

# The Gift Economy in Maternity and Childbirth in Italy

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*Donner la vie et la maintenir est l'activité humaine la plus productrice, mais dans notre société basée sur le travail rémunéré, ce n'est pas apprécié. Le don maternel est exclu des politiques et des discours officiels. Ce vide épistémique a des conséquences directes sur la société et plus encore directement sur les soins donnés en maternité.*

Mothering and the gift economy are topics that are often absent from official discourses. Mothers' direct voices are inaudible, and the patterns of interaction within the mother-baby unit are little known or understood. Today, very few people can accurately describe the process of birth. If society does not acknowledge the fundamental importance of this process, it risks paving the way to abuse and exploitation from the first moments of a child's life without even realizing it.

The economic and political paradigm on which our society is based is not very clear. What does "labour force" mean? What exactly is "human capital"? It is immediately clear that, in English, the word "labour" is directly connected and very much bound up with the act of childbearing. Yet, when women are in labour

it is not considered as work. Nor is the process of the "production of human capital," that is pregnancy. Furthermore, as the process evolves, the work of reproduction and the care of "human capital", in other words raising children, is taken for granted. However, the products of mothers' labour have tangible commercial and political value. As it stands, society benefits from care work free of charge, and the economy profits from the exploitation of such "labourers."

The issue of the work of mothers being denied, and thus made invisible, has been extensively addressed by Genevieve Vaughan:

[T]he market only rewards with a judgment of positive value those who accumulate gifts of profit consistently. At the same time, it degrades those who do not succeed in doing so. Work is understood only as work for money, Marx's abstract(ed) labour, while gift work is ignored and devalued, often even by the people who want an alternative economy. (Vaughan *The Gift in the Heart of Language*, 514)

Mothers are the ones who produce "manpower" and "work force," who "deliver" human beings that become workers as well as citizens. Mothers are the ones who, from their own bodies, produce optimal food supply for the growth and development of these citizens: mothers' milk. Mothers are the ones who take care of "human resources," teaching them the principles and the practice of language and socialization, thereby making them autonomous. Since the 1970s, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, an Italian feminist activist, writer, and researcher, has meticulously worked to put reproduction and care on the list of valued discourses, as well as practices and governmental policies, in Italy and abroad. However, many decades later, we are still at the "zero point of the revolution" (Federici).

Mothers' contributions to the creation and the maintenance of the society are simply ignored, despite the discursive efforts and political actions of women. At this point, we should consider the possibility that the dominant society and its mothers do not speak the same language. Could it be that the language of economics, so dear to the neoliberal society we live

in (Foucault), acts imperialistically on another language, the “mother tongue,” in a way that completely and deliberately obscures the maternal practice and the maternal economy such that even the mothers themselves cannot access it?

Vaughan addresses the issue within the Marxist framework, as does Federici and Foucault, pointing out the intrinsic and symbolic relations that our society projects on humans, and specifically on mothers:

“Those whose labour is free consider it valueless because it is *not* related to the money as its exemplar. The virtualization of work in money leaves out work that is unvirtualized, making it unrecognized, unknown but nevertheless able to be owned by the ‘head’ of the family or the capitalist.” (Vaughan, *The Gift*, 490)

In fact, mothers are the ones who create society from its roots. This process takes place within what Genevieve Vaughan calls “the maternal gift paradigm,” a way of constructing and interpreting reality originating from the maternal practice of reproduction and care. The reality of reproductive work and the way it is being enacted is therefore initially established by women (insofar as women are typically the ones to enact the maternal practices of gifting). (*For-Giving*). According to Vaughan, the gift paradigm resides in the heart of the language (*The Gift*), as the maternal gift practice reflects itself in primal language patterns. The interaction between the mother and the child is a continuous process of giving and receiving whereby the mother gives freely in order to satisfy the needs of the child, who could not survive without her gifts. On the other side, the child is not just a passive receiver. In fact, after he or she actively receives and processes the gifts, he or

she gives back signs of satisfaction, acts of communication, and other gifts (including urine and feces), according to his or her competences. Children with special needs, as well, actively participate in the gift turn-taking with their mothers (see Noble). The mother-baby relationship is the basis of our human relations and of our society; it is the model for all the rest of our activities. It is so normal and “spontaneous” that we take it for granted. Humans could not survive without the gift of mothers, neither as individuals nor in relation with others. Putting the “gift in the heart of language,” according to Vaughan, means putting the mother at the centre of the contemporary epistemology and discourses through which society engages in self-reflection. Although the gift paradigm and the maternal principle are absent from the common consciousness, they are not invisible to the laws of the market. Rather, the gift is consistently exploited by means of rhetoric that evokes it only to trap it inside the mechanisms of exchange and profit. The same method is used to exploit the Earth, Indigenous peoples, mothers, and children.

The International Feminists for a Gift Economy network argues that there are two economies in action today worldwide, the gift economy and the exchange economy, and that the latter is based on profit or capitalism. The exchange economy grafts onto the gift economy and benefits from it, and, in so doing, makes the gift invisible. From a macroscopic perspective, it is clear that so many people are exploited for the benefit of others; indeed, an enormous amount of societies and individuals live in induced scarcity while only a small amount of people enjoy the resulting abundance. From a microscopic or nuclear perspective, it is clear that the value of women and mothers has been rendered invisible.

Feminist economists have estab-

lished that the work of reproduction and care is not incalculable; if economists are willing to include it in the calculations, it can be given a value. In 1988, Marilyn Waring concluded that the economic contribution of mothers, considering housework and childcare alone, would represent forty to fifty percent of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Since her first call for action in her 1999 book *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, feminist economists have developed theoretical and practical tools for calculating women’s contributions to the economy and to the wellbeing of society (Bjørnholt and McKay). However, very few of the national GDP accounting systems—the main international and national economic tool for measuring of the wealth of the nation—have attempted to include these data.

Despite the importance of making women’s and mothers’ work visible in economic terms, Waring warns us that there is a need for a radical change within the paradigm itself. She argues that giving economic and symbolic (“welfare”) value to the work of the mothers and the gifts of nature does not solve the problem (Waring). She advocates instead for a rethinking of the economic systems, which threaten the gift of people as well as that of the Earth, from the ground up. A paradigm shift is required on all levels—institutional, common and individual—in order to fully acknowledge the gift of the mothers, the gift we all practice. We cannot withdraw ourselves from the danger of commodification of our most precious and invaluable goods.

Economists have not yet included the work of reproduction and of maternal contributions in their calculations. The production of human milk and feeding of humans at the beginning of their lives, is not considered as value *per se*. However,

these practices have a very calculated value for someone else. We are entering muddy waters; it is possible that the examples that I provide might offend someone's sensibility, so I would therefore like to contextualize this discussion further. My wish is to draw attention to the tangible, physical maternal gifts in order to go beyond the surface-level, idealizing

130 euros per litre (Smith). In 2014 and 2015, twenty-six mothers in the Italian city of Lucca donated a total of 330 litres of milk to the local Bank of Human Donated Milk while at the same time breastfeeding their own children. Two mothers from Chieti, also in Italy, donated a combined total of 390 litres of milk in 2007. Guinness World Records indicates

inadequate breastfeeding policies to see that the system nevertheless assigns a timid symbolic value to the act of breastfeeding when it takes place between the mother and the baby directly (without the change of container, expensive processing or distribution). Actually, this transaction has absolutely no economic value, as far as the system is concerned, despite

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metaphors of motherhood. I would like, at the same time, to point to the language that is being used to take advantage of those gifts.

We all know that human mothers produce milk for their children while they are newborns, and even for some time more. It is a kind of production that, when it is well established, represents an archetype of abundance. The abundance of maternal breasts have been represented in art, yet even then their role has not been given enough credit. For example, there is a fountain in the centre of the Italian city of Bologna that features one dry finger-pointing Neptune and four mermaids spraying water ("milk") from their nipples that make the fountain alive. Yet, it is called the Fountain of Neptune and the mermaids are not mentioned.

Mothers' milk is a well-known, precious resource, and it is regaining its reputation nowadays, thanks to mothers' activism and institutional recognition. As a consequence, a market of human milk has been established—the market calls this milk "human," not "maternal"—based on free donation or remuneration. In Europe, the price of human milk is

that, "the most breastmilk donated is 1569.79 litres (55,249 UK fl oz; 53,081 U.S. fl oz) to Mother's Milk Bank of North Texas." The record was achieved by Alyse Ogletree, in Argyle, Texas, USA, between the 11 January 2011 to 25 March 2014. On average, an Italian milk bank is estimated to receive around 500 to 1000 litres of milk per year (La Stampa). In Italy, twenty-nine banks of human donated milk are financed by the National Health System, and one operates privately. In Europe, only France has more such banks (36). This resource has obviously been given a calculated value; we are talking about figures expressed in billions of dollars and euros. The monetary transaction involves neither the donors and nor the end users (the pre-term babies in neonatal intensive care units [NICU]), but this doesn't mean that there is no monetary exchange going on in between the banks and the hospitals, or between the hospital banks and the National Health System. Donating mothers sometimes receive a public thank you for their contribution. Although it recognizes the economic value of the donated human milk, we need only to look to consistently

the fact that every breastfeeding mother produces at least one litre of milk per day. Worse, the mothers who wish to breastfeed their own pre-term babies in the NICU in Italy are strongly discouraged from doing so, if they are permitted at all. They are dismissed from the hospitals, and they are not allowed to see their babies outside of visiting hours. In this case, their gift is not recognized; it is trivialized.

The gift rhetoric is common in the domain of childbirth, and it obscures an underlying practice of commodification of reproduction. You have probably heard of cord blood donation (Skoko). This practice is presented as non-invasive and without consequences for the baby and the mother (Ministry of Health). The cord blood is considered to be a waste product of childbirth. Accordingly, the practice of cord blood donation belongs to the discursive field of sustainability, and as such it is strongly incentivized and supported by the state and the regions. It is widely practised by mothers, who do not realize that they are donating the blood of their newborn babies, and not a piece of umbilical cord. Unfortunately, this practice is not harmless

(Giovannini; Lim), and it is not even sustainable. Only ten percent of the donated units are suitable for stem-cell transfusion (the main reason why they are collected), but all the units are nevertheless banked and maintained indefinitely. The banks that want to get rid of those unproductive units can now employ them to produce “platelet gel,” applying an Italian medical

vide for others in need. It is not an illusion of the mothers to live in the intrinsic abundance of their nature, their big belly is the proof, as well as their pointing nipples sprinkling milk like a fountain, after the baby is born (as any woman who breastfed can testify). Mothers may well be induced to think that even neonatal blood at birth is overabundant and

are not failures of a wealth-creating system. They are essential expressions of a parasitical-centralizing system which denies the gift giving logic of mothering.

As a mother activist, the gift economy paradigm, as developed by Vaughan, is a discourse that rings true to my ears. It mirrors my experience

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patent (Justia Patents Database). The units are plastic sacks containing 100 to 150 ml of neonatal blood drained from the baby through the cord and the placenta. This blood, which used to be part of the total blood volume of the fetoplacental unit in the womb, was originally meant for the placental transfusion for the baby at birth, to secure the baby's adjustment in the extra-uterine life. Without this blood, the baby incurs in health risks. Instead of being used for its original purpose, the cord blood unit is banked inside the eighteen national cord blood banks, where it is given a market value of 17,000 euros. Italy is the world's fifth major exporter of cord blood. Still, the units that are being sold every year (less than eighty) don't cover the costs of the national cord blood banks; instead, these costs are covered by the national and regional health systems.

People donate because they feel the urge to satisfy the needs of others without asking for anything in return. Mothers give because they are asked to provide for a need, they trust the system, and they are deeply convinced that they own an abundance of gifts. With their gifts, they want to pro-

it could be used where there is scarcity. It is the idea of an ever-present scarcity, created by the economy of exchange, that paves the way for the exploitation of gifts. The system presents the neonatal cord blood as an overabundance and a waste for the baby but a resource for the ones in need. The neonatal blood would be in fact a resource for the baby itself if spontaneous placental transfusion at birth was allowed, without cutting the cord immediately. Yet, in order to supply for a presumed scarcity, the baby blood is requested as a gift. In the international medical system this gift is transformed into commodity, a blood product that circulates in the market. This is happening since the process of childbearing has been obscured by hospital maternity care practices, giving way to exploitation.

In the International Feminists for a Gift Economy's "Position Statement for a Peaceful World," presented at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2002, we read:

The creation of scarcity, the globalization of spiritual and material poverty, and the destruction of cultures and species

and the experiences of so many mothers I collaborate with. My friend Michela Cericco, president of an Italian voluntary peer-to-peer breastfeeding support association called La Goccia Magica, said in a personal conversation, "Our force is our gratuity." By this she means that the support she and her colleagues give to mothers who wish to breastfeed is a gift that they wish to offer, knowing that it is mutual and that it is the foundation of the community. They give their support and their experience freely, they don't place themselves above the mother and father in need, as professionals might do, and they don't act as authorities on breastfeeding or childbirth. On the contrary, the gift creates a relationship among equals in which both parties are validated for mutual benefit.

As Vaughan puts it:

"Gift value received and internalized becomes self-esteem, and it enhances the capacity to creatively assimilate, to respond appropriately with gratitude, to give again, and give value again to others. It is not the same as use value, which is understood sim-

ply as the utility of the need-satisfying good. The willing care of others, the ‘investment’ of the life force of the carer in satisfying their needs, gives value to the receivers by implication.” (Vaughan *The Gift* 512)

At this very moment, peer-to-peer mothers, as well as other mothers involved in mutual support in maternity and childbirth, are in a very difficult position. They have to make up for extremely inadequate and damaging birth care that have direct consequences on breastfeeding as well as on the overall health of mothers and babies, producing short- and long-term repercussions. There is an enormous array of authorities who seek to control and regulate pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, mothering, and parenting, leaving the mothers and babies disempowered, as well as subject to abuse, disrespect, and mistreatment (WHO).

The maternity assistance we have today is based on theories and practices of gynaecology and obstetrics developed within universities and applied by a series of medical professionals in hospitals. In Italy hospitals are officially called *aziende sanitarie* or public health trusts since 1992. The management of public health trusts is based on economic principles and financial calculations that dictate that the clinicians have the formal duty to be managers as well as doctors. Childbirth (spontaneous and by caesarean section) is at the top of the list of diagnoses-related groups (DRG) for which hospitals receive compensations by the national health system. The public health trusts literally subsist on maternity health services and gifts provided by women and mothers. Women that enter a hospital to give birth are seen as a series of numbers that have specific monetary value; with their bodies and the act of childbirth, they make the economy

of the hospital. The hospitalization of childbirth has an economic side; it is not all about safety.

The ob-gyn manual in use in Italian universities, claims that “birth is a biological event that involves the expulsion of the fetus and its annexes from the uterus”<sup>1</sup> (Pescetto, De Cecco, and Pecorari). Where is the mother? The invisibility of the mother is not only theoretical; it is also carried out in the practice of assistance in childbirth, with heavy consequences. Today we don’t know how babies are born because this common event is hidden inside hospital walls where women are considered to be enemies of their own babies, unable to give birth without the intervention of an authority figure. The ones placed in the positions of authority believe babies come from a container, the uterus, that they are simply the result of a biological event. The role of the mother is made invisible, and the childbearing woman simply disappears, she is objectified. The objectification of childbearing women and newborns may lead to abusive treatments.

In September 2014, the World Health Organization published a declaration entitled “The Prevention and Elimination of Disrespect and Abuse during Facility-Based Childbirth,” stating the following:

Reports of disrespectful and abusive treatment during childbirth in facilities have included outright physical abuse, profound humiliation and verbal abuse, coercive or unconsented medical procedures (including sterilization), lack of confidentiality, failure to get fully informed consent, refusal to give pain medication, gross violations of privacy, refusal of admission to health facilities, neglecting women during childbirth to suffer life-threatening, avoidable

complications, and detention of women and their newborns in facilities after childbirth due to an inability to pay.” [1]

This is not happening only in the “developing countries,” as specified in the WHO statement, this situation is evident in maternity healthcare across the globe. The invisibility of mothers is dangerous; it is a threat to their lives, to the lives of their children. The lives of their partners are also affected, because they cannot explain what happened during the birth of their children but bear the consequences nevertheless. Mothers and fathers expect compassionate and loving assistance during childbirth, a gift of care, because they are deeply convinced that birth is a beautiful thing. When they enter the world of the public health trusts, or hospitals in general, they are trapped inside unknown logics and economic considerations that they don’t understand. They don’t recognize that they are in an exchange economy where *they* are the commodity, together with their children. In that kind of exchange economy, mothers are not validated as interlocutors. They are spoken of in third person, as if they were not present. At the individual level, mothers are not part of the “team” when they give birth, their voice is not taken into consideration. Even politically, maternity care users don’t have a say in the development of policies regarding the assistance they are going to receive during childbirth. If childbearing women are not considered as persons in charge, but simple objects of care, the assistance they receive may result as being “dehumanized” and abusive, and patologization of otherwise physiological processes of birth becomes the norm. In Latin America, the phenomenon is called “obstetric violence” (Sadler, Santos, Ruis-Berdún, Leiva Rojas, Skoko, Gallen and Clausen).



The adverse reactions of women on motherhood can be extreme, suicide being the second most common cause of maternal death in Italy (Donati, Maraschini, Buoncristiano, and the Regional Maternal Mortality Working Group). The rates of suicide among women who gave birth invite us to seriously acknowledge the silent and solitary suffering of women in maternity, a suffering that is not to be automatically attributed to the women's fallible nature or their mental illness; we should also investigate the role of childbirth trauma.

If we investigate the consequences of abusive maternity care, we realize that medical personnel are suffering as well, because acts of violence between human beings negatively affect both parties (Byrom and Downe; Angelino, Cennamo, De Murtas, Forte, Librizzi, and Saviano).

In order to break the silence, we must put maternity and birth at the centre of our epistemology. Storytelling is powerful. Through the gift of stories we can bring birth and the mothers at the centre of our discourse. We can make childbirth part of the community again. Birth is one of those experiences we all go through as human beings; it is *the* most common experience of all humans, women and men, and yet we don't know anything about it anymore. Realizing what is happening to mothers and babies in maternity health care nowadays is disturbing and hard to believe, even for mothers themselves. It takes some time for the mothers to acknowledge that they have been objectified, that it was not right, and that it was not how it was supposed to be. Birth is an empowering experience for a woman, fundamental for the community and for the society as a whole. It is at the core of the human existence, and it is based on the gift. We have to make the gift visible and acknowledge where it comes from.

Only when mothers and babies

return to the centre of our discourses will we be able to reconsider our paradigms. If we don't respect the gifts of mothers, we will never respect the gifts of the Earth; if we don't respect the mother-baby unit, we will not understand how we and Mother Earth are connected.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Author's translation.

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## ILONA MARTONFI

### Skibbereen Workhouse

Walk by the An Aighlinn River,  
past St. Patrick's Cathedral church  
sculpted tympanum, a belfry

look at the bakehouse and washhouse.  
Infirmary. Idiots' ward. The dining hall.

Oh gentry of Skibbereen.

no photographs of the famine exist  
black and white images of evictions  
razed turf and stone houses

no calotype negatives

spinning flax into thread  
a hay card, a horse  
ships of departing immigrants

cottiers renting land is what was.  
But what is home?  
Potato ridges among bogs and rocks  
tubers rotting on the stalk.

Oh gentry of Skibbereen.

beyond the workhouse  
under an old yew tree, wild blackberry brambles,  
men, women, and children buried not in coffins.  
No gravestones. Nothing to inscribe names.

The grey of late November.

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