

STUDI E QUESTIONI DI GENERE

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STUDI E QUESTIONI DI GENERE



La collana Studi e questioni di genere si propone di accogliere ricerche, in particolare monografie e volumi collettanei, dedicati all'ampio spettro di studi, indagini e questioni che riflettono sulla portata euristica del "genere" come chiave interpretativa per analizzare fenomeni politici, sociali, culturali e come strumento di azione per ricerche a carattere interdisciplinare. La collana intende ospitare lavori provenienti da aree differenti, quali le scienze politiche, sociali, giuridiche e umane, che presentino al loro interno una visione di "genere" articolata dal punto di vista teorico. Particolare attenzione è rivolta agli studi che mettono in evidenza come questo campo di produzione del sapere consenta di ripensare metodologia e approccio a questioni che attraversano trasversalmente molti ambiti disciplinari. I temi risignificati alla luce di questa prospettiva riguardano la costruzione della sessualità e l'identità di genere, la socializzazione e la famiglia, i diritti e le politiche, mettendo al centro una profonda riflessione su soggettività e soggettivazione politica a fronte dei rapporti di forza che forgianno quotidianamente le esistenze umane.



Vai al contenuto multimediale

Giulia Maria Dotti Sani

**Changing equilibria in a context
of low gender equality**

Women's paid and unpaid work in Italy
1988–2014





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To Paolo, who was right all along

The most effective way to do it, is to do it.

A. EARHART

Table of contents

11	<i>Introduction</i>
19	Chapter I <i>Theoretical background</i> 1.1. Gender differences in paid and unpaid work: an overview, 19 – 1.2. Women’s employment in comparative perspective, 23 – 1.3. The determinants of housework: micro and macro theoretical approaches, 27 – 1.4. Explaining time on childcare: gender, class, norms and resources, 31 – 1.5. Conclusions, 33
35	Chapter II <i>The Italian time use data</i> 2.1. Time use data: what is it and how can we use it, 35 – 2.2. The Italian Time Use Survey, 35 – 2.3. Samples, measures and method, 39 – 2.4. Descriptive results, 42. – 2.5. Conclusions, 50
51	Chapter III <i>Advances in women’s employment</i> 3.1. Introduction, 51 – 3.2. Employment status and time in paid work: what changes over time? 51 – 3.3. Work-family arrangements and their changes, 59 – 3.4. Conclusions, 68
71	Chapter IV <i>Changing housework</i> 4.1. Introduction, 71 – 4.2. Have housework time and participation declined over the decades? 71 – 4.3. Housework time and participation among working age women, 74 – 4.4. The division of housework within couples: has it changed? 85 – 4.5. Conclusions, 93
97	Chapter V <i>The evolution of childcare</i> 5.1. Introduction, 97 – 5.2. Are Italian mothers spending more time with their children?, 97 – 5.3. Conclusions, 110
113	<i>Conclusions</i>
123	<i>Reference List</i>

Introduction

This volume analyses two decades of changes in paid and unpaid work among Italian women, as well as changes in work-family arrangements among Italian households. The data – derived from the Italian Time Use Survey – cover four points in time going from 1988-89 to 2013-14.

From a historical perspective, 1989 is a pivotal year for Europe and the Western world: it is the year of the fall of the Berlin wall and the birth of the World Wide Web, two events that represents a symbolic watershed between the past and the future of Europe and the World as we know them. Italy, in 1989, was living the final years of the so-called “Prima Repubblica” and would soon face a dramatic change in its political system. In terms of women’s presence in the public field, during that year nearly 43% of women aged 15 to 64 were employed against 78% of men. Nearly one out of two students obtaining a university degree was a woman, and about 12% of members of the lower chamber of parliament were women.

Fast forward to twenty-five years later. In 2014, Barack Obama was elected the first non-white president of the United States; in Nigeria, 276 girls and women were abducted and held hostage by Boko Haram, setting off a storm of solidarity on social media, while the Islamic State of Iraq – that will bring terror and mayhem in European cities in the years to come – declared itself a caliphate. Italy and several other European countries had just started to recover from the 2008-09 economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures. During these years, female employment rates have risen to 54% and nearly 60% of students obtaining a university degree are women. Large changes have occurred in politics: in 2013, about 30% of members of the lower chamber

are women and, by 2014, for the first time, half of the government is composed of women. Changes in women's roles can also be found looking at survey data. According to data from European Values Study, in 1988, 37% of the sample of Italian women and men aged 15 to 64 agreed that "When jobs are scarce, priority should be given to men". This figure was down to 17% in 2008.

These two historical snapshots of the Italian society along with anecdotal evidence about women's daily lives suggest that there has been some change in Italian women's behavior in the public and private sphere over the past few decades. But is this really the case? And if so, how large are these changes and who did they mainly involve?

The book addresses these questions by focusing on three key activities – paid employment, housework, and childcare – and offers a picture of how the engagement of Italian women in, and their time on, the three activities has changed since the late 1980s to 2014. Moreover, the volume investigates at which point of the social strata and the life-cycle such changes have occurred.

Worldwide, never as much as today are women present in the public arena as heads of state, prime ministers, and CEOs (EIGE 2015). Women are also becoming increasingly present – albeit at a slower pace – in typically male and high-status professions such as engineering and surgery (Padovic and Reskin 2002; Ridgeway 1997; van de Werfhorst 2017). Women's climb towards the top is rooted in many decades of change in terms of level and field of education and career trajectories. Indeed, much research has shown that, over the past few decades, there has been a surge in women's presence in key decision-making positions (EIGE 2015; IPU 2014), in the labor market (Bettio *et al.* 2013; Eurostat 2017), and in women's levels of education throughout Europe (Breen *et al.* 2010).

The gender gap in employment rates, for example, has been consistently declining over the past few decades in the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain¹. In Sweden, the gap was already small in the

¹ Results for other European countries are consistent, the ones used here are merely taken as examples.

1990s and has remained rather stable, whereas the gender gap has decreased spectacularly in Spain. Italy has also experienced a reduction in the gender gap in employment, but differences in the employment rates of women and men remain large in international comparison. Similarly, the gap in tertiary education has also closed in most of the considered countries – with Germany being an exception – suggesting that women should be better able to compete with men in the labor market than in past.

Women's increased presence in the labor market has been accompanied by changes in the way couples allocate resources to home and work, the so-called "work-family arrangements". Research has in fact shown that over the past decades there has been a move away from the male breadwinner model toward the one and a half earner model and the dual earner model (Lewis 2001; OECD 2017). This shift has occurred in several European countries with varying welfare (Esping-Andersen 1999) and care regimes (Jane 1992; Korpi 2000; Lewis *et al.* 2008), but has been far from uniform. Indeed, European countries still differ in the their configuration of work-family arrangements (Dotti Sani 2017; Hook 2015; Lewis *et al.* 2008). Scholars agree that the full-time dual earner model has become dominant only in northern European countries, the so-called "social democratic" welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1999). The one and a half earner model, that sees the woman employed part-time and the man full-time is the most common in liberal and conservative countries like Germany and the United Kingdom (Lewis *et al.* 2008). Southern Europe, instead, appears characterized by a mixed or, as Jennifer Hook (2015) has defined it, polarized situation where households from the higher social strata, that is where the woman has higher education, tend towards the dual earner arrangement while households from lower strata opt for the male breadwinner arrangement. This result is troubling because it implies inequalities not just between women and men, but also between women – and therefore households – from different social strata.

Women's social class, and education in particular, are also relevant for differences in employment outcomes between mothers and childless women. Indeed, research has shown that having

a child can strongly hamper women's employment (Del Boca *et al.* 2004), but whether and the extent to which this occurs largely depends on women's level of education (Dotti Sani and Scherer 2017).

Recent evidence also suggests important changes in the amount of time spent on housework and childcare by women and men. Specifically, there is evidence of a decline in women's time on chores and an increase in men's time (Gershuny 2000), while there has been a general increase in mothers' and fathers' time on childcare (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016; Gauthier *et al.* 2004). Several factors have been called upon to explain such changes. On the one hand, explanations based on the time availability theory (Hiller 1984) suggest that increased levels of women's labor force participation translate into less time to spend on housework. On the other hand, resource-based explanations indicate that the increased bargaining power among women in households allows them to do less chores and demand that their partners do more (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Finally, theories about changes in gender roles suggest that there has been an evolution toward greater gender egalitarianism, with women and men valuing shared responsibilities for home and children to a greater extent than in the past (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Changing values and norms about what is "best for the child" can also be seen behind parents' increased time with their children, especially among the higher educated (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016).

Employment, housework and childcare represent the three areas in which adults spend an enormous amount of time during their lives. Thus, understanding how time spent on these activities has changed over the decades can offer us crucial insights in the evolution of our societies. Furthermore, examining changes in a context of low gender equality, where strong institutional and cultural barriers hinder its achievement, can be of great importance to help spur changes in the future decades.

And why is Italy such a peculiar case and therefore an important area of exploration? First of all, Italy is infamous for its low levels of societal gender equality (EIGE 2015). It has a score

of 41 on the Gender Equality Index, a composite measure gauging gender equality in the European Union in terms of political and economic power, as well as knowledge, health and violence. Few European countries have a score lower than the Italian one, that is well below the EU-28 average of nearly 53. Italy scores less than another southern European country, Spain (54), and a continental country, Germany (55). It lags considerably behind the European pioneers of gender equality: Denmark (71), Finland (72) and Sweden (74).

The Gender Equality Index suggests that, in the Italian context, women fare considerably worse than men in many areas. Indeed, as will be detailed in Chapter 1, Italian women are considerably less likely than men of being employed, and do much more housework and childcare in comparison. As mentioned, although the labor force participation of women has increased over the past decades (Eurostat 2017), homemaking is still much more common among Italian women than among their European counterparts (Bettio *et al.* 2013; Dotti Sani and Scherer 2017; Eurostat 2017). Women are also much more involved than men – and women from other countries – in the care of their home and children (Anxo *et al.* 2011; Carriero and Todesco 2016). Furthermore, individual characteristics that can help reduce women’s domestic workload, such as employment and education, have only a moderate impact, meaning that women do the majority of chores even in dual earner households (Dotti Sani 2012).

As mentioned, there has been a crucial move toward a more egalitarian view about gender roles over the past few decades. Nonetheless, Italians still have more traditional attitudes in this respect compared to individuals in other European countries. For example, about 50% of Italian women and men aged 18 to 65 in 2008 agreed with the statement: “what women really want is a home and children”. The figure is lower in other European countries such as Germany (42%), Spain (32%), the UK (12%) and Sweden (6%) (EVS 2011). Conversely, 34% of Italian women and men agreed that being a housewife is as fulfilling as doing paid work compared to 29% in Norway and 25% in Sweden and Germany.

Considering its position in the European context, Italy stands out as a place where there is ample room for improvement in women's position in society. Some progress has been made, but several questions have remained unaddressed. Specifically, in the rise of Italian women, what social groups, if any, have been favored? Is the progress made in the labor market and women's position within households consistent across social backgrounds, or are some groups of women, typically younger, childfree and better educated ones, those who have advanced the most over the decades?

Against this background, this volume addresses changes in employment, housework and childcare among Italian women from 1988-89 to 2013-14. Furthermore, the volume investigates at which point of a) the social strata and b) the life-cycle such change has occurred. Indeed, the increase in female labor force participation could be confined to younger, single and better educated women without affecting the work-family arrangements of families with young children or lower educated mothers. Hence, the question is whether Italian women, as a whole, are becoming closer to their European counterparts or whether changes are restricted to specific and "privileged" groups, belonging to the upper social strata.

The volume also addresses the "counterpart" of employment, that is, unpaid work. Previous studies showed that parents in many Western countries have increased the amount of time on child care and child related activities (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016; Gauthier *et al.* 2004), and have decreased the amount of time spent on housework (Gershuny 2000). Hence, the book asks to what extent unpaid work has changed in Italy over the past decades and if such change has occurred among all women or rather is confined to a group of forerunners (e.g. the better educated, the younger ones).

These questions are addressed using four rounds of data from the Italian Time Use Survey (1988-89, 2002-03, 2008-09, 2013-14). These data contain detailed information about individual use of time as well as household structure and composition. Therefore, they allow us to assess to what extent paid and unpaid work

have changed from the late 1980s to well into the 2010s under different individual and household characteristics and at different points of the life cycle.

The volume is structured as follows. In Chapter 1 we offer a general background on gender differences in paid and unpaid work as revealed from previous studies in the international literature. The chapter discusses the theoretical explanations for gender differences in employment, housework and childcare and relates them to the peculiar Italian case. In Chapter 2, we present the Italian Time Use data which are used throughout the volume. The chapter provides a general description of the data along with details regarding the sample, variables and methods used in the empirical chapters. Chapter 3, the first empirical chapter, addresses changes in women's participation in paid employment as well the time spent on paid work on average weekdays from 1988-89 to 2013-14. The chapter illustrates these trends while keeping into account within gender differences in terms of age, education, marital status and presence of children. Finally, the chapter adopts a couple-approach to examine changes in work-family arrangements and whether these have occurred in different parts of the social strata. In Chapter 4, we adopt a similar scheme and apply it to housework. This allows us to investigate whether participation in and time on housework activities has changed during the considered time span and which individual characteristics are more closely related to these changes. We also focus on the division of domestic labor within households by restricting the sample to partnered women. In Chapter 5, finally, we center the attention on mothers and consider changes in childcare time and participation calling on theories of concerted cultivation and class differentiation to account for within gender differences in this activity. In the last chapter we summarize the results of the volume, draw our conclusions and point to avenues for future research in this area. Furthermore, we also discuss the policy implications of our results.