

Chapter 5

Italy: Gender Segregation and Higher Education

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In recent years, Italy has changed profoundly with regard to areas like the organization of work, the structure of the family, and the idea of motherhood. Although lifestyles and the working world have changed, the country holds a very low position internationally in terms of equity, ranking 70th out of 149 countries according to the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2018), and last among EU countries.

OECD (2017b), ISTAT (2018), and Almalaurea (2019a) data show a worrisome situation: women rarely choose to study STEAM subjects and are poorly represented in technical and scientific professions. The percentage of employed women in Italy is still much lower than that of men. Other critical areas of concern are wages, levels of participation in, and access to, highly qualified professions.

The main elements contributing to this *educational segregation of gender* are often “invisible constraints,” prejudices and stereotypes, socially and historically assigned roles and models, and traditional patterns of study choices influence access to specific professional paths. As a result, educational and professional *self-segregation* is often added to an *imposed segregation*. This chapter analyses the current situation in Italy and critically discusses recent data and research on the presence of women in higher education (HE) and in the job market.

1. Gender (In)equality: The Current Situation and Its Evolution

The fight against inequalities represents one of the priority objectives of the UN’s 2030 Agenda, which delineates a close link between women’s empowerment and sustainable development, and supports an approach based on gender being transversal to all objectives for orienting future policies and strategies.

Among the “17 Sustainable Development Goals” established in the 2030 Agenda, Goal number 5 “Equality”, states: “Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” (UNESCO, 2015).¹

¹<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

In addition, during the open session of the 70th General Assembly, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon emphasized the key role of gender equality as a stimulus for development progress, underscoring that the potential of women is not being fully realized because of enduring social, economic, and political inequalities.

Framed in this scenario, providing women with balanced access to education, adequate work, equal wages, and equal representation in decision-making activities and processes could be a starting point to support sustainable economies, societies, and the community as a whole.

According Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi (2013), “empowering women means a more efficient use of a nation’s human capital endowment and [...] reducing gender inequality enhances productivity and economic growth” (p. 31). In this sense, gender inequality could be considered a waste of women’s human capital due to several factor in societies that prevent them from expressing their full potential.

Until the 1990s, there were more male than female students in HE in OECD countries. Since then, the latest increase in female participation has reversed that trend due to several factors: first, the so-called “fecundity management” allowing women the choice to postpone maternity to a later age. The result is a reduction in women dropout rates, support for female participation in the job market, and better career plans (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008).

Even though higher education leads to individual returns in the form of higher income, women often need to have more education than men to get some jobs [...] women continue to confront discrimination in jobs, disparities in power, voice and political representation and laws that are prejudicial on the basis of their gender. As a result, well-educated women often end up in jobs where they do not use their full potential and skills. (UNESCO, 2012, p. 84).

Gender inequality could be considered an “umbrella term” encompassing various concepts and ideas: segregation, inequality, and discrimination. In this essay, we will focus on gender inequity in Italian HE.

A distinction can be made between horizontal and vertical segregation in gender equality.

Horizontal segregation describes the concentration of females in specific study paths (specifically in the fields of teaching, social studies, and care) and their underrepresentation in technical and scientific studies (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics – STEAM). This means that women tend to be overrepresented in employment sectors that often guarantee lower wages (University Report – Observatory JobPricing, 2018).² These sectors generally

²https://www.jobpricing.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/University_Report_2018.pdf.

require skill levels considered lower than those required by the occupations in which men are overrepresented (OECD, 2018). This is considered a major factor contributing to the gender pay gap in the European Union (EC, 2011a; 2011b).

The basis of this form of segregation is that it is often composed of “invisible bonds”: women almost automatically introject representations, stereotypes, different attitudes attributed to the sexes, and different social roles and models of behavior assigned to women and men.

These representations often coexist with an “illusion of equality” and with the conviction that discrimination and the disparity of power and opportunities have been overcome (Biemmi & Leonelli, 2017).

Based on these data, study paths – from high school to university – are chosen on the basis of *self-segregation* according to which certain fields of study and work contexts are more suitable for men and women.

When choosing studies and/or a career, a significant role is played by the conditioning and attitudes of parents, teachers, friends, and the job market. All these elements propose a symbolic and imaginary world of the feminine and masculine with different professional realizations.

Vertical segregation describes the situation whereby opportunities for career advancement within a company or working sector are limited based on gender. This situation usually contributes to increased gender inequality such as the gender wage gap. This phenomenon is defined as the “glass ceiling” describing an invisible ceiling preventing women from accessing the highest levels of career.

Gender inequality in the workplace can affect women’s health and safety in the workplace, and there are considerable links between discrimination issues and health (EU-OSHA, 2013; 2016).

Moreover, according to European data (GEC, 2016), the underrepresentation of women in decision-making processes is closely related to traditional roles and stereotypes, the imbalance between men and women in caring responsibilities (children, family), and the political and corporate culture.

How can the evolution of gender inequality in Italian HE be explained? There is no simple answer because several factors contribute to these data. Research suggests that gender and socioeconomic status could be risk factors in relation with attitudes toward learning and school in addition to parental expectations. They often have stereotypical notions about what is the best career and/or job and studies for women and men to pursue.

Another influencing factor is represented by classmates and friends who can influence the academic choices, achievement, and behavior of an individual student. Boys appear to succumb to peer pressure to conform to gender identities more than girls. In this sense, teachers using specific teaching strategies could play a strategic role in supporting the development of students’ attitudes and inspiring them to work at their best (Andrus, Jacobs, & Kuriloff, 2018; Geven, Jonsson, & Tubergen, 2017; Warrington, Younger, & Williams, 2000).

2. Gender Inequality: Italy on the National and International Landscape

2.1 The National Landscape

The Italian Constitution states that “all citizens are equal, without differences of sex, religion and social status” (Art. 3). This declaration constitutes the base guaranteeing that there are no barriers for women in the educational system and in jobs and careers.

In addition to this constitutional statement, antidiscrimination laws and documents assure equal treatment and opportunities for men and women:

- Law 183/2010 launched the Unique Guarantee Committee for Equal Opportunities in Public Administrations for workers’ well-being and against discrimination;
- The National Code of Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (2006) establishes the responsibility for Public Administrations to approve a Positive Action Plan³;
- Law 240/2010 on the General Reform of University Education defines two key aims in terms of equal opportunities: (1) it calls for a gender balance on the boards of trustees of research institutions; and (2) it extends maternity leave to postdoc researchers;
- The Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education, University and Research and the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (DPO) (2011) creates a pioneering tool promoting equal opportunities in science. Due to government instability, the Memorandum has yet to be applied;
- The introduction of the so-called “pink quotas” (2011) to ensure measures for female participation in decision-making processes in companies and administrations;
- the Guidelines for the University Gender Budget (2017). This document involves not only the collection of data but also the definition of policies for equal opportunities and the enhancement of diversity and organizational well-being, as well as the promotion and dissemination of good practices.

In Italy, the road to women’s access to HE has been long and not without ambiguity. Yet, the country is home to the world’s first female university graduate, Elena Cornaro Piscopia, who wanted to study theology but, due to the opposition of Cardinal Barbarigo, graduated with a degree in Philosophy from the University of Padua in 1678.

A first important push toward the process of feminization of Italian culture was given by the Casati Law (1859), which introduced the “normal school” for the training of elementary teachers (men and women). However, it also re-proposed more traditional stereotypes relating to the predestination of women to the

³See Legislative Decree 198 of April 11, 2006.

care of family life. The feminization of teaching caused a massive influx of women into the educational sector, given the apparent natural contiguity with the maternal role of the teacher. Although the idea that women should remain ignorant had been overcome, prejudices regarding the education of women persisted in Italian culture.

At the time of the proclamation of Italian unification, the 1861 census revealed a 78% illiteracy rate in the general population, with women representing 84% of that percentage. At the start of the century (1911), the percentage of illiterate women fell to 50% and the law establishing women's inferiority and dependence on men was repealed (1911).

The process of revising gender roles and stereotypes was suddenly interrupted during the Fascist period. Convinced of the importance of having a populous nation for colonial purposes, Mussolini launched a campaign supporting births and calling on women to be exemplary wives and mothers as well as prolific. The "Rocco law" reduced the penalty for honor killings of women and permitted violent punishment of females within the family group. Women were forbidden access to higher studies (except for teachers' college), and their role of bearing children for the family and homeland was exalted.

During World War II, the role of women changed as, on the one hand, the Fascist government needed them in manufacturing, while, on the other, they played a crucial role in the partisan movement during the Resistance, fighting fascism through the collection of funds, communication, and propaganda and in transporting provisions and resources. Despite their important role in Italian society, only five women – symbolically called the "Founding Mothers" – participated in the commission responsible for drafting the Italian Constitution following the proclamation of the Republic. On June 2, 1946, women were granted the right to vote in national elections for the first time, but only 21 women were elected in 1948, representing just 4% of all deputies.

2.2 Gender Segregation in Italian Academia

University studies for women were introduced by the University General Regulation in 1875. Despite this, cultural prejudices and the opposition of the Catholic Church prevented women from accessing university studies, so that by 1890, only about 20 women had graduated from university in Italy.

In 1877, the first woman graduated in medicine after the birth of the Italian State. The year 1881 saw the first two Italian female graduates in the natural sciences. In 1894, the first woman graduated in law, 1908 saw the first female engineer, and 1932 the first female architect. In 1926, females represented just over 14% of all graduates, and very few women actually completed their university studies. They were limited to certain faculties (Letters and Philosophy) and had very few employment prospects. Examples of this situation are Maria Montessori, who graduated in medicine in 1896 but worked as a pedagogue and educator, and Lidia Poet, who graduated in law in 1881 and became a member of the bar, but was not permitted to practice law following cancellation of her

registration by the Court of Cassation because she was a woman. Progress in reducing gender segregation has been very slow in all sectors. As recently as 1996, the Accademia della Crusca, one of the world's most prestigious language societies, was called on to rule on the feminine form of professions having only a masculine form. This is doubtlessly a linguistic rearrangement of the Italian language that not only reflects changes in society but also highlights the persistence of sexist use of language reflecting occupations still linked to the gender of the person exercising them. In fact, Italy had its first woman police officer only in 1952, the first female judge in 1964, the first female Minister of State in 1976, the first female Prefect in 1997, the first female Union President in 2010, the first female President of the Senate in 2018, and the first female President of the Supreme Court in 2019.

The situation was no different in academia because Italian universities were not and still are not gender-neutral institutions (Eddy & Ward, 2017). In the past, academic careers were considered prestigious and too demanding to permit a family–work balance. And so, the few female university professors gave up a life as wife and mother, remaining unmarried academics being preferred. Admission to university studies diverted women from an interest in marital and family life and challenged the wisdom of the principles of social ascent usually based on family affluence work and her husband's income. In order to “have a career,” especially an academic one, women were required to adopt a working style mimicking that of men forcing her to “sacrifice” both motherhood and marriage to her work. For this reason, it was not until in 1911 that the first woman was named full professor at the University of Pavia, and only four Italian universities had appointed female professors in the early decades of the twentieth century (in Bologna, Pavia, Naples, and Rome).

During the twentieth century, a number of factors contributed to a general renewal in Italian culture and to the weakening of gender-related stereotypes: the economic boom, processes of societal modernization, feminist movements and demands for women's rights, and democratic governments. This process certainly cannot be considered concluded but in constant development (Covato, 2003, 2012).

During that century, female university students participated actively in labor movements, protests, and political militancy, attacking universities and their professors' privileges (Ulivieri, 2007). Gender demands went hand in hand with demands for political democracy, the need for social participation, and awareness of the condition of women (Ulivieri, 2015) that sought to move beyond the stereotypes and the system of social expectations. In “*La donna contro sé stessa*” (*The Woman against herself*) (1969), Carla Ravaglioli explained the dichotomy of the condition of contemporary women stuck between following traditional models and stereotyped roles and the quest for independence and emancipation. In her book, “*Dalla parte delle bambine*” (*What Are Little Girls Made of?*) (1973), Elena Gianini Belotti denounces the exclusion of women from the world of culture, academia, and employment, governed by asymmetrical roles and by an educational adaptation of models of dependence with respect to males, that lock women in a “gender cage.”

Reflection on the relationship between gender and HE developed in Italy a few decades late with respect to the European debate and international research (Dillabough, 2001). This can be seen in the unavailability of certain books on the national publishing market: for example, Simon de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) was not translated into Italian until 1961, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) only in 1976. Certain fundamental books of the 1970s, like *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (1974) by Eleanor Maccoby and *The Traffic in Women* (1975) by Gayle Rubin, have never been translated into Italian.

The 1970s saw numerous legislative and social steps taken to oppose segregation: the law prohibited dismissing pregnant women in 1971, family law decreed legal equality between spouses in 1975, and a 1979 law established equality between men and women in the labor world. Still, discrimination against women persisted until the mid-1990s, with sexual violence still regarded as a "crime" against public morality and not as a crime against women. Only toward the end of the century was the first female Faculty Dean hired at the University of Palermo (1981), and a woman was appointed Rector of the University of Udine (2008) for the first time at the start of the new millennium.

Just a few decades ago, under strong pressure from the European Union (EC 2010; 2011a), HE policies began to understand fully the need to close the gender gap. At the same time, laws were enacted to oppose gender-based violence and femicide (Law 113/2013), violence against women, and the introduction of the offenses of revenge porn and permanent injury to the face (Legislative Decree 1200/2019). Gender research centers and interdisciplinary women's studies centers have been established in many Italian universities (Padua, Trieste, Naples, Catania, Milan, Turin, Bologna, Pavia, and Bari) examining the issue of feminine identity and permanent postgraduate gender studies. These centers are often paired with Unique Guarantee Committees (Comitati Unici di Garanzia – CUG) and supported by initiatives undertaken by female professors delegated by rectors to oversee the issue of equality in HE, prepare gender reports, conferences, publications, research projects, annual reports, and codes of conduct, and create observatories and networks in order to promote equality in HE. However, interest in the initiatives and research conducted by university centers on gender studies often remains limited to certain cultural distribution circuits because the thematisation of the gender–university relationship is still not systematically present and is often too weak to direct the public debate and to have an effective impact on changing cultural mentalities and social stereotypes. A 2013 research study conducted by the University of Rome shows that, out of some 60 public universities in Italy, barely a dozen provides a gender studies program, mostly in the north and with most of these programs at the University of Bologna. Students are offered about 50 courses – graduate and undergraduate – almost all of which are available in humanist and social degree programs; only six master's programs and four doctorates are proposed in the entire country. In recent years, a line of research devoted to gender pedagogy has been reflecting on the educational importance of gender and how it is established and reinforced by educational institutions (Leonelli, 2011). While gender education more or less intentionally and formally influences choices and women's agency capacity has an impact on

the pressure of tradition shaping representations and expectations of women, gender pedagogy, on the other hand, problematizes the role of the gender divide in schools and in HE.

Three major chronological phases can be identified in Italian pedagogical reflection on the topic (Leonelli, 2011):

- (1) 1970–1990: Studies on *sexual equality* criticize the idea of feminine knowledge being inferior to dominant male knowledge and discuss the sense of social and cultural inferiority transmitted to girls in order to emancipate them from the male world and aim for equal rights and access to education and training;
- (2) 1990–2000: studies on *gender differences* theorize the specificity of the feminine, stressing the conflict between the genders in HE as well. Luisa Muraro's book *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (1987) clearly highlights the attempt to address sexual, educational, biological, and social issues, associating them with the emblem of Diotima: priestess-seeress and teacher of Socrates. Still, the idea of feminine excellence tends to identify the difference with the paradigm of maternity and care, generating a broad debate on the "place of the feminine" in schools, society, and in the media (especially on television), which has led to a backlash against the awareness of feminism in previous decades;
- (3) 2000–2020: *postgender* studies complexified the gender category no longer according to the male–female binary opposition through a critical and demanding decentralization of the female point of view on reality, with multiple interpretations of sexual, individual, and social identities. Studies on storytelling and on women's life stories, on the role of women in society, of female students in HE and on diversity go hand in hand with research on the construction of female professionalism (in school) in order to deconstruct stereotypes.

However, in Italian HE, gender studies, teaching and learning continue to be of little value despite being cultural, scientific, and educational issues crucial for the country. HE continues to resist changes to a sexist vision and forms of segregation and self-segregation of teachers and students.

2.3 International Data

ISTAT (2018) data reveal an increase in women's participation in HE: currently, 59% of all university graduates are women.

A number of factors help explain the constant rise in female participation in the labor market: cultural changes, the image of foreign occupations in services to families, etc. However, despite the general improvement in the female employment rate, profound differences remain with respect to their participation in the labor market.

Almalaurea data on Graduate Profile (2019a) reveal that 53.1% of women graduated on time (compared with 48.2% of men) with an average final grade of 103.5 out of 110 (101.6 for men). Additionally, female graduates come largely from less supportive family contexts both from a cultural and socioeconomic point of view.

According to Almalaurea data (2018), women appear to have strong cultural motivations for enrolling at university (33.3%, compared to 28.7% of men), and many of them participate in internships (61.4%, compared to 52.6% of men).

The survey highlights the different gender composition of STEAM graduates, with more males (59.0%) than females (41%), particularly in engineering and scientific subjects.

Despite their superior university performance, the Almalaurea survey on the employment status of graduates (2019b) highlights that women continue to be penalized in the job market. Five years after graduation, the overall employment rate is 89.3% (92.5% for men and 85.0% for women). The wage gap between men and women remains high: after five years, male STEAM graduates reported a salary of 1,699 euros per month compared to 1,375 euros for women.

The Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2018) confirms the gender gap for graduates by degree type: women are overrepresented in Humanities and Education and underrepresented in Engineering and Technologies (Table 5.1).

The European Gender Equality Index (2019) ranks Italy among the countries in the European Union with the lowest gender equality, assigning it a score of 63

Table 5.1. Graduated b Degree Type.

Graduates by Degree Type	Female	Male	Value
Agri., Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary	1.7	2.6	0.65
Arts and Humanities	19.2	10.9	1.75
Business, Admin and Law	17.2	21.5	0.80
Education	10.3	1.7	6.02
Engineering Manuf and Construction	9.5	26.5	0.36
Health and Welfare	18.5	12.8	1.45
Information and Comm Technologies	0.3	1.9	0.13
Natural Sci., Mathematics and Statistics	6.4	6.8	0.94
Services	1.7	3.0	0.58
Social Sci., Journalism and Information	14.4	11.4	1.26

Source: Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2018).

out of 100, which puts it in 14th place.⁴ Despite having improved its ranking, Italy's ranking remains below the EU-28 average (67.4).

Italy's scores are lower than the EU's scores in all domains except "health." At the same time, it is important to highlight that the number of years women and men can expect to live in good health has decreased.

The most critical items concern "money," "power," "time," and "work." Italy's "money" score has improved since 2005 but reveals increased poverty and inequality in income distribution, with women earning 18% less than men. In couples with children, women earn 30% less than men.

As regard the comparison with other European countries, EUROSTAT (2017) ranks Italy 17th out of 24 European nations for differences in pay for men and women in the private sector, while the gap is just 4.1% in the public sector and is one of the lowest in Europe.⁵

In terms of "power," Italy's score is the lowest of all domains, but has improved the most over time.

Challenges continue in the "time" domain, where Italy's score has stagnated since 2005, underscoring persisting inequalities in the household division of tasks between women and men.

Italy has the lowest score of all EU Member States in the domain of "work," not reaching its national EU 2020 employment target of 67–69% (the overall employment rate is 63%).

The gender gap decreases as education levels increase, but the percentage of women in part-time work is more than three times that of men (around 33% of women work part-time, compared to 9% of men).

Key critical issues remain the unequal distribution of men and women in the workforce and in different study fields in tertiary education: around 26% of women work in education, health, and social work (compared to 7% of men). Approximately 6% of women work in STEAM (compared to 31% of men); 44% of women study education, health and welfare, or humanities and art (compared to 27% of men).

⁴“The Gender Equality Index is a tool to measure the progress of gender equality in the EU, developed by EIGE. It gives more visibility to areas that need improvement and ultimately supports policy makers to design more effective gender equality measures. Measuring gender equality is integral to effective policymaking in the EU. Since the first edition in 2013, the Gender Equality Index has tracked and reported progress by providing a comprehensive measure of gender equality, tailored to fit the EU's policy goals. It reveals both progress and setbacks and explores what can be done better to seize opportunities for change. Building on previous editions and EIGE's approach to intersecting inequalities, the Gender Equality Index 2019 continues to show the diverse realities that different groups of women and men face. It examines how elements such as disability, age, level of education, country of birth and family type intersect with gender to create different pathways in people's lives. For the first time, the Index highlights the situation of LGBTIQ* people and Roma and Muslim women in areas where statistics are available” (see <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/about>).

⁵See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tesem180>.

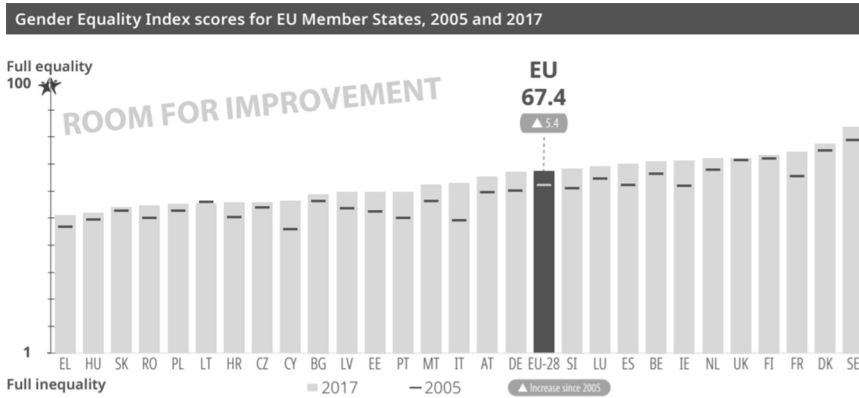


Fig. 5.1. Gender Equality Index Scores for EU Member States, 2005 and 2017. *Source:* Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2018).

These results reveal that Italy’s Gender Equality Index score is slightly below the EU-28 average, with considerable room for improvement. A more holistic approach is needed to reach fuller gender equality (Fig. 5.1).

3. Gender Trends in Italian HE

The ANVUR report (2018) on the Evaluation of Italian Universities and Research shows a strong contradiction in the Italian HE system; while most Bachelor and Master graduates (58%), half of PhD graduates (52%), and post-doctorate (51%) are women, these percentages are inverted when it comes to an academic career. Men continue to prevail as researchers (58%), associate professors (63%), and, especially as full professors (78%). These data show that universities remain predominantly masculine institutions, where women represent the majority of students but the minority of instructors. And so, HE is a conservative system of gender inequality (Eddy & Ward, 2017), reproducing sexual discrimination (Stake, 2006), subordinate to the dominant male narrative with little interest in gender recognition (Francis, Burke, & Read, 2014), oriented to perpetuate the gender gap that consolidates stereotyped construction and socialization (Bank, 2011). HE plays an important role in the “doing gender” process because it conditions the concept of femininity and masculinity, as well the expectations, objectives, and projects closely linked to the roles (Burke, 2015).

In Italy, the prevalence of women in the areas of education, humanist studies, and social work is more pronounced than in other European countries. Subsequently, the choice of the area of university study sustains the high occupational segregation between women and men in the working world. Comparing eight European countries (including Italy) with different educational systems, labor markets, and social and welfare systems, Barone (2011) shows how the contradiction between the feminization of the HE system and inequalities in the labor market in Italy can be explained by two different and coexisting forms of gender

divide. On the one hand, gender differences in HE are stabilized around the humanist–scientific divide opposition: women tend to choose humanist–social fields of study, rather than scientific ones, and therefore prepare for careers in these areas. On the other hand, gender differences solidify within a second opposition: the care–technical divide. Women prefer areas of study related to professional roles that can more easily be reconciled with family and social responsibilities and that are more in agreement with traditional stereotypes of the female gender.

In Italy, the predominance of female students in three-year Bachelor’s programs in education (95%), languages (83%), and psychology (82%) reinforces the conviction that university preparation is functional to work related to teaching (nursery school, kindergarten, primary, and secondary school teachers) or care (nurses, midwives, dietitians, and social workers) that have a lower employment status in the national labor market and are penalized in terms of economic, social, and professional recognition with respect to predominantly male professions.

This dual divide (humanist–scientific; care–technical) is rooted in the different contents of university curricula and is found in teaching–learning styles, in representations of educational roles, in the type and value of the knowledge produced, and in the function and application of academic knowledge. Two parallel and opposing curricula coexist in Italian HE: an explicit curriculum, identical for males and females, is that of the school understood as an institution guaranteeing equal opportunity for growth and learning to all, regardless of specific conditions like gender. The second, hidden, curriculum presupposes a symbolic gender order, with different representations, expectations, and behaviors that distinguish between the possibilities and capacities of males and females (Biemmi, 2015a), which may or may not lead to real opportunities.

The level, duration, and pervasiveness of gender inequality have remained almost unchanged for many decades despite the transformations of society, the structure of the family, the Italian labor market, and numerous educational and university reforms (Barone, 2011). Recent studies confirm that there have been no significant changes in university program choices in the past 20 years. Males remain predominantly career-oriented with respect to females, who continue to prioritize a family-centered career. Even the impact of the recent financial crisis has not changed this attitude: gender differences in HE persist both in the period before (2003–2008) and after (2009–2012) the major production and economic crises in Italy (Cattaneo, Horta, Malighetti, Meoli, & Paleari, 2016), continuing to separate the different expectations of graduates with respect to their future and selecting gender-based careers in an increasingly competitive, performance-based, and global world of work (Stake, 2006).

The gender socialization and conditioning process perpetuated in HE begins in earliest childhood. One of the reasons is the “complicity” of female teachers, who represent four-fifths of Italian teachers and implicitly accept a difference that is considered innate. Italian teachers generally consider boys to be more intelligent, more capable, and with better performance though with greater behavior problems. On the other hand, girls’ scholastic success is considered to be due more to hard work than to true ability (Biemmi, 2015c). Paradoxically, female teachers represent the main barrier to gender parity in Italy. Instead of promoting educational activities aiming to develop male and female students or create a

critical gender awareness, they continue to perpetuate restrictive educational practices and feed discriminatory representations. Although Italian schools (and their teachers) do not bear sole responsibility for the persistence of gender stereotypes, they continue to strengthen the “hegemony of a symbolic neutral-universal-male order” (Musi, 2015, p. 122) and waste the opportunity to create a more equitable school and society. Research on a representative sample of Italian primary school textbooks shows that females are still represented mostly in the role of loving mothers, naturally capable of caring for their children, home, and husband. Women are shown in primarily family contexts or in the private sphere, while they are associated with a limited number of jobs (one-third) in the working world with respect to professions attributed to males (Biemmi, 2015b). Although girls who do not reflect the traditional model (such as Pippi Longstocking or Malala Yousafzai) and women who are identified with the male pattern (working late, having no children, not cooking) are present, there are no examples of boys or men in nontraditional models. So, the Italian school system and HE remain elements of educational segregation due to the stereotypic gender message that they continue to transmit as a model for the development of female identity in Italy (Biemmi, 2015a).

4. Study Paths and the World of Work

Despite higher educational qualifications guaranteeing greater access to the labor market, the employment rates of women are still very low.

These inequalities between men and women cannot be attributed solely to different qualifications and to related professional choices but relate to a broader framework.

Various data and research reveal that one of the causes of this result is the poor division of work and care times between men and women. Women who participate in the working world are required to interrupt their careers more frequently, earn lower wages, and have less chance of being promoted to top positions. These disparities in turn lead to more difficult economic conditions and systematically lower levels of pension benefits.

Moreover, one of the first elements of analysis to understand the reason for gender wage differences is certainly that inherent in women’s actual career opportunities (WEF, 2019).

Analyses – broken down by gender – on the levels of education reached and the subsequent school–work transition reveal scarce use of female capital in Italy; women have significantly higher levels of education than their male peers, but differences in employment rates are significant.

The report on the employment status of graduates (Almalaurea, 2019b) once again shows significant and persistent gender inequalities: among Master graduates, gender differences are confirmed to be significant five years after graduation at 6.4 percentage points in terms of employment, with women’s employment rate at 84.6% and men’s 91%. Furthermore, permanent employment contracts are a male prerogative (60.3% of men and 50.1% of women). Five years after graduation, 49.4% of women and 59.2% of men are highly skilled. The report shows that it is more

difficult for women to find a suitable placement on the labor market based on their studies. Bachelor graduates employed four years after graduation are occupied in professions suited to their level of education in 67% of cases (79% of men). Distribution by profession is more balanced in the case of Master's graduates, with female graduates falling less than two percentage points behind their male counterparts.

The gender wage gap for graduates working three years after graduation is €233 for Bachelor graduates and €275 for Master graduates due to the different incidence of part-time work for men and women.

Men have an advantage over women even within the same area of study including in programs in great demand by the labor market, such as Engineering, Healthcare, and Economic Statistics (STEAM).

Wage differences in Italy do not appear to be linked to a greater presence of women in less remunerative sectors, but rather to a persistent discrimination: thus, gender itself causes the wage gaps.

Women are predominantly employed in nonindustrial sectors (services, financial services, trade), where pay differentials with respect to male colleagues are even more frequent: the fact that the wage level of female workers is lower than that of men is due not only to their choice of employment sectors that are less profitable (so-called horizontal segregation), but is the outcome of persistent wage discrimination *tout court*.

Data confirm that women are more highly penalized at work if they have children. In fact, the significant gap in terms of employment, contracts, and pay between men and women increases in the presence of children. Even in the comparison between graduates, those with children are penalized: five years after graduating, the employment rate of childless graduates is 84.1%, with a differential of 18.4 percentage points compared to women with children.

The She Figures Report (EC, 2019) confirms that women still suffer from more precarious working conditions than men; they are paid less (with the gender wage gap increasing with age), struggle to reach top positions in their career, struggle to be recognized as the creators of patentable inventions, and have difficulty raising funds for their research.

The OECD's The Pursuit of Gender Equality Report (2017a) emphasizes that Italy has the fewest women in the workforce with respect to other countries. This means that women who work have a greater opportunity to be better educated and have well-remunerated jobs or better professional career.

With respect to work satisfaction, Italian women are less satisfied with their work than their male counterparts, especially with regard to lesser opportunities for contacts with foreign countries, lower earnings, and poorer career prospects. The scope of the social utility of work and available free time are exceptions.

According to the data of the Salary Satisfaction Report (2018), in a general context of low satisfaction of Italian workers (3.7 on a scale of 1–10), women are less happy than their male colleagues and least happy about the perceived fairness of their salaries.⁶

⁶<https://www.jobpricing.it/blog/salary-satisfaction-2018/>.

While 63% of female workers would change jobs to improve their salary (compared to 68% of men), women emphasize other elements of satisfaction not directly linked to monetary remuneration such as flexibility of working hours, work–life balance, welfare services, and interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

From this perspective, it appears clear that the issue of the gender wage gap should be tackled more broadly, and not just limited to monetary remuneration.

5. Critical Points and Perspectives

The European Pact for Gender Equality for 2011–2020 aims to improve equality between men and women in the labor market.⁷ In order to support this declaration, the European Council advised EU Member States in 2011 to take concrete action to fight gender segregation and promote gender equality at different levels and in different areas: education, training, and the labor market.

Nevertheless, according to the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2018), a very critical situation persists in the world, which is changing much too slowly: from 2006 to today, the gender gap has shrunk a mere 3.6% overall. Obviously, the gender gap is not the same everywhere: Western Europe and North America represent the “driving force” in a situation that is not encouraging.

In order to meet the ambitious aims posed at national and European levels, a “pedagogical perspective” must be adopted to view the gender (in)equality question and proposals (Agenda 2030; UNESCO, 2010; 2012): a holistic approach is needed to consider the rule and the impact of different elements and variables in this process, such as discussed below.

5.1 A Broad Question of Collaboration

A broad perspective must be adopted. Gender (in)equality is not simply a question to be solved in a restricted area (such as wages, education, etc.) but also requires the cooperation of institutions and stakeholders at the European and national, civil society, and community levels. This collaboration will be strategic to ensuring progress in that field.

5.2 Stereotypes about Male and Female Roles and Functions

For centuries, stereotypes have contributed to disseminating a culture of inequality between men and woman. While many States encourage girls to study STEM, to prove their skill in fields usually dominated by men, and to promote gender wage equality, too few push men to participate in fields and sectors traditionally dominated by women.

This is not only a question of fighting for woman rights but for men’s rights as well. Differences in labor fields, education paths and fields of study, and wage

⁷See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52011XG0525%2801%29>.

payment are typically rooted in social norms that feed on stereotypes. These stereotypes are usually used to justify – and/or tolerate – physical, psychological, and emotional violence against women (or men).

5.3 *The Key Role of Parents and Teachers*

Parents and/or teachers could help improve the gender (in)equality between men and woman by supporting their children in undertaking specific study paths or work. Their ideas and/or stereotypes reinforce – usually unconsciously – gender roles and reflect expectations regarding gender/sex (Kuriloff, Andrus, & Jacobs, 2017).

Fighting female inequality starts at home: parents have the first direct impact on children’s social and cognitive development. Parents express their gender orientation by choosing “gendered toys” for their children or guiding them toward specific educational and working options and opportunities. They also promote and support gender inequality by expressing disapproval of specific female behaviors (such as ambition or competitiveness) or influence it through their parenting style and offering role models. These ideas and stereotypes rooted in society can contribute to expanding gender achievement gaps and the under-representation of women in leadership or in top work positions.

The second most influential channel is represented by teachers who represent an authority figure in the classroom and may push students to adopt their ideas. They also disseminate their beliefs through feedback on performance, answering and/or dismissing questions and evaluating performance and tests.

Parents and teachers generally lack awareness of these situations; teachers do not receive specific training regarding gender stereotypes during their formal education and are not provided tools, guidelines, etc., during their professional career development.

In this sense, it could be interesting to train teachers and distribute the recent UNESCO (2015) documents, practices, and guidelines among them.

5.4 *Curricula and Guidance*

Scholastic curricula generally do not take gender into consideration when defining subject contents or when adopting teaching methods to make science and technology more “girl friendly” and humanities more “boy friendly.” In this sense, the proposal by the Female Historians Italian Association to adopt a gender-neutral perspective when teaching history or the national “DIVA project” initiative (Science in a different voice) which aims to improve awareness of gender equality in science is of interest.⁸

In short, gender equality is the responsibility of all in the society. Supporting the empowerment of girls and women does not mean taking power from men and giving it to women. Gender equality means empowering everyone, guaranteeing a win-win approach to improve society and the broader community.

⁸<http://www.irpps.cnr.it/diva/progetto.php>.

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