

# Gender Narratives in Academia: How Gender is Constructed Through Gender Policies in Italian Universities

Giulia Arena

University of Genoa, Italy

[giulia\\_arena@outlook.it](mailto:giulia_arena@outlook.it)

**Abstract:** This proposal aims to explore gender equality measures in the academic context, which is undergoing changes such as the recent introduction of the Gender Equality Plan requirement and the broadening of equality, diversity and inclusion topics, both in research and in the actions practically proposed. Assuming that gender is continuously made and 'unmade' through gender policies (Acker, 1990), the key question is what kind of gender narrative is proposed by these measures, often attributed to the framework of gender mainstreaming (O'Hagan and Klatzer, 2018). This paper aims to discuss and problematise this assumption from a theoretical and critical perspective, with the use of the methodology known as Critical Frame Analysis that originates in the field of public policy (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010). The use of Critical Frame Analysis applied to the main policy documents on gender measures and objectives at the Italian national level leads to a theoretical proposal on the reclassification of academic gender frameworks.

**Keywords:** Gender equality in academia, Equality, Diversity and inclusion, Gender mainstreaming, Gender policies, Gender equality plans

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Aims

That there is a gender issue in academia, especially in teaching and researching careers, has long been known: in Italy, female full professors are only 11%, compared to 25% male full professors (SheFigures, 2021). The ratio is slightly higher than the European average, placing Italian universities in the midst of a problem that affects all European countries, with hardly any exceptions.

The different interpretations of this problem have led to various attempts to solve it (e.g. with the European Commission's "fixing the woman" to "fixing the institution" strategies), which then resulted in a European corpus that translates so-called "gender mainstreaming" into practice through a series of more or less binding rules (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo, 2012). In this paper, the focus will mainly be on gender policies expressed through the adoption of documents such as gender budgets, gender equality plans and so on.

Assuming that gender is continuously done and "undone" also through policy documents (Acker, 1990), the main question is what kind of narrative is proposed by these measures, which, as stated before, are often traced back to the framework of gender mainstreaming (O'Hagan and Klatzer, 2018).

This paper aims to discuss and problematise this assumption from a theoretical and critical perspective, making use of the methodology known as Critical Frame Analysis that comes from the study of public policy (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010), applied to the evolving Italian legislation and practices about gender equality in the academic context. What do these specific measures tell us about the vision of gender equality? How do they portray the woman targeted by those measures, what are her problems, her obstacles? This type of questions, starting from the emblematic question "What's the problem?" by Bacchi and Eveline (see methodological section below), made it possible to analyse some of the main documents for gender equality in the context of Italian universities.

### 1.2 Background

Indeed, the analysis of the literature (O'Connor et al., 2015) has made it possible to reconstruct the main explanations given to the issue of the so-called *leaking pipeline*, a complex and multifactorial phenomenon in which individual, relational, organisational, systemic, institutional and cultural factors are intertwined.

Most scholars agree in identifying three main levels (Contarello et al., 2008) into which these factors can be divided: the micro level, which involves individual factors such as individual people's preferences, gender-appropriate behaviours and economic theories on the benefit–cost ratio in the gendered division of labour; the meso level, which encompasses relational factors such as gender micro-policies and homosociality, along with organisational factors such as the rules on recruitment and male gatekeeping; and finally the macro level in which there are systemic, institutional and cultural factors such as national legislation, beliefs about gender roles and so on.

The leaking pipeline isn't the only gendered phenomenon in academia: the current university is also characterised by the phenomena of horizontal segregation (in particular along the axis defined as the care-technical divide, see Barone, 2011) and the importance given to the topic of mobility and excellence (Brink and Benschop, 2012; Bozzon et al., 2019; Raffini, 2017) in an increasingly international academic arena. These changes have also been interpreted together resulting in the concept of the neoliberal university (Riegraf and Weber, 2017), while in the Italian context more emphasis has been placed on the precariousness that characterises the life experience of the young researchers, especially the female ones (Ferri and Murgia, 2017; Picardi, 2020). Certain dimensions of marginalisation are gradually being studied and help to broaden and enrich the research on gender in the academia, for instance by taking into account other intersectional factors such as disability and race (Navarro, 2017).

### 1.3 Leaky Pipeline and Gender Mainstreaming in Italy

As stated above, gender equality within the university context is a complex issue that is also rooted in the theories that have organised work within public bodies in the recent decades: universities have in fact been profoundly changed by the new management of public administrations that originated in the 1990s with the New Public Management movement. In addition to that, in Italy, Law n. 240/2010, the so-called Gelmini reform, profoundly changed the career and recruitment of the teaching and researching staff, introducing the new figure of researchers on fixed-term contracts and abolishing open-ended contracts for researchers; in general, it shaped recruitment on the basis of principles of competition and competence. Subsequently, the 2008 financial crisis and the period of austerity policies that have followed have in turn changed the way universities can continue to operate, especially with regard to spending limits and the recruitment of academics.

In this context the new EU strategy for gender equality, gender mainstreaming, has now been introduced, drawing on the 1995 Beijing Conference.

The main application of gender mainstreaming in Italian universities has taken the form of the introduction of specific bodies dedicated to gender equality and countering discrimination in the workplace. These equality committees since 2011 have been obliged to draft an Annual Plan of Positive Actions dedicated to improving gender imbalances and occupational well-being in general, but despite this regulatory provision the results have not been incisive, partly due to the limited power these bodies hold in the overall framework of an institution.

Furthermore, since 2008 Italian universities have been subjected to austerity measures lasting more than a decade, which had severely limited the possibility of hiring new staff and making career advancements (Viesti, 2022). In this sense, while on the one hand there was a growing emphasis on gender equality, with the creation of an organisational and normative system aimed at implementing gender mainstreaming, on the other hand, the resources potentially aimed towards changing the composition of university recruitment were severely limited.

However, the two most important changes that have been introduced in Italian universities are recent: using soft law and peer pressure tools, in 2019 the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) approved the Guidelines for adopting university gender budgets, giving a great impulse to the adoption of this type of documents in Italian universities (Oppi et al., 2021), so much so that as of April 2022 40 Italian universities have already adopted a gender budget and another 7 are about to publish it (data presented by the CRUI Gender Working Group). However, most Italian gender budgets consist of a context statistical analysis and do not contain a financial analysis of the university budget.

The other relevant news is the decision by the European Commission to include the possession of a Gender Equality Plan as an eligibility requirement for research institutions wishing to apply for Horizon Europe funding (Bencivenga et al., 2017): in this case the European Commission specifically asked to include five main areas (work-life balance and organizational culture; gender balance in leadership and decision making; gender equality in recruitment and career progression; integration of the sex/gender dimension into research and teaching content and measures against gender-based violence including sexual harassment) and for each category the research institution must shape specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based (SMART) actions.

At the moment, many Italian universities have therefore approved three separate documents in the area of gender mainstreaming: the Annual Positive Action Plan, the Gender Equality Plan and the Gender Budget.

Those universities that have taken this application to a more advanced level are beginning to approve one single document, which is able to incorporate the different instances.

## 2. Methodology

Considering the national context, in which gender mainstreaming has been operating in a concrete manner for more than ten years, the two main research questions concerned, on the one hand, which characteristics of gender mainstreaming can be tracked down in the reception of gender mainstreaming in Italian universities and, on the other hand, which specific gender narratives result from this implementation.

The main issue here concerns what kind of gender narratives these kinds of documents produce, in the perspective of gender being done and "undone" (Acker, 1990) continuously also through policy documents such as gender budgeting and gender equality plans. All these changes concur to define gendered universities, in which gender is constructed through gendered practices that reproduce and pass on specific gender roles (Poggio, 2010). Policies are part of this process in which gender is done and undone (again Acker, 1990, but also Connell, 2006). Policy documents on gender do not simply acknowledge a situation, but help to co-create it; in fact, they define what is inequality, what is equality, and a hierarchy among the various possible situations, as well as among desirable outcomes. They are performative documents.

Faced with this framework, it was possible to apply the Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) methodology, which starts from the consideration that policy documents are capable of discursively constructing policy problems (Garforth and Kerr, 2009; Bacchi and Eveline, 2010). In particular, the theoretical assumptions on which Critical Frame Analysis is based rest on the consideration of the anticipatory ability of textual problem statements to call up answers (Garforth and Kerr, 2009), together with the retrospective ability of documents to construct a selective history of their origins (Garforth and Kerr, 2009). In addition to these aspects, Bacchi emphasised how Critical Frame Analysis is particularly useful in detecting the disappearance of what has not been problematised (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010) within political discourse.

The application of this methodology to the research questions that were analysed earlier makes it possible to focus not so significantly on the usefulness or effectiveness of the documents that are gradually implemented, but on the narratives and political boundaries of the 'women in academia' problem.

## 3. Results

The aim of the research was therefore to be able to identify some significant features within the current discourse about gender mainstreaming in the academia and to be able to trace policy frameworks within this particular field.

The documents considered for the application of the Critical Frame Analysis were the national legislation on the functioning of equality bodies within universities and on Annual Positive Action Plans; the Guidelines for Gender Balance and the *Vademecum* for the elaboration of the Gender Equality Plan in Italian Universities, both issued by the National Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI); and finally the documents that were adopted within the University of Genoa in response to these impulses: the Positive Action Plan, the Gender Budget and the Gender Equality Plan.

### 3.1 Gender Mainstreaming in Italian Universities

Some initial considerations can be drawn in order to answer the first research question on the characteristics of gender mainstreaming in Italian universities: first of all, as the international literature points out, also in Italy it is possible to witness a transversal competence of gender mainstreaming that seems to be particularly strong in the sphere of research institutions. Unlike other types of companies or public bodies, in fact, the documents mentioned affect all university components (students, professors, researchers and staff) and the three so-called 'missions' of the university (teaching, research and the economic and social exploitation of knowledge).

Secondly, there is the use of soft legislative instruments (Lombardo and Meier, 2008), which is represented by the above-mentioned Guidelines, which in themselves have no binding value, but use peer pressure between universities and the linking of reward funding to equality objectives to increase the dissemination of gender policy documents.

Another issue highlighted in the literature is also found in the Italian application of gender mainstreaming and that is the risk of further intersectional inequalities (Walby, 2005). The document, among those mentioned,

that appears to be most capable of responding to intersectional inequalities is in fact the Positive Action Plan, which concerns the well-being of workers in the broadest sense and not only aspects of gender equality. However, it is also the document that has been weakened the most in recent years, not least in the face of the emerging Gender Equality Plan and Gender Budget.

### 3.2 A Classification Proposal of Gender Equality Policy Frameworks in Academia

Regarding the application of Critical Frame Analysis to documents concerning gender mainstreaming, the attempt has already been made by both Walby (2005) and Verloo (2016), and both propose a tripartition of the possible meanings that gender equity assumes in the context of public policies.

In Walby's model, the frameworks identified are sameness, difference and transformation, taking more account of the final objective of the policy; in Verloo's model, the three frameworks are equal treatment, specific equality policies and gender mainstreaming, giving more attention to the instrument used, also from a normative point of view.

However, a classification of university gender policies has not yet been proposed, which is what this working hypothesis aims to do. In particular, a four-part reclassification of the frameworks that provide the information base for gender equality policies is suggested here: gender mainstreaming, work-life balance, capabilities and neoliberal approaches.

The gender mainstreaming framework implies a strong focus on the institution's accountability, which, following the requirements of the European Union, will have to carefully consider each choice from the perspective of its effects on gender equality: for Verloo, this is also the framework of transformative change (Verloo, 2016). It is a framework in which the institution is proactive towards institutional change (following an approach that the European Commission has also called 'fixing the institution'): the specific measures taken as a result are those that most directly involve the university's governing bodies, which bear the responsibility for institutional change.

The literature on gender in academia has focused on the 'new' gender mainstreaming strategy from two perspectives: some scholars have linked it to the concept of neoliberalism (Bacchi, 2010), while others have rejected this interpretation (Walby, 2011). Here, the starting point is drawn from Walby's interpretation: neoliberalism and gender mainstreaming are still distinct frameworks, because they are considered to answer the question "What's the problem?" - which summarises Critical Frame Analysis - in different ways. In the case of gender mainstreaming, this question can be answered by identifying the problem in the institution, through the inclusion of care work in policies, and through paying attention to the gender bias that policy makers unintentionally convey in "neutral" policies.

On the other hand, the second framework identified, neo-liberalism, answers the question "what's the problem?" by identifying the problem in the lack of personal skills or of the right attitude in women. In this case, the focus is on individual responsibility: it is no longer the institution that has to change, but the woman ('fixing the woman'), who, thanks to the measures provided by equality policies, can succeed in closing the gap that was the cause of *her* disadvantage. The concept of empowerment is strongly emphasised along with the full responsibility of the individual for his or her own successes or failures. Consequently, there is a denial of systematic elements of inequality and there is no attempt to re-discuss the male model, only the need to close the 'gap' with that model. Furthermore, there is a preference for the defamilisation of care work through the promotion of the idea of the a-gendered worker who outsources family management and childcare to the private market. Measures deriving from this approach seek to bridge a gap that is no longer institutional, but individual: mentoring and coaching programmes, for example, together with work-life balance tools that "free" the academic woman from the burden of care work, thus making her more competitive on the (male) market.

The third framework considered has been referred to as work-life balance or 'specific equality policies' (Verloo, 2016), it considers motherhood as the main obstacle to women's careers and it focuses on proposing and implementing positive actions that mainly concern motherhood and care work. This framework echoes the traditional gender policies of the 1970s and 1980s, when the tools to achieve gender equality consisted mainly in maternity leaves, measures to protect women's work and other instruments to enable them to fulfil the role of both worker and mother.

However, sociological research has shown that the early stages of women's academic careers are characterized by feelings of insecurity and that the pursuit of a career is seen as impossible to reconcile with

motherhood (Murgia and Poggio, 2019), but at the same time, it does not seem that care work is such a major obstacle in academic careers. The risk is that if parenting is seen as the only obstacle to women's academic careers, it totally obscures the effect of structural, institutional and organizational problems.

Finally, the capability approach has also been examined, from which important policy tools have also been derived in academia, namely gender budgets for well-being (Addabbo, Lanzi, Picchio, 2010). This framework was developed by the Center for Public Policy Analysis at the University of Modena (Addabbo, Lanzi, and Picchio, 2010) and is inspired by the theories of Sen and Nussbaum, with a focus on the well-being of the individual and the creation of a list of capabilities in a participatory way, together with the target group. It is the only framework in which individual well-being is explicitly taken into consideration and there is attention to the subjective and qualitative dimensions of well-being in gender equality.

#### 4. Discussion and Further Research

In conclusion, it seems that it is possible to draw a connection between the causes of the leaking pipeline highlighted by the research and literature on the topic (see O'Connor et al., 2015) and the frameworks identified by applying Critical Frame Analysis to the main documents for gender equality in Italian universities. In particular, the framework defined as "gender mainstreaming" identifies the problem in institutional factors, along with the capabilities framework, although the latter with less emphasis on institution accountability. Individual factors, on the other hand, are the answer to the question "what's the problem?" for the neoliberal and work-life balance frameworks.

As the Critical Frame Analysis rightly points out, the discursive assessment of a problem, including the potential contributing factors, demonstrates the anticipatory ability to call up answers. In this context, frameworks focusing on individual explanations of the leaking pipeline (along with other gendered issues in academia) tend to suggest remedies that target individual-level factors. In this sense, with the application of the CFA methodology it is also feasible to do a backward analysis of the policy documents involved: if the solutions, measures or actions proposed in the documents are aimed at individual improvement, then the issue being addressed is likely an individual-level problem. This aspect in particular calls for further conceptualization of the research.

In fact, the paper also aims to offer a critical overview of different possible frameworks, in order to unmask those academic policies that present themselves as neutral on the one hand (e.g., focusing on the concept of merit and productivity) or as pro-equality on the other, but in reality, they continue to reproduce a neoliberal model of academia, while at the same time continuing to celebrate fatigue as a paradigm of success (Arena, 2022). Another reflection is also due following Bacchi and Eveline's lesson on what remains unproblematized: in the context of Italian universities, heavily affected by the reforms mentioned earlier and chronically plagued by a lack of resources, it is surprising that the documents on gender equality analysed here hardly ever mention the issue of precariousness, which has also become an existential figure for young researchers (Raffini, 2017).

These reflections open up new spaces for research on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion aspects in universities: in particular, on the role that equity committees have in this process that is intended to be one of institutional change, avoiding the risk of technocratisation (Daly, 2005).

The linkage between the research fields that have traditionally been associated with gender equality studies in academia for years and the current academic policies being enforced now, as exemplified by the Horizon Europe EDIRE project, presents a compelling point of interest, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate. The transformative potential that resides in the alliance of different components of the academy could be a pivotal junction to achieve a real implementation of gender mainstreaming, just as in the case of government gender budgets this alliance was identified in the velvet triangle that supported, for example, the successful Australian experience (Woodward, 2004).

In the academic context, the velvet triangle can be reformed by exploiting the surfacing of gender expertise and its transfusion into policy. In this regard, it would be crucial to investigate the processes that lead to the materialisation of the documents analysed here, with a focus on governance and the distribution of power (Drew and Canavan, 2020).

More than a year after the introduction of the Gender Equality Plan requirement, it is necessary to ask whether it is possible to create not only gender policies, but feminist gender policies. I believe that two aspects above all need to be considered: how the situated knowledge of women (Haraway, 1988), especially feminist

academics, can filter into these technicalised documents; and how a democratisation of these policies can lead to a broadening and deepening of the meaning of 'gender equality' that we perform and share and transmit every day in our universities.

To further research on this topic, however, it is necessary to identify more clearly which elements belong to gender mainstreaming and which to other frameworks, such as those proposed in this article.

Furthermore, a further step is needed in defining what inclusion really is, by broadening these gender policies to a view that can take into account the intersectional aspects of discrimination.

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