

## **Back at home?**

# **Gendered histories of deindustrialisation and female unemployment in Europe since 1973**

### *Abstract*

I aim to investigate women's unemployment in the phase of deindustrialisation that began in the aftermath of 1973 oil crisis and is still affecting Western countries. Female unemployment has a rather 'marginal' status in academia, being overlooked both by labour historians focused on male unemployment and by feminist social scientist focused on recent occurrences. My project will offer new insights, framing this experience in a longer timespan and embracing a comparative and multidisciplinary approach.

Western countries have had to face economic crises since the mid-seventies and from the eighties neoliberal capitalism started to heavily reshape the global labour market. The old stereotype of female salary as 'pin money' within the household budget was again publicly put forth, thus implicitly questioning women's right to work. How did women experience unemployment? What did it mean in terms of their social status, economic independence, sense of self, relationship to the home? Were specific welfare policies put into place? How did societies of different countries discuss female unemployment in relation to male unemployment? To what extent did the decline of traditional working-class culture affect public debate as well as individual perception of this phenomenon?

To answer these questions and to understand the reconfiguration of class and gender identities I have selected three case studies (FIAT in Italy, LIP in France, Plessey in the UK). These three countries are Western European democracies with strong traditions of organised labour; however, their political situations were different, thus policies to cope with unemployment were developed according to different principles and objectives.

In addition to examining government records and company as well as trade union archives, I will conduct original in-depth interviews. Combining oral history with a variety of written records allows me to understand the interaction of subjectivity, community and wider social structures.

## *Description - State of the Art*

This project aims to investigate, from a historical perspective, the issue of women's unemployment in the phase of corporate restructuring and deindustrialisation that began in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis and is still affecting Western countries today. Historians and social scientists interested in the gendered dimension of the labour market have convincingly highlighted that the very meaning of the word "work" changes when considered from a gender perspective.<sup>1</sup> Joan Scott, in her seminal book *Gender and the Politics of History*, developed a rich and path-breaking reflection on the symbolic and discursive different meaning attributed to extra-domestic paid labour and domestic un-paid labour – historically respectively performed by men and women.

Likewise, I consider it important to reflect on women's standpoints on the issue of "losing one's job". Scholars have long investigated the dynamics of the global market in terms of labour relations, equality, and redistribution. Within this framework, unemployment in Western countries surely represents a significant issue, but it has not yet been addressed in all its complexity. As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen underlined: "Given the massive scale of unemployment in contemporary European economies, the concentration on income inequality alone can be particularly deceptive. ... [A]t this time the massive levels of European unemployment constitute at least as important an issue of inequality, in its own right, as income distribution itself."<sup>2</sup>

The history of female unemployment has a rather 'marginal' status in academia: women's unemployment has certainly been dealt with in works by feminist scholars in the fields of economy, sociology, psychology, yet labour and social historians have focused on the links between employment, identity and masculinity, thus overlooking the situation of women.

In the first case, we find a significant number of enquiries and reflections that has been often stimulated by the current economic crisis and that look at its impact on unemployment rates on the base of gender differences. These studies have the merit of restoring the importance of social reality after the so-called 'cultural turn' which mainly oriented the development of social sciences in the past decades. Moreover, they interestingly consider gender in its intersectional dimension, taking into account its imbrications with the categories of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability. However, their approach partly lacks long-term perspective and being closely interested in the interpretation of macro-phenomena they tend to overlook the impact of unemployment on personal biographical trajectories (the opposite of the micro-history perspective here proposed).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Amartya Sen, *Inequality, Unemployment and Contemporary Europe*, «International Labour Review», n.136 (1997), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> See: Rania Antonopoulos (ed. by), *Gender perspectives and gender impacts of the global economic crisis*, Routledge, New York, 2014. Harriet Bradley, *Fractured identities: changing patterns of inequality*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, 2016.

In the second case, labour and social historians proved to be very sensitive to the issue of deindustrialisation because of its role in the dismantling of the traditional working-class. They investigated the weight of unemployment in the redefinition of blue-collar identities and they explored the links between masculinity and labour (in terms of physical effort, collective identity, professional pride). However, all this great deal of work has been often realised showing an incredible indifference to the issue of female unemployment, with its specific features and questions.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the proposed project - providing an alternative and original perspective - will offer new insights by bringing gender analysis together with a historical perspective capable of embracing a comparative as well as a multidisciplinary approach.

### *Context and questions*

After the exceptional period of the two world wars when women were called to replace men in various traditionally male occupations,<sup>5</sup> they started entering the labour market on a massive scale in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> In a few decades, women made crucial steps in terms of accessing new sectors, developing careers, and obtaining new rights. However, Western countries had to face economic crises from the mid-seventies, and from the eighties neoliberal capitalism – strongly oriented towards laissez-faire – started to heavily reshape the global labour market.<sup>7</sup> There are indications from various countries to suggest that, more often than not, women were considered the first to be made redundant: the evaluation of their income as a "*salaires d'appoint*", or the old stereotype of 'pin money' within the household budget were again publicly put forth, thus implicitly questioning their right to work. This clear androcentric perspective was articulated not only by businessmen, but also by some politicians, trade unions, and by many male workers.<sup>8</sup>

How did women experience unemployment? What did it mean in terms of their social status, their economic independence, their sense of self and of their place in the world, their relationship to the home? How and where did they find alliances in their fight against it, and where did they meet indifference

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<sup>4</sup> See: Alexander Keyssar, *Out of Work. The first century of unemployment in Massachusetts*, CUP, Cambridge, 1986. John Burnett, *Idle Hands. The experience of unemployment, 1790 - 1990*. Routledge, London, 1994. Ava Baron, *Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian's Gaze*, «International Labor and Working-Class History», n. 69 (2006), pp. 143- 160.

<sup>5</sup> See Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Of course women had always been working, but mostly in the informal and domestic sectors. See for example the French classic Evelyne Sullerot, *Histoire et sociologie du travail féminin*, Editions Gonthier, Paris, 1968. And the British Carolyn Steedman, *Labours lost : domestic service and the making of modern England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK ; New York, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> On the one hand through the adoption of neoliberal state policies like in the cases of Reagan and Thatcher; on the other hand because of the market globalization (competition from emerging countries and off-shoring of production). See for example Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the welfare state? : Reagan, Thatcher, and the politics of retrenchment*, Cambridge, England ; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> See for example a declaration of the General Office of the French trade union "Confédération Général du Travail" published in view of the 8 March 1979: "Speculating both on the dramatic situation of unemployment and on the difficulties faced by working women in their lives and works [...] a campaign against women's work is conducted". Document preserved at the Institut d'Histoire Sociale, box 43 CFD 10 file 7. See also this report, from Toulouse: "At the municipal congress in February 1977 a comrade said that if women remained at home, there would be more job for men..." IHS, box 43 CFD 35 file 2. [Translations mine]

or opposition against their struggle for equal rights to work? Did governments put into place specific policies to reduce female unemployment? Women had only in recent decades started to see their work more fully valued and accepted by society. Thus, how did they experience the contradiction of having only recently gained a more equal place and a status in the labour market and soon risking its loss? How did they understand the meaning of their becoming part of the "productive" labour force and how did they handle the loss of such a status?

These research questions address the reconfiguration of gender and class identity: Western countries had just experienced the development of vital feminist movements that – despite largely focusing on new issues such as body and sexualities – nevertheless also managed to influence traditional notions of class struggle, enhancing the value of work as a feature for the redefinition of women's sense of self and social relationships. This was an epistemological revolution in the framework of traditional labour culture, and it helped working women to develop a new awareness of their aspirations and possibilities as well as a new collective, gendered identity, based also on work. Women's participation in the formal labour force significantly affected gender relations in Western societies, making female unemployment in this period a particularly rich terrain to explore. Did this phenomenon bring back outdated stereotypes about women's role in the domestic sphere? To what extent did the always shifting border between "the domestic" and "the public"<sup>9</sup> risk being once again re-established? How did societies of different countries discuss the question of female unemployment in relation to male unemployment? To what extent did deindustrialisation, recession, and the decline of traditional working-class culture affect public debate as well as individual perception of this phenomenon?

### *The case studies*

My purpose is to approach women's experience of unemployment in Western countries in a comparative perspective which would take into account different national settings and public responses. I have selected three case studies of companies that went through phases of crisis and heavy restructuring, dismissing much of their female workforce.

Firstly, I consider FIAT,<sup>10</sup> the major automobile company with headquarters in Turin, Italy: here female workers were a minority, but many of them had been hired only a few years earlier thanks to the 1977 reform of the unemployment register,<sup>11</sup> and had accordingly developed a strong commitment to their workplace and sense of collective identity. When, in 1980, FIAT announced a restructuring plan

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<sup>9</sup> See Susan Gal, A Semiotic of the Public/Private Distinction, «Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies», v. 13, n° 1, Spring 2002, pp. 77-95.

<sup>10</sup> See the works by Maud Bracke:

- Building a 'counter-community of emotions': feminist encounters and socio-cultural difference in 1970s Turin, «Modern Italy», n. 2 (2012), pp. 223-236.

- *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy (1968-1983)*, Routledge, New York, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> This was due to the law n° 903/77 "Equality of treatment between men and women on the issue of labour".

involving hundreds of layoffs (soon to become real dismissals<sup>12</sup>), workers conducted a strike of 35 days that ended with the well-known “march of 40.000”<sup>13</sup> organised by the company managers. In the subsequent period women actively participated in the unemployed workers’ committee that showed great awareness of gender specific issues,<sup>14</sup> and that was led by a woman unionist I have interviewed.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, I consider LIP, a watch factory based in Besançon, France, whose workers had to face the threat of massive dismissals already in 1973. The following period of strikes and occupation became an important national and international struggle for the workers movement and had an apparently positive outcome about which much was written at the time.<sup>16</sup> However, in 1976 a new crisis arose (trade unions founded the first “unemployed committee” in town) and in 1977 the firm went bankrupt. The only strategy workers could put into place was an attempt at self-employment: six cooperatives were created, recruiting around half of the LIP workers (220 out of 403). However, many others experienced unemployment. Almost 50% of LIP workforce was made up of women (especially in the lower levels) who had conducted a highly self-reflexive struggle from a gender perspective during the ’73/’74:<sup>17</sup> thus it will be of considerable interest to investigate their reactions in the time of unemployment.

Finally, I consider Plessey Electronics for the United Kingdom:<sup>18</sup> set in Scotland’s central belt (Bathgate), where most heavy industry enterprises - such as shipbuilding and mining – were the preserve of men, it represented an opportunity for women’s employment (75% of the employees). Plessey acquired the factory in 1965 from Telegraph Condenser Company, but in 1981 it announced that the Bathgate capacitor division would close in March 1982. 220 workers decided to mobilize occupying the factory: this event, as in the case of LIP, has raised a certain academic interest - mostly among sociologists, but its aftermath has remained unquestioned so far. The occupation led to a takeover that saved just 62 jobs,<sup>19</sup> thus clearly the issues of unemployment and relocation touched a great proportion of Plessey’s workers.

The choice of these case studies is guided by the decision to develop a comparison that addresses the experience of female unemployment within similar contexts, but in distinct concrete situations. The three countries considered are Western European democracies with strong traditions of organised labour, that had just experienced the flourishing of very active feminist movements<sup>20</sup> which also affected

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<sup>12</sup> The site of Mirafiori went from having 57.700 works in 1980 to 36.00 in 1988.

<sup>13</sup> See Andrea Sangiovanni, *Tute blu, la parabola operaia nell’Italia repubblicana*, Donzelli, Roma, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> A picture preserved in the union archives shows women who lift up a banner stating: We won’t go back home!”

<sup>15</sup> See also the archive cataloguing made of this unionist’s documents by Paola De Ferrari, *Salva con nome, L’archivio di Alessandra Mecozzi. 1974-1999*, Associazione Piera Zumaglinò Archivio storico del movimento femminista – Torino, Torino, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> See Edmond Maire, *Lip 73*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1973.

Various authors, *LIP : how French workers are fighting the sack*, RSM publications, Bristol, 1973.

The film *LIP : l’imagination au pouvoir*, directed by Christian Rouaud (2007).

<sup>17</sup> See the collective booklet *Lip au féminin*, Syros, Paris, 1977.

<sup>18</sup> See Patricia Findlay, *Worker Reaction to Closure: A Case Study of the Occupation at Plessey, Bathgate*, Honours Dissertation, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 1984.

<sup>19</sup> Plessey workforce declined from 2.400 units in 1973 to 330 in 1981 (before the occupation).

<sup>20</sup> For a brief but significant overview on second-wave feminism in Europe, see the last chapter of Gisela Bock, *Women in European History*, Blackwell, Malden (Mass), 2002.

working-class organisations such as the trade unions and the extra-parliamentary left.<sup>21</sup> After the economic growth following the end of Second World War, between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, all three countries were facing industrial decline and increasing unemployment rates. However, the political situation was different in each country.<sup>22</sup> Thus policies to cope with unemployment were developed according to different principles and objectives. Moreover, my case studies include companies of different size and workforce composition (as outlined above), thus enabling me to explore the gender and class dynamics of unemployment in these different settings. Indeed, the aim of the project is to build a non-homogeneous comparison in order to address the issue of female unemployment at multiple levels. It will consider women's biographical trajectories while looking at the following variables: state welfare policies tackling female unemployment, trade unions' struggles and their outcomes, feminist movement strategies and levels of feminist commitment.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Sources and Methodology: a focus on oral history***

Working women who lost their jobs were - of course - autonomous subjects looking at the world with their own eyes and producing an unexplored knowledge, but at the same time they remained the object - although often unexpectedly rebellious - of someone else's eyes. To catch overlaps or fractures among multiple representations, it is essential to take into account different sources: governmental documents, archival material preserved both by the companies and by the trade unions, press publications of the period, individual memoirs, and original oral sources.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Heidi Hartmann, *The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union*, in Lydia Sargent (ed. by), *Women and Revolution*, Black Rose Books, Boston, 1981.

<sup>22</sup> At the turn between the '70s and the '80s we find: in Italy a government of Christian Democrats followed by one led by socialist Bettino Craxi with Christian Democrats' support (1983); in France, a strong change from Giscard D'Estaing to the first socialist government led by Mitterrand (1981); in the UK Margaret Thatcher political success (1979).

<sup>23</sup> Preliminary reference to archives for the research on the three case studies:

FIAT:

- Archivio Fondazione Istituto Gramsci: collections CGIL and FIOM
- Fondazione Vera Nocentini: collections CISL and FIM
- Archivio Ass. Zumaglino at the Casa delle Donne di Torino: collection Alessandra Mecozzi

LIP:

- CFDT archives in Paris: collection "Soutien de la CFDT lors du conflit de l'usine horlogère LIP à Besançon"
- Institut d'Histoire Sociale - Montreuil: collection generale CGT
- Institut François Mitterrand.
- Archives Départementales du Doubs: 45J fonds Michel Jeanningros - Documentation sur le conflit à Lip Besançon.
- Archives Municipales de Besançon: collection LIP

PLESSEY:

- Glasgow Caledonian University Archives: collection STUC - Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC)
- West Lothian Council Archives
- The Glasgow Women's Library Archive

<sup>24</sup> On the relevance of oral history to investigate women's experience, Luisa Passerini stated that: "It has taken place a long process of integration between oral history and gender history: [...] they went together in broadening the territory of history and so renewing its objects and methods. These historical narrations [...] highlight several problems and aspects that other sources can not, such as the role of emotions at the intersection between public and private spheres". Passerini, *Il genere è ancora una categoria utile per la storia orale?*, in «Quaderno di storia contemporanea», n. 40 (2006), Falsopiano, Alessandria, pp. 12-14. [Translation is mine]

My objective is to realise 30 in-depth interviews: 10 for each case study considered, 24 with women and 6 with men. I have a relevant experience in oral history research and I have found crucially significant and scientifically fruitful – from a truly gender perspective – to compare female and male memories. The men selected for the project will be ex-work colleagues of the women interviewed or trade union representatives: integrating their testimonies within the historical narrative of female unemployment will be illuminating to understand gender balances and relations at the time.

By weaving together different sources, I aim to understand the complexity and the multi-layered nature of a ‘historical object’ - unemployment - with regard to its role in affecting and/or reconfiguring class and gender identities. On the one hand, assessing public sources offers insight into the discourses around unemployed women and thus of how female unemployment as a problem was debated by policy actors such as governments, trade unions, etc. On the other hand, oral history interviews offer a crucial contribution to establishing a historical narrative. As highlighted by Portelli: “The element that oral sources provide with greater intensity than any other source, is the subjectivity of the narrator. [...] We are informed not only about facts, but about what they meant to those who experienced them”.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the analysis of the inter- subjective dialogue established in the interviews provides invaluable insights into the personal and collective experience of unemployment and its place in one’s life narrative and sense of self. Combining oral history with a variety of written records makes for an original and challenging approach: one which will allow me to understand the interacting of subjectivity, community and wider social structures.

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<sup>25</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *Storie orali*, Donzelli, Roma 2007, p. 11. [Translation is mine]

## *Preliminary bibliography*

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## ***Work schedule***

This project is built on the basis of an already well-established knowledge of two of the selected three case studies. Indeed, for my PhD thesis (successfully defended at the European University Institute) I have developed comparative research between Italy and France investigating so-called “trade union feminism” of the 1970s: it is thanks to some findings emerged during my archival research in the past years that I have been able to design this new project related to female unemployment.

The work already done on women’s commitment within the trade unions both in Italy and in France will enable me to further expand my comparative analysis and to reach some accurate conclusions in twelve months from the study bursary.

Research will be divided up into the following work packages:

WP1. Archival research on trade union sources and Labour Ministry sources + Oral History research – 3 months in the UK. The case study of Plessey, in Scotland, is the really new one (Glasgow Caledonian University Archives: collection STUC, West Lothian Council Archives, The Glasgow Women's Library Archive): that’s why I plan to devote to it a month more than to the French and to the Italian case studies. However, I have already established fruitful contacts with the University of Glasgow and particularly with professors Maud Bracke and Jackie Clarke, who have provided me with precious links to the Scottish Trade Union Congress and to the Glasgow Women’s Library. All this will allow me to plan and conduct my research [milestone 1 (M1)] in an environment where I already have significant reference points.

WP2. Archival research on trade union sources and Labour Ministry sources + Oral History research – 2 months in France. I already have great familiarity with the archives in Paris (CFDT archives in Paris: collection “Soutien de la CFDT lors du conflit de l'usine horlogère LIP à Besançon”; Institut d’Histoire Sociale - Montreuil: collection generale CGT): this period of research will help me to go into the details of some funds that I have already examined Moreover, some time in Besançon will be needed to look into local archives (Archives Départementales du Doubs: 45J fonds Michel Jeanningros - Documentation sur le conflit à Lip Besançon ; Archives Municipales de Besançon: collection LIP) and realise the interviews. [Milestone 2 (M2)].

WP3. Archival research on trade union sources and Labour Ministry sources + Oral History research – 2 months in Italy. Turin is the ideal starting point of my project: I have already extensively worked on the sources here (Archivio Fondazione Istituto Gramsci: collections CGIL and FIOM; Fondazione Vera Nocentini: collections CISL and FIM) and I have personal contact with the woman unionist who was in charge of the FIAT unemployed’s committee in the 1980s (Archivio Ass. Zumaglinò at the Casa delle

Donne di Torino: collection Alessandra Mecozzi). That’s why I would return to explore this context just after having finalised my research for the two other case studies: indeed, it is illuminating to look at what we best know, with the new and different glance gained on the basis of the research conducted elsewhere. [Milestone 3 (M3)]

WP4. Systematisation of the sources and building of the interviews’ database – 3 months. I will dedicate this period to the careful analysis of all the sources collected, to their interpretation and to the building of a database collecting information on my oral history enquiry [milestone 4 (M4)]. Having participated in the constitution of the Social Movements’ Archive in my hometown, Genoa, I am very much committed into public history and that’s why I plan to realise a database that could help the public access and informed use of the oral sources produced in the framework of the present research. The database will include a file for each interview, providing: technical details on the interview (tool, length, date); details on the interviewee (age, education, job, union or political affiliation) always respecting anonymity; a summary of the interview’s content; a description of the context for the interview, including my positioning.

WP5. Writing of an article to be published on an international journal – 2 months. In the time span supported by the Edith Saurer grant, I aim at preparing a rich and compelling article [deliverable 1 (D1)] presenting the ground-breaking profile of my project: in terms of content, because of the focus on so-far marginalised issue of female unemployment; in terms of theoretical analysis, because of its exploration of the intersection between class and gender dynamics; in terms of methodology, because of the integration of oral and archival sources as well as the building of a database for the access to qualitative sources. I have already published in Italy, France and in the UK (see the list of publications in my CV): the article is meant to be published on an international journal, for example “Gender & History” that already hosted an article of mine.

### Gantt chart

<b>MONTH</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>WP1</b>			M1									
<b>WP2</b>					M2							
<b>WP3</b>							M3					
<b>WP4</b>										M4		
<b>WP5</b>												D1