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Descriptive Finding

Retraditionalisation? Work patterns of families with children during the pandemic in Italy

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Retraditionalisation? Work patterns of families with children during the pandemic in Italy

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

During the COVID-19 pandemic, employment declined and real incomes fell worldwide. The burden of childcare on families increased and, in many countries, women's employment fell more than men's. From a couple-level perspective, changing employment patterns could lead to a retraditionalisation of gender roles between partners, especially for families with dependent children.

METHOD

We focus on couples with children under 16 and use quarterly large-scale micro data (the Italian Labour Force Survey) to examine, through descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regressions, the changes and composition of couples' work patterns between 2019 and 2020.

RESULTS

During the pandemic, three types of couples declined (dual-worker couples; 'pure' male-breadwinner couples, where only men work; and 'modified' male-breadwinner couples, where women work fewer hours than men) and three increased ('pure' female-breadwinner couples, where only women work; 'modified' female-breadwinner couples, where women work more hours than men; and not-working couples). Changes were most pronounced in the second quarter of 2020, to a lesser extent, in the fourth quarter, and among the least educated.

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CONTRIBUTION

We do not find signs of gender roles in paid work retraditionalising among couples in Italy with dependent children. Instead, our results suggest that women's employment contributed to shield families from earnings losses at least during the second quarter of 2020, very like what happened during the Great Recession. Still, the notoriously low female employment contributed to exposing many Italian families to an increased risk of worklessness.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had vast effects on the labour market. Employment has declined, inactivity increased, working hours have been reduced, and real incomes have fallen all across the world, probably generating long-lasting social change. Also work–family life balance has begun to totter for many. Families with children are among those who have struggled the most (Del Boca et al. 2020; Power 2020), with the threat of employment and loss of income on one side and the increased burden of unpaid work on the other, as formal and informal care and housework support broke away.

Public opinion and scholars alike fear the pandemic will trigger a regression in gender inequalities, pushing women back to more traditional roles either by increasing housework and childcare activities among mothers or marginalising the economic position of women compared to men. Families with dependent children are most at risk of 'retraditionalisation.' There is consensus that the increased burden of unpaid work overwhelmingly rested on women during the pandemic (Biroli et al. 2020; Del Boca et al. 2020; Kulic et al. 2020), even though fathers play an important role in family well-being (Mangiavacchi, Piccoli, and Pieroni 2021) and some fathers increased their involvement in care (Zamberlan, Gioachin, and Gritti 2021). The situation regarding employment is less clear. ILO (2020) and others, especially those writing from an American perspective (e.g., Landivar et al. 2020), report employment-related consequences of the pandemic have been more severe for women than for men. Others show that (the early) effects of the pandemic on the labour markets may have been gender-neutral in some contexts (e.g., Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020 for the United Kingdom; Galasso and Foucault 2020 for a cross-national comparison).

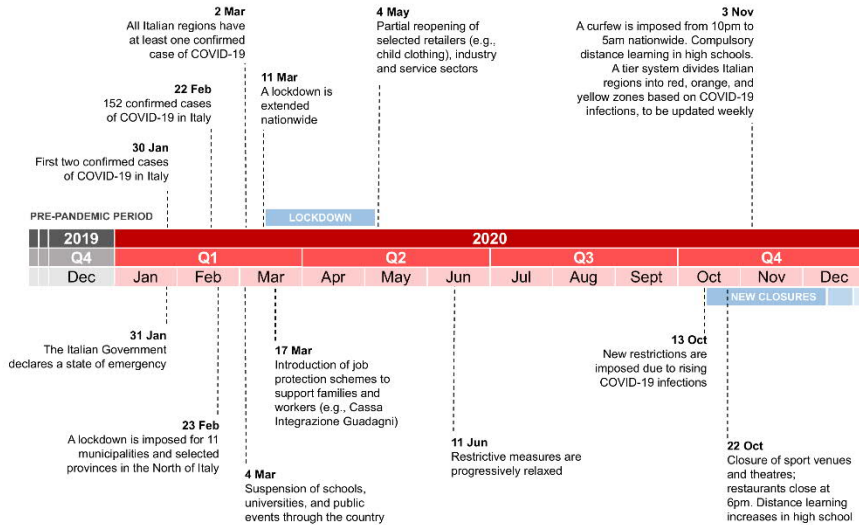
Previous evidence focused predominantly on individuals, disregarding the family perspective. And yet, the family perspective is important as it gives a more comprehensive picture of the individual's opportunities to face unexpected vulnerabilities linked to reducing employment and provides insights into gender inequalities within the couple. Individuals share resources within the family. Thus, a

couple's perspective allows for a more realistic assessment of both the situation and the risks individuals face. To the best of our knowledge, so far only Qian and Hu (2021) have studied gendered work patterns during the pandemic using a couple-level (rather than an individual-level) focus; others, for example, Yerkes et al. (2020), collected information at the household level but did not analyse family work patterns. Focusing on the work patterns of couples in the United States and the United Kingdom, Qian and Hu find increases in the percentages of couples who are not working, couples where the man is the sole breadwinner, and couples with women as sole or primary breadwinners. They offer evidence that partners' relative human capital, rather than gender, affected the reshaping of families' work arrangements during the pandemic.

While for these two liberal countries there is no evidence for a retraditionalisation of gender roles, the situation may be different in a familistic society such as Italy. Italy starts from lower levels of gender equality – low levels of female employment, as well as high levels of inequality in the allocation of household and care activities (Matteazzi and Scherer 2020) – and its welfare state support programmes are less targeted, and less generous, than those of other countries (Daly and Ferragina 2018; OECD 2021a; Thévenon 2011). Because after 2008 Italy suffered a more severe economic crisis than most other EU countries (OECD 2021b), Italian families might be more exposed to market risks than elsewhere. Further, the low pre-pandemic levels of female employment (OECD 2020) may have exposed families to higher risks of complete worklessness during the pandemic than families in other countries, while the prevailing traditional gender attitudes (Guetto, Luijkx, and Scherer 2015) might have further increased the risk of retraditionalisation. Moreover, the Italian welfare state is less developed than that of other European countries, which might expose families much more to market forces. The nationwide closure of schools and nurseries probably placed families with dependent children at especially high risk of retraditionalisation.

In the European context, Italy was among the countries most severely hit by the first wave of the pandemic and the first to enter lockdown (Ritchie et al. 2020). Figure 1 reports the timeline of the pandemic and the main measures implemented in Italy.

Figure 1: COVID-19 timeline in Italy from Q4 2019 to Q4 2020



Note: Dates are generally the date the provision came into effect.
 Source: Author's elaboration.

On 23 February 2020 the Italian government introduced the first lockdown measures, for 11 Italian municipalities located in the north of Italy where the first COVID-19 cases were recorded. These measures were extended to the rest of the country starting from 12 March. They included closure of schools and day-care centres, and the complete suspension of ‘non-essential’ activities involving about 48.5% of employees (INPS 2020). Nationwide employment-protection laws prevented layoffs during 2020, which limited job losses and concentrated them among workers on temporary contracts. Those who remained employed in non-essential sectors during lockdowns and whose job was not suitable for homeworking – such as retail (other than groceries, which remained open) or hospitality – were usually placed in short-time work schemes. In Italy, many employees entered the Cassa Integrazione Guadagni (CIG). Similar to a furlough scheme, the CIG is a wage guarantee programme allowing firms to temporarily layoff or reduce the hours worked while claiming income support from the state for their employees to cover 60%–80% of the salary for the hours not worked. Access to CIG is usually limited to particular industries and available only to sectors where activities are severely reduced, but the scheme was extended during the pandemic (see also: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/country/italy>). To support self-employed workers and small companies, other aid schemes were made available (i.e., non-refundable direct

grants, suspension of tax payments, and social security contributions). Steps towards a reopening of economic activities were taken starting from May 2020. New restrictions then came into place with the second wave of the pandemic in the autumn but did not feature total lockdown and was region-specific rather than national (e.g., school closure was temporary and only in some regions).

2. Data and sample

We use large-scale, repeated, cross-sectional, quarterly data from the Italian Labour Force Survey for the years 2019 and 2020 (ISTAT), where 2019 serves as the pre-pandemic reference point. We focus on changes between the two years by comparing the respective quarters (Q1 through Q4). The analytical sample consists of 50,158 couples with both partners aged between 20 and 64 years old, living with at least one child under the age of 16, where neither partner is a student, retired, or permanently disabled. As reported in Table 1A, we retained information on both the active workforce (including employees, the self-employed, and job seekers) and the inactive population. A total of 390 cases were excluded because information on key variables was missing, giving us a sample of 49,768 couples.

During a pandemic the status ‘employed’ is not necessarily the best measure of one’s employment situation: If furloughed or on short-term work schemes, an individual is classified as employed despite not working or working fewer hours and on a reduced salary. Hence, our definition of couples’ work patterns is based on the number of hours actually worked by each partner in the week before the survey interview. People who worked zero hours encompass the inactive, the unemployed, and those who were employed but did not work during the reference week. We rely on the relative share of hours worked by each partner to capture how paid work is distributed within the couple. We distinguish the following five types of couples:

- ‘Pure’ male breadwinner: The woman worked zero hours during the reference week, and the man worked one hour or more;
- ‘Modified’ male breadwinner: The woman worked fewer hours than the man (women in this group worked between 1% and 44% of the total hours worked by the couple);
- Equal hours: The woman worked about the same number of hours as the man (between 45% and 55%);
- ‘Modified’ female breadwinner: The woman worked more hours than the man (between 55% and 99%);

- ‘Pure’ female breadwinner: The woman worked one hour or more in the week, and the man worked zero hours;
- Neither partner worked: Both partners worked zero hours.

Crucially, and differently from Qian and Hu (2021), we distinguish between pure and modified female breadwinners, as the economic characteristics of these two couple types are essentially different (Kowalewska and Vitali 2021), and using these categories can give us a better understanding of possible signs of retraditionalisation in work patterns among partners.

We approach our analysis in three stages. First, we describe how couples’ work patterns changed during the four quarters of 2020, in comparison to the same quarters in 2019. Second, we study socioeconomic differentials in the effect of the pandemic on couples’ work patterns through multinomial logistic regressions by restricting our sample to couples interviewed in the second and fourth quarters of 2020 (i.e., during the periods spanning the first and second wave of the pandemic) in comparison to couples interviewed in the same quarters of 2019. In so doing we identify which social groups faced the largest reductions in work hours – hence in earnings – and the related change in couples’ work patterns during the pandemic. We test various interaction effects and control for both partners’ age and age squared, education (using a dominant approach distinguishing tertiary, secondary, and below), the number of children living at home (one, two, or three or more), the age of the youngest child (0 to 5 years, 6 to 10, 11 to 15), and geographical area (north, centre, or south of Italy). Lastly, to complete the picture we provide major detail on the somewhat heterogeneous group of those not working and discern the reasons why women and men have not been working in the reference week and highlight gender differences. Table 1B presents the distribution of couples’ work patterns by sociodemographic characteristics.

Table 1: Sample selection and description

A) Sample selection	Individuals (N)	%	Couples (N)	%
Raw data	778,085	100	:	:
Coupled households	564,363	72.5	200,009	100
Exclusion of children	400,018	51.4	200,009	100
Exclusion of people aged under 20 or over 64	228,532	29.4	114,266	57.1
Exclusion of couples with students, retirees, not able to work	211,194	27.1	105,597	52.8
Exclusion of couples with children over 16	100,316	12.9	50,158	25.1
Exclusion of missing cases (Final sample)	99,536	12.8	49,768	24.9

Table 1: (Continued)

B) Description of analytical sample (Standard errors in parentheses)	Pure male BW	Modified male BW	Equal hours	Modified female BW	Pure female BW	Neither partner worked
Mean age women	38.47 (0.05)	41.02 (0.06)	40.96 (0.07)	41.64 (0.15)	40.88 (0.12)	38.36 (0.09)
Mean age men	42.04 (0.05)	43.75 (0.06)	43.70 (0.07)	44.50 (0.17)	44.00 (0.14)	42.16 (0.09)
% Employed men	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	39.51 (0.01)	45.53 (0.01)
% Unemployed men	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	30.88 (0.01)	24.28 (0.01)
% Employed women	14.47 (0.00)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	24.31 (0.01)
% Unemployed women	11.03 (0.00)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	11.70 (0.00)
% Employed but did not work men	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	40.12 (0.01)	46.27 (0.01)
% Employed but did not work women	15.35 (0.00)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	24.99 (0.01)
% Less than secondary education	27.40 (0.00)	10.77 (0.00)	10.29 (0.00)	9.94 (0.01)	21.79 (0.01)	37.98 (0.01)
% Secondary education	50.13 (0.00)	46.47 (0.01)	43.60 (0.01)	39.09 (0.01)	45.02 (0.01)	41.96 (0.01)
% Tertiary education	22.82 (0.00)	42.76 (0.01)	46.11 (0.01)	50.97 (0.02)	33.19 (0.01)	20.06 (0.01)
% 1 child	34.93 (0.00)	37.66 (0.01)	43.70 (0.01)	43.97 (0.02)	42.85 (0.01)	36.08 (0.01)
% 2 children	48.47 (0.00)	51.14 (0.01)	47.23 (0.01)	46.38 (0.02)	45.09 (0.01)	45.87 (0.01)
% 3+ children	16.59 (0.00)	11.20 (0.00)	9.06 (0.00)	9.64 (0.01)	12.05 (0.01)	18.05 (0.01)
% Youngest child aged 0–5	51.78 (0.00)	42.64 (0.01)	42.11 (0.01)	39.76 (0.02)	40.31 (0.01)	49.73 (0.01)
% Youngest child aged 6–10	28.59 (0.00)	32.17 (0.01)	33.61 (0.01)	34.47 (0.01)	32.09 (0.01)	28.75 (0.01)
% Youngest child aged 11–15	19.63 (0.01)	25.18 (0.01)	24.28 (0.01)	25.76 (0.01)	27.60 (0.01)	21.52 (0.01)
% North Italy	40.52 (0.01)	56.48 (0.01)	57.71 (0.01)	48.94 (0.02)	41.88 (0.01)	31.41 (0.01)
% Centre Italy	18.05 (0.00)	22.19 (0.01)	22.67 (0.01)	24.71 (0.01)	20.05 (0.01)	14.91 (0.01)
% South Italy	41.43 (0.01)	21.33 (0.01)	19.61 (0.01)	26.34 (0.01)	38.07 (0.01)	53.68 (0.01)
<i>N</i>	18,506	11,665	8,601	1,742	2,829	6,425

3. Findings

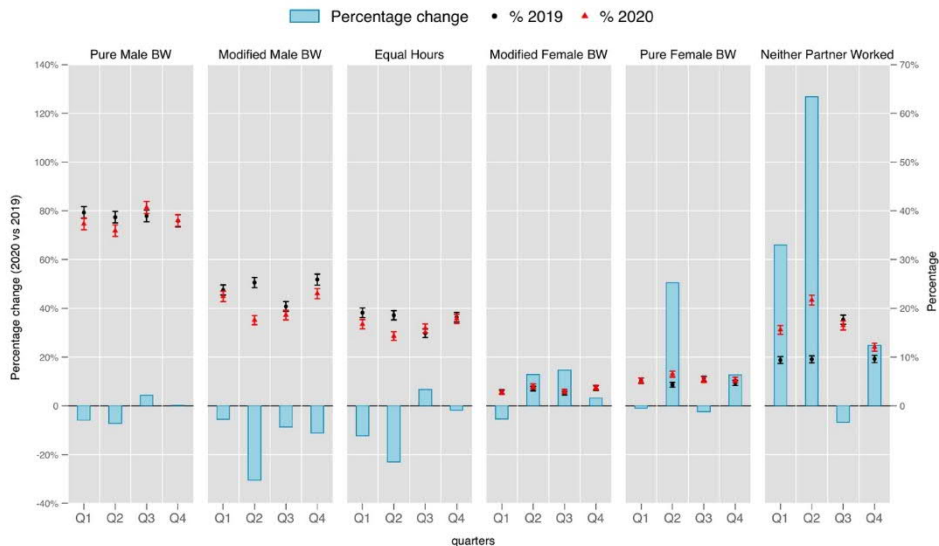
3.1 Gendered changes in parents' work patterns during the pandemic

In Italy, unlike other countries, such as the United States (Landivar et al. 2020), but like the United Kingdom (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020), female employment did not decline substantially more than male employment during the pandemic (INPS 2020). In our sample, the percentage of fathers who were employed but did not work jumped from 2.69% (Std. Err. 0.20) in the second quarter of 2019 to 17.32% in the second quarter of 2020 (Std. Err. 0.48), while the increase was more contained for mothers, from 4.82% (Std. Err. 0.27) to 13.09% (Std. Err. 0.42). The changes were smaller in the fourth quarter and more similar between mothers and fathers.

3.2 Changes in couples' work patterns during the pandemic

During the first lockdown couples with children lost almost 20% of their combined weekly working hours, from 50.3 to 39.9 hours on average (not shown). Figure 2 reports couples' work patterns comparing each quarter of 2019 with the same quarter in 2020, both in absolute terms (right axis) and as percentage change (left axis). We find significant changes between 2019 and 2020 as early as the first quarter (January to March): Out of our total sample the percentage of couples with partners working a similar number of hours reduced significantly (−12% [blue bar], from 19.1% of couples in 2019 [black symbol] to 16.8% in 2020 [red symbol]), and the percentage of couples with partners both working zero hours considerably increased (+66%, from 9.4% to 15.6%). By the second quarter of 2020 (April to June) most of the changes in couples' work patterns had occurred: The percentage of equal-hours couples declined further (−23%, from 18.6 to 14.3) and nonworking couples increased tremendously (+127%, from 9.6% to 21.7%), while the percentage of modified male-breadwinner and pure male-breadwinner couples declined significantly (−30.4% and −7.2%, respectively). Comparing the same two quarters the percentage of pure female-breadwinner couples significantly increased (+50%, from 4.3% to 6.5%). The percentage of modified female-breadwinner couples in the population did not change significantly. In the third quarter (July to September) of 2020, when lockdown ended and the summer began, couples' work patterns were similar to those observed in 2019, while the only change observed in the fourth quarter (October to December) of 2020 is a decline in the percentage of modified male-breadwinner couples and an increase in non-working couples.

Figure 2: Percentage changes (left axis, blue bars) and percentages (right axis, symbols) in couples' work patterns among Italian couples with children



Notes: 'BW' stands for breadwinner. The sample includes couples with partners aged 20 to 64 years, with at least one child aged 0 to 15 years ($N = 49,768$ couples).

Source: IT-LFS 2019 and 2020, weighted estimates.

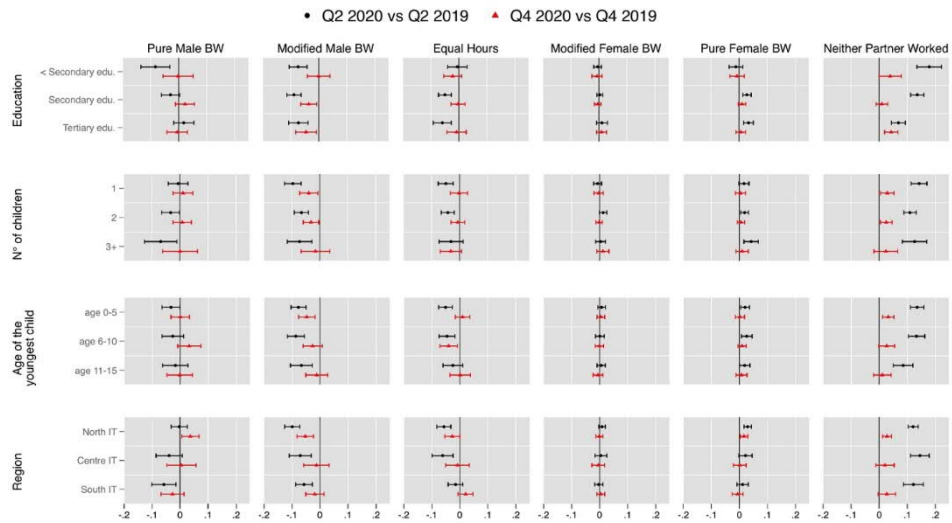
To provide insights into which of these groups experienced the greatest fall in hours worked, we focus on the second (Q2) and fourth (Q4) quarters of 2020 and compare each quarter to the situation in 2019. Figure 3 reports the differences between 2020 and 2019 in the probability (average marginal effect) that a couple would belong to a given couple type, analysed by four sociodemographic characteristics.

Looking first at stratification by education, the percentage of workless households among the low educated rose by almost 20 points between Q2 2019 and Q2 2020 (black bar). The observed changes in couples' work patterns are common to all educational levels, with some important exceptions: (1) Only among the least educated is the negative effect on male breadwinning significant; similarly, while all educational levels saw an increase in non-working couples, the rise was more pronounced among the least educated; (2) female breadwinning increased; but (3) the percentages of couples working equal hours declined only among the secondary- and tertiary-educated couples. The number and age of children do not explain the variation in couples' work patterns during the pandemic: We do not find evidence that mothers with more or younger children in

Italy may have lost more work hours. The decline in the percentage of male-breadwinner couples is driven by changes occurring in the south, while the increase in female breadwinning is driven by the north. Changes in couples' work patterns are concentrated in Q2, notwithstanding the onset of the second wave in autumn (Q4; red bars). Most of the red bars show small or no change; only the reduction in the percentage of modified male-breadwinner couples persists in Q4, in the north and among those with small children.

Results are overall very similar when run on the childless couples from the same sample group (not shown).

Figure 3: Marginal effects of two year-quarters on couples' work type, by socioeconomic characteristics



Notes: 'BW' stands for breadwinner. The sample includes couples with partners aged 20 to 64 years and with at least one child aged 0 to 15 years ($N = 25,118$ couples).

Source: IT-LFS 2019 and 2020, weighted estimates based on multinomial logistic regression. No evidence for violation of IIA (Long and Freese 2013).

3.3 Reasons for not having worked during the pandemic

Reasons for not having worked during the reference week might vary considerably between men and women. We compare the second and fourth quarters of 2020 with the same periods in 2019 (Table 2).

Table 2: Reasons for not working during the reference week, Q2 and Q4 of 2019 and 2020

	Men (%)				Women (%)			
	2019 Q2	2019 Q4	2020 Q2	2020 Q4	2019 Q2	2019 Q4	2020 Q2	2020 Q4
<i>Working status in the previous week</i>								
Not employed (inactive or unemployed)	11.19	10.82	10.86	10.70	43.44	42.08	44.50	42.84
Employed and worked	86.12	85.66	71.82	82.67	51.74	52.43	42.41	49.94
Employed but did not work	2.69	3.51	17.32	6.63	4.82	5.49	13.09	7.21
<i>N</i>	6,531	5,990	6,326	6,271	6,531	5,990	6,326	6,271

	Men (%)				Women (%)			
	2019 Q2	2019 Q4	2020 Q2	2020 Q4	2019 Q2	2019 Q4	2020 Q2	2020 Q4
<i>Reasons for 'employed but did not work' in the previous week</i>								
Cassa Integrazione Guadagni (CIG)	4.44	2.71	42.38	18.67	0.40	0.71	31.41	12.36
Temporary layoff (without CIG)	9.42	10.15	15.97	17.54	2.82	3.86	12.92	7.33
Illness	15.44	15.35	2.87	11.65	4.64	8.63	1.67	8.09
Holidays	67.59	67.06	7.99	42.46	37.86	37.18	7.59	30.09
Parental leave	0.00	0.25	0.20	0.69	52.46	45.75	17.99	34.95
Other reasons	1.28	4.06	0.48	1.29	1.81	3.28	2.13	2.85
Other (not specified)	1.83	0.43	30.11	7.69	0.00	0.58	26.28	4.33
<i>N</i>	196	219	1,117	398	322	286	897	439

Notes: 'Other reasons' includes labour dispute, bad weather, flexible working hours, atypical contract, vertical part-time, training, family-related reasons, and casual or seasonal work. CIG is a wage guarantee programme for temporary layoffs or short-time work accessible to some but not all firms based on firm size and sector.

Source: IT-LFS 2019 and 2020, weighted estimates.

Prior to the pandemic the most common reason why male workers had not worked while employed was being on holiday, followed by illness and wage guarantee programmes for temporary layoffs or short-time working schemes (CIG). Among female employees the most widely reported reason was maternity leave, followed by being on holiday and (to a lesser extent) temporary layoff (without income support). During the first and second waves of the pandemic, there is a considerable increase in the percentage of workers who report not having worked due to being on wage guarantee programmes (temporary layoffs or short-time work schemes CIG), temporary layoffs without access to wage guarantee programmes, and other unspecified reasons (probably explicitly linked to the pandemic). Such changes are especially visible among men.

Table 2 also underlines that the increase in not working was not attributable to job loss: The percentage of unemployed men and women hardly changes between 2019 and 2020. This result can be attributed to the job-protection scheme that was put in place by the Italian government, making it illegal to lay off workers during the pandemic; employment loss is basically reduced to temporary employment contracts reaching their term. This situation may change once layoffs become possible again.

4. Conclusion

During 2020 the number of non-working couples with dependent children increased tremendously. Only during the summer (Q3) do we find no significant difference in the percentage of not-working couples, when 2020 is compared with 2019. Table 2 shows that fewer than three in five women were employed in Italy before the pandemic, especially low-educated women often are not employed; this made Italian families very vulnerable to worklessness. Even if many of these households were not jobless but retained employment thanks to job-protection schemes put in place by the government, their incomes were lower than usual, increasing economic strain on families. Not-working couples, we find, are widespread, especially among the least educated. Accordingly, we expect to find pay cuts attributable to workers unable to work receiving state-based job supplements (instead of regular earnings) would be concentrated among low socioeconomic strata.

Our results confirm what Qian and Hu (2021) find for the United Kingdom and the United States: a reduction in dual-worker couples, an increase in not-working couples, especially among the lower educated, and an increase in female breadwinning. Such confirmation is not obvious because Italy is a familistic society, with lower maternal employment and more rigid gender roles than those two liberal countries. Hence, Italy might have been predicted to see a retraditionalisation of gender roles during the pandemic, with fathers holding paid employment and mothers devoted to the house and children. Interestingly, our results diverge from Qian and Hu (2021) precisely in this area: Diverging from what was found for the United Kingdom and the United States, in Italy we do not find any signs of increasing pure or modified male breadwinning.

Further, our descriptive findings support the claims made by some scholars (e.g., Profeta 2020) that the effects of the pandemic on gender equality are not clear-cut. In Italy, when using the household as our lens, we find no signs of a retraditionalisation of gender roles within couples with children below 16; on the contrary, we find a significant increase in female breadwinning during the second quarter of 2020, (partly) coinciding with the first nationwide lockdown. Hence, like what happened in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Dotti Sani 2018; Sánchez-Mira and O'Reilly 2019; Vitali and Mendola

2014), women's incomes from paid work proved important to shield families from earnings' losses, at least during the first phases of the pandemic in 2020. This finding is in stark contrast to the general idea that women would be most penalised or pushed back into the traditional 'housewife and mother' role. Quite to the contrary, in Italy the pandemic has reduced the time spent in paid work (and earnings) more for fathers than for mothers. For a country that scores low in international comparisons because of overall female employment and gender equality, the pandemic appears to have been an opportunity to harness mothers' potential as workers and fathers' potential as carers.

It would be fundamental to base future research on longitudinal data, as well as information about the economic situation of family members, to better address the economic impact of the pandemic on families.

Corrections:

On October 28, 2021 minor changes were made on page 964, in the first paragraph under 3.2 Changes in couples' work patterns during the pandemic, at the authors' request.

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