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*Matteo Moscatelli, Elisabetta Carrà, Chiara Ferrari*

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### **1. Author information**

*Matteo Moscatelli*

Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

*Elisabetta Carrà*

Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

*Chiara Ferrari*

Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

### **2. Author e-mail address**

*Matteo Moscatelli*

E-mail: [matteo.moscatelli@unicatt.it](mailto:matteo.moscatelli@unicatt.it)

*Elisabetta Carrà*

E-mail: [elisabetta.carra@unicatt.it](mailto:elisabetta.carra@unicatt.it)

*Chiara Ferrari*

E-mail: [chiara.ferrari1@unicatt.it](mailto:chiara.ferrari1@unicatt.it)

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# *Government Support, Active Participation of Families and Optimistic Vision of the Future During the COVID-19 Emergency: Results of a Longitudinal Research Study<sup>1</sup>*

Matteo Moscatelli,\* Elisabetta Carrà,\*\* Chiara Ferrari\*\*\*

Corresponding author:  
Matteo Moscatelli  
E-mail: [matteo.moscatelli@unicatt.it](mailto:matteo.moscatelli@unicatt.it)

## **Abstract**

The emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the Italian government to run the risk of strengthening a welfare regime which is still too widespread and that delegates to families the answers to social needs, taking for granted their willingness to act. Through data from the first and second waves of a longitudinal research project entitled ‘The family at the time of COVID-19’ (W1, N=2,985; W2, N=2,191), it has been possible to highlight a certain disagreement on the capacity of the government to support families effectively during the most critical period of the pandemic in Italy (March–April 2020) and when the pandemic was less rampant (July 2020), despite entrusting these families with several crucial tasks and functions. Data from both waves also show that feeling supported by the government as a family is closely related to an optimistic vision of the future and the belief in the possibility that families can contribute to social change. These results suggest that participants are

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<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of the joint reflection of the three authors; however, in order to attribute authorship to the parts, the introduction and the concluding remarks were jointly authored; the paragraph 2 was written by Chiara Ferrari, the paragraph 3 by Matteo Moscatelli, the paragraph 4 by Elisabetta Carrà.

\* Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0003-2339-9651.

\*\* Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0001-8339-0400.

\*\*\* Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy. ORCID: 0000-0003-1433-571X.

geared to a subsidiary welfare regime, in which families, with support from the government, play a crucial role as agents of social change.

Keywords: COVID-19, family impact lens, subsidiarity.

## 1. Introduction

The pandemic crisis we are experiencing is a paradigmatic phenomenon that demonstrates the relevance of social relations: on the one hand it has unequivocally highlighted the inconsistency of individual boundaries, and on the other, the interconnection of multiple areas of social life. It is precisely this complexity that also makes it difficult to determine the effects of the actions put in place to counter the harmful consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in the health and economic sectors. It has become clear that as an individualistic attitude, a perverse effect of the individualisation processes typical of so-called reflexive modernity (Beck et al., 1994; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) could have caused serious damage to the population; and it was only when every citizen realised that all of their actions would have an impact not only on themselves, but on the whole community, that society began the path out of the emergency.

Among social relations, however, there is one that has suddenly taken on an essential and paradigmatic role to ensure the continuity of certain activities essential for the functioning of the social system: it is the *family*, which in particular during the first lockdown (the hardest one in Italy<sup>1</sup>) proved, for better or for worse, to be the only social context for most citizens. Without warning, it has simultaneously become a place for work, school, sport, play, leisure, and affection: the boundaries between individual experiences have shown their inconsistency and the inextricable interweaving between the lives of all family members has been revealed.

In this sense, the pandemic crisis has only brought to light the mostly unrecognised essence of family relationships: families constantly try to combine rights and obligations, expectations, needs, and time for all of their members, with the aim of balancing them in a way satisfactory to all (Donati, 2012; Rossi, Carrà, 2016). While in the past the Italian family model was described as ‘familist’ (Banfield, 1958), indicating the perverse tendency to protect first of all

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<sup>1</sup> The first lockdown in Italy due to COVID-19 began on 9 March and ended on 2 May, 2021. The Dpcm of 9 March 2020 established that schools of all types and levels had to close everywhere, mobility between regions was prohibited, and self-certification was necessary to travel. Schools had to use remote teaching methods for the entire duration of the suspension.

the interests of one's family over those of society, today more recent studies have shown that familism is mostly linked to the tendency of the state to delegate to the family the solution for most of the problems affecting its members (from the care of the weakest to the economic protection of young people). Saraceno (2016) distinguishes different forms through which this 'vocation' of the family is supported in the public sphere and identifies 'default familism' among others, which the state takes for granted, without recognising, however, that it is the family that does most of the above tasks, thus making family welfare the hinge of the Italian social state. The burden of this welfare and the mediation between subjective and intersubjective rights falls more on women, who therefore remain scarcely represented in the labour market. Many also abandon their jobs at the birth of their children (Mazzucchelli, 2014; Naldini, Saraceno, 2011; Saraceno, 2003). Forced cohabitation during the lockdowns allowed all family members to be more aware of the daily organisational challenge, which in a sense became more complicated, causing people to become more agile, thanks to a massive use of what has been improperly called 'smartworking' which has mainly been homeworking (Mazzucchelli, Bosoni, Medina, 2020): while the former had already shown its full potential as a resource for the reconciliation of family and work times (Manzi, Mazzucchelli, 2020), the latter, not linked to a clear plan of how to carry out professional activity, is much more difficult to reconcile with the rest of the activities subsumed within the family at home. In essence, during the pandemic the family was able to reveal its nature as a *sui generis social relationship*, different from all the other relational contexts in which people are involved: in fact, families have the task of protecting the well-being of all members, free of charge (Rossi, Carrà, 2016).

The health emergency, however, has in a sense forced institutions not to abuse family welfare; that is, the traditional willingness of Italian families to act as social shock absorbers. From the early stages of the pandemic, measures were put in place in order to facilitate families in carrying out the crucial task of 'moving things forward', despite the lockdown: the 'Decreto Cura Italia', the 'Decreto Rilancio', and the 'Decreto Agosto' have instituted extraordinary leave for parents, bonuses for the purchase of babysitting services, and mandatory smartworking (where possible) for parents with children up to 14 years old.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> D.L. 18/2020 (decree 'Cura Italia'); D.L. 34/2020 ('Relaunch' decree) also instituted extraordinary leave to parents, bonuses for the purchase of babysitting services and mandatory smartworking (where possible) for parents with children up to 14 years of age. Information on the measures implemented by the government can be found here: [Le misure del Governo a sostegno delle famiglie italiane - Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze \(mef.gov.it\)](https://www.mef.gov.it/le-misure-del-governo-a-sostegno-delle-famiglie-italiane)

On the basis of the above considerations, a number of questions have arisen to which the survey presented here offers exploratory and general answers as well as providing the basis for further study. On the one hand, the question was raised as to whether the families felt supported by the Italian government through the measures listed above; on the other hand, it seemed important to examine how aware families are of being a crucial resource for the common good. In both aspects – government support for families and their awareness of being a social entity crucial for change – the basic idea of a welfare model, based on the principle of subsidiarity, is recognisable. As is well known, this principle is a guiding rule of the European Union, which applies it to the regulation of relations between social actors (public authorities, the market, third sector organisations, and families) in so-called plural welfare (Donati, 2009; Lodigiani, Pesenti, 2014). This plural welfare stipulates that higher-level bodies (in this case the government) must support those at a lower level (third sector organisations, citizens, and families), so that they can actively carry out their specific functions moving away from a substitute and disabling logic. For this principle to be implemented, families must be involved in a policy co-design and co-production strategy (Connolly, White, Satka, 2017; Prandini, 2018), and they must be given the capability (Nussbaum, Sen, 1993) of being fundamental actors in social morphogenesis (Archer, 2003).

This article analyses whether feeling supported by the government and being recognised as subjects able to contribute significantly to the common good were linked to a positive vision of the future by families. Connecting a positive vision of the future not only with feeling supported by the government, but also with confidence in the possibility for families to influence social life could be a hint about the logic of subsidiarity. In fact on the one hand it entails that civil society actors (in this case families) are asked to contribute to the building of a common good, and on the other, that the state recognises their irreplaceable contribution and leaves them free to act, at the same time as guaranteeing the resources to carry out this task.

In the present study, preliminary answers are given to these questions, based on data from the first and second wave of a longitudinal research which was conducted on a representative sample of the Italian population. From a social and psychological point of view, this study aimed to describe the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on the family experience.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1 Participants and procedures

This study is part of a larger longitudinal research project entitled ‘The family at the time of COVID-19’, carried out by the Family Studies and Research University Centre of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan and which was conducted in collaboration with the Human Highway Society. The multidisciplinary research team included both sociologists and psychologists. The research included a sample (W1, N = 2,985; W2, N = 2,191) representative of the Italian population who had access to the Internet at least once a week and who were between 18 and 85 years of age (corresponding to about 40 million Italians), distributed homogeneously by sex and region of residence. Human Highway conducted the data collection through an online questionnaire, conceived by the University Centre team.<sup>3</sup> The data were collected in wave 1 (W1) from 30 March to 7 April, during the phase of the first lockdown in Italy, while data from the second wave were collected in July 2020 (W2). A third wave of data collection is scheduled for May 2021. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of the Catholic University of Milan (protocol number 15-20).

Among respondents in W1 women accounted for 65.6% (N=1,965) and men 34.4% (N =1,031). Overall, 9.5% of the research participants were between 18 and 24 years of age, 17.1% were between the ages of 24 and 34, 22.6% were aged from 35 to 44, 24.3% from 45 to 54, 16.5% from 55 to 64, and only 10.0% were over 65. In addition, 55.7% of participants were parents, 22% of these parents have more than one child, 80% of them lived with their child(s) during lockdown. In total, 28.7% of the participants resided in regions of the north west, 16.8% in the north east, 21% in the centre and 33.4% in the south and islands. The respondents who participated at W2 consisted of 65.8% (N = 1,442) women and 34.2% men (N = 749). The number of young people aged 18 to 24 was 2.1% and had dropped compared to W1. Overall, 18.1% were between the ages of 24 and 34, 31.4% were from 35 to 44 years old, 29.5% were from 45 to 54, 13.9% were from 55 to 64, and only 5% were over 65. The percentage of parents (56.2%) at W2 was similar to W1 and 87.1% of these parents were living with their children during July 2020. The geographical distribution of respondents at W2 was almost the same as W1 (28.7% of

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<sup>3</sup> The Human Highway Society is a research company that extracts samples from OpLine panels of individuals representative of the Italian population with an Internet user.

participants came from the north west, 16.8% from the north east, 21.0% from the centre, and 33.4 % from the south).

## **2.2 Measures**

### *2.2.1 Family Impact Scale*

For the purposes of this research, an ad hoc scale was developed to analyse the views of the interviewees on the ability of the Italian government to support families during the emergency. This scale is based on the Family Impact Lens, a model developed by the Family Impact Institute of Purdue University (Indiana, US), in the 1980s (Bogenschneider et al., 2012). This started from an assumption that can be summarised by this statement of Bronfenbrenner: ‘The family is the most powerful, most humane and, by far, cheapest system ever known for the construction of skills and character’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1986: 4). Therefore, according to this approach, public policies must support families, so that this crucial function for social wellbeing is facilitated and supported: families, in fact, perform better in a *family-friendly environment*—one in which, for example, schools actively seek parental involvement; employers recognise that workers are also family members; services are *family-centred* in their culture and functioning; and legislation supports the roles of family members such as caregivers, parents, partners, and workers.

Through the analysis of a large amount of research (Morris et al., 2008), the Family Impact Institute was able to identify the best strategies to achieve the goal of a positive impact on families, by developing the *five evidence-based principles* of the Family Impact Lens.

1. *Responsibility*. Policies and services should not replace families but rather lay the foundations for their autonomy, also in terms of a focus on balancing family–work rhythms (Hawkins, Ooms, 2012).
2. *Stability*. Given the risks linked to family instability, including in terms of social costs and the fallout from non-productivity, policies and services should aim to promote stability, including by supporting the family in critical transitions of its life cycle (Hawkins, Ooms, 2012).
3. *Support for family relationships*. Family relationships should be supported, even if weak, in terms of communication skills and empathy, problem solving and conflict resolution skills, parenting skills (Miller et al., 2000; Walsh, 2002) as an essential resource for combining the needs of family members.
4. *Diversity*. Policies and services must take account of differences (cultural, socio-economic, structural, etc.) by seeking to avoid or reduce disparities attributable to them which may adversely affect family functioning (McGoldrick, Carter, 2003).



5. *Involvement*. Families must be actively involved in the design and implementation of the interventions (Dunst, Trivette, Hamby, 2007; Walsh, 2002) and the establishment of family networks should be promoted, in which families experience their ability to find independent answers to their problems (Carrà, 2018).

The five principles were translated into a 5-dimension scale which was included in the questionnaire (Carrà, Moscatelli, Ferrari, 2020) describing the perception of received Government support:

- 1) The decisions taken by the government have supported the responsibilities of family members.
- 2) The decisions taken by the government have helped family members not to come into conflict with each other.
- 3) The decisions taken by the government have helped families to strike a balance between the needs of all members.
- 4) The decisions taken by the government have taken account of the different needs of families, with support suitable for different situations.
- 5) The government has listened to the needs of families in making decisions.

The interviewees were asked: 'We now present you with phrases related to the decisions made by the government starting from the onset of the emergency until now and how they have impacted on your family. Indicate your degree of agreement with each statement' (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = totally agree). A factor analysis showed a strong correlation between the 5 items on the Family Impact Lens scale in both waves: only one factor was extracted by the method of analysis of the main components and explains 79.05% of the variance (W1). A Family Impact Index was then created, using the averages method (min = 1; max = 5).

### *2.2.2 Positivity scale*

To explore the relationship between government support and an optimistic vision of the future a psychological construct – the Scale of Positivity (Caprara et al. 2012) – which was included in the interdisciplinary questionnaire, was considered. This scale was designed to directly assess the disposition to view life and experiences in a positive manner and is composed of 8 items on a 5-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

### *2.2.3 Participatory Efficacy Belief: believing in being able to 'make a difference' in social change*

In order to measure the orientation towards active participation in social change, psychological studies on *participation efficacy*, and in particular the predictor identified by Van Zomeren, Saguy, Schellhaas (2012), were also taken

into account for the objectives of this study, namely, the belief of ‘making a difference’ in a class action. In line with the family perspective of the research, the questionnaire was asked to express the agreement (1 = strongly disagreed; 7 = totally agree) with the statement ‘I believe that, as a family, we can make an important contribution so that things in Italy can change’.

### 3. Results

Table 1 shows the percentages of response to the 5 questions related to the Family Impact Lens Checklist of government action during the two waves of the research.

TABLE 1. Answers the questions related to the following: ‘We now present some questions related to the decisions made by the government regarding this emergency and how they impacted your family. Indicate your degree of agreement with each statement’ (% values).

Family Impact Lens Checklist	Strongly or slightly disagree (W1)	Strongly or slightly disagree (W2)	Partially agree, partially disagree (W1)	Partially agree, partially disagree (W2)	Totally or fairly agree (W1)	Totally or fairly agree (W2)	Total (N.W1 = 2985; N.W2=2191)
1. Did the government decisions support the responsibilities of family members? ( <i>Responsibility</i> )	30.0%	35.9%	37.0%	38.3%	34.0%	25.2%	100.0%
2. Did the government decisions help family members not to conflict with each other? ( <i>Stability</i> )	36.1%	38.5%	39.2%	39.6%	25.2%	22.0%	100.0%
3. Have the government decisions helped families find a balance between the needs of all members? ( <i>Relationships</i> )	34.2%	37.1%	36.9%	49.4%	29.1%	23.5%	100.0%
4. Have the government decisions taken into account the different needs of families, providing support suitable for diverse situations? ( <i>Diversity</i> )	36.7%	40.1%	33.9%	34.8%	31.1%	25.1%	100.0%
5. Has the government listened to the families’ expectations in making decisions? ( <i>Involvement</i> )	37.8%	40.4%	34.7%	35.1%	29.3%	24.5%	100.0%

With the exception of the last two items (*principles of Diversity and Involvement*), the prevailing answer is ‘partially agree and partially disagree’ in both waves; excluding the first item (principle of *Responsibility*) in W1, the ‘total or fair agreement’ answers always recorded the lowest percentages in both waves,

compared to the other choices (strongly or slightly disagree and partially agree or disagree). Respondents in both waves also considered *Responsibility* to be the most promoted aspect of government; in both waves the most negative opinions were related to the *involvement* of families and the recognition of *diversity* among families; in fact the percentage of respondents who totally or fairly agree on the attention of the government to the different needs of families, providing support suitable for diverse situations is 31 at W1 and decreases to 25.1 at W2; furthermore the percentage of those who totally or fairly agree that government listened to the families' expectations in making decisions is 29.3 at W1 and decreases to 24.5 at W2. With regard to the second and third principles (*Stability*, i.e., helping family members not to conflict with each other and *Family Relations*, i.e. helping families to find a balance between the needs of all members), the respondents show prevailing indecision, especially at W2, even if, as stated above, negative judgment continues to prevail over the positive in both waves.

The overall perception of support from the government declines between the two waves, in particular with respect to the principle of responsibility pointing out the overload that families experienced in the six months and with respect to the principles that already performed worse: diversity and involvement. For these principles in W2 the percentage of those who strongly or slightly disagree increases by 3.4% (diversity) and by 2.6% (involvement).

The Family Impact Index is just below the median, with an average at W1 of 2.87 ( $\sigma = 0.97$ ; Min = 1; Max = 5) and at W2 2.72 ( $\sigma = 1.0$ ; Min = 1; Max = 5). Significant average differences (T-tests with  $p < 0.01$ ) in the perception of support given by the government are recorded in relation to the territorial macro-area: in the south, the Family Impact Index has an average of 3.01 ( $\sigma = 0.97$ ), as against 2.73 ( $\sigma = 0.97$ ) in the northwest at W1. It should also be noted that families with young children perceive slightly higher government support ( $M = 2.90$ ;  $\sigma = 0.98$ ) but this decreases particularly during W2 ( $M = 2.76$ ;  $\sigma = 0.99$ ), compared to families living other phases of the family life cycle ( $M = 2.81$ ;  $\sigma = 1.03$ ) whose perceived government support however decreases in W2 ( $M = 2.69$ ;  $\sigma = 1.06$ ). If we consider this data in relation to other indices of perceived social support<sup>4</sup> – the one for families (at W1 3.79 and at W2 3.76) and the one for friends (3.37 in both waves) – we can see that the perception of government support is the lowest.

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<sup>4</sup> The family support index (Min=1; Max=5) includes these items: my family really tries to help me; my family gives me the emotional support and support I need; I can really talk about my problems with my family; my family really tries to help me make decisions. The friends support index (Min=1; Max=5) include these items: my friends really try to help me; I can rely on my friends when things go wrong; I have friends with whom I can share joys and sorrows; I can really talk about my problems with my friends.

As regards the Positivity Scale, it registers a similar medium–low value in W1 (M = 3.53;  $\sigma$  = 0.81. Min = 1; Max=5) and W2 (M = 3.52;  $\sigma$  = 0.68) and is slightly higher in men (T-test with  $p < 0.01$ ). Both the synthetic Family Impact Index and all its items, considered individually, show a strong correlation with a positive orientation to the future, in particular *Stability* and *Family Relations*, highlighting the fact that the more respondents agree that the government has supported families, the more optimistic they are (Table 2). Each correlation is confirmed at W2 with a slight diminution.

TABLE 2. Correlation coefficients between the elements of the family impact checklist and the scale of positivity and conviction with regard to ‘making a difference’ in social change as a family (participatory effectiveness).

	Positivity Scale W1	Believing that you are ‘making a difference’ to social change W1	Positivity scale W2	Believing that you are ‘making a difference’ to social change W2
Family Impact Scale	.301**	.292**	.276**	.283**
Items of the Family Impact Scale:				
1. Did the government decisions support the responsibilities of family members? ( <i>Responsibility</i> )	.273**	.289**	.253**	.263**
2. Did the government decisions help family members not to conflict with each other? ( <i>Stability</i> )	.287**	.261**	.276**	.252**
3. Have the government decisions helped families find a balance between the needs of all members? ( <i>Relationships</i> )	.281**	.261**	.263**	.253**
4. Have the government decisions taken into account the different needs of families, providing support suitable for diverse situations? ( <i>Diversity</i> )	.261**	.235**	.236**	.259**
5. Has the government listened to the families’ expectations in making decisions? ( <i>Engagement</i> )	.238**	.250**	.206**	.238**

Note: N = 2985. \*p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\*p ≤ .001

As for the belief that the family, by participating socially, can be an agent of change (Participatory Efficacy Belief), the W1 the respondents are almost equally divided among those who are totally or quite in agreement (59.3%) and those who strongly or slightly disagree (41.1%). But at W2 things get worse: the former falls to 51.8% and the latter rises to 49.2%. The correlation between this

measure<sup>5</sup> and the positivity scale is highly significant in both waves (In W1:  $r = 0.385$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; in W2:  $r = 0.382$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, this variable is also strongly linked to the Family Impact Index and all its sub-dimensions (see Table 2).

Since the three measures are strongly related to each other in both waves, different regression models have been estimated by proving diverse directions of the relationships between the three main variables considered in the study (Family Impact Index, Participatory Efficacy Belief and Positivity Scale); three structural variables (sex, territorial area, and family life cycle phase) are also included in the analysis. In particular, the difference explained ( $R^2$ ) of the model, in which the positivity scale was considered as a dependent variable, was greater ( $R^2 = .167$ ;  $F(5,1191) = 47.717$ ;  $p < .001$ ), which confirms the significance of the effect of Participatory Efficacy Belief at W2 ( $b = 0.29$ ;  $t = 10.904$ ;  $p < .001$ ), followed by that of the Family Impact Index at W1 ( $b = 0.186$ ;  $t = 6.794$ ;  $p < .001$ ), while excluding the capacity to predict of the structural variables (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Regression on the Positivity Scale W2 (dependent variable) of the variables considered in the study ( $R^2 = .167$ ;  $F(5,1191) = 47.717$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

	T	Standard Error	Coefficient Standard Beta	t	Significance
(Constant)	2.646	.077		34.400	.000
Participatory effectivenessW2	.189	.017	.298	10.904	.000
Family Impact ScaleW1	.117	.017	.186	6.764	.000
Sex (female)	-.043	.036	-.032	-1.193	.233
Territorial Area (Living in the South)	.113	.036	.084	3.159	.002
Family life cycle (Family with children under 14 years old)	-.040	.033	-.031	-1.184	.237

Finally, a mediation analysis was conducted to explore if Participatory Efficacy Belief also has a significant mediating effect in the relationship between the Family Impact Index (W1) and the Positivity Scale (W2). To see if Participatory Efficacy Belief (the attitude of active participation of families in a subsidiary model) mediates the relationship between the Family Impact Index and families' positivity we tested different mediation analyses with PROCESS. The most significant model ( $R^2 = .419$ ;  $F(2,2188) = 234.04$ ;  $p < .001$ ) shows that Participatory Efficacy Belief mediated the positivity (outcome at W2) that comes from the Family Impact Index (predictor at W1) and the precise indirect

<sup>5</sup> Compared with the structural variables considered, there are no significant differences in relation to the Participatory Efficacy Belief, it should be noted that as the age of the children increases, Participatory Effectiveness is lower and that it is lower in the northwest than in other territorial areas.

effect of Participatory Efficacy Belief on positivity was found to be statistically significant (.0643, 95%; C.I. .015, .0778).

#### 4. Discussion

More than a third of respondents expressed strong disagreement with all the items of the Family Impact Scale, except for the first, which relates to the principle of responsibility. *Involvement* (understood as listening to the needs of families) and *diversity* were the principles on which respondents expressed the most negative opinion: this seems to indicate that policies still suffer from a standardised approach incapable of recognising and meeting specific family needs and complex demands linked to ethnic, socio-economic, and structural differences in families. This seems to be linked to a limited willingness of the government to involve families in policy decision-making. The level of respondents' agreement on the helpful attitude of the government declines over the time of the two waves, signalling an increasing distrust and overall worsening of the relationship between government measures and families' wellbeing, and also pointing to the complications of the crisis and pandemic fatigue (Reicher, Drury, 2021).

The fact that the agreement on government support prevailed over disagreement only on the principle of family responsibility, seems to confirm that in Italy the family was strongly responsabilised during the COVID-19 crisis. In many cases several essential activities (which otherwise could not have performed outside families, without danger to the community) have fallen to the family to carry out; smartworking, while increasing the worker's burden, at the same time makes all family members responsible for facilitating working from home for one or more of them. Related to these problems, it is worth citing some studies that highlight the fact that Italian policies provide limited or no measures for the self-employed and vulnerable parents (Mazzucchelli, 2014). Moreover, other studies report strong and persistent territorial differences between the northern and southern regions, where employment rates, especially for women, are significantly lower (Istat, 2020).<sup>6</sup>

In addition, families during the first and subsequent lockdowns have become responsible for the remote teaching of children. This not only requires adequate digital equipment, but also time, attention, and the energy of the parents as well as the reorganisation of family life. Likewise, the care of disabled

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<sup>6</sup> In Italy, 67.3% of men and 49.6% of women are employed, taking into account the population aged between 15 and 64. In the South, these percentages are 55.4% and 32.4% respectively.

and vulnerable elderly people has weighed almost exclusively on family caregivers, especially before specific measures were implemented by the government<sup>7</sup>.

However, the responses to the Family Impact Scale seem implicitly to indicate that this manifestation of respect for families has been perceived as a delegation to solve an extremely complex puzzle: family balances previously achieved have been called into question and the inequality between families has been increased, widening the gap between those overloaded with tasks and those marginalised because they lack the technological tools and skills necessary to carry out activities remotely. Evaluating this from a negative point of view and considering the responses to other questions related to perceived social support from families and friends, this suggests that during this period of the pandemic there was not enough government support for families. The third wave of the research project presented here, scheduled for May 2021, could provide more arguments to verify this hypothesis.

Moreover, the fact that results based on both the Family Impact Index and the Participatory Efficacy, related to ‘making a difference as a family’, have significant correlations with the Positivity Scale, suggesting that confidence in the possibility of exiting the crisis may grow along with government support and the active contribution of families to social change. This confirms the desirability of accepting the principle of subsidiarity as a key to understanding the expectations of families in the post-pandemic reconstruction phase. In order for the state to be able to act in accordance with a logic of subsidiarity towards families, it is nevertheless necessary for them to believe that their participation is effective in changing things. In order to reinforce this conviction, it is not enough to make families responsible, because – as is acknowledged – subsidiarity does not just mean that higher-level bodies do not take the place of lower-level bodies, but also that they put them in a position to perform the functions that are their own (Donati, 2011). According to the principles of the Family Impact Lens, this implies giving tools to stem family conflict, to facilitate the balance between the different family areas, to reduce inequalities of opportunity between families and, above all, to encourage the active involvement of families in decision-making processes.

A final aspect to consider carefully is that, given the five items, from 34% to 39% of participants at W1 and from 35% to 49% at W2 avoided taking a clear position of agreement or disagreement on government support, with an accentuation of the trend in W2: the methodological choice to opt for a 5-point Likert has led to the well-known effect of *central tendency bias*. Nevertheless, this

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<sup>7</sup> Decreto Rilancio in July 2020 added extraordinary support for families with severely disabled or non-self-sufficient members.

enabled us to reveal the position of those who have in a sense suspended their judgment on a subject – support for the government – on which people generally take clear positions, based on their political sympathy. In this case, due to the great uncertainty and the novelty of situation, people probably were waiting to understand how things would really go. Some studies (Nadler, Weston, Voyles, 2015) indicate that the central position in an odd-point Likert can mean ‘I am neutral’, ‘I do not care’, ‘I am uncertain’, ‘both, it depends’, ‘neither’, ‘I do not know what to answer’: thus, it can be assumed that the questions could have somewhat disoriented the respondents (‘I do not know what to answer’), because it is not usual to explore the support of the government with respect to the five aspects proposed. Moreover, they may be formulated too indeterminately and too openly (‘It depends’), preventing the respondents from expressing more accurate judgments. In fact, the Family Impact Institute (Bogenschneider et al., 2012) hypothesise different levels of application for *the Family Impact Lens*, from a more general to a more analytical one: in their extended formulation the five principles should, in a second-level analysis, be disaggregated into different batteries of analytical indicators (with more items), better suited to measure the specific object whose family impact is to be analysed.

From this perspective, the third wave of the survey will correlate the Family Impact Scale with some specific socioeconomic measures received by the respondents from the government.

## **5. Conclusion**

The emergency caused by the pandemic has led the Italian government to leverage families as a resource to tackle the crisis. In this way, however, there is a danger of strengthening the welfare model based on a default familism (Saraceno, 2016), which is still too widespread in Italy. Analysing the data of the first and second wave of a longitudinal research project entitled ‘The family at the time of COVID-19’, it was possible to highlight a certain dissatisfaction with the family impact of government measures during both the most critical period for the pandemic in Italy (March–April 2020) and when the virus seemed less virulent (July 2020). This dissatisfaction reverberates with an optimistic vision of the future, which has, in fact, been directly related to the appreciation for government support. The same correlation has been noted with the conviction that the family can contribute to social change. This confirms the hypothesis that families push towards a subsidiary model of welfare, in which they see themselves as effective architects of change, being allowed to participate as social actors and adequately supported by the government. This



combination (participation and support) fosters an optimistic vision of the future.

The possible future development of this study may be the verification of the resilience of the hypothesis developed here in the third wave of research. From July 2020 to May 2021 new measures have been implemented by the government and this could modify the respondent's judgement; moreover, to counter the central tendency bias, inherent in the Family Impact Scale, new specific indicators will be added to the questionnaire and they will be correlated with the principles of the Family Impact Lens.

Other future developments could be to compare different types of families in relation to the socio-economic status and the presence of children (0-6 or adolescents) with respect to the models presented, and to assess if family support networks may mediate the effect of the Family Impact Index on positivity.

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