

Who cares?

The interweaving of social movements and local governments in the birth and quality of public childcare services.

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## **Introduction**

The presence and quality of childcare services has a crucial role in children well being and in their parents' capabilities to access resources by paid work. The existence of public child care services has a positive effect on parents' work life balance and provide parents more degrees of freedom in their choices in the allocation of time therefore positively contributing to their well-being. Given the major role played by mothers in Italy in unpaid child care activities this is particularly relevant to the development of women's well being. Addabbo and Picchio (2009) mentioned that, with reference to a particular town in Italy, women's social movement had a key role in the birth of childcare services in Modena.

In this study the authors will go more in depth in showing the links between childcare services and women's social movement in Modena, by going back to the mid of last century and by using documents and interviews to witnesses. The role of women's social movements in the birth of the services and its interweaving with local municipality governments taking into account also institutional constraints and norms is revealed. The paper aims also at reconstructing the role of women's social movements in affecting the laws regulating the diffusion and availability of the services at national level. A peculiarity of the public child care services is its participatory organization involving families, experts and professional carers in their managing. Another question we try to answer in this paper is how this participatory organization is connected to the way the services have been created in this town. Attention is paid to the development of this model and to its change in the last decades of the last century.

An attempt is made to analyse how also in the late decades of the last century social movements lead to an extension of the services and/or to a change in the selection criteria adopted by local municipality.

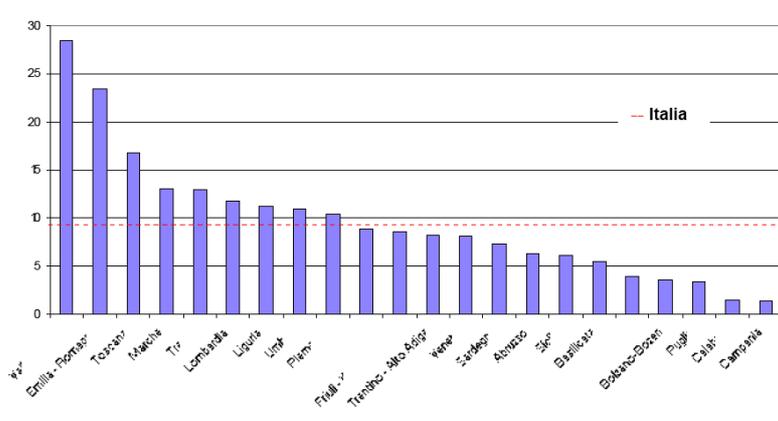
The case of Modena municipality where women's association played a crucial role in the very beginning of the development of the services is compared to the role played by mothers who received minimum income support in Naples in 2000 in the birth of a new project called 'Nidi di mamme'. This project allows mothers, who have characteristics that exposed them to a higher risk of being unemployed and excluded from paid regular work, to work and at the same time increases the

coverage of public services supplied to children in Naples (it is currently included in the list of services available to the inhabitants applying for a place in kindergarten). For the building of well-being it is important to analyse the social roots of childcare services now that the very diffusion of high quality childcare services in Italy is seriously constrained by lack of public funding and their presence is very heterogeneous across the country.

### **Child care services in Italy**

Child care services are very unevenly distributed in Italy, the places available in kindergartens according to Istat (2008a) data covered about 9.1% of children aged less than 3 years old. The low level of coverage reached by kindergartens in Italy contrasts with the target of 33% coverage fixed in 2002 by 2010 in Barcelona Council by EU leaders. The coverage rate is higher in the North eastern regions (where it reaches 14% of children aged less than 3) and lower in the South of Italy. It ranged from 1.5% in Campania to 28.5% in Valle d'Aosta followed by Emilia Romagna (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Places in Kindergarten on children aged less than 3 years old in Italy – year 2005

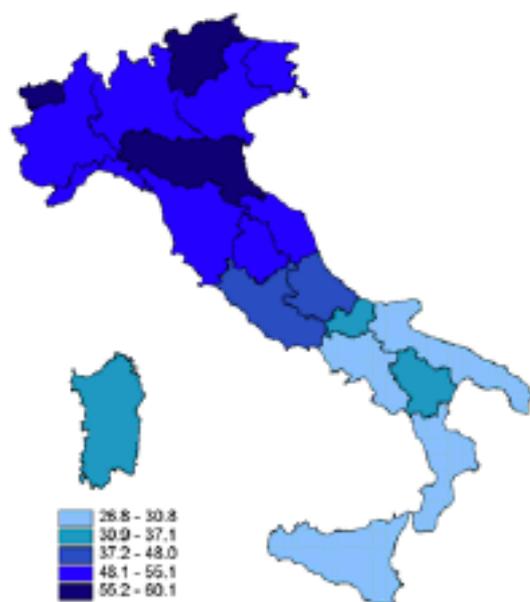


Sources: Istat (2008a) Figure 2.

Though it cannot be considered a mirror of the heterogeneous distribution observed in kindergarten one can see that also women’s employment rates have very different levels across Italian regions with a lower level in the regions located in the South of Italy where also kindergartens are less spread amongst children living in those regions. Women’s employment rates are lower in Italy than on average in Europe and, apart from Malta, Italy is characterized by the lowest employment rates for women in Europe and the difference is even higher if employment rates of women with children aged less than 12 are concerned (Istat, 2007).

In this paper we will focus on two municipalities located in regions characterized by opposite levels of women’s employment rates and presence of kindergarten: Modena located in Emilia-Romagna where women’s employment rates in 2007 in the district was 62,8% (Table 1) and the degree of coverage of kindergarten on children aged less than 3 was 31,4% in 2004/2005 (Addabbo et al. 2006) and Naples whose women’s employment rates in the district in year 2007 was 24,3% (Table 1) and kindergarten covered not more than 4% of children aged less than 3.

Figure 1 – Women aged 15-64 employment rates by regions – Italy 2005



Fonte: Istat, RCFL

Source: Istat (2007)

Table 1 – Employment rates by gender on average in year 2007 and areas

Age group	Naples			Modena			Italy		
	M	F	gap	M	F	gap	M	F	gap
25-34	61.1	28.6	32.5	90.6	76.3	14.3	81	59	22
35-44	79.2	29.9	49.3	96.7	81.5	15.2	91.1	62.3	28.8
15-64	58.5	24.3	34.2	79	62.8	16.2	70.7	46.6	24.1

Source: Istat (2008b)

## Where do they come from? At the roots of Modena kindergartens

The first childcare services for children aged less than 3 in Italy have been created from 1840 to 1850 with the name of crèches (*presepi*)<sup>4</sup>. They have been promoted by private charities and their origins can be traced in the philanthropic attempts to care for poor people living conditions. In year 1850 the “*Pio ricovero pei bambini lattanti*” was created by Giuseppe Sacchi and Laura Solera Mantegazza and funded by private institutions with the statutory aim of ‘helping honest and poor mothers’ who worked outside their houses feeding and caring their children.

From 1850 to 1880 other crèches have been created, more of them were concentrated in the Northern regions of the country (in Como,1873, Genoa,1874, Bergamo,1877) they had always a care-social aim and they often explicitly stated the aim of fighting the phenomenon, highly spread at the time, of the abandon of children connected to the difficulties in their assistance by very poor families.<sup>5</sup>

A new design of kindergarten can be traced at the beginning of last century with the aim of providing social and health services to maternity and childhood. In year 1924 the number of crèches in Italy was only 40. A National institution to protect maternity and childhood (ONMI Opera Nazionale per la protezione della Maternità e dell’Infanzia) was established in Italy by Law 2277/1925. ONMI crèches were devoted to the childcare of children aged less than 3 whose mothers were employed not in the household and only in special cases children living in very poor households could be admitted. ONMI kindergarten did not have educational aims, this can be also traced in the structure of their buildings divided in a sleeping room, a refectory and a hall where there were no educational tools that can be found only for elder children. ONMI Statutory rules were not modified after the second world war and the number of personnel employed with respect to the number of children was not fit for developing educational activities, moreover the access to the building was not allowed to people not involved in the managing of the structure and relationship with the family was actually not an issue.

In December 1970 the kindergarten in Italy were 765: 604 run by ONMI, 59 by firms, 59 by private institutions and 43 by public institutions.

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<sup>4</sup> Catarsi (1982), Lucchini and Sala La Guardia (1980).

<sup>5</sup> Bertolini, Callari Galli, Palmonari, Saitta (1988), p.40.

In 1971 in the same month the Italian Parliament approved a Law (Law 1204/1971) establishing the rights for mothers to maternity leaves and a Law (Law 1044/1971) that established a 5 years plan to create municipal kindergarten with the cofunding of the State («*Piano quinquennale per l'istituzione di asili nido comunali con il concorso dello Stato*»); the aim was to create at least 3,800 kindergarten between 1972 and 1976 and, though mixed with other aims more connected to the social assistance role of the services, the Law referred to the educational role of kindergarten. ONMI was dismissed by Law 698/1975 that transferred the functions on kindergarten to the Municipalities.

What was the role played by women's association in the birth of public childcare services in Italy?

Since 1960<sup>6</sup>, Women Italian Union (UDI - *Unione Donne Italiane*) was active in the debate on public childcare services and presented a project of Law to transfer the functions on childcare services from ONMI to municipalities.

In 1962 a popular petition was promoted at national level by UDI for the institution of public childcare services. In year 1964 a new petition was launched that lead to the collection of 50,000 signatures to support the proposal of building 20,000 kindergartens in 10 years. This petition has been presented together with a proposal of Law to the Italian Parliament in 1965.

The debate at national level was also reflected at the local level with the organization of conferences (like in 1965 a public conference on kindergartens), petitions and a strong participation to the movement that supported the birth of the public childcare services ruled by the municipalities in Modena reflected also in the importance that from the very beginning the kindergarten gave to participation.

The role of women's associations in the building of the child care public services system in the town is witnessed also by their participation and promotion of public movements to open public kindergartens. This is well documented by the reconstruction of the process leading to the birth of the kindergarten in Bonacini street in Modena that was accompanied by a collection of families' applications to the kindergarten (that was still closed) and requests in favour of its public management by means of UDI representatives, public debates, and a protest

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<sup>6</sup> A conference on the reform of the assistance to maternity and childhood promoted by UDI was held in Bologna in May 1960. A new conference on 'Women's work and childhood rights' was held in Rome in July 1962. The analysis of conference proceedings shows that there was already a new concept of kindergarten with an important role played by the education of the child and participation.

extended to the inhabitants of the district that led to the occupation of the building and finally to the opening of the public kindergarten in year 1969.

In 1965 the Modena-UDI- committee presented a request to the local government for the institution of a survey on the childcare situation regarding children aged less than 3. In 1966 Modena municipality settled a Council commission for studying the state of kindergartens in the town. The survey showed that 4.2% of people living in the town was aged less than 3 and that the only kindergarten in the town covered 80 children only 1.24% of the children living in the town. The Commission concluded that the institution of kindergarten was crucial and that they were a crucial tool for social services in a modern society: “indispensabili strumenti di un servizio sociale per una moderna comunità”.<sup>7</sup>

Women associations played an important role also in the creation of a Committee for the building and management of kindergarten (“Comitato per la costituzione ed il funzionamento di asili nido”) in 1968 subscribed by tiles firms in the district of Modena having the role of:

- 1) collecting and managing funds erogated by tiles firms in the district that subscribed the statement for the constitution of kindergarten;
- 2) creation, by using firms’ funds and in favour of them, of the agreements with local institutions to create and manage kindergarten according to art. 11 Law 860/1950.

Tiles firms in Modena were actually the first ones in Italy that in order to improve female employment committed themselves to the contribution of funds to create kindergarten.

The code for the management of public kindergarten signed by Modena Municipality in July 1969 stated, together with their educational role and structure, that a Kindergarten Council has to be created to link ‘kindergarten-households and community’.<sup>8</sup>

The interweaving of women’s associations and local government for the construction of public childcare services can be traced by the analysis of the archives of UDI and interviews to those people who participated to that phase.

According to UDI archives in February 1970 a delegation of UDI representatives

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<sup>7</sup> Modena municipality 1966, p.6 from Rosanna Galli’s Archive at Centro Documentazione Donna di Modena.

<sup>8</sup> Modena municipality, 1969, art.7, from Rosanna Galli’s Archive at Centro Documentazione Donna di Modena.

from Modena took part to the national meeting on the creation of kindergarten in Rome. The Major of Modena at the time (Rubes Triva) accompanied the UDI delegation and in his speech at the meeting said: 'I wanted to present these opinions to show that I fully subscribe the UDI's initiative, and to underline that, in my opinion, local governments have a double role of interlocutors and interested protagonists'.

In December 1971, when the Law 1044 was approved by the Italian Parliament, in the Municipality of Modena there were already 3 kindergartens (2 ruled by the Municipality and 1 by ONMI) and 160 places were available.

After 10 years (in 1982) the Municipality Council acknowledged the increase in the demand of this service and fixed a target of covering 25% of the population aged less than 3. In the same year the management of the public services moved from the Social Sector to the Education Sector stressing its educational role.

During the last decades the childcare services developed with new places being created and new types of service being experimented. Important innovations, given an increasing demand of the service and the change in the composition of the population living in Modena, are the change occurred in the selection criteria adopted by local municipality for the access to a still rationed supply. The selection criteria involved the consultation of community committees that had a voice in the establishment of them. Through time different claims have been made by people belonging to groups more easily excluded on the basis of the selection criteria from the services. Changes in the composition of the population are reflected in changes in the selection criteria that now can increase the participation to the services of strata of the society otherwise excluded like young precarious workers or immigrants whose children, according to previous selection criteria, used to be excluded from the services.

### **A link between family, community and education system.**

Public childcare services in the region where Modena municipality is located acknowledged from the very beginning the importance of participation. Social participation is considered as essential in the functioning of the service.<sup>9</sup> The first experiences of kindergarten in Emilia Romagna have been characterized by a relevant participation of families.<sup>10</sup> Social management of kindergartens in Emilia Romagna involved at the same level parents, personnel, experts and administrators.

Over the years important changes occurred in the social participation and in the development of the link between family, community and kindergartens. Starting from the end of 1970s participation is structured in institutions like the management committee, and formal occasion to communicate like section meetings. In the 1980's statistics on the participation to different moments and committees show a lower participation to wider meetings and a higher participation by families to section meetings.<sup>11</sup>

Public childcare services are now acting also as an important social integration platform (migrant families meet 'local' families, and sometimes collaborate also through social governance of the services).<sup>12</sup>

New projects have developed involving the participation not only of parents but by the extended family with the active involvement of elderly people or adults, via the deployment of their competences [taking care of the buildings, organizing small agricultural activities, etc.] and this shows a role of childcare services as a device for strengthening social tissue.

The role played by institutions in meeting and collaborating with representatives of families, in the discussion of alternative small budgets spending, or projects by

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<sup>9</sup> See art. 6 Law 1044/1971 and Region Emilia Romagna Law 15/1973 art. 2, comma 3°.

<sup>10</sup> On the role of social participation see D'Alfonso, Ferrari, Nora, Torricelli (1992), Ghedini (1988), Saitta (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Changes occurred in the social participation in the kindergartens in Emilia Romagna are documented in Ingrosso (1988).

<sup>12</sup> This role can be traced by the collection of experiences and through interviews with the direction of the Education Sector of Modena Municipality (interviews to Dr Mauro Francia, and Ass. Adriana Querzè, February 2009). We aim at expanding this analysis with further collection of experiences.

developing opportunities of listening each others of institutions and citizens is increasing the role of childcare services as a space of public learning.

Experience of participative urban planning concerning childcare services themselves or the town (like the design of bench to be settled in public places in the town with a children's design developed in the services) show a role of kindergartens as a space of institutional innovation.

### **Mothers' kindergarten in Naples**

The experience of 'Nidi di mamme' starts in 2000 in Naples from the request presented by a group of mothers who were beneficiaries of a public subsidy (minimum insertion income) to a non profit territorial organization (*Associazione Quartieri Spagnoli*) to elaborate a new project that could involve them as workers and mothers. The project is now part of the supply of child care services and it has been sustained by the University, non profit organizations and the Municipality of Naples, though it underwent difficulties in its funding.

Women were trained and have been inserted in the educational system as 'auxiliary mothers' together with educators in 8 new structures called 'Nidi di mamme', attended by more than 150 children a year.

The positive effect of this project on the well being of the women involved in it can be traced by their experiences in terms of different dimensions (being trained, working, caring) and it contributes to increase the child care supply in an area characterized by a very low diffusion of child care services and with special reference to children belonging to poor families.

Moreover mothers' kindergarten can also be seen as an attempt to create a link between kindergarten, households and community. A link that was acknowledged and stated at the very beginning of the life of public kindergartens in Modena, in the first Code for the management of public kindergartens subscribed by Modena municipality in 1969. The importance of this link in the current experience of *Nidi di Mamme* is acknowledged by interviews to personnel involved in the project and can be traced by its very origin in the link between mothers and *Associazione Quartieri Spagnoli* deeply involved in the community.

According to a microsimulation analysis on the implications of minimum insertion income that includes the evaluation of unpaid work activity,<sup>13</sup> women who are in families eligible for minimum insertion income are on average more exposed to the risk of being excluded from the activation part of the policy. Women involved in the project *Nidi di mamme* have a very low level of education and are at a high risk of social exclusion. Therefore this project is also in line with the policy proposals, based on the gender impact of this policy, of promoting women's participation to activation policies.

## Conclusions

The role of kindergartens in the development of well being is documented by the experiences analysed in this paper. Different dimensions of well being are affected by kindergartens depending on their organization and on the degree of social participation enacted from the capability of participation to social life and interaction with others to capability of being educated,<sup>14</sup> and parents' capability of taking care of others (through the exchange that occur between the family member and the kindergarten educators). The presence of kindergartens allows also the development of parents' capability of having access to work and working and this, given the current distribution of labour, plays a crucial role for women.

The supply of public child care services for children aged less than 3 in Italy on average is still far from the target stated at the European level in year 2002 and they are also very unevenly spread by regions. After having shown data on these inequalities we focussed on kindergartens in two towns in areas that are in an opposite situation as far as kindergarten's diffusion and women's employment rates are concerned.

These areas are analysed with special regards to:

- the role of women's association in the creation of municipalities run kindergartens in Modena

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<sup>13</sup> Addabbo and Baldini (2003).

<sup>14</sup> The analysis of different phases in the development of kindergarten in Italy shows that this role was initially absent (consider for instance the case of ONMI kindergartens) while it has a crucial role and importance in the current construction of the service.

- the role of a particular group of women and territorial non profit association in the birth of a new type of child care services in Naples
- the link between institutions, family and community and social participation (both).

Both experiences show the relevance of the link between community, family and the service. In the decades of the experiences of childcare services in Modena a change in the social participation involved in the initial project took place together with new roles played by the services in participative urban planning, in strengthening the social tissue and as a space of public learning. The almost ten years experience in *Nidi di mamme* can lead to an assessment to its role in the different dimensions of well being of the people involved in the project, in its sustainability (the project experienced difficulties in its funding), in the demand for child care in the town and in the community that would require a deeper analysis.

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