ITALIAN FORMS OF MASCULINITY BETWEEN FAMILISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

ABSTRACT This article summarizes historical and emergent factors in the contemporary pluralization of Italian gender identities, specifically the current penetration of alternative models of masculinity more adaptive to contemporary social change. Highlighted is the tension between progressive social forces and familism. Familism encompasses a cultural value system involving strong attachment and loyalty to one’s family. This includes a strong reliance on family for material and emotional support. The article concludes with a discussion of good practices concerning men, as well as a brief reflection on the future of Italian gender studies.

KEYWORDS ITALY, MASCULINITY, FAMILISM, SOCIAL CHANGE, EDUCATION

Aim of this article is to examine some aspects of the still largely unexplored tension between socio-economic change, familism, and masculinity in Italy. In the first two sections I will look at the current situation in Italy regarding the social construction of masculinity in relation to notions of the family, state, fluid modernity. In a subsequent section I offer a digest of selected research and educational programs seeking to enhance richer, more flexible forms of masculinity adaptive to the sketched processes of social change.

GENDER AND FAMILISM: TRADITION AND CHANGE

The Italian context for gender studies is marked by certain distinctive features. Family values play an enduringly crucial role in social life; as Livi Bacci (2001) argues, Italy is characterized by “too much family.” First of all, demographic behaviors are still somewhat “traditional” as compared to other European contexts, evidenced by an emphasis on the quality of intra-family care. Moreover, a welfare model is constructed, more than elsewhere, on the rigidity of the gender system; on the moral duty of familial sponsorship (according

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to which the family, encompassing an extended network of relatives, is always obliged to protect its weaker members); on the indefinite prolonging of financial ties between generations; and on the role of women’s intergenerational networks as mainly associated with care work. Italy is also characterized by a considerable presence of small-, medium-, and even large-sized family businesses. Italian family firms comprise 80% of all business enterprises across all economic sectors. Their main distinctive feature is the founder’s will to transfer ownership and management positions to heirs so that family traditions are transmitted together with corporate values. Finally, we should mention Italy’s strong territorial dualism coinciding with a polycentric character: the Italian territorial backbone is formed by a system of medium-sized cities well established in the northern and central regions but less so in the weak-performing southern regions (the so-called Mezzogiorno).

The survival of this cultural and economic infrastructure heavily depends on “traditional” gender relations. Familism requires and encourages a specific two-gender model, where the gender categories “man” and “woman” carry with them specific expectations about how to act, what to do, who to love, and so on. A specific interdependency also emerges: the idea of “feminine” behavior says as much about how men are not supposed to act as it does about how women are supposed to act. This transcultural antithesis is well described by Michael Kimmel (1995, 1996): hegemonic masculinity exists in contrast with that which is feminine. Masculinity is not just based on contrast with femininity, it is a complete renunciation of everything feminine.

Demands for change and challenges to traditional ways have multiplied even in familistic contexts like Italy and today constitute an eventful horizon for the “traditional” division of life courses, roles, desires between genders—polarized between the concentration on male adults for financial responsibilities and on women for family duties and reproduction—and thus for the hegemonic, patriarchal, unidirectional male model. In particular the changes in female identities increasingly and inevitably tend to involve male partners, workers and fathers. Women, who (especially in the years of the economic boom) had been concerned with the management of the home and care have become increasingly less willing to deal exclusively with family matters. This motivational decline is due to women’s new competences associated with growing schooling rates and presence on the employment market. The latest generations of women are well aware of the need for cultural training to achieve a satisfactory life. Their school careers proceed more smoothly and they consider study more and more important; at the same time, they have high expectations regarding their entry to the labor market.

It is therefore becoming necessary to prepare new generations of men for their encounter with the “new” women and “new” models of masculinity. This is a multi-faceted project of enabling children, young boys and men to broaden the scope of their emotional and communicative skills. That is, to show that there are a number of ways of being a man, enabling them to engage with gender in diverse and pluralistic ways. This entails, first and foremost, processes of reflection on, and prevention of, the darker sides of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Hearn, 1998; Kimmel, 1995, 1996): anti-femininity, gender violence; ho-
mophobia; limits imposed by gender stereotypes on “other” forms of masculinity; the difficult, at times absent dialogue men have with their own bodies.

Remodeling of the historical rupture between male and female, through dialogue and mutual understanding, may bring with it bilaterally positive effects. For women, it means deconstructing the processes of financial dependence on male income; increasing presence on the labor market; rebalancing time schedules to facilitate the conciliation between life and work demands and, at the same time, health improvement. For men, the positive effects include the challenge of reappropriating historically denied parts of their gender identity: we mean the tasks of nurturing, care, and socialization. The overcoming of the dark sides of “familism,” in other words, cannot be achieved without the shared involvement of both women and men.

The current Italian situation appears suspended between tradition and fluid modernity. Although the Italians have modified their demographic behaviors, they have done so without losing any of the features which traditionally differentiate them from the wider European context, namely a still marked preference for institutionalized bonds, low frequency of marital break-ups, and limited spread of reconstructed families. Despite the progressive postponement of first marriages and the decision to have children seen across Europe, behavior patterns rooted in “traditional” Italian culture are still quite strong: marriage as a primary form of union, coincidence of leaving the parental home with couple formation, birth of children almost exclusively within marriage (Dalla Zuanna, 2004; Rosina, 2007). This all is accompanied by late entry into adult sexual life (as compared with both other Europeans of the same age and co-nationals of the preceding generation) as well as by traditional patterns of birth control (Cazzola, 1999).

In Italy, transitioning to adulthood takes on a particular shape. There is a great difference between Italian culture and that of the rest of developed Western countries, not just in the particularly high number of unemployed young persons, especially in the South, but also in the extremely high percentage of young adults, especially men, who continue to live with their parents. The tie binding parents and children is a peculiarity in the Italian model. This relates to high importance attributed to children and intense support given to them—continuing even after they have married—in terms of emotional support, closeness, and time-spending. In Italy, young adults of both sexes live with their parents until they get married and are maintained by them as long as they stay within the family—even in families with a single breadwinner—and regardless whether the young person has a separate income. In other words, there is a lengthening of the time span over which people reside in their family of origin. This phenomenon has come to be known as the famiglia lunga or “long family” (Scabini & Donati, 1988).

We should emphasize the quality of intra-family care. This is seen in the “dramatization” of the investment of personal resources in family life, in the hostility towards outsourcing of caring activities, and in the difficulties of adopting strategies to redistribute these duties between men and women (Mingione, 2001). While the attribution of domestic responsibilities to men is fairly
limited even in young couples, the consideration of care tasks as a wife’s/maternal/sororal priority remains strong. The large efforts made to ameliorate concomitant tensions are exemplified in the ubiquity of domestic services—the care of the elderly and sick, assistance in bringing up the children—supplied by foreign women (and men) in Italian families.

Despite these factors, forms of cohabitation and family planning are changing in Italy. From the mid-1960 onward a growing disaffection is evidenced towards the “traditional” family model as based on marriage and numerous offspring. Despite marked geographic differences (in the North tendencies towards social change are more evident and incisive), there is a movement toward more diversified biographies that are less organized around a standard marital nucleus with children. There is an increase in the number of childless families and single-parent households. The number of divorces and separations is also increasing. Lastly, foreign and mixed-heritage families are appearing on the scene.

These trends are closely linked to changes in gender identities (especially in women’s life courses) and, consequently, in the relations between women and men. As we have already underlined, we are at an historical juncture at which boundaries are being redrawn. While the divisions between “male” and “female” which marked past history still remain, these divisions must at the same time deal with the radical changes affecting life courses. We may think of the changes in gender identity and in life courses, particularly those of women; radical changes on the labor market (unemployment; irregular, temporary, low-income employment); globalization and secularization; (enforced) encounters with new cultures and new forms of masculinity (migrants, non-heterosexuals, transgender and transsexual people); difficult confrontations with male genealogies (Deriu, 2005) and an unwieldy, misogynous, virile past; and the challenges posed by the complication of paternal roles. Female identities have arguably undergone the most intense transformations: in women’s increasing investment in education; their growing aspirations for self-fulfillment in work (female financial autonomy is today inalienable); greater involvement in working life; reproductive choice-making; free expression of their sexuality.

How are men reacting to these major demands being made on them? Are they adapting to the changes in women’s identities and needs?

Some have accepted the challenges, however often accompanied by second thoughts, doubts and perplexities; others have rejected them, reacting with fear and aggressiveness. These different reactions vary according to the different characteristics of the men involved, in terms of age and generation, level of education, ethnic group, social class, and so on. A key element that seems to sustain our view is that some interesting changes may be observed among the younger male generations.

First, we cannot fail to recognize the growing assumption of responsibilities by younger fathers after the birth of their children. Younger men are also beginning to claim a greater share in bringing up their children, although in the father-child relation, playing dominates other dimensions (Zajczyk & Ruspini, 2008). The desire to discover (or rediscover) the terms and values of one’s specific masculinity also seems to be growing, to challenge the conditioning im-
posed by the static, one-dimensional model of masculinity. While the growing involvement of husbands, partners and fathers in family life is undeniable—as a recent survey on fatherhood (Rosina & Sabbadini, 2006) shows, the average time devoted to care by fathers in the last fifteen years (1988-2003) increased by 18 minutes per day—it must however be said that commitment to caring activities increases with the rise in the father’s level of education and still concerns a limited number of men, in particular the segment of younger, urban and single-parent fathers, and—more generally—those who have taken over a model of masculinity which no longer clearly divides the public from the private.

Tension emerges, furthermore, between the virility model and the need to look after one’s image and health. While models of subjectivity historically constructed by men are based on the repression of the body, on emancipation from it, from its bonds and its signals, biological imperatives and changing conditions and styles of life demand a different attitude to one’s body, which is increasingly implicated in notions of care, for instance in terms of “remaining young” and/or “ageing well.” Men are thus beginning to borrow from women attitudes previously considered as exclusively feminine. Men’s use of products for facial and body care and recourse to diets, masseurs, plastic surgery is strongly increasing (Ghigi, 2008; Ruspini, 2009).

The number of men willing to question the stereotyped model of masculinity is also growing, as well as that of men desirous of exploring a part of themselves which for a long time had been kept silent, in care functions and socialization. For example, Fiorenzo Bresciani, President of the Italian Association of House-husbands (Associazione Italiana Uomini Casalinghi or ASUC) writes:

Cooking, cleaning the house, the ability to take care of all those details which seem insignificant but make the art of home-dwelling an art have enthralled me more and more and made me reflect on how much “gender prejudices and a culture rigidly linked to the stereotypes of a macho, virile male, had penalized us men, depriving us of the ability to take care of the persons living with us and the chance to enjoy the pleasures of home.”

Men’s rights groups are of course a many-sided phenomenon. In some cases they are an outright counterattack on the goals of feminist movements, in other cases attempts are made to regain equilibrium in gender relations. It is, however, a very active movement in organizing structures for legal and psychological assistance for men in cases of divorce, abuse, etc., and in promoting a new male image. We should also refer to those groups aimed at re-conquering the paternal role in the right to custody of children after marital separation and—in some cases—proposing a reformed image of fatherhood compared

1 See ASUC’s homepage: http://www.peacelink.it/webgate/pcknews/msg02855.html
2 Examples include Uomini 3000 onlus, a male ethics association (http://www.uomini3000.it00_commento.htm), and Pari diritti per gli uomini (http://uomini.cjb.net). For reflection on the contents of these sites, see Pieroni (2002).
with the “traditional” model. These associations meet often, join in demonstrations such as the Armata dei Padri (Daddy’s Army), and organize appeals, marches, and campaigns.

ITALIAN MASCULINITIES

Notwithstanding these changes, there has been, and continues to be (not only in Italy) a lack of adequate reflection leading to a real overcoming of gender stereotypes. Gender is one of the most interesting dimensions of social change, but it is also more controversial and underanalyzed in many European contexts. A blanket of silence continues to shroud thought on transformations in gender identities and on the effects caused by changes in relationships between men and women, their forms of cohabitation, and experiences of fatherhood and motherhood. This silence is caught up with the unaddressed question of the relation between sex and gender identity, given that it is thought no conflict exists between the latter and personal autonomy: boys will “naturally” become men, and girls women ("biology is destiny"). Gender identity is considered a stable characteristic,unchanging over time: the relationship between sexual characteristics and gender has historically been schematized as natural, permanent and compulsory, thus defining life destinies. Fatherhood and motherhood are correspondingly outlined, sustained, and ossified by many commonplaces: “Fathers are not very suited to caring activities;” “Children must stay with their mother;” “Women are made to be wives and mothers;” “Women are fulfilled when they become mothers, men in supporting their family."

We may also speak of a lack of male self-awareness: an ability to observe oneself, to understand changes in oneself and others, and consequently to adapt to the new relational needs along lines of gender and generation. Masculinity and men’s powers and practices were for a long time largely taken for granted (see, among others, Connell, 1995; Hearn, 1998; Kimmel, 1995, 1996; Pieroni, 2002) Among men, there is a lack of awareness of the full range of cultural, political, and symbolic effects brought about by the feminist and homosexual movements, and of their potential impact on the redefinition of male identity. In Italy, this delay may be seen in the light of the historical reconstruction of the “male” movement. Bellassai writes:

The rise and fall of male awareness collectives—definitely another phenomenon worth devoting a series of historical reconstruction to—was extremely brief in Italy. Their overall ephemeral life was certainly also due to the misunderstandings and actual head-on clashes between the neo-feminist movement and the male militants of the “New Left”; but perhaps

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³ They include the Associazione Padri Separati in Bologna, the Associazione Papà Separati based in Milan; the Associazione Padri Presenti and the Associazione Padri e Madri, both in Verona; the Padri ad ore, Assopapà, Padri Negati, Gesef-Genitori separati dai figli, all in Rome; the Padri Italiani Uniti and Papà Separati based in Turin; and the Associazione Figli Negati (Deriu, 2007).
the fragility and internal contradictions in that experience also played against them. (2005, pp. 133-134)

He goes on to cite Paolo Jedlowski—one of the most well-known Italian sociologists—reminiscing many years later:

[…] I remember that with a few others who had early on left the experiments with the small ultra-left parties, I started up groups of male self-awareness, on the model of women’s groups. We never thought we might be ridiculous. But these groups were quickly shipwrecked. Unlike those of the women and homosexuals, they weren’t supported by a movement, and anyway the question of gender identity was not very urgent for us. We moved on from those groups to psychotherapies or theatre (here, not unlike women and homosexuals); or simply, some people just gave up. (Jedlowski, 1997, p. 92 quoted by Bellassai)

Gender stereotypes have been for a long time maintained and supported by the institutional sphere. For example, the social construction of paternity in Italy is the story of an absence. Or perhaps, rather more than an absence, we may speak of a partial, incomplete paternity, which has pivoted the father figure around concepts such as “virility,” “authority,” “parental authority,” “maintenance,” and “transmission of social and moral norms” (Ruspini, 2006). This builds on strong cultural convictions that masculinity is the “natural” expression of “tradition” and “social order.” We are only to remind of the construction of masculinity in the Fascist period, inspired by the need to reconstruct an unequivocally “virile” identity and to strengthen the boundaries between male and female. The Fascist regime implemented carefully controlled propaganda that was to deliver a New Italian, a New Italy (Gori, 1999). Institutional measures were devised by the Fascist state to maximize infiltration of fascist ideology with its stakes in normatively masculine ways of life. Fascist constructions of masculinity colonized the life course. According to a mentality of manliness, nationalism and imperialism, investing in children meant investing in the nation’s assets. For example, in 1943 preschool (Scuola Materna) guidelines, we read:

The Scuola Materna must care for, protect and facilitate the free expression of the child’s personality, at the same time impressing on its mind and life habits of order and joyful, conscious discipline. These are habits which, by informing the childish conscience of the first sense of duty, will also instill the first sense of sociality.4

4 This and the following quote are taken from the volume Programmi didattici delle scuole infantili e delle scuole per educatori d’infanzia dal 1924 al 1958, Brescia, Centro Didattico Nazionale per la Scuola Materna, 1962 (translation by Elisabetta Ruspini with supervision by Mary Rubick).
Political education sought to socialize specific symbols:

The figure of the Duce, resembling the integration in a broader world of goodness, justice and protection that parents represent in the child’s eyes in the family setting. The symbols of Fascism (Black Shirts, the Fasces, etc.) shown for their ethical and epic significance, so as to spontaneously arouse veneration for them in the child. Hierarchy, discipline, and obedience. Love for the Fatherland and for the men who govern it.

Pronatalism was an important aspect of the regime’s ideology (De Grazia, 1993, p. 105). Proving virility required numerous offspring, clearly highlighting the tension between family duties and manly agonism. Male sexuality, like female eroticism, was to be exorcised and normalized to remove any danger of homosexuality and any emancipatory impulse: women were engaged in the public cult of motherhood (destined to become healthy, buxom mothers and wives) and men as heads of family, committed to sowing their seed. The close link between virility and offspring is clearly expressed in the tax on egoism of 1926, repudiating the “onianist” by condemning infertile men:

Today’s society despises deserters, ruffians, homosexuals, and thieves. Those who can but do not do their duty to the nation should be placed in the same category. We must despise them. We must shame bachelors and those who do not bring children into the world. We must bend them and make them bite the dust. (Carlo Scorza, quoted in De Grazia, 1993, pp. 105-106)

This affected the sphere of legislation, which has been on the whole unoccupied with paternity and support to fathers’ care tasks. We may think, for example, of maternity leave Law no. 1204 of 30 December 1971 protecting working mothers. But making no reference to paternity or to any kind of exemption from work for fathers. They had to wait several decades to see significant change (see next paragraph for details).

The school system, likewise, was never exempt from gender stereotypes. If schooling rests on gender “neutral” definitions of pedagogy, it definitely distinguishes between “masculine” and “feminine” aptitudes and skills. In line with the models characterizing other socialization agencies, the institutional training system today still demands of young women demonstrations of “femininity” and compliance while offering young men a strong training, oriented to autonomy and development of technical, logical, and rational skills. The prevalent forms of learning in school educational and professional training systems are still essentially constructed to highlight values and behaviors linked to “traditional” masculine and feminine roles (see also Boffo et al., 2003; Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1997).

More specifically, education toward social change, sexuality, plurality in sexual desire, and the acceptance of “other” gender identities than the heterosexual model are still lacking in Italy (among other European countries), both in primary socialization contexts and in educational and school curricula. The
question of sexuality continues to be a definite taboo subject in Italian families. Intergenerational dialogue on subjects such as love and sex is a precarious undertaking. Adults often feel more embarrassment than their children in dealing with issues concerning sexual relations or contraception. Modesty and the need to maintain their privacy force boys and girls to seek remedies for their doubts and curiosities outside the family. People outside the family (often friends) in fact seem to be the main vehicles of information on sexuality, which however is often inexact, distorted, or in any case insufficient. Italy has no state legislation regulating sexuality education in schools. Young people are therefore often unprepared and ill-informed when discovering their sexuality, and find themselves having to handle the crucial knots of their life courses unaided. Together with the many prejudices and stereotypes on sexuality and sex practices, this lack of information offers fertile ground for a range of attested risks that especially concern young people and men: bullying, sexual harassment, homophobia, and transphobia. For gay adolescents who, according to the World Health Organization, account for 5% of young people, the problem of handling sex education becomes even more complex. Rigidity of male and female stereotypes, lack of preparation in the school environment, social stigma, and lack of sympathetic listeners contribute to strong unease, at times even (attempted) suicides. The family and the school system, arguably the most important spheres of socialization, are seemingly unable to guarantee training matching the needs arising from changes in gender identities. In the former, it often proves itself an “absent” institution, or, when present, in strong continuity with traditional conceptions of gender relations. In the latter sphere, education concerning gender differences and sexual desire is too little developed to make a difference.

Media may play a significant role. While for a long time mass media have been considered a powerful factor in the transmission of stereotypes, commonplaces and obsolete gender images, they may just as well become co-protagonists in the redefinition of gender identity and relationships. The media landscape today is a potent socializing environment, effectively competing with traditional agencies (Besozzi, 1998; Capecci & Ferrari, 1998; Grossi & Ruspini, 2007; Meyrowitz, 1985; Morcellini, 1999). Meaningful, attractive languages deployed by the media constitute symbolic universes that contextualize the formation of subjectivities, both in terms of disseminating knowledge (through processes of self-training) and regarding constructions of gender identity. Media accommodate multiple types of masculinity, from models con-

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5 A sex education project, with the involvement of families and teachers, conducted by the Institute “O. Romero” in Rivoli, Turin (Giommi & Perrotta, 1998), shows that parents, despite declaring themselves in favor of sex education in schools, expressed discomfort at being interviewed (41%), and an even lower number (23%) answered questions relating to the discussion of sexual problems with their children. Fifty percent did not know of the existence of family planning clinics and advisory centers for adolescents, 56% occasionally buy books and magazines dealing with sexual subjects from the medical point of view. In short, interest in sex education is limited to subjects which help to protect children from unwanted pregnancies and STDs.
sidered “hegemonic” (white, heterosexual, assertive) and those emerging from marginality (have succeeded in gaining full legitimacy at the level of representations), to the “minority masculinities” that in pre-media times would have been largely “invisible” (immigrants, gays, etc.). While the traditional differences between male and female, between men and women have been indexed—at least in part—by access to information (Goffman, 1959), it is reasonable to suppose that electronic media, especially television, have helped to bring male and female elements closer (Meyrowitz). Firstly, women “see” things completely new to them, and above all have easy access to realistic and de-mystified characterizations of the masculine world. In the same way, men are starting to get to know better some aspects of the feminine sphere which they did not have direct access to before. Meyrowitz claims this entails a move “toward more career-orientated women and more family-orientated men, toward more work-orientated homes and more family-orientated workplaces” (p. 48). Male and female roles are blending by way of media discourse. Men today have access to other ways of “being male,” to forms of and approaches to masculinity which they had never had to come to terms with, and of which they are now aware (Boni, 2004, 2007). Italian fashion has also contributed to innovating masculinity models less rigidly regulated by indisputable codes. It is a man interested in caring for his appearance, playing with it, and with his body (Mora, 2007). The rhetoric of the New Man is tied to the expansion of consumer society and the manufacture of new consumer identities.

GOOD PRACTICES: A SELECTION

Below are presented selected legislative, educational, and research initiatives in Italy aimed at a reconsideration of masculinity traditionally defined, at deconstructing the violent symbolism still affecting the process of male socialization, and lastly at forging new models of masculinity. These efforts, some of them ongoing, show both similarities and differences. We stress their heterogeneity both in scale (national/local) and officiality. Surely, gender balancing requires many closely inter-linked components: from removal of stereotypes to setting up new, more suitable education frameworks for new generations covering preparation for parental and care tasks, the reimagining of relationships between gender and social change, and nurturing of gender plurality.

Legislative Reform of Fatherhood and Paternal Custody

Law 53 of 8 March 2000 (“Provisions for the support of maternity and paternity, for the right to care and training, and for the coordination of times in the cities”) proposed important innovations regarding, in particular, incentives to fathers taking care of their children and the extension of the possibility to stay at home up till the child’s eighth year of life. Both parents were guaranteed the right to make use of periods of abstention from work—up to a maximum of six months each and ten months together—to take care of their children during the first eight years of the child’s life (entitled to an allowance of 30% of salary up to the child’s third year of life). Fathers making use of leave for a period of at least
three months (even if not consecutive) were entitled to a “bonus” of one extra month. Thus they could take up to 11 months of leave altogether. According to a Consolidation Act, the father had the right to paternity leave in cases of the mother not making use (or partial use) of maternity leave.

A more recent law (58 of February 8 2006) was vigorously demanded by various associations of separated fathers embattling “inequality of treatment in lawsuits for separation and custody of minors.” It modified existing legislation (Art. 155 and 708 of the Civil Code) regarding custody of children in cases of separation or divorce, where sole custody was rule and joint custody exceptional. Shared custody has therefore become the main solution in cases of separation or divorce. With the new law, the judge normally entrusts the children to both parents without having to choose between them. For questions of ordinary administration, parental power would then appear as a shared right, with a number of duties to be attributed to both parents according to the areas of competence linked to their past experience, their aptitudes and to indications made by the children.


This brings together the work of the European Research Network on Men in Europe (operative since March 2000) within the EU Framework 5. The Network’s titular reference to “social problem” relates to the problems both created and experienced by men. The notion of societal problematization refers to the various ways in which the “topic” of men and masculinities has become and is becoming noticed and problematized in society—in the media, in politics, in policy debates, and so on. This focus is set within a general problematic: that changing and improving gender relations and reducing gender inequity involves changing men as well as changing the position of women. The final report (Hearn et al., 2004) provides information on the other Network outputs, including the European Data Base and Documentation Centre on Men’s Practices and relevant publications of Network members, arising from the Network’s activities.

*Pariteia—Promoting Gender Equality in Active European Citizenship* (http://www.pariteia.org)

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6 Shared custody must not be confused with joint custody, enforced since 1975. In joint custody, decisions are taken singly by the parents: it therefore presupposes the utmost spirit of cooperation between two parents, and must thus be denied when conflicts remain between them. Perhaps this is why it was rarely applied. In the case of shared custody, on the other hand, a shared decision is not always necessary since each parent has his or her field of competence.
and aimed at establishing a European citizenship based on the active participation of women and men in all social, political and professional activities. Five territorial contexts were involved: Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. The final report (ter Woerds, Stavenuiter, & Duyvendak, 2007) offers an analysis of the in-depth interviews which the project partners carried out in their own countries with a group of married and lone working fathers.

Anti-Homophobia Initiatives

One worthwhile example is the “Triangle-Transfer of Information to Combat Discrimination against Gays and Lesbians in Europe” (http://triangle-info.de), a transnational framework for exchanging information and good practice within the framework of the “Community Action program to Combat Discrimination” of the EU. Its teenage guidance manual—developed by the a project team made up of representatives from five countries: Austria, France; Germany, Italy, The Netherlands—addresses teachers, psycho-social operators, students and young people. It condenses know-how and experiences of many specialists in the field and aims for more in-depth understanding of the fundamental dimensions implied in the fear of “others.” We should also mention the 2000 Agreement Protocol between the Ministry for Public Education, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (Department for Equal Opportunities), and Agedo (Association of Parents of Homosexuals) facilitating collaboration between the various organs to promote diversity-focused research, education, and support.

Polite Project (Pari Opportunità nei Libri di TEsto [Equal Opportunities in Textbooks]; http://www.abside.net/corsi/accesso/polite.htm)

Initiated in 1998-99, Polite is a European self-regulation project for textbook publishing set up to promote cultural, didactic and publishing proposals to rethink textbooks to ensure that those women and men who have led the way in culture, history, politics and science are represented in textbooks with no discrimination based on sex.

“How many women you can become. New models for young girls and boys in Turin schools” (http://www.comune.torino.it/quantedonne)

Financed by the Piedmont Region and developed in collaboration with Turin civic libraries, this project aims to work out a reading code of the main gender stereotypes in illustrated works for childhood. It started out with the aim of helping authors and illustrators of children’s texts, teachers, librarians and parents to decode the symbolic images proposed by school programs, enabling the proposition of stereotype-free cultural models. Achievements include a guide to de-ciphering, a survey of texts in bookshops and civic libraries in Turin, and several seminar-meetings with teachers, librarians, booksellers, and students of design schools.
Lastly, I should mention several interesting collective projects part of a network of critical thought on dominating models of masculinity set up by men choosing to speak up about violence, gender relations, and patriarchic cultures and language use, starting from their identity and sexed experience (Vedovati, 2007). These projects promote dialogue and critical thinking on the complexity, richness, and contradictory aspects which mark male gender identities. Groups like MaschilePlurale (in Rome and Bologna), Uomini in Cammino (Pinerolo), Il Cerchio degli uomini (Turin), the Gruppo Uomini (Verona, Viareggio, and Turin) have made a critical re-examination of the historical experience of male identity, in which gender-comparative work and dialogue with the vista of feminism has been a decisive element (Ciccone, 2005). The movement gives particular attention to problems regarding male sexual violence. An internet-based appeal launched in 2006 (re-launched in 2009) against violence by Italian men bears the signatures of men from various political, cultural, religious, and sexual spheres condemning acts of violence against women highlighted by media attention.

PROSPECTS

The above-reported observations reveal, within the extended Italian/Mediterranean-familist context, the existence of diverse masculinities and the emergence of “new” types of masculinity that are more egalitarian and oriented to sharing, thus negotiating the traditional, stereotyped expectations that feed the cultural gap separating the “traditional” ideal of a virile man from the man who has decided to reveal (and converse with) the feminine part of himself. This element of fluidity offers fertile ground for the multiplication of educational schemes—concrete possibilities for children and young people to understand and change aggressive or homophobic behaviors.

Italy’s familist heritage—which appears to contrast sharply with the increasingly acute changes in cohabitation patterns—complicates, hinders, but certainly calls for, educational courses preparing new generations of men for the encounter with the multiple facets of social change. This is evident given growing male interests in constructing relationships with their children that may prove more authentic, intimate, and profound than those experienced with their own fathers (Zajczyk & Ruspini, 2008). Also evident is the importance of men’s participation in the redistribution of family responsibilities and in the process of their children’s socialization (including all care tasks, not just play), both in terms of positive effects on the wellbeing of children and in terms of greater gender equality and, therefore, of an improvement in the relations between men and women. We also underline the urgent need for Italian boys and girls to learn to deal with the tension separating tradition and a more fluid modernity, and to critically engage in the transitional challenges between present and future: on the one hand, the need to express a freer and more spontaneous sexuality; on the other hand, the need to overcome the “familistic” heritage of the past in terms of fears, prejudices, and ignorance.

To further the re-equilibrium of the historical imbalance between the male and female gender, sensitization initiatives should be supported by all the so-
cialization agencies, and necessarily address both sexes. In our view, there cannot be gender equality—in rights, in access to resources and public facilities and decision-making processes, while respectful of diversity and difference—without the participation of men, that is, without a change in the way of feeling and thinking of men themselves.

References


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