



The Education of Gender The Gender of Education Sociological Research in Italy

Maddalena Colombo
Luca Salmieri

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CONTENTS

1	Gender and Education in Italy <i>Maddalena Colombo, Luca Salmieri</i>	7
2	Girls and Boys at School Do Gender Differences Still Matter? <i>Fabio Corbisiero, Antonella Berritto</i>	25
3	Female Hegemony among Italian Educational Professionals <i>Maddalena Colombo, Paolo Barabanti</i>	43
4	Gender Differences in Higher Education Choices Italian Girls in the Corner? <i>Marco Romito, Tiziano Gerosa, Martina Visentin, Giulia Maria Cavaletto</i>	61
5	Gender Differences in Tertiary Educational Attainment and the Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Capital in Italy <i>Luca Salmieri, Orazio Giancola</i>	77
6	Gender, Social Origins, and Educational Choices How it really works <i>Orazio Giancola, Simona Colarusso</i>	95
7	Computer Skills and Employment A Comparative Gender Study <i>Sara Binassi, Claudia Girotti</i>	111
8	Coding and Educational Robotics Gender Stereotypes and Training Opportunities <i>Daniela Bagattini, Beatrice Miotti, Valentina Pedani</i>	129
9	Gender Gaps in Financial Education The Italian Case <i>Luca Salmieri, Emanuela E. Rinaldi</i>	141
10	Contradictions and Critical Limitations of the Gender Category in the Use of OECD-PISA Datasets <i>Marialuisa Villani, Chiara Carbone</i>	169
11	Reading Networks through “Gender Lenses” Scientific Collaborations at the University of Naples, Federico II <i>Ilaria Marotta</i>	183
	Notes on contributors	201

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3

Female Hegemony among Italian Educational Professionals

Maddalena Colombo and Paolo Barabanti

1. GENDER INEQUALITY AND WOMEN IMBALANCE AMONG EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

One of the most recurrent issues in education in Italy, particularly in primary education and childcare services, is the gender imbalance among staff, and the resulting feminization of Italian education. Thanks to rooted gender stereotypes and habitus (Shinar, 1975), several generations of schoolchildren have been influenced from an early age in their school path and choice of profession by the assumption that women are naturally gifted or superior than men in the care and education of offspring and by this transforming «constraint into preference» (Correll, 2004). Girls and boys have interiorized these gender differences as biological and parents cultivated the conviction that women are more disposed than men to sacrifice, care, generosity, sensitivity and emotion. On the other hand, men are thought to be biologically equipped with other traits such as physical power, integrity of thought and action, entrepreneurship, and independence, all of which are considered less pertinent for care-oriented jobs (Block et al., 2018). This is called «genderism», which refers to how people think about masculinity and femininity, and it is widespread and rooted in one's cultural identity. As theories of the social construction of gender show (Connell, 1987; Lorber, 1995; Piccone Stella, Saraceno, 1996), gender identity develops very early on the basis of parental expectations, patterns of behaviour and lifestyles, and it is practiced across intimate relationships with them, so that «individuals, to some extent, tacitly agree with a pre-packaged destiny» (Gianini Bellotti, 1975: 25).

The educational sector was one of the first in which women were granted meaningful opportunities. Until the 19th century, there were plenty of men who attended and managed schools and there were few employment opportunities for women. With the extension of scholarships, women entering this professional field started satisfying the need for early education teachers and caregivers (Coffman, 1911.) Along with the increasing feminization of the teaching corps, women achieved

relative gender parity and more egalitarian access to every educational track. Thus, females have progressively shown that they are able to meet the same standards as males (Colombo, 2003). By the end of 20th century in Italy, females had begun to outperform males in terms of educational attainment (Giancola, Fornari, 2009) and since then surveys have registered an increase in aspiration and investment in long-term educational tracks amongst young women. This change has resulted in deep changes in competition in the labour market, as, for the first time in history, women are empowered enough to be a threat to men, especially in those economic and social positions previously held exclusively by men (Segal, 2006; Abbatecola, 2015).

However, despite women's achievements and the more balanced distribution of occupational and social roles, there are several professional fields in which gender segregation is still evident. This is what has happened in education: over the last decades, these jobs have becoming increasingly feminized (as well as in health and other caring jobs) leading to a sort of «vaporization of masculinity» (Guida, 2017). In Italy, for example, in SY 2016-2017 women make up 82.7% of the in-service employees in state schools. This trend extends to the new generations of teachers and educators who still consider these jobs unattractive. The OECD notes that (2017: 1): «In the OECD countries, the largest share of women is found among the new generation of teachers (below the age of 30), raising concerns about the intensification of gender imbalances over time—in particular at the lower education levels, where women make up the great majority of teachers».

In Italy, the feminization of the teaching profession is partly due to the long-lasting image of pre-primary school as “maternal”. This conception was so pervasive that in 1968, Law 44 (March 18th, 1968) was passed, changing the name of pre-primary schools from “infant schools” to “maternal schools”. This law stated all the roles in maternal school as exclusively feminine: *maestra* (female teacher), *educatrice* (female educator), *segretaria* (female secretary) and *bidella* (female janitor). Pre-primary education was only re-defined as “childhood school,” in 2007 (Ministry of Public Education, 2007). We believe that this change has been significant and offers a good start to the wider project of deconstructing the stereotypical association between women and early childhood education. This, however, is not sufficient to change behaviour and deeper meanings. Education is still considered a domain of and for women; in Italy, in the vast majority of families, domestic tasks (both at home and outside) are up to wives and – if there are little children – to mothers (ISTAT, 2016). Often mothers, rather than their male partners, serve as the point of contact with professors and the school system (Fleischmann, de Haas, 2016). Hence many fathers avoid dealing with teachers, supposing that women are “naturally” in agreement each other. Moreover, mothers exhibit a preference for female staff in the context of schools and childcare services; they tend to trust each other more and instead express feelings of discomfort when a man takes care of their children.

In the following pages, we showcase the results of an exploratory inquiry of consequences of the feminization of education. After describing the research design and hypothesis, we present some recent data on the

university choices of Italian girls and boys in educational careers, followed by data on the professional motivation of in-service teachers.

Subsequently, we present findings from an empirical study on student teachers, student educators and in-service teachers and educators in southern Italy. In conclusion we remark three main evidences drawn from it.

2. THE FEMINIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL STAFF: A CASE OF FEMALE HEGEMONY?

The feminization of educational staff has strong consequences for both the educational profession and pupils. The fact that nearly all of the teaching staff are female means that the entire school organization becomes gendered and segregated. Different impacts have already come to pass, with reference to the Italian context.

Impacts on professionals. Teaching and other jobs associated with childcare lose their economic value on the labour market, which changes the social prestige and the profitability of careers in education in both the private and the public sector and is likely to have long term repercussions on the professional self-esteem and agency of the worker. These feelings of anxiety and decreased self-esteem are common among Italian teachers: (Romano 2016; Mascherpa, 2016; Colombo, 2017).

Impacts on educational delivery. In a feminized school, the dialectic between genders diminishes or disappears and the prevalence of one gender is masked by a seemingly neutral pedagogy (Besozzi, 2003); the cultivation of relationships within the school environment is confirmed to be a female prerogative (Bombardieri, 2016).

Impacts on peer relations among both female and male students. If the school environment is lacking male role models, the entire system of interactions in the classroom is affected; both empathic relations between teachers and pupils and the coaching role of the teacher are thrown off balance for girls and boys (Colombo, 2009). The gender identity of a teacher or an educator is pivotal in reinforcing the student's motivation to be educated or taught (the mechanism of gender continuity): and a teaching staff comprised solely of women surely has much less impact on boys than a mixed one.

Impacts on organizational climate. A feminine organization does not support exchanges and hybridization with other gender cultures; moreover, it pushes educational staff to insist on their routines of education and care (routines which, being gendered, are thus more unconscious). A gendered organization is also discriminatory and exclusionary. In this case, men are discouraged from entering the field of education and they feel looked upon by women as invaders and thus unwelcome. There are also men who still think their masculinity can be threatened and «contaminated» if they undertake feminine jobs (Faludi, 1991; Abbatecola, 2012). Gendered organizations could be furthermore negative because, in the

case of feminine jobs, men have some competitive advantages. They achieve top positions more easily than women, both in school and university environments, where men have higher representation as principals and rectors. Hence a gendered organization can reinforce the negative effects for women (Williams, 1992).

In order to understand why feminization persists, the sociology of education has to investigate this persistence in terms of the direct and indirect exclusion of men. Many of the reasons men are excluded are tied to job motivation, which can be intrinsic (“expressive” in psycho-social terms) or extrinsic (“instrumental”). Intrinsic occupational values are those inextricably bound up with a particular form of work (i.e. self-realization, working with pupils, making society better, staying in contact with nature), while extrinsic ones are to some extent detachable from it (i.e. salary, security and status). Some authors distinguish also between fundamental and non-fundamental values (Rønnow-Rasmussen, 2015).

There are economic, social and cultural particularities that affect the career choices of males and females. Some authors point out that feminization is exacerbated by the weak social and economic profitability of a profession (Smithers, Robinson, 2000; Perra, Ruspini, 2014). Previous studies have shown that women seem to choose the teaching/educational profession to gain more free time to devote to family care; while men tend to go into education because they are influenced by positive past experiences with their teachers (Biklen, 1995; Guerrini, 2015). It is possible that women opt for this field in a more automatic and non-reflexive way whereas men need a reflexive and non-random motivation to choose it. This choice is particularly difficult for men given that men often have greater difficulties acclimatizing to educational contexts. In fact, men who want to become educators most likely do not mirror the traditional model of masculinity, but instead live their gender identities in alternative ways (Coulter, McNay, 1993).

However, males have an additional motivation to enter the profession as male educators are much requested by public and private schools and care services, especially to deal with teenagers and adolescents who need a “paternal” presence during their development. The ease by which a young man can find a job in education may compensate for the loss (real or symbolic) of prestige they suffer by entering the educational job market given the major remuneration they meet in the wider job market in Italy.

The role of the pedagogy consultant has a higher professional status than that of schoolteacher. In Italy, a pedagogy consultant must have a degree (this has been a legal requirement since 2017 - Law 2443 *Legge Iori* as do teachers at the secondary levels. Law 2443 made teaching more reputable in Italian society and consequently more appealing for men. In fact, as this job entails both management and designing skills, it fits better with men’s social and professional expectations. For this reason, the gender imbalance among pedagogic consultants is weaker than among teachers and educators (Guida, 2017).

We now analyse the access that women and men have to educational jobs (teacher, educator, pedagogic consultant), and how they fit into these roles and build their professional and gender identity by practicing

the job. Our hypothesis is that, in a latent manner, women limit access to the educational profession through a sort of discriminatory attitude, that is “female hegemony”. We use this concept as Antonio Gramsci did, to remark both a “cultural imposition” and an “avant-garde leadership”. Gramsci applied the concept of hegemony to both the middle class or bourgeoisies (hegemonic over the under-class or proletarians) and to the Communist International (hegemonic over the united mass of proletarians). As a “cultural imposition” (negative meaning), hegemony refers to the domination exerted by a set of values, models and interests of a group over the cultural of one other. On the other hand, as an “an avant-garde leadership” (positive meaning), hegemony refers to a cultural group exerts a dominating power in order to lead the masses to social evolution or the final “gain”.

Within Gender Studies, the concept of hegemony has typically been applied to males since men have traditionally dominated women throughout history (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987) and imposed a particular shape on masculinity (Bellé, 2012). Recently, however, the concept has been revised (Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005). In the case of women who dominate the educational field on the basis of numeric and cultural superiority, the concept of female hegemony can help to argue that women tend to subordinate, reject and exclude their masculine counterparts, either consciously or unconsciously. Men’s reactions can also be interpreted through the frame of hegemony; when they feel excluded from access to these jobs and refuse to take on the role of caregivers, and thus seem to implicitly accept the stereotype that caregiving is a “women’s work”. In this case, we argue that women have the capability to create an implicit consensus toward accepted cultural norms and impose to men a “dominant ideology” (limited to this specific field).

Our research hypothesis is as follows: *i*) women and men perceive gender imbalance in educational professions (and its effects) in a different manner, being women more sensitive than men; *ii*) men and women do not differ in the ways they experience the teaching profession in terms of vocation, professional satisfaction and self-realization; *iii*) women hold stronger stereotypes than men as regards men working in education; *iv*) men feel greater distress and discrimination on the job (due to female hegemony or other factors).

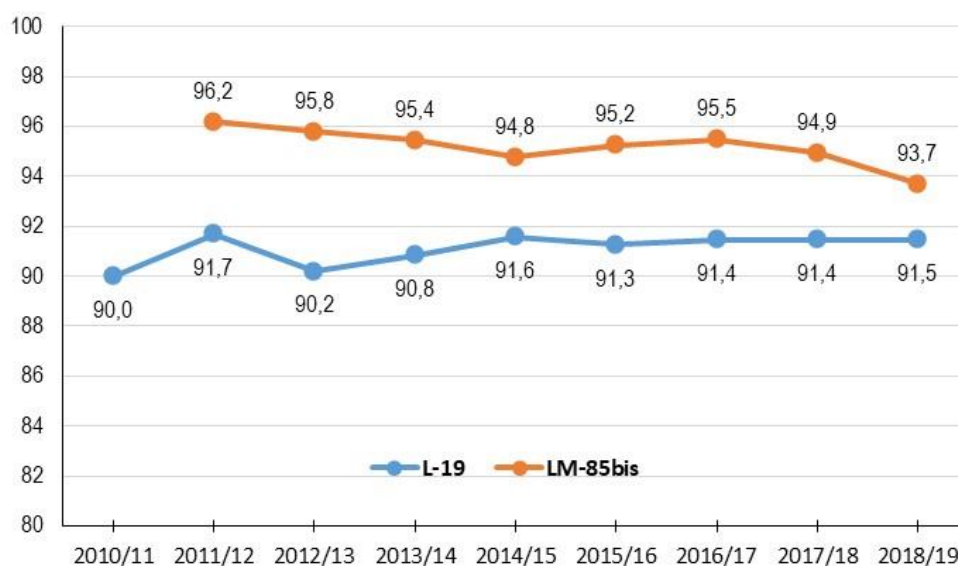
3. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN UNIVERSITY CHOICE AND TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL MOTIVATIONS

We investigate the gender imbalance in education by analysing the university choices of males and females. In Italy, there are *ad hoc* courses to become educators (the bachelor’s degree L-19 in *Educational Science*) and primary/infant schoolteachers (the single-cycle master’s degree LM-85bis in *Primary Teacher Education*). Male and female distribution within the two courses brings to light the pivotal gender segregation

(Figure 1). We here consider educational segregation as the concentration of a specific group of people sharing by a common feature (such as: sex, nationality or social background) in one educational branch (upper secondary school pathway or university course). When segregated, the school choice is based on inequality mechanisms, that is, forced orientation, hidden school selection or a perpetuation of social stereotypes (Goldsmith, 2009; Besozzi, 2017). It also reinforces occupational segregation (Charles, Grusky, 2004).

The majority of those who enrol in *Educational Science* are female (9 for every 10 matriculated), with an increasing trend from academic year (henceforth ‘AY’) 2010-2011 to AY 2018-2019 (+1.5%). This gender gap is even more marked when we look at registrations (first year enrolled) in *Primary Teacher Education*. However, in this latter case, the past 7 years have seen an increase in the share male students and consequently a decrease in the share of women registering for the course: -2.5 percentage points in seven years, from AY 2010-2011 to AY 2018-2019. Currently, males amount to 8.5% of students enrolled in L-19 and 6.3% of students enrolled in LM-85bis.

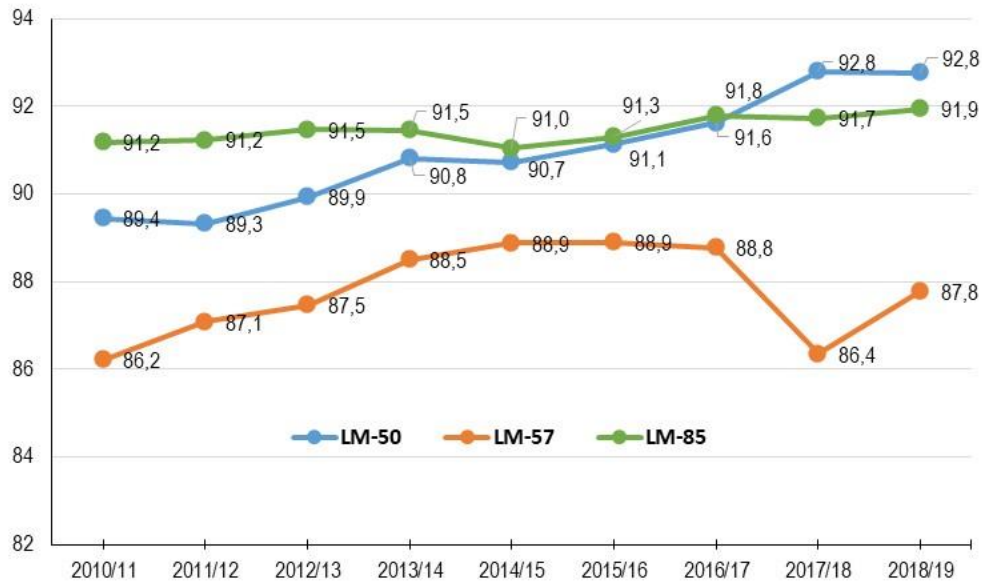
FIGURE 1. Percentage of women enrolled in Italian bachelor’s degree L-19 in Educational Science and single-cycle master’s degree LM-85bis in Primary Teacher Education. AY 2010-2011 to AY 2018-2019.



Source: our analysis on Secondary Education Data Portal – Ministry of Education

There is also a gender gap in all master’s degree courses for educational and training experts (LM-50 *Socio-educational Services Manager*, LM-57 *Adult Education and Life-Long Learning* and LM-85 *Pedagogic Management*), especially in the LM-50 which is focused on childcare (Figure 2). In the AY 2018-2019, 92.8% of enrolled students were females. LM-57 seems to be less feminised (87.8% of females), perhaps because this learning path – addressed to professional training with adult learners – seems more appealing to men.

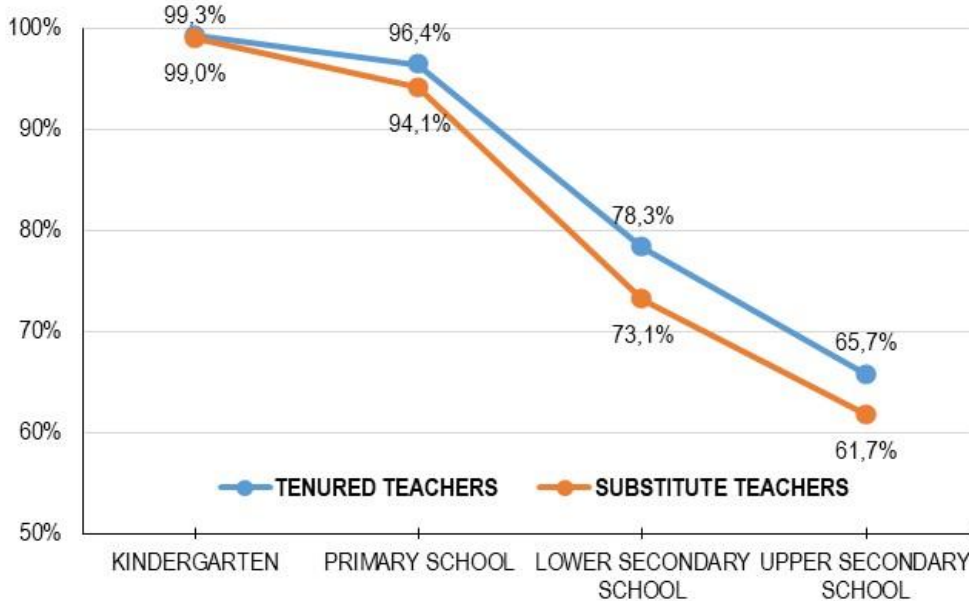
FIGURE 2. *Percentage of women enrolled in master's degrees LM-50 in Socio-educational Services Manager, LM-57 in Adult Education and Life-Long Learning and LM-85 in Pedagogic Management. AY 2010-2011 to AY 2018-2019*



Source: our analysis on Secondary Education Data Portal – Ministry of Education

Furthermore, the distribution of in-service teachers by sex in all types and grades of school is an indicator of strong gender segregation in tertiary education in Italy. Here the feminization of the teaching profession is a structural phenomenon. The proportion of women is similar throughout the country (Colombo, 2017) and has increased consistently since the 1950s (Argentin, 2018). At all levels of education, there are more female

FIGURE 3. *Percentage of female teachers in each school level. SY 2017-2018*



Source: our analysis on Secondary Education Data Portal – Ministry of Education

teachers than males, but the gender gap is smaller in secondary than in primary education (Fondazione Agnelli, 2009). Additionally, the

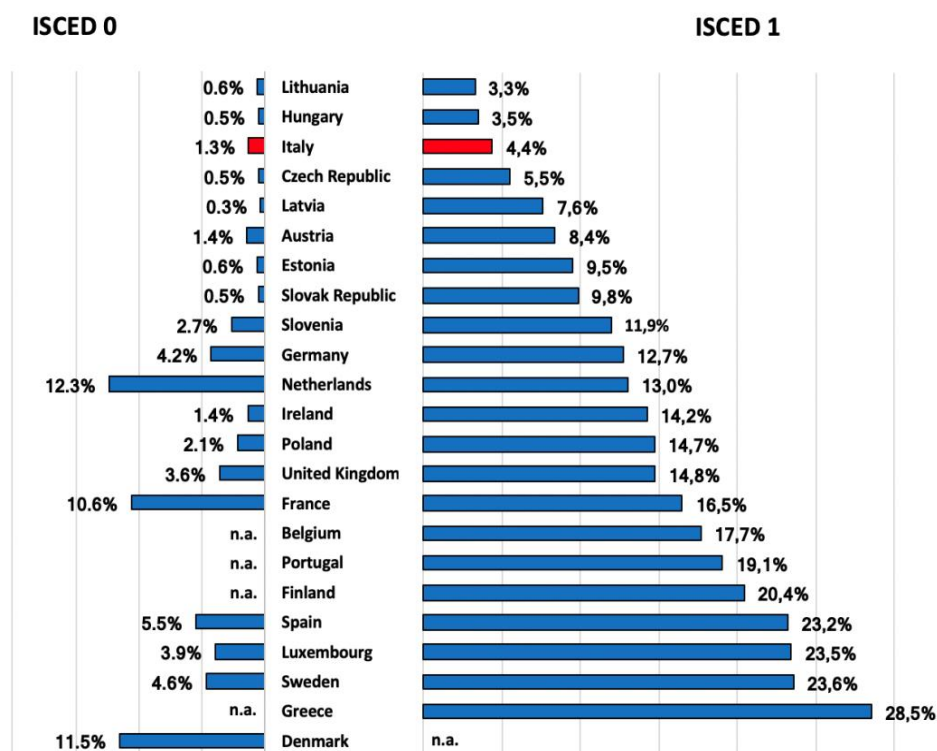
percentage of male teachers is higher at technical and vocational schools than in lyceums (men seem to prefer to teach professional subjects more than women). At university, where there are higher salaries and greater prestige, the ratio reverses (Guerrini, 2015).

In the school year (from now on: SY) 2017-2018 (Figure 3), around 82% of teachers were women, with a female monopoly in kindergarten (99.3%) and primary school (96.1%), and a bulk incidence in lower secondary (77.2%) and upper secondary schools (65%).

The feminization of teaching is not peculiar to Italy; it can be found across all Western countries (Sugg, 1978; Warren, 1989; Dei, 2012), OECD countries (OECD, 2017) and in European Union members (EU-RYDICE, 2015), who all display similar features to Italy (e.g. the increasing female ratio in the last decades and the decreasing gap as the school level rises). However, among all EU countries, the Italian case deserves special attention, above all with regards to pre-primary (ISCED 0) and primary education (ISCED 1) (Figure 4). In ISCED 0 (infant schools), the percentage of male teachers varies from 0.3% in Latvia to 12.3% in Netherlands; Italy is amongst those with the lowest percentage of male teachers (1.3%). In ISCED 1 (primary schools), the range is from 3.3% in Lithuania up to 28.5% in Greece; Italy is similar to Lithuania: 4.4%.

This data shows that in every country, men avoid choosing the teaching profession, which is likely a result of the factors mentioned above: the fact that teaching is viewed as principally about caregiving, the lack of social prestige, lack of career opportunities, and low salary.

FIGURE 4. Percentage of male teachers in 23 EU countries* in ISCED 0-1. Year 2017



Source: our analysis on OECD.Stat data. *For unmentioned EU countries, data was not available

It is important to understand whether men's professional motivations are similar or different to women's and whether they are influenced by gender. In 2009, Fondazione Agnelli (2019) reported on the newly-hired Italian teachers in the SY 2007-2008; the survey highlighted that around 80% of those who took part reported that the choice of becoming a teacher derived from a sense of vocation and from the pursuit for personal fulfilment rather than from the need to have time to fulfil other responsibilities (mainly in the family), from the desire to make a career, or from casualty¹.

Moreover, the third IARD survey on a probabilistic sample of Italian in-service teachers dedicated a part of the questionnaire to this topic. The emerging picture is similar: for the whole test sample, the reasons for becoming a teacher mainly derive from "the calling" rather than from instrumental motivations or from causal motives. It also showed that there is no solid difference between male and female teachers in relation to instrumental motivations, but women and younger teachers (of both gender) tend to highlight the vocation of this profession (Argentin, 2010); in addition, causal motives are more common among male teachers, especially among the ones who teach a scientific or a technical-applicative school subject.

Thanks to a specific question included in an INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training Educational System) questionnaire (SY 2017-2018)² addressed to maths and literature teachers in Italy, we know more about the motives underlying their professional choice (8,924 teachers, from primary to upper secondary school, were surveyed, of whom 1,168 were men and 7,757 women). The question was: "It is not easy to describe in a few words the path to become a teacher. Which of these statements is the most suitable to summarize your decision to follow this career path? Please select only one answer".

The most frequent answers were: vocational reasons (38.7%); the pleasure of teaching (30.6%); and the desire to improve society (9.8%). Instead the "instrumental and casual items" were chosen less frequently: accidental motivations (6.7%), coincidence (4.7%), and economic reasons (6.8%). It is possible to group these responses into categories, according to the kind of motivation that they express: *i*) passion and vocation; *ii*) chance or coincidence, *iii*) the best choice among possible options; *iv*) reconciliation with other commitments; *v*) family tradition; *vi*) the sole job opportunity.

We focused our analysis on the first and second type of motivations (passion and vocation; chance and coincidence) as they are the most popular (Table 1). More women than men express a vocational motivation (+15.5 percentage points) and, inversely, more men became teachers for accidental reasons (+8.5 percentage points).

¹ Unfortunately, in the survey by Fondazione Agnelli data are not split among male and female respondents.

² The questionnaire is administered to literature and maths teachers in Italy, whose classes were selected for the national INVALSI sample; its aim was to collect information regarding teachers' attitudes toward standardized tests and other teaching tools.

TABLE 1. *Italian teachers surveyed by INVALSI. Aggregated items for the question Which of these statements is the most suitable to summarize your decision to follow this career path?, by gender and school levels. SY 2017-2018*

	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary	Men	Women
Passion and vocation	86.2%	71.4%	75.5%	65.6%	81.1%
Chance and coincidence	8.7%	16.2%	11.7%	18.8%	10.3%
Best choice among options	2.1%	7.3%	6.7%	8.2%	4.4%
Reconciliation with commitments	0.7%	1.9%	3.4%	4.0%	1.6%
Family tradition	2.0%	1.7%	1.7%	1.9%	1.8%
Sole job opportunity	0.4%	1.5%	1.0%	1.5%	0.8%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: our analysis on INVALSI data

Primary school teachers are mainly motivated by passion and vocational reasons (86.2%) whereas this is far less the case for teachers at lower secondary schools (71.4%). Respondents who opted for motives of chance and coincidence are more frequent among teachers at lower (16.2%) and upper secondary school (11.7%). Lastly, we wondered whether these patterns might signal discontinuity with the past, and thus whether motivations vary by the age of female and male teachers (Table 2) and found that vocational motivation is more widespread among younger male cohorts and less among older ones; while for female teachers there are no significant differences.

TABLE 2 – *Aggregated items for the question Which of these statements is the most suitable to summarize your decision to follow this career path?, by age cohort and gender. Percentages SY 2017-2018*

	under 45		46-50		51-55		56-60		61 and over	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Passion and vocation	74.0	82.0	69.6	79.9	66.3	81.7	60.5	80.4	54.1	81.2
Chance - coincidence	13.3	9.2	14.2	11.4	23.5	10.8	22.0	10.5	23.6	10.2
Best choice among options	6.6	4.7	6.8	4.5	4.6	3.5	12.5	4.6	11.0	4.4
Reconciliation with commitments	2.7	1.7	3.4	1.7	2.0	0.6	3.5	1.7	8.5	2.3
Family tradition	2.1	1.6	3.4	1.7	2.0	2.7	1.0	1.9	1.2	1.3
Sole job opportunity	1.3	0.8	2.7	0.9	1.5	0.8	0.5	0.9	1.6	0.6
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: our analysis on INVALSI data

Data from INVALSI questionnaire do not indicate what female and male teachers mean by “vocational choice” or “accidental choice” or “best choice”. As mentioned in § 2, qualitative research has highlighted that males who decide to have a career in a feminized workforce tend to be more aware and engaged than females or – on the basis of a similar motivations – to show a higher degree of reflexivity than females because they go beyond gender boundaries with their choice (Cross, Bagihole, 2002; Biemmi, Leonelli, 2018). However, there are some male teachers

who emphasized that their choice was driven by an accidental reason, by a lack of other job opportunities, or because they considered it the best channel to pursue their goals (Gherardi, Poggio, 2003).

4. GENDERED VISIONS: WOMEN AND MEN IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE SERVICES

An explorative enquiry was carried out in Autumn 2019 to reconstruct the gendered visions of women and men engaged or employed in primary/infant schools and childcare services. We conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 24 interviewees (12 men and 12 women), including student teachers and student educators enrolled in the Faculty of Education, teachers in primary schools and consultants in educational services. The respondents were asked to describe the gender imbalance in the current landscape of education and to imagine a new situation of education, in which men and women would be more balanced. The recruitment was carried out on a non-probabilistic base (snowball selection) in Southern Italy (Apulia). Both the male and female sub-samples respectively were made up of three students in LT-19 *Educational Science*, five in-service teachers, two in-service educators, one in-service pedagogical consultant, and one student in LM-85 *Pedagogic Management*. On average, female respondents were 30 years old and male respondents 32 years old.

The interview tool contained 16 questions divided into five sections: professional choice and motivations, care jobs and gender identity, degree of personal satisfaction at work, career opportunities, opinion on the present gender imbalance and visions of the future³. We sum up research findings in three blocks: *i*) the ways women and men experience their profession; *ii*) their opinions about the gender imbalance; *iii*) female hegemony in education.

i) The ways women and men live their profession. As regards *professional motivation*, many interviewees (22 out of 24) mention a “passion for education”. Those who preparing for the teaching profession (or who are already in-service) motivated also by an “inter-generational continuity” (i.e. their parents or other relatives were teachers as well). Even those who are training for or already performing the job are influenced by the memory of a positive model among their teachers during secondary school or university. Thus, vocational choices and the reproduction of positive models are key this choice of profession for both men and women.

Both samples agree that caregiving is the main content of the educational job. Men and women feel themselves to be particularly devoted to children and ready to take care of them.

³ The field research was limited to a single area located in the southern Italy (Foggia and its province); notwithstanding the fact that the training and coursework paths are similar throughout Italy, the particular location might have affected results in terms of negative impact (on the interviewees), of more widespread unemployment.

Another common point is the high level of professional satisfaction and the high expectations of self-realization and improvement during career. Only two young men voiced dissatisfaction, one of whom cited low wages as factor:

I cannot say I am fully happy with my job, and this is not because of the teens (they are not guilty of that) but because of the organization in which I work. They do not totally accept me I often feel like a fish out of water, I cannot be as influential as I would like, and I think my job is not well remunerated ... this also matters! (Int. #13, man, in-service educator).

Both samples tend to neglect the gender issue in education. Some women think that education is a vocational choice, regardless of gender:

Maybe if I were a boy, and I had looked at the world from a male perspective, I would have chosen to become educator as well (Int. #20, woman, in-service pedagogic consultant).

Other women argue that childcare is up to women because they have the “maternal instinct”; they are presumed to be more appropriate than men and better than to them in all care activities.

The masculine sample confirms that men are slightly aware that their choice of job goes against contemporary stereotypes. Some do not mind if the rest of society judge their occupation negatively:

I got into the habit of being among girls and I don't think that being a man can become a burden for me (Int. #9, man, in-service educator).

Some other men claim their right to step out of line:

I feel called and prepared to this profession. Who has the right to impede me? Where are the equal rights of the Italian Constitution? (Int. #7, male, student educator).

Although many criticized my decision, I feel good, I feel I am a special person because I have challenged prejudices and gender stereotypes... (Int. #11, male, in-service primary teacher).

Hence men appear to be more open-minded than women in dealing with gender stereotypes in education. None of the men we interviewed mentioned the biological differences or the maternal instinct. They all responded that men working in education are “special”, “proud”, “outstanding” and “sensitive” people.

Moreover, the majority of women agree with this profile of the men engaged in educational jobs, and they share with men the perception that they are denigrated (or simply misunderstood) by those outside the sector. For example, girls enrolled in the Faculty of Education are often accused of attending an easy course of study, called with disdain the “university of afternoon snacks”. As a result, both women and men feel that their profession is in line with their personality and intimate aspirations.

Apart from the intrinsic motivation, some men report experiences of distress and a sense of being oppressed within the feminine environment of a school or a childcare service, because they are the minority and perceive to be discriminated against by women.

I suffered discrimination by women; they said to me: "You will not be good as a father at taking care of your children!" I replied: "How can I be discriminated now. I am still young, and so far, I have not had the chance to show my capabilities!" (Int. #7, male, educator student).

I was sure that in a service for young children I would never find a job! (Int. #13, male, in-service educator)

There is some gender parity at a formal and professional level, but at a deeper level, when we deal with feelings and conscience, we are a minority, so we are discriminated against. Men dominate jobs that are based on resistance and muscle power, but they cannot take care of others; in this case, they are seen as inferior to women (Int. #21, male, in-service primary teacher).

Being a man makes me feel discriminated against when I think that I cannot exchange things with other men as colleagues (Int. #22, in-service primary teacher).

One of the most negative consequence of being a minority is denounced by women and confirmed by some men: male educators and teachers are often belittled or disregarded by parents, especially by mothers.

I have seen in some cases that parents were suspicious towards male educators or teachers; but in my case, it has never happened (Int. #5, female, pre-service primary school teacher).

I feel surprised when (men) are undervalued by parents.... I guess it happens because some mothers look at these men in the classroom and implicitly see her husband or partner in them, and it is not a good thing (Int. #15, female, in-service educator).

My difficulty was when parents realized that the educator was a man, and often it happened that they wanted a woman. They did not ask about my competence or my education, nothing. They only wanted a woman and not a man (Int. #18, male, in-service primary school teacher).

ii) Opinions about the gender imbalance. Both women and men replied to the question: *How do you feel about the fact that in your school (or kindergarten) women are by far the majority?* There were a variety of different responses to this question. On the one hand, women mostly deny feeling distressed by the gender imbalance (8 out of 12). Only four female interviewees report that women—in the absence of competition from men—emphasize competition amongst women. On the other hand, 5 of the 12 male interviewees do not agree that gender balance in education has negative consequences and report that they feel content with the situation and appreciated by their female colleagues:

It is a real pleasure to work among women. I can be in harmony with them. Women are available, creative, gentle and friendly...On the contrary, when I worked with men, I felt that they were less empathic and engaged than women, and too self-centred (Int. #23, male, in-service primary school teacher).

However, there are also men (6 out of 12) who consider the same female attitudes as sources of distress and misunderstanding and feel that it is difficult to relate to women in primary schools.

I often came across female colleagues who misunderstood my words or requests for information. Some of them even supposed that I was flirting with them! (Int. #18, male, in-service primary school teacher).

One male educator thinks that the gender imbalance itself brings about misunderstanding and ambiguity in the professional relations. Due to their minority status, men are sometimes too protected and pampered by women, and only women have the power to decide if they want to cooperate with men, not the contrary.

There are women who recognize my professional competence, but there are also those who perceive a masculine presence in the school setting as an impediment for them, as if it were an interference (Int. #17, male, in-service primary school teacher).

Women sometimes look at men with surprise, and they make me feel strange, but I think that it depends also on me, on my capacity to receive their gaze with a good spirit. Very often, even if they joke with me, I choose to accept it as a bit of fun...And very often I am able to use their joking to my advantage (Int. #19, male, in-service educator).

iii) In order to explore the female hegemony, we asked women: *What do you think about men who work in education?* and men: *How do you think women see men who work in education?* Among women, only three (out of 12) explicitly declared that men are not devoted to (and prepared for) childcare; the majority of women recognizes that men working in education are mainly sensitive and reliable and appreciates their non-conformism. Thus, the majority of both women and men consider the masculine presence in education as an added value (and this is far from confirming the female hegemony hypothesis). Besides, when they envision a possible future, in which men are equivalent in number to women in education, they have a clear positive attitude and wish it would really happen. If the former results are in contradiction with the hypothesis of female hegemony, however, we noted some signs of a gendered closure on the women's side, which might refer to an ongoing process of hegemonization, mostly unintentional, which needs to be further explored. For example, when some women talk about how men address their female colleagues, they say that some men behave with the well-known attitude of 'masculine superiority,' both tacit and explicit; and this is uncomfortable for women who want to counteract these attitudes with defensive responses.

Unfortunately, sometimes (not always) men adopt their typical attitude of superiority. I mean, when they suggest or say that they are very good at working and imply that women are not (Int. #20, female, in-service pedagogical consultant).

On the male side, there are those who claim that women deal with male colleagues in an ambivalent manner, because they accept or wish for the masculine presence while refusing to compete with men on an equal basis:

In my institute, I always noticed among the women a strong antagonism toward the psychologist, no matter if it were a man or woman; they compete with this consultant because they want to play the same role and substitute the therapist (Int. #12, male, in-service pedagogical consultant).

As a male educator in my school, they assign me the worst cases (e.g. pupils with severe disabilities), but I would also prefer working with less severe cases and teaching more for the entire class. However, since I am male they attribute to me the strongest case (Int. #13, male, in-service educator).

In conclusion, even if subtle and mainly unacknowledged, this ambivalence exists and it manifests itself clearly, as for a young female student teacher who says:

Women are still mistrustful towards men. Maybe they have interiorized the typical idea that caregiving is the domain of women and that men are not good at it. But we all (women included) need to overcome this kind of terrible prejudice and mental barrier (Int. #5, female, student teacher).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This work has analysed if (and how) there is a gender imbalance among educational professionals in Italy, as we assist to an almost exclusive presence of women to the detriment of men. We have also explored how the Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony applies to the female predominance in educational contexts. Considering the outcomes emerged from the data here presented, three topics can be pointed out.

Firstly, there are many similarities between the ways males and females think about, choose and perform their jobs in the educational field. They both believe professional motivations are mainly due to passion and vocation (especially at primary school), even if on average men tend to choose this job more frequently than women for accidental reasons or reasons of convenience. Younger men tend to choose an educational career based on vocation, and we assumed this as a meaningful cultural change. Further studies on the changing masculinity could develop this issue more in depth.

Secondly, although we noticed a common trend in denying gender-related issues and minimizing the gender imbalance in education, young women affirmed more frequently than men the stereotype according to which females are more naturally inclined to the caring professions (Bolton, Muzio, 2008). However, overall, both men and women are more in favour than against the male presence in education.

Finally, the findings indicate that males remark some negative aspects of belonging to a minority. It can occur that they feel devalued or ignored by parents and also seen with distrust (Priegert Coulter, McNay, 1993); from within the institution, some female colleagues misunderstand the professional relationship with men, sometimes because of envy or fear of competition. In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that, even though none of the male respondents made direct reference to "female hegemony", at least half of them commented on personal incidents of discrimination; in addition, men refer to a sort of ambivalence and ambiguity in the way that women tend to interact with them. On the part of

women, a few of them consider men, because of a sort of mental barrier that limits them. This information allows us to partly confirm the hypothesis of female hegemony; but the limited sample (in numbers and territorial distribution) considered by this study pushes us to go further in the exploration of it.

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