

Chapter 18

Gender and Work-Life Balance: A Contest Analysis on Nurse Schools in Palermo



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Abstract This paper reflects on the gender inequalities and their influence in the access to labor market and, on the other one, to reproductive process. Maternity and work often arise as choices excluding one another due for the inadequacy of care services. The essay reviews some laws of the last years for encourage the work-life balance and analyzes the presence of the services for children in Palermo. The “case study” of the municipality of Palermo shows a general lack of services and a progressive reduction of public nurseries and kindergarten, despite the economic investments of the last decades at institutional level. It points out how many obstacles persist that discourage female participation in the labor market, but above all discourage procreative choices in the couples “dual earner”, with negative effects on future generational balances.

Keywords Women · Social policies · Work-life balance · Social effort

18.1 Introduction

The subject of reconciling between work and family emerges in the public debate, especially in relation to the failure to achieve the full employment of women and the parallel decrease in the birth rate.

Gender inequalities do not concern only the access and permanence of women in the production system, but also the reproductive sphere, more or less favored by social policies that have the allowances and supports for the family carers among their objectives for a better work life balance.

Since the 1990s, welfare efforts towards early childhood care (ECEC) have increased in all countries and in all welfare regimes of UE. However, the centrality

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of the theme unites countries with very different rates of female employment and very distant degrees of social policy familization.

Only few member States of European Union had an excellent level of coverage of the old risks and were able to convert a part of their welfare spending into reconciliation measures: the Nordic countries (Anttonen et al. 2003; Bonoli 2005), the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, but only partially and, finally, France, Belgium and the German (Morel 2007; Morel et al. 2012; Morgan 2012). In Italy, the theme of conciliation has become a focal point for social policies only in the recent years (Bimbi and Toffanin 2017; Trifiletti 2017; Bartholini 2017).

For this reason, this essay will try to identify some ambiguities of the politics of conciliation, to analyze the possible contribution of the conciliation policies to the approach of social investments; to describe the effects of investment policies that have been concentrated in southern Italy through a case study represented by early childhood services in the municipality of Palermo.

We will focus on childcare services in Sicily in relation to two macro-factors: the legislative references that in recent years have been aimed reconciliation policies between work and family in the crossing between self-realization and structural constraints. We will outline a brief outline of the laws that have succeeded in the last decades and we will outline an overview of the services present in the municipality of Palermo.

18.2 The Social Effort in Europe: Some Examples

Recent literature highlights how family policy moves on a thin ridge of profound ambiguity between the conservative tendency to protect the traditional functioning of the family and, on the contrary, the gender-oriented one (Lewis 2002, 2006; Leira 2002; Saraceno 1994; Jenson 1997; Hobson et al. 2006; Lohmann and Zigel 2016).

The theme of conciliation, or work-life balance, has developed as a “field”, in which labor rights are negotiated starting from work, including leave for mothers and guarantees of equal opportunities (Morgan 2006). The term “Conciliation Policies” appears for the first time on the political agenda of the European Commission in the 1990s, indicating a type of policy that was able to reconcile responsibility for care and participation in the world of work (Bettio 2017).

Over time, European conciliation policies have increasingly tightened national and local levels (Crompton 2006). This has contributed to the structuring of conciliation as a “field of intersections” between work and care, in which relationships are drawn between the private sphere and the public sphere, between genres and generations (Bettio and Platenga 2004; Lohmann and Zigel 2016).

The successes and failures of reconciliation depend broadly from the flexibility of the times, schedules and movements required of those who are employed (European Foundation 2016). A flexibility that creates increasing income uncertainties in daily life and which does not seem to stop the crisis of the different welfare regimes.

In this sense, paradigmatic is the case of the turning point of Germany after 2000, which, from a typically Bismarckian and male-breadwinner country, introduced the right to request a reduced working time and introduced parental leave for one year in 2007, also open to fathers. It has also invested in kindergartens for all children over three years of age, in childhood nurseries (Gottschall and Schwartzkopf 2011).

In England, the Third Way of the Labor Government of Tony Blair, interrupted traditional non-interventionism in family policy with an explicit attempt to engage employers in a new culture of work practices that promoted flexibility from below (Jenson 2008).

In the same years, Iceland introduced changes to high-impact parental leave, allowing in 2001 a total of nine months leave to divide freely between both parents (Duvander et al. 2016).

18.3 The Social Effort in Italy

Since the 1970s to today, some family policy measures have been implemented, such as the early childhood services, the maternity leave, monetary support (home care allowances), aimed at harmonizing care and work commitments (Donati and Prandini 2008; Rizza and Sansavini 2010; Saraceno 2015). The social effort has moved from a centralized management of care services to another one that is increasingly regionalised and localized (Esping-Andersen 2009). Conciliation policies are not part of a single framework and can be considered as the result of various measures regarding child policies, labor policies, and policies for equal opportunities. The welfare effort has therefore a high degree of inhomogeneity. In terms of childcare services, regions model like Emilia Romagna are juxtaposed to other regions still deeply lacking for the services and allowances offered.

The social effort has moved in three directions:

- a. Early childhood services;
- b. Instruments that provide financial resources (family allowances, voucher subsidies or tax deductions) including incentives for the purchase of market care services or from the third non-profit sector;
- c. Tools that provide time resources (with reference to the flexible regulation of working time and city times) (Fargion and Guglielmini 2013).

The combination of these three types of instruments and the organizational modalities of their management have differently characterized the reconciliation policies of the various regional models.

No measure is completely decisive in itself if it is not associated with other measures (Veronese). However, in this article we focus mainly on childcare services as a fundamental tool for the “defamiliarization” of care responsibilities for children in the age group between 0 and 3 years.

On the basis of regional planning, nurseries with municipal management are established with the law 1044, only in 1977. The same law defines them as a service of public interest, aimed at encouraging the reconciliation of working families but without restricting access only the working mothers. The right of every mother to be able to take advantage of care services appeared as an innovative element for recognizing also the social value of motherhood (Landuzzi and Corazza 2007).

Alongside childcare services, other important instruments are been created to implement reconciliation policies, such as supplementary services (baby parking, playrooms, summer camps, play areas). Integrative services are important tools for their complementarity with nursery schools, primary and primary schools. They provide assistance and care for minors in the different time slots that aren't covered by other services during the year and are been created from the enactment and application of Law 285/97 "Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence". Specifically, this law introduced the principle of participation of children, encouraging the transition of the welfare system for children from an assistance perspective to a promotional one with universal access. It has also affirmed the principle of integration of services, the inter-institutional collaboration network, network, work as pillars of the new child welfare system. However, the services are offered mainly by private operators, and are characterized by high costs of use. Their presence and their functioning, the ability and the possibility of use by citizens strongly call into question the public administration in its regulatory function and quality assurance, especially as regards the accreditation of the structures and the qualification of the operators.

For the three-year period 2002–2004, the Italian government approved an Action Plan for children and adolescents, in which it reaffirmed the principle of parenting support, the recognition of the right of the family to design and manage services it needs according to the principle of subsidiarity, the protection of minors in the educational and social fields. Government has therefore emphasized the family-based system rather than child-based.

In 2002, through the financial law, was set up a special fund for kindergartens, which provides an additional financing to the regions, in order to allow a quantitative and qualitative increase in care facilities for children, recalling, at the same time, the centrality of the child and his needs already enunciated with the 1997 law and cited from the European Union (Boca and Pasqua 2010).

In 2007 the "Extraordinary intervention plan for the development of the territorial system of youth-related services for early childhood" was approved, which provided for an allocation of almost 450 million euro (integrated with other regional economic resources), aimed at increasing of places in educational services for children in the 0–3 age range (Fargion and Guglielmini 2013).

At the end of the three-year plan, also for 2010 the Department for Family Policies has allocated significant funding for the "Fund for family policies", to continue to support the development of the integrated system of services for early childhood, resources aimed to:

- a. the continuation of the development and consolidation of the integrated system of socio-educational services for early childhood, which can be used for the activation of new posts, to support running costs of existing places and for the qualitative improvement of the offer;
- b. the implementation of other interventions for large or poor families, based on the evaluation of the number and composition of the family unit and income levels.

On an experimental basis, for the three years period from 2013–2015, the possibility for female workers to apply for an economic contribution to use for the baby-sitting service or to meet the costs of the public network of childcare services was subsequently scheduled.

Despite the efforts made, some serious problems remain, including those concerning the reception rates of nests and supplementary services for early childhood that remain on average low in Italy (19.7%), with some exceptions for some regions.

In a recent research of ISTAT, entitled “The municipal supply of nurseries and other socio-educational services for early childhood”, highlights the drastic decline in enrollment of minors to municipal kindergartens (about 2600 users less than the previous year), as well as a decrease in the allowances of the municipalities for the private nests or to the families themselves. In the regional distribution of the indicator of taking charge of the users of nurseries for the year 2015/2016, at the two extremes there are Calabria, with only 2.1% (down from 2.5% of the previous year) and Emilia-Romagna, with 27.3%. There is therefore a negative drop in the level of reception offered by the public childcare and supplementary services system, which represents an overall critical indicator in social effort’s theme. Despite the policies for the dissemination of these services, which were also supported by extraordinary government measures from 2007 to date, no positive structural effects on the system were produced.

18.4 Sicily Between Social Effort and Structural Disadvantages and the Case Study of Municipality of Palermo

18.4.1 In Sicily

In Sicily, five years after implementation from the national plan 2007/2013, the taking charge of users in public facilities is on average equal to 5.6% compared to 12% set as the level to be achieved.¹ A situation that leads to consider the region of Sicily as the “cow’s tail”—along with Calabria and Campania for what concerns

¹Cfr. Piano di Azione e Coesione Sociale, www.pacinfanziaeanziani.interno.gov.it.

“welfare for children” and the implementation of work-life balance programs, especially if observed with respect to regions such as Emilia Romagna and Piemonte, where the coverage of public services for children exceeds 33% (Saccone 2014).

The monitoring of the development plan for social and educational services for early childhood 2013 highlights, in addition to the difficulty of enhancing the service offer, the difficulties of some regions, such as Sicily, to plan and spend the economic resources allocated at the central level.

The Legislator has therefore intervened by providing for some tax breaks. More recently, through the Law of labor market reform (Law No. 92/2012), it has experimentally introduced, in the three year period 2013–2015, the possibility for female workers to request an economic contribution that can be used for the service of baby-sitting or for the charges of the public network of childcare services. The Region of Sicily has been allocated 128 million euro for the enhancement of services for early childhood in the last three-year period 2013/15. The subsequent actions undertaken by the “Cohesion Action Plan”, to which are added those foreseen through the economic resources of the “National Social Policy Fund”, will be completed within the first half of 2018.²

18.4.2 In Palermo

Kindergartens and municipal schools of childhood constitute the first segment of the educational path. They welcome children resident in the City of Palermo or in other neighboring municipalities, if the parents work there, or that the grandparents are resident in the same municipalities, or that the brothers of future users attend schools in the same main town of Sicily. Kindergartens and municipal childcare facilities guarantee the educational service for a total 42 weeks a year, between the month of September and that of June, from Monday to Friday, from 7.30 to 15.30. Among the necessary documentation for registration is the certification attesting the indicator of the economic situation of the parents, for establishing the monthly fee. The related selection criteria give priority to particular family situations of emergency and/or suffering, such as low income, disability conditions, occupation of the mother.

In the school year 2012/2013, municipal nurseries distributed throughout the city were 26, in 2013/2014 only 25.³ In 2012 there were 985 children attending, while numbers slightly lower were recorded in the following year, when the registered children were 933.

²Cfr. Piano azione coesione. Programma nazionale servizi di cura all’infanzia e agli anziani non autosufficienti: www.pacinfanziaeanziani.interno.gov.it.

³Cfr. Comune di Palermo - Direzione Generale - Ufficio controllo di gestione, *bilancio sociale 2014*, p. 2: www.comune.palermo.it.

Table 18.1 Distribution municipal childcare facilities for frequenting children and children on reserve list

School Year	Number of town childcare facilities	Number of children admitted	Number of children on reserve list
2012/2013	26	985	869
2013/2014	25	933	736
2014/2015	24	845	735
2016/2017	24	856	726
2017/2018	24	859	710

Source Data obtained from manual survey of the lists related to the town childcare facilities in Palermo

From Table 18.1, it shows a decrease of childcare facilities in the municipal offer between 2012 and 2015, also due to the closure of some structures deemed unfit on the structural level. From the analysis of data for the school year 2017/2018 in Table 18.1, the number of children admitted in one of the 24 nurseries located in the eight districts of Palermo, are 859, while the children excluded and on reserve list are 710. The most up-to-date data at a. s. 2017/2018 highlight how only about 40% of children attend the town childcare facilities.

The decrease, between 2012 and 2017, of the children on the reserve list could be explained by a birth rate, or of a parental choice that preferred private facilities. To limit the lack of places in public facilities, and in order to reduce waiting lists by expanding the offer of nursery schools, the City of Palermo has provided, following the approval of the national directives “Action Plan and Cohesion”, to accredit some private facilities. It has therefore tried to experiment with a model of subsidiarity between the public and private system with a view to gradual integration.⁴

The “Action Plan for Cohesion—Childhood”, aimed at a target of children from 0 to 36 months, as well as providing for a series of “traditional” interventions, aimed at building a public-private integrated system. For the city of Palermo, this integration between public and private, as well as representing an important innovation, ensures a considerable increase in the range of services to households. At the same time, it allows a reduction in the costs that the municipality should face if to build from scratch the necessary structures to cover the demand and to recruit new specialised personnel.

The initiatives put in place, through “The action and cohesion plan”, have foreseen an increasing number of accredited nursery nests. Although these structures have guaranteed an increasing number of places during the five years, they have proved to be insufficient to respond to the overall number of children on the waiting list (see Table 18.2). Today they begin to exhaust their driving force, leaving the municipalities without a guarantee of coverage, and therefore without a guarantee of stability for investments made in the last years, increasingly exposed to

⁴www.comune.palermo.it.

Table 18.2 Distribution of municipal childcare facilities and private childcare facilities for frequenting children

School Year	Number of town childcare facilities	Number of children admitted	Number of accredited private childcare facilities	Number of children admitted	Total of children admitted for each year
2012/2013	26	985	3	96	1081
2013/2014	25	933	3	112	1045
2014/2015	24	845	4	158	1003
2016/2017	24	856	5	177	1033
2017/2018	24	859	5	181	1040

Table composed through data and informations from Report of Municipality of Palermo: *Area Scuola e Realtà dell'Infanzia, Progettazione e gestione Fondi extra-comunali Infanzia*, in www.comune.palermo.it

Source Data obtained from manual survey of the lists related to the town and accredited private childcare facilities in Palermo

the growing difficulties of local finance, the risk of backtracking in quantity that in quality.

However, the causes of the non-coverage of services are not attributable solely to investments in this area, which however are higher than in the past. Often the management of such kindergartens is not what is expected of the families and this favors the migration for the children of the highest social classes in the private nursery schools.

18.4.3 Implications for Future Research and Conclusions

Probably the work-life balance policies, accompanied by major economic investments, produce results only in those countries of Europe that already had a good capacity to transform social spending into productivity and in reconciliation measures such as the Scandinavian welfare countries (Bonoli 2005; Lewis and Campbell 2008) and, in part, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, France, Belgium as well as the German-speaking countries (Morel et al. 2012). In the conservative-corporate welfare countries of the Mediterranean type such as Italy, the two speeds mean that the distance increases, also due to the waste of public money that the investment policies have produced (Kazepov and Ranci 2015).

As we have tried to highlight in these pages, the problem to be solved is not in the folds of legal guarantees relating to care, but ex ante in access to work and gradually in the accompaniment of parental responsibilities through an adequate network of services. In Sicily and in Palermo the small number of childcare services continues to be probably one of the indirect causes of the low birth rate and perhaps even of female employment. Precisely in regions such as Sicily, to encourage a work-life balance does not just mean to allow to mothers to “be mothers” while

working life but, above all, to favor to women at the beginning of their career their choice of maternity. This implies a social effort aimed at harmonizing care and work commitments not only through early childhood services, but also through home care allowances (economic compensation for prolonging parental care), parental leave and reductions of time in the workplaces (Naldini and Saraceno 2008).

The possibility of an effective implementation of a social effort based on the investment approach is being played out on these cultural intertwining and on the generational repercussions that will follow (Riva and Zanfrini 2010). The theme of conciliation, precisely for its transversal nature, should be considered as a field of policy rather than a conceptual focus. A policy field—like the one described in Sicily and the Municipality of Palermo in particular—is the product of exogenous and systemic factors in which the whole measures adopted by central and local governments converge in specific and interrelated areas of intervention: labor policies, equal opportunities, policies aimed at children, disabled people, no self-sufficient elderly people, etc. (Bartholini 2017). The difficulty of making individual choices that intersect personal biographies with epochal changes, which do not concern only the de-familization processes, but also the solidarity between generations and their future (Zurla 2006; Zanatta 2011, 2013). State and regions, providing services otherwise circumscribed in the family, can promote greater participation of women in the workplace. However, the ability to combine social effort with “bottom up” choices depends not only on European indications and legislative provisions at national level, but on the mechanisms of transparency and effectiveness that the municipal systems will be able to achieve (Bimbi and Toffanin 2017; Trifiletti 2017). The unstable equilibrium of Sicily finds it difficult to transform laws and resources into adequate services in favor of a work-life balance. Despite the many efforts to overcome old legacies and limits attributable to the “welfare traps”, they are still many.

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