



Gendered Visualities in the University: Space, Language, and Institutional Responsibility

Barbara Poggio¹

1. Introduction: Why Gendered Visualities Matter

When discussing gender inequality, visual dimensions are often treated as secondary – less urgent than legal frameworks, organizational structures, or material resources. Yet feminist research has long shown that visibility is never neutral. What is made visible, how it is represented, and where it is placed in space profoundly affect whose experiences are recognised, whose knowledge is legitimised, and whose presence is taken for granted.

This chapter builds on the premise that gendered visualities should not be understood merely as images or visual artefacts, but as part of broader regimes of visibility that operate through space, language, and institutional practices. Visibility is therefore understood here in an expanded sense, including the textual and spatial infrastructures through which visibility is organised. These regimes shape everyday perceptions and expectations, defining what appears normal, credible, or out of place. In this sense, visibility is inseparable from power: it structures access, belonging, and authority.

¹ Vice-Rector for Equity and Diversity Policies, Università degli Studi di Trento, barbara.poggio@unitn.it

PAGE 170:

*Responsibility, non
responsability. Language
e non languages, image
generated by ChatGPT, 2026.*

Universities provide a particularly relevant context for this discussion. As institutions devoted to knowledge production, universities play a central role in shaping cultural imaginaries, professional identities, and future-oriented visions. At the same time, they tend to present themselves as meritocratic and progressive spaces, often obscuring the ways in which inequalities are reproduced through arrangements that appear neutral or purely technical.

Exploring gendered visualities within universities therefore allows us to interrogate how power operates precisely where it is least expected – or most effectively naturalised. Approaching gendered visualities from an institutional perspective also means shifting attention from individual intentions to collective arrangements. Rather than asking only who discriminates or excludes, this perspective invites us to examine how visibility itself is organised, stabilised, and legitimised through everyday practices, spaces, and languages.

2. Visuality as a Regime of Visibility

In feminist and critical theory, visibility is not understood merely as the act of seeing or the circulation of images, but as a regime of visibility: a structured set of social, cultural, and institutional conditions that determine what can be seen, who can appear, and under what terms (Rose, 2016). This perspective is connected to earlier analyses of power, most notably Foucault's account of disciplinary power as operating through surveillance and normalisation, made effective by the strategic organisation of visibility within modern institutions (Foucault, 1977).

Understanding visibility as a regime of visibility highlights its political character. What is repeatedly foregrounded becomes naturalised, while what remains unseen or unrepresented becomes difficult to articulate or contest. Feminist scholarship has shown that the effects of these regimes of visibility are not only symbolic, but also organisational and material: they are deeply gendered, intersect with other axes of power, and configure both cultural imaginaries and concrete opportunities, resources, and constraints (Ahmed, 2012; Acker, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).

Importantly, regimes of visibility do not operate solely through spectacular images or explicit representations. They are embedded in ordinary spatial layouts, visual conventions, and communicative practices that appear self-evident and unremarkable (Rose, 2016). It is precisely this ordinariness that makes them particularly powerful and resistant to change. Feminist scholars have further emphasised that looking itself is a political practice. bell hooks' analysis of the "oppositional gaze", for instance, foregrounds how power operates through representation and spectatorship, and how dominant visual regimes can be resisted and re-signified from situated positions (Hooks, 1992). Visibility is therefore not only a site of domination, but also a potential site of contestation.

3. Universities as Gendered and Spatial Organizations

The relevance of gendered visualities in academia becomes clearer when universities are conceptualised as gendered organizations. Feminist organizational studies have long argued that inequality is not simply the result of individual bias

or discriminatory behaviour, but is embedded in organizational structures, routines, symbols, and cultures (Acker, 1990; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). From this perspective, gender is not something that organizations merely have, but something they actively do through ongoing practices (Gherardi, 1994; Poggio, 2006).

Seen through this lens, spatial arrangements, visual representations, and institutional language are not peripheral elements. They are part of the everyday infrastructure through which universities define legitimate trajectories, normalise certain academic identities, and marginalise others. Offices, corridors, classrooms, signage, websites, and official documents all contribute to producing a sense of who belongs and who does not. The spatial dimension is particularly important. As Henri Lefebvre (1991) argued, space is socially produced: it reflects and reinforces relations of power. Feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey (1994) have further shown how space is relational and gendered, shaping mobility, access, and safety in uneven ways. Universities, despite their self-image as universal spaces of reason, are no exception. They are inhabited differently by different subjects, and their spatial and visual orders may either reproduce or challenge existing inequalities.

These dynamics are often intensified by the symbolic authority of academic institutions. Universities not only organise space and knowledge, but also embody ideals of neutrality and universality. This makes their gendered and spatial arrangements particularly difficult to question, as they tend to appear functional or technical rather than political.

The following sections examine on two institutional initiatives developed at the University of Trento to illustrate how gendered visualities are produced, contested, and negotiated within academic settings. Rather than offering generalisable conclusions, these situated examples make visible the everyday work through which universities attempt to address gender inequality.

Over the past decade, the University of Trento has invested in a range of policies, initiatives, and communicative actions aimed at promoting gender equity, inclusion, and the prevention of discrimination and violence. The two initiatives discussed below – one focusing on spatial – visual interventions and the other on linguistic and communicative infrastructures – are embedded within this broader institutional trajectory and offer insight into how regimes of visibility can be reshaped through concrete, though necessarily limited, practices.

4. Red Benches: A Spatial–Visual Institutional Intervention

The first example concerns the *Red Benches* project, developed with the active involvement of students from the Department of Civil, Environmental and Mechanical Engineering. The initiative entailed installing red benches in visible university spaces, conceived as symbolic devices to raise awareness of gender-based violence. Accompanied by explanatory plaques, the benches were intended as sites of memory and public interpellation, explicitly acknowledging violence as an issue that also concerns academic institutions. Their placement within university premises reflects a deliberate choice to counter the ten-

dency to locate violence “elsewhere”, outside the boundaries of academic life.

From the perspective of gendered visualities, the intervention operates as a spatial and perceptual interruption. The bench, an ordinary object associated with waiting and informal interaction, is transformed through colour and symbolism into a disruptive artefact. The red surface interrupts habitual perception and introduces a rupture in the routinised flow of movement and attention. The sociological relevance of this intervention lies not only in its message, but in its capacity to temporarily reconfigure the regime of visibility of academic space. The red bench creates a micro-site of public pedagogy, inviting reflection without imposing a single interpretation. It contributes to rendering gender-based violence visible, nameable, and discussable within everyday university environments. At the same time, such symbolic interventions are inherently ambivalent. Their communicative force may fade over time, and the risk of ritualisation is ever present. This ambivalence underscores the importance of embedding visual actions within broader and sustained institutional strategies. While red benches cannot substitute for structural change, they can reshape the conditions under which violence becomes publicly acknowledged and institutionally addressed. Their effectiveness depends on remaining connected to broader institutional measures, so that the symbol does not become a ritualised substitute for action.

5. The campaign #finiscequi: Linguistic and Communicative Infrastructures of Visibility

The second example approaches language as a

core infrastructure of institutional regimes of visibility and focuses on the *#finiscequi* (*#itendshere*) campaign, launched by the University of Trento in November 2022. The initiative addresses harassment, discrimination, and everyday micro-aggressions by isolating seemingly ordinary phrases that may appear neutral or harmless, and re-situating them in ways that reveal mechanisms of exclusion and symbolic violence.

The campaign combined a strong on-campus presence – posters displayed across university premises and the distribution of bookmarks in university libraries – with extensive dissemination through social media and institutional communication channels. Its communicative effectiveness has been recognised beyond the local setting: the initiative received the *EUPRIO Awards* 2023 first prize, and its approach was subsequently adopted by several other Italian universities.

This circulation points to the emergence of shared institutional languages for naming and contesting everyday discrimination in academia. From a visual and discursive standpoint, the campaign relies on a strategy of unmasking: apparently neutral statements are isolated and stylised graphically, then re-situated in ways that make their discriminatory implications visible – especially when addressed to specific bodies and identities. The hashtag *#finiscequi* plays a central performative role, combining a literal meaning of interruption (*it ends here*) with a broader stance against the normalisation of micro-aggressions. In this sense, the campaign resonates with Butler's understanding of language as performative, capable of producing, sustaining, or interrupting social realities (Butler 1997). From its

inception, the campaign explicitly embraced an intersectional lens, drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) conceptualisation of intersecting axes of marginalisation. The scenarios foreground not only single identity markers – such as gender, racialised belonging, religion, disability, or sexual orientation – but also their combinations, thereby making visible forms of discrimination that emerge precisely at their intersections.

A further key aim of the initiative was to reinforce the idea of the university as an inclusive and accountable community that actively rejects harassment and discrimination. In this sense, the initiative also performed an institutional accountability function, seeking to strengthen trust and contribute to the emergence of problematic behaviours. This communicative intervention is part of a broader institutional effort to reshape the university's symbolic and normative environment, including the development of inclusive language guidelines and the progressive integration of gender-aware forms into key institutional documents. Read through the lens of gendered visualities, *#finiscequi* shows how language—through its textual, graphic, and spatial circulation—constitutes an integral part of regimes of visibility. By making taken-for-granted phrases visible and contestable, the campaign intervenes in the boundaries of what is sayable and thinkable, expanding what can be publicly recognised as problematic. As Ahmed (2012) has argued, institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion often coexist with resistance and forms of non-performativity; yet such frictions can also make implicit norms explicit, opening space for contestation and, potentially, change.

6. Ambivalence, Conflict, and the Limits of Symbolic Change

Taken together, these two examples illustrate a broader point: interventions in the domain of visibility and language are necessary but not sufficient. They operate primarily at the symbolic level, and their effects are contingent, uneven, and reversible. There is always a risk that such measures are dismissed as superficial or instrumentalised as evidence of progress without addressing deeper inequalities.

Acknowledging these limits is crucial. At the same time, dismissing symbolic interventions altogether would overlook their role in shaping institutional cultures. Visual and linguistic practices contribute to defining what problems are recognised, what solutions are imaginable, and who is authorised to speak. They are part of the slow, everyday work through which institutions change – or fail to change. From this perspective, ambivalence and conflict should not be seen as obstacles to institutional transformation, but as constitutive elements of it. Change processes are rarely linear. They involve negotiation, contestation, and moments of backlash. What matters is not the elimination of tension, but the capacity of institutions to remain accountable, consistent, and open to critique over time.

7. Implications for Design and Visual Literacy

The implications of these reflections are particularly significant for design-related disciplines, including architecture, urban planning, and visual communication. These fields do not merely represent space; they actively participate in producing it. Through drawings, models,

renderings, and narratives of the future, they shape expectations about bodies, practices, and social relations.

A gender perspective invites designers and educators to interrogate the implicit assumptions embedded in visual representations. Who is the “standard body” presupposed by a project? Whose mobility, safety, and comfort are prioritised? Which forms of life are rendered visible, and which remain absent? Addressing gendered visualities therefore requires developing visual literacy as a critical skill. From this perspective, visual literacy also involves learning to recognise absence: whose bodies, needs, and experiences are not represented in images and plans, and whose futures are implicitly excluded. Making absence visible can be as politically significant as producing new representations, particularly in disciplines oriented towards projecting and shaping collective futures. In educational contexts, this means fostering reflexivity rather than providing prescriptive rules. Comparative analysis of images, attention to absence and silence, and interdisciplinary dialogue can help students recognise how power operates through representation. Such practices do not constrain creativity; on the contrary, they expand the range of possible futures that design can imagine and make visible.

8. Conclusion: Institutional Responsibility and Everyday Practices

Reflecting on gendered visualities in the university ultimately means insisting that space, images, and language are not secondary to justice. They are among the means through which justice becomes possible – or impossible – in

everyday institutional life. Universities, as sites of knowledge production and social reproduction, bear a specific responsibility in this regard. The examples discussed in this chapter do not offer ready-made solutions. Rather, they illustrate how institutions can intervene in regimes of visibility through situated, partial, and revisable practices. Progress in this field is never guaranteed. Advances can be challenged or reversed, particularly in times of political polarisation. This makes vigilance essential – not as moral surveillance, but as an ongoing commitment to reflexivity, responsibility, and the continuous questioning of what is made visible, sayable, and thinkable within academic institutions.

Ultimately, institutional responsibility is enacted not only through policies and regulations, but through the everyday ways in which space is organised, images circulate, and language is used.

References

Acker J. (1990). "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations". *Gender & Society*, 4(2), pp. 139-158.

Ahmed S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Benschop Y., and Doorewaard H. (1998). "Covered by Equality: The Gender Subtext of Organizations". *Organization*, 5(4), 571-600.

Butler J. (1997). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics". *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 139-167.

Crenshaw K. (1991). "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241-1299.

Foucault M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gherardi S. (1994). "The Gender We Think, the Gender We Do in Our Everyday Organizational Lives". *Human Relations*, 47(6), 591-610.

Hooks B. (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.

Lefebvre H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Massey D. (1994). *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Poggio B. (2006). "Outline of a Theory of Gender Practices". *Gender, Work & Organization*, 13(3), 225-246.

Rose G. (2016). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th ed. London: Sage.