Women and Trade Unions, a relationship in crisis?

History and developments in Italy.

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Abstract

Many analyses and debates developed in the last decades around trade unions’ revitalisation, pointing to different national traditions in the varieties of capitalism. Gender equality adds a new perspective to these debates, showing that women can be a crucial test for, and an instrument of, trade union revitalisation. In the current situation in Italy, what are the main challenges facing working women and involving trade unions? And which resources may be available from the Italian historical tradition? The atypical workers are today what the unskilled workers were in the 20th century, a test for the unions’ ability to represent a growing underprivileged workforce, in which women are a relevant part. Women’s protection has developed in Italy through collective bargaining since the action for equal pay in the past and, recently, for the ‘reconciliation’ of work and family obligations. Italian trade unions lack a comprehensive policy for working women, they need to improve the protection and the promotion of women in the labour market and in society, where especially young women, despite their high credentials, are faced with increasing dilemmas about their work and family life. We shall hold that to address these issues is an important challenge for Italian trade unions revitalisation: it would involve gendering the trade unions agenda and mainstreaming their gender issues; it would involve renewing organizational practices and gender relations inside the unions; it would involve combining labour market policies with community and welfare state policies. Despite the growing numbers of women workers we observe an enduring vertical and horizontal segregation that makes representation difficult. In this paper we shall discuss how the economic crisis is changing the presence of women in the labour market and if trade unions are changing themselves for coping with the old and new challenges.

1. Introduction

Are women a burden or a resource for contemporary trade unions? Everywhere trade unions meet similar deep changes in the world of work and welfare, often as a result of globalization. Many analyses and debates developed in the last decades around trade unions’ survival, resistance, or renewal in this period of change, pointing to different national traditions in the Varieties of Capitalism, based for instance on the differences in trade union strength and the degree of their political ‘embeddedness’. To take into consideration gender equality policies adds a new perspective to these debates, showing
that women can be a crucial test for, and an instrument of, trade union renewal. This paper will analyse the relationship between women and trade unions in Italy. In our country the scholars gave a modest attention to the theme with just few exceptions (Beccalli, 1984; Beccalli and Meardi, 2002) compared to what happened in other countries, particularly in the English speaking countries such as the UK and the US (for the UK see Wajcman, 2000; for the US see Milkman, 1987; or the remarkable international comparative work of Cook, 1984; Colgan and Ledwith, 2002).

The relationship between women and Italian trade unions is still ambiguous. In the past, trade unions in Italy with their distinctive egalitarian policy formed a unique alliance with the feminist movement; but in the meanwhile the unions as organisations were (and still are) rooted in basically male social, cultural and organizational models and they found it difficult to cope with the issues of diversity. The Italian case shows two historical legacies, which are particular to and significant for the relation between women and unions: on the one hand, a century-long tradition of universalistic, non corporatist unionism ('class unionism'); and, on the other hand, a remarkable openness of the trade unions to social movements and to political and cultural pressures including the policies of the Italian public government and even the requests of the European and other international authorities. The first legacy meant that women workers where never excluded from trade unions, even in the early days of industrialization at the end of the 19th century. The unskilled workers, including then many women, in general the newcomers, were accepted into the trade union structures in Italy, while they were often excluded or marginalized in other countries. That legacy was reinforced during the late ‘60s and ‘70s, when women (the lower status workers) benefitted from the general solidarity policies of the unions, which did not aim at women as such but in effect resulted, for instance, in very low wage differentials by gender ('unintended feminism'). The second legacy could be seen in two steps: until the '90s the radical feminism of the second wave was accepted in the trade unions structure giving rise also to separate structures representing women within the union organisation itself. That very special experience of trade union feminism was not, however, carried over into the ordinary union power structure and practices (as one would say now, it was not 'mainstreamed'). After the '90s (and until today) as it was mentioned previously, as a response to the pressures, the first steps of positive action were developed with the help of the trade unions.

The two given examples of trade unions' legacy in the Italian case are among the elements most frequently quoted in general in the current literature on trade union revitalisation: first, that the unions should not be entrenched in a 'sectional unionism' deriving from a obsolete hierarchy of labour is in fact considered an important condition for their ability to approach the complex variety of the new population of workers; second, an openness to social movements is seen as enhancing the ability of the unions to find new roots in community-based actions outside the workplace. In Italy these two elements were present in past experiences, but they disappeared or were diluted in the '80s and '90s. On the one side, the solidarity policies have been abandoned in favour of a more differentiated and flexible, sometimes individualized, kind of bargaining (as a result wage differentials by gender, for instance, have increased remarkably); on the other side, the women's separate coordinating committees have almost disappeared, leaving however some sensitivity for
the issues of women’s presence in the unions, as it is shown by the introduction of women’s quotas in some leadership positions, and leaving a widespread sensitivity for gender equality policies, which was captured by the emerging policies of positive action in the late ’80s and the ’90s.

The paper will give first some historical information about the presence of women inside the Italian labour market and the presence of women in the Italian trade unions. Eventually, the paper will present some suggestions from a case research in progress on women’s presence within trade unions in the north of Italy. The conclusions will try to answer the question raised at the beginning: if women are a resource or a burden for trade unions and if trade unions consider women as a key resource for its revitalisation. Will the particular Italian path affect the answer of new challenges?

2. Tradition

In Italy industrialization occurred considerably later than in the other western European countries: in 1901, with an estimated labour force of 15.9 million (in a total population of 32.4 millions) only 23.0% worked in industry and about 62.0% in agricultural labour (Livi Bacci, 1965). Peculiar to Italy at the beginning of the 20th century was the absence of an intermediate level of workers between the top small number of highly skilled workers, organized in 'leagues' (or corporazioni) with a long craft tradition, and at the bottom a mass of young unskilled workers, for whom employment was more contingent. In these three levels women were present only at the bottom (and they were young women).

It is possible to divide the Italian history of women in labour market in four stages: first, the stage in which agricultural work was central for the whole Italian economy; second, the stage in which the textile and garment workers have been the most important segment of the Italian working class, after World War II; then the stage in which there is shift to another important sector of the emerging working class (e.g. the metalworkers - the automobile workers in particular); the last stage started with globalisation and the increase of importance of the service sector (tertiary sector), not necessarily low skill.

Today, it is possible to add a fifth stage: the emerging service sector which is split in two different segments, one extremely guaranteed (e.g. the public sector) and the second with a wide range of positions that include the work of care and poorly valued workers sometimes in non manual jobs. For each of these (five) stages it is possible to look at women’s presence within and outside unions. The fundamental developments of women inside Italian trade unions can be drawn following Beccalli (1984, 1996; Beccalli and Meardi, 2002).

During the stage in which the agriculture worker were dominant (end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th) the labour movement was lacking a strong craft core given the heterogeneity of Italian working class at the time on these basis the first structure of representation of trade unions was mainly horizontal: the Chambers of Labour (or Camere del Lavoro) which often involved not only workers but the community at large, including non wage earning women and men. These horizontal structures were committed to
gender equality; they established several women commissions but they were open to women in leadership positions. In fact, by the way, a distinctive characteristic of Italian unions was the presence of intellectuals. The 'moral political' character of the Italian labour movement has been a very original idea by Robert Michels (1908). This became a method for the recruitment of unions' leaders, and it guaranteed openness to feminism, at the turn of the century as well as in recent years. Not only women were present as leaders in several Chambers of Labour were they had full time positions, but also for several years the president of the powerful agricultural union was a woman intellectual, Argentina Altabelli.

The textile and garment stage (during the ‘50s and the ‘60s): in this period it was the most important segment of the Italian economy, and the textile and garment sector was at the top until the emergence of the metalworking sector. Here one can see a woman at the very top of the textile and garment sector, Teresa Noce, who promoted the central policies both on the side of protection and on the side of equal pay; she also defined a number of women’s commissions inside CGIL supported also by a parallel non-union organization, the Italian Women Association (or UDI, Unione Donne Italiane), a highly politicized organisation of communist and socialist women where also not working women were members.

From the late ‘60s to the ‘90’s the strongest sector of Italian economy became the metalworking industry that attracted quite large numbers of internal immigrants (from the countryside to the cities and from the south to the north of Italy, the massive phenomenon in Italian history of labour migrations). After the hegemony of the textile, in the metalworkers one cannot see a comparable centrality of women workers. Although women have participated in the upsurge of militancy of the ‘60s and ‘70s they were marginal in the remarkable union renewal of those years. In fact even the literature on this upsurge of militancy that centred on the strong metalworker’s union, everybody was unaware that the workers had a gender (Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978). The working class mobilisation prepared the background on which 'trade unions feminism', a peculiar Italian phenomenon, developed. What needs to be underlined is that this specific type of social movement took place parallel to and within the trade unions following the routes of a general mobilisation. In a form theoretically analysed by Tarrow (1994) one wave of mobilisation prepared the resources for a second and different wave. So it happened that trade union feminism took place within the metalworkers union that was not the main area of women’s labour market participation: it did not take place in the service sector, not in the retail trade nor in the banking sector, the segments of employment most feminised at the time. An intention of this paper is in fact to contribute to explore the logic of the representation of women in unions.

The service sector stage (from 2000 onwards): also in Italy the tertiary sector of the economy became dominant in the country with some delay relative to other western European countries. The majority of workers shift from the industry sector to the service sector with a deep change in the structure of economy. The service sector is a heterogeneous world. At the beginning of the 21st century several scholars and observers have been considering this shift as a good ground for women’s promotion in the labour
market and in society also because the rate of participation of women in the educational system in Italy increased considerably at the end of the 20th century, so that women’s credentials became higher than men’s. It is possible to divide this heterogeneous world in different segments: on the one side, a privileged and protected service segment, that in Italy is the public sector; on the other side some strong sectors such as banking at the same time as some emerging areas of precarious work. In the latter, it is possible to see a strong presence of women (especially immigrant women) in several types of occupations: sometimes non-manual jobs including workers with considerable educational credentials, sometimes workers engaged in work of the care usually undervalued such as domestic work, care of the children, the elderly and disabled people (Ambrosini e Beccalli, 2009; Ehrenreich, 2003). As well as the sector has become more heterogeneous the structure of representation became heterogeneous, as the paper will deal with in the next paragraph. Italian trade unions did not answer quickly to the structural changes in the labour force. The historical legacy of the past from the beginning of the 20th century up to the metalworkers of the ’70s which had been special relative to other western European countries were over, this has been the time for a ‘normal’ trade union representation which developed without remarkable signs of innovation; while innovations appeared in public sector unionism both in the UK and the US (Colgan and Ledwith, 2000; Milkman, 2006). At the same time, Italian trade unions have not developed a new and suitable model of representation for the precarious workers of the tertiary service as a whole.

The current stage is heavily influenced by globalization, which on the one side has feebled the remaining strong sector of the manufacturing work (the last years of FIAT history is a good example); where on the other side the new wave of the immigrant workers has increased considerably involving women as primary immigrants in care work and low level service work. The once called working class has shrunk considerably but it still exists with its traditional forms of representation, while on the other side the ‘multitude’ of the other workers has not expressed a structure of representation on its own.

3. Represented and representatives from stage to stage

To summarise the different historical stages in which women’s representation in Italian trade unions has developed one can put forward a few remarks. There have been five patterns of representation of women in unions: one starting at the beginning of the 20th century with the heavy influence of the agricultural unions; the second was built around the textile and garment workers and reflected the structure of the labour force and of the labour movement in general, after the World War II; the third pattern was connected with a general trade union mobilisation at the end of the 20th century; a fourth more 'normal’ phase of representation reflecting a pretty heterogeneous workforce from the end of the 20th century onwards, with a skewed representation in favour of male workers; and a fifth facing the new current phase which is interesting but to some extent confusing, that suggests new roles not only for trade unions representation but also for a women’s role in it.
The first and the third stages are very unusual in the industrialised countries of the west: the agricultural basis of Italian unionism, hence the community base of the organizational horizontal structure of representation, in which women have been so important; the representation coming out of the general upsurge of workers mobilisation in the ‘70s. Around 1975 the first ‘collectives’ of women trade unionists were formed at the local level. The first collectives developed in the areas of working class militancy, like in the manufacturing unions – in particular inside metalworkers -, and not in highest feminised sectors like textile and garment. This female participation developed autonomously and was not an effect of instrumental recruitment. Women inside trade unions criticised the hierarchy and the unequal division of labour that they faced as new union activists. Militant women started to proclaim their difference and their own orientation about labour market and trade union apparatus. The new approach of women dismissed the concept of equal opportunities as the goal to achieve, and aimed at changing the rules of the game for both men and women. The new strategy became the self-organisation of women in the Italian trade unions: feminists wanted to change unions rather than to find a place in them. Trade union feminists achieved their basic demand of autonomy inside the unions although they met a considerable resistance especially among CGIL communists, because in the tradition there was a strong belief in working class unity. These collectives spread rapidly and coordinating committees were formed both at the local and at the national levels. The two examples that have been quoted, the women’s presence at the beginning of the century and the trade union feminism of the last part of the 20th century are in different ways connected with historically unique events. What was peculiar for different reasons was the recruitment in the trade unions organisation of activists and leaders, outsiders from the rank and file: such was the case of the leaders of the powerful agricultural union (Argentina Altobelli to quote the most impressive case), such was the case of the activists recruited as political militant intellectuals during and after the general upsurge of militancy from the ‘70s onwards. These activists were very often students’ leaders (1968), and in these position women had an important role. In both stages those women were not necessarily ‘normal’ wage earners, the male-breadwinner model still dominated the Italian labour market and it was not reflected in the trade unions representation. More in general Italian workingwomen were marginal in that time in the labour market. So far as they were working they where working in different sectors, from where they were representatives, such as teaching for example.

Between these two exceptional cases, one can remark that the textile and garment workers show a more ‘normal’ correspondence between the labour workforce and the recruitment of women’s leaders, although it is remarkable and exceptional compared to the other countries the presence at the top of one woman leader, Teresa Noce, whose career as a CGIL major leader was helped by her political background as a communist and as a leader of the powerful non union association UDI. The powerful influence of the textile and garment unions can well be seen in its adoption of both protection and equality policies. Protection was advocated very strongly without a consciousness of a potential conflict with equality policies: in fact Teresa Noce was a sustainer of both, she not only promoted a very advanced protective legislation for working mothers but also she was the sustainer of the struggles for equal pay. The first target was reached through legislation in
1950; the second through the collective agreements on equal pay in the early ‘60s. Within the CGIL itself one can remember several contradictions. One case can be singled out in the immediate post war period. As it happened in most other countries involved in the war, like the US, the unions ratified the expulsion of women from employment face to the shrinking of the military industry and face to the return home of many soldiers who had been previously employed. Despite the lack of a formal seniority principle the unions decided to defend the male ‘head of the family’.

The fourth stage was a long transitional period in which women’s representation did not emerge with clear characteristics. One had in fact a mixture of different types of representation including a traditional representation of women in the protected public sector and some strong segments of the tertiary world such as banking as it has been mentioned before. During the ‘90s the presence of women inside the labour market and trade unions has incessantly increased. At the end of the ‘80s many intellectual feminist unionists quit the trade unions for other jobs including political or cultural work. The feminists still present at the turn of the century continue to work within Italian unions but the separate structures of women, collectives and committees, suffered a crisis. For example the most important body, the CGIL women’s coordinating committee, was replaced with a women’s forum, a lighter version of the previous body but more autonomous and more visible. The creation of this forum inside the main Italian union created a cleavage between union’s women as many leftist women opposed the idea of the forum; however the CGIL women’s forum planned in 1996, was installed in 1999. After a long period of neglect, the promotion of equal opportunities policies became one of the most important activities for Italian women militants; close to this issue it is possible to find other initiatives, such as working time. About this issue, during the ‘80s Italian feminists abandoned their position against part-time work, but they continued their struggle against the sexual division of labour both in the family and in society. For these latter issues it will be sufficient to remind the CGIL charter of 1996 and that the more convincing efforts were made through collective bargaining.

The fifth stage, the current one. The precariousness became a widespread and dominant characteristic of most occupations in the labour market, including the emerging sector of younger women with high educational credentials. In fact the women with a university degree are in Italy the 15,7%, overcoming the educational credentials of men who are 13,0% (data based on population between 25 and 64 years), even if the percentage of young people with university degree in Italy is one of the lowest in Europe and inside OECD countries (Eurostat, 2014). Despite the high credentials the rate of participation of women in the labour market is still very low: the women with an occupation are 50,5% in 2012 while men are the 71,6%, far away from the Lisbon target (data hide remarkable regional differences, in the south the percentage of women’s labour market partecipation is halted at 34,3 while in the north-east it touches the 61,7%) (ISTAT, 2014). The fertility rate in Italy is very low: it was 1,3 children per woman in the 2003, it is 1,4 in 2012 (ISTAT, 2014). One can say that Italian women neither work nor have children. Trade unions are trying, with some delays, to deal with the issues of work and family balance: work and family balance became an emerging issue in the trade unions agenda from the beginning of the 2000’s and it also involved some attention by young men, as it will be
seen in the next paragraph, this has been happening in several countries, years before Italy, even in the US – the country most far away from the issue of work-family balance (Milkman and Appelbaum, 2013). Despite the efforts of Italian unions for equality in the work-family balance, part-time is basically a matter for women: in the 2012 31,1% of women were working part-time while only 7,2% of men were in the same situation (ISTAT, 2014). Similarly not exclusively for women are other issues to which trade unions have given their attention such as sexual harassment and violence against women: old issues but cyclically reappear and are picked up in the Italian trade unions agenda.

Immigrant workers and in particular working women became a new milestone of the Italian workforce. While Italy has been a century long country of migration it has been in the last decades a target of attraction for migrants coming from different less developed countries (in particular from eastern European countries such as Romania and Ukraine and from Morocco, China and Albania). Inclusion and exclusion as a dividing line within the world of labour such as it was for the unskilled workers versus the hard core workers in the unionism of the early 20th century took up a different form on the border between inclusion through trade union representation and inclusion through sheer mechanisms of citizenship. To become an Italian citizen included to be a worker, to become a worker had to cope with some requirements of citizenship (Ambrosini, 2013). In this process women are a central element whose focus of representation has been shifting from the world of association of different ethnic groups to the trade unions themselves. Still Italy is remarkably behind other countries of the north of the world, such as the US in which organizing immigrants became the new resource of a declining labour movement (Milkman, 2014, 2006).

Working women have a central position face to the strategies of representation since they represent the hard core (it is an oxymoron) of the vulnerable workers who are potentially the losers of the current economic crisis which has started in 2007. They are the bearers of some important dilemmas that trade unions are facing in this second decade of 21st century. This is in fact a period in which a variety of representation is emerging matching to some extent the varieties of capitalism typology (Beccalli et al., 2014). Now the paper will continue and conclude the reasoning about women’s labour representations using some examples out of an on going case studies research on the region Lombardy and the city of Milan, aiming to look at the role of women in trade unions and the type of representation that trade unions offer to women given the shrinking resources within the economic crisis.

4. Unions in the north of Italy: a case study

In order to check what has been presented in the first part of this paper the northern Italian region of Lombardy has been selected and specifically the city of Milan. Both are often defined the ‘locomotives of Italy’ (or lomocotive d’Italia) from the economic point of you (think of the importance of the manufacturing industry, of the services, of fashion and design). From the population point of you Lombardy has the 16,3% of the Italian population and it is the most important region, while Milan is the second large city of the
country with 1,2 million habitants (ISTAT, 2013). In fact Lombardy and Milan are two good tests for the current research. Also referring to the labour market in 2012, 69,1% of Lombards are employed (78,0% of men and 60,0% of women). One includes temporary contract workers. Both for women and for men the temporary contract work rate is the lowest in Italy (11,0% for women and 9,6% for men) showing this way a high and continuous participation both of men and women to the labour market (part time work is not significantly different in Lombardy from the national data) (ISTAT, 2014).

The case study research in progress has been applied to the two major Italian trade unions: CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro) and CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori). CGIL was the heir of the socialist and communist unionism while CISL was the heir of the catholic unionism. The paper concentrates on the CGIL in Lombardy and on the Milan’s Chamber of Labour, particularly on the Women’s Centre in it; and it concentrates on the CISL Lombardy plus the CISL ‘Milano Metropoli’. In fact it has been decided to give a special attention to the specific case of Milan city, the same which had been done in a previous research, one of the very few researches developed on this subject in Italy (Beccalli e Meardi, 2002); and it was also decided to extend the area of observation to the Lombardy region as a whole. This is useful not only to give a more complete picture of subject but also because of the merging processes of the unions themselves so it is necessary now to explore the regional dimension rather than the city dimension. The research is based on the documents produced by the unions themselves for the period 2002-2014 and, mainly, on some interviews with union leaders and union members.

4.1 CGIL Lombardy and Milan

CGIL Milan has historically been a vanguard among trade unions in the dialogue with their feminist movement and in the struggles for women rights (Beccalli and Meardi, 2002). The general secretary of CGIL Lombardy is a woman and out of six regional secretaries three are women. One of the secretaries is also in charge of women and equal opportunities issues: her task is mainly to interface with the provincial chambers of labour and with the vertical categories where there is also a structural collaboration with the women’s centre. The regional secretary does not have a budget of her own but she has the possibility to accede to resources for developing her tasks, for organising conferences, seminars and training courses on trade unions jointly developed with the other important unions in the territory (such as CISL). CGIL has also established as a statutory norm a quota system that requires that gender presence must be not less than 40% nor more then 60% (it has to be remarked that the terms female and male are not used as if the quotas were a gender neutral action regardless of the gender of the individuals. In the XVII CGIL national conference (Rimini, 2014) a change to the statute has been brought up aiming to bring the quotas of representations to the 50%; the norm has been accepted not as a change in the national statute but as a recommendation for the confederations and for the vertical categories. In the confederations it is easier to follow it and it is in fact often implemented although it is more difficult to do it for the categories. As it was said previously and as it emerged from the literature also the Italian trade unions organisations are highly masculinized and very paternalistic relative to women inside the organisations. All the
trade unions leaders who had been interviewed have underlined this aspect, despite different nuances; for some of them masculinism as a cultural orientation is strong and difficult to change since it is passed over from generation to generation; according to others the masculist orientations are not more present in trade unions than in other organisation. Woman CGIL trade unionist with a long carrier, now retired, says:

“The CGIL is still a male oriented organisation which means that women in top positions need support and trust by women at lower levels of the trade union structure but this phenomenon induce to repeat for women what we always fought for men, that is the creation of friends clubs and cliques”

The task of the regional level of the organisation is to make sure that CGIL policies are implemented in the territory and in the categories. It is the chambers of labour more that the vertical categories which address the regional level for problems and doubts on gender issues. Today, during the economic crisis the prevailing themes are company welfare schemes and the balance between work and family. At the territory level also the themes of sexual harassment and job discrimination became important. Face to pressing demands also Lombardy CGIL has establish training courses together with CISL addressing women trade unionists (especially women but the courses were also open to men) to teach them how to bargain on the themes of company welfare and in order to improve work-life balance policies. Relative to these courses a CGIL woman union said:

“The aim of these courses, more and more frequently, is to explain to the trade unions organizers at the work place level how to use bargaining from the gender point of view”

In fact according to all interviewees collective bargaining does not seriously consider the demands and the needs of women workers but both by the companies and by the very trade unionists involved in the bargaining process (who are usually men) it is considered as a plus relative to the basic demands of the workers. Looking instead at the chamber of labour in Milan, one can see that CGIL has invested on the women centre. The women centre in Milan has the task to inform and support women against any discrimination in work and in society. It was created in 1986 although it had been discussed for several years before. The structure is not written in the CGIL’s statute and in fact it is present only in some chambers of labour: beyond Milan, it is present also in Bologna, Cagliari, Rome and in other few small cities. CGIL in the opening of this centre has shown an intention of protection and promotion of women but, not being backed by the statute and being, such as the Milan centre is, without staff and budget they are weak and enjoy a low consideration. Also paradoxically there are other gender points within the categories which give information and support to the women union members (such as for example in the retail service sector union and in the transportation union). The Milan women centre is highly requested with 956 accesses in 2013 (increasing relative to 2012 and 2011); these requests are overwhelmingly from women and the majority of them are Italian. During the economic crisis the number of the Italian women relative to the foreigner has increased: in fact the number of foreigners has decreased from 28% in 2012 to 16% 2013. This help desk of CGIL aims to be a pillar for defending women in work and in society, but it became more of the desk which listens at women in general and does not have much to
do with the trade union (the themes on which the desk is requested advice are for instance domestic violence, stalking, separation and divorce and so on). CGIL itself does not seen happy about this evolution but at the same time it became a service important for many women in trouble in the city of Milan:

“The day against the violence against women we decided to put a huge banner on the external façade of the chamber of labour in Milan, which is close to downtown centre, and there we have left it after that day and since then a large number of women came in order to ask informations or to denounce cases of physical or psychological violence. In fact we should not take care of all of problems of women as such but mainly of women at work”

The service is still free for everybody although the unions push for the users to enrol. One has to underline that a remarkable number of women is addressing the CGIL of Milan asking information on work and family balance and here one can notice for the first time a male presence although men prefer to use the telephone rather physically go to the women centre. Now there are several husbands and fathers asking information about parental leaves; from all the interviews it seems that the number of men interested in the sharing of domestic roles has increasingly especially among the young generation. It has been noticed eventually that 90% of the users who address the union for problem strictly connected to work dimension, are working in small enterprises where trade unions do not exist.

4.2 CISL Lombardy and Milan

In the historical review of the previous pages less attention has been given to CISL, hence we can underline a few points. In the ’60s the first women’s commission had been establish in CISL and the commission had been booming in the ’70s. In the ’80s the women’s coordination commissions in Milan was a ‘diamond’ in the CISL panorama (quote from a union organizer who is now retired) for the number of members and of activities. The shift from the commissions to the coordinating committees happened during the ’90s because of the increasing number of members and their rooting in the territories: more stability and a better organization were needed at the time. The story is different from the CGIL story. However the relationship between CISL and women turns out to be more problematic as a CISL intervieweed told:

“The relationship between CISL and women had always been complicated basically for two reasons: the catholic culture of CISL was very cautious relative to gender issues and hostile to a real equality policy; also the associational tradition of CISL always made gender issues difficult to be received in the different vertical categories”

At the moment in CISL there is not a statute rule relative to women’s quotas in the different bodies of the confederation and the categories, very differently from what has been noticed in CGIL story. The only norm relative to women is present in the guidelines for the election of the CISL bodies. Such guidelines established as rule the presence of at least of 30% of women in the electoral lists; the norm only applies to the electoral lists and not to the actual elected; the electoral results in fact depend on the position in which the candidates are put in the list. The rule turned out to be particularly unfavourable to
women in the sector that have the lowest women's presence in the workforce. As a union organizer says:

“CISL made some remarkable cultural changes but this does not seem enough, in fact at the moment of choosing leaders women are not chosen”

The current economic crisis has changed scene for the women's presence on the workplace, a shop floor trade unionist tells:

“The crisis produced an increase of women’s presence at the shop floor level which is true not only for the service sector but also for industry. Maybe this change means that many men started to consider the role of trade unionist as a less prestigious role, while in the meantime women became more courageous and decided to take over more responsibilities”

CISL is the second Italian trade union and like the other trade unions saw a decrease of members during the last twenty years. A number of internal changes had taken place in order to face the new situation, in particular there have been mergers of categories and a different distribution of the resources in the territory which have given place to a reduction of the number of levels and to the merging of the horizontal structures. At the lowest level of the territory, the Milan CISL has included a great part of its province creating the CISL Milan Metropolitan area. At the regional level there are four secretaries of which only one is a woman; the general regional secretary is a man who has kept the task of the women workers coordinating regional committee, knowing that the role of responsible of such committee was eventually de facto going to be carried out by an elder woman CISL trade union activist with a long career. As it has been seen for the CGIL also the women’s coordinating committee of CISL does not have a budget on its own but can ask for funds to the regional general secretary for its work. The task of the coordination committee is to follow the gender themes, within the world of work but not only. This uses the flux of information constantly transmitted from the lower levels (in the territories and in the vertical categories) but also the flux circulates of the higher level, such as within the confederations national apex. Also for the CISL Lombardy the main points of the actions in favour of women workers seem to be those to teach the trade unionists at the company level the best way which can be used to claim in a trade union language more benefits in the work and family balance field. Some of these conferences had been organised together with the other trade union organisations, some had been held by CISL only, in order to assert a proper CISL line. A different and unexpected event, very timely relative to the current situation, has been the one-day conference which the regional coordination of women of CISL Lombardy has offered to its women organizers (but also men were present) in order to use the new instruments of communication (such as the smartphones, the tablets and the social networks like Facebook and Twitter) for their trade union activities. In 2014 the workshop has already reached three editions in less than six months and several others are foreseen for the following period given the success of the initiative. In 2013 in Milan the women’s coordinating committee changed its name and became the coordination committee for women and gender policies (hinting in this way to equality and some kind of gender neutral approach). The coordination committee in Milan has a different shape from the women centre of CGIL or from a help desk service.
But the current coordinator has been working for a while to create a help desk for women and families. Trade union members can address the coordinator via email or telephone (which makes it difficult to ask for help on delicate subjects such as domestic violence). The coordinating committee is in touch with the categories that ask for advice at the enterprise level on the gender sensitive themes; particularly the CISL coordinating committee asks for better projects and steps forward on the themes of work and family balance.

4.3 A synthetic overview of the main data

After the long historical review on women and trade unions in Italy and after the short review of some important contemporary local cases the paper will give a tentative picture of the current structure of representation of working women. It is not worth to try to get through the complex analyses of the union membership figure especially as far as working women are involved. In fact if there is a shortage of gender analyses in Italian industrial relations, even more striking in many regards is the lack of gender analyses in trade unions; the lack of data on unions gender composition is an evident proof of union low level of interest gender issues (Beccalli and Meardi, 2002). Italian trade unions density is overall higher than in many other industrialized countries and union feminization is slightly more than the percentage of the workforce so it is pretty high although pensioners are about the half of them; these are optimistic estimates by the unions themselves. Young and precarious workers are underrepresented as a special current resource for Italy as it underlined by a few recent researches (Ambra, 2013; Galetto, 2010). During the work progress on the local north Italian area only some data could be gathered because trade unions organization were reluctant to furnish them, only CGIL Lombardy and Milan in fact sent their union membership number for 2013. So one knows very little about union density as a whole. In Lombardy of a total of some 900.000 members, 51,88% are member of the CGIL pensioners union by contrast only 0,98% are member of the CGIL union of young precarious workers (NIDIL); immigrant workers constitute only 6,68%. Women are the 42,98% out of 400.000 members, of which a great number are pensioners (59,57%). In Milan with about 230.000 union members the 44,30% are pensioners, 4,69% immigrants, 0,84% are precarious workers. All data show that the labour market in Milan is more vigorous than in the rest of the region. However the women members of CGIL in Milan are less than in Lombardy (41,98%) but paradoxically in Milan the number of women members of the pensioners union is low compared to Lombardy (48,02%).

5. Conclusions

In the current situation in Italy, what are the main challenges facing working women and involving trade unions? And which resources may be available from the Italian historical tradition? Among several possibilities, we choose here two points as examples for discussion: first, the representation of the 'atypical' workers, the outsiders, the majority of whom are female and young (in Italy); and the second, the strategies of 'reconciliation' of work and family. Both points are relevant to a major structural specificity of Italian society today, where women's employment is growing but is remarkably lower than in other
European countries, and where the fertility rate has become one of the lowest in the world.

a) The atypical workers are today what the unskilled workers were in the 20th century, the test for the unions’ ability to present a new, growing underprivileged workforce, in which women are a relevant part. The task is difficult since it involves addressing the workers’ work and life history, beyond the specifics jobs and workplaces; it involves community networking and bargaining at the territorial level, as the non-sectional Italian unions were in fact doing at the beginning of the last century.

b) The regulation of working time is at the intersection between the collective bargaining agenda (in principle but non in practice), a widespread sensitivity for the issues of time on the feminist side, and the emerging accent of the European Union-led positive action policies, which are increasingly centred on the reconciliation of work and family obligation. Also important is the action of the ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation, especially after its 2007 Congress and the adoption of the ETUC Charter for women (ETUC, 2007).

Both a) and b) relate to a new gendered need for security and freedom in the world of work, where young women especially, despite the high credentials with which they enter the labour market, are faced with increasing dilemmas about their work and family life, both in the irregular, contingent jobs of the secondary labour market, and in the safer but very demanding jobs of the ‘greedy’ organizations in the regular market. It is possible to say that to address these issues is an important challenge for the unions in the future: it would involve gendering their agenda (point a) and mainstreaming their gender issues (point b); it would involve renewing organizational practices and gender relations inside the unions; it would involve combing labour market policies with community and welfare state policies. A new regulation of work and welfare is underway in many capitalist countries, and trade unions are involved in negotiating it: beyond their defence of labour trade unions could watch that the new regulations should also lead to a new form of the ‘gender contract’ (O’Reilly and Spee, 1998).
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