

The Second Female Serfdom

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Description of the problem

Numerous surveys conducted by the various regional administrations of European Affairs of the Balkans, as well as those carried out by those European states who are presently candidates to enter the European Union in 2004, have pointed out the persistence of an accentuated situation of occupational disadvantage for women in the local labor market with an unemployment rate three times that of male unemployment indicating the greater difficulty faced by women for taking up a career or setting up a business. In these countries such difficulties are increased in an exponential manner, since they are typical of weaker geographical areas that are still suffering the consequences of a centuries-old cultural heritage in which the woman plays a role of extreme subordination.

Such an emerging phenomenon represents the new problem in the extensive marginal rural areas stretching from the eastern Alps to reach into, beyond the borders of Central Europe with its rugged mountainous morphology, a large part of the Balkans. The social system here is degraded and about to disappear, human resources are weak, the female component is precluded from every social-economic alternative.

Description of the past situation

Inside a region composed of no less than a hundred ethnic groups, which have never become totally integrated if not formally (for example, Yugoslavia), the long-established patriarchal system within the larger rural context has resisted because it is supported by a strong conservative component, that is to say tradition, notwithstanding the economic reality of the survival of the major part of the population. The social-economic order was structured around the female figure, a fixed constant of the rural system: a guarantee of the family's perpetuation (for example "heredity farm") and an unlimited work force because of her availability and the employment of her labor. A "strong" type of society in a demographically vivacious rural context was formed in which the opportunities offered in industrial societies were rare with insignificant and often sexist requests.

Nevertheless, during the last century for the female figure horizons were opened which had previously been closed to her by the cultural environment as well as by her kin's management which had substantially effected her "domestic serfdom".

Description of the actual situation

During the past fifty years the figure of the woman who lives in this marginal rural environment (Dars, the abbreviation in Italian of "donne dell'area rurale svantaggiata" will be used hereafter rather than the entire phrase. The English translation of this phrase is "women in a socially and culturally depressed rural area") of the regions mentioned above was lacerated by three notable trends which were almost contemporary but had final converging effects:

1. their movement (when not emigration) to the towns,
2. their demographic isolation owing to the abandoning of their native lands,
3. the reduction of requests for their primary activity.

Moreover, after the fall of the Berlin Wall the demographic trends of these rural areas underwent centrifugal forces such as the emigration of young women to other countries and the substantial reduction of the demographically fertile age group, obviously useful in the turn-over of the rural settlements.

At the present time the statistical framework, carried out by sampling, can be described as follows:

- 100,000 Dars per every 1,000,000 inhabitants in the economically and culturally depressed marginal area,
- 70% of these are women in the fertile age group,
- the employment rate of the Dars exceeds 40% falling to the lowest levels in all of Europe,
- the unemployment rate is three times that of males,
- 70-80% of the Dars hold only a secondary (junior high school) diploma (finishing their studies at the age of thirteen).

Furthermore, three social emergencies are added to the problem of gender:

1. the decreased birth rate;
2. the disintegration of the multiple family-unit and the increase of the single family-unit;
3. the notable increase in the survival of the elderly with an index of old age superior to the national average values which are around 110-120.

Consequently in the rural environment are taking place the following:

- the collapse of the family-run businesses (in the past 10 years more than 50% fewer compared to the national average of 10-15%),
- the almost complete absence of women as artisans and as collaborators in family-run businesses:
 - the support of the 21-40 year-old age group cannot be increased,
 - the support is not in turn-over with the 41-60 year-old age group above;
- the constantly low per cent of part-time (fundamental relationship with the increase of the female employment rate),
- the curbed development of the services sector, in which a large part of future female employment is at risk, but into which access is denied to the Dars because of their lack of preparation¹.

The Dars' problem, because of their exclusion from the services sector, indicates the beginning of a second period in European history, a period characterized by an entirely female modern serfdom. According to the Supplementary Convention of 1956, "serfdom" indicates the state of constraint "of those who, for necessity or custom, work in their own sphere whether compensated or not, but without having the liberty to change their condition".

According to the studies of the trend toward serfdom in Eastern European countries, carried out by researchers of the University of Munich, the phenomenon even has an influence in the extreme north-east region of Italy and in south-east Austria and they forecast for the next decade value-indexes fivefold the present ones.

The Dars' "non-possibility-of-choice" even when it is kind-heartedly named "free-to have-to stay" is worsened by an environment which has favored a sort of underhanded serfdom rather than opposing its mechanisms, and by continuous comparison with other female scenarios presented by the television.

The comparison of one's own state with the standard of living, with cultural interests as well as with personal care of women who have moved to towns, who are penalized still more than Dars due to the lack of opportunity for making a choice: thus often causes an inevitable mental involution

¹ Source of data : Unioncamere and Fondazione Nord-Est – Unioncamere.

that is already drowned in alcohol in the morning hours. This phenomenon which was triggered thirty years ago in the Eastern Region of the European Union Countries and probably even earlier in the Socialist Countries, is increasing – as is that of suicide – being in third place in Europe and the trend does not seem to be inverting.

Future scenario

The predictable scenario for the near future as regards the demography of the marginal areas under study can be seen against a background with three different trends while it must be recognized that these trends can possibly interact offering a worse intermediate scenario.

1. The demographic movement from the country toward large urban centers will come to an end with the younger generations ready to change over from commuting to urban living. The marginal rural context of the several remaining farmers with ever smaller family units composed of the elderly. This trend has already shown its results in the Pre-Alps of North-East Italy and in Slovenia where, for example, in less than 300 square kilometers the 190 villages which existed in the 1970s are today reduced to 60, ruining those already abandoned and a similar end foreseeable for the others following the death of their last elderly residents.
2. The rural villages, still offering a middling functionality, will come to be partially repopulated by groups of mono-ethnic immigrants constituting a “cultural ghetto”, which by its very nature does not favor exogamy. This phase of temporary “settling down” due to its low costs – by immigrants will come to an end with the movement toward the towns of the next generation which will be fully integrated. In many countries of the hilly area of the Alpine piedmont (a less evident phenomenon in former Socialist countries) the phenomenon already began more than 15 years ago, and what’s more involves immigrants hired by the *Lumpenproletariat* “caporato” (ndt: Italian term for the system used for hiring the unemployed on a daily basis).
3. Non-predictable historical events of a super-national nature which make the revision of the present social organization obligatory thus reversing it: depopulation of the urban sphere in favor of the periphery.

The historic responsibility for what has taken place, for all that is involved in it and for the social scenario is directly related to the *woman's non-value* or rather to the preservation of the segregating obligations assigned her for an exclusive social –cultural positioning.

Facing such a responsibility, innate in our societies and due to deeply-rooted sexist prejudices, the need for proposing a lever that can be used by the Dars as a *backing* with which to unhinge the female culture and re-positioning it emerges which has substantially revealed itself to be the major obstacle.

The general objective of the action to be proposed is not individual changes in adult Dars which would be an unreal fantasy and, what is more, offensive since it would be proposed as a plagiarism of the human mind. On the contrary it means offering strong points of ineluctable evidence about ways to bring about the individual *action of becoming aware* of one's own condition, of the missed opportunities and of the positivity of those coming in one's own future and for the coming generations.

This *action of becoming aware* carried out with differentiated levels and tactics in a pyramid-shaped form (thus not with itinerant teachers), does not aim at a disruptive effect but rather leads toward a serene revisiting of one's own daily sphere, of short-term programming and of the future project which in any case is based upon a coherence of independent choices. The *action of becoming aware* must also involve responsibility towards the young female component; for this reason, for example, the mother does not transfer daily repeated actions to her daughter but the motivations and the possible pursuable and obtainable variations that exist for doing them inside and outside of the context in which she was born and educated.

Several projects, supported by Europe, for searching for this *action of becoming aware* were carried out in the marginal rural areas. Two projects in particular started with a basic informatics course leading into a foreign language course transmitted via television to several areas of the services sector. Both projects tested the crisis peak after several months during which the individual resistance of the women being trained (although superior to that of males) broke down before reaching perceptible results. The non-hoped for results arrived unexpectedly when the first tangible product overcame the critical phase and opened the intellectual potential of the women being trained. The discovery of their own potentiality, the increasing results as well as their enthusiasm permitted the women being trained to pass from daily repetition of domestic tasks to online booking

for hotels and tourism farms, then to the online work of a compilation and artistic type and again to the final point of an informatic services company.

For this reason, the objectives obtained in the case of the Dars being trained touched both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Vertical: the segregating mechanism was overcome by requesting the woman to have confidence in herself, by allowing her to savor her capacity for self-management with independent excursions in small projects. The acceleration was exponential above all during the online interview outside the sphere of training. What S. Moravia, in his book “L’enigma della mente” characterizes as “*sentio, ergo sum*” expressing a level of becoming aware successive to that of pure identity happened to these women.

Horizontal: the conversion of the obstructing mechanism was obtained through projects of the first range of application and in a successive phase, through projects of a wider range, obtainable from the interrelation of results derived from the emulative force and those derived from inductive development. This implies a diffusion of major capacity which necessarily involves the transfer system which is present in schools, associations a (even from simple contamination) in those aggregating institutions of inhabited settlements.

The vertical and horizontal systems did not necessarily focus upon an online system but upon any instrument for the *action of becoming aware* which fortunately is not necessarily related to a computer keyboard.

Other interventions for the emancipation of the Dars, in their sequential dynamics should therefore be conducted in 4 phases:

1. individual *action of becoming aware*,
2. real *action of becoming aware*,
3. *action of becoming aware* of opportunities
4. *access* to activities as applying tools.

1. Individual *action of becoming aware*: a revisiting of one's own dimension as a women in the rural sphere by means of lessons and studies aimed at individual analysis without considering the daily environment.
2. Real *action of becoming aware*: a revisiting of one's own dimension as a woman in the rural sphere by means of lessons and studies aimed at the analysis of one's own daily environment without considering the active and passive individual conditioning. Individuation of objective ties to the daily dimension which conditions subject valence.
3. *Action of becoming aware* of opportunities: simulation of the removal of these ties by accessing real opportunities in the daily sphere or in the one configured as an alternative.
4. *Access* to activities as applying tools: in the opportunities individuated during simulation without impeding ties and with the direct involvement of the Dars according to their own potentialities and attitudes. Individualization of the sector, preparation and critical course for reaching the first tangible results.

It is felt, even if it must be further confirmed that the course of this *action of becoming aware* can contribute or even determine, the liberation of the Dars woman from the conditions of:

- social subjection because of sexist discrimination,
- economic outcasting due to the lack of produced earnings,
- lack of opportunities for geographical questions,
- outcasting because of religious heredity, in which the woman-mystery and/or satanic mystery constitute serious cultural continuity,

she was set in humanity's social schemes for which she became an object and never a subject of rights.