

Interview Transcripts

Below you will find the full interview transcripts that were generated in the course of the production of the ePublication *Implications of COVID-19 on Women Workers in the Service Sector. A Special Focus on Italy* by Tania Toffanin

1. Federica S. (province of Como, Lombardy, Italy), 26 years old, living with her mother and sister, previously employed in the hospitality sector, currently unemployed

Tania Toffanin: Can you tell us what was your educational path after finishing compulsory school? Can you tell us your career path? At what age did you start working for pay? In which sector? What other occupations did you perform?

Federica S.: I studied at the school of hotel administration and then I specialised in hospitality. I have a diploma in technical tourism services. My first job was as a receptionist in a hotel with an internship and then other experiences...in a supermarket but I did not like the contract. I was a cashier. After six months, they did not give me any guarantee of stability.

Who do you live with? If you live with a partner, what work does your partner do? Do you have children? If yes, how old are they? How would you describe the economic condition of your household?

I live with my mum and sister. We lost dad last year. My parents came to Italy from Turkey 30 years ago. My mum also works in the same hotel as me as a seasonal worker. My sister works in a café that has closed down. All three of us are at home. Mum got the survivor's pension from dad.

In relation to your last job, can you tell us which institution/enterprise is involved? Is it still active? In which sector does it work/did it work? How long have you worked in this institution/enterprise? What tasks did you perform? How much did you earn? Were you a member of the union? What was your relationship with colleagues?

I have been working in the tourism sector since 2015. I am in charge of animation in a hotel in Lake Como. This hotel has been open for over 20 years. I finished on 31 October and now I am unemployed. There are only seasonal jobs here. I have been working for three years in this hotel. It is a four and a half star hotel. Most of the customers are foreigners. The season runs from April until the end of October. I take care of children, children of the hotel's clients. I have a regular work contract. I earn around 1,300 to 1,400 euros per month. I was a member of the union, but with the end of the contract my membership ceased. Relations with colleagues have always been good.

When have you lost or suspended your job? Can you describe the reasons and conditions that led to the loss of employment or its suspension? To what extent did the pandemic play a crucial role in the loss of your job or its suspension? Were you supported by your family and friends? If yes, in what way?

I live with my mum and sister. We lost dad last year. My mum also works in the same hotel as me as a seasonal worker. In March, we were waiting for the season to start again. There are only seasonal jobs here. My sister works in a bar that has closed down. All three of us are at home. After dad died, mum got an indirect pension. I was home until June and then returned to my department in the hotel. From October onwards I am still at home. I received the unemployment benefit for the months I did not work, about 500 euros. Mum also managed to get a bonus. It was not easy. We saved as much as we could. We only bought the essentials. It was different when dad was here: he worked all year round, we only worked during the season. Dad worked in construction all year round.

Did you interact with the union and/or other groups (women's networks, local volunteer networks...) in the phase immediately before and after the beginning of the pandemic? Could you tell us in which specific way? Did the trade unions intervene to help you? If yes, in what way?

No, we did not interact with the associations. The union helped us a lot in our house to sort out all the succession issues after dad passed away. They gave us information on bonuses.

Since when have you been unemployed or temporarily laid-off what income support have you received? For what amount? Do you still have income support from the state? If yes, how long will you receive it and how much is it?

I received 500 euros per month of unemployment benefit. Nothing else.

Are there any public employment services to help you? Have you asked for help from the structures dealing with the relocation of workers or other supports? What answers did you get?

They are there but they do not help to find a job. I look for work on the internet. I try Switzerland as we are at the border but I have not a permit ready so I cannot go there. They will not give you a permit if you do not already have a job in Switzerland.

After losing your job or during the suspension from work did you get other job offers? If yes, in which sectors and under what conditions?

No, I did not. With the pandemic everything came to a standstill.

Have you thought about finding another job? If so, what actions have you taken? Do you think women are discriminated in the labour market?

For now I am waiting for the hotel to restart in April. I do not think women are more discriminated against. Concerning the hotel sector, where there are many women: I did not feel that I was discriminated against.

What reflections have you made in relation to the job loss you experienced or this temporary suspension from work? Do you think there is sufficient protection for workers who lose their jobs or suspended from work? Moreover, for women who lose their jobs? What should the state and social partners do to support workers in this particular pandemic phase?

I have been thinking about how to move forward in life, about perspective. After dad's death, we have been wondering a lot about the future. The family took care of all the formalities. When I finished high school, I wanted to go to university. I am the daughter of a bricklayer, I could not afford some things...I could not study. Now I think... I do not feel like it. Education is important but I do not feel the freshness that I had a few years ago. I do not know if I feel like continuing to study. I wanted to study psychology or art history. I was very interested in that. I did not want to burden my parents and study in Milan.

Economic support from the state...I honestly think that support for seasonal workers is totally insufficient. People work six months and six months are at home. If you do not save for those six months... with what you get from the state you cannot live. With the pandemic it has become impossible. There was not much support. Dad paid for everything with his salary. Now there are condominium fees, mortgage and more. We manage to cover the mortgage with mum's indirect pension. We are afraid of other unforeseen events. Job centres should help people more. When we are unemployed rather than leaving us to do nothing... they should help us find work. Personally, I am not happy to stay at home unemployed. If I could find something, I would gladly work. In Germany, the job centres are very active in finding employment for the unemployed.

When the season reopens...if the pandemic stops...there will be plenty of work. For now, if the borders are closed, we have no work. Clients of the hotel where I work are mainly foreign.

2. Giovanna F. (Vicenza, Veneto, Italy), 41 years old, cohabitant, 4-year-old son, employed in the area of design and business consultancy, temporarily laid-off

Tania Toffanin: Can you tell us what was your educational path after finishing compulsory school? Can you tell us your career path? At what age did you start working for pay? In which sector? What other occupations did you perform?

Giovanna F.: I studied at the linguistic high school and then enrolled in political science, graduating in 2004. I did another two years of university in Bologna and a master's degree in euro planning. I worked in trade associations, in the Chamber of Commerce and then in another

company for 15 years. After maternity leave, I had to apply for part-time work but I was not granted it. Since I could not count on family support, I had to change companies and I found this one where I am still employed. I have a part-time contract of 28 hours.

Who do you live with? If you live with a partner, what work does your partner do? Do you have children? If yes, how old are they? How would you describe the economic condition of your household?

I am cohabiting. My partner is a self-employed. He has his own business. We have a 4-year-old child. My partner was also affected by the pandemic. He has a business that was stopped by the pandemic. We have seen a drastic reduction in income in the family budget.

In relation to your last job, can you tell us which institution/enterprise is involved? Is it still active? In which sector does it work/did it work? How long have you worked in this institution/enterprise? What tasks did you perform? How much did you earn? Were you a member of the union? What was your relationship with colleagues?

I have been working there for two years with a (miraculously) part-time contract that allows me to look after my son. I work in business consulting and strategic partnerships. I write projects and look for funding lines to propose to companies, schools, and training institutions. We work a lot with European funds for groups of companies. I have a second level of the national contract for commerce. I earn about 1,500, 1,600 euros per month. It is a part-time job, so the pay is proportional to my working hours. We have not a union internally. I can say that we have good relations between colleagues.

When have you lost or suspended your job? Can you describe the reasons and conditions that led to the loss of employment or its suspension? To what extent did the pandemic play a crucial role in the loss of your job or its suspension? Were you supported by your family and friends? If yes, in what way?

With the outbreak of the pandemic in the company, a disaster occurred. The owner is getting on in years and has never heard of working remotely, despite the requests I had made before the arrival of COVID-19. As I have a small child who is often ill, I had asked to work from home at certain times. I was never given this option. With the pandemic the schools closed on 20 February. In Veneto, we closed earlier than in other Italian regions. It took the owner a month to organise the work from home. It was very hard: actually, for me the end of the pandemic will coincide with the possibility of uninstalling all the remote work connections from my phone. Since February, I have been working on a 24-hour basis. These are the effects of the pandemic: work has entered the house. There are no Saturdays or Sundays. I and other colleagues have children. During the pandemic I had to manage my son at home and work deadlines. I worked very often at night because my partner opened his business during the day, even though work was scarce. Adapting to working remotely was not easy. However, the work has partially stopped: we work on projects but also on the foreign exchange system. This last part got stuck

and is still stuck. It was a nightmare with the kindergartens closed. By June I had to hand in projects written in English. I have to study, I have to talk to partners abroad and with the baby how could I? My partner could not follow the child. All this work at home, remotely, invaded the family dimension. My son smashed my computer twice...

The owner took it for granted that we had computers and an Internet connection at home. All at our expense. No PCs were offered and no contributions were made for the connection. Everything was taken for granted, as was the management of distance learning in the schools. The cost of the connection for work is borne by my family. Between colleagues at work, we did not ask for anything. We were already on redundancy pay and with the reduction in salary,... you don't know how it goes, so you just shut up and do it. I work with many companies abroad and I can say that remote working does not work like here. In Veneto, there is no idea of working by objectives. We were asked to make daily timesheets indicating what we were doing every hour. It is a typical Veneto culture. If I am in the office and I am reading *Vanity Fair* its fine...but if I am at home and I am working at night to finish a job...it has to be done. It is a mania for control. There is no corporate culture at many levels....

As far as managing lack of work is concerned: we employees, especially mothers with children, have used a special leave¹ but it lasted only 30 days and I have finished it all. I had to use holidays and leave to cover the lack of work but they should not be used for that purpose you take them when you need them, not because there is no work! The unemployment benefit (FIS) arrived months late. Fortunately I was partially working. It has to be said that with remote work I worked an unquantifiable number of hours, at least twice as many as in my part-time contract (28 hours per week). Even without the pandemic I work much more with part-time.

During the lockdown, I have always been in contact with friends, colleagues and other acquaintances in the same situation. My family helped me financially during the months of total suspension of activity. The government's measures came very late and I have many expenses to bear.

Did you interact with the union and/or other groups (women's networks, local volunteer networks...) in the phase immediately before and after the beginning of the pandemic? Could you tell us in which specific way? Did the trade unions intervene to help you? If yes, in what way?

I had to go to the trade union to find out how to deal with the leave for parents with young children during the lockdown. The owner of the company I work for wanted me to return to the company but my son was not old enough to attend the summer centres. Everything worked out

¹ It is a special leave for parents launched by the Italian Government with measures to support families during the Covid-19 crisis. They are included in the "Cura Italia" Decree enacted on 18 March 2020. Measures for families were the following: 1) Employees who are parents of children under the age of 12 are entitled to 15 days of special leave while schools are closed. An indemnity equal to 50% of salary will be paid by the National Social Security Institute (INPS). The leave is granted alternatively to both parents, at the condition that they are not already receiving another unemployment allowance or are working from home on smart-working; 2) Employees who are parents of children aged 12 to 16 are alternatively entitled to a special unpaid leave to be used until schools reopen; 3) As an alternative measure to the above, parents can apply for a baby-sitting voucher, the value of which is set at Euro 600.00 paid by the Italian National Institute for Social Security (*Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale*, INPS).

fine. I did not want to create a conflict but I also did not want to be made fun by the owner: I had to stay at home with my son as the law required.

Since when have you been unemployed or temporarily laid-off what income support have you received? For what amount? Do you still have income support from the state? If yes, how long will you receive it and how much is it?

We were on temporary laid-off from March to June and then we came back to work for half the month. Only since April, however, has the owner asked the FIS² to intervene. Until then we were put on leave and took personal leave. Since June, half the month I worked from home, the other half in the company. During the months of July and August, we worked in the company. Until 18 November we worked without suspensions. From 18 November to December, we were on 50% suspended from work. The times I did not work, I received about 30% of my salary but the supplement from INPS³ also arrived more than two months late. If there are ordinary and extraordinary expenses to be made, that is a problem: my family has helped me during this period.

Are there any public employment services to help you? Have you asked for help from the structures dealing with the relocation of workers or other supports? What answers did you get?

No, I did not ask them for help.

After losing your job or during the suspension from work did you get other job offers? If yes, in which sectors and under what conditions?

No, I did not. I did not actively search. I applied for two public calls in public administration.

Have you thought about finding another job? If so, what actions have you taken? Do you think women are discriminated in the labour market?

During this long year, I thought about going into the public sector. I have applied for two recruitment competitions in the public administration, but since the competitions are also at a standstill, I am still waiting for them to draw up a timetable for the examinations. I will not do what I am doing now at work and what I studied for, but at least I will have a permanent job, with relevant permits and rights. I think there is an unequal treatment between those who work in the public sector and those who work in the private sector. I will see how these two competitions go. I have good working hours in the company I work for but there is a lot of stress and a lot of job uncertainty. The owner is a competent and very passionate person, but he

² The FIS (*Fondo di Integrazione Salariale*) was launched in 2015. It is a wage fund that can be used in case of reduction or suspension of business of companies employing more than five employees to which the above normal schemes of the wages guarantee funds (ordinary and extraordinary fund) are not applicable.

³ The INPS (*Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale*) is the Italian National Institute for Social Security.

is in his old age and when he will retire from work his son, whom I have no confidence in, will take over. In relation to the condition of women, I think that women's salaries are still lower than those of men. In Italy, welfare does not help working women so discrimination is widespread. They invite couples to have children but we women are very penalised. Men with children can work outside the home for many hours during the day. Women with children cannot. Children under three have many needs: it is always women who have to think more about childcare.

What reflections have you made in relation to the job loss you experienced or this temporary suspension from work? Do you think there is sufficient protection for workers who lose their jobs or suspended from work? Moreover, for women who lose their jobs? What should the state and social partners do to support workers in this particular pandemic phase?

Work has entered the house and I think we have to keep it. I like to dress up to go to work and be in the company. I have missed chatting with colleagues, patting myself on the back, having collective discussions about work. I have missed the human relationships a lot. Even the arguments, even “you didn't flush the toilet”. It is different working in the office. I do not want to work at home. I asked for it before the pandemic just to deal with any problems with my son. I don't want to be in tracksuits all day.

Women continue to receive less than men do. A colleague of mine has a higher level than me even though he joined the company two months later. Part-time has penalised me. I do not know whether the discrimination suffered by women is to their disadvantage because they are women, because they are mothers, or because they can become mothers. All I can say is that since I am a mother I work much better. At work, I do everything faster because I know that at home I have to do another job. Employers do not think that mothers are more productive: they think that when we come back from maternity leave we are at a standstill. More than once the owner asked me why I did not entrust my son to his grandparents. He asked me that even during the lockdown. Welfare in Italy is a family affair. I asked the owner that if he wanted me to come back to work he should support me with a contribution for a baby-sitter. There are a thousand ways to contribute to these expenses but nothing happened. I think Italian women have made many mistakes... we have got used to having our children raised by grandparents because there are few nurseries, because they cost so much. Grandparents cost nothing but babysitters do. It is a fact that child welfare is provided by grandparents in Italy but at the beginning of the pandemic children could not be delivered to grandparents. For that reason, I have seen many friends go into a panic. Many who work full-time have had to ask for a reduction in their working hours. It is even worse if you have a partner who is self-employed or professional. I always told my boss that I had no support for childcare: he seemed to have understanding, but that was not the case. At work, there are prejudices towards working mothers, made of jokes, of representations about the productivity of the working mother. I would have liked support for my condition but it never came.

Regarding protections for workers... Unions, as soon as they did not catch the precarious work that came after the reforms of the 2000s, have stopped dealing with the protection of workers.

Now they play more of a role of individual and fiscal assistance. I do not know what they could do.

3. Paola B. (Venice, Veneto, Italy), 45 years old, single, previously employed in the hospitality sector, currently unemployed

Tania Toffanin: Can you tell us what was your educational path after finishing compulsory school? Can you tell us your career path? At what age did you start working for pay? In which sector? What other occupations did you perform?

Paola B.: After finishing compulsory school, I worked and then I got a diploma as an accountant. I have always been in the tourist industry. As a first job, I worked as a maid in a hotel in Venice. Later I worked for 6 years in London to learn the language and get work experience. I worked in a hotel that was part of a chain owned by a family: I worked in reception and then in the back office as a supervisor. I could not take it any more: I was working a lot and wanted to come back, so in 2014 I returned to Italy. From 2014 to 2018, I did seasonal work in hotels.

Who do you live with? If you live with a partner, what work does your partner do? Do you have children? If yes, how old are they? How would you describe the economic condition of your household?

I live with my parents. I am single. I live in the province of Venice. My father receives a pension and my mother is a housewife.

In relation to your last job, can you tell us which institution/enterprise is involved? Is it still active? In which sector does it work/did it work? How long have you worked in this institution/enterprise? What tasks did you perform? How much did you earn? Were you a member of the union? What was your relationship with colleagues?

In 2018, I started working on a permanent basis (for the first time!) in a company in Venice that dealt with reception services. The company managed many flats and hotel facilities in the city and we did all reception services: check-in, first information about the city and other reception services. The clients were mixed: mostly American tourists, but also British, French, Spanish and German. Sometimes we also took care of some professionals who needed support in the city. I was hired with an open-ended contract: it was my first stable work experience. There were five of us working in Venice. The owner had two companies: one in Venice and the other on the mainland. I worked as a clerk and my employment contract was for tourism. A few months after I was hired, I was promoted to manager because of my experience. My monthly salary was around 1,500 euros. The salary was in line with the work contract. I had a good relationship with my colleagues: they were all younger than me but we always got along well with each other. I worked from 2018 until February 2020. The company is still formally active...but has no employees.

When have you lost or suspended your job? Can you describe the reasons and conditions that led to the loss of employment or its suspension? To what extent did the pandemic play a crucial role in the loss of your job or its suspension? Were you supported by your family and friends? If yes, in what way?

After the first week of March, the employers closed down and put us on holiday. They closed the office and even before the first DPCM,⁴ they fired two employees. We were very surprised by the decision. I do not think they knew what they were doing either, and who knows, maybe they were uncertain and decided to cut jobs. They did not renew the fixed-term contracts under which the people who did the cleaning in the facilities we managed were employed. At first, we were put on paid leave, then at home with the wage guarantee fund. The income support provided by the wage guarantee fund came and did not come, so we were struggling to make ends meet. In May, the Venice office of the company I worked for closed and we employees were transferred to the mainland office, working remotely, sometimes returning to the office. We worked until July. I was the only employee in the Venice office. In August, I was temporarily laid off but I suspected that there would be no recovery. I was not called for some time. I called and asked for a meeting with the employers, who told me I was being fired. They dismissed me in August 2020, telling me it was better that way because I would be unemployed and then I would be rehired in the other company he managed later, but without specifying when. At my age, it is not easy to find another job. I hoped that the possibility of returning to work for the same company was real. The employers offered to terminate my employment by mutual agreement. This did not suit me. By signing the agreement, I renounced to sue the company. In the meantime, I inquired with the trade unions who advised me to sign the agreement with the company only in exchange for a compensation. The problem was that the employers offered me 100 euros gross! When I saw the amount, I did not sign. There was another meeting in the presence of the union and we found a more dignified agreement. The other workers signed the agreement proposed by the owner. In any case, I then became unemployed.

The employers made a drastic choice in my opinion. I had the impression that the pandemic was the justification they were waiting for to close the business. At first, I had the hope that everything would return to normal. I hoped that they would fire me from the company I was working for and hire me in the other company. It is also true that the employers had contacts with other companies in Venice and could have taken steps to relocate us. Instead they did nothing. They thought about their own financial situation and that was it.

After losing my job, I was helped a lot by friends and relatives but I had my tears.

Did you interact with the union and/or other groups (women's networks, local volunteer networks...) in the phase immediately before and after the beginning of the pandemic?

⁴ The DPCM is the Prime Minister's Decree (*Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri*). It is an administrative act existing in the Italian legal system. It was widely used with the spread of the pandemic. This type of decree, like Ministerial decrees, has a short procedure and therefore is particularly suited to emergency situations. Its launch does not involve Parliament, and is therefore an expression of the will of the political majority alone.

Could you tell us in which specific way? Did the trade unions intervene to help you? If yes, in what way?

I interacted with the union to know my rights. The union intervened when I got involved but I was not a member before then. I did not interact with groups or associations. My brother is a psychologist: he gave me good advice to get out of the tunnel I was in.

Since when have you been unemployed or temporarily laid-off what income support have you received? For what amount? Do you still have income support from the state? If yes, how long will you receive it and how much is it?

Since March, we, the employees, have been partly on paid holiday and partly laid-off with the wage guarantee fund. The wage guarantee fund was not anticipated by the owners as happened in other companies. The income support for March arrived at the end of May... The problem is that I received much less than what I was entitled to: the employers declared that the basic salary on which the income support was calculated was lower than what I actually received under the employment contract. I will not comment on what happened because it is unbelievable! What I received per month was 400 euros. I worked the whole month of May, in June, half the month and then almost the whole month of July. On 1 September, I became unemployed. Since then I have received about 860 euros per month. I waited a month to receive it. I am entitled to receive the unemployment benefit for 24 months.

Are there any public employment services to help you? Have you asked for help from the structures dealing with the relocation of workers or other supports? What answers did you get?

I went to the job centre. I registered on various job-finding sites and then went to temporary employment agencies.

After losing your job or during the suspension from work did you get other job offers? If yes, in which sectors and under what conditions?

No, I did not receive any offer.

Have you thought about finding another job? If so, what actions have you taken? Do you think women are discriminated in the labour market?

I invested the months off work in my personal training. I resumed my old accounting studies. I applied for the allowance for work⁵ and took two courses: one on logistics and one on

⁵ The allowance for work (*assegno per il lavoro*) is a financing tool made available by the Veneto Region to fight long-term unemployment by supporting unemployed people over 30 in their search for a new job through free guidance, training and job placement services. The Employment Allowance consists of a bonus, up to a maximum value of EUR 5,796, which citizens can spend at accredited employment services in exchange for personalised

accounting. At my age, it is hard to get back into work. Companies only hire very young people. I thought of reorienting myself in the clerical sector since tourism has stopped. Now I am doing an online course organised by the regional authority for the tax campaign. I would better change employment sector: tourism is too risky.

In the labour market, women are discriminated and strongly restricted. We have positions of little responsibility and lower salaries. When I worked in hotels, I saw that men took the biggest tips. Abroad I did not see this differentiation. In London, if you are capable you are taken into consideration regardless of whether you are a man or a woman. They are far ahead of our country abroad.

What reflections have you made in relation to the job loss you experienced or this temporary suspension from work? Do you think there is sufficient protection for workers who lose their jobs or suspended from work? Moreover, for women who lose their jobs? What should the state and social partners do to support workers in this particular pandemic phase?

My first thought was: I am a failure, I will never find a job again...It is not easy, especially if you have always worked and if you had a permanent job for the first time. I then started to use my time in creative activities: I fixed up my house. I wanted to give another meaning to the place where I live. I wanted a change: inside and outside. This activity helped me a lot on an inner level. From these activities, I started to think about what I would like to do professionally. I told myself that I had to put aside the tourist sector. I would always like to work in contact with the public: when I worked, I woke up in the morning and I was always happy. There was never a day when I went to work unhappy. I want to continue working with people.

The state has forgotten the tourism sector and us women. I hear all the newspapers talking about “refreshments”⁶ for pubs and restaurants, but the whole tourism sector has not been taken care of. A city like Venice, which alone made a huge amount of the regional GDP, has been forgotten: nobody talks about it. I think women are very penalised: in hotels and restaurants there are mostly women. We are convenient for the companies in the sector but we are not taken into consideration at all. When you are young, you have your whole life ahead of you and you do not pay much attention to your contractual position and accept any employment but then it is very difficult for women to find new employment in a stable position.

outplacement assistance services, such as guidance, counselling, training, skills enhancement, and support for job placement or reintegration by matching labour demand and supply.

⁶ As a result of the pandemic-related blockade of activities, the Italian government has provided for the disbursement directly to the bank or postal account of companies that had suffered a drop in turnover of at least 33% in April 2020 compared to April 2019). At the same time, new subsidies have been granted to companies that have had to close or limit their activities. Contributions are also available in the absence of the turnover requirements to persons who activated their VAT registration on or after 1 January 2019. In this case, the amount of the contribution is determined by applying the percentages already indicated to the minimum amounts of €1,000 for individuals and €2,000 for persons other than individuals. In October 2020, with Law Decree n. 137, the Council of Ministers approved the so-called “refreshment decree” to compensate for the measures decided by the government with the latest DPCM to try to contain the new increase in coronavirus cases.

4. Sara P. (Venice, Veneto, Italy), 52 years old, single with no children, employed in the cultural sector, temporarily suspended from work

Tania Toffanin: Can you tell us what was your educational path after finishing compulsory school? Can you tell us your career path? At what age did you start working for pay? In which sector? What other occupations did you perform?

Sara P.: I have a degree in literature and have always worked in museums. I am not a very ambitious person. I always wanted to study on my own and have a secure job doing other things. This in cooperatives is a second best job for many people. Limited schooling is required. Now they ask us for high skills but with little economic recognition... The activity that is carried out in civic museums should be considered more but in general...in Italy culture is considered very little. Soon we will all be replaced by volunteers or cameras...

I have always worked in Venice's civic museums. I have been working in museums for thirty years. I have also been a ticket-taker but I did not like it. I am a security guard. I started when I was 20. I was studying and working. It was different at that time: our work was better paid and safer. It was the 1990s. Cooperatives started to replace public staff in museums. It was the first wave of outsourcing in the civil service. There was a lot of work to be done. Politicians were very attentive to the promotion of cooperatives. Here in Venice in particular because of the presence of centre-left coalitions. Left...so to speak. In the last decades, there was an explosion of work in cooperatives. My cooperative is the biggest in Italy and has taken on many contracts. Before the cooperatives, museums were almost exclusively staffed by people with physical or mental disabilities. Cooperatives offered better and cheaper 'human capital'. We were all young or ladies of a certain age who needed to work, mainly divorced.

Who do you live with? If you live with a partner, what work does your partner do? Do you have children? If yes, how old are they? How would you describe the economic condition of your household?

I am single with no children. I am living with my family. My parents are retired.

In relation to your last job, can you tell us which institution/enterprise is involved? Is it still active? In which sector does it work/did it work? How long have you worked in this institution/enterprise? What tasks did you perform? How much did you earn? Were you a member of the union? What was your relationship with colleagues?

I work for a service cooperative, guarding the civic museums in Venice. I have a fixed-term contract, but the cooperative works on a contract basis... there is always insecurity. Now the contract is expiring. A few years ago I would have said it was surmountable, but not today. Especially after the Jobs Act and in relation to the policies of the Venice City Council. Anyone can do my job, even if you need some training to deal with the public. Cooperatives suck, they are an aberration, but in those years they offered a different image, as they try to do today. It is a very different image from reality. In those years I got more or less what I get now. I got a million in the nineties and I get a thousand euros now for 42 hours a week. The paradox of outsourcing to cooperatives is that they are very expensive, but when we are not needed, the contracting organisation can get rid of them. We cost 30 euros per hour but we get 8 euros gross per hour. In Venice, my cooperative has 300 employees. Only in the civic museums because the cooperative also has other contracts with other museums in Venice. The cooperative has thousands of employees all over Italy and manages events and museum services. The co-

operatives deal with surveillance and guarding. The relations between colleagues are good but it is very difficult that there is unity for a shared mobilisation. It depends on the fact that the co-operatives have paternalistic ways that divide the workers. They seem to do us a favour by making us work.

When have you lost or suspended your job? Can you describe the reasons and conditions that led to the loss of employment or its suspension? To what extent did the pandemic play a crucial role in the loss of your job or its suspension? Were you supported by your family and friends? If yes, in what way?

I worked until February 2020. From March until June, I stayed at home. After the outbreak of the pandemic the management of the cooperative disappeared. They were not reachable. Total silence. We were told by email not to come anymore. We were told about the suspension from work and the financial difficulties, which prevented them from giving us the advance payment of the allowance. They were completely absconding. They started to show up in May. In June, I worked a few days a month. I worked full-time in July and August. I worked part-time until October and have been at home since November. The suspension of work was due to the closure of the museums. When we came back in the summer, the cooperative provided us with a mask and disinfectant. We had to fight to get a changing room to change in the summer. We asked for a changing room, but to avoid the cost of sanitisation they made us suffer. It was only in October that we were given a space to change our clothes. I am supported by my parents: I live with them.

Did you interact with the union and/or other groups (women's networks, local volunteer networks...) in the phase immediately before and after the beginning of the pandemic? Could you tell us in which specific way? Did the trade unions intervene to help you? If yes, in what way?

I have always been a union member but I have changed three unions. Now I am a member of the base union because I could no longer tolerate the excessive complicity between the main unions and the cooperatives. Many of us are union members in the cooperative. The unions have intervened but the cooperative management has no intention of dialogue.

Since when have you been unemployed or temporarily laid-off what income support have you received? For what amount? Do you still have income support from the state? If yes, how long will you receive it and how much is it?

I took the "FIS covid"⁷. We are waiting for it with great delay. The co-operative was supposed to pay us the allowance in advance but it did not happen. We waited several months to receive the first tranche. The management of the co-operative had signed an agreement with the union to provide us with the FIS allowance, but then they broke the agreement. We received the

⁷ The Wage Integration Fund (*Fondo di Integrazione Salariale, FIS*) provides income support instruments in case of suspension or termination of employment of workers employed in companies belonging to sectors not covered by the wage integration legislation. Employers who suspend or reduce their work activity can apply for the ordinary wage integration allowance or for access to the ordinary allowance with the reason 'COVID-19 emergency'. This allowance is granted to employees of employers who are members of the fund and who employ on average more than 5 employees (instead of the 15 employees required in the ordinary way). The FIS is the fund for undertakings employing more than five employees but not covered by the Earnings Supplement Fund (ordinary and extraordinary). It is particularly widespread among enterprises in the service sector.

allowance from INPS⁸. There are many of my colleagues who have a part-time contract and have received 300-400 euros of FIS. A pittance. There are other workers who were not employees and were only called to manage events. These workers only have unemployment. Fortunately, I have a full-time job and I received 800 euros per month in benefits. We are almost all women of a certain age and you cannot find another job. I have consumed savings. I stay in my parents' house. I have had material support from my family. I am lucky that have not to pay a mortgage or rent. I would not have been able to meet these expenses. I have a friend in Germany who has had many help from the state. Welfare in Italy is the family. This system is exploding. Until next year, the cooperative I work for should have its contract renewed. When the contract ends, the co-operative competes and reduces our salary shares. Competition in procurement is on labour costs and with the misery that is advancing, I see a very dramatic prospect. The system of outsourcing will be even stronger after the pandemic. I do not know how long I will receive my allowance. It depends on how the pandemic develops. The talks that the management had with the union were very bad. The management told us: 'The world of work has changed and you have to resign yourselves'.

Are there any public employment services to help you? Have you asked for help from the structures dealing with the relocation of workers or other supports? What answers did you get?

No, I did not ask them for help.

After losing your job or during the suspension from work did you get other job offers? If yes, in which sectors and under what conditions?

No, I did not but there are no jobs available as far as I can see.

Have you thought about finding another job? If so, what actions have you taken? Do you think women are discriminated in the labour market?

I am taking credits for substitute teaching at secondary school. I have already taken three exams. It is not easy to start substitute teaching. I would have to pay additional fees. As long as I am not fired, I will keep my job in the cooperative. I have thought about doing tutoring but with COVID-19 it's not possible. Other colleagues are trying to take part in public competitions or go to work in the fields to pick vegetables. Everything is blocked now. Jobs involving contact with people are suspended. We are clinging to our jobs tooth and nail. I think women are very discriminated in the world of work. In my sector, which is predominantly female, the wages are low, but many women live alone and cannot afford to live on the wages we have.

What reflections have you made in relation to the job loss you experienced or this temporary suspension from work? Do you think there is sufficient protection for workers who lose their jobs or suspended from work? Moreover, for women who lose their jobs? What should the state and social partners do to support workers in this particular pandemic phase?

At least we have the redundancy fund. Many workers have been denied benefits. Yet many notaries and freelancers received benefits! I have a friend who had just started a mortgage and had to move back home to her parents by suspending the mortgage. The world of work has

⁸ INPS (Italian National Social Security Institute).

changed for the worse. The big problem in Italy is welfare. Now that I'm experiencing it at first hand, it's terrifying even being my age and knowing that there's so much time left until retirement...and thinking about where you're going to hit your head. Many colleagues have the support of their husbands, others do not. Our salaries do not allow for savings. In the museums there are many couples who live on the salaries of the cooperatives. There are people who are closing down and have reoriented themselves to work in the cooperatives in Venice. Women find it harder than men to find work when they lose it. Women are always seen in relation to their age. When you are over fifty you are old for the world of work. I wish there were strict rules to protect workers. If that Renzi had not created the Jobs Act, if there were not these precarious contracts ... there is a jungle in employment contracts. We can all find ourselves in a precarious work situation and we will have to think in a less selfish way. It is very difficult to put up a united front because in the workplace we are pitted against each other. Precariousness is a trap: many colleagues started out working with discontinuous contracts and then never knew stabilisation. They had to accept the job they had. Venice with the tourist monoculture: it was a trough. Millions of tourists came but my salary got worse over the years. Unfortunately, this political class is still being perpetuated. My colleagues have been working in museums for at least fifteen years. Those who have been hired in the last ten years only work on call. They are middle-aged men and women. My fear is that all this will be accepted as normal. There are people who are calling for the freedom not to wear a mask...how will they react to the misery that lies ahead. What freedom are we talking about if we have no money to move? With a right-wing government?

5. Silvia E. (Milan, Lombardy, Italy), 39 years old, single mother of an 11-year-old daughter, previously employed in the hospitality sector, currently unemployed

Tania Toffanin: Can you tell us what was your educational path after finishing compulsory school? Can you tell us your career path? At what age did you start working for pay? In which sector? What other occupations did you perform?

Silvia E.: I studied in Romania. I finished my high school studies in accounting and then I managed the accounts of a clothing shop. After six years spent in this shop, I moved to Italy. I asked for a leave of absence from the shop in Romania and started working in Italy, in Milan. I worked for five years in a company but I was not stabilised. Seven years ago, I found a job in a consortium of cooperatives that managed contracts for cleaning in hotels. I started working as a floor maid in the province of Milan. I changed companies several times: the consortium continuously transferred workers from one cooperative to another. This was in order not to recognise seniority bonuses and not to respect work contracts. In 2015, I found some anomalies in my payroll: overtime was paid as travel expenses but we never moved. Consequently, I turned to the union to sue the company. Days off were not respected, pay was not recognised, there was no timetable. The employment contract was devoid of content. I have a daughter in charge and they made me work twenty days in a row without rest. I worked for this consortium for three years. At some point, the trade unions intervened and filed a dispute with the company. Finally, they recognised our seniority bonuses for the last three years. Last year we were hired directly by a new company that managed the contract for cleaning in this hotel where I worked until January 2020.

Who do you live with? If you live with a partner, what work does your partner do? Do you have children? If yes, how old are they? How would you describe the economic condition of your household?

I live in the province of Milan with my 11-year-old daughter. I reported my ex-partner for abuses. I have obtained a paid leave of absence that is due to women in my situation. My ex-husband does not contribute in any way in his daughter's life. My daughter and I can only rely on my income.

In relation to your last job, can you tell us which institution/enterprise is involved? Is it still active? In which sector does it work/did it work? How long have you worked in this institution/enterprise? What tasks did you perform? How much did you earn? Were you a member of the union? What was your relationship with colleagues?

The company, the last one I worked for, was a limited liability company that managed contracts in many luxury hotels in Milan and its province. I have been working there since 2014. I have a part-time contract of 5 hours a day. It is difficult for them to hire workers with a full-time contract. I have always cleaned the floors of the hotel where the company had the contract. I used to get about 700 euros per month, but I must say that the company did not pay me for many of the hours I actually worked. I sued the company and won, but they did not even respect the judge's ruling. The company pays on a piecework basis: although we have a contract that establishes an hourly wage, the company pays based on the rooms you manage to clean in a day. They give a precise timetable and if you do not respect it, they do not pay you. The hotel was a four-star hotel: the quality standards are very high. The time frame set by the company was very tight if we take into account the tight schedule and the quality standards of a 4-star hotel. There were 23 maids and one janitor in this hotel. We always had good relations with each other.

When have you lost or suspended your job? Can you describe the reasons and conditions that led to the loss of employment or its suspension? To what extent did the pandemic play a crucial role in the loss of your job or its suspension? Were you supported by your family and friends? If yes, in what way?

With the arrival of the pandemic, the company I work for literally disappeared. There was no way to contact anyone. No one was working shifts. They no longer answered the phone. The person who managed the work organisation did not know what to do. On 2 March, I received a registered letter from the company I worked for announcing that I was being fired. It seems that the company took the arrival of the pandemic as an excuse to leave us at home. On 2 March, the company started collective redundancies of 1,400 employees nationwide. Here in the hotel where I worked none of us knew anything. After 8 March, the government banned

redundancies. The redundancy fund (the ordinary FIS)⁹ started and we were saved. Looking back at last year, I can say that we worked very little. From March until August, I stayed at home. In mid-August, we returned to work in rotation. Only part of the 23 employees. Many employees had fixed-term contracts. There were nine of us left with permanent contracts and we returned. After the trade unions intervened, the company had to stop the redundancies and let us go back to work. The hotel had reopened and needed to reopen but we worked very little. About a quarter of a month in rotation. We worked until the first days of November and then we went home again. The company does not have a fair relationship with us workers: they often deny us respect for our employment contract. I had to fight for family allowances. Not to mention health protection. The chances of infection were high at work: the company barely handed us gloves in August when we returned to work. We wore our own masks and sanitizers....

It has been a horrible year. During the first months of the pandemic, friends helped me a lot, also financially.

Did you interact with the union and/or other groups (women's networks, local volunteer networks...) in the phase immediately before and after the beginning of the pandemic? Could you tell us in which specific way? Did the trade unions intervene to help you? If yes, in what way?

Since 2019 I have been a trade union delegate. I was supported also for my family affair by the CGIL¹⁰ women's office but I do not actively participate in the local association life. I participated in the union's initiatives to give a signal: the wage guarantee fund was not coming and my work colleagues were desperate. For this reason I participated to some public meetings and conferences. We are talking about survival, not holiday spending!

Since when have you been unemployed or temporarily laid-off what income support have you received? For what amount? Do you still have income support from the state? If yes, how long will you receive it and how much is it?

I have not worked since March last year. The allowance is small: it covers between 50 and 60 per cent of the salary. The highest amount received is 750 euro. I applied for the FIS in March, but the benefit arrived in June. I received €700. In my town of residence, there were shopping vouchers available. I participated in the call for applications and received a 200-euro shopping voucher. In May, I applied for emergency income and got the two monthly payments of 960 euro for two months. I live in a rented house, I have utilities to pay. My daughter is on DAD¹¹

⁹ The FIS (*Fondo di Integrazione Salariale*) is a wage integration fund launched in 2015. It can be used in case of reduction or suspension of business of companies employing more than five employees to which the above normal schemes of the wages guarantee funds (ordinary and extraordinary fund) are not applicable.

¹⁰ CGIL is the acronym of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (*Conferazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*), the largest trade union Italy.

¹¹ DAD is the acronym of the long-distance learning (*didattica a distanza*). Distance learning was ordered by the Council of Ministers following the outbreak of the pandemic in order to contain the contagion. This mode requires students and families to have the means (PCs), resources (connection to the network), and computer skills to access online lessons.

and I had to activate the internet connection that I had not. During the pandemic I stopped watching television: I had not a breakdown but I was close. It was not easy. It is not easy to stay at home and do nothing when you are used to working all the time, on Sundays, Christmas, New Year's Eve...especially if you know that your income is the only one in the family. For now we are covered until March 2021, then I don't know. I did not ask the owners of the flat I live in to reduce the rent because they have already shown little concern for my condition in the past. When I reported my husband, the landlords made it clear that they did not want any problems. The last thing on my mind was to ask for understanding from the owners of the flat. I paid my rent with the little money I received. I am sure there is zero altruism: many female colleagues have been put out on the street by their flat owners.

Are there any public employment services to help you? Have you asked for help from the structures dealing with the relocation of workers or other supports? What answers did you get?

No, I did not ask them for help. I could monitor job offers from home, on the available sites but there was nothing for me.

After losing your job or during the suspension from work did you get other job offers? If yes, in which sectors and under what conditions?

I answered some job advertisements but the jobs they offered were incompatible with my responsibility as a parent. I was asked to work night shifts or evenings. I cannot with my daughter at home alone! The jobs available were in the restaurant sector but at night. I cannot leave my daughter alone. She needs me. I cannot do a job in the evening. She comes back at two in the afternoon. The job I had at the hotel allowed me to work in the morning and come back in the afternoon with her. We are in a difficult situation: I have sole custody of my daughter and the father has a ban on approaching her. I cannot count on the help of other people or relatives.

Have you thought about finding another job? If so, what actions have you taken? Do you think women are discriminated in the labour market?

I tried a few jobs. I found some black jobs. The hotels were all closed. I asked around if they knew of any openings, but there was no hiring. In any case, the hotels that have been closed must first take back the workers who have been laid off and then, if there is more work to be done, they can hire new people. I had thought about looking for another job in another sector, but I had not much chance of finding one, so I waited, hoping to get back to work soon. Recovery always seemed close. I must add that since I had an open-ended contract, it did not seem the wisest choice in my situation to resign and work for a few months on an on-call contract. The company is still active but has lost the contract at this hotel where I worked. Regarding discrimination against women...I can say that we have not any kind of support. I have my daughter and I have no choice. I do not know if we can talk about discrimination but

certainly if I look at my situation I can say that there are obstacles to working when you have children. It is difficult to find a serious company that respects workers' rights. Now I cannot resign. I could do a second part-time job but it is very difficult to find and combine it with my current one. I am comfortable working in the morning. I applied for some positions to work in the afternoon but the possibilities have been few. The contracts are on call. In some cases you have to go when they tell you. Now I am waiting to return to this job soon with another company. The problem is that in the hotel sector the cleaning companies are waiting for the hotels to reopen: our hands are tied. I have not even thought about moving: Milan is an important tourist destination and tourism has to start again sooner or later. Before the pandemic, you could find five jobs in Milan on the same day if you wanted to work. Changing region is not the solution because now everything is blocked.

What reflections have you made in relation to the job loss you experienced or this temporary suspension from work? Do you think there is sufficient protection for workers who lose their jobs or suspended from work? Moreover, for women who lose their jobs? What should the state and social partners do to support workers in this particular pandemic phase?

It is not easy to stay with yourself, especially at a time of great difficulty. I tried to keep myself busy: sometimes I looked crazy. I was cleaning all day. My daughter had to stop me. I used to invent something. I helped my daughter with her homework. There was little to do. I thought a lot, but to tell the truth I tried to keep the fear in check. It is not easy to maintain a balance. I was waiting for my daughter to fall asleep so I could cry. I have no vices: I do not smoke, I do not drink. All I could do was cry and release the tension. Not always but it was difficult. Economically it was also difficult. It is true that lack of work forces you to curb your spending. If you used to buy unnecessary things, as far as possible of course, now I am content. I am content to make ends meet with little, but at least not in the middle of the road. I know female colleagues who have moved in with other friends when they have children. It is fine to be able to stop eviction but if you accumulate bills to pay then you cannot manage. I consider myself lucky because I used up my savings and with state benefits I am still here. I have seen many people in difficulty find themselves in situations they never thought they would be in. I think this pandemic has affected women more than men. I have not seen or heard men complaining about the situation. Perhaps it is because women are more combative, but even within the union I have only heard women expressing their discomfort. Women are more aware and they realize the situation before it reaches rock bottom.

During the pandemic I had more time to spend with my daughter: at home I was out of work but with my daughter I felt protected. During the first months, with what you saw on TV, the ambulances... I was terrified. Being at home with my daughter was perhaps the only positive note. If one of them had taken the covid, it would have been very difficult to manage living in a flat with few rooms and sharing common spaces. I think there are not enough protections for workers who lose their jobs. This pandemic has created a situation that is out of our control. I can understand that it has shocked the world, but from what I have read in other countries, income support for workers has been activated soon. In Italy, the government locked us at home

and we had to wait months to get this minimal income support. The right to work is suspended but at the same time we have not sufficient subsidies. It is companies that make workers lose their jobs. There is no lack of work. Governments need to invest more in job creation, but they also need to put constraints on companies to hire the people who are now at home. The same constraint must be imposed on workers who should not be kept at home without working.

I would like to add that being protected by the unions over the years has been my salvation. It has been difficult. I wanted my employment contract to be respected: I have duties but also rights. Without the union I don't know how my work situation would have gone.