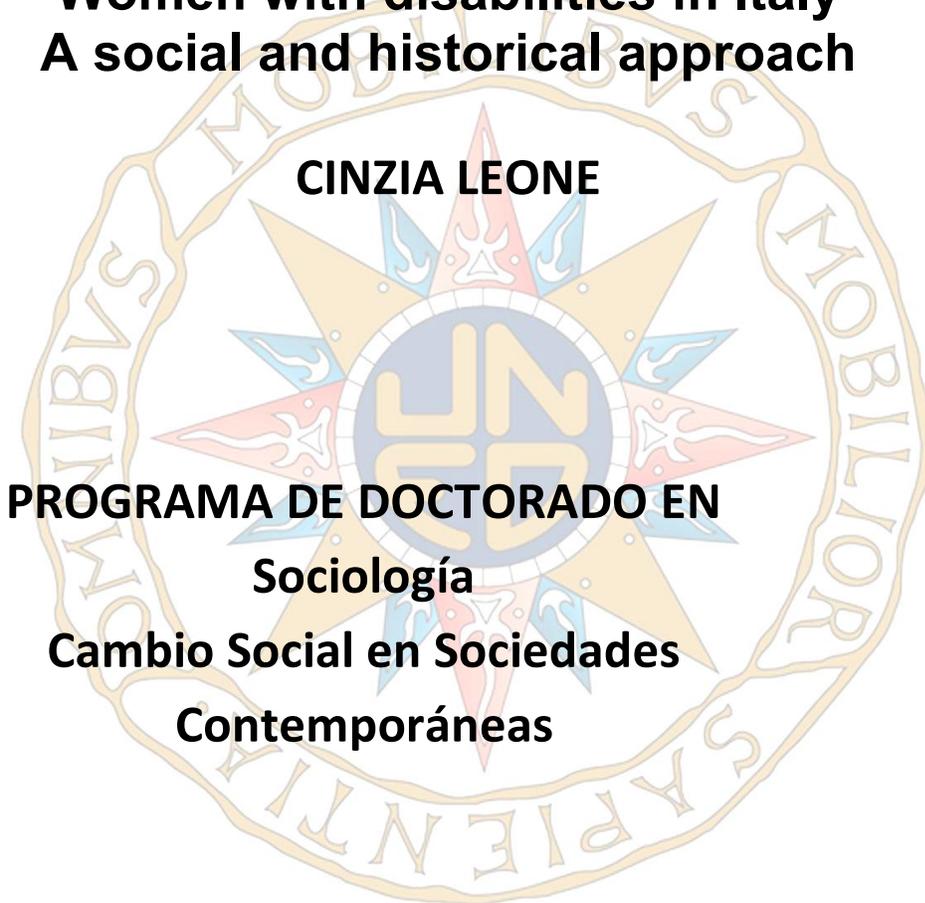


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Resumen de la tesis:
Women with disabilities in Italy
A social and historical approach

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*If disability is so widespread that it is the individual with the
perfectly functioning body who is truly remarkable,
then why is it that we speak of people with disabilities as though
they constitute a minority?*

Sharon Dale Stone

ABSTRACT

In our western culture disability is very often still meaning incompetence and inferiority. A woman with disability is frequently considered double inferior to everyone, being woman and having a disability, and being in the intersection of different kinds of discrimination. During last decades, at social and political level many things have transformed, and society changed even the words used to speak of or about disability, but nevertheless many questions remain unsolved and the fact that disability is either hidden or denied, or misrepresented, or misevaluated is a reality even now. The experiences of disability are missing from the general culture and very often an engendered investigation is lacking.

This thesis aims to widen the existing knowledge on what is needed to improve the quality of life of women with disabilities, by analysing the gap between current legislation in Europe and in particular in Italy and the real life of people with disabilities from a gender perspective. Therefore, the objective of this thesis is to contribute to the literature on the well-being and quality of life of women with disabilities, applying an intersectional approach in empirical research and studies on gender inequality.

The thesis argues the theory that women's voices would help better identify priorities and choose the most appropriate policies accordingly, as well as help discover the reasons behind the persistent condition of injustice, with the aim of ensuring more equitable and effective services and sustainable well-being for all.

After a European historical and legislative overview and an analysis of the main models of disability that have followed over time, the thesis has been developed by analysing the Italian context where, despite the legislative and social progress in recent years, women with disabilities are still subject to discrimination and exclusion compared to other groups. Through a qualitative analysis, the research aims to deepen the real-life situation and the marginalisation even existing in Italy through the voice of women, offering an important perspective and food for thought to fill the gaps.

RESUMEN DE LA TESIS PARA LA BASE TESEO DEL MINISTERIO DE EDUCACION

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is based on personal experience and research activities, factors that led the researcher to investigate issues relating to physical disabilities.

The scientific basis of the present work is represented by the group of eminent scholars who investigated and narrated of physical disability (Jenny Morris, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mike Oliver, Tom Shakespeare, just to name some). In the broad field of disability studies, an analysis framework based on sociological perspective of the impact of disability and the condition of women with disabilities in Italy has been chosen. To avoid generalisation, in fact, the research is focused on physical disability. The selection of field is therefore represented by scientific fundamentals and by the profound conviction that one cannot consider persons with disabilities as a category to group in one or more subsets on the basis of a classified type of impairment or deficit (Morris, 1991; Garland Thomson, 1997; and many others).

Another focal point is that one related to the reason why the present doctoral work has its focus on women and disability and not generally on persons with disabilities. Still nowadays, women and disability is an almost negative combination. If observed under an intersectional point of view, this is much more than the mixture of a double discrimination. Weakness and non-ability, which are still associated to the female part of the world, would be added by stigma and exclusion invoked for disability. The thesis recalls the attention to the historical lack of consideration towards women with disabilities by side of the feminist movements, not contemplating any woman who did not correspond to the standard western white, able, from upper-middle class (Dale Stone, 1993; Pečarič, 2002). Therefore the need to focus on women with disabilities is still particularly felt nowadays.

Frequently statistics in Italy do not consider the splitting female/male when counting the disability world: treated as a homogeneous group, often with no difference. For instance, in the accessing to education, health assistance, employment, leisure, tourism and others. Italy has a very modern and inclusive legislation with specific measures towards disability. Indeed, for example, the Italian school system does not conceive any separation among the students, no matter if the student has or has not a disability. Moreover, the health assistance and the welfare system are public and paid by the state, therefore all citizens can access. Furthermore, during last decades the Italian parliament has emitted a wide range of laws aiming at integrating people with disabilities in the employment panorama. However, besides the legislation, a meaningful gap still exists. In addition, in Italy there is a touchable bias between women and men in general and between women and men with disabilities in specific. The gap is concrete, for example according to the report *She Figures 2018*, requesting an improved cultural change and “systematic and coordinated actions” (European Commission, 2019: 4).

All here in the above introduced narration constitutes the basis from which the interest towards women and disability started in the doctoral path.

HYPOTHESIS

The present doctorate thesis arises from the need of investigation towards the theme of women with disabilities under a sociological point of view. The research question is: are women with disabilities in Italy subject to discrimination more than men with disabilities and than women without disabilities? Is there an effective need of a deeper investigation?

At international level, the discussion about the full inclusion of persons with disabilities is still an open issue and nevertheless participatory instances are active at different levels of societies.

To this day and age, in Italy the studies related to the topic are scarce and there is neither a specific related research line, nor departments of disability studies at academic level. The scholars within disability studies at academies are few compared to the total number of researchers, they are young and mostly women (Bencivenga, 2020; Noson, 2014). The same can be said concerning feminist disability studies, where the action domain is much more restricted. In the country, there is therefore a specific need of investigation more boosted and deepened at scientific level and with a holistic approach (Garosi, 2012; Monceri, 2010; Schianchi, 2009).

The dissertation hypothesis represents the most important part of the scientific research, as it is the testable prediction statement around which the investigation has been built, written down prior to collecting and analysing the data, and conducting the research depending on this preliminary proposition.

This is the foundation of the present scholarly work and the basis of further analyses where the concise and clear hypothesis is presented. All the parts of this thesis, especially the conclusion, are closely related to the hypothesis. The researcher did not test a wide range of hypotheses, concentrating the focus on the analysed domain, corroborating the scientific suppositions.

The basic hypothesis on which the research activity revolves is that women with disabilities are more subject to discrimination than women without disabilities and than men with or without disabilities. This also happens in countries that boast advanced legislation to protect them, such as Italy. The research

aims to deepen the forms of discrimination that still exist, as well as to identify regulatory gaps that emphasise their effects and determine the fact that Italy is still a non-fully inclusive society. The investigation has been made also thanks to the analysis of the Italian regulatory and statistical framework which lead to a deeper analysis of the Italian society in the aspects linked to women with disabilities enshrined in the present research work. Furthermore, the thesis addresses the approach to and the attitude towards disability, which in spite of everything in Italy are rooted in a predominantly medical interpretation of disability, that does not take into account a vision of the person as a human being, as a citizen.

Firstly in Part I the thesis will present an historical introduction to the approach to disability at worldwide level, then in Part II it will follow an as well historical excursus of the Italian legislation in the domain and lastly a sociological investigation will be presented, to validate the hypothesis related to the assessment of inclusiveness of the Italian society through statistical data and the voices of persons with disabilities in Part III. This work would corroborate its basic hypothesis, where the prediction of an Italian panorama still immersed in discrimination and non-participation - in particular against women with disabilities - is supported by statistics data and sociological analysis.

RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the research works with different types of information and, therefore, articulate various quantitative and qualitative research strategies. Hence, an articulation design is proposed in the complementation (Callejo & Viedma, 2005; Alvira, Serrano, 2015), which implies the approach to the study object from different information sources, allowing a more complete approach to it. The use of quantitative and qualitative methods facilitates the carrying out of more comprehensive analysis of the social phenomena of study (Hentschel, 1999).

The project design is organised, on the one hand, in the qualitative methodology, understood as the interpretive study of a specific issue or problem, where the researcher is central to obtaining meaning that allows the understanding of the complex processes of subjectivisation and intersubjectivisation in the different contexts (Banister, Dunna, Burman et al., 2011; Biehl, Byron, Kleinman, 2007). The qualitative study will be based in particular on:

- A review of the historical sociological approach to disability;
- A review of national and international jurisprudence regarding disability and of the Italian legislation on disability and welfare, education and work;
- Selected interviews and one focus group with women with disabilities.

On the other hand, the quantitative methodology allows to describe and explore trends and associations between the investigated aspects, having as reference the substantive theories and the theoretical conceptual relations established at the beginning of the research, and which poses an open approach to possible modifications or confirmations of the hypotheses raised. Accordingly, a quantitative analysis of the Italian framework will be presented by means of available public statistics and data.

The two methodologies have been developed simultaneously, although the bibliographic and legislative review precedes broadly the field work and the exploitation of statistical sources will be accompanied with an analysis of the data and specific considerations. The results of qualitative and quantitative work have been analysed to discover possible situations of rights violations and to add theoretical fundamentals to the above listed hypothesis.

In this research work the environments to be investigated are corresponding to: work, education, welfare. In fact these are the milieus where inequalities and disparities mostly verify for women with disabilities (Bencivenga, 2007; Braccialini, 2017; Di Gregorio, 2020) and the rooms for their enhancement and

improvement correspond also to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of United Nation.

Once fixed the environments to be investigated in relation to the topic of women and disability in Italy, the adopted research techniques have been differentiated, concerning either quantitative or qualitative methods.

A first quantitative analysis of the domain *women and disability in Italy* is introduced, with data arising from public reliable sources. Data analysed are generally from the last 10 years and responding to the keywords of: disability, women with disabilities, disabled, chronicle illness, deficit, and correlated ones corresponding to the three selected environments to be investigated.

The qualitative approach followed the first analysis performed quantitatively and was necessary to deepen the topic of interest in particular related to the hypotheses of discrimination. This has been implemented in two steps: first step was a review of regulation against the three environments, represented by the laws emitted at international and national level during last decades. The driver of analysis was linked to the disability keyword. The analysed regulatory documents have been those official laws, rules and regulations emitted by the UN, the EU and Italian government. The results fed up the fundamental hypothesis and endorsed it, supporting the theoretical argument being made and leading to major findings pertaining the topic.

Second step of the qualitative analysis has been those related to the interviews and focus groups, to hear the voices of the interested subjects.

The whole qualitative work has been preceded by a historical and sociological review of the topic of disability in general and in particular of the situation of women with disabilities. With an overview of the history of disability movements, disability studies and feminist disability studies, the work has progressed towards the analysis of the Italian framework under a historical and sociological point of view. Keywords for this analysis were disability, women, gender, history of women and connected ones. The study is based on the sources used in the academic

environment and also in the most affirmed disability movements. Citations and scholarly recognition have been the criteria used for the sources to be considered.

To achieve the final aim of demonstrating the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the present work, following objectives have been fixed:

1. Present a historical and sociological review of the topic of disability in general and in particular of the situation of women with disabilities;
2. Conduct a qualitative literature review of the regulation towards disability and women with disabilities with a focus on Italy to draw a framework analysis of the policies;
3. Interview women with disabilities to understand the impact these policies have had and their quality of life;
4. Collect data and perform quantitative analysis of selected environments of interest;
5. Elaborate conclusions on the basis of the work done corresponding to the final aim and to the hypothesis formulated.

These objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time constrained: specific because they precisely indicate what the thesis will do; measurable in the sense that their goals are clear and can be reached exactly in the research performed; achievable because the ambition is to demonstrate the hypothesis by supporting literature review and research work; moreover the objectives are realistic due to the fact that I had the necessary resources to accomplish the objectives; time constrained because this work has been done in a specific time-lapse and with determined steps and stages to be completed in a schedule.

THESIS' DEVELOPMENT AND FINDINGS

Women with disabilities suffer from several discrimination in several facets of their lives. According to the *World report on disability* emitted by World Health Organisation and World Bank and published in 2011, women with disabilities come across more difficulties to access to health care, education, employment, and other environments. The same limitations are present in social life, where women are more marginalised than men, and in the free-time.

When investigating disability, very often social science considers the persons with disabilities as an *unicuum*, with no gender differentiation. There is still a great work to do to measure the impact of disability on the women, or on the contrary the impact of the society on the women with disabilities. In a world full of big data and supercomputer, it is still difficult to find specific data connected with this particular group.

During last decades the feminist movement has eventually focused the look on this subgroup of women, remained outside the borders of the feminism for many years before (Garland-Thomson, Morris, Butler, Bernardini, Jacob, Köbsell and others). Feminist movements, in the past, concentrated their efforts not on the difference among the women, but on the women *per se*, in contrast with the men's world. Due to the consideration of women as a standard (for example white and able), of necessity, no attention was paid to women with disabilities. On the contrary, a concentration on the women's body has been the focus of any feminist intervention for long times, and this excluded non-able bodies.

At the same time, even during last decades, disability and gender has gained its place in research and scientific fields, but not wholly in Italy. At present times, in Europe and in Italy (and in most developed countries) disability is the centre of a slightly increasing interest, with certain attention to inclusion and to social inclusion in particular.

In the social science, a specific attention has been devoted to the social aspect of the disability. But up to some years ago the reflections were centred on the person with disability as a person

to integrate, to heal, to recover, to treat as a patient with a disease to be cured and reinserted in the social context after rehab (Bernardini, 2016).

This doctorate thesis concentrates also on the analysis of the interpretative models of disability in Italy, with a central focus on the women. These models went through considering persons with disabilities only under a medical point of view (Bencivenga, Tinti, 2011), passing through a mixed approach related to the social insertion of the disability and the social consideration of it, where culture and social constructs represented the fundamental basis (Griffo, 2014). Finally more recent theories related to disability aim at looking at the person with disability as a citizen to be included in a society which should modify and adapt itself in order to be inclusive (Degener, 2014; Gomiz Pascual, 2017). The part tries to respond to open questions that disability keeps on asking to the society: what is normality, who is normal, who should be able to take active part in the society, who has the right to be a citizen and who has not, what defines a citizen and whether diversity and normality are a contradiction in terms.

An overview of the recent history of the movement for the rights of people with disabilities is also offered, which introduced a theoretical framework that drastically influenced everything to do with disability and studies on it after the 1960s/1970s.

Up until the end of the 1950s, in the western societies people with disabilities were considered as socially inferior and there was “an absolute presumption on [their] incapacity and an annihilation of [their] subjectivity”. (Bernardini, 2016: XXIV). Consequently, many things changed with the birth of the activist movements and Disability Studies.

The thesis offers an historical overview of the models of interpretation of the disability. As a matter of fact, disability expresses not only an object, but also a concept with an outline difficult to define. And it is for this reason that the various historical conceptions related to disability are more and more important, aiming at specifying the contents of the concept in several environments and under diverse points of view.

These conceptions have been developed in models: descending on different ways of understanding and analysis of the

disability, various standards of interpretation have been elaborated, in particular during last and current centuries. These models, even if criticised and continuously updated or overtaken, represented and represent a heuristic instrument for the interpretation of social phenomena involving or concerning persons with disabilities. These models shall be considered as similar to plots through which it is possible to find an orientation in the understanding of disability as a complex phenomenon.

This is also what Disability Studies represents: structurally it constitutes a multi-perspective look, under a not only inter- but also transdisciplinary point of view. It is also a not aligned look aiming at problematising what is seen as consolidated, normal, given for granted and observed as the only truth (Goodley, D'Alessio, Ferri et al., 2018; Gomes, Lopes, Gesser et al., 2019).

The analysis starts from the model based on the consideration of disability only under a medical point of view, to approach to more recent and affirmed models related to the social evaluation of the disability, where the social perspective prevailed. Latest coeval models stemming from the social model, and coexisting, affirmed a more modern or post-modern concept of socio-political perspective of disability, where persons with disabilities are seen as full-right-citizens, with rights not only to be recognised but also fulfilled by the state and the society.

Actually the fight against barriers and social constructs remain still a common goal, embraced also by United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), foreseeing the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in the social context, also by adapting the society to the deficit in order to let no one be excluded.

Current theories on persons with disabilities have changed over the years and evolved from the initial most known medical and social models moving towards the necessary cultural and political paradigm shift. Certain models illustrate how disability was perceived (in a given timeframe, by a given social group, by a given framework of analysis), with which influence and what action was undertaken and considered appropriate in terms of eliminating both the causes and effects of disability under different points of view (Zajadacz, 2015). The shift in the attitude towards disability

that our societies registered is hence represented also by the richness of the theoretical reflections bore and represented by other interpretative models which developed and grew in the decades.

As a matter of fact, in the ongoing and lively debate between functionalism and constructivism, the models of interpretation of disability have often reflected and continue to reflect the times when they were implemented. But a great part of interpretative models has been over time united in their lack of appreciation of the medical-individualist approach. Nevertheless the proposal of different theoretical and interpretative frameworks has been followed by discordant or similar discussions and narratives.

The thesis would use an intersectional approach when speaking of women and disability. In the case of women with disabilities, the bias existing in the male-female dichotomy, the inequalities and the discrimination are unquestionably amplified (Maroto, Pettinicchio, Patterson, 2018b). The term “intersectionality” is used to define the interpretative approach that analyses the complexity of interdependent discriminatory factors relating to the same person, or to the same group or social context, without being limited to an individual analysis that is isolated from the context or from other factors. Individual social categories are therefore not used as the key drivers of analysis, but rather the discrimination resulting from the relations existing within them are observed. (Maroto; Pettinicchio, 2015)

Intersectionality is therefore not intended as the addition of different labels, but as the analysis of the actual living conditions that often result in discrimination caused by contextual and interconnected factors.

The four basic elements of this type of social and political approach are:

- 1) oppression and discrimination are simultaneous, as is the individual’s membership of different social categories, without the possibility of separating from each other the individual discriminations or oppressions deriving from the single social contexts of reference;

- 2) the importance of a situated and relational awareness inserted within the context that assesses and understands the surrounding conditions in a holistic and non-discriminatory manner, with a subjective assessment of the position of the person in a given place, context and time;
- 3) the introduction of an intersectional approach into every aspect of the fight against discrimination and oppression, by rejecting and criticising the universal identity movements of the past which, by identifying a single category of membership or a single axis of differentiation as the all-encompassing environment, in turn increased marginalisation and did not contribute to a positive solution;
- 4) the multiple and simultaneous factors of oppression and/or discrimination, but also the subjective experiences perceived by the people concerned, which necessarily does not represent a simple sum of all the different types of discrimination.

The key point of this new approach to social, political and legal studies and in other areas was that no one can be placed and/or locked in a single category of analysis and that no one can be defined in a unidirectional manner, with a single criterion of analysis. The intersectional approach thus creates a new emerging entity and a new method of analysis that can and must be applied to every study, whether social, legal or political (Degener, 2016; Jorba, Rodó-de-Zárate, 2020; European Parliament, 2013). It therefore follows that, in the case of women with disabilities, the discrimination against them cannot simply be described as the sum of two kinds of discrimination (as a woman and as a person with a disability), because the result cannot be separated into the addition of the factors that cause it. Intersectionality of discriminatory factors creates new situations that should not be analysed as if they were simply the computation of individual factors.

The intersectional approach is not only necessary in the Italian context, but also fundamental in obtaining a better understanding of discrimination and finding the best solutions to fight it and, most importantly, to prevent it, by paying attention to differences (Gopaldas, De Roy, 2015). The intersectional approach becomes a driver in allowing an actual increase or improvement in the life of women with disabilities also for EC: it is not a theory, but an actual need aimed at improving the various aspects of the life of the people concerned (European Parliament, 2013). The intersectional approach would result in inclusion of disability at every level of action, facilitating the mainstreaming that is needed everywhere. The one-dimensional view of disability has been superseded with a multi-dimensional one that, by placing disability at the centre, ensures that a person's entire existence is viewed through the lens of the disability or even simply the deficit, but mainstreaming would have a positive effect because discriminatory and oppressive practices would be eliminated at their origin. (European Parliament, 2013)

Feminist disability studies evolved from the birth of disability studies and conjugated them with feminist studies, women's studies and racial studies (Garland-Thomson, 2017) thus not constituting the synthesis of them, but being a new independent creation in the theoretical panorama around disability, with proper features and characteristics (Gomes, Lopes, Gesser et al., 2019).

The advancement of feminist disability studies has its firm foundations on the intersection of disability and feminism, where some reference points of feminist theories are taken and further developed (Barile, 2002). Born at the turn of last century, feminist disability studies added values to the recent born disability studies arisen within the sociological domain and rapidly gaining room in the Humanities and undertaking a radical critique of the former approach to disability, by asserting that disability is a "culturally fabricated narrative of the body" (Garland-Thomson, 2001: 1) and perpetrating "the distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment" (Garland-Thomson, 2001: 1).

At the intersection of disability studies and feminist studies, feminist disability studies represents the convergence of both and the richness of other above mentioned studies emerging during the years 1990s and at the same time an overwhelming of the status questions within the single ones (Garland-Thomson, 2001). Therefore, one cannot affirm that feminist disability studies is simply feminist studies applied to disability (Garland-Thomson, 2005). Moreover, disability has to be considered a single category of analysis eventually and definitely, inserted in a social construct where power relations are determined by procedures aiming at excluding disabled bodies and at stigmatising differences (Gomes, Lopes, Gesser et al., 2019). All this should be expected avoiding to relapse into medical approach when speaking of disability. Beyond the critic already introduced, this former approach was putting together every kind of “abnormality” in a rough ensemble of people with “same” characteristics which were a difference from the normality (Garland-Thomson, 2005a; ADL, 2018).

What was and is the added value of feminist disability studies to the panorama of disability studies and of feminist studies? Since its very beginning, this new line of scientific investigation was not limited to a feminist approach to disability. It was not only related to women and to gender identities. It put under question the society, the social constructs and the identity of every single component. Feminist disability studies helped also feminist studies reconsider female body and gender issues in much more real and concrete terms, by putting into doubt the fundamental beliefs of the feminist era, when the affirmation of the body was a dominant part of the feminist thinking, and overcoming the mistakes of the past (Barile, 2002). It is the whole social gender construct which was to be redressed and not only the disability as a mere object of analysis (Barnes, 1997).

With a paradigm shifting, feminist disability studies represented then a room, where disability would question every belief about body, perfection, normality, beauty, also getting to every affirmation of denied or non-considered rights related to reproduction, abortion, ageing, inclusion. The light would therefore be turned on those aspects of the life which were not analysed by

other lines of studies because underestimated or simply excluded as non-pertinent (Davis, 2017).

It is therefore easy to understand how inequality is mirrored in research and theoretical discourses, where the majority speak of their own world. Also in the case of feminist movement the oppression of an ungendered mainstreamed feminism was the proof of a distance of the women to the totality of their own world (Davis, 2017). In addition, the rejection of care discourse was another fundament of the feminist movement: Feminist disability studies would question if care discourse is about exploitation of women or would represent a cultural benefit.

In conclusion, feminist disability studies helps feminist studies also better understand the bias and disability studies to multi-focus. As said, the first underestimated the importance of a different point of view, based on differences and disability, the last focused exclusively on the body and on the social model.

As a matter of fact, a key driver of analysis connected only with ability has revealed inevitably partial and not wholly objective. At the same time, a key driver of analysis concentrated only on gender has disclosed its weakness in approaching disability, race and other minority instances. Feminist disability studies represents the richness of a holistic approach aimed at not restricting the framework of analysis to a certain domain or identity, but enlarging the theoretical discussion and narration to a wider context and, being wider, to a more inclusive environment, where all individuals are part of the society (Elias, 1985) and therefore worth to be investigated.

The research work illustrate then how for long years in the past, the approach to disability was confined within the health panorama and relevant only to the medical/assistance sector and every discussion towards disability was almost within the rehabilitation or the healing. Recovery chances, cures, treatment, support, assistance, aid, help, rehab, institutionalisation: these were the fundamental watchwords. Those long years have passed and now it is slightly possible to think of disability without thinking (exclusively) of recovery and healing. After the '60s and a different approach to the disability by side of the women rights' movements, other European countries welcomed the new social theories related to disability more rapidly than Italy did (Grasselli, 2006).

As a matter of fact, in Italy several factors hindered a full development of new theories and a different approach to the issue of disability (Medeghini, 2015). Italy is often described as a traditionalist country, anchored firmly to its catholic, patriarchal and conservative roots. Italy is home to the Vatican State and has a long history of Catholicism; hence the social and cultural values that have formed its culture over the years are permeated by religion. The Italian woman has inherited the task assigned to her a long time previously, basically connected with the role of mother and wife (Duby, Perrot, 1992). This has taken place more evidently than in other countries thought as traditionalist, patriarchal and conservative too (Gomes Bonan, Lopes, Gesser et al., 2019).

Despite being a high-impacting moment of change, the feminist revolution has had consequences that were often circumscribed in the years that followed, limited to merely affirming just some of the rights of women, in particular those linked to the self-determination and freedom of a small group of women who coincided with the *norm* established by the movement. Women with disabilities were therefore not included (Bernardini, 2015, 2013).

Feminist fights have changed much of Italian society, stabbing at and threatening the figure of the woman that continued to stem from the previous century, when women were not even considered as citizens and had no rights. In their monumental work relating to the history of women, amongst others, Duby and Perrot (1992) discussed the figure of the woman in Italy as a history of

centuries-old oppression, with patriarchal dominion at its heart. This was never entirely overturned: the move was made from different types in different periods of oppression, but the common denominator was, and remains, a patriarchal dominion (Rodotà, 2012).

By and large, at a certain point in history, again according to Duby and Perrot (1992), Italian women became second class citizens. This was now the late nineteenth century - early twentieth century. The general consideration was then that women were indeed citizens, albeit second class ones (Scoppola, 2010). The fascist period that followed led women to be considered as citizens of the time, but in any case different to men. The difference between men and women was exalted by the politicisation of any aspect of the lives of women, who were also controlled in their sexuality, work, even their participation in society, before thereafter exploiting them as underpaid labour when men were called to arms and the female workforce was the only workforce left (Venè, 1988).

The end of the second world war did not, however, represent a turning point towards emancipation and fairness. Despite obtaining the right to vote for the first time (it was 1946), despite having entered the employment market with great force and experiencing the advent of mass culture during the 50s and the early 60s, Italian women did not enjoy that facilitation of their position or social consideration that should perhaps have been expected from these events (Venè, 1988). Thereafter, this concept was entirely upturned by the feminist wave that, a little all over the world and also in Italy, threatened the patriarchal and paternalist society, completely denying its basis starting from the 1960s. In a very broad outline, according to the feminist movement, women should therefore be considered autonomous, independent beings, just like men. This similarity with male strength and virility, absurdly, has contributed towards the distancing of the possible difference on the female scene. A direct consequence of this was the fact that women with disabilities were not at all observed, whereas egalitarian feminism that first gained standing, decided not to consider disability (Bernardini, 2015). Indeed, women were to be considered as equals of men.

During the following decades an evolution of the feminist thought verified, changing the theoretical framework and welcoming several and different instances (Italian Journal of Disability Studies, 2014: 6) arising from the women who did not feel included in the first wave of feminism (Bernardini, 2013). The kern was not to look for a symmetrical and equivalent relation with men, but to consider possible asymmetrical relationships between men and women or women and women, by shifting from the paradigm of the body and centering on differences and needs (Hillyer, 1992; Pečarič, 2000, Zaviršek, 2014).

The thesis goes on by analysing the (negative) attitudes and the perceptions of disability in the Italian contemporary society (fish, 2020; Noson, 2014; Petrelli, Frova, 2019), in a country where the integration is still to be completed (Grasselli, 2006) and the attention to be paid to “the cultural and social resources that persons with disabilities added and can add to the development of integration” (Grasselli, 2006: 13).

Partially because of the architectural barriers and partially because of lack of accompanying persons, very often the Italian standard is that persons with severe disabilities go outside less and therefore benefit less from public spaces, partially repeating ancient times, when diversity was side-lined and the society firmly based on tradition and paternalism (Duby, Perrot, 1992; Pernoud, 1982), where differences were hidden or confined in determined spaces or room of actions. Roberto Medeghini (2015) explains this phenomenon as linked to the obsession of normality that we inherited from the past and still alive. He links disability and abnormality as a product of the search for normality, in a country where the approach to the difference and diversity and the attitudes towards diversities are still under discussion in the Italian society (Lombardi, 2005). Specifically, each time the theme of disability is discussed, a comparison is drawn with a specific standard of normality (Zanobini, Usai, 2005). The disability in itself is an affirmation of non-conformity with so-called normality (Medeghini, 2015). Thus disability is difference and a declaration of not adhering to the norm, above all as regards the body. And

there is a sort of estrangement felt by the persons with disabilities when they leave their homes (Fabbri, 2017). According to the experience referred by Fabbri (2017), for example, the people around a person with disability compulsively fixate what is not compliant with and differs from the standard.

Clearly, Italy has a long history all hinged on pietism and compassion, Catholicism and on the central role of the family, paternalism and moralism and social Darwinism (Garosi, 2012). In past times, the person with disability was even banned from adulthood, considered an eternal child (Medeghini, 2015; Morandini, 1977), moving towards inferior stages or those prior to development, even when reaching adulthood. Today Italian society is changing but the ableist paradigm connected with the male model even within the health and care system are still pervasive (Fabbri, 2017).

Still nowadays persons with disabilities are side-lined and confined to the circuit of welfarism (Bruzzone, 2017), with a perhaps pietist, “do-gooder” or paternalist approach. Left to the care of their families, often active participation to society is not even expected; as a result, the person with disability can rarely develop as a full citizen (Degener, 2016; Ferrucci, 2004).

The individualist drive that is seen in western societies has greater weighting with regard to those with disabilities, who can perhaps not be active members of the organic society as a whole, but who are therefore marginalised according to the most ancient functionalist theories. Parsons’ theories adapt perfectly to Italian social system, which is mainly male and strength-centric particularly if observed under an economic point of view (Braccialini, 2017; Bencivenga, Marchegiani, Marchiori, 2020; Varva, 2014; Bencivenga, 2007): society is similar to a living organism, where, in order to be autonomous, each part of it needs to collaborate towards the general societal function, aiming to maintain a balance and relational mechanisms towards a standardised structure of society, which always tends to restore order.

This happens by matching with the description given of society by Pierre Bourdieu when he talks of *habitus* as a system of durable and transmissible dispositions, aiming at generating

representations (Bourdieu, 2003). It is a sort of a system socially built on the basis of experiences and habits lived in the practical life, a set of structured and structuring dispositions letting social made body (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992) and thus perpetrating the social structure acquired in a determined social group or field.

Then, in cases of disability that onsets through disease, incident or other, the regression is more obvious and felt to a greater degree by the person suffering it. The role held up to that point is cancelled as a result of the onset deficit and mostly surprises the person who suffers it, who finds themselves suddenly stripped of status, of the self-power enjoyed up to that point, of the social role, frequently of employment and salary (Milenkovic, 2018; O'Hara, 2004), of a sense of productivity and purpose, struck by the stigma of the sense of uselessness, difference and handicap (Maroto, Pettinicchio, 2019). All this, in particular if dealing with young people, is often automatically identified as depression, where the person complains of being frustrated through the different treatment reserved to them with respect to previously or to others, over the stigma to which they are subjected or the loss of identity (Maroto, Pettinicchio, Patterson, 2018a). From a positive person, making an active contribution to society, holding a certain social role, the person with the onset disability becomes the opposite, no longer contributing to society and who, by contrast, now constitutes a weight on such, therefore left out of all decisions and possibilities of being free to live their lives independently (Degener, 2016), "deprived from the possibility of social and political interventions" (Grasselli, 2006:14).

The scarcity of interest towards disability in Italy is confirmed even by the scarcity of research and scientific activity around the theme, where there is still a "gap in the Italian literature, where there is a lack of a systematic work on the socio-economical aspects of disability (Agovino, Parodi, Sciulli, 2014: XVI).

In conclusion, it is affirmed that in Italy the paradigm of abnormality is still confronted with that one of the normality and the society has not yet reached the important goal of considering every part as essential, it does not matter who and how the person is: a society just adhering to already established standards.

In the thesis, the framework of analysis of the international legislative and regulation arena is centred on the CRPD with a short insertion dedicated to the work done by WHO towards disability during last decades.

The CRPD adopted by the United Nations in 2006 represented and still represents the major corner stone in the history, not only for the persons with disabilities, but it led to the new affirmation of human rights and to the celebration of human diversity and human dignity (Degener, 2016; Broderick, 2018). It embodied the most important achievement after decades of fight for the fundamental freedom and full participation of persons with disabilities (Estrada-Tanck, 2016), who nowadays stand for one out of eight persons in the world, according to UN data retrievable from un.org.

Regarding the international contest, another important mention is to be reported for what concerns the World Health Organisation. As already said, during last decades WHO tried to furnish a comprehensive definition of disability together with a scale of evaluation of it under the health point of view, with a strict link to the social appreciation of disability. Correspondingly, its "International classification of functioning, disability and health" (ICF) is currently the most used.

CRPD asked the EU as a whole and to single member states to revise their approach to fundamental values of all human beings, such as dignity, participation, equality, non-discrimination, among others. Hence, within the first decade of the present century within the EU a discussion about the general approach to rights of minorities, diversity and disability in the European contest arose. As a result, the occasion of the introduction of CRPD was that one to reconsider the general approach to important themes never or rarely analysed in the past, when the EU was founded and implemented on the basis of other values mainly related to economy.

As a matter of fact, the EU vision of inclusion and equality changed remarkably during last decades, up to incorporate also disability and minorities instances lastly and the fundamental result is that nowadays inclusion constitutes the current basis of the pool of values of the modern EU. Born on the basis of economy and

market, the years seventies of the Ninth century did not assist to particular inclination by side of the first tentative of European Union towards inclusion, protection of minorities, avoidance of disparities and discriminations. Therefore it is affirmed that, since its very beginning, the European Union did not pay a great attention to the specific theme of disability. In the times the attention to social instances and conditions of the population grew in the EU and during the eighties, the European alliance evolved in the direction of major safeguard and protections of its citizens, beginning to pay attention to the more discriminated groups. But the most significant indications regarding the topic of interest can be traced in the nineties, when the rights of persons with disabilities have been advanced by the revised European Social Charter (ESC) (first emitted 1961 and revised in 1996).

It is still under question if the novel approach contained in the CRPD has been completely understood and incorporated in the EU legislation or it has yet to become real fully. Scholars are demanding and investigating about the whole and consistent implementation of the holistic and ground-breaking doctrine (Estrada-Tanck, 2016) contained in the UN Convention within the EU regulations and some of them are still critical (Degener, 2014 and 2016; Broderick, 2018).

Furthermore, an analysis of the Italian law framework is delivered, with a particular attention to its regulatory history, under three different research lines: on welfare, education, and work.

Some insights and discussions of the real applications of the law – even to evaluate its effectiveness – are deepened in the third part of the thesis work, with numbers and data from statistic sources and with several interviews and a focus group with women with disabilities performed during the doctorate preparation. The regulation analysis draws an outline of how the positive actions towards women with disabilities and disability in general impacted on their lives.

Although there is a huge amount of Italian legislation on people with disabilities, no fully participatory process in which the people concerned take part and are heard has ever actually taken place. Particularly in the case of education, but also in employment

and welfare, the Italian government has historically passed all-encompassing laws, followed by specific indications for particular social groups. Thus, for example, general laws on employment do not mention disability, but there are special laws on inclusion targeting people with disabilities or employers. In education as well, legislation on youngsters with disabilities frequently originates from ad hoc laws based on general and collective regulations. The legislator therefore establishes that the community is formed of everyone, but particular cases that do not fall within the regulation or the standard model of ability require specific provisions.

Where possible, a gendered perspective in the observation has been maintained. Therefore there has been a search for references towards women with disabilities and put in evidence what is still lacking.

Then it comes the part devoted to data analysis.

Nowadays the population with disabilities in Italy accounts for around 7,5-8% of the total population, i.e. approximately 4,5 million people. More than a third live alone and 55% are women (i.e. ca. 2,5 million women), very often elderly. As the population ages and the disability becomes more severe, the prevalence of the female sex grows. In the part related to the precise Italian framework under the sociological point of view, general recent data about disability are presented, with detailed illustration of aspects of interest of the thesis and still demonstrating the initial hypothesis of a major disparity in the case of women with disabilities.

To this aim, initially, it will be presented a short introduction about the history of the unique Italian central bureau for statistics, Italian National Statistics Institute (ISTAT), which represents the principal source for the quantitative part. Still nowadays quantitative studies of social and economic phenomena represent the most important chance to better understand social changes and attitudes applied to large numbers of population and to different social stratifications. At present, statistical data on the social inclusion of persons with severe functional limitations, invalidities or chronic problems are collected more frequently, even if latest data available, however, dates back from 2011.

The author evidences how disability is described by ISTAT as being linked to a *negative* impact of a lack of health and social interaction. As a matter of fact, in Italy, disability is often observed as a solely health matter, and “the scarcity of data in the theme of disability represents a serious and long-standing problem for our country” (Agovino, Parodi, Sciulli, 2014: XIX).

Numbers say that, as a matter of fact, behind the difficulties related to the mobility, important factors impeding enjoying free time activities are mostly not related to the boundary/environmental conditions. Indeed, economic restrictions, family or work impediments are often at the basis of exclusion. In general, the photograph of persons with disabilities in Italy returns a framework of poverty and economic restrictions.

It emerges how the situation of discrimination and disadvantage represents the daily experience of Italian persons with disabilities and in particular of the female part. Nowadays Italy

registers a persisting bias in the approach to disability, particularly in the case this one is concerning a woman. Every domain of the life is interested and numbers are always inferior or of minor entity in the case of women, repeating, with a quantitative approach, what the voices of the women said to me during interviews and a focus group, which will be analysed in the following. Once again, the quantitative method helps understand how deep is the social isolation and the bias interesting women in Italy and women with disabilities in particular.

As underlined by several Italian researchers (Goodley, D'Alessio, Ferri et al. 2018; Medeghini, 2015; Italian Journal of Disability Studies, 2013, 2014) and clearly evincible from above, the bias condition requests a meaningful change of pace in the "passage from a situation of dependence and passivity to a situation based on autonomy, awareness and self-determination" (Reiter, Schalock, cited by Traina: 181), understanding the inclusion as an "ongoing process rather than the end point" (Cologon, 2013: 152), and experienced in the everyday life and in the daily activities.

Therefore if persons with disabilities and in particular women with disabilities cannot do usage of public means of transport or enjoy free-time activities and find it difficult to meet relatives and friends by living in great number in mono-nuclear families, the inclusion is not complete. The same can be said regarding education paths and ICT accessibility. These are important and fundamental parameters to measure inclusion and participation to society.

At the same level, an important criticism is still represented in the way with which the Italian central official statistic centre collects data, where a lack of clarity in the sample used and in the real number of persons reached is evidenced, without a clear distinction of the sub-groups analysed, and this represents a nebula up to nowadays. Another important criticism is that one related to the exclusion from the data collection of persons living in institutions. It is essential to have the data related to institutionalised persons to proceed with a real and concrete evaluation of disability and its social dimension in Italy. As a matter of fact, on the contrary, every data risks to be distorted or

misrepresented by partial data or reproducing only a portion of the Italian population.

In conclusion, the quantitative part confirmed the hypothesis at the basis of the thesis.

Then the thesis passes to hear the voices of women with disabilities and their environmental substrate as its central qualitative part by means of interviews and of a focus group. In fact, especially regarding relatively small and unstudied population, or group of population, or minorities, researchers must listen to the real experts: in this case women with disabilities (Trieschmann, 1987).

The work has the aim to give voice and the right form of advocacy/resonance to women with disabilities, reliable and important in the findings and in the substance. With the purpose to test initial hypothesis, the results arising from the qualitative work are introduced, with two couple of in-depth interviews with four selected experts in the topic: women with different disability, age, education and profession and a focus group with a group of twelve persons with disability linked to impairments occurred during the life course.

The women heard are representatives of the group of women with disabilities and professionals in the domain: active in the society and in the volunteering, with a high level of involvement in the disability world, they are very good examples of full participation into the citizen's life and would add a critic thought to the observation done. However, this involvement and their life did not let them underestimate the issues related to difficulties and bias they met in their existences. The critical thinking offered by themselves during the discussions helped focus the results of the interviews and corroborated the hypothesis done, laying at the basis of this research work. Thus the thesis focuses the interest in hearing voices of persons with a certain grade of experience and expertise, who could add information and comments, or corroborate or contrast the thesis sustained. Therefore the interviews were limited to four expert persons holding such a level of background and knowledge to be fruitful for the thesis work.

As per the interviews, first results corroborated the hypothesis of thesis: women with disabilities still suffer from discrimination and from a negative stance they register and feel. The interviewed experts confirmed this in the measure where, even if they are inserted in the social surroundings and have a self-defined full life, they described the difficulties and the barriers they

meet in the everyday life, consisting both in architectural barriers and adverse attitudes.

Second main result was that the totality of them affirmed that their life could have gone another path in case of absence of the impairment, it does not matter the measure of it and the timing of the emergence of the same.

Third result was that the interviewees agreed on the social impact of their being disabled, in different measure and in the different environments such as job activity, in the family, in the education paths and in the health dimension.

Fourth important outcome of the meetings with these experts and directly descending from third result was their engagement in social instances and their interest in my investigation, they proved themselves open mind persons willing to help.

The perceived discrimination is subject to diversity of approach and attitudes depending on the personal situation of each person, and the literature on disability, intersectionality and gendered discrimination contains varied attempts to explore what are considered the most important. The main themes found in this part of research are the discrimination of women with disabilities in several domains, the awareness of women with disabilities and the constant challenging daily life.

The interviewees have been consistent with the suggestion that women's concerns regarding discrimination were linked to their lack of adherence to standards already fixed and not fitting with their personal situation, concepts expressed thanks to their gravitas conjugated with a great experience and knowledge. That is also a general lack of knowledge by side of professionals and those who have to deal with women with disabilities for different purposes (Zaviršek, 2009; Quinn, Walsh, 1995). This can cause to rely on stereotypes and misconceptions regarding their work performance, absenteeism rates, difficulties linked to accessibility and mobility, lack of knowledge of the impact of the impairment in its psycho-social aspects; to name a few (Schur, 2002). These in turn impact upon both women with disabilities and their willingness

to develop an autonomous and independent life (Bickenbach, Stucki, 2019; Pečarič, 2002).

Limitations: The number of participants to the qualitative work in interviewing has been very limited, even if constituting the best sample of analysis. In fact, they were not only disabled, but also experts and with a deep expertise in the advocacy, social and volunteering domains, with a mature age and a consolidated know-how. The work could return different and more exhaustive results if a higher number of interviewees could be presented, with major data needed for a meta-analysis available. Thus, the results consisted of outlining the themes and trends found in the interviews and further studies. This type of analysis therefore acknowledges the potential limitation of the bias, which may influence the identification of the trends discussed.

Future research: All the interviewees were with an outstanding knowledge and with high level of representability, but the restricted number returns a framework to be extended, to better understand the impact of disability in the life of a major sample of women with disabilities in Italy. Moreover the extension could be linked to the possible discussion of the impact of the disability in other domains or environments outside the selected context. Thus pointing out the need for research on disability and women in major and extended contexts and culture (Bencivenga, 2020), and posing the research question whether a deeper confrontation among women with disabilities, men with disabilities and women without disabilities could add knowledge and literature (Bend, Priola, 2018).

Studies throughout the literature suggest that educating and raising the awareness of persons without disabilities would be beneficial in eradicating common misconceptions and therefore open more doors to inclusion of persons with disabilities and women with disabilities in particular (Biehl, Byron, Kleinmann, 2007; Bickenbach, 1993). It was noted by Copeland (2007) that the more someone is exposed to something new, the more confident they will be in dealing with issues that may come with it. That is, for example, by increasing a colleague's knowledge and experience of disability will likely lead them to perceive women with

disabilities as more agreeable and employable. Despite this bid to raise awareness there is yet an attempt to study whether educational interventions based on disabilities and employment are effective in shifting attitudes towards women with disabilities as full citizens.

The focus group dealt in the thesis has been developed with the presence of 12 people with MS, and different ages, 10 women and 2 men. The aim was to draw up from complex personal experiences, perceptions, practices and attitudes of the participants through a very moderate interaction with them.

The fundamental reasons to perform a focus group with persons with MS have been indicated in the following:

- 1) High impact in the Italian population in terms of number;
- 2) High rate of women;
- 3) Impairment affecting persons in the adulthood and therefore offering different points of view of the life with or without an impairment;
- 4) High impact in the lives of the persons affected;
- 5) Insurgence of the disability along a life already developed, up to that moment generally without a disability;
- 6) Different degree of disability, with different evolution and development;
- 7) Need of a holistic investigation about the lives of women with MS because especially in Italy only some aspects have been investigated up to that moment;
- 8) Extrapolation and separation of the concept of disease from the concept of disability/impairment.

The affection of MS on the bodies has been much observed under a medical point of view whereas on the contrary smaller

number of scientific works has been performed trying to investigate the impact of the deficit in the lives of the persons (Willson, Tetley, Lloyd et al., 2017). Moreover, it is a pathology linked to women more than to men and therefore the impact of the disease in the lives under sociological investigation features is more interesting for a gendered perspective (Dyck, 1995). Another important aspect adding wide interest to the focus group with persons with MS is the typicality of the occurrence of the disability during the adulthood. Hence in the cases of a disability such as a progressing disease in many aspects not containable, the aspects of investigation are multifaceted (Harbo, Gold, Tintoré, 2013; Ganz, Hirji, Sim et al., 1993) and additional analysis to this group can be offered in combination with other disciplines.

The focus group helped draw an outline of how the positive actions towards women with disabilities and disability in general impacted on lives, with the final intent to let the field work represent more largely the extended community of women with disabilities in our western societies. The perceptions, the opinions, the beliefs, the needs and the expectations heard are the same foreseeable and awaited from different minorities, women with different disabilities, not considering them as a determined social group with the same distinctive character of disability (Garosi, 2012). In addition, they represent neither a social group nor a homogeneous cohort (Garland Thomson 2005, Morris, 1991). Nevertheless they affirmed their expectations towards a “normal” life, that is to say inclusion in the social structure where they live and the demands towards a life as an ordinary citizen in the social context to which they belong. Expectations common to persons without disabilities and to all human beings (Degener, 2014, 2016).

Limitations: the outcome of the work connected to focus group is largely dependent on the skill of the interviewer (Britten, 1995); the nature and the method make it virtually impossible to reproduce the interview or the focus group exactly in the same way and therefore it can be considered as unreliable (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick et al., 2018); determining the relevance of the answers provided can be difficult (Neutens, Rubinson, 2002).

Future research: focus groups represent the best way to be near to a topic, to really understand the extent of the impact of the object of the research passing through the subject and real lives and not only through theories (Turner, Kelly, Swanson, et al., 2005; Stewart, Shamdasani, Rook, 2002). Moreover it is demonstrated that small samples can represent also a keystone to a major or a better understanding of a meanings or a life. They can become important factor of changes and include a sociological approach to a larger group, departing from a small number of observations (Minichiello, 1995; Merton, Kendall, 1946). In the view of the large proportion of women with disabilities in similar conditions it can be assumed that this sample has been representative of the larger population of women with disabilities.

Results of the four interviews and of the focus group are then outlined, grouped per macro-themes and environments. To sum up, the interviews and the focus group were the occasion to fix once more how the discrimination is important and alive in the everyday life of women with disabilities, even when disability is feeble or invisible.

In conclusion, the thesis represents the response to the hypothesis formulated at the very beginning of the work, letting affirm that women with disabilities in Italy still suffer from discrimination and exclusion, even in presence of a very avantgarde legislation and some important shared and affirmed best practices, existing in particular at the associations, NGOs and grass-root movements.

As a matter of fact, in Italy, being woman and with a disability still means to be exposed to different kinds of discrimination, as stated also by the UNCRPD. During last decades, the intersectional approach added more understanding and awareness to this concept. Despite the forward-thinking Italian legislation, still a long way has to be walked for what concerns job market, education, welfare, motherhood, and others. Regarding motherhood in particular, the example of those women speaking of being mother as the first feeling of their existence and trying to protect their child against the outbreak of the impairment is a clear paradigm of what it means.

Hence one can conclude that there is a lack of investigation and attention to this topic, notwithstanding the fact that the majority of Italian people with disabilities is female (Alpi, 2007), notwithstanding that a consistent number of them is a mother, or would like to or will become a mother during the disability years (Willson, Tetley, Lloyd et al., 2017).

Through the decades, Italy tried to respond to basic needs of persons with disabilities by dictation of precise rules, giving some monetary helps, pensions, subsidies and allowances. However, the formal framework often does not correspond to reality and in Italy a large part of persons with disabilities is alive only thanks to the family. The monetary sustain is not sufficient to cover the high expenses linked to the special needs of persons with disabilities. The key issue is not to increase the monetary support, but to build a more inclusive gentrified world, where people with disabilities and women first can go outside, have a walk, do the shopping and so on, without a specific support, but affirming their rights to an independent living (Griffo, 2014, 2017; Pečarič, 2002, 2006).

It is not only a matter of welfare: it is the cultural aspect of being not a man in a traditional and patriarchal society, where

some values, related to strength, masculinity and integrity in the body are even everlasting and where in general women should have quotas to find their right places and take decisions. Near to the pietistic thoughts, in the past, disability has been often perceived as a sin to be atoned or a sorrow to stand for God's sake or on the contrary as a blessing from God to be a human proof of mercy and compassion during the whole life. And this is still the reason why many persons with disabilities are not seen in the streets in Italy. Not only for the impediments or architectural barriers, but also because some particular disabilities attract direct staring and people prefer not to see them (Garland-Thomson, 2009; Hanna, Rogovsky 1991), as argued in the above.

But the women heard do not look for compassion and they do not like to be addressed as unlucky (Morris, 1991; Fabbri, 2017; Garland-Thomson, 2009). They clearly stated that the classification among able and non-able persons should be made under a different point of view and not trying to slot persons in standard boxes where very often they do not fit.

If one keeps on asking whether women with disabilities are second-class citizens¹, from what emerged during the work of researcher towards this multiple-discriminated group, one can still affirm that it is so. Notwithstanding the laws and the formal statements, the substance of these women's life is riddled with exclusion events, starting from waking up in the morning and trying to go outside, passing through linchpins such as educational system and health assistance; every moment reminds about the difference, pointing at the deficit and undermining their life. Women with disabilities work lower, have poorer wages, stay more at home, study less and access in minor number to health and other public services (Bencivenga, 2004; Braccialini, 2017; Bruzzone, 2017). In Italy, in short, there is still a great deal to be done even if, with the advent of Disability Studies and the growth of

¹ i.e. <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/opinion/are-women-disabilities-second-class-citizens>. The author of the article published on 23rd August 2018 on *The Parliament Magazine*, Gunta Anca, affirms that "women and girls with disabilities are still living on the margins of society [...] despite representing 16 per cent of the EU's female population".

movements for an independent life (Barnes, 1990), it has been recorded, throughout Europe, starting from the 1960s, a larger gaining of self-awareness and a demand for greater centrality by those with disabilities.

Deconstructing a consolidated social construction: this is what the movements of people with disabilities in Italy have done in the last 50 years, with alternating moments of success and invisibility, but a great deal remains to be done (Italian Journal of Disability Studies, 2013, 2014). The issue is the physical and cultural barriers, the ramp, the steps, and the social and architectonic obstacles in general. The open question is whether it is possible to shift the discussion and, when speaking of disability, finally to speak of rights, differences, lives, women, gender, diversity (Leonardi, 2008).

The final reflections arising from this thesis are in the following:

- new research lines are needed to a deeper investigation of such a central topic;
- departments for disability studies, feminist disability studies, gender studies have to be created by our universities;
- women with disabilities should be seen as the only deciders about themselves; still not having same rights as those without a disability;
- a new definition of *normality* should be affirmed in our contemporary societies, by deconstructing and abandoning ancient standards and procedures: the standard of a society should be defined more and more by its members, and not adapted to the members on the base of measures, values, procedures and cultures inherited and static.

The discrimination and the consideration of the difference as a disruptive element should be overcome by putting in doubt Italian society theoretically and at academic level. In Italy there is still the need of an open debate at society level about what is normal and what is not, who should fix normality, who should say who is in or out, but in the meantime academics and research can move on. Times are harder and harder. After the last European

election, the stigmatisation of the difference has been underlined by the mass of votes given to extremist parties. As a matter of fact, investigation should pay the highest level of attention to disability, in particular in non-medical fields, also by creating new research lines in the cultural and sociological domains, for example, to instil doubt in our current society and work every day for a more inclusive and integrated one.