

# Nurturing equality: gender education and family dialogue for combating gender-based violence

## Coltivare la parità: educazione di genere e confronto familiare per il contrasto alla violenza di genere

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## ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the role of gender education, with reference to Italian legislation, as a tool to counter sexism and violence against women. A questionnaire administered to 678 university students explored participation in university courses and/or external seminars on gender-based violence, as well as the influence of parental values on students' adherence to pro-feminist attitudes. The results indicate that parents play a crucial role in transmitting values of equality and promoting a non-stereotyped understanding of gender roles. Conversely, in the academic sector, training on these topics remains limited or poorly attended.

**KEYWORDS**

**Gender education; Gender-based violence; Equality; Stereotypes; Family; Educazione di genere; Violenza di genere; Parità; Stereotipi; Famiglia.**

Il contributo analizza il ruolo dell'educazione di genere, con riferimento alla normativa italiana, come strumento per contrastare sessismo e violenza contro le donne. Un questionario somministrato a 678 studenti universitari ha esplorato la partecipazione a corsi universitari e/o seminari esterni sulla violenza di genere e l'influenza dei valori genitoriali sull'adesione a istanze pro-femministe. I risultati indicano che le figure genitoriali esercitano un'influenza determinante nella trasmissione di valori di parità e nella promozione di una comprensione non stereotipata dei ruoli di genere. Viceversa, nel settore accademico, gli interventi formativi su tali tematiche risultano ancora limitati o scarsamente frequentati.

**Citation:** Feresin M., Bortolotti E. (2025). Nurturing Equality: Gender Education and Family Dialogue for Combating Gender-Based Violence. *Women & Education*, 3(6), 104-111.

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**Conflicts of interest:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

**DOI:** [https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-III-06-25\\_18](https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-III-06-25_18)

**Submitted:** October 3, 2025 • **Accepted:** October 28, 2025 • **Published:** December 30, 2025

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

## 1. Gender Education and the Regulatory Framework in Italy

The notion of *gender education* refers to the set of daily behaviors, practices, and attentions—whether intentional or not—carried out by individuals who hold educational responsibilities (such as parents, teachers, and other educators) in relation to young people's gender experience, roles, and social relationships. This concept therefore includes interventions within the family, at school, and across the integrated educational system (Leonelli, 2011).

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (commonly referred to as the Istanbul Convention), ratified by Italy through Law No. 77/2013, establishes in Article 14 the obligation to integrate into school curricula content related to gender equality, non-stereotyped roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution, and the prevention of gender-based violence.

In Italy, this commitment has been further reinforced by Law No. 119/2013, which promotes the training of school staff and the sensitization of student on issues of the prevention of gender-based violence and discrimination; by Law No. 107/2015, which promotes the implementation of equal opportunity principles and the promotion of gender equality education in all schools; and by the National Strategic Plan on Male Violence against Women 2021–2023, which identifies schools and training centers as pivotal settings for targeted interventions aimed at the prevention of violence and overcoming gender stereotypes.

At the international level, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda emphasizes the importance of gender equality education as an essential component of sustainable development.

Overall, these normative and policy frameworks equip the Italian educational system with the instruments to intervene in an integrated and systematic manner in order to counteract gender-based violence and to foster gender equality.

### 1.1 Theoretical Framework: Foundational Contributions to Gender Pedagogy

In the Italian pedagogical landscape, the debate on gender education has been profoundly shaped by the contributions of Franco Cambi, Franca Pinto Minerva, Simonetta Ulivieri, Giuseppe Burgio, Anna Grazia Lopez, Rosa Gallelli, Carmela Covato, Gabriella Seveso, Francesca Borruso, Elisabetta Musi, Vanna Iori, Carla Roverselli, and Margarete Durst. These scholars have inaugurated and sustained the academic discourse on gender pedagogy, emphasizing its epistemological autonomy and its transformative potential in rethinking education as a practice of freedom, recognition, and social justice.

Cambi, in his *Manuale di storia della pedagogia* (2003), provided a historical reconstruction of Western pedagogical traditions, highlighting the power dynamics and educational structures that have historically perpetuated gender inequalities. Building on this foundation, Loiodice and Pinto Minerva developed a pedagogy of differences that emphasizes dialogue and reciprocal listening, integrating gender and ethnicity within an intersectional framework to promote inclusive educational practices (Pinto Minerva, 2006).

Ulivieri focused her research on gender pedagogy and education for difference, proposing both theoretical models and practical interventions aimed at fostering respect for diversity and ensuring equal treatment in educational settings (Ulivieri, 2010). Similarly, Burgio, in his volume *La pedagogia di genere. Percorsi di ricerca contemporanei* (2923), explore contemporary challenges in gender education, including gender-based violence, inclusion, and educational equity.

Gallelli's work on gender disparities in scientific education underscores how media, games, and digital platforms can reinforce stereotypes, calling for a critical pedagogy that interrogates and transforms educational practices (Gallelli, 2009). Covato's historical and methodological analyses illuminate how educational practices have been influenced by gendered paradigms and how they can evolve toward more inclusive models (Covato, 2018). Seveso also highlights the role of educational institutions in shaping gender identities and the potential for reform to promote inclusion and parity (Seveso, 2018).

Musi (2017) emphasizes the construction of identity through openness to difference and relational dynamics, advocating for critical reflection on symbolic orders within educational contexts. Iori (2014) addresses gender management in educational and organizational settings, proposing strategies to counteract stereotypes and promote equality. Roverselli (2017) integrates gender perspectives within intercultural pedagogy, exploring family roles and their impact on educational experiences. Durst (2005) contributes historical and interdisciplinary insights into the formation of gendered identities, offering a nuanced understanding of the intersections between education, history, and gender.

Collectively, these scholars establish the theoretical and practical foundations for a gender pedagogy that not only recognizes differences but values them as a resource for fostering a more equitable and just society. Their work continues to influence educational policies and practices, promoting a cultural shift that challenges traditional gender norms and opens new possibilities for learning and personal growth.

## 2. Learning (non) Violent Models

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) emphasizes that learning does not occur solely through direct experience, but also through processes of observation and modeling. Children exposed to domestic violence are at risk of internalizing violent relational patterns and of perceiving violence as a legitimate means of achieving one's goals (Beltramini, 2020). Within such contexts, affective education is often permeated by gender stereotypes, characterized by the devaluation of the maternal figure and by contempt toward both women and men who do not conform to traditional masculine norms (Luberti, 2017).

Empirical evidence confirms the importance of working with parents in order to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of violence: growing up in peaceful environments, where adequate care is provided, increases the likelihood of developing a positive self-concept, a constructive perception of others, and the capacity to establish respectful and empathetic relationships (Beltramini, 2020; American Psychological Association, 2018).

At the macro-social level, comparative research conducted by Htun and Weldon (2012) across 70 countries between 1975 and 2005 demonstrated that the presence of strong and active feminist movements represents the most decisive factor in prompting significant political changes in strategies aimed at combating violence against women.

## 3. Universities and the Fight against Gender-Based Violence

Alongside schools and training centers, universities are also identified by the *National Strategic Plan 2021–2023 on Male Violence against Women* as crucial contexts for the prevention and contrast of gender-based violence. The plan particularly emphasizes the need to establish curricular and specialized courses—multidisciplinary and cross-cutting in nature—developed in synergy with institutions, anti-violence centers, and sector professionals.

The structural integration of such content into academic curricula would strengthen scientific and methodological competencies while fostering an academic environment conducive to the promotion of gender equality. However, this requires explicit institutional commitment: the absence of such topics in mandatory study programs risks conveying the message that gender-based violence constitutes a secondary issue.

Although recent years have witnessed a growth in dedicated courses, these remain largely optional and lack a specific disciplinary framework. This gap limits the capacity of the Italian university system to contribute in a systematic and impactful manner to the prevention of violence and the promotion of a culture of equality.

## 4. Feminism and Transmission

The question of the intergenerational transmission of feminism constitutes a central theme in contemporary feminist debate. It is marked by the complexity of relationships among different generations of women, characterized by continuities and ruptures, conflicts and alliances, which reflect both the persistence of patriarchal structures and the challenges inherent in recognizing the very necessity of transmission (Vingelli, 2019).

According to Collin (1986), feminism must be understood as an action in constant reformulation, grounded in practices of resistance and experimentation. Cirant (2005) emphasizes that feminism cannot be transmitted in a direct sense, but rather that conditions can be created for its emergence.

International scholarship indicates that contact with feminism—whether through media or through significant figures—represents an important predictor for the development of feminist consciousness (Leape, Arias, 2011; Zucker, 2004). Moreover, the refusal to explicitly adopt the label feminist, despite sharing its values, reduces the likelihood of active engagement in feminist practices and activism (Eisele, Stake, 2008).

## 5. The study

Within this framework, our research is situated with the aim of investigating the well-being, relationships, and life experiences of university students.

The sample consisted of 678 students enrolled at the University of Trieste (362 female and 316 male), aged between 18 and 23 years. Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire comprising 45 closed-ended items, administered via Google Forms.

Descriptive statistics ( $M \pm SD$ ) were used for data analysis. Questionnaire responses were reported in terms of frequencies (N) and percentages (%). Relationships between variables were examined using the Chi-Square test, with the level of significance set at  $p = .05$ . All analyses were conducted using SPSS software.

The results presented in this article focus specifically on responses concerning participation in activities addressing gender-based violence and feminist issues.

The questionnaire adopted in this study underwent a pilot validation to ensure reliability and construct validity (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to completing the survey. Responses were anonymous, and no identifying information was collected. The research adhered to the ethical standards of the University of Trieste.

## 6. Results

An analysis of opportunities—both academic and social—for engaging with issues related to gender-based violence reveals a relatively limited level of participation. Only 14.3% of the sample reported having attended a university course specifically addressing the topic, while 17.7% indicated participation in an external conference or seminar (Table 1).

<i>On the issue of gender-based violence, have you ever...</i>	N	%
Attended a university course		
Yes	97	14,3
No	581	85,7
Attended a conference/seminar outside the University		
Yes	120	17,7
No	558	82,3

Table 1. Frequencies of participation in university courses and external seminars on issues related to gender-based violence

Given the positive effects associated with living a feminist life as a consciously feminist individual, the crucial question to be addressed is the extent to which today's young women and men identify with the Movement and whether or not they adopt the feminist label.

To answer this question, we now examine data concerning self-identification as a feminist, responses to the scale measuring adherence to feminist values—the F Scale, validated in a previous study (Grassi et al., 2022)—and dialogue with parents on issues related to feminism.

The findings indicate that self-identification in feminist terms is more pronounced among female students compared to their male counterparts (Table 2).

	Female		Male	
	N	%	N	%
How would you define yourself?				
Pro-feminist	218	60,2	99	31,3
Anti-feminist	0	0	11	3,5
Neither pro- nor antifeminist	106	29,3	174	55,1
Unsure	38	10,5	32	10,1

p<.05

Table 2. Self-identification as a feminist

In parallel, the analysis of the F Scale (Grassi et al., 2022), employed to assess and explore support for feminist values, indicates that female students tend to adhere more strongly to feminist values, thereby confirming the pattern observed in self-labeling (Table 3).

Level of adherence to feminist values	Female		Male	
	N	%	N	%
High	235	64,9	104	32,9
Moderate	116	32,0	157	49,7
Low	11	3,0	17,4	17,4

p<.05

Table 3. Adherence to feminist values

The study therefore aimed to investigate the potential impact of having—or not having—discussed feminism with one's parents. The analysis of parent–child dialogue revealed a particularly noteworthy finding: parental figures exert a decisive influence on both self-identification as a feminist and adherence to gender equality values. Specifically, the data show that the transmission of a positive impression of feminism by either mother or father is associated with a higher likelihood that students self-identify as pro-feminist (Table 4) and demonstrate strong adherence to the movement's values (Table 5).

Interestingly, this tendency also emerges in the presence of a negative paternal narrative: in these cases, both young women and men tend to deviate from the transmitted model and consistently adopt positions supporting feminist values.

Overall, the results indicate that family dialogue about feminism—regardless of whether the conveyed message is positive or negative—promotes critical reflection among young people and fosters greater adherence to principles of equality and the dismantling of stereotypical gender roles.

	Mother communicated:			
	A positive impression of feminism %	A negative impression %	No impression %	Never discussed %
How would you define yourself?				
Pro-feminist	75,0	33,3	34,0	39,6
Anti-feminist	0,0	20,0	1,9	1,5
Neither pro- nor anti-feminist	18,6	40,0	57,3	46,0
Unsure	6,4	6,7	6,8	12,9

p<.05

	Father communicated:			
	A positive impression of feminism %	A negative impression %	No impression %	Never discussed %
How would you define yourself?				
Pro-feminist	74,1	67,7	29,8	43,8
Anti-feminist	0,0	3,2	2,4	1,7
Neither pro- nor anti-feminist	18,5	25,8	61,9	42,5
Unsure	7,4	3,2	6,0	12

p<.05

Table 4. Influence of parent–child dialogue on self-identification as a feminist

Mother communicated:				
Level of adherence to feminist values	A positive impression %	A negative impression %	No impression %	Never discussed %
High	76,9	33,3	36,9	43,6
Moderate	23,1	40,0	51,5	44,1
Low	0,0	26,7	11,7	12,4

p<.05

Father communicated:				
Level of adherence to feminist values	A positive impression %	A negative impression %	No impression %	Never discussed %
High	75,3	71,0	42,9	45,6
Moderate	24,7	19,4	46,4	43,2
Low	0,0	9,7	10,7	11,2

p<.05

Table 5. Influence of Parent–Child Dialogue on Adherence to Feminist Values and Principles.

Taken together, the quantitative findings reveal a coherent pattern in which gender socialization, academic exposure, and family dialogue converge to shape young people's identification with feminist values. The low participation in university courses or seminars on gender-based violence underscores the marginal presence of these topics in higher education, suggesting that formal learning environments still fail to provide systematic engagement with gender equality education. At the same time, the marked gender gap in both feminist self-identification and adherence to feminist values highlights how women are more likely to interiorize and articulate equality-oriented perspectives, whereas men tend to occupy more neutral or uncertain positions—an outcome that reflects enduring gendered dynamics in cultural and affective socialization. Finally, the decisive role of parental communication—particularly that of mothers—emerges as a critical determinant in shaping attitudes toward feminism. Even in cases where parental discourse was negative, many respondents demonstrated a reflective and autonomous engagement with feminist ideals, suggesting that intergenerational dialogue, whether supportive or conflictual, acts as a powerful pedagogical process. Overall, the data confirm that family remains the primary context for value transmission, while universities still represent an underutilized arena for promoting a widespread culture of gender equality and non-violence.

## 7. Conclusions

Gender education, aimed at transmitting values of equality and deconstructing stereotypical visions of gender roles, represents an essential prerequisite for combating violence against women, as also emphasized by the Istanbul Convention (2011). From this perspective, the family and educational institutions—particularly schools and universities—play a central role in the promotion of such values.

The findings of our study highlight that parental narratives regarding feminism, especially when conveyed positively, exert a significant impact on the development of a feminist identity among young people. At the same time, these narratives foster greater adherence to equality values and a critical attitude toward discriminatory gender norms, which underlie male violence against women. These results are consistent with international literature, which has already underscored the importance of primary and secondary socialization sources (media, teachers, peers, and family) in enhancing feminist identification and the ability to recognize and counteract instances of sexism (Zucker, 2004; Leaper, Arias, 2011; Leaper, Brown, 2008).

Regarding the academic context, the data collected do not allow for definitive conclusions on the impact of participation in university courses addressing gender-based violence and feminist issues. Nevertheless, international studies demonstrate that such educational pathways play a significant role in strengthening feminist identification, promoting more sensitive and aware attitudes toward sexism, and encouraging active engagement against gender discrimination (Henderson-King, Stewart, 1999; Eisele, Stake, 2008).

These findings highlight the importance of systematically disseminating knowledge and discursive practices on feminism across different socialization contexts, both public and private. The construction of feminist identities, nurtured through interactions among family, school, university, and civil society, emerges as a key factor in promoting equality and combating sexism and gender-based violence.

## Limitations and Implications

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The sample consisted exclusively of students from a single Italian university, which limits the representativeness and generalizability of the results. Cultural and territorial factors specific to the region may have influenced participants' attitudes toward feminism and gender equality. Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation may have introduced self-selection bias, as individuals already interested in gender issues might have been more inclined to respond. Future research should expand the sample to include multiple universities across diverse geographical and cultural contexts and adopt mixed-method approaches to gain a deeper understanding of intergenerational and cultural dynamics in gender identity formation. Acknowledging these limitations reinforces the need for cautious interpretation while highlighting pathways for future investigation to strengthen the evidence base for gender education interventions.

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