

The unequal pandemic

Working women, welfare states and policy responses to Covid-19 in Italy

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1. *Introduction*

«The damage is incalculable and will resound down the decades into future generations». This is how António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, described the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on women, during his speech addressed to the Commission on the Status of Women on 15 March 2021. Guterres delivered a clear message: Covid-19's effect on the economy and society is not gender neutral, and ignoring such gendered impact would exacerbate inequalities.

Due to the nature of the health emergency and the respective containment measures, women are among those who are paying the highest price, as demonstrated by data collected by international organisations over the last year and a half (Eurofound 2020; OECD 2020; ILO 2021) and corroborated by a strand of emerging literature (Alon *et al.* 2021; Chung *et al.* 2021; Collins *et al.* 2021; Hipp, Bünning 2021; Moen *et al.* 2020). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), globally 64 million women lost their jobs in 2020. Job losses reached 5% for women and 3.9% for men. This applies to all continents: between 2019 and 2020, in the Americas women's employment dropped by 9.4% compared to a 7% decline in men's job. In the Arab States, it decreased respectively by 4.1% and 1.8%. In Asia and the Pacific, female occupation declined by 3.8%, compared to men's 2.9%. In Europe and Central Asia, it diminished by 2.5% for women and 1.9% for men, and in Africa it dropped by 1.9% against 0.1% (ILO 2021).

Data on Europe also indicate that between the last quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020 the drop in women's

total hours worked was -18.1% and -14.3% for men. The female workforce also had more difficulties re-entering the labour market during the partial recovery in the summer of 2020, with employment rates rising by 1.4% for men but only by 0.8% for women between the second and the third quarter of 2020. In eleven months, between March 2020 and February 2021, the number of unemployed in the EU27 increased by around 2.4 million, of whom more than 1.3 million were women. Female unemployment rose by 20.4%, against 16.3% for men (Eurostat 2021).

A *she*-cession, as it has been called by some scholars (Alon *et al.* 2021) which is related to the high proportion of women working in the service sector and tertiary industry such as wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food services, personal and family services, and tourism. While the sectors most strongly affected by the 2008 financial crisis were primarily male-dominated¹, the pandemic and lockdown are hitting harder female-dominated industries (Eurofound 2020; OECD 2020; OxCGRT 2021), in which the job content is often characterised by a high level of social interaction and physical proximity, precisely the factors that have been most affected by social distancing measures. As a further disadvantage, the tele-workability of these jobs tends to be much lower and the periodic shutdown of such sectors has meant a considerable proportion of women being made redundant (ILO 2021).

However, the greater vulnerability of women in the labour market, not just in pandemic times, is not only linked to the sectors in which they are principally employed, but also to the quality of their jobs. An extensive literature highlights the transversal nature of gender inequality, which can be seen, despite cross-country variations, in access to social protection, ease of dismissal, wage levels, and access to training and economic resources (Christofides *et al.* 2013; Blau, Kahn 2017; ILO 2017). Therefore, employment subject to termination has been largely female, low paid, low skilled, more likely temporary or self-employed (European Commission 2020; ILO 2021; OxCGRT 2021).

¹ On average across OECD countries, women make up 62% in the retail sector, 53% in food and beverage services, and 60% in accommodation services (ILO 2020). Male-dominated sectors, such as industry and construction, have not been immune to the crisis, but compared to the service sector the initial drop in activity was less intense and they also rebounded more rapidly and strongly in the following months (Eurostat 2021).

Another crucial factor to understand why existing gender inequalities have been heightened in these times of pandemic is the increase in unpaid extra work as carers. With nurseries and schools closed during the lockdowns and the shift to online education, a new form of unpaid care arose for women, who became involved in assisting their children in virtual schooling, in addition to housework and caring for other family members (Chung *et al.* 2021; Hipp, Bünning 2021; Manzo, Minello 2020; Reichelt *et al.* 2020). Though telework is not a solution, and neither can it be a substitute for childcare, over the last year and a half remote working has been higher in households with children and particularly amongst single parents (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021).

This article addresses the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis on working women in the Italian context, where statistics reveal particularly alarming data on women's employment before and throughout the pandemic. The aim is to analyse the national policy response to the Covid-19 emergency in supporting working women. Section two looks at the pandemic's impact in terms of exacerbating the existing gender inequalities deeply rooted in the Italian labour market. In order to understand the existence of such a sharp gender gap in employment levels and conditions, Section three analyses the core relation between gender and welfare, and adopts the incomplete revolution theoretical framework as its mode of interpretation. To verify whether the gendered impact of the pandemic has been acknowledged and to understand which measures have been introduced to support women, Section four examines the emergency policies implemented in Italy to address the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, and Section five compares Italian policies with measures introduced in other European countries.

The analysis demonstrates that the public action in Italy did not take into account the pre-existing gender inequalities in the labour market and the unequal burden of care responsibilities between women and men, an unpaid extra work amplified by multiple lockdowns, which exacerbated women's challenges in the labour market. The policy response to Covid-19 is subject to path-dependency and reproduces the existing institutional and welfare legacies, preventing the reformulation of welfare measures in favour of greater gender equality, and not allowing

this crisis to be a turning point at which to begin healing the gender fracture in Italy.

2. *The gendered impact of Covid-19*

Initial empirical evidence on the pandemic's short-term socio-economic consequences by gender (among others Adams-Prassl *et al.* 2020; Collins *et al.* 2021; Farre *et al.* 2020; Kristal, Yaish 2020) is confirming that when structural forms of inequality are deep-rooted in society, even phenomena that seem to affect everyone indiscriminately, such as a virus, in actual fact have a differentiated impact on different social groups. This is why gender inequality, a solidified asymmetry embedded in the world's political, social, economic, reproductive and value systems (Orloff 2009), risks to be exacerbated by the current pandemic crisis.

The gender gap is intrinsic to all the different spheres of social life and is reproduced within institutional and cultural frameworks (van der Lippe *et al.* 2011). It is a deep-seated characteristic of the social organisation and, in addition to having profound social costs, it has significant economic costs, limiting growth and development potential, since women are quantitatively less employed and because their qualifications, skills and abilities are not appropriately valued².

Gender inequality in the labour market has been widely problematised and discussed in academia, in the public sphere and at the political level, and many reforms have been introduced over the last thirty years aimed at increasing women's employment and reconciling work and family life (Gornick, Mayers 2003; Hege- wisch, Gornick 2011; Naldini, Saraceno 2011). Higher female employment rates, however, do not automatically correspond to gender equality: even in the contexts in which these policies have been most successful and the gender gap has effectively narrowed, such as the Scandinavian countries, inequality persists and can be seen in different ways. In fact, while the female employment rate has tendentially grown steadily in many countries, the gap

² In 2019 the World Economic Forum estimated that the cost attributable to the gender gap is about 15% of the entire global gross domestic product (GDP). The European Union (EU) quantifies the economic impact of the gender employment gap at €70 billion per year and estimates that improvements in gender equality could lead to an increase in GDP of up to €1.15 trillion by 2050.

in the quality of work and the sectors and occupations in which women are concentrated remain tendentially stable or improve very little (Bettio 2002; European Commission 2019). These are the major causes why, over the last decade, in Europe women have continued to earn on average 14% less per hour than men (Eurostat 2020). Women are over-represented in lower-paid and more precarious sectors, such as care work, education, and the service sector (e.g., hospitality, restoration, retail), while are under-represented for instance in the financial and construction industries, engineering, and technology sectors. Another factor impacting the job quality gap is the higher prevalence of part-time work, often involuntary: in 2019, almost a third of women (30.7%) in Europe worked part-time compared to 8% of men (Eurostat 2020). Women are also more likely to be employed in the informal economy, which excludes them from any access to social protection and social security (e.g., income benefits and pensions) and puts them at greater risk of poverty. As is known, vertical segregation – the under-representation of women at top and managerial positions – is also extensive: in Europe, only 7.7% of CEOs are women, and they are paid 23% less than their male counterparts (European Commission 2020). This happens even though in all European countries, women have higher levels of tertiary education than men. Finally, women work, on average, fewer hours of paid work, but more hours of unpaid work in the domestic context, where they bear the brunt of an unequal division of the workload, and this influences their career choices and opportunities (Ferrant *et al.* 2014; ILO 2021).

However, these general trends mask very different patterns amongst European countries, in which Italian women, even considering just the quantitative dimensions of employment, prove to be in a particularly unfavourable position. National statistics present a complex picture of the gender gap in Italy and a high vulnerability of female workers, which intersects with other structural forms of inequality linked to geographical, generational, socio-economic and cultural factors (ISTAT 2020a). Despite the employment gender gap in Italy has decreased considerably over the last twenty years³, it remains one of the highest in Europe

³ The gender employment gap in Italy has narrowed from 41% in 1977 to 18% in 2018 because the male employment rate has dropped by 7% over the last forty years, from 74.6% in 1977 to 67.6% in 2018, while the female employment rate, which started

(above 15%), and, as a result of the strong territorial divide, in 2018 the female employment rate in Southern Italy (32.2%) was still lower than the national female employment rate in 1977 (33.5%), the lowest in Europe. The current 53% of Italian female employment is well below the EU average (67%), it is far removed from Scandinavian Europe (80% in Sweden, 74% in Denmark, 71% in Finland), from the UK (72%), Ireland (63%), Central-Eastern countries (i.e. 71% in Czech Republic, 75% in Estonia, 61% in Romania) and Continental Europe (76% in Germany, 74% in the Netherlands, 72% in Austria, 68% in France), and it is also lower than some other Mediterranean countries such as Portugal (72%) and Spain (61%) (Eurostat 2020).

Italy is not a late-comer on all gender equality indicators. For example, gender balance in economic decision-making has increased after the Italian government in 2011 introduced a legislative quota of 33% for women on company boards. Italy has better performances than some Scandinavian and Continental countries in terms of horizontal segregation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics professions and also performs better than most EU countries on the gender pay gap index, although this is related to the low female employment rate (European Institute for Gender Equality 2020).

However, the modest labour force participation and the low quality of jobs remain among the most critical constraints on gender equality in Italy. Young Italian women and especially mothers struggle in the labour market. Approximately a third of women under the age of 35 have a job and more than 60% of female part-time work is involuntary. The employment gap between women aged 25-49 with pre-school children and women without children is very high (74%) and voluntary resignation from work involves mothers in 73% of cases. Finally, Italian women are often overeducated – one in four – but with a more precarious position of employment, and have 6.2% lower average salary than that of men (ISTAT 2020a)⁴.

at very low levels – in 1977 only a third of women were employed – has increased by 16% and reached 49.5% in 2018 (ISTAT 2020a).

⁴ In 2020 Italian women working part-time were 32% of total employment, against 8% of men, 12.8% were employed with temporary contracts, against 10.9% of men. In 2018, employees with fixed-term contracts had a lower average hourly wage of 29.7% than those with permanent contracts. In part-time, the gap rises to 31.1%. The gender

This is the picture of female employment in Italy at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the pandemic is hardly over, it is too early to precisely assess its consequences. Additionally, the virus had – and is still having – a differentiated impact by timing, infectivity and virulence on countries and regions, meaning that the socio-economic repercussion and countries' response capacity also differ across territories. Nevertheless, preliminary data on the Italian context confirm that Covid-19 is having a greater impact on sectors such as the domestic care, where Italian women account for 88%, accommodation and catering, where they represent 50.6% of workers and in which they are often employed with atypical contracts, to cope with seasonal peaks (Fondazione Studi Consulenti del Lavoro 2020)⁵.

If we compare Eurostat data between the second quarter of 2019 and the same period of 2020, in order to observe the effects of the spring 2020 lockdown, the drop in female employment in Italy is 2.2%, against the 1.6% decrease of male employment and 1.2% drop of the EU27 female employment. This means that the distance in the gender gap in employment rate between Italy and the European average has increased further: in EU27 male employment rate exceeds that of women by 11.2%, while in Italy the gap is 19.9%⁶.

Among Italian women who lost their job in the second quarter of 2020, those employed with fixed-term contracts (-22.7%), but also self-employed women (-5.1%), suffered the most (ISTAT 2020b). These estimates, which refer to a specific time span and are certainly related to the fact that Italy was one of the countries first and hardest hit by the pandemic and with longer lockdowns and school closures, still exclude the thousands of

pay gap is 18% among employees with a tertiary education and 15% with a primary education (Eurostat 2021).

⁵ In the third quarter of 2020, about 70% of Italian female employment was concentrated in just 7 sectors out of 21: 1. commerce, 2. health and social services, 3. manufacturing, 4. education, 5. hotels and catering, 6. professional activities 7. domestic workers, babysitters and caregivers (Eurostat 2021).

⁶ The cross-country comparison in Europe shows different employment trends and the gender gap in job loss is not present everywhere, but it can be found especially in countries where female employment is higher, such as Nordic and CEE countries. This could be linked to the higher selection and qualification of working women in countries with low female employment rate. Yet, explanation of cross-country variation of the gender gap in jobs loss due to the pandemic requires an in-depth analysis of individual countries and of the multiple factors which influence domestic labour market – such as the degrees of tertiarization – which goes beyond the purpose of this article.

women in undeclared employment, working without a regular contract – domestic workers, market vendors, agricultural workers etc. – who have been dismissed without access to any form of unemployment benefit or income replacement.

Between 2019 and 2020, the number of women who were inactive also increased (+8.5%), meaning that many women had lost confidence and were not looking for any job (ISTAT 2020b). Additionally, school closures and the greater needs of the elderly due to restrictions have aggravated women's care responsibilities, already heavily unbalanced due to the unequal distribution of the unpaid workload linked to household activities and care in Italian families (Naldini *et al.* 2016). For around three million employed mothers with a child under fifteen, this has meant experimenting remote working and simultaneously assisting their children in distance learning (Fondazione Studi Consulenti del Lavoro 2020). A further complication was that grandparents, who are often relied on as informal care providers, were particularly vulnerable to Covid-19 and were required to minimise close contact with others, notably with children. Without family networks to rely on, many working mothers had few options other than caring for their children at home.

This picture of female employment in Italy cannot be fully understood if we focus uniquely on the dynamics and regulation of the Italian labour market, while its comprehension may be facilitated by framing it within the broader gender-welfare nexus and by considering how welfare institutions influence gender relations.

3. *The incomplete revolution and the gender-welfare question*

A considerable feminist literature has addressed the issue of women in relation to the state arguing that institutions and the state regulatory apparatus have reinforced the male breadwinner welfare model by granting benefits to women indirectly, as wives of full-time employed men and as mothers, rather than as citizens in their own right (Gornick, Meyers 2003; 2004). Since the Nineties, feminist scholars engaged in a critical reassessment of welfare state analysis from a gender perspective and examined the relationship between the different systems of social insurances and protections that were developed since the Fifties,

and gender relations, showing the «conflict between earning and caring» that was increasingly arising in industrialized countries from changing gender norms and labour market opportunities (Gornick, Meyers 2003, 58).

In particular, Esping-Andersen's *Three worlds of welfare capitalism* (1990) and mainstream comparative research have been criticised for the lack of consideration of gender-specific problems and perspectives (Orloff 2009; Sainsbury 1999). Feminist scholars engendered an international debate and redesigned Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes -which was considered gender-blind - by incorporating in the analysis some factors which are key to acknowledge the gendered nature of welfare states, such as: the social construction of conventional gender roles and families; the centrality of unpaid family labour and caring work; the changing nature of family arrangements; and the gendered composition of the labour force (Crompton 2006; Jacobs, Gerson 2004; Lewis 2010). In order to resolve the conflict between care and work activities that arises from changing social norms, families and workplaces, and that hinders the full realisation of the «gender revolution», a new model of gender arrangement aimed at rebalancing paid and unpaid work time within the couple and the sharing of care activities was coined as the dual earner-dual carer model (Crompton 2006; Gornick, Meyers 2003; Gaiaschi 2014).

In subsequent works, Esping-Andersen (1999; 2009) acknowledges the significance of the family and women's employment in his analysis and the role of social policies in resolving the dilemmas women face between devoting their time to work commitments and caring for their families. Building on collective feminist reflections and on the concept of «stalled» revolution (Hochschild 1989) - later further reframed as unfinished (Gerson 1999) and silent (Goldin 2006) - he theorises the change of women's roles in the post-industrial and knowledge society within a slow path of institutional and policy change, that has not yet been totally accomplished.

Esping-Andersen describes a process moving towards a new social order through which women seek their own human capital, professional realisation, economic autonomy and time to devote to paid work. At the micro level, this incomplete revolution has a profound impact on behaviour in the areas of education, work, marriage, family and parenting. At the macro level, it gen-

erates a structural change in institutions and in the way society functions. In this path of change, societies stand in an unstable equilibrium with suboptimal results, which can be seen in declining birth rates – the result of the gap between desired and actual fertility – and in increasing forms of inequalities between families and generations.

To manage this imbalance and progress towards a new equilibrium, welfare state renewal is fundamental, particularly by means of remodelled family and social policies, necessary to achieve greater equality and to support the women's revolution.

Thanks to conciliation policies which include generous parental leave, reduced working hours, and quality childcare, in Esping-Andersen's ideal typical country-clusters the Scandinavian welfare arrangements are the furthest along the path of institutional change and are the closest to the dual earner-dual carer model conceived by feminist scholars. Despite persistent problems of segregation in female-typed occupations, exclusion from managerial positions, and earnings penalties, also linked to work-family policy trade-offs for mothers (Budig *et al.* 2016), Nordic welfare states are the ones that have most actively promoted double-income families and equal parental responsibility, in a context that values individual independence and universal rights. Welfare institutions represent an effective buffer against new social risks and a productive factor playing a key role in competitive Scandinavian economies, since the welfare state strongly relies on training policies, to strengthen the availability of skills, and on care services, to transform unpaid care work into skilled and paid work – predominantly female – for the benefit of the community (Hemerijck 2017).

Other European countries with male breadwinner welfare traditions are following this path of institutional change. Belgium and France, for instance, share the same approach based on an explicit family support strategy, launched in response to declining fertility rates, which provides parents with generous monetary transfers and other services (Thevenon 2011). Although far removed from a social investment logic, these measures facilitate work-life balance and reconciliation. Even Germany, traditionally more conservative on social policies, has made visible progress as regards gender equality and family-friendly policies, increasing child-related cash transfers, financial support through the tax

system and services for families and single parents (Ahrens *et al.* 2021).

Mediterranean countries are lagging in this process, trailing behind the most advanced nations at different speeds, and Italy seems particularly slow. The Southern European familistic welfare state (Ferrera 2005) is traditionally sluggish in the provision of services and monetary transfers addressed to families, a model that has been further weakened by more than a decade of fiscal consolidation policies (León *et al.* 2015)⁷. In Italy, social policy is extremely fragmented, and family support and work-life balance measures are marginal and underdeveloped⁸. This is well illustrated by the percentage of children under three years of age in public nurseries, namely 12.7% (ISTAT 2020b), not compensated by adequate subsidies and public support enabling families to afford private nurseries. Income transfer measures, especially in the form of pensions – which accounted for 17% of Italian GDP in 2020 – prevail massively over the provision of collective goods and services.

These features are combined with a dualistic protection system that draws a clear distinction between labour market insiders and outsiders, namely between employees with standard, open-ended, full-time contracts, fully protected against social risks, and those employed under various forms of atypical contracts (Emmenegger *et al.* 2012). The segmentation of the labour market is reflected by a fragmentation of the social protection system, with some groups, amongst them a high percentage of women, with little or no protection and heavily penalised in terms of income coverage (Ranci 2010).

Family and intergenerational solidarity plays a compensatory role with respect to the weak inclusive capacity of welfare institutions, in particular making up for the lack of care provided for children, the elderly, and the most vulnerable people, such as people with disabilities. Women's role as caregivers strongly affects career choices. The traditional attribution of gender roles

⁷ Since the 2000s, Spain began to invest more in reconciliation and active labour market policies, dedicating more attention to gender equality. However, the 2008 crisis interrupted this trend (Scalise 2020).

⁸ In Italy maternity leave allowance for employed mothers is equal to 80% of pay for 5 months. For independent workers or self-employed professionals there is no link between the benefit and any obligatory absence from work. Paternity leave is 10-day 100% paid and parental leave allowance is equal to 30% of pay.

prevails in families – with strong asymmetries between partners in the division of domestic work and care – and at the workplace, but this is not counterbalanced by organisational models which facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life.

In such a context, Italian working women have been particularly exposed to the pandemic, being over-represented both in the sectors most subject to closures and in non-standard and informal jobs, and having absorbed more of the unpaid work associated with the lockdown and the health emergency. Has there been a political acknowledgement of the gendered impact of Covid-19 in Italy? Do the policy measures implemented in response to the pandemic reflect this condition, and are they aimed at ensuring a gender-sensitive recovery from this crisis? Could the pandemic represent a critical juncture (Capoccia 2016) and an opportunity to initiate a path of institutional change, in order to accelerate the incomplete revolution in Italy?

4. *The policy response to Covid-19 in Italy*

In order to understand which policies have been introduced to support working women during the Covid-19 emergency, the following analysis focuses on the policies implemented in Italy from February 2020, when the government declared a state of emergency and introduced the first measures to contain the first wave of the infection throughout the country, up until the end of April 2021, when the Italian Council of Ministers extended the state of emergency to 31 July 2021. The analysis concentrates on policies enacted in order to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and lockdown, and it is based on process tracing and the examination of policy programmes and regulations implemented by the Italian government⁹. The study was then complemented with a comparative analysis of policy measures introduced in European countries documented in the following five policy repositories that have tracked government responses to Covid-19:

⁹ The empirical analysis does not include health measures and policies to contain the spread of the virus, i.e., school closures, travel restrictions, bans on public gatherings, emergency investments in healthcare facilities, contact tracing. Information collected focuses mainly on measures taken by governments at the national or federal level, not at subnational level.

Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT);
 Eurofound's Covid-19 EU PolicyWatch;
 Covid-19 and the world of work by the International Labour Organisation (ILO);

OECD Tracking Coronavirus;

European Trade Union Confederation Covid Watch (ETUC).

The Italian government has deployed extraordinary actions and resources to manage the Covid-19 crisis. More than twenty decrees and regulations – the so-called *Cura Italia* (Cure Italy), *Liquidità* (Liquidity), *Rilancio* (Relaunch), *Decreti Agosto* (August Decrees), *Ristori* (Relief) – were brought to bear on labour, businesses, households, liquidity and taxation, and were aimed at supporting the categories most affected by the restrictions. Based on their purposes, these measures can be grouped into three main categories:

measures aimed at supporting businesses to allow them to overcome the short- to medium-term impact of full or partial closure and loss of revenue and enabling them to cover ongoing operational costs;

policy tools aimed at retaining employment, temporarily modifying short-time work and lay-off schemes in order to limit workers' loss of income and companies' wage costs, and preserving employment relationships so that the workers were available and the enterprises were ready to recommence activity once lockdown measures were lifted;

measures aimed at protecting workers and households, covering the salaries or providing direct cash payments and income support for people who lost their jobs or could not work, freezing financial obligations through the adoption of initiatives to defer rent, mortgage or loan payments, supporting parents faced with the closure of schools and nurseries, or who were quarantining or self-isolating.

In principle, all these measures may have had a direct impact or indirect implication on female employment and care work. Female self-employed people, freelancers, entrepreneurs and SME owners may have taken advantage of the support given to businesses through: (1) grants (*Ristori* and *Sostegni*) issued to companies, self-employed people, freelancers and third sector organisations that closed or suffered reductions in their business activities (in the case that their contraction in business compared with 2019 was at least 33%); (2) the suspension of tax payments, social security and welfare contributions, and mandatory insurance for the worst affected sectors (e.g., hospitality and tourism, catering, culture and sports), and the suspension of the period relating to tax liquidation, control, assessment, collection and litigation activities, together with a tax credit equal to 60% of the rent awarded to shop owners; (3) an increase in funding for the negotiation of existing loans, a moratorium on loan repayment by micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including mort-

gages and lease contracts, and the introduction of a guarantee mechanism for banks granting credit to companies.

Women facing job losses and income reductions may have benefited from: (1) the suspension of all the procedures for collective dismissals and individual layoffs justified by economic or production factors; (2) the revision of work compensation schemes (*Cassa integrazione*), the income replacement given to workers during periods of temporary or permanent disruption in production (normally granted to enterprises in the manufacturing and construction sectors with 15 or more workers), which were temporarily extended to all sectors – except for domestic work – and enterprises, regardless of the size of the latter; and wage compensation for non-worked hours, granted to enterprises in cases of reduced activity or hours of work, including shift work or partial and temporary turnovers; (3) the suspension of conditionalities related to the Guaranteed Minimum Income programme and the gradual extension of income support to the residual categories of uninsured workers, which were not included in the measures initially provided, namely the one-off €600 bonus issued to self-employed and professional workers; the emergency income for households with an equivalent income of up to €15,000, which amounted to €400 per month (€840 for large households with a disabled member); the one-off allowance of €2,400 provided in 2021 to seasonal and temporary workers in the tourism sector; the bonus of €100 granted to workers in essential services with an overall annual income of less than €40,000; the €500 granted to domestic workers and caregivers with a contract of over 10 hours per week (increased to €600 for 20-hour contracts); the cash transfer of €300 through a voucher system granted to all people who had fallen into poverty, for the purchase of food and other primary items; (4) mortgage repayments suspended for low- and mid-range annual income households.

Finally, in terms of work-life balance, women with caring responsibilities may have had access to: (1) an increase in paid leave at 50% of the salary for 15 days (and further extended by another 15 days) for workers with children aged under 14, a measure that was also extended to non-standard workers; (2) paid leave for up to 12 days – instead of three days under normal circumstances – per month granted to workers with care duties for people with disabilities and elderly/non autonomous

members of the family; (3) fully paid (sick) leave granted to workers during the imposed quarantine period, workers with disabilities and workers with immune system diseases; (4) a baby-sitting voucher that ranged between €600 and €1,200 (€2,000 for health care workers) in the period of closure of nurseries and schools (available only as an alternative to the extra leave period); (5) distance working and flexible working options to help parents juggle work and care.

These measures represent a significant commitment in terms of a response to the pandemic crisis, based on what has been called emergency Keynesianism (Bremer, McDaniel 2020), an approach shared by European countries, in part reflecting a change in the EU's attitude, totally different from the response to the 2008 crisis and from the austerity policies pursued during the last decade.

Yet, despite the great financial effort and flexibility of welfare institutions, which are temporarily supporting social groups that are normally excluded from income support and compensation schemes, most of the measures introduced are amendments or adaptations to pre-existing schemes, which have been implemented and expanded to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. As the long list of measures mentioned above shows, the characteristic fragmentation of the Italian welfare state is mirrored by the emergency policy response, amongst which income transfers, instead of services, prevail.

Undoubtedly, the temporary extension of job and income protection schemes to non-standard workers makes these policies more inclusive, also towards working women. However, except for the work-balance package, most policy tools appear relying on implicit assumptions about being gender neutral, ignoring the pre-existing gender inequalities in the labour market and the specific exposure of women to this crisis caused by the repercussions of multiple lockdowns on particular economic sectors and on family organisation. The basic premise is that women are considered as participating in the labour market in exactly the same way as men, and are considered as able to benefit from these measures as such, without acknowledging men's and women's different structural positions in the economy and society. The result, in practice, is that these policy tools tend to jeopardise gender equality because they are designed in such a way as to mirror and reproduce gender roles, thus contributing to

the reinforcement of existing norms and expectations about the roles of males and females in the labour market and in household activities. As a result, negative effects cannot be ruled out.

This is further demonstrated by the great attention given in the policy response strategy to business, income and employment, compared to the minimal focus on care for children and elderly people, on support for parents in case of school closures, and by the way that periods of caregiving leave are regulated, which show that care is not considered and not treated as an integral part of the economy. In actual fact, care responsibility is a dimension which requires specific policies and attention, partly in consideration of the possible longer-term effects of the pandemic on the balance between professional and personal life and on women's economic independence, which may force many women to make difficult choices and to move to unpaid care work.

An example of the underestimation of care work is represented by the adoption of teleworking, a tool which represents a typical system specifically designed for supporting working women, which in practice, during the pandemic, has been considered as a means of combining professional work with the role as carers and childcare replacement. Despite the fact that during lockdowns telework was mandatory rather than voluntary, it was full-time rather than part-time or occasional, and coincided with closures in schools and child care facilities and children's distance learning services, parents whose jobs allowed them to work remotely and short-time workers were excluded from the additional parental leave.

The level of coverage and inclusiveness of income support benefits is another key gendered issue, since a large proportion of women is paid less than their male colleagues (even in the same occupation and given equal positions), women are more concentrated in part-time employment, and have precarious and short-term contracts (Eurostat 2021; ISTAT 2020a). When income support and wage compensation schemes are calculated on the basis of previous profits, they may exclude women from receiving adequate support because of their over-representation in temporary and part-time employment, and because they have taken on the majority of unpaid care work. For instance, these measures do not take into account female self-employed or freelancing individuals' time taken for maternity leave or care. Even the uniform 80% rate of the wage compensation scheme, which

appears high, has a monthly cap of €1,129 for monthly gross wages above €2,159.48, which is far lower than other European countries' compensation schemes.

The problem of women's low wages is aggravated by the lack of a universal minimum wage floor and low compliance with the collectively agreed minimum income (Garnero 2018), and this also applies to the extra leave granted to parents with children below 14, paid at 50% of the salary. While in Italy there is no minimum threshold to the compensation payment, in several European countries the national minimum wage has been fixed as the minimum payment, thereby ensuring a satisfactory standard of living for the lowest-paid individuals (Eurofound 2020).

Another significant issue regards domestic workers, such as housekeepers, babysitters, or caretakers, the great majority of whom are women. These categories of workers could not access any income protection benefits during the first months of the pandemic. After trade unions had called upon government to include domestic work as part of essential services, in June 2020 a specific allowance of €500 (*indennità per lavoratori domestici*) was introduced, but only available to domestic workers with a valid employment contract for at least 10 weekly hours, while short-hours workers and informal workers were totally excluded. A portion of non-standard forms of female employment remains less protected, and workers hidden in the informal economy, particularly vulnerable to job losses, enjoy no job-related social protection.

Despite the pandemic policy responses were more comprehensive than existing social security provision, the level of protection awarded to self-employed and atypical workers was significantly below that of employees. Unemployment benefit schemes remained the most difficult to access for women in non-standard work and self-employment, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, when changes in the laws regulating formal access for these groups were lacking. Additionally, the policy package is dominated by short-term measures, or even a one-off approach, constituting minor adjustments to the traditional social security schemes that were in place before the pandemic and confirming its weak protective and inclusive capacity.

5. *A comparative outlook*

Despite the fact that all the measures analysed are emergency policies not specifically aimed at rebalancing gender equality, European countries' response differs in policy sensitivity towards gender issues, and the comparative perspective highlights different ways of dealing with gender inequality in the design and implementation of Covid-19 policy packages, especially concerning care facilities.

Throughout the pandemic, one of the most fiercely-debated topics has certainly been provisions regarding the closure of nurseries and schools, a tool that has been widely used in governmental plans of response to minimise the risk of virus transmission. Substantially different approaches have been taken across Europe. While Italy is one of the countries where schools and nurseries have been closed by far the most (OxCGRT 2021), in Sweden, nurseries and schools below the secondary level never closed at all. This controversial decision, which set Sweden apart from most of the rest of Europe, was taken by the national Public Health Agency, in part considering the negative social consequences of schools' closure for low-income families, for single (predominantly female) parents, and for women in general, recognising the uneven distribution of unpaid care work. The decision was taken after consultation with the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, a governmental institution established in 2018 and responsible for a gendered policy monitoring, which is mandatory for all government activities. The Agency assessed the consequences of the pandemic in each of the goals set out in Sweden's gender equality policy, on the basis of the assumption that the labour market is gender segregated.

Beyond this most radically-different case¹⁰, many countries have dedicated special attention to care facilities and have tried to keep nurseries and schools closed for as short a time as possible, always endeavouring to keep some facilities open. In Portugal, Ireland, Estonia, the Czech Republic, France and the UK, nurseries with a skeleton staff have always stayed open to

¹⁰ The choice led to an extreme polarization in the Swedish public debate and after statistics proved that other Scandinavian countries, which enforced much stricter policies, have suffered considerably fewer losses, in December 2020 both King Carl XVI Gustaf and prime minister Stefan Löfven publicly acknowledged that the Swedish approach had failed.

look after the children of essential service workers, notably those in health and social care and teaching. In Ireland, the government introduced new measures allowing parents not to pay childcare fees during the pandemic and providing extra funding to support childcare providers. In Portugal, free nursery schooling for children of low-income households was also arranged. In France, for parents forced to look after their children when schools were closed, a partial activity scheme has been introduced for private sector employees, daily allowances for the self-employed and special leave of absence for civil servants paid at 100% of earnings. In Denmark, in addition to the usual extensive parental benefits, a new scheme entitled parents of children up to 13 years old to additional days of compensation at the same level of maternity benefit (about €2,400 per month).

In Germany, as in Italy, childcare facilities and schools were closed for many months, but some childcare centres were left open, initially reserved exclusively for parents employed at essential service workplaces, and later extended to low-income single parents, which in most cases were mothers. In addition, families and single parents were supported by means of different measures: those who needed to care for children at home due to quarantine or sickness received compensation for loss of earnings (67% of net income with a maximum of €2,016, for ten weeks per working parent or 20 weeks for a single parent) and the number of days off for parents with children under the age of 12 was doubled (20 per parent and 40 for single parents), and 90% of the net income was compensated; families received a one-off child bonus payment of €300 per child in 2020 (€150 in 2021) – in addition to child benefit – and households with reduced income due to the pandemic had easier access to child supplements of up to €185 euro per month and per child (increased to €205 in 2021); single parents were also granted an amount of income tax relief. The Federal Government also made arrangements for an additional €1 billion for the years 2020 and 2021 for the provision of 90,000 new places in child day care centres.

In Lithuania, the amendment of the Law on Sickness and Maternity Social Insurance stipulated that after the suspension of social service institutions (day centres) due to lockdowns or quarantine, those caring for persons of retirement age and persons with a disability, who usually receive day or short-term social

care in such institutions, were paid 65.94% of sickness benefit equal to the amount of the beneficiary's compensatory earnings.

In Slovenia, a new measure was introduced, specifically addressing vulnerable women (e.g., older women, migrant women, women with disabilities) on financial social assistance and care allowance, who were entitled to an additional one-time allowance of €150.

As for job retention schemes, as in Italy, nearly all countries have expanded their pre-existing programmes to adapt them to the new circumstances of the pandemic. Amongst the different forms they take, it is possible to distinguish varying degrees of inclusion, deeply-rooted in the domestic welfare institutions and labour market regulations. For instance, in Denmark the full salary has been guaranteed – 75% (maximum €4,000) funded by the government and covered to 25% by companies – while for hourly workers the compensation rate was 90% (maximum €5,500). In Germany, wage compensation was increased from 60% to 70% (77% for workers with children) from the fourth month of short-time work and 80% (87% for workers with children) from the seventh month until the end of 2021. In Norway, where the government commissioned the Directorate for Children and Family Affairs to map the inequality consequences of the pandemic on the basis of gender and to report regularly on this, the 100% compensation was applied from the third to the twentieth day, after which it was reduced, but low earners (below €26,500) received 80% of wages, while those earning between €26,500-€53,000 received 62.4%. This means that women in low-wage jobs were in a relatively strong position, receiving between 80% and 100% of previous earnings during temporary displacement (Cook, Grimsham 2020).

The UK provided workers with 80% of the gross salary, like Italy, but the scheme had a much higher monthly cap of £2,700 per month. Finally, the French short-time scheme was also changed to include companies and workers that were normally excluded, and the same minimum monthly remuneration as full-time employees has been guaranteed for part-time workers. Apprentices and employees on a professional training contract have been compensated with 100% of their usual remuneration and employees who took a training course during the period of short-time work received compensation amounting to 100% of their remuneration.

It is interesting to note that even during emergency times in the pandemic, some countries, such as the UK, France and Denmark, have reserved programmes and funding for skills development, including sectors in which women represent a high proportion of employees. For instance, in Denmark, despite all job search and activation requirements having been cancelled, specific funds were allocated for improving the qualifications of the unemployed and to secure subsidised apprenticeships in order to allow private companies to cover 75% of the salary costs for apprentices. This programme included the possibility for employees in hotels and restaurants to participate in online vocational education and training for 30 days instead of being laid off. In France, new training programmes targeted young people not involved in higher education in order to empower young women as well, enhancing their employability through vocational training. Although distance learning in technical and vocational education and training is influenced by the pre-existing social and digital divides, which exclude the most marginalised groups and put them at risk of falling further behind, such schemes represent an important tool to ensure continuity of training throughout the pandemic, thus facilitating labour market inclusion in the post-Covid period.

6. *Conclusion*

This article has analysed the economic and social policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy to understand whether the gender dimension of the pandemic has been acknowledged and whether the impact of the current crisis on women, owing to pre-existing gender-based disadvantages in the labour market, has been addressed.

Feminist reflection on welfare state institutions and Esping-Andersen's interpretation of the incomplete revolution as a gradual path of institutional change allow us to better understand the origin of the Italian and other European policy responses to the Covid-19 crisis, and to better identify where Italy stands in this slow process. Certainly, it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the recent policy reforms and whether and how they will affect the process of change of welfare institutions. Yet, it is noteworthy that all strategies adopted by European countries to

respond to the socio-economic consequences of the unexpected and widespread Covid-19, regardless of their welfare regime, have generally enacted extraordinary efforts to transform and temporarily extend traditional social security schemes that were in place before the pandemic to face this exceptional condition and protect individuals, households and companies from the detrimental impacts of the pandemic.

However, what the analysis of Italian measures reveals is that a large part of the policy package did not consider the possibility that the pandemic could have a differentiated socio-economic impact on men and women in the labour market and within households. Except for minor amendments on work-life balance policies, no specific measures were targeted towards the improvement of women's economic security, female employment and social protection, nor to rebalancing responsibilities in the care context. No measures promoted a recovery based on rebalancing equal opportunities in the labour market, no programmes supported changes in gender roles and habits in care responsibility, and no funds were devoted to redressing gender inequalities in the access to social rights or to supporting women in need.

The comparative outlook has shown that some countries have paid more attention to how this unexpected crisis has hit the different social groups and, more specifically, to its effect on gender structural inequalities within societies. These countries have consequently sought to respond through policies that were more aware of gender inequality and women's care responsibility. As we have seen, in some countries *ad hoc* institutions were already in place to monitor and support changes in gender roles and norms, additional funds have been devoted to redressing gender inequalities, legislative tools have been executed to strengthen equality, and were translated into concrete initiatives.

The design and scope of the policy response to Covid-19 vary, sometimes greatly, across countries in ways that are consistent and reproduce existing national institutional legacies and welfare regimes (Beland *et al.* 2021). This path-dependency, stability and continuity over time, reinforce and preserve existing institutions, hindering efforts at change and placing restraints on progress towards the gender equilibrium. Italian measures appear conditioned by the enduring weight of historical legacies and prevailing male breadwinner and familistic welfare institutions. They are rooted in the existing institutional framework and followed the

logic on which the welfare state was built, developing pre-existing policy-tools (e.g., monetary transfer rather than services), revised and extended to new categories of workers, in a process of continuous renewal, without knowing the time frame within which these new rights would continue to apply.

The short time span investigated and the still limited availability of data on employment changes represent two main limitations of this article. The events discussed here are very recent and the pandemic is not yet over. Additionally, the differentiated impact of Covid-19 in terms of time, space and virulence may have influenced both employment trends and the measures implemented in countries that have been hit later than others. Empirical research on welfare states' response to Covid-19 and on labour market adjustments is needed to provide a systematic and comparative reading of the recent employment and social policy reforms, and more time is also required to evaluate possible policy learning processes between countries and the potential transformative impact of this crisis on institutions.

The pandemic crisis has represented an unexpected shock of which we cannot know the long-term consequences and development. So far, Covid-19 has not represented in Italy a window of opportunity to initiate a process of policy reform through a new gender perspective and to start considering the public investment in care and social infrastructure as a multiplier of greater inclusion and participation of women in the country's growth and innovation process (ITUC 2016).

The EU, as part of the Next Generation EU recovery package, has made gender equality a cross-cutting principle for the approval of Member States' Recovery Plans. This is a unique opportunity to finally include women's voice, vision and capacities in planning a fair and sustainable recovery and anchoring gender equality into the Italian political agenda¹¹.

¹¹ The transnational campaign #halfofit has been launched to urge the EU to allocate half of the Recovery and Resilience funds on women's jobs, gender balance and the advancement of women's rights.

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The unequal pandemic. Working women, welfare states and policy responses to Covid-19 in Italy

Due to the nature of the health emergency and the respective containment measures, working women have been particularly exposed to the first waves of Covid-19. To understand the pandemic's gendered impact in the Italian labour market, the article focuses on the relation between gender and welfare through the 'incomplete revolution' theoretical framework. The aim is to explore whether, among the policies implemented in Italy to cope with the socio-economic consequences of Covid-19, some targeted measures to support women have been introduced. The analysis shows that the public action did not take into account the pre-existing gender inequalities in the labour market and the unequal burden of care responsibilities between women and men, which represent an unpaid extra work that has been amplified by multiple lockdowns and has exacerbated women's challenges in the labour market. A comparative outlook on emergency measures in Europe demonstrates that the policy response to Covid-19 tends to reproduce the existing institutional and welfare legacies. In Italy, this path-dependency has inhibited welfare measures rethinking in favour of greater gender equality and did not allow the pandemic crisis to be a turning point at which to begin healing the gender fracture.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, gender equality, labour market, welfare state, institutional change.

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