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What is keeping Italian men at home?

Experts warn of population fall as most prefer mamma's cooking

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Updated: 3:19 p.m. CT Aug 20, 2004

ROME - For most Italian single men, inviting a girlfriend home is a dangerous affair: If the visit is not planned carefully, they run the big risk of bumping into the other woman in their lives — their mother.

Italian men, in fact, still find it too difficult to cleanly sever the umbilical cord, and end up staying at home with their parents well into their 30s.

Now experts believe that the nationwide Oedipal complex might cause more serious damage than the endless complaints of aspiring wives: men's chronic refusal to move on might be responsible for the drastic decline of Italy's birth rate.

Drop in Italian birth rate

At least this is the conclusion of the experts at the Population Reference Bureau, a non-profit association that studies population trends.

The annual study recently released by the private organization found that despite the fact that the world's population will increase approximately 50 percent by mid-century, Italy is projected to actually lose 10 percent of its population by 2050.

"Many young men live at home with parents until their late 20s because it is less acceptable to live with someone and raise a family out of wedlock," said Carl Haub, author of the report. "As a result, many young Italians either don't get married or leave the country entirely."

So where does the stereotype of the Italian *mamma's boy* end, and reality begin? The answer lies in the many recent surveys that all come to the same conclusion: more than half of Italian men between the age of 25 and 35 still live with their mother. But why?

Why move out of a luxury hotel?

"I just don't see the point of leaving my parents' home," said Luca Orsenigo, a 30 year-old software analyst from Milan. Despite the fact that his income is higher than average, he is not ready to give up his *dolce vita* yet.

"Right now I am single, so why would I give up traveling, my bike, the car, the clothes to waste money on rent? I would only start making such sacrifices when I find the right woman," Orsenigo said.

His mother doesn't seem to share his view.

"I keep telling him that it is time to find his own place," Enrica Turconi said. "He's become a burden, and he behaves like a guest in a hotel: I wash and iron, cut the grass and paint the walls, no wonder he doesn't want to leave."

Italian ladies have had it

Luca's behavior is so widespread that many Italian women aren't waiting any longer. Cristina Guidi, a 30-year-old flight coordinator, has just bought a one-bedroom apartment for herself.

"Relationships are not what they used to be. Both men and women have become unreliable, so it's not unusual for girls to decide to buy their own place," Guidi said.

On one issue, she agreed with Luca. "Still, I had to wait until I could afford to buy my own place, as I didn't want to throw away money on rent," she said.

If Italy is not used to single men living alone, a female "going solo" might prove too much to bear.

"Every time I have to deal with bricklayers, estate agents or carpet layers, I get asked the same thing: 'Where is your husband?' Nobody seems to believe that I can take care of myself," Guidi said.

Is money, rather than cultural tradition, the real hurdle keeping Italians from independence and making babies?

Not according to an initiative by a small village in the southern province of Salerno, where local authorities promised to give parents \$12,000 for every newborn. Despite the offer, so far only one child has born.

Another sign that no check is big enough to entice Italian men away from their nests.

Claudio Lavanga is an NBC News producer based in Rome. He no longer lives at home.

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