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Gender gaps in the Italian economy and the role of public policy

Paola Profeta*

Less than one woman out of two works in Italy.

In spite of the gender revolution which pervaded the last decades, in spite of the massive prevalence of women at higher levels of education, the Italian labor market is still male dominated. The numbers are even more critical if we focus on the South of Italy, where only one woman out of three is employed.

Gender differences in the labor market are not only an Italian feature. However they are particularly serious in Italy. The Italian gap between male and female labor force participation is twice the average level of US and Europe. According to the last report of the World Economic Forum (2018), which measures gender equality according to four dimensions – economics, politics, education and health - Italy ranks 70th out of 140 countries analyzed and 118th when we consider only the economic dimension. Among western European countries, Italy is a poor performer: only Greece, Malta and Cyprus show a lower level of gender equality than Italy.

There is a lively and growing international debate on the beneficial economic effects of a higher participation of women to the labor force. All major institutions provide evidence – and even measures - that more women at work imply higher GDP, more economic development and a virtuous circle of gender equality and economic growth. The main reason behind this evidence is that a better use of the unexploited female talent and of female skills in the

* Università Bocconi

labor market would necessarily produce a positive economic outcome. The argument is driven by the fact that women are nowadays more educated than men. This is particularly true in Italy, where gender gaps in education have rapidly closed and reversed in favor of women in the last decades: more than 60% of graduates today are girls.¹ Under this perspective, equality between men and women is not only in itself an important development goal, but, as women represent half of the population, and have talent, human capital and productivity not lower to those of men, the global economy would benefit from boosting women's participation in the labor force. This is particularly relevant in times and countries of modest economic growth, as it is the Italian economy.

Beneficial effects to the economy are associated not only to the participation of women into the labour market, but also to a gender-balanced leadership.

Several studies have characterized the emergence of a female leadership style. Women are more able than men to deal with difficult personal relationships, they pay attention to people's needs, they are inclined towards prevention and solution of conflicts, they share views with other people and make efforts to reach agreements, they monitor and give feedbacks more intensively, they take less risky decisions. Thus, the presence of women in decision-making positions may contribute to have more balanced, innovative and agreed outcomes.

Additional efficiency gains associated with a gender-balanced leadership include a better quality of the institution and the organization. Promoting women in top positions implies a dramatic change of the initial *status quo* dominated by male representatives. As competent and talented women are abundant, this change necessarily induces a better selection process with positive effects on the quality of representatives. Both in the context of business and of politics, recent research has shown that gender quotas which impose the entry of women in decision-making positions induce a better selection of the entire group of decision-makers, not only because women are on average highly qualified but also because it induces the exit of the less qualified men

1 There are still differences in some fields of education, with a low presence of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) disciplines, which have to be carefully monitored and understood, because these disciplines are particularly rewarding on the labor market.

(Baltrunaite et al., 2015, Ferrari et al., 2018).

The next natural question is whether women in decision-making positions matter for the decisions and the performance of institutions and organizations. This issue is much more controversial and the existing evidence is not conclusive. However several contributions highlight that the agenda proposed by women leaders is different from the one proposed by men, and it includes items which are typically neglected by men. These include, for example, in companies a greater attention to less risky decisions, or to sustainability and environmental policies with a longer time-horizon, and in policy-making more investment in childcare and social needs.

For all these reasons, the promotion of female labor force participation should be a priority in our country today. However this is not what we observe. Policy reforms aimed at promoting gender equality have been scarce and not substantial, apart from the successful and revolutionary introduction of mandatory gender quotas on boards of listed and state-owned companies (Law 120/2011). There are no clear guidelines nor a comprehensive plan on how to design and implement effective policies to reduce economic gender gaps.

The collection of papers in this special issue of *Economia Italiana* presents new data and analysis which, after presenting evidence on several aspects of the gender gaps in the Italian economy, discuss the role of public policies in addressing them. Gender gaps characterize the entire life-cycle: they start at early stages, continue during the education period and exacerbate during the working age, which often coincides with the family formation. They also prolong into the retirement period. The papers of this volume describe some crucial aspects of the emergence of gender gaps at different stages of the life-cycle in the Italian context and provide new insights into the role of policies in dealing with them.

Del Boca, Meroni, Martino and Piazzalunga focus on early education and show how gender gaps are related to childcare arrangements at that stage. Childcare policies, which are typically neglected in the Italian political agenda, are instead very important. They represent the most powerful policy in-

strument to boost child development and reduce inequalities stemming out from diverse backgrounds. Early childcare is also associated to a reduction of gender gaps between boys and girls: using Italian data, the authors show that gender differences in the outcomes over life are lower among children who attended a day care centre, while it is higher and more often statistically significant for those who received informal care. This result confirms the positive and equalizing role of early public childcare. The analysis makes it clear that the scarce presence of formal childcare at early ages in Italy may have long-run consequences on the emergence and evolution of gender gaps.

Childcare policies are not only important to reduce future gender gaps among children who receive it but also to support female employment and thus reduce current gender gaps. In fact, gender gaps exacerbate under two circumstances, i.e. when women enter the labor market and when they have children. Carta provides evidence that childcare support is essential in these moments. After providing a useful and comprehensive overall picture of labor market conditions of women in Italy, Carta explores the role of childcare in reducing gender gaps in employment, together with a comparison with other OECD countries. Her analysis concludes that there is scope to foster childcare support to further improve female labour supply. She also analyzes another policy, which turns out to be particularly important to help mothers to reconcile work and family responsibilities: parental leaves. Her analysis shows that increasing the length of paternity leaves may help to rebalance the domestic workload among genders and overcome stereotypes, thus reinforcing the reduction of gender gaps.

Moving deeply into the role of the maternity event in exacerbating gender gaps, Barigozzi, Cremer and Monfardini analyze the child penalty, i.e. the cost for women to have children, in terms of wages and career. They show that this penalty depends on cultural aspects related to gender norms and to the role of fathers. They develop a theoretical model and test it with Italian data. The main result is that social norms impose to women to dedicate more time to informal care and household work than men. There are however large heterogeneities: more educated parents devote more time to quality informal care than less educated parents; more educated mothers spend more time in the labor market than less educated mothers.

As concluded by these contributions, childcare and family policies are at the center of policy interventions to promote female employment. However they may not be enough to promote women's careers and women's empowerment. Even in countries where women highly participate to the labor market, their presence in decision-making positions is scarce. Gender quotas are the most known policy targeted to increase, or accelerate the presence of women in top positions. Gender quotas are a however controversial policy: are they at odds with meritocracy? On one side, by reducing the inefficiency losses associated to discrimination, quotas may increase the quality of representatives. On the other side, by restricting the set of candidates and imposing constraints to the selection process, they may generate economic costs. Which outcome prevails depends also on the cultural context and the initial *status quo* and thus has to be empirically tested in each specific case. As I have already mentioned, the most relevant policy intervention for gender equality in Italy over the last 10 years has been the introduction of mandatory gender quotas on boards of listed and state-owned companies (Law 120/2011). Macchioni analyzes the consequences of the law with reference to a sample of Italian firms and provides evidence that the first effect prevails and a positive effect on the selection of board members emerge after the implementation of board gender quotas.

Labor market institutions play a crucial role in determining gender gaps in multiple ways. An interesting, specific case is explored by Gianfreda and Vallanti, who address the impact that labor market institutions in connection with labour courts' delays have on gender gaps. They show that in Italian regions with a more rigid labour market, which arises from the inefficiency of the judiciary system, gender disparities are larger both in terms of employability and type of contracts (temporary and part-time jobs). The effect is stronger for women aged between 25 and 40, i.e. those in their reproductive and care giving years.

The paper suggests that a gender perspective is needed, not only when we consider family policies, childcare and gender quotas who are targeted to the reduction of gender gaps, but more generally in policy evaluations exercises, as non-neutralities with respect to gender emerge in many different contexts. A gender approach to the evaluation of all policies and reforms is thus highly recommended.

The different angles explored by the papers collected in this volume make it clear that gender gaps have deep roots, tend to be persistent due to a conservative culture and dominant traditional family relations and invade all areas of the economy. In order to exploit its efficiency gains, gender equality should thus be a key priority for Italian institutions and policy-makers.

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Gender gaps in Italy and the role of public policy

In Italia il tema della parità di genere è di particolare urgenza. Secondo classifiche internazionali nel 2018 il Paese si attesta al 70° posto (su 149 Paesi considerati) rispetto al 41° del 2015. Ciò nonostante, di parità di genere se ne parla in modo spesso superficiale, le azioni concrete sono poche e le risorse limitate. Questo numero di Economia Italiana, **editor la prof.ssa Paola Profeta**, fa il punto sul gender gap nell'economia italiana e analizza il ruolo della politica pubblica proponendo stimolanti spunti di riflessione.

Daniela Del Boca, Enrica Martino, Elena Claudia Meroni e Daniela Piazzalunga analizzano il ruolo che le diverse forme di cura nei primi anni di vita hanno sull'influenza di bambine e bambini, per comprendere come incoraggiare il loro sviluppo cognitivo e non cognitivo specifico e ridurre i differenziali di genere nel corso della vita. **Francesca Carta** partendo dalla partecipazione femminile al mercato del lavoro in Italia si concentra sul ruolo delle politiche in materia di congedi di paternità e servizi per l'infanzia. Anche **Francesca Barigozzi, Helmuth Cremer e Chiara Monfardini** pongono l'accento sulla cura dei figli che, soprattutto in Italia, penalizza il lavoro delle madri. **Giuseppina Gianfreda e Giovanna Vallanti** affrontano il tema dei tempi di giustizia e dei costi di licenziamento e gli effetti della durata dei processi sulla parità di genere nel mercato del lavoro italiano. Focalizzandosi sulla rappresentanza delle donne ai vertici aziendali, **Anna Rita Macchioni Giaquinto** propone un approfondimento sulle conseguenze delle quote di genere introdotte dalla legge "Golfo-Mosca" del 2011. L'intervento di **Alessandra Perrazzelli** approfondisce il ruolo delle donne italiane tra lavoro e genitorialità, nodo cruciale dei differenziali di genere.

Nelle "rubriche", **Roberta Palazzetti** spiega come la diversità di genera possa costituire un impulso all'innovazione costituendo un vantaggio competitivo. **Pamela Minelli e Alberto Navarra** invitano ad una riflessione sul gender gap come fattore che rallenta le strategie di successo aziendale. **Valeria Manieri** propone la sfida di costruire un futuro tecnologico a misura di donna.

ECONOMIA ITALIANA nasce nel 1979 per approfondire e allargare il dibattito sui nodi strutturali e i problemi dell'economia italiana, anche al fine di elaborare adeguate proposte strategiche e di *policy*. L'Editrice Minerva Bancaria si impegna a riprendere questa sfida e a fare di Economia Italiana il più vivace e aperto strumento di dialogo e riflessione tra accademici, *policy makers* ed esponenti di rilievo dei diversi settori produttivi del Paese.