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**The unequal division of unpaid work in Italian couples of different generations:
does the adherence to traditional value still matter?**

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ABSTRACT

The huge changes that affected women's lives in the social domain over the last decades have not been accompanied by analogous changes in the households, where women still bring most of the burden of unpaid work. Different explanations for this enduring inequality have been put forward, but it is plausible that in several contexts the persistence of traditional values has continued to reinforce the perception that differentiated gender roles are natural and fair. There are no many studies focusing on the influence of gender values on current division of domestic work in Southern Europe, comparing different generations.

This paper tries to fill this gap by empirically testing whether the division of unpaid work significantly differs among Italian couples according to women and men's adherence to traditional (or less traditional) values, controlling for the structural characteristics of the couples (with particular interest to the mix of age, education level and labour market participation). The analysis is carried out on 9,500 Italian couples, a sample selected from 2014-15 Time Use Survey.

The hypothesis that those who adopt more egalitarian values also have more egalitarian behaviour is confirmed, but the differences affecting the asymmetry index are rather small, while those related to structural variables, in particular the employment situation of the partners, are much more important. Unexpectedly, male partner adhesion to more traditionalist value seem to affect more the asymmetry index than women's one. Young couples are more egalitarian in their behaviour, but not all generational differences are explained by less traditional values.

Keywords: Gender ideology, gender role-set, unpaid work, generations, time use, Italy.

1. Introduction and background

The achievement of gender equality is one of the sustainable development goals. It is well known however that the huge changes that affected women's lives in the social domain over the last decades – as the increased education level and labour market participation - have not been accompanied by analogous changes in the more intimate and private domain of the households where women still bring most of the burden of domestic chores and care activities. Different explanations for the persistent inequality in the division of unpaid work have been put forward, referring to individual resources that make a certain division of work among partners economically rational and convenient (the theory of relative resources), to the relative time availability between partners, and to the adherence to traditional gender norms ('doing gender').

In some context - as Southern Europe and Eastern Asia - gender inequalities are particularly evident as women - despite their progressive engagement in the labour market - do not reduce the time spent in domestic chores and care activities, while men seem to be particularly reluctant to be involved household activities. In these contexts, a lot of emphasis is usually given to household production over outsourcing: e.g. preference given to homemade meals over purchased ones; preference for the childcare at home provided by family members, rather than care provided by a babysitting or kindergarten; priority for the care of the older relatives at home rather than in a nursing home. In addition, in those contexts, great importance is given to high standards of home comfort that seem persist as well, without there being any obvious signs of adaptation to the fact that necessarily less time can be devoted to the home by working women.

In those contexts, specific cultural traits persist and seem impervious to the changes that have taken place for women in society. Traditional values have continued to support the perception that differentiated gender roles are fair. In particular, gender ideology may endorse the unequal division of unpaid labour by considering it as natural, as an effect of the differentiated capacities of women to deal with family duties and men with the public sphere. It is plausible however that signs of changes may be seen among younger generations, which have been characterised by a massive increase in women's education (now higher educated than their male peers) and a more relevant female labour market participation. It is also likely that a more similar process of socialization among younger men and women may also contribute to adhere to less traditionalist gender ideology and therefore to trigger the change in domestic life.

There are not many studies focusing on the influence of gender values on current division of domestic work in Southern Europe, comparing different generations. This paper tries to fill this gap by empirically testing whether the division of unpaid work significantly differs among Italian couples according to women and men's adherence to traditional (or less traditional) values, controlling for the structural characteristics of the couples (with particular interest to the mix of age, education level and labour market participation).

Italy is an interesting context with this respect as it is usually considered as a familialist society, where the adherence of traditional values is still well rooted and where the domestic unpaid work is mainly on women's shoulders, even with the progressive spread of the dual-earners family model. From recent surveys, it emerges that half of the Italian still agree that it is better for the family that the man devotes himself mainly to the economic needs and the woman to take care of the home; and over 90% of the Italian state that having a clean and tidy house is fairly or very important (ISTAT Time Use Study 2014-15).

It is plausible to hypothesise that among young adults the adherence to these traditional values is slowly waning, that less emphasis is being placed on domestic comfort, and that more egalitarian behaviour - less defined by rigid gender roles - is finally being enacted. We also expect to find less unequal gender role-set among the oldest group, but for different reasons: despite the adherence to

more traditional gender values, it is indeed possible that men's increased time availability after retirement may result in a major involvement in the domestic sphere.

2. Data and methods

This study relies on data from the most recent available Italian Time Use Survey (TUS) carried out by ISTAT in 2014-15. This data source is particularly valuable for the aim of this paper for several reasons. First, it allows to study in great details how individuals spend their time all along a 24 hours day thanks to the daily activity diary - based on a grid of 10 minute-intervals of time - with a description of the main activities carried out by the respondent during a sample day. The other useful peculiarity of the Italian TUS is the fact that all household members aged three years or more fill the diary. In this way, we can measure how couples divide domestic work by relying on each partner's detailed report on the time actually spent on various activities and not by relying only on one partner's statements on the other partner's contribution (which could be biased in some way). Third, the sample is quite large, as more than 50,000 individuals and 20,000 households have been interviewed. Finally - aside from the diary - the data set contains a quite rich set of information on the background and socio-economic situation of each partners and their household, and an extremely interesting battery of items to study gender values and attitudes.

We select a subsample of 9,500 married or cohabiting couples, with individuals aged 25 and over. We focus on daily time spent on housework and care activities (including cooking and washing up, cleaning the house, repairs, shopping, family management, care of the children and other adults members). Our independent variable is the proportion of female unpaid work contribution on the couple's total unpaid workload (Asymmetry Index). We estimate OLS regression models to understand whether the division of unpaid work significantly differs among couples according to women and men's adherence to a traditional (or less traditional) values, controlling for the structural characteristics of the couples (with particular interest to the mix of age, education level and labor market participation).

To measure the adherence to gender ideology we rely on opinions expressed by the respective partners regarding gender roles. In the TUS, indeed, respondents are asked the degree of agreement (according to a 4-point Likert scale: *very much in agreement, fairly agree, little agree, not at all agree*) with the following four items:

- 1) "it is better for the family that the man devotes himself mainly to the economic needs and the woman to take care of the home" (*gendered roles*);
- 2) if both spouses/partners work full-time, the man must do the same amount of housework as the woman (washing, ironing, tidying up, cooking, etc.) (*equality in practice*);
- 3) men perform domestic tasks as well as women (*gendered capacity*);
- 4) it is important that the house is always tidy and clean (*propensity to domestic comfort*).

For the sake of interpretative simplicity, in the model all the opinions expressed by each partner of the couple have been aggregated: those who agree "very much" and "fairly" with each statement have been included in the same category "agree", while those who agree "a little" or "not at all" with the item proposed are included in the model as "disagree".

The structural independent variable includes:

- the combination of age of the respective partners of the couple, divided into 5 categories: 1) both young adults (25-39 years), 2) both mature adults (40-59 years), 3) both elderly (over 60 years), 4) he elderly and she mature adult, 5) he not young (adult/elderly) and she young;
- the education levels of each of the partners, combined in five categories: 1) both with high level (at least a university degree); 2) both with medium level (a high school diploma); 3) both with low level (less than a high school diploma); 4) he with higher level than her; 5) she with higher level than him;
- a categorical variable combining the various types of employment status in the couple: 1) both partners are employed; 2) he works and she works other; 3) he other and she other; 4) both other. In particular, working status "other" means: seeking employment, housewife, student, person retired from work, person in another condition or unfit for work.
- a categorical variable distinguishing the area of residence of households (North, Centre and South of Italy);
- a dummy variable to distinguish the day of the week when the diary was compiled, equal to 1 if the day of survey is either Saturday or Sunday;
- a categorical variable to distinguish the number of household components: 1) two members, 2) three members 3) four members, 4) five or more members;
- a dummy indicating the presence of either an housekeeper, a babysitter or a caregiver for the elderly/disabled.

3. First results

Two regression models have been estimated: the first one (Table 1, Model 1) includes all structural variables, while the second also introduces the responses to the battery of values, reported for each partner (Table 1, Model 2). A reference couple was identified in which both partners are aged between 40 and 59 years (*mature adults*); both with an average level of education, both employed, residing in the Centre, who filled in the diary in a weekday, whose number of family members is equal to 2 and who cannot rely on external paid help. In addition, in model 2, we choose a reference “non traditionalist” couple in which expressed little/no agreement with the statement: "it is better for the family that the man devotes himself mainly to the economic needs and the woman to take care of the home", both of whom expressed fairly/very much agree with the following statements: "if both spouses/partners work full-time, the man must do the same amount of housework as the woman (washing, ironing, tidying up, cooking, etc.)", "men perform domestic tasks as well as women", "it is important that the house is always tidy and clean”.

The percentage of the unpaid work performed by a woman in the reference couple is 68.2%, the intercept value in model 1, a particularly asymmetrical situation, despite the fact that it is a dual-income couple. Other things being equal, in couples in which both partners are young this share falls by more than 4 percentage points compared to the average, thus confirming the hypothesis of a change - albeit slight - on the part of the young. If, on the other hand, we consider older couples, this share rises by about 1.3 percentage points, not confirming the hypothesis that old men devote much freed time after retirement to domestic activities. It is interesting to see that, all other things being equal, if the woman is young and the man is an adult or elderly man, this share decreases, while vice versa if the couple is formed by adult women and elderly men this indicator increases, showing how the couples composed of adults and/or elderly people on average turn out to be much less egalitarian than younger couples. In model 2 where we include values, the significance and magnitude of the age effect is partially reduced, as evidence that the effect of age is mediated by adherence to different values.

The same happens with regard to education level: the gradient that sees the more educated as the more egalitarian and the less educated as the less egalitarian is mediated by adherence to different

gender values. Not surprisingly, women in male-breadwinner households do more than 2/3 of the total unpaid work (+ 8 percentage points than the dual-income one) and even in the female-breadwinner families continues to bear more than half of the household production (61%). This variable is less affected by the introduction of values in the model 2. Couples living in the North are slightly more egalitarian than couples in the South, but the differences are quite small and become negligible in model 2.

The burden of woman's workload grows proportionally to the increase in the number of family members, and this results is unaffected by the introduction of the battery of value in model 2. Only the presence of a housekeeper, a babysitter, or a caregiver for the elderly, can alleviate women's burden by almost 4 percentage points compared to the average.

In Model 2, as reference pair is configured as a pair with less traditional values, the average share of family work performed by the woman in the reference couple falls to 65.5%, thus confirming the hypothesis that couples with more equal ideas tend to behave less unequally in domestic and care work. Surprisingly, the opinions expressed by the male component turn out to be more important than the opinions expressed by the female component –in terms of both significance and magnitude – and this leads one to reflect on the fact that the woman's share of work is strongly influenced by the man's way of thinking, as already observed for Sweden (Evertsson, 2014).

If partners agree that the “male breadwinner/female caregiver” model should prevail, then the Asymmetry index increases by 1,3 percentage points (p.p.), if it is the man of the couple who supports this type of thinking versus 0.66 percentage points if it is a woman (although weakly significant). Similarly, when a man is not in favour of an equal gender division of domestic tasks in dual earner family, women burden increases of + 1.82 p.p. and if it is a woman it increases only slightly.

In analogous way, if the woman of the couple considers that the man is unable to perform the various household chores as well as she does, the asymmetry index rises by 0.8 points; if the man agrees on this, the index rises by 1.88 points. These results seem not to confirm the idea that women adopt a strong “gatekeeper” behaviour.

The cultural importance attributed to cleanliness and tidiness in the home influences the asymmetry index: if it is of little or no importance to the woman, her burden falls by almost two percentage points, if it is to her partner, the burden rises by 1.4 points, because he is likely to decrease his commitment. It is possible that high domestic standards are deeply rooted in Italian women and that this is the reason for the large domestic load they continue to carry

4. Preliminary conclusion

The hypothesis that those who adopt more egalitarian values also have more egalitarian behaviour is confirmed, but the differences affecting the asymmetry index are rather small, while those related to structural variables, in particular the employment situation of the partners, are much more important. Unexpectedly, male partner adhesion to more traditionalist value seem to affect more the asymmetry index than women’s one. The importance given to the cleanliness and tidiness of the house is the only value that affects the asymmetry index in an opposite way by gender. Young people are more egalitarian in their behaviour, but not all differences between generations are explained by the adhesion to less traditional values.

Table 1: OLS estimates of percentage of total unpaid work performed by women (Asimmetry Index). Model 1 (only structural variables) and Model 2 (structural variables + values).

		MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
		Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error
(Intercept)		68.205 ***	0.6969	65.546 ***	0.7246
Age mix (Mature adults)	He aged/she mature	1.715 **	0.6447	1.336 *	0.6396
	Both aged	1.296 *	0.6162	0.8350	0.6117
	He mature/she young	-1.959 **	0.6567	-2.071 **	0.6507
	Both young adults	-4.047 ***	0.5371	-4.022 ***	0.5327
Education level mix (both medium)	Both high	-1.534 *	0.7244	-0.985	0.7194
	She higher than he	0.870 .	0.5275	0.994 .	0.5230
	He highet than she	0.376	0.5716	0.266	0.5670
	Both low	2.712 ***	0.4757	1.982 ***	0.4771
Employment mix (both work)	He works, she doesn't	8.106 ***	0.4550	7.313 ***	0.4589
	He doesn't work, she does	-7.290 ***	0.7129	-7.236 ***	0.7070
	Both don't work	2.153 ***	0.6127	1.671 **	0.6142
Regional area (Centre)	North	-1.142 *	0.4573	-0.843 .	0.4536
	South	1.840 ***	0.4711	1.459 **	0.4683
Day (weekday)	Weekend	-2.362 ***	0.3416	-2.320 ***	0.3384
Family members (two)	Three	1.572 ***	0.4424	1.522 ***	0.4384
	Four	2.436 ***	0.4913	2.361 ***	0.4870
	Five or more	3.772 ***	0.7619	3.543 ***	0.7554
Paid help (None)	Housekeeper, babysitter	-3.793 ***	0.6521	-3.760 ***	0.6467
Gender values among women	Unequal gendered roles (agree)			0.658 .	0.3806
	Equality in practice (disagree)			0.869 *	0.4113
	Men equally capable (disagree)			1.020 **	0.3791
	House tidy and clean (agree)			-1.835 *	0.7260
Gender values among men	Unequal gendered roles (agree)			1.348 ***	0.3862
	Equality in practice (disagree)			1.821 ***	0.3880
	Men equally capable (disagree)			1.882 ***	0.3805
	House tidy and clean (agree)			1.413 *	0.6175
Sign.	Multiple R-squared:	0.1064		0.1239	
	Adjusted R-squared:	0.1047		0.1214	

Sign Code: 0 '***'; 0.001 '**'; 0.01 '*'; 0.05 '.'; 0.1 ' '.

Data source: author's own elaboration on Time Use Survey