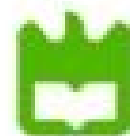




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21-22 June 2021



**Edited by
Professor Elisabeth T. Pereira, Professor Carlos Costa
and Professor Zélia Breda**

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The Spread of Gender Stereotypes in Italy During the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract: Stereotyping is a recurrent mind process through which our brain easily stores a large amount of information synthesising them through simplifications and generalisations. Stereotypes, particularly those related to gender, are internalised during growth, offering a rigid perspective on male and female roles within a society. Two nation-wide surveys were carried out by the MUSA research group of the National Research Council of Italy within the Ongoing Social Changes-COVID19 Observatory. This work compares the changes in the acceptance of gender stereotypes occurred between the first and the second survey. The study highlights the great strength of the "hidden persuasion" produced by gender stereotypes. Since the family and domestic environment are the main contexts where gender stereotypes grow and reinforce, the lockdown period of close and intense cohabitation of household' members during COVID 19 pandemic has exacerbated gender stereotypes acceptance. This is especially true for women who spend most of their time at home. Future studies will be able to verify the possible chronicity of this phenomenon and the cultural regression that it may have triggered. There is a risk that this social dynamic could revitalise forms of exclusion and self-exclusion of women from the labour market, reinforcing the idea of women's inadequacy in relation to specific roles still associated to male supremacy.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, Cultural regression, Isolation, COVID-19, Lockdown, Research.

1. Introduction

Gender inequalities at home and at work are hard to change. The reason for their persistence is that differences in gender roles are based on deeply-rooted stereotypes, that shape social relationships in every sphere of our lives – at work, at home, and in public affairs. Gender stereotypes create common social expectations about what is "natural" for men and women, and deviations from them can often be socially penalised. As a result, disparities in gender roles are usually taken for granted and change very slowly.

It has been demonstrated that economic downturns or social shocks affect gender roles and equality (see for example European Parliament, 2013). Recently, many scientific articles and reports of international organisations highlighted that, with the fast spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent social distancing measures to tackle its diffusion, gender inequalities have been intensified (Lyttelton et al. 2020; Farré et al. 2020; Galasso 2020). The pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities between men and women, revealing fragilities and weaknesses in social, cultural and economic systems and making one of the unique aspects of the current recession the way it is affecting women (UN Women, 2020).

The effects of the pandemic came to the fore earlier in Italy than in other European countries. For many Europeans the moment Coronavirus arrived on our continent was in February 23rd 2020 when Italian authorities quarantined 10 small towns south-east of Milan (Hall et al, 2020). Italy was the first European country where the virus broke through the defences of health, economic and social system, showing all its severity and destructive potential. The poor awareness of our politicians about the pandemic, and the disagreement between central, regional and local authorities were factors facilitating the Covid-19 diffusion. In early Spring 2020, in order to block Covid-19 pandemic, Italian government implemented mandatory social distancing that lasted about 3 months.

This paper focuses on the effects of social distancing due to Covid-19 pandemic on the spread of gender stereotypes, exploring how people's lives are changing in the face of Coronavirus. The Italian context is particularly interesting, because of the strict lockdown measures adopted to contain the pandemic, the high gender gaps already existing in the labour market, and the traditional gender roles at home, which put on women most of the burden of housework, childcare and elderly (Manzo, Minello 2020; Brunori et al. 2020). It should be noted that it has been calculated that Italian women not only work more than Italian men, but also more than men and women in most European countries (ISTAT, 2019).

The impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. Contrary to previous economic recessions where job losses have been greater for men than women, the current shock is expected to have a similar impact on male and female employment (ILO, 2020). Unlike these expectations, in Italy the decline in women's employment exceeds that of men. Between the end of 2019 and the first half of 2020, 470,000 Italian women lost their jobs: out of a total of 841,00 employment losses, 55.9% were lost by women (ISTAT, 2020). Of course, the virus does not specifically target women, but it does impact some sectors of the economy more than others. According to recent data, in December 2020 99 thousand out of 101 thousand new unemployed people were women (ISTAT, 2021). This happened because service occupations with high proportion of women's employment, such as restaurants, cafes, hotels and tourism, were disproportionately affected by measures of social isolation. As a result, an increasing quota of Italian women remained at home without paid work.

During the period of social distancing, many workers were asked to work from home. In Italy we passed from 600,000 people working from home before Covid-19 pandemic to 8 million expected by the end of 2020 (CGIL, Fondazione Di Vittorio 2020). A recent survey shows that Italian women are more likely to work from home than men (Del Boca et al., 2020). Working from home allows workers (women and men) to do both paid and unpaid work, but it seems to do little to encourage shifts towards a more gender-based egalitarian organisation within families (Arntz M., et al. 2020; Rao H.A. 2020; Reichelt M., 2020 et al.).

The "lockdown" that is being imposed by Governments to fight the virus spreading entails multiple new stresses, including isolation and loneliness. In Italy, during the strict initial "lockdown", people were asked to stay at home and get out only for essential reasons such as buying food, collecting medicines or carrying out a key worker role. However, home is not always a safe place to live in; unlikely, it is often the space where physical and psychological abuse occurs (Boserup et al. 2020; Bradbury-Jones 2020). In Italy, recent data have shown an increase in domestic violence (ISTAT 2020; Lundin et al. 2020). Little is known about change in attitudes towards more dangerous and violent behaviours as a consequence of the stay-at-home measures.

In Italy a large proportion of grandparents provides valuable, reliable and informal daily childcare. Continuing closures of schools and day-care centres have greatly increased parents' childcare needs, but the mandatory implementation of social distancing has significantly reduced the availability of grandparental care. Relying on grandparents for help is no longer an option, especially if grandparents are aged over 70 and are now advised to stay at home, avoiding contacts with other people. When schools are closed and mothers are at home, due to gender stereotypes, childcare becomes primarily a women's responsibility. As many studies have pointed out, the real danger is that an increasing number of people may start to associate women with childcare and housework more strongly than before (Alon et al. 2020; Power 2020; Rosenfeld, Tomiyama 2021).

The Social Changes, Evaluations and Methods (MUSA) research group of the National Research Council of Italy has carried out 2 web-surveys to investigate attitudes, behaviours and well-being of the Italian population during the Covid-19 lockdown. Amongst other topics, the surveys collected data about the spread of gender stereotypes among the Italian population, analysing differences in their acceptance from the beginning of the lockdown period (end of March 2020) and during the last month of mandatory social distancing phase (end of April 2020). Data collected through both surveys are stored in the OSC-Observatory on Social Changes (OSC-COVID-19) database that is part of MUSA.

In this paper we will try to answer the following questions. COVID-19 is expected to have major consequences on family work due to increased housework and childcare resulting from schools' closures, work from home and the loss of jobs of a large share of the Italian population. Did the domestic isolation and the drastic reduction of social interactions affect the adherence to gender stereotypes? Among the Italian population, which are the social categories who show highest levels of adherence to gender stereotypes and are at risk of cultural regression? To what extent has this change affected attitudes and behaviours concerning gender roles? Great differences exist from a socio-cultural and economic point of view in different areas of our country. Have gender stereotypes spread more significantly in some specific geographic areas, that show more traditionalist attitudes respect to the social role of women? May differences, depending on household composition, educational level, and job position, be highlighted? May we expect a recovery in terms of gender equality, once the pandemic will be over? If measures and initiatives - implemented to contain Covid-19 spreading - reinforced stereotypes about women's roles, the backlash for Italian women going back to traditional roles is high. Therefore, this study hypothesises that even a temporary reduction in external social interactions can revitalise the presence of gender stereotypes.

2. Method

During the lockdown, the research group carried out two online national surveys. The first survey focused mainly on the psycho-social effects of social distancing and isolation due to the COVID-19 containment measures; it took place between the end of March and beginning of April 2020 (140,656 respondents). The second survey (4,523 respondents) took place immediately after the end of lockdown (end of April). It focused on the same topics of the first survey in order to allow for comparisons but more in-depth information about the reorganization of daily life were included. Two databases have been populated with comparable data related to different public and private living conditions. Both studies were carried out through a self-administered electronic questionnaire (CAWI method). A posteriori validation and balance were needed to mitigate the effects of self-selection of respondents. As a result, the two final samples are not probabilistic but proportional to Italian resident population according to specific characteristics such as gender, age, educational level.

The questionnaires have been divided into four main areas of interest: the first one concerned social and personal information of respondents; the second one considered the interaction under conditions of social distancing/cohabitation; the third area concerned trust and opinions towards public organisations and authorities, gender stereotypes and prejudices, religious beliefs and political orientations; finally, the fourth area investigated emotions and resilience, relating to self-assessment, primary emotions and coping strategies.

In this paper we will describe and discuss changes on the adherence to gender stereotyped believes and expectations related to the roles that the two sexes should play. We consider a discriminating factor the agreement of respondents on the statement " Now women can take on again their natural role as mothers and wives". Respondents who agreed on this statement may be considered as holding a stereotypical view of female social roles. We built on this question a gender stereotype dummy variable (GSDV) that measures the adherence to the existence of "natural" social roles of women as wives and mothers. This GSDV has been used as dependent variable in statistical models.

The model we used is the following:

$$\ln(OR) = a + b_x x_i \quad (a)$$

where OR is the Odds Ratio of the target variable, i.e. the ratio between the probability of belonging to the category at risk of adherence to stereotypes and its complement to 1 (therefore a value greater than 1 indicates that the probability of belonging to this category is greater than the probability of not belonging); a and b_x are the coefficients of the model; x_i is the vector of the variables involved in the model. The variables that have been involved in the regression model are the following: the level of education (2 modalities: medium-low and high); the geographical areas (2 modalities: living in the South of Italy or not); the kind of city (2modalities: Living in a big city centre or not); religion beliefs (2 modalities: not-believer and believer).

3. Results

In Italy Covid-19 crisis occurred in a context where the employment gap between women and men was still among the highest in Europe (The Global Gender Gap Report 2020). In the first survey, the proportion of unemployed women was 26.4% and that of men 15.4%. Unemployment in the second survey covered 27.7% of women and 16% of men. The lockdown phase had immediately repercussions on the Italian world of work: during the first survey the work activities have been suspended for 24.9% of respondents (of which 24.6% of women and 25.2% of men), while during the second for 18.2%of respondents (16.8% of women and 19.6% of men).

In addition, in order to contain the virus' spread, many workers were asked to work from their home. Table 1 summarises the condition of Italian workers during both the first and the second survey. As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, women were more likely to work from home, while a higher proportion of men continued to go to their workplace. Workers' conditions worsened between the first and the second survey in terms of redundancies especially for women, whilst the proportion of women working from home increased as that of men working from home decreased.

Table 1: Temporary working arrangements (%)

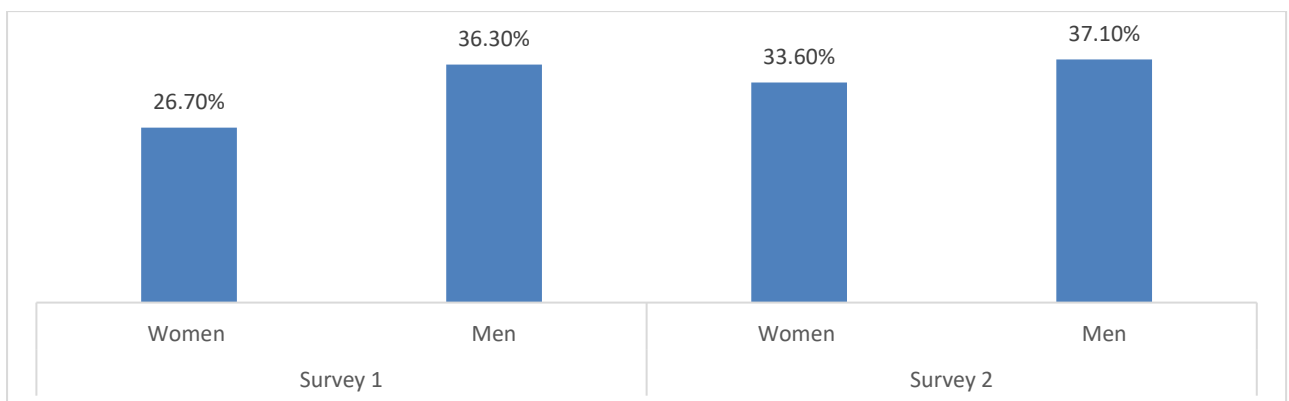
	Survey I			Survey II		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
I work from home	38.2	36.3	37.2	39.3	32.3	35.6
I go to my workplace	15.1	19.3	17.2	16.6	22.6	19.7
My work activities have been suspended	41.5	37.8	39.6	33.7	32.6	33.1
I was fired	1.3	.9	1.1	2.7	1.5	2.1
I work both from home and my workplace	4.0	5.7	4.8	7.7	11.0	9.4

Source: elaboration on OSC-COVID-19 data base, 2020.

As in many countries around the world, in Italy during the lockdown phase most of the population spent much more time at home than in the past. This implied reshaping daily routines, especially for those who had to simultaneously work, do household chores and look after their children, without the support of social services and the network of grandparents and friends. The free time available has increased for most of respondents during both phases of the survey (70.8% and 64% for men and women respectively). However, 12.5% of women and 7.8% of men had less free time than usual during the first survey, while during the second one the percentage of women who reported to have less free time than usual increased to 15.2% and the percentage of men increased to 9.5%. If we take a closer look at these groups of respondents, data show that, considering parents with children under 12 years of age, the number of women who reported having less free time was 28% against 15% of men during the first survey. These percentages rose to 38.6% of women and 17.8% of men during the second survey.

Thus, results show that the division of tasks and responsibilities within families is still strongly stereotyped and unbalanced between women and men. The unbalance is confirmed by data which describe how respondents spent their free time: during the first survey, 68.7% of women spent their time cooking, compared to 41% of men; 11% of women played video games, compared to 23.6% of men; 31.6% of women spent their free time surfing on the web against 43.7% of men. During the second survey, 63% of women spent their time cooking, compared to 39.7% of men, 9.3% of women played video games, compared to 23% of men, 34.7% of women spent their free time surfing on the web against 47.4% of men.

The analysis of the use of the free time from a gender perspective reveals a strong adherence to traditional gender roles which derives from the spread of gender stereotypes among the population. To synthesise the adherence to gender stereotypes in Italy we built a gender stereotype variable as described in the methodological paragraph. This variable shows that, at national level, during the first survey, 31.1% of respondents had a stereotypical view of gender roles, compared to 35% during the second phase of data collection. In particular, data show an increase in the adherence to gender stereotypes among Italian women. Figure 1 shows the values as a percentage of the degree of adherence to gender stereotypes from a gender perspective.

**Figure 1:** Adherence to gender stereotypes (% of respondents who agree with GSDV)

Source: elaboration on OSC-COVID-19 data base, 2020.

It is crucial to analyse the difference in the spread of gender stereotypes within the population in terms of gender, age, educational qualification, job position, house location, religion beliefs and political orientation. Table 2 shows the percentage of adherence to gender stereotypes in relation to selected structural variables during both the first and second survey.

Table 2: The spread of gender stereotypes among certain categories of the Italian population ((% of respondents who agree with GSDV)

		Survey 1	Survey 2
Gender	Female	26.3	33.1
	Male	36.3	37.1
Education	Medium-low	33.4	37.5
	High	18.5	16.8
Age class	18-29	21.0	26.4
	30-49	28.8	28.7
	50-69	34.4	37.5
	70 +	50.6	51.8
Type of city	Big city centre	26.40	30.20
	other	32.30	36
Political orientation	Left	22.0	27.1
	Centre	38.2	40.9
	Right	45.9	48.9
Religion beliefs	Believer	40.1	44.5
	Not believer	20.2	22.4
Job Position	Unemployed	37.3	37.0
	Student	17.7	29.7
	Intermittent worker	27.2	30.5
	Part-time worker	29.0	27.1
	Full-time worker	30.4	30.2
	Retired	42.7	45.8
	Housewife	40.0	55.4

Source: elaboration on OSC-COVID-19 data base, 2020.

Since there are still relevant cultural, social and economic differences among Italian macro-areas, it is essential to examine more closely the adherence to gender stereotypes from a geographical perspective,. Figure 2 shows that the internalisation of gender stereotypes is greater in southern regions of Italy than in the other four macro areas.

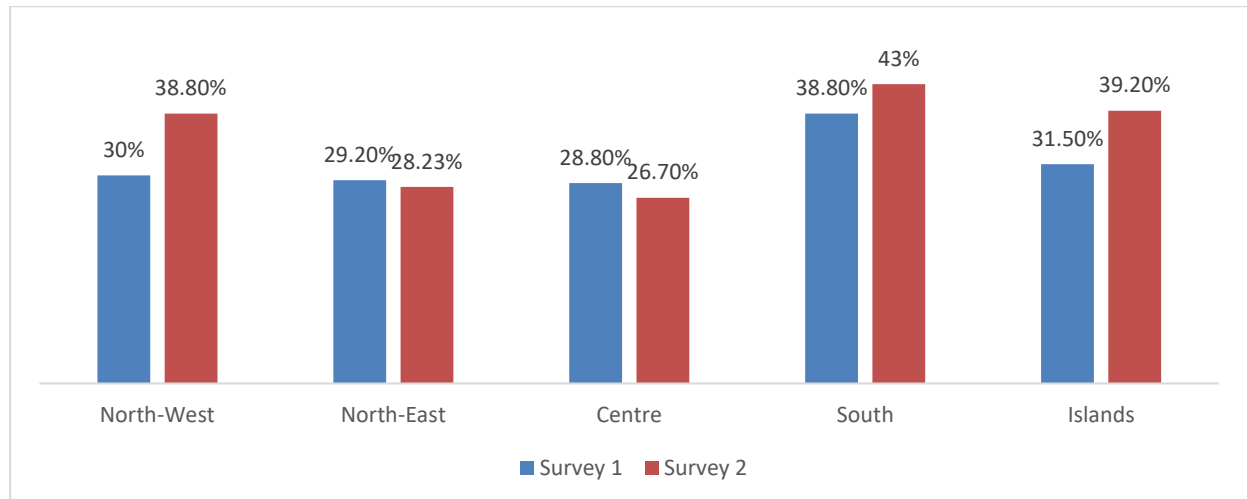


Figure 2: Adherence to gender stereotypes in 5 Italian macro areas (% of respondents who agree with GSDV)

Source: elaboration on OSC-COVID-19 data base, 2020.

Changes in stereotypes' spread during the second phase of data collection had a significant influence on behaviours and attitudes among the population. Indeed, by comparing leisure-time activities of respondents

with a stereotypical view of gender roles and respondents who have not adhered to gender stereotypes, we can observe differences in free-time activities traditionally considered either masculine or feminine. For example, taking into consideration respondents having a gender stereotypical view, during the first survey 71.5% of women have spent their time cooking against 37.3% of men, 28.6% of women have spent their time doing little repair activities against 44.2% of men, 27.6% of women have spent their time surfing on the web against 42.6% of men. On the other hand, analysing the free-time activities of respondents with a stereotypical view during the second survey, we can notice that 68.4% of women have spent their time cooking against 34% of men, 49.9% of women have spent their time watching Tv against 64.3% of men, 25.3% of women have spent their time surfing on the web against 47.5% of men.

Accepting stereotypes that relegate women to a subordinate social role can lead to prejudices and unbalances. Prejudices can sometimes take the shape of physical and psychological violence. If on the one hand, physical distancing control measures reduced the number and quality of contacts between people to struggle against the virus spread, on the other hand it has forced a large part of the population into close cohabitation in their own home, which is not *per se* a safe space for everyone. As mentioned in the introduction, in Italy domestic violence episodes increased during the lockdown (ISTAT 2020). During the two surveys we investigated the perception of risk of domestic violence. Figure 3 shows how values have significantly increased between the first and second survey. In addition, according to results, in some cases children were present during such episodes of violence. Children witnessing violence were 3.4% of cases during the first phase and 5.7% of cases during the second one.

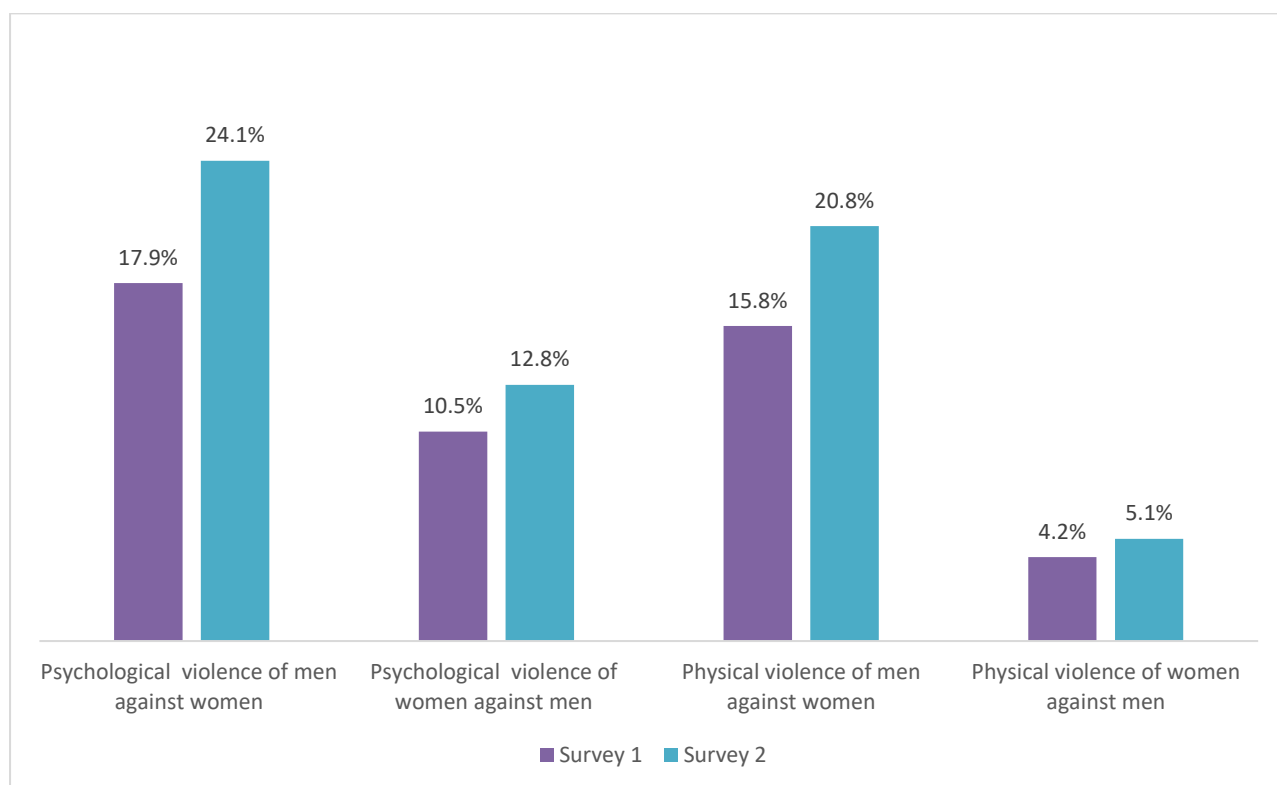


Figure 3: Risk Perception of domestic violence (% of respondents who agree with GSDV)

Source: elaboration on OSC-COVID-19 data base, 2020.

Furthermore, other data support the idea that domestic environment is not comfortable for everyone. Cohabiting couples show a slight deterioration in their relations between the first and second survey. In the first survey, the climate at home was not cooperative for 6.7% of respondents, as compared to 7.9% of the second survey; 8.5% of respondents stated that the atmosphere at home was not peaceful in the first survey, as compared to 9.6% in the second survey; in the first survey 11.7% of respondents stated that family atmosphere was not warm and soft, as compared to 10.9% in the second survey. The worsening of couple relationship affected 6% of cohabitants during in the first survey and 8% in the second survey.

In order to verify the hypothesis that the lack of external social interactions may reinforce the adherence to gender stereotypes, we selected from the 2 samples 2 groups of respondents respectively composed of women who were unemployed, students, housewives and who were working from home (Group 1), and a group composed of women who were working from their usual workplace (Group 2). Making a comparison of results concerning the adherence to gender stereotypes of these two specific groups of Italian women in the two surveys we notice that for women who have spent most of their time at home, without the possibility of going out even for working reasons, the acceptance of gender stereotypes has increased. On the other hand, for women who had the possibility of going to their workplace preserving social interaction out of their domestic environment, the percentage of adherence to these social conditioning has decreased (Figure 4).

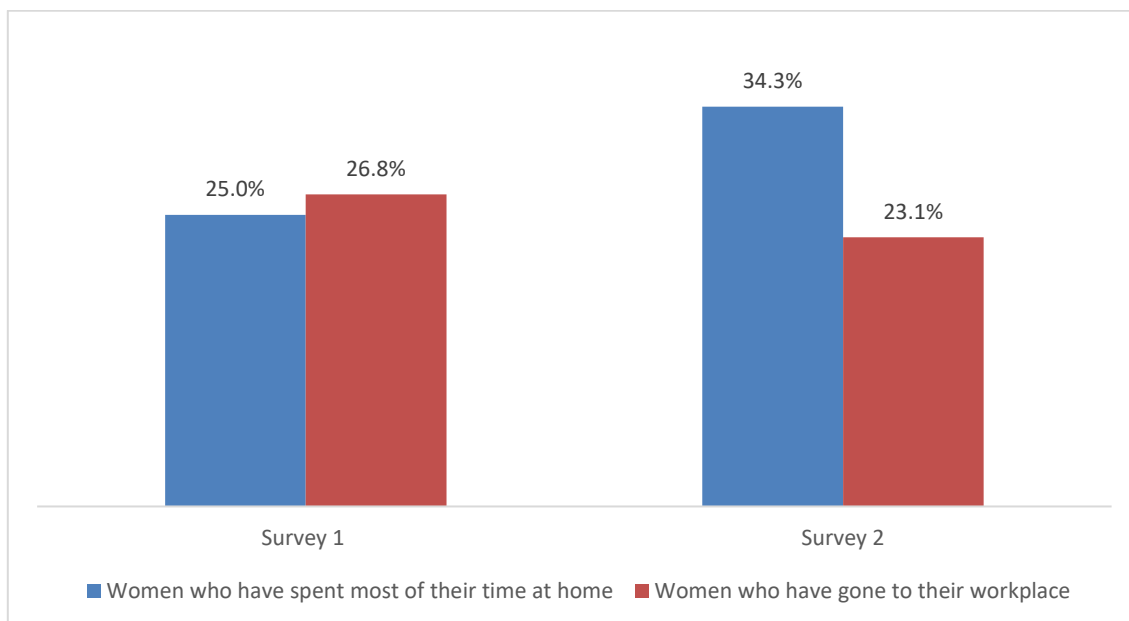


Figure 4: Adherence to gender stereotypes among specific categories of Italian women (% of respondents who agree with GSDV)

Source: elaboration on OSC-COVID-19 data base, 2020.

A binary logistic model has been carried out to better understand the main risk and protective factors concerning the adherence to gender stereotypes during both the first and the second survey. We hypothesised that social distancing measures that isolate us from our friends and work communities and force us to live closer together with our families and partners affect the acceptance of gender stereotypes. The binary logistic regression model has been applied to Group 1 and 2 of respondents by using the GSDV as target variable, while as independent variables we used those indicated in the methodological paragraph. Figure 5 shows the binary logistic model respectively applied to the first and the second survey, identifying the significant variables with the OR value in parentheses. Results show that being a believer increases more than twice the probability of belonging to the category of people with a gender stereotyped view, as well as living in the south of Italy though to a lesser extent. On the other hand, having a high level of education and living in a big city reduce the probability of belonging to the category of respondents having a gender stereotyped view.

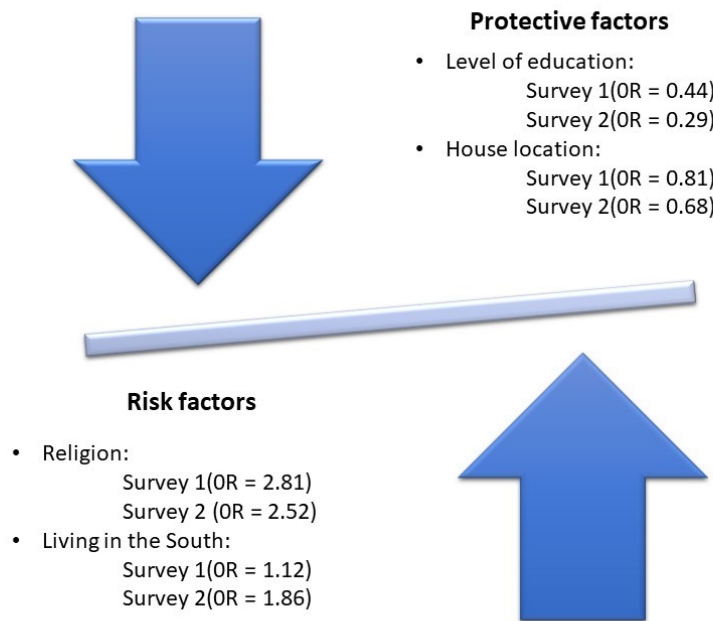


Figure 5: Binary logistic model applied to the first and the second surveys

Source: elaboration on OSC-COVID-19 data base, 2020.

4. Discussion and conclusions

It is widely known that the social and cultural context strongly affects the internalisation of gender stereotypes during the socialization process. The family is the main environment where these conditionings are transferred (Witt, 1997). The spread of COVID-19, and more specifically the lockdown phase during the spring of 2020 forced many Italians to stay with their own family or at home. This has led to an overexposure of women and men to relational models conditioned by the adherence to gender stereotypes. Indeed, at the time of crisis such that triggered by the pandemic, stereotypes, which are still widespread in Italy, have shaped a consolidated cultural model that has been mistaken for refuge, in response to uncertainty and contingent difficulties (Tintori et al, 2020).

This work compares two surveys carried out respectively at the beginning and at the end of the lockdown period, and it has revealed a significant presence of gender stereotypes within the Italian society. In particular, there was an increase in the spread of gender stereotypes between the first and the second survey. Particular attention has been paid to women who adhere to gender stereotypes while being victims of them. An increase in gender stereotypes was found in particular among women who did not leave their home during the lockdown for working reasons. They belong to different categories of women: those who were working from home, housewives, and the unemployed people and students. During the lockdown schools in Italy were closed; as a result the large majority of women with children had simultaneously to work and to take care of their children. In addition, women should take care of their elderly (parents/relatives) in need of urgent and continuous care. A huge problem in a country like Italy, where there is a high proportion of elderly people. Women who were forced to stay at home for the Government lockdown measures, have children and work from home (if they work) have been the most affected by gender stereotypes. Isolation at home and deprivation of extra domestic interactions can produce a strengthening of gender stereotypes triggering a cultural regression.

Further investigations are needed to confirm the accuracy of these conclusions, while new issues are raised. Indeed, smart working will be a structural working condition for all the eligible jobs. After the COVID-19 pandemic, will the smart working continue to be a risk factor for the strenghtening of gender stereotypes within the Italian society? If the results of these surveys are confirmed, what actions should be taken as a matter of urgency to stem the new spread of these social constraints? Will the reopening of social services and the reactivation of formal and informal child support networks be sufficient to counteract the negative effects

triggered by the period of close domestic cohabitation? Since gender stereotypes are the main factor shaping gender roles, gender inequalities, male prejudices and violence against women, these questions call for new studies and for the definition of urgent educational interventions.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declared that they have no conflict of interests.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was approved by the National Ethics Committee of the National Institute for Infectious Diseases Lazzaro Spallanzani I.R.C.C.S. of Rome.

Availability of Data and Material

All the data considered in this paper were obtained from OSC COVID-19 surveys.

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Authors' contributions

TA, CL, CG conceived and designed the study, consulted literature, collected data and wrote and edit the paper. CL did the statistical data analysis. TA did the sociological interpretation. PR reviewed the manuscript. All authors read and approved the manuscript.

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