

Motherhood in the paths of growth and sharing in the value of sisterhood

La maternità nei percorsi di crescita e di condivisione nel valore della sorellanza

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ABSTRACT

If it is true, as Simone de Beauvoir states, that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman by virtue of experiences, personality and psyche, it can equally be said that motherhood is also the result of a cultural process (Stramaglia, 2009). So parenting, mothering, is a transformation that starts from the depths and affects every single sphere of life. Becoming a mother is a completely different thing from recognizing oneself as a parent, which is why generativity and parenting are conditions that do not always coincide.

From the pedagogical aspect, access to parenthood is closely related to an educational itinerary made throughout the life journey taken by a woman, including through shared storytelling meetings with other women, mothers, sisters, friends, to establish shared experiences. In the time of the crisis of parental figures and family instability, a valid strategy could be to recreate an on-going, caring and supportive educating community among peers (Zucchi, 2013) starting from sharing the value of solidarity and a sense of sisterhood (Musi, 2007).

KEYWORDS

Motherhood, sisterhood, educational community, parenthood, narratives.
Maternità, sorellanza, comunità educante, genitorialità, narrazioni.

Se è vero, come afferma Simone de Beauvoir, che donna non si nasce ma si diventa, in virtù di esperienze, personalità, psiche, si può altrettanto affermare che anche la maternità è frutto di un processo culturale (Stramaglia, 2009). Dunque la genitorialità, materna, è una trasformazione che parte dal profondo e che influenza ogni singolo ambito di vita. Diventare madre è condizione completamente diversa dal riconoscersi genitori, per questo la generatività e la genitorialità sono condizioni che non sempre coincidono.

Sotto l'aspetto pedagogico, l'accesso alla genitorialità si correla strettamente a un itinerario educativo compiuto durante tutto il percorso di vita di una donna, anche attraverso incontri di narrazione condivisi con altre donne, madri, sorelle, amiche, per stabilire esperienze condivise. Nel tempo della crisi delle figure genitoriali e dell'instabilità familiare una strategia valida potrebbe essere ricreare una comunità educante in itinere, accudente tra pari (Zucchi, 2013) partendo dalla condivisione del valore della solidarietà e del senso di sorellanza (Musi, 2007).

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Introduction

It is always difficult to talk about motherhood in absolute and universal terms; it is also very dangerous because of the high probability of stigmatizing or neglecting different maternal identities.

For centuries motherhood was considered the natural destiny of women, today we know that it is by no means enough to be pregnant to feel like a mother (Mathieu, 1991), since despite being a biological act it is not a natural phenomenon, much less an individual one, but it can be defined as the product of a collective decision sanctioned by cultural and ritual mediations (Calarza, 2022). If, on the other hand, one disavows the strong natural valence of motherhood, one runs the risk of failing to grasp in its depths the bodily and unconscious maternal essence, which eludes a merely biological description of the life of both mother and child (Recalcati, 2015).

Building on Simone de Beauvoir's historical assumption that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (2013) by virtue of experiences, personality and psyche, it can equally be said that motherhood is the result of a complex cultural process. Almost eighty years after this intellectual inheritance, we still witness an irrevocable anchoring of woman to her sexed body, which claims she is devoted "by nature" to the reproduction of the species with all the repercussions on the body, inwardness and social life itself.

The philosopher, over the centuries, has had the acumen to grasp the ambiguity of motherhood, what Galimberti describes as "maternal emotional contrast", since the woman, while acknowledging her love for her child, cannot help but experience moments of refusing them, undergoing the metamorphosis of her body, the stolen time and the occupation of space inside and outside her body (2008, p. 172).

Caring for the newborn, historically generalized into the attitude "of caring for others", and its recognition as a virtue, transformed this competence into a "natural competence" marking inescapably, for centuries, the fate of women (Mapelli, 2006). In this process that was anything but accidental, the family and then the school became the custodians and mediators of sociocultural values, a veiled expression of a cultural and pedagogical hegemony that is markedly sexist (Ulivieri, 2007).

There is a difference between biological motherhood and fulfilling the maternal function. Experiencing pregnancy for nine months, breastfeeding and nurturing, providing care and nursing, does not mean that the woman/mother is naturally inclined to affective life, caring, the condition of sacrifice, and adaptation, nor does it mean that the feminine essence – whether she has children or not, which is by no means assumed – is to nurture, protect, and love (Rigotti, 2010). In fact, the refrain that women are predisposed to motherhood is confirmed to be a redundant cliché, misunderstanding a learned behavior with an innate behavior.

Studies in social anthropology confirm that maternal feelings and emotions are not the same for all cultures and in every latitude of the globe, today as in the past. Moreover, the same studies highlight how cultural, political and economic indicators are key inferents for the value of motherhood, which cannot be called absolute and universal (Scheper-Hughes, 1993). The choice of motherhood depends on personal and motivational paths as well as on the socio-historical system, one of them being the possibility of feeling free to bring a child into the world or not (Augè, 1986).

So, the maternal instinct is a social instinct rather than a biological instinct. As a corollary to this statement, it is deduced as a direct and immediate consequence that, the biological clock referred to is nothing but a social clock, a chronometer that, at a certain point, reminds the woman, as a guarantee of her personal fulfilment, of "the duty" of imagining herself as a mother, instead to achieve independence, success and aspire to an important career it is better to give up the desire for a child (Fabiotti, 2015).

1. Self-determination to unhinge the role stereotype

The awareness and questioning of this "pedagogy of ignorance" (Barseghi, Telmon, 1992) for a long time has seen women relegated to domestic roles, repressed and unable to assert their identity. In the late 1960s, cultural protest movements stimulated an opportunity for self-reflection and self-recognition, which cause the consequent disintegration of the traditional relationship between the sexes, as well as the questioning of the love relationship itself in couples (Ulivieri, 2019). In those years, some feminist movements challenged not only the maternal role of women, but also the meaning of motherhood as a "natural" condition, so slogans urged women to become more aware of female capabilities, repudiating the concept of motherhood as a limitation, rather claiming a value that was properly and uniquely feminine (De Serio, 2009).

The slogan "the personal is political", and consequently "the private is political", would become a symbol for the deconstruction of sexist power (Sulis, 2013), a power, however, that would continue undaunted to impose itself for another few decades with coercive practices against daughters, wives and mothers, relegating them to the four walls of the home, denying them the freedom to decide whether or not to have children and perpetrating psychological, physical and emotional violence. These are not private matters at all; on the contrary, they are such

widespread customs that they belie the intimate meaning of domestic violence. This critical reflection will require more attention to the crime of private violence, which has been in place but neglected in our legal system for the past few decades¹.

Likewise, in the same period, the same movements challenged the learned powerlessness caused by an education given to girls and young women, which aimed to make them feel inferior and therefore not free to express desires, the possibility of realizing their ambitions, and spontaneously managing their bodies and sexuality (Lopez, 2016). The revolution will take shape with paths of personal growth and awareness that will be realized through reflective experiences. These experiences at first began as opportunities for autonomous research, for new gender identity, and then evolved into acts of sharing, into possibilities for mirroring oneself in other women and other experiences, emotions, and relationships (Ulivieri, 2019).

During the period of the protests of the 1970s, an overbearing advancement of Clinical Medicine breaking into the delivery room encouraged multidisciplinary studies on the subject. Inevitably, great attention is thus kindled to the “hyper-medicalization” of the female body, a phenomenon that Ivan Illich (1977) highlights in his early studies as a great insight. The vast amount of gender studies of the so-called second wave has repeatedly investigated the issue of male control over women’s bodies, in particular, over their power to generate new life. This control was imposed by the control of sexuality, which had to be necessarily and exclusively privatized, family-related and heterosexual (Bertilotti, 2005; Casalini, 2011).

In different cultures and eras, the place par excellence where collective identity has manifested itself is the female body, recognizable as the space in which society’s power of coercion and control is most exercised (Diasio, 2000). It is detectable how the domination over women’s bodies still persists, albeit in a different and more subtle way, even through medicine in its interference with female biology. In fact, the current medicalization of the female body can be read as modernity’s response to the need for social control over the generativity of being a woman, which turns out to be a widespread constant in many contemporary cultures (Pizzini, 1999).

The practices through which female subjugation is carried out, perpetrated in all androcentric societies, are aimed at controlling and pathologizing pregnancy, medicalizing childbirth, and disrupting the perinatal period, thus employing the “disempowering” of woman, the only being of the human race who holds generative power (Falcicchio, 2018).

It is verifiable how the patriarchal system, while devaluing women’s maternal competence by reducing it to a mere natural inclination, strives to control the practices inherent in the female body as unquestionable differences with the human male.

It is no coincidence that it was feminist and committed women, including anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger (2012), activist and midwife Ina May Gaskin (2010), midwife Robin Lim (Sokoko, 2020), and scholar and midwife Verena Schmid (2005), who first spoke about generativity from a respectful perspective, collaborating in the weaving of a veritable worldwide network of activism on the issue. A true warp of scholarly knowledge, understandings, and reflections of the female gender, its needs in the expression of motherhood, the feminine it generates, in the emerging need to counter and combat “obstetric violence”² a construct now affirmed and directly relatable to the “power devices” of Foucaultian memory (Foucault, 1977; Falcicchio, 2018).

1 In the offence of private violence referred to in Article 610. c.p. (Royal Decree no. 1398 of 19 October 1930), the hermeneutic option according to which the notion of violence is not to be understood, sic et simpliciter, as physical violence (id est: the so-called ‘violence in the proper sense’) that is exercised on the victim is consolidated, since the so-called improper or moral violence alone – which is expressed through the use of abnormal means aimed at exerting pressure on the will of others – is sufficient to constitute the offence referred to in Article 610. improper or moral violence – which is carried out through the use of abnormal means aimed at exerting pressure on the will of others – is sufficient to constitute the offence referred to in Article 610 of the Criminal Code if it induces the victim to do, tolerate or omit something (see: Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 09 April 2019, no. 35092; Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 24 February 2017, no. 29261; Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 29 September 2015 - 2 February 2016, no. 4284; Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 27 February 1998 - 7 May 1998, no. 1195; Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 7 October 1980 - 21 October 1980, no. 10676).

The element of violence, in fact, disregards the exercise of actual physical coercion since it embraces, in itself, any act or fact put in place by the agent that results in the coercion of the physical or psychological freedom of the passive subject, embracing - per facta concludentia - any means capable of coercively depriving the offended party of the freedom of determination and action so as to induce him to do, tolerate or omit a quid (Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 09/04/2019, no. 35092; Corte App. Milan, Sec. II, 03/10/2018, no. 5752; Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 29/09/2015 - 2/02/2016, no. 4284; Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 22/01/2010 - 26/03/2010, no. 11907; Cass. Pen., Sec. V, 17/12/2003 - 29/01/2004, no. 3403; Cass., Sec. VI, 16/12/1982 - 1/03/1983, no. 1818).

Available in <https://www.diritto.it/costringere-altri-a-fare-tollerare-o-omettere-qualche-cosa-e-reato/?callback=in&code=YJK1ZJ-DKMTMTYMYXOC0ZMMY3LWE3MJYTMDJINZEXMWFMYZLJ&state=7a3d86717bc04d44a2e4e6fc4e2fbcbb> [accessed 26/04/2024].

2 The expression “obstetric violence” is coined in the South American legal arena, specifically in Argentina in the 2000s, when the demands of women’s movements were incorporated and this phenomenon was included in gender-based violence. In Italy, the term “humanization of birth” was adopted, but it did not evolve into “obstetrical violence” the moment it was realized that it had no impact on improving care, as was the case in Latin American countries, which with the epistemological change gained both legislation and the attention of practitioners. Finuoli, M. D. L. (2022), *Criminal Profiles of the So-Called Obstetric Violence Aspectos penales de la denominada “violencia obstétrica Criminal Profiles of the So-Called Obstetric Violence”*, Editorial Board.

Obstetric violence is symbolic and bodily violence, involving the erasure of female subjectivity, which stifles the possibility for women to experience motherhood as a transformative possibility.

Also in the 1970s, a feminist collective in Ferrara, Italy, promoted the *Break the silence* campaign, recounting in a publication the traumatic experiences they had in the obstetric and gynecological sphere. So the well-known awareness campaign *Break the silence*³, which started in Italy in 1972, was born precisely from a note left in the hospital by a woman, complaining of labor pains, who was answered, “but don’t you know that during childbirth you have to suffer?”. A woman rewrote this sentence on a slip of paper before discharge and attached it to a bulletin board, filled with notes that expressed only the joy of birth.

In 1978, another note is found “ten hours suffering alone in a room. No more silence!” and then another and another. This kind of violence is taboo both for women and for society as a whole. It is difficult to talk about it openly and it is very difficult to acknowledge having suffered obstetric violence, because the humiliation, mortification and contempt of a new mother does not correspond to what the neo-patriarchal society⁴ expects of her. The representation of pain as necessary and functional to achieving the joy of “bringing a child into the world” is as time-tested as it is widespread (Fariello, Strazzeri, 2021).

In April 2016, following the independent press release of a pamphlet, the *Basta tacere: Women Have Voice* campaign was relaunched through a media tam tam. The Facebook campaign “#bastatacere”, a true media booming, simultaneously gathers both support and thousands of testimonies of protest and denunciation, giving birth to the Obstetric Violence Observatory (OVOItalia)⁵.

2. Sisterhood as a turning point of change

In the face of a committed information and awareness campaign, women/mothers formed associations and claimed the right to be heard and the possibility to listen to each other.

Today, in Italy many are the known and widespread realities among which stand out Mamamia, MammaSì, La Leche League Italia, Mamma&Co, associations that promote the meeting and exchange between women, offering emotional support and information about motherhood.

Among them is Rinascere al Naturale, which was founded in Calimera (Le) as a committee in 2012 and formalized as a non-profit organization in January 2013. RaN is engaged in activities aimed at promoting motherhood and parenting with respect for the rights of women and newborns, supported by the latest scientific evidence promoting respected childbirth and good birth.

Main goals of the association are: to foster access to authoritative information regarding the issues of pregnancy, respected childbirth, natural breastfeeding, newborn care, conscious parenting, and women’s empowerment; as well as to foster the creation of a social network that supports and promotes motherhood free from socio-cultural conditioning.

A group of women who believe in the importance of mutual support. The first contacts and friendships among the founders of the Association Rinascere al Naturale were born in the Natural Childbirth Forum, a virtual “nest” where it is possible to exchange information, but above all, emotions: from anger about previous unnecessary and harmful interventions, to fear and impatience for what will be, to the shared joy for a new birth. In 2020 in conjunction with the need for distancing due to the risk of COVID19 contagion, the mothers’ chat was born, a WhatsApp group, dedicated to requests for support, which presents activist and committed members.

A support network in case of difficulties, doubts, negative thoughts related to pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, family life, ideas to better cope with the long days at home with children; welcome in case of perinatal bereavement; information and support to prepare for a new birth by opening up to different realities in the field of motherhood and women’s rights.

Thus, Rinascere al Naturale is a group that has made a path to approach the concept of a motherhood experience that respects individuality, a right that belongs to every woman. These people who believe in the involvement of

3 Movimento di lotta femminista di Ferrara (1972), *Basta Tacere, Testimonianza di donne. Parto, aborto, gravidanza e maternità*. Consultabile in http://www.femminismo-ruggente.it/femminismo/pdf/1972/basta_tacere.pdf, [accessed 24/3/2024].

4 Adriana Perrotta Ribassi, by re-naming it ‘neo’, presents a vision of patriarchy still alive and well, but above all able to restructure and reorganise itself in the presence of actual changes in relations between the sexes, both in the private-affective-family sphere and in the public sphere; transformations brought about not only by the modernisation of production and social processes.

5 The Observatory on Obstetrical Violence in Italy is a multidisciplinary body created on 20 April 2016, at the end of the #bastatacere campaign, with the aim of monitoring the incidence of practices that constitute this type of violence against women in their maternity journey. OVOItalia is an initiative promoted by Elena Skoko in collaboration with Alessandra Battisti, Michela Cericco and Claudia Ravaldi, with the participation of numerous collaborators and associations. Elena Skoko and Alessandra Battisti manage the Observatory’s website and initiatives, continuing the common commitment in advocacy for human rights in childbirth and birth in Italy started in 2013. www.ovoitatia.wordpress.com/violenza-ostetrica-faq/ [accessed 22/3/2024].

the whole family in the birth event also think of moments of conscious engagement for the paternal parental figure. Because for every birth there is a woman who begins a path of growth, a path never definitively concluded that leads her to become a mother and accompanying her to raise a child with support and sharing in the value of “sisterhood”. Recovering the concept that supports the raising of a child by an entire village. A “sisterhood” that concurs to give entity and strength to that concatenation of acts of the experience of pregnancy – from conception to puerperium – that are consolidated in a condition of existential co-partnership (Musi, 2007). A dialectic between freedom and responsibility, which is transformed into co-responsibility, making each woman feel a participant in her own and others’ development of a humanity interwoven with relationships.

There is a moral duty in looking at the birth of motherhood as a revelatory experience of the human condition, open to transcendence, as it is traversed by an embodied intentionality that lives a condition of design in fieri never ceasing to reorient itself.

Says Monica Fronteddu, RaN Operations Group member and doula:

I think sisterhood is a fundamental principle of RaN, and it is implemented through a circle of women serving each other to support each other in overcoming the difficulties inherent in the condition of being women. Together we are stronger, we are better able to promote our rights, we move through the world with assertiveness and confidence, shaking off our “weaker sex” status. It is important and crucial to do this together, because one of the tools of patriarchy is to divide and isolate us. Sisterhood goes beyond friendship or acquaintance, and this is very evident in RaN, as we network regardless of whether we know each other personally or our geographical location. Then new and deep friendships often arise, but this is a pleasant consequence, not a premise. When we act on the principles of sisterhood, what we do benefits every woman, regardless of what we think of her as a person. Sisterhood recognizes the difficulties of being a woman in a patriarchal society, and promotes their overcoming, beyond individual choices and conditions. With RaN we do this primarily in reference to issues surrounding motherhood, but then it is easy for the consequences to embrace other aspects of our existence.

It is a taking the floor and talking about oneself, recognizing oneself as a group with strong political value and the will to transformative action in society, typical of feminist movements of 1968 memory, those in which narrative actions, criticism of a society with a monocular phallogocentric vision (Ulivieri, 2007), the centrality of violated civil rights and the reappropriation of one’s body through actions of mutual support and public evidence were linked.

Again, says Denise Montinaro, president of the association and activist mom:

We hope for change in the culture about birth and motherhood, helping it to become more respectful of the well-being of mothers, children, women, and families. We want to go even beyond our boundary of intimate sharing, by actively participating in public advocacy events, signature-gathering activities, raising awareness of respect for the generative and birth experience.

When I listen to or read what members, or mothers who turn to RaN, have to say with respect to the gifts received from RaN, I always get excited. RaN is sisterhood, or perhaps it is much more, it is life! It is a village that welcomes every woman, every family seeking support, that village that with modern times has been lost in today’s society. And it is an ideal shared by many women who cherish motherhood, a growth project, an evolutionary path. RaN is every woman who has approached the association, but it is also something above each of us: like an ideal, it lives a life of its own by nurturing the contribution of every woman who is part of it and, at the same time, it nurtures the women with whom it comes into contact. As a founding member, I have lived through every phase of the association’s life, and I have been able to see how it continually changes and grows with each new woman who is part of it. Although it has faced moments of deep crisis that made people speculate its end, each time new women, with their energy, with their creative will that, as mothers, belongs to us, have managed to revive it, renewing the meaning of its name.

The power of true sisterhood, of recognizing and embracing each other has become even more evident during historical events and social phenomena that, in other contexts, have created rifts: despite differences, different life choices, the mothers and women of Rinascere have continued to stay in a circle and support each other. I believe that the Association represents a great example of the solidarity that mothers are capable of.

These are new examples of forms of feminism, then, that affirm the principle as women of knowing how to love themselves as mothers, and to borrow Luisa Muraro’s words, “knowing how to love the mother makes symbolic order” (1991, p. 21). Loving her through female genealogies, through the practice of women’s relationships, a fundamental condition for enabling women to be creative, to search for meanings that recompose the link between experience and interiority, breaking the conventional character of the social role (Missina, 2014).

3. Conclusions

Today, therefore, we are witnessing new educational itineraries between sisters, at once mothers of today and daughters of a secular misrecognition, of an implicit male will that has denied the bond between women forced into what Lea Melandri calls “female loneliness” (1991, p. 48).

In this generative space pulsating with energy, then, the group becomes a covenant of educational alliance, capable of supporting all women in the most challenging moments of daily life, as well as in times of deep crisis (Zucchi, 2013). It is a mobile and flexible space that changes according to who comes in and who goes out and is capable of changing posture with respect to the topics discussed, always showing empathy and availability, repositioning themselves as mothers and as people. Friendship is not a prerequisite for feeling part of the sisterhood, as the circle rests on solidarity among women, on feeling part of the existence of other sisters, on the nonjudgmental status of mothers among mothers, and last but not least on the desire to be there and not to lose oneself. The “sisterhood” in the experience of motherhood is a place of metamorphosis, initiation and learning that has the double valence, the typical one of the circle of women and the enriched one of women-mothers so full of conflicting emotions, only apparently fragile.

The women’s revolution is the sign of a reforming activity (Cambi, 1992) that makes politics from below, becoming for the new generations a natural continuum of all the emancipatory struggles that were the forerunners of the transformative change of the intergenerational relationship and gender respect, never definitively concluded.

In a time of great fragility of traditional family models, new social and educational models are emerging and the most traditional visions of pedagogy are being deconstructed (Ulivieri, 2019), which instead, by its very nature stands open to change and to utopian and transformative tension.

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Sitography

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