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

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Abstract

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[1] This article, in line with the overarching aim of this Special Issue, focuses on research conducted by political science scholars. While it necessarily leaves aside the valuable contributions to gender studies of influential figures from adjacent disciplines, such as sociologists Bianca Beccalli and Chiara Saraceno, it nevertheless acknowledges important instances of interdisciplinary cooperation and editorial exchanges that have significantly enriched the field within Italian political science. The studies and authors cited in this article were identified through our personal research and the activities of the Standing Group "Gender and Politics" of the Italian Political Science Association, complemented by web-scraping the personal webpages of Italian academics in the former SPS/04 area. The dataset is not exhaustive and, for particularly prolific authors, not all studies or topics could be included; nonetheless, we aimed to provide a comprehensive overview.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1. Political representation and leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2. Public policy

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

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

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

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

3.3. Political Communication

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

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

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

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

3.4. Social movements research and LGBTQI+ politics

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

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

LGBTQI+ activism and its opponents are also at the center of Anna Lavizzari's research, including her book *Protesting Gender: The LGBTIQ Movement and Its Opponents in Italy* (2020) and recent co-authored studies.

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

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

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

3.5. International Relations and Area Studies

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

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

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

4. Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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