Helpless Mothers Dropping Out of the Workplace: The Italian Case of Voluntary Resignation

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Abstract

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Keywords

voluntary resignation, mothering, gender roles' internalization, family-work balance, qualitative research

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in work-life research (Hirschi et al., 2019) "motivated by greater societal interest in the topic owing to several social trends as the changing natures of gender, role families, work and careers" (Powell et al., 2019, p. 3).

Discriminatory attitudes in the workplace and the family experiences of working mothers are both linked to sociocultural scripts (Procentese, 2005), which may affect a woman's experience and individual decision-making (Byron, 2005). Gender stereotypes of women as mothers and males being the ideal workers create pressures forcing pregnant women/mothers out of the workforce. Interdisciplinary literature shows maternity plays a key role in workplace discrimination against women, since it influences both the female presence in the labor market and the emotional and psychological abuse directed at mothering women (Eby et al., 2005; England, 2005). As a result, mothers become blatantly disadvantaged in the labor market and are disproportionally discriminated against (Correll et al., 2007; Pratto & Walker 2004; Fine-Davis et al., 2004). In particular, working mothers are considered to be less

productive, competent, and more "distracted" by preoccupations related to their roles as caregivers (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Williams, 2005). At social and organizational levels motherhood is often perceived as an economic and organizational cost and the "maternal wall" (Swiss & Walker, 1993) is the expression that conveys how the woman's progress is inhibited upon becoming a mother (Williams & Segal, 2003). At an individual level in the US, Stone and Lovejoy (2004), in their qualitative research with mothers spontaneously leaving their careers, affirm "professional women are caught in a double bind between the competing models of the ideal worker and ideal parent" (p. 1). Indeed, few articles focus on how role prescriptions are internalized by working mothers (Pas et al., 2014; Lupu et al., 2018).

The Italian Case of "Voluntary" Resignation: Choose Either Your Child or Your Job

On examining mothering issues related to women's work carefully, a peculiar Italian circumstance caught our attention. This peculiarity was the case of those women who had resigned during pregnancy or the first three years after childbirth. *Licenziamento in bianco* (Blank resignation) was a specific discrimination against working mothers that was widespread across Italian companies, particularly small private organizations, where the protection of unions was frequently poorer and the power relationship between employer and worker was more effective. It occurred when employers forced newly hired female employees to sign an undated resignation letter, which they could fill out when a pregnancy was announced. In order to forestall this practice, Italian legislation introduced an explicit ban (Legislative Decree n.151/2001) on firing female workers at the beginning of their pregnancy, which would last up to the end of the third year of the baby's life (ex-art. 54). Moreover, working women who intended to leave their job during this shielded period needed to go to the Local Department of Labor to state that their resignation was voluntary, thereby indicating the absence of any discrimination whatsoever related to their status as mother and worker. In spite of their rights, at the time of this research, each year more than 17,000 Italian working mothers still submit the so-called "maternity voluntary resignation," thereby giving up their job during the period protected and guaranteed by the law (Sabbadini, 2012).

In fact, in Italy, being a mother in the workforce is expressly discriminated against (Bratti et al., 2005; Casadio et al., 2012; Zizza, 2012). On the contrary, in Northern European countries, the employment rate of new mothers shows a sharp drop in the three years after childbirth, and a gradual return to employment when the child grows up (ib.). Therefore, mothering for working women is not the same in different countries. "Italy welfare model is family oriented, it has a weak welfare state, and its social protection system is fragmented" (Collins, 2019, p. 153). At an inter-regional level (Moss, 2015), Italy reports a general lack of public services for children in the Southern regions, where employment rates for women with two children and with tertiary education are lower than the European average levels. Casadio et al. (2012) provide evidence regarding the greater likelihood mothers employed in the private sector — particularly in the South of Italy — voluntarily interrupt their work experience after childbirth (ISTAT, 2014).

It is well known that the availability of childcare services is also associated with the probability of securing employment. In Italy, the number of public childcare facilities is extremely limited for babies aged under three, particularly in Southern regions (Del Boca & Vuri, 2007; Del Boca & Wetzels, 2008). In fact, 51.4% of babies under the age of 2 are cared for by their grandparents (this happens for 47.5% in the South, for 33.7% in the North, and for 18.8% in Central Italy). "Informal care within the family is coupled with limited social services" (Collins, 2019, p. 156). According to Cañón Rodríguez et al. (2018), to pay off "the debt" to children means to bring boys and girls, their family, and their needs into the public sphere, strengthening its negotiating power in the political arena, as well as in the debate on

priorities in public policies. Furthermore, in Southern Italy, the family – rather than educational or social services — supports working mothers. In fact, in Southern Italy, only 18.3% of children under 3 attend public nursery or pre-kindergarten (ISTAT, 2017).

Therefore, Italy is a country that apparently does not allow discrimination against working mothers, but indeed slightly induces forms of blatant mistreatments. In her article, Valentini (2010) names Italy as "a country not for mothers," referring both to the absence of adequate work-family measures for employees and to the psychological exhaustion suffered by the employee due to her condition of being a working mother. The article describes a typical Italian dynamic of strategic mobbing towards working mothers: the origin of the employer's oppressive behavior towards the working mothers should be traced back to the fact that motherhood is experienced as a form of betrayal perpetrated on the company. In other words, the woman with her pregnancy dares to carve out a private space, outside of working life, and with her "egoism" puts her relational desires before the good of the company. This is specific to the Italian employment context, where a relationship based on loyalty is assumed to be established with the company.

Furthermore, the worker who returns after pregnancy is a "weak employee" in need of care that needs time to reorganize her daily life and presumably will take her attention away from the company. This often causes a kind of horizontal mobbing, that is, inflicted by colleagues instead of the employer. Again, this is specific to the Italian work context because dynamics of envy can be activated against the working mother precisely because of the benefits and protective measures to which she is entitled by the Italian law. For example, she receives a salary even when she is on leave, she can benefit from reductions and permits, or she impersonates the desire for maternity that other women have reluctantly given up to protect their careers (Hewlett, 2002; Manna, 2014).

All these considerations create a fertile ground for proper gender discriminations even in a country where the laws seem to strongly intend to avoid them. Moreover, Di Napoli, Procentese, and Arcidiacono (2019) and Di Napoli, Esposito, Candice, and Arcidiacono (2019) highlighted a powerlessness of women in mutual relations, preventing them from acquiring a more powerful role in their social context.

Literature on voluntary resignation is still rather poor, having mainly highlighted the role of social discriminatory actions. Indeed, 800,000 working women declared they have been dismissed or have "been forced to leave" their job because of their pregnancy. Essentially, 25% of these 800,000 "voluntary" maternity resignations are indeed induced by the employer, particularly *primiparae* (ISTAT, 2014). Moreover, the choice that is sometimes imposed on the mother by the employer ("choose either your baby or your job") is carried out in a blatant manner, indirectly pushing the woman into a voluntary resignation through mobbing strategies (ACLI, 2003).

Festa et al. (2011) investigated 457 working mothers who had submitted voluntary resignations to the Provincial Directorate for Employment of Naples during the first year of their baby's life. The study was conducted under the established collaboration of the Provincial Directorate for Employment, the Counselor for Equal Opportunities, and the University of Naples. It was aimed at outlining a socio-demographical profile of the mother who resigned from work, also highlighting the presence of external constraints and discriminations from the firm. The study was quantitative in nature, based on a questionnaire collecting data about demographics and reasons for the choice to resign. This research showed that, although voluntarily tendered, the resignations were strongly influenced by external pressure, partly coming from the family (11.3%) and partly from the firm. The latter was overtly recognized by a small number of women (3.2%) and silently, and perhaps badly concealed, by 27.1% of the whole sample who preferred not to give a direct answer to the question: "have you been subjected to any pressure by your employer to leave your job?" As this was the question that

had the highest non-response rate, the researchers (Festa et al., 2011) could not help but wonder whether this could mask some constraining element.

Therefore, the aim of our research was to gather women's narratives to detect the interplay among stereotypes, norms, and expectations about women's roles and familial as well employer pressure to exit the workforce once women become mothers within the Southern Italian context. The goal was to contribute to the debate on family work balancing measures and to highlight the impact of subjective factors (Hewlett, 2002; Westman, 2001).

In this vein, we considered three different levels of evaluating maternity: as institution (welfare measures and support services), as experience, and as identity (O'Reilly, 2010). Motherhood as a cultural and socially prescriptive role affects a woman's decisions about reproduction and work and their reciprocal balance (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Hays, 1996) women feel guilty because they are not conforming to the societal standard of what a good mother is deemed to be (Guendouzi, 2006). Furthermore, the ideologization of motherhood implies in order to be excellent mothers, women are expected to focus their attention exclusively on child rearing (Stuart, 2007). Conversely, the normative image of the ideal worker demands an exclusive focus on one's career. In this regard, contemporary women interiorize both the figure of the "intense" mother and the ideal worker, irrespective of their actual capacity to serve both functions (Katz, 2012; Weigt, 2006). To fulfil both expectations, working mothers are then faced with "cognitive pirouettes" (Johnston & Swanson, 2007).

For this reason, we have undertaken a situated study (Flick, 2018) aimed at analysing resigning mothers' conditions and collecting their narratives (De Luca Picione, Martino, & Freda, 2018; Esposito et al., 2017); so far, we have considered women in terms of "if" and "how" they perceive the enacting of multiple life roles – namely the inter-role conflict between work and family (Westman, 2001). Furthermore, following Chodorow (2003), we consider the effect of motherhood both as a social role and as individual unconscious experiences, exploring its inner dynamics in caregiving. We document how the social role and individual unconscious experiences directly affect mothering among our interviewees. Usually, social research involves the gap between men and women's employment rates and job opportunities, focusing on the social constraints of women's maternal role (Addabbo et al., 2010). In this case, studying women "who voluntary resign," our aim was to acquire the subjective and relational circumstances supporting this decision. Indeed, the lack of opportunities for mothers in the job market is a widespread phenomenon mostly in the South of the country, but there are also symbolic and relational factors that strongly affect this decision (Galli et al., 2019). The final goals of our research were then to detect welfare policies taking into account multidimensional factors and hopefully effectively supporting working mothers.

Aims

This study lays out the way in which both structural factors (such as workplace influences and personnel discriminating attitudes), sociocultural factors (such as the current ideology about mothering and women working), and identity factors (relating to how a woman perceives her multiple roles in life within her whole identity) interact and impact a woman's decision to take voluntary redundancy.

The specific aims of this study were as follows:

1. To illustrate the decision-making process leading to voluntary maternity resignation by identifying its motivations and circumstances.
2. To explore the subjective experience of work-life dilemmas in women who resign after childbirth.

3. To recognize the dimensions underlying maternity redundancy, by adopting a complex perspective that deepens knowledge of the interaction between external and internal factors.
4. To analyse the consequences of resignation for a woman's individual and relational wellbeing.

Our interest in this topic originates from a deep commitment to overcome women's trouble related to pregnancy and women's sexual determinants (Procentese, Di Napoli, et al., 2019; Esposito et al., 2020; Fasanelli et al., 2020). One of us is the coordinator of the Ph.D. course in Gender Studies at the Federico II University, as well as the editor of an international journal on gender studies (*La camera blu*).

Moreover, a member of our research team started her internship with the Provincial Office of the Counselor of Equal Opportunities that has as institutional mandate to contrast the difficulties women face in the labor market, regularly analyse circumstances, and fight them. This gave origin to her strong research interest in the mediating role of maternity across the women's life and careers. She then developed this in her Doctoral Thesis, with special reference to the consequences for the mother-child relationship in case of work-family conflict. In addition, a further member of our research is involved in the study of the conditions that hinder women's wellbeing and their emancipation. Finally, all of us have been involved in national initiatives directed towards improving family-work balance (see http://www.mgl.unina.it/materiali/eventi/beldi.pdf) and investigating this topic (see Manna, 2014; Procentese, 2005, 2008).

Method

We used a grounded theory method (GTM; Bryant, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method fit with the research aims because it helped to understand our issue, especially in absence of specific and defined hypothesis to investigate.

Glaser and Strauss stated "generating a theory from data means that many hypotheses and concepts not only come from data but are systematically extrapolated in relation to data during the course of research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6). Grounded theory is a general method that, through a rigorous set of research procedures, leads to the emergence of conceptual categories. Grounded theory involves the "use of an intensive, open-ended, and iterative process that simultaneously involves data collection, coding (data analysis), and memo-writing (theory building)" (Groat & Wang, 2002, p. 181).

A constant interactive reflexive process between the researchers on the collected data characterizes the GTM and the reflectivity of the team induces researchers to question themselves in light of the results acquired, in order to outline an emerging theory. Grounded theory involves the researcher leaving behind preconceived ideas, questions, and frameworks about the given research topic when collecting and analysing data (Charmaz, 2000). Bryant (2017) states that an emerging theory needs: "to fit" the context from which it was derived, "to grab" everything that is present in the context considered, and "to work," indicating how theory can lead to better practice and understanding the participants' point of view.

Participants

In the context of GTM, we adopted a theoretical sampling: thirty women who expressed their willingness to take part in this study were selected out of 457 respondents who had submitted their resignation to the Provincial Department of Labor in 2011, all from the private sector, as described in Festa et al. (2011). All these women were asked, five years after the

resignation, to take part in an anonymous study on the topic. In the researchers' aims, the five year period was chosen because of the need for a follow-up on mothers' conditions a long time after resignation.

Women were contacted (via phone) by a female researcher, who presented the study, informed the respondents about the aims of the research, and guaranteed anonymity; after this, individual appointments were then arranged. Thirty women expressed their willingness to take part in this research and were interviewed. Indeed, this kind of participant was extremely difficult to reach and distrustful about releasing interviews on such a complex phenomenon, probably due to the fear of revenge from firms or because the resignation was somehow perceived as a blatant violence women do not want to re-evoke. Women were asked to arrange an appointment at a location of their choice, which was their home for most of the interviewees, and interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes allowed the interviewees to freely express their thoughts on the whole topic, while at the same time focusing on the research questions (Richards & Morse, 2007).

Consistent with the qualitative research methodology, we used "saturation" as a guiding principle during data collection (Saumure & Given, 2008) and considered our 30 interviewees to be sufficiently representative to saturate our research questions. The participants were an average age of 35.4 years with 1.8 children, a range of educational achievements (20 high school, 7 university, and 3 middle school), and employment positions (e.g., cashier, waitress, teacher). All participants were working for companies with a maximum of 50 employees and were equally distributed by type of contract (50% open-ended contract; 50% fixed-term contract) and for working formula (50% full time job; 50% part-time job). They were all married but one separated and one cohabitant.

The research participants were contacted in 2011 (Festa et al., 2011) from the office of the Provincial Department of Labor where they had presented their resignation. Before the interview, each of the respondents was asked to sign a document of informed consent, previously approved by the research board of the Department of Labor and Provincial Counsellor for Equal Opportunities.

We prepared an interview guideline, which focused on six areas of investigation:

1. Their personal life context: culture and beliefs.
2. Their experience of motherhood.
3. Their working and educational experiences.
4. Their work-family balance.
5. Their resignation.
6. Their individual and family wellbeing after resignation.

Data Analysis

The narratives collected via the interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and subsequently analysed by means of the Grounded Theory Method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) with Atlas.ti 6.0. In GTM, the process of data analysis starts after the first interviews are collected. This is aimed at shaping subsequent interview questions in the light of the acquired data. A reflexivity-based iterative process was adopted during the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the qualitative material. Focused. Writing down memos and team meeting protocols enhanced the researchers' reflexivity (Esposito, 2017), which supported the interpretative textual analysis collecting thoughts, cognitions, and emotions.

In addition, towards the end of the analytical phase, an independent coder separately analysed the data, reaching similar conclusions. Whenever discrepancies were found, there were discussed amongst the whole research team and integrated into the analysis of the data.

Early data analysis informed subsequent data collection and categorization into wider categories

> The researcher analyses data by constant comparison, initially of data with data, progressing to comparisons between their interpretations translated into codes and categories and more data. This constant comparison of analysis to the field, grounds the researcher's final theorizing to the participants' experiences. (Mills et al., 2006, p. 1)

Strauss and Corbin (2008) identified three different coding steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, selection of the phenomenon that performs a central role, having interactions with all the other categories. This last coding provides a core category around which all the others must be systematically integrated, which enabled an explanation of all data collected into the different categories. The core category constructed a more general theory, which highlighted the network of relationships and meanings within the specific phenomenon. This procedure was pursued by a parallel activity of the research team directed at improving the contact with the office employers having first contact with women and then categorizing the textual materials.

Following grounded theory, the coding process was developed in three different levels of analysis (open, axial, and selective), through a bottom-up interpretative process. During the open coding, 280 codes were identified, subsequently the codes were reduced to 170, by combining the similar codes. In the axial coding, the codes were grouped into 12 categories, through a similarity criterion of meaning. Finally, in the selective coding phase, the categories were grouped into four macro-categories that represent the common themes underlying the categories, and, moreover, a network was created that explains the phenomena examined, through the interrelations among the categories identified.

The first macro-category, which we named "Influences from the outside: The role of the context" merges all the pressures coming from the living environments of the participants. The family (subcategory n. 1a) and the work context (subcategory n. 1b) reveal themselves to be similar in their constraining role in absence of supporting measures for the participants (subcategory n. 1c). The second macro-category "Mothering and working experience" collects the narratives about the meaning of work (subcategory n. 2b) and maternity (subcategory n. 2c) in the participants' own lives and how they interrelate in the experience of working mothering (subcategory n. 2a). The third macro-category "Identity conflicts" contains all references to ambivalent feelings in the emotional experience of the participants, related to the self (subcategory n. 3a: identity split and inner dilemma), to a constant sense of guilt (subcategory n. 3b) and to a frustrating vision around the part-time job (subcategory n. 3c). The last macro-category, named "Who really benefits from a voluntary resignation?" encloses women's thoughts questioning the real benefits of their decision to resign, in terms of women's quality of life (subcategory n. 4a), relationship with the child (subcategory n. 4b), and community trust (subcategory n. 4c).

We will now describe the contents of the four macro-areas and discuss how the core category helps to interpret the key core of voluntary resignation.

Results

Macro-Category n.1 "Influences from the Outside: The Role of the Context"

The first macro-category encompasses elements constituting external pressures:

1a. Family Context: Mothering as Women's "Natural" Role

The family cultural context of the interviewees is marked by gender role stereotypes, which attribute caregiving entirely to women. The decision to resign is "legitimated" by the "women's natural role" that lies in caregiving, as G., a 37-year-old married teacher, with two children says: "Mothers come first because they hold a much more constant relationship with their baby than the father; I mean if someone must make this choice (resignation)… I think it's more natural, that's all."

This "natural" character that most of the respondents attributed to caregiving appears as a constant in the collected narratives, thus it probably steers the direction of their work-life dilemma towards resignation. The latter becomes somehow legitimized and even right in itself when the participants consider their maternal responsibilities as a personal duty:

> I started to think that my boss was right, that actually my being mother was not allowing me to do my work properly. Eventually I said to myself: who is going to bring up my family, if not me? So, I gave in, I resigned. (F., 35 years old, 2 children, shop assistant)

1b. Work Context: The Workplace is Not for Moms!

The workplace is sometimes perceived as hostile to maternity, since motherhood is generally perceived as a hindrance to career progression, as in S.'s words: "Anyway, a mother is a burden for the employer, just like pregnancy" (S., aged 36, married, 2 children, speech therapist).

By means of more or less explicit pressures, the productive environment steers working mothers towards resignation: "Your employer tells you: if you are ready to stick to my conditions, fine, otherwise you're out" (L., aged 38, married, 3 children, employee).

If the employee does not submit herself to these direct and indirect pressures by handing in her resignation, in some cases the hostility from the firm increases to such an extent that it verges on mass intimidation. This is clearly stated by E., a 38-year-old shop assistant, with one child: "If you don't do as they say, you see, they get on your nerves so much that you leave." As stated in the literature concerning blank resignation, all of our participants came from the private sector, which in their words is a very hostile work environment for mothers.

1c. Obstacles and Perceived Support: Running Against the Clock While Feeling Lonely

For all the respondents the absence of adequate supportive policies hinders the work-family balance: "Here in Campania we have nothing at all: no available childcare services, no good policies, no facilities or support for working mothers… We are completely alone: we get no help at all" (S., aged 36, married, 2 children, speech therapist). This results in a sense of loneliness in facing the organizational difficulties related to the work-family balance, which increases stress and inadequacy related to the caring role:

> I was so irritable because every morning I used to pull my children out of bed, not as a mum would normally do, but anxiously, so I could take them to school in time because first I was meant to make the beds, do the laundry, and then hang it out, do a little bit of cooking, take care of the shopping… (F., aged 38, married, 3 children, employee)

Therefore, external pressures (linked to the family context, work environment, and organizational issues) upon the resignation, shed light on how they affect both the working environment and them as mothers.

Macro-category n.2: Mothering and working experience

The aspects analysed so far lead us to interrogate the second macro-area, which pertains to the way the interviewees perceive the relationship between motherhood and working life. This macro-category encompasses all categories that refer to the meaning that the work experience assumes after motherhood for the interviewees.

2a. External Decision-Making: Resignation as an Experience of Non-Choice

While analyzing the experience of being mother and worker at the same time, we found out that all the participants were aware of their rights, professional competence, needs, and difficulties, and felt they belonged to the category named "working mothers." N. clearly expresses her opinion when talking as a spokesperson for working mothers: "How can you really do everything? I mean job, family, house chores, children… Simply be a super-heroine! That's what working mothers are: super-heroines!" (B., aged 40, separated, 3 children, cashier).

In contrast to this statement, these women show a passive acceptance of the events. For some women, the decision to resign is primarily delegated to other major figures, e.g., the husband. From this perspective, the very decision of resigning is presented by them as an unavoidable, unmanageable issue:

> The worst thing of all this story is that I had no choice… I did cry my eyes out, just for a moment, because of all the anger, but it was something that had to be done, without much thinking about it. (A., aged 32, married, 1 child, accountant)

Some women then described they feel trapped, with no choice: "Whatever you do, someone says that you were wrong. How can you decide what's best given these circumstances? That's why you leave the other to decide." (F., aged 38, married, 3 children, employee). The perception of not having any control over their lives appears to be a predominant dimension of the respondents' whole struggle to combine both working and mothering. For example, about working abilities T. states: "There was actually trouble at work, because I had my own concerns with being a mother and a wife so I couldn't manage to fulfil my working duties and do my best... I couldn't do either of them right" (T., aged 35, married, 1 child, employee). In the same vein, C. comments on her mothering experience:

> "I knew that I was wrong because I spent very little time with my children, even qualitatively speaking sometimes, because I was so busy, I would give them a superficial attention, and I was not proud of that, I couldn't feel like a good mother." (C. Aged 38, married, 2 children, employee)

2b. Work as a Source of Both Preoccupation and Self-Fulfilment

In effect, work evoked ambivalent feelings. For most of the respondents, work is perceived as a tiring and restricting source of preoccupation, and the family demands the woman adjusts to it by putting her "motherly duties" first. At the same time, work is viewed

by them as a source of self-fulfilment, enhancing self-esteem and independence, and a social context for cultivating relationships outside the family circle:

> Dressing up in the morning, meeting people, knowing that you're good at something else other than changing nappies… Because, after all, this is what work is all about, and it's not true that women need it less than men. I think it's a vital space… […] I miss work; it was a time when I was existing, C. was existing as a woman, not just as a mum... (C., aged 38, married, 2 children, employee)

2c. Maternity as an Overarching Experience which Transforms and Limits

Mothering is described as an amazing experience that changes women life requiring them to be totally devoted to another human being:

> If I had to choose a word for motherhood I'd choose "sublime… that means wonderful and frightful at the same time. That is maternity for me. It changed my life completely... you need to take care of another human being by completely nullifying yourself... (D., aged 34, married, 2 children, nurse)

Alongside the burden of caregiving, some participants perceived the inherent risk of giving themselves over to their children. The ambivalent representation of both working life and mothering reveals inner conflict, which, combined with external pressures, turns into inner pressure (Chodorow, 2003; Glenn et al., 2016). This makes it difficult to manage the work-family balance and contributes to the choice of resigning.

Macro-Category n.3: Identity Conflicts

The ambivalent description of working and mothering which emerged in the previous section is strictly related to some identity issues grouped here. This third macro-category describes the conflict, generated by two opposing wishes that lead them to view motherhood and work as equal, absolute, and vital (although at odds with each other). For all of them the crux is to combine these different roles: "It's as if motherhood gave you certain things and work others, and you absolutely need both" (S., aged 36, 2 children, speech therapist). The categories included in this macro-category are related to personal feelings and accommodation attempts the interviewees used to balance family and work needs.

3a. Identity Split and Inner Dilemma

The interviewees were torn between incompatible drives: on the one hand there is the mother who feels childrearing is important, on the other hand, there is the working woman who sees work as a source of gratification, strengthening her self-esteem. This dilemma is clearly expressed by I.:

> You can't get out of this dilemma: to be a mother or to be a worker? Anyway, you are yourself only for a half. If you decide to continue working, you are condemned to regretting all the little progresses of your children that you can't see due to work. But… work, it is an indispensable need to me! You know. (I., aged 31, married, 1 child, beautician)

This irresolvable dilemma doomed to respondents' existential dissatisfaction that fuels their work-family conflict (Carlson et al, 2011).

3b. Sense of Guilt

The main feeling that some participants acknowledge as being the ultimate cause of resignation are the sense of guilt and of the responsibility they feel towards their children. A more in-depth analysis shows that these women feel a "double" sense of guilt that is directed towards their children and towards themselves – against which the resignation appears to be the only way out:

> I believe that feeling guilty is an existential condition of all working mothers, and those who decide to give up their jo, do that because they make a decision that they need to stop feeling guilty, to stop blaming themselves too much... however when you work you're sorry you leave your children, when you don't work you feel frustrated because you don't feel fulfilled... (M., aged 38, married, 2 children, employee)

3c. Part-Time Work as a Frustrating Compromise

The interviewees sometimes saw the solution to their balancing dilemma in taking a part-time job, though they overlooked how this could result in a further indirect form of discrimination that increases the gender gap (Addabbo & Favaro, 2012; Blazquez Cuesta & Moral Carcedo, 2014; Warren, 2010).

In this light, for some respondents, although it could be an excellent tool for organizational matters, a part-time job could still reflect, in fact, an instance of external decision-making in that it pushes the woman to "keep a foot in both camps." This effectively bypasses decision-making and/or problem-solving processes, though without completely allowing them to fulfil their desires – a sort of frustrating compromise.

> I think that the best solution for a working mother is – paradoxically – to split yourself: in the morning you should work, and in the afternoon, you should be at home with your children. This is the only way I can imagine in order to not be too stressed by your job or babies… (V., aged 32, married, 2 children, physiotherapist)

Psychologically, with this strategy the woman retains her roles as mother and worker, without being forced to make any decision, but without any outside help or intervention from relatives and institutions.

Macro-Category n.4: Effects of Voluntary Resignation

The last macro-category includes the consequences of the resignation on a personal, interpersonal, and community level, as reported by the participants.

4a. Worsening of Women's Quality of Life

On an individual level, the participants perceive giving up work as worsening their quality of life: "All of that comes with consequences, because (women who tender their

resignation) they may not feel capable of doing anything..." (R., aged 39, married, 2 children, secretary).

To this, we should also add for some of our respondents the loss of independence, gratification, and an increase in life dissatisfaction and regrets manifested by depression and psychosomatic symptoms: "I've been a bit depressed for a while. Not really clinically depressed, rather I'd say I've been feeling a bit down..." (N., aged 38, married, 2 children, pharmaceutical representative).

For some women giving up one's job is perceived as a real amputation of self-identity, which is tantamount to renouncing a vital part of the self:

> I feel as if I lacked something, as if I lacked a bit […], a mother who resigns from her work fulfills only one part of herself, and gives up the rest [...] A mother who resigns from her work is a half woman, that's how I kind of feel today, halved I'd say… (M., aged 38, married, 3 children, employee)

4b. Relationship with the Child: The Worsening of Maternal Care

All the above-mentioned elements have consequences for the mother-child relationship, which for most of our respondents paradoxically worsens, in spite of the increased time available for child-care. The mother's care is weakened, as the interviewees report they have "less energy" to devote to their children and to support them and / or that they are less able to play with their children. As J., a 37 year old confectioner with two children, says:

> How can you be a good and joyful mother if you are not satisfied with yourself? When I lost my job, of course I had much more time for my babies but when I was with them, when I played with them. I felt as I was not really involved in our relationship… of course this kind of situation could damage a family…

A woman pays dearly for her children's temporary happiness and she does so by renouncing her own autonomy:

> I think that anyway it's not right to give up your work, because sooner or later your children will develop their own independence. And, by the time they have achieved their autonomy, you'll have lost the chance to create your own autonomy, your own career, your social life. You end up with something missing. There's a part of you which is not developed. (R., aged 39, married, 2 children, secretary)

These quotations highlight what has been already described in literature (Bass et al., 2009; Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Manna & Boursier, 2018; Shahla & Chehrazi, 1990): that it is not so much the quantity but the quality of the mother's time that influences children's outcomes and the establishment of a harmonious mother-child interaction.

4c. Reduction of Community Trust

Finally, all of this results in a feeling of mistrust towards society, which is perceived as being distant from the woman´s needs, given the inappropriate support it provides. Mistrust is also directed towards the business context, as it is perceived as being hostile towards the working mother. This creates an uncertain and pessimistic vision of the future: "Otherwise, if
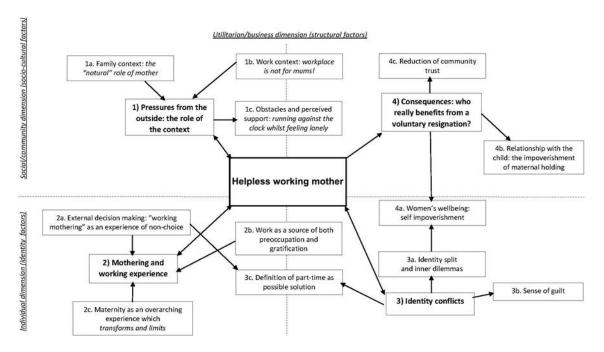
you wait for society to help you, think again… unfortunately this society does not give us a lot of help in that sense" (L., aged 38, married, 1 child, shop assistant). In our study, lack of community trust (Di Napoli et al., 2019) is particularly evident among mothers who have had their first child.

Discussion

The final step of the analysis process created a conceptual network that described the interrelations among the macro categories as well as the categories identified in the previous phases of analysis. This explanatory graphic network of interrelations between the categories described so far is displayed in Figure 1 in which the core category "helpless working mother" expresses all the "hidden connections."

Among our interviewees, the interiorized pressures from the outside (macro-category n.1), led not only to failure in mothering-work balancing (macro-category n.2), but also to the identification of identity conflicts between the two domains: mothering and working (macro-category n.3).

Figure 1
Core category: Helpless working mother

According to the interviews, an internalized struggle between the different roles emerged. The struggle was aimed at fulfilling both the ideal model of the working woman and that of the perfect mother. Since both are unattainable, they naturally tend to fail. It is worth mentioning that the interviewees never discussed paternal support in family tasks.

The family cultural model calls for caregiving tasks only for women, who feel inadequate when they are not able to shoulder all these duties (Procentese, 2008). Fathers are still not used to taking parental leave and welfare measures are mostly requested to support mothers (Gaunt, 2019).

Therefore, the responsibility is merely attributed to workplace pressures. Hence, this sense of internal defeat fosters a passive adherence to the pressures exerted by both employers

and family alike. This also triggers collusive helplessness stemming from a complex intertwining of internal and external factors.

In particular, the blatant mistreatment these women experience in the workplace determines, on the one hand, a negative evaluation of their own working abilities. On the other hand, the fear of not being a "good enough mother" always looms large.

The interviewees surrendered to the external and internal pressures. This engenders the feeling they are not up to their role. Even the family at large perpetuates the cultural model of the sacrificial mother (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Hays, 1996; McCormick, 2010), not providing support for the woman, who again cannot emerge unscathed from the work-family conflict. Therefore, this conflict is neither faced nor untangled but instead is impotently endured.

From an emotional standpoint, the ambivalent representation of work and motherhood as two incompatible, but collusive domains create a twofold sense of guilt (aimed towards both the self and the offspring). This, together with the unilateral choice (either I am a mother or I am a worker), engenders an experience of fragmentation. Within this framework, the cultural dimensions underlying the representation of the maternal role are the key variable.

Our research highlights subjective feelings concerning motherhood and their implications on women's work decisions. These topics are well known in psychological clinical practices and in feminist self-awareness groups, but, because in a multidisciplinary perspective the social burdens are much more heavily emphasized, their additional power on women's decisions is not considered in economics and sociological literature. Therefore, we decided to investigate subjective domains of a special "theoretical sampling," that is to say, women that had voluntarily resigned from their job. For decades, the blank dismission was such a heavy "invisible" oppression of women, the concurrent psychological burdens were neglect and underestimated. Therefore, all the individual emotions, thoughts and feelings concerning blank resignation were not taken into consideration and even considered to be a significant topic to be studied. We collaborated on a large quantitative study (Festa at al., 2011) that induced us to further examine all social relational and cultural circumstances framing this decision.

At the beginning, it was not easy to create close contact with our respondents, because of women's uneasiness to talk about these topics, but then, very quickly their narratives saturated all the interview domains. We considered their voice to be a very rich contribution to understanding the burden that caring for children brings to working mothers. Their "secret" individual aspects of mothering strengthen the need to increase further awareness about the difficulties of mothering in our cultural and social contexts and support the need for specific social welfare measures supporting families in their caring role.

This study brings into discussion the nature of "voluntary choice" of resignations during early motherhood. These, in fact, are decisions that are never willingly made – rather they are induced by external pressures (firm/family), which in turn collude with internal ones stemming from an internalized conflict between the different role expectancies. The impossibility of integrating them forced the working mothers to perceive themselves as inadequate in both roles, hence legitimizing the discriminative behaviours. In particular, the employer fails to "welcome" the working mother into his/her firm. In addition, being a working mother, she cannot live entirely with this part of herself. At the same time, the strong internalization of the mother's role exacerbates her sense of guilt for their own children and steers her decision toward resignation.

Everything discussed so far expresses the overwhelming power of a prescriptive gender role (Fine-Davis, 2015). By analyzing the interview transcripts and their categorization we assumed that for our interviewees such a complex experience tends to be reduced to one's own single story. While acknowledging the obstacles of social and political nature to the condition of working mothers, each interviewee seemed to translate these obstacles and conditions into

an individual experience of impotence that imprisons the woman in her personal work-life dilemma.

Thus, they inscribe their decision under the umbrella of traditional role of mother and are not able to escape from the feelings of guilt and resignation. Their leaving work is assumed in personal terms 'paradoxically' interiorizing the cultural and social circumstances of oppression they are submitted to. Therefore, their decision to leave is a sort of adjustment. We can argue that when we ask about their relations with children and family after resignation they do not talk about increased wellbeing. They are silent about their couple relationship and own mattering. Furthermore, their narratives described a poor interaction with children. Therefore, resignation did not lead to empowered relationships with their children. This tells us that resignation was for them an ineffective failed implementation.

The women interviewed disliked being forced out of the workforce, and they disagreed with the belief that mothers should not work. Although they internalized the stereotypes that a woman's primary role is a mother, they did not justify the system, which did not support women's ability to combine work and motherhood. Leslie et al. (2019) offer a model for improving the management of the work-family interface, proposing various strategies to help women deal with barriers to goal attainment. However, facing the impossibility of balancing life and work, our respondents resigned. In their experience the lack of system welfare opportunity is intertwined with poor familial support and personal identification in the role of the sacrificial mother.

In fact, the analysis of our case study has highlighted three different dimensions of voluntary resignation:

a) The social/community dimension related to the persistence of gender role stereotypes, which attributes the responsibility for caregiving only to women and accounts for the poor support given by the institutional networks and welfare measures (see Figure 1: above).

b) The structural dimension, namely the utilitarian business vision, of employers who discriminate against women on the grounds of motherhood being considered a burden; the business management model results in a family-work balance that is insensitive to women and therefore contributes to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes (see Figure 1: middle area).

c) The individual identity dimension characterized by the incompatible integration of different roles, and by the subjective submission to stereotypes of mothers or in a psychodynamic way the internalization of social constraints (see Figure 1: below).

These dimensions meet the socio-cultural (a), the structural (b) and the identity factors (c) which we identified in our study.

Our conclusions are consistent with Brown's reasoning (2010) according to which the ambivalence towards modern female identity is a social phenomenon which stems from the relationship mothers have with the social institution of motherhood and with the social expectations of the maternal role. According to this account, the working mother is subjected to mistreatment, which is set within the cultural model of idealized sacrificial motherhood (McCormick, 2010). At an individual level, according to Blair-Loy (2003) and Ridgeway and Correll (2004), the cultural normative demands a good mother to be always at her children's beck and call. However, this coexists with another widespread normative belief: the "ideal worker" should always demonstrate an absolute dedication to his or her job, along with a willingness to sacrifice any other interests for the sake of their career (Correll et al., 2007).

Thus, an internal conflict ensues in which both the prescribed images of the ideal worker and the ideal mother eat away at the modern female identity (Katz, 2012). Since it is impossible to fully adhere to both models, a clash between these two normative aspects ensues. This forces the woman to face that she cannot be both a good worker and a good mother (Williams & Segal, 2003).

In our case study, the participants' decision to resign is, therefore, a non-choice that reflects the inadequacies of the business context when dealing with working women as well as the impossibility of bringing together multiple identity experiences into a single, multi-centred existence (Campbell, 2001). Thus, the resignation throws the woman into a disempowering process, which most evidently results in a reduction of self-efficacy. The non-integration between mother and worker is reflected in the deceptive representation of the part-time job as the only solution that could serve as organizational support. In conclusion, both the blatant mistreatment arising from the behaviours of the business employers and the shared and internalized cultural stereotypes affect the woman's perception of her own potential. By sacrificing her own working satisfaction in the name of the cultural model of the best mother – which is essential within the family, the woman comes up against a forced fitting of her own identity into the role of mother, which deprives her of both social relations and her potential for success. Among our respondents the conflict is experienced only on an individual level, and they never discussed work-family support measures in the work organization and in the workplace.

Byron (2005), thanks to a meta-analytic review of work-family conflict and its antecedents, supports the bidirectional nature of family-work balance and suggests further examining variables that may more fully capture employees' experiences in that domain. In our case no comparison between public and private jobs, or between large and small-to-medium-sized enterprises was possible. Our research also needs to be reinforced by further studies of a broader group of women, aimed at examining more specific variables. These might include the period in which the woman resigns (during pregnancy /during the first year after giving birth, or later), age, number of children, and quality of the relationship with the partner. It would also be interesting to investigate how the supportive life contexts could influence the choice to resign. Another aspect to expand upon is the perception in our research that a part-time job surprisingly results in a collusive strategy that eventually worsens rather than resolves the identity conflicts involved in the fulfilment of different role expectations. Moreover, in terms of preventing resignation, it could be useful to promote practices that take into account the various systems involved in this process, which may be of value in promoting a multilevel wellbeing (Di Martino et al., 2018) of women and to develop a sense of responsible togetherness (Procentese, Gatti, et al., 2019). Different family organizations, with the active collaboration of fathers in childrearing as well as different social measures supporting working women, are not at stake. Therefore, our interviews give evidence that life-work balance as a sustainable issue needs to take into account societal provisions as well as welfare organization and cultural gender stereotypes.

Our research also gives evidence to the fact that reducing the social burden to a single fact makes finding strategies of change difficult. This is the risk we identified in the attitudes of our interviewed. Therefore, we assumed the Italian law concerning the ban on firing women the first three years of the child's life is a social measure that has a strong symbolic meaning as a protective measure for motherhood. However, its effectiveness as a supportive strategy is very far from accomplishing its goals. On the contrary, it provides support for internal feelings of guilt, hidden under the label of a "decision" which does not appear as fully voluntary as was intended by the law.

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