

DIVERGING DESTINIES? A LONG-TERM OUTLOOK INTO WOMEN'S WORK AND GENDER ROLES IN ITALY AND SPAIN

¿DESTINOS DIVERGENTES? UNA PERSPECTIVA A LARGO PLAZO SOBRE EL TRABAJO DE LAS MUJERES Y LOS ROLES DE GÉNERO EN ITALIA Y ESPAÑA

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Abstract

This article analyses how social and economic transformations over the last two decades have shaped women's position in the work and family spheres in Italy and Spain, two countries often clustered together with other Southern European countries and yet exhibiting distinct features. Taking a long-term outlook, we discuss patterns of change of labour market indicators and gender-role attitudes during periods of economic growth, recession and recovery, to identify the implications of such changes for models of female socio-economic integration and gender equality issues in both countries. We show that the divergent trends have situated the two countries in significantly different positions. While Italy seems to be on a trajectory of continuity, with no significant change in female labour market integration, Spain shows a fundamental path-departure from the distinctive characteristics of the Southern model, with the 2008 economic downturn acting as a catalyst for change regarding women's work and family roles.

Keywords: Gender inequalities; Female activity; Part-time work; Gender-role attitudes; Southern Europe

Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo las transformaciones sociales y económicas de las dos últimas décadas han configurado la posición de las mujeres en las esferas laboral y familiar en Italia y España. Aunque suele considerarse que ambos países corresponden al perfil de países del Sur de Europa, los datos analizados muestran características significativamente distintas. Adoptando una perspectiva a largo plazo, analizamos los patrones de cambio de los indicadores del mercado laboral y las actitudes en cuanto a los roles de género durante los periodos de crecimiento económico, recesión y recuperación. Ello permite identificar las implicaciones de estos cambios para los modelos de integración socioeconómica de las mujeres y las cuestiones de igualdad de género en ambos países. Los hallazgos revelan que las tendencias divergentes en Italia y España han colocado a estos dos países en posiciones claramente diferentes. Mientras que Italia parece seguir una trayectoria de continuidad, sin cambios notables en la integración femenina en el mercado laboral, España ha experimentado un alejamiento fundamental de las características típicas del modelo del Sur de Europa. En este contexto, la recesión económica de 2008 ha actuado como un catalizador para el cambio en los roles laborales y familiares de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Desigualdades de género; Ocupación femenina; Trabajo a tiempo parcial; Actitudes respecto a los roles de género; Sur de Europa

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I. INTRODUCTION

Debates on the existence of a distinctive 'Mediterranean' welfare model in the 1990s identified among its crucial characteristics the role of the family as welfare provider (Ferrera, 1996; Martin, 1996). The last two decades have marked a period of economic upheaval and social transformation in Europe, with the 2008 economic downturn — and the subsequent period of fiscal austerity — and the COVID-19 crisis hitting the Southern countries particularly hard. Spells of economic or social disruption represent potential sites for change in gender relations (Chesley, 2011) since they are likely to affect men and women differently, due to the different positions men and women occupy in society with respect to family, employment and the welfare system. In that, such moments are of particular interest for their potential to either emphasize or modify previous gender inequalities with respect to, for example, the conditions favouring women's role as a more or less flexible reserve workforce over business cycles, women's degree of

commitment to labour market participation and the extent to which this involvement is supported by public policy (Karamessini & Rubery, 2014; Rubery, 1988; Rubery & Rafferty, 2013). Therefore, a long-term outlook into the reconfiguration of women's position in the work and family domains and its implications for gender inequalities in Southern Europe requires considering the last two decades as a period marked by multiple crises.

When looking at the 2008 economic downturn and the subsequent period of fiscal austerity, studies have highlighted not only the particular dynamics that have characterised South European countries compared to other countries in Europe, but also the heterogeneity that have characterised their patterns of responses (Périer, 2018). In fact, while Spain (together with Greece) saw an increase in women's labour force participation in an attempt to compensate for the loss of household income (Addabbo et al., 2013; González Gago & Segales Kirzner, 2014), women's added-worker effect in Italy appears to have been smaller (Périer, 2018; Verashchagina & Capparucci, 2014). In turn, studies looking at the effects of the 2008 economic downturn through the household lens have pointed out that what is more determinant of Southern countries are not low participation rates but a polarisation of work-family arrangements according to a couple's socio-economic status, which is the product of differential employment opportunities and degrees of job security for men and women across occupational groups (Sánchez-Mira, 2020). Overall, abundant evidence suggests the weakening of men's breadwinner status during the 2008 economic downturn, significantly more so in Spain than in Italy (Périer, 2018; Sánchez-Mira, 2020), while shocks associated with the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a disproportionate increase in the amount of unpaid work that women undertook both in Italy and Spain in response to the challenges brought by the temporary closure of childcare services (Del Boca et al., 2021; Farré et al., 2020; Seiz, 2021). In short, the direction and persistence of these changes within this context of successive crises, and to what extent they may contribute to consolidation the longer-term trend of transition to a dual-earner model, remains an open question (Sánchez-Mira, 2021).

Against this background, we examine whether Italy and Spain are diverging from each other and approaching other societies representing varied situations in Europe, considering the last two decades also as a period of subsequent crises that may have acted as a potential accelerator or inhibitor of underlying processes of change. By analysing the trends over the periods of economic expansion, recession and recovery in both countries, we aim to identify not only the contextual implications of the economic shock but also whether more deep-rooted transformations may contribute to delineating similar or divergent trajectories for both countries.

2. WOMEN, WORK AND GENDER ROLES IN SOUTHERN EUROPE: HOW SIMILAR, HOW DIFFERENT?

As noted by Saraceno (2017, p. 226), paradoxically, Southern European countries began to differentiate themselves at the same time, in the 1990s, when their existence as a

group was being acknowledged in the literature. Studies have since identified the distinctive characteristics of the Mediterranean or Southern European type and have discussed the (growing) heterogeneity within the group, with varying focuses on the welfare system (León & Migliavacca, 2013; León & Pavolini, 2014; Martin, 1996; Rhodes, 1996; Saraceno, 2017), the employment model (Karamessini, 2008) or the Southern family (Jurado & Naldini, 1996).

In the late 1990s, scholars argued for the need to nuance some of the archetypical characteristics of Mediterranean countries, pointing out the weakening of the male provider role and women's increased educational levels and labour market attachment amongst the main trend shifts (González et al., 1999). Later on, scholars argued that shifting life conditions and generational change challenged the ability of families to continue to act as the primary providers of welfare and care (Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013), weakening one of the central pillars of the Southern model.

Moreover, researchers have argued that the heterogeneities amongst the Southern group have been more important than generally assumed, both amongst and within countries, and that these gaps have grown over time (León & Migliavacca, 2013; Mari-Klose & Moreno-Fuentes, 2013; Naldini & Jurado, 2013). If Portugal has long been identified as a singular case due to its elevated female activity rates, which date back to the 1960s (André, 1996 in Karamessini, 2008; Tavora, 2012), Spain has been highlighted for the remarkable increase in women's labour market participation in recent decades (Naldini & Jurado, 2013; Salido, 2022). Indeed, some authors have argued that the two countries now share similar features that distinguish them from another subgroup constituted by Greece and Italy (Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013; Saraceno, 2017).

Overall, scholars have tended to agree that, while national differences in the pace and direction of institutional and social change have increased diversity within the model, the four constitutive countries (Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece)¹ continue to share important distinctive features (Karamessini, 2008, León & Pavolini, 2014; Tavora, 2012). However, these studies are based on data or policy analyses that are a decade old. At present, we have a longer perspective into later developments, including the period of economic recovery that followed the Great Recession and the crisis period triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments warrant a new evaluation of the differentiation thesis.

In this task, we build on critical approaches to regime analysis, which have highlighted how typologies tend to overemphasise consistency, often neglecting diversity within countries and country types (Daly & Rake, 2003). There have also been calls to overcome the rather static lens that tends to dominate these studies, which favours the underestimation of hybridisation in regimes (Rubery, 2011). Finally, while studies have frequently tended to highlight consistencies amongst gender norms, welfare policies and

¹ We are unable to go into detail here on the discussions about the pertinence of including other countries, such as Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, in the Southern Regime (see, for example, Gal, 2010).

employment patterns, recent research suggests that these three dimensions are far from coherent (Grunow et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2008), with work-family arrangements resulting from dynamic tensions and conflicts amongst societal norms, opportunities offered by care policies and available jobs (O'Reilly et al., 2014). These interactions explain interesting cases of both *dissonance* — such as the Portuguese contrast between high female employment rates and traditional gender-role attitudes (Aboim, 2010) — and *rapid transformation* — illustrated paradigmatically by Spain, a steep increase in female activity rates and dual earner households (Sánchez-Mira, 2020) and a lower gender gap in unpaid work hours than the one registered in Italy, Portugal or the Netherlands (Gaiaschi, 2014).

Gender-role attitudes are probably the least studied dimension in the discussions on the Mediterranean cluster, despite the growing attention they have received in the comparative literature. While studies show that traditional gender roles have progressively lost support across the Western world in the last fifty years, this shift has happened at a different pace across time and countries (see Knight & Brinton, 2017, for a review). Moreover, if up until the mid-1990s, the decline in the traditional male-breadwinner ideal was paralleled by an increase in anti-essential egalitarian values, advocating gender equality both in roles and preferences, more ambivalent attitudes have been progressively gaining support thereafter (Knight & Brinton, 2017; Scarborough et al., 2019). In this sense, studies have shown the rise of new, complex, egalitarian schemas — combining the support for gender equality in the labour market with gender difference in preferences, and so the rejection of traditionalism — the idea that men should be the breadwinner of the family, — with the persistence of essentialist ideals — the notion that women and men are intrinsically different in preferences and desires (Cotter et al., 2011; Scarborough et al., 2019). In this respect, Spain is a recurring case in the literature, scoring higher than expected on non-traditional gender values, including the support for dual earner-dual career couples (Aboim, 2010) and women's full-time employment (Eicher et al., 2016), outperforming the rest of the Mediterranean countries, the UK and Germany in the support for egalitarian values (Arpino et al., 2015; Grunow et al., 2018; Knight & Brinton, 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2014). Overall, the heterogeneity that emerges when considering both cultural and material factors casts a shadow over the opportunity to see the Mediterranean countries as a homogeneous group and deserves to be explored in more detail.

3. WOMEN, CRISES AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The last two decades have marked a period of economic upheaval and social transformation in Europe, with the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis hitting the Southern countries particularly hard. Spells of economic or social disruption represent potential sites for change in gender relations (Chesley, 2011) since they are likely to affect men and women differently, due to the different positions men and women occupy in society with respect to family, employment and the welfare system. In that, such

moments are of particular interest for their potential to either emphasise or modify previous gender inequalities with respect to, for example, the conditions favouring women's role as a more or less flexible reserve workforce over business cycles, women's degree of commitment to labour market participation and the extent to which this involvement is supported by public policy (Rubery, 1988; Rubery & Rafferty, 2013; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014). Therefore, a long-term outlook into the reconfiguration of women's position in the work and family domains and its implications for gender inequalities in Southern Europe requires considering the last two decades as a period marked by multiple crises.

When looking at the Great Recession, studies have highlighted not only the particular dynamics that have characterised South European countries compared to other countries in Europe, but also the heterogeneity that has marked their patterns of responses (Périvier, 2018). In fact, while Spain (together with Greece) saw an increase in women's labour force participation in an attempt to compensate for the loss of household income (Addabbo et al., 2013; González Gago & Segales Kirzner, 2014), women's added-worker effect in Italy appears to have been smaller (Périvier, 2018; Verashchagina & Capparucci, 2014). In turn, studies looking at the effects of the Great Recession through the household lens have pointed out that what is more determinant of Southern countries are not low participation rates but a polarisation of work-family arrangements according to a couple's socioeconomic status, which is the product of differential employment opportunities and degrees of job security for men and women across occupational groups (Sánchez-Mira, 2020). Overall, abundant evidence suggests the weakening of men's breadwinner status during the Great Recession, significantly more so in Spain than in Italy (Périvier, 2018; Sánchez-Mira, 2020), while shocks associated with the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a disproportionate increase in the amount of unpaid work that women undertook both in Italy and Spain in response to the challenges brought by the temporary closure of childcare services (Del Boca et al., 2021; Farré et al., 2020; Seiz, 2021). In short, the direction and persistence of these changes within this context of successive crises, and to what extent they may contribute to consolidation the longer-term trend of transition to a dual-earner model, remains an open question (Sánchez-Mira, 2021).

Against this background, we examine whether Italy and Spain are diverging from each other and approaching other societies representing varied situations in Europe, considering the last two decades also as a period of subsequent crises that may have acted as a potential accelerator or inhibitor of underlying processes of change. By analysing the trends over the periods of economic expansion, recession and recovery in both countries, we aim to identify not only the contextual implications of the economic shock but also whether more deep-rooted transformations may contribute to delineating similar or divergent trajectories for both countries.

4. DATA AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Main objective and areas of focus

The main objective of the analysis is to examine to what extent long-term trends reflect women's changing role in the labour market and the family spheres and how this evolution differs for Italy and Spain. With this aim, we focus on three main areas to examine different facets of women's roles in society: a) activity patterns, b) part-time work and c) gender-role attitudes.

First, we argue that looking at levels of activity instead of employment rates is most appropriate to address women's changing labour market behaviour from a comparative perspective. In this way, we avoid confounding women's labour market orientation with their employment opportunities (Sánchez-Mira & O'Reilly, 2019). The pertinence of this approach is illustrated paradigmatically by the Spanish case, which is characterised by a situation of high structural (female) unemployment that was particularly aggravated by the crisis (Sánchez-Mira, 2020), which meant that women's employment rates were much lower than activity rates.

Second, it is essential to analyse whether the nature of part-time work in these countries may have evolved during the analysed period. Part-time work supports a model of female economic integration based on the secondary nature attributed to female labour and its specialisation in unpaid domestic work, with a distinctive position in the configuration of employment structures (Insarauto, 2021). A low level of part-time work has been deemed a distinctive characteristic of the South European model (Karamessini, 2008), along with high levels of involuntariness and precarious working conditions, particularly amongst the most vulnerable groups of women (Maestripieri & León, 2019). Examining the evolution of part-time levels, the reasons for holding this kind of job and the degree of involuntariness is crucial to determining whether we can identify distinctive trajectories for Italy and Spain in the nature of this employment form as a facilitator of work-life articulation or rather a mostly undesired, low-quality way of securing access to employment.

Third, we analyse data on gender-role attitudes to investigate the shifting social representations of women's work and family roles. We do that by looking at changes in a) the idea that children may suffer when their mother works, and b) the notion that women want a home and children. The former reflects the opinion that women should not participate or should participate less in the labour market, and it is commonly used to measure changes in traditionalism — that is, the notion that women and men should not be equally involved in paid work. The latter reflects the opinion that women have their own specific aspirations, and it is used to measure changes in essentialism, the notion that women and men are intrinsically different (Grunow et al., 2018; Knight & Brinton, 2017). As mentioned in the theoretical section, the lack of perfect correspondence between changes in traditionalism/egalitarianism and changes in essentialism/anti-

essentialism over time highlights the importance of considering both dimensions when looking at gender-role attitudes.

4.2. Approach and data

Taking a long-term outlook at patterns of change, we comment on macro indicators regarding these three areas for the last two decades (starting in 1999 or 2000 and up to 2022, depending on data availability). This approach allows us to capture the continuities and transformations taking place during the different phases that have characterised the period: the economic expansion that preceded global financial crisis, the 2008 economic downturn and later implementation of austerity policies — starting in 2010 in most affected countries, and the phase of recovery that started around 2015 and lasted until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, for which we also capture the short-term impact.

In order to interpret the Spanish and Italian trends in a contextualised manner, we also include in the tables and figures the data for the trends observed in other Western European countries, namely France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden. These different countries reflect a variety of gender and policy regimes, levels of female activity, part-time employment and gender values. In this way, they constitute valid references for our contextualised comparison, allowing us to determine whether Italy and Spain are following similar trajectories or more differentiated ones that may be bringing them closer to other European countries, and to gauge the relative importance of such differences.

In terms of data, we first retrieved labour market indicators from the Labour Force Survey provided by Eurostat to look at macro trends in activity levels and part-time work patterns. We then used the European Value Study (EVS) to look at trends in gender-role attitudes by focusing on two items. The first approaches egalitarianism in the labour market by investigating attitudes towards working mothers ('A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works'). The second approaches essentialism — the idea that women are fundamentally caring and nurturing and thus better suited to take care of the family — by investigating attitudes towards female preferences ('A job is all right but what most women really want is a home and children').² We analyse changes in these two items throughout the period covered by the three last waves of the EVS, which corresponds to the survey's third, fourth and fifth waves (1999–2000, 2008–2010 and 2017–2020).³ This time frame covers a similar period analysed for the labour market indicators, but does not cover the post-pandemic period, given that more recent data on this topic are unavailable.

² This construction mirrors how the question was formulated in the 1990, 1999 and 2008 waves. From the 2017 wave on, the question has been slightly modified: 'when a mother works for pay, the children suffer'.

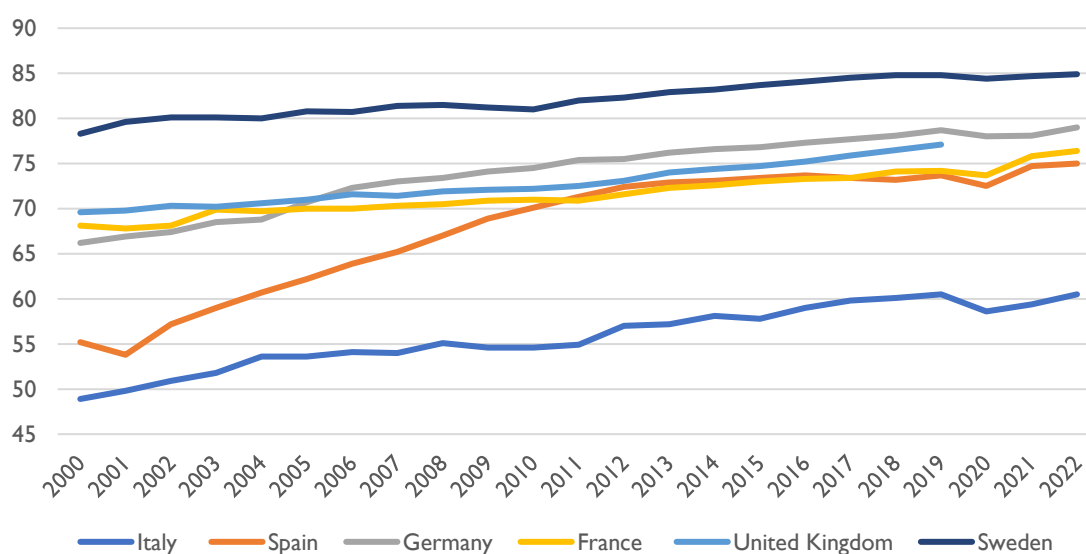
³ Data collection for Spain took place in 1999, 2008 and 2017–2018. For Italy, it took place in 1999, 2009 and 2017–2018.

5. A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT LONG-TERM TRENDS IN WOMEN'S WORK AND GENDER ROLES OVER TWO TURBULENT DECADES

5.1. Patterns of activity: Diverging trajectories in women's labour market orientations?

The evolution of the share of women working or looking for paid employment can indicate the deeper transformations of women's labour market attachment and household earning patterns. It is also a good proxy of the change in women's mentality and aspirations. Figure I shows that in the early 2000s, activity rates in Italy and Spain were relatively close but far from the other countries used in the comparison. However, as of 2004, both countries' activity rates began to diverge, with Spain's growing much faster than Italy's. Spain's activity rate was even above that of France in 2012, although, as of 2017, it had slowed down and France's has been slightly above since then. Moreover, Spain's activity rate has been growing closer to those of the UK or Germany, a pattern that stands out considering that part-time employment is much higher in these two countries.

Figure I. Activity rates by country amongst women between 20 and 64 years old



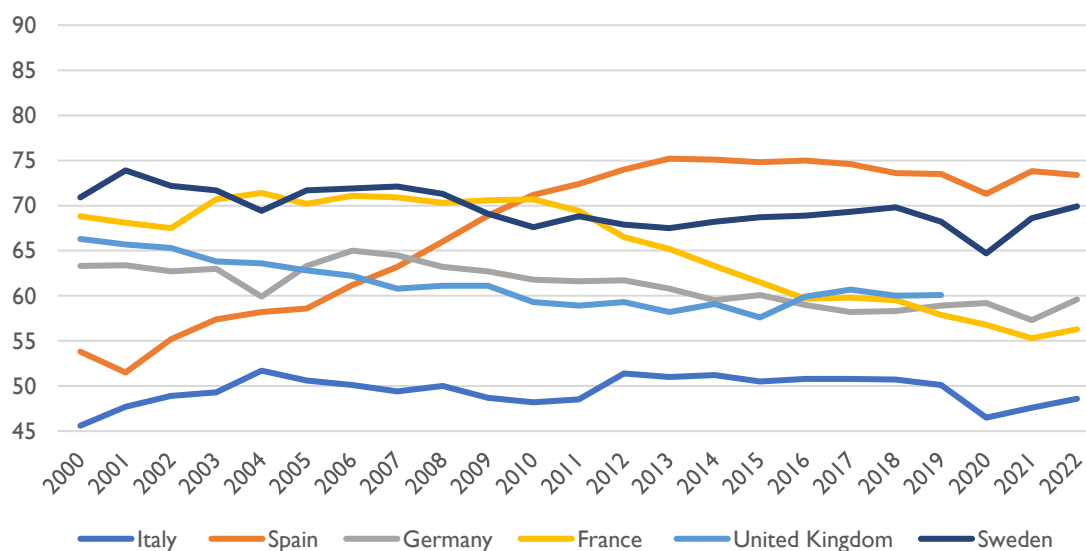
Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey

The growth in Spain occurs across all educational levels (data shown in tables A, B and C of the appendix), although more strongly amongst the lowest educated. The increase amongst the lower educated is less remarkable in Italy and took place since 2011 in the context of the recession, while the higher educated experienced a decrease during an important part of the period (2004–2011), and prior levels were only reached in 2019 before the COVID-19 crisis struck and a short-term drop in activity levels was again observed. Activity levels amongst the middle-educated have remained remarkably stable

over the whole period. If anything, they have tended to decrease and had not fully recovered yet in 2022 from the drop experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trends of change and differences between the two countries are most evident if we focus on lower-educated women of prime working age (25–49; Figure 2), an age range that better reflects generational change as it excludes the oldest generations that are progressively leaving the labour market and hold more traditional labour market patterns. The increase is impressive in Spain, rising from 53.8 in 2000 to a maximum of 75.2 in 2013, a figure that, despite decreasing slightly thereafter, remains at 73.4 in 2022. Since 2013, the activity rate for this particular profile of working women is above all the other countries considered in our comparison, including Sweden. This finding is possibly the most striking characteristic of the Spanish case compared with other countries in Europe. In contrast, the data for Italy show a much flatter evolution and a remarkably different arrival point with respect to Spain in 2022. The highest level of activity over the period analysed (51.4) is observed in 2012, declining slightly thereafter to reach 46.5 when the pandemic stroke in 2020 (71.3 in Spain in the same year). While this social group suffered from the impact of the pandemic in both countries, the decline in activity rates was steeper in Italy and had still not recovered pre-pandemic levels in 2022, while figures for Spain were equivalent in 2022 to those of 2019.

Figure 2. Activity rates by country. Women with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 0–2) between 25 and 49 years old



Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey

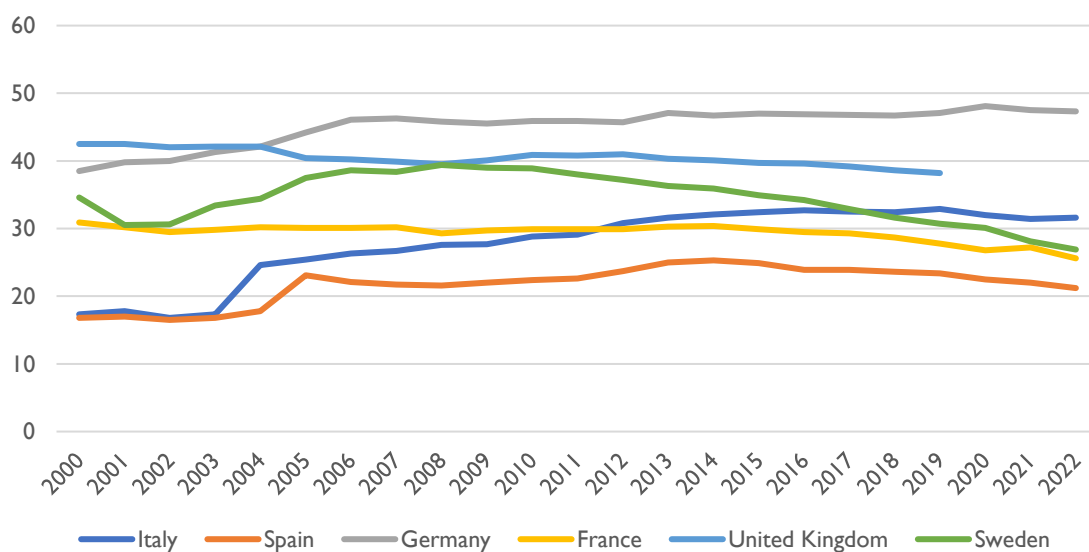
5.2. Part-time work: Have Southern countries maintained distinctive characteristics?

During the last two decades, part-time employment has increased throughout the European Union, including in Italy and Spain. While in a majority of countries high levels of female part-time work tend to be correlated with higher levels of female activity —

which has been interpreted in light of women's need to balance work and family — part-time work has evolved distinctively in Southern Europe, including Italy and Spain, where it remained comparatively low. Nevertheless, behind this Southern European 'low female part-time' pattern, there are heterogeneous trajectories. If in the early 2000s Italy and Spain showed very similar levels of female part-time employment (around 17%), Italy exhibited consistently higher figures thereafter, whereas these remained more than 10 percentage points (henceforth p.p.) lower in Spain (figure 3).

Nonetheless, we have seen that it is precisely in Spain that activity rates have been growing the most, while in Italy, they have been stagnating, which suggests that the role of part-time work within the Mediterranean 'exit or work full-time' model of maternal employment (Anxo & Boulin, 2006) has evolved differently in each country. In the early 2000s, Italy was shifting towards a Mediterranean 'privileged part-time regime' (Warren, 2008) — that is, part-time work spread mainly amongst occupationally privileged women in their motherhood stages (Maestriperi & Insarauto, 2020) — while Spain was moving towards an 'all remain full-time' model, with women developing continuous employment trajectories and disrupting the typical 'opt in–opt out' model of female participation (Anxo & Boulin, 2006).

Figure 3. Share of part-time employment as a percentage of total employment amongst women 20–64 years old



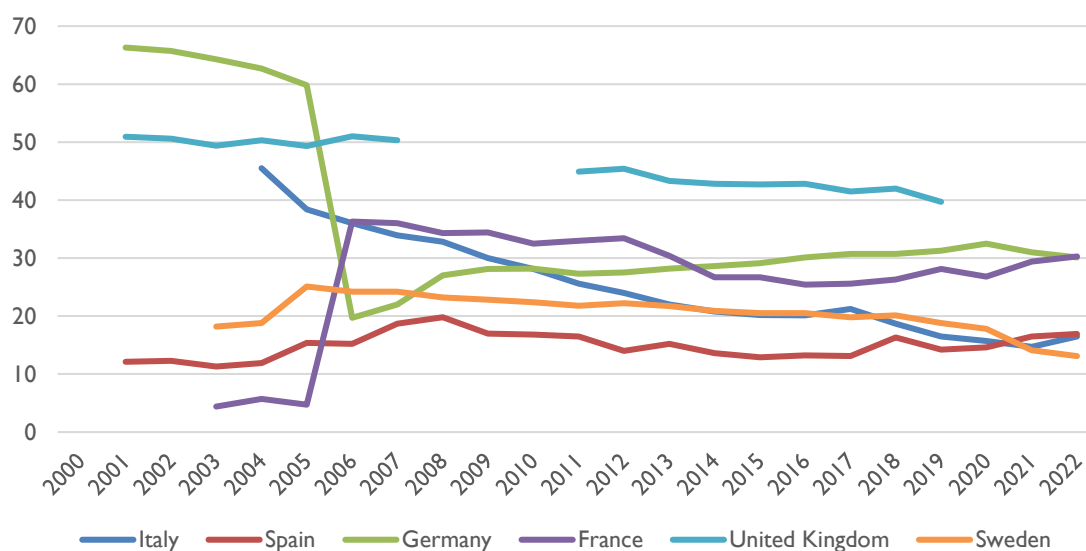
Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey.

During the 2008 economic downturn, female part-time employment continued to increase in both countries, although more sharply in Italy initially, where it remained stable over the recovery period (i.e. from 2014 onwards), starting to decline slightly only from 2020. Today, Italy registers overall levels (31.6% in 2022) above those of France or Sweden, two dual-earner countries with full-time maternal employment models of female activity, where part-time work can be used as a transitional stage during the early stages

of motherhood (Anxo et al., 2017). However, such levels remain significantly lower than those of Germany or the United Kingdom, respectively a country of maternal part-time work (Dotti Sani & Scherer, 2018) and a modified-breadwinner model (Lyonette, 2015). In Spain, female part-time work started to decline from 2014, and continued declining ever since, maintaining much lower levels than Italy and the lowest levels across all countries analysed (21.2% in 2022).

This varying incidence of female part-time work in the two countries across periods of economic expansion, downturn, recovery and subsequent crisis can indicate the underlying divergencies in women's patterns of socioeconomic integration and the potential long-lasting entrenchment of changes in female activity models. Trends in the family reasons for female part-time work are informative in this sense (figure 4).

Figure 4. Share of part-time work for family reasons as a percentage of total part-time employment amongst women between 20–64 years old



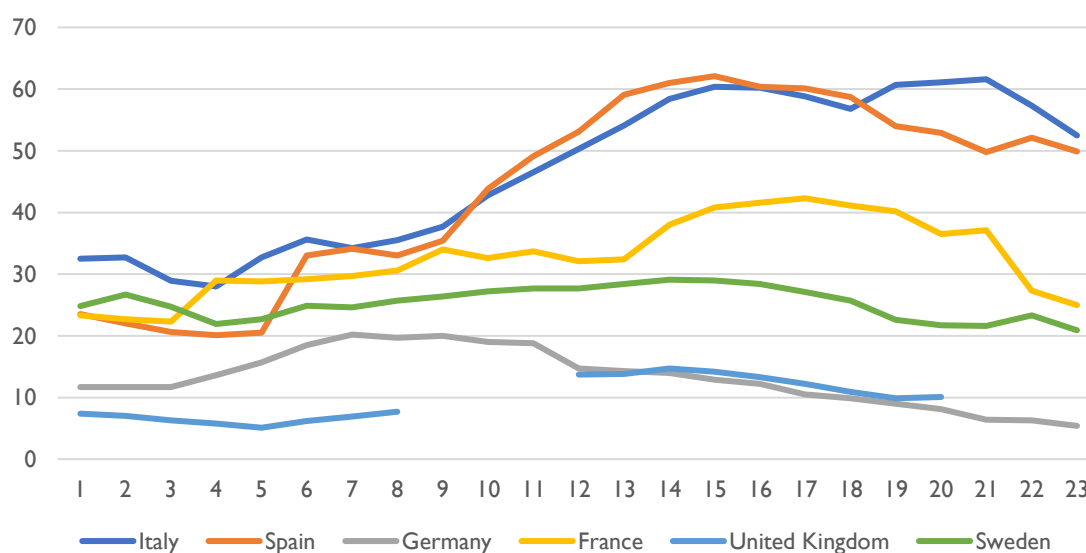
Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey.

Before 2008, the take up of part-time work to combine employment with family responsibilities was more widespread in Italy than Spain. The 2008 economic downturn and particularly the 'she-austerity' phase marked a decline in the share of female part-time work due to family reasons in all the countries compared. However, Italy and Spain maintained the lowest levels, including in the after-crisis period, reaching overall similar levels of, respectively, 16.5% and 16.9% of total female part-time work in 2022. Relatedly, female part-time work shows high levels of involuntariness in both countries, which have risen dramatically since 2008, although with different paths (figure 5).⁴ Before the crisis, female involuntary part-time work was higher in Italy, but this trend reversed thereafter,

⁴ Ruptures or sharp fluctuations in the trends for some countries are due to breaks in the time series (e.g. when the Labour Force Survey changed from quarterly to continuous) or an incomplete time series (e.g. for reliability issues).

with Spain catching up to Italian levels. Since then, both countries have evolved similarly, especially after the turning point of 2011, when the 'she-austerity' phase of the crisis kicked in, reaching the peak of about 60% in 2013. Indeed, one of the most substantial impacts of the crisis in Southern European labour markets has been the growing use by employers of atypical forms of employment, including part-time work, to increase flexibility, decreasing the quality of part-time jobs and work-life balance opportunities (Maestriperi & León 2019; OECD 2010, chapter "How Good is Part-Time Work?"). Involuntary part-time work started to decline in Spain thereafter (dropping to 49.9% in 2022), while in Italy, the trend was less linear: after a slight decline, it began to increase, returning to levels similar to those prior to the recovery phase, reaching the pick of 61.6% in 2020), suggesting that this sudden growth could be related to restrictions on economic activity imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, since then, it has sharply declined again: in two years, the reduction has been of around 9 percentage points (dropping to 52.5% in 2022). Currently, both countries show similar levels of involuntarily part-time work and the highest across all countries observed, despite their respective declining trends. However, this similarity might stand against a background of differences in societal representations of women's role in the work and family domains, hiding hence potential divergencies in the evolution of underlying models of female socio-economic integration in the two countries.

Figure 5. Share of involuntary part-time work as a percentage of total part-time employment amongst women 20–64 years old



Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey.

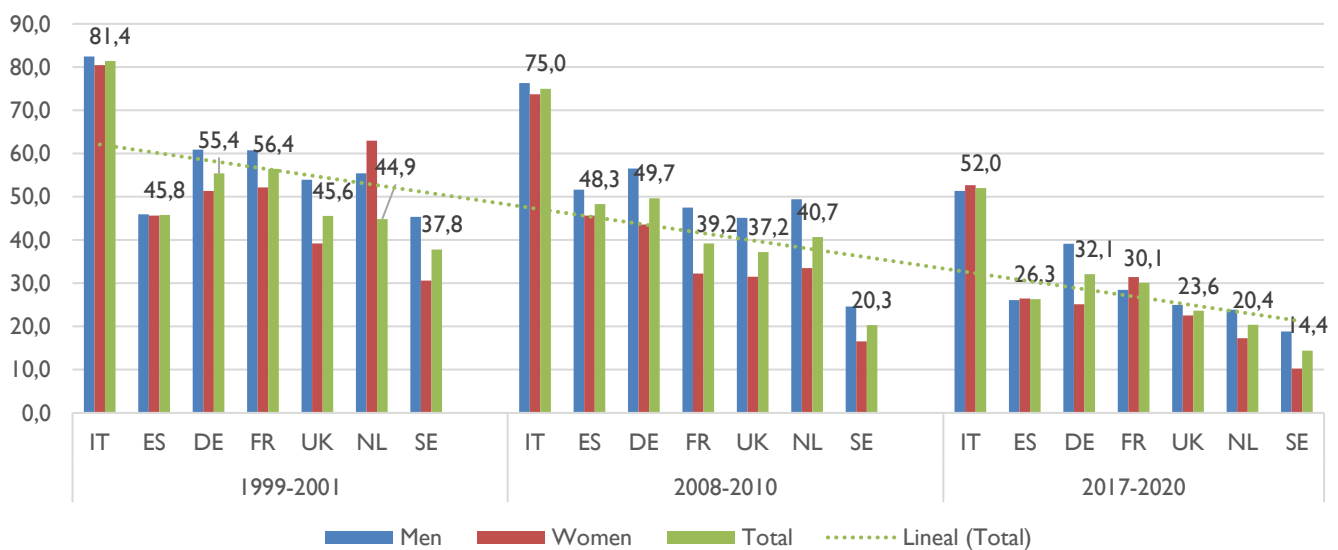
5.3. Social representations of women's work and family roles: Different paths?

Traditional gender roles have progressively lost support across Europe, including in Italy and Spain (Knight & Brinton, 2017). However, the decline of the male-breadwinner ideal has not exhibited the same strength and intensity across countries and has not

necessarily entailed rejecting an essentialist approach to gender differences (Cotter et al., 2011). The lack of correlation between the evolution in attitudes favourable to women's employment and essentialist ideals about women's natural predisposition to care highlights the need to analyse both dimensions when looking at attitudes.

Figures 6 and 7 show different 'paces' of change for the two items representing each of these dimensions. Considering all seven countries together, in 1999–2000, the support for traditionalism was slightly higher than the support for essentialism: the share of both male and female respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with (from now on: supporting) the idea that children suffer as a result of having a working mother was 55.8%, while the share of respondents supporting the idea that women want a home and children was 50.1%. Twenty years later, the pattern is reversed: the support for essentialism (33%) is slightly higher than the support for traditionalism (29.7%). In other words, taking the average of the seven countries, the decrease in traditionalist ideas towards maternal employment has been stronger than the rejection of essentialist ones towards 'female' characteristics.

Figure 6. Share of respondents agreeing and strongly agreeing with the item 'pre-school children suffer if their mother is working', by gender, year and country



Source: European Value Study (EVS, 2021)

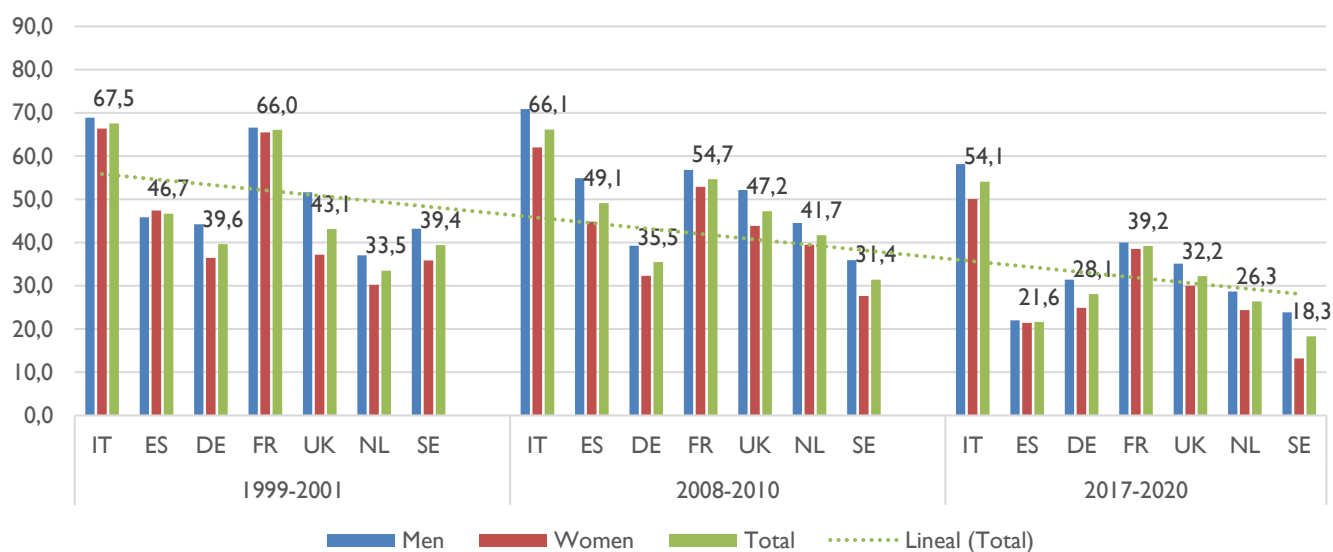
This different evolution of the two slopes occurred for all countries except France, where the variation is similar for both items, and remarkably, for Spain, where the trend observed is the opposite of the one detected for the full set of countries. In 1999, the share of supporters of traditional and essentialist ideas was almost equivalent (respectively 45.8% and 46.7%), and almost no change occurred between 1999 and 2008. However, by 2018, the support for the same two items had fallen short, more so for essentialism (-25.1 p.p. to 21.6%) than for traditionalism (-19.5 p.p. to 26.3%).

In Italy, the decline of traditionalism is stunning and the highest amongst the seven countries surveyed (around 30 p.p. over the whole period). In contrast with Spain, this decrease is much higher than the decline in essentialism (-13.4 p.p.). However, it should be noted that Italy departed from the remarkably highest percentages of support for both items in 1999, with the exception of France for the essentialism item. As a result, and notwithstanding the sharp progression in egalitarian values, Italy remains the most traditional amongst the selected countries concerning mothers' employment. In the last wave, 52% of respondents supported the idea that children suffer when their mothers work, a percentage double that of Spain. Moreover, Italy is the worst-performer with respect to essentialism, with 54.15% of support for the idea that motherhood is a natural aspiration for women, more than doubling the percentages for Spain. Indeed, Spain appears to be amongst the most progressive countries with respect to both items, but especially regarding the latter, with levels similar to those of Sweden: only 26% of respondents currently think that working mothers may lead children to suffer, and 22% support an essentialist idea of femininity.

Notwithstanding the differences in the outcomes, both countries experienced the strongest changes in the second decade observed — the one following the 2008 downturn. Spain actually witnessed a slight increase (of around 2 p.p.) in support for both traditionalism and essentialism from the 1999–2001 to the 2008–2010 waves, followed by a sharp decrease from the 2008–2010 to the 2017–2020 wave in the two items, especially in essentialism (-27.5 p.p. against -22 p.p. in traditionalism). The Italian trend is less discontinuous, but the amelioration is nonetheless greater in the last decade, with traditionalism and essentialism decreasing, respectively, by 6 p.p. and 1.5 p.p. in the first period, and 23 p.p. and 12 p.p. in the second.

In addition to the changes *within* each country, it is interesting to look at the changes in the gaps *between* countries. Data show that the overall gap between the two countries — considering the two items — is increasing. In 1999, Italy and Spain scored, respectively, 81.4% and 45.8% in support for traditional gender roles (36 p.p. gap) and 67.5% and 54.1% in support for essentialist motherhood (13 p.p. gap). Over time, the gap in traditionalism between the two countries has decreased (now 26 p.p.), while the difference in essentialism has substantially widened (31.5 p.p.).

All in all, the results point to a strikingly quick-paced progression towards egalitarian and anti-essentialist gender-role attitudes in Spain, particularly during the decade that followed the 2008 economic downturn, while the significant decrease in traditional gender roles observed in Italy is insufficient to close the pre-existing gap with this country. On the contrary, the figures suggest a growing divergence between both societies. Today, Spain performs better than many Western countries on gender-role attitudes, looking remarkably similar to Sweden, while Italy's progression towards egalitarian and particularly anti-essentialist values remains slow, situating it way behind the remaining countries analysed.

Figure 7. Share of respondents agreeing and strongly agreeing with the item ‘women want a home and children’, by gender, year and country

Source: European Value Study.

6. DISCUSSION

Looking first at female activity, the data reveal notably divergent trends in both countries, reflecting different labour market integration patterns for Spanish and Italian women. The constant increase of women’s activity in Spain, regardless of economic context, reflects deep-rooted transformations in women’s labour market attachment, which are mirrored by the changes in gender-role attitudes. The most remarkable trend in this respect is the one observed for low-skilled women of prime working age, whose activity levels have increased strikingly to surpass Italy by almost 30 p.p. and exceed those of all countries compared, including Sweden. This evolution, which reflects a significant generational change amongst less-educated Spanish women, can be interpreted as a result of a combination of (push and pull) factors that have intersected, particularly during periods of crisis and especially with the 2008 economic downturn. These include the shifts in women’s aspirations and gender-role attitudes and men’s weakening position in the labour market — particularly during the recession, which pushed many low-skilled women into employment or made them primary breadwinners in their households (Addabbo et al., 2013; González Gago & Segales Kirzner, 2014). This pattern must also be understood alongside the sectoral composition of the Spanish labour market, where the important weight of the service economy offers vast employment opportunities to semi-skilled and low-skilled women (Sánchez-Mira, 2020). It should not be forgotten, though, that these are highly precarious, temporary and low paid jobs, which explains why, despite having one of the highest shares of female breadwinners across Europe, it is in Spain (and Italy) — in comparison with other European countries — that these households are worse off than their male-breadwinner counterparts (Kowalewska & Vitali, 2021).

In sum, the observed trend implies a clear break with earlier tendencies in the Spanish labour market, with previous studies highlighting how changes were mainly driven by the increased activity of highly educated women (González et al., 1999; León & Migliavacca, 2013). Our long-term data show instead that it is clearly less-educated women who have represented the main driver of change for over a decade now, while highly-skilled women continue to consolidate their uninterrupted presence in the labour market, paradigmatically representing the dual-earner full-time model (Sánchez-Mira, 2020).

A similar confluence of factors is not observed in Italy, where activity levels amongst the less-educated increased more recently and less substantially. The gap between the highest and lowest educated remains significant in this country, with the least educated women suffering from diminished employment opportunities during the recession (Maestripieri & Insarauto, 2020) in an economy where services demanding a low-skilled workforce are less important and where regional differences are substantial. One possible avenue for future research would be to explore the potential role of undeclared work in explaining the differences observed between both countries. More generally, the share of inactive but potential workers amongst women of prime working age appears exceptionally high in Italy, either due to work-family reconciliation difficulties or a discouragement effect (Maestripieri & Insarauto, 2020).

Concerning our second focus area, part-time employment, the observed trends indicate that behind an original common South European pattern of 'low part-time work', and a similar constraining impact exerted by the 2008 crisis, the two countries have experienced different types of trajectories over time, which seem to have to converge again only recently. In the early 2000', Italy's trajectory consisted of the progressive entrenchment of an alternative model of maternal employment based on part-time work, which was halted by the 2008 crisis; Spain followed a generalisation of the 'all remain full-time' model that was constrained by the changing labour market conditions during the crisis, forcing women into undesired part-time work. Both patterns suggest that where models of female socioeconomic integration are still fragile, as in Italy and Spain, a crisis is more likely to favour the subsidiary nature of female labour through part-time work (Insarauto, 2021). The recession would have promoted a trend of convergence between the two countries, through a decrease in part-time work for family reasons and a sharp increase in involuntary part-time work, fuelled by regulatory changes that made this form of employment more attractive to firms and more responsive to employers' strategies to weather the economic downturn through reduced labour costs. Nowadays, similarities remain between the two countries in terms of high levels of involuntary part-time work and low levels of part-time work for family reasons, suggesting a withstanding convergence. However, trends in overall levels of part-time work throughout the recovery period and over the COVID-19 crisis call for a more nuanced perspective, as female part-time rates remained substantially higher in Italy than in Spain, contrary to what is observed for activity rates. This combined pattern suggests that underlying divergencies in models of female socio-economic integration remain and may continue to shape both

countries' trajectories. In Italy, much more than in Spain, the idea that women should maintain the role of family carer first and labour force participant second may still be shaping the amount and types of employment opportunities that are available to them.

Trends in cultural norms and attitudes can illuminate the evolution of these work trajectories. On this respect, data show a general amelioration for the two countries, both in traditionalist and essentialist attitudes, but with significant differences. Concerning the starting points and the trends across time: twenty years ago, Italy appeared to be a fairly conservative society, a remarkable outlier considering both items when compared to the rest of the countries, including Spain. This gap slightly increased in the last two decades, more precisely with respect to essentialism, with Italy currently lagging behind all countries analysed and Spain being amongst the best performers, with levels similar to those of Sweden. Regarding the 'quality' of the long-term trends, Italy has ameliorated across time more concerning traditionalism than essentialism, consistently with international trends (Cotter et al., 2011; Grunow et al., 2018), while the opposite has occurred in Spain. In other words, if in Italy the decrease in the traditional male-breadwinner ideal has paralleled the persistence of essentialist ideas on gender differences, the Spanish case is less ambivalent and runs counter to general trends in its most robust support for a deconstructivist approach to gender equality. Finally, regarding the pace of the trends and the role of the 2008 economic downturn and later implementation of austerity policies: for both countries, the changes are concentrated in the second decade analysed, but the difference between the two sub-periods is particularly significant for Spain, where the amelioration occurred *only* from the 2008–2010 wave onward. Overall, the results suggest that Italy and Spain exhibit strongly divergent patterns that situate them into two distinct positions. Moreover, the 2008 crisis seems to have played an important role in accelerating changes towards more gender-egalitarian values, but to a greater extent in Spain, where essentialist ideals have fallen drastically.

Overall, Spain shows a longer-term trend toward weakening men's breadwinner status and strengthening women's labour market attachment, which seems to have been fuelled by the impact of the 2008 economic downturn. In contrast, women's position in Italy remained weaker due to the persistence of familialistic socio-institutional arrangements, including more traditional and essentialist values, that hinder labour market integration and consolidation.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have looked at the societal trends delineating women's changing position in the work and family spheres in Italy and Spain, focusing on the long-term evolution of female labour market participation and gender-role attitudes. Within this long-term outlook, we also examined the role of the social and economic crises touching these countries over this period and discussed whether they may have acted as inhibitors of change or catalysts for underlying social processes. Overall, the trends identified in the three areas suggest that against a common departing background of limited female labour

force participation, low part-time work, and traditional gender norms, the two countries have evolved differently over the last two decades.

Such trends underscore the argument suggested by other scholars (León & Migliavacca, 2013) that using the ambivalent notion of 'familialism' to identify the existence of a Southern European regime has led to a misspecification of the model and overlooks the capacity for change amongst Southern countries. Italy seems to be on a trajectory of continuity where the crisis has hindered significant change in women's labour market integration, while the critical evolution in attitudes has been insufficient to reduce existing gaps comparatively. Spain shows a fundamental path-departure from the traditionally distinctive characteristics of the Southern model, with the 2008 economic downturn acting as a catalyst for changes in women's work and family roles, as indicated by their increased labour market attachment, their constrained involvement in part-time work, and the weakening of traditional and particularly essentialist ideologies. Such divergences are likely to consolidate in the future, reinforcing the heterogeneities identified within the group.

While looking at the evolution of macro indicators over an extended period has the value of outlining societal trends, this analysis is not without limitations in terms of scope and depth, pointing to the need for further research in several directions. First, while our focus has been on labour market behaviour and attitudes, future analyses should also integrate an empirical outlook into policy change. Welfare scholars have argued that Spain and Italy were drawing differentiated trajectories during the pre-recessionary period, with the former advancing towards greater universalism, individualisation of rights and defamilialisation, while retrenchment processes due to austerity policies would have resulted in a downward reconvergence between both countries, with negative consequences for gender equality and women's unpaid overall workload (León & Pavolini, 2014; Saraceno, 2017). However, our analysis suggests that retrenchment may have had less of an inhibitory effect on women's labour market attachment and the pursuit of an egalitarian model in Spain than in Italy. Future studies could explore to what extent labour market factors on one hand and policies on the other may have acted as opposing forces driving distinct behavioural outcomes during the crisis in both countries. Moreover, recent developments in Spain, such as the implementation of non-transferable paternity leave with equivalent duration to maternity leave, suggest the existence of a bottom-up effect, through which policies are at least to some extent adapting to increasing demands consistent with shifting behaviours and attitudes. Future research could delve into the processes favouring path-departure in the policy domain.

Second, despite the trends identified suggest that the COVID-19 crisis had a shorter-term and less deep impact on (gendered) employment patterns with respect to the 2008 economic downturn, available data (up to 2022) do not permit an analysis of the longer-term consequences of the pandemic. The different characteristics of both crises warrant a comparison of their distinctive effects in shaping the (divergent) trajectories of both countries. Moreover, Italy and Spain were amongst the European countries most

severely affected by the pandemic, at least during its initial stages. Women and men's positions within sex-segregated occupational structures and precarious jobs constitute a privileged angle of analysis in this respect. During the pandemic, women were over-represented amongst essential occupations, such as health and social care workers, which are generally undervalued and low paid, but which may be gaining recognition due to their increased visibility (Cook & Grimshaw, 2021). At the same time, female workers constitute an important share of the workforce in branches of the service sector, like hospitality or retail, disproportionately affected by closures resulting from social distancing measures. In both cases, women are more often involved in non-standard forms of employment that face a higher risk of precarisation as crises deepen. In turn, policies during the pandemic were mostly 'gender-blind' in that families' increased care burden fell disproportionately on women's shoulders without public support. In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic delivered a shock to existing gender systems that has generated particular patterns of vulnerabilities, raising questions about the implications for gender-role attitudes and gender outcomes for the years to come (Reichelt et al., 2021).

Only time will provide the necessary perspective and access to the data needed to disentangle the complex intersections amongst gender norms, social policies and employment structures shaping (divergent) trajectories in both countries, allowing us to identify the potentially distinctive effects of both crises and to differentiate more confluent effects from deep-seated transformations with long-lasting implications. The current article provides an analytical framework for future research endeavours in this direction.

APPENDIX

Table A. Activity rates by country amongst women with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 0-2) between 20 and 64 years old

	Italy	Spain	Germany	France	UK	Sweden
2000	35.2	44	50.4	56.1	63.8	65.2
2001	35.6	42.5	51	55.5	63.6	65.3
2002	36.6	45.1	50.8	55.3	63.3	64.8
2003	37.3	46.7	51.8	57.7	62.9	64.5
2004	38.3	47.4	50.5	57.9	62.8	62.9
2005	37.6	47.8	54.9	57.8	61.9	62.7
2006	37.5	49.8	57.4	57.9	61.8	66.3
2007	37.3	51.3	57.3	57	61.2	66.2
2008	37.8	53.6	57	55.9	54.1	65
2009	37.1	56	57	55.9	54.2	64.6
2010	36.8	57.9	56.6	56.6	52.8	63.9
2011	37.3	59.4	57.1	56.6	53	65.1
2012	39.9	60.6	57.1	56.4	53.6	64.3
2013	40.4	61.4	57.3	55.4	54.0	63.0
2014	41.3	61.5	57.0	54.7	55.0	64.0
2015	40.9	61.9	57.0	54.1	54.8	63.9
2016	42.0	62.2	56.9	52.9	56.5	64.1
2017	42.6	61.9	57.4	53.6	58.3	65.6
2018	42.9	61.6	57.5	53.2	59.3	65.3
2019	42.8	62.0	57.7	51.8	58.9	63.4
2020	40.5	59.8	58.5	51.6		61.3
2021	40.9	62.2	57.2	51.9		65.2
2022	41.8	62.4	60.2	53.1		65.7

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey

Table B. Activity rates by country amongst women with upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3-4) between 20 and 64 years old

	Italy	Spain	Germany	France	UK	Sweden
2000	63.3	60.7	69.7	72.7	79	80.4
2001	63.3	57.6	69.9	72.1	78.5	80.7
2002	63.6	61.3	70.8	72.2	78.7	81.2
2003	63.2	63.2	71.1	73.4	79.2	80.8
2004	64.7	65.2	71.1	72.9	77.1	80.6
2005	64.5	67.2	72.4	72.6	77.5	81.1
2006	65	68.8	73.8	72.4	78	81.7
2007	64.3	70	74.4	72.8	78.2	82.6
2008	64.8	71.5	74.6	72.6	74.9	82.6
2009	64.1	72.8	75.2	73.1	74.5	82
2010	63.9	72.8	75.6	72.7	74.2	81.4
2011	63.3	73.2	76.2	71.9	75.5	82.5
2012	64	74	76.4	72.3	75	82.7
2013	63.3	73.6	77.3	72.9	75.2	83.5
2014	63.8	73	78.2	72.6	75.3	83.3
2015	62.9	72.3	78.4	73.1	75.2	83.6
2016	63.8	72.2	79.1	73.6	75.2	83.9
2017	63.6	71.3	79.5	73	75.5	84.2
2018	63.5	70.9	79.8	73.8	75.3	84
2019	63.9	70.7	80.3	72.8	75.7	83.9
2020	61.7	68.5	79.5	71.1		83.3
2021	62.3	70.7	79.9	73.6		82
2022	63.4	70.8	80.7	73.4		81.2

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey

Table C. Activity rates by country amongst women with tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8) between 20 and 64 years old

	Italy	Spain	Germany	France	UK	Sweden
2000	81.2	80	82.3	80.2	86.9	84.6
2001	81.1	78	82.2	79.9	87	88
2002	82.5	80.8	82.2	80.2	87.6	88.2
2003	81.4	81.9	83.1	81.1	87.1	88.8
2004	81.8	83.1	83.4	80.3	87.4	88.7
2005	79.6	82.7	83	81	87.9	89.4
2006	78.6	83.5	84.2	80.5	87.9	89.1
2007	76.8	83.8	84.4	81.5	87.7	89.6
2008	78.4	84.3	84.3	82.6	84.5	90
2009	77.8	85.2	85.3	82.5	84.3	89.6
2010	77	85.3	85.5	82.5	84.2	89.5
2011	77.5	85.6	86.3	82.6	82.7	89.8
2012	78.6	86.2	86	83.3	82.9	90
2013	78.6	86.1	86	83.8	83.7	90.3
2014	78.5	86.2	86	84.3	83.7	90.2
2015	78.4	86.3	86	84.5	84	90.7
2016	79.8	86.2	86.2	85	84.1	90.7
2017	80.8	86	86.1	85.1	84.1	90.7
2018	81.1	85.4	86.4	85	84.6	91.1
2019	81.1	85.6	87	85.7	85.4	91.3
2020	79,3	85	85,6	85,2		91,5
2021	81	86,1	87	87,1		91,7
2022	81,6	86,4	87,3	87,3		91,7

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey

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