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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 H2O2O 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.

#### **References**

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# Overcoming Glass Ceilings, Glass Doors and Bottlenecks: Female Recruiting and Progression in Italian Political Science

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## Abstract

This article examines gender inequality in Italian academia, focusing on Political Science (SPS/04) compared with the broader Area 14 (Social and Political Sciences) and General Sociology (SPS/07), between 2005 and 2020. The period allows an assessment of changes over time, especially after the Gelmini reform (law 240/2010) and restrictions on turnover. Using original datasets and segregation indexes, we trace women's representation across academic career stages. Political Science shows persistent gender imbalance from the outset: women are underrepresented among postdocs and junior assistant professors (RTDA), and this disadvantage carries forward through the entire career ladder. By contrast, Area 14 shows stronger feminization at entry with women forming the majority among postdocs and nearing parity at RTDA, but faces sharper barriers at promotion, particularly to full professorships. General Sociology follows yet another pattern: women dominate at entry and are close to parity at mid-career, but their presence declines at the top. These findings highlight distinct configurations of gender inequality in Italian academia.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of women's underrepresentation in academia was first raised in the United States in the mid-1960s, notably through feminist sociologist Alice Rossi's seminal article *Why so Few?* (1965), which highlighted the challenges women were facing in accessing and remaining in science. However, it was not until at least the 1990s that the topic gained significant relevance in both the US and Europe, leading to a series of initiatives aimed at promoting the presence of women in research and academia, especially in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) fields. These efforts were framed not only as a matter of social justice but also as a matter of efficiency, given the considerable waste of human capital within the university system. At the time, the question 'Why so few?' was paralleled by the question 'Why (has improvement been) so slow?' (Valian 1999). Today, these questions remain unchanged, concerning both the phenomenon of horizontal segregation, namely the low number of women accessing some scientific fields, and vertical segregation, which



refers to women's slower career advancement and their scarce presence in top positions (i.e. Naldini & Poggio 2023).

In Italy the debate gained clear relevance especially after the 2010 university reform (L. 240/2010), also called the Gelmini reform. For several years, the issue remained a hot topic due to the cumulation of two different processes: firstly, the cuts in recruitment with the freezing of turnover from 2007 to 2017 and secondly, the precarization of the role of assistant professor (*Ricercatore*) set forth by the Gelmini reform itself.

So far, the research on gender inequalities in academia in Italy has focused on the whole academic population comprising all fields, or, at most, by comparing macro fields such as, on the one hand, the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) and, on the other, the STEMM disciplines (Murgia & Poggio 2019; Picardi 2019; Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020; Filandri & Pasqua 2021; Naldini & Poggio 2023). However, there is still scarce knowledge regarding the presence of women across different fields and sub-fields, despite some recent exceptions related to the sub-field of Political Science (Bosco & Feo 2024, Marino 2023; Bolgherini & Verzichelli 2023). Recent data show that the picture is far from homogeneous in both STEMM and SSH (Gaiaschi 2022 and forthcoming). According to the Ministry of University and Research's (MUR) classification of academic scientific fields<sup>1</sup> substantial differences persist across these fields. Within STEMM, the rate of women, considering all career positions from postdoc to full professorship, ranges between 56.2% in Biology (Area 05) and 23.5% in Industrial and Computer Engineering (Area 09), which is the least feminized field (2020 data). Among the SSH fields, Ancient, Philological-Literary and Historical Art Sciences (Area 10) is the most feminized field (55.6% of women) in the whole academic population, while the women's rate substantially decreases to 40% in the field of Law (Area 12). Moreover, such a picture can change considerably across the different positions of the career ladder. On this point, the use of indexes accounting for the different forms of vertical segregation – for example the *Leaky Pipeline Index* or the *Glass Ceiling Index* – can be useful. Indeed, the loss of female personnel between the first and final career stage (Leaky Pipeline Index) is particularly strong in Medicine (Area 06), among STEMM fields, and Political and Social Sciences (Area 14), among SSH. In addition, the proportion of female full professors is lower than the proportion of women in the general population (Glass Ceiling Index) particularly for Physics (Area 02), Earth Sciences (Area 04), Medicine (Area 06) and Industrial and Computer Engineering (Area 09) among STEMM and in Political and Social Sciences (Area 14) among SSH (Gaiaschi 2022, p. 148).

Against this background, the aim of this article is to highlight gender inequalities in academic careers, particularly in Political Science, as this seems to be a sub-field where improvement is particularly slow among SSH. The sub-field Political Science (which, in

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<sup>1</sup> The 14 scientific fields identified by the MUR are: Mathematical and Computer Sciences (Area 01); Physical Sciences (Area 02); Chemical Sciences (Area 03); Earth Sciences (Area 04); Biological Sciences (Area 05); Medical Sciences (Area 06); Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences (Area 07); Civil Engineering and Architecture (Area 08); Industrial and Information Engineering (Area 09); Ancient, Philological, Literary and Historical-Artistic Sciences (Area 10); Historical, Philosophical, Pedagogical and Psychological Sciences (Area 11); Legal Sciences (Area 12); Economic and Statistical Sciences (Area 13); Political and Social Sciences (Area 14). Each of these fields is divided into several sub-fields. Fields and sub-fields were reformed in 2022. Given the time frame under analysis, the data used for this article are not affected by the change in the nomenclature.

the above-mentioned MUR classification, is coded as SPS/04) will be compared, at a higher level, to the whole academic population and to the broader field of Political and Social Sciences (Area 14), to which political scientists belong, together with sociologists, political historians and political philosophers. Within area 14, the sub-field of General Sociology (SPS/07) has been chosen as a further point of comparison due to its relative proximity and size.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 recalls the theoretical debate on the gender gap in academia focusing on macro-level explanations, while section 3 provides some insights into the Italian University context. In section 4 we describe the dataset and the methods, and sections 5 and 6 give an account of empirical findings through descriptive statistics and the use of indexes. In the conclusion (section 7) we summarize the main findings and briefly discuss some possible solutions for promoting gender equality in academia and research.

## **2. The gender gap in academia: an overview of the literature**

Notwithstanding the progressive advance of women in academia, gender inequalities still persist both in terms of horizontal segregation, namely the uneven gender distribution across scientific fields (Rossi 1965; Valian 1999; Palomba 2012), and vertical segregation, namely the low and slow feminization of the highest positions in academia. Indeed, an increasing number of contributions (among others: Sabatier & Carrere 2010; Van den Brink & Benschop 2012; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2015; Marini & Meschitti 2018; Filandri & Pasqua 2021; Durodoye et al. 2020) have shed light on the so-called glass ceiling, which is the existence of an invisible barrier located at the top of an academic career, preventing women from becoming full professors or principal investigators. Further contributions (Gaughan & Robin 2004; Perna 2005; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden 2008; Bozzon, Murgia & Villa 2017; Murgia & Poggio 2018) have also focused on intermediate and early positions, showing that obstacles for women are not limited to the top of the career ladder but are present throughout their entire academic career path, including early positions. In particular, some research has pointed out how women in academia are particularly concentrated in lower and non-tenured positions and that they are more likely to leave the academic labour market than men (Alper 1993; Bozzon, Murgia & Villa 2017; Le Feuvre et al. 2019).

The literature has investigated the manifold reasons at the base of such inequalities, including gender differences in care and domestic work, in scientific production, in access to research funds, or discrimination due to unconscious gender biases. However, an efficient way to disentangle the whole debate is to divide between supply- and demand-side explanations (Carriero & Naldini 2022; Gaiaschi 2021). Supply-side approaches focus on gender differences in individual characteristics, namely gender differences in care responsibilities (see for example: Sax et al. 2002; Fox 2005; Heijstra, Bjarnason & Rafnsdottir 2015), in mobility and collaborations (Bozeman, Fay & Slade 2013; Beaudry & Larivière 2016) and self-promotion, namely the fact that women are less likely to take on leadership positions (Bosak & Sczesny 2008), also because they reshape their career aspirations with the awareness of working in a gender-unequal environment (Kelly & Grant 2012). Lastly, an important strand of literature has shed light on gender differences in scientific productivity with a specific focus on the structural determinants of

such differences (e.g. Abramo, D'Angelo & Caprasecca 2009; D'Amico, Vermigli & Cannello 2011; Van Arensbergen, van der Weijden & van der Besselaar 2012).

Turning to demand-side approaches, they point out the existence of gender biases, both at the individual (i.e. from employers) and organizational level, that generate discrimination in recruitment and promotion processes (Bagues, Sylos-Labini & Zinovyeva 2017; Checchi, Cicognani & Kulic 2019; Gërxhani, Kulic & Liechti 2023). Several contributions have shown how scientific excellence is framed by gender stereotypes that systematically disadvantage women (Addis & Villa 2003; van den Brink & Benschop 2011; Lund 2015). Others have focused on barriers and resistances to the application of gender equality policies inside academic institutions (Lombardo & Bustelo 2021; Verge 2021). Finally, more 'structural' approaches have focused on the role of networks and homophily, with men benefiting from their higher social capital within university institutions (Beaudry & Larivière 2016), as well as on forms of subtle segregation within scientific organizations, with women more concentrated in service and teaching, which are less rewarded in terms of career progression (Winslow 2010).

More recently, other demand-side studies go beyond the micro (or individual) and meso (or organizational) levels of explanation to focus on the institutional level that pertains to the reforms of the academic system as a whole (macro level). In this regard, numerous contributions have explored the gendered implications of recent 'neoliberal' transformations of university institutions, focusing on the effects of the 'meritocratic ideal' and the precarization of work due to cuts in public expenditure for higher education (Riegraf et al. 2010; Van den Brink & Benschop 2012; Ferree & Zippel 2015; Bozzon, Murgia & Villa 2017; Murgia & Poggio 2019; Gaiaschi 2023). This latter perspective has been chosen over other approaches.

Our research questions can basically be divided into two subgroups, the first being related to the problem of horizontal segregation: are there still fewer women than men in Italian academia more in general, and in the Social and Political Sciences field (Area 14) more specifically? Moreover, is the trend of the sub-field of Political Science (SPS/04) consistent, or not, with the broader Area 14? Are there differences from and similarities to the sub-field of General Sociology (SPS/07)?

The second block of our research questions relates to the problem of vertical segregation and thus whether it is still so hard for women to climb the academic ladder. This problem can be unpacked into other questions: does the gender gap only persist in the final position of full professorship, or is the gender gap to be found at all other career steps? As a consequence, by comparing the sub-field of Political Science (SPS/04) with the broader Area 14 and the sub-field of General Sociology (SPS/07) this paper focuses not only on the disadvantage of women in the final career stage but also at the early and mid-career steps, i.e. in the transition from the position of assistant professor to that of associate professor and in access to tenure-track positions.

The main expectations based on the literature relate to both forms of segregation. On the one hand, previous research has shown that political science has long been a highly male-dominated sub-field, with women having a marginal presence until the 1990s (Graziano 1986; Morlino 1989). Moreover, women have remained underrepresented in subsequent decades (Bosco & Feo 2024). Therefore, we expect female political

scientists to be underrepresented in all positions compared to the wider Area 14, especially in the top position of full professorship (Bolgherini & Verzichelli 2023).

On the other hand, previous studies (Picardi 2019; Gaiaschi & Musumeci 2020; Guarascio, Musumeci & Villa 2023), suggest that the gender gap among assistant professors increased after the 2010 Gelmini reform, especially for the RTD B position. Consequently, we also expect that since 2011 the situation has worsened for female assistant professors in the SPS/04 sub-field as well, especially for the RTD B position, as has occurred in other fields.

Additionally, we expect that the freeze in turnover may have stronger negative effects for women and so it may have slowed down female recruitments at all levels, including for associate and full professors. At the same time, the end of the freeze in 2017 should have contributed to an amelioration in the rate of women across all positions, as previous literature has suggested (Gaiaschi & Musumeci 2020). Thus, we expect an amelioration in the feminization of such positions after 2017 in the SPS/04 sub-field as well.

### 3. Italian university transformations: towards a market-oriented approach

From a macro-level perspective, Italy is an interesting case in point because it has experienced various processes of change related to organizational and financial reforms involving the public university system as a whole since the mid-2000s (Capano 2011 and 2020).

The reorganization of the Italian university system began in 2005 with the Moratti reform (law 230/2005), which put an end to the role of permanent assistant professor (RU) and introduced fixed-term assistant professors (*ricercatore a tempo determinato* in Italian, or RTD) for the first time. However, the idea that research could be entrusted mainly to temporary staff was the key to the subsequent 240/2010 law (Guarascio, Musumeci & Villa 2023).

In 2010, the so-called Gelmini reform (law 240/2010) further strengthened this approach by introducing two new types of assistant professor position: a junior (non-tenured) assistant professor, also called RTDA, based on a three-year fixed-term contract (renewable once for two more years), and a senior (tenure-track) assistant professor, also called RTDB, based on a three-year non-renewable fixed-term contract reserved for those who had previously held an RTDA position or had other postdoctoral experiences, with the possibility of becoming associate professor after obtaining the National Scientific Qualification<sup>2</sup>, and after receiving a positive local evaluation from their university<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Scientific Qualification is an evaluation process introduced by the 240/2010 Law managed by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) awarding a qualification based on standard metrics of individual performance that academics need to hold when applying for the positions of associate and full professors.

<sup>3</sup> In 2022, a unique position of fixed term tenure-track assistant professor (also called RTT) was introduced, with a contract length of a maximum of 6 years instead of the existing RTDA and RTDB. Being comprised between 2005 and 2020, the data used for this article do not include this type of position, whose very first contracts were implemented in 2023.

While the 2005 reform was mainly aimed at reducing University research funding and staff turnover, the 2010 reform's objectives were certainly much broader. From this point of view, the redesign of the early-steps academic positions undertaken by the 240/2010 law was part of wider structural and cultural changes inspired by the New Public Management (NPM) principles of competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, in the context of profound transformations that had also affected other European countries in previous years.

The NPM principles led to three lines of change that justified a series of financial policies from 2007 to 2017 aimed at cuts and turnover freezes. These were: the institutional autonomy of public universities; the evaluation of the quality of research of individuals (through, for example, the introduction of the National Scientific Qualification) and organizations (through the 'Research Quality Assessment', in Italian *Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca* or VQR, see below), as well as the introduction of competitive funding mechanisms based on results (Regini 2014).

In a first phase, from 2008 to 2012, the Italian university system was squeezed by a sharp reduction in its overall funding, which is guaranteed by the Ministry of University and Research through the so-called Ordinary Financing Fund (FFO) (Viesti 2016), and the consequent, prolonged restrictions on turnover that significantly reduced the number of teaching staff. As pointed out by Zamponi and Gonzales (2019), these cuts are widely considered to be one of the earliest manifestations of austerity/anti-austerity cycles. In particular, following the approval of Law 133/2008, 'state funding for public universities was cut by 63.5 million euros in 2009, 190 million euros in 2010, 316 million euros in 2011 and 417 million euros in 2012' (Ibidem, p. 5).

In a second phase (2012-2016), which paralleled the implementation of periodical evaluation mechanisms of University and Department research quality (through the above mentioned Research Quality Assessment) in order to better allocate resources, the funding cuts were maintained and continued. For example, there was a further cut of €455 million in 2013. Furthermore, the implementation of such evaluation processes resulted in an increasing territorial differentiation of state funding (FFO) allocation, entailing increasing differences in the capacity of universities to hire new personnel or grant career progression. Hence, there are now greater staff turnover disparities between universities.

Since 2017, funding for universities has again begun to grow in nominal terms, but this is mainly due to the provision of extraordinary funds (mainly for recruitment), a circumstance that does not guarantee future funding. Staff turnover has returned to 100 percent, but still varies between universities, taking into account that an increasing proportion of the teaching staff is non-permanent.

In 2021, 8.55 billion euro of PNRR funds were earmarked for research and development. However, most of these resources have been invested in a variety of pre-role measures, such as the creation of temporary post-doc positions (in Italian *asseggni di ricerca*), RTDA positions and PhDs.

Finally, in 2024, the right-wing Meloni government cut €500 million from the FFO — one of the largest cuts since 2013 — which would seem to usher in a new era of retrenchment.

Against this background, this paper aims to understand changes over time in the presence of women on the academic ladder, with a particular focus on the implications, for women, of macro-level processes, namely the turnover freeze due to financial cuts and the precarization of early-career positions. The analyses will be carried out on the sub-field of Political Science, in comparison with the broader field of Political and Social Sciences (Area14) and with the sub-field of General Sociology (SPS/07).

#### 4. Data and Methods

In this paper we rely on an original dataset including the number of employed academics as of 31 December of each year in the period 2000-2020 (with the exception of the data on post-docs which start in 2005), by gender<sup>4</sup>, qualification, geographic area, scientific field and sub-field in Italian public and private universities. More specifically, the timeframe varies according to the position. Broadly speaking, the starting point is the year 2000 for pre-reform assistant, associate and full professors, 2005 for post-docs and 2011 for the post-reform assistant professors. As a consequence, the timeframe covered by our dataset does not allow us to capture the effect of PNRR funding, nor the most recent cuts. Data were provided by the statistical office of the Ministry of Research and University (MUR previously MIUR) under the aegis of the WIRED project<sup>5</sup>. Differently from other publicly-available, open-source datasets<sup>6</sup>, the one used for this article comprises micro-data on post-docs (in Italian *assegnisti di ricerca*) over time. Their presence is innovative compared to other studies on the Italian academic population as it allows us to seize the trends of early-career positions over time and construct indexes of vertical segregation accounting for the whole career trajectory.

The professional qualifications to which the data refer are: full (*professore ordinario* or PO) and associate (*professore associato* or PA) professors, pre-Gelmini reform permanent assistant professors (*ricercatore universitario* or RU), type A or ‘junior’ and type B ‘senior’ fixed-term (post-Gelmini) assistant professors (*ricercatore a tempo determinato* or RTDA and RTDB for junior and senior respectively), and post-docs (*assegnisti di ricerca* or AR). The data are divided into fields (*area scientifica*) and sub-fields (*settore scientifico-disciplinare* or SSD), as they are identified by the National University Council (CUN).

The data were analysed by means of descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions, averages and percentage changes, as well as by means of vertical segregation indexes, including the glass ceiling index (European Commission 2024), the glass door index (Picardi 2019) and a recently introduced index called the bottleneck index (Gaiaschi & Musumeci 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the data provided do not allow us to identify non binary or transgender individuals. We are aware of the fact that this is a limit hampering data inclusivity as well as the accuracy of these analyses.

<sup>5</sup> WIRED – Women In Research and higher EDucation (GA 898507, PI: Camilla Gaiaschi), EU Horizon 2020 MSCA-IF.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://cercauniversita.mur.gov.it/> include and <https://ustat.mur.gov.it/opendata/>. The former includes micro-data on the academic population but it lacks information on post-docs over time. The latter has time-series data, including on post-docs, but on an aggregated level and with very limited information.

The Glass Ceiling Index (GCI) has been used both at the institutional level (OECD 2015; European Commission 2024) and, more recently, at the academic level (Picardi 2019) to measure female under-representation in the top positions of the academic career ladder, that is, among full professors. In the well-known She Figures report, the European Commission defines the GCI as the ratio between the proportion of women in grades A, B, and C of their academic career in a given year [ $PW(a + b + c), Y$ ] and the proportion of women in grade A in the same year [ $PW(a), y$ ] (European Commission 2024). Grade A corresponds to full professor and grade B to associate professor (European Commission 2024). On the contrary, the definitions of grade C change from country to country, thus implying difficulties – recognized by the Commission itself – of cross-country comparisons. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development definition (OECD 2015), which is used in the She Figures report, grade C includes both assistant professors and post-docs. According to the MIUR definition, which is the definition adopted in this work, grade C includes only assistant professors (pre-reform RU and post-reform RTDB and RTDA), while post-docs are included in grade D (if the MIUR definition is adopted, the GCI equation changes as it coherently reports, in the nominator, grade D as well).

Therefore, the GCI reported in this work is calculated as follows:

$$GCI = \frac{\%W(a + b + c + d); Y}{\%W(a); Y}$$

that is, as the ratio between the proportion of women in grades A, B, C and D of the academic track [ $\%W(a+b+c+d), Y$ ] and the proportion of women in grade A in a given year [ $\%W(a), Y$ ].

The GCI measures the disadvantage women experience at the top of the career ladder. As such, it does not allow gender inequalities to be measured across the previous steps of the career ladder, namely in the transition from D (post-doc) to C (assistant professor) level, and from C (assistant professor RU, RTDB, RTDA) to B level (associate professor, PA).

The first issue has been addressed by Picardi (2019) with the Glass Door Index (GDI), which measures the under-representation of women in access to assistant professor positions, and it is calculated as follows:

$$GDI = \frac{\%W(c + d); Y}{\%W(c); Y}$$

that is, as the ratio of the proportion of women in grades C (assistant professors) and D (post-docs) of the academic career in a given year [ $\%W(c+d), Y$ ] to the proportion of women in grade C (assistant professors) in the same year [ $\%W(c), Y$ ].

In her article, Picardi considers only tenured or tenure-track assistant professors, that is, respectively, the RU for the pre-reform years and RTDB for the post-reform years. In this article, we calculate the GDI following this approach. In addition, we calculate the GDI also considering, for the post-reform years, both tenure-track or ‘senior’ (RTDB) and non-tenure-track or ‘junior’ (RTDA) positions of assistant professor.

The second issue was addressed by Gaiaschi and Musumeci (2020) with the Glass Bottleneck Index (GBI) which is inspired by the metaphor of the middle-level bottleneck

used in management studies (Yap & Konrad 2009). The GBI measures the gender gap at mid-career, i.e. in the transition from the position of assistant professor (RU, RTDB, RTDA) to that of associate professor (PA).

The Glass Bottleneck Index (GBI) is calculated as follows:

$$GBI = \frac{\%W(b+c); Y}{\%W(b); Y}$$

that is, as the ratio between the proportion of women in career grades B and C [%W(b+c), Y] and the proportion in grade B [%W(b), Y].

An index greater than one indicates that women are under-represented among full professors (in the case of the GCI), associate professors (in the case of the GBI), or among assistant professors (in the case of the GDI). The higher the index, the greater the disadvantage.

## 5. Women across career stages: comparing Political Science, the wider field of Political and Social Sciences, and the sub-field of General Sociology

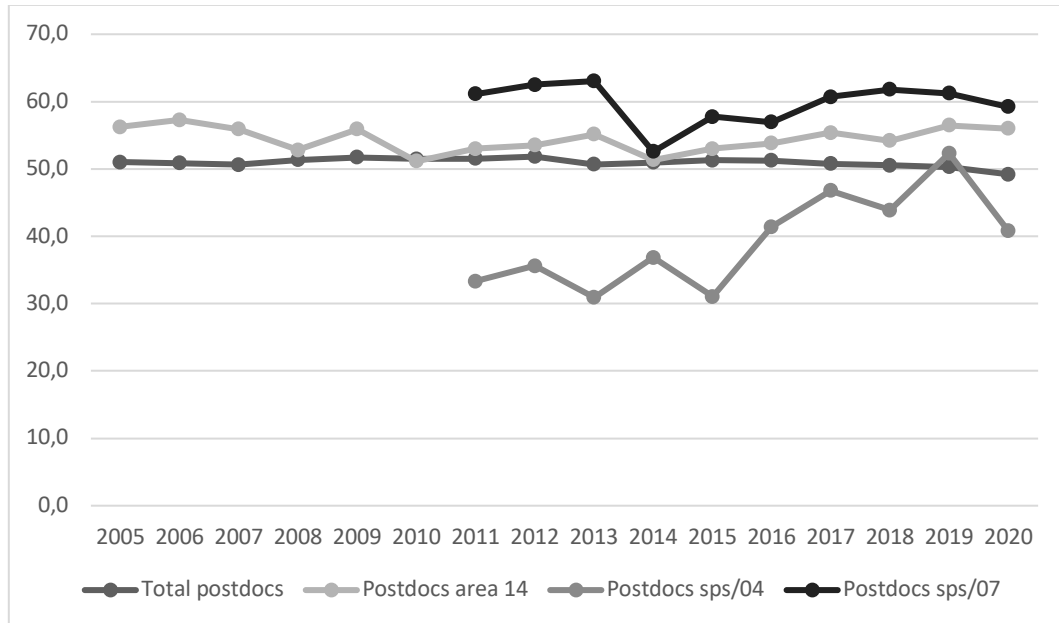
To address our research questions, we first provide descriptive statistics on gender distribution across positions and years, in the whole academic population and in the field and sub-fields under investigation. Secondly, we provide the three above-mentioned indexes in the same sub-populations.

Figures from 1 to 6 show women's distribution across the hierarchy, taking into account the whole academic population comprising all scientific fields, the field of Political and Social Sciences (Area 14), and the sub-fields of Political Science (SPS/04) and General Sociology (SPS/07).

Figure 1 shows that post-doctoral positions are rather gender-balanced, with women representing 51 percent on average from 2005 to 2020 considering all fields. However, after the Gelmini reform and the end of the turnover freeze, the data witness a slight decrease in the female post-docs rate. Moreover, the female presence is higher in Area 14 than in all fields combined. The average over the whole period is 54.4 percent of female postdocs, with a decrease during the turnover freeze (53.2%) and an increase afterwards (55.6%).

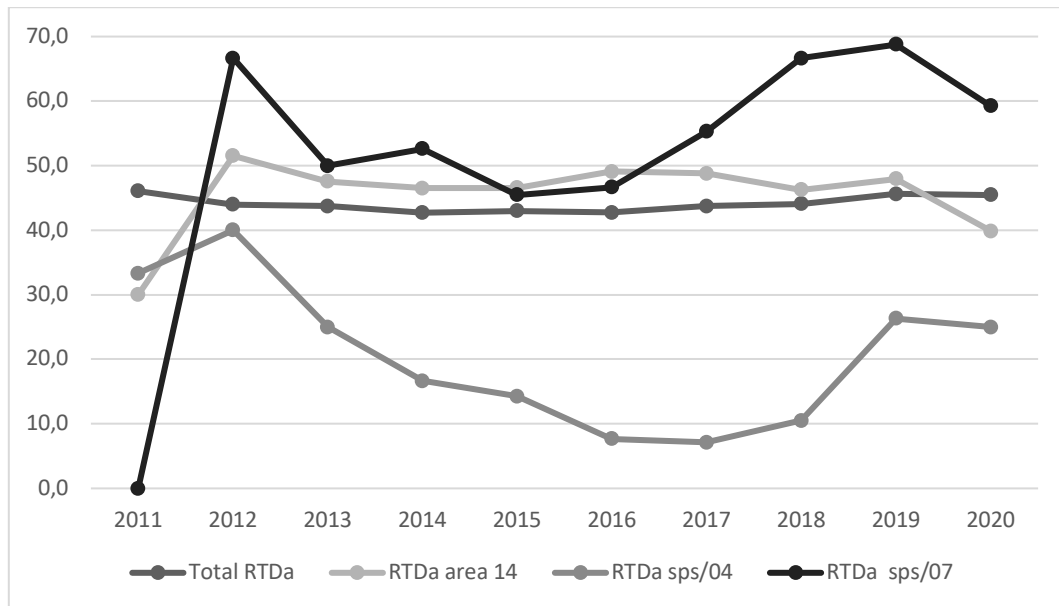
Turning to the sub-fields SPS/04 and SPS/07, data on postdocs are only available from 2011 onwards. The early career situation is different when Political Science (SPS/04) is compared to the broader Area 14 and to General Sociology (SPS/07). In fact, over the period considered (2011-2020), the share of female postdocs in SPS/04 (mean value 39.3%) is always lower, both compared to the entire population (except for the year 2019) and compared to Area 14 (-15.1 percentage points) and especially to SPS/07 (-20.4 percentage points). In sum, Figure 1 shows that while feminization is stronger in Area 14 and especially in SPS/07, SPS/04 stands out for its persistently low representation of women. This result is in line with our expectations and confirms that SPS/04 is still a male-dominated sector even at the bottom of the academic ladder.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of Female Post Doc: total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2005-2020)



Note: First post-docs per sub-field (in SPS/04 and SPS/07) appeared in 2011.  
 Source: authors' elaboration.

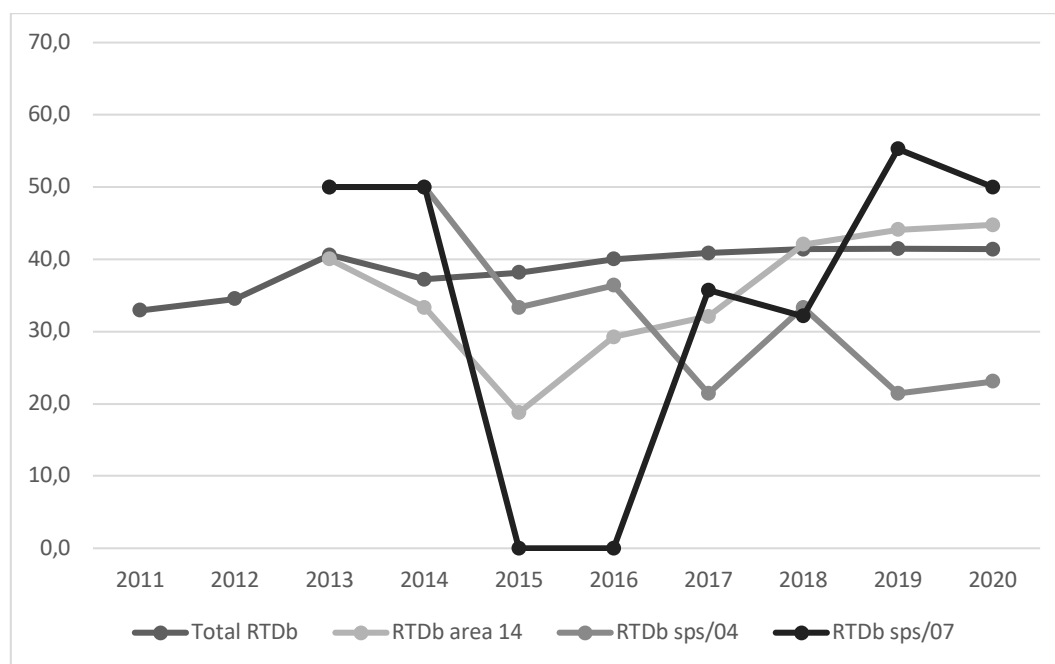
As, junior assistant professor (RTDA) is a precarious position which was introduced by the Gelmini reform. However, it is perceived as a more stable position compared to the post-doc, as it is the stepping stone to tenure-track positions. In contrast to the post-doc position, Figure 2 shows that such a position is not gender equal, both considering all fields combined (mean value for women equal to 44.1% in the timeframe) and Area 14 only (mean value 45.4%). Similarly to post-doctoral positions, the sub-fields of Political Science and General Sociology behave very differently. Women represent on average 51.1% of the RTDAs in General Sociology over the period considered. However, until 2017, women were less than half of the population (45.2%), while after the turnover freeze, a significant increase was observed, with a peak of 69% of female RTDA in 2019. On the contrary, female RTDAs in Political Science are equal to 20.6% throughout the period, with a peak of 40 percent in 2012. However, this peak may reflect the small overall number of contracts in that year, which inflate the percentage. This result again confirms the unequal representation of women in Political Science.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of Female RTDA: total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2011-2020)

Note: in 2011, there was only one RTDA SPS/07 hired, a man, which explains the 0% value in the graph.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Figure 3 shows that, considering all fields combined, from 2011 to 2020 the presence of female RTDBs – which, as aforementioned, is a tenure-track position – is less than 40%, being on average 38.8%. The female rate of RTDBs in Area 14 is even lower (35.5% being the mean value over the whole period), although after 2018 (and thus by the end of the freeze of the turnover) it experiences an increase, reaching or slightly exceeding the percentage of RTDBs in the whole academic population. As far as the SPS/04 and SPS/07 sub-fields are concerned, useful comparisons can only be made from 2013 onwards. Also due to the low number of contracts, in both 2013 and 2014 women represent half of the population in both sub-fields. In 2015 there is a strong decrease for both sub-fields and from that moment on, the female rate of RTDBs in Political Science has always been smaller than the one considering all fields combined. As for Sociology, the rate of female RTDBs was unstable up until 2018, with a substantial parity in the first years followed by a drop in 2015 and 2016 when no women were reported (but this should be interpreted in the light of the low number of RTDBs across sub-fields more in general). In the last two years considered, the rate of female sociologists exceed the percentage of female RTDBs in the whole academic population, in Area 14 and in the SPS/04 sub-field. Today, they represent half of the population in their sub-field, while in the SPS/04 sub-field the share of women has decreased and is barely less than a quarter of the total population of political scientists. This may be related also to the fact that the RTDA position, from which some RTDBs are recruited, is more male-dominated in Political Science than in General Sociology.

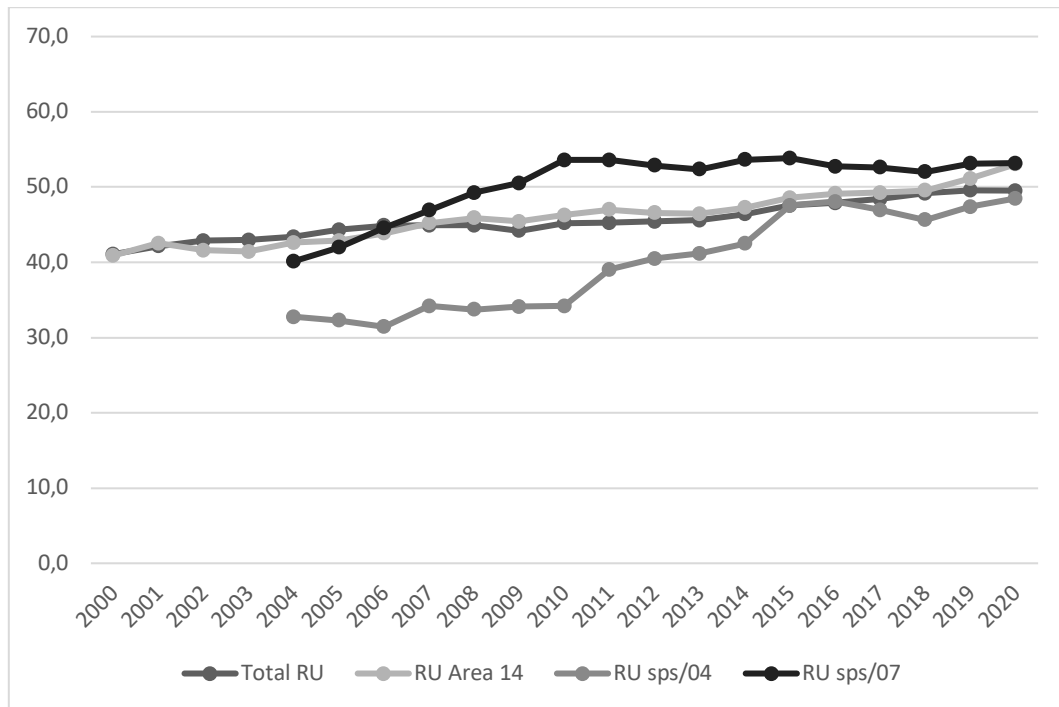
**Figure 3.** Percentage of female RTDB: total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2011-2020)

Note: In 2011, Area 14 accounted for only two RTDBs, both in the SPS/07 sub-field and both women. The following year two men were hired (in the SPS/07 and in the SPS/08 sub-fields). Because of the low numbers of RTDBs registered in these two years, which makes gender distribution irrelevant, the year 2011 and 2012 were removed from the graph both for Area 14 and for the two sub-fields to make data easier to interpret. In 2015 and 2016, there were no female RTDBs for the SPS/07 sub-field, but only one and nine male RTDBs, respectively. The data suffer from low numbers, leading to strong fluctuations from year to year.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Although the tenured pre-reform RU position was legally abolished in 2010, a transitional period allowed universities to continue, albeit at a decreasing rate, to recruit for this role for some time thereafter. In fact, around 1,000 RU were recruited both in 2010 and in 2011, then the recruitment of this type of contract dropped to 500 in 2012, 50 in 2013 and it kept on dropping in the following years in the whole population. Interestingly, Figure 4 shows that the feminization of this position has increased since 2010 for all the categories examined also because of the higher likelihood for men of becoming associate professors compared to women, who have gradually become the majority of pre-reform assistant professors (Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020).

Both the precarization of early academic positions and the freeze on staff turnover have contributed to the feminization of the pre-reform tenured assistant professorship (RU). In particular after the Gelmini reform female RU increased across all fields (+3.8 percentage points from 2011 to 2020), for Area 14 (+5.3 percentage points), for SPS/04 (+11.5 percentage points) and for SPS/07 (+6.3 percentage points). In other words, women have become, or are close to becoming, the majority of academic staff in a stable but less prestigious position. Our data show that this is precisely the case in the SPS04 sub-field as well. Probably, as some qualitative research has pointed out (Bosco & Feo 2024), it is likely that the very high or exclusive presence of men in ASN and selection committees tends to favour homosocial choice mechanisms, particularly in highly masculinized fields such as SPS/04.

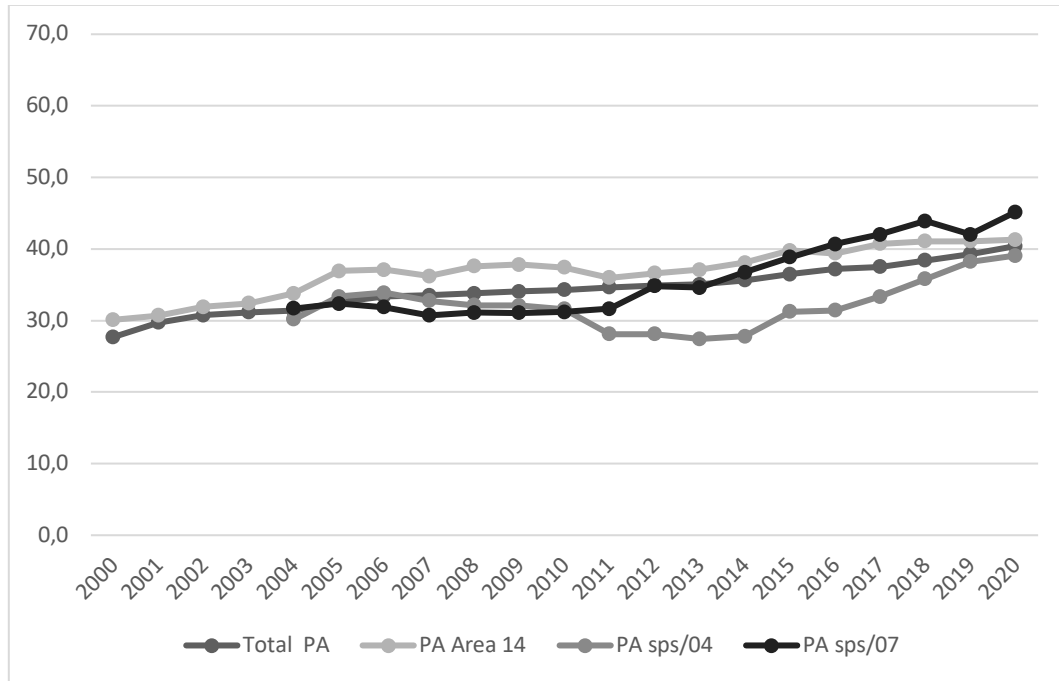
**Figure 4.** Percentage of Female RU: total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2000-2020)

Source: authors' elaboration.

With regard to the associate professor position (PA), the average proportion of women in all fields from 2000 to 2020 is equal to 34.4%. As shown in Figure 5, the proportion of women in Area 14 is always higher compared to the entire population, with an average of 36.8% over the whole period. Within Area 14, the sub-field of General Sociology (SPS/07) out-performs the Area while the sub-field of Political Science (SPS/04) under-performs it, with the lowest female proportion at this level. Regarding trends, the data suggest a slight amelioration in the number of women among associate professors which is quite constant over the years in the general population and in Area 14, while the two sub-fields show non-linear trends, probably due to the lower numbers, with an acceleration of recruitments between 2004 and 2010 for SPS/07 and between 2010 and 2015 for SPS/04. However, unlike the other categories, the share of female political scientists remained below 40% even after the turnover freeze ended.

Despite the feminization of pre-reform tenured assistant professor and associate professor positions, we can still confirm our expectation of a lower presence of female political scientists compared to women in all fields and the SPS/07 sub-field.

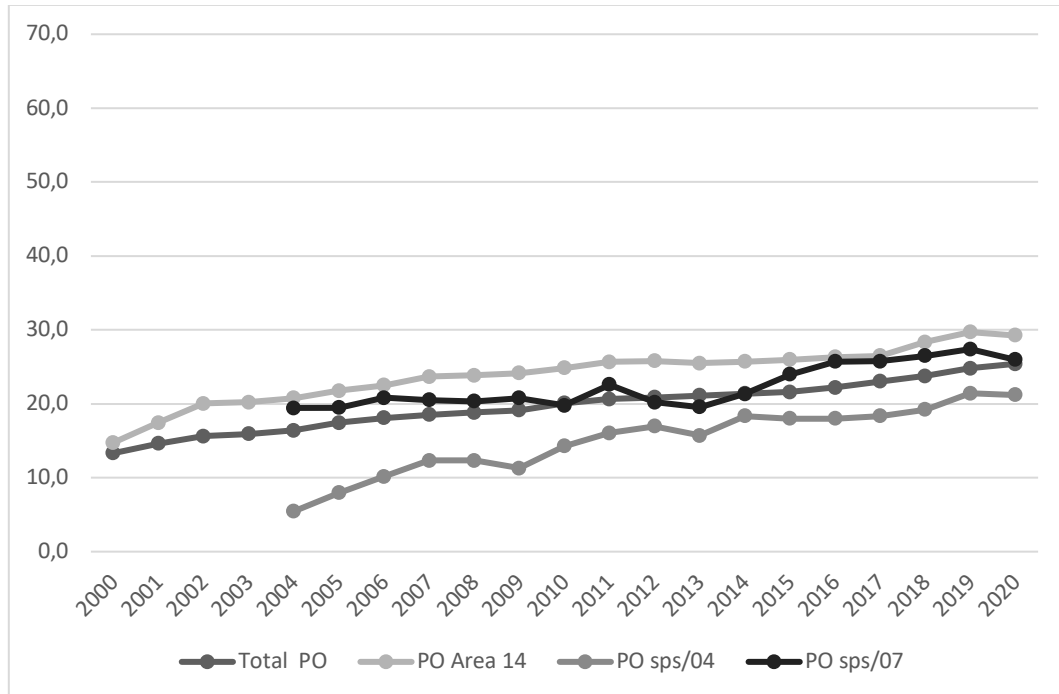
**Figure 5.** Percentage of female associate professors: total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2000-2020)



Source: authors' elaboration.

As expected, the gender gap is by far the widest for female full professors (PO). As shown in Figure 6, the threshold of 20% of women was reached in Area 14 in 2002, in General Sociology in 2006 and in 2010 for all the fields together, whereas in Political Science this threshold was not exceeded until 2019. Once again, SPS/04 seems to be the most problematic sub-field from a gender perspective. In fact, the share of female full professors in the sub-field of Political Science is always lower than the share of female full professors over the whole academic population, Area 14 and SPS/07. With regard to trends, the data suggest a slight amelioration in the number of women over time, which is constant for the general population, Area 14 and the SPS/07 sub-field, with a pretty flat trend from 2005 to 2013, which – at least for the most recent years – may be partly due to the cuts in turnover. The effect of the restrictions in funding is more apparent for the SPS/04 sub-field, which witnessed a strong deterioration in the female rate from 2009 to 2014. The highest presence of women full professors was after the end of the turnover freeze for all categories, specifically in 2019 for Area 14 (29.7%), SPS/04 (21.4%) and for SPS/07 (27.4%), whereas for all fields combined the peak was registered in 2020 (25.4%).

**Figure 6.** Percentage of Female Full Professors: total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2000-2020)



Source: authors' elaboration.

## 6. Measuring vertical segregation with glass indexes

In order to better measure the disadvantages that women experience throughout all the steps of the career ladder, starting from the highest level, i.e. full professor, then looking at the middle position of associate professor, and finally focusing on the lowest position, i.e. RTDB (or RTDB plus RTDA), we use the following indexes: the Glass Ceiling Index (GCI), the Glass Bottleneck Index (GBI) and the Glass Door Index (GDI).

Regarding the GCI, Table 1 shows a progressive amelioration in the index over time across all fields and for Area14. With regard to sub-fields, one must remember that these indexes reflect the lower number of observations, which make them quite unstable from one year to another. Having said that, the SPS/04 index has been quite stable over time, while the SPS/07 index has experienced a non-linear trend, with a slight deterioration from 2008 to 2013, after which it started to decrease again, suggesting that the turnover freeze was particularly strong for sociologists and for female sociologists more specifically. The end of the freeze seems to have improved the situation for all categories, as from 2017 the index decreases for the academic population (from 1.87 in the years 2007-2017 to 1.65 in the years 2018-2020 on average), for Area 14 (from 2.00 to 1.79), for the SPS/07 sub-field (from 2.03 to 1.93) and, though to a smaller extent, for the SPS/04 sub-field (from 1.45 to 1.42). The data show that, despite the strong feminization of Area 14 (stronger than the whole academic population, see Fig. 6), it is still more difficult for women to become full professors in this field compared to all other fields. Similarly, despite the higher presence of women in SPS/07 compared to SPS/04, the data show that

female sociologists are less likely to become full professors than female political scientists.

All in all, our third expectation was only partially confirmed. By the end of the turnover freeze, the number of female full professors in SPS/04 had increased only marginally. In other words, the legacy of strong masculinity in the sub-field has not been challenged.

**Table 1.** Glass Ceiling Index: Total population, Area14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2005-2020)

| Year | GCI  | GCI - area 14 | GCI - SPS/04 | GCI - SPS/07 |
|------|------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| 2005 | 1.99 | 2.13          | 1.40         | 1.87         |
| 2006 | 1.96 | 2.12          | 1.37         | 1.88         |
| 2007 | 1.94 | 2.11          | 1.44         | 1.87         |
| 2008 | 1.94 | 2.11          | 1.41         | 1.93         |
| 2009 | 1.95 | 2.12          | 1.38         | 1.95         |
| 2010 | 1.89 | 2.01          | 1.37         | 1.96         |
| 2011 | 1.86 | 1.98          | 1.45         | 2.13         |
| 2012 | 1.88 | 1.99          | 1.52         | 2.14         |
| 2013 | 1.87 | 1.99          | 1.44         | 2.11         |
| 2014 | 1.86 | 1.95          | 1.48         | 2.05         |
| 2015 | 1.84 | 1.96          | 1.46         | 2.08         |
| 2016 | 1.80 | 1.91          | 1.52         | 2.01         |
| 2017 | 1.74 | 1.87          | 1.48         | 2.05         |
| 2018 | 1.70 | 1.83          | 1.43         | 2.01         |
| 2019 | 1.64 | 1.79          | 1.49         | 1.96         |
| 2020 | 1.60 | 1.74          | 1.35         | 1.90         |

Source: authors' elaboration.

With regard to the GBI, Table 2 shows a clear disadvantage for women in becoming associate professors, although this gap is less pronounced compared to that of full professors. In particular, regarding the whole period (2005-2020), this index is higher on average for women in the SPS/07 sub-field (1.31), compared to Area 14 (1.28) and to all fields combined (1.22), while for women in the SPS/04 sub-field it is rather low as it reaches full parity (with a mean value over the years equal to 0.98, suggesting a slight female advantage). At the same time, the end of the turnover freeze seems to have improved the situation for women, considering all fields combined (from 1.24 in the years 2007-2017 to 1.13 in the years 2018-2020 on average) and in Area 14 (from 1.29 to 1.20 comparing the two sub-periods), but the improvement was slight for female sociologists (from 1.33 to 1.32) and does not affect the situation of political scientists (equal to 0.98 on average in both periods).

All in all, results show that despite the higher presence of associate professors in SPS/07 compared to SPS/04, it is in the former that it is more difficult for women to reach the position of associate professor. The good performance of female political scientists at the associate level parallels the fairly good results reported at the full professor level.

Consequently, our third expectation is not met for associate professors in SPS/04. Specifically, the share of women remains unchanged over time and does not appear to be impacted by the end of the turnover freeze.

**Table 2.** Glass Bottleneck Index: total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2005-2020)

| Year | GBI  | GBI - area 14 | GBI - SPS/04 | GBI - SPS/07 |
|------|------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| 2005 | 1.27 | 1.32          | 1.01         | 1.15         |
| 2006 | 1.26 | 1.33          | 0.98         | 1.17         |
| 2007 | 1.26 | 1.33          | 1.00         | 1.19         |
| 2008 | 1.26 | 1.33          | 0.98         | 1.24         |
| 2009 | 1.27 | 1.34          | 0.98         | 1.25         |
| 2010 | 1.26 | 1.30          | 0.96         | 1.31         |
| 2011 | 1.25 | 1.30          | 0.98         | 1.41         |
| 2012 | 1.26 | 1.30          | 1.01         | 1.44         |
| 2013 | 1.26 | 1.31          | 0.97         | 1.43         |
| 2014 | 1.24 | 1.27          | 0.98         | 1.35         |
| 2015 | 1.21 | 1.26          | 0.95         | 1.34         |
| 2016 | 1.19 | 1.23          | 1.00         | 1.30         |
| 2017 | 1.18 | 1.24          | 1.00         | 1.35         |
| 2018 | 1.16 | 1.21          | 0.98         | 1.34         |
| 2019 | 1.14 | 1.21          | 1.03         | 1.33         |
| 2020 | 1.11 | 1.17          | 0.94         | 1.29         |

Source: authors' elaboration.

Tables 3a and 3b report indexes at the assistant professor level. In order to calculate the index, the female rate among pre-reform assistant professors (RU) is used up until the year 2012. Since 2013, the female rate among the post-reform assistant professor has been used instead<sup>7</sup>. Table 3a shows the index calculated by considering the senior assistant professor only or 'RTDB', which is a tenure-track position (see section 4), whereas Table 3b considers both senior (RTDB) and junior, non-tenure-track (RTDA), positions.

Starting with the stricter version (Table 3a), the data show that, on average, it became more difficult for women to obtain an assistant professor position after the Gelmini reform, i.e. after the change from a stable to a temporary contract for assistant professors. This holds true, both for all fields (from 1.04 in the period 2005-2010 to 1.18 in the period 2011-2020 on average) and for Area 14 (from 1.09 to 1.46 on average). Unfortunately, the lack of data on post-docs in SPS/04 and SPS/07 does not allow us to look at changes across the two sub-periods for these two sub-fields.

At the same time, the comparison with the GBI in the post-reform era proves to be particularly eloquent: since 2013, it has become more difficult for women both in Area 14 and in General Sociology to obtain a senior assistant professor position compared to associate professor position (1.56 vs. 1.24 on average for Area 14 and 1.42 vs. 1.34 for

<sup>7</sup> We chose 2013 as the starting year to calculate the GDI with the post-reform assistant professor because in 2011 and 2012 recruitment of this figure was negligible.

SPS/07 over the period 2013-2020). As for all fields combined, the penalty, since 2013, is extremely similar (1.19 vs 1.21). However, it should be observed that in the pre-reform years it was much easier, for women, to become assistant professor than associate professor. Once again, the political scientists behave quite differently, as there is a negligible difference in achieving the associate professor position compared to the RTDB position in the post-reform years (0.98 vs. 0.96). These results suggest that, generally speaking, the strongest obstacles for women are now not so much in the transition from assistant to associate professor, as it was before the reform, but in the previous step, from post-doc to assistant professorship. This is quite trivial given that, following the Gelmini reform, the senior assistant professor is – de facto – a ‘quasi’ associate professor, as such a contract is quasi-automatically transformed into an associate professor position after three years. As a consequence, women’s negative selection has now been brought forward to the previous level. However, this does not hold true for political scientists, where the GBI and the GDI remain quite similar, with few women making the pool of candidates (both in the case of promotion to associate professor and in the case of promotion to assistant professor) and more or less the same (few) women get promoted.

Since 2018, that is after the end of the freeze, the data suggest that the situation has improved as the GDI has decreased for all categories, although the disadvantage for women in the SPS/07 sub-field is always the highest (1.55 on average for the period 2018-2020) compared to the SPS/04 sub-field (0.95) and the whole of Area 14 (1.23).

**Table 3a.** Glass Door Index (RU and RTDB): total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2005-2020)

| Year | GDI (b) | GDI (b) - area 14 | GDI (b) - SPS/04 | GDI (b) - SPS/07 |
|------|---------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 2005 | 1.05    | 1.09              | na               | na               |
| 2006 | 1.04    | 1.10              | na               | na               |
| 2007 | 1.04    | 1.08              | na               | na               |
| 2008 | 1.04    | 1.05              | na               | na               |
| 2009 | 1.05    | 1.08              | na               | na               |
| 2010 | 1.05    | 1.03              | na               | na               |
| 2011 | 1.05    | 1.04              | 0.95             | 1.04             |
| 2012 | 1.05    | 1.05              | 0.95             | 1.06             |
| 2013 | 1.23    | 1.35              | 0.62             | 1.22             |
| 2014 | 1.33    | 1.50              | 0.68             | 1.05             |
| 2015 | 1.30    | 2.69              | 0.84             | na               |
| 2016 | 1.22    | 1.70              | 0.99             | na               |
| 2017 | 1.18    | 1.57              | 1.71             | 1.59             |
| 2018 | 1.15    | 1.19              | 1.05             | 1.78             |
| 2019 | 1.15    | 1.25              | 0.97             | 1.48             |
| 2020 | 1.14    | 1.23              | 0.83             | 1.39             |

Source: authors' elaboration.

Notes: 1) n.a. (not applicable): either post-docs did not have an SDS at the time (years 2005-2010) or all positions were covered by men (2015-2016). 2) From 2005 to 2012 pre-reform assistant professors (RU) are considered; from 2013 onwards RTDs B only.

Regarding the same index including the junior positions (Table 3b), data confirm that, even considering the RTDA, the Gelmini reform has made it harder for women to become assistant professors. Indeed, the average GDI increased from 1.05 in the years 2005-2012, to 1.14 in the years 2013-2020 for all fields. Similarly, the GDI increased from 1.06 to 1.16 for Area 14 comparing the same two sub-periods. The data show that the years from 2013 to 2017 were particularly challenging for women, and with the end of the turnover freeze, the GDI started to decrease for all categories, suggesting that when resources are scarce, women pay the highest price.

Moreover, the results also show that in most cases it is less difficult, for women, to obtain an assistant professor position when the junior (RTDA) position is included in the analyses. This is particularly the case for all fields taken together, for Area 14 and for General Sociology, but not for Political Science for which the female disadvantage in becoming RTDA+RTDB is higher than the female disadvantage in becoming RTDB only (1.66 for the former vs 0.96 for the latter in the years 2013-2020).

This result parallels a further consideration: if, contrary to the rest of the academic population (including the field of Political and Social Sciences and the sub-field of General Sociology), in the sub-field of Political Science the transition to RTDB (GDIb), as already said, shows the same female disadvantage as the transition to associate professor (GBI), this is not the case when for the junior assistant professor position, as the GDI(a+b) index worsens to 1.66 in the years 2013-2020, against 0.98 for the GBI in the same years.

**Table 3b.** Glass Door Index (RU, RTDB and RTDA): total population, Area 14, SPS/04 and SPS/07 (2005-2020)

| Year | GDI (a+b) | GDI (a+b) -<br>area 14 | GDI (a+b) -<br>SPS/04 | Year |
|------|-----------|------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 2005 | 1.05      | 1.09                   | na                    | na   |
| 2006 | 1.04      | 1.10                   | na                    | na   |
| 2007 | 1.04      | 1.08                   | na                    | na   |
| 2008 | 1.04      | 1.05                   | na                    | na   |
| 2009 | 1.05      | 1.08                   | na                    | na   |
| 2010 | 1.05      | 1.03                   | na                    | na   |
| 2011 | 1.05      | 1.04                   | 0.95                  | 1.04 |
| 2012 | 1.05      | 1.05                   | 0.95                  | 1.06 |
| 2013 | 1.15      | 1.15                   | 1.03                  | 1.22 |
| 2014 | 1.18      | 1.11                   | 1.58                  | 1.00 |
| 2015 | 1.17      | 1.18                   | 1.59                  | 1.25 |
| 2016 | 1.17      | 1.19                   | 1.74                  | 1.39 |
| 2017 | 1.13      | 1.19                   | 2.57                  | 1.13 |
| 2018 | 1.12      | 1.13                   | 1.62                  | 1.13 |
| 2019 | 1.10      | 1.14                   | 1.72                  | 1.00 |
| 2020 | 1.08      | 1.19                   | 1.42                  | 1.07 |

Source: authors' elaboration.

Notes: 1) n.a. (not applicable): either post-docs did not have an SDS at the time (years 2005-2010) or all positions were covered by men (2015-2016). 2) From 2005 to 2012 pre-reform assistant professors (RU) are considered; from 2013 onwards RTDs A and B only.

In other words, if, after the reform, the female obstacle for all, including sociologists, is represented by the senior assistant professor position, in the sub-field of Political Science the real milestone is placed at the junior assistant professor position. As mentioned, this position often comes before that of senior assistant professor. As such, it basically represents the access point of an academic career.

Consequently, our second expectation is not fully confirmed, since the reforms have had a worse impact on women's career entry at the RTDA level than at the RTDB level. This result appears to be a peculiarity of SPS/04.

## **7. Conclusions**

Women have massively entered the academic profession but their presence is not the same across fields and positions. Regarding the Italian academic population with a specific focus on the Political Science sub-field, our research shows three important findings.

First, the most precarious positions are the most gender balanced. In fact, postdoctoral positions show an equal distribution between men and women, considering all fields together, the field of the Political and Social Sciences (Area 14), as well as the SPS/04 (Political Science) and SPS/07 (General Sociology) sub-fields.

Second, the less prestigious the positions, the more likely they are to be feminized: as the position of pre-reform assistant professor (RU) was abolished by the 2010 University reform, data show that in the long run such positions are filled more by women than by men. As a result, while male pre-reform assistant professors are more likely to become associate professors, female pre-reform assistant professors are more likely to remain in this stable but less prestigious position and often their careers end in such a role.

Third, there has been an increase in the number of women in the middle (associate professorship) and top (full professorship) positions, but for both positions and especially for the position of full professor, the gender balance is still an objective to reach. Moreover, the amelioration in women's representation in these positions has been quite significant since the end of the turnover freeze, that is from 2017 onwards, suggesting that when financial resources are scarce, women pay a higher price. On the contrary, when opportunities – of promotion in this case – increase for all, women's opportunities increase as well.

As far as the possibility of climbing the academic ladder is concerned, the data show that, as expected, full professorship represents the hardest step to reach for women in Italy. Moreover, it is in highly feminized fields that it is more, not less, difficult for women to become full professors. This is true both for Area 14 compared to all other fields combined, and for General Sociology compared to Political Science. This finding suggests that numbers, and thus a good rate of feminization in the population, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for gender equality to occur in the top position. Paradoxically, when women are few, female promotions to middle and top positions are easier. Such results provide a contribution to the wider debate on the relation between horizontal and vertical segregation: do feminized sectors, occupations and fields ameliorate the gender promotion gap? On this point, the literature is not consistent, with some studies pointing to an amelioration in female opportunities when a 'critical mass' (Kanter 1977) is reached (Reskin and McBrier 2000; Rubery and Rafferty 2013), and others,

on the contrary, showing that career progression is easier in male-dominated occupations (England, 1982; Hultin, 2003; Gaiaschi 2022). Faced with this debate, our contribution provides an argument in support of the second position, pointing to the ‘positive’ effects, in terms of career progression, of the stronger selection and self-selection of women in male-dominated fields: few of them enter but, once in, many of them survive the subsequent steps.

Furthermore, data show that the real obstacle for women is no longer at the level of the position of associate professor, as in the pre-reform years, but it now coincides with that of RTDB, and so with the senior assistant professor position, at least for all fields considered, for the field of Political and Social Sciences and for the sub-field of General Sociology. From this point of view, results suggest that after the Gelmini reform it became more difficult for women to become tenure-track assistant professors than associate professors, and the end of the turnover freeze has not yet reversed this situation. However, this does not hold true for the sub-field of Political Science, for which the barred door coincides more with the junior (RTDA) than with the senior (RTDB) assistant professor position. Once again, this sheds light on the fact that the problem, for Political Science, is at entry level rather than at the subsequent steps of the ladder. Gender discrimination occurs when it’s time to obtain what, in Italian academia, is considered the first ‘real’ (quasi-stable) position: that of junior assistant professor. In other words, and citing the aforementioned metaphors on women and science, the gender question at the heart of the Political Science sub-field is ‘why so few?’ rather than ‘why so slow?’

All in all, our paper highlights the specificity of the sub-field of Political Science when a gender perspective is taken into account. On the one hand, as expected, in SPS/04 there are fewer women in all academic positions, including among the most precarious ones, namely postdocs. In other words, political science is still a male-dominated field, regardless of the position considered. On the other hand, the recruitment process in the SPS/04 sub-field is particularly unfavourable for women when it comes to the possibility of entering the profession as a junior assistant professor. However, once in, their chances of progressing to more prestigious positions are equal to, or even better than their female colleagues in the rest of the academic population, including Area 14 and the SPS/07 sub-field. From this point of view, the sub-field of Political Science shares many more similarities with the hard sciences than with the social and human sciences: the problematic step, for both, lies more in accessing the profession than in promotions, probably due to the higher selection and self-selection of women who survive the entry point (Gaiaschi 2022; Gaiaschi forthcoming). Further research on this point is needed.

Taking all our results together, we can generally conclude that the Gelmini reform and the freeze on staff turnover worsened the conditions of women in academia. As long as neoliberal funding cuts to universities persist, no meaningful progress in gender equality can be achieved within the Italian system.

What are the possible solutions in order to achieve gender parity, both at entry level (in the case of still under-feminized sub-fields like Political Science) and in promotion to stable and prestigious positions more in general?

According to our macro-level perspective, any solution to the gender gap in Italian academia should start with the idea of putting more money on the table. However, more

money is needed not only to create new positions to facilitate women's access to the profession, but it should also be used to create more *stable* positions.

However, recent policies seem to be going in a different direction. In fact, funding provided by the EU through the PNRR has mostly led to the creation of RTDA positions, i.e. non-tenure track positions that are unlikely to lead to further progression. Once again, therefore, the investment has proved to be short-sighted and risks creating, in the longer term, a bubble of non-tenured assistant professors who will then be forced to leave the academic labour market. Unfortunately, research shows that this will have a much greater impact on women than on men.

Furthermore, the recent cuts in FFO, foreseen by the latest decree of the Meloni government, will end up freezing most career progressions and stopping recruitment. As we have seen, the cuts are likely to affect women more than men. Finally, the 'Bernini' bill (DDL 1240), formulated in autumn 2024, exacerbates the vulnerability of public universities and early-career researchers. Indeed, the reform increases the number of precarious contractual roles, which are now expected to total five: post-doctoral contracts, two types of research assistance grants, and adjunct professorships. In conclusion, we do not see any improvement for women in Italian academia in the near future.

## **Author contributions**

The article is the result of a joint contribution by the authors, whose names appear in alphabetical order. However, if for academic reasons individual responsibility were to be attributed, please refer to the following CRediT authorship contribution statement. Camilla Gaiaschi: conceptualization (equal), funding acquisition (lead), investigation (lead), methodology (lead), data curation (lead), formal analysis (lead), writing - original draft (supporting), writing - review & editing (equal). Selena Grimaldi: conceptualization (equal), formal analysis (supporting), writing - original draft (lead), writing - review & editing (equal).

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# Early-Career Gender Inequalities in Italian Political Science in the context of neoliberal academia

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## Abstract

Gender disparities persist as a prominent issue in academic careers, reflecting systemic biases and structural barriers that hinder advancement and contribute to the marginalization of women in precarious academic positions. This article investigates gender inequalities in early careers in Italy with a specific focus on the field of Political Science. Drawing from an original dataset encompassing variables such as gender, age, career stage, geographical areas, and disciplinary sectors, alongside qualitative interviews with post-docs and assistant professors, it offers a comprehensive analysis of Italian researchers' experiences in precarious academic careers. Through quantitative analysis, it identifies patterns of gender differentiation across various dimensions of academic precarity by comparing the field of Political Science with the whole academic population. Qualitative insights from interviews aim to further investigate such patterns by providing nuanced perspectives on the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of precarious researchers that work in the sector of Political Science, illuminating the intersectional dynamics of gender, age, and career stage.

## 1. Introduction

Gender disparities in Italian academia have been extensively studied across a range of disciplines, from social inequality and organizational studies, to feminist and gender studies, and through a heterogeneous array of theoretical and methodological approaches. These studies show that gender inequalities are not a matter of the past, but still translate into structural 'double standards' that pose numerous and multifaceted barriers to women's access to academic positions and their career advancement (Naldini & Poggio 2023). Furthermore, gender disparities emerge and are (re)produced through a variety of mechanisms functioning at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Gaiaschi 2022).

Within the framework of the so-called 'neoliberal turn' of academia (Ferree & Zippel 2015), scholars have also increasingly examined how women's disadvantage may be affected by the implementation of enterprise models characterized by market-oriented principles, paralleling the progressive decrease of public investment and the



precarization of academic positions (Murgia & Poggio 2019). Studies focusing on Italy find that gender inequalities have not been reduced by these transformations, rather, they ‘reshape them and thrive in them [...]’. Moreover, the meritocratic discourse is likely to make inequalities more invisible’ (Gaiaschi 2023, p. 74). In other words, despite the feminization of academic disciplines, women are still penalized both in their access to tenured positions (Gaiaschi 2025) and in the promotion to associate and full professorship (Filandri and Pasqua 2021). At the same time, early-career female researchers have been particularly affected by the precarization of academic positions with respect to work-life balance (Bozzon, Murgia & Poggio 2019; Krilić, Istenič & Hočevar 2019) and career advancement (Gaiaschi & Musumeci 2020; Picardi 2019).

Against this background, Italian Political Science remains ‘a largely male-dominated and masculinized discipline’ (Donà 2019, p. 208; see also Bosco & Feo 2024). While the absolute number of female political scientists has certainly increased since the 1980s (Bolgherini & Verzichelli 2023; Bosco & Feo 2024), data suggest that the field is still characterized by a prominent phenomenon of ‘leaky pipeline’ (Alper 1993) which prevents women from advancing across the different steps of the career track and finally achieving full professorship (Bosco & Feo 2024). However, despite recent scholarship having blossomed on the topic of gender disparities in Italian Political Science, we currently lack systematic and comprehensive investigations into the state of the art of gender inequalities in the field, and even more so with respect to early-career and precarious researchers.

As part of this Special Issue investigating gender disparities in Italian Political Science, this paper aims to address this scientific gap by exploring the nexus between gender inequalities and the precarization of academic careers in Political Science. It does so by considering two interrelated aspects: on the one hand, it examines the evolution of gender gaps among early-career political scientists in Italy between 2011 and 2020; on the other hand, it explores female political scientists’<sup>1</sup> experiences in precarious academic careers. On these grounds, we aim to answer the following research questions (RQs):

1. How have gender inequalities in Italian Political Science evolved over time, in particular between 2011 and 2020, with respect to early-career researchers?
2. How are gender inequalities and academic precarity experienced and narrated by Italian early-career female political scientists?

To address these concerns, we employ a mixed-method research approach (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007), combining quantitative analyses on two original datasets with a thematic analysis on semi-structured interviews conducted with Italian female early-career researchers. These two strands of analysis allow us to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the nexus between gender inequalities and precarity, combining a

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper we interchangeably refer to (cisgender) ‘women’ and ‘female researchers’ as our main analytical focus. We do so by understanding gender as an order constituted through patriarchal social relations and practices (Connell 2002) advantaging men over women. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that this understanding and operationalization of gender as binary, hence either ‘male’ or ‘female’, reflects a partial picture of how inequalities work, and renders invisible experiences of trans\* a non-binary individuals discriminated against because of their gender identity (Bourelly et al. 2024).

more general overview of the phenomenon with a more fine-grained exploration of its consequences for different aspects of individuals' lives.

The article is organized as follows. Section two provides an overview of gender inequalities in academia through micro-, meso- and macro-level perspectives, focusing on the precarization of academic positions. Section three illustrates our mixed-method approach, data and methods. Section four discusses the results from our quantitative analysis on the evolution of gender inequalities since 2011. Section five presents findings from our qualitative thematic analysis on the experiences of female researchers in precarious academic positions. We conclude by summarizing the findings of our investigation, reflecting on possible measures to reduce the impact of gender inequalities on early-career researchers, and suggesting avenues for future research.

## 2. Gender disparities in neoliberal academia

Gender disparities in academia are (re)produced through multifaceted mechanisms entangling structural and cultural factors that simultaneously operate at micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Gaiaschi 2022; Naldini & Poggio 2023). The micro level includes individual choices and attributes, both on the supply side and the demand side. Supply-side studies focus on differences in characteristics between female and male academics, for example in care responsibilities (Fox 2005), scientific productivity (Abramo, Aksnes & D'angelo 2021; Anzivino & Dordoni 2022; Huang et al. 2020) and self-promotion. On this last point, studies on Italy suggest that women are less likely to apply for the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (National Scientific Qualification – from now on: ASN), an essential prerequisite for becoming a professor (Pautasso 2015; De Paola, Ponzio & Scoppa 2017). Other contributions address women's individual experiences, including coping mechanisms (Krilic, Istenic & Hocevar 2019) and resistance practices (Hawking, Manzi & Ojeda 2014). On the demand side, studies show that gender biases in selection processes can lead employers to discriminate against women, as they consider them to be less competent and capable, regardless of equal levels of productivity (Bagues, Sylos-Labini & Zinovyeva 2017; Checchi, Cicognani & Kulic 2019).

At the meso-level, meaning the organizational level, scholarship examines the academic culture and structure of work practices. These include the construction and evaluation of excellence, which systematically disadvantage women (Van den Brink and Benschop 2011) as well as the role of homophily and 'old boy networks' (Araújo & Fontainha 2017), with women excluded from informal channels of information and more subjected to isolation and exclusionary dynamics (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor & Uzzi 2000; Van den Brink & Benschop 2012). Other studies focus on the gendered divisions of tasks, suggesting that women are more concentrated in 'academic housework' (Heijstra et al. 2017; Russo & Minello 2021), namely activities such as teaching and service that are less rewarding in terms of career progression (Kantola 2008; Rudman & Phelan 2008).

At the macro-level, meaning the institutional level, research addresses university policies, including market-oriented reforms concerning processes of academic recruitment (Poggio 2018) and gender equality (Lombardo & Bustelo 2021), as well as welfare systems (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier 2015), gender regimes (Alonso, Ciccio & Lombardo 2023), labour markets (Bagilhole & White 2013), and the wider socio-political context (O' Connor et al. 2015). These investigations demonstrate that gender disparities in

academia, rather than being episodic or due to individual biases, are rooted in structural inequalities operating at multiple levels, thus resembling a ‘seven-headed dragon that has a multitude of faces in academic life’ (Van den Brink & Benschop 2011, p. 71). Furthermore, gender inequalities are affected by neoliberal policies that have profoundly changed Italian academia through cuts in public spending, the precarization of academic positions, and hyper-productivity models (Naldini & Poggio 2023). Operating at the macro-level, such policies have entailed and implemented changes both within universities and in researchers’ own lives.

## 2.1. Gender and precarious careers paths

In recent decades, academic policies and practices have become increasingly influenced by neoliberal values, market forces, and management logics. This ‘academic enterprise model’ (Bozzon, Murgia & Poggio 2019, p. 18) has led to the marketisation of research activities, heightened competition, a focus on applied research driven by market-oriented concerns, and an emphasis on quality assurance through performance indicators (Riegraf & Weber 2017; Krüger et al. 2018). Key principles such as performance, productivity, quality assurance, and excellence have become the primary drivers of the neoliberal transformation of higher education institutions (Morley 2024).

In Italy, these trends have manifested in two significant ways. First, performance indicators – of both scholars and universities – have been increasingly adopted to better allocate scarce government funds. Examples at the organizational level include the ‘Research Quality Assessment’ (RQA), which is conducted every four years by a ministerial agency, and the 2017 and 2023 ‘Department of Excellence’ rankings, which award high-score departments with extra grants. At the individual level, the 2010 University Reform (L. 240/2010), also called the ‘Gelmini’ reform, introduced the ASN, a national evaluation process managed by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR), awarding academics with a qualification based on standard metrics of individual performance, which is mandatory when applying for the positions of associate and full professor.

Parallel to this new managerial culture enhancing the quest to meet high productivity standards, a worsening in the precarization of the profession has occurred. This is due to two main factors: on the one hand, the aforementioned 2010 University Reform replaced the old permanent contract for assistant professors (also called RU) with two temporary contracts, both short-term: a junior position, which is non-tenured (RTD-A) and a senior (tenure-track) position (or RTD-B). On the other hand, the cuts in the funds for higher education, in place from 2007 to 2017, prevented universities from replacing retiring professors with new ones, further increasing the number of precarious academics (Gaiaschi & Musumeci 2020). The changes – in the assistant professor contracts and in the capacity of universities to hire assistant professors – have entailed an increase in the number of years of precarity, as well as a greater heterogeneity of careers in the early years of the profession. Indeed, after the postdoc phase, the ‘natural’ career track foresees transition to ‘junior’ (non-tenured) assistant professor, which lasts three years and can be extended for two further years. Once the junior contract ends, the next step is the ‘senior’ (tenure-track) assistant professor position (RTD-B), which also lasts three years. If the researcher holds the ASN, the RTD-B contract is automatically converted into an associate professorship at its conclusion. In practice, things are much more

complicated, and the junior assistant professor phase can be skipped: in this case, a post-doc fellow can directly become senior assistant professor.

More recently, Law 79/2022 art. 14, has further reshaped academic career paths, replacing the RTD-A and RTD-B contracts with a new tenure-track model called *ricercatore tenure track* (RTT), in force since 2025. This reform formally aims to simplify the academic recruitment process; however, the RTT position still implies a long period of uncertainty based on a non-renewable duration of up to six years before leading to a tenured position as associate professor.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, early career researchers are particularly vulnerable. Establishing a career in academia has become increasingly challenging, as access to permanent positions now demands not only scientific excellence but also a broad array of managerial skills. The combination of multiplying tasks, high workloads and precarious, low-paid contracts makes career progression especially difficult. Consequently, early-career researchers must continuously search for the next contract, compounding the instability of their professional and personal lives. Precarious academic subjectivities are shaped by ambivalent dynamics: the perceived flexibility of their profession is coupled with an entrepreneurial imperative, which frames the work as a ‘calling’ while simultaneously entrapping them in an invisible web of subordination (Bozzon, Murgia & Poggio 2019, p. 33). Additionally, the pervasive integration of work into private life – fuelled by workloads that exceed regular working hours – contributes to guilt, frustration, and mental health challenges (Krilic, Istenič & Hočevár 2019).

The precarious conditions of early academic careers also have significant gendered dimensions. When funds for recruitments are scarce, women are likely to be more penalized than men in accessing the profession (Gaiaschi 2022). Moreover, the increasing emphasis on productivity, namely scientific production, clashes with existing gender asymmetries in task division. Indeed, activities that are less valuable for career advancement, like teaching and administrative work, are more feminized and remain undervalued (Heijstra et al. 2017; Naldini & Poggio 2023). At the same time, short-term, low-paid contracts and frequent mobility requirements exacerbate challenges in balancing work and personal life. The academic work ethic, which demands full commitment, loyalty, and dedication, is particularly incompatible with family planning – a stage that often coincides with early career phases. Women with children have fewer opportunities to secure permanent positions compared to men (Puljak & Sharif 2009). Those who achieve permanent positions are often childless (Nikunen 2012; Russo 2024) while mothers are perceived as being less committed to their work (Ginther & Kahn 2004). These findings underscore the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989) to fully grasp how gender, class, and socio-economic conditions co-produce differentiated experiences of precarity in academic contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of our data collection, the implementation of the RTT reform was still in its early stages. To our knowledge, the first public call for an RTT position in Political Science (SSD SPS/04) was not yet published while the last interviews for this study were being conducted (June-July 2024). As such, the reform had not yet entered the lived experience of our interviewees and was therefore not discussed in the qualitative material.

### 3. Methods

To examine gender disparities amongst early-career researchers in Italian Political Science, this study develops a mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). The quantitative strand allows us to address RQ1 by providing a multilayered overview of the evolution of gender disparities since 2011, which is when the new short-term assistant professor positions – introduced by the aforementioned 2010 University Reform – were implemented. The qualitative strand, instead, tackles RQ2 by allowing us to explore the ways in which a sample of early-career female political scientists experience, cope with and recount academic precarity. The purpose of our qualitative analysis is to uncover salient and recurrent themes in early-career female researchers' experiences with academic precarity.

The quantitative analyses presented in this work combine an original dataset of academics working in Italy from 2011 to 2020 collected within the frame of the WIRED project,<sup>3</sup> with the SISP Archive (Bosco et al. 2024) containing information on academic staff affiliated with the field of Political Science, also limited, for our purposes, to the years 2011-2023. The WIRED dataset is the result of the harmonization of multiple sources, including administrative micro data on Italian academics (career dataset) and administrative micro data on the ASN (ASN dataset), as well as web scraped data on organizational performance. The first two datasets were provided by the MUR and, contrary to publicly available datasets on the Italian academic population, they include microdata on post-docs as well as information on the ASN across time.<sup>4</sup> The career dataset includes demographic and work information, among which gender, year of birth, the rank held by the individual, the scientific field (*'area scientifica'*) and sub-field (*'settore scientifico-disciplinare'*) were used for these analyses. The ASN dataset includes information related to the first four waves (2012, 2013, 2016, 2018) of the ASN.<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this study, the dataset was restricted to post-docs and post-reform assistant professors tracked over time from 2011 to 2020, that is to 185,722 observations corresponding to 63,642 individuals. Of these, 839 observations (corresponding to 260 individuals: 156 men and 104 women) regard the SPS/04 sub-field. The SISP Archive results from the harmonization of the following sources, consulted in chronological order: 1) the MUR personnel database, accessible from 2001; 2) various printed sources from CUN (National University Council) regarding affiliation with the disciplinary sub-field SPS/04 (since 1991); 3) the archive relating to the original CUN disciplinary sector (named Q02X since 1982); 4) a detailed manual coding of the CVs of individuals to compile additional micro-level variables, such as birth year and the year in which the person obtained their PhD. For the purpose of this study, the dataset was restricted to post-reform assistant professors (RTD-A and RTD-B) only, i.e., 129 individuals corresponding

<sup>3</sup> WIRED (Women In Research and higher EDucation) was a project undertaken within the framework of a H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship (GA No. 898507) at the University of Lausanne, CH, aimed at tracking gender inequalities in academic career progression (PI: Camilla Gaiaschi).

<sup>4</sup> The <https://cercauniversita.mur.gov.it/> website includes micro-data on the academic population, but it lacks information on the post-docs across time. On the other hand, <https://ustat.mur.gov.it/opendata/> has time-series data, including post-docs, but on an aggregated level and with very limited information.

<sup>5</sup> We used data on whether or not the individual applied for at least one qualification for associate professor, and whether or not he/she obtained it. In the case of multiple habilitations, we considered the habilitation relating to the last sub-field in which the individual was observed.

to 423 observations tracked over time from 2011 to 2023. The WIRED dataset was used to perform descriptive statistical analyses on the gender distribution amongst early career positions in the SPS/O4 field and compared to the whole academic population, on gender differences in age across positions, as well as on the likelihood, for men and women, of obtaining the ASN. The archive was used to analyse gender differences in the number of years from the obtention of a PhD before obtaining a position as assistant professor (either RTD-A or RTD-B) and before obtaining a position of senior assistant professor (RTD-B).

For the qualitative part of the study, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with early career female researchers in the field of Political Science (code SPS/O4 according to the MUR's classification up until 2023, GSPS-O2/A since 2024). The sample was constructed through a purposive, criterion-based strategy (Patton, 2015), targeting early-career female researchers working in the field of Political Science. Selection criteria included disciplinary affiliation, career stage (postdoc, RTD-A, RTD-B), and geographical location. Given our position as early-career researchers in the fields of Political Science and Sociology, we encountered no specific access barriers, but chose to prioritize analytical depth and thematic recurrence over representativeness. We initially contacted 18 potential participants and successfully conducted interviews with ten of them. Although the number of interviews may appear limited, we observed partial saturation with respect to key recurring themes such as academic housework, gendered exclusion, and work-life balance. In line with Guest et al. (2006), who suggest that saturation in homogeneous samples can be reached with as few as 12 interviews, we argue that our sample allows for the identification of core patterns within the targeted population. We acknowledge the limitations of the small sample and suggest that future research should include larger and more diverse samples to further expand our findings.

The interviews were undertaken in 2024 and include nine researchers currently holding an academic position in an Italian university, and one researcher with a background in Italy and currently working in a foreign university. Seven researchers are affiliated with universities located in central Italy, two in northern Italy, and one in the south. The positions range from postdocs (*assegnista di ricerca*), to RTD-A and RTD-B. All interviewees conducted their doctoral studies in Italian universities, between 2014 and 2022. Out of ten, three have children. All interviews were anonymized and assigned an identification number. The interviews covered the following themes: academic background, challenges encountered in career progression, life-work balance, academic context and gender inclusion, recommendations for the improvement of female researchers' careers. We transcribed and coded all interviews through the MAXQDA 2024 (Verbi Software, 2023), using a combination of inductive and deductive coding (for the coding scheme, see Appendix).

#### **4. Gender gaps among early-career political scientists**

The quantitative strand of this research addresses the phenomenon of gender disparities in early stage academic careers in the field of Political Science by presenting an overview of its evolution between 2011 and 2020, focusing on different aspects: besides gender distribution across early-career phases (WIRED dataset), which provides a picture of female disadvantage in accessing the profession, socio-demographic and performance-

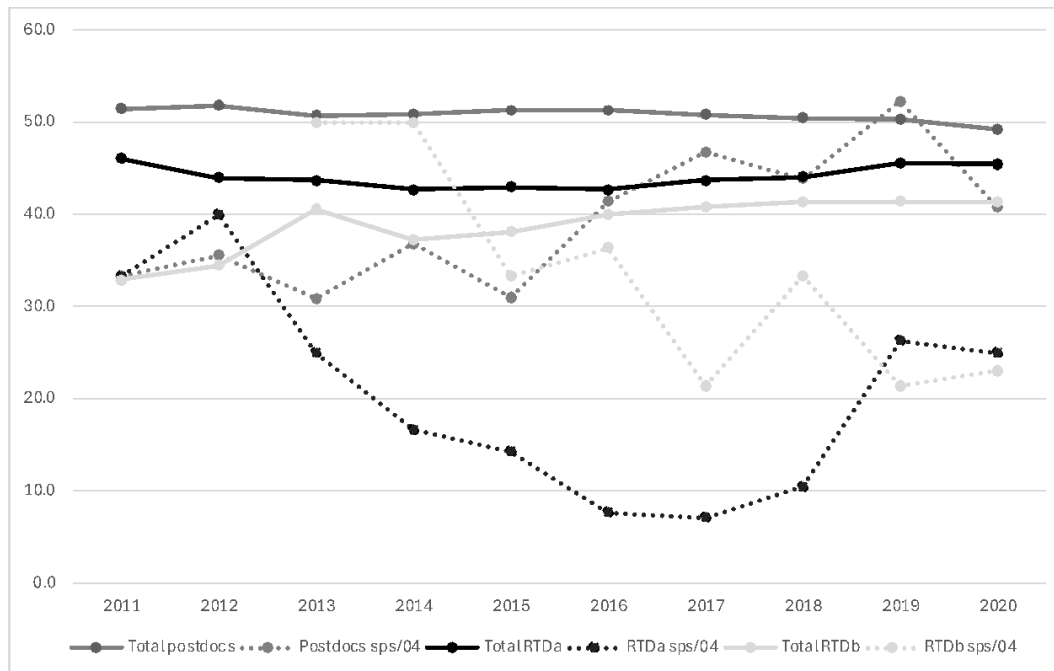
related information was analysed. This includes the gender difference in age across positions (WIRED dataset), as well as the gender difference in the number of years before obtaining a position of assistant professor in general and RTD-B more specifically (SISP dataset). The former measure gives an account of the length of the post-doctoral phase, the second provides information on the length of precarity more in general. Scientific performance was tracked through the likelihood of holding the ASN (WIRED dataset). This overview not only provides us with a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, but also with an analytical entry point for a more in-depth understanding achieved through our qualitative analysis.

#### 4.1. Gender distribution across early-career steps

Considering the field of Political Science, the number of post-docs and assistant professors tracked over the years 2011-2020 equals 207, among which 124 were men (60%) and 83 women (40%), corresponding to 839 observations (547 men and 292 women). Figure 1 illustrates how the percentage of women working as post-doctoral researchers, RTD-A and RTD-B, has evolved over time both in Political Science (dotted lines) and in the whole academic population (full lines). Looking at the graph, the first consideration concerns trends in Political Science, with women being increasingly hired as post-docs (from 33.3% in 2011 to 40.8% in 2020) but not as assistant professors. In this case, their presence is substantially lower, at least from 2013 for female RTD-A and from 2015 for female RTD-B, when the number of hirings for these two new positions starts being relevant.

The second consideration concerns the comparison with the entire academic population: as the graph shows, Political Science under-performs compared to the rest of Italian academia in all three positions considered. In 2020, the last year tracked, women represent 40 per cent of post-docs in Political Science, ten percentage points (p.p.) fewer than all fields considered. Likewise, in Political Science female RTD-As and RTD-Bs make up 25% and 23.1% respectively, compared to 45.5% and 41.4% of the general population. Certainly, these data should be interpreted in light of the relatively low absolute numbers in the field of Political Science (corresponding to 76 post-docs, 24 RTD-A, and 26 RTD-B in 2020), which make figures and temporal fluctuations appear more pronounced. Having said that, these findings suggest that there is a decrease in female representation in the transition from post-doc to assistant professor positions, both in Italian academia as a whole and in the Political Science field more specifically. However, the female loss in Political Science is stronger than the one observed across all fields considered. In other words, the so-called 'glass door' phenomenon (Picardi 2019; Gaiaschi & Musumeci 2020), i.e. the female disadvantage in accessing the position of assistant professors, is more prominent among political scientists than elsewhere.

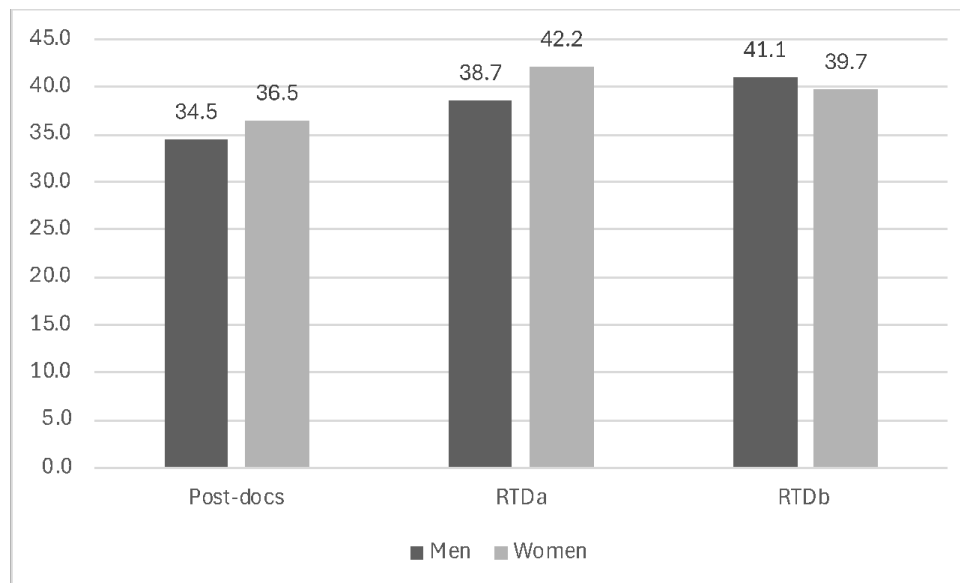
**Figure 1.** Percentage of women working as post-docs and assistant professors, years 2011-2020.



Source: WIRED data.

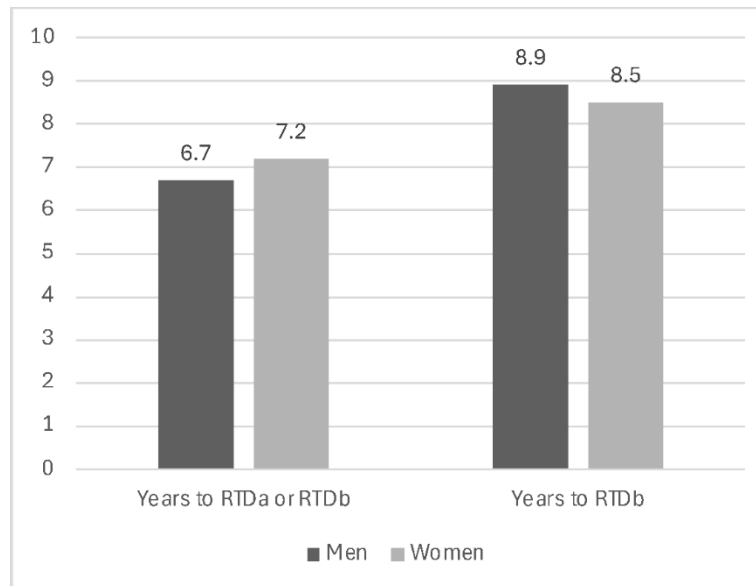
#### 4.2. Time to tenure and age across positions, by gender

Two further important aspects to consider are age and times of transition. In Political Science, Figure 2 illustrates that women are two years and almost three and a half years older than their male colleagues among, respectively, post-docs and RTD-A, a difference which is stronger than that occurring in the whole academic population (analyses available upon request). At the same time, the gender difference in age among RTD-B is null (women are actually around one year and a half months younger than their male colleagues). The analyses are run on 239 post-docs (141 men and 98 women) but only on 12 RTD-A and 9 RTD-B. Considering the low number of cases across positions, these results suggest that women spend a longer period of time in the post-doc phase, which entails a later recruitment, at least, as RTD-A.

**Figure 2.** Age by gender and position, years 2011-2020 - Political Sciences.

Source: WIRED data.

This interpretation finds further ground in the analysis of gender differences in the years spent before obtaining a position of assistant professor (either as RTD-A or RTD-B) and in the years spent before obtaining a senior assistant professor position (RTD-B) more specifically. The two cases have been considered to take into account the heterogeneity of the academic career track after the 2010 reform (see section 2.2). Indeed, the first measure gives account of the length of the post-doc phase, and so of the number of years that a post-doc takes to become assistant professor, either A or B and so regardless of the type of contract. The second measure gives account of the years of precarity more in general: in the case of a PhD following a ‘linear’ career track, this time-span includes the years of post-doc fellowships followed by the years as RTD-A; in the case of a non-linear track (so in this case the RTD-A is skipped) they include the years of post-doc only. Both were computed on the basis of the SISP archive, which tracks 129 assistant professors observed from 2011 to 2023, among which 94 men and 35 women. For each individual, the year in which s/he has obtained their PhD –when the counting starts – is provided. On this point, Figure 3 suggests that female political scientists stay around six months longer in the post-doc phase, while the difference is reversed if considering the years before obtaining a tenure-track position, and so in obtaining the senior assistant professor position. Also in this case, analyses should be read cautiously given the low number of cases, in particular among RTD-B (44, of which 29 men and 15 women).

**Figure 3.** Years of post-doc and years of precarity by gender, years 2011-2023 - Political Science.

Source: SISP data.

#### 4.3. The national scientific qualification

Holding a qualification for associate professor is mandatory in order to participate in the public selection for the homonymous position. However, in practice, it is an informal requirement needed to obtain the previous position, that of RTD-B as well, given that – after the end of the contract and an evaluation by the department – senior assistant professors become associate professors without a recruitment process. The promotion is quasi automatic: in the Italian academic system, the real selection occurs in the previous phase, that is at transition to the RTD-B position. For this reason, this position can be considered as a ‘quasi’ tenured position. Therefore, looking at the gender distribution of the ASN for becoming associate professor can contribute to explaining women’s under-representation among this type of contract.

Tables 1a and 1b show that women are less likely than men to apply for an ASN. However, the gender difference in the application rates is much higher in the field of Political Science (44.5% of the women corresponding to 130 female observations vs 72.8% of men corresponding to 398 male observations) compared to the whole academic population (42.9% of women corresponding to 38,913 female observations vs 50.2% of men corresponding to 47,546 male observations). Moreover, after applying, women show slightly lower rates of success: 84% vs 91.5% of the men in Political Science, and 84.7% vs 88.3% of the men across all fields considered, with the difference – once again – being higher in Political Science.

These findings are consistent with previous studies on the National Scientific Qualification showing women’s lower application rates (Pautasso 2015; De Paola et al. 2017). On this point, different interpretations could be taken into consideration. By using an individualistic (or ‘supply-side’) lens, women’s lower self-promotion to apply for the ASN could be due to their higher risk aversion and/or to their lower eligibility criteria – which in turn are due to women’s lower scientific productivity. With regard to the first

interpretation, several studies in the fields of management and social psychology have suggest that professional women are more risk averse than men (Booth, Cardona-Sosa & Nolen 2014; Borghans et al. 2009; Charness & Gneezy 2012). At the same time, a recent study on the academic Political Science profession shows that women are more likely to ask for resources, thus showing a higher level of bargaining (Mitchell & Hesli 2013). With respect to the second interpretation, most of the literature on the productivity gap in science indicates that women publish less than men (e.g., Abramo et al. 2021; Anzivilino & Dordoni 2022; Huang et al. 2020). However, this gap narrows when taking into consideration differences in career length (Huang et al. 2020), periods of parental leave (Mairesse & Pezzoni 2015) and among the youngest generations (Symonds et al. 2006; Van Arensbergen, Van Der Weijden & Van Den Besselaar 2012). Moreover, more critical (or ‘demand-side’) approaches suggest that scientific productivity itself relies on factors – such as access to networks, the number of co-authors, the size of the research group, and the distribution of financial resources – which are not deprived of gender disparities (Gaiaschi 2022). Finally, gender biases in the evaluation of productivity may also occur (Jappelli, Nappi & Torrini 2017) and this may also have some ‘feedback effects’ on the female propensity to self-promote. In summary, these considerations suggest that gender differences in self-promotion should be considered in the light of the context in which they are generated, by looking at the interaction between individual agencies and structural factors.

**Table 1a.** Applications for the National Scientific Qualification for associate professor: gender distribution, 2012-2020.

|                    | Total   |           | SPS/04  |           |
|--------------------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|
|                    | Men (%) | Women (%) | Men (%) | Women (%) |
| <b>Applied</b>     | 50.2    | 42.9      | 72.8    | 44.5      |
| <b>Not applied</b> | 49.8    | 57.1      | 27.2    | 55.5      |
| <b>Total</b>       | 100     | 100       | 100     | 100       |

Source: WIRED data.

**Table 1b.** Failure and success rate of the National Scientific Qualification for associate professor: gender distribution, 2012-2020.

|                              | Total   |           | SPS/04  |           |
|------------------------------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|
|                              | Men (%) | Women (%) | Men (%) | Women (%) |
| <b>Applied and failed</b>    | 11.7    | 15.3      | 8.5     | 16.2      |
| <b>Applied and succeeded</b> | 88.3    | 84.7      | 91.5    | 83.9      |
| <b>Total</b>                 | 100     | 100       | 100     | 100       |

Source: WIRED data.

## 5. Biographical experiences of early-career female political scientists

Our thematic analysis highlights how gender has had and continues to have an impact not only on the career opportunities of Italian political scientists but also on their personal lives, entailing social, emotional, and psychological aspects. Furthermore, our interviewees' narratives indicate that gender inequalities, in particular the ones we identified in the following themes, have been exacerbated by a market-based logic and increasing levels of competition.

A prominent theme recounted by our interviewees concerns their perceptions of Italian Political Science as a male-dominated academic field, characterized by a normative understanding of gender relations, rooted gender stereotypes and persistent gender expectations. Our interviewees argue that Italian Political Science is not only dominated by men in numeric terms, but it also entails a tacit division between areas of research considered to be more 'appropriate' for men and others more 'related' to women. As explained by I7 (RTD-A, 35 years old):

Well, Political Science in Italy [...] is a field, among the academic ones, perhaps one of the most male-dominated. Historically, that is. And we're mainly talking about the 'hard' side of Political Science, the one that studies organizations, the one that studies 'constitutional engineering', to reference a well-known scholar. But it's true. Historically, it's always been led by men. So, it's difficult for women to access that particular subfield. Just look at electoral studies: 95% or more are men. [...] Because there are areas within political science that are defined as 'hard'. And women are more often found in communication, in public policy.

In the interviewee's experience, the dichotomy between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences is reproduced in the Italian Political Science field at the expense of female researchers. 'Hard' subfields are indeed the ones in which women are underrepresented due to difficulty in accessing them, often linked to 'academic patronage' (Martin 2009) by male supervisors facilitating and supporting their male mentees. 'Soft' subfields, instead, are the ones in which female political scientists tend to be more present, also because of rooted gender stereotypes that might consider women more fitted to study communication and public policy dynamics (Kantola 2008). Against this backdrop, 'soft' subfields are the ones facing scientific delegitimization. This is particularly relevant for researchers examining gendered dynamics, due to the delegitimization of gender studies (Donà 2019) and the delegation of gender issues exclusively to women (Kantola 2008). Gender studies are indeed still considered 'less scientific' than other fields of inquiry (Cannito & Mercuri 2023), thus also contributing to framing researchers who examine gender issues as less scientifically rigorous than their colleagues investigating other social phenomena. As Donà (2019) argues, this process has been marked by a strong drive toward epistemic legitimacy, often pursued through alignment with quantitatively oriented, male-dominated subfields and through the exclusion of perspectives perceived as 'partisan' or 'non-scientific', such as feminist and gender studies. This trajectory has contributed to what we may call a process of 'epistemic masculinization', whereby the symbolic boundaries of disciplinary legitimacy (Gieryn 1983) are drawn in ways that

marginalize both women as academic subjects and feminist epistemologies as valid contributions to the field.

Linked to the delegitimization of ‘female’ subfields and ‘female’ issues, our interviewees also experienced invisibility and exclusion by male colleagues and, at times, also by students. They report being often ignored or not considered in professional interactions, being excluded from contact networks and collaboration opportunities. This marginalization is clearly perceived as gendered, but also intersects with other factors, such as age and academic position. For instance, early-career scholars – particularly women – are perceived as being less authoritative. I10 (Postdoc, 33) describes this dynamic:

I was part of an exam commission. There was a student approaching me [...], they asked for some information, and while I was answering, I was interrupted by a member of the Commission who said: ‘You can ask us’. At that moment, I remembered very well who that ‘us’ referred to. In that ‘us’ there was no place for me. ‘Us’ referred to the commission of adult men.

Working in male-dominated academic environments in which both their superiors and their peers remind them that they do not belong also leads early-career female researchers to perceive that they lack authority and credibility compared to their male colleagues. A sense of inadequacy is deeply rooted among our interviewees, negatively affecting their ability to be perceived as authoritative in the academic context, to speaking up and being heard, especially in public (I1, Postdoc, 35; I2, RTD-A, 42). This dynamic, attributed to different gender socialization, contributes to lower self-confidence and slower career progression (Channah Herschberg, Benschop & van den Brink 2019).

However, our interviewees also recount being subject to a double standard that delegitimizes them when they show assertive conducts (I1, Postdoc, 35), which contributes to a culture of discrimination. Some of our interviewees indeed report experiencing gender-based discrimination. These behaviours include sexist comments, ridicule and marginalization in the professional field (I2, RTD-A 42; I4, Postdoc, 33). I2 (RTD-A, 42) reports a significant episode: “There was a case where I was told how to dress to make a good impression. A man told me, ‘be elegant tomorrow’. I don’t know if a woman would have said that.” In line with previous studies on the intersection between sexism and racism in academic environments (Bourbain 2021), these comments highlight how gender and age intersect to shape experiences with male professors and supervisors in the field of Political Science, co-producing experiences of gender-based discrimination that are particularly visible in the early stages of female academic careers.

Furthermore, our interviewees discuss the theme of normative gender expectations, in particular with respect to academic housework and gender quotas. Non-tenured female researchers are frequently assigned administrative and clerical tasks, such as providing coffee, taking minutes or managing revision work (I9, Postdoc, 33; I10, Postdoc, 33), in contrast with their male colleagues that are responsible for research-related tasks. This ‘academic housework’ (Heijstra et al. 2017) contributes to an extra and undervalued workload that results in less time devoted to research (Misra et al. 2012) which, under neoliberal academic paradigms, contributes to disadvantaging women in their academic performances. I3 (RTD-A, 39) reflects on this dynamic:

[...] when it came to doing administrative work or many other tasks, now that I think about it, they were entrusted to me or another woman and not to men. It was certainly extra work. Like, I don't know, doing the bibliography or, for example, if there was a collective book, it was always up to me to collect all the chapters and put the files together, the abstracts, that is. There is still a tendency, I noticed, to entrust this kind of work to women assuming they are more precise, better, more disciplined than men.

In addition to administrative work, I9 (Postdoc, 33) recounts how female researchers are also expected to take care of the non-scientific organizational aspects of conferences and seminars, such as catering and coffee breaks, while their male colleagues might be involved in scientific committees selecting the keynote speakers. This specific aspect of academic housework is related to women's role as 'mothers of the department' (Kantola 2008), according to which female scholars are considered more appropriate for creating a welcoming environment and organizing social events. Even if this role is also assigned to tenured female scholars, expectations to take up these responsibilities are particularly accentuated in the case of early-career researchers (Bozzon, Murgia & Poggio 2019).

Several interviewees also recount being invited to seminars and roundtables not because of their expertise, but because of their gender. In their experiences, increased attention to gender distribution and representation in public scientific events has led organizers to look for female political scientists, regardless of their academic production. As illustrated by I9 (Postdoc, 33):

It was more like 'We need a woman'. Then, my presence led to the recognition of my work, and during my participation [at the event], they would say, 'Oh, well, you're a woman, but you're good, huh!' But the line was: 'We need a woman! Yes, maybe you don't fully fit the theme, but you know, we need one.'

Hence our interviewees recount apparently contrasting experiences as early-career female political scientists: on the one hand, women are assigned less 'prestigious' tasks that derail time from research-related activities, which in contrast are crucial for accessing tenure-track positions, thus assuming a 'behind-the-scenes' role; on the other hand, they are invited to public events in light of their gender, thus coming to the forefront of public visibility and academic debates. While the former dynamic is well documented by available studies (Bozzon et al. 2019), the latter contrasts with evidence showing that women – especially early-career researchers – tend to be underrepresented in academic conferences and seminars (Johnson, Smith & Wang 2017). As such, this recent tendency to invite female political scientists not due to their expertise, but because of their gender, might configure as a peculiarity of the Italian Political Science field that deserves further examination. In any case, despite their apparent contrast, both trends show a common devaluation of early-career female political scientists' expertise and skills.

A further element emerging as a significant obstacle to career advancement for female researchers concerns caregiving responsibilities and work-life balance. Due to traditional gender roles, an unequal distribution of household tasks often primarily falls on women, thus making the balance between personal and professional life harder for them to achieve than their male colleagues and partners (Krilić, Istenič & Hočevar

2019). Our interviewees emphasize the fact that their caring responsibilities reduce the time available for research and academic production, creating a disparity with their male colleagues. According to I4 (Postdoc, 33), “the only thing I see is that men generally have fewer problems related to family care. They are focused solely on work, they do not have to deal with family care. This has a huge impact.” This impact concerns the possibility to devote most of their life to academic productivity, since growing levels of competition are requiring researchers to constantly overwork themselves to achieve hyper-productivity (Busso & Rivetti 2014; Macfarlane 2019).

Within this framework, an unbalanced division of care tasks and responsibilities has a stronger impact on female career advancement under neoliberal academia in numerous ways (Bozzon et al. 2017). On the one hand, as described by I5 (RTD-A, n.a.), caring responsibilities are often overlooked by male colleagues:

The nursery reopens in September, and there wasn't even a moment of consideration. Male colleagues I had asked for help by saying, 'Well, at least help me out by writing this little piece,' simply responded, 'I don't have time, I'm on vacation, I'll send you the slides'. It's as if the expectation remains that the woman can handle it all, but the man cannot.

Furthermore, our interviewees address the lack of support tools and services as another crucial obstacle, in particular for early-career researchers (I4, Postdoc, 33). In several universities, support services are only available to administrative and tenure-track staff, thus accentuating gender disparities in care work for precarious female researchers in comparison with their male colleagues.

In the effort to reconcile work and life, parenthood is a crucial concern for our interviewees. They face the paramount dilemma between ‘investing’ their time in career-related activities or becoming a parent (Blackwell & Glover 2008; Gill 2010; Russo 2024). This dilemma is exacerbated by being in precarious positions, due to economic instability and a lack of prospects that often lead women to postpone pregnancies to the moment in which they can access tenure-track positions (Bozzon et al. 2017). Motherhood is indeed perceived as an obstacle to career advancement, not only by female researchers, but also by their supervisors and colleagues. I1 (Postdoc, 35) recounts being faced with normative expectations on reproductive work:

I don't think this has had a great impact on my specific opportunities in various post-doc selections, but someone in Italy did ask me if I had family constraints that would prevent me from moving, which I would never have expected.

Aware of the extra burdens that parenthood brings for precarious female scholars, our interviewees recounted two different ways to deal with difficulties in work-life balance (Russo, 2024). On the one hand, some of them have embraced the precariousness of their positions without, however, renouncing their personal prospects and desires. As outlined by I7 (RTD-A, 35):

I mean, I've always prioritized my life decisions over, how can I say, these work dynamics. Otherwise, I wouldn't have... My contract is theoretically supposed to expire in six months, I wouldn't have a child, would I? Six months before my contract ends! But I don't want this to affect my life, also because knowing that our lives... our contracts are precarious, one tries to set

aside some money, to have other contacts, to build a network so that you can still make life choices.

On the other hand, others have consciously decided not to have any significant affective ties to be able to cope with the requirements of neoliberal academia and the consequences of not having a long-term contract. As illustrated by I8 (RTD-A, 40):

My choice was quite an either-or decision, so I chose to make private life coincide with work life, in the sense that I don't have a private life. Literally! I mean, I chose not to focus on family – in the traditional sense of the word – or building a home. [...] And I would like to emphasize that this choice, in my opinion, comes from a sort of economic rationality [...] When, in my case, you're used to being very independent from your family of origin, whether by necessity or by choice, I focus on what makes sense for my small budget. So, for me, it's literally impossible to think about investing in a house, a family, a pet, or any other form of commitment right now. [...]

This account highlights a paramount aspect with respect to gender inequalities in care work and, ultimately, work-life balance: such inequalities are inextricably intertwined with class, socio-economic status and available economic resources, whether from the family of origin or from life partners (Gaiaschi 2023). This indicates that non-tenured female political scientists benefiting from good socio-economic conditions or whose partners have a stable contract might face fewer difficulties in finding strategies to reconcile work and life. Nonetheless, they might also face difficulties in moving as often as the change of temporary contracts might require. Our analysis suggests that the intersection of gender, class and socio-economic status might co-articulate in specific ways in the experiences of female early-career scholars, making the hurdles of neoliberal academia different for each of them. In line with previous studies, it also indicates that neoliberal academic transformations might increase gender and class disparities amongst women themselves (Gaiaschi 2021).

In relation to these challenges, the interviews reveal a significant lack of services and support networks for young female researchers, particularly regarding psychological support and career development. This gap is evident in Italy compared to abroad, where there are more resources and safe spaces to address the challenges related to gender inequalities (Bozzon, Murgia & Poggio 2019). Differences between Italian and foreign academic cultures are evident in the interviews. Foreign institutions are perceived as more inclusive and valuing of women, in contrast with the male-dominated dynamics present in Italy (I3, RTD-A, 39; I7, RTD-A, 35; I9, Postdoc, 33).

With relevant differences also between Italian universities, our interviewees note that the main support services concern sexual harassment and work-life reconciliation, with the latter being mainly provided to tenure-track staff. Less attention is devoted to psychological well-being, despite the precarious and anxiety-provoking conditions of Italian early-career researchers (ADI, 2024).

## 6. Conclusions

The career paths of early-career female political scientists in Italy continue to be shaped by an unyielding labyrinth of gendered barriers. Our findings underscore the interplay of structural, cultural, and individual factors at the base of gender inequalities in

academia. At the structural level, neoliberal academic reforms have intensified precarity and competition, disadvantaging women. Institutional cultures perpetuate gendered expectations, with norms around caregiving, productivity, and authority reinforcing systemic inequities. At the individual level, women's experiences reflect the emotional and psychological toll of navigating these barriers, compounded by the internalization of gendered societal norms that equate self-sacrifice with professional dedication.

Quantitative findings reveal the persistent underrepresentation of women both among post-doc and, even more so, assistant professor positions. Between 2011 and 2020, the representation of women among postdoctoral researchers modestly rose but it remains lower than the female rates of post-docs in the whole academic population. The same holds true for assistant professors, especially in tenure-track positions, underscoring heightened barriers in Political Science. The 'glass door' phenomenon is particularly pronounced in this field, with women disproportionately excluded during transitions to more stable positions. Women also spend more time in postdoctoral roles, reflecting extended precarity. At the same time, they are less likely to hold the ASN, a key credential for career advancement, even though this disparity stems primarily from lower application rates rather than differences in success once applications are submitted.

The qualitative analysis reveals the lived experiences behind these trends. A major concern is work-life balance, as caregiving responsibilities disproportionately fall on women, limiting their availability for research and other career-enhancing activities. Interviewees described how societal norms and institutional cultures often fail to recognize or accommodate these responsibilities. This imbalance is exacerbated by the academic 'sacrificial ethos', which demands relentless dedication and sacrifices that disproportionately burden women, particularly those with caregiving roles. Women's narratives also illustrate the psychological toll of navigating such expectations, with many reporting feelings of inadequacy when attempting to balance professional and personal demands.

Academic housework emerged as another critical barrier. Women are frequently assigned undervalued administrative and clerical tasks while male colleagues are more likely to focus on higher-status research activities. These additional duties detract from research productivity and hinder career advancement. Issues of delegitimization further compound these disparities. Interviewees described instances of their expertise being dismissed by colleagues and students alike, reflecting entrenched biases that delegitimize women's authority in the academic space. This dynamic is particularly relevant in male-dominated Political Science, where internal epistemic hierarchies confer greater legitimacy to quantitative, institutional, and electoral subfields – fields still largely male-dominated in Italy – while devaluing topics such as gender, communication, and social movements. This gendered epistemic divide not only affects women's visibility and authority but reinforces informal boundaries around what is considered to be core disciplinary knowledge.

While many of the patterns discussed – such as academic housework, exclusion from networks, and work-life imbalance – are common across academic disciplines, our findings suggest that Political Science in Italy presents some specific features that exacerbate gendered inequalities. These include strong epistemic hierarchies, the marginalization of gender-related topics, and informal recruitment logics in a relatively

small and competitive disciplinary community. All in all, this research sheds light on the fact that Political Science remains a male-dominated field with women being under-represented from the very first entry-level of the profession, that of post-docs, while further diminishing in subsequent steps. The underlying reasons are multiple and heterogeneous. They include interiorized gender stereotypes which consider the field and many of its 'core' topics as a traditional 'male field', a circumstance that may prevent many women from undertaking this field of study. And for those who enter the field, obstacles to career advancement persist, including hostile environments, and subtle mechanisms of segregation producing disadvantages and work-life balance issues.

The implications of these findings are profound. First, they highlight the need for institutional reforms that address both the structural and cultural dimensions of gender inequality in academia. Policies must go beyond measures such as gender quotas to tackle the systemic roots of these disparities (Ferree & Zippel 2015).

Second, academic performance evaluation, mostly based on quantitative metrics, must be reevaluated to prioritize meaningful research and teaching over sheer productivity. A shift toward qualitative criteria could foster more inclusive opportunities, particularly for women, and ensure the production of impactful scholarship. Providing financial support for those with caregiving responsibilities, as well as incorporating compensatory measures for family care in academic competitions, is equally crucial.

To conclude, our research contributes to an understanding of the broader societal consequences of gender disparities in Italian Political Science, where underrepresentation limits diversity in intellectual leadership. Future research lines could examine the intersections of race, class, disability, gender and sexual orientation in shaping academic experiences, the cumulative impacts of structural and cultural barriers over time, as well as best practices for fostering gender equality in academia across socio-political contexts. Meanwhile, practical actions, such as accessible childcare, equitable parental leave, transparent promotion processes, psychological support, and explicit efforts to revise gender-blind selection procedures, must become academic standards. These changes will require more than policy shifts; they demand a cultural reckoning with the biases and norms that underpin academic life.

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## 7. Appendix

1. Background
  - Code: ACADEMIC\_PROFESSIONAL\_PATH
  - Definition: Description of the interviewee's academic and professional path.
  
2. Difficulties in career progression
  - Code: MAIN\_DIFFICULTIES
  - Definition: Main difficulties encountered in the academic path.
  
  - Code: IMPACT\_OF\_JOB\_INSECURITY\_ON\_PERSONAL\_LIFE
  - Definition: How temporary contracts have affected the interviewee's personal life.
  
  - Code: GENDER\_IDENTITY\_AND\_CAREER\_OPPORTUNITIES
  - Definition: Influence of gender identity on career opportunities and advancement.
  
  - Code: GENDER\_SPECIFIC\_OBSTACLES
  - Definition: Specific obstacles related to gender identity in transitioning between academic positions.
  
  - Code: ATTEMPTS\_AT\_TENURE
  - Definition: Experiences related to the attempt to obtain academic tenure.
  
  - Code: EXCLUSION\_FROM\_OPPORTUNITIES\_DUE\_TO\_GENDER
  - Definition: Experiences of exclusion from professional networks or opportunities due to gender identity.
  
  - Code: PERCEIVED\_DIFFERENCES\_IN\_JOB\_STABILITY\_BY\_GENDER
  - Definition: Perceived differences in job stability among colleagues based on gender identity.
  
3. Work-life balance
  - Code: WORK\_LIFE\_BALANCE
  - Definition: Main difficulties encountered in the academic path.
  
4. Inclusivity
  - Code: INCLUSIVE\_CULTURE\_OF\_INSTITUTION
  - Definition: Description of the academic culture of the institution in terms of gender inclusivity.
  
  - Code: SERVICES\_FOR\_REPORTING\_DISCRIMINATION
  - Definition: Existence and perceived effectiveness of spaces or services for reporting incidents of discrimination.
  
  - Code: USE\_OF\_REPORTING\_SERVICES

- Definition: Experiences using services to report incidents of discrimination.
5. Recommendations
- Code: POLICIES\_FOR\_REDUCING\_DISPARIETIES
  - Definition: Policies or interventions considered effective in reducing gender disparities in academic careers.
6. Demographic information
- Code: AGE
  - Code: GENDER
  - Code: ACADEMIC\_DISCIPLINE
  - Code: YEARS\_OF\_WORK\_EXPERIENCE
  - Code: UNIVERSITY

**Table A1.1.** Sample of the interviewees

| <b>N. Interview</b> | <b>University</b> | <b>Position</b>         | <b>Age</b> | <b>Children</b> | <b>Years of postdoctoral experience</b> |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------|-----------------|---|
| 1                   | North             | Postdoctoral researcher | 35         | No              | 3                                       |
| 2                   | Centre            | RTD-A                   | 42         | No              | 7                                       |
| 3                   | Centre            | RTD-A                   | 39         | No              | 8                                       |
| 4                   | Centre            | Postdoctoral researcher | 33         | No              | 2                                       |
| 5                   | Centre            | RTD-B                   | NA         | Yes             | 10                                      |
| 6                   | South             | Postdoctoral researcher | 40         | Yes             | 3                                       |
| 7                   | North             | RTD-A                   | 35         | Yes             | 5                                       |
| 8                   | Centre            | RTD-A                   | 40         | No              | 7                                       |

Source: own elaboration.

# Advancing against the Odds: Career Trajectories of Women Full Professors in Italian Political Science

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## Abstract

Despite the growing feminization of the academic profession, gender disparities at the highest echelons remain a pressing global challenge. Italian academia is no exception: entrenched patterns of vertical gendered segregation have been further exacerbated by cycles of reform and austerity, which have curtailed opportunities for full professorships and intensified competition for these posts. Building on previous research that identifies political science as a discipline that is particularly resistant to gendered transformation, this article offers the first systematic examination of the career trajectories and lived experiences of female full professors in the field. It draws on an original dataset documenting the biographical and professional profiles of Italian political scientists from 1971 to 2023, combined with 21 semi-structured interviews with women who have reached the discipline's highest rank. The findings reveal that women attaining this level follow career paths that are largely indistinguishable from those of their male counterparts, underscoring the dominance of a singular career model within the discipline. Yet the qualitative evidence exposes the persistence of gender-specific obstacles and entrenched professional practices that compel women to invest substantially more effort in securing and sustaining senior positions.

## 1. Introduction

Gender inequality in academia has long been a prolific field of study. Since the pioneering work of feminist activists and scholars, which critically examined the patriarchal structures underpinning knowledge production, research has explored the multifaceted nature of gender disparities in higher education. While some progress has been achieved – particularly through the increasing feminization of the lower tiers of the academic hierarchy – marked vertical segregation persists. Women remain disproportionately underrepresented in top academic and leadership positions, and this gap shows little sign of narrowing over time (Gaiaschi and Musumeci, 2020). Such persistent disparities underscore the enduring influence of entrenched structures and ideologies that disadvantage women in academia, exerting a profound yet often unacknowledged impact (Acker and Armenti, 2004).

In Italy, research on gender and academia is at a pivotal juncture. The recent implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in many universities has stimulated a wave of studies examining the institutional and cultural factors that create additional barriers

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to women's entry into, and progression within, academic careers (Picardi, 2020; Gaiaschi, 2022; Naldini and Poggio, 2023). These studies portray gender inequality in academia as a 'multiple-headed dragon' (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012), perpetuated through the interplay of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors.

Within the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), Italian Political Science stands out for its pronounced gender gap at the highest career levels (Gaiaschi, 2022; Bolgherini and Verzichelli, 2023; Bosco and Feo, 2024). Yet, despite this imbalance, field-specific analyses are lacking, unlike in other contexts such as Europe and the United States, where a gender perspective on the historical and institutional development of political science is well established (Engeli and Mügge, 2020; APSA 2022). In other words, Italian Political Science has yet to undertake a sustained, critical reflection on the persistence of vertical segregation within the discipline.

In this work, we examine the career trajectories of full professors (FPs) in Italian political science since the discipline's establishment in the 1970s. Between 1980, when the first woman attained full professorship in the field, and 2023, only 25 women reached the highest rank. By focusing on these cases of 'success', our aim is to identify potential gendered patterns that have shaped pathways to the top of the academic hierarchy. In addition, by analysing their narratives, we seek to provide a nuanced understanding of how gender dynamics and practices influence women's careers and experiences in Italian political science. Finally, we also explore the strategies and enabling factors that have allowed these women to overcome the barriers of a male-dominated sector.

Our research is guided by two questions:

What career steps and age patterns characterize the trajectories of women who have achieved full professorship in Italian political science? Do these differ significantly from those of their male counterparts?

How do female full professors navigate gendered obstacles and opportunities over the course of their careers?

To address these questions we proceed as follows. The first two sections review, respectively, the main strands of literature explaining the persistence of a gender gap in academia, particularly in top positions, and the data and methods employed in our study. The third section presents the first quantitative analysis of the career paths of full professors in Italian political science, comparing men and women. Next, we examine the life-course narrative of the 21 female FPs we interviewed, examining the obstacles and opportunities encountered throughout their careers. The final section offers our conclusions.

## **2. Academic careers under glass ceilings: a literature overview**

Gender inequality in academia remains a persistent global issue. While there has been measurable progress at the lower tiers of the academic hierarchy, vertical gender segregation continues to be the norm. The 'glass ceiling' and 'leaky pipeline' phenomena – referring, respectively, to the chronic underrepresentation of women in senior roles (full professorships and leadership positions) and their gradual attrition as they progress through academic ranks – stem from a set of often invisible barriers that systematically obstruct women's career advancement (Picardi, 2020).

Scholarly analyses of the glass ceiling in academia commonly distinguish between supply-side and demand-side explanations (Gaiaschi, 2022). Supply-side accounts focus on factors shaping women's willingness and ability to enter and compete for academic positions, such as attitudes, motivations, self-selection mechanisms, and individual performance. Demand-side accounts, by contrast, foreground the institutional and structural factors that limit the 'demand' for women in academia.

In recent years, research has increasingly prioritized demand-side explanations (Lombardo, Naldini, & Poggio, 2024), building on a long-standing feminist scholarship that exposed how organizational structures, cultures, and practices are socially constructed to disadvantage women and other minoritized groups (Acker, 1990). The rise of feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2011) has further advanced this agenda, providing a theoretical framework to examine the gendered dynamics embedded in universities' institutional design, governance, and practices (Clavero & Galligan, 2020). Crucially, this scholarship does not merely diagnose inequality but also investigates concrete pathways for institutional transformation (Clavero & Galligan, 2020).

One key source of obstacles to women's academic careers lies in the construction of the 'ideal academic' around stereotypically masculine traits and norms. Thornton (2013) conceptualizes this as the normative masculinist standard of the 'Benchmark Man' – a successful, white, middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual, able-bodied man endowed with epistemic authority – which operates as the implicit standard against which all academics are measured, leaving women and other minoritized groups 'invariably found wanting' (p. 128). Research has shown that framing academic leadership roles in terms of masculine traits diminishes women's confidence in their own qualifications and reduces their likelihood of applying for promotion (De Paola, Ponzio, & Scoppa, 2017; Cannito, Naldini, & Santero, 2023). It also steers hiring committee preferences towards candidates that are perceived to embody the characteristics of the 'ideal candidate' (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014).

The shift toward academic capitalism (Ferree & Zippel, 2015) has redefined the 'ideal academic' as one who meets the benchmarks of 'excellence' and 'merit' – categories often presented as gender-neutral but, in practice, deeply gendered in their construction (Thornton, 2013). These benchmarks have fostered evaluation systems that privilege work patterns traditionally associated with men, such as total temporal availability, competitiveness, extensive international mobility, and uninterrupted research productivity – often assessed through a sustained record of publications in top-ranked journals.

Women often encounter greater challenges in conforming to the prevailing model of the 'ideal academic'. These difficulties arise from both broad structural factors and gendered organizational dynamics. At the structural level, the societal gendered division of care work means that women academics with caregiving responsibilities – particularly for young children – face significant obstacles in meeting the expectations associated with the 'ideal academic' profile. Research shows that the 'motherhood penalty' can reduce women's chances of attaining full professorships (Acker and Armenti, 2004; Troeger et al., 2020), particularly in 'gender-blind' organizational environments, i.e., those that fail to recognize the influence of gender stereotypes related to parenthood

(Cannito, 2022; Thun, 2019), and in contexts with weak or traditional parental-leave frameworks (Cannito, Poggio, Tuselli 2023).

These results resonate with others from qualitative research on women in top career positions that show that they tend to be free from childcare responsibilities, compared to men (Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2019). Other studies also suggest that in the narratives of women academics, motherhood is often perceived as a career stopper, to the extent that it is often postponed until the attainment of a permanent position to avoid career setbacks (Thébaud & Taylor, 2021). Perceptions about the negative impact of motherhood, however, can be mitigated through a more equitable division of both caregiving responsibilities and cognitive household labour, i.e., the mental load involved in anticipating, fulfilling and monitoring household needs (Weeks, 2024). The presence of ‘supportive partners’ is often mentioned in the narrative of women academics as a key enabler of their career progression (Zippel, 2017).

Other studies, however, challenge the centrality attributed to motherhood (or parenthood more generally) in explaining slower or stalled career advancement among women academics. In their study on Iceland, Heijstra, Bjarnason, and Rafnsdóttir (2015) find that family-related variables are not significant predictors of career progression (or its absence) when compared to organizational and institutional factors. Similarly, critical scholarship argues that the hypervisibility of the ‘motherhood penalty’ can obscure the structural barriers that hinder women’s careers (Naldini, Santero, and Tuselli, 2023) and overlook societal shifts in parental roles that increasingly expose men to work–life balance challenges within academia (Cannito, 2022; Lund et al., 2019).

Turning to gendered organizational dynamics, a substantial body of research has shown that women are disproportionately engaged in ‘academic housework’, that is, ‘institutional service work performed by all academic staff but rarely recognized in career advancement or in definitions of academic excellence’ (Heijstra, Steinthorsdóttir, and Einarsdóttir, 2017, p. 765). In the Italian context, for example, women academics have been found to devote more time than their male counterparts to teaching and service (Minello and Russo, 2021), as well as to administrative and managerial tasks (Guarino and Borden, 2021). Even when women attain top-level managerial positions within university governance, they are more likely to assume ‘emotional’ roles – such as the pastoral care of students – rather than strategic or steering functions as shown in the case of Spanish universities by Castaño, Vasquez-Cupeiro, Martinez-Cantos (2019).

Women are also more frequently excluded from key international networks compared to men, with consequences for their research productivity and overall competitiveness (Zippel 2017). Exclusion from international networks is explained both as a consequence of greater caregiving responsibilities and as an outcome of organizational dynamics, particularly the persistence of homosocial mechanisms in research groups and departments. ‘Old boy networks’ provide men with stronger social capital and more extensive connections within university institutions than women (Teel, 2020; Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2024a). Exclusion from such networks can lead to reduced participation in collaborative and international projects, thereby lowering research output. More critically, it can result in disadvantages during recruitment and promotion processes (van den Brink and Benshop, 2013), especially in systems, like the Italian one, where academic social capital continues to play an important role in hiring

practices (Pezzoni, Sterzi and Lissoni, 2012). Discrimination rooted in homophilic networks plays a significant role in explaining gender gaps, particularly in the upper echelons of the academic hierarchy. In Italy, women remain less likely than men with equivalent professional profiles and productivity levels to obtain promotions (De Paola, Ponzo and Scoppa, 2017).

Research on women academics' career trajectories shows that the interaction of these gendered practices and norms affects women at all stages of the career ladder, including those who ultimately attain full professorships (Fritch, 2015). In the Italian context, qualitative studies find that women tend to have less continuous career paths and report encountering more obstacles than their male colleagues (Santero, Bertolini, and Piga 2023). Quantitative analyses employing survival models corroborate these findings: in Italy, the probability that a 'median' associate professor will be promoted to full professor within seven years is significantly lower for women than for men (Falco, Cuntrera and Attanasio, 2023). Moreover, when women do attain full professorship, they are, on average, promoted later than men, even when demonstrating comparable levels of scholarly productivity (Filandri, Pasqua, and Ubaldi, 2025).

To counteract the persistence of gender inequality in academia, various measures have been implemented in recent years, largely driven by the growing integration of gender equality objectives within EU-led coordination efforts in the higher education sector and the establishment of the European Research Area (ERA). The ERA has prompted the adoption of a variety of equality policies - such as gender quotas in hiring, work-life balance measures, and protocols against sexual and sexist harassment - alongside the creation or expansion of gender equality structures at the university level (Clavero and Galligan, 2020; Lombardo and Bustelo, 2021). These initiatives are typically integrated within Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), strategic planning documents designed to promote equity in research, teaching, and governance. The adoption of GEPs by universities has been strongly incentivized through a conditionality mechanism that makes eligibility for European Research Council funding contingent on the presence of such plans.

Literature examining the adoption and implementation of equality measures at the university level highlights the key role played by feminist actors and 'critical actors' - individuals in positions of influence who are committed to institutional change, regardless of gender (Childs and Krook, 2009). Their impact includes advocating for, and overseeing, the adoption of gender equality policies (Tildesley, Lombardo, and Verge, 2022) while more broadly challenging exclusionary practices embedded within academic institutions (Hinze, 2024; Verge, 2021).

At the same time, this body of literature critically points out that, despite some tangible progress, gender mainstreaming in higher education remains a textbook case of policy failure, largely due to ongoing resistance by pro status-quo actors (Verge 2021). Studies in this tradition help to uncover the contentious politics around gender equality policies in academia, and the complex dynamics in place when seeking gendered institutional change. As an example, in their study of Spanish universities, Tildesley et al. (2021) identify multiple forms of resistance that are put forward by pro status-quo actors, ranging from discursive strategies, such as denying the need for gender equality measures or deprioritizing them in institutional agendas; passive resistance, expressed

through non-actions and non-decisions, and strategic behaviours, including the defunding or understaffing of equality units.

Finally, another strand of research focuses on the individual career trajectories of women academics, seeking to identify both opportunities for challenging gendered institutional norms and personal strategies for navigating persistent inequalities within university departments. Feminist institutionalist studies emphasize that the presence of a ‘critical mass’ of women in academic departments, combined with ‘critical actors,’ is essential for dismantling gendered norms. Advocacy networks formed by such critical masses can create more supportive environments for female researchers (Hinze, 2024). Female mentors are also frequently cited in interview-based research as career enablers, providing role models for managing the gendered challenges of academic life (Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2019; Kaepfel, Grenier, and Björngard-Basayne, 2020).

While much of the literature takes gender as the primary analytical lens for examining inequalities in academia, gender is inextricably intertwined with other axes of inequality such as class, ethnicity, and nationality. Intersectional approaches to higher education (e.g., Ahmed, 2012) show how these categories interact to produce additional power relations, and how universities function not only as gendered institutions but also as classed and racialized ones. In particular, universities are both expressions of – and crucial sites for the reproduction of – middle- and upper-class habitus. In other words, academic careers often require the acquisition of middle-class cultural and economic resources, with strong sanctions for individuals who fail to do so (Bourdieu, 1990; Keil, 2025). It is therefore no coincidence that middle-class values such as rationality, independence, individualism and competitiveness are not only closely tied to hegemonic masculinity, but also form the benchmark of the ‘ideal’ academic (Lund et al., 2019).

Taken together, these studies seem to suggest that while institutional policies and individual strategies can create more favourable conditions for women in academia, they remain insufficient to dismantle the entrenched structural barriers that continue to shape career trajectories, a challenge that our empirical analysis seeks to explore in the specific context of Italian political science.

### **3. Methods and data**

This study investigates gendered career paths and experiences of women at the top of Italian political science by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, each designed to address a distinct research question. The quantitative analysis examines the career steps and age patterns of all full professors in the discipline, in order to determine whether women who achieved this rank followed different trajectories from their male counterparts (RQ1). The qualitative analysis draws on in-depth interviews and offers richer and more nuanced insights into the descriptive results by capturing participants’ perspectives and experiences regarding gendered obstacles and opportunities in women’s careers in Italian political science (RQ2).

The case is both analytically significant and empirically rich: since the 1970s, only 25 women have reached full professorship in political science in Italy, and our sample includes 21 of them, 84% coverage of the target population. Given that this is the first study to address this topic in Italian political science, the research design also

incorporates a strong descriptive component, aimed at mapping the phenomenon and establishing a baseline for future investigations.

### 3.1. Quantitative analysis

To address RQ1, we employ an original dataset, the archive of the Italian Political Science Association, SISP (Bosco et al., 2024). The dataset gathers professional information on all academic staff affiliated with the field of political science since its creation in 1971.<sup>1</sup> We focus on two key indicators: (1) the mean age at which academics were appointed as full professors and (2) the average time taken to achieve this rank from their first academic appointment (tenured or untenured) in the field. This allows us to compare gendered career trajectories across different cohorts and to highlight both generational and disciplinary patterns (see also Gaiaschi and Grimaldi, 2025).

### 3.2. Qualitative analysis

To address RQ2, we conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with women who attained full professorship (FPs) in political science (SPS/O4 under the MUR classification until 2023) between 1980 and 2023 at Italian universities. The broad timeframe was chosen to capture rich insights from different cohorts of scholars whose careers developed under varying disciplinary and institutional conditions, including major university reforms and the shift towards academic capitalism (Ferree and Zippel, 2015; Verzichelli and Zucchini, 2024).

In line with international ethical standards, we deliberately avoided reporting any personal matters, anecdotes, or events that could reveal the identities of our interviewees. In this spirit, we also excluded demographic information (such as age, academic affiliation, and parental status) from our interview overview table (see Table A.1 in the Appendix), which only reports details about the interview settings. Below, we provide aggregated information about our sample. All participants in our study are white and Italian-born, and 47% have experienced parenthood.

All interviews began with an introduction to the study, followed by recorded consent. The interview guide covered topics including: academic background and trajectory, challenges and opportunities in career progression, academic recruitment, research networks, academic work and gender inclusion, work-life balance, and recommendations for initiatives to improve gender equity in the discipline and in academia more broadly. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling us to explore topics of particular interest to the interviewees and ourselves. All interviews were conducted by the authors between January and September 2024, either online (17), in person (3), or by telephone (1). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 47 minutes (see Table A.1 in the Appendix). Of the 21 interviews, 19 were recorded and fully transcribed.

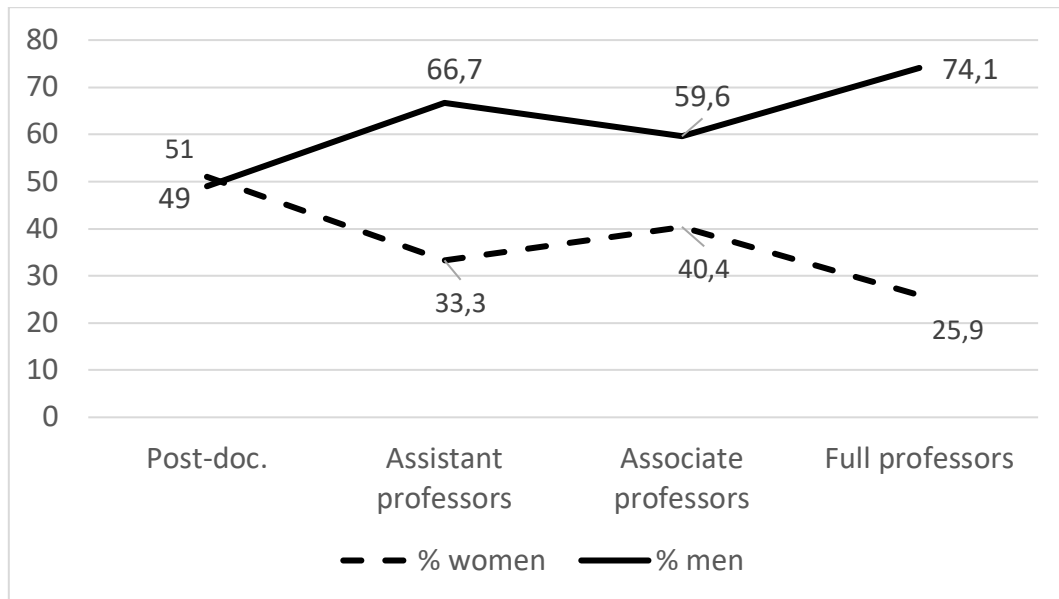
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<sup>1</sup> The SISP Archive is the product of integrating multiple data sources: (1) the MUR personnel database, available since 2001; (2) printed materials from the National University Council (CUN) documenting affiliations with the SPS/O4 disciplinary sub-field, dating back to 1991; (3) archival records from the original CUN disciplinary sector, identified as Q02X since 1982; and (4) manual coding of individual researchers' CVs to capture additional micro-level variables, such as birth year and PhD completion year. The Archive is available from SISP upon request for research reasons.

Subsequently we applied thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2022) using NVIVO14 to identify key themes and subthemes within the transcripts. We adopted a coding approach that allowed us to trace interviewees' narratives about the role of institutional and workplace factors, as well as individual factors, in their own trajectories. In line with our theoretical framework, which emphasized the importance of demand-side factors vis-à-vis supply side, we do not treat these individual characteristics as self-standing explanations for career success; rather, we interpret them as narratives and self-descriptions worth mapping, as they are themselves shaped against (gendered) academic norms and embedded in broader organizational dynamics (for a similar approach, see Gherardi and Poggio 2003). In a second analytical step, we searched for patterns across the interviews, comparing different cohorts of scholars and exploring various analytical angles. Many of these themes are not presented or discussed in this article. Detailed information about the coding scheme and the specific codes used in the analysis is provided in the Appendix (A.2). The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses are presented in the following sections.

#### **4. The dimensions of the gap**

Women have historically been underrepresented in Italian political science. Until the late 1990s, they comprised less than 20% of the academic community. However, their presence has grown steadily over the subsequent two decades. By the end of 2023, women accounted for 33.6% of the political science faculty, a proportion notably lower than the 41.7% observed in the broader disciplinary field of 'area 14', which includes both political and social sciences. Despite a modest narrowing of the gender gap during the 2000s, disparities across career stages remain evident. Figure 1 illustrates the gender distribution of Italian political scientists by academic rank in 2023. The data reveal that despite near parity at the beginning, men's careers tend to follow a linear progression, whereas women encounter significant barriers in advancing to the highest academic positions (Bosco and Feo, 2024).

**Figure 1.** Italian political scientists, by gender and career position (2023, in %).

Source: Bosco et al. (2024).

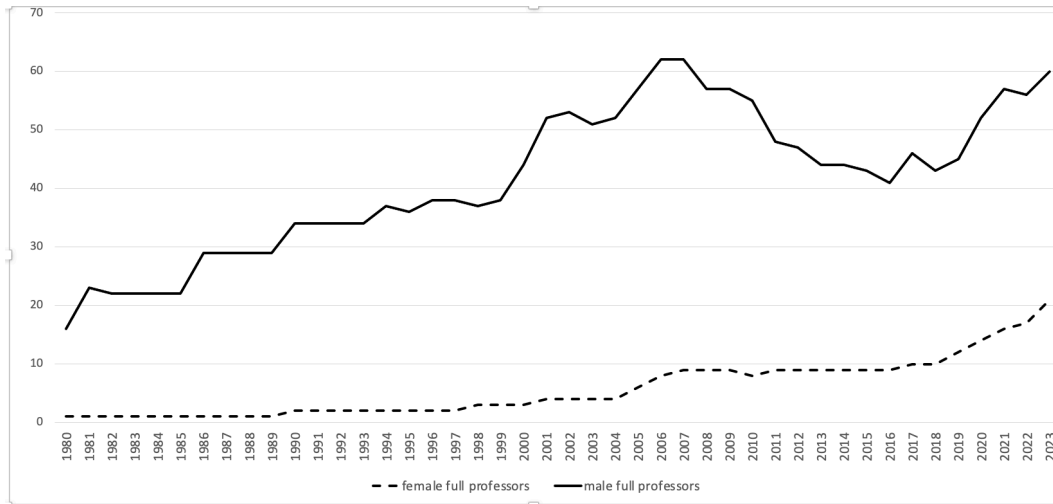
The most significant gender disparity in Italian political science is found at the highest academic rank, where male FPs outnumber their female counterparts by a ratio of three to one (74.1% vs. 25.9%). This imbalance is not mirrored in the broader ‘area 14’ disciplinary field, where women comprise 31.5% of full professors, nor in the Italian academic community as a whole, where women held 27.9% of full professorships at the end of 2023 (Bosco et al. 2024). As already stressed, only 25 women reached full professorship – a remarkably small number. By 2023, four of these women had retired, leaving 21 active female FPs, the largest cohort in the history of Italian political science to date (see Figure 2).

A further look at Figure 2 illustrates that the first woman to attain the rank of FP in Italian political science did not do so until 1980. By 1990, this number had doubled – albeit to only two – and it took more than three decades for the figure to exceed 20. The graph also highlights the persistent overrepresentation of male scholars in full professorships throughout this period.

This disparity is the complex result of different intersecting factors: broad social trends affecting women's access to higher education and, consequently, to highly qualified professions since the 1960s, university reforms, and individual features (Lombardo, Naldini and Poggio, 2024). However, the discipline's original structure, characterized by a predominantly male academic elite, further perpetuated the disparity. Dynamics in the recruitment processes have certainly contributed to reinforcing it, with hiring committees – often composed almost exclusively of male full professors – exhibiting a homophilic bias by favouring male candidates. Thornton aptly describes ‘the replacement of like with like – performed unproblematically and on a regular basis’ (2013, p.130), a pattern well-documented in studies on gendered mechanisms in Italian academia (Gaiaschi and Musumeci, 2020). The scarcity of women in top positions confirms the presence of a robust ‘glass ceiling’ that only began to crack open during the early

2000s, driven by the retirement of the first generation of male full professors and austerity-led academic reforms that froze recruitment. Between 2006 and 2016, the number of male FPs declined from 62 to 41, while the number of female FPs increased only slightly, from 8 to 9 (Bosco et al. 2024). A more significant upward trend in the recruitment of female FPs emerged in 2019: since then, their number has more than doubled.

**Figure 2.** Number of full professors, by gender (1980-2023).



Source: Bosco et al. (2024).

To explore gendered differences in career progression and address RQ1, we focused on two key indicators: the mean age at which academics were appointed as full professors and the average time taken to achieve this rank since the start of their academic career (i.e., the year they first got a position – tenured or untenured – in the field of political science).

Table 1, which presents the results of the analysis dividing scholars by their academic start, does not reveal significant gender differences amongst FPs. In the cohort of scholars who started their career in political science before the 1990s, both the mean age at recruitment as FPs and the number of years employed to reach the highest step of their career was almost the same for men and women. For the academics who started their careers in the 1990s, the average age at FP appointment was 45.5 years for women and 49.9 for men. Furthermore, women reached promotion to FP, on average, two years before their male counterparts, but this small difference is not statistically significant.<sup>2</sup>

For the group of female professors who began their careers in the first decade of the 2000s, we notice that the average age at reaching FP is 5 years higher than the preceding cohort (50.6). In this case, men reach full professorship one year before women on average, but again this difference is not statistically significant.<sup>3</sup> Similarly to the previous cohort, we can see only a very small gender difference in the time employed to reach full professorship (+0.9 years for women), and a general increase – from 9 to 12 years. A different pattern is instead present for the last cohort of FPs, those who started their

<sup>2</sup> Two-tailed t-test p-value = 0.6406

<sup>3</sup> Two-tailed t-test p-value = 0.6169

academic career after 2010. The age of those in the class 2010-2023 is heavily influenced by the high number of academics recruited from abroad or other careers directly into the role of full professors. Women are younger than men in this cohort<sup>4</sup> and also younger compared to the previous cohort, while men are slightly older than their colleagues who started their ‘regular’ careers in the previous decade.

**Table 1.** Career features of Italian full professors of political science (1971-2023).

|  | Mean age at recruitment as Full Professors |              | Average time employed to reach full professorship (since entry in academic career) in years |       |
|--|--|--------------|---|-------|
|  | Men  | Women        | Men   | Women |
| FPs who began academic career before 1990 (N)*             | 44.9<br>(60)                               | 44.5<br>(4)  | 9.1   | 9.5   |
| FPs who began academic career between 1990 and 1999 (N)*   | 49.4<br>(22)                               | 45.5<br>(4)  | 11.9  | 8.7   |
| FPs who began academic career in the period 2000-2009 (N)* | 49.4<br>(25)                               | 50.6<br>(11) | 11.5  | 12.4  |
| FP who began academic career in the period 2010-2023 (N)** | 50.3<br>(22)                               | 47.8<br>(6)  | 4.3   | 0.6   |

Note: \* The table was built using the variable ‘entry year’ of the SISP Archive, which refers to the entry into the Political Science sector (SPS04), in both tenured and non-tenured positions.

\*\* Since 2010, a wave of full professors have been appointed in this role directly from abroad or through alternative career paths. This trend accounts for the reduction in the average time required to achieve full professorship.

Source: Bosco et al. (2024)

Finally, the averages are tainted by the fact that 100% of the six women recruited as full professors had entered Italian academia from abroad directly as full (5) or associate professors (the remaining one was promoted to FP shortly afterwards). As for men, only 43.7% of them followed the same ‘from abroad’ path in the 2010-2023 period.

To gain a more detailed understanding of the career trajectories of female FPs we frame their working paths taking into account the institutional constraints and regulatory frameworks governing career progression at different points in time.

Female political scientists began their academic careers as either assistant professors, associate professors, or, in some cases, were directly appointed as full professors in political science.<sup>5</sup> As shown in Table 2, we refer to the women who started their career in

<sup>4</sup> Also in this case the difference is not statistically significant: two-tailed t-test p-value = 0.3872

<sup>5</sup> Like Tab.1, Tab. 2 was built on the variable ‘entry year’ of the SISP Archive (Bosco et al. 2024), which refers to entry into the political science sector (SPS04), in both tenured and non-tenured positions. However, as women started their careers in political science as assistant, associate or full professors, for all of them the ‘entry year’ variable is equivalent to tenure.

the 1980s as ‘first timers’. Since not all of them held a PhD – given that the first Italian doctoral programme in political science was established only in the late 1980s – it is not possible to determine the exact time span between the completion of their doctoral studies and their first academic appointment. Notably, the age at which first timers achieved a position was lower than that of their peers in subsequent decades (see column 3). Moreover, they progressed through the academic ranks relatively quickly, achieving full professorship in an average of 9.5 years.

**Table 2.** Career features of female full professors in political science (1980-2023).

| <b>Entry/tenure, by decade</b>        | <b>N</b> | <b>Years from PhD to tenure</b> | <b>Mean age at tenure</b> | <b>Years from tenure to FP</b> | <b>Mean age at FP</b> |
|---------------------------------------|----------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>First timers</i><br>1980-1989      | 4        | n.a.                            | 35                        | 9.5                            | 44.5                  |
| <i>Early PhD holders</i><br>1990-1999 | 4        | 6.2                             | 36.7                      | 8.7                            | 45.5                  |
| <i>Crisis sufferers</i><br>2000-2009  | 11       | 7.5                             | 38.2                      | 12.4                           | 50.6                  |
| <i>Out-of-townners</i><br>2010-2023   | 6        | 15.8                            | 47.2                      | 0.6                            | 47.2                  |

Source: Bosco et al. (2024).

The second cohort presented in Table 2 comprises the ‘early PhD holders’, a group composed of four women. All but one of them earned their doctoral degrees in Italy between 1988 and 1996 and obtained tenure between 1997 and 1999 as assistant professors. They all became full professors between 2005 and 2010. Three of them were based in Bologna, two in Turin and one in Catania. Their career trajectories appear relatively smooth, with an average wait of 6.2 years between earning their PhDs and entering university as assistant professors, albeit at a higher average age than the ‘first timers’ (36.7 years). The early PhD holders were subsequently promoted to associate professor positions within a relatively short timeframe (2000–2004) and achieved full professorship in less than nine years since tenure, at a mean age of 45.5 years.

We refer to the third group as ‘crisis sufferers’ because, compared to their predecessors, they experienced the impact of a worsening economic context on their career progression. These scholars started their academic path between 2000 and 2009 and therefore faced the challenges posed by the Great Recession and the reform of the recruitment system for associate and full professors. In particular, since 2008, the limitation of faculty turnover and the drastic reduction of the ordinary financial resources (FFO) received by each university have intensified the competition for increasingly limited resources. Moreover, their careers were slowed down by a change in university recruitment rules and the introduction of the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (National Scientific Qualification, ASN). According to Law 240/2010, access to the positions of associate and full professors required the possession of a specific qualification (the ASN).

A national commission made up of full professors in the discipline was responsible for awarding the title on the basis of quantitative criteria and evaluative judgments. As a consequence of the new rules, Italian scholars have to pass a double exam to eventually win a position as associate or full professor. First they need to get the ASN qualification and, later, they have to apply for and participate in the competitions opened by local universities for associate and full professors. The competitions depend on the resources allocated each year by the Ministry of Universities and are unrelated to the number of candidates who have received the ASN title.

The results of the qualification are not the same for everyone: research has shown that despite the qualification, women have lower probabilities of promotion to full professorship than their male colleagues (Marini and Meschitti, 2018; De Paola, Ponzio and Scoppa, 2018; Filandri and 3, 2021). This pattern is evident in political science as well: by February 2025, only 32% of women holding the ASN qualification for full professorship had been promoted, compared to 48% of their male counterparts, a gap of 16 percentage points (Bosco and Prearo, 2024).

Finally, the ‘out-of-towners’ have specific features that make it almost impossible to compare them with the other groups. As noted above, the academics included were all based in foreign universities and were directly recruited as full or associate professors between 2010 and 2023. According to the law, academics benefit from tax advantages for a number of years, while universities benefit from the funds associated with this type of recruitment. ‘Out-of-towner’ academics, therefore, spent part of their career abroad before entering Italian university at high career levels. As a result, their age at the time of tenure in an Italian university was high (47.2 years) and the time from tenure to full professorship (0.6 years) too short to compare with those of the other groups. However, the important feature of this group is that in 2023, 28.6% of female FPs in Italian political science had not followed the internal career path.

In conclusion, our analysis confirms the existence of a particularly wide gender gap in Italian political science for full professorships. Three features deserve attention. First, our data indicate that the career trajectories of women who have reached the top of Italian political science closely resemble those of their male counterparts. This contrasts with previous studies showing that women academics often follow non-traditional career paths (Bennett, 2011; Santero, Bertolini and Piga, 2023) and are typically promoted later than men, all other factors being equal (Filandri, Pasqua and Uboldi, 2025). In political science, instead, women and men tend to attain full professorship at comparable ages and with similar career durations – and in some instances, women reach this milestone even earlier. This pattern suggests the dominance of a single, standardized model of progression to full professorship to which both men and women do conform. It also points to a limited diversification of career pathways within the discipline, with lesser career path equifinality, where success appears contingent on meeting the same rigid benchmarks regardless of gender.

Second, the most recent decade (2010-2023) reveals a new pattern characterizing women’s access to full professorship, as all the women (100%) who became FPs were hired as a result of mechanisms that prioritized highly international careers (*vis-à-vis* 43.7% of men). In other words, higher excellence was demanded of women than of their male colleagues, who were instead favoured by the traditional (local) patterns. This

finding confirms that holding a highly international profile is one of the available strategies for women to circumvent gendered barriers to career progression in academia (Zippel, 2017), particularly during periods of crisis marked by hiring freezes and shrinking academic budgets.

Finally, other findings (Bosco and Prearo, 2024) highlight that the ASN did not help women to attain full professorship. Data show in fact that once they obtain the qualification, female political scientists tend to remain in the promotion pipeline much longer than men before attaining a full professorship position. After the 2010 reform, thus, the glass ceiling in Italy turned into reinforced glass at the local level, as university institutions prefer to hire men first (Filandri and Pasqua, 2025).

## **5. Beyond career profiles: more different than equal?**

This section examines in depth the academic life courses of women full professors (FPs). Although the career profiles presented in Table 1 show similarities, the 21 interviews we conducted with women FPs allowed us to explore the gendered experiences shaping their career trajectories. By focusing on the perceived ‘snakes and ladders’ encountered along their career paths (Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2019), both obstacles and opportunities, our thematic analysis highlights the complex ways in which gender intersects with other factors to shape the experiences of women, even those who have succeeded in the highly male-dominated environment of academia (Acker, 1990).

*Mentorship* was repeatedly identified as a critical factor in overcoming challenges and achieving career milestones. Many respondents recalled the supportive role of senior male full professors, who created cohesive and inclusive research groups, where gender discrimination was absent (FP\_6; FP\_11; FP\_21). These mentors introduced their mentees to the practicalities of academic life, such as networking, while providing intellectual guidance, encouragement, and confidence-building (FP\_4; FP\_17; FP\_20; FP\_21). In some cases, they actively encouraged women to join major research projects despite initial hesitation (FP\_8). As one interviewee noted:

My mentor played a super important role because, especially at the beginning of one’s career, the way others look at you is important... and I’m very grateful... to have found people who believed in me. It’s not just a matter of insecurity - your sense of worth also comes from interaction with others, from the recognition they give you (FP\_2).

While these relationships were valued, they also reflected a common hierarchical dependency, where junior scholars rely on senior figures for the acceptance and recognition essential for building a reputation (Bourdieu, 1988). Some of the interviewees mitigated this dependency by cultivating multiple mentorship relationships (FP\_1; FP\_4; FP\_7; FP\_9) and maintaining active peer networks (FP\_1).

*Female mentorship* was described as profoundly empowering, although experienced only outside Italian academia (FP\_4; FP\_15; FP\_19) due to the slow feminization of top career ranks. This lack of domestic female role models, especially for those working in gender studies, underscores the male-dominated nature of Italian political science (Donà, 2020). Female mentors can be crucial in helping women navigate gendered challenges as one interviewee explained:

I always tell [mentor] that she's the one who saved me... I started applying for postdoc positions everywhere... Then she took me in, and that was really the turning point in my career... That's when I realized that I did have the capacities... And [she was] a woman who had children too... The main thing for me was that gave me... the proof and the reassurance that I had the qualities to do this job, and that it was possible as a woman to pursue it (FP\_19).

While the role of mentor is generally considered crucial in the early stages of an academic career, the interviews show that their support continues to play a significant role in later stages as well, both in facilitating advancement to top positions and in fostering the development and consolidation of one's scholarly profile. In many cases, there is an evolution towards a genuine *life-long professional partnership*, in which mentors become both key actors in the scholar's research network and trusted go-to figures for advice and support.

*Networking* also emerged as essential for career advancement. Access to 'benevolent gatekeepers' (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014) was described as key to becoming an insider in what many perceived as closed and exclusionary networks (FP\_1; FP\_3; FP\_5; FP\_11; FP\_13; FP\_17).<sup>6</sup> In the early years of the discipline, network membership could counteract gender bias, though it often required women to conform to male norms. 'Women at the time were seen as family mothers. If you were part of a powerful network, you had chances to be included... but it was better to blend in and be like the men' (FP\_14).

What also emerges from this narrative is how female FPs were also confronted with the need to adhere to benchmark masculinity traits (Thornton 2013). But more generally, these groups are out-of-reach for women, and contribute to increasing women's disadvantage (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2024b). FP\_3 recalls that, 'It took [her] a good while to understand that there was also a sort of 'parlour', a select club in which, as a woman, you were not admitted'.

Those who could not readily rely on domestic networks – which still play a crucial role in hiring processes as a result of academic clientelism (Pezzoni, Sterzi and Lissoni, 2012) – identify this 'outsider' status as an additional hurdle they had to overcome (FP\_8; FP\_12), leading to frustration and anger:

I remember it as something that made me angry because I already had, let's say, a strong CV [...] and I think I participated in three selections at the time. But often, someone with a less impressive CV – not necessarily less skilled, but definitely less accomplished – would get the position because they had a connection. Things were so structured this way that even friends in academia who were slightly older than me would ask me, 'But who's supporting you?' .... And they would continue: 'well, if you don't have someone backing you...'. Of course, there was no chance (FP\_1).

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<sup>6</sup>The predominance of closed networks and the importance of personal connections, however, is not considered a prerogative of political science but rather a common feature of the entire academic environment or, more generally, a distinctly Italian dynamic, as noted in the following quotes: 'There's no denying it – I can never imagine academic environments in this country where these connections and relational networks don't play a role,' (FP\_11); 'At the time, it was clear – there were recommendations, but no more and no fewer than in other sectors,' (FP\_5).

In these cases, the establishment of – or continuous reliance on – international research networks is deemed crucial for women's careers. These networks offered opportunities for academic exchange, professional growth, and international recognition (FP\_1; FP\_9; FP\_12; FP\_16). For outsider women in recent cohorts, reliance on international networks, a highly international profile and, most importantly, grants from prestigious research funding bodies became strategic tools to 'come back through the rear door' and bypass internal gatekeeping (FP\_19).

*Institutional factors* also influenced career outcomes. In a large university a shift in practices concerning recruitment broke with seniority-based norms, privileging, instead, the hiring of younger scholars in higher positions. While this shift was meant mostly to secure a certain degree of innovation in research and teaching, it had a clear gendered effect as it helped women 'newcomers' to secure a tenured position (FP\_11; FP\_18).

*Individual attributes*, such as resilience, assertiveness, determination, and hard work, were frequently cited as enablers by our interviewees. In particular, the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties (resilience) appears strikingly often, especially evoked in relation to the competing demands of family and academic careers (Filandri and Pasqua, 2021; Gaiaschi, 2022). The attributes were also connected with some performances – such as 'not being afraid of slamming doors' or 'being someone who does not beat around the bush' – which hint at the connection between the need to perform according to hegemonic masculine traits and achieving success in the academic sector (Thornton 2013). Interestingly, some of the interviewees directly identified the importance of embodying some masculine traits to gain acceptance and respect within male-dominated academic circles. In the words of FP\_1:

I have always been told by male colleagues that I come across as aggressive. I don't think that's true – I'm just confident when I speak. But perhaps that's what earned me their respect.

For some of the interviewees these traits – including owning a sense of authority and *droit de parole* (FP\_1; FP\_21) – were described as essential to fitting in an overall male-dominated academic environment.

Others mentioned 'luck', 'chance' or 'opportunity', often in a self-deprecating manner. We interpret the use of these descriptors – rather than citing other factors such as securing research grants, publishing in high-impact journals, or holding leadership roles – as a pattern rooted in early gender socialization (Connell & Pearse, 2015). This reflects the 'impostor syndrome', often present in the self-perceptions of high-achieving women who attribute their success to luck rather than ability (Clance & O'Toole, 1987). Moreover, as Gherardi and Poggio (2003) suggest, references to luck function as a rhetorical device that downplays the scale of the gendered challenges underlying women's professional achievements.

*Caring responsibilities* feature prominently in the narratives of obstacles and burdens encountered throughout women's careers. Thus, concerns – both for children and elderly family members – emerge as the most difficult life aspect to reconcile with an academic career among all the cohorts of scholars included in our study. The significant tension that exists for mothers who try to combine academic work and a family is well-documented in the literature, which also highlights a worsening in this tension since the

turn to New Public Management organizational principles and the increasingly competitive nature of academic work (Acker and Armenti, 2004; Troeger et al., 2020). In this context, studies report that women postpone motherhood until the attainment of a permanent position to avoid career setbacks (Thébaud and Taylor, 2021). These difficulties are rooted in hard-to-die societal norms regarding the gendered division of reproductive work, which more often falls on women's shoulders, reducing time available for research and academic production (Acker and Armenti, 2004), as well as the 'gender-blindness' of academic institutions when addressing topics related to work-life balance (Thun, 2020). In line with these findings, motherhood is perceived as a crucial moment in the life course of our interviewees, bearing both factual and psychological consequences.

*Motherhood* was described as a pivotal, and often challenging, moment. It is worth noting that only 47% of our interviewees have or have had caring responsibilities for children. As mentioned before, one of the most visible effects of motherhood on researchers' careers is the impact on productivity levels and publication rates, which are important benchmarks for career progression. Reflecting on these aspects, one of our interviewees concluded that, 'Our work is highly competitive, where the drive to compete is very strong, but the conditions for competing are obviously not the same for everyone,' (FP\_2). Indeed, among those who did not experience motherhood, the lack of childcare responsibilities is considered a comparative advantage to other female colleagues: 'The fact that I didn't have children, compared to colleagues who do – it's unpleasant to say, but – it definitely freed up time' (FP\_11).

Time – or its lack thereof – is crucial to understand the significant tension that exists for women who try to combine academic work and family. As one of the interviewees reflects: 'Time is a truly limited resource, and it becomes even more so if you have children. For example, I only had one child... also out of professional considerations' (FP\_2). Many of the interviewees emphasize the physical and mental strain of balancing motherhood with professional tasks – an experience that is described as a 'hurdle race' or 'doing somersaults' (FP\_6; FP\_8; FP\_12; FP\_15; FP\_17). An additional source of stress is linked to the need to constantly switch between two modes of life, especially when children are still young. As explained by FP\_2: 'You travel on two trains going at different speeds: a very fast train at work and a slow, normal one at home. You spend your time constantly adjusting, but you are mostly accustomed to going fast, you can't slow down'. Thus, a shared feeling is that of guilt, for failing to invest enough time in both family and research projects.

Negotiations with partners and reliance on both family and friends as a support network play a critical role in easing the psychological burdens and organizational challenges experienced by our interviewees during this delicate moment in their life course. Supportive partners, in particular, are seen as a necessary condition to face these challenges (FP\_2; FP\_6; FP\_7; FP\_19), as well as extended families of choice. FP\_2 specifies why:

Because you can't come home late every evening unless you have someone who not only picks up your [children] but also does more than that, right? Someone who provides [them] with a sense of family affection and not just material care. So, having a support network around me was absolutely essential.

On the contrary, institutional support remains mostly lacking – with the exception of some universities that provide nursery services, as recalled by some of our interviewees (FP\_17), with little progress recorded over time. Surely, a shift has occurred: an interviewee from the first cohort recalled being openly discouraged – ‘admonished’ – not to have children if they were to pursue an academic career (FP\_14), while another clearly remembered scheduling a pregnancy according to the academic calendar, so as to be granted some time off work, and then struggling to reconcile research and breastfeeding amid the total indifference of colleagues (FP\_3) – practices and experiences very common in that generation of scholars (Armenti, 2004).

The institutional attitude towards motherhood described by our interviewees aligns with what Thun (2020) terms *gender blindness*, whereby structural barriers related to care responsibilities are rendered invisible and responsibility is shifted onto individuals. As FP\_2 put it:

No. The institution neither acknowledged nor anticipated these kinds of problems [motherhood and work-family balance]. It was really (pause)... how can I put it (pause) – not hostile, you know – but more like, ‘If you’re doing this job, you’re handling these things. How you handle it is kind of your problem, you figure it out.’

This account also resonates with what Tildesley et al. (2022) identify as a form of resistance to gender equality, whereby status-quo actors strategically frame care as a purely personal issue, thereby undermining the setting up of institutional intervention to secure work-life balance policies. The understanding of care as a solely individual responsibility – with its disproportionately negative consequences for women – is critically present during the hiring process as well, thus directly affecting the career advancement of female scholars. FP\_7 articulates the challenges to introducing some gender-sensitive norms regarding the issue among male colleagues while recalling her experience in a hiring procedure:

Now that I’m part of the restricted group of full professors, I hear all the evaluations. I have to be honest: when it comes to this whole thing about ‘evaluating the continuity of scientific output,’ it’s never, ever taken into account that a female professor might have had children. It’s always, ‘Oh, there are gaps; she didn’t publish for two years. That’s a problem.’ And I say, ‘Excuse me, but do you realize that this corresponds to maternity leave?’ Now (pause), after much insistence, this issue is no longer formally raised, but...difficult to say if there was any shift in their [male colleague] thinking around it.

The acknowledgement of persisting ‘motherhood penalties’ (Troeger et al., 2020) also leads many of our interviewees to identify this area as the most in need of institutional intervention to reduce gender inequality and gender gaps in Italian political science. According to our interviewees, more institutional support for motherhood is needed – such as the provision of nurseries – and greater sensitivity to the issue among male colleagues. Encouragingly, they note some change among younger generations, who are increasingly willing to demand more time and flexibility to dedicate to caregiving (e.g., FP\_7; FP\_2). Additionally, career evaluation processes should take periods of maternity and caregiving more seriously.

Another critical life stage that creates gendered challenges is the emergence of care-giving responsibilities for aging parents and relatives. This typically occurs at a more stable point in a person's career, which softens its impact on professional advancement but still has significant consequences for ongoing activities. F\_11 explains her strategy for managing the desire and need to care for an aging parent:

'I really had to take a lot of time away from work. I took advantage of the opportunities that this job gives you, primarily the freedom not to punch a time clock [...]. So, I always showed up for lectures and for all things connected to [an institutional role]. It's the kind of slightly different work you do in these cases, but you can't say no, right? But then, when it came to making up time for care work, I had to cut down on research time.'

Similarly to care responsibilities for children, interviewees identify care work as a factor that forcibly slows their research productivity. In their opinion, a more holistic conception of care would be beneficial so to have these issues addressed in university policies designed to provide support, and in career progression evaluations.

*Academic housework* – defined as the gendered distribution of teaching, clerical and research tasks within university departments (Heijstra, Steinhorsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017) – emerged in our interviews as a recurrent barrier shaping women's career progression. Women are asked to take on – or volunteer for – administrative and managerial roles more frequently than men (Mitchell and Hesli, 2013). This engagement diverts their time and energy away from research and publishing, which are the activities most highly valued for tenure and career advancement. This perception is shared among our interviewees, either because of personal experience or as an observation of their female colleagues' behaviour. FP\_2 addresses the consequences of this gendered distribution of tasks: 'Of course, women do more of these organizational tasks... and they tend to volunteer more, making it hard to address the imbalance and to involve men in these tasks as well, and to address the gender gap'.

We also notice that some of our interviewees strategically decided to break out of this path, taking into consideration its consequences for their career. As FP\_18 recalls: 'Honestly, I have to say that I didn't really fall into this trap. There was just too much to do, and I decided to prioritize research and my children'. Finally, some of the interviewees note an increase in academic housework as an unintended consequence of the adoption and implementation of gender equality measures (FP\_1; FP\_4; FP\_6; FP\_7). For example, the establishment of gender quotas for hiring committees or other institutional bodies, while recognized as an important measure to introduce a more diverse perspective in these settings, can also overburden women professors, especially when they are a scarce minority in departments, to the extent of being 'counterproductive' (FP\_7). They noted, as well, how male colleagues tend to not become involved in any activity broadly related to gender equality in academic management, turning these into 'strictly speaking women's tasks' (FP\_7).

## 6. Conclusions

This study offers the first systematic analysis of the career trajectories of women full professors in Italian political science, a field that remains strikingly male-dominated compared to other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (HSS) in Italian

academia, as well as in a cross-national perspective (Hinze, 2024). It addresses two central research questions: (1) whether the career patterns and age profiles of female full professors align with those of their male counterparts, and (2) how female full professors navigate gendered obstacles and leverage opportunities throughout their careers.

The quantitative findings reveal a tenacious and significant gender gap in the attainment of full professorships in Italian political science, with women constituting only 25.9% of full professors as of 2023. This figure underscores the enduring 'glass ceiling' in the discipline, shaped by historical, institutional, and disciplinary-specific barriers (Bolgnerini and Verzichelli, 2023; Donà, 2020; Verzichelli and Zucchini, 2024). While incremental progress has been observed since the late 1990s, the data highlight a 'leaky pipeline,' wherein the representation of women diminishes with each career stage. Importantly, and in contrast with previous evidence, our analysis found that women who have reached full professorship have done so at similar speeds and life stages as their male peers, showing that in the field of political science there is a predominant, linear career trajectory that women also follow instead of having non-traditional career trajectories (cf. Santero, Bertolini and Piga, 2023). However, the paths of recent female full professors suggest a shift: investing in a highly international career profile has emerged as a key strategy for overcoming domestic (gendered) barriers, with 100% of women recruited to full professorships between 2010 and 2023 entering Italian academia from abroad, against 43.7% of men, for whom domestic careers are still the predominant model.

The qualitative analysis enriches these findings by shedding light on the lived experiences of female FPs. In line with Acker (2006) who notices how gender is so embedded in the structure of organizations that we often fail to appreciate just how much it shapes our lives, experiences and opportunities, the majority of our interviewees did not directly attribute to gender a particular relevant role in influencing their career paths. However, our analysis shows that gendered challenges permeate their academic trajectories, from navigating closed and male-dominated networks to balancing caregiving responsibilities with the increasingly competitive demands of academic work. Academic institutions often fail to address these challenges, perpetuating inequality regimes that constrain women's career progression. However, the narratives also highlight critical enablers of success, including mentorship (often from male colleagues), international networks, and individual resilience. The intersection of gender with broader structural changes in academia – such as the adoption of the National Scientific Qualification (ASN) and austerity-driven reforms – further underscores the complexity of women's experiences in piloting their careers.

Furthermore, although the participants' social class was not a specific focus of our data collection, it emerged as a recurring topic in many interviews. Interviewees from working-class backgrounds often reflected on the unique challenges they faced in adapting to the social codes and expectations prevalent in elite academic spaces. Conversely, others acknowledged how their middle- or upper-middle-class origins provided them with material and social advantages that eased their career progression. While social class was not systematically addressed as a distinct analytical dimension in our research project, we underscore the relevance of an intersectional approach when analysing gendered experiences in academia.

Taken together, the two strands of analysis converge in highlighting the persistence of structural barriers and the narrowing of career pathways in the discipline. Quantitatively, the absence of significant gender differences in age and time to full professorship suggests a shared, highly standardized career trajectory. Qualitatively, interviewees highlight a set of strategies and factors that have paid off in career advancement: high levels of research productivity, international engagement, the capacity to attract external funding, and sustained networking. These were strategies that paid off in the absence of gender-sensitive institutions and targeted support. In other words, the apparent parity in promotion age masks the exclusionary effects of a system that rewards those able to comply with a narrow ‘ideal academic’ model, which, as our data show, is easier to achieve for those with access to networks and middle-class resources.

Our work contributes to the broader literature on gender inequality in academia by demonstrating that while women in Italian political science have increasingly succeeded in breaking through the glass ceiling, their career paths remain shaped by structural and cultural barriers. The reliance on internationalization as a pathway to success reveals both the adaptive strategies of women academics and the persistent limitations of the domestic system in addressing gendered inequities.

Looking forward, these findings underscore the urgent need for institutional transformation to support gender equity in Italian political science and academia more broadly. Policies that explicitly account for caregiving responsibilities, reduce the ‘motherhood penalty’, and address the gendered division of academic labour are critical to fostering a more inclusive academic environment.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1. List of Interviews

| <b>Identifier</b> | <b>date</b> | <b>duration</b>                      | <b>type</b> |
|-------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| FP_1              | 19/01/2024  | 01:25:53                             | In person   |
| FP_2              | 23/01/2024  | 00:49:24                             | Online      |
| FP_3              | 30/01/2024  | 01:00:29                             | Online      |
| FP_4              | 02/02/2024  | 01:20:41                             | Online      |
| FP_5              | 05/02/2024  | No recording, only notes and summary | Telephone   |
| FP_6              | 09/02/2024  | 01:07:37                             | Online      |
| FP_7              | 21/02/2024  | 01:38:19                             | Online      |
| FP_8              | 23/02/2024  | 00:33:19                             | Online      |
| FP_9              | 29/02/2024  | 00:42:08                             | Online      |
| FP_10             | 29/02/2024  | 00:50:05                             | Online      |
| FP_11             | 08/03/2024  | 00:48:49                             | Online      |
| FP_12             | 14/03/2024  | 00:48:37                             | Online      |
| FP_13             | 29/03/2024  | 00:53:58                             | Online      |
| FP_14             | 12/04/2024  | 01:46:36                             | In person   |
| FP_15             | 12/04/2024  | No recording, only notes             | In person   |
| FP_16             | 19/04/2024  | 01:20:20                             | Online      |
| FP_17             | 24/07/2024  | 00:41:21                             | Online      |
| FP_18             | 26/07/2024  | 00:52:39                             | Online      |
| FP_19             | 29/07/2024  | 01:47:00                             | Online      |
| FP_20             | 29/07/2024  | 01:20:00                             | Online      |
| FP_21             | 29/09/2024  | 00:50:33                             | Online      |

Source: own elaboration.

## 7.2. Coding scheme of the thematic analysis

Demographic characteristics were added in the NVIVO14 project as attributes to the single 'cases' (each interviewee) and are not part of the coding scheme. These included: age, university affiliation, number of children, years as full professor.

### **Career Trajectories**

#### 1.1 Milestones:

Description: description of academic and professional career.

#### 1.2 Mobility:

Description: experience of international mobility.

#### 1.3 Perception\_career:

Description: Perception of interviewees' own path (linear, non-linear, continuous, interrupted).

#### 1.4 Career\_strategy:

Description: mentions of strategic thinking behind career choices.

#### 1.5 Difficult\_moments:

Description: perceived difficult phases in the academic path.

### **Obstacles in academic career**

#### 2.1 Main\_obstacles:

Description: systemic/institutional/personal obstacles.

#### 2.2 New\_obstacles:

Description: reflection on new emerging obstacles faced by today's early-career researchers.

### **Enabling factors in academic career**

#### 3.1 'out\_of\_luck'

Description: perception of the role played by luck/chance in career advancement.

#### 3.2 individual\_characteristics

Description: perception of the role played by individual characteristics in career pursuit.

#### 3.3 International\_networks

Description: the role of international networks in career advancement.

#### 3.4 Institutional\_enablers

Description: perception of institutional conditions favouring career advancement.

## **Organizational culture**

### 4.1 Department\_culture:

Description: perception of departmental dynamics and institutional culture (non gendered).

### 4.2 Leadership characteristics

#### 4.2.1 Male\_leadership:

Description: perception of male

#### 4.2.2 leadership.Female\_leadership:

Description: perception of female leadership.

## **Mechanisms**

### 5.1 Networks

#### 5.1.1 Networks\_inclusion:

Description: experience of inclusion in professional networks – being insider.

#### 5.1.2 Networks\_exclusion:

Description: experience of exclusion from professional networks – being outsider.

#### 5.1.3 ‘the\_boys\_club’

Description: the presence of male homosocial networks and their consequences.

### 5.2 Mentoring

#### 5.2.1 Mentoring\_positive\_effects

Description: value and effects of receiving mentoring.

#### 5.2.2 Women\_mentors

Description: presence of women mentoring figures.

#### 5.2.3 Being\_mentors

Description: mention of (lack of) experience of being mentors.

### 5.3 Bias\_evaluation\_processes

Description: the influence and hidden bias of processes of academic performance.

## **Gendered mechanisms**

### 6.1 Gender\_stereotypes

Description: mention/exposure of gender stereotypes by colleagues & students.

### 6.2 Parenthood\_penalty

Description: effects of parenthood (motherhood) in academic career.

### 6.3 Academic\_housework

Description: mention of undervalued academic service work.

### 6.4 (Sexual)\_harassment

Description: experiences of (sexual) harassment in academia.

6.5 gender&care\_opportunities

Description: (non) influence of gender on academic careers.

6.6 Undoing\_gender

Description: instances in which interviewees' behaviour was judged as 'masculine' or masculinity traits were relevant.

6.7 Pulish\_perish

Description: description of high demands from the academic sector; experience of working under systemic pressure

**Work-Life balance**

7.1 Parenthood

Description: personal experience of parenthood and repercussions for career.

7.2 Partner\_negotiations\_family\_support\_networks

Description: experience of family negotiations and support.

7.3 Elderly\_care

Description: experience of caring for elderly people and repercussions for career.

7.4 'Sacrificing\_it\_all'

Description: experience or feeling of a lack of work/life balance.

**Policies and recommendations**

8.1 gender\_inclusive\_policies

Description: recommendations for policies and other instruments to improve gender equality in academia.

8.2 gender\_policies\_side\_effects

Description: unwanted consequences of positive actions in academia.

8.3 slow\_academia

Description: critical reflections on demanding requirements of an academic career.

# A Gendered Chokepoint? Italian Political Science and the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale*

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (ASN) in shaping the academic careers of Italian political scientists through a gender perspective. Drawing on an original dataset covering five ASN rounds (2012–2023), we find that while the procedure appears gender-neutral for associate professorships, significant disparities persist at the level of full professorships. Women are underrepresented among applicants, have lower success rates in obtaining the qualification, and are less likely than their male colleagues to be promoted once qualified. Institutional proximity between candidates and committee members significantly increase the likelihood of success and tends to benefit men more. To date, no study has examined the impact of the ASN within political science. This article offers the first systematic, gender-sensitive analysis of how the procedure affects career advancement in the field. The findings challenge the assumption of ASN's gender neutrality and highlight the persistence of structural barriers that continue to hinder women's progression to the highest academic ranks.

## 1. Introduction

Since 2012 career progression to associate and full professorships in Italy has been reshaped by the introduction of the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (ASN, National Scientific Qualification). A national-level evaluation based on academic credentials and publications, the ASN is (at least until 2025) a necessary prerequisite for participating in competitive selections for tenured positions at universities.<sup>1</sup>

Does gender affect the likelihood of obtaining qualification as an associate or full professor in Italian political science, and ultimately, of being promoted to a permanent academic position? We know it does. Data show that careers of male and female political scientists resemble the shape of a pair of scissors: women are well represented at early career stages but not in apical positions, whereas the presence of men increases with career progression (Bosco and Feo 2024). What remains unclear, however, is how gender dynamics have unfolded within the ASN procedure, and to what extent they have contributed to shaping the career progression of men and women in Italian political science.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time we are writing, a reform proposal is under discussion that would abolish the ASN in its current form and replace it with a system based on quantitative indicators and self-certification of eligibility. However, the outcome of this proposal still remains uncertain.



In other terms, we do not yet know whether, and how, career progression has changed since 2012 from a gender perspective.

Most of the (scarce) literature on the ASN assumes that the procedure is gender neutral (Pautasso 2015), and that women discrimination is instead located at the subsequent stage, when those qualified compete for actual positions at individual universities. For example, Marini and Meschitti (2018, p. 989), analyzing ASN outcomes in the period 2013-2016, found that, at parity of scientific production, men were about 24% more likely than women to be promoted, with women facing significant barriers, particularly in promotions to full professorship. Similar conclusions are presented by De Paola, Ponzio and Scoppa (2018a), who examined the results of ASN and university promotions between 2013 and 2015. They found no gender differences in the probability of obtaining qualification, but a meaningful gender gap in subsequent promotion outcomes. Furthermore - to our interest - the gender gap resulted especially large in the area of social sciences (as well as natural sciences and engineering) and particularly evident in advancements to full professorship.

However, the gender-neutrality hypothesis of the ASN has not been tested in individual scientific sectors such as political science. Our aim, in this article, is to understand how the ASN procedure has contributed to shaping specific patterns of career progression in Italian political science and what role it has played for male and female scholars. To address these questions, we built an original dataset covering all the Italian political scientists who took part in the ASN in the period 2012-2025 (February). We examine five rounds of ASN (starting in 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018 and 2021). Although the fifth round concluded in 2023, we tracked local level hiring processes through February 2025. The article is organized as follows. The first section provides an overview of the ASN procedure. The next one presents data and methodology. The subsequent three parts investigate, respectively, the main actors involved in the ASN process: the candidates (those seeking career progression) and the qualified (those who obtained the ASN certification); the commissioners (those who evaluated the candidates); and the promoted (ASN-qualified individuals who were later recruited as associate or full professors). The last section discusses the main findings. For each actor (candidates, qualified, commissioners and promoted) we draw on the existing literature, present data from our dataset and adopt a gender perspective to assess the presence of a gender gap and its implications.

## **2. The *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale*: an outline**

In this section we summarize the main features of the ASN within the context of the university reforms that have reshaped the Italian higher education system since the first decade of the new millennium. For this reason, we do not delve into the regulatory details and the countless controversies that have surrounded the ASN since its inception (see Manzo 2017; Marini e Meschitti 2018; Marzolla 2015). Instead, we provide a general overview of the qualification procedure within the career advancement framework of Italian universities.

In the first decade of the 2000s the center-right governments led by Silvio Berlusconi (2001- 2006 and 2008-2011) radically changed the system of academic recruitment and career progression. Law no. 230/2005 initially set the abolition of the

tenured assistant professor position (*ricercatore*), which had existed since 1980, to take effect in 2013. Later on, law no. 240/2010, also known as the Gelmini reform - by the name of the then Minister of Education, University and Research (MIUR) - anticipated the abrogation of the figure to 2011. Tenured assistant professors were thus replaced with two fixed-term positions: the RTD-A, a non-tenured role with a contract of three to five years; and the RTD-B, a tenure-track position with a three-year contract.

The Gelmini reform also introduced a national evaluation process for the first time. Since 2012 the ASN has become a prerequisite for career progression to associate or full professorship. This means that all Italian academics - except full professors - must obtain the ASN qualification before applying for a tenured position in a specific university. The result has been a two-tiered promotion system, in which national evaluation through the ASN precedes the local competitive recruitment process.

In the Italian university system, the disciplinary affiliation of academic staff, i.e. the scientific classification under which each faculty member operates, is structured through a set of disciplinary groups established by Law 240/2010 (art. 15). This classification unfolds across three levels: 86 Macro-Competition Sectors (*Macro Settori Concorsuali* - MSC), 190 Competition Sectors (*Settori Concorsuali* - SC), and 383 Scientific-Disciplinary Sectors (*Settori Scientifico-Disciplinari* - SSD). Each faculty member is formally affiliated with a single SSD, which defines their scientific domain for the purposes of teaching, research, and academic recruitment. The SSDs are the most micro units and are grouped into SCs and MSCs, which in turn fall under one of the 14 national disciplinary areas. For example, Area 14 (Political and Social Sciences) includes SSDs such as SPS/04 (Political Science), SPS/07 (General Sociology), and SPS/11 (Political Sociology).

To implement the ASN, the Ministry appointed an examination committee for each MSC. The committees were initially composed by four Italian full professors and one from a foreign university. The Italian commissioners were randomly selected from among full professors who had applied for the role and belonged to the same SSDs as the candidates. Each committee was responsible for assessing candidates to both associate and full professorship qualifications. Evaluation was based on candidates' publications and academic credentials (e.g., leadership of financed research projects, editorial roles in scientific journals etc.). For candidates in so-called 'bibliometric' Areas, citation metrics had also to be considered. In contrast, Area 14 -classified as non 'bibliometric'- was assessed only on the number and type of publications, excluding citation data.

As part of the reform's implementation, scientific journals were divided into two different categories: regular journals, recognized as standard scholarly publications, and so-called 'class A journals', which were identified as particularly relevant to specific SSDs. Finally, the *abilitazione* was to last four years, a period of time initially deemed sufficient for the qualified candidates to be recruited as associate or full professors by local universities. However, when it became clear that the academic system was unable to absorb the large number of qualified scholars, the validity of the ASN title was extended first to 6 years (in 2016), then to 9 (in 2019), and later to 12 (in 2024).

A major reform of the procedure took place in 2016. Originally, the ASN was supposed to occur annually, but various issues emerged during 2012-2013, convincing the MIUR to reform it. As a consequence there were changes in the evaluation parameters,

the duration of the title (as seen above), the composition of the commissions (now entirely composed by Italian full professors) and the timing of application windows, which were opened three times a year to avoid the massive number of candidates that had characterized the starting of the process (Manzo 2017; Marzolla 2015).

Between 2012 and 2023 five different rounds of ASN took place (in 2012; 2013; 2016-2018; 2018-2021 and 2021-2023). A sixth round (2023-2025) is ongoing at the time of writing (Summer 2025). During the five rounds just four committees were appointed since in 2012 and 2013 (before the reform) the Commissioners remained the same.

### 3. Data and methodology

To investigate the gendered dynamics of academic career advancement in Italian political science following the introduction of the national qualification (ASN), we constructed an original dataset by integrating multiple data sources. The aim of this empirical strategy is twofold: first, to provide a longitudinal, gender-disaggregated overview of participation, qualification, and promotion in the political science sector; second, to assess whether and how the ASN has functioned as a mechanism of reproduction or disruption of existing and well-known gender hierarchies in academic careers.

The dataset combines and expands upon previous data collections carried out by the Italian Society of Political Science (SISP), enriched by systematic data extraction from institutional sources. We collected individual-level data on all applicants in the sector 14/A2 (Political Science) for the five completed ASN rounds (2012, 2013, 2016-2018, 2018-2020, and 2021-2023), using information published on the official ASN portal. Given that the composition of the 2012 and 2013 ASN committees remained unchanged, featuring the same appointed members, we treated these two rounds as analytically aggregated. As a result, the five ASN rounds conducted between 2012 and 2023 correspond to four distinct committee compositions: 2012-2013, 2016-2018, 2018-2021, and 2021-2023.

For each candidate, we collected: name; gender (inferred from first name and validated manually); ASN academic rank applied for (associate or full professor); institutional affiliation (where applicable) at the time of the application; professional background (i.e. tenured faculty member; non-tenured post-doc, including also unaffiliated with academic institutions, or based abroad); outcome of the ASN evaluation; and date and institution of a subsequent promotion to associate or full professorship. Using and triangulating data collected by the SISP dataset on the political science community in Italy (Bosco et al 2024)<sup>2</sup>, we were able to document whether and when each candidate secured a permanent position within the Italian university system. The final dataset contains 772 observations, as individuals who applied multiple times are counted separately for each application.

In addition to ASN candidates and ASN qualified, we systematically collected data on the ASN commissioners. We extracted the composition of the evaluation committees (five members per round, including their gender, institutional affiliation, and role as president or member) for each round of the ASN. We also included contextual indicators

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<sup>2</sup> See also Marino, 2017 for an early analysis of Italian political science community based on a different dataset.

such as geographic provenance of commissioners and institutional overlap with candidates.

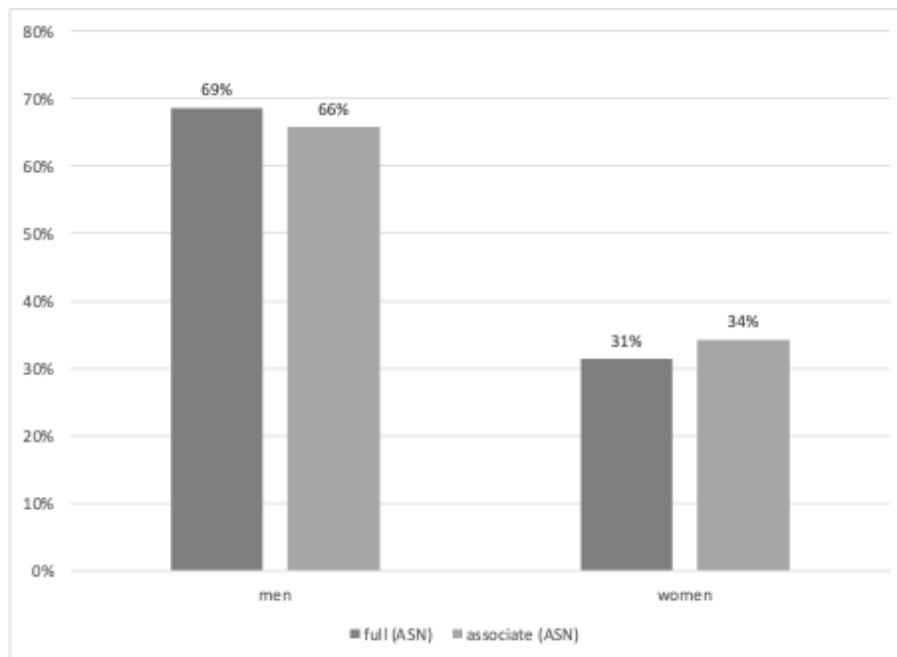
Our approach is primarily descriptive. While we do not employ statistical techniques, we focus on identifying patterns in participation, success rates, and transitions to permanent positions, disaggregated by gender and academic rank. This choice reflects our theoretical focus on institutional mechanisms of (re)production of gendered academic inequalities (Gaiaschi 2025) and our intention to contribute to the literature with fine-grained empirical evidence from a specific disciplinary sector. We limited the scope of our dataset to the sector 14/A2 for research purposes.

#### 4. ASN candidates and ASN qualified

Have women participated in the ASN qualification process as much as men? The literature consistently indicates that women have applied to the procedure less frequently than their male colleagues. In the first two rounds (2012 and 2013), for example, women accounted for less than 37% of all applicants (Manzo, 2017, p. 183). Higher levels of risk aversion and lower self-confidence have been identified as factors contributing to this lower application rate among women (De Paola, Ponzio, and Scoppa, 2015; De Paola, Ponzio, and Scoppa, 2017).

In political science, an even more pronounced process of self-selection appears to have characterized female candidates: on average, they accounted for only 33% of ASN candidates between 2012 and 2023. As shown in Fig. 1, women made up only 31% of applicants for full professorship and 34% for associate professorship in the discipline.

**Figure 1.** Candidates to the ASN qualification, by gender and academic rank applied for (2012-2023)

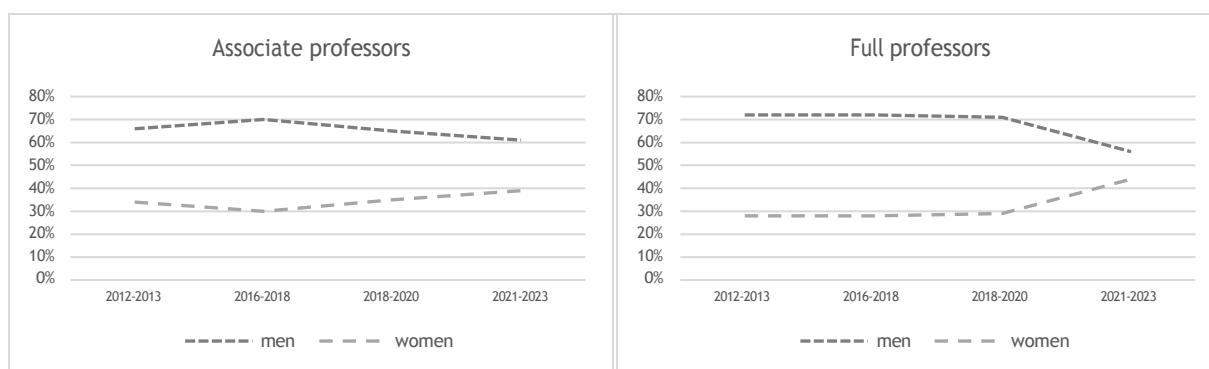


Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Such a large gap in application rates cannot be attributed to gender differences in candidates' academic background. Approximately 50% of applicants –50% of men and 49% of women– already held a position within a university. Another 34% of them –33% of men and 36% of women– were still in non-tenured role (post-doc or temporary position). The remaining 16% of applicants (15% in the case of women) were based at institutions abroad. Similarities also characterized the academic rank candidates applied for: 72% of women (compared to 69% of men) sought qualification for associate professorship, while the remaining 28% (versus 31% of men) applied for full professorship.

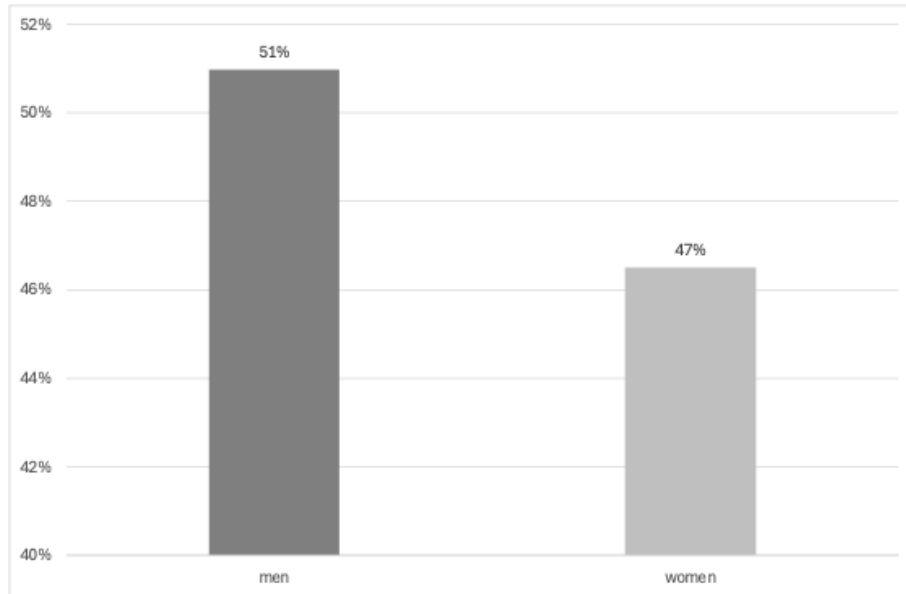
Shifting attention to the ASN rounds we observe a gradual reduction of the gender gap over time. For associate professorships, the number of female applicants began to rise steadily after 2018. In contrast, the increase in female candidates for full professorships occurred later, becoming evident only after the fourth round in 2020 (Fig.2). However, the narrowing of the gender gap was driven more by a decline in the number of male applicants than by a significant expansion in the group of female candidates.

**Figure 2.** Candidates to ASN by gender, rank applied for and round (2012–2023)



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Turning now to the winners of the procedure –the qualified– how successful were women? Did they obtain the ASN qualification at the same rate as the male candidates? Raw data from the Italian National University Council (CUN) on the 2012-2020 rounds of the ASN provide valuable insights. First, the overall qualification rate –for both associate and full professorships across all scientific areas– increased from 44% in 2012 to 56% in 2018. Second, and more importantly, the proportion of female candidates who obtained the ASN qualification increased over time, from 43% in 2012 to 56% in 2018 – compared, respectively, to 45% and 56% for men (CUN, 2023). Furthermore, after controlling for candidates' scientific productivity, De Paola, Ponzio, and Scoppa (2018), found no significant gender differences in the likelihood of obtaining the *abilitazione*. Other studies similarly report no evidence of a gender gap in qualification outcomes (Filandri & Pasqua 2021; Marini & Meschitti 2018; Pautasso 2015). Finally, our aggregated data suggest a tendency toward gender neutrality in the ASN outcomes for political science, though the evidence remains only partial. As shown in Fig. 3, 47% of female candidates achieved the qualification compared to 51% of male applicants.

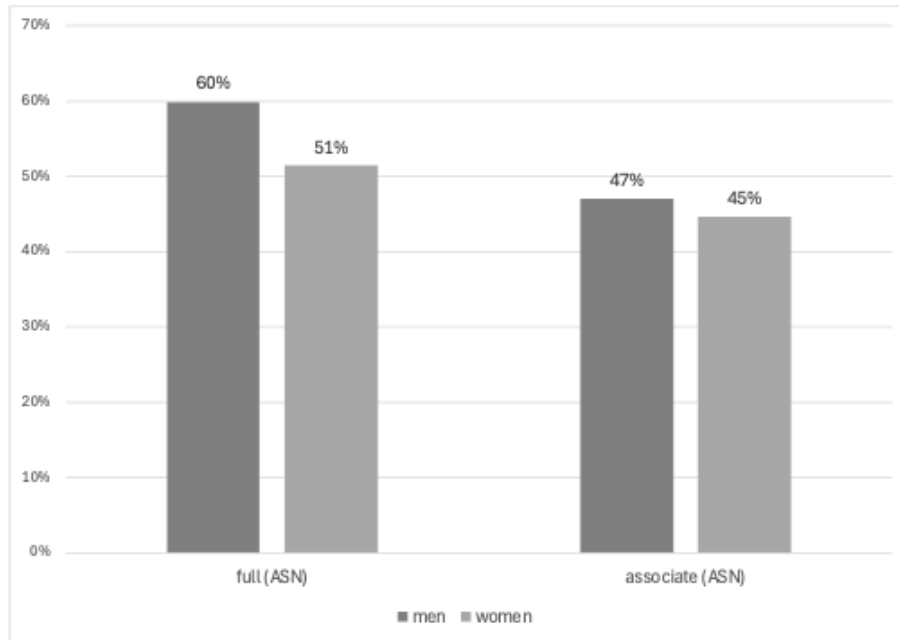
**Figure 3.** Qualified political scientists, by gender (% of candidates 2012-2023)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Does this suggest that the ASN procedure has operated in a gender-neutral manner? The point to be stressed is that general findings conceal disparities both among and within disciplinary areas. During the 2012 and 2013 rounds, for instance, Manzo (2017) observed significant variations within Area 14. Notably, political science, recorded the lowest percentage of women qualified for full professorship—only 11.8% compared to an average of 42.2% across the other sectors within Area 14.

Our findings confirm the existence of a significant gender gap in qualifications for full professorship, but not for associate professorship. As shown in Fig. 4, the success rates of male and female candidates in the ASN procedure differ markedly across the two academic ranks. Over the 2012-2023 period, in fact, only 51% of women got the qualification as full professor, compared to 60% of men. Women resulted also slightly less qualified as associate professor, but in this case the gap is narrower: 45% of women versus 47% of men. The gender disparity is thus more pronounced at the full professorship level.

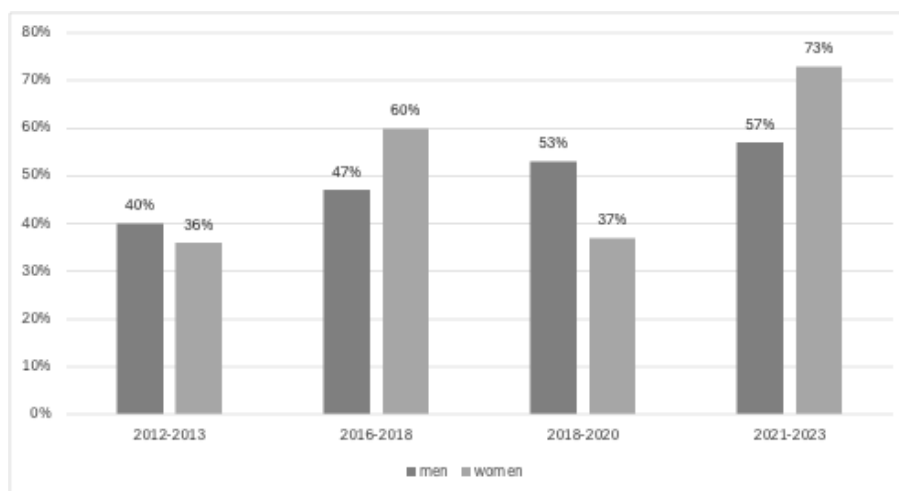
**Figure 4.** Qualified political scientists by gender and academic rank applied for (% of candidates, 2012-2023)



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

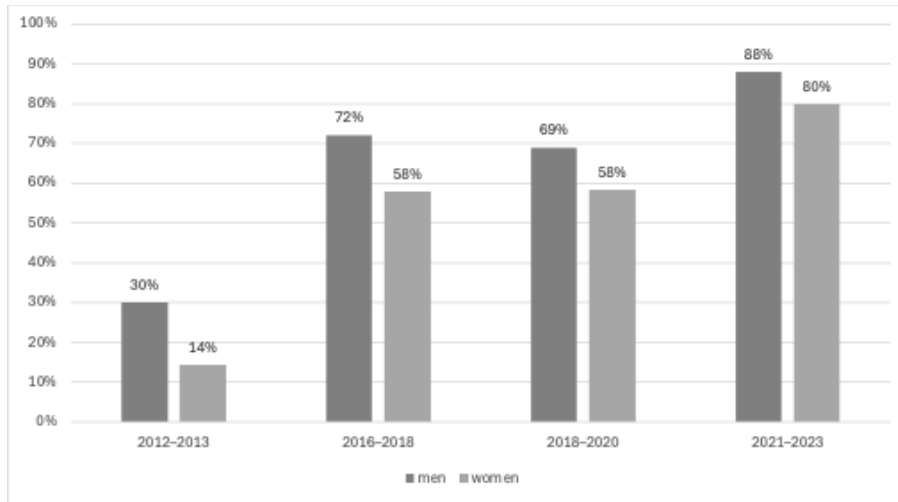
More differences emerge by looking at the evolution of the ASN qualified in the different rounds of the procedure. Actually, only twice, in the 2016-2018 and 2021-2023 rounds for associate professorship, was the percentage of qualified women higher than that of men, while in all the other rounds, for both associate and full professorships, men always resulted more successful than women (Fig. 5 and 6).

**Figure 5.** Success rates obtained by qualified political scientists for associate professorship, by gender and ASN round



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

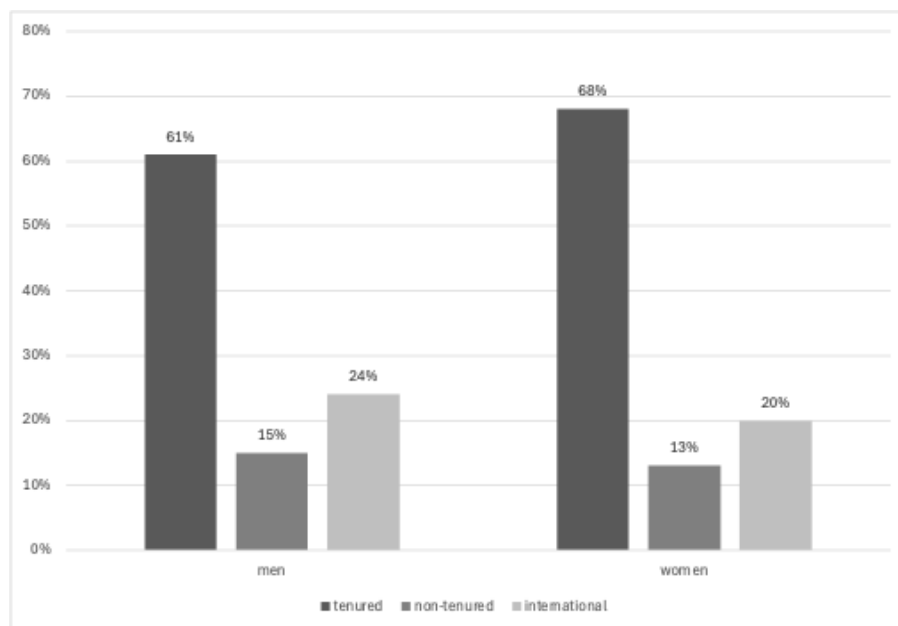
**Figure 6.** Success rates obtained by qualified political scientists for full professorship, by gender and ASN round



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

The data presented in Fig. 6, in particular, show how the gender gap in the qualification to full professorship seriously narrowed only in the fifth round of the procedure (fourth commission, 2021- 2023). In contrast, the preceding rounds, and especially those of 2012 and 2013, limited women's career advancement producing the well-known 'crystal ceiling' phenomenon (Gaiaschi 2022; Naldini and Poggio 2023).

**Figure 7.** Success rate of qualified political scientists, by gender and academic background (2012-2023)



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Finally, another gendered pattern emerges in figure 7. Our findings indicate that women are more likely to obtain the qualification when they already hold a tenured position (68%) and are therefore better known within the academic community. Previous reputation, in other terms, appears to play a more critical role for women than for men.

## 5. The evaluators

Has the ASN evaluation procedure reflected gender bias on the part of commissioners? This question cannot be answered directly. However, we can investigate certain characteristics of the evaluation committees –such as their gender composition and institutional affiliation– to assess whether these factors may have influenced candidates' chances of success.

Regarding gender composition, in the first five ASN rounds, women accounted for only 22.9% of all commissioners (ANVUR 2023, p. 31). This figure is lower than the proportion of female full professors in Italian universities, which stood at 27.9% in 2023 (<https://cercauniversita.mur.gov.it/>).

According to some strands of the existing literature, the absence of women on evaluation committees tends to disadvantage female candidates, as mixed-gender committees are more likely to appoint women to professorships (Van den Brink, Benschop, and Jansen 2010; De Paola and Scoppa 2015). However, contrasting evidence is provided by Bagues, Sylos-Labini and Zinovyeva (2017), who find that the presence of women on committees does not necessarily lead to more favorable outcomes for female candidates.

There is, nonetheless, one area where the literature appears to converge: the importance of connections between candidates and evaluators. Abramo, D'Angelo and Rosati (2015) show that male committee presidents are more likely to favor candidates affiliated with their own institution, whereas female presidents are more inclined to support candidates with whom they have co-authored publications. Since no ASN committee in political science has been chaired by a female full professor, the latter hypothesis cannot be tested in this case.

The relevance of personal and institutional ties is further supported by findings from De Paola, Ponzio and Scoppa (2018), who report that a candidate's probability of success increases by 11% when a university colleague sits on the ASN committee. Similarly, Abramo and D'Angelo (2015) identify the duration of a candidate's academic career within the same university as a committee member as a significant predictor of success in academic competitions. Notably, this factor appears to benefit male candidates than on female ones. Moreover, this pattern holds across academic selection procedures conducted both before and after the introduction of the ASN.

Among the four ASN committees considered in our research, only two women served alongside eighteen men. As shown in Table 1, women were present in the first commission, which evaluated candidates in the two rounds of 2012 and 2013, and again in the 2018-2020 commission. This imbalance reflects the broader underrepresentation of women among full professors, the academic rank required to serve on ASN evaluation committees.

A second factor is related to the rules for forming the commissions: candidate commissioners are drawn by lot, with no regard to gender. As a result, although female

professors applied in every round, only two were selected. As shown in Table 2, random drawing systematically favors the larger gender group, while the *candidature rate by gender* (the share of full professors of each gender applying to become ASN commissioners) makes little difference. In 2016, for example, 33% of female full professors applied, yet all the positions went to men, whose candidature rate was much lower (14.6%).

The near absence of female evaluators is therefore a critical weakness of the system, which could be addressed by revising the rules. In any case, given the strong gender asymmetry, it was not possible to conduct a robust analysis of the potential effects of committee gender composition on qualification outcomes.

**Table 1.** Gender composition of the ASN commissions

|           | Men FPs | Women FPs |
|-----------|---------|-----------|
| 2012-2013 | 4       | 1         |
| 2016-2018 | 5       | 0         |
| 2018-2020 | 4       | 1         |
| 2021-2023 | 5       | 0         |

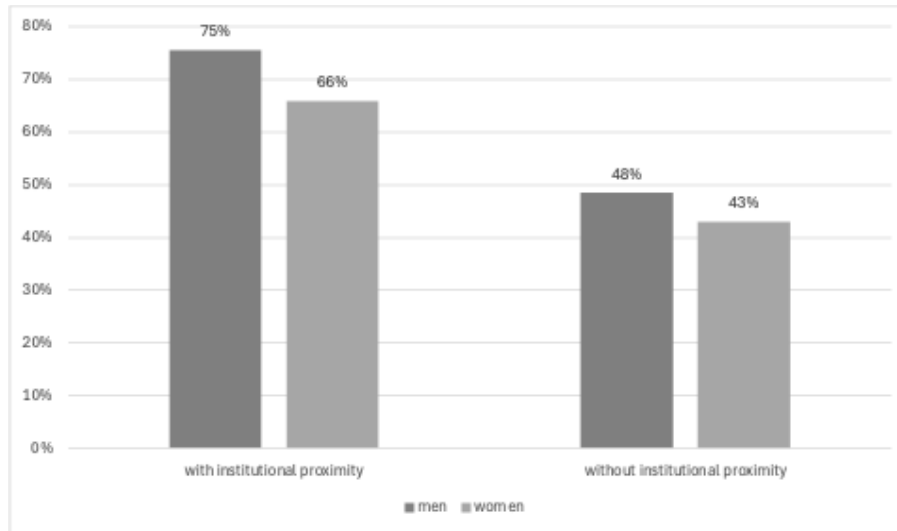
**Table 2.** Gender gap in candidature and selection to commissions

|           | Men<br>FP candidates (%) | Men<br>commissioners (%) | Women<br>FP candidates (%) | Women<br>commissioners (%) |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2012-2013 | 40.9                     | 80                       | 22.2                       | 20                         |
| 2016-2018 | 14.6                     | 100                      | 33.3                       | 0                          |
| 2018-2020 | 20.9                     | 80                       | 20                         | 20                         |
| 2021-2023 | 12.3                     | 100                      | 6.3                        | 0                          |

Note: Men/Women FP candidates: percentage of political science full professors in service who applied in each round of the ASN. Men/Women commissioners: percentage of members of the committees.

Instead, we directed our attention on the role of institutional proximity, that is, instances in which candidates and commissioners were affiliated with the same university at the time of application. Could institutional proximity increase the likelihood of obtaining the ASN qualification? To investigate this issue, we systematically coded shared affiliations and identified a non-negligible number of cases in which such overlap occurred.

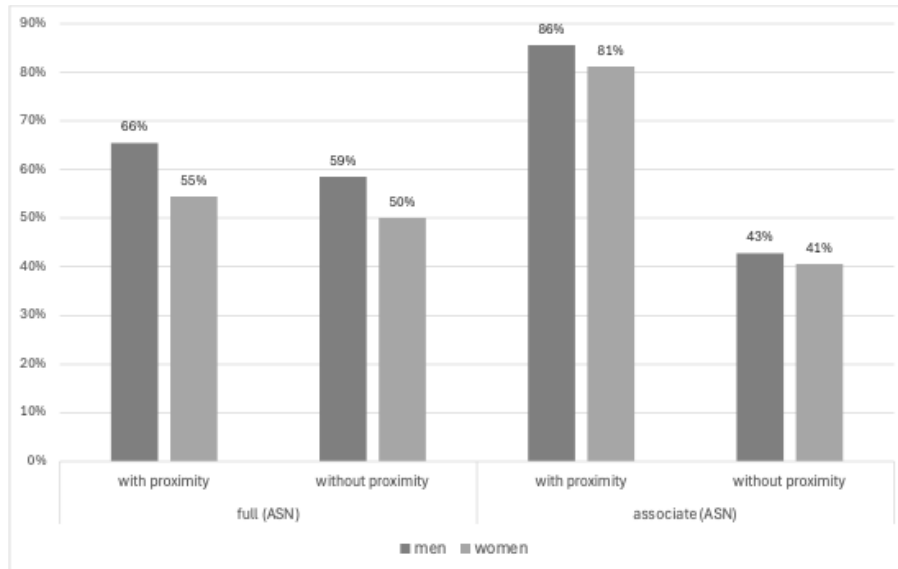
**Figure 8.** Success rates of qualified political scientists, by institutional proximity and gender (2013-2023)



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Fig. 8 shows that candidates who shared an institutional affiliation with at least one committee member at the time of application were significantly more likely to obtain the *abilitazione*. The difference is substantial: 75% of men and 66% of female candidates with institutional proximity succeeded, compared to only 48% of men and 43% of women without such a connection. While this is a descriptive observation, it underscores the enduring influence of institutional proximity in shaping academic careers. These findings seem to confirm the persistence of what has often been described as an "old men's club", particularly in the access to the rank of full professor, where male-dominated informal networks and institutional loyalty may play a decisive role in structuring academic opportunities and outcomes (Stapleton & Michelson, 2021).

**Figure 9.** Success rates of qualified political scientists, by academic rank applied for, gender and institutional proximity (2012-2023)



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

As further illustrated in Fig. 9, institutional proximity is associated with higher success rates at both career levels. For full professorships, the success rate was 66% for men and 55% for women with institutional proximity, compared to 59% and 50%, respectively, among those without it. The difference is even more striking for associate professorships: 86% of men and 81% of women with proximity succeeded, versus only 43% and 41% among those without. Institutional proximity thus has a stronger impact for associate professorship - where it nearly doubles the success rate.

These patterns suggest that proximity functions as a key mechanism in shaping access to academic positions, exerting a stronger influence than gender alone. However, it is important to stress that the findings can also be interpreted through the lens of short-range networks—that is, territorially embedded strong ties—which are especially relevant for younger candidates. With shorter professional careers, these candidates may not yet have developed broader academic visibility or independence, making local connections more consequential for their success. In this context, institutional proximity can provide a crucial advantage. For senior candidates, however, longer trajectories tend to diminish—but not eliminate—the importance of local ties. As professional reputations and collaborative networks expand beyond institutional boundaries, weak ties and long-range networks become increasingly significant (Granovetter 1973).

More generally, the success rate differential between candidates with and without institutional proximity is larger than the gender differential. In this sense, institutional proximity may operate as a form of “gender gap compensation”: women with proximity display higher success rates than men without it. This pattern emerges clearly in the aggregate (Fig. 8) and is particularly evident among candidates for associate professorships.

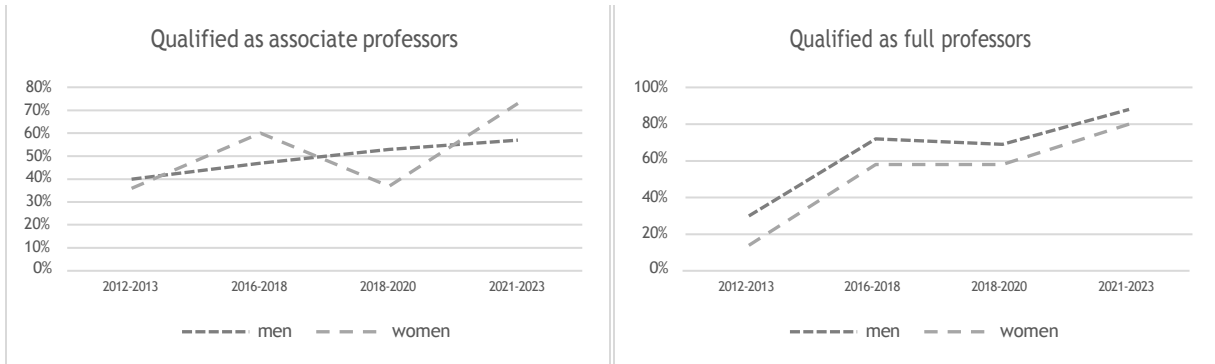
## 6. The promoted

With the enactment of Law 240/2010, obtaining the ASN qualification represents only the first step in the career progression toward associate or full professorship. Actual promotions occur subsequently at the local level, when university departments issue open calls for these positions. Only candidates who have obtained the ASN qualification are eligible to apply, compete and, potentially, be appointed. While ASN thus provides a national-level certification of eligibility, recruitment remains managed at the local level, with individual universities exercising autonomy in launching competitions and appointing selection committees.

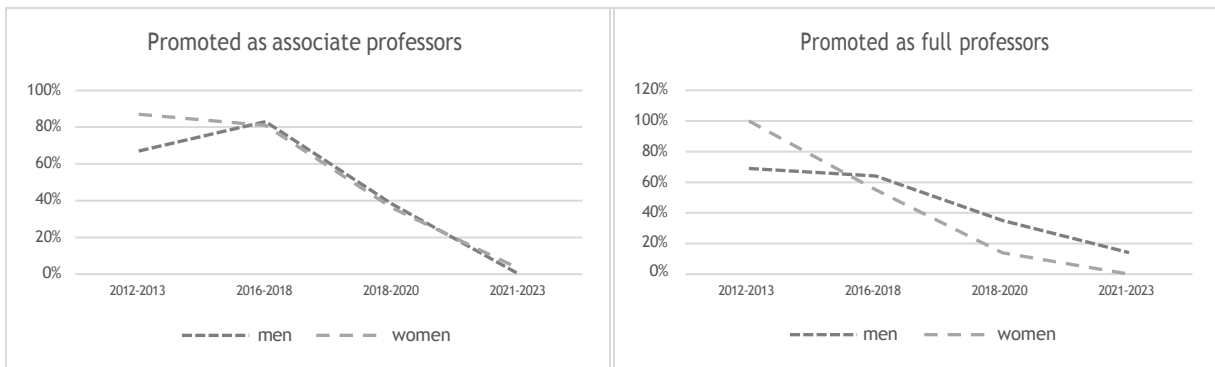
The limited number of studies that have examined the final outcomes of the ASN process suggest that, as in earlier stages, women tend to be at a disadvantage compared to men. According to De Paola, Ponzio, and Scoppa (2018), in contexts where positions are scarce – such as at the departmental level – “females have a significantly lower probability of promotion.” This finding is corroborated by Marini and Meschitti (2018). Data covering the period from 2012 to 2018 (the first three ASN rounds) show that – by 2021 – while approximately 50% of all candidates obtained the qualification, only 31% of those qualified had secured a permanent position through a local competition by 2021 (CUN 2023). Moreover, the share of qualified candidates who were eventually promoted declined markedly over time, from 53% in 2012 to just 4% in 2018, reflecting the limited capacity of the Italian university system to convert qualifications into actual job positions. Among those who were promoted, the presence of women increased only marginally: from 37% in 2012–2013, to 39% in 2016, to 40% in 2018. In short, women consistently remained a minority among those who successfully progressed in their academic careers (CUN 2023).

Regarding political science, Figures 10 and 11 provide a longitudinal, gender-disaggregated overview of the ASN process, illustrating trends in qualification rates and subsequent appointments to permanent positions. While gender disparities in qualification rates are evident in the early rounds, the gap narrows in more recent cycles, as previously discussed. However, this apparent progress is not mirrored in actual promotions (see Fig. 11). For both ranks, the proportion of qualified candidates who were ultimately promoted declines sharply over time, and this downward trend affects both men and women. Notably, in the most recent round, the percentage of promotions falls to very low levels for both genders, but particularly so for women aspiring to full professorships. This pattern confirms the existence of a structural bottleneck in academic career advancement and suggests that, even when women succeeded in overcoming the qualification hurdle, their prospects for promotion remain constrained, likely due to a combination of systemic limitations and gendered bias.

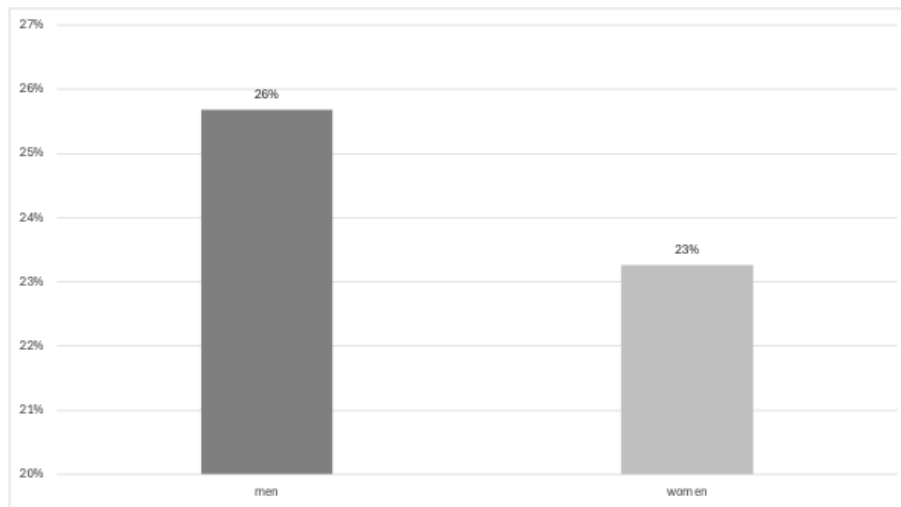
**Figure 10.** Trends in qualified political scientists by gender, rank applied for and commission (2012–2023)



**Figure 11.** Trends in promoted political scientists by gender, rank applied for and commission (2012–2023)

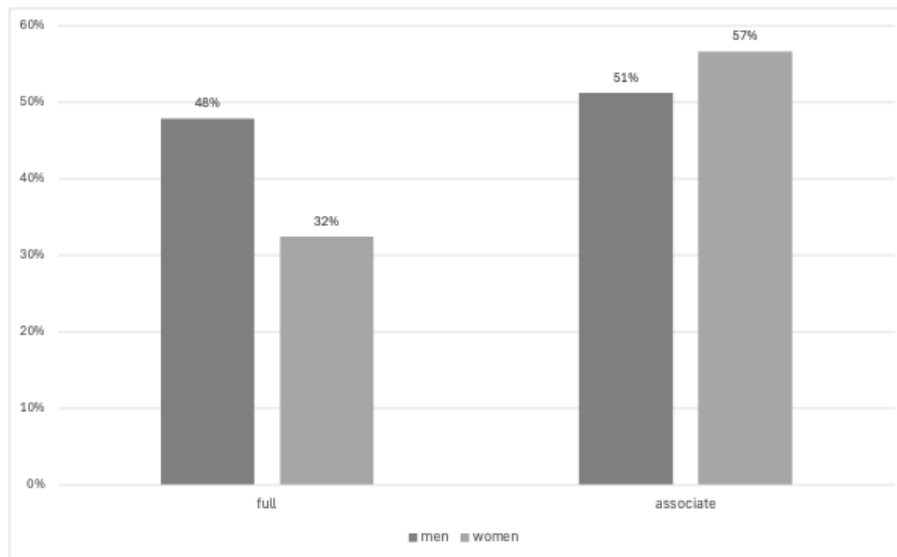


More recently, Brunetti, Fabretti, and Zoli (2024) conducted a fine-grained analysis by focusing on the recruitment of ASN-qualified candidates already employed within university departments. Their study, which spans the 2012–2021 period, found that women were more likely to be promoted to full professorships only when they were well represented on the committees responsible for recruitment decisions. In other terms, the presence of female full professors in decision-making bodies appears to be a crucial factor in promoting gender equality at the highest academic level. Considering the low number of women full professors in Italian political science - they were just 21 at the end of 2023 (Feo and Bosco, 2024) - it's easy to understand their limited influence when it comes to recruitment decisions.

**Figure 12.** Promoted political scientists, by gender (2012-2025)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

As shown in Figure 12, on average, only 25% of the Italian political scientists who obtained the ASN title between 2012 and 2023 were able to progress in their careers by securing a tenured position by 2025. As the literature suggests, women were less likely to be promoted than men (23% vs. 26%). While this overall difference may appear modest, more substantial disparities emerge when disaggregating by academic rank. Only 32% of women who obtained the qualification for full professorship in political science were ultimately appointed, compared to 48% of their male counterparts (Fig. 13). Furthermore, the time span between qualification and promotion was longer for women (an average of 3.3 years) than for men (2.8 years). These gaps are not observed in the case of associate professorships. By 2025, 57% of qualified women had secured tenure, compared to 51% of men. Moreover, the average time to promotion was identical for both genders (2.8), a convergence likely due to the standardizing effect of the RTD-B contract introduced by the Gelmini law.

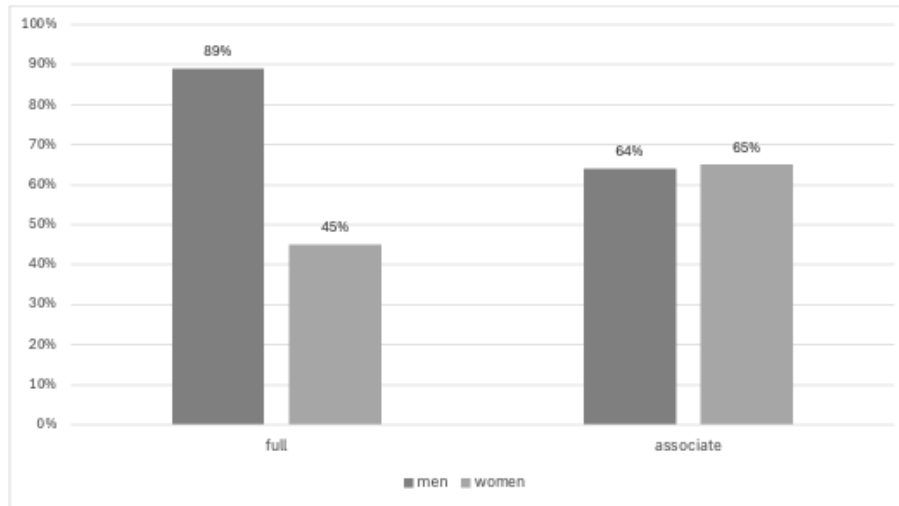
**Figure 13.** Promoted political scientists, by gender and position applied for (2012-2025)

Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

Finally, beyond gender disparities, a broader structural pattern has been observed: most competitions for associate and full professorships are won by internal candidates –those already employed at the university issuing the call. In our dataset, 131 out of 188 promoted political scientists (70%) obtained their position at the same institution where they were affiliated at the time of the ASN. As one of the leading scholars of the Italian university system, and himself a former president of an ASN committee, Giliberto Capano observed, “the system did not change the prevalence of localistic interests or the asymmetric chances of being promoted” (Capano 2022, p. 29). According to our data, these enduring asymmetries also contribute to the persistence of gender gaps in academic career advancement.

When we disaggregate the data by gender and academic rank (Fig. 14) a further dimension of inequality emerges, one that distinguishes between associate and full professorships. gender gap dividing full professors from associate ones emerges. For associate professors, the proportion of candidates who obtain a position at the same institution where they were previously employed is identical for men and women. By contrast, a striking gender gap emerges at the level of full professorships: 90% of male qualified political scientists take up the position at the same university in which they were affiliated during the ASN process, compared to only 45% of their female counterparts. In other words, female full professors experience significantly greater, and likely more burdensome, territorial mobility, as they are less frequently recruited by the universities in which they were previously employed.

**Figure 14.** ASN Promoted political scientists recruited in the same institution they were previously employed, by gender and rank (2012-2025)



Source: authors' own elaboration on MUR data.

## 7. Conclusions

Other The goal of this study was to examine the role played by the *Abilitazione scientifica nazionale* (ASN) in the career progression of political scientists, adopting a gender perspective. Previous research has already documented the underrepresentation of women in Italian political science. At the end of 2023, for instance, when the fifth ASN round concluded, women accounted for only 33.6% of political scientists, against 41.7% in the broader Area 14 (Bosco and Feo 2024).

What had not yet been explored is the role of the ASN in the career advancement of female political scientists. The existing literature, which is based exclusively on aggregate data, offers two key claims. First, the qualification procedure is considered to be "gender neutral" or even gender blind: since it relies on objective indicators of productivity, it is assumed not to introduce gender bias in the evaluation of candidates' scholarly work. Second, unequal outcomes are said to emerge at a later stage, when qualified women apply for promotions at local universities, particularly for full professorships.

But do these claims hold in the specific case of political science? We argue that investigating the ASN's role from a gender perspective is crucial for understanding the future of the discipline. At the end of 2023, only 25 women had been promoted to full professorships in political science since the early 1980s (Bosco and Feo 2024). What has been the impact of the ASN on these extraordinarily small numbers? The original dataset we have built allowed us to identify six gendered patterns through which the ASN has contributed to producing gender disparities.

First, women have been underrepresented among political scientists applying for the ASN. This is especially significant for full professorship applications. In contrast, the time limits (three years) connected to the tenure-track contracts (RTD-B) may have pressured candidates to face the ASN, limiting procrastination and strategic choices.

Second, success rates in the ASN vary by rank and by gender. While qualification rates for associate professorships are similar for men and women (47% vs. 45%), the picture is quite different for full professorships. Here, 60% of male candidates obtained the qualification, compared to just 51% of women: furthermore, women's success rates were consistently lower than men's in every round and particularly so in the 2012–2013 period.

Third, our data revealed another important dimension, institutional proximity – i.e., sharing affiliation with at least one committee member. Across all applications—for both associate and full professorships—candidates who shared an affiliation with at least one commissioner were more likely to succeed than those without such ties. This effect is particularly pronounced for associate professorships, where the success rate of candidates with institutional proximity—both men and women—is more than twice that of candidates without any territorial connection to committee members. For full professorships, by contrast, the influence of institutional proximity is weaker, but is associated to a stronger gender dimension as men continue to have a success rate higher than women (66% vs. 55%).

Turning now to the final stage of the career progression—the actual promotion to tenured positions within universities—our findings align with the broader literature, which shows that men are more likely to be promoted than women. In political science, as elsewhere, the rank for which one applies makes a difference. For associate professorships, women have higher success rates than men (57% vs. 51%). For full professorships, however, the familiar gender gap re-emerges: 48% of men who qualified were promoted, compared to only 32% of women. The gap is not only quantitative, but also qualitative in terms of the conditions of promotion. Around two-thirds of both men and women promoted to associate professor secured the position at the same university where they were employed at the time of their ASN application. In contrast, promotions to full professorship appear to entail greater "costs" for women. While 89% of men were promoted within their home institution, only 45% of women achieved the same. In other words, women are more frequently required to change institutions in order to advance, paying a price in terms of territorial mobility that their male colleagues are less likely to face. Future research could further deepen the analysis by extending the comparison to other academic competition areas and disciplinary fields beyond political science. It would also be valuable to explore additional dimensions of inequality, such as territorial disparities, to better understand how institutional and geographic factors interact in shaping academic careers.

Yet, our findings suggest that, for political scientists, the ASN cannot be considered gender neutral in its effects. While the procedure appears to operate in a relatively gender-neutral manner for associate professorships, this is not the case for full professorships, where significant disparities persist. The data thus point to the continued existence of a structural bottleneck that hampers women's advancement to the highest academic ranks.

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# Gender and Politics Research: The Evolution of a New Strand in Italian Political Science between Delays and Accelerations

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## Abstract

The study of gender and politics has emerged as one of the most dynamic subfields in contemporary political science. Over the past three decades, research exploring the relationship between gender and politics has permeated the discipline, introducing a gender perspective in the majority of its subfields, ranging from public policy to comparative politics, and from international relations to political communication. In the Italian context, while sustained academic engagement with this field has emerged only in the last ten years, the literature has grown significantly in both scope and visibility. This contribution aims to trace the development of gender and politics within Italian political science by offering a historical overview of its key contributions and mapping the main lines of research currently pursued by Italian scholars.

## 1. Introduction

The study of gender and politics is among the most rapidly expanding areas within contemporary political science. Originating in the US and the UK in the late 1970s, the subfield began to gain broader academic traction globally from the mid-1990s onward. Over the past thirty years, research exploring the relationship between gender and politics has increasingly permeated the discipline, influencing subfields such as political theory, comparative politics, international relations, and political communication. This body of work spans diverse epistemological approaches, ranging from positivism to constructivism, and employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

In the 1970s, the first political science studies explicitly addressing the issue of women in politics drew on theories and hypotheses developed within classical political science, particularly in the areas of political participation, electoral behavior, and political elite recruitment. These early contributions focused primarily on the low levels of women's political participation, and their underrepresentation in national and local legislatures within representative democracies, framing these patterns as empirical phenomena to be explained in terms of their political, institutional and social causes and implications (see, for example, Bourque and Grossholtz 1974; Andersen 1975; Welch 1975, 1977, 1978). During this period, a feminist perspective, emphasizing women's

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structural discrimination as distinct from that experienced by other underrepresented groups, began to inform this body of work. However, it was in the 1980s and especially the 1990s that feminist approaches became more firmly established in the field, thanks to the work of scholars who would become key reference points for gender and politics research across national contexts (Lovenduski and Hill 1981; Randall 1982; Dahlerup 1986; Githens, Norris, and Lovenduski 1994). While much of this literature initially focused on the United States and the United Kingdom (Lovenduski and Randall 1993; Norris and Lovenduski 1995), even in this early stage there was a marked interest in comparative analysis, both focused and large-scale, enabled by growing access to international datasets and collaborative research networks (Lovenduski and Hill 1981; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Matland and Studlar 1996; Caul 1999; Lovenduski 2005).

This initial body of scholarship emerged primarily within the intellectual and political framework of *women's studies*, itself grounded in feminist movements dedicated to the advancement of women's rights, the dismantling of patriarchal structures, and the recuperation of epistemologies and experiences historically excluded from, or rendered invisible within, academic knowledge production. Over time, this epistemic project underwent a significant reorientation, moving toward a more expansive and theoretically sophisticated conception of *gender* as a socially constructed, relational, and perpetually contested category (Krook & Mackay, 2011), thereby transcending an analytical focus confined exclusively to women. Since the mid-1990s, building on these seminal contributions, the field of gender and politics has emerged as a prolific stream of research within international political science. Over time, it has matured into a well-defined domain of inquiry, progressively consolidating its position and gaining formal recognition through the development of specific research agendas and a substantial body of literature, complete with theoretical frameworks and testable hypotheses aimed at advancing knowledge in the field. This body of work has expanded not only in terms of the number of scholars involved and the volume of research produced, but also in the breadth of topics addressed, spanning the full range of the discipline's traditional subfields. Furthermore, scholarship on intersectionality, as well as on the rights and experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals and the discrimination they face, has introduced new analytical perspectives from which to interrogate the relationship between gender and politics.

The trajectory of gender and politics research within Italian political science has broadly mirrored international developments, yet its progress has been comparatively slow and fraught with challenges, at least until the early 2000s. With the notable exception of seminal works produced between the 1970s and 1990s by a small group of pioneering scholars, it was not until the late 2010s that this line of inquiry began to gain a foothold in the research agendas of a limited number of female political scientists in Italy, and of an even smaller cohort of their male counterparts. Only at this stage did it start generating a substantive body of literature, ultimately emerging more recently as a recognizable subfield within the discipline, a development we illustrate in the following sections. While an in-depth examination of the factors underpinning this distinctive trajectory lies beyond the scope of the present article, we offer some preliminary reflections on this question in the concluding section.

The primary aim of this contribution is to provide an overview, necessarily partial, of the increasingly expanding body of research on gender and politics within Italian political

science, with particular attention to its dynamic evolution over the past two decades. To this end, we review what we consider to be the principal works in the field,<sup>1</sup> organized around five broad areas that have developed most notably since the 2000s: (1) political representation, participation, and leadership; (2) public policy; (3) political communication; (4) international relations and area studies; and (5) the study of social movements and the more recent emergence of scholarship on intersectionality and LGBTQI+ politics. Within each area, the contributions are presented in broadly chronological order from earlier to more recent works.

## 2. The beginnings: early studies on women and politics between the late 1970s and 1990s

In 1977, in the immediate aftermath of the “earthquake” of the 1976 Italian general elections,<sup>2</sup> Maria Weber, at the time one of the few Italian women political scientists, published an essay on female voting behavior in Italy in the journal *Quaderni di “Biblioteca della Libertà”* (Notebooks of “Biblioteca della Libertà”), introduced by a preface by Giovanna Zincone. Indeed, the electoral behavior of women in Italy had already attracted scholarly attention since the late 1950s. Earlier contributions included, among others, the pioneering studies by Mattei Dogan, such as *Il voto delle donne in Italia e in altre democrazie* (1959) (Women's Voting in Italy and Other Democracies), and *Le donne italiane tra il cattolicesimo e il marxismo* (1963) (Women in Italy between Catholicism and Marxism), the latter published in the volume edited by Alberto Spreafico and Joseph La Palombara, *Elezioni e comportamento politico in Italia* (Elections and Political Behavior in Italy).

However, in her essay, Weber explicitly sought to introduce a new perspective by treating “the female vote” as “a factor in itself, worthy of specific analysis” (Weber 1977, p. 1). To this end, and despite acknowledging its limitations, she employed an innovative methodological approach: the analysis of voting in maternity wards. These exclusively female polling stations provided direct, rather than inferred, data on women’s electoral behavior, thus enabling a more precise assessment of its distinctive features. Weber’s findings suggested a significant shift: whereas women’s vote had been traditionally

<sup>1</sup> This article, in line with the overarching aim of this Special Issue, focuses on research conducted by political science scholars. While it necessarily leaves aside the valuable contributions to gender studies of influential figures from adjacent disciplines, such as sociologists Bianca Beccalli and Chiara Saraceno, it nevertheless acknowledges important instances of interdisciplinary cooperation and editorial exchanges that have significantly enriched the field within Italian political science. The studies and authors cited in this article were identified through our personal research and the activities of the Standing Group “Gender and Politics” of the Italian Political Science Association, complemented by web-scraping the personal webpages of Italian academics in the former SPS/O4 area. The dataset is not exhaustive and, for particularly prolific authors, not all studies or topics could be included; nonetheless, we aimed to provide a comprehensive overview.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1976 elections, the Communist Party gained over 30% of the vote, narrowing the gap with the Christian Democrats but failing to alter the long-standing balance of political forces. The PCI pursued “national solidarity” as a path to the so-called “historic compromise” and to a grand coalition government, an option rendered unfeasible after the kidnapping and murder of the Christian Democratic leader Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978. More in general, during the 1970s, Italian society underwent deep social and cultural transformations, driven also by new social movements, including feminism, which contributed to major legal reforms such as divorce (1970), family law reform (1975), equal pay (1977), and the legalization of abortion (1978).

shaped by strong religious motivations, by the late 1970s it was moving increasingly to the left and converging with male voting patterns. She attributed this change to several socio-economic and cultural transformations, including the growing influence of mass media, the expansion of women's participation in the paid workforce, which weakened traditional familial and religious socialization, and rising educational attainment levels that were increasingly similar for young men and women.

Weber revisited and further developed this analysis in her chapter on Italy in the volume *The Politics of the Second Electorate: Women and Public Participation*, edited by Lovenduski and Hills (1981). This comparative project brought together contributions from fourteen scholars examining women's political participation across fourteen industrialized democracies, as well as in selected Eastern European countries.

As early as the 1980s, the study of women's political participation and their recruitment into Italian political elites emerged as a distinct research agenda, notably advanced by the work of Marila Guadagnini and Alisa Del Re.

Guadagnini, building on foundational studies of Italian political elites (Farneti 1972, 1974; Cotta 1979; Sartori 1963), examined the limited and difficult inclusion of women within Italy's parliamentary elite from the outset of the country's democratic era (Guadagnini 1983, 1987). Her analysis illuminated both the similarities and differences between female and male parliamentarians, focusing on their socio-economic and political profiles. This comparative approach sought to deepen the understanding of the dynamics underpinning the professionalization of political careers and parliamentary access in Italy, while also elucidating how the evolving pathways into parliamentary office functioned as barriers to female political participation.

In the 1990s, she revisited and expanded on these topics, focusing in particular on party recruitment strategies and on the influence of party ideology and organizational structures. This line of research developed especially through her contributions to international editorial projects comparing case studies from various European and Western democracies. One notable example is the volume *Gender and Party Politics* (1993), edited by Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris. In her chapter on Italy, Guadagnini traced the evolution of the Italian party system, described as a "partitocrazia without women" (p. 168), up to 1992, on the eve of the institutional and political upheavals that, in 1994, marked the collapse of the so-called First Republic, the rise of new parties, and the overall reconfiguration of the political system. Her analysis suggested that left-wing parties with highly bureaucratic and institutionalized organizations, such as the Communist Party of the time, were generally more favorable to the recruitment of women than parties with factionalized structures based on the "notables" model, such as the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Socialist Party (PSI). Guadagnini's work also adopted a comparative and transdisciplinary perspective, engaging, for example, with major contributions from the international political and social sciences literature on gender inequality, particularly the "glass ceiling" as it manifests across political, social, and economic domains (Fornengo and Guadagnini 1999). She further expanded her research into public policy, examining the impact of gender quotas (Guadagnini 1998), the dynamics of the so-called state feminism and women's policy agencies on women's political representation (Guadagnini 2005; Lovenduski and Guadagnini 2010), and the

implementation of policies aimed at combating discrimination against women (Guadagnini and Donà 2007).

In the late 1980s, Alisa Del Re co-founded the French-speaking multidisciplinary network “État et rapports sociaux de sexe” (*State and Gender*), which explored the gendered dimensions of citizenship. The network’s work focused on three interrelated key themes – the state, social policies, and citizenship – emphasizing the importance of situating gender-state relations within specific historical, geographical, and political contexts. It also investigated how social movements influence access to citizenship rights and contribute to shifts in the discourse on gender equality.

Around the mid-2000s, reflecting on the group’s intellectual legacy, Del Re et al. (2013) offered insights into avenues for further research in response to emerging challenges. Although the three interconnected concepts of state, social policies and citizenship remained relevant, they needed to be reinterpreted in light of globalization and social change. Globalization had reduced the centrality of the state, shifting the focus toward human rights and transnational feminist networks, while state action remained significant in diverse contexts. Under neoliberalism, social policies increasingly privatized welfare and promoted a “social investment” approach centered on children, risking a new maternalism, viewing women as deserving support solely by virtue of motherhood, and marginalizing gender equality claims. Citizenship had expanded to include migrant, LGBTQI+, and anti-racist demands, reinforcing intersectional and postcolonial perspectives. Lastly, reproductive rights, central to the group’s work, were threatened by legislative and practical restrictions, with regressions on abortion, contraception, and women’s autonomy. Framed within a critical feminist perspective and building on the group’s research agenda, Del Re’s work portrayed the history of state institutions as one of domination, in which a sexually defined subject imposes the “general” interest over an excluded sex through unequal social relations. She also underscored the intersection of gender and class dynamics, arguing that acknowledging these intersections is essential to transforming power structures (Del Re 1989). Building on this approach, she analyzed how political institutions and social policies have alternatively reinforced or challenged gender inequalities. Her work also examined European social policies through a gendered lens (Del Re 1991, 1996), highlighting their role in shaping women’s socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, she investigated women’s political underrepresentation in Italy and across Europe, both in national parliaments and local government, shedding light on the structural barriers to gender parity in political decision-making (Del Re 1997, 1999, 2007, Del Re, Longo & Perini 2010).

### **3. The evolution of gender and politics research in the 2000s: topics and timing**

Early contributions laid the groundwork for gender and politics as a field within Italian political science, yet the number of scholars remained small until the early 2010s, and the field struggled to consolidate. Only in the latter half of the decade did it expand rapidly, diversifying across five main subfields: political participation (with emphasis on representation and leadership); public policy; political communication; international relations and area studies; social movements and LGBTQI+ politics.

### 3.1. Political representation and leadership

The study of women's political representation has undoubtedly attracted the greatest scholarly attention in recent Italian political science.

Research has concentrated mainly on *descriptive representation*, exploring the extent and causes of women's persistent underrepresentation in national, subnational, and local representative assemblies – a long-standing challenge for Italian democracy.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 2000s, alongside the works mentioned above, studies expanded to examine both the drivers of underrepresentation and the uneven pace of progress in Italian legislatures. Papavero (2006), comparing Italy and Spain through the lens of “contagion theory” (Matland and Studlar 1996; Krook 2002), analyzed women's representation across eight legislatures (1976–2001). While Spain experienced rapid and sustained growth, Italy followed a slower, contested trajectory, exemplifying what Kjær (1999) termed “saturation without parity”. The study identified inter- and intra-party competition, party organization, and institutional factors, particularly the electoral system, as key explanatory variables accounting for these differences.

Further work by Papavero and Verzichelli (2008), which also examined the socio-economic and political profiles of MPs elected to the Chamber of Deputies, and by Papavero (2009) assessed the impact of these factors on the recruitment of women in the 2006 and 2008 elections (15th and 16th legislatures). Both contests marked a significant rise in women's representation, compared with the preceding two legislatures, reaching respectively 17% (+6%) and 21% (+10%), accompanied by a parallel increase in the share of female candidates across the political spectrum. The authors attribute these developments to an interplay of factors, foremost being the 2006 reform of the electoral system towards a predominantly proportional model. This occurred within a political context marked by alternation in government between the two coalitions formed after the 1994 upheaval, and by a gradually intensifying, though still contested, focus on gender (in)equality in political representation.

In Italy, since the mid-1990s, new legislative measures have been adopted to promote gender balance in political representation at all levels of government. Central to these reforms is the use of gender quotas, first introduced at the local level in the early 1990s (Laws No. 125/1991 and No. 85/1993) and extended to parliamentary elections in 1994. Both the 1993 and 1994 provisions, however, were annulled by the Constitutional Court in 1995. Quotas were permanently reinstated for municipalities, provinces, and regions in 2012 (Law No. 215/2012) and extended to parliamentary elections through the

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<sup>3</sup> In the Chamber of Deputies, on average, women accounted for about 4% of MPs from the Constituent Assembly (1946–1948) to the 6th Legislature (1972–1976). Their representation fluctuated until the 14th Legislature (2001–2006), with peaks at 7% (1948), 8.3% (1976), 13% (1987), and 15% (1994). A marked increase occurred in the 15th Legislature (2006–2008), rising from 11% to 17%, followed by steady growth through the 18th Legislature (2018–2022), reaching 35.7%. After the most recent elections, women's share fell to 32.8%. A similar pattern is seen in the Senate, where women's representation has remained even lower than in the Chamber, but reached 28% in the current 19th Legislature, the first led by a female Prime Minister. Lastly, similar trends are also observed at the regional and local government levels, and in elections for the Italian delegation to the European Parliament, confirming that female political representation, in addition to remaining far from the goal of parity, continues to be an issue in Italian politics.

Rosato Law (Law No. 165/2017), which introduced reforms in the electoral system and was applied for the first time in the 2018 parliamentary elections.

Subsequent research has examined both the impact and the limitations of these measures. Studies on local, regional, and European elections (Biancalana and Regalia 2014; Carbone and Farina 2019, 2020; Sampugnaro and Montemagno 2020; Legnante and Regalia 2020) find that quotas have increased women's representation but remain insufficient to achieve parity, with outcomes shaped by political culture (often with distinct geographical patterns), by institutional resistance, and by varying effectiveness across levels of government. At the intersection of public policy and political representation studies, Donà (2018) traced the historical roots of gender quotas in Italy, focusing on the persistent barriers to its institutionalization, as exemplified by the fate of the 1994 quota system. Feo and Piccio (2020a) examined the policy formulation process behind a complementary affirmative action measure, *gendered party finance*, designed to link party funding to gender provisions. Their analysis of late-1990s parliamentary debates and votes shows that structural constraints curtailed more ambitious reforms, while the policy's weak design stemmed from a fragile support base for feminist measures and the absence of cross-party alliances among women MPs that could have strengthened its legitimacy. In a follow-up study on party compliance (Feo and Piccio 2020b), they conclude that, lacking effective sanction and reward mechanisms, these instruments amounted to little more than symbolic policy, insufficient to alter party behavior. More recent analyses of the 2018 general elections (Regalia and Legnante 2023; Pansardi and Pedrazzani 2023) demonstrate that, despite the strict provisions of the Rosato Law, parties adopted strategies to limit their effects, resulting in fewer female MPs than expected. From a demand-side perspective, Pansardi and Pinto (2020b) highlight that, although the Rosato Law led to a general increase in female candidates, women faced a *gender penalty* from the electorate, particularly in single-member districts, where gender negatively affected their electoral performance.

Marta Regalia's *Una democrazia dimezzata. Autoselezione, selezione ed elezione delle donne in Italia* (2021) (A Half-Hearted Democracy: Self-Selection, Selection, and Election of Women in Italy) examines core themes in the study of political representation, including the supply of and demand for female candidates, women's ambition and decisions to run for office, and the influence of party ideology and electoral systems. Offering a detailed empirical account of the Italian case, the book situates these dynamics within broader debates on descriptive representation. Other studies address specific dimensions of women's political representation from complementary perspectives. One of the early studies in the field by Donatella Campus (2010) analyzes women's political attitudes, focusing on how socialization within primary groups, such as family, peers, and professional networks, shapes engagement in political discussion. Her findings support the hypothesis that, despite narrowing social and economic gaps between men and women, persistent gender-role expectations continue to limit women's active political participation and representation. Looking into party dynamics, and building on a theoretical framework that combines Bourdieu's social theory and feminist institutional theory, Bordandini and Mulè (2020) explore how disparities in the personal capital (economic, cultural and social) of male and female politicians result in the uneven participation of women as party delegates at national parties' congresses. Pansardi and

Pinto (2020a) investigate party gatekeeping and candidate selection processes, while Feo, Fiorelli, and Piccio (2023) examine gendered patterns in political candidate funding, and Pansardi and Stucchi (2023) focus on female voter turnout.

By contrast, intersectionality, a growing field in international political science, remains largely underexplored in Italian scholarship. The notable exceptions are two recent studies by Prearo and Trastulli (2024; 2025), which examine the political careers of LGBTQI+ individuals, bringing intersectional perspectives into the analysis of political representation in Italy.

While descriptive representation has long been, and remains, a central focus of Italian political science, *substantive representation* has received comparatively less attention. Over the past decade and a half, however, a growing body of research has explored “what women do” once elected to the Italian Parliament, and how the dynamics of their recruitment shape their legislative behavior. Key questions include: Do female legislators display distinctive policy interests? Do they prioritize issues that, as feminist theory suggests (Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 1999), reflect women’s specific needs and experiences in the home, workplace, and public sphere? And does the number of women elected influence the parliamentary policy agenda? These questions are central to the study of women’s substantive representation and are at the core of Papavero’s (2011) analysis of bill sponsorship in the Italian Chamber of Deputies across six legislatures (10th–15th). Her findings show that women MPs were more likely than men to sponsor legislation on women’s rights, family, and education, and that these priorities were shaped more strongly by party ideology than in other international contexts. Notably, as women’s numerical presence in parliament increased, gender differences in policy focus tended to narrow.

Research on women’s legislative behavior in both national and supranational arenas reveals nuanced patterns shaped by preferences, recruitment dynamics, and ideological positioning. Franchino, Papavero, and Zucchini (2016), examining committee assignments in the European Parliament (6th–8th legislatures), find that gender differences in activity reflect genuine policy preferences rather than discrimination, and that a “critical mass” of women does not alter men’s legislative behavior. By contrast, Pansardi and Vercesi (2017), analyzing committee assignments in the Italian Parliament between 1994 and 2013, find that female MPs were more frequently assigned to committees dealing with stereotypically “feminine” and less prestigious policy areas. This pattern, they argue, reflects and reinforces the traditional way of conceiving of gender roles that is still prevalent in Italian society. In the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Papavero and Zucchini (2018) show that while women MPs exhibit lower cross-party cohesion, they demonstrate higher party loyalty than men, a dynamic rooted in recruitment processes that heighten dependence on party leadership for career stability.

Extending the analysis to political leadership, De Giorgi, Cavaliere, and Feo (2023) examine Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d’Italia’s parliamentary activity and social media presence (2013–2021), showing that women’s issues occupied a marginal place in the party’s agenda, gaining prominence mainly when tied to trending topics. When addressed, they were often framed through a “femonationalist” lens (Farris 2017), portraying women’s rights as emblematic of Western values in opposition to allegedly discriminatory non-Western cultures, and linked to the defense of the “natural family”.

This discourse blended “neo-traditional” and “modern- traditional” values, setting the party apart from fully “neo-traditional” European counterparts.

At the local level, Lorenza Perini’s (2017) work examines whether a greater female presence in Italian local politics actually results in policies that are more attentive to gender equality. Her research focuses primarily on equal opportunity policies, traditionally viewed as a female domain in Italy, and on how gender perspectives enter policymaking regardless of the proponent (Perini 2017). She adopts a perspective that challenges the conflation of “gender”, “equal opportunities” and “women”, which overburdens female politicians and absolves men of responsibility. Her 2020 study, (Perini 2020), provides evidence that despite the increase in elected women (from 6.7% in 1986 to 31.7% in 2018), cultural barriers and stereotypes continued to limit the real impact of this presence. In the 118 provincial capitals and 20 regional capitals, Equal Opportunities departments were often marginal, lacking adequate resources, and frequently combined with heterogeneous and sometimes incoherent portfolios. The persistent gap between institutional potential and concrete outcomes, she argues, remains a central weakness of gender equality policy in Italy.

Overall, women’s leadership in top political roles, such as presidents, prime ministers and cabinet members, has received limited attention in Italian political science, though interest is likely to expand following Giorgia Meloni’s appointment as the first female Prime Minister. A notable exception is Müller-Rommel and Vercesi’s (2017) comparative study of female prime ministers, which finds that in EU countries they are predominantly from center-right parties, possess greater parliamentary and cabinet experience than men, yet tend to serve shorter terms in office. Complementing this institutional perspective, Donatella Campus (2013) offers theoretical and empirical analyses of leadership style, communication and media influence, drawing on cases such as Angela Merkel, Margaret Thatcher and Hillary Clinton. She underscores the enduring “double bind” women face, needing to appear authoritative without being “too masculine” and likable without being “too feminine”, and highlights the media’s powerful role in shaping their public image, electability, and the broader prospects for gender equality in politics.

### 3.2. Public policy

In public policy studies, equal opportunity policies in Italy began attracting significant scholarly attention in the early 2000s, notably through the work of Alessia Donà (2004a; 2005; 2007). In *Le pari opportunità. Condizione femminile in Italia e integrazione europea* (2006) (Equal Opportunities: The Condition of Women in Italy and European Integration), she traces the legislative history of equal opportunity measures and the institutionalization of women’s rights agencies, underscoring the growing influence of EU constraints. Maria Antonietta Confalonieri likewise examined the evolution of gender equality policies in Italy and the EU from the mid- 2000s. Although her full study remained unpublished, an introductory theoretical essay was posthumously released (2022) and widely circulated in academic circles at the University of Pavia and Milan *La Statale*.

Research in this field has also addressed the role of state agencies in promoting equal opportunities (Guadagnini and Donà 2007; Donà 2020a) and the development of

work–family reconciliation policies, traditionally marginal in Italy but increasingly shaped, though unevenly, by EU initiatives (Donà 2009a, 2011; Graziano and Madama 2011). Gender dynamics within Italy’s public administration are the focus of Barbara Poggio’s edited volume *L’isola che non c’è. Pratiche di genere nella pubblica amministrazione tra carriere, conciliazione e nuove precarietà* (2008) (Never Never Land: Gender Practices in Public Administration Between Careers, Work-Life Balance, and New Precarities), which examines career advancement, work–life balance, and job insecurity.

Recent scholarship has expanded to gender policies within far-right and populist parties, including their opposition to so-called “gender ideology” (Donà 2019; 2020b), as well as the political and institutional challenges in adopting and implementing gender policies (Donà 2020c). Other contributions address policies against violence towards women (Perini and Verzola 2014; Degani 2018) and broader women’s human rights, assessing the role of international and supranational institutions in shaping debate and adoption (Donà 2015; Degani 2005, 2016; Degani and Perini 2019; Cimino and Degani 2025). Further research explores reproductive rights (Del Re and Perini 2014; Perini 2019; Rispoli and Perini 2023), the integration of women’s interests into the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Ceron and Zarra 2021), and the gender dimension of labor market policies (Rizza and Mulè 2023).

### 3.3. Political Communication

Italian scholarship on women and political communication spans media representation, policy advocacy and language use. Campus (2013) and Belluati (2020) show how media strategies and coverage perpetuate gendered biases in the portrayal of female politicians, while Padovani’s extensive work examines gender equality in media systems, digital rights, women’s representation in media, and gender dynamics in media decision-making. Her work highlights the role of gender equality advocacy in promoting inclusive, gender-sensitive communication policies (Padovani 2010), and how media policies and governance frameworks shape gender relations (Padovani and Pavan 2016; Padovani 2016, 2017, 2021, 2023).

Recent studies have shifted the focus to political discourse. Mueller and Pansardi (2022; 2023) show that female politicians in European institutions tend to display greater rhetorical skill and charismatic leadership than their male counterparts. Lavizzari and Pirro (2024) find cross-country and ideological differences in the salience and framing of gender issues among Italian and Spanish populist parties, the latter displaying greater salience and polarization. Using computational text analysis of Italian parliamentary debates (1948–2020), Curini et al. (2024) demonstrate that gender-specific language in Italian parliamentary debates follows the patterns predicted by tokenism theory (Kanter, 1977): gender-specific language is most pronounced when women are few in number, declines with their increasing presence, and rises again when they reach a significant minority. Finally, Decadri and Negri (2024), combining social network and computational text analysis of Italian politicians’ Twitter activity, find that women are as active and well-connected as men, addressing a broad range of topics but with greater emphasis on women-related sub-issues.

Belluati and Tirocchi (2020) complemented this line of enquiry examining how femicide is addressed at the intersection of media coverage and institutional discourse.

Exploring media framing beyond crime reports, political-institutional debates, and insights from interviews with media professionals, they highlight both persistent stereotypes and efforts to promote awareness of changing gender roles. They also assess interactions between political and media narratives, suggesting an ongoing process of mediating social meanings.

### 3.4. Social movements research and LGBTQI+ politics

Significant contributions to Italian political science literature come also from studies on feminist and LGBTQI+ movements. Della Porta's research charts a broad transformation in feminist activism from the late twentieth century to the present. In her 2003 book, she examines the changing relationship between women's movements and the state in Western Europe and North America in the context of neoliberal restructuring and the relocation of political authority beyond the nation-state. She shows how second-wave movements, once radical, autonomous, and informally organized, evolved by the 1990s into more formalized actors, adopting moderate rhetoric and engaging directly with state institutions, both shaping and being shaped by the reconfiguration of national governance. Her 2023 edited volume widens the scope, tracing feminism's historical trajectory from nineteenth and twentieth century struggles for civil and political rights to contemporary intersectional activism addressing identity, race, class, and sexual orientation. It situates feminist "waves" in their specific historical, economic, and cultural contexts, explores adaptations in the Global South, and highlights the role of transnational networks, globalization, and digital technologies in fostering solidarity. The Italian case study included in the volume focuses on the movement *Non Una di Meno*, whose agenda spans gender-based violence, LGBTQ+ rights, economic inequality, racism and environmental issues, linking local activism to global struggles through intersectional discourse, digital mobilization, and horizontal organizing, with youth playing a central role.

Research on LGBTQI+ politics has been substantially advanced by Massimo Prearo, whose studies trace the emergence of LGBTQI+ identities and movements in Italy and France, the rise of anti-gender campaigns, and the role of Catholic activism in shaping gender politics (e.g., Prearo 2014; 2015; Prearo & Garbagnoli 2018; 2020; Lavizzari & Prearo 2019). His recent work focuses on the political participation of LGBT+ individuals, persistent barriers to representation, and the development of LGBTQI+ rights and policies.

LGBTQI+ activism and its opponents are also at the center of Anna Lavizzari's research, including her book *Protesting Gender: The LGBTIQ Movement and Its Opponents in Italy* and recent co-authored studies.

More in general, over the past two decades, the intersection of gender and sexual orientation and the study of LGBTQI+ politics has gained increasing scholarly attention in Italian political science. Research on this theme has often focused on the slow and contested path toward the recognition of same-sex couples, culminating in Law No. 76 of 2016, which introduced civil unions with rights and obligations comparable to marriage – excluding joint adoption and assisted reproduction – and established cohabitation contracts for unmarried partners. Before this reform was passed, Donà (2009) analyzed Italy's repeated failure to pass civil partnership legislation, emphasizing the Catholic

Church's decisive influence, partisan divisions, and the reframing of the issue as a moral rather than political question, which contrasted with EU-driven reforms elsewhere in Europe. Further research by Ozzano (2015) and Ozzano and Giorgi (2015) examined how political actors framed the same-sex marriage debate, showing its shift from a marginal, Church-dominated issue in 2006 to a mainstream topic by 2013, shaped by international trends and the activism of openly gay leaders. This evolution, from religiously grounded arguments to frames centered on human rights and anti-discrimination, marked the growing normalization of LGBTQI+ rights in Italy and set the stage for subsequent legislation.

Expanding this line of analysis, more recently both Ozzano (2020) and Prearo (2025) assess Italy's 2016 law on same-sex unions as a partial and contested achievement, but they frame it differently. While Ozzano highlights shifting cultural attitudes and political opportunity as the keys that finally enabled passage of the law, Prearo underlines structural constraints. Ozzano stresses the changing context: religious arguments lost weight, rights-based frames became central, the Catholic Church appeared less cohesive, and the Renzi government's determination, combined with European legal pressure, proved decisive. Prearo, instead, interprets the passage of the law within a "traditionalist" *pattern of morality politics* in the Italian Parliament, where debate was not simply a clash between religious and secular arguments, but a mosaic of moral, cultural, legal, and procedural frames that crossed party lines, and eventually resulted in compromises that limit equality.

### **3.5. International Relations and Area Studies**

The gender dimension in international relations has only recently gained traction in Italian political science, with the first studies emerging after 2020. Research has focused mainly on the implementation of the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda (della Valle and Strazzari 2023; della Valle and Piras 2022; Musina 2023) and on EU gender equality policies within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), analyzed in specific local contexts (Berlingozzi 2023a; 2023b; della Valle and Giusti 2021). These studies examine how international agendas incorporate the needs, perspectives, and agency of women and LGBTQI+ persons "on the ground". They highlight that, two decades after its adoption, the WPS Agenda is a key normative reference, promoting action plans, gender-sensitive indicators, and attention to conflict-related sexual violence. Yet its transformative potential remains limited by essentialist views of women as victims, a neglect of masculinities and LGBTQI+ perspectives, weak monitoring, and scarce resources. In EU–Tunisian security cooperation, for example, WPS rhetoric is subordinated to migration-control and counterterrorism, producing a "militarisation of gender" that frames women as vulnerable subjects or instruments of stabilization rather than autonomous actors (Musina 2023). Similarly, EU engagement with gender in external action, from CVE (Counter Violent Extremism) programs in Mali and Niger (Berlingozzi 2023a; 2023b) to ENP policies in Tunisia (della Valle and Giusti 2021), reveals significant gaps between discourse and practice. In Mali, gender mainstreaming homogenizes women's identities and fails to challenge patriarchal structures, reinforcing inequalities. In Niger, gender is instrumentalized for security and migration agendas, sidelining women's agency. In Tunisia, complex funding, short-term projects,

and weak monitoring marginalize grassroots women's organizations. Across these cases, gender risks being subordinated to securitized or technocratic logics, highlighting the need for inclusive, context-sensitive and feminist approaches.

Parallel research in area studies has examined women's and LGBTQI+ rights and movements across North Africa (Acconcia, Perego, and Perini 2024; della Valle and Simoncini 2024; Simoncini 2024), the Middle East (Acconcia and Perini 2023), Latin America (Perini 2023), and specific countries such as Iran (Rivetti and Saedi 2022) and Turkey (Maritato 2020; 2023; Yabanci and Maritato 2023). Studies on LGBTQI+ mobilizations after the 2011–13 protests in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey emphasize the role of civil society and digital technologies under repression, with strategies shaped by local contexts. In Tunisia, feminist and queer movements have advanced both institutional and digital mobilizations, while “artivism” (i.e. a form of political activity that merges art and activism), exemplified by the Chouftouhonna Festival, promotes individual liberties and sexual rights. On the other hand, patriarchal hierarchies are persistent in Tunisian society, as interestingly exemplified by the interpretation and representation of women's role within Tunisian public discourse on counterterrorism (Simoncini 2024). Analyses of protest dynamics in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria show how informal networks adapt under repression, while the Kurdish diaspora in Italy demonstrates how migrant communities link homeland struggles with local human rights agendas. In Iran, women's activism illustrates the limits of liberal feminism, which must adapt to authoritarian and religious contexts. In Turkey, gender politics under the AKP intertwine populism, religion, and nationalism, sacralizing women in traditional roles. Yet feminist resistance, both secular and religious, remains resilient even after withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Overall, these studies highlight the creativity and diversity of feminist, queer, and diasporic mobilizations, while revealing structural constraints imposed by repression, patriarchal norms, and securitized or conservative agendas. Moreover, they underscore the centrality of local adaptation and transnational networks in contemporary struggles for gender equality and rights.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Gender-focused research in Italian political science has followed a slow and uneven trajectory, but it has achieved remarkable growth in the last decade. Scholarly inquiry has addressed women's descriptive and substantive representation, feminist activism, equal opportunity and work–family reconciliation policies, alongside measures concerning anti-violence and reproductive rights. The literature has documented both significant advancements and the persistent structural challenges that continue to shape these domains in Italy, while suggesting that there remains room for further exploration in future research. The contested evolution of civil rights, such as same-sex marriage, further illustrates how progress has often been shaped by the interplay of institutional reforms, cultural resistance, and EU pressure. Similarly, studies in political communication highlight how entrenched stereotypes coexist with new forms of rhetorical innovation by female leaders and the gendered dynamics of digital campaigning.

These developments, however, still uncover some gaps. For example, research on women in top leadership roles and on their broader political careers remains limited. Intersectionality is also relatively underexplored, with limited attention to LGBTQI+

experiences or the combined effects of other dimensions, such as class, age, and race. Likewise, political communication studies could examine further the strategic use of gender discourse, including nationalist and populist framings, while international relations research has only recently started to focus on gender-related issues, and to adopt feminist and intersectional perspectives.

The distinctive trajectory of gender-focused research in Italy cannot be fully explained within the scope of this article. Nonetheless, a few provisional hypotheses to account for its recent acceleration can be advanced. At a global level, the diffusion of gender equality as normative political structures and practices shape gendered outcomes. Concurrently, the gradual, although still limited, introduction of university courses and curricula on gender issues has fostered the emergence of specialized expertise and novel research perspectives (GIFT 2022). Moreover, the increasing representation of women in academia in the field of political science has contributed to the rise of gender-focused research, providing both diverse perspectives and a stronger advocacy for the field.

As noted in a 2016 Special Issue of *IPS on Gender and Politics* edited by Padovani and Vignelli (2016), professional associations are key to advancing women in political science, by opening opportunities, countering sexism, and challenging the discipline's masculine assumptions. In this spirit, the creation of the Standing Group on Gender and Politics within the Italian Political Science Association in 2018 was a significant step forward, offering the first structured institutional support to the development of gender-focused studies in the discipline. It enhanced the visibility of the field and fostered scholarly collaboration and activism, also through cooperation with other Standing Groups. Internationalization has likewise played a crucial role, connecting Italian scholars to global debates, expanding collaborative networks, and amplifying the impact of their research. Overall, the development of gender and politics within Italian political science reflects the convergence of local dynamics and global trends that, especially over the past decade, have jointly contributed to the growth of the field.

Nevertheless, the consolidation of this area remains fragile and faces several persistent challenges. Chief among these is the chronic underfunding of research in Italy, which hampers the advancement of political science as a whole, and poses particular obstacles for an emerging subfield such as gender and politics. Furthermore, progress relies heavily on the commitment of early-career scholars, often employed in precarious positions, within a relatively small academic community. A further element to be taken into consideration is the increasingly hostile political climate toward gender-related research that has been consolidating at the international level, particularly in those contexts that initially inspired and shaped the early corpus of studies in this field. Although less pronounced, given the comparatively small size of the Italian academic community, this trend has also begun to surface in Italy. Such a climate may, in turn, discourage younger scholars especially from committing to the study of gender-sensitive politics in the medium to long term. To secure stable and lasting development, stronger institutional engagement is indispensable. Building structured networks, supporting training and research programs, fostering international collaboration, and promoting concrete measures to reduce gender inequalities in academia are all crucial steps to ensure the sustainable advancement of gender and politics research in Italy.

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# LGBTIQ+ Scholars within Political Science: An Exploratory Review of PSAs' Good Practices and (Un)Available Data

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to provide the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) with an exploratory review of practices implemented within other national and international political science associations to assess and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, through an in-depth focus on LGBTIQ+ scholars. To do so, the article reviews publicly available documentation, such as codes of conduct, equality plans, and monitoring reports produced by selected major political science associations (including APSA, PSA, and ECPR). Our review highlights the widespread lack of systematic data on LGBTIQ+ scholars in international political science and the importance of complementing data collection within broader organizational mechanisms, such as institutional policies, political engagement, and active strategies of visibility. On this basis, we thus offer practice-informed observations tailored to the Italian context and aimed at supporting the development of a sustainable monitoring and inclusion agenda within political science associations.

## 1. Introduction

In a historical moment in which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are explicitly under attack and increasingly contested, higher education institutions face renewed pressures that directly affect minority scholars and research agendas. Recent evidence shows how anti-DEI legislation and political backlash are reshaping academic environments, constraining the teaching and research of LGBTQ+ issues, and fostering environments of precarity and self-censorship among faculty (Goldberg, 2024). Against this backdrop, this article seeks to address the following question: how do political science communities and organizations engage with DEI programs and initiatives, particularly with respect to gender and sexual minorities, within their institutional frameworks and professional practices? It does so with the goal of generating evidence-based observations in order to inform the development of an inclusive agenda within the profession. Indeed, despite increasing attention to diversity, minority communities in political science often still struggle with structural and cultural barriers, such as implicit biases (Reinhardt et al, 2023). By providing an exploratory review of existing practices, our goal is to contribute towards the identification of feasible and effective strategies, both already pursued or yet to be followed, for fostering a more equitable and supportive academic environment – specifically within Italian political science, as addressed by this special issue.

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The literature on DEI within academia, particularly in political science, has generally focused on gender equality (Stapleton & Michelson, 2021). To encompass a more comprehensive array of identities, the inclusion of categories such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and other forms of marginalization seems to be necessary (Briscoe-Palmer & Mattock, 2020). This is not only because these issues concern the practical lived experiences of scholars within academia, but also because attention to such issues has itself become a matter of public debate and political contention. Hence, our review of existing DEI strategies in international political science will specifically focus on the case of gender and sexual minorities, traditionally stigmatized both in the job and in terms of research interests.

Thinking about DEI programs and initiatives in academia entails a broader reflection on the institutional and scientific dynamics of participation, representation, and legitimization of marginalized and discriminated groups. More specifically, promoting a diverse and inclusive institutional and scientific environment involves active engagement to ensure equitable access to opportunities, resources, decision-making processes, and publications.

Political science as a discipline and as a profession has been predominantly occupied by white, male, and upper-class individuals from the Global North, shaping the discipline's research agendas, methodologies, and institutional priorities (Lustick, 1996; Erdmann, 2004; Gunaratne, 2009; Gorodzeisky & Leykin, 2022). This bias has led to significant gaps in scholarship, particularly concerning issues related to marginalized communities, despite recent developments indicating significant changes in the field (Donà, Pandardi & Prearo, 2025; Boncourt, Engeli & Garzia, 2020). In fact, the underrepresentation of minorities (e.g., women, racialized groups, LGBTIQ+ scholars) is not merely a numerical problem: it involves the kinds of research questions investigated, the resources that are mobilized, and the interpretations accepted as valid within the epistemological paradigms that define the discipline.

Specifically with regard to gender and sexual minorities, research on LGBTIQ+ issues in higher education has increased over the past two decades, with a concentration in fields such as education, psychology, and sociology, as most studies focus on students or curricular inclusion (Renn, 2010). In contrast, systematic research on LGBTIQ+ scholars – their professional trajectories, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, and institutional positioning – remains limited. This gap is particularly evident in political science, where empirical studies focusing on LGBTIQ+ scholars' experiences are dramatically scarce. This raises an empirical challenge: in the absence of systematic data, how can we identify and conceptualize the dynamics (and more particularly the obstacles) that shape the careers of LGBTIQ+ academics, beyond professional merit alone, and in relation to their identity and research focus, which are often closely intertwined?

Rather than providing a conclusive and normative answer to this question, this paper aims to contribute to the debate by foregrounding the role of professional associations. It does so by reviewing actions, measures and initiatives proposed and adopted by political science associations (PSAs) to tackle these challenges, offering a map of existing practices. Our goal is not to provide causal explanations – such as historical trajectories, national political cultures, or organizational resources –, but to identify the range and scope of inclusion-oriented measures across major political science

associations, in order to helpfully inform the relevant debate currently ongoing within Italian political science and SISP. Thus, this article takes the form of a review essay.

It is structured as follows. The first section assesses the specific dynamics of exclusion of LGBTIQ+ scholars and studies within political science as a discipline. In the second section, we review the broader academic debate on DEI, with a particular focus on the representation of gender and sexual minorities in political science. The third section reviews existing practices and mechanisms adopted by political science associations to identify and address gender and diversity-related issues. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses their implications for the discipline, with the goal of proposing initial recommendations for enhanced DEI in the specific case of Italian political science.

## **2. Logics and mechanisms of exclusion: the case of LGBTIQ+ political scientists**

How widespread is the exclusion of minority scholars in political science? Because of enduring structural barriers, women, racialized minorities, and specifically LGBTIQ+ political scientists keep facing enduring systemic exclusion within the discipline. These structural barriers, which limit access to funding, publishing opportunities, and professional recognition, do not just hurt the discipline as a whole by restricting the array of diverse viewpoints that constitute it, but also and perhaps most importantly by considerably hindering the career prospects of these scholars.

Evidence shows that structural barriers disproportionately affect women, especially in subfields traditionally dominated by men such as international relations and security studies. Drawing on a survey of 1,273 female PhD students and faculty members in political science departments across the United States, Hinze (2023) documents that 43% of respondents perceive their gender as a disadvantage to their professional standing. Notably, this figure rises to 49% for women in PhD-granting institutions, reflecting a more pronounced exclusionary dynamic at the higher strata of academia. The barriers experienced by women often manifest in the form of gendered isolation, which significantly hampers their access to critical career-enhancing resources such as mentorship, professional networks, and insider know-how. This isolation is particularly concerning given its implications for long-term career trajectories (Bosco & Feo, 2024), as mentorship and professional networks are integral to securing funding, publishing in high-impact venues, and gaining recognition within the field (Hinze, 2023). Despite incremental progress in women's representation in political science, the culture within academic departments often remains resistant to change. Male-dominated norms continue to dictate practices in hiring, promotion, and collaboration, perpetuating an environment in which women's contributions are undervalued or marginalized (Stapleton & Michelson, 2021).

The systemic underrepresentation and marginalization of racial and ethnic minorities in political science also persist as critical issues. According to the American Political Science Association's (APSA) Project on Women and Minorities (P-WAM), data from the 2018–2019 academic year reveal that 75% of political science faculty at the top 100-ranked institutions are white. In sharp contrast, only 7.7% of faculty identify as Asian, 4% as Latin American/Hispanic, and 3.9% as Black/African American (APSA, 2019).

Furthermore, the disadvantages of racialized faculty members are not just limited to their numerical underrepresentation. Scholars of color are less likely than their white counterparts to secure research funding (Hoppe et al., 2019), publish in prestigious academic journals (Roberts et al., 2020), or achieve high citation rates for their work (Chakravartty et al., 2018).

Moreover, a 2019 survey conducted among members of the International Security Studies Section (ISSS) of the International Studies Association (ISA) shows that only 59% of scholars of color reported feeling welcome within the security studies community most or all of the time, compared to 73.9% of white scholars. Additionally, scholars of color were nearly six times more likely to report never feeling welcome. These findings underscore a persistent sense of exclusion that is exacerbated by perceptions of the ISSS as an insular and exclusionary “old boys’ network” (Mershon & Walsh, 2016). The survey further reveals that 45.2% of scholars of color described the section as “clubby” and 46.2% as an “old boys’ club”, compared to only 28.6% and 23.2% of white scholars respectively (Zvobgo et al., 2023).

Additionally, and more dramatically, 32.5% of scholars of color report experiences of harassment and exclusion at ISA events, which nearly double the 16.5% reported by white scholars. Among those who experienced these incidents, 85% attributed them to their race. Regarding networking dynamics, findings from the 2019 ISSS survey reveal that scholars of color are 1.5 times more likely than white scholars to seek additional mentoring opportunities and institutional support. Nevertheless, despite this heightened interest, racialized scholars report fewer opportunities to participate in professional development initiatives, indicating a disparity in access to resources and mentorship (Zvobgo et al., 2023). Of course, scholars are not affected by single axes of discrimination: gender, race, and sexuality intersect in shaping differentiated experiences of marginalization and access within the discipline. Acknowledging these intersectional positionalities is essential to fully grasp the structural dynamics at play and to design inclusive policies that respond to the complexity of scholars’ lived experiences.

Building on the above considerations concerning women and racialized scholars, LGBTIQ+ colleagues – which are of key interest to this review – also remain underrepresented across all ranks of academia and often occupy precarious or temporary positions. APSA’s 2007 survey on the status of LGBTIQ+ individuals in the profession, which gathered responses from 2,215 political scientists, illustrates this disparity in detail. The study found that 16.4% of LGBTIQ+ scholars were in visiting, adjunct, or instructor roles, compared to only 11% at the full professor level. These patterns suggest the persistence of a gendered “glass ceiling” and a “leaky pipeline” that, as in the case of women’s careers, limit LGBTIQ+ scholars’ advancement to senior academic positions (Novkov & Barclay, 2010; Naldini & Poggio, 2023). Regarding the way LGBTIQ+ political scientists navigate academic spaces, while 56% of LGBTIQ+ respondents in the APSA survey believed they had not experienced discrimination, 25% reported facing discrimination, and 20% were uncertain. These percentages suggest that while overt acts of discrimination may be rare, subtler forms of exclusion, such as microaggressions, seem to remain pervasive (Novkov & Barclay, 2010).

Finally, this stigmatization also extends to the marginalization of LGBTIQ+ research, further reflecting broader patterns of exclusion. A pioneer of the LGBTIQ+ politics strand of literature, Haider-Markel (2009) emphasizes the traditional marginalization of LGBTIQ+ research within political science, which is historically more focused on dominant or traditional research interests. Ayoub (2022) highlights how LGBTIQ+ scholars face frequent accusations of conducting “politically charged” or “activist-oriented” research, with their work often dismissed as “me-search”.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this critique fails to recognize the epistemic value of positionality and embodied knowledge. LGBTIQ+ scholars navigate a structural paradox: their proximity to the subject is seen as a liability, while their lived experience constitutes a crucial epistemic asset. Thus, the stigma they face is not merely directed at their research interests or career choices, but rather operates at the level of embodiment and identity (Prearo, 2024), reinforcing mechanisms of exclusion that are embodied as much as epistemological.

To sum up, the professional and research exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization of minorities is historically widespread and far-reaching in political science, often reflecting traditional substantive imbalances in the discipline’s interests (e.g., Paternotte, 2018) as well as an inadequacy in assumptions, methodologies, and priorities (e.g., Durand, 2021). This highlights the need to scrutinize the institutional responses developed within political science to address these persistent inequalities, at both national and international levels.

### **3. Addressing DEI in higher education and political science**

The evidence discussed above aligns with a broader set of debates on DEI in higher education. Over the past two decades, universities have increasingly institutionalized DEI frameworks, introducing equality plans, recruitment targets, mentoring schemes, and codes of conduct. Yet, scholars underline that the presence of such measures is not sufficient to dismantle entrenched cultures of exclusion. When structural prejudice remains unaddressed, “diversity hires” often encounter the same obstacles as historically marginalized minorities in academia, leading to high turnover and stalled career trajectories (Gaiaschi & Musumeci, 2020; Duarte, Losleben & Fjørtoft, 2023). This disjuncture between formal policies and informal practices illustrates a key feature of DEI in academia: the persistence of cultural and epistemic norms that reproduce inequities despite institutional commitments.

Within this literature, LGBTIQ+ scholars occupy a specific position. While much of the DEI agenda has centered on gender and race, research shows that LGBTIQ+ students and faculty continue to experience exclusion and obstacles in ways that exceed general diversity concerns. Trans and non-binary students are disproportionately subjected to harassment and exclusion, often leading to withdrawal from higher education (Goldberg, 2018; Freeman & Stephenson, 2023). LGBTIQ+ students from racialized or migrant backgrounds encounter compounded disadvantages at the intersection of sexuality, ethnicity, and class (Raja et al., 2024). Faculty inclusion also remains uneven, with gaps in institutional preparedness, curricular integration, and mentoring opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> The term “me-search” is used to undermine the academic legitimacy of research either grounded in personal or identity-related experiences (Harrison & Michelson, 2022), or on marginalized gender and sexual minorities, or both. See also Ayoub and Rose (2016).

(Murray et al., 2025). These dynamics highlight the epistemic invisibility of LGBTIQ+ issues within academic knowledge production and the institutional vulnerability of scholars working in these fields.

At the same time, the current political climate underscores that DEI in academia is never insulated from broader societal conflicts. In the United States, for example, the spread of anti-DEI legislation has created hostile environments for faculty engaged with issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Recent surveys show that these measures not only constrain teaching and research but also contribute to self-censorship, declining well-being, and increased attrition among LGBTIQ+ faculty (Goldberg, 2024). The fact that DEI has itself become a political target demonstrates both its symbolic significance and its vulnerability to backlash.

Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that LGBTIQ+ inclusion in academia cannot be reduced to a generic extension of diversity frameworks. Instead, it requires proactive and intersectional measures that address cisheteronormative structures and acknowledge the epistemic value of positionality and embodied knowledge (Golubeva, 2025). Such recognition also raises the question of which institutional actors are best positioned to initiate meaningful change. Universities and funding bodies play a role, but professional associations occupy a particularly strategic position within the discipline. As organizations that regulate professional standards, provide networking and mentoring opportunities, and shape disciplinary priorities, they act as both epistemic and political actors. Their infrastructures and representational practices can either reproduce systemic inequalities or foster inclusive transformations (Zvobgo et al., 2023).

Focusing on political science associations, rather than solely on universities or public policies, makes it possible to examine how disciplinary self-regulation operates and how collective professional identities are constructed and contested. For political science, where systematic data on LGBTIQ+ scholars remain scarce, associations are a crucial but underexplored site for institutional innovation. By documenting existing practices across PSAs, this article seeks not to offer definitive explanations but to contribute to an ongoing debate on how disciplinary organizations can advance equity and inclusion in ways that respond to the specific challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ political scientists.

#### **4. PSA measures addressing discrimination, violence, harassment, and exclusion**

What have political science associations done to address the exclusion or to promote the inclusion of political scientists belonging to minorities and minoritized groups? Over the last few decades, professional and political science organizations have progressed to tackle pressing concerns in their respective fields. Here, we provide an exploratory review of this subject. We have taken into consideration the major political science associations (APSA, ECPR, EPSA, IPSA), as well as – given this paper’s interest in Italian political science – the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) and the British Political Science Association (PSA), the latter by means of comparison and as a model for early intervention, at the national level in Europe, on such issues. Although the documents analyzed were not always the same across every association – insofar as they were not

available –, we included as many DEI a) codes of conduct, b) dedicated programs, and c) public reports as possible. Whilst we fully acknowledge the methodological limitations of our exploratory review, we still believe our initial and comprehensive attempt provides a considerable amount of useful information for our ultimate goal: providing helpful observations for SISP’s future policy elaboration on this matter. For a summative overview of many of the actions and practices discussed below, see Table 1.

**Table 1.** Political science associations’ practices towards DEI

| Association  | Code of Conduct  | Program  | Report   |
|--------------|--|--|--|
| APSA         | New code of conduct; Ombudspersons at Annual Meetings                                      | Project on Women and Minorities (P-WAM)  | Dashboard (Online: no LGBTQ+ lens published)   |
| ECPR         | Adopted Code of Conduct (revised 2021) with explicit policies on gender and sexual grounds | --   | Gender study (2024, yearly report since 2016)  |
| EPSA         | One-page Code of Conduct; Ombudsperson for reporting                                       | Mentoring LGBT Program   | --   |
| IPSA         | Comprehensive Code of Conduct (2018) including sexual harassment and sexual violence       | --   | Gender Inequalities in Political Science (2025)<br>Gender and Diversity Monitoring Report (2022, 2019, 2017, 2011) |
| British PSA  | Code of Practice – Diversity & Equality  | Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Strategy, including 10-year strategy and EDI Working Group | Report on Career Trajectories and EDI in Politics and IR (2021, Online: no LGBTQ+ lens)                            |
| Italian SISP | Ethical Chart promoting diversity, gender equality, and non-discrimination                 | --   | Articles published in Italian Political Science (IPS)<br>Special issue IPS (2025)                                  |

Source: own elaboration.

One of the most critical forms of actions taken within political science is internal investigations into harassment. In 2017, APSA conducted an internal investigation into harassment acts reported at its Annual Meetings between 2013 and 2016. This effort, led by the Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms Committee, aimed to identify the prevalence and nature of harassment within the discipline. The survey used the "Sexual Experiences Questionnaire" model, a widely recognized tool frequently employed in studies, especially in military settings. Distributed to APSA’s 13,367 members, the survey achieved an 18.1% response rate, with 2,424 completed questionnaires. Respondents

were asked about their experiences with three distinct categories of harassment: condescending behavior or "put-downs", inappropriate language or looks, and inappropriate sexual advances or touching. The results revealed troubling disparities, particularly along gender lines. Experiencing condescending behavior or "put-downs" was reported by 42% of women, compared to 22% of men; 30% of women were exposed to inappropriate language or looks, sexist remarks, leering, or sexist materials, compared to 10% of men, and inappropriate sexual advances or touching were reported by 17% of women versus 6% of men. The data also highlighted that 63% of all members reported no experiences of negative behavior, though only 51% of women fell into this category. Further analysis revealed that women, younger professionals, and those without tenure were disproportionately affected. Additionally, graduate students and postdocs did not report significantly higher harassment rates compared to tenured faculty, suggesting that socio-professional vulnerability, rather than career stage alone, played a critical role. Regular conference attendance and recent PhD completion were also identified as important predictors of harassment, particularly severe forms such as inappropriate sexual advances and touching. However, race and ethnicity did not significantly affect the rates of harassment (Sapiro & Campbell, 2018). In responses to open-ended questions, some participants shared that they had encountered such behaviors before the study's four-year timeframe. Notably, older women often noted that while they were no longer subjected to such behaviors, they had faced them earlier in their careers.

In response to the findings from this investigation, several political science associations have undertaken the additional effort of developing and implementing comprehensive Codes of Conduct, designed to foster a respectful and inclusive professional environment. The APSA Guide to Professional Ethics includes a robust section on "Sexual Misconduct, Harassment, and Discrimination Guidelines", offering a detailed framework to define and address such behaviors. The guide categorizes offenses into sexual harassment, sexual violence, and sexual discrimination. Sexual violence is explicitly defined as "*a particularly grievous form of sexual misconduct, including but not limited to sexual assault and rape*", emphasizing that coercive sexual conduct is a criminal offense. EPSA, on the other hand, designated an Ombudsperson to handle complaints, ensuring accessibility and confidentiality for victims. Both the IPSA and APSA Codes feature detailed procedures for filing and resolving grievances. APSA's approach includes provisions for confidentiality, protection against retaliation, and the involvement of its ethics committee in adjudicating complaints. These measures emphasize transparency and victim-centered solutions while ensuring accountability within the discipline. Similarly, the SISP Ethical Chart (2024) emphasizes nondiscrimination and gender equality within Italian political science. It outlines principles for equitable academic evaluations and teaching practices, explicitly denouncing comments or behaviors that undermine dignity based on personal characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. In preparation for its 2024 Annual Conference, SISP also circulated a warning to ensure gender-balanced panels and intergenerational dialogue, reflecting its commitment to fostering inclusivity.

Furthermore, structural reforms within political science associations have emerged as a critical effort to advance diversity, equity and inclusivity. The British PSA exemplifies such efforts through its Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Strategy, which spans

a decade (2017-2027). This strategy integrates inclusivity into all facets of the organization's operations and governance. Notable initiatives include: fostering research spaces; supporting research by and about social minorities through targeted journals, conferences, and awards; revising governance structures; enhancing oversight and accountability regarding diversity goals, and creating the EDI Working Group. Awards for scholarly contributions in gender studies were also promoted by APSA and ECPR.

Finally, building on the points illustrated above, sound data collection and reporting seem to be essential to understanding and addressing systemic inequalities within academia. The British PSA's 2021 report (Hanretty, 2021) on diversity in British political science offers a compelling case. It revealed that men represented 61% of political science staff (78% of whom were white), while women held only 29% of senior positions, and ethnic minorities accounted for 13%. It is noteworthy that gender and sexual minorities were not included in this data collection.

Complementing this national-level initiative, the ECPR's Gender Study reports for 2023 and 2024, respectively the eighth and ninth in a longitudinal series launched in 2016, offer a comparative view across a pan-European professional association. These reports track gender representation across participation, leadership, and editorial roles, enabling the identification of both areas of improvement and persistent gaps. In 2023, ECPR achieved or exceeded gender parity in 18 of 26 key categories (69%), including 78% of women among Teaching Assistants and 64% among prize recipients. In 2024, these figures remained strong in 17 categories (65%). Particularly notable are both the upward trend among Section Chairs at the General Conference (from 55% to 56%) and the maintenance of parity within the Executive Committee. At the same time, setbacks emerged. The proportion of published women authors declined from 35% in 2023 to 26% in 2024, and female prize recipients dropped sharply from 57% to 22%, although the 2024 data are currently provisional.

At the international level, IPSA has proactively monitored gender diversity through a Gender and Diversity Monitoring Report (Korkut & St-Laurent, 2022). According to the report, in terms of membership and representation, women now constitute a substantial portion of the membership in most of the large political science associations, averaging 38.6% across the most significant associations surveyed (more than 400 members). However, there is considerable variation between countries, reflecting broader societal, cultural, and institutional dynamics that influence gender inclusivity in academia and beyond. For instance, the UK and Spanish political science associations have achieved gender parity or even exceeded it, with women making up 50% and 54.6% of their respective memberships. In contrast, political science associations in Japan and Korea report much lower female representation, with women comprising only 15.9% and 17.3% of their memberships respectively. These disparities are rooted in long-standing gender norms and institutional structures within these countries. They not only restrict women's participation in academia but also impede their representation in professional organizations like PSAs (e.g., Steele, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2021).

The report also points to a considerable improvement in the representation of women in leadership roles within political science associations. As of 2022, women held 50% of the presidencies, which corresponds to a significant increase from previous years. Furthermore, women constitute 39% of vice presidents, 40% of executive committee

members, and 58% of advisory board members. As for women's participation in political science associations' conferences, women represented 44% of panel chairs, 40% of participants, and 54% of paper presenters at the most recent conferences.

More recently the "Gender Inequalities in Political Science" survey conducted among IPSA's individual members (IPSA, 2025) highlights that the barriers facing LGBTIQ+ academics are not marginal or anecdotal, but systematic. Testimonies from the survey underscore how identity and research focus intersect to produce specific forms of vulnerability, often compounded by nationality, ethnicity, or other axes of inequality. While these initiatives and research signal progress in gender inclusivity, one persistent critical issue emerging from our exploratory review is the lack of data on diversity beyond gender.

None of these reports includes data on LGBTIQ+ identities, since they continue to conceptualize inclusivity primarily through a binary gender lens. In fact, only a few associations, such as those in Ecuador, the UK, and the USA, systematically collect data on aspects such as race, ethnicity, LGBTIQ+ identities, and disability. This limitation highlights a broader challenge: while PSAs have begun institutionalizing commitments to inclusion through policies, reforms, and targeted initiatives such efforts remain constrained by a structural blind spot. Addressing these gaps requires investment in data infrastructures that capture sexual and gender diversity more comprehensively.

It is noteworthy that in 2023, the ECPG Steering Committee launched an internal survey among its members that collected both demographic information – explicitly including sexual orientation and gender identity – and experiential data related to discrimination and harassment. Although the results of the survey were not made public, they served as the empirical foundation for the elaboration and formal adoption of the Guiding Principles and Ethical Framework at the 2024 ECPG Conference. The Guiding Principles are intended, as stated, to promote inclusion, respect, and transparency across all forms of participation, with a particular focus on supporting early-career scholars and mitigating structural inequalities.

## **5. Conclusion**

Our article had the goal of providing SISP, and more broadly political science communities, with an exploratory review of existing initiatives to promote DEI in PSAs. Despite the methodological limitations of our preliminary overview, we believe that one of the main results that emerges is the beneficial role of data collection and availability on minority scholars for the development of effective and comprehensive policies. Associations that collect comprehensive and fine-grained data – on scholars' identities and experiences – seem better equipped to formulate policies that address the specific challenges individuals face, especially (but not exclusively) those from minoritized groups.

Of course, the aforementioned challenges related to collecting extremely sensitive data on stigmatized and marginalized minorities persist, and this should be made abundantly clear for anybody seeking to attain data-driven approaches and solutions within political science associations. This challenge is common in LGBTIQ+ studies relying on survey data (e.g., Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020; Jones, 2021; Grahn, 2024; Prearo & Trastulli, 2025), which are difficult to collect because of well-known issues such as the under-

representation of sexual and gender minorities in self-reported data through concealment derived from social desirability bias, problematic question wordings and related response bias or dropout rates, and small sample sizes for LGBTIQ+ communities (e.g., Waite & Denier, 2019). It is easy to imagine that all of these problems of data sensitivity are exacerbated in even smaller circles, such as national academic and political science communities, where the personal and professional consequences derived from coming out are likely to be perceived as more tangible. Indeed, the risk of outing LGBTIQ+ scholars might be perceived as even higher than usual, given the tight-knit nature of academic circles, compounding the methodological and data-collection issues at hand. Concerns about privacy, potential backlash, or the perceived sensitivity of these issues might explain the reluctance to collect data on LGBTIQ+ identities (Guyan, 2022).

However, formulating questions on gender and sexual minorities following the best practices from academic and institutional specialists (e.g., FRA, 2024; 2020; 2013), involving LGBTIQ+ associations and communities in the formulation of such questions (e.g., NYU Langone Health, 2022), and focusing the communication of political science associations on the benefits of data-driven practices for LGBTIQ+ scholars, can go a long way towards gathering greater and better information on sexual and gender minorities in the profession.

Yet, collecting data is just one part of the equation to promote DEI in academia. As Lombardo and Meier (2022) argue, equality and, by extension, diversity policies are inherently political processes, embedded in power relations and subject to contestation and resistance. The success of such policies depends not only on the availability of empirical evidence, but also on several complementary factors: a clear political will on the part of institutional actors; the presence of critical actors committed to advancing equality; the allocation of adequate resources and supportive legal and organizational structures; the capacity to overcome explicit and implicit resistance, including institutional inertia and anti-gender mobilizations; and a continuous critical reflexivity in the power relations underpinning knowledge production and academic practices. Without sustained engagement on these fronts, even the most data-driven policies risk producing only superficial or symbolic change. It would thus be beneficial for PSAs not only to document inequality but also to reflect on their own role in sustaining or challenging the hierarchical structures embedded in academic institutions, committing to structural and cultural transformations.

As shown in our exploratory review, PSAs can act as key institutional actors with the capacity to shape and transform academic environments, exposing and addressing inequalities. Their significance should go beyond issuing formal statements against discrimination, as it ultimately lies within their ability to leverage a range of mechanisms: from systematic data collection and efforts to increase representation in leadership roles and academic events, to the establishment of diversity awards, mentorship schemes, and financial support programs. To this end, we hope our exploratory contribution can be a useful starting point to foster a constructive conversation for PSAs' DEI policy elaboration, including within SISF.

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