

# 11. What's gender got to do with the Great Recession? The Italian case

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

What began as a subprime mortgage debacle in the US has become the worst global crisis since the Great Depression, resulting in a widespread destruction of livelihoods and jobs. So a great deal of attention has been focused on understanding the causes of the unfolding crisis, in order to implement policy measures and recovery plans. Many different explanations have been offered by various schools of economic thought (some also in this volume). Most mainstream explanations tend to concentrate on the imperfections of the financial markets (Schiller 2008); on the mistakes of the monetary policy (Taylor 2009); and on the phenomenon of the global saving glut (Bernanke 2013). Heterodox explanations share the view that the crisis is due not only to financial market imperfections, mistakes in monetary policy or exogenous shocks, but also, and more importantly, to the endogenous dynamic of this new phase of capitalist accumulation. Post-Keynesian accounts range from Minsky's financial instability hypothesis (Wray 2009) to insufficient aggregate demand (Fitoussi and Stiglitz 2009; Barba and Pivetti 2009). Under-consumption is the basis of the Sraffian arguments (Brancaccio and Fontana 2011). Marxists' explanations span from the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (Kliman 2011) to the limits of monopoly capital (Magdoff and Foster 2009). More eclectic explanations are based on capital asset inflation (Toporowski, Chapter 6 in this volume) or on the novelty of the structure of production and finance in this 'new' capitalism (Bellofiore 2013 and Chapter 1 in this volume).

It is not an aim of this chapter to review this literature. Yet, it is important to recall it in order to show that, despite the growing debate about the causes of the crisis, less attention is given to its gender dimension. There is very little discussion about the gender implications of the crisis, despite the fact that *feminist* and *gender economics* have assessed that every economic phenomenon affects men and women differently because of

gender-specific inequalities in the capitalistic society (Farber and Nelson 1993; Picchio 2003).

Early attention to gender considerations was given by international organizations. The 53rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women of the United Nations was entirely dedicated to *The Gender Perspectives of the Financial Crisis* (UN 2009). Also the International Labour Organization (ILO) grew immediately concerned about the impact of the crisis on the labour market (Otoabe 2011). These works tend to be focused on women's situations in developing countries, remarking that those women might be more affected by the crisis for a number of reasons. Firstly, the financial crisis has had huge impact on the real economy. Export-oriented countries, both industrialized and developing, have experienced substantial declines in export levels due to a drastic reduction in world demand. Manufacturing production levels have been impacted not only by the reduction of liquidity in the financial market, but also by the reduction of consumer demand, both domestic and external. Developing countries with mono-production/exports, in particular in labour-intensive manufacturing such as textiles and clothing, have been particularly negatively affected by the downturn in international trade. Women and men have been affected differently from country to country, depending on the gender composition of the labour force in the most affected sectors. Where labour-intensive export industrial sectors have been negatively affected, women have tended to be more disproportionately affected, given the higher concentration of female workforce in those sectors. Secondly, the crisis has had an impact on migrant workers and remittances. Migrants working in such sectors as manufacturing and construction are the first to be retrenched. For the sending countries, this would mean a decline in remittances and overall national income, as well as loss of jobs for those migrant workers who are being sent back home. At the household level, this would mean reduced/loss of income for the families back home. About half of the world's migrants are women, and how women and men migrants have been affected depends also on the gender division of labour. Thirdly, the fiscal space for governments' policies has been narrowing. Developing countries' already narrower fiscal space has been further constrained in the global economic crisis. As a general trend, both public investments and social expenditures have been reduced, thus leading to disproportionate negative impacts on women who rely on common public goods and services. Fourthly, the social and poverty impacts are very gendered. Given that women workers form the bottom rung of the world's working poor, the global economic crisis has a long-lasting negative socioeconomic impact on the most vulnerable part of the population, the female one. Finally, the crisis has impacted girls' and women's well-being. As past financial and economic crises show, even when women may not be directly affected by the reduction

in employment and income opportunities as workers, they tend to increase their hours of both productive and reproductive work, as a household-level coping mechanism. Those women who had not been previously engaged in paid work would try to seek income and job opportunities outside the household in order to compensate for the loss/reduction of overall household income when their male family members lose jobs or reduce their working hours. This is called the 'additional workers' effect. Furthermore, because mothers have to increase their hours of paid work, female children are likely to face a high risk of being withdrawn from schools, in order to replace the mother's role in the household. The reduction of income in the households could cause excessive hours of both paid and unpaid work, having a negative impact on the well-being of poor working women and girls. This could also be exacerbated by the cuts in the public expenditures for public services and investments in infrastructure.

Fewer works analyse the situation in developed countries (Dütting 2009; Peterson 2012; Ruggeri 2010). At the beginning of the crisis, the main problem was to discover whether the crisis would hit more men or more women. For example, in the US and the UK the crisis was a 'male' one because job losses were mainly concentrated in the manufacturing sectors (mainly automobile and construction), which are more male-dominated. With the unfolding of the crisis and the implementation of fiscal stimulus packages, the concerns were related to the presence (or absence) of gender considerations in the anti-crisis policies.

Due to the small number of works with gender perspective, this chapter attempts to fill this gap with a twofold goal. On the one hand, it proposes a theoretical framework which enables gender considerations to be taken into account; on the other hand, it empirically applies this framework to the Italian case. The framework presented is intentionally created only for developed countries. I am well aware of the fact that the crisis hits developing as well as developed countries, but I believe that a unified framework of analysis is impossible due to the strong differences among them.

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework in order to put women in the analysis. Section 3 applies the theoretical framework to the Italian case. Section 4 closes the chapter with some conclusions.

## 2. PUTTING WOMEN IN THE ANALYSIS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to analyse the crisis with a gender perspective, I propose a theoretical framework which puts together gender and class dimensions. The

need to intertwine these two dimensions arises from the fact that working women are likely to be affected in different ways by the crisis than working men. This intersection is necessary because the neglect of either dimension gives rise to very partial and bizarre explanations.

A ‘gender-without-class’ type of explanation leads to the awkward idea that this is a ‘macho’ crisis: if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, run by women instead of men, the credit crunch might not have happened (or it might have been lighter). In February 2009, the *World Economic Forum* was animated by the discussion around masculinity as a source of the crisis. The debate was immediately taken up by both international media and academic literature speculating about the more prudent investment style of women (for a very good review of this debate, see Prügl 2012). The main argument was that, since the financial and banking sectors are dominated by men, with women occupying a small portion of top positions, and since men have a greater risk-taker behaviour when speculation is concerned, more women in leading roles might have lessened or even avoided the crisis. This discourse tends to create and enforce a mythological idea of both sexes: ‘macho Wall Street bankers brought to their knees and the feminine phoenix rising from the ashes of casino capitalism’ (Prügl 2012, p.26). Moreover, most of these studies tend to offer explanations based on biological determinations: ‘boys will always be boys’ (Barber and Odean 2001), testosterone (Apicella *et al.* 2008; Sapienza *et al.* 2009), and the ‘chromosome Y factor’ in general. By contrast, women and their ‘natural’ prudent behaviour are shown to be good for business and, consequently, for capitalism. The gender-diversity management literature offers the scientific support: firms with more women in top positions show better economic results (Luckerath-Rovers 2013; McKinsey & Company 2007). This kind of explanation has two main flaws. Firstly, it easily forgets the feminist philosophical debate on the difference between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ (Scott 1986), thus reaffirming the idea that differences in men’s and women’s behaviour is due to ‘nature’ instead of social constructions. Secondly, it gives an explanation of the crisis based on individual behaviours of a certain social group – male bankers and financial CEOs – thus diverting the attention from the capitalism system as a whole, as if the law of motion of capital depends upon the sex ruling it. It is a crisis of ‘the system’: the capitalism system which came to life after the Golden Age, especially since the 1990s, with its new features like the return of monetarism, supply-side economics, the financialization of the economy, just to cite a few.

By contrast, a ‘class-without-gender’ type of explanation hides the impacts of the crisis on the social reproduction system. Despite different approaches, the 1970s feminist debate over domestic labour had the merit

of drawing attention to two important, and today taken-for-granted, insights: (i) capitalist production is not self-sufficient but depends on domestic labour that goes outside capitalist relations; (ii) men and women participate in the labour market in different ways due to their unequal domestic responsibilities (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Coulson *et al.* 1975; Himmelweit and Mohun 1977; Benería 1979; Molyneux 1979). More recently, a number of feminist economists have extended the classical political macroeconomic approach in order to include the social reproduction system (Benería *et al.* 2011; Picchio 2003). This approach conceives well-being not in terms of individual choices, but as a part of a structural framework that includes the material process of production, distribution and exchange of wealth together with the process of social reproduction of the working class. Placing the unpaid work within the macroeconomic circular flows makes it possible to address the question of the quality and adequacy of living conditions and well-being of the working class, not as women's responsibility but as a central and general problem of the capitalist system, thus redefining the traditional view in which the functioning of the system is reduced to monetary transactions. The point is not to reduce the work of social reproduction to an economic variable, but to find an approach that does not relegate it to the margin of the analysis of the system and its dynamics. Therefore, domestic labour performed for social reproduction needs to become a central category for a feminist study of the capitalist system and its crises.

That is the reason why an exhaustive look at the impact of the crisis must keep these two dimensions – class and gender – together, thus unveiling the general and orthodox assumption that the capitalist system is class as well as gender neutral. In order to do that, I create a framework for the analysis, taking the basic idea from Elson (2010). The theoretical framework is shown in Table 11.1, where the rows represent the economic spheres to look at and the columns the evolving time.

The rows represent the sphere of the economy, when gender considerations are taken into account. The first row stands for the *production system* (PS), providing goods and services throughout market transactions, grounded on wage labour commanded by capital, and productive of value. The focus here is on the gender division of the labour market. The second row represents the *public social reproduction system* (public SRS), based on the paid (but non-market) work in public services. This system has a twofold dimension. On the one hand, it provides social public goods/services through the welfare system. Some of them are strictly related to the reproduction of the working class (i.e. the healthcare, the pensions systems, etc.); while others are ways to help families to reconcile paid work and family responsibilities (i.e. nursery school, etc.). On the other hand,

Table 11.1 *The theoretical framework*

|                | Pre-crisis situation   | Impact of the crisis   | Today's situation  |
|----------------|--|--|--|
| PS             | Lower female labour market participation than male one<br>Occupational segregation<br>Contractual inequality<br>Gender pay gap<br>Pension inequality | Which sectors are hit most?<br>Which gender division of labour in those sectors? | Which 'new' gender division of labour?                   |
| 'Public' SRS   | Privatization and 'commodification' of social public goods/services<br>Public expenditure cuts in social public goods/services                       | Any gender considerations in the stimulus fiscal packages?                       | Any gender consideration in the fiscal austerity policy? |
| 'Familiar' SRS | Gender inequality (with strong differences among countries due to different gender norms)  | Visible in the long-run  | Which 'new' gender division of the domestic/care work?   |
| Gender norms   | Strong national differences according to cultural beliefs and values, social traditions and habits   | High risk to bring back the male breadwinner family model                        |  |

it is a source of female employment, because in general, women are more employed in public sectors. The third row represents what I called the *familiar social reproduction system* (familiar SRS), given by the domestic, unpaid and voluntary work carried out within the households by family members. According to countries' social, cultural and traditional beliefs, which can be often supported by public policy, this 'system' can be very gendered.

Splitting the SRS into two parts (the public and the familiar one) enables attention to be drawn to their negative relationship: the burden of unpaid labour increases when the supply of social public goods/services declines, with the 'familiar' welfare becoming a substitute for the lack of the 'public' one. Yet, while the reduction of social public goods/services is visible, recorded and accountable in a country's public budget, the increase in the unpaid labour is invisible, not registered in any national accounts. It is just an increase in the unpaid labour time. For example, a reduction

of hospital stay, politically implemented in order to reduce the public expenditure of the national health service, immediately becomes more care work for the person who, within the family, takes care of the sick person. So, the 'public' and the 'family' part of the SRS are both affected by the government fiscal and budgetary policy, directly the former and indirectly the latter. This is the reason why the fiscal policy becomes an important variable within a gender analysis of the crisis.

The last row takes into account some kinds of *patriarchal dimensions*. I borrow Elson's (2010, p. 203) concept of 'gender norms' and her definition as 'social norms that constrain the choices of men and women, and their associated social sanctions, encouraging forms of behaviour that conform to the norms, and discouraging behaviour that does not'. Gender norms are based on gender stereotypes, social and cultural beliefs, and can have strong influences on male and female behaviour. They can also affect economic outcomes (Badgett and Folbre 1999). Examples of gender norms can be found in the education sphere (i.e. high professional qualification is considered to be important only for men), in the profession one (i.e. workplace is not considered to be the primary area for women, therefore career and professional advancement is deemed unimportant for them), in the housework (i.e. housekeeping and childcare are considered to be the primary functions of women) and in the decision-making process (i.e. in case of conflicts, men have the last say, for example in the choice of the place to live, the school for children, the buying decisions). Therefore, gender norms can contribute to increase or decrease gender inequality. In periods of crisis, gender norms can work as backlash mechanisms. For example, when jobs are scarce it becomes socially and culturally acceptable that men have more right to keep theirs, because they have a family to support. This belief tends to bring back the traditional *male breadwinner family model*. So, changes in gender norms must be taken into consideration in order to see whether new ones come about because of the crisis and how they can influence the long and difficult road towards gender equality.

The framework presented here is suitable for advanced countries only, because I believe that a unified framework for developed and developing countries is not possible, due to their differences. Moreover, the analysis is based on some stylized facts about the current phase of capitalist accumulation common to all advanced countries. Yet, those facts must be taken *cum grano salis* because they are great generalizations and cannot account too much for different national specificities. Finally, it must be kept in mind that the form the crisis has taken and the government responses can vary widely between different countries. The next section deals with the application of this theoretical framework to the Italian situation.

### 3. THE EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: THE ITALIAN CASE

The theoretical framework presented earlier is here applied to the Italian situation.

#### 3.1. The Pre-crisis Situation

As far as the PS is concerned, the labour market of all advanced countries is still characterized by strong gender inequality, despite the feminist movements of the 1970s and the process of feminization of work. To start with, total employment is still male-dominated (Table 11.2).

Furthermore, strong qualitative differences exist. The most significant are: (i) occupational segregation; (ii) contractual inequality; (iii) gender pay gap. Vertical (the so-called glass ceiling phenomenon) and horizontal segregations<sup>1</sup> are still common features among advanced countries (Charles and Grusky 2004). Contractual inequality refers to the fact that men and women are employed with different types of contracts: women have more vulnerable, less secured, informal, flexible and part-time jobs. The neoliberal political agenda with its pressure on labour has pushed towards more flexibility in the labour market. In the advanced countries, there was a general tendency towards a declining of 'secure' jobs, which give welfare protection and social security, and an increase of temporary

*Table 11.2 Total employment ('000), 2007*

|           | M       | F      | Total   | Feminization rate<br>F/(M+F) |
|-----------|---------|--------|---------|------------------------------|
| Italy     | 14,057  | 9,165  | 23,222  | 39.4%                        |
| Euro-zone | 78,314  | 61,400 | 139,714 | 43.9%                        |
| EU27      | 121,463 | 97,607 | 219,070 | 44.5%                        |
| USA       | 78,254  | 67,792 | 146,046 | 46.4%                        |
| Japan     | 37,530  | 26,590 | 64,120  | 41.4%                        |

*Sources:* Eurostat (for Italy, the Euro-zone and the EU27); ILO (for USA and Japan).

<sup>1</sup> Vertical segregation is the unseen, yet unbreakable barrier that keeps women from reaching top positions in both traditionally male and traditionally female occupations. Horizontal segregation (the 'sex-typing' phenomenon) occurs when women are relegated only in some jobs and activities. Both these phenomena are the results of social and cultural stereotypes. In the former case, women are never considered to be as good as men for top positions, despite their qualifications. In the latter case, there is the idea that some jobs are just for women (i.e. the secretary).



positions, characterized by uncertainty, irregularity and interruption, and very little, if any, security. The rise of these temporary positions affected all workers, but their diffusion coincides with the feminization of the labour market (Standing 1999). The gender pay gap is the obvious outcome of the previous inequalities (ILO 2013). Women are prevented from reaching top positions, are stuck in 'typical' female jobs, which are generally low paid, and have more fixed-term and part-time contracts. The result cannot but be less income. Last but not least, in those countries, like Italy, having a public pension system, at the end of their working life women will have lower pensions due to their uneven participation in the labour market (European Commission 2013).

As previously mentioned, the burden of the care and domestic work is strictly related to the welfare system (the 'public' SRS, in my analysis). A common trend of the neoliberal agenda of the advanced countries has been privatization, liberalization and deregulation of many state-owned enterprises, together with the idea of reducing the welfare state. Privatization began in the 1980s in the US and the UK with the neoliberal turn of Reagan and Thatcher. Afterwards it became the inspiration of the European integration, the Maastricht Treaty and its parameters<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, privatization was promoted with the idea that it would substitute inefficient state industries, and it became one of the ten ingredients of the Washington consensus (Williamson 2004–05). On the other hand, for some of the European countries wishing to enter the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), privatization became a tool for monetary convergence, used to tackle budget deficits and meet the stringent criteria for monetary integration. Furthermore, privatization programmes went hand in hand with the reduction of the welfare state ('we cannot afford a welfare system anymore' used to be the general refrain). This common trend was even stronger in the countries of the Euro-zone. The strong preoccupation with public deficit and debt has pushed towards a reduction in public expenditure, which has generally hit social expenditures. The shrinking of the welfare system has been translated into an increased burden of unpaid work, mostly done by women. Nevertheless, economic policy-makers paid very little attention to this problem, thus hiding a withdrawal of firms and state from their social responsibility towards the quality of life.

Privatization programmes, together with the reduction of the welfare state, led to an increase 'commodification' of social public goods/services. More expensive, or even inaccessible, public goods/services means more unpaid work for domestic and care responsibilities. Moreover, since the public sector is generally a source for female employment in all advanced

<sup>2</sup> For a critic of the 3 per cent deficit/GDP Maastricht parameter see Pasinetti (1998).

countries, privatization and reduction of public goods/services meant the lay-off of female public workers. In Italy the situation is even worse, because Italy never had a well-functioning welfare system, even during the Golden Age (Boeri 2000; Del Boca 2009). Moreover, Italy has chosen a welfare in money instead of a welfare in kind, thus reducing its impact on the citizens' well-being.

As far as the 'familiar' SRS is concerned, it is possible to use *Time Use Surveys* to measure unpaid work, although they must be handled with caution (Fleming and Spellerberg 1999; Budlender 2007). At any rate, they are helpful in making the unpaid work carried out within families visible. The 'familiar' SRS is as much gendered as the productive system, despite strong national disparities. Italian women carried out the most part of it (Table 11.3). Yet, the contribution of migrant women, whose work is often informal, flexible and low paid, must also be acknowledged.

Finally, there are also strong national specificities in gender norms, since they are the results of national cultural beliefs and values, acceptable social traditions and habits.

*Table 11.3 Time use of a person aged 20–74 (hours and minutes)*

|           | M          |             | F          |             |
|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
|           | Paid work* | Unpaid work | Paid work* | Unpaid work |
| Italy     | 4:26       | 1:35        | 2:06       | 5:20        |
| Estonia   | 3:40       | 2:48        | 2:33       | 5:02        |
| Hungary   | 3:46       | 2:39        | 2:32       | 4:48        |
| Slovenia  | 4:07       | 2:40        | 2:59       | 4:58        |
| Spain     | 4:39       | 1:37        | 2:26       | 4:55        |
| Poland    | 4:15       | 2:22        | 2:29       | 4:45        |
| Belgium   | 3:30       | 2:38        | 2:07       | 4:32        |
| France    | 4:03       | 2:22        | 2:31       | 4:30        |
| Lithuania | 4:55       | 2:09        | 3:41       | 4:29        |
| UK        | 4:18       | 2:18        | 2:33       | 4:15        |
| Germany   | 3:35       | 2:21        | 2:05       | 4:11        |
| Finland   | 4:01       | 2:16        | 2:49       | 3:56        |
| Latvia    | 5:09       | 1:50        | 3:41       | 3:56        |
| Norway    | 4:16       | 2:22        | 2:53       | 3:47        |
| Sweden    | 4:25       | 2:29        | 3:12       | 3:42        |

*Note:* \* paid work includes time dedicated to study.

*Source:* Istat (2008, pp. 21–2).

### 3.2. The Impact of the Crisis

To understand the gender transmission of the crisis in the PS it is necessary to see the gender composition of employment in those sectors which were hit most. It becomes, therefore, fundamental to have disaggregated data by gender. Yet, unemployment statistics might not be good indicators because of the 'discouraged worker' phenomenon, which is more typical for women than men. The decrease of female unemployment can be just a statistical illusion. Women who lose their jobs may disappear altogether from the labour force statistics because they give up looking for one (thus, they are not counted among the unemployed), or because they increasingly experience difficulty in reconciling work and family commitments. For this reason, I prefer to use employment data.

In advanced countries, the crisis has hit industrial sectors more heavily. For example, in the US and in the UK the crisis struck particularly the automobile and the construction industries, which are typically male-dominated sectors as far as employment is concerned (Hartmann *et al.* 2010). In those countries, women lost fewer jobs because they are employed mainly in retailing and services sectors. Something similar occurred in Italy as well. The Italian labour market started experiencing the effects of the crisis in 2009. Since then, men have lost more jobs than women because the crisis hit heavily the industrial sector as a whole (Table 11.4). It seems that occupational segregation – the fact the more women are employed in the services sectors – has prevented women from being stricken by the crisis. Moreover, the service sectors are those where there seems to be a substitution effect: men are fired while women are gaining jobs.

Yet, the good performance of the services sectors for female employment must be investigated in more detail. The increase in female occupation in

Table 11.4 Absolute variation of Italian total employment ('000), 2009–2012

|                                    | M    | F    | Total |
|------------------------------------|------|------|-------|
| TOTAL                              | -623 | 117  | -506  |
| Agriculture                        | 2    | -21  | -19   |
| Industry, total                    |      |      |       |
| – industry (construction excluded) | -216 | -176 | -392  |
| – construction                     | -235 | 2    | -233  |
| Services                           | -174 | 312  | 138   |

Source: Istat.

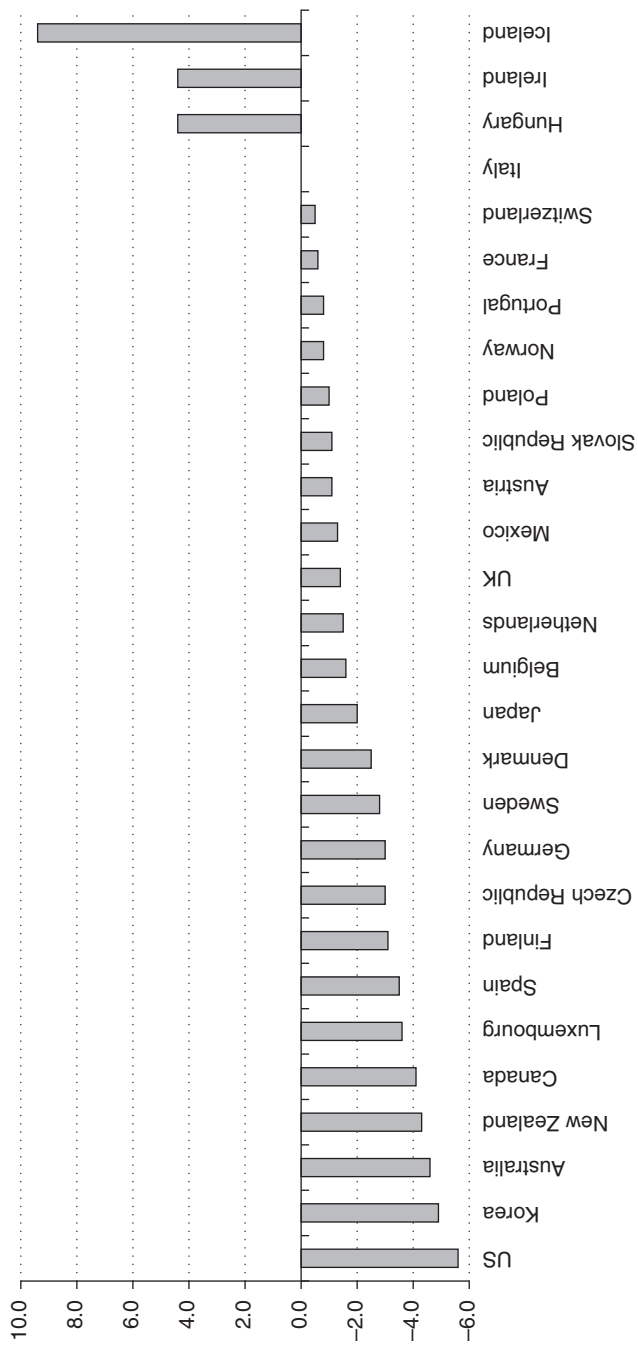
the services sectors is due to the increase in clerks, sellers and unskilled professions.

In the 'public' SRS the effect of the crisis is related to the kind of fiscal policy adopted. In order to reduce the severity of the downturn, most advanced countries included a fiscal boost as part of their policy to respond to the crisis. As a general trend, many European countries used 'automatic stabilisers'; while in the US such expenditure is treated as discretionary to a greater extent. The fiscal stimulus packages of advanced countries were very different in quantity (Figure 11.1) and in the kinds of measures they adopted.

Yet, they did share a common feature: none of them showed any gender consideration (European Commission 2009). A gender audit and budget analysis of these packages concludes that male-dominated industries benefit most. For example, Scheele (2009) points to the gender imbalance of the stimulus packages of the US, the UK and Germany, thus reflecting the underlying gender-political conservatism still orientated to the idea of the 'male breadwinner family model'. In those cases analysed by Scheele, the main beneficiaries of the expansionary fiscal policy were male-dominated industries (i.e. the automotive industries and its suppliers, engineering and the construction and transport industries). Scheele looks more closely at the German case. At first glance, it was assumed that the funds for education might have meant new teachers and nurses, thus supporting predominately female sectors. But, in fact, the money was used for physical infrastructures (i.e. the physical restoration of their buildings), thus boosting the male-dominated construction industry. The European Economic Recovery Plan (EERP) and the G20 Global Plan for Recovery and Reform are other examples along the same lines. They both promote forms of employment but they do not include any kind of gender considerations. As far as Italy is concerned, the case was much simpler to audit because the fiscal packages were practically non-existent (Figure 11.1). Therefore, there was nothing to audit.

Contrary to what has been done, fiscal stimulus packages should have been designed with the goal of achieving gender equality. The support for physical infrastructures should have been accompanied with support for social infrastructures and services. Moreover, since the public sector is an important source of female employment, governments should have avoided budget cuts. Unfortunately, none of this happened. Walby (2009) is very clear: those stimulus packages do not mention any gender-specific impact of the crisis; nor do they include gender-awareness.

The effects of the crisis on the 'familiar' SRS, as well as on gender norms, can be seen only in the long run. Yet, as far as gender norms



Source: OECD (2009).

Figure 11.1 Net effect on fiscal balance in percentage of GDP, 2008-2010

are concerned, what happened in Italy during the summer of 2011 can be taken as an example of the way they work. Ma-Vib, a family-owned engineering firm based in Inzago, near Milan, responded to a downturn in sales by cutting half its workforce and selecting only women for redundancy. FIOM<sup>3</sup> was not only shocked by that decision but, even more, by the reasons given. 'We are firing only women so they can stay at home and look after the children. In any case, what they bring in is a second income', said the company (Hooper 2011). But, what was even worse was that when the union called a strike to protest against the move, only one of the men whose jobs had been saved at the women's expense heeded the strike call. This example shows that the prevalence of 'male breadwinner norms' led the employer and even the male workers to think that men have more right to retain their jobs.

Unfortunately, this belief is quite widespread. The World Values Survey confirms that the 42.8 per cent of people interviewed believe that men have more rights to keep their work than women when there is a scarcity of jobs<sup>4</sup>. This change in gender norms due to the crisis might bring back the 'male breadwinner family model', thus walking away from gender equality and equal opportunities.

### 3.3. Today's Situation

In the PS, today's situation depends on the job losses occurred earlier. The crisis could have increased or decreased occupational segregation, according to the specific national situations. In Italy, as well as in the most advanced countries, the crisis was a 'macho' one, because it hit the sectors with a higher male employment than female (i.e. industry and construction). Thus, in Italy, today's total employment is more feminized than before the crisis (41.5 per cent in the first three quarters of 2013 (Table 11.5) compared to 39.4 per cent in 2008 (Table 11.2)). Yet, when looking at more disaggregated data, men lose jobs in the industrial sectors while women gain jobs in the service ones. Therefore, the final result is a reinforcement of occupational segregation. Despite the fact that men lost more jobs than women and, consequently, unemployment is less feminized, inactivity is a typically female feature of the labour market (Table 11.5). Not only inactivity as a whole, but inactivity due to discouragement (66.2 per cent) and to family responsibilities (91.5 per cent) are very feminized in the first three quarters of 2013. This data can be seen

<sup>3</sup> FIOM is the Italian General Confederation of Labour's (CGIL's) trade union for metalworkers.

<sup>4</sup> [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

Table 11.5 Italian labour market ('000), 2013Q3

|                                     | M      | F     | Total  | Feminization rate(F/total) |
|-------------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|----------------------------|
| Employment                          | 13,103 | 9,321 | 22,424 | 41.5 %                     |
| Unemployment                        | 1,681  | 1,384 | 3,065  | 45.1 %                     |
| Inactivity                          | 5,256  | 9,244 | 14,500 | 63.7 %                     |
| – of which: discouragement          | 594    | 1,166 | 1,760  | 66.2 %                     |
| – of which: family responsibilities | 210    | 2,265 | 2,475  | 91.5 %                     |

Source: Istat.

as women's increasing difficulties in reconciling paid and unpaid work, especially after the cuts in social expenditure due to the Italian austerity measures.

The situation in the 'public' SRS depends on the kind of fiscal policy implemented. So, in this case, a distinction must be made. On the one hand, there is the US expansionary fiscal policy while, on the other hand, there is the European sovereign debt crisis. An enormous amount of money has been paid out of state funds worldwide for bank bailouts and stimulus packages, thus leading to an increase in the sovereign debts of some European countries. The European debt crisis has already lent apparent plausibility to the notion that countries of the Euro-zone should reduce their indebtedness drastically. Governments have two ways to reach that goal: limiting public expenditure and raising taxes. The governments of the most indebted European countries have decided on a combination of both options. Restrictive fiscal policy has two consequences: a drop in female employment and an increasing potential to jeopardize women's reconciliation of paid and unpaid work. In an open letter, the European Federation of Public Services Unions (EPSU) has asked the European Commission for more gender equality and awareness in the current crisis<sup>5</sup>. The rearrangement of the public sphere and the withdrawal of the state from its responsibility, due to this restrictive policy, will lead to a worsening of women's living conditions, as women are much more dependent on public physical and social infrastructures. In addition, this worsening is also due to the neoliberal agenda, which enforces further privatizations, thus leading to an increasing influence of private capital on ever larger areas of social life, crucial for women's opportunities to enter the labour market. So, in the end, restrictive fiscal

<sup>5</sup> www.epsu.org/a/6713.

policy will have a ‘lag effect’ on the financial crisis, which will affect women more than men.

In the ‘familiar’ SRS, the consequences of the crisis becomes a paradox: too little paid work for everybody and too much unpaid work just for women (Antonopoulos 2009). While downsizing, firing and restructuring are all sources of job losses, gender-blind fiscal stimulus packages and the later fiscal austerity increase domestic and care work. Unfortunately, unlike paid work, these costs remain invisible: they cannot be measured and they are not seen as problems to be addressed. So, the ‘familiar’ SRS, with women at the centre of it, becomes the shock absorber for the austerity measures. A shifting of burdens from the visible economy of state and market to the invisible one of unpaid work occurs. All this will very likely lead to the intolerable situation of women withdrawing from the labour market, due to the increasing difficulty of reconciling work with family commitments. This is exactly what has been happening in Italy in this period.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis proposed in this chapter is an attempt to bridge a gap: a gender perspective when looking at the impact of the crisis. In fact, the impact is very gendered, but not only the impact, as the policy responses to the crisis are also very gendered. Therefore, in order to see this gendering, the analysis must look at both the production and the social reproduction systems. The analysis must be carried out at the macroeconomic level, by looking to the ‘enlarged’ capitalist system, where the unpaid work and domestic labour are taken into consideration. Also the fiscal policy – the former fiscal anti-crisis packages and the later austerity measures of some European countries – is a very gendered variable. Expansionary fiscal policy must be assessed as to whether it is designed to protect women as well as men, thus also checking the situations in the public jobs and the distributions of public subsidies for unemployment. Austerity measures must be assessed to see if their cost in terms of cuts in public expenditures is fairly distributed between the two sexes (it is worth remembering that it is not an aim of the chapter to evaluate their ability to solve the European debt crisis, but I do not think they do).

The feminist debate on productive and reproductive work has returned in this time of crisis, emphasizing the gender-segregated labour market, the gender pay gap and the unsolved issues of domestic unpaid work and immigrant domestic labour. Despite years of feminist theory on women’s invisible reproductive labour, the dominant economic and political thinking



still does not count and value it. Most analyses with a gender perspective propose a reform of the financial architecture with more democratic control (Antonopoulos 2009; Elson 2002); the need for a gender economic view, which includes social reproduction as a basis for anti-crisis policies; sustainable livelihoods, decent work, gender equality and women's rights. Moreover, specific recommendations as far as fiscal policy is concerned include the gender budgeting of the fiscal stimulus packages and of the austerity measures, in order to build an economic system that includes unpaid as well as paid work as a basis for policy-makers.

Unfortunately, although the crisis has shaken the belief in the free market, it has not altered the theoretical, political and ideological foundations of the neoliberal agenda. So far, the only change is that nation states have temporarily reappeared as the vehicle to allocate national tax money to bankrupt firms and banks. Yet, burdening national budgets with these enormous debts will lead to further privatization, and the additional rollback of welfare regimes will result in a worsening of the conditions of women's lives.

The only hope left is that the crisis will be an opportunity for putting the unsolved question of the social reproduction problem at the core of economic analysis.

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