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Gender in Italian Political Science: the Neglected Dimension

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1. Introduction

Gender inequality in academia has long been a central issue in higher education and a sustained field of inquiry. Yet, despite the growing international literature on the topic, Italian political science has largely neglected it. With few exceptions, analyses of the discipline's development have seldom addressed gender, while research on the academic gender gap has been mostly carried out by sociologists, with little specific attention to political science.

This neglect is striking. Internationally, research on gender inequalities has been actively supported by major disciplinary associations such as the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), both of which have promoted sustained initiatives and projects on the issue.

This special issue seeks to gauge the dimensions of this long-standing neglect. It analyses women's underrepresentation in political science, reviews the discipline's engagement with gender, and brings to light the good practices of inclusion developed within national and international academic communities. In so doing, through the contributions collected here, it aims to open a long-overdue space for reflection and to reconnect Italian political science to an international debate in which gender is recognized as a central dimension of academic life.

2. Why and how this special issue

The goal of this collective enterprise is to provide an up-to-date picture of the gender dimension in Italian political science, fifty years after the discipline's institutional foundation. Drawing on the existing literature on gender and politics, the contributions – authored by both senior and junior scholars – analyze a variety of data and theoretical perspectives to map the state of a long-overlooked topic.

During the pandemic years, the Italian Political Science Association (SISP), under the initiative of its then president Luca Verzichelli, promoted the collection and organization of data on Italian political scientists in what became the *Archivio SISP Archive* (Bosco et al. 2024). This archive integrates multiple sources: the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) personnel database (available since 2001); printed materials from

the National University Council (CUN) documenting affiliations with the SPS/o4 disciplinary sub-field since 1991; archival records from the earlier CUN disciplinary sector (Qo2X) dating back to 1982; and the manual coding of individual researchers' CVs to capture additional micro-level variables such as year of birth and PhD completion. The most recent version of the Archive covers the period 1971–2023 and provides detailed information on career trajectories and institutional affiliations.

A second source mobilized in this special issue is *Women in Research and Higher Education* (WIRED), a dataset of academics working in Italy between 2011 and 2020, developed within a H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship at the University of Lausanne (PI: Camilla Gaiaschi). WIRED was specifically designed to track gender inequalities in academic career progression across the Italian higher education system.

The third original dataset utilized in this special issue regards the National Scientific Qualification (ASN). It covers the five first rounds of the process, including personal data on all the political scientists who applied to the ASN in the period 2012–2023, the ASN outcomes, the members of the ASN committees, as well as the qualified candidates who were hired by a local university after obtaining the qualification (by February 2025), and the time they had to wait before their promotion took effect.

Finally, original interviews were conducted with all women who became full professors in political science between 1980 and 2023, as well as with post-PhD and junior female scholars.

These multiple unpublished sources have been brought together for the first time to investigate systematically the role of gender in Italian political science.

3. Contributions and findings

This collection of articles focuses on three themes. First, gender inequalities in the academic careers of Italian political scientists are the main issue under study, with four articles focusing on different aspects of it. Second, our work provides an overview of the early development and institutionalization of gender studies within Italian Political Science. Finally, the special issue examines practices of inclusion and promotion of diversity, highlighting the roads for the representation of gender and sexual minorities within the international academic community.

Women's career progression is at the core of the research, as data have long been missing and it was important to collect and offer a reflection on them. Three contributions thus address women's career features, compared to those of their male colleagues and to those of other disciplines.

A general overview and starting point to understand the current situation and its evolution over time is offered by Gaiaschi and Grimaldi's article, *Overcoming Glass Ceilings, Glass Doors and Bottlenecks: Female Recruiting and Progression in Italian Political Science*. It provides an overview of women's career progression in Political Science and General Sociology, set against the broader context of Area 14 (Political and Social Sciences). The authors highlight distinct patterns of gender inequality with reference to political scientists, general sociologists, and Area 14 scholars. Two main configurations emerge. General Sociology is strongly feminized at entry levels (postdoc and RTDA), but women's share declines in the higher ranks, although it remains above the averages for

Area 14 and Political Science. By contrast, Political Science is male-dominated from the outset, with consistently lower female representation than both Area 14 and General Sociology across all career stages, culminating in the lowest share of female full professors.

The heavy "glass door" faced by female political scientists at the beginning of the profession is deepened by Gaiaschi, Lavizzari and Perego in their work on *Early-Career Gender Inequalities in Italian Political Science in the context of neoliberal academia*. With the help of the WIRED database, which is the only source to include detailed information on the postdoc level, they show that women face compounded disadvantages – lower entry into assistant professorships, longer precarity, and lower application and success rates for the National Scientific Qualification – with only 25% of RTDA and 23% of RTDB, a clear manifestation of the glass door effect.

At the other end of the career ladder, the passage from associate to full professorship is not easier. As shown by Feo and Bosco in their contribution, *Advancing against the Odds: Career Trajectories of Women Full Professors in Italian Political Science*, several obstacles make career advancement slippery. The authors demonstrate how the early-career glass door is compounded by a reinforced glass ceiling: women remain a minority among full professors, their promotions often requiring higher international credentials, while the National Scientific Qualification continues to disadvantage them in both access to and the timing of appointments.

These three articles on career progression are complemented by an analysis of the Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale carried out by Bosco and Prearo. *A Gendered Chokepoint? Italian Political Science and the Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* is the first study on the consequences of the ASN on career progression in Italian Political Science. Using an original, purpose-built dataset, they show that while the procedure appears gender-neutral at the associate level, it reinforces disparities at the full professor level, where women are underrepresented among applicants, less successful in obtaining qualification, and less likely to be promoted once qualified.

The fifth article of the special issue focuses on the novel strand of literature on gender and politics authored by Italian scholars. In their *Gender and Politics Research: The Evolution of a New Strand in Italian Political Science between Delays and Accelerations* Pamela Pansardi and Licia Papavero explore how the study of gender and politics has gradually taken root in Italian political science. After a few pioneering studies in the 1970s–1990s, the field gained momentum in the 2000s and expanded significantly in the following decade. The authors map its development across five areas: political representation, participation and leadership; public policy; political communication; international relations and area studies; and, more recently, intersectionality and LGBTQI+ politics. The authors show how local and global dynamics have converged to consolidate a once marginal field into a vibrant research area.

Finally, the sixth article addresses an even less considered dimension, namely the experiences of political scientists belonging to sexual minorities. In their *LGBTIQ+ Scholars within Political Science: An Exploratory Review of PSAs' Good Practices and (Un)Available Data*, Massimo Prearo and Federico Trastulli review initiatives of major political science associations (APSA, ECPR, IPSA, EPSA, PSA) to address discrimination and promote diversity, highlighting codes of conduct, ombudspersons, mentoring schemes, and monitoring reports. Yet the study reveals a structural blind spot: data on

sexual orientation and gender identity remain largely absent, rendering LGBTIQ+ scholars invisible and hindering the design of effective inclusion policies. By treating associations as key institutional actors, the work shows how these data gaps limit accountability and policy learning across contexts. It concludes with practice-informed recommendations for the Italian community, such as the establishment of a permanent Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) committee within SISP. In doing so, the article extends the debate from gendered glass doors and ceilings to the equally pressing issue of the invisibility of LGBTIQ+ scholars and studies within Italian political science and academia.

4. Conclusions: challenges and progress

Our analysis leaves little doubt: Italian Political Science remains one of the most male-dominated sectors within the social sciences. From entry to the highest rank, women are systematically underrepresented. This imbalance is especially stark for female political scientists working alongside colleagues in Area 14, where gender balance is far more advanced.

In 2023, gender parity was reached only among postdoctoral fellows (49% women), but the proportion dropped sharply at subsequent career stages: about 33% among RTD-A and RTD-B, 40% among associate professors, and only one woman for every three men among full professors. The National Scientific Qualification (ASN), intended to ensure transparency and fairness, has proved gender-neutral only at the associate level, not for women aspiring to full professorship.

Yet the picture is not without signs of progress. Women grew from under 20% of faculty in the late 1990s to 33.6% in 2023. The number of female full professors — 21 in 2023, the largest cohort ever — then rose to 26 (28.3%) by mid-2025. New resources such as the SISP Archive also make it possible to track these dynamics with unprecedented precision, while gender and politics has emerged as a vibrant strand of research within the discipline. Finally, political science associations have already started to institutionalize diversity and inclusion through codes of conduct, mentoring schemes, and equality plans. These efforts, reflected in the steady expansion of gender and politics research, indicate that the discipline is gradually equipping itself with instruments to enhance the visibility and legitimacy of LGBTIQ+ and minority scholars and studies within academia.

The glass, in our opinion, remains half-empty. But for the first time we hold the data, tools, and scholarly foundations needed to challenge entrenched inequalities and imagine a more inclusive future.

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