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The transformation of the social regulation of work. The case of women's employment in northern and southern Italy in comparative perspective.

Abstract:

The paper analyses the transformations in the social regulation of work through an examination of female employment and changes in the role of women in industrial society. The processes of change have weakened the equilibrium of the Fordist regime founded on the breadwinner role, on a gendered division of labour, and on women's responsibility for providing care services within the family. Thus the increase of women's employment is not an effect of change, as are higher rates of unemployment and the spread of 'atypical' work, but is rather the key to redesigning a new equilibrium of social relations.

The paper outlines a few European examples of change and then focuses on two specific cases of women's employment in northern and southern Italy. In northern Italy the rise of female employment, primarily full time, occurs in a social context where available welfare services do not meet existing demands. Rather these needs are met through local arrangements and kin relations. In southern Italy female employment is limited and often women who are active in the labour force are unemployed.

Through this analysis we begin to shed light on the regulating tensions typical of the current phase of work transformation in industrial society. On the whole, although expressed differently in different contexts, the responsibility of the family to provide care is still problematically compatible with female employment. More generally, but much more visible in the forms of female and youth employment, the rupture in the trade off between subordination in the work place and social guarantees (typical of the forms of Fordist employment for the adult male breadwinner) creates a series of difficulties that existing reforms of occupational and welfare systems are unable to resolve.