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Mothers, childcare duties, and remote working under COVID-19 lockdown in Italy: Cultivating communities of care

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Abstract

Drawing on a virtual ethnography, we explore how the increase in remote working has created unequal domestic rearrangements of parenting duties with respect to gender relations during the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy. We also discuss the resources that mothers have mobilized to create a network of social support in the organization of care.

Keywords

care, childcare duties, COVID-19, gender equality, remote working

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is teaching us an important lesson about the gendered division of labor, as mothers and fathers are facing the consequences of a new organization of care and work time imposed by lockdown measures. It is well-known that the gendered division of care was unbalanced before the COVID-19 experience. Care work was not equally distributed between genders across all groups in society, even among highly educated couples (Piedad Urdinola, and Tovar, 2019), with women devoting significantly more time to household work than men. In particular, married women spent almost twice as much time on household and childcare responsibilities than men (Bianchi et al., 2012), and this is also true for the

most gender-egalitarian countries in Northern Europe (Bernhardt et al., 2008). Even among couples with female wage earners, women perform most of the care work (Chesley, 2017).

In Italy, where we focus our study, care-related work is divided along traditional lines. Together with Romanian women, Italian women hold the record among Europeans for daily family work at an average of 4.5 hours per day, compared with 1.5 hours for Italian men. Moreover, while Italian women are the most active in care-related work,

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men are less active than in other countries (Eurostat, 2019).

Given the low participation of women in paid work, one might think that the difference in household work is due to the fact that women spend more time at home than men. According to the latest data from the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2019), however, even when women contribute to income and work as much as men, they also contribute the bulk of the family work. Women contribute 2.8 hours more than men, a gap that increases to 4.2 when there are children in the household.

The preliminary results of our virtual ethnography suggest that the lockdown has exacerbated gender inequality, creating unequal domestic rearrangements of parenting duties in Italy. The lockdown had an effect not only on the gendered division of care but also on the resources that can be mobilized to activate social support in the organization of care. Our research highlights the key role that working mothers have played in creatively (and effectively) organizing caretaking activities to resist the never-ending burden of social distancing, childcare, and maintaining a degree of normalcy and efficiency at work.

Inspired by the geographies of ethics, responsibility, and care (McEwan and Goodman, 2010), we understand caring as a distinctive, network-based activity, and we believe that understanding the mechanism of such gendered practices of network-based solidarity and social endurance is crucial to approaching the issue of care beyond common-sense notions of labor and love (Manzo, 2020), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remote-working while parenting

In this time of radical uncertainty, we assessed the opportunity to perform fieldwork in online environments (Lupton, 2020). We decided to approach several social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp), following the communities of practice perspective (i.e. considering the benefits that people can create when interacting and working together in social networks even if they gather in cyberspace; Wenger et al., 2002). We decided to reach out to women who were

working from home and had preschool children (ages 0–5) living in northern Italy, the area most affected by the pandemic. We interviewed them regarding their daily lives and how life has changed during the lockdown. From March to May 2020, we contacted over 50 mothers. Some of them participated in the study, others just wanted to express emotional support.

Using Zoom and Skype, we collected 20 real-time online interviews in which all our participants clearly expressed a complete rescheduling of their daily activities: wake-up times, bedtimes, work shifts, cooking, cleaning, play, and childcare. This happened even though fathers were also remotely working or had suspended their work. Generally, almost all mothers were taking care of their children during the lockdown, sacrificing their work time and putting into place diverse strategies to cope with the new situation, from radical reorganizations of their home spaces (e.g. the balcony used for afternoon snack and games, the living room for gymnastics, the garage transformed into the father's office, etc.) to ongoing negotiations with their children over the supply of snacks and screen time and even breastfeeding to carve out time to work:

I feel very guilty, so I try to get organized: on the round table, we do puzzles, constructions, [and] drawings together. Sometimes I turn on the PC and work while he plays, we don't interact much. There is silence, so I put on some music. It's all horrendous! Perhaps you are in a call with your boss and your son needs to go pee, and you can't understand either one or the other.

Let's say that I had an 'evolution'! I understood that I can do everything on the phone, I can do anything anywhere, only when I have a call she [the daughter] is smart and takes advantage of it, she may ask for sweets and knows that she will get them!

The remote-working mothers who participated in our study told us that they primarily worked when their children were sleeping: at dawn, at night, and during the post-lunchtime nap, which suddenly became the peak of their productivity. The couples who attempted to support each other between calls and deadlines, and tended to divide childcare equally, were few. The 'male-breadwinner' model,

which unconditionally privileges men's work, prevailed:

He is a labor consultant, so he created an office in the garage and he's there 9-13 and 15-dinner; he tells me that he tried to keep the girls, but he couldn't do it and therefore I do everything by myself, even when I have to teach online and therefore I work at night.

The girls stay at home with me, I'm taking care of them alone. Even if my partner has started smart-working, too; he takes care of them only when I have online meetings. Mine is the activity of putting them to bed, cooking . . . I work immediately in the morning after having prepared the girls and then after lunch, while the little one sleeps.

In this sense, reaching a compromise with children and partners in the daily organization of work and care did not mean finding a balance. Our participants often expressed discouragement and frustration:

The grievousness of the housework is crushing! For instance, I wash the floors, and then the girl literally pees on it. I make the beds, and a second later they already suck . . . it's frustrating, and I think 'thank goodness' that I don't do this all my life!

Some of our interviewees reacted by expressing their emotions aloud: 'Managing the exhaustion is the most difficult thing. There are days that I cry and scream. My husband does not understand me, saying that it is useless to scream'. On the contrary, others preferred to avoid any clashes: 'Should I fight for everything? I let it go as much as I can. I can't fight every day in this moment of crisis!'

Communities of care

Despite social distancing, most working mothers found creative ways to care for others and themselves through social media connections. They organized children's birthday parties via Zoom, lunches with family members who were alone at home via Skype, video aperitifs with their closest friends but also with other friends that the pandemic brought closer after some time. They also looked for emotional support on WhatsApp groups, sometimes even with experts in psychology:

The most difficult thing to share are couple fights. It would take me time (that I don't have) to talk to friends about it. I'm in a mother-child WhatsApp group that is great support, especially on children matters. I found a bit of comfort from colleagues who are mothers too. I try not to involve my parents in the extreme difficulty of some moments. Emotionally I feel a little lonely.

In addition to interviews, we carried out a virtual ethnography of a Facebook community, which, for this commentary, we call 'Smart Mum', founded by three professional mothers (a psycho-social counselor, an obstetrician, and a communication specialist) who hosted free Zoom meetings for members. The community is a solidarity network project born in northern Italy to bring support to all mothers in this period of emergency and isolation. It aimed to build 'digital spaces to meet, compare, share fears, stress, resources, activities (but also laugh and chat)'. We observed how mothers, in general, did not want to pretend that nothing was happening. We experienced a great sense of community, a common desire to discuss life under COVID-19, create empathy and share the management of emotional stress (including those of mothers, children, and partners) and the compromises to organize work and home life, eventually searching for an emerging shared social identity. These practices constitute a therapeutic support to make the afflictions faced by Italian mothers meaningful and bearable.

Conclusion

Our virtual ethnography illustrated the centrality of mothers' emotional resources to deal with the pandemic as care leaders. Organic forms of caring (Skeggs, 2020) emerged, as in the case of Smart Mum. Their mode of intervention suggests a women-centered mutual aid support model (Manzo, 2019) as a way to create spaces of solidarity for people to heal, forging emotional ties, awareness, and participation.

The results confirm that the reorganization of care during the COVID-19 pandemic has been unbalanced: women, including those working

regularly, performed most of the household duties. There is the urgency to understand why the male ‘breadwinner’ model prevails even in emergency conditions when it shows intrinsic limits, as the long-time adverse effects on the women’s labor market might suggest (Blaskò et al., 2020).

Financialized capitalist societies created an institutional basis for new forms of women’s subordination, with women often being silenced in realm of politics and relegated to the domestic sphere. More than ever, the pandemic has magnified a ‘crisis of care’ (Fraser, 2016) that must be understood structurally. The present study calls our attention to the need for a gender-egalitarian reorganization of social-reproductive activities—particularly with respect to caring for children—and for care duties and emotional resources to be more of a central concern. We hope that our study inspires future comparative research on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected domestic life in different geographical contexts.

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