

Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Marketing Issues

Vol 1, No 1 (2024)

Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Marketing Issues (2024)



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doi: [10.12681/iccmi.7658](https://doi.org/10.12681/iccmi.7658)

Gender Equality in the Workplace: Women's Perspective

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Abstract

The present paper investigates gender equality in employment. It aims to understand which factors fuel gender gaps and which drivers could overcome them to build an inclusive and fair working environment. In high-income countries, female employment has been rising steadily for decades. However, average employment levels among women remain lower than those of men and considering parents with young children, the situation is even more emphasized. To achieve the research objective we administered a structured quantitative survey questionnaire to a sample of women from Italy and Canada. From the analysis, it emerged that there are some differences between the Italian and Canadian women's points of view. Specifically, the latter seem more satisfied with their country's support for women's work than Italian women.

Moreover, both samples believe that working and having economic independence is fundamental in a woman's life. At the same time, however, they perceive that having a family could affect their career growth. Respondents pointed out that tools such as kindergartens, paternity leave, childcare incentives, and smart working can be valuable tools to support female work. Despite the many advances, greater effort is required to support women's empowerment and overcome gender barriers by promoting more equality in the workplace.

Keywords: *female employment, Agenda 2030, gender equality, work-life balance, women empowerment.*

Introduction

According to the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2023 report (World Bank Group, 2023), around 2.4 billion working-age women live in economies that do not grant them the same rights as men. Legal barriers in 176 countries hinder their full participation in the economy. Comparatively, women globally enjoy only 77% of the legal rights that men do, indicating that achieving complete legal equality is still a distant goal. According to the report, at the current pace of reform, it would take at least 50 years to reach legal gender equality everywhere (Fruttero, et al., 2023). Considering its social and economic relevance, this topic is also covered in the 2030 Agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women addressing the reality that, despite progress, gender inequality persists. It recognizes that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Women often face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, additionally compounded due to factors based on race, ethnicity, geography, income, education, religion, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, disability and migrant or refugee status (United Nations, 2015). SDG 5 aims for action that will address issues and practices that limit opportunities for women (Government of Canada, 2024).

This research investigates the topic of gender equality in employment and studies women's perspectives on women's employment conditions. The aim is to understand which factors fuel gender gaps and which drivers could overcome them to build an inclusive and fair working environment.

To achieve this objective, an empirical investigation was developed through the use of a quantitative methodology and the administration of a structured questionnaire to a sample of women from two different countries, Italy and Canada.

According to the Global Gender Gap Index, based on the level of workforce participation, in 2022 Italy ranks 99th, the value of the advancement of women to leadership roles amount to 4.03 (1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest) and share of women's membership in boards is 38.80%. Meanwhile, Canada ranks 31st for the level of workforce participation. The value of the advancement of women to leadership roles amount to 4.84 (1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest) and the share of women's membership in boards 32.90% (World Economic Forum, 2022).

The remain part of the paper is organised as follows. First, a literature review is presented in order to advance the aims of the research, then authors illustrate the methodology, the subsequent section describes the main results of the research, finally, the authors provide discussions and conclusion.

Literature review

In high-income countries, female employment has been rising steadily for several decades (ILO, 2020), yet average employment levels among women remain considerably lower than those of men. Considering parents with young children, the situation is even more emphasized. For example, the average employment rate among fathers with at least one child under six in 2019 in the EU was 90.4%; among mothers, it was only 63.8% (EUROSTAT, 2018). What happen is, according to the neo-classical theory of the gendered division of labour (Becker, 1981), the parent with the lower wage stays at home due to the lower loss of family income. Thus, women typically take on the position of primary childcare provider due to their lower income on average. This results in pension disparities between males and females, elderly female poverty, and women's financial dependence on their partners (OECD, 2019).

It may seem that part-time work, which is strongly gendered and frequently perceived as a way to combine work with family responsibilities and lessen work-life conflict, is the answer to improving the connection between labor and women. (Russell et al., 2009). Married women with family responsibility are most likely to work part-time contributing to its diffusion (Bardasi and Gornick, 2008; Riederer and Berghammer, 2020; Drobnič and Guillén, 2011; Gornick and Jacobs, 1998; Tjeldens, 2002). Unlikely, the problem is that according to international research, women working part-time are more likely to be trapped in low paid, low status jobs, as higher paying jobs offering career progression are often constructed as full-time positions (Abbasian and Hellgren, 2012; Grant et al., 2006). Therefore, part-time employment is not the answer because it leaves women economically dependent on a male provider and raises the possibility of poor retirement income due to earnings-related pensions (e.g., Hinrichs and Jessoula, 2012).

Nowadays, despite the long-run decrease in the time spent in home-production tasks, women remain the main provider of childcare, as well as domestic work in general. Few studies have shown that childless women have similar earning trajectories to men, but as said before, parenthood drives sizable and persistent gaps in the employment rates, including working hours and earnings of mothers and fathers (e.g., Adda et al., 2017; Angelov et al., 2016; Kleven et al., 2019a, Kleven et al., 2019b). Over the past few decades, the earnings penalty associated to motherhood has remained remarkably stable, while other dimensions of gender inequalities, related to human capital differences or discrimination in hiring and pay, are falling. Hence the motherhood penalty currently captures the bulk of remaining earning gaps (Mósesdóttir and Ellingsæter, 2019).

A recent approach highlights that cultural, contextual factors may play a moderating role (i.e., Budig et al., 2012; Morrissey, 2017; Schober and Schmitt, 2017; Zoch and Hondralis, 2017). In summary, it is hypothesized that conventional gender roles could counteract the benefits of childcare for working mothers. According to Boeckmann et al. (2015), Hummelsheim and Hirschle (2010), and Uunk et al. (2005), there is a significant influence of family policy and cultural views on maternal employment, which aligns with theoretical predictions (i.e., fewer conservative attitudes towards maternal employment and public childcare promote maternal employment). It appears that part-time jobs could be a solution only in conservative and especially Mediterranean contexts, in which women's employment is low. In fact, due to culture and family policies, part time employment could increase women's participation to the working force in conservative countries, but as said before, it does not give them economically independence. Different reasons mentioned before establish that maintaining this number of unemployed women is a failed choice, one of them includes demographics problems. In fact, international experiences demonstrate that the female employment rate is positively correlated to the birth rate, it appears working women tend to have more children because they can count on financial stability (Barbieri et al., 2019).

Government plays an important role in the female workforce; politics can simplify the relationship between women and labor market, or it can make it harder. In Italy, particular attention has been paid to measures aimed at implementing Article 51 of the Constitution, on equal access for women and men to elective offices, amending electoral systems at different levels (national, regional, local and European Parliament), as well as at promoting women's participation in listed companies. The issue of gender equality in the labor market has also been the subject of numerous regulatory measures aimed at recognizing rights and increasing protection for female workers. In particular, provisions aimed at facilitating the reconciliation of life and work time (including a babysitting bonus) and support for parenthood should be included in this direction, as well as provisions to combat so called "blank resignation". Support instruments for the creation and development of enterprises with a majority or full participation of women have also been strengthened (Italian Parliament, 2022).

While in Canada, in August 2021 the Pay Equity Act was introduced to "achieve pay equity through proactive means by redressing the systemic gender-based discrimination in the compensation practices and systems of employers that is experienced by employees who occupy positions in predominantly female job classes so that they receive equal compensation for work of equal value". The Pay Equity Act has established a Pay Equity Commissioner whose role is to ensure the implementation and compliance of the Act, assist people in understanding the Act and facilitate the resolution of disputes relating to pay equity (Government of Canada, 2023).

Methodology

To achieve the research aim, an empirical study was developed using quantitative methodology. Specifically, a structured questionnaire was administered between November 2023 and January 2024 to a sample of women from Canada and Italy. The sample was selected using the snowball approach (Guido, 1999; Mugion et al., 2017). At the end of the process, 153 fully completed questionnaires were collected from Italy and 53 from Canada.

The questionnaire was developed considering the research objective and scales present and already validated in the literature. It is structured in 59 questions (open questions, multiple choices and a 5-point Likert scale - 1=completely disagree; 5=completely agree) and in four sections: i) sample profiling; ii) working experience and personal life; iii) national working conditions and cultural and legislative influences (independence, culture, work-life balance, maternity, glass ceiling, legislation). The questionnaires used in the two countries involved in the survey are the same but translated into two different languages, Italian and English.

The questionnaire was distributed via social networks (Instagram and Facebook), telephone contacts (WhatsApp), and the LinkedIn application (which shares content about the work market).

Data were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS IBM 17.0 (Muthen and Muthen, 1998). In particular, descriptive analyses were developed to highlight the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample and to understand the perceptions of the panel of respondents regarding each dimension of the questionnaire.

Results

The current section presents the survey results, which are divided into two sub-paragraphs, namely, the point of view of women in Italy and Canada. The data were analysed with SPSS IBM Statistics, considering each section of the questionnaire. Descriptive statistical measures were calculated for all the variables of the questionnaire.

Italian women perspectives

Starting from the profiling section, the sample is composed of 153 women. Most respondents are between 19 and 25 years old ($f_q=51$), followed by 26-30 ($f_q=28$). 35,9% of the sample have a bachelor's degree (36 %), 35% have a master's degree and 28% have a higher license. Most of the sample (56%) do not live with a partner and are unmarried, while 27% are married and 17% live together. 70% of the sample state that they have no children, 16% have two children, 11% have one child, and 3% have more than two children.

Considering the section on working experience and personal life, 58% of women declare that they have a full-time job, 22% a part-time job and 21% don't work. Two people who do not work say that they lost their jobs because they became mothers and one person had to leave her job to take care of her children. Almost all women who took part in the survey (97%) would return to work/returned to work after having children. Forty-three women in the job interview process were asked questions relevant to their personal sphere, particularly whether they were married or cohabiting or intended to marry or have children. 80% of the sample would entrust their children to a kindergarten, and only 3% said they would not entrust it to anyone and would stay with their child.

Regarding the part of the questionnaire related to the national working conditions and cultural and legislative influences (independence, culture, work-life balance, maternity, glass ceiling, legislation), the answers were expressed using a 5-point Likert scale.

Most of the interviewees declare that there is no gender equality in Italy ($\mu=2.30$; median=2). Moreover, they think that having a job is fundamental in women's lives ($\mu=4.77$; median=5), that economic independence is essential for a woman ($\mu=4.91$; median=5), and almost no one will quit the job after a wedding ($\mu=1.18$; median=1).

The survey participants believe that religion does not affect the way women work ($\mu=2.25$; median=2), but they believe that Italian culture does not support women in having a job ($\mu=2.53$; median=3), and almost no one is sceptical about entrusting children to childcare ($\mu=1.95$; median=2). Some respondents felt that having children could impact their career choices. The majority of the sample would not be willing to stop working after having children ($\mu=2.05$; median=2) and believes, however, that the presence of kindergartens is not adequate ($\mu=2.52$; median=2) as well as childcare ($\mu=2.38$; median=2). In addition, many believe that investing in kindergartens would help women's employment ($\mu=4.20$; median=4), that motherhood impacts recruitment choices and that they would favour paternity leave ($\mu=4.50$; median=5). The women who participated in the interview stated that it is easier for a man to be hired than a woman ($\mu=4.23$; median=4) and that entering the world of work for women is as tricky as making a career. In addition, respondents felt that women had to work harder than men to get the same professional recognition ($\mu=4.17$; median=4), and no one thought it was right that questions about their personal sphere should be asked at the job interview. Finally, the majority of the sample do not feel protected by their country's gender ($f_q=103$, 1 and 2 points) and maternity ($f_q=90$, 1 and 2 points) policies and are not satisfied with the incentives for childcare ($f_q=102$, 1 and 2 points).

Canadian women perspectives

Considering the profiling section, the sample is composed of 53 women. The majority of respondents are between 51 and 55 years old ($f_q=14$), followed by >56 ($f_q=9$) and 26-30 ($f_q=8$), and most of the respondents have a university degree ($f_q=43$). 56% of participants are married, while 41% are unmarried or don't live with their partner. 38% of the sample state that they have no children, 26% have two children, and 21% have more than two children.

Evaluating the section on working experience and personal life, it emerged that 79% of women declare that they have a full-time job, 11% a part-time job and 9% don't work. Four people who do not work stated that they have to take care of the house or someone else (children or parents). Almost all women who took part in the survey (92%) would return to work/returned to work after having children. Eight women in the job interview were asked questions about their life conditions, marital status, and intention to have children. 40% of respondents would entrust their children to a kindergarten, and 17% declared that they would not entrust it to anyone and would stay with their child.

Regarding the part of the questionnaire related to the national working conditions and cultural and legislative influences (independence, culture, work-life balance, maternity, glass ceiling, legislation), the answers were expressed using a 5-point Likert scale.

Half of the interviewees think that there is gender equality in Canada ($f_q=25$, points 4 and 5), while 13 expressed a neutral opinion (point 3), and 15 are not in accordance (points 1 and 2). Moreover, women interviewed think that having a job is fundamental in women's life ($\mu=4.0$; median=4), that economic independence is essential for a woman ($\mu=4.53$; median=5), and almost no one will quit the job after a wedding ($\mu=1.64$; median=1).

The survey participants believe that religion does not affect the way women work ($\mu=1.92$; median=2), but they believe that Canadian culture supports women in having a job ($\mu=3.89$; median=4) and almost no one is sceptical in entrusting children to childcare ($\mu=2.43$; median=2). Some interviewees felt that having children could impact their career choice ($\mu=3.57$; median=4). Most respondents believe that the presence of kindergartens is inadequate in the country ($\mu=2.89$; median=3) as well as childcare arrangements ($\mu=2.89$; median=3). In addition, many believe that investing in kindergartens and daycare would help women's employment ($\mu=3.64$; median=4), 22 respondents said that maternity impacts recruitment choices but mostly are neutral about this question ($f_q=23$, point 3) and that they would be favour of paternity leave ($\mu=4.38$; median=5).

The women who participated in the interview are neutral ($f_q=23$) or in accordance ($f_q=24$, points 4 and 5) with the statement that it is easier for a man to be hired than a woman. They are mostly neutral ($f_q=26$, point 3) about the statement that entering the world of work for women is as difficult. Moreover, 20 participants think making career advancement is difficult for women, while 25 are neutral.

In addition, respondents felt that women had to work harder than men to get the same professional recognition ($\mu=3.77$; median=4), and no one felt it was right that questions about their personal sphere should be asked at the job interview ($f_q=37$, point 1 and 2).

Half of the sample is neutral about the statement "I feel protected by their country's gender policies" ($f_q=23$, point 3), while almost the other half feel protected ($f_q=18$, points 4 and 5). A similar result is obtained for maternity policies. Finally, respondents are mostly not satisfied with the incentives for childcare ($\mu=2.75$; median=3).

Discussions and Conclusion

This article was developed to explore the topic of women's employment by analysing the factors influencing women's participation in the labour market.

The data shows that the majority of the sample of Italian women have a full-time job. Almost all would return to work even after building a family or having a child. They believe working and having economic independence is fundamental in a woman's life. At the same time, however, they perceive that having children could impact their career growth.

An important finding emerges: a large proportion of the respondents were asked about their personal lives during the interviews, particularly whether they had a partner or intended to have children.

Most would like to use kindergartens and consider them a valuable tool to support women's work but feel that their presence in the country is inadequate. Paternity leave is also mentioned as a useful tool in supporting working women. Currently, fathers are only granted ten days of abstention from work in Italy.

The analysis clearly shows that women believe that there is no gender equity in Italy and that there is still no culture that supports women's entry into the labour market. Moreover, regulations on maternity and the gender gap are considered inadequate.

In fact, the majority of the participants believe that it is easier for a man than a woman to find a job, make a career, and get professional recognition.

Considering the Canadian sample, the majority of women also claim to have a full-time job, and almost all of them would return to work even after having children. Although in smaller numbers than in Italy, part of the sample was asked questions about their personal sphere during the interview about marital status and children.

Canadian women also favour using kindergartens that could support women's work but feel that their presence is not yet adequate in the country. They also see paternity leave as a useful tool to help women in their professional development. Currently, in Canada, all parents have 40 weeks of parental leave, 5 of which are specifically meant for Dads to take time off work to care for their newborn.

In contrast to Italy, Canadian women believe that gender equity is mostly present in their country and that Canadian culture supports women's work. They believe that working and having economic independence are fundamental in a woman's life, and some believe that having children may impact career advancement.

They are not as clear-cut as Italian women in stating that there are differences between men and women entering the workforce and in career advancement, and that regulations do not support them. This is in line with their belief that there is sufficient gender equity in the country.

Therefore, while we cannot draw generalisable conclusions from the comparison of the two samples as they are composed of different numbers, it would seem that Canadian women are generally more satisfied with their country's support for women's work than Italian women.

However, cultural, social, and economic barriers continue to hinder women's full potential in the workplace, and society and institutions must continuously work to remove them.

Overcoming women's labour issues requires synergy between different actors, such as governments, regulators, companies, and society. A cultural change is needed to help reduce gender gaps and put men and women on the same level in the professional sphere and beyond. It is necessary to develop a culture of equal care not only delegated to women. Some policies such as kindergartens (or babysitting bonuses,...), paternity leave and community support could help women balance private life and work. A further element that emerges is that women should feel protected in reporting, for example, companies that ask personal questions during interviews, and this should be punished as well as dismissed in the case of children as discriminatory attitudes.

Awareness-raising should also be increased starting at school from an early age. Women should then be encouraged to undertake professional studies (educated women have a better chance of finding a job, according to ISTAT, 2022). We could then think about how to strengthen support for companies that promote women's leadership through reward mechanisms that provide for and/or enhance any benefits, awards, dedicated tax incentives, and use any other means that may be deemed appropriate to promote a more conscious, responsible and gender-sensitive work and business 'culture'.

Companies themselves could provide nurseries where working mothers could entrust their children during working hours, and smart working could also be a useful tool to help women balance their private and work lives.

This research underlines the importance of continuing efforts to build a more equitable and inclusive working environment and, above all, to achieve this goal faster. Only through a collective effort to overcome gender barriers, promote equality policies, and support women's empowerment can we hope to create a future where every woman has the opportunity to realise her full potential in the world of work.

As with all empirical research, the present study has some limitations which can be a driver for future studies. First, future research could be extended to other geographical areas to understand if the vision of the role of women in the job market changes. Moreover, the sample of people involved can be enlarged. The present study analyses the point of view only of women; however, future studies should also evaluate the perspectives of other actors, such as men or companies, to compare the results.

Finally, further research could investigate whether additional unconsidered factors may influence women's entry into the labour market and what mechanisms could be included to incentivise companies to hire women with families.

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