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The Care of the Baby: a Family Affair in Italy¹

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Abstract

The paper aims to reconstruct how “best for” the baby is defined by pregnant couples and addresses their main expectations in gender division of care and paid work. In reconstructing the main expected strategies of couples we will look specifically at the role of social resources (family and social network), of social policy and work environments in shaping the nature, scope and quality of parental (leave policy) and non-parental child care (out-of-home services) arrangements.

The qualitative study is based on interviews conducted on 21 Italian working (with typical/atypical contracts) couples during their first transition to parenthood, aged between 26-45 and living in the north of Italy in the city of Turin (a medium size city) and in the surrounding area. The sample has been selected mostly by gynecologists/midwives, maternity homes, pre-childbirth courses.

The results of the first preliminary analysis show that the main “care ideal” behind Italian working couples expecting a baby is that a newborn baby needs its mother. The “Family care model” (which includes grandparents), if available, is a better solution until the baby is not 12 to 18 months old. The assumption behind this “caring ideal” is that the mother may (or should) reduce her commitment towards job but the father should not. There is little reflection concerning the consequences of long work interruption on women’s career paths.

We predict that the majority of interviewees will act according to the normative Italian model: mothers will return work after 5-9 months, some of them can add a few months of holidays (fully paid) to maternity leave and then get the help of grandparents and/or use crèches. Fathers (who are entitled to 6 months parental leave paid at 30%) rarely take up parental leave, if they do so they use it for a very short period. If the mother cannot interrupt paid work in order to take care of the baby, parents think that the second best solution for the baby is for a family member (grandparents) take care of him/her. Few interviewees choose the crèches for the first year. The last solution for the parents is to externalize care of the baby, for example through a child-minder.

key words: parenthood, gender, work, family, social policy

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1 Constraints and opportunities in the Italian institutional context

Despite of the fact that the male breadwinner family model has long been the dominant factor and the hegemonic cultural model in Italy, strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, Italian family, as this study intends to show, has changed considerably (Naldini and Jurado, 2013). During the last decades, Italian family has changed hugely in terms of starting a family, in that young people tend to stay longer in the parental home, postpone marriage, have their first child later in life and have fewer children (Aassave et al., 2002; Iacovu, 2002). In the early 90s, Italy (together with Spain) was the first countries to attain and sustain the lowest-low fertility levels in Europe (Kohler et al., 2002).

Although female participation is still remarkably under the European average, dual-earner families prevail in the northern regions of the country, where 60% to 70% of mothers with very young children are in work (Istat, 2011). While, given the territorial heterogeneity and in particular the north/south socio-economic divide, women's employment patterns vary strongly according to geographical area, as well as education level. In 2012 female employment rates (in the 15 to 64 age group) by education level were 33.8% for lower secondary school leavers and 72.3% for university graduates (Istat, 2013).²

Moreover, the increasing number of young people and women, who are mainly employed in non standard jobs forms, that are different from subordinate, permanent and full-time contracts at least in one dimension (Chiesi, 2000; Reyneri, 2005) has affected their economic power and their life chances. In fact the incidence of non permanent contracts on total employment in Italy was 16% in 2008 and became 12.8 % in 2012, because with the economic crisis contracts had not been renewed, but the share of temporary workers among young people in Italy have risen more recently from around 30 per cent in the year 2000 to 47.6 for men and 53.3% per cent for women in 2011 (OECD, 2012). In another corner of the "atypical" job market, the number of part-timers remains lower in comparative terms.

Despite these family and labour market changes, several factors point to persisting difficulty faced by young women in trying to become parents and to manage family and work. First of all, Italy as whole is characterized by a persistent of traditional gender division of housework. As a matter of the fact, throughout the country sharing housework between men and women remains highly unbalanced, and the gender gap, even among younger cohorts, with respect to domestic chores remains one of the widest in Europe (Eurostat, 2008; Naldini and Jurado, 2013).

² In Italy, as in Spain (Léon and Migliavacca, 2013), during the last 20 years female participation rate has increased even among the lowest educated women.

This incomplete transformation of gender relations (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Gerson, 2010) is particularly evident in this Country because also labor market policy and more broadly social policies, as we will try to illustrate, remain unbalanced with respect to gender and to generation.

First of all, despite an important policy shift in reconciliation policy (Law 53/2000 on parental leave),³ in defining childcare as parental, not maternal-only responsibility, the law shows several shortcomings, especially for parents-to-be who have an unstable job trajectory. The replacement rate is only 30% of pay for a maximum of 6 months for each parent. In addition, non-standard work contracts, which mainly affect men and women in the reproductive age group, are excluded from some measures protecting motherhood or supporting reconciliation, and where entitlement does exist, implementation is difficult (Bertolini, 2006). For instance, a self-employed parents-to-be and the majority of temporary worker parents-to-be are entitled only to 3 months of parental leave instead of 6 months. Moreover, although the new law introduces a “use or lose” quota for the father, the rate of take-up by fathers remains very low. According to recent national data based on the Italian Labour Force survey (Istat, 2011), among working parents having a child under 8 years old, 45.3% of mothers and 6.9% of fathers have taken up parental leave at least once.⁴ The same survey shows that the number of parents who do not use parental leave is very high and among them respectively 25% of interviewed mothers and 20% of interviewed fathers declared the reason is that they were not entitled.⁵

Childcare services for children under 3 years of age (*asili nido*, nursery school) are relatively few (12.7% being the national average in 2008, Istituto degli Innocenti, 2009) and vary extensively in geographical terms. Even in regions, i.e. Northern Italy, and municipalities where coverage is higher, the figure remains well below the 33% “Barcelona target”⁶. For example, in 2006, the coverage rate in the municipality of Turin was 15.4%, with only 50% parents' demand for services being met. Pre-primary school services for 3 to 6 year-olds are well developed (by the age of 5, almost 100% of children attend school) but school time is shorter than a normal working day, so

³ The law has acknowledged an individual entitlement for fathers. It stipulates that working fathers of newborn children are individually entitled to a portion of the parental leave (10 months in total, between mother and father, until the child reaches the age of 8, of which neither parent may take more than 6 months, but if the father takes at least 3 months of leave, then he is entitled to an additional month.

⁴ Information on take up rate of leave entitlements is full of gaps, however, from a comparative perspective, according to Plantenga and Remery (2005, box 5), take up rate of Italian fathers is higher compared to Spanish, Polish and German fathers (cfr. Ray, Gornick and Smith, 2010).

⁵ In addition, data coming from administrative records shows that parental leave among fathers was much higher in the in the public sector, where almost half had used some Parental leave at some point. Take-up of Parental leave is also much higher for more educated women: it reaches 49 per cent among women with high school or tertiary education compared with just under 30 per cent for women with secondary education. The take up of leaves is higher for women who are employees (51.7 per cent) and lower for self employed (17.1 per cent) (Moss, 2012).

⁶ In 2002, at the Barcelona Summit, the European Council set the targets of providing childcare by 2010 to: 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and 33% of children under 3 years of age.

that parents who have full time job are unable to combine family and work without some “external” help.

Reconciliation policy in Italy is also inadequate at company level, where the flexibilization of work schedules, part-time work and “family-friendly” measures are not widespread and/or many employees are unable to take advantage of them (Den Dulk, 2001; Fine-Davis et al., 2004; Naldini, 2006).

Hence, in Italy the dilemma of work versus family is still largely relegated to the private sphere, whilst the tensions between change in women’s life and resistant institutions and the issues of gender imbalance are not addressed.

This is not surprising, as the lack of strong state involvement in the welfare system means that the family (and family network) is the main provider of care and welfare. The family is perceived, by both public opinion and policy-makers, as the bottomless resource for the “weaker” members of society. This ‘unsupported familialism’ (Saraceno, 2010), slows down the development of care services, especially for very young children, and the adoption of measures for the reconciliation of work to family life.

Work-family reconciliation tensions, as well as gender issues, have figured little in public debate.⁷ As it has been argued, along with cultural factors one has to take into account lack of a shared political consensus on priorities, together with a high degree of political and ideological divisiveness, between catholic and no-catholic political forces and political parties, with regard to issues concerning the family, sexuality and equal opportunities (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008). So that, managing family and work continues to be regarded as an issue for women. These factors, together with a strong bias by the welfare state toward supporting childcare a family responsibility, explain why working parents, as the study of parent-to-be will show, depend/rely heavily on relatives (mainly grandparents) and informal support in general.

Within a National context for long time marked by the cultural dominance of the male breadwinner model and by an "unsupported familialism" this study intend to illustrate: 1) If the "traditional" gender division of domestic and care work is (still) the prevalent pattern even among well-educated dual-earner parents-to-be; 2) how a potential "equally oriented" parents-to-be decide to divide paid and unpaid work and how their ideas on the best for the child is congruent with the planned division.

⁷ The reasons of the scant development of welfare state and in particular of social policies for families and for the lack of public debate over time in Italy cannot be addressed here, but have been covered in the literature (see, e.g. Naldini, 2003; Saraceno, 2006).

2 The qualitative study

The chapter aims to reconstruct how the social construction of fatherhood/motherhood is perceived through the lens of what's "best for the child" and how this relates to the main expectations in sharing care between genders and paid work in Greater Turin.

A study was conducted, consisting of 42 in-depth interviews of 21 dual-earner couples, aged 26 to 45 (mostly 30 to 39). The couples interviewed in this study have been contacted through gynecologists/midwives and maternity clinics and pre-natal courses.

Before illustrating questions and results of the qualitative analysis, it is worth looking at the socio-economic characteristics and features of individual couples. Most respondents were university graduate professionals. Hence, in theory the sample is intentionally biased towards "gender oriented" couples. Thus, the socio-economic variability of the sample was rather limited, the majority being employed in the service sector, i.e. teachers, researchers, administrators, social workers, nurses, technicians, lawyers. Moreover, most jobs were unstable from the financial and social security aspect. Only 5 out of 21 couples consisted of partners with "fordist employment", i.e. employees with a full-time permanent job. The remainder were individuals experiencing a mix of standard and "non-standard" employment, or a mix of non-standard and self-employment. This is relevant since those in non standard employment and/or the self-employed might not be able (by law or in practice) to take maternity and parental leave.

Female and male respondents in dual-earner couples had fairly similar employment positions in terms of "power resources". Most women enjoyed a similar or higher position than their male partner in terms of education and standing in the labor market. Despite this, men tended to earn more than their partner (with three exceptions). However, the main gender gap was not in financial terms as much as in individual attitude toward work. Men turned out to form a more homogeneous group. Almost all were work-oriented and very worried about finding themselves in a precarious or unstable work situation. Conversely, women formed a more heterogeneous group. In fact, although for most expectant mothers work was a source of satisfaction and sometimes of self-gratification, one group of women did not consider work a priority, being in a position to reduce or leave work (maybe temporarily) after childbirth. One group of women had ambivalent attitudes toward their job, and they clearly show that this has been the consequence of a redefinition of their priority *vis a vis* their new conditions as mother-to-be.

The current pre-childbirth share between paid work and (unpaid) housework showed, as it was expected, the prevailing pattern to be an "egalitarian" model (10 out of 21 couples), where partners shared housework equally and/or had a subjective perception of "fair" share. In addition, except a

few cases, the sharing of domestic work was not subject to bargaining. These couples also had the same opinion on sharing of paid work. They agreed on the woman's commitment to her job. Beside the "egalitarian" group of couples who shared both unpaid and paid work equally, as well as their commitment to work, there was a group that we label "neo-traditional" couples (7 out of 21) who shared housework equally, but in which women had a lower commitment than their partner vis a vis their job. Then there was a smaller group of couples (4 out of 21), defined as "traditional" because they showed a high gender division of roles in housework and in the labor market. The sample considered contained a dominant group of couples "egalitarian" in behavior toward housework and paid work and "equality oriented" in attitude.

In considering how "best for the child" was defined by future parents and how this related to the main expectations on about the sharing of care and paid work, several questions arose: How do ideas, beliefs and social norms regarding fatherhood and motherhood influenced respondents' decisions about how best to balance work and childcare? Which are the main reasons behind their plan to use (or not) parental leave? How do they discuss and how do they plan to organize their working life after the baby's arrival? Evaluation of the main ideas on parenthood and the expected strategies of couples to balance work and family life, necessitated a review of how the event of motherhood and parenthood contributed to "doing and undoing gender" and "money", with particular attention to the role of financial resources (income and job-related benefits), social resources (family and social network), social policy and work environment in shaping the nature, the scope and the quality of parental (leave policy) and non-parental childcare (out-of-home services) arrangements.

Para. 3 illustrates the "normative" parenthood model and the way in which the transition contributed to arguing and acting in a more or less traditional way as regards gender roles. When parents made plans for "proper" care to be given to the newborn, the exclusive presence of the mother for the first months was the norm. The father-child relationship was not considered crucial in the period immediately following childbirth. Variability in the mother's central role depended on time and degree of "exclusivity" of her role and presence of "others" in supporting the mother and parents (grandparents, crèches, baby-sitter, etc.).

In line with the "subjective interpretation" that "best for the child" was the mother's presence during the period immediately after childbirth, para. 4 shows that ideas, plans and decisions concerning parental leave are highly gendered. Despite the law defining parental leave, as opposed to maternal rights, and despite "father's quota", parental leave was woman's choice even among "egalitarian" couples. Work culture not being family-friendly, employers' and colleagues' expectations of fathers and mothers were highly gendered. Para. 5 also shows that, when couples

discussed how to balance post-natal family and work life, their arguments concerning motherhood and fatherhood, as well as the gendered work climate, contributed to planning very different careers for men and women.

3 Toward parenthood

Several studies on parenthood emphasize that in every society women and men develop, when they become parents, an own idea of what it means to be a mother or father, of what should or should not be done in the upbringing and growth of their child (Hays, 1996; Fox, 2009; Rubin and Chung, 2006; Christopher, 2012). The beliefs formulated by parents regarding what was appropriate for the care and education of their children are important, as they have an impact at several levels. They can create and give shape to actual behavior, i.e. educational practices, they can mediate the effectiveness of educational practices, or help organize parenting skills and, more broadly, they can contribute to the continuity of the culture of society by supporting the process of teaching and learning of values, norms and behavior across generations (Rubin and Chung, 2006).

In addition, the analysis of parents' representations of what is considered "best" for their child is very useful to understand whether beliefs about gender roles change with parenthood. The transition to parenthood is often accompanied by a return to traditional gender roles (Treas and Widmer 2000; Bühlmann and al. 2010; Grunow and al. 2012).

Based on these considerations, the first part of this section aims to *identify the subjective interpretation of the transition to fatherhood and motherhood, in particular underlying to what extent becoming a parent and reasoning in terms of childbirth contributed to building traditional gender roles (doing gender)*. In the second part the goal is to *identify the dominant model in the organization of childcare provided by parents-to-be after the birth of the child*. Topics in this section include an analysis of attitudes toward gender equity and sharing to the normative issue on redefining gender roles (undoing gender) and a study about parents' attitude on the manner on which sequences and transitions of children' growth should be faced up to (when the child should be separated from the mother; at what age the father could take care of the child; who, apart from the parents, could be involved in childcare)

3.1 Beliefs, representations, social norms involved in motherhood and fatherhood

In the Italian context, the idealisation of mother (*the good mother*) was deeply encouraged by the strong presence of the Catholic Church which has always supported motherhood as "eternal vocation of women" (Gianini Belotti, 1981). Until Seventies the prevalent ideology in public Italian discourse on motherhood was referred to an "intensive mothering" model⁸, according that mothers should be the central caregivers of children and that ideal child rearing is time-intensive, guided by experts, and emotionally engrossing.

In the dominant ideology on motherhood in Italy the culture of experts has got an important role. The social implications of the *mystique on motherhood* are evident: the unquestioned authority of the science had identified in the relationship between mother and child the root of wellbeing of society. Only the mother became responsible, in *toto*, for the wellness of the baby. The relation with baby is conceptualized as natural and instinctual: the maternal instinct gives foolproof skills to mother (Gianini Belotti, 1981). Again, women are encouraged to renounce their self-realisation in the public sphere and to prefer their role as guarantors of family happiness.

On the contrary, the social construction of fatherhood is, in Italy, the history of an absence, or an incomplete paternity. The predominant ideas around fatherhood are mainly referred to concepts of virility, authority, success, provision, transmission of social norms. In the traditional construction, fatherhood has a normative nature: *the good father* helps children to become socially responsible adults. It is a role of boundary between family and society (Bimbi, 2006; Ruspini, 2006). The prevalent social norms predicted that men' main role was to provide for the economic needs of family. In this construction of father's identity, work becomes an instrument in order to better carry out this role.

In more recent years, the growth of women's level of education and the consequent increase of their attachment to labour market have modified deeply their behaviour in the reproductive sphere but also their attitude toward motherhood. It is in this period that women try to appropriate of dimension of choice: they don't renounce to become mothers but they want to decide when have a baby (later in the life course) and how many children to have (one or two no more).

The new participation of women at labour market did not transform completely the expectations and obligations on their role of caregivers. The women's life courses are characterized always more from a "dual burden" (Balbo, 1978): in the private sphere as caregivers and in public sphere as workers.

⁸ According to Hays the intensive mothering "[...] requires the day-to-day labor of nurturing the child, listening to the child, attempting to decipher the child's needs and desires, struggling to meet the child's wishes, and placing the child's well-being ahead of their [mothers'] own convenience" (Hays, 1996, 115; Christopher, 2012).

In any case the relationship between work and family life is not actually pacified for Italian women. A research conducted in 2004 in Italy on a sample of 50 women (mothers and not) indicates that for mothers the motherhood is a complex and, sometimes, contradictory experience: the reference model is still the older generation one (*the good mother, the intensive mothering*) but these women don't want to renounce at their job attachment. So the care for their children is a balancing act that is only partly shared with partner (Mapelli, 2005).

Another cultural factor make the choice to have a baby particularly complex in Italy: perceptions on what children's needs are, and how children should be cared for and by whom. Data from the Multipurpose Survey conducted by ISTAT show that nearly half of mothers who do not use public childcare services for under-3s prefer family care arrangements. Moreover, about one in three mothers who use public services declare that they would prefer to rely on care by a family member or a relative if it were available (Saraceno, 2003). Although this depends on age and education, many younger parents, too, believe that family care is the best solution for very young children. Scott et al., in a cross-country comparative study on gender-role attitudes based on International Social Survey Programme data (ISSP), find that in 1994 only 27 per cent of Italians disagreed with the statement "*All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job*", against 51 per cent in Great Britain and the USA, and 38 per cent in Ireland and the Netherlands (Scott et al. 1996).

In the 1999 European Value Survey, the level of moderate or strong agreement with the statement, '*A preschool child is likely to suffer if the mother works*', ranged from over 80 percent in Italy (as Malta and Austria) to 17 percent in Denmark (Saraceno, 2011).

Moreover fatherhood ideals change slowly in Italy. New models of fathering are also linked with traditional ones. On the one hand, fathers want to take back the bond with their children and move away from traditional models of fatherhood. On the other hand they are still scarcely present in the care (Ruspini, 2006).

Starting to these premises, it is important to analyse not only how mothers and fathers explain their caregiving and employment decisions but also how they make sense of these decisions in light of what they think they *should* be doing.

Pregnancy is a decisive moment in which the expectations, memories, desires, and the positive and negative experiences belonging to the significant interactions of its past are in crisis, resulting in changes in the body image, family life and work and the sense of identity of the woman.

Pregnancy, approaching childbirth⁹ and the imminent transition to motherhood and fatherhood were events which, according to respondents, set in motion a process of re-definition of own

⁹ Most couples interviewed were in the 7th to 9th month of pregnancy. A smaller group of couples was interviewed when the woman was in the 4th or 5th month.

specific role in the couple and personal identity. In fact, the mothers-to-be in our sample talked about "*profound change*", "*adaptation*" and "*strong emotions*".

It is interesting the case of Patrizia. She lives in an egalitarian couple, her partner is really oriented to share the domestic burden and the care for the baby.

Pregnancy, even if planned, undermines her not in a general way but specifically in her gender identity. Describing her emotions about pregnancy, Patrizia talked about a "*great upheaval*", which also affected her identity as a woman:

"[...] an upheaval in our lives, lifestyles and, for me, in a way it's also an upheaval in my identity because, as a woman, apart from my body changing, which is just temporary, I feel that your actual identity changes, yeah. / So it's a great upheaval/, very exciting and now and then it can be quite overwhelming, definitely [...]" (*Patrizia Celidonia, expert of youth policies planning, 32*)

"[...] uno stravolgimento della nostra vita, degli stili di vita, e per me anche uno stravolgimento un po' di identità perché come donna sento, al di là del corpo che cambia e che comunque è provvisorio, senti proprio che cambia la tua identità, ecco. /Quindi è un bello stravolgimento/, molto emozionante e ogni tanto mette anche un po' in crisi, sicuramente [...]" (*Patrizia Celidonia, esperta di programmazione politiche giovanili, 32 anni*)

Moreover, the emotional turmoil was particularly intense if the pregnancy came a little unexpectedly, perhaps earlier than planned by the couple, when the employment situation was still not entirely stable or a change was in progress¹⁰. In these cases there was amazement and a mixture of disbelief, anxiety and fear about how to manage after childbirth.

For some, however, it was a real crisis. Like Gaia, who discovered she was pregnant much sooner than she had planned, at a time when her partner had no job security because he was working without a proper contract:

"[...] Let's say that things were tragic at the beginning for me, because we had said right from the start that we should have children. We would say: "Yes! we have to become parents while we're young!" I would say: "Yes, we're young so even in two or three years' time; and then one day/my period didn't come [...]" For the first two or three days I was a bit up in the air, crying and laughing because I didn't know how... I said ..." no! I'm young! (*Gaia Ciclamino, hairdresser, 27*)

"[...] Diciamo che l'inizio per me è stato tragico perché abbiamo parlato da subito che dovevamo avere dei bambini. Dicevamo: "no! dobbiamo diventare genitori giovani!" Dicevo: "sì, sì giovani siamo quindi va bene anche tra due, tre anni e poi un giorno /questo ciclo non arriva [...]" Io i primi due, tre giorni sono

¹⁰ It's the case of a small number of couple of this sample (4 out 21).

rimasta un po' così tra pianti e sorrisi perché non sapevo come... dicevo "no! sono giovane! (*Gaia Ciclamino, parrucchiera, 27 anni*)

Greater peace of mind for the event emerged from female respondents who planned pregnancy with their partners or who had been trying to have a baby for a while or who thought they were too old to have one. Some stories reflected the idea of maternity as an "achievement", a realization of self as woman, as the "time to become a better person" and to discover new skills.

Carla, for example, is a self-employed. She is involved in her job activity but now that she is becoming mother her priority are changed. Talking about how she felt, Carla said:

[...] on the whole, this thing has given me an energy boost and relaunched me as a person, a more positive being towards other people, the future/(enthusiastically) [...] I don't worry too much about whether things could be different in the sense that, for me, the fact that I'm becoming a mother is an achievement, so I think I can overlook the fact that there might be obstacles in terms of work [...]" (*Carla Falasco, quantity surveyor, 35*)

[...] complessivamente questa cosa mi ha dato un aumento di energie, un rilancio proprio come persona, un essere maggiormente positiva nei confronti degli altri, del futuro/ (con entusiasmo)[...] Non me ne preoccupo tantissimo del fatto che le cose potrebbero andare diversamente nel senso che per me il fatto di diventare mamma è una realizzazione quindi il fatto che potrebbero esserci degli intoppi dal punto di vista lavorativo lo ritengo sorvolabile[...]"(*Carla Falasco, geometra, 35 anni*)

The need for mental, as well as physical, preparation was a theme that appeared a lot in the words of expectant mothers, especially those who, for professional reasons, had only recently been able to carve out the time to focus on what was going to happen.

The body's transformation, inner change and high emotions generated by pregnancy were processes leading some respondents to rediscover their womanhood and to place more emphasis on the biological changes that made the experience different for them and for their partners:

[...] With respect to the changes that pregnancy brings in women, it's really about listening to your body, trying to regain those skills that are inherent in women and I think that have got a little lost [...]. (*Daniela Loglio, manager in no-profit society, 37*)

[...] Rispetto alle trasformazioni che la gravidanza porta nella donna, è proprio un porsi all'ascolto del proprio corpo, cercare di riacquisire quelle competenze che sono connaturate secondo me nella donna e che un po' si sono perse [...]. (*Daniela Loglio, vicepresidente cooperativa sociale, 37 anni*)

As in Spanish case, for Italian women the physical experience of pregnancy seems to relate to a process of *naturalization of gender differences*.

The pregnancy seems to result in a special knowledge and ability to respond to baby's need, a consciousness that is often considered as an inner instinct of woman, connected with the experience of carrying the baby inside.

Talking about how her partner was experiencing pregnancy, Agnese said:

[...] He's definitely less involved because he is not carrying it inside. We often say this, in the sense that the father's role is different from that of the mother because, however much he feels it is his, he's not the one carrying it in his belly every day, every hour, night and day.

(Agnese Verbasco, secretary, 36)

[...] Sicuramente è meno coinvolto perché non lo porta lui in grembo. Questo ce lo diciamo spesso nel senso che effettivamente il ruolo del padre non si può sostituire al ruolo della madre perché per quanto lo senta suo però comunque non lo porta lui nel ventre tutti i giorni, tutte le ore, la notte e il giorno. (Agnese Verbasco, segretaria, 36 anni)

Whatever the emotions in the early stages of pregnancy, all mothers-to-be were very involved in the event that they were experiencing and had tried to prepare in various ways. From classic antenatal courses in public hospitals and clinics, to private courses run by midwives, yoga courses designed specifically for couples expecting a child. They read a lot, bought guides, searched the internet which was often the main source of knowledge on pregnancy and childbirth for fathers-to-be.

The emotions in the transition to fatherhood, although less intense than in females in some cases, were quite different in the male sample. Most of fathers-to-be (about half of the sample) felt *happy, involved and basically ready* to deal with the transition. In this group, some respondents hoped to become fathers, and so they had already thought before the pregnancy about their role as fathers or fathers-to-be, regarding the birth of a child as the ideal completion of the couple. They speak about the need for the father to create a bond with the child, to get to know the child and learn to take care of her/him. Generally, these men had in common the fact that they had reached a certain degree of security in their work, sometimes with good career prospects or improvement prospects. Davide's words illustrate the feelings shared by this group of respondents:

[...] I feel good, happy, a little impatient. ' [...] I'm not too frightened about it in that /I feel/(firmly) quite convinced about being able to understand what will need to be done because I'm sure about this decision of having a child and becoming a father [...]. (Davide Loglio, researcher, 42)

[...] Mi sento bene, contento, impaziente un po'. [...]. La cosa non mi spaventa molto nel senso che /mi sento/ (con decisione) abbastanza convinto di riuscire a capire quello che ci sarà da fare anche perché sono convinto di questa scelta di avere un figlio, diventare padre [...]. (Davide Loglio, ricercatore, 42 anni)

Then, there was the group of fathers (about one third of the sample) who, while being involved in childbirth, placed greater emphasis on the aspect of *concern for future responsibilities*. These respondents were no doubt happy about the forthcoming event but experienced the transition with a greater sense of anxiety, mainly because they were wondering whether they would be able to handle their relationship with their son/daughter. For example, one respondent stated:

“[...] How do I feel? Better, now. It's been very tiring. It's been a time when I've questioned myself continuously, in an unconscious way, about what my experiences have been and the things I experienced when I was eight, ten, fifteen years old and my relationship with my parents. It's been a few months of/intensive psychotherapy/ (laughing) but it happened naturally, I didn't deliberately think about it, but I was reminded of experiences, things I've done. [...]. [...] There are so many questions, there are. My desire is to be a good father. I believe being a good father is more difficult than being a good husband, precisely because a mutual decision was made. [...] (Gabriele Tamerici, teacher in high school, 36)

“[...] Come mi sento? Adesso meglio. È stato molto faticoso. È stato un periodo nel quale io ho fatto un'analisi continua, in maniera inconsapevole, di quelli che sono stati sia i miei vissuti, sia delle cose che avevo vissuto quando avevo otto, dieci, quindici anni sia del rapporto con i mie. Ho vissuto un po' di mesi in cui /ho fatto una psicoterapia intensiva/ (ridendo) ma succedeva in maniera naturale non è che mi metessi a pensarci però mi venivano alla mente cose vissute, cose fatte. [...]. [...] Ci sono tanti interrogativi, ci sono. Il desiderio è quello di essere un buon padre. Secondo me essere un buon padre è più difficile che essere un buon marito proprio per una dimensione di scelta reciproca che c'è stata. [...]. (Gabriele Tamerici, insegnante di scuola superiore, 36 anni)

Finally, there was the group of fathers (less than a fifth of the sample), who still felt overwhelmed by an event that had come suddenly, and especially at a time when job prospects were unclear. In these cases it is prevailing an identification with the traditional father's representation as principal provider. When the job conditions are precarious, these men feel threatened if they think they might not be able to be a good breadwinner. For Luca, for example, the period he was experiencing was rather complicated. He was out of work and did not think he could spend all his energy on his wife's pregnancy. This is how he talked about his emotions at the idea of becoming a father:

we were not planning having a baby but when we heard, we decided to keep it. It took a while for me to take it in. She realized immediately but I said, "but I'm going to be a dad!" (Pause) How do I feel? /I don't know/ (annoyed). I'm happy ... I'm a little scared about if I can't find work... (pause) Anyway, I think it'll be fine. I take it one day at a time. It's such a big thing when I start to think about it and when he/she grows up... it doesn't solve anything. (*Luca Verbasco, waiter, 29*)

[...] Noi non lo abbiamo cercato il bambino però quando lo abbiamo saputo abbiamo deciso di tenerlo. È passato un po' di tempo che io mi rendessi conto di questa cosa. Lei si è resa conto subito ma io dico "ma sto diventando papà!" (pausa) Come mi sento? /Non lo so/ (infastidito). Sono contento... Ho un po' di paura se non riesco a trovare lavoro... (pausa) Comunque penso che andrà bene. Vivo alla giornata. Essendo una cosa così grande quando mi metto a pensare lui e quando crescerà... cioè non risolvo niente. (*Luca Verbasco, cameriere, 29 anni*)

Apart from the concerns and emotions of fathers-to-be in terms of actual involvement and participation in the pregnancy, the prevailing behavior was to take action only on specific requests from their partners. The fathers' participation was not always active, i.e. did not always spring from personal interest and need to read up on pregnancy and childbirth, and in most cases was stimulated and supported by the wife and others. Wives found the sources of information (books, articles, manuals) and proposed them to their partner or summarized the content, they were the ones who made contact with the midwife and decided how they intended to give birth. However, the reactions of fathers-to-be to requests for involvement made by their partner could differ. More than half of fathers said they were not preparing specifically for the event, apart from a little reading up. Generally, these respondents gathered information from their circle of friends or relatives (brothers, sisters) who had recently gone through the same experience. The prevalent idea is that, after all, the ultimate expert of process is the woman.

A minority of fathers became very involved. These were generally very eager to take part in ante-natal classes for fathers, read a lot and talked at length with their partner and maybe attended private courses in preparation for childbirth. These men are oriented to analyze themselves, the relationship with their fathers and to reflect on the bond they will have with the baby.

The remaining group's attitude was one of "*waiting to see what happen*". They had attended the pre-birth courses, read up specifically but tended to wait for the event to actually happen. In these discourse the reflection about the necessity to create a bond with baby is less explored.

Basically, none of the mothers-to-be complained about any lack of involvement from their partner¹¹. On the contrary, their attending the pre-birth course or getting involved in the topics addressed in the course, was regarded by many as unexpected, pleasant and a sign of sharing.

"It was nice, I think, that even when he couldn't come - because maybe fathers weren't allowed in that evening, he always read the notes or we read them together. (*Rachele Cerfoglio, researcher, 33*)

“È stato carino, secondo me, che anche quando non è potuto venire – anche perché magari i papà non potevano venire – la sera ha letto sempre gli appunti o li abbiamo letti insieme. (*Rachele Cerfoglio, ricercatrice, 33 anni*)

The structure of classic pre-birth courses contributed to the differentiation between the roles of men and women during pregnancy: most hospital-run courses taken by respondents involved fathers-to-be in the final part of the course.

In terms of organizing the practical aspects (dealing with the child's clothes, preparing the room, buying the things needed to take care of the child), there was a certain degree of gender specialization. Expectant mothers were responsible for finding materials and, in particular, preparing clothes. The fathers are very involved in the practical work needed to arrange the bedroom or areas of the home to be dedicated to the baby.

3.2 Plans for childcare arrangements: The persisting family care model

After childbirth, couples had a single reference model, i.e. the baby should be with the mother, particularly in the first few months and preferably for the whole of the first year. None of the couples suggested that the roles of father and mother were similar and interchangeable in the first months after birth. The prevailing idea was that of there being a certain degree of specialization, with the first few months dedicated to bond building between mother and child.

For some couples, this element of specialization was slightly less rigid, but in these cases, when male respondents described how they dealt with childcare, they defined themselves (and were defined by their partner) as male mothers ("*mammo*"), almost as if there were no room in the male identity for taking full responsibility of childcare practices.

For instance, Luciano Lupetto, talking about the consequences of wife's return to work, says:

¹¹ The only respondent whose partner was less enthusiastically involved in the pregnancy immediately justified her partner saying, "*Well, he's more of a man, he shows things in a different way*" [Solarino]

“I would have no problem to [...] find alternative ways, [...], in fact, my secret dream is to become the “mammo” and then to stay at home all day.”

io non avrei nessun problema a [...] trovare delle vie alternative, ecco, [...], anzi, il mio sogno segreto è fare il mammo e quindi stare a casa tutto il giorno.

A very similar expression is used by Fabiola Citiso when she describes her husband’s future behaviour after baby birth:

“He can also become a mammo (laughs). It may happen that, for employment problems, he will spend a little more time [with the baby], and I a bit less, it could happen.” (*Fabiola Citiso, teacher, 34*)

“Lui può fare anche il mammo (ride). Sì, potrebbe capitare che per problemi lavorativi lui si dedichi un po’ di più e io un po’ di meno, potrebbe accadere sì”. (*Fabiola Citiso, insegnante, 34*)

A small part of these fathers-to-be (5 out of 21) seems ready for a new involvement in care, but *in the shadow of mothering care*. They seem don’t have “words” for talking about it. It is a very different construction of fatherhood from the Dutch situation where men insist on “take care of the baby in their way”, in a “masculine” way.

In any way, it is a initial sign of a new declination of fatherhood. In this representation there are all elements of the ambivalence of this transition: on one hand, men and women agree with the possibility that the father is able to take care of the baby (temporarily and in case of necessity) but, on the other hand, they think that the best way of caring it's in mothering way.

The mother's presence was considered necessary, fundamental and best for the child, especially since all couples believed in breastfeeding as much as possible. The father's presence was often thought of more as a support role, especially during the breastfeeding months when the mother-child relationship was considered essentially symbiotic. This attitude was supported not only by fathers and mothers, but also by the sources of information they had consulted during pregnancy¹². For example, Davide talked about how he imagined family life immediately after birth:

"in the first months of life, in the first year of life, even compared to what I've read, the father is a kind of super-waiter who has to do everything (laughs) because the child needs to be with her mother and the mother has to focus on the child alone. So we'll see how it goes, we'll see what needs to be done..."
(*Davide Loglio, researcher, 42*)

¹² The most extreme opinion in this regard is Agnese's, who thinks that, above all, the mother's presence is important for the first three years of a child's life.

“nei primi mesi di vita, nel primo anno di vita, anche rispetto a quello che ho letto, il papà è una sorta di supercameriere che deve fare tutto (ride) perché la bimba ha bisogno di rimanere con la mamma e la mamma si deve concentrare solo sul bambino quindi vedremo come sarà, vedremo quello che ci sarà da fare...” (Davide Loglio, ricercatore, 42 anni)

Even respondents most involved in their role as fathers and highly motivated to be part of the child's life believed that the mother, first and foremost, had the material and mental serenity needed to establish a good relationship with her child. Their own relationship with the child would come later, after gaining the ability to interact more with the outside world.

In the words of fathers and a few mothers, there was a tendency toward *helping* rather than *managing care* (see also Coltrane, 1989). The expert in this field was the mother; fathers would only stand by as assistants.

On the other hand, fathers-to-be did not intend to withhold collaboration in caring for the newborn. Several of them indicated that they had no particular problems about it, a task they believed was not too complicated. Here, for instance, is Raniero's position:

“[...] This first phase about to come, just taking care of the child, such a small creature, does not scare me much. Changing nappies, washing, this doesn't scare me that much, whereas I am more afraid of not educating him well enough.”

(Raniero Cerfoglio, mechanic designer, 36)

“[...] Questa prima fase che verrà e che sarebbe proprio un semplice accudimento nel senso che è talmente piccolo non mi spaventa tanto. Cambiare i pannolini, lavarlo, questa non è una cosa che mi spaventa tanto, invece per il processo educativo ho più paura di non essere all'altezza.” (Raniero Cerfoglio, disegnatore tecnico, 36 anni)

Davide also agreed with the idea that care in the first months consisted of *practical things that you learn quickly* and Terenzio believed that the sharing of care they had planned (wife at home taking care of their daughter and him going to work) was right *because a mother is a mother*. He believed that his wife was very tired of her working hours, so it might be a good opportunity for her to have a break. (“*I don't consider taking care of a child is work. It should be a pleasure*”). He also believed that, after the baby's birth, it would be up to the mother to work out the schedule for childcare, housework and running the home. It seems emerged in this representation a permanent idea that motherhood should be an “intensive mothering”.

Being autonomous in matters of childcare seemed to be an important matter of pride for some couples. For example, Rachele and Raniero thought it was *"absurd that a father is incapable of changing a baby's nappy on his own or giving him/her the bottle when it's time."*

But Luciano talked about a friend who had recently become a father and did not change nappies, but assisted his partner while she did, and that kind of "subsidiary" role bothered him a little: *"I mean, I want a slightly more active role, but that's another story; and then I'd like my partner to have her own commitments, but only because, selfishly, I also want to take care of this little being who's just arrived"*.

However, as regards the plans for childcare time by fathers-to-be, only four respondents intended to apply for parental leave, whereas two said they would take paid vacation time off (see para. 4). More than half the fathers would only take a few days off work.¹³ Most did not plan to take time off for child caring, neither shortly after birth nor after the most difficult months of breastfeeding.

The Italian father that we interviewed don't plan clearly to do less paid work and arrive home bit easier after child born. There don't have in mind to reduce significantly their working hours, change their working shift or somehow modify the working condition to take care of the child.

Furthermore, for most female respondents, helping with housework was more important than childcare. This is what wives/partners expected more, at least in the first months after childbirth.

Given that the mother's presence was indispensable, different care models should be taken into account.

Firstly, the period during which the presence of the mother was planned varied from a minimum of 3 to 4 months to a maximum of 12 (only two respondents mentioned 24 and 36 months respectively) depending on what was considered to be best for the child, on family income, the working needs of the mother and the possibility of organizing care by involving other family members (especially the availability of grandparents). Nevertheless, even in the case of couples for whom "ideally" the mother would care for her child on her own for the first year, strong differences arose between the "ideal" and the achievable (in Italy parental leave for mothers applies to children of up to 9 months of age). In particular, mothers who tried to further their career and those most likely to continue to invest in their job were returning to work sooner (3 to 4 months after childbirth).

Secondly, the main differences involved considering caregivers other than the mother and father after the initial period of mother-only care (in most cases 6 to 7 months). Here, there seemed to be three prevailing models of care when for babies aged 6 to 7 months. One model, in keeping with what happened during the first 6 to 7 months of the child's life, was still "mother-centered", the

¹³ For more information see para. 4.

mother being the main provider of care along with the sporadic help of some other family members (grandparents) in case of emergency, and the father's role being one of logistic support without recourse to crèches facilities¹⁴. Another "family-centered" model with mostly parents and some relatives (mainly grandparents) responsible for childcare, the father having a more active role possibly by taking time off work, but without resorting to nurseries, at least in the first year of the child's life¹⁵. In the third model, "multi-childcare strategy-oriented", childcare is shared by the mother (part-time job or reduced work commitments), the father (through increased presence at home alone with the baby), the grandparents and public or private childcare services. Couples who adopted this model intended to place their child in crèches school at around 6 to 9 months, or earlier if there were no other solutions available, as seemed inevitable for 6 out of 21 couples¹⁶.

Looking at the sample as a whole, the main tendency observed was, where possible, to avoid crèches in the first year of the child's life (15 out of 21 couples). Couples tended to prefer childcare provided by the family, resorting to crèches only if no family members (grandparents) were able and available. In general, services for very young children were not considered as an alternative to family care during the first year of life, nor as a way of allowing mothers to return to work earlier, except when for various reasons relatives were not available .

Almost none of the couples intended using the services of a child-minder as a possible alternative. The reason given for not using a child-minder was lack of trust in strangers.

Examples of couples trying to deconstruct traditional gender roles (undoing gender) were very few (3 out 21). Even couples tending toward equitable sharing of household tasks seemed to suggest that their decisions were guided by a traditional model. The opinions of first-child couples almost invariably lead to the idea of a process of deconstruction of classic gender roles.

A significant example was provided by Paolo and Patrizia. Talking about the impact that their child's arrival could have on her career, Patrizia mentioned what her husband usually said:

"Anyway, he says 'it's important for you to go back. It is important for you to take time to think about your career, too, or if it's not your career, your interests, what you want to do besides the child, your baby shouldn't be the only, ever-present part of your life' because he knows that it's an important part of me, for my fulfillment, etc... and so we ... And even, say, on a daily basis, for him it's fine to think about the needs of the child, we have to consider them and try to adapt as much as possible, but we should also bear in mind our own needs as a couple and as individuals". (*Patrizia Celidonia, youth policies programmation professional, 32*)

¹⁴ These are couples: Citiso, Mirride, Salice, Verbasco, Ciclamino, Albizia, Calendula and Lupetto (see Annex 1).

¹⁵ These are couples Falasco, Loglio, Robinia, Tamerici, Mangiafuoco, Mercorella and Oky (see Annex 1)

¹⁶ These are couples Celidonia, Cerfoglio, Solarino, Bluma, Poli, Loto .

“Mi dice comunque “è importante che tu rientri. È importante che ti prendi del tempo per pensare anche alla tua carriera o, se non è la carriera professionale, ai tuoi interessi, a quello che vuoi fare al di là del bambino, che non diventi l’unica parte onnipresente della tua vita” perché comunque lo sa che è una parte importante di me, per la mia soddisfazione ecc. e quindi ne abbiamo... E a livello anche, diciamo, quotidiano quello che pensa lui è che vanno bene le esigenze del bambino, bisognerà ascoltarle e cercare il più possibile di adeguarci, ma dovremo poi tener presente anche le nostre esigenze come coppia e come singoli”.(Patrizia Celidonia, esperta di programmazione politiche giovanili, 32 anni)

From the data of this first section it would seem that maternal and paternal roles for future Italian parents continue to be based on still very different assumptions. In the female identity, *being a good mother* was a requirement which, for almost all respondents, was already structured during pregnancy, taking shape in the transformation of the body and identity of women and was met by achieving various objectives, not only in being able to carry the pregnancy to a successful end but also nursing the child and, above all, taking responsibility for childcare. For Italian future mothers the scenario of their motherhood seems still the *intensive mothering*, with the central idea that the mother has to decipher the child’s needs and desires, and place the child’s well-being ahead of their [mothers’] own interest. There is a very little reference to a *extensive mothering* model in which the women justify their employment by discussing the personal benefits they themselves receive from paid work, in addition to the benefits accrued to their children. *Good fatherhood* might include diverse forms of acceptable behavior. Men could be considered "good fathers" regardless of whether their participation in childcare was marginal or similar to that of the mother. However, they were not considered to have an "active" role distinct from the mother's.

The male identity of contemporary fathers is not compromised by the change of baby’s nappy or preparation of baby food. However it is yet difficult that Italian fathers talk about themselves as manager of baby care planning or that they think to reduce their commitment in other spheres of life, mainly in paid work ambit.

The general picture, emerging from analysis, indicates the persistence in Italy of very traditional fatherhood norms. As it will be explained also in the next section, fathers had a strong obligation to be seen as good fathers in terms of "income and the job market", i.e. a good father was one who, at the time of pregnancy, did his utmost to provide extra income for the family and secure a good livelihood.

4 Parental leave: a very gendered choice

Having given just above an overview of the beliefs, representations, social norms involved in motherhood and fatherhood, on one hand and, on the other, of the plans for childcare arrangements, in this paragraph we analyze the specific role of parental leave as regards reconciling childcare to job responsibilities which, at the time of interview, the parents-to-be were planning or had decided to assume in the near future. In particular we try to disentangle the mechanisms underlying her, his or both choice to take up (or not) parental leave, for how long and at what stages after child's arrival, at the crossroad between opportunity cost reasons, gender ideology, attitudes and plans toward personal working career and/or that of the partner and, last but not least, institutional characteristics of parental leave in Italy.

In this latter regard, to make intelligible to the reader the institutional framework within our couples make their choices, it is important underline that not all workers are entitled to parental leave, and in some cases maternity leave, and not for all workers it has the same duration. In particular, as mentioned in the introduction, workers with a non-standard contract or self-employed workers may *de facto or de jure* not to be entitled or not to be in position to use them.¹⁷

The sample of interviewees was a mixed group of people not necessarily knowledgeable about the existence of parental leave. Some interviewees (about 1/5) appeared to be unaware of its existence or to have partial and approximate information about it ("*I/we have not asked for information*" was a recurrent statement); among these interviewees the great part is constituted by men who do not know to be (or not) entitled to parental leave, or women who do not know if their own partners are entitled to benefit from it.

Not knowing/*mis*-knowing was a significant datum in many ways and different can be the reasons why parents-to-be might not know this policy.

On one side, one could suppose that the law on parental leave in Italy (no. 53/2000) is relatively new at the time of the interviews, for being experienced by interviewees in the family of origin and, probably, in a consistent way inside the peer group given that parenthood among young-adults is a relatively rare and late experience in their life course because of the declining birth rate and because

¹⁷ According to Addabbo and Giovannini (in Moss, 2013), all employed parents, except domestic workers and home helps, are entitled to parental leave; it is of six months and paid 30% of earnings when leave is taken for a child under three years (unpaid if taken when a child is three to eight years) for permanent workers but self-employed workers and temporary workers enrolled with *Gestione separata* by the INPS are generally entitled to three months, which can be taken only during the first year after child's birth. There are two options for taking this leave: a single leave period up to a maximum of six months; or shorter leave periods amounting to a maximum of six months. Public sector employees receive 100 per cent of earnings during the first 30 days of leave. In 2011, according to the INPS data used for this analysis, 89 per cent of employees using Parental leave are women and 11 per cent male. Regarding workers enrolled in *Gestione separata*, they are also entitled to 5 months of maternity leave, but studies show that only the 48% raise the qualification to use them (Berton, Richiardi, Sacchi, 2009).

of older age at the first child for women and men; in add to this, the growing diffusion of fixed term labour contracts, that not always imply for temporary workers a full and concrete eligibility to parental leave, could have had as consequence the discouragement to use them.

On the other side, in Italy, information about parental leave is not given to eligible people in a systematic and efficacious way and this varies very much according to local governments policies on reconciliation matter. In particular, information carried out by professionals like doctors and midwives is very little promoted. For example, it was only recently (in 2013, after the interviews to our couples were realized) that in Piedmont Region initiatives aimed to promote among the fathers the use of parental leave and a more equal sharing of the childcare with the mothers, have been projected and experimented inside prenatal courses.

Not knowing/*mis*-knowing could also denote lacking or diminished reflection on the organization of childcare which might adversely affect conscious reconciliation strategies. But, at the same time, it could indicate precisely the attitudes toward her/his own job and beliefs and preferences about the organization of childcare, or the internalization of childcare within the network of kinship (mainly grandparents) or, conversely, externalization (childcare outside the home), if both mother and father decided not to take up parental leave and to go back to work very early.

Plans and decisions of parents-to-be who seemed to know about this policy of support to working parents and their entitlement to benefit from it¹⁸, appeared to be highly gendered: the typical pattern was that women were planning to take up parental leave for one or two to six months (maximum by law), whereas men rarely planned to discontinue their own career for full-time family care. Even among couples most willing to equally share childcare responsibilities there was no clear evidence of fathers going for parental leave, whereas almost all mothers were expecting to take it. These differences between women's and men's plans for parental leave reflected the results of national surveys mentioned previously (see introduction).

According to interviewees, a wide range of factors seemed to affect plans and decision patterns just above described, including cultural norms/beliefs and preferences on the appropriate locus and figure of childcare, financial constraints and economic motivations, attitudes and perceptions about work and generally the climate at work. Here below some examples.

One argument used more frequently by fathers-to-be to motivate their decision and plans for not taking up parental leave, was the widespread culture in the workplace regarding the mother as the most appropriate provider of childcare. Many interviewees reported that the work climate would be

¹⁸ Excluding the self-employed, for which it is not always clear whether they are eligible or not and under what conditions.

hostile to such a request and employers and colleagues were not expecting such behavior *from a man*. This was true mainly for private sector workers, although also public sector employees, generally perceived as more “family friendly”, reported varying degrees of latent hostility toward a father taking parental leave.

For example, Paolo, a municipal council worker operating in the youth development policy sector on a full time fixed-term contract and cohabiting with Patrizia (32) working in a social cooperative on a permanent labour contract as expert of youth policies planning, would have liked to take a short period of parental leave but said:

“*My employer has reacted) /badly/ (emphatically)*. When I told them my girlfriend was pregnant, the response was “great! Ah, well, luckily you are not a woman” (*he laughs*) And I said “yes, but then I was thinking of taking a short period of parental leave”; I brought out the two magic words, but no practical plans were made for the future, no. [...] Certainly, today, if a *male*, a *man*, even one working for a small town council, were to say “I want to stay at home because I’ve got a son”, he’d be looked at as if he were a Martian. /I’ve already been looked at as if I were a Martian/ (*laughing*). [...] my employer will think “can we rely on a person who disappears for a month?”, because, if I go away for a month, it would be “chaos”. If I were a woman, it would be a chaos in that case, too, but they [the firm] would understand because it’s normal to think like that, but in the case of a man, it wouldn’t be seen as normal.” (*Paolo Celidonia, municipal council worker, 36¹⁹*).

“*Il mio datore di lavoro ha reagito /male/ (con enfasi)*. Io quando l’ho detto che la mia compagna era incinta la risposta è stata “che bello! Ah, beh certo, meno male che non sei una donna tu”. (*ride*) E io gli ho detto “sì, però io pensavo magari poi di prendere anche un po’ del congedo parentale” quindi diciamo che ho messo sul piatto del discorso le due paroline magiche, poi che abbiamo fatto dei piani per il futuro, NO. [...] Sicuramente oggi un maschio, un uomo che fa il responsabile in un comune che non è neanche il manager nella mega-multinazionale ma un comune di 50 mila abitanti dice “io voglio stare a casa perché c’ho un figlio” lo guardano come un extra-terrestre. /Io sono già stato guardato come un extra-terrestre in proposito/ (*ridendo*). [...] “sì può fare meno affidamento sa uno che scompare per un mese”. [...] Se io vado via per un mese /è un casino/ per il posto di lavoro, senza ombra di dubbio. Non c’hanno nessuno che può sostituirmi e succedono dei casini [...] Però se io fossi una donna che va in maternità sarebbe un casino che rientra ormai /un minimo/ (*con enfasi*) in una logica. In quanto maschio diventa un casino che non rientra in una logica.” (*Paolo Celidonia, responsabile politiche giovanili presso comune, 36 anni*)

According to non-Italian studies as of Smith (2004), the decisive factor in fathers taking time off work is the level of replacement income and we know from other studies that a higher income of both the mother and the father leads to higher uptake by fathers (Sundström and Duvander, 2002;

¹⁹ In all interview references, the number at the end identifies the couple, not the individual.

see Moss, 2013), but the correlation is not linear: infact, fathers with low income take short periods of leave, if any at all, and high income fathers take less leave, especially those in managerial positions (Eriksson and Duvander, 2012). Among our respondents, the opportunity cost was another frequently cited factor amongst fathers-to-be wanting to justify their decision not to take parental leave. For example, Davide, a full-time researcher in a private company with a permanent labour contract earning about twice as much as his partner (37) working as manager in no-profit cooperative, thought that pay during parental leave was very low for fathers:

“we can't live on so little money and so I tend to continue working” (Davide Loglio, researcher, 42)

[è insostenibile poi riuscire a vivere con così troppi pochi soldi e quindi io tendenzialmente continuerò a lavorare] (*Davide Loglio, ricercatore, 42 anni*).

Considering that the women of all couples in the sample except three earned less than their partners (and in half the cases the gender gap was in excess of €500 per month), it was understandable why monetary considerations figured highly among fathers talking about not taking parental leave and stating that “it is more costly to lose 70% of my salary than 70% of hers”.

Fathers-to-be planned not to take parental leave also for another reason. They often perceived their job and their position to be impossible to leave, for one reason or another, depending on whether they were temporary or permanent workers. For the former, as stated by one interviewee, a private school teacher married to Fabiola (34) she teacher also but part time, “it is not only a matter of pay”, i.e. the inadequate level of replacement income, but also an unspoken dread of not having their contract renewed:

“I would take (*parental leave*), but only if I had my back covered! (laughs) No, I can't! At the moment I'm a little... doubtful.” (*Fabrizio Citiso, teacher, 36*)

“Allora, io lo prenderei ma solo quando c'ho il sedere ben parato! (ride) [...] Non possono farlo! [...] in questo momento io sono un po' così.” (*Fabrizio Citiso, insegnante, 36 anni*)

For permanent workers, the economic downturn, its adverse effects on the company's performance and the sector they worked in, as well as their own employment prospects were recurrent reasons for not taking parental leave. Specifically, men feared losing their job, being dismissed, after prolonged absence from work for childcare. A technical drafter employed at a large Turin factory with a permanent labour contract, married to Rachele (33, researcher, fixed-term scholarship) said:

I would like to take at least two weeks' holiday after the birth, but I'm afraid I'll only ask for one... I don't see another possibility, I can't take too much advantage of my job given the economic climate.” (*Raniero Cerfoglio, technical drafter, 36*)

[Visto che il contratto che ha *** (*nome della moglie*) non ha praticamente nessun diritto al di là della maternità obbligatoria di cinque mesi e invece io con il contratto a tempo indeterminato ho tutti i diritti del mondo dal congedo parentale all'allattamento e tutto ci stavamo chiedendo se potevo essere io a stare un po' più a casa però purtroppo il momento lavorativo non è dei migliori e quindi è difficile anche tirare la corda, non farsi tanto vedere a lavoro... insomma si parla ancora di cassa integrazione.” (*Raniero Cerfoglio, disegnatore tecnico, 36 anni*)

Fathers-to-be perceived their job and their position as being impossible to leave also for another reason, i.e. they saw themselves in the workplace as being indispensable and irreplaceable. Here was an example of this kind of perception; Angelo, manager in a trading company in a private company with a permanent labour contract and cohabiting with Agnese (36, secretary in a private company with a part time permanent labour contract) said:

“As I have a special role in the company and I'm the only one doing that type of job, I'm irreplaceable.” (*Angelo Mercorella, manager, 36*)

“Io avendo un ruolo particolare in azienda e facendolo solo io quel tipo di lavoro, sono insostituibile].” (*Angelo Mercorella, responsabile commerciale, 36 anni*).

This type of attitude and the perception that there was no guarantee against the risk of losing their job if they decided to take parental leave, were more frequent among private sector workers than in the public sector. In fact, those in the public sector said they felt less pressure not to take parental leave than those in the private sector. For example, Michele, a public research center employee for many years with a permanent labour contract married to Marika (37, human resources responsible in private company with full time permanent labour contract), taking parental leave, stated:

“I am lucky not to have the “Sword of Damocles” hanging over me, because the environment is public sector [...] in that respect, I'm well protected because nobody will take my job away from me, and professionally, I won't be penalized.” (*Michele Mirride, public research center employee, 45*)

“Io ho la fortuna di non avere questa spada di Damocle perché è un ambiente statale [...] da questo punto sono in una botte di ferro nel senso che il mio posto non me lo tirerà via nessuno e dal punto di vista

professionale non subirò nessuna penalizzazione.” (*Michele Mirride, tecnico in centro di ricerca pubblico, 45 anni*).

It was not always possible to distinguish unequivocally which aspects weighed more heavily on fathers-to-be deciding and planning parental leave. More specifically, in many cases opportunity cost arguments were strongly related to cultural references and motivations with respect to gender roles and sometimes the first type of arguments seem to be used by men (but also by women in some cases) to mask the second type of arguments. A father who is not planning to take parental leave is more socially legitimated to not be a dad-at-home for economic and labour reasons in a traditional society in which alternatives fatherhood ideals and roles are emerging in a very slowly way.

For example, a wealth of factors and their interplay emerged from the words used by Davide to explain his decisions and plans for the near future. Despite seeming to be a very egalitarian man in terms of his attitudes and behavior toward the gender division of paid and unpaid work, Davide’s arguments seemed to be related to his role as *male breadwinner*:

Interviewer: So your choice is only based on financial reasons? In what circumstances would you take parental leave?

Davide: Of course, I would take it. I would take it if it were compatible my finances, in the sense that, in my opinion it is definitely important for the mother to stay with the baby and the role of the father in this phase is to make sure that the family has enough to live on; in other words, so that both mother and baby can have the resources, the things they need (*Davide Loglio, researcher, 42*).

Intervistatrice: E il fattore economico è l’unico che entra in gioco in questa sua scelta? A quali condizioni sarebbe disposto a prendere il congedo facoltativo?

Davide: Certo lo prenderei, certo. Lo farei compatibilmente sempre con la questione economica nel senso che secondo me è importante che la madre stia col bambino sicuramente e il ruolo del padre in questa fase qua è di fare in modo che la famiglia abbia il sostentamento giusto per vivere quindi che sia la mamma che la bambina possano avere le risorse, le cose di cui c’è bisogno.] (*Davide Loglio, ricercatore, 42 anni*)

In such references there are clear indications of traditional fatherhood cultural ideals, values and beliefs.

Such attitudes were also observed among those men who did not know about this policy and were not entitled to benefit from it *but*, having been informed by the interviewer of its existence and main characteristics, expressed opinions on the possibility of taking it if they were entitled. These included a similar mixture of financial, cultural and regulatory reasons as described above, for

example, Terenzio a gardener of informal economy married to Gaia (27, hairdresser, self employed) said:

“Interviewer: ...and assuming you were soon to have a regular labor contract entitling you to parental leave, and by that I mean (...*description by the interviewer*) what would you do? Would you go on leave to take care of the baby or not?

Terenzio Ciclamino (gardener, 27): No, absolutely not. Income is important.

Interviewer: at what conditions would you take it?

Terenzio: I would stay at home for about ten days because it is a new thing and to see things from the start, but then I would need to get back to my normal life... for the baby's sake, too... What can you do with 30% pay?/ (laugh). You have to pay for things at the end of the month. We rent.

Interviewer: and if the replacement pay for parental leave were 80% like compulsory maternity leave?

Terenzio: I would still only stay at home for a short period.

Interviewer: Why have you planned this division of labor, in particular with regard to parental leave?

Terenzio: I think it's fair. I do not know... I can't answer this question... because the convenience and because the mother is the mother. I would be able to look after our child but I think it's also right to do so”.

[I: E ipotizzando che prossimamente riuscirai ad avere un regolare contratto di lavoro che ti dà la facoltà di prendere il congedo parentale, che sarebbe un periodo variabile fino ad alcuni mesi di astensione dal lavoro, e fino agli 8 anni di vita della bimba, di cui può usufruire il padre oltre alla madre e “pagato” al 30%, tu cosa faresti? Lo prenderesti per un periodo, a queste condizioni, per accudire la bambina oppure no?

Terenzio Ciclamino (*giardiniere, 27 anni*): No, assolutamente. Lo stipendio è importante].

[I: A quali condizioni saresti disposto a prenderlo?

Terenzio: Starei a casa una decina di giorni perché è una cosa nuova e per vedere gli inizi però poi giustamente si deve ritornare alla vita normale. Ma anche per lei, per la bambina. /Cioè cosa fai con il 30%?/ (*ridendo*) Le cose le devi pagare alla fine del mese. Viviamo in affitto.]

[I: E se fosse “pagato” all'80% come la maternità obbligatoria per le madri lavoratrici?

Terenzio: In ogni caso starei a casa un breve tempo.]

[I: Perché avete programmato in questo modo la divisione del lavoro, in particolare riguardo al congedo parentale?

Terenzio: Penso che sia giusto così. Non lo so. Non ti so dare una risposta. Per convenienza e poi perché la mamma è la mamma. Non che io non sarei capace però penso che sia giusto anche così]

We recorded a similar mix of reasons from the very few expectant mothers who were not planning to take parental leave (economic, financial, irreplaceability, culturally hostile workplace, etc.), to justify their own projects and intentions. For example Marta, secretary in a private company with a full time permanent labour contract and cohabiting with a sports trainer self employed:

“Well the problem is that 30% of a salary of 1200 Euros... I wouldn't take anything /home / (emphatically); and the problem is also that I work in a very small studio... that is, if I worked in a large company where you are just a number, you know, there would be other people who can take your place.” (Solarino Marta, accountant, 30)

“Eh il problema è che, va bè, indennità al 30% con uno stipendio di 1200 euro porti a casa /niente/ (marcato) e poi il problema è come ti dicevo che comunque /purtroppo/ (sorridente) io dico per me, ma se sento tutti comunque in Italia (sorride) stare a casa troppo, cioè, diventa io ri, io ripeto, lavoro anche in uno studio molto piccolo, cioè, lavorassi in una grande azienda dove comunque tra virgolette sei solo un numero, sai, manchi tu ma c'è altre persone che possono prendere il tuo posto.” (Solarino Marta, segretaria, 30 anni).

Similar statements were made by mothers going on parental leave but their partners not, to explain why they would not be taking leave. For example, Rachele (33, researcher, fixed-term scholarship) was entitled to maternity leave but not parental leave. She wanted her husband to take parental leave but then, after bad results in his company everything seemed more difficult. She said:

“I don't think he would take it [parental leave], anyway, because men don't usually go on leave at his workplace [...] Taking parental leave can have a serious impact on husband's future career.” (Rachele Cerfoglio, researcher, 33)

“No, io non credo che l'avrebbe utilizzato, prenderlo proprio per dei mesi in modo continuativo; penso che gli avrebbe creato molte difficoltà prenderlo perché lavora in un ambiente in cui non è assolutamente normale il fatto che l'uomo lo prenda. [...] l'assenza continuativa da lavoro secondo me lo avrebbe messo in difficoltà.” (Rachele Cerfoglio, ricercatrice, 33 anni).

The reference to gender ideology, cultural reasons and beliefs of “what is best for the child” and the role of “a good father and a good mother” appeared repeatedly in the words of pregnant women, justifying gendered patterns of choices about parental leave (she takes it/he does not). Here are some examples of pregnant women's statements illustrating the concept of

“what is best for the child”, whereby the woman had the greatest, nearly exclusive, responsibility for childcare, and where biological facts, such as breastfeeding, played a decisive role and where the role of the father seemed secondary in the early stages and years of a child’s life, increasing in importance for the subsequent development of the potential for interaction:

“In our opinion, in my opinion... based on things I have read... the mother's presence is indispensable for the baby because children start to develop sociality when they are three. It's here that the father figure starts to be crucial because he is the child's interface with the outside world... because we believe in these things.” (*this is what we have decided: she takes parental leave/he does not*) (Agnese Mercorella, secretary, 36)

“Entrambi siamo convinti, ne sono convinta, almeno dalle letture che ho fatto, che sia indispensabile la presenza della mamma per il bambino perché poi è dal terzo anno che il bambino inizia a sviluppare la socialità ed è lì che la figura del padre inizia a essere poi più cruciale perché è il suo tramite per il mondo esterno... credendo in questa cosa qua, di conseguenza.” (Agnese Mercorella, segretaria, 36 anni).

The reference to such ideas about what's “best for the child” in the first years of life and concerning parenthood, was observable not only among couples believing in the traditional division between paid work and homemaking, but also among the more egalitarian with respect to this division. This was the case of Gaia and Terenzio: neither were entitled to parental leave but (irrationally in financial terms), even if in a better position in job terms, she was planning to stop her self-employed work for some years to take care of the baby. When questioned about the possibility of her husband taking parental leave, if he were entitled to it in the near future, she said:

“I think he would not take much (*parental leave*) because it's only right that / the woman should be the mum and the man should be the dad/ (*emphatically*) and there shouldn't be too much reversal of roles. [...] I would like to breastfeed, I would like to spend time with her ... I don't know ... It seems like more stuff for Mum.” (*laughs*) (Gaia Ciclamino, hairdresser, 27)

“Penso non ne prenderebbe tantissimo (*di congedo*), perché comunque è anche giusto che /la mamma faccia la mamma e il papà faccia il papà/ (marcando e scandendo) cioè che non si invertano troppo i ruoli. [...] vorrei allattare, vorrei passare del tempo con lei... non so... mi sembra una roba più da mamma.” (*ride*) (Gaia Ciclamino, parrucchiera, 27 anni)]

To sum up, although, in the mix of factors described in this paragraph as those affecting parents-to-be plans on parental leave, the opportunity cost motivation was recurrent in the

words of our respondents, not always it seemed to be the prevalent mechanism that explains such plans. In other words, couples seemed to take for granted that mother is the parent most appropriate to take parental leave, consistently with the idea more widespread among them that best for the child is the presence of the mother and not necessarily of both parents (as we have seen thoroughly in paragraph 3). For example, in some cases decisions and plans about parental leave did not seem to be made by the *couple*; they did not seem to be the outcome of interaction and bargaining between partners. Not uncommonly, even for couples who were very near childbirth, interviewees said “we haven't talked much about *that...*”. The lack of dialogue concerning who would take parental leave, when and for how long, together with the tendency of future parents to not inquire at work or with the responsible institutions about parental leave rights for fathers, seem to strengthen our thesis.

5 Interruption or continuity? The choices about paid work

Given the opinions on parental leave, such as described above, we will now turn to reviewing the general attitude of couples toward work with approaching childbirth. Starting with what parents-to-be thought would be best for their child, how did they plan to organize their working life? Had pregnancy set new priorities in relation to work and family life? Would future mums and dads think of staying off work and for how long? Would they think of changing their working hours?

For most couples developing a relationship with the father in the first months or years of child's life was not considered relevant to the "good of the child". The father's role was only one of support, for example, by taking more responsibility for housework. For many couples, interaction with the father only became important when the child was able to socialize and interact with other people using the language. This is in contrast to the findings in the Swedish context in which couples emphasize the importance of “participating fathers” and the interaction between the baby and the father from the first month of the birth.

This had consequences also on the female and male choices about paid work. With approaching childbirth, in the nine months of pregnancy the parents redefined their priorities and, on the basis of these, they thought about reorganizing their working life and reconciling work to family life. This reference model impacted heavily on the cultural attitudes of the couples interviewed. So, a good father was often seen as one who thought about investing more in his job in order to increase family income:

“I consider my present job as stable but I also want to do some extra work, not only to increase the family income but also to grow professionally” (*Davide Loglio, researcher, 42*)

“Considero il mio lavoro come stabile ma voglio anche fare del lavoro extra, non solo per aumentare il reddito familiare ma per crescere professionalmente” (*Davide Loglio, ricercatore, 42*)

Whereas the father's help in childcare was seen as secondary, a "good mother" was the one who, even if she loved her job, decided to reduce her work commitments to take care of her child, almost always taking time off work for as long as and whenever she could, possibly asking to work part-time or fewer hours.

In the interviews, these potential career choices are very often motivated with the female partner earning a lower salary or having worse job prospects. But what happens in cases where this is not the case?

An example was that of Gaia, a self-employed hairdresser, and Terenzio, a gardener on the informal economy (i.e. black market). Despite the fact that in this case she is the one with a higher income and greater stability, the couple's future plans include her staying off work for two or three years, while he will invest more in work and look for more stable employment. The reason for this decision was that the presence of the mother was considered to be "best for the child" in the early years, and since Gaia was self-employed, if she stayed in the same line of business she could only take a few months off work. As we have seen, self-employment workers in Italy has a very low level of social protection and a very short parental leave. Furthermore, self-employed loose their clients if they leave their job for long time and it is very difficult to find a substitute.

It is interesting that according to the theory (Becker, 1981, Lober, 2000) this couple could be a deviant couple from the main Italian normative model in order to act economically rational, but they did not. They did not make a rational assessment of his and her job opportunities, deciding on the basis of these. On the contrary, the decision was dictated by gender ideology, with a strong bias toward the traditional gender roles when motherhood was involved:

"But I think (that even if he could take parental leave) he wouldn't take much, because it's also right for the mother to be mom and the father to be dad, that you do not reverse the roles" (*Gaia Ciclamino, hairdresser, 27*)

“ Ma io penso che (anche se lui potesse prendere il cpngedo parentale) non lo avrebbe fatto. Perchè è giusto per la madre essere la mamma e per il padre il papà, rispettando i ruoli” (*Gaia Ciclamino, parrucchiera, 27 anni*)

Another interviewee, Marika (couple 7), thought she could go back to work whenever she wanted ("because she is a professional"), but data and research on women's career breaks coinciding with maternity show that the longer the absence from the employment market, the more difficult and less likely returning to it becomes (Scherer and Reyneri, 2009, Solera, 2009).

That of Rachele and Raniero was a further example. Rachele had the chance of a better career in the long term, having invested heavily in training (degree, PhD) in an industry, food safety, which was expanding fast. She is working with a fixed-term scholarship, without social protection, and earned less, but her long-term prospect was becoming a manager in the public sector. Raniero was earning more, had a permanent job, but worked for a small company with fewer than 15 employees, so with little job protection. Moreover, for him the risk of being made redundant was high, having already been laid off a number of times, in a field greatly affected by the downturn in the Turin area (metalworking). In spite of this situation, it was Rachele who thought of reducing her work commitments, whereas Raniero wanted to invest more in his job, precisely because of the difficult times:

"When I graduated and started work at the university, I think I was more ambitious. Now, after marriage and pregnancy, I think I am focusing on other things, in the sense that I'm a bit resigned to the fact that things will go as they should. But I also want to build a life outside work, I care about my family, I really want to have children if they come, even at the cost of sacrificing my career. Then again I don't know what will happen when the time actually comes to give up something, but now the decision to try for a baby before securing job stability was precisely because this is more important at the moment."(*Rachele Cerfoglio, researcher 33*)

"Quando mi sono laureata e ho iniziato a lavorare all'università forse ero più ambiziosa. Adesso con il matrimonio e la gravidanza forse punto anche su altre cose, nel senso che sono un po' rassegnata che andrà come deve andare però ci tengo anche a costruire fuori dal lavoro, ci tengo alla mia famiglia, ci tengo ad avere un bimbo e altri se ne verranno anche a costo di sacrificare la carriera lavorativa. Poi non so quando mi troverò al momento di rinunciare veramente, però adesso anche la scelta di cercare un figlio prima di una stabilizzazione è stata perché appunto è più importante questo in questo momento"(*Rachele Cerfoglio, ricercatrice, 33*)

This despite the fact that they were a fairly egalitarian couple as regards work sharing and the man wanted to be active as a father, especially in terms of education:

"He is more worried than me about how good we'll be as parents . Also, he wanted to be a parent more than me"(*Rachele Cerfoglio, researcher, 33*)

"I'm worried about the educational role, about the experience of becoming a father...a leap in the dark... but I am happy. I want to look my child straight in the eyes, but then again I'm scared "(*Raniero cerfoglio, mechanic designer, 36*)

"At first I'm definitely going to devote myself to the baby and *** (*husband's name*) will run the home. They always tell us on courses we've done, that for the first month the mother should just rest and I have enough confidence that he'll take care of everything "(*Rachele Cerfoglio, researcher, 33*)

"Lui è più preoccupato di me sull'essere dei buoni genitori. Lui ha voluto diventare genitore più di me". (*Rachele Cerfoglio, ricercatrice, 33*)

"Sono preoccupato del ruolo educativo, l'esperienza di diventare padre...un salto nel buio...ma sono felice. Vorrei già vedere la sua faccia, ma allo stesso tempo sono preoccupato" (*Raniero cerfoglio, disegnatore meccanico, 36*)

"Sicuramente all'inizio io mi dedicherò al bambino e *** (*nome del marito*) si occuperà più della gestione della casa. Ci dicono tutti ai corsi vari che il primo mese la donna si deve riposare e basta e io ho abbastanza fiducia che si occuperà lui di tutto" (*Rachele Cerfoglio, ricercatrice, 33*)

So, in many cases, even in the early years of cohabitation or marriage, couples had "challenged" the traditional model, for example by sharing housework and both investing in their careers; but at childbirth, they tended to move closer to the more traditional model. So negotiation is allowed within the couple on the sharing of household chores, but not on childcare in the early years: a good mother cannot be a career woman. Of course, only a small part of female want to be a carerer woman, even because this is not socially accepted. Great importance was given to the fact that the child needed the constant presence of the mother, often deriving from the reading done by the couple and the opinions of family members and colleagues at work. The "good" of the child drove most women interviewed to choose between home and work and not to demand greater reconciliation of work to family life or more male participation in childcare. Therefore, the solution proposed was to reduce the mother's work commitments, leaving reconciliation to the private fold, even when childcare took place outside the home.

Only a few particular situations put the father at the center of the relationship with the child in the first years after childbirth. One of the couples interviewed, included a woman with an important full-time job as aeronautical engineer in a large company, earning a medium to high salary. For this reason, she had no plans to reduce her work commitments in the run-up to childbirth:

"Yes, we're both thinking about continuing to work because it also gives you the guarantee of living a better life, children come with lots of expenses, they are so nice, and so with current salaries and the cost of living, a single salary is not enough, but then I also like the idea of working" (*Susanna Poli, aeronautic engineer, 32*)

“I don’t change my mind, I’m sure that the work can be reconciled to family life, and it’s important to understand that, in the sense that all over the world there are women who also become executives and manage to have a family in a balanced way, it’s right that we in this Country should be doing the same, we should convince ourselves about it, I’m convinced” (*Susanna Poli, aeronautic engineer, 32*)

“Sì, pensiamo di continuare a lavorare entrambi, anche perché ti garantisce anche la possibilità di vivere poi in maniera tranquilla, i figli portano un sacco di spese, sono tanto carini, e quindi gli stipendi attuali e il costo della vita, uno stipendio in famiglia non è sufficiente, ma del resto mi piace anche l’idea di lavorare (*Susanna Poli, ingegnere aeronautico, 32*)

“Si ricorda quali erano le Sue prospettive di carriera? Ha cambiato nel tempo i suoi obiettivi professionali? Ha cambiato le Sue priorità? Per quali motivi? Eh, *** (nome del compagno) non lo so, io mantengo le mie idee stabili, io sono sicura che il lavoro si possa conciliare con la famiglia, e che sia importante che anche l’Italia lo capisca, nel senso che dovunque nel mondo ci sono donne che diventano anche dirigenti e riescono a mantenere una famiglia e mantenerla bene in maniera equilibrata, è giusto che anche noi italiane lo facciamo, no, che siamo convinte di ciò, io ne son convinta.” (*Susanna Poli, ingegnere aeronautico, 32*)

Her partner agreed with her career decisions. However, also he said he wanted to reduce his commitments outside the home, and the couple seemed to have no clear plans yet as to how they would organize childcare:

"She is so committed to this job, also because she studied for years at university, she's done something that not everyone can do, and not all women can do, not in terms of intelligence, but because her field of engineering, is generally preferred by men and so, at *** (company name), there are very few women; so her work is that, not raising children, that's it, if I really have to say ... of course, I honestly don't know how it will change in practice, I mean what will change" (*Simone Poli, trade official, 35*)

“Lei ci tiene tanto a questo lavoro che ha fatto, anche perché ha studiato per anni all’università, ha fatto una cosa che comunque non tutti riescono a fare e non tutte le ragazze riescono a fare, non per un fatto di intelligenza ma perché il suo settore, di ingegneria, è preferito più dagli uomini e quindi, difatti da lei in azienda alla *** (nome dell’azienda) ci sono pochissime donne, per cui comunque il suo lavoro è quello, non è crescere i figli, ecco, detto proprio in maniera... naturalmente, sinceramente non lo so nel pratico come cambierà, cioè, cosa cambierà” (*Simone Poli, trade official, 35*)

When a couple decides to break the traditional norm, like in this case, they can face problems because the social and institutional context tries to reimpose a traditional norm. In this case, there were concerns related to the response in the workplace.

As in Italy is still persistent the idea that a woman having a child will become less committed to their job, employers try to stop the career of new mothers or to interrupt their contracts. It still exists

the practice of *white letter*. To ask women to sign a white paper when they are hired, paper that the employers can use for “voluntary dismisses in case of maternity.

Some situations caused difficulties leading couples to make different arrangements, but also to question the traditional gendered family model. In one of the couple interviewed, the man had been laid off for more than a year with no hours, while she is employed full-time with a permanent contract in a industry firm:

"In some ways I hope to return to work and for obvious reasons and on the other hand, I almost don't, in the sense that it would be easier to look after our daughter, that we would not need anyone to look after her, I could look after her myself"(Enzo Loto, *unemployment insurance*, 20)

“My ideal job would be to stop working as an employee, and to be self-employed, so the job I would like to do would allow me to work from home and I could easily look after my daughter better. Like that it would be perfect” (*Enzo Loto, unemployment insurance*, 20)

Question: “So, instead ... you are thinking of taking care of your baby yourself?”

“Yes, yes, yes, I hope so, absolutely. Right now, if things don't change it'll have to be like that. The first three months she'll still be at home, then I'll have to do it during the day” (*Enzo Loto, unemployment insurance* 20)

“Per certi versi spero di tornare a lavorare e per ovvie ragioni e per altri quasi quasi no, nel senso che semplificherebbe da un certo punto di vista la gestione della bambina, nel senso che non avremmo bisogno di nessuno che ce la guarda, cioè potrei tranquillamente guardarla io” (*Enzo Loto, cassa integrazione*, 20)

Il mio lavoro ideale sarebbe quello di non lavorare più da dipendente ma come libero professionista, quindi il lavoro che ho in mente di fare mi permetterebbe di lavorare da casa e di conseguenza potrei tranquillamente anche gestire al meglio la bambina, sarebbe perfetto anche da quel punto di vista.”(*Enzo Loto, cassa integrazione*, 20)

Domanda: “Ecco, qui invece... Quindi pensa di occuparsi direttamente per esempio della bambina?”

Spero, sì sì sì, assolutamente sì. Ora come ora non dovessero cambiare le cose tra l'altro sarà per forza così. I primi tre mesi c'è ancora lei a casa, poi me ne dovrò occupare io durante il giorno.”(*Enzo Loto, cassa integrazione*, 20)

Finally, the interviews confirmed the strong influence the workplace had in structuring the idea of what a good father was and how much the father could/should participate in childcare for his own good. Almost no workplace encouraged reconciliation by the unwillingness to grant parental leave. Taking time off for a month or asking for reduced working hours was frowned upon for men, and even for women, as seen in the section on parental leave. This strongly influenced the idea of being a good father or mother and of how legitimate it was for men to take part in childcare in the first months after birth. In fact, for men working in the public sector, see the case of Michele Mirride in the previous paragraph where leave of absence for reasons related to reconciliation was

seen as more authorized, there seemed to be more legitimacy for their presence in the first months of a child's life. Conversely, for men in the private sector, a good father was one who dealt with the financial aspects of family life and as childbirth approached, worked harder to provide extra income:

Question: "If it hadn't been for the economic crisis, what kind of choice do you think your husband would have made? Would he have taken parental leave? And if so, how long for?"

No, I don't think he would have taken it, just like that, for a few months, continuously. I think it would have caused a lot of difficulties because he works in an environment where it is absolutely not normal for men to take it. Perhaps during breastfeeding, but continuous absence from work, I think would have caused him difficulty " (*Rachele Cerfoglio, researcher, 33*)

"E se non ci fosse stata la crisi economica che tipo di scelta pensi avrebbe fatto tuo marito? Avrebbe utilizzato il congedo parentale? E se sì per quanto tempo?"

No, io non credo che l'avrebbe utilizzato, prenderlo proprio per dei mesi in modo continuativo; penso che gli avrebbe creato molte difficoltà prenderlo perché lavora in un ambiente in cui non è assolutamente normale il fatto che l'uomo lo prenda. Forse l'allattamento sì, però l'assenza continuativa da lavoro secondo me lo avrebbe messo in difficoltà" (*Rachele Cerfoglio, ricercatrice, 33*)

To conclude, it appeared that mothers- and fathers-to-be often shared the same vision regarding their future role. Mothers did not question their maternal role as the ones with primary responsibility for childcare. Looking at the results of interviews from a lifetime perspective, as noted by other studies, it emerged that couples starting out believing in an egalitarian division of labor, tended to experience a traditionalization of their work and family roles over time. Forces of traditionalization appeared to be especially strong when couples became parents (Grunow et al. 2012; Kühhirt, 2011; Schober, 2011).

Moreover, as other research has shown, there did not seem to be greater demand on the institutions to facilitate reconciliation of work to family life. Reconciliation seemed to be a private issue, and women, even those who loved their work and had invested in their education and career, were resigned to sacrificing their working life, at least in the first year after childbirth, for the sake of their child.

Nevertheless, a number of new elements emerged, namely that although there are fewer working women in Italy than in the rest of Europe, those in work have the highest rate of job continuity at the time of childbirth (Fondazione Brodolini, 2012). Also, of the couples interviewed, only one woman intended to leave work, whereas the others were planning to continue working, although some of them would wish to ask for part-time or reduced working hours.

6 Conclusions

From our interviews emerges that ideals about what's the best for the child contribute to construct very different roles for fathers and for mothers and contribute to influence in very different way men's and women's job investment. As a matter of the fact, to the underlined generalized equal sharing attitudes and behaviours, before childbirth, toward the division of domestic work do not correspond an equivalent equal sharing with respect to attitudes toward childcare. The majority of women and men of the sample have ideals and give representations about parenthood, in line with what is supported by the culture of "experts", in which the best for the child is the presence of the mother especially for the first year, one year and half.

It would seem that maternal and paternal roles for future Italian parents continue to be based on still very different assumptions. In the female identity, *being a good mother* was a requirement which, for almost all respondents, was already structured during pregnancy, not only in being able to carry the pregnancy to a successful end but also nursing the child and, above all, taking responsibility for childcare. For Italian future mothers the scenario of their motherhood seems still the *intensive mothering*, with the central idea that the mother has to decipher the child's needs and desires, and place the child's well-being ahead of their [mothers'] own interest. There is a very little reference to an *extensive mothering* model, theorized by Christopher (2010), in which the women justify their employment by discussing the personal benefits they themselves receive from paid work, in addition to the benefits accrued to their children.

Good fatherhood might include diverse forms of acceptable behavior. Men could be considered "good fathers" regardless of whether their participation in childcare was marginal. However, they were not considered to have an "active" role distinct from the mother's.

After the baby arrival the majority of the couples will change their behaviour from egalitarian towards a neo-traditional one, so, yet equal oriented with respect to the division of homemaking but not also toward work given that she is planning to reduce her working hours and attachment to work. In addition, as we have seen, if a *good mother* is the one who stay with the new-born baby and, possibly, the one who resizes her job involvement, a *good father* is that who reinforces his commitment in job, even in the egalitarian couple.

If in the more traditional couples the "mother-centered" model prevails, in those more egalitarian, the picture is more complex. Next to situations which cover a broad spectrum of care solutions, there are couples that prefer clearly the model "mother centred", as if, in agreement with what is already identified by Fox (2009), the transition to parenthood is accompanied by a return to

traditional gender roles. In general these Italian couples during the transition to parenthood show attitudes and expectations toward motherhood and fatherhood consistent with the traditional model of complementary roles.

In this representation there are all elements of the ambivalence of the transition: on one hand, women are not willing to completely divest their role of main *manager care* on the other hand the men are not willing to reduce consistently their attachment to work in order to organise the care of the baby. According the reconstruction coming from our interviews, fathers can change nappies and prepare baby food but for understand the real needs of the baby is necessary the mothers' monitoring.

These resistances to change are due also to the lack of public debate and public support on parenthood. Our couples lack a public discourse that suggest them a different, alternative model of motherhood and fatherhood to which they can refer in redefines their identities during the transitions to parenthood. This could be the reason why we do not find in general the "negotiated family" (Giddens, 1991), that instead of following traditional discuss about their roles negotiate form and content of role. In fact, we find little discussions about gender roles in our couples.

In reality, we may presume that a lot of women will return work after the born of the child, as data on women labour market participation show. But their involvement in job probably will change in the first years after birth because they think that organization of baby's care is mainly their affair.

Looking at mechanisms and regarding the theory, the expectant parent's plans (unpaid and paid work) can depend on social gender norms or on the distributions of economic recourses. If couples can be deviant either in order to act economically rational, or by actively undoing gender, in the majority of our couples the undoing gender goes in the same direction that the economic rationality, because usually women earn less than men and they have less possibilities of career. We have found only few deviant cases, who are the ones in which the two elements do not coincide. Couples that find themselves in innovating economic and work situations, for choices (she engineering) or necessity (he in unemployment insurance), face a new definition of "undoing gender".

Italy probably is in a situation on transition of model of doing gender, but behaviors are quicker to change than cultural model. If beliefs and ideals about what's the best for the child shape very different roles for fathers and mothers with all the repercussions on their job investment, it must be said that probably most of our respondents will have difficulty to realize their childcare ideals and their work-family conciliation preferences.

First of all, in several cases the institutional context where couples find themselves to plan for the near future childcare arrangements and work-family reconciliation strategies does not fit well to beliefs and ideals about "the best for child": for example, in most cases, mothers and fathers think

that it is good for the baby to stay at home with the mother at least for 1 or 1 and half year (some mothers affirms it would be better even 2 or 3 years) but the maximum duration of parental leave in Italy (6 months for each parent) do not allow to put into practice this "mother-centered" ideal model. The institution seems to answer more to the preferences of employers that of family regarding the parental leave. In fact, women would like to stay longer at home after the born of the child. At the same time institutions may facilitate the work-family reconciliation issue after the baby is one year old. Then there are several mothers who would stay with the child for a prolonged period (until all the parental leave, namely 9-10 months) cannot because they are not entitled because are atypical workers or because of the negative consequences that this choice could have on their work future.

In addition to the nature of parental leave and of conciliation policies, other labour market constraints, and an "unfriendly" workplace climate seem not to allow to future parents to build courses of action coherent with their ideals. For example, many couples are ideally "parenting-oriented" with respect to childcare of new-born baby but not always for the fathers it is possible to leave job without facing negative consequences. Many of our men interviewees perceive (not always wrong) the cultural obstructionism on their own workplace toward the choice of the men to take parental leave. On the contrary, men working in the public sector that is more family friendly than the private one are planning to take (although a brief period) parental leave.

Constraints hinder also the couples more oriented in the ideals to make use of formal services for the care of their baby up to 1 year old. The high costs of public and private childcare services force the couples (really not many, given that the majority of our couples would prefer the crèche after the first year and more of the baby) that would prefer a more grandparents independent childcare arrangement but have not enough economic resources to "sacrifice" this childcare ideal by choosing cheaper solutions like for example, the prolongation of her absence from labour market (even if not completely wanted by woman or not always advantageous for her future working career).

Similar plans for couples that are oriented toward a grandparents-independent childcare arrangement, or more precisely toward a "mother-centered" model not for "choice", not for "ideals" but because they have no options.

In this frame the role of informal resources are of crucial importance in the shaping of satisfactory childcare and in general work-family reconciliation arrangements with respect the baby good.

In terms of their statements about plans and decisions concerning parental leave and childcare arrangement, men's and women's discourses and representations on childcare responsibilities appear more gender-divided than their images of the current division of paid and housework.

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