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In Italy, Economy and Law Leave Many Single Fathers Broke and Homeless

By **ELISABETTA POVOLEDO**

MILAN — The pain of Europe's economic crisis is shared by almost everyone. But it is apparently being felt sharply in some countries by a new class of people: divorced men who end up impoverished or on the streets as they struggle to maintain themselves while keeping up child support and alimony payments.

The number of single fathers who find themselves in such difficulties is hard to pin down, and while it may not be very large, it is growing, according to researchers, government statistics and anecdotal accounts from social workers, particularly in Europe's southern tier.

In *Italy*, where the phenomenon is perhaps most acute, it reflects a fearsome combination of forces as the four-year-old economic crisis meets the steady fraying of the social safety net and the slow-motion implosion of the Italian family.

For some single fathers, the burdens have become unbearable as they find themselves jobless or unable to make ends meet as their children — facing grim economic prospects themselves — remain dependent on family support well into adulthood.

"The support that Italian families used to provide," which essentially substituted for a welfare state, "is no longer something that can be taken for granted," said Alberto Bruno, Provincial Commissioner of the C.R.I., or Italian Red Cross, in Milan. His volunteers, he said, have increasingly come across men living in cars, even in Milan's Linate airport, "mixing with passengers, dressed in their suits."

One volunteer, Gianni Villa, 25, who brings food, clothing and blankets once a week to Milan's growing legions of homeless, said he was surprised at the change he had seen. "Before, men who lived on the streets were clochards, people adrift, or drug addicts," he said. "Nowadays you find people there because of the economic crisis or because of personal problems."

"They don't tell you they are fathers," he said, "because they don't want their family to know."

Indeed, one man, who gave his name as Franco, did not want to be fully identified to avoid suffering the shame if his wife and two daughters learned of his troubles. After his restaurant went bankrupt, he traveled in April to Milan from his native Puglia, in Italy's far south, to find a job so he could keep up alimony payments to his wife of 34 years, with whom he had split about a year and half ago, he said.

"In Puglia I was living day to day but I couldn't keep that up forever," said Franco, 56, who said he was still supporting his daughters, both of whom are in their early twenties but unemployed.

With no place to stay in Milan, Franco said he was "very fortunate" to meet a man at a McDonald's who gave him a blanket and showed him "the ropes of living on the street." It was not long before he was sleeping on a cardboard box under the portico facing Milan's stock exchange.

Separations and divorces have steadily risen in this traditionally Roman Catholic country since divorce was legalized in 1970 and then reaffirmed in a referendum in 1974. In 1995, 158 of every 1,000 marriages ended in separation, and 80 out of 1,000 ended in divorce. In 2009, the last year for which statistics were available, the numbers had reached 297 separations and 181 divorces per thousand, according to Istat, the national statistics agency.

Even though a 2006 law made joint custody of children the norm when parents split, Italian courts continue to make mothers the primary caregivers while fathers bear the financial brunt of the separation. Critics say the law, as it is applied, favors women, whose participation in the work force has steadily grown, reaching 46.5 percent according to Istat.

While more than 50 percent of separated women also see a decline in their economic conditions, according to statistics published last December by Istat, divorce is proving financially devastating for some men.

When Umberto Vaghi split from his wife in 2004, for example, he was ordered to pay her €2,000 a month to keep up their home and raise their two children, then 10 and 8. Mr. Vaghi, a manager, was earning €2,200 a month.

"I was attacked by the Italian justice system," said Mr. Vaghi, 43, a board member of the Papa Separati Lombardia movement, a non-profit organization that assists single fathers and lobbies to improve Italian family law legislation.

"Society is changing, and the roles of the father as the breadwinner and the mother as homemaker with it," he said. "Legislation should take that into consideration."

Unfortunately, "there isn't much will to change things," he added. He and others attribute the resistance in part to the still-powerful influence of the Catholic church in Italy, as well as the fact that Parliament is filled with lawyers who have little interest in reducing litigation.

Similarly, in Spain, court filings against fathers who have not paid alimony have risen sharply since the start of the economic crisis. Recent news reports in places like Navarra and Galicia describe fathers who have been jailed for failing to support their children. In April last year, a Barcelona judge denied parental custody to a divorced father, citing the fact that he had lost his job.

Poverty among single parents is "a rising phenomenon," said Raffaella Saso, who wrote on the "new poor" — separated fathers and single-parent families — for the annual report of the Rome-based research institute Eurispes.

Homelessness, too, in Italy and elsewhere, is growing. In Greece, the Klimaka charity group estimates that the number of homeless has increased by 25 percent in the past two years. The trend is a concern in a country where traditionally strong family ties have averted such phenomena. A third of those who had registered as homeless were divorced or separated, mostly men, according to a study carried out by the National Center for Social Research on behalf of the Health Ministry and published in February.

In Italy, charities say that a growing number of those using soup kitchens and dormitories are now single parents. "An uncomfortable reality but easy to believe, considering that 80 percent of separated fathers cannot live on what remains of their salary," Ms. Saso, the researcher, wrote.

The Rev. Clemente Moriggi, who oversees the Brothers of St. Francis of Assisi, a Milanese Catholic charity, said that in the past year, separated fathers, aged 28 to 60, occupied 80 of the 700 beds in the foundation's dormitories, more than twice the number of just a few years ago.

"These men earned average salaries that only left them tears to cry once they paid their alimony and mortgages; they are the people who come to us," Father Moriggi said. "But this is not a situation where family life can prosper. They feel ashamed to see their children in these structures, and this makes them suffer. And makes relationships suffer."

In large cities like Milan, Rome or Turin, local administrators are becoming increasingly aware of the crisis. Two years ago, lawmakers with the Milan Provincial government inaugurated a housing project for separated fathers at the Oblate Missionary College in Rho, just outside of Milan.

The fathers occupy 15 rooms in a recently refurbished 16th-century guesthouse that also caters to tourists and pilgrims. The lodgings are spare, but the exquisite setting, in a park, is welcoming for children to visit. Guests pay €200 a month for lodging and assistance from psychologists and social workers, and the province pays twice that as a subsidy.

Fabio, 51, has been living in the Rho facility since January 2011, when he separated from his wife of 15 years, who still lives in a suburb of Milan with their 13-year-old son. Fabio's €1,200 a month salary as a bookbinder did not go very far once alimony and mortgage payments were paid, so the subsidized housing has been a relief.

Despite the hard times he has gone through, he remains optimistic. "I hope to find a home for myself because I can't stay here forever," he said.