

**The importance of intersectionality
for gender equality
in the labor market analysis**

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to use intersectionality framework to question the neoliberal rhetoric that currently characterizes gender equality policies in the labor market. While recent guidelines attribute the chances of entering and advancing in the labor market primarily to personal merits and talents, they also provide a homogeneous view of the female population that fails to take into account the significant differences among women and result in the creation of several barriers that hinder access to and participation in the labor market. This paper then intends to reflect on how the use of an intersectional perspective is necessary to better analyse inequalities in the labor market and to design policy actions that are more attentive to women's overlapping identities, roles, and experiences to understand the barriers, challenges, obstacles, and opportunities they face.

Keywords: intersectionality, labour market, inequalities; gender, gender equality.

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1. Introduction

The advance toward gender equality seems to be going through a standstill. This is largely because women are mostly employed in those sectors of the economy characterized not only by high labor intensity, lower wages, and lower social protections but also seen as lower innovation and profitability and therefore associated with lower social recognition.

The slow progress is the result of two opposing trends. On one hand, the proportion of women among skilled professionals continues to increase, as does progress towards wage equality, albeit at a slower pace. Indeed, while the gender quota law introduced in Italy in 2011 has produced an increase in the number of women on the boards of listed companies, there have been no trickle-down effects either in management positions, where there are still few women or in companies that are not required to comply with quotas. On the other hand, the employment conditions of the most vulnerable women (with children, low education etc.) are found to be much worse, emerging strong segregation among women. These impacts appear to be the result of the neoliberal turn of gender equality policies aimed at valuing especially women who have high credentials and thus can meet the demands of competitive markets that, however, force the most fragile women to accept extremely disadvantageous conditions to remain employed. From this, the paper aims to use an intersectionality framework to question the neoliberal rhetoric that currently characterizes gender equality policies in the labor market. While recent guidelines attribute the chances of entering and advancing in the labor market primarily to individual merits and talents, they also provide a homogeneous view of the female population. Thus fails to consider the substantial differences among women and results in the creation of several barriers that hinder access to and participation in the labor market. This paper then intends to reflect

on how the use of an intersectional perspective is necessary to better analyse inequalities in the labor market and to design policy actions that are more attentive to women's overlapping identities, roles, and experiences to understand the barriers, challenges, obstacles, and opportunities they face.

The paper is organized into four paragraphs. The first highlights the risks of neoliberal feminism, the second discusses how the use of intersectionality can revitalize the study of inequality in the labor market also in an organizational logic aimed at re-discussing corporate culture (para. 3). Finally, the last part of the conclusions discusses the role of intersectionality in analysing the impacts of labor policies and promoting interventions more oriented toward reducing labor market inequalities

2. The risks of neoliberal feminism

Neoliberalism refers to an extremely complex phenomenon that can be analyzed starting from its political, economic and cultural determinants. From the political point of view, neoliberalism is associated with a set of policies that entails mainly deregulation, privatization, and structural adjustment to reduce social welfare. As an economic doctrine, therefore, stemming from Milton Friedman, and the Chicago School allows a central valuing of private enterprise and the market with a deep retrenchment of the State. More deeply, neoliberalism is also, in the Foucaultian sense (Brown 2005), a new rationality that sees the market, competitiveness and self-entrepreneurial attitude as the pillars for development and growth.

In the construction of this new rationality, gender issues have become an important category within development discourses, structures and practices, with a focus on the selective appropriation of elements of feminist thinking within contemporary neoliberal approaches to development (Wilson 2015). As pointed out, many scholars show how the values and arguments of feminist movements have

been incorporated into the logic and tools of neoliberal ideology (Prügl 2015). This new kind of feminism called 'market feminism' (Kantola and Squires 2012), 'managerial feminism' (Eisenstein 2009), 'faux-feminism' (McRobbie 2009), 'transnational business feminism' (Roberts 2012) and 'post-feminism' (Elias 2013), seems to be far from generating structural change.

One of the most relevant aspects of this process is the progressive instrumentalizing of gender equality that is relevant only if focuses on benefits for businesses and the national economy (Elomäki 2015). In an increasingly hegemonic way, transnational government, international economic institutions, large corporations, but also women's organizations and female associations cast gender equality as good for the profitability of the business and national economic growth and competitiveness. Also, the governance techniques, for example, cost-benefit calculation and tools for reduction of transaction cost, which translate political decisions for more gender equality in financial terms, legitimize and strengthen neoliberal economic priorities (Bexell 2012, 398; Kantola and Squires 2012, 386).

Gender equality loses its ethical purpose aimed at fighting the conditions of inequality and the power asymmetries, to become functional for the performance improvement of socio-economic systems.

The incorporation of economic rationale is for example clearly visible in the EU's gender equality policy (Elomäki 2015). In the 1990s and for most of the 2000s, the EU institutions focused on women's representation in political decision-making. The economy was regularly mentioned, but the policy goal was complemented with the idea that the under-representation of women- also in the economy - violated the principle of justice and democracy. The roadmap for equality between women and men 2006-2010, strengthened by the Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015, was the first strategy to represent economic decision-making as an autonomous policy problem with a market-oriented rationale. At the same time in terms of leadership, balanced participation of women and men in

decision-making is linked not to the need to balance power asymmetries and to guarantee greater democracy in decision-making mechanisms, but instrumentally to a more productive work environment and better economic performance.

The increasingly close link between gender policies and economic competitiveness is driving two trends. On the one hand, talents and personal efforts to keep themselves employable, productive, and attractive to the market are emphasized; on the other hand, women are seen as a homogeneous group that it is necessary to bring or keep in paid work without questioning the structural elements. While this is very evident when referring, for example, to finance or top positions where it is primarily individual credentials that are valued, it is also true, for example, when the reference is to women's entrepreneurship. Rather than questioning access to economic resources, asymmetries related to care work, and structural barriers to entry in certain sectors, the focus is on promoting digital skills or access to technologies to overcome barriers. Indeed, there are several contributions highlighting the supposed democratizing effects of technologies (Fieseler and Fleck 2013; Fischer and Reuber 2014; Pergelova *et al.* 2019). Technologies not only do not eliminate structural inequalities (indeed, the online environment re-proposes off-line inequalities) (Dy *et al.* 2018 and 2017) they also foster an homogeneous image of women entrepreneurs without concern for impacts related for example to ethnicity, age, sexual orientation etc.

This echoes Fraser's thought, since she called liberal feminism 'capitalism's handmaiden' (2013), just to emphasize the tendency to favour analyses focused on the individual at the expense of structures.

Neoliberalism can be regarded as a form of personal governmentality emphasizing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising through the exertion of entrepreneurial agency within a free market to attain rewards (Featherstone *et al.* 2015; Marttila 2013). In accordance, neoliberalism is

gender-blind and advocates that individual effort will result in meritorious advancement and thus (re)configures the individual constructions of a “good worker” (Adamson 2017). In this vein, moreover, inclusion and non-discrimination policies de facto have already secured gender equality. Career advancement and empowerment are awarded based on skills, competencies, and merit so gender is no longer relevant (Ahl and Marlow 2019). Similarly, it is no longer necessary to deconstruct organizational practices and rules. The gender asymmetry of power that legitimizes what is right and what is wrong within companies is not up for questioning, structural barriers are omitted; the implication being that only workers’ efforts can overcome inequalities by improving working conditions and obtaining the most prestigious positions. As pointed out by several scholars (Treanor *et al.* 2021), this leads to a sort of post-feminist paradox i.e. a disparity between rhetoric and reality.

If the postfeminist actor is an individualistic, empowered woman who is responsible for and proactive about their own life and career (Lewis *et al.* 2018; Rottenberg 2014), a woman that can “have it all” (Rottenberg 2014; Sullivan and Delaney 2017, 839); the ability to attain that success is troublesome. Often, women fail to achieve results, but the cause of failure is attributed to individual mistakes and weaknesses. In a rhetoric where it is believed that equality policies and high credential attainment by women are enough to eliminate inequality, women are to blame for failing to achieve important professional goals. Women who fail to succeed have failed in their ability to adhere to the needed requirements. As a result, women tend to blame themselves for failure, feeling unable and unsuitable.

Compared to this turn of feminism and gender instances, intersectionality, on the contrary, represents a framework that in the opposite direction not only aims to highlight the complexity of different subjectivities but also reflects on power

relations in a processual logic (Puar 2020) that looks at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social positioning/meaning and practice) (Anthias 2008).

However, the marginalization of the structural and power elements underlying inequality has paradoxically made even intersectionality functional to the logic of neoliberalism. The intersectionality framework as a tool of resistance to the mainstream erasure of inequalities issues has been depoliticized and turned into the idea of “diversity” understood as a positive approach to social inclusion. Not only the term intersectionality become widely used, a buzzword (Davis 2008), but it was also matched with a different language aimed at emphasizing its ability to broaden the range of differences to pay attention to, in a logic of valuing diversity. The constant call for the concept of diversity, however, limited the radical scope introduced by the intersectional framework, which had the critique of systems of domination and power hierarchies as one of its most disruptive effects. As Crenshaw argues: ‘There is a sense that efforts to repackage intersectionality for universal (and neoliberal) consumption require a re-marginalizing of black women (2011, 224).

Through the marginalization of power dynamics and structural aspects that cause inequality, the call to intersectionality is thus useful in promotional terms, especially for managers and policymakers. Valuing diversity from an intersectional perspective enhances the competitiveness of firms, and worker commitment, and makes managers who propose these models informed and professional who care about the well-being of firms and workers (Bilge 2013).

So even for intersectionality, the risk is that the representational politics of gender, class, race and so on are detached from their materialist underpinnings and difference is thereby flattened (Mohanty 2013). Moreover, how and who chooses which diversities are detected does not seem to be problematized at all.

Like gender discrimination to be included are only the “diversity” useful to the economic goals of the various power groups.

Thus, intersectionality is either assimilated with the concept of multiple discriminations (meaning as a sum of inequalities), or it is fully integrated into corporate diversity management plans. In either case, whether it is seen as useful for summing up the different discriminations that one may experience or seen in the positive sense of looking at the value of diversity, it loses its radical dimension of questioning power relations and the social structures that sustain it. A depoliticized intersectionality (Bilge 2013), in which the issue of diversity is reframed in market terms transforms radical identity-based politics into corporate diversity tools, exploited by dominant groups to achieve various ideological and institutional goals.

However, despite these risks, in analysing the discrimination that characterizes the labor market, the use of intersectionality still seems to be a key framework. Recovering the analysis of the social relations on which the mechanisms of production are based, analysing the relations of subordination embedded in modern capitalism is necessary to understand how inequalities are produced and reproduced. Moreover, is also crucial to explore the subjective spaces of agency and the processual making of different identities in which, for example, class is not only an expression of income or employment status but is also changeable in relation to different hierarchies of power and subordination.

3. Recovering intersectionality to reframe labor market inequality

Intersectionality can be an extremely useful concept if it addresses relationships of power. However, its use remains relatively limited within studies of work and employment conditions.

This field of study would benefit from greater engagement with and understanding of an intersectional approach first in the analysis and interpretation of discrimination in the labour market. The intersectional approach contains an important caution against over-generalization and the tendency to consider women as a homogeneous group, subject to the same conditions and, above all, with the same opportunities to enter the labour market. After all, Crenshaw's critique was born to point out that the experience of discrimination against white women did not represent a corollary for all other discrimination and that this had precisely led to a misunderstanding and marginalization of the experiences of Black women. In the analysis of labour market and employment conditions, feminist arguments against generalizations based on male 'norms' have ensured that most studies of workers include a gendered categorization and comparison of male and female experiences (Holgate *et al.* 2006). The intersectionality framework introduces two further questions. First, this framework point out that there will be diversity within each category and classification. Is important indeed to pay attention to the generalization of the male or the female experience highlighting the limits of a lived applied to all women, all people of colour and so on. Second, intersectionality is interested in analysing individuals within two or more overlapping categories. These people who lived in an intersectional space, probably feel and experience something significantly different from those occupying just one of the "discriminatory" categories.

Several scholars indeed show the conditions experienced by different women about their class (McDonald *et al.* 2011), ethnic background (Rakoviski and Price-Glynn 2010), age (Jrkinen and McKie 2012) level of education (Wilton 2011; Rafferty 2012) and so on.

Moreover, the ritual mention of the combination race-gender-class not only overshadows other categories of difference such as age, disability, sexual orientation, and religion but also shadows the discovery of new, emerging categories of

difference. This is true especially in transnational workplaces or in the emerging platform economy in which other discriminations such as linguistic fluency or physical performance may produce new inequalities (Eisenstein 2005). Indeed, the gig economy, but also large multinational groups find, just in the extension of organizational hierarchies obtained by exploiting 'global workers' in increasingly fragmented tasks, the main source of exploitations. From this point of view then, intersectionality could allow exploring these new dynamics of subordination and power also to different contexts.

Using an intersectional approach would be very useful to initiate more detailed analyses not only of working conditions but also of the mechanisms that shape, for example, satisfaction especially in some low-paying sectors where women are highly represented. For example, using an intersectional approach provides a better understanding of how the preferences of individuals and groups are often constrained by restricted economic, educational and labor market opportunities. For example, in the case of care work gender alone cannot be used as the framework for understanding women's labour market opportunities and experiences in the care sector. Other forms of social inequalities, such as ethnicity or age and how these interact to shape opportunities and orientations are also central to understanding the hierarchies that exist within the care workforce for different groups and the different nature of attachments (Duffy 2005; McBride *et al.* 2014). Still concerning care work, if we know that these workers build different professional identities depending on ethnicity, for example (Macdonald and Merrill 2009), it would be interesting to understand how and why altruistic behaviours that trap care workers are shaped, or from which specific identities violence behaviours are nurtured. On leadership roles, on the other hand, an intersectional analysis could, in addition to highlighting how a substantial homogenization of men and women is operated when top positions are to be selected (Porino and De Vita 2020), also

allow understanding how power mechanisms shape, for example, languages by excluding “other” identities than socially legitimized norms.

From a methodological point of view, analyses have mostly adopted a qualitative methodology through in-depth biographical interviews. Certainly, with specific reference to the study of occupational conditions, qualitative techniques let to privilege the direct experience of subjects both within a specific group and in the relationship with other groups that influence or condition occupational outcomes.

The intersectional methodology is starting to be applied also to quantitative methods. Empirical work following this approach has used quantitative analyses of large data sets to measure identities as variables, determining their interrelationships and ultimate impact on different material realities (e.g., employment outcomes). They argue that quantitative methods allow scholars to test empirical hypotheses and relationships between variables, have the potential to offer definitive tests of causal relationships, and account for nonadditive relationships (Bright *et al.* 2016). For example, Bright *et al.* (2016) argue that interventionism and causal graphical model using Bayesian statistics can provide a means to test claims based on the intersection of certain variables. The rationale for quantitative and positivist approaches is supported by their legitimacy and authority in what counts as rigorous and legitimate knowledge production in the field of work and organizations.

Following Hancock (2007), however, it seems to be important to distinguish between an intracategorical and an intercategory methodology.

The first, the intracategorical one is certainly the most popular, this approach while foregoing the deconstruction of categories that homogenize individuals within the own group, focuses on the analysis of individual experiences. In this sense, categories should not be destroyed but complexified. This methodology focuses on social groups living at the intersection of different categories to bring to

light the meaning of that experience. The focus is on the analysis of the differences that exist “within” a single group.

The intercategorical instead requires that scholars adopt existing analytical categories to document the relationship of inequalities among social groups and changing configuration of inequalities along multiple and conflicting inequalities. As the context changes, different “configurations of inequality” will emerge, indeed inequalities are reproduced in the interplay between different forms of discrimination, the economic, social, or organizational structure that promotes them and the type of anti-discrimination strategy that would be most fruitful under those conditions. As pointed out by McCall the focus of the analysis is not just on the marginalized subjects or sub-groups but on “the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing” (McCall 2005, 1785).

Although there have been important contributions of quantitative intercategorical approaches in recent years (e.g. Dubrow 2008; Hancock 2013; Scott and Siltinen 2016), most scholars have used the anticategorical and intracategorical approaches to intersectionality, whereas relatively few scholars have applied the concept of intercategorical complexity.

The interaction between different welfare systems, organizational policies, and differing access to employment regulated by contracts with different protections and benefits cause different outputs even within homogeneous groups, for example, gender, ethnicity, or age. Especially for labor market analysis, on the other hand, the well-established tradition of segmentation studies and research (Rubery and Wilkinson 1994) could benefit from this approach in reading competitive or exclusionary dynamics between insiders and outsiders. Looking at these dynamics makes it possible to look at the boundaries built by different groups of workers to carve out privilege or the ability to stay within the market while protecting,

through the exclusion of others, their privileges. This occurs, for example, in domestic work or agriculture among those who have been arriving the longest and newcomers who may experience situations of subordination from individuals belonging to the same ethnic group. Another example relates to the study of new working conditions, for example, in some public sectors, especially in the highly feminized personal service sectors where very different professional conditions are experienced for the same professionality. Due to the progressive privatization of health services, in the same department, it may happen to perform the same job ranging from permanent contract to self-employment through several blurred conditions between self-employed and subordinate. In this case, the interrelation between the type of contract and different organizational contexts redefines the professional conditions and experiences in the overlap between gender, generation, and type of contract.

4. The meso level: questioning the corporate culture

Empirical studies of intersectionality in organizations are growing and the majority address the construction of identities or the relationship between social and work identities (Atewologun and Sealy 2014; Kelan 2014; Boogaard and Roggeband 2010). The emphasis on individual experiences however results in an under-exploration of the intersections of identity with broader societal and institutional practices.

As pointed out by Acker's 'inequality regimes' (2006) 'organizations' are the major site where inequalities are created and reproduced, and result from a complex interaction between individual identity, societal structures, and organizational and cultural practices (Bowleg 2012; Holvino 2003).

In this vein is important to use Holvino's reconceptualization of the intersectionality of social differences as 'the simultaneity of identities, organizational and

societal practices' (Holvino 2010). So individual characteristics (such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality) are considered by analysing the relations between identities, organizational and societal-structural practices and how they create fluid, complex and contradictory inequalities (Holvino 2012; Purkayastha 2012; Ruiz Castro and Holvino 2016).

At the meso-organizational level, using an intersectional approach allows to call into question the supposed neutrality of corporate culture.

Corporate culture can be described as the image an organization has of itself, which is manifested in practices, rituals, symbols, values, and heroes. As pointed out by several scholars (Acker 1990; Wajcman 2000), in organizations norms and everyday cultural practices are rarely gender neutral. Indeed, organizational practices, symbols, interactions, and hierarchies are constructed on male times, bodies and expectations.

The "male norm" can therefore be seen as a set of processes that produce gender differences based on asymmetrical power relations which creates consensus or acceptance of hegemonic practices (Benschop and Doorewaard 1998). These practices embodied by those occupying positions of power are represented or interpreted by actors as masculine and then used to achieve consent within organizations (Martin 2001). These gendered behaviours are mobilized when men jointly enact practices to obtain resources, exercise control and differentiate themselves from others (women, newcomers etc.), as well as by managers who promote for example hiring and career process based on compliance to aggressive and competitive models. The result is twofold: first the normalization and therefore the invisibility of the gendered power in organizations, second the emphasis is on the employee who must adapt to the "right" rules without questioning them. The problem here is related to the flattening on the gender dimension alone. Promoting women is enough to promote greater diversity, but in no case does it promote real inclusion.

The current leadership model “neutralizes” pluralism through the endorsement of individuals who are similar in all respects to their counterparts, apart from their gender.

The lack of intersectionality is risky because dilutes even the policies, if any, focusing on diversity. As shown often these actions serves to protect access boundaries useful for maintaining homogeneity and consolidated mechanisms of power. Especially the power elite within the organizations seem to be engaged in an active process of construction of boundary work (Lamont and Molnar 2002). By building and maintaining boundaries, the insiders actively adapt the regulation mechanisms by defining what kind of diversity can be accepted without altering the previous order.

These processes are carried out not only on the definition of access criteria and credentials but also through precise discursive rhetoric. The type of language used and the underlying values tend to strengthen and reproduce the already shared and legitimized organizational practices and mechanisms.

This fuels a type of culture that accepts only those diversities that conform to the dominant culture. Intersectionality from this point of view can provide important insights into which groups make decisions, through what mechanisms, for example, free care work is considered natural (Razavi 2012), what tasks or duties are considered suitable and to whom, and finally also investigate the normativity of sexual and reproductive behaviours.

Recovering intersectionality in the analysis of the mechanisms that enable people to enter the labor market and also to get a career would also serve to undermine the neoliberal idea based on merit, talents and individual efforts.

In this regard, of particular interest is the concept of ‘translocational positionality’ (see Anthias 2001; 2002; 2008; 2009). This concept addresses issues of identity and belonging in terms of locations which are not fixed but are context, struc-

ture, meaning and time related and which therefore involve change and contradictions. It thereby provides an intersectional framing for understanding how different subject move and acts in different organizational environment and socio-economic context. As an intersectional frame, it moves away from the idea of giving 'groups' or 'categories' of gender, ethnicity, or class, which then intersect and instead pays much more attention to broader social locations and processes. Thus, in the analysis of working conditions, it is important to recognize that, contrary to neoliberal naiveté, that social positions are characterized by hierarchical difference and unequal access to economic, political, symbolic and cultural resources. Naturalized via continuous social reinforcement, these hierarchies are made to appear invisible through apparent normalcy (Acker 2006; Ahmed 2012). From a positional perspective, then, the opportunity to enter, stay and have a career in the labor market, is embedded within complex social hierarchies that influence the unequal accumulation of resources. A marginal positionality constraining the accrual of human, social and economic capital (Anthias 2001) is likely to pose structural barriers to enter and build a successful path in the labor market. Contemporary intersectional perspectives understand gender, race/ethnicity and class as discursive categories, produced by a range of discourses and practices that convey contextually shifting social meanings (Byrne 2006; McRobbie 2009). If we look at the individual experience we explore how individuals creatively, and often surprisingly, draw upon various aspects and contexts of their multiple experiences to gain control over their lives.

Very important then are spaces and contexts of action i.e. LGBTQ community, people of colour and immigrants find in informal networks, often on line, more space of visibility, legitimation but also for awareness raising (Schmitz *et al.* 2020). Meaningful in this regard are the protests of workers in the food delivery industry. Riders even from an evident position of marginality, related to working conditions

but also ethnicity and young age, have succeeded through their wide visibility in the public space to become interesting to management and policy makers.

Looking, therefore, at individuals and their complex interaction with social and organizational practices seems to be useful in questioning both the homogeneity and static nature of organizational cultures and in merging the different positioning strategies that, even from networks outside the organization, can influence selection and career processes and make some of the mechanisms of production and reproduction of inequalities more visible.

5. Intersectionality's for active labour market policies, some concluding remarks

Given the considerations made so far, the adoption of intersectional lens seems to be very important for the analysis of consolidated inequalities and even more for new mechanisms of segmentation. As argued this approach is necessary to reveal the causes and consequences of multiple intersections of inequalities in interaction with social and organizational structures that shape different labour opportunity. In addition to the important implications for research and analysis, intersectional frame seems to be strategic also for the definition of active labor market policies.

The lack of attention to overlapping identities and to structural barriers in entering and remaining in the labor market seems to be one of the reasons behind policies' ineffectiveness. Often policy design focuses on extremely broad groups without capturing either the specificities and differences, for example, when designing policies for women or youth, or reflecting on the processes of exclusion that are embedded in these interventions and that paradoxically deny access to people who would need it most.

Certainly, the need to not fragment the type of targets, to avoid the risk of making different policies too difficult to manage, is a justified concern in policy

design. Moreover, sometimes the failure to apply an intersectional approach is functional in maintaining the focus on physical markers such as race and gender that have a very strong impact in terms of inequalities. Surely the categories of differences are not equal, they vary in terms of visibility; possibility of change; possibility of choice; social-legal regulation, and some have a predetermining effect on inequality. However, actions that do not consider the intersection of different categories of difference and do not look at the power relations and interests at stake exclude the weaker subjects. A good example of this is the phenomena of creaming and parking (Rees *et al.* 2014; Greer *et al.* 2018) that occur in employment services and paradoxically exclude those who would most need to work and do not provide practitioners with tools to understand how to foster the inclusion in the labor market. Labor market analyses also seem to fail to take into account the complexity of subjective identities and the deeply asymmetrical structure of employment.

In this regard, while intersectional analysis can help to dismantle some well-established acquisitions such as those that believe that women are often satisfied with low pay. Gender alone is not enough, and it is only by looking at class and ethnicity as well that is possible to understand how women's working orientations in low paid job are shaped by the subjective expectations to gain a job. On the other some analyses show how social policies that consider only gender without concern for class or family burdens exacerbates class inequality between women by encouraging low-qualified and low-paid women with two or more children to stop working or take part-time (Anxo *et al.* 2017).

Further evidence can be found by looking at the consequences of the pandemic crisis from Covid 19. Women's employment indeed seems to have behaved differently from the economic crisis of 2008. If with Covid female employment collapsed, with the economic crisis it was mostly men who were pushed out of the market with a consequent return of women to work. Analyses that remain fixed on

looking only at stocks, however, fail to capture how in both cases it was the most fragile groups that paid the worst consequences. With the 2008 crisis women entered the labour market but were trapped in very low-quality working conditions where wages are insufficient (the so-called working poor). With Covid, on the other hand, the same women were immediately expelled from the market. The ineffectiveness of aid allocated in the months following Covid, but also the measures designed afterward, call for a deeper reflection looking at the differentiations present both in the female population and in different employment contexts. In none of the planned analyses and interventions is there any reference to the extent to which gender, migration background, low education, or family burden in different combinations can foster exploitative behaviour then legitimizing in the proposed contracts and in highly discriminatory work arrangements.

The use of intersectional analysis in addition to showing how the neoliberal labor market policies create the profound economic and social vulnerabilities experienced by most vulnerable groups especially highlights the hierarchy among different economic and production sectors. These mechanisms penalize above all personal service sectors where the concentration of vulnerable workers is highest. For this reason, an intersectional approach may help to understand that the institution of a minimum wage is a key mechanism of gender equality, thereby identifying the need for a targeted policy approach towards women in low-wage jobs (Rubery and Grimshaw 2011).

Another mechanism that can be better highlighted using intersectionality is related to access to different income supports. The feeling of failure that often follows those who fail to enter the labor market also fosters a kind of blaming that also prompts people to refuse or not benefit from the entitlement to public support.

These behaviours have been highlighted in the literature on poverty benefits (Sutton *et al.* 2014; Shildrick 2018). The fear of being stigmatized for asking for a

benefit can lead to giving up even when there is a real need. Following the definition of stigma provided by Baumberg (2016, 182) stigma is ‘when a person possesses (or is believed to possess) “some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context”. Stigma is rooted in reciprocity norms. People who fail to reciprocate benefits incur social penalties, and to the extent that benefits are perceived to be gifts. The degree of stigma depends on how claimants are perceived as ‘deserving’ recipients, on the level of need and above all on the narratives and expectations of the institutional context. This helps explain why stigma will vary across countries and, we may add, across organizational cultures.

Similarly, work cultures based on productivity, competitiveness, and total commitment to one's work can push, for example, women, especially highly educated women working in highly masculinized fields to forgo, for example, flexibility tools such as part-time, or leave, to situations that then result, for both men and women, in the complete avoidance of parenting. In several cases, the failure in unpacking this patriarchal work context leaves gender and diversity policies, ineffective or often unusable.

Without a greater ability to deconstruct the social norms that affect choices within organizations even normative changes are undermined. As pointed out by Lott and Klenner (2018), in Germany despite part-time for women in upper-level positions has become more accepted due to work-life balance policies at the company level, these women are expected to deliver performance similar to that of full-time workers. Instead, fathers are still expected to prioritize their careers and schedule parental leave according to their organization's business needs.

For the analysis of labor policies, therefore, adopting an intersectional approach is useful both for understanding to whom and how different interventions apply but also, above all, for making more evident the power relations between

different social groups and how they are embodied in the economic and organizational structures.

The intersectional analysis is therefore crucial to better highlight the structural barriers – related to the operation of the political and economic system – of having governmental authorities implement public policy that reduces inequalities. These include the strong influence of the business sector, institutional adherence to this sector's wishes for deregulation and a weakened welfare state together with the ideological discourse that justifies these imbalances of power based on merit, skills and talent.

In this way, intersectionality loses its focus only on identity and subjective dimensions to become a fundamental framework for a structural reading of systems and mechanisms of inequalities, especially in the labor market.

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