

## **WOMEN'S TRAJECTORIES IN ITALIAN COOPERATIVES.**

### **All that glitters is not gold**

*by Alessandro Martelli, Rebecca Paraciani, Ilaria Pitti\**

#### **Abstract**

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In Italy, cooperative organisations are well developed and extremely important for the national economy. Although they are capitalist enterprises, they are based on democratic and mutualist principles, which (at a theoretical level) have facilitated the inclusion of women. The paper focuses on the employment of women in Italian cooperative organisations. By analysing secondary national data from the Italian Commercial Register, contents from semi-structured interviews with experts and interviews with cooperative workers in three different productive sectors, we investigate three dimensions of women's employment: horizontal and vertical labour segregation and the gender pay gap. The research shows that although the level of female employment in the sector is higher than in the capitalist organisations, vertical and horizontal segregation, combined with the fact that women work less due to the massive spread of part-time contracts, still contribute to a significant gender pay gap.

#### **Keywords**

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Cooperative organisation, Labour segregation, Women's employment, Italian labour market

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the phenomenon of women's employment in cooperative organisations. Women have historically represented a significant part of the social and employment base in this kind of enterprises. Indeed, in principle, cooperative organisations seem to offer women more opportunities for employment and empowerment than capitalist enterprises<sup>1</sup> (Nippierd, 2012; Bharti, 2021). Focusing on Italy, a country with a rich, well-developed and diversified ecosystem of cooperative organisations, this research questions these assumptions by looking more closely at the type of employment obtained by women in cooperative enterprises. The article specifically investigates horizontal and vertical labour segregation and the gender pay gap in the cooperative sector, through the secondary analysis of national statistical data and the analysis of semi-structured interviews with experts and employees.

With women making up half of the employees, cooperatives appear to be fertile ground for female employment. However, data show a gendered horizontal segregation of labour, with women working mainly in social cooperatives, in agriculture and in the service sectors. Moreover, women seem to be able to break through the glass ceiling and to reach positions of leadership and power only in social cooperatives, while vertical segregation of labour persists in the other fields. Despite the impressive levels of female employment that characterise the sector, where 53.1% of jobs are held by women (Euricse 2023), vertical segregation and the massive spread of part-time contracts among female workers contribute to a significant gender pay gap.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the main characteristics of cooperative organisations in Italy are introduced. Second, the article explores literature on gender studies in cooperative organisations. After presenting the issues and dimensions observed in relation to female participation in cooperatives in the Italian labour market, the paper explores and discusses the main results, integrating quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The last section shares some conclusive considerations.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "capitalist enterprises" refers to those organisations in which property, business and industry are controlled by private owners rather than by the state, while the term "co-operative enterprises" is used to refer to associations set up for the purpose of the joint management of an enterprise in order to provide its members with the goods or services for which the co-operative was set up.

## 2. COOPERATIVES IN ITALY

In Italy, there are five types of cooperatives, which can be categorised according to their purpose: labour cooperatives, social cooperatives, user or consumer cooperatives, and primary sector producer cooperatives. The first type accounts for the majority of the Italian cooperatives (49.8%), while 24% of Italian cooperatives belong to the social sector, 6.5% are user cooperatives, and 3% are producer cooperatives (Istat, 2019). Data on employment show that out of 10 workers in cooperatives, 4 work in a workers' cooperative and 3 in a social cooperative. An analysis of the sectors of economic activity allows us to understand the main activity of the cooperatives. The sectors with the highest number of both cooperatives and workers are health and social work, transport and storage, and business support services and education. Trade and manufacturing come next, followed by construction (Istat, 2019).

The largest growth in cooperatives and the number of workers in them has been recorded in strategic sectors: logistics, large commercial distribution, construction and personal and business services. In these sectors, Italian cooperatives have progressively become effective competitors to other capitalist enterprises. At the same time, they have partially replaced public administrations in the provision of some basic social services (Minnardi, 2023).

Italian cooperatives are organised under three central umbrella associations: Legacoop, Confcoop and AGCI. The central associations provide support and advocacy to their members. Available data point to the significance of these associations in the Italian economy and labour market: in 2010, the three cooperative centres had a turnover of €140 billion (corresponding to 7% of Italian GDP), represented 43,000 enterprises and involved more than 12 million workers (Parisini, 2017; Istat-Euricse, 2019).

Compared to other EU countries, Italy has a relatively rich, well-developed and diversified ecosystem for cooperatives. Numerous public support measures and initiatives have been developed by national authorities, and networks and mutual support mechanisms are also well established, especially for social cooperatives. Cooperatives have thus ensured high levels of employment: the workforce employed by cooperatives has reached 1.3 million people, representing 7.2% of the total workforce in Italy (Istat, 2014<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>2</sup> The Istat 2014 report, based on the 2011 dataset, is one of the most recent statistical surveys, together with the datasets presented in the methodological part of this paper. This undoubtedly justifies the need to complement quantitative data with in-depth qualitative research.

### 3. GENDER DYNAMICS IN COOPERATIVE ORGANISATIONS

The review of relevant literature suggests the need for research on gender dynamics in cooperative organisations.

International research focuses on the relationship between female workers and cooperatives. For example, Huang and colleagues (2015) examined the annual reports from 2008 to 2012 of 34 cooperatives in Malaysia. Through this analysis, they found not only that male directors dominated the boards of cooperatives in the country, but also that the relationship between the gender composition of the board and cooperative performance was insignificant: no differences emerged when comparing cooperatives with men or women on the board. Spadaro and colleagues (2024), who analysed 20 cooperatives, also affirm that gender differences in cooperatives did not emerge with the degree of conflicting interests and societal levels of gender equality and economic development. Furtner and colleagues (2021) produced the same results with similar research conducted in Germany. The main problem that emerges is that even though cooperatives increasingly promote strategies to value women, women are often marginalised in cooperatives when it comes to decision-making and leadership positions (Dohmwirth and Hanisch, 2019). A study conducted by Bastida and colleagues (2020) on 264 Spanish cooperatives shows a positive association between cooperatives and women's entrepreneurial activity, based on the assumption that this model is especially suitable for women's expectations and is favourable to their economic entrepreneurial development. The authors also emphasise the need for responsive policies and programmes that promote the cooperative model, since it aids female employment and women's entrepreneurship even in periods of economic austerity.

The importance of non-discriminatory organisational systems that enable participation in conditions of equality was the focus of another series of studies on women in cooperatives (Senent, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2015). For instance, Sánchez (2011) suggests that cooperatives can favour the implementation of work-family policies, such as flexible timework or parental leave. The adoption of these policies can, in turn, act as a motivating factor for women seeking employment in these enterprises. According to this research, cooperatives have a set of intrinsic "cooperative" values and operating principles able to facilitate and increase the implementation of policies and programmes to promote genuine equality. As cooperatives pay special attention to collective needs and social issues, they are likely to be especially sensitive to issues related to gender equality

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and the adoption of socially responsible behaviour (Okechukwu and Agbodike, 2016).

In Italy, a tradition of study on the ‘women and cooperatives’ combination emerged between the 1980s and the early 1990s, when interest in this topic progressively waned. Historically, women have represented a significant part of the social base and employment in cooperatives, but their role in middle and top positions has been limited, with boards of directors and technical structures largely composed of men. Only in recent decades has there been a gradual increase in the number of women on boards of directors and in the management and administration of cooperatives (Bassi and Miolano, 2020). As in other sectors (e.g. high-tech, engineering or music and audiovisual production), in the world of cooperative enterprises, “technical culture” seems to be an object of research (Menzani, 2021, p.159). The term “technical culture” refers to the so-called professional *savoir faire* that is a prerequisite for the technical professions in demand in the cooperative world, especially in the primary and secondary sectors, where the presence of women is low.

In Italy, women’s work in cooperative organisations has rarely been studied (Bassi and Moiano, 2020), even though gender equality has been central to discussions and development strategies in the cooperative world. For example, much attention has been paid to the composition of decision-making bodies, with the introduction of a minimum threshold of 30% female representation on cooperatives’ decision-making bodies (Fedrizzi, 2007). Furthermore, actions have been identified to counteract the “glass ceiling” phenomenon, i.e. the difficulty for female workers to access top positions, and to mainstream gender in organisational practices (e.g. by developing inclusive glossaries or introducing gender quotas) and to promote women’s empowerment.

The next section presents the design of our research.

#### 4. STUDYING WOMEN’S TRAJECTORIES IN ITALIAN COOPERATIVES: RESEARCH DESIGN

To understand female participation in cooperative organisations in Italy, a secondary analysis of Istat data on the Italian Commercial Register was conducted, and eight semi-structured interviews with experts were carried out between October and November 2023. Lastly, 51 semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and April 2024 with male and female workers in three different cooperatives in three different productive sectors: construction, catering and services. The purpose of the interviews was to supplement the lack of some quantitative information

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and to illustrate the complexity of the object of study by including the life stories of the professionals involved.

The cooperatives involved in the qualitative research were selected on the basis of differences in female participation in them and in the broader sector they belonged to. In the first cooperative, labelled *Build*, in the construction sector, female participation is low. In the second cooperative, in the services sector (mainly cleaning and socio-educational services) the female presence is high, especially among workers and members. We labelled it *Multi-service*. The third and last cooperative, which we will call *Catering* and which is in the catering sector, features a broad female participation at both employee and governance level, with female managers and executives.

We have considered dimensions that are important for the emergence and reproduction of gender inequalities in the labour market: *horizontal segregation*, *vertical segregation* and the *gender pay gap*. Horizontal segregation refers to the higher (or lower) concentration of female workers in certain economic sectors or occupations. For instance, in Italy, women occupy almost all the so-called “essential” occupations in education, social services, domestic work and cleaning (Istat, 2023). Care and social work are a large employment pool for women in Italy, but this also leads to their exclusion from other, male-dominated sectors, such as those characterised by a demand for technical and/or technological skills (Cardinali, 2021). Horizontal segregation is closely linked to the second dimension: vertical segregation. This is essentially the difficulty – indeed in certain sectors, the impossibility – for women to reach top and managerial positions (Purcell et al., 2010). The third dimension – gender pay gap – can be understood both as the difference in average wages between the female and male working population (in 2018, the difference in average wages between men and women was 43% in Italy and 36.2% in Europe. In both cases, the difference is in favour of men) and as the difference in wages between male and female workers with the same occupation, level of education and seniority (in this case, in Italy, men earn 5% more than women in the public sector and 15% more in the private sector) (Eurostat, 2021).

## 5. WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT, LABOUR MARKET AND COOPERATIVE ORGANISATIONS

It is a fact that female participation in the labour market is still limited in Italy, and in order to discuss gender inequalities in the labour market, it

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is appropriate to consider several factors that contribute to their persistence over time.

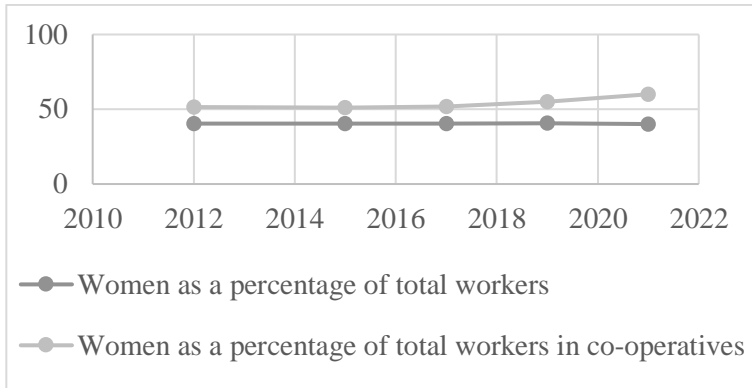
In 2023, the women's employment rate stood at 52.5% (15-64 years) while the men's rate stood at 70.5% (Istat, 2023). 27.7% of working women have a non-standard contract, compared to 16.2% of working men (Istat, 2021). Part-time contracts (mostly involuntary), which are inappropriately used as a tool to reconcile work and family life, are very common among Italian female workers (Burrioni, 2016). The gender gap is even wider if we look at the inactivity rate, i.e. the percentage of people who are not part of the labour force, out of the total number of people of working age (15-64): 42.7% of women are inactive, compared with 24.4% of men (Istat, 2023). In Italy, in one out of five cases (Istat, 2023), the birth of a first child for women coincides with a break from work or a reduction in the number of hours worked. If we look at the data from the 2018 International Labour Organization (ILO) survey on the use of time, we see that women in the world spend at least 5 hours a day on unpaid care activities, while men spend only 1.5 hours. Based on the ILO survey, Italian women spend about 5 hours a day on unpaid care activities, while men spend 1.6 hours. Considering that our country belongs to a Mediterranean and familistic welfare model (Esping-Andersen, 2015), further inequalities emerge in the performance of activities related to the management of domestic activities and the care of children and the elderly (Carreri and Poggio, 2022). In particular, given the inadequate supply of childcare services (Gori, 2023), this gap is particularly high in the first years after the birth of a child, to the extent that this event appears to seriously affect women's employment prospects, often leading – as underlined – to an interruption in employment, if not a permanent exit from the labour market (ILO, 2023). If we analyse the employment rate of women (25-49) in Italy, taking into account the family status of female workers, we see that 80.9% of single women and 74.9% of women living with a partner and without children are active in the labour market, while only 58.3% of women with children work (Istat, 2022).

Restricting our analysis to the world of cooperatives, we see that, at a statistical level, these organisations, especially those of a social nature, seem to increase employment opportunities for women.

In Italy, women make up 40.1% of the total number of workers (Istat, 2021). This figure remained fairly constant (Fig. 1) in the years from 2012 to 2021. In Italian cooperatives, 60% of the total number of workers are women (Istat, 2021) and women's participation increased by ten percentage points between 2012 and 2022 (Istat, 2021), as shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 1. Women among workers in the labour market and women among workers in cooperative organisations in Italy from 2012 to 2021, percentage values.



Source: ASIA, elaboration by the authors.

### 5.1 Horizontal labour segregation in cooperatives

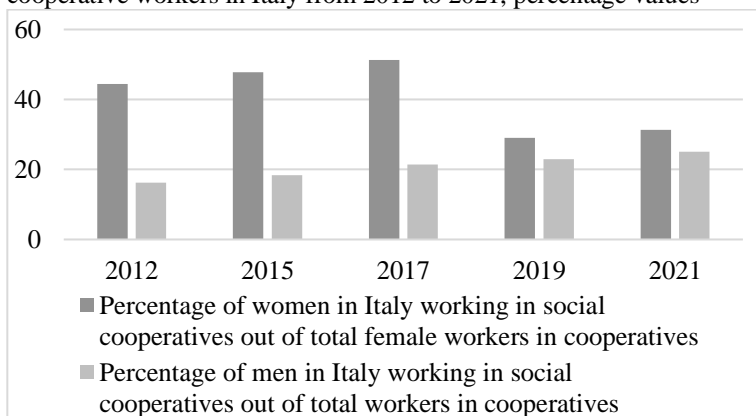
Focusing on the dimension of *horizontal segregation*, data allowed us to analyse and compare the percentage of women and men working in social cooperatives. Once again, data for Italy are available for the period 2012-2021. Data show that the world of cooperative organisations is not immune to horizontal segregation: the majority of women working in cooperative organisations are employed in social work, while the same does not apply to male workers. However, on a positive note, the gap appears to be narrowing (Fig. 2).

The percentage of women working in social cooperatives decreased from 44.4% in 2012 to 31.3% in 2021, while the percentage of men working in social co-operatives in the same years increased, from 16.3% to 25%.

Considering the qualitative data collected through our research, in terms of horizontal segregation, all the interviews highlight that the presence of women does not characterise all production sectors in the same way. Just as in other entrepreneurial structures, there are sectors that facilitate female inclusion and others where women's participation is limited.



Figure 2 - Women and men working in social cooperatives out of total cooperative workers in Italy from 2012 to 2021, percentage values



Source: ASIA, elaboration by the authors.

If we think of service cooperatives that do cleaning and things like that, even there we see that these are women's jobs, if you'll forgive the expression. They are tasks suitable for women, considered suitable for them, I mean taking care of people and places.  
Expert, Female

In sectors like construction [the female presence] is almost zero. I have a hard time imagining women on construction sites, so when there are any women among the working partners, they're usually technicians or, even more likely, office workers; there are a few there.  
Expert, Male

In Italy, the sectors dominated by women are social and service, agri-food, tourism and cultural cooperatives. Although these sectors all have high female employment rates, women's careers do not have the same characteristics. In some cases (e.g. social cooperatives), there are many women in management and decision-making positions, while in others (e.g. agri-food) there are many women among blue-collar workers.

A widespread belief that there are jobs suitable for women and others suitable for men also emerged from the interviews. Taking our three case studies as an example, even in male-dominated sectors (e.g. construction), administrative offices are staffed entirely by women. Again, jobs such as cleaning or canteen attendant are seen as typically female. These activities are linked to qualities such as precision and concentration,

which are (stereotypically) associated with the feminine sphere. This belief is shared by women and men alike.

I certainly believe that a woman has a harder time making herself heard in front of thirty male workers. It is more difficult to assert herself, even if she is an engineer or surveyor.

Worker, Male, Build

Let's say that I see a difference here. If I think of the cook, I see him as a man, but the kitchen workers are women. Or at the tills there are more attractive girls, to give a good image of the company.

Worker, Female, Catering

There are no male cleaners, and if there are, they do things like extraordinary or particularly extensive cleaning. I think because of a stereotype... that is, they [men] think that women should do the cleaning.

Worker, Female, Multi-Service

## 5.2 *Vertical labour segregation*

Here we present the dimensions of *vertical segregation* and the *gender wage gap*: while in the social and cultural sector most female workers have an open-ended type of contract, in the agri-food and tourism sectors – female-dominated, as underlined – there are less stable forms of contractualisation (also due to the seasonal nature of the employment).

We see that a prevalence of part-time contracts emerges among the female workers in cooperatives.

Part-time work has a particular incidence in the cooperative sector, where the female component is higher and where female workers request it [...] for us, it offers flexibility [part-time work], useful for those who have to reconcile family and work life.

Expert, Male

What we definitely see is [the use of] flexibility tools, as part-time contracts can be... it's certainly the element most widely found in recent years among female workers, also due to the strong impact the pandemic has had on extending remote working. [...] In terms of reconciling work and family life, part-time work is still –unfortunately, I would say – the most widespread tool.

Expert, Female

In other words, for women, a stable contract is more often characterised by fewer hours worked, and in most cases for reasons related to the need to reconcile work and family life (from a male perspective). In Italy, part-

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time employment often emerges as an involuntary choice, made necessary by the lack of other conciliatory tools and policies, and by cultural patterns that continue to hinder female trajectories. In our country, more than 50% of women with a part-time contract have an involuntary part-time contract, far exceeding the average of EU countries, which stands at around 20% (Istat, 2022). In the world of cooperative organisations, as in other enterprises, the lack of specific tools to facilitate the work-life balance of female workers means that this type of contract is often used as a substitute for the development of appropriate tools, often to the disadvantage of working mothers. Part-time work undoubtedly affects the salary of female workers, who, because they are employed for fewer hours, earn less than their male colleagues, in most cases employed on a full-time contract.

When we speak about *vertical segregation of labour*, we refer to that glass ceiling, which is difficult to see, but even harder to break, and which makes it difficult for female workers to reach managerial positions and power roles (Cotter et al., 2001). This low presence of women in top roles also emerges in female-dominated cooperative organisations. However, there are also sectoral differences. While in the agrifood and service sectors women are present but do not reach power roles within organisations, in the social cooperative sector the presence of women is high even at managerial level (Bassi and Miolano, 2020).

With regard to the *gender wage gap*, it is clear that if women tend to work fewer hours (involuntary part-time) and do not hold managerial roles, they will also be more likely to earn less than a man who, in addition to working more, is more likely to be in a hierarchically superior position (Hegewisch and Hartmann, 2014).

The sector that leads the way in terms of female employment is the social cooperation sector, due to the fact that in personal services first and foremost, and unfortunately in all care work even outside the entrepreneurial system, it is still women who keep this system going. [...] So as I was saying, social cooperation is the sector that has the highest numbers in terms both of female workers and of women in governance. And women sit on the boards and are the directors of these cooperatives; very often they are the presidents. This is not the case in all the other sectors.

Expert, Female

Let's say I find it difficult to give a promotion to a person who works only half of the time, in the sense that he or she works part-time. And here almost all the women work part-time, so they can look after their children.

Worker, Man, Build

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The world of social cooperatives seems to be the most suitable for breaking the so-called glass ceiling, almost certainly because of the greater presence of women, due to what we previously called horizontal segregation. Moreover, it is precisely in this sector that there seem to be many instances of 'women's co-operatives', i.e. organisational structures in which the presence of women on the Board exceeds 50%. From the interviews, it emerges that the common intention of the central organisations in Italy is to maintain the female presence on Boards of Directors at around 30%, trying, where possible, not to fall below this percentage. Interviewees' opinions on gender quotas are ambivalent.

I wouldn't call it a gender quota. Let's say that having at least 30 per cent of women on the association's board of directors is ... how should I put it, a mission, a desire.

Expert, Male

The decision was taken to adopt so-called "pink quotas"<sup>3</sup> because otherwise there are really no [women on Boards of Directors], and this way at least 30% of positions are held by women. So this is a double-edged sword, in the sense that on the one hand, there is a push to identify female figures able to serve on these bodies, while on the other hand, there are those who think that the pink quotas can actually penalise [women]. For example, people might think: 'she is there thanks to a pink quota'. I personally think [the gender quota] is positive, because otherwise there wouldn't even be this 30%, so it's an opportunity, because in any case, once you're on the Board, regardless of your gender, you can certainly make a contribution or express a thought.

Expert, Female.

The mere fact that this internal debate exists leads us to affirm that the presence of women in the cooperative world is a topic of vital and renewed interest.

Again, in the case studies considered, a wage disparity emerges between women and men at the same level, and this disparity seems to increase as responsibilities increase. Thus, women managing to break the so-called 'glass ceiling' still have lower earnings.

I think it's normal to have different salaries even among us directors, and equal grading does not mean equal responsibilities in their field. I am a manager in the management systems department, but I do not have the same

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<sup>3</sup> The term "pink quota" is colloquially used to mean "gender quota". A gender quota is an instrument designed to accelerate the achievement of balanced participation and representation of women and men, setting a defined proportion (percentage) or number of places or seats to be filled by or allocated to women and/or men, usually according to certain rules or criteria.

responsibilities as the commercial director. That's why I earn less.  
Worker, Female, Catering

When looking at women's working experiences within cooperatives, we can ultimately affirm that "all that glitters is not gold". Cooperative organisations seem to welcome more female workers than the private sector, but even in this type of organisation there are clear indicators of gender inequalities: horizontal and vertical segregation and gender pay gaps. There also seems to be a lack of corporate welfare solutions, distributed differently according to the size and type of enterprises involved (Pavolini et al, 2013).

The most widespread solution to work-life balance issues is part-time work, although this tool can be seen as a double-edged sword: working fewer hours means a reduction in salary, and it is more difficult to offer career progression and decision-making roles to those who are present for less time in the cooperative.

Nevertheless, a positive aspect of the research is that in the Italian context – notably in cooperatives – we can identify organisational and associative practices that have been introduced with the aim of generating cultural change (Ely and Meyerson, 2000): an increase in gender equality training events, the spread of inclusive glossaries and a growing demand from cooperatives to obtain Gender Equality Certification<sup>4</sup>. It should be noted that, like any newly introduced regulatory instrument, its interpretation is also affected by a construction phase (Trigilia, 2007). In particular, different interpretations have emerged, for example regarding what the certification means by 'gender equality'.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research aims to provide an introductory overview of the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of female workers' participation in cooperative organisations, with a particular focus on Italy.

After considering the structure of cooperative organisations in Italy, we focused on the characteristics of women's work in these contexts, proposing a literature review on the topic. We set out the reasons for the research and illustrated quantitative and qualitative data on the issue of gender in cooperative work in Italy, against the backdrop of the Italian labour market.

With almost half of employees being women, the cooperative world seems to be fertile ground for female employment. As confirmed by the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://certificazione.pariopportunita.gov.it/public/info>

interviews, it is above all the world of social cooperatives that is favourable to female employment. Although cooperative organisations seem to facilitate female employment compared to the world of traditional businesses, there is a horizontal gender segregation emerging here. Vertical segregation also seems to emerge in this context, with a low female presence on the territorial and presidential councils of these organisations, confirming the existence of a glass ceiling, which is even more difficult to see when female workers represent more than half of the employees of these economic realities.

Women mostly work in social cooperatives, agribusiness and services. Furthermore, they tend to do similar activities, specifically associated (in the words of both men and women) with female characteristics (such as caring, listening, precision, concentration). Moreover, it is only in the world of social cooperatives that they seem to be able to break the glass ceiling and reach top roles and positions of power, highlighting a *vertical segregation of labour*. Even where the glass ceiling is broken, however, we see that there is still a difference in wages and in the perception of the type of responsibility required of a man and of a woman. This type of segregation, combined with the fact that women tend to work less due to the massive spread of part-time contracts, contributes to the emergence, even where there seems to be room for female employment, of a *gender wage gap*.

Nevertheless, the issue of equal opportunities for male and female workers seems to be an increasingly widespread theme in the cooperative world: glossaries, good practices, seminars on the subject and an increasing number of applications for Gender Equality Certification highlight a growing interest in the subject.

In conclusion, we feel it is appropriate to make a few remarks about future scenarios and the hoped-for shift from dealing with these issues to establishing legislation and adopting practices that promote, develop and value difference.

The broad recourse to involuntary part-time and remote working in cooperatives to compensate for the lack of suitable work-life balance policies seemed to us to be one of the first issues to consider, also with reference to the size and scope of the different cooperatives.

In addition to the hoped-for introduction of measures to improve work-life balance (e. g. Legislative Decree 105/2022)<sup>5</sup>, a first step would

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<sup>5</sup> Legislative Decree no. 105 of 30 June 2022 implementing Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers

be to extend the number of people entitled to part-time work and priority access to remote work, granting it to both parents.

Moreover, investments in a corporate welfare system made up of services rather than vouchers could fill some of the gaps that emerge in the world of cooperatives, and elsewhere, due to the characteristics of our welfare system, which, although it has been undergoing a period of reform and development in recent years in terms of essential services, remains rather fragmented, Mediterranean and family-based (Kazepov and Barberis, 2013), effectively placing much of the burden on women.

In addition, the obligation to draw up biannual reports on the situation of male and female staff in cooperatives with more than 50 employees could be extended.

Our analysis also reveals a clear link between co-operative values and gender equality strategies and policies. At the basis of work-life balance policies, for example, are the co-operative values of mutualism and responsibility, with repercussions on the local area and benefits for the community. The challenge that the cooperative movement needs to rise to regards a cultural *rapprochement* between different working environments, in order to address gender mainstreaming as a cultural issue, and not just an organisational matter.

Moreover, in cooperative organisations, as in the Italian labour market, there seems to be a lack of correspondence between the high level of professionalism in the female workforce and an adequate response on the part of enterprises. The cooperative world could therefore be a model for valuing and promoting women's individual abilities and skills, with all the values mentioned above, and especially meritocracy. Cooperative organisations, in essence, seem to offer more opportunities than capitalist enterprises, both theoretically and historically, because their very basic, distinctive principles and contents make them a more suitable economic model, with more tools for a better interpretation of new circumstances and of people's needs. However, these principles still need to be turned more extensively into practice, finding a way to play a role of social innovation in the field of equal opportunities.

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