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Cristina Solera, Women in an out of paid work. Changes across generations in Italy and Britain. Bristol: The Policy Press, 2009, 228 pp.

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Book reviews

Cristina Solera, *Women in an out of paid work. Changes across generations in Italy and Britain*. Bristol: The Policy Press, 2009, 228 pp.

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One of the most fruitful areas of research in contemporary family sociology is that of the study of gender inequalities that unfold from the interplay between the labour market and the domestic spheres. It is precisely in the gendered nature of the interconnection between paid and unpaid responsibilities which poses the fundamental challenge for a sound contribution in this area: to disentangle the complex societal and individual mechanisms as well as the causal relationships that explain the observed gender inequalities in the lifecourse trajectories of women and men. Cristina Solera's contribution comes to shed new light on the existing debate. The focus of the book is on women's employment transitions over the lifecourse and across cohorts. The aim is to identify and explain changes in typical employment histories of women (continuous or with interruptions) on the basis of an integrated approach that considers both macro and micro factors and the linkages between them through a comparative study of two diverse welfare regime configurations: Italy and the United Kingdom.

The word *change* is of paramount importance in Solera's approach to the study of the labour market trajectories of women. Indeed, her work continues a quite recent development in quantitative family and labour market sociology for the use of longitudinal data and econometric techniques to account for the changes in the lifecourses of individuals that unfold over time. Concretely, Solera makes use of two household panels, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the *Indagine Longitudinale sulle Famiglie Italiane* (ILFI) that contain extensive information on the lifecourses of the individuals interviewed. The longitudinal approach of the book is strengthened through the comparison of the labour market trajectories of different birth cohorts of women. In the author's own words, this strategy allows the appropriate study of "the timing and type of change that has occurred in women's labour market participation" [p. 8].

Methodologically, given the dynamic nature of the labour market trajectories of women, Event History Analysis (EHA) is the main econometric technique applied to a sample of women in their working age. The main transitions analyzed are from employment to housework and from housework to employment. The author also uses selection models to check the robustness of the main findings for the transitions in and out of employment. In addition, logistic models to analyze the first entry into employment are also estimated for the two countries. Furthermore, in her attempt to capture the role that the institutional settings and the welfare regime configuration have on the employment transitions of women, the two datasets used allow the comparison between a liberal welfare regime represented by the UK and a southern European or Mediterranean one represented by Italy.

As for the theoretical framework, the author relies on key contributions that both from family sociology and economics have covered a wide array of issues dealing with women's participation in the labour market. From all this contribution, Solera has built

up an original integrated theoretical approach that considers the interplay between micro factors such as women's preferences, individual attributes like education, social class and labour market experience, but also other relevant family characteristics with macro elements such as the shaping effect on women's labour market opportunities of those welfare regime institutions that address work-life balance issues and the regulation of the labour market. Remarkably, this theoretical framework together with the empirical strategy followed in the book does not treat women as isolate individuals inside the family but in interaction with their male partners. Concretely, the author considers the role of her husband's education in the employment transitions of the women and tries to disentangle whether the decisions regarding their involvement in the labour market versus homemaking activities are more affected by their own educational endowments or by those of their husbands. In this regard, Solera's work falls nicely in one of the most promising areas of contemporary social stratification research: the study of gender inequalities as a by-product of educational homogamy patterns in the process of coupledom. Finally, a key contribution of her theoretical stand is the role of women's agency in their decisions regarding work-life balance issues.

Turning to the main findings, the author discusses interesting descriptive evidence showing that the distribution of types of work histories has changed across cohorts in Italy and the UK. Specifically, "[C]ontinuous careers have clearly increased in both countries. However, in Britain the increase have been sharper and it has been mainly due to a decline in the 'one break, with return' type of work history, but also, at the same time, to a growth in the 'two or more breaks' type of career" [pp. 124-125]. The author interprets this pattern as indicative of a more intense normative shift in the UK than in Italy towards a greater societal acceptance of women's work after motherhood. Indeed, although continuous labour market careers are also more common nowadays in Italy, the increase is much lower than in the UK and it mainly stems from a reduction in the proportion of women who have never worked over their lifecourses. Interestingly, although the findings suggest that British women are more affected by career interruptions around childbirth than their Italian counterparts, the author's careful examination to the data indicates that in the UK women re-enter more in the labour market after childbirth than it is the case in Italy. To put it simply, Italian women have a higher risk of abandoning the labour market with motherhood than it is the case in the UK. Thus, the author concludes that in comparison with Britain "women's work patterns have changed little across cohorts in Italy" [p. 130].

Moreover, for the case of Italian women several findings in the book highlight the key role of education in their labour market involvement. It affects not only whether a women enters the labour market at all, but also the type of career she will have once she has started working. Overall, the picture for Italy is one of change towards an increasing participation of women within a context of intense polarisation of their life chances along education and the region of residence. Thus, highly educated women and those living in the North enjoy more continuous and stable labour market careers both in terms of their first job and in returning to the labour market after childbirth. Indeed, if one remarkable shift in the labour market participation of Italian women has to be identified it is precisely that for younger cohorts neither marriage nor motherhood are as such life cycle events that hinder them from pursuing professional careers. As Solera

puts it, “Women in younger cohorts tend to work regardless of their family status or whether they have children, they tend to exit less or later, or to return to paid work more rapidly and on a larger scale” [p. 137]. It is also in Italy, according to the author, that a closer relationship between education and approval of women’s new roles in employment and family can be found which might, at least, partially explain the gap in the quantity and quality of women’s labour market participation between the top and the bottom distribution of education. British women, instead, show more attachment to paid work than their Italian counterparts even though Solera identifies more heterogeneity than in Italy in the incidence and timing of their exits and re-entries. She concludes that the fact that the labour market is more de-regulated may facilitate a higher number of transitions between paid and unpaid episodes weakening the stratifying effect of education that was found for Italy.

The analyses presented in the book also show evidence of another key difference between the Italian and the British cases. While in Italy women’s education appears as the determining factor for the stability and quality (measured in terms of continuity) of their labour market participation, in the UK, by contrast, this seems to respond more to motherhood than education even though the effect of having dependent children is slightly stronger for low educated women. The author concludes that while in “Britain differences between highly educated and poorly educated women seem to concern more the rate than the timing of interruption [...] In Italy, differences between highly educated and poorly educated women seem, by contrast, to reside less in ‘quantum’ and more in ‘timing’” [p.156].

The study of the effect of the husband’s education in the woman’s labour market decisions is one of the main contributions of Solera’s book. As advanced above the interest in spousal influences has to do with the importance of homogamy in the process of coupledom. Looking at the husband side, as Solera rightly says, makes it possible to consider whether “women’s behavior has become more or less dependent on what their husbands do, and whether polarisation has assumed new forms” [p. 161]. The author argues that both Italy and the UK, as advanced economies, share a common trend of increasing educational attainment among women. Consequently, the existing evidence show that the effect of the partner’s resources on women’s life chances and decisions has weakened over time while women’s own education has become the driving force for the differentiation among them. Her results show that in Italy if the woman’s educational and labour market profile is controlled for, “the woman’s labour supply is now strongly dependent on her own profile, and no longer on her partner’s” [p. 167]. Nevertheless, for the oldest cohorts the partner’s personal endowment seem to matter which suggest that the women’s gained independence is quite a recent phenomenon. For the UK, instead, it seems that class is much more important than education, but again like in Italy, it is her own class what matters. As for the husband’s resources, his employment status, and particularly, whether he is in employment or not, affect more the woman’s labour supply than his education or occupational class.

There are a couple of possible criticisms to make to Solera’s work. These are closely related with her brave attempt to address such a complex issue as women’s involvement in the labour market given the wide array of factors that may affect directly or indirectly their decision regarding the pursuit of a rewarding professional career. Firstly,

the integrated theoretical framework she develops, at moments appear too ambitious to be appropriately tested given the inherent limitations of the micro-data used. This could leave the impression in the interested reader of a certain imbalance between the richness of theoretical and conceptual discussion and some obvious limitations in the empirical analyses that address the substantive arguments of the book. For instance, such imbalance, is evident regarding the lack of a direct test of the role of gender and family values in the labour market transitions of women. In several passages of the book the author argues that direct information on values is not available in either of the surveys but this is not true, at least, for the case of UK data. The BHPS contains a battery of up to seven items specially suitable to measure the values and beliefs regarding gender and family matters of the individuals interviewed. They are asked every two waves of the panel. It is a pity that this information could not be used in the empirical analyses to address one of the key dimensions of the rich conceptual framework of the book. Nevertheless, the work provides path breaking analyses and a complex and well grounded discussion of all the issues that affect women's labour market careers. In this sense, Solera's contribution should be part of the obligatory readings of all family and labour market sociologists interested in the study of women's life chances in contemporary society.

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