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Breaking the Divide: Can Public Spending on Social Infrastructure Boost Female Employment in Italy?

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Breaking the Divide: Can Public Spending on Social Infrastructure Boost Female Employment in Italy?

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Abstract

We contribute to the long-standing debate on the Italian North–South divide by assessing the impact of public spending on social infrastructure — including education, healthcare, childcare and social assistance — on the gender employment gap over the last two decades, using a P-SVAR analysis. These investments, while not explicitly targeting women, may increase both their labour supply — by reducing the unpaid care work burden — and pro-women labour demand through job creation in care sectors that predominantly employ women. Our research reveals a positive and long-lasting impact of social infrastructure expenditure on private investment, GDP and employment in all areas of the country. However, the reduction of the gender employment gap is detected only in the South and among high-skilled women. These results stress the need for targeted policies to fill the investment gaps in social infrastructure, aiming for a more inclusive labour market, particularly in Southern regions, which suffer from chronic underinvestment and structural challenges.

Keywords: Social infrastructure; Gender inequality; Fiscal Policy; Panel SVAR; Italian regions.

JEL: C33; E24; H30; J16; J18; J21; R58

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1. Introduction

The financial crisis and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic have both had devastating effects on living and working conditions in Europe, particularly in the southern periphery (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain). Following the 2008 crisis, these countries turned to austerity agendas, which led to significant cuts in social spending (Piacentini et al., 2016; Zezza, 2020), along with further deregulation of the labour market (Cirillo et al., 2017; d'Agostino et al., 2018). Instead of delivering the hoped-for effects in terms of growth, these policies have further exacerbated the existing core-periphery divides both between and within EU countries (Celi et al., 2019, 2018).

Labour market fragmentation has disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, such as youth, immigrants and women. The latter, in particular, have been further penalised by public spending cuts in social infrastructure— including education, healthcare, childcare and social assistance (Oyvat and Önarar 2020). On the labour demand side, the social sector - which tends to employ more women than men - has been crippling as a consequence of fiscal consolidation, limiting employment opportunities for women (León and Pavolini, 2014; Pavolini et al., 2015). On the supply side, given the unequal distribution of unpaid care work women borne within household (Mussida and Patimo, 2021; Simonazzi, 2008), inadequate provision of essential public care services has put additional burden on their participation in the labour market (Chierigato, 2021; González et al., 2022; Pacelli et al., 2013). The pandemic's effects have further accentuated these enduring gender disparities (Cetrulo et al., 2022; Corsi and Ilkkaracan, 2023; De Henau and Himmelweit, 2021).

In 2022, the average female employment rate in the EU stood at 69 per cent, over 10 percentage lower than that for men. Furthermore, women earn on average 13 per cent less than men and this adjusted gender hourly pay gap has remained relatively stable over time (Castagnetti and Giorgetti, 2019). However, without adjusting for the higher likelihood of part-time work and more unstable careers among women, this pay gap becomes threefold. This disparity extends also to pension gaps: women's pensions were on average 36 per cent lower than men's, with variations ranging from as little as 3 per cent in Estonia to as much as 46 per cent in Malta (Dessimirova, 2019). These differences stem from gender imbalances in the labour market, which not only reflect but also tend to exacerbate pension inequalities.

In this context, policies aimed at reducing gender disparities in the labour market are crucial not only for promoting fairness and inclusivity, ensuring equal opportunities for women and men, but also for enhancing economic efficiency (Bertrand, 2020). The European Commission has estimated that the gender employment gap leads to an annual economic loss of around €370 billion. Closing this gap could increase GDP by 10 per cent and generate between 6.3 and 10.5 million new jobs by 2050.²

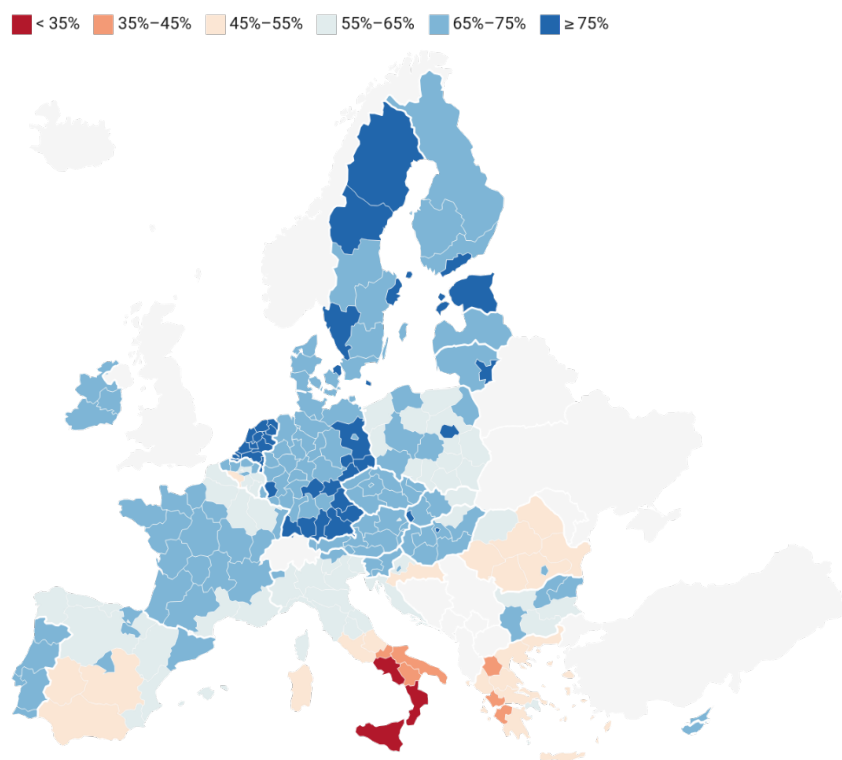
So far, the literature evolved along different lines of research to investigate the role of government spending in shaping female labour market outcomes. The effects of fiscal policy on female employment have been examined at micro, sectoral and macro level. The evidence from impact evaluation studies is vast. While these allow for higher level of detail on the labour supply side, their findings often remain silent on net aggregate effects and more-than-often suffer from external validity (Ernst et al., 2022). Another line of research focused on the impact of government spending on social infrastructure by employing input-output tables (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2020; Ilkkaracan et al., 2021, among others), with the advantage of accounting for structural and institutional characteristics, albeit at the expense of the longitudinal dimension. A less investigated aspect of this nexus is the territorial dimension, which is crucial in countries with marked regional inequalities. To address this research gap, we bring together two strands of literature - the macroeconomic contributions analysing the employment impact of public spending on social infrastructure (Onaran et al., 2022; Onaran and Oyvat, 2023; Oyvat and Onaran, 2020) and those focusing on structural polarisation and core-periphery divides (Accetturo et al. 2022; Celi et al. 2018; Gräbner et al. 2020) - to provide, to the best of our knowledge, the first empirical analysis at the regional level in Italy.

The Italian context is an interesting case for investigation, distinguished by substantial regional disparities between the Centre-North and South. Italy stands out as one of the worst performers in the EU regarding gender parity, with female employment and inactivity rate standing at 51.1 per cent and 43.6 per cent, respectively, in 2022. Such national averages mask remarkable regional heterogeneities. At the NUTS-2 level across all EU27 countries (see Figure 1), among the ten regions with the lowest female employment rates, six are Italian, all located in the South. The disparity is particularly pronounced in Sicilia, Calabria and Campania, where less than one

² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/women-labour-market-work-life-balance/womens-situation-labour-market_en#documents.

in three women work. This pattern is even more prevalent among young women with pre-school children, whose employment rates are over 25 per cent lower than that of young women without children (Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, 2023).

Figure 1. Female employment rate across NUTS-2 regions, 2022



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat data

The North-South gender divide is a longstanding structural issue that has always plagued Italy. The post-World War II era, marked by significant growth and public interventions aimed at inclusive regional development, represents a rare period of convergence between the two macro-areas (Cirillo and Reljic, 2024). However, this was relatively short-lived. While in 1978, female employment rates in the North and South differed by 13.2 percentage points, this gap widened dramatically, reaching nearly 20 percentage points by 1993 (Andreotti et al., 2013). Since the 1970s, Southern Italy has increasingly fallen behind the Centre-North regions and Europe economically. This divide was further exacerbated in the 1980s and 1990s due to industrial restructuring, liberal economic policies, the introduction of euro and the 2008 financial crisis (Celi et al., 2024; Guarascio et al., 2023). Additionally, the adverse effects of austerity agenda have further disadvantaged the South, reinforcing the core-periphery dynamics (Cirillo and Reljic, 2024).

Such underrepresentation of women in Italy's labour market, particularly pronounced in the South, can be attributed to a combination of social and cultural norms, which assign care duties primarily to women, alongside structural barriers like the lack (or inadequate) provision of public early childcare services (Simonazzi, 2008). Italy's coverage rates for children aged 0-2 years is merely 27 per cent, far below Spain (57.4 per cent) and France (50.8 per cent). In the South, however, coverage is below 15 per cent³. Furthermore, labour demand matters too. The low employment rates of women can also be attributed to broader structural weaknesses, persistent long-term unemployment and a generally depressed labour market that characterises the Italian Mezzogiorno⁴.

Addressing these well-documented investment gaps in social infrastructure, notably in education and healthcare, is critical for breaking the North-South divide and placing Italy closer to its EU peers. Hence, examining the impact of public spending on social infrastructure and its effects on female labour market outcomes is both crucial and timely, especially as gender inequalities risk being aggravated by demographic changes (i.e., an ageing population), which place additional burdens on women (Bettio et al., 2006; Simonazzi, 2008).

Our empirical analysis draws on the earlier works of Akitoby et al. (2022) and Onaran and Oyvatt (2023), extending their approaches to include a regional perspective by estimating a panel structural vector autoregressive (P-SVAR) model with regional fixed effects. Our findings reveal a positive and long-lasting impact of social expenditure on private investment, GDP and employment. While the employment effect of social spending is similar across regions, despite structural differences, the magnitudes vary. The effect on the gender employment gap is favourable only in the South – regions characterised by a lower quality of public services, chronic underinvestment in social infrastructures and a more disadvantaged labour market conditions – but only for high-skilled women. However, these positive outcomes tend to diminish over time in the South, suggesting that structural weaknesses prevail in the medium to long term.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on fiscal policy and its impact on women in the labour market, as well as on fiscal multipliers. Section 3

³ https://www.istat.it/it/files/2021/11/REPORT_ASILI-NIDO-2019-2020.pdf.

⁴ Mezzogiorno and South are used interchangeably. It is made of Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicilia, and Sardegna.

presents the data used in the analysis and outlines the empirical strategy adopted. The results are presented and discussed in Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Fiscal multipliers

In recent years, fiscal research has experienced a “Renaissance” (Ramey, 2019), particularly in the analysis of the macroeconomic effects of government spending. This research largely relies on SVAR models⁵, employing various identification methods (Caldara and Kamps, 2017). Meta-analyses of this extensive literature show that fiscal multipliers for government spending are positive, typically ranging from 0.5 to 1. The investment component tends to yield the highest multipliers, followed by public purchases and transfers (Gechert, 2015; Ramey, 2019). However, the magnitude of these multipliers varies depending on factors such as the model used, the specific country under study, the time frame considered and the data used to define fiscal variables.⁶ Furthermore, the structural characteristics of the economy — including industrial development, exchange rate regimes, trade openness and levels of public debt — can also influence the size and persistence of fiscal multipliers (Ilzetzki et al., 2013). Labour market institutions are also relevant. Studies by Cole and Ohanian (2004) and Gorodnichenko et al. (2012) suggest that more rigid labour markets lead to larger fiscal multipliers, as rigid wages tend to amplify the output response to demand shocks.

We contribute to this literature by focusing on Italian regions, using SVARs in a panel setting, in line with recent studies estimating local fiscal multipliers in Italy. Among others, Deleidi et al. (2021) distinguish between current and investment spending, revealing investment multipliers of 4 in the Centre-North and 2.3 in Mezzogiorno. Zezza and Guarascio (2023) concentrate on mission-oriented public expenditures in green, digital and knowledge-related areas, showing that different spending categories yield varying cumulative multipliers. While knowledge-related expenditures generate the highest effects, digital spending crowds out private investment in the South, due to its import reliance on intermediate and capital goods,

⁵ Another widely adopted methodology is the Local Projections approach pioneered by Jordà (2005) and integrated into SVAR analysis (Auerbach and Gorodnichenko, 2017). However, Plagborg-Møller and Wolf (2021) show that the two methodologies produce the same IRFs, and are equally robust to non-linearities.

⁶ The last point is particularly important for VAR models, where one of the main issues stems from the potential endogeneity of public spending due to automatic stabilizers. This problem makes the identification of shocks harder, inevitably influences the values of the estimated multipliers, and questions the robustness of results.

along with a specialisation in low-tech sectors. De Stefanis et al. (2022), focusing on EU structural funds, government investment and government consumption, find that the former yields the highest positive multipliers, with these effects being more pronounced in Mezzogiorno. In contrast, Lucidi (2022) highlights how shocks to public expenditures, investment and deficits reveal disparities in fiscal multipliers, which are notably higher in the Centre-North. However, the empirical evidence so far, focusing on Italian regions, has left research gap regarding persisting gender inequalities in the labour market that we aim to address with our study.

2.2.Fiscal policy and female labour market outcomes

Despite a global increase in female labour force participation over the last four decades, narrowing the gender gap, disparities persist. Parenthood remains the primary factor behind female inactivity and the gender employment gap (Ferragina, 2020).

Gender norms still place the main responsibility of housework, childcare and elderly care on women (González et al., 2022). The World Bank (2011) reports that women spend up to ten times more time daily on caregiving activities and up to four hours less on market activities than men. This is particularly pronounced in Southern Europe (Simonazzi, 2008), where informal elderly care constitutes approximately 80 per cent of the total care (Sepulveda Carmona, 2014). This figure reflects the inadequate provision of public care services, which coupled with the uneven distribution of unpaid care places a significant burden on women, contributing to their high inactivity rates and weak labour attachment.

Additionally, sectors traditionally employing women — like healthcare and education — are often the first to experience budget cuts, reducing employment opportunities (Pavolini et al., 2015). Not less relevant are working conditions in these sectors. Low wages and instability characterise most occupations within these sectors, further diminishing work attractiveness (Perez-Arce and Prados, 2021).

Many high-income countries have implemented a range of policies to increase female labour force participation and employment, such as tax reforms to eliminate work disincentives for the secondary earners (e.g., eligibility for in-work benefits based on individual rather than household income), targeted payroll tax cuts, family policies including public childcare subsidies, paid parental leave and gender quotas in management positions. But how effective are public policies in lifting the barriers women face and improving their labour market

attachment? The literature has evolved along different lines to examine the role of fiscal policy in shaping female labour market outcomes. In terms of policy measures, studies either emphasised the role of specific policies, typically in isolation, or they focused on more general fiscal stimulus.

The empirical evidence is vast and has, so far, predominantly focused on the labour supply side. Numerous empirical studies from different countries show that public early childcare services and enrolment have a positive impact on female participation and employment rates (Abendroth et al., 2014; Asai et al., 2023; Gal and Theising, 2015; Grigoli et al., 2018; Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017; Sikirić, 2021). Paid parental leave also has positive effects, although its relationship with female employment rates is complex: above a certain threshold, longer leaves potentially weakening labour market attachment (Ferragina, 2020; Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). Taxation represents another policy in the toolkit that governments often resort to. While labour supply responses to after-tax wages and transfers are generally small (Keane, 2011), they are higher for women, particularly those married or with young children (Kalíšková, 2020). Whether taxes apply at the individual or household level is particularly relevant, as the latter often results in higher marginal tax rates for secondary earners, mostly women, discouraging their participation (Coelho et al., 2022; Colonna and Marcassa, 2015). Tax policy design, therefore, plays an important role in addressing gender disparities in the labour market. However, studies reviewed so far typically have focused only on the labour supply response, overlooking the demand side and the indirect effects, which is a significant limitation.

In contrast, macroeconomic analyses, such as those discussed in Section 2.1, are able to account for the net aggregate effects (Ernst et al., 2022). However, they rarely focus on gender issues, with some notable exceptions (Akitoby et al., 2022; Asai et al., 2023; Kovalenko and Töpfer, 2021; Onaran and Oyvat, 2023; Oyvat and Onaran, 2020). Akitoby et al. (2022), for example, investigate whether countercyclical fiscal policy improves the gender employment gap during economic downturns by analysing data from G7 countries between 1980 and 2017, employing SVAR and Local Projection methods. Their findings suggest that while positive fiscal spending shocks promote gender equality in times of recession, the influence on gender employment during economic expansions is less pronounced and typically smaller. Our research follows a similar methodology but adopts a regional perspective. While Akitoby and co-authors concentrate on the impact of total fiscal expenditures, our study narrows the scope to public spending on the social sector, borrowing from another important research strand, which builds

on a concept of social infrastructure (Himmelweit, 2016; Onaran and Oyvat, 2023; Seguino, 2019), encompassing a wider array of public services and facilities aimed at meeting social needs and generating long-term collective benefits. This includes not only early childcare support, as discussed above, but also healthcare, education and elder care, among others. Importantly, this body of research highlights not only the impact of social investment on labour supply — by reducing the time women allocate to unpaid care work — but also on labour demand, as most workers in the care sector are women. Given its labour-intensive nature, the care sector — which often suffers from underinvestment — has enormous potential with respect to other sectors (Ilkcaracan et al., 2021), making such investment a strategic choice for fostering employment growth and addressing the unmet social needs, especially in the face of an ageing population (Cresti and Virgilito, 2022).

These studies typically employ input-output tables to evaluate the impact of government spending on social infrastructure or they use structural macro models (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2021; Ilkcaracan et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019). The empirical evidence is encouraging, pointing out that an increase in public spending on the care economy boosts total employment, notably for women, reducing unpaid labour and gender employment disparities (Ilkcaracan et al., 2021; Onaran and Oyvat, 2023). We introduce a novelty with respect to earlier studies by exploring the regional and qualitative dimension, distinguishing not only between male and female employment but also across different skill levels.

3. Data and methodology

3.1. Data and descriptive evidence

Our study builds on the concept of ‘social infrastructure’, which encompasses the provision of education, healthcare, social assistance and childcare (Onaran and Oyvat, 2023; Oyvat and Onaran, 2020).

The international System of National Accounts (SNA) classification fails to acknowledge the contribution of social infrastructure spending to the creation and accumulation of human and social capital. According to the SNA, the management and staffing of educational, healthcare and childcare facilities, is not considered an investment but falls under the government’s annual current expenditure. This is one of the primary reasons why fiscal consolidation policies often target spending on social infrastructure, neglecting the fact that the benefits derived from today’s investments in health, education and childcare will extend well into the future, yielding

societal benefits through a more educated and healthier population and supportive systems. Feminist economists have redefined public expenditures in the social sector as ‘investment’ or ‘infrastructure’, acknowledging instead their role in creating durable human and social capital with long-term public benefits (Himmelweit, 2016; Seguino, 2019), which is the definition that we adopt in this work.

Eurostat provides country-level data on social sector spending. At a more granular level, like NUTS 2 territories, public consumption data follows the COFOG 10-sector classification, with investment spending being broadly categorised into education, healthcare and other sectors. This broad classification hinders precise matching of public consumption with investment by sector. Moreover, this classification does not allow for the differentiation between categories of expenditures, thereby precluding the exclusion of highly endogenous components like interest expenditures and automatic stabilisers. To overcome these limitations, following Zezza and Guarascio (2023), we rely on the Public Territorial Accounts (CPT) database that offers detailed categorisation of public spending by type, economic sector and institutional level. This granularity allows us to construct fiscal variables that exclude endogenous components identified in SVAR literature (e.g., automatic stabilisers), facilitating the identification of exogenous fiscal shocks. Our fiscal variable (g_i) is the sum of “wages and salaries paid”, “goods and services bought”, “current transfers to households and firms” and “investment in fixed capital” (i.e., machineries and infrastructure), selectively within the “education”, “healthcare” and “social assistance” sectors.⁷ List of variables and detailed data sources are reported in Table A1.

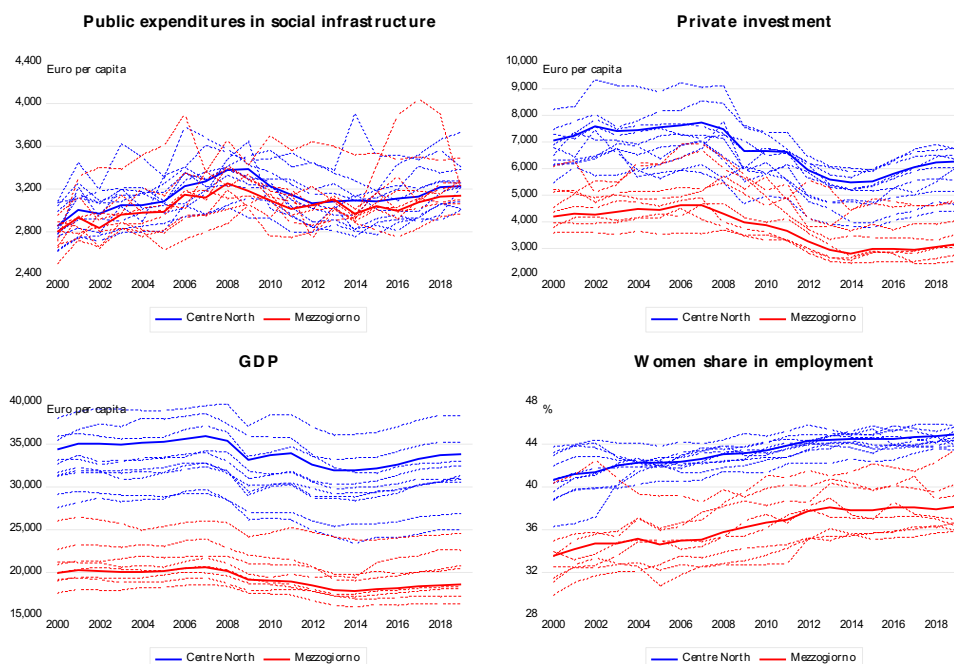
The upper-left panel of Figure 2 shows the evolution of public spending on the social sector by region.⁸ While there is some disparity between the two macro-regions, with the Centre-North maintaining a higher level of spending per capita, this difference is not as pronounced as in other economic indicators, suggesting some degree of redistribution. Notably, the 2008 crisis appears to have initiated a downturn in social sector spending in both macro-regions, reflecting austerity measures and budgetary constraints that have only recently been reversed following

⁷ Note that regional current transfers to households and firms, for the sectors included (i.e., “education”, “healthcare”, and “social assistance”) are mostly made of subsidies to production and are thus assimilable to public procurement. Estimates excluding net current transfers yield qualitatively identical results.

⁸ Data inspection showed that the two alpine regions of Trentino Alto Adige and Valle d’Aosta display values for social infrastructure spending systematically higher than all other regions and are thus dropped from the empirical analysis. However, results including all regions are qualitatively similar.

the Covid-19 pandemic (Storm, 2023). In contrast to the social sector spending patterns, the North-South divide is more pronounced in other economic aspects such as private investment, GDP and the gender employment gap, with the Centre-North regions exhibiting a stronger economic base and lower gender employment gap. Moreover, there is no evidence of convergence over the observed period, suggesting a deep structural divide across Italian regions.

Figure 2. Selected macroeconomic variables by region, 2000-2019.



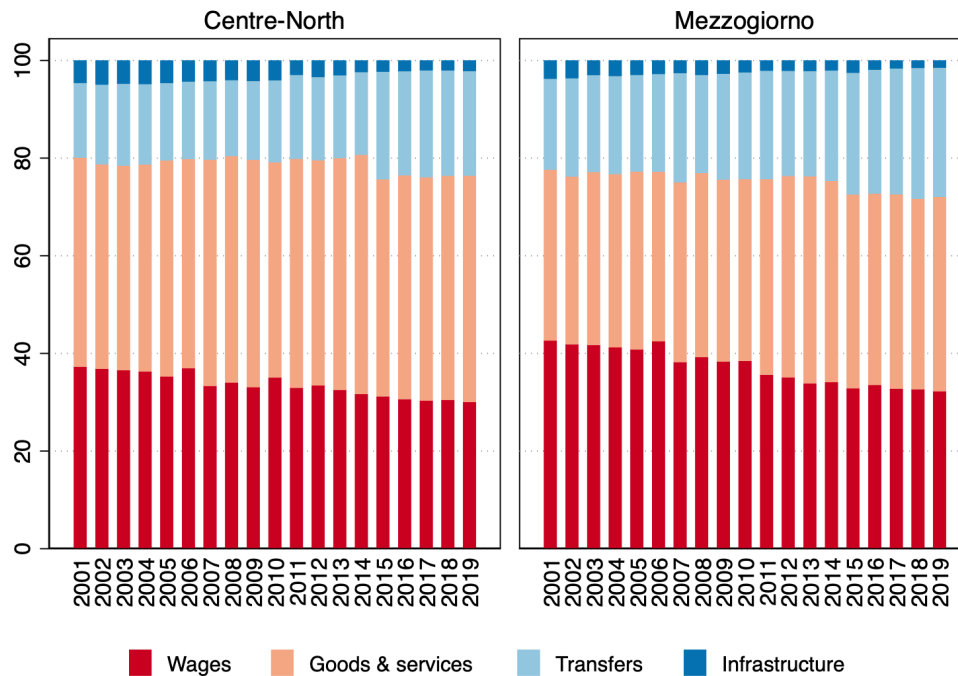
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on ISTAT and CPT data.

Figure 3 provides a detailed breakdown of social infrastructure expenditures over time, revealing relatively similar patterns within the Centre-North and Mezzogiorno. At the beginning of the period, both macro-regions allocated a significant portion of their social infrastructure budgets to wages. We observe, however, a noticeable shift in spending patterns, characterised by a growing allocation towards goods and services (i.e., public procurement). This is consistent across both macro-regions, indicating a broader change rather than a regional-specific phenomenon. This trend may reflect the privatisation of the social sector, whereby the public sector undergoes downsizing by contracting out public services (e.g., healthcare and education) to private providers (Buzelli and Boyce, 2021; Storm, 2023).⁹ Table

⁹ Figures A1 and A2 show the individual cross section.

A2 shows the summary statistics for our variables of interest, for the whole sample and across macro-areas.

Figure 3. Public expenditures in the Social Sector. Components. Macro-areas, 2000-2019.



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on CPT data.

3.2. Methodology

In our framework, we bring together two literature strands – one examining the impact of public spending on social infrastructure (Himmelweit, 2016; Onaran and Oyvat, 2023) and the other focusing on core-periphery and regional divides à la Celi et al. (2018), Gräbner et al (2020) and Rodriguez-Pose and Ketterer (2020) – to address the following research questions:

- i. Can public spending on social infrastructure boost investment, output and reduce the gender employment gap in Italy?
- ii. Can such spending break the regional North-South divide in terms of gender gaps?
- iii. Is there a gender difference in employment response along the skill distribution?

We do this by estimating a five-variable panel structural vector autoregressive (P-SVAR) model, employing a four-step procedure (Ramey, 2016). Firstly, we estimate a reduced-form P-VAR(n):

$$y_{i,t} = A_i(L)y_{i,t-n} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

where $y_{i,t}$ represents the vector of variables in region i in year t , $A_i(L)$ is a polynomial of lagged coefficients, μ_i denotes regional fixed effects and $\varepsilon_{i,t}$ is the reduced-form error term.

All variables are log-transformed and the choice of two lags is based on information criteria tests (AIC, SIC). In the second step, we derive a structural model (P-SVAR) as in Equation 2 by imposing restrictions on the matrix of contemporaneous coefficients ($B_{0i}y_{i,t}$) using the recursive Choleski approach (Caldara and Kamps, 2017).

$$B_{0i}y_{i,t} = B_i(L)y_{i,t-n} + w_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

In Equation 3, $B_{0i}y_{i,t}$ is the matrix of contemporaneous coefficients with “-” denoting ‘free’ parameters and 0s indicating restrictions. The Choleski scheme is described as “a story about a given endogenous variable being determined by those higher up in the system but not those lower down” (Ouliaris et al., 2016, pp. 92–93), with variable ordering guided by economic theory.

$$B_{0i}y_{i,t} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ - & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ - & - & 1 & 0 & 0 \\ - & - & - & 1 & 0 \\ - & - & - & - & 1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} g_{i,t} \\ i_{i,t} \\ y_{i,t} \\ e_{i,t} \\ w_{i,t} \end{bmatrix} \quad (3)$$

We calculate impulse response functions (IRFs) to assess the dynamic effect of public social expenditure over a period of 10 years and subsequently convert them into multipliers.¹⁰

This methodology is applied in estimating three models. In model 1, we include public expenditures in social infrastructure per capita (g_i), private investment per capita (i_i), Gross Domestic Product per capita (y_i), total employment (e_i) and the female share in total employment (w_i). In line with literature, government spending is ordered first (Blanchard and Perotti, 2002). Private investment comes second – as in Deleidi and Mazzucato (2021) and Zezza and Guarascio (2023). The rationale behind is that private firms’ (long-run) investment

¹⁰ There are various ways of converting IRFs into monetary multipliers. In our case, where variables are log-transformed, the ex-post conversion is done by multiplying the cumulative mean responses by the average ratios of macro variables-to-fiscal expenditures. An alternative method employs an ex-ante conversion – dividing all variables by potential output (usually adopting the HP filter on real GDP), as in Gordon and Krenn (2010) or Ramey and Zubairy (2018). Results using this latter methodology are qualitatively similar.

plans are shaped by (long-run) expectations about the state of the economy rather than contemporaneous changes in fiscal policy. Labour market variables, employment (e) and the female employment share (w) enter the VAR next, as in Akitoby et al. (2022), to explore the effects of fiscal shocks on labour force composition.

It is worth noting that most workers in the social sector, both paid and unpaid, are women. Consequently, while spending on social infrastructure may not explicitly target women, it has the potential to alleviate gender inequalities and enhance inclusiveness in the labour market by increasing both labour supply and pro-women labour demand (Azmat and Petrongolo, 2014; Huidrom et al., 2020; Ngai and Petrongolo, 2017), especially if implemented along women-targeted measure (e.g., paid parental leave, gender quotas). Thus, a shock to social infrastructure may positively influence w , thereby reducing the gender employment gap, although outcomes may be affected by the structural characteristics of the examined regions.

Furthermore, acknowledging criticisms regarding the use of female employment share by some (Onaran and Oyvat, 2023), we also examine the employment effects for men and women separately in model 2.¹¹ Whereas existing studies have concentrated on quantitative aspects of employment, our research broadens the scope to explore qualitative dimensions as well. In model 3, by splitting employment between high- and low-skill workers, we investigate whether an increase in social infrastructure expenditure leads to skill upgrading or downgrading.¹²

To assess the possible heterogeneous effects of social spending across regions, all models are first estimated on the whole sample and then separately for Centre-North and Mezzogiorno. The results are reported in Table 1.

4. Results

In this section, we report the findings of the estimated P-SVAR using IRFs and cumulative multipliers. We begin by examining the results of our baseline model 1, focusing on the effects of social infrastructure spending on the female employment share. Acknowledging the

¹¹ Even if coupled with total employment figure, as in model 1, movements in the share of women in employment may hide important dynamics at work. We are grateful to Marcella Corsi and Arin Dube for pointing this out.

¹² For model 2, the vector of endogenous variables becomes $[g_i, i_i, y_i, em_i, ew_i]$ where em and ew stand for male and female employment, respectively. Model 3 has seven variables, with the vector of endogenous variables being $[g_i, i_i, y_i, em_i^H, em_i^L, ew_i^H, ew_i^L]$, where the superscripts H and L stand for high (ISCED 5-8) and low skill (ISCED 0-4), respectively. In general, we specified our models by ordering men before women, and high-skill before low-skill workers. However, changing the order of employment variables does not affect the overall results.

limitations of this relative measure, we further analyse the effects on male versus female employment in absolute terms, which constitutes our second model. Additionally, we extend beyond current research to explore the qualitative effects along the skill distribution and to assess whether investment in social infrastructure can lead to the much-needed upgrading, particularly in the South. Lastly, we check the robustness of our findings through alternative specifications.

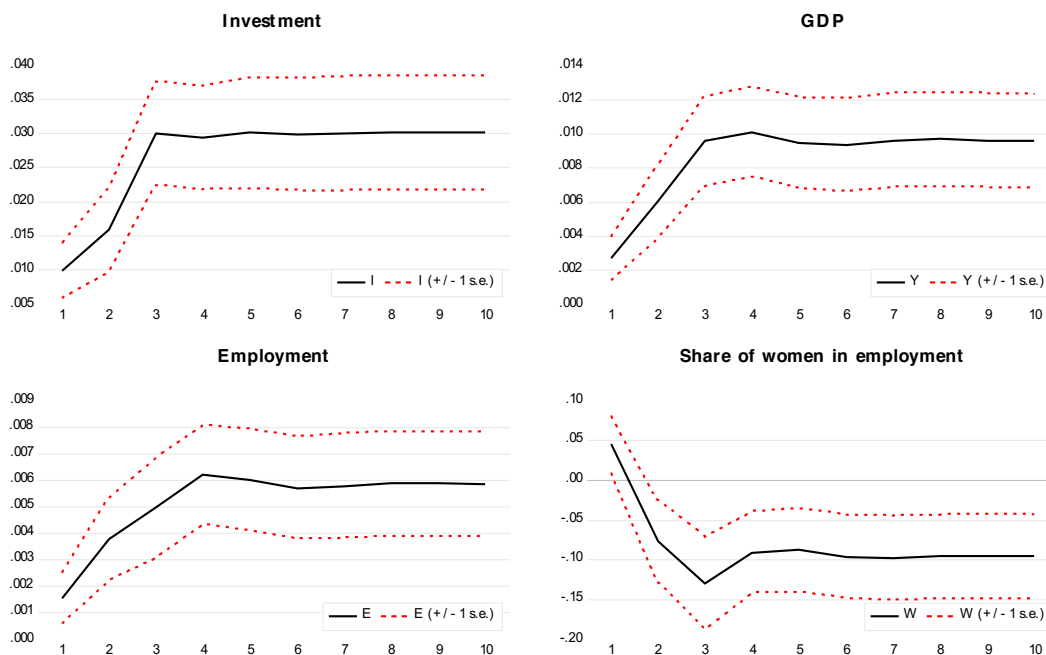
4.1.Main findings

Figure 4 reports IRFs, illustrating the dynamic response of variables to an expansionary fiscal spending shock - based on model 1 when all Italian regions are considered.

IRFs show that a one standard deviation shock to social infrastructure spending – specifically, about €260 per capita – generates positive and lasting impacts on investment, GDP and employment, highlighting its self-financing potential (Seguino, 2019). This finding is corroborated by IRFs estimated separately for the regions of Centre-North and Mezzogiorno, as shown in Figure 5. A fiscal stimulus in social infrastructure spending yields a positive output response, crowds in private investment and boosts total employment in both macro-areas. However, concerning the gender employment gap, while an expansionary fiscal policy initially narrows it, this effect is only short-lived and subsequently tends to exacerbate it. This pattern referring to the entire sample, is predominantly influenced by dynamics in the South, as depicted in Figure 5.

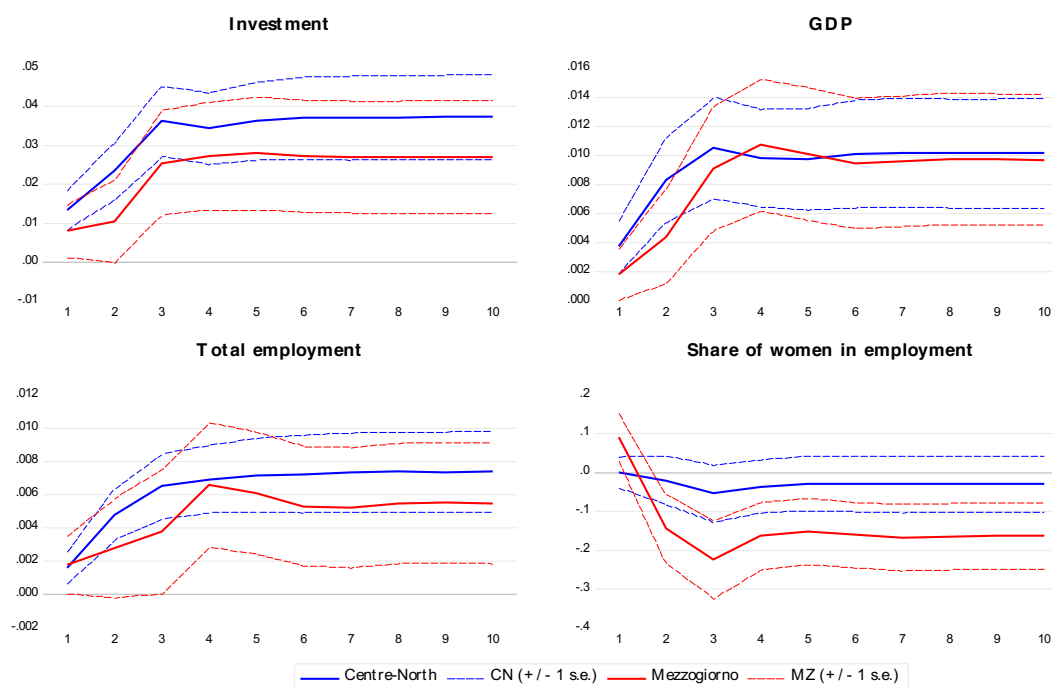
Table 1 presents the cumulative multipliers derived from IRFs, both based on the entire sample as well as for two macro-areas independently. The impact multipliers for private investment and GDP stand at 0.4 and 0.5, respectively, increasing to 1.3 and 2 in the long run. Employment rises by 12.9 thousand units at impact, with a peak of 60.8 thousand in the fourth year. The effect on the female employment share, initially positive with a 1 percentage point increase, turns negative, peaking at -3.3 p.p. in the third year.

Figure 4. Impulse response functions (IRFs) from baseline model: elasticities. All regions



Source: Authors' own elaboration. Notes: mean response = solid lines; confidence bands = dotted lines.

Figure 5. Impulse response functions (IRFs) from baseline model: elasticities by macro-areas



Source: Authors' own elaboration. Notes: mean response = solid lines; confidence bands = dotted lines.

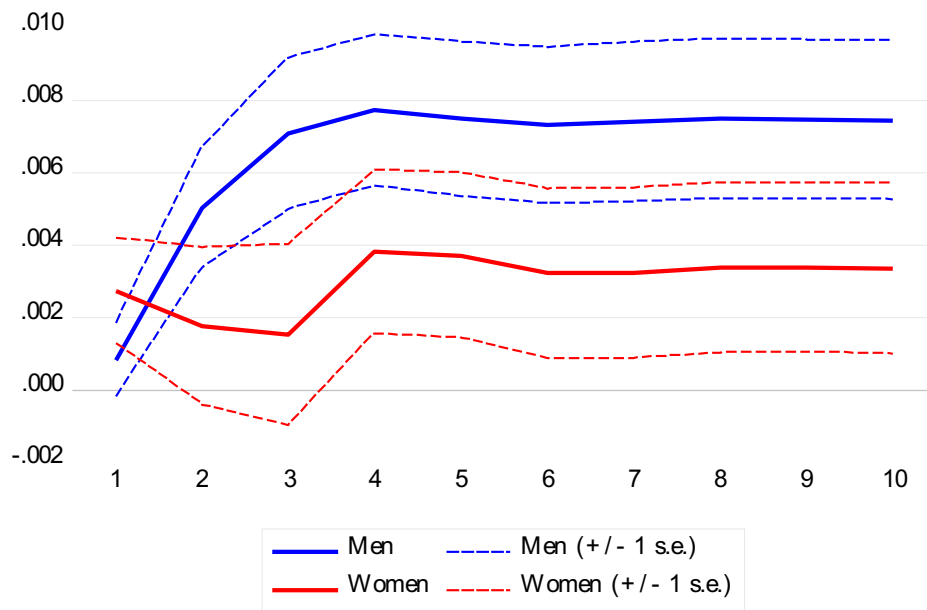
What underpins this unexpected adverse impact of social infrastructure expenditure on gender inequalities? It is important to stress that this outcome does not imply a decrease in female employment due to a fiscal stimulus. Instead, it indicates that employment of women does not increase as much as that of men. This is confirmed in an alternative specification (model 2) illustrated in Figure 6. Female employment rises by 9.5 thousand at impact, while the increase for men is less than half this amount (4.1 thousand and statistically insignificant). Nonetheless, from the second year after the shock, the growth in economic activity disproportionately favours male employment, which by the fifth year stabilises at around three times that of women: 42.3 thousand against 14.5 thousand.

Table 1. Cumulative multipliers relative to a shock to social infrastructure

Horizon	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	<i>i</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>em</i>	<i>ew</i>	<i>em^H</i>	<i>em^L</i>	<i>ew^H</i>	<i>ew^L</i>
All regions												
1	0.4	0.5	12.9	1.0	0.4	0.5	4.1	9.5	1.9	2.1	8.4	0.4
5	1.3	2.0	57.1	-2.2	1.3	2.0	42.3	14.5	4.8	39.6	14.9	0.2
10	1.3	2.0	55.8	-2.4	1.3	2.0	42.3	13.1	4.7	39.9	14.5	-0.4
Centre-North												
1	0.6	0.9	19.0	0.0	0.6	0.9	10.9	7.7	4.0	3.6	10.5	-2.7
5	1.9	2.5	91.0	-0.8	1.8	2.5	55.5	35.5	3.6	48.1	21.4	20.1
10	1.9	2.6	92.7	-0.8	1.9	2.6	56.7	36.2	2.9	51.9	21.3	21.8
Mezzogiorno												
1	0.2	0.2	8.7	1.8	0.2	0.2	1.1	7.1	0.7	1.9	5.4	1.4
5	0.9	1.5	34.2	-3.5	0.9	1.5	31.3	3.6	6.5	29.0	10.1	-5.7
10	0.8	1.5	31.2	-3.8	0.8	1.5	30.2	1.9	5.8	29.0	9.6	-7.1

Source: Authors' own elaboration. *Notes:* Table reports the cumulative multipliers relative to a shock to per-capita Public Expenditures in social infrastructure. Multipliers for investment (*i*) and GDP (*y*) are expressed euro-on-euro. The response of the share of women in employment (*w*) is expressed in percentage points. Responses of employment variables (*e*, *em*, *ew*, *em^H*, *em^L*, *ew^H*, *ew^L*) are expressed in thousand units. Statistically significant values are reported in bold.

Figure 6. IRFs from Model 2. Employment elasticities (by sex). All regions.



Source: Authors' own elaboration. *Notes:* mean response = solid lines; confidence bands = dotted lines.

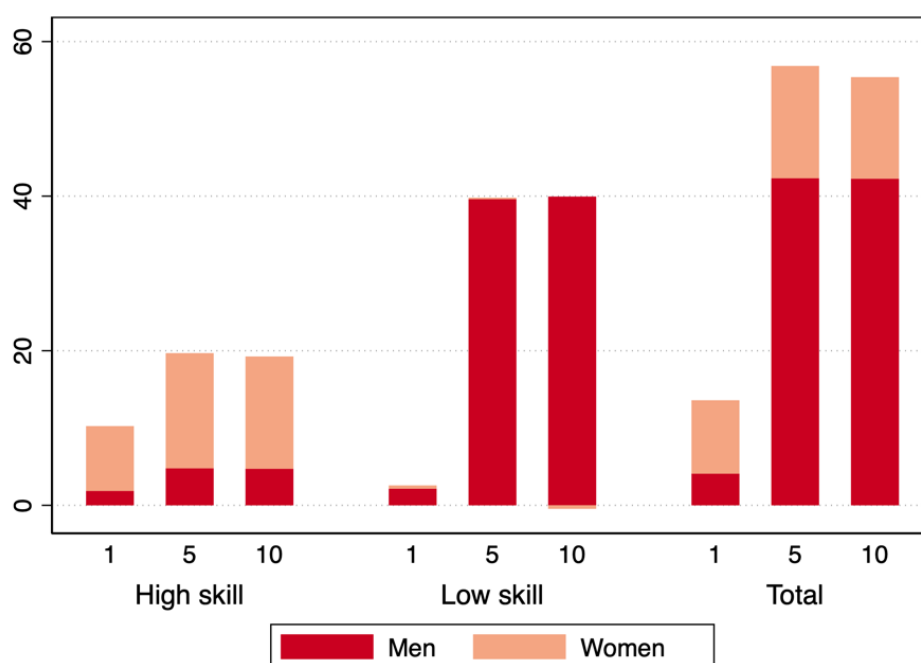
Consistent with the existing research on Italian regional multipliers (Deleidi et al., 2021; Lucidi, 2022; Zezza and Guarascio, 2023), our findings suggest that, although shocks to public spending on social infrastructure lead to positive outcomes in output growth, stimulate private investment and increase total employment nationwide, the impact is more sizeable in the Centre-North. This is likely due to the region's superior industrial and infrastructural base, lower reliance on imports and the higher quality of public institutions vis-à-vis Mezzogiorno.

In terms of labour market outcomes, when splitting the sample along territorial lines, the effect on gender employment gap is present (and significant) solely in the South. Here too, the favourable effect on female employment – +1.8 p.p. in the share of women in employment – is only transitory, while the dysfunctional characteristics of the Italian labour market seem to prevail in the medium-to-long term. Indeed, the positive effect on female employment share turns negative and statistically significant over time in the South, peaking at -5.1 p.p. three years after the shock. Again, this is due to a larger increase in male employment rather than a decrease in female employment.

We further investigate these results by estimating our baseline model across different skill groups (model 3): high-skilled versus medium- and low-skilled (i.e., ISCED levels 5-8 and 0-4, respectively). Figure 7 documents the remarkable differences between men and women along the skill distribution. A shock to social infrastructure spending generates a jump in high-skill employment at impact (+11 thousand employees), mostly women, hinting at an upgrading

process towards more skilled occupations. However, while men generally see a greater increase in employment than women, in line with Models 1 and 2, this is primarily within low-skilled positions. Overall, while the gender gap shows improvement among the high-skill cohort, it widens among the low-skilled workforce.

Figure 7. Skill-upgrading effects of shocks to social infrastructure. All regions. Thousand employees.



Source: Authors' own elaboration. *Notes:* The Figure reports the cumulative multipliers relative to a shock to per-capita public expenditures in social infrastructure.

Continuing our analysis, we re-estimate also model 3 by splitting the sample between two macro-areas, to assess whether and to what extent regional structural characteristics affect these results. Our primary findings – skill upgrading at impact that narrows the gender gap among high-skilled workers – hold true across both regions. These findings are reported in Table A3. The key distinction between the North-Centre and South stems from the dynamics in low-skill employment: while in the South female employment gains are concentrated in high-skilled occupations, in the North there is a sustained increase also in low-skill female employment over the medium to long term.

Given the poor economic performance of southern regions over the last three decades, the relative backwardness of their industrial structure, fragmented labour markets and inadequate public services - including both infrastructure and the quality of public administration - we argue that temporary/one-off or isolated measures are insufficient. Instead, structural and

farsighted policy actions are necessary to reverse trend of persistent gender and territorial divides. The effectiveness of social infrastructure spending is influenced by a range of factors, including the modality of implementation - such as the nature of spending and duration - and its interplay with other policy measures (e.g., parental leave) and labour market institutions (e.g., minimum wages, employment protection legislation). The composition and allocation of spending are critical too. Our analysis in Section 3 highlights that the recent decades have seen a shift towards privatisation in the social sector, with an increasing trend of outsourcing public services. Constructing new childcare facilities is paramount, particularly given Italy's backwardness relative to EU benchmarks, a gap that is even more pronounced in the South (ISTAT, 2021). Such capital investments can stimulate employment in the construction sector, traditionally dominated by low-skilled men and simultaneously encourage women's participation in the workforce. However, without a comprehensive, long-term national strategy for recruitment and the generation of quality jobs in the social sector (Cresti and Virgilito, 2022), these investments may fail to break the gender and regional divides and, instead, could exacerbate current conditions through reliance on insecure and temporary jobs (d'Agostino et al., 2018).

Another crucial consideration is whether standalone policies can achieve gender parity objectives—in this instance, through social infrastructure—or whether a more systematic approach is needed to ensure not only equitable employment opportunities for men and women but also access to good jobs.

4.2. Robustness checks

In line with standard practice in fiscal research, we conduct a series of robustness checks. A well-known limitation of VARs, particularly those identified using a Choleski scheme, is the potential influence of variable ordering on the results. Therefore, we first re-estimate the baseline model altering the order of variables, such as positioning GDP before investment and changing the order of female with male employment. Second, the selection of variables can also affect results. Thus, we alternatively use private sector value added instead of GDP. Our main findings – that fiscal expansion in social infrastructure positively affects private investment, GDP and total employment, and that the positive impact on the gender employment gap is only transitory – are confirmed in both scenarios. The results for these robustness checks are available upon request.

Furthermore, as the territorial division in two macro-areas – North-Centre and South – splits the sample in two unequal parts, we also divide the sample using additional indicators that reflect women's conditions in the labour market and the diffusion of early childcare facilities and enrolment rates, known to affect female participation. Specifically, we divide the sample in two equal parts according to: (i) the degree of structural female unemployment rate; (ii) the rate of territorial coverage of early childhood services; and (iii) enrolment rates. It should be noted that these divides largely coincide with the North-Centre and South dichotomy, meaning that regions with more favourable labour market conditions and higher prevalence of childcare services tend to be located in the Centre-North. Consequently, results for these robustness checks unsurprisingly mimic those observed for the macro-areas (Figure B1).

5. Concluding remarks

We contribute to the debate on the Italian North–South divide from a gender labour market perspective by estimating the P-SVAR based on regional data from 2000 to 2019. We find that fiscal spending on social infrastructure not only delivers long-term collective benefits, fulfilling social needs and accumulating human and social capital but also stimulates output growth, encourages private investment and boosts employment growth in both macro-areas, pointing to its self-financing potential. However, despite a favourable but transitory effect on the gender employment gap, the dysfunctional characteristics of the Italian labour market appear to prevail in the medium to long term. Indeed, the positive effect of social spending on female employment share turns negative after three years.

While the expansion of the social sector is crucial to strengthening female labour market attachment, the scarcity of good (and well-paid) jobs remains a significant obstacle to female participation in the workforce, particularly in the Southern regions. Thus, to create a more inclusive labour market in the South, it is also necessary to break the vicious circle of non-standard work, low wages, limited productive capacity, low productivity and depressed demand (Andreotti et al., 2013; Fanti et al., 2023; Pianta and Reljic, 2022). Therefore, more structural policy actions, such as long-term investment in social infrastructure aimed at closing the regional investment gaps, rather than one-off measures, are necessary to overcome the barriers women face in the labour market, ultimately supporting regional convergence.

Our findings deliver some important policy implications, especially considering the objectives of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). On the one hand, given that we find

public spending on social infrastructure can sustain private investment, employment and output, allocating 40 per cent of NRRP resources to Mezzogiorno may help reduce the longstanding core-periphery divide. On the other hand, the resources from the NRRP aimed at reducing gender disparities may, by contrast, not be sufficient. The goal to create 152,000 new places in childcare facilities by 2026 is ambitious (CDP, 2023), and much needed. Nevertheless, without a comparable long-term national strategy for the permanent recruitment of personnel, which cannot be funded by the NRRP, there is a risk that these facilities will remain underutilised or, at best, continue to rely on low-paid and temporary contracts. Furthermore, the NRRP has already been scaled down due to inflationary pressures and changes in government priorities. In late 2023, the plan has been revised and 11.8 billion euro have been allocated to RePower EU, however, at the expense of other missions. In particular, “strengthening the supply of educational services: from kindergartens to universities” and “social infrastructure, families, communities and the third sector” have seen the largest cuts, with a budget reduction of 360 million and 2.85 billion euro, respectively.¹³

In addition, the newly agreed EU fiscal framework risks jeopardising even more public efforts toward addressing gender gaps in labour markets. As discussed, fiscal austerity over the last twenty years has translated into large cuts in social infrastructure spending. This dynamic is likely to endure – and worsen – in the coming years, as Italy is expected to pursue structural primary surpluses of at least 3% of GDP up to the end of the decade to make its public debt ‘sustainable’ (Darvas et al., 2023).

This work provides a conceptual framework that could be adapted to other countries with marked territorial and gender disparities. Moreover, this analysis could be extended in several ways. As employment gaps are rather heterogeneous across economic sectors and that social infrastructure spending is usually directed towards gender-segregated ones, it would be valuable to explore if outcomes differ across different industries or contract types.

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¹³ For more information, see: <https://temi.camera.it/leg19/pnrr/pnrrItalia/OCD57-2/il-pnrr-italiano-quadro-sintesi.html#:~:text=Il%20nuovo%20PNRR%20modificato%20con,piano%20originario%2C%20e%20150%20investimenti>.

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Appendix A. Tables

Table A1. List of variables and data sources

Variable	Description	Source	Units	Notes
g_i	Public expenditures in social infrastructure	Own elaboration based on CPT	Million-euro, current prices (2015)	CPT sector: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education (005) • Healthcare (0010) • Social intervention (0011) CPT category: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • S06 (wages and salaries) • S12 (goods and services) • S15 (current transfers to households) • S16 (current transfers to firms) • S43 (investment in machineries) • S45 (investment in infrastructure)
i_i	Private sector gross fixed investment	Istat, territorial accounts	Million-euro, constant prices (2015)	
y_i	Gross Domestic Product	Istat, territorial accounts	Million-euro, constant prices (2015)	
$e_i; em_i; ew_i$	Employment (by sex)	Istat, territorial accounts	Thousand employees	
w_i	Share of women in employment	Own elaboration	Percent	
$e_i^H; e_i^L;$ $em_i^H; em_i^L;$ $ew_i^H; ew_i^L$	Employment (by ISCED)	Eurostat, LFS (extraction)	Thousand employees	We use the EU LFS data to calculate employment shares by sex and ISCED level. We then use these shares to construct employment sub-groups from Istat aggregate data

Table A2. Descriptive Statistics.

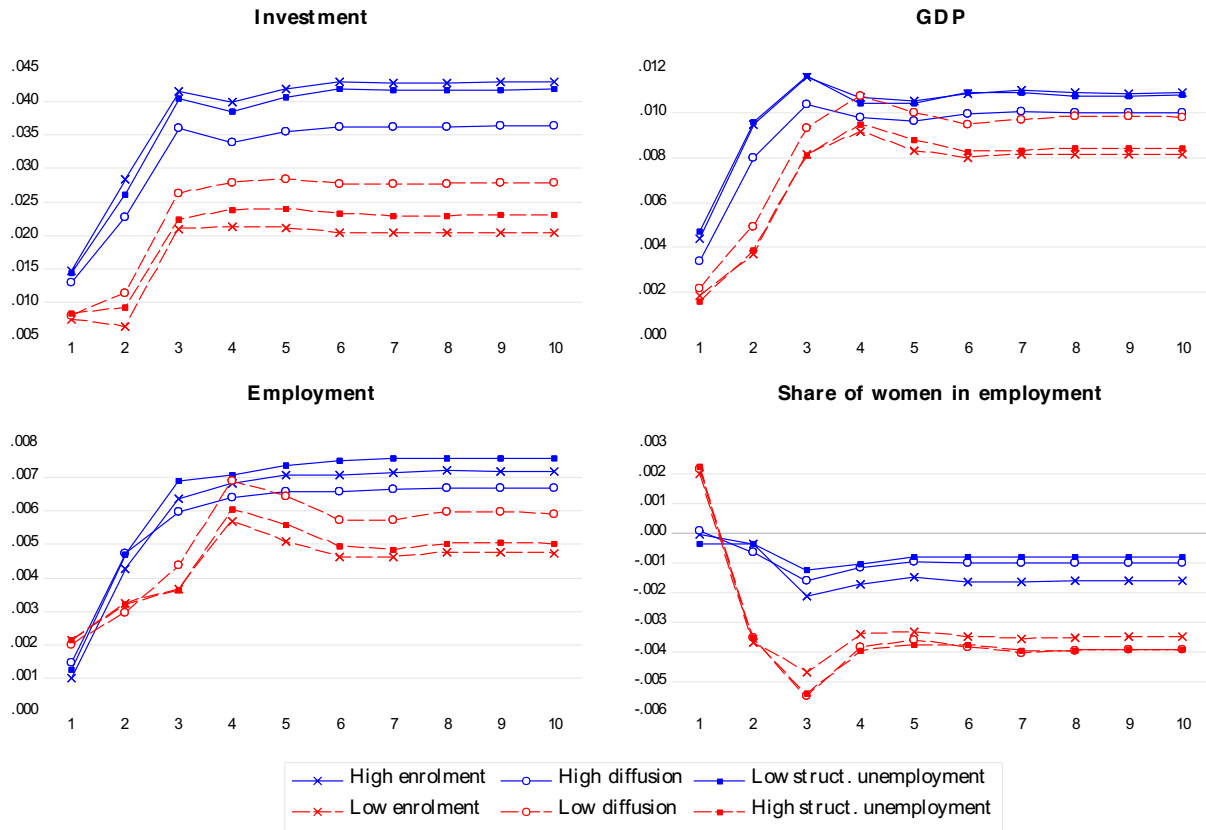
	g_i	i_i	y_i	e_i	w_i	em_i	em_i^H	em_i^L	ew_i	ew_i^H	ew_i^L
All regions											
Mean	3.1	5.3	26.6	1202.0	40.2	710.6	104.5	606.1	491.5	111.3	380.1
Median	3.1	5.3	26.9	885.1	41.6	564.1	72.9	487.8	322.3	73.8	263.4
Maximum	4.0	9.3	39.8	4372.3	45.9	2456.7	480.4	2082.5	1915.7	561.0	1449.3
Minimum	2.6	2.4	15.8	97.3	30.6	58.0	6.6	49.7	37.7	5.6	27.6
Std. Dev.	0.3	1.5	6.7	967.8	4.1	556.4	92.1	469.8	417.3	100.3	326.0
Observations	342	342	342	342	342	342	342	342	342	342	342
Centre-North											
Mean	3.2	6.2	31.8	1550.1	43.2	881.5	136.5	745.0	668.7	147.4	521.2
Median	3.1	6.2	31.7	1628.3	43.6	908.5	122.4	772.5	711.6	122.8	546.9
Maximum	3.9	9.3	39.8	4372.3	45.9	2456.7	480.4	2082.5	1915.7	561.0	1449.3
Minimum	2.7	3.7	23.4	326.1	36.6	186.0	18.9	154.8	139.9	18.0	107.6
Std. Dev.	0.2	1.2	3.7	1089.1	1.6	623.3	105.3	525.2	467.1	115.7	364.5
Observations	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190
Mezzogiorno											
Mean	3.1	4.2	20.1	766.9	36.4	496.9	64.4	432.5	269.9	66.2	203.7
Median	3.1	4.1	19.7	572.5	36.1	348.8	46.9	305.1	209.0	53.1	167.2
Maximum	4.0	6.9	26.4	1750.5	43.6	1178.8	174.7	1048.9	577.6	190.5	461.6
Minimum	2.6	2.4	15.8	97.3	30.6	58.0	6.6	49.7	37.7	5.6	27.6
Std. Dev.	0.3	1.1	2.5	536.1	2.9	360.6	48.5	314.1	176.9	47.7	132.0
Observations	152	152	152	152	152	152	152	152	152	152	152

Source: Own elaboration based on CPT and ISTAT data. *Notes:* Public expenditures in social infrastructure, private investment and GDP are expressed in real (2015) thousand euro per capita. Share of women in employment is expressed in percentage point. Employment variables are expressed in thousand units.

Legend: g_i = public expenditure in social infrastructure; i_i = private investment; y_i = GDP; e_i = employment (total); w_i = share of women in total employment; em_i = employment (men); em_i^H = high-skill employment (men); em_i^L = low-skill employment (men); ew_i = employment (women); ew_i^H = high-skill employment (women); ew_i^L = low-skill employment (women).

Appendix B. Robustness checks

Figure B.1 IRFs from model 1. Sample split according to (i) enrolment rate and (ii) territorial diffusion of childcare services, (iii) level of structural female unemployment. Elasticities.



Note: mean responses; solid lines = high enrolment rate/territorial diffusion; dotted lines = low enrolment rate/territorial diffusion. Source: Authors' own elaboration.