

WOMEN IN WORK CONTEXTS; SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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How to cite: CIONI, P. (2022). "Women in Work Contexts; Sociological Investigation." *Annals of Spiru Haret University. Economic Series*, 22(1), 213-226, doi: <https://doi.org/10.26458/22113>

Abstract

In the world of work, the presence of women has been a very stable phenomenon for years now. Some factors, such as:

- the increasing level of education,*
- the progressive outsourcing of the national economy,*
- the diversification of employment contracts,*

have definitely favored an increase in the employed female population, which however still remains in a due minority compared to the figures regarding male employment. However, one factor outlines the importance of the presence of women in the labor market, and is that relating to female entrepreneurship, which has grown in recent years thanks above all to regulatory systems which, in fact, have progressively favored both its promotion and development. . However, this is a process that has not only affected Italy, but the entire sphere of the European Union, where it is estimated that almost a fifth of the annual GDP growth can be explained, in principle, precisely with the increase participation of women in the workforce. Although disparities continue to affect the employment market, the "gender segregation" element appears singular, with women concentrated in some types of employment and men, obviously, in others.

Keywords: *gender segregation; women's empowerment; prejudices; women's work; professional skills.*

JEL Classification: JELM12, JELM15, JELM54

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Introduction

The trend of "segregation by gender", which can be seen in several working sectors, also ends up affecting income differences deriving both from the professional qualifications held and from the positions taken on in the public or private company organization charts. However, the fact remains that, at the working level, women have always had a fundamental role in society since the past, when domestic work was typically intended for them, up to the present day, where the sociological concept of "double presence" in the family and on the job market has ended up defining its characteristics with increasing clarity.

1. Some factors for women's empowerment

In Italy, the increase in the presence of women on the labor market is generally traced back to a series of sociologically concomitant factors. First of all, the disappearance of the family, understood as the central nucleus and source of identification, which for decades has passed its baton to highly individualizing social processes and which, in our system oriented towards maximizing profit, have increasingly favored the drive to highlight the potential of the individual. The consequence of this is the evident polarization towards aspirations for cultural, economic and professional achievement, very distant from the ambitions manifested by the workers of just a few decades ago. This widespread "model of behavior", especially for women, has begun to represent an unparalleled incentive for emancipation, personality development and independence. These were therefore elements that, observed not so much individually, but as a whole, right within the labor market and the consultations that come to life in it, have allowed the development of concepts that were very innovative yesterday, such as:

- flexibility of working hours,
- the extension of new forms of contract (e.g. part-time),
- the sedimentation of facilitated rules (e.g. parental leave),
- the employee's alternative location (eg: teleworking),

who have been able to contribute to the increase in female employment, but also to the change in the sectoral composition of employment. Among other things, today the recent Jobs Act has also promoted the extension of the possibilities of using parental leave, strengthened the protection of self-employed workers, granted benefits to companies that use teleworking, favored the tax credit for female workers with minor children and, finally, the offer of services for parental care was integrated. However, there is another important factor that cannot be overlooked,

and it is linked to the change and increase in consumption and the economic needs of families. The birth of national and EU policies linked to equal opportunities has also succeeded in raising awareness of the promotion of positive and indispensable actions to tackle forms of indirect employment discrimination and, in large part, also to overcome segregation in low-profile occupations. What should not be forgotten about the policies linked to equal opportunities, is that these have at least had the merit of assigning and economically measuring the peculiarity of the value that female work, centered on home care, possesses, but not through concepts linked to direct remuneration, but through the provision of services for children and legal recognition for the protection of maternity at work. These preparatory confirmations to the female condition, and which in contemporary society have generated new "significant concepts", have been able, at least in part, to respond to the needs and tight times of contemporary women, providing her with guidance, information and training services. It was these who, after all, were able to allow women to enter the labor market, not only with a more careful preparation in terms of specific skills, but rather strengthened and convinced in the awareness of their ability to manage dynamics of:

- power,
- leadership,
- command,
- risk, and to support the confrontation with a context that, at times, did not fully legitimize them as work resources.

2. The disappearance of conditioning

It may seem established, but it is precisely with the launch of care services dedicated to both children and the elderly, that women have been able to start living their relationship with the labor market in a more serene and effective way, especially if involved – as has happened in many cases and still happens – in entrepreneurial work dimensions. Today, the female working segment is increasingly characterized by an inversion of trend that sees a preference for a technical-scientific and economic training, to a fundamentally humanistic one and this thanks, both to the advent of new technologies, and to a greater awareness of own means. In fact, if yesterday women entered the productive cycle of work driven by necessity or in view of personal affirmations with respect to the role to which marriage relegated them, today they come to propose and compete on the market with very high levels of education and therefore placing themselves as

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authentic competitors with strong and determined aspirations, with the firm intention of working even after marriage and motherhood. The contemporary woman is a distant relative of that “whole house and church” of the past and in fact she no longer appears discouraged, but ambitious and strongly willing to establish herself professionally. For obvious reasons, her participation model in the world of work has therefore changed a lot. Women once entered it quite early, only to get out of it just as quickly with marriage and the birth of children, while now their entry takes place at an older age, because they look for work longer and once found, they tend not to abandon it. Whether it is an employee or an entrepreneurial activity. This means that women too see and find significant elements of gratification in their work today, indispensable for achieving that complete self-realization, which yesterday was dear mainly to men and a characteristic of the “individual traction” society that was just mentioned. It can therefore be said that the labor market has therefore changed its perspective, thus demonstrating that it has long since disappeared from the cultural, historical and operational conditioning that hindered the relationship with the female component until a few decades ago. , on the other hand, it has been able to demonstrate that it has fully developed all its potential. The aspiration to autonomy, independence, greater social recognition, the quality of work, the acquisition of higher quality margins and direct control over one’s business and one’s life, have thus proved increasingly valid reasons. For all those choices and paths that, by removing prejudices, have finally been able to accompany the rise of women in the world of work both in Italy and in Europe.

3. Career as a life project?

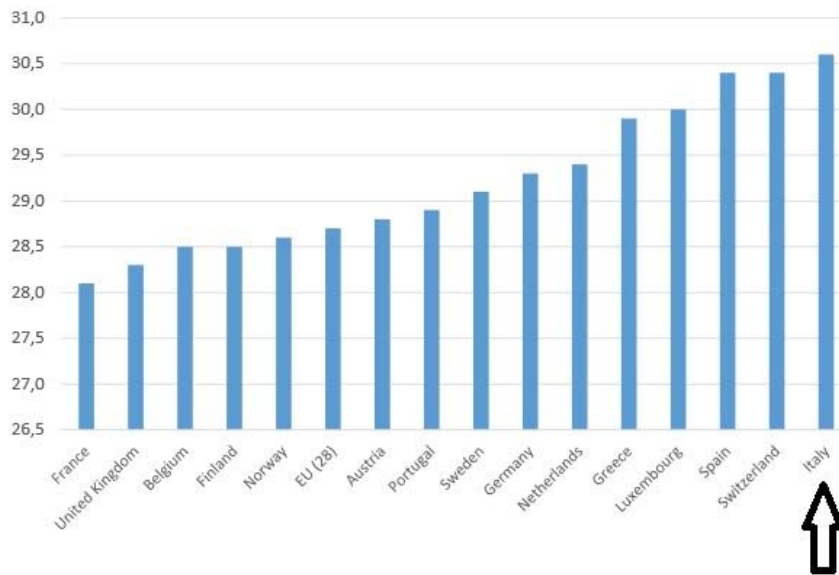
Compared to men, women show a strong predisposition for independent work, and in particular for entrepreneurial activity. Furthermore, both in the liberal professions and within companies, they love - or perhaps accept almost as a challenge - to engage in traditionally male activities. One of the major signs of a reversal of the trend with respect to the “sexist” work culture concerns, albeit to a not excessive extent, the increase in women in management and entrepreneurial roles. The areas that until yesterday were considered “monopoly of men”, today see female figures very advanced in their careers, highly autonomous in their decisions and motivated in assuming responsibilities that were unthinkable until yesterday. These are certainly not negligible characteristics, given that they allow women to land on the high “steps” of work organizations, to be identified as part of the elite,

to be morally and economically gratified and to ensure the charisma necessary for management, also in terms of power, of complex and hierarchically stratified work organizations. In this vision, however, two sides of the same coin coexist which must be considered sociologically and which many women do not neglect at all. If, in fact, high positions represent career goals and points of arrival for individual career paths that, in most cases, last as long as a person's working life, it is also true that all this has a price. A price that ends up paying through the conditioning of one's entire existence and, too often, with lacerating consequences and heavy responsibilities that derive from it. Beyond these observations, which are also closely linked to the personal sphere, the fact is that in the more educated women, a higher and lasting activity rate and a work behavior very similar to that of male colleagues was found. It can therefore be asserted that in female identity, since work is no longer a constraint, but something that is impossible to give up, this has ended up becoming an almost essential element for one's life, as well as a factor that forces rhythms, schedules, and sacrificial methods of performance that end up definitively deconstructing a woman's life project itself. So work, which until the expectation to assume its own family reproductive role, yesterday conditioned life as a transitory experience, today it has instead become the central dimension of the life project of Italian women who, to obtain it, invest resources, education and time, especially in the age period - as shown in Figure 1 - in which they could become mothers for the first time.

Even if the female family role continues to have its importance, what is certain is that today it has ended up being seen as a conditioning element for the professional career, and even if many women are committed to managing their spaces in such a way as not to having to sacrifice neither time nor career, new strategies in female behavior are now historicized. There is a tendency to never give up on the family, but it is better if, for example, the wedding is postponed, you can also start living together, but then motherhood is planned by making use of a whole series of domestic and childcare services. Eloquent in the change in approach to life, is the data with which for years there has been a decrease in the birth rate and in the number of children which, in industrialized countries, is in fact a recursive factor. It is true that this allows for greater female participation in work, but it is also true that something in our society is changing in meaning. The concept of "conscious motherhood" has disappeared to the advantage of that of "renunciation" or "postponement", since a desired motherhood essentially ends up making participation in work too difficult. Everything is therefore taking place the

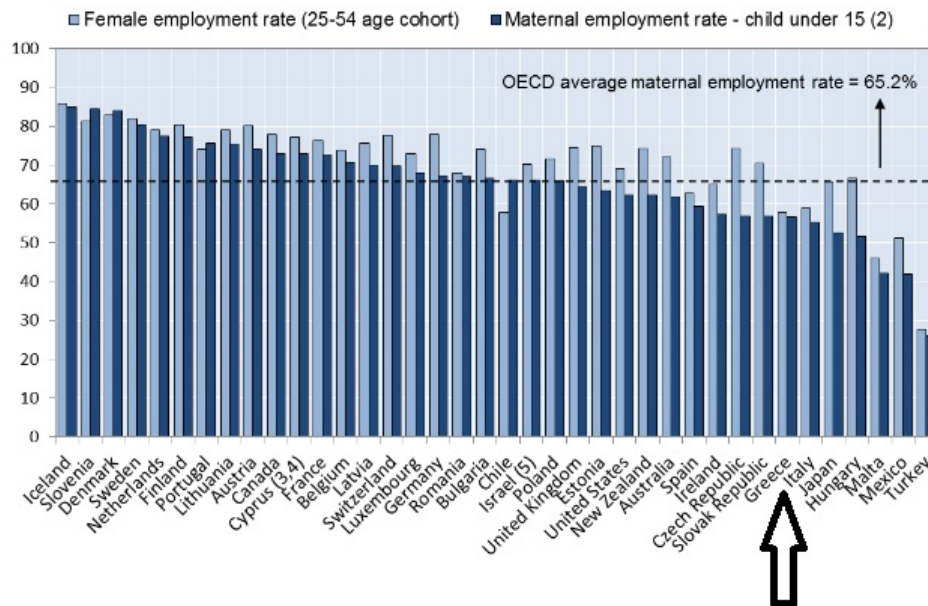
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other way around, given that once upon a time we first gave up work to have a maternity leave, while today we don't think about giving birth to babies, because we must first dedicate ourselves to work. As the graph in Figure 2 shows, women with children have lower employment rates than women without children.



1. Photo 1, source: OECD Family Database, 2015, „Average age of women at first maternity leave”

It then becomes natural to ask a question: but these "career women", ambitious, determined and full of responsibilities and commitments, once loaded with family burdens, will they feel satisfied or not satisfied with their choices? And will they be able to weigh their affections from professional satisfactions in terms of distinction? The data on life choices will tell us that, beyond how they can be analyzed, always provide a recurring certainty: women now choose their life project independently and alone. They are, for the most part, satisfied with their professional career, they positively evaluate the activity they carry out and the way in which they reconcile it with other commitments and, very importantly, they are fully aware of the "price paid" on maternity work.



2. Photo 2, source: OCSE Family database, 2015, The crucial role of motherhood

4. Goffman and Roenbau: between “face time” and tournaments

Daily life and future, innovation and conservation, modernity and tradition, impatience and patience coexist in every woman. And, in some ways, these dichotomies represent the strength of the female universe as well as ritually favoring entrepreneurial creativity, the ability to face unexpected events, the propensity to work together, the ability to analyze one’s working condition and continuous research. Of ideal solutions to avoid the excess of both family and social conditioning. To consolidate the knowledge related to the structural aspects and the functioning of productive initiatives involving women, it becomes appropriate to highlight the existence of the strengths and critical areas that belong to this universe, in order to investigate a hierarchy of the needs that emerge in the evolution of relations between business and development and between business and family, without neglecting those between the times of work and the times of life. Analyzing different working realities with these survey perspectives, a clear fact always emerges immediately: women, precisely because of their high level of

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education, bring with them strong expectations in terms of opportunities for professional growth and are hardly willing to put part of their development aspirations. They do not give up on professional activity even in the period considered to be of the maximum parental commitment, that is, the one that would go from 25 to 49 years. In the model that, generically, we define “career woman”, in fact two strong elements always recur:

- the request for almost total availability,
- confirmation of the investment of one’s time, both during the day and throughout the entire working life.

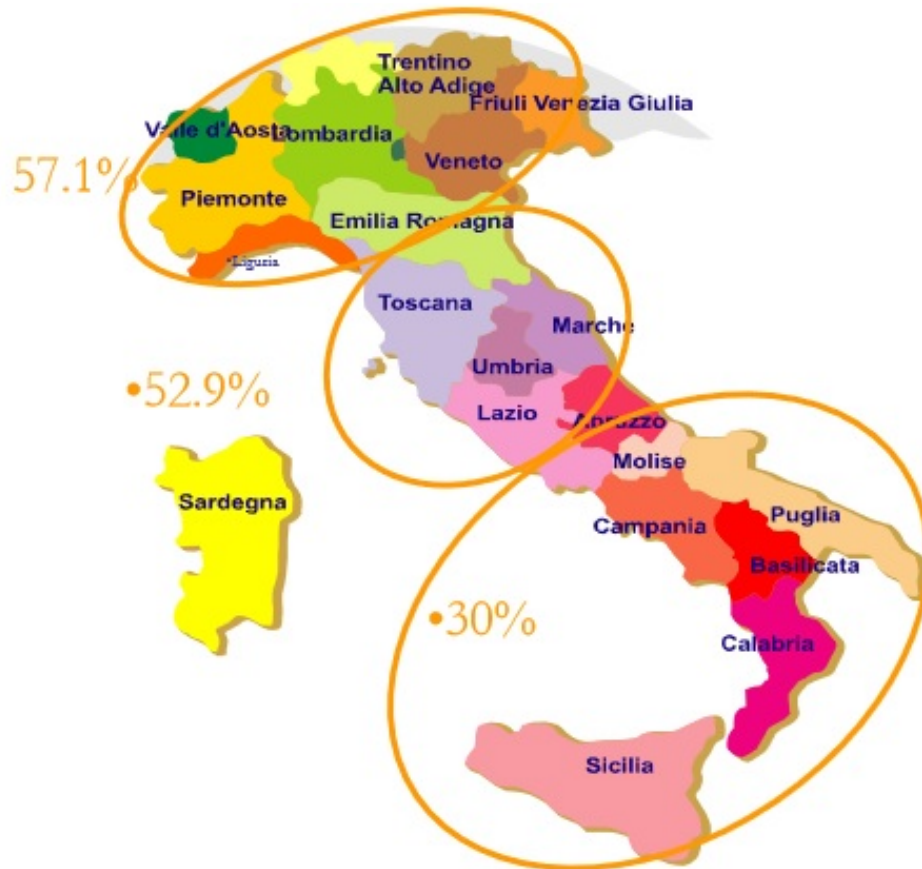
Sociologist Erving Goffman defined this total availability with the term “face time”, by which he meant the hours spent in the office – the so-called façade time – both to meet pressing deadlines and to ensure visibility in the eyes of management. In short, a strong signal of availability that is codified as a cultural trait typical of the Italian managerial culture, but extraneous to the reality of other European countries. The need to be present in the office as much as possible, even when this is not directly useful for carrying out one’s work, does not heavily affect men as much as it does women. In fact, when both men and women are engaged in work and both aspire to forms of professional development, domestic responsibilities are often not shared equally, so much so that, in crucial moments of transition, this dynamic ends up being sacrificed. Often her career. But given that today, careers have lost their reassuring temporal scheduling to acquire more discontinuous rhythms and can have sudden accelerations, as well as sudden stops, they can even be interpreted no longer with the metaphor of “climbing”, but with the explanatory comparison of the tournament. This provides, depending on the moments of corporate life, that the recognition or promotion is assigned only to those who are ready at the moment, leaving out all the others who will inevitably not be considered. This is a cumulative mechanism in which, however, no one is able to recover any selection errors and to have second chances. Open instead to the possibility of a reversal of the trend, and therefore to changes useful for the recovery of a career, it is the metaphor of small differences. According to this approach, the inequalities that occur in promotion opportunities are linked to cultural models, to some failures at the start of work, to subjective reactions of discouragement or small discriminations which, accumulating and influencing each other over time, end up by produce career differences and gaps. However, these can become changeable and produce adjustments and repositioning within the organization, even if the professional path of women always seems to run the risk

of major negative events. If, as unfortunately often happens, errors of assessment are based on gender discrimination, they tend to systematically disadvantage the future working of women, preventing them, despite possessing suitable personal characteristics, from having the same probability of success compared to their counterpart. Male. Unfortunately, it has always been true that motherhood at the wrong time has made many women lose the chance to hold a certain position. However, there are also resistances of a purely female matrix concerning the lower availability to geographic mobility – mainly due to the dynamics linked to family ties – and the greater difficulty in developing networks of contacts that are decisive for career advancement that are often subject to mechanisms corporate engagement internals.

5. Women's work and professional skills

Also for the female world, the professional career development model is defined and concretized around the concept of competence. Making a career in this perspective pushes to acquire greater centrality and visibility in the professional community which, it is good to observe it, remains in any case external to the organization, and in fact constitutes one's reference group in which one is accredited and in which one systematically checks. The ambition for career advancement thus takes the concrete form of acquiring specializations and positioning oneself with a greater reputation, strengthening experiences that contribute to improving and making one's profile attractive. To push women to enhance their skills are also negative factors, such as dissatisfaction at work, but also the possible opportunities offered by the market which, however, represent - at least yesterday - the positive factor. In any case, the general policies continue to appear, however, still linked to a social conception of work, according to which it is the duty of men to invest in work and women in the family. This is a focus - decidedly very restrictive - which within the work organizations is reflected in the maintenance of the functions of greater prestige and power by male principals and, for those of support and less centrality, by the concentration of the female gender. Unfortunately, we end up witnessing the maintenance of a traditionalist vision that is still strongly crystallized and which, by locking on a fixed idea that continues to distinguish between masculine and feminine, risks wasting the potential, resources and human capital that one has. available, as shown by the female employment rate shown as a percentage in Figure 3.

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3. Photo 3, source: Istat, 2014, The percentage of the female employment rate in the three areas of Italy

Companies and organizations driven by result and performance constraints, even with the same educational qualifications or other conditions, see the female component still underrepresented within management despite Italy having today reached participation rates of women graduates, equal to those of other European

countries. This actual lack of recognition of the decision-making weight of women becomes a critical factor for a large part of the labor market, because it confirms the presence of gender stereotypes that are still widespread and well rooted in organizational cultures. It is, in fact, in these interstices of knowledge that the selective mechanism of co-optation insinuates itself, considered the basic element on which the widespread male homologation is based in the world of work, sociologically defined homosociability and which we could translate as "male reproduction in society" . Therefore a definition that captures with great clarity how much male management is more inclined to facilitate and sponsor the entry of other elements of the same sex, to compact "sexually driven" management structures and thus strengthen single-gender ropes. A habit in which, on the other hand, women are perhaps not so interested, above all due to the lack of female solidarity, but also due to the smallness of their presence in top positions. Two factors that in fact do not allow them to weave informal networks of influence and therefore establish real leadership networks. The result is that the distribution of women in work involves professions, cadres and professional qualifications, even of significant ones, but still encounters difficulties in crossing the boundaries of management. In fact, it is no coincidence that women's careers are slower than men's and, often, more stranded in intermediate positions. This is because organizations reward unconditional time availability and a continuous presence in the workplace, both in daily life and for the entire cycle of working life. And in fact, one of the most important factors to be put in place in the career competition is precisely that of flexibility in extending working hours which ends up putting women in conditions of greater difficulty than men, especially at the moment. which they choose not to give up their private life. The model of tournaments, indicated above, confirms that an element such as maternity or the sudden illness of a family member, often falls on women and this, in the context of work, risks making them lose progress or definitively exclude them from the possibility of access. to what we can define the "successive play-offs".

6. A look at the "mare nostrum"

Despite the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity today between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea is certainly not a secondary ingredient of misunderstandings, socio-economic antagonisms, ideological conflicts and episodic fratricidal wars, to give hope for the countries of the South from where one emigrates, while in those of the North it arrives, it is precisely women. It is they

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who, in recent years, have continued to demonstrate that they look to problems, hopes and opportunities, with a view to sharing the "mare nostrum", despite the differences linked, for example, to the indicator of human development (HDI), recorded by the United Nations in the 2015 Human Development Report. The strategy to make gender equality operational and effective on a purely economic level continues to pass only through women. Equality of pay in carrying out an identical job, which Pope Francis also recently mentioned, continues to be evaded, if not even evaded, even if it is guaranteed, for example, in Italy by the Constitution or by the rules of the Treaties Europeans. The laws on equal pay are calculated exclusively on the compensation per hour worked by employees. But the wage difference between men and women - measured in percentage terms with respect to the male wage - is for example in Italy only 5.2%, while it rises to 6.6% in Greece, even 16.7% in Spain, for then drop to 3.9% in Turkey. Equality of earnings by gender is also disregarded among self-employed workers and among earners of capital income, where the differential between the male and female employment rate seems to be decreasing, unlike that concerning dependent work. In this context, the Gender-GEDI index (Gender Global Entrepreneurship and Development Index, 2015), aimed at identifying and comparing the elements that favor the entrepreneurial potential of women in various social contexts, sees for example Spain in 9th place. , Turkey in 18th - 19th place, Egypt in 27 - 28th place, out of 30 countries examined. More generally, the Global Gender Gap, used by the World Economic Forum, records the examination of the overall difference in participation and economic opportunities offered to men and women in the world, registering the 84th position of Spain, the 87th of Greece, the 114th Italy, the 130th, 131st and 132nd respectively of Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey, out of a total of 142 states. Even if the work is not at all equal, due to the horizontal and vertical segregation of women's jobs compared to men's, it should be noted that equal pay by gender is established by very clear rules. Yet the activities typically assigned to women result in a less satisfactory social but also economic status. The metaphor of the so-called "glass ceiling" makes us understand how equal career progress continues to be prevented, even in the public sector, where equal pay for equal work is more respected. Although essentially focused on the European dynamics of work, numerous researches reveal in any case and forcefully how the two shores of the Mediterranean face qualitatively similar problems, even if quantitatively diversified in the avoidance and evasion of equal pay by gender.

Conclusions

Promote development and multiply the well-being of all within the European Union which, never as today, has bonds of solidarity that are strengthened daily with dynamics of consolidation of the reception of migratory flows from the Mediterranean countries of the East and from the Africa also implies the need to fight in a coordinated way for greater justice and social equity in favor of women. The female universe today, scarcely or poorly occupied, is in fact a reservoir with a higher average productivity than that of men. Assuming then that the distribution of talents can be the same between the male and female population, an identical division of available jobs becomes necessary, as much as indispensable. The Mediterranean countries which, up to now, have favored and continued to favor men, will only continue to be very far from this vision. Women, on the other hand, with their demands and battles for equality, will be able to contribute well to what will be, not only the future of their civil societies, but also that of each of us.

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