

Women, work and health between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from a national and international perspective

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KEY WORDS

Women; twentieth century; occupational diseases; health; Italy

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SUMMARY

Background: *A few years after a series of meetings of Italian scientists were convened prior to the unification of Italy, the first women qualified in medicine and other dedicated women participated in founding a movement for the improvement of living and working conditions of women and children in Italy. Objectives: analysis of Italian women's contributions in the proceedings of the International Council of Women Congresses and their impact on increasing the number of women's occupational health studies presented at the fourth National Congress on Occupational Diseases held in Rome in 1914. Methods: Analysis of the proceedings of the International Council of Women Congresses (Washington, Chicago, London), and of the Women's National Council and other documents so as to obtain a picture of Italian women's working conditions at that time. Results: Women and children worked an excessive number of hours per day, were underpaid, and had a legal status of inferiority. The main work sectors were sewing, embroidery, lace making, ironing, cooking, washing, dressmaking, millinery, fashion design, typing, weaving, artificial flowers, etc. The same sort of work was available to Italian women who emigrated to the United States of America. The success achieved by the women's movement is shown in the paper presented by Irene de Bonis "Occupational diseases among women" and published in the proceedings of the fourth National Congress on Occupational Diseases held in Rome, 9-14 June 1914. Conclusions: The article outlines the main features of the women's movement at the turn of the twentieth century, focussing on their publications describing Italian women's working conditions, considered in an international context. The movement's engagement in the promotion of women's occupational health at international and national level was successful but the First World War was to transform this achievement into the women's peace movement.*

RIASSUNTO

«Donne lavoro e salute nell'Italia tra ottocento e novecento in una prospettiva nazionale e internazionale».
Introduzione: *Qualche anno dopo le riunioni degli scienziati italiani, le prime donne laureate in medicina e altre donne dedicate partecipano alla costruzione del movimento femminile per il miglioramento delle condizioni di vita*

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e di lavoro di donne e fanciulle/i italiane. Obiettivi: Ricostruzione della condizione femminile al lavoro in Italia attraverso gli atti dei congressi internazionali delle donne e il loro impatto sugli studi della salute al lavoro delle donne presentati al Congresso nazionale delle malattie da lavoro di Roma (1914). Metodo: Analisi dei contributi scritti, presenti negli atti dei Congressi Internazionali delle donne (Washington, Chicago e Londra), di quelli nazionali insieme ad altri materiali, per ricostruire le condizioni di lavoro delle donne italiane dell'epoca. Risultati: il lavoro delle donne e delle minori era caratterizzato da un elevato numero di ore lavorate, sottopagate, in una posizione giuridica di inferiorità. I settori di lavoro prevalenti erano: cucito, ricamo, merletti, stiratura, cucina, lavatura, sartoria modisteria, tessitoria, fiori artificiali, ecc. Analoghi lavori erano quelli delle emigrate negli Stati Uniti d'America. Il contributo su "Alcune malattie professionali delle donne" di Irene de Bonis nel quarto congresso per le malattie da lavoro di Roma 9-14 giugno 1914 rappresenta il successo della capacità del movimento femminile di rappresentare le condizioni di lavoro delle donne. Conclusioni: Gli scritti delle donne laureate e non nel fornire un quadro dei lavori femminili, della salute, dell'emarginazione socio-culturale e giuridica delle donne viene discussa considerando il contesto internazionale femminile. La prima guerra mondiale modificherà per sempre il crescendo positivo di questa esperienza storica e il loro impegno verrà riorientato per la pace.

WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN DISCUSSED IN MEETINGS OF SCIENTISTS PRIOR TO THE UNIFICATION OF ITALY

The biologist Carlo Luciano Bonaparte (1803-1857) organized nine annual meetings of scientists (1839-1847) before the unification of Italy (1861). Socio-economic issues related to the major diseases of the period such as malaria, leprosy, chlorosis (iron deficiency anaemia in young women), ancylostomiasis, scurvy and pellagra were discussed in the medicine sections (9). Carlo Ilarione Petitti di Roretto (1790-1850), an economist and jurist from the Italian region of Piedmont, presented an outstanding paper on "Children's working conditions in Italian factories" at the Milan meeting in 1844. He discussed children's physical and psychological working conditions and the considerable investment needed to improve their lives. Working children were mostly girls, as statistical data on silk, wood, cotton and paper factories showed in Sardinia (57%), Piedmont (55%) and Lombardy (51% in Lecco). His report described the dramatic consequences of working conditions on children's health, such as body deformities due to early age labour (sometimes even at 4 years old), disproportion of the arms due to unbalanced overload, inadequate posture, long working hours (up to 16 hours/day), lack of rest, night shifts, unhealthy environment,

poor general and technical education, monotonous and unvaried work. Among children's health consequences were: "poor thinking", depressive mood, hypochondria, life disaffection, promiscuous environment, "inebriation and sexual arousal" due to widespread alcohol abuse.

THE OPENING OF UNIVERSITIES TO WOMEN IN EUROPE AND ITALY

No women attended these meetings for a simple reason: universities were closed to women. This restriction was widespread across Europe. The first exceptions occurred in Switzerland with the first medical degree obtained by a Russian woman, Nadedja Souslova (1867) and in France with a British woman, Elisabeth Garrett (1870). Marie Sklodowska (Curie) (1867-1934) and her sister Bronia were also forced to leave Warsaw to continue their studies in Paris where Bronia graduated in medicine and Marie in physics.

Among the first European female physicians was the Dutch woman, Aletta Henriette Jacobs (1854-1929). She was also leader of the movement for peace and emancipation of women together with the American Alice Hamilton (1869-1970), who graduated in 1878 and subsequently was an occupational health physician, and Jane Addams

(1865-1935), Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. In the United States of America (USA), Elisabeth Blackwell (1821-1910) was the first woman in the modern world to obtain a medical degree in 1849. Elizabeth Garrett had to wait ten years to obtain recognition of her medical degree in England. As a physician Blackwell suggested women to take up the medical profession (7) and, following in the steps of the English pioneers Elisabeth Garrett and Florence Nightingale, she set up a health settlement for poor girls and women in New York (1855).

In 1876, Italian universities were finally opened to women and Ernestina Paper Puritz-Manasse in Florence was the first medical doctor of the new Italian nation (1877) (28). Maria Farnè Velleda in Turin (1878), Anna Kuliscioff in Naples (1885), Maria Montessori in Rome (1896), Gina Lombroso (1901), Linita Beretta (1902), Teresita Sandeski (1909) were to follow, with many others. The opening of medical faculties to women led to strengthening the contribution of less educated or self-educated women philanthropists, such as the Italian Ersilia Majno Bronzini (1859-1933) and the above mentioned American Jane Addams.

ITALIAN WOMEN'S WORKING CONDITIONS DISCUSSED AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESSES OF WOMEN IN WASHINGTON, CHICAGO AND LONDON

In 1888 the first International Council of Women (ICW) was organized in Washington by women engaged in overcoming national limits to women's rights. American women's associations along with delegates from nine countries met in Washington after almost half a century since the Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights (1848). Elisabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was the leader of these two events. She upheld women's rights and the anti-slavery movement, as Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) did before her death. The Washington Congress proceedings were dedicated to Lucretia Mott's memory and the example she gave to other women (22). The American Helen Gardener (1853-1925) proved her scientific competence with

her presentation "Sex in brain", a contribution on the controversial "scientific" theory of women's inferior brain. She cited William Alexander Hammond, who was the leading supporter of this theory among American physicians, followers of Charles Darwin's *Evolution of Species*, like the great Italian anthropologists Giuseppe Sergi, Paolo Mantegazza and Cesare Lombroso. Darwin had already died a few years before in 1882 (24). Gardener donated her brain to science for the years to come and her brain is still preserved at Cornell University. Her personal gesture later proved her efforts to oppose a "scientific" theory that would delay women's emancipation and better living conditions.

"Condition of women in Italy" was the only Italian paper presented at the Congress. Fanny Salazar Zampini (1853-1937), an Italian writer, wrote in english. She stressed how, in her own english words: "Among the lower classes, women share the labours of the 'sterner sex', except in one or two handicrafts, where their lack of muscular strength renders them unsuitable. As weavers, spinners, field labourers (I had almost said beasts of burden) we find them (women) toiling for a mere pittance; often for twelve hours of work their highest pay is two francs 25 centimes (45 cents), and a so-called short day of ten hours will sometimes only earn 60 centimes (12 cents). That there exists an earnest desire among Italian women to earn their own livelihood is proven by there being 1,830,482 women workers, 161,202 of whom are, alas! under fifteen years of age. Between schoolmistresses and labourers there is an intermediate class of women comprising about 11,035 midwives, 23 blood-letters, 9 dentists, 487 female post-office employees and a few telephone clerks; quite lately a few female booking-clerks and chemists' assistants have been appointed in rural districts." Zampini also discussed the plague of legal prostitution in Italy: "Over that darkest social question of legal prostitution, I would willingly draw a veil, but I cannot give an adequate view of women's conditions without alluding to this plague spot".

Five years later (1893), on occasion of the World's Columbian Exposition, a second International Congress of Women was held in Chicago

(26). Again Zampini presented a contribution on “Women in modern Italy”. In this new report she discussed the inequalities between southern and northern Italy, the latter socio-economically and culturally more advanced. New female figures were mentioned, such as: Giorgina Saffi (1827-1911) in Bologna, organizer of the Women’s Mutual Aid Society in Forli, Paulina Schiff (1841-1926) in Milan, the first female professor of German literature at Pavia University and promoter of the first women’s trade union, the hem sewing workers (“*orlatrici*”) in Milan, Alessandrina Ravizza (1846-1915), founder of workers’ poor houses and supporter of the “*Clinica del Lavoro*” in Milan (3). Zampini recalled the role of the malariologist and hygienist Angelo Celli (1857-1914), who was recruiting aristocratic women in Rome for the “Aid and work” Society. Their initiatives aimed at continuing the experience of the “Society of working women and children’s recovery rooms” established in Rome in 1871 to help “honest and poor women” working in factories (30). Stressing the need to replace manual work with more educated female activities, Fanny Zampini expressed her appreciation of the extraordinary lace work centres organized by Cora Slocomb di Brazza (1862-1944), another woman representing Italy in Chicago. Cora Slocomb described the beauty of the Friuli region and the lace and embroidery school, established in 1891. In her own English words: “God grant that you may never set upon a piece of lace, however mean, without being reminded of what you can do for the hardworking women of the people in Italy...remembering that every piece of lace sold – however insignificant it may seem – means at least one hearty meal for some poor and industrious woman, some fatherless, dumb or crippled child in Italy”. She received a gold medal in recognition of her work and her ancient lace and embroidery collections exhibited in Chicago. Thanks to her efforts and commitment, a very important lace industry with twenty thousand women employed was later established in Italy (11).

In 1899, with a year’s delay, London hosted the third international Congress (27). The young woman just graduated at the University of Rome, Maria Montessori (1870-1952), was the Italian delega-

te to speak on “Children working in mines and dangerous trades”. Montessori invited the British delegates to support a new Italian law forbidding employment of children in sulphur and other mines before the age of fourteen, inspired by the Factory Acts. She described the long working hours, the constrained work positions, the task of carrying up and down heavy loads, the poor enlightenment and poor salaries. A few years earlier (1894), the dedicated to the Unification of Italy Englishwoman Jessie White Mario (1832-1906), who hoped to become a physician, had made an enquiry into the working conditions of sulphur mines in Sicily (29). White had been inspired by the Italian historian Pasquale Villari who had already described women and children working in the mines in “Letters from the south”. He wrote: “Here is the centre of sulphur mines that, besides agriculture, represents the main and richest industry of the island. This industry occupies many thousands of workers of every sex and age....hundreds and hundreds of boys and girls go down on steep ladders along paths carved in wet ground at risk of landslide. Once in the deep of the mine, they have to dangerously carry on their backs heavy and slippery burdens on unsafe ground at risk of landslide. They are continuously at risk of sliding down and losing their lives. The adults scramble out with desperate screams and the children’s cries. This work represents an unbelievable slaughter of people, a very well known issue, repeated thousands of times. Many die, many others will be crippled, deformed or sick for their whole lives. Terror is spreading, weak bodies are destroyed, the stronger ones survive to command and oppress boys and girls in those dark environments where anything can happen” (20).

Those were years of emigration not only for Sicilian people. At the London Congress, Florence B. Kelley (1859-1932) presented a paper on working conditions of Italian immigrants in Chicago “Insanitary conditions amongst home workers”. Italian immigrants were living in the Hull House district in Chicago, called “Little Italy”. The same year Jane Addams bought a house in order to help poor women, especially immigrants. Images of those Italian women and children were captured in the pictures of the American sociologist Lewis Wickes Hine

for years to come. Florence Kelley had been the first English translator (1887) of Friedrich Engels' book "The condition of the working-class in England, 1844". She was chief factory inspector in the American State of Illinois and fought to obtain the first law against child labour and in favour of a working day of eight hours. The "Illinois Sweatshop Law" was promulgated in 1893 but it was considered anti-constitutional within two years.

The Women's International Congresses of Washington, Chicago and London reveal important common similarities in national and international movements towards better working conditions for women and children in Europe and the USA.

In 1902 the Italian women's movement, mainly due to the efforts of the physician Anna Kuliscioff (1855-1925) and the self-educated Ersilia Majno Bronzini, succeeded in securing the first law in favour of women and children. This law limited the working day to 12 hours for women, 11 hours for children aged 12 years and 8 hours for minors (aged <10 years). In 1894 Anna Kuliscioff and Paolina Schiff had previously presented their contributions on how to improve women's working conditions at the International Congress on Social Insurance in Milan (Congrès International des accidents du travail et des assurances sociales) (12), and the following year Ersilia Majno Bronzini presented a paper on "The work of women" at the trade union conference on "Work accidents in relation to hygiene, working women and children and compulsory education" (23). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Milan hosted the first International Congress on occupational diseases ("Annus Mirabilis 1906") and saw the inauguration of the Clinica del Lavoro (1910) (5). Ersilia Majno Bronzini participated in those events physically and intellectually together with Nina Rignano Sullam.

The importance of national women's associations had been discussed in Chicago and Ishbel Hamilton-Gordon (Lady Aberdeen), president of the ICW, delegated Miss Grawshay to promote initiatives in Italy. The meeting with Italian women's representatives took place in Rome in May 1898. Lavinia Boncompagni Ludovisi in Taverna (1854-1938), daughter of the senator Antonio, was elected president of the women's groups appointed

to organize the National Council of women, with Miss Grawshay as vice-president.

In 1903, the National Council of women (CNDI), the Italian section of ICW, became a reality with the help of Olga Ossani Lodi (1857-1933), a writer, cited in the proceedings of the meeting. The Union of Women (Unione Femminile-UF) had joined the CNDI and was one of the major Italian women's associations, founded in Milan in 1899. Ersilia Majno Bronzini was the founder with other pioneers of the movement to promote "the emancipation of woman, the defence of childhood and motherhood, study and work within socially engaged Institutions, to unite all women's associations and institutions in a single house". Afterwards the Union of Women took on national status (UFN), becoming a reference for all other institutions seeking the improvement of Italian women's living and working conditions.

THE FIRST CONGRESS OF ITALIAN WOMEN (1908)

In April 1908, sixty-two women's associations, united in CNDI, organized the first Congress of Italian women in Rome. The anglo-italian Ernesto Nathan was the mayor of the Capital. Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi (1853-1931), daughter of Letizia Rasponi Murat, was President. She had already organized an embroidery school in Quarrata (Pistoia) with the purpose of promoting the wellbeing of women living in that village. More than a thousand women delegates met in Rome in order to discuss important issues: education, suffrage, law, emigration, paternity identification, working conditions. Women telegraph operators asked for Sundays off, equal pay for equal jobs, equality between sexes and the right to work after marriage. Montessori made a speech on the moral aspects of sex, Elena Lucifero (1871-1953) on education and prejudices in the south of Italy, Irene de Bonis on children's education. The front pages of Italian newspapers carried articles and photographs from the Congress that was held in the recently unveiled grand palace of justice (15). The following month in Milan, the Union of Women (UF) organized the First National Congress on practical female activities. Many

women, such as Alessandrina Ravizza, Ersilia Majno Bronzini, Lidia Poet, Nina Rignano Sullam, Linda Malnati, Argentina Altobelli, Anna Fraentzel Celli, Linita Beretta, already leading figures in Rome, presented technical reports on women's work, maternity, infancy, law and education (16). Anna Fraentzel Celli (1878-1958), wife of Angelo Celli, reported a survey on nurses "Women nurses in Italy" published in the Union of Women's journal, founded in 1901. Women were asked to choose working as nurses because "If many women are teachers... very few women are employed as nurses, a profession so close to motherhood, assisting and taking care of patients". Fraentzel Celli also advocated rest breaks from work (daily, weekly, yearly) for the same wages and application to women of the Retirement Reserve Funds for accidents, invalidity and old age (14).

Linita Beretta (1877-1955), the first female physician in Bologna together with Giuseppina Cattani, reported on "Taking care of children". She became responsible for maternity care at the Tobacco Manufacturing company in Milan where she carried out a study on infant mortality. Her study was published in Luigi Devoto's journal "Work" (*Il lavoro*) in 1911 (6).

CONGRESS ON "OCCUPATIONAL DISEASES" IN ROME AND WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL DISEASES BY IRENE DE BONIS (1913)

The CNDI was becoming an important association and many initiatives were organized throughout the country. The "Società Umanitaria" helped Montessori to open children's homes in Milan located on the Solari council house estate (1908), following a similar initiative - San Lorenzo - in Rome (1907). Occupational health courses were also organized. Sibilla Aleramo (Rina Faccio) wrote her book "A Woman" (1906), describing her story of violence and abuse. She participated, together with Anna Fraentzel Celli, president of the Rome section of the National Union of Women (UFN), in an initiative to improve the education of peasant women in the Rome countryside in 1910. Schools were organised as a way to promote health

with the fight against malaria and occupational and environmental diseases. Quinine was distributed free. Social justice and women's rights were considered a means to improve living conditions.

An emigration disaster, involving Italian immigrants, took place in 1911 on a Saturday evening, 25 March, in New York: the fire at the "triangle shirtwaist factory". One hundred and forty workers, mostly women died: they faced locked doors and some of them tried to escape by throwing themselves out of the windows. Forty of them were Italian, the youngest, Vincenza Bilotta, was only 16 years old (17). This event was to become one of the foundation stones of the American movement for occupational health (19).

In 1912 Kathe Schirmacher (1865-1930), who graduated in Zurich, wrote a detailed report on women's conditions in many countries, Italy included. In Italy women's inferior status, lack of education, husband's permission, suffrage and working conditions represented the unsolved problems. Schirmacher however stressed the improvements made in Italy due to the first female physicians, the women's work movement, particularly the rice weeders ("mondine") in Lombardy, the abolition of prostitution, the first Women's Congress in Rome 1908 (25).

In June 1913 the fourth Congress on Occupational Diseases was held in Rome (after Milan, Palermo, Florence). Aristide Ranelletti (1873-1945), a well known occupational health physician from Abruzzi, was the organizer. The Congress was reviewed in Luigi Devoto's journal "Work" (*Il lavoro*) (2). Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi and other women from the Italian Council of Women were appointed to the Executive Committee of the Congress together with Irene De Bonis De Baroni De' Nobili, Elena Lucifero, Teresita Sandesky (medical doctor), Romelia Troise. The "Società Umanitaria" of Milan and the Italian Council of Women with Teresa Labriola secretary (the first Italian woman with a law degree in 1898) were the main sponsors. Three congress communications were presented for the first time by women: Irene de Bonis "On women's occupational diseases", Elena Lucifero "On hygiene for children", Romelia Troise on "Breast feeding and food in female telegraph and telephone workers" (4).

Prospetto di alcuni lavori femminili.

Genere del lavoro	Inconvenienti cui danno luogo	Alterazioni anatomiche e malattie
Cucito . . .	Flessione del troneo — Sforzo della vista — Movimento degli arti su pedale della macchina.	Torace piccolo — Cifosi — Anemie — Congestioni pelviche, stitichezza — Disturbi mestruali — Aborti.
Ricamo. . .	id. id.	Come il cucito, ed inoltre cefalee da sforzo cerebrale — Cifoscoliosi.
Stiratura . .	Posizione eretta prolungata — Calore e gas della combustione del carbone.	Ginocchio valgo-statico — Peptosi renale — Anemia — Cefalee da lenta intossicazione carbonica — Varici agli arti inferiori.
Cucina . . .	Calore — Gas della combustione.	Affanno — Oligoemia — Dispepsie — Cefalea.
Lavatura. .	Panni infetti — Umidità.	Infezioni — Reumatismi — Nevralgie — Formicolio delle dita delle mani — Dolori lombari — Raffreddori, ecc.
Sartoria . .	V. cucito; inoltre, surmenage.	V. cucito — Cefalea.
Modisteria .	Eccessiva attenzione — ambiente chiuso.	Nevrastenia — Disturbi nevrotici — Clorosi — Dispepsie.
Tessitoria. .	Stazione seduta — Ambiente viziato — Uniformità di movimenti.	Stitichezza — Disturbi mestruali — Menorragie — Predisposizione agli aborti — Anemia — Crampi.
Fiori artific.	Colori tossici — Ambiente chiuso — Tensione mentale.	Intossicazioni varie — Anemie e tubercolosi — Nevrosi e alterazioni del carattere.
Dattilografia	Posizione curva — Ambiente chiuso — Tensione mentale.	Torace piccolo — Crampi e spocinesie delle mani, acroparestesie — Anemie.

Figure 1 - Irene de Bonis. Some types of work exclusively done by women (4)

In her important paper, Irene de Bonis stressed how some types of work were exclusively done by women (figure 1), who were exposed to unhealthy

working conditions and very few studies considered their occupational health risks. "Women are mainly employed in: sewing, embroidery, ironing,

cooking, washing, dressmaking, fashion design, weaving, artificial flower making, typing. Each type of work had “health inconveniences” (nowadays we call them organizational constraints) leading to body deformities and disease”. She described the major risks for women: inadequate postures (trunk flexion, standing or sitting, curving posture, movement of machinery), mental and sensory system disorders (eyesight overload, surmenage, high level of attention, monotony and mental tension) physical issues (hot climate, gas, humidity, unhealthy microclimate, toxicity of dyes) and biological agents (infections). De Bonis recalled the female professions already described by Fanny Zampini, Cora di Brazza and Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi, such as “the lace maker woman working all day with those light bobbins performing a long, slow, heavy work... the poor woman who sews... the embroidery consuming her eyes... with frequent abortions, tuberculosis, anaemia, fatigue”... “Women also have to wash the clothes of men suffering from tuberculosis together with little white baby clothes”. Irene did not forget the work done by Italian women in North America, that she had already studied (10): “The majority of these types of work are common among women in Italy and among Italian women who emigrated to America where they continue to work in jobs such as sewing, embroidery, artificial flower production, tobacco products”. She used the English word “sweat-shop” referring to home workers as Florence Kelley and Jane Addams had done. Louise C. Odencrantz also described the Italian immigrants’ conditions in a 1919 survey among factory workers of New York (21): the reality of Italian working women, their young age, low wages, unhealthy working conditions, lack of education and overcrowded living conditions. The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was also recalled.

Irene De Bonis concluded her communication exhorting the congress participants: “We must not forget the diseases of some women’s work that we may consider as occupational diseases of women. Physicians and hygienists have to build up occupational health that can study the relationship between occupational health issues and social law”

CONCLUSIONS

The following year (1914) the International Congress of Women was held in Rome, confirming the international success of Italian women’s associations (18). Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi, Teresa Labriola, Elena Lucifero, Teresita Sandeski, Lidia Poet and others participated in the Congress organization after having organized the Council of women, its first congress in 1908 and the Congress on occupational diseases in 1913. Female participants were invited to visit the new “social housing estates” in Rome in the San Lorenzo and Celio districts, the first Montessori children’s homes in Via dei Marsi and Via dei Giusti and the “Policlinico Umberto I”, the new Rome hospital where Dorothy Snell, a Florence Nightingale student, started a “nursing school” as suggested by Anna Frantzel Celli.

National Five-Year Technical Reports were discussed at the Congress. Beatrice Betts Melegari (1862-1918) (Secretary for Italy) described the numerous activities of the regional sections of Lombardy, Piedmont, Tuscany and Emilia. She reported with satisfaction how Italian authorities now employed women for inspections at workplaces, schools, prisons. International Committees reported ICW activities on peace negotiations, women’s legal status, suffrage, rights of citizenship, moral standards and trafficking of women, public health, education and emigration. Elena Lucifero, on behalf of the health committee, stressed in her paper “Delinquency of minors” how prevention was better than cure (“plus beau que guérir est prévenir”) and how it was important to prevent deprivation, fatigue and occupational exposure to lead among pregnant women. This citation concerning lead exposure was probably due to the Alice Hamilton’s publications on lead poisoning at that time (13).

In July that year, women physicians and all other women were forced to abandon this extraordinary experience of knowledge and improvement and dedicate their efforts to stopping war with all its health consequences. In 1915 Alice Hamilton visited Rome. She did not come for women’s occupational health but to keep Italy (and the USA) free

from conflict. Unfortunately Italy was to join the conflict within a year and the USA two years later. Alice Hamilton's and women's appeals for world peace, which began at the International Council of women at the Hague with Aletta Jacobs, Jane Addams, Rosa Genoni, an Italian pacifist journalist, went unheard (1). Internal divisions in women's associations on Italy's entry in the conflict did not stop their engagement in endeavouring to reduce the health consequences of war.

The First World War (1915-1918), with Italian troops at the front, gave Italian women the opportunity to show their worth in "heavy" working conditions, such as metal engineering, demonstrating how gender work limits were mainly a socio-cultural issue. Fascism and its politics of dictatorship would rapidly close this chapter but the course of history was changed (8).

NO POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST RELEVANT TO THIS ARTICLE WAS REPORTED

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