporting the EU’s broader policy goals such as gender equality, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities in investments. As part of the EU's cohesion policy, the ESF+ continues to support economic, territorial, and social cohesion by reducing disparities between Member States and regions. This is achieved by targeting investments in areas that enhance employment opportunities, improve education quality, and promote social inclusion.

The E-Family Program (2021-2025) - Nursery Vouchers in the Lazio region (Italy) are an example of Italian policies supporting families to promote the reconciliation of work and private life—a central theme in social and labour policies aimed at ensuring a balance between professional commitments and family responsibilities (EU Directive 2019/1158; Legislative Decree No. 105/2022).

The starting point of the research was an observed gap in welfare accessibility and effectiveness, directly experienced by the authors within the IV Municipality of Rome—a context they personally know and inhabit. This localized awareness motivated the choice of a municipal case study approach, focusing on a territory that reflects broader demographic and socio-economic challenges, while allowing in-depth analysis. Several local nursery schools demonstrated awareness of the issue and voluntarily collaborated in the data collection process by sharing a survey among families.

The main objective is linking the initiative to Italy’s demographic decline, integrating ISTAT data on birth rates in Italy and Lazio between 2020 and 2024 to understand the demographic and social context in which the program operates and to explore the extent to which the E-Family Program contributes to building a sustainable and inclusive welfare state, in line with the European Union's strategic priorities (EU Regulation 2021/1057) and the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015). In doing so, the study aims to contribute both theoretically—by engaging with debates on equity, territorial cohesion, and welfare state transformation—and practically, by offering data-driven insights for improving family support mechanisms.

The study responds to two main questions:

RQ1: “To what extent does the E-Family Program align with and contribute to the objectives of the European Social Fund Plus?”

RQ2: “Is there a measurable link between the E-Family Program and demographic trends (birth and fertility rates) in Lazio and Italy?”

Although several studies have analysed European welfare programs and fertility dynamics, micro-level evidence from the municipal level remains underdeveloped. This paper contributes to filling that gap by offering a grounded perspective on how ESF+-funded policies are perceived and accessed in practice, within a complex urban territory.Overall, the results reveal critical challenges: the rapiddepletion of financial resources, uneven territorial distribution of benefits, and the modest impact of vouchers on fertility trends, despite their relevance to the work–care

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

balance. By addressing these issues through a municipal-level case study, the paper advances existing scholarship on welfare and family policies. It provides context-specific insights with theoretical, practical, and policy relevance that are further elaborated in the concluding sections.

The main findings show that, while representing a significant step in supporting families, the E-Family Program presents funding limitations and territorial inequalities that reduce its impact on demographic trends. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature on territorial welfare by integrating demographic analysis with micro-municipal evidence; from a practical perspective, it provides concrete insights for policymakers and local administrators on the design of more equitable, stable, and coordinated measures

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The E-Family program is part of European welfare policies, which promote social inclusion and territorial cohesion as pillars of sustainable development (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Through ESF+, the European Union sets specific targets to reduce inequalities, increase access to education services, and improve gender equality. These goals are directly linked to the SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

2.1 Welfare State and Equity

The Welfare State emerged during industrialization and globalization to ensure economic equality (Van Lancker and Van der Heede, 2020). Its origins can be found in 19th- and 20th-century Britain, where social welfare provisions in health, housing, education, and poverty relief developed in response to societal challenges, influenced by significant events such as the World Wars and the policies of early 20th-century Liberal governments (Briggs, 1961; Castles, 1989; Harris, 2004).

Today, one of the main challenges for the Welfare State is achieving real equity, not only in outcomes, but also in access and distribution. According to Esping-Andersen (1990), an effective Welfare State must ensure universal access to essential services by reducing gender and territorial disparities. Andrews et al. (2019) expand on this view, underlining the importance of measuring equity (Cepiku et al., 2021) in terms of:

- Input: Equitable access to services (Wang et al., 2018).
- Output: Proportional distribution of resources (Smith et al., 2013).
- Outcome: Improvement of living conditions (Charbonneau et al., 2008; Osman et al., 2018).

This study engages with these dimensions by analysing whether E-Family vouchers in Lazio ensure equitable input (access) and how territorial disparities influence both output and outcome.
Critiques of the Welfare State point to limitations in reducing poverty and inequality (Arts and Gelissen, 2002), questioning redistributive efficacy (Uusitalo, 1985). Scholars also highlight its gender blindness, urging the inclusion of care work and the role of women in policy design (Lewis, 1997), only emerging starting from the first 2000s (Prandini, 2006). In Europe, family welfare policies have evolved to include maternity and parental leave, childcare services, and income support (Neyer, 2003). These measures are also tied to female labour participation and family dynamics (Shaver and Lewis, 1994).

In the Italian context, these tensions are evident: work-family reconciliation remains unevenly distributed, especially across regions. The E-Family program, as a targeted instrument, is therefore analysed through this equity lens.

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

The Welfare State also plays a role in promoting intergenerational solidarity, through services that complement family care, with effectiveness measured by reductions in poverty among vulnerable groups and improved maternal labour participation (Saraceno, 2011).

Such investments are key in urban areas like Municipality IV, where families face pressure from limited public service availability.

In more recent studies, research challenges the Welfare State paradox, showing that higher female labour force participation and more public spending on health, education and care are contributing to reducing gender segregation in the labour market (Barth et al., 2023). The social transfers are even found to be more effective than direct taxes in reducing income inequality, with social-democratic Welfare States experiencing the smallest increase in inequality (Wildowicz-Szumarska, 2022).

2.2 Territorial Convergence in European Family Welfare Policies

Territorial equity is a fundamental principle of European welfare. Family welfare policies aim to harmonize social development, reduce regional imbalances (Monedero, 2019). These territorial policies involve complex interactions between national and regional levels, affecting the preservation and development of welfare systems. This territorial dimension is evident in various Countries, including the UK, Germany, France, Spain, and Italy, where welfare management increasingly involves regional actors (Moreno and McEwen, 2005).

Literature suggests that territorial cohesion and convergence are part of the European social model, contrasting with market-driven systems that rely on labour mobility rather than place-based development (Bachtler and Polverari, 2007).These tensions affect programs like E-Family, which must be implemented across diverse regional contexts.

Studies have shown how inequality in childcare services reflects broader social and territorial disparities. For instance, access to childhood services is shaped not only by income and family structure, but also by how policies are spatially implemented. For example, Bywaters et al. (2018) and Webb et al. (2020) highlight how structural and policy-level differences in service allocation affect outcomes for children and families, irrespective of actual need.

European territorial equity is shaped by both intragenerational equity and broader political and economic dynamics (Zuindeau, 2005; Dabinett, 2017) of a cross-disciplinary nature at various scales (Oppido et al., 2023).In this sense, recent literature points to a growing territorialization of income-conditional policies, where local implementation and monitoring have proven crucial for effective social inclusion (Pinto & Goncalves, 2023).

Bywaters et al. (2015:2018) highlight the “inverse intervention law”, according to which disadvantaged areas often receive fewer resources than their actual social needs. More specifically, higher rates of child welfare interventions tend to occur in less deprived local authorities (Bywaters et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2020). This phenomenon exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities in child welfare interventions, with steeper social gradients observed in areas of low overall deprivation and high-income inequality (Webb et al., 2020). This concept is central to the present analysis of Municipality IV, where the distribution of E-Family vouchers appears misaligned with local vulnerabilities and demand levels.

The "inverse intervention" dynamic extends beyond child welfare. In healthcare, market forces and logistical failures can create inequities in service access, particularly during crises or disasters (Phibbs et al., 2018). This "inverse response law" disproportionately affects lower socioeconomic groups during disaster recovery, revealing structural gaps in resource allocation. In the Scottish context, targeted interventions to correct care gaps—such as enhanced financial

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

support and health condition targeting—have shown mixed effectiveness and uncertain sustainability, especially in underserved areas (Bogie et al., 2024).

A further element of disparity concerns the differential uptake of services by income level. Higher-income families also tend to use childcare services more than lower-income families (Van Lancker, 2018). Although early intervention through quality childcare has been associated with improved equity of opportunity (Causa and Chapuis, 2009; Hippe et al., 2016), others consider increasing public spending on childcare not directly sufficient to imply it (Van Lancker, 2018).

Parents' motivations for choosing specific childcare arrangements vary, and gaps persist between statutory provision and actual user experiences (Koslowski et al., 2015). To address these inequalities, recent studies recommend tailoring policies to local contexts and improving data collection methods to support evidence-based adjustments (Hippe et al., 2016; Koslowski et al., 2015).

Despite its objectives, the ESF+ may also reproduce these disparities. Hermans et al. (2022) noted that previous instruments, such as the ESF and FEAD, benefited poorer Member States only partially, with significant mismatches between resource allocation and actual needs. When assessed against EU poverty thresholds, countries requiring greater support often received less. This reinforces the need for a more needs-based, territorially responsive funding model—particularly relevant when assessing micro-level policies such as E-Family.

These dynamics underline the importance of evaluating not only national policy frameworks but also how interventions are implemented locally. The municipal-level focus of this case study offers insight into how territorial equity—or its absence—materializes on the ground. Building on this perspective, the present analysis investigates whether local access to E-Family vouchers effectively contributes to reducing socio-territorial inequalities.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-quantitative exploratory approach aimed at investigating perceptions, access, and potential impacts of the E-Family Program. Given the limited availability of official evaluation data and the absence of disaggregated municipal-level analyses, the research was designed to generate preliminary evidence through field-based data collection and stakeholder engagement.

1. Case selection: Rome's Municipality IV

The case under investigation is the E-Family Program as implemented in the Lazio region, Italy. This includes all aspects of the program, from its design and funding mechanisms to its implementation and outcomes. Rome's Municipality IV was selected for its relevance as a representative urban context characterized by socio-economic heterogeneity, population aging, and childcare accessibility challenges (Comune di Roma, 2025).

However, due to the lack of external funding, the study was limited to a single municipality. This is acknowledged as a limitation but also positions the work as an exploratory pilot for future research. In fact, with adequate financial and human resources, this framework could be extended to other local contexts, enabling broader evaluations of the E-Family Program's capacity to respond to structural demographic and social needs.

2. Primary and Secondary Data Sources Collection

The data collection process involved a survey distributed in collaboration with several local nursery schools, which voluntarily agreed to share the questionnaire with families. The survey was developed by the authors in line with ESF+ strategic objectives and covered key areas such as awareness of the E-Family Program, application experiences, perceived usefulness, and perceived accessibility barriers. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to allow for quantitative analysis and thematic exploration. In particular, the survey assessed:

1. Awareness of the E-Family Program – How well-informed parents were about eligibility criteria and application processes.
2. Program Accessibility – Whether families found it easy or difficult to apply and whether the support was sufficient to cover nursery costs.
3. Impact on Work-Life Balance – Whether parents experienced an improvement in their ability to balance work and childcare thanks to the program.
4. Financial Support Evaluation – Parents' perception of whether the voucher amount was adequate in relation to the real cost of nursery services.
5. Perceived Long-Term Effects – If and how the E-Family Program influenced their decision to have more children or maintain a stable work-life balance.

The survey was distributed in digital format between 1st of October and the 1st of December 2024. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. In total, 150 valid responses were collected.

Quantitative data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and medians), while open-ended responses were examined through thematic coding following a qualitative approach. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods ensured triangulation and greater interpretative robustness of the results.

The data analysis combined descriptive statistics and qualitative coding to identify emerging patterns related to access, equity, and effectiveness. This mixed-methods approach allowed for the triangulation of findings with official demographic data (ISTAT, 2025) and program documentation, enabling a more comprehensive interpretation of the results.

No personal or sensitive data was collected. Participants provided informed consent, and the study complied with standard ethical research practices in the social sciences.

Besides primary data, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the program's implementation and effects, the following secondary data were analysed:

a) Program guidelines and policy documents outlining the E-Family Program's objectives, eligibility criteria, application process, and available resources were reviewed.
b) Regional Implementation Reports provide detailed information on the allocation of resources, demographics of beneficiaries, and the overall outcomes of the program.
c) ISTAT demographic data on birth rates, fertility rates, and family structures in Italy and the Lazio region have been analysed to assess whether the E-Family Program has had a measurable impact on these indicators.
d) ESF+ Documentation was reviewed to establish the policy framework and funding mechanisms supporting the E-Family Program.
e) Publicly Available Materials, such as press releases, government websites, and media reports about the program, were examined to understand the public perception and awareness of the initiative.

3. Development of a Document Analysis Framework

A structured document analysis framework was developed to systematically review, extract, and categorize key themes from policy documents, program reports, and survey responses.

The documents were analysed using thematic coding techniques aligned with the study's research questions. Emergent themes were grouped according to policy effectiveness, user experience, and territorial equity.

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

The key themes analysed include:

- Program effectiveness (reach, number of beneficiaries, financial adequacy).
- Barriers to access (application challenges, eligibility issues).
- Impact on birth and fertility rates (correlation between voucher use and family planning decisions).
- Disparities in program implementation (variations based on income level and demographic characteristics).

4. Triangulation of Findings
To increase the validity and reliability of the study, a triangulation approach was used by cross-referencing theoretical insights, survey results, and statistical data:

1. Theoretical findings from the literature review, which offered a conceptual basis on family policies, demographic decline, and welfare systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Van Lancker, 2018; Lewis, 1997).
2. Survey results from Municipality IV, providing direct beneficiary experiences on program access, perceived fairness, and actual utility.
3. Demographic and statistical data (ISTAT, 2025),used to explore potential correlations between policy implementation and fertility behaviour.

The triangulation allowed for a cross-validation of qualitative and quantitative findings, reinforcing both internal consistency and external plausibility. This multi-method integration is particularly suited to exploratory research (Stebbins, 2001), as it combines depth and contextual specificity with broader demographic indicators.

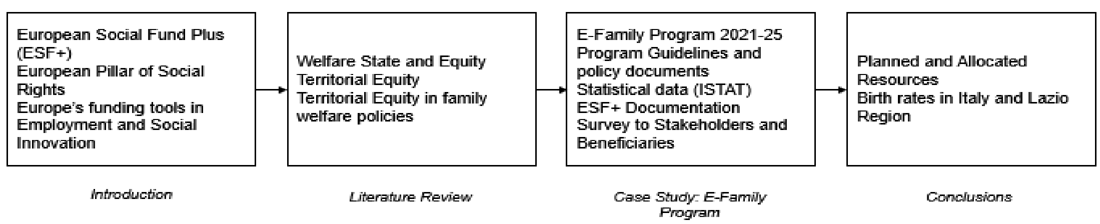

FIGURE 2: Research Flow. Source: Authors' elaboration, 2025.

4. THE E-FAMILY PROGRAM IN LAZIO REGION-ITALY

The E-Family program has been promoted by the Italian Latium Region as the Global Grant for "Service Vouchers for children and non-self-sufficient individuals". Service Vouchers are one of the "Strategic Operations" within the Lazio Region's ESF+ 2021-27 spending program. These operations are key interventions designed to achieve program objectives and are subject to specific monitoring and communication requirements; they can be divided into three sets:

- "Nuovo Fondo Futuro": a financial instrument supporting self-employment through microcredit (Budget: 15 € million).
- "Torno Subito": an initiative promoting specialized training for young people in strategic sectors, including international experiences (Budget: 120 € million).
- "Service Vouchers": a voucher program focusing on work-life balance by providing support for early childhood care and non-self-sufficient individuals (Budget: 40 € million).

The overarching objective of the Global Grant E-Family is to enhance the provision of social and care services available within the regional territory through initiatives that aim to both improve the overall quality of life and facilitate participation in the workforce. The investment in support and

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

development actions for children's services within the Regions represents a strategic area of intervention of ESF+ and it is aligned with the European Commission's Recommendation "Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage" (2013/112/EU).

This Notice aims to address families with minors by ensuring optimal educational, socialization, and inclusion conditions for children. Additionally, it seeks to facilitate work-life balance and support the prerequisites necessary for caregivers, particularly women, to participate in the labour market, as stipulated in the Commission's Recommendation on Active Inclusion (2008/867/EC).The activities outlined in this Notice are part of broader initiatives by the Lazio Region to enhance the accessibility of nursery services, complementing state initiatives (such as the nursery bonus). Specifically, the goal is to target users who cannot access public services due to a lack of availability, absence of services, or incompatibility with their daily needs, thereby having to rely on private services at their own expense.

Regarding the E-Family vouchers, they are designed to support families caring for non-self-sufficient individuals by providing financial assistance for services such as home care and day centres. The desired outcomes to be achieved through the program include:

- Enhancement of Service Quality: Improving the quality of services delivered by care and social services.
- Strengthening of Territorial Health and Social Services: Reinforcing the availability of health and social services at the territorial level.
- Increased Accessibility: Enhancing the accessibility of services across the regional territory.

These objectives are pursued through the instrument of monetary vouchers. They can be used to cover expenses up to €700 per month for 12 months, enhancing the accessibility and quality of social and healthcare services within the region. The incentives could be requested exclusively online through the dedicated platform, requiring ID, residency permit, Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator (ISEE) certificate, and child enrolment documentation. The eligibility criteria for the vouchers were the following:

- Italian citizenship or EU member state citizenship,
- Residence in a municipality within the Lazio region,
- Parental responsibility for the child receiving the service,
- ISEE (Equivalent Financial Situation Indicator) ≤ €60,000.

Applications for service vouchers were excluded following a thorough examination if they were submitted beyond the deadlines, or by individuals who did not meet the eligibility criteria mentioned, or they were prepared in a manner not conforming to the guidelines established in the Public Notice. The approval of submitted applications occurred through a first-come, first-served procedure. The verification process to confirm the presence of required qualifications, as stipulated in this Notice, was conducted in chronological order of submission until the available resources were depleted. In cases of applications being submitted at the same time and insufficient resources, priority was given to the application with the lowest ISEE value.

While the program is formally universal within the Lazio Region, its implementation reveals significant territorial asymmetries. As previous research on voucher-based systems has shown, such policies may unintentionally benefit families with higher social capital and digital literacy, who are better positioned to navigate application procedures and meet documentation requirements (Van Lancker, 2018; Koslowski et al., 2015).

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

The analysis of the E-Family program (2021-2025) highlights important results concerning support for families, equity in the distribution of resources, and the context of demographic challenges, responding to the objectives of the study.

The E-Family program shows a partial ability to support work-life balance, especially for women, thanks to vouchers for nurseries that help reduce the costs of childcare. The amount of funding banned has decreased dramatically in the last year (Figure 1).

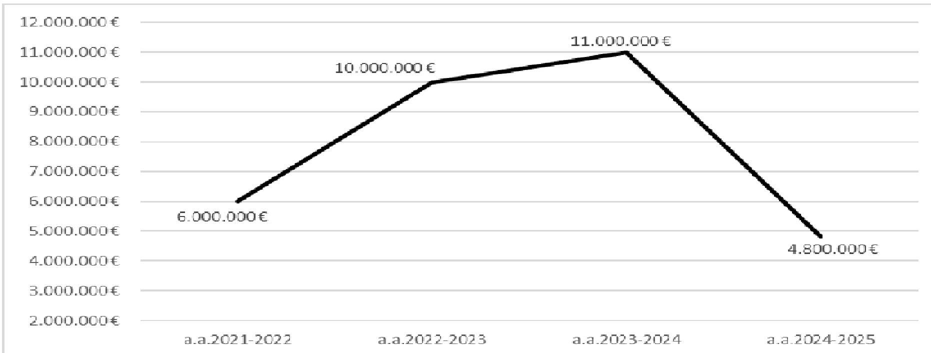

FIGURE 2: Annual funding available for the program. Source: Authors' elaboration, 2025.

In addition, the overall impact is limited by the rapid depletion of available resources. In the 2023 cycle, funds were exhausted within ten days of the opening of the call, covering less than 70% of applications. In 2024, the funds were exhausted in the afternoon of the first day, among many participants, in a "fight for funds". This imbalance between demand and available resources reduces the potential of the program to stimulate female labour market participation and promote wider social inclusion. In addition, households in urban areas have reported better access than those living in rural or peripheral areas, reflecting a disparity in the availability of services.

4.1 Available Resources

Year	Resources	Start of application submission	End of application submission	Service Voucher Monthly Amount
2021-2022	6.000.000,00 €	20/10/2021	30/06/2022	400 €
2021-2022	10.000.000,00 € *	--	--	400 €
2022-2023	10.000.000,00 €	15/12/2022	30/06/2023	400 €
2023-2024	11.000.000,00 €	11/09/2023	28/06/2024	400 €
2024-2025	4.800.000,00 €	26/11/2024	30/06/2025	400 €
2024-2025	7.330.000,00 € *	27/01/2025, 15:00	17/02/2025, 23:59	400 €
Total	**49.130.000,00 €**			

*Integration of further financial resources.
**This is reserved exclusively for individuals who, despite completing registration procedures on November 26, 2024, were unable to submit their applications due to technical issues on the platform that occurred on the same day (EFG, 2025).

TABLE 1: E-Family Resources allocation per year. Source: Authors' elaboration, 2025.

While aiming to ensure equitable access to childcare services, the program has significant distributional justice issues. The use of the ISEE as a selection criterion has created unexpected barriers for some vulnerable households, particularly those with unstable or undocumented incomes.

Moreover, the program is set against a background of persistent demographic decline. Between 2020 and 2023, births in Italy decreased from 404.000 to 379.000, with a similar trend in Lazio, where the numbers fell from 35.000 to 33.000.

Although the program provides crucial support to families with young children, its scope and financial impact are insufficient to significantly influence demographic trends. The limited coverage capacity and exclusion of a significant part of the population reduce the potential of the program as a strategic tool to counter the decline in birth rates in Italy. In fact, as previous research on voucher-based systems has shown, such policies may unintentionally benefit families with higher social capital and digital literacy, who are better positioned to navigate application procedures and meet documentation requirements (Van Lancker, 2018; Koslowski et al., 2015). Participation is influenced by families' socioeconomic status, institutional proximity to services, and familiarity with digital tools.

4.2 Birth Rates in Italy and in Lazio Region

In the last decades, Italy has been following a negative trend in birth and fertility rates. In 2020, Italy's birth rate experienced a notable decline, reaching its lowest level in the post-war period, with a total of 404.104 births recorded (ISTAT, 2025). This decrease reflects a significant demographic trend of declining birth rates in the Country.

According to ISTAT, this phenomenon is partly due to structural changes in the female population of childbearing age (15-49 years), where Italian women are becoming fewer. The baby-boomer generation is exiting the reproductive phase, while younger generations are smaller due to the "baby-bust" period of low fertility between 1976 and 1995. Although immigration partially offset these effects in the 2000s, its positive impact is waning as the foreign resident population ages. Additionally, births within marriages have decreased substantially, with a drop of nearly 204.000 since 2008, partly due to a decline in marriages. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this trend, contributing to a notable decrease in births in 2021 (ISTAT, 2025).

Year	Births (Total)	Fertility Rate (%)	Birth Rate (%)	Children per family (n.)
2020	404.892	1,24	6,8	1,17
2021	400.249	1,25	6,8	1,18
2022	393.333	1,24	6,7	1,18
2023	379.890	1,20	6,4	1,14

TABLE 2: Birth and Fertility Rates in Italy. Source: Authors' elaboration, 2025.

The total fertility rate in Italy is influenced by the timing of childbirth, with women often recovering from postponed births during more favourable periods. This phenomenon was observed between 1995 and the early 2000s, and the modest contribution of births from foreign parents in the South only marginally offset this decline. The overall average age at childbirth increased to 32.5 years, with Italian women giving birth at 33.0 years compared to 29.7 years for foreign women. Since 1995, the average age at childbirth has risen by over two and a half years (ISTAT, 2025).

Economic uncertainty, among expansions and recessions, is also having an influence on birth and fertility rates. For instance, the 2011-2012 sovereign debt crisis caused a 1,5-5% drop in birth rates (Comolli and Vignoli, 2021). At a regional level, fertility patterns vary with socioeconomic factors, with Southern Italy exhibiting relatively stable fertility despite economic disadvantages and Northern Italy being more responsive to economic conditions (Salvati et al., 2020). Looking back to the historical progression, data confirm persistent differences between North, Central, and Southern Italy, including variations in the impact of the 1960s baby boom (Abrami and Sorvillo, 1993).

For what concerns the Lazio Region, the report "Births in Lazio - Year 2021" already presented an analysis of live births in the Lazio region based on maternal, neonatal, and healthcare characteristics, underlining the territorial decline. In 2021, there were 37.460 live births in Lazio, slightly fewer than the 37.773 recorded in 2020, but higher than the 34.292 of 2023. This decline reflected the broader national trend already highlighted by ISTAT reports, with a national rate of 6.8 per 1,000 inhabitants and 6.5 per 1,000 in Lazio, below average.

The E-Family program's Service Vouchers, with a budget of around 40 € million, aim to enhance social and care services in the Lazio Region, aligning with the EU's focus on work-life balance and investment in children. However, juxtaposing this initiative with ISTAT data on declining birth rates in the Region, between 2020 and 2024, reveals a complex dynamic. While the vouchers partially improved quality of life and workforce participation, particularly for women (Shaver & Lewis, 1994), allocating useful resources, birth and fertility rates continued a significant decline. The results are aligned with scholars suggesting that such targeted policies may not directly translate into increased fertility (Van Lancker, 2018).

The program's focus on early childhood care aligns with evidence that early intervention can reduce inequality (Causa & Chapuis, 2009; Hippe et al., 2016) and echoes the EU Commission’s Recommendation on Investing in Children (2013/112/EU). However, the program's success in reversing demographic decline remains uncertain, especially considering findings that higher-income families tend to utilize childcare services more (Van Lancker, 2018), potentially exacerbating existing inequalities in resource allocation. Furthermore, the inverse intervention law (Bywaters et al., 2015; 2018) suggests that the most disadvantaged areas might receive fewer resources relative to their needs, warranting careful monitoring of the E-Family program's implementation to ensure equitable access and impact across the Lazio Region. Therefore, further investigation is needed to assess the program's long-term effects and its capacity to address the multifaceted factors influencing birth rates and social equity, as well as how well the program can deliver on the ESF+ objective of reducing disparities between Member States and Regions.

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

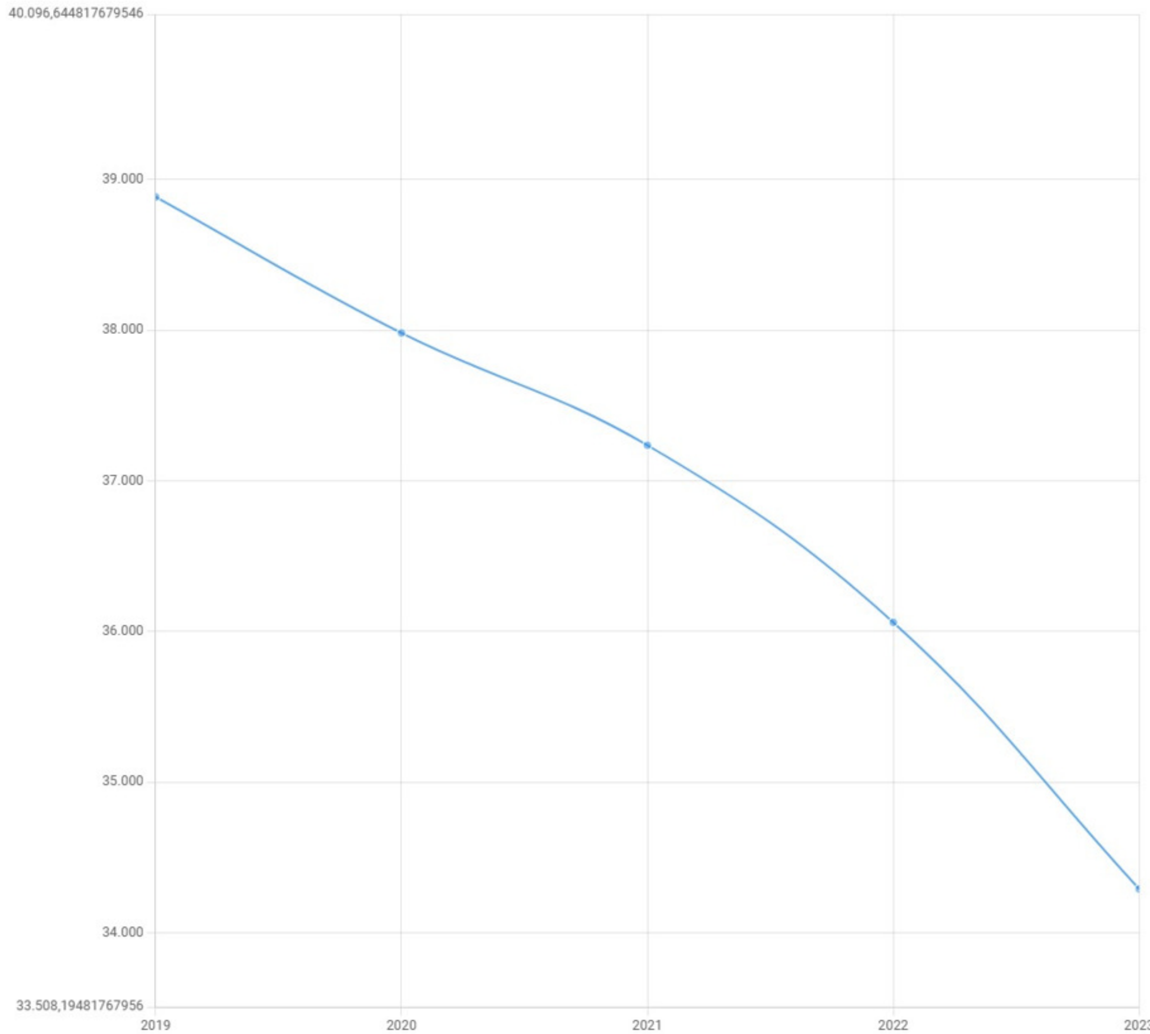

FIGURE 3: Birth and Fertility Rates in Italy (2020-2023). Source: ISTAT, 2025.

5. MUNICIPALITY IV AS A CASE STUDY FOR ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC POLICIES AND SOCIAL SENSITIVITY: RESULTS

The analysis of public policy impact requires the selection of a territorial context that can significantly represent the socio-economic and demographic dynamics of a large city like Rome.
To this end, Municipality IV of Rome was selected as an emblematic case study, offering a complex socio-demographic structure reflective of broader urban dynamics.

Its selection was driven by multiple methodological considerations: 1) demographic aging combined with low birth rates; 2) a multicultural and socio-economically diverse population; and 3) observable disparities in access to public services, particularly in early childhood care. These findings are interpreted considering the theoretical framework on territorial equity, welfare access, and work-family reconciliation.

5.1 Municipality IV: A Representative Demographic Context

With a population of 171,890 residents and an aging index of 215.2, Municipality IV reflects broader demographic patterns observed in urban Europe, including population aging and low fertility rates (Municipality of Rome, 2023) imbalance—over 215 elderly per 100 youth under 14—

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

suggests growing intergenerational pressure on welfare systems, particularly in areas such as childcare, eldercare, and family support. This figure illustrates a progressively aging demographic structure, indicating the need for effective public policies to ensure the well-being of the elderly population and promote generational renewal (ISTAT, 2022).

The local population's average age of 47 years (above the citywide average of 46.6) further confirms its demographic maturity (Municipality of Rome, 2023). These demographic trends make Municipality IV a particularly suitable context for examining the impact of work-life balance and family support policies, which are essential to mitigating fertility decline and supporting generational renewal (ISTAT, 2022; Eurostat, 2021).

As emphasized in European policy discourse, demographic aging and declining birth rates demand targeted public interventions—not only to incentivize fertility, but to ensure equitable access to early childhood services, especially in socially diverse urban settings (European Commission, 2021).

5.2 Social Inclusion and the Presence of Foreign Residents

With 17,761 foreign residents—10.3% of the total population—Municipality IV is among the most multicultural areas of Rome, and the share of non-Italian citizens has increased by 7.6% since 2017(Municipality of Rome, 2023).

This growing diversity raises important questions about how universal welfare measures—such as nursery vouchers—are accessed across ethnic and linguistic lines. In urban areas with complex social structures, formal entitlement often coexists with informal exclusion.

Previous research has shown that access to early childhood education and care is not automatically equitable, even in universalistic systems. Social capital, administrative literacy, and language proficiency remain crucial mediators (Van Lancker & Van der Heede, 2020). Therefore, assessing the E-Family Program within such a multicultural district allows for a critical evaluation of whether equity in policy design translates into equity in policy outcomes.

5.3 Declining Birth Rates and Family Policies

The progressive decline in birth rates observed in Municipality IV mirrors national trends and reflects broader structural challenges facing Italian family policy (ISTAT, 2022).

Such trends emphasize the urgency of effective family support interventions, particularly those aimed at reducing the cost of early childcare and improving work-life balance—core objectives of the E-Family Program (Municipality of Rome, 2023; European Commission, 2021).

Analysing this data allows for an evaluation of the effectiveness of current policies and the identification of potential weaknesses in their impact on young families.

Survey data confirms this pattern: 70% of respondent families report having only one child, citing financial and organizational barriers to expanding their family. This reinforces previous research suggesting that economic insecurity and lack of institutional support influence reproductive decisions (Causa & Chapuis, 2009; Hippe et al., 2016).

While some authors argue that increasing public spending on childcare fosters equality of opportunity and fertility (Hippe et al., 2016), others caution that financial instruments alone—such as vouchers—may not be sufficient to shift demographic trends (Van Lancker, 2018).

In this context, Municipality IV provides an opportunity to explore whether targeted local interventions can influence demographic behaviour or whether broader structural changes are required.

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

5.4 Socio-Economic Conditions and Access to Services

Socio-economic fragmentation within Municipality IV—marked by a juxtaposition of affluent areas and zones of pronounced economic vulnerability—plays a central role in shaping both the demand for, and the accessibility of, public services (Municipality of Rome, 2023).

Key indicators such as the economic dependency ratio (57.2) and uneven public service distribution underscore these disparities, with peripheral zones often lacking adequate infrastructure and institutional support. This data helps study the equity of public resource allocation and verify whether interventions are effectively targeted at reducing socio-economic inequalities (Arts & Gelissen, 2002).

This spatial inequality reflects what Bywaters et al. (2018) describe as the "inverse intervention law," whereby the areas with the greatest need frequently receive the least institutional attention and resources. In Municipality IV, such dynamics risk undermining the equity goals of programs like E-Family.

These findings are consistent with Pinto and Gonçalves (2023), who argue that territorial equity is increasingly determined by the territorialization of income-conditioned policies.

Without robust mechanisms to account for these local imbalances, even well-intentioned welfare programs risk reinforcing pre-existing inequalities—a concern already raised in broader European debates on cohesion and social investment (Zuindeau, 2005; Dabinett, 2017).

5.5 Female Employment and Labour Policies

Municipality IV offers a relevant context to explore the intersection between female employment and the accessibility of family support services. The participation of women in the labour market is substantial, but tensions between work responsibilities and care needs remain significant—especially for mothers of young children.

As Lewis (1997) argued in her theory of the gender contract, care responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on women, and without adequate public provision, this imbalance directly affects their economic autonomy.

Survey data support this view: while 68.4% of mothers in the sample work full-time, 15.8% report being unable to balance employment with childcare responsibilities. Moreover, 70% of respondents feel unsupported in managing work-family demands, citing rigid work schedules, insufficient flexibility, and the high cost of childcare as primary barriers. (Van Lancker, 2018; European Commission, 2021). In this light, the E-Family Program's contribution to female labour participation appears limited in practice, constrained by barriers in both the design and delivery of services. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for evaluating gender equality outcomes but also for assessing the redistributive effectiveness of local welfare interventions in achieving inclusive growth.

5.6 Survey on the E-Family Program in Rome's IV Municipality: Access, Support, and Work-Family Balance

The survey conducted at a partnered nursery school in Rome's IV Municipality, based on 102 interviews, analysed the equity of access to the E-Family program, the support provided to families, and the challenges in balancing work and family life. The findings highlight significant shortcomings in the program's effectiveness, both in terms of accessibility and its impact on birth rate support.

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

1. Family Structure and Access to Nursery Services
The data reveal that 90% of surveyed families rely on paid nursery services, indicating that private or semi-private solutions remain the dominant childcare model despite available public programs.

Among them, 80% are dual-income households and 85% fall within an ISEE range of €20,001–€30,000—highlighting a segment of the population that, while not at the poverty level, still experiences significant cost burdens.

These findings underscore a critical mismatch between the socio-economic profile of working families and the affordability of nursery services. They confirm literature that emphasizes the persistent gap between formal access and effective use of services (Van Lancker, 2018; Koslowski et al., 2015).

2. Support from the E-Family Program
Awareness of the E-Family Program was relatively high (80%), but only 30% of families completed the application process—and a mere 6% succeeded during the first window.

Technical barriers were prevalent: nearly 70% were unable to complete registration on the platform, while others reported difficulties submitting applications (6.9%) or gathering required documentation (3%). Among those who succeeded in registering, 6.9% encountered difficulties submitting their application. Additionally, 3% of respondents struggled to gather the required documentation.

Families often relied on informal support networks—including other parents, nursery administrators, and local associations—to navigate the process.

Nursery administrators and local associations also played a crucial role in supporting families in accessing information and resources.

Despite procedural obstacles, 66.7% of families considered the program essential to accessing early education services. Yet 83.3% called for additional financial aid, and 71.4% criticized the eligibility and application process as unfair—especially during the second window, which many felt favoured families with more time or knowledge.

These perceptions echo structural critiques of welfare access, where bureaucratic complexity and digital literacy gaps lead to "hidden exclusion"—a phenomenon well documented in early childhood policy research (Koslowski et al., 2015; Van Lancker, 2018).

3. Suggestions for Improving Family Support Policies
Families consistently emphasized the need for greater transparency and communication from institutions. Many requested that nursery costs already sustained at the time of application be considered in voucher disbursement, highlighting a disconnection between policy timing and family financial planning.

Respondents also advocated for the structural integration of nurseries into the public education system, rather than relying on fragmented voucher schemes—a suggestion aligned with recent calls for universal, stable childcare systems (Van Lancker & Van der Heede, 2020).

These inputs reflect not just dissatisfaction, but a clear demand for a systemic shift—from reactive assistance to proactive, rights-based family policies.

4. Work-Family Balance
As of early 2025, 68.4% of mothers in the sample were employed full-time and 15.8% part-time. Yet an equal proportion—15.8%—reported that balancing employment and childcare was unmanageable.

Overall, 70% of mothers felt unsupported in managing their dual roles. Barriers cited include rigid work hours (57.9%), lack of workplace flexibility (47.4%), and insufficient family or external support (60%). Families overwhelmingly report the high cost of childcare services as a major barrier, further restricting their ability to access reliable childcare solutions.

This confirms that work-family reconciliation remains structurally weak—dependent not just on individual effort, but on the broader availability of institutional and informal supports.

The persistence of these barriers, despite active employment, suggests that work-life balance policies have yet to close the implementation gap. As highlighted by Lewis (1997), formal measures do not dismantle the gendered division of care unless paired with systemic change.

These findings strengthen the call for localized monitoring of welfare policies and the creation of flexible, inclusive tools that respond to actual family needs.

In this sense, pilot initiatives like this survey can inform broader evaluations of equity and social justice within local welfare regimes.

6. DISCUSSION
The findings of this study provide new insights into the functioning and limitations of the E-Family Program within the broader framework of welfare and family policies in Italy. The rapid depletion of financial resources and the unequal territorial distribution of vouchers confirm structural weaknesses already discussed in the literature on welfare state retrenchment and childcare accessibility. However, by examining these dynamics at the municipal level, our analysis highlights how macro-level trends are experienced differently across local contexts, with implications for both families and service providers.

Importantly, the study shows that while childcare vouchers can facilitate work–care reconciliation, they appear insufficient to influence fertility decisions in a meaningful way. This finding aligns with previous research on the limited demographic impact of short-term or monetary measures (Van Lancker, 2018) and suggests that more integrated, long-term policies are required. From a theoretical perspective, the results underscore the need to bridge macro approaches to welfare state typologies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lewis, 1997) with micro-level evidence that captures the heterogeneity of family experiences across territories. In this sense, the case of Rome's IV Municipality illustrates how administrative design and local implementation strongly condition the actual impact of welfare measures.

Beyond the Italian case, the findings echo current EU-level debates on demographic sustainability and the restructuring of welfare systems. The European Commission's Demography Reports have repeatedly emphasized that financial transfers alone are insufficient to reverse declining fertility trends, calling for integrated approaches that combine affordable childcare, parental leave, and gender equality measures. In this regard, the limited demographic impact of the E-Family Program corroborates concerns that voucher schemes, while mitigating immediate financial barriers, fail to address structural determinants such as unstable labour markets, insufficient parental leave provisions, and persistent gendered expectations of caregiving.

The discussion also highlights the tension between fragmented, short-term policy instruments and the long-term objectives of demographic resilience and social cohesion. This resonates with scholarship emphasizing the ongoing transition of European welfare regimes towards service-oriented and multidimensional models (Daly & Ferragina, 2018; Saraceno & Keck, 2010). By providing localized empirical evidence, the present study illustrates the shortcomings of narrowly targeted programs and the necessity of embedding family support within a broader welfare architecture that integrates financial, cultural, and structural interventions.

Taken together, these findings advance the literature by showing that the effectiveness of welfare policies cannot be assessed solely in terms of financial provision or uptake rates. Instead, their success depends on the interplay between funding design, territorial equity, cultural norms, and institutional coordination. The E-Family case thus offers a lens through which to better understand how European welfare systems might evolve to confront the dual challenge of supporting families and ensuring demographic sustainability.

6.1 Academic Implications

This study contributes to the academic debate on welfare and family policies by providing empirical evidence at the micro-territorial level. While most research on childcare vouchers and family support programs has focused on national or regional frameworks, the analysis of a single municipal case highlights the heterogeneous ways in which families experience welfare interventions. By linking macro-level theories of welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lewis, 1997) with micro-level findings, the paper advances understanding of how policy design interacts with local dynamics of accessibility, gender roles, and demographic behaviour. The results, therefore, enrich the literature on social policy implementation, territorial equity, and demographic sustainability.

6.2 Practical Implications

Beyond the academic sphere, the study offers insights for practitioners involved in childcare provision and family support services. For municipal authorities and nursery networks, the findings point to the need for clearer communication, transparent eligibility criteria, and mechanisms that prevent unequal access caused by administrative bottlenecks or fund exhaustion. For employers and service providers, the results underscore the importance of integrating childcare support with broader measures promoting work–life balance, including flexible working arrangements and corporate welfare initiatives.

6.3 Policy Recommendations

From a policy perspective, the evidence points to several strategic areas for improvement. First, adequate and stable funding is essential to prevent rapid resource depletion and ensure program continuity (Blessett, 2019). Second, territorial equity must be addressed by allocating resources based on socio-economic needs, particularly in marginalized and peripheral areas, and by adapting program design to local specificities (Frederickson, 2015). Third, selection criteria should be revised to better target the most vulnerable families, incorporating both economic and social indicators to promote inclusion and reduce inequality (Frederickson, 2015). Lastly, governance and coordination need to be strengthened across all institutional levels—EU, regional authorities, municipalities, service providers, and the Third Sector—to ensure coherent implementation and responsiveness to families' needs (UNDP, 2012).

By prioritizing these interventions, the program can move closer to its demographic and social equity objectives, contributing to a more sustainable and inclusive welfare model in the Lazio region.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

While the study offers novel contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The empirical analysis is based on a single municipal case study, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. The survey sample, although valuable, may not fully capture the diversity of voucher applicants across the region, and the reliance on self-reported data raises potential issues of response bias. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal data prevents an assessment of long-term impacts on fertility and employment patterns. These limitations suggest caution in extrapolating the results and highlight the need for complementary studies.

At the same time, the study's focus on a single municipality—grounded in direct local engagement and enabled by voluntary collaboration with nursery schools—also represents one of its strengths. It illustrates the potential of small-scale, bottom-up research to inform equity-oriented welfare design. With adequate financial and human resources, similar investigations could be extended to other urban contexts, generating comparative insights for national and European policymaking.

7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

This study has examined the E-Family Program as a case to understand how locally implemented welfare measures influence territorial equity in early childhood services. Using Rome's Municipality IV, the analysis shows that access—despite the program's universal design—is stratified by socio-economic status, digital literacy, and familiarity with institutional procedures. Survey data reveal a significant gap between awareness and participation: although 80% of families knew about the program, only 30% successfully applied. Procedural and technical barriers disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, reflecting broader concerns about the mismatch between policy intent and delivery in contexts shaped by institutional fragmentation and digital inequality (Koslowski et al., 2015; Van Lancker, 2018).

Promoting territorial equity thus requires more than financial tools; it calls for redesigning accessibility, service delivery, and communication strategies based on local conditions. The E-Family Program has the potential to evolve into a tool for social inclusion—if embedded within integrated and territorially informed welfare policies.

By situating the analysis within a clearly defined local setting, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how welfare programs shape urban life and social well-being. It offers evidence-based insights for improving family support, labour policies, and social inclusion strategies at multiple governance levels.

The data also raises broader questions about the program's social impact. Despite its family-support goals, structural limitations—such as high childcare costs, rigid work environments, and weak support networks—continue to hinder work-family reconciliation, particularly for women. Notably, 10% of mothers reported being perceived as less suitable employees due to parenthood, highlighting persistent workplace discrimination and gendered career constraints.

These findings challenge assumptions about individual reproductive choices. The prevalence of single-child families may reflect not preference, but constrained decisions shaped by economic and structural pressures. Addressing these barriers is critical to evaluating whether policies like E-Family genuinely influence fertility behaviours.

Overall, the study shows that while vouchers can assist in balancing work and care responsibilities, they are insufficient alone to reverse fertility decline. A localized analytical lens reveals the complex interaction between program design, territorial inequality, and family behaviours. Future research should expand this approach across multiple municipalities, adopt longitudinal methods to assess long-term demographic outcomes, and investigate how financial incentives interact with cultural norms and labour market dynamics. Such work is essential to inform more integrated and sustainable family policy at national and European levels.

8. REFERENCES

Abrami, V. T., & Sorvillo, M. P. (1993). La fécondité en Italie et danssesrégions: Analyse par période et par génération. *Population (French edition)*, 48(3), 735–751. https://doi.org/10.2307/1534103.

Andrews, R., Beynon, M. J., & McDermott, A. (2019). Configurations of new public management reforms and the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of public healthcare systems: A fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis. *Public Management Review, 21*(8), 1236–1260. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2018.1561927.

Arts, W., & Gelissen, J. (2002). Three worlds of welfare capitalism or more? A state-of-the-art report. *Journal of European Social Policy, 12*(2), 137–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952872002012002114.

Bachtler, J., & Polverari, L. (2007). *Territorial cohesion and the European model of society*. In Delivering territorial cohesion: European cohesion policy and the European model of society. Routledge.

Barth, E., Reisel, L., & MisjeØstbakken, K. (2024). The equality hurdle: Resolving the welfare state paradox. *Work, Employment and Society, 38*(3), 766–786. https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170231155293.

Bogie, J., Bezzina, C., Lunan, C., Mercer, S., & Blane, D. (2024). What interventions have addressed the inverse care law in general practice in Scotland over the last 20 years? A systematics coping review. *British Journal of General Practice, 74*(Suppl 1). https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp24x737529.

Briggs, A. (1961). The welfare state in historical perspective. *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie, 2*(2), 221–258. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975600000412.

Bywaters, P., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Daniel, B., Featherstone, B., Jones, C., & Webb, C. (2018). Inequalities in English child protection practice under austerity: A universal challenge? *Child & Family Social Work, 23*(1), 53–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12383.

Castles, F. (1989). Welfare and equality in capitalist societies: How and why Australia was different. In *Australian welfare: Historical sociology* (pp. 56–73). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11081-0_3.

Causa, O., & Chapuis, C. (2009). Equity in student achievement across OECD countries: An investigation of the role of policies. *OECD Economics Department Working Papers, 708*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/223056645650.

Cepiku, D., & Mastrodascio, M. (2021). Equity in public services: A systematic literature review. *Public Administration Review, 81*(6), 1019–1032. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13402.

Charbonneau, E., & Riccucci, N. M. (2008). Beyond the usual suspects: An analysis of the performance measurement literature on social equity indicators in policing. *Public Performance & Management Review, 31*(4), 604–620. https://doi.org/10.2753/PMR153-9576310405.

Comolli, C. L., & Vignoli, D. (2021). Spreading uncertainty, shrinking birthrates: A natural experiment for Italy. *European Sociological Review, 37*(4), 555–570. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcab001.

International Journal of Business Research Management (IJBRM)
ISSN: 2180-2165, https://www.cscjournals.org/journals/IJBRM/description.php

Dabinett, G. (2017). The territorial dimension of EU policies and spatial inequalities. In *Uncovering the territorial dimension of European Union cohesion policy* (pp. 44–60). Routledge.

Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU. (2019). *Official Journal of the European Union, L 188*, 79–93.

Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton University Press.

European Commission. (2021). *Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)*. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1057.

European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2021). Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013. *Official Journal of the European Union, L 231*, 21–59.

Harris, B. (2018). *The origins of the British welfare state: Society, state and social welfare in England and Wales, 1800–1945*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Hermans, K., Greiss, J., Delanghe, H., & Cantillon, B. (2023). Delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights: Towards a needs-based distribution of the European social funds? *Social Policy & Administration, 57*(4), 464–480. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12879.

Hippe, R., Araújo, L., & da Costa, P. D. (2016). *Equity in education in Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union.

ISTAT. (2022). *Rapporto annuale sulla popolazione italiana*. ISTAT.

Koslowski, A., McLean, C., & Naumann, I. K. (2015). Report on incentive structures of parents' use of particular childcare forms. Families And Societies Project.

Legislative Decree No. 105 of 30 June 2022. (2022). *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, Serie Generale, 176*.

Lewis, J. (1993). *Women and social policies in Europe: Work, family and the state*. Edward Elgar.

Lewis, J. (1997). Gender and welfare regimes: Furtherthoughts. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 4*(2), 160–177. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/4.2.160.

Monedero, P. J. A. (2019). Family laws in the European Union. *Socialinė Teorija, Empirija, PolitikaIrPraktika, 19*, 87–94. https://doi.org/10.15388/STEPP.2019.13.

Moreno, L., & McEwen, N. (2005). Exploring the territorial politics of welfare. In *The territorial politics of welfare* (pp. 1–40). Routledge.

Municipality of Rome. (2023). *Annuario statistico 2023*. Roma Capitale.

Neyer, G. (2003). Family policies and lowfertility in Western Europe. *Discussion Papers, 2003-021*. Institute of EconomicResearch, Hitotsubashi University.

Oppido, S., Ragozino, S., & Esposito De Vita, G. (2023). Peripheral, marginal, or non-core areas? Setting the context to deal with territorial in equalities through a systematic literature review. *Sustainability, 15*(13), 10401. https://doi.org/10.3390/su151310401.

Osman, F. A., & Bennett, S. (2018). Political economy and quality of primary health service in rural Bangladesh and the United States of America: A comparative analysis. *Journal of International Development, 30*(5), 818–836. https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3343.

Phibbs, S., Kenney, C., Rivera-Munoz, G., Huggins, T. J., Severinsen, C., & Curtis, B. (2018). The inverse response law: Theory and relevance to the aftermath of disasters. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 15*(5), 916. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15050916.

Pinto, A. F., & Gonçalves, H. (2023). European tendencies of territorialization of income conditional policies to insertion: Systematic and narrative review. *Societies, 13*(8), 185. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13080185.

Prandini, R. (2006). Framing Europe: L'emergere di un welfare state attivo mother-friendly e le sue conseguenze per la famiglia. *Sociologia e Politiche Sociali, 9*(1), 1000–1040.

Salvati, L., Benassi, F., Miccoli, S., Rabiei-Dastjerdi, H., & Matthews, S. A. (2020). Spatial variability of total fertility rate and crude birth rate in a low-fertility country: Patterns and trends in regional and local scale heterogeneity across Italy, 2002–2018. *AppliedGeography, 124*, 102321. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2020.102321.

Saraceno, C. (2011). Family and the welfare state in Europe: Intergenerational relations in ageing societies. *International Review of Sociology, 21*(3), 601–602. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2011.625671.

Smith, H. K., Harper, P. R., & Potts, C. N. (2013). Bicriteria efficiency/equity hierarchical location models for public service application. *Journal of the Operational Research Society, 64*(4), 500–512. https://doi.org/10.1057/jors.2012.68.

Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *Exploratory research in the social sciences* (Vol. 48). Sage.

Van Lancker, W. (2018). Reducing inequality in childcare service use across European countries: What (ifany) is the role of social spending? *Social Policy & Administration, 52*(1), 271–292. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12311.

Van Lancker, W., & Van denHeede, A. (2021). Economic equality and the welfare state. In *Equality: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 199–230). Springer.

Van Lancker, W., & Van derHeede, S. (2020). Social policies and child poverty eduction: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Social Policy, 49*(3), 487–506. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279419000724.

Wang, H., Mu, R., & Liu, S. (2018). The effects of privatisation on the equity of public services: Evidence from China. *Policy &Politics, 46*(3), 427–443. https://doi.org/10.1332/030557317X14938075758967.

Webb, C., Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., McCartan, C., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., & Morris, K. (2020). Untangling child welfare inequalities and the 'inverse intervention law' in England.

Children and Youth Services Review, 111, 104849. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104849.

Wildowicz-Szumarska, A. (2022). Is redistributive policy of EU welfare state effective in tackling income inequality? A panel data analysis. *Equilibrium: Quarterly Journal of Economics and Economic Policy, 17*(1), 81–101. https://doi.org/10.24136/eq.2022.004.

Zuindeau, B. (2005). Équité territoriale: Quelleslectures par lesthéoriesdudéveloppementdurable? *Reflets et Perspectives de la Vie Économique, 44*(4), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.3917/rpve.444.0005

Municipality of Rome, IV District. (2025, September 15). *Municipio IV*. Retrieved from https://comune.roma.it/web/it/municipio-iv.page.

E-Family SG. (2025, February 25). *E-Family Program website*. Retrieved from https://efamilysg.it/.

European Commission. (2025, February 25). *European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)*. Retrieved from https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en.

Regione Lazio. (2025, February 25). *Rapporti salute materno-infantile*. Retrieved from https://regione.lazio.it/enti/salute/salute-materno-infantile/rapporti.

United Nations. (2025, February 25). *Sustainable Development Goals*. Retrieved from https://sdgs.un.org/goals.