

Is Europe Anti-Big Family?

A new organization in Italy is fighting for better rights of big families

By JEFF ISRAELY | ROME

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It doesn't look like the cutting edge of social protest: each morning, Sabina and Edoardo Mazzetti make a stand of sorts by getting their nine children — who range in age from 3 to 24 — up and out of a rented four-bedroom, two-bathroom flat in downtown Rome. Mazzetti, 50, says it has all gotten easier over the years: "The older kids help with the younger ones. And my wife has organized the morning into shifts. But everyone's always still in a hurry." A devout Catholic who's employed by a firm that monitors workplace health and safety measures, Mazzetti says the family's energy is replenished by the constant buzz of affection and camaraderie. "You happily give up a bit of your space and freedom for the fun and spirit of community that's created," he says.

Where that community spirit is lacking, according to Mazzetti, is in the Italian government's policies toward large families. That's why the Mazzetti clan recently joined the National Association of Large Families, a new organization formed to fight for the rights — mostly economic — of households that include six or more members. Bucking Italy's low fertility rate of 1.29, large families suffer from the same inadequate social policy that demographers blame for discouraging others from having more children: inadequate child care and family leave policy, insufficient tax breaks and no protection against rising housing costs. But le famiglie numerose are also exposed to things smaller families are not: water, garbage and electricity rates that increase progressively as consumption rises; restaurants that suddenly run out of tables when all those kids walk in the door; landlords who squeeze out crowded families through rent increases they know their tenants can't afford.

Mario Sberna, a Brescia father of five who helped found the association last month, says that large families are short-shrifted in part because they are becoming more rare. Six-member families now account for just 1.4% of all families in Italy, down from 3.5% in 1991. "The state needs to take the long view," Sberna says. "Large families are providing Italy with the gift of new life. And all we get in return are lots of nice words." Sberna's group has hooked up with a network of similar associations around Europe, including groups in Denmark, the Netherlands and Poland, to form a Continental lobby for large families. It plans to take its case to Brussels, hoping the E.U. will set European-wide standards to protect the rights of fruitful families.

José Román Losana heads Spain's big family federation, which was founded in 1967 when the fascist government was actively encouraging population growth. Now Spain stands alongside Italy at the bottom of the European charts with a fertility rate of around 1.3. Losana has not only been pushing public officials but has also started a program called Masfamilia that seeks discounts for large families from food chains and other retailers. The father of 12 says he isn't asking others to pay for his choice: "We simply ask society for the right to have the children we want to have, and to be able to live in decent conditions."

Francesco Billari, a professor of demography at Milan's Bocconi University, says large families are the only way to fix Europe's dangerous population slide. In Italy, he says, "even a three-child family is considered completely deviant. That notion has to be avoided; otherwise you can't ever achieve [population] equilibrium." As Europe looks for new ways to convince couples to have more children, it might start by helping those who need no convincing.