

Like mother, like daughter.

Educational and transformative aspects of maternal employment

Tale madre, tale figlia.

Aspetti educativi e trasformativi del *maternal employment*

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ABSTRACT

If it is already known in scientific literature how daughters of working mothers enter the world of work more easily and successfully when compared to daughters brought up by unemployed mothers, (Mc Ginn et al., 2019), still needs a deep and thorough analysis of what happens in the current context of women's widespread job insecurity (World Economic Forum, 2023). Do widespread difficulties in reconciling caring and working roles and the stigma and guilt conveyed by the extended family and society, effectively perpetuate a patriarchal model, especially in young girls' minds, besides burdening women's career paths? The article focuses on the concept of "maternal employment" as a crucial educational, cultural and transformative factor.

KEYWORDS

**Women's emancipation, maternal employment, career, transformative education, gender.
Emancipazione femminile, maternal employment, carriera, educazione trasformativa, genere.**

Se è già noto in letteratura come le figlie di madri lavoratrici da adulte si inseriscano più facilmente e con successo nel mondo del lavoro (Mc Ginn et al., 2019), è importante indagare nel profondo cosa accada nell'attuale contesto di diffusa precarietà lavorativa delle donne e in particolare delle giovani madri (World Economic Forum, 2023). La diffusa difficoltà a conciliare ruoli di cura e di lavoro, lo stigma e il senso di colpa veicolati dalla famiglia allargata e dalla società, oltre a gravare sui percorsi lavorativi delle donne, si riflettono sugli immaginari delle figlie, perpetuando di fatto un modello patriarcale? L'articolo si focalizza sul costruito di "maternal employment", come fattore educativo, culturale e trasformativo di cruciale importanza.

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1. Work, motherhood and happiness

Work occupies a paramount part of our adult lives: it has to do with the meaning we give to our existence, the role we play in society, and the quality of life we are able to ensure for ourselves and our families. A topic so central to the lives of each of us, does not seem to take on as much significance in the education of the younger generation. “Almost no one grows up learning that the work we choose to do will have a huge impact on our ability to love ourselves”, writes bell hooks in her book *All About Love* (2022, p. 42). For the African-American scholar, work is an important aspect of self-love and love for the next generation.

In this essay, we address the issue of mothers’ work, in relation to the experience of raising daughters, in the current Italian context of low female employment and severe demographic crisis. In fact, the dynamics of gender identification play a decisive role in adult choices: if as far as tastes and fashions are concerned the comparison with peers is essential, the role of the same-sex parent appears decisive concerning life choices such as work and the choice of a partner (Stevens, Boyd, 1980; Stinson, Gottschalk, 2016).

The starting point for this reflection are the following questions: (1) if mothers work with a sense of guilt and inadequacy, due to the disappointment of their family contexts, what impression can their daughters cultivate with regard to work? (2) if often mothers leave their jobs or give up their careers with a heavy burden of frustration, what will daughters do when they grow up?

The topic is carefully investigated in the psychological and organizational literature, but the issue at stake is exquisitely educational. I will refer in particular to the construct of “maternal employment” that refers to the employment of mothers during their children’s early childhood, a predictive element of their life paths in adulthood (Mc Ginn et al., 2019).

The employment of women during their early children’s childhood years continue to be a topic of discussion and debate in policy circles. The United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and the European Commission’s Europe 2020 Strategy both recognize the importance of gender equality in employment for parents with young children. However, despite these efforts, maternal employment in Europe remains below recommended levels.

Beliefs about the negative impact of maternal employment on children’s outcomes vary across different countries and cultural contexts. Many people believe that children suffer when their mothers are involved in paid employment. However, research does not consistently support these beliefs.

On the contrary, what in our culture is considered a risk factor for the psychological development of children – having a working mother in the first years of life –, read in a longitudinal perspective would instead be a factor of existential success of daughters in adulthood.

Various research has shown in different contexts around the globe, how daughters of working mothers tend to perform better at work, while sons tend to be more involved in home care, both following a gender pattern (Dipietro, Urwin, 2003; Emran, Shilpi, 2011; McGinn et al., 2019; Steven, Boyd, 1980; Stinson, Gottschalk, 2016).

The aim of this paper is to interpret in a pedagogical key this process. The valorization of mothers’ work and the transmission of love for work in their daughters are two closely related goals.

2. *Momcession*: the great resignation of mothers

Only one woman in two works in Italy in 2023. We are in the twenty-seventh place out of twenty-seven European countries for the female employment rate (Eurostat, 2023). Those who voluntarily resign from work are mainly mothers with small children, who often leave the work market when they have their first child, without being able to re-enter it in the following years. The women in Italy who maintain a job are few, mainly concentrated in the cities of Northern Italy, many of them do not have a stable contract and do not enjoy of full economic autonomy.

The birth of the first child constitutes a real break in the life of lots women. Among the endless stories of women of working age in Italy, there are certainly mothers who wish to stay at home and fulfill themselves in a more assiduous presence with their children, but amongst new generations this choice increasingly has the bitter taste of a painful and frustrating renunciation (Minello, 2022).

There are many women who accept as a matter of course to occupy more marginal working positions because they know that this is the price they have to pay for the balance of work and family. Still others make do with low salaries and before long their income is perceived by the family as ancillary: if childcare is more onerous, women decide to stay at home with their children rather than go at a loss. Sometimes it is still that “benevolent sexism” described by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske (1996) that comes into play: “dear, don’t worry, we manage on my salary, you take care of the children and the house!”, neglecting the dimension of ambition and personal fulfillment that work brings, beyond the salary. A vicious circle is thus created: women who are at home invest a lot of time in caring for their children, even when they are grown up, are actively involved in their school or sports life, and come to build up an intense week of unpaid work that takes up all their energy.

Working and having children today in Italy is considered a privilege of few middle-upper-class women, with economically recognized professions, located mainly in the urban contexts of northern Italy, where there is a network of childcare services that facilitates family-work reconciliation and integrates an informal welfare of proximity with the large family (Minello, 2022).

If a mother is not supported by a strong inner motivation and personal work ambition, but above all by the concrete and emotional support of her partner and extended family, she can easily end up giving up her job and career. The phenomenon is so widespread that it has even received a name: *momcession*¹, which we could freely translate as the “great secession” of mothers from work, almost always as a forced choice (Coin, 2023). Low salaries for women, precarious contracts, and the uneven spread of childcare services lead many women to give up work.

The spread of unemployment among mothers is not only explained in structural terms (the absence of a welfare system that widely guarantees parental leave and childcare services) but also necessarily in cultural terms. The employment and career of mothers is still predominantly perceived negatively in Italy and Europe. In 2012, the British Social Attitudes Survey found that one in four respondents – male or female – still consider that if a mother works full-time, the family and children in particular are negatively affected. The emphasis therefore falls on the negative effects of women’s work as if we still had to discuss not *how* to make women work better but *whether* to make them work.

Alessandra Minello (2022), in her book *Non è un paese per madri*, describes the experience of motherhood in Italy as an obstacle course. Although since the 1980s European research has amply demonstrated the direct link between female participation in the labour market and fertility: women and their partners are more easily disposed to having one or more children if they can enjoy personal and couple economic serenity and if part of their life is fulfilled by work.

In a country with a huge demographic problem, the so-called “myth of motherhood” persists, according to Minello (2022). The mother is seen as the fundamental custodian of the care and upbringing of children; crushed by the weight of perfection, responsibility and guilt, stigmatized if she devotes energy and time to work, as well as if she nurtures ambitions with respect to a career.

Most critical are the women of the previous generation themselves (i.e. mothers of mothers, mothers-in-law) who not infrequently unconsciously adhere to what Sandra Bem has called the “gender schema” (1981): the impulse to transfer roles and ways of living from one generation to the next, based on belonging to the female gender. As if together with gender we inherit lifestyles, habits, beliefs, and life paths already given in advance. Women find themselves in the lacerating choice between remaining faithful to the female model of the previous generation or to emancipate themselves from it, betraying family expectations (Riva, 2023).

3. The impact on daughters’ growth paths

Elena Gianini Belotti had already highlighted in 1973 how two complementary psychological processes lead girls to repeat and internalize their mothers’ behaviors, in a society where gender roles clearly and distinctly define people’s identities. First is *imitation*: the child in the first years of life learns many skills through imitation of significant adults. This is the case, for example, for language, first by imitating sounds and pronunciations, then words and an ever-increasing vocabulary, including the idioms of each family context. The same can happen for the ability to open and close a door or take care of a baby, perhaps with the symbolic play of a doll. At this stage, boys and girls imitate the adult who shares everyday life with them, or both adults, without questioning whether it is a male or a female figure.

The capacity for imitation is greatest in the first years of life and progressively decreases with age, generating certain actions, gestures, repeated abilities until imitative perfection is achieved.

Growing up, every child leaves the habit of imitation and adopts a more pervasive and deep cognitive process called *identification*. The child assimilates a behavior, an attitude, an attribute of another person and transforms herself on the basis of the latter. In this way, by adding up a series of identifications, her personality takes shape. While at first girls and boys identify with both father and mother, as they grow up they focus more narrowly on the adult of their own gender.

This is a social and cultural dynamic. If the differentiation of gender roles within the family were not so clear-cut, boys and girls could identify with both parental figures, but in the context of role separation, children follow the example of the same-sex figure.

For the daughters of housewife mothers, the identification dynamic is even more pronounced and pervasive: if fathers leave the house, leaving behind expectations, imaginings of their children about what they do outside,

1 The expression first appeared in Save the Children’s report, “Le equilibriste: la maternità in Italia nel 2022”, 2022, published at <https://www.savethechildren.it/>.

mothers are always available to their daughters' gaze, without soliciting any curiosity or imagination. It is a ubiquitous model, completely familiar and at times uninteresting. The world into which the child must project herself is all at her disposal, in front of her, without mystery or fascination:

Imagination feeds on these absences, the desire to know subsides in imagining who knows what fantastic events that happen to the one who goes out, and only to him, as soon as he walks through that door. Male and female envy their father who works, but the former with the immense pride of one who knows how to be like his father so that one day he too will have the same adventure, the latter as the excluded spectator of something that will never belong to her (Gianini Belotti, 2018, p. 65).

Times have changed since the early 1970s. But the current exclusion of many mothers from the labor market still has direct effects on their daughters' imaginations. The image of the suffering, non-working or guilt-ridden mother is often unconsciously transferred from one generation to the next (Riva, 2021). Girls associate the idea of work with the idea of frustration, anxiety and stress and this has an impact on their future desires: feelings often unknown to fathers and sons.

4. The hidden power of “maternal employment”

If we step outside the narrow context of our national and cultural boundaries, we discover that work and motherhood are dimensions that can implement each other. Being fulfilled in work and caring for children is possible and has very positive effects on their future, as an extensive international literature shows. Longitudinal studies conducted in Canada, Ireland, Italy, Nepal, the UK and the USA show that mothers' work and fathers' involvement in household chores is a predictor of daughters' employment (Dipietro, Urwin, 2003; Emran, Shilpi, 2011; Hayes 1987; McGinn et al., 2019; Steven, Boyd, 1980; Stinson, Gottschalk, 2016).

Daughters of working mothers are more likely to have a profession and have more careers as adults, a data that does not emerge in the same way for sons (McGinn et al., 2019). The data is intertwined with two additional variables: the social class of the family and the presence or absence of alternative female role models to the maternal one during childhood. The results that emerged from this research are all extremely interesting and not taken for granted. Firstly, there is the dimension called by the authors “the same-gender parent”, for example the stronger impact of the same-gender parent on the career paths of children.

If maternal employment, like all forms of employment, is a marker of children's socio-economic status, predictive of positive paths also in their adult lives, it is daughters in particular who benefit in their future from their mothers' careers. The mother-daughter identification dimension seems to be crucial, an element that does not emerge in the case of sons: “Daughters of employed mothers, when faced with the opportunities and challenges of having children, seem inclined to emulate their mothers in simultaneously managing their work and caring roles” (Mc Ginn et al., 2019, p. 394).

Secondly, there is the fundamental dimension of social learning. Daughters of single mothers or those with little social exchange suffer from a lack of multiple role models. It is not enough to have mothers who are successful in life and at work, if the surrounding context is characterized by women who have given up their careers and have not realized their goals. School, for instance, can play a crucial role: contact with teachers who are satisfied with their jobs, passionate and accomplished workers, can positively influence the life paths of girls.

As they grow up, girls do not only identify with the mother figure, but also with the other significant female figures in their lives, as well as with the image of women disseminated in society.

It is therefore not only mother figures who must cultivate a sense of work and communicate to future women the value of this dimension of life: other female figures present in the family, but also professional figures such as teachers, educators, and coaches, can also play a fundamental role in this sense. “As teachers and as educators” writes Simonetta Ulivieri, “it is necessary to start from oneself, from the valorization of one's own identity, recovering the difference also in education, without falling back into the traditional stereotypes of subalternity” (Ulivieri, 2016, p. 16). A reflection that concerns all spheres of adult identity, including the professional identity that teachers convey on a daily basis.

5. Overturning collective consciousness about women at work

From an ecosystem perspective, a collective initiative is needed to overturn the perception around women's work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The importance of identification models for girls and young women leads us to think that it is mainly female figures who can convey different imaginations about work. We need the effective and united initiative of grandmothers and aunts, sisters and friends, pediatricians and midwives, nursery and kinder-

garten educators. Changing the code of emotions around the work of mothers would be a complete cultural revolution: pride and enthusiasm, satisfaction and recognition for every woman who not only raises children but also makes a special contribution to the community through her work. If we communicated these positive emotions to new mothers or during antenatal classes, we would extinguish at the outset that deep sense of guilt that makes returning to work after motherhood even more difficult.

Equal rights, access to work, career and any profession for women, are almost entirely achieved, at least on paper, in our society. “They will remain inaccessible to most, however, until the psychological structures that prevent women from strongly desiring them are changed” (Gianini Belotti, 2018, p. 9). Putting aside guilt and performance anxiety, and instead cultivating a love of work, a desire for fulfillment and an ambition to get ahead, is the only way to significantly change perceptions about working mothers.

While norms and laws can be changed quickly, the psychological structures of individuals and communities change very slowly. The point of view of teenage daughters is crucial. If they are the most subject to social and cultural pressures, having to “resemble socially imposed female role models” (Ulivieri, 2023), they are also in the condition and position to innovate those models. Collocated at the border point between childhood and adulthood, they can foster a transformative approach to female identity, also regarding work dimension. The relational dimension is crucial, in relation to the female figures of the previous generation, not only mothers: their questions on work and career, their curiosity about trades and professions, represent the best opportunity to build a new narrative about women at work.

A transformative movement of the perception of women at work is crucial not only for their personal well-being and personal achievement, but also for building a different future for the new generations of women.

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