



Exchange of good practices on gender equality

The role of men in
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Fathers between Familism and Social Change. The case of Italy

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1. The cultural and policy context of fatherhood in Italy

Italy occupies a rather peculiar position among western countries when it comes to family policy in general and policies directed at fathers in particular. Italian culture may be defined as *familistic*. By *familism* we mean a set of normative beliefs that describes a strong attachment and loyalty to one's family, emphasises the centrality of the family unit, and stresses the obligations and support that family members owe to both nuclear and extended kin (see for example Saraceno 2003; Rossi 2009). This includes a strong reliance on family for material and emotional help.

In a familistic culture, the norms and traditions of the family are transmitted to the younger generation, and people usually perceive these norms to be fair and legitimate. If family is seen as the crucial foundation of society, a sense of society is not very strong, nor is a sense of the state (Ginsborg 1989 and 1994). The familistic culture also tends to assume that all family members experience family life in the same basically positive ways. This assumption persists despite considerable evidence that women and men often experience the rhythms of a family's life together from quite different perspectives. Familism is also at the root of the very common attitude that considers young people in perpetual need of care and assistance.

As Dalla Zuanna (2001) explains, familism is not only a general attitude toward the 'traditional' family, based on marriage and children, with the breadwinner-father and the housewife-mother. Familism and the traditional family are certainly linked, but familism can persist even where traditional family life declines. This is what happens in contemporary Italy, where fertility is low and where 'new' marital and reproductive behaviours (divorce, cohabitation, extra-marital fertility) are spreading (see for example Ruspini 2011, ISTAT 2014a). The familistic culture has indeed contributed to creating the model of "few but high quality children" (Dalla Zuanna 2004; Livi Bacci 2004). Couples renounce having an extra child in order to guarantee the 'best' to those they already have, investing very high energies and expectations. The total fertility rate in Italy - 1.4 children per woman in 2012 - was one of the lowest in the world in the Nineties (1.19) and it is still among the lowest in Western Europe. As Tanturri and Mencarini (2008) wrote, recent fertility theories, as well as empirical studies have taken into consideration gender inequality as a possible explanation of lowest-low levels of fertility in Southern Mediterranean countries.

Familism has its good sides: in Italy (the same is true, for example, for Spain, Greece, Mexico¹: Gérman, Gonzales, and Dumka 2009) family has acted as an informal support network (a social security cushion), offering care services for children, the elderly and sick people – services provided by the welfare state in other countries. This has contributed to reinforce family solidarity between generations, as well as to create broad family networks. The negative compensation of this family economy model has affected the female collective: familism implies a prioritisation of the needs of the family over those of women (Saraceno 1994). Familism also influenced men's contribution to housework and child care and the visibility of men's changes: as we will shortly see, Italian family policy is characterised by a legalised absence of men's support.

Due to the fact that care work still remains the responsibility of women, women's job opportunities can be seriously compromised by having children (Pacelli, Pasqua, and Villosio 2007; ISTAT 2007). Maternity forces many women to retire from their professional life. In Italy, the employment rate among mothers with children is one of the lowest in Europe: 54.3 percent in 2013 (ISTAT 2014b).

The Italian cultural system and welfare state based on familism have proven difficult to change, also due to the persistence of a strong male domination of political life, with a low percentage (11 percent) of women's representation in Parliament over the last decade, and political culture, with a widespread idea that women's main role is in the private sphere of the family rather than in the public, political and professional areas (Guadagnini and Donà, 2007).

The Italian political sphere is showing some positive signs. In November 2012, the Italian Government (led by Prime Minister Mario Monti: November 2011-April 2013) approved a Decree-Law (Decreto Legge no. 215/2012) to promote a more balanced gender representation within the legislative and executive bodies of the Italian local entities (Municipalities, Provinces and Regions). The Italian government has seen other changes. Enrico Letta's Government (April 2013-February 2014) introduced key legislation to achieve gender equality. One of the first major reforms, passed in late May 2013, was to approve the adoption of the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women. This Government also passed a new Law (Decree-Law 14 August 2013) that will make it easier to protect women against domestic violence. The new legislation includes mandatory arrest for stalking and family abuse, with the abusive spouse subject to immediate removal from the home when there is any risk of violence. Matteo Renzi's government (that took office in February 2014) appointed eight women, the highest proportion to date.

However, legislative processes cannot be disconnected from a long-term planning of gender change. In other words, legislative measures should be supported, preceded and followed by gender-sensitive, comprehensive education and training programmes. Some of these efforts and actions will be discussed in the next paragraph.

1 There is an implicit assumption in the existing literature that familism is primarily applicable to Italian or Hispanic people. However, as Schwarz (2007) notes, there is some evidence that familism may apply to other cultures and ethnic groups as well. For example, Papadopolous (1998) speaks about a "Greek familism". Coohy (2001) found that familism was protective against child abuse for both Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites.

2. The Social Construction of Fatherhood and the Related Policy Debate

In Italy, the social construction of paternity is the story of an absence of fathers from family policy (Ruspini 2006). Italian legislation has dealt very little with paternity and support to the fathers' care functions. We may think, for example, of Law no. 1204/30 December 1971 on the protection of working mothers. This legislation defined the policy of maternity leave – i.e. not allowing pregnant women to work in the two months before the delivery date and in the three months following – with an allowance of 80 % of their last pay (the time limits could be extended in case of pregnancy at risk, heavy or harmful work, etc.). No reference was made to paternity, however, or to any kind of exemption from work for the father. We had to wait several decades to see a significant change (Law 53/8 March 2000, see below).

In the year 2000, in response to the 1996 EU directive on parental leave, new legislation came into force, providing the option of parental leave and introducing the individual, rather than non-transferable, right of male employees to take time off work, in order to care for their children. In contrast to maternity leave² parental leave is not mandatory and is dependent upon negotiation. We are referring to Law no. 53/8 March 2000 "*Provisions for the support of maternity and paternity, for the right to care and training and for the coordination of urban temporalities*". This Law introduced important innovations regarding, in particular, incentives to fathers taking care of their children and the extension of the possibility to stay at home up till the child's eighth year of life. The leave available extends to 10 months in total (extended to 11 months, if the father takes at least three months), at 30 % of salary until the child is 3 years old (and subsequently unpaid, but available until the child reaches the age of 8 years).

However, the ISTAT Report on Work-life Balance (2011) shows that the use of parental leave remains very limited and stable among fathers: only 6.9 % of the entitled fathers – with at least a child under 8 – took up leave in 2010 (take up rate in 2005 was 7.5 %) and only less than one out of five for at least a month. Conversely the take up rate is remarkably higher for women (45 % of mothers exercising their entitlement in 2010) and in addition most of them (70 %) stay at home for at least a month (ISTAT 2008, 2011). The reasons most often reported by fathers for not using parental leave were (1) that they did not need it because their partner or another person cared for their children (27 %), (2) that they preferred working as a personal choice (21 %), (3) that their partner used the entire leave (13 %), or (4) that they were not entitled (20 %) (ISTAT 2011). Only 4 % of the fathers report financial reasons for not taking leave. As in other countries, public sector workers in Italy are more inclined to take paternity or parental leave: the take-up rate is high (around 50 %) among the civil servants fathers. As Baker, Miller, Bosoni and Rossi (2011) explain, in Italy, there is equally no real fiscal incentive supporting parental leave

2 Italian employed women can stay home with 80% of their wage (but in many cases—e.g. in the public sector—with full pay) during the last two months of pregnancy and the first three months after giving birth (or, alternatively, during the last month of pregnancy and the first four months after the birth of the child), and can go home to nurse their babies during works hours for a maximum of two hours a day (full-time work; one hour if the work day is less than 6 hours) in the baby's first year of life. In Italy, paternity leave exists only insofar as it may be invoked (up to a maximum of three months after the birth of the child) if the mother is sick, dead or absent, or if the father has sole custody. In such circumstances, the father is entitled to three months' leave, paid at 80 % of salary (see for example Addabbo and Giovannini 2013).

and the concept of fathers taking time off work to look after children remains stigmatised (Rossi 2006; Mazzucchelli 2011). Although the introduction of the above mentioned Law no. 53/2000 represents an innovative attempt to foster a cultural change in parenting roles and that of fatherhood, there are significant doubts over its actual success.

Italian fathers have been entitled to paternity leave (only one day off) only since 2012. Before 2012, maternity leave could be transferred to fathers in certain conditions. The father has the right to paternity leave in all those cases when the mother did not make use (or made only partial use) of maternity leave. That is, because of the mother's death or serious illness, her abandoning the family or sole custody of the father in case of separation or divorce³. In case of adoption or foster care adoption, the working mother can renounce (totally or partially) her maternity leave to the father. Following the request of the EU Parliament, a parliamentary debate began in June 2010 regarding the introduction of a compulsory and fully paid paternity leave. The very recent employment law reform (Law 92/2012, The Reform of Italian Employment Law) introduced, on a trial basis for the years 2013-2015, an important, albeit symbolic, innovation. Starting from January 2013, employees who become fathers are entitled to: 1) a one day compulsory paternity leave; 2) two days of voluntary leave from work, which can be used as an alternative to the mother's compulsory maternity leave and with her consent. That is, fathers can take two additional days if the mother agrees to transfer these days from her maternity leave allocation. The above days of leave should be used within the fifth month after the child's birth and the employee must notify to the employer his intention to take the leave at least 15 days in advance. The leave is paid by INPS (Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale-the Italian Social Security Body): paternity leave compensation is 100 % of pay (Addabbo and Giovannini 2013).

Demands for change have multiplied even in the Italian familistic context. The forms of cohabitation and making of a family are now changing (see for example Crespi 2007; Rossi 2009; Ruspini 2011, Santoro, 2013, ISTAT 2013a). These social changes vary by region but also include more divorces, stepfamilies, multiethnic families, and unmarried families. Consequently, Italians are starting families later (typically at around 35 years' old – 2-3 years later than the European average – in the case of men) and fertility is low.

Changes in female identities increasingly tend to involve male partners and fathers. Women, who (especially in the years of the economic boom) had been concerned with the management of the home and care, have become increasingly less willing to be the ones to deal exclusively with family matters. This decline in motivation is due to the lack of institutional family support, to women's new competences – consequent to more extensive education and growing schooling rates – and because they are increasingly able to access the labour market.

³ The legal separation in Italy does not break up the marriage, but instead divides the legal communion, the duty of marital fidelity and necessity to cohabit. Moreover, the legal separation of the spouses in Italy, unlike a divorce, is temporary so that the couple can reconcile, without formalities before the Tribunal or in the City Hall of their residence issuing an ad hoc declaration. In Italy, almost all divorces are granted on the ground of legal separation lasting for three years since the first hearing in the separation procedure. Although attitudes towards separation and divorce are becoming more neutral as society becomes more secularized, such transitions still bear the hallmark of stigma (Rossi, 2006).

It has therefore become necessary to prepare the new generations of men for an encounter with the 'new' women and 'new' models of masculinity.

Several initiatives aimed at supporting the changes observed in new family forms and at shifting traditional forms of masculinity towards a gender egalitarian culture have been developed in Italy. A number of them are national initiatives while others have a local dimension and some are official or unofficial policies.

We begin by mentioning some key legislative initiatives concerning fatherhood and fathers' child custody. Above all, the already mentioned Law no. 53/8 March 2000 regarding support for maternity and paternity and parental leave.

Law no. 54/8 February 2006 is also noteworthy. This Law identified shared custody as the preferred model in custody cases for the children of divorced parents. The Law was demanded by the various associations of separated fathers to combat what was described as "*inequality of treatment in lawsuits for separation and custody of minors*". The Law modifies the existing legislation (Art. no. 155 of the Civil Code and Art. no. 708 of the Civil Code) regarding the custody of children in cases of separation or divorce of parents, in which the rule is sole custody and joint custody is an exception. Following this law, shared custody has therefore become the main solution in cases of separation or divorce. With the new law, the judge normally entrusts the children to both parents without having to choose between them. For questions of ordinary administration, parental power would then appear as a shared right, with a number of duties to be attributed to both parents according to the areas of competence linked to their past experience, their aptitudes and to indications of preference made by the children.

The educational project *Condividiamo con i papà* (Let's share with fathers) is aimed at helping fathers become more involved with their children. This project is sponsored by the province of Turin, the association *Il Cerchio degli uomini* (Men's Circle), and the maternity hospital S. Anna. Through child birth education classes fathers are offered the opportunity to discuss gender stereotypes in parenting and various parental leave opportunities.

Padri coraggiosi (Brave Fathers) is a web and media campaign, sponsored by the Provincia of Bologna and funded by the European Social Fund, aimed at raising awareness about the need to share caring activities among parents. The campaign started in May 2007 and especially targets young fathers. It aims to create a better appreciation of men's care activities and reduce the practice of maternal gatekeeping in performing care. The media campaign uses a variety of strategies: billboards in public places, press releases for newspapers, TV and radio, and a free brochure distributed throughout the area with information for fathers on the 2000 parental leave law.

Another phenomenon is emerging on the cultural and symbolic level: the movement for fathers' rights, as part of the more general men's rights movement. We refer to those groups aimed at re-conquering the paternal role in the right to custody of children after marital separation and – in some cases – proposing a reformed image of fatherhood compared with the 'traditional' model. These associations often meet, join in movements such as the *Armata dei Papà* (*Dad's Army*), or organise appeals, demonstrations, marches, campaigns and pressure actions on the issues of fatherhood and claims for men's rights.

3. Transferability of the Good Practices of Finland, Austria and Iceland

Empirical evidence shows a trend of convergence between women and men in their behaviours, desires, and in their gender attitudes and roles, in and out of the home. This is true for Italy but also for other European countries (Toulemon, 2010). These changes could effectively challenge sexism and gender stereotypes. The new women's and men's lifestyles, attitudes, and roles may promote trends that encourage gender equality.

However, the interplay between the past and present raises the key question of how contemporary modernity relates to and interacts with the 'old' institutions, norms, rules, values, and with the familistic culture. One of the biggest challenges for Italy and its culture is indeed how to support the positive convergence of gender identities, perceptions and roles, the generational turn, women's empowerment but also men's changes.

The Italian fatherhood regime is in transition. While the father as a breadwinner is far from losing its importance, the traditional identity of good father as a good provider without direct involvement in nurturing is slowly eroding. The 'new' fathers or 'nurturing' fathers who are more involved in care activities are emerging now, but within a legal and cultural framework that is still predominantly shaped by traditional gender norms. It is not by chance that, similarly to mothers, also fathers have to face the challenge of work-family reconciliation. Will the 'new' fathers create a new environment of social diffusion that will change Italian family and work life? This is difficult to tell and will not only depend upon how effective new policy interventions will be, but also on how mothers will respond to this.

In a familistic culture, a simple transferability of good practices (e.g. the extensive Icelandic law on parental leave; the Austrian Papamonat, the Finnish example) may not be enough. In order to support the involvement of men/fathers in gender equality in the Italian context, a combination of different actions seems necessary (Tanturri and Ruspini, forthcoming).

- Extension of compulsory and paid paternity leave could be useful to induce fathers to stay at home with their children and, through a process of learning-by-doing, to become skilled at being able to run all the routine tasks, and therefore interchangeable with mothers. In Italy paternity leave has just been implemented, but it has been designed as merely symbolic. Consistent policies on gender equity (e.g. the Icelandic law on parental leave; the Finnish example, the Austrian Papamonat, the Finnish good practice). may contribute to induce more fathers to take up paternity leave and employee to consider it a worker's right.
- Implementation of planned educational programmes designed to enhance fathering skills and promote paternal family involvement, with particular attention to key moments in the life course, such as separation/divorce, could be helpful in a process of empowering fathers.
- Promoting active fatherhood in media campaigns is necessary in a context where motherhood is considered more central for children's well-being than fatherhood. Due to the mother-centred culture even employed mothers maintain their childcare time by cutting back on their own leisure, personal care, and

sleep. This suggests that mothers may actively limit fathers' care opportunities through gate-keeping, thereby hampering their involvement with young children. Mothers might do this because they wish to retain control of a domain they feel expert in, or they do not trust fathers to deliver as high a standard of care as they themselves provide (see for example Bianchi and Milkie 2010). Hence the educational programmes and campaigns need to include mothers so that more egalitarian views of parenting are developed by both genders.

- Increased adult male presence in schools and child care centres and the revision of children's and school books – so that both mothers and fathers are shown performing care work and paid work – would help reduce traditional gender expectations regarding child care. In order to reduce gender stereotypes, the development of new educational structures and processes for the new generations should include education on the non-gendered preparation for parental and care functions, on the diversity of family relations, and on the plurality of gender identities.
- An investment in the research on fathers and the production of adequate data on them – nowadays extremely fragmented or even non-existent – would allow to show the difficulties and/or the resistance of different typology of men in assuming the role of the fathers fully and allow to design and implement measure to support fatherhood effectively. In the Italian case, there is a specific need to implement research on men and the work-life balance.

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