

**We want sex (equality). Labour market reforms, economic crisis and the condition of women in Europe**

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**Editorial\***

It was 1968 when 187 female workers from the Ford factory in Dagenham, faced with further discriminatory treatment compared to their male counterparts (over 50,000), walked out, thereby starting one of the most memorable strikes in the history of gender equality movements in Europe. Although this was a small group of women with very little political experience, their protest against the salary gap between the sexes managed to arouse public opinion, probably laying the foundations for the adoption of the *Equal Pay Act*: the measure adopted by the British Parliament in 1970 which became the model for various European national laws on equal pay. It was certainly an

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unexpected result for the local press, which only a short time before had commented with ill-concealed hilarity on the upset caused by the march of these workers from the factory gates to the Palace of Westminster (particularly when – at least in Nigel Cole’s screen portrayal – one of the banners displaying the cry *We want sex equality*, had not been fully unrolled and merely showed the beginning of the phrase *We want sex*).

More than forty years has passed since then – and the opening words of the title of our editorial are intended as a small tribute to those English workers and to the beautiful film in which they were recently portrayed<sup>1</sup> – yet, despite the (sometimes) good laws and various appeals to gender mainstreaming, the status of women in the world of work can still be described in terms of discrimination, and not just from the perspective of pay. The impression, in fact, supported by the reflections contained in the essays found in this monographic section of “About Gender”, is that the economic downturns of recent years, combined with the reduction in social spending and the tax consolidation measures enacted in the last decade by European governments, have contributed to causing a setback in the emancipation process of women in Europe, pushing for their return to the private world. The data collected in the *Gender Equality Index Report* – a very recent EU investigation on the status of equality between men and women – is testimony to this phenomenon. This data, albeit with a varying incidence in the different national scenarios, outlines a context in which the under-representation of women in the labour market, occupational segregation, the salary gap and the precariousness of women’s labour constitute phenomena that are still very widespread; along with the marginalisation effect linked to the choice of maternity, “responsible” for further reducing the presence of women in the market of external/paid work or requiring “flexible” solutions from them which lead to a lack of social protection.

Moreover, while, in the United States, both public discussion and academic debate have engaged in “gender semantics” of the current economic crisis (is it a *he*-cession or a *she*-cession?) with outcomes that are not always attractive or fruitful from a scientific perspective (Bettio 2012), the issues of the impact of the recession and the labour market reforms on gender inequalities do not seem to have received the same attention

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<sup>1</sup> The original title of the film, directed by Nigel Cole and released in Great Britain in 2010, was actually *Made in Dagenham*.

from us. This is particularly true in Italy where, albeit with some significant exceptions<sup>2</sup>, the dominant argument of the crisis tends to focus on financial numbers or on the most dramatic and tragically sensational cases, often overlooking the real life of an unheard majority, largely consisting of women.

The contributions of the monographic section presented here intend to focus attention upon these themes, in the awareness that there are various issues at play, not just theoretical but also political, all the more so in a country like Italy which, as also suggested by the *Global Gender Report of the World Forum* of 2012, is suffering, in relation to the various dimensions of the gender gap, from serious backwardness, particularly on a cultural level.

## **1. Women *in crisis*. Visible and invisible (but predictable) effects of the economic recession**

One of the most recurrent themes in the research concerned with analysing the impact of the economic crisis from a gender perspective is that this crisis, like economic recessions of the past, has had more harmful effects on male employment than female employment. On this basis, it can be said that the reason for this “universal” product of economic recessions is linked to a contingent factor that is easily deduced: men constitute, numerically, the dominant workforce in the market of paid employment, particularly in the sectors most affected by the crisis (manufacturing, construction, finance, property services), in which the presence of women is very low.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that the results of the comparison of data preceding the onset of the crisis (in 2008) with that of the first quarter of 2012 show that the gender gap has reduced in the employment rate at European level<sup>3</sup>. As noted by the

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<sup>2</sup> Consider the various contributions, interventions and areas of investigation on the impact of the crisis from a gender perspective found in the online magazine «InGenere» ([www. http://www.ingenere.it](http://www.ingenere.it)), from which we obtained various information and ideas for reflection when drafting this editorial. Some interesting research on these issues has also recently been sponsored by Banca d'Italia and can be consulted at the address [http://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/econo/quest\\_ecofin\\_2](http://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/econo/quest_ecofin_2)

<sup>3</sup> More precisely, it dropped from 14.1 points before the crisis to 10.9 in the first quarter of 2012 (source: 2013 ENEGE report available at the address <http://www.enege.eu>)

experts<sup>4</sup>, the bridging of the gap is, however, attributable to the losses suffered by the gender represented most predominantly on the labour market, and thus most exposed to risk, and not, as we will see below, to an improvement in the working conditions of women. The same can be said of the “equality downwards” analogy, evidenced by the estimates on the progress of unemployment which, in the darkest period of the recession, from 2008 to 2010, recorded, at least in some European countries, such an increase in male unemployment that it reached, and in some cases exceeded, the level of female unemployment<sup>5</sup>. As we will investigate further below, the recession also produced levelling effects in relation to the gender pay gap but, also in this case, the underlying reason was that the recession predominantly affected salary components (such as overtime and production bonuses), which are traditionally more significant in the wages of men.

In brief, the slight bridging of the gender gap in Europe says nothing of the costs incurred by women as a result of the economic crisis and, conversely, as those costs are less easy to record in the short-term, it only risks making them less visible, obscuring the persistent and alarming dimensions of the gap.

A more detailed analysis, however, reveals various signs that show how the recent crisis has also directly and indirectly affected women: a new phenomenon, compared to the economic recessions of the past, which can also be interpreted in the sense of a greater significance of women’s income in the market of paid labour but, aside from this, it leaves no room for any positive assessment in terms of the development of their emancipatory path.

The numbers and statistics still speak for themselves in this regard: despite the decrease in differentials of employment and salary, the integration of women into the labour market, after the positive trend recorded from the Nineties, has severely reduced. Just consider that, in the space of four years (from 2008 to 2012), the number of member states in which the employment rate of women aged between 15 and 64 years old was over 65% has reduced by almost half (from 10 to 6 in the first quarter of 2012)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> We note that it is predominantly women who deal with these issues.

<sup>5</sup> EUROSTAT, January 2010.

<sup>6</sup> ENEGE Report.

And in countries where women's employment has demonstrated, even in times of crisis, some resilience – for example, Italy<sup>7</sup>, where the presence of women in the world of work is far beneath the European average<sup>8</sup> – this is often due to contingent factors, such as the raising of the pensionable age of women in the public sector or the regularisation of migrant workers employed in domestic work or care, which do not offer any guarantee of stability for the future<sup>9</sup>. Or - still in relation to the Italian case, but also to that of other European nations - strong support for female employment, and a new aspect of the current crisis, has come from the involvement of women in the ranks of so-called added workers: women, that is, who, as a result of the loss of income of their partner, have entered or returned to the employment market in order to cope with the family's economic difficulties<sup>10</sup>. Even in this situation, however, as evidenced by the latest ISTAT report in relation to Italy, the offer of women's labour tends to be concentrated in part-time work, in atypical contractual forms and in the performance of tasks with low specialisations often not corresponding to the skills or academic qualifications they hold<sup>11</sup>.

It also appears that women, when they leave the market, find it harder to return; this is also evidenced, in Italy and elsewhere, by the high number of “inactive” people, i.e. women, possibly extremely active in the field of domestic work or in the black or informal economy in general, who are seen to be “inactive” in the formal labour market and, as they are not showing interest in seeking visible employment in the eyes of the market, are not calculated among the unemployed. Also for this reason, it is right to say that unemployment rates – which are still very high in the world of women (particularly young women) despite the powerful levelling action of the recession – are not good indicators for analysing the different impacts of the crisis on men and women (Villa

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<sup>7</sup> Istat Annual Report 2012, which shows a trend of stability in women's employment in 2010 and an increase of 110,000 units in 2011.

<sup>8</sup> According to the ISTAT Report of 2013, the percentage of employed women in Italy is 47.1% as opposed to 58.6 in the EU. Also see Lucchese 2012.

<sup>9</sup> This emerges from the Istat Report 2012.

<sup>10</sup> On the growth of the phenomenon of “added work” in Italy, with a significant incidence of more women entering the employment market in the centre-south (where men are more likely to be the only income earners), see E. Ghignoni and A. Verashchagina 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Suffice to say that, as emerges from the Istat Report of 2013, from 2008 the increase in unqualified professionals is, for women, more than double that compared to men (+ 24.9% compared to 10.4%).

2010, 81). Official data on unemployment, in fact, does not take account, amongst other things, of the involuntary nature of many part-time contracts (that is, those who accept them are considered to be employed to all intents and purposes<sup>12</sup>), nor does it take account of the phenomenon, known in economic literature as the “discouragement effect”, now, moreover, also widespread among men, in fact, in percentage terms, more so among men than women<sup>13</sup>.

In addition to numbers and statistics, it is easy to make some predictions which, in European countries most affected by austerity policies and social spending cuts (such as Greece or Spain), have already come to fruition and are supported by empirical evidence. Those predictions relate to some effects of horizontal segregation in the context of the full-blown public debt crisis: while the concentration of women in certain production sectors has thus far “protected” women’s labour compared to men’s labour, it is likely to come to penalise it in future, precisely by virtue of the tax consolidation measures that the overwhelming majority of European countries have enacted or are about to enact. As well as reducing the purchasing power of families, with a consequent reduction in demand for goods and services, these measures in fact tend to hit typically “female” employment sectors, such as public administration, health or social services. This has a dual negative effect: firstly, many women risk losing their place of work or seeing their salary reduced or “frozen”; secondly, against cuts in health, education and personal services, it will be families, and thus in the majority of cases women, who have to compensate for the cutbacks and the shortcomings of the welfare state, placing on their shoulders an additional workload, obviously unpaid.

## **2. All because of the crisis?**

In light of these figures and predictions, it is certainly not a case of “levelling the score” or claiming that the economic and financial crisis that is still on-going has affected women more than men. As emerges from the recent ENEGE report, which was drafted,

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<sup>12</sup> It has been calculated that in Sweden, for example, the number of involuntary part-timer workers is greater than that of the unemployed, male and female (source: ENEGE report).

<sup>13</sup> ENEGE report.

inter alia, by various Italian economists<sup>14</sup>, the crisis has affected both men and women to varying degrees, showing, at the same time, some unprecedented analogies of behaviour on the market: in addition to the “transversal” effect of discouragement noted above, the most important analogy, which also constitutes one of the conclusions of the cited report, involves the definitive refutation of the traditional characterisation of the female workforce exclusively in terms of reserve labour, absorbed by the market in line with the increase in demand and expunged by the same when that demand contracts. The Italian experience, from this perspective, is emblematic where, as we have seen, female labour has shown some resilience also (but not only) due to the entry or return to the labour market of women forced to deal with the economic hardship suffered by the family as a result of the crisis; while in the role of reserve, and more exposed to the risk of unemployment, we find, in this phase, alongside young women, often female graduates, young men, as well as migrants, particularly when male and originating from non-EU countries (R. Carlini and G. Pavone 2013)<sup>15</sup>.

The point is that, due to the way in which official statistics are often represented and, in particular, due to the inadequacy of the solutions adopted at political level by the European governments, the crisis risks radicalising, and thus making them chronic, the critical issues that have always connoted the weakness of women’s presence in the market. These are well-known discriminations but upon which, as the authors of the essays collected in this section invite, it is worth focusing.

As well as being well-known, these critical issues are closely related: this is what emerges from the study of salary differentials by the labour law expert Luciana Guaglianone and from the study of the effects of deregulation of the labour market in Italy by the sociologist Gabriella Pauli, which open the single-themed section of the magazine. Against a regulatory framework, according to Guaglianone, which is, all in all, satisfactory, both at national level and EU level, where the prohibition on salary discrimination is, under the consistent case law of the Court of Justice, interpreted in terms of fundamental principle, the salary gap between the sexes (average difference between the gross hourly pay of women and men across the economy) remains a

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<sup>14</sup> Bettio *et al.* (2012).

<sup>15</sup> Also see data offered in relation to the cited ENEGE report.

widespread phenomenon at European level (17.8%), with significant peaks, unexpectedly, in the Netherlands (23.6%), Germany (23.2%) and Sweden (17.1%). As mentioned, the crisis has contributed to reducing that gap in sixteen countries of the Union (ENECE Report), while Italy, albeit occupying third position in the classification of the most “virtuous” European countries (particularly due to its low levels of female employment), has seen in recent years an increase in the rate of salary gap, moving from 4.9% in 2008 to 5.8% in 2013.

The Italian case testifies – but a similar argument applies to other European nations – as to how the salary differential often operates as part of those production sectors: so, according to recent estimates by «Il Sole 24 ore»,<sup>16</sup> a female worker in Italy earns 32% less than her male colleague and the gap (which, in clerical work, is 19%) is greater in the north than in the south, but also because in the south the percentage of so-called inactive people rises to 64%.

It is, however, important to consider the strong incidence of the phenomenon on another well-known index of gender inequality. We are referring to occupational segregation, particularly of a horizontal nature, and thus to the fact that women and men still tend to be employed in different sectors (meaning there are “naturally” female and “naturally” male jobs) and, incidentally, the typically female jobs, in healthcare, education and public administration, are less well-paid and (also for this reason) enjoy less social prestige.

Alongside occupational segregation, the other element to which the gender pay gap increase in Italy is largely attributable is – as, again, noted by Guaglianone and Pauli – the gradual increase of precarious and flexible work in the labour market. This primarily relates to the institution of part-time work which, as is well-known, constitutes a typical “choice” for women everywhere<sup>17</sup>, almost always motivated by the need to reconcile

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<sup>16</sup> Barbieri (2012).

<sup>17</sup> See data of European nations in the Eurofound report, *Part-Time Work in Europe*, published in 2011 and available at the address <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2010/86/en/3/EF1086EN.pdf>. At page 2 of this report, it states: «While male part-time is most common in the youngest and the oldest age groups, the female part-time rate increases with age, reflecting gender inequalities in transitions from part-time to full-time».



work and family needs<sup>18</sup>: it is no coincidence that the largest number of decisions made by the European Court of Justice in relation to salaries in recent years concerned this type of contract.

This is why, as noted by the European Commission document *Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015*<sup>19</sup>, cited by Guaglianone, the issue of the salary gap can no longer be considered as solely and exclusively a problem of equality or of balance of the economic earnings between men and women, but it requires the activation of integrated regulatory actions to remove the broader upstream inequalities: not least, the disproportion of family responsibilities that affects both the type of working activity chosen by women and their career perspectives and, as a result, their earning capacity. Conversely – this is the theory supported by Gabriella Pauli – the economic policies of increasing flexible work in the labour market, inspired by neoclassical theories and logics of market deregulation, have thus far demonstrated their inadequacy, contributing to increasing gender inequalities in salary levels, in the forms and organisation of work and in social protection. There is no doubt, in fact, that due to the increase of precarious and flexible work in the labour market that has predominantly affected women. The latter remain, for example, more exposed than men from the perspective of social protection, due to their insecurity and their part-time work which will provide them lower pensions, sometimes to a ridiculous extent, and also due to their continued confinement to household work: that performed in their own home, as a result of the widespread ideology according to which women typically have to deal with it; and that performed in the homes of others, externally, but which often remains in the shadows of undeclared work and which contributes, as stated, to their qualification as “inactive”.

But in order to complete this summary picture of gender inequalities in the labour market – a picture that can be traced in clear terms to well before the onset of the economic crisis – we must also look at so-called vertical segregation.

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<sup>18</sup> Even though, as is noted in the previous paragraph, the phenomenon of involuntary part-time work is increasingly widespread.

<sup>19</sup> Communication of the European Commission dated 21 September 2010 (COM/2010/0491 def.)

So far we have discussed women without further qualifications, and whilst we do not wish to detract from the undisputable theoretical and practical relevance of the differences between women, in the issue considered here, gender type appears to be crucial in determining, autonomously, conditions of social disadvantage, in that even the most fortunate of women by social class membership, due to levels of family income and education, are often destined to pay a high price for the sole fact of being women, especially if they are mothers. It is true that, for example, in Italy, female labour consists mainly of highly educated people (and thus with better paid jobs, which affects the “virtuous” levels of the salary gap in Italy compared to the European average)<sup>20</sup>. However, above the heads of women, of the majority of women, here in Italy just as elsewhere, stands a *glass ceiling*, dotted with senior and decision-making roles that are mostly the exclusive domain of men. This ceiling is as dangerously invisible as it is unreachable and contrasts with the rhetoric of “merit” so rampant in public discourse in recent years, in which all the adopted reforms or those upon which the governments are working invoke meritocracy as the solution to many problems. Despite this, in the case of equal merit and qualifications, the career possibilities for women are destined to encounter a series of obstacles unknown to the male world; and what is striking is how this ceiling is more unbreakable in the private sector, which often boasts, compared to the public sector, that it operates according to meritocratic rules and logic. Yet the data says that women are more qualified, but if they want a career they should opt for a public competition which, with all its limits, is a more neutral procedure compared to the often implicitly “selective” recruitments that characterise access to the private sector (Gualtieri and Rossi 2013)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> In that regard, as recent Istat (2012) data tells us, the unemployment rate of female graduates is increasing and, in any case, four years after achieving the degree, it exceeds that of their male colleagues by an average of eight points.

<sup>21</sup> The recent research report of Banca d’Italia by Bianco, Lotti and Zizza 2013 also focuses on this phenomenon of implicit discrimination (which moreover does not only relate to gender), in terms of which there is a tendency to recruit male candidates with greater frequency than would be justifiable on the basis of the characteristics of the participants in the competition. The classic case, mentioned in this report, is that of the United States orchestras, where the introduction of blind selective mechanisms (*blind auditions*), with a curtain affixed between those making the selection and the candidate(s), has considerably increased the amount of women chosen.

### 3. Anti-crisis measures and labour reforms in Europe

As perhaps could have been expected – and the studies gathered in this themed section thus confirm in various ways – the economic downturn of recent years has not created fertile ground either for the adoption of political solutions able to combat the root causes of the disadvantageous conditions that characterise, from well before the crisis, the presence of women in the labour market, or for considering the removal of those situations as a priority in the political agenda. Indeed, to quote Luz Rodriguez, author of one of the essays found in this section, perhaps the most serious product of the recession, from the perspective considered here, is that issues of gender inequality seem to have even disappeared from this agenda, as though these were issues that we can only afford to deal with in periods of economic prosperity.

With the exception of some European countries which have enacted innovative measures in relation to equal opportunities or measures to make existing structures more effective<sup>22</sup>, elsewhere, still in Europe, the adoption of anti-crisis political solutions has often served as a pretext for undermining the functioning of those structures<sup>23</sup> or for cutting the investments in those policies that support the presence of women in the labour market.

Besides this, the tax consolidation measures passed to address the reduction of the deficit and public debt, for the reasons noted above, risk strongly penalising female workers, both in terms of employment and salary, and in terms of an increase in unpaid domestic work and care (Welby 2009): consider the freezing or cutting of salaries and the reduction of personnel in the public sector; the pension reforms, the reductions of benefits/allowances/structures relating to the care of people or even the increases in tariffs for subsidised public services. It is no coincidence that the impact of all these measures has almost never been assessed from a gender perspective.

Moreover, as noted by the already cited European ENEGE report from which we have taken the data set out above, the situation appears to be very different in the individual

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<sup>22</sup> See ENEGE report.

<sup>23</sup> In Italy, for example, equal opportunities committees in public administrations have disappeared, arousing little uproar and a similar destiny was had by the Ministry for Equal Opportunities, now merged with that of sport and youth policies.

national situations: against countries in which the specific implications of the austerity measures on gender inequality are modest, in others, the significant decline in employment, benefits and social services is significantly affecting the progress previously made.

From this perspective, the Spanish experience, to which the contribution of the labour law expert Luz Rodriguez is dedicated, is emblematic. While the law against gender-based violence and that in relation to equality (*Ley de Igualdad*), adopted by the Spanish Parliament respectively in 2004 and 2007, have had the effect of conferring to issues of gender inequality an unprecedented centrality in public debate and in the actions of the government, the recent labour reform of 2012 marks a significant step backwards, particularly on the front of the reconciliation between family life and professional life. Thus, the entitlement granted to male and female workers to enjoy a series of days of leave to satisfy requirements for caring for their families – an entitlement qualified in terms of real subjective right by the cited *Ley de Igualdad* – is severely downgraded and its exercise is subject to the decision-making powers of companies.

Besides, the fact that the labour reforms made during these times of crisis showed themselves to be more sensitive to the interest of companies, and not to the rights of male and female workers, clearly emerges also from a cursory analysis of Italian events. The content of the two measures introduced by the recent Fornero reform (Law no. 92/2012), with the stated objective of “supporting parenthood” are extremely informative in this regard. On the one hand, there is the new mandatory paternity leave<sup>24</sup> – which, for as long as it lasts (one working day, plus two optional days), is perhaps useful for allowing their wives or partners to take a trip to the hairdressers (Martelloni 2012, 25-26) – on the other hand, there are the vouchers for nurseries and babysitters<sup>25</sup>: a measure, the latter, aimed only at mothers (as if, in spite of the sharing of roles, reconciliation is only an issue for women and, in actual fact, it risks becoming so), who may use them only on the condition that they waive the enjoyment of parental

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<sup>24</sup> Art. 4 of Law no. 92/2012 states that, on an experimental basis, for the years 2013- 2014- 2015 employed fathers must refrain from work for the period of one day, within five months of the birth of their child, and a further two days of continuous abstention, enjoyed in replacement of the mother, for which daily pay is provided by the INPS (NI body) amounting to 100% of the salary.

<sup>25</sup> C.f. Art. 4 of Law no. 92/2012.

leave, meaning the enjoyment of a right, which is also the most important guarantee offered by the Italian legal system in support of parenthood. The suspicion, as has been pointed out (Cardinali 2013), is that the motive behind the exchange of leave with a financial payment is the desire to encourage the return of mothers to work, also in view of placating the fears of employers, often inclined to associate with maternity a decline in productivity and other serious stereotypes, thereby also avoiding the risk of so-called blank resignations. Needless to say, more effective regulation is required against this risk compared to what has recently been introduced in the cited Fornero reform (Ballestrero 2012), along with a more pervasive system of controls.

More generally, it is not surprising that, thanks to the measures devised by the Italian government (and while the allocation of funds to support the expansion of local services for children is reducing), in Italy the main support to parenthood comes particularly from grandparents, especially from grandmothers (24% of Italian babies against 7% of German babies are cared for by their grandparents when they are not entrusted to any type of educational institution)<sup>26</sup>. Yet, as is known, investing public resources to support care services would be a fundamental means for ensuring greater continuity to the participation of women in the labour market as, moreover, is shown by the fact that female unemployment rates in Italy tend to reduce significantly in coincidence with the birth of the first child and even more so with the second, also due to the significant incidence of the cited phenomenon of blank resignations<sup>27</sup>.

You might think that these are problems typical of European countries dominated by a catholic/family-focused culture and particularly where the effects of the crisis in terms of public deficit and increase in unemployment rates have been strongly felt but, looking closely, even in countries, such as Germany, that are stronger from an economic perspective and better-equipped from the point of view of public or subsidised care services<sup>28</sup>, over the course of the initial years of the new millennium, there has been a

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<sup>26</sup> For further information, see Keck, W. and C. Saraceno (2008).

<sup>27</sup> According to the annual ISTAT report of 2011, over half the interruptions to working activity after the birth of the first child are dictated by employers.

<sup>28</sup> Precisely in August 2013 the German Parliament was preparing to discuss a reform proposed by the Merkel government which would involve the provision of the right to a place at nursery for every child living in Germany: a project, supplemented, however, by the controversial provision, inspired by

reduction in social spending and a *cultural retreat* which has reiterated the domestic centrality of the female role. As highlighted by the comparative study proposed in this section by three German sociologists Ostner, Kurz and Schulze, the reforms recently launched in Germany have certainly allowed the country to better address the economic crisis in progress but, albeit being an aspect neglected by our own newspapers, women have paid a very high price for it. The welfare cuts which, in a liberal perspective, would help to recover competitiveness on the markets for the nation, have also led here to an increase in the precarious nature of female employment: against the greater involvement of German women in the labour market compared to the bleak Italian and Spanish situation, almost half of them in 2010 were found to be employed in part-time jobs (46% against 8% of men), often “mini-jobs” with very low salaries. Reflecting on the “successful” German reform is therefore also important as it allows for us to question the very legitimacy of the demands that, in the name of the “common good” are brought by the various rulers of the day.

According to interpretation proposed by Clarissa Rudolph in the essay found herein, the recent employment policies in Germany, using the rhetoric of individual autonomy whereby everyone is responsible for him or herself and the collective entity should not be charged with duties of care, only actually serve to re-credit a traditional vision of the sexual (or sexist) division of familial roles, focused on “voluntary” female work: so, in fact, many women are forced to give up spaces of visibility in the public context to deal with requirements imposed by the “private”, and due to the scarcity of their income often also a future of economic independence.

Reaching similar considerations on the ambivalent nature of the insertion of women in the labour market (employed, yes, but at “low cost”) is also the study performed by Sabine Beckmann on the increase of so-called *adult model work* in Germany. Combining the genealogical method of Foucault’s matrix with the analysis of some qualitative data obtained from empirical research, this study provides some critical ideas for reflection upon what, according to the author, replaced, in many western industrialised nations, the model of social organisation of work based upon the

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principles of right-wing welfare, of a monthly allowance (so-called *Betreuungsgeld*) for those parents who, instead of nursery, decide to keep their children at home.

centrality of the *male breadwinner* (with wives who stayed at home): the reference is to the so-called *adult worker model*, often invoked by European social reformers in recent years, which requires, by virtue of the feminization of labour, women also to be treated as autonomous individuals on the market free to choose *between* the career and the family. The impression, however, is that also in this model, the field of care continues to be confined to a privatised, familiar space, hidden and dominated, unaltered, by the modern ideology of the separation between the private sphere and the public sphere: an ideology, we might add, that has helped to disguise the artificial origin of that separation and, with it, the manifestations of a patriarchal device that no longer acts in the forms of sovereign power but, in Foucault's terms, through a network of widespread knowledge and power. So, while the feminization of paid work everywhere becomes slightly synonymous with its precarious nature, as it is for many young men, the rhetoric of individual responsibility that accompanies saving policies on social investments marries well with the celebration of the advent of a new paradigm, where, with a certain assonance with respect to some dictates of so-called *choice feminism* (Casalini 2011), women are characterised precisely as individuals free to choose. A paradigm, however, that in its theoretical configurations seems to ignore the real living conditions of people (Daly 2011) and the structural contexts within which existential choices are made, as well as the diversity of those choices for men and women and between different groups of women, as well as between individuals of different identity and sexual orientation.

#### **4. Ambivalences of the “feminization” of work and gender discriminations**

Certainly in Italy, but not just there, the family, far from being perceived at political level as an entity in which to invest resources, (has represented and) represents a source of *wealth* to compensate for the deficiencies from the dismantling of the welfare state<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> By saying this, we are not revealing any secret: Istat itself said as much in 2008: see R. Ranaldi and M.C. Romano (2008).

To avoid any misunderstanding, we note that the reference to the familial social model (meant traditionally) is due to reasons of mere opportunity, and does not belie, of course, any assessment regarding its greater moral importance compared to alternative forms of union or to single life. Rather, the use of that model is justified by the fact that the available data makes reference to it, allowing us to highlight how social policies have unload and are still unloading on this type of “private” area the responsibility and resolution of the majority of issues linked to the reconciliation between times of work, times of rest and human reproduction<sup>30</sup>. The consequence being that precisely in the context of the traditional family, dynamics of gender inequality tend to be reproduced and perpetuated (almost) surreptitiously (Moller Okin 1989).

It is no coincidence that transformations of the nuclear family risk causing the depletion of this *source of wealth* based upon “female volunteering”, which could lead to reflection on the reasons, perhaps partly also of convenience, that often accompany, particularly in Italy, the attitude of stubborn resistance to the legal recognition of forms of cohabitation alternative to the heterosexual family.

Moreover, the analysis of the Italian case allows us to highlight how leaving women “at home” today does not at all produce a greater impact in terms of the well-being of the traditional family, instead allowing for the emergence of the paradoxical combination between low levels of female employment and the decrease in the birth rate (Valentini, 2012). And, besides, the phenomenon of female housewives has also profoundly changed: based upon the complexity of its composition today, as shown by the research by Franca Maria Alacevich and Annalisa Tonarelli published here, it is a phenomenon that now escapes any unitary characterisation. It is important, on the other hand, to identify and understand the in-depth causes of “inactivity” in the female labour market (very high in the Italian context, where in any case the role of housewife is still quite widespread and culturally accepted).

From reading the essays that make up this single-themed section, it emerges that the lack of policies aimed at a redistribution of care work between the sexes constitutes the crucial aspect of problems linked to the gender gap. While some equality has been achieved in the management of this labour – essential to social reproduction – this has

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*



occurred, the majority of times, thanks to the *outsourcing* of domestic activities and care. Women have thereby reduced their (“free of charge”) involvement in those activities, but without a corresponding redistribution of roles and responsibilities within the couple (Menniti and Demurtas 2012, 30).

On the other hand, the political solutions proposed to date have addressed the issue of reconciliation substantially through the expedient of part-time work. This, however, has not reaped great rewards and, instead, as has already been noted, has ended up adding further weight to the shoulders of women, compromising their career opportunities and their future economic independence and reducing their contractual power in the context of the family. Various studies show, on the other hand, how the time spent on domestic work by men and women changes in relation to their qualifications and the income of the two partners: as their education levels and employment income increase, women tend to spend less time on domestic work. In particular, the more women reach the level of income of their partner, the more they are freed from family responsibilities; in parallel, men who live with women earning high incomes from work dedicate more time to domestic activities and to care. «It should therefore be highlighted how the economic aspect is one of the few variables that shows the opposite relationship between the two partners » (*ibidem*), supporting the theory that greater symmetry in the world of work encourages greater symmetry in private and family relationships (Saraceno 2007). Also for this reason, reducing the gender pay gap should be a primary objective of public policies, which would produce both economic and social benefits<sup>31</sup>.

However, beyond the expression of good intentions, often translated into regulatory principles of limited effectiveness, the contributions gathered here show the sad evidence of the non-existent or at least insufficient attention of the political world and the social parties towards the problem of the gender gap in its various guises. It is a well-known problem, but it is constantly overshadowed by other issues that are considered more urgent. Yet the OECD, as early as 2008, associated the lack of exploitation of the potential of female production with a substantial failure of the market, because gender inequality translates, amongst other things, into an incredible

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<sup>31</sup> The study performed by Menniti and Demurtas also notes that the distinction between the genders is more marked in the South and that the domestic workload is more imbalanced, to the disadvantage of women, when they live in rural areas (*ibidem*).

waste of resources: for example, consider the under-utilisation of women's educational capital and how the «greater inclusion of women in the labour market could potentially increase the European GDP by approximately 27 per cent»<sup>32</sup> – in Italy by 32% (Palomba 2013, 81; Casarico and Profeta 2010). Often, it is the same people who run the economy, as noted by Alisa Del Re in a contribution published in the opening issue of this magazine (Del Re 2012), who invoke “the entry of women into paid work” as a possible solution for getting out of the crisis: it is a shame that in exalting the role of female productive work as a key resource for the development of social and economic productivity, they hardly ever ask how this development could improve the living conditions of women.

In our opinion, the results of the research presented by Michela Bolis, Cecilia Manzo, Ivana Pais at the end of this themed section should be read precisely with a view to enhancing women's potential. Repudiating any essentialist temptation, which confines women to “natural” destinies by virtue of their innate altruistic qualities, the study by the three sociologists, in fact, gives us clues as to how, in the context of a very political and operational declination of the ethics of care, a predilection to care can contribute to developing a different, and more positive, approach to entrepreneurial activity, or at least to relationships with employees. It is a delicate aspect: there are those who look at «putting into production the aptitude to relating and to care, historically more marked among women, trained for centuries in the reproductive role » (Morini 2010) as one of the (disturbing) faces of the “feminization” of work, functional to a bio-capitalist economic system that would tend to convert the professional occupation into “service”, often leading to an overlapping of work times with living times (Leccardi 2009). An interpretation of the transformations of contemporary work worthy of attention – female and male workers often make direct experience out of knowledge – which suggests, together with other reasons, that we should adhere to a weak, and not celebratory, version of the idea of care of the other: an idea that works on the premise of the ascertainment of (inter)dependence as a figure of humanity and, on the theoretical level, on the conviction that the very notion of “oneself” is incoherent unless understood as

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<sup>32</sup> Palomba's text makes reference to the study, funded by the Swedish Ministry for Gender Integration and Equality, by Löfström.

the result of a complex series of networks, relationships and exchanges with others (Robinson 2006). This is also useful in stating that the claim and especially the effective guarantee of legal rights and moral claims, primarily of equality, cannot be separated from the form of society of which those rights and those claims are part. It is for this reason that the reduction of asymmetries, for example in the use of time, should take account of the incisiveness performed by the traditional gender roles, since the data shows that asymmetry reduces, and thus the time of women is considered less “expendable”, in social and cultural contexts in which the representation of the sexual division of roles is not so strong<sup>33</sup>.

We are aware that the recent transformations of the world of work, exacerbated by the economic and social crisis of recent years, have contributed to increasing the ambiguity of the expression “feminization of work”. Thus, this expression is no longer suitable for denoting only the increase in the female presence on the paid labour market (with all the ambivalences noted above). At least two other meanings have been attributed to it which evoke as many new phenomena compared to the past and not necessarily, it seems, connected between. The first phenomenon, which we have just mentioned, relates to the exaltation of empathetic, emotional and relational qualities, traditionally ascribed to women, in paid professional contexts, or at least in some of them (Morini 2010; Del Re 2012); the second refers, on the other hand, to the extension, irrespective of gender (perhaps on the side of social class and relevant ethnicity), of the mechanisms of subjugation and exploitation that have historically marked out the female condition, meaning the processes of making labour precarious and flexible and the lack of guarantee of social rights would involve now, albeit to a different extent, men as much as women (Beck 2000).

That said, we remain convinced that the disadvantageous position of women in the labour market – productive and reproductive, paid and “voluntary” – should be interpreted primarily as an issue of gender (discrimination). Against the background of a common destiny which involves, without doubt, a concatenation of mechanisms and strategies of exploitation, it is women, as women, who are left at the fringes. The picture

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<sup>33</sup> When, in the family, the only income earner is the woman «the gender asymmetry leaves room for a greater male contribution»: A. Menniti, P. Demurtas (2012), 29.

that emerges from the recent labour reforms adopted in response to the various winds of crisis, tend not only, as stated, to reiterate the centrality of their domestic and nurturing role, but also to complicate their overall living conditions, strengthening stereotypes and social expectations of which they have always been the exclusive recipients, albeit in the good company of individuals variously assimilated to the female universe.

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