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Women's Activism and Innovation in Education: the Role of the *Unione Femminile Nazionale* in Sicily for the Transformation of Italian Pedagogy at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

El activismo y la innovación de las mujeres en la educación: el papel de la «Unione Nazionale Femminile» en Sicilia para la transformación de la pedagogía italiana a principios del siglo XX

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Abstract: The beginning of the twentieth century represented a special occasion in the development of women's movements as a vehicle for a new culture of education. The growing role of women's associations in modern society found fertile ground in the increasing demand for childcare.

In Italy such a process reflected a meaningful phenomenon of social transformation, which was linked to the ascent of the lower classes and to the progression of democratic values. In a region like Sicily, the appearance of local branches of the *Unione Femminile Nazionale* in some principal cities of the isle, such as Catania, from 1909 onwards represented a crucial opportunity not only for the social and cultural elevation of working-class children, but also for the introduction of new models of schooling and the experimentation of new methods in education, within the wider framework of a general renewal in the science of education of the time. The most representative witness and «learner» of these innovative approaches to education was Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, who was to «transfer» many aspects of his experience into the reform of the entire primary school system in Italy (1923) in line with the design of «active schooling».

A survey of the experience of the Sicilian sections of the *Unione* provides not only a significant example of civilization processes promoted by women's activism, but also a key to better understanding the wealth of resources involved in the construction of a modern pedagogy in Italy before the coming of Fascism.

Key words: Active school; Childhood; Democracy; School-Reforms; Women Organizations.

Resumen: El comienzo del siglo XX representó una ocasión especial para el desarrollo de los movimientos de mujeres como vehículo de una nueva cultura de la educación. El creciente papel de las asociaciones de mujeres en la sociedad moderna encontró un terreno fértil en la creciente demanda de la atención de los niños. En Italia tal proceso refleja un fenómeno significativo de la transformación social que estaba vinculado al ascenso de las clases más bajas y para la progresión de los valores democráticos. En una región como Sicilia, el aspecto de las secciones locales de la *Unione Femminile Nazionale* en algunas ciudades principales de la isla, como Catania desde 1909, representa una oportunidad crucial no sólo para la elevación social y cultural de los niños de la clase trabajadora, sino también para la introducción de nuevos modelos de escuela y de experimentación con nuevos métodos educativos, todo ello enmarcado por un contexto mucho más amplio de renovación general en la ciencia de la educación de la época. El testimonio más representativo y «alumno» de estas innovaciones fue Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, que transferiría muchos aspectos de esta experiencia en toda la reforma del sistema de enseñanza primaria en Italia (1923), en consonancia con la sensibilidad de la «escuela activa». En gran medida, la experiencia de las secciones de Sicilia de la *Unione* ofrece no sólo un ejemplo significativo de los procesos de civilización promovida por la actividad de las mujeres, sino también una clave para comprender mejor la riqueza de los recursos implicados en la construcción de una pedagogía moderna en Italia antes de la llegada del fascismo.

Palabras clave: Escuela activa; Infancia; Democracia; Reformas escolares; Organizaciones de mujeres.

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1. Changes in education and ‘active school’: some disregarded actors in the Italian Pedagogy of the early Twentieth Century

The interest in our subject starts from an observation moved forward by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice – one of the main characters of the Italian Reform of the Scholastic System which was signed by the Minister of Education Giovanni Gentile in 1923. Lombardo Radice played a central role within the Reform Board as General Director of the Primary School (Chiosso, 1997, pp. 148-151).

As many studies on the quality of innovation have pointed out, the changes introduced at the Primary School level represented the highest point of the Reform from an educational point of view, fostering a remarkable development in composing school-life in a new culture of education, better able to perform teaching methods and educational practices (Catarsi, 1990, pp. 83-98; De Fort, 1996, pp. 366-372; Tognon, 1997, p. 331).

Many works have analyzed the measures adopted by the Government and the conceptions of education they implied, underlining the role of Lombardo Radice in encouraging a process of transformation within the Italian primary school. (Ostenc, 1981, pp. 61-89; Charnitzky, 1996, pp. 146-147). Such process of transformation seemed to follow the typical way pointed out by the large spreading of the New Education, yet already started at the beginning of the XXth Century. (Tomarchio, D’Aprile, 2010; Tomarchio, D’Aprile, 2011). So we could affirm that, as far as this area of public instruction was concerned, the Reform Acts took inspiration from the various experiences derived from the innovative movement in educational methods generally known as «active school» (Ferrière, 1927).

In fact, at the beginning of 1925, when Lombardo Radice tried to explain the leading concepts and the educational values implied by the Reform acts in a large text published under the title *La riforma della scuola elementare. Vita nuova della scuola del popolo*, his efforts were directed to express the idea of a continuity between the policy of Reform and the various sorts of activities formerly at work in changing education, set up at the outset of the Century and generally focused on the enhancement of childhood, conceived as source of creativity and midpoint of fresh energies. So, as Lombardo Radice said, nothing had been created «out of nothing» (Lombardo Radice, 1925, p. XIII) but the Reform could rather be thought as the result of a long-running course in which it was possible to distinguish some different actors, already active in practicing and testing new models and methods of cultivating childhood.

In a further article published in 1927 in the remarkable review «L'Educazione Nazionale» Lombardo Radice went back to describe the elements linked to the idea of «active school» which had taken part in the Reform, highlighting the debit that the Reform itself had to admit in front of an «army» of operating reformers, already at work long before the Government could set hands to changing the educational system and thanks to whom Italy could be very proud in front of the other nations (Lombardo Radice, 1927, p. 21).

It's very also interesting to note that, among the different actors committed with innovation and capable to draw new lines in Italian education from the beginning of the new Century, Lombardo Radice insisted to show the relevance of some schools belonging to the Unione Femminile Nazionale and operating in one of the main cities of Sicily, such as Catania (Lombardo Radice, 1927, p. 20).

The information disclosed by Lombardo Radice is quite interesting as a significant statement to reconsider a not well-known page in the history of education in Italy, directly linked to the spreading of Women activism, especially pointing out the remarkable connection existing between the rise of Women organizations and the progresses registered in the increasing of a culture of education in such a hard environment as South Italy was¹.

The existence of a leading experience, located in Sicily, operating for the improvement of the educational system and actively committed in renewing the learning settings, appears really curious and almost fascinating, taking into account the wide situation of cultural delay characterizing the isle, especially in terms of popular participation in the public school system (Lo Piparo, 1997, pp. 786-793). It could be just enough to consider that, at the moment of the National Unification, the situation in Sicily was very problematic as far as the

1 Concerning the problematic situation registered in the enhancement of schooling and literacy in South Italy at the early Twentieth Century see Strongoli, pp. 19-38.

score of literacy was concerned: more than 80% of the people over six years living on the island were registered as illiterate and around 1911 this percentage still scored 58% (Cipolla, 2002, p. 93).

So, considering this uncomfortable context, the case of the excellent work performed by section of the *Unione Femminile Nazionale* in Catania in the first decades of the Twentieth Century for the strengthening of popular schooling and for the elevation of the working-class children, seems to demand for a more proper attention.

Coming to a more accurate analysis of the situation, the first question that we have to deal with concerns the beginnings of the *Unione Femminile* schools in Catania.

Within a historical perspective, we have to take into consideration the following questions: when were the local sections of the *Unione Femminile* founded in Catania? How was it possible for these sections to find an opportunity for setting up and developing? Which relations could be established between the sections in Catania and the others operating in different areas of Italy? What were their aims and in what sense could they represent relevant and powerful agents for a social and cultural transformation?

2. A pragmatic vision of women emancipation: the enlargement of *Unione Femminile Nazionale* in Italy and its presence in Sicily

But, before dealing with such questions, it could be useful to recall some information about the origins of the *Unione Femminile Nazionale*, its beginnings and first steps which led it to become one of the most important women organization in Italy at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, properly working for the elevation of women².

We should remind that the birth of the *Unione Femminile* in Italy dates back to 1899 and that its first section was founded in Milan, thanks to the initiative of Ersilia Maino Bronzini with a group of distinguished women mostly related to the socialist movement (Taricone, 1996, pp. 139-173). It was a group of enlightened women, more generally characterized by a shared progressive vision of society and taking inspiration from those composite cultural lines linked to the increasing of a more democratic vision of society and to the widespread faith in the idea of the progress, openly recognizable for cultivating a laical creed in the civil advance (Gabbalo, 2015, pp. 21-110).

² For a profile of the spread of women organizations and activism in Italy between the XIX and the XX Century see Pieroni Bortolotti (1975); Tomasi (1982).

Some of the latest works on the development of women organizations in the Italian Giolittian era, that is the historical phase extending from the beginning of the new Century to the outbreak of the First World War, have highlighted the complexity of functions and the hard work that the *Unione Femminile* had to hold up to enlarge its spaces. Particularly, in the recent work *Femminismo ed educazione in età giolittiana* (Pironi, 2013) it is possible to observe the initial difficulties that the organization ran into in order to widen its branches and find active followers, ready to support the cause of its diffusion around Italy. But, above all, the organization had to wait for a while before giving itself a well organized framework within which to perform and carry on its specific qualities. At its starting time, the issue at stake was to abandon a generic philanthropic inspiration and to go further towards a well-formed activism, able to convert the idea of women emancipation into practical ways and useful actions for the enrichment of social values at the same time. This was to say giving a political meaning to the expansion of the movement in a wide sense, attempting to launch activities meant to improve society and to raise the quality of public life in the name of women liberation. But, it also meant to be able to realize concrete actions for a closer connection between the aims of the organization and the production of social benefits (Chianese, 1980, p. 53).

The enlargement of the *Unione Femminile* gradually began to show its trails³: in 1903 an important section was founded in Rome thanks to the eminent writer Sibilla Aleramo⁴, in 1904 an office was opened in Florence, in 1905 another relevant section started in Turin. In 1908 the first great national conference was held in the principal headquarter in Milan (Pironi, pp.71-98), and soon after, in 1909, the section in Catania was founded⁵ (Gaballo, pp.114-116).

What were the reasons that made it possible for Catania to succeed – first city in Southern Italy⁶ – in acknowledging and fully putting into effect the expansion of the *Unione Femminile*?

3 For a summary on the first enlargement of the organization see *Unione Femminile Nazionale*. (2013). *Unione Femminile Nazionale. Mostra storica*. Pdf. Extracted the 20 of jan, 2016, from <http://unioneffemminile.it/la-nostra-storia/>

4 About the development of a pragmatic vision in pursuing an idea of women emancipation within the *Unione Femminile* see Buttafuoco, pp. 146-150.

5 Lombardo Radice dates the birth of the *Unione Femminile* section in Catania back to 3 april 1909. See, Lombardo Radice (1910, p. 342).

6 Another section of the *Unione Femminile* was founded in Sicily, in Girgenti (now Agrigento), in June 1911. The action of this section was directed to pursue the ordinary aims of the organization in that troubled area of Sicily, mainly through the foundation of Sunday Schools for illiterates workers, the setting of embroidery laboratories for young women and the development of public conferences on the themes of social hygiene. See Bonfiglio (1912).

To answer this question, we must go back to the specific situation that characterized the evolution of the Sicilian town at the beginning of the century, taking on the value given to such changes by some distinguished historians such as Giuseppe Giarrizzo, in terms of the development of Catania as a sort of a «Milan of the South» (Giarrizzo, 1986, pp. 148-198). Through the use of this concept one could well represent the dynamism that defined the transformation of Catania on different levels in the first decade of the Twentieth Century, for the town registered a remarkable growth in population, as well as in the development of factories and productive activities (Barone, 1987, pp. 332-352). Above all, one could observe the statement of a model of urban life in which the differentiation of social functions, actors and needs became more clear. As the town went through a period of expansion, the transformation of the new urban patterns could be reflected in the increasing democratic expectations. Indeed, the faith in a possible modernization of the social framework was well built by a clear political direction, inspired by a democratic vision, concerned about popular demands and managed by a charismatic leader who was able to rule the local government until the breaking of the War: the mayor Giuseppe De Felice (Astuto, 2014, pp. 211-244).

The local government was successful in interpreting a well inspired synthesis between the leading role of an intellectual class engaged with the idea of progress and a smart policy grounded in the enlargement of civil values and in the pursuit of democratic ideals. Moving from these conditions, some important measures were implemented by the local administration in that period, such as the municipal management of many public services operating in the town: transports, lighting, water system, and even the activity of bakeries. All these public activities were directly controlled by the local government in the name of a more comfortable service provided to the citizens. At the same time other measures were employed to improve public involvement in cultural life: a considerable impulse was given to the increasing of public libraries and a special attention was paid to find new opportunities for the development of nurseries, kindergartens, schools for illiterate adults and workers (Giarrizzo, 1999).

This implied, on the one hand that the problems of education were taken over in the public debate; on the other hand, an increasing awareness of their relevance represented the right environment for the coming up of the *Unione Femminile*.

However, the real juncture was due to the advent of a special situation of public emergency, that is the catastrophic consequences following the earthquake occurred in Messina in December 1908. It was a terrible disaster not only in terms of material devastation, but also for its effects on the human beings: the

great number of deaths corresponded to a large amount of injured people and orphans⁷. And it is exactly in the various rescue actions provided for the struck population and especially for the abandoned children that we can point out the contingent situation due to which the Unione Femminile could rise in Catania.

In fact, the birth of the Unione Femminile section in Catania was especially originated thanks to the encounter between Irene Pace Fassari, a wealthy and generous woman soon operating in the town to accommodate the refugee children coming from Messina, and Isabella Cuman Fornasari, already a member of the organization coming from Padova, to lead a committee created for assistance and medical aid on behalf of the Unione Femminile (Pace Fassari, 1921, p. 8).

Irene Pace Fassari, who belonged to a notable family of well-off merchants in Catania, was going through a terrible time in her personal life, since she had lost her little son due to a deathly disease just short before⁸. The encounter with Isabella Cuman Fornasari in the painful shelters of the refugee orphans coming from Messina was decisive to direct the intensity of her sorrows towards helping children within a systematic and well-organized assistance program (Lombardo Radice, 1910, p. 342).

Thanks to their amity, the purpose to establish a section of the Unione Femminile in Catania could be fulfilled and came true in June 1909, when the official opening of the section was celebrated by a public speech disclosed by one of its first member, Cecilia Deni⁹. She was a distinguished teacher, a cultivated woman and a poetess, one of the best pupils of the more famous poet Mario Rapisardi, active in Catania over the changing centuries and rather well-known within the national literary circle for his libertarian thought, radical laicism and democratic vision (Zappulla Muscarà, 1990).

In the crucial moment publicly announcing the starting activities, the refined speaker would first of all read this fact as a distinct sign of the times and as a trial for the achievement of values of civilization. In her speech a remarkable role was played by two main factors: on the one hand, the power of ideals, on the other hand, the sense of a practical connection between the engagement of women cause and the treatment of some wider social problems¹⁰.

The conceptual synthesis of these two dimensions corresponded to the idea of achieving success in the «struggle for life»: now the time was coming

7 About the dramatic event and its consequences see Dickie (2008).

8 For further information about Irene Pace Fassari see Correnti (1990, p. 120).

9 For further informations about Cecilia Deni see Todaro (2013).

10 The main goal set by the Unione Femminile from its beginnings in Catania was clearly exposed in the first lines of the organization Statute, declaring a wide intention directed to protect women and children as well as to promote their improvement in learning and education. See Unione Femminile Catanese (1909, p. 3).

for women to fight their battle and come forward as active actors in social life (Deni, 1909, p. 13). Certainly, in her inaugural speech Cecilia Deni didn't lack to show the difficulties related to the existence of resistant forces: the fear about a larger participation of women in social life marked a critical sign in a cultural environment traditionally characterized by the authority of males. But now, the challenge was to break down such an unpleasant situation and try to go beyond a resistant block of long-lasting beliefs (Deni, pp. 9-11).

The inaugural lecture represented an important occasion to outline the social context in relation to which the incoming activities of *Unione Femminile* in Catania could fulfill its aims and services. It would have been helpful in different branches of social assistance, such as childcare, health care, instruction, public hygiene, services of helping for deprived class as well as in giving many support to women activities in society. It was clear that such a program would also involve another notable issue: at the beginning of the Twentieth Century the presence of women in the processes of instruction was very low in Sicily and one of the principal aims of the starting section was to encourage the enhancement of young women in schooling. More over, the situation needed to contrast illiteracy, to organize new forms of popular schools and at the same time it stressed the urgency to improve the physical conditions of disadvantaged children by setting up suitable places to ensure education and health (Deni, pp. 24-32).

Such intentions came into effect in a short while. Just to meet to these common needs, one of the first initiative organized by the section of the *Unione Femminile* in Catania – and one of the more rewarded in the following years – was the establishment of a summer-camp for anemic and poor children in a city-area close to the sea and mostly populated by modest fishers as Ognina. So, by the summer 1909, such a valuable educational set could take its first steps. According to the principles of an advanced science of education, the summer-camp would be a special occasion to strengthen children both in body and mind¹¹. The camp first edition included a selection of 40 children belonging to needy families, who received clothes and meals and who benefited of baths, exposure to the sunlight, fresh air and medical checks (Lombardo Radice, 1910, p. 343). It was the first beach-camp of this sort ever set up in Sicily: a pioneering experience that was to be fruitful and rich in educational outcomes and long-lasting in time.

The start up of such summer-camps pointed out the ability of the spreading women organization in Catania to foster children's development and meet the popular needs. At the same time it represented the acceptance of new tendencies in education based in the idea to let children enjoy open spaces, gain factors

11 About the relationships between pedagogy, hygiene and medical science as terms of innovation within a larger vision of children education in the early Twentieth Century see D'Aprile (2014, pp. 63-77).

for growth and acquire freedom and serenity in their life. In fact, in such an educational framework, offering children the opportunity to spend a lot of time in the camp was considered a powerful cure in terms of physical health, but also a special occasion for enjoying delight and pleasure in playtime, as well as recovering a feeling of human confidence and well-being in staying together. The care for the little participants was committed to a group of helpful women, chosen among the first adherents of the *Unione Femminile* in Catania, whereas the supervision was held by a group of doctors who disposed the daily diet for children and recommended the guidelines for a healthy physical development. The city government undertook the payments for transfers, but the section of the *Unione Femminile* took directly charge of most of the costs for the maintenance of the camp, soon working to find enough resources to bear this and all others its initiatives (Pace Fassari, 1910, p. 6).

Since its first steps, support could be found from different sources: a lot of funds were transferred by the national Government, thanks to the mediation of some relevant politicians linked to the Socialist party; any funds came by the local institutions as the local Chamber of Commerce or Municipality; other shares were made available thanks to contribution offered by some wealthy privates and by the British Consul too (Pace Fassari, 1910, p. 5). Moreover, the section soon began to organize some public events for charity to reinforce the incoming: exhibitions, plays, or special sales were sometimes organized to encourage well-off classes and philanthropists to support the section.

Following a concrete vision of the social condition of children belonging to the working-class and considering most of their more urgent needs meant also taking care of a question largely exposed in the contemporary educational debate on health's status of childhood in modern metropolis – that was a current subject in Italian pedagogy at that time, especially denounced by Maria Montessori (Montessori, 1913, pp. 37-43). For this reason, another starting initiative was the foundation of some special clinics where medical offices were created and equipped for taking care of children stricken by anemia or scrofula, while some others offered free gynecological checks for poor women (Lombardo Radice, 1910, p. 344).

But it was soon clear in the bright vision of the promoters that, in order to respond to the social requests of the lower classes, the need for medical and hygienic help had to be taken into consideration as much as cultural one. So, an important effort was soon directed to the organization of special schools or courses for popular education.

Among the earliest special schools organized by the section of *Unione Femminile* in Catania since autumn 1909, there was a School for 75 children

refugees from the Messina disaster, created in the area of the well-known S. Placido cloister (Pace Fassari, 1910, p. 4). It was a charitable initiative that soon moved the public sympathy. But it was also relevant as an indicator for the attention addressed to the processes of education even in an extraordinary context of first aid and which disclosed the larger vision inspiring the assistance given to children survived (Lombardo Radice, 1910, p. 342).

In a short time other special activities could begin: among the most relevant, there was a Sunday School for Women Workers, that soon gathered around 200 illiterate women from 15 to 45 years-old (Lombardo Radice, 1910, p. 344). «After-school» activities were also created for children attending public schools as well as special courses for young students who had to face exams in the autumnal sessions (Pace Fassari, 1910, pp. 8-10).

By the second year of activity, the Sicilian section could stabilize and reinforce its main foundations: the summer camp could welcome 108 children, improving all its performances (Lombardo Radice, 1910, p. 343). The empowerment of Sunday Schools showed the attempt to involve a lot of women employed in some relevant textile-factories operating in the different areas of the town trying to publicize the initiative by a 'door to door' advertising campaign. The results were comforting enough: the women enrolled were around 400, although a certain part of them was forced to drop out during the lesson-time for reasons often related to the hard working conditions suffered during the week (Pace Fassari, 1911, pp. 9-20).

In the same year, from May to October 1910, another special course for children and adult education was created in Ognina for the fishers and sailors sons, almost illiterates. It was an original creation. Since the young seamen were having hard times for their job, working during the night or in the first daybreak hours for fishing, and spending many hours in the morning to mend the nets too, the school time was scheduled in the afternoon, from 14 to 19, according to their special needs. In this way, a flexible system was created in order to engage a group of young people unfortunately dropped out from regular schools (Lombardo Radice, 1910, p. 346).

So, it's possible to observe how diverse, dynamic and considerable the educational activities turned on by the Unione Femminile section in Catania since the beginning could be and how it could enjoy remarkable appreciations in a very short time. It received some special «Diplomas of honor» for the quality of the hygienic and health-care services in favor of children in occasion of international events: for example, in the International Exposition of Industry

and Labor, held in Turin in 1911, or in the International Exposition of Social Hygiene held in Rome in 1912¹².

Of course, important acknowledgment came from the main Office of the organization in Milan: at the end of 1912, after an observation visit, the national Vice President of the Unione Femminile Virginia Bartesaghi sent a devoted commendation to Mrs. Irene Pace Fassari, president of the section in Catania, emphasizing the excellent results obtained such in a short time (Pace Fassari, 1912, pp. 8-21).

3. «To sow in a wild soil»: enhancing education in a hard context

In the years leading to the outbreak of the Great War, the section of Unione Femminile in Catania seemed to be very animated in its enterprises and able enough to hold steady in the social context. But, above all, it well represented, since its beginnings, those special factors by which it could be furtherly recognized as a subject of innovation in acting education.

Making use of a recurring metaphor in the pedagogical debate at the time, it was an attempt to sow and reap the fruits of an ideal mission devoted to expand human values by education. Retaking the expressions used by the President Irene Pace Fassari in a report on the activities developed in 1912, one could say that the activism of women adherents of Unione Femminile in Catania took on a very hard task, the most delicate, as the president told: «to sow in a wild soil».

But, as she used to say, it was important to sow, trusting in the blooming of a right faith, of a courageous passion and of a confident persistence, keeping clear in sight the horizon of the ultimate aim; and so, she would recommend, one needed to educate, to be useful to others, to try with every effort to relieve from moral misery all those who suffer for it (Pace Fassari, 1912, pp. 3-4).

Before the outbreaking of the war the section of Unione Femminile in Catania achieved another important result: in 1913 a new Preparatory School for Women Workers started, according to a model already begun in other Italian sections of the organization. It was a three-year course school in which young women could receive some basics of general culture attending, at the same time, sewing classes and courses of technical drawing. This school was provided with a kindergarten for learning educational methods and for practicing services in childcare (Pace Fassari, 1921, pp. 11-14).

¹² See, 4 Sep. 1912, Unione Femminile Catanese. Chiusura della Colonia Marina. *Corriere di Catania*.

The break of the war carried the educational and social organizations into a special phase. The section of *Unione Femminile* in Catania was forced to reorganize, though partially, some of its functions.

In those troubled years some activities went through a relevant increase: the Summer-Camp grew more and more and it was moved to a largest beach on the southern area of the city. Since 1915 the wider and sandy beach of the so-called «Plaja» became the new location for the camp: the number of guest children increased and they were soon distributed into two turns. The various activities recently started for schooling and education continued, but the special context of the war directed all the forces to support some extraordinary initiatives connected to wartime and to the idea of serving the Motherland.

According to the national guidelines of the *Unione Femminile* in Italy, the local section in Catania also worked in partnership with different associations for helping the combatants¹³: not only it took part in special committees for handling wool-products and for sending to front-line stocks of socks, gloves, ski-masks, hats but it particularly took care of widows and of fighting soldiers sons. Special schooling activities were organized for the enlisted trooper's sons; a special office was created to provide assistance to widows and orphans of fallen, offering food, medicines, clothes, and some money in the cases of the most critical situations. Between 1917 and 1918 a special 'home-residence' was created to accommodate around 100 orphan children aged 0 to 10, coming from different areas of the nation (Pace Fassari, 1921, pp. 16-23).

Therefore, the wartime didn't stop the activism of *Unione Femminile* in Catania, but it rather created the conditions to reinforce a core of services in favor of children education.

The strongest and most striking of its services ever seemed the Summer-Camp: the summer of 1918 welcomed as many as 900 children distributed in three rounds.

Soon after the end of the war, the settlement at the Plaja beach was enlarged with the foundation of a new Hospice for children especially devoted to the therapy of those affected by tuberculosis; but it received even children stricken from anemia, rickets, glandular disorders and so on.

Once again, at the end of 1922 all the main activities seemed to be already working very well: the Summer-Camp received from June to September around 700 children; the sea-hospice at the Playa took care of 50 children injured by tuberculosis; the Preparatory School for Women had 90 pupils and was by the

13 For the engagement of the *Unione Femminile Nazionale* in the activities of war mobilization and for the various actions that it powered up as forms of social care during the War period, see Gaballo, pp. 185-255.

time very appreciated; the Kindergarten hosted 100 children; the Office for the assistance of widows and orphans of the fallen during the war continued to lavish benefits and allowances¹⁴.

We can now go back to our starting point and try to close our exposition, drawing some conclusions.

In what terms could the experience collected since 1909 represent an agent of evolution for the culture of education in Italy destined to transfer its results into the Reform of Scholastic System of 1923?

First, we can underline the aspects linked to a pedagogical dimension pointed out as a kind of experimental attitude and text for innovation. The different schools launched by the section of Unione Femminile in Catania, as the general lines characterizing «New Education» at the beginning of XX Century, were inspired by the purpose to organize schools in not usual ways.

That meant to try to deconstruct the canonical way of acting schooling, reorganizing educational practices starting from the real needs of children, especially trying to understand the difficulties of childhood belonging to troubled social classes.

It was also clear that the Union's work had attempted to find solutions for bringing closer school activities and a culture of work.

Secondly, the improvement of education and the special attention to the conditions of disadvantaged children – illiterate, sick, poor, abandoned, orphan – was expression of a pedagogical ideal that started to work to ensure serenity and to nurture hope in the process of human growth. The force of human ideals devoted to pursue aims of social emancipation assigned high values to such an experience spread in Sicily, contributing to establish a progressive culture of education able to prompt the Reform of School before the involution of public life determined in Italy by the coming of the Fascist regime. Therefore, according to the valuable opinion of Lombardo Radice, it could be included among the best experiences that marked an advancement in the culture of education in Italy at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, like those realized by the Agazzi sisters in Mompiano, Alice e Leopoldo Franchetti in the Montesca rural schools, Giuseppina Pizzigoni in the area of Ghisolfi in Milan, Maurilio Salvoni in Gazzada, Angelo Celli in the Roman countryside, and David Levi Moreno with the foundation of the school-ships (Lombardo Radice, 1927, p. 20).

Moreover, the experience of the Schools and educational institutions created in Catania by the Unione Femminile discloses the close connection between the development of women movements and the democratic enlargement of

14 See 15 Oct. 1922, Colonia Marina dell'Unione Femminile Catanese. *La Rinascenza Scolastica*.

educational processes for historical insight. Embracing the cause of other neglected social actors, the movement for women emancipation carried on the aims and objectives of such usually marginalized subjects, first of all those concerning children.

Unfortunately, such a promising path incurred in the destiny of the Nation in the following years: as the other offices of *Unione Femminile* in Italy, the section in Catania continued to work further and to remain formally operating as a separate institution, but it was gradually compelled to affiliate to the Agency for Maternity and Childhood seized in 1925 by Fascist government (Gaballo, pp. 321-357). Therefore, the original meaning of the social enterprises was gradually assimilated into the ideology of Nationalism, into the totalitarian appropriation of education and into the policy for the safeguard of the race. In so far as late as 1938 all the sections of the *Unione Femminile* in Italy were obliged to close and the Organization was dissolved (Gaballo, pp. 358-371).

Anyway, as far as the history of education in Italy is concerned, the pages written by the *Unione Femminile* in Sicily in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century still represent a fine chapter in the Italian hard path for the statement of social values towards the ideals of democracy and emancipation.

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