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**WHO CARES FOR WHOM? THE EXPERIENCE OF  
ITALIAN MULTIPURPOSE SURVEYS**

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***1. Introduction***

In Italy, informal support network plays an important role for types and quantity of assistance that it is able to provide. It involves a large number of individuals in a big flow of helps. The crucial role of this network arises from the reduction process of welfare policies resulting from the worsening of economic and demographic conditions that had assured their functioning. In addition, population ageing produces an increase of needing care people, and tends to be associated with a gradual decline in the aggregate helping capacity of informal support networks. Help capacity and resiliency of informal support network are related to the size and composition of the primary potential support group, of which the real support group is a subset. The birth decline, the increase of female employment rate and of matrimonial instability weaken strongly the support and care function that are been always carried out by household and, in particular, by women in Italy.

Measures and concepts of social support represent a topic of special interest for social statistics. In recent years, they have represented a subject of several discussions, in terms of survey methodology, too.

In the 1980s, the Italian National Statistics Institute began to collect data on the dimensions and characteristics of the help informal network (*Households Behaviour and Structures* survey), and a Multipurpose survey<sup>1</sup> (*4<sup>th</sup> cycle*) dealt with this issue again in 1990-91. The questionnaires sections provided a picture of the main flows of given and received helps, and detailed information (help typology, people who gave and received helps, reasons, frequency) about helps considered most demanding by respondents.

Human support systems cover both the activities of the informal network, as well as those of formal organisations and private services that provide various kinds of assistance to persons and groups. Thus, to enlarge the picture of the support resources, each year, since 1993, the Multipurpose survey on *Aspects of Every Day-Life* collected data on paid caring activities and domestic work which households can resort (assistance service, domestic service, baby sitting). Some results of the above mentioned surveys will be examined in the next paragraphs.

In sum, during last years we added by different surveys some precious information to recompose the support networks mosaic; furthermore, an approach that permits to analyse flows of formal and informal helps in a more comprehensive view represents the decisive step in this direction. With this aim, the Italian National Statistics Institute is preparing a new Multipurpose survey on *Household and Social Subjects* whose contents will be described in the last paragraph.

***2. Informal support network: size and characteristics***

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s, Italian National Statistics Institute recognised the need for an innovative, periodic survey which would provide information on a number of emerging social and socio-economic issue. The result was the initiation of a System of Multipurpose Surveys on Households which, at present, cover a cycle of six core topics (household and social subjects, health, citizen's safety, leisure time, time use, demand of tourism; each survey on a sample of 24,000 households) and a yearly survey on several *Aspects of Every Day-Life*.

There are different kinds of help, in different directions, with heterogeneous reasons: 8 million helps in one month, about 100 million help a year: this is the estimate of helps from June 1990 to May 1991. A very remarkable datum if compared to the use of public and private services: in one month 15 million people resort to medical care, 8 million people recourse to diagnostic exams in one year, only 500,000 to home treatment services. 15% of population give help, 19% of households receive help, with an average of two types of help each: the trend is toward adding different kinds of help (assistance for housework, for example, or escort and bureaucratic help) for those case where help is greatly needed, in particular for households with elderly people or disabled.

The prevailing types of help are assistance and care (40.2%) and after housework (14.6%). Services are connected with daily routine inside household and do not require specific skills from help providers.

Medical help represent 7.4% of the total amount of help. This type of help is mainly provided when there are health problems with invalidism or temporary health problems. In taking care of the sick the role of relatives, whether cohabiting or not, is important. Even if this is not a highly specialised help, the psychological support provided in the rehabilitation phase is very important, because the needs of the sick are taken into account without breaking habits existing before the illness. Because 40% of medical help is provided to non relatives, it can be assumed the existence of a friend, neighbourhood, voluntary network. On the whole, in the informal network helps related to assistance and care prevail on more instrumental helps, such as economic help (9.8%), work and study help (12.4%). Escort, hospitality and bureaucratic help reach 8% and 9%.

The informal network operates in these areas, it is of remarkable importance to outline who receives help and how help is organised (table 1). Relations with close relatives are prevailing (ascending, descending, brothers and cognates), but within close relatives the most important flow of help is about parents and children (42.3%). However if only distant relatives and brothers and sisters are considered, it is more frequent that support is given by a non relative (friend, neighbourhood, voluntary network). This underlines, on one side the familiar character of the informal network, but on the other side the deep modifications that are taking place in the relations with the primary social network, regarding the weight of the different existing figures. Every state of need is faced by a number of responses; from invalidism reasons (26.6%), to general problems of health (17.6%), to the need of company (13.1%). Each type of help is supplied for specific reasons: medical care is provided for health reasons with invalidism (65.1%), for care and assistance the set of reasons for providing help is wider: invalidism, help, need of company are on the same level.

The character of provided help does not seem to be contingent, *una tantum*; because the mechanism to provide help is very flexible, the response to a need fits into the situation: any help is given when it must be given, it is carried on if the need is still present, and it is interrupted when it is no longer needed, it is given again when the need rises again. Almost half of help is regularly provided, one third is occasionally provided, therefore the network of informal help is quite structured, the room for contingent help is rather limited, especially for care, assistance and support in housework.

Help is mainly provided alone (43.1%) or with other cohabiting relatives (40.0%), or within voluntary organisations (5%) or sometime with other relatives (10.2%).

Help provided on one's own is prevailing for health, home, bureaucratic, work or study help. The contribution of other persons is more important for escort. The synthetic table provided shows that even at the organisational level, the flexibility characteristic generally concerns helps provided by the informal network: apart from few exceptions, the different dimensions of help are directed into different directions, add to each other, have greater or less intensity, and are more or less

**Tab. 1 - Most demanding helps provided by type of help, people who received help, help organisation**

	Economic	Medical	Care Assistance	Escort Hospitality	Domestic	Bureaucratic	Work study
<b>People to which help was given:</b>							
Parents, mother and father-in-law	15,8	32,6	37,8	34,2	45,4	31,3	18,3
Children, sons and daughters-in-law	20,0	2,8	6,6	5,2	18,0	4,9	8,2
Brothers, cognates	9,6	4,6	6,7	9,0	7,8	7,3	11,1
Grandchildren	4,5	2,2	7,0	5,5	1,6	1,1	3,9
Grandparents	0,3	108,0	8,1	4,0	5,0	4,0	1,2
Other elderly relatives	2,4	8,4	8,4	8,7	5,5	8,7	2,9
Other non elderly relatives	5,7	4,2	2,8	4,3	2,3	5,7	7,7
Other elder people non relatives	5,4	17,5	13,2	9,2	7,6	13,9	4,4
Other non elder people and non relatives	32,0	22,5	8,8	18,4	5,6	21,2	40,0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>
<b>Person to which help was given:</b>							
Lives alone	19,5	26,3	36,0	34,0	28,6	25,4	7,8
Does not live alone	73,0	67,3	59,7	60,3	65,9	67,8	85,8
Not given	7,5	6,4	4,3	5,7	5,5	6,8	6,4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>
<b>Character of help:</b>							
Random	33,4	2034,0	8,9	19,5	11,0	24,7	25,3
Contingent	32,0	36,2	30,9	34,8	36,3	38,4	44,8
Regular	30,0	39,7	59,2	43,5	50,6	34,4	27,8
Not given	4,6	3,7	1,0	2,2	2,1	2,5	2,1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>
<b>Reason for help:</b>							
Health (invalidism)	5,5	65,1	30,4	29,4	33,1	16,4	6,6
Health (no invalidism)	5,5	18,9	27,2	15,8	16,6	10,6	3,2
Company	1,6	0,9	24,8	2038,0	6,4	1,8	1,4
Economic	70,6	0,4	0,5	2,2	0,6	1,6	2,4
Work or study	3,1	1,1	5,1	5,9	12,0	1,9	58,5
Difficulty in organisation	1,4	1,3	3,6	8,1	12,3	34,9	12,1
Other	9,0	9,0	7,6	15,9	17,3	22,9	14,3
Not given	3,3	3,3	0,8	1,9	1,7	9,1	1,5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>
<b>Help organisation:</b>							
With other family members	41,7	25,8	48,9	51,4	34,3	25,8	26,4
With other relatives	5,4	8,2	13,6	9,3	10,9	5,4	7,3
Outside voluntary organisations	1,7	2,2	1,9	1,3	1,2	2,0	2,9
With lay voluntary	3,1	6,4	3,0	2,5	0,5	3,2	2,3
With religious voluntary	3,8	1,5	3,2	2,6	0,7	1,3	2,9
With no-one	41,9	51,1	32,0	33,5	51,1	60,7	58,2
Not given	2,4	4,8	-	-	1,3	1,6	-

Source: ISTAT Multipurpose survey 1990-91

permanent. Lack of formality is a synonym for flexibility and high variability in motivations of people providing help, however affection and solidarity are the basic elements.

### ***3. Women as crucial “pivots” of the help informal network***

Women are at the centre of a deep network of household relations: which means establish relations, be aware of aspects concerning the organisation of other people lives, inside and outside the household, know their needs, provide support and help, be always available, take on manual labour and psychological load. These two roles overlap and become one inside and outside the household: women deal with caring because it is also psychologically more challenging, men supply instrumental help (economic, work and study).

Women are more active than men in the informal network (17.2% versus 13.4%) and especially in caring. If we examine women in charge of household organisation, informal network activation reaches 20%, if reference is made to women living in couples with children between 35 and 54 years old then 25% is reached (1 woman in 4), while for men 18% is reached. This aspect proves the initial statement: women take care of organising the daily life of their families and of household members, and they even take care of organising the household life of non cohabiting household members.

The “sandwich woman” - as it was named - who compresses time for physiological activities and spare time to arrange the whole household organisation, who devotes herself to care of children and care of elder parents, this woman is the main pivot of the informal network, especially for care and housework. The “sandwich woman” is devoted to the longer and longer care of children (who stay longer in their household) and to the care of the elder whose average life is longer, and in their old age need more support. It is not difficult to believe that in the future care for the elder would become more important, due to the progressive ageing of population, and with no social policy to support care and assistance for the elder, pressure on women would be higher, even if their number would decrease.

Moreover, the character of help provided by women in every part of the Country is less contingent because it is more and more characterised by regularity. It is a more demanding activity because it is continuative, fitted into the organisation of a more and more complex daily life, where it is necessary to “fit” the needs of members living inside the household and in some cases living outside the household. However in the South there is a more marked division of roles. In the North and East of the Country the roles of man-woman are drawing together, because in the North the number of men providing an “expressive” help is greater, as well as the number of women providing instrumental help. This means that there are different behavioural models in the different areas of the Country.

The rising crucial role of woman in charge of the household is including other women as well. Since youth a higher pressure is exerted on woman, because part of her time is devoted to the assistance of those that are in difficult conditions. In fact, it is not a chance that the activation of the informal network of young women living in their origin household is greater (11.2%) than male of their own age (6.2%) and directed to help concerning care. Training for the role implies that women are activated from the beginning in the help informal network when there is the need for help.

Lastly it is typical of women to be oriented towards help and support of household members, whereas men seem to be more involved in solidarity help, outside the parental network. This is more true for younger age classes in every part of the Country, and it is even true for the help provided within voluntary organisations (5% of help, 4000,000 help a month, 4,800,000 a year).

#### 4. Lone parent households and couples with children: given and received helps

A different situation characterises lone parent households, couples with children and more than one job (both partners work) and couples with traditional children (the woman is a housewife), with regard to support received from the informal network. Even in our Country lone parent households belong to the type of household under risk of poverty. 27% considered their household income as scarce, 7.9% considered it absolutely insufficient.

A greater flow of economic help correspond to these data, if compared with other households: almost half of lone parent households received economic help (48.3%), which is more important than care help (33.7%) and than housework (24.7%) (table 2). This situation and the higher than average resort to the informal network is the result of having lost “half” of the parental network, usually a woman, and the tremendous reduction of income.

Couples with double work and traditional children receive help with different characteristics and intensity. There is a greater importance of economic help to traditional couples (28.3%) and of help concerning care and assistance (52%) and housework help for couples with more than one job (39.6%). One third of traditional couples received economic help. It is interesting to consider the crossed situation of give-receive in the two different types of couples even at territorial level. Both types of couples give more and receive less than in every other area of the Country (table 3). The couples with children in which women work take advantage of greater help in the Northern-Central area than in the South. In couples with children we find a contrary situation.

**Tab. 2 - Lone-parent households and couples with children by type of received help (for 100 households who received helps)**

	Economic	Medical	Care Assistance	Escort Hospitality	Domestic	Bureaucratic	Work study
Couples with children where the woman is employed	13,9	12,4	52,0	39,6	9,6	9,3	11,2
Couples with children where the woman is a housewife	28,3	20,8	39,1	32,0	13,5	15,5	11,8
Lone-parent	48,3	9,0	33,7	24,7	12,3	11,2	9,0

Source: see Tab. 1

**Tab. 3 - Percentage of couples with children who received or gave help**

		North W	North E	Centre	South	Islands	ITALY
Couples with children where the woman is employed	Received help	15,8	15,8	15,1	14,8	10,6	15,0
	Given help	30,1	31,5	26,0	34,5	29,4	30,4
Couples with children where the woman is a housewife	Received help	8,4	9,1	10,3	11,7	12,5	10,4
	Given help	32,8	35,0	25,0	26,0	25,4	28,6
Single parent	Received help	17,2	20,3	30,2	21,1	16,7	17,0
	Given help	24,0	27,6	16,3	22,9	20,0	21,7

Source: see Tab. 1

Furthermore, in the islands, traditional couples receive more help (12.5% and 10.5%) and couple where the woman works give more help (29.4% versus 25.4%). This lack of proportionality generates a double disadvantage for women in the South and points how difficult it is for a woman to work and have children in these areas of the South, for lack in service structure as well as for the greater load of family work. Lastly, it is to be said that there are no great differences between the help given by the two different types of couples, and in the South there is a greater activation in giving help from couples where women work.

### 5. Paid services

As stated in the introduction, every year, the Multipurpose survey on *Aspects of Every Day-Life* collects data on private services which households can resort (assistance or caring service, domestic service, baby sitting). Examining data collected in 1996, we can notice that 7,9% of Italian households (1,668,000 in all) recourse to paid caring or domestic services. The types of households that recourse more frequently to paid services are those formed by a single member (11,6% of this type of households) or by a lone-father (12,4%) (table 4). Types of paid helps tend to change according to the composition of household. For example, lone-fathers have often and almost exclusively a domestic help (11,4%), instead, because of their average advanced age, men and women living alone and couples without children (*empty nest* in many cases) often recourse to assistance services (3,7% and 1,3% respectively). Concerning in particular couples, presence of children does not seem to determine a different degree of propensity to make use of paid services. Nevertheless, obviously, couples without children do not utilise a baby sitter; they recourse to domestic help more frequently than the other couples.

Table 4 - Households by household type and paid services utilised.

Household type	domestic help only	baby-sitter only	assistance to elderly or disabled person only	more than one service	none service	Total
Living alone	7,8	-	2,8	0,9	88,6	100,0
Couple with children	4,7	0,9	0,3	0,7	93,4	100,0
Couple without children	5,2	-	1,0	0,3	93,4	100,0
Lone father household	11,4	0,1	0,9	-	87,5	100,0
Lone mother household	5,0	1,2	1,6	1,2	91,0	100,0
Total	5,6	0,5	1,1	0,7	92,0	100,0

Source: ISTAT Multipurpose survey 1996.

Table 5 - Households by woman professional status and paid services utilised.

Professional status	domestic help only	baby-sitter only	assistance to elderly or disabled only	domestic help and baby sitter	others combinations of services	none service	Total
Entrepreneur, manager, self-employed professional	20,2	2,2	-	4,7	0,3	72,5	100,0
Middle manager and white-collar worker	10,9	3,1	0,2	1,8	0,2	83,7	100,0
Blue-collars worker	1,1	0,7	0,2	-	0,2	97,7	100,0
Self-employed worker	7,0	1,1	0,4	0,5	0,1	90,8	100,0
Not employed	3,3	0,1	0,7	0,1	0,2	95,6	100,0

Source: see Tab. 4

If advanced age and handicap explain the recourse to assistance services, the variables which differentiate the access to the paid services in general are: woman work and professional status, age of children. A working woman will have an higher probability to make use of domestic help than a housewife (9,6% and 3,1% respectively). Furthermore, if the housewife lives in the Southern the propensity to recourse to a domestic help is still lower (1,9%). Professional status of woman explains still better than work status the possibility to recourse to private service. 20,2% and 10,9%, respectively, of manager and white-collar women can rely on at least a domestic worker versus 7% of the self-employed women and 1,1% of blue-collar workers women (table 5). 5% of women with higher professional status (managers, entrepreneurs and self-employed professionals) recourse to more than one help, versus 1,8% of white-collar women and 0,2% of not employed women.

Age of children is an other important variable to explain the recourse to all different types of services. 9,7% of households with less than 6 years old children have at least one helps. This percentage decreases to 7,6% for households with children between 6 and 13 years. Obviously, the recourse to a baby sitter depends on mother status work, too.

In conclusion, socio-economic conditions can be considered the most conditioning factor when households need to recourse to private paid services. In facts, work overload for women (on inside and outside their household) or demands for care by particularly unprotected individuals (children, elderly or handicapped persons) cannot be regarded as the unique motivations which induce people to refer to such kinds of help; rather, we should focus on the dimension of the available economic resources. Obviously, double-income households dispose of the required budget, since also their female members are employed.

However, though female work (particularly when women professional status is very high) provides a further economic resource, it cause at the same time a further help demand, since women have the necessity of accomplish the tasks required by their double role.

Furthermore, we can assume that households which can not recourse to private paid services may obtain a series of free helps (public services, voluntary helps, etc.). Unfortunately, the information provided by the early Multipurpose Survey does not allow us to investigate this peculiar aspect of the informal support network. This is the reason why the *Household and Social Subjects Survey* has been projected and started.

## **6. Discussion: risks and policies**

As it was correctly noticed by C. Saraceno “it was easier for women to access the world of paid work than for men to access the world family work”. Family work is still basically a domain of women. The possibility of having household support is a basic resource for children who stay longer in their household, for men who work and for the elder. Women assure the necessary service work and care inside and outside home.

How long would such an unbalanced condition between the two sexes last inside the household? Harriet Hartman, an English member of Parliament, recently defined this as “the furrow of a century” between men and women since “women have already entered the twenty-first century, while the men to which they are connected, the employers for whom they work, governments determining the structure of the society in which they live are one century behind. Women have domestic and economic responsibilities and their lives are thrown inside and outside home. Changes that should have been introduced in society did not occur: rigid hours, the labour world organised into schemes where it is assumed that all workers are men, all this makes difficult and complex the life of women working at home and outside.

If this is true for the responsibilities inside the household, the role played by women in providing family work outside is important as well. How long would the help informal network operate, with women as its central pivot? We should ask to what extent the interest of those

providing help and of those needing help would converge. In the future, the number of elderly people would increase, and the rate of female activities would increase as well. The number of women providing help would decrease, while their need for help and support would increase since the number of women in the labour market would be greater.

Would individual efforts be enough to cope with the complexity of needed resources? Up to which point is it correct to count on a more and more unstable bases or in any case on a changing bases such as that of female informal work to face the basic problems of an ageing society, and which is changing at household level in the relations between sexes and generations? The contradictions due to a population needing more and more help and a decreasing population which gives help and which need help for itself can become an explosive contradiction, if it is not seriously examined at the level of social policy. It is time that other subject were involved, from men to institutions, otherwise there is a risk of a progressive degrading of everybody quality life: of lonely elderly people, of non integrated disabled; of women, more and more “overloaded”, and of the less children, a change is necessary in the global cultural attitude of societies and men in this field.

There is solidarity among individuals, but it cannot solve problems. Specific social policies are required, these policies should take into account demographic and social dynamics in progress, changes in the relations between sexes, and which should aim at reducing inequalities due to sex, generation, geographical area and which should aim at a more marked support of service and care work within households. A cultural change is necessary to introduce a real equal life between men and women.

## **6. A new step: Multipurpose survey on Households and Social Subjects**

The design of the Multipurpose survey on *Household and Social Subjects* that will be carried out in a few months represents a powerful tool to analyse household and close-friend ties as social support system. The analysis of flow of helps has to move from the knowledge of composition of the extended family and close-friend structure. The questionnaires of the new survey permit to design the diagram of different types of familial and friend structures, and relationships that the individuals have with others who reside outside their household (number of close-friends, number of different living relatives, frequency of contact, given and received helps, etc.). Furthermore, they do not neglect both helps received by households from public administration, in terms of home assistance or care (sanitary or not) and economic transfers, as well as those received from voluntary workers.

The pilot survey on *Household and Social Subjects* has yet permitted to test a new solution for questionnaires sections concerning social support. The purpose was to reduce the risk of information loss, deriving by the individual perception of what can be considered “help”. Previous surveys pointed out that, sometimes, respondents did not consider “helps” some habitual support activities or some helps provided to close relatives. This had suggested to take into account questions expressed in a more analytical way. Information about type of help, reasons, frequency, etc. have been asked detailing deeply relationships between people who gave and received helps. Nevertheless, the new survey methodology placed a considerable additional burden on respondents without producing estimates of bigger flow of help. In view of the main survey, results of the test have led to design less onerous questionnaires sections.

Furthermore the informal support network tend to change his structure in the course of different phases of life. Thus, according to a life course approach, some retrospective questions are been introduced to investigate helps received by households and individuals in occasion of several crucial life events (the beginning of working life, economic difficulties, marriage, etc.).

In conclusion, the informative contest in which data on informal support network will be collected is much more comprehensive than the previous ones and allows to take into account, at the same time, the different dimensions of support, to analyse informal and official support network

starting modalities, to individuate specific conditions of poor or lacking social relationships, to verify the complementary or substitutive role of the several support sources, according to each different need (economic, sanitary, care, etc.).

The results of the survey will provide us which basic and crucial information about the topic, in view of a correct design of social household-oriented policies and social risk-oriented interventions.

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