



italian political science

THE PROFESSIONAL REVIEW OF THE ITALIAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

ISSN 2420-8434

(<https://italianpoliticalscience.com/>)

Networking and Partnership as Strategic Practices for Gender Studies in Academia: the Case of the University of Trento

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Gender as a concept entered the Italian political debate in the late 1970s. As in many other European countries and the United States, theoretical reflections on gender first emerged outside academia and were closely linked to political activism by women on issues such as abortion and divorce. The debate then moved from women's studies to gender studies. It thus **no longer focused solely on women and women's rights, but also encompassed broader aspects of gender relations and the intersection between gender and other identity categories such as race, ethnicity and sexual identity**. Only in the late 1980s did gender studies begin their fight to become a discipline fully acknowledged by Italian academic institutions.

As Saraceno (2010) states, there was a debate among women feminist academics on how better to achieve institutionalization within academia: by introducing specific women and gender studies curricula, or by attempting to mainstream women and gender perspective in existing courses and curricula. Given the institutional rigidity of the Italian university system, feminist scholars opted for a mainstream solution. They introduced a focus on women, and later on gender, in their regular teaching subjects. They offered students seminars, initiatives, and events in addition to normal curricula, and eventually established gender research centers. The first such center opened in 1991 at the University of Torino. This was the CIRSDE (Women and Gender Studies Interdisciplinary Centre) whose founders came from many academic fields: both humanities like sociology, psychology, history, political science, literature, economics, foreign languages, and "hard" sciences like biology, law, medicine, and chemistry. Thereafter, several research centers and programs were founded, and today there are around 20 research centers at universities across Italy.

The Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Trento

The Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies (CSG) of the University of Trento belongs to this tradition. On the one hand, it aims to transform social reality and promote equal rights for women and girls; on the other, it works to develop critical and interdisciplinary theoretical approaches to gender relations. CSG was formally established in 2008 by a group of scholars and researchers from different faculties and departments. Its aim was to give formal recognition to an existing active collaboration among gender scholars in multiple fields. Cooperation among scholars in these fields had been informally in existence for several years, and their collaboration was strengthened by the joint effort to establish an interdisciplinary specialist program,

“Gender Policies in the Labour Market”. This collaboration was based from the outset on **the conviction that studying gender needs a composite approach, the adoption of multiple perspectives, and the ability to consider the complexity of cultural, social, and structural factors that come into play in the social construction of gender**. Of necessity, therefore, gender studies must draw on varied knowledge bases—sociological, legal, economic, political, psychological, narrative, and philosophical—in an interdisciplinary perspective.

A second cornerstone of CSG is recognition of the importance of collaboration between university and community. For this reason, the Centre is open to external members, including individuals as well as public and private institutions concerned in any way with gender issues. The ultimate goal of the Centre is, in fact, to create a multidisciplinary laboratory in which interaction between the university and society can become a stimulus for reflection, debate, and social change.

In order to achieve its goals, CSG undertakes initiatives in three realms: teaching and training, conferences and seminars, and research and action.

The first set of activities is aimed at promoting a gender-sensitive culture through graduate and postgraduate programs and courses, as well as continuing education on different issues (in particular gender policies in the labour market, gender and politics, gender and education, gender and law, gender and interculture).

A second group of activities includes conferences and seminars on a variety of topics usually connected with key issues in the Italian debate on gender and feminism and addressed both to students and a wider audience. Moreover, every two years the CSG organizes a national conference to deal with a specific issue, always from a gender perspective (topics that have been addressed: Gender and Precariousness; Gender and Power; Gender, Knowledge and Science).

The third area is that of research and action. We are involved in research projects at national and international level, focused on such diverse issues as gender policies within organizations, gender pay gap, gender implications of precariousness, fatherhood, gender and education.

Several of the activities carried out have been based on interdisciplinary collaborations with other national and international scholars and research centers.

The GARCIA project

Currently the Centre is engaged in a European Project, GARCIA (Gendering the Academy and Research: combating Career Instability and Asymmetries)¹ concerned with the implementation of actions in European universities and research centers to promote a gender culture and combat gender stereotypes and discriminations. Particular attention is paid to the early stages of academic and scientific careers: the main targets are researchers with non-tenured positions and people who have left the university after their PhD or a temporary position (Murgia, Poggio 2015).

To this end, we have constructed a partnership consisting of seven European universities² and research centers representing different EU countries. By involving both STEM and SSH disciplines, the aim of transforming academia and research into a more gender equal environment may be extended to all disciplines by adopting the best systemic organizational approaches. Macro, meso, and micro level analyses are followed through the implementation of Gender Action Plans, which are mainly directed to: gender regimes; gender equality in management and decision-making; awareness raising on gendered practices; everyday working conditions; recruitment and selection processes; and the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon.

The role of coordinator of the GARCIA project has enabled us to become part of a network of “sister projects” (i.e., the structural change projects funded under the FP7 from 2010 to 2013) engaged in encouraging and supporting mutual learning dynamics, the purpose being to integrate the efforts that each project is making toward gender equality in scientific organizations. Moreover, in order to disseminate the results of our project, we have organized several streams in different national and international conferences and scientific networks (for example, the Gender Summit, Gender Work and Organization, the International Sociological Association,

the European Group for Organizational Studies, and the Society for Advancement of Socio-Economics). This has created a solid international network.

Building partnerships and networking

In the last part of this short contribution I would like to focus specifically on the issue of partnership building and networking, because they are critical dimensions for the survival and development of gender studies in academia, and in particular for research centers working on these topics.

There are various reasons for this importance. First of all, I must mention the interdisciplinary vocation of many of these centers, which makes it vital for them to have and to create opportunities to interact and to relate with other scholars, other disciplines, other perspectives.

Another important point is that these centers do not usually have a very easy life within universities, where gender issues are not considered a priority, and sometimes are even dismissed as “non-scientific”. It is therefore important for gender issues to gain legitimacy through relationships with other universities and similar organizations, as well as with other institutions, both public and private. In the case of our center, being chosen as an honorary member of the US Sociologists for Women in Society network or coordinating an important international project are examples of ways to obtain internal recognition within the university.

Moreover, networking can be useful in order to act as pressure groups linked through meta-organizations, such as the gender-dedicated sections of disciplinary associations (for instance, the Gender Studies section of the Italian Sociological Association) or the European network of women scientists (EPWS) (Antonucci 2013), and therefore able to lobby national and supranational bodies.

Networking is also necessary to establish close relations with local stakeholders, in our case, the provincial ministry for equal opportunities and equality bodies, trade unions, and other public institutions. **Networking at the local level makes it possible on the one hand to obtain additional authority, and on the other, to affect local policies, experimenting with innovative measures.** In our case this has happened through both innovative work-life balance initiatives in public organizations and gender-sensitive education in schools.

Finally, it is also important to build and consolidate a network within the university. In our case this has been done at institutional level by establishing contacts with all representative groups and categories of the university and identifying delegates within each department. The outcome is a group of motivated and proactive people who can collect in a widespread manner the needs and requirements of individual departments and disseminate the actions and policies enabled.

Networking is certainly a very fatiguing and delicate work. It requires a constant activity of relationship and connection; but at the same time it is a necessary condition for legitimizing and supporting change.

Notes

¹ Online at: <http://garciaproject.eu/> (<http://garciaproject.eu/>).

² University of Trento (Italy); University of Louvain (Belgium); Radboud University (the Netherlands); University of Iceland; University of Lausanne (Switzerland); ZRCASU Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts (Slovenia); and Joanneum Research (Austria).

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