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Instruments to foster long-term paternal involvement in family work in Italy

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1. The Italian context

1.1. Paternal involvement in family work

The country context is characterised by a persistent gendered division of family work, men being prevalently responsible for financial provisions and women for care1 (Saraceno & Keck, 2010; Naldini & Jurado, 2013; Istat, 2015).

Men’s contribution to family work in the past decade has grown at a higher speed than before. From 2009 to 2014, the daily time dedicated by adult men to family work increased by 12 minutes, and previously the male contribution had increased by only 17 minutes in twenty years. Gender asymmetries, however, remain substantial. Men devote 7.6% of their daily time to family work (on average 1h50'/24), while women dedicate 21.7% (on average 5h13' per day) (Istat, 2016). The difference is almost three hours a day for couples without children and six hours a day for couples with children (Francavilla et al., 2010). The gender asymmetry is less sharp in dual earner couples. Paternal involvement in childcare concerns mainly interactional/playing activities and less physical care (Istat, 2016). In 2009, 19% of fathers were involved every day in at least three routine material care activities (such as feeding or dressing the child, putting to bed, giving a bath, changing the nappy); 35% engaged in no more than two of these activities every day, and 46% of fathers did not engage on a daily basis in material care activities (Mencarini & Solera, 2015).

1.2. Transition to parenthood and the role of policies

The transition to parenthood in Italy, as in other European countries, has been found to be a crucial phase reinforcing gender asymmetries in the division of care and paid work responsibilities, including in the context of highly educated egalitarian couples before the first child’s birth (Naldini, 2015; Grunow & Evertson, 2016).

Policies addressing work-family reconciliation during this phase are therefore key instruments to fostering long-term paternal involvement in family work. According to empirical patterns of take-up rates, countries which have instituted individual non-transferable and well-paid parental leave have higher take-up rates among fathers.

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1 The increase in time spent by women in the paid labour market has not been accompanied by a symmetric increase in time dedicated to family work by men. Women’s labour-market participation has increased since the late 90s, especially among more highly educated women. However, it remains comparatively lower than men’s, and the difference between employment rates increases with the number of children (Istat, 2015; Eurostat, 2017). Also, part-time work was not equally spread between men and women: in 2016, 8.3% of men in employment worked part time, compared with 32.7% of women (Eurostat, 2017). One out of 4 women in Italy exited the labour market after maternity and 67% declared they resigned because of the impossibility of reconciling family and work (Istat, 2012; 2015).
On the other hand, the less paid the parental leave, the less often it is taken by fathers (Ray, Gornick & Schmitt, 2010; Saraceno, 2011).

1.3. Instruments to support work-family balance

In Italy, there is a clear distinction between maternity, parental and paternity leave.

**Maternity leave** is a five-month period of abstention from work (2 months before + 3 months after the child’s birth, or 3+2) paid at 80% of salary (100% for some categories of employees). Maternity leave is compulsory except for self-employed mothers, who are entitled to indemnity, but not obliged to work abstention.

**Parental leave** has been an individual and non-transferable entitlement since 2000 (Law no. 53). The definition of childcare as a parental responsibility and not just a maternal one was an important policy shift (Naldini & Saraceno, 2008). Each parent may be absent from work for a maximum of six months, without exceeding 10 months in total. An additional month is offered if the father takes parental leave for at least three months, even if not consecutive. The parental allowance is 30% of salary for a maximum of six months in total, paid by the National Institute of Social Security for children under 6, paid accordingly to an income threshold for 6- to 8-years old children, and unpaid for children from 8 to 12 years old. Fathers’ take up of parental leave remained almost insignificant in the first years of implementation, involving less than 2% of fathers (Crosta, 2008). Then it started to increase, but it still concerns a small fraction of entitled fathers. From 2009 to 2016 the percentage of fathers who used parental leave on the beneficiaries in the private and agricultural sectors increased from 8.6% to 17%.

The Jobs Act of 2015, in addition to raising the ages of the child which entitle, respectively, to the parental allowance and to unpaid parental leave, introduced the possibility to convert parental leave to part time work, in order to be able to return earlier but reducing the working hours. Moreover, it shortened the time required for parents to inform their employers from 15 to 5 days.

While maternity leave has the same duration for all workers, parental leave is shorter for the self-employed and temporary workers: three months during the child’s first year. Unemployed parents are not entitled. Fathers who are temporary workers or self-employed are entitled only under particular circumstances.

**Paternity leave**, compulsory and fully paid in the first five months following the birth of the child, was introduced in 2012 for one day (optional for another two days on the condition that the mother forgoes two days of her own compulsory maternity leave), and temporally extended to 2 days (+ 2 optional) in 2016 and 4 days (+ 1 optional) in 2018. The impact of this measure is still limited and few fathers take advantage of the optional day (Martino, 2018).

Decree No. 151/2001 also provides for leave for the illness of a child, leave for workers taking care of disabled persons, time off in connection with childcare, and time off for workers taking care of disabled relatives. All these provisions are also granted in the case of adoption and official custody of a child. Single parents are entitled to 10 months of parental leave.

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2. Policy debates: Challenges and priorities addressed

2.1. Parental leaves and allowances

Work-family conciliation issues (including parental leave, parental allowances and vouchers to pay childcare services) have never been on the foreground of the policy debates in Italy, with the partial exception of the late nineties, when the new law on maternity and parental leaves was discussed and then approved (Law 53/2000). Moreover, they are persistently framed as women’s, and particularly mothers’, issues only. Even the introduction of fathers’ entitlement to parental leave and of the symbolic paternity leave has been mainly framed as a way of supporting mothers to remain in the labour market, rather than as (also) a means to acknowledge time to care also a social right of fathers.

Conservative parties tend to frame the work-family reconciliation as mainly a female question and focus on demographic issues, in particular supporting the ‘traditional’ family (married couple with children) to increase birth rates. Social-democratic parties focus on how to promote a cultural change beyond the male breadwinner model. However, work-family balance issues are not central in the Italian political agenda.

In part, the debate has concerned the limited entitlements of temporary and atypical workers, since the duration of leave and the amount of the allowance depend on the parents’ employment positions, and the negotiation with the employer influences the effective possibility of taking leave.

Criticisms also concerned the low level of parental allowance as a disincentive for fathers to take advantage of this entitlement, since their income in general is the higher in the household (when not the only one).

One of the local initiatives addressing this issue in the Piedmont region was the project Together with Dad. This initiative consists of the provision of an economic contribution of 400 euros per month in addition to the parental allowance and is targeted at couples with fathers (adoptive and foster fathers included) who are employees and take parental leave for at least one month during the child’s first year while the mother returns to work. The project had two main purposes: first, encouraging mothers to return to work soon, and second, promoting paternal involvement in childcare and a cultural change towards a more equal sharing of work and family responsibilities.

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3 Child-raising vouchers have been designed in 2012 to help meet the expenses of raising children (baby-sitting or other childcare services) within 11 months following the compulsory maternity leave and as an alternative to parental leave (600 euros/month). Discussion focuses on the fact that mothers (fathers are not entitled) have to choose between parental leave and the voucher.

4 Realised by the Piedmont region from 2011 to 2015 by using national funds for gender equality, and then by three other regions in 2014 (Campania, Emilia Romagna, Trentino Alto Adige). The Piedmont region reactivated a similar initiative for the period 2018-2020 (project Fathers and Mothers Both Responsible and Employed, with European Social Funds). In 2018 the project also foresees 200 euros/months when the mother returns to work part time and 500 Euros for single mothers. Among the beneficiaries, the mothers’ level of education was higher than that of their partners (source: dataset on applications). The initiative was publicised through radio, web, leaflets, a free call centre and pre-birth courses to promote paternal involvement in childcare.
2.2. Towards 15-day paternity leave?

The introduction of paternity leave has inspired debate regarding cultural norms and practices placing primary responsibility for childcare with mothers, not fathers. The 2015 legislative proposal to extend it to 15 days has not been approved so far. Key aspects of ‘involved fathers’ discussed in other countries, such as their desire to spend more time with their children and the beneficial effects of paternity leave for the father-child relationship and for the long-term paternal contribution to family work, are also detectable in the Italian context. Other questions concern changing norms and practices surrounding masculinity, gender relations, fathering and the educational role of fathers. However, these issues are present in expert and civil society debate more so than in political debate.

2.3. An integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Services system

Despite the expansion of early childhood education and care services, there remains a gap between parental leave and childcare services. According to national data, in the year 2014/2015 the supply of formal care services for children younger than three years, both public (36%), and private (64%), covered on average 22.8% of potential users (Istat, 2017). The limited provision of formal childcare services for children under three years is due to the lack of availability of places or alternative forms of care and to high costs (Romano, Mencarini & Tanturri, 2012). On the other hand, Italy has almost universal pre-primary schools for children aged three to six years (scuole dell’infanzia). In 2017 the government issued the National Action Plan, aimed at favouring the implementation of the 0-6 ECEC integrated system in the three-year period from 2018-2020. The plan aims to consolidate and widen the existing ECEC networks, consolidate and strengthen the so-called ‘spring sections’ (sections for children aged 24-36 months annexed to the 3-6 ECEC schools) and widen ECEC services, particularly in areas where such services are lacking. Currently the debate focuses on how to expand the number of beneficiaries, reduce costs and improve quality.

2.4. Child benefits and the demographic question

The justification for the implementation of financial transfers such as the birth allowance5 and, in part, the childcare service allowance6, concerned demographic arguments and, in particular, the need to support the economic efforts of families during the transition to parenthood and motivate men and women to become parents or to have more children.

2.5. Family-friendly policies at the company level?

Reconciliation policies at the company level in Italy are still poorly developed, despite these initiatives are increasing, especially in large companies: flexible work schedules and ‘family-friendly’ measures are not widespread, and many employees are unable to take advantage of them. Moreover, part-time work in increased mainly as involuntary part-time during the economic downturn. The workplace culture plays

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5 Bonus bebé: 80 Euros/month (160 Euros for low-income households) in the child’s first three years, from 2015 to 2017; Bonus mamma domani: 800 Euros to mothers who have a child in 2017.
6 Childcare service allowance Bonus nido: 1000 Euros as contribution to childcare services cost in 2016.
an important role in diminishing fathers' ‘sense of entitlement’ (Lewis & Smithson, 2001) to parental leave (Murgia & Poggio, 2013; Musumeci et al, 2015; Musumeci & Santero, 2018; Cannito, 2018), and, especially in SMEs, parental protection is often perceived as a burden (cfr. Lewis et al., 2014). In the public sector, where expectations of negative impact of taking parental leave are lower, fathers' propensity to take parental leave is higher (Istat, 2011). The discussion concerned how to improve economic competitiveness and employability versus the value of care in itself and how to support the role of fathers as (not marginal/secondary) caregivers and promote a cultural change beyond the male breadwinner model. Since 2016, companies that sign contracts with work-life balance measures have been able to apply for tax relief. Local initiatives have promoted similar measures, especially in SMEs.

3. Transferability potential: Lessons from Germany

Eligibility. The German policy allows parents with different employment conditions, including unemployed, students, apprentices and self-employed workers, to receive benefits. The Italian parental leave and allowances schema excludes some of these categories. Also, for parental leave and allowances, the Italian labour market is characterised by higher protection/benefits for permanent employees and low protection for those with temporary jobs or atypical contracts. Considering the structurally disadvantaged position of the younger cohorts in the Italian labour market, measures to expand potential beneficiaries and address employment inequalities would be desirable in Italy.

Amount of the allowance. Germany implemented a 65% allowance for parental leave, while in Italy it is 30% and only for the first six months. Adopting the German approach also in Italy, would significantly increase incentives for fathers and help to ensure greater recognition of paternal (and maternal) involvement in childcare. Given the budget constraints, and the already high cost of labour, it is however not likely that such change would happen soon. Italy could evaluate the sustainability to test local interventions to increase the replacement rate as an incentive to fathers who take parental leave when mothers return to work such as the Together with Dad project on a larger scale. Moreover, Italy could assess the feasibility of the higher compensation rate for low-income parents, as well as interventions to increase pay for shorter leave. Experiences developed in other contexts show the sustainability of a parental leave and allowance schema based on two different options: a basic plan (longer leave with lower benefits) or a special plan (shorter leave with higher benefits).

Flexibility. Germany implemented flexibilisation of parental leave in terms of part-time. As mentioned before, in Italy the possibility to combine part-time work with parental leave is not provided. It is possible to work part-time only as an alternative to parental leave, for a corresponding period of time and with a reduction in hours not exceeding 50%. These aspects may discourage parents towards this option. Moreover, flexibility should not be understood only as part-time, which halves the salary and is often very rigid, but, for example, variable entry and exit times, or an articulated distribution of working hours during the week, month, year, as in the Dutch system. In Italy, the possibility of taking leave on an hourly basis rather than only a daily basis, introduced in 2012, goes in this direction, although it is currently configured more as a reduced than a flexible work schedule.
Expansion of childcare facilities. Quality and accessibility of childcare services are crucial aspects of supporting fathers’ and mothers’ work-family balance and promoting equal opportunities for the children. In Germany the supply has increased in recent years, although large cross-regional differences remain. Also in Italy, there has been an increase on average, although mostly through private initiatives. Furthermore, cross-regional differences are very large and the Southern regions are far away from the Barcelona target. Further investments would help to increase the coverage rate and reduce the territorial imbalance.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

In order to promote gender equality in paid labour market and care responsibilities, as well as equal opportunity for all children, the question of long-term paternal involvement in family work should be addressed and framed not only, or not predominantly, as a way to support mothers’ participation in the paid labour market, but mainly as an individual social right of children, fathers and mothers.

Effective instruments to fostering ‘involved’ fathering should include not only support for fathers spending more time with their children, but also egalitarian parenting, focusing on training and quality of education, and teaching about caregiving as a valuable activity.

More attention should be paid to the role of infancy experts and workplace cultures in shaping fathers’ reconciliation perspectives and the ‘father as provider’ model of masculinity. Incentives such as tax credits for companies, and especially for SMEs, to support the creation of structures that encourage fathers to be involved in childcare should be useful instruments.

As for the impact on non-transferable leaves and allowances to improve fathers’ participation and the dual earner/dual caregiver model, it is important to identify and remove contradictory incentives at the national and European levels of intervention. Furthermore, inequalities in the labour market, including gender pay gap, should also be addressed to grant support for paternal involvement in the context of socioeconomic disadvantages.

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