

**Toward shared conciliation? Work, families and private life
within a context of crisis**

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Editorial¹

The word ‘conciliation’ derives from the Latin *concilium*, composed of *cum* (together) and *calare* (call), which means to call together, unite, bring into agreement. The normal

¹ Even if this introduction is the result of collective discussions and shared work, Sveva Magaraggia wrote pages 1-3, Paola Bonizzoni pages 4-5 and Daniela Falcinelli 6-8.

meaning refers to the idea of bringing together different parts, to find agreement among competing positions.

So what does it mean to speak of shared conciliation, when speaking about work-life balance? Whence derives the need to use the term ‘shared’ to mark a shade of meaning that is already etymologically present in the term conciliation?

The need for a rethinking of terms derives from a series of considerations. On the one hand, the terms used most frequently in the debate on gender and conciliation (such as ‘balancing’ or ‘flexibility’) often reflect and signal the (apparently inevitable) need for unpaid caregiving work by women and/or the absence of involvement in this work by men. On the other, the profound social transformations and tensions we are witnessing in contemporary societies (in the spheres of both work and family/intimate relations) are radically changing not only the sphere within which the practices and meanings of conciliation take form, but also how the relations between gender, work and family life are (re)configured (Crompton 2006; Gerson 2009).

The purpose of this issue of *AG* is to spark thinking about these transformations and resistance to them, weighing whether and how to modify the language used in talking about them in an attempt to give new meaning to the gap between being parents and being workers, reflecting on how and to what extent caregiving and household responsibilities are shared today, attempting to shift debate to issues that do not receive a great deal of attention by researchers in spite of their increasing urgency.

The nexus around which the six selected essays orbit is an understanding of how caregiving itself is changing in its practices and in its meanings within an increasingly fraught and precarious time horizon marked by profound transformations in family relations, work and social welfare. To what extent do these transformations have or lack the power to initiate transformations in contemporary gender roles and relations?

The essays proposed herein, which explore the theme from different angles and disciplinary perspectives, reveal trends that clearly bring out the tensions between continuity and change.

The differences emerge immediately from data on time use and the division of household labor as discussed in the various papers.

As the most recent OECD data (2014) show, although a slight improvement over earlier years may be observed, the gender gap (in terms of both paid and unpaid work) is still broad: men do an average of 103 more minutes of paid work per day, while women do an average of 122 more minutes of unpaid caregiving and housekeeping work per day. As clearly highlighted by Gaiaschi's paper, these data provide an excellent basis for mapping gender relations in western countries: this map places the Scandinavian countries (not surprisingly) among the most progressive and those in southern Europe as the most conservative. However, in the middle we find the English-speaking countries and countries in continental Europe that are, in this sense, difficult to frame within the classic Esping-Andersen's "welfare systems", suggesting the need to bring them up to date along the lines of a gender perspective.

In particular, the case of the United States (on the road to a dual-career paradigm among partners) is discussed in the paper by Cassino and Besen-Cassino, and that of Italy (in which the paradigm of the man as breadwinner and the woman as caregiver is still culturally rooted) in the paper by Fuochi, Mencarini and Solera. Cassino and Besen-Cassino (basing their work on various editions of the American Time Use Survey) show us that, in families where both partners are employed in the labor market, men do less housekeeping regardless of which partner takes on the role of breadwinner and regardless of the hardships brought by the ongoing recession. This is confirmed by OECD data (2014), which show that in the United States men work in paid employment 61 minutes more per day than women do and perform unpaid work 87 minutes per day less than women do. This gap is significantly wider in Italy: men work 133 minutes more outside of the home and perform housekeeping tasks 232 minutes less per day than women do. Italy is thus a fully "Mediterranean" country, even though this does not seem to be by any means inevitable, especially if we look at the significant direction of change taking place in Spain.

On the other hand, we cannot deny – looking, in this case, at Italy – that some form of change is indeed taking place. A modest increase in participation in caregiving and household work by men has been recorded over the years (1988-2002), both in terms of

numbers of caregiving fathers (+6%) and in amount of time they dedicate to childcare (+20 minutes) (Sabbadini and Cappadozzi, 2011). At the same time, the index of asymmetry between fathers and mothers in childcare seems to be shrinking (from 80% in 1990 to 73% in 2003 and to 76% in 2009. Source: ISTAT 2005 and 2010). These data must be interpreted keeping in mind that one of the causes of this apparent -democratization is the continuing reduction of time dedicated by mothers to housework. We may state that the slow change recorded by the statistics is primarily due to the changing strategies of women rather than men.

Comparative studies (Oechsle *et al.* 2012) support this interpretation of the data. Among European fathers, Italian fathers show the lowest degree of involvement in childcare (such as preparing meals, dressing the children, caring for them when they are ill, helping them with their homework), probably as a result of in addition to cultural and ideological factors of the low participation by Italian mothers (compared to the European average) in the employment market. As brought out in the paper by Fuochi, Mencarini and Solera, we are still far from a truly egalitarian paradigm of sharing, both as regards caregiving and even more regarding attitudes regarding which member of the couple is better suited to providing care. A minority of -innovative couples thus has to cope with a hostile environment both in terms of how the employment market is structured and regarding social welfare policies. They represent, perhaps inevitably, a very narrowly defined social profile in terms of education (university graduates), type of employment (often in the public sector) and area of residence (northern Italy).

The most recent research on fatherhood does not merely record increases in male participation (however slight) in caregiving activities but enters into increasing detail regarding the ambiguity and conflict that they experience, seeking to bring out the salient aspects.

Researchers seek to understand, for example, how transformations in the public sphere of work and the cultural models of masculinity influence how young people play the role of father on a daily basis. Knowing that any change in cultural routines triggers resistance mechanisms, they have analyzed the consequences, with increasing attention of within both the national and the international debate of to the transformations that these fathers

are facing. In this regard, as confirmed by Cassino and Besen-Cassino, a symbolic scale of prestige regarding activities tends to take form between the partners in association with the threat to stereotypical gender roles, a scale that can easily be connected to the division of work based on gender and the social prestige of occupations: just as almost all great chefs in the public sphere are men, cooking within the private sphere takes on a particular meaning that is unaffected by gender differences. The same may perhaps be said of the quality time spent by the new fathers with their children. In this sense, as is well illustrated in the paper written by Carreri, the growing precarity of highly educated young people undermines the possibility of forming a traditional male identity centered on the role of breadwinner. Therefore new forms of participatory fatherhood may constitute a resource for coping with a crisis that has a profound relevance for the relations between gender and employment in contemporary societies.

If we consider these changes in relation to how many years have passed, it is impossible not to admit their limited and marginal nature. Nevertheless, they do send a precise signal of cultural changes underway and of the progressive creation, among the younger generations, of common ground between males and females as regards experiences and experimentation with ways of living, unquestionably something new with respect even to the recent past.

At the same time, we observe, even in Italy, a growing plurality of family forms and ways of being a family. Non traditional family situations are increasingly coming into public view (homosexual parents, single parents, recomposed families, people who are divorced or separated), as well as migrant or mixed families (transnational, multi-locality, or living apart together). The literature on the conciliation of family and work ó and not just in Italy ó has only recently begun to ask the question about the paradigms adopted by these families.

There are numerous aspects that lead us to presume, in particular, that there is some specificity in the experience of families of foreign origin with respect to their native Italian counterparts in terms of participation in the economy, family structures, cultural variability in gender contracts, and management of caregiving relations. For example, in Italy (and also elsewhere) a tendency towards segregation of foreign workers in lower

skilled and lower paid jobs is observed, something which is especially pronounced among women, for whom caregiving, cleaning and assistance still represent the prevailing scenarios in terms of numbers (ISTAT, 2009). What prospects for conciliation are available for employment having little contractual protection (such as housework or work in cooperatives) and characterized by a high level of informality (ISTAT, 2010) as well as by working times and spaces (think of live-in caregivers) that leave very little space for personal/private life?

It is not by chance that a good number of studies investigating the question have highlighted that oftentimes conciliation occurs at a distance for foreign women working in Italy, partly due to migration policies that restrict the mobility of family members and access to rights. The growing number of reunifications and births on Italian soil demonstrates that the sphere of transnational relations does not account for the totality of their experiences and, in this sense, it is interesting to ask what resources there are for families who seldom enjoy the support of an extended network of relatives in their adopted countries (which is often crucial for native families), families that not infrequently contain a large number of dependents. The extreme variety that can be observed both in the rates of female participation in the employment market and in family structures opens questions that so far have only partially been examined by researchers. As rightly emphasized (Abbatecola and Bimbi, 2013), this is also traceable to specific phenomena of social construction of gender and ethnic identity, which bring migrant women to the attention of observers only as ‘care providers’ (as seen in the broad debate on migrant domestic workers) while their real needs frequently fade into the background.

In this sense, the paper by Trovão, Ramalho and Batoréu offers an interesting cross section of the experiences of foreign families in a country, Portugal, where the distribution of household tasks and caregiving between genders is still strongly imbalanced – as we also see in Italy. But instead of adapting to the ‘local’ conciliation paradigms typical of native families, families of foreign origin develop multiple and rather variable forms of adaptation relating both to their ethnic and cultural origins and to their ability to draw on resources that often extend in both directions across national boundaries.

Lastly, the paper by La Rocca proposes an interpretation of the potentials and limits of a response from the legal system to the dilemma of gender differences and the (re)distribution of roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. The author emphasizes that in order for a shared conciliation paradigm to be truly successful, it is necessary to identify new formulas of social recognition and collective responsibility for caregiving activities that lead to a new paradigm of coexistence between genders and greater interchangeability of roles. Beyond the choices made by individuals, couples or specific social groups, the theme of shared conciliation directly calls into question economic development strategies and the role of public powers.

Overcoming the risk that derives from proceeding exclusively by means of continuing accommodation and compromise, destined to produce contradictions, requires precise identification of those responsible for caregiving. Without this, European law implicitly and involuntarily amplifies demands through an emphasis on the rights and value of the person (minors, elderly, disabled, the sick, etc.) without identifying who has the duty and obligation to provide care. In the final analysis, this translates into the absence of conciliatory solutions, with significant repercussions on the professional and private life of women.

As pointed out in many of the contributions collected here, seeking to change the private sphere without modifying the public sphere, and vice versa, cannot ensure the hoped-for shared conciliation. Indeed, it is not a question of imposing one paradigm rather than another, but of managing to dismantle the mechanisms that produce and reproduce a gender-based division of labor. Behind what are presented as "choices" we find a hidden fixity of gender roles regarding caregiving and paid employment (with some slight improvement over time). The objective of policy in this regard should thus be to put measures in place that reduce gender differences in paid work and unpaid caregiving work, promoting greater sharing in conciliatory practices.

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