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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

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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'[1] 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

[1] 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, Ponzo & Scoppa 2017). Other contributions address women's individual experiences, including coping mechanisms (Krilíc, Istenič & Hočevar 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, Ciccia & 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.[2]

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 & Hočevar 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.

[2] 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,[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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

[3] WIRED (Women In Research and higher EDucation) was a project undertaken within the framework of a H2020 Marie Sklodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship (GA No. 898507) at the University of Lausanne, CH, aimed at tracking gender inequalities in academic career progression (PI: Camilla Gaiaschi).
[4] 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.
5 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/04 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/04 according to the MUR's classification up until 2023, GSPS-02/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-

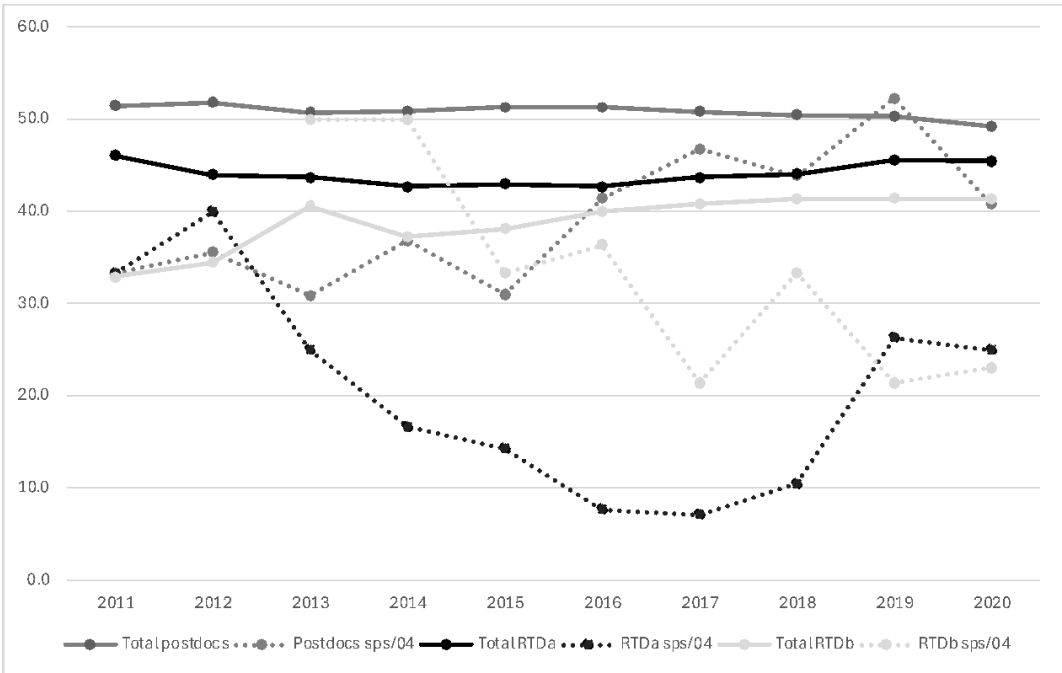
related information was analysed. This includes the gender difference in age across positions (WIRED dataset), as well as the gender difference in the number of years before obtaining a position of assistant professor in general and RTD-B more specifically (SISP dataset). The former measure gives an 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.

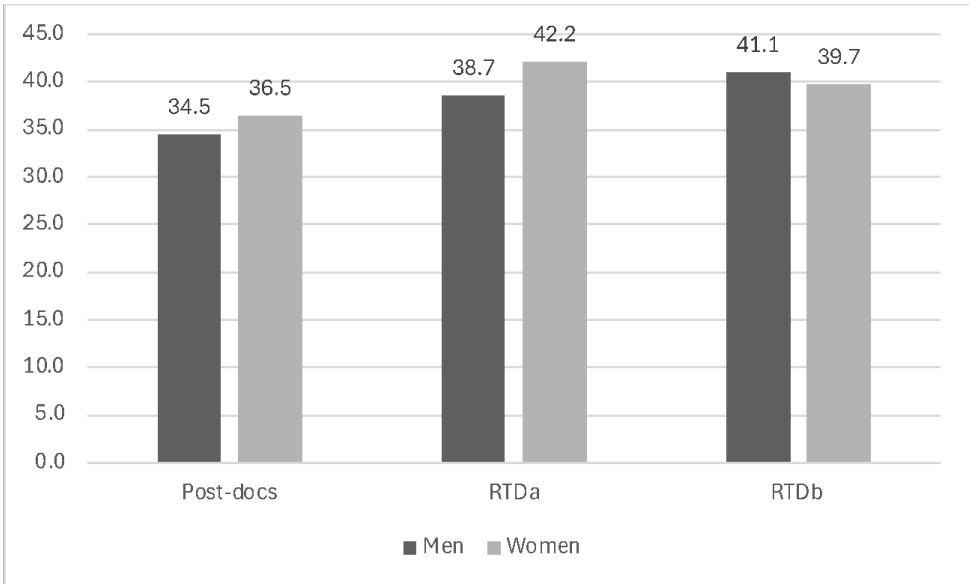


Source: WIRED data.

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.

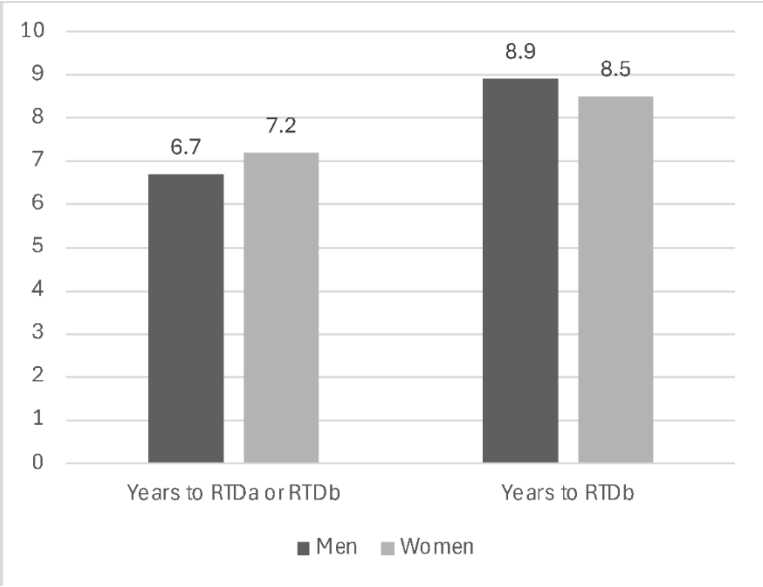
Figure 2. Age by gender and position, years 2011-2020 - Political Sciences.



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 nonlinear 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 revesed 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 underrepresentation 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; Anzivino & 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 (%)
Applied	50.2	42.9	72.8	44.5
Not applied	49.8	57.1	27.2	55.5
Total	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 (%)
Applied and failed	11.7	15.3	8.5	16.2
Applied and succeded	88.3	84.7	91.5	83.9
Total	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_DISPARITIES
   - 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

N. Interview	University	Position	Age	Children	Years of postdoctoral experience
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.