

Working Women-Mothers in southern Europe : Reconciling female Roles in the turn of the twentieth century

1 Introduction

1.1 Background, aims and objectives of the study

In the last decades the kind of research done on the family and work relationship has changed substantially in Europe. Women's participation in the labour market (LM) opened new fields for research on the social and economic consequences of female participation in paid work, its impact in the family sphere and its relationship to declining fertility and smaller family size, but also lately for its impact in the workplace. In most recent years the issue of reconciliation between work and family life has become more important, considered to be a key factor for the development of mainstream family policies. In addition the differences between the various European regions has been an important issue that gave particular emphasis on the diversity and complexity of the patterns present in Europe.

On the other hand there is now extended literature on women's situation in the labour markets of most European countries. Much of this literature reflects the efforts of primarily female social scientists to make visible the role of women in the labour market and society and explore the reasons for both continuity and change in the gender division of labour. However, the impact of this literature has been to highlight the differences in methodological approaches. In reality studies on balancing family and work life should combine both a "gender relationships approach", namely looking at the

kind of relationship that women construct between them and their family and workplace, as well as a “labour market situation” approach, looking on the particular labour and institutional framework in which women are employed. Such studies are also possible through comparative research which during the last years has revealed differences in the meaning and significance of women’s work over time and space.

In the context of these processes of change, the current research has a double-fold question. First, what are the implications of the different roles assumed by women for their participation into the labour markets of southern European countries, given that they have (with the exception of Portugal) the lowest employment and fertility rates in the EU? Second, what are the differences between the three countries, in terms of the construction of a ‘working mother’ role? In other words, working women’s biographies are looked as cases studies, and thus looking at how variations in experiences relate to general employment patterns found in three southern countries. It will be argued that women actively construct their “working- mother” roles through historically and culturally available opportunities and constrains. We will assume that the different elements that compose reconciliation arrangements affecting (as opportunities and constrains) employment behaviour of women are: the kind of domestic division of labour and uses of time found within southern marriages, the type of work done and the hours that women work, number of children found in the family and the type of child care used by the mother and the family. Such individually based reconciliation characteristics will be looked in a comparative perspective through the working-mother biographies selected as different behavioural patterns in order to suggest different working mother constructs and the differences between such constructs. Working women’s biographies are selected from three southern European countries, Greece, Italy

and Spain. These countries have been selected because they offer an interesting frame which has up to recent received a very homogeneous treatment because of the similar behaviour of these countries in demographic , family and employment developments in the last twenty or thirty years. Also the period of the study will cover the last three decades based both on the quantitative data available as well as on the personal accounts in form of work and family-life biographies. However, before going into issues of research design, we will also have a brief look on existing relevant theories for the family and work relationship and explain what are the particular characteristics of the southern context in which women are employed.

1.2 Why is the South different? : paradoxes in low employment – low fertility regimes.

To some extent Southern countries have been less studied from a comparative point of view. The few studies that have appeared in the last decade have looked mainly on women's situation in southern labour markets, in terms of unemployment, segregation, different types of work and to a smaller extend pay gap. At a European level they have given an overall picture of the similarities but also the important differences with the rest of their neighbouring countries. On the other hand, southern families have undergone significant changes during the post war period. The rise in the age of marriage, the higher presence of women in education, the rise of divorce and the low fertility rates are also part of the southern family transformation, although with large differences with some of the EU countries. In parallel, there were some important elements of change within the usual family practices, like motherhood and the family economy in general, although these remain largely unexplored. One of the principal characteristics of such changes was the different situation of women within the family. In relation to that, Ch. Bagavos and C. Martin (2000) argue that people are often surprised at the family and female employment situation in Southern European countries, and especially that of Spain, Italy and Greece, considering it to be a paradox. Why a paradox? In 1975, after a decade of declining fertility in northern and central European countries, the highest fertility levels where found in Spain (2.7), Greece and Italy (2.2). After 15 years, at the beginning of the 1990s, the situation was the opposite. As the decline continued during the last decade, they now have reached unprecedented low levels for the European context. Such a dramatic change is related to the second

reason why the situation seemed like a paradox, since the existing low fertility level seems to contradict the theories of an economically less developed and more traditional South. This region was characterised by a strong family orientation and few women in the labour force. But the expected relationship between fertility and the proportion of working women (inverse) and tradition (positive) did not seem to work: hence the paradox.

Economic theories of fertility that link the two trends together (higher employment rates and lower fertility) note that the increase in women's relative earnings have increased the opportunity costs of child-bearing, as well as that the rising consumption aspirations encourage both members of couple families to remain in full-time employment. However, social scientists have been intrigued by a number of inconsistencies (mainly associated with the lower employment rates found in southern countries) and have offered other explanations for the lower fertility and participation rates of southern women.

One theoretical explanation relies on the gender inequality at work, concerned largely with the economics of information and institutions, mainly for Italy, or with a neo-classical and feminist ideology in Greece. The sociological approach, more developed in Italy, has led to the development of new ideas and most notably the "dual burden" concept, being for the moment the most fruitful route in understanding women's position in the labour market (C. Saraceno, 1992, Bimbi, 1995) In Greece, an important methodological contribution has been to reveal the limitations of the traditional definitions and instruments currently used to record the various kinds of women's work. In Spain, methodological debates are very recent, with researchers exploring the

capacities of the various approaches to explain the situation of women in Spanish society.

A second explanation relies on the role of the welfare state in shaping the gender order, which is a fairly recent debate in Italy and Spain. The few studies related to the gender dimension place the southern countries in a comparative perspective where the Mediterranean family is seen as the provider of welfare to its members. Studies following this approach argue that it is the different kind of family system (family as a provider of welfare) that explains the different way in which women have increased their presence in the labour market (Bettio and Villa, 1996). For example, it has been suggested that the long permanence of young adults in the parental home (up to the age of 30), has been a major element in shaping southern family behaviour in giving support to its members for example during prolonged periods of unemployment, more than in any other European country. There is a broad consensus in the sociological literature that the southern family has qualities that distinguish it from families elsewhere in western Europe. Three of these qualities are directly relevant to female employment participation. First, southern families have closer internal ties than families in the rest of Europe. Community and survey studies indicate that southern families interact more frequently and have a substantially greater sense of mutual obligations between generations than families in the rest of Europe. Guerrero and Naldini (1996) write of the 'southern family model' and contrast it with two other models that fit the rest of Europe. The context in which 'intra-familial redistribution' takes place are typically the family business and the family residence. These are the second and third characteristics of the southern family. Family business are a natural location for the absorption of the unemployed and residential patterns show a tendency for southern families to live near

one another which ensures that 'extreme poverty and social exclusion are very limited' (Symeonidou, 1996). What Symeonidou and other argue is that the supportive role of the family serves as a counterweight to the state's very weak welfare provision. This approach has been a well established one in recent years.

A third set of explanations relies on the gender segregation at work and the gender pay gap. While there are more studies on the former, these have not provided a comparative frame, while most of the references made deal with the career prospects of women (affected by segregation) and not with the impact on wages (Bettio and Villa, 1992). There are few studies of the gender pay gap in the southern countries, most probably as a direct consequence of the lack of data, on the one hand, and of the absence of this subject from the political agenda on the other. One common feature on both the wage differential and the segregation hypothesis has been the use of decomposition techniques to ascertain the proportion of wage differential attributed to discrimination (Employment in Europe, 2000).

Finally, there are some explanations given to reasons of the different forms of work. These studies vary considerably from country to country, although the main problems, i.e. unemployment and rigidities in the formal labour market, temporary contracts, etc., are common to most southern countries. With the exception of Greece, analysis of different forms of work is not an important element in recent research in the field of southern women's studies (Stratigaki, M and Vaiou, D., 1994). In addition, in these studies there are weak conclusions as to the desirable working time for women in different labour market situations.

Most of the explanations given in the existing literature about women's employment behaviour in the southern countries, have strongly pointed to the structural characteristics that make difficult women's participation in higher rates among these three countries. Few of these explanations consider an interaction between reconciliation patterns and employment behaviour, thus, leaving great part of women's situation unexplored. As a consequence there is a large number of variables intervening in the decision of working full time, part time or doing any work at all. However, despite the fact that female labour market participation has increased in the three countries since the 1970s, what has been really new for these countries is that the female labour supply is no longer strictly dependent on market demand but is more and more influenced by women's willingness to reconcile work with family obligations.

The present research will agree to some extent with those theories about the southern process of change that consider some element of traditional thinking, however it will be suggested that women's employment behaviour is actively constructed through opportunities and constraints trying to achieve both a workers role as well as a balanced relationship with their role of mothers. In addition, the present case-oriented research focuses on the tendency of southern woman to work in the public sector and more specially in occupations with more stable working hours. The focus will be on such employment arrangements which highlight the interest of getting a permanent/stable job in the public sector, where a number of needs will be satisfied (e.g. social security), at the same time family plans outside the world of work are satisfied. In many ways such pattern shows a strong interest in getting a job which will not interrupt the family career that women have in mind. In recent years however, such life-course planning has

slightly moved into a new pattern of later family formation which on the other hand has not diminished female interest in public sector paid work. Most jobs done by women in the public sector may provide the security needed for developing in a balanced way their family expectations and it is this struggle between job attainment and family expectations which has been important in the southern countries in the last decades.

In order to answer to the above questions it is crucial that qualitative elements in the research are present. Although there are many different aspects that the study could include in terms of institutional changes, or the importance of the different structure of the labour markets in southern Europe, the focus of this study will be on the effects that different life events have on the construction of working mother roles, and consequently on employment and fertility behaviour. The link is not obvious in many cases, for what we will offer a construction of the southern working mother figure in terms of priorities given between family and work, choices for raising up children and consequent feelings of having completed the desired image of a working mother.

1.3 About the research, case-oriented comparative study and gender

In studying the family and work histories of the women interviewed I have two empirical concerns. First, what are the principal characteristics of the working mother roles/constructs found in the southern countries. Second, what are the differences between them both cross nationally and between generations. My theoretical concern is to see if the selected biographical cases of “working mothers” usefully outlines in exaggerated form the possibility under certain conditions, of reconciliation arrangements found in more than one gender cultural models, and not necessarily those corresponding to the one considered as particular of the southern context.

The fact that women’s market work and family lives are intertwined brings the study of women’s careers closer to the life-course literature, which emphasises the interweaving of career and family events. Some life-course studies argue that individuals compare their work lives to familiar models and struggle to shape them into these cultural patterns. This would lead us to expect patterned careers. However, clear cultural models may not exist to help women construct careers into recognisable patterns. Many respondents have few female models and believe their career paths are ‘unusual’ and marked by flukes and accidents. Furthermore, women face contradictory paradigms for structuring their lives. For example, the male pattern of intense commitment to the organisation during the first several years of the career coincides with the life-cycle point at which most women in our society bear children.

The life-course emphasis on entire life histories reintroduces the intact career of individuals as a viable unit of analysis. Ideally, data on intact careers would include spells out of the workplace or in part-time jobs, as these may have implications for future advancement. The study of intact careers should also consider the sex type of all jobs held since time spent in female dominated, sex-neutral, and male-dominated jobs may affect women's mobility. Since careers unfold within real time and space, the study of careers over the life-course is in part an historical analysis. It is of theoretical interest to see how social practices usually reproduce social structures with small revisions but historical events (i.e.: individual life-course events) can interrupt social regularities and rearrange structures. In that way, as mentioned above the main line of argument suggests that historical events shape careers by interacting with social structural constrains and openings.

For the present study a case-oriented comparative research method was thought as the approach which best describes women's situation in relation to both working and family obligations. It represents an important strategy of research on gender and brings together most of the elements shown above (Crompton et al, 1999). Although this method will not be developed in a fully feminist approach, the case-orientated comparative research also facilitates to focus on gender processes. I will, however, like to draw at least some significant points of reference, not only in relation to Compton's theories, which will be important to the present case-study research on gender and work.

1.3.1 Concepts: operationalization and measurement.

There are different concepts to define used in this research. Some of the sociological writings on women's situation have used widely terms such as reconciliation, domestic division of labour, paid and unpaid work, etc. We will here try to define the way and meanings that we attach to those particular concepts, as well as to other also very important to this research.

Gender – systems, has been the latest development in theoretical thinking used for cross-national comparisons about how men and women co-operate within the different European family systems. Analysed by Pfau-Effinger, the gender-systems approach has suggested at least five different models existing in Europe , two of which are versions of the male breadwinner/ female carer or traditional model. In such models gender relations are reorganised giving a better understanding of their multiplicity in Europe. In this approach the domestic division of labour is seen as an element present to any kind of 'gender order' or 'gender regime', terms used also in discussions of female participation in paid work (O'Reilly and Fagan, 1998). It is therefore recognised that gender division of labour has not only a mere economic dimension but also a cultural one which appears as the gender coding of caring and market work (Crompton, 1999).

Family- breadwinner model, this concept has been developed by southern authors who saw the different way in which family transformations occurred in southern European countries. A significant study by Bettio and Villa outlines the emergence of 'a

Mediterranean path' to the emancipation of women which differs markedly from that of Northern countries. The combination of low female participation rates, high unemployment rates and low fertility rates, common to most Southern countries, is underpinned by the family, which provides welfare to its members. Also, Greek research has continued the argument that southern countries represent a special case and that much of women's work in the south lies outside the realm of wage work. According to the study of Bettio and Villa we will follow the argument of the different situation that women face in southern countries in terms of labour segregation, gender pay gap and the different forms of work. We need, however, to stress that the southern gender order is not only biased by the structural environment but also by cultural and other societal norms which in this case are important for shaping the Mediterranean path /model also envisaged by other scholars. In the present work we would be assuming that the family-breadwinner model has been the norm for southern countries, meaning that welfare *to* and *from* the family has been a major element in southern families, however, we will argue that within this model there were important transformations of the family breadwinner model as a consequence of the changing roles of women.

Motherhood. When trying to explain changes occurring in women's situation in respect to family and work obligations, motherhood is an important concept which however can adopt different meanings. It is also an important concept for the working mother and state relationship, when referring to welfare provisions important for mothers. There is an agreement that up to recent motherhood can be understood in two different ways. On one hand we speak about *biological motherhood* and state protection is usually given to the stages of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. Legislation exists in order to prevent

discrimination because of these natural practices. However, biological motherhood has also socially constructed elements, evidenced through practices attached to 'good mothers', such as the duration of breastfeeding or women's health care and nutritional habits during pregnancy. The different length of breastfeeding practices has been very important for the division of care work between mothers and fathers and therefore for the engagement of women in employment. *Political motherhood*, on the other hand, is all the other care work done by mothers in connection to children and has been both socially and politically defined. In this case the political response for care towards children has been the right for child benefits, however, entitled by both mothers and fathers.

Reconciliation arrangements. It is essential to define the different meanings of reconciliation arrangements and their implications for women's paid work. One can distinguish at least three types of arrangements : first, arrangements that enable both parents to adjust their work obligations to their family and personal circumstances. These are usually supply based and include child care provisions offered by the state. Secondly, arrangements that cover partly the female accommodation patterns, such as flexible forms of work (also characterised as atypical) which can be both supply or demand based. Thirdly, a later type of arrangement which corresponds with new forms of flexible work different to the production models of the traditional economic system and which are demand based (flexi-time and tele-working). All these types of arrangements have important consequences for future developments in female paid work and family obligations.

Planning and strategic behaviour. In recent sociological literature the concepts of life-planning and strategic behaviour have been used in order to explain the way people organise their thoughts and resources in order to realise short or long term ambitions. In the present study life-planning is looked at the long term, and thus will focus mainly on those actions that were part of an integrated plan towards the achievement of personal ambitions in relation to family and work. Conceptually the terms offer a wide range of applications, both in the macro as well as the micro levels of working and family history analysis. First, they can show the ways in which women actively construct their ideal of a 'working mother' and how that ideal is integrated in the two societal spheres (work-home), and where these are seen as either short or long phases during life-course. Second they can show the ways in which such ideal is then adjusted to the more personal level through different types of work-family arrangements. Finally, life-planning can also offer a useful frame for comparison in terms of differences and similarities in the birth-cohorts studied.

The primarily purpose of the study is to consider the practice of working and mothering in southern countries during the last decades. In order to explain how women construct their working mother biographies we will make use of a case-oriented comparative method termed as 'biographical matching' (Crompton., 1999). Consequently qualitative analysis is used. This approach does not permit statistical generalisations or inferences but it does allow analytical insights to be obtained into the way that working and mothering has been introduced and experienced. There are four different dimensions in which comparison of working-mother's biographies are going to be looked at:

1. The social ideal of a 'working mother' relating to the two societal spheres in question (family and work) through which women should be integrated into society, and the way the interrelationship of these spheres is constructed. (As plans in order to participate in employment what has it been done for that? How long did education lasted, marriage before or after the first job? Do the hours worked offer a desired outcome for the type of family for which care is provided? Are there thoughts of dropping out and return later to work?)
2. The way dependencies between women and their families are constructed (autonomy vs. one-sided/mutual dependency, how far is the job important to the family economy, how far is family an obstacle to the working career of women, meanings and importance given to risk, flexibility and plans that show the lack or presence of the above?)
3. The cultural construction of the relationship between generations (what are the characteristics that women attach to the 'working mother' role?, how has this changed with their earlier generation?),
4. The main social sphere for caring (family, state or other, how important are the caring practices for women's work development, what plans are done for caring strategies across the working life of women, etc.).

These four levels of analysis are thought to give a better view of the gender system that southern women operate in. They will be used as a guide in order to make comparisons using individual biographies as case studies. After a first decoding, these topics are of

great importance when looking for similarities and differences in the way women actively construct their working and family behaviour. As it will be discussed in later chapters the typologies suggested in this study will make a distinction between those women whose biographies are constructed based on family, and those constructed based both in work and children

1. **The *family-values oriented* women.** In this group, women can be found both in paid employment and at home. Although both spouses can be actively contributing to the family economy, the 'working woman' role is not constructed as a long phase of life, being the roles of 'wife' and 'mother' those which absorb the substantial proportion of goals set in women's lives. Household work and child care are regarded as primarily the responsibility of the woman, however, child care may be arranged by including other family members or marketized care. What is important to this group, therefore, is that the cultural dimension of family making has a stronger meaning for women than that of a career making. Family events (e.g. marriage, change of residence, husband's change of workplace) are they key factors for developing family-oriented plans and/or job attainment. In addition, this group may chose less state child – care services and respond less to employment policies, while they do get intensive support from primarily close family members. Although this group would be more in line with the part-timers found in other European countries, in the south taking up some work for this group would express a different experience, as one that reaffirms the ideas about the potential of family-oriented women to integrate into the LM at some point in life. Economic need may not be a catalytic force for them to seek employment, at the same time training and skills

updating is seen as a negative element for them to consider before taking up any work at all.

2. **The *family and work oriented women*.** This group varies little with the above mentioned in terms of the family roles taken. However, there are important differences in the planing of the working career and the construction of stronger 'worker' roles. In this group of women, the relation of women with work has been important since it is associated with higher education and time spend in training . In southern countries this group may well correspond to the vast majority of women who seek a permanent job in the public sector which enables women to assist with better efficiency both work and family obligations. In this group women respond greatly to welfare provisions and employment policies. They relay heavily on state child care, where available, but also to other family members. They have usually few aspirations for career making but have given the same importance to the construction of the 'wife', 'mother' and 'worker' roles.

3. **The *child-centred women*.** This is probably the most recently developing group of women found among those born after the 1960s. In this group women are found in paid work at the same time the "correct" raising of children occupies a central role in women's life, although their distinct characteristic is that of longer periods in education and thus stronger employment histories that women in the other two groups. Plans for work are adjusted only during phases of active motherhood which can be late in age and carefully planned, however, the roles of 'working woman' and

‘mother’ are constructed both as long phases in life. Child care arrangements are very important and do not rely extensively on external help by other family members or state and marketized care. In these cases ideals about childhood overlap in a contradictory way with ideas about the waged work of mothers. Although the waged work has been increasingly accepted and has gained more importance in these women’s lives, this is linked to the idea that is best for children to be supervised by their mother at home, with more emphasis to the mother-children relationship. This is probably the most intriguing group of women in southern societies since it captures the strong belief among researchers that women’s situation today is both improving and worsening.

1.3.2 Structure of data and notes on biographical matching method:

One of the initial objectives of this study was to propose a typology of different groups of women based on their reconciliation strategies. However, as these can vary due to the different experiences of women in respect to work and family events, the final strategy of analysis is to identify and describe relevant structural factors that shape the way multiple female roles are reconciled, that is, the important characteristics that shape female behaviour in respect of work and family reconciliation in southern countries. The realisation of interviews was planned in order to obtain the desired first hand information about how women construct their working mother role in three southern European countries.

There are 60 work and family-life biographies to be collected from women in two occupations – education and medicine- in the three countries. This strategy was selected both for theoretical and methodological reasons. The number of the in-depth interviews was narrow in order to achieve better measures of comparability and the occupations were selected to illustrate particular trends relating to occupational feminisation like that of being present in services and within that in the public rather than the private sector. One of the initial objectives has been, therefore, to explore the significance and consequences of a job pursuing within the public sector in two highly demanding but differently structured careers. All interviewees had a common list of topics (see Topic Guide and Questionnaire). All interviews were firstly transcribed in the original languages and relevant extracts were translated and transcribed in a common Coding document. Women of the three countries were aged between 30 and 60 years old. This

was because of the necessity to look on generation differences on how the working mother biographies were constructed. All women had to be currently in employment or worked until recently. All women were selected to have been in higher education. Doctors had to have completed their specialisation qualification and all teachers were found within schools and institutes providing secondary education. In relation to the questionnaire the overall sample size was small and sampling procedures varied between the countries. As a consequence no statistical inferences can be drawn from the results, although they provide a context in which to analyse the interviews. The value of the study is that from the interviews it is possible to get a sense of how women manage combining work and family life – the way in which people engage in very complex juggling of time and space in order to meet their various commitments.

However, this study does not rest only on the in-depth interviews. In addition quantitative data are to be used in many forms. To summarise the research framework includes different levels of analysis :

- Descriptive statistics on family and employment macro-level data, including European Labour Force Survey data, reports and information relating to education systems, welfare state structures and child-care services.
- Data collected by the Family and Fertility Survey (UNECE, project no.72) for Spain and Italy.
- Micro-level data focusing on individuals and their relationships through interviews.

In chapter 2, I give evidence of the changes occurring in the last decades in female participation rates, the EU framework in which further changes are expected to occur and the importance of gender oriented employment strategies in the southern context

but also some of its contradictory elements. In addition, conclusions are drawn from the comparative empirical work as to the fundamental factors influencing the construction of the 'worker' role, that is the importance of changes occurring in the structures of the workplace (i.e.: hospital and high schools), and the generational dimension of the working mother figure. Chapter 3 focuses on the family obligations of women, uses of time and the gendered patterns of domestic division of labour found to exist within southern households. It also provides a comparative analysis of the child-care services found in southern countries. Family biographies are compared in order to illustrate the different aspects of gendered-role making through the whole study.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

BAGAVOS, CH. AND MARTIN, C. (2000)

'Low Fertility , Families and Public Policies', *Paper presented at AIFS Annual Seminar, Seville, Spain.*

BIMBI, F. (1995)

'Metafore di Genere tra lavoro non pagato e lavro pagato'. Il tempo nei rapporti sociali di sesso. *Polis*, vol. IX, no.3.

BETTIO, F. AND VILLA, P. (1992)

' Occupational Segregation. The case of Italy' *Working Paper, UMIST, Manchester, UK*

BETTIO, F. AND VILLA, P. (1996)

'A Mediterranean Perspective on the break-down of the relationship between participation and fertility'. *Discussion Paper n.5, University of Trento.*

CROMPTON, R. et all. (1999)

Restructuring Gender Relations and Employment. The Decline of the Male Breadwinner. OxfordUniversityPress.

GUERRERO AND NALDINI, (1996)

'Is the South so different? Italian and Spanish Families in comparative Perspective'. *South European Society and Politics*, 1/3, pp. 42-66

SARACENO, C. (1996)

'Done e Lavoro o strutture di genere del lavoro', *Polis*, vol. VI, no.1.

STRATIGAKI, M. AND VAIIOU, D.(1994)

'Women's work and informal activities in Southern Europe', *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 26, n.8.

SYMEONIDOU, H. (1996)

' Social Protection in Contemporary Greece', *South European Society and Politics*, 1/3, pp. 67-86