
Article

PASSION, THE NEW FRONTIER OF INNOVATION

By Filomena Pucci

The "Appassionate" project

I am only a writer, and three years ago I wrote "Appassionate": Women Who Transform Their Own Passion into Enterprises. Since then, the idea has become a much wider project, affecting and perhaps modifying facets of Italian reality. Influence and transformation are, in fact, the factors in which I want to invest all my energy in the forthcoming future.

My work has always been to find stories that are worth telling and bring them to a wider audience through words. Since 2014, my research has become entirely devoted to stories of Italian women who have been able to transform their passions into enterprises. In a production environment established for centuries and present throughout the world, the two elements – passion and women – represent an interesting novelty and a real opportunity for innovation.

In my work, I have discovered interesting data showing that the viewpoint of women is the frontier for new and real innovation in the world of production and business. In Italy, there are 1,320,000 enterprises run by women, one of the highest numbers in Europe (Unioncamere 2016), and they have higher longevity, i.e., they fail less frequently than those run by men. Women-run business, therefore, guarantee a higher level of job security. But the most interesting fact pertains to the areas in which women are creating their enterprises. Even if the majority fall within traditional sectors of the Italian industry, as many as 40% do not belong to any standard category: therefore, women invent new jobs and capture new markets.

In 2012, two years before starting the Appassionate project, I quit my job as a TV author to devote myself to my passion, writing. And I absolutely needed examples. Not just positive examples, but cases demonstrating that one can create her own job by building on her passion – and that our individuality provides the key resource for conquering a place in the world and generating ideas that are truly innovative because they respond to a real need.

While developing the material for my work, I stumbled upon the meaning of the word "potere" in Latin: "potes esse", meaning "being able to be yourself". That gave me confidence that I was on the right path, and that I had to start traveling to meet women who presented themselves through their enterprises, thus changing the reality of working. That is how the wonderful journey in the world of Appassionate started – and it is far from being complete.

Examples that form and inform

For the majority of the passionate women I met, everything started from a personal need and a long introspection – after which they decided to invest all their resources in creating something useful to many people. Like Daniela Ducato, who did not accept the concept of waste and created Edilana, a company producing insulating panels for the building industry, manufactured with surplus wool. "In nature, there is no waste; I love using the word 'surplus' because it carries the meanings of both abundance and gift." Or Lucia Iraci, a hairdresser for wealthy Parisians, who created the association Josephine pour La Beauté, allowing underprivileged women to use a hairdresser at the cost of only 3 euros. "We take care of their aesthetic beauty so they can concentrate in taking care of the beauty of their soul," Lucia told me. "Only in this way will they be able to return to the world and recover their place in it." Or architect Maria Fermanelli, deeply in love with beauty, bread and justice. She left her thriving architectural firm to create, twelve years ago, Cose dell'Altro Pane, a company specializing in the production of gluten-free baked goods, at a time when celiac patients were still being only marginally served by pharmaceutical production. "I was astonished that children had to eat those boring and tasteless things and figured they could have been produced with more love and sweetness." The result was the first non-pharmaceutical Italian company producing gluten-free food – such an innovation that it required the development of a new protocol, drafted jointly by Maria and the Italian Ministry of Health. This protocol has since become a reference for other private operators entering this market. And we also have Sarah Pottharst, a young fashion designer in New York who has created a fashionable maternity dress line in Italy, made with all-Italian cloths, cotton and silver fabrics that repel mosquitos, the potential carriers of the Zika virus. "In New York, I was just working on glitters and sequins, and I wanted to create fashion with human sense." And many, many more.

Thanks to the women I have met, I have realized that the strength to handle the many difficulties to run enterprises in Italy is deeply rooted in the meaning of what they produce. That women look at the world with different eyes – not worse or better, just different. And with that vision they come up with new solutions. It is well known that once you formulate the correct question, you are already very close to finding the answer.

A few months ago, I met Fabia Gozzo, CEO of Excelsus Structural Solutions, a spin-off company of the Paul Scherrer Institute (PSI) with its headquarters based at PARK INNOVAARE in Villigen and in Brussels. For a long time, I had wanted to interview a woman scientist to link my idea of passion with the world of science. The first time I met Fabia, I was fascinated by the happiness in her eyes as she talked about her work and her laboratory. We were in the garden of the Italian Institute of Culture in Brussels, with wine and many people; during the party she started to explain to me concepts like synchrotron light and polymorphs. Despite my bad grades in high school science classes, I understood everything. And on that occasion, I also realized that we were more similar than I had expected: while I use words to enter the core of issues, Fabia uses light.

Continuing the work of Appassionate, I keep seeking the answer to my question: can women do business in a new way by building on themselves? Can women, by investing in their different worldview, create more timely, more reasonable, more humanly sensible enterprises?



I found my answer, and in that sense Fabia's Excelsus experience also confirms that the viewpoint of women is the key to innovation. "I realized how underexploited synchrotron light was in the industrial environments, especially in the pharmaceutical industry. I was certainly not the first, but we can say that I changed the way to use it." In Italy and around the world, I am looking for examples, not only to emulate but also as stimulating factors for learning to be ourselves. Women-led enterprises, before being economic events, constitute the experience of women in promoting their viewpoint in the world, their own values, their organization capabilities. The flourishing of women's businesses in Italy and in the world represents an anthropological transformation that is finally allowing women to intervene in the economic, political and social reality surrounding them, a transformation through which the female specificities of caring, loving, really seeing others, courage, patience, ecological conscience, relationships and support reach the world of work and production, transforming it and enabling many sensible and courageous men to adopt them as well, changing the way they work.

An energy that increases by being narrated

In three years, I collected dozens and dozens of powerful stories. The project kept expanding: energy is contagious for those who propose and narrate it, and the examples inspire many others. Today there is a website, www.appassionate.eu, where I continue to report "Appassionate" stories, which are afterwards often published by the Corriere della Sera, Italy's most prominent newspaper. I travel around Europe as a speaker on Appassionate in different environments, proposing workshops on the theme of "passion and work".

One of the Appassionate I met told me, "Nothing more than what we do leaves the mark of who we really are, in our private lives as in our work. I have cultivated a positive attitude since childhood, and the association I founded and my own work were born from the will to live with love, in spite of everything. As a child I did not receive any of it, but I always wanted it to be present in my life. Love can be generated inside ourselves and in others: this awareness has marked my whole life and my work. That is also why women must sustain the world. We must set free the energy of love."

I thus believe that if we want to innovate the world, the frontier to cross and the land to discover will be the women's view of the world.