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2015

https://doi.org/10.25595/1512

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Toffanin, Tania: *Italian women in times of crisis between precarity and austerity*, in: Kurswechsel : Zeitschrift für gesellschafts-, wirtschafts- und umweltpolitische Alternativen (2015) Nr: 1, 51-59. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/1512.

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Italian women in times of crisis between precarity and austerity

Tania Toffanin

1. Introduction

In Italy, from the year 2000 onwards, in relation both to social changes occurring and to pension policies enacted, as early as the nineties, active women in the labour market have particularly grown: from 2000 to 2013 they more than doubled, rising from 15.9% in 2000 to 34.6% in 2013 (the employment rate was 15.2% in 2000 and 33.1% in 2013). However, the economic transformations taking place on a global scale and the deregulation of the labour market at national level, in fact, make the employment status and living conditions of women workers even more discontinuous and precarious. The transformations at the global scale and the on-going deregulation of the Italian labour market and industrial relations involve both younger and older women. For younger women the lack of job opportunities, fitting to combine life and professional prospects, is driving to a deep re-orientation of life and working paths, swinging between the refusal to procreate and the attempt to find new solutions for the work-life balance. Older women workers, aged over 55, are now experiencing multiple and peculiar disadvantages, especially if they have recently moved from inactivity to activity or if they are involved in work discontinuity, or if they have become unemployed. They are not even close to retirement, and because of the recent pension reforms, they are unlikely to accrue the requirements. Moreover, they are also struggling to find a permanent job in order to keep a stable level of income to allow their autonomy.

2. Women between paid and care work

The analysis of the composition of the Italian labour market shows distinctive continuities in the historical path and commonalities to Greece, Spain and Portugal (Naldini 2003). Along these lines, the Italian welfare regime is traditionally based on:

- Modest provisions of public services for the care of children and older people;
- Limited cash transfers to families;
- A marginal diffusion of private care services.

In the long run these particular features have enlarged the invisible (and unpaid) burden of domestic and care work for women who, for material and cultural reasons, have been forced to carry out a huge amount of work in order to allow their partners, their fathers and brothers to be always available for productive work outside the household (Saraceno 2011). The scarcity of welfare provisions has amplified the subordination of women to family needs. Along these lines, exactly the domestic and care work made by women has been crucial to the functioning of the capitalistic mode of production (Fortunati 1995 [1981]; Federici 2012).

In order to explain the low participation of women in paid work it is essential to consider some peculiar features of the Italian economic structure:

- The manufacturing sector: with a rigid gendered division (men in mechanic industry, women in textile, clothing and leather industry). Then, low technological investment, low capitalization, scarce financing addressed to training activity (Babecký et al. 2009);
- The spread of the irregular, black and criminal economy;
- The culture of tax avoidance;

A social structure based on a low social mobility and the relevance of family networks.

The rigid division of gender roles in the household and the public sphere based on patriarchal structures represent a crucial feature of the Italian economic development. In these terms, even if during the seventies many women entered the labour market, the burden of domestic and care work was not redistributed in the household. In the long run the dual earner family has substituted the male breadwinner model, nevertheless new patterns of life and consumption increased the need of care work and so the amount of tasks in the household. Nowadays, in order to provide for the new needs, the family of origin and the family network have largely substituted the lack of welfare provisions offered by the state. Far from allowing equal opportunities and women's emancipation, the growth of women in paid work, in most industrialized areas of Italy, produced new burdens for women. In these areas, women have long time faced multiple working activities (paid and unpaid):

- Paid work for the market;
- Unpaid work for other adults in the household;
- Unpaid work for grandchildren;
- Unpaid work for older people.

Noticeably the condition of women in the household depends on the economic background and class belonging: high wages allow women outsourcing some domestic and care work. Moreover, the type of the household (in terms of number and professional status of its members) makes the difference. Nevertheless, the worsening of the working conditions both in working time and in wages has affected all types of households, even with some differences among countries, as shown by data from EU-SILC on distribution of income.[1] Since 2007, the economic crisis has produced a reduction in net income difficult to overcome, especially for countries that from 2000 to the beginning of the crisis experienced a high increase of net incomes (Fabiani / Sabbatini 2011; Bartiloro / Rampazzi 2013). EU-SILC data shows that the median equivalised net income for all household types in Italy has increased only by 728 euro from 2007 to 2013, in comparison to the increase experienced from 2000 to 2007 by 5,037 euro.

The economic crisis, pension reforms and the ever-increasing deregulation of the labour market have exacerbated the current scenario (Saraceno 2014). The effects for women, especially for those ones with low skills, low educational levels and those belonging to the working class have been the following:

- The reduction of the inactive population without the increasing of permanent job positions;
- The increase of burdens deriving from children, even if those children live outside the household because of the enlarging economic crisis and the (consequent) casualization of the labour market;
- The forced full activity in the household for women as a consequence of the negative trade-off between the outsourcing of domestic and care work and the quality of the working conditions (hours and wages) in a job position;
- The growth of the involuntary part-time employment, as a consequence of the enlargement of the service sector and the destandardization of labour contracts.

The reduction of the inactive population has involved all women in many European countries but it is more relevant for women aged 55–64, particularly in Italy (but also in Germany, it is very high). In Italy, from 2007 to 2013, among women aged 55–64, the inactive population has decreased by 11.1 percentage points. In Germany, for the same age group, it has decreased by 11.8 percentage points.

3. Old dilemmas and new risks involving the female workforce

The analysis of the condition of women in Italy, as in the other Southern European countries, requires combining some peculiar variables:

- The increase of life expectancies (especially for women);
- The growth of the elderly population;
- Further reductions of welfare state provisions;
- The postponement of the retirement age forced by recent reforms;
- The substantial continuity of the gendered division of labour both in paid work and in the household.

The abovementioned variables have contributed in increasing the employment rate among women of different age groups in many European countries but in very different terms. Considering the Italian case, there is still present a big divide between Northern and Southern regions and, even if the crisis has caused a high reduction in the employment rate of younger women in the Northern regions, the gap between regions is still very large (Verashchagina / Capparucci 2014).

The Italian case needs to be analysed considering also the big divide existing also between younger and older workers. After the crisis the participation of women in paid work has grown, with more emphasis among older women workers in all areas of Italy. In Southern Italy, the employment rate of women of all age groups has decreased whilst in other areas it has particularly increased among women over 45 years of age.[2] Since the second post-war period the economy in Southern regions was based on public employment thus, due to the lack of private investments or to their scarcity, it has advantaged male workers. In Southern regions, women have dealt with a full commitment in reproductive labour, within the household, even if they have high educational levels. The other option has been the immigration towards Northern regions or other countries. Along these lines, the widespread of the black economy has strongly contributed in reproducing the gendered division of paid and unpaid work across the country. Nevertheless, whilst in Northern regions mainly immigrant women have been involved in the black economy, especially in domestic and care work, in Southern regions women, regardless their nationality, have traditionally experienced an irregular job.

Eurostat data between 2008 and 2013 on the development of the labour market shows that only Germany had an increase of the employment rate for women of all age groups. In all other European countries there has been a general decrease of the employment rate among women aged 15–24 years and a spread increase regarding women aged 55–64. This last issue is very interesting to analyse with a focus on the variables that have produced this increase, especially concerning the Italian case. Between 2008 and 2013, the economic crisis and austerity measures have produced some relevant consequences, especially for women with care burdens . On the one hand, the expanding casualization of the workforce has intensified precarity and the need of more care work (in order to make all the active family members more available to the flexible requirements of the labour demand); on the

other hand, women have to work longer than some decades ago (and continue to be paid less than men), so their effort in order to keep their position in the labour market is ever more demanding. Nevertheless, even if women are working more than in the previous decades, the improvement of their material condition is debateable. In Italy, the female workforce is dealing with a growing risk of poverty, as shown by Eurostat data: from 2007 to 2013 the in-work at risk-of-poverty rate of employed women, aged 25–54 has increased by 2.6 percentage points, for women aged 55–64 it has increased by 3.3 percentage points. In both cases, it is the highest increase among EU 28 countries.[3]

The worsening of the working conditions is also produced by the casualization of employment and the deregulation of the labour market, particularly relevant since the beginning of the 2000's. In these terms, the effects of the financial and economic crisis on women and especially on older women workers have been the following:

- The consequence of the crisis in crucial sectors of the Italian economy, such as manufacturing sectors[4] and among small firms. The crisis has produced many closures, especially of companies placed in lower positions of the global value chain. These closures involved mainly workers with a high seniority and a low education.[5] The workers dismissed by those firms can count on income supports such as the "indennita' di mobilità" (mobility allowance)[6] and "cassa integrazione guadagni" (wage guarantee fund).[7] Nevertheless, because of the high incidence of micro firms, with less than 15 employees, involved in closures or restructuring, public funds mainly allocated on regional basis are already ended;[8]
- The increasing difficulties in re-entering the labour market: even if job losses are more concentrated in worse paid jobs, the crisis has damaged also higher white-collar occupational grades with a relevant job reduction.[9] Nevertheless, there is a low amount of job creation aimed to reallocate redundant workers from declining to emerging and most innovative sectors. This fact is due to two main features, strictly embedded in Italy: the structure of the labour demand, which is still marked by a low rate of spending in research and development[10] and a low state expenditure on active labour market policies.[11] In particular, the support offered by the Italian state has been traditionally focused on income provisions (especially long-term shock absorbers allowing recipients to join the retirement age), less in retraining activities, so low-skilled workers over 55 years of age are more exposed to the risk of being entrapped in precarity or to become long-term unemployed. Again, new jobs in the service sector are marked by instability and reduced working time to the point that since 2007, the involuntary part-time among women aged 25–49 and 50–64 has increased in Italy by over 23 percentage points, reaching the top in the EU 28.[12]

Field researches carried out in Italy after the beginning of the crisis confirm this scenario. In particular, women interviewed in Veneto, one of the most industrialized regions of Italy – in a survey financed by the European Commission to study the labour market integration of vulnerable age groups through social dialogue[13]– admitted not only the total lack of job opportunities after their dismissal but the unavoidable return to a condition of full dependency on care work. Many women interviewed expressed a deep despair for the forced entry in the condition of full time homemakers and confessed the desire to change radically their life, albeit without conceiving in which way.

Nevertheless, the pivotal problems in Italy are also associated with the long-established structure of public expenditure in social protection (Saraceno 1994). Considering ISTAT disaggregate data, in 2012 the expenditure on social protection services (representing

95.8 % of overall expenditure) dedicated over than half of the amount (52.3 %) to the "old age" function (pensions), while the remaining part was distributed between "sickness/health care" (24.4 %), "survivors" (9.3 %), "disability" (5.7 %), "family/children" (4.8 %) and "unemployment and other social exclusion" (0.3 %). In these terms, in Italy the public expenditure in pensions was traditionally used as an extraordinary source of political consensus. As highlighted by Pennacchi (1997) social expenditure in pensions has been used by Italian governments for all purposes: to fight poverty, to support industrial policies and the restructuring processes. In that way the Italian welfare, as underlined by Pennacchi (1997, 91), has offered reparations instead of promoting wellbeing and social equality, with all the plausible consequences, especially for women.

4. Transformations of gender roles and initiatives to face the crisis

In Italy, the participation of women in paid work has been significantly shaped by the state. In the last century, the advent of Fascism, as underlined by Willson (2010), radically changed the relationship between the state and the private sphere. Female labour was condemned and the representation of women as prolific mothers was exalted, coherently with the portrayal drawn by the Catholic Church. Also during the Fascist regime, women were prevented to gain access to many public jobs and positions. In the long run, the control in the public sector recruitment and the rigidity of work schedules in the private sector strongly limited the access of women in the paid work and in this way they increased the economic dependence of women on the income of their partners or their family of origin. Moreover, the reproduction of patriarchal hegemony has been substantially boosted by the control of public expenditure: welfare provisions to support reproductive functions have been deliberately kept low so to assign to women the whole burden and preventing them to emancipate from a permanent condition of economic dependence.

The patriarchal culture reproduced by the Italian state disengagement in financing public policies is still deep-rooted, but both the economic crisis and the increasing of educational levels are producing changes. As a consequence of the crisis, but also in connection with the increasing mobility of career paths, many couples are moving far from the family of origin with the effect of reducing the reliance on family for material and emotional needs. This aspect will produce new balances among the couple and, also, due to the lack of the family network, it will increase the demand for public services. The Italian traditional welfare model, mainly based on family subsidiarity, has for long time represented an alibi for the state but also for families: the role of women's intergenerational network has been assumed as granted, because women were and still are considered "naturally" responsible for care work. Along these lines, also the attempts of enlarging the quantity and quality of initiatives focused on the work-life balance failed. The state spending for supporting policies addressed to improve the work-life balance – such as new systems of flexible working hours and work organization (i.e. reversible part-time, telecommuting, flexible schedule incoming or outgoing, flexible shifts, bank of hours and also programs and activities for the reintegration of workers returning from leave periods of at least 60 days) has produced scarce results.[14] Consequently, these measures have not produced a revision of work organization patterns and a growth in the female employment, as expected. As a matter of fact, deep-rooted features of the Italian economy and culture – such as the small size of firms and the reluctance of employers in rethinking the work organization (substantially because it supposes a general reflection on the division of labour and also on power relati-

onships in the workplace) – hampered the activation of policies, mainly provided through free grants offered by the Italian state to companies.

Despite the permanence of a big divide between Northern and Southern regions, something is changing. The increase in educational levels is producing a new orientation among women but also new balances in the couple. On the one hand, there is a permanent declining of birth rates starting in 1985, highly intensified after the year 2008,[15] because of the growing access to the tertiary education and the subsequent postponement of the emancipation of women and men from the family of origin. On the other hand, women who want to achieve high results in their career paths – without renouncing to their reproduction – are forcing the emergence of new patterns among couples, which imply new and more care responsibilities for male partners.

The Article 4 of Law 92/2012 has introduced – in experimental form for the years 20013-2015 – a day of compulsory leave for fathers, to be requested within the first 5 months after the child's birth and regardless of the mother's right to compulsory leave. Only the father employee is entitled and the one-day allowance paid by INPS[16] covers 100% of the salary. However, the compulsory leave for fathers does not solve, even not partially, work-life balance concerns. There are no recent data available about the request of parental leaves by fathers, but until now, there have been very few, mainly for one crucial reason: the scarcity of the allowance (30 percent of salary up to the child's third year of life, for the complete period requested). In fact, this measure has reproduced gender stereotypes because as women are less paid than men are, again mostly working mothers apply for the leave.[17] Furthermore, the law requires the status of "employee", but in Italy, both for structural features and the economic crisis, many people are self-employed or working with intermittent labour contracts so to prevent them to be entitled to apply for parental leave.

Nevertheless, the economic crisis risks to slow down the spread of new models of fatherhood and to preclude a more general transformation of gender roles in the household and society as a whole. In 2013, according to ISTAT[18] data on the workforce, there were 999,437 parents living in households with children and without having a job even if searching for it.[19]

Data and field researches show that economic crisis has produced different outcomes:

- The diffusion of time banking and initiatives of mutual assistance among parents: for supporting working couples for the care of children. In Italy, time banking has largely strengthened after the beginning of the crisis. The initiatives carried out are the following: exchange of goods for children (clothes, books, toys but also food and nappies); supporting children doing homework; generating programs of elderly care; school opening during holidays. These initiatives have involved mostly women. They have mainly addressed to the social inclusion of immigrant women and socialized the issue of motherhood;[20]
- The growing number of Italian women who have no children: as mentioned before, both the expansion of discontinuous jobs and reduction of child-care provisions are producing a procreation strike. The fertility rate of women with Italian citizenship is 1.29 (compared to 2.10 of women with a foreign citizenship). In addition, the mother's average age at childbirth is very high (32.10) in comparison to that of women in other European countries, as shown by ISTAT and Eurostat data.[21] This trend cannot be interpreted as a form of resistance of Italian women: conversely, it shows that for several factors it is very difficult for women, especially for those more educated, to combine reproductive ideals and career paths;

- New forms of resistance and struggle of women: workplace-based struggles such as the protest of *Madri nella crisi* (Mothers in Crisis). This is a protest started in July 2014 by a hundred women who, day and night, stayed 70 days on the roof of the Polyclinic of Milan (Cosentino S. 2014). For several years, those women have worked continuously for the hospital, by doing service activities in cooperatives, without resulting as employees because of the spread of casual contracts, renewed monthly by the managers of cooperatives that have taken place over the years. At the beginning of 2014, all the women employed in those cooperatives lost their job and decided to start the protest by bringing also their children on the roof. Then, in Sulcis (Sardinia), a traditional mining industrial area at the end of last November, forty women, employees of the former Igea (in-house company of the Sardinia region) in a night raid occupied one of the galleries of the mine. It was the first time that a protest of all women took place in that area, traditionally well known for the mines and the male employment in the sector. The protest took place after the Sardinia region had once again rejected any kind of commitment, not only to the payment of back wages for workers, but, also, to the presentation of a recovery plan. The women avoided an individual exposure on media by announcing that they would choose a collective name for all: the "Maria". These women occupied the mine for claiming back wages and assurances about their future. After this protest, the Sardinia region has ensured adequate resources in the 2015 budget to enable and support the future reorganization of the in-house company (Fatto Quotidiano 2014).

5. Conclusions

In Italy, women are facing a huge amount of care burdens, under other overlapping dynamics: the employment discontinuity that, often, by producing the casualization of the material conditions of life, has expanded difficulties in balancing work-life times; the increase in life expectancies and, therefore, the number of elderly dependents to care; the growing unemployment crisis that has produced greater insecurity in the younger generations who continue, necessarily, to be supported by the family of origin; the restructuring of many firms that is generally solved with the dismissal of the workforce with greater seniority, unable, however, to reach the retirement eligibility. In Italy, especially in the most industrialized areas of Central and Northern regions, this condition was little-known until the previous decade: its diffusion, nowadays, poses many questions to politics and the central government. Historically, Italian governments have completely disengaged from a structural intervention in reducing the burdens deriving from care work: this choice has shaped the labour market composition and it has reproduced the patriarchal control on the gendered division of paid and unpaid work. Nevertheless, to what extent is it feasible to reduce the spending in welfare provisions, as it is happening, without damaging social reproduction?

The analysis of the Italian case shows that for women is emerging both a return to a condition of extreme dependence on the position of their partner and the complete subordination to care work. This dynamic is widening the already high social polarization and reproducing the gendered division of labour that was considered overcome by the mass entry of women in the formal labour market during the previous decades. The recent struggles and initiatives abovementioned testify that in Italy, nowadays, women are not willing to come back to the condition experienced by the former generations of women, mainly dependent on the resources of their partner and, therefore, totally unable to claim their emancipation. Along these lines, the austerity measures are representing a controversial alibi: under the demand

of limiting the public expenditure, many governments, like the Italian one, are worsening the reproductive sphere and removing the results of women's struggles for the emancipation from both the full time commitment to care work and the dependence on men's earning.

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Notes

1 See also the complete database at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions/data/database.

2 See ISTAT data on this divide. Available at: < http://dati.istat.it/> [Accessed 20 February].
3 See Eurostat data on in-work poverty. Available at: < http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database?node_code=ilc_li06h> [Accessed 20 February].
4 From the beginning of 2008 to the end of 2011 Italy has recorded the largest textile sector employment decline in Europe with a total amount of job losses accounted to 130,800. See also Eurofound (2012).
5 Also in the banking sector there has been a large amount of restructuring. In 2012, Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena, announced the loss of 4,600 jobs and the closure of 400 branches. In 2011, Unicredit announced that it would cut 5,200 jobs in Italy. At the same time, Intesa Sanpaolo announced that it would cut 3,000 jobs by 2014, mainly through voluntary departure (Eurofound 2012).
6 It involves workers dismissed by manufacturing firms with more than 15 employees and service sector firms with more than 200 employees. The duration of the income support varies from 12 to 48 months, depending on the age of the worker. Then companies offering a job to redundant workers receive benefits (e.g. reduced social security contributions). See the detailed scheme on INPS web site (in Italian). Available at: <http://www.inps.it/portale/default.aspx?sID=%3b0%3b&lastMenu=5673&iMenu=1&p4=2> [Accessed 15 December 2014].
7 In the case of a temporary suspension of production and extraordinary restructuring activities workers received an allowance, the so called "wage guarantee fund" covering 80% of last pay.
8 See also the update made by CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, Italian General Confederation of Labour) on this issue. Available (in Italian) on line at: <http://www.Cgil.it/tematiche/default.aspx?ARG=POLAV[Accessed 15 November 2014].
9 The higher-level occupations, such as officials/legislators, managers, professionals and associate professionals, during the recession (considering the period between 2008 and 2010) have accounted for just over 500,000 job losses. See Eurofound (2013).
10 See ISTAT data on Research and Development, Time Series. Available at: <http://timeseries.Istat.it/index.php?id=61&user_100ind_pi1[uid_categoria]=51&cHash=7d88f39c6e21ccd3815a280ce5141b09> [Accessed 21 November 2014].
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12 See Eurostat database on involuntary part-time employment. Available at: <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=lfsa_eppgai&lang=en> [Accessed 15 November 2014].
13 See the final report written by the research team. Available at: http://151.236.221.20:8282/files/LinkAge_Final_Report.pdf [Accessed 13 January 2015].
14 See the article 9 Law 53/2000 and Gagliarducci, Francesca / Malfer, Luciano (2013).
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16 The National Institute for Social Assurance (Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale, INPS). It is the public institution that provides unemployment benefits and pensions.
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19 See the annual report made by ISTAT on the workforce. Available at: <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/119478> [Accessed 12 December 2014].
20 Some examples can be found here: <http://www.banchetempo.milano.it/nsito/images/banchedeltempo_opuscolo.pdf> [Accessed 9 January 2015].
21 See ISTAT data about Italian women. Available at: http://dati.istat.it/?lang=en&SubSessionId=65fc07a1-7c70-4f69-9c14-953da34a805f&themetreeid=-200> [Accessed 12 December 2014] and Eurostat data, available at: <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do> [Accessed 12 December 2014].