

THE GLASS CEILING IN THE HOUSE OF POWER

Current female success at the top is of little relevance to the majority of women at the lower levels of the “social house.”

Sara R. Farris

The increasingly significant presence of women at the top of political and economic institutions has been hailed by several international commentators as a momentous culmination of feminist battles for gender equality.

The election of van der Leyen to the European presidency, Christine Lagarde to the presidency of the ECB, or Giorgia Meloni to the presidency of the Council of Ministers in Italy is in part symptomatic of a fundamental shift that has taken place within the feminist movement over the past four decades. If the women’s rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s fought primarily for the development of public welfare services and access to the labor market – in a context where most women in Europe were engaged mainly in unpaid domestic work – the gradual increase of women’s labor force in all productive sectors since the 1980s has also changed the nature of the feminist claims for economic equality. Campaigns for free daycare, or better conditions for maternity allowances, have been joined, and increasingly dominated, by battles for equal pay, equal opportunities in the public sphere (with the inclusion of so-called pink quotas) and denunciation of the implicit and explicit obstacles that prevent especially women seeking a career from reaching leadership positions.

The latter battles, on closer inspection, reflect mainly the desiderata of institutional feminism, which has increasingly focused on the needs of middle-class women committed to breaking the famous “glass ceiling.”

Giorgia Meloni herself, in her inaugural speech as the new Italian PM, framed her election as Italy’s first female premier as the result of that glass ceiling finally being broken.

The presence of an increasing number of women at

the head of key institutions, then would seem to testify to the success of this climbing exercise to the top ranks of the house of power by female white-collar workers.

IS SISTERHOOD A MYTH?

But what happens on the lower floors of that house? Is it possible to imagine that from the attic of this metaphorical abode of power the women who occupy it benefit all others?

In a fine 2011 book, American feminist theorist Kathi Weeks argued that most women (in the U.S., as elsewhere) are not so much concerned about breaking the glass ceiling as they are about not slipping through the faults of a structurally unstable floor.

Instead of throngs of women lining up to climb the ladder that will take them to the upper floors, the house of power seems overcrowded especially on the ground floor. It is here that we find the largest number of women, engaged not only in the business of not slipping, but also in the arduous and unrecognized task of keeping that floor clean and safe for the frail ones in particular.

Data from the latest INAPP 2022 report in Italy speak for themselves. Domestic and care work is not only the mainstay of care in Italy, but is also the economic sector of key importance in the growth of women’s employment “both because of the delegation of care by employed women and the significant percentage of women employed in the sector.” With more than 2 million men and women workers between regular and undeclared, domestic and care work employs the largest share of employed labor in the Southern European country.

Although it is a critically important job, domestic and care work is also one of the lowest paid and least

secure, the latter aspect of which seems to characterize sectors that employ women more generally. But there is more. While we have so far paid attention mainly to the abode of power, the reality is that a very large segment of women are not inside that house at all, but outside of it.

According to the Gender Policies Report compiled by INAPP in 2022, the female unemployment rate in Italy (at 9.2 percent) is higher than the male unemployment rate (at 6.8 percent), and the gap is even higher among the 15-24 year old population with unemployment rates of 32.8 percent for girls, and 27.7 percent for boys. Women are also those most often employed in part-time jobs, on precarious contracts or in low-paid, low-strategy sectors.

But the most striking figure is related to inactivity rates, which are almost double for women (43.3 percent) than for men (25.3 percent). And if so many women are officially 'inactive'-that is, not employed and not engaged in job search-it is largely due to the fact that unpaid care work falls mainly on their shoulders. In a country where daycare centers for children under three, or nursing homes for the elderly, are predominantly private or inaccessible due to high costs, it is women (including many immigrant women) who take charge by providing a vital and yet unrecognized, or socially devalued and underpaid service.

We must ask ourselves, then, whether really the fact that several women now occupy positions of power, and even the premiership of the country, is an advantage to those who instead continue to occupy the lower echelons, or who rake in the backyard of unemployment and unpaid care.

Giorgia Meloni's example is quite clear. Hailed by so many as an example and inspiration for Italian women, her election to the highest office of state actually risks undermining many achievements of the feminist movements of the past fifty years. In the Marche region led by Meloni's party, the right to abortion is virtually denied and the region has opposed the introduction of the abortion pill. What's more, although Meloni talks about introducing pro-birth measures and has promised to protect the mechanism that would allow more flexibility for women retiring, Fratelli d'Italia on the one hand threatens to eliminate the citizenship income that allows many poor women to plan a pregnancy, and on the other hand makes Opzione Donna more difficult especially for women without children.

That the Melonian invocation of women's centrality was purely instrumental in a fundamentally nationalist and anti-immigration framework, after all, was well understood the very moment Giorgia Meloni set foot in parliament as head of government. As soon as she ascended to the penthouse of power, she surrounded herself with men in key ministries, naming very few women to lead ministries considered secondary; she omitted the last names of the women she said built the ladder that enabled her to break the glass ceiling (thus denying the public sphere of these women and relegating them to anonymity); and insisted that she be called president with the masculine article, as if to reassure the party's entourage and base that her gender poses no threat, but rather reinforces patriarchal symbols of leadership.

The reality is that Giorgia Meloni, as well as Ursula van der Leyen, Christine Lagarde, or before them Theresa May for instance, do not represent a generic female united by the same interests for all. These 'leaders' actually represent the political interests of the political formations that brought them to power, as well as the interests of the classes to which they belong. It is not they who are betraying women, it is the myth of universal sisterhood already denounced by African American women and socialist and intersectional feminism that should no longer be taken seriously in our discussions. As Angela Davis, or Gloria Wekker put it well, the myth of sisterhood among women only reflects the needs and claims of middle-class white women. To believe that women at the top can extend a hand, or benefit women at the bottom, would be to re-propose a form of essentialism and naturalization of women's roles that the feminist movement has struggled against since its inception. ■

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