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# CHANGES IN THE ITALIAN WORK-FAMILY SYSTEM: AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL POLICIES IN THE LAST FORTY YEARS

Manuela Naldini and Chiara Saraceno

## 1. The Italian gendered «work-family system»: forty years of change

Scholars began to focus systematically on interdependence between family and (paid) work organization in the 1970s. In the US, Joseph Pleck (1977) introduced the concept of «family-work system», meaning that, even in industrial societies, family and (paid) work were not fully autonomous and separate spheres of life, but were linked by a set of structured interdependencies. British sociologists Allen and Barker (1976) also pointed out the interdependency between work and marriage. The gender division of labor, responsibilities and competencies is one of the main components of that structured interdependency. Since the 1990s, following changes in the family and in work arrangements, the interference and interdependence between the spheres of work and family has been increasingly conceptualized as an issue of conciliation, particularly for women (for an overview, see Naldini and Saraceno 2011). From this perspective, how adult women balance family responsibilities and labor market participation is seen as involving a redefinition of both—gendered—family arrangements and work arrangements and logics that take those family arrangements as given. Changes in gendered family-work arrangements have taken place in all developed countries during the past forty years. The balance between care needs and the availability of potential carers has changed, as have labor market opportunities and constraints. As regards the former, women's labor force participation has increased in the very age brackets and life cycle phases in which caring needs are likely to be intense, viz., when children are small. The great change in women's labor force participation, in fact, has concerned not only the numbers, but the profile of women involved, with mothers of young children in the forefront. In turn, while this made households less vulnerable to job loss by one of the earners, and limited the financial damage to women and children if the couple breaks up, it has also increased inequalities among families, due to the combination of couple's homogamy and the prevalence of employment among better educated women. Because of its ambivalent consequences, women's labor force participation has been framed both as a new social risk (Bonoli 2005) and as a target of social investment. As a result, family policies have been recast as work-family policies.

In addition to women's employment, two other changes should be mentioned that impact directly on the family-work system, unbalancing the arrangements that had taken shape during the 1960s and 1970s, although we will not address them directly in this article. The first is demographic: population and kinship aging, combined with declining fertility. The second involves the changing opportunities for the young generations (see Saraceno and Naldini 2021). The lengthening of the time spent in education, coupled with raising precarity in the labor market, particularly for new entrants, has prolonged children's dependence on parental support, delaying their age at exiting the parental home and forming their own, although substantial cross-country differences persist. The family now has a

role of social protection during young adulthood even in countries that are traditionally more oriented towards the individualization of rights and responsibilities and where, unlike Italy (and other Mediterranean countries), parents' legal obligation to provide financial support to their children stops when the latter come of age. Observing this phenomenon in the United States and other European countries, Newman (2012) has spoken of the «accordion family»(i.e., a family where children do not exit their parents' home once and for all in order to live independently and form their own household, but move in and out depending on their economic circumstances).

Young people's increasing difficulties in entering the labor market and finding a stable job, and their delay in exiting the parental home are particularly marked in Italy. By contrast, the numbers of dual earner couples have increased later and more slowly than in most West European countries, given women's persistently low employment rate. In addition, Italy shows large regional differences.

Available ISTAT labor force survey data make it possible to analyze trends in couples' employment status according to whether or not they have children only over the past 16 years, 2004-2020. Focusing on couples where the woman is in the 25-49 age bracket, i.e., in a phase of life when, if she has had children, they are very likely to be still at home, Figure 1 shows how employment statuses differ between men and women, as well as between couples (and women) with and without children together with the changes that have occurred over time. Clearly, strong differences persist, not only between men and women, but also between mothers and non-mothers, as well as among regions. Throughout the period, single earner male breadwinner households are more frequent if the couple has children. But in the South they are also frequent among childless households and there is a significant percentage of jobless households. In these regions, many households are highly vulnerable financially, which explains the area's high poverty rates. Furthermore, the substantial proportion of households where adults (mostly women, but also men) in their prime age are far from the labor market or are partially or tenuously attached to it diminishes, or even prevents, these individuals' and households' access to all employment-linked welfare measures: old age pensions, unemployment protection and (until the second half of 2021) child-linked allowances.

INSERT HERE FIG 1

**Figure 1. Distribution of employment within the couple by geographical area and by presence of children, years 2004-2020, women aged 25-49**

Source: ISTAT, Data extracted on September 21, 2021 15:07 UTC (GMT) from I.Stat

Figure 1 also shows that the financial crisis which began in 2008 impacted negatively both on childless households and on households with children, with a decrease in dual worker households and a slight increase in workless households and in female single earner households. These phenomena are more pronounced in the South. The increase in female breadwinner households resulted from the fact that the financial crisis mainly hit male jobs. By contrast, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have largely been felt in sectors where workers are predominately women (and young people of both sexes).

Alongside the region of residence and the presence of children, women's level of education also matters for family-work arrangements. The percentage of households where both partners work full time increases with women's education. As shown in Figure 2, such households are in the majority even when children are present if the mother has a university degree. Conversely, if the woman has only a primary education, the percentage of male breadwinner households is comparatively high, as is that of jobless households.

Insert here FIG. 2

**Figure 2. Employment status in couples with children by mother's education level (25-64 years old), 2004-2020**

Though the numbers of employed mothers of young children have increased over the years, for many Italian women the decision to have one or more children continues to be in conflict with labor force participation, making them and their household potentially vulnerable financially. According to ISTAT (2015) data, the percentage of women exiting the labor market for family reasons has remained stable at around 20% over the period. National Labor Inspectorate data on voluntary job resignations indicate that about 70% of all resignations are by women for maternity-linked reasons, a percentage that has been increasing in recent years (Ispettorato del lavoro 2020).

Changing quality and quantity of demand in the labor market has to some extent changed the meaning of the gendered work-family conciliation strategies that make up the work-family system. In particular, part time work, which was less widespread in Italy than in other countries as a conciliation option, has increased in recent years. However, this increase does not reflect a—more or less forced—conciliation strategy, but has been dictated by the labor market. As Brandolini (2021) recently observed, over 60% of women who work part time today state that they accepted a part time job because there were no full time opportunities, compared to one third at the beginning of the century. For men working part time, the proportion doing so involuntarily has increased from a little under half to three quarters.

Italy ranks along Greece as the EU countries with the lowest women's employment rate. In addition, it is the Member State with the largest gender gap in general, particularly for households with children. According to the latest Eurostat data (2021)<sup>1</sup> referring to 2020, there is a 28.9% gap between women and men with children, compared to the 17.8% European average. These data are the result of the complex intertwining of the gender division of labor within the family, the characteristics of the labor market, with its concentration of short term and/or short-hours contracts among the young of both sexes and among women of all ages—one of the sectors where labor supply is weakest—and of welfare arrangements which are slow in adapting to women's need to balance family and paid work.

In the next section, we will focus in particular on how the Italian welfare system has—or has not—responded to the increased labor market participation of women with children over the past forty years.

## 2. Changes in Family Policies 1980-2021: from slow motion to radical shifts?

### 2.1 Overcoming a legacy of marginality and scarce resources

In order to grasp the nature and the magnitude of changes (or lack thereof) in policies over the past four decades (1980-2021), we follow previous work (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015 for the OECD countries, p. 10; Riva 2015; Migliavacca and Naldini, 2018 for Italy) in distinguishing between different kinds, or «orders», of change as conceptualized by Peter Hall's seminal work. According to this author (Hall, 1993), there are three different orders of policy change. First order changes are minimal in scope, and affect only the settings of the policy instruments. Second order changes alter the instruments and techniques of policy as well as their settings in order to reach certain goals, while third order changes affect the overarching principles and the hierarchy of goals guiding social policies and are associated with a «paradigm shift».

Family policies in Italy have long been comparatively minimal, whether one considers income transfers or the provision of care services (Saraceno 2015). In the only exception, pre-school has been almost universally available for children over three years old since the 1970s. As for maternity and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210809-1>

parental leaves, Italy was once among the most generous countries in Europe, but by the early 1980s had started to lose ground in terms of length of fully compensated leave and fathers' involvement. Furthermore, the degree of «defamilization of care» both for very young children (under three) and for the frail elderly was and still is very low (Estévez-Abe and Naldini 2016; Saraceno 2016). During the 1990s, the demand for recalibrated welfare arrangements to provide care and work-family policies to accommodate women's increasing labor force participation (Ferrera, Hemerijck and Rhodes 2000) met with obstacles not only from existing interest groups, but because of the Maastricht Treaty's strict financial requirements (Negri and Saraceno 2018). To be sure, the increase in women's labor force participation, together with concerns for the persistently low fertility rate, did in fact spark debates as well as policy proposals. But moving from debates and proposals to decisions has proven difficult, for reasons we will discuss in section 3. In this respect, Italy has departed somewhat from the trends in the other OECD countries in the same period, where spending in family policy and especially for supporting work-family balance has generally been expansionary (Daly and Ferragina 2018; Morgan 2013).<sup>2</sup> In particular, there has been an increasing effort to provide ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) for children under three. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, Italy has increased public spending on child-linked income transfers (both direct and indirect, i.e., tax breaks) since 2010 but, unlike the rest of the OECD, not on childcare services, thus moving away from countries such as Spain and Germany that until then had a similar under-provision for the under-threes (see also León *et al.* 2021). As we shall see, a real change in funding occurred only in 2021, and is expected to continue in the coming years with the implementation of the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan. These forty years, however, have not passed without substantial changes in policies affecting the gendered family-work system. Particularly since the turn of the century, several paradigmatic changes in policies have refashioned the landscape in which parents with young children make decisions about paid work and care, though not all sectors have been affected equally or at the same time. On the contrary, the situation of families and individuals caring for disabled or frail relatives has remained substantially unchanged.

[INSERT HERE - FIG. 3]

**Figure 3. Public spending on family benefits in cash and services, in percent of GDP, 1980-2017**

## 2.2 Four paradigmatic changes in family policy

### 2.1.1 Parental Leave: an incomplete «shift»

A policy innovation that is particularly crucial for the work-family system and its gender arrangements was the reform of maternity and parental leave, with Law 53/2000. Under the dual pressure of the women's movement and European directives, this law introduced the status of «working father» alongside that of «working mother», acknowledging working fathers' individual entitlement to parental leave in an improvement on the previous 1977 law that allowed fathers to take parental leave only if the mother did not. Parental couples (or single mothers) are entitled to ten months of additional leave after the five months of maternity leave, up to when the child turns 8 (later raised to 12). Parents may share this period, but neither of the two may take more than six months. If the father takes at least three months, he can earn an extra month. This truly «ideational» change, however, was not adequately funded. Parental leave is poorly compensated and only for a limited period, thus discouraging fathers from taking it. Furthermore, the self-employed are entitled to it only until their child turns 3. As large numbers of young men and women have temporary work contracts,

<sup>2</sup> According to Daly and Ferragina (2018, p. 265), however, more recently there has been a marked shift to tax credits and a decrease in the commitment to universalism in supporting families with children.

often masquerading as self-employment, many new parents are either not entitled, or cannot afford, to take parental leave. Paternity leave, as distinct from parental leave, was introduced (first experimentally) only with Law 92/2012. Initially for only three days, only one of which was compulsory, it was gradually increased in the following years to the present period of 10 days. Following Hall's conceptualization, we would classify this as a third order change at the cultural and normative level, but a second order change in practice.

### 2.1.2 Early child education and care services: a slow move towards a universal right to early education

In general, it can be said that children's right to publicly provided education and care in Italy traditionally starts at age 3. By the end of the '70s, coverage in the form of kindergartens (*scuole per l'infanzia*), was almost universal for children in the 3–5 age bracket, as it was integrated in the school system. By the mid-80s, the coverage rate for children 3–6 years old reached around 89%, rising to 94% by the mid-90s (Censis/Cnel 1980; Naldini 1999). By contrast, ECEC coverage was less than 10 percent nationwide until the end of the '90s, ranging from less than 5% in most Southern regions to over 20% in most Center and Northern regions (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008). An important policy innovation, although more at the ideational level than at that of implementation, was introduced in 1997, when the center-left government approved a law (285/1997) that for the first time formally stipulated a universal right for children under three to certain education services. Based on the principle of co-financing by local governments and private bodies, it had only a small impact on the number of childcare places for the under-3s, but paved the way to a number of experiments and to a change in how these services were perceived as a means of work-family conciliation and an opportunity for children's development.

A more important, third level change came with Law 65/2017 (*Sistema integrato di educazione e istruzione dalla nascita fino ai sei anni*), which re-defined childcare services (*nidi*) for the under-3s as educational rather than social assistance services, and sought to build a comprehensive 0-6 ECEC system. In the following years, however, implementation proved to be difficult and, unlike the situation with kindergartens, ECEC services for the under 3s are still spotty in both quality and in distribution across the country. There are multiple reasons for this: a complex governance system that, together with the Ministry of Education, includes the regions and the municipalities, which have the final say on whether to organize (and fund) this kind of provision; the lack of a clear and systematic funding system covering management as well as building costs; the vicious circle of low women's/mothers' employment and low demand for this kind of service, particularly in the South. In recent years, increased provision has been driven more by the market than by public investment (Sabatinelli 2016). According to latest ISTAT data (2021), public facilities provide childcare for 14.7% of under-3s nationwide, while coverage rises to 27% if we also consider private facilities. Center-North regions, where a higher proportion of women and mothers hold jobs, do not always reach the Barcelona agreement's coverage target of 33% for 2010, but come much closer to it than the Southern regions, some of which do not even reach 10% (ISTAT 2021).

Law 65/2017 notwithstanding, policy making and parental/family cultures in Italy have not fully embraced the idea that early childhood education and care can contrast the inequalities in children's developmental resources that persist irrespective of the mother's employment status. On the contrary: *nidi* attendance is still strongly skewed in favor of children of better off-families with higher educated parents, since they are more often dual earners (ISTAT 2021). In turn, the scarcity of *nidi* and the high cost of private ones limits low-qualified mothers' labor market participation. From this standpoint, the substantial funding earmarked for new *nidi* construction by the Recovery and Resilience Plan, particularly in under-served areas, plus the funds allocated for their management in the 2022 budget (which also applies to the following years) is a stepping-stone point towards a third order change.

### 2.1.3 Family allowances: towards the Single Universal Allowance, a paradigmatic shift

The final approval on April 1, 2021 of Law 46 instituting the Single Universal Allowance (AUU) was probably the most clear and complete (also in terms of funding) third order change. In Italy, in fact, cash benefits to cover the cost of raising children were fragmented until the end of 2021. Over the years, several instruments were introduced, some temporary, others more permanent. Not only was the overall package fragmented, but the amount of support it provided depended on the parents' employment status.

The most important piece of this package was the «Assegno al Nucleo Familiare» (ANF- Household allowance). Since the 1983 and 1988 reforms, it was targeted only to households whose income derived for at least 70% from wages or from old age pensions of former wage workers, since it was funded by employers' contributions. The self-employed were therefore excluded. It was household income tested for the amount and was not paid above a defined income threshold (varying on the basis of the size of household and whether or not it included members with a disability). Given its design, although the allowance was meant to support low income households with children, it left out all poor households whose income did not come from wages, including jobless households. Furthermore, the household means-test *de facto* discouraged second earners (usually wives) in low income households, particularly in the larger ones, thus exposing mothers to the risk of poverty in old age, since they have not paid enough—or any—social security contributions to receive a pension. Such households could also fall into poverty if for some reason the only earner lost his job or died, or the couple broke up.

The allowance for the third child (*Assegno Nucleo Familiare 3 Figli Minori*-ANF3), introduced in 1999 (Law 448/98), together with the maternity benefits for mothers who are not entitled to social security benefits and live in poor households marked a second order change in Hall's terms: it overcame the categorical approach which was typical of ANF but was limited in scope.

The Single Universal Allowance (AUU) combines all existing child-linked direct and indirect transfers: ANF, ANF3, child-linked tax deductions, as well the various bonuses introduced over the years for newborn children. It applies to all children under 18 (and under 21 in certain circumstances). The amount paid is means-tested on the basis of household income and wealth, and thus involves some of the same risks for mothers' labor force participation as the old ANF. To fund it, a yearly 6 billion euros have been added to the monies previously allocated to the various measures it substitutes.

The AUU was originally part of an ambitious larger project, which, under the name of *Family Act.*, had been presented by the Italian Minister of the Family during the second Conte government in Fall 2019. In addition to introducing the AUU, this project—now a draft bill—aims to overhaul the parental leave system and strengthen social services (although only for small children, rather than for the frail elderly or people with disabilities). However, its progress in Parliament has been slow. It was finally approved in April 2022, but, since it is a delegation law, it requires further laws in order to be implemented.

### 2.1.4 Pension reforms (1992, 1995 and 2011)

Pensions are not usually thought of as being part of the family policy package. However, some of their regulations may have implicit or explicit repercussions on gendered and intergenerational family obligations over an individual worker's life cycle. The Italian pension reforms of 1992 and 1995, for instance, while substantially changing the principle whereby pension benefits are calculated (a third order change), also affected the gender arrangements that had underlain the work-family system until them, at four levels. First, the transition to a contribution-plus-seniority based system strongly penalized discontinuous and partial contributory histories, which are typical for women, as well as for the younger generations, thus widening the gender pension gap. Second, for social security pensions that needed to be topped up to a minimum level because of an inadequate contributory

record, the reform changed the means test from an individual basis to a couple basis. In principle, this change established a level playing field for everyone benefiting from social assistance. In practice, however, it radically changed the prospects of many women approaching pension age who had counted on this supplement and had even been encouraged to leave their jobs after reaching the minimum contribution threshold. Furthermore, while the general reform was implemented slowly and affected only the younger workers, this specific part of the reform took immediate effect, with no transition mechanisms. Many women—most recipients of pension supplements, in fact—who were too old to reverse their previous choices, suddenly found that they were no longer entitled to an adequate pension simply because their birthday was a day too late to allow them to continue under the previous system. Third, the .survivor's pension also became partially means-tested. Fourth, the reform eliminated the early retirement privileges of female government employees (who up to then, if married or with children, were free to retire after 15 years of contributions, receiving their pension straight away).

As a—very unbalanced—form of compensation for these changes, the reform offered all women workers three months of virtual contributions for each child, up to a maximum of twelve months. Actual caring time, rather than family status, was thus acknowledged as a social value, but to a very limited extent. The 2011 pension reform, which hastened the transition to the contributory system and raised the pension age for both men and women, also brought progress in closing the gender age difference in the private sector, at a time of drastic cuts in national and local spending on social services because of the long financial crisis. Gender equality in pension age was thus achieved, while the asymmetries in the gender division of family labor persisted and were not eased by the offer of social services (Saraceno 2018).

This long and tortuous process radically overturned some of the implicit expectations and even incentives that had governed the gender arrangements of the work-family system since the post-war years at the expense of many women who were reaching, or nearing, pension age. But it did not change the social organization that took those very arrangements as given.

## 2.2 Long-Term-Care: .legislative inertia in a migrant care model

The several changes that have taken place in Italian policies for parents and (young) children have not been mirrored in the area of care for the frail elderly. Though debates and policy proposals arose in Italy, as in many other countries, in the 1990s, the care of the frail elderly has remained mainly a family matter (Naldini and Saraceno 2008). Compared to the rest of Europe, Italy continues to show what Pavolini and Ranci (2008) called a unique .legislative inertia. in this sector. The main provision remains the personal attendance allowance or *Indennità di Accompagnamento* (IdA), whose transformation into a kind of voucher to pay for services was not the outcome of an institutional reform, but of an innovation in its use favored by migration: the explosion of the *badanti* phenomenon, i.e., the private hiring of mostly foreign carers. The allowance, in fact, is often used to pay for hours of care provided by cheap, mostly migrant, labor: a phenomenon that Bettio, Simonazzi and Villa (2006) have aptly dubbed the «migrant in the family» care model. The phenomenon has gained strength from periodic initiatives to legalize irregular migrants, as migrant carers have been systematically «fast-tracked». Only a few municipalities have developed some kind of system for monitoring and supporting supply and demand for this kind of work (Arlotti et al. 2020). Institutional care is comparatively limited and mainly used for people who are extremely frail and non self-sufficient.

The general framework of social policies in this field is still premised on the implicit and often explicit assumption that the family should remain the main provider of care, directly and indirectly, even beyond the household boundaries. The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the limits of this framework



and provided a new impetus to debate on the much-needed reforms contemplated in the Recovery and Resilience Plan.

### 3. Policy debates and policy issues: the politics of work-family policies

The policy changes briefly described above have stemmed from the political parties' growing awareness of the need to respond to demographic shifts and evolving work-family arrangements. A vocal women's movement that was able to engage a number of party factions, particularly on the left, as well as trade unions, put discrimination and the need for better work-family balance on the political agenda. The onset of a fertility decline that would culminate in the mid-Nineties raised concerns about demographic and social budget balance. Marriage instability, though still comparatively limited, was on the rise, exposing the risks—particularly for women and children—of the male breadwinner model. All these phenomena indicated that the family, and its gender and intergenerational arrangements could no longer be taken as a given, although views of what the priorities and solutions might be differed, and even conflicted, across the political spectrum.

#### 3.1 The emergence of family and gender arrangements as policy issues in the late '80s and early '90s

In the mid-80s, almost all political platforms began to include, more or less explicitly, family policy issues. By the end of the decade a considerable number of «family bills» had been presented in the Italian Parliament by different parties (Colozzi and Matteini, 1991). In 1989, the PDS (former PCI) drafted a bill entitled «Women's Time and City Times» that was the result of a grassroots polling initiative conducted by Livia Turco, who was then the party's point woman on gender issues and later became minister of the family in the first Prodi government (1996-1998). The bill never came to the floor, but it inspired several regional laws and municipal regulations governing office hours, school schedules and transportation that aimed at balancing work and family responsibilities.

Various regions also started to introduce bills framed as «family laws» (see Saraceno 2003, pp. 229-236). Though there were some similarities and areas of overlap, the aims and value orientations of the bill's promoters differed according to where they stood on the political spectrum, ranging from promoting fertility choices—which might include easing access to contraception and abortion or stressing the value of motherhood—to reviewing the tax treatment of the family (with a preference for the French family quotient system), or helping women balance work and family responsibilities. However, only a few of these proposals were ever approved.

After 1993, as new parties emerged on the Italian political scene, old ones dropped from sight, and new alliances were forged, partisan differences became political fodder in the new bipolar structure of left-wing and right-wing parties (Saraceno, 2003, p. 234). The 1994 election was the first ever in which family issues were raised in the electoral campaign (Blome 2017). This new interest, however, did not translate into a systematic policy program. As Naldini and Saraceno (2008) note, some of the difficulties stemmed from financial constraints, as the social budget was heavily skewed towards pensions. But they also resulted from the lack of consensus on priorities, together with a high degree of political and ideological divisiveness with regard to issues concerning the family, sexuality and equal opportunities. Filling in the missing pieces of the Italian welfare state called for a reassignment of responsibilities between families and society, between genders, and between different levels of government: changes that struggled to gain broad acceptance. Furthermore, as Naldini and Saraceno also point out, «while the breakdown of the Italian Communist Party revealed the lack of sturdy roots for a secular culture and attitude in Italy, the even more dramatic collapse of the Christian Democratic Party opened the way for a more explicit initiative on the part of the Catholic church in Italian politics,

which expanded its influence across the various political parties, particularly with regard to matters concerning the family and sexuality» (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008, p. 734).

### 3.2 New Challenges and New Policy Drivers

Several studies of childcare and parental leave policies emphasize the causal importance of the percentage of women in parliament and in politics (Bonoli and Reber, 2010; Fleckenstein and Lee, 2014), as well as of party competition over female votes and the electorate's preferences on such policies (Morgan, 2013). Moreover, according to Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser (2015), family policy expansion may also have a positive feedback effect in swaying public opinion in favor of such policies.

From this perspective, it might be argued that the lack of a perceived need to win over female voters in Italy has slowed women's advancement in politics and kept issues relating to care and support for working women off the political agenda.

In a comparative study of Italy, Spain, Japan and Korea, Estévez-Abe and Naldini (2016) concluded that partisanship and socioeconomic factors have become less important since the 2000s as drivers of changes in family policies, while cultural change, as indicated by urban women's preferences for gender equality and employment-oriented family policy, may push political parties to adopt new platforms. This may explain why in Italy, particularly in the richer regions, where more women hold jobs, childcare services have increased in a process that has been called «modernization from below» (Ferrera and Maino, 2014; Léon and Pavolini, 2014; Oliver and Mätzke, 2014). This development, however, has not been sufficient to produce any clear shift towards a general expansion of childcare services and (partial) defamilization of care at the national level (Estévez-Abe and Naldini, 2016).

In the following paragraphs, we will focus on the political parties' positioning on family policy supporting women's employment in Italy during the so-called «Second Republic».

In the mid-90s, the issue of work-family reconciliation policies became increasingly important, especially among the center-left parties. Many of the reforms discussed in section 2—parental leaves, the introduction of the principle of children's right to early education, the maternity allowance for uninsured low-income mothers and the «third child» allowance—were introduced during the first Prodi government, supported by a center-left coalition. The center-left government that replaced the Prodi administration also won parliamentary approval for the framework Law 328/2000, which strengthened social services, granting the same basic coverage and quality throughout the country. However, this law's provisions were watered down immediately afterwards by the Constitutional reform that gave autonomous power to the regions on many matters, including social services, opening up a series of disputes between the central and regional governments over responsibilities and powers, while increasing the inter-regional differences in services that the law had sought to reduce. Even at the time of writing, the issue of the essential levels of care, which should have granted a common minimum standard throughout the country, is a matter of inter-institutional contention.

In 2001, a center-right coalition government took over. During the electoral campaign, the coalition had extolled the family as the basis of society and the locus of solidarity and promised to appropriate resources to support it. The coalition also emphasized the importance of the implicit federalism introduced by the Constitutional reform and the principle of subsidiarity, while decrying the role of the central state (see Blome, 2017).

In particular, the 2001–2006 center-right government encouraged private enterprise to provide their own childcare (Estévez Abe and Naldini, 2016). In two yearly budgets (2002 and 2003), the Berlusconi government incentivized the creation of services for the under-3s at the workplace. These government initiatives had two main shortcomings: (1) funding for private firms was not framed as additional, but as alternative, to that provided to local governments for the same purpose; (2) these initiatives underestimated the changed governance pattern and the new division of responsibility

between the central government and the regions resulting from the 2001 constitutional reform. Consequently, these laws' provisions concerning the funding of childcare services were eventually declared unconstitutional (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008).

As Riva (2015) has argued, while the center-left governments (1996-2001; 2006-2008) «addressed work-family issues, according to the EU agenda», for instance with regard to parental leave reform (Law 53/2000), to stimulate women's employment, increase ECEC provision—mainly for the under-3s—and promote gender equality, the center-right governments (2001-2006) «concentrated on the recruitment of women to paid employment, within the context of a major commitment to labour market flexibilisation and welfare state reform [...]. Accordingly, they predicated work-family policies on the principle of subsidiarity and placed great reliance either on the family's capacity to care for its own members or on employer-based provision» (Riva, 2015, p. 17). This interpretation is partly in line with a large strand of literature that considers the expansion of welfare provision to be strongly associated with partisanship, especially when left-wing parties are in government. Recent studies, however, seem to be moving away from a focus on left-wing governments and women's advocacy groups in politics toward a greater attention to how and why right-wing parties change their position regarding to family policy, especially in terms of defamilization policies (León et al. 2021, p. 461). According to León *et al* (2021), for instance, the main factors that explain the differences between family policy in Italy and Spain from 1990 to 2015 include the number of women in politics and how it is affected by rules of access, the different socioeconomic profile of the voters of the two main left-wing and right-wing parties, and cultural preferences in the two countries and the way they have evolved over time. Based on an analysis of party manifestos, they argue «that in Spain, the positions on family policy of the two large parties have been converging to the point where views on gender roles, female employment, or child upbringing do not appear to be significantly different» (p. 470). By contrast, family policy figures less prominently in Italian parties' manifestos during the same period. In addition, there is a left/right divide in the preferred type of family policy, with the left being more inclined to services, the right being more in favor of cash transfers and tax benefits for families with children. If there is a convergence, it has been because the left has recently joined in supporting cash transfers over services (León *et al*. 2021, p. 470).

#### 4. The pandemic crisis: a «window of opportunity»?

With a welfare system notable for its weaknesses—in family policies and social investment for children, not to mention long term care policies—the Covid-19 pandemic crisis amplified the social, territorial, age and gender inequalities that had been already worsened by the 2008 international financial crisis, which in Italy lasted longer than elsewhere. It has been suggested that the very magnitude and multidimensionality of this new crisis might make it a window of opportunity for a radical change in welfare state arrangements (Sabatinelli and Pavolini 2021). What is of interest for the purposes of this article is that the pandemic compelled policy makers as never before to deal with the urgency of work-family conciliation problems, since childcare services and schools were shut down and parents were burdened with the added responsibility of helping their younger children with distance learning.

The pandemic thus make it necessary to support those who, though fortunate enough not to have lost their job because of the lockdowns, needed to combine work and family responsibilities 24 hours a day, since children were at home all day. Accordingly, two alternative measures were introduced for people for whom remote working was not possible: an «extraordinary» leave for parents of children under 12, remunerated at 50% of current earnings, and a babysitting voucher. Both measures covered only part of the period that childcare services and schools were closed down (Naldini, 2021). Data show that the overwhelming majority of the workers who took extraordinary leave were mothers, confirming the traditional division of labor (INPS, 2020). Furthermore, women's use of the two instruments differed according to their professional position: better educated mothers made more frequent use of the babysitting voucher, thus losing less income and not weakening their position in

the labor market. Conversely, less educated women relied more heavily on extraordinary leave. No support was envisaged to help parents (and children) with the new responsibilities and tasks involved in distance learning, which not only caused overwork for parents but also increased inequalities among children (Naldini, 2021; Sabatinelli and Pavolini 2021). Most research data indicate that overall the family-work arrangements set in motion by the pandemic have increased the symmetrical gender gaps in employment and in unpaid family work (Del Boca et al. 2020; but for a different view see Brini *et al.* 2021). On the one hand, higher percentages of jobs have been lost by women (and by the young of both sexes) than by men. On the other hand, surveys have found that, although about 50% of men increased their engagement in family work during the lockdowns, an even higher percentage of women did so, and for a higher proportion of work/time, thus increasing the gender gap (Villa 2021).

While change in behavior and policies regarding the gender division of labor between fathers and mothers has been uneven, the lockdown and the hardships of distance learning focused attention on ECEC services and schools, spurring intense civic mobilization. Although this mobilization did not succeed in having the schools re-opened sooner, nor in changing school schedules in order to counter the negative effects of the lockdown, it did help bolster demand for major investments in providing more ECEC services for the under-3s and full time primary schools, specifically in the most underserved areas. These two objectives have been included in the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan. The debates accompanying the preparation of prospects offered the Plan have also encouraged various women's associations to present their own agenda centering on the universalization of ECEC services for the under-3s and support for women's employment and equal opportunities in the labor market.<sup>3</sup> The newfound visibility of gender equality issues on the political and economic agenda, as well as women's mobilization around them, are probably among the most promising repercussions of the pandemic and the Plan, although the latter has addressed them to a limited extent. Whether this development will also lead to the emergence of new political leaderships and coalitions remains to be seen.

## 5. Conclusions

Compared to other Continental countries like Germany, and even to Spain and other «familialist countries» (Estévez-Abe and Naldini 2016; Saraceno 2016), Italy (still) shows less defamilialization of care for both children and the frail elderly in need of long-term assistance. In addition, Italy makes fewer investments in family policies in general, and particularly in work-family policies to support women's employment and de-gender family caregiving. Nevertheless, the four policy shifts we have analyzed suggest that the policy landscape is no longer «totally frozen».

Focusing our attention on the changes in the work-family system and on its interplay with social policies, we can see that the Italian family policy model continued to be influenced by the legacy of the «family/kinship solidarity model» well into the twenty-first century (Naldini 1999, 2003). This model has proved to be a long-lasting feature of the functioning of families and the welfare state in the Mediterranean area and a mainstay of the «mid-century. compromise». It is based on intergenerational and kin solidarity throughout the life-course, a strong gender division of work, and on social policies based on such assumptions. Family solidarity (and reliance on privately hired, mostly migrant, carers) must bridge the functional gap created by limited provision of social protection and especially the limited expansion of childcare and eldercare services. Were that not enough, it must also act as an income redistribution agency not only towards underage children, but also for adult ones, given the difficulties the young find in gaining a foothold in the labor market. This dual role of extended family solidarity is a constraint on women's labor force participation, particularly among the lower and less educated social strata. Moreover, this dual role long stood in the way of the modernization of social policies, in that intra-family pooling of resources and

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<sup>3</sup> See Half of it/donne per la salvezza: [www.halfofit.it](http://www.halfofit.it)

intergenerational redistribution reduced the social and electoral pressure to expand and recalibrate the welfare state through work-family conciliating policies and measures to help young people be independent of their parents. According to Hall's ideas, the «motor lies in the electoral arena». In the case of Italy, regardless of which party was in power, conciliation and family policies were never at the top of the political agenda, not only because they are divisive topics, but also because demand was weak and ill-organized.

Cultural models played a role in weakening the demand for more pro-active policies. As shown by international surveys (European Value Survey, Eurobarometer; on this issue see, e.g., Naldini and Jurado, 2013, figures 2 and 3), Italy is among the countries with the highest expectations for intergenerational (upward and downward) support, and where a large percentage of the population thinks that «a child suffers if the mother works». Even recent surveys on values and attitudes indicate that a substantial percentage of interviewees shares the view that the asymmetrical gender division of unpaid family work is acceptable and that men should be given priority in access to paid work (see ISTAT's survey on stereotypes, ISTAT, 2019), although there are differences by age, level of education and region of residence. This may explain why, pressure from the women's movement notwithstanding, political parties long failed to see supporting substantial gender equality in the labor market and the household through positive policies as a crucial way of appealing to voters.

Issues such as the fertility decline and the increase in the number of frail elderly, although recurrent in the public debate, also did not gain sufficient force to become drivers for substantial policy changes. In Italy, strengthening individual rights to social security, particularly for the young, and increasing care services to improve work-family balance for women and provide equal opportunities for children and frail adults seemed to conflict with entrenched entitlements, thus mobilizing traditional interest groups who already felt that their privileges were under attack. As Bonoli (2007) suggests, the timing was far from favorable for the emergence of «new social risks» in Italy. Social expenditure was indeed rebalanced, but through cuts (with successive pension reforms), rather than through a different distribution across sectors (see Saraceno, 2017, p. 473).

Just before the pandemic crisis disrupted everyday life and priorities, however, changes were taking place in policy making and in the set of actors shaping the public debate, with fertility and equal opportunities between men and women gaining electoral visibility. With all its limitations, the Family Act is an ambitious attempt to systematically address some of the crucial issues that until then had been treated as separate: gender equality in the division of paid and unpaid work, the care and education needs of children, making financial support for children more universal and more efficacious. A measure of success has been achieved only in the last area at the time of writing, with the approval of the Single Universal Allowance. But other topics are contemplated by the Family Act and by the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan as part of the NextGeneration-EU package, in response to pressure from women's associations and civic movements lobbying for children's rights. Gender equality is one of the three overarching priorities of the Italian Plan (the other two being the rebalancing of regional disparities and supporting the young). Whether and how these changes will be followed through and adequately supported will depend in part on social actors' ability to monitor the Plan's implementation and to contribute to shaping salient policy issues, and in part on the fate of the fractious alliance currently in government and the outcome of the 2023 national elections.

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