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'Gender and employment' in the Italian policy debates: The construction of 'non employed' gendered subjects

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SYNOPSIS

In this article we reconstruct the development of the issue of 'gender' and 'non employment' in Italian policy debates from 1995 to 2007. Considering that 'non employment' refers to which category of citizens is considered as legitimately non-employed and to what are the gender implications of these assumptions, we ask the following questions: which are the 'hottest' issues in Italian policy debates in the area of 'non employment'? How gendered are debates? What categories of subjects do the debates construct? In discussing Italian policy debates on reconciliation, domestic work, and pensions, we argue that Italian non-employment policies construct specific subjects by reproducing traditional gender stereotypes concerning the division of productive and reproductive work, and by politically articulating the intersection of gender and class, ethnicity, and age which contributes to further disadvantages for women. The article originates from research carried out within the European QUING project (www.quing.eu).

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Introduction

In this article we will analyze gender and employment-related policies in Italian policy debates between 1995 and 2007.¹ We have adopted the analytical notion of 'non-employment' as a way of looking at employment and employment-related policies with an inverted perspective. The state we dubbed 'non-employment' is one separate from employment and unemployment, in effect either a government-sanctioned state in which a person is understood to be off the labor market with good reason (recent parenthood or retirement, for instance), or an unofficial, or even illegal, state in which a person is working in the 'informal' economy, often without a permit or visa.

Our perspective highlights the way these policies construct categories of subjects who are considered to be legitimately employed and 'non-employed', as well as the gender implications of this construction. With this perspective in mind we analyze a diversified set of Italian policies that, through their specific regulations of employment

conditions, social benefits, parental leaves, retirement age, and domestic work construct categories of non-employed people in a gendered manner (QUING, 2007).

In this article we ask three main questions: What are the 'hottest' debates that emerge in the Italian policy agenda in the area of gender and non-employment from 1995 to 2007? How gendered are Italian policy debates on non-employment? What categories of subjects do Italian non-employment policies construct, in relation to gender as well as the intersection of gender with class, age, and ethnicity?

We found that the hottest policy debates on gender and non-employment in Italy in the period studied, with varying degrees of relevance, concerned the issues of reconciliation of work and family life, pensions, and care and domestic work. We also found that the most gendered debates were those on reconciliation of work and family life, while the other debates showed little evidence of a gender perspective on the issue at stake. By genderedness we mean the extent to which debates explicitly address women and men, include considerations of the differential impact that particular policy measures might have on women and men, or present solutions to bring about a more gender-equal society. Regarding our question on the construction of categories of subjects, we argue that Italian non-employment policies construct specific subjects

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by reproducing traditional gender stereotypes concerning the division of productive and reproductive work, and by politically articulating the intersection of gender and class/ethnicity/age which contributes to further disadvantages for women (see Saraceno, 1994).

In the first section we explain our focus on the issues of gender and non-employment, and provide contextual data on women and employment in Italy. In the second section, we analyze the most relevant policy debates in Italy concerning gender and non-employment, and assess the extent to which such debates are gendered. In the third section, before drawing our conclusions, we discuss how Italian employment-related policies construct categories of non-employed gendered subjects and how these policies deal with the intersection of gender with other inequalities.

The context of gender and non-employment policies in Italy²

Gender scholars focusing on the Italian context have long studied employment and social policies, the inequalities between women and men that still persist in the labor market, and the ways these are affected by provision and/or lack of welfare services (Saraceno, 2003; Gottardi, 2005; Picchio, 2003; Naldini, 2003; Addis, 1999; Bimbi, 1997). The analysis developed in this article draws on the gender literature on employment and social policies in Italy, but re-orientates the focus of study on the issue of 'gender and non-employment'.

The non-employment perspective is particularly suited for exploring the division between reproductive and productive work that distinguishes between paid labor and unpaid domestic work and care in ways that are strictly interrelated and deeply gendered. If policies construct some subjects (usually men) as more legitimately accepted to be employed (full-time), they also construct other subjects (usually women) as more legitimately accepted to be non-employed, or part-time employed, in order to care for people and households. Welfare services that make reconciliation between family and work possible – such as childcare, elder care, parental leaves, or domestic work provisions – impact the more or less unequal ways in which paid and unpaid work is distributed between women and men. Policies on retirement age and pensions, as well as tax/welfare policies that use the individual or family as the unit for tax and benefit systems, thus create different dependent and independent subjects and also construct legitimate states of non-employment that regulate different labor market entry and exit paths for men and women (QUING, 2007).

Before analyzing what the most relevant policy debates are in Italy, we need to provide some data on the Italian socio-political context, the situation of wo/men in employment, and the Italian welfare and care provisions. One of the most typical features of the Italian social context is its familism, or its reliance on the family as provider of social protection, with minimum state intervention (Saraceno, 2003; Naldini, 2003). Italian governments provide little resources for family policies compared to other European countries (around 4% of overall expenses in Italy compared to a European average of 8%; Eurostat, 2005). The situation of women and work in Italy is one of the worst in Europe in terms of gendered discrimination, especially for women in southern Italy, due to the deep cleavages characterizing Italian regional develop-

ment. The employment rate is 69.7% for men and 45.3% for women if we consider Italy overall. But we see the gap widening as soon as we compare the northern/eastern regions, where women's employment rate rises to 56%, with the southern ones, where employed women number only 30% of the total adult female population. Women still make up the majority of unemployed people, almost doubling the number of men, as unemployment rates clearly show – 6.2% for men and 10.1% for women, rising to 11.4% and 19.6% in southern Italy (Istat, 2006). Even more interesting, when looking at labor policies through non-employment lenses, are the data on the inactive population. These also show the aforementioned imbalance based on gender (inactivity rate is 39% for men and 62.1% for women) and geography (women's employment rate in northern-western Italy is 56.1% in contrast with 33.2 in southern regions) (Istat, 2006).

An important feature for understanding the context of non-employment policies in Italy is the dearth of welfare state services, especially childcare: the percentage of the total number of children aged 0–3 that have a place in public and private nurseries is a paltry 7.4%. The situation is highly disproportionate across the national territory and the percentage may reach 20% in regions such as the northern Emilia Romagna and drop to 2% in some southern regions. Regarding care services for children aged 3–6 the picture is completely different with a coverage of 95% (most of these services are privately run by religious institutions) (data from Istat/CNEL, 2003 quoted by Villa, 2006: 65). The work of grandmothers appears crucial to solving the problem of insufficient state childcare services in Italy, reinforcing the central role of the family as an institution that provides for social welfare (CNEL, 2004; Saraceno, 2003).

In Italy care work still remains the responsibility of women. Statistics on the use of parental leaves by men and women also show this, which is significant for understanding the types of employment paths that are constructed for working mothers and men as carers. In Italy maternity forces many women to retire from their professional life, and only 13.4% of mothers come back to work immediately after the compulsory maternity leave. From a survey carried out by Istat in 2003 only 7% of fathers used a parental leave within their child's second year and only another 4% had the intention of using it in the near future (Villa, 2006: 66–67).

Gender and class intersections have been detected by many scholars: poverty studies show that, due to the increasing number of single mothers and older women living alone, the great majority of the population living under the poverty threshold in Italy is made up of women (Bimbi & Ruspini, 2000). The gender/class intersection that disadvantages women is also visible in the different types of job contract that women and men enjoy, with an increase in the last decade in women employed with fixed-term contracts (Villa, 2006).

To give a more comprehensive picture of women's work in Italy we need to mention the situation of immigrant women. There were 2,730,000 legal immigrants at the end of 2004 and more than 3 million in 2005, representing 8% of the total workforce. Almost half of them are women, mainly working in the care sector as domestic workers without any legal contracts. It is estimated that of the 600,000 domestic workers, no less than 500,000 are immigrants (Caritas/Migrantes, 2005).

The lack of public family and care measures to reconcile work and family life in Italy was the result of a political context based on a consensual democracy characterized by a unique ideological cleavage. The coexistence of both a strong catholic and a socialist culture affected the type of gender equality that emerged in Italy, which had to maintain a central role for the family (Guadagnini & Donà, 2007). The Italian 'Mediterranean welfare state' based on familism has proven difficult to change, also due to the persistence of a strong male domination of political life, with a low percentage (11%) of women's representation in Parliament over the last decade, and political culture, with a widespread idea that women's main role is in the private sphere of the family rather than in the public, political and professional areas (Guadagnini & Donà, 2007).

In spite of these limitations, women's policy agencies began to develop in Italy in the 1980s and 90s, thanks to the European Union's influence and the input given by center-leftist governments. The main institutions set up to develop gender equality policies in Italy have been the National Commission for Equal Treatment established in 1983 within the Ministry of Labor to deal with employment matters, the National Commission for Equality and Equal Opportunities (operational from 1985 to 2004), and the Ministry for Equal Opportunities created in 1996. These institutions, which contributed to the promotion of gender policies in Italy, were influenced by the color of the party in government, with greater progress coming from center-left than from center-right governments (Guadagnini & Donà, 2007).

Italian policy debates on gender and non-employment, and their gendered dimension³

The contextual data on gender and employment in Italy provided in the previous section offer us some elements to help understand the background in which the policy debates that we will discuss here were articulated. But what were these policy debates like, and how gendered were they? The hottest policy debates that we identified in Italy in the area of non-employment from 1995 to 2007 first of all concerned the two issues which attracted the most public and political attention, *reconciliation of work and family life* and *pensions (age of retirement)*, and secondly one issue which was less debated, but still present in the political arena, such as *care and domestic work*. In these cases we were able to identify at least one relevant official policy document that was also debated in Parliament and discussed by civil society and the media. Some of these debates were gendered, such as the one on reconciliation of work and family life, while others were less gendered or not gendered at all in spite of their gender implications, as in the case of the debates on pensions and domestic work. We will first discuss the debates that concern care issues and secondly those that regard pension issues, in each case considering the different contextual reasons that might help understand the type of genderedness encountered.

Non-employed carers

The debates on reconciliation of work and family, allowances, and care and domestic work have raised important issues for the development of gender equality in the Italian context.

Though in different ways, they have all constructed female carers as non-employed subjects. The *reconciliation of work and family life* has been a particularly hot issue in policy debates, and an especially gendered one too. The reasons for the genderedness of this debate can be found in the strategic alliance between state feminists (femocrats) and feminist movements that materialized during the center-leftist D'Alema government in the 1990s thanks to the impulse of the European Directive 96/34 on parental leave. The issue, though, had been developed well before 1990s as a typical 'women's issue' connected to matters of quality of life for all.

From the end of the 1970s onward, the debate on work and family balance started to be articulated among state feminists, scholars, and women in trade unions. The strength of the 'difference feminism' in Italy, centered on the maternal role at a symbolic level (Buttarelli et al. 1997), can partly explain the convergence of interests between feminists and femocrats on the issue of reconciliation of family and work. Italian feminist movements have often remained outside the sphere of institutional policies and political debates on the issue, showing the existence of an ongoing tension between the two domains that characterises the Italian political context. When the Ministry for Equal Opportunities was created in 1996 under Italy's then center-leftist government, ministers such as Anna Finocchiaro, Laura Balbo, and Katia Belillo, due to their experience both in the leftist parties and in the feminist movement, opened up opportunities for feminists (and also theorists of difference) to enter the institutional scene by becoming officers and participating in different policy projects. However, many feminists decided not to contribute to the institutional policies, and the tensions between institutional equal opportunities machineries and a multifaceted feminist movement remained, sometimes constructive and at other times simply indicative of the fragmentation of women's activism (Calloni, 2006). In spite of this problematic relation between feminists and femocrats, the issue of reconciliation of work and family life has mobilized actors from both domains who have contributed to introducing a gender dimension to the debate.

This long-term debate on reconciliation issues led to a law proposal by women from the Communist Party (PCI) presented in 1990 by MP Livia Turco called 'Working hours, life's seasons and urban time policies'. The document claimed each (male or female) citizen's right to self-management of time, right to personal development (in work, care, free time, training, and relational and emotional life), the institutional coordination of 'urban time policies' (e.g. regulations on the opening hours of shops), and the need for overcoming the sexual division of labor by redistributing care work between men and women.

At the end of the 1990s, the debate on employment policies was focused on the reduction of working hours, with trade unions proposing a 35-hour working week. In this debate the argument about reducing the importance of productive work in people's lives went together with the ones on valuing time for care work and recognizing rights to parental leaves to women workers, along with the call for a more equal distribution of care work between men and women. These arguments were articulated by feminists around the assumption of women's difference: women's experiences as carers and their use of productive/reproductive time could suggest social changes

affecting everybody's lives. During these years women MPs and feminists established alliances with trade unions, and while opposing proposals based on deregulation were promoted by employers' organizations, gender advocates supported a compulsory maternity leave as a means to guarantee the protection of women workers' rights.

The result of these debates was Law 53/2000 on parental leave which was promoted by Livia Turco, Minister for Social Affairs of a center-leftist government, together with the Minister of Labor. A strong impulse for this proposal came from the obligation to transpose EU directive 96/34 on parental leave. Law 53 introduced a mandatory 5-month maternity leave, established parental leaves and extended the support to parents with disabled and adopted children. It introduced measures on the organization of urban time policies, and initiatives to support working hours flexibility in favor of the employee with the cooperation of enterprises and unions. However, in spite of the changes introduced in Law 53/2000, women still faced many problems balancing work and life due to the insufficient provision of childcare services for infants aged 0–3 (see [The context of gender and non-employment policies in Italy](#)) and the limited involvement of fathers in family responsibilities (CNEL, 2003). In fact, Law 53/2000 did not promote the fathers' role in family care work, because while parental leave was open to both parents, the fact that the leave was only paid at 30% of the salary discouraged men from using it.

As a result of the compulsory 5-month maternity leave, the lack of childcare services, and a parental leave that does not sufficiently promote men's involvement, new Italian mothers are particularly pushed into a situation of non-employment. Only a few voices, among them the economist Fiorella Kostoris, have dared to challenge the compulsory maternity, and address the fact that the inattention to the role of fathers and the protectionism toward women as mothers and carers maintains, rather than challenges, the existing male breadwinner model.⁴ This model was also reinforced in 1998 with the introduction of a 'means test' of families' wealth which determines access to welfare services and the amount of allowances.⁵ Since this means test is calculated on the basis of families' and not individuals' incomes, it has encouraged especially poorer women not to return to work after maternity and rather depend on the partner's income (Picchio, 2003; Addis, 1999). A more gendered approach would have implied a prioritization of the needs of women over those of the family, something difficult to conceive in the context of Italian familism (Saraceno, 1994; 2003). The result was that, as the childcare services on offer are so limited, a woman with children and a partner with a low income may prefer to stay at home or to work in the informal sector. This will prevent her from paying higher taxes and fees for health and welfare services. In short, Italian women in single-income families are indirectly encouraged to be non-employed.

The debate on *care and domestic work* rose to prominence in Italy only in the last seven years, long after the heated discussions on the issue that split the feminist movements during the 1970s (Bertilotti & Scattigno, 2005). Migrant women are employed to take care of the house or of elderly and dependent persons, thus creating new gender, class, and nationality divisions between Italians and the foreign women who work as their caregivers (Colombo, 2003; Decimo, 2005).

In Italy the demand for migrant women's care labor arose mainly from shortages in welfare services, an aging population and the increasing participation of Italian women in the formal labor market. Migrant domestic workers are usually hired through informal work contracts (Eurispes, 2003). Sometimes they are 'regularized' through emergency measures and 'quota for entering the country'.⁶ However, research promoted by one of the biggest catholic workers' leagues (ACLI) showed that 57% of domestic workers in Italy are not working with a legal contract and 84% of the workers are women (Iref/Acli 2007).

After a first period, from the 1980s to the 1990s, when the Italian feminist movement was criticized for its lack of attention to intersections of gender and ethnicity (Pojman, 2006), the last decade has seen the movement strongly denounce the exploitation of migrant women workers in the care sector, and call for stronger national and European legislation on migration and asylum (Campani, 2007). However, feminist debates often remained at the stage of sociological analyses on multicultural feminism, with no proposals of specific policy measures to improve the quality of migrant women's work. Effects of this separation of feminist reflections from the realm of policymaking were the lack of recognition of domestic workers' parental rights in Law 53/2000 (Filcams/CGIL, 2007) and the absence of feminist comments on the new contract for domestic work.

Indeed there have recently been efforts to formalize and increase protection for domestic workers through fairer forms of contracts. A new national contract for domestic workers was approved in 2007 after two years of negotiations. The new contract included increased salaries and contributions to the national pension fund, the creation of professional categories, the introduction of part-time positions, and a general reduction of full-time working hours. The focus on labor protection for domestic workers was the result both of the state's attempt to expose the informal economy in the domestic work sector, and of new alliances among other actors. The actors who have taken the lead in the debate on domestic workers, reaching an agreement on the new domestic work contract in 2007, were trade unions from the service sector and housewives organizations. In a context marked by membership decline, trade unions have begun to increasingly attract migrant domestic workers, and migrant workers in general, as new groups of union affiliates (Leonardi & Mottura, 2003).

Pressure to improve the rights of domestic and care workers also came from different social sectors, ranging from catholic workers' associations (ACLI), social forums, and feminist movements. All these organizations have increasingly represented the rights of male and female migrant workers in a general attempt to reinforce their memberships and/or to interpret the shift toward a multicultural/globalized society (Andall, 2000; Iref/Acli, 2007). The large presence of migrant women of catholic origins among people working in Italy's care sector may explain the interest of catholic associations in these issues (Colombo, 2003). The crucial role of migration within globalized capitalism as well as new forms of exclusion/exploitation, including those related to care/sex work, are at the core of the antiglobalization movements' interest in migrant domestic work (Basso & Perocco, 2003; Andrijasevic, 2004).

However, unlike the debate on reconciliation of work and family life, the issue of domestic work did not promote alliances

between movements and state feminists. The 'gender paradox' was that, even if trade unions, also pushed by feminist movements, succeeded in promoting some mechanisms to protect pregnant workers and mothers within the 2007 contract for domestic workers, the granted rights were limited by gaps in the national legislation on parental leave (Law 53/2000) (Filcams/CGIL, 2007). This shows that state and movements feminists did not prioritize the issue of domestic work at the time in which the law on maternity and parental leave was approved and they did not join efforts to gender the debate on the rights of domestic workers in the years that preceded the adoption of the 2007 contract.

Differentiated pensioners

The debate on the reform of the social security system, particularly *pensions*, has definitely been fervent in Italy over the last decade. It has been much less gendered than the one on reconciliation, as it was not put on the feminist agenda and it did not promote feminist and femocrats' alliances. The debate was gendered only to the extent that the pension reform concerned, among other aspects, the establishment of a different retirement age for women and for men. Since 1995, when the first pensions' reform (Law 335/1995) radically changed the whole system promoting a shift from an earnings-based system to a contributions-based one and equalizing retirement age for women and men at 65, the debate has been polarized. The dominant position in favor of a different retirement age for women and men was adopted by state feminists and trade unions, while the more liberal defense of an equal retirement age for both sexes was coming from the European Union and isolated voices (MP Emma Bonino) in the Italian political context. Feminist actors did not consider that such differentiated treatment could create further gender inequalities and have accordingly not intervened in the debate in a visible way. Femocrats seemed to fear that equalizing men and women's retirement age would not be manageable for the state due to the lack of care services and to the fact that younger women's employment is still made possible by the availability of care work by older, 'non employed' women.

Only two years after the 1995 pension reform, the 1997 Budget Law (Law 450/1997) re-established a different and anticipated retirement age for women, and the Maroni pension reform, enacted in 2004 by Law 243, finally set the retirement age at 65 for men and 60 for women, but established that, from 2008, the minimum contributory period would pass from 35 to 40 years, independently of age. A special regulation on early retirement made it possible for women to receive a pension at age 57, after 35 years of contribution. Since the pension is calculated on the basis of past contributions, women who retire earlier will receive a lower amount of money. Moreover, the contribution system will impact workers differently depending on their working history: workers with continuous working lives will be better off than those with discontinuous ones, such as those employed with atypical contracts. For women, it can be foreseen that a pension will be ensured mainly for those entering the labor market as civil servants or employees with open-ended contracts. However, this pension will show a gender gap when compared to that achieved by men in the

same conditions, due to women's shorter average contributory period (CNEL, 2004). Some women, due to the care work they carry out in their lives and the increasing offer of non stable jobs, could never reach 35 years of contribution, and would thus never be entitled to any occupational pension benefits at all (CNEL, 2004).

In the public debate, the trade union CGIL expressed the most critical positions about the Maroni pension reform's impact on women's lives. However, none of the unions criticized the 'inequality' in granting women a lower retirement age, citing as justification the substantial disadvantages women face in accumulating working years, and the greater discontinuities in their working lives due to the uneven distribution of domestic and care work. By contrast, employers' organizations were generally in favor of the process of pension reform.

The Italian center-leftist government, in the Budget Law approved in 2007, maintained different retirement ages: women's maximum retirement age was set at 60, while men could work until the age of 65. The measure disregarded the debate opened by the Radical Party MP Emma Bonino on the need to put the retirement age for women on equal footing with that for men, even after the European Justice Court (ECJ 2005/2114) declared Italian legislation as inconsistent with European Law. Only the smallest of the official trade unions, UIL, openly approved Bonino's claims, while the Minister for Labor declined to support any government projects in line with her proposal. Barbara Pollastrini (Democratic Left Party), who was Minister for Equal Opportunities at the time, also explicitly disagreed with Bonino, stating that at present this equality measure would represent an increased workload for women who are already in charge of most domestic and care work, especially on retirement.

It is certainly possible that, in the debate on pensions, the trade union CGIL and the center-leftist party really believed that raising the retirement age for women would entail a hardship more fundamental than the inequality of retirement age, particularly for lower-class women. However, while the current, lower retirement age might have advantages for lower-classes women, the joint positions of trade unions and state feminists ended up defending the status quo of the male breadwinner and female caregiver model: since women are *de facto* held responsible for care work, setting a different retirement age will only further uphold their role as carers. The result of this polarized debate in Italy in which a 'differential' approach prevailed over an 'egalitarian' liberal approach has been the construction of 'differentiated' female pensioners whose main role of carers is supported and maintained in spite of the consequences for women's lives and the definition of their employment status.

The construction of 'non-employed' gender subjects and its intersections with age, class, and ethnicity

Our findings show that Italian non-employment policies construct specific categories of subjects by reproducing traditional gender stereotypes concerning the division of productive and reproductive work, hereby politically articulating intersections of gender with class/ethnicity/age and generating further disadvantages for women. The analysis of

the debates enabled us to construct hypothetical life-paths of 'non-employed' native and migrant women in Italy.

For native women, mainly low and middle class ones, the life-path begins with the difficult process of entering the labor market, often having to accept unstable and low-level positions, in a context that does not encourage women's employment. As soon as they become mothers, a series of mechanisms encourage them to exit the labor market. This is caused not only by a 'protectionist' system of social assistance, exemplified by the mandatory 5-month maternity leave and the system of parental leaves that does not encourage men's involvement, but also by the lack of services for childcare and elderly care (see the debate on reconciliation). In concert, these factors in effect encourage Italian working mothers, particularly civil servants, not to re-enter the labor market. Once women are out of the labor market, the mechanism of means-tested social services and allowances based on family income make it more convenient for women (at least those not married to high-earning breadwinners) to stay economically dependent on their partner, access social services, pay lower taxes, and be eligible for state benefits. In this case, the need to protect poorer families visibly prevails over gender equality considerations (Addis, 1999). If, besides the means-test benefits for families, we also include the insufficient offer of childcare and other care services, as well as these women's usually unstable jobs, it is easy to see Italian women are 'pushed' into a situation of 'non-employment'. Men, on the contrary, are constructed here as primary breadwinners, legitimately employed, independent subjects.

The ways in which intersections of gender and age, class, and ethnicity/immigration status are currently articulated in policies seem to create further disadvantages for women. As the years pass and her life-path continues, our native Italian woman will either never manage to accumulate enough contributions to be eligible for a pension, or, if she has succeeded in going back to work after maternity, she will have the possibility to retire five years earlier than men, thus further increasing the gap between her pension level and her partner's (see the debate on pensions). Here, the political articulation of the intersection of gender and class inequalities leads to the progressive feminization of poverty. Furthermore, public policies with conflicting aims put pressure on aging women in two opposite directions: on one side, they lengthen women's working lives, hindering early retirement (see the debate on pensions); on the other side, they implicitly demand care work from grandmothers to make up for the deficiencies of Italian childcare services (see the debate on reconciliation). Aging Italian women are paradoxically asked to be employed as well as non-employed, with the further aggravating circumstance that their care work, from which the state greatly profits, is not treated as employment and thus does not entitle them to any social benefits such as leaves, holidays, etc.

The already difficult life-path of the Italian woman is interconnected with the more disadvantaged migrant woman's, who, at the stage of the hypothetical life-cycle that we are sketching here, is likely to be the carer of our aged native woman. As she is not a citizen and works in the informal economy, she is not entitled to the parental leaves and benefits that help to cope with reconciliation but also

discourage the native woman to re-enter the labor market after maternity. The migrant woman is instead pushed to be mother and worker at the same time, all the while paradoxically treated as 'non-employed' for two reasons.

Firstly, because most migrant women arrive without a permit or visa, due to restrictive Italian law on migration, their job situation is therefore precarious as they may only be legally employed either through 'emergency' measures for migrants or through so-called 'entry quota' which expose them to an uncertain situation that can force them into non-employment at any time. If employers are unsatisfied with migrants' work they can simply make them redundant, thus converting them back into illegal individuals facing expulsion. Secondly, the elderly pensioner she cares for might have such a low pension she might very well not be given a regular contract. In short, she is likely to be 'informally' employed as a carer, without any legal safeguards, and thus officially 'non-employed', a contradictory status painfully typical of migrant women in Italy.

Andall (2000) underlines that the liberation of middle class western European women from care responsibilities occurred at the cost of their migrant care givers. However, this only tells part of the story, as one should not overlook the fact that the ongoing 'liberation' of European, and in our case, Italian *men*, from assuming care and domestic responsibilities also engenders costs to both migrant and native women.

Conclusions

The hottest policy debates on gender and non-employment in Italy from 1995 to 2007 concerned, with different degrees of relevance, the issues of reconciliation of work and family life, pensions, and care and domestic work. Our findings reveal that the debates are more gendered when they are related to the issue of care, while issues that have similar gender implications but are not directly related to care issues, like pensions, are less gendered. The debate on the reconciliation of work and family life appears especially gendered because it catalyzed the interests of state feminists and movement feminists during the window of opportunity offered by a more women-friendly center-leftist government and the obligation to transpose the European Union Directive 96/34 on parental leaves into Italian legislation. The convergence of interests between feminists and femocrats on the issue of reconciliation and the protection of maternity is understandable within a shared cultural framework of 'difference feminism' and its symbolic emphasis on the maternal role.

The debate on domestic work in Italy has been less gendered than the one on reconciliation. It is gendered in the sense that it has focused on the role of female migrant domestic workers, the so-called *badanti* (carers), but it has emphasized issues related to the need to overcome the informal economy, issues of work protection and citizenship's rights, rather than gender equality. These issues were raised both by trade unions and social movements, in a context where the needs of an aging population were prioritized over the intersection of inequalities suffered by female migrant domestic workers. The debate on pensions in Italy has also been less gendered than the one on reconciliation. Its gendered aspect was the setting of a different retirement age for women and for men. The debate was dominated, apart

from the government and party politicians, by the trade unions and employers' organizations, while there was little room for alliances of movement feminists and femocrats. State feminists more or less visibly joined forces with trade unions in supporting a different retirement age for women due to their role of carers, thus taking a protectionist and more traditional approach to women and men's retirement ages instead of the more egalitarian liberal approach promoted by the European Court of Justice and the isolated voice of MP Emma Bonino.

The analysis of the aforementioned Italian debates showed that the main actors involved were state feminists, women within (especially left-wing) parties, trade unions, and employers' organizations. Though their influence needs to be explored in more depth, the Ministry of Equal Opportunities and other equality institutions especially participated in the debate on reconciliation, but seemed to play a minor role in the other debates. The European Union has particularly been a crucial and influential policy actor in the debates on pensions and the reconciliation of family and work due both to legally binding equality directives and ECJ sentences (Donà, 2006; Guadagnini & Donà, 2007). Feminist activists have often stayed out of the sphere of institutional policies, not participating in the governmental policy debates on the issues: their mediations with the political sphere have mainly taken place at the local level through their participation in the process of transferring state competences from central to local administrations, often in the form of project and welfare services management (Della Porta, 2003). However, they have been active both within the academic world and the movements, especially in connection with social movements on specific topics such as reconciliation of family and work, and domestic work.

In general, our analysis of Italian debates on reconciliation, domestic/care work, social benefits, and pensions, reveals that policies tend to construct different categories of women as legitimately 'non-employed': working mothers discouraged to work by social security provisions, informal carers of all ages, migrant women working in the informal economy or regularized by emergency legislation to work in the care and domestic sectors, women with 'flexible' or unstable jobs, penalized pensioners. All these subjects are constructed as legitimately 'non-employed' mainly to supply low-cost or free care work for the Italian state and, ultimately, Italian men.

Endnotes

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² This section draws on the following QUING research reports: Sangiuliano and Lombardo (2007); QUING 2007.

³ This section is based on Longo and Sangiuliano (2007).

⁴ See http://www.marketpress.net/notiziario_det.php?art=34538.

⁵ See http://www.regione.fvg.it/politichesociali/allegati/tutelaMaternit%C3%A0/DLGS109_1998.pdf.

⁶ Law 189/2002, as modified by the Decree law 195/2002 on 'Urgent measures on the regularization of irregular work of migrants' granted more than 300,000 work permits to women.

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