

Women's Employment in France: a strong Resilience to the Economic Downturn?

Natacha Ordioni
Université de Toulon (France)
ordioni@univ-tln.fr

The starting point of this work lies in a research commissioned and published by UNICRI¹, aiming to analyze the gendered impact of the 2008 financial and economic crisis in four Mediterranean countries: France, Greece, Italy and Spain². The study was centered on the issues of poverty, health and exposure to violence.

In this presentation, I intend to focus mainly on the case of France. Building on a statistical support, the first part aims to examine why women have proven to be more resilient in this downturn than in previous ones in terms of employment. The "reserve army" theory³, suggesting that economic contractions contribute to women's foreclosure from the labor market, does not match in this case. And even though the economic slowdown has eroded State revenues, with damaging consequences for public employment, the gender gap in public sector has remained more or less steady for about ten years.

In a second part, I will argue that the greater resilience of women's employment to the current economic cycle masks an underlying trend: deterioration takes henceforth the form of the under-employment rather than unemployment. In addition, the mid 20th century social compromise, ensuring the expansion of well paid job contracts through a gendered division of labor within families, has ended. In many European countries, the male breadwinner model gave way to dual-income families but above all to single-parent families, 85 per cent of which are headed by women in France.

Although current economic slowdown has amplified preexisting heavy trends rather than creating new ones, new patterns of poverty and inequality are emerging rapidly, after a long period of declining trend. Above all, the exclusion process has been worsening in "Sensitive Urban Areas" (ZUS), which suffer from the highest gendered impact on employment.

I- An apparent resilience to the 2008 economic crisis

1-1. Growing unemployment

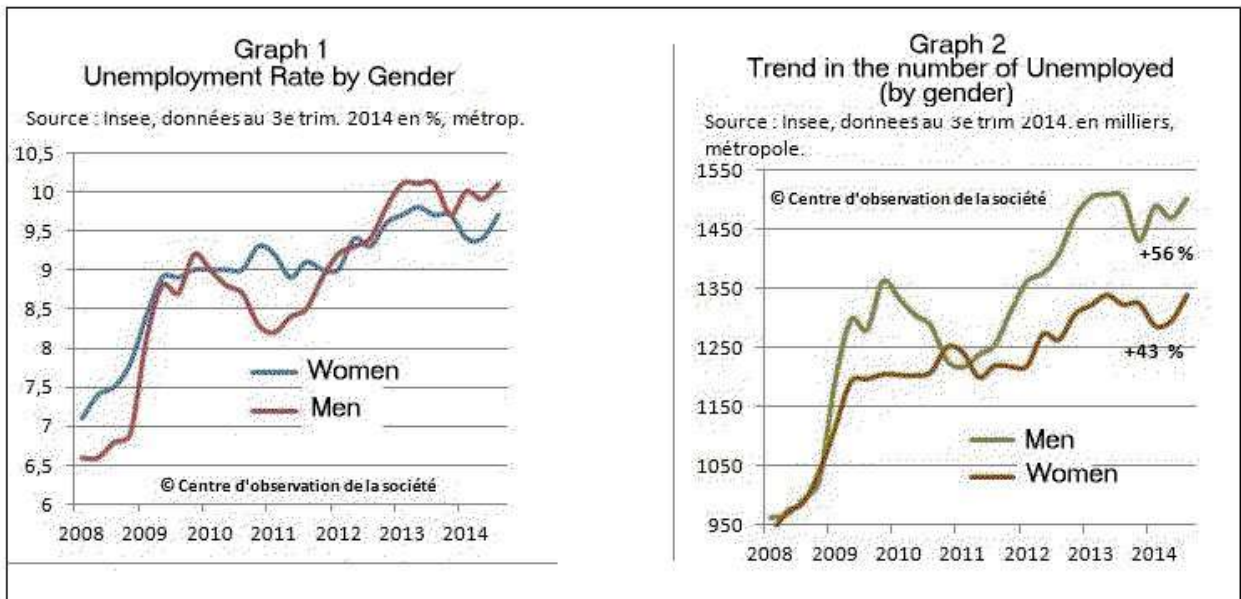
In France, between 2008 and 2014, the unemployment rate has not stopped growing, according to INSEE⁴ - reaching around 10 per cent in 2014 (graph 1).

¹ United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

² http://www.unicri.it/news/files/VAW_draft_last_lowq.pdf (accessed 12 June 2015).

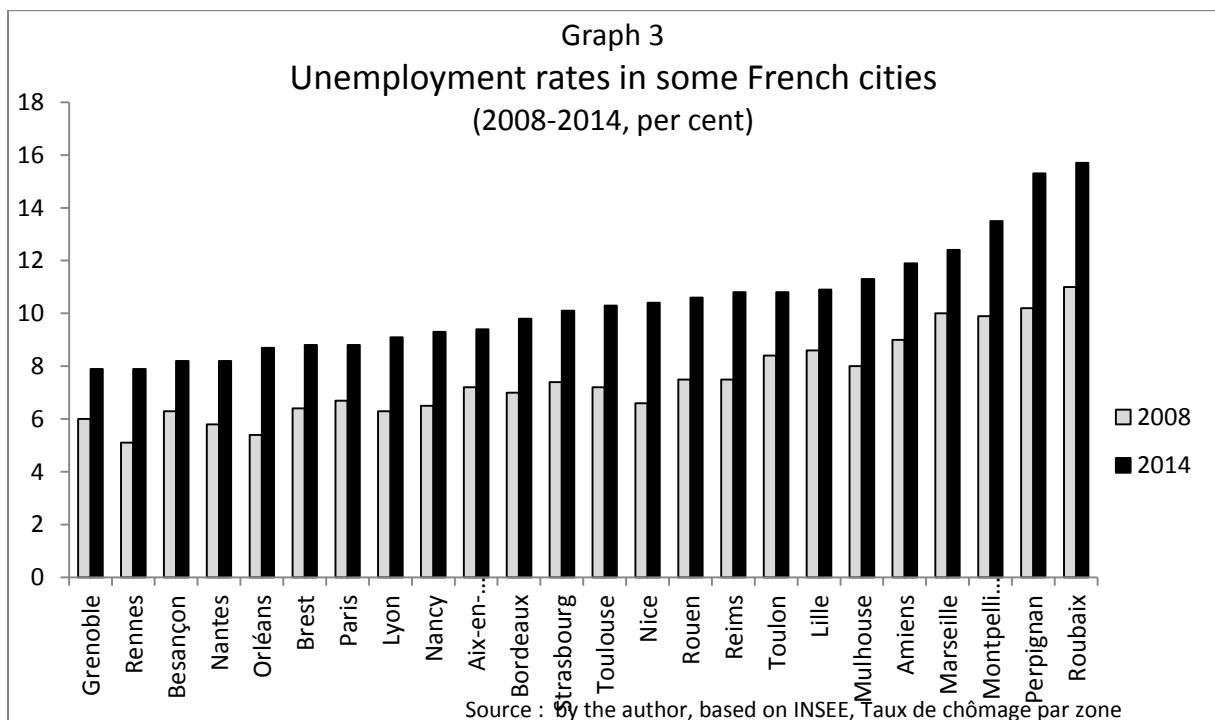
³ Mitchell, Juliet (1971) *Woman's Estate*, New York: Vintage Books.

⁴ French National Statistics Office.



Over the last 25 years, female and male unemployment rates have converged. Despite the financial and economic crisis, this trend continued up to 2009⁵ : as their jobs were overrepresented in cyclical and industrial sectors, employment losses affected men (+56 per cent) more than women (+43 per cent, graph 2).

During a second period, in several cities, women's employment was affected in its turn by the challenges facing the services sector, and the loss of public sector jobs (Graph 3).



⁵ France. INSEE, Informations Rapides. (2013) n° 203. Paris.

In all cities, post-industrial changes have increased flexibility in the labor markets. However, the different cities can be linked to a diversity of employment models considering the nature of flexible arrangements that prevail – part-time jobs, temporary contracts, self-employment, public employment. Former industrial centers are particularly vulnerable. Conversely, cities with an educated and skilled workforce and a diversified productive base, tend to promote innovation and job creation (Nantes, Lyon, Toulouse)⁶.

In terms of absolute value, the two thirds of job-seekers are located within one quarter of employment areas. There is therefore a size effect in terms of unemployment – the big cities like Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Marseille, Bordeaux, Nantes cover the majority of job seekers, while they create most of the jobs. Thus some of the figures may be misleading: the registered unemployment rate can be very high in a context of strong job creation: it is thus a *pull effect*, resulting from the mass arrival of the labor force on a territory (example: in Montpellier). Conversely, the low unemployment rate of many small towns may simply mean that many job-seekers choose to register with unemployment offices located in bigger towns.

1-2. A better educational achievement

It occurs that women, notably among younger generations, have reaped some benefits from the effects of increased educational attainment on employability. In 2008, unemployment rate of women who completed their educational training less than six years ago, was about 14 per cent, a fewer rate than their male counterparts (16 per cent)⁷. In 2008, 51 per cent of girls and 37 per cent of boys who had been working for at least six years have successfully completed tertiary-level education, while 19 per cent of boys and 12 per cent of girls have no school diploma at the start of their working lives. Thus women have easier access to qualified jobs: in 2008, 48 per cent of them are employed as an executive or in a middle-level profession, for only 43 per cent of men⁸. In addition, the proportion of women among executives has increased from 20 per cent in 1982 to about 40 per cent in 2012⁹.

1-3. Public employment, a shock absorber

The public sector has been one of the main targets of fiscal consolidation policies, notably in response to the sovereign debt crisis. The representation of women in public service is high: in 2010, they accounted for 60 per cent of the three civil services (State, Territorial and Hospital)¹⁰. In addition, as women are more dependent on social benefits, austerity plans and cuts in public budgets might have a greater effect on them. Women may be also confronted to the necessity to substitute their own labor for goods and services that were state-funded.

In France, although since 2008, austerity measures have affected terms and conditions of employment, several reforms predated the economic turmoil: around 11 000 jobs were cut in 2007,

⁶ France. INSEE (2014). Analyses Pays de la Loire. n°7.

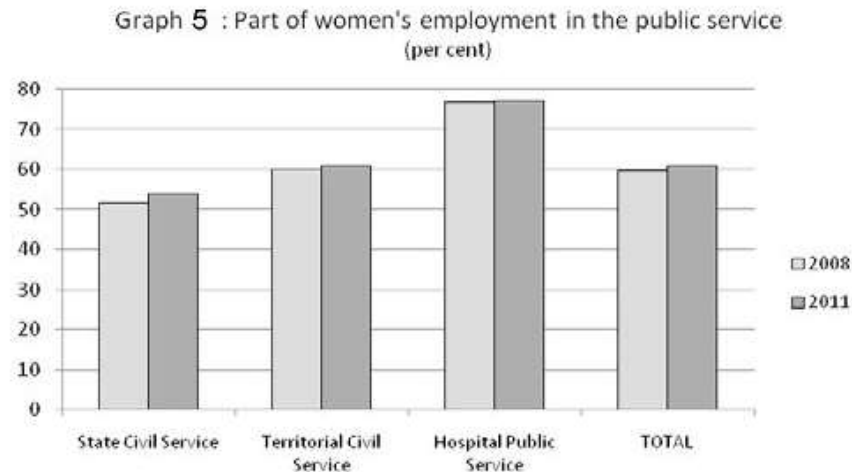
⁷ France. INSEE Première. (2010) n°1284. Paris.

⁸ In 1984, 33 per cent of men and 30 per cent of women. FRANCE. INSEE Première (2010) 'Girls begin to take advantage of their better school performance'. n° 1284. Paris.

⁹ France. INSEE. Employment Survey.1982-2012. For Further developments regarding France, see Ordioni, Natacha, "Gendered dimensions of the impact of the economic crisis in France" (2014), In "The impacts of the crisis on gender equality and wellbeing", UNICRI, p. 10-70, Turin.

¹⁰ France. SIASP, INSEE. Traitement DGAFP-DES.

nearly 23 000 in 2008, more than 30 000 between 2009 and 2012¹¹. However, women’s share in public sector employment remained more or less stable since 2008 – it slightly increased from 2007 to 2010, evolving from 60.5 to 61.9 per cent, depending on the body of civil servants considered (Graph 5).



Source: The state of the public sector annual report, DGAFP, 2013

Public employment acted as an important shock absorber during current economic turmoil. For example, the good situation of Besançon is directly linked with the high level of public employment: over a-third of the employees works in the public sector¹².

However, the greater resilience of women’s employment to the current economic cycle masks a deterioration which takes henceforth the form of under-employment, while appears a growing discomfort between some territories and nations.

II. The emergence of new disparities and social risks

2-1. Part-time employment, an adjustment variable

Since 1980, the number of part-time jobs increased from 1.8 million to 4.2 million (2011): the rate has more than doubled over the last thirty years from 8.4 per cent to almost 19 per cent of all jobs. Practiced mainly by women, part-time work has developed in the most feminized segments of the service sector, like catering, cleaning or distribution industry. Even if the economic turmoil has not been linked with a notable increase in part-time work, during Quarter 2 2012, the rate of women in their first job who wish to work more, increased more (12 per cent) than among men (3 per cent). Women’s higher part-time work rate also explains to a large extent why, during their first six years of carrier, they earn up to 10 per cent less than men¹³.

Great differences appear between “voluntary” and “involuntary” part-time workers, that is, those who work part time only because they could not find full-time work. Thus 64 per cent of involuntary and 45 per cent of voluntary part-time workers have either qualifications below baccalaureate level

¹¹ France. DGAPP (2013). Report on the state of the Public services and wages. Paris.

¹² France. INSEE (2012). Le Point Sur...La zone d’emploi de Besançon.

¹³ France. INSEE Première (2010) ‘Girls begin to take advantage of their better school performance’. Op.cit.

or no qualifications at all¹⁴. A majority (65 per cent) of involuntary part-timers work as office employees or unskilled manual workers (11 per cent). While average earnings for all part-time workers are EUR 996, fifty per cent of involuntary part timers earn less than EUR 719.

This makes it clear that part-time work can represent a variety of situations. Even if in 2012, slightly more men (37 per cent) than women (31 per cent) report that they had rather worked longer, in absolute terms, given their weight in the category, women constitute one million out of involuntary part-time workers and men only 300 000¹⁵. In this regard, women's part-time work is not an alternative to full-time work but to unemployment.

In order to combat abusive recourse to part-time contracts and atypical work, which tends to grow during periods of economic crisis, a new legislation included in the bill for Gender Equality was adopted on June 14th 2013. It sets at 24 hours a week the minimum part-time working time, however it authorizes numerous exceptions¹⁶.

Behind women's employment apparent resilience, there is evidence that, five years after leaving the school system, they are more often in precarious jobs than men, who take advantage of an improved integration into the labor market, because of their training characteristics and gender bias in recruitment.

2-2.A strong occupational segregation index by gender

Often considered to be an extension of the domestic work, women's employment is concentrated in the Services sector (horizontal segregation), especially among poorly skilled occupations as childcare assistant, home care provider or office secretary - the percentage of women in these jobs exceeds 95 per cent¹⁷. In addition, women are overrepresented in the lower levels of occupational hierarchy (vertical segregation) in private and public sectors alike. The extent to which these effects occur differs spatially.

2-3.New territorial inequalities

Traditional complementary links between regions and cities have sharply declined in the immaterial economy. In other words, the division of labor associated with globalization no longer gathers together regions and cities. This has been creating major risks for social cohesion and financial solidarity, while the structure of the population experiencing poverty has been changing.

Who are the Poor?

Poverty has rooted, evolving from a cyclical to a structural dimension: before the current downturn, it was associated with life crisis events, such as a loss of employment, a couple's separation or a health issue. Nowadays, in most cases, poverty results from the chronic shortage of resources of families, regarding to their growing expenses.

¹⁴ France. Directorate for Research, Studies, and Statistics (DARES) Analyses (2013) 'Part-time work in 2011: high contrasted conditions of employment whether part-time work is voluntary or not' n° 005. Paris.

¹⁵ Available at: [HTPP://www.observationsociete.fr/lévoluation-du-temps-partiel](http://www.observationsociete.fr/lévoluation-du-temps-partiel) (accessed 31 January 2013).

¹⁶ Available at: [HTPP://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2013/6/14/2013-504/jo/article_12](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2013/6/14/2013-504/jo/article_12) (accessed 19 May 2015).

¹⁷ France. INSEE.Employment Survey.(2008-2010) DARES.

The extent of atypical forms of employment, in particular the growth in part-time employment, led to a growing phenomenon: the *working poor*. Thus, while access to a job was traditionally considered as a key route out of poverty, in 2012, around four million people, about half of whom are women, live in a household having work intensity less than a threshold set at 0.20¹⁸.

From a socio-demographic point of view, the structure of the population experiencing poverty has been changing over the last decade: vulnerability increased among families – mainly single-parents women-led - which expanded from 1 million in 1982 to 2.2 million in 2010¹⁹.

Where do the Poor live?

Mass poverty occurs in the first place in the large cities of more than fifty thousand inhabitants (two third of the Poor) and in suburbs (“Sensitive Urban Zones”). Cities which experience industrial decline, with high levels of unemployment, are especially vulnerable.

Poverty is also linked with the share of social housing and with the rental levels. Thus even the heart of the most dynamic towns (in creating employment) – as Paris, Lyon or Marseilles – is suffering a high level of poverty – the 3rd, the 1st and the 2nd districts of Marseilles, the 8th and the 9th districts of Lyon, the 18th, 19th and 20th districts of Paris²⁰.

The current economic crisis has confirmed the emergence of a new category of residential style cities, which attract inactive people and generate a significant tourist economy mostly based on female employment. Thus, some of the richest cities are surrounded by *drop-zones*, the so-called “Sensitive urban zones” (ZUS), where the economic situation particularly worsened for women.

Sensitive Urban Zones and Priority Neighborhoods

Gendered vulnerability to unemployment and poverty greatly differs between areas of residence: ZUS refer to districts where there is a high density of high-rise and rented social buildings, often degraded, while residents suffer from important levels of unemployment and exclusion. Their list was laid down by decree in order to be a priority target of urban policy. There were 751 ZUS, bringing together approximately 4.5 million people and around 7 per cent of the French population²¹: more than half of them - 60 per cent of those in the Paris region - are either immigrants or descendant of immigrants, Maghrebians being the most numerous (ONZUS 2012:20)²². ZUS were replaced on the first of January, 2015, by “Priority Neighborhoods” (QP).

While over the long term, one may observe a slow but continuous improving integration of the immigrant women on the labor market, which mainly refers to the need for labor in sectors such as services to individuals, the economic crisis has contributed to a slight fall in their participation, which may express a discouraged-worker effect leading many of them to withdraw from the labor force or to move towards informal employment.

¹⁸ Eurostat, EU-SILK Data.

¹⁹ INSEE. Census data 1982 and 2010.

²⁰ France. Compas études n°11, janvier 2014. Paris.

²¹ Available at: [HTTP://www.onzus.fr/presentation/les-quartiers-de-la-politique-de-la-ville](http://www.onzus.fr/presentation/les-quartiers-de-la-politique-de-la-ville) (accessed 19 May 2015).

²² France. Observatoire national des zones urbaines sensibles (ONZUS) (2012) Report. Paris : Les éditions du CIV.

In addition, women living in ZUS are also much more likely to suffer from the extent of atypical forms of employment - fixed-terms contracts, involuntary part-time, assisted jobs, while evening and Sunday work increased between 2009 and 2012²³. Moreover, periods of recession and economic uncertainty fuel discriminations and contribute to the spread of xenophobic attitudes.

Conclusion

Current economic crisis has opened up new spatial and social divides among the French population. Thus trend towards more equal income distribution, that was started in the 1960s, stabilizing at a low level during the early 2000s, reversed: the *Gini* coefficient, which measures income inequality, records a notable augment since 2008²⁴.

The increase in social inequalities accompanying the economic crisis is not homogenous: it involves new major fragmentations within the French society and between territories, which sign an ideological turn. Indeed, the current economic crisis has confirmed the consolidation of situations of social insecurity, linked with the inability to get out from a precarious-employment situation. New shifts are emerging, notably between bi-active households and single-parent families, mainly headed by women, while the place of residence started to play a much decisive role in terms of schooling or access to employment.

The distinction between the pursuit of unequal position of women, notably in labor markets, and the effects of the current depression cannot easily be accurately distinguished. However, economic factors have no direct effect and are always mediated by socio-cultural norms related to age, gender, femininity and masculinity.

²³ France. ONZUS infos. March 2014.

²⁴ Ordioni (2014), "Gendered dimensions of the impact of the economic crisis in France", op.cit. p.14.