

Girls' education in 20th century Italy L'educazione delle bambine nel Novecento italiano

Simonetta Ulivieri

Professoressa Emerita | Università di Firenze | simonetta.ulivieri@unifi.it

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ABSTRACT

The twentieth century has been called 'the century of women', and we can therefore also consider it the century in which women saw their living conditions, parental relations, levels of education and freedom in life, sentimental, work and social choices profoundly change.

In the last century, female identity has changed considerably and a new way of growing up as women has become established, through the realisation of self-esteem, self-assertion and empowerment. Equal relationships are created in the relationship between partners, sexual liberation and planned and conscious maternity choices spread, with the affirmation of new models and lifestyles (Ulivieri, 1992). The lives of girls and young women are increasingly marked by new gender rights, in the family, in society, in the world of work (Ulivieri, 1999).

KEYWORDS

Girls/young women, middle-class childhood, education, child labor, children's rights.

Bambine/ragazze, infanzia borghese, istruzione, lavoro minorile, diritti dell'infanzia.

Il Novecento è stato definito "il secolo delle donne", e quindi possiamo considerarlo anche il secolo in cui le bambine hanno visto profondamente cambiate le loro condizioni di vita, le relazioni parentali, i livelli d'istruzione e di libertà nelle scelte di vita, sentimentali, lavorative, sociali.

Nel secolo scorso è cambiata notevolmente l'identità femminile e si è andato affermando un modo nuovo di crescere come donne, attraverso la realizzazione dell'autostima, dell'autoaffermazione e dell'empowerment. Si creano rapporti paritari nella relazione tra partners, si diffondono la liberazione sessuale e scelte di maternità programmate e consapevoli con l'affermazione di nuovi modelli e stili di vita (Ulivieri, 1992). La vita delle bambine e delle giovani donne è sempre più contraddistinta da nuovi diritti di genere, in famiglia, nella società, nel mondo del lavoro (Ulivieri, 1999).

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Corresponding author: Simonetta Ulivieri | simonetta.ulivieri@unifi.it

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1. Childhood in the Twentieth Century

The Twentieth Century can be defined as “the century of girls and boys” considering educational styles, living conditions, and the rights of female childhood. It is possible to undertake a journey in the history of our country, and more generally in the social and cultural history of Western civilisation, since in other areas of the world the life of children, of all children, remains in dramatic conditions of stagnation and pure survival, worsened perhaps by the interventions of an economic and cultural neo-colonialism which, in addition to depauperating countries that are already poor, exports conflict and genocide and spreads the worst needs of consumerism and the sex trade, contributing to exploiting in every way, physically and psychologically, a derelict and wounded childhood (Sereny, 1986; Cambi, Ulivieri, 1990). A series of factors should be emphasised here, factors that have been making the condition of childhood easier and more human, mostly considering girls.

Four phenomena that progressively spread throughout the 20th Century deserve to be emphasised: 1) the reduction of infant mortality and disappearance of infanticide and abandonment; 2) the diffusion of voluntary birth restriction; 3) the affirmation of a new collective mentality that places children at the centre of family life, loving them and valuing them regardless of their gender; 4) the diffusion of social processes of care and the birth and rooting of educational policies for children diffused throughout the territory (Sarsini, 2012).

The first important fact to be noted during the 20th Century is the close disappearance of infant mortality at a newborn age (Cambi, Ulivieri, 1988). Greater care for child health and hygiene, together with a better diet, promoted by the rise and spread of pediatrics, made this achievement possible, compared to previous centuries when infant mortality was very high, increasing in years of economic crisis and severe food shortages, when bad weather and poor harvests were accompanied by periods of war and political uncertainty. In these situations, child abandonment had a considerable increase, combined with anti-female prevention, which led to a greater suppression or abandonment of new-born girls, early weaning of females compared to males, and less feeding of little girls compared to little boys (Di Bello, Meringolo, 1997).

The decrease in births, accompanied by a new attitude concerning the “female child”, has led to an acceptance of the son or daughter beyond his/her gender. Yet, the time is not far away when, still bound to an archaic view of life and to the predominance of the male sex over the female, mothers had more or less value in the eyes of their fathers and of the family and village community, depending on the sex of the newborn child, up to the point of forcing them to numerous and successive births, until the long-awaited male child was born. From the oral testimonies of Veronese peasant women of the early 20th Century we have a clear testimony of the distinction established between women with sons, or with only daughters, or even without sons. Having children did not improve the quality of life; on the contrary, it entailed an increase in tasks, work, often friction and conflict with the mother-in-law and the sisters-in-law, but not having children was a terrible situation, difficult to sustain. It meant disappointing fundamental expectations, failing in a “duty”, not being able to count on secure support in her husband’s family in the future and, above all, not having any hope for an improvement of her own condition. A woman who had sons could expect to attain, on the death of her in-laws, a position of power in a new family structure – reflected power, of course – that was extended over her children, but through them passed on to her husband, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. “A woman who had only daughters was already deprived of this prospect; the woman who had none, in addition to personal disillusionment, carried with her the mockery, the more or less veiled reproach of not having known, of not having been able, to give children to her husband, to the family community” (Filippini Cappelletto, 1982, p. 46); even in the mothers’ memory the birth of sons, if they were born after daughters, is very precise and still recounted with satisfaction, due to the relevant role that the male son gave them in the family.

A final variant that we must take into account when outlining the history of girls in the 20th Century is the social dimension (Seveso, 2001a). In fact, in addition to gender difference, a gender considered different/inferior, what gave girls a social identity and made them very different from each other was their belonging to a certain class. In the largely rural Italy of a hundred years ago, there were in fact different types of childhood. First and foremost the peasant childhood, simple, sometimes crude and largely illiterate, which contrasted with a city childhood, which, if wealthy, had the “gilded” appearance of a middle-class childhood, dressed in lace and velvet, while if poor it was a childhood related to the urban, artisan, proletarian and even sub-proletarian classes, with characteristics of extreme poverty that favoured an early introduction to work and exploitation of daughters and sons (Ghizzoni, Polenghi, 2008).

The little girls of the 20th Century, of whom we retrace the existential destiny, are sometimes little peasants or little factory workers, initiated at a very early age to work in the fields and pastures, or in factories and artisan workshops, often exploited by inhuman bosses, entrusted by needy families. However, we can find also wealthy girls, precociously initiated into the role of “little women”. They appeared as dressed-up dolls who were taught to please and seduce through ornamental education (embroidery, drawing, singing, music, dancing, French language), strongly privatising their behaviour, to the point that once they became young, they often lacked the freedom to choose their marriages, which the family strongly supervised.

In the course of the century, as it will be discussed, the role of women, and therefore the role of girls, changes. The two World Wars, with all their atrocities, all their dramas from which childhood is by no means excluded, break down family systems of control, giving unimaginable freedom to women, girls and children; the abandonment of domestic roles, the hardships and/or persecutions suffered, the new economic autonomy, the approach to the great issues of politics, the desire for peace, all lead to greater gender awareness. This new autonomy, often achieved at great cost, from adult women, grandmothers, and mothers reverberates on daughters and granddaughters who start dreaming of a different destiny, which finally finds an expression in the great neo-feminism, when after 1968, and especially in the 1970s, the issue of building a world suitable for girls was raised (Gianini Belotti, 1973). Thus, there is a new look at new educational methods in the family and outside it, at new play spaces in the cities, at a new non-sexist publishing industry (Biemmi, 2010), at a different educational relationship between mothers and daughters (Loiodice, 2014), between teachers and pupils, at a more empathetic way of teaching and doing school, starting from the valorisation of gender difference (Dato, De Serio, Lopez, 2009).

It is evident, as Carmela Covato notes, that the autobiographical narration and the analysis of children's life stories contribute to restoring the materiality of such childhood experiences, subtracting them from the ambiguity of normative devices, whether latent or codified by ad hoc preconceptions (Covato, 2001).

2. Countryside girls

According to the 1901 Census (Sereni, 1968) girls and adolescents worked in the countryside in greater numbers than their city peers. Those girls who did not work directly in the fields had to perform domestic tasks, look after farm animals and look after younger sisters and brothers when their mother was at work. And it was the mother who initiated her daughter into work, who taught her the "woman's profession". According to Anna Bravo, the mother-daughter relationship is embodied in this initiation: "It starts early, when the child is 6-8 years old: her mother puts a stool under her feet to get her to the kitchen table, shows her how to spin and weave, do laundry with ash and water, keep house. It is a rudimentary apprenticeship, because domestic activities are rudimentary" (Bravo, 1997, p. 161). Egle Becchi notes that, mostly in the case of girls, "education is the reproduction of the identical" (Becchi, 1986, p. 23), carried out through careful pedagogical devices: the gesture, the example, the act of doing together with older women.

In agricultural work contexts, school as a tool for elementary education is often missing or too far away to be reached, but even when the girls attend it, they do it on an occasional basis, prioritising the family economy, which at times also needs the work of little girls. For country children, going to school was often a luxury, a pleasure. The work of small farmers' daughters is hard, school becomes a serene break, a wish based on the pleasure of reading, of understanding, of learning, but also of dreaming of another world. Little Iole, born in 1926, recounts:

Then I started to help my father and there were many jobs to be done: feeding the cows and chickens, doing the grass for the rabbits [...] There are many jobs a child can do in the country and so we all worked. I liked school a lot, I was happy going there, for me it was hours of earned rest. I got up every day at four o'clock and went with my father to the fields. Then I would bring, this around six o'clock, two cans of milk, my mother had milked the cows. I would take them to the village dairy and walk three kilometres [...] I did everything quickly because I had to get to school at eight o'clock and it was a kilometer away. I kept my shoes in my hand, though, so I didn't wear them out, but I was fast anyway. I did well at school and I liked reading, a lot. Even as a teenager I suffered because I had nothing to read and there was no money to buy books or newspapers. I remember I used to go on Sundays and pick up the papers that the lovers had used to sit on the benches or on the floor. And I would take them home and read them and dream (Nassetti, in Ulivieri, 2001, p. 281).

Of the agricultural work carried out by the girls, we are left with memories of numerous activities, sometimes very heavy and tiring. The army of rice-workers who populated the plains of the Veronese, Pavese and Novarese areas at the turn of the century, working for hours in the sun with their feet in the water, often emigrating from neighbouring countries, were very young, half of them was under the age of fifteen (Spectator, 1907). Often the girls and boys were hired as seasonal labourers to take the animals out to pasture. Shepherd girls and boys lived their lonely conditions with sadness, which was often accompanied by hunger, because sometimes, out of greed, the masters did not feed their workers adequately; when the living conditions became intolerable, the little girls and boys fled and returned home. One woman recounts her experience as a sad and mistreated child:

They rented us like calves. Our parents were forced to rent us out, there was misery, they didn't even have bread to give us. I remember being there in the square with many others, me with my little bundle and four rags inside. I was crying [...] the others were crying too. We were children to keep at home, not to be rented out. I went to people who had many cattle, fifteen, or twenty cows, but they gave me little or nothing to eat. A little soup, a piece of hard bread in the bread bag, and then all day in the pasture. The next year they rented

me out again, and even there they gave me little or nothing to eat, and I ran away. I bundled up and found my way home. My parents, as soon as they saw me, realised: because one gets hurt immediately if ill-treated. Ah, once it was simply like that: the masters took advantage (Laugero, cited in Revelli, 1985, p. LXII).

It was not uncommon for girls to be “sold” to passing peddlers who, in addition to making them work, also sexually abused them and tried to sell them to others. In the farmsteads, the owners and their children would often threaten the servants, as they considered them almost their property, little lives to dispose of as they pleased. Or-tensia, born in the Langhe in 1913, narrates about herself:

I started as a child to be a servant, I took on masters. We had little land, more coasts than fields, six sheep and six goats. My family was large, ten children one after the other, a great misery. When I was nine I was sold to a peddler, they sold me for five liras, but he used me as a slave. The first day he said to me: – Do you know how to kiss? –. The next day he makes love to me and wants me to make love to others. I ran away, I went to the farmsteads as a *serventa*, I lived like that until I was almost twenty (quoted in Revelli, 1977, vol. II, pp. 202-203).

The rape of girls and young women was so widespread in the countryside that there was no place where it was not practiced. The victim could be raped under a bridge, or along the bank of a river while doing her washing, or in a forest while collecting wood, or while grazing, or while working in the fields, or while going to the spring to draw water, or while tending animals at the farm, or even while at home alone. If there were no complications (serious physical ailments and/or pregnancies), the violence was often not even reported and denounced by the girls and young women, either because they were threatened by the rapist, or because they feared being accused of having complacently suffered the act of violence.

The practice of hiring girls and boys to take animals out to pasture survived into the post-World War II period, when improved living conditions and the reduced number of children meant that this sad market came to an end in almost all parts of Italy (Loiodice, 1988). But among large families, the custom of giving some son or daughter to relatives or friends survives. We report the case of a little girl who, in the early 1950s, was entrusted by her parents to a country family. Lifestyles differed greatly between town and country. They lived only eighty kilometres from Rome, but in the houses there was no water, no electricity, and no bathroom. Water was collected at an outside well, there were oil lamps to provide light, and as a toilet they used the dunghill, the stable or some shrubbery. The little girl is barely six years old, but she is already entrusted with numerous tasks; one is that of washing dishes: to reach the marble sink she is put up on a stool. But what she can least endure is the task of taking the cows out to pasture at the arrival of summer. She is sent out to pasture alone so that the presence of other children will not distract her from looking after the cows. Melancholy then assails the little girl who, as an adult, remembers: “I still feel a squeeze in my heart at the memory of those hours that never passed, of the thought of the other children who had stayed behind to chatter in the farmyard, of the infinite silence that surrounded me, of the tender colours of spring whose arrival brought me anguish and loneliness” (Pennacchi, 1990, pp. 169-170).

3. Little girls working in the city

In urban areas, the condition of young workers employed in textile factories at a very young age was possibly even worse. At the end of the 19th Century, Northern Italian spinning mills employed ‘girls from 9 to 15 years of age’ who, like other factory workers, worked for fifteen hours a day, from four in the morning to eight in the evening, with a one-hour break from eleven to twelve (Pisoni Cerlesi, 1959, p. 26). The workplaces and the young workers are described as follows:

The factories are gloomy rooms with hermetically sealed windows, antiquated machines. At the spinning looms, at the tannery, at the basins filled with boiling water, dull, pale women work, dressed in rags, and they have little girls in front of them, who are also burnt-out, tired, humiliated. Those poor beings are constantly urged to work by the directors and by the factory assistants, armed with a cane (Ravera, 1951, p. 29).

In these environments, the air was mephitic and breathing heavy, so long stays in these factories caused asthma and lung diseases of various kinds in young girls. At the beginning of the 20th Century, moreover, out of every thousand deaths from lung disease, almost half were spinners and weavers, and the poor health of the young girls was certainly influenced by the premature deterioration they had suffered from an early age. In the spinning mills, girls were preferred to boys because of their dexterity in fine, prattognosic movements. For example, a report by the provincial doctor of Como states that working girls: “at an early age are obliged to stay the whole day, from sunrise to late night, locked up in more or less salubrious and ventilated workrooms in order to run after a spindle or tie a thread, tasks they are extremely suited to because of their small stature and the dexterity of their hands”

(in Osnaghi Dodi, 1972, p. 99). The girls were often so small that they were brought to work in people's arms. An exceptional eyewitness, Anna Maria Mozzoni, recounts having found in some factories "four-year-old girls at work alone, pale, sad, bewildered by the rigid discipline of the factory, tired to death and always standing in the same place, vigilant and silent, for 12, 14 and even 15 hours out of twenty-four" (Mozzoni, 1898).

With the introduction of the law "for the protection of women's and children's work" in 1902 (there had been a first, but unsuccessful, legislation concerning the protection of child labour in 1886), "outlawed" girls and boys were hidden in yarn boxes during factory inspections.

If factory work spared neither females nor males, girls from poor and deprived families in the city were given the job of going as shop assistants to some craftsmen's workshop. In affluent and already wealthy Milan in the early 20th Century, the figure of the "piscinina" was recurring, an almost adolescent girl employed by a milliner who wandered the streets of the centre accompanying her teacher, or alone to make deliveries. In the laboratories where little girls were employed, various activities took place: there were dressmakers and white seamstresses, but also glovemakers, hemmers, gilettresses, trousers-makers, and shirt-makers. The daily wage was miserable and the little workers ruined their eyes in dark and unhealthy environments, often working without time limits, also because the festive emergencies of some customers could prolong work into the night. These occupations were affected by seasonal trends and therefore inherently precarious. Moreover, they were based on an entirely personal working relationship, the one between master and apprentice, based on sympathy, patience and a shared commitment to work. However, since it was an asymmetrical relationship between adult women and little girls, such relationships often involved not only authority, but also physical violence, ranging from corporal punishment to unlimited labour exploitation, especially because these little girls had little protection from their family of origin, who only cared about the poor income they had to bring home every week (Taricone, Pisa, 1985).

This type of activity often constituted a risky work, precisely because the little ones were at the mercy of any ill-intentioned person. Moving alone in the urban fabric was dangerous. There are numerous cases of Milanese girls raped at the turn of the century, documented by Annarita Buttafuoco (1988) in her archival study on the little girls at the "Asilo Mariuccia".

Over time, the family's attitude to this violence changed. The behaviour of family members in the first decades of the century appeared surrendered and often resigned, as though the act of violence constituted a norm, while later on a greater awareness of the harm suffered and a stronger responsibility towards their daughters emerged. Sometimes paternal indignation is placated by financial compensation, the price of which is often negotiated. But the fathers hardly appear in these stories, whose script often involves family units composed only of women (illegitimate mothers, widowed mothers, grandmothers and orphaned granddaughters), apparently as if the aggressor had first evaluated the impossibility of potential violent revenge on the part of a family unit that is in itself weaker. The mothers, more than resigned, seem to be inert, unable to protect their daughters from an ancient evil, that of male violence, which perhaps they also suffered as children, receiving an imprinting they could not free themselves from and which in some cases made them complicit with the man.

Girls and young women formed a large part of the vast army of female service workers (maids, handmaids) that had been forming in the large cities of our country since the last century. Uprooted from their rural places of origin, unprepared to adequately perform the required professional tasks, forced to work unlimited hours for a few liras, subjected to the whims and harassment of high-ranking ladies, or worse, the new rich members of a greedy and exploitative bourgeoisie, servant girls were often beaten and abused (Baldini, 2022).

The little maids were also exposed to the sexual advances of the men of the house, especially the younger ones, but also others; the texts of the time define these advances, which were often real attempts at violence: "the provocative insistences of the shameless masters" or even "the seductions of corrupt husbands" (Tammeo, 1890); the masters would find it natural to experience their sexual initiation and to have relations with these maidens who, moreover, did not have a strong family network behind them to defend them. In fact, when they were considered dishonoured, or worse, if they got pregnant, they were thrown out of the house by their mistresses, eventually increasing the number of abandoned illegitimate children. Economic hardship and the difficulty of finding new "honest" employment after childbirth pushed the young women inexorably into prostitution. According to some scholars, the majority of the girls who were in service in Rome in the first decades of the century were young and very young peasant girls from the poorest areas of the Marche and Umbria countryside, who went to seek work in the big city, either out of poverty or to help their families. In an essay on Roman domestic servants, Arru recalled an old Sardinian servant who died in the 1980s, whose work in someone else's home had begun in the late 19th Century, when she was just seven years old, and had continued until the early 1970s, taking place for forty years with the same family and whose story, according to Arru, mirrors that of thousands of other women who had lived in service in Italy (Arru, 1985, p. 95).

Even at the beginning of the 1960s, 12-year-old girls from the poorest areas of the Modena Apennines, having finished the fifth grade, would leave for the city, either to Florence or Bologna, to work for small bourgeoisie

families in shops and clerical jobs. They were generally engaged in the most menial domestic services and childcare, in return for which they received food, lodging and the low wages agreed between parents and employers.

Working and living in someone else's home is certainly not just an ordinary job. The motivations for placing one's daughters to work outside the home with rich and influential families were different from choosing any other job. According to these logics, work was not just a search for wages, but for something more: the search for a home, for a family, for control, for protection, for positive relations even for the family of origin, which, thanks to the relationship of loyalty and affection, could ask for advice, loans, work placements for other relatives.

4. The daughters of the bourgeoisie

What image of themselves do the daughters of the Italian bourgeoisie of the first half of the century send us from old black-and-white photos? What kind of child model did the parents refer to when they educated, dressed and exhibited their little girls? Little girls with long, thin hair, so light it looked like silk, little girls with white, embroidered, fluffy dresses. Little girls with long, curly hair that the maids brushed for long periods of time and combed with huge coloured ribbons; little girls dressed in white marinara in the summer, with a blue marinara in the winter and on top a marinara coat too and a round hat with the name of one of His Britannic Majesty's ships written on the ribbon. This was the image of the daughters of the Neapolitan intellectual bourgeoisie and those of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie in Turin. But a closer look in the pages of Susanna Agnelli (1975) and Elena Croce's (1979) childhood recollections – two paradigmatic childhoods illustrating the lifestyles of middle and upper middle-class families and their educational guidelines for their daughters in the first half of the century – reveals at times impatience, at others even suffering from the constraints that accompanied their privatised and constantly controlled daily lives. Instead, there was boredom over a rigid education, which mothers often had little to do with (caught up in other worldly activities) and which was entrusted to governesses and tutors they completely trusted. The life of bourgeois families in first Giolittian Italy and then in Fascist Italy often unfolded according to a ritual in which everyone, young and old, master and servant, played a role. Every bourgeois family has a set of servants who follow them on their travels, during summer holidays at the seaside or in the mountains, and who often serve them faithfully for life. An elderly Roman nobleman, born in 1906, recounts: "In the house, at that time (at the beginning of the century), there were five servants: nursemaid, a male and a female maid, and a helper for washing the laundry. At night, before going to bed, we would kiss daddy's hand. The girls would greet him with a bow" (Cardelli, in Ascoli, 1994).

When the Croce family travels by train on holiday from Naples to the Susa Valley, they move in a group, like a caravan. Nine people are part of the group: the father, the mother, four daughters, the old housekeeper, the cook, and the maid. Other houses, even more affluent, bustled with maids, waiters, chauffeurs, cooks, and butlers. In the Agnelli household, the governess is English (in other families the *schwester* is a German lady) and regulates the children's lives with determination, without indulging in the fears and anxieties of childhood. The children sleep in separate rooms and when little Suni is afraid of the dark at night and asks to be allowed a glimmer of light, Miss Parker allows no exceptions, because it is silly to be afraid:

When she left, for a while I could see the light of the playroom peeking out from the gap at the bottom of the door. Then when the light went out I was horrified to be in the dark. I would get up, go into my brothers' rooms and watch them sleep; it was as if they were not there because we could not talk to each other and they could not see me; it was as if I were dead; and I was even more afraid. I would go back to bed and pee to get a feeling of warmth and life. Sometimes I would scream. No one heard me, or if they did, they pretended not to hear me (Agnelli, 1975, p. 12).

Even the housekeeper at Croce's house "educated, exercised discipline with the rigidity and fanaticism of someone who belonged to a better world than the one that was coming along" (Croce, 1979, p. 41). The elderly Piemontese lady with Austrian ancestry passed on to little Elena, the eldest daughter, what she considered the best 'values' of childhood femininity: fragility, finesse, elegance, and the dignity of a princess. But the model of the young princess was by then outdated, obsolete, and even the "Corriere dei piccoli" reflected this, where delicate madamines no longer appeared, but where the protagonists from the Fascist period onwards were increasingly "little Italian girls", determined in their new uniforms, bold with their bob-cut hair, who put themselves forward in heroic episodes, perhaps by swimming to the rescue of some small child in difficulty and earning themselves a medal in the process (Seveso, 2001b).

The bourgeois model of the little girl, however, as a figure of elegance and gracefulness, survived through the period of Fascism and even after the Second World War, until the 1950s, when it extended from the top down, becoming the respectable and dominant model in the middle classes. Basically, at leisure occasions, at birthday

parties, at family gatherings, little girls continued to be dressed up like dolls, “submerged in bows and ribbons, ruffles and leaflets, flowers and little flowers” (Magnani, 1992, p. 82), the uniform was only worn at school.

5. Girls of the Fifties. The “daughters of Mary”

Studies on women’s history recognise in the Fifties a period that was somehow greyer than the previous decade, when the desire to overcome the war and the need to provide for family survival, and later the partisan struggle and the commitment to a reconstruction, had led women, especially the youngest, to become actively involved in social and political life. As the war came to an end, women returned to conditions and lifestyles that were closely tied to homemaking, women’s non-domestic work decreased, and a male-dominated family order was re-established, while the female and maternal role was reduced to family and domestic work (Groppi, 1996). Alongside structural factors leading to a strong demand for female ‘dedication’ and care for the family, the pressures resulting from the overall moderate restoration of Italian society in the 1950s should not be underestimated (Pescarolo, 2019).

The Church’s social and educational efforts are very incisive. In those years “the dream of a great system of control, management and promotion of the Italian youth world is more vivid than ever in the minds of churchmen” (Tassani, 1997, p. 138; Caimi, 1988). Starting from the parishes (Borzomati, 1997), the traditional Catholic associationism is renewed and relaunched with a precise pastoral care for girls: every parish, for example, must have a male and a female oratory. In fact, it is considered necessary to cultivate in girls and young women a solid ethical-religious formation and a great sense of individual responsibility, so that they know how to avoid – these are the words of “Civiltà Cattolica”, the authoritative organ of the Jesuits – “the anti-religious spirit drawn from schools or from socialism, and the flattery of new ideals, all aimed at pleasure” (Cavalli, 1948, p. 338).

This new strong wave of religious proselytism reached the girls, who were organised according to age groups: the Angioletti (from birth to 4 years old), the Piccolissime (from 4 to 6 years old), the Beniamine (from 6 to 10-12 years old), the Aspiranti (from 10-12 to 14-16 years old), the Giovanissime (from 14-16 to 18 years old), and the Effettive (from 18 to 30 years old). The Effettive women form the main nucleus of the Female Youth of Catholic Action, which itself is subdivided into: Workers’ Youth, Student Youth, Rural Youth, Housewife Youth. Many places are reached by the new women’s apostolate, especially where social life is organised: children’s holiday camps, women’s workshops, cooperatives, after-school care, home economics courses, vocational courses, and factories. Women and girls are the main objects of what is called the “crusade for purity”; it is directed mainly against dancing and indecent fashion, which together with bad books, licentious illustrated magazines, improper shows, obscene beach immodesty, threaten to mislead young people along with radio and cinema.

In this rather sexophobic climate, where a political, economic and ideological clash is taking place between the Church and “materialism”, represented by left-wing forces, and where the same left-wing in turn accuses the Church of using exaggerated and monstrous slogans, and of exploiting “superstition, fear, and the ignorance of women” (Macciocchi, 1953, p. 38), the girls grow up divided from the boys, far from street and playground games, in schools with strictly female sections, following their own and specific growth paths, where the celebration of the “first communion” in a certain sense anticipates the following celebration of marriage, as they are both marked by the white dress, symbol of purity and virginity. The cult of the Virgin Mary also regains strong vigour, particularly that of Our Lady of Lourdes; all little and young women are protected by the Virgin and for this reason they are considered “daughters of Mary” (Encyclopaedia Catholica, 1950; ad vocem: “Figlie di Maria” and “Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice”). The model often proposed to girls is that of St. Maria Goretti, namely the achievement of holiness, even at the cost of sacrifice and death. In parish cinemas, *Cielo sulla palude* is shown: a film about the life of a young peasant girl who is killed because she rebels against rape and violence. Compared to an evil, ancient custom, that of the “normality” of violating young women, Maria Goretti represents a new model, even if dramatic and sacrificial, of refusing violence.

The first major occasion of social display which no Catholic family avoids is the First Communion of daughters and sons, which takes place with much participation and happiness, according to an ancient rite in which worldly celebration and mysticism are combined. To organize a large reception with many guests, for dresses made of the most expensive fabrics, for wedding favors, for gifts, some parents do not hesitate to go into debt. A middle school teacher who works in a suburb of Rome, Alberone, outside Porta S. Giovanni, a semi-periphery of petty bourgeois immigrants from the South, remembers that when asked to write “about the best day of your life”, the young girls all described the day of their First Communion. “What surprised me, in the homework of my pupils”, the teacher writes, “was the cinematic, indeed divine rhythm of the ceremony: it began at dawn with the last dress rehearsals, close relatives arrived; by car, they drove to the church, the director of which was not the priest, but the photographer; they went out from there, and a procession of cars drove to some public place for typical refreshments” (Giudice, 1967, p. 20).

Also in the capital city, during the Fifties in public schools the girls' religious obligations were varied: they attended ceremonies at St. Peter's and saw the Pope, they promoted fundraising for poor people, and choral prayers were said at particular liturgical times. The girls are also forbidden to cross their legs and, fearing that particular friendships will arise, are taught that it is not good to walk arm in arm with classmates during recreation (D'Amelia, 1990, pp. 70-71).

Primary and secondary schools are strictly divided by gender. Educational controls on knowledge, leisure time and sexual conduct are very careful. In families that scrupulously follow the religious tradition, the little ones make "fioretos", follow novenas, triduum, Marian months, attend the girls' oratory and are part of the "daughters of Mary"; prayers are a recurring element of their education, mostly at certain times of the day, especially in the morning and at sunset, but also before the main meals.

In other families, forms of control reserved for females are of various kinds and concern behavioural patterns, the choices related to friendships, and the timings for going out. In comparison with their brothers, it emerges that the free time given to girls is always less than that the time allowed to boys, and that very often sisters must also assume the domestic care of their brothers: "When I was a little girl, I wanted very much to be a boy in order to be free, and when I was older I felt as an injustice that my brothers were dispensed from helping with the housework and even had the right to have their beds made by their sisters" (Saraceno, 1990, p. 94).

After all, many domestic tasks have always been entrusted to daughters, they are the ones who are conventionally expected to help their mothers with household chores. This educational trend between adult women and daughters, which is based on the dimension of domesticity, i.e. the handing down from mother to daughter of feminine/domestic skills is a long-standing factor in the history of female education, which is also evident in the models proposed through children's literature and the cinema.

For a long time, the activities that mothers and daughters do mostly together are "housework"; instead, there are fewer different situations that involve mothers and daughters together, such as moments of leisure: going out, playing, or moments of confidence: talking, confiding (Marone, 2012).

6. "Different" girls and new identities

Composing a kind of catalogue of the infantologies of the 20th Century, Egle Becchi (1995) speaks, among others, of close children, who live close to us and that we know best, but also of distant children, who come from other realities, from other cultural forms; of healthy children, who live a happy and serene growing existence, but also of sick and suffering children; of literate children for whom forms of learning and rhythms of development are designed and planned, and of illiterate children, who live in oral cultures with laws and traditions that differ from ours. It may therefore be almost surprising to raise gender difference as an issue within the dramatic universe of the many child "diversities" (Borruso, 2019). It could be thought that the profound diversity of those who are bearers of inequalities in terms, either of religion, or of race, or of disability, or of class, or of culture, is already so penalising that it does not need further specification; any attempt to create hierarchies in terms of greater or lesser suffering, with respect to the degree of social exclusion, or to the persistence of prejudice, might appear artificial (Batini, 2011; Di Bari, Felini, 2019).

But being a girl, even before being a woman, constitutes a social impairment in itself, and possibly even more than for the boys, little girls can't escape the harsh necessity of appearance, of having to resemble the socially imposed models of female ideals (of beauty, of belonging). A different female face, darker, lighter, with different features, thinner, heavier, with different eyes, straighter, more oblique, a dysmorphic or awkward female face, can generate a deeper unease, a greater disturbance, a more immediate rejection, than a similar male face. Girls who are in some ways "different" are therefore the object of a double marginality, both because of their gender belonging and because of the specificity they bear and represent.

Prostitutes subjected to sex tourism in Asian countries, but also in North America and Europe, young Roma girls forced to live a daily conflict between their culture of belonging and our own, between the obligations of survival and the fascinations of integration. Girls immigrated from the south to the north of Italy, girls immigrated from the south to the north of the world. To describe and analyse the discrimination suffered by young immigrant women and, before that, girls, Giovanna Campani (2000) refers to a triple form of oppression, of gender, class, and race, as belonging to the female sex, to an ethnic minority, and to a subaltern class. Girls and young women have gendered needs and peculiarities, a fact that is often overlooked by those concerned with the pedagogy of acceptance and multiculturalism and who usually refer to immigrant children as a whole. In fact, it is necessary to raise the problem of the possible effects of the encounter between different cultures, between such distant prefigurations of feminine destiny on a subject as delicate as a migrant girl and/or adolescent (Roverselli, 2017; Dello Preite, 2017). It can be very difficult, for example, for an immigrant child belonging to the Islamic culture to manage the conflict between the maternal model and the related traditional sexual expectations and the very different suggestions coming from the extra-familial world (peers, school, television, smartphones). Research carried

out in Milan on the inclusion of foreign children in educational services, for instance, reveals many problems concerning food and the difficult relationship with Italian children, who in some cases tend to exclude black children in particular: “I have observed that no one sits spontaneously next to the black child; or they do not let her play. If we don’t intervene,” says the educator, “she remains somewhat isolated from the others” (Favaro, 1995, p. 95).

It is therefore necessary to question ourselves with more empathy about the needs of the girls, girls who are so different from each other, yet so equal in their need for identity and autonomy (Ulivieri, 2018).

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