

# Daily life time of women during Covid-19: trends and drivers

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our living systems and on the economic and political organization of our country. The significant loss of human lives, the interruption of economic activities, the lockdown, to give just a few references, are undoubted threats to our well-being.

The Italian context is of great interest to analyse the possible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic with respect to women's new daily life routines, not only because of the drastic measures adopted by the Government in the first emergency phase, but also because of the significant gender differences that characterise the country. In a more recent study (Chirivì & Moffa 2020) on women's equality paths, we were able to highlight how the typically family-based Italian welfare system – the care of the most fragile people (children, elderly and disabled) is almost entirely entrusted to families – penalises women who bear the burden of looking after everyone. The spread of the pandemic has in fact laid bare the already existing gender inequalities, highlighting a dimension of women's lives that is often hidden or overlooked, based on a persistent disparity in different areas of daily life, from everyday family life to work and social activities.

This paper<sup>1</sup> aims to explore two key issues: gender inequality and links between reproduction and production sphere, focusing on pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in women's life experiences.

**Keywords:** gender equality; productive sphere; reproductive sphere; COVID-19; work-family balance; lockdown; Italy

## Introduction

«If the future of humanity is decided in your absence, because you are too busy feeding and clothing your kids – you and they will not be exempt from the consequences.» (Harari, 2019, p. 7). In the introduction to *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Harari makes it

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<sup>1</sup> We report some of the main results that emerged from a research conducted by Ce.Do.M.- UniSA (Documentation Centre on New Migrations), a more extensive and detailed account of this work can be found in *The Lab's Quarterly 2022 / a. XXIV / n. 4* – ISSN 1724-451X M. Chirivì & G. Moffa *“L’impatto del covid-19 nella gestione dei tempi di vita e di lavoro delle donne in Italia”*.

very clear that many of us can barely afford the luxury of participating in the debate about the future of humanity. A debate that is now more pressing than ever, given the uncertainties spread by the COVID-19 pandemic on our private and public lives in relation to health, work and individual and collective well-being. Despite the uncertainty of the future, it is possible to trace some possible trajectories in the present, with respect to which we must reflect, in the light of the changes brought about by the first phase of emergency and the subsequent phase of transition towards a new normality.

The measures adopted in response to the health emergency caused by the spread of the pandemic – the suspension of non-essential economic activities, confinement to the home, working from home, the extraordinary closure of schools and nurseries – have in fact redrawn the boundaries between living time and working time. The relocation of paid work to the home places a burden on families and requires a different and new management of daily life time, especially for women who are often entrusted with unpaid (domestic and care) work. The new boundaries of working and living time in fact raise the issue of gender equality. The effects of the pandemic – economic and social – do not affect everyone to the same extent and with the same intensity. There is a risk that existing gender inequalities will be exacerbated, thus undermining the – albeit slow and laborious – progress made by western countries towards full equality (which is still a long way off) between men and women.

In this framework, the Italian context is of particular interest to analyse the possible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic with reference to the management of women's life and work times, in the light of a context already characterised by significant gender differences. These differences are identifiable both with respect to the labour market, where women appear to be the weakest link (difficulty of access, discontinuity in career paths, forced inactivity, pay differentials, occupational segregation) and with respect to the different distribution of the family work load (domestic and care work), which is unbalanced on women. The different division of roles in society and in families reflects a welfare system that is still unable to guarantee equal participation both in the labour market and in domestic activities. In a more recent reflection (Chirivi & Moffa, 2020) on the pathways to equality for women, we were able to highlight how the typically family-based Italian welfare system – in fact, the care of the most fragile subjects (children, the elderly and the disabled) is almost entirely handed over to families – penalises women, who bear the burden of care. The lack of effective family-work reconciliation policies points in the same direction. The limited access – in terms of supply and cost – to childcare and other care services, and the still very limited paternity leave, certainly do not encourage a balanced participation in the labour market. Similarly, measures aimed at fostering a cultural change<sup>2</sup> to redistribute

<sup>2</sup> The persistence of certain gender stereotypes, i.e. common and oversimplified images and representations of reality, influence collective thinking, shaping reproduced beliefs about gender relations (Ruspini, 2017).

parental responsibilities to facilitate women's entry or re-entry into the labour market and to counter the gap in professional careers seem insufficient. This challenge requires a change of pace in political and governance culture that looks beyond the (conscious and unconscious) gender stereotypes and social norms that assign care responsibilities and domestic work to women. The current economic situation, in fact, calls for urgent action in this direction. The spread of the pandemic has revealed the persistence of gender inequalities and the risk of worsening the situation of women. A recent report on poverty and social exclusion by Caritas Italiana confirms this, noting that among the new poor there is an increase in the incidence of women, who are «more fragile and disadvantaged in terms of employment and often the spokesperson for the needs of the entire household.» (Caritas Italiana, 2020, p. 22).

Given this scenario, we are obliged to reflect on the organisation and management of daily life time, on how to balance the two worlds in different ways: the domestic-family world where care and reproductive work is carried out, and the productive world where economic and non-domestic activities are carried out. In this perspective, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 directs us to dust off the meaning of one of the key issues that has marked women's life trajectories: the intertwining of the reproductive and productive spheres. This link has been silenced in the debate for a very long time and has excluded and continues to exclude women from the public sphere.

In this framework, the paper addresses the issue of gender inequalities in Italy in the light of the new context created by the spread of the pandemic, with particular reference to the management of women's new daily life times. Considering the key aspects of gender inequalities and revisiting the debate that has animated the reflection on these issues, the paper is oriented to highlight how a different position of women in the world of work and in the family is rooted in a persistent disparity in the management of productive and reproductive life times. And, in this perspective, attention is drawn to how gender inequalities are not an effect of the pandemic but express conditions of life, settled over time, that are still poorly reflected in the prevailing culture of the world of production and in the policies that regulate the world of reproductive life. More specifically, in the first paragraph we address the issues of gender equality paths with reference to the Italian context, in order to understand the framework in which the COVID-19 pandemic was triggered. In the second paragraph we highlight some key aspects that characterise the link between the domestic and non-domestic spheres and how, during the lockdown period, the overlapping of domestic and care work with non-domestic work revealed the interference between the time required for domestic and care work and that more properly pertaining to the productive sphere, making gender gaps more evident.

## The Key Issues of Gender Inequality

In this first part, we refer to some statistics and indicators to represent the state of the art of gender equality paths, with particular reference to the Italian context, in order to understand the framework within which the COVID-19 pandemic was triggered. On the whole, a reading of the data reveals important gender gaps in terms of: (i) labour market participation; (ii) unpaid workload (care and domestic work)<sup>3</sup>; (iii) distribution of employment across sectors of economic activity and occupations. With regard to the latter, it should be noted that horizontal segregation brings into play gender inequalities in terms of pay and career paths, contributing in fact to increasing labour market rigidities and allocative inefficiencies.

A significant estimation of gender inequality with reference to the European Union countries is represented by the Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)<sup>4</sup>, expressed through a score ranging from 1 (total inequality) to 100 (total equality), based on six domains of analysis: work, money, knowledge, time, power and health. The most recent report (EIGE, 2020) states that the European Union still has a long way to go before achieving gender equality. The Gender Equality Index for all European countries as a whole – estimated with respect to the latest data available in 2018 – is 67.9 points out of 100 and shows an increase of just 0.5 points compared to 2017. The estimate for Italy is 63.5 points, which is 4.4 points lower than for the EU-28. In the ranking of the 28 member countries, Italy is in 14th place, behind the main European countries (Germany 2nd place, France 3rd place, United Kingdom 6th place and Spain 8th place). The distinction according to the domains of analysis shows that Italy's scores are lower than those of the EU-28<sup>5</sup> in all the domains considered, except for the health domain (88.4 points compared with 88 points for the EU-28). In terms of content, gender inequalities are more pronounced in the work domain, with a difference of 8.9 points compared to the EU28 average; in the time domain with a difference of 6.4 points and in the power one with a difference of 4.7 points. Less distant are the scores for the domains knowledge (1.7 points lower than in the EU-28) and money (1.6 points lower than in the EU-28), (Fig. 1).

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<sup>3</sup> In Italy, 62.4% of men's total working time is taken up by paid work and 37.6% by unpaid work; the situation is more than reversed for women, who concentrate 75.0% of their daily working time on unpaid work (ISTAT 2019, p. 42).

<sup>4</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is an autonomous body of the European Union, established with the aim to contribute to and strengthen the promotion of gender equality, including gender mainstreaming in all EU policies and the resulting national policies, and the fight against discrimination based on sex, as well as to raise EU citizens' awareness of gender equality.

<sup>5</sup> The EU aggregate refers to the EU-28 and includes the United Kingdom because during the reference period the United Kingdom was a Member State.

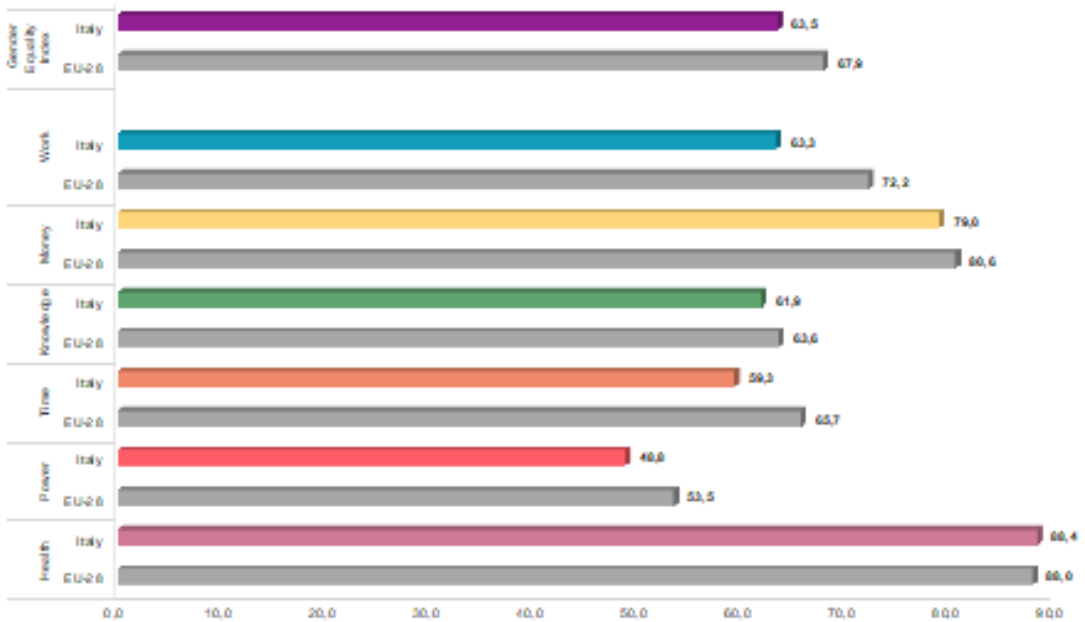


Figure 1 - Gender Equality Index 2020 by six core domains, Italy vs EU-286

(The data for 2020 Index is mostly from 2018)

Source: authors' elaboration on EIGE data

Elements such as age, level of education, type of family condition people's life paths and to a greater extent if they are female. With specific reference to the work domain, there are significant gender differences in relation to family type and level of education. As far as Italy is concerned, the results are not comforting. With regard to the full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate, there is a significant difference between men and women. In detail, the full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate of women in couples with children is 49.2% compared to 86.4% for men, recording a gender gap of 37.1 percentage points; among singles there is a smaller, albeit significant, gap of 28.2 percentage points (Fig. 2). Similarly, there is a gender gap when considering the level of education. In particular, the full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate of women with a low level of education is 13.6 % compared to 37.4 % for men, a difference of 23.8 percentage points; the gap is slightly smaller for those with a medium level of education (20.8 percentage points) while there is a significantly smaller gap (7.7 percentage points) between men and women with a high level of education (Fig. 3).

<sup>6</sup> The EU aggregate refers to the EU-28 and includes the United Kingdom because during the reference period the United Kingdom was a Member State

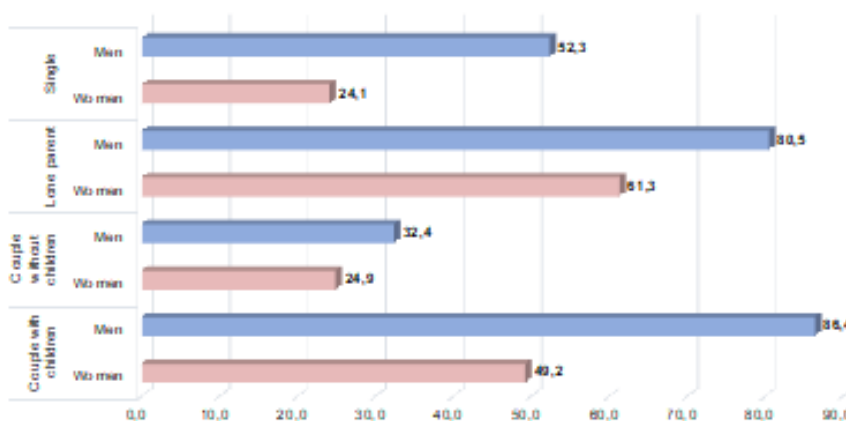


Figure 2 - Full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate by family type and sex, Italy, 2018 (% , 15+ population)<sup>7</sup>

Source: authors' elaboration on EIGE data

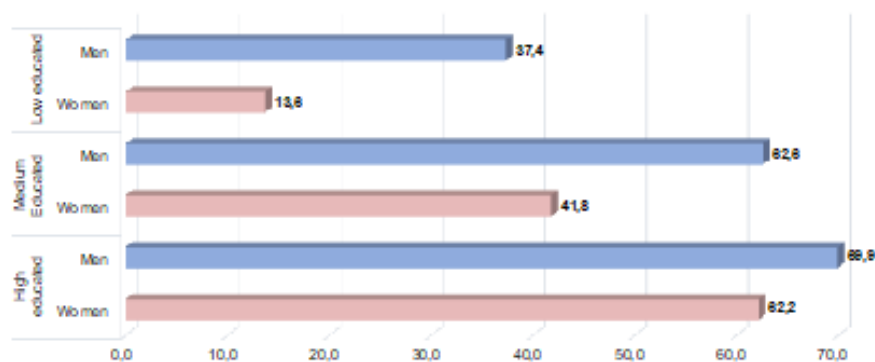


Figure 3 - Full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate by level of education and sex, Italy, 2018 (% , 15+ population)<sup>8</sup>

Source: authors' elaboration on EIGE data

With reference to employed people in education, human health and social work activities, a higher share of women than men is observed. In particular, the gender gap is wider among couples with children: the share of women employed in these sectors of economic activity is 27.5% compared to 6.6% for men, a difference of 20.9 percentage points. Gender gaps are smaller among singles (15 percentage points) and single parents (14.7 percentage points), (Fig. 4).

<sup>7</sup> Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) employment is a measure that counts employed persons in a way that makes them comparable although they may work a different number of hours

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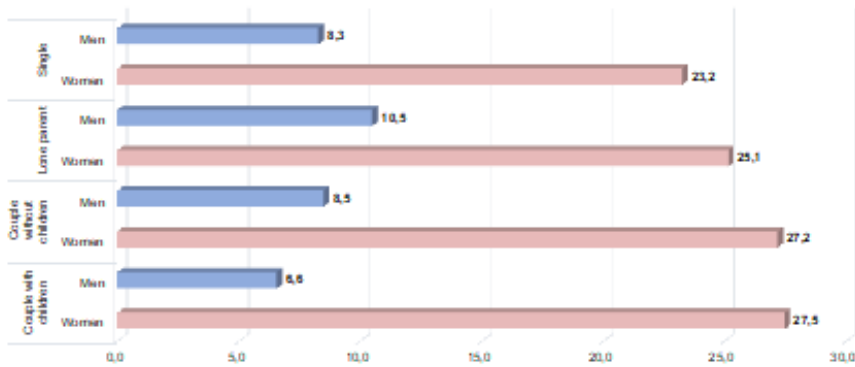


Figure 4 - Employed people in education, human health and social work activities by family type and sex, Italy, 2018 (% , 15+ employed)<sup>9</sup>

Source: authors' elaboration on EIGE data

Significant gender differences are also observed with reference to domain time and, in particular, in the distribution of time devoted to domestic activities, care work, socio-cultural activities outside the home and outside work. With reference to people caring for and educating their children or grandchildren, elderly or people with disabilities, every day, women represent 34.1% compared to 24.0% of men, recording a difference of 10.1 percentage points, lower than that observed in the EU-28 (12.8 percentage points). The gender gap is even more significant when considering the time devoted to household activities. In particular, in Italy women take on more daily responsibilities for food preparation and housework than men: 80.9% compared to 19.7%, a difference of 61.3 percentage points; in the EU28 countries the difference is smaller, at 45.0 percentage points (Fig. 5).

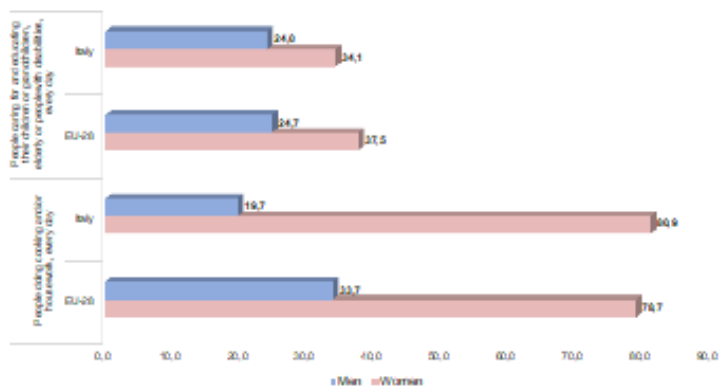


Figure 5 - People by care activities, Italy vs EU-28, 2016 (% , 18+ population)

Source: authors' elaboration on EIGE data

<sup>9</sup> Percentage of people employed in the following economic activities out of total employed (based on NACE Rev 2) are included: P. Education + Q. Human health and social work, as percentage from TOTAL activities (All NACE activities).

Considering the time devoted by workers to socio-cultural activities outside the home and outside of work, it can be observed that women are more engaged than men in voluntary and charitable activities, recording a difference of 2.0 percentage points compared to men; in comparison, in the EU28 countries there is a smaller gender gap of 0.8 percentage points. Men, on the other hand, are more inclined towards sports and entertainment activities (28.2%), a difference of 4.6 percentage points compared to women (23.6%); in the EU28 countries, a similar gender gap of 4.4 percentage points is observed (Fig. 6).

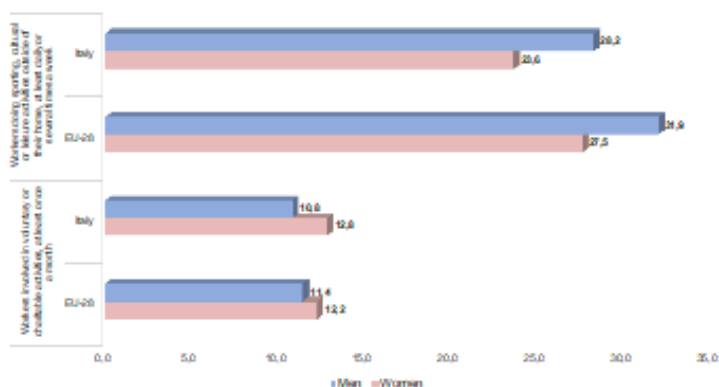


Figure 6 - Workers by social activities, Italy vs EU-28, 2015  
(%, 15+ workers)

Source: authors' elaboration on EIGE data

On the whole, the data suggest that women's life paths, compared to men, are marked by a different level of resources and opportunities, but above all by a reduced participation in the labour market if one assumes the family as a substitute for the welfare state. The studies and empirical research carried out over the years on these issues have strongly highlighted these aspects. In particular, they have underlined the function of family and domestic work for the social and economic organisation and have prompted several reflections on the reproductive sphere as an area where specific forms of unrecognised work take place.

In Italy, participation in the labour market is almost entirely a male experience: in 2019, the labour force participation rate for women was 56.5% compared to 75.0% for men, a difference of 18.5 percentage points. Although women's share has increased over time, a significant gap with men persists (Fig. 7).



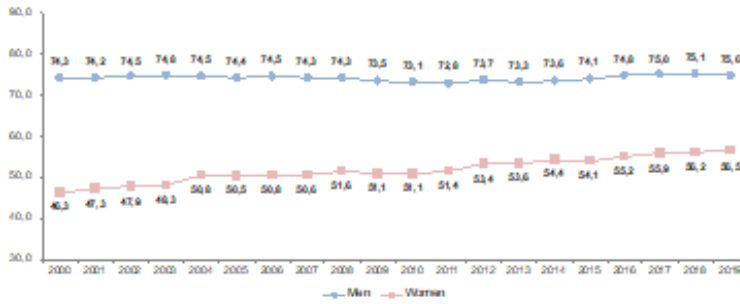


Figure 7 - Labour force participation rate by sex, Italy, 2000-2019 (15-64 years-old, % in same age group)

Source: authors' elaboration on OECD data

The comparison with the EU countries shows that the disparity between men and women in Italy is quite significant: the labour force participation rate of women in the 28 EU countries is 68.8%, recording a difference compared to men of 10.8 percentage points significantly lower than the gap observed in Italy. Overall, compared to the main EU-28 countries, Italy has the highest gender gap.

The differences are more significant when comparing the shares of labour force participation by age group. As shown in Figure 8, the gap between men and women from the 35-44 age group onwards increases significantly, with a difference of 21.4 percentage points in the 35-44 age group and 22.6 percentage points in the 45-54 age group. Overall, the labour force participation rate of women aged 45-54, at 67.8%, is 2.4 percentage points lower than that of the 35-44 age group (70.2%), compared with a difference of 1.1 percentage points for men. The decrease in the labour force participation rate reflects the exit of the female labour force from the labour market at a stage in the life cycle usually marked by the birth of children and the consequent need to provide for their care.

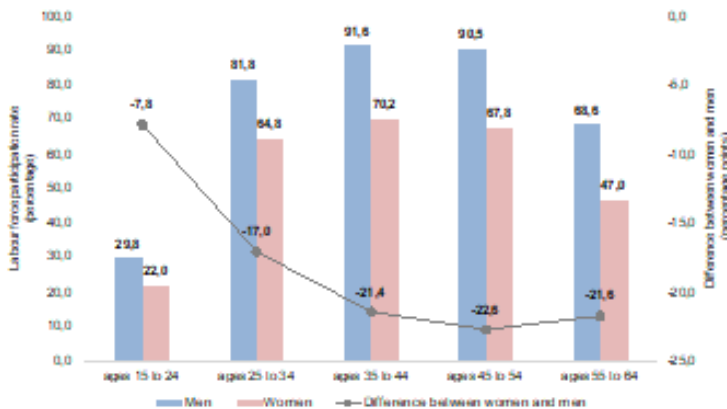


Figure 8 - Labour force participation rate by age group and sex, Italy, 2019 (% in same age group)

Source: authors' elaboration on OECD data

On the employment front, it should be noted that in Italy only one woman in two is employed (50.1%), marking a significant difference compared to men of 17.9 percentage points. The European comparison shows that the level of female employment is far from the average of the EU28 countries (64.1%). If we consider the gender gap, we observe that Italy records a gap with men (-17,9%) lower than only Greece (-18,6%) and Malta (-19,6%).

Looking at sectors of economic activity, in the EU countries there is a higher concentration of women in employment in some sectors than in others. In detail, as of 2019 in the 28 European countries there is a greater presence of women on average in Health and social assistance (18.8%), Trade (14.3%) and Education (12.0%). In Italy, almost 40% of employed women work in these same sectors; in particular, 13.8% in commerce, 13.6% in health and social work and 12.1% in education<sup>10</sup>. In Italy, as is well known, these sectors – with the exception of some sectors – are typically characterised by less qualified jobs with lower average wages and fewer opportunities for professional growth.

There are several analyses aimed at highlighting the endurance of inequalities between men and women and the persistence of conditions of serious exclusion or insufficient inclusion of women. The World Economic Forum's latest Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (2019), which aims to monitor the gender gap in economics, education, health and politics, fits into this perspective. Among the first introductory remarks it is highlighted that, proceeding at the current pace of change, it will take almost a century to achieve gender equality (WEF, 2019). The account of the gap in the 153 countries surveyed reveals that no country has achieved full gender equality.

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There are five countries with a smaller gender gap of around 20%, four of which are northern European countries. Iceland tops the list with a gap of around 12%, followed by Norway, Finland, Sweden and Nicaragua. The top ten countries also include Ireland (7th place), Spain (8th place) and Germany (10th place). Italy ranks 76th, registering six places lower than in 2018 and a 30% gap from achieving gender parity.

The World Health Organization's 2019 report on the health workforce in 104 countries reveals that women make up 70% of the health and social care workforce, accounting for the largest share among nurses compared to doctors, as well as earning on average

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<sup>10</sup> Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, Dipartimento della Ragioneria Generale dello Stato (2020) on data from ISTAT - Labour Force Survey (EU LFS), p. 46.

about 28% less than men. Moreover, they are more exposed to virus infections due to the professional positions they hold.

With reference to the Italian context, the monitoring carried out by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS, 2020) shows a higher infection among female healthcare workers: with reference to 60,242 registered cases of COVID-19 as of 18 November 2020, women account for 70.2% of the units detected.

In this context and in light of the pandemic, there is a strong fear that gender gaps make women more vulnerable than men. Just consider the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the labour market. Looking at sectors of economic activity, it is clear that those hardest hit by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic – the air transport, accommodation and catering sectors – are among the sectors that employ a large proportion of the female workforce. In the Report Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis (OECD, 2020), with reference to ILO data, it is stated that on average in OECD countries women represent about 47% of employment in the air transport industry, 53% of employment in food services (bars, restaurants, catering, etc.), 60% in accommodation services (hotels, etc.) and 62% in the retail sector. With reference to the Italian context, in the period Q3 2019-Q3 2020, an increase in gender gaps is observed with reference to the main labour market indicators. In particular, for women there is: (i) a greater decline in the employment rate (-1.5 percentage points, -1.2 percentage points for men); (ii) a more relevant increase in the unemployment rate (+1.3 percentage points, +0.8 percentage points for men); and (iii) a greater growth in the inactivity rate (+0.9 percentage points, +0.7 percentage points for men), (ISTAT, 2020a).

In more general terms, women faced a much heavier burden, not only playing a key role in the social and health care response, but also having to cope with the implications of school and childcare closures. In this respect, the pandemic has amplified women's family workload and has made it increasingly clear that care work is a public good and, as such, needs to be supported by public services, increased investment in early childhood education, long-term care services for the elderly and people with disabilities, and basic infrastructure to support care work.

### **Paths to Gender Equality: Family Life and Work**

Although in a historical context that has changed profoundly in terms of women's autonomy of choice with regard to their own life trajectories, we find ourselves having to revive the debate on gender inequalities that animated the feminist ferment of the 1970s, years in which feminist theoretical reflection laid the foundations for redefining the work done by women in the home. The main points of reflection have been highlighted – depending on the point of attention – in terms of

*second shift* (Hochschild, 1989), *disponibilità permanente* (Chabaud, Foudeyrollas, Sontthonnax, 1985), *doppia presenza* (Balbo, 1978), *lavoro mal diviso* (Saraceno, 1980), *giochi di equilibrio* (Merelli et al., 1985), The studies on the *double presence* have focused attention on the discontinuity of the presence of female figures in paid work, highlighting not only the presence of women in the world of production but also the workload in the family sphere: work that is ignored as an economic indicator and not recognised as a substitute for weak welfare. It is a work in which the normative models of the organisation of family and market work converge, as well as the transformations produced by women in these areas (Bimbi, Pristinger, 1985; Bimbi, 1989). This reflection has made it possible to interpret the participation of women and men in the labour market by shifting the terms of the problem from the simple quantitative difference to the ways in which this difference is realised. Ultimately, how different areas of daily life – from family daily life to work and social activities – present themselves with different content to men and women (Balbo, Siebert-Zahar, 1979; Saraceno, 1988). These include women's plural jobs, defined from time to time as housework, emotional labour, care work, service work, slipper work, reproductive work, which have led to not a few obstacles to women's career paths and not a few preclusions to top positions (Chirivi & Moffa, 2020). In the same way, the so-called *opt-out* revolution (Stone, 2007) is recalled, which, starting from the renunciation of professional work by some highly educated women, describes the choice gap between work and family. These reflections are accompanied by a more widespread debate that focuses attention on a division of roles historically and socially constructed, acquired and naturalised through the main agents of socialisation, including the family, school and the mass media (see, among others, Ruspini, 2017).

In other words, the role of women in the two spheres is increasingly highlighted, describing it in terms of double constraints, dependence on schedules, commitments and times that continually overlap. In this direction, the reflections on the temporal dimension are enriched and it is highlighted how the organisation of women's time is characterised by discontinuity and flexibility or, more appropriately, by permanent availability (Chabaud, Foudeyrollas & Sontthonnax, 1985) to specify the dimension of the incommensurability of the time spent at the service of the family. It is a dimension that does not refer so much to the tasks carried out as to a way of using time that is marked by others. And the specification of this dimension calls into question the concept of repetitiveness of domestic work, to recall not only the use of physical energies but also the emotional investment. In this perspective, the concept of social reproduction is enriched with meanings: not only the work of looking after and socialising children, caring for the elderly or frail persons, but also the work of organising sexuality, biological reproduction, producing and organising food and clothing. Unpaid work, the expression of an *invisible heart* (Folbre, 2001). This work is carried out entirely within the family nucleus, free of charge but highly productive as it includes behaviours, emotions,

responsibilities and relationships that are directly useful for the maintenance of life and not only for everyday life (Laslett & Brenner, 1989).

In short, there is an awareness of the need to reconsider the articulation between the productive and reproductive worlds, between the sphere of work and the sphere of the family – a binomial that goes beyond the meaning of work-family balance – in the light of the changes that have affected individual and collective experiences and, to a significant extent, the family structure itself. Questions arise as to how to respond to the growing expectations of greater equality between men and women and greater sharing of responsibilities in the family. In spite of the considerable progress made – for example, the distribution of care work and the sharing of parental responsibilities is legitimised – there is no cultural change to redistribute equally the care work that takes place in the home, delegating solutions to the couple's little wars (Kaufmann, 2007).

With reference to these issues, in Italy there is a lack of policies oriented to mitigate these differences and consequently a lack of measures to facilitate the reconciliation of life and work times and the inclusion (or re-entry) of women in the labour market. In fact, there is the problem of intertwining these aspects with the normative meanings and the meanings of the system of rules, i.e. the possibilities and opportunities offered by a given context and the tools used by policies. It is probably necessary to (re)start from the family-work nexus in order to imagine new ways of organising our life systems, of (re)thinking about forms of social life that are practicable, equal and able to face the emergencies dictated by COVID-19.

### **Gender Gap during COVID-19 lockdown**

The measures adopted in the first phase of the health emergency – the obligation to stay at home, the closure of schools and the management of distance learning, the suspension of non-essential economic activities, work from home – and in the subsequent transition phase have in fact redrawn the boundaries of life and work times, imposing a reorganisation of family and work life that is not immune to gender differences. In the period from 5 April to 21 April 2020, 44% of those who worked in Italy did so from home; among domestic work activities, preparing meals is the one that involved the greatest number of people (63.6%) with significant differences between women (82.9%) and men (42.9%); Similarly, there are important gender differences for house cleaning activities carried out by more than half of the citizens (54.4%) and which involved women to a greater extent (67.3%) than men (40.5%); childcare (in 67.2% of those who carried it out) was indicated as the activity to which more time was devoted compared to the situation before the pandemic (ISTAT, 2020b).

Given this scenario, some recent Italian and European studies highlight the gender dynamics involved in the management of the new daily life times, starting from the first phase of the health emergency. The idea is identifying the effects of the pandemic in the long term in terms of reconciliation of women's life and work times and the impact on the gender equality paths taken. Overall, the results for Italy are not comforting. A follow-up of a pre-pandemic survey<sup>11</sup> – on a representative sample of all employed Italian women – investigated family habits and balances during the first phase of the health emergency, allowing a comparison with the pre-emergency period (Del Boca, Oggero, Profeta, Rossi & Villosio, 2020). The survey shows how confinement within the home penalised women to a greater extent in terms of family workload. In substance, during the lockdown most working women with partners spent more time on both household work and childcare than before the pandemic; in contrast, most men did not change their behaviour at home while they spent more time on childcare than before the pandemic.

The results of a qualitative survey conducted in Italy during the lockdown show the same trends (Cannito & Scavarda, 2020). In particular, during the period of confinement within the home, women's burden of domestic work and care is strengthened and unbalanced, even in couples where there is a more equal division of family burdens, and there is a tendency for family burdens to increase in those couples where there is a greater gender gap. Moreover, it is highlighted that, although for many fathers working from home has represented an opportunity to experience a greater commitment to childcare, for most of them – unlike mothers – it is inconceivable to reconsider their commitment to paid work or to consider the possibility of reducing their working hours.

Another survey<sup>12</sup> (Mazzucchelli, Bosoni, Medina, 2020), also conducted during the lockdown period in Italy, shows an overload of work and parental responsibilities on families and especially on mothers. In fact, the measures introduced to cope with the health emergency have contributed to highlight the criticalities of the Italian welfare system, which is typically family-based and entrusts women with the role of primary caregiver.

A further study carried out on Italian families in lockdown<sup>13</sup> (Mangiavacchi, Piccoli & Pieroni, 2020) shows how the forced confinement within the home, the suspension of non-essential economic activities and the closure of schools and childcare services led to a reallocation of domestic workload and parental responsibilities within the family. In this respect, a different distribution of family workloads is evidenced in relation to the condition of activity or inactivity of both parents due to the lockdown. In the case of fathers' inactivity, the mothers' family workload is slightly reduced with respect to

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews carried out in April and July 2019 and in May 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews carried out in March and April 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews carried out in April 2020.

domestic work and to a greater extent with respect to childcare. The survey results also suggest that changing care work roles within the family influences children's emotional well-being and learning process. In particular, they show that when fathers become the primary caregivers, the child's well-being increases substantially with respect to both emotional state and relationship with parents. This raises the question of whether measures should be put in place to encourage greater involvement of fathers in childcare (e.g. by extending paternity leave) in order to rebalance the workload of women (paid and unpaid) and encourage a more egalitarian division of roles.

The National Institute for Public Policy Analysis (INAPP)<sup>14</sup> survey of Italian male and female workers shows a worsening of gender gaps not only in the first emergency phase but also in the following period, the so-called second phase. In this respect, it is noted that during the lockdown the family workload remained the prerogative of women, despite the (compulsory) co-presence of both partners at home. This imbalance emerges also with respect to a different management of working time: while for women, working at home complicates the management of work and home life due to the overlapping of commitments and needs, for men, working from home has no impact on the management of working time. In the second phase with the resumption of face-to-face work, men return earlier and to a greater extent, thus restoring their (reduced or absent) contribution to the management of family responsibilities prior to the lockdown. In order to cope with the difficulties of the so-called transition phase, it is evident that in couples with family loads it is the woman who postpones the return to work or gives it up; these choices are based on organisational reasons (greater flexibility compared to the partner), economic reasons (lower loss of income) and cultural reasons (greater ability to manage family work). As a matter of fact, in the post-lockdown period some gender gaps have strengthened, outcomes that invite us to reflect on the medium- and long-term effects.

Last but not least, the study by Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey & Tertilt (2020a), on the one hand, shows how the economic recession caused by the spread of the pandemic has strong implications in terms of gender inequalities; on the other, it opens a more articulated reflection on the possible effects – not necessarily negative – in the long term. On the one hand, opposing forces are identified that can favour paths towards gender equality once the emergency is over: (i) more flexible work arrangements; and (ii) changes in social norms and role models. With reference to the first aspect, it should be noted that the process of reorganising work in favour of more flexible forms put in place because of the pandemic could favour – once the emergency phase has passed – the reconciliation of life and work times, especially for women who are entrusted with the greatest unpaid workload. The second aspect calls into question the dynamics that occurred during the first emergency phase. The lockdown period

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<sup>14</sup> Interviews carried out in June and July 2020.



actually increased the burden of parental responsibilities for families and in some cases favoured a more equal distribution of the childcare burden, for example when the man stays at home and the woman works in attendance. In this context, an increased awareness of family workload – especially childcare – acquired by men during the lockdown period and temporary changes to the division of workloads could induce a process of awareness-raising with possible positive effects for gender equality in the long run.

As it is well known, the period we are currently experiencing has been referred to as the *shecession* (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey & Tertilt, 2020) to indicate how the recession caused by the pandemic has hit women much harder than men. Evidence was obtained by comparing the impact of other economic crises with that caused by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to quantify the macroeconomic effects. The macroeconomic model based on the distinction between women and men, married couples and singles, and people with and without children, showed that the pandemic recession resulted in relatively higher job losses for women and a sharp increase in the need for elderly and childcare, effectively widening the gender gap in work and family life. Similarly, the results of a Eurofound<sup>15</sup> survey show that the pandemic has significantly disadvantaged women in terms of health risks, pre-existing employment inequalities and care responsibilities, and has eroded work-life balance to a greater extent than men. Overall, the survey finds that women are less optimistic about their future than men.

It is not difficult to see that, once again, it is the family that has to be configured as the place where a multiple range of services for its members are produced and ensured in response to inadequate external services, representing an important area of welfare support. The family remains the place where much of the reproductive care work, carried out to a greater extent by women, takes place. This work is unpaid and excluded from economic analysis. Moreover, to echo the *Report Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020. Families in a changing world* by UN Women (2019), living in a rural area, in a poor household, being married and having young children increases the burden of care work for women. More generally, women do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men. It is worth recalling the notion, which is by no means obsolete, of service work, i.e. that important part of work that women do for the home and family (Balbo & Bianchi, 1981); as well as the notion of discontinuous work to represent a typically female form of access to paid work, a sort of regulation of the balance between paid work and domestic work necessary for the family. It is, in fact, a condition that has allowed a different participation of women in the labour market and has hindered their career paths.

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<sup>15</sup> Eurofound launched an e-survey called *Living, working and COVID-19* in April 2020. The survey consisted of two phases: the data collected up to 1 May were considered in the first round and a second round was carried out in July. The first round took place at a time when most of the EU Member States were in lockdown.



In the Italian context, ISTAT data<sup>16</sup> confirms the link between women's participation in the labour market and family loads: «the employment rate of mothers is lower than that of women without children. In 2018, the disadvantage of women (aged 25-49) with pre-school children compared to women without children increases. [...] the employment rate of mothers is 26% lower than that of childless women.» (ISTAT, 2020c, p. 13). Similarly, the inadequate availability of socio-educational services for early childhood is highlighted; with reference to the 2017/2018 school year in Italy there is a coverage of places equal to 24.7% of potential users (children under 3 years of age), significantly distant from the 33% parameter set by the 2002 Barcelona European Council.

On the whole, it emerges how the overlap – during the lockdown period – of unpaid work with that of paid work, has revealed the interference between the time required for domestic and care work and that more properly pertaining to the productive sphere, making gender gaps more evident.

### **Concluding remarks**

The family stands out as a place characterised by different types of activities and roles, a clearing house of income, a centre for spending and a centre for employment and production decisions (Balbo, 1976). There is talk of new jobs, new educational paths, new ways of living at home, new ways of being a mother, new ways of constructing an identity other than the stereotypical one, but this happens without any change in the distribution of family commitments between the sexes. As shown by the reading of the data taken as reference, gender inequalities remain deep and linked to the dynamics of family life, where women play a role of primary responsibility for the care of children and adults, often as a non-negotiable part of being a mother, wife or daughter. In fact, the sphere of work and the sphere of the family are increasingly intertwined and influence each other on a daily basis. All the difficulties of reconciling roles within and outside the family remain. In this respect, the non-domestic work confined to the home experienced during the lockdown period has amplified the overlapping of family and work commitments. This renewed the risk of the inseparability of the two spheres – domestic and productive – and accentuated the invisibility of care and nursing work carried out in the family and for the family, activities that were taken for granted and were therefore invisible, as shown by the debate on these issues in the 1970s.

It is in this light that our reflections on how lockdown and working from home have led to new family dynamics being experimented with. These dynamics question us – from the perspective of gender equality – on the future trajectories of new ways

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<sup>16</sup> ISTAT Hearing at the XI Commission on Public and Private Employment of the Chamber of Deputies. Rome, 26 February 2020 (ISTAT, 2020c).

of reconciling life and work times in a context, such as the Italian one, characterised by little flexibility in the labour market, by a typically family-based welfare system and by a culture anchored to stereotyped gender roles that entrusts women with the role of the main caregiver. The data taken as reference confirm how the asymmetry between men and women in the labour market reflects the different life paths of men and women and the different division of paid and unpaid workloads.

Beyond the health emergency, the pandemic raises questions about the consequent economic recession and the possible repercussions on gender equality, it raises questions about a female experience that is often taken for granted, about a family context that is still seen as a social buffer at the expense of women's autonomy. As already mentioned in the paper, the economic recession we are experiencing has been defined as *shcession*, meaning that it has hit women much harder than men and that the pandemic has significantly penalised women. The risk that gender inequalities may therefore be exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 economic crisis is high. Past experience shows that when job opportunities are scarce, it is often women who pay the highest price in terms of employment. For women, the loss of paid work often translates into an imbalance towards unpaid work, with the risk of halting the process of redistribution of family burdens and reinforcing gender gaps within the family.

Against this backdrop, there is a growing need to bring the issue of welfare, starting with health, education and the family, back into the centre of the political debate from the perspective of gender equality. It is hoped that these areas will not just remain privileged areas of debate but will be placed at the heart of decisions taken on the use of European resources, and that gender equality will not be treated as primarily a question of equity and cohesion, because it is above all an issue of modernising a country. Overall, the broader debate provides us with reflections that have distinctly highlighted persistent issues and aspects on which the pandemic has forced and inexorably forces us to reflect: household care, childcare, family relationships, work, livelihood resources (Ruspini, 2020; Chirivi & Moffa, 2020; Di Nicola, Ruspini, 2020; Graig, 2020). In this perspective, it is highlighted how the pandemic has laid bare gender inequalities and highlighted a dimension of women's lives, often left in the shadows, based on persistent inequality in different areas of daily life - from daily family life to work and social activities.

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