

# Homeworking, Care Work and Gender-Based Violence The Condition of Women and Mothers during Covid-19 Domestic Confinement

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic, like any social event characterised by the loss of securities and balances, has caused a worsening of the living conditions of women who, suddenly, have experienced the expansion of many problems that already existed before the sanitary emergency, including: job insecurity, the increase in family tasks and loads, and the exacerbation of domestic violence. The contribution, taking into consideration some recent documents and studies published at an international and national level, attempts to analyse these issues and their consequences from a pedagogical and gender perspective, highlighting both the political strategies designed to contrast the forms of discrimination still suffered by women and the crucial role that pedagogy plays in the promotion of educational paths and practices aimed at implementing and consolidating gender equality.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, women, work, family loads, violence.

## Abstract

La pandemia da Covid-19, come ogni evento sociale caratterizzato dalla perdita delle sicurezze e degli equilibri esistenti, ha causato un peggioramento delle condizioni di vita delle donne che, in modo repentino, hanno sperimentato l'ampliarsi di molte problematiche già esistenti prima dell'emergenza sanitaria tra cui: la precarietà lavorativa, l'accrescimento dei compiti e dei carichi familiari e l'inasprirsi delle violenze domestiche. Il contributo, prendendo in considerazione alcuni recenti documenti e studi prodotti a livello internazionale e nazionale, cerca di analizzare tali problematiche e le loro conseguenze in ottica pedagogica e di genere, evidenziando sia le strategie predisposte per contrastare le discriminazioni che le donne continuano a subire, sia il ruolo cruciale che la pedagogia ricopre nella promozione di percorsi educativi volti a implementare le life skills necessarie per contrastare le disuguaglianze e consolidare la parità tra i generi.

**Parole chiave:** Pandemia, donne, lavoro, carichi familiari, violenza.

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### *Introduction*

The last two years of the new Millennium were marked by the health emergency, which has profoundly altered the main arrangements underlying the functioning of social communities. To counteract the spread of the virus and reduce its dramatic consequences, the entire world population had to suddenly change its daily habits and routines, facing problems of various kinds and magnitudes (United Nations, 2021).

For months, distancing and repeated lockdowns have been the main “regulators” of social life and, as it has been extensively documented in national and international the scientific literature, difficulties have mainly affected the most fragile groups, aggravating their pre-existing conditions. It is sufficient to mention the fact that on the health front, the repercussions regarded most of all the elderly and the immunocompromised (as far as virus infections are concerned), but also adolescents who, deprived of their relational spaces and times, have been showing a growing discomfort in the sphere of mental health, with a worrying increase of depression cases, self-harming acts, and even suicide attempts (World Health Organization, 2022; Department for Family Policies, Istituto degli Innocenti, 2021).

Moreover, in terms of employment, the greatest difficulties have fallen on young people, women and foreigners: individuals who were the first to be affected by precariousness, or even by the loss of their employment and related economic benefits (International Labour Organization, 2021; Ministry of Labor et al., 2020). There is no doubt that the pandemic has globally amplified the existing severe social inequalities. As argued by Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for the United Nations:

The pandemic has exposed and intensified inequalities within and among countries. The poorest and most vulnerable people have a greater risk of becoming infected by the virus, and bear the brunt of the economic fallout. The crisis has threatened the livelihoods of 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy. The collapse of international tourism disproportionately affects small island developing States. And vast inequities exist in vaccine distribution: as of 17 June 2021, around 68 vaccines were administered for every 100 people in Europe and Northern America compared with fewer than 2 in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations, 2021, p. 3).

In view of these premises, the paper intends to develop an in-depth study of the repercussions that anti-viral actions (first and foremost, confinement within the home) produced on women's life and the obstacles they experienced in both public and private contexts. In particular, an analysis will be conducted starting from these questions: have social policies been able to respond to the new female demands, which even in "ordinary times" struggled to obtain proper recognition? What strategies have been planned in our country to support women who have lost their jobs, or those that during smart-working had to take care of their children and their education, up to those women who, within the walls of their home, have been the victim of gender-based violence? Has the education field been able to take on these new needs, not simply by limiting its interventions to the "here and now" but looking toward a foresighted change able to provide full citizenship to that half of the population that still feels the effects of a long-lasting patriarchal and misogynistic culture? Starting from these promptings, the contribution proposes some reflections of a pedagogical nature with the intention of highlighting all those educational actions and dynamics that can actively and responsibly foster a culture based on respect and equal opportunities.

1. *Pandemic, women, labour market and family burdens. "An emergency within an emergency"*

A first picture of the situation women faced during the pandemic can be drawn from "The Sustainable Development Goals Report" published by the UN in 2021, which states:

The social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have adversely affected progress towards gender equality. Violence against women and girls has intensified; child marriage, on the decline in recent years, is expected to increase; and women have suffered a disproportionate share of job losses and increased care work at home. The pandemic has highlighted the need to act swiftly to address pervasive global gender inequalities. Women have played a central role in the response to COVID-19, as frontline health workers, care providers, and as managers and leaders of recovery efforts. Yet they remain underrepresented in leadership positions, and their rights and priorities are often not explicitly addressed in response and recovery measures. The crisis presents an opportunity to re-shape and rebuild systems, laws, policies and institutions to advance gender equality (ivi, 2021, p. 36).

The Report focuses on an analysis of the goals of the Agenda 2030 in relation to Covid-19, and at Goal 5 “Gender equality” highlights that in the world, and especially in the poorest countries and contexts, women, girls and little girls have become one of the main targets of the pandemic crisis. About one in three women (736 million, including girls and underage girls) have experienced physical and/or sexual violence predominantly by their partners or a man in the household. School closures, economic shock, and the interruption of reproductive health services have amplified the risk of early marriages for girls by predicting an increase of 10 million cases over the next 10 years. The amount of time women have to devote to childcare has significantly risen (mainly due to the closures of schools and childcare centres), a situation that has forced many mothers with children under the age of 6 to leave their jobs.

Generally speaking, the critical issues observed worldwide also reflect the conditions manifested in our country, where women, even before the emergency, were already experiencing a long-standing delay on the gender equality and equal opportunity front.

In Italy, the gender gap is certainly not a recently born issue. We can rather see it as the outcome of a long and deep-rooted imbalance in the management of power and resources between men and women (Beard, 2018; Bourdieu, 1998; Brogi, 2022; Cantarella, 2019).

Work instability, increased family burdens and domestic violence: we can define these elements as the three big wounds that the emergency has unfolded in the lives of Italian women (and not only). Starting from an analysis of what happened in the working sphere, the darkest year was definitely 2020 and, in particular, the month of December, which ended with the loss of 101 thousand positions of which 99 thousand were held by women (Istat, 2021a). The “Rapporto annuale 2021. La situazione del Paese” by Istat shows that those who suffered the most from the backlash were women with lower educational qualifications, with children under the age of 6 and residing in the South and Islands. As mentioned within the same document:

The shock that the crisis brought to the labour market has exacerbated the interaction between the level of education and family roles. Employment performance is dramatic for less-educated women who are also mothers of children under 6, with the rate falling in 2020 to 26.4 percent for mothers with low education compared with 76 percent for college graduates with young children; the corresponding rates are 13.9 and 66.7 percent in the South. Women living in families with parents, which is to say in the role of daughters, also present a relatively difficult situation, in particular when they have low education: their

employment rate was 29.7 percent at national level and 18.1 percent in southern regions (Istat, 2021b, p. 151).

Women's employment situation, which is still very uncertain and precarious despite the slight recovery recorded in 2021 (Istat, 2022), is configured as closely related to another persistent issue concerning the time women spend on domestic work and caring for family members. In this regard, the research "Prima, durante e dopo il Covid: disuguaglianze in famiglia" (Del Boca et al., 2020) highlighted that the closure of kindergartens and schools has primarily influenced mothers with negative effects. In detail, the study was carried out on a sample of 1250 employed women and wanted to investigate how the lockdown has caused changes on the sharing of family loads and roles within couples. The data analysed showed that 68% of the participants spent more time doing housework than before; 29% spent the same amount of time; and only 3% spent less time than before. For what concerns the answers given about partners, it can be observed that 55% of them did not change their schedule at all, 6% decreased the time spent doing house chores and 40% incremented it. Looking at issues related to family care and, specifically, to childcare, it is shown that 61% of working mothers saw an increase in their commitment, 34% maintained their previous standards and only 5% reduced them; whereas for partners, it is noted that 51% increased the time they devoted to their children, 45% did not change their habits, and only 3% reduced this commitment. As scholars state, gender asymmetries in family settings persist and it will take a long time to overcome them. In particular, what contributes to the persistence and durability of this phenomenon is the lack of an adequate network of early childhood socio-educational services that can support families, and especially mothers, in their daily routine. In Italy, in the educational year 2019/2020, only 14.7% of children between the age of 0 and 2 years attended a nursery (Save the Children, 2022). In the past decades, Italian policies and investments on childcare services have been almost absent although research strongly argues that high-quality education in the earlier years of life can have a marked effect on adult life outcomes, as well as foster mothers' employment and thus contribute to the reduction of the gender pay gap<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> On the issue, the European Commission reaffirmed that «Public or subsidized ECEC is a key facilitator of parental employment outcomes. Research has shown that the provision of public or subsidized ECEC is a key facilitator of parental employment outcomes, particularly for mother» (European Commission, 2022, p. 6).

Exacerbated by the pandemic, women's employment, gender pay gap and work-life balance remain three major challenges for the future, not just for women, and specifically for mothers, but for the whole country. As the President of the Republic himself, Sergio Mattarella, declared at the Stati Generali della Natalità (General States of Natality):

The issue is particularly topical for women who still face too many impediments and difficulties in achieving full equality, and an essential contribution may come from reconciling family care time and work time. This issue also concerns businesses and their social function. No opposition can exist between professional commitment, work activity and the choice of motherhood. The Republic cannot be deprived of the talents of women's full participation. Work is not what keeps women away from motherhood: women are kept away because of the deficiencies in the support given to mothers. Family policies are an essential contribution to the balanced and sustainable development of the country (Mattarella, 2022).

## *2. Domestic confinement and gender-based violence. Living h24 with your perpetrator*

While the virus paralyzed economic activities and people's mobility, it failed to restrain the gender-based violence that everyday hurts girls and women in every part of the world. As the 2011 "Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence" asserts:

a. "violence against women" is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life;

b. "domestic violence" shall mean all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3).

For centuries, the abuse perpetrated by men on women appeared as

a “natural behaviour” acted and suffered without any hesitation because it was thought to be closely related to the biological dimension of the sex they belonged to. Men, constantly finding themselves in a position of greater power, have believed that subordinating women from an early age through all forms of coercion was their own prerogative and should not to be questioned (Ulivieri, 2014). Conversely, the female gender has introjected the idea that inferiority, submissiveness, as well as meekness and gentleness, were unchangeable biological characteristics, seamlessly transmitted from one generation to the next. These pseudo-truths, placed at the foundation of patriarchal culture, have made violence against women appear as a permissible and legitimate behaviour, even from a legislative perspective. In this regard, it is significant to recall that the “delitto d’onore” (honour killing), sanctioned in 1930 by the Rocco Code (Art. 587 of the Penal Code) and abolished only in 1981 by Law 442. The same applies to the case of “rehabilitating marriages” (Article 544 of the Penal Code), according to which «For the crimes stipulated in Chapter One and Article 530, the marriage, which the offender contracts with the offended person, extinguishes the crime, even with regard to those who are concurring in the same crime; and, if there has been a sentence, its execution and penal effects cease». For far too long in family and public contexts, women have remained hostage to a misogynistic culture that has deprived them of their freedom and considered them as male property.

It has only been a few decades since protecting women victims of violence became a principle in our legislative system. The latest legislation, introduced to fight cases of violence against women, is the so-called “Codice rosso” (Red Code) (Law N. 69 of 2019), which provides a “fast track” for investigations and harsher punishments for crimes committed in family settings or within cohabiting relationships. In particular, the law introduces four new crimes into the Criminal Code: the crime of illicit dissemination of sexually explicit images or videos without the consent of the persons depicted (revenge porn); the crime of deformation of the person’s appearance by permanent facial injury; the crime of coercion or inducement to marriage; and the violation of restraining order from the family home and prohibition from proximity to places frequented by the offended person. Unfortunately, despite the intentions, this Law has been of little benefit in countering the cases of domestic violence exploded during the pandemic. The rules imposed by social distancing forced the entire population to be confined within the domestic sphere, they increased the amount of time that members of the same family had to live together and, given that most abusive men possess “the keys to

the house”, this fact further exposed women to intrafamilial violence (Abramson, 2020; Campbell, 2020; Kumar, 2020).

According to ISTAT statistics (2021c), in 2020 there were more than 15,000 women who started their path out of violence through a specialized centre (CAV – Centro Antiviolenza) and among them about 13,700 (90%) sought support for the first time during the pandemic, despite the fact that 74.2% (about 7,700) claimed to have experienced violence prior to the health emergency. In terms of demographics, victims belong to all age groups, and in terms of citizenship, 72% said they were Italian. Going into the type of violence enacted by perpetrators, the report shows that the most frequent violence was psychological, followed by physical violence, threats and economic violence; all harassment that in 10.5% of cases combined and generated abuses of different form and severity.

As Daniela Loi and Flavia Pesce from the Institute for Social Research (2021) emphasized, this health emergency has substantially amplified the already existing criticalities associated with women’s difficulties in accessing territorial services, but also in finding temporary accommodation facilities; in addition to these impediments, there are also organizational and coordination problems faced by specialized services and the lack of sufficient resources to cover the expenses arising from Covid-19.

### *3. Measures, strategies and actions to contrast gender-based violence. The goals of the National Strategy 2021-2026*

In July 2021, while the pandemic continued to be a focus in Italian political agendas, the Department for Equal Opportunities, under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, released the first «National Strategy for Gender Equality», a document aimed at «giving the country a clear perspective and a definite path towards gender equality and equal opportunities, to clearly outline a system of integrated policy actions in which concrete, defined and measurable initiatives will come to life» (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2021, p. 2). In the document, policy-makers, taking up the five domains that the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) uses every year to draft the Gender Equality Index<sup>3</sup>, map out, for each of the five domains, the interventions to be

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<sup>3</sup> The five domains that the EIGE every year uses to draft the Gender Equality Index

taken and set the relevant indicators and targets needed to guide government action on the issue and monitor the effectiveness of the interventions enacted. For the purposes of this work, although we consider all of the Strategy's domains to be of utmost importance, it is considered pertinent to focus on the "skills" as it is closely related to the educational and formative reflections that will be outlined in the final part of the paper.

Specifically, in the section devoted to "Context Analysis", it is highlighted that our country ranks only 12th in Europe in relation to participation in education, achievements and segregation in academic paths. What penalizes us the most is the phenomenon of educational segregation that sees girls and boys undertaking their high school and university paths asymmetrically. In fact, regardless of the fact that girls achieve, on average, higher levels of education and training than their male peers, there is a strong tendency for them to be concentrated in the disciplines from the fields of teaching, psychology and law while, as far as STEM disciplines are concerned, the scenario is reversed as it shows a male prevalence. Consequently, these largely unbalanced trajectories contribute to increase horizontal segregation (Iori, 2014) and gender pay gap, two elements that in the workplace penalize, as we know, the female gender. A similar process is also found in academic careers where only 11% of full professors are women. Based on this analysis, the paper identifies indicators and targets to look at in order to reverse the trend. First, there is the need to promote equal development of mathematical and scientific skills in order to reduce the gender gap that persists in these disciplinary fields. The targets to be measured, therefore, are «the percentage of female students in the 5th grade who do not reach the minimum proficiency levels in mathematics [...]; the percentage of female students enrolling in STEM degree programs» (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2021, pp. 14-15). The second goal is to raise female participation in academia, assuming as a target «the percentage of female full professors over the total [...]]» (*ibidem*). Finally, this is followed by «the goal of increasing the digital, computer and communication technology skills of women» monitoring «the percentage of women with "above average" digital skills out of the total female population» (*ibidem*).

The last section of the Strategy, reserved for "measures", is composed of a list of initiatives to be put in place to qualitatively and quantitatively improve the "skills" domain, and among these:

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are: work, income, skills, time, power.

- to revise the requirements for textbooks and teaching materials in order to incentivize publishers to promote non-stereotyped products that give equal visibility to genders;
- to introduce guidance and reinforcement pathways in STEM disciplines and strengthen curricular programs in mathematics;
- to establish some forms of support for student-mothers in college;
- to introduce gender quotas in university personnel's evaluation committees;
- to organize public and cost-free after-school courses on digital and computer literacy;
- to provide mandatory training for teachers on gender mainstreaming and gender stereotype, especially in STEM and high-segregation subjects.

The Strategy, as a whole, turns out to be a proactive, coherent and innovative tool since, starting from the problems that our country is still facing, it advances concrete suggestions and targeted indications to strengthen gender equality, especially in the areas where inequalities and discrimination are still pervasive. At the moment, the risk at hand is that the document will remain, as it has already happened with other devices (think of all the indications contained in the Istanbul Convention), only on the level of good intentions and promises. This conjecture must be absolutely avoided, and it can be done by incentivising and supporting all the actors involved (from institutions to the third sector) to synergistically achieve the objectives of their own pertinence.

#### *4. The contribution of pedagogy and gender education to support present and future women*

The pandemic crisis has clearly demonstrated that women's rights and achievements continue to be characterised by a high level of precariousness that, especially in vulnerable and unpredictable situations such as those arising during Covid-19, facilitates the reappearance of violence and discrimination thought to have been overcome. This consideration should, therefore, serve to not let down our guard and to maintain a vivid and constant commitment to women's empowerment as a fundamental goal for the sustainable development of the entire Earth's society (UN, 2015).

So how can pedagogical reflection contribute to mending the gen-

der inequalities created by the pandemic? What educational devices can provide re-generative and transformative support for all those women and mothers who have personally experienced job insecurity, family work overload and domestic violence during social distancing? How can we implement, from a preventive perspective, the culture of respect and equal opportunities starting from the early ages of life?

In the awareness of having to significantly limit the current analysis, it is considered appropriate to focus this last reflection on two intervention perspectives that, although seem to be distinct one from the other, are strongly interconnected: the first concerning the implementation of life skills that, at present, can support women in regaining confidence in their abilities and in making themselves active protagonists of the work and family challenges that await them; the second relating to equality education programmes to be promoted in educational and school contexts in order to contribute to the formation of critical and plural thinking and to the construction of intergenerational relations «open to mutual aid and supportive collaboration» (Loiodice, 2020, p. 7).

With regard to the first perspective, it emerges the need to accompany and guide women towards those formal, non-formal and informal education paths aimed at reactivating in them the 'desire' to start planning their lives again, to become more receptive to new possibilities (Bruscaglioni, 2007; Dato, De Serio, Lopez, 2007) by exploiting the talents they possess (Margiotta, 2018) and enhancing proactive coping strategies. The latter, in particular, are indispensable for anticipating critical events and reducing their negative effects (Aspinwall, Taylor, 1997), for thinking ahead, for taking responsibility and making conscious choices both at work and at home. The processes of coming out of difficult and complex phases, in which the person may have felt his or her own efficacy competencies weakened, require a strong emotional and cognitive investment in regaining self-esteem, empowerment and all those life skills that allow one to take care of the self and then to take care of others and of the world. The objective is, therefore, to urge women and mothers who have experienced the pandemic with criticality, to acquire the skills that allow them to 'navigate their way through a myriad of complex changes' (Boffo, Iavarone, Nuzzaci, 2022, p. 3) effectively managing the unfolding situations and confidently planning those that will follow. Over the last two years, many organisations and associations operating online and, in the territories, have moved in this direction. Starting from the most tangible and explicit needs of women, they have proposed a multidimensional and multidirectional

training programme capable of providing resources both to deal with the most pressing and material problems and to restore confidence in that deep part of the self that has been strongly affected by the adversities exacerbated by the pandemic.

Considering the second perspective, educating children and young people to understand that each person – regardless of sex, gender or any other difference – should be respected, valued and allowed to make their own choices is the first step towards a democratic and inclusive society.

It is precisely in the encounter and equal confrontation with otherness that each individual becomes aware of himself or herself, of his or her abilities and limitations, and learns to interact with the world, recognising that respect for others is the first educational device to be used to prevent and combat violence, discrimination and inequality. However, in order to guide the new generations to actively build a culture of respect and equality, it is necessary, first and foremost, to train educators and teachers in this direction both in basic and in-service training. As the National Strategy 2021-2026 highlights, educators and school staff need to be solicited to recognize in their own behaviour, as well as in the way they think and teach, the presence of sexist clichés that, if not critically recognised, obstruct the development of educational interventions aimed at promoting the full appreciation of differences and self-determination in growing individuals. It is therefore necessary to offer professional training that, starting from the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, aims at the acquisition of transversal skills of a reflective, linguistic, planning, methodological and didactic nature (Dello Preite, 2019). Thanks to these skills teachers can construct curricula and establish gender-oriented educational settings.

Despite all its critical issues, the health emergency has taught us that in times of uncertainty and precariousness, human rights, which are at the foundation of democracy, are likely to be unjustly undermined and obliterated, causing discomfort and vulnerability, especially at the expense of the most fragile social groups. Therefore, seeking to draw benefits from this dramatic experience, it is time to «change our path» (Morin, 2020) and to target an education that makes equality and inclusiveness its «reference briccola» (Trisciuzzi, 1995), and of dialogue and confrontation its pedagogical devices to promote the respect and appreciation of differences.

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