

Women's Activism, Vocational Training, and Cultural Exchanges between East and West

The Case of Cold War Italy (1948–1962)

Eloisa Betti

Abstract

Women's vocational training was a key topic in women's debates in Cold War Italy. Between the 1950s and 1960s, women started to mobilize around the reform of the secondary school system and vocational training schemes in order to create new opportunities for women workers in line with the new phase of industrial development. Women unionists, along with women MPs and officials of women's associations, played a crucial role in pushing for a less gender-stereotypical system of vocational and technical high schools as well. Drawing on archival material, conference proceedings, parliamentary speeches, and women's and union magazines, this chapter analyzes the role played by Italian women in pushing for a more inclusive and less stereotypical form of vocational training in Cold War Italy. It takes into consideration the period between 1945 and 1968, which saw widespread debate and mobilization around the issue of vocational training and which has never been properly investigated. The chapter connects different scales (local, national, and international) of political engagement, highlighting the circulation of ideas on vocational training in Cold War Europe. The relevance of the Italian case in the Cold War context is demonstrated by the different international actors, from both the West and the East, who participated in Italian conferences as well as the organization of international congresses in Italian cities.

Keywords

Cold War – cultural exchange – equal pay – equal remuneration – International Labour Organization (ILO) – International Association for Social Progress (IASP) – Italy – technical institute – vocational training – women's activism – women's right agenda

Women's vocational training was a key topic in women's debates and mobilization in Cold War Italy and in the Global Cold War due to its relevance

in and beyond the blocs.¹ Women's associations and trade unions, together with philanthropic organizations, were active in promoting vocational training courses.² Nevertheless, in postwar Italy, such training was implemented in a very traditional manner as women were mainly trained as nurses, seamstresses, and maids, all highly feminized professions. Only between the 1950s and 1960s did women begin to mobilize in favor of reforms to the secondary school system as well as the vocational training scheme for adult women; they did so in order to create new opportunities for women workers in line with the industrial development that occurred during the so-called Italian economic miracle (1958–1963).³ Women unionists along with women MPs and officials of women's associations played a crucial role in pushing for a less stereotyped system of vocational and technical high schools, inspired by the circulation of imaginaries and models related to socialist women workers especially prominent in the left-wing milieu.

The debate on women's vocational training in Cold War Italy was closely related to the ongoing mobilization around equal pay and the equal value of women's work, which has a transnational character, as revealed by recent studies.⁴ The principles of equality between women and men as well as equal pay were written into the text of the Republican Constitution in 1948, which states that “a woman worker has the same rights and, for equal work, the same remuneration as a man” and recognized the right to vocational training.

In the first half of the 1950s, both equal pay and vocational training were discussed in congresses promoted by Italian women's associations such as the Union of Italian Women (Unione Donne Italiane, UDI); conferences devoted to women and women workers organized by political parties including the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI); and by trade unions like the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, CGIL). The three organizations shared a common agenda on women's rights that was advanced by activists and officials who were often involved in more than one of these organizations. Increasing the effectiveness

1 This contribution has been realized within the project “Genere, lavoro e cultura tecnica” [Gender, labour and technical culture] promoted by UDI of Bologna and supported by the Emilia-Romagna Region and Fondazione del Monte di Bologna e Ravenna. See <https://generelavoroculturatecnica.it/>. See, for instance, Laot 2022; Richards 2018.

2 See, for instance, Betti, Campigotto, and Grandi 2019; Cosmai 2017; Della Campa 2003.

3 Ginsborg 1990.

4 On equal pay in the Italian context, see Betti 2021 and 2018. On the equal pay struggle from an international perspective, see Neunsinger and Warriier 2019; Neunsinger 2018; Määttä 2008. On equal pay in Eastern Europe, see Zimmermann 2020.

of women's vocational training became a shared goal in left-wing organizations in the second half of the decade.

In 1959, the Committee of Female Associations for Equal Remuneration, established after the ratification of the ILO Convention no. 100, organized a conference wholly devoted to women's vocational training.⁵ Several national and international speakers took the floor, including representatives of Italian women trade unionists and workers and officials of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).⁶ A few years earlier, in 1956, Italy had hosted the Congress of the International Association for Social Progress (IASP), which approved—under the leadership of Marguerite Thibert and Margarita Schwarz-Gagg—a resolution on women's work that included vocational training and equal pay as key topics.⁷

Drawing on a number of archives, especially those of women's associations (e.g., UDI), conference proceedings on women's vocational training, parliamentary speeches, women's and union magazines (e.g., *Noi donne* [*We Women*]), this chapter analyzes the role played by Italian women, especially communists and socialists, in pushing for a more inclusive and less stereotypically gendered model of vocational training in Cold War Italy. In doing so, it will highlight how the Italian debate was shaped by the state-socialist model of women workers and women's vocational training from Eastern Europe and Soviet Union as portrayed in women's magazines. It focuses on the period between 1948 and 1962, during which there was significant debate and mobilization on women's vocational training but which has never been systematically studied. In March 1948, the National Congress for Female Vocational Education, promoted by the General Office for Technical Training of the Education Ministry,⁸ marked the resumption of a debate that had its roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁹ After the inauguration of the new middle school model in 1962,¹⁰ women's access to technical and technical-industrial institutes in particular was broadened within the scope of the more general development of mass schooling which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹

The chapter necessarily engages with different levels of analysis (local, national, and international), illuminating the circulation of ideas on women's

5 Società Umanitaria di Milano 1959.

6 On the history of WIDF, see De Haan 2012.

7 "Progetto di risoluzione sul lavoro delle donne," 123–124.

8 Ministry of Education 1948.

9 Soldani 1991.

10 Gaudio 2019.

11 Galfré 2017.

vocational training in Cold War Europe before 1965, when both the ILO and UNESCO recognized it as a priority.¹² In fact, different international actors from both the West and East participated in Italian conferences, and international congresses were held in Italian cities, providing the necessary foundation for this circulation. The Italian case also shows the role played by both national and international women's associations (UDI and WIDF) as well as by international organizations like the ILO and IASP in the vocational training debate.

The first section addresses vocational training and women's work in the Cold War imaginary, underscoring the distance between opposing models in postwar Italy. On the one hand, the traditional model of the female worker and gendered vocational training inherited from the Fascist regime was still in place; on the other hand, the model of Soviet women workers was being advanced by Italian communist women and left-wing women's magazines. The second section analyzes the debate on equal pay and vocational training in the 1950s, taking into account the conferences and congresses promoted by women's association and trade unions, with particular focus on the role played by international organizations such as WIDF. The third section reconstructs women's advocacy for more inclusive vocational training in the years known as economic miracle (1958–1963), focusing on major Italian conferences concerning women's work and training. The role of international organizations and trade unions such as the ILO, UNESCO, IASP, WFTU is explicitly explored in order to understand the connection between the local, national, and international dimensions of the debate on women's vocational training in Cold War Europe and beyond.

1 Vocational Training, Women's Work, and the Cold War Imaginary in Post-World War Two Italy

In the aftermath of World War Two, a nationwide debate was initiated on vocational training for women in Italy, as testified by the *Convegno nazionale per l'istruzione professionale femminile* (National Congress for Female Vocational Training), which was held in Florence in March 1948 and promoted by the General Secretariat for Technical Education of the Ministry of Public Education.¹³ At that congress, the results of the questionnaires sent to the schools and other institutions and actors involved in women's vocational

¹² Laot 2022.

¹³ Ministry of Education 1948.

training were discussed, along with the measures proposed by the ministry itself. In the years following the war, the structure of vocational training introduced by the Fascist regime was still in force;¹⁴ it established two-year or three-year vocational training schools for women. In 1950, the curricula of these programs were still those ratified in 1936,¹⁵ which proposed a traditional conception of a woman's role in the family, society, and the world of work that was in line with Fascist ideology.¹⁶

Home economics was still one of the cornerstones of the curricula of vocational schools for women. The theoretical lessons on the home and family wardrobe were combined with exercises related to proper cleaning, the management of crockery and cookware, laundry and ironing, managing and purchasing groceries, and, lastly, food preparation. The declared aim of these lessons and exercises was to "prepare the pupil to run the domestic company alone, following rational norms of economics and hygiene."¹⁷ The syllabus was completed through activities deemed to be distinctively feminine tasks defined as "women's work": laundry, sewing, needlework, lacework, and lacemaking. The practical workshops completed at these schools were supposed to provide girls with the appropriate training to independently carry out at least two of the above tasks.

Girls' vocational teacher training schools and other related vocational schools for women were revamped only in the second half of the 1950s. Law no. 782, passed in 1956, transformed them into five-year technical institutes for women whose stated objective—"to be prepared for the exercise of the technical activities best suited to women"¹⁸—revealed a traditional conceptualization of women's roles, with home economics and female work (e.g., needlework) still the pillars of such schools. The diploma in "vocational qualification in women's technical activities" reiterated the same alleged difference between male and female technical applications.¹⁹ The program of the girls' technical institutes bore a strong resemblance to girls' vocational institutes launched during the Fascist regime; one of the few innovations was represented by the

14 Bonafede and Causarano 2019, 219–254; Pironi 2019, 287–318.

15 *Orari e programmi della scuola professionale femminile* 1950.

16 De Grazia 1993.

17 *Orari e programmi della scuola professionale femminile* 1950.

18 Law passed on 8 July 1956, no. 782, "Trasformazione delle scuole di magistero professionale per la donna e delle annesse scuole professionali femminili in istituti tecnici femminili" [Transformation of professional schools for women and attached female vocational schools in female technical schools], *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, no. 192 dated 2 August 1956.

19 See De Maria 2021.

introduction of subjects like “social legislation and social services.”²⁰ In the preface to the short volume drafted by the Ministry of Public Education on the technical institute for girls, the Minister for Education Giuseppe Medici nicely summed up the concept of female education prevalent among the leadership during postwar economic boom:

However, it is not always easy to reconcile the new social function of the woman with the traditional tasks that placed her and still put her at the heart of family and domestic life. Finding the right balance between the two forms of activity is a very difficult task because it is a question of running a house and educating one’s children—that is, holding together a family—and at the same time, if necessary, ultimately practicing a trade or a profession. The natural way to achieve this dual purpose is to develop as far as possible specifically female aptitudes on both the empirical level, through imitation, and on a technical level. This will facilitate both a more rational organization of family life and the application of the techniques acquired beyond the domestic sphere, in productive companies.²¹

This was not the only model of womanhood, women workers, and female vocational training circulating in postwar Italy. Foreign cultural models and practices, exchanges and networks with the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern European countries were, in fact, crucial for advancing a different, modern idea of women in Italy, one that was based on emancipation through paid work and equal rights.²² Women were observers and promoters of such a model, which they reproduced both publicly and privately. At the same time, they espoused the imaginary of equality and the models of emancipation propagated by real socialism²³ that was reasserted in Italy by the Communist Party, the Union of Italian Women, and, to some extent, by the Italian General Confederation of Labour. The paradigm of the working mother, the main reference point for left-wing women influenced by the ideal of the communist/Soviet woman, was fortified and legitimized in Italy.²⁴

20 Ministry of Education 1960.

21 The quotation has been translated for the purpose of this article from the original Italian appearing in Medici 1960, 5–6.

22 On networks and exchanges during the Cold War, see Babiracki and Zimmer 2014; Ilic 2011, 157–174; Autio, Humphreys, and Miklóssy 2010.

23 Navailh 1996.

24 See Betti 2020.

A number of Italian left-wing women had first-hand knowledge about women's lives on the other side of the Iron Curtain thanks to official trips to the Soviet Union and other communist countries in Eastern Europe. A continuous exchange of delegations was promoted by the Association Italy-USSR, and some women-only delegations were hosted by, for instance, the Soviet Women's Committee. This was the experience of UDI women in the mid-1950s. In 1954, more than twenty UDI women from all over Italy made a trip to the Soviet Union, visiting several cities including Moscow, St. Petersburg (formerly Petrograd, Leningrad), Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad), and Minsk, among others. During their trip, the Italian delegation had a chance to visit schools, nurseries, universities, as well as a car factory in Moscow, the summer camp of communist children's organization Pioneer, and a farm with agricultural workers in Georgia. From the perspective of the Soviet Union, the trip had a dual purpose: to show off Soviet modernity, and showcase the main Russian tourist attractions such as the Kremlin.²⁵

"Women are everywhere," according to the memoirs published by members of the Italian delegation, a sentiment repeated in their correspondence and photographs dated 1954 (to be catalogued) in the UDI Archive of Bologna, which was probably rather impressive for a Italian woman in the 1950s. Soviet women were blue-collar workers in automobile factories, agricultural workers, and street cleaners, but they also held a leading position in highly sensitive sectors, such as the underground system in Moscow. The modernity of transportation, together with the health system, was highly regarded by Italian women, who considered these sectors to be highly advanced. The 1954 trip was neither the last nor probably the first of such trips, but it gave Italian women from UDI a taste of how Soviet women lived. Equality was surely one of the impressions that emerged from the writing of these women. Private accounts of the trip were much less rhetorical than the letter sent by UDI women to the Soviet Women's Committee, but Italian women were genuinely impressed by their encounter with the Eastern bloc.²⁶

UDI was inspired by the Soviet emancipation model, especially in the so-called "Red Regions" such as Emilia-Romagna, which was locally governed by the Communist Party.²⁷ Nevertheless, in a Catholic country like Italy, the Soviet model had to be restyled, preserving the crucial role of the family and

25 "Note di viaggio dall'Unione Sovietica," [Travel notes from the Soviet Union] (to be catalogued), UDI Archive of Bologna.

26 Correspondence and photographs dated back to 1954 (to be catalogued), UDI Archive of Bologna.

27 On Soviet culture in the Emilia-Romagna Region, see also Fincardi 2007.

incorporating the reassuring model of the working mother as the ideal woman so as not to undermine the traditional basis of Italian culture and morality.²⁸ The communist press and the left-wing women's press, in publications such as *Noi Donne*, were the dedicated channel for promoting such models, publishing articles with pictures (both photographs and drawings) describing the Soviet Union as the "promised land" for workers and their families.²⁹

In 1950, *Noi Donne* hosted the feature "Conversations on the Soviet Union," penned by Rita Montagnana. The communist leader and vice president of the WIDF answered readers' questions about the working and living conditions in the USSR, from trends in prices,³⁰ to children's education, and social services. One article, for example, was dedicated to the condition of Soviet maids, renamed "house workers," testifying to the rights attributed to them as full-fledged workers: from the working hours set at eight hours per day, to weekly rest-days and holidays.³¹ It was emphasized that this type of work would soon be superseded by the use of electrical appliances commonly owned. Besides Rita Montagnana, other important communist leaders of UDI and the WIDF wrote reports on their journeys to the Soviet Union, turning their attention to the roles played by women in Soviet society. Maria Maddalena Rossi underlined that women made up 50 percent of the workforce of the Soviet railways, mentioning that the general director of the Moscow underground was a woman, Zinaida Trotskaia.³² The Italian leader shed light on other ordinary women workers, but above all were women who had achieved high-level positions; among these was the vice president of the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Women Zinaida Gagarina, who was not only a politician but also a scientist and the vice rector of the University of Moscow.

Other reports published in the journal addressed the female condition in both the Soviet Union and in other countries in Eastern Europe. Some testimonies published not only by women but also by men³³ in the magazine *Noi Donne* document that women constituted the majority of the labour force in some factories and were present all the way up the hierarchy to executive roles. It was stressed that in the USSR, equality was so deeply rooted that there were no doubts as to the "executive and managerial capacities of women." The profile of the factory manager emerged in the reports and in a specifically

28 See, for instance, Guerra 2000.

29 "Da un lato impetuoso sviluppo dall'altro continuo regresso" 1952.

30 Montagnana 1950a.

31 Montagnana 1950b.

32 Rossi 1950.

33 Pieraccini 1950.

dedicated column: a woman who started as an ordinary manual worker and had risen through the ranks to become a food engineer thanks to her studies and after having filled several management roles in other factories, had become the director of the Mikonian candy factory. The column stressed that this manager's path was not unique but rather served as an example for other workers who studied to become industrial technicians and engineers after they finished their workday. The theme of education was discussed in terms of gender stereotypes, and it was clear that education was women's springboard to management positions. The social and recreational structures adjacent to the factory, in particular nurseries, were not overlooked. In an effort to reassure Italian readers—both men and women—that “equal rights did not mean masculinization or fighting against the family,” precisely the family and the role of “bride and mother” was explicitly identified as the foundation the Soviet system. Other “atypical” workers recalled in the reports were women station-masters, tram drivers, policewomen, and company directors.

Here we move to the matriarchy, one of our delegates said jokingly after coming across numerous women factory managers, executives, employees, and scientists in the Soviet Union. In actual fact, in no other country had gender equality become such a concrete and living reality as in the Soviet Union.³⁴

2 The Debate on Equal Pay and Vocational Training at Conferences in the 1950s

Communist and socialist women belonging to UDI used these international models to assert local claims and to call for the advancement of rights for women in the working and social sphere despite their awareness that these very same models were idealized, as recent publications show.³⁵ In communist-led Bologna, for instance, the Declaration of Bolognese Women's Rights clearly addressed the issue of women's education and vocational training, promoting the creation of “a women's vocational skills center for unemployed young women and, across the Province, new vocational courses of various kinds (for sewing, dressmaking, ironing; for shops assistants, farmworkers, etc.).”³⁶ The issue of paid work was at the heart of both the Italian and international

34 Pieraccini 1950.

35 See, for instance, Ilic 2011.

36 Consiglio delle donne bolognesi 1953.

“Declaration of Women’s Rights”: the latter clearly states that education and vocational training were to be considered fundamental women’s rights. The Italian document was ratified at the National Congress of Italian Women organized by UDI³⁷ in 1953 on the basis of the results of local congresses taking place across Italy, which were well attended by women workers.

The connection between the local, national, and international levels was relevant not only in the drafting of the document(s) but also in its worldwide promotion. Communist MP and high-ranking trade unionist Teresa Noce³⁸ publicly supported the international document, which the WIDF was trying to disseminate. UDI also played a key role in defining a national and, to some extent, global agenda for women’s rights thanks to its affiliation to the Women’s International Democratic Federation.³⁹ UDI was a key member of the federation itself, and several UDI women served as officials in its ranks, such as the communist MPs Rita Montagnana and Maria Maddalena Rossi; the former was the president of UDI, and the latter became vice president of the WIDF in the 1950s.⁴⁰ In 1951, Rina Picolato, UDI’s representative at the WIDF, gave the executive committee of the WIDF in Bucharest⁴¹ a well-documented account of the conditions of Italian women workers and the numerous battles promoted together with women’s associations and trade unions, raising also the issue of vocational training in relation to equal pay. In 1953, Teresa Noce published an article on her participation in the 3rd Congress of the World Federation of Trade Unions, mentioning explicitly that she raised the issue of equal pay and providing information about the mobilization on the issue that she was leading in Italy.⁴² Equal pay and vocational training were discussed jointly at two other two events in the mid-1950s.

The National Conference of Women’s Workers held in Florence in January 1954 was another important venue for mobilization around the issue of women’s vocational training. The 1954 conference put the battle for wage equality and the fight against exploitation at the center of CGIL’s strategy for women workers. Across the whole of Italy, 20,000 preparatory assemblies for the National Conference of the Women Workers were held; of these gatherings, 4,000 were organized for labourers, 6,000 for sharecroppers, and over 10,000

37 “La voce di tutte” 1953.

38 On Teresa Noce, see Betti and Migliucci 2023.

39 De Haan 2012.

40 On Carmen Zanti, see Ledda 2018, 58–66; Nava and Ruggerini 1987.

41 XIII session of Executive Committee of the WIDF (Bucharest, July 18–20, 1952), box. 11, f. 50, Thematic Section “Donne nel mondo” [Women in the world], UDI National Archive.

42 Noce 1953.

for those belonging to other categories of workers. Over 1.5 million altogether participated in these assemblies.⁴³ In Bologna, in preparation for the national conference, the *Costituente della Donna Lavoratrice Bolognese* was held on 26 April 1953 and was chaired by Teresa Noce, among others. The improvement of women's working and living conditions and women's equality constituted the core themes, and there was a particular emphasis on the relationship between working conditions and social rights. At the end of the work period, the "*Carta Costituente della donna lavoratrice bolognese*" (Constituent Charter of the Working Woman of Bologna) was passed; it included these demands: the right to work, an increased standard of living, the need to fight against exploitation, wage equality, vocational training courses for young women, respect for the needs of women workers in the workplace; adequate old-age pensions; insurance against injuries and illnesses equal to that of men, access to all careers and professions, and proper protections for mothers and infant children.⁴⁴

One year later, the Second Communist Women's Conference (Rome, 1955) affirmed the existence of a common women's rights agenda, while the importance of the role of UDI, CGIL, and the cooperative movement was declared a pillar of the project to emancipate women.⁴⁵ Although women workers were the main focus of the PCI's strategy, housewives were also mentioned explicitly, as in the second half of the 1950s, when the campaign "Pensions for Housewives" was launched. Equal pay was a key topic at the conference and was addressed by several delegates including Marisa Rodano, Ines Pisoni Cerlesi, and General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party Palmiro Togliatti himself. Pisoni Cerlesi, a key figure in the mobilization for equal pay along with Teresa Noce and Marisa Rodano, explicitly mentioned the 1956 conference of the World Federation of Trade Unions, which was devoted to women workers and had placed the issue of equal pay at the top of its agenda.⁴⁶ The equal-pay principle was clearly stated in the final resolution of the conference together with the immediate goal of the reduction of the pay gap between men and women workers. The Communist Women's Conference held in Rome in October 1955 was preceded by an intense discussion and wide-ranging debate that led to some interesting developments among the women from Emilia-Romagna and Bologna in particular, who continued to expand on them within the scope of numerous branch conferences (*sezione*) and hundreds of local conferences (*cellula*). Many reports testified to the poor labour conditions of

43 CGIL 1954.

44 "Le rivendicazioni di tutte le lavoratrici" 1953; Noce 1953.

45 PCI 1956.

46 Pisoni Cerlesi in PCI 1956, 172–180.

women workers in the provinces. On the one hand, the elevated rates of female unemployment and the dismissal of thousands of workers following the demobilization of Italian factories in the postwar years was highlighted; on the other hand, the conditions in which the Bolognese women were forced to work were described, including aspects of precarity, disparate levels of exploitation, and discrimination that were widely reported in the concluding conference and effectively summarized in an article published in *La lotta (The Fight)*.⁴⁷

At the 1956 UDI Congress, the “right to work” was voiced by Italian women through the so-called “referendum on women’s rights”; this referendum was launched by the association in preparation for the congress in order to better understand women’s working and living conditions.⁴⁸ Maria Maddalena Rossi’s speech clearly referenced the 1944 ILO Declaration of Philadelphia,⁴⁹ as evidenced by the relevance UDI attributed to the actions of international institutions, namely the International Labour Organization.⁵⁰ Demands related to women’s work clearly emerged such as equal pay and the equal value of women farmworkers, access to all professions and jobs (including the judiciary, from which Italian women were still excluded in the late 1950s), the safeguarding of maternity and women’s health, the fight against the dismissal of married women, unemployment and health insurance for every woman, and last but not least, pension rights for housewives. In the speech given by representatives of the Young Women’s Commission of UDI, vocational training for girls and young women was clearly identified as a matter of concern. Not only was existing vocational training considered outdated; it was also regarded as discriminatory toward women because it was based on sex. Also addressed was the lack of vocational training schools in 785 of Italian municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants. These concerns were reinforced with data: “Between 1952 and 1953, 4,171 of these courses were delivered, with the participation of 185,000 pupils: of these, 60,000 were girls, most of whom attended commercial or handicraft courses; women’s participation in agro-industrial courses was close to zero.”⁵¹ In the concluding speech delivered by Rosetta Longo, the

47 “La 2^o Conferenza delle donne comuniste apre i suoi lavori sabato alla Farnese” 1955.

48 “Un grande referendum sui diritti della donna” 1956.

49 The 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia stated that “labour is not a commodity” and “freedom of association and of expression are essential to sustained progress.” In addition, it extended the scope of the the ILO’s work by affirming the centrality of human rights for all people: “all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity.” Maul 2019.

50 UDI 1956.

51 UDI 1956, 55.

general secretary of UDI, equal pay was clearly reinstated as one of the main priorities, along with structural reform of the school system to address the issue of women's vocational training. Several delegates of the women's association and branches from Eastern Europe were hosted (from Poland, Albania, Yugoslavia, the USSR, Czechoslovakia), demonstrating the exchanges between Italian women and their counterparts from state-socialist countries. President of the WIDF Eugénie Cotton took the floor to emphasize once more the close relationship between UDI and the WIDF, recalling the 1953 Declaration of Women's Rights.

3 Toward More Inclusive Vocational Training: Italian Women's Activism during the Economic Miracle

In the mid-1950s, the socio-economic and politico-cultural situation in Italy changed significantly. The industrial growth during the years of the so-called economic miracle (1958–1963) generated new employment opportunities for women, in particular younger women who entered the factories and offices of the industrial cities of the north and elsewhere *en masse*.⁵² Together with the new visibility of women's work captured, for example, by the television documentary *La donna che lavora* (*The Working Woman*),⁵³ a renewed female leadership emerged in the mid-1950s and coalesced around the important battle for wage equality.⁵⁴ In addition to the UDI Congress, two significant events took place in 1956: the ratification of the ILO Convention no. 100 “Equal Remuneration for Male and Female Workers for Work of Equal Value” and the Congress of the International Association for Social Progress. The latter was held in Milan in March 1956; it was hosted by the Società Umanitaria (Humanitarian Society) of Milan and was partly dedicated to women's employment.⁵⁵

The resolution of the Commission for Women's Labour, chaired by two experts on working women's problems—Margherite Thibert and Margarita Schwarz-Gagg⁵⁶—effectively summarized some of the key elements of the national and international debate on technical and vocational training. The

52 Betti 2020; Betti 2010.

53 The documentary consisting of eight episodes was released in 1959 thanks to the contributions of journalist Ugo Zatterin and director Giovanni Salvi.

54 Betti 2018, 276–299.

55 “Progetto di risoluzione sul lavoro delle donne” 1957, 123–124.

56 On Margherite Thibert, see Thébaud 2017; on Margarita Schwarz-Gagg, see Mantilleri and Hervé 2005.

links between vocational training, wage equality, and the fair evaluation of women's work emerged in the discussion together with the need to professionalize women's work and give women equal access to managerial positions in order to adapt the company to the demands of the women workers and establish social services promoted by the public authorities. The national sections of the International Association for Social Progress were also called upon to conduct studies and exchange results by making them available to the International Labour Organization.

It was the Società Umanitaria of Milan, the headquarters of the Italian section of the IASP, and its president Riccardo Bauer that played a strategic role in creating research and discussion opportunities on the issues of wage equality and women's vocational training/education during the boom years. A few months after the Milan congress of the IASP, the ratification process of ILO Equal Remuneration Convention no. 100 was completed. Starting on 8 June 1956, Italy was on the list of countries that had ratified international norms concerning "equal remuneration for work of equal value." Recommendation no. 90, combined with Convention no. 100, explicitly referred to the importance of vocational training for the achievement of equal pay, highlighting the need for the equal training of workers of both sexes and adopting appropriate measures to facilitate women's vocational training.

In October 1957, a committee of eleven women's associations ranging from mass organizations that were part of the left-wing milieu like UDI, to associations like the Unione Femminile Nazionale (National Women's Union) of Milan, to religious and professional groups,⁵⁷ organized the congress "Retribuzione eguale per un lavoro di valore uguale" (Equal Remuneration for Work of Equal Value). The congress was hosted and supported by the Società Umanitaria of Milan and addressed the political, economic, and legal implications of the ratification of ILO Convention no. 100 in Italy.⁵⁸ On this occasion, Leone Diena, the director of the Center for Social Studies of the Società Umanitaria, gave a lecture that dealt with women's vocational training⁵⁹ in relation to the goal of wage equality. Diena highlighted the complexity of the issue and the

57 The Conference was promoted by: Alleanza Femminile Italiana, Associazione Nazionale Donne Elettrici, Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane, Consociazione Nazionale Infermiere Professionali ed Assistenti Sanitarie, Federazione Italiana di Arti, Professioni e Affari (FIDAPA), Federazione Italiana Donne Giuriste, Federazione Italiana Laureate e Docenti Istituti Superiori (FILDIS), Unione Cristiana delle Giovani d'Italia (YWCA), Unione Donne Italiane (UDI), Unione Giuriste Italiane, Unione Femminile Nazionale di Milano.

58 On the Società Umanitaria di Milano, see Della Campa 2003; Colombo 2002.

59 Diena 1958, 177–204.

fragmented nature of the data available, stressing the challenges women faced when attempting to attain up-to-date professional qualifications, an issue closely related to the (in)adequacy of existing vocational schools.

The cooperation between women's associations that had begun with the ratification of Convention no. 100 did not conclude at the congress in 1957. As president of UDI—the association that played a pivotal role both in the organization of the congress mentioned above and in the battle for wage equality between the 1940s and 1950s⁶⁰—Marisa Rodano officially proposed transforming the organizing committee of the congress into a permanent structure. In 1959, the Committee of Female Associations for Equal Remuneration under the patronage of the Società Umanitaria of Milan once again promoted a national congress specifically dedicated to the theme of women's vocational training.⁶¹ The starting point was the assertion that the “search for better and greater professional qualifications would allow for a broader and more fruitful inclusion of women into productive activity and a just acknowledgment of women's work.”⁶² In the opening speech, Riccardo Bauer argued that women's vocational training was directly connected to the more general role of women in the labour and social sphere and influenced by the numerous, persistent, and widespread stereotypes and prejudices that would affect future women workers. Bauer critiqued the recent reform measures concerning vocational schools for women, which reiterated the concept of “typically female activities” in a context of profound technological transformation and industrial growth.

Statistician Nora Federici⁶³ provided important data for the discussion, highlighting how, by the late 1950s, “the low average level of education and the near-absolute exceptionality of adequate technical-vocational preparation undoubtedly constitute major obstacles to the broader and, above all, the more extensive participation of women in the economic life of the country.” The actions to be undertaken, in her opinion, needed to include the reform of schools for both workers and the unemployed; such reforms must avoid confining women to traditional fields of female craftwork and address the needs of new generations of women workers/students. Economist Luciano Barca dealt with the more general relationship between women's employment, vocational training and professional development, highlighting the very diverse socio-economic conditions of Italian regions grouped in two main areas, namely the under-developed southern regions and the industrial-driven northern

60 UDI 1957.

61 Società Umanitaria di Milano 1959.

62 Dal Pozzo 1959.

63 Federici in Società Umanitaria di Milano 1959, 23–77.

regions.⁶⁴ According to Barca, increasing the qualifications of the female workforce could help reduce regional imbalances.⁶⁵

Several teachers from vocational schools and professors from universities, along with trade unionists, economists, pedagogues, officials of women's associations, and government officials participated in the three-day conference. Among the topics discussed were the level of primary education and women's education; the need to respect compulsory schooling for everyone and in particular women; women's employment prospects; the school structure and nature of vocational training; proposals for vocational institutes and re-training courses; and wider reforms to technical and vocational education.⁶⁶ There were numerous discussions regarding women's vocational training in specific sectors: industry, agriculture, the tertiary sector. The theme of technological progress and the improvement of female qualifications resurfaced in many speeches and was dealt with directly by Ines Pisoni Cerlesi, who emphasized the need to improve women's vocational training by adapting it to the new boom economy and the professions that were emerging as a result.⁶⁷ As indicated by Pisoni Cerlesi's speech, unionists were crucial for an equal determination of wages and, ultimately, for the achievement of equal pay.

A detailed analysis of women's apprenticeships was made. In 1958, over 170,000 young women had been involved in this type of training and work, representing about 30 percent of the total apprentices. The speech by MP Giuseppina Palumbo, National Secretary of the Italian Federation of Garment Workers,⁶⁸ referenced more negatives than positives in the condition of apprentices during the boom years. The violation of the norms established by the law on apprenticeships no. 25 passed in 1955⁶⁹ was also a consequence of the lack of training content of the complementary teaching courses delivered to apprentices. Technical-practical traineeships called for a decisive improvement which, according to the unionist, should occur through a concerted effort on the part of unions. Palumbo also referenced the relationship between qualifications, training, and equal pay, arguing that in the case of apprentices, their relative youth often generated inequality in terms of an even greater pay differential.

64 Lutz 1958; Graziani 1962; Cafagna 1989.

65 Barca in *Società Umanitaria di Milano* 1959, 75–110.

66 Dal Pozzo 1959.

67 Pisoni Cerlesi in *Società Umanitaria di Milano* 1959, 394–405.

68 Palumbo in *Società Umanitaria di Milano* 1959, 387–393.

69 Zago 2016, 107–123.

At the congress, UDI presented the results of a large-scale study of women workers (employed in industry, agriculture, the public sector, commerce), unemployed women, and women searching for their first job. The talk given by Baldina Berti Di Vittorio of the National Secretariat of UDI⁷⁰ shed light on the methodology used: 240,000 copies of a questionnaire was distributed to girls aged between 14 and 21 and to adult and elderly women, both single and married. Overall, around 56,000 questionnaires were collected, representing twenty-four different Italian provinces. Of the submitted questionnaires, 6,450 were completed by adolescents 14 to 18 years of age, and 12,150 by girls between 18 to 21 years old; of the total 18,600 girls who submitted questionnaires, 2,130 were already married by the age of twenty-one (11 percent of the total). The schooling rates of girls were low according to the UDI survey: 67.1 percent of the girls had completed primary school, just 3.69 percent had finished middle school, and 12.9 percent had completed high school; 14 percent had not even finished primary school. Overall, 77.8 percent of the women examined in the study held no professional qualifications, while the few (12.8 percent) who had completed some vocational training reported that those courses were in dress-making, knitting, and handicrafts.⁷¹

At the center of the questionnaire was the topic of education and women's vocational training, but the questions also mapped out the familial status, employment situation, level of education, and, finally, the respondent's aspirations, desires, and opinions about the job. Berti Di Vittorio emphasized the need to reassert some of the key principles in the hoped-for reform of women's vocational training and education: the abolition of limits on women's access to training activities; the expansion of new training/work opportunities; the creation of a coordinating commission that would include representatives from unions and women's associations; and the consolidation and reform of the territorial consortia for technical and vocational education.

The 1959 conference clearly showed how the Italian discussion on women's vocational training fit into the broader global context. In his speech, engineer Marco Pantaleo referred to key national and international achievements of the 1950s, recalling the Conference on Public Education organized by the International Bureau of Education and UNESCO and held in Geneva in 1952. This conference focused in particular on recommendation no. 34, "Access of Women to Education,"⁷² which represented a document of special significance because it not only asserted the general principle that "general education for

70 Berti Di Vittorio in *Società Umanitaria di Milano* 1959, 139–159.

71 Berti Di Vittorio 1959, 141–144.

72 Azara 2021.

girls should be equal in value and status to that for boys” but also provided a series of recommendations to the education ministers of participating countries intended to facilitate women and girls’ access to education and vocational training. Thus, the relationship between the national and international levels of discussion at the 1959 conference also emerged in connection with UNESCO to the extent that resolution no. 34 was included in the conference proceedings.

The international situation was also inserted into the communications of the Women’s International Democratic Federation, which underlined how the “profound transformations that occur in society and are reflected in the work of women requiring their upskilling, pose the urgent problem of vocational training of girls and women.”⁷³ The 1959 Italian conference was regarded as a model by WIDF delegates as it showed the possibility of collaboration between different organizations and very different actors all united around the goal of ensuring that “laws and institutions allow women to exercise their right to education and vocational training.” The communiqué of the WIDF representative expressed the relations between their organization and specific international organizations—first and foremost the ILO—active in these matters and committed to improving women’s vocational training as well as equal pay claims. In this regard, the 1956 “Recommendations Concerning Vocational Training in Agriculture” was mentioned with respect to the topic of vocational training for women in agriculture.

The WIDF communiqué clearly expressed how the ILO Recommendation had in actual fact embraced the proposals on women’s vocational training formulated at the WFTU World Conference on Women Workers held in Budapest in 1956. The WIDF also stated that it had underwritten the UNESCO report approved at the 12th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1958. Lastly, the communiqué emphasized the role of education and vocational training within the broader emancipatory vision of the WIDF: “The WIDF has always considered the education and vocational training of women, without discrimination, to be one of the elements of women’s emancipation. In the Charter of Women’s Rights, passed by the Congress of Copenhagen in 1953, the WIDF placed vocational training among the fundamental rights of women.”⁷⁴

The 1962 conference marked an important step in the discussion of and mobilization around women’s vocational training and women’s work in general. From the institutional perspective, the theme of vocational training was reiterated by the “National Commission for Working Women.” Established on

73 “Comunicazione della Federazione Democratica Internazionale delle donne” 1959, 367–373.

74 “Comunicazione della Federazione Democratica Internazionale delle donne” 1959, 369.

1 February 1962 by the Ministry of Employment and National Insurance,⁷⁵ and chaired by Riccardo Bauer (president of the Società Umanitaria of Milan), by statute the commission was supposed to deal with the orientation and vocational training of women; the placement and emigration of women workers; the regulation and protection of women's employment; and insurance and social care for particular groups of workers. It could also call for special inquiries and investigations.⁷⁶ The members of the commission and the respective institutions it was related to⁷⁷ sent reports to the commission that included remarks on the most critical aspects of women's employment. Both the Italian Confederation of Trade Unions (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori, CISL) and CISL stressed the importance of women's professional training with a view to achieve wage parity, employment stability and job guarantees.⁷⁸

That same year, a single middle school was set up (law no. 1859 dated 31 December 1962) which would give graduates access to all secondary schools. This reform had an impact on vocational training schools and technical-industrial schools and ended up triggering a broader reorganization of vocational schools. This did not result in an instant change because until the end of the 1960s, the traditional role of the woman was emphasized in the regulations relating to training in technical applications, which were subdivided into male technical applications and female technical applications.⁷⁹ For women, dressmaking, embroidery, knitting, and home economics were core subjects. However, women's access to technical institutes, and to the technical-industrial

75 *La Commissione Nazionale per le donne lavoratrici presso il Ministero per il lavoro e la Previdenza Sociale, ha iniziato i suoi lavori*, [The National Commission for women workers at the Ministry for Labour and Social Security has begun its works] "Posta della Settimana" [Weekly post], 10–11 (1962), 5–9; box 7, f. 4, Thematic Section "Diritto al Lavoro" [The right to work], UDI National Archive.

76 Commissione nazionale per le donne lavoratrici, *Appunto per l'onorevole Ministro* [The National Commission for women workers, *Note to the Honorable Minister*] [1962], box 7, f. 4, Thematic Section "Diritto al Lavoro" [The right to work], UDI National Archive.

77 The president of the Commission was Riccardo Bauer, and the vice president was Maria Eletta Martini. The secretariat of the commission was set up in the Ministry for Labour and Social Security and was directed by Elena Gatti Caporaso. Cfr: Ministerial decree, *Nomina del presidente e dei componenti la Commissione nazionale per le donne lavoratrici* [Appointment of the president and the members of the national Commission for women workers], passed on 23 August 1962, published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* [Official gazette] no. 228 on 10 September 1962.

78 *Memorie presentate dai componenti la Commissione nazionale per le donne lavoratrici—Indicazioni in ordine ad un primo programma di lavoro della Commissione* [Memorandum presented by the members of the National Commission for women workers. Indications concerning an initial working programme of the Commission] [CISL], box 7, f. 4, Thematic Section "Diritto al Lavoro," [The right to work], UDI National Archive.

79 De Maria 2021.

institutes in particular, increased within the more general scope of the development of mass education that occurred in the 1960s.

It was precisely in a red region like Emilia-Romagna—characterized by forms of local communism and a process of industrialization in which women were present in significant numbers—where the issue of vocational training for women took on an important role in the public debate and in the actions of both women's associations and the local authorities. Vocational training had been addressed at the regional conference of the Emilian women workers promoted by the Emilia-Romagna UDI branches in 1962. The conference attendees welcomed the opening of the first courses for women chemists and electronics experts initiated by the Aldini-Valeriani technical institute in Bologna and held at the technical-vocational institute Elisabetta Sirani. At the same conference, the fact that most of the existing professional courses were still overly oriented toward “typically female” competencies was heavily criticized, and speakers declared their hope that reforms were in the offing.⁸⁰ A petition containing the main demands of the Emilian women workers was circulated at the conference.⁸¹ Among these was the demand for equal pay for equal work and the reorganization of vocational education. After thousands of women in the region signed the petition, it was sent to the Ministry of Labour and the National Commission for Women Workers: no direct reply appears in the archives, however. In Emilia-Romagna, and specifically in Modena, the first electronics technician earned her diploma in 1963.⁸²

80 UDI Regione Emiliana, *Parità, libertà, dignità sul luogo di lavoro, formazione professionale, servizi sociali, assistenza all'infanzia* [Equality, liberty, dignity in the workplace, vocational training, social services, childcare services] (Bologna, 14 October 1962) in particular: *Onorevole Marisa Rodano: conclusioni alla Conferenza regionale delle lavoratrici del 14-10-1962* [Marisa Rodano MP: conclusions to the regional conference of women workers], box. 3, f. 1962III, UDI Archive of Bologna.

81 UDI Regione Emiliana, *Parità, libertà, dignità sul luogo di lavoro, formazione professionale, servizi sociali, assistenza all'infanzia* [Equality, liberty, dignity in the workplace, vocational training, social services, childcare services] (Bologna, 14 October 1962) in particular: *Onorevole Marisa Rodano: conclusioni alla Conferenza regionale delle lavoratrici del 14-10-1962* [Marisa Rodano MP: Conclusions to the regional conference of women workers on 14.10.1962], box. 3, f. 1962III, UDI Archive of Bologna.

82 Ascari 1963.

4 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the relevance of the debate on women's vocational training in Cold War Italy in the first fifteen years following the establishment of the Italian Republican Constitution (1948–1962). Several conferences and congresses organized by women's associations, political parties, and trade unions, along with philanthropic associations, debated the intersection of women's work, equal pay, and vocational training. This chapter identifies three major periods: the postwar years (1948–1953), the mid-1950s (1954–1957), and the economic boom years (1958–1963). Whereas in the first period, vocational training and equal pay were discussed mainly at congresses promoted by women's associations and trade union organizations, during the second period, women's work and equal pay began to be discussed in ad hoc conferences thanks in part to the ratification of the 1951 ILO Equal Remuneration Convention no. 100. In the third period, due to the changes occurring in the Italian labour market, namely the increase in women's employment, the issue of women's vocational training became topical, and women began to mobilize in support of a less stereotypical and gender-oriented model of training.

Two subsequent conferences promoted by the Committee of Female Associations for Equal Remuneration and the Società Umanitaria of Milan held in 1957 and 1959, respectively, discussed the links between equal pay and vocational training in the debate as well as within the scope of women's activism. The struggle to implement the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value in Italy led to a new awareness of the importance of improving women's vocational training, thereby overcoming the gender divide in professional education. In particular, the 1959 conference on women's vocational training displays the scope of the debate which involved teachers, university professors, trade unionists, economists, pedagogues, officials of women's associations, and government officials. Moreover, the 1959 conference revealed that the Italian discussion on women's vocational training was linked to broader international debates around the issue from two different perspectives. On the one hand, foreign delegations, especially those from Eastern bloc state-socialist countries and related organizations were hosted by Italian organizations; on the other hand, globally relevant documents concerning women's vocational training promoted by international organizations such as UNESCO were referenced and taken into account in Italy.

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