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Incomes and Employment of Italian Women, 1900-1950

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Incomes and Employment of Italian Women, 1900-1950¹

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Abstract:

In this paper, we aim to address a major gap in the economic history of interwar Italy, by discussing the evolution of women's incomes and employment during this crucial period of Italian and European history. After examining the available statistical evidence, we build on recently reconstructed dynamic social tables for Italy, from 1900 to 1950, to chart trends in both gender wage gap and female labour force participation, disaggregated by major sectors. Our methodology greatly contributes to the understanding of history of women's work for pay, placing it within the broader dynamics of income inequality. This approach also allows us to shed light on the growing gap between Fascist claims and the reality of women's work: despite discriminatory laws, throughout these decades women increased their presence and visibility in all sectors, with the only exception of agriculture. Conversely, the March on Rome marked the beginning of a strong reversal in terms of gender wage gaps. We are thus able to confirm the important role played by female work in the Fascist accumulation model, characterized by wage squeezes and reduced private consumption.

¹ This work has been written for the forthcoming book *Women at work in Italy (1750-1950) and their economic thought*, edited by Manuela Mosca for the Springer Studies in the History of Economic Thought. It expands a previous paper on inequality in Fascist Italy (Gómez León and Gabbuti, 2022). In this form, it has been benefitted from comments by participants to the AISPE online workshop: "Women between economic facts and ideas in Italy (1750-1950)"; the conference "Le donne e l'economia in Italia, 1750-1950", Università del Salento; the Inequality in Rome Seminars, Rome 3 University; and the fifteenth EHES Conference, Vienna University of Economics and Business. We also benefitted from the feedback by Francesca Bettio, Giuliana Freschi, Alessandra Gissi, Stefania Licini, and Giulia Mancini.

1. Introduction

Within a long-run history of Italian women at work, and their broader economic culture, such as the one pursued in this book, the first half of the 20th century inevitably strikes out as a fundamental juncture. For most European countries, the so-called interwar decades, marked by two devastating global conflicts, but also the Spanish flu pandemic, the Great Depression, and all sorts of national economic and policy shocks, marked an important turn in women's work. As highlighted by works such as Curli (1998), even more than in practical aspects, female work in 'visible' occupations greatly affected its perception, structuring post-war debates on women's employment. This was the case, for instance, in public transportation, or in the 'auxiliary factories' producing arms and munitions, where women rose from 23,000 to 198,000 between 1915 and 1918. Still, these were just a fraction of the women who had already been working in textile, who were then making uniforms for the army (Willson 2010, p. 53), not to mention the majority working in agriculture.

As noted by De Grazia (1992, 3), "In the interwar decades, all Western governments reacted to th[e] double challenge of democratization and demographic crisis. They responded at first by sanctioning female suffrage, and then by developing new public discourses about women, legislating about their place in the labor market, and recodifying family policies". What De Grazia calls a "restructuring of gender relations" was, indeed, a crucial component of the broader recasting of bourgeois Europe, after the troubling experience of the War (Maier 1975). Not only in Revolutionary Russia, women were at the frontline of popular unrest against the war and worsening living conditions, falsifying the stereotype of the 'docile' nature of female workforce (Pescarolo 2019, 199). While protests such as the 5-days long Turin of August 1917 were most often "begun by women angered by flour and bread shortages", "64.2 per cent of strikers in auxiliary factories were female" (Willson 2010, p. 55), despite being a

minority of the overall labour force. In line with Mosca's introduction to this volume, women's activism "was not due to some sort of 'innate female pacifism' but because women risked less"; aware economic agents, women realised soon that "Male strikers could be sent to the front whereas women were usually only fined, since prison would disrupt their families too much" (Willson 2010, p. 55). Indeed, work is a crucial "concrete experience" from which we can study the economic culture of millions of Italian women under fascism.

As noted by Pescarolo (2019, 164), in this period science also concurred to a new attention to female bodies in the workplace: the discovery of the biological specificity of female gametes, and women's autonomous contribution to child generation, contributed to look at the women not only as sexual objects to preserve, under "traditional patriarchal protection", but "as a precious, delicate mechanism". "For the first time the labour effort became an object of attention in this new cultural framework", not only because of the danger to women's respectability, but also for the consequences on their reproductive capacity as mothers. Not surprisingly, then, "Never before was the sphere of gender relations more explicitly the focus of reformist zeal" (De Grazia 1992, 3): however, "both the scope and outcome of policies differed from country to country", depending on "whether government policies would take an authoritarian or democratic cast, repress labor or coopt it, allow women greater freedom or impose more restrictions on them. By and large, the outcomes varied according to the character of the class coalitions in power and their stands on broad issues of social welfare and economic redistribution" (De Grazia 1992, 3). Among the already controversial discussion of the 'modernising' developments of Italian society within the Fascist decades (Settis 2022), the reality of women's lives and the contrast with Fascist policy objectives and broader ideological claims are thus among the most crucial and difficult aspects. Within the growing attention devoted to these issues – including the international conference organised in November 2023 by the *Italian Association of Women Historians* (SIS) – this contribution aims at improving our

quantitative understanding of women's paid work in this period, and of the extent of the gap they faced in the remuneration for that work.

As noted by Pescarolo (2019, 219), “the role assigned to women in the economy has been relatively overlooked” by gender historians working on Fascist Italy. In a recent survey, Mancini (2022, 75) showed how, despite the crucial importance of quantifying employment and incomes of Italian women in history, and the “wealth of research on the history of female work throughout different eras of Italy's history”, these dimensions are among “the least investigated in the Italian economic history literature”, making it “extremely promising in terms of future research prospects.” Indeed, the most comprehensive account on gender labour market gaps in modern Italy remains Bettio (1988). As for incomes, the only major advancement is represented by the estimates of gender wage gaps (henceforth, GWG) for the agriculture and manufacturing during the liberal age, carried on by Federico et al. (2021). Mancini (2018) herself contributed to an upward revision of overall figures for female labour market participation, and to highlight (in line with previous, more qualitative accounts by Salvatici 1999) the productive work by rural women not recorded by censuses (Mancini 2023). However, the important focus on the complex nature of work (Sarti et al. 2018), of what official sources hide (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012, 40) and the limitations of indicators such as female labour force participation (henceforth, FLFP) – better understood not as work “for the market”, but rather as work “for pay” (Burnette 2021, 241) – possibly induced historians of this period to overlook what even official sources reveal about the evolution of gender gaps. In this chapter, therefore, we try to reconstruct trends in both GWG and FLFP, by major sectors, during a crucial period such as the first half of the 20th century. Despite unavoidable limitations, this reconstruction fills major gaps in the literature, while contributing to the discussion of the economic culture of Italian women, as reflected by their actions as wage earners.

As highlighted in our earlier reconstruction of the overall income distribution in the period 1900-1950 by means of so-called “dynamic social tables” (henceforth, DST) (Gómez León and Gabbuti 2022), GWG were indeed among the major drivers of the peculiar Italian trajectory, within the compression of inequality occurred in most European countries in that period (Piketty 2014). Normally overlooked by historical works on inequality (Bellavitis and Martinat 2022, 8), GWG show the crucial role of labour market dynamics, and unions’ more or less ‘inclusive’ practices (Bettio, 1988), in driving inequality dynamics. By adopting this approach, we hope to fulfil Groppi’s (1996, xiv) recommendation of not placing ‘the history of women, and of their work’ in a lateral corner, but right at the center of the productive economy under investigation. In this sense, our contribution here is complementary to Freschi’s previous chapter. Surely, modern Italy reveals how the same issues affecting the reliability of binary measures of labour market participation, that do not discuss work intensity (Burnette 2021, 424), undermine historical macroeconomic history, in presence of the persistence of widespread unemployment and precarious employment (Alberti 2018).² At the same time, Humphries and Sarasúa (2021, 170) reminded us that it is a “myth” to believe that “LFP will automatically lead to women’s empowerment and independence”, since “in the context of patriarchal and discriminatory economic and social institutions” (such as Fascist Italy), mere access to a job does not imply economic independence. Nonetheless, even a ‘lower bound’ quantification of women’s work for pay, and GWG, reveal the crucial role of women’s work even in Fascist Italy.

To do so, the rest of the chapter is structured as follows: section 2 briefly introduces the reader to the DST approach, and discusses its suitability and limitations in discussing women’s work in history; section 3 presents our reconstruction of women’s employment for pay,

² For a discussion on the importance of precarious work in estimating labour shares, see Gabbuti (2021).

discussing its limitation, as well as the interesting trends we can observe in the data. Section 4 discusses surviving evidence on GWG. Section 5 concludes, trying to place women's work within the broader economic history of Fascist Italy.

2. Dynamic Social Tables and Women's History

Social tables are an established methodology in the historical literature on income inequality (Lindert and Williamson 1982; Milanovic et al. 2011). Pioneered in Rodríguez Weber's (2014) doctoral dissertation, which aimed to explore income inequality in Chile between 1850 and 2009, the DST approach quickly spread to the analysis of long-run inequality in other Latin American countries (Gómez León 2021). This approach, which captures annual movements in both population shares and average incomes, provides us with insights into year-to-year inequality developments. Notably, its application played a crucial role in revealing the contrasting distributive histories of interwar Britain and Germany (Gómez León and De Jong 2019). Milanovic (2023, 293-5) recently listed this methodology among the "three remarkable developments in the work on inequality that ... are most likely to have enduring impact on the economics profession and social scientists, at least for another half century".

But what are DST? First of all, economic historians refer to "social tables" when dealing with sources that provide an account of the number of people belonging to different social groups and the estimated average incomes that can be linked to these groups. Classic examples of these sources are the British social tables, adopted for instance by Lindert and Williamson (1982). Works such as Milanovic et al. (2011) established standard procedures in order to estimate Gini based on these sources. When social tables are not available as historical sources, it is possible to build them, combining other sources on occupational structure (say, censuses) and on the incomes earned by different groups in society, as in Table 1. Conceptually, this procedure is very similar to the reconstruction of national accounts, when different items

are compiled to eventually cover the entirety of national income. The novelty of Rodríguez Weber (2014) and later works was to let both population shares and incomes move on an annual basis, to cover the evolution of income distribution over time.

Table 1 - An Example of Social Table: Italy, 1913

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Work status</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Income</i>
<i>Industry</i>	salary-earners	male	625096	1233
		female	239986	604
	self-employed	male	54947	2250
		female	13059	1212
Mining and Quarrying	wage-earners	male	99295	772
		female	2286	378
Bricks, cement, pottery	wage-earners	male	153097	837
		female	17593	410
Metalworking	wage-earners	male	383687	1075
		female	17758	526
Chemical industry	wage-earners	male	44046	869
		female	34119	426
Wood and furniture	wage-earners	male	284019	497
		female	46274	243
Paper industry, printing, arts	wage-earners	male	55168	608
		female	24083	298
Building	wage-earners	male	718364	837
		female	8886	410
Textile industry	wage-earners	male	104436	451
		female	434212	221

Source: authors' elaborations on Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022).

The advantage of DST, compared to most available alternatives, is to capture the evolution of the whole range of the distribution, without limiting the discussion to partial indicators, such as top incomes or factorial shares of national income, or proxies such as the GDP wage-ratio, or the evolution of top income shares and labour shares. This is particularly important “when studying inequality in periods of rapid structural change (linked to sectoral shifts and inter-occupational inequalities), when changes in inequality are mostly linked to increasing differences between the middle and lower part of the income distribution” (Gómez León and Gabbuti, 2022). On the other hand, social tables will be imprecise when they encompass a restricted number of socioeconomic groups or fail to capture the internal income dispersion within these groups. Historically, however, it is standard to assume that the majority

of income differentials can be attributed to inequality between major groups, such as capitalists and workers, white and blue collars, urban and rural sectors (Gabbuti 2021, 357-359).

In our work on Italy, we highlighted another, overlooked advantage of this methodology: to overcome women's invisibility. In line with Bellavitis and Martinat (2022), we noted how most works on historical inequality "failed to include women's participation and pay gaps in the picture, due either to methodological issues, or source limitations" (Gómez León and Gabbuti 2022, 7). Social tables, instead, allows us to place gender gaps within the broader historical evolution of income inequality. In this chapter, by making a backward step – that is, by discussing the very construction of social tables, rather than the 'final', synthetic measures of inequality – we hope to contribute methodologically to the historical literature on female work. Surely, we have to be aware that by social tables we restrict the analysis to a fraction of FLFP – following Burnette (2021), we speak of "work for pay". Moreover, the underlying sources suffer, often substantially, from strong gender bias.³ A women's history perspective highlight other limitations: at the present state of knowledge, we cannot take into account multi-activity, differences in work intensity and the amount of hours worked in a year, and whether assumptions as the aforementioned irrelevance of within-group inequality is just another 'myth' to be debunked (Humphries and Sarasúa 2021). Despite the limited quantitative information available on these phenomena, the innovative approaches developed by feminist scholarship (see Humphries and Sarasúa 2012) should inspire future works on social tables, to better account for the reality of historical work, for both men and women.

Still, DST already represent a useful tool for women's historians. As we will show in section 3, the harmonisation of occupational structures makes possible to open the black box of FLFP, discussing the changing presence of women across sectors. On top of the sectoral

³ For a discussion on the gender-bias of Italian censuses, see Patriarca (1988), and Freschi in this volume.

GWG, discussed in section 4, we could also highlight the relative evolution in the incomes of specific groups – say, of rural vs. urban working women.⁴ Moreover, social tables make it possible to analyse at the same time women’s work for pay and its remuneration: we will conclude section 4 by showing an ‘average’ GWG, obtained by taking into account the weight of different sectors. Given that our DST have been built following as closely as possible Gómez León and De Jong (2019), we will also be able to compare Italian GWG with those of Britain and Germany. While the construction of the series is fully discussed in Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022), in the next section we will discuss the evidence we assembled on female employment in 1901-1950.

3. Women participation to the labour market: what the census did not hide

To reconstruct social tables for Italy, it seems impossible to avoid population censuses to reconstruct the active population structure by professions. In population censuses individuals were asked about their main occupation and were grouped according to their work category and gender. Considering the various territorial changes occurred in the period, due to the territories annexed and lost as consequences of the World Wars, we followed the adjustment proposed by the statistician Vitali (1968), to obtain homogeneous series using current borders, making our series also consistent with national accounts. The number of occupations was standardised to 18, as reported in detail in Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022). It is important to note here that, in line with the focus on work for pay, we aimed at excluding people living on a family wage, and thus left out a significant number of women, such as family assistants and housewives, together with students. We also re-classified work categories into three for agriculture (owners, self-employed, and wage earners); one for owners in industry, commerce

⁴ In Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022), we took advantage of this possibility to show the relative position of the various (male) middle class groups, compared to blue collars.

and transport; three for industry (self-employed, salary-earners and wage earners); three for commerce and transport (self-employed, salary earners and wage-earners); two for public administration and services (salary earners and wage earners); one for liberal professions; and one for the unoccupied. They were all disaggregated, in turn, by gender (male and female), resulting into 60 classes. This disaggregation will be exploited to enrich, in line with Mancini (2023), the discussion on women's work in different sectors.

The vast literature on Italian censuses, and their biased representation of female work, has been surveyed by Freschi in this volume: despite earlier censuses arguably better captured female work, by 1901 (the first census adopted for this chapter) a more 'masculine' definition of employment had been established (Patriarca 1988). This should of course affect the level of our series – arguably a lower bound of female labour force participation – but hopefully, not trends. As for the overall FLFP, Mancini's (2018) recent series tackled censuses' major problem: the underestimation of women working in agriculture, addressed by looking at the differences between agricultural and population censuses. This led her to further increase FLFP, even compared to the previous correction by Vitali (1968), appreciated also by Patriarca (1988). Unfortunately, contrary to Vitali, who provided separate figures for peasants, sharecroppers, and other rural occupations, Mancini only estimated a sectoral FLFP: for this reason, in our social tables we had to rely on Vitali's lower figures.

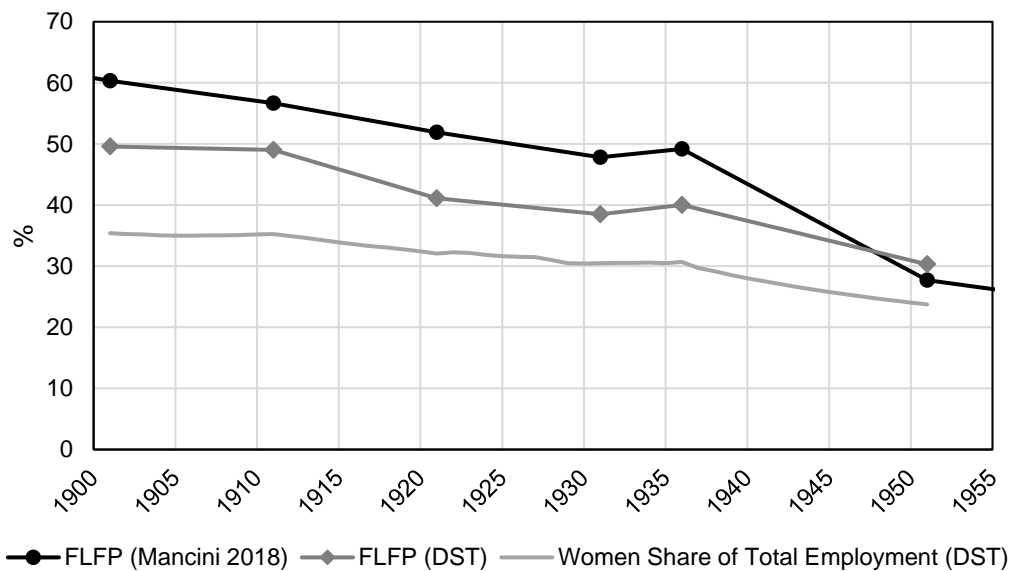
For the secondary sector, an alternative to population censuses is represented by industrial ones: Italian economic historians have indeed heatedly debated on the issue.⁵ While those in favour of this source consider it, at most, as a proper proxy of full-time equivalent workers, population censuses are the only source covering the whole Italian population (including those without any profession) and agriculture, still accounting for the lion's share

⁵ See the discussion in Gabbuti (2021) and Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022), as well as in Freschi's chapter.

of employment. Moreover, as pointed out by Fenoaltea (2015, 234-235), the differences between the two sources strongly ‘discriminated’ domestic production by women, very important, and definitely ‘for pay’, in sectors such as textile. As noted by Pescarolo (2019, 147), in 1911, the industrial census counted only 117,927 women in the clothing industry, less than a fifth of those counted in the population census; other sources, such as the early 1920s industrial inquiries, prove industrial censuses strongly underestimated female employment. We thus decided to not apply any corrections for textile female workers, contrary to the literature surveyed by Freschi.

FLPF resulting from our series are reported in Figure 1, alongside Mancini’s series. Before discussing the trend – reassuringly very similar – it is worth noting the very high starting levels, even with ‘limited’ adjustment. As discussed by Ortaggi Cammarosano (1991, 152-155), “waged work for women did not have its origins in the factory system”; in Italy, even more than elsewhere, industrialisation “only reinforced and perfected tendencies” already present in agriculture, but also in the century-old putting-out system of textile manufacturing. Indeed, Italy was “a society in which the widespread employment of women and children in industry ... was considered a natural state of affairs, having its origins in the long-standing traditions of rural society.” Unadjusted census figures show that in 1861, FLFP was higher in the newborn Kingdom of Italy than in France, Spain, Sweden, UK and US; in 1901, after decades of strong decline, Italy had just been ‘reached’ by France and UK (Mancini 2018, 25).

Figure 1 – Women and the Labour Force in Italy, 1900-1960



Source: authors' elaborations on Mancini (2018) and Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022).

This secular decline, slower in Mancini's series, saw a sizeable reversal in the 1930s. The 1936 census registered a share of women in employment higher than in 1931, almost back to the 1921 level. The result is confirmed even by industrial censuses, capturing the growth of women employed in industry between 1927 (11,2%) and 1937 (16,3%). This result, somehow overlooked in long-run reconstructions, is of major importance, and deserves some discussion. Humphries and Sarasúa (2021, 173) noted how "in times of recession the scarcity of work justified prioritizing male 'breadwinners.'" Surprisingly, however, the increase was especially marked among married women: 20.7% of them worked by 1936, from 12% in 1931 (De Grazia 1992, 186).⁶ Mortara (1978, 68) had noted the increasing 'competition' of both women and children in the 1930s labour market, as a factor contributing to the decline in average wages. Cinnirella et al. (2017), indeed, detected increasing labour force participation for children between 14 and 18 between the same census years.

⁶ According to some estimates, she adds, "40 percent of all Italian working women were married in the 1930s, a figure that was surpassed only in social democratic Sweden where working women benefited from a wide range of social services" (Ibid.).

These results are clearly at odds with the standard view of women's work under Fascism – a view largely drawing from Fascists' own statements. A generous supplier of quotes such as Mussolini stated how “Work, where it is not a direct impediment, distracts from conception. It forms an independence and consequent physical and moral habits contrary to child bearing”.⁷ This view was shared by Fascist women themselves: for the mathematician Castellani (1937), the reduction of female employment before 1931 had been due to “living standard improvements”;⁸ even for women workers in commerce, “work constitutes not a life goal for a woman, but a stage in her life, one to be finished up as soon as possible with her return to the home environment”.⁹

According to De Grazia (1992, 7-9), however, Fascists had no “ready-made stance on ‘the woman question’” at the time of the March on Rome: it was only in 1927, when Mussolini launched his demographic policies, that women became central for Fascists. Surely, as most interwar governments, they passed laws against female employment, marking a reversal with the great advancements of the post-war years. In particular, the Sacchi Law of July 1919 had abolished husband's marital authorization (see Licini in this volume) and decreed the legal equality of the sexes for professional and public employment, with the exclusion of “positions that involve the exercise of public judicial authority, political rights or power, or the military defence of the state”; when reforming the school system, already in the early 1920s, instead, Fascists “determined that women lacked the prerequisite ‘virile conception of life’ necessary to direct upper-grade schools or to teach certain key subjects” (De Grazia 1992, 178). However, according to Musso (2019), Italian owners' willingness of “employing low-wage women” led in many cases to “stabilise higher shares of women workforce” after the War. It was only after

⁷ ‘Macchina e donna’, *Popolo d'Italia*, 31 agosto 1934, quoted in De Grand (1976, 956).

⁸ On Castellani, see Pagliai in this volume.

⁹ First National Congress of Women in Commerce (1940), quoted in De Grazia (1992, 166).

the Great Depression, in 1933, that new laws restricting female employment were issued. Still, historians agree that they were really binding only in public employment, again, for not “harming private owners” (Pisoni Cerlesi 1959, 59). Surely, women had been affected by the firing of the public employees assumed during the war; even in this sector, however, the main goal was to avoid them to reach apical positions, and ‘quotas’ were often set above the share of women already employed. Overall, historians agree the most sizeable effect of this legislation was to delegitimise women’s professionalism (Pescarolo 2019), reinforcing their segregation into low-paid jobs – a well known issue in gender literature (Humphries and Sarasúa 2021, 176). More important were the measures introduced to protect working mothers that, when effectively applied, reduced the incentives to hire them. By 1931, “1,220,000 out of about 1,500,000 women employed in industry and commerce were insured” under the 1910 legislation on maternity funds; benefits and coverage were expanded in 1934, and in 1938 it was extended to women in agriculture (De Grazia 1992, 178), as similar measures were increasingly included in collective agreements (Musso 2019, pp. 113-114).

In any case, as shown by the third series in Figure 1, until the mid-1930s women represented at least a third of the labour force. This series makes also possible to appreciate how we obtained annual series, interpolating our series by means of the annual labour input figures by Giordano and Zollino (2015). Apart for agriculture, Giordano and Zollino relied on a great number of existing sources: however, their series are not disaggregated by gender. This is particularly unsatisfactory considering that both World Wars are in between census years, and especially in the later one, when the gap between the benchmark years is 15 years, any interpolation will arguably miss the specific dynamic of the 1930s and the war years – something that deserves a detailed discussion, in order to correctly interpret the graphs.

As for World War I, it is important to distinguish between reality and perception. In Italy, the war had a relatively modest impact on women’s industrial employment: according to

Musso (2019, 37-38), by the end of the war, 250,000 women were employed in auxiliary industries, compared to 800,000 in France, and 1 and 1.5 million in Germany and UK. Rather than ‘replacing’ men, women took new opportunities created by ‘the war economic diversification’, mostly in clerical and office jobs, where women’s share rose from 11.6 to 16.6% (Curli 1998, 13). On the other hand, ‘traditional’ sectors already employed many women. In agriculture, in both conflicts men conscriptions determined increased workload for women, especially those working in tenant or sharecropping families. In textile, according to figures reported by Willson (2010, 52), some 600,000 women worked to provide uniforms for the army, in factories or from home.

In many areas, indeed, too many women (even middle-class ones) “queued up for th[is] work” (Willson 2010, 52). Then, according to De Grand (1976, 949), “women were especially hard hit by the demobilization of wartime industries”, with “thousands ... leaving the employment market after failing to find positions to replace those lost to veterans”: this was reflected by the “higher than average female emigration rate” recorded in the first nine months of 1920, when women accounted for 60% of migrants to North America.¹⁰ This gives us the opportunity to discuss the complicated issue of female unemployment – complicated even by the standards of historical unemployment (Alberti 2018). According to Saraceno (1981, 209), women were hit “the most” by the scarcity of employment in this period, “in all sectors”. Even official statistics reported lower rates for women in 1921-22, equal in 1924-25, and higher in 1926-32. Since then, female unemployment was lower (even though, in the early 1930s, more than 250,000 women, including thousands of primary school teachers, were officially unemployed) just because “female left active population”: precisely as discussed by Humphries

¹⁰ As noted by Ertola (2017, 102-115), in the few years of Italian colonisation of Ethiopia, a sizeable number of Italian women (some 10,000) had already settled there; their lives (and work) clearly deserve more attention from the literature.

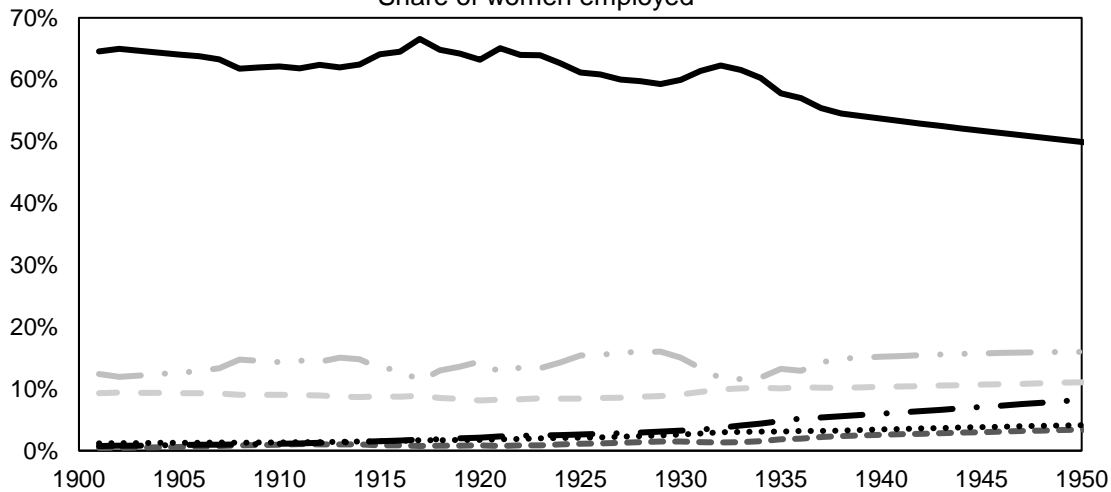
and Sarasúa (2021, 173), in these situations, “women often became ‘discouraged workers,’ not registering for unemployment benefit or formally seeking work, their unemployment hidden behind domestic roles”. Indeed, the 1931-1936 censuses show the marked increase of women ‘without profession’.

Much less information is available for World War II, whose impact on female employment “has not been properly studied” (Willson 2010, 98). In June 1940, Italy’s intervention led to the suspension of further “quotas on female recruitment in public sector white-collar employment” introduced in 1938; in April 1943, it was even forbidden to employ men in some jobs, such as waiters, cashiers, tram-conductors, where women were encouraged to work. Fascist outlets, of course, stressed how female work – an “attack to woman’s health” – had to be used “only in necessity” (and in any case, was most “remunerative” and morally acceptable in “administrative and agricultural jobs”): after the period of necessity, it was important to go back to the “gradual, but systematic elimination of female work” (Dolmetta 1940). Also in this case, however, war mobilisation was much less effective than in the Great War: while some local studies revealed sizeable increase in female industrial workforce, these changes “were largely not officially co-ordinated by the authorities”: by September 1941, “a mere 73,000 of the six and half million women and children the PNF had registered as available for war work were recorded as in employment” (Willson 2010, 98).

With these limitations in mind, Figure 2 allows us to appreciate what census did not hide. As shown by the upper panel, the majority of women working for pay was still employed in agriculture, accounting for two-thirds of women workers in 1918. By 1950, however, this sector fell to less than 50%. In the same period, women increased their presence in all other sectors, also increasing their relative share within those sectors, as shown in the lower panel. Even in services, middle-class women – according to Willson (2010, 71), the “main targets” of Fascists, given the “perennial oversupply of suitably qualified candidates for posts in state

employment and the professions” that affected their male supporters – increased their relevance, even as physicians and pharmacists; the same trend, but with larger absolute numbers, can be observed for ‘humbler’ jobs in tourism, restaurants, cleaning services (Pescarolo 2019). Indeed, many authors noted the growth of domestic services, accounting for 10% of active women in 1936, with an absolute increase from 380,614 in 1921 to 554,076 in 1936 (Willson 2010, 76); for De Grazia (1992, 190-191), even these “likely much underestimated” figures “put Italy on a different course from other Western nations in which declining middle-class wealth and new opportunities for employment in growing tertiary or consumer-oriented industries caused the servant population to decline”.

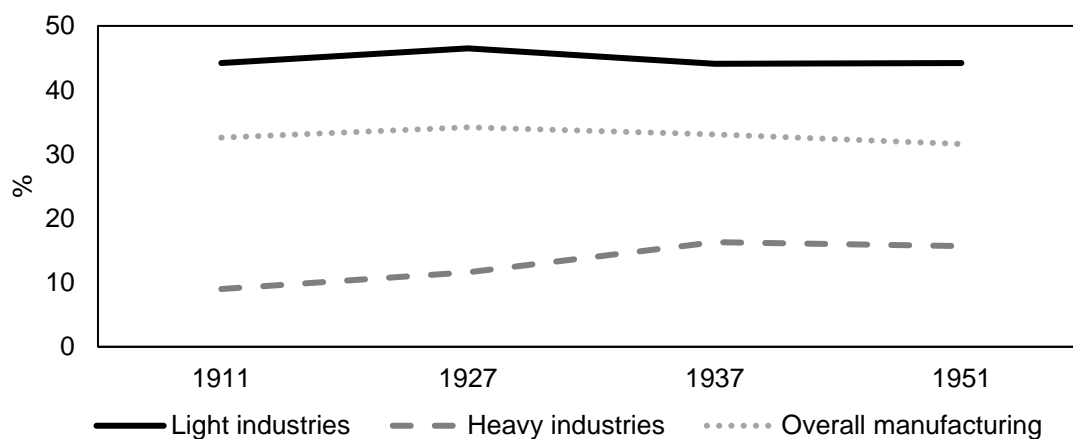
Figure 2 - Women Working For Pay in Italy, 1900-1950
Share of women employed



Source: authors’ elaborations on Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022).

As mentioned, even industrial censuses capture the increased share of women working in heavy manufacturing sectors (Figure 3): women were more than 20 per cent of metal production workers in 1937, compared to 8.5% in 1911, and went from 4.3 to 13.1% in machinery. On the other hand, trends light industries (where female share was already higher) seem to reflect business cycle dynamics: while women increased their share in food industry (from 14.3 to 23.9% according to the same industrial censuses) or in tanning (from 9.8 to 15.6%), they suffered the most from the struggling cycle of the textile sector (Musso 2019, 37), hit by the collapse of global trade.

Figure 3 –Women in Manufacturing according to Industrial Censuses



Source: authors' elaborations on Federico (2006).

According to De Grand (1976, 968), “fascist policy toward women ... can be seen as a struggle with no clear results”. In this section, we confirmed this claim, discussing both women’s participation to the labour force, and their presence in increasingly more remunerative and visible sectors outside agriculture. What can we say, however, about their incomes? They will be the object of section 4.

4. The Incomes of Italian Women

As discussed by Mancini (2022), the historical literature on Italian women’s wage is very limited: more archival research is needed to estimate levels and trends across the many

sectors in which women worked. In this sense, while the evidence assembled for our social tables should be considered as a second-best, by documenting the limitations of existing sources, together with other sources not suitable to be included in the social tables, this section aims at stimulating further quantitative work.

As documented in detail in Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022), the main source for the estimation of male average incomes has been the various works on the matter by Vera Zamagni. We had to rely on a number of other sources to cover the whole period, and to account for differences in work status. In the absence of comparable evidence of women's wages, we compiled estimates of GWG in agriculture, industry (here distinguishing between heavy and light industries), transport, commerce, public administration, liberal professions and services for the years 1901, 1911, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1938 and 1951. As listed in Table 2, they were compiled from both primary sources (as the *Annuario Statistico Italiano*) and secondary literature. Annual series were obtained by interpolating the ratios between available benchmark years, with the exception of agriculture, for which we have annual estimates from 1911 to 1950.

Table 2 - Sources for Gender-Wage-Gaps behind Italian Dynamic Social Tables

Sectors	Estimated incomes:	Source
Agriculture	1911-1951 actual data on female wages	ISTAT (1953)
Heavy industry	1901, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1930, 1938, 1950 = 43, 47, 46, 65, 65, 52, 50, 71% (respectively) of men	MAIC (1900, 1905-07, 1911, 1913, 1917-1918), Bettio (1988), Lasorsa (1931)
Light industry	1901, 1910, 1914, 1925, 1930, 1938, 1950 = 56, 64, 64, 77, 48, 50, 71% (resp.) of men	MAIC (1900, 1905-07, 1911, 1913, 1917-1918), Bettio (1988), Lasorsa (1931)
Railway	1901, 1911, 1938 = 45, 50, 55% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)
Commerce	1901, 1911, 1938 = 53, 55, 60% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)
Credits	1901, 1911, 1938 = 38, 40, 60% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)
Various serv.	1901, 1911, 1938 = 55, 55, 60% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)
Public Administration	1901, 1911, 1938 = 45, 50, 60% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)
Liberal Professions	1901, 1911, 1938 = 50, 55, 60% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)
Personal services	1911, 1938 = 70, 75% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)
Salaried employees	1911, 1938 = 55, 60% (resp.) of men	Felice (2005)

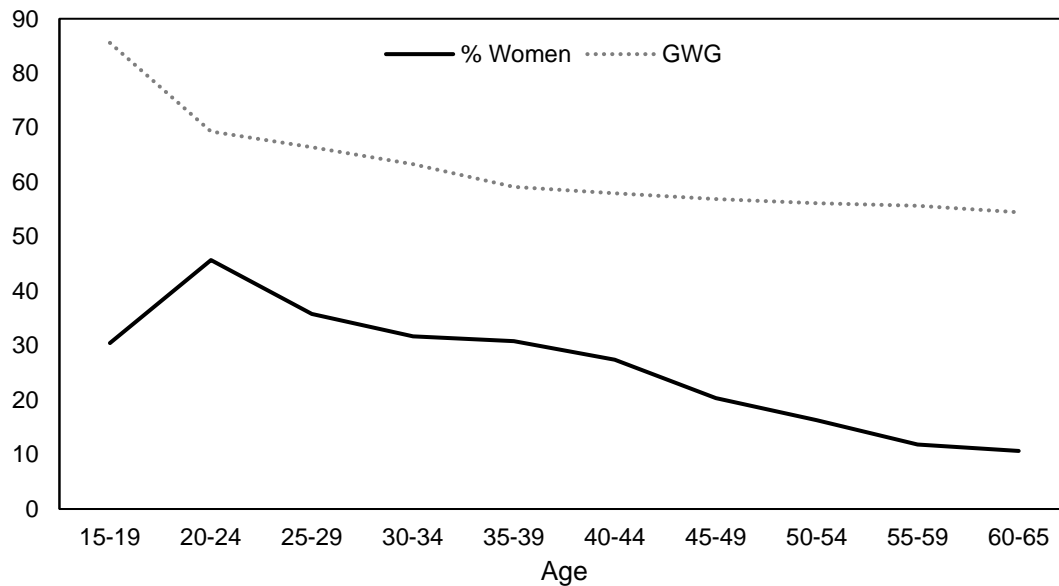
Source: Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022) (see there for the references).

Apart for the aforementioned Bettio (1988), Felice (2005) deserves a discussion. In this paper, the author documented his regional disaggregation of value added, in which wages are

adopted to proxy regional differences in productivity (Felice 2005, 273). Instead of imputing, as typical in Italian economic history, a fixed fraction of male wages to women and children, Felice (2005, 291-295) looked for sectoral GWGs, documenting the results in an appendix: notably, when a sector lacked consistent figures, he made informed assumptions, based on secondary literature. Further work could expand this approach to more years, taking advantage of the aforementioned wealth of secondary literature. On the other hand, richer direct evidence is already available. For the liberal period, for instance, MAIC (1908) would make possible to discuss the evolution of GWG in sectors such as chemicals, food, typography, tobacco, wood, mining. For the Great War, Curli (1998, 303-311) reported interesting evidence on white collar GWG in large firms, together with female wages in metalmaking and paper factories. Even for the Fascist period, when female wages disappeared from most official sources, scholarly works reveal the wealth of sources produced by Fascist bodies. For instance, for the period “just before the war”. Alberti’s (1943) work on the wage distribution in milling reported data by qualification, from the Provincial Unions of industrial workers. The aforementioned gender segregation, and its ‘certification’ by Fascist collective agreements, allows us to identify “women” as the 14th of 16 categories, just above under-age “Kids” and “Apprentices between 18 and 20”. The 462 women (over 16,719 workers) earned 1.47 lire per hour – second lowest, just above kids up to 18 (1.33), but well below apprentices (2.03), and less than half of the industry average (3 lire). More interestingly, Pinghini (1936), “manager at the Commerce Workers’ National Health Fund”, took advantage of the extremely detailed data collected by this “typically Corporatist body” to discuss insured workers’ wages. His work includes two tables on wages and employment by gender and age. As shown in Figure 4, GWG are relatively low for under-age workers (above 85% in almost all sectors, and slightly above 100 in furniture, machinery trades, and auxiliary activities), but sharply declined in the 20-24 age bracket, the peak of female employment (more than 45 for 100 males on average, even 91 in clothing

shops), consistently with the aforementioned segregation of women in ‘unskilled’ jobs. Although biased towards more stable and visible forms of employment, similar evidence has definitely survived in social security archives.

Figure 4 – Gender-Wage-Gap and Female Share of Employment in Commerce, by Age (1930-35)



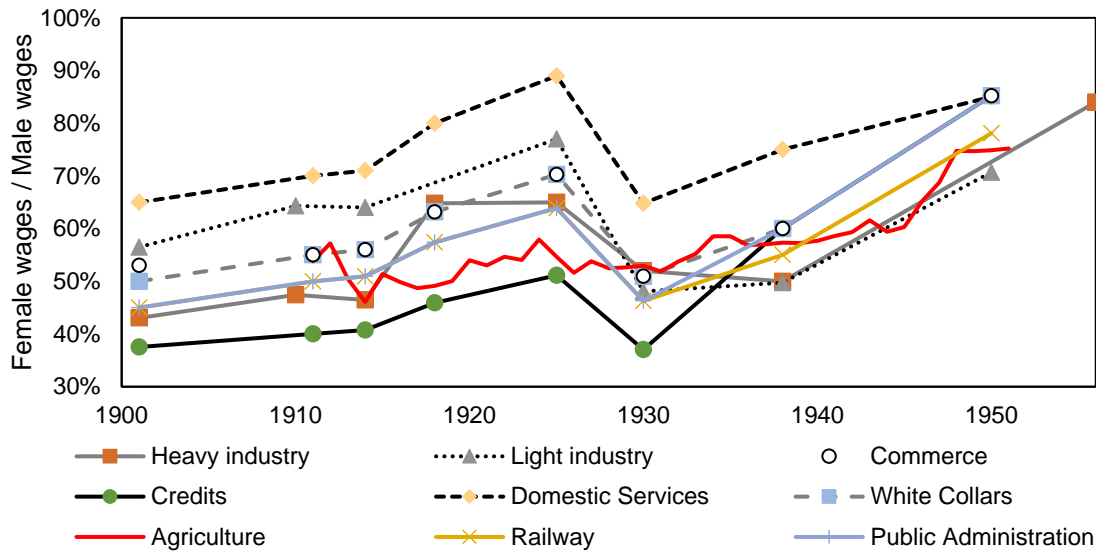
Source: authors’ elaborations on Pinghini (1935).

In building social tables, however, our main effort was to cover most representative sectors throughout the whole period, covering the major turning points identified by gender historians. The resulting GWG, obtained as the ratios between female and male incomes in a given sector, are presented by sector in Figure 5.¹¹ The room for improvement is clear, especially for the late 1930s; however, the figures already represent an important contribution for several reasons. First, the series reflect the equalising effect of the Great War: reduction in GWG was strongest in heavy industry but was common to most sectors. The major exception was agriculture, where convergence took place only after the war. Indeed, most of the reduction in GWG happened between 1918 and 1925, encompassing both the two years of labour unrest known as ‘red biennium’, the later Fascist reaction culminating into the March on Rome, and

¹¹ As discussed, gender segregation makes often impossible or meaningless to compute ratios of workers performing similar tasks- see also Humphries and Sarasua (2021, 176).

the first years of Fascist rule, characterised by ‘laissez-faire’ policies, but also wage squeezes, falling labour share, and rising within-labour inequality (Gómez León and Gabbuti, 2022).

Figure 5 – Gender-Wage-Gaps across Italy's Sectors



Source: authors' elaborations on Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022).

Indeed, as discussed by Bettio (1988), two different forces – one ‘benign’, and one ‘malign’ – were driving this result. First, equalising union practices have been a partly overlooked ‘tradition’ of the Italian labour movement, at least with reference to remuneration. Both in the red biennium, and in the post-WWII period, unions had often advocated wage compression (that is, more than proportional increases in the unskilled wages), thus also benefitting women. De Grazia (1992, 172) attributes this strategy to weakness: the Italian labour movement, “never as strong as the British or German trade unions”, could not promote reformist alliances “to pass protective legislation to eliminate low-paid female and child labor from the market”, and thus had to “treat marginal female workers as full-fledged workers, involving them as much as possible in the labor movement”. However, Bettio (1988) highlighted the importance of very similar tendencies in Republican Italy, when unions’ strength and institutionalisation was quite higher than in the liberal period. The first national contracts signed in 1945-46 limited to 30% the maximum GWG for the same occupation

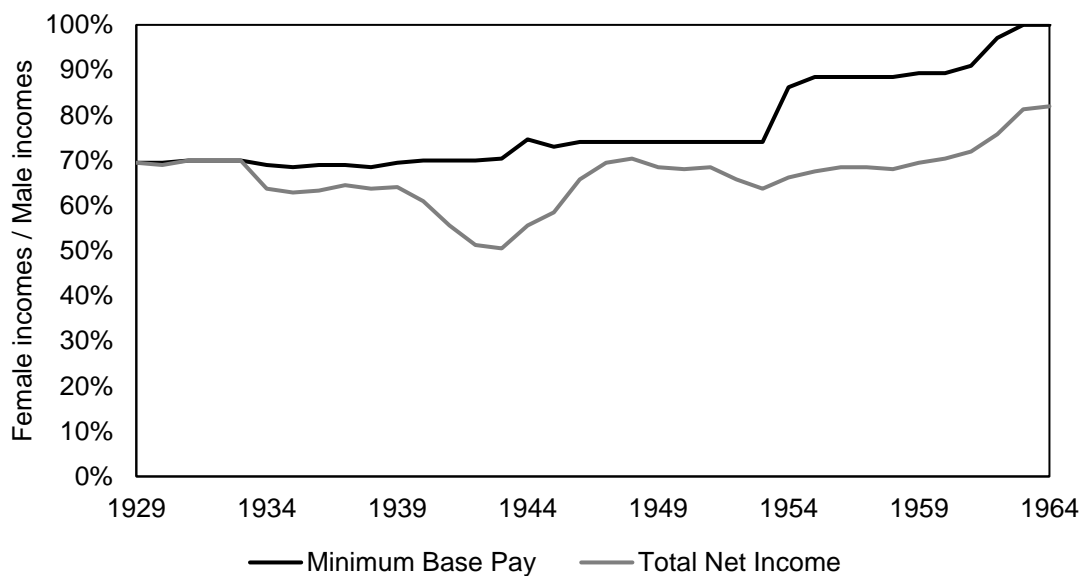
(Bettio 2015, 234); in 1948, article 37 of the new Constitution – written, as discussed by Rotondi in this volume, also by female delegates – recognised the “same rights and, for equal work, equal retribution” to the “working woman”. Still, it would take 1977 for a law on equal work treatment, the culmination of three decades of fight by female left-wing organisations such as the Union of Italian Women, trade unionists and politicians (Betti 2018).

Indeed, as shown by Figure 5, the GWG went back to the early 1920s level only after 1945, driven by convergence also in agriculture. In this sector, female workers’ conditions worsened during the interwar period, with the “return to semi-feudal situations” such as the landowners’ right of authorising sharecroppers’ marriages or evicting them in case of variations in their household size, according to Pisoni-Cerlesi (1959, 84-85). For sure, “in the wake of the war, the Italian socialist trade unions, leagues, and chambers of labor, with their hundreds of thousands of female members, achieved the largest following of women of any labor movement in post-World War I Europe”; moreover, a woman, the socialist Argentina Altobelli, led the single most numerous union branch, the rural workers’ *Federterra* (De Grazia 1992, 172).

Unions’ impact changed sign after 1922, when “the corporate organization of labor centralized and politicized the bargaining process. Unsuccessful in negotiating wage increases, the fascist unions settled for bargaining over benefits and special privileges” (De Grazia 1992, 174) - including, as we have seen, ‘protective’ measures against women. By working on collective agreements in Turin Manufacturing, Musso (1992) revealed the potential of this source in reconstructing GWG, at least for minimum levels. Figure 6 reports the ratio between a “first category” woman and a skilled male: in this case, contracts stabilised the GWG ‘restored’ in the early 1920s; on the other hand, we can observe the strong convergence in base pay from the early 1950s, leading to equality by 1963. On the other hand, this source reveals the impact of the introduction of family allowances for male household heads in 1934. This is one of the few cases in which we can quantify the discriminatory nature of the Fascist welfare

state (Giorgi and Pavan, 2021), not captured by series as those of Figures 4 and 5. National contracts also “codified sex-based differences. That women earned one-half of men's wages was nothing new; that skill levels and rate differentials were pegged to override local customs and market conditions perhaps more favourable to women was” (De Grazia 1992, 174). A similar development in agriculture was the widespread adoption of the so-called ‘Serpieri coefficient’ – named after Arrigo, the foremost Fascist agrarian economist – that attributed to women 60% of male workers’ productivity (Salvatici 1999, 16).

Figure 6 – The Impact of Family Allowances on Women’s Relative Incomes in in Turin Metalmaking



Source: authors’ elaborations on Musso (1992).

A further element noted by De Grazia (1992, 174) was how “the corporate system prevented female workers from obtaining adequate representation”: by grouping workers (and employers) by sector, it was “disarming ... for any marginal or inchoate group, not least of all for women”. Indeed, only one woman (the head of the all-female Midwives Corporation, Vittoria Maria Luzzi)¹² ever took part to the Superior Council of Corporations. Indeed, the aforementioned discriminations of women found no opposition in Fascist unions: it was only

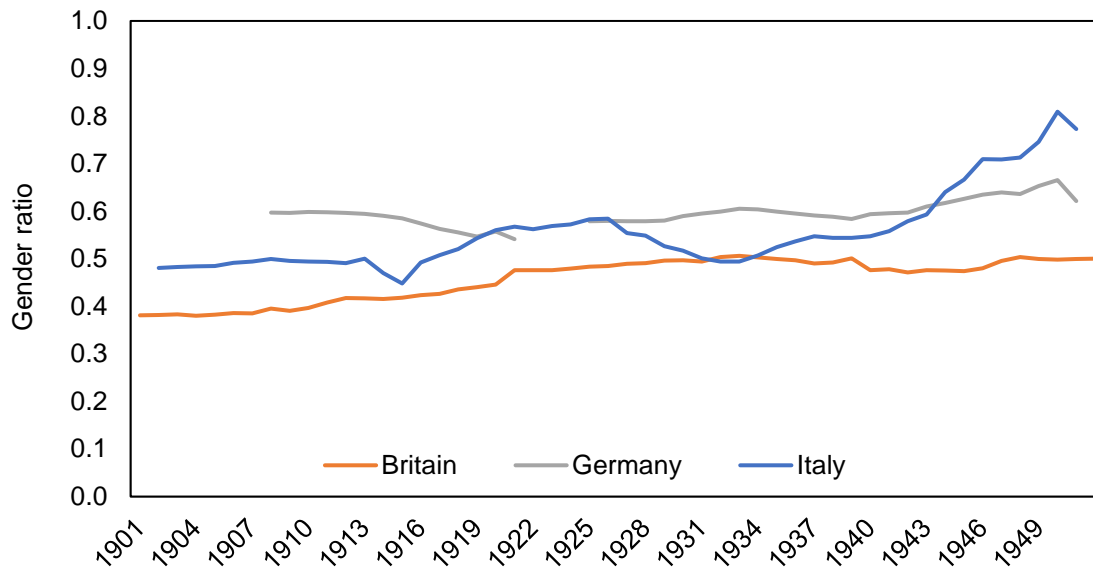
¹² On midwives in Fascist Italy, see Gissi (2004).

in 1940 that 140 women delegates met to “illustrate in detail” restrictive legislation affecting 250,000 female commercial workers (De Grazia 1992, 200) in the meeting issuing the statement quoted in footnote 9. While the available evidence does not allow us to deepen the class analysis of female work, it is interesting to note that convergence was lower for industrial workers, both in ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ sectors, compared to the (relatively) rising ‘middle class’ in the services. Even these ‘white-collar’ women, however, were effectively “confined” to the “lower ranks” (Willson 2010, 72).

The change in union and bargaining practices, thus, contributed to the sizeable reversal, observed in most sectors from the mid-1920s (and the deflationary policy shift marked by the so-called *Quota 90*) to at least the Great Depression. Another element of convergence is what Humphries and Sarasúa (2021, 176) defined as the “dark side” of convergence in GWG – that is, the “levelling down” of men. Their analysis, referred to the recent financial crises, applied very well to the Great War years – when the already low Italian labour share fell by almost 15 points in few years (Gabbuti 2021), with growing capital incomes driving inequality up, despite the collapse of the within-labour Gini fell from 35 to 25 (Gómez León and Gabbuti 2022). Even more, it perfectly fits the later Fascist experience. As long noted by historians, if something of the Italian interwar economy emerges as truly ‘Fascist’, it is the unique level of control imposed over the labour force (Toniolo, 1980, xii-xiii). As noted by Zamagni (1975, 543-546), Italy was the only country where wages declined or stagnated throughout the whole interwar decades: in this period, wage squeezes (a characteristic feature of “Italian capitalism”) became “a deliberate economic policy”. This specific feature of Fascist domination affected women twice. First, as workers for pay: according to De Grazia (1992, 174), by “enabling employers to slash men's wages”, Fascists reduced the “incentive to substitute women for men” – as well as to “mechanize firms, a process that elsewhere caused machine-tool enterprises and other light manufacture to increase the hiring of women”. On the other hand, lower wages –

and the resulting, dramatic effect on living standards of the working masses (Gabbuti 2020) – affected women in the reproductive sphere. Studies such as Salvatici (1999) and Mancini (2023) revealed the increasing burden imposed on rural women: but even in urban settings, women had to meet family needs with reduced means.

Figure 7 – Italian Gender-Wage-Gaps in International Comparison, 1901-1950



Source: authors’ elaborations on Gómez León and de Jong (2019) and Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022).

Figure 7, by showing ‘average’ GWG, obtained as weighted averages, and thus ‘summarising’ the evidence presented in Figures 2 and 5, allows us to conclude this section by placing GWG in Fascist Italy in comparative perspective. First, with respect to the historical literature: according to De Pleijt and Van Zanden (2021, 614), in early modern Italy, the GWG “was about 50 per cent”. For the first decades after unification, Federico et al. (2021, 13-4) estimated “remarkably stable” GWG in agriculture and industry, “oscillating between 0.4 and 0.5”, rising to 0.55 before the Great War. Our evidence, thus, confirms the earlier assessment by Bettio (1988, 96): during the 20th century, Italian relative wages converged “to an extent unparalleled in other industrialized countries”. Indeed, in Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022) we showed that declining GWG were “one of the major ‘equality forces’ contributing to the Italian

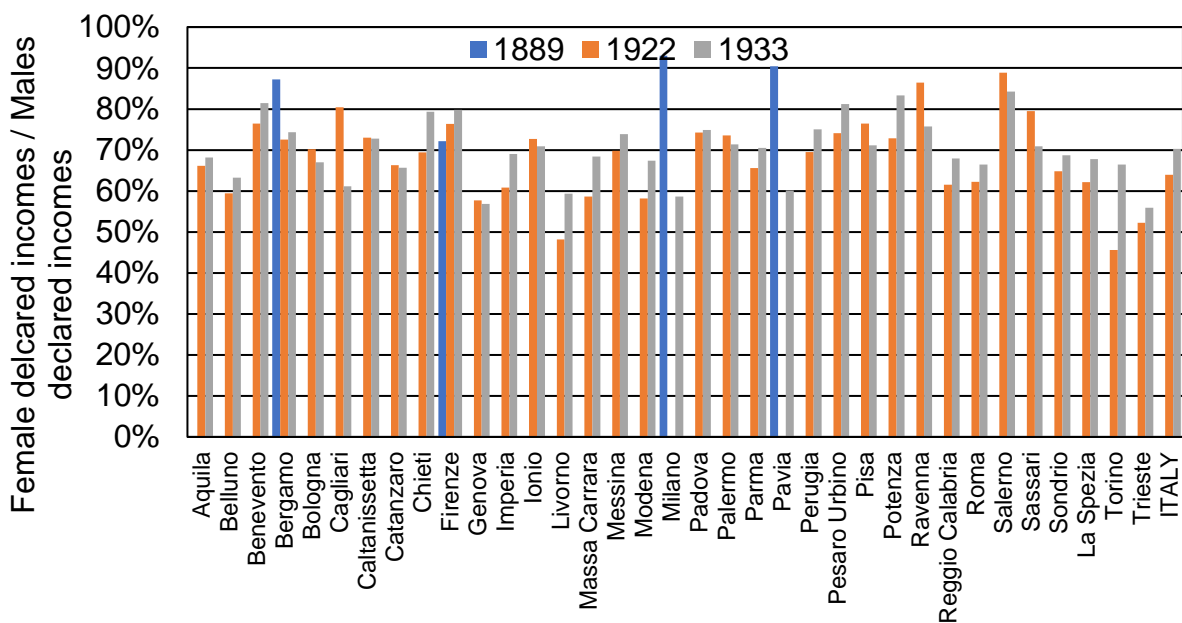
“Great Levelling” throughout the first half of the 20th century”. Most of the action, however, took place in the years before and Fascism, and should rather be attributed to the labour movement. Both in the red biennium and in the late-1940s, in a context of low wages, egalitarian union ideology promoted pro-unskilled, pro-women wage compression, bringing Italian women closer to equality than British and German ones. Within this long-run convergence story, Fascism represented indeed the most striking, although temporary, reversal. While we need more research on the late 1930s, by then the Fascist control of the labour market brought Italian wage gaps back to the ‘secular’, low levels of 50%, below both Britain and Germany – another dimension of the reversal in living standards experienced by Italians under Fascism (Gabbuti 2020).

To conclude this section, it is worth mentioning that wage is not the only relevant monetary dimension of gender gaps. Groppi (1996) has long stressed the importance of “taking into account women’s patrimonial dynamics, to remind how the relationship with the labour market – for both men and women – is always conditioned by social origin”. As revealed by Stefania Licini, probate records are all but silent on women: despite the large literature devoted to their analysis in the liberal period, no study has so far investigated them in the interwar decades. ‘Wealthy’ women – traditionally receiving from their families financial assets, instead of family firms or property destined to male heirs (Licini 2020) – arguably suffered from the turbulent macro-economic environment of the period.

Some of these women, such as those investigated by Licini in this volume, were active as entrepreneurs: many more were running smaller businesses, or working as self-employed. While in Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022) we were forced to rely on assumptions, also in this case we already have more detailed evidence. Gabbuti (2023) presents gender income gaps at the provincial level, from the lists of some categories of self-employed taxpayers, issued by the Finance Ministry in 1889, 1922 and 1933. In the later year, women represented some 15% of

these taxpayers, ranging from 7.5 to 27% across provinces. Even more interestingly, for a subset of provinces, we can appreciate the reduction of income gaps between 1922 and 1933, and the more sizeable contraction from 1889 (Figure 8). The interpretation of similar gaps, for which we have few references in the literature, will require further investigation: still, it is interesting to use the source to highlight the extraordinarily diverse activities performed by women (from Elvira, tax collector, to Agnese the tinsmith), and indeed, the presence of few rich entrepreneurs, such as Turin’s Gori Sisters, declaring 600,000 lire for their tailor’s shops. As stressed by Licini (2020, 121), fiscal sources of this kind show reinforce the impression that Italian women did not limit themselves to “trades, jobs, and occupations consistent with the ideology of gentility, domesticity, and ‘respectability’”, even in the Fascist period, as we have seen in this chapter.

Figure 8 – Gender Income Gaps among Italian Taxpayers



Source: authors’ elaborations on Gabbuti (2023).

5. Female labour in the Fascist accumulation model

In a 1936 speech to the National Assembly Corporation, Mussolini stressed how “in the fascist era, work ... becomes the sole measure of the social and national utility of individual and groups”.¹³ Fascist attempts of keeping women outside the (official) labour force, and the degradation of their professionalism, should thus be intended as an explicit attempt of undermining their contribution to society.

In this chapter, we made twofold contribution. The first is methodological, since we proved that social tables have the potential bringing new light to the history of women’s work. Then, we addressed a major gap in the economic history of Italy, by discussing the overlooked topic of female work. In this sense, we have shown the growing gap between Fascist claims and the reality of women’s work. In the Fascist period – and especially after the Great Depression – women increased their presence and visibility in industry and services: their presence declined (at least according to census data) only “the very sector, agriculture, in which fascism wished to keep women occupied” (De Grand, 1976, 959). After applying standard adjustments proposed by the literature, even the distorted mirror of official statistics revealed how Fascism managed only to slow down the spread of female work outside traditional rural and textile jobs, and to segregate it into lower paid and qualified positions. Employment figures capture, at a more aggregate, but nonetheless insightful level, the same economic culture discussed in more granular ways in Parts III and IV of this volume – the various ways in which women reacted to incentives and discrimination.

In this chapter, however, we argued that looking at employment level is not enough. Moving the analysis to GWGs, we were able to confirm the long-run reconstruction by Bettio (1988): by the half of the 20th century, the pay gap faced by Italian women, already at the low,

¹³ Quoted in De Grazia (1992, 166).

‘traditional’ levels of 50% registered since the Black Death, had been reduced to 80%. A discussion of union practices also confirmed that, “in contrast to the recent experience of other countries, where legislation has played a major role in rising female earnings ..., this outcome in the case of Italy was much more endogenous to the labour market” (Ibid., 98). As we argued in Gómez León and Gabbuti (2022), DST are indeed able to reveal the importance of labour market developments in the reduction of inequality experienced by European countries in this period. This positive story, however, almost entirely occurred before and after the Fascist regime. After the turning point represented by the Great War, and the further push towards parity represented by the labour movement victories of the ‘red biennium’, Fascism represented a marked reversal in GWG terms. Drawing on women’s history, we linked these developments to the change in union practices and labour market dynamics imposed by the Fascist domination. Unpacking the ‘black box’ of FLFP into sectoral series also allowed us to see how the history of women’s work is better understood when intersecting that with class and income differences.

Indeed, looking together at employment and wage gaps allows us to understand how female work, both productive and reproductive, was crucial in the Fascist accumulation model of wage squeezes and reduced private consumption. As already highlighted by De Grazia (1992, 9), “Mussolini’s strategies of regime building inevitably had far reaching repercussions on the situation of Italian women, in particular on the working class and peasant majority. ... To sustain its pressure on wages and consumption, the dictatorship exploited household economic resources to an unusual degree for a country well advanced on the path of industrialization: it demanded that women act as careful consumers, efficient household managers, and astute clients to squeeze services out of an ever stinting social welfare system, in addition to being part time, oftentimes concealed wage earners who rounded out family incomes. ... To curb the use of cheap female labor in the face of high male unemployment, yet

maintain Italian industry's reserve force of low cost workers, the regime devised an elaborate system of protections and prohibitions regulating the exploitation of female labor”.

In this sense, also in Fascist Italy, demand for female labour seemed to have been more important than other factors (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012); in line with the introduction of this volume, despite Fascist oppression Italian women remained active, autonomous agents, adapting to the economic environment. In post-unification Italy – a country well used to women and children working, at least in some – this demand was mostly driven by the possibility of paying women lower wages. Despite Fascists’ claims of placing the economy under the leadership of ‘politics’, even crucial policy objectives such as demographic growth could not be pursued at the expenses of private owners. Discriminatory laws mostly affected women in public services and reduced their ability of making career – thus defending the status of male middle-class supporters of the Regime – while ‘protective’ legislation could be easily avoided by firms. “Equal pay for equal job”, in order to avoid female work to be more convenient (Dolmetta 1940), remained a mere slogan. Indeed, if we take seriously De Grazia’s discussion on the importance of wage differentials in promoting female employment, we might even wonder if the rapid post-World War II convergence contributed to the strong decline of female occupation, really extraordinary when we see that in a long-run perspective. On the other hand, the extent of the double burden faced by women in the interwar decades, exploited without representation and for lower pays at work – as noted by Dolmetta (1940), after all, women’s work was a “duty”, not a “right” – and under increasing pressure at home, might have made many of them eager to focus on reproductive work when improved economic conditions made possible to live on one wage.

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