One of the characteristics of societies undergoing industrialization is the progressive opening up of various sectors to women and the defining of their professional capabilities, different from those associated with the “women’s work” of pre-capitalist economies. There emerge “feminine” sectors, so called inasmuch as they involve jobs and professions considered particularly suitable for women; within these sectors, the percentage of women workers grows, but they have difficulty in finding employment in other fields.

There are, on the other hand, those professions which are seen as extensions of a maternal, caring role: teachers, nurses, midwives, and later, social workers, personal secretaries, paediatricians. On the other hand, there are the activities for which women were preferred because of the combination of physical and psychological qualities considered typically feminine, such as patience, a caring nature, being used to repetitive work, as well as greater adaptability and kindness.

I would like to present the results of a research about women’s participation in industrial and tertiary, concerning mainly hierarchy and discipline, careers, role and social image; their own assessment of their skill and working value, and the way they represented themselves. The research, based mainly on oral reports, involved work-employees (workers and clerks) in the SMI, Società Metallurgica Italiana (copper and alloys, munitions), and women clerks in telephone exchanges.

While, in the first instance, women are employed as industrial workers, and in the second they are assigned to tertiary sector, in both cases they come to be employed precisely because they are women, since some of the activities carried out in both sectors are considered particularly suitable for them. As regards the SMI’s factories, the women are assigned to producing screws, nails, pins, buttons, buttonholes and copper wire, as well as small and medium calibre munitions, because they are more patient and careful. As regards the telephone operators, the telephone exchanges are solely staffed by women, because yet again, they are more patient and polite. In both cases it is a question of repetitive, “boring” activities, for which, it is thought, men would have difficulty in adapting.

In both situations there is a strong link with the State. The Società Metallurgica Italiana, an industrial group which came into being in 1883, produced, in its factories, sheets, pipes, bars and wire, in copper, brass and other alloys, small metal objects - nails, screws, buttons,- in the same materials, and bandelle for cartridge-cases and bullets. In 1911, on the Pistoia hills, the SMI opens a new factory concerned above all with the production of munitions, for rifles, pistols and light artillery - machine guns, small cannons - for the Air Force (anti-aircraft guns) and the Navy. The plants and the telephone services, in
their turn, pass from the private to the public sector and, once again, in 1924, revert to private hands, although the State retains part ownership of the services and plants.

It is, however, worth noting the different social origins of the two groups; while the SMI’s female factory workers are from a working class–peasant background, and generally live in villages, the telephonists come from the lower middle class and, to a much lesser extent, from the upper strata of the urban working class.

2. Female employment in the SMI

The history of female employment in Italian industry, between the 1800s and the 1900s, is essentially a history of hard work, underpayment, a lack of social recognition, and marginalization within the working-class associations themselves. The young age of most of the women workers and the relative brevity and precariousness of factory employment have made it more difficult to recognise, over and above the unduly simplistic correlations between work outside the home and autonomy, between industry and emancipation– the actual transformations produced in the lives and thinking of Italian women through their contact with the factory. It is even more difficult to assess such changes in young girls, for whom working in a factory was still tied to the life of rural and mountain villages, where patriarchal family relationships, characterized by male supremacy and parental authority, survive longer. On the other hand, some studies of urban women workers suggest that, at least in the cities, the experience of factory employment could have represented “a basis upon which to build a female consciousness freer from the usual family roles”, and offered a new model of womanhood, lively and elegant, often rebelling against discipline, but also proud of her own working ability.

“We have a strong nucleus of trained workers, for whom suspension or dismissal should certainly be avoided; we also have many labourers and women workers, considered as supplementary staff, whose numbers can be reduced”. This was the view, in 1935, of the firm’s management, regarding the employment situation of the three factories in the Tuscan Apennines, Mammiano, Limestre and Campo Tizzoro, in the rural district of San Marcello Pistoiese. In this way they confirm the division, which also and above all expresses itself in terms of gender, of the labour-force into two distinct segments; even though this division is less clear-cut than the management itself maintains, it is the characteristic feature of labour organization in the metallurgical plants of the Pistoia mountains.

The area’s particular employment situation made it not only possible, but necessary, to turn to the “strong mountain women”, who, for centuries, had been used to hard work unknown to the women of the plains. The area - the site, since the 1500s, of ironworks (foundries, rolling mills, distendini) and of smaller workshops concerned with the production of nails and tools- was characterized by small peasant holdings and scarcely profitable agriculture, in which most of the male population was involved (as sheep farmers, charcoal-burners or wood-cutters) and which swelled widespread seasonal emigration. The reduction of

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2 Cfr. Pistoia State’s Archive, Police’s Ispezioni, b.188, Fase.1417, Letter from Smi to Prefect, 23the June 1936.
the forests both because of the iron-foundries’ need to burn wood and the extension of sown land, between the 1800s and the 1900s, led to male emigration increasing both numerically and in terms of duration, including overseas destinations.

Women emigrate less than men and generally only accompany their husbands in long-term emigration, when the family as a whole moves. There is an autonomous female emigration, even involving girls aged 11 or 12, almost exclusively restricted to domestic service in the cities and small towns in the plains. Tied to their villages by the absence of the men, the mountain women played an important economic role, both as workers and as administrators of family resources. The mothers enjoyed a certain power in family decisions, particularly regarding work allocation for their sons and daughters; furthermore, they held the purse strings.

The women also carried out non-agricultural activities. For centuries they had spun hemp and linen for merchants/entrepreneurs; but already in the last decades of the nineteenth century this activity was no longer being pursued on an industrial scale, but purely for a family’s own needs; in the twentieth century there is a great increase in embroidery, carried out for firms and merchants of the plains, who operate through intermediaries and local people. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, with the closure of the area’s numerous textile plants, the women work in furnaces and in the production of natural ice, in the cold valley of the river Reno.

The SMI also employs many mountain women because of their strength and the fact that they were used to hard work; other reasons were the low salaries they received and the greater facility with which they could be dismissed. Also of importance, as has already been pointed out, was their greater adaptability to monotonous work, but which required greater care and precision. Very many women were involved in the production of munitions, both in the workmanship itself and in the checking and measurement of the calibres (and the test firing was carried out by military personnel sent by the army).

Nevertheless, the female workers did not only represent a reservoir of unspecialized labour, which could be drawn upon at times of greatest necessity, even though it is at these times that the highest percentages of women workers in the three factories have been recorded. Inasmuch as they were assigned to specific areas of workmanship - small objects and wire, munitions - the female workers have constituted a skeletal framework in Metallurgy.

The area offered women scant work alternatives; therefore, industrial employment appeared preferable, in their eyes, to domestic service or working from home. In the first place, the factory offered a higher salary; secondly, it enabled them to remain in their own villages, while giving them the opportunity, appreciated by the girls, of leaving the house, even though the strength of the traditional family structure still strongly limited the freedom conceded to the young women. Finally, although they were characterized by rigid discipline, relations with superiors were certainly more impersonal and less oppressive than those between a servant and the family for whom she worked.
“At the times, it was bad to go out the service […] Power girls; at times to these young girls… but, [the masters] made so things, I, with these fears, with these talks, which people hears: there happened to this girl, there happened to that one, I always hated it for this reason; I saw it: I staied there for eight days, and after I went away”. It remembers Solidea Tonarelli, speaking about a short period of work like servant.

The female work-force was assigned to specific tasks and areas of workmanship; consequently the women workers found themselves in different locations from the men, in departments where there were few men, concerned with checking and management functions: department heads, foremen, machine repairmen and porters. This separation reassured the families with regard to young women’s employment in factories, in so far as it did not seem to pose a serious threat to their moral conduct, nor did it appear to challenge the traditional division of roles established on the basis of gender.

As may be seen in tables 1,2,3 of the Appendix, the level of employment in the SMI shows strong fluctuations, particularly in the case of the Campo Tizzoro factory, more committed to producing war materials and more directly dependent upon munitions orders, above all from the Italian Army, but also from some foreign countries.

The metallurgical industry increasingly becomes, in the course of the 1900s, the main source of employment, or of hope of employment, in the area. In 1911, the three factories employ 989 people. This district’s increase in population: from 6,460 in 1901 to 7,120 in 1911, may also, in large measure, be attributed to the development of the metallurgical industry. In 1936- following the resolution of the post-war employment crisis and the more serious one of 1929-30, thanks to new orders from the Italian Army, committed, by the regime’s imperial policy, first, to the conquest of Ethiopia and then to intervention in the Spanish Civil War- 71% of the active population of the district of San Marcello appears to be employed in industry.

The principal shareholder of the SMI, since the early years of the 1900s, is Luigi Orlando, of the well-known family of entrepreneurs. He is succeeded by his son, Salvatore, in 1932. The Orlandos strive to give their presence in this mountainous area a social significance, closely linked, nevertheless, to the requirements of the firm and its productivity. These requirements, and the particular nature of the production as well as of the work-force, with such an overwhelming number of women and young men, led to a personnel management policy based on a very rigidly hierarchical structure, which comes to be reinforced by the fact that, in the periods 1915-18 and 1935-44, the SMI’s factories, inasmuch as they produce war materials, are declared “auxiliaries”, and are therefore subject to a particular, more rigid, disciplinary regime, which often, as will be seen, went beyond the confines of the factory, and also gave the civilian personnel a particular habitus.

Side by side with the disciplinary interventions, the Orlandos pursue, with equal commitment, a policy aiming at consensus, through welfare, cultural and recreational institutions linked to the factory and the firm. This policy begins with their arrival in the mountainous area and reaches its peak in the second half of the 1930s. The firm’s pervasive paternalism regulates the health, education and free time of its

dependants; women are not excluded from these various initiatives, and moreover there are specific
courses of embroidery and dressmaking reserved for them, while a professional school is opened for the
young male workers.
From this paternalism springs the willingness to employ the dependants’ sons and daughters, thereby
creating real family dynasties. Thus, there comes into being a “workers’ world”, which has its main centre
in Campo Tizzoro, a real “one-shop town”, but which pursues the everyday life of many villages of the
area. The factory is not only, for the population, the main source of employment, it also offers the
opportunity of climbing the professional and social ladders, as well as being an important context in
which to develop relationships, a meeting-place where politics can be discussed, a setting within which
the relationships between the sexes can be redefined.
In the period under consideration, most of the population of the rural district of San Marcello and the
neighbouring villages works, for greater or lesser periods, in the Società Metallurgica’s factories. The
experience marks individuals and their relationships, even, in the long term, affecting the rigid family
hierarchies. The concentrated impact of this reality and the dominating presence of the factory have
coloured the research on the oral sources, the accounts of some of the men and women who worked in the
Società Metallurgica’s factories, during the period being considered. These accounts, together with
articles from local newspapers and some reports already drawn up, have presented us with recollections
on two levels: on the one hand, individual memory, namely, each person’s story as remembered in terms
of his/her hierarchical classification of recollected events, impressions, feelings; on the other hand, there
was the collective memory, based on events and relationships, which had impacted not only on individual
lives, but also on whole communities, affecting their development, wealth, behaviour and mentality.

3. The image and self-perception of the women workers
What is the relationship between the male and female worlds, in the SMI’s factories? Contradictory
answers emerge from the different sources: the registers present a male world with a hierarchical structure,
which is extremely well-defined in terms of qualifications and jobs, and a compact, “levelled” female
world; the mercerie and the production of munitions are completely in the hands of women; the foundry
and the workshops are the exclusive domain of men. The women, as always, occupy the lowest levels of
the working hierarchical scale, as also on the employment ladder. In contrast to what happens for the male
workers, there is no acknowledgement of the female work-force’s efforts or achievements, even in the
case of work of a certain complexity. The women’s tasks do not appear in the registers, except in the case
of the Limestre factory, where the female work-force has its own specific sector of production, still tied to
a certain professional ability, with high levels of presence in the work-place, and a hierarchical distinction
between factory workers and forewomen. There is no such distinction in the registers of Campo Tizzoro,
and all the women are simply referred to as “women workers”. After all, this was normal practice, both in
industrial surveys and the registers of Italian factories, where the female workers were referred to with the
generic term, “women”.
However, an apparently objective source, the 1936 census, demonstrates, through the information
provided by the women workers themselves, the multiplicity of jobs assigned to them, as confirmed by
the oral accounts. The women are almost exclusively in the production departments, where they constitute
the majority of the personnel. All the stages in the manufacture of munitions, including loading, are
entrusted to them and involve tasks carrying considerable responsibility, in view of their greater patience
and care: the selection of cartridge-cases, percussion caps and bullets, in order to detect possible faults
and inspect the cartridges and bullets, by measuring their respective calibres. During the Second World
War they also work on the production of explosives (in powder form). The female workers, however, are
excluded from the workshops- where most of the specialized workers are to be found- concerned with the
construction, maintenance and repair of instruments and machinery. Also excluded from the foundry, the
women workers are, however, present in the rolling mills, even if in limited numbers, assigned to washing
and cutting the metal sheets: they are scarcely sought-after, tiring and unhealthy jobs, because they
involve keeping one's hands immersed in water and acids. There are very few career openings for the
female work-force: they can become forewomen for a group of workers, or move on to those jobs which
are half-way between the factory-floor worker and a white-collar worker: a messenger, assigned to the
porter’s lodge, a time-keeper, a sales assistant in the firm’s shop, working in the infirmary. Between the
wars, a new possibility opens up for them: working as laboratory assistants both in chemistry- concerned
with new metal alloys- and physics: where these alloys are tested for their hardness and suitability for the
firm’s production processes. This is a much sought-after job, because the work is clean and the superiors,
polite.

Whatever their jobs or tasks, the women are paid much less than the men, and the salary range is very
narrow. For the men, there are different rates of pay corresponding with the many different tasks they
carry out; the very small salary differentials for the women are, however, only minimally related to their
specific jobs, but depend primarily upon the women’s seniority. The pay of the clerical staff, present only
in the administrative offices and at the lowest levels, is also inferior to that of their male colleagues.

In the production departments, successive waves of new workers reinforce the need to discipline a work-
force, for the most part, unfamiliar with the work and the factory environment, passing from autonomous
activities- ranging from agricultural work to that of the charcoal-burners and wood-cutters, from sheep-
farming to working from home- to jobs whose rhythms are imposed by the machine. Controlling the
behaviour of the dependants, within the departments, is entrusted to the department heads; even where the
majority of the personnel is female, the task of controlling the work and behaviour is entrusted to men.

Our interviewees remembered a few forewomen, in the 1930s and 1940s, only in the departments dealing
with packaging and boxes, where the staff consisted mainly of young people of both sexes.

The women, often very young, are treated harshly by the department heads. One of our interviewees
remembers the trauma suffered by her elder sister, who had, until then, been in a boarding-school run by
nuns, when she joined the Campo Tizzoro factory, aged thirteen, during the Great War:

“My sister too: she came off the college, and she went at school always. And, when they [her family] came back to
Italy [ from Switzerland, in 1914], for example, she haved to go to work, because… Yes, she went in SMI, at Campo
Tizzoro; and she said to my mother: if you now the living in factory, you could not send me here neither one hour.

Power girl, she felt not well, she saw things that she did not like, at all. Unfortunately, in those environments, there
are clever women, and less clever women. And so she went to my father, and said him… Eh! My mother said her: “listen to me, all girls go to factory, you must work, we need your work. At that time she [mother] had three sons: my brother, she and me”.

This young woman belongs to the first wave of the SMI’s female workers, who joined the firm between 1900 and the First World War. These girls live in a society which is still rigidly patriarchal, and, in the factory too, their subordination to men, department heads and colleagues is very marked. Having begun work when they are very young, they generally leave it, as emerges from an examination of the firm’s registers and the accounts of the women’s sons and daughters, after getting married, or at the latest after having their first child.

Nevertheless, there are some exceptions; a case in point is one of our interviewees, Esterina Filoni (1900-1999): she joins the Campo Tizzoro factory aged 13 and is dismissed at the end of the Great War. She returns to the factory in 1924 and leaves in 1926 because of family commitments; finally, she rejoins the firm for eight years (1934-42). In the meantime, she gets married and has two children. As often happens in the families of the area, her husband also works for the SMI; as do her daughter and son-in-law.

Little seems to have changed, two decades later, in the treatment reserved for the women workers, as is borne out by Ottavia’s words:

“But I, I must say, I was always a rebel, so I laid the blame on this chief and i was send to…. [ plate’s cut] […] because he was impolite, and I rebel […] he was a bit cockerel. But, afterwards, I want to specific that, at the time, woman was considered… nothing, and we had a little wage, we were considered a little… and we had to work very much; no, no, very much we had to work.; ann we were not considered. To pay! Forty five, forty six lira fortnightly. [How much earned a man?] One hundred! And, approximately, the same work, good Lord!”

Ottavia is still remembered by her contemporaries, as well as by the younger male and female work-force, as an authentic leader of the women workers who, on the whole, appear, in the period between the two wars, less dominated by male authority, also in the factory. Between 1935-1944, in the SMI’s mountain factories, over half of the new workers, 52.10%, are women. This figure rises to 54% for the years between 1935 and 1940, with a slight percentage fall precisely during the Second World War, probably due to the possibility of exemption from military call-up for the men doing essential work.

Not subject to the laws progressively limiting the female presence in public and private offices, inasmuch as they were dependants of auxiliary factories, the number of female clerical workers, in the SMI’s personnel, continues to grow. After all, as may be seen in the relevant registers, it is the clerical sector, as a whole, which expands, because of the increase in the technical and administrative functions required by the factory and the transfer of the former duties from skilled workmen to fully-qualified technicians.

Women, moreover, are mainly to be found in administration and in the firm’s social initiatives: the infirmary, the schools and the nursery-school. It is only in 1942 that the first technical woman employee, a graduate in chemistry, is taken on.

The women were also the object of attention, not always welcome, and victims of sexual blackmail on the part of their department heads. Particularly at risk, were the girls from the remotest mountain villages; young, naïve, but sometimes also anxious for new experiences and free from the constraints of a patriarchal family. These are the girls who, above all, come to be considered not very respectable by the local people, who comment on the free and easy ways of the fabbrichine.

The SMI’s increased demand for labour brings many outside workers, forestieri, into the factory. Since the opening of the Campo Tizzoro factory, the area of labour recruitment had spread to villages until then barely affected by factories: first of all, the nearby hamlets of Bardalone, Pontepetri and Maresca, then the neighbouring district of Piteglio, and the mountain villages of the district of Pistoia, as far as the remotest villages on the highest peaks of the Apennines. Travelling, to and from work, within a certain range, up to 6 kilometres or more, takes place daily, on foot, but those living farther away are forced to rent a room or a garret, in Campo Tizzoro or the nearby villages. Five or six people crowd into these rooms; the women, who constitute the majority of these immigrants, often arrive as small groups of relatives or from the same village, guided by an adult, who, however, is sometimes no older than eighteen. From 1926, thanks to the railway line from Pracchia to Mammiano - between Pistoia and Bologna - many workers, men and women, can avoid moving, and new workers arrive from the plain of Pistoia and the provinces of Bologna and Modena in Emilia.

The female work-force of the Società Metallurgica are envied by the women of their class and, above all, by the girls, for whom they represent a behavioural model, because they are cleaner, more lively, with more refined and modern tastes and manners, acquired through their contact with both the women and girls, from the urban centres of the plain, as well as the women clerical workers. The girls who work in the factory make new acquaintances, male and female, they dress better, they learn new things and are more respected by their families, because they bring home a pay-packet. In the factory, it is even possible to make a little headway in one’s career: by becoming a forewoman or, better still, a white-collar worker, and so improve one’s economic status and social prestige.

As regards their self-image, the female workers of the Società Metallurgica, through their interviews, have given us an image of a woman who is certainly not a rebel, but, with difficulty, is conscious of her own value as a worker, not only because of the taxing nature of this work, but also because of the persistent undervaluation of their role in the social reality of their environment, excepting, to a certain extent, the “workers’ centre” of Campo Tizzoro.

The main reason for entering the factory is the pay; the pay-packet is particularly important for the women, since they can make a tangible contribution to the family’s finances. It enables married women to give their children a better education, and is often indispensable in view of the precariousness of male earnings; it also increases, even if to a limited extent, the wives’ prestige and contractual power in their husbands’ eyes. For the unmarried girls, it allows them to spend a little on improving themselves, for example, in buying a pair of socks, a ribbon, a novel. For all the women, their salary and the resulting esteem because of their contribution to the family income give them a little more autonomy.
The factory is the place where one can make new friends. It constituted, particularly for the older of our interviewees, the only opportunity to socialize outside the circle of friends and relatives and after the brief experience of school. The older women sometimes treat the younger ones harshly, but, at the same time, teach them their work, how to take care of themselves and how to behave with the opposite sex. In the factory, in fact, it is easy to get engaged; marriages between colleagues are very common.

Pride in work well done and in their own abilities, whether acknowledged or not by the firm, runs through all the accounts of the male interviewees. Although it occurs less frequently, or is less emphasized, in the women’s accounts, nevertheless the good results of their own work constitute rewarding aspects of the factory experience and are among the reasons why it is happily remembered. A longer or more frequent association with the factory, a more responsible, or minimally creative, job, like that of the chemistry and physics, laboratory assistants, reinforces the link with the firm, in the workers of both sexes, and makes working outside the home a significant experience in the women’s lives. For the women, the jobs with the greatest interpersonal contacts, from the sales assistant in the firm’s shop to the clerical worker in the personnel office, are those which made the greatest impact in our interviewees’ memories. No less strong, nevertheless, is the awareness of their own abilities, in those women who were maestre and controlle.

These phenomena seem to stand out more in the accounts of the youngest women workers, born between 1912 and 1925, whose factory experience begins in the 1930s. These women are more educated than their mothers, and this permits some of them, who had begun working on the factory floor, to become clerical workers, without foregoing maternity and their family role.

In the twenty years between the two wars, profound changes affected women’s role in society. In Italy there is a constant increase in women’s work outside the home, side by side with the reduction in the number of children. The regime’s contradictory policy with regard to women and the family is unable to counteract these phenomena, nor the widespread change in personal behaviour and relationships. As Victoria De Grazia has observed, Fascism itself was fragmenting the family, directing its members into associations, based on sex and age, which involved women, including those from the country, in the life of these associations, outside the home. Moreover, the regime’s welfare policy relied, in good measure, upon the voluntary work of the married ladies and the young women of the well-to-do classes, who thus imparted, to lower middle class and working class women, forms of behaviour based upon a more respectable and rational care and attention for the family and the home. This lifestyle was unattainable without increasing the sources of income and having less children.

Also on the Pistoia mountains, there are, to a certain extent, notable changes in the behaviour of women in relation to their families. In particular, working-class families appear more and more like the urban working classes. From the 1920s onwards, there is a constant decline in the birth rate. The 1931 census registers a marked decline and from that year the birth rate in the rural district of San Marcello coincides with the regional average.

The attitude to working outside the home changes. Young women regard it ever more favourably; married women often also choose to continue working in the factory, at least until they can find someone to look after the children, who, in the working-class families, are, by now, almost never more than three. There
are even those, like Solidea, who pay another woman, in this case a very young female relative, to look after the children; this girl, however, once she herself is old enough, goes to work in the factory. Family control over young women tends to become less rigid; their desire to enjoy themselves is tolerated, and sometimes supported by the family. The cinema is usually permitted, while some families do not allow their daughters to go to public dance halls. Relationships with their peers and contacts with the opposite sex, favoured by work in the factory and after-work initiatives, are therefore easier to pursue.

4. Workers’ Associations and political participation
The women workers of this area are excluded from the first workers’ associations, which come into being, between the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the new century, in many villages of the Pistoia mountains. These mutual aid associations and workers’ clubs align themselves close to the Left, but only accept in their ranks artisans and craftsmen. The Workers’ Association of Bardalone, according to its rules, drawn up in 1912, only admitted “married women” as honorary members, therefore without the right to vote or to receive any of the financial assistance set aside for the members (22). The Workers’ Mutual Aid Association of San Marcello, instituted in 1883, decides, in 1911, not to accept women members, but to create a separate Mutual Aid Association for the “female sex”. Around 1908, some middle-class married ladies of San Marcello set up a feminist group, affiliated to the National Council of Italian Women, which is committed to the welfare and education of working-class women. It organizes courses on the principles of hygiene and makes small loans available to the women. There is very little information about this group and so we cannot determine the closeness and frequency of its contacts with working-class women; we do, however, have some information about one of the group’s activities, namely, that of the local section of the Italian Federation of Women’s Industries, which concerned itself with teaching women valued work- embroidery, sewing, knitting and traditional crafts-and organizing the production and direct sale of the finished products, deducting only a small percentage to cover expenses. This gave the women the chance to earn an “acceptable” income, without compelling them to work outside the home, and, at the same time, enhanced their feminine qualities. Drawing inspiration from these concepts was the laboratory for the printing of artistic designs on shawls, paper, textile materials, created in Lima by Elena French Cini, the main director of the local feminist group and a member of the family which was the principal shareholder of the Lima paper-mill. Also inspired by the above-mentioned ideas, was the sewing school, opened in 1913 in Limestre, for the women workers of the SMI’s factory, by Bertha Bollier, the wife of the manager of this factory. This school had the aim of providing the factory’s women workers with a trade they could practise after leaving the factory. The women workers, during the First World War and immediately afterwards, claim their right to participate in the associations, bringing up once again the question of women’s membership of the Baccarini Workers’ Mutual Aid Association, which, in 1917, decides to agree to women workers joining the Association. The Mutual Aid Association of Bardalone follows suit. The Association’s new rules, drawn up in 1921, accept, as members, workers, between the ages of 15 and 60, who follow good moral and legal conduct and do not refer to sex.
Nevertheless, women’s access to politics was through male mediation, since the local mentality and customs continued to sanction their exclusion, which the Fascist regime, for its part, did not lose an opportunity of reaffirming. The women themselves seem, to a certain extent, to share this way of thinking: very few of our women interviewees defined themselves, individually, as being anti-Fascist, while a good number highlighted that they belonged to families opposed to the regime. Their status as women workers has by now become an integral part of their personalities; however, their exclusion from politics devalues, also in their own eyes, entry into that sphere, which only acquires legitimacy through the family tradition, and the substitution by, and assistance from, men, since the women are prevented from acting directly. During the years of the Fascist regime, it is, in fact, precisely the women who take it upon themselves to keep alive the memory of the workers’ movement and its celebrations, even if only by pinning a flower on their dresses on the first of May or by strewing flowers on the roads, the night before.

Nevertheless, the link between the regime’s social and political conservatism is also underlined by some of our women worker interviewees, who have experienced it, both inside and outside the factory; and, perhaps, for this reason, they have arrived at a clearer awareness of it. The Second World War is an important period according to the accounts gathered by us. They do experience suffering, but, for some, it is also an opportunity to play an active role, by participating in the struggle against the Fascists and the German occupying forces. Esterina— whose husband is committed to the Resistance Movement, being responsible for supplying the Bozzi Brigade and away from home for long periods— is deeply committed to maternage: she hides, in her own home, food, blankets and clothing for partisans and ex-prisoners passing through, she gives some of them hospitality, and acts as a contact between the partisan fighters of Maresca and their families.

The younger women seek more direct forms of participation, parity as combatants, which would enable them to overcome the limitations imposed upon women by custom and the regime. As has already been noted, it is above all the generation in their twenties, whose lives had not yet been delimited by family roles and tasks, which is most deeply affected, in building its own subjectivity and in subsequent choices, by the dramatic changes, whether temporary or permanent, caused by the war. The young women, less oppressed by the daily struggle to ensure the family’s survival, find, in the Resistance Movement, the opportunity to experience a reality, beyond traditional confines and roles, imposed by a patriarchal society, and reaffirmed and guaranteed by the regime. The girls participate in the abstention from work which, following 25 July 1943, is organized in order to ask for the expulsion of the Fascists from the factory. The women take munitions, hidden in their clothing, out of the factory for the partisans.

5. Some final remarks about the relationship between women and the factory

How do years and years of working outside the home, a limited career, the War, participating in the Resistance movement, and acquiring even the slightest awareness of their own value change women’s lives, in both the public and private spheres?

Through their interviews, the women working in Metallurgica have given us an image of a woman, certainly not a rebel, but who, with difficulty, arrived at an awareness of her own value as a worker, not
only on account of the physically taxing work, but also because of the persistent undervaluing of her role in her social milieu, with the possible exception of the Campo Tizzoro “workers’ centre”.

As regards the significance of the women’s experience of factory work, there emerge, from our research, some factors which, to a certain extent, undermine the deeply-rooted image of the worker/peasant woman as a beast of burden, incapable of escaping from a chain of exploitation, whose links- the home, the family, the land, the factory- support and reinforce each other. In this peripheral situation too, one can see how the factory experience provided women with the best setting in which to achieve self-awareness, by using and so becoming conscious of their abilities, as well as having new relationships and experiencing solidarity.

As far as the work-place is concerned, the women’s behaviour and self-image underwent marked changes. They were, instead, less significant in the context of social and family relationships. The women workers’ lives, outside the factory, brought to light how family and social structures adapted to and resisted the modern trends coming from the factory. The greatest changes were in young women’s relationships with their families. The latter grant their children, male and female, a degree of freedom, unacceptable a few years earlier, which included the choice of job and of a marriage partner.

If we consider the most intimate areas of the relationship between the sexes, then, from the accounts gathered, one finds the ever-greater recurrence of the freedom, for the young, to choose their own marriage partner, to decide for themselves about their sentimental relationships, and marriages sometimes preceded by broken engagements. Nevertheless, as history and literature have repeatedly reminded us, a marriage having friendship as its foundation will strengthen the couple’s bond of affection, but will still have little impact on the roles of husband and wife and the division of labour between them.

The family and the community continue to consider the status of women workers as secondary to their duties and role within the family. The fact that Metallurgica continues to consider it easier and more convenient to dismiss women workers does not give rise to any objections, because the prevailing mentality finds it easier to accept that a woman, rather than a man, should lose her job: no female employment is considered essential, and everyone, including relatives, expects women, wives, daughters and sisters to do what is best for the home and family, not what they like.

So, in the wake of the widespread dismissals, following the Second World War, families- by accepting the trade union-management agreement, stipulating the employment of only one member of each family choose to sacrifice their daughters.

The criterion adopted some months later- a points system – also penalizes women, giving men a higher rating. Fortunately, this time, their right to an unemployment subsidy is not in question.

While some of the women, dismissed from the factory, take up sewing, knitting and embroidery, working from home- these activities give a much lower income than industrial employment and do not offer the same opportunities to socialize- others, unable or unwilling, to remain at home, find work in the tourist industry. A few work with their husbands, also dismissed from SMI, who set up mechanical and metallurgical workshops. Some of the wives’ former colleagues come to be employed by these couples, either working on the premises or from home. Finally, there are those who, in order to join their parents
or husbands, or more rarely on their own, swell the ranks of the overseas emigrants. In fact, yet again, following the 1946 dismissals and the even greater ones of October, 1948, emigration will be on a very large scale.

Strongly rooted in the local working-class tradition, and revived by the Resistance movement, there is, in the post-war period, a return, on the part of many, to a deep involvement in various associations, within the popular political parties, or in recreational centres, whether of Socialist, Communist or Christian Democrat affiliation, or linked to the trade unions. Nevertheless, the prevailing image, in the newspapers of the time, is of women involved in the struggles and political life, more because of their propensity to be helpful and caring, rather than in their role as workers.

In this context, we regard as significant the article, which the periodical, “Noi donne”- the journal of the Italian Women’s Union, a women’s association linked to the parties of the Left- devoted to the struggle against dismissals by the SMI’s workers, in the spring and summer of 1948. Nella Gioi, who wrote the article, deals primarily with the role played by women. While there is a reference to the women workers, the greatest emphasis is placed upon the support and help given by the mountain women to their men, involved in the struggle. Undoubtedly, what had a great emotional impact was the decision to put Maria Ducceschi- the elderly mother of a worker, perhaps herself a former SMI employee - at the head of the first “hunger march” to Pistoia by 2,600 SMI workers (men and women) and their families.6

Therefore, following the Second World War, the area, despite the great reduction in the number of workers, confirms its industrial vocation, while, on the other hand, extensive trade union membership, the return of a red administration in the rural district of San Marcello, with a strong presence of the SMI’s workers and former employees among the councillors and chairmen confirm the local people’s marked links with the Left.

And the women? The picture is not encouraging: the first to be dismissed from employment, reconsigned to working at home, stereotypically set in a secondary role, both by the female political press itself and the Left, they seem to have made little headway, particularly bearing in mind that their part in the struggle against Nazism and Fascism receives little public acknowledgement.7 The prevailing image is still that of the mother, seen as elderly as in the hunger march, or the homely young woman with children, like Oliva, Giovanna, Anna Maria, while even the female Partisan couriers leave the factory to make way for their brothers.

Nevertheless, I think it is possible to find indications of a new attitude, on the part of the women, with regard to work and the right to work. This new attitude, which appears in our interviewees’ accounts, can

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6) N. GIOI, The Hunger March. History of a Struggle against dismissals, “Noi donne”, III, n. 44, December 19th 1948. Maria’s photograph is on the cover of issue 44 of the periodical

also be found in the letters to the trade union and SMI, in the immediate post-war years, in which the
women also claimed the right, as already granted to the men, to inherit the employment seniority of their
parents, whether from a father or a mother, or their husbands. Griselda C., a widow, taken on by SMI on
16 December, 1944, following the death of her husband- a worker at Campo Tizzoro, killed in the air-raid
on Maresca - asks, in April 1946, for her husband’s seniority, in order to raise her rating in the points
system and so avoid dismissal.8 Clementina S., working on munitions testing, asks for the seniority of her
mother, whom she had replaced eight years earlier, when her mother had left on the grounds of
invalidity.9

There is a change not only in their self-image, but also in the image the women workers project to the
world, at least for the younger generation. The son of one of our interviewees has allowed us to read the
account of his recollection of the hunger march, which took place while he was still a child and according
to which it is no longer an old mother at the head of the march, but a young woman worker, fighting for
her job, together with her comrades, both men and women. The eyes of the child, therefore, have
impressed on his memory a different image from the one presented by the press, an image evidently
reflecting a strong leading role for women. According to the adult’s memory, it is the women workers
who embody the driving force of the mountain people’s determination to carry on the struggle.

6. The telephone’s young ladies.

As in the production departments of the SMI’s factories, there are more women than men in the telephone
exchanges. The end of the 19th century, in Italy, witnesses the opening up of white-collar employment to
women. As in all Western countries, in Italy too, the commercial and services sectors expanded; in these
sectors the capital mainly consisted in the work of the employees, who, moreover, had to have a certain
level of education. It is not mere chance that these sectors, as they expand, employ more and more women,
thanks to girls’ ever-greater access to education and the lower costs of the female work-force.

The communications sector- postal, telegraph and telephone services- is one of the first to employ women.
In Italy, the State, having a monopoly of postal and telegraph services, decides, with the new regulations
of 1865, to employ women, even if, initially, accepting only “the widows, daughters and sisters of the
Post Office’s administrative male staff, present and deceased”.10 The expansion of telephone services
(managed by private companies under government licence) begins in the 1880s: in 1881 there is the first
decree authorizing the licensing of telephone services to private firms; in 1901, long-distance calls come
into operation and, in the following year, the international service begins. Women, because of their high-
pitched voices, are considered more suitable for employment in the telephone exchanges.

8) The archives of the Trade Union’s representatives in Campo Tizzoro, the Shop Stewards’ Committee’s
papers, folders, file Esposti, Letters from Maresca, April 8th, 1946.
9) Ibid., Note, N.D. Some young male workers also claim their mothers’ seniority
10) Regulations of the Post Office Administrative Code passed by Royal Decree on 18th September, 1865.
Regarding women employed in the postal and telegraph services, see M.L. Odorisio, The Women
Employees in the Ministry Postal Services, in Il lavoro delle donne, cit., pp.398-420, and S. Soldani, Main
Roads and Tortuous Paths. The Liberal State and the Issue of Women’s Rights, in Operaie, serve, maestre,
According to the census of 1911, the women employees of the Ministry of Postal and Telegraph Services were 2,707, 17% of the work-force; this is not a high percentage, but “The Postal, Telegraph and Telephone Periodical for Receivers and Temporary Employees”, in the issue of 1st January, 1909, counted at least 10,000 women, out of the 16,000 non-permanent staff.

In subsequent decades, the number of women telephone and telegraph operators grows, so much so that, at the time of the 1931 census, they outnumber men, since they constitute 66% of the staff in these areas. In 1951, the 11,789 women telephone and telegraph operators make up 58% of the employees in these sectors; in 1971, for the first time, there is an increase in the male staff, as a consequence of the introduction of direct dialling also for long-distance calls.

Work in the telecommunications industry offers a new opportunity for lower middle class girls, hopeful of receiving an income which would “enable them to live modestly and be self-sufficient”. However, the wages are low, there is no job security, and life, consequently, rather than being modest, is poor. The respectability of the job, in comparison with the brazen image of the factory girl, the still ambiguous figure of the nurse, and the perilous role of the housekeeper and governess, justified wages which were even lower than those of these three categories.

The women civil servants, in the postal and telegraph services, are at a disadvantage compared to their male colleagues, both in terms of pay and employment regulations: in 1881, the male temporary staff achieved the status of permanent State employees, with job security, pension rights, paid holidays etc., the same regulations would only be extended to the female personnel some years later. After campaigning for years for the right to marry, the women telegraph operators achieve this goal, as well as inclusion in the ranks of the permanent staff, in 1887.

The women telephone operators employed by private firms, which are often very small, do not have job security and experience even worse working conditions. They have to be single or widowed, marriage entails immediate dismissal. The women telephone operators, after a long dispute, during which their cause received parliamentary support from the socialists, attained, in 1907, the nationalization of the telephone service and the abrogation of the rule enforcing spinsterhood. However, it would only be years later that, in terms of their working conditions, they would achieve parity with the other women civil servants, while the women employed by private firms had to wait until 1922 for their right to equitable treatment to be recognised, by a resolution of a committee, set up for this purpose by the Ministry. The new regulations for the women telephone operators laid down a minimum age, a seven-hour working day, over-time pay, also to be applied to night work, which was, in fact, accepted practice. However, this rule also maintained the ambiguous figure of the temporary employee, with no right to be included among the permanent staff and subject to a month’s training.

“For continuous services, the firm will have to employ permanent staff. While members of the latter will be on holiday or for any other reason connected with the continuous services, the necessary replacements will be recruited

impiegare [Women Workers, Servants, Teachers and Clerks], edited by P. Nava, Turin, Rosenber & Sellier, 1992, pp.289-337

from the temporary personnel and, all things being equal, priority will be given to the temporary employee with the most seniority”.

On the other hand, the temporary employees had the right to be given notice and to receive severance pay, in the case of dismissal, subject to their having been employed for at least one year.

“The dismissal of female temporary telephone operators, who have worked for at least one year, must be preceded by a month’s notice. In which case, she will have the right to a compensation equivalent to fifteen days’ pay for every year of employment”.

The Ministry of Postal and Telegraph Services, for its part, also in 1922, in March, finally incorporated the personnel into a new system, giving many temporary clerks the status of permanent staff, and establishing the same level of basic pay, for the same qualifications, for men and women.

In the public sector, as in the private - in 1924 the management of telephone services once again reverts to private companies, only the international services remaining under State control- women are still assigned the lowest levels of clerical work, even if there were women supervisors in the telephone exchanges. The highest levels, and particularly the executive posts, are closed to women, who will take a long time to reach some of these positions. As late as 1971, the female employees in the telephone sector, in the offices subordinate to the Ministry of Postal and Telecommunications Services, constituted 56.5% of the executive employees, but only slightly more than 35% of those concerned with planning, while, at the management level, their representation remains extremely low: 24 out of 286.

The majority of the staff in the telephone exchanges and in the public telephone service, above all in the smaller towns, are women.

What are the working conditions for the female personnel in the telephone exchanges?

The women employees of the Società Generale dei telefoni (The General Telephone Company), having the concession for Rome and part of Central Italy, “must be spinsters or childless widows, at least 18 years of age, tall and of sound constitution”.12 Daily employment is fixed at 7 or 7.5 hours, within a 24-hour period, for working days and 5 hours for public holidays. Moreover, “There is no rest-day, neither Sundays, nor weekly or fortnightly. By night work is meant the period from 9.00 PM to 7.00 AM the following day; to be carried out by a group of switchboard girls, working in shifts”.13

There are three levels of monthly salary for the day-time switchboard girls, namely (in Italian liras): 60, 75 and 90. For the women on the night-shift, the monthly salary goes from a minimum of 50 liras to a maximum of 70. What Guglielminetti writes tallied with a common practice among all the concessionary companies, as results from a ministerial inquiry of 1905.14

Twenty-four years later, there was only a small increase in salaries. In a small Tuscan town, S. Maria a Monte, in 1929, the Mayor finally decided to supplement, from municipal funds, the monthly salary of 60

12) E. Guglielminetti, The Salaried Woman in Rome, Rome, 1905, cited in M .L. ODORISI, op. cit. Some companies give a rest-day every fortnight. The women telephone operators, like all women tertiary workers, were excluded from the 1902 protective laws concerning the work carried out by women and children.

13) Ibid.
liras - offered by the private telephone company, TETI (The Tyrrhenian Telephone Company), -which no young woman was prepared to accept. The amended monthly salary amounted to 90 liras.\(^{15}\)

The women working in telephone exchanges got slightly better salaries. Following the Second World War, their working conditions seemed to have undergone little change. In 1950, thirty-five switchboard girls worked 8 hours a day in a TETI telephone exchange, in Florence, in a small room, which was badly ventilated, because of the ill-planned position of the windows and the heat produced by the electrical equipment.

“In the meantime, the young ladies, dressed in black, attend to the telephone calls and carry on spending their days in a room which is as long as the tables accommodating the equipment for the long-distance calls. They have a snack, in the twenty-minute break between shifts, in a dressing-room with two tiny windows and devoid of adequate kitchen and bathroom facilities. It is in this dressing-room that they also have to spend their two-hour break, under a ceiling which is so low that it produces a stifling atmosphere.

The tension, caused by the very nature of the work itself, is aggravated by these environmental shortcomings, so much so that it is not unusual for a switchboard girl to faint while at work. Suffice it to say that, on average, 30% of these women clerks fall ill, suffering, above all, from nervous breakdowns”.\(^{16}\)

Most telephone exchange operators still did not have job security. The firm’s collective contract, drawn up, on 14\(^{th}\) April, 1947, between the relevant trade unions and SET (a private telephone company), stipulated the minimum annual term of work necessary to be designated temporary personnel, and the consequent rights. The number of working days depended upon the size of the office (the number of permanent employees).\(^{17}\)

The telephonists, from the middle classes, must behave like ladies, even if with limited means. They have to be polite, patient with customers and colleagues, and respectful towards superiors. Their black aprons are made more attractive, and differentiated even more from the women workers’ grey uniforms by their white collars, which are embroidered and starched. A switchboard girl’s 1956 handbook stated:

“A switchboard girl must have excellent hearing, to be able to understand precisely a voice which is transmitted, by instrument, even if it is faint and in a noisy place; the eyesight must be good, at least for near vision (to be able to: see the switchboard and differentiate the location of the connections, read, for prolonged periods, directories and other printed matter). […] The following are also necessary: good physical co-ordination, quick-wittedness, good reflexes, a clear and pleasant (voice) timbre, a clear, fluent pronunciation, without any trace of a regional accent, clear, neat handwriting, and to be able to transcribe quickly.

The intellectual prerequisites for this job include: good, overall intelligence, with the ability both to analyse and synthesize, as well as prompt intuition. In particular, intuition is very important. Without this quality it is impossible


\(^{15}\) State Archives of Pisa, Prefecture, Inventory 30, Folder 92, Santa Maria a Monte, 13\(^{th}\) June, 1929.

\(^{16}\) F. Pieroni Bortolotti, Prefect, what about the offices of TETI? The ever-more unbearable working conditions of thirty-five women clerks, “Toscana Nuova”, V, n. 40, 8\(^{th}\) October, 1950.

\(^{17}\) SILTE (CISL) “Notiziario”, n.5 (1953?), p.25. The minutes of the agreement between the trade unions, FIDAT, Silte, Fenastel and SET (private telephone companies), 7\(^{th}\) July, 1953, extending, until 1954, the 14\(^{th}\) April 1947 contract.
to be a good switchboard girl. We have to consider a situation in which a customer is very excited and is not clear in his requests, we have to consider a communications in which, for various reasons, the words are not all comprehensible. In all these instances it is essential to work out intuitively what cannot be clearly heard. As well as intuition, the woman telephonist should also have common sense and the ability to make decisions independently, when necessary.

Exceptional qualities, in terms of character, are also needed: apart from being calm and careful, a woman telephonist should be able to get on well with others and be adaptable --- in fact, the switchboard girl sits virtually shoulder to shoulder with her colleagues, she is continuously in contact with them and these relationships must be characterized by the greatest clarity and friendliness; furthermore, she has to be able to adapt easily to new situations, when she is called upon to replace a colleague or do different work".18

Like the women working in industry, only more so, the women telephonists experience isolation and marginalisation. It is only following the Second World War that the women clerks will pass from the switchboards to the real and proper offices, and will, even more slowly, reach the management level. The women telephonists have very little power and no particular professional training, but they end up, as early as the inter-war years, enjoying the relative advantages of an almost exclusively female work-place, with the obvious exception of the management. The virtual absence of men and the fact that women are also occupying the positions of superiors make it easier to pass on knowledge and experience- which are not only useful in the working environment, but also for social relationships-between the old and the young, the city girls and those from the country, women from different strata of the lower and middle classes, and sometimes from working-class backgrounds.

Moreover, the women clerks of the telephone service offer a model of social behaviour both for the single and married women, since the latter’s decision, in the second half of the 20th century, to continue working in the telephone service becomes more and more relevant.

At this early stage of my research about women telephonists, I cannot go beyond the above findings. I can conclude with a list of issues which should prove to be interesting:

1- The peculiar relationship of the telephone service employees with the State, since it is responsible for part of the services and is the employer of some of the personnel, as well as remaining the nominal head of the service (it is not mere chance that, still today, the staff of the telephone service enjoy particular pension rights).

2- The relationship with municipal administrations, the employers of the women working in the public telephone services.

3- The relationships with colleagues and superiors in the work-place.

4- The respectability of this job, which, despite the physically tiring work, raises the status of girls and women of modest social origins. The respectability depends primarily upon the job’s gender segregation.

5- The quantitative and qualitative ratio between unmarried and married women.

6- The relationship between a woman’s role in the family and at work.

7- The participation of the girl telephonists in the activities of various associations (including those specifically for women) and the relevant trade unions.