

SEX AND GENDER

Sex affects the biological and anatomical differences between men and women (hormonal levels, sexual internal and external organs, reproductive capacities)

Sex depends on the 23rd pair of chromosomes that in the human species can be identical or different. In the first case (two XX chromosomes) the embryo will become a female, in the second (a X chromosome and a Y chromosome) it will become a male. The existence or the absence of the Y chromosome influences the physical development of the body in one direction or the other. Men and women have different features: the males of the human species are generally taller and stronger than the females. The latter, in addition, are physically weaker because of pregnancies.

Gender is the process of social construction that starts from the pre-existing biological features. This process defines, represents and fosters appropriate behaviour according to the social expectations connected with the status of man or woman. It also reinforces the structural, biological and hormonal differences between the sexes from a cultural and social point of view.

Being man or woman is also the result of a historical process common to all cultures and societies. The male and the female were defined by creating collective and individual identities and models of behaviour, duties, responsibilities and expectations connected with the female/male status. To these do men and women have to conform.

These models and identities vary according to the social class, the ethnic origin, the religion, the age and the historic period. The sexual distribution of work and of responsibilities within the family and in the society reproduction (that is the sum of processes through which a given society preserves itself and reproduces itself in space and time) are based on these models. In other words they establish the existing power relationships and the access to resources, benefits, information and decisions.

Gender is a comparative concept: it is referred both to women/men and to their way of interacting. It expresses the social organisation of the relationship between the sexes in terms of agreement, conflict, competition.

The heterosexual bias is strictly connected with a biological need: the survival of the species through reproduction. However, different degrees of femininity and masculinity exist between the extremes. Being man or woman can mean different things.

The equations male = man = heterosexual and female = woman = heterosexual that, in theory, represents the so-called "normality" can be interrupted in one or more points. There is not always correspondence between biological features, identity of gender and sexual practice.

LEARNING TO BE A WOMAN

The process of building a female identity has always been connected to the biological and physical destiny, that is the maternal and reproductive role. Historically, women have always been directed towards roles such as children care and housework. Cultural, moral, emotional limitations are particularly strong in the Italian context and in the Mediterranean countries. These limitations oblige women to feel responsible for their relatives. It is mainly women who adapt/link their existential strategies to family needs, often neglecting their own needs.

Children-, as well as disabled and elderly people care is mainly left to women's work. The higher maternal involvement and responsibility in children care is confirmed by legal practice as for the entrusting of children during separation or divorce: e.g. in 1998 in Italy in 90% of cases children were entrusted to mothers.

The leading model of masculinity revolves around the ideas of successful work, economic success, aggressiveness, homophobia, refusal of the feminine; otherwise virility is called into question.

Everyday relationships have a strong influence in the building of the identity of gender: this process is brought about by the common participation of all the social entities, private and public: the family, school, peers, mass media, job experiences, religious, political experiences.

Through the incessant everyday interactions adults teach young girls and boys the system of roles, values, rules that they have to respect to be accepted in society. This attitude is consequent to the specific gender models they have in mind and that their children have to absorb.

The building of gender identity starts before birth, thanks to the possibility to know the sex of the foetus in advance. First of all the colours of the layette are chosen (pink for females, blue for males) followed by clothes, furniture, toys suitable for the gender identity that has to be built.

As soon as the sex of the baby is clear, s/he will be treated in a different way from the babies of the opposite sex.

For young boys less accommodating behaviour is tolerated, while young girls are expected to be more docile since the first years of age. Young boys are considered more aggressive both verbally and physically, stronger and risk-taking. Masculinity focuses on self attainment through independence, risk, bravery. On the other hand, young girls are considered weaker, sweeter, more docile and apt for listening to other people.

Adults tend to influence the choices of their children in the field of toys as well. While both sexes are directed towards motion games, puzzles, building bricks and drawing, the majority of young boys will play with trains, automobiles or balls. Young girls will play with dolls or games simulating housework.

Fairy tales books, illustrated books and TV programs tend to highlight the differences as well. In pre-school books male characters face adventurous feats, outdoor activities that require strength and independence, while female characters do the cooking and cleaning and wait for men to come back. In children books female characters that are not mothers or wives are imaginary creatures such as witches and fairies. The same trends are present in the depiction of genders in cartoons, TV programs, and commercials. From studies on cartoons stereotyped models emerge: the male characters are more aggressive and active while the female are more home – loving, fond of boys and preoccupied with their beauty. The male characters of TV programs are represented at work, while women are more frequently depicted in private relationships (love and family).

In advertising the levels of stereotyping are even higher: the commercials on detergents and house cleaning products are almost always associated to the housewife mother. Even if other female models are being proposed like the woman executive or the career woman, the old feminine stereotypes of housewife or seducer are not neglected. On one hand the aspects of sweetness and femininity are underlined, on the other elements from the male universe of emancipation and professional success are presented. Rarely are men represented in housework contexts without depicting unreal and humorous situations in which men work under the attentive scrutiny of their wives.

Worthy of notice is the fact that the commercials in which the male body (instead of the female) is presented as the object of desire are increasing. Scenes with ambiguity of gender and characters reminding of homosexuality are increasing as well.

The situation in mass media has lead the Council of Europe to take a specific decision on the image of women and men in advertising and communication media (5th October 1995), in order to encourage the member states to promote a diverse and realistic representation of men's and women's activities in society. The school system promotes stereotypes related to femininity and masculinity as well. As far as the choice of school is concerned, boys tend to prefer technical, agrarian, naval, aeronautical and industrial institutes, while girls are the majority in schools of commerce, tourism, social services, as well as in grammar schools and schools of languages. This brings about a decisive polarisation of professions: the typical jobs of women are teacher, secretary, nurse, waitress, etc. As far as the teaching profession is concerned, the majority of teachers of humanities are women, while men prevail in the teaching of scientific subjects and are almost the totality of teachers of technical subjects.

THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT

The feminist movement of the 70s developed in the United States and in Europe. It questions all the aspects of the feminine status. It intends to change the image that women have of themselves, the result of centuries of oppression. The main themes of the movement are: the oppression of women in all its social forms, the knowledge of themselves outside stereotypes and male prejudices and the creation of organisations to reach the new goals and to satisfy the new needs. Within the feminist thinking different theories and opinions can be identified:

- **Essentialism**, which values female culture, encourages to reflect upon the biological basis of bodies and the maternal function and explains differences upon this. This position is accused of creating a stereotyped figure of woman and of freezing femininity, preventing growth and change.
- **Deconstructivism**, which identifies the social construction as the process responsible for the existence of the two genders. The woman – subject is seen as built “from outside” through discourse, language, culture, incessant layers of symbols and meanings. Sexual difference is then relative, historical and liable to changing. This position has discouraged the idea of a feminine essence, of an identical feminine subject thus underlining the complexity and variety of the feminine universe. On the other hand, this model is criticised for its scarce link with reality and could discourage women from creating an autonomous identity by underlining differences among them.
- the **notion of sexual difference**, researching the distinctiveness of the “feminine culture” in comparison with the male. According to this view, the body and its features are at the basis of an irreducible feminine quality. Men and women are different by nature: since they are two beings, each with his/her own view of the world, their getting on is totally or partially incompatible.
- the **theory of local differences**, which is a synthesis of the various views. Gender comprehends the pre-existing physical differences between men and women but, at the same time, is the way in which meanings are ascribed historically and socially to these physical differences. No theory can be unique and valid for all women. This new paradigm allows to comprehend diversities and the themes of multiculturalism in the relationship between gender and difference.

The different trends bring about two main positions: women that claim the equality and parity (egalitarian feminism) and women that go beyond and see man as an enemy responsible for all the evils of the patriarchal society, as keeper of all the powers (radical feminism).

According to radical feminists all institutions can be suspected, since they are the expression of male power. The same family institution becomes an oppressive cell that imprisons woman in the role of mother and wife alienating her as autonomous human being. Love is seen as mystification.

“Be pretty and keep silent”: feminists protest against the image of women presented by advertising, against beauty contests in the world, because they represent the male cult of the woman- object. Together with politics, male military force and its control are crucial to the development of sexual oppression. In the early 80s the view of radical feminists gives little importance to the “new women” reconciled with men in their successful professional life. The conquests are concluded and the young female generation have difficulties in understanding the battles of who preceded them. The feminist movement played a relevant role in the evolution of habits, giving women awareness of their skills and legitimating the right to take part to everyday life like men.

WOMEN AND POLITICS

In the 20th century women were engaged in political movements that fought for a radical change in society. They also fought against dictators and tyranny and some of them received the Nobel prize for peace for their determination and courage. It is the case of the Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, who worked for her women compatriots, or of Aung San Suu Kyi , spokeswoman of the Burma democratic movement, who fought against the military regime that condemned her to total isolation for 6 years; or of the mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, who since 1977 have been meeting to ask for the accusation of the military torturers responsible for the death of their sons.

One of the most important political battles fought by feminist movements was for the right to vote at the beginning of the century. “Suffragettes” fought hard without neglecting spectacular actions, hunger strikes and even acts of violence.

Here are the dates in which women obtained the right to vote in political elections country by country:

1893: New Zealand
1902: Australia
1906: Finland
1913: Norway
1915: Denmark, Ireland
1917: Canada
1918: Russia
1919: Germany, Sweden
1920: Austria, Hungary, U.S.A
1921: Czechoslovakia
1928: Great Britain
1931: Brazil
1934: Turkey
1935: Philippines
1944: France
1945: Italy
1946: Albania, Japan
1947: Argentina, Bulgaria, Venezuela, Yugoslavia
1948: Belgium, Romania
1949: Chile
1952: Bolivia, Greece, India
1953: Mexico
1954: Colombia, Pakistan, Syria
1955: Peru
1956: Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Madagascar, Vietnam
1961: Paraguay
1963: Iran, Kenya
1971: Switzerland
1976: Portugal

The fight for the right to vote was necessary for the introduction of women in politics. Nowadays women are still under-represented everywhere.

Margaret Thatcher was the first woman to lead a Western government in 1979. Worthy of notice is the fact that the so-called “Iron Lady” opposed the feminist movement and did not face the problems indicated by this.

The political female representation of Parliaments in different countries is highest in the Scandinavian countries with Sweden (40,4%), Norway (39,4%), Finland (33,5%), Denmark (33%) and the Netherlands (31,3%). These are followed by Canada(18%), the USA (10,9%), The United Kingdom (9,5%) and France (6,4%). Women are not present in Kuwait and in the United Arabian Emirates.

In some countries women have acquired an exceptional capacity of being represented by using the clause of quotas, that is supporting the rights of representation of minorities in all institutions. This has allowed an important evolution of in the relationship between men and women.

A new strategy has been recently devised. The movement of women refuses the notion of quota, deciding it is not enough. They believe that the real percentage of women in population should be considered, in order to be granted a real representation, equal to men's. This because the female population is at least half of the total number.

WOMEN AND PRIVATE LIFE

Decide about one's life: this was the main theme of the feminist movement's battles since the early 60s for civil rights, the freedom to abort, contraception and the acknowledgement of violence on women. Women have questioned the traditional relationship between the sexes, the models of education and claim the right to decide about their bodies and to discover new ways of life. Due to this, government have released laws changing rules that seemed unchangeable for centuries.

In Italy divorce was for long illegal due to the Lateran Pacts signed by Mussolini and Cardinal Gasparri in 1929. The infringe of the matrimonial bound could only be decided by the ecclesiastic Tribunal of Sacra Rota on the basis of precise and limited conditions. The problem of divorce was introduced in the early 70s by the Italian feminist movements when in the near countries and in the Scandinavian countries it had existed for almost a century.

The left parties, understanding the evolution of women electors, supported these ideas. Political demonstrations, debates, petitions followed and associations were created. Who did not agree threatened the dismembering of family and the destruction of society. The law establishing divorce was approved in Italy in December 1972. Soon afterwards opponents started to gather the necessary signatures to abolish the law. The actions of the opposite movements reached the climax and the abolishing referendum took place in an atmosphere of strong controversy. On 12th May 1974 the Italian people decided the non abrogation of the law on divorce with 59,26% of votes. The country was in the same position as the other western democracies (save Spain and Ireland, other two countries in which Catholic religion is predominant. They introduced divorce respectively in 1981 and in 1995). Large numbers of women chose for the pro-divorce position.

A further revolutionary event taking place at the end of the century was the conquest of the right to decide freely about their body, choosing whether to procreate or not and when. The great battles for contraception and abortion remain two fundamental turning points in western societies. Often it is the case of unmarried women with an unwanted pregnancy they are unable to face, of married women with a numerous family, or of women becoming pregnant after rape: the list of tragic situations is endless. Both the Christian religion and the political power refused to take into consideration the sufferings of these women for a long time.

At the beginning of the 20th century birth control remained a taboo issue for the majority of the European countries and the United States. Contraception pills were experimented by Dr. Gregory Pincus in 1956 in Boston and were introduced into the market in 1960 in the USA and afterwards in the UK. Nothing was able to stop its spreading among women. In 1956 265 women were experimenting it with Dr. Pincus, in 1980 55 million women and in 1990 113 million were taking it. With the spreading of AIDS other contraception forms increased, for example the use of condoms.

All religions tend to encourage procreation ("Ye shall multiply and increase") and each has its own extremist currents refusing any method of contraception with intolerance.

Among Christian religions, Protestants adopted a liberal attitude towards the choice of having babies, while the Catholic religion has condemned all forms of contraception and pregnancy interruption (even as a consequence of rape). Acting in this way man would exercise a power that belongs only to God.

In comparison with the USA and Britain, in other countries like France, Italy, Germany and Spain abortion became legal after a long time. The history of women has been stained with the blood of millions of illegal abortions carried out by non – experts or unscrupulous doctors in terrible hygienic conditions. The protagonists were women scared by a possible reporting to the police and by prison, sometimes struck by a life-long sterility due to the lack of medical control. Thanks to the demonstrations of the feminists and of famous women in the 70s, who claimed freedom for women to have babies when they wanted and if they wanted to, the female members of Parliament introduced the problem of abortion into the political debate. After years of battles, the various Parliaments approved similar laws that allowed abortions in specific cases like rape or when there are risks for the woman's health between 10 to 12 weeks after conception (up to 24 weeks in Britain). The permission of parents if the mother is minor of age is required and the surgical operation is free.

"The right to abort belongs only to God": this is the main argument of non-abortionists, who continue their fight, even showing terrible images of fetuses and taking sometimes violent actions against doctors who do abortion.

However, women taking part in pro-abortion demonstrations consider it a remedial solution. Birth planning with modern contraception forms is the most desirable way, both to avoid physical traumas and for economic reasons. Together with laws on abortions, governments have taken actions to prevent undesired pregnancies. In this way abortion should become the exception.

It must not be denied that abortion continues to exist, due to lack of information or responsibility on the part of very young women and their partners. Contraception obliges who exercise it to decide in some way about their own destiny.

The anti – abortion movements remain strong all over the world. Proclaiming the respect for life, they consider women mainly in their role as mothers and the traditional family as the pilaster of society, and tend to deny emancipation to women.

Women's sexuality has been much more controlled in time than men's. Women were not at all instructed for sexuality. Many used to get married without knowing anything about sex, except for the fact that it existed for men's pleasure and it was necessary to tolerate it. Female sexuality was strictly associated with undesired pregnancies and deaths by child deliverance in high percentage.

A sexually active woman was considered as deviating, like a woman who did well in typical male domains. The over-romantic ideal of femininity saw women as asexual, docile and friendly beings. Virginity, chastity and faithfulness were (and in some cultures still are) virtues indissoluble from femininity. The social reputation of a girl depended upon her capacity to control and select sexual offers, while that of a boy depended on the number of his "conquests" and at the same time on the necessity to form a prosperous family.

There are rules that supported and still support an orthodox sexual model (heterosexual and based on monogamy) punishing homosexuality on one hand and adultery on the other. A close connection between family order and social- political order results from these. Family disorder becomes a menace and sexual betrayal (e.g. of wives) becomes the symbol of men's abdication of power. The betrayed husband, incapable of ensuring his spouse's faithfulness, undermines the credibility of society, which is based on a hierarchy ruled by men.

The necessity of women to exercise their sexuality has always been highly discouraged, while the contrary has happened for men. The current trends question these certainties.

Male sexuality becomes increasingly problematic and sometimes violent. Men are disoriented by the requests of reciprocity and equality (also in sex) from their partners. This can engender violence, a reaction to the decline of women's complicity.

Violence (in particular sexual harassment) brings about serious consequences: together with wounds (the most frequent are bruises, fractures, partial loss of hearing and sight) , women victims of violence are more likely to have panic, depression, low self-esteem, sleep and eating disorders, hypertension, alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual disorders. Girls who faced sexual abuses during childhood are more likely to have premature sexual intercourse, undesired pregnancies, sexual diseases, due to the infrequent use of contraception.

There is strong interrelationship between maleness and violence, not only in wars, but also in everyday life and in family life. This violence is mainly directed to women (incest, rape, physical abuse on one hand and psychological abuse and blackmailing on the other). This does not mean that feminine violence does not exist, as recent studies on the female collaborators of Nazism or on the role of women in the 1994 Rwanda facts demonstrate. In the last years acts of violence by female (as well as male) adolescents are increasing. Violence is then typical of the human genre independently from sex. However, male violence is predominant. Sexual harassment against women can mean the will to predominate on the part of the male sex on the female, considered as different, dangerous if not inferior.

Violence in marriage, against all common places, involves all social classes, from the poorest to the richest. This situation is more frequent where women have reached a high degree of independence. The dialogue between sexes is so difficult that violence seems to become the ultimate way to be listened to.

After long battles to consider rape a serious crime, almost in every country it is punished with severe penalties and imprisonment. Again the USA has been the first to introduce the concept of sexual vexation to protect women that are vexed in working places by their bosses. Until recent times women were obliged to bear offensive gestures considered as "natural" by men, for fear of losing their jobs.

WOMEN AND WORK

The process of industrialisation established a clear separation between family life and the world of economic transactions, between domestic economy and business economy.

The Industrial Revolution inaugurated the relationship between women and the job market. On the other hand, it produced the role of housewife depending on the protection of her spouse, a full time worker. From the patriarchal family of the Middle Ages (still present in societies based on agriculture, where all the members take part in the production process), the restricted patriarchal family starts and becomes the privileged and natural place of feelings, private life, relationships and primary socialisation.

If no existing/well-known society, from the most ancient to the modern, is devoid of any form of division of work based on sex, the Ford model, revolving around mass industrial production, needed well-defined steady roles in institutions like family, education and job market. In particular, the division of work within the family and the difference between femininity and maleness were social imperatives.

The nuclear family typical of industrialised societies sees women specialising in tasks connected with care, breeding, assistance and in general satisfaction of the family needs. Maternity and care work became for women the main way of asserting themselves/make themselves known. If male work signified dignity, emancipation and active participation in society, for the majority of women waged work and marriage were alternative. Although women factory workers were emblematic figures of industrialisation, they were mainly young unmarried women, often very poor and belonging to the lower classes. They used to work until they married or had children and went on working only if the male figure was absent or missing. A mechanism of mutual dependence developed: women from men's incomes and men from women's care work. The more support from a wife at home they receive the highest is the potential of success of male careers. Married people, especially men, live better and longer if they receive care from a wife/husband. On the other hand, women didn't need a source of income because their men provided the money they needed.

Women's times are different

The time dimensions of women are complex and fragmented between biological-procreative deadlines and activities in the job market. There is an unequal distribution of time resources between the sexes and there are differences between men's and women's times. The first are rigid and dependent upon working times, the second are flexible and disjointed. This is due to the necessity to combine rigid working times, social needs, family needs and the long time devoted to housework, children, partner. Men's times do not vary in the course of family life, it is only women's times that change. The birth of a child imposes a new balance of times/proportioning of times that does not take place in men's lives. The birth of a third child provokes such an increase of family needs that working time decreases in a consistent way, thus compromising the participation in the job market. Non-working women's family care takes an average of 8 hours a day. The highest quantity of work belongs to married women with children. Free time is residual only in the group of lonely (separated, divorced, widows) mothers, particularly disadvantaged from the point of view of time and money resources. The participation of men in housework and children care is so limited that their absence from the family nucleus reduces instead of increasing housework. While men take advantage of their partners, women seem to benefit from the absence of men.

From research on new generations it emerges that it is still women who do housework in young couples, while men do small repairing tasks and pay bills. The most frequently shared activity is going shopping. As for young people living with their parents, there are still greater limitations for girls in terms of freedom of movement and use of free time. Girls are required to take part in house activities much more than boys. These trends seem to be rather Italian, since in other European countries the discrepancies between men's and women's times are increasingly disappearing and a substantial uniformity of male and female courses of life is appearing in the relationship time/activity.

Work and wages

So as to illustrate the conquests of women in work conditions, here is a short overview of the evolution of law in favour of working women in France in the last century.

1874: prohibition to employ children under 12 in factories. Limitation of the working day to 12 hours

1886: women can have a pension without the permission of their husbands

1892: the working day is reduced to 10 hours for women younger than 16 with a maximum of 60 hours per week; for the other women the limit is 11 hours per day

1904: the working day is reduced to 10 hours

1907: married women can dispose freely of their wages

1909: pregnant women can take 8 weeks leave (without salary) and employers cannot extinguish the contract during this time.

1910: 2 months maternity leave with full pay for school teachers; in 1911 the advantage is extended to post and telephone offices clerks; only in 1911 it is extended to civil service

1920: central committee for family allowances;

1937-38: family allowances are increased by 142%

1945: maternity leave is compulsory (2 weeks before and 6 weeks after childbirth) and paid for the 50%

1966: maternity leave up to 14 weeks

1972: a law establishes equal pay between sexes for similar jobs

1975: sexual discrimination is prohibited in job appointing.

1980: Prohibition to dismiss a pregnant woman. Maternity leave extended to 16 weeks

1986: the use of the feminine gender for names indicating jobs and functions is legal

Work and women's status in the world: report on the human development program of UN, 1995.

The countries in which women are less disadvantaged in comparison with men are: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, United States, Australia, France, Japan, Canada and Austria. Latin America countries and Arabian

countries are in the lowest positions. Taking into consideration the participation of women in economic activities and politics, Northern countries place first again, followed by Canada, New Zealand, Netherlands, USA, Austria and Italy.

Among students, women are more numerous than men in Finland, Norway, France. Women cover the 4,4% of Nobel Prize winners, 8% in literature, 2,5% in medicine, 3% in chemistry, 1,3% in physics and 11% for peace.

Two third of non-literate people are women.

In the USA women are 62 % of the poor, while on a world level they are 70% of a population amounting to 1 billion 300 million indigent people.

Life expectancy, however, is about 20% higher for women.

The report concludes that social and economic progress of a country increases more quickly if women take part into it.

Since the two sexes are involved in family activities and professional life in a different way, the result is that women with a high quantity of family work or taking maternity leave find it more important to mediate between productive functions and reproductive functions. For men this problem doesn't exist.

The reduced capacity to do physically demanding activities for women in the last months of their pregnancy or in the first months of life of their babies encouraged the division of work between the sexes in the pre – modern societies. This happened when pregnancies were frequent and the life of babies depended on human milk.

Since these factors are less influential after the disappearance of physically demanding activities and frequent pregnancies and after the spreading of artificial milk, in modern societies the differences between men and women in productive and reproductive activities can no longer be explained. The problem of the marginality of women in the job market is due to the organisation of work based on "normal" workers without family responsibilities, just because one or more women can take care of these.

In Italy the participation of women in the job market is by and large lower than the European average: although working women have increased in the last twenty years, working women rate is one of the lowest in Europe (in 2001 about 40% in comparison with 55% in Europe with 15 partners). Also part-time jobs are not numerous among the possibilities of employment (in 2001 18% of Italian women in comparison with 34% in Europe).

The increase of women's occupation took place thanks to the increase of typically feminine jobs (teachers, clerks, nurses, sellers, waitresses, etc.): on one hand it was a protection from male rivalry, on the other this has concentrated them in some sectors precluding the others.

There is a strong percentage of irregular jobs and women are particularly numerous both as workers of small manufactories (textiles, shoes, clothes) and as agricultural worker or independent workers.

Working women suffer more from poverty if they are in this latter condition: individual businesswomen, entrepreneurs of family concerns. There are strong differences in income between men and women: according to recent studies Italian working women earn from 20 to 25% less than men, while the European average is 23%. Men have upper positions in hierarchy and are more numerous in sectors where wages are higher and in middle-large companies where salaries are defended by trade unions.

On the other hand, women are more numerous in sectors where the average salaries are lower and, within each sector, in the lower professional levels.

Other explanations of the fact that women have lower incomes concern the tendency of married women to accept jobs and wages under their qualification, since their income is perceived as "secondary". They also work fewer hours and don't do extra – work due to their housework.

While during economic growth women's work is encouraged, during crisis it is limited to fight against male unemployment. This happened, for instance, during economic world crisis of the years 1929-1935.

TRENDS OF SOCIAL CHANGES

Since the late 60s all developed industrial societies started to experiment a time of deep social and economical changes: instability of family models, disappearance of the protective role of the nuclear family, growing importance of the sector of services, decline of stable occupation, increase of prolonged unemployment experiences and of unsteady job forms, which are atypical, temporary and paid less money. in a parallel way, from a social point of view, the traditional form of family based on marriage is no longer the reference point. Families composed of 1 person, families with divorced people, nuclear families with only 1 parent increase in number. Women's occupation expands and since women's education develops, they take on responsibilities that were typically male. On the other hand, they choose marriage and procreation less frequently.

Deep changes are occurring and new forms of relationship between the sexes are necessary. The problem of a new balance emerges, since new women and new men have changed radically in their self-definition. Women's lives are in a time of great changes.

Women study more, work more, get married at an older age or don't get married at all, have fewer children, look for sexual independence and for a sexuality devoid of reproductive purposes and avoid traditional links based on the principle of the "natural" male superiority and female inferiority.

On the other hand, they are overwhelmed with the increasing tension between an identity based on a unique pivot (family) and an identity based on two intersecting axes (work and family).

It is the increase of female education the main factor that influences the choices of women. Educated girls marry at an older age, decide to have fewer children or none at all, choose a career rather than family life, play active roles in politics and economics. The last female generations are well aware of the necessity of an education to enact a good life plan.

The report of the Italian Government on the application of UN Beijing program in Italy (Department for Equal Opportunities, 1999) emphasises that women are better students than men: they rarely drop out, they graduate in time, more often with full marks even in typical male courses of studies like engineering and scientific disciplines.

Women work increasingly also when they are wives and mothers, while young women tend to choose less frequently the model housewife – wife – mother.

Women having a job and an income of their own have more possibilities to negotiate an equal/symmetric relationship with their partners and, at the same time, to break one that does no longer meet these requirements. It is in couples in which the wife has a paid job that more frequently women ask for divorce, while sexual harassment and abuses are increasingly reported to the police. In the past they remained hidden and unpunished.

The growing participation of women in the job market gives them less time for care activities of elderly people and children, since a re-distribution of family responsibilities between men and women has not taken place. A relevant activity of assistance often leads to a destiny of marginality. That is why the new aspirations and work expectations of women in western societies lead them to mediate the tensions by employing immigrants for paid housework services. One could say there is a transfer of the conflict between men and women in family life (consequent to the lack of time of working women) to the relationship between higher and lower classes. The comfort of western working women, in the absence of a re-distribution of family tasks between men and women, is based on the less paid work of immigrant women that provide these housework services.

It must be pointed out that the increase of working women in western societies depends upon forms of atypical work (temporary jobs, part-time jobs, etc.). These forms are increasing for men as well. However, women are damaged as far as maternity protection and retirement fund are concerned. The welfare systems seem not to be able to respond to the profound changes of feminine identity and of the relationship between genders and generations.

Joblessness and diseases are indemnified only for "official" members of the job market, as well as the birth of a child brings about the maintenance of the post and of the salary for the mother, and the reduction of working hours in the postnatal period for both parents.

If women are making their presence in society more visible, the process of redefinition of male identity does not seem to be comprehensible yet. The women movement played a fundamental role in recognising that the inequality between men and women is a historical construction, and that it is modifiable as such.

From the mid 60s to the mid 70s, in a parallel way with the feminist movement as a political entity, groups of men's self-consciousness developed. The approach to the male identity tended to overturn the traditional stereotype of strength, in order to focus on the repressed feminine aspects, "weaknesses". The event that triggered the development of the male liberation movements was the Vietnam war. The American defeat became the metaphor of the crisis of men.

Despite these changes, men are scarcely aware of the real cultural, political and symbolical effects of the feminist movement, which started the confirmation process of women's freedom and authority and their impact on the redefinition of male identity. Men tend to believe that gender problems are and remain "women's matters". If some men have accepted these challenges and incentives, others have refused them reacting with fear and aggressiveness.

In view of this strong claim of equality on the part of women, the discrepancy between the public-legal and the private - family sphere is still deep. The first promotes an egalitarian ideology, the latter is based on traditional differences. Some changes can be observed in young generations. Men begin to claim a role in the education of children and are increasingly occupied in children and babies care (the higher is the qualification of the father the greater is his involvement). On the other hand, some women react in a hostile way to this "male intrusion".

New types of maleness are emerging. They are more egalitarian and share responsibilities, thus opposing traditional expectations and bringing about a historical re-balancing between the male and the female genders. Stereotypes are being removed and a mutual new feeling between genders is developing.

BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Between the constraints of traditional culture and a western model of emancipation in which women don't always recognise themselves, in many countries women are looking for their identity and destiny. In a large number of Muslim countries women are considered as eternal minors of age with no sense, some beings that have to be dominated in all acts of life. Inferior to men, women do not possess any autonomy and are submitted to the power of their fathers before and of their husbands after. Their life can be overturned at any time by their husbands, who can impose a new wife, repudiate them or take their children away. However, in some Muslim countries, like Egypt and Turkey, some changes have occurred. In Turkey, for example, with the seize of power on the part of Kemal Ataruk a separation between religion and state is carried out according to the western model. Marriage becomes laic, divorce on equal bases is introduced, the Muslim veil is prohibited, education is opened to women, and in 1934 they are allowed to vote, much earlier than in countries like Italy and France. Decades later the results were apparent with a woman as prime minister, Tansu Ciller, who reached power by following a traditional western kind of political career. She wasn't favoured by the support of powerful clans like in India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Bandaranaike Sirimavo and Chandrika.

A further example of Muslim country that developed the idea of laity, equality and female emancipation is Tunisia. Women are active and modern in public life and work, in comparison with other Muslim societies, but they are paradoxically old-fashioned in private life where men keep the traditional prejudices. Burghiba, taking inspiration from the western model, introduced a series of courageous reforms among which the Personal Statute. It gives women equality of rights within the family. To contain a too high population growth contraception was introduced in 1961, while abortion became legal in 1973. Since 1958 equality of education had been guaranteed. It would be one of the principal means to change the status of women.

The criticism to the western model has led some educated Muslim women to go back to the Islam tradition, notwithstanding their awareness of its excesses.

These women believe polygamy, prohibition of contraception and abortion, obedience to husbands are not incompatible with work, social and political responsibilities. A dichotomy between the role of citizen serving the State and of private submitted woman is created. These attitudes witness a crisis of identity consequent to deep changes and typical of Muslim civilisations balancing between tradition and modernity.

How to reconcile the respect for culture and tradition to the desire to change? Doesn't this respect become often a pretext for oppression? Vice versa, does the western model have to be adopted as such in countries that have a completely different tradition? Only from these considerations can a real evolution of the women's status start, an evolution accepted by women freely.

It is necessary to point out that the progress occurred in democratic lay countries, in which law is equal for everybody, without distinction of sex. Regimes based on authority, where power is exercised through violence, contempt for citizens' rights cannot accept women's emancipation.

Liberation from poverty and emancipation from gender disparity depend above all on economic development and education. Also mentality plays a key role. When tradition encourages contempt for women and male superiority, when women have no chance to decide about their own lives, they absorb these norms and do not infringe them without being exposed to refusal, dishonour, even death.

The western model, a reference point for women's emancipation, is not devoid of contradictions. The double burden on women who work and have a family, the loneliness of women who have opted for their careers, the difficulties within the couple due to women's needs and men's fears, which sometimes bring about rupture, sufferance and incomprehension, are the reverse of women's conquests.

LEGISLATION ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

The history of Equality of Gender in Italy starts with the **Constitution**, which in the opening of **Article 3** establishes the juridical foundation of subsequent laws:

Art. 3

*All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, **without distinction of sex**, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country.*

As for the European Community laws on women's rights, the **Treaty of Rome of 25th March 1957**, establishing the EEC (European Economic Community), is worthy of notice. Article 119 of this treaty states:

Each Member State shall during the first stage ensure and subsequently maintain the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work.

For the purpose of this Article, pay' means the ordinary basic or minimum wage or salary and any other consideration, whether in cash or in kind, which the worker receives, directly or indirectly, in respect of his employment from his employer.

Equal pay without discrimination based on sex means:

a. that pay for the same work at piece rates shall be calculated on the basis of the same unit of measurement;

b. that pay for work at time rates shall be the same for the same job.

Since 1957, further **nine governmental directives**, numerous proposals and laws, 4 government action programmes and vast case-law on the subject assembled by the Court of Justice have been necessary to try to obtain the so-longed-for equal pay.

As for equality of men and women at work in the **Italian law, Law nr. 903 of 9th December 1977** is worthy of notice. It proposed to translate into law the principles stated in article 3 of the Constitution. This law, developing in 19 articles, reiterated the points discussed in the Community directive of 1976 on the equal treatment in employment. For example the three first articles established:

“Any discrimination for access to employment based on sex is forbidden, independently from the way of employment and from the type of job, at all levels of the professional hierarchy ...”.

“Women have the right to receive the same pay as men for the same work. Professional classification systems for pay determination should adopt common criteria for men and women...”.

“Any discrimination between men and women as for job title, assignment, career progress is forbidden ...”.

In 1984 a **Council of Europe Recommendation (84/635/EEC of 13th December 1984)** was promulgated to promote positive actions in favour of women. It reminded member states that they should adopt active politics for equal treatment in employment and **mixed occupation**, with general and specific measures, in the framework of national politics and practice and respecting the social parts, in order to remove the negative effects deriving from a traditional division of roles in society between men and women. In this way participation of women in the sectors in which they are under-represented could be enhanced and a better employment of human resources could be achieved.

In 1981 the European Union in the **“European Commission’s First Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (1982-1985)”** reported the lack of actions programmes for a real equality between the sexes and invited member states to introduce equal opportunities between men and women in employment through positive actions, such as programs to remove situations of sexual discrimination.

The European laws during the 80s enclose different proposals insisting on the equality of treatment of men and women: **Directive 378 of 24th July 1986** concerning equal opportunities for women or **Directive 86/613/EEC of 11th December** of the same year implementing “the principle of equal treatment for persons engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity and spouses participating in this activity and concerning the protection of pregnant women and women who have recently given birth engaged” in such activities.

As for Emilia Romagna Region, **Regional Law nr. 3 (27th January 1986)** was promulgated in 1986 to establish the Commission for equality of men and women as counselling organ of the Region as to the adoption of measures on women’s status, in order to comply with the equality principles of the Constitution and of the Regional Statute.

In Italy the first National Commission for Gender Equality was established in 1988 within the Council of Ministers Presidency Department (**law nr. 400 of 23rd August 1988, concerning the discipline of the activities of the Government and of the Council of Ministers Presidency Department**).

Improvements to laws regulating the protection of working women were introduced above all about motherhood: **law nr. 546 of 29th December 1987** extended maternal indemnity to self-employed women

such as agricultural workers, artisans and shop keepers, while **law nr. 379 of 11th December 1990** recognised this right to freelance women as well.

Law nr. 25 of 27th January 1989 in article nr. 2 elevated to 40 years the limit of age to take part in employment calls in the civil service, so as to favour women who had spent some years in children and family care.

In **law nr. 125 of 10th April 1991 “Positive actions for gender equality in employment”** an amendment summarising all case law on women in Italy up to that time is introduced. This law intended to remove inequality between men and women in different aspects of society: access to employment, vocational training, mobility, career progress. Different choices for women were encouraged through vocational training, self – employed work, which achieved useful results on a national level (especially in the field of fashion). To remove inequality in employment, pay, career progress of women, this law tried to promote the recruitment of competent professional figures in the fields where women were under-represented, such as new technologies, or managing activities in private companies and public institutions.

In order to achieve such goals a new balance between family responsibilities and work and a new organisation of working times were to be established.

The first goal of this law was described in this way:

“The dispositions contained in this law have the purpose to encourage women’s employment and to achieve equality of gender, also through measures called ‘positive actions for women’, in order to remove the obstacles to equal opportunities”.

Article 9 states:

“Public bodies and private companies with more than 100 employees have to compile a biennial report on the state of human resources (female and male) for each profession, regarding employment, vocational training, career progress, job titles, mobility, dismissals, pay...”

This article is reiterated in a **Minister Decree of 8th July 1991**, “Directions to companies as to the periodical report on the state of male and female personnel”, since female employment is encouraged by monitoring the different social positions of men and women.

After law nr. 125, **law 215** follows in **1992**. It establishes the Committee for **Women's entrepreneurship**, operating through the Ministry for Industry and giving financial support to self-employed women in the fields of industry, agriculture, commerce, tourism, services. **Law nr. 81** “to support female participation and Committees for Equal Opportunities in the principal bodies of public administration” is promulgated in **1993**.

In the same years the international laws were changing as well: in **1994** the **European Council meeting in Essen** (December 1994), declared that the promotion of equal opportunities for women and men was a key priority of the European Union and the Member States, on a par with the struggle against unemployment.

But the exceptional event in these years is the **UN World Conference on Women in Beijing** in September **1995**: it gave a new impulse to equal opportunities policies in each country. All governments and politically active subjects were invited to adopt a “gender perspective” in all fields of society and politics, presupposing a previous analysis based on inequality of gender. The necessity of an “impact evaluation” with respect to sex in every political decision or programme has to be taken into consideration: the principles of empowerment, that is decisions taken also by women, and the mainstreaming of equal opportunities in all political actions are some of the priorities that were presented to women in Beijing. No neuter political actions exist, if only apparently. As a consequence of that, political actions should be examined with respect to sex and in terms of impact on gender, establishing criteria for the fruition of resources, rights and possibilities for women and men in an equal way.

The first consequence of Beijing Platform can be seen in the “**European Commission’s Fourth Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men(1996 – 2000)**” where the 12 priorities indicated in Beijing are reiterated:

1. women and poverty;
2. women’s education and vocational training;
3. women and health;
4. sexual harassment and violence against women;
5. women and wars;
6. promotion of economic independence;
7. decision making;

8. gender mainstreaming;
9. women's rights
10. gender portrayal in the media;
11. women and environment;
12. women – little girls.

In **1996**, The Council of Europe emanated a **Recommendation** to the member states (96/694/EC) regarding the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process. The **second point** is particularly interesting: it recommended that educational and vocational training operators were sensitised as to the importance of **a realistic and complete image of the roles and attitudes of women and men in society**, devoid of discriminating prejudices and stereotypes, thus granting a more balanced partaking of professional, family and social responsibilities between women and men.

In Italy, a **Ministry of Equal Opportunities** was also established in **1996 (18th May 1996)**, with a remit to develop, manage and co-ordinate equal opportunities initiatives. The Ministry represents the government at a national level on equal opportunities issues and also ensures that national and local initiatives involving other Ministries are co-ordinated. The first Minister is the MP Angela Finocchiaro, who signed together with Prime Minister Romano Prodi the subsequent directive in **1997 (Directive nr. 116 of 21st May 1997)** **“Actions promoting women’s decision-making, freedom of choice, and social quality for women and men”**.

On **28th October 1997** The Prime Minister emanated **Decree nr. 405**, which established the Department for Equal Opportunities, that is the supporting administrative organisation of the Ministry.

The **Treaty of Amsterdam** was signed on **2nd October 1997**. It reinforced the policies in favour of Equality of Gender and promoted concrete actions to improve women’s participation in all sectors of society. The Treaty was ratified by all member states and came into force on the **1st May 1999**.

In **1999** (October) in Italy a law called **“Measures against discrimination and in favour of equal opportunities”** is promulgated; it established a judicial protection against all kinds of discrimination in society.

Subsequent laws on the protection of motherhood and fatherhood were emanated: **law nr. 53 of 8th March 2000** was followed by a **Resolution of the Council of Europe of 29th June 2000** concerning the balanced partaking of women and man in family and professional life as a necessary condition for a real equality of gender.

Another important law concerns the discipline of the activity of Equality Commissars (**nr. 196 of 23rd May 2000**) but the last relevant event is the **modification of article 51 of the Italian Constitution** about electoral laws granting a participation of women in politics.