

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Italian women workers and women activists between home and factory: the struggle against labour precarity (1950s–1970s)

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Abstract

From a gender historical perspective, labour precarity constitutes a long-term phenomenon. Women's work represents a privileged observatory to understand how instability and precarity also characterised the cycle of economic and industrial expansion of the 1950s and 1960s. The article compares the conditions of female factory workers with those of home-based workers, a traditionally invisible category of workers, who between the 1960s and 1970s promoted demonstrations and protests with the support of trade unions, women's associations and local institutions. Changes in the subjectivity of women workers and homeworkers, whose demands often came together and gave rise to joint protests, not only became part of broader discussions on the relationship between industrial crisis and precariousness, but also generated discourses on specific forms of work that are now central to debates on flexible/precarious work such as part-time work.

Keywords: precarity; labour; women; home; factory; part-time

Introduction

From a gender historical perspective, labour precarity is a long-term phenomenon that has characterised, albeit in different forms and dimensions, all the phases of industrial capitalism, including the Fordist period. This article adopts a working definition of labour precarity that attempts to shed light on three main recurring aspects in the lives of precarious workers: wage stability; job duration and continuity; and the relationship between the labour contract and social/labour rights. On a more subjective level, the article examines job precarity in relation to its opposite – i.e. job stability – in order to understand its self-perception and social perception.

Women's work is a privileged observatory to understand how instability and precarity also characterised the cycle of great economic and industrial expansion of the 1950s and 1960s, generally considered to be the era of stability par excellence. Furthermore, this article analyses the period between the economic boom (1958–63) and the crisis of the 1970s, situating the Italian case within the broader international debate. Indeed, the first part critically presents the main Italian and international studies that have helped to

shape the article's approach, contributing to the development of a gender historical perspective in the analysis of precarious work.

The second part provides an overview of trends in women's employment and analyses the forms of precarity that characterised women's industrial work in the Fordist period, highlighting continuities and discontinuities as well as the link between precarity, exploitation and discrimination. In addition to factory workers, homeworkers are also considered in order to demonstrate the relevance of this traditionally invisible category. Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, the latter, with the support of trade unions, women's associations and local institutions, promoted demonstrations and unprecedented forms of protest, which are analysed in the following sections.

The third section of the article focuses on the response of factory workers and homeworkers to the crisis of the mid-1960s, which threatened their jobs in the aftermath of the economic boom (1964–5) and which led to a new expansion of precarious work. The voices of precarious women workers between home and factory, with a specific focus on the textiles sector, are examined to explore the levels of subjectivity and self-representation in a period such as the 1950s and 1960s when the perception of precarious work was not yet widespread. The points of view of workers, journalists and trade unionists were compared and contrasted, thanks to some articles published in *Noi Donne*, the journal of the left-wing Union of Italian Women (UDI), a key women's association for the debates and mobilisations on women's work in the period considered.

The fourth part of the article focuses on the political struggles and debates that, in the wake of the so-called 'hot autumn', were promoted by women workers for stable employment, together with left-wing trade unions and political parties, such as the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI), respectively. A wider alliance between factory workers and homeworkers was created, with important joint struggles and inquiries into women's working conditions. At the same time, some audiovisual sources reveal the different subjectivities and the difficult dialogue between factory workers and homeworkers, when they had a chance to hold discussions together, as occurred in Carpi in the early 1970s.

The last part analyses the transformations of the final phase of Fordism, with particular focus on the period between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. The change in the political-cultural and economic-social scenario had a significant impact on both the demands of women workers and the public debate on women's work. The latter is briefly outlined to show the relevance of women's employment and women's working conditions between 1968 and the mid-1970s, together with the better-known demands of the various women's movements. A specific debate on part-time work emerged, showing the connection with the wider discussion on work precarity and stability that would become central to the debate on flexible/precarious work in the 1980s.

This article draws on different types of sources. On the one hand, archival sources from women's associations, in particular the UDI national archives in Rome and the UDI archives in Bologna, are important to provide examples of protests and political mobilisations against the precarity and exploitation of industrial homeworkers and factory workers, especially in the textile and clothing sector. Archival and printed sources from the UDI are also useful for understanding the debate on part-time work, as are articles from the PCI newspaper *l'Unità*. Inquiries, proceedings of conferences and congresses, reports from women's journals such as *Noi Donne* and *Effe*, and collections of oral sources allow us to focus on the subjectivity of women workers, activists and leaders and how it changed over the period under study. The variety of sources allows us to interweave micro and macro analysis, looking at different scales such as the local, national and regional to understand the role and subjectivity of precarious women workers and homeworkers.

Women's work and precarity

Since the 'discovery' of precarity as a social phenomenon and as a specific field of study in the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s, a growing number of studies have examined the relationship between gender and precarity both at the international level and in the Italian context. Judy Fudge and Rosemary Owens (2006), together with Leah Vosko, Martha MacDonald and Iain Campbell (2009), have provided an important theoretical framework for a critical rethinking of the allegedly positive relationship between the feminisation and flexibilisation of work. In the years of the global economic crisis, Italian scholars such as Cristina Morini (2010), Adriana Nannicini (2002), Laura Fantone (2011) and monographic issues of Italian journals including *Lavoro e diritto* (De Simone and Scarponi 2010) have also critically examined the nexus between women's work and labour precarity in the post-Fordist phase.

However, some feminist scholars have also provided crucial insights to deconstruct the exceptionality of precarious work, challenging 'standard work' as the 'normal' form of employment during the golden age of the twentieth century through the category of gender and intersectionality. While Angela Mitropoulos (2005) has shown how the experience of regular and full-time employment was based on the exploitation of women's unpaid domestic labour and on the hyper-exploitation of the colonies, Isabelle Lorey (2015) has underlined that precarity was indeed the rule of capitalism, as demonstrated by the exclusion of women and migrants from the benefits of the welfare state.

The gender historical perspective has definitively proven that precarity has been a constant feature of employment in Western countries over the long term, as, for instance, the case studies presented in the issue of *Genesis* titled 'Flessibili/precarie' (Bellavitis and Piccone Stella 2008) show. Historical sources and historical studies have challenged the novelty of precarity promoted by the social science debate, which often associates the phenomenon exclusively with post-industrial capitalism and post-Fordism. Women's history and labour history had already made a significant contribution in the 1970s and 1980s, before the category of precarity had become part of the theoretical apparatus of the social sciences, entering the public and political debate, and introducing concepts such as 'instability', 'temporariness' and 'intermittency'. The studies of scholars such as Joan W. Scott (1999), Louise Tilly (1981) and Michelle Perrot (1974) for France, and Alessandra Pescarolo (1990), Simonetta Ortaggi Cammarosano (1991) and Andreina De Clementi (1976) for Italy, have been crucial in revealing the role of women in the formation of the working class and its varied path beyond stability.

More recently, Anne-Sophie Beau (2004) and Augusto De Benedetti (2006) have shown the persistence of rather similar forms of precarious work in female-dominated workplaces such as department stores in Lyon or in glove making in Naples, despite the changes in the organisation of production that took place between the eighteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century. Saffia Elisa Shaukat's (2011) research on the conditions of seasonal workers in Switzerland from the 1950s to the present day shows how precarity has represented a constant feature in the experience of Italian men and women who have emigrated across the Alps. Studies on multi-activity have revealed the condition of structural precarity of Italian women workers between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries (Fincardi 2008). Moreover, Judy Fudge and Leah Vosko's (2001) research on Canada and my own research on Italy have questioned the spread of a 'standard employment model' in the Fordist era, which seemed to be the dominant model only for non-migrant male workers (Betti 2020). Eileen Boris and Leigh Dodson (2013) have pointed out that in periods of strong growth such as the 'Fordist' period, precarity has shifted to the more 'marginal' actors in the labour market, mainly women and migrants.

Women's and trade union archives, together with the periodicals, surveys and audio-visual sources used in this article, help to understand not only the degree of precarity that characterised the lives of women workers both in the factory and at home, but also other relevant aspects such as the activism and subjectivities of both factory and homeworkers and the political solutions put forward by unions, women's associations and MPs. Primary sources help us to move beyond the image of precarious women workers as mere victims and objects of top-down policymaking, but also to understand the level of mobilisation that existed between the 1960s and 1970s, when work was thought to be more stable than ever.

Precarious work, women workers and industrial development

The dynamics of female employment in Italian manufacturing, still scarcely analysed by historians, are important to understand women's contribution to the industrial growth of the 1950s and 1960s. It is also relevant to include forms of precarious work within the broader analysis of industrial development in order to fully consider the role of women workers (Pescarolo 2019; Betti and Curli 2016). According to official statistics, in 1951 there were around 1.1 million women workers in Italian industry, compared with 2.3 million men, out of a total of 3.4 million industrial workers. In 1971, after the economic boom had fizzled out, there were 5.3 million factory workers, of whom only 1.4 were women. Thus, it is apparent that women had made a limited contribution to the overall growth in manufacturing employment, which reached almost 2 million between 1951 and 1971.¹ Employment growth in the industrial sector was mainly concentrated in the boom years for both male and female workers, as the comparison between the 1951 and 1961 censuses shows. It continued to rise in the 1960s, although the increase was more limited and intermittent due to the post-boom crisis of 1964–5, which particularly affected women workers.

According to the official statistics, in Italy's transition from a mainly agricultural country to an industrial power, the proportion of female workers in the industrial sector, which was expanding rapidly in those years, declined. Women made up 31.6 per cent of the total industrial workforce in 1951, but their presence had fallen to 28 per cent by 1971. Women workers benefited less from the economic development of the boom years, with the exception of younger women who had more opportunities to enter the factory on an equal footing with their male counterparts. The regions of the so-called Third Italy, which played a central role in the growth of women's employment between the 1950s and 1960s, ran counter to this trend. Geographically, around 50 per cent of the new female industrial workers were concentrated in Tuscany, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna. The latter region played a key role in the overall growth of female employment in industry. Between 1951 and 1971, 20 per cent of the new Italian female industrial workers were employed in the factories of the Emilia-Romagna region, where their number more than doubled between 1951 and 1971, from 61,000 to 135,000.²

Half of the women working in industry were employed in textile and clothing factories (about 700,000 out of 1.4 million in 1971), with the former decreasing and the latter increasing in terms of women's employment over the period from 1951 to 1971. After textile and clothing factories, the growth in the number of female workers in Italian metal-working factories was considerable: from 109,000 in 1951 to 280,000 in 1971. The level of qualifications of women in Italian factories decreased between the 1950s and 1960s. Statistics from the 1951 industrial census showed that women in manufacturing crowded the blue-collar ranks: around 70 per cent of the total number of female industrial workers were concentrated there, while white-collar workers accounted for 6.2 per cent of the total and apprentices for 7 per cent. In particular, there was a dramatic increase in the

number of young female apprentices, which rose from 80,000 in 1951 to 179,000 in 1961, making up 13.6 per cent of the total female workforce in Italian industry. On the other hand, looking at the composition of the blue-collar workforce, the decline in female skilled and intermediate blue-collar workers stands out: whereas in 1951 they constituted 37.1 per cent of blue-collar workers overall, by 1971 they had fallen to just 21.5 per cent. Women blue-collar workers, especially the most skilled, were much older, showing that they were kept on as apprentices for a long time. During the economic miracle years and again in the 1960s, a heated debate developed around the (improper) use of this contractual form, in which the youngest female workers were often kept on for many years without receiving adequate training.

However, the official statistics are insufficient to provide an overall picture of women's work in the industrial sector. We should not underestimate the existence of a significant number of women termed 'housewives' (*casalinghe*) who frequently worked outside the home. According to surveys on the topic from ISTAT (the Italian National Institute of Statistics), 1 million housewives had part-time or temporary jobs in the 1950s and 1960s. This shows that official employment statistics underestimated the number of women workers, because they considered only women's work that was regulated by proper employment contracts, both in industry and in the services sector.

Looking at the industrial sector, the Fordist factory, such as the FIAT plant in Turin, became the paradigmatic image of Italian modernity in the years of the economic miracle, but this image obscured the mixture of old and new that continued to characterise Italian industry and industrial relations. It was not only the factory system that contributed to the industrial development of the economic miracle years. Homeworking was seen alternately as an economically backward form of production and as a degeneration of the modern industrial system that should be absorbed into the factory system. According to some estimates, however, there were between 600,000 and 700,000 women working at home in Italy in the late 1950s, out of a total of around 5 million women workers (Commissione Parlamentare d'Inchiesta 1959). By the end of the 1960s, the estimates presented in the parliamentary debate showed a significant increase; in the Italy of the '*autunno caldo*' (hot autumn) in 1969, between 1 million and 1.5 million homeworkers had to be added to the number of factory workers, which had reached 1.4 million by 1971.

The economic, social and political importance of homeworking in the first 30 years of Republican Italy also emerged from the legislative process that developed over more than two decades and saw the adoption of two important laws in 1958 and 1973. Communist Party MPs played an important role in discussing and drafting the protective legislation, which anticipated international standards on homeworking by several decades. As reconstructed elsewhere, the first law was passed in response to the findings of the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Conditions of Workers in Italy. This Inquiry was a snapshot of the composite reality of home-based work, present from North to South and widespread in several industries, among which the textile and clothing industry stood out. The law passed in 1958 was the result of almost ten years of debate and numerous draft laws, signed by the Communist MP and CGIL general secretary Giuseppe di Vittorio, among others, and involving several Communist women MPs, some of whom, like Adele Bei and Teresa Noce, had had trade union experience. The 1958 law contained a restrictive definition of homeworkers, which would be the reason for the failure to enforce the measure. Home-based work was considered the most precarious form of work, even by sources dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. Homeworkers did not usually have a contract with the company or the intermediaries employing them, so they had no continuity or stability of pay and were not covered by sickness, pregnancy or redundancy benefits. For these reasons, the new law passed in 1973, after four years of debate, finally put homeworkers on an equal footing with factory workers. Thousands of homeworkers,

the legislators believed, would, once legalised, enjoy all the social guarantees of factory workers, such as sickness and maternity leave and employment safeguards. The law also provided for the possibility to negotiate piecemeal rates with employers through the trade unions.³

In addition to homeworking, during the Italian economic miracle, women workers of the industrial sector were involved in various forms of work that can be defined as precarious. Fixed-term contracts and unregulated dismissals deprived women of a continuous and stable wage; in the worst cases, these women were denied any form of job security and protection as they could lose their jobs at any time (Betti 2020). Other forms of discrimination, such as dismissals on the grounds of marriage, contributed to increasing women's precarity, as evidenced by the decline in the number of adult women in Italian factories.⁴ The growth of stable jobs for adult male workers in large factories was offset by the presence of a female and migrant labour force that remained in a more precarious condition. Moreover, even for workers in Fordist companies, job stability could not be taken for granted, as there was no protection against dismissals until 1966.

To conclude, the factory system based on mass production, with production in series and the assembly line, did not generate stable work alone, even in the presence of a positive economic cycle such as that of the boom years (Felice 2007). Only the regulation of labour relations and the restrictions on dismissals between 1958 and 1970, which have been reconstructed elsewhere, played a central role in creating the conditions for real employment stability for workers even in the large Fordist company (Fudge and Owens 2006).

Women's voices between the home and the factories: the shadows of the miracle

By the mid-1960s, the end of the economic boom and the shattering of the expectations it had raised among women workers and their representatives led to a renewed discussion about women's employment. The economic slump following the boom led to a massive exodus of women from paid work: according to some contemporary estimates, 283,000 women workers lost their jobs (Castellina 1964b). In Emilia-Romagna, the region with some of the highest growth rates in female employment, almost 40,000 women lost their jobs, following an 8 per cent fall in total employment between 1964 and 1965.⁵ Rural women also suffered from the consequences of the mid-1960s crisis; the fear of unemployment clearly emerged from a report conducted by *Noi Donne* in 1964. According to the publication, which had promoted important debates on women's work since its foundation as the press agency of the UDI, fewer women were working in the fields, and for fewer individual hours. In 1964, 209,000 women were no longer working in agriculture compared with the previous year; of these, 122,000 were farm labourers. Women's demands were for more stable and skilled terms of employment, including in agriculture.

Between 1963 and 1965, *Noi Donne* published numerous inquiries into the effects of the economic crisis on women workers, to understand how women were reacting to 'the great fear of unemployment' and what their actual living and working conditions were like during this period (Castellina 1964c, 1964a). In the textiles sector, according to *Noi Donne*, the female workforce had fallen by 5 per cent and the percentage of working women had dropped from 73 per cent to 68 per cent. The substitution of female workers by male workers was taking place, according to the report, owing to the use of new, more technologically advanced machines and production patterns, along with the growing use of artificial fibres instead of natural ones. Also, the introduction of round-the-clock production lines, including night shifts, tended to reduce the number of women who did not work at night, as Luciana Castellina stressed:

As can be seen, we have reached the usual discussion on technological progress. We are in a period in which men and women could work four hours instead of eight. Working mothers could solve all the apparently insoluble problems that are termed a balance between domestic work and factory work. And yet we are very far from it! For now, what is happening leads to an expulsion of women from production ... In order to stay in the factory, they will have to be able to add new theoretical knowledge to the traditional skills – by attending a vocational training college – so as to learn how to use the new machinery correctly. (Castellina 1964b)

The article highlighted how, during the boom years, strategies were being implemented to increase productivity, reducing the number of workers employed, above all women, while increasing the work rate. The perverse effect of the increase in female wages that had produced male competition for the same tasks was emphasised. In the wool-making centre of Schio in the province of Vicenza, some interviews had been conducted with the female textile workers, who stressed the fear of losing their jobs but also the desire to not go back in time. Overall, 8,000 employees were working in the wool-making centre of Schio, 4,000 of whom were women (Castellina 1964a). Antonietta Mercante, a blue-collar textile worker who had worked in Schio for several years, reported that the economic boom had increased factory work deemed to be more ‘stable’ and safeguarded, reducing homeworking. In contrast, the 1964 crisis was threatening this achievement, one that had also been considered important for female emancipation:

I have worked in the factory since 1959 and work in the repairs division. There are about one hundred women who do the work at home in our area. Now there is a crisis also in outsourcing, whereas in 1959, when there was a substantial productive development on the part of the company, many of us working in the centres were hired in the factory. For all of us it was like making a dream come true: more rights, more pay, shorter and more regular working time, more respect and then a lot of us all together. Now there is a lot of worry around and many of us fear we will be cast aside. Here also the married women want to work; those who don't work in the factory are considered to be of little importance. I don't know how to put it: it's because of the independence, the earnings and then because there is an old tradition. (Castellina 1964a)

What emerged from the stories of the women workers was how, in the context of a crisis and the restructuring of the textile sector following the economic boom, a lot of pressure was put on women to leave. Indeed, this was evident from the testimony of Adriana Fabrian, a former Lane Rossi worker, who after eight years of factory work, during which she had to deal with discrimination and mobbing, was offered a substantial payout (Castellina 1964a). Maria Pento Sartori, a member of the internal commission at Lane Rossi for the Catholic-backed trade union CISL (Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions), clearly stated that women were to be removed from weaving, transferring them to less skilled areas or else putting pressure on them to quit ‘voluntarily’. The union representative stressed the need for women to ‘study’ so that they could put themselves on an equal standing with men and be given various tasks.

The theme of vocational training also emerged from the interview with Edi De Vicari, a student in the training school for industry and crafts, who highlighted the discrimination that existed in the training of young men and women, starting with the fact that only men were admitted to the skilled textile trade schools and that the training for young women was outdated and not aligned with the technological transformations. The interview also

underlined the worsening of employment stability and of the chances of finding a stable job owing to the crisis:

In practice, the school belongs to Lane Rossi: after two years you get into the factory with the qualification of specialised worker. Or should I say you got into the factory because now there is a crisis and the job is no longer guaranteed. Actually, it is guaranteed so little that last year only half of the students got in, that is to say just 15. This year the first course didn't even start as there is a stop on new job hirings and they are not needed. So by the time I finish in June I simply don't know what I'll be doing next. (Castellina 1964b)

In the textile-making city of Prato, blue-collar women workers and industrial homeworkers worked for the very same factory, but the latter 'were everywhere', according to *Noi Donne*. The journal explained the spread of industrial homework very clearly, thanks to the analysis by the journalist Benedetta Galassi Beria:

The industry is not all there, however, in those sordid rooms: it is scattered throughout the municipality, in the rural houses, in the stables, wherever there are the looms of the female homeworkers who in hours and hours of work make at least the same output as the factory workers. That is why it can be said that all the women of Prato and in many other outlying municipalities are weavers even if in the surveys there is a high percentage of housewives instead. (Galassi Beria 1964)

In the wake of the '*autunno caldo*': factory women and industrial homeworkers together

During the political and cultural storm of the so-called *autunno caldo*, new laws were being passed to regulate homeworking, with the aim of moving forward from the previous law, which had been criticised for its limitations and lack of enforcement. Already in the mid-1960s, there had been numerous inquiries and studies, such as conferences and congresses, promoted by the UDI and the PCI, and by the textile workers' union. In this political and cultural context, the PCI promoted, during the national congress on domestic labour issues organised in Modena in 1966, a turnaround bristling with consequences and useful for the broadening of the concept of the working class.⁶ In the 1950s, homeworkers had often been criticised by the Communists and by the textile and clothing union, since they were difficult to unionise and to organise politically.

At the congress in Modena, the PCI promoted the full inclusion of homeworkers among the working class, highlighting the need to search for unity 'between the factory working class and the working class that work at home'. The reduction in homeworking had to be directly linked to the achievement of a 'secure and stable' job, since homeworking was explicitly associated with job instability by the PCI as well (Betti 2022a).

The new legislative process led to renewed institutional attention to the phenomenon, and also saw direct action by Communist-led local institutions and union organisations in monitoring homeworking. In the period 1969–73, women factory workers and homeworkers promoted various forms of protest, including joint strikes and bottom-up inquiries initiated by the workers themselves with the support of the textile and clothing workers' union. These inquiries contributed, in some cases, to broadening the demands for health-care in factories and took place thanks to an alliance between university students and doctors, often with the collaboration of local institutions.

In San Giovanni in Persiceto, near Bologna, where there was a high proportion of homeworkers, a high level of activism and a strong UDI group, in 1969 a collective of

doctors and students promoted a survey. The research involved meetings that took place between the collective and the 86 homeworkers who participated in the survey, the distribution of a standard questionnaire, and individual interviews at the women's homes and their workplace.⁷ The subject of mental and physical health emerged as a central point in the analysis, highlighting a harmful ambience, while working times turned out to be particularly long – up to 12 hours on average, with peaks of up to 15 hours. A sense of frustration and resignation emerged alongside a desire for change. In 1971, it was the municipality of San Giovanni in Persiceto that undertook a new inquiry based on a sample of 978 homeworkers, mostly engaged in knitwear activities.

Trade union leaders also played an important role. Rosa Marchi, from the secretariat of the Italian Textile and Clothing Workers' Federation (FILTEA-CGIL), reiterated the importance of trade union involvement with homeworkers. The Bolognese trade unionist underlined the need, inside the factories, for the union activists to deal with homeworking and, on the outside, that the homeworkers should register with the labour exchange and the union, forming guilds (*leghe*) 'to create the premises for the fight for better pay, demanding the enforcement of contractual tariffs' (Cutrufelli 1977). The importance of the activation of the female homeworkers and the control of homeworking was reiterated at the 1971 provincial congress of FILTEA in Bologna.⁸

The Emilia-Romagna case, examined in recent studies, shows how the passing of the 1973 national law was preceded by an important protest by female homeworkers, supported by the trade unions, and by women's associations such as the UDI and the PCI. Numerous assemblies were held in 1973, some trace of which remains in the archives: a new strike promoted by the clothing trade unions saw the female homeworkers of the Bolognese plains lay down their tools and take to the streets.⁹ There was no lack of meeting agendas approved transversally by all the political groups, as was the case of the district council of San Donato in Bologna.¹⁰

Concerning the role of the PCI in promoting assemblies and debates on homeworking, there is also an important audiovisual record preserved by the Audiovisual Archive of the Workers' and Democratic Movement – namely, the film made by the Bertolucci brothers in Carpi in 1971.¹¹ The documentary records moments of a homeworkers' assembly organised by the PCI, which showed the encounter between the homeworkers, some activists and the women factory workers. The exchange between a factory worker and a homemaker was indicative of the difficulty of establishing a dialogue between them, partly because of the mistrust that the former nurtured towards the latter.

In the factory we are always more united than the homeworkers; if you think something is good for the workers, think again with the unions ... the homeworkers, if you ask them to do something, to go on strike, they refuse, they even laugh ... There are a lot of differences; we are very far from reaching an agreement with the homeworkers.

The homeworkers, on the other hand, emphasised the difficulties they faced every day compared with factory workers, the loneliness they experienced daily, and the threats they received from employers.

What I wanted to tell you is that the internal workers are more united in the struggle because they have contact with each other day by day; for us homeworkers it is very difficult to agree on how to behave ... if you can go to the factory without the workers' groups ... for example, the work I do in the embroidery field and we have to do directly with the employer but in these last days with the scaremongering that the employer spreads among the internal workers saying that he wants to reduce the

hours among the homeworkers because he says that there is too little work ... saying that the factories must be closed while this is a lie concocted by the industrialists because there is enough work, they are always in a hurry, and instead work ten hours.

The 1973 law was considered a victory by the political and union organisations, the women's associations and the female workers. It produced even more incisive action by the unions, in particular those involved in clothing, which in the Bolognese and Emilia-Romagna context promoted a broad campaign for negotiations concerning piece-meal tariffs (Betti 2021). The creation of unity between the female factory workers and the homeworkers was the unions' main objective, by holding joint negotiations and thus avoiding the distinction between the internal and external workforce, seeking to reduce precarious work and illegal work.

The unions and the female associations were supported by the local and district bodies, as occurred in Zola Predosa and in the Mazzini neighbourhood of Bologna, which promoted assemblies and public initiatives to make the new law known to female homeworkers.¹² The UDI took steps to map the actual enforcement of the law, mobilising its members to promote a campaign of training and awareness in a context like that of the Emilia region and Bologna, where the association could count on large numbers. The debate on homeworking did not end with the passing of the law in 1973; on the contrary, a new phase of mobilisation began thanks to the actions, often joint, of homeworkers and factory workers in a changing context dominated by industrial restructuring and a new expansion of the home-based work.

In the mid-1970s, a new debate on women's employment emerged as the effects of the economic crisis drove growing numbers of women out of the factories and into industrial homeworking or into the informal sector as domestic workers. However, the public debate on women's employment had already begun in the late 1960s.

The protests against part-time work and the crisis

In 1968, during the National Conference on the Problems of Women's Employment promoted by Pieraccini, the Minister for the Budget and Economic Planning, the UDI had denounced women's unemployment and underemployment, which were considered the main problems affecting women's work at the time (*Noi Donne* 1968). The conference was attended by a wide range of participants, from the trade unions and the employers' federation to women's associations, including the women's movements of the parties themselves.

On that occasion, it was estimated that the number of employed women in 1968 had fallen by hundreds of thousands compared with 1963. It was also pointed out that the process of productive restructuring, which had affected sectors with a high proportion of female employment, such as food and textiles, had in fact undermined the working conditions of many women (Righi 2008). The priority was to establish a medium-term target for women's employment, which, according to the statistician Nora Federici, had to be brought in line with levels in other countries.¹³ The socialist Maria Magnani Noja spoke of the need to change the features of economic development through planning, together with structural reforms.

In preparation for the conference, the Ministry of the Budget had sent a questionnaire with a series of questions to find out what the political and social stakeholders thought about the dynamics of women's employment and future scenarios. The replies show some interesting convergences between the Catholic and Communist areas. On the eve of the conference, the PCI publicly reiterated its criticism of government policy, which

it blamed for the deterioration in the quality of women's employment. The Communists called for the creation of 750,000 new jobs for women, an improvement in the qualifications and social conditions of women workers through a reform of the vocational training system, an increase in compulsory education and the establishment of a national kindergarten service, public nurseries and full-time primary education. The congress organised by the Women's Movement of Christian Democracy (DC) in the autumn before the conference also underlined the importance attached by Catholic leaders to stable and qualified paid work for women, while an important role was also attributed to vocational training, especially technical training.

In the difficult economic situation of the 1970s, a decade increasingly characterised by productive restructuring and decentralisation in the industrial sector after the oil shock (1973), women were again the most affected by informal employment, precarious work and redundancies. The condition of precarity was seen by the women members of the Women's Co-ordinating Committee of the Metalworkers' Federation (FLM) as a specific aspect of the more general problem of female subordination in the world of work (Frisone 2014). This problem could not be resolved, according to the so-called 'feminist trade unionists', without broadening and improving social services, in particular nurseries and kindergartens. The Co-ordinating Committee of the Feminist Commissions of the University of Rome clearly highlighted the fact that demanding extra-domestic work, or even a percentage of places allocated solely to women, would have meant demanding a 'double job' (Stelliferi 2015). Some feminist groups that were active within the 1977 movement stressed that only a change in the functioning of the family institution and a radical change in the sexual division of work could improve women's social and working conditions and lead to a reduction in labour precarity (Benecchi et al. 1977).

Between the late 1960s and late 1970s, a specific discussion on part-time work emerged after the launch of the so-called Pirelli Programme. This was proposed in March 1969 by the businessman Leopoldo Pirelli, head of the Pirelli group, internationally known for its tyres and with factories in Brazil, Turkey and Greece in the 1960s. In April 1969, the corporate Pirelli magazine *Fatti e Notizie: Manuale per i dipendenti Pirelli* published an article aimed at explaining the relevance of part-time work and its social scope, as well as its spread in other Western countries such as the USA and the UK. The *Fatti e Notizie* article, which was intended as a response to harsh criticism from women's associations and trade unions, reaffirmed that the Pirelli Programme was not compulsory, either for existing female employees or for new recruits.

When the public debate on part-time employment started in Italy, part-time work had already become widespread in various European countries, as well as in North America during the golden age, and was discussed at the international level in the postwar period. Since the 1950s, the International Labour Organization had promoted surveys and studies, while international trade union organisations took different positions regarding part-time work between the 1950s and the 1970s, as recent studies show (Helfert 2023; Boris 2019).

In the 1969 press conference organised by the Union of Italian Women to discuss the Pirelli Programme, several women industrial workers spoke out against part-time work. A female worker from Pirelli stressed that part-time work was not even discussed among the thousand or so women workers, because they knew that part-time work would mean a 50 per cent reduction in the normal wage. She recollected a recent example of the possible implementation of part-time work:

Now, a month ago, Pirelli had spread the word among the factory workers that they needed women to work four hours in the canteen: if the Pirelli workers agreed to work four hours, they would accept it, but nobody did, so they hired women from outside who were forced to accept these four hours, otherwise Pirelli would not

take them on. That's why we don't believe in the free choice of four hours: if a worker is hired for four hours, then the boss makes sure that she can't go to full time. (UDI 1969)

Other blue-collar workers from Turin (Superga), Milan (Face) and Reggio Emilia (Max Mara) took the floor and explained why part-time work was not a viable solution, owing to the difficulties in the work–life balance they were experiencing (Vegetti 1969). Both the UDI weekly *Noi Donne* (1969a, 1969b) and *l'Unità*, the PCI newspaper, devoted several articles to women workers' opposition to part-time work. The trade unionist and radical left-wing activist Ninetta Zandigiacomi (1969) pointed out that both men and women workers at the time fought hard for, among other things, a reduction in working hours, since Saturday was still a working day. The mobilisation of women to get a qualified job contrasted with the idea that they had to reduce their working hours in order to look after the family.

The UDI's reflection on part-time work addressed a historical problem of women's working conditions – i.e. the disproportionate number of women in casual and unskilled work. According to the women's association, this tendency was encouraged by the spread of part-time work, which they called 'half-time work'. Other disadvantages were related to women's retirement income, which would have been considerably lower if they had worked only part-time (UDI 1969). A few years later, as the problems of women's employment grew more acute, UDI promoted a series of national meetings to examine the problems of women's employment and to establish its political line of action. The defence of women's employment and protests for the stability and qualification of women's work were the key priorities, together with action to reduce underemployment and create new jobs in the services sector.

During the 1974 national conference held in Genoa under the title 'Le donne protagoniste del nuovo modello di sviluppo' (Women Protagonists in the New Development Model), UDI reaffirmed its opposition to part-time work.¹⁴ In that same year, in the pages of *Effe*, the feminist magazine founded in 1973 by second-wave feminists, Danielle Turone and Grazia Francescato emblematically titled their article 'Paga dimezzata fatica raddoppiata' to criticise the possibility of including part-time work in the industrial context, limited to 'students, people with disabilities, women' (Turone and Francescato 1974). During the National Conference on Women's Employment in 1975, the bill on part-time employment presented by Tina Anselmi, the DC Minister of Labour, was bitterly contested by both left-wing women's associations and trade unions. In the second half of the 1970s, DC women MPs introduced further bills to highlight the increasing popularity of part-time work among women and the need to modernise the labour market (Betti 2022b).

In 1984, part-time work was finally regulated by law, after a debate that saw both trade unionists and feminist activists embrace a positive approach to the introduction of part-time employment. The law enshrined the possibility of working regularly for a shorter period than provided for in collective agreements or for fewer hours per week, month or year. This law allowed for two types of part-time contracts: horizontal part-time and vertical part-time. These part-time contracts had to be in writing and could no longer be informal as they were before; they also had to specify duties and schedules (by day, week, month and year). Politicians, trade unionists, women's organisations and second-wave feminist groups all contributed to the debate from different perspectives, but they all agreed that part-time work could be a tool for redesigning work patterns and promoting a better work–life balance for both women and men (Betti 2022b). In the 1980s, the debate on part-time work was intertwined with the more general debate on the conditions of working women and flexibility, which will be the subject of further analysis.

Conclusions

This article not only shows the relevance of women's labour precarity in the history of work in Fordist Italy but also offers new insights for understanding the role of precarious women workers during the Italian economic miracle. The impact of Italian industrial growth during the boom years and its aftermath can be reconceptualised through the lenses of precarity and gender. Women's work helps to deconstruct the shining image of the boom. The latter has been critically analysed, especially from a geographical perspective, which has revealed the deepening of inequalities between the North and the South of Italy; less analysis has been devoted to the issue of the quality of work and its gendered dimension. By analysing the boom from the perspective of women's work, fully including industrial homeworkers, women become more and more important for the Italian industrialisation process. In 1971, according to official statistics, around 3.8 million men were working in industrial sectors compared with 1.4 million women. However, there were between 1 million and 1.5 million homeworkers, most of them women, according to estimates in the late 1970s. Considering both factory workers and industrial homeworkers helps us recognise the real impact of women's work in the 1950s and 1960s labour market, something that has been obscured by the precarity of their condition.

The impact of the 1963–4 crisis, usually underestimated and under-researched, has emerged as a pivotal event in revealing the existence of precarity among women workers as well as their demands for job stability in the mid-1960s. Blue-collar female workers were the first to be ousted from industrial production in the post-economic boom years, especially during the process of restructuring the textile industry. The UDI journal *Noi Donne* revealed women's fears of losing their jobs along with their commitment to keep working in the factory despite the pressure exerted on them by their employers, who asked them repeatedly to quit to become full-time housewives or to seek employment elsewhere. Instances of women workers' subjectivity emerged in the articles analysed.

Industrial homeworkers, a traditionally invisible and highly precarious category of workers, started to take action more and more frequently from the mid-1960s, thanks to support from trade unions and political parties, such as CGIL and PCI, respectively. The debates and protests preceding the passing of the new labour protection law showed new alliances with blue-collar workers during the peak of labour struggles in Italian factories, which came to a head in the so-called *autunno caldo* in 1969. In the early 1970s, after the 1973 law on industrial homeworkers was passed, a fresh series of protests emerged thanks to the combined efforts of women workers, trade unions, women's associations such as the UDI, political parties including the PCI and local municipalities. The different approaches of factory workers and homeworkers also transpired in the joint assembly held in Carpi in 1971 and in the women's speeches.

This article casts light on a debate on women's work in the late 1960s and early 1970s that had previously been overlooked by historiography. In 1967–9, women's employment was discussed at the national level, with the involvement of the government, but it was also debated by trade unions, political parties and women's associations. A specific aspect of the debate was related to the proposal made by Leopoldo Pirelli aimed at introducing part-time work in the Pirelli factory; this was opposed by women workers in the 1970s as it was deemed to be a possible step backwards, whereas it was embraced in the 1980s. The debate on part-time work for women was not new at the international level, and in the Italian context it had influenced the public debate since the late 1960s. The voices of the Pirelli workers, together with those of trade unionists, UDI officials and feminist intellectuals, are useful to help us understand how part-time work was seen by many in the 1970s as a possible source of precarity and de-qualification, while in the economic and cultural climate of the 1980s a diametrically opposite view prevailed.

Notes

1. III General Census of Industry and Commerce, 5 November 1951, various volumes; V General Census of Industry and Commerce, 25 October 1971.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Law no. 877, 'Nuove norme per la tutela del lavoro a domicilio', approved 18 December 1973; published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, no. 5, January 1974.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Gramsci Foundation of Emilia-Romagna Region (FGER), Archive of the Italian Communist Party of Bologna, s. 'Commissioni, Sezioni di lavoro e Dipartimenti', 'Commissione femminile', 'Corrispondenza 1961–1971', b. 1, fasc. 2 'Corrispondenza Sezione Femminile Centrale 1964' (Nilde Iotti, 29 June 1964).
6. FGER, Vittorina Dal Monte Archive, Attività sindacale (1951–1987), b. 4, fasc. 1., *Orientamenti e programma di lavoro del Pci per i lavoratori a domicilio: documento conclusivo del convegno nazionale sul lavoro a domicilio*, Modena, 2 July 1966.
7. Archive of the Union of Italian Women of Bologna (AUDIBO), b. 19, f. 'Lavoro a domicilio, documenti, 1972–1973', *Inchiesta campionaria sul lavoro a domicilio nel Comune di San Giovanni in Persiceto a cura di un Collettivo di medici e di studenti*.
8. AUDIBO, b. 19, f. 'Lavoro a domicilio 1972–1973', *Relazione al 2 congresso provinciale della FILTEA-CGIL*, Bologna, 7–8 May 1971.
9. AUDIBO, b. 19, f. 'Lavoro a domicilio, documenti, 1972–1973', *Flyer Lavoranti a domicilio*, 1973.
10. AUDIBO, b. 19, f. 'Lavoro a domicilio, documenti, 1972–1973', *Flyer Comune di Bologna, Quartiere San Donato*, 1973.
11. B. Bertolucci and G. Bertolucci, *Le lavoranti a domicilio*, 1971; in Archivio audiovisivo del movimento operaio e democratico (Aamod), <https://youtu.be/v8tkmxBqMas>, accessed 19 July 2023.
12. AUDIBO, b. 19, fasc. 'Lavoro a domicilio, documenti, 1972–1973', *Una conquista delle donne e dei lavoratori (6 dicembre 1973)*.
13. National Archive of the Union of Italian Women (NAUDI), Thematic Section, 'Diritto al lavoro', b. 10, f. 82, Nora Federici, *I problemi del mondo del lavoro, Relazione alla conferenza stampa d'inizio d'anno indetta dall'UDI*, Rome, 12 January 1965.
14. NAUDI, Thematic Section, 'Diritto al lavoro', b. 24, fasc. 148, *No al lavoro dequalificato, no al tempo parziale, no all'emarginazione della donna. Le donne protagoniste del nuovo modello di sviluppo.* Note in preparazione del Convegno dell'Unione donne italiane. Genova, 23 marzo 1974.

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Italian summary

Da una prospettiva storica di genere, la precarietà del lavoro costituisce un fenomeno di lungo periodo. Il lavoro femminile rappresenta un osservatorio privilegiato per comprendere come instabilità e precarietà abbiano caratterizzato anche il ciclo di grande espansione economica e industriale degli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta. Le condizioni delle lavoratrici di fabbrica sono messe a confronto con quelle delle lavoratrici a domicilio, una categoria tradizionalmente invisibile che tra gli anni Sessanta e Settanta ha promosso manifestazioni e proteste, con il sostegno di sindacati, associazioni femminili e istituzioni locali. Il cambiamento della soggettività delle lavoratrici di fabbrica e delle lavoratrici a domicilio, le cui rivendicazioni spesso confluivano in proteste comuni, si inserì in un dibattito più ampio non solo sul rapporto tra crisi industriale e precarietà, ma anche su specifiche forme di lavoro che sarebbero diventate centrali nel dibattito contemporaneo sul lavoro flessibile/precario, come il part-time.

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