

# **Female workforce in the retail sector: welfare policies and collective bargaining perspective**

**Arianna Marcolin and Beatrice Bianconi**

**ABSTRACT:** *Retail women's' workforce is characterized by high level of turnover rate, higher percentage of part-time contracts, low-skilled workforce and increased level of connectivity/availability due to the spread of digitalization. especially in countries – such as Italy – where public policies and welfare systems are not sufficient to let women working full-time, making women's needs to cope with work-life balances issues crucial. Collective bargaining should meet this evolution, in order to define the new tasks that are rising and to improve workers' conditions, gaining equal treatment and higher transparency vis-à-vis employers' decisions. The aim of the paper is then to disentangle whether the social actors strategically negotiate over the changes that women workforce are facing or whether the regulation of women in the GDO (Great Organized Distribution) is regulated by the state, through policies that protect their needs. Thus, the question that this paper addresses is whether women's retail workforce is regulated by social actors, looking at the content of collective agreement. The methodology utilized is the inductive content analysis of the Italian sector collective agreement, run through ad-hoc codebook. The content analysis allows to verify whether the issue of work-life balance, harassment and training are regulated through collective agreements, specifically for women during digital transition, and/or whether the state, through specific welfare policies, is sustaining women.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Retail Sector, Industrial Relations, Women Workforce, Work-life Balance, Italian Institutions.*

## **Introduction**

Service sector has been greatly growing in the last decades, both in terms of occupational percentage and in terms of specific subsectors (Reyneri, 2011; Fellini, 2017). Inside the great group of service sector, retail results to be very interesting due to many peculiarities. In particular, the theme of digital transition and the theme of gender balance are quite peculiar in retail. On one hand, the composition of the labour force in retail has strongly involved women labour force participation. That has a collateral aspects, that social actors need to handle, such as gender pay gap, work-life balance, life prospects (Reyneri, 2001; Eurofound, 2012). On the other, retail is a challenging sector for industrial relations (Ambra, 2019), considering the fragmentation of the workplaces and the high level of turn-over rate, which affects the possibility of unionise workers. Collective bargaining can play a fundamental role in making fair digital transition for female workers (Peña-Casas et al, 2018), but also on topics more related

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to gender balance. For this reason, this article proposes, first of all, a brief recognition of the service sector characteristics, focusing on retail sector, and secondly it points on the role of the institutions in affecting to various and different extent women's presence in retail, in collaboration with industrial relations. Last collective agreement signed at sector level is analysed, through the analysis made by WageIndicator.org. The analysis aims to demonstrate whether actors are able to include in the agreement gender issues able to actual tackling gender disparities or whether they focus more on qualitative topics.

## **1. Service Sector General Characteristics**

There are some major theories which explain the reasons beyond the great increase of the employment level inside service sector (Wren, 2013). On the one hand, families' better economic conditions have led to an increase in the demand of services; on the other, it is affected by the so-called cost disease (Baumol, 1967), which describes how, in very high labour-intensive services, technological innovation does not affect labour's productivity –even if in sub sectors like call centres or at delivery, technology have led to the increase of the general level of workers' «availability», affecting working time, «traditional» shifts and timetable (Connell, Gough and McDonnell, 2014). Also, in service sector industrial relations present some disadvantages - for example, workplaces' fragmentation, high level of autonomous workers, high turnover rate and so forth - which make more difficult to adopt unions' strategies (Dølvik and Waddington, 2002).

Inside the macro group of service sector, however, retail, more than other sub-sectors, presents a series of characteristics, better explained in the next paragraph. Is exactly looking at retail that the research questions become more relevant: what is the incidence of target policies for women? Among other instruments, how effective is the collective bargaining?

## **2. Why Focusing on Retail sector**

The retail sector is described as having some characteristics that imply sector-specific innovation which is not always comparable with or measurable against other sectors (European Commission, 2015), making it particularly interested to study. The specific features to take into account when studying this sector is the retail function, the store format in relation to its marketing mix, and the manufacturing function, the development, production, and marketing of the product itself. In addition, the retail sector needs to retain attractive brick-and-mortar storefronts while at the same time finding new strategies to create a satisfied shopping experience. As the European Commission (2015) notes, examples of the most efficient innovations in the retail sector involve the re-engineering of the shopping process rather than a streamlining of the administrative process.

Alongside fast-food, retail is one of the most recognizable low-wage labour sectors, often associated not only with low-wages but also instability (Ikeler, 2016). Retail (considered at a subsector level but also as whole, mainly because the high degree of similarities) presents a set of common characteristics recognisable also in different countries (Carré and Tilly, 2017). In fact, in retail workers are usually low-skilled, and

perceive low wages, especially in comparison with other sectors. Retail presents, also, a high percentage of part-time workers, which usually have to deal with schedules' management, and a higher level of turnover. High turnover, also, weights on trade unions power and coverage, which in this particular labour sector have to face with more obstacles than in others. Part-time, high level of turnover rate and flexibilization have all a great role in affecting the contingent control over these workers, and consequently also on the possibilities for trade unions to unionise them (Campbell, Chalmers, 2008; Ikeler, 2016). Also, working in retail usually means that the access to some forms of social protection is lower, especially in those countries based on corporatist system.

Even if these characteristics are highly transversal (both in terms of countries and partly of subsectors), women employed in retail tend to face with worst conditions at least from two point of view. Following Eurofound's job quality indices, women are especially penalised in the skills and discretion index (women: 46,5, against men: 53,4) and in the monthly earnings index (women: 885,4, against men: 1254,4)<sup>2</sup>. The tendency of women to choose for a part-time contract, often due to family-care burdens, affect not only (and more understandably) their income, but also the possibility to access to a full formation.

One aspect that has emerged in the retail sector is the liberalization of hours, increasing the issue of working-life balance for female workers. Since 2011, hours of work have been extended with the liberalization of Sunday working. Employers considered the agreement as a way of modernizing Italian industrial relations and strengthening their role at lower levels. Furthermore, trade unions were unable to oppose the creation of new part-time contracts, such as the '8 hours contract' on Saturdays and Sundays, intended for students and those aged under 25 years old, and in 2015 CONFCOMMERCIO signed an agreement, at the sector level, extending working hours from 40-44 to 44-48 hours per week, increasing working time flexibility.

Social actors in the Italian retail sector are comparatively less influential due to the fact that Italian retail sector is composed (98%) by small and medium companies for the majority run at familiar level, where the level of unionization is pretty low (Eurocommerce and Uniglobal, 2017). Moreover, during the economic crisis, the retail sector has contracted substantially. In Italy, the situation just after the crisis was particularly tough: among the eight percent of companies that closed during the period 2008–2014, 57% (52,978 firms) were in the retail sector (Istat, 2018). Combined, these features have had an important impact on employment conditions and work organization leading, for instance, to the liberalization of opening hours, an increase in part-time contracts, and a higher demand for high-skilled workers, especially those with ICT competences (Eurofound, 2018). Despite the crisis, some recovery is evident: in 2017 in Italy, economic activity grew in all service activities by more than 1.5% (Istat, 2018).

### *3.1. Why digital transition is interesting in retail sector?*

According to Donnelly and Wright (2017), about 90% of the retail sales workforce worldwide are likely to be substituted by robots in the next year. Thus, the sector will experience a fundamental change in the nature of work, which is one of the consequences already forecast by Degryse (2016). Thus, social actors are burdened with the task of handling the risks and opportunities that digitalization implies for workers and employers (Guaraschio and Sacchi, 2017), assuring also that economic growth is innovative, inclusive, and sustainable (Mazzucato, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> European Working Condition Survey 2015, dataset, own elaboration on microdata

Also, the Italian retail is changing and so social actors need to answer properly. In Italy, digitalization means mainly e-commerce. The website EcommerceNews, reports that Italian internet penetration is around 60% and that Italy is now the European country with the highest growth of e-commerce, indicating a potential market for online selling. Data-gathered before the spread of Covid-19, confirmed by the latest Istat report (2019), demonstrates that the retail sector as a whole is contracting, but sales of electronic goods are also shaping the way shops are with the spread of blockchain technologies providing consumers with information about products, or robotization allowing for automated shelf filling (Faioli et al, 2021), addressing consumers need (Deloitte, 2017).

### **3. Institutional Role?**

When looking specifically at retail, usually there are several institutional issues taken into account in literature. First of all, the impact of laws which regulate labour organisation (management of part-time contracts, easiness in firing/hiring procedures), can highly affect the issue of career prospects for workers employed in retail (Eurofound, 2012). Secondly, minimum wages policies can then clearly boosts for higher wages, reducing, at least partly, the issue of earnings (Askenazy et al., 2012), even if this aspect can be approached also from the perspective of the trade unions' role. Another element to take into account is the national tax and benefits systems. In fact, the lower is the level of the public childcare services, the higher will be the possibility to find women available and willing to work part-time and to accept jobs' conditions which usually comprehend low wages (Gautié et al., in Gautié, Schmitt, 2010). Active and passive labour market polices shape the labour supply available to work in these industries (and at lower wages) as well.

For its purpose, this paper analyses two institutional variables: welfare policies affecting work-life balance, in order to see if they sustain gender equality in the retail sector; and industrial relations and collective bargaining influence (Gasparri, Ikeler and Fullin, 2019), to grasp if they point attention on the theme of gender balance in retail sector.

#### *3.1 Why welfare policies affect gender issues in retail sector*

From the social services and caring point of view, the lack of investments also depends on the strong role assigned to family, women in particular (familistic model), who often remain excluded from the labour market or tend to opt for solutions capable to leave space for child or eldest care – such as part-time contracts. This theme becomes more relevant if considering that – as outlined – the progressive shift from an industrial society to a society of services has eroded the well-known and embedded model of the male breadwinner – men employed in a flourish labour market, women devoted to family care, possibility to live with dignity with a single income. The erosion of this system has progressively pushed for a new series of requests and needs, not completely developed, leading to a strong feminization role in the family care still nowadays (Ascoli and Pavolini, 2012).

Due to these social changes, there is the need for new target policies especially in some aspects, like work-life balance and family care. Such investments can help in improving gender balance and in reducing gender asymmetries; in Italy, inside the macro group of work-life balance policies, there are three sub-groups: monetary

transfers, externalisation of family-care services (public or private) and flexibilization in work schedules (Gaiaschi and Mallone, 2017).

In Italy, among the main policies related to the issue of work-life balance, there are four major areas of interest (Maino, Razetti and Santoni, 2019). Each category favours the status quo: measures promoting work-flexibility, which actually increase the presence of the male bread winner/female part-time earner; measures promoting the extension of (external) family services, on the direction of the dual earner model; measures based on monetary transfers and measures promoting fiscal helps. Italy presents a propensity on the first group of policies (Gaiaschi and Mallone, 2017), meaning that women tend to opt for part-time/reduced hours jobs to take care of family or not to work at all. For instance, the lack of a sufficient diffusion of public or private services push to a remodulation of the working time, and this affect especially women. Parental leaving is regulated by the «legislative degree 151/2001” and by the «Law 53/2000”, which guarantees, including the facultative extension, up to 11 months to be distributed among both parents. Nevertheless, parents tend to reduce their working time in order to take care of children (22,5%), but again with a major incidence among mothers (38,3% against 11,9% of the fathers). Another significant difference between mothers and fathers is that mothers are more likely to reduce the working hours (6 mothers out of 10), while fathers tend to opt for a remodulation of the working time (38,3% against 27,2% who opts for a reduction) (ISTAT, 2018). Monetary transfers and voucher are more diffuse, and comprehend, for example, the «*bonus bebè*», «*bonus asilo nido*» (which is derogated depending on the economic conditions, looking at «ISEE»), «*bonus mamme domani*» as well as «*assegni familiari*», which depend on the numerosity of the family and on the complex income perceived. The tendency, thus, is more to invest in “passive” policies, leading most of the time the firms to offer other specific benefits.

In a sector such as the retail characterized by high percentage of women in retail labour force, the high level of part-time contracts use, the labour organisation based on (asocial) shifts (Carré et al., 2010), the role the trade union in shaping women’s working conditions through collective agreement is crucial (Colombo and Regalia, 2011). In the last decade the majorly representative trade unions in Italy (CGIL, CISL, UIL) expressed favour to stronger investments in public policies, in order to «provide equal and universal rights for women». Also, the issue of the second-level bargaining has been pointed as a possible instruments to promote reconciliation of work and life (ETUC, 2014).

The instrument of the collective agreement has been used at all level as a way to shape various aspects, starting from work-life balance (Agostini and Ascoli, 2014; Gaiaschi and Mallone, 2017) and flexibility of working time than offering concrete services (e.g., nurse). In the next paragraph we verify whether collective agreement is efficient in affecting gender issues, and whether it is integrated with the public policies on gender issue.

### *3.2 Why look in particular at collective agreement and which are the relevant actors*

The Italian retail sector is mainly comprised of micro and small firms (about 98%), then traditionally the level of unionization has been particularly low. Moreover, bargaining coverage is less extensive and trade unions are characterized by less innovation and a more defensive nature (Carrieri et al., 2018). During the financial crisis and its immediate aftermath, trade unions have adopted a defensive attitude vis-à-vis the inflexible position of employers, but since 2016, the trade unions room of manoeuvre has amplified and they have been able to push for contract renewal (Carrieri et al., 2018; Leonardi, 2017).

Following the INPS-CNEL database we consider only the most representative trade unions and employers' associations in order to avoid pirate agreements, that negotiate worst working conditions.

In the retail sector, workers in trade and retail, restaurants, hotels, and cleaning are represented by three main union organizations: FILCAMS-CGIL, FISASCAT-CISL and UILTUCS-UIL. The membership of the three trade unions, taken together, increased by 33.6% between 2008 and 2014 (Leonardi et al., 2018). While union density is one of the lowest among all sectors (only 25% in 2017), both CGIL and UIL have increased their membership levels, although CISL membership has decreased (Visser, database, 2019).

Different employers' associations represent different firm size: (a) tradition retail sector- CONFCOMMERCIO (with more than 700,000 affiliated firms and almost 2.7 million employees) and CONFESERCENTI (representing 350,000 SMEs with more than 1,000,000 employees); large-scale and modern distribution represented by FEDERDISTRIBUZIONE (with 200 large companies and multinationals and more than 220,000 employees and (c) the cooperative distribution sector, which follows cooperative business model (Carrieri et al, 2018).

In 2011, FEDERDISTRIBUZIONE exit from CONFCOMMERCIO provokes a disequilibrium in the sector. CONFCOMMERCIO and FEDERDISTRIBUZIONE are the two polarized associations with contrasting interests, while CONFESERCENTI has played the role of the intermediary (Burroni et al, 2019). The main contested point is represented by working hours: FEDERDISTRIBUZIONE pushed for working time liberalization. This *casus belli* gave the lead for the separation between two associations that represent companies that have different interests (Ambra, 2019; Leonardi et al, 2018).

There are different ideological differences. FILCAMS CGIL more pro-active against employers - the only trade union who did not sign the agreement on hours liberalization and FISASCAT CISL more moderate and willing to find a compromise within different interests and finally UILTUCS UIL being the buffer between FEDERDISTRIBUZIONE and CONFCOMMERCIO (Ambra, 2019; Gasparri and Tassinari, 2020). Despite this, the trade unions are aware of the changes and the necessity to align their strategies to theme . One of the best way to study the trade unions actions is to analyse collective agreements. Thus, in the next section we will go through the analysis of the sector collective agreement.

#### **4. National Collective Agreements: an Overview**

Following Ilo Report (2016), we analyse the content of sector collective agreement, because it sets the base line of actions, covering the majority of workers in the sector. Whereas we do not take into account the company-based agreements because they rely extensively to the company conditions. More, as Etuc (2014) points out, the national collective agreement represents the most powerful mechanism for «reducing pay inequalities between women and men» and involving employers' associations in negotiation that reinforces the role of female workers in a sector characterized as the retail by high level of part-time (Carrieri et al, 2018).

Thus, we analyse the sector collective agreement of the retail sector. Taking into account the following variable that are mostly related to gender discrimination and fair digital transition: *pay level, training and lifelong learning and finally harassment at*

*work*, verifying whether trade unions actions support female workers in particular during the current digital transition. The content analysis of the collective agreement is derived from the study made by WageIndicator.org, meaning that we report the study done by WageIndicator for the Italian retail sector.

First of all, among the most important findings it is not negotiated equal pay between female and male workers. The agreement provides also equal promotion treatment (as well as chances) for women as well as same chance of training and lifelong learning. It is also signed that a trade unions representative tasks should be devoted to gender parity issues. Moreover, the sector agreement protects workers against discrimination and from sexual harassment or violence in the working place. In fact, the gender parity should be monitored. Despite all these provisions, various are the aspects that are not included for the protection of female workers against discrimination.

For instance, it is not specified a specific sustainment for female disable workers. Finally, the agreement does not include special leave for female workers that have undergone domestic violence.

Furthermore, the first issue is that within the section of «Health and Disease» it is not included the period of an illness that allows female workers to stay at home. The maternity leave is paid for 21.5 weeks and only the 80% of the salary is provided. The retail agreement assures the job position after the maternity leave. However, services for mothers who breast-feed their children are not negotiated, and the employers do not provide any further service for the working mother.

The result is that sector collective agreement provides the basic protection for women and anything specific regarding digital transition. We hypothesize that the company-based level is the level devoted to the development of this issue.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aims to fulfil a void between the welfare measures and the decision taken by social actors, verifying whether the two complement their tasks in sustaining women, especially during the digital transitions.

In this changing pattern, the issue of gender becomes even more important, because the transition towards digitalization is fair only if all workers, despite their gender, have the same chances of training, promotion and decent working conditions. In Italy, the equality between men and women is far from being reached. Social actors are aware that they have to strategically tackling this issue, through ad hoc debates, round tables, and actions organized within the companies. However, the most powerful action is represented by the rise of this issue at the negotiating table. In fact, Italian trade unions have channelled a significant amount of effort in utilizing agreement in order to assure a decent balance between working and family time, fighting against gender stereotypes (ILO, 2015).

As we saw from the analysis, trade unions bargain on the topics that we considered crucial for assuring a fair digital transition for all retail workers despite their gender. Thus, there not any specific measure for women in the labour market neither by social actors not by government. However, still the gender gap is quite significant within retail workforce and the actions that seem more effective are the ones that regard the qualitative aspects of the negotiation, meaning training, assuring the same opportunity of career development, as well as providing maternal leaving.

Moreover, in the fair transition debate the role of female workers is not a leading topic. While, if trade unions interpretation of digitalization in a sector, such as the retail

(whose workforce is constituted by the majority by female workers) were linked with the crucial role played by women, maybe their debate will be more efficient.

Future researches are necessary for understanding whether company-based agreements are more efficient in sustaining women's rights more it would be useful comparing the retail sector with another sector where innovative technologies are spread, such as the automotive one.

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