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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The economic proposals of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and gender budgeting in Italy

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman anticipated Amartya Sen's theories on the economy of wellbeing and the theory of the capabilities by placing humanity at the centre of economic politics, the full development of abilities of the entire population and the participation in all the social, economic and political activities of men and women, as a premise for social progress and genuine democracy. In particular, she highlighted the value of women's competences and female innovative contribution towards the achievement of these goals. Today, the European Union considers these issues as a priority but in Italy they are not fully taken into consideration. Gilman, the American authoritative sociologist and economist, defined in 1993 by the Women's Hall of Fame as one of the 10 most influential women of the twentieth century, thanks to her studies and her in-depth analysis of women's real conditions of life, reached the conclusion that the origins of the traditional sexual roles – and of the female 'natural' subordination to man – are not due to nature, but to the economic dependence on man. Consequently, she believed that true freedom and effective citizenship for women are possible only with economic independence. Through the denunciation of the myths and traditional stereotypes that tie women to the so-called 'natural roles', Gilman showed the damages that the exclusion of women from socioeconomic activities cause to the progress of human society, and proposed the *new woman*. The *new woman* is well-educated – and thus endowed with a critical mind – and professionally prepared, and is aware of the necessity of her full citizenship. Women are also aware of the fundamental social value of maternity. Consequently they are aware that the 'unpaid caring works' should not be exclusively assigned to women but rather should be shared by both family and society. Gilman's theories and proposals for the social and economic reorganization, and her criticism of the traditional myths and stereotypes, supply a valid contribution to the present gender politics and in particular to the affirmation of gender budgeting in economics. These policies Gilman had indicated in her study *Women and economics*, published in 1898!

Keywords: women; gender economic politics; critical mind; real democracy; stereotypes

Introduction

My article deals with the topicality, with regard to the actual situation of Italy, of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's proposals for social and institutional reorganization in order to 'realize' democracy.

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Though the mutual relationship between the social situation of the twenty-first century – even if at its beginning – and the analysis of the organization of society described by Charlotte Perkins Gilman at the end of the nineteenth century could seem a bit hazardous, I am here to demonstrate that her ideas are still present in Italian society as well as in most Western countries.

Examining the Italian situation we must first consider that, although the female movements in the 1960s and 1970s caused a great reflection on the emancipation of women, and women's associations developed studies and remarkable theories, all politics meant to improve gender mainstreaming¹ still face difficulties in being applied.

In the Italian Constitution of 1948, thanks to the firm will of the 21 female members (out of 510) of the Constituent Assembly, equal rights for women and men were granted. In this way though, formal but not actual equality between sexes was instituted.²

If we want to properly understand the situation we must first remember that only 30 years after the proclamation of the Constitution was sex equality in the family sanctioned; only in 1975 did the new 'Right of Family' abolish the *patria potestà* (father's power, literally) and, for example, the duty of women to follow their husbands in the city chosen by them to work, raise children, etc.; only in 1981 was the Article stating the mitigating circumstances for the 'murder for honor' abolished; only in 1996 was violence against women considered a crime against the person and no longer against morality.

If gender politics in Italy have difficulties in attracting attention, it is necessary to emphasize that *gender* itself is almost an unknown word to the majority of Italians. Even within the academic community it is rare to find people who know that by the word 'gender' (the historian Joan W. Scott's definition now commonly accepted) we mean a category of historical interpretation that allows us to identify the social organization of the relation between sexes,³ i.e. the same organization that gives rise to sexual roles and to the 'most suitable' activities for men and women that settle power relationships and hierarchies between sexes.

According to Scott's definition, by the individualization of the category of gender (a category 'of relation', i.e. based on personal relationships rather than 'truths' or 'absolute' concepts), we try to find out the history of the sexual roles in different societies and in different periods. In political doctrines this category is useful to determine in which way the cultural values of a period have become part of a political speech aimed to maintain, change or transform a definite social order.⁴

By reconsidering history this way, it is evident that the sexual role-based hierarchical organization of sexes that characterizes the patriarchal systems has brought the division of life and activities of men and women into rigid ranges of competence, assigning to women the private sphere and to men all public activities and responsibilities. This situation has allowed the social patriarchal system to establish an 'order' based on the exclusion of women from civic and economic rights. The hierarchical system, assigning to women the 'private' aspect of life and action, shutting them out from the 'public' one (reserved for men), has favoured, through hierarchies between sexes in the family, a kind of social peace that permitted an easier subjection of the heads of the family to the supreme authority. Moreover, the exclusion of women from the patrimony has permitted the maintenance of undivided property.

In the course of centuries the exclusion of women from citizenship rights has happened and has been consolidated through a 'culture' and a set of traditions that have determined forms of right and positive laws that, with a circular logic, have ended up legitimating themselves.⁵

To this day, these are the same cultures held to legitimate the negation of the basic rights of the individual in many countries, i.e. the right to dignity, to health, to physical integrity, to expression, to the reproductive sexual self-determination of women.

By the discovery of the category of gender (which shows the historical and cultural origin of sexual roles) we clear away the still existing biological, psychological or divine hypotheses, and we set the premise for a really universal (formed by men and women) history of humankind.

From the analysis of the modern gender vision, it is clear that the social organization of the patriarchal system is the cause in Italy, as well as in other countries, of the poor participation of women in social, economic and political activities, i.e. all those activities which are necessary to the development of society. The patriarchal system interferes, then, with progress, which Charlotte Perkins Gilman considered in any case unstoppable, despite 'our foolish fear'.⁶ So, the Italian delay in gender-oriented politics originates from cultural reasons often hidden by economic reasons. This 'anti-economic' idea prevents the principal educational, administrative and political institutions from committing themselves to the global reorganization of society with equal rights, abolishing the patriarchal points of view still present in it. Such a situation calls for, in addition to a deep cultural action aimed to demolish the still existing sexual stereotypes, the fulfillment of specific gender politics able to set a social reorganization based on the real possibilities and abilities of individual men as well as women, i.e. not based on the traditional stereotypes. In detail, the main cultural reasons for the Italian delay lie fundamentally in the conceptualization of woman (her role and her duties in the family and in society) which, even if it no longer matches reality, still causes the social and political discrepancies we all know. Just to give an example, although women are scarcely present in leading roles and at the highest positions, many authoritative studies show that they get the highest certificates and that they are cleverer and more resolute in their professions than men. Despite these qualities women are still forced to yield to men because of motherhood and the lack of services to facilitate it and because of the existence of so many impediments which should not exist, according to Italian laws, but which are still decisive when faced with the choice of whether to choose a 'Womanager' or not. I refer to bias, to *old boys' network* stuff and similar (in Italy we would say *soffitto di cristallo*, literally 'glass ceiling').

As to the need for specific gender politics and current experiences in Italy, people dealing with the issue talked about it on 20 February 2006, during the National Meeting on Gender Budgeting held in Rome at *Casa Internazionale delle Donne* ('The Women's International House').⁷ In this meeting I, acting on behalf of the Università Roma Tre, wanted to stress the importance and topicality of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ideas, so well described in her main writing, *Women and economics* (Moschini 2006a, 2007, Perkins Stetson 1998).

The thesis I exposed was that the Italian resistance to reconsidering the traditional idea of women and family probably goes back, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman asserted after having analysed the female condition and society in the Western world, to the fact that *family*, *home* and *mother* are still considered sacred and inalterable institutions. This mentality constitutes *the* obstacle to the active participation of women in productive and social political actions. And it is sad to realize that indeed such participation could become, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote, *the* real freedom for women and result in *the* progress of society and democracy. In Italy, as she wrote, it happens that

in reconstructing in our minds the position of woman under conditions of economic independence, it is most difficult to think of her as a mother, We are so rigidly accustomed to the old methods of motherhood, so convinced that all its processes are inter-relative and indispensable, and that to alter one of them is to endanger the whole relation, that we cannot conceive of any desirable change. (Perkins Stetson 1998, p. 270)

In *Women and economics* Charlotte Perkins Gilman asserted that the origins of the subordinated conditions of women are economic, and not biological or divine, as still today asserted especially by all the monotheist patriarchal religions, so resolute in holding the point that the female role is to serve the family and society because of 'nature'. The Catholic Church shares this idea: it does not help Italian women to rid themselves of their sexual traditional role, giving place to an enormous delay, if we compare the situation of Italian women to that of other women in the rest of the European countries where Protestantism, though probably unintentionally, has favored the process of emancipation and granted 'more' freedom to women.⁸

Having examined the situation in Italy, let us now see why Charlotte Perkins Gilman's idea of politics and her main issues are still so present, and what the link might be between her idea and *gender budgeting* in Italy.

In addition to her analysis of the conditions of women, the main issues of Charlotte Perkins Gilman are her proposals of social reorganization. Speaking about her proposals, it's important to underline that they ensued not only from her studies, but also from her own experiences, and in synthesis, to improve daily living conditions of *real* persons. This 'political' thought of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, i.e. aimed at the modification of reality, is close to what Hannah Arendt⁹ considered politics: a commitment arising from an idea of social participation, and a need for a striking root in real life as well as in history. This idea affects real acting, and leads to taking upon one's shoulders all the responsibilities over the others around. Arendt's and Perkins's idea of politics is not that of the management of power, or a technique of governance, as we generally consider politics: rather it is *an existential dimension practised via any form of activity and experience*; a sort of art, the pleasure to get and stay well together, to exchange words and ideas. This idea of politics connects Charlotte Perkins Gilman not only to Hannah Arendt, but also to the highest contemporary feminist thought.

From her idea of politics rises the link with actual gender politics and, in particular, with gender budgeting and the reasons why Charlotte Perkins Gilman's thought on this issue has to be considered topical. By gender politics in fact we mean the whole of social, political and economic initiatives for the fulfilment of the principle of gender mainstreaming that, as we know, is the integration of the gender

perspective in all stages and at all levels of public politics by all the actors involved in the decisional process.

Gender budgeting (in Italian *bilancio di genere*) is a fundamental issue in gender policy because, contrary to what we think – and what the traditional economic theories affirm – public budgeting is not a neutral instrument but, on the contrary, it reflects the distribution of power existing in society. As feminist economists affirm, together with most ‘left-wing’ economists, in defining debits and credits we make political choices; as a matter of fact they sketch a particular model of social-economic growth via the definition of standards of redistribution of the economic resources in society. This is possible by fixing priorities of intervention in accordance to what governors consider their citizens’ needs to be. It is then obvious that in this way the authorities can produce, through budgeting choices, a different effect if the individuals are men or women.¹⁰

It is unquestionable that, in the ways public budgets are (at present) generally built, they ignore the diversities (in terms of role, responsibility and ability) existing between men and women. Moreover there are no statistics or data sorted by gender and, even when attempting a gender-oriented analysis, the indicators themselves are an obstacle to correct analysis: being not based on sex-oriented parameters, they can only, in the end, approach the issue.

It can therefore be said that the commonly proposed public budgets, with their fake neutrality and with the lack of instruments for a reliable gender analysis, reflect and reproduce the power relations between the sexes and the social economic inequalities already present in a community.

It is clear then that in order to achieve really democratic budget politics, according to the key components – equity, cheapness and clearness – the first step, in order to achieve equity, must be to evaluate the different gender impact that the politics will produce on the needs of real (not abstract) people. Moreover public expense is efficient when it can produce development, and it can be economical, and ‘fair’ when it can take advantage of the potentialities of the whole society, either men or women, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman already pointed out in her works.

According to the principle of clearness, and in order to impress a mark of essentiality on the democratic system at every level of central or local government, it is important to make citizens aware of the results produced with the budgeting politics and, in particular, to inform them of the effects these politics produce, which social categories benefit from them, what are the possible alternatives for the destination of the resources, and in what way the costs of definite choices are justified (Bettio 2006).

It is important to emphasize that the reinforcement, the modernization, the reorganization of the public intervention for social development which can derive from the gender budgeting politics is really an ‘immaterial’ investment in abilities, in female ‘empowerment’, in the creation of human resources and opportunities that reveals itself as undoubtedly necessary to an economic system aiming to be active and competitive in facing the economic challenges and all the social, cultural and political implications coming out as a result of globalization.

If the three key principles are common to all correct budgeting politics, the innovatory element, which also constitutes the added value of gender budgeting, is that the attention passes from a totally economic theoretical analysis to the real conditions of daily lives. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman anticipated in her works

(the Italian economist Antonella Picchio also agrees with these ideas), dealing with this issue we not only understand the great differences between sexes, but also we can point out some structural tensions affecting the relationship between men and women (Picchio 2003, p. 17).

For this reason it is necessary to pass from the consideration of the traditional theoretical economic principles (which mainly consist in the observance/devotion to the laws of market and competition) to the awareness of the real needs and priorities that come from daily life, thus becoming aware of the existence of differences to be respected and evaluated.

But to shift the attention from an abstract and unbalanced intervention to the priorities that arise from daily life requires a radical shifting of perspective, not only the few adjustments generally implemented.

As in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's social-economic analysis, feminist economists point out that in the traditional economic theories all the questions that are central to women are not taken into consideration, or only partially mentioned, and are therefore marginal and not adequate to the general interest. The reason is that 'female questions' are still placed within 'private questions', i.e. to be kept apart, at the 'theoretical tables', from the 'economic questions'. Following this logic we could go on endlessly trying to make do with this or that measure of economic politics, but unless we start to consider as fundamental women's interest and all the individuals around them, we will never reach that cultural change that will produce real equality between sexes.

The limit of Italian equal opportunity politics (*pari opportunità*) is maybe this: although those in charge of budgeting try to create some area within a specific economic context (i.e. a political one) to meet women's needs, they consider these needs as a necessity bound to the private world and regarding a part only of society, and therefore not a general interest priority. By these needs I mean efficient or concrete assistance for children, elderly people or disabled people which would permit women to carry on with their lives serenely and without interfering with their professional plans. This would result in a benefit not only to working women's tranquility and professional satisfaction but to society as a whole, which could take economic advantage of the full contribution of feminine abilities. Moreover children and the elderly or disabled could be better assisted by skilled, professional workers, rather than being, as happens today in many Italian families, on of the shoulders of overstressed (and disappointed with their lifestyle) women. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman declares, a happy, serene woman will be¹¹ a more efficient mother, wife and daughter, with an evident advantage to the welfare of the whole family and consequently of the whole society. In the radical change of perspective that, as we have seen, is needed in order to carry out effective politics of gender we must consider that women, as Picchio points out, fortunately do not succeed in separating their condition of life from their condition of work, thus maintaining a real sense of complexity, of the order of priorities and of the true responsibility towards themselves and towards others. If, for Picchio, this has nothing to do with the feminine nature itself, but rather with those anxieties and emotions which have 'historically' become 'feminine', for Charlotte Perkins Gilman those historically definite abilities derive from a motherly instinct that makes women, as well as other 'females' in nature, careful 'before any thing else' about the health and welfare of their children. It is right to notice, in order to avoid false interpretations, that

Charlotte Perkins Gilman emphasizes the motherly (i.e. marking the natural tendencies of women) instinct to take care of *real* individuals. This motherly instinct has been, in her opinion, subdued in the course of centuries in order to extend the cares to children and family for far more than the necessary time: so women have become *oversexed* individuals in which the distinctive features bound to the functions of biological and social reproduction have undoubtedly become predominant, to the detriment of those qualities considered 'human', the abilities necessary for survival included. At first connected to the quest for food, then for a job outside home, these sorts of activities have become 'because of nature' reserved for men. This has given way, according to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, to the condition of subjection of women to the one who could ensure economic support for them and their children; from such a situation derived the family-head power given to (or self-taken by) the man who had to grant survival and support to the family.

The impossibility for women to engage in activities which could allow them to survive on their own (let us keep in mind that this has been the cause of their economic subordination) has given rise to uses, traditions and cultures which have become, as I mentioned, the basis of rules, rights and laws which in turn have become 'natural' and turned into 'laws' by the 'circularity' leading to female subjugation.

Once having considered the historical origin of the differences in roles and behaviours, as shown by gender studies (i.e. they are not the result of an immutable nature), it is evident how there is no contrast with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's idea of the motherly instinct: in both visions women's sense of responsibility is stressed in terms of life conditions of individuals provided with a body that feels, perceives, thinks and is steadily and necessarily in relation with other bodies.

In the great UN Conference on Women's Rights, held in Peking in 1995,¹² participants spoke about *gender budgeting*. That conference has set up a basic movement of negotiation among worldwide governments in order to recognize and face women's (and consequently children's) questions. This negotiation has been carried on by a massive feminist movement that has become the basis of a system of networks and has organized a parallel forum of NGOs coming from all over the world. From the Peking platform – and its proposals chart signed by representatives of 181 different countries – have emerged some of the most relevant targets to be achieved in order to analyse and solve those problems that, still today, afflict women and those depending on them: children, elders, and non-self-sufficient people. Among the politics to be implemented by the platform, one of the most relevant has been the need for a radical transformation of the perspective point of view: that is, to consent the implementation of mainstreaming and empowerment principles, the point of view must go from an original '*on women*' into a new '*of women*' one. It must then enter economics, and balances mostly, where, as seen, it is decided that priority expenses must be in favour of development. Unfortunately, as emerged from the New York 2000 (Peking+5) and 2005 (Peking+10) conferences, meant to check the *state of the art*, much has still to be done.

Actually gender budgeting existed before the 1995 UN conference, thanks to the International Association For Feminist Economics (IAFFE); that is a space (made of male and female economists) for political debate and academic reflection on economics. These economists embrace a gender perspective; they publish a journal, *Feminist Economics*. In IAFFE, since 1980, Debby Budlender, Rondha Sharp and Diane Elson have proposed a scheme of analysis of public national budgeting; their

proposal was born in an institutional context, and it has interested the Commonwealth Secretariat, which has supported many experiences of gender budgeting in Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom.¹³

Let us now have a look at what the fundamental presuppositions are in order to carry out gender budgeting, and if we can see points in common with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's thought.

To realize gender budgeting, it is first necessary, as we said before, to shift the attention from a simply economic matter to one directly connected to the actual daily living of real individuals: individuals who, as one great organism, operate, interact and then form society.

Society, considered in this way and no longer in its abstract meaning, becomes a real entity made up of living individuals, individuals who deal with all the aspects of real life: their jobs, health problems, the joys and cares caused by domestic relationships, the necessity of developing their own abilities and pursuing their own personal satisfaction, the pleasure of acquiring knowledge, in sports, or establishing and consolidating personal relationships. Planning gender budgeting then, in the sense of public action or service, must first be concerned with living conditions and people's welfare. That means to shift politics on everyday life, which today is quite neglected in traditional economic theories, even though it is considered a real priority in feminist economic theories.

After having agreed on the concept of society as a community of living individuals which continually interact among themselves, and before 'thinking' the budget, we must set the priorities. The first method problem we face with gender budgeting is the traditional economical analysis on which actual budgets are based: it states that the population's conditions of life must fit the expenses decided, i.e. match market laws.

Market laws, as we know, consider society to be formed by neutral bodiless individuals, and therefore abstract entities who, according to the market, must undergo a continuous reduction of services, to buy goods, to take part in wars or in environmental destruction in the name of economics: an economic belief considered as the only possible one. It is clear that the relationship between the institution (i.e. public expense) and the market derives from the conception of society we have just described. It is then necessary in gender budgeting to reverse that point of view and start, instead of from market laws, from a precise analysis of the context and living conditions of the population, to set priorities on public expenses (gender auditing).¹⁴ In fact the aim must not be the fulfilment of market needs but to promote welfare and happiness which, according to Adam Smith's definition (a thinker quite far from feminist logic), is 'comfort of the body and peace of mind'.¹⁵

It is easy to see how these issues are fundamental also in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's idea of social reorganization in order to obtain not only satisfactory conditions of life for all, but starting from the conditions of life and work of women. To Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in fact, women who are prepared and free to devote themselves to activities more suited to their nature and to their abilities could carry on their tasks in society with the double result of satisfying their human aspirations and encourage productive processes.

In this way they could take part in the creation of higher standards of welfare for all and also as a result free men from the responsibility of having to be the only economic support of the family.

Moreover, not less important is that their personal satisfaction would influence positively all the members of the family, and this could give origin to a process of widespread social welfare that could decrease the tensions between men and women, children and parents etc.¹⁶

Another point of agreement between modern gender budgeting and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's analysis and proposals regards 'unpaid caring work' to which women were, and still are today, subjected. Picchio points out that from the analytical perspective of the traditional economy this great quantity of work is absent, as is also absent the value of the whole process of *social reproduction*; it is worthwhile to remember that feminist thought has made of unpaid work a political issue and a fundamental theory. Unpaid work, considered marginal as it does not yield an income, has been idealized as a right and a duty so deeply rooted in feminine nature to allow people to think that women would never renounce it;¹⁷ but considering gender analysis it is clear that unpaid work is anything but marginal in terms of (1) quantity, lasting in total more than the paid work of men and women, and (2) quality, because its high content of relationships makes it an essential part of the quality of life.¹⁸

It is therefore evident that a traditional economy-oriented evaluation and economic quantification of this great mass of work would cause devastating results in terms of expense; but in an economy revised in accordance with feminist theories, unpaid work would get a social and fundamental economic value. Following the path of our reflections, in order to 'actualize' gender budgeting, a radical shifting of perspective as to the way we conceive society, family, women's role and their unpaid work is necessary.

It is necessary to determine a total revision of the objects and the aims of public expense, rather than a simple rearrangement of individual items via temporary, shallow measures, as happens with equal opportunity politics, which act prevalently on resolving the differences between men and women in terms of paid work.

When Charlotte Perkins Gilman spoke of female participation in productive activities she had in mind the problem of both unpaid and underpaid work, which is commonly claimed and justified by economists via economic–sexual motivations. Conscious of these 'motivations', Charlotte Perkins Gilman suggested a total feminine participation in productive activities: she meant the entrance into the working field of women well prepared and trained (contrary to the sexual dominating stereotypes) in accordance with their talents; she meant working-women supported by a social organization which considers their demands as a real advantage for the social and economic welfare of the whole society; a target which is shared, as we have seen, with actual gender politics.

Before detailing Charlotte Perkins Gilman's proposals it is important to emphasize that, in order to understand its importance, and also imagine the possible resistance her thought could face in Italy, it is necessary to remember that her operative proposals to make easier the process of social–economic reorganization arise from the fundamental assertion on which her whole thought is based: women are individuals who may 'also' be mothers, not 'only'.¹⁹

Therefore to Charlotte Perkins Gilman women are not, differently from what was (and still is) generally said, 'naturally mothers' because their nature is inclined to 'sacrifice themselves' and their own aspirations; women are not 'naturally satisfied and pleased' by carrying out, over and over, their 'low social level' and 'naturally

learnt' tasks in the private field. As to this statement Charlotte Perkins Gilman's idea is that women, as well as men, in order to be really free must be economically independent and, in order to fully be citizens, must play an active role in all the spheres of society, carrying on productive and satisfying jobs, chosen on the grounds of their own dispositions and abilities; I have in mind women who, being an active part of the productive processes, can (shall I say 'must?') participate in institutional and political life, and bring to the public field their precious contribution.

But will women then no longer dedicate themselves to their families and their homes?

On this point Charlotte Perkins Gilman's contemporaries worried, and even today some who listen to her proposals worry. They were, and are, wrong: the woman that Charlotte Perkins Gilman has in mind takes care both of the partner and of the family so that, possibly together, women and men finally can, equal in their dignity and both satisfied with their jobs, take care of children and the elders with participation and joy; i.e., without domestic chores becoming a nightmare upon returning from work; Charlotte Perkins Gilman had in mind women and men eager to enjoy their family, home and leisure time.

Such a new woman, the driving force of the development of society, thanks to the realization of her potentiality, and by becoming economically self-sufficient, could rely and pay for services carried out by skilled personnel who could work cleaning the house, preparing meals, taking care of children and of elders or non-self-sufficient people. In this way probably, Charlotte Perkins Gilman said, the results will be better than those obtained with assistance provided by untrained women. Motherhood this way becomes again a *social* function, and women are no longer forced to face it on their own and, much more often than one could think, unprepared.

From a strict economic point of view Charlotte Perkins Gilman had to be well aware that all these radical changes would impose on families a cost; and indeed she pointed out that if it is true that families must pay to obtain quality services, on the other side women could, via the changes she proposes, finally have access to professions: many of them could work in education, or be professional cooks, cleaners or assistants for children or the elderly. The bigger costs for families would then be compensated by a redistribution of wealth and by causing lighter taxes which would promote more widespread economic and social welfare. Moreover Charlotte Perkins Gilman proposed, in accordance with the most distinguished pedagogues of the time,²⁰ newly organized schools that allow children's minds to grow and develop free and able, interesting them with pleasant and recreational activities, enabling them to acquire critical minds and expressive abilities. This learning style in a renewed (i.e. healthy for the mind and the body) school could make both teaching more effective and life in families easier, pupils being *well* overseen and looked after.

The analysis of the context naturally led Charlotte Perkins Gilman to propose a new town-planning style too with a new kind of buildings, with large common spaces meant for socializing, having fun together and limiting social discomfort and loneliness.

As Charlotte Perkins Gilman knew, such a domestic and social reorganization obviously has a cost which has to be carefully planned and deducted from other expenses; a cost that does not give immediate profit but that could allow a social organization that is finally more suitable to individual needs as opposed to market laws.

According to her this is indeed a cost, but a cost that can produce a radical democratic change of social organization and favour the participation of all men and women in it; it can result in not only social but also economic progress. The economic advantages produced by a massive and skilled presence of woman in productive, cultural and artistic activities (a presence given by the possibility of every individual to follow and develop her/his talents) could result in the overcoming of commonplaces and stereotypes; it could result in economic advantages that would produce an increase of well-distributed (i.e. no longer concentrated in few hands only) wealth which, together with a situation of personal satisfaction, would in the end even increase, in a 'virtuous circle', active participation in the construction of a democratic, 'clean' society, i.e. a society aiming toward progress, rather than to the predominance of a few individuals and the exploitation of the masses and the environment.

The consideration of costs meant to favour such radical changes in the social structure requires the capability to see beyond, requires courage, and also requires the will to demolish the stereotypes and the conditionings imposed by the traditional, limited and limiting sexual roles we know.

That is the reason why it is so important that some Italian public administration offices are now beginning to implement gender budgeting, and that is the reason why it is important that these administrators be supported by a *gender analysis* of the context in which they operate and by the elaboration of such an innovative (though set in 1898!) economic theory. In July 2003 the European Parliament passed a relation on gender budgeting based on some reflections to which the Italian Provincia of Genova had also been actively contributing since 2001, via a pilot project started experimentally in the Comune of Sestri Levante.²¹ In Italy in 2003 a protocol of agreement was signed by the municipalities of Genova, Modena and Siena; they have promoted a network for the diffusion of good practices on gender politics. So far, 12 Province and six Comuni (Rome is about to) have joined the protocol. All the administrations that are part of this network are well aware of the work to be done in terms of the difficulties to be faced before public politics can overcome gender inequalities: for this reason it is important that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's belief, and her proposals, be accessed, investigated and implemented – even with a 100-year delay.

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Notes

1. *Gender mainstreaming* and *empowerment* are the key principles coming out of the UN Conference held in Peking in 1995. By gender mainstreaming we mean the integration of the gender perspective in all the stages and at all the levels of public politics by all the actors involved in the decisional process.
2. Compare Aa. Vv. 1988, 3–10. It is worth remembering that the Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana at its Article no. 3 states '... the full parity and dignity of all citizens, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, personal and social conditions'.

3. Scott, 1991; from the 1980s, thanks to Natalie Zamon Davis and Joan W. Scott, the focus of historical survey and interpretation has moved from Women's Studies to the relationship between the sexes: see Conti Odorisio 1999–2000, p. 56.
4. Conti Odorisio 2005. Ginevra Conti Odorisio is Full Professor of History of Political Doctrines and History of the Female Question within the Faculty of Political Sciences at the Università Roma Tre; she has participated in the works of the European Commission, has been deputy chairwoman of the General Division in Brussels (it deals with education and training), and is among the founders (1975) of DWF, one of the first international feminist periodicals.
5. Circular logics, as to the female condition, are based on 'facts'. For example the fact that, as in the past women never studied, as a matter of fact people have come to believe that women were unable to study: i.e., in a 'circular logic', 'women cannot study'; or the fact that women never voted established the 'fact' that they could not vote, and so on. For further investigation on circular logics in determining 'laws' see Scott 1991, pp. 366–369.
6. Perkins Stetson 1998, p. 294; It. trans. by Carolina Pironti, 1902, p. 304. It is worth remarking that Countess Carolina Pironti was the only one among coeval publishers to give Charlotte Perkins Gilman \$30 for royalties; see Lane 1991, p. 270. In her *Preface* Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Stetson was the name of her first husband, whom she left after her second marriage, to Houghton Gilman) even points out that 'the social forces are compelling us further, even without our knowledge and against our violent opposition' (p. lxxv).
7. Organized by the Università Roma Tre and the Assessorato al Lavoro e alle Pari Opportunità ('Work and Equal Opportunities Office') of Regione Lazio.
8. With the idea of *freedom of conscience* the Protestant Reformation has inserted a principle that has allowed women the beginning of a certain extent of freedom in spiritual self-determination, often even in opposition to the faith of their fathers. The seed had been sown, in other terms, that would have led to a process of more extensive self-determination. For further investigation on the issue see Conti Odorisio 1999–2000, Scott, 1991, pp. 192–245. Also Charlotte Perkins Gilman dealt with the topic in *Women and economics* (1898) and, besides many other writings and conferences, in *His religion and hers* (1923), where she publicized her idea of faith and religion in agreement with the book (which gave rise to great scandal) by Elisabeth Cady Stanton. *The women's bible*.
9. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) is considered one the most relevant contemporary political thinkers. She expressed her thinking in *The human condition* (1989); for further investigation of the role she played see Brezzi and Pansera (2007) and Briganti (2002).
10. Compare Moschini 2006a; Dal Fiume 2006; Sen 1987; Picchio 1992; Nussbaum 2003, Addabbo et al. 2005.
11. Of course, given her will to.
12. Compare Aa. Vv. 2003; Tinari 1995.
13. Compare Aa. Vv. 2006, p. 19.
14. Gender auditing is the first step to be followed in implementing gender budgeting and consists in drawing out budget priorities from an analysis of the needs of people. For further information see Addabbo in Aa. Vv. 2006, pp. 66–71; Badalassi 2006; Aa. Vv. 2004.
15. Compare Aa. Vv. 2006, p. 29.
16. Perkins Stetson 1998, pp. 293–294; see also what she writes in Chapters 11, 13 and 14. The one quoted is a recurring statement and shows, in my opinion, all Charlotte Perkins Gilman's optimism on humankind, when it is enlightened by awareness. See also Perkins Gilman 2002, 2003.
17. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), although being a champion of female civil and political rights, in his famous book *The subjection of women* (1869) also asserted that it had not to be feared that women, once they got the right to education and the vote, would no longer take care of the house and family to devote themselves to politics as, he thought, women would never abandon 'their very duties'. Mill 1999, pp. 402–482.
18. Aa. Vv. 2006, pp. 21–22; for further information on 'unpaid caring work' see Picchio 2003.
19. Charlotte Perkins Stetson, in *Women and economics* (1998), wrote much on women's being above all human beings who, in one or more phases of their lives, *can also* be

- mothers; she also wrote on the need to change mentality to consent not only to female progress, but to the progress of all society; see in particular Chs. 8, 9, 13 and Perkins Gilman 2003; as for the female discomfort due to the traditional, 'false' idea of motherhood, see Perkins Gilman 1973; as for the operative proposals of domestic and social re-organization see *Women and economics* (1998) Chs. 11, 12 and 14.
20. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was often in contact with Jane Addams at the Hull House Settlement, where also John Dewey worked; even without proven evidence that Charlotte Perkins could have met John Dewey, still many pedagogical and educational features are common to the three authors.
 21. For further information on the Italian projects which are being carried out see www.genderbudget.it and www.capp.unimo.it.

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