



DATI ALLA MANO

I PODCAST

WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT, TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

Female employment is on the rise and more and more women are on the labour market. This is definitely good news. But I wonder: have we actually chipped away at that famous glass ceiling we hear about, or are there still invisible obstacles that hinder women's career paths and professional fulfilment?

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast by Istat, the National Institute of Statistics, where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a public communication project.

In this episode we will talk about women's work, about the sectors in which they are most present, their career paths and the difficulties they encounter.

Let us start with the positive data. In 2023, the activity rate for women aged between 15 and 64 reached 57.7%. Does this seem like a small percentage to anyone? Then I must remind our listeners that in the 1970s it was just over 30%, so it's easy to understand that there has been a big step forward. And for those who don't remember, the activity rate is an important indicator, because it tells us how many women are in the labour market, employed or looking for employment. Furthermore, the proportion of employed women is also growing, and this, clearly, makes us very happy.

Now, however, let's move on to the downsides. In Europe, we are in the last place for the rate of female employment. German, Dutch, and Finnish women are at least 20 percentage points ahead of us. French women are more than ten points ahead, and Spanish women are eight points ahead. Italy is more in line with Greece and Romania. Be careful, in line but still behind Greece and Romania.

And then there is the issue of professions, which led me to ask a question: is there equal access to different professional fields?

I asked Maria Clelia Romano, an Istat expert on the subject and co-editor of a book edited by Istat and Cnel, which will be published soon and which has a title that says it all: "Women's work: between obstacles and opportunities".

Cristiana. Hi Clelia, welcome.

Maria Clelia. Thank you, hello everyone.

C. Listen, are men and women equally present in different professional fields?

MC. I'll answer you with the data from 2023: more or less half of female employment is concentrated in 21 professions, while for men the professions are as many as 53.

C. An interesting phenomenon.

MC. It is called *horizontal professional segregation* and has been increasing over the last 15 years, meaning women are increasingly present in activities that have historically been feminised.

C. But is it women who choose from a more restricted range of work areas, or what?

MC. I would say the issue is more complex and involves cultural factors, starting from choices of study paths to family roles.

C. Okay, let's stick to the numbers. Which are the jobs where women are more represented?

MC. Let's start with specialist-intellectual professions; in this field, we find a female prevalence in those related to education: pre-primary and primary school teachers, humanities teachers in upper secondary education, and special needs teachers.

C. And in professions like engineering and architecture? Today many more girls than before are enrolling in these faculties.

MC. That's true, but if we look at their presence in the workforce, women make up just under a quarter of engineers and architects. It's better among specialists in mathematics, chemistry, physics, and natural sciences where they represent a third of those employed, whereas if we talk about computer science and technological sciences, women employment rate drops to less than 18%.

C. But younger women are making progress in historically less 'female' areas...

MC Yes, that's true, but the gap remains, and it is wide. In STEM professions, younger women, those aged between 25 and 39, are more represented than those of the 55-69 age group. The difference is about 10%, but they still remain a strong minority compared to their male peers.

C. Are there however, highly qualified professions that show significant progress in female presence?

MC Yes, we have recorded an increase in women among public administration managers and among doctors.

C. Speaking of healthcare, we also have many women employed in nursing.

MC. Yes, social and healthcare and nursing professions are among those with a strong female prevalence.

C. Apart from the type of work, how does career progression work for women?

MC. let us take the healthcare sector as an example: in 2022, more than half of the medical managers in the National Health Service were women. 56% to be precise. But if we look at doctors with structural assignments, things change. Among those responsible for simple structures, women account for 38%, and among those responsible for complex structures – those that were once called '*primari*' (heads of department) – the share drops to 21%.

C. Is this an example of the famous glass ceiling?

MC. Yes, and we are not facing an exception. Let us look at magistrates, where women make up more than 58% of the workforce – these are March 2024 data – women are the majority, but not among magistrates in managerial roles: in that case female representation is below 30%.

C. And in institutional roles, how are we doing?

MC. In governmental functions, we are below the European average, even though we have a woman Prime Minister. In the Italian Parliament however, we are in line with Europe because women make up one third, but we are far from the Nordic countries.

C. What do you mean?

MC. Well, in Iceland, Finland, and Sweden, female representatives are between 46 and 47%.

C. What about territorial representation?

MC. At the end of 2024 we find only one woman as Regional President, only two women among the Mayors of Provincial Capitals, and no woman leading a Metropolitan City.

C. Is it any better in companies?

MC. Less than one third are led by women. And in this case too, we find a concentration in specific sectors: there is greater gender balance in some service companies and those operating in healthcare, social care and education. But if we talk about industrial companies, less than one in five are led by women.

C. But for example, in companies listed on the stock exchange, there has been a regulatory intervention for equality... I am referring to Law 120 in 2011...

MC. Yes, in fact on the Boards of Directors of listed companies we have a fair gender balance, but at chief executive officers level women do not reach 3%.

C. And compared to Europe, where do we stand?

MC. The European average for the presence of women among Chief Executive Officers of large listed companies is close to 8%.

C. Not very high but better than us. Going back to Italy, there are opinions of greater vulnerability in women's employment, what does that mean?

MC. It means for example having a fixed-term contract that does not guarantee salary continuity, or involuntary part-time and therefore reduced salary.

C. Do we find gender differences regarding this condition?

MC. Yes, women with involuntary part-time employment are three times more than men. Instead, those who can rely on standard employment – because they are permanent and full-time employees or self-employed with employees and full-time - are just over a half of the employed women, while approximately 7 men out of 10 have standard employment.

C. And which categories of women are the most disadvantaged?

MC. The most vulnerable are young female workers, resident in the South, with low education and foreign citizenship.

C. Are there sectors where they are more concentrated?

MC. Yes, in trade the proportion of vulnerable female workers is significantly higher than that of men. But among the sectors where vulnerable workers are generally more frequent, besides agriculture, there are the hotel and catering sector and family services, where we find a high percentage of women and foreign female workers.

C. Women often also have the problem of balancing family care and work. How much does this affect female employment?

MC. For many women, the family workload is a reason to give up work, especially when there are pre-school children. Mothers have a significantly lower employment rate compared to single women. We find that there is a 30% difference in the employment rate between men and women when they are parents of minor children.

C. Right, let us talk about women who do not work.

MC. Inactive women between 15 and 64 years old – meaning women who are not employed and are not looking for employment – are over 7.8 million.

C. An army!

MC. And most of them not only do not look for work, but also declare themselves unavailable to work if the opportunity arose.

C. And what are the reasons for this self-exclusion?

MC. About two-thirds of inactive mothers do not look for work for family reasons. However, the same reason is also given by over a third of inactive women living as a couple without children and by more than 13% of inactive single women. So the obstacles are not only childcare, but also care for older people or people who are not self-sufficient.

C. That is, the man brings home the salary and the woman takes care of the house and family members.

MC. That's right. Although decreasing, male single-income households in Italy are more than a quarter. And in the South, in four out of ten couples - so more than a third of couples - the woman does not work.

C. What is the situation in the rest of Europe?

MC. Italy ranks third for the prevalence of the male breadwinner model – after Greece and Romania. The European average is 16.1%. With our 25.2% we are far from the Nordic countries, but also from France's 10.5%.

C. And for women, leaving the labour market can become a long-term trap regarding economic independence, access to credit, and pensions.

MC. This is an important point. Early childhood education services and policies for life and work balancing are fundamental, as is the effective sharing of household chores.

C. What do data tell us about childcare services?

MC. They show a shortage. In 2022, less than a third of children aged 0 to 2 in Italy attended nursery school, compared to the European average of 35.9%.

C. But applications for nursery places are increasing, right?

MC. Yes, demand has grown, partly due to the nursery school bonus. But along with demand, waiting lists are growing across Italy. Over half of services cannot accommodate all the children who apply, especially in state nurseries.

C. How is it decided who gets in and who doesn't?

MC. Apart from the absolute priority criteria such as disability, the criteria in municipal nurseries are often linked to the parents' employment status. If both are working, they have priority.

C. So if a mother does not work, her child is also less likely to get into nursery... a dog chasing its own tail.

MC. Yes, and it is worth remembering that the low female employment rate affects everyone and is the cause of Italy's low employment rate compared to our neighbouring European countries.

C. But do we at least have some good news?

MC. Yes. Despite the obstacles, the number of couples where both partners work is growing, and among these, also those where the earned income of the two partners is similar. And this is a promising sign.

C. So let us stop here. Thank you, Maria Clelia, for being with us.

MC. Thank you all and see you soon.

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that women have made a lot of progress in the workplace, but still not enough to definitively break the famous glass ceiling. We can still do much for women's professional fulfilment and, consequently, for the well-being of society as a whole.

Let's arm ourselves with determination because there is still a long way to go.

I am Cristiana Conti and this was Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast from the National Institute of Statistics.

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Are there topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at datiallamano@istat.it.

Maria Clelia Romano, Sara Maulo, Manuela Bartolotta, Federica Pintaldi, Silvia Montecolle, Maria Elena Pontecorvo, Giulia Milan, Patrizia Cella, Francesca Gallo, Elisa Marzilli worked on this episode.