

How women experienced the lockdown in Italy: From new vulnerabilities to new forms of agency

AG AboutGender
2022, 11(21), 229-257
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Abstract

The article questions the coping strategies adopted by women in order to deal with and manage subjective experiences during and after the first total lockdown in Italy (from March 2020 to May 2020). Following this, in order to understand the meanings attributed by women to their specific experiences resulting from this intersection, as well as the strategies they adopted to deal with it, the author opted for qualitative research methods, as shown in the next section of the article. The analysis show, relevant shift towards individual responsibility on a structural level but also a shift in responsibility on a very private level – predominantly to the detriment of women. The almost automatically expected return of women to their traditionally attributed tasks in the unpaid economy on both, the structural as well as on the cultural level has laid bare a particular social order, installed by a patriarchal system of power and functioning. Against this background, the analysis clearly showed that the notion of social distancing may not be an

appropriate way to describe women's behaviour during the pandemic, which can be described within the core categories 'adherence to traditional gender roles', 'recreating new social interactions' and 'transformative strategies'.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown, women, gender roles, social distancing, vulnerabilities, forms of agency.

1. Theoretical introduction

Global interdependence and interconnectivity – results of the second modernity – enabled the coronavirus to circulate worldwide in such a short time. Linked to this, Beck (1992) would define the COVID-19 pandemic as a typical example of the risk society, which, in its form, is a distinctive phenomenon of our modern and global world. However, the pandemic, as a societal risk situation, cannot only be understood as something that prevalently expresses a future component (Beck 2009). In contrast, the risk linked to the COVID-19 pandemic is very concretely embedded in the present – the cultural, moral and normative context in which people live (Douglas 1992).

1.1. *Rational approach to crisis management*

In order to minimize the risk of the pandemic and thus reduce the spread of the virus, politicians and governments worldwide have primarily relied merely on the knowledge of experts in order to identify rational collective strategies and measures for society. This uniform approach, as Serhan (2020) outlines, has been underpinned and legitimized by war-like language. In line with this, the World Health Organization (WHO), for example, in early 2020, called for countries to take “*urgent and aggressive action*” (WHO 2020). Christoyannopoulos (2020) and Branicki (2020) emphasize that such war-like rhetoric has contributed to legitimate

rational measures, directed by experts, attributing particular responsibilities to citizens themselves. In line with this, stopping the spread of the virus would only be possible by underscoring individuals' responsibility, not only for their own well-being but also for the well-being of the community (Christoyannopoulos 2020). Following this line of argument, civil society has been forced to accept responsibility for *the social*, which, on a political level, has been neglected for decades by neoliberal policies that have reinforced policies of social austerity, together with the privatization of medical and social care services (Aluffi Pentini and Lorenz 2020). As mentioned by De Ceukelaire and Bodini (2020), privatization of health and social services has affected the ability to coordinate large-scale preventive campaigns; has limited the capacity to expand curative services in crises like the current pandemic; and has eroded the broad public's confidence in the institutional and political system as a whole. Specifically, in the case of Italy (one of the European countries most affected by the coronavirus), progressive dismantlement and privatization of the national health system have seriously affected its ability to manage the pandemic and contain the disease (De Ceukelaire and Bodini 2020).

1.2. New inequalities emerging

The rationalist approach to crisis management, which Branicki (2020) defines as “typified by utilitarian logics, masculine and militaristic language, and the belief that crises follow linear processes of signal detection, preparation/prevention, containment, recovery and learning”, has not gone unnoticed in critical and, in particular, in feminist literature (Ozkazanc-Pan and Pullen 2020; Cullen and Murphey 2021). Branicki (2021), for example, puts emphasis on the prioritization of quantifiable resources and measurable outcomes while neglecting already existing inequalities within society (Ali *et al.* 2020). Similarly, Mitroff, back in 1988, highlighted how rational crisis management generally tends to protect and

maintain organizations and social orders, as well as social systems, rather than protecting and advancing the interests of socially marginalized groups in specific situations. Linked to this, there is a growing strand of empirical research (Lokot and Avakyan 2020; Dlamini 2021) supporting the fact that rational crisis-management strategies (based on deductive or mathematical logics rather than on inductive, contextual and relational elements; see Gilligan, 2011) have unequally affected women during the pandemic. In their empirical work, Power (2020) and Collins *et al.* (2020), for example, have obtained evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically increased the care burden of women in families. In particular, this is true for single-parent households (mainly the responsibility of the mother) (Fortier 2020), for women/mothers of elementary school-aged children (rather than preschoolers) and among less educated parents, as outlined by Qian and Fuller (2020). In addition, empirical research in different European countries shows that women (more so than men) reduced their working hours during the lockdown, and although parents tried to share household responsibilities more equally, mothers still shouldered more childcare and household responsibilities than fathers (Farré *et al.* 2020; Hipp and Bünning 2020). In fact, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the total amount of care work in households with children has grown massively and shifted from the paid economy to the unpaid one. Women's jobs and livelihoods are more vulnerable to the pandemic, and women are more likely to be under-employed or unemployed because of the "lockdown recession". Thus, while women are less likely to die from COVID-19 than men (Polglase *et al.* 2020), they are disproportionately affected by the socioeconomic and psychological effects of the virus and containment measures, particularly lockdowns, due to the impacts of structural inequalities. They report a higher incidence of anxiety, depression and loneliness, and lower levels of satisfaction and well-being (Etheridge and Spantig 2020). As Blaskò *et al.*

(2020) outline, the pandemic has clearly shown, once more, how a patriarchal division of gender roles still prevails in Europe.

Although literature on the impact of the pandemic and adopted measures for women is growing, this field of study is distinctive in its systematic examination of the coping strategies adopted by women in order to deal with and manage subjective experiences during and after the first total lockdown in Italy (from March 2020 to May 2020). In line with this, the analysis presented here had two main goals: firstly, to critically review the subjective meaning that women attribute to this particular experience of lockdown and secondly to analyse the coping strategies women adopted, being involved not only as women but also as mothers and workers. Following this, in order to understand the meanings attributed by women to their specific experiences resulting from this intersection, as well as the strategies they adopted to deal with it, the author opted for qualitative research methods, as shown in the next section of the article.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research aims

The project is part of the research “Being locked up? Women’s experiences and collective action during and following the Covid-19 Lockdown” (BELOW), which is carried out by the Free University of Bolzano and EURAC research. It investigates and critically evaluates women’s experiences and female collective action and mobilization during and following the Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020 in the region of South Tyrol in Northern Italy. South Tyrol is an autonomous province in northern Italy. The province is granted a considerable level of self-government, consisting of a large range of exclusive legislative and executive powers. With the new Autonomy Statute of January 20 1972, the authorities in Rome place responsibility for the education of all three of the ethnic groups (German, Italian

and Ladin) in South Tyrol in the hands of the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano. The present article is the research output of the first research phase that aimed to foster the challenges that women in the region of South-Tyrol faced during and following the Covid-19 lockdown and to identify the resources that they mobilized to cope with their situation.

2.1. Data collection

The research adopted a qualitative approach to understand the complex settings through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. In the research phase (October 2020 - January 2021) 17 interviews were conducted with a varied selection of women (employed, unemployed, with/without children and with/without migration background) to understand the resources they used to cope with the complex situation of an unexpected and strict lockdown imposed by the Italian Government on March 9th. Due to the Covid-19 situation, all interviews were conducted online and recorded for further transcription by the interviewers themselves. In average, the interview's time was between 20-45 min. The three criteria for selection of the sample were gender (women), being a parent (a mother with children between 1 and 16 years of age) and being a worker (employed or self-employed). Thus, central to selection of the sample was the specific experience of working mothers shared by all interviewees. As table 1 shows, the interviewees have been chosen based on different criteria: the level of education, the possibility during lockdown to work from home, children, family status, profession as well as the housing situation (rural/urban). The intersection of these criteria guaranteed a diversity of viewpoints, respecting the principle of variance maximization and enabling the researchers to obtain a group of participants that was as heterogeneous as possible, maximally contrasted in terms of the relevant characteristics and thus informative.

	<i>Education</i>	<i>Home office</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Family status</i>	<i>Profession</i>	<i>Housing situation</i>
IP 1	University	yes	5 years, 3 years	married	full-time employed psychologist	rural
IP 2	University	yes	6 years	living together	Freelancer	urban
IP 3	High school	no	9 years, 7 years, 4 years	married	part time employee in the service sector	rural
IP 4	High school	yes	7 years	Living together	self-employed	rural
IP 5	University	no	14 years	seperated	part time employee in an cultural association	urban
IP 6	work- related training	no	1 years	living together	full time worker in a pharmacy/ on parental leave	rural
IP 7	High school	no	6 years, 4 years	living together	part time employee in the private sector	rural
IP 8	University	yes	7 years, 4 years	married	Full-time employee in a consulting firm	urban
IP 9	High school, work-	no	16 years, 15 years, 11 years	married	full-time employee in the health sector	rural

	related training					
IP 10	University	yes	5 years	living together	full time teacher	urban
IP 11	Middle school	no	1,5 years	Living together	full time employee in an association	rural
IP 12	High school, work related training	no	16 years, 14 years	married	employee in the health sector	urban
IP 13	High School	Yes	3 years, 1 years	married	part time teacher	urban
IP 14	University	Yes	3 years	separated	full time researcher	urban
IP 15	University	Yes	3 years, 16 years	married	Researcher, private institution	rural
IP 16	High school	No	6 years, 2 years	married	full time employee in public sector on maternity leave	urban
IP 17	High school	Yes	7 years, 9 years	married	full time employee in the trade sector	rural

Table 1: the sample of interviewees

2.2. Data analysis

The analysis of the data is based on the methodological approach of Grounded Theory (Bryant and Charmaz 2010). In an alternating and repetitive process of data collection and analysis, successive categories were formed and related to each other, ultimately condensing them into a theory. Writing memos was important for the analysis. These helped to develop ideas, to structure, reflect and form concepts and accompanied the entire research process (planning, survey, evaluation). The analysis is based on the method of open coding. In this process, the data were analysed on a small scale by breaking them down into units of meaning and interpreting them in terms of their conceptual content. For this purpose, they were assigned to codes. The aim of this procedure was to go beyond a descriptive approach and work towards concepts. This was done primarily through systematic theory-generating “W-questions” that were applied to the material.

2.3. Research context

From February 23 to March 8 2020, after the discovery of some outbreaks, in Italy, ten municipalities in the province of Lodi and one in the province of Padua were quarantined and, in some regions, schools and universities were temporarily closed. As of March 5, teaching in-presence for schools of all levels and universities was suspended throughout the country. On March 9, a new Prime Ministerial Decree extended the ban on unnecessary travels, the suspension of sports activities and events, and the closure of museums, cultural sites and sports centres to the whole of Italy. Further restrictive measures came into force with the “Decreto #loRestoaCasa”, published on March 11, which provided for the suspension of common retail activities, catering services, religious celebrations, and prohibits the gathering of people in public places or places open to the public. On March 22, a new order, adopted jointly by the Minister of Health and the Minister of the

Interior, prohibited all individuals from moving to any municipality other than the one in which they were located, and a list of other activities that were not considered necessary was published, which must be suspended. All these measures were extended several times, until May 3, 2020.

3. Interpretation of the data

3.1. Containment measures

Between February 23 and March 11 2020, following discovery of coronavirus outbreaks in northern Italy, various containment measures came into force with the “Decreto #IoRestoaCasa”, stipulating suspension of common retail activities, catering services, religious celebrations and the gathering of people in public places. On March 22, a new order, adopted jointly by the Minister of Health and the Minister of the Interior, prohibited all individuals from moving to any municipality other than the one in which they were located. Single measures were extended several times, until May 3 2020. On 5 March, in-person teaching in schools at all levels and in universities was suspended throughout the country (from March 15 until April 10 2020). Successively, the Italian government (with the decree of April 10 2020) extended the closure of all public educational institutions further, until May 3 2020, followed by a national decree, which envisaged closure of all public educational institutions for the entire semester and a continuation of distance learning.

3.1.1. Institutional support measures

In contrast to the uniformity with which the anti-contamination measures were implemented, to absorb the social consequences of the anti-contamination strategies, institutional support measures for families have been highly selective. On May 18 2020, the province of Bolzano offered an extraordinary emergency

childcare service for kindergartens and primary schools (to be made available until 16 June 2020). Essential prerequisites for accessing this service were that both parents were employed; they had no other means of caring for their children; and they were not entitled to flexible working hours or did not have the option of working from home. The second support measure for families, extraordinary parental leave, was a measure introduced by the “Cura Italia” law decree (published on March 17), with the purpose of supporting working parents (both mothers and fathers), helping them to take care of their children during the period when teaching activities were suspended in schools due to the epidemiological emergency. The decree was the first official government measure taken in response to the emergency resulting from the spread of the coronavirus. The “Rilancio” law decree (published on May 19 2020) extended the provision for extraordinary parental leave until December 2020. COVID parental leave provides an allowance equal to 50% of one parent’s salary and leave of up to 15 days (subsequently extended to 30 days). However, extraordinary parental leave could only be requested by employed parents – one parent per household and only if one parent did not have the possibility of doing “smart” working. The selectiveness of both support measures excluded many families *a priori* from this form of institutional support.

3.1.2. Traditional gender roles and attributed responsibilities

Due to the high selectivity that has characterized institutional support measures, a shift from social to individual (family) responsibility (in terms of dealing with the pandemic) can be noted. In fact, on the micro level of families, it is evident that there was an almost automatic shift in responsibilities – to the detriment of women. In line with this, with the ongoing lockdown, women were increasingly tied to a dual (or even triple) form of responsibility: continuing to function in their modern role (as working mothers) as well as in their traditional role (as

housekeepers and caregivers). The triple burden on women can also be contrasted in non-pandemic times, but was exacerbated due to the pandemic as the analysis show. In line with this, One interviewee (a mother and full-time employed psychologist) made this clear: “[A]ctually we live in a relatively equal relationship, but I stayed at home with the children, took over home-schooling and tried to do my work from home at the same time. For me, it was somehow easier to address this in the work environment”. Similarly, a mother and part-time employee in the service sector stated: “[T]here was not much discussion about it; for us it was actually clear that I would reduce my working hours”. A mother and freelancer also underlined this automatism: “There was not much time to think about it. I was always more at home, so it was actually logical”. Thus, on both a structural as well as on a cultural level, the emergency situation of the lockdown accentuated a particular social order based on a patriarchal system and gender division.

Even if men’s contribution increased during lockdown, it did not redress the fundamental imbalance in the distribution of household labour, for example. In supporting this claim, the analysis showed that men’s contribution to the household was often oriented towards the “outside world”. Hence, as revealed during the interviews, men took on jobs that could be done outside the home, such as going shopping or going to the recycling centre. Furthermore, here, a certain automatism in favour of the traditional division of tasks between the sexes could be observed. One interviewee (a mother and full-time researcher working from home) stated: “[H]e takes care of that. He went to work anyway; everything that had to be done outside the house was done by him”. In contrast, women continued to act “inside the private space”: “I was at home with the children, I cooked, did the laundry etc. I was responsible for the household, yes. Only the shopping was done by my husband when he came back from work” (mother and part-time employee in a hair salon).

As could be seen from the analysis, the policy of social distancing had a different impact for women. Following Goffman's line of argumentation (1961, 17), in modern Western society, "[T]he individual tends to sleep, play and work in different places". When comparing this to the interviews, it could be observed that during the lockdown, this separation lessened, particularly for women, and their spatial radius of action reduced drastically: "I was always at home. Of course, it was much more because everyone was at home. Yes, look, he works... of course, [but] even if he works half a day, I do more. I always do the housework like doing laundry, vacuuming, tidying up etc.". Furthermore, it could be seen that men generally carried out the tasks they "liked to do". In line with this, one interviewed woman (a mother and full-time worker in a pharmacy, on maternity leave) reported: "When he wasn't working, he liked to cook. I helped him cook, so he took care of that". In several interviews (IP3, IP5, IP8, IP9, IP11, IP15 and IP16), housework was strongly anchored in women's responsibilities, and when men shared household chores, this was interpreted as being by way of help/support or as a pastime, rather than a (shared) responsibility. Indeed, several statements made during the interviews underlined this, such as "he helped me a bit" or "he just did what he liked to do".

In line with this, as stated by the women interviewed, and confirmed by statistical data (Autonomous Province of Bolzano 2021, 29), during the so-called second phase of the lockdown (when most families' resources were exhausted, particularly in terms of annual leave, as well as in terms of support from social networks), women – more so than men – adopted flexible working arrangements such as a reduction in working hours and/or adoption of flexible work arrangements (home and/or smart working): "After three weeks our holidays were used up, then for the first time we didn't know what to do. One of us had to stay at home and it was kind of clear that I would do it. I work in the private sector, so I asked for a reduction in hours. My husband didn't ask at all" (mother and full-

time employee in a consulting firm). Similarly, another interviewee (a mother and full-time employee in a clothing shop) stated: “My husband continued to work for 100% [of his usual working hours] as always, for him it was not possible to reduce working hours, [and working from] home was not an option, so I did”. The fact that this was not only a short-term experience but turned into a long-lasting consequence of the lockdown was shown in various interviews. In line with this, one interviewee (a mother and full-time employee in the health sector prior to lockdown) underlined: “During the lockdown, I initially reduced my working hours. Then I started to have health problems myself so that I couldn’t manage my old workload. I am still not working full-time”. This is confirmed by regional and national data. In fact, statistical data show that in the province of South Tyrol, the number of women in part-time employment has increased (+101), while the number of women in full-time employment has decreased significantly due to the corona crisis (-1,054) (Autonomous Province of Bolzano 2021, 29).

3.2. The lockdown as subjective experience

3.2.1 Feelings of hope

The analysis showed that during the first few weeks of the lockdown, women widely accepted the guidelines issued to reduce contamination and stop the spread of the virus. In fact, most women described the social distancing measures and subsequent closure of most important institutions as a “reasonable” and “appropriate” response to the infection figures that Italy was facing at that time¹. Interview partners underlined that the adopted measures demanded a high level

¹ By March 27 2020, according to the report by the World Health Organization, Italy had had 80,539 confirmed cases and 8165 deaths, making it the highest-ranking country in Europe in terms of the number of people affected by the virus. Around just three weeks later, as of April 15 2020, the World Health Organization reported 162,488 confirmed cases and 21,069 deaths, meaning that the death rate in Italy had almost trebled. In fact, during the lockdown from March to May 2020, Italy was one of the hardest-hit countries, consistently ranked as one of the countries with the highest mortality rates worldwide.

of individual commitment, i.e., investment of “mostly personal resources like time, money, patience and all that” (mother and part-time employee in a private firm). This included, in particular, taking care of children and elderly people at home, supervising the homeschooling of school-age children and/or doing household chores (on top of their own work responsibilities). As shown in the analysis, women generally defined this investment of personal, economic, social and cultural resources as a kind of “leap of faith for politics”, and they expressed not only hope but also an expectation that institutional support would follow. Women also generally described the first few weeks of the lockdown as a positive experience for them and their family. In doing so, one woman (a mother and employee in the private sector) stated: “[T]he first period I remember as very positive. I was at home, also my husband and the children. We shared so much time as a family which we hadn’t done for a long time”. Similarly, another interviewee (a mother and part-time employee in a clothing store) stated: “It was a nice time because I could do a lot more with my children. Without the stress of having to go here and there. That was nice yes”. Thus, the positive mood which the interviewed women experienced during this first period of lockdown was closely linked to have more family time and to the trust in politicians’ and local decision-makers’ responsibility towards the public. Linked to this, one woman reflected: “I thought to not support us [with this], they couldn’t and wouldn’t do [that]. But we [know] better [now]”.

3.2.2. Feelings of anger, disappointment/excessive demands

Women with kindergarten or school-aged children generally described the first extension of the closure of all public educational institutions as a turning point in their perception of the lockdown as being a relatively positive experience. When describing this period of the lockdown, women generally used language that expressed negative emotions like “anger”, “disappointment” and “despair”. To

underline this, one woman (a self-employed mother) reported: “I got angry; I realized that now my batteries were running out. There was this fixed idea in my mind that schools [would be] opened again and then the dates changed several times. It was just a mixture of anger and sadness and resignation and also fear of what would happen next”. Another woman (a mother employed in the private sector full-time) expressed similar feelings: “[W]hen I realized that the schools weren’t opening this year [2020] this was a low point for me and [I became] resigned, I have to say – and also my children”. Following this, they not only had to bear their own negative feelings but also the (different and changing) emotions of their children: “[A]fter Easter, my children’s mood was changing. It was ok before, but they had no social contact, and from Easter onwards, the schools didn’t open. So it was quite difficult to explain to them that they could not go outside to play with the other children or go back to school or kindergarten. This was difficult for them” (mother and full-time teacher). Individualization of responsibility for dealing with the consequences of measures changed the perceptions of these women, which shifted towards ever greater desperation and loss of trust in institutional support. A feeling of being “abandoned by the system”, as one interviewee (a mother and full-time employee) described it, along with a feeling of being “alone as a family – as a woman” (mother and full-time researcher), spread. Consequently, all women underlined that being responsible for both working (from home) and homeschooling had a significant impact on their own psychological well-being: “This multiple burden over weeks, that was very stressful. You just function more. In the end, it’s hard on the psyche” (single, self-employed mother). One interviewee (a mother and full-time employee in the private sector) underlined: “[F]or the whole month of March, when we had projects to deliver, I took care of the child almost [all the time] during the day [and] I took care of other things and partly I worked and then in the evening, at 9

o'clock, I was there and I worked until 3 o'clock at night. You cannot do that for weeks on end. In the end I collapsed".

3.2.3 Feelings of risk (role in society)

In the popular press, COVID-19 has been called "a disaster for feminism" (Lewis 2020) as heightened care obligations within the pandemic context negatively impact on many women's financial and employment security. The women in our interviews confirmed this line of argument: "During lockdown, I just felt like they were taking us back to the 50s and nobody's saying anything, that's how I felt. And we have an employment rate for women like in central Europe; we run with them; we are great. But when the going gets tough, we are treated like Tunisian women" (self-employed mother). Similarly, another interviewee (a mother and full-time lecturer) reported her assessment of the particular situation during lockdown: "In these times, as a woman, you are very quickly written off. You couldn't count to three [before finding] yourself with a part-time job, no more retirement pension, the children are stuck, you have to do the homeschooling with your children etc.". These tendencies towards strong conformism, as well as stereotypical and supposedly safe role distributions, were present and observable before the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly after the increase in right-wing parties in Europe, promoting a rather conservative and traditional image of women, without too much headwind from the wider population. However, these tendencies have intensified during this emergency.

3.3. Strategies for coping

Strategies for coping were developed in response to these subjective experiences. Following this line of argumentation, these strategies were influenced by particular contextual markers, which included temporality on the one hand and spatiality on the other hand. Considering the spatiality of action, the importance

of the virtual world of smartphones and social media increased. In fact, one interviewee reported generally increasing use of the virtual space in order to stay in contact with the outside world and to recreate sociality in times of social distancing. Thus, getting in touch with friends, virtual participation in parties and participation in interest groups were some of the activities described in the interviews, and these things characterized the respondents' strategies. Considering temporality, it could be observed that in the first period of lockdown, women were more engaged in family management and less in self-care activities. It was only secondarily that women started developing strategies to deal with or change their subjective experiences under lockdown. In doing so, during the first period of lockdown, women made more or less "fateful" decisions, in an almost reflex-like manner, without enough time or knowledge available to reflect on other alternatives besides investing personal resources. Such decision-making was characterized by a high level of trust in politics but also in the opinion of experts, with their appropriate knowledge and skills (Zinn 2008).

In addition, individualized intervening conditions had an impact on participants' coping strategies. The privatization of public life via the stay-at-home policy showed itself to be profoundly divisive. According to this, the amount of social, cultural and economic capital that a family had at its disposal (with which to survive this crisis without fearing for its own existence) revealed already existing and newly developed divisions within society. Following this, the analysis revealed a dividing line between personal housing situations, i.e., between those who lived in a large space and those who lived in cramped conditions: "[W]e don't have a big terrace because it's a city flat. That means that you play ball in the condominium dog litter box" (mother and full-time researcher). In addition, women living with their families in rural areas generally had more space available: "We live in a small village, a house in the countryside with a garden. We could always go outside. That was positive" (mother and employee in a private firm).

The reality of lockdown was also lived differently, depending on the personal working situation. Here, a dividing line appeared between those women who had the opportunity to make use of flexible working models (“I worked from home, for me it was extremely stressful. It was a tearing test between childcare and work”; mother and full-time employee in the public sector) and those who continued to work as usual (“I work in the healthcare sector. I continued to work. For me it was ok”; mother and employee in the health sector). Linked to this, the working situation of family members had a direct impact on their financial situation and drew a dividing line between those who were financially secure even during lockdown and could afford private childcare (“[F]or me the lockdown was ok, the children were at home for only two weeks, they are in private kindergarten, which were not closed”; mother and full-time teacher) and those who suffered hardship as a result of the lockdown (“[I]t was a very difficult time with a lot of pressure, financially. My husband was not working and I could but it was financially difficult”; mother and part-time employee in a cultural association). The divisive character of the stay-at-home policy depended further on the family situation and family constellation. Here, besides others, the main dividing line was found to run between those who had a personal support network (“[M]y parents live in the same house so this was very helpful for us because they looked after the children when I was working”; mother and full-time teacher) and those who did not (“I was alone with the children most of the time. My husband worked as usual, 100% and we do not have our parents in the vicinity, this was very difficult and stressful”; mother and part-time employee in the public sector). The accentuation of inequalities derived from the intersection of different categories and codes of intervening conditions. Linked to this, the analysis showed a drastic deterioration in living conditions, due to the stay-at-home policy, in the overlap of the following codes: living in cramped conditions; flexible working models/working from home alongside homeschooling; and not having personal support networks.

3.4. Action/interaction

As seen so far, the adopted measures and the uniformity with which they were implemented, as well as the lack of adequate institutional forms of support for all, forced families – especially women – to compensate for the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing upon their own resources. Following this, the analysis clearly showed that the notion of social distancing may not be an appropriate way to describe women’s behaviour during the pandemic, which can be described within the core categories ‘adherence to traditional gender roles’, ‘recreating new social interactions’ and ‘transformative strategies’.

3.4.1 Adherence to traditional gender roles

In terms of adherence to traditional gender role models and the associated responsibilities can certainly be interpreted as a coping strategy for dealing with a crisis. It was clear from the interviews that some women objected to being relegated to traditional gender roles with the attributed responsibilities, but there were also women in the sample who underlined the specific “responsibility and competencies of women” – to manage lockdown for the whole family, which not only included taking care of children but also their partner: “[M]y partner was very bored when he was at home, so we looked for new hobbies for him. For example, to work in his workshop; he always liked that kind of work” (mother and part-time employee in the private sector). Similarly, another woman explained: “We women and mothers always try to reconcile things. [I] need to think like this because I have a family, children, my husband; even if you are stressed you have to not show the children; you have to play, you have to laugh, everything, even if inside you are worried and stressed” (mother and full-time employee in an association). Chung (2020, 134) describes such attitudes as “ensuring the emotional wellbeing of not only children but also partners and other family members. In other words, they are in charge of the mental load of worrying about the family”. What is

central here is preservation of the family system in the course of a crisis situation. Such practices are thus ways of maintaining social cohesion, stability and social order. In line with Douglas (1992), such coping strategies function to protect symbolic boundaries and manage threats to social order. Women following this kind of coping mechanism have deliberately kept out of critical discussions and have used their own personal and family resources in order to live a life that closely resembles their normality, despite the upheaval of everyday life. This form of agency falls into the category of burden-bearing actions that “conform” to changing structural circumstances, rather than shaping them.

3.4.2 (Re)creating new social interactions

The analysis indicated that women (when unable to physically meet up with friends and family) recreated social interaction in digital space, in a communicative as well as in a participative way. In terms of the latter, one woman, for example, pointed to several courses and initiatives offered online by different organizations/associations during the pandemic: “[W]ith the Association [name of the association] I did some online keep-fit sessions, then with the internet now [being this] internet world, I participated in online cooking courses. So you meet people even if you stay at home” (mother and part-time teacher). Similarly, another woman indicated that she had increasingly joined mothers’ groups on Facebook to look for activity ideas for her child: “As a mother, you are always trying to keep your child occupied, especially at this time. There was a lot on the internet, especially during this time” (mother and full-time employee in the public sector, on maternity leave). Cooking and sharing recipes online were also a means of entertainment and a way to do something good for themselves: “Sharing recipes... lots of them [with a photo] of the dish... [that was] a feature [of] the pandemic” (mother and full-time employee in an association). In terms of the communicative aspect, women in the interviews spoke of more intensive

exchanges with friends, acquaintances and family members via digital media such as Zoom, WhatsApp and other communication applications, which acquired greater importance during lockdown as the main gateway to the outside world: “We have a WhatsApp group that is very much alive; some people live in Australia; [we’re] scattered all over the world. And you could see how the virus moved. And there were equal phases of behaviour for everything: first the jokes, then the more spiritual part and then you [become] resigned, this curve” (mother and part-time employee in the trade sector). Another woman affirmed a similar thing: “I’ve always been in touch with all my friends, with everyone, with my family, with my [loved ones], so I’ve never felt alone. You know that there have been many private initiatives where people would come together for dinner, for an aperitif, to play music etc. In short, this has been done and we have done it too” (mother and full-time employee in the private sector). Via the digital sphere, new forms of togetherness and social relations developed: “My husband always says one of his best birthdays was this year in April, with friends from England and [it was] practically [just] the two of us with them two on a Zoom call and then everyone else popped up and then [there] were people from America, New Zealand, Dubai...; all sorts of people dialled in” (mother and full-time employee in the private sector).

3.4.3 Transformative strategies

Parallel to the coping strategies described above, the analysis gave insights into another form of strategy development, namely the wish to change something on a more structural level. This form of strategic action was not only characterized by the recovery aspect but also strongly oriented towards change, reducing the vulnerability of a particular group of people on a long-term basis. In this perspective, individual autonomy was linked to creation of enabling structural forces, based on a collective and shared consciousness. In the interviews, two local

groups/initiatives were named as being particularly supportive in enabling people to share their own experiences during lockdown. On the one hand, the *SUSI* Facebook group (2,721 members) gained importance during the pandemic by discussing and sharing women-related issues and experiences. On the other hand, the *Be a reminder* initiative currently has 1,589 subscribers on Facebook. The *SUSI* platform sees itself as a platform for living feminism, which discusses gender-sensitive approaches to transforming society. As stated by one woman interviewed: “[T]his raising of awareness of the importance of public discourse on certain issues is for me a formative and lasting experience that also draws from the lockdown” (mother and full-time researcher). The interviews indicated that developing transformative agency is very strongly associated with self-efficacy, as expressed by one interviewee: “Definitely, you had to make a point of actually doing something because otherwise you won’t be heard. And for me it was important to do something for self-efficacy, that you experience yourself differently” (mother and full-time employee in a private firm). The platform embraces women-specific issues related – but not limited – to experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with this, several awareness initiatives related to violence against women or the large-scale “body-shaming in pregnancy” awareness campaign have been identified as key issues by members of the group, prompting discussion and development of a shared collective consciousness, resulting in concrete forms of gender-sensitive activism. Of more specific relevance to the COVID-19 pandemic are the activities of the *Be a reminder* group, which advocates for those who have no lobby – and no voice – in society and whose voices have not been heard during the COVID-19 pandemic – especially children and youngsters. Linked to this, the core group has initiated several political actions, like the “*Listen to us now – Ascoltateci ora*” initiative (<https://be-a-reminder.com/in-action>) on behalf of children who were excluded from educational institutions for too long in the first lockdown. This initiative developed, as a co-founder pointed out, “via WhatsApp.

It went from Facebook to WhatsApp and after a few Zoom calls the idea was born” (mother and full-time employee in the public sector). The initiative was borne out of the shared experiences of working mothers with small children, eager to fight for more equality and gender-sensitive measures: “[W]e all met at night on Zoom, all women with children... small children, which is absolutely no coincidence... women who like to work, who do a job they have chosen, but who fight to be able to stay in their working world and that was unbelievable; we always met at night and in between some eyes got wet” (mother and full-time employee in the private sector).

To summarize, all women in the interviews reported different forms of adapting strategies that increasingly involved the virtual space and could be collocated merely in their private sphere. In contrast, the adoption of transformative strategies may be favoured by the overlap of different categories and codes. In line with this, women who were well-educated (i.e., university graduates), some of whom were in high-ranking professional positions, who had experienced the double burden resulting from flexible working models and lacked personal support networks, showed an increased tendency to initiate transformative strategies. They shared the lived experience of an impending regression of women’s position within society, and felt the need to organize and to act by developing different forms of transformative agency that call for a stronger gender lens in post-COVID response and recovery efforts, in order to prevent disproportionate impacts from exacerbating existing inequalities. Conversely, those women who tended not to adopt transformative initiatives tended to share a traditional gender role consciousness, were generally embedded in a wider personal support network and lived in a large space.

4. Conclusion

“Are we all in this together?” With this question, Ali *et al.* (2020) have endeavoured to meet the main challenge deriving from the rational, mathematically oriented logic of COVID-19 anti-contamination strategies in society. In fact, as shown in this article, the consequences of the measures (in particular, the social distancing mantra) have not only exacerbated already existing inequalities but have created new forms of social stratification by promoting a policy of individual responsibility. This article has presented insights into how increasing inequalities that widened the gender equality gap between men and women during the first year of the pandemic are thus both a structural problem (given the lack of comprehensive gender-sensitive policies, measures and access) and a cultural problem (given the traditional distributions of roles that are still very much entrenched in society). This has led to a general devaluation of women within society, who were urged to conform to modern and traditional ideas and expectations. In line with this, analysis of the data revealed the different strategies that women adopted in order to deal with the overlapping of causal conditions in the form of anti-contamination measures and related policies, institutional norms and priorities, and the traditional gender roles that characterize social institutions. Given the importance of informativity in this study, the focus was on the specific experiences of women/working mothers during the Lockdown. In doing so, the results give valuable insights into first-hand experiences of women dealing with the consequences of the pandemic in a specific territory. Against this background, the results may contribute to develop a more critical perspective on the uniformity in dealing with the pandemic promoting a more gender and social stratification sensitive thinking in the post pandemic recovery plans. At the same time, some limitations and shortcomings can be pointed out. In line with this, an analysis of the intersection of the different variables (different cultural backgrounds, age of the children etc.)

that emerged during the sampling process would have been useful but was not within the primary scope of the study. Subsequent research questions could discuss this interplay against the background of a common subjective experience.

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