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**Proceedings of the  
4th International Conference on  
Gender Research**  
A Virtual Conference hosted by  
University of Aveiro  
Portugal  
21-22 June 2021



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

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**Proceedings of the**

**4th International Conference on  
Gender Research  
ICGR 2021**

**A Virtual Conference  
hosted by**

**University of Aveiro  
Portugal**

**21-22 June 2021**

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## Preface

These proceedings represent the work of contributors to the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Gender Research (ICGR 2021), hosted by University of Aveiro, Portugal on 21-22 June 2021. The Conference Co-Chairs are Professor Elisabeth T. Pereira and Professor Carlos Costa, and the Programme Chair is Professor Zélia Breda, all from University of Aveiro, Portugal.

ICGR is a well-established event on the academic research calendar and now in its 4<sup>th</sup> year the key aim remains the opportunity for participants to share ideas and meet the people who hold them. The conference was due to be held at The University of Aveiro, Portugal but due to the global Covid-19 pandemic it was moved online to be held as a virtual event. The scope of papers will ensure an interesting two days. The subjects covered illustrate the wide range of topics that fall into this important and ever-growing area of research.

The opening keynote presentation is given by Professor Vanessa Ratten, from La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia on the topic of *Gender, Ageing and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems*. The second day of the conference will open with an address by Professor Erica Wilson, Southern Cross University, NSW, Australia who will talk about *Gender in the time of COVID: Imagining a more Inclusive (Tourism) World*.

With an initial submission of 113 abstracts, after the double blind, peer review process there are 37 Academic research papers, 2 PhD research papers, 1 Masters Research paper and 8 work-in-progress papers published in these Conference Proceedings. These papers represent research from, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, India, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Nigeria, North Cyprus, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, UK, UAE, USA and Vietnam

We hope you enjoy the conference.

Professor Elisabeth T. Pereira, Professor Carlos Costa and Professor Zélia Breda

University of Aveiro  
Portugal  
June 2021



## ICGR Conference Committee

*Prof Iiris Aaltio, School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä, Finland; Dr Ishrat Abbasi, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan; Ms Noor Abu Jbara, Freelance Work, Jordan; Prof Tindara Addabbo, Department of Economics Marco Biagi University of Modena & Reggio Emilia, Italy; Prof Laurice Alexandre, Paris Descartes university, France; Dr Reem Alkhamash, Taif University, Saudi Arabia; Professor Simona Arduini, Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy; Prof Liz Bacon, University of Greenwich, UK; Dr Afsaneh Bagheri, Faculty of Entrepreneurship, University of Teahran, Iran; Dr Olgahan Baksi Yalcin, Istanbul Yeni Yuzyil University, Turkey; Prof Joan Ballantine, University of Ulster, United Kingdom; Dr Nathalie BITBOL-SABA, Paris School of Business, France; Prof Ewa Bojar, Lublin University of Technology, Poland; Dr Zélia Breda, University of Aveiro, Portugal; Prof Sladjana Cabrilo, I-Shou University, Department of International Business Administration, Taiwan (R.O.C.); Senior Lecturer, Phd Ana Paula Camarinha Teixeira, IPP - Iscap, Portugal; Dr Claudia Canali, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy; Prof Luísa Carvalho, University of Évora, Portugal; Prof Teresa Carvalho, University of Aveiro, Portugal; Prof Francesca Maria Cesaroni, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy; Prof Mary Corcoran, University of Michigan, USA; Francesca Dal Mas, Università degli Studi di Udine, Italy; Dr Serene Dalati, Arab International University, Syria; Geoffrey Darnton, WMG, UK; Dr Madeleine Davies, University of Reading, UK; Dr Marina Della Giusta, University of Reading, UK; Prof Sara Diogo, University of Aveiro, Portugal; Assc John Dumay, Macquarie University, Australia; Dr Jeanne Ellis, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa; Prof Turan Erman Erkan, Atilim University, Turkey; Dr José Esteves, IE business school, Spain; Prof Elisabete G. S. Félix, University of Évora, Portugal; Prof Emilia Fernandes, Universidade do Minho, Portugal; Dr Ana Freire, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain; Dr Valerie Priscilla Goby, Zayed University, UAE; Professor Grace James, University of Reading, UK; Dr Elisabeth Katzlinger, Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria; Prof Mortaza kokabi, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Iran; Blair Kuntz, University of Toronto, Canada; Dr Alessandra Lardo, University of Naples Parthenope, Italy; Dr Regina Leite, University of Minho - School of Economics and Management, Portugal; Assc Jeanette Lemmergaard, University of Southern Denmark, Dept. of Marketing & Management, Denmark; Dr Maria de Lourdes Machado-Taylor, CIPES-Center for Higher Education Policies, Portugal; Dr Jolanta Maj, Opole University of Technology, Poland; Dr. Anabela Mesquita, School of Accounting and Administration of Porto (ISCAP) / Politechnic Institute of Porto (IPP), Portugal; Professor Dorata Michulka, University of Wrocław, Poland; Assc Ludmila Mladkova, University of Economics Prague, Czech Republic; Prof Nasima Mohamed Hoosen Carrim, University of Pretoria, South Africa; Dr Gunilla Myretég, Örebro University School of Business, Sweden; Assoc.Prof.Dr. Chetsada Noknoi, Thaksin University, ไทย; Prof Alcina Nunes, Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, Portugal; Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nuran Öze, Near East University, Turkey; Prof Inna Sousa Paiva, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa ISCTE-IUL, Portugal; Professor Mauro Paoloni, Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy; Professor Paola Paoloni, La Sapienza University, Rome, Italy; Prof Elisabeth T. Pereira, Department of Economics, Management, Industrial Engineering and Tourism - University of Aveiro, Portugal; Dr francesca picciaia, Department of Economics, University of Perugia, Italy; Prof Maryna Pichugina, National Technical University of Ukraine, Ukraine; Gitte Rosenbaum, Syddansk Universitet, Denmark; Prof Agnieszka Rzepka, Lublin University of Technology, Poland; Dr navjot Sandhu, Birmingham city university, UK; Dr Roy Schwartzman, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA; Dr paola Sdao, University of Calabria, Italia; Dr Annalisa Sentuti, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy; Dr Jenni Simon, University of North Carolina Greensboro, USA; Prof Nachiketa Tripathi, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India; Assc Tuna Uslu, Women Entrepreneurship Research and Application Center, Istanbul Gedik University, Turkey; Dr Annelien van Rooyen, University of South Africa, South Africa; Dr Antonella Veltri, Institute for Agricultural and Forest Systems in the Mediterranean, National Research Council, Italy; Dr Sonia Vivona, Institute for Agricultural and Forest Systems in the Mediterranean, National Research Council, Italy; Johanna M. Werz, Institute for Information Management in Mechanical Engineering (IMA), Germany;*

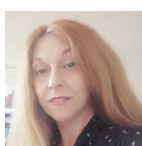
## Biographies

### Conference and Programme Chairs



**Professor Carlos Costa** is a full professor and entrepreneur based at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. Carlos started out doing an undergraduate degree in regional and urban planning (University of Aveiro). This was followed by a specialization in tourism, at the master's and doctoral level, at the University of Surrey, in the UK. Carlos is now Head of Department, at DEGEIT – the largest department of the University of Aveiro.

With publications at the highest level, Carlos also enjoys writing down-to-earth articles for the media and for the general public. As the Director of the PhD in Marketing and Strategy, as well as of the PhD in Tourism, both at the University of Aveiro, Carlos is an inspiration to colleagues and students alike – to perform beyond their dreams and achieve new entrepreneurial heights, whatever the domain may be.

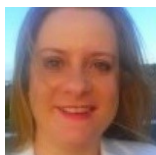


**Professor Elisabeth T. Pereira** holds a PhD and Master in the fields of Economics and Business Management. She is Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Aveiro (Portugal), and senior researcher in the field of Competitiveness and Innovation at the Research Unit GOVCOPP-University of Aveiro. She is author of several dozen articles, books, chapter of books and communications at international conferences.



**Zélia Breda**, Assistant Professor and Director of MA in Tourism Management and Planning, University of Aveiro. Member of Research Unit Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (GOVCOPP); founding member/vice-president of Observatory of China and Portuguese Institute of Sinology. Authored/co-authored national/international papers/communications on tourism development, networks, tourism in China and Goa (India), gender and tourism, and internationalisation of tourism economy.

### Keynote Speakers



**Vanessa Ratten** is an Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in the Department of Management, Sport and Tourism, La Trobe Business School at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. She is the Program Director for Entrepreneurship and Innovation courses and teaches Entrepreneurial Business Planning, Managing Innovation in Organisations and Entrepreneurship. She has published numerous books including "Gender and Family Entrepreneurship" (Routledge), "Diversity and Entrepreneurship" (Routledge), "Women Entrepreneurship in Family Business" (Routledge), "Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Smart Cities" (Routledge) and "Frugal Innovation" (Routledge). Her research interests include gender studies, international business, entrepreneurship and innovation.



**Professor Erica Wilson** is Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic Innovation) at Southern Cross University, based at the Lismore campus. Previously, Erica has held the roles of Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic (Acting), as well as Acting Dean, Deputy Head and Director of Teaching and Learning in the School of Business and Tourism. Born in Seattle, Erica has called Australia home for over three decades. Erica has published over 80 scholarly outputs, including two co-edited books, including, 'Women and Travel: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives' in 2017. She currently sits on the Editorial Advisory Boards for several journals focusing on management and hospitality research. Ministerially appointed, Erica was member of the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Technical and Scientific and Advisory Committee (from 2006 to 2015). She is passionate about supporting higher degree and early career research, and has supervised a number of PhDs, Masters by Research and Honours theses to successful completion. Erica is a proud advocate for gender equality in higher education and research.

## Mini Track Chairs

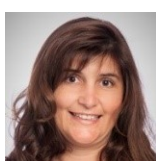


**Tindara Addabbo** is a full Professor in Economic Policy at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Current main research areas: wage discrimination by gender, well-being, gender budgeting, gender gap in education, gender equity firms certification. Coordinator of Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality Plans in research institutions – (H2020-SwafS-2019 –873072). Web site:

<http://personale.unimore.it/rubrica/curriculum/addabbo>



**Dr. Claudia Canali** is Associate Professor in Information Engineering at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Her research interests focus on cloud/fog computing systems and gender equality in ICT. She was scientific responsible for her university in the Horizon 2020 Project EQUAL-IST Gender Equality Plans for Information Sciences and Technology Research Institutions.



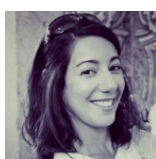
**Teresa Carvalho** is an associate Professor at the University of Aveiro, Portugal and a senior researcher at CIPES (Center for Research in Higher Education Policies). She is the coordinator of the H2020 CHANGE project - CHAlleNging Gender (In)Equality in Science and Research.



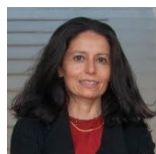
**Francesca Dal Mas** is a Senior Lecturer in Strategy and Enterprise at the Lincoln International Business School, University of Lincoln, UK. She has a Master's Degree in Business Administration and a PhD in Managerial and Actuarial Sciences from the University of Udine, and a law degree from the University of Bologna. Her research interests include strategy, knowledge management, and intellectual capital.



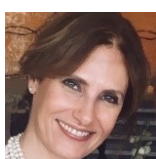
**Dr. Serene Dalati** is a senior lecturer at the faculty of Business administration at the Arab International University, Syria. Serene has obtained a PhD in Leadership, Organizational Culture and Job satisfaction in 2008 which was preceded by British Chevening scholarship to study for an MBA in Banking and Finance from University of Wales, Bangor in 2002. Serene teaches for areas in Organizational Behaviour, Leadership, Culture and Job satisfaction. Serene has also established experience in Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education and developed a project application with acronym FREE which has a scope of Female Resilience and Empowerment in Higher Education in the South Mediterranean Region.



**Sara Diogo** is an invited assistant Professor at the University of Aveiro, Portugal, a post-doc at GOVCOPP and a research member at CHANGE.



**Emília Fernandes** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Economics and Management of the University of Minho, Portugal, lecturing at undergraduate and post-graduate levels in courses of Management, Human Resources Management. Her publications have been in research areas related to gender discourses and identities, practices of resistance, entrepreneurship and small and medium enterprises, and professional embodiment.



**Regina Leite** is an Assistant Professor in Organizational Behaviour and HRM in the Department of Management of the School of Economics and Management at the University of Minho. Former coordinator of the master course in Human Resource Management. Research interests: Work and non-work spheres, privacy in the workplace, sexual and moral harassment, and gender issues.



**Giuseppe Modaffari** is a PhD student in Business and Administration at Niccolò Cusano University of Rome His main research areas are financial reporting, corporate finance, female entrepreneurship and turnaround management



**Dr Manuel Au-Yong-Oliveira** has a PhD in Industrial Engineering and Management from FEUP (University of Porto, 2012). Manuel is an Assistant Professor at the University of Aveiro, and a researcher affiliated to GOVCOPP. At present, Manuel is the Director of the Master's degree in Management at the University of Aveiro, in Portugal. Manuel is also a member of the Executive Committee of his department - DEGEIT – Department of Economics, Management, Industrial Engineering and Tourism, University of Aveiro. Manuel has over 200 academic publications.



**Nuran Öze** is Assistant Professor Dr., Chair of Department of Visual Communication Design in the Faculty of Communication, Arkin University of Creative Arts and Design, Cyprus. She is especially interested in culture, communication, gender, PR and specifically with social media. In recent years she has researched social media usage patterns and its effect on society, social media addiction, identity construction on social media.



**Paola Paoloni** is a Full Professor in Accounting at the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. She teaches Business Economics and Contemporary Strategy Analysis. Her main research interests include general management, financial reporting, female entrepreneurship and intellectual based management. She is an author and co-author of several articles and books on above mentioned research areas. She is foundress and scientific director of “Ipazia,” the scientific observatory on gender research.

## Biographies of Contributing Authors

**Fatima Zahra Abbou** is a Ph.D. student at the University of Reading, institute of education. She obtained both her BA and MA degree in English language and Didactics from the University of Adrar, Algeria. Her Ph.D. topic is tackling the perceptions and experiences of female academics concerning their career progression and holding senior leadership roles.

**Tindara Addabbo** is Full Professor in Economic Policy at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Current main research areas: wage discrimination by gender, well-being, gender budgeting, gender gap in education, gender equity firms certification. Coordinator of *Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality Plans in research institutions* – (H2020-SwafS-2019 – 873072). web site: <http://personale.unimore.it/rubrica/curriculum/addabbo>

**Emília Rodrigues Araújo** is full-time teacher at the University of Minho, Portugal. She holds a PhD in Sociology and presently works at the Institute of Social Sciences, in the same University. Amongst other topics, she has worked on gender, science and time.

**Sveva Avveduto** Emeritus CNR, President Women and Science Association, Chair GETA Gender and Talent Observatory, Italian delegate W20. Her research activity focusses on science and education policy, human resources for R&D, gender issues and international mobility. She has been member of the OECD CSTP and chief scientist of H2020 projects.

**Giovanna Badalassi** is an independent researcher on gender budgeting and gender impact assessment. Main research areas: Gender budgeting, Labour market, Violence against women and child abuse and maltreatment. Post-doc Researcher at Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality

Plans in research institutions – (H2020-SwafS-2019 – 873072). web site: <https://it.linkedin.com/in/giovanna-badalassi-3b487a13>

**Mariasole Bannò**, University of Brescia, is Associate Professor at the University of Brescia, Italy, where she teaches in the fields of economics and management. She gained a PhD in Economics and Management of Technology in 2009. She published several articles and book chapters in international publications, in the fields of economics, international and family business.

**Rita Bencivenga** is Visiting Research Fellow at the Trinity Centre for Gender Equality and Leadership (TCGEL), Trinity College Dublin and member of LEGS - Laboratoire d'études de genre et de sexualité, CNRS/Université Paris. Main research areas: gender studies, adult non formal and informal education, gender in higher education, and gender and technology.

**Vic Benuyenah**: Professor of organisational psychology and labour market studies. Received his PhD in organisational psychology (University of London, UK). Associate Editor of the Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning and has also been involved in several international research studies including, organizational theory, labour market inefficiencies and recruitment studies. Teaches HRM, work psychology and economics.

**Sandrine Bonin** is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Centre for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India's only UNESCO Chair for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Her ongoing doctoral research revolves around integrating participatory research methods to optimize women's entrepreneurial ecosystem through women's saving groups.

**Nasima M.H. Carrim** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Human Resource Management at the University of Pretoria. Her research focuses on gender in management, culture, religion and minorities in the workplace from an intersectionality and identity perspective. She has authored many articles in international journals and books related to diversity management.

**Giulia Ciancimino** Graduated in Economics for Development, now collaborating to scientific and research activities as well as communication for NRC's Social Transformation, Evaluation and Methods (MUSA) team. Currently a member of the Observatory for Ongoing Social Changes-COVID-19 (OSC COVID-19).

**Antonietta Cosentino** is Assistant Professor at the University of Rome "La Sapienza", Faculty of Economics, Rome (Italy). She obtained the National Scientific Qualification as an Associate Professor. Her research interest includes financial reporting, integrated reporting, relational capital, no-profit organizations, social accounting, social impact, social enterprise.

**Edna Costa** is a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the project "*Into the Secret Garden of Portuguese politics*" at GOVCOPP, Aveiro University and a researcher in the project "*The political participation of Portuguese youth*" (CGF). Holding a European PhD (2018) in Political Science from NOVA-FCSH, her work focuses democracy and political representation from a gender perspective.

**Maria da Conceição Costa** is currently Assistant Professor in Universidade de Aveiro, Departamento de Matemática and researcher at CIDMA. Her main areas of research are time series analysis with focus on surveillance systems, maximum entropy methodologies in the context of information theory, inference, and Big-Data, and applied statistics in social and health sciences.

**Maria João Couto** is a PhD student in Business Administration at the School of Economics and Management in the University of Minho. Her doctoral research is about work and non-work balance, from a male perspective.

**Giorgia Maria D’Allura**, University of Catania, Assistant Professor of Economics and Business, from which she received her PhD in Management. Her research focuses on governance structures and firm’s development pattern and strategy, especially focusing on institutional context, innovation and internationalization. She also focused on the role of emotion in the governance of family business.

**Anusha De.** Pre-Doctoral fellow and incoming PhD candidate at LICOS Centre for Institutions and Economic Performance, Faculty of Economics and Business, KU Leuven, Belgium; MSc in Quantitative Economics from University College Dublin, Ireland; Research interests include food value chains, agriculture and gender aspects in the developing nations

**Sheila Delhumeau Rivera:** Professor of gender and methodology (Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, México). She received her PhD in social sciences from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. She coordinates the Equity and gender program of her Faculty and the Ensenada Communication and Gender Observatory. She is also a social activist in Ensenada’s Slut Walk colectiva since 2016.

**Hind Elhinnawy** is a dedicated feminist and activist with a research focus on gender, race, ethnicity, and social change. She joined Nottingham Trent University as a lecturer in criminology in 2019, after finishing her doctoral studies at the University of Kent. Hind’s work for over a decade, on gender-focused social and political activism, has led to law and policy reform in Egypt.

**Francesco Faenza** is a PhD Candidate in Labour, Development and Innovation, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia - Marco Biagi Foundation. His research interests include gender equality in ICT and gamification. He has taught coding and robotics since 2016 in primary and secondary school. Teacher from 2016 to 2019 at Digital Girls Summer Camp.

**Federica Fornaciari** is an Associate Professor the in Department of Arts and Humanities, National University, California. She received a doctorate in Communication from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Master of Arts in Journalism and Mass Communication from Marshall University. Her research and teaching revolve around digital identities, frame theory, and media representation.

**Susanne Frederiksen** is associate professor at the Department of Teacher Education at UCN, University College Northjotland in Denmark. Most of her research concerns gender issues in relation to education and school communities.

**Irene García Muñoz:** MSCA 6iDIR COFUND researcher and PhD candidate (University of Deusto). A political scientist and women’s rights specialist, with more than 10 years’ experience in the social justice sector, she holds a Master on “Women, Gender and Citizenship” (University of Barcelona) a Master on “Globalization, Development and Cooperation” (University of Barcelona), and a Bachelor Degree on Political Science (Complutense University of Madrid).

**Sarina Gursch** holds a master’s in industrial mathematics. She currently works as a PhD student at the institute for software technology at the technical university of Graz. The topic of her doctoral thesis is gender equality in technology.

**Katarzyna Gut** Research Assistant for Transport Innovation Gender Observatory ([TInnGO](#)) Coventry University. TInnGO Project concentrates on gender and smart mobility by building the capacity to generate and apply evidence on issues relating to gender equality and transport. Kat also works as a Community Researcher at Birmingham University for [USE-IT](#) (Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together).

**Hana Himi**, PhD. in criminology from Bar Ilan University – 2001, is a psychotherapist specializing in trauma, and a senior lecturer in Beit Berl Academic College. As being the college’s GEO, she is currently

participating in the H2020 CHANGE project (No. 787177) as a Transfer Agent (TA) and leader of the BBC TA team.

**Dang Thi Hoa:** Assoc. Prf, Doctor Anthropologist (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences). She has worked 29 years at Anthropology and Gender Studies. Experienced research on Culture respect Healthcare, Gender Equality, Domestic violence analysis. She also worked as a Social advisor, teaching for various poverty reduction and development projects and postgraduate education (Vietnam Graduate Academy of Social Sciences)

**Priscalia Khosa** is a lecturer and PhD candidate in the Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch University. Her fields of research interest include social work supervision and management; social work education; social policy, substance abuse and gender dynamics.

**Ulpiana Kocollari** Associate Professor in Management and Business Administration (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia), Italy. Main research topics and publications are on CSR and Sustainability Management and Reporting; Organizations' development through Social Innovation, Crowdfunding for Social Enterprises. She received the PhD in Management in 2009 and since then she is teaching courses of Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility.

**Blair Kuntz** has been the Near and Middle Eastern Studies and Islamic Studies Librarian at the University of Toronto since 2003. He has presented and published internationally several peer-reviewed papers in the fields of library science, foreign-language learning, peace and conflict studies, e-learning, gender studies and cultural studies.

**María López Belloso** earned her PhD in Human Rights from the University of Deusto, and received the Brunet Award in 2017. She has a solid background in research, both in scientific production and in research management, as well as teaching experience. She focuses on the emerging possibilities and potential application of new technologies to the promotion and advocacy of Human Rights.

**Marlene Loureiro** has a PhD in Communication Sciences (2012). She is an assistant professor of Communication Sciences at University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD). She is currently a researcher at LABCOM.IFP – Communication, Philosophy and Humanities Research Unit of University of Beira Interior. At the moment, her research focuses on organizational and interpersonal communication and gender studies.

**Maria de Lourdes Machado-Taylor** is a Senior Researcher Associate at the Center for Research on Higher Education Policies (CIPES) and works at the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) in Portugal. Areas of research include Strategies, Higher Education and Gender Studies. She has coordinated and contributed to multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional research projects. She has many publications.

**Nicolò Marchesini**, social statistician, is a research fellow at the National Research Council - IRPPS (Institute for Research on Population and Social Policy). Expert in qualitative and quantitative statistical analysis, his main research interests concern international migration, in particular forced migration, and gender issues in Italy, with a special focus on new forms of parenthood.

**Diane McGiffen** is the Chief Operating Officer at Audit Scotland, leading their focus on delivering effective public audit in Scotland and leading their strategy to be a world class organisation. Diane is studying for a DBA at Cranfield University, initially focusing on retaining women over 50 in health and social care, and considering how to take that forward post-covid.

**Deolinda Meira** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Law of Porto Accounting and Business School of Polytechnic Institute of Porto. She is a researcher at the Center for Social and Organizational

Studies, where she is responsible for a research group on Social Economy. She holds a Ph.D. and a master's Law. Her main fields of research include Cooperative Law and Social Economy Enterprises.

**Charlotte Morphet**, MRTPI is a part-time PhD student at Leeds Beckett Housing and Planning School where she is researching women in leadership and management positions in the UK planning profession. She is a recipient of the women and planning bursary.

**Ester Noguer-Juncà**. Associated professor of Economics at University of Girona (UdG), Spain. Member of the Interdisciplinary Gender and Social Inequalities Research Group (UdG). Her main research areas are hospitality industry and gender equality, CSR and human capital issues; and the analysis of economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism activity, especially in rural areas.

**Kehinde Deborah Ogunjemilusi** holds a MSC in Finance and is currently in the first year of her Ph.D. at Dundalk Institute of Technology. Her main research interest is in the areas of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and women entrepreneurship. Her PhD Thesis focuses on exploring the entrepreneurship policies and access to finance available for women on the island of Ireland

**Asta Dis Oladottir**, associate professor at School of business at University of Iceland. She earned her Ph.D at Copenhagen Business School, and has over 20 years of management experience, including CEO and chairman. Her main research focus is on international management, food security and gender equality.

**Abbi Pearson** is a management PhD Candidate at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon, United States. Her main area of research is studying how intersectionality affects the process of discrimination in evaluations, as well as how intersectional marginalized identities affect feelings of trust and authenticity in the workplace.

**Ana Teresa Pedreiro** is a researcher at the Health Sciences Research Unit: Nursing of the Nursing School of Coimbra. She is finishing her PhD in Public Health at the Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, in which she studied Retirement adjustment, focusing on gender issues and conjugality.

**Maria Rosaria Pelizzari**: Professor of Gender Studies and Women's History (University of Salerno, Italy). Rector's Delegate for Equal Opportunities for 8 years, currently covering the role of Project Coordinator for H2020 R&I PEERS project. Main research includes social and cultural history, with particular reference to gender-based violence, gambling and urban history. Published numerous essays on these topics in both Italian and international journals.

**Pregala Pillay** serves as Vice Dean: Social Impact and Transformation in the Faculty of Economic & Management Sciences, Professor in the School of Public Leadership and Director of the Anti-Corruption Centre for Education and Research at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. She co-leads the Working Group on Ethics & Culture in the Public Sector at IASIA.

**Nasim Roustapisheh**, PhD candidate in Technology Entrepreneurship, Science and Research Branch of Islamic Azad University, master of corporate entrepreneurship, is interested in research and study of women entrepreneurship. She has done some researches in the field of Brand equity, opportunities in tourism industry and women entrepreneurship networks, and working on publishing book in this fields.

**Joana Vieira dos Santos** PhD in organizational psychology, master's in health psychology and degree in psychology. Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, at University of Algarve. Nowadays she is vice-director of the Faculty.



She is also author of scientific publications in organizational psychology, specifically in occupational health.

**Paola Sdao:** She works in the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, University of Calabria. She's a member of the Scientific Committee of Women's Studies Centre of University of Calabria. She works in the field of statistics on gender violence and is a member of research and data collection team of D.i.Re (Donne in Rete contro la violenza).

**Alma Alejandra Soberano Serrano** is a professor of family law and methodology at Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, México. She received her PhD in Regional Studies from Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas. Her research interests are on gender violence and human rights.

**Jenni M. Simon** is the Director of Undergraduate Studies for the Communication Studies Department at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Her research focuses on gender and the critical and rhetorical intersections that exist between culture and social movement.

**Antonio Tintori** is a sociologist, Ph.D in Economic geography, Italian CNR researcher and teacher of Methodology of Social Sciences at Sapienza, University of Rome. His key competences include quantitative-qualitative analysis of attitudes and behaviours of the population in psychosocial and economic fields.

**Marco Traversi, University of Brescia,** is a PhD student the University of Brescia, Italy. His research interests concern sustainability, gender diversity and the evaluation of public policies.

**Andreia Veloso** is a researcher in the Department of Information Systems (DSI) of the School of Engineering of the University of Minho. She graduated in 2019 as Engineering and Management of Information Systems at the same university. And in beginning of 2021 she finished her master's degree in same field.

**Doris Wesley** is a Lecturer at the Department of Communication Studies, University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Her research revolves around understanding the role of communication in terrorism and how communication can address, manage, combat terrorism issues, and examine the problems of terrorism among established terrorist organizations within the African continent.

**Peirui Yang** is a PhD candidate in Prehistory and Archaeology at the University of Alcalá. Her research is about archaeology and contemporary art, especially the connection between prehistoric art and contemporary art. As an archaeologist and artist, she is dedicated to exploring artistic creation and academic practice under multiple identities.

**Sadia Zaman** is doctoral student at the Social Behavior Research Center at SWPS University, Poland. She received her Master of Philosophy in Psychology from National Institute of Psychology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan in the field of positive and gender psychology. Her areas of interest are social psychology, motivation science, positive psychology and gender issues.

**Bea Zhang** is currently working as Project Engineer in manufacturing field and completed her Master's degree in Management in Durham University (2021). Prior to her MSc, Miss Zhang completed a BEng degree (1<sup>st</sup> class) in the Department of Electronic Engineering, University of York in the year 2019.

# Rethinking Fatherhood: Investigating Fathers' Family Engagement Between Individual Will and Social Constraints

Nicolò Marchesini

National Research Council of Italy, CNR-IRPPS, Rome, Italy

[nicolo.marchesini@irpps.cnr.it](mailto:nicolo.marchesini@irpps.cnr.it)

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**Abstract:** In the last 50 years the role of fathers in western societies has considerably changed, as demonstrated by an increasing body of research in social, human and psychological sciences. Although fathers are increasingly involved in family life, gender equality in both family and working life is still far from being achieved, and socially stressful situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic are exacerbating them. While the female burden of unpaid work within families has been widely studied in the literature, to date little is still known about fathers' perception of their engagement in the family routine. Through the analysis of seven in-depth interviews of fathers with children aged 0-7, the present case-study investigates how and to what extent sharing parental responsibilities, i.e. childcare and household tasks, affects a variety of gender-equality related variables, such as the return to work of the partner, the fathers' working career, and difficulties they have to address. By adopting text-mining analytical techniques, our findings suggest that, on the one hand, fathers' higher family engagement facilitates and supports the mothers' returning to work; on the other hand, such commitment is recognised by fathers as slowing down their careers, especially in the case of self-employees. Broadly, whilst fathers recognise their parenting role and experience as a positive change compared to past generations, due to their family engagement they also point out how they have been victims of prejudices linked to gender stereotypes both at the workplace and among relatives or acquaintances. Importantly, the present study sheds (preliminary) light on the difficulties and obstacles experienced by fathers as a consequence of their closer engagement in family life - a rather unexplored aspect in literature so far. Indeed, if such behaviours will be sustained at a quantitative level as well, it might have important consequences for future gender-oriented strategies and policies, in terms of reshaping the productive system, overcoming gender stereotypes for both females and males, and mainstreaming approach to gender issues.

**Keywords:** fatherhood, family engagement, gender stereotypes, workplace, Italy

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## 1. Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the severe restricting measures implemented accordingly by governments, such as extended and full lockdown periods, an increasing amount of evidence was presented of the important consequences these measures had on the population, often exacerbating critical issues already present in the social and productive structure of the countries. In Italy, similarly to many other countries, a picture of economic distress is part of a broader context of crisis at the European level to which certain categories of people have been particularly exposed as a consequence of the pandemic measures. The financial and economic shock produced by the general closing down of productive activities has produced, among other things, higher rates of unemployment, of which women are particularly more at risk compared to men - especially if they are young and self-employed (ILO, 2021). At the same time, however, the pandemic has enormously increased teleworking and homeworking modalities (EIGE, 2020). At the European level, the tertiary sector has taken most advantage of the possibility of working from home, especially in the field of education, public administration and services in general. This sector includes jobs that can be carried out mainly in the office, involving administrative, training or educational tasks, where the necessity for physical presence is reduced (Sostero *et al.*, 2020), and presents higher proportions of women compared to male workers. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the quota of female teleworkers is higher than that of male workers (Eurofound, 2020).

In Italy, a complete lockdown took place between 8 March and 3 May, affecting the majority of productive, educational, and social activities. Following such overall conditions, the employment situation appears to have seriously deteriorated over the last year, and comparing the female contingent with their male counterpart shows that women have suffered the most from negative shocks in the labour market dynamics (ISTAT, 2021). The working difficulties faced by the Italian women are intertwined with a division of the family duties that remains strongly unbalanced on the female side (ISTAT, 2019a; Barigozzi, Di Timoteo and Monfardini, 2020). As highlighted by recent studies, in Italy the increasing work-related uncertainty and impoverishment caused by the COVID-lockdown has exacerbated unpaid work especially for women and mothers (Del Boca *et al.*, 2020; Zannella *et al.*, 2020). Similar data were reported in other countries such as the US (Deryugina, Shurchkov and Stearns, 2021), suggesting that gender as a social construction is still a determinant for unpaid activities division (Meraviglia and Dudka, 2021).

Although many advancements have been made towards evening out gender equality, some salient issues remain unresolved in Italy, such as: the strong difference between employment rates of men and women in the face of significant labour market segmentation (EIGE, 2019); the difficulties for women to re-enter the labour market after their maternity leave and the high number of women giving up their careers due to these difficulties (CEDAW, 2017; Camera dei Deputati, XI Commissione Lavoro pubblico e privato, 2020). With the aim of supporting women's employment, one central aspect is to improve the balance between partners (and parents)' in their work-life organisation. In Italy, family-tailored welfare measures have been introduced or enhanced, among which the increase of compulsory paternity leave for employed fathers from 7 to 10 days since 2021 (the State Finance Bill, 2020), in agreement with the EU directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2019). However, except for the information available about the use and distribution of family time (ISTAT, 2016, 2019a), and on the access to paternity leave by employees in the private sector (INPS data; Villa, 2020), still little is known about how fathers engaged in and juggled in the family management, e.g. the resources they invested or the daily difficulties they encountered. This study provides a closer look into the personal experiences and the adopted strategies by contemporary fathers in Italy; and particularly those who decide to be engaged in childcare and housework.

Recent literature has highlighted how current forms of parental leave, paternity leave, and working flexibility improve the family environment, in terms of the child well-being, the father-child relationship, and the economic security of the household if paternity leave is paid (e.g. O'Brien, Brandth and Kvande, 2007; OECD, 2016; Mangiavacchi, Piccoli and Pieroni, 2020). This is particularly evident in workplaces allowing for a certain amount of time and location flexibility to employees such as the academia (Galinsky, Aumann and Bond, 2009; Damaske *et al.*, 2014), where men choose to be more involved in childcare and housekeeping, trying to adapt their work to the needs of both the child and the partner. However, every rose has its thorn: while such a change in attitudes may undoubtedly support the working career of the partner, it does not leave the father immune from major difficulties in organising his work and reconciling these commitments with the family schedule (Coltrane *et al.*, 2013; Marchesini, 2021). And this seems to be true even in countries where gender differences are less accentuated, such as Sweden (Allard, Haas and Hwang, 2007; Raiden and Räisänen, 2013). Along with work difficulties, men choosing higher degrees of engagement, i.e. in childcare and housework tasks, must also deal with male stereotypes and in particular with the (failed) social expectations that their behaviour may generate. Indeed, the latest available data on gender role stereotypes in Italy reveals that there is still a strong belief that work success is more important for men than women, that it is mainly men who have to provide for the financial needs of the family and that men are less suited to take care of household duties (ISTAT, 2019b). Such a gender-stereotypical view was also found among secondary school pupils mainly from low socio-economic backgrounds, who identify care duties and household chores as exclusively female (Caruso, Cerbara and Tintori, 2019).

As already argued above, such a heavily stereotyped view might have been exacerbated during the pandemic. Recent research evidence shows how stereotypes can play a protective role against a lack of certainty in times of health emergencies, as in the case of the COVID-19, reducing the degree of perceived complexity of the reality and encouraging people to look for pre-established models of behaviour to adhere to, thus constituting a protective factor for the person's well-being against external stress agents (Tintori *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, for those fathers no longer responding to the male breadwinner stereotypes may happen, on the one hand, to experiencing an identity dilemma (Doucet and Merla, 2007; Lee and Lee, 2018), and, on the other hand, such engaging fatherhood seems to let fathers in redefining the own masculine identity by rejecting conventional gender roles (Rochlen *et al.*, 2008; Fischer and Anderson, 2012; Latshaw, 2015; Solomon, 2017).

Given the persistence of gender differences in the work and family spheres, and in light of the innovations in gender and family support policies that are being implemented in Italy, this contribution aims to remark how the importance of engaging fathers in parental responsibilities can play towards gender equality; as well as highlighting the work and social challenges that they may experience and, consequently, inhibit the spread of gender equality behaviours among contemporary fathers.

## **2. Data and methods**

To highlight the behaviour of Italian fathers regarding childcare and housework, as well as possible difficulties in balancing working life and a high degree of family life involvement, a case study was carried out through in-depth interviews with seven fathers having at least one child aged 0-3 within a heterosexual and dual-earner couple, conducted in October 2020. The fathers were provided with a topics outline addressed for developing a

common logical thread. Thanks to the semi-structured interviews, the interviewed fathers were allowed to bring out priority and important topics to them.

The questions investigated the family daily habits and organisation, the difficulties of their work-life balance, as well as their experience towards attitudes and expectations with gender stereotypes. The interviews, collected via both face-to-face and WAPI methods, were recorded, transcribed, and then anonymised, and only the transcript has been kept for analysis.

The seven interviewees were selected by trying to differentiate as much as possible some key-characteristics about their educational qualification and profession. The fathers of this study are between 31 and 46 years old, with at least two children aged between 6 months and 7 years, their educational qualification ranges between a high school diploma and a PhD. All interviewed fathers are employed, whether in the public administration or private sector or self-employed.

Text mining techniques were applied to uncover common semantic structures in the interviews. In particular, in this study the focus is placed on the terms considered important for each respondent (through the calculation of the coefficient term frequency-inverse document frequency or *tf-idf*), as well as on the relationships existing between the terms used, focusing specifically on the most recurrent word pairs (*bi-grams*) (Manning and Schütze, 1999) and terms association ( $\phi$  coefficient of correlation) (Silge and Robinson, 2017). As the interviews were conducted in Italian, the results are kept in the mother tongue in order not to change the semantic meaning of the terms used by interviewees.

### **3. Main findings**

#### **3.1 Fathers' engagement**

The first part of the interviews investigated to what extent fathers considered themselves as involved in childcare and housework. By adopting the *tf-idf* coefficient - which weights the frequency of a single word in an interview by the length of the interview itself - to the analysis of the most recurrent words, a variety of terms related to both childcare and domestic management emerged for each respondent (Figure 1). For example, *storia* (tale), *leggere* (reading), *pannolino* (nappy), *cura* (care) and *pomeriggio* (afternoon) all refer to activities carried out by fathers with their children, indicating the usual activities concerning both personal care, such as changing nappies, bathing and preparing meals, and activities such as taking children to school, playing or reading together, or spending time with them in the afternoon. In parallel, terms as *partecipare* (attending to), *presenza* (presence), *disponibile* (available), *condividere* (sharing) and *partecipazione* (participation) refer to fathers' engagement in family life. Results from the interviews show that often fathers and mothers take turns in childcare on working days so that both parents can plan and be exclusively committed to their work for a certain time during the day or week. All interviewed fathers report to share housework with their partners, such as shopping, cooking, or housecleaning, except for some specific task that remains in one partner's domain. The housework division, therefore, seems to reflect parents' time spent with the children and their work commitments.

Regarding the sharing of housekeeping tasks with their partner, interviewees recognise their behaviour as different and often in antithesis to that of their fathers', highlighting a sort of generational shift. Benjamin, aged 41-45 and with two children, is French and lives in Rome, his partner's hometown. Talking about childcare, he points out how the maternal grandfather is not helpful in their daily routine, for he was never keen on playing and spending time with his children in their family routine, looking after children has always been carried out by the mother. Similarly, Elio, father of two children, underlines this contrast of paternal styles referring to his own family and experience:

*Times have changed: for my father and my mother [...] it is natural that my mother is a housewife and my father is always the worker. [...] I remember that my mum was the one who changed my nappies and spent the most time with me, my dad didn't play with me or take me for riding the bike.*

Additionally, fathers' perception is that this division of duties is not so unusual: for instance, Antonio, part-time worker with two children, recognises how, in his network, many fathers actively participate in the family life. In his view, this facilitates a mutual understanding of shared experiences and difficulties with other fathers.

Although fathers interviewed describe themselves as actively engaged in family life, and although this emerging family organisation is designed to reserve specific working spots for both parents, fathers seem to show difficulties in work-life balance anyway.

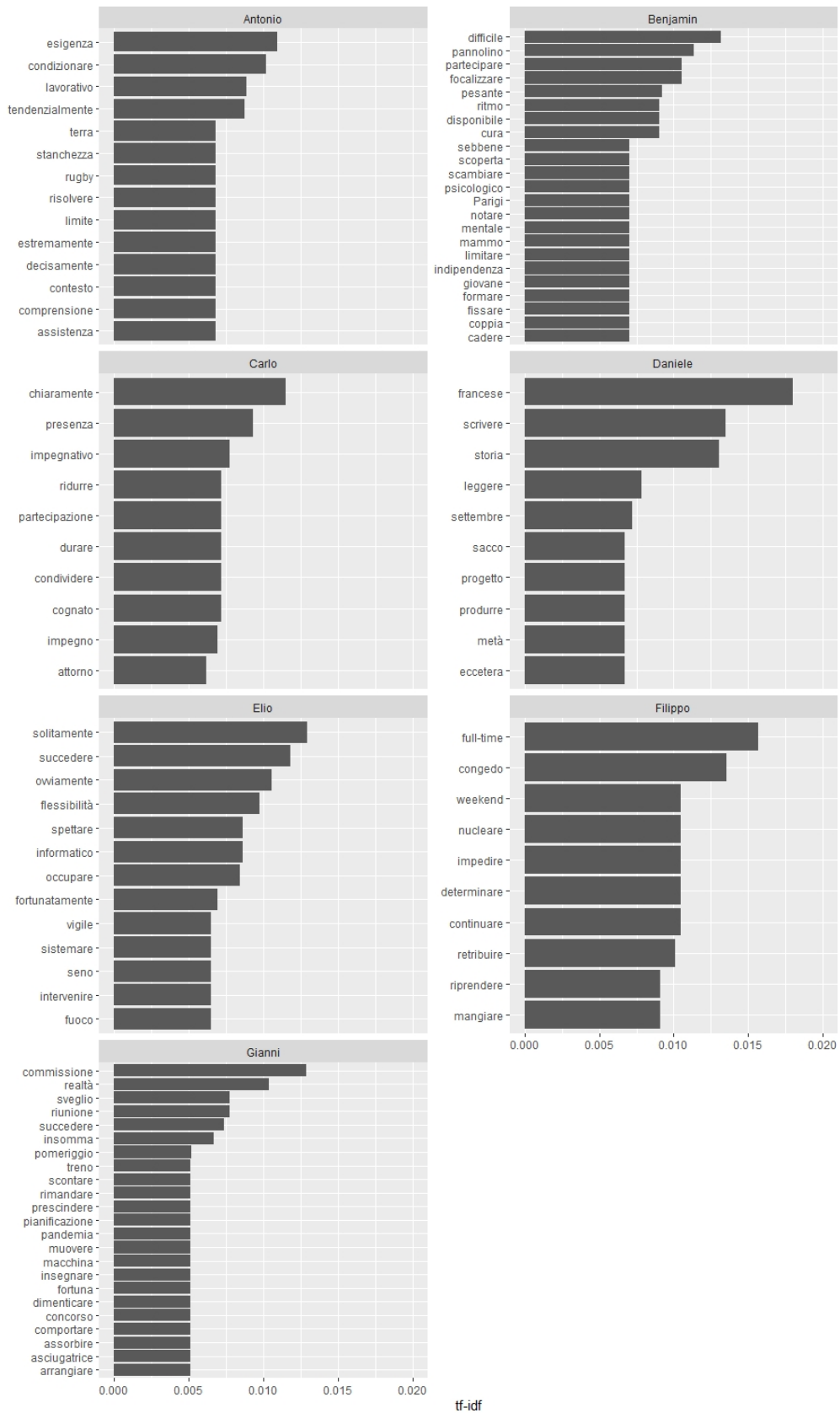
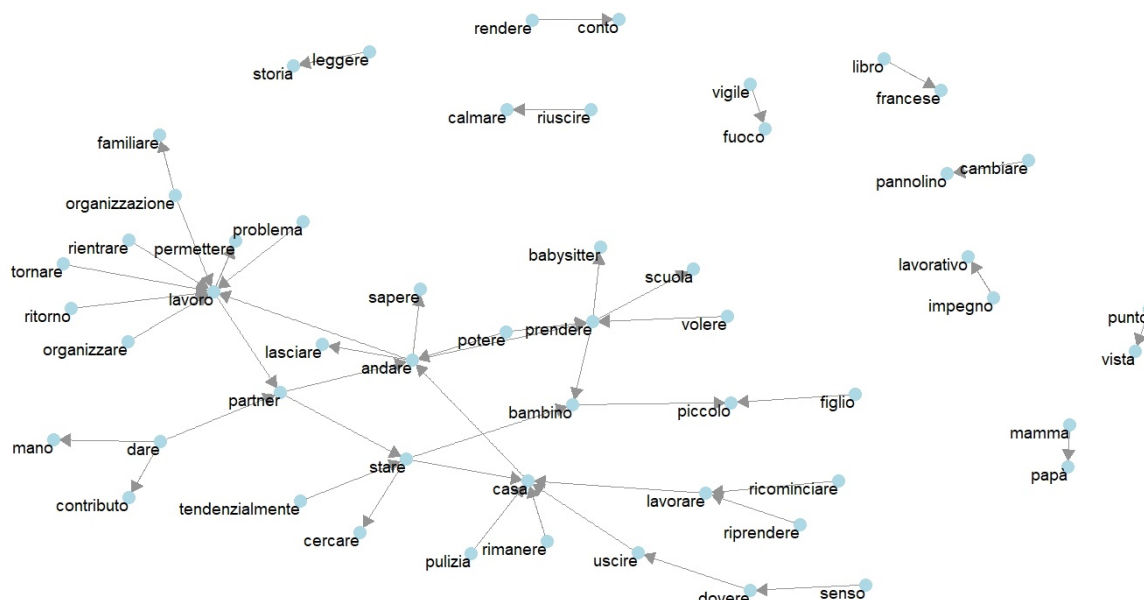


Figure 1: Most important words by interviewed fathers. Tf-idf coefficient.

### 3.2 Parenthood impact on fathers' careers

Looking at the lexical structure of the seven interviews as emerged in the analysis of the most recurrent word pairs in the text collection (Figure 2), several work-related terms emerge, highlighting the difficulties fathers face as a result of the engaging-in-family choice made. The term *lavoro* (work), which appears to be a key node, is often used in combination with words such as *problema* (issue), *organizzazione* (planning), and *impegno* (effort). Such a relationship seems significant in all fathers' interviews regardless of their profession or contract type.



**Figure 2:** Network plot of the most recurrent pairs of adjacent words (*bi-grams*).

In terms of fathers' work-life balance, paternity leave is not always perceived as a resource and even when entitled to, interviewees do not always choose to use it. Benjamin, a self-employed worker in the media area with a French contract, was entitled to 5 days of paid leave after his child's birth, but he did not seize it as an opportunity because of the flexible nature of his job: as he independently organises and schedules his tasks, and thanks to the agreement with his colleagues, he took advantage of the flexibility provided by his contract to carve out daily moments with his new-born child: "you can open the door and change a nappy or help out and then go back to work. But it's also true that you don't switch off, so you have advantages and disadvantages". Similarly, both Antonio, a permanent part-time employee, and Gianni, a fixed-term full-time employee, chose not to apply for paternity leave although provided by their contracts, because their working environments were sensitive and welcoming to their new situation. Indeed, Antonio states how with the second baby's born,

*I told at work that I was staying home for 10 days. I didn't worry [about the official procedure], I didn't ask for parental leave because I have some autonomy at work anyway and I work with people I know. I currently have a friendly working environment about these things, and [my colleagues] have children the same age as mine,*

thus highlighting the aspect of sympathy for the situation and sharing of the difficulties with colleagues who were in the same situation as him. In addition to the aspect of familiarity and welcoming of the workplace, Gianni adds that he did not "inform too much" about getting the parental leave because, as a teacher in a small school with few teaching staff, he is aware of the difficulties that his choice would have entailed for students and colleagues.

On the contrary, Daniele, who is also self-employed in the film industry but has an Italian contract, is not entitled to parental leave for the Italian legislation and decided to rearrange his work commitments, accepting and taking part in projects that did not involve long journeys in Italy or abroad.

Two of the interviewed fathers declare that they do not find re-arranging their jobs particularly demanding. Elio can enjoy high flexibility and an autonomous work organisation that allows him to enter and leave the workplace according to family commitments. He can rely on the significant presence of his partner who, as a permanent

employee, can take advantage of extended periods of maternity leave or other forms of work-life balance. Gianni, on the other hand, manages to reconcile work and family life because his partner, a research fellow, organises her working time according to the children's school and Gianni's return home from work. To summarise, the flexibility of both parents - in terms of working place, schedules, and autonomous task management - seems essential in reconciling work and family life, as well as in dealing with potential emergencies that cannot be planned for. For instance, Carlo states several times in his interview that being a permanent researcher allowed him, and still allows him, to organise his work according to his family commitments, since he carries out a job that evaluates his productivity over a long period and not on a daily or weekly basis.

On the contrary, self-employed workers are those who struggle the most from finding a balance between work and family life. Benjamin, for instance, while considering his homeworking as positive for the overall family well-being, states that it

*also put extra pressure on me, because I felt guilty or unable to do two things at once - home and work. [...] What burdened me, though, was the fact that I never had time off, that I didn't have any specific room for myself, so being available all the time made it difficult to concentrate. I only went out shopping, but [my life] was all there, at home,*

highlighting the scarcity of extended time and defined space for working, and accusing a lack of concentration and increasing stress under both a parental and professional perspectives. Daniele, self-employed in the media as well, also points out such time issue, because his job requires concentration and a significant dedicated time. To overcome this problem, Daniele and his partner decided to plan their week, so they both know how many days and hours they can devote to work and plan it accordingly.

When talking about the difficulties they face in their work-life balance, almost all fathers interviewed perceive their choice of being actively engaged in parenting as an obstacle for their career. Carlo reckons that the great flexibility of his job has allowed him to modulate his work schedule according to the family needs; at the same time though the numerous absentee days, the reduced in-office working hours, and his limited availability to business trips may have affected his performance and productivity. In his view, this is a direct consequence of his parental choices, which negatively impacted his career and "labour market possibilities". Gianni, a fixed-term teacher in a private school, emphasises that being present almost every afternoon with his children does not leave him with enough time to study for the selection procedure to become a teacher in the public school.

Benjamin and Daniele also recognise that their family engagement has and still is holding back their careers. Benjamin acknowledges that, during the early childhood of both children, he felt very limited professionally.

Working as a self-employed, he has to

*be [always] up to date, to have that curiosity always and to be available for training permanently [...], and this is part of our work. [In the children's early years] I didn't have such time or availability anymore.*

Daniele, who is professionally similar to Benjamin, adds that experiencing engaging fatherhood has led him to discard many projects, to choose only those with a satisfactory salary but a close location to his home, so as not to ask his partner to take over the family responsibilities by her own. For example,

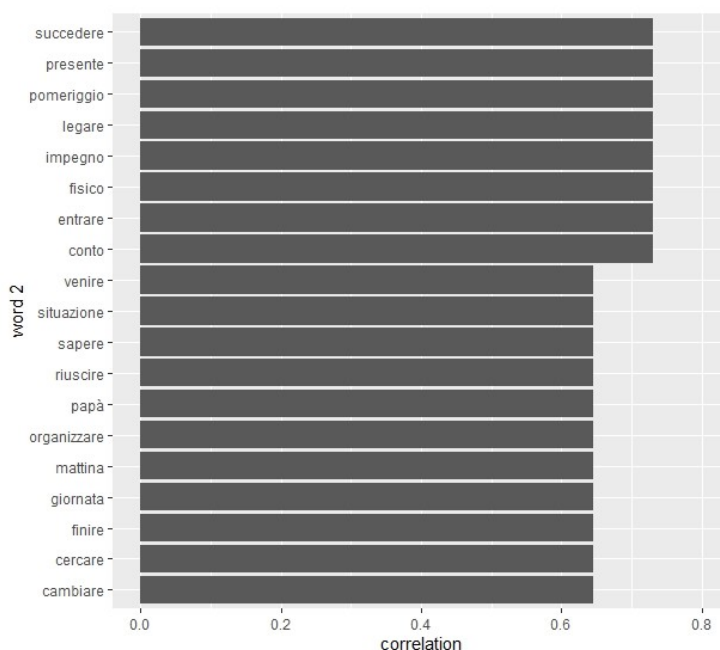
*I turned down a job offer [...] for two months in Vietnam, which has, let's say, all the characteristics of the job I chose. [...] the desire to travel and see the world [...] it's a bit of what I've built up over the years. But [in September] my partner had to start working again, there was the children's school inclusion, so I didn't really think about that job and I just said no.*

In some ways, flexibility might not always be the answer: men with highly flexible work organisation may still perceive a slowdown in their working or professional development.

### **3.3 Highly-engaged fathers and male stereotypes**

Along with the work-related difficulties, the interview aimed to investigate whether the fathers experienced some form of stigma because of their choice to live engaging parenting. Throughout the interview, fathers revealed situations, episodes or attitudes experienced as directly related to gender stereotypes. To investigate

this topic, a specific question was asked on whether they had experienced jokes about their choice. The correlation ( $\phi$  coefficient) between the term “joke” and the other used words was then calculated (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Words from the interviews most positive correlated with *battuta* (joke).  $\phi$  coefficient  $\geq 0.6$

Five out of seven interviewed fathers declare to have been the object of jokes or teasing concerning their parenting style. The term *battuta* (joke) appears as highly correlated with words linked to their own experience and events, such as *succedere* (happening) and *situazione* (situation); as well as it appears connected to the father's *presenza* (presence) in the family and his will to *riuscire* (succeed to) in being there. Carlo, a researcher with three children, mentions some of the jokes he often received in the workplace such as "do you still work here?"; "do we keep your desk?"; "but didn't you just arrived and already leaving?", highlighting how the working reality before the COVID-19 pandemic was closely linked to the equation the poorer the presence at work, the poorer the person. Carlo reports that he was also the object of jokes within the family because he did not respect the male-worker stereotypes.

*It happened that after lunch I got up and helped my mother-in-law with the plates, and my father- and my brother-in-law used to say to me: "stop it, you're ruining our reputation!", meaning "remain seated like we are [...] because someone else cleans the dishes".*

Daniele, who is self-employed in the film industry, points out that having a family puts him in the position of having to justify something:

*[This] thing happened just recently, with a working group of people I'm very close to, friends who are my age, who don't have children and lead the life I did when I was 30, and at that age, at most you have a few affairs, you go to parties, you come back, you do whatever you want. We had the idea of writing a project together based in South America, but during the summer I didn't want to be away from the children and my partner, and I contributed very little and with a lot of difficulties just before the deadline, locking myself in two or three nights the last few days. They've been giving me a hard time about it, [making] issues about me not being around much lately, not being very reliable...*

In terms of male stereotypes in the workplace, the testimony of Elio, a full-time civil servant, is exemplary.

*During the first year of the child's age, [any parent] is entitled to two hours of breastfeeding, and with the little one, I took this leave. So there were days that I would go to work at 07:30 and [...] at 11:30 I could leave, so it's the time that you go there, have a coffee, have a chat, do two bits of work and then you can leave. And there have been times [I've got] jokes from colleagues "what are you doing? so you're going to breastfeed with fake breasts?".*



Most of the other correlations refer to the family *organizzazione* (organisation), such as *mattina* (morning), *pomeriggio* (afternoon) or *giornata* (day), and to the *fisico* (physical) *impegno* (effort) shown by the father in combining all the needs, such as *cercare* (looking for) new jobs for the self-employed. For example, Benjamin, who is self-employed in the media field, points out that he did not perceive any jokes in the working environment because it is a female majority - as Antonio's, part-time in an administrative office -, but his high family engagement has been psychological as a heavy burden.

*I felt limited in my being as a person, as an individual, I found myself very limited very constrained not only with work. [...] Being a "Mr Mum" I found myself constrained by this, and I'm only just getting out today, to find some time to be curious, to waste time training, without having an immediate economic return and to look for other jobs...*

According to Benjamin's testimony, it is important to note that he defines his own behaviour as "Mr Mum", thus linking attitudes of home and family caring more to the feminine than to the masculine universe, although he is convinced of his parenting style. This implicit classification also appears in Elio's testimony, however, concerning his partner's choice to change her work commitment from full-time to part-time:

*It was her choice, I mean in the sense that she proposed it, she said "it's not a problem for me if I work two hours less [per day], but I'll pick up the eldest easily", so let's say she proposed it and obviously I supported her choice. I didn't choose it instead of her because she proposed and it went well, so it's fine.*

#### **4. Discussion and further implications**

This contribution adopted an innovative approach towards the investigation of how modern Italian fathers perceived and described themselves and their habits within the family. Seven fathers in a heterosexual couple with at least one child aged 0-3 were interviewed, and analyses highlighted some still under-explored aspects concerning the difficulties that fathers experience in relation to their active engagement in childcare and household tasks.

Indeed, all the interviewed fathers described themselves as actively engaged in childcare - both in personal care and social activities - and in household tasks, and acknowledged that their behaviour was antithetical to their past experience as children with their own fathers, thus suggesting a sort of generational shift in male parenting styles. Results from this case study are in line with previous evidence reported by O'Brien, Brandth and Kvande, (2007) in their review, showing how fathers rely heavily on the flexibility that their profession, contract and workplace can give them to cope with family commitments in daily routines. On the one hand, self-employed fathers seem to consciously decide to reduce their work commitments or to reshape them according to their new family commitments by taking advantage of the flexibility granted by their profession. Employed fathers, however, can count on "official" flexibility, i.e. regulated by the worker's contract, and an "unofficial" one, i.e. granted because the employer and the workplace are sympathetic to the father's new situation.

Most of the fathers interviewed in the present study reported difficulties in work-life balance, acknowledging in some cases even a career slowdown. The most important limitations are identified for self-employed workers in the lack of time for activities that are complementary but essential to their profession, such as lifelong learning through study or courses, as the heaviest limitation they experienced. Similarly, a restriction of work-related travelling, i.e. the need to select less demanding jobs or projects close to home, was also experienced as an hindering factor which might, in turn, decrease their opportunities to walk on important steps towards the development of fathers' professional career. Among employed fathers, a strong limitation was identified in the lower in-office presence in terms of working days or hours, which is felt to communicate to colleagues a lower involvement and reliability at work. In this perspective, the changes related to home- or smart-working brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic could play a key role in balancing this kind of difficulties (Cellini *et al.*, 2020), and for experimenting new forms of flexible and soft-age boundaries between being fully concentrated to work and being engaged in the family life.

A significant theme emerging from the interviews concerned the male stereotypes that fathers with a high degree of engagement in parental responsibilities face. Indeed, those who choose an active and participative parenting style seem to struggle with jokes at the workplace or among their networks because they do not fulfil the societal and cultural expectation of fathers as male breadwinner, that is fully devoted to their job as their primary concern.

To summarise, two important aspects emerged from the analyses of fathers' interviews collected in this study. First, fathers showed a full-fledged awareness about both regarding their choice of being more engaged as parents, and of how this had helped to redefine their view of "masculinity" or gender-related duties and expectations as they rejected traditional gender roles (e.g. Solomon, 2017). Secondly, and only apparently in contrast with the previous point, fathers seem to be not completely free from such social norms as yet, as evidenced, for instance, by their spontaneous assumption that the mother should be the first to ask for a reduction in working hours or by associating childcare behaviour more with the female domain, revealing a kind of identity dilemma (e.g. Lee and Lee, 2018).

Although the limitations related to the low number of participants (proper to any case-study), this contribution aimed to identify suggestions and open doors to a still little known aspect of gender differences. If these early results would be confirmed by further studies and supported by quantitative analyses, they might provide strong and important guidelines to improve and make more effective gender policies at national and international level. Since in Italy the traditional breadwinner model persists from a social point of view, and still, men are largely the primary income earners within the family, policies aimed at reducing the salary gap and facilitating women's and mothers' employment should (i) take into account the difficulties of the category of fathers analysed here, aiming at extending social protection to both parents; (ii) facilitate work-life balance for parents of both genders and (iii) overcome gender stereotypes on both the female and male sides, which stereotypes seem to still have very deep roots into society.

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