

Women and men in scientific careers: new scenarios, old asymmetries

Introduction

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Abstract: *Despite the remarkable growth of women participation in the higher education system, one can observe the persistence of significant gender imbalances in the scientific careers, both in horizontal and vertical way, or even the emergence of new asymmetries due to the current trends in work and management patterns as well as to the processes of redefinition ongoing within different scientific fields. The complexity and articulation of the phenomenon require the adoption of multiple analytical tools and interpretations, which allow to account for both the changes taking place, and of the plurality of factors at play.*

This special issue intends to show and discuss some facets of the phenomena in the Italian context, considering the transition from education to work, women's trajectories and strategies in some disciplinary fields, the experiences of early-career researchers, and the pay gap phenomenon among physicians. These issues will be investigated using different research tools and interpretative lens.

In recent decades in Italy, as in many other parts of the world, there have occurred significant changes in the participation of women and men in different levels of the educational system. In particular, there has been a process of progressive feminization of the student population which has also characterized tertiary education (Eurostat 2017, Giancola and Fornari 2009, UNESCO 2012). However, data and analyses evidence the

persistence of significant gender disparities with respect to the different disciplinary areas, as well as marked imbalances in scientific careers (Barone 2011, European Commission 2016, OECD 2016). Women continue to be more represented in the social sciences and humanities, while they are less present in STEM¹ disciplines. Moreover, even when women enter in scientific fields, new disciplinary boundaries emerge: if biology and health fields undergo a process of progressive feminization, engineering and physics maintain a clear male hegemony (Mann and Di Prete 2013). At the same time women entering in IT sector tend to be mainly concentrated in the more applicative fields, as information system, than in computer science (Ahuja 2002) and even within an increasing feminized discipline as medicine, there remain male-dominated specialties as surgery (Boulis and Jacobs 2008). More generally the presence of women appears to be still limited in senior positions, regardless of the subject area.

Horizontal and vertical segregation seem to reinforce each other, creating different career entry opportunities for women. This situation has been described using various metaphors: while the images of «scissor trends» and «leaky pipeline» (European Commission 2000) illustrate the divergence of pathways according to gender, and the progressive reduction in the number of women along the trajectory of scientific careers, the metaphors of the «Matthew effect» and the «Matilda effect»² are used to emphasise the systematic undervaluation or denial of the contribution of women to science and the enactment of gendering practices that produce different standards for women and men in science.

To account for this phenomenon, developed over the years have been a number of interpretations which have gradually shifted the focus from innate characteristics and individual choices to structural, cultural and organizational dimensions.

The most traditional explanations of the gender gap in academia stressed the role of inborn cognitive sex differences, as in the case of the biological factors that allegedly determine different mathematical and spatial performances (for a review, see Maccoby and Jacklin 1974). These explanations today appear less convincing given, on one hand,

¹ Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics.

² The expression «Matthew effect» refers to the phenomenon – cited in the gospel of St. Matthew – whereby «the rich get richer and the poor get poorer» in accumulated advantages. The metaphor was used by Robert Merton (1968) to describe how well-known scientists often receive more credit than less well-known ones, even if their work is similar. The «Matilda effect» – referred to the U.S. feminist Matilda J. Gage – was used by Margaret Rossiter (1993) to talk about the systematic repression and denial of women's contributions to scientific research.

of the progressive narrowing of the performance gap, which in some countries – like the Scandinavian ones – has disappeared (European Commission 2012), and on the other, the evidence that smaller gaps in scientific performance are correlated with integrated educational systems and more equal societies (Guiso *et al.* 2009). Other approaches focused on the individual level emphasising some weaknesses attributed to women, as the lack of self-esteem, ambition, career-planning or self-marketing abilities. These works have been criticised for reflecting an essentialist view and for not taking account of the context in which those choices are made (O'Connor 2014).

A different perspective is taken by the studies which emphasise the importance of structural factors. These contributions consider the education system, the labour market, the care and welfare regimes, and the presence of developed gender equality policies. They show how women and men are not subject to the same structural and regulatory constraints or have the same opportunities in different national contexts (Musselin 2005, Van Langen, Bosker and Dekkers 2006). The educational systems, in fact, vary significantly depending on countries, generating differences with respect to both the participation of women and men in the various disciplinary sectors and their performances (Eurydice 2011). The labour market structure, the welfare regimes, and the role attributed to academic work in the socioeconomic system produce different opportunities for men and women in the academic sector (Le Feuvre 2015). Moreover, public programmes and legislative measures to encourage the presence of women in scientific contexts differ among national contexts (O'Connor *et al.* 2015). At the same time, however, it has been observed that a good welfare system and structural measures are not in themselves sufficient to significantly counteract gender imbalances in academia (Heijstra, O'Connor and Rafnsdottir 2013), but other factors – cultural and organisational - should be considered.

The impact of sociocultural determinants has been investigated by a third group of studies, which concentrate on socialization and gender identity construction, as well as on the role performed by gender stereotypes in society (Ridgeway 2011). These studies find that a dichotomous view of gender differences underlies the divergence of career pathways. It normatively assigns and naturalizes different tasks and competences to women and men in society, so that women are associated with reproduction and men with production, women with social skills and men with technical ones (Connell 1987).

Various socialization agents, such as family, peers, teachers, and the media, cooperate in the process of gender identity construction and contribute to defining the educational paths of girls and boys through stereotyped expectations, pressures on vocational choices, and different evaluation criteria that reinforce gender asymmetries (Jacobs and Eccles 1992, Xie and Shaumann 2003).

Finally, a fourth stream of research focuses on organizational practices and processes. It examines how gender asymmetries are produced and reproduced within organizations through norms, rules, everyday practices, disciplines, discourses, and symbols. In particular, some of these studies have analysed the norms that govern formal recruitment and promotion procedures, observing power relations and gatekeeping practices, and analysing formal and informal networks (Bagilhole and Goode 2001, Benschop and Brouns 2003, Knights and Richards 2003, Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). It has thus been possible to highlight the presence of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion deeply embedded in organizational cultures and reproduced through homosocial practices such as informal male-dominated networks (Husu 2004, Osborn *et al.* 2000); biases in formal assessment procedures, such as peer-review, recruitment, and evaluation, which give rise to unequal access to funding research or academic positions (European Commission 2012); asymmetries in the allocation of time to the different kinds of academic tasks performed by men and women (production/research tasks versus reproduction/teaching and administrative tasks), with differing consequences for career advancement (Bird 2011, De Welde, Stepnick 2014). Some of these studies have also observed that the dominant career model within scientific organizations is based on an exclusive and heroic vision of scientific work (Kerfoot and Whitehead, 1998) which assumes a «long hours culture», constant availability, and a linearity that excludes deviations or interruptions (Currie, Harris and Thiele 2000; Ward, 2000). Accordingly, scientific careers appear to be irreconcilable with commitments of other kinds and tend to penalize women with care responsibilities much more than men (Blackwell and Glover 2008, Menniti and Palomba 2001).

These various interpretations have furnished a composite picture of the problem and highlighted its multi-faceted and multi-layered nature (O'Connor *et al.* 2015). However, today they should be reconsidered in light of more general changes which characterise the world of science, producing new configurations affecting the various

areas considered and which, in general, have important implications for gender balances within scientific domains.

1. New and old imbalances in a changing world

In recent years, the complex array of analyses seeking to account for the presence and persistence of gender imbalances in the scientific world have been joined by studies calling attention to the changes taking place within the university and research world and their implications in terms of gender.

I refer primarily to the so-called «neoliberal turn» and to the policies that have sought to make research and scientific work increasingly rationalized and efficiency-driven in response to the need to promote economic growth and competitiveness in global markets (Thorres and Rhoades 2006, Ylijoki and Ursin 2013), also through application of a model of centralized managerialism and an audit culture. According to some authors, these processes have contributed to turning academic organizations into «greedy institutions» (Coser 1974, Hochschild 1989) with regard to the higher level of work productivity, time pressure, undivided loyalty, flexibility, competitiveness and emotional engagement expected from their members (Grant, Kennelly, Ward 2000).

This is not a neutral process with respect to gender (Currie, Harris, Thiele 2000): although at first sight the prevalence of a managerial model might seem useful for superseding a collegial model designed on a male dominated community, the view of the researcher that emerges from the new agenda does not present fewer risks in terms of gender imbalances (Deem 1998, Ferree and Zippel 2015), since it is closely associated with the male breadwinner model and with a view of science where the dominant profile of a researcher is that of «a young man in solitude high on top of the Olympus, distanced from all everyday practices» (Benshop and Brouns 2003, 207). Also the growing emphasis on the measurement of merit and performance, and above all on the construct of «excellence», although ostensibly gender neutral, does not appear free from gender implications (O'Connor and O'Hagan 2015). On the one hand, in fact, as recognition and evaluation of merit gradually become more focused on productivity, performance, and entrepreneurship, other important dimensions of academic work in the past, such as teaching responsibilities, become more feminized, and progressively lose

prestige (Thornton 2014). Several other studies have shown that the same evaluation standards are applied differently to men and women: this is the case, for example, of the different ways in which curricula and applications are evaluated in recruitment processes (Foschi 2006, Moss-Racusin *et al.* 2012, Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Other researches have analysed the growing orientation to internationalization, showing its various gender implications: women researchers face more obstacles to international activities, are less involved in international collaboration and in international publications, and are less likely to have access to international funds (Padilla-González *et al.* 2011, Vabø *et al.* 2014).

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A second trend that seems to characterise the current scientific labour market concerns the growing precarisation of careers. Indeed the higher education sector has witnessed a proliferation of job roles and contract positions associated with insecurity and precariousness (Hey 2001). Rationalization and financial cuts have had a significant impact on the composition of academic research staff, reducing permanent posts and instead increasing the share of research personnel with temporary positions all concentrated among the younger generation of researchers. In Italy for example, in 2013, more than one fourth of academic staff had a temporary position (Bozzon *et al.* 2016). Instability and reduced career prospects impact differently on male and female researchers, in particular with respect to work/life balance choices, exacerbating the dilemma between career and family (Lind 2008).

Finally it may be useful to highlight how in the scientific debate an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinarity and on contamination between different scientific fields is emerging. These trends could lead to a progressive overcoming of disciplinary borders and may represent an opportunity to overcome some of the existing gender imbalances, to the extent that they are so deeply anchored to a vision of scientific community as a closed and self-referential group. At the same time, some studies show how interdisciplinarity, that most often seem to characterize women's careers, tends to be scarcely recognized and rewarded in the selection processes, within an academic system still based on mono-disciplinary structures (European Commission 2012, Rees 2004).

2. Overview of the special issue

Against the background of the wider scenario just described, characterized by the persistence of old gender asymmetries and by the emergence of new ones, the aim of this special issue is to provide insights into the form taken by these phenomena in the Italian context. Italy is a country characterized by the presence of a traditional cultural order of gender based on a still substantial division of roles (Casarico and Profeta 2010, Sassatelli 2011) that also reverberates within the academic and research system, despite the increasing participation of women in education. The important processes and reforms that have characterized the scientific sector, and academia in particular, in the last years – with a change of the organisational models, a drastic reduction in resources and the increasing precarisation of career paths – have certainly affected the work patterns that characterise the early-career researchers, with consequences that require more attention, even from a gender perspective.

The contributions to this special issue allow us to look at the intertwining of gender and scientific careers from various perspectives, using different methods of research and analysis and different interpretative keys to account for the complexity of the phenomenon, as well as the ambivalent nature of some of the ongoing processes. Starting from a broader perspective, that looks at the Italian context within the wider European framework, we will reflect on the need to adopt analytical approaches that combine different levels and intersections. We then will focus on various facets of the phenomenon, as the transition from education to work, the women's trajectories and strategies, the early-career researchers' experiences and the gender pay gap between male and female physicians.

In the first article, Rosy Musumeci and Cristina Solera seek to provide a comparative and theoretically grounded description of gender asymmetries in academia in Europe. Starting from consideration of data on the gap in the presence of women and men in academic posts and in decision-making bodies, Musumeci and Solera propose an interpretation based on the intersection among different levels (micro, meso and macro) and dimensions (cultural and institutional/structural). They pay particular attention to the macro level: by means of comparative analysis of various datasets, they highlight how the presence of gender imbalances in academic pathways is rather independent of types of welfare and gender regimes, or of some of their constitutive features such as defamilising social policies and prevalent gender norms, which instead substantially

affect other gendered outcomes such as family poverty, female employment, and fertility. The academic context therefore seems to be an occupational reality *sui generis*, which can only be understood by combining different perspectives and research instruments which make it possible to explore the complexity and plurality of the dimensions involved.

The second contribution to this special issue focuses on the Italian case. Using various datasets, Orazio Giancola and Luisa De Vita carried out an analysis of the trajectories, in the first step, between different levels of education and, in the second step, between education and work within the STEM disciplines. The study shows that greater participation in educational processes does not automatically result in a reduction of horizontal educational segregation. The analysis highlights the importance of educational choices in the transition from high-school education to university, in which one observes a strong polarization effect linked to gender and social background. At the same time, it can be noted the existence of different gender-based pathways also within the STEM disciplines: while some areas, such as medicine/biology register a growing presence of women (mainly with high social background), others, such as engineering/computer science, are still largely male dominated. Moreover, Giancola and De Vita show the existence of gender gaps with respect to access to the STEM professions, as well as with regard to the chances of being employed, and the types of educational credentials required to obtain senior positions.

The need to combine different perspectives to study the interweaving between gender and careers in science and technology, as well as to open the black box of the STEM disciplines, is also emphasised in the essay by Alessia Pozzi, Mariacristina Sciannamblo and Assunta Viteritti. In this case, referring to both a distal and proximal view of the phenomenon, the authors reflect on the presence of women in technoscience, with a specific focus on disciplines such as mathematics and computer science. Analysis of the narratives of these women helps to highlight the specificity of female trajectories and strategies, and in particular the greater interdisciplinary hybridization and different positionings within and among disciplines and contexts. In this way, in fact, these women tend to challenge and redefine disciplinary boundaries.

The contribution by Camilla Gaiaschi focuses on a scientific field, the medical one, which in recent years has been connoted by progressive feminization, but which still

appears internally characterized by the presence of forms of both vertical and horizontal segregation. The article specifically addresses the issue of pay differentials among physicians, considering the penalties and premiums associated with marriage and parenthood. It shows that the consequences of the presence of children differ between the cases of married fathers or married mothers: in fact, whilst the former exhibit an increase in the pay as the number of children grows, the latter experience a pay penalty. Finally the article by Rossella Bozzon, Annalisa Murgia and Paola Villa considers the early stages of scientific and academic careers in Italy. It does so in light of current changes in the management and governance of the Italian high education system consequent on affirmation of the neoliberal agenda. Combining analysis of quantitative data and of interviews with early career researchers in the STEM area, the authors evidence the growing instability and precariousness that characterize the working and personal lives of these subjects, highlighting how gender disadvantages in scientific careers not only are not being undermined, but turn out to be reinforced. Indeed, high levels of job instability seem to negatively impact especially on female career chances and strategies.

The overall picture that emerges from the various contributions, therefore, is that of a context characterized by ambivalent tensions, where women seem to be growing in numbers in both educational pathways and some traditionally male disciplines, but overall are still under-represented in some areas, especially in decision-making positions, and endangered by the processes taking place within the academic and research world. This has obvious implications in terms of both social justice and repercussions on the quality of research, and it is at odds with some of the principles on which the ongoing reforms are based, including those of rewarding merit and talent.

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