Empowering women and children: an empirical analysis of human development in Rome and Caltanissetta

ALBA FRANCESCA CANTA

1. **Affiliazione Autore/Authors' information**
   Roma Tre University, Italy

2. **Contatti / Authors' contact**
   albafrancesca.canta[a]uniroma3.it

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Alba Francesca Canta

Roma Tre University, Italy

Email: albafrancesca.canta[a]uniroma3.it

Abstract

Amidst the various approaches that have focused on the importance of cultural processes in organising societies and institutions lies Amartya Sen's capability approach, a multidimensional paradigm that assigns to the cultural issue a specific importance. In particular, the author relates the cultural question to the one of women, that still suffer deep discrimination, although their situation seems to have improved. The world of everyday life is structured according to a specific system of sex and gender roles, norms, habitus, beliefs, values and practices that perpetuate gender stereotypes and violence (Connell 2012). These practices, by the way, do not have an isolated impact and do not only affect women: besides being a global issue, some empirical research shows the impact of violence and discrimination on their children (Heckert et al. 2019; UNICEF 2006; Course 2006; Levendosky et al. 2003). In the wave of these studies, this contribution presents some results of research conducted in 2020 on women's empowerment and the effects on children's well-being in two Italian territories. By using mixed methodology, the results highlight the persistence of discrimination and symbolic violence the women experience in many spheres of life. To this is added the impact that such discrimination has on the well-being of children and the importance of variables such as education, health and maternal empowerment as positive factors for children's empowerment.

Keywords: culture, women, children.

1. Women and children's empowerment: the capability approach

The culture and the processes that define its characteristics have always represented and continue to represent even today essential factors when discussing development, whether be it economic, political, territorial or human. For this reason, many approaches in different disciplinary areas have focused on the importance of cultural processes in the construction of society, in the strengthening of human capacities and in the organization of institutions capable of promoting a development of value (Schütz, 1974; Bourdieu, 2002; Sen, 2004)[1]. Especially in the field of human development, within these approaches fits the Amartya Sen's capability approach, a multidimensional paradigm born in 1983 with the aim of redefining the concept of development, well-being and equality, bringing the person and his freedom *to live a life of value*[2] back to the centre of analysis. By making capabilities,

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[1] Culture plays a fundamental role in maintaining and enhancing the quality of life and well-being of individuals and communities. Cultural goods, practices and expressions are fundamental vectors for the creation, transmission and reinterpretation of the values, skills and beliefs through which individuals and communities express the meaning they give to their lives and development (UNESCO, p.84).

[2] It is a specific expression that Sen uses in his approach.

functionings and agency the three fundamental pillars of his approach[3], Sen identified several key factors to consider when talking about human development. The Author focuses not only on the importance of possessing material resources, which are essential, but on the necessity of other variables that allow their use, such as formal and substantial freedoms. Therefore, Sen speaks of development and equality from in terms of *capabilities*, which refers to people's fundamental abilities to live a life worthy of being called such (Sen, 1999) and freedoms, elements that are in most cases culturally and socially determined. For this reason, the Author assigns to the cultural question a specific importance in his analysis and relates it, in particular, to the issue of women: although they may seem improved, they still suffer from strong discrimination. The worlds of everyday life, as well as those of the family, sport, culture, school, job, and religion are still organized according to a very precise distinction, first men and then, perhaps, women. They live side by side, but gender inequalities remain the strongest barriers that exist (Sassatelli, 2016).

What characterizes the complex issue of gender, then, is the existence of social practices consolidated over time that can favour or limit women's ability *to live a life of value*: the term *social* encompasses a range of elements such as values, norms, habitus, the quality of institutions, the educational system, interactions between people, the temporary public policies of a territory (Bourdieu, 2002; Sen, 2004). Women in most countries do not have the resources and support for the fundamental functions of human life; they are less nourished than men, less healthy, less educated, more vulnerable and subject to sexual abuse and to physical and psychological violence (Nussbaum, 2001). Among other things, this situation of discrimination knows no temporal or geographical limits: even in countries considered to be more developed, women live in conditions that limit their possibilities to be empowered. The empowerment process is therefore based on a set of conditions that are *sine qua non* for it to become a reality: the cultural assumption that enshrines human equality, respect for diversity, values and the persistence of democratic cultural norms (Mannheim & Campbell Stewart, 2017). It becomes therefore a priority to pay attention to all the factors that determine the level of women's empowerment, even if they do not seem to be directly related to it.

The capability approach also pays particular attention to the impact of empowerment on other people. Empirical evidence shows the causal link between women's empowerment and children's well-being: more educated women, for example, are more aware of healthy nutrition and health practices for children, have a greater capacity to cope with economic hardship and are better informed about the existence of public childcare services (UNICEF, 2006); yet, a woman with a higher level of decision-making power will have a greater impact on children's health, education and freedom of expression (Bessant, 2014; Ibrahim et al., 2015; Heckert et al., 2019). It is therefore impossible to address the issue of women without considering the impact on children, who become active agents and recipients of empowerment policies. This process presupposes a new concept of the child: from an early age, he/she becomes the protagonist of his/her life, although he/she needs to be guided. The process also presupposes the need to equip them with skills, critical knowledge and social responsibility by providing them with appropriate tools to become conscious and thinking people (Nussbaum, 2001). This complex framework gives rise to the main questions of the empirical research, which is presented synthetically in the next section, and which aims to study the level of human development of wom-

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[3] For an in-depth discussion compare Sen (1999).

en and children in two Italian areas, Rome and Caltanissetta, using the capability approach and mixed research methods.

2. The Research methods

Methodology, made up of the lines of interpretation that each researcher develops from his/her own experience or from the object of research, accompanies the researcher along a difficult path: it aims to answer specific research questions, to achieve objectives and to confirm or falsify assumptions. In this study, mixed methods have been used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2001) with the aim of approaching the object of analysis from different angles, knowing that "science is not concerned with the search for certainty or probability, but (*is interested in*) criticizing them in the hope of learning from mistakes and arriving at better explanations" (Popper, 1967, pp. 392-393).

The qualitative methods used in the research were:

- Secondary analysis, on human development, gender issues and the relationship between women's and children's empowerment; - Key social and institutional informant's interviewees (n. 9), experts on gender and empowerment, through semi-structured interviews (Bichi, 2000)[4]; - Project techniques (n. 4), with women with a lower level of education: the attempt was to bring out their experiences in the field of discrimination and the impact on children. This research used techniques such as *word association*, in which the researcher asks the interviewee to associate a word with a specific image, and choice *ordering*, characterized by the presence of batteries of specific words that the interviewee has to order according to the importance attached to them[5]; - Focus group (n. 2), composed of seven mothers for each group, with a higher level of education and differentiated by age and employment. The aim was to explore the gender issue and its impact on children through specific *stimuli*[6]; the variables tested in this study were: discrimination, social relations, extra-cultural activities, local services, family of origin, institutions, school skills, relations with children/ e. The focus groups were transcribed in detail and analysed by the researcher herself; The quantitative method used in the research was:

- Questionnaire (n. 106), for all women distinguished by age (18-64 years), employment and marital status. The sample was selected using the avalanche method, one of the non-probability methods (Statera, 1982): starting from the Soroptimist Club[7] present in both Rome and Caltanissetta, the questionnaire was administered to the members of the club and then to other women identified by the club according to the characteristics outlined. The questionnaire was made up of seven batter-

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[4] They were interviewed, for example, sociologists of gender and cultural processes, Presidents of clubs or gender associations, both in Rome and in Caltanissetta. The interviews were transcribed in detail and analysed by the researcher (Corrao, 2000).

[5] Such techniques are important in cases the study wants to investigate particularly sensitive issues, such as gender discrimination, and are used with people who may feel inhibited in a wide discussion. It can also be used together with other qualitative techniques to deepen the object of the study (Babbie, 2010).

[6] The focus group is a group discussion with 8/12 subjects chosen according to selected criteria. The aim is to stimulate discussion thanks to specific topics proposed based on the variables under study. This technique is particularly important since it allows us to capture more sincere experiences. In our research this technique has allowed us to deepen themes on discrimination that have also been the basis for the questionnaire (Bichi, 2000; Babbie, 2010).

[7] The Soroptimist Club is an international club of women and for women that constantly work on discrimination's issues.

ies: Work and income, family of origin, Extra-activities and social relations, Education, Cooperation with partners and decision-making autonomy in the family, Health, Nutrition. The questionnaire was also divided into two parts: the first related to the situation of women and the second to that of children[8]. The different research techniques, used in a sequential order, allowed to deepen both the same variables, for an integration, and different variables and allowed to verify or falsify the research hypotheses. The results will be presented in the next section.

Table 1: Methodology used during the research.

Technique	Who
In-depth interviews with social and institutional Key informant	9 experts On women and empowerment (sociologist of gender and cultural processes, President of clubs and association of gender, national councillor, etc.)
Project techniques • Word Choice Ordering • Word Association	4 mothers chosen for: • Level of education (lower education) • Job (Retired/disemployed, Public/Private/Autonomous)
Focus Group (2)	7 mothers (each group) chosen for: • Level of education (higher education) • Job (Retired/disemployed, Public/Private/Autonomous)
Questionnaire	106 mothers chosen for: • Age (18-64 anni) • Job (Retired/disemployed, Public/Private/Autonomous) • Marital status (Single, Connivant/Married)

3. Case studies: a comparative human development analysis in Rome and Caltanissetta

Based on a secondary analysis and previous studies in the field of human development, the following research questions emerged:

1. Is the level of women's empowerment higher in Rome than in Caltanissetta?

2. Is there a relationship between female empowerment and children's empowerment in the two areas? And, consequently,

3. If such a relationship exists, is the level of children's empowerment higher in Rome than in Caltanissetta?

There are several reasons for choosing these two cities, including the fact that they allow us to see both differences, such as the territorial dimension, and similarities, such as gender culture and structural opportunities. Rome is a metropolis that offers greater structural, employment and development opportunities for women and children, but at the same time it is highly fragmented within itself, so that the level of human development of women varies greatly depending on the neighbourhood considered. This leads to a certain similarity with Caltanissetta, which, on the contrary, is a medium-sized town in Sicily with fewer opportunities for human and gender development. For this reason, it was hypothesised that the level of women's empowerment could be lower in Caltanissetta, on the wave of previous analyses that confirm this hypothesis (Istat, 2019).

But what are the variables that have an impact on the level of women's empowerment? The hypothesis was that women's empowerment is influenced by the opportunity structure, in terms of living in Rome or Caltanissetta and quality of insti-

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[8] For problems related to the privacy and the age of many, it was not possible to interview children directly: the questions were answered by the mothers. This necessarily represents a limit for the research that we will try to deepen in another research.

tutions; territorial culture; socio-economic status of the family of origin; relationship and cooperation with the partner. It was also necessary to define the measures of empowerment in order to operationalize it, since it refers to a plurality of situations: in our case it was measured as the level of education, including questions about the possibility to study and choose the educational path[9] ; work and pay, also looking at the possibility to choose the type of work and to receive a decent income[10]; good health; leisure activities, including the possibility to choose them without conditioning; decision-making autonomy in family, in terms of freedom of expression, participation in family decisions and participation in decisions concerning children[11]. Similarly, children's well-being was measured in terms of education; good health; healthy diet; leisure activities and the ability to choose them, assuming that the influencing factors were the variables identified to measure women's empowerment[12].

Based on these questions, important results have emerged: the general situation was problematic in both territories and discrimination was, as suggested by hypothesis, deeply rooted.

Women have repeatedly highlighted the many forms of discrimination they face in their daily lives, particularly in the workplace where male authority prevails over that of women. The discriminatory language, the long and exhausting working hours, the lack of free time to devote to their children are all problems underlined by the women both in Rome and in Caltanissetta. In particular, those women who have embarked on a career path have encountered strong obstacles: from discrimination by men to discrimination by women who have undergone a so-called "masculinization" process. In line with other previous studies (Santagati et al., 2003; Bartholini, 2016), therefore, a vertical and horizontal gender segregation has emerged in the present research: many women spoke of the difficulty of leading a dignified life without the help of their partner, because of work discrimination. Both married and single mothers stated that the presence of a partner favours a better standard of living, since women's employment opportunities are very limited, even in the case of a higher level of education. The experiences reported by 'our' women also highlighted the impact of work discrimination on their children, not being able to be present in their important moments or to offer them decent living conditions.

> «I have not been there... because of an exaggerated sense of duty, and I have to say that this stems from the underlying discrimination, because if you are a man, you can systematically leave, a woman who asks for free time for children and, for the family, is accused of being a woman. The children suffer from this situation; I regret it [...] that is, I have a privileged job to the detriment of the children». (interviewee A – Caltanissetta)

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[9] The questions were, for example: "did you choose the course of studies that you most liked?"; "If you could have chosen, would you have continued to study?".

[10] The questions were, for example: "did you choose your job?"; "If you went back, would you do the same choice?"; and with Likert scale (very much/very/enough/little/very little): "I earn enough to: travel; have healthy nutrition; afford health care; have a decent home; be able to pay all expenses; to engage in extra activities".

[11] The capability approach looks not only at what a person does, but also at the freedom/conditionality that led to the choice.

[12] In the wave of the Human Development Index (HDI) and grouping all the variables, in the study were created two indexes: the Empowerment's Index and the Children's well-being Index. The indicators to measure the condition of empowerment has been chosen according to the Oxford Poverty and Human Initiative (OPHI) questionnaire (https://ophi.org.uk/about/) and previous studies on children's wellbeing (Biggeri et al., 2011).

This is the experience of a woman during the focus group who talked about the discrimination she suffered in some areas of her life and the constant feeling of guilt because of it, and its impact on her children. Motherhood is a very complicated issue: some women during the focus groups declared they had to leave their jobs for motherhood, unlike the few who, on the contrary, have reached top positions, but with difficulties.

> «I lost my job because of maternity... and to be back now, for a judge [laughs]... because otherwise I would now be relegated to being precarious». (interviewee B - Rome)

The story belongs to a RAI journalist who has been in a precarious situation for many years and, just when she decided to become a mother, she faced several problems. In this sense, emerges a clear distinction between work and private life, which the women did not want to renounce because work is fundamental, but the quality of life derives from a series of different situations. Among all these difficulties, there is also the lack or exuberance of support services offered to mothers, both in Caltanissetta, whose situation has often led women to give up work, and in Rome, where distances and the lack of a family network have conducted women to experience great difficulties.

> «The first two years with my first child were very difficult for me. My parents are in Sicily and my husband, also a journalist, was suddenly sent to work without warning. I was alone with this child for three days and I have a painful memory... from small moments of love to bad moments». (interviewee C - Rome).

This is the experience of one woman during the focus group, which talked about the difficulties of facing motherhood alone, without a family because of the distance, and often without a husband because of work. In this experience and in many others, motherhood turns from a source of joy to a source of pain. From the focus group's experiences emerged two situations: on one hand, a similarity between the two territories, and, on the other hand, a clear difference in terms of empowerment between the women who continued to work and those who left, regardless of territory. The former faced more difficulties and discrimination but became more aware of the situation of women; the latter faced less discrimination - precisely because they left their jobs[13] - but seemed to have internalized it to such an extent that they were not aware of it. In many cases, low levels of women's empowerment are dictated by a lack of awareness of one's own *status*, because of its internalization (Sen, 1999). Although the experiences were similar in both cities, the first and second research questions were answered in the affirmative: women in Caltanissetta have a lower level of empowerment than women in Rome, and this has an impact on the well-being of their children, who consequently have a lower level of well-being than children in Rome. The results were confirmed by the regression study carried out by constructing indices of women's empowerment and children's well-being.

The first variable that emerged as determinant for women's empowerment is the so-called opportunity structure, which refers to the set of services that are built *ad*

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[13] The fact that they abandoned their job is a sign of lower level of empowerment: 'our' women that live in Caltanissetta had no possibility to continue to work, unless the women that live in Rome that decided to continue. In conclusion, women in Caltanissetta seemed to have faced less discrimination but are less empowered than the roman women.

hoc according to the needs and demands of a community and that necessarily reflects the values, norms and habitus of those who build such services (Sen, 1999). In line with the hypothesis, it has emerged that living or growing up in Caltanissetta decreases the probability that women and children have a higher level of empowerment[14]. Together with this variable, there are many others that arose as key factors that can hinder or favour the empowerment condition. Regarding the situation of 'our' women, it emerged that the level of education of the family of origin and the degree of partner's education have a positive impact on women in terms of level of education, autonomy in decision-making in the family, employment and empowerment, as an aggregate index. In this sense, a higher level of family socio-economic status corresponds to a higher level of female education, a proficient level of self-determination and freedom to make valuable choices, awareness of the own abilities and choice of work. Similarly, an educated man favours women's empowerment because he understands her importance as an integral part of society, although this process is influenced by many cultural and social variables. The level of partner's education also emerges as a factor influencing the children's empowerment: it has a positive impact on their well-being that includes the level of education, health, nutrition and leisure activities, variables aggregated in one index. This seems particularly important and confirms the need to invest simultaneously in education of women and men.

The regression study also confirmed the impact of women's empowerment on children's well-being and the results emerged are interesting. Although much human development research emphasizes the impact of maternal educational level and decision-making power on children's condition (Sen, 1999), in this research the women's level of education was not statistically influent. On the contrary, maternal employment affects children's well-being, together with other variables such as the partner's help, especially at home and with the children, the leisure activities carried out by the mother and the opportunity structure (living in Rome has a positive impact).

The effect of women's employment on children's well-being is essential because it represents the situation that women have been living for a long time: the discrimination they suffer, enables them to influence their children not because of their internal factors, but because of the structural possibilities offered by the territory and the culture. In fact, there is no direct correspondence between the level of female education (which is relatively high in Italy) and access to the labour market (which is relatively low): for this reason, the children's education is often a direct consequence of women's economic resources and their freedoms (Oppo et al., 2000). Moreover, there are no explicit prohibition preventing women from entering the labour market, but cultural and social prohibitions that still relegate them to a certain area, especially in the private sphere.

Nonetheless,

> «We have not achieved the goals we women hope for so much! We have a central role in the family, that no one takes it away, but it is not enough! (Men) have no interest until this happens, and until this is not understood by man, this equality will never be because it has remained in the roots and emerges [accentuates

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[14] The variable 'opportunity structure' was measured in different way with different research methods: in the focus group, that allows to have a deeper experience, was considered as the culture and the services in the territory; in the questionnaire, was considered in terms of living in Rome or in Caltanissetta.

the tone of the voice] ... in every moment and occasion it emerges». (interviewee D - Caltanissetta)

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is possible to highlight the importance of the two main factors that have emerged from the study as variables of greater influence on both women's and children's empowerment: the partner's level of education and the structural opportunities of the territory considered. To these can be added the cultural and educational systems of a territory, social factors that can influence society (Cersosimo & Van Kleeck, 2020; Cersosimo & Goldmark, 2022). Especially the variable 'men's education' seems particularly important: in addition to the direct impact it has on the situation of women and children, it is one of the initial factors from which the whole process of empowerment begins. In fact, if many forms of gender discrimination stem from the existence of a deeply rooted male culture, and if men influence the process of women's and children's empowerment, then it is necessary to start from and work on men's education, necessarily alongside that of society as a whole.

Although education alone is not enough, since practices and ideas of discrimination often prescind from it, it stands as one of the essential tools both for women, who are often unaware of their potential, and for men and children. Moreover, given the strong relationship between the empowerment of women and children (Sen, 1999; Heckert et al., 2019; Canta, 2020), investing in education from an early age could break the intergenerational chains of discrimination still present today (Piccone Stella, Saraceno, 1996). In this regard, several scholars (Dewey, 1916; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2001; Morin, 2015; Mannheim & Campbell Stewart, 2017; Banerjee & Duflò, 2020) emphasize the importance of widening the concept of education. They highlight the need to establish a broad and solid educational system that can help people from an early age to acquire those critical, cosmopolitan and imaginative abilities (Nussbaum, 2001) that contribute to the formation of *new social beings* capable of thinking. Such a system presupposes concerted action from various educational agencies - not just school - moving on to a fruitful and open dialogue, pluralism and respect for human beings. These factors appear to be relevant for the dissemination of a democratic culture and a democratic personality, its direct manifestation, which respects people, and in this case, women and children. Accepting the challenges of women question means rethinking an inclusive and open society where prejudices have no place, recognizing the importance of women and children in the public and private spheres.

This process inaugurates a crisis of traditional institutions, of society, of norms and values that have been designed only for men until now (Santagati, 2022). As, in fact, Marianne Weber would have said, whose words are reported by Barbara Grüning (2018, p. 1)

> «the transformations of modern society offer women new forms of participation in cultural production in the public space. The heart of the problem, rather, lies in the way in which dominant philosophical and sociological thought has assigned objective culture and subjective culture to two opposing social spaces, "public" and "private", relegating, in fact, the cultivation of a culture subjective to the female gender to the confined and idealized space of the domestic sphere».

Alba Francesca Canta

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