



The Sociology of Gender in Italy: From Marginal to Mainstream

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Abstract

Sociology is a field that examines the social construction of various aspects of human life, including gender and sexuality, and explores how these are produced and perceived by individuals, groups, and institutions. In Italy, despite resistance to institutionalization, Gender Studies have significantly enriched sociology by identifying new research areas and generating innovative analytical categories. Initially linked to second-wave feminism, Gender Studies gained momentum in the Western world from the mid-1970s, exploring the nature-culture-society relationship and its impact on bodies, sexuality, and identity within specific cultural contexts. The Gender Studies section within the Italian Sociology Association was established in 2012 after a prolonged accreditation process. While gender issues entered Italian social sciences in the late 1970s, their integration varied across research areas. Sociology, with its broad analytical frameworks, has played a crucial role in understanding and addressing gender disparities in a country marked by a discriminatory welfare system. The integration of gender perspectives into sociological research has fostered a deeper understanding of Italian social reality and reshaped scientific paradigms. Moreover, sociology's comprehensive approach to studying social inequalities has been instrumental in highlighting the importance of gender studies within academia. Recent years have witnessed increased attention to Gender Studies in Italian universities, reflecting legislative mandates and evolving cultural attitudes. More scholars, including men, are engaging with gender issues, expanding research beyond women's status to encompass diverse sexual and gender identities. Approaches like intersectionality promise to broaden the scope of Gender Studies within Italian sociology, offering new avenues for exploration and analysis. The collaboration between sociology and gender studies continues to enhance the academic environment and contributes significantly to the evolution of Italian society.

Keywords Gender studies · Italy · Sociology · Research · Intersectionality

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Introduction

Gender Sociology has significantly enriched Italian sociological research by re-evaluating themes and issues specific to sociology, identifying novel areas and subjects for examination, and generating innovative categories of analysis.

However, the Italian Sociology Association established a gender studies section only in 2012 after a protracted accreditation process that started with the first evidence in the 1970s. This coincided with a shift from deterministic paradigms towards focusing on social actors and identity issues that prioritised gender to a broader perspective, including interactionist and symbolic approaches.

Studies and research on the female condition first, and then, more generally, on gender, have emerged mainly thanks to the impulse of feminist movements and within academic and non-academic networks into which knowledge and perspectives from various disciplines, not only humanities and social sciences, have converged. In this context, previously invisible figures in the sociological scientific community have emerged, and, with them, issues such as women's experiences, struggles, and achievements aiming to address gender inequality and promote women's rights in society, but also in the universities.

Therefore, the establishment of Gender Sociology has found strong resistance in the academy, but also within it, having to take up the challenge of highlighting women's marginalisation and gender inequality without an oversimplification of the complexity of gender dynamics and overlooking the experiences of other marginalised groups.

Gender studies are a potential avenue for rejuvenating Italian sociology and cultural discourse. Initially rooted in second-wave feminism, they have developed into a comprehensive interdisciplinary field of enquiry. They now revolve around problematising the nature–culture–society relationship, beginning with how bodies and definitions of male and female shape sexuality, subjectivity, and social norms within specific cultural contexts.

It is crucial, however, to reflect on the various manifestations of gender within different areas of Italian sociological research. In a country characterised, perhaps more than others in Europe, by a gender gap and a gender-discriminatory welfare system, gender issues are often either dismissed as superfluous or perceived as indicating a broader social breakdown. Within an academy that is experiencing a profound identity crisis, perspectives on gender, if adequately integrated into university curricula and cultural discourse, could facilitate both renewed engagement with Italian reality and the redefinition of scientific paradigms within the humanities and social sciences.

Many scholars, including men, are now engaging with these issues. Additionally, alongside the status of women, other sexual and gender identities are emerging as foci of study. Intersectional approaches promise to broaden the future horizons of gender studies within Italian sociology.

This article considers Italian contributions to Gender Sociology, considering their progressive integration in the last four decades (Sect. 2), its academic institutionalisation (Sect. 3), into teaching and research activities (Sect. 4) as well as their recent inclusion in the 'third mission' and university organisational structures (Sect. 5).

Some conclusive remarks outline possible developments for the discipline in the light of its history (Sect. 6).

Historical Context of Sociology of Gender in Italy

The First Steps towards a Sociology of Gender Starting from Women's Studies

The first essential developments in women's and gender studies in Italy were in the humanities and social sciences, based on Marxist feminist, radical feminist, and post-feminist approaches. The first academic research on gender issues related to literature, history, and philosophy, with figures such as Lonzi (1970) and Muraro (1976) applying gender perspectives to the critical analysis of social structures. They were, among the others, some of the first researchers that brought to the attention of the scientific community the questions posed in those years throughout the Western world and, in particular in Italy, by the first feminist organisations, such as the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), founded in 1970, and the Revolutionary Feminist Movement (RFM), on women's rights and gender roles – according to the Rubin's coeval definition (1975 – and on issues such as domestic work, gender violence and the representation of women in the media.

In subsequent years, gender studies in Italy continued to develop, characterised by theoretical, methodological, and institutional changes. The first phase of change, from the 1970s to the 1980s, strongly emphasised the political and militant dimensions of the feminist movement and criticism of Italian society's patriarchal structures.

Important feminist journals emerged, such as *Le Ore* (*The Hours*) and *DWF – Women, Web, Feminisms*, which crucially contributed to the debate on gender issues and disseminated new theoretical perspectives. DWF (*donnawomanfemme*), founded in Rome by Annarita Buttafuoco and Tilde Capomazza in 1975, bridged the gap between the academy and the feminist movement by considering the movement and its issues. It became a space for circulating projects and research with an interdisciplinary and international focus that involved many female (and male) scholars.

Meanwhile, in 1973, the first sociological study and research groups were founded in universities, including the Research Group on the Family and the Feminine Condition (GRIFF in Italian), which was established by professors and researchers in the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Milan and coordinated by the sociologist Laura Balbo. This group comprised women within and outside the university who collaborated on university premises at least one weekend monthly. One issue they researched was the so-called “double presence” (Balbo, 1981) – women working both within and outside the family—and its connection with female subjectivity as an oscillation between the public and private spheres.

News of this development soon spread, inspiring the formation of other groups, such as one in Milan that brought many scholars and academics in social disciplines together to work on the *Libreria delle Donne* (Library of Women) project, which promoted study and debate on authoritative practices. Later, in 1983, based on this group's collective activities, a well-known women's philosophical community emerged at the University of Verona, Diotima. Both were important because their

revolution promoted deep reflection on women's conditions; they fostered the consolidation of sociological studies on the subject.

First indications are in the work of the sociologist Marisa Ferrari Occhionero who, on the occasion of the International Women's Year, described the role of Italian women, played at an individual and associative level, for peace and social development, starting with the Resistance as an occasion for the discovery of politics by millions of women and the public appreciation of their participation (1975). The overview of the areas of social life in which women had been active in previous decades allowed Ferrari Occhionero to trace the first theoretical lines of a "sociology of woman" (1979): it was time to take a scientifically rigorous look at the status and role of women on a theoretical level with its inclusion in a systematic view of society and on an empirical level with the ascertainment of all the elements relating to the professional placement and economic productivity of women. Thanks to a thorough investigation of the position of some of the 'fathers of sociology' on the female condition, the analysis starts from the history of sociology to describe the process of transformation that takes women from being a marginal element in society to a subject which emerges from the social isolation of domestic work, with all the consequent problems of reconciling roles.

These crucial issues of the early developments were deeply explored in the 1980s in first institutionalised academic activities: the first university chair of women's history was established at the University of Bologna (1984) and collaborations were consolidated with the feminist associations which, after achieving goals such as the divorce (1974) and abortion (1978), set up libraries and documentation centres for women, considered women's psychological and physical health, and offered legal and work support. It's the case of the *Casa Internazionale delle Donne*, (International Women's House) established on 2 October 1976.

Paradigm Shift in Italian Sociology of Gender

The first sign of a paradigm shift in the Italian social sciences was the continued expansion of gender studies in an increasing number of academic disciplines, including sociology. These changes were doubly important for sociology: firstly, they forced the discipline to consider new topics of study and to embrace a different perspective of analysis; secondly, female sociologists had more opportunities to establish themselves in interdisciplinary networks. For example, the 1994 establishment of the *Centro Interdipartimentale per gli Studi della Donna nella Storia e nella Società* (Interdepartmental Centre for Studies on Woman in the History and Society) (in Italian CISDOS) allowed scholars from two universities, the University of Rome La Sapienza with the sociologist Ferrari Occhionero, and the University of Cassino, to collaborate, promote research on women and gender relations, and institutionalise cross-fertilisation between different disciplines regarding gender issues. Moreover, the *Centro per lo Studio e la Ricerca sulle Donne e le Differenze di Genere*, (Center for the Study and Research on Women and the Gender Differences) founded in 1995 within the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Milan and the *Coordinamento Donne dell'Ateneo Bicocca di Milano* (Bicocca University of Milan Women's Coordination) (*ABCD* in Italian) saw sociologists such as Chiara Saraceno, Bianca

Beccalli and Maria Carmen Belloni held intense activities and discussions on gender issue including also students and administrative/technical staff.

These groups' interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral activities, all organised within universities, would later merge into one of the first supranational networks to coordinate women's initiatives in higher education—ATHENA. This network emerged in June 1995 at an international conference in Coimbra to evaluate new EU programmes concerning women's studies. The time was ripe for European cooperation, leading to the use and sharing of information through permanent databases such as GRACE, which was coordinated by a group associated with the historic Belgian journal *Les Cahiers du Grif* (The GRIF Notebooks), which conducted an Italian survey on women's studies. The results highlighted, among other issues, the predominantly female presence of academic scholars considering these subjects in Italy.

Interdisciplinary and critical approaches incorporating gender perspectives into social and cultural analyses had gained increasing acceptance in sociology. This shift, in turn, contributed to the growth of gender studies and their institutionalisation within universities and research institutes. A twofold process characterised this change: the affirmation of the presence of women within the sociological scientific community and the definitive recognition of new elements of feminist perspectives brought to sociological studies.

First, gender studies foregrounded women's perspectives and experiences, helping to fill gaps in research and interpretations of Italian history, culture, and society. These developments paved the way for women's recognition in the academy. However, 'differences' remained undervalued, leading many female researchers to comply with the dominant male model by, for example, subordinating themselves to the authority of "masters" (Bimbi, 1981), or "self-ghettoising" (Colella et al., 2015) in marginal teaching and research subject areas.

Second, gender studies focused on old and new issues and adopted a different perspective. Sociological reflections went beyond classical distinctions between society and individuals by, for example, theorising 'the structure of emotionality' (Turnaturi, 1981, p. 45) or examining society as a complex assemblage of the specificities of acting subjects. The new relationship between the private and public spheres, based on the non-institutionalised private experiences of women, was one of the distinctive elements of this new paradigm that employed gender as a category for investigating all social dynamics. Later, Simonetta Piccone Stella argued about the differences with the previous dominant perspective:

It is not just a matter of women and men not appearing in it, gender; it is the whole approach to prefer an impersonal approach to the phenomena of society, made of interactions and objectified mechanisms, described as things, almost Durkheim-like. (Piccone Stella, 2013, p. 13)

For her part, Bianca Beccalli emphasised how, assuming representation as an expression of individual and collective subjectivity,

(...) gender should never be neglected. It should never confine itself to a specialised department of studies, but should intervene critically in relation to other paradigms (Beccalli, 2005, p. 2).

Certainly, the paradigm change was based also on the feminist practices that centralised subjects and required, especially within universities, cooperation between disciplines. According to Balbo (1981):

A sort of feminist paradigm [was] born from the increasingly rigid dislocation of the discourse around the nodes of reciprocity and, starting from oneself, precisely those ways of knowing, and knowing oneself, and communicating in which female diversity was concretely experienced. (pp. 115–116).

The sociological paradigm for a scholar such as Laura Balbo is also to make ‘private’ use of social science themes and perspectives in the sense that they have helped to give meaning to many of her choices. The experiences of her everyday life have certainly interfered in many ways with her thoughts, readings, observations, writings; and they have marked her presence in the ‘public’ (1987)- among others as Minister of Equal Opportunities, as well as the first female President of the Italian Sociology Association both in 1998.

Many of the issues related to female daily life became research topics, e.g. that of the family in which the profound transformations taking place brought to the issues such as the reconciliation of family time and work time, changing relations between genders and generations, and welfare systems that required precise political strategies. In a study on separation and its effect Chiara Saraceno (with Marzio Barbagli), through rich research material (unpublished ISTAT data, historical statistical series and about two thousand interviews), focused on this phase of the couple’s crisis in order to highlight the dynamics of the decision, the economic and social consequences, the repercussions on children as some of the constitutive elements of the social construction of the feminine and masculine identity (1998).

Thanks to their presence, the theme of women’s identity in a society becoming progressively more diverse has returned to many studies, among which those of Simionetta Piccone Stella are considered significant. Her experience as a militant feminist and profound connoisseur of international studies at the end of the 1990s led her and Saraceno to reflect on the various dimensions - biological, social, cultural, economic, normative - that intervene in shaping identities, reasoning on the dilemma-binomial between the perspective of equality and that of difference (1996). A controversial theme for feminism, which returned in the most innovative theories of the time on the multiplication of genders, Piccone Stella proposed it as a new way of declining an egalitarian perspective to counter the most radical essentialisms.

Increasingly appropriate (albeit unusual nontraditional) methodological apparatuses supported these conceptualisations, such as qualitative frameworks that were more suitable for examining the everyday practices and visions of society elaborated by subjects with all their specificities (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014). The movement-driven, speculative nature of gender studies underpinned deconstructive analyses of reality, but also aimed to change them.

Finally, gender studies have transformative epistemological and methodological elements. They have fostered different ways of considering reality, based on recomposing the relationship between rationality and subjectivity:

Institutionalisation of Gender Sociology in Italy

The institutionalisation of Gender Sociology in Italy, which commenced in the 2000s, led to important developments in the academicsocial fields. This process developed in parallel with the consolidation and legitimisation of gender research within academic institutions and society, providing a solid foundation for further progress in understanding gender inequalities and promoting gender equality.

Universities responded to the theoretical and methodological proposals of gender studies by establishing a growing number of interdisciplinary, interdepartmental, and even interuniversity research centres, in which sociology has been constantly present and fostering encounters with other disciplines: among the others, the *Osservatorio Interuniversitario di Genere, Parità e Pari Opportunità* (Interuniversity Gender, Equality and Equal Opportunities Observatory) set up as a collaboration among the three public universities in Rome in 2009. The sociological contribution to the Observatory can be found in the transformations of the organisational culture of universities as a result of the increase of women among female students and lecturers at the highest level of their careers. One of the main topics dealt with is that of gender-based violence, explored, for example, as part of the UN.I.RE Project - Italian Universities in the Network for the 'Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence' for the knowledge and application of the principles of the Council of Europe Convention, known as the Istanbul Convention: the victimisation process and female empowerment strategies for preventing and combating the phenomenon were analysed by exploring the incidence of communication processes and of the economic independence of women victims (Calloni, 2020). Also related scientific journals, such as *AboutGender* (2012), were founded. Among the main sociological issues of this journal the social participation, especially when critical, the voice and the practices of people who live at the margin of society and a methodological attention for stories, paths and narratives of people in non-compliant positions, especially women.

At this stage, newly created government institutes and bodies dedicated to promoting women's rights and combating gender discrimination provided a strong impetus for the institutionalisation of gender studies. For instance, the Ministry of Equal Opportunities and Family played a crucial role in coordinating public policies to promote gender equality and support gender studies research and training. University training courses were launched on topics such as *Donne, politica e istituzioni* (Women, Politics and Institutions), starting in 2005 and continuing for at least a decade in collaboration with the *Scuola Superiore della Pubblica Amministrazione* (Advanced School for the Public Administration).

Italian institutional initiatives were part of a broader orientation of European institutions towards promoting gender equality in all social spheres by assessing the different implications for men and women of planned political actions, including legislation and programmes (gender mainstreaming) (Lomazzi & Crespi, 2019). This European approach was evident in these earliest interdisciplinary experiences in Italy. It was characterised by subsequent institutionalisation and supported by European guidelines and funding (Strategy for Equality between Women and Men

2010–2015) but started late due to the rigid academic system and some resistance from the feminist movement.

Establishment of a Gender Studies Section, Accreditation Process, and Timeline

One of the fundamental steps in the institutionalisation of gender studies in sociology occurred when the Italian Sociology Association (AIS in Italian) established a Gender Studies Section in 2012. This initiative contributed to making visible and legitimising gender research within the Italian sociological academic community, providing an institutional context for debate and the exchange of ideas on gender inequalities and promoting gender equality in Italian society.

Thanks to the commitment of a group of active lecturers and researchers (mainly women), a space was finally dedicated to providing a point of reference for scholars (especially new-generation scholars) interested in this field, promoting greater awareness of and sensitivity to gender issues, and developing gender-sensitive research models.

The Gender Studies Section, coordinated by Elisabetta Ruspini, promoted various initiatives and still works to realise its founding aims: conferences, seminars, and workshops on gender issues; the organisation of special sessions during national and international sociology congresses; and the publication of articles and contributions in scientific journals dedicated to gender studies. Moreover, the AIS Gender Studies Section continues supporting educational, research, training, and theoretical reflections in collaboration with other ISA sections, universities, departments, and research centres.

Recently, the *Manuale di educazione al genere e alla sessualità* (Handbook for the gender and sexuality education) (Corbisiero & Nocenzi, 2022) offered an up-to-date didactic tool on gender issues based on contributions by experts engaged in study and research at the intersections of disciplines (regarding intersectionality, gender impact assessments, gender medicine, etc.). The tool is designed to address gender issues in emerging social spheres (sexuality, violence, prostitution, and immigration) across the main institutions in politics, economics, education, religion, and art.

Impact of Gender Studies on Italian Social Sciences

Gender studies have significantly influenced Italian social sciences, helping to enrich and broaden academic debate on a wide range of issues. In particular, sociological gender analysis has shed light on the inequalities and oppressions that permeate Italian society, providing new perspectives and conceptual tools for addressing these inequalities, e.g. on education, media representation and sexuality (Besozzi, 2003; Cipolla, 2005). Moreover, Women's and Gender Sociology have helped to promote greater sensitivity to and awareness of gender issues within Italian society, driving changes at both the academic and social levels, as revealed in the studies on the work-life balance (Naldini, & Saraceno, 2011) and on the methodological analysis for organisation changing (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014).

At the academic level, universities introduced policies and programmes to promote gender equality and combat discrimination in Italian academic institutions (see Sect. 5).

In conceptual and methodological terms, the impact of gender studies on research is appreciated not only in the social sciences but increasingly beyond this discipline. Indeed, the emergence of a sociology of gender has fostered interdisciplinary research that integrates sociological, anthropological, political, and historical perspectives to analyse the social dimensions of gender and conceptualise equality and equity. Extensive self-reflexive historical research (Fazio, 2018; Feci, 2020) has been conducted to meticulously reconstruct sources and give visibility to the role of women in history. Similarly, psychology and pedagogy have recognised the centrality of masculinity and intersectionality to reflections on phenomena such as male sex work, gender violence, homo/bi/transphobic bullying, and gender stereotypes in schoolbooks (Burgio, 2021).

Sociology has provided the basis for applying the outcomes of common epistemological and methodological considerations of gender, giving new impetus to activism. This has encompassed analyses of gender identities and intersectional vulnerabilities, including LGBT+ experiences. Research funding, such as that provided by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)¹ during the 2021–2026 period, has supported prospective studies and research models on gender issues. Undoubtedly, one of the pioneers in this respect is the *Italian Network of Gender, Intersex, Feminist, Transfeminist and Sexuality Studies* (GIFTS). This network was established in Bari in 2019 to support researchers from different disciplines in conducting their studies, based on the assumption that the knowledge they use is not neutral and their research should defend marginalised groups by opposing all forms of discrimination and oppression within and through scientific production. The new gender studies activism in Italy in the third decade of the 21st century is transdisciplinary and providing “mutual support to those who are part of it and realising a dialogue between a plurality of voices, encouraging the creation of relations based on mutual trust, practising exchanges starting from the pleasure of thinking together without locking oneself into rigid and identity-based positions” (Rete GIFTS, homepage).

Italian Sociology and the Gender Issue: Still far from There?

Gender Issues in Italian Sociological Research

In recent decades, Italian sociological research has delved deeply into the intricate web of gender issues, shedding light on the crucial factors that shape the social aspects of the country (Botto et al., 2022; Di Cori, 2013; Abbatecola et al., 2014). This exploration has encompassed multifaceted analyses of violence against women, the challenge of maintaining a work-life balance, pervasive discrimination, and the

¹ The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, NRRP) is funded by the Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme via a €750 billion package that the EU negotiated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

persistent gender gaps in employment and education as more relevant themes many others also joined in the following years.

One of the central issues addressed by gender studies in sociology in Italy concerns the structural social and economic inequalities that persist between men and women. Despite efforts to promote gender equality, significant inequalities exist in access to work, pay, career advancement, and the division of domestic labour. Gender studies highlight how these inequalities result from historical and cultural processes rooted in patriarchal power structures that deeply influence people's lives Scientific Council of the AIS Gender Studies Sect. (2014) (*Consiglio Scientifico della Sezione AIS Studi di Genere*, 2014).

Gender-based discrimination continues to impede progress in various spheres of Italian society. Sociological research uncovers the subtle and overt ways in which women encounter bias in education, employment, and social interactions (Poggio, 2017). Scholars have called for heightened awareness, legislative reforms, and corporate initiatives, emphasising the importance of dismantling discriminatory structures (Ferluga, 2019; Mazzucchelli & Scisci, 2016).

Considering the way sociology faced the gender issue in Italy, we could say that the dominant perspective that was applied was initially strongly connected with the conflict model and the struggle for liberation and equality.

Subtle and pervasive gender-based discrimination has cast a long shadow on Italian society, obstructing advances in various spheres. Sociological research meticulously uncovers the multifaceted aspects of the overt and insidious bias women experience across the realms of education, employment, and social interactions.

In the professional realm, women continue to face significant barriers due to discriminatory practices. Wage gaps endure, and women frequently encounter glass ceilings that hinder their career progression. Sociological research highlights these inequalities and examines the systemic factors perpetuating them (Beccalli, 1985; Addabbo, 2018). Experts advocate for legislative reforms and stringent measures to address pay disparities, promote equal leadership opportunities, and eliminate discriminatory workplace practices² (D'Amico, 2020).

Although women's participation in the workforce has increased, wage gaps remain a stark indicator of gender inequality. Sociological studies document the pay disparities between men and women, exposing systemic biases that undervalue women's contributions. Occupational segregation further exacerbates these gaps, with women often concentrated in lower-paid professions with limited access to leadership roles. Researchers call for comprehensive strategies to address pay inequalities and dis-

² In particular, some measures concern parental leave: Maternity leave: Legislative Decree March 26, 2001, no. 151, Consolidated Text of legislative provisions on the protection and support of maternity and paternity, articles 16 and following. The legislative reference for parental leave in Italy in 2003 is contained in Legislative Decree March 26, 2001, no. 151, known as the "Consolidated Text of legislative provisions on the protection and support of maternity and paternity." However, specific amendments from 2003 refer to Law March 8, 2000, no. 53, which introduced significant changes regarding parental leave and work flexibility for parents. Paternity leave: Law December 30, 2020, no. 178, article 1, paragraph 363 (Budget Law 2021) extended the mandatory paternity leave. Parental leave: Legislative Decree March 26, 2001, no. 151, articles 32 and following, amended by Legislative Decree June 15, 2015, no. 80.

mantle the structural barriers that prevent women from succeeding in various professional fields (Addabbo, 2018).

Since the 1980s, studies like those of Balbo (1981) have examined the dual role of women at work and in the family. Balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities remains a significant challenge for women in Italy due to the complex interplay of social expectations, workplace demands, and family obligations. Sociological perspectives underscore the difficulties women face in achieving work–life balance in Italy (Naldini & Saraceno, 2011; Rossi, 2006).

In Italy, sociology has long regarded the issue of balancing family and work as a ‘predominantly feminine issue’ due to the urgent need to highlight inequalities in employment and low female employment. More recently, studies on this issue have also begun to consider the male presence in care work and work-life balance (Bosoni, 2014; Ruspini & Crespi, 2016; Cannito, 2020).

By advocating for policy changes and cultural shifts, researchers aim to create a future where women can pursue professional goals without compromising their personal lives, fostering a society that values and supports diverse roles in workplaces and homes.

Education is another critical area in which gender disparities persist. Although strides have been made in increasing women’s access to education, sociological studies have uncovered subtler forms of discrimination that hinder their academic advancement. Stereotypes and biases can influence choices of educational paths, perpetuating gender-based segregation in specific fields of study (Abbatecola & Stagi, 2020; Ghigi, 2019). Additionally, women may encounter challenges in accessing the resources and mentorship that are crucial for academic success. Scholars such as Naldini and Poggio (2023) have emphasised the need for policies to foster inclusive educational environments, challenge stereotypes, and provide equal opportunities for women in diverse academic disciplines.

Many Italian sociologists have illuminated disparities in the expectations and treatment of male and female students (Besozzi, 2003; Bianco, 2017; Colombo, 2003). Stereotypes regarding academic and career choices are subtly ingrained in all stages of education, shaping the future trajectories of young minds. This perpetuates the barriers women face in pursuing specific fields of study or career paths. Sociological insights underscore the need to dismantle these biases to create an educational landscape that fosters equal opportunities for all (Corbisiero & Nocenzi, 2022).

Another area of interest is the analysis of gender representations in the media. Gender scholars have focused on identifying and critiquing gender stereotypes in the media and cultural representations, highlighting that these narratives can influence the perceptions and opportunities of men and women in society (Belluati, 2018; Belluati & Tirocchi, 2023; Capecchi, 2018; Scarcelli & Farci, 2022).

Challenging ingrained stereotypes is crucial for bridging gender gaps. Sociological studies have emphasised the need for a social shift in perceptions of gender roles, encouraging a more open-minded approach towards career choices and educational pursuits (Grossi & Ruspini, 2007). Dismantling stereotypes would help create a society that allows women to explore diverse opportunities without preconceived notions limiting their potential. As Faccioli and Panarese (2022) highlighted, sociological

investigation into gender gaps in Italy provides a diagnostic tool and catalyst for transformative change.

Sociological enquiry delves into the evolving dynamics of how individuals perceive, express, and experience their gender within the broader context of identity formation (Leccardi, 2002; Rinaldi, 2007). This issue encompasses a spectrum of experiences, acknowledging the diverse ways in which people navigate and redefine gender within the complex tapestry of their identities.

In recent decades, there has been a noticeable shift in the approach to analysing gender issues within Italian sociology. A growing number of sociologists, particularly those focusing on identity, everyday life, social practices, and interactions, have begun to adopt a symbolic and constructivist theoretical framework to understand gender dynamics better (Ruggerone, 1997; Leccardi, 2002; Anzoise et al., 2011; Balocchi, 2003; Garbagnoli, 2014; Sassatelli, 2014). This marks a significant departure from traditional paradigms that often overlooked the complexities of gender and relied on rigid, binary conceptions.

This shift reflects a broader recognition within the field of sociology of the need to move beyond simplistic understandings of gender as a fixed biological category. Instead, scholars increasingly acknowledge gender as a multifaceted social construct shaped by cultural, symbolic, and personal factors. By embracing a symbolic and constructivist approach, sociologists can explore how meanings, symbols, and social norms influence the construction and performance of gender identities.

Moreover, this shift in perspective represents a crucial step towards addressing the limitations of previous research on gender within Italian sociology. By foregrounding the symbolic and constructivist dimensions of gender, sociologists are better equipped to analyse the fluidity and contingency of gender identities and practices. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of how gender operates in various social contexts, challenging essentialist assumptions and opening up new avenues for research and activism.

However, it's essential to recognise that this transition is still in its early stages and remains somewhat tentative. While there is growing interest and engagement with symbolic and constructivist approaches to gender, there are also lingering challenges and barriers. These include resistance from more traditional quarters of the discipline and the need for further theoretical development and empirical research.

Nevertheless, the increasing prominence of symbolic and constructivist perspectives signals a promising direction for the future of gender studies within Italian sociology. By interrogating the symbolic meanings and social constructions of gender, scholars can contribute to a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of human experience, paving the way for social change and greater gender equality.

The traditional binary understanding of gender is increasingly being challenged within the sociological discourse in Italy. Researchers have explored the narratives of individuals who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or gender-nonconforming (Cipolla, 2005; Abbatecola et al., 2012; Rinaldi, 2012). This research has documented their diverse experiences and contributed to broader conversations about deconstructing binary norms and recognising various gender identities.

Sociological enquiry into gender and identity also examines social norms' influence on individual identities. From childhood socialisation to the expectations

placed upon individuals by various institutions, researchers (Crespi, 2008; Fornari & Ruspini, 2019) have investigated how social norms shape and constrain the development of people's gender identities. Understanding these influences facilitates discussions about social responsibility to foster inclusive environments that allow for authentic identity expression.

Men's studies, or 'men's studies', is a relatively new academic field in Italy, focusing on the analysis of men's experiences, identities and roles in society. In Italy, this field is developing, although it may not be as institutionalised as in other parts of the world (Dell'Agnese & Ruspini, 2007). Interest in men's studies has grown in recent decades as a response to the growing recognition of the importance of understanding gender issues from a broader perspective that includes not only women, but also men. However, while gender issue has a long academic history, men's studies emerged later and has been debated in many contexts. In Italy, there are academics and researchers dedicated to this field, but they could be included in broader gender studies programmes or departments rather than having specific programmes dedicated to men's studies and very few of them are men (Aymone, 1992, 1993; Pieroni, 2002). Research in this field could examine issues such as masculinity, patriarchy, male role models, male mental health and more. As in other countries, studies on men in Italy could face criticism and controversy, especially if they are interpreted as an opposition to gender studies or if they do not consider existing structural inequalities between men and women. As a matter of fact, the lack of development of men's studies in Italy shows how in almost all male scholars, there is no desire or need to question themselves as men and bring this reflection into their own disciplines.

Another critical aspect of gender studies in sociology in Italy concerns the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within Italian society. Gender scholars have examined how gender norms influence the lives and relationships of LGBTQ+ people, highlighting the challenges and discrimination they often face (Corbisiero & Monaco, 2021; Masullo & Coppola, 2022). Awareness and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity are promoted to counter stereotypes and prejudices that can limit the full participation of citizens in Italian social and political life.

Italian society must grapple with the alarming prevalence of violence against women (Corradi, 2008). Sociological studies have revealed that despite increasing awareness, domestic violence and abuse persist. Researchers have emphasised the need for a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural factors that perpetuate this phenomenon, urging society to address root causes and break the cycle of violence (Moffa & Addeo, 2020). The prevailing challenge lies not only in recognising and documenting instances of violence but also in comprehending the complex sociocultural factors that contribute to this alarming phenomenon. Sociologists have advocated going beyond a superficial acknowledgement of the issue, urging more profound explorations of the root causes of such violence. This involves examining traditional gender norms, power imbalances, and cultural attitudes that perpetuate violence against women (De Murtas & Misiti, 2021; Nocenzi, 2022a, b).

The call for action extends beyond the academic realm. Sociologists have emphasised the urgent need for society to confront the ingrained beliefs and cultural norms that inadvertently perpetuate a climate conducive to violence. This necessitates

educational initiatives, community awareness programmes, and policy reforms to dismantle the deeply entrenched structures that sustain gender-based violence (Bartholini, 2019; Biancheri, 2016; Piga, 2021).

The intersection of gender and religion is a pivotal point at which sociological analyses unravel the intricate dynamics shaping belief systems, social structures, and individual identities. This is a pressing issue in Italy due to the country's Catholic religious tradition. Researchers have considered how religious doctrines, practices, and institutions influence and are influenced by gender roles and expectations (Crespi & Ruspini, 2014; Pace & Ravecca, 2010). Religious traditions often play a central role in shaping social norms and expectations regarding gender roles. Sociological enquiry scrutinises the interpretation and dissemination of religious texts, exploring how these narratives contribute to establishing and reinforcing specific gender norms. Examining scriptural interpretations and the role of religious authorities is crucial for understanding how religious doctrines either challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles (Canta, 2013; Palmisano & Simone, 2017).

Despite progress, gender inequality persists in many religious institutions. Sociological research has highlighted women's limited access to leadership roles within religious hierarchies, limitations on their participation in certain rituals, and the reinforcement of patriarchal structures. The analysis extends beyond specific religious traditions to explore commonalities and differences, emphasising the need for a nuanced understanding of the intersections of gender and diverse religious contexts (Ruspini & Antonelli, 2017).

In conclusion, the intersection of gender and religion is a rich territory for sociological enquiry in Italy. By unravelling the complex dynamics of this intersection, researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious beliefs shape and are shaped by gender norms, identities, and power structures.

The Role of Gender Studies in Shaping Scientific Paradigms in Sociology and Beyond: Embracing Intersectionality?

The emergence of gender issue as an important aspect of society has profoundly influenced scientific paradigms within sociology, including theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and broader sociological perspectives³. Introducing a gender perspective in sociology has played a transformative role in challenging traditional norms, expanding the scope of enquiry and fostering more inclusive and nuanced understandings of social dynamics (Baccolini, 2005; Ruspini, 2023).

Gender have also challenged and deconstructed the binary paradigms that have historically shaped sociological thinking. The male/female dichotomy, once entrenched in sociological discourse, has given way to more expansive and inclusive conceptualisations of gender. Recognising diverse gender identities and experiences has broadened the scope of sociological enquiry, challenging researchers to consider a spectrum of identities and expressions.

As De cataldo and Ruspini (2014) explained, gender studies have catalysed methodological innovations within sociology. Researchers have developed new quan-

³ Regarding these aspects, Sect. 2 extensively focuses on the relevant issues.

titative and qualitative tools and approaches to capture the nuances of gendered experiences. Hence, participatory action research, ethnographic studies, and innovative survey designs have become integral to unravelling the complexities of gender dynamics, offering more nuanced insights into the lived experiences of diverse communities.

Integrating gender studies and methodology in sociology provides a critical lens for researchers to examine how gender biases, perspectives, and power dynamics influence social research design, implementation, and interpretation. This issue underscores the importance of adopting inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to enhance the rigour and relevance of sociological studies (Addeo et al., 2022).

Sociological research is not immune to the biases that permeate society, including those related to gender (Ruspini, 2014). The intersection of gender and methodology prompts scholars to critically assess how research questions are formulated, study populations are selected, and variables are operationalised. Researchers such as Marshall and Young (2006) have scrutinised potential biases in sampling methods to ensure that diverse gender identities are adequately represented and to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or reinforcing existing power imbalances.

This issue emphasises the need for researchers to reflexively consider their own gender identities and biases. Acknowledging the influence of the researcher's gender on the research process is vital for maintaining transparency and ethical conduct. Scholars should therefore explore how their own positionality influences data collection, interpretation, and relationships with participants (De cataldo & Ruspini, 2014).

The intersection of gender and methodology in sociology underscores the need for reflexive, inclusive, and ethically grounded approaches to social research. By critically examining biases, embracing intersectionality, and adopting participatory, gender-sensitive methodologies, researchers can contribute to developing a more robust and equitable sociological landscape.

The debate on gender issue in Italy have centralised the concept of intersectionality in sociological discourse based on the work of early pioneers, such as Corradi (2003, 2013) and Perilli & Ellena (2012), and have acknowledged the interconnected nature of social categories, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. Intersectionality has become a cornerstone of studies considering individuals' complex experiences, offering a more comprehensive lens for analysing social structures and power dynamics within diverse communities, as Vingelli et al. (2021) explained recently.

Incorporating an intersectional lens into data analysis is crucial for enhancing examinations of gender and methodology. Researchers have recognised that individuals have multiple identities that intersect and influence their experiences (Bello & Scudieri, 2022). Intersectional approaches facilitate nuanced analyses that consider how gender intersects with other social categories, such as race, class, ethnicity, disability, and ageing, expanding gender studies beyond women's issues.

Moreover, intersectionality challenges scholars and activists to analyse power structures and systems of oppression critically, interrogate dominant narratives, and centralise the voices and experiences of marginalised communities in academic research, policy advocacy, and social movements. It necessitates solidarity and coalitions among diverse groups to collectively challenge and dismantle intersect-

ing forms of oppression and advance social justice (Shields, 2008; Nocenzi, 2022a; Gianturco & Colella, 2023).

More recently what stands out in contemporary discourse is the growing significance placed on “identity” and the exploration of specific amalgamations of identity intertwined with lived realities. While certain elements such as race/ethnicity, class, and gender have understandably dominated discussions, particularly in addressing inequality, others have frequently been overlooked: age, cultural background (language, religion, customs), occupation, and geographical location (rural vs. urban). The full depiction of an individual’s intersectionality would undoubtedly be intricate. Moreover, from a sociological perspective, intersectionality encompasses more than just delineating individuals as either oppressors or victims.

Italian sociological research is necessary to unravel the complexities of gender issues. Since scholars have delved into the nuances of violence against women, work–life balance challenges, discrimination, and gender gaps, the need for social introspection and proactive measures has become more vital. The ongoing dialogue fosters hope for a thriving future in Italy based on equality, justice, and inclusivity.

Conclusion

In Italy, the history of gender and sociology has been complex and contradictory since the 1970s, characterised by significant delays in institutional legitimisation, the ambivalence of feminist academics, the fragile structure of university teaching practices, and the resistance of specific sectors of society and politics. However, the emergence of feminist sociology has played a pivotal role in shaping discourse on gender issues. Feminist scholars have been instrumental in challenging patriarchal structures, advocating for women’s rights, and fostering a deeper understanding of the systemic inequalities ingrained in society.

The discipline has evolved based on the need to dissect social structures from a gendered perspective. This shift towards more inclusive and comprehensive analysis has allowed sociologists to examine critical factors shaping the country’s social dimension.

Over the last decade, the sociology of gender in Italy has continued to evolve, with an increased focus on issues related to sexuality, reproductive health, and gender-based violence. Simultaneously, there has been increased criticism of institutionalised forms of gender discrimination and the introduction of public policies to foster gender equality in different spheres of social life. These new areas of research in gender sociology underline the progressive tendency to broaden the perspectives of analysis beyond those initially prevalent on women’s issues to include men and individuals with different sexual orientations and gender identities. Critical reflection especially on the masculine is in fact still limited in Italy, both because it is concealed by the heterosexual male norm and because it has historically measured itself against the so defined “gender issues”. Those who study the male condition, however, have brought to attention how much female emancipation has also contributed to the redefinition of male roles, the initial state of the male identity remodelling process while the female one is now mature, but, above all, an acquired overcoming of the undifferentiated use

of the category of ‘men’: among them there are profiles close to the hegemonic model of masculinity, but also many others who are far from, opposed to, victims of it.

However, the work is still in progress. It is necessary to continue fighting cultural resistance and to expand the dissemination of gender studies in Italy. Through institutional consolidation, intersectional approaches, the integration of gender perspectives into public policies, international collaboration, and the promotion of gender awareness and education, gender studies will continue to play a key role in fostering equitable, inclusive, and respectful consideration of gender differences in Italian society.

The sociological engagement with gender issues in Italy marked a pivotal turning point in the discipline’s evolution. Early sociological frameworks often overlooked or underplayed the significance of gender dynamics in shaping social structures. However, contemporary scholars, recognising the inadequacy of such perspectives, have pioneered a shift towards more nuanced and inclusive analyses. An increased awareness of the interplays among gender, power, and social norms has characterised this evolution. Sociologists have begun interrogating traditional assumptions, acknowledging the nuanced ways in which gender intersects with other social categories. Thus, Italian sociological research has become a dynamic space for exploring and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups, particularly women. The discipline’s evolving methodologies, incorporating qualitative narratives and participatory approaches, facilitate more authentic representations of the complexities of gender dynamics in the Italian context.

Using intersectional lenses, researchers have striven to capture the diverse experiences of women, recognising that the challenges they face are often compounded by factors such as race, class, and sexuality. This happened mainly because gender was studied outside universities but in collaboration with them and with cultural centres, local authorities, publishing houses, and the media. Studies were primarily conducted by independent subjects who were not affected by institutional rigidities and benefited from activism regarding gender. Today, similar actions are taken in the country by opposing movements, such as anti-gender movements, which are more than a reflection of the rise of sovereigntist and populist approaches in Europe. Indeed, opposing movements decisively influence the current debate on gender issues, concerning which their denial of the centrality of these issues calls into question many of the theoretical and practical achievements of gender studies over the past five decades. Inaccurately identified as ‘gender ideology’ or ‘cancel culture’ developments, the achievements of gender studies—LGBT+ rights, the acceptability of reproductive techniques, legislation against gender-based violence—have been defined as conflicting with naturalistic and essentialist conceptions of gender and sexuality. Another challenge to gender studies in Italy, perhaps more demanding than academic resistance, now presents itself regarding calls to deconstruct new narratives on differences.

As sociology continues to mature in its approach to gender, the ongoing dialogue between theory and experiences contributes to a richer understanding of the challenges and opportunities of fostering gender equality in Italy.

Appendix

The sociology of gender and its relationship with other disciplines in the academy.

The Persistent Resistance to Academic Institutionalisation

Challenges and controversies accompanied the introduction of gender studies in Italy. Some sectors of Italian society distrusted and opposed the new academic perspectives being fostered by universities. Italian academic traditions tended to favour gender-neutral approaches, neglecting the inequalities and oppressions affecting women in society and leading to resistance towards activists and academics who were researching gender. An example of this resistance was the controversy surrounding the introduction of women's (and, later, gender) studies into academic curricula: some saw it as a threat to the traditional social order. In some academic fields, gender studies were perceived as "soft" or "non-scientific" and lacking academic rigour. This perception downplayed the importance and validity of women's and gender studies, hindering their acceptance and integration into Italian universities. Inadequate financial resources and the lack of institutional support also opposed significant obstacles to introducing and developing women's and gender studies courses in Italy. The scarcity of funding and investment by academic institutions made it more challenging to create and maintain curricula in this field. Many critics argued that the inclusion of these topics would politicise education by spreading a "gender ideology" and a specifically politicised agenda. Finally, some lecturers and researchers resisted gender studies because they saw them as a threat to established academic traditions or to their disciplinary authority (Saraceno, 1987).

A second factor that should be considered is the heterogeneity of women working inside, outside, and around universities. For a long time, albeit with very different motivations, influential feminists and academics were ambivalent about how and when gender studies should be institutionally incorporated. The intertwining of this position with theoretical and practical dimensions in women's studies had some influence in the analysis of the predominant female presence of academic scholar and the relationship between women, academia, and research in Italy, especially in two integrated processes – the valorisation of (physical, sexual, affective, psychological, and intellectual) reproduction in the modern family and workforce (Bimbi, 1981). This research delved into the patriarchal power structures pervading Italian society, investigating the existing power dynamics, structural inequalities, and several forms of gender discrimination (Facchini, 1989).

The efforts of supporters of sociological studies gradually led to changed mindsets and the acceptance of a gender perspective within the Italian academy.

Sociology, Gender and Universities: the recent Changing Perspectives in Academia

Gender studies in Italy have contributed significantly to improving the academic environment and the evolution of society and have helped raise awareness of issues related to gender inequalities, discrimination, and underrepresentation. This has led to increased awareness and understanding of power dynamics and inequalities in society following an initial period of academic resistance to women's and gender studies, as explained previously. Similarly, sociology has played a crucial role in reducing inequalities and has significantly impacted the institutional levels of universities in Italy through its research and teachings.

In the past decade, Italian universities have introduced specific academic programmes dedicated to gender studies. Courses and master's and doctoral programmes offer students opportunities to study gender-related topics in depth, including their historical, sociological, psychological, and legal aspects. The presence of sociological research has further enhanced these programmes, contributing to a deeper understanding of social issues and the development of policies aimed at promoting social justice and equity.

The innovative research of gender scholars has led to a better understanding of gender issues. Scientific publications and academic contributions have expanded knowledge in the field, fuelling critical reflection, and debate has played a crucial role in promoting diversity and inclusion within universities. Gender studies have fostered interdisciplinary collaborations among different academic disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, history, law, and literature, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in different contexts (Sapegno et al., 2014). Attention to the complexity of gender identities has fostered academic environments that are more open and respectful of diversity (Agodi & Picardi, 2016).

Consideration of gender inequalities in recruitment and career advancement processes has led to initiatives for ensuring the equal representation of men and women in academic positions, including the introduction of gender budgeting (GB) and gender equality plans (GEPs)⁴.

In addition to the institutional academic aspect, increased awareness of gender issues among students has inspired student activism, leading to the creation of student groups and associations dedicated to gender equality and LGBTQ+ issues. Overall, gender studies in Italy have positively influenced higher education, helping to shape a new generation of professionals and citizens who are aware of gender-related challenges and committed to building a more equitable and inclusive society.

From an institutional perspective, the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) and the Unique Committees of Guarantee (CUGs) have played crucial roles

⁴ The term 'GEP' refers to a 'Gender Equality Plan'. These plans are strategies and actions implemented by academic institutions to promote gender equality among students, lecturers, researchers and administrative staff. A Gender Equality Plan (GEP) includes a series of measures aimed at ensuring that men and women have equal opportunities for access, advancement and representation in all aspects of academic life, including, for example, recruitment, promotion, remuneration, distribution of resources and work-life balance. These plans can be part of broader efforts by academic institutions to promote diversity and inclusion and to eliminate gender inequalities in academia.

in fostering gender studies and gender equality in Italy. These institutions have fundamentally shaped an academic environment that is more inclusive and respectful of gender diversity, supported by rapidly expanding international and European legislation that is increasingly linked to research funding.

CRUI, as the actor bringing the rectors of Italy's leading universities together (Antonucci et al., 2022), is a key player in steering university policies towards a greater focus on gender studies. Through inter-university collaborations, CRUI has promoted the creation of courses and programmes dedicated to gender, encouraging critical reflection on gender inequality and gender identity issues.

CRUI's initiatives include the following:

1. Awareness-raising and training: CRUI organises events, seminars, and workshops to raise the academic community's awareness of the importance of gender equality and provides training on related topics, such as intersectionality and discrimination prevention⁵.
2. Implementation of policies and good practices: CRUI encourages universities to adopt concrete policies and measures to promote gender equality, such as the creation of gender equality plans, the establishment of dedicated gender equality offices, and the implementation of mentoring and support programmes for academic women⁶.
3. Monitoring and reporting: CRUI highlights the importance of monitoring and evaluation to ensure gender equality in Italian universities, encouraging academic institutions to collect gender-disaggregated data and publish reports on gender equity.
4. Collaboration and exchange of good practices: CRUI facilitates collaboration and exchanges of experiences regarding gender equality between Italian and international universities, promoting the sharing of good practices and effective strategies.

CRUI supported the integration of gender equality into research programmes and academic activities, encouraging the production of knowledge and the dissemination of innovative approaches for addressing gender inequalities in universities and beyond. In 2018, the Commission on Gender Issues was set up with the aim of disseminating actions and interventions to promote equality between men and women in all areas of the university system. In this perspective, in the light of the experiences gained in some Universities, the first theme on which the Commission focused its work concerned the dissemination and use of the Gender Balance Sheet as a fundamental tool to include gender equality in the broader development strategy of the Universities. In particular On September 19, 2019, the CRUI Gender Balance Group presented the Guidelines for Gender Balance in Italian Universities to the Conference of Rectors. The Gender Balance Report is a document that, on one hand, provides an

⁵ CRUI meetings were launched in Udine on 29 May 2019, and gender mainstreaming was a guiding principle.

⁶ The Network of Universities for Sustainability (RUS) established specific social justice and inclusion objectives for universities based on gender factors.

overview of the gender distribution within the University's various components as well as the participation of women and men in the university's governing bodies, and on the other hand, monitors the actions of the University in favour of gender equality, and assesses the impact of these actions and the University's policies, including financial commitments, on women and men.

In summary, CRUI has played a fundamental role in promoting gender equality in Italian universities, acting as a catalyst for the adoption of policies, actions, and organisational cultures that foster diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunities for all individuals.

In parallel, the CUGs were established following the Italian law on gender equality in the workplace, Law No. 183/2010. These committees operate within academic institutions to promote and safeguard equal treatment and equal opportunities between men and women, including gender-related issues. CUGs⁷ ensure welcoming and discrimination-free environments in universities. CUGs are established in public institutions, including universities, in compliance with national gender equality legislation to promote working environments free from discrimination and harassment of any kind, including gender-related harassment. CUGs in universities have helped to create environments that are more aware of and attentive to the needs of all people, regardless of gender (Galgano & Papillo, 2020).

The main role of CUGs is to monitor and promote gender equality within academic institutions. They provide support and advice to people experiencing gender discrimination or harassment and take preventive measures to prevent such behaviour. CUGs also work to raise the university community's awareness of the importance of gender equality and antidiscrimination policies. They organise events, workshops, and information campaigns to promote inclusive organisational cultures that respect the rights of all individuals, regardless of gender.

In addition, CUGs deal with reports of gender discrimination or harassment, ensuring proper case handling and taking corrective measures when necessary. They also cooperate with other university bodies, such as gender equality offices and student support services, to ensure integrated approaches to gender equality and combat discrimination (e.g. the introduction of alias careers for people who define themselves as non-binary).

The reports' results show that gaps and discrimination have not all been overcome, but GEPs have certainly been more effective in recent years than in previous decades, which were characterised by a total absence of reflection on these issues.

The CRUI and the CUGs have become relevant institutional actors in the promotion of gender studies in Italy. Through their joint efforts, they have contributed to making universities more inclusive and respectful of gender diversity, promoting awareness and understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to this important social dimension.

Let us now consider in detail two of the most significant measures in relation to these issues in Italian universities.

⁷ The Comitato unico di Garanzia (*Unique Guarantee Committee*) (CUG) works to ensure gender equality and equal opportunities in the workplace, guaranteeing the absence of all forms of moral or psychological violence and discrimination.

First, the introduction of GEPs in Italian universities was motivated by the need to address gender inequalities in the academic sector and to promote equal opportunities for men and women (Addabbo et al., 2019; Fissi et al., 2022). Italian legislation concerning GEPs includes Law 120/2011 on ‘Urgent measures concerning equal opportunities’, which established the need for public institutions, including universities, to take concrete actions to promote gender equality.

GEPs were widely introduced in response to obligations arising from national and international legislation on gender equality, especially in relation to Horizon 2020 programmes for research funding (Bencivenga et al., 2021).

Italian universities have implemented GEPs through various initiatives and policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities and promoting equality in career opportunities, decision-making positions, access to resources, and organisational culture.

These plans may include actions such as encouraging women’s participation in academic and scientific fields, adopting merit-based selection and promotion criteria free of gender discrimination, implementing measures to reconcile work and family life, and introducing support structures and programmes for women pursuing academic careers. The main objective of GEPs is to create an inclusive and gender-equal academic environment in which men and women can realise their potential and contribute to advancing research and higher education.

A second measure is gender budgeting in universities, which involves analysing and evaluating the allocation of financial resources within academic institutions to promote gender equality and address any inequalities between men and women (Arena, 2020; Liccardo, 2020).

In Italy, the introduction of gender budgeting in universities has occurred gradually in recent years, in parallel with the adoption of policies and actions to promote gender equality in the academic sector. Although no specific data are available regarding the implementation of gender budgeting in Italian universities, many institutions are progressively integrating this approach into their decision-making and financial planning processes (Quartararo & Ruspini, 2021).

Some virtuous universities have established specific gender equality offices or commissions and have adopted policies and programmes to promote gender equality in several areas, including access to academic careers, representation in leadership roles, work–life balance, and the prevention of gender discrimination.

For instance, the University of Bologna has been recognised for its commitment to implementing gender policies through a wide range of initiatives, including mentoring programmes for female academics, work–life balance policies, and actions to foster greater female representation in leadership roles. Other Italian universities are following suit, adopting strategies and concrete measures to promote gender equality and improve the working and academic environment for all involved.

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