

Working mothers and motherhood at risk.  
For a social history of women's work  
Madri operaie e maternità a rischio.  
Per una storia sociale del lavoro femminile

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ABSTRACT

The employment boom of the late 1800s led to women being massively employed in factories, taking them away from the home and family. The new jobs, however, added wage labour to the already existing unpaid work aimed at caring for others and performing within the home, with no return in money, had one in-use value (cultivating fields, raising animals, performing hand-crafts). Employment in industry was neither the only nor the most critical form of work for women. They were flanking the gruelling factory shifts with the traditional and main work activity entrusted to them by society: care work. The latter remained a solid constant in women's lives, and non-domestic work was structurally interconnected with the needs and the family economy that women learned to manage from the use of their time divided between productive, reproductive and personal identity needs. That exercised by women has repeatedly been shown to be a "flexibility" that stands out only if one connects wage labour with other essential variables such as demographics, birth/mortality rates, family history and in particular the transformations that have affected not only the size of household aggregates but especially the quality of care work. Such flexibility, however, has for a long time not been reflected either in the workplace or in society, forcing the female world into actual balancing acts in order to be able to fulfil the role of motherhood that is often invisible to employers and for a long time unprotected by institutions.

**KEYWORDS**

**Maternity at risk, proletarian women, industry, birthrate, care work.  
Maternità a rischio, donne proletarie, industria, natalità, lavoro di cura.**

Il boom occupazionale di fine '800 portò le donne ad essere impiegate massivamente negli opifici sottraendole alla casa e alla famiglia. I nuovi impieghi aggiungevano tuttavia il lavoro salariato a quello già esistente e non retribuito che, rivolto alla cura degli altri ed espletato all'interno delle mura domestiche, pur non avendo un ritorno in denaro, ne aveva uno in valore d'uso (coltivare campi, allevare animali, realizzare lavori artigianali). L'impiego nell'industria non fu né l'unica né la più importante forma di lavoro delle donne che si trovarono ad affiancare gli estenuanti turni in fabbrica alla tradizionale e principale attività lavorativa a loro affidata dalla società: il lavoro di cura. Quest'ultimo rimase solida costante nella vita femminile e il lavoro extradomestico si trovava strutturalmente interconnesso con le esigenze e con l'economia familiare che le donne impararono a gestire a partire dall'uso del proprio tempo suddiviso tra esigenze produttive, ri-produttive e d'identità personale. Quella esercitata dalle donne si è più volte dimostrata una "flessibilità" che risalta solo se si collega il lavoro salariato con altre importanti variabili quali la demografia, i tassi di natalità/mortalità, la storia della famiglia ed in particolare le trasformazioni che hanno riguardato non solo le dimensioni degli aggregati domestici, ma soprattutto la qualità dei lavori di cura. Tale flessibilità, tuttavia, non ha per lungo tempo avuto alcun riscontro né in ambito lavorativo né nella società, costringendo il mondo femminile a veri e propri equilibrismi per poter portare a compimento il ruolo di una maternità spesso invisibile ai datori di lavoro e a lungo tempo non tutelata dalle istituzioni.

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## 1. The condition of women in factories and industry

The profound geographic, social, political and economic changes that affected Italy after its unification also brought the first hints of a slowdown in birth rates, which affected the various economic strata of society across the board, albeit with variations in timing and modalities. The proletariat, in particular, experienced the first significant setback in birth rates, mainly due to the large-scale spread of the factory labour model, which mainly affected women of working-class extraction, whether they were employed or not as labourers (Livi Bacci, 1980). There is no denying the fact that the spread of factories brought about by industrial development, with the concentration of residence movements in city centres and the consequent emptying out of rural areas, profoundly altered the social fabric, upsetting the almost centuries-old balances that had hitherto governed proletarian society. Particularly in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and in the years leading up to the Great War, the industrial development of the country, which had hitherto had an economy based on a purely agricultural model and which saw, in this short period, a veritable industrial *boom*, led to the indiscriminate use of a de-skilled and underpaid workforce, largely represented also by minors and women (Merli, 1972; Olivieri, Covato, 2001).

Pirelli's hiring at the factory in Via Ponte Seveso in Milan of Rosa Navoni in August 1873 is emblematic in this regard. The girl, just 15 years old, was the first woman ever hired at Pirelli and was in charge of sewing "playground" balls. Indeed, the 1901 census shows that of the two and a half million workers who were over nine years old (out of the total 4 million), more than seven hundred thousand were women, constituting 28 per cent of the workforce (MAIC, 1905, p. LXXXV). Only one year later, statistics specify how more than half a million women, between adults and minors, were employed in industry, accounting for as much as 39% of the total labour force (MAIC, 1906, p. 18). These figures, however, represent but the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" since most of the extra-housewife activities carried out by women in those years were most often done irregularly or on an irregular basis and were reduced to ancillary activities to domestic duties, with the risk of not being recorded at all (Taricone, Pisa, 1985; Ortaggi, 1999).

Most female wage earners, however, were employed in the industry: in addition to the branches of wool, cotton, and silk harvesting and processing, the workplaces that emerged were tobacco manufacturing, paper mills, wood and straw processing, garment, and even iron and steel industries, going on to engage nearly ninety per cent of female wage earners. While the employment of male workers turned out to be long-lasting and often even lasted a lifetime, the demand for employment of female workers was relatively high for the younger age groups. However, it was also going to contract markedly as the female workers reached marriageable age or that of their first deliveries, demonstrating early on a social scourge that has endured to the present day: that of sex discrimination in employment, primarily related to motherhood.

## 2. Women's work in the family budget

In Italy at the beginning of the 20th century, studies conducted by the Labor Office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce (MAIC) revealed that 39.6 per cent of female workers (of childbearing age) were between 15 and 20 years old, 46 per cent between 20 and 35 years old, and 14.4 per cent between 35 and 55 years old. Thus, "the pattern that seems to be prevalent in urban [working-class] families at the turn of the century is that of the husband's wage labour as the main source of income, supplemented by the wage labour of the children and the wife's home or odd jobs, or pan-labour [...] Naturally, the more pressing the need to support the family budget, the greater the impulse to maintain regular employment of the wife-mother" (Musso, 1988, p. 67).

Where women workers were unable to have continuity of employment, they still found themselves having to contribute to the optimisation of the household economy by cutting back on expenses as much as possible and even working nights to finish sewing or tailoring jobs, especially when they managed to find piecework and irregular jobs, for garment factories (Baldini, 2023). Despite this, the most widespread view was one that regarded women as incapable of managing the household economy and saw them as responsible for the critical issues of the household, especially if they found themselves sharing household chores with some permanent employment. This view was so ingrained that even the socialist political area, which was a significant contributor to the debate concerning the bill for the protection of child and female labour (which was translated into law on June 19, 1902), proposed a rule that should have limited the commitment of working women to 48 hours per week, to leave Saturday afternoons and Sundays free to be able to come to grips with "obvious family needs" (Essmoi, 1970). Industrialisation, accomplices of the urbanisation of young masses of workers of peasant origin and the mobility of female labour, also brought with it another social change, namely the increase in pre-nuptial conceptions with a consequent increase in abortions in the proletarian segment of the population. Moving to the city and increased economic security also brought several constraints, such as rents and various expenses that, by raising the cost of living, induced more and more young couples to delay marriage or child conception. The sometimes excessive alarmism

manifested by scholars of the period regarding the decline in nuptiality and birth rate also seems to have had partial confirmation from the data collected in the economic-demographic survey carried out between 1902 and 1903 by the MAIC's Labor Office, which was being set up in those very years.

### 3. The impact of women's work on health conditions and infant mortality

Urbanisation also contributed significantly to changes in the social habits of new families who moved from living in cottages to living in urban agglomerations with increased health risks for family members, especially children. Many surveys of the period noted how infant mortality was accentuated by poor sanitary conditions that were also often linked to housing conditions, from the report *Infant Mortality in Milan. Results of an Investigation of 1903 Births in Relation to Nursing Ways and Parents' Economic Conditions* published in 1908 by the Humanitarian Society of the Labor Office, found that child deaths occurred 27.08 per cent in families living in 1 room, 23.48 per cent in 2 rooms, 17.89 per cent in 3 rooms, 15.50 per cent in 4 rooms, and 10.52 per cent in 5 or more rooms, demonstrating a close correlation between housing conditions and the incidence of deaths. Shrinking household space triggered a chain of cause-consequences that contributed to increased infant mortality: overcrowding, increased promiscuity, and increased prolificacy all contributed to worsening hygienic conditions, resulting in greater spread of disease and infection. If, in fact, the families that had the most children also turned out, for typical statistical reasons, to have the highest infant mortality, it is also true that said mortality tended to be concentrated in the poorest segment of the population (Allaria, 1912; Carozzi, 1913).

Another factor affecting infant mortality was that related to gestation, which young women often carried out in conjunction with work. In fact, at the time, there were no regulations that considered the condition of pregnant working women, and the protection of those women was left to the good hearts of colleagues or employers. Although in 1902 Law No. 242 c.d., known as the Carcano Law, established maternity leave for women who had just given birth, who could not return to work "until after a month had passed from that of delivery," it did not take into account the period before delivery. Pregnant women found themselves working until the very last with often gruelling hours (the same law established a working ceiling for pregnant women of 12 hours with two hours of rest, which, at best, translated into two 6-hour shifts). Even where solidarity was present and pregnant women were relieved of the heaviest work, the unhealthy working environment and poor hygienic conditions often led to miscarriages, premature births or stillbirths (Dodi, 1978). In cases where women workers were found to be living in an all-too-decent environment, the situation did not improve because the primary issue concerned the working environment in which they found themselves spending most of their time with shifts that reached, often, as long as 14 or 16 hours (after 1902, as we have seen, 12 hours) (Bernardy, 1909). However, even those jobs that might have been considered "safer" compared to employment in the steel industry or agriculture hid pitfalls. For example, female employees in the textile industry found themselves doing work that on paper might have been described as "lighter" or less dangerous than others but concealed several hidden dangers of no minor consequence. The increasing automation of work in the early twentieth century brought shifts with tight rhythms and no breaks, forcing women workers' bodies into often anti-ergonomic positions and making abrupt movements. Moreover, the absence of filters and adequate air recirculation was an invisible danger that everyone, workers and employers alike, underestimated, especially in the yarn industry, where chemicals were often used and fabric processing produced suspended dust. The fatigue and exhaustion to which expectant mothers were subjected often led to miscarriages, and even where pregnancies were correctly carried to term, the unborn were weak and fragile in health (Musso, 1988; D'Amelia, 1996; Ortaggi, 1999). As a result of this, about 20 per cent of pregnancies ended prematurely with miscarriages or stillbirths, and about half of term pregnancies saw the death of the unborn child by age 20; half of these died within the first year of age (Pinnelli, 1989). In this regard Bertha Novich points out how: "Vices of position, even very slight ones, due to the ten or twelve hours of work, as much in rice-, wheat-, or field-workers as in women standing still at the loom or the basin, end up affecting the uterine-ovarian circulation and determine [...] one of the most serious occurrences of pregnancy, which, if not terminated by abortion, can endanger the lives of mothers[...] there is no worker who does not remember, in addition to the numerous children born at term her two or three abortions" (Novich, 1907, p. 231). Reinforcing these assertions also come the data shown in the Proceedings of the Second National Congress for Occupational Diseases held in Florence in 1909, in which the results of a survey carried out on more than four thousand five hundred medical records from the Turin Maternity Ward in the years from 1890 to 1909 were reported, showing that weavers were the category most at risk overall: between miscarriages and stillbirths as many as 40 per cent of the pregnancies of women workers in the industry did not reach full term (compared to 21 per cent of peasant women)(Levi, 1910).

## 4. Conclusions

Having to look with a pedagogical eye at the role of working motherhood in the period analysed, one cannot refrain from making an overall negative judgment, given the virtually total absence of 'care' for the children, whose mothers, unable to do otherwise, often found themselves bringing them to the workplace to help them with their homework. However, it would be superficial and unfair to pin responsibility for such failures solely on the parental side. At the turn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the whole of society that contributed to this *status quo*: the patriarchal culture that saw the woman as the only member of the family who would have to take care of the children, aggravating her workload; a failing economy that required the poorer classes to send all the able-bodied elements of the household, including boys and children, to work in factories (Bernardy, 1909); industrialists, who profited from this condition by obtaining labour at meagre cost without providing adequate protections, not even for female workers and minors, who were even more exploited than the workers; and institutions, which were trudging to enact and implement laws that would provide adequate protections for workers in a rapidly changing economic and social condition. It is not surprising, then, that at least until the outbreak of the Great War, the proletariat saw the death of so many unborn babies and infants and that many of those who survived became adults without ever being children, deprived of childhood by a condition that forced them to contribute to the family economy as quickly as possible.

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