

## SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORKERS IN ITALY

*SERVIÇO SOCIAL E OS ASSISTENTES SOCIAIS NA ITÁLIA*

*TRABAJO SOCIAL Y TRABAJADORAS SOCIALES EN ITALIA*

**David Benassi<sup>1</sup>**

**Teresa Bertotti<sup>2</sup>**

**Annamaría Campanini<sup>3</sup>**

**Paolo Rossi<sup>4</sup>**


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<sup>1</sup> University of Milano-Bicocca (Italia)  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8628-1813>

<sup>2</sup> University of Trento (Italia)  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3670-0709>

<sup>3</sup> International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1726-8690>

<sup>4</sup> University of Milano-Bicocca (Italia)

Contact: David Benassi. Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca. Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale. Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo, 1 - 20126, Milano. E-mail: david.benassi@unimib.it

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## Abstract

The article tackles the characteristics of social work in Italy, focusing on some specific features of this professional domain within the broader framework of the Italian welfare system. Indeed, given the historical roots of Italian welfare regime and the model of governance of policies, social assistance benefits and services are the less developed component of welfare provisions. This is one of the reasons for the late full acknowledgement and regulation of the social worker at the national level, requiring specific skills and competences and therefore a specific academic curriculum. In the first part of the article, we present the development of social work in Italy, with particular attention to the creation of academic courses and the formal regulation as a profession. Then we present the current situation of social work and social workers in Italy, taking into consideration the weakness of social assistance and the effects of the financial crisis. In fact, the crises had an impact on the dimensions and composition of vulnerable population, which is more and more large and fragmented, putting growing pressure on social assistance offices and on social workers. At the same time, because of fiscal austerity, resources for welfare benefits have been reduced in these years, changing the organizational settings and worsening the working conditions of social workers. This article has been written mainly considering the situation before the pandemic, which had an impact on increasing social inequalities as well as posing hard challenges to the health and social welfare system.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Social workers, Italy

## Resumo

*O artigo aborda as características do Serviço Social em Itália, concentrando-se em algumas particularidades desse domínio profissional no quadro mais amplo do sistema de Welfare italiano. De fato, dadas as raízes históricas do regime de bem-estar italiano e o modelo de governança das políticas, os benefícios e serviços de assistência social são o componente menos desenvolvido das disposições de bem-estar. Esta é uma das razões para o reconhecimento e a regulamentação tardias do assistente social a nível nacional, requerendo competências e habilidades específicas e, portanto, um currículo acadêmico específico. Na primeira parte do artigo, apresentamos o desenvolvimento do serviço social na Itália, com particular atenção na criação acadêmica dos cursos e a regulamentação jurídica como profissão. Em seguida, destacamos o contexto atual do serviço social e dos assistentes sociais na Itália, considerando a fragilidade da assistência social e os efeitos da crise financeira. A crise, de fato, teve impacto sobre as dimensões e na composição da população vulnerável, cada vez mais numerosa e fragmentada, exercendo uma pressão crescente sobre as estruturas de assistência social e sobre os assistentes sociais. Ao mesmo tempo, nestes anos, devido a austeridade fiscal, os recursos para os benefícios sociais foram reduzidos, alterando as configurações organizacionais e deteriorando as condições de trabalho dos assistentes sociais.*

**Palavras-chave:** Serviço Social, Assistentes sociais, Itália

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## **SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORKERS IN ITALY**

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### **1. A short introduction to the approach to social assistance in Italy**

In Italy social assistance is an area of public policies historically characterised by weak legal regulation as a result of the scarce political attention it has received (Conti e Silei, 2013). It would be beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed analysis of the reasons for that; we will outline some salient events in order to understand the cultural and political framework within which social workers play their role in the Italian social protection system.

As it is well known, the Italian welfare state belongs to the Mediterranean regime (Ferrera 1996), based on the pivotal role of the family as a distributive actor, the centrality of the male breadwinner regime and welfare protection oriented to defend the income capacity of the adult male through work legislation and, above all, pensions. The role of the State in providing social services to support people in case of need has been historically very weak, namely because of the importance of the family and, above all, the very long tradition of catholic charities providing support to the poor. Summarizing, the rationale of the Italian welfare state is that 1) the family is responsible for the wellbeing of its members, 2) welfare policies have to protect the main income earner of the family, 3) private charities offer relief to the poor, 4) public social services have a residual role. Following this model of welfare protection, the legal regulation of social assistance has traditionally been weak, erratic and incomplete, including – until recently - the social work as a distinguished profession in welfare state administration (as discussed in par. 2).

The first law on social assistance after the unification of the country (1861) was enacted in 1890 (“legge Crispi”) and gave public relevance to local religious charities without a definition of the services to be offered to the poor. Substantially, every city or village was autonomous about the set of services to be implemented: it is worth mentioning that that law was definitely repealed only in 2000, 110 years later. The situation did not change radically

after WW2, except for some constitutional rights acknowledged to some categories (protection of minors, disabled, aged). With the creation in 1970 of the Regions as the intermediate level of government between the State and the municipality, a situation of concurrence between State and Regions on social assistance emerged, caused again by an “under law-making” in the field.

In 2000 the very important law n. 328 was finally approved after an unusual - for Italy – wide public debate on the modernization of the welfare State. This law drew a completely new legal framework for social assistance with several innovations in terms of both competences at different levels of government, tools for management and planning of policies, and benefits to be implemented homogeneously throughout the country. This law, long awaited by all actors of welfare in Italy, was a really important innovation for Italy, but in 2001, only 1 year later, the same coalition in power in the Parliament, approved a constitutional law – the so called “Riforma del titolo V” – with a strong regionalization of powers based on the principle of subsidiarization (horizontal and vertical). Article 117 of the new Fifth Section of the Constitution (entitled “Regions, Provinces and Municipalities”) lists a set of policy areas that are reserved to the State (armed forces and police, justice, taxes, foreign policy, monetary policy, social insurance ...) and another set that are subjected to “concurrent responsibility” between State and Regions (labour law, education, scientific research, protection of environment ...). All other subjects are reserved to the Regions, including social assistance, with municipalities charged with the delivery of benefits and services. The consequence of this change of the Constitution is that the national level has very little power on the decisions taken at the Regional level, with one important exception. Indeed, the central State has the duty to determine the “livelli essenziali delle prestazioni” (the basic level of services and benefits) in order to establish a minimum level of social protection throughout the country. Twenty years after the reform of the Constitution this set of basic allowances has not yet been defined (Ranci, 2008) for two very reasons: 1) the shortage of resources devoted to social assistance and the sharp differences between southern regions and the rest of the country; 2) the fact that it would imply the acknowledgement of personal rights to social assistance, and therefore the right to expect to receive that set of allowances, which would imply an increase of expenditure.

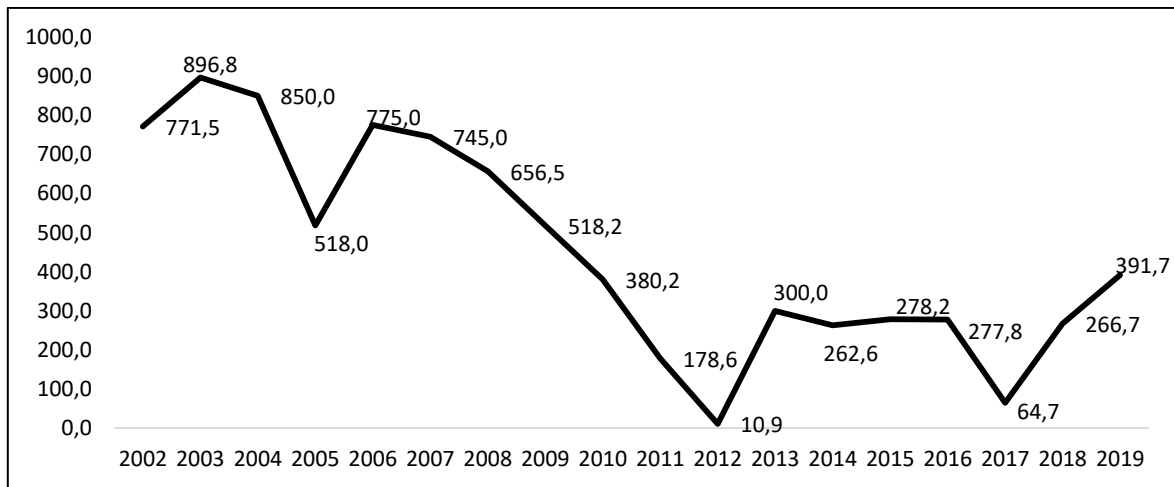
This institutional set-up has led to a highly unequal and differentiated development of social assistance at regional level, as several studies have shown (Kazepov & Genova, 2006; Kazepov, 2009, 2011; Ciarini, 2012; Gori, 2004; Bifulco, 2015), a dynamic that was deepened by the austerity measures taken after the 2008 financial crisis. The crisis had a very strong impact both on the vulnerable populations demanding social protection, and on

the, already weak, capacity of the welfare system to provide answers. On the first side, all statistical indicators of social vulnerability increased after the 2008 crisis, without recovering the pre-crisis level: absolute poverty doubled from 3,5% to 7%, relative poverty of families with three or more children increased from 21% to 32%, unemployment rate doubled from 6% to 12%, youth unemployment rates more than doubled from 20% to 42%, and so on (Saraceno et al., 2020). The two main pillars on which the Italian welfare system is based – stable employment of male breadwinner and stable and cohesive nuclear family – was dramatically affected by the crisis, widening the area of vulnerability and, consequently, the demand for social protection.

On the side of resources destined to welfare, four main types of austerity measures were implemented: wage freezes, cuts to salaries, staff reduction, and pension reform. Although the Italian government had already adopted similar measures since the '90s, the economic and financial crisis escalated the problem, pushing the central government to implement increasingly severe cuts to public expenditures. Above all, two measures had a particular impact on social work: the cut of resources for social policies and the freeze in public sector recruitment (on this see par. 3 and 4).

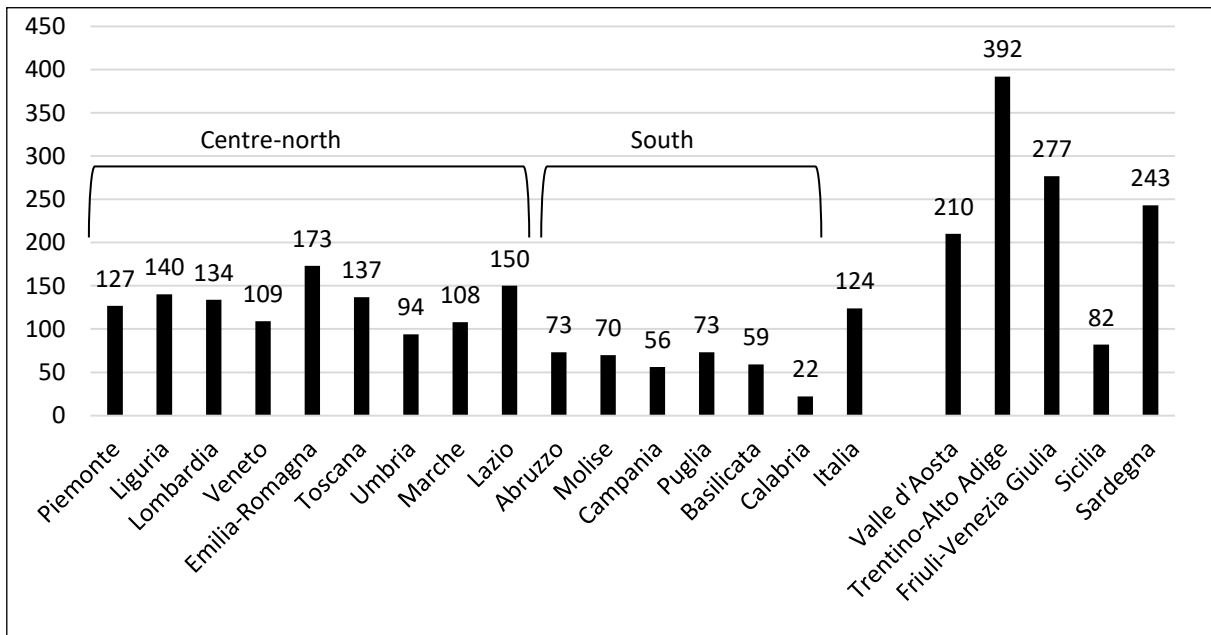
The resources allocated to the National Fund for Social Policies (FNPS), the main source of resources for local social assistance policies, were strongly reduced in the last decade, notwithstanding the increase in the last two years (fig. 1). As a consequence, local administrations (Regions and municipalities) must rely more and more on local taxation, but the taxable income varies dramatically moving from north to south. The effect is shown in fig. 2 on average social expenditure of municipalities at regional level. These huge differences on expenditures, that follow the north/south cleavage, have a relevant impact on the extension and quality of social services, and of course on social workers, as we show in the following paragraphs.

Fig. 1  
Resources allocated to the FNPS (National Fund for Social Policies), in millions, 2002-2019



Note: Italian Ministry of welfare

Fig. 2  
Average per capita social expenditure of municipalities per region (2018)



Note: The five regions on the right have “special powers” on several issues, including social assistance.

Note: ISTAT (Italian Statistical Office) online datawarehouse

## 2. The late and incomplete academic legitimization of social work

Social work was introduced in Italy at the end of the Second World War when many organizations, both lay and catholic, decided to set up schools to train social workers to support the reconstruction of the country. During the Tremezzo Conference in 1946, that can be defined as the milestone for the social work foundation in Italy (Giraldo, 2013; Campanini, 2013), a very lively discussion concerning the type of establishment for such education took place. Although many professors in social work schools came from the academic world, it was decided that the courses would not be integrated within the university system because the lack of professional vocation in the Italian academic tradition (Ferrarotti, 1965).

The idea was that the private sector was better equipped to host a curriculum that focused on both theoretical and practical training. This ambivalence profoundly affected the development of social work education, which by then did not enjoy formal recognition from the government, although students aspiring to follow social work courses were required to possess a secondary school diploma (*maturità*) and pass many entrance exams.

Some critical thinking persisted in several directors and teachers of the social work schools. They highlighted the lack of research and theorisation in social work curriculum, besides the non-recognition of the course at the university level. For these reasons, seven universities promoted the Scuole a fini speciali (Schools for special purposes) within their curricula. These universities included the University of Siena in 1956, followed by Rome in 1966 (both La Sapienza and St. Maria Assunta), Parma and Florence in 1969 and Pisa and Perugia in the 1970s.

A reviewing process initiated by the Minister for Universities in the eighties, led, in 1985 to the legalisation of social work education, establishing that the courses would be offered only within the university system, under the structure of "school for special purposes".

The legal recognition of the title happened in 1987 and the creation of the University Diploma in Social Work took place in 1993. Moreover, in the same year the social Workers professional register was created, which regulates the access to the profession and monitors the professional behaviour of social workers. According to the professional register, social work diploma holders are required to pass a State examination in order to become registered social workers. These State examinations are to be held on university premises with examiners including both academics and social workers appointed by the Professional Order.

The first Research Doctorate in Sociology, Theory and Methodology of Social Work was established at Trieste University in 1994, and an experimental Degree Course in Social Work has been organised by the University of Trieste and the University of LUMSA in Roma since 1998. They offered social workers the possibility, with a three years' diploma, which may be obtained from either a private or university institution, to enrol at this integrative year in order to obtain the title of *laurea*.

In 1999, following the Bologna process on the harmonization of higher education degrees in Europe (Campanini, 2015), Italy introduced a national higher education reform, which established three levels of degrees (BA/MA/Ph.D.) in all university faculties. As to what concerns social work, this resulted in a three-years Bachelor degree entitled "Sciences of Social Work" (later "Social Work") and a two-years Master's Degree in "Planning and Management of Politics and Social Services" (later "Social work and Social Policies").

As a consequence of the Bologna reform, the professional register was split into two sections: Section A for those who completed the master's degree and section B for those who completed the bachelor's degree. Consequently, two different examinations were introduced.

Concerning the current situation, in the academic year 2018/2019 36 BA are offered by Italian universities. Concerning the MA, there are 35 programs with a vast array of names. The most frequent ones are named: Social work and social policies; Planning and organisation of social work, and, to a lesser extent: Work, social citizenship and interculturality; Social work in complex contexts; Methodology, organisation and evaluation of social services; Society and local development; and Innovation and social work, to name a few.

It is worth noting that during this process, social work as a particular area of research was not recognized as an autonomous academic discipline, like in many other countries, and was included in the General Sociology academic sector. This was, and still is, an important weakness of social work as a discipline, as far as the academic career for researchers in this field is thwarted, limiting furthermore the theoretical and empirical research on social work issues.

It is interesting to compare the Italian story with what happened in Spain more or less in the same years, where social work was recognised as a specific academic discipline. In 1990 teachers from the private schools were employed in the Universities, offering them the chance of acquiring bachelor's degrees and Phd within a ten-year timeframe, so that they could take up an academic career (Pastor Seller, 2014).



In Italy, neither guarantees were provided for teachers who were teaching social work under the previous system, nor the possibility to participate in the public competitions for the recruitment of professors, acknowledging the specialization acquired as teachers and professionals.

The Italian situation of the teachers in social work disciplines has been and still is very critical (Bertotti, 2021). The large majority are social workers employed in social services teaching in universities with temporary contracts and very low salaries. Until now, very few permanent academic positions in social work have been established: at the time we are writing, there are less than 20 researchers or professors with a background in social work, as the general standard in education approved by IASSW (International Association of Schools of Social Work) and IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) would require<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in the last ten years, the social work specific courses were seriously cut in terms of number and of hours. Given the lack of an academic acknowledgement of social work as a specific discipline, and therefore the shortage of people with an academic curriculum, the last reform of the curricula in social work, despite the requests of the professional register, of the AIDOSS (the Association of Italian Teachers in Social Work), and also the opinion by the EASSW (European Association of Schools of Social Work), was very unsatisfactory. Out of 180 credits for the BA, the ministerial regulation established a minimum of 15 credits for social work disciplines and 18 credits for curricular internship (*tirocinio*). This means that students can earn a BA degree in social work after having completed only three courses of social work disciplines over the course of their major. Usually, one course is dedicated to Foundations and principles of social work, while the two others to Methods and Techniques of social work. Furthermore, nothing was specified for the MA, except the 10 credits for curricular internship.

It is clear that this curriculum structure has affected the professional skills of social workers, of whom, paradoxically, is required a greater breadth of competences because of the globalisation. The few mandatory social work courses are very general, and none of them deals with specific intervention methods or clients' problems. Further, none of the mandatory courses relate directly to human rights, social justice, advocacy or policy practice.

Internship placement of students, however, has a relevant role in social work programs (Dellavalle 2011), perhaps because of the scarcity of social work-related courses. Notwithstanding this, it is limited in terms of hours compared to our European homologues and arguably not as well-structured (Campanini, 2009). The organisation of placements varies widely across institutions: in some universities, there are specific offices charged with

the coordination of internship placements, while in others students are left to themselves. In some cases, supervision is carried out by employees of the hosting institution, but in some cases these supervisors are not social workers. Only in very few universities do students have the possibility to reflect on their internship in small groups supervised by field teachers. These cases, while rare, are hugely beneficial for students to get feedback on their experiences and to connect theory and practice.

Other critical elements relate to the fact that, despite the orientation of the Bologna process and the Tuning Methodology ([www.unideusto.org](http://www.unideusto.org)), the curricula have not focused on the preparation required for facing the challenges that social workers are experiencing in the social services. Instead, the curricula are often shaped by the resources available at the faculty and departmental levels. Therefore, there may be more courses related to sociology or law or political science or pedagogy, depending on the vocation of the Department and on the teaching resources available. Teaching is not adequately oriented towards the development of skills and teaching methods are still too teacher-centred (as opposed to student-centred). Italian universities still follow the traditional mode of lecturing, from the pulpit, while student-centred teaching methods process tend to foster more critical and creative thinking. Moreover, too many students are admitted into the programmes (up to 400 in some universities) given the number of teachers available. This is due to the growing pressure on universities to increase the number of freshmen in order to gather more financial resources, while in the past the average number of students admitted to social work schools was 35 to 60 per year. The current increase in the teacher/student ratio is hampering a more student-focused learning process.

An additional problem is the lack of analysis of the motivations and attitudes of the students who are enrolling in social work programs. Access examinations in the majority of universities are based on questions relating to general cultural issues. The scores on these tests and the grades of the final high school examination are the only criteria on which selection is based. The issue is that in Italy, a selection based on the assessment of student motivations or their attitudes towards the social work profession is not possible because it is deemed as a discriminatory approach. This discrimination violates the Italian constitution, which guarantees to all citizens the right to choose their education. To improve the preparedness of students in scientific disciplines, and to make up for the deficiencies of the curricula, it is imperative to organise more seminars or laboratories, and to provide proper supervision and tutorship in relation to placement (Dellavalle, 2011). However, in the case of social work education, these expenses are viewed as an additional burden by the

universities' administrative bodies. Further, the constraining structure of the programs makes it difficult to find the time to undertake such activities.

Despite all of these problems, many social work teachers in different universities are more and more adopting active teaching methodologies (Bertotti, 2012; Rizzo, 2012; Fazzi, 2016). These teachers find themselves juggling with various regulations, for example, a security law that stipulates that all furniture should be fixed to the floor, hindering the attempts to use less formal ways of teaching. Some universities conduct workshops on different issues, such as: communication and writing skills; intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches; seminars and group work for active learning; good practices; training through role-playing activities; getting in touch with clients as experts by experience.

These are only a few examples of good practices that are being carried out in different social work programs across the country in order to lift up the quality of education and there is a growing sentiment regarding the need to develop cross cutting and so called soft competences, as communicative skills, critical thinking, creativity as key factors for facing the future challenges of social work (Lorenz et al., 2020; Bertotti et al., 2021). However, the big financial crisis started in 2008 has had an adverse impact on universities.

In the following paragraph we discuss how the spread of the neoliberalism had an impact on the social profession and the organisation of social services.

### **3. Social work as a profession in Italy**

In parallel with the regulation of the academic status of social work, above mentioned, the Italian social work gained formal recognition as a profession in its own right, acquiring the 5 attributes foreseen by Greenwood (1957). It was a long process taking almost 20 years, started in the 1980s with the recognition of the education title, as the basis for the qualification as social worker. It continued up to 1993, when the full legal recognition of the professional title was achieved, and the professional register was established (n.84/1993 Act, named "Regulations of the profession of social worker and constitution of the professional register", 'Ordinamento della professione di assistente sociale e istituzione dell'albo professionale'). Registration is compulsory to be allowed to work as a social worker, and it is conditional upon passing a special State-run examination, in addition to the degree awarded by a university.

In contrast with other European experiences where access to the social work register is managed by mixed committees (Orme & Rennie, 2006), the Italian register is self-regulated, which means that the Consiglio (Board) is elected from and by social workers. The profession is regulated by means of a professional code of ethics whose violations are judged by a disciplinary committee, also elected by members.

In 1995, the order of social work was settled, with a national council and 20 regional councils. Three years later, the first ethical code was approved, then reviewed in 2009 and in 2020 a third revision was issued. Since 2012, social workers must engage in continuing professional training, through a system of credits.

The establishment of the professional order contributed to define the sense of identity of the profession (Fargion, 2008) with an effort to define specific competences and boundaries, especially in relation to other cognate professions (Abbott, 1988). It is now one of the most relevant sources to preserve the professional image and community.

The number of social workers shows a steadily increasing trend. In 1999, a few years after the establishment of the Register, there were 27,000 (EISS, 2001, 32); almost 20 years later, in 2018, 44,000 people were registered as social workers in one of the 20 regional order (CNOAS, 2018), with an increase of about 60% (Bertotti, 2021).

Their areas of employment varied according to changes in the Italian social assistance system that passed from an almost total presence of social worker in public services to an increase of employment in the Third Sector. Moreover, the reform of the National Health system during the 1990s, that introduced forms of quasi-market system, also stressed the implementation of services more strictly focused on health care rather than integrated forms of social and health care (Bifulco, 2017). The social assistance reform of 2000 (Law n.328) then attributed several social functions to municipalities, that later, after the severe cuts on resources and moved to forms of externalization, as mentioned later. These changes in the Italian welfare system are clearly visible in the numbers of social workers' areas of employment through the decades. Gathering different studies, table 1 provides some evidence of these changes, even though they are not strictly comparable (Bertotti, 2021, p. 118). In 1999, the data collected after the establishment of the national register (Censis, 1999) showed that Italian social work is in its great majority carried out in public agencies (74,10%) where social workers act as 'civil servants', and are often politically engaged (SgROI, 2001; Sicora, 2015; Fazzi & Rosignoli, 2020). Ten years later, in 2008, a similar sample survey carried out by Facchini (2010), still showed a prevalence of social workers employed in the public sector, (69,9%) with an increase of those working for municipalities

(45,5%,) and a decrease of those employed in the health sector (24,4%,) but also the move towards mixed forms of welfare. In fact, the number of social workers employed in the third sector increased to 18% of respondents (Facchini & Lorenz, 2013). The last data provided by the CNOAS (2018) give further evidence of changes in the Italian welfare system: social workers employed in public local services and health services dropped to 41,5% (respectively to 26,2% and 15,3%,) whilst the number of those employed in the third sector and similar services increased to 29% (CNOAS, 2018).

Table 1 – Distribution of social workers by sector

<b>Year</b>	<b>Local administrations</b>	<b>Public health services</b>	<b>Third sector</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1999</b>	39,5	34,6	na	na	100
<b>2008</b>	45,5	24,4	18,0	12,1	100
<b>2018</b>	26,2	15,3	29,0	29,5	100

Notes: Bertotti (2021, p.118)

As regards to their activities and working environment, social workers employed in municipalities are hired to deal with first access points, with the task of analysing situations and for 'professional social work', aimed at drafting and realizing plans for interventions. According to the L. 328/00 municipalities have four main areas of intervention related to support to families and children including child protection, social support for people with disabilities, for vulnerable and marginalised adults and social assistance for elderly people. Usually municipal social services' teams are made up of professional social workers, sometimes including social work educators and, seldomly, psychologists. As will be mentioned later, municipalities may have different organisational settings with an impact on social workers' work ranging from a more specialised to a more generalist and community based approach

On the other hand, in the health sector social workers mainly work in multi-disciplinary teams, according to the features of the service. In fact, according to national laws, the health sector provides specialised services for families and for children with disabilities, services for people with problems of drug, alcohol or game addiction, or with mental health problems. Often, they are employed in hospitals. In these services social workers works in strict contact with doctors, with several specialisations as psychiatry, child psychiatry, but also

gynaecologists, psychologists, nurses, educators, etc. In these contexts social workers may struggle for recognition, when compared with professions with a stronger social status and with a different language, but are also often very much appreciated for the possibility of including social work in the medical perspective (Fargion et al., 2017; Olivetti, 2015). Team composition and interprofessional collaboration in the third sector may vary to a great extent, according to the wide diversity of services they provide.

As for the social work methods mainly adopted in Italy, working with individuals and using a case work approach is the prevalence in Italy, often associated with work with families (Facchini & Lorenz, 2013; Campanini, 2007). For instance, according to Facchini (2010) about 40% of working time is employed in direct relationship with clients and it is rated with an average interest level of 8.5 out of 10.

Following the traditional distinction of the methods of social work, the same study also witnessed the reduced spread of community work and group work. The former seems to be more common in municipal social services and in the third sector, with an increasing trend in the second decade of 2000s because of the reduction of resources and the call for a stronger involvement of the community. As for group work, it shows a similar trend: it is more common in the health sector, in family counselling centres as self-help support for women, or in mental health centres or with people with addiction problems. Alongside these changes, several studies also show in Italy the increase of the 'paper work' connected with the introduction of managerial policies, stressing performances and measurements that induced a bureaucratization of work practices (Harlow et al, 2012). To complete the picture, preventative work that was carried out by social workers, through campaigns of awareness and the creation of self-help support groups, also shows a decrease. The recent development of the SOCISS (Società Italiana di Servizio Sociale) as an independent association, based on a strong alliance between social work research and professional practice is providing an interesting ground for the innovation of the social work.

#### **4. The complex morphology of organizational contests of social work**

The organizational architecture of social work is quite complex in Italy. Although the provision of social services is institutionally recognized as a declination of a subjective social right, the actual delivery of social welfare benefits, care services and other instances of social work is highly differentiated across the country. This differentiation depends both on legislative and organizational factors. As illustrated in the first paragraph, the absence of a

uniform definition of the minimal interventions of social provision affects the heterogeneity of services. The devolution of the legislative power to Regions has brought about a further differentiation.

The differentiation of the mechanisms of organizational and provision of social services is not only a “territorial” issue, i.e. a misalignment of available resources across Regions. It is possible to argue that a subtler layer of differentiation emerges considering the heterogeneity of organizational contexts in which social workers perform their activities.

The main organizational “location” for the access to, management and delivery of social services are municipalities. Consequently, municipalities are still the most important employer of social workers (Facchini & Lorenz, 2013). From an institutional point of view, municipalities hold the administrative ownership of social services. However, the organizational structure of municipalities, as well as the forms of management of social services within municipalities, are very different. A primary source of differentiation is the size of cities and villages. Italy is a country characterized by the presence of a plurality of small villages, with very few cities that have more than 150.000 inhabitants. Large cities may have well-staffed and well-structured departments of social policies/social services. In such contexts, social workers typically deal with a specific target of clients (elderly, disabled people, children etc.). As a consequence, they are specialized in tackling issues related to their category of clients. Vice-versa, in smaller villages, social workers are likely to be involved in activities devoted to heterogeneous clients and they have fewer opportunities to specialize in specific subjects.

Because of financial constraints, as well as the will of enhancing more specialised units, a growing number of departments of social policies of small villages have joined into inter-municipal partnerships (IMPs). The creation of an IMP implies sharing economic and professional resources, as well as defining mechanisms of governance (Citroni et al, 2013). Within the Italian legislative system, a plurality of juridical and organizational options for the creation and governance of IMPs may be found. Basically, each IMPs may choose its institutional configurational, although some Regions have tried to conform to the “morphology” of IMPs (Fedele e Moini, 2006). The opportunity of autonomously defining organizational and institutional configurations led to a terrific differentiation of IMPs within and across regions (Rossi, 2014). Within this polymorphic scenario, social workers may be called to work in different villages that are members of a IMP. This means they are expected to move each day to different villages, having reduced occasions for encountering clients and colleagues.

Moreover, each village may be a member of public-private partnership (PPP). PPPs are frequently established with a twofold purpose: developing innovative services (sharing skills and resources of public and private actors, e.g.) and/or overcoming the asymmetry between public actors (i.e. the principal) and private actors (i.e. the agent) when outsourcing a public service.

The establishment of a PPP may affect social workers' self-perception of their professional and institutional status. Firstly, within a PPP a social worker employed by a municipality (or other public administrations) can collaborate with colleagues employed by private actors (mainly social enterprises). As already said above, social workers employed by public actors frequently enjoy better working conditions, in terms of income, stability of contracts, working hours and opportunities for balancing work and life. Secondly, within the setting of a PPP, a social worker may be expected to report to more than one supervisor: the leader of his/her employer and the leader of the PPP. Since most PPP are mainly financed by public actors, social workers who participate to the PPP being employed by private members may feel a lower professional and organizational status than his/her colleagues employed by public actors.

The diffusion of IMPs and PPPs contributes to the “hybridization” of providers of social services. Concisely, the notion of hybrid organization may refer both to organizations set up by a network of actors (such as IMPs and PPPs) and to pre-existing public organizations who are employing professionals through private-style contractual agreements [Dorigatti et al., 2018]. This possibility comes from the change of the juridical status of some typologies of public organizations, who are becoming private organizations (e.g. IPAB<sup>1</sup> who have been transformed into private foundations). In this case, “older” workers maintain the status of public employees, while the new ones are employed with private contractual agreements.

Within this scenario, it is important to include private organizations, such as social enterprises. In Italy, the most widespread typology of social enterprise are social cooperatives, i.e. a specific form of not-for-profit organization that maintains mutual and cooperative principles in the governance of economic resources. This means that the members of the board of the organization are elected by its workers, adopting the criteria of *per capita vote*. This means that social workers (as any other workers of a social cooperative) can be engaged (more or less actively) in the governance of the organization. Since a growing number of social cooperatives are involved in the planning of local social

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<sup>1</sup> IPAB is the acronym of “Istituzioni di Pubblica Assistenza e Beneficenza” (Institutions for Public Assistance and Philanthropy), an old typology of public organizations aimed at delivering a variety of social and educative services.



services, it is important to stress that social workers may participate to the implementation of social services both as professional and as managers (or members of the board of directors) of their own organization.

Finally, it is important to mention that the Government is implementing a structural reform of the Third Sector, a very broad and heterogeneous domain of entrepreneurial activities (who share the principle of not pursuing profit). Although the full implementation of this reform is still to come, it could have some important implications for the regulation of the relationships between public and private actors even in the field of social welfare.

### **Conclusions: Working as social workers in times of austerity**

These changes have had a widespread impact on social workers, affecting their employment conditions and straining the overall sense of professional identity.

The process of outsourcing and the creation of public-private welfare companies have injected into social work an element of precariousness, hitherto absent (Facchini & Lorenz, 2013). Instability of working conditions affects mainly young social workers, both in the public sector as well as the private one. For instance, a study carried out in Lombardy in 2012-13 showed that 85% of respondents were employed with long term contracts; this rate dropped to 48.3% for social workers under 30 (Casartelli e Dessi, 2013). Similarly, a national survey on employment opportunities for social work graduates from 2006 to 2012 (Tognetti, 2015) shows that the first place of employment for newly graduated social workers is mainly in the third sector, but also that even in the public sector 45% of new graduates have temporary contracts. Moreover, the average time needed to find a first job is lengthening (Niero et al., 2015). The employment conditions in the third sector may vary widely depending on the type of non-profit organization, whether they are social cooperatives, charities, simple associations, more or less structured, and on their ability to perform in the quasi - market competition of social welfare.

Beyond precariousness, the reduced number of practitioners available has resulted in increased workloads, especially in the public sector, and in increasing difficulties in matching organizational constraints with professional interventions. At the level of frontline social workers, the retrenchment of public funding is an additional worsening factor on social work practice, as it means fewer resources and services delivered to those in need. As the

provision of material supports is often the base to develop deeper helping relationships, the lack of possibilities to provide services becomes a major threat to the role of professionals.

Furthermore, social services face the emergence of new social protection needs, displayed by an increase and change of demands on social workers, both in terms of quantity and quality. In addition to traditional clients, a new middle-class is now seeking assistance in relation to debt or housing problems, and loss of job. In general, service users now bring a complex and multifaceted kinds of issues, in which social problems, exacerbated by the economic crisis, are intertwined with relational problems and social isolation. Confronted with these challenges, social workers call for a space for rethinking and for innovating services and the ways used for supporting people. Instead, they find themselves caught up in the role of “gate keepers” of reduced resources rather than being a helping professional. In this position, they are often on the frontline of protest and distress of service users that may result in violent acts against social workers, as argued in a recent research on violence against social professions (Sicora e Rosina, 2019).

Social and mass media also play an important role in increasing the distrust towards institutions and professionals, sometimes fueling the aggression towards social workers. Although this is not a new phenomenon (it began with the spread of neoliberal policies and the attack on public institutions), it has increased with the spread of neoliberal and populist discourses. At the time of writing this article, it is mainly associated to a criminalization of social workers in the field of child protection.

The introduction of the NPM principles has worsened the situation, undermining the professional relation with clients as well as the working conditions and professional integrity. Social workers have been criticized for being too discretionary, disregarding the need for standardization and financial constraints. Often, the top management ignore professional evaluations, thus eroding the possibility for social workers ‘to be reliable and trustworthy’ with clients. Moreover, under the NPM regulations, cuts have also reduced opportunities for further professional training, supervision and peer support, as well as time for case discussion in professional teams (Bertotti, 2014; Sammarco and Tilli, 2012). In the face of these new demands and expectations, the gap between dwindling resources and overwhelming workloads produces acute and widespread distress amongst social workers. Such response is often expressed in terms of feeling helpless and inadequate, ‘being under siege’ or constantly working “under a state of emergency”, and is conducive to depression and withdrawal (Bertotti, 2016).

The strategies adopted to manage the mounting pressures have substantially changed the professional role of social workers. For instance, Riva (2014) analyzed strategies adopted by social workers to deal with the swelling caseloads and showed how these strategies, such as sidestepping professional protocols or postponing the assignment of the case, are often odds with both professional guidelines and social work values. Since this fact does not seem to be questioned, it is argued that social workers tend to prioritize speed as part of the quality of response, showing an attitude that may be interpreted as an effect of the market-oriented, “customer satisfaction” culture, where performance is assessed in terms of quantity instead of quality. On the contrary, interpreting similar results on their studies, Tousijn e Dellavalle (2017) argue that the process of restructuring social work practices under the pressure of managerialism may be seen as the emergence of new forms of professionalism. They show how social workers find the ways to interpret managerial principles by adapting them to social work values.

According to a critical and radical perspective, this trend can be interpreted as an aspiration to create an ‘austerity social worker’, whose precarious contract and low recognition imbue social workers with low expectations about their career and social roles (Garrett, 2014). Rather than being an agent of change, this is a professional figure “encouraged to be politically docile, viewing budgeting and the rationing of services to clients as paramount” (Garrett & Bertotti, 2017, p.37).

The reactions of social workers are varied and range from depression to protest. Some social workers tend to experience low moods and opt for withdrawal, others may express their discontent, demanding more recognition and denouncing the gap between organisational demands and the ethos of the profession (Burgalassi e Noci, 2012). Dissatisfaction seems to be more widespread within the public sector, whereas in the third sector social workers consider that their professionalism is more recognized and valued, at least in some regions of Italy (Fazzi, 2012).

Clearly, the combination of austerity measures and the way social services are managed have put under severe pressure the relationship between the professional and their employers. In a study carried out by one of the authors, the sense of belonging to the organization and the focus on the needs of service users are severely strained, resulting in different postures. They may range from a detached attitude to adaptation or critical engagement, following seniority and kind of context (Bertotti, 2016)

In this picture, it is not easy to identify which developments are foreseeable for Italian social work in the near future. Alongside the delusion and resignation, there are several attempts

to react positively, trying to understand how new forms of professionalism can be forged and how the cultural project of the profession is to be refunded. The national professional council is highly engaged in this effort, often taking several public initiatives and upholding the efforts to innovate and rethink the professional project.

One of these goes in the direction of developing a more aware and strong capacity of policy practice and increase the ability of social workers of thinking themselves as agent of change. This includes interventions carried out within the professional context with the aim of influencing social policies. Social workers should develop capacities to transform their daily activity in a meaningful analysis of the social needs and activate the community, supporting the groups with social advocacy initiatives. Should also be able to develop innovative proposals and make concrete steps to realize the social work mission to enhance human rights and social justice.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> As stated at point 5.1. of the Global standard for Social Work Education and Training issued by IASSW: “The provision of professional staff, adequate in number and range of expertise, who have appropriate qualifications as determined by the development status of the social work profession in any given country. As far as possible a Masters level qualification in social work, or a related discipline (in countries where social work is an emerging discipline), should be required” ([www.iasw-aiets.org](http://www.iasw-aiets.org)).