

ANNEX

REPORT 'NEEDS OF UNEMPLOYED WOMEN IN TESTING TERRITORIES'



This document has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014- 2020).

Disclaimer

The information, documentation and figures in this document are under the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission. The European Commission is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.

Technical report

Interviews and focus groups in the Autonomous Province of Trento

Document by Arianna Bazzanella

with the support of Vida Bardiya and Emma Mitrotta

Revision by Isabella Speziali

INDEX

1. GROUP DESCRIPTION: CRITERIA, SELECTION METHODS, RESULTS

- 1.1 Methodological premise
- 1.2 The characteristics of the respondents
- 1.3 The respondents' motivations
- 1.4 Performance, non-verbal and paraverbal behaviour in focus groups

2. BEING MOTHER

- 2.1 Quantitative data on care responsibility
- 2.2 Qualitative elements of care responsibility and sharing
- 2.3 Motherhood as a learning opportunity

3. WORK AND NEED FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

- 3.1 Introduction: the financial aspect
- 3.2 Past experience
- 3.3 The present: the search for a new job and future expectations
- 3.4 The experiences of reconciliation: a summary

4. THE ROLE, THE PERCEPTION, AND THE EXPERIENCE WITH SERVICES

- 4.1 The approach to services
- 4.2 Courses and training
- 4.3 The gaps to be filled

5. THE PROPOSALS OF THE RESPONDENTS

6. SOME KEYWORDS

Clarification notes: the term “respondents” used in the following document refers indiscriminately to individual or group interviews (focus groups) so as to make reading easier and protect the anonymity of the women involved. In the Italian version, when speaking of “children”, the masculine form shall be used without any gender discriminatory intent but just to simplify the text. The respondents' verbatim quotations are enclosed in double quotation marks.

1. GROUP DESCRIPTION: CRITERIA, SELECTION METHODS, RESULTS

1.1 Methodological premise

The universe of reference for the qualitative research module was defined by some basic variables:

- female individuals;
- between the ages of 29 and 49;
- unemployed in the strict sense: without a job but with previous professional experience in the last 3 years;
- with care responsibility;
- with varied family composition;
- in possession of at least a high school diploma.

Taking into account 1) the tools for identifying, selecting and contacting the potential respondents made available by the Employment Agency of the Province of Trento 2) the timing and 3) the purpose of the investigation, which did not require statistical representativeness by its nature, the qualitative research did not rely on a sampling process, but it rather involved people who had the characteristics described above and who were available to participate.

We therefore started from the analysis of available datasets that provided for an adequate privacy release (a non-secondary constraint) and the possibility of cross-checking all necessary variables. In some cases, in fact, it was possible to reconstruct partially compatible profiles but it was not possible to proceed with an in-depth study on the type of care responsibility, for it would have required an investigation of family status that was not feasible.

It is a necessary methodological caution because, in order to meet the criteria and to optimize times and results, we have resorted to lists of women who had already participated in initiatives carried out by the Employment Agency or who had turned to services (policies, interventions or research) directly managed by the Agency itself. In detail, the target has been pursued by involving two groups of candidates:

1. unemployed in the strict sense (former workers who became unemployed) who have lost their jobs as a result of voluntary resignations during the period of pregnancy and *puerperium*;
2. unemployed women who took action in the search for a new job through the Employment Agency and of whom there was a trace of a previous occupation and their family responsibilities.

Once a population large enough to achieve the target was defined - although we expected some refusals - we proceeded with contacting people individually by telephone. Following the initial contacts, a further critical element was revealed.

Trentino has a particular orographic configuration, typical of mountainous areas, where a large part of the population and services are based in the county seats and in the larger centres surrounded by medium or small villages that are often distant from the former or do not have a road network that easily allows to reach them.

We are talking of about 540,000 inhabitants distributed in 175 municipalities with a wide variability of size: ranging from Trento which has almost 120,000 residents (22%) to Massimeno which has about 130 (0.02%). A third of the total population lives between the county seat, Rovereto (7%) and Pergine Valsugana (4%). This is an element that must be taken into account.

In this specific case, also women residing outside the main centres were initially contacted, in order to make the points of view more heterogeneous. But precisely the distance, the travel times for the activities themselves, as well as - given the target - the need to be present in one's own home environment made it almost impossible to involve people from the most distant villages and small towns.

it was therefore decided to include mainly Trento and a second significant centre, Pergine Valsugana, reaching a potential of 28 women.

Unfortunately, just before the appointments or without any previous communication, there were 3 withdrawals in the first case and 6 in the second, thus reaching an effective number of 19 women involved - 11 from Trento, 8 from different Municipalities - which allowed to carry out 5 interviews and 2 focus groups.

1.2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

The Table *Characteristics of the respondents* shows the basic variables of the women involved, distinguished by individual and group interviews. The information was collected through a specific self-administered form in the reception phase, before starting the interviews (ANNEX 1).

Summary Table: Characteristics of the respondents

	Interviews	Focus groups
Total women involved	5 women	14 women
Age	from 34 to 47 years	from 30 to 48 years
Presence of children	2 women with 1 child 2 women with 2 children 1 woman with 3 children	4 women with 1 child 8 women with 2 children 2 women with 3 children
Children Age	from 2 a 9 years; all mothers have children aged 0-5 years	from 1 a 19 years; 10 women have children aged 0-5 years
Presence of the elderly	No	No
Presence of other non-self-sufficient people	No	No
State of birth	Italy	13 Italy; 1 Extra UE country
Nationality	Italian	13 Italians; 1 foreigner
Education	High school diploma: 3 Post-graduate specialisation degree: 2	Vocational diploma: 1 High school diploma: 9 Degree: 3 Post-graduate specialisation degree: 1
Career levels	Entry level: 1 Administrative/technical level: 3 Executive/manager: 1	Entry level: 4 Administrative/technical level: 7 Executive/manager: 3
Work Contract	Permanent: 2 Temporary: 3	Permanent: 7 Temporary: 5 Self-employed: 1 Job on call: 1

Family status	Married/domestic partner: 5	Married/domestic partner: 13 Single: 1
----------------------	-----------------------------	---

For obvious methodological reasons, the table did not provide for any specific question concerning financial information or information about personal assets which, however, would have been interesting to investigate in relation to the objectives. However, no explicit and manifest economic difficulties emerged during the interviews (both individual and group). On the contrary, welfare payments (which many of them benefit from) constitute a temporary lifesaver which allows to slow down decision times and to raise the conditions considered minimum to accept a job. In this, the presence of partners with safe jobs and sufficient income (many are craftsmen or with high profiles) is an element underlying many statements made by the respondents.

1.3 THE RESPONDENTS' MOTIVATIONS

The women who indicated their willingness to be interviewed individually were mainly motivated by the desire to "talk about themselves", their personal commitment, their trust in the Employment Agency and their hope that their commitment and ideas can serve this purpose.

In the focus groups, in line with the type of method (and alongside the trust in the Employment Agency and in listening to citizens actions), the participants show a widespread motivation relating to the possibility of deepening the topic and gathering information.

All of them have to do with at least one of the motivations proposed and, when they indicate only one, it is the curiosity towards the topics/methods that attracts.

Summary Table: the respondents' motivations

	<i>Absolute values of "Yes"</i>
Civic sense/sense of duty	13
Trust in listening to citizens actions	12
Trust in the Employment Agency	12
Curiosity about the subject of conciliation	12
Deepening the topic	12
Gathering information	10
Curiosity about the method	8
Building relationships	8
Other (specify below): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ to have concrete answers ✓ to find a job suitable for mom's needs ✓ to be able to express my opinion on the matter ✓ to discuss ✓ to give a direct concrete idea about employment issues 	5

Some questions from the participants suggest that there was also the hope that their commitment could be

recognized in some way to facilitate a new insertion in the labour market or, at least, be a facilitator in the relationship with the Job Centres and/or directly with companies.

Tautological assertion: given the recruitment processes, the groups were made up of people with a high level of involvement. At some moments, the conversation and the exchange represented an opportunity for real outburst of sufferings, disillusionings, grudges, disappointments that previously had not had any channel for liberation or sublimation.

1.4 PERFORMANCE, NON-VERBAL AND PARAVERBAL BEHAVIOUR IN FOCUS GROUPS

Beyond the evidently recurring themes, the two focus groups had different rhythms and attitudes. In both cases participants expressed - directly or with irony – doubt, and at the same time, hope that their commitment could be really useful to the system and to the improvement of the conditions of women with experiences similar to theirs.

9 respondents took part in the first focus group. They were mostly aware, determined, and resentful about being unemployed, for they perceived their situation as unfair and penalizing, and often as an unexpected outcome after years of truthfulness, conscientious and constant commitment to employers.

At several moments, emotions like anger and resentment - moreover alternated with resignation and discouragement - prevailed when reflecting on situations they have had to and must unjustly face, even though they have always been busy and (in some cases) despite their high-level qualifications.

The second group revealed a more melancholy and resigned attitude. Probably also for the limited number of participants (5) the climate was less effervescent, more intimate and even more discouraged. In two cases, the storytelling led to a strong emotional tension, and was interrupted by an outburst of tears.

In both cases, the free and at the same time protected manifestation of strong, albeit sometimes conflicting, feelings facilitated the creation of an open context in which all participants felt free to talk about themselves. It was necessary to push some respondents who were more shy and discreet, but all of them had the opportunity to express at least an opinion with what emerged.

At certain moments, the understanding among them and the feeling of being part of a group, that listen to and understand, led the respondents to ask each other questions to deepen their stories or to give themselves advice, and encourage each other. There was a great need to express and channel their own negative feelings in order to give voice to them, but also, at the same time, a willingness to listen to and welcome the “other”.

Grudges, feelings of disappointment and disenchantment were not only intended for the labour market and employers, but also for the Employment Agency and Job Centres whose proposals were often defined as useless because, on the one hand, they were not related to their skills and abilities, and on the other hand, they were not consistent with companies labour demand.

In relation to employers or managers, an element that particularly stirred up the discussions was a gender issue: it is reported with anger and disappointment that if the “boss” is a woman, the relationships are even more hostile, unprofessional, and tiring. Or, at least, they are perceived as such in the face of their expectations that probably involve greater understanding and empathy.

Another discussions that ignited the spirits and displayed non-verbal and paraverbal signals (nodding with determination, raising the tone of voice, moving excitedly) was that concerning the crèches and, in general, childcare services as they complained about the lack of, and the difficulty to access to such services, their economic sustainability, and opening hours which do not help those who work extra hours or on shifts. A sort of “race to apply” has been reported several times as people has to go to the appropriate offices to apply at dawn in order to increase the possibility of getting a place at the daycare facility for their children.

Another paradox that emerged is that women who do not work are not entitled to public crèches (cheaper than the private ones), but if they do not have access to childcare services it is more difficult for them to re-enter the labour market.

At the end of the meetings, words of gratitude were expressed for having had the opportunity to discuss. Some pointed out that for the first time – other than their close friendships - they had the opportunity to tell their story and the emotional (positive and negative) load that accompanied them.

2. BEIGN MOTHER

2.1 Quantitative data on care responsibilities

The 19 respondents said they exclusively take care of their own children except some who receive a limited support from relatives or paid babysitters. Overall, as shown above, there are:

6 women with 1 child

10 women with 2 children

3 women with 3 children

None of them take care of elderly, disabled or non-self-sufficient people. This is often due to the fact that their parents/in-laws are independent or far away. In this second case, it may happen that it is still necessary to visit them for temporary support.

Although such commitments have never been reported as burdensome, respondents are slightly concerned about future as it may have in store a heavier burden, as well as about present, for they cannot guarantee to be there for them.

It should also be noted that, during the contact phase, some women were not willing to participate precisely because they found difficult to organize themselves while caring for a particularly needy child or because their care responsibilities do not allow them to be absent for several hours, especially if the travel took a long time.

These self-selection processes must be taken into account in order to complete the contents of the methodological premise.

The age of their children varies from 1 year to 19 years, therefore participants have heterogeneous loads and responsibilities: 15 out of the 19 women involved in the research have children aged 0-5 years.

The starting situations are, therefore, similar in some respects and very different in others. In order to propose a typology summarizing the profiles, it can be highlighted that, although they all share care responsibilities, the interviews (both individual and group) showed two types of experiences to which an intermediate third is added:

- 1) workers who left or lost their job during pregnancy, even before becoming mothers for the first time or just before they give birth;
- 2) workers who left or lost their jobs when their children grew up and became potentially autonomous in carrying out the main daily activities.

In the former case, a whole series of elements made working impossible or anti-economic and, in the latter case, what prevailed was the desire not to protract the rhythms of life and work they considered no longer sustainable and that invalidate the quality of life and family relationships. In a certain sense, in the latter cases, there seems to be a desire to make up for times, and experiences participants believed to have lost without being aware of, as they thought they could manage them.

- 3) After the first group but before the second one, there are intermediate experiences including women who, mostly after the birth of their second child, concluded that the physical and emotional effort, the economic costs, stress, etc. were greater than the advantages of a possible work activity. "I resigned -one respondent says - to please everyone".

2.2 Qualitative elements of care responsibility and sharing

All participants had the opportunity to briefly describe, either directly or indirectly, their experience as mothers in relation to work.

Motherhood is obviously a revolution that "changes your life" and leads to changes in the organization of time and travel as well as in the labour market, that - as they said - are often unexpected and unpredictable.

When referring to their daily lives, the respondents often talk about how long it takes to go from one place to another, and how difficult is that work (as long as they worked), family, childcare services and recurring children activities fit together in their own lives. The fact that they have to drive their children to the playground to play with friends and classmates, to sports facilities or cultural centres is a recurring theme: some of them even perceive themselves as a "taxi driver".

On the contrary, none of the respondents ever mentioned their personal time, so much so that it was impossible to broaden the discussion to the reconciliation between life time in general (not just family time) and work time. Despite the invitations and suggestions to consider other dimensions (such as sports activities, a dinner with friends or a partner), they only referred to the desire to take a long relaxing shower.

A feeling of possible stigmatization of mothers who take time for themselves, ask for support from family members or access childcare services in order to dedicate time to non-baby-related activities has emerged only later and in reference to other situations, as if it was not considered socially legitimate.

From the research point of view, this has represented an obstacle. Besides, it has not been possible to investigate these elements which, moreover, are strictly connected to the relationship with the partners, a dimension that has remained undetected and that can be looked at, as in a photo, only in negative: the partners shine through their (almost) absence. They are there and are often described as extremely understanding and collaborative (many participants call themselves "lucky" or declare that they should erect a monument to their partner), but they are mainly represented as male breadwinners, engaged in demanding professional activities which ensure the family maintenance, assuming that it would make no sense in any way they gave it up. Men are present in the decision-making path to quit their job, in support of their partner; no complaint of being put under pressure because unemployed. But there are no further steps. Parental leave for their fathers, for example, is not an instrument used or considered particularly useful. Only one respondent reports that she has benefited from it and resorted to it only because of extreme necessity.

All this reflects a perception and organisation of family anchored to obviously legitimate traditional models, though they often contrast with the aspirations of the respondents both as workers and women. Some admit that they are not able to be only mothers, that they feel part of their life is missing, especially when they talk to other working mothers who manage to engage themselves in both work and family. They do not have second thoughts about their choices, given the reasons underlying them. Still, but a feeling of melancholy shines through for a part of themselves that is missing. Paradoxically, getting back to work could even be a break: a woman just declared that she would like to have a job to be able to rest.

Therefore, a social structure unable to accommodate and satisfy the requests of aware, determined, prepared and competent women is confirmed. These women are and remain an underutilized capital, often during years in which the energies and the desire to get involved are however still high, despite their care responsibilities.

Note: it would have been and it would be very interesting to resume this theme in order to deepen the sphere of representations of family relationships and not only from the point of view of women/mothers but also - and, perhaps, above all - of men/fathers. This theme might also include an in-depth study on the relationship of women with their free time/themselves: do they recognize it? Do they make time for themselves? How do they spend that time that seems non-existent? Is it "stolen" from other commitments? Is it not legitimate? And what about their partners? Do they make time for themselves?

In the end, it seems appropriate to report that these mothers "almost have no expectations" of the role their partners play. Respondents do not perceive their partners as subjects involved (or who could be involved) in the management of care responsibilities. It is surprising to see that such a cultural datum is so strongly rooted among the participants in our research - young mothers who, although unemployed, have a medium-high education level.

[2.3 Motherhood as a learning opportunity](#)

Motherhood is defined as an experience that "changes your life", a "revolution" that breaks down previous daily life but also offers opportunities for learning new skills and new awareness.

Respondents mainly highlighted the organizational and managerial aspects of motherhood, including economic aspects («the mother is the CEO of a large company»), basic first aid, mediation between people (mostly children), ability to stay focused even in contexts that do not predispose it, ability to multitasking without leaving anything behind.

Some respondents report that they have learned to act as “mediators” in conflict situations. Others refer to their strength and going forward attitude: anything, if it is to be done, "you just do it", finding energies they did not think they still had. Besides, thanks to their children, some mothers turn back into baby girls, recovering and training their imagination again.

The respondents who refer to frequent travels also report they improved their driving skills. In addition, they learn to save and optimize home and family care activities, also in terms of evaluation, management, choice of expenses and products.

Some respondents also show a change of perspective towards working women, as well as towards themselves: "I have learned to ask," a respondent reports.

In addition, many of them say that motherhood helped them become more patient, an ability considered useful both in life and at work.

3. WORK AND NEED FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

3.1 *Introduction: the financial aspect*

As mentioned above, the financial aspect has not been investigated and therefore it is not possible to deal with it accurately, even if the respondents did not report any difficulties, if not transitory, and now anyway overcome.

The financial aspect is mentioned quite positively. Particularly, receiving social welfare payments, such as NASPI and other benefits, played an important role in supporting them. This financial support, although did not compensate for the job loss, has allowed them to live serenely, considering other advantages such as having more time and the possibility of being close to their children. Probably, if the respondents had not benefited from social welfare payments, they would have stayed longer in the labour market, thus putting further pressure on their life.

Respondents' work interruption is often associated with their husbands'/partners' jobs, that are demanding but also high-skilled and well-paid, thus having allowed them to leave their careers. Many of them expressed fear about the quality of family life if their partner were to become unemployed. In anticipation of future employment, these elements impact the decision-making process in terms of acceptability and wage. Many respondents say they would be willing to do «Anything to get back to work», but where there is no urgency, the criteria for evaluating a possible occupation become more stringent. A respondent says "I have become more selective".

3.2 *PAST EXPERIENCE*

Given the premise, the job is (was) for the respondents also and above all an opportunity for self-fulfilment, satisfaction, independence, implementation of skills acquired through education or professional experience.

Storytelling reveals the image of women divided into two equally important parts: being a mother and a worker. None - consistently with what emerged previously - speaks about a third part: being a woman, a friend, a

sportswoman, an artist ... This component is never mentioned. Even when - in multiple situations - referring to multiple identity, only two are highlighted: the mother and the worker.

Therefore, in the interviews, many women expressed feelings of great disappointment, discouragement, and resentment for having had to leave a place that, in the majority of cases, was peaceful and gratifying, as well as representing an important living space "for themselves", for it was an alternative to family life. But the cost-benefit ratio in terms of employment is disadvantageous, both in economic terms and in terms of psychological sustainability, especially if one is entitled to social welfare benefits (such as NASPI, the unemployment benefit workers are entitled to if they leave their job within the 1st year of their child's life).

However, the termination of the employment contract represents a relationships rupture for all. As a result, two ideal typical situations can be seen:

- in the first situation the working mothers or, more often, future mothers, leave their job without claiming anything. This happens because they want to be correct. They do not want to create problems, nor ask questions they already know the answer to. They want to maintain good personal relationships with their colleagues (their leave may affect colleagues' workload), as they are important to them, or with the employers themselves;
- in the second situation the working mothers decide to leave after they gave birth or maybe after returning to work after maternity leave, as the unexpected, often insulting, and ungrateful reactions they experienced upset them. They reported, in their stories, the insulting expressions some employers addressed them when announcing their pregnancy or requesting an organization of the activities compatible with the agreement following the arrival of a child (often the second one). Part-time - the first option claimed - is seen as uneconomical by employers ("6 hours cost me like 8!", one said), and is strongly discouraged.

What emerges from the former case is a state of resigned awareness, the sense of having done what was right and brought greater serenity, albeit the regret associated with losing their job, especially when it was a satisfying job. All things considered, the idea of having preserved important relationships is what counts.

On the contrary, the feelings associated with the latter case are much more intense. They include grudge, anger, and a sense of injustice. The respondents report that they felt humiliated, undervalued, not respected. People who used to share everyday life with them suddenly change their way of communicating, and develop attitudes of exclusion such as revisions of tasks, using desks and spaces previously assigned to the respondents who suddenly find themselves without room to work. A respondent reports that, after refusing any alternative possibility of reorganizing the work, the employer added provocatively: "The buggy fits in here". Others were subjected to threats such as: "If I decide to change the shift schedule, you will no longer see your child."

In this context, according to the respondents, the elements (already highlighted in the corresponding literature) that would have made it possible to maintain employment and which, where possible, they have tried to achieve, are:

- reduced working hours, although not necessarily at 50%;
- flexible working hours;
- possibility to take time off work in case the children are ill;
- possibility to take time off work in summertime, a critical time in all cases;
- presence of flexible and economically sustainable childcare services: this topic always ignites discussions, especially if there have been difficulties in accessing them in terms of waiting lists, opening hours, costs (if private), distance.

The interruption of the employment relationship has led to experience very strong feelings. The words associated with this first phase have been mainly negative:

- *guilt, unease, resentment, worthlessness, disorientation, disappointment, discouragement, humiliation, frustration* both in relation to the employer and the professional situation tout court. If the interruption occurred after a long period of negotiation or tense exchanges, a momentary sense of liberation is also experienced, but it remains bitter and in any case transitory;

- *loneliness, abandonment* in relation to a context that has not been able to offer support, a psychological support

rather than a professional one. The respondents recognize that it would have helped them manage such a painful moment.

Employers/entrepreneurs are blamed for being excessively focused on profit, saving on human resources, searching for profit margins wherever possible, even to the detriment of people. According to some respondents, hiring obligations should also be imposed based on company's revenue: "You have had a lot of profit, I am obliging you to hire", a respondent says.

In this context, only few refer to trade unions which, even in perspective, are considered an insignificant presence. It is at a later stage that a sense of relief is felt, resulting from rediscovering a different and more relaxed time to spend with their children and to manage previous activities with a new mood.

Many women, however, also stress the risk of an excessive slowdown that may lead to laziness or even depression, sometimes resulting in exhausting mood swings.

In the discussion around these themes it was pointed out that it would have been very useful to have a listening support to help them re-elaborate such a significant rupture in their existence.

3.3 THE PRESENT: THE SEARCH FOR A NEW JOB AND FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

The feelings described in the past experience section are now partially overcome but the mood swings. Some feel great because they have rediscovered possibilities, abilities, beauties that they would have missed with their past rhythms and commitments; they want to remain hopeful, but the most common moods when searching for a new job that cannot be found are mistrust, demoralization, fear, and anxiety. What motivates them most is the desire to succeed in "something else", be independent and autonomous, emancipate themselves financially.

The selection criteria in evaluating job posts remain relatively high, on the one hand for their organizational needs, and on the other hand for not having urgent economic needs: flexible working hours are reiterated as essential elements, along with childcare services. Women can not only search for a new job: in parallel they must also think about the future of their children, following a track that is always double. A respondent said she would like to find a new "young grandmother": not having relatives nearby, she would like to have a neighbour who could somehow replace parental figures and help her out when she needs it.

During the employment reintegration phase, all respondents experience the feeling of being discriminated against as female workers and judged as non-workers: a vicious and paradoxical circle from which there is no escape. In fact, the inadequacy, the idea of being "wrong" explicitly emerges. Some even declare to feel desperate or non-existent, as if they had become transparent and useless despite their previous high-level job and the excellent results they achieved. Still, they keep sending CV, attending courses, going to job interviews for consistent positions. "Job searching is actually a job", a respondent says with discouragement.

In this phase, the employers' unwillingness to meet their specific organizational needs is evident: a mother who has exclusive care responsibilities cannot always start the new job immediately, she needs a few days to organize herself and this is not necessarily granted. For employers, maternity is only a burden and a cost they want to get rid of, the respondents say. And the paradox - they point out - is that as time passes they become less competitive; it is a question of age: it seems a vicious circle.

Expectations towards the labour market inevitably lower and job searching, despite the above criteria, is carried out randomly and all-round without any reasoned planning starting from an analysis of the labour market on the one hand, and their own possibilities, on the other hand.

Apart from the need for part-time and flexible hours (which return and return like a mantra), anything becomes indefinite and indifferent, at least in words. They still want to resume previously acquired skills and experiences, but being all cloaked by a sense of uselessness, that desire moves to the background and they are willing to pay their dues if this can ensure actual reintegration possibilities.

The words "dignity" and "exploitation" come back several times. The former refers to the recognition of skills and decent salary. The latter refers to what they feel when receiving disadvantageous organizational and/or salary proposals. They reported proposals in terms of salary which, net of travel and childcare costs, would not balance

the increase in family expenses.

A respondent declares that she has thought of getting a license to drive the forklift, for many job posts require it; she expressed it with a mixture of bitterness, resignation, and challenge. Others, aware of having a weak professional profile, also consider the idea of investing in targeted training in order to build new strengths.

When addressing the topic of working hours and job placement, respondents report also particularly positive experiences they have heard about. As in the case of a friend of a respondent, a saleswoman for a German chain of stores, who was asked "What is the best work shift for you?" so that she managed to keep a work-life balance. Or the case of a Venetian company that has encouraged teleworking and smart working to allow workers to organize their work independently without losing competitiveness.

3.4 THE EXPERIENCES OF RECONCILIATION: A SUMMARY

All respondents share negative experiences as regards the possibility to reconcile work and family life. As already described, the recurring elements are associated with working hours and shift schedule that both previous employers and the potential future ones did not want to reconsider. Even when it comes to job interview, the presence of children always represents an obstacle to get the job.

Alternative organizational methods cannot be found and cannot be proposed even when they are practicable. According to the respondents, this is due to employers' and managers' "blindness" as they are not able to question consolidated working methods that have always worked. "It has always been done this way and it will always be done this way" is what they learnt from their experiences.

It is during the discussion of these themes in a focus group that a respondent came up with the idea of introducing a moderator/facilitator figure. The idea underlying this proposal is that it seems there were two worlds with different needs and visions that actually are only apparently antithetical and with conflicting and incompatible interests. On the one hand, employers and their profit targets, and on the other hand, female workers with their needs for reconciliation: in most cases a solution could have been found that would allow women to keep their jobs and employers not to lose productivity. This would have required reorganization, short-term investments (perhaps flanking junior resources with experienced workers who can train them), new ways of interacting between colleagues, but it would not have been impossible. The possibility of introducing a person who, with authority and power, stands in the middle to try to find the least impacting solution has been considered feasible and positive and assessed as potentially decisive in many environments.

In a context where reconciliation is very difficult, many women put job searching on hold and postpone until when the children will go to kindergarten or primary school, when the social welfare benefits will end and finding financial resources will become urgent.

Note: "cultural traditionalism" of companies and employers, whose approach in favour of families is limited to the financial aspect, reveals ignorance about the real problems of working mothers and is defined by the respondents as "blindness".

4. THE ROLE, THE PERCEPTION AND THE EXPERIENCE WITH CHILDCARE SERVICES

4.1 THE APPROACH TO SERVICES

When asking the respondents about services and tools they deem necessary, the first answers concern childcare services, particularly two main reflections accompany their descriptions, i.e. their quality and the small amount of time their children spend in childcare facilities. To refer to policies, interventions, supports specifically aimed at them as women, unemployed, mothers, it is necessary to make the question explicit. As for childcare services, they mention crèches, kindergartens, museums, parishes, summer camps, libraries ("Born to read", in particular). Respondents often complain about the low capacity and excessive costs of these facilities which are deemed useful and important, even for children development and not only to babysit them.

As regards services intended for working mothers, respondents stress the poor circulation of information: whether it is about incentives or supports for workers, unemployed mothers rights, social welfare benefits or other. The first source of communication is the network of women who experience similar conditions; the respondents also declare that they are a source of information for potential employers they meet who know little about the measures they could enjoy.

The tools considered significant are substantially three: NASPI, courses, job centres.

All respondents turned to job centres and private temping agencies and many complain of their inadequacy. Some of these agencies helped them restructure their CV or provided them with competence assessment, even though these supports did not prove very useful. Also, the employment voucher system is not really considered as an incentive by companies, in fact it did not encourage their recruitment.

Respondents also reported that competence and knowledge of the operators (both in the public and in the private job agencies) they met were not always adequate and did not match their job searching expectations (concrete indications and operational tools). Some respondents denounce a detached and not very empathic attitude of operators, who, sometimes, even provided them with discordant information.

This encourages them to organize themselves independently to reconstruct complete and organic information thanks to the support of informal networks (mainly mothers experiencing similar conditions).

"Yet it is not up to us to do the job, or at least it should not be!" a respondent summarizes, without anyway diminishing their direct responsibility in the employment reintegration process.

Note: we remind that the universe of reference for the qualitative research module was defined by some basic variables including "being still unemployed": the content of the respondents' responses is clearly related to the persistence of this condition.

4.2 COURSES AND TRAINING

These women did not attend training courses aimed at their specific job search.

For compliance with the rules (entitlement to NASPI is conditional on beneficiary's pro-active training courses attendance), all respondents have attended courses offered by the Employment Agency. Discussions on these courses provided only partially interesting reflections, particularly because they were aimed at other purposes. The critical issues expressed by respondents concern the timing of those training courses the Employment Agency provided as they were on a full-time basis and lasted up to two weeks, thus requiring a very demanding family organization.

Other critical issues are as follows: a mismatch between their expectations of targeted training for employment reintegration and the training provided; criteria for selecting participants that do not take into account the unemployed skills; heterogeneity of participants in terms of experience and professional backgrounds, which slow down and reduce the possibility of learning; lack of organization and trainers low levels of commitment. "It is also a psychological investment which, if it is null and void, makes you feel stupid", a respondent says, or in anycase the feeling is to have wasted time.

Respondents share the need to interact directly with companies in order to better know them and let the companies themselves to know the applicants. Internships are repeatedly mentioned as an opportunity for training on the job and mutual interaction between employers and workers provided that they really involve that purpose and do not create situations where it is the trainee who teaches her know-how to other resources.

A respondent speaks very positively of a ESF professional training course which included internship abroad she attended many years ago.

4.3 THE GAPS TO BE FILLED

According to the overview provided, it follows that what would be needed and would be more useful concerns:

1) Services supporting care activities:

– presence and accessibility, also in financial terms, of crèches/tagesmutter: some respondents declare that they have withdrawn their children from private crèches because the fee was unsustainable, or that they have

experienced the paradox of being entitled to access them only in case they were employed, but they are not able to look for a job as they have to look after their children;

- spaces where children can be brought when jumping from one commitment to another (where they can be left or where they can stay next to them): they mention a space in the library that is not always available;
- services that provide recreational activities, and supervision of their children during the summer: in this case too, the criteria of accessibility and financial sustainability return as crucial. There are initiatives, respondents say, but they are few compared to the demand, as well as often expensive, especially when having more than one child to enrol.

2) Employment support:

- possibility of working with a reduced hourly load;
- a flexible work schedule;
- possibility of teleworking or smart working for consistent profiles or activities;
- possibility to get days off easily;
- temporary and flexible day care centres, also within companies (on-site crèches);
- rules, controls and economic incentives that make these elements feasible for companies and employers.

3) Psychological support/coaching: respondents recognize that a listening service would help them pour out their feelings and share discussions with other women. For sure, it would have been very useful at an early stage to help them face and re-elaborate the radical change they experienced when turned from committed workers to unemployed.

The mere sporadic social welfare benefits such as the "baby bonus" are not perceived as particularly positive (note that the target has not expressed particular financial difficulties): they are certainly a support, but for sure the respondents would not invest in such resources.

5. THE PROPOSALS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Encouraged to devise ways to try to deal with the problems emerged during the discussion, respondents made accurate and specific proposals (some very rigorous and binding), which only partially reflect elements already addressed. They are briefly described, by area of relevance:

1) *Childcare services:*

- day care facilities with flexible and non-standard opening hours, also accessible in the evening and on weekends or "on call". They also should be affordable, especially if used occasionally: the need to pay a fee for extended periods is sometimes limiting;
- occasional in-home childcare services in case of emergencies such as when a child is sick: some respondents are in touch with a small pool of babysitters they can call in case of sudden need. An accredited organization that carries out this organizational work, guaranteeing qualified personnel could solve many difficulties;
- temporary childcare centres and services would be needed, too. Relatives or other mothers/friends who are already looking after their own children currently provide this service;
- on-site crèches or childcare facilities close to workplaces that allow to optimize travel times and to intervene quickly in case of need of the children;
- schools open during the summer: they could become activity centres for kids with minimum additional costs. Associations, cooperatives, voluntary bodies, etc. could provide the staff;
- activities to ease children's transition back to school from summer break (for both parents and children), perhaps providing moments of review;

- facilities where different needs and life experiences, such as for the elderly and children, can meet through promoting storytelling experiences. For example, providing a nursing home with a nursery school can brighten the life of elderly people and give children the opportunity to spend time with them, especially if grandparents are away. Or, older children can practice reading by reading books to the elderly. A concrete example reported is "Casa alla Vela", a facility which houses self-sufficient elderly people and university students who share needs and help in a relationship of constructive reciprocity;
- encouraging and supporting the self-organization of mothers: a respondent reported a bizarre circumstance in which, at an information evening on activities of this type, dozens of mothers showed up to eventually find out that the event dealt with childcare for children with disability. Their willingness to listen and get involved was anyway high;
- encouraging kids' clothing and gears swap, for they are used for a short time (such as strollers). This would allow families to save significantly.

2) *Services available to working women:*

- providing working woman with tailored services before she becomes a mother: a reliable moderator/facilitator figure who can help the woman communicate her pregnancy to the employer is hypothesized, in order to evaluate new and compatible organizational possibilities for both and have the time to plan everything in the best way, by finding any additional resources or ways that allow the parties involved to achieve a satisfactory balance;
- accurate and tailored job search support services which take into account the real possibilities and skills of the worker (which recalls the case manager figure). Possibly, it should include (also thanks to the involvement of more experts) labour market analysis, analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the worker, psychological support;
- professional re-qualification of the operators of the Employment Agencies (and the private temping agencies), perhaps also providing incentives associated with the outcome;
- opportunities for workers and companies to meet, also through protected traineeships;
- obligations for fathers to take parental leave so that the birth of a child becomes a cost that weighs on both parents. In this way, it is assumed to fill the gender gap that makes a woman less competitive than a man (both before a potential pregnancy and when she becomes mother) in the labour market;
- courses specifically aimed at mothers, that take into account the organizational constraints stemmed from care responsibilities, especially if they do not benefit from childcare services;
- affordable courses: the idea that the unemployed pay for a course without having the certainty of being reimbursed means, in some cases, that they must give up;
- a guide for women workers who will become mothers including all information they may need for reconciling and recognizing motherhood as a period of activity: many women report the lack of information and how whatsapp group chats for mothers are the first source of collection and sharing of useful information to support motherhood or parenting issues. Some information, however, is missing: such as the the social security child benefit, a measure often ignored by families;
- creating and experimenting with new employment contract terms and conditions similar to those for self-employment jobs and relative training to learn how to manage them. The underlying idea is that this allows the working mother to manage flexibility in terms of working hours and tasks, resulting in a financial relief for potential employers. The risks associated with self-employment could be balanced by the possibility of getting back to work and by creating *ad hoc* social welfare benefits;
- services to support domestic activities organized on the basis of the workplace, where there are many employees: for instance, support to complete bureaucratic paperwork, do the grocery shopping, or provide laundry service with pick up and delivery services of the clothes to the workplace. The costs of these services, potentially high, would be reduced by sharing them with colleagues/employers.

3) *Actions aimed at employers:*

rules (and related controls), tax exemptions and economic incentives that really help employers hire female mothers: some respondents point out that provincial employment support schemes are not attractive to employers as they entail too high risks for the employers themselves. Paradoxically, respondents reckon it would

be more effective to reduce them: the amount should be lowered and (obviously) proportionally the duration of the contract reduced. According to the women involved in focus groups and individual interviews, it is unlikely that an employer will hire a mother for a year or as a permanent employee, but perhaps he would hire her as a temp employee in order to know her better and then evaluate whether to extend the contract;

- promoting short-term employment contracts that allow a sort of break when female workers turn into full-time mothers. Obviously such actions should not undermine social welfare benefits or other supports;

- obligation for employers to grant mother workers part-time in case they request it (and offering them adequate coverage);

- training: on the one hand, employers must be informed about incentives and financial support they are entitled to if they hire disadvantaged workers; on the other hand, they must be trained in human resource management: they often seem to reveal rigidity in organizational terms, have prejudices and not pay attention to female workers (they are defined "inhuman"). Respondents suggest training programs aimed at the deconstruction of some assumptions and preconceptions, also by sharing stories of innovative and positive organizational experiences;

- more serious and punctual rules and controls in situations where mothers are discriminated against or mistreated because they are mothers;

- on-site recreational spaces and services aimed at workers (gyms, *ad hoc* teachers...), similar to what is done to teach foreign languages, so that those who have little time can be facilitated in organizing "time for themselves" by optimizing travel.

Finally, there is a need/proposal that goes beyond employment relations even though it is connected to them: women who become mothers and live the revolutionary experience of motherhood need to pour out their feelings, also obviously in relation to an employment relationship that still requires adjustments after the birth of a child. It would therefore be useful to provide a competent and specific listening service (both individual and group) where women can tell their story and receive emotional support. "I was not born a mother," a respondent said quoting the title of a book (which she suggests) to express the need for help not only to reconcile family and work, but also to manage a dual identity.

6. SOME KEYWORDS

Fragile determination or determined fragility

The respondents show an often ambivalent mood: they are very determined, energetic, often aware of their position, their strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, they are heartbroken, disillusioned, disenchanted in a context that does not seem to see them, value them, offer them a place and a different role other than that of being a mother. It is difficult for them to cope with real suffering, as they often feel lonely and, above all, abandoned by a context that does not legitimize their specific needs.

Time: life and work

The recurring theme, always present in every report, proposal, desire, is about time. Work time and family time (and, therefore, life time) that would deserve to and could be managed without fatigue, renunciations, alteration to the natural rhythms of families, children and employers themselves.

New "industrial relations": rights, dignity, quality

At several moments, the respondents denounce the lack of a shared "culture" that recognizes and includes them as active protagonists. Therefore, they require a change not only in the labour market, but in wider terms, in quality of life, preserving people's and families' dignity.

The production system is organized on a male rhythm and focused solely on profit. It expects that everything adapts to it: even motherhood must fit into a context that does not consider it and does not recognize it except as a burden. Everyone should be able to work and live a dignified existence with sufficient time, and personal and financial resources. A respondent even says that it is necessary that "we start again from human rights".

Technical report

Interviews and focus groups in the metropolitan area of Milan

Afol Metropolitana

Edited by Mara Ghidorzi

Scientific advice Adriana Nannicini

INDEX

1. GROUP DESCRIPTION

Premise

1.1 Personal characteristics of the participants

1.2 Context and motivations

2. THE ROLE OF WORK: ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND THE NEED FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

3. TAKE CARE OF/CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 Quantitative data on care responsibilities

3.2 Care responsibilities (qualitative data)

4. EXPERIENCES OF RECONCILIATION OF WORK AND FAMILY

4.1 Considerations on the experiences of reconciliation of work and family

5. THE ROLE, THE PERCEPTION AND THE EXPERIENCE WITH EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

6. KEY WORDS

1. GROUP DESCRIPTION

PREMISE

The participants were selected on the basis of requirements agreed in the design phase by the partners involved in the quantitative research activity, that is:

- Age 29/49 years old
- With care responsibilities (children, relatives, family members etc.)
- With a varied family composition
- At least 1 work experience in the previous 3 years
- A qualification equal to at least a high school diploma
- A varied territorial origin, particularly aimed at guaranteeing both the centre of Milan and its suburbs
- Knowledge of the services offered by Afol Metropolitana

Based on these characteristics, we contacted women present in the Afol Metropolitana database who had been involved in the services or projects funded by the Agency. In particular:

- Women involved in the Dote Unica Lavoro initiative
- Women involved in the Traineeships service
- Women involved in the Meeting Demand Supply service
- Women who turned to the Employment Agency for administrative activities.

Once the list was made (about 115 women), a first contact was made by email. Many women have not responded. Those who replied, mostly from the Internship service, said they were employed, albeit on precarious contracts. Due to the first difficulties in the collection of the sample, we proceeded then by contacting the people by telephone.

Some critical issues and considerations to evaluate:

The length of the focus groups (3 hours): for women with care responsibilities, it was a problem, despite their interest in the initiative.

Timing: two weeks of time for the realization of this activity did not allow us to proceed with a new search on the databases of the other territorial offices of Afol Metropolitana.

The age of the participants: as better described in the following pages, the female users who turn to our services and who have difficulty with reintegration into the labour market are mainly women over 40. The young women (under 35 years) who answered us do not see the reconciliation as a problem, as many still live in the family of origin "as daughters" or in any case do not yet have care responsibilities (it should be noted that in Milan the average age of mothers is 33 years and women who give birth between 35-44 years outnumber those who give birth to a child between 25 and 34 years: respectively 48.4% against 44.7% - data processed by the Mangiagalli Clinic in Milan). Furthermore, with the raising of the retirement age and the fragmented contributory career of women, it would perhaps have been interesting to extend the survey to women aged 60 years.

1.1 PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

16 women were involved for a total of 19 contacts/units as 3 women made themselves available for both the focus groups and the interview. This allowed for a small sample, but also a greater an in-depth analysis of life/work biographies and some intimate aspects not emerged in the group dynamics.

In total, 12 units were involved in the focus group activities, 7 in interviews.

For the reasons described above, we were unable to reach the target of 30 participants envisaged for the focus group activities. The completion of the activities is postponed to September.

	Interviews	Focus Groups
Women involved	7	12
Age	29-35 years old = 3 women 36-40 years old = 1 woman 41-45 years old= 6 women Over 46 years old = 6 women	
Presence of children	1 Child = 1 woman 2 children = 5 women 3 children = 8 women 4 children= 1 woman 5 children = 1 woman	
Education	High school diploma = 6 women Degree = 7 women Post-graduate degree = 2 women PhD = 1 woman	
Previous jobs	Worker in a cooperative = 2 technical designer = 2 saleswoman = 1 employment advisor = 1 free lance marketing = 2 staff management in a multinational company: 1 project manager in a NGO: 1 blue-collar worker: 1 Employee: 1 Cultural mediator: 1 Beautician: 1 Educator: 1 Entertainment industry worker: 1	

Civil status	Married = 7 Divorced= 2 Separated= 2 Domestic partner= 2 Single woman = 3
Nationality	Italian= 13 Peruvian= 1 Albanian= 1
	Polish= 1
Residence	Milan= 11 the suburbs= 5

1.2 CONTEXT AND MOTIVATIONS

Motivation to participate

The women involved participated in the focus groups and interviews showing a high willingness especially to individual meetings; a verbalized desire to have a time dedicated to talk about themselves and to be listened to in an exclusive, however temporary, relationship. All participants, both in the two groups and in individual meetings, describe themselves widely in an open way. They express a desire to talk about themselves that reveals the need to re-elaborate their relationship with their present condition: a condition that "lacks stability, planning", which requires to constantly and repeatedly pay attention to "active focusing". In this sense, meeting with others in the focus groups constitutes a significant plus, allows a discussion, an exchange of contacts, a shared condition; an opportunity to contrast the sense of "loneliness, frustration, depression".

Some husbands and grandparents offered to take care of the children to allow them to participate in the meeting in Afol.

The main motivation for participation is the relational component: women have seen these moments as an opportunity to create new contacts, consolidate relationships, forge new ties with women with similar life experiences.

Indications for the reasons of interest to participate in focus groups/interviews	n. answers
Curiosity on the theme of reconciliation/on the method	7
Opportunity to strengthen relationships	11
Opportunity to receive information on the topic	10

Data collected from the registration form. Multiple answers were possible

Education

Almost all workers who participated in the two focus groups and interviews have a high level of education, many hold a master's degree, one has a PhD in physics, one has various master's degrees in Humanities, some (3) are returning to university education particularly to acquire qualifications to get into teaching. Six women have a high school diploma.

Features of last job

Six (6) participants were employed on a permanent contract, or a fixed-term contract -for 3 years approximately- (2 of them, the saleswoman and the beautician, were employed in niche shops, 4 of them hold high positions in multinational companies or worked as freelancers); 10 of them have precarious jobs, paradoxically these are not considered the last paid job opportunities, as their job searching is aimed at positions held in the past and then lost; the various paid jobs they have do not offer a sufficient representation of themselves as workers. These are precarious jobs: three-month contract, collaboration with professional offices, hourly contracts with cooperatives, internships, one-off collaborations of various types. Only three of them have no jobs to date.

Resignation/dismissal/ other

One participant resigned to follow her husband in Japan, one for the birth of their her child and the impossibility of working on shifts in a hospital. One participant did not have her contract renewed at the end of maternity leave. The others were fired or the organization they worked for (firm, start-up company, vocational training centres) lost their funding resulting in the closure of the business. One participant was fired a for requesting parttime.

Emotional state

Respondents were highly willing to participate. They often expressed the pain they go through for both the job loss and their current situation, as well as concern for the uncertainty of their future. They were moved, excited. They expressed a feeling of suffering mixed with gratitude for the opportunity for discussion, for feeling welcomed and visible.

At the end of one of the focus groups, the women exchanged their contacts to create a group chat. The desire to network, as well as the closeness experienced, despite the difference of their individual life stories, are important elements for reaffirming their public dimension.

2. THE ROLE OF WORK: ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND THE NEED FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

They regard work as important, meaningful and relevant. This belief stems from their family background, the education received, the satisfaction received from their studies or the sorrow of not having studied what they liked when they were young. They all agree about that, both in the focus groups and in the interviews. Only one of them affirms that "nature entrusts women with the task of being a mother, a task that never ends", and talking about herself she says: "I have studied sociology, I want to succeed, find a job that I like". Work foster open-mindedness; many of them believe that women have specific talents. Milan "has a strong work-ethic, you have to work a lot, wear yourself out, and in fact a mother worker is always one step behind". Only if you are employed you are legitimate to take part in society and the public sphere. so they try to continue to participate in that social dimension in other ways volunteering in parents', local community associations, and social street, feminists and environmentalist organisations.

Working for a company is considered a great experience because of the flow of information circulating in there, the employment legislation protection, the high-level salary, the possibility to learn a lot of things. This idealized representation is accompanied, though, by a narration of misogynist boss, mobbing, "defenestration" in the event of company mergers. However, following employment experiences are even worse: uncertainty of payments, random relationships with colleagues, little possibility of learning and acquiring skills

Financial independence achieved through work is recognized by all of them as an important element. This value has been inherited from their mothers (whether they worked or not). Gaining financial independence through employment is particularly relevant for single mothers following separation; it may happen that the ex-husband

does not pay alimony on time, or he does not pay it at all. Some fear the possibility of separation if they lost their permanent job.

Job loss

The difficulty of shift work was decisive in job loss, particularly for those who had no family members supporting them when they gave birth to their children. This happened to a participant who is a theatre actress. After the birth of her son, no performances, nor tours for her. For all of them, the focus is mainly on finding a new job.

Those who have worked for companies and lost their job due to bankruptcies or restructuring programs say they feel "like someone who has experienced a traumatic event". They feel they invested in their professional development in terms of time, improvement of competences and skills, pleasure in creating new products, inventions of creative solutions.

Two of them are relieved to be able to afford a sabbatical, and other two to benefit from an advantageous severance allowance. Relief that in a short time they consider will be illusory and will not produce any change.

The period following job loss lasts for years, and even when it is interspersed with temporary jobs, it is a period of emotional and organizational uncertainties, it requires elaboration as the dismissal "was a mourning".

Some participants said they even did not tell their children they lost their job. This also reveals their vulnerability.

They all highlight that age is a critical element: those who are over 40 years old feel that they are slipping towards 50s, a figure they fear as the threshold that excludes them, and therefore anxiety is focused on the present. They see that threshold as the time to take stock of the situation. They are aware of being subjected to a double limitation: sex and age!

Professional planning is evident for the participant who has a PhD in physics as she is looking for a specific position. It seems desolately absent for the NGO worker who sees her experience and ability worthless in every job interview. For all the others the idea is firstly, get a job, secondly, get a job they like (without articulating the variants, though). These statements were pronounced with ironic and disillusioned tones, and at the same time they revealed the desire to keep the expectation of a feasible project life.

The majority of those who previously had a full-time employment are very critical towards the current representation of their role as housewives. They have not chosen this role, and besides it describes them as unemployed, a description they consider malevolent. The culture of Milan based on work-driven identity – once aimed only at men and now extended to women, too - put a lot of pressure on them.

Besides, looking after any kind of family needs weakens their organizational skills: "now it takes me the whole day to complete 8 tasks, while before I could complete 10 tasks in half the time". This risks to undermine their self-esteem and self-image, that they will be needing when re-entering the labour market, and therefore they reject their role as housewives: "I told my husband: I really cannot embrace home life". They do not want their daughters to be housewives one day. However, they complain about the lack of participation in domestic tasks by family members (teenage children, husband, grandparents) since they are unemployed. Their participation is "regressed, vanished".

They talk about themselves using working images: "Before I managed the agenda of 150 people, now I manage that of six people: husband, me, two children, two grandparents! Do you pay me as a personal assistant? "

The burden of care and domestic responsibilities gets heavier in case of (intermittent) unemployment situations, when they turn into full-time housewives. It is experienced as if any past sharing practice is abandoned and all domestic responsibilities are offloaded on their shoulders.

3. TAKE CARE OF/CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 Quantitative data on care responsibilities

18 out of 19 of the respondents declare to have one or more dependent children. The age of the children varies from less than one year to 18 years old.

Most of the women have primary and secondary school-age children. Two have crèche-age children, 1 has a child of kindergarten age. Only one woman has an adult son.

Four women take care for elderly people:

1 woman takes care of her mother suffering from multiple sclerosis;

2 women take care of their parents and mother-in-law when they need to see doctors;

1 woman has her parents in their country of origin; they do not need help yet.

3.2 CARE RESPONSIBILITIES (QUALITATIVE DATA).

Care responsibilities are described as a kaleidoscope of tasks and duties aimed at providing their children with well-being and education. This burden, which falls particularly heavily on mothers, is strongly expressed during the focus groups. So, it happens that a storytelling becomes an occasion for pouring out feelings trapped inside for a long time. The narration is prolonged and long-winded, from the episode of the appendicitis operation of her daughter while her husband was abroad for work, to the difficulty of being focused in the first year of life of her baby girl. The long story becomes a unique case, which does not connect to the experiences of the others present.

They are aware of the mental and emotional effort necessary to organise schedules of the family, such as driving children to school, even though sometimes neighbours or grandparents help them out in this task, to music classes or sporting events. A management method that is overstressed when critical events or changes in family members' health occur, as in the case of a woman whose child received a diagnosis of ASD, resulting in the need for consequent support activities, or a sudden disease of a husband, or his evident non-compliance with any form of active presence (severe depression).

Difficulty and support in achieving a balance

The possibility of a balance, even precarious, between work and family life has not been possible for a health worker when she gave birth to her child as she had a shift work in a hospital. The same happened to a blue-collar worker. This resulted in resignation for the former, and non-renewal of the contract for the latter. For those who had informal jobs, as babysitting, pregnancy was the cause of job loss.

For 2 women who got pregnant at a young age (around 19 years), maternity interrupted the course of their studies. They regret this decision and reckon it was a mistake because it did not allow them to find a satisfactory job. (one of them resumed her studies at the Brera Academy).

Those who worked full-time in a company (jobs including a lot of responsibilities and therefore extended working hours) were helped by their parents and husbands. Only one could benefit from an on-site crèche at very affordable costs.

Fathers' role

The birth of a second child clearly changes the burden and sometimes causes problems for fathers who are not willing to help out. Others help out taking care of the first child as soon as they are back home from work or during the week end. One husband has applied for smart working and is awaiting an answer.

Middle schools

Child transition to middle school is describe as a critical element particularly because women have to cope with new tasks. For a separated mother without grandparents, it means giving her child packed lunch, paying a neighbour for lunch time, looking for a cleaning lady every day at that time... Others agree on the difficulty due to a school timetable resulting in a surplus of organization and costs for them.

Distance from home

The following may be an extreme but still a real example: a worker has found a very satisfactory job, also in terms of financial conditions. The problem is that the company is in Germany, in a small village on the borders of Slovakia! "It would mean facing a transfer for the whole family, the second one after moving from Albania!"

Self-care

They highlight the change in self-care occurring in the period of unemployment. This is due to a slower rhythm of daily life. "I discover the value of slowness as a way to learn empathy", one respondent says. They appreciate the opportunity to take time for themselves, and for self-analysis.

The present

A worker who is currently temporarily employed is helped by her grandmother who lives with her and used to be a nanny.

Those who are searching for a new job say they would prefer to find a part-time job so as to be able to take care of their children. Particularly, they would like to work in the late afternoon after her husband is back home from work.

Those who have temporary jobs rely on paid neighbours for babysitting.

One would like to work from home as a freelance. She deals with communication.

Another one has no time to look for a job as she is round-the-clock taking care of her child. However, her child is in the waiting list of a municipal crèche. She is hopeful as the unemployment benefit she is getting (NASPI) gives her a high ranking.

Another respondent is happy to share care responsibilities with her partner, who unfortunately has temporary and disqualified jobs compared to his education (he is a Mozambican economist). She also receives support from her parents when she has job interviews and he works.

4. EXPERIENCES OF RECONCILIATION OF WORK AND FAMILY

4.1 Consideration on the experiences of reconciliation of work and family

The word and the concept of reconciliation do not belong to the women involved. They seldom use it during the meetings. They prefer to use terms such as "puzzle, patchwork, fumbling" that better represent them. However, they are very committed to reconciling work and family life by continuously inventing organizational strategies to compose the puzzle supporting care responsibilities.

The prevailing current situation of the participating women is characterized by temporary and precarious jobs, even though it is considered as a transitory condition. They are all waiting for a definitive position, the one that will correspond to their needs and desires.

As a result, the forms of current reconciliation are also transitory, fortuitous. They are not worried about them, they give a positive value to their ability to bring together many pieces and fragments of the puzzle, even if the final image is subject to changes.

The expectation of services that support them in childcare is mainly aimed at the municipal services of the territory of residence: crèches, kindergartens, canteens for middle school children. Services that are insufficient, expensive, subject to too many administrative-bureaucratic rules. The place of residence and home play a central role as they represent the continuity that employment does not offer. The most critical issue is due to the difficult access to crèches, so much so that it is considered a 'very serious' problem.

They say that the point is not about giving more time to women workers and women, but rather about providing more services. They require overall policies to support families, both at municipal and national level.

They demand that welfare be really social: aware that their generation is first "engaged in care responsibilities as parents and later on as daughters". The conciliation of work and family life is entirely borne by the family network.

The forms of conciliation offered by companies are assessed, by the only one who has experienced them directly (on-site crèche), as the index of "a mentality aimed at employees, which expresses a concern that would make us more motivated, more flexible in terms of schedules, of greater care in carrying out the tasks".

Organizational forms such as smart working are known in very general terms and are mainly used in some big companies such as Telecom, L'Oreal, Luxottica and, according to some, intended mainly for middle managers.

5. THE ROLE, THE PERCEPTION AND THE EXPERIENCES OF EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

The experiences with employment services are numerous, prolonged over time, and diversified in the type of services to which they turn to. The workers communicate various reasons associated with various levels of satisfaction, sometimes felt scarce.

The real great weakness of each type of employment service is easily recognized by all in the failed match with the labour market. They are committed to finding a new job and consider these services as allies, thus discovering that its support stops halfway, i.e. it does not foster contact with employers, represents a bitter surprise. Even the best ones, such as the Self Empowerment and the Female Empowerment courses, are considered as valid experiences to escape isolation and to resume agency, but not useful for finding a job: the channel does not lead to a continuously changing labour market.

Accessibility

The various services are traceable online and often on posters hung in the halls of the Municipalities, the methods of contact vary from Municipality to Municipality.

First contact

The CPI (Employment Centres) are easily accessible, although they are often described as confusing as they continuously send users to other places: patronages and trade unions, without the path being clear.

The requests are different and articulated: the first is to receive Naspi, get information about the necessary paperwork, receive answers about when getting appointments and completing the procedure.

Naspi's request, and the expectation of receiving it, is for some an uneven path (times, methods, legislative changes from 2017 to today), which tires the whole following path.

Some note that the CPI function is limited to registration in a database, and not to take any proactive action. For the youngest woman (35 years old) the experience with the CPI of her municipality was particularly frustrating, "they did nothing for me" while at Afol in Milan she was flanked by a tutor who helped her out in applying for internships. But, above all, in Milan she did not feel "judged", a feeling she perceived and suffered in the municipality of residence.

For many, the first meeting is the occasion for requesting Naspi and therefore the Employment Centre, but also Patronages, and Trade Unions are the places they got in touch with. These are criticized for not giving immediate answers, resulting in a real inconvenience: people are always sent elsewhere, operators are poorly informed about the legislative changes. On the contrary, for others, obtaining Naspi was faster due to simpler starting situation.

The retrieval of information to access to family allowances was postponed by the Employment Centres for reasons that are difficult to understand.

Job Interviews

Job interviews can be with both public and private employment centres, but mainly with potential employers. Many express their displeasure not only because job interviews do not lead to a second, or a third step, that is, to pass the selection, but also because they make them relive anger for the many and all equally useless interviews they had. They feel they are wasting their time: "going to job interviews is another job", and moreover, they "undermine self-esteem".

All would like to be contacted by the employment centres, at least periodically by email, to feel like someone is taking care of their situation.

The CV, so important, so unsatisfactory

The CV is handed to the CPI, to Afol, to other employment agencies, and the question returns insistent: "I handed it in, but what do they do with it? Nobody ever called me".

They ask for an individual evaluation phase to assess what they learnt in courses regarding the modification of the CV; some solicit a more scholastic model, like the physical presence of a tutor in all phases. In addition to the CV, they remember that the "cover letter" is important, but they are not sure they can write it, while for others it is useless, the recruiter does not even get there, he stops on the date of birth".

Private employment agencies

Formaper and Adecco "organise 2-week paid courses (30 euros), if you pass the test the company will hire you on a very short-term basis (2-month contract)", in general, the courses remain generic and those really in-depth are pay courses in the private market.

Tutor

The relationship with the tutor is considered central, some remember his/her name, events. They remember having "learnt to undergo an interview, how to be calm"; others know that the tutor has 1400 users, it is impossible that they can deal with such a large number.

Afol Metropolitana

The course with Afol aimed at learning how to write a cv and a cover letter is considered very useful, "it gave me a real refresh, an update on how to look for work, it let me know websites that I didn't know before".

The Female Empowerment course attended at Afol is the link that many have with this institution. They all consider it as a real opportunity to develop knowledge, skills, to receive psychological help in a difficult period. They appreciate many aspects of that (experimental) course: the plural teaching, the composition of the group, "I met good people among the colleagues, many engineers", says one participant. The sufficiently personalized path with the teacher and the tutor was very useful for some as it helped them expand the range of areas for

job searching. The tutor provides with indications to identify specific and targeted websites on the basis of one's profile; it is considered by all to be a support to deal with uncertainty. The fact that the course was aimed only at women, and had female teachers has recreated a female context typical of women's groups that facilitates sharing, the recognition of a strength often denied. Each course offers the opportunity to build a new network, to expand the exchange of information and emotional support.

Criticism

Criticism refers to the way employment services work: operators are superficial, and poorly informed; they deal with too many users; overall, the CPI are poorly organized "typical of Italy, it is better for us in Poland", a participant says. Direct contact should be replaced by an exclusive online path, procedures are too complex and intricate. These centres should need someone who could recompose the information and sources. "What are the indicators to measure their effectiveness? They are part of an organized system, what are the objectives on which they are annually assessed? "

There is a need for an orientation and support figure who knows the labour market.

Criticism to the corporate world

Some participants also express themselves on company management competences. There is a need for a true cultural change, which is able to read and appreciate the skills built up over the years, to recognize female talent. Some criticism is aimed at those who are responsible for selections. They are considered unable to read beyond the quantitative data, nor the quality content of a CV , basically they cannot recognize the elements of competence. They all should be trained again, according to the participants.

Private employment agencies

Some have chosen to sign the reintegration agreement with private employment agencies. Among them, the most express their dissatisfaction and maximum criticism, "what did Adecco do with my CV?", one participant says. Others are more satisfied, and think that private employment agencies are closer to the labour market, "Adecco can really help, they have real ties with companies" (who shows the greatest enthusiasm is the worker who is continuously hired on a very short-term basis). Manpower did not care after the initial job interview.

Social

The online search for websites and operators that facilitate direct contact with employers has already been tried by many as the method that offers completeness of information and quick access; except then verify that they did not receive "help, but only contacts". For the youngest participant sending resumes to websites ensures "more certainty, than passing them door-to-door". For many participants such websites should be visited daily, others find it difficult to decipher the information they provide.

Some fear surfing the Internet, as if it hides ambushes. Others are convinced that interesting positions are not found online, and the hours spent in front of a screen become a waste of time!

The more visited websites are Monster, Infojobs, Ineed, Corriere Lavoro,

Some quickly verify that surfing the Internet requires specific skills: again, they refer to the skills acquired during the course, and to what they learnt from the tutor. Some high-level professional mention LinkedIn, that is considered useful to know the labour market, rather than to create connections.

A German platform that targets low profile workers, is mentioned, too. Not all of them have a computer at home or an internet connection.

A neighbourhood job posting website was useful for temporary employment.

Dote Unica Lavoro

Dote Unica Lavoro is an initiative of the Lombardy Region created with the contribution of the European Social Fund which aims to promote support for retraining and job placement, through employment services and free training activities, modulated according to the difficulties and professional needs of those who search for a job.

Dote Unica Lavoro gives people the possibility to benefit from a basket of services functional to the needs of qualification and/or job placement through a renewed profiling model that takes into account elements such as gender, age and professional career of the unemployed.

The women who benefited from it were all satisfied both in terms of the service and the training courses provided. The personalization of the service is positively assessed compared to the smokiness and complexity of the CPI system.

However, the limit of this tool is that although it was a nice self-updating experience it did not lead to any hiring. Some women complained about the lack of feed back at the end of the course.

Suggestions

Suggestions mainly refer to the Afol course: participants reiterate the desire for continuity, a sort of "personal follow-up" where the teacher is involved ensuring continuity to the path.

A participant takes inspiration from the imagery proposed in American films for her suggestions: "leave the employment centre with the company address in hand".

Learn a more informed and aware use of social media, such as LinkedIn. Internships open at any age are needed. Expanding Naspi also to freelancers or to those who had collaboration contracts abroad.

The technical sphere is more manned than the emotional one, while both should be addressed in order to remove "the blocks that do not allow us to involve resources".

- Open a coffee shop on Friday at Afol so that the women who have attended the courses can continue to see each other
- Networks that interconnect talents, not just classify them
- Formation of guided groups, that should not be replicas of groups of friends, nor family intimacy which cannot change the relationship.
- Afol's authority enters this experience.
- 10 single and 10 group sessions
- Public counseling service

6. KEYWORDS

Today that I am a housewife everything is a burden to me

Being unemployed is like a scarlet letter, "she doesn't want to do anything".

Being dependent from my husband mortifies me

I don't want to stand still, I would have died

Rebuilding dignity and self-esteem

We need a protected category for separate women, like war widows

From a new job I wish I didn't always have to start over, colleagues, environment, work organization

I didn't have a child to leave it to the babysitters.

To introduce myself to the world as a worker

Women struggle between family and work

In Milan there is Piazza Conciliazione

*Nanny, nannies (antiquated term, referred to women from different social class and different residence)
Work makes you free, it is true despite the fact that the phrase has been used in history with other meanings
We are cannon fodder for the labour market*

Males in the workplaces are lobbyists



This publication has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014- 2020).

Disclaimer

The information, documentation and figures in this document are under the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission. The European Commission is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.