

Covid-19 and Inequality: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

My paper examines some aspects of the Covid19 pandemic in Italy from a gender perspective. I intend to highlight some important inequalities in the management and cohabitation during the pandemic that risk being otherwise hidden in the public discourse. I will focus in particular on two circumstances: public decisions about the pandemic and work-care balancing. As regards the first profile, I will focus on the composition of the committees appointed by the government for the management of the crisis and the effects that this composition had on the way to deal with the pandemic in our country. With regard to the second profile, working environment is certainly where inequalities have emerged most clearly, albeit in a different way. First of all, there were women who had to work during the emergency and had problems reconciling work and care role. Secondly, women who could / had to work from home had to deal with the lack of a distinction between workspace and care duties. On this point, the Italian State has taken very different measures from those of other countries, for example the decision not to reopen schools, which has penalised and will continue to penalise women's work. In this perspective, the work will investigate what other measures have been or will be adopted since the so-called third phase.

Keywords: covid, gender, Italy, public decisions, gender digital divide

Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has made clear the profound inequalities from which our society has been affected. Just think of the so-called digital divide (Rodotà, 1995, 2006 Pietrangelo, 2009, Van Duk, 2020), which emerged in all its amplitude when access to the network became the only means of connection with the outside world, or the inequalities in access to the possibility of treatment, or the difference between those who were able to continue their work remotely and those who, suddenly, were cut off from that world, with the inevitable dramatic economic fallout. These inequalities must certainly be accompanied by the inequalities arising from gender, which have become even more marked at this difficult time.

On the basis of these premises, the work will examine the Italian situation, analysing in particular a) the role that women have played in public decisions regarding the emergency and b) the relationship between women and work. The analysis will compare the data relating to the situation of women in the period before the covid with those relating to the period of the pandemic and the so-called phase three, where Italy has now entered since the beginning of June. In this perspective, the solutions adopted by the Italian legislator and their impact on women's lives will be evaluated.

Women in public decision making: the case of the Colao task force

As far as the first aspect is concerned, namely the presence of women in the places where decisions are taken, what is striking is the small number of women appointed to committees who have been called upon to manage the emergency and propose ideas for getting the country moving again. This is in line with what happens in many other countries (*Garikipati and Kambhampati, 2020*) where, as stated in a document published by the UN on 15 April 2020

"Women and girls - and women's networks and rights organizations - are not equally represented in local, national and global COVID-19 policy spaces and decision-making. The voices, expertise and experience of women are not being fully incorporated into global health security surveillance, detection, and prevention mechanisms. In terms of media, only one woman is quoted for every three men quoted in media coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak. In past health emergencies, gaps in participation of women in such spaces has led to corresponding gaps in responses to their specific experiences, situations, challenges and requirements. Examples from around the world suggests that this situation is no different. As noted, women represent more than 70% of the health workforce and are at the frontline of interaction with communities and caregiving, placing them in a prime position to identify outbreak trends and responses at the local level and effectively influence the design and implementation of prevention activities and community engagement".

Regarding Italy, the story of the so-called task force appointed by the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and chaired by Vittorio Colao is truly emblematic in this regard. The task force is a committee of experts on economic and social issues that has been assigned the task of developing and proposing measures necessary to deal with the emergency and for a gradual recovery in the various sectors of social, economic and productive activities starting from the so-called Phase 2.

In its initial composition the committee was composed of 16 members, only 4 of whom were women. In the face of this obvious lack of women in the group called upon to carry out the important task of 'rethinking the future of the country', and thus the lives of millions of women and men, the President of the Council was subjected to a crossfire of criticism.

The debate that has opened up in public opinion has had the effect of leading the President-in-Office of the Council to integrate the Commission with five other women and to motivate this choice precisely on the basis of the lack of consideration for women in his previous appointment.

This public assumption of responsibility had the "cascading" effect of imposing the integration of the equally important Scientific Technical Committee set up within the Civil Protection. Since the date of its creation, this Committee had been integrated several times "by experts in relation to specific needs, taking into account the crisis situation and in order to give continuity to emergency activities, also in view of the gradual recovery of social, economic and productive activities", but there was never felt the need to evaluate appointments also taking into account a gender perspective. What has just been mentioned, however, is hardly surprising when one considers the worrying lack of women in the places where public decisions are taken. This absence has been denounced in our country for years and has led to the adoption of various legislative measures and two important constitutional amendments which, however, have failed to really change things.

In this regard, it is worth remembering a few facts. In the last national elections, 231 out of 630 women were elected to the House and 112 out of 315 were elected to the Senate. They represent 31.7% of those elected to the House and 35.11% of those elected to the Senate. There is still an insufficient number of women, but this is already a major achievement if one only looks at the figures from previous legislatures. In the 17th legislature, for example, there were 197 women out of 630 deputies, while in the Senate there were 97 out of 315.

To these figures, broadening our perspective, we can add that in Italy, a woman has never been appointed Prime Minister. Only four women were elected Presidents of the House and Senate and it was only in 2019 that a woman was elected President of the Constitutional Court. These are disturbing numbers.

The exclusion of women from places of representation is a problem that clearly does not only affect women, but more generally represents a vulnus for democracy, for its effectiveness, because we are witnessing the exclusion of some citizens from places where decisions are taken. That is despite the fact that Article 51 of the Italian Constitution provides for equal access to elected office and public employment. In particular, the right to stand for election was introduced into the Constitution with a formula that expressly states that "all citizens, men and women, may be elected" to avoid that the constitutional provision could be interpreted as excluding women from the enjoyment of political rights, as had happened in the past. In Italy, in fact, the right of active and passive electorate was granted to women only in 1946. In particular, women were able to vote and be elected to the Constituent Assembly on June 2, 1946.

As has already been mentioned, however, the constitutional provision has not prevented a real under-representation of women in politics in Italy.

To deal with this exclusion, measures (positive actions) aimed at rebalancing the gender balance in political representation have been introduced since the 1990s. These actions did not take the form of quotas, but simply aimed to ensure that men and women had equal access to elected office. In addition, two important constitutional amendments were approved which required the adoption of such measures by both the state legislator and the regional legislator. In accordance with this constitutional provision, the recent electoral law No 165 of 2017 provides for various measures aimed at rebalancing the gender balance in political representation.

As the case of appointments to Coronavirus Task Forces shows, however, the issue of inequality re-emerges when it comes to acts of appointment, political acts in respect of which legal criteria cannot be invoked when the choice is made (*Equilibri di genere e procedure di nomina. Tero report intermedi, 2020*)

From this point of view, however, the Italian Constitutional Court has specified that, if it is true that there are spaces reserved for political choice, nevertheless, they find their boundaries in the legal principles set by the system, both at constitutional and legislative level; and when the legislator predetermines canons of legality, politics must adhere to them, in compliance with the fundamental principles of the rule of law". Because, inasmuch as the scope of the extension of discretionary power, even the very broad one that characterizes a government action, is circumscribed by constraints set by legal norms that mark its boundaries or direct its exercise, respect for such constraints constitutes a requirement of legitimacy and validity of the act, which can be syndicated in the appropriate forums".

The low number of women who make up the bodies of the State is a worrying phenomenon, as demonstrated by an incident that occurred in 2018. In that year, on the occasion of the renewal of the members of the Superior Council of the Magistracy, the self-governing body of the judiciary, and other organs of guarantee of the judiciary, Parliament elected 21 men out of 21 posts. To censor the exclusion of women, a group of constitutionalists sent a letter to the Presidents of the two Houses denouncing the lack of transparency in the proceedings and in particular the absence of a procedure for submitting nominations before voting. This procedure would have made the choices of the parties and the violation of Article 51 of the Constitution visible to the public.

Women and smart working

As far as the second profile is concerned, the working environment is certainly the one in which inequalities have emerged most clearly, confirming what statistics and doctrine have long stressed. That is to say, the world of work remains a place where inequality between women and men in terms of salary received, equal work done and the possibility of reaching top positions is still evident.

The pandemic also confirmed that talking about gender inequality can be misleading. Women, despite having many common problems, are also profoundly different from each other and cannot be taken into account as a unitary category (Butler, 1999). In this sense, the pandemic has also affected in a very different way women who have had to continue working outside the home (cashiers, nurses, doctors, sweepers...), women who do not work, women who could (or should) continue working remotely and domestic workers (Staiano, 2020).

As far as the former are concerned, the problem was to reconcile work outside the home with the role of caregiver, the difficulty of being able to use external people for help and the concern for the health and well-being of their loved ones. In Italy, domestic work was banned from 13 March to 4 May. In this case, the role of care was carried out by husbands or companions, where they were present, also because the Government banned visits to relatives and therefore it was not possible to have recourse to the help of grandparents. In Italy, traditionally, they play an important role in supporting families with young children. A 2019 ISTAT survey reveals that in a family where both parents are workers, 60.4% entrust children under two years of age to their grandparents. In this pandemic, the important role of grandparents has disappeared.

Non-working women, like everyone else, have seen an increase in domestic work, from caring for the home to confined children at home. While women who were able to take advantage of the so-called smart working have experienced the difficulty of reconciling work with the increased role of care, in the impossibility of being able to separate private and public space.

Finally, as far as domestic workers are concerned, the impossibility of being able to carry out their work has dramatically put their very survival at risk. In this regard, it is important to remember that these people very often work illegally and that, in any case, in the economic measures adopted by the Italian Government to deal with the emergency these women workers have been guilty of being forgotten. Their condition was taken into consideration by the Government only after the other working categories.

In this work, the situation of women who have worked in smart-working will be examined in particular.

In this regard, the advertising of the immune app, chosen by the Italian Government to carry out the contact tracing, has aroused a huge controversy because of the gender stereotype it conveyed. The advertisement showed an apartment divided in two. In one room there was a woman with a child in her arms and in the other a man working on a computer. This advertisement, if on the one hand it photographed a dramatically true image of the family life of many women in Italy and around the world (gender digital divided), on the other hand it did not represent the reality as true as the women who have to reconcile work with their role of care.

In this sense, the app image should have shown a woman working at the computer with a baby in her arms! For many women, in fact, the problem in this period has been that of reconciling work and care tasks that are still conceived as typically feminine.

As was also underlined by the already mentioned document published by the UN on 15 April 2020:

[...] closure of schools and day-care centres has a differential impact on women parents or guardians, who will often be expected to take on additional caregiving responsibilities due to discriminatory gender norms, further restricting their work and economic opportunities. In previous health emergencies, such as the Zika outbreak, the amount of unpaid work carried by women increased exponentially.

In order to face this problem, the Italian Government has foreseen two different instruments: the extension of the extraordinary parental leave and the so-called baby sitter bonus. The first instrument consists in the possibility of enjoying a period of 30 days of leave in addition to ordinary leave for a period between March 5 and July 30, receiving a salary equal to 50% of salary in the case of children up to 12 years of age. In the case of children between 12 and 16 years of age, the leave is granted to the worker but is not paid.

The second measure provides, instead, the possibility of receiving a bonus to pay for babysitting services up to a maximum of 600 euros, 1000 for nurses, doctors and other workers in the security sector. The sum has been doubled by the subsequent relaunch decree and has been increased up to 2000 euros for doctors, nurses and workers in the security, defence and public aid sectors employed to deal with the Covid-19 emergency.

Evidently, the measures are very different. The first, although it is aimed at mothers and fathers alike, is intended to be used in particular by women, who usually receive a lower salary. In this way, in fact, the reduction to 30% of the salary will have a smaller impact on the overall family budget.

The second, on the contrary, seems to be really neutral by not penalising the work of mothers differently from that of fathers.

In the summer period, the bonus can be used to cover the costs of the summer centres and can be allocated to grandparents, not living together, who take care of keeping grandchildren instead of babysitters (see INPS no. 73 of 2020).

The latter is really a novelty to be welcomed, because for the first time it is an express recognition of the care work done by grandparents, which in Italy is a very important aid for families.

The pandemic has certainly contributed to this activity of support for families carried out by grandparents, which has prevented contact between grandparents and

grandchildren for many months and, as already mentioned, has represented a big problem for many families.

Against the background of these measures, there is the great question of the reopening of schools which, it is good to clarify right away, should not be reopened because they are the place where parents leave their children while they are at work, but they are the place where children grow up and develop their skills.

For this reason, correctly, the debate on the reopening of schools should be kept separate from that of its possible impact on the work of women/mothers. The big issue of reopening schools is not, and should not be, confused with a gender issue. The Government must commit to the safe reopening of schools for future generations and not to allow parents to work.

The closure of schools was a very fair measure at a time when the epidemic was at its peak, the news about the virus was still confusing and the contagion in Italy was very widespread, but at the current stage the political decision-maker should develop instruments that will allow a safe reopening in September. In Italy, on the other hand, the work to get schools back on track is proceeding very slowly and there is still no clear plan for a return to school. Also in this area, however, the emergency has made clear the deep inequalities among students and, as a result of the now well-known digital divide, has in fact produced the emergence of students belonging to the weaker sections of the population (Calvano, 2020, Zuddas, 2020)). As pointed out in the Istat report of 2020, Throughout the pandemic of 2020, in Italy it has been registered that among school children aged from 6 to 17 years old, many do not have access to an adequate IT equipment. The figures are worrying: 12.3% are without PC/tablet at home, whereas 57.0% share a pc/tablet with a member of their family. Only 6.1% have a personal computer. Moreover, in 2019, among 14-17 year old teenagers who have used the internet in the last 3 months, two out of 3 have low or basic digital skills while less than three out of 10 (equal to about 700 thousand kids) are at high levels. To these data we must add that more than a quarter of people live in conditions of overcrowding, the share rises to 41.9% among minors. The emergency linked to the spread of Covid-19 has highlighted the need to have sufficient space at home for those who live there and adequate computer equipment to allow students to follow lessons at a distance, those who work can continue to do so from home and those who want to relate with others, watch movies, find opportunities for leisure time.

Returning to women's smart working, the emergency seems to have made it clear how strong the inequalities are still strong and how far equality within the same family is still far away. Symptomatic, from this point of view, seems to be the figure relating to the significant reduction in the scientific production of female researchers in the covid period, which contrasts with the considerable increase in the production of male colleagues in the same period. In the light of these data, it seems that at the moment when the private sector became public, inequalities have once again become evident

even in strata of the population that seem to be far removed from gender stereotypes (*Drew, Canavan, 2021*)

With regard to the research activity, it is interesting to note that the decree n. 18 of 17 March 2020 the cd. Cura Italia has expressly taken into consideration this working sector and the problems related to the closure of libraries and universities. In particular, the decree provided for the extension of the deadline for obtaining the national scientific qualification, which in Italy is necessary to hold the position of university professor, but did not take into account the problems related to the conciliation between study and research and care activities, unlike the Gelmini Law of 2010, which provided for a different calculation criterion for the number of publications of female researchers, who had enjoyed periods of maternity leave, and their male colleagues.

Conclusion

The analysis above makes it clear that the Coronavirus emergency has highlighted the profound inequalities between women and men who are still present in our society in terms of access to elected and non-elected public offices, access to the world of work, type of work done, salary and above all the role played within the family.

The emergence of private space has thus made the reasons for the inequalities in public space more strident and perhaps intelligible. In Italy, in particular, the pandemic has brought out the difficulties of a society that is not able to think back and that, despite all the battles, continues to perceive women, as explicitly written in Article 37 of the Italian Constitution in "its essential family function" that dangerously refers to an image of women linked to the role of care of the whole family (husband, children, parents ...).

Hence the difficulties of thinking of women in top positions within institutions and hence in an eternal vicious circle derives the inability of the political class (mostly composed of men) to imagine a society that is able to give more space to all, men and women, and that sees in diversity and education, especially of the youngest, the road to a future of change.

The Italian case shows, however, that adequate pressure from the media and public opinion can make a difference. While waiting for transparent nomination and selection procedures for candidatures, the story of the so-called task force Colao and the change in its composition shows that change also comes through the circulation of information in the media. Certainly it was a truly sensational case of exclusion at such a difficult time for the country. Public opinion is not always so vigilant, while the cases are really numerous. In this sense, we must welcome the recent election by Parliament of the members of the Guarantor of Privacy and that of the members of the Agcom which saw the election of 1 woman out of 4 members of the college to the

Guarantor of Privacy and two women out of 4 members of the college to the Guarantor of Communications.

As far as the world of work is concerned, there still seems to be a long way to go, also because of some structural inequalities in our society we are still struggling to realize and, for this reason, we do not find the cultural tools, even before the legal ones, to fight them. In this case too, however, we should welcome a recent law passed by the Lazio region on 17 July 2020 which, for the first time, implemented a legislative decree in Italy aimed at transforming the school from 0 to 6 years. The law has, among other things, the important objective of reducing fees and, finally, making the service free. In this perspective, priority will be given to families in socio-economic distress, those with disabled children and foster children who rely on private individuals for lack of places available in the public. These services will be managed by the municipalities, which will also take care of fares and management costs for families. This is an important first step in the direction of a state that takes charge of the lives of parents and their children. The lack of services for families is one of the factors that makes Italy one of the lowest birth rates in Europe in European statistics.

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