



Implications of COVID-19 on women workers in the service sector. A special focus on Italy

Tania Toffanin

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EVERYTHING IS CANCELED

A large billboard sign is mounted on a metal frame, positioned above a multi-story building with a curved facade and many windows. The sky behind the sign is a uniform, overcast grey. The text on the sign is in a bold, sans-serif font, with each word on a separate line.

Tania Toffanin

**Implications of COVID-19 on women workers in the service sector.
A special focus on Italy**

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1. Introduction

Before the outbreak of the coronavirus disease COVID-19, 1.3 billion women, i.e. 44.3 per cent of the world's women were employed, compared with 2 billion men, i.e. 70 per cent of men (ILO 2020).

Historically, in accordance with the findings of the International Labour Organisation, economic downturns affect men more than women, because men tend to work in sectors closely linked to economic cycles (construction, automotive and manufacturing in general), while women dominate in sectors less sensitive to such cycles (such as those related to care and health and education). However, it has been noted that after the economic and financial crisis that began in 2007, it was precisely women's employment that was put at risk due to cuts in crucial sectors of the welfare state.

The ILO has assessed four sectors at high risk of severe impact from COVID-19 pandemic in terms of job losses and reduced working hours: hospitality and food services; real estate, business and administrative activities; manufacturing; and wholesale/retail trade.

In 2020, according to ILO data, as many as 527 million women (41% of total female employment) were employed in these sectors. Unlike the economic and financial crisis that began in 2007, this crisis produced by COVID-19 has a greater impact on the sectors that absorb most female employment.

The research assumes that the crisis produced by COVID-19 has a particularly negative impact on Italian women, especially in the sectors mentioned. There are several reasons that support this assumption:

- 1) The characteristics of women's participation in the labour market: compared to the European average (EU 27) Italian women continue to be moderately employed (50.1% compared to the EU 27 average of 63.0%) and less economically active (56.5% compared to the EU 27 average of 67.9%). This limited participation in paid work is due to the burden of care work, which in Italy still falls mainly on women, who, in the absence of adequate social services and policies for work-life balance, are forced to work discontinuously, resign or work part-

time. It is conceivable that, as a result of the crisis, many women employed in the above-mentioned sectors have had to engage full-time in unpaid domestic and care work, ruling out, at least in the immediate phase, the search for new employment;

- 2) The ongoing reduction in public spending on care services for children and dependent persons also means that employment in the care sector is being cut. These sectors have historically been the preserve of the female workforce: data provided by Eurostat (2017) reveal a low investment by Italian governments in spending to support children and families, and this shortfall can only weigh on women, who are most employed in these sectors.

Analysing the condition of employed women in these sectors is functional to depict a piece of factual reality to be used for the definition of new social, industrial and employment policies. In Italy, these three areas of State intervention have always been totally inadequate to the needs of the people, especially in relation to the pressure to create new jobs by the State and businesses.

The analysis carried out includes 18 interviews with women workers in the service sector aged between 25 and 54 years: 10 of whom lived in Veneto and 8 in Lombardy. The interviewees are employed in the following industries: workers in the canteen and catering sector, workers in the hospitality industry, tourist guides and workers in the entertainment industry. They were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Among the topics investigated are management of work suspension, work-life balance, income difficulties and reflections on future prospects. Moreover, ten trade unionists were then interviewed in Veneto and Lombardy. The qualitative analysis was then accompanied by the analysis of various social and economic indicators.

2. The Italian labour market from a gender perspective

On 1 January 2020, the resident population of Italy was 59,641,488 (29,050,096 males and 30,591,392 females). The decrease compared to 1 January 2019 is 175,185. At the local scale, Italy is characterised by a persistent imbalance that is also displayed at the demographic level: the highest number of residents is in the Northwest (26.80%), compared to the Northeast (19.49%), Centre (19.83%), South (22.98%) and Islands (10.87%).

An analysis of the ISTAT¹ historical series shows that the distribution with the greatest decrease over the last few decades is Southern Italy. The depopulation of the southern regions is mainly linked to the absence of job opportunities. Consistent with the trend that has emerged since the Second World War, the population of the southern regions continues to move to seek work in the northern regions. Since 2010, and with greater emphasis since 2015, there has been a significant increase in the number of Italian citizens cancelled from the civil registry mainly due to expatriation: 899,000 expatriates compared to 372,000 repatriates (ISTAT 2020a). The emigration rate of Italian citizens is 2.2 per thousand. Northern regions account for 49% of expatriates. According to the data provided by ISTAT, the region from which the most Italians emigrate, in absolute terms, is Lombardy, with a number of cancellations of registration for foreign countries equal to 23,000, followed by Sicily and Veneto (both 12,000), Campania (11,000) and Lazio (9,000). Considering the regions most interested in the phenomenon of emigration abroad, it is important to underline the continuity between the emigration that characterizes the immediate post-war period and the one that starts in the 2000s to the present day (Colucci 2019; Ramella *et al.* 2001).

With regard to the foreign population: on 1 January 2020, the resident foreign population was 5,306,548, 8.8 per cent of the total number of residents (ISTAT 2020). Among the regions of the North, the North-West is the area with the highest number of foreign residents (33.8% of the total number of foreign residents in Italy) and, overall, 57.8% of the total number of foreigners reside in the North. Most of the foreign residents living in Italy come from the European Union (29.9%). This is followed by residents from Central and Eastern Europe (19.5%) and North Africa (13.0%).

On the demographic front, the indicators reported in Table 1 show a rather paradigmatic picture. In Europe (EU 27), Italy is the country with the highest median population age (46.7 years compared to the EU average of 43.7) and with the highest proportion of over-80s (7.2% compared to the EU average of 5.8%) and the longest life expectancy (in Italy, life expectancy averages 83.4 years compared to the EU average of 81 years). On the other hand, Italy is the European country with the lowest birth rate (7.3 compared to the EU average of 9.5) and with the highest average age of women at the birth of their first child (31.2 compared to the EU average of 29.3).

The demographic indicators observed highlight some unresolved issues of the Italian welfare state. In particular, they make us reflect on the dynamics affecting the family-work system (Pleck 1977): for Italian women there is a trade-off between family and career. This is certainly not a typically national characteristic. Rather, it is an element common to many industrialised societies. Educational qualifications and, above all, social class make the difference. In the absence of support for the reduction of care work in terms of services and work-life balance policies, reproductive decisions will continue to depend on the resources offered by the family of origin in terms of care support and on the couple's own resources for recourse to the market. In couples lacking such resources, it is usually women who, due to the existing gender gap, opt for a part-time job, thereby increasing their dependence on their partner.

As far as Italy is concerned, the increase in women's participation in paid work has not solved the persistent problem of reconciling motherhood and paid work (Saraceno 2018a).

¹ The Italian National Institute of Statistics (*Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, ISTAT*).

Table 1. Population indicators, 2018, 2019 (%)

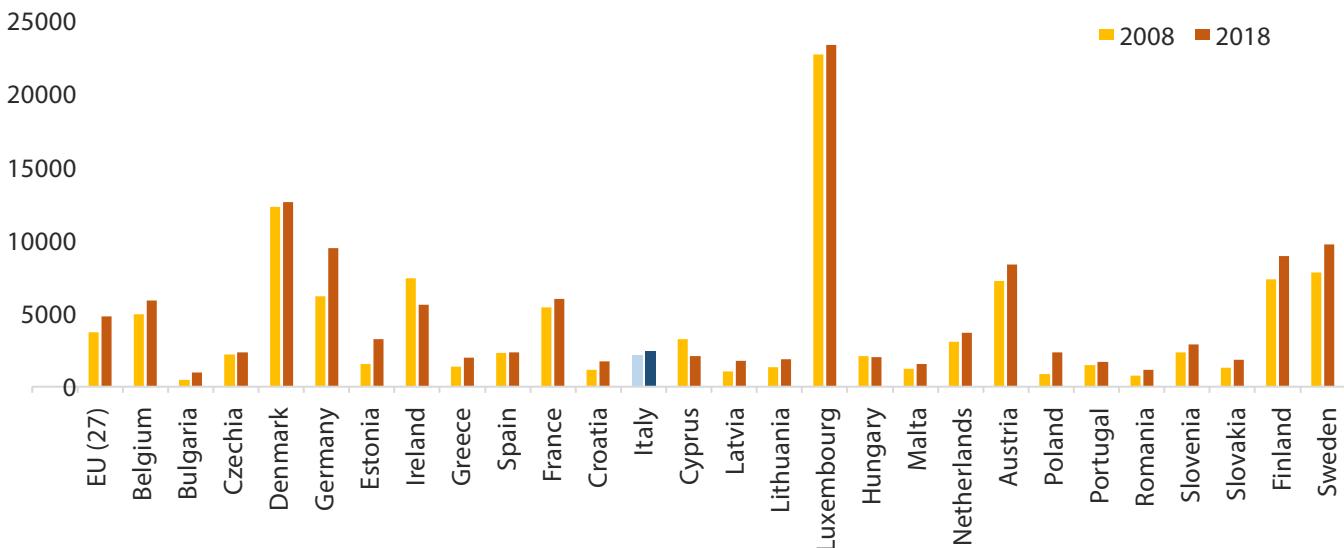
	Median age of population (2019)	Proportion of population aged 80 years and more (2019)	Young-age dependency ratio (pop. aged 0-14 to pop. 15-64 years), 2019	Old dependency ratio (pop. aged 65 and over to pop. 15-64 years), 2019	Mean age of women at birth of first child (2018)	Life expectancy by age (2018)	Crude birth rate (2018)
EU 27	43.7	5.8	23.5	31.4	29.3	81.0	9.5
Belgium	41.7	5.6	26.4	29.5	29.0	81.7	10.4
Bulgaria	44.5	4.8	22.3	33.2	26.2	75.0	8.9
Czechia	42.6	4.1	24.6	30.4	28.4	79.1	10.7
Denmark	41.9	4.5	25.8	30.6	29.5	81.0	10.6
Germany	46.0	6.5	21.0	33.2	29.7	81.0	9.5
Estonia	42.1	5.6	25.7	31.0	27.7	78.5	10.9
Ireland	37.7	3.3	31.4	21.6	30.5	82.3	12.5
Greece	44.9	7.1	22.5	34.6	30.4	81.9	8.1
Spain	44.0	6.1	22.4	29.5	31.0	83.5	7.9
France	41.8	6.1	29.0	32.5	28.7	82.9	11.3
Croatia	44.0	5.3	22.2	31.6	28.8	78.2	9.0
Italy	46.7	7.2	20.6	35.7	31.2	83.4	7.3
Cyprus	37.7	3.7	23.8	23.8	29.8	82.9	10.7
Latvia	43.5	5.6	24.9	31.7	27.2	75.1	10.0
Lithuania	44.1	5.8	23.2	20.4	27.8	76.0	10.0
Luxembourg	39.5	4.0	23.1	20.7	30.9	82.3	10.3
Hungary	43.0	4.4	22.0	29.3	28.2	76.2	9.6
Malta	40.0	4.2	20.2	27.6	29.2	82.5	9.2
Netherlands	42.7	4.6	24.4	29.5	30.0	81.9	9.8
Austria	43.4	5.0	21.6	28.2	29.5	81.8	9.7
Poland	41.0	4.4	22.9	26.4	27.4	77.7	10.2
Portugal	45.2	6.4	21.2	33.9	29.8	81.5	8.5
Romania	42.5	4.7	23.8	28.1	26.7	75.3	10.4
Slovenia	44.0	5.3	23.2	30.5	28.8	81.5	9.4
Slovakia	40.6	3.3	23.1	23.5	27.1	77.4	10.6
Finland	42.9	5.5	25.7	35.1	29.2	81.8	8.6
Sweden	40.5	5.1	28.5	31.9	29.3	82.6	11.4

Source: Eurostat, 2021.

As can be seen from the Eurostat data on social expenditure (2018) shown in Figure 1, in the European Union each inhabitant receives on average €8,076.48. In Italy, each in-

habitant receives €8,167.74 per head. In ten years, spending on social protection has increased by €1,094.63 compared to €1,797.85 for the European average (EU 27).

Figure 1. Social protection benefits, euro per inhabitant, 2008-2018

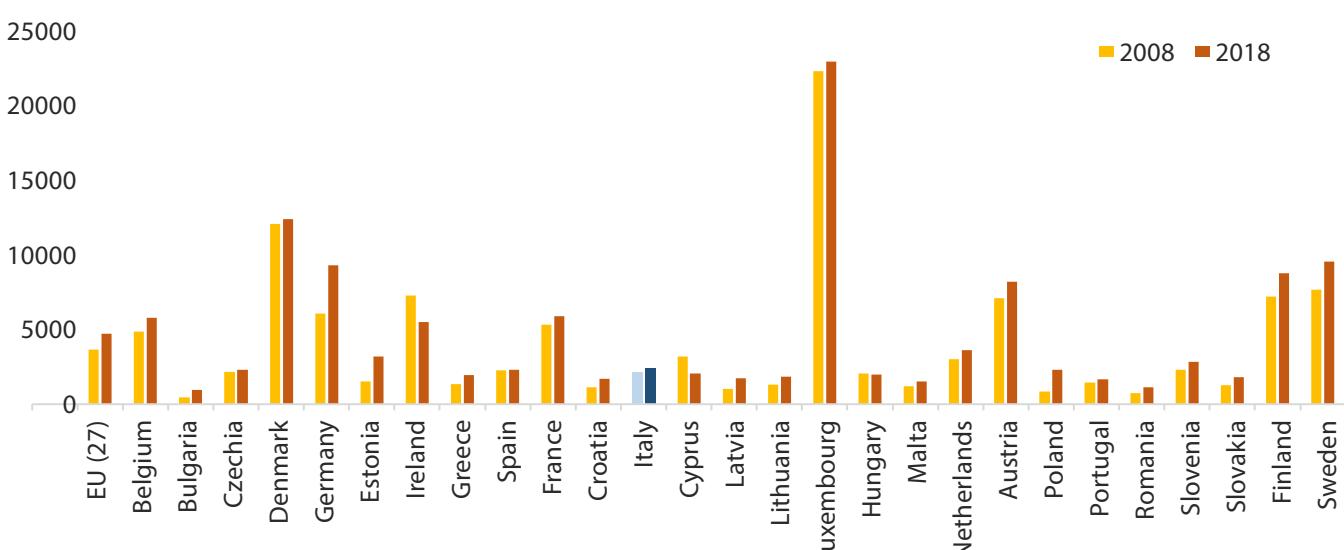


Source: Eurostat, ESSPROS, 2021.

However, while Italy almost exactly mirrors the European average in terms of general expenditure, it is the structure of expenditure that shows profound differences with the European average. In 2018, in Italy, social expenditure per inhabitant devoted to families and children, as the data in

Figure 2 show, is €336.52 compared to the European (EU 27) average of €672.17. It does not fare any better in relation to spending on health: in 2018, €1,880.76 was spent per inhabitant compared to the European (EU 27) average of €2,362.15.

Figure 2. Social expenditure, family/children, euro per inhabitant, 2008-2018



Source: Eurostat, ESSPROS, 2021.

Despite the increased participation of women in paid work and the socio-cultural changes that have taken place, the Italian welfare state continues to be characterised by an 'ambivalent familism' (Saraceno 1995). In Italy, the family continues to be the pivot of the welfare state. As Saraceno (1995, pp. 60-61) points out, the family is an economic unit because it manages the burden of care and distributes resources among its members. Nevertheless, governments allocate limited resources to it in order to encourage the autonomy of its members. The familism that characterises the Italian welfare state is not peculiar to Italy: it is also present, albeit with different adaptations, in other Mediterranean European States, such as Spain, Greece and Portugal.

In Italy, the structural interdependence that defines the system of relations between the family members is the effect of the combination of two factors: firstly, the disengagement of the State in the provision of services to reduce care work; secondly, the precariousness of employment. A combination that makes it difficult for people to live autonomously. Across Europe, since the 2000s, the policies of many national governments and the full discretion granted to employers to restructure companies regardless of the workforce employed and to decentralise parts of the production process to countries with fewer workers' rights have contributed to the increasing de-standardisation of employment. According to ILO (2016), women, not only those with low qualifications, have experienced three distinct types of contract more than men have, such as: fixed-term contracts, involuntary part-time work and other non-standard forms of employment, such as dependent self-employment. In Italy, these employment contracts are particularly common among women workers, as the data in Table 2 show.

Table 2. Involuntary part-time, temporary employment, activity and unemployment rates (%), females, 25-59 years (2019)

	Involuntary part-time employment ²	Temporary employees as a percentage of the total number of employees ³	Activity rates	Unemployment rates
European Union (27)	24.2	13.6	78.7	6.6
Belgium	4.3	8.7	78.3	4.3
Bulgaria	52.1	3.7	81.0	3.8
Czechia	7.4	8.6	82.6	2.3
Denmark	12.5	8.8	82.8	4.6
Germany	8.0	8.9	82.7	2.5
Estonia	6.2	2.6	83.3	4.6
Ireland	11.2	6.6	75.1	3.9
Greece	65.6	14.3	73.4	21.2
Spain	53.7	27.0	79.9	14.9
France	36.0	13.7	81.8	7.5
Croatia	34.1	18.0	75.6	6.5
Italy	60.4	17.3	66.1	10.6
Cyprus	54.9	17.8	80.8	7.7
Latvia	20.7	1.9	85.0	5.5
Lithuania	28.0	0.8	88.4	5.5
Luxembourg	13.7	7.4	80.5	4.7
Hungary	21.4	6.5	79.2	3.1
Malta	5.0	9.0	72.7	3.5
Netherlands	4.7	16.2	81.6	2.7
Austria	7.8	6.4	83.3	4.1
Poland	14.3	20.8	76.9	3.2
Portugal	50.3	19.9	85.2	6.3

2 Involuntary part-time employment is calculated here as a percentage of the total part-time employment.

3 The age group considered is from 25 to 54 years.

	Involuntary part-time employment ²	Temporary employees as a percentage of the total number of employees ³	Activity rates	Unemployment rates
Romania	47.7	0.8	72.4	2.6
Slovenia	5.8	11.7	87.3	4.7
Slovakia	26.2	7.8	79.7	5.4
Finland	35.7	16.5	85.0	4.9
Sweden	21.2	13.3	88.5	5.4

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 2021.

Wage restraint, job insecurity and the State's disengagement from family and childcare policies have thus made family support crucial for many young couples. The effects of the combination of these three factors are articulated below:

- 1) The persistent gender asymmetry in the management of domestic and care workload.

With an average of 4.46 hours per day devoted to home and family care, Italian women are in first place in Europe for the amount of time they devote to unpaid work at home (Eurostat 2010).⁴ This finding is also confirmed by the observation of the time spent by Italian women, whether or not they have children, in domestic and care work (Eurostat 2010). The greater commitment of women in unpaid domestic and care work on the one hand makes women unavailable for full-time work or makes it very difficult, and on the other hand it removes the responsibility of public institutions in offering services to reduce care work. This lack of responsibility affects male partners, who in fact cooperate in family work to a very limited extent. This gender gap in the division of domestic and care work has a direct impact not only in the participation of men and women in paid work but also

in wage setting. Taking into account the overall gender pay gap (a more comprehensive indicator than the wages-only indicator),⁵ in 2014, Italy (43.7) ranks first in Europe (EU 27), after Germany (45.2), Austria (44.9) and Malta (43.9).⁶ In Italy, equal pay is enshrined in law. The asymmetry in the incomes of men and women is first the result of the unequal gender division of reproductive labour that prevents women from choosing for themselves the work they want to do and how much time to devote to it, then of the dynamics involved in career advancement;

- 2) The high dependence of working women on family support to manage the care burden.

It should be pointed out that Italian governments have always invested residual resources in early childhood care. This disengagement on the part of Italian governments has led to the structural recourse of young couples to the family of origin to care for their children, especially those under three years of age. Over time, this trend, rather than being reduced by the increase in women's participation in paid work, has widened. In the 2000s, the 2007 financial crisis provided a strong argument for the Italian Government's continued disengagement from childcare provision. The result is that once again it was women who paid the price: through both reduced or partial participation in paid work and the assignment of childcare to their mothers (Sarti 2010; Naldini and Saraceno 2011; Keck and Saraceno 2013; Léon and Pavolini 2014; Saraceno 2018b);

- 3) The strong discontinuity of women's working careers.

In the absence of adequate care policies, many Italian women: a) leave the labour force and enter the inactivity area; b) are forced to accept part-time positions. The data shown in Table 2 reveal a rather paradigmatic picture: in Italy, women aged 25-59 are second only to their working peers in Greece in terms of the prevalence of involuntary part-time work. Among women in this age group, involuntary part-time work increased

4 This is the latest figure available in the Eurostat database. See also Eurostat, Time Use Surveys.

5 The gender overall earnings gap is a synthetic indicator. It measures the impact of the three combined factors, namely: (1) the average hourly earnings, (2) the monthly average of the number of hours paid (before any adjustment for part-time work) and (3) the employment rate, on the average earnings of all women of working age – whether employed or not employed – compared to men.

6 Eurostat, Gender overall earnings gap 2014.

by more than 15 percentage points from 2010 to 2019. During the same period, in Europe (EU 27) it decreased by 1.6 percentage points (Eurostat 2021). The analysis of the activity rate also contributes to highlighting the dilemmas of the relationship between women and work in Italy. In 2019, for women aged 25-59, the activity rate is 66.1% against the European (EU27) average of 78.7%: it is the lowest in Europe. Similarly, the inactivity rate for women of the same age is 33.9% compared to the EU27 average of 21.3% (Eurostat 2021). In relation to unemployment, the analysis of the rate for women in the investigated age group shows that Italy (10.6%) is third in Europe, after Spain (14.9%) and Greece (21.2%).

The dynamic highlighted by the analysis of employment data is also worrying in relation to the growing poverty among Italian women workers, as shown by the data in Table 3. This indicator tells us that the great emphasis placed by neo-liberal theorising on the necessary transition from employment to employability continues to clash with factual reality. People become poor while working. Governments have the task of creating new jobs and protecting existing ones. The reforms implemented in Italy in the last 25 years have all been mainly oriented towards reducing labour costs. There have been no effective initiatives on active policies. Indeed, little insistence on the subject has come from the trade unions either, whose action is still focused on employees and little attention is paid to workers with non-standard forms of employment.

Table 3. In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate, women (25-54), employed persons (%)

	2010	2019
European Union (27)	7.7	8.3
Belgium	4.0	4.9
Bulgaria	7.2	8.8
Czechia	3.8	3.9
Denmark	4.9	3.9
Germany	8.0	8.8
Estonia	8.7	9.3
Ireland	3.6	4.2
Greece	10.1	7.1
Spain	9.6	11.9

	2010	2019
France	5.8	7.4
Croatia	4.2	4.1
Italy	7.5	10.6
Cyprus	9.1	6.3
Latvia	10.6	8.3
Lithuania	15.2	7.9
Luxembourg	10.8	12.0
Hungary	4.9	8.7
Malta	3.2	4.3
Netherlands	4.2	4.4
Austria	7.1	7.1
Poland	10.4	8.8
Portugal	7.9	10.5
Romania	13.3	9.8
Slovenia	4.2	3.7
Slovakia	5.7	3.3
Finland	2.8	2.1
Sweden	7.4	7.3

Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC, 2021.

The established socio-economic literature (Bettio and Villa 1998; Saraceno 2003; Modena *et al.* 2014; Schmitt 2021) shows that low birth rates and precarious employment are closely related. It follows that the issue of work-life balance policies cannot therefore fail to take into account the material working conditions in which men and women with care responsibilities live.

According to data from the Labour Inspectorate, in 2019, 51,558 orders were issued to validate the resignations and consensual terminations of working mothers and working fathers. 73 per cent of these were women (Ispettorato Nazionale del Lavoro, 2020a). Of the total number of resigning workers, 20,930 stated that they were unable to balance work requirements with childcare needs. In particular, workers who resigned declared: not being able to count on supportive relatives (27%); high incidence of costs for newborn care (7%); failure to take in a child (2%).

In the educational year 2018/2019, according to ISTAT, there were 13,335 public and private early childhood services (ISTAT 2020). Available places cover 25.5% of potential users, children up to 2 years old, still below the 33% parameter set in 2002 by the EU for 2010.

In Italy, the issue of work-life balance policies continues to be absent from the political agenda (it is also scarcely present in the trade union agenda). However, it is necessary to think about the implementation of these policies in relation to the employment shock produced by the pandemic, also in a logic of redistribution of labour.

Among the possible measures to be implemented in the workplace:

- 1) Allowances and leave: the employer can supplement the allowances provided for by national legislation up to the full salary. This measure would promote the demand for leave also by fathers (who usually earn more in a couple) and discourage the resignation of workers with care responsibilities;
- 2) Modulation of working time: flexible working time is often left to negotiation between worker and employer. Specific plans are needed to support convenient hourly flexibility for workers with care responsibilities;
- 3) Company nurseries: as of 31 December 2018, there are 212 corporate nurseries in Italy. 34 are public and 178 are private for a total availability of places of 6,270 (ISTAT 2020). This is a very small number, but it is consistent with some structural elements of Italian entrepreneurship: the low consideration for the reproductive sphere and work-life balance needs and the small size of enterprises. There are still many cases of dismissal or demotion when women return from maternity leave and 94.9% of Italian companies have fewer than 10 employees (ISTAT 2020). These elements are not conducive to the promotion of company-based nurseries.

Among policies on a national basis:

- 1) Maternity/paternity leave: maternity leave lasts for five months (two months before the birth and three months after the birth). It is aimed at female employees and those working with non-standard contracts. From 2019, mothers can request to take time off work exclusively after giving birth. Paternity leave is granted in case of death or serious infirmity of the mother; abandonment of the child by the mother and sole custody of the

child by the father. In the case of adoption or fostering of children, in addition to the above events, paternity leave is granted to the father following the total or partial renunciation by the working mother of the maternity leave to which she is entitled. In a country with the lowest birth rate in Europe, the duration and coverage of leave needs to be reconsidered. The duration of the leave is very limited if we consider the events that engage mothers and fathers during childcare. Its extension should therefore be reviewed, as should the allowance, which is now 80%. The penalty in the pay packet does not promote its use;

- 2) Parental leave: currently it is only available to employees. This is already a serious limitation if we consider the structure of the labour market in Italy. The leave is granted to parents of children under 12 years old for a period of 10 to 11 months. This period can be fractioned. The period of leave is covered by an allowance of 30% of the average daily wage for a maximum period of six months and only until the child is six years old. The period of extension of the leave is very limited and especially the allowance does not promote its use, especially by fathers who usually have the highest salary in the couple. Therefore, it is necessary to think about: a) the extension of the leave to all workers (employees and non-standard employees); b) the increase of the leave period (at least 24 months) and c) its economic coverage (regardless of the age of the child and with an allowance covering at least 60 per cent of the average daily wage);
- 3) Father's leave: this is a leave addressed to employed fathers, including adoptive and foster fathers, no later than the fifth month of the child's life. It concerns fathers in cases of birth, adoption or fostering of a child. It consists of a compulsory leave of 10 days and optional leave of one day during the calendar year as an alternative to the mother. During compulsory paternity leave, fathers are entitled to receive 100% of their full salary in their pay packet. Again, this measure is only aimed at employed fathers and therefore excludes all those employed in non-standard forms of employment. Also in this case, the coverage and extension of the leave should be reviewed.

3. Pandemic and working women: old and new dilemmas

The spread of COVID-19 and the Italian government's confinement orders have increased women's risk of intimate partner violence within the family. This dynamic has affected women all over the world. In Italy, the fight against domestic violence has continued during confinement. The 1522 anti-violence and stalking number, anti-violence centres and shelters have always remained active, in compliance with hygiene and health requirements.⁷ Institutions have strengthened law enforcement and prevention efforts. However, social distancing regulations introduced to contain the contagion hampered the reception of victims in the appropriate facilities.

A first analysis of domestic violence during the pandemic is made possible by the analysis of the use of the public utility number 1522 from March to October 2020. ISTAT reports that the number of valid calls both by phone and via chat in the period from March to October 2020 increased considerably compared to the same period last year (+71.7%), from 13,424 to 23,071.⁸ The growth of help requests via chat has tripled from 829 to 3,347 messages. Among the reasons for contacting the hotline, calls for 'requests for help from victims of violence' and 'reports of violence' doubled, and together account for 45.8% of valid calls (10,577). In the reporting period, they increased by 107% compared to the same period of 2019.

From March to October 2020, calls for information on Anti-Violence Centres also increased (+65.7%). The users who contacted 1522 were female in 88.7% of the cases, 92.4% were of Italian nationality. However, the pandemic itself hindered the activity of the Anti-Violence Centres, bringing to light the hardships that already existed before the pandemic, as one of the coordinators of the Veneto Women's Projects Centre (*Centro Veneto Progetti Donna*) in Padua pointed out:

“Mothers with children who tested positive came to the centres. The centre workers had to use the health services but no one had thought of that. There were no plans. Gender-based violence is still considered an emergency. Local plans are needed that involve concerted action by different actors, such as centre workers, institutions, police and health workers. During the pandemic, hotels and other facilities were closed. The ministers stated that the Anti-Violence Centres should be considered essential services, but there was a lack of support.⁹

Violence against women is not only located within the framework of couples. It is also present in the workplace. According to the latest ISTAT estimates (2015-2016), 1,404,000 women have suffered physical harassment or sexual blackmail in the workplace: 425,000 in the last three years.¹⁰ With the onset of the pandemic, many women experienced inten-

7 The 1522 number was activated in 2006 by the Department for Equal Opportunities with the aim of developing a wide-ranging system action for emerging and combating the phenomenon of intra- and extra-family violence against women. In 2009, with the entry into force of Law 38/2009, amended in 2013, on the subject of persecutory acts, it started to support stalking victims. The public utility number 1522 is active 24 hours a day, every day of the year and is accessible from the entire national territory free of charge, both from fixed and mobile networks. The service is available in Italian, English, French, Spanish and Arabic. The telephone operators dedicated to the service provide an initial response to the needs of victims of gender-based violence and stalking, offering useful information and orientation towards the public and private social-health services present on the national territory and included in the official mapping of the Presidency of the Council – Equal Opportunities Department. Cases of violence are dealt with by means of a specific technical and operational procedure shared with the Police Forces.

8 The information provided during the call is recorded on a computerised platform whose data has been available since January 2013. The call is recorded following questions that the freephone operators ask the caller. The questions follow a standardised path, the filter being the reason for the call. Depending on the different reasons for the call, the operator enters information and data, reporting what the caller says. Depending on the reason, calls are classified as follows: 1) Valid calls coming from callers who call to get information or ask for support for themselves, for other people in their friend and/or parental network; 2) Invalid calls coming from callers whose purpose is not to ask for help but to joke or denigrate the same and calls made as unintentional mistakes. Within the valid calls, the information reported was further subdivided by the macro-categories 'users' and 'victims'. Victims are those who have suffered some form of violence and/or stalking, and whose socio-demographic details are available, which are much less investigated in the case of users. See the full methodological note prepared by ISTAT, available at: <https://www.ISTAT.it/it/files//2020/11/Nota-metodologica.pdf>.

9 Interview with Patrizia Zantedeschi, member, former president, of the board of the Veneto Women's Projects Centre (*Centro Veneto Progetti Donna*) in Padua.

10 See the ISTAT report on sexual harassment and blackmail at work (ISTAT 2018).

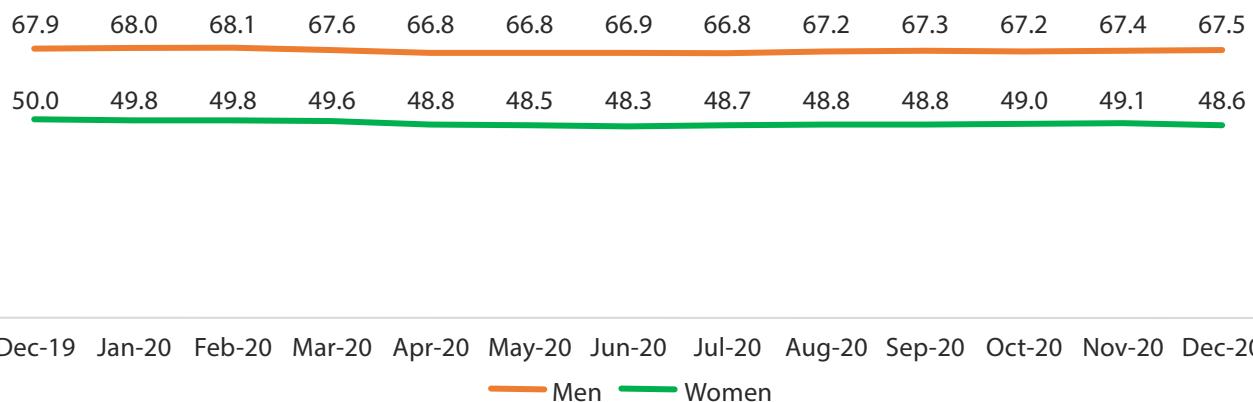
sified difficulties in the relationship with their employers. For many women workers, pressure from employers and worries regarding balancing personal and family life with work have augmented. The trade union has received many reports, as Cecilia De Pantz (Filcams-Cgil Veneto) states:

“We represent women workers in tourism, commerce, domestic work, professional offices. We represent women workers who have partly used remote working. We have many accounts of cases of violence that have not been reported to the police. Difficulties in balancing remote work with domestic and care work have increased exponentially. On the part of some employers there was no consideration of the difficulties of managing family and work during this period. We have often received reports of employers intimidating women workers. If an employer verbally assaults employees or decides to reduce employees' working hours, the first affected are women.

The spectre of job loss acts as a brake on the emergence of the discomfort that many women workers experience, especially in the work-life balance. With the pandemic, life-long problems have emerged in the relationship between paid work and personal and family life. The rescheduling of work commitments has been accompanied by the need to care for children and elderly parents to a greater extent: the former, if they are minors, have been engaged in distance learning, while the latter have often been deprived of assistance due to the interruption of the family carer's employment.

In this situation, the work-family system falls entirely on women. Employment data, broken down by gender, show a worrying situation. Over the whole year, the employment rate, observed based on gender, developed as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Employment rate, men and women, December 2019-December 2020 (%)



Source: ISTAT, 2021.

Historically, inactivity affects more women. However, statistical categories and definitions are not neutral: they are social constructions. It follows that the very concept of "inactivity" deserves to be problematised. Data on workers consider only the paid work so unpaid family work is totally removed from the national accounting. As shown by many scholars (Folbre and Abel, 1989; Folbre, 1991; Patriarca, 1998; Scott, 1999; Hakim, 1980; Wobbe and Renard, 2017), this removal is the result of a long-standing process started in the nineteenth century, when a positivist use of statistical reports of the workforce was aimed at strengthening and standardising a polarisation between "work" and "home", "public" and "private". In addition, we know that there are specific reasons why many women are excluded from paid work.

Data in Table 4 highlight the gender differentiation present: especially in the age group 35-49. In Italy, this is the age group most interested in early childhood care. We know that in Italy the biggest problems parents face in balancing work and life are mainly focused on services for children from zero to three years old. It should be noted that in Italy, with significant differences, inactivity also concerns the male population. It is therefore a structural element of the Italian labour market that should be investigated in its historical evolution and location.

Table 4. Inactivity rate, men and women, 2019-2020 (%)

	Men				Women			
	III-2019	I-2020	II-2020	III-2020	III-2019	I-2020	II-2020	III-2020
15-24 years	70.2	70.8	72.6	71.5	78.5	79.5	81.9	80.4
25-34 years	18.9	19.9	21.7	19.4	35.4	36.1	41.1	38.0
15-34 years	43.5	44.4	46.2	44.6	55.5	56.4	60.3	58.0
35-49 years	8.6	9.2	11.2	9.8	30.1	30.7	32.7	31.1
50-64 years	23.6	23.7	24.5	24.0	46.2	46.4	46.8	46.7
15-64 years	25.2	25.8	27.4	26.2	43.7	44.3	46.4	45.1
50 years and over	56.5	56.6	57.1	56.7	73.2	73.2	73.4	73.3
15 years and over	41.0	41.6	42.9	42.0	58.9	59.4	60.9	60.0

Source: ISTAT, 2021.

According to ISTAT data, the last two months of 2020 were particularly difficult: between November and December, the number of employed people fell by 101,000 (98.0% women). Unemployment increased by 34,000 (58.9% of whom were women). The inactivity figure is worrying: men decreased by 20,000 and women increased by 62,000.

Table 5 shows the cyclical data in absolute values and the trends data referring to the period December 2020/December 2019. It emerges even more significantly that, in terms of employment, the negative effects of the pandemic are mainly being paid for by women.

Table 5. Employment, unemployment and inactivity, men and women, 15-64 years old, 2020/2019

	Men			Women		
	Dec20 (1,000s) (%)	Dec20/ Dec19 (1,000s)	Dec20/ Dec19 (%)	Dec20 (1,000s) (%)	Dec20/ Dec19 (1,000s)	Dec20/ Dec19 (%)
Employed persons	13,309	- 132	- 1.0%	9,530	- 312	- 3.2%
Unemployed persons	1,202	- 96	-7.4%	1,055	- 126	- 10.6%
Inactive persons	4,995	+ 144	+3.0%	8,764	+ 338	+ 4.0%
Employment rate	67.5%		- 0.4%	48.6%		- 1.4%
Unemployment rate	8.3%		- 0.5%	10.0%		- 0.7%
Inactivity rate	26.3%		+ 0.9%	45.9%		+ 2.0%

Source: ISTAT 2021.

It should be noted that the dynamics of unemployment are more the result of regulatory provisions than of actual economic trends. As we will see below, since March 2020 the Italian Government has committed itself to an extensive programme of income support for workers and financial support for companies. Among the initiatives undertaken is a freeze on dismissals until 31 March 2021. A deadline

that the current government, which took office in February 2021, is amending, along with other measures to address job losses.

4. Measures taken by the Italian Government to deal with the crisis produced by the pandemic

In 2020, the Italian Government has provided for several measures to support workers, including categories of workers with non-standard forms of employment. We list a partial summary of the measures taken, through three different legislative measures.¹¹

- 1) Decree Law no. 18 of 17 March 2020, known as "Cura Italia Decree", coordinated with conversion Law no. 27 of 24 April 2020, provided for a set of measures aimed at coping with the effects of the crisis produced by the pandemic. These initial provisions were then revised by increasing the measures and budgetary funds available through subsequent legislation;
- 2) Decree-Law No 34 of 19 May 2020, known as the "Re-launch Decree" (*Decreto Rilancio*);
- 3) The "August Decree", decree-law no. 104 of 14 August 2020, converted into law no. 126 of 13 October 2020;
- 4) The Ristori decree (Decree-Law No 137 of 28 October 2020) and the Ristori-bis decree (Decree-Law No 149 of 9 November 2020).

The most relevant interventions adopted by the government in the area of labour were:

- 1) Increase in the maximum duration of the ordinary and exceptional wage guarantee fund and of the ordinary allowance: from 9 to 18 weeks for periods from 23 February to 31 August 2020 and 4 weeks from 1 September to 31 October 2020. It has also been extended to workers employed by the employers claiming the benefit on 25 March 2020. Workers who used these benefits in full in the first 14 weeks can claim an additional four weeks also for periods before 1 September 2020;
- 2) Special provisions on ordinary wage integration treatment and ordinary allowance: employers suspending or reducing their work activity may apply for ordinary wage integration treatment or ordinary allowance by

stating the reason "COVID-19 emergency". This allowance is granted to employees of employers who are members of the wage integration fund (*Fondo di Integrazione Salariale, FIS*) and who employ on average more than five employees (instead of the 15 required in the ordinary way). The FIS is the fund for enterprises employing more than five employees but not covered by the wage guarantee fund (ordinary and extraordinary).¹² It is particularly widespread among companies in the service sector;

- 2) Recognition of the integration fund for agricultural workers, for events related to the pandemic emergency;
- 3) The provision of a direct payment procedure for the ordinary wage guarantee fund (*Cassa Integrazione Ordinaria, CIGO*);
- 4) The establishment of a specific budget chapter (in the Ministry of Labour's estimate of expenditure) with an allocation, for 2020, of €2,673.2 million to ensure further financing of wage integration funds;
- 5) The extension by two months of the eligibility for unemployment benefits ending in the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 April 2020;
- 6) The extension to the end of 2020 of the "mobility in derogation"¹³ for workers who are not entitled to the unemployment benefit.

The Italian Government has granted partial coverage to workers employed under non-standard contracts. The continuing blockade of many production and service activities has made it necessary to extend the benefits and to introduce new ones.

The allowances were granted to the following categories of workers, on the basis of specific conditions as shown in the box below.

¹¹ For an exhaustive list of the measures taken by the government, see the relevant part of the INPS website (in Italian) available at: <https://www.inps.it/NuovoportaleINPS/default.aspx?sPathID=%3b0%3b&lastMenu=53000&iMenu=1&p4=2>.

¹² See INPS: <https://www.inps.it/nuovoportaleinps/default.aspx?itemdir=50262>.

¹³ It is an allowance that guarantees redundant workers, who cannot benefit from ordinary shock absorbers, an income in lieu of pay. See the INPS website (in Italian) at: <https://www.inps.it/nuovoportaleinps/default.aspx?itemdir=46116#:~:text=l%20limiti%20di%20durata%20massima,abbiano%20gi%C3%A0%20beneficiato%20i%20lavoratori>.

Categories of workers benefiting from the allowances	Allowances assigned
Seasonal workers in tourism, spas and entertainment	€2,000
Freelance professionals with VAT registration numbers in travel agencies, tour operators, guides and tour leaders, photojournalists, wedding planners, translators and interpreters, holistic practitioners, tattoo artists, hawkers, commercial agents and representatives.	€2,000 + A non-repayable grant that is determined by applying a percentage to the difference between the amount of turnover and fees for April 2020 and the amount of turnover and fees for April 2019. The allowance of the contribution varies from 15% to 25%
Workers enrolled in the Entertainment Workers Pension Fund (<i>Fondo pensione lavoratori dello spettacolo, FLPS</i>) who have at least 30 daily contributions paid in 2019 from which an income not exceeding €50,000, or at least 7 daily contributions paid in 2019 from which an income not exceeding €35,000.	€2,200
Self-employed workers enrolled in the INPS separate social security regime (artisans, business operators and farmers, sharecroppers, settlers and professional farmers).	€600
Self-employed workers, without VAT registration numbers but registered with the INPS separate social security regime as of 23 February 2020.	€1,200
Domestic workers who have, as of 23 February 2020, one or more employment contracts for a total duration of more than 10 hours per week.	€1,000
Fixed-term farm workers as long as they can claim at least 50 days of actual farm work in 2019.	€600
Intermittent workers who have worked at least 30 days in the period between 1 January 2019 and 29 October 2020.	€2,200

In addition to the economic coverage, the government has established some measures to guarantee employment continuity:

- Fixed-term contracts: their renewal or extension has been foreseen until 30 August 2020, even if the reasons required by current legislation are not present;
- Dismissals: a ban on dismissals by companies until 31 March 2021.¹⁴

In order to facilitate work-life balance, the following measures have been provided:

- Increase in parental leave: from 15 to 30 days, for parents with children up to 12 years old. The leave is available until 31 August 2020;

- Unpaid leave: for parents with an employment contract (in private companies) with children under 16;
- Increase in baby-sitting voucher: from €600 to €1,200, to be used also in summer centres and childcare services;
- 12 days of paid leave (in addition to what is already provided) for the months of May and June for the care of disabled family members.

The government has intervened in the regulation of remote working by derogating from the existing rule that required employers to use this work scheme only by written agreements.

¹⁴ While this report was already closed, the Italian Government with the so-called "Sostegni Decree" (Decree of March 22, 2021, no. 41) extends the ban on dismissals. Until 30 June 2021, the ban concerns all employers. From 1 July to 31 October 2021, however, the ban will concern only sectors receiving the ordinary allowance and the Wage guaranteed fund in derogation (*CIG in deroga*).

Another measure introduced by the government to cope with the pandemic emergency is the Emergency Income (*Reddito di Emergenza*, REM). This is an extraordinary income support measure introduced to support households experiencing economic difficulty caused by the Covid-19 epidemiological emergency. It has been established by article 82, decree-law no. 34 of 19 May 2020 (Relaunch Decree). It varies from €400 to €840, depending on the composition of the household. It is provided for two monthly payments.

Despite the measures taken by the Italian Government, the employment data did not show a positive trend. It is conceivable that the increase in unemployment in the last month of 2020, as shown by ISTAT data, is due to the fact that many companies decided to close down at the end of

the year, without waiting for the restart of production and service activities.

The data available shows that it is women who are penalised to a greater extent. The reasons for this have already been partly examined: the asymmetrical distribution of domestic and care work between men and women leads to a lower availability of women for paid work. This lower availability exposes women to non-standard forms of employment of a discontinuous nature, even where women are highly qualified. Non-standard forms of employment do not benefit from the protections afforded to permanent employment. The differentiation of protection is particularly marked in the case of suspension of work, as was the case in this pandemic phase.

5. The service sector and the pandemic: a gender perspective

In Italy, over the last twenty years, employment has experienced many dynamics underway in other countries. These dynamics include: growth in employment in the service sector (commerce, tourism and services to businesses and individuals); increase in non-standard forms of employment (involuntary part-time, dependent self-employment, temporary work (fixed-term work, on-call work); reduction in the incidence of female employment in the industrial sector (especially as a result of the restructuring processes ongoing in the branches of industry that have traditionally employed women, such as the textiles, clothing and footwear industries). These processes have often been associated with the relocation of many production activities to countries with fewer rights for workers and lower labour costs.

In the third quarter of 2020, 22,863,000 people over the age of 15 were employed. Of these, 15,893,000 were employed in the service sector, accounting for 69.5% of the employed persons in all sectors. 50.5% of the employed persons in the service sector are women. During the same period, 4,168,000 workers were employed part-time, of whom 3,575,000 were in the services sector, accounting for 85.8% of total part-time employment and 22.5% of total employment in the tertiary sector.

The growth of the service sector in Italy has been strongly driven by the tourism sector. In 2019, the tourism sector produced over 40 billion Euro (13% of GDP). For the year 2019, ISTAT surveyed 185,597 non-hotel establishments and 32,730 hotel establishments. Compared to the previous year, there is an increase for the former (+1.3 per cent) and a slight reduction for the latter (- 0.5 per cent). The number of beds remained almost unchanged compared to 2018 for hotel establishments, while there was an increase of 2.2 per cent for beds in non-hotel establishments. In the first nine months of 2020, there was a decrease of 50.9 per cent compared to 2019, equivalent to 192 million fewer admissions (ISTAT 2021).

Many women previously employed in the industrial sector have lost their jobs and have had to relocate to the service sector. The sectors analysed in this study are those most affected by the pandemic wave. The activities carried out by workers employed in the following sectors require direct contact with customers in the workplace:

- 1) Cafés and restaurants: workers experience problems related to work organisation (shifts and hours that make work-life balance difficult) and the very high presence of part-time work. Full time is the preserve of workers with roles involving a certain level of responsibility. Integrative bargaining has decreased a lot in the most

- solid enterprises at national level. In small bars and restaurants, the biggest problem is undeclared work and grey work. With the outbreak of the pandemic and the closure of many activities, part-time workers and those with irregular contracts have received very limited economic support;
- 2) Hotels: with the outbreak of the pandemic, incoming tourist flows were immediately blocked. The most critical issue was for contract workers: room cleaners and janitorial staff, roles which had been outsourced for some time. The workers were laid off immediately in March, but often the companies did not pay the benefits in advance, forcing the workers to wait for payment by the INPS;
 - 3) Canteens: women workers in this sub-sector have contracts of only a few hours per week. Their income was already limited before the outbreak of the pandemic. School canteen workers have a cyclical part-time status: they are paid when they work but have no income support during the summer months. Recently, they have been allowed to accrue contributions during the summer months. During the pandemic, these workers were the first to be suspended from work. Workers in company canteens were also suspended: the contracting companies continued to make employees work remotely with the effect of suspending canteen services altogether. Workers in hospital canteens are the only ones who have always worked;
 - 4) Retail (excluding food and medical products): in this sector, contracts are more stable and full-time contracts are more widespread than in other service sectors. However, the arrival of the pandemic resulted in many workers being suspended from work.

5.1 A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE SERVICE SECTOR IN THE LOMBARDY AND VENETO REGIONS

Lombardy and Veneto are among the regions with the highest average per capita wealth in Italy: in 2018, income per inhabitant was €22,943 in Lombardy and €20,675 in Veneto (North-East average=21,881; Italy=18,902).

Since the Second World War, although characterised by a different production structure in terms of company size

and specialisation, the two regions have recorded growth rates that have had a direct impact on employment.

As the data in Table 6 show, in the third quarter of 2019 the employment rates present in Lombardy and Veneto continue the trend of recent decades. For men and women, the rates are 8 percentage points higher than the national average rate. However, the outbreak of the pandemic has reduced the gap.

Table 6. Employment rates, 15-64 years by sex, 2019, 2020 (%)

	Employment rates 15-64 years			
	III-2019		III-2020	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Lombardy	76.4	59.7	73.9	58.2
Veneto	76.1	58.0	75.6	55.4
Italy	68.7	50.1	67.5	48.5

Source: ISTAT 2021.

Over time, both regions have experienced a major increase in employment in the service sector, with the partial integration of workers from the industrial sector. Among the service sector, tourism is prominent. As far as tourism is concerned, the offer in Lombardy is concentrated on Milan and Lake Como, and in Veneto on Venice, the Dolomites and the Adriatic coast. Both have a tourist offer linked to arts cities (Mantova, Bergamo, Brescia, Cremona, Pavia, Lecco and Lodi in Lombardy, and Padova, Vicenza, Verona and Treviso in Veneto), wine and food itineraries.

In 2019, the service sector in terms of added value produced in Lombardy will amount to over 258 billion euros; in Veneto to over 98 billion euros (ISTAT 2021).

Table 7. Employed persons in the service sector by sex, 2020/2019 (1,000s)

	Employed persons in the service sector				Employed persons in commerce, hotels, restaurants			
	III-2020		Var. 2020/2019		III-2020		Var. 2020/2019	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Lombardy	1,351	1,556	- 74	- 23	402	369	- 50	- 24
Veneto	617	706	- 7	- 30	212	181	+ 17	- 24
Italy	15,399	8,019	- 316	- 329	2,603	2,015	- 161	- 153

Source: ISTAT, 2021.

From the 2000s onwards, the service sector has experienced a decline in small neighbourhood shops to the benefit of large-scale organised distribution led by foreign multinationals. Billa, Auchan, DM, Carrefour, Conforama and Ikea are the most representative. After a few decades of settlement, some of these multinationals left Italy and created significant occupational problems.

As observed by the unionists interviewed, in recent years working conditions have worsened in relation to the pace and wages of workers in stable jobs, and there has been a general increase in the precariousness of employment (Eurofound 2012; 2016).

In the service sector, the workers employed in contracted and subcontracted services struggle more: they have open-ended contracts but no security in the event of a change of contract. In the case of a change of contractor, companies can take on workers previously employed by reducing contracts, working hours and changing pay conditions. In addition, the Jobs Act, the 2015 labour market reform, has provided for the loss of protection under Article 18 of the Workers' Statute. There are workers who have been working in contracted companies for many years and actually have the protections that new hires have.

The canteen sector has also been badly affected by the pandemic: women aged over 50 work in this sector, with employment contracts of 15-20 hours per week. During the lockdown, many companies reduced or even cancelled their canteen services: smart working has rendered them effectively useless. Women working in school canteens are already suffering from not being paid during the summer: with the pandemic, they could not even rely on social se-

curity. In the retail sector, the opening of shops has been patchy. Workers used the wage guarantee fund on a rotating basis. In this sector, the pandemic accelerated online sales. In Milan, fashion trade has always been one of the leading sectors: fast-fashion chains have reduced sales quantities while high-fashion chains have suffered from the tourism freeze.¹⁵

5.2 THE PANDEMIC AND THE CHANGING LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN EMPLOYED IN THE SERVICE SECTOR

On 23 February 2020, confinement began in Veneto and Lombardy. In these two regions, COVID-19 was immediately isolated. The service sector is large within it: pharmacies and grocery shops remained open all the time, as did catering workers in some workplaces and in hospitals and care facilities, multiservice in health facilities; other sectors did not.

For many workers in the service sector, work was totally suspended. However, the protections afforded to workers in the service sector in the event of suspension from work differ from those in industry.

Table 8 shows the list of hours authorised by the National Social Security Institute (INPS):

¹⁵ This part was elaborated based on the material that emerged in the interviews with trade unionists from Lombardy and Veneto.

Table 8. Social shock absorbers, hours authorised in the service sector, 2019, 2020 - (1,000s)

	Extraordinary wage guarantee fund (<i>CIG Straordinaria</i>)		Wage guaranteed fund in derogation (<i>CIG in deroga</i>)		Solidarity funds (<i>Fondi di solidarietà</i>)	
	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020
Lombardy	2,442,491	5,136,350	2,847	195,020,400	445,086	332,388,011
Veneto	176,836	6,676,150	2,518	73,718,157	244,054	123,532,302
Italy	13,511,410	27,965,258	478,145	744,118,461	12,122,835	1,223,391,904

Source: INPS, 2021.

For many female workers interviewed, the use of social shock absorbers was unheard of until the outbreak of the pandemic. Suspension from work, for permanent women workers in the retail sector, was mainly managed through recourse to the FIS. This is a wage integration fund which, however, has often been inadequate, as observed by Chiara S., 46 years old, separated, living with two children aged 20 and 15, employee of a fast-food outlet in Milan:

“The pandemic stopped the mobility of people and forced the closure of the sites. I worked until the beginning of March 2020. We used the FIS 100% because the shop was closed. When they reopened, we still used it because of the few hours we worked. When the wage guarantee fund exceeds 50%, we do not accrue thirteenth and fourteenth salary payments, paid holidays or leave. Unfortunately, we used a lot of it. Towards the end of the year we recovered some of it by working but it is still very little [...] The employer paid us the FIS so we did not wait for our salary. From that point of view we were lucky. It should be observed that this support only covers a part of the salary that is not 80% of our salary. We actually receive 60% of what we would have received if we had worked. Owning a house actually means less support from the government. I have condominium fees to pay. There are big inequalities among people. There are three of us and we have to live on 13,000 euros a year...



An empty canteen. Photo by Max Frajer on Unsplash.

Work in the cultural sector has also come to a standstill because of the pandemic. In the Green Paper on cultural and creative industries published in 2010,¹⁶ the European Parliament urged national governments to guarantee the creative industries and the workers employed in them. The pandemic severely affected a sector already compromised by the Italian Government's structural lack of investment. The benefits that were provided for workers were limited. Support from the Single Fund for the Performing Arts (*Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo, FUS*) only covered workers with VAT numbers and collaboration contracts.¹⁷ Workers in other types of employment were excluded, as Anna R., 29 years old, an entertainment worker in Venice, noted:

16 European Commission, Green Paper. Unlocking the potential of cultural and creative industries, 2010.

17 A bonus of €1,000 has been provided. See Article 15, Decree-Law No 137 of 28 October 2020.

“ I work for a contracted company at La Fenice Theatre. We all have occasional labour contracts. I am paid per performance, based on the number of performances. We have no leave or paid holidays. We got stuck on 23 February to coincide with carnival. They cancelled the calendar and we never returned to the theatre. From February until September, we never worked. We were excluded from the bonus scheme. The first €600 bonus was for workers in the performing arts with a VAT number or a collaboration contract. In showbusiness, we all have discontinuous contracts. Many of us have second jobs so that we can afford to cultivate our passion for the performing arts. We are very worried about the future. In Veneto, there is little investment in culture. Performing arts are not thought of as work. Many people tell me that you should go abroad. Abroad is the answer to everything... why do I have to leave? To give up everything because there is no desire to invest in this country? I do not feel like it.

Tourism has been severely damaged by the pandemic. In some areas of Italy, the tourism sector is a monoculture. As a result, the stoppage of tourist flows meant that the season did not start, and thousands of workers were laid off. In many tourist areas, entire families are often employed in hotels, bars and restaurants (e.g. in the Lake Como area, the Lake Garda area, the Padua spa area).

In the Como area of Lombardy, the tourism sector has only developed since the 2000s. Before the pandemic, employment in the sector stood at around 18,000 persons. With the arrival of the pandemic, the drop in admissions was 85%. The suspension of work has complicated the existence of many families employed in the sector, as Michela P., 25 years old, a seasonal worker in a hotel on Lake Como, notes:

“ I live with my mum and sister. We lost dad last year. My parents came to Italy from Turkey 30 years ago. My mum also works in the same hotel as me as a seasonal worker. In March, we were waiting for the season to start again. There are only seasonal jobs

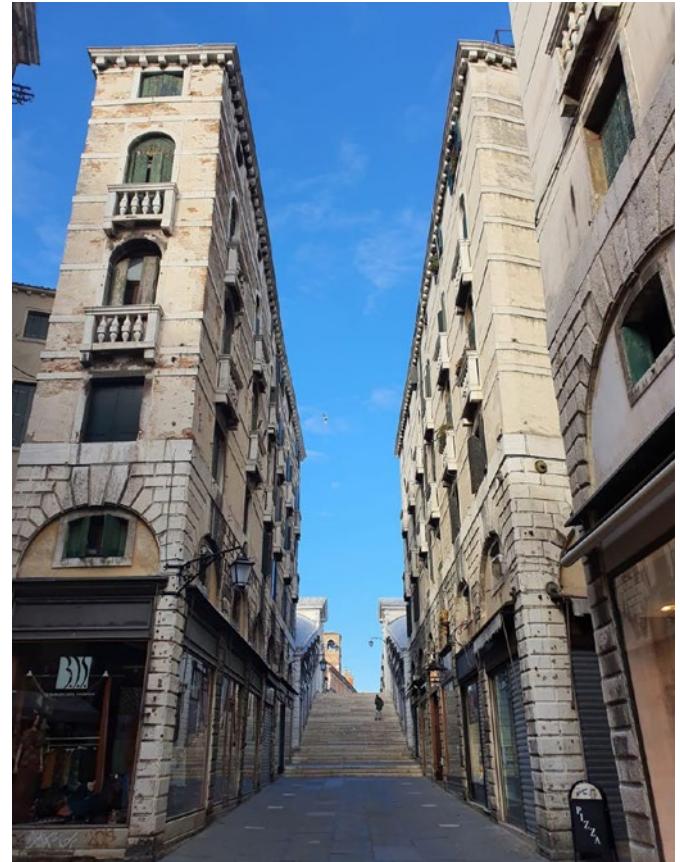
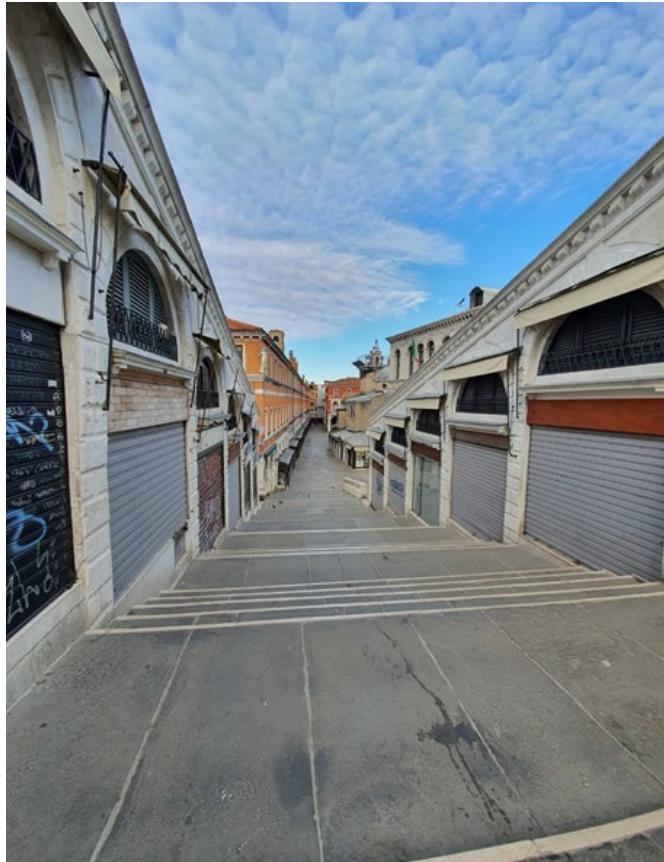
here. My sister works in a bar that has closed down. All three of us are at home. After dad died, mum got an indirect pension. I was home until June and then returned to my department in the hotel. From October onwards I have been at home. I received the unemployment benefit for the months I did not work, about 500 euros. Mum also managed to get a bonus. It was not easy. We saved as much as we could. We only bought the essentials [...] The only hope is that the pandemic will stop, and the season will start again.

Over time, the economy of the city of Venice has also been oriented towards abandoning production specialisations linked to the manufacturing sector to become a tourist monoculture. This transformation accelerated during the 1990s. Between 2000 and 2019, arrivals (number of persons who arrive at a tourist accommodation and check in) tripled while presences (nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments) more than doubled. The pandemic brought this flow to an unimaginable halt.

“ From February to November 2020, 867,478 arrivals and 2,421,654 presences were recorded in Venice. In the same period in 2019, there were 5,121,792 arrivals and 11,753,074 presences.¹⁸ The loss of revenue for tourism in the entire Venetian province amounted to EUR 2 billion.¹⁹

18 Data from the Veneto Region Statistics Office on ISTAT data.

19 See a study by the Fondazione Studi Consulenti del Lavoro entitled: "Impatto occupazionale dell'emergenza covid-19 nella realtà metropolitana veneziana". Available at: <https://www.consulentidellavoro.venezia.it/venezia-al-tempo-del-covid-pesanti-ripercussioni-sulle-imprese-la-ripresa-nel-2022/>.



An empty Rialto Market. Photo courtesy of Marenza Gastaldi Cibola, tourist manager in Venice.

Several economic sectors bore the brunt of the impact of the stoppage of tourist flows. However, the worst consequences were experienced by workers employed under discontinuous or inadequately protected contracts in the event of work suspension, as in this case for reasons beyond the worker's control. These included tourist guides and tour operators in Venice. They are young people, mostly women, often with a university degree and several specialised qualifications. There are about 20,000 licensed tour guides in Italy. In Venice, there are about 200. They mainly work with VAT numbers: they are not guaranteed the social security benefits provided for workers employed in standard forms of employment.²⁰

With the arrival of the pandemic, the work of Venetian tourist guides came to a complete standstill. Stefania E., 46

years old, a single mother of a 10-year-old boy, describes the condition she has been experiencing since March 2020:

“I have been in the tourism industry since 2003. I got into it after graduating in Chinese. I went to China to work, changing to different sectors. In 2004, I came back to Italy and started working for an Italian tour operator who forced me to open a VAT number. When I became pregnant, the employer fired me. I did a few months without work and then I decided to study for the licence to become a tourist guide. Since 2010, I have always worked with the licence. Every year between December and January, I organise an annual diary. In February 2020, I knew how much I would be working until the end of October: I had a full diary until the whole month of October. From the first weeks of March, all the bookings for the whole year were cancelled. It was a shock. No-

20 Since 2007, the Italian Government has provided for the extension of maternity and paternity leave and allowances to female workers employed in non-standard forms of employment. The benefit is paid by the INPS and is 80% of the income, calculated on the previous year (daily basis multiplied by the 5 months of compulsory leave).

body expected it to last so long. We hoped that during the summer it would all end. I got 600 euros in March and 600 euros in April and 1,000 euros for May. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism had provided additional compensation for guides and tour leaders. I received another 7,000 euros. It has to be said that I went from a billing of 50,000 euros in 2019 to 2,000 in 2020. My father helped me pay my mortgage... and he still helps me.

Like Veneto, Lombardy also experienced an immediate halt to many activities at the end of February 2020. Milan was also heavily affected by the effects of the pandemic. The city has tourist flows linked to art but also to business. In 2019, arrivals were 8,016,853, presences were 16,424,158. In 2019, there were 2,483 accommodation establishments (ISTAT 2021).



A deserted Milan. Photo by Ouael Ben Salah on Unsplash.

Many workers employed in accommodation establishments were suspended from work. As already mentioned, the tourism sector, not unlike the dynamics affecting the entire service sector, relies on non-standard, female employment. This is the case of floor staff and food service workers in hotels. The work stoppage caused by the spread of the pandemic was supported through recourse to the

solidarity funds. However, for many workers employed in the hospitality industry in the metropolitan city of Milan, being employed under a non-standard employment contract implies very limited income support in the event of work stoppage.

There will be recovery but the timing is not predictable, given the indicators of the spread of the pandemic. The restructuring of the sector, if not accompanied by forward-looking investments, could mean the loss of many jobs. The difficulties experienced by workers employed in Milan hotels since last February and the uncertainty that follows are reported by Francesca F., 46 years old, married, mother of two daughters, employed in a five-star hotel in Milan, suspended from work since 23 February 2020:

“I have been working in this hotel since 1996. I am employed part-time for 25 hours per week. At the beginning, I was in charge of events, but when I was hired on a permanent basis, I was in charge of breakfasts. When I started, I had no family commitments and then with my daughters I always preferred to work part-time. My working hours are from 7 a.m. to 12 p.m. My monthly pay is 960 euros. We are 135 employees, all direct, no contractors or external companies. In recent years, the work organisation has changed, but for a long time the work went on well, like a family business. Now, because of the pandemic, the management has started the procedure for 20 lay-offs. For now, it has involved workers close to retirement. After 2007, the hotels lowered their prices a lot and rather than quality, they focused on quantity. This work stoppage came as a shock. The first stoppage came after the attack on the twin towers in 2001. However, not in these terms. I have been at home receiving the FIS from 26 February 2020. The company is paying us the subsidy that we would otherwise have received from the State. As long as there are no foreign clients, we have no work. I receive 400 euros per month. During this period, my parents helped me and I had to suspend my mortgage payments. As a result of my work being suspended, I have imposed a strict control on my purchases, including food.

5.3 THE PANDEMIC AND THE WORKERS IN THE SERVICE SECTOR: HOPES AND PERSPECTIVES

The interviews carried out with female workers highlight the centrality of the family and parental network in the management of work suspension. As already pointed out, especially in the service sector, women workers are interested in part-time work, with percentages well above the

European average. In Italy, the average hourly wage of a female worker in a part-time position in the service sector is €9.6, compared to €12.24 in France and €11.08 in Germany (Eurostat 2018). Low wages and the prevalence of part-time work are associated with the absence of adequate protections when work is missing. These are key issues that need to be addressed by the social partners as part of the recovery plan.

However, it would be wrong to ascribe responsibility for the current conditions in the sectors analysed to the pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 has accelerated ongoing processes that, if not understood and addressed, risk widening social exclusion and new forms of poverty. The pandemic wave has had critical effects in sectors, such as the tertiary sector, that in the last two decades have experienced strong employment expansion and growing profits.

For many workers, termination or suspension of work is accompanied by uncertain prospects for recovery. For many of the female workers interviewed, the loss of income and even of work has led to existential destabilisation. For all the interviewees, the job they did before the pandemic was partly necessary and partly a choice. In both cases, it ensured a certain income stability that contributed substantially to their autonomy. Autonomy that risks being compromised by a recovery that promises to be slow and full of unpredictable scenarios. The organisation of work in businesses and tourist flows is undergoing important transformations that will have direct consequences for the sector. Although the focus of the interviewees was more on subsistence and the reorganisation of daily life, the pandemic has forced them to reflect on their own working future, their expectations and the real possibilities for achieving income stability.

Among the workers interviewed, the most qualified have used the time made available by the forced confinement by attending courses and increasing their knowledge, including in fields outside their profession. Workers with fewer qualifications but lengthy work experience do not have many options: the hope that the recovery will be rapid and will not entail the loss of jobs or the reduction of the guarantees obtained so far is shared. The prevalence of non-standard forms of employment among workers interviewed does not support an optimistic view of future prospects.

For many of these women, part-time work was not a choice: it was an obligatory path to carry the burden of domestic and care work that a male partner would not have carried out. Their future prospects, in the absence of an effective recovery on equal terms with the pre-pandemic period, are not very encouraging, as Francesca F. observes:

“The future? I have never taken any courses. If I were to be fired... because I am afraid of that... the management could sell the hotel to another owner... and we who are old for work but young for retirement are useful but not indispensable. If I were to be fired, I would go and work for some old people or as a baby-sitter, as long as the parents are at work and not in smart-working. I do not think I would be able to find a job in another hotel. They hire kids who cost less. I cost the company more for a part-time job than a 20-year-old boy who costs 500 euros. There is no recognition of our expertise. Nowadays, companies are not very interested. Even five-star hotels focus on quantity.

For other interviewees, especially the youngest and highly educated ones, the investment made in their professional career calls into question years of sacrifices. If they are single mothers without help from their ex-partner the worries increase, as underlined by Stefania E., 46 years old, a single mother of a 10-year-old child and who works as a self-employed tourist guide in Venice:

“To protect myself, I thought I would rethink my career and try teaching. I took the 24 CFU²¹ to teach Chinese in high school. I have put myself on the school list for substitute teaching. I have no intention of giving up my job as a tour guide. I am thinking of combining the two activities: no work at school during the summer months, Saturdays, and Sundays. I like both. I enrolled in a master's programme to become qualified to teach English as well. I spent six months doing that. If another pandemic comes along, I do not want to end up with no rescue network and have my business cut off

overnight. The economic supports given by the government have been completely unexpected. I have been very worried about my son. I am living off my savings because VAT²² involves risks... but I am using them up. It makes me think that in the future I will not be able to maintain the lifestyle that I have built up so laboriously over the years. I have savings. I am afraid that I will not be able to guarantee my son those life experiences, that standard of living that must be guaranteed in order to give him a decent future, such as sending him abroad to study. Will I have the money to do that? This is my biggest worry.

Rita B., 39 years old, is in the same situation. She cohabits with a partner, also a tourist guide in Venice:

“I regretted having chosen to work in the tourism sector because it was very badly affected by the pandemic. I was actually doing a job that I liked. Being able to manage it... not having hours: it was stressful but also a source of adrenalin. Now I see that I suffer being in front of the computer for hours and hours. I did not mind waking up at four in the morning, walking twenty thousand steps a day... hot and cold temperatures. I liked the work itself and the autonomy I had. In high season there was so much work that we had to work at a frenetic pace, but I was satisfied. I used to plan for the long term and now I cannot do that. I have always planned my life. I have never been still in the present. However, now I see that I have come to live in the present. I cannot think in the long term any more. I thought I would suffer... but I do not. I used to put a lot of trust in controlling my life. I have realised that there is no point in making so many plans.

For other interviewees, the suspension from work disrupted established life plans, which had been put to the test by previous life experiences. Anja G., 41 years old, of Albanian origin, was previously employed in the thermal area of Padua and is now unemployed. She explains:

21 CFU is a university educational credit (*Credito Formativo Universitario*). It is the unit of measure of learning and studying that students need to acquire knowledge and skills. One credit corresponds to 25 hours of learning, spent attending classes, laboratories and seminars and studying. 24-CFU are specific credits that graduates who want to teach must acquire in the pedagogical field in order to enter the public competition.

22 The Value Added Tax, or VAT, is a general, broadly based consumption tax assessed on the value added to goods and services. In Italy, self-employment is mainly carried out under the VAT system, which means that the work is subject to value added tax at the current rate.

“ I was born in Albania. I studied but did not finish my studies. I arrived in Italy in 1998. In 2001 I started working as a floor maid in a hotel. I have always worked in the hospitality sector. I started on fixed-term contracts until I was hired on a permanent basis. I started working in this last hotel in 2007. When I started, I had a permanent contract. In 2019, the employer changed my contract from permanent to fixed-term. The hotel management imposed this condition on us. The alternative was to lose my job. Before the pandemic I was earning about 1,200 euros a month. I have been home unemployed since March last year. The first few months I received 800 euros a month. Now I receive 400 euros. In 2018, when I separated from my husband, I asked the employer for part of the severance pay. I am getting by now with that money. We hope to start back soon in the same hotel. I do not see any prospects in other sectors.

5.4 SOLIDARITY NETWORKS AND COLLECTIVE MOBILIZATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

In the service sector, work stoppages are generally linked to seasonality. At the end of February 2020, the tourist season would have started again. Many seasonal workers were not re-employed. For permanent workers, unions intervened to manage the work suspension.

From February to December 2020, the central governing bodies adopted the following acts: 21 Prime Minister's Decrees; 32 Decree laws by the Government; 57 ordinances by the Department of Civil Protection of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers; 56 ordinances and decrees by the Ministry of Health. This does not include the ordinances of other ministries and regions.²³ The regulatory hypertrophy certainly did not facilitate the management of the work stoppage, as observed by Cecilia De Pantz (Filcams-Cgil Veneto):

“ We did not know which funds could be used. We asked the Ministry of Labour to extend the ordinary wage guarantee fund but it did not go through. There was no universal instrument for this massive stoppage. Many workers had no fund to refer to: seasonal workers, temporary workers and VAT holders were not protected. At that time, we put pressure on at ministerial level to extend the use of the funds to workers who did not have any form of income support. Thereby, the next DPCM²⁴ supplemented the previous provisions and this took place the whole of 2020.

The control of working conditions also took on the monitoring of the physical integrity of the employees. It should be remembered that, initially, there was a lack of safety equipment such as masks and gloves. Such equipment was also restricted for a long time for medical and healthcare staff.²⁵ In some cases, the use of the devices was opposed by employers, making the working conditions of employed workers even more difficult, as shown below:

“ There was a lot of fear. None of us had faced this experience. The first problem was how to deal with the workers who stayed at home and those who went to work. Cleaners and caterers in hospitals and workers employed in food distribution continued to work throughout but initially without protective equipment. We asked for discussions with the employers to get the protective equipment. We sent letters to the president of the Veneto region and to employers' organisations. In a first phase, especially in commerce, employers did not want employees to use masks: they thought they would scare the customers. We had a continuous dialogue with the labour inspectorates and had to threaten to call in the police and to start strike activity. The problem was that the supermarkets were among the few businesses that were open: it was difficult to get the workers to go on strike. We would have sent Italy into a panic! We had spontaneous strikes until the managers of the companies were convinced to adopt safety

23 See the collection of acts containing urgent measures for the management of the epidemiological emergency caused by COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/detttaglioArea/12>.

24 The Prime Minister's Decrees (*Decreti del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri*) have been launched to contain the spread of COVID-19 since March 2020.

25 See Nava et al. 2020.

devices for the workers. From being invisible, many workers were considered as essential.²⁶

The work stoppage was managed by the trade unions with all the difficulties concerned: ambivalent health information and inadequate support for workers affected by reduced working time or total suspension of work had to be managed. The impossibility of communicating directly with workers forced the massive use of technology: a major challenge for the trade union in the new millennium. There were tensions with employers that forced mobilisations, aimed at giving a voice to silenced workers who risked not having any form of economic support. The union reorganised itself, using the available technology to facilitate the flow of information, as Roberta Griffini (Filcams-Cgil Milan) remarks:

“We gave as much information as we could in new ways. Initially, we managed communication through whatsapp, phone calls and emails. Then we organised the meetings with the available platforms. Most of the workers are of a certain age and not very tech-savvy, but in the end we managed to organise ourselves. In the first period of the lockdown, we were all confused. We have been an important point of reference both for information and for concrete actions. Despite the restrictions, we organised initiatives and protests to give a voice to these lesser-regarded sectors and to ask for protection, guarantees and shock absorbers. At certain times, we realized that income supports were expiring and no decree to renew them was adopted. There was great concern that we would be left without economic support [...] In the service sector, for the women workers, many difficulties are adding up. We saw situations of complete desperation. Some workers did not know how to eat. For months, they had to suspend rents and mortgages. We made several initiatives to push companies to anticipate the wage guarantee fund supplements. Some suspended workers found their benefits still blocked in June.

The labour reforms implemented in Italy since the second half of the 1990s have complicated the representation

and protection activities of trade unions. The plurality of non-standard forms of employment and collective contracts in the same sector has been associated with greater difficulties in monitoring working conditions. It must be emphasised that the number of labour inspectors has been steadily decreasing since the 2000s. In 2019, the inspection bodies numbered: 2,561 labour inspectors; 345 military personnel from the department of the Carabinieri (Labour Protection Command); 1,073 inspectors of the INPS and 273 inspectors of the INAIL.²⁷ As of 2018, there were 4,404,501 companies, 95% of which had fewer than nine employees. Employment within the home is even harder to come by: domestic workers and family assistants have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. However, there have been few safeguards for them. Conditions that have increased the traditional asymmetry that characterises the employment relationship, with the effect of weakening the position of workers who are already contractually weak, as Andrea Lovisetto (Filcams-Cgil Verona) observes:

“The government offered many tools and many funds but it did so with a quick resolution of the problem in mind. Seasonal workers were not protected: they lost their jobs and the possibility of claiming unemployment [...] Family caregivers were very badly affected: they stayed at home because of their own illness and contagion with the carer. They got a one-off bonus. The bilateral body of family assistants has provided a daily amount to cover them in case of illness of the carer. Recently, we have been informed that some workers are forced to resign by their employers in exchange for the promise to be rehired once the pandemic is over. In this way, workers risk losing their jobs and their social security entitlements. In some cases, we have forced companies to avoid dismissals for two years: many workers will not find a new job. Employers not only have a social responsibility towards the workers and the community in which they operate, but they also have an important responsibility in creating new jobs.

As pointed out, labour reforms carried out in recent decades have mainly followed the imperative of reducing labour costs. There have been limited efforts to imagine new

26 This is what Cecilia De Pantz, General Secretary of the Filcams-Cgil in the Veneto region, says.

27 INAIL is the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work (*Istituto Nazionale Assicurazione Infortuni sul Lavoro*). See also Ispettorato nazionale del lavoro (2020b).

job opportunities and to rethink the relationship between the economy and territories.

Prior to the pandemic, unions initiated a dialogue with regional and local institutions to avoid the repetition of speculative processes to the detriment of the territory and employment. The dialogue built up over time was indispensable for dealing with the health emergency, as observed below:

“In the retail sector, the exit of many foreign multinationals from Italy implied the activation of unions with regional and local institutions to provide solutions for employment. This interlocution has been very useful because relations we established with the institutions have been crucial with the outbreak of the pandemic. We entered a dialogue with the institutions and policymakers to avoid a recurrence of speculative dynamics in our area: just think of the continuous invasion of shopping centres that are now half-deserted. As the shopping centre model on the outskirts of cities is no longer viable, we need to rebuild the commercial environment by restoring the town centres. Local administrations do not want to invest resources to promote the repopulation of shopping centres. Even after the spread of vaccines, it will be necessary to rethink consumption patterns. Revitalising historic centres is essential.

The dialogue with the employer organisations and institutions has been indispensable in managing the pandemic crisis. However, as noted by several unionists interviewed, the management of the recovery is equally important. This pandemic highlights the urgency of radically reviewing the growth model. The difficulties experienced by the interviewees testify to the inadequacy of income protection policies but also to the precariousness of pre-pandemic working conditions. As Roberta Griffini (Filcams-Cgil Milano) points out, these are issues that unions have to address with employers' associations and policy makers:

“It is important to implement policies and measures to ensure the continuity of the employment relationship. However, this is not enough. Looking at the sectors most affected by the pandemic, we have to imagine that they will be transformed. Change

must come through the adoption of a growth model based on the quality of work. In the tourism sector, a large part of the labour contracts is discontinuous! Work must be of quality. Investment must be made in this direction. Technology can also be an advantage and not necessarily an obstacle to employment. During the pandemic, many workers were assigned to prepare online orders. In-store shopping will remain a key component of the retail sector. It is therefore necessary to invest in training workers. Companies in the sector should innovate to improve employment and working conditions rather than cutting costs. We need a general reform of social shock absorbers and a reform of active labour policies. Fiscal reform, lowering taxes and renewing national labour contracts are increasingly necessary. Hearing the words of the General Confederation of Italian Industry (*Confindustria*) makes us shudder. What we have not understood is how to get out of the crisis without renewing national contracts! We need to create jobs and give people purchasing power. In 2016, the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) presented the Charter of Rights.²⁸ In this proposal, we demand a set of basic rights that should apply to all working people. Labour policy reforms have to go for enlarging protections and not enlarging inequalities as has been the case in recent years.

²⁸ The charter was issued in 2016. See the text (in Italian) here: <http://www.cartacgil.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Testo-Carta-dei-Diritti.pdf>.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the data and the content of the interviews highlight some major contradictions in the observed scenario. With the progressive reduction of job opportunities in the manufacturing sector and the same changes in the social and economic sphere, for many women the services sector, especially the hotel, restaurant and café (Ho.Re.Ca.) sector, was an immediate employment opportunity after their studies. However, the availability of employment opportunities in the service sector comes up against a number of negative implications: involuntary part-time work, uncontracted working time flexibility, lack of adequate income support tools in the event of joblessness. In terms of working conditions, the sectors surveyed record higher levels of undeclared and irregular work, a high proportion of temporary jobs and low wages. Seasonality, which is a key feature of the tourism industry, leads to the use of non-standard forms of employment at higher rates than in other economic sectors. As this pandemic crisis has shown, workers employed in certain sectors marked by discontinuity of work activity (hotels, restaurants, cafés but also media, arts and entertainment) do not have sufficient income protection during periods of non-work. Work can be discontinuous but income guarantees must cover the whole year. Currently, however, for many workers there is no or very limited coverage during periods of non-work. This situation only fuels the increase of undeclared work, as evidenced by ISTAT estimates in the years before the pandemic crisis (ISTAT 2020b) and expands social exclusion and poverty.

The pandemic crisis, like all crises, has highlighted the contradictions in the social and economic framework analysed. Women, especially those with care responsibilities, have been hit hardest. An economic recovery plan is not enough to solve Italy's structural dilemmas. It is necessary to redesign the architecture of the rights and protections granted to workers, especially to those men and women who perform care work. The recovery of the economy requires a rethink of labour regulation that provides protection for all workers and is not almost exclusively aimed at reducing labour costs for companies, as has been the case in Italy for the past 25 years.

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