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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1659285> since 2019-05-23T14:27:29Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1080/1354571X.2019.1576418

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Women on Board: Chain of Command and Gender Discrimination at the Workplace

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Abstract

We analyse how the gender composition of the Board of Directors and of the management affects the hiring and promotion decisions by gender in large private Italian firms. We observe a disproportionate share of men hired and promoted, regardless of the top ranks' gender composition. However, a mitigating effect is detected due to the presence of women in higher managerial ranks that increases promotions of women in lower ranks consistently with the 'women helping women hypothesis'. However, this mitigating effect is far from rebalancing career chances by gender. No significant differences emerge between firms in innovative and traditional sectors, despite the quite different narrative put in place by HR managers.

Key words: glass doors, glass ceiling, discrimination, HR management

Word count: 8173

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1. Introduction

In the third millennium, in Italy, barriers to women's employment and career remain high and pose serious challenges to the political agenda. In 2016, female employment rate was only 47.5%, well below the average value of 59.1% in the OECD countries and of 61% in the Euro-28 area (OECD). Despite the increase in the share of Italian women with tertiary education, that raised from 2.2% in 1971 to 17.6% in 2015 (ISTAT), women are still underrepresented in the top positions of firms: in 2013, only 15% of non-executive directors and 5.4% of senior executives were women (European Commission, 2013). To increase gender balance in the top positions of firms, in 2011 Italy introduced the Law 120/2011 (so called Golfo-Mosca Law) imposing to publicly traded companies a minimum share of 1/5 and then 1/3 of women in the boards of directors at the time of the first and the two following renewals. As a consequence, the share of women in boards has increased from 5% before 2011 (when in France, Germany and the UK it was about 13%) to 30% in 2016, almost reaching France (37%) and overtaking Germany and the UK (27%) (Eurostat, 2016). However, no law can target the share of women in top or middle management, which is in the area of firm human resources (HR) managers' initiative only. We investigate whether there is a correlation between gender composition of different hierarchical levels and whether this has a relation with the working career of women within the firm.

Women's discrimination in the labour market is a multidimensional phenomenon that affects women along all their working life. Even if Italian women surpassed men in educational level and academic results, it remains more difficult for them to find a job and they are often allocated in lower qualified and lower paid positions (the so-called *glass doors*, Hassink and Russo, 2010). Discrimination becomes even more evident when women have the first child. Italy is one of the European countries with the lowest employment rate of mothers (Del Boca *et al.*, 2012): employment rate of women with children under 12 is almost 10 per cent lower than the employment rate of childless women and of women with older children (European Commission, 2014). Difficulties in reconciling working life and family care responsibilities place Italian women in a so-called *glass labyrinth* (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Those who 'resist' and remain at work after childbirth are often considered less productive than their male colleagues, because they are assumed less attached to their job (Pacelli *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, the probability of promotion is much lower for mothers than for their male counterparts, while the opposite is observed for fathers (Kunze and Miller, 2014). Therefore, women hardly reach the highest positions in the firms' hierarchy, and even at middle management level women are underrepresented (*glass ceiling*).

We focus our analysis on hiring and promotion decisions by gender within large private firms, and on how these decisions are affected by the gender composition of the management and of the board of directors (BoD). We analyse whether the presence of women in the BoD correlates to the presence of women among managers, and whether the presence of women at the highest managerial levels of the enterprises hierarchies helps to reduce gender discrimination in hiring and promotions of lower rank employees. We also detect if the sector of activity influences the HR policy by considering separately firms operating in 'innovative' and 'traditional' sectors.

Even though we cannot address causal relationships, that would require a longitudinal analysis for which no data are available at the moment for Italy, we can highlight interesting and novel associations between these features within firms. For our analysis we use a unique dataset, collected by the Office of the Piedmont Regional Councillor for Equality (as prescribed by the L.D. 198/06, art. 46) that includes all enterprises of the private sector with more than 100 employees

situated in the region in 2012-2013, and records data on hirings, promotions, firings, training by gender and hierarchical level. Piedmont region is well representative of the Italian economic situation: its economy is in transition from a productive structure based on the secondary sector to a tertiary-sector economy; it has been severely affected by the recent economic crisis; the public sector, although present, is not too large. Moreover, in Piedmont there is a quite large number of medium and large enterprises within which it is possible to observe and analyse specific and conscious HR policies that are, on the contrary, more informal in small firms.

Furthermore, we integrated these data with balance sheets from AIDA (a dataset on firms produced by the Bureau van Dijk), with interviews to HR managers and with focus groups with union representatives to deepen the aspects that emerged from the data analysis.

The picture emerging from our empirical analysis is rather complex, but clear: barriers to women's recruitment and career advancements persist in the absence of a constructive dialogue on the issues of reconciliation and flexibility between the parties involved (enterprises, institutions, unions, families). No significant differences emerge between innovative and traditional sectors.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 discusses the relevant literature; Section 3 presents our research design; Section 4 focuses on women in the BoD and top managerial positions, while Section 5 shows the effect of top management gender composition on women's recruitment and career. Conclusions follow.

2. Review of the literature

Many causes have been identified to explain gender discrimination in the labour market; all are related to the role of women as predominant/sole caregivers in the family.

Since women often experience motherhood during their working life, firms consider them less productive than their male counterparts because of career interruptions and less worked hours (Bertrand *et al.*, 2010). Women with family responsibilities, in fact, are more likely to suffer from lack of concentration, stress and burnout (Beauregard and Lesley, 2009) because of the limited support received from the partner and from public services (Del Boca *et al.*, 2012; Del Boca and Giraldo, 2013). The theory of statistical discrimination explains how the impossibility for the firm to know worker's individual productivity leads to fewer job and career opportunities for all female employees (Smith *et al.*, 2013). Petit (2007) showed that, sending identical CVs to firms differing only in the applicant's gender, women are less likely to be invited for interview, especially for high-qualified positions; discrimination is weaker for older women even when they have (probably older) children.

Herman *et al.* (2013) report how in Science, Technology and Engineering sectors, female employees are excluded from 'the group of boys' in the phase of transition to motherhood, with the assignment of lower-responsibility tasks. As a result, women at the top positions in the firms' hierarchies are often childless (Grund, 2015; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2017). Smith *et al.* (2013) show that also men who take parental leave face lower promotion chances than their male colleagues, demonstrating that firms perceive parenthood and, more generally, family responsibilities as a signal of lower commitment and work effort.

During their working life, female workers experience different forms of discrimination: from less training received to dismissal when they reveal their pregnancy status. E.g., O'Halloren (2008) analysed on-the-job training received by a cohort of 13,000 workers between 1979 and 2004 and showed that women received less and shorter training.

Gender discrimination makes women pessimistic about their career opportunities and, as a consequence, they tend to underestimate their abilities (Kaiser, 2014). Therefore, they are disproportionately represented in queues for lower-status and non-executive positions (Fernandez and Mors, 2008) while they are less likely to apply for male-dominated occupations, unless they are characterized by more 'masculine' traits, as independence, self-confidence, impassiveness, assertiveness (Antecol *et al.*, 2013).

Lack of self-confidence, higher risk aversion, lower propensity to propose themselves for top positions and lower attitude to negotiation are often interpreted by firms as the outcome of women's preferences that give more importance to family life than to work responsibilities (Mohsin-Ul, 1997; Del Bono and Vuri, 2011; Grund, 2015).

However, it is not clear whether women's behaviour in the labour market is the result of preferences or of tighter constraints. The effect, though, is an evident vicious circle: female workers are allocated to lower positions in firms' hierarchies, receive less training and have fewer opportunity of career. Top and middle positions are therefore male-dominated and men replicate the traditional HR management, assigning challenging tasks mostly to males (De Pater *et al.*, 2010) and offering less career opportunities to women. Moreover, women need to show higher ability and higher performance than men to be promoted to the same job (Lazear and Rosen, 1990; Pema and Mehay, 2010). Gender gap in promotions and careers is the obvious consequence.

Is the situation different when there are more women in top management positions? Female leadership seems to be characterized by a style that is more sensitive to other's people needs (Katila and Eriksson, 2011). Results on the 'women helping women' hypothesis find significant effects of having a female boss on women's career (Kunze and Miller, 2014; Lucifora and Vigani, 2016) Is this the case in Italy as well?

There are many studies on gender discrimination in the Italian labour market, but, as far as we know, none of them focuses on the effect of gender composition of top and middle management on female workers' hiring and career opportunities. Italian literature shows that women are more likely to be found in low qualified positions, with informal contracts (Bratti *et al.*, 2005) and are less likely to move from a temporary to a permanent contract (Corsini and Guerrazzi, 2007). Italian female employees suffer from a wage gap that is mainly explained by their lower positions in the firms' hierarchies, but the gender wage gap increases along their career also because of lower mobility between enterprises compared to males (Del Bono and Vuri, 2011). Men are still perceived as having a comparative advantage in prestigious careers and therefore more investment is done on them, resulting in better career and higher wages (Filippin and Ichino, 2005). Only Flabbi *et al.* (2014) and Ferrari *et al.* (2016) analyse the effects of female leadership on several firm outcomes. In particular, Flabbi *et al.* (2014) found that 'female leadership has a positive impact at the top of the female wage distribution and a negative impact at the bottom. Moreover, the impact of female leadership on firm performance increases with the share of female workers'; while Ferrari *et al.* (2016) highlight that 'the share of female directors is associated with a lower variability of stock market prices'. As anticipated, there is no literature on the link between female leadership and HR management by gender in Italy. In the following sections we try to fill this gap.

3. Data and research design

The dataset we use for our empirical analysis is collected by the Office of the Piedmont Regional Councillor for Equality and it covers all firms larger than 100 employees located in Piedmont in 2013. 1,139 firms have been recorded, and 920 have provided full questionnaires that can be used for the analysis. The remaining ones are multi-plant firms located also outside the Region and hence exempted from answering part of the questionnaire. For each firm, the survey collects quantitative data, by gender and hierarchical level, on the number of employees, on hirings and separations (quit, firing, retirement), on the kind of contract (permanent, temporary, training, subsidized) and eventual transformation from temporary to permanent contracts, on the use of supplementation schemes, on firm provided training (hours and number of participants), on wages.

We added balance sheet data, detailed industry coding and BoD gender composition using the public use file AIDA.

We split firms in two groups, referring to the wide literature on Pavitt coding: we have defined ‘innovative’ those firms operating in communications, ICT, mechatronics, chemicals; ‘traditional’ all the others (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows the sample composition by industry, ordered by decreasing share of women employed. The typical ‘female sectors’ emerge: private health (e.g. social cooperatives for care, nursing homes), tourism and trade, followed by textile firms, services to firms (e.g. logistic, security, cleaning services) and to consumers.

(Table 1)

Most firms employ between 100 and 200 workers. Those above 500 employees are a small minority, confirming that the Italian firm size distribution is very skewed toward small sizes.

Crucially, we supplemented the quantitative data with qualitative data: interviews with HR executives and managers and focus groups with trade unions’ members (10 interviews and 2 focus groups with representatives of the main Italian trade union confederations). Firms whose managers were interviewed were selected in order to have a balanced sample of traditional and innovative companies (Table 2).

(Table 2)

Participants to the focus groups were selected to ensure the representativeness by industry of the companies included in the quantitative sample.

For interviews with HR managers and for the focus groups an interview scheme was prepared to investigate the following areas: horizontal and vertical occupational segregation,

women in senior positions, use of maternity and parental leave and managers' attitude towards workers on leave, recruitment criteria and promotion criteria, firm's policies regarding job flexibility.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted with a dedicated software (Alceste 4.9), allowing quantitative analyses of qualitative materials, based on lexical correspondences to identify semantic areas within the analysed texts and to relate them with the analytical dimensions.

4. Women in the leading positions

Top positions are heterogeneous with respect to the power they command, e.g. sitting in the BoD or being the sole director, being the top-manager of finance instead of marketing, being middle manager of a large or small branch. We cannot control for this heterogeneity. However, we can observe whether women are present in top positions and we can test whether this is associated to employment shares and career patterns by gender in the lower ranks.

Table 3 shows that if the firm is managed by a sole director, in 90 per cent of cases he is a man. If there is a BoD, it is mixed by gender in 40 per cent cases only; we observe a tiny minority of all-women boards (5 per cent) while the all-men boards represent 55 per cent of the cases. It emerges a clear correlation between the share of women in the firm and in the BoD (col. 2). Only-men BoD or male-sole directors are present in firms that are larger (col. 3) and have a higher value added per head (col. 4). Only-women BoD do not usually manage corporate or innovative firms. Mixed boards are more frequent among larger firms and corporate companies, also as an effect of the Golfo-Mosca Law that imposed a minimum share of women in the boards of publicly traded companies.

(Table 3)

Data inspection of the board composition by industry (results not reported) shows that firms managed by female-sole directors or by a female-only BoD operate almost exclusively in the private health sector, with few cases in professional activities and services to firms. The larger share of firms is managed by male-sole directors (62.3 per cent): mainly industrial activities like chemicals, automotive, metal products, machinery, but also trade and communications. Interestingly, some typical 'female sectors' like tourism and trade are not in the list of those managed by women; e.g., tourism firms, in which 71 per cent of employees are women, emerge as those most often managed by a sole-male director.

Moving down along the firm hierarchy, we observe that some firms have no top-managers but only a BoD or a sole director and middle management. Among those who do have both a BoD or a sole director and top-managers, we observe a correlation between top-managers' gender and the gender composition of the board (Table 4). If the board is composed only by men or if there is a male-sole director (80 per cent of cases) we find a male-only management in 64 per cent of cases; if the board is mixed (12 per cent of cases) the share of firms with male-only managers decreases to 49 per cent. Splitting the sample by innovative/traditional sector provides no further strong evidence.

(Table 4)

Our descriptive data confirms that women are under-represented in top positions even in sectors where the proportion of female employees is prevalent. The career to the top management remains a male prerogative.

How do the HR managers we interviewed explain the limited presence of women in top positions? We investigate whether this is due to the characteristics of the management responsible for the selection and career progressions, and whether it depends on firms' characteristics, according to the dichotomy between traditional and innovative companies.

Using Alceste tool on the transcripts of the interviews, we can identify different *classes of meaning*, i.e. groups of words pointing to the same meaning that the researcher can interpret and name (see Cavaletto and Pacelli, 2014, and Reinert, 1993, for details on the methodology). We run the analysis separately on innovative and traditional firms.

From the interviews of the HR managers of *traditional firms*, two classes of meaning emerge, which are well balanced in terms of percentage of text analysed for each class: 52 and 48 per cent respectively; hence, the narrative materials can be divided into two types of reasoning. Based on the recurring terms found in each class with the higher χ^2 value, we named the first class 'characteristics of top management'. The typical words in this class were *men, manager/s, all male*, as exemplified by the excerpts below, that we translate from native Italian spoken by the interviewed:

For management positions men are usually preferred to women [...]. The selection criterion, for both internal and external candidates, is to be male [...]. We are an old-fashioned company and the owners still have the idea that a company should be headed by men (staff to the HR manager, Orange company)

Family and work cannot be reconciled, and this is the reason why for men it is easier to reach the top. In our company the top management is all male (staff to the HR manager, Yellow company)

We named the second class of meanings as 'good reasons for exclusion'. The words repeatedly used by respondents to justify and legitimize the lack of women in top positions are: *women, children, career, family, working hours*. e.g.:

You have to be in the office all the time, even beyond normal working hours [...]. If you are there all the time it means you work hard [...]. If at four o'clock you have to leave to pick up your children from the nursery, it means that work is not your top priority (staff to the HR manager, Yellow company)

Women that reached top positions had their children when they were young. Afterwards they concentrate themselves into their work because their children are no longer a burden (HR manager, Blue company)

The text analysed for the group of HR managers of *innovative companies* produced three classes of meaning. All texts contain references to equal opportunities and acknowledgement of merit. We named the first class, corresponding to 25 per cent of the text analysed, as 'keeping pace' as it contains terms that are specific to one of the crucial issues in women's careers: managing time and reconciling work with family life. The typical words in this class are indeed *meeting/s* and *schedule/s*. The most representative phrases in this class highlight an approach strongly based on the objectives assigned rather than on mere presenteeism:

In terms of everyday routine, there is no reason to schedule meetings at six o'clock in the evening; this is a habit that has to be overcome (HR manager, Light blue company)

I have eight hours of their time every day [...]: it would be ridiculous to use more time than that. If they have really worked eight hours, then they are tired [...]. How are they supposed to contribute with lucidity to a meeting? (HR manager, Purple company)

Meetings are always and only during the working hours, when the employees involved are all present (HR manager, Turquoise company)

We named the second class of meaning (which regards 27.5 per cent of the text) 'fair competition' and the typical words used highlight formal and concrete equality: *women, men, groups*, as exemplified by the selected excerpts:

We have women coordinating work groups just like men; women go on business trips just like men do (HR manager, Purple company)

If a person fulfils the necessary requirements for promotion, then whether is a man or woman is frankly irrelevant (HR manager, Pink company)

These companies are also those that claim the biggest investments on reconciliation policies and flexibility, and to have introduced new ways of organising work:

One of the most important elements that enables us to have this [reconciliation] is flexibility, which translates in practical terms into no clocking in: it is a question of individual responsibility. Basically none of the employees have a swipe card or have to clock in. They have to do the work that is assigned to them and at the end of the month they fill in a sheet with the hours worked [...]. With this system people, men and women, work better, work harder, with greater job satisfaction (HR manager, Turquoise company)

Finally, we named the third class of meanings, which is the largest in terms of the amount of text included (42.5 per cent) 'barriers to women'. This class is characterized by the presence of keywords like *family, children, women*. Even innovative companies, that claim to have introduced more merit-based criteria for advancements, acknowledge the limiting effect of the family, and above all of children, for (female) workers' career.

It continues to be the case that even among women, if you are competing against someone with a family and children you will stand a better chance (HR manager, Purple company)

For the top positions obviously having a family and children represents a burden for women, there is no point in denying it (HR manager, Light blue company)

Some of the top positions are occupied by women who have overcome the hurdle of motherhood (HR manager, Turquoise company)

Summing up, it emerges clearly that traditional and innovative companies present a different portrait of their HR management strategies. However, one element is common to both traditional and innovative companies: all companies, to various degrees, show a lack of interest in the issue of finding solutions to the exclusion or under-representation of women in the organisations. It is not a company duty to address equal opportunities, but rather it is a family and a public policies' responsibility.

The problem is not in the firm, the problem is the family and the society as a whole. Social organization did not change and still childcare services have timetables that do not fit with those of working people (HR manager, Blue company)

It is not a firm's task to reconcile work and family. Families decide reconciliation. I am convinced about this. Certainly, most of the men that work in our company, even if they are young, think that caring of children is a women's task (HR manager, Pink company)

We cannot use the workplace to help the society to promote a change in habits or to substitute the government in what institutions do not do. We are here to produce goods and services. (HR manager, Purple company)

It is now worth investigating whether an effect of these different narratives emerge in different career patterns by gender in the two types of firms.

5. Hiring and career of women

In this Section, first we set the stage looking at hiring and promotion probabilities by gender. Then we move to analyse whether the gender composition of the top management makes a difference on these patterns.

Bivariate analysis shows some interesting patterns. Comparing the share of women that have been hired or promoted during the previous year (no. women promoted in the rank over total no. of women in the rank), with respect to the male share (idem), by occupation (Table 5), we see that firms hire more males in middle management levels (33.3 compared to 10.7 per cent for females), but promote equally men and women (20.1 vs 20.4 per cent). Firms promote almost evenly male and female white collars (27.4 vs 25.1 per cent) but hire disproportionately more men (65.4 vs 11.9 per cent). Finally, among blue collar workers, firms hire disproportionately more men (66.9 vs 10.1 per cent), and also promote more often men (29.7 vs 14.3 per cent). Furthermore, (not reported) there seem to be no strong correlation between hiring and promotion patterns; e.g. taking middle managers, the share of promotions by gender is about equal in total as above said, and it is about equal also looking at firms that hire more men (10 vs 9.2 per cent), or at firms that hire more women (3.9 vs 4.1 per cent). The pattern is similar for all ranks. Separating the statistics by innovative/traditional firms, the picture does not change substantially, although traditional firms seem to be more female friendly with respect to innovative ones in the promotion process. On the contrary, in the hiring decisions, innovative firms seem to be more female friendly with respect to traditional ones. Multivariate analysis will shed more light on these patterns.

Summing up, these descriptive statistics seem to hint to different strategies enacted by firms on the hiring side and on the internal promotion side. On the one hand, male and female employees seem to be more equally promoted, even if males seem to be advantaged in promotion if they belong to lower ranks; on the other hand, hirings favour men disproportionately, and the unbalance is more evident the lower the position in the firm hierarchy, highlighting a significant 'glass door' problem.

(Table 5)

Moving to multivariate models, we repeat the analysis conditional on main firm characteristics: value added per head as a proxy for productivity; firm size to measure the internal labour market width; presence of maternity leaves in the firm as a proxy for prime age women in the firm; whether the firm shows signals of crisis (e.g. supplementation schemes in place); whether the firm employs also external precarious workers (i.e. free-lance or temporary work agency workers) to signal whether the firm invests in specific human capital of its workforce. Finally, whether the firm registers patents (innovative activities), if it is young (less than 15 years of activity) and whether it is a corporate company (for which the Golfo-Mosca law applies); 19 sectors of activity are included as further controls.

First, we estimate a bivariate probit model to measure the joint probability of having women in the top and in the middle management (Table 6): the presence of women in the BoD increases the likelihood of having also women among top-managers, and the presence of women among top-managers increases the likelihood of having also female middle managers. This might indicate a short command line, i.e. each hierarchical level is in charge of the one just below. It seems also to be consistent with the clustering of two kinds of firms: those in which women are present in the top ranks, and those male dominated. The correlation is statistically significant in the whole sample of firms and among traditional kind of firms, while it is not significant among innovative firms.

(Table 6)

Second, in Table 7 we estimate, for each occupation separately, the probability for male workers of being *promoted* relatively more or less than female ones, as a function of the gender composition of the management and of the above mentioned controls. We also split the sample in innovative and traditional sectors.

Overall, results are consistent with the ‘women helping women’ story (highlighted in bold in the table): women in the higher ranks seem to be able to support effectively the career of women in the lower ranks. Results are less consistent, instead, with an alternative pattern - e.g. more female middle managers provide a larger pool from which to promote women to top management - as the analysis is conditional on the number of men and women in the rank. Innovative and traditional firms do not seem different with respect to their promotion process.

More specifically, if the firm has women among top-managers it is more likely that the share of female middle managers that gets promoted during the year is larger than the share of male middle managers that gets promoted during the year. The results are similar if we look at white collars, but innovative firms link this effect to women in the BoD instead of in the middle management. Also, women in the BoD are associated to a lower probability that top-manager men are promoted in larger shares than top-manager women, and women in top management are associated to a lower probability that blue collars men are promoted in larger shares than blue collar women.

(Table 7)

Finally, in Table 8 we estimate, for each occupation separately, the probability for male workers of being *hired* more or less than females, again as a function of the gender composition of the management and controls.

We saw in Table 5 that firms hire disproportionately more men in all occupations. In the multivariate analysis, i.e. controlling for firm characteristics, we see that the pattern of glass doors cannot be reversed by the presence of women in top ranks. Women in the BoD are associated with a lower probability of hiring a larger share of female middle managers; women in middle management are associated with a higher probability of hiring more male white collars and less female blue collars. I.e., in this case results are consistent with a ‘women helping *men*’ story! We obtain just one coefficient (in bold in the table) indicating a female friendly policy linked to the presence of women in the higher ranks of the firm. Finally, top rank women do not seem to play any role in innovative firms in the hiring process by gender.

(Table 8)

Summing up, traditional and innovative firms do not seem different in the hiring and promotion processes as found in Truss *et al.* (2012) and Holth *et al.* (2017), contrary to what emerged from HR managers’ interviews. It is therefore crucial to give voice to the workers, through trade union representatives, to shed some more light.

The focus groups with trade union representatives confirm the quantitative analysis, plotting a more homogeneous representation across sectors. The focus groups, in fact, highlight how the issue of equality in accessing senior positions is a common challenge for all enterprises, regardless the sector, the type of product and the organization of the firm. It seems that the vertical segregation, i.e. the glass ceiling, has shifted up: women are excluded from position where strategic decisions are taken.

Women are now trying to reach the top positions, and are slowly succeeding. They manage to reach middle levels but they reach the top positions only if they do not have family burden (Union representative, banking sector, traditional firm)

Even those women with excellent qualifications do not reach the top positions. They have always to prove something. My company is a very competitive one and the recruiters are all male (Union representative manufacturing company, innovative firm)

Therefore, the problem seems to be related to beliefs, deeply rooted in the BoD, that cannot imagine women in top positions.

The Boards are male-dominated and they work according to their schemes. They praise themselves for implementing equality actions but this is simply not true (Union representative, insurance sector, traditional firm)

Union representatives agree on the fact that while firms claim to consider worker’s value, competences and skills, in recruitment and promotion decisions they consider mainly the ‘boundless time availability’.

The time availability issue is crucial for gender identity. The prevailing model is the presentism one: a valuable worker is one who stays till late in the office, does overtime work, is available in the evening and present on Saturday morning. Staying in the office long hours is a sign of commitment. This emphasis on time spent at work, instead of on results obtained, discourages female participation in the completion for top positions and it becomes

an alibi for men. It is also advantageous for men to spend many hours at work to avoid family responsibilities (Union representative, transport sector, traditional firm)

The above mentioned presenteeism style makes women 'inadequate' in comparison to men in crucial aspects relevant in the selection processes: availability for overtime work, availability to travel, no flexible working schedules and part-time options. Women are therefore discouraged to apply for top positions, and this is often interpreted by the management as a preference for care activities (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012; Leuze and Strauß, 2016). Time availability has also direct implications on career since important and strategic meetings are often scheduled late in the afternoon.

In all divisions when important and strategic decisions must be taken or when there are deals to be made the meeting are scheduled after 5 p.m. (Union representative, manufacturing firm, innovative firm)

For career advancement, the importance of taking part in strategic meetings is threefold: it gives visibility to the employee and it offers the opportunity to be considered by the management for promotion; it allows to access more information useful for career building; it allows a forward-looking socialization to acquire behaviours that the management considers important. It is in fact clear that bosses prefer to promote and to work with people similar to themselves.

Finally, it is evident that women, in particular after childbirth, cannot travel frequently if they have no support from partners, other family members or public childcare.

'Availability' is very important and it is a 'men only' phenomenon, especially when women have very young children or elderly parents, as care is still a woman's responsibility. Therefore, travelling several days in a month and staying over for several nights is unsustainable for most women (Union representative, manufacturing sector, innovative firm)

Thus, reconciliation between work and family life is always the crucial issues for women's career, involving not only firms' HR policies, but also public services and the division of care and domestic tasks within the family.

One last statement brings to our last question: although women who gain top positions are a minority, did they pay a price to reach their goal? Accepted, suffered or chosen, there is a price. If having a successful career is considered as a natural fact for men, perfectly compatible with having family and children, for women in the top positions schedules, commitments, travels make it difficult and therefore rare to have care responsibilities.

There are women in the top managerial positions: those who do not have family responsibilities. When they do have a family, it is pushed in the background (Union representative, banking sector, traditional firm)

Another price, perhaps unconscious, seems to be the change in attitudes and behaviors. Since socialization in the role is based on male models, women in high managerial positions are not different from their male peers in the approach to work and subordinates. The union representatives report the impression that power, even when in female hands, remains a male prerogative in term of style, behaviors and languages.

Furthermore, women that succeed in career become often 'caricatures' of their male peers. Women who reach the top-managerial positions and continue to be 'women' are those who really achieved the success (Union representative, telecommunications sector, innovative firm)

Conclusions

The scarcity of women in the BoD and in the top-managerial ranks of the Italian firms is a well-known phenomenon. In our research we investigate whether HR policies and a more gender balanced composition of the top decisional ranks can help a more female-friendly environment.

Mohsin-UI (1997) showed how a supporting work/family culture in firms is the most important variable to explain women's opportunities for promotion. However, our results confirm the absence of firms' policies for equal opportunities in the sample of companies we analyse (and that we regard as representative of Italian large firms). These policies seem to be more formal than substantial, with low commitment and consciousness in the middle levels of firm's hierarchies.

So, vertical occupational segregation resists. Although intermediate positions (those of professionals and staff) are covered increasingly by women, they are yet not fully involved in higher managerial positions. The gender bias operating in the promotions to senior positions, the absence of maternity and reconciliation tools are still strong limits to an equal competition between men and women in the workplace.

The inequality affecting women at work is taking a more hidden quality: companies state they are protagonists of a new organizational climate, where flexibility, merit, selections based on curricula and skills would open the way for women. However, no trace of this can be found in the data or in the narrative of the employees.

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Tables

Table 1: Sector composition, share of women and firm size (no. of employees) of the sample

SECTOR	Innovative sector	no. firms	%	% of women employed	median firm size
Health		72	7.77	85%	160
Tourism		10	1.08	71%	377
Trade		91	9.82	67%	187
Textile		39	4.21	55%	174
Services to firms		77	8.31	54%	248
Services to consumers		15	1.62	50%	143
Non metal products		14	1.51	40%	257
Food		33	3.56	36%	166
Communications	yes	54	5.83	32%	196
Professionals		55	5.93	30%	160
Machinery	yes	129	13.92	26%	167
Transports		65	7.01	26%	207
Chemicals	yes	56	6.04	23%	197
Wood		20	2.16	22%	158
Utilities		24	2.59	20%	242
Automotive		64	6.90	20%	220
Finance		6	0.65	19%	201
Metal products	yes	79	8.52	18%	154
Constructions		24	2.59	11%	155
<i>Total</i>		<i>927</i>	<i>100.00</i>		<i>185</i>

Table 2: Interviews – Type of firm

Nickname	Traditional/ Innovative	Sector	Size class	Manager interviewed
Yellow	T	Automotive	> 500	Staff to the HR director – female
Red	T	Transports	> 500	HR director – male
Blue	T	Finance	200-300	HR director – female
Green	T	Textile	100-200	HR director – male
Orange	T	Tourism	200-300	Staff to the HR director – female
Pink	I	Communication	200-300	HR director – male
Purple	I	Communication	100-200	HR director – male
Turquoise	I	Communication	300-400	HR director – male
Light blue	I	Machinery	100-200	HR director – male

Table 3: Main characteristics of firms by board composition

	<i>% firms in the sample</i>	<i>Median share of women in the firm</i>	<i>Median firm size</i>	<i>Median value added per head (,000)</i>	<i>Share of corporate firms</i>	<i>Share of traditional firms</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(7)
BoD only men	16.9	33%	197	57.8	39%	71%
Male sole director	62.3	26%	184	57.1	37%	58%
BoD mix	11.9	53%	206	42.8	46%	80%
Female sole director	7.3	42%	145	47.4	40%	65%
BoD only women	1.6	80%	142	22.5	0%	100%

Table 4: BoD and managers: composition by gender

<i>Managers</i>				
All		<i>Both</i>	<i>Men only</i>	<i>Total</i>
BoD/sole director	<i>Men (79.2%)</i>	35.9	64.1	100
	<i>Both (11.9%)</i>	50.9	49.1	100
	<i>Women (8.9%)</i>	42.3	57.7	100
	<i>Total</i>	38.1	61.9	100

Table 5: Hirings and promotions by gender**Promotions**

	<i>All firms</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Innovative</i>
Middle managers			
<i>More men</i>	20.1	17.1	24.1
<i>None</i>	59.6	60.8	57.9
<i>More women</i>	20.4	22.1	17.9
White collars			
<i>More men</i>	27.4	24.3	32.5
<i>None</i>	47.6	51.6	40.7
<i>More women</i>	25.1	24.1	26.8
Blue collars			
<i>More men</i>	29.7	25.4	37.7
<i>None</i>	56.0	59.7	49.2
<i>More women</i>	14.3	15.0	13.1

Hirings

	<i>All firms</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Innovative</i>
Middle managers			
<i>More men</i>	33.3	34.0	32.4
<i>None</i>	56.0	56.9	54.7
<i>More women</i>	10.7	9.0	13.0
White collars			
<i>More men</i>	65.4	69.9	57.9
<i>None</i>	22.7	21.0	25.5
<i>More women</i>	11.9	9.1	16.6
Blue collars			
<i>More men</i>	66.9	70.5	60.5
<i>None</i>	23.0	20.4	27.6
<i>More women</i>	10.1	9.1	11.9

Table 6: Bivariate probit: joint probability of having women in the top and in the middle management

	All firms		Traditional firms		Innovative firms	
	prob(females among top-managers)	prob(females among middle managers)	prob(females among top-managers)	prob(females among middle managers)	prob(females among top-managers)	prob(females among middle managers)
women in BoD	0.352**	-0.084	0.342*	-0.136	0.477	0.008
women among top-managers		1.632***		2.093***		0.126
In value added per head	0.569***	0.351**	0.524***	0.421***	0.713***	0.388
In employees	0.691***	0.271*	0.655***	0.208**	0.845***	0.504
maternity leave	0.311**	-0.062	0.162	-0.056	0.487**	0.137
supplementation schemes	-0.07	0.023	0.002	-0.244	-0.276	0.239
no free-lance or twa	-0.128	-0.146	-0.255	-0.071	0.122	-0.185
patents	-0.259*	0.108	-0.566***	0.226	0.178	-0.04
firm age < 15	-0.133	-0.126	-0.078	-0.034	-0.236	-0.208
corporate	-0.371**	0.097	-0.539***	0.033	-0.321	0.145
constant	-6.514***	-3.048**	-5.732***	-3.129***	-8.171***	-3.436
athrho	-0.932		-14.164		0.121	
19 sectors	yes		Yes		Yes	
no. obs	618		389		229	

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table 7: Promotions, multinomial logit, reference category %M = %F (meaning no promotions)

	All firms		Traditional firms		Innovative firms	
	%M > %F	%F > %M	%M > %F	%F > %M	%M > %F	%F > %M
<i>TOP-MANAGERS</i>						
women in BoD	-1.605	0.38	-2.481*	0.774	-1.295	-0.308
<i>MIDDLE MANAGERS</i>						
women in BoD	-0.241	-0.679	-0.094	-0.808	-0.574	-0.73
women among top-managers	0.139	0.914***	0.194	0.849*	-0.152	1.261*
<i>WHITE COLLARS</i>						
women in BoD	-0.386	0.391	-0.299	0.084	-0.627	0.854*
women among top-managers	-0.099	-0.119	0.07	-0.153	-0.428	-0.109
women among middle managers	0.382	0.425*	0.272	0.713**	0.574	-0.02
<i>BLUE COLLARS</i>						
women in BoD	0.215	-0.127	0.189	-0.262	0.155	0.141
women among top-managers	-0.868***	-0.115	-1.556***	0.271	-0.282	-0.442
women among middle managers	0.311	-0.479	0.532	-0.559	0.014	-0.595

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Controls as in

Table 6

Table 8: Hirings, multinomial logit, reference category %M = %F (meaning no hiring)

	All firms		Traditional firms		Innovative firms	
	%M > %F	%F > %M	%M > %F	%F > %M	%M > %F	%F > %M
<i>TOP-MANAGERS</i>						
women in BoD	0.827	0.835	0.861	0.394	0.386	1.172
<i>MIDDLE MANAGERS</i>						
women in BoD	-0.238	-1.401*	-0.662	-1.896*	0.203	-1.229
women among top-managers	0.793***	1.255***	1.015**	2.066***	0.488	0.884
<i>WHITE COLLARS</i>						
women in BoD	0.472	0.018	0.538	-0.263	0.129	-0.074
women among top-managers	-0.013	0.132	0.273	0.715	-0.259	-0.412
women among middle managers	0.750***	-0.482	0.895**	-0.781	0.551	-0.432
<i>BLUE COLLARS</i>						
women in BoD	0.073	0.048	0.196	-	-0.467	0.896
women among top-managers	-0.291	-0.564	-0.757*	-0.697	0.418	-0.479
women among middle managers	-0.339	-1.023**	-0.34	-1.045*	-0.301	-1.163*

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Controls as in

Table 6