

## WOMEN AND FASCISM. CHANGING FAMILY ROLES IN THE TRANSITION FROM AN AGRICULTURAL TO AN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY.

*Paul Corner*  
(Università di Siena)

That the position of women in Italian society was subject to a consistent attack during the years of fascism is beyond discussion. As Franca Pieroni Bortolotti has written '*no politica movement was so hostile to any kind of emancipation of women, so consistent in sustaining the division of social roles, so dedicated to returning the female condition to the solid rock of the pre-bourgeois tradition as was fascism*'<sup>1</sup>. Fascist legislation mirrored the ideological values which the regime claimed to represent, and among these values were the hierarchy of gender and the supremacy of the male. The military virtues of the 'new fascist man' left little room for women; the role of the women was defined in terms of family and motherhood, and was never intended to be anything other than subordinate. As a consequence, women faced adverse treatment in almost all spheres — political, economic, social — from legislation designed to reinforce the position of the male<sup>2</sup>.

That this was the intention would seem incontestable. Yet the precise impact of fascism on women is a much more complex issue. Clearly there were variations in the effect of hostile legislation depending on a whole series of factors — age, class, marital status, type of employment, even geographical location. These variations were in part related to the degree to

---

1. F. PIERONI BORTOLOTTI, *Emancipazione femminile e democrazia nell'Italia contemporanea*, in (by the same author, with introduction by A. Buttafuoco), *Sul movimento politico delle donne. Scritti inediti*, (Rome 1987), 48.

2. With certain exceptions, women were excluded from voting and from applying for jobs in public administration; women were supposed to be paid no more than half the wage of men employed in similar jobs; certain tax regulations were introduced which were intended to discourage female employment. Apart from the voting exclusion, it is still not clear the extent to which these provisions were followed in practice. See C. CHIANESE, *Storia sociale della donna in Italia (1800-1980)*, (Naples 1980), 69-88, and, in more general terms, B. WANROOIJ, *Storia del pudore. La questione sessuale in Italia 1860-1940* (Venezia 1990), who notes Mussolini's attitude to the role of women: 'My programm is: children or beatings'.

which the regime was able to exercise its control in any particular area, and this — in turn — itself depended on a whole series of factors which it would be impossible to examine here. But the complexity of the question derives also from the fact that during the 20s and 30s women were — very obviously affected by developments which had little or nothing to do with fascism, and over which fascism had little control. In other words, while fascist legislation may have had as its objective the reduction of women to a subordinate role, it would be an oversimplification to argue the question purely in terms what fascism itself proposed to do and to read into these proposals a necessary worsening of the position of women.

Here it is suggested that this disparity between intention and realisation is particularly marked in certain agricultural zones which had for long been characterised by a high level of pluriactivity i.e. by the employment of members of the peasant family in both agricultural and industrial sectors. The areas considered here are those above Milan — the Alto Milanese, the Brianza, and the Comasco — where, as is well-known, agricultural employment had been combined with work in the silk spinning and reeling mills since the middle of the nineteenth century. This tradition of intertwining agricultural work and rural manufacturing requires some introduction. Indeed, to understand the nature of the changes which took place during the 1920s and 30s, it is necessary first to outline the specific characteristics of social and economic relations in these zones from the years well before World War One.

The close-knit interrelationship between the peasant family<sup>3</sup> and the silk industry had really been forged in the years 1850-1870, when the prospect of cheap and abundant peasant labour and control of the raw material (the cocoons produced by the peasants) had induced silk merchants to move their factories from the urban centres to the hills of the surrounding countryside<sup>4</sup>. Peasant families responded in a fairly standard manner. Young women and girls (usually when they were eight) went to the mills — often

---

<sup>3.</sup> Most were still multiple families. This term is used to mean families composed of at least two married units, although many households would be composed of more. For this definition see M. BARBAGLI, *Sotto lo stesso tetto. Mutamenti della famiglia in Italia dal XV al XX secolo*, (Bologna 1984), 15-16.

<sup>4.</sup> There is an ample literature on these developments. References can be found in the fundamental essay of L. CAFAGNA, *La 'rivoluzione agraria' in Lombardia*, in *Annali dell'Istituto GG. Feltrinelli*, II, 1959; now reprinted in (by the same author), *Dualismo e sviluppo nella storia d'Italia* (Venezia 1989), 31-112.

until they were married, but sometimes beyond — while the men — usually sharecroppers — remained to cultivate the land (it goes almost without saying that women continued to work in the fields and to look after the house in the time that remained to them). As conditions worsened during the second half of the century, due to the increasing pressure created by the *fitto misto a grano* (corn rent) on the small plots worked by the peasants<sup>5</sup>, families came to depend on introits from the silk industry in order to pay their debts and survive on the land. The difference between the renewal of the sharecropping contract, and eviction, was often provided by the wages of the women and girls<sup>6</sup>.

It is hardly necessary to stress that the division of roles within the family reflected the dominance of the male members. Work in the silk mills was extremely unpleasant, hours were long, the consequences on the health of the workers often disastrous<sup>7</sup>. Women went to the mill because they had to, because they were sent, and not because they wanted to. Their wages returned to the head of the family (the *capoccia* or *reggitore*), who probably added insult to injury by considering industrial work demeaning for peasant families. This position of subordination was reflected in the fact that,

---

5. The *fitto misto a grano* (grain rent) required peasants to produce a given quantity of grain in the course of year, which was then handed over to the proprietor as rent. The quantity was such that usually more than half of the land had to be used in this way, leaving little for production of crops required by the peasant family. Even so, peasants were almost always in debt to the proprietor. As a consequence, silk cocoon production — officially realised on a 50/50 basis — would go entirely to the landowner, to be set against debts, thus depriving the peasant of the most profitable crop. This practice had become so common by the end of the century that it was unheard of for peasants to attempt to sell their own cocoons. Most peasants were in any case almost totally isolated from the market, which was controlled by landowners and silk merchants, who obviously dictated prices to the peasants.

6. For a more detailed examination of the economic and social aspects of this system, see P. CORNER, *Il contadino-operaio nell'Italia padana*, in P. BEVILACQUA (ed.), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, II, (Venezia 1990), 751-83.

7. On the appalling conditions within the mills, see, for the early part of the nineteenth century, M. BALLISTRERO — R. LEVRERO, *Il genocidio perfetto*, (Milan 1979). For the later period there is ample evidence in S. MERLI, *Proletariato di fabbrica e capitalismo industriale* (Florence 1972); M. L. BERTI — A.C. MARCETTI (eds.), *Salute e classi lavoratrici in Italia dall'Unità al fascismo*, (Milan 1982), and L. OSNAGHI DODI, *Sfruttamento del lavoro nell'industria tessile comasco e prime esperienze di organizzazione operaia*, in *Classe*, 5, (1972). For a contemporary account of conditions, see S. BONOMI, *Intorno alle condizioni igieniche degli operai e in particolare delle operaie in seta in provincia di Como* (Milan 1873).

when women organised and began to protest against their conditions, they usually had, ditte support from their husbands<sup>8</sup>. The men may have feared an undermining — of roles, but it is more likely that they were afraid of loss of income and even of eviction and proletarianisation, given that landowner and mill owner might often be the same person. What is clear is that the conservative, catholic, usually intensely individualistic peasant mentality, typical of the men, continued to prevail over any collectivist or solidaristic mentality generated by the women, with obvious consequences in terms the persistence of female subordination. This was the difference created between those who worked exclusively on the land on the one hand and those who came into contact with diffused rural industry on the other<sup>9</sup>.

In these circumstances, pluriactivity represented a means of survival for the family as an agricultural unit, and within this picture the women members of the family — even if their contribution was indispensable — were likely to remain subject to a high level of exploitation, realised through the discipline and control exercised by the head of the family. The family strategy was essentially that of the reproduction of the status quo — that is, the avoidance of eviction from generation to generation by keeping pace with debt — rather than that of accumulation. In so far as this was the case, the pluriactivity of the Alto Milanese was a phenomenon which reflected a static social model, in which there was little prospect of change. Within this model, women were an essential element in the process of survival, but the fact that they — rather than the men — moved out of the agricultural sector in order to realise that survival — tended to guarantee their continued subordination to the male hierarchy of the peasant family.

---

8. For an example of male resistance to women's organisations, see *Il lavoratore comasco*, 5-6 September 1902, quoted in A. CENTO BULL, *The Lombard silkspinners in the nineteenth century*, in *The Italianist*, 7 (1987).

9. On the relationships within families which reveal the dominance of the men, see the numerous provincial monographs of the *Inchiesta Jacini*. For example, for Lecco: 'Ogni famiglia è subordinata ad un capo o reggitore, che ordinariamente ne è il membro più vecchio, e che ne regola tanto il regime interno quanto i rapporti coi terzi e specialmente col padrone. Egli tiene la cassa, e dispensa i generi alimentari, di mano in mano che occorrono, alla donna più anziana, detta massaia, incaricata della cucina', *Atti della Giunta parlamentare per la inchiesta agraria e sulle condizioni della classe agricola*, VI, *Monografia del circondario di Lecco* (Roma 1882-84), 371.

This static picture only began to change with the first two decades of the century. Before the war, increased opportunities for male employment in industry in the area around Milan began to attract the sons of peasant families, who would usually work away from home on a temporary basis<sup>10</sup>. This marked the beginning of the slow shift in the balance of the family economy — from the predominance of agriculture over industry to the opposite — which was to accelerate after the war. This shift did not imply a break-up of the family, however; on the contrary, the extension of pluriactivity to more members of the family appears to have permitted the continued survival of the multiple family unit which was characteristic of the area. That both men and women within the family had experience of industrial work was likely, however, to lead to the gradual undermining of the patriarchal role of the male head, as values changed and agriculture became less important<sup>11</sup>.

This gradual adjustment of roles was greatly accelerated by the war. In the absence of their husbands and sons, women were left to look after both sides of the family economy, the industrial and the agricultural. Shortage of labour permitted women to organise and improve their conditions in the factories (they were temporarily without the moderating influence of their husbands)<sup>12</sup> while the rise in agricultural prices, combined with wartime legislation relating to rents, permitted many families to cancel their debts with the landowner — a fact which was to have enormous implications in the postwar<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>10.</sup> On this phenomenon, see in particular the comments of Serpieri on the prospects of keeping cheap labour in the silk industry in the face of increasing competition from other industries. Ministero dell'Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, *Atti della Commissione d'inchiesta per la industrie bacologica e serica*, (Roma 1910-11), IV, 642-55.

<sup>11.</sup> In general on this issue see M. BARBAGLI, *Sotto lo stesso tetto*, cit., 100-120, who identifies both the beginnings of change at the start of the century and then the freezing of family relations in the inter war years.

<sup>12.</sup> See the reports on strikes and demonstrations by women factory workers in Como, in Ministero per l'Industria, il Commercio, e il Lavoro, *Bollettino dell'Ufficio del Lavoro*, (serie mensile), 1916, IV trimestre, 91; *ibid*, 1917, II trimestre, 202.

<sup>13.</sup> The effects of the war on the peasantry in general are analysed in A. SERPIERI, *La guerra e le classi rurali italiane*, (Bari 1930); for more detailed information on the Alto Milanese see A. MOLINARI, *Contratti di lavoro e salari nelle aziende agricole dell'Alto e Basso Milanese*, (Milan 1923). Molinari notes both the close interrelationship between peasants and rural manufacturing and the general tendency towards capital accumulation among the worker-peasants of the region.

The increased protagonism of the women of peasant families (indeed their dominant role in many areas) during the war was unlikely to be carried through into the postwar period, however. This was not simply because their power on the labour market was reduced with the return of peace. Rather it was a reflection of the fact that, within the peasant-worker family, accustomed to pluriactivity, the position of the woman had never been determined by the extent of her contribution to the family economy. As we have already seen, this contribution had been fundamental to the survival of the family for much of the nineteenth century. The determinant was very much more the attitudes of the men of the family, which, traditionally, were individualistic, paternalist, conservative, and — in the Alto Milanese — catholic. Women might be the ‘carriers’ of a more modern culture, but increased protagonism of the woman was by itself destined to meet with the barrier represented by the prevailing male socio-political culture, therefore. What was more likely to alter the position of the woman was a change in that male culture, and here it was the opening up of new economic prospects for the peasant families — new prospects in large part created by the work of female members of the families — which was likely to influence the thinking of the men.

The beginnings of capital accumulation in the pre-war years, the cancellation of debt during the war itself (both phenomena in which women played a large part), permitted the heads of sharecropping families to abandon gradually the idea of simple survival through pluriactivity and to look beyond the limited ambition of reproduction of the family from generation to generation<sup>14</sup>. This was likely to be reflected in a change of attitudes and mentalities within the family itself, with an increasingly flexible attitude being adopted to the function of the women. It might be said, therefore, that pluriactivity in peasant-worker families permitted the survival of those families and saved them from total proletarianisation, and at the same time encouraged, very gradually, through an improvement in economic prospects, a redefinition of roles within those families. This redefinition was based fundamentally on the fact that the family was no longer a social form dedicated exclusively to the conservation of a static social model; it had become a much more dynamic unit in which work was no longer purely a defensive action directed towards self-preservation.

---

<sup>14.</sup> MOLINARI, op. cit., 4-5, 9-10.

The passage from the static to the dynamic peasant family clearly involved more than one generation. But the indication that the passage had been made by many families was provided by the postwar. As elsewhere in Italy demonstrations for revision of contracts were frequent in the Alto Milanese, and in many zones grain rents were replaced by more straightforward money rents<sup>15</sup>. Peasant families now fought for and acquired a direct contact with the market — something which had previously been in large part denied to them. This pressure for change was already a clear sign that family mentalities had altered during the first two decades of the century, and that a more entrepreneurial spirit had permeated the previously closed and defensive attitudes.

The same can be said — to an even greater degree — of those families which bought land in the period 1920-1927 — that is, before the revaluation of the lira put a halt to the movement. This phenomenon was widespread and saw a change in the ownership of entire zones of the regions together with a progressive fragmentation of holdings<sup>16</sup>. The cancellation of debt as a consequence of the wartime inflation was evidently a factor in this movement of property, but the fundamental cause appears to have been the steady accumulation of capital among peasant families as a result of work in non-agricultural employment. Women had played a central part in permitting this new possibility of independence, but the evidence of contemporary observers suggests that, their role was not exhausted by the eventual acquisition of greater autonomy or complete family independence.

Peasant families aspired to freedom from the grain rent, which severely restricted their choices, and to ownership of the land in order — self-evidently — to improve their situation. This could be achieved in part through a change in the type of cultivation (abandoning at least a part of grain production for more profitable crops), but it could also be achieved by a better utilisation of family resources — in particular, by a better utilisation of family time. The social protest of the postwar period sought principally to realise this second objective; the raising of silkworms, which required massive inputs of labour for a relatively short period, had increasingly impeded an effective use of family time in a phase of growing opportunities

---

<sup>15</sup>. For a summary of this movement, see R. ROSSI, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra: Lombardia* (Rome 1931), 45-65.

<sup>16</sup>. *Ibid.*

for extra-agricultural employment. In fact, families rarely hoped to survive solely through the conquest of independence in agriculture. As was to be the case in many areas of Italy in the following half-century, the achievement of independence — a secular ambition which had justified the hardships of generations — was achieved at the moment in which the land began to lose importance. In reality, peasants stayed on the land in many cases because the land provided a house (usually at a very much lower rent than a house in the town) and an integration of income through farming.

But — from the outset of the movement for the abolition of the grain rent — the land and the house were assumed to be viable only with the continuation of family employment outside agriculture. Pluriactivity — which frequently implied continuing female employment in manufacturing or service industries — was, therefore, an assumed and integral feature of the family economy — even at the moment in which peasants fought for better contracts or began to purchase land<sup>17</sup>.

This is suggested by the fact that, in many cases, large peasant families continued to live on plots of land which were insufficient for the upkeep of the family. As stated above, the postwar period saw not only land purchases but also an increasing fragmentation of the land. People bought small plots precisely because they did not intend to live entirely from the proceeds of that land<sup>18</sup>. And the movement accelerated during the 20s as families — for the first time proprietors of the land and therefore in a position to apply rules of inheritance — often split up the plots between brothers. By the end of the 1920s this phenomenon had achieved such levels that the Ufficio Provinciale di Economia di Como (the provincial chamber of commerce) was urging government to pass legislation which

---

<sup>17</sup>. A fuller description of this situation, said to characterise large areas of the territory to the north of Milan, can be found in MOLINARI, op. cit., 5-11. Prefects' reports of the early twenties noted that there were few families in the region which still depended entirely on a single income; see, for example, ARCHIVIO CENTRALE DELLO STATO, MINISTERO DEGLI INTERNI, DIREZIONE GENERALE PUBBLICA SICUREZZA, *Affari Generali e Riservati*, 1921, busta 65,4 June 1921, and 20 July 1921.

<sup>18</sup>. There seems in fact to have been a fairly direct, inverse, correlation between the average size of holdings and the possibility of family employment outside agriculture. See Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria, *Rapporti fra proprietà, impresa e manodopera nell'agricoltura italiana*, XIV, *Lombardia*, by Giuseppe Medici (Rome 1932), 64-66; also MOLINARI, op. cit., 9-10; also ROSSI, op. cit., 45-52.

would permit the reconstitution of farms in such a way as to make them once again economically viable as agricultural units.

Within the families of peasant-workers, the role and the position of the women changed considerably as a consequence of these developments. As the importance and the advantages of industrial work became obvious to the agricultural population, so more members of the family dedicated their time to those activities. Women continued to work in the textile industry (in slightly reduced numbers as crisis hit both silk and cotton), and extended their range of occupations to many other activities, as will be shown below. More significantly, perhaps, male employment in manufacturing in the region rose during the twenties, reflecting the higher earnings to be gained in the industrial sector<sup>19</sup>. Where this happened, it might be the women who remained to cultivate the land, or — where the plot in question was relatively small — both husband and wife might work in manufacturing, while the land was left to the old and the children, and to occasional or part-time work by the adults<sup>20</sup>.

These developments provoked important changes in family relations. As already suggested, the static model of defence of the family which had prevailed for so long had sanctioned a rigid division of roles in which the woman (factory worker) was subordinate to the man (agricultural worker). Central to this division was the mentality of the man, totally linked to agriculture, often contemptuous of factory workers. In the more dynamic, entrepreneurial families which emerged from the first two decades of the century, roles were less precise and mentalities correspondingly more flexible. At the point at which either the man or woman could work either in manufacturing or in agriculture, roles had become far more interchangeable, the mobility of labour was much greater and the dominance of the male was likely to be less than under the old grain rent/silk production cycle.

---

<sup>19.</sup> Male employment in manufacturing in the province of Como rose from 57% of the total industrial workforce in 1921 to 60% in 1936; see population censuses VI (1921) and VIII (1936). The industrial censuses suggest a larger increase — from 53% in 1927 to 58% in 1937-40. It is likely that incentives to take jobs outside the agricultural sector were provided by the gradual process of unfavourable revision of agricultural contracts practised by the fascists in the course of the 1920s; see ALBERTO DEL RE, *I patti agrari dell'Alto Milanese dalla restaurazione contrattuale fascista alla grande crisi (1922-1938)*, in (various authors), *Agricoltura e forze sociali in Lombardia nella crisi anni trenta* (Milan, 1983).

<sup>20.</sup> ROSSI, op. cit., 21.

Reports on the region speak, in fact, of the change in family relationships, emphasising the decline in the authority of the male head of the household. Certain reports speak of centrifugal forces, occasioned by conflicts of interests between the various family units who lived under the same roof, and in some cases multiple families split up under the pressure of these conflicts<sup>21</sup>. In general, however, the advantages of pluriactivity based on the multiple family and employment in both the agricultural and the industrial sector were too obvious to make separation an attractive choice. Even so, the fact that increasing friction was noted suggests that the old rigid authority of the capoccia had all but disappeared with a change in the economic situation of the family. If anything, family discipline was more likely to be based on respect, not for the traditional authority of the capoccia and his position, but on the more mundane respect for age, with sons and their wives and daughters and their husbands, accepting — not without complaint it would seem — the decisions taken by parents and grandparents, both male and female. This accentuated difference between generations, evident during this period, is fairly typical of a moment of transition in a zone of rapid industrialisation. The same kind of division will be evident in many other areas of Italy, but only in the decades following World War Two.

The decline of the silk industry, increased opportunities for employment for both men and women outside agriculture, the cultural shock represented by the First World War, land purchases all these factors served to undermine established values and previously accepted family roles<sup>22</sup>. In certain respects fascism clearly presented itself as a response to this breakdown of traditional values and roles. The legislation aimed at the place of women in society was intended to have obvious repercussions in the

---

<sup>21</sup>. ROSSI, op. cit., 19-20. The reluctance of the multiple family to split up, despite a tendency towards increasing conflict, is noted in BARBAGLI, op.cit., 106-8.

<sup>22</sup>. The importance of the war for peasant families should not be underestimated. While older men might not be called up for military service, most young men of peasant families would be. Women of all ages, particularly in the north, worked under the harsh regime of Industrial Mobilisation. The experience gained during the conflict was bound to widen horizons and disturb traditional values. Attitudes to hierarchy within the family were unlikely to emerge unscathed from such ordeals. In the north of Italy, the First World War may well have constituted that 'historic breach' with the past which Becattini has argued for the Second World War in respect of central Italy; G. BECATTINI, *Riflessioni sullo sviluppo socio-economico della Toscana in questo dopoguerra*, in G. MORI (ed.), *Storia d'Italia. Le regioni dall'Unità ad oggi. La Toscana*, (Turin 1986).

home; indeed, the intention was precisely that of compelling women to return to the home and of restoring hierarchies within the household. The demographic campaign of fascism had clear and very obvious implications for Italian women. Equally, ‘ruralism’ and ‘sbracciantizzazione’<sup>23</sup> were concepts based on fragile and utopian ideas of a rural community where it was assumed that the supposedly ‘traditional’ peasant family values would again have priority. Here, as in other areas, fascism demonstrated a conservativi and traditionalist response to the social consequences of economic change.

In areas of pluriactivity, however, these objectives squared very badly with the strategies of peasant-worker families. For more than seventy years, peasant families in the Alto Milanese had relied on the wages earned by women in local manufacturing. Nothing suggests that the changes provoked by the war, the revision of contracts, or the purchase of land had changed this situation. If anything, the entrepreneurial spirit of the family, which was released by these changes, required ever increasing commitment to female employment outside agriculture. Nor could fascism call any longer on traditional male values as embodied by the peasant head of the household. Men now had more frequent contact with manufacturing and understood its advantages for the family economy. The old resistance to industrial employment, seen as demeaning because it was a female prerogative, was fast disappearing. As a consequence, men were unlikely to countenance the loss of a second income with satisfaction, just as much as they were unlikely to cease factory work themselves in order to return to the land.

In reality, the family unit — as it had evolved by the inter-war years — was highly integrated and based on the maximum exploitation of all opportunities on the part of all economically active members of the family. Injunctions to return to a situation where certain members were debarred from participation in the functioning of this unit were destined to fall on deaf ears. Indeed, the reductions in women’s wages, which undoubtedly were felt, were likely to have the result of making pluriactivity even more

---

<sup>23.</sup> *Sbracciantizzazione* was the policy which aimed at the reduction in the numbers of the landless agricultural workers (*braccianti*) — notoriously the most politically radical — by the reconstitution of small family farms or small leaseholds. On the significance and effective realisation of this policy, see p. CORNER, *Fascist Agrarian Policy and the Italian Economy in the Inter-War Years*, in J. DAVIS (ed.), *Gramsci and Italy's Passive Revolution*, (London 1979), 239-74.

necessary for the survival of the family. It was, in any case, unlikely that industrialists would prefer the consolations of ideology to the advantages of cheap labour.

In fact, the statistics of the censuses, unreliable as they undoubtedly are, provide evidence of only a very slight reduction in female labour in n-tanufacturing during the ventennio — a reduction amply compensated by the increase in female employment in the tertiary sector. Women suffered redundancies during the world crisis — many were paid off in the silk industry and others were put on short time<sup>24</sup> — but they suffered no more (in fact less) than men. More importants women remained at around 40-42% of the total manufacturing workforce in the region — certainly a decline from the level women bad occupied before the war — but very similar to the position they had held in the early and mid twenties<sup>25</sup>. It is true that certain specialised industries — notably the optical industry employed a high number of women proportionate to men, and that these industries expanded with the war economy of the thirties; but the overall numbers were, in reality, small and do little to alter the general picture. There is little to suggest that fascist legislation achieved in these zones what it managed in others — that is, a substantial substitution of female by male labour<sup>26</sup>.

What is notable about the period is the great expansion in the types of job in which women were employed. Silk had traditionally been the principal female employer, using some 70% of the female workforce before the war. But with the crisis in textiles, and particularly the decline of silk production, many of these women were forced to look for work elsewhere<sup>27</sup>. Certain of the areas in which they appear are perhaps surprising. The-

---

24. *Relazione, Ufficio Provinciale dell'Economia — Como, (1930), 33-39.*

25. As a percentage of the total industrial workforce in the Comasco, women represented around 43% in 1921, 40% in 1936, according to the population censuses. According to the industrial censuses women represented 47% in 1927 and 42% 1937-40. Taking industry and commerce together, the figures show less variation, confirming the shift in employment of women towards commerce and services, and the slow decline of textile employment.

26. This conclusion is supported by the figures reproduced in O. VITALI, *La n<sup>u</sup>lazione attiva in amoltura attraverso i censimenti italiani* (Roma 1968), and by the description of occupational changes during the ventennio in P. SABBATUCCI-SEVERINI — A. TRENTO, *Alcuni cenni sul mercato del lavoro durante il fascismo*, in «Quademi storici», 29-30 (1975), 550-578. For very similar conclusion see also F. PIERONI BORTOLOTTI, *Osservazioni sulla occupazione femminile sotto il fascismo*, in (by the same author) *Sul movimento politico delle donne*, cit.

re is a large female presence in the mechanical industry, for instance, in the 1930s round about 20% of the total workforce in that sector<sup>28</sup>. The high level of women employed in the optical sector has already been mentioned, and would seem to support the conclusion of Pieroni Bortolotti about the tendency of women — within the industrial sector — to move to higher qualified jobs during the fascist period. But women also increased their representation in clothing, furniture and paper production — areas which, at a national level see a gradual decline in terms of numbers employed<sup>29</sup>.

A chapter apart is the increase in employment generally in commerce, services, and public administration. This corresponded evidently to the changing nature of the local economy — in one respect, moving away from what had been a virtual economy of subsistence for many of its inhabitants towards a prevalently industrial economy; in another, developing tourist and hotel trades to meet the demands of the lake region. Men were employed in larger numbers than women in these areas overall, but the relative increase in female representation is notable, and more than compensates for the slight decline in female employment in manufacturing. By the end of the thirties it would appear that employment in commerce, services, and administration was divided on a roughly 60% male/40% female basis — a dramatic change from the complete male dominance of the early twenties<sup>30</sup>.

This diversification in the types of job undertaken by women during the interwar years has been noted already in the few studies dedicated to this subject. In general it is argued that diversification represents a marginalisation of female labour under the impact of the economic crisis, with women

---

27. Whereas before the war over 70% of the female industrial workforce in the Comasco had been employed in textiles, by the 1920s the figure had declined to around 55%.

28. See the census of industry and commerce for 1937-40.

29. Absolute numbers of women employed in the clothing industry fell in the Alto Milanese, reflecting the general decline in the industry, but the percentage of women increased significantly — from 48%, according to the industrial census of 1927, to around 64%, according to the census of 1937-40. In the furniture industry, female employment doubled in the same period, despite an overall decline in numbers in the industry. This reflected the passage of the furniture industry from the artisanal, male-dominated, stage to that of increased mechanisation and standardisation. The substitution of women for men — a normal feature of industrial modernisation in certain trades was evidently not impeded by fascist legislation. Indeed, fascist legislation did much to guarantee that women remained an excellent source of cheap labour.

returning to jobs which were essentially precarious and generally defined as fallback occupations (*occupazioni di ripiego*)<sup>31</sup>. This is undoubtedly a valid interpretation for many areas of Italy. The Alto Milanese and Comasco may provide a slightly different case, however. This was in part because the region was — even in years of crisis — nonetheless still at the centre of Italian industrialisation and therefore to some extent protected from shock, and in part because of the type of economic activity which had developed around the phenomenon of pluriactivity, where the presence of several incomes within the family had traditionally been a guarantee against hard times, and where the position of the woman as industrial worker was, therefore, better established.

A glance at the literature on patterns of industrialisation might tempt the conclusion that the pluriactive phase would soon pass, with industrial employment passing increasingly to the man, while the women would lose their wage-earning role, remaining at home to look after the land, the children, and the elderly. In other words, one might expect that the expansion of industrialisation would create the modern housewife. Fascism certainly encouraged the idea of the 'household wage', brought home, of course, by the breadwinning male, and the censuses suggest a very small increase in 'nonprofessional' women, particularly housewives, during the period although this statistic is to be treated with caution given the pressures on women to register as housewives<sup>32</sup>.

In reality, something very different appears to have taken place. The *Relazioni* of the Ufficio provinciale di economia (the old chamber of commerce) speak of a surprising increase in the number of small family businesses which spread across the region in the late 20s and the 30s. Both censuses and reports of the Ufficio provinciale dell'economia confirm this development<sup>33</sup>. Once employees in the few big industries (i.e. the major employers) are subtracted from the main total of employees, the average size of the remaining businesses is extremely small — around 4 employees

---

<sup>30.</sup> Women formed around 40% of the total workforce in commerce and administration at the end of the thirties (see industrial census 1937). This was a substantial increase on the percentage for the early twenties, (the population censuses for 1921 and 1936 give the figures of 17% and 38% respectively) and undoubtedly reflected the growing industrialisation of the region which provoked demand for services, and the expansion of the public administration, in particular teaching.

<sup>31.</sup> See, for example, SABATTUCCI-SEVERINI — TRENTO, quoted above at note 26.

<sup>32.</sup> On this issue see the comments of F. PIERONI BORTOLOTTI, *op. cit.*, 183-85.

per unit. The fields in which these businesses expanded were in many cases those traditional for the region (small scale metal and mechanical production, furniture, paper, preparation of foodstuffs, clothing). In many cases they undoubtedly represented a response to the crisis.

Nonetheless, it is the exact nature of this defensive fallback which needs examining. While there was undoubtedly an element of marginalisation in the face of the depression, many new small businesses appear to have put down roots and to have survived and developed precisely because of the crisis. Workers (belonging to peasant-worker families) laid off in the major industries as a consequence of the slump frequently returned home with a trade and a knowledge of industrial production. This may have happened in many areas of northern Italy, but what was important for the workers of the Alto Milanese was that they returned to a family which had always exploited all possible economic opportunities to the maximum. This was a family which remained rurally based, but which in fact embraced employment in both agricultural and industrial sectors. Multiple families remained together as economic units, and sought to react to difficulties in the way which was normal for these families — through a diversification of economic activity. Again, it is necessary to stress that even the development of a small business was not incompatible with continued employment in industry on the part of certain members of the family. Indeed, some element of continuing income from dependent labour meant a reduction of risk for the family attempting to start a small business. Within this kind of structure, the role of women was undoubtedly enhanced. As the traditionally conservative attitudes of the men grew weaker (with the declining importance of the land), so the position of women within the family economy was revised. Their role became less subordinate (women's labour was more public and less apparently «demeaning») precisely because — for a part of their lives at least — they were able to perform the same functions as the men. The small family business, for example, which typically required very high inputs of labour in order to 'compensate for low technology', generally required the participation of the women of the family at certain points. Indeed, this may explain the high proportion of women in the me-

---

<sup>33</sup>. The Ufficio provinciale — apparently concerned to explain the absence of industrial concentrations in the province — noted the 'prevailing even if diffused — industrialism of the region' and spoke of the 'the limited size of the individual concerns', 'often of healthy family origins'; *Relazione*, Ufficio provinciale della Economia, Como (1930), cit.

tal and mechanical industries, which were in many cases no more than 'back yard' industries, dependent on family labour. Also, small businesses typically exploited part-time women workers — a fact which permitted women to work and to meet other commitments.

The improved position of women within the family would seem to be linked to the specific circumstances of partial transition from agriculture to industry in the Comasco. It was precisely the adjustment of a farming population to manufacturing in a way which avoided out-and-out proletarianisation which broke down traditional roles while preserving the multiple family. This population was clearly not a proletariat in the generally accepted sense of the term and had not been «freed» from the land<sup>34</sup>. It was based on a family structure which had attempted very strenuously to such a breach with the land (with its almost inevitable consequences of proletarianisation, urbanisation — possible emigration). Within this structure, women occupied a very different position from that of the wife in the urban, nuclear family, but equally from that which they had originally occupied within the peasant-worker structure. Indeed, neither *peasant* nor *worker* seems adequate to define the members of these families by the 1930s. A more accurate definition might be «a rurally-based industrial population», for example, which would distinguish it clearly from those of many regions of central and southern Italy.

The significance for the Italian economy of the development of this kind of social form is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless it seems legitimate to argue that, within the social form of the worker-peasant family, fascist ideas about women found little space precisely because they were in essence opposed to the economic interests and the established patterns of economic activity of such families. If the fascist rhetoric about ruralisation was designed to conceal a progressive subordination of agriculture to industry, and to compensate those who remained in agriculture with an ideology which attempted to justify the low standard of living<sup>35</sup>, it could find little hold on families actively involved in the process of transition from a dominantly agricultural economy to one which was predominantly industrial. These families depended on female employ-

---

<sup>34</sup>. For a different interpretation of the evolution of peasant-worker families in the context of theories of protoindustrialisation, see A. DEWERPE, *L'industrie aux champs. Essai sur la proto-industrialisation en Italie du Nord (1800-1880)*, (Rome 1985).

<sup>35</sup>. CORNER, 'Fascist agrarian policy ...', cit.

ment in manufacturing, and found ways — even in times of crisis — of perpetuating that employment. Over the years it is process produced attitudes which were diametrically opposed to a limitation of the role of the woman. This in turn emancipateci women in their contacts with each other within the factory, and led to a revision of their roles within the family. No doubt women suffered from many aspects of fascist legislation concerning wages, political rights, etc., but it seems that — in certain areas at least — the effort to erode the position of women within society and to re-establish male, conservativi and traditional norms, which fascism proposed, contrasted with forces which were — in the end — much stronger than those the regime could muster.