



# Gender equality in Europe and intersectionality in times of crisis

## L'uguaglianza di genere in Europa e l'intersezionalità in tempi di crisi

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### ABSTRACT

Gender equality is still a key target for the EU which gives priority to equal economic independence and decision making, dignity, integrity and fighting of gender-based violence (Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality). In particular, the article compares three European countries: Spain, Portugal and Italy and the situation of these three countries in terms of gender policies. On the other hand, in addition to the statistics that many research centers provide, it is important to take into consideration some relevant methodological approaches that can allow us to study a specific topic in greater depth, in our case gender discrimination. Finally I take in consideration the current situation of crisis and the immediate consequences on the women condition.

La parità di genere è ancora un obiettivo chiave per l'UE che privilegia la parità di indipendenza economica e il processo decisionale, la dignità, l'integrità e la lotta alla violenza di genere (impegno strategico per l'uguaglianza di genere). In particolare, l'articolo confronta tre paesi europei: Spagna, Portogallo e Italia e la situazione di questi tre paesi in termini di politiche di genere. D'altra parte, oltre alle statistiche fornite da molti centri di ricerca, è importante prendere in considerazione alcuni approcci metodologici pertinenti che possono permetterci di studiare un argomento specifico in modo più approfondito, nel nostro caso la discriminazione di genere. Infine, prendo in considerazione l'attuale situazione di crisi e le conseguenze immediate sulla condizione delle donne.

### KEYWORDS

Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities, Intersectionality, Methodology, Crisis.

Parità di Genere, Pari Opportunità, Intersezionalità, Metodologia, Crisi.

## 1. Overview on the Gender Equality strategy

Gender equality is a key target for Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 of the EU whose policy goals and actions are designed to promote a gender-equal Europe, through the social progress, which includes working at different levels to destroy gender stereotypes and create equal opportunities for all, men and women, boys and girls, in all their diversity. In line with the Gender Equality Index (2019), Europe is still far from the finish line. Women do 75% of unpaid work and domestic care; only 67% of women are employed when compared to 78% of men; women in EU earn on average 16% less per hour than men (EU Strategy, 2020-2025). Statistics show horizontal and vertical segregation in the inclusion of women and men in educational and professional fields due to gender stereotypes that are perpetuated by school curricula, role models performed by teachers and other school staff, pedagogical resources (as textbooks), among other examples. This Strategy for the next five years is based on a gender mainstream approach and reinforces the importance of intersectionality in all actions to be developed, striving for a Union of Equality. Education and educational institutions are core partners in creating a better Europe for all, where all the citizens may be free to pursue their chosen paths in life. Specific objectives of the EU Strategy are: ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics. Furthermore, one of the sustainable development goals of United Nations is precisely gender equality. Goal 5 claims that «Despite some significant progress, real change has been agonizingly slow for the majority of women and girls in the world. Today, not a single country can claim to have achieved gender equality.»<sup>1</sup> To achieve all these goals that require structural changes with permanent effects in people's lives, it is very important to work with schools, pupils and teachers, on gender equality in order to free younger generations of the burden of traditional standards of masculinity and femininity, including patriarchy and androcentric values that are the roots of discriminations.

## 2. Spain, Portugal and Italy: a comparison between these three states regarding gender policies

The gap between the theory and practice of gender mainstreaming in EU policymaking is well known to feminist scholars and activists. Whilst scholars once heralded the concept of gender mainstreaming as “potentially revolutionary” the empirical reality has shown otherwise (Minto e Mergaert, 2018). The EU officially committed to gender mainstreaming in the 1990s, fixing the principle in treaty articles, action programmes and communications, and setting up institutional bodies and mechanisms to promote the incorporation of a gender perspective into policymaking. However, the implementation has not reflected these official commitments, with gaps showing in the mainstreaming of gender into the EU's public policies (Mergaert e Lombardo, 2014). In 2018, the employment rate for women in the European Union stood at 67%, one percentage-point (pp) increase from the

1 Cfr. <https://www.un.org>. Visited last time on 7/04/2020.

previous year and 5 pp higher than in 2008. However, the employment rate for women was still 12 pp(\*) less than the corresponding rate for men of the same age. Among EU Member States, Sweden had the highest employment rate for women (80%) in 2018, whereas Greece (49%) and Italy (53%) reported the lowest rates. Across all Member States, the employment rate for men was higher than that of women. Nevertheless, this gender employment gap has narrowed from 15 pp in 2008 to 12 pp in 2018. The gender employment gap varied significantly across EU Member States in 2018. The highest gaps were recorded in Malta (22 pp) and Greece (21 pp), while the lowest gap was observed in Lithuania (2 pp). We know that all European countries are developing strategies to overcome those gaps, however, gender inequality still exists; in 2015 women carried out  $\frac{3}{4}$  of household chores,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of childcare and were more likely to work part-time and earn less. In terms of public policies on gender equality Portugal, Italy, and Spain have many international compromises that have been fostering internal and national policies. The Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Platform of Beijing (1995), the Istanbul Convention (2011), among other supranational legal documents has been feeding different National Plans for Gender Equality. For example, a political measure recently approved in Portugal to promote younger generations citizenship values is the National Strategy of Education for Citizenship approved and implemented in 2018, establishing gender equality as mandatory. In 2015 in Italy a new law regarding school education has been made, Law n°.107<sup>2</sup> including education for gender equality, among other important issues. Spain approved its Law on Equality in 2007, modified in June 2019<sup>3</sup>, brought public administrations to work on a gender perspective. Catalonia approved its law of effective equality of men and women in 2015 (Law 17/2015) that affects the field of education, coeducation and involve the whole educational community in the fight against gender stereotypes and vertical and horizontal segregation in the labour market. Starting with Catalonia, other Spanish Autonomous Communities have followed suit by transversally including a gender perspective in a number of research policies (Alonso, 2017). In 2017 a country-specific recommendation on the participation of women in the labour market was addressed to ten Member States in the context of the European Semester, including Spain and Italy. The Global Gender Gap (2018) has highlighted a worrisome situation about Italy: it is at position 70 on 149 countries and the worst aspect is related to job (position 118). Spain is at position 29 (global position) but it is at position 80 in the economic participation and opportunity. Portugal is at position 37 (global position) but its position in economic subjects is 40. The most relevant issues in schools on gender equality include segregation in educational choices, equality in textbooks (images and contents are not equally representative of men and women), some teachers' lack of awareness and the language used: the masculine is used as a neutral form for everyone. Although in the three countries have been done legal efforts for including education for gender equality, prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination, there is still a gap between de jure equality and the facto assurance of peoples' rights. Therefore, although Italy's situation may be is worst and Spain and Portugals' can be considered models of some good practices to take into account, teachers' training about gender differences is a priority in the three countries. A Special Eurobarometer survey on gender equality, released on 20th November 2017, has emphasized that equality

2 Cfr. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it>. Visited last time on 7/04/2020.

3 Cfr. <https://www.boe.es>. Visited last time on 7/04/2020.

has not been achieved in the EU Member States yet. If we consider the data acquired on the relevance of stereotypical beliefs, we notice that 44 % of men and women think that the most important role of women is to take care of her home and family. This stereotype is only supported by 24% of people in Spain and the percentage grows to 47% in Portugal and to 51% in Italy. The gender gap in employment was 11,6% on average in Europe (EU-28) in 2016, but it is 11,5% in Spain, 20,1% in Italy and only 6,8% in Portugal (Report on Equality between women and men in the EU 2018). Italy, Spain and Portugal are part of the same Welfare State model, which is characterized by the importance given to the family. Gender stereotypes that arise from the sexual division in the labour market influence the distribution of care tasks within families and the participation of women. Education reflects gender stereotypes and the school becomes a major actor in focusing on the role of them among teachers, students and training activities. This is the reason why it has emerged the need for specific professional training to fight those stereotypes. Portugal, Spain and Italy have mature democracies, but all the three Southern European countries, with a Latin origin, are suffering in recent years the rising of right-wing parties that tend to foster the discourses of gender ideology. Such movements are sometimes very well organized and try to do advocacy in order to prevent public schools of debating gender with students. Among the reasons for this emergence of conservatism and populism, we could point out the fears never really made explicit that abstract models of 'traditional family' and 'social organization' are at risk. Based on this rationale, the distribution of roles and power acquired by men and women should be maintained by school teachings in order to avoid the collapse of the foundations of our culture and our history and, perhaps, to prevent the 'debauchery' of individual behavior. That's not what gender equality promotion is about. Gender should be used as a grid to read reality and to a tool – gender lenses – to identify specific areas where men and women suffer explicit and/or silent forms of discrimination across the lifespan (Bem, 1993). Other reasons for considering the comparability of Portuguese, Spanish and Italian contexts is the fact that those three countries are Catholic and the influence of the Catholic Church on many fields isn't weak. Also, the three countries are still recovering from a huge economic crisis that affects women's and men's lives differently in many aspects. Some of the services that were ensured by the Social State, as the services for caring of younger children of older people suffered many cuts and these are tasks mainly done by women in domestic contexts.

### **3. Gender study through an intersectional approach and focus group**

I would like to shortly reflect on the methodological approach but also on the analytical and language approach with respect to gender discrimination. I think that researching on gender issues, two are the main aspects to take in consideration: 1) the methodology, 2) the study of theoretical and analytical approaches that can improve the condition of women. Regarding methodology, the biographical approach and the focus groups will be investigated. Qualitative research helps identify possible types of gender discrimination, rather than how widespread discrimination is. The focus group is used when the interest is to identify the inter-subjective representations and the socially shared knowledge disseminated in particular social groups ("citizens", "politicians", "women", "young people", etc.). Indeed, during discussions, interaction among people, who share similar experi-

ences or a common background in relation to the topic discussed, can be generated inter-subjective representations reflecting the images and beliefs of the social group involved into the focus group. This is why I consider it as an important tool for teachers involved in training about gender and inclusion<sup>4</sup>. The interaction among them during the group discussion can help them to become more inclined to consider and reflect upon aspects of their daily life that are usually taken for granted. For example do teachers use male-dominating terms at school without thinking about it? Do our textbooks present a rhetorical image of women? From the other side, the biographical approach is used inductively to construct identity profiles which make it possible to move from individual stories to sociological ideal-types in which each story is inserted. The biographical approach makes it possible to explore simultaneously various spheres of the narrator's life (e.g., family, school, work, relationships) in order to identify how the main events of his or her life have developed and the way in which events in different spheres have integrated with each other over time and changed the life of the subject. In addition, this approach considers both the individual time of a person's life course and the socio-historical time in which the events narrated are embedded. (Elder et al. 2003; Miller 2005). At the same time, the biographical approach is useful for identifying profiles of school inclusion and exclusion and therefore what is the background behind the girl or boy who decides to leave school. As far as the analytical approach is concerned, it is important to take in consideration the processes of subjectivation, subjugation, and subordination through an intersectionality approach of multiple systems of inequality. This concept that was coined by the black US legal expert Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and spread quickly beyond the United States, first and foremost in the field of gender studies, inside the feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s, when Marxist and materialist feminism argued on the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, while black women movements and postcolonial approaches introduced the issue of colour difference and racial discrimination as specific forms of oppression. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective, an American black lesbian feminist organization said that «We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously» (Lutz, 2016). This concept was then elaborated in Black feminist scholars' work of Angela Davis' famous «Women, Race and Class»(1981). How much is this concept influencing the ordinary life and professional experience of European teachers still nowadays? The concept of intersectionality is a matter of fact still today regarding the condition of women, worldwide. Through this reflection, I sincerely would like to think about some adaptation strategies in order to prevent those various levels of discrimination in our educational and welfare system. Intersectionality takes up the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible, but does so by employing methodologies compatible with the poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory working of power (Davis, 2011).

4 Reflections on this topic may be found in Leoncini, S., (2016) *Dall'accoglienza all'inclusione sociale e di genere. Prospettive e racconti di docenti, ricercatori e formatori sul mondo della scuola*. Roma: Aracne.

## 4. Conclusions

I hope with this article to offer, starting from several data about the condition of women in Europe, a multi-level analysis demonstrating the interrelation between social positionality and the narratives of collective identity on gender issues. I would like to conclude, reflecting our condition during the time of the quarantine and the influence of the coronavirus on our life as teachers, nurses, academics, care workers, students and woman, mothers, daughters. Doing so I try to analyze the situation with an intersectionality approach. As the European Institute for Gender Equality reports:

«We are learning what it means to self-quarantine, work from home, home-school children, lose a job or even a loved one. Each person's situation is different, but for sure, the coronavirus will reveal the different realities of women and men. At the frontline of this coronavirus pandemic are the healthcare workers who are working around the clock and putting themselves at risk to care for patients. Most of the nurses and healthcare workers in the EU are women. Their workload is very demanding, often taking an emotional toll. Yet their profession is one of the most undervalued, and under-paid jobs in the EU.»<sup>5</sup>

Those woman with a precarious job are likely to have difficulty paying for basic necessities. EIGE's research shows that a quarter of women employees across the EU are in a precarious job and for migrants, the situation is even worse. Nearly one in three non-EU born women (35 %) and one in four men (24 %) work in precarious jobs. Moreover caring responsibilities usually fall heavily on women and in a situation of crisis (schools and workplaces will be closed still for a while) the unpaid workload is going to increase, not to mention that many households depend on informal care from relatives or friends so maintain physical distancing it is not simple. Let's think about kids or adults with disabilities. In Europe, most of the professional carers working with people with disabilities or older people are women (83 %).<sup>6</sup> During this crisis also domestic abuse could increase while our decision-makers are still mainly men, taking decisions that affect everybody's life. The gender inequalities that exist at European level could worsen with the crisis; for this reason, research must not stop but highlight the intersectionality of these discriminations through a relevant methodological approach. It is very important to work with teachers and educators on gender equality to achieve all these cores as it is necessary to work with the new generations and change the working market, where gender stereotypes can be overcome as long as we deal with them. This is why it is important to study the gender roles in the pedagogical action and analyse what can be done at school through horizontal segregation actions. The socialization of gender continues in our daily life, in our schools, and in our society.

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr. <https://eige.europa.eu>. Visited last time on 7/04/2020.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Ibidem.

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## Links

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