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# Gender equality in the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan: the depoliticizing effects of the technocratic Draghi government

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## ABSTRACT

The European Union considers gender equality to be a key issue for post-pandemic recovery. The establishment of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) required member states to present their National Recovery and Resilience Plans and commit themselves to considering gender equality a horizontal objective. As Italy's Recovery and Resilience Plan was, in terms of resources, the largest national plan under the RRF, it had the potential to be a 'turning point' for gender equality in Italy. This article offers a preliminary analysis, based on the categories elaborated by feminist policy research, aimed at assessing whether the National Plan initiated a process of policy and institutional change and if so, in what direction. It is argued that under pressure from the European *vincolo esterno*, the scope of gender equality has been narrowed and the measures aimed at promoting gender equality have become more bureaucratized and aligned with a managerial and technical policy turn, thus promoting a shift towards the depoliticization of gender equality.

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Gender equality policy; National Recovery and Resilience Plan; depoliticization; COVID-19 pandemic

## Introduction

The pandemic outbreak has proven to be a major challenge for gender equality across Europe (European Commission 2021; Bateman and Ross 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has especially affected women and, in a European Parliament (2021) study, has been characterized as a 'she-cession'. In particular, the pandemic and European governments' responses to it have had a greater impact in those economic sectors that employ a majority of female workers; they have increased the amount of unpaid care and housework provided by women, and they have also led to increased violence against women by intimate partners (European Parliament 2022).

Already in the years before the pandemic, Italy was among the European Union (EU) countries with the worst performances in terms of gender equality: according to the 2021 Gender Equality Index,<sup>1</sup> Italy ranked 14th in the EU, and especially in the areas of employment and education Italy's performance was far from being satisfactory. As in the rest of Europe, the COVID-19 crisis in Italy turned into a 'she-cession' (European

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Parliament 2021) as reflected in the fact that the female employment rate decreased dramatically<sup>2</sup> because women were obliged to deal with caring responsibilities while staying at home (Profeta 2020). In addition, national statistical data<sup>3</sup> have shown that in 2020 the number of women subjected to violence by intimate partners increased dramatically.

Given such figures, one would expect gender equality issues to represent a top priority on the political agenda in Italy during and after the pandemic. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Public policy measures adopted by the Government during the pandemic were more concerned with the health crisis than with addressing increasing gender disparities. This deficiency was the result of gender-blind decisions and the lack of well-equipped machinery at central level able to promote, coordinate and monitor gender-equality initiatives (Donà 2020). It was the EU – which considered gender equality as a key issue for post-pandemic recovery – that required member states to include gender-equality issues on their political agendas. In addition, the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was built on the previous experience of the Global Financial Crisis, which led to the introduction of the European Semester in 2011. Both crises had gendered consequences; however, while gender equality concerns and analysis were sidelined in fighting the effects of the economic and fiscal crisis (Kantola and Lombardo 2017a), so far the EU's response to the pandemic has taken issues of gender and gender equality into consideration (O'Dwyer 2022). Following the establishment of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) – the EU's largest financial instrument supporting national recovery – member states were required to present National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). NRRPs were to consider gender equality to be a horizontal objective across policy sectors. As Italy's Recovery and Resilience Plan was, in terms of resources, the largest national plan under the RRF, it had the potential to be a 'turning point' for gender equality in Italy, given the scope and the number of the programmed gender equality measures for the period 2021–2026.

Recognizing that a proper evidence-based assessment of these measures will be possible only after their implementation, in this article I focus on the early stages of policy making, namely policy development and decision. Our empirical analysis of the NRRP and of gender equality policy relies on qualitative research based on 'process tracing' and discourse analysis based on careful scrutiny of official national and EU documents for the period 2020–2022, and of relevant secondary literature. Additional information was drawn from the available statistical data.

The article is divided into four parts. The first briefly describes the Italian gender equality context before and during the pandemic. The second provides an overview of the main stages behind the process of drafting the NRRP during the Conte II government (2019–2021) and its subsequent adoption by the Draghi government (2021–present). The third part presents an overview of the substance of the NRRP from a gender perspective. The fourth part examines the main gender equality measures adopted in 2021 and during the first part of 2022. We undertake a preliminary analysis aimed at assessing whether the NRRP promoted a process of policy and institutional change, and in what direction, based on the categories elaborated by feminist policy research (Mazur 2002; Kantola and Lombardo 2017b). The conclusion presents the main research findings and discusses them in light of the process of the neo-liberalization of gender equality policy. I argue that under pressure from the European *vincolo esterno*, Italy adhered to the EU's

requirements for gender equality by narrowing the scope of this policy sector in order to privilege economic growth. As a result, measures to promote gender equality have become more bureaucratized and aligned with a managerial and technical policy turn, thus promoting a shift towards the depoliticization of gender equality.

### **Gender equality policy in Italy before and during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Women's rights appeared on the Italian political agenda during the 1970s when the feminist movements were on the rise and able to mobilize and elicit policy responses on issues such as divorce and abortion rights; reform of patriarchal family laws, and violence against women (della Porta 2003; Guadagnini 1995). After that period, the main legislation promoting gender equality was adopted in response to EU requirements (i.e. directives) addressing the promotion of gender equality in the workplace (Guadagnini and Donà 2007; Donà 2006). In fact, measures such as positive action for female employability, laws on work-life balance and gender pay equality were introduced under EU pressure. Given that the EU's main concern was with the economic dimension, gender equality measures were re-framed as neoliberal tools aimed at achieving better and fairer economic development in Europe (Kantola 2010; Stratigaki 2004). Moreover, the EU's adoption of a gender mainstreaming strategy from 1997 meant the beginning of a paradigm shift from the politicization to the managerialization or bureaucratization of gender equality (Verloo 2001). As a number of scholars have noted, over the last two decades this shift has affected the functioning of the gender equality machinery such that it has brought a move from *state feminism* to *market feminism* (Kantola and Squires 2012). This move has not only changed the relationship between public agencies and the women's movement, but it has also given primacy to those feminist claims that have been complicit with a market agenda.

As our analysis will show, encouraged by the pandemic and by technocratic government, this move has recently happened in Italy too. Before that, especially during the period of the so-called Second Republic (1994–2018), gender issues were a political battleground between the centre-right and left-wing coalitions. Conservative and progressive forces confronted one another on issues such as sexuality, abortion, gender education, LGBT+ people's rights, recognition of same-sex partnerships, and opposition to homophobia and transphobia (Donà 2021a). For example, while left-wing governments (1996–2001; 2006–08) promoted policies based on the discourse of equality and human rights – and hence included – beyond women – other discriminated minority groups such as migrants, ethnic minorities, disabled people, LGBT people – centre-right governments (2001–2006; 2008–2011) maintained a more conservative and traditional agenda – in line with the stances of the Vatican – centred on the protection of women as victims and on support for the traditional family composed of a man and a woman (Donà 2009). The politicization of gender issues reached a height during the Conte I government (2018–2019) when the Lega (League) acquired a position of power and brought about a process of backsliding on gender equality and LGBT rights by dismantling and de-funding equality programmes and institutions (Donà 2021b).

Therefore, as gender equality was such a divisive political issue, none of the measures adopted by the Conte II government (2019–2021) – sustained mainly by the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement) and the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) –

before and during the pandemic, were enough to tackle the dramatic situation of Italian women.<sup>4</sup> As data and studies evidenced (Del Boca, Mencarini, and Pasqua 2012) before the pandemic, women worked less than men, as Italy was among the countries with the lowest rates of female employment. Women generally earned less than men because they tended to be segregated in low skilled, atypical or undervalued jobs. The majority of women experienced discrimination and barriers to achieving positions of power because of sexism and sexist stereotypes in the workplace. Women were obliged to abandon the labour market after having a child and carried the major burden of daily family care responsibilities due to the lack of adequate child-care facilities and work-life balance measures. They were more likely to be exposed to gender-based violence given the lack of adequate prevention measures. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already existing and pronounced gender inequalities, making women's conditions of employment even worse and affecting women's future careers in the long run (Meraviglia and Dudka 2021).

The Conte II government's response to the pandemic did not address the differential socioeconomic impacts of the crisis on women and men, and did not alleviate the very unequal short-term effects (Poggio 2020). Moreover, at first the national task forces set up to tackle the pandemic placed none or a very small number of women in decision-making positions or as experts in key roles. Such gender gaps in decision-making increased the likelihood of women's needs being left out of the solutions to address the pandemic. Hence, they maintained the unequal power structures and potentially weakened COVID-19 responses, since health and health problems vary by gender. To combat the invisibility of women's issues on the political agenda, a constellation of women's organizations mobilized to raise awareness of the worsening of conditions facing women and to demand gender-sensitive policy responses from the Government. To cite a remarkable case, after Draghi formed his technocratic government in February 2021, more than 40 associations, together with academics, trade unions, experts, female managers and other organizations presented a manifesto entitled, '*Donne per la salvezza-Half of it*',<sup>5</sup> in which the multiple dimensions of gender inequality were addressed with a variety of policy measures across policy sectors (ranging from employment to education; from political representation to family policies). The manifesto also demanded the creation of an independent Authority against gender discrimination to replace the scattered structures of the existing gender equality machinery. The manifesto's aim was to ensure that the drafting of the NRRP took place in a more gender sensitive way. However, as mentioned by one of the leading experts, Linda Laura Sabbadini, none of the proposals was seriously taken into consideration,<sup>6</sup> and in the end the NRRP resulted in a highly centralized government-driven process, leaving aside both Parliament and non-governmental organizations (Moschella and Verzichelli 2021).

### **The launch of NextGenerationEU and the troubled road towards the adoption of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan**

To mitigate the socio economic impact of the pandemic, during the summer of 2020 the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council agreed on *NextGenerationEU*, Europe's recovery plan of €750 billion to rebuild a greener, more digital and more resilient Europe. This unprecedented increase in budgetary resources

strengthened the EU's ability to provide the help needed in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, and obliged member states to explain how their planned reforms and investments, that would be funded via the RRF, would contribute to mainstreaming gender equality. In fact, one of the core EU requirements was that member states mainstream gender in the design and implementation of their emergency and recovery policy responses. This meant that gender skills and expertise were to be promoted among those responsible for crisis management and that national gender equality bodies had to work with the national structures responsible for COVID-19 recovery efforts to ensure that gender-mainstreaming tools, such as gender impact assessments and gender budgeting, were used throughout the recovery. Specifically, the European Commission required that national plans included measures with a focus on gender equality,<sup>7</sup> such as reforms to reduce the gender pay gap; to combat inequality between women and men on the workplace; to support the upskilling of women, and to encourage flexible working arrangements. As regards investments, the RRF would help member states to improve social and early childcare infrastructures; introduce gender-equality certificates for companies; deliver training to boost women's entrepreneurial skills; establish a support line for women in rural and urban areas, and better regulate professions (domestic work, social care etc.) traditionally taken up by women. Regulation 2021/241 stated clearly that gender equality and equal opportunities for all, and the mainstreaming of those objectives, should be taken into account and promoted throughout the preparation and implementation of recovery and resilience plans. The Commission would monitor progress on the commitments made by the member states and disbursements from the RRF were made conditional upon the fulfilment of legally binding milestones and targets. For this purpose, in November 2021 the Commission adopted rules setting out common indicators on which member states have to report twice a year.<sup>8</sup> A number of these indicators require member states to collect data disaggregated by gender. In sum, it appears quite evident that given the mandatory nature of the European regulations, EU-driven reforms and investments are unavoidable for those countries, such as Italy, dependant on receiving recovery funding.

Before the EU recovery fund was established, Italy tried to define a political agenda on its own. To do so, the Conte II government decided to establish high-level task forces charged with developing long-term reform plans for domestic recovery. Specifically, there were two plans on the table in June 2020. First, there was the plan developed by the all-women task force established by the Minister for Equal Opportunities, Elena Bonetti (Presidenza Del Consiglio, Dipartimento Pari Opportunita' 2020). The document issued in May 2020 was entitled 'Women for a new Renaissance' (*Donne per un nuovo Rinascimento*). It identified a series of gender-equality goals such as improving the role of girls and women in areas of research and education; promoting female labour-force participation and economic leadership; adopting stringent gender measures in the workplace and reinforcing education in STEM subjects for women and girls. Second, in June 2020 there was the so-called Colao Plan, after the entrepreneur Vittorio Colao who was head of the task force concerning economic and social measures for Italy 2020–2022. The Colao Plan envisaged three main policy priorities, namely: digitalization and innovation; the green revolution, and gender equality and inclusion. Concerning gender equality, the Colao Plan recommended a series of measures dealing with combatting gender stereotypes in education;



the support of female employment; the strengthening of child-care facilities and other work-life balance measures, and a set of policy measures to combat violence against women (Comitato di Esperti In Materia Economica e Sociale 2020, p. 42). Both plans were meant to be used as instruments of technical advice for the Conte II government in developing policy initiatives for the period 2020–2022.

Both plans were abandoned when the EU recovery programme was adopted and it emerged that Italy would be the main beneficiary. Developing the NRRP by the EU's stringent deadline was a matter of urgency. The NRRP was originally drafted by Prime Minister Conte himself and a first version appeared in January 2021 (PNRR Conte 2021). As it was not a document that was endorsed by all of the governing parties, it gave rise to internal conflict and the start of a political crisis that was resolved by the intervention of the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella. Hence, in February 2021 Conte was replaced by the Draghi technocratic government. This, in the name of national unity, approved a second version of the NRRP in April 2021 (PNRR Draghi 2021), and the following month it was presented to the European Commission. The differences between Conte's and Draghi's NRRPs were minimal in terms of policy goals and the allocation of financial resources across missions and policy priorities – given the EU's requirements. What was peculiar was that Draghi's NRRP gave more emphasis to two aspects. These were what are called 'structural reforms' (*ristrutturazioni di sistema*) in sectors such as justice, administration and competition, defined as necessary conditions for reaching the NRRP's goals; and the system of governance. In addition, Draghi's NRRP established a centralized system of political control and monitoring supervised by the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Economy and Finance (Guidi and Moschella 2021).

During the NRRP development and adoption stages, Parliament played a marginal role and in the end the legislative body merely ratified the Government's plan in the summer of 2021 (Cavatorto, De Giorgi, and Piccolino 2021). On 22 June 2021, the European Commission gave its green light to the plan. The plan was in turn adopted by the Council on 13 July 2021 opening the door to its implementation and financing. One month later, Bonetti adopted the National strategy for gender equality (NSGE) 2021–2026<sup>9</sup> (Presidenza del Consiglio, Dipartimento Pari Opportunità 2021) which addressed five priority areas already mentioned in the NRRP and reflecting the domains of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) index: work, money, knowledge, time and power. Overall, the entire policy process was a top-down exercise directed by the Government with little involvement of the regions or stakeholders (Bitonti et al. 2021; Profeti and Baldi 2021). The NSGE document itself – despite mentioning the contributions to its development of the regions, state administrations, the social partners and gender-equality associations – failed to provide detailed information about the array of organizations consulted or about their mode of participation. Hence, analysis of the NRRP process from a gender-sensitive perspective evidences the following elements: first, a pronounced process of centralization of decision-making power in the hands of the Prime Minister, Draghi, in the context of a national unity government which relied on the international credibility of the former president of the European Central Bank in dialogue with the EU institutions. Second, the EU had a guiding role in selecting key policy sectors to be taken into account in the elaboration and implementation of the Italian NRRP. Third, there was a bureaucratization of gender equality measures, transformed into depoliticized technical matters as part of

**Table 1.** Gender equality measures across NRRP missions.

Missions	Equality policy measures
M1: PA digitalization, culture & tourism M1C1 M1C3	Introduction of new recruitment measures in the public administration to ensure gender balance at the top level; adoption of smart working as a work-family reconciliation measure. Digital infrastructure investment should have a positive impact on sectors that employ mainly female workers (tourism, cultural activities, restoration).
M4: Education and research M4C1 M4C2	Adoption of a child-care facility plan to enhance support services for parents, specifically to encourage women's participation in the labour market and support them in reconciling family and professional life. Investment to reduce gender disparities in STEM subjects.
M5: Inclusion and cohesion M5C1 M5C2	Adoption of a specific fund to support female entrepreneurship ( <i>Fondo Impresa Femminile</i> ), to increase the level of participation of women in the labour market and, in particular, to sustain women's participation in business activities. Introduction of a national certification system for female friendly enterprises (in terms of salaries, working conditions, recruitment and career advancement). Other measures (including social housing and for disabled people) should improve conditions for women undertaking caring activities.
M6 Health M6C1	Increasing the provision of local health and domestic services.

Source: Author's elaboration.

the Government's strategic prioritizing in response to the conditions for the receipt of funding laid down by the EU.

### The gender measures of the plan

Following the EU regulations, gender equality was included as one of the three cross-cutting missions of the National Plan, alongside those dealing with generational and regional disparities. The plan describes how the measures are expected to contribute to overcoming the national challenges identified in terms of gender equality. The main frame which drives the definition of gender equality refers to the economic discourse of promoting female participation in the labour market. In narrowing the scope of equality, the NRRP's gender equality measures include the promotion of women's enterprises and the adoption of a gender-equality certification system for each economic sector (Table 1). To support female employment, the plan aims at investing in nurseries, preschool and early childhood education and care services, and includes tailored measures in the areas of entrepreneurship and skills development (Ragioneria generale dello Stato e Dipartimento del Tesoro del Ministero dell'economia e delle finanze 2021). To gear the implementation of the plan to achievement of its equality objectives, the Italian authorities have introduced anticipating mechanisms, such as equality-driven criteria in calls for tenders, and have made the funding of projects conditional on the recruitment of young people and women.

In terms of NRRP governance, responsibility for implementation of the Italian plan rests with the Government for the duration of the Recovery and Resilience Fund. Law Decree 77/2021<sup>10</sup> has established six new bodies. Of these, the 'Control Room' (*Camera di Regia*), elaborates guidelines and is the main body responsible for monitoring. The Permanent committee for economic, social and territorial partnership, is a consulting body. The Technical secretariat coordinates dialogue with the permanent committee. The Unit for the rationalization and improvement of regulation identifies obstacles to the



correct implementation of the reforms and investments envisaged by the plan and develops proposals to overcome the dysfunctions detected. The Central service for the NRRP is responsible for managing the NGEU revolving fund and the resulting financial flows. It is also involved in monitoring the plan. Finally, the Audit office of the NRRP verifies the quality and completeness of the monitoring data as well as enhancing and developing transparency and participation initiatives.

### The gender-equality legislative measures in 2021 and early 2022

From the NRRP's approval in the summer of 2020, to April 2022, a series of measures was adopted as part of the NRRP commitments (Sottosegretario Alla Presidenza Del Consiglio Dei Ministri E Del Ministro Dell'Economia E Delle Finanze 2021; Presidenza del Consiglio 2021). Firstly, law 162/2021, which came into force on 5 November 2021, reformed the Equal Opportunities Code (Law Decree 198/2006). It stipulated that private and public firms with more than 50 employees (instead of 100) were required to submit a biannual report on the working conditions of men and women with special attention to the issue of gender pay equality.<sup>11</sup> The law also introduced gender equality certification stipulating that compliant firms would benefit from tax relief (*sgravio contributivo*). The law represented a first step towards the establishment of a bonus system for 'female friendly firms', hence promoting the discourse that investing in women is an economically sound proposition. Moreover, the law established a new committee for gender certification consisting of representatives of ministers, trade unions, experts and gender-equality counsellors. On 4 April 2022, the Ministers of Labour and Equal Opportunities signed the required implementing decree,<sup>12</sup> which specified the administrative procedures to be followed by firms when submitting their biannual report (required by 30 September 2022). Secondly, on 30 September 2021, by decree of the Minister for Economic Development, the fund (amounting to €200 million) to support female entrepreneurship (*Fondo Impresa Femminile*) was established. The call for bids was opened in May 2022<sup>13</sup> and the new advisory body, the *Comitato Impresa Donna*, was in the meantime activated within the Ministry for Economic Development. Thirdly, on 2 December 2021, the Minister for Education launched a special fund (amounting to €3 billion) to support municipalities in building child-care facilities for the 0–6 age group,<sup>14</sup> with the aim of reaching a participation rate of 33% by 2026 (in 2019 it was 26.9%). The original deadline of 28 February 2022 was later postponed to 30 March 2022 in view of the small number of applications presented by local authorities,<sup>15</sup> especially in southern Italy. And again, given the lack of applications, the deadline for southern regions' municipalities was postponed to 31 May 2022. In light of this further postponement, it is quite clear that the availability of funding is not on its own a sufficient condition for ensuring the diffusion of child-care facilities as essential services to be guaranteed across Italy. According to the NRRP, the three gender equality measures mentioned above were among the milestones to be reached by the end of 2021 and Italy reached them in a timely manner with specific legislative measures.<sup>16</sup> However, at this stage it is too early to evaluate them in terms of implementation and goals achieved.

Concerning the gender equality machinery, Bonetti decided by decree to establish two new institutions. The National Observatory for the mainstreaming of gender equality (*Osservatorio nazionale per l'integrazione delle politiche per la parità di genere*) began

work on March 2022 together with the *Cabina di regia interistituzionale sulla parità di genere*, a body composed of political representatives of all levels of government (from municipalities to central administrations). The political activities of the *Cabina di regia* will be supported by the technical assistance of the *Osservatorio* in order to operationalize and implement the NSGE 2021–26. So far, there are no indications as to whether these new bodies will be integrated into the existing gender equality structures of the Department for Equal Opportunities, or whether feminist organizations and associations will be consulted and involved in the policy-making process.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the process of elaboration and adoption of the Italian NRRP and has examined how gender equality became one of the key dimensions of the economic and social recovery of EU member states, in line with the prescriptions of the European Commission's regulation on the EU Recovery and Resilience Fund.

The Italian NRRP was drafted during a period of political crisis which led to change of government, namely a transition from the yellow-red coalition led by Conte (2020– 2021) to the national unity government led by Draghi (February 2021- present). The peculiar political context – the formation of a technocratic government supported by all the parliamentary parties except Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers, of Italy, FdI) and other minor groups – surely had an impact on the elaboration and content of the NRRP. According to Garzia and Karremans (2021), the Draghi government belongs to the category of 'technocratic-led partisan governments', given that it consisted of eight technocratic and fifteen partisan ministers. However, the key portfolios – such as the Economy and Finance, Justice, and the Green Transition, were all assigned to non-partisan technical experts. The technocratic ministries are responsible for important areas of decision-making – namely, those structural reforms planned as milestones in the NRRP. Hence, in the Draghi cabinet policy-steering capacity seems to be skewed towards the technical experts, who are in charge of the more strategic branches of government. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the major features of the Draghi government have been the centralization of power in the hands of the Prime Minister, and the marginalization of Parliament, first during the NRRP's development and, later, during the phases of its adoption. In this context, Draghi included in the NRRP a series of structural reforms conceived as preliminary conditions for the Italian recovery, among which reform of the judicial system, of the public administration, and of the fiscal system. Concerning the monitoring of the NRRP, a new system of governance was built outside the usual bureaucratic machinery. Overall, the Draghi technocratic government made possible the adoption of policy initiatives that were electorally problematic for the political parties. In a nutshell, the Draghi government's first year in office had the effect of depoliticizing policymaking, as analysis of NRRP has evidenced. Depoliticization refers to a process by which core decisions are taken away from elected politicians, hence insulated from political bargaining (Flanders and Wood 2014). Depoliticization might be associated with the neutralization of policy making, based on a shift towards the managerialization of policy issues (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2021).

This process of depoliticization also affected the gender-equality field. The gender-equality measures included in the NRRP were adopted in line with EU requirements. As

such, they did not provoke political debate, given that their main goal was supporting an increase in female employment and stimulating economic growth. As a result, over the last two years gender equality has shifted from being a contested political issue to being a strategic government goal to be achieved as part of the NRRP's milestones and targets. Hence, gender equality has been reframed in order to serve the Government's economic agenda and in this way it has become normalized. The meaning and priority given to gender equality by the Draghi government resonate with the frames of economic growth and competitiveness, in line with the EU's market-oriented agenda, rather than with those of social justice.

In addition, some of the NRRP gender equality measures are neither innovative nor new for Italy. For example, special funding for female entrepreneurship was for the first time adopted in 1992 (law 215/1992). The proposal for a national plan for child-care facilities dated back to the Prodi government of 1996–98, but was later abandoned. A gender mainstreaming strategy was adopted by the centre-left government in 1997 and then abandoned by the following centre-right government. Our analysis has evidenced that the political contentiousness of gender-equality issues was suspended in the context of the Draghi government. This means that previously contested policy measures are now decided with the support (or at least without the contestation) of political actors.

What is new though is the increasing use of managerial instruments to promote gender equality, and the resulting bureaucratization of gender equality policy. The depoliticizing effects of technocratic government have meant the neutralization of gender equality policy, namely the sliding of gender power relations and the disappearance of political interests, ideologies and conflicts. This aspect is quite evident in light of the new gender-equality machinery, which was established without the involvement of women's organizations. The newly created bodies governing the NRRP's equality measures might well represent the first step towards market feminism, given their complicity with the neoliberal agenda.

The strong imperative of respecting the commitments to the EU in the NRRP in order to receive recovery funding was the main reason behind the shift of gender equality from a political or ideological issue to a technical matter. In this shift, the role of language and issue framing was also important. Thus, as emerged from the Government documents, the scope of gender equality narrowed to the economic field – leaving aside issues such as LGBT+ rights, violence against women and reproductive rights – and in this way the opposition of conservative forces promoting anti-equality policies was neutralized. Nevertheless, the narrowing of the scope of gender equality policy, and the shift towards bureaucratization, could be a temporary phase associated with the duration in office of the technocratic government. Alternatively, it could be maintained in the future only for those measures addressing the issue of low female employment. Radical-right parties such as the League and FdI have maintained their conservative political agendas, appealing to traditional and Christian values and keeping defence of the traditional family at the core of their programmatic manifestos. Hence, in the event of a right-wing victory at the next general election, the end of the technocratic government might also mark the end of the depoliticization of gender equality. Time will tell whether the return of party politics will bring the return of political debate and contestation over the meaning of gender equality.

## Notes

1. European Institute for Gender Equality- Gender Equality Index 2021 <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/country/IT> (last accessed 11 April 2022).
2. ISTAT March 2021, BES Report, Il benessere equo e sostenibile in Italia, <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2021/03/3.pdf>.
3. ISTAT November 2021, <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/263847>.
4. For example, in December 2020 the Conte II government adopted a decree introducing a special fund for the economic independence of female victims of violence. The so-called *reddito di libertà* (financial freedom income) – which was implemented one year later, in November 2021 – is meant to be a form of financial assistance guaranteeing that victims can afford housing and childcare. However, given the small size of the allowance (€400 per month) and its short duration (12 months), it seems a symbolic measure rather than an effective instrument for combatting the financial dependence of women on their aggressors.
5. [https://www.halfokit.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/manifesto\\_completo.pdf](https://www.halfokit.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/manifesto_completo.pdf) (last accessed 13 April 2022).
6. <https://www.economymagazine.it/donne-e-lavoro-serve-unauthority-contro-le-discriminazioni-di-genere/> (1 January 2022); see also *Focus Repubblica*, 30 April 2021 <https://video.repubblica.it/focus/focus-pnrr-non-e-una-ripresa-per-donne/386306/387032?ref=RHTP-BS-I278611553-P16-S2-T1>.
7. Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility.
8. Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2021/2106 of 28 September 2021 on supplementing Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility by setting out the common indicators and the detailed elements of the recovery and resilience scoreboard, and its Annex, OJ 2021 L 429/83.
9. For a detailed account of the document see P. Villa (2021); Redazione In Genere, "Strategia nazionale di genere, un'analisi punto per punto", 27 September 2021 <https://www.ingenere.it/articoli/strategia-nazionale-di-genere-analisi-punto-punto>; M.G. Rossilli (2022); *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/basta-gli-incentivi-tempo-parita-diventera-strutturale-AEgx2eh>.
10. See the text here: <https://temi.camera.it/leg18/provvedimento/d-l-77-2021-governance-del-pnrr-e-semplificazioni.html>.
11. For a review see <https://www.labourlawcommunity.org/dialoghi/la-legge-per-la-parita-retributiva-un-passo-avanti-verso-la-parita-di-genere/>.
12. <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/notizie/pagine/firmato-decreto-per-redazione-del-rapporto-biennale-su-situazione-del-personale-maschile-e-femminile.aspx/>.
13. See the ministry website: <https://www.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/incentivi/impresa/fondo-a-sostegno-impresa-femminile>.
14. <https://pnrr.istruzione.it/avviso/asili/>.
15. See the comments: [https://www.corriere.it/scuola/primaria/22\\_marzo\\_03/pnrr-fondi-gli-asili-nido-troppe-poche-domande-rischio-miliardo-mezzo-euro-ae68b5d6-9ad8-11ec-9441-3731719c94e7.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/scuola/primaria/22_marzo_03/pnrr-fondi-gli-asili-nido-troppe-poche-domande-rischio-miliardo-mezzo-euro-ae68b5d6-9ad8-11ec-9441-3731719c94e7.shtml); <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2022/03/14/perche-i-comuni-disertano-il-bando-del-pnrr-sugli-asili-nido/162175/>.
16. See, 'Dossier di monitoraggio dell'attuazione del PNRR. I traguardi e gli obiettivi da conseguire entro dicembre 2021', Servizio Studi della Camera, available here: [http://documenti.camera.it/leg18/dossier/pdf/DFP28c.pdf?\\_1642674230424](http://documenti.camera.it/leg18/dossier/pdf/DFP28c.pdf?_1642674230424). The web site specifically devoted to the NRRP was also very useful: <https://temi.camera.it/leg18/pnrr.html>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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