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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, Ponzo, & 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 Benshop, 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 (Teele, 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 Uboldi, 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; Kaeppel, 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.[1] 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/04 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.

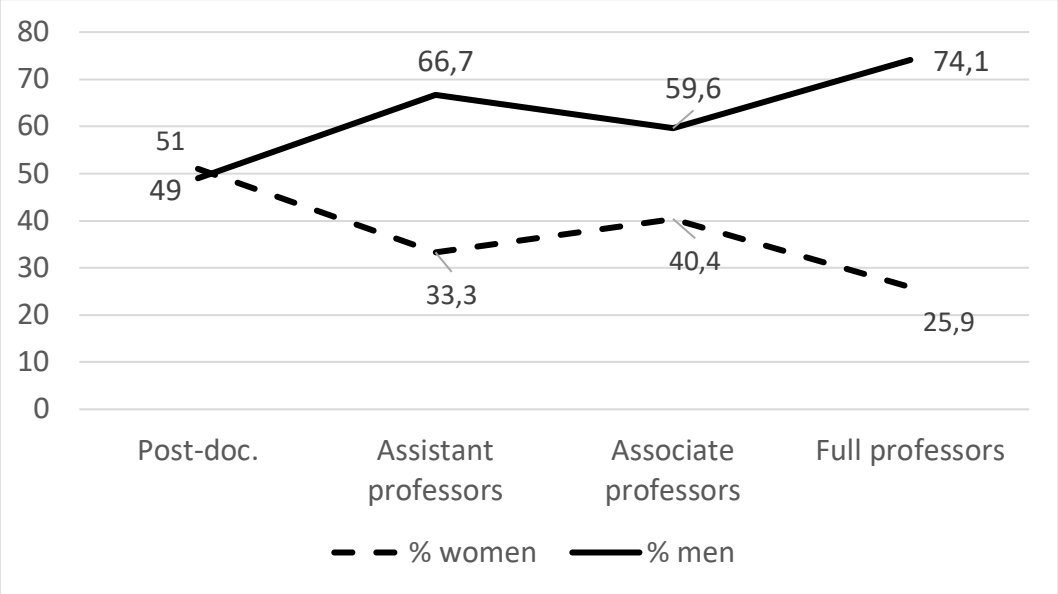
[1] The SISP Archive is the product of integrating multiple data sources: (1) the MUR personnel database, available since 2001; (2) printed materials from the National University Council (CUN) documenting affiliations with the SPS/04 disciplinary sub-field, dating back to 1991; (3) archival records from 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).

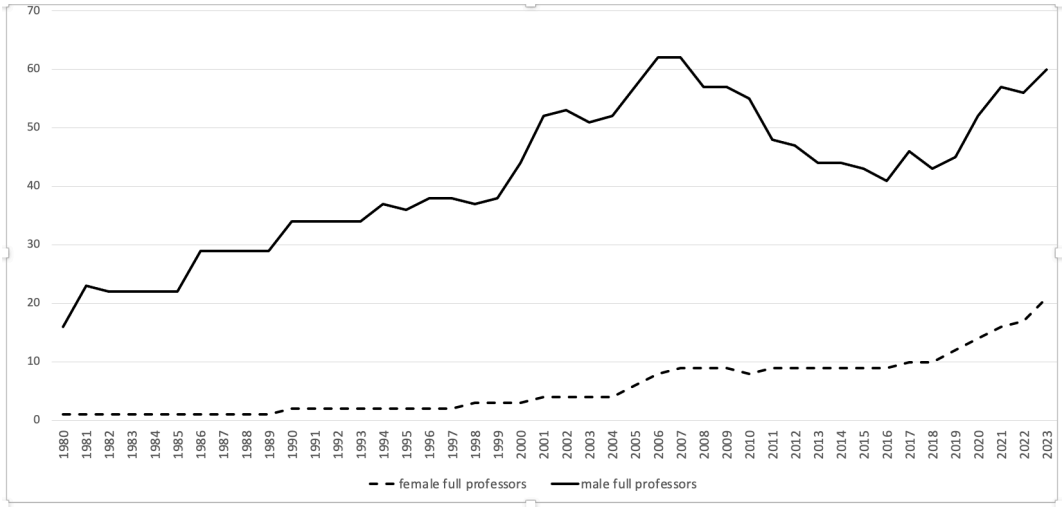
The most significant gender disparity in Italian political science is found at the highest academic rank, where male FPs outnumber their female counterparts by a ratio of three to one (74.1% vs. 25.9%). This imbalance is not mirrored in the broader 'area 14' disciplinary field, where women comprise 31.5% 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.[2]

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.[3] 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

[2] Two-tailed t-test p-value = 0.6406

[3] 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[4] 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 (60)	44.5 (4)	9.1	9.5
FPs who began academic career between 1990 and 1999 (N)*	49.4 (22)	45.5 (4)	11.9	8.7
FPs who began academic career in the period 2000-2009 (N)*	49.4 (25)	50.6 (11)	11.5	12.4
FP who began academic career in the period 2010-2023 (N)**	50.3 (22)	47.8 (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.[5] As shown in Table 2, we refer to the women who started their career in

[4] Also in this case the difference is not statistically significant: two-tailed t-test p-value = 0.3872

[5] 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 'entryear' 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).

Entry/tenure, by decade	N	Years from PhD to tenure	Mean age at tenure	Years from tenure to FP	Mean age at FP
First timers 1980-1989	4	n.a.	35	9.5	44.5
Early PhD holders 1990-1999	4	6.2	36.7	8.7	45.5
Crisis sufferers 2000-2009	11	7.5	38.2	12.4	50.6
Out-of-towners 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, Ponzo 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).[6] 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).

[6] 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 caregiving 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, Steinthorsdóttir 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 (Bolgherini 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

Identifier	date	duration	type
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.