

Work and earnings within couples in Italy

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Abstract

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Female education has increased steadily and gender reversal in education has been observed in Italy since the '90s. Female employment rate has increased slowly and persistently across generations, yet less than 50% of women is employed in 2018. Nowadays the proportion of dual-earner couples is generally higher than that of male breadwinners. However gender balance within the household and on the labour market is far from being reached; indeed, women are increasingly at risk to leave the labour market when the first child is born. On the other hand, during the economic crisis we observed an increase in female employment rate, in part as a substitution of the male exit from the labour market. Our purpose is to investigate the changing distributions of work and earnings within couples in Italy: we study whether the female breadwinner model is becoming structurally present in the Italian labour market and whether the female relative contribution to the couple's income is increasing. We consider the association between individual and couple characteristics and the likelihood for a couple to be dual-earner, male or female breadwinner; then we focus on dual earners to study whether women contribute in a smaller, similar or larger proportion than their partners to the couple income. The consequences are relevant in order to study the change in inequalities arising from a shift in the gender roles within the household. We use data from the Labour force and Eu-Silc survey for the years 2008, 2013 and the latest available year.

Keywords: Dual earners; Family economics; Female breadwinner; Family-work balance; Household

1. Changes in the distribution of work within the family

During the past decades, as in many other countries, the increased educational investment of the female population has resulted in the reversal of the gender gap in education, with a larger proportion of young women being educationally advantaged than the men of the same age group (Esteve et al. 2016). Implications are relevant on the marriage market with an increasing proportion of marriages with wives more educated than their husbands (De Rose and Fraboni 2015). The female entry into the labour market has shifted the configuration of the households by work, with the emergence of new family-work models. In the '50s and '60s, the traditional prevailing model was the male-breadwinner model; more recently an increasing share of women is employed and, as a result, dual earners and female-breadwinner couples are emerging. So, the rise in the female breadwinner couples is, on one hand, a consequence of the reversal in the

educational gender gap and, on the other hand, a consequence of the increasing male economic instability (rising unemployment rates, poor labor market positions and lower earnings for (low-skilled men) on the labour market, i.e. a couple strategy to face economic adversities (Oppenheimer 1994, Drago 2005). Women's contribution to the couple income appears to be mostly secondary (Moen and Sweet, 2003). However, couples characterised by similar levels of partners' income are quite common, while the proportion of women out-earning their partners is generally small (Winkler et al., 2005).

2. Method

The dynamics occurred with the economic crisis have affected the distribution of work within the households and, particularly, the couple families. We follow two main steps: first, we look at the participation to work of both partners; second, we study the female relative income distribution. Particularly we study changes since 2008. The analysis is based on heterosexual couples where the woman is aged 25-49 years.

In the first step, we identify different couple's typologies according to the presence of children and the characteristics of the partners' jobs. We compare over time the shifts in the distribution of work among partners according to the presence or absence of children. We study the likelihood for a couple to be in one of the alternative status: i.e., dual earner or male or female breadwinner, independently of the partners' earnings, and apply a multinomial logistic regression to investigate the association between the selected covariates (individual and household characteristics: such as education of both partners, age of the woman, age homogamy, couple's citizenship, type of union, geographical area, age of the youngest children) and the preferences towards any of these models. In particular, we contrast male and female breadwinner against dual earners. The empirical basis is the microdata of the Labor Force (Istat) survey for the years 2008, 2013 and 2018.

In the second step, we focus on changes in partners' contribution to the couple's income therefore we define a man breadwinner couple, where the man has the responsibility to economically support the family, while the woman does not earn anything, and a dual-earner couple, where both partners contribute to the economy of the family, by producing earnings. After having detected who are the partners who prefer to contribute together to the household economic needs, we argue that partners' contribution may differ significantly, and we would like to investigate which are the household and partners characteristics likely to be associated with a gender equal or different contribution. Thus, among dual-earners we distinguish three models: man main provider, equal providers (woman earns between the 40% and the 60% of the sum of partners' earnings) and woman main provider. The empirical basis is the microdata of the Eu-Silc (Istat) survey for the years 2008, 2013 and latest available year.

3. Distribution of work among couple's partners

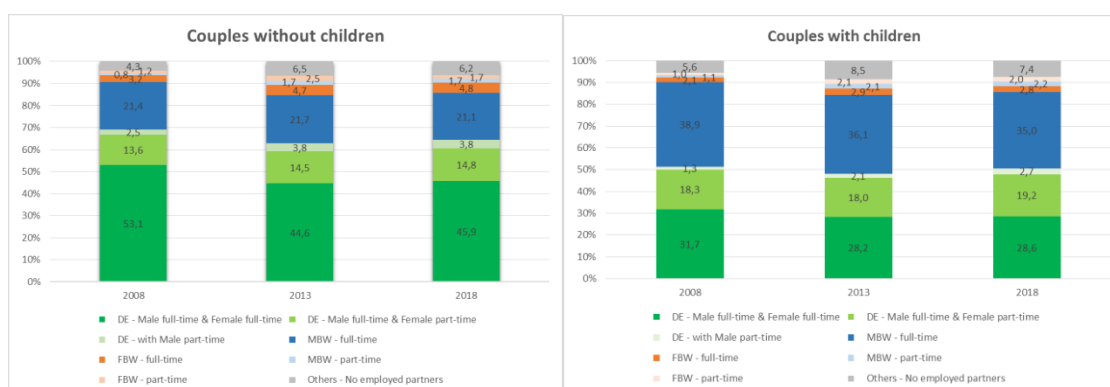
The family context and the relative role of women affect the female participation in the labour market. In the age group 25-49 years, where the reproductive role is highest with the presence of mothers of minors, the female employment rate is 59.5% in 2018 in Italy, against the corresponding male employment rate in the same age group of 79.5%.

Moreover, in Italy the higher the family burden, the lower the female employment rate: the labor difficulties of mothers aged 25-49 years increase with the number of children, so the female employment rate progressively decreases: from 61.2% with one child, to 55.9% with two children, and to 42.1% with three or more children. On the contrary, the employment condition for men aged 25-49 is quite different: their employment rate is 89,1% whether they have one child or two, while it downs to 85.3% if they have three or more children.

However, the female level of education is very important: while the inverse relation between employment rate and number of children is clear for low-educated women, and, to a lower extent, also for medium educated women, this is not the case for highly educated women. Indeed, women with tertiary education show the highest employment rate, regardless of the number of children.

We classify couple families in which woman is aged 25-49 years according to the presence of employed partners, distinguishing between part-time and full-time workers. In detail, 8 types of couple families are identified. In this couples, in absence of children, the prevailing model is Dual Earners, both full-time (in 2018 is 45.9%); just over one in five couples is Male Breadwinner (MBW).

Figure 1 – Distribution of work among couple’s partners by presence of children. Years 2008, 2013 and 2018.



The economic crisis during 2008-2013 influenced the distribution of work among couple’s partners. The recent economic crisis hit the labor market with a greater loss of jobs in economic sectors where men are mostly employed (such as manufacturing, construction ...). As a result, between 2008 and 2013, among couple families without children a significant reduction of “Dual earner – Male full-time & Female full-time” (the percentage passed from 53.1% of 2008 to 44.6% of 2013), partially offset by an increase of “Female breadwinner couples”, especially with full-time job (from 3.2% to 4.7%) it has been observed,. Moreover between 2008 and 2013 there was an increase of “jobless couples – with no employed partners” (from 4.3% to 6.5%) and of “Dual earner couples with Male part-time” (from 2.5% to 3.8%). In the second period (2013-2018), couples with both employed partners started to increase thanks to the reversal trend of couples with both partners full-time employed (from 44.6% of 2013 to 45.9% of 2018) and the uninterrupted growth of couples with full-time employed man and part-time employed woman (the percentage reached 14.8% in 2018).

In presence of children there is a lower prevalence of the model “DE - Dual earner” than couples without children and an higher relevance of the model “MBW – Male Breadwinner”. About half of couples with children are “DE - Dual earner”, while almost four out of ten couples are “MBW – Male Breadwinner”. Also among couple families with children the economic crisis influenced the distribution of work among couple’s families partners. Between 2008 and 2013 there were significant reductions of couples based on “MBW – Male Breadwinner with full-time job” (from 38.9% to 36.1%) and on “DE - Dual earner with both partners full-time” (from 31.7% to 28.2%). At the same time there was a significant increase of couples based on “Others - no employed partners (Jobless couples)” (from 5.6% to 8.5%) and a little increase of couples based on “MBW - Male breadwinner with part-time job” (from 1.1% to 2.1%) and on “FBW- Female breadwinner” (both part-time or full-time) (from 3.1% to 5.0%).

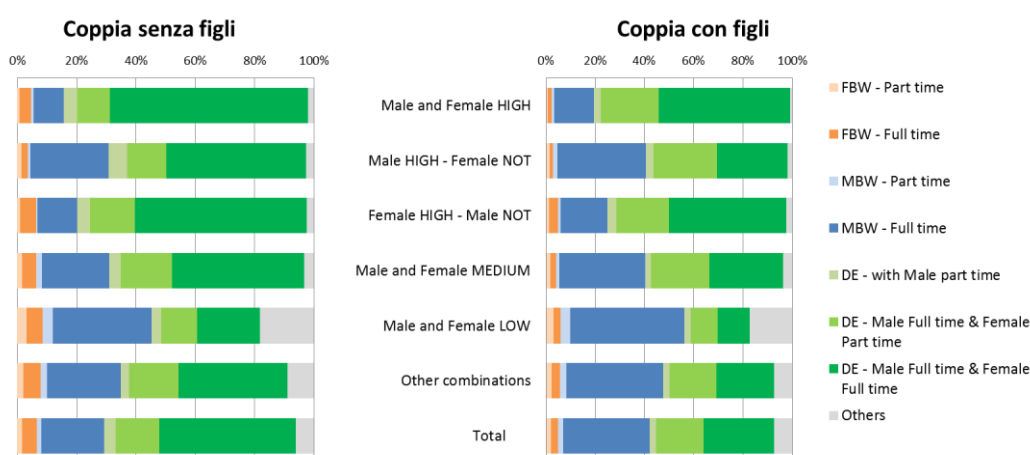
In the second period 2013-2018 among couples with children, those based on the "DE - Dual earner" model recorded a recovery (from 48.3% in 2013 to 50.5% in 2018), while those focused on the "FBW- Female" model breadwinner" slightly slowed (from 5.0% to 4.8%)

The couple's education plays a role in the distribution of work between partners.

In couple families in which woman is aged 25-49 years without children there is a prevalence of the model "DE - Dual earner". In couple families in which woman is aged 25-49 years with children there is a lower prevalence of the model "DE - Dual earner" than couple families without children and an higher relevance of the model "MBW – Male Breadwinner".

When woman is highly educated there is an higher prevalence of "DE – Dual earner Male full-time and Female full-time" and, among couples with children, "DE – Dual earner Male full-time and Female part-time".

Figure 2 - Distribution of work among couple by partners' education



From the preliminary results of the multinomial logistic regression it emerges that the distribution of work among couples is highly affected by the level of education of the woman and the educational homogamy. It emerges a clear gradient in the likelihood to be in dual earners couple for the highly educated women, and this is highest when also the husband is highly educated. These are followed by women with medium education, especially if also the husband is medium-high educated. The likelihood to be in dual earners couples is lowest when both partners are low educated. In this case it is highest the likelihood to live in a traditional male-breadwinner couples; the same is observed for low educated women with medium-high educated men. Other covariates such as being in consensual union or in a reconstituted family (vs married couple), living in the North or Centre of Italy (vs South and Islands), having no children, or children older than 13, both Italians, or only the woman Italian with a foreign men, are associated with higher probability to be in a dual earner couple.

Next step will be devoted to the analysis of earning differentials among partners.

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