



GenderEd



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# Gender-Ed: combatting gender stereotypes in education and career guidance

## National diagnostic report - Italy



Funded by  
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This research was conducted within the framework of the European project “GenderEd” (Call for proposal REC) which is coordinated by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies and co-financed by the European Union (Just/2015/RGEN/AG/ROLE/9617).  
This report presents and discusses the research results from Italy.

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## Introduction

The research was conducted in the framework of the European co-funded project “Gender-Ed: *Combating Gender Stereotypes in Education and Career Guidance*”.

The aim of the research was to identify attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate or challenge gender stereotypes in education across four EU countries: Cyprus, Italy, Romania, and Lithuania. Each partner country used the same methodology to conduct the research on a national level.

The research focused on the role that schools, teachers and *curricula* play in terms of perpetuating or challenging gender stereotypical behaviours and expectations among girls and boys. The research also explored the impact of gender stereotypes on the attitudes and beliefs of girls and boys in relation to their career choices.

## Background

The gendered socialisation greatly influences study and career choices resulting in persistent gender segregation, both in the field of education and in the labour market, which often reflect traditional gender stereotypes.

Stereotypes are rigid and problematic in that they present simplistic caricatures of particular groups, which can then negatively affect individuals in a variety of ways, such as limiting their academic and professional achievement.

Gender segregation has been identified as a cause of diverging educational and career choices that are based on dominant stereotypical assumptions about which fields are “more appropriate” for women and men respectively. Boys are expected to pursue Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics school fields, girls are expected to pursue care-giving, people-oriented and humanistic school fields.

Gender segregation is a characteristic problem of the Italian school and academic system. The problem is evident from the selection of secondary school, and is perpetuated in the transition to university. Although there are many female teachers and girls get better marks at school than boys, the choices made by male and female students have historically been very different. (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2016).

**Table n.1 – Male and female students by type and stream of secondary school, Italy, 2014/2015**

Type of school	% Male	% Female
<b>Vocational institute</b>	<b>57.0</b>	<b>43.0</b>
Industrial/small industrial	76.0	24.0
Commercial	36.4	63.6
Hotel and catering	57.7	42.3
Other	53.1	46.9
<b>Technical institute</b>	<b>65.6</b>	<b>34.4</b>
Industrial	87.5	12.5
Commercial	50.1	49.9
Surveying/architecture	79.8	20.2
Other	57.5	42.5
<b>High school</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>59.8</b>
Social, psychological, pedagogy, communications, social sciences	18.3	81.7
Sciences	49.4	50.6
Classics	29.9	70.1
Languages	19.7	80.3
<b>Art school</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>67.3</b>
Vocational	32.8	67.2
Fine arts	32.6	67.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>51.2</b>	<b>48.8</b>

Source: Istat

Table 1 shows the percentages of male and female students by type of school, in Italy, for school year 2014/2015. It is clear that, on the one hand, more girls attend high school than boys (59.8% as compared to just over 40%); and on the other, that boys are more likely to attend technical and vocational colleges (65.6% and 57.0% respectively, against 34.4% and 43.0% girls). Art schools register the largest differential between boys and girls: 32.7% and 67.3% respectively. The table clearly shows that gender segregation is reflected in the various streams offered by the education system. There is a clear division between “masculine” and “feminine” streams in vocational colleges, with the most evident example being vocational colleges for industrial/small industrial studies (76% boys, three times more than girls, at 24%), while commercial studies are frequented by 63% girls against 36% boys. Attendance at technical colleges is dominated by male students: industrial technical colleges are attended by 87% boys (12% girls), as is surveying/architecture, where 4 out of 5 students are boys (80% against 20% girls); it is only in commercial technical studies that boys and girls are on a substantially equal footing. In high schools, we see exactly the opposite situation, with girl students clearly in the majority. While science studies see an equal attendance of boys and girls (49% boys, 51% girls), all other streams are dominated by girls: both in languages and social/psychological/pedagogical studies, girls form 80% of students with boys taking up the remaining 20%, while classics registers slightly different percentages: 30% boys, 70% girls. As for art schools, both fine arts and vocational arts studies register similar statistics, with around 32% boys and 67% girls.

The situation is similar in university studies. First off, if we consider students registered at university in academic year 2016/2017, 44.8% are men, while 55.2% are women. However, there are still considerable differences, and hence a strong presence of educational segregation, in the choice of studies. The phenomenon of educational segregation by area of study is also confirmed for academic year 2015/2016. Female attendance in humanities is strong, at 78.5% compared to 21.5% for men, and the same is true in health (68.4%) and social studies (56,9%). The percentages are inverted in the sciences, where men still dominate the field: 62.4% against 37.6%, for a differential of almost 25%.

**Table n. 2 – Male and female students by group, university level, Italy, 2012**

First degree groups	% Male	% Female
sciences	<b>69.9</b>	30.1
chemical/pharmaceutical	33.6	<b>66.4</b>
geological/biological	35.8	<b>64.2</b>
medicine	38.7	<b>61.3</b>
engineering	<b>78.0</b>	22.0
architecture	49.0	<b>51.0</b>
agriculture	<b>50.6</b>	49.4
economics/statistics	50.0	50.0
politics, social sciences	35.9	<b>64.1</b>
law	37.0	<b>63.0</b>
literature	31.0	<b>69.0</b>
languages	17.2	<b>82.8</b>
education	7.5	<b>92.5</b>
psychology	19.3	<b>80.7</b>
physical education	<b>65.5</b>	34.5
defence, security	<b>85.6</b>	14.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>42.7</b>	<b>57.3</b>

Source: Istat

**Table n. 3 – Male and female students by macro area of studies, university level, Italy, 2015/2016**

Macro area of studies	% Male	% Female
Humanities	21.5	<b>78.5</b>
Health	31.6	<b>68.4</b>
Social	43.1	<b>56.9</b>
Sciences	<b>62.4</b>	37.6

Source: Miur

To fully understand the effects of educational segregation, we must consider the transition from education to work. There is a link between female educational segregation and labour segregation, i.e. the problems in starting work experienced by women largely depend on their educational experience.

**Table n. 4 – Industries in which the gender disparity is more than 25% greater than the mean disparity in Italy, 2015**

ATECO 2007 SECTIONS	% Male	% Female	Disparity
<b>Agriculture</b>	72.9	27.1	45.7
<b>Industry</b>			
Construction	91.5	8.5	83.1
Extraction	91.4	8.6	82.8
Water/waste management	85.8	14.2	71.6
Energy	78.1	21.9	56.2
Manufacturing	73	27	46
<b>Services</b>			
Transport, warehousing	77.9	22.1	55.8
General public authority services	67.5	32.5	35
Information and communications	66.4	33.6	32.8

Source: Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Finance

The Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Finance issue a yearly inter-ministerial decree listing the industries and professions in which the gender disparity is more than 25% greater than the mean disparity in Italy. Table 4 shows a strong disparity in "typically male" jobs, including industry, construction and the extraction industries. There are also differences in the service sector, such as general public authority services, information and communications. The major inequalities are in the industrial sector, while services and agriculture have, in almost all cases, differences of less than 50%.

**Table n. 5 – Professions in which the gender disparity is more than 25% greater than the mean disparity in Italy, 2015**

PROFESSION (CP2011)	% Male	% Female	% disparity
92 - NCO's, superintendents and police sergeants in the armed forces	99.9	0.1	99.8
74 - Vehicle, mobile equipment and lifting equipment operators	98.7	1.3	97.4
61 - Craftsmen and specialised labour in the extraction, construction and building maintenance industries	98.7	1.3	97.4
62 - Craftsmen and specialised mechanical engineering labour, installers and service technicians for electrical and electronic equipment	97.7	2.3	95.4
93 - Armed forces, private soldiers	97.3	2.7	94.6
91 - Armed forces, commissioned officers	97.3	2.7	94.6
71 - Industrial plant operators	86.4	13.6	72.8
64 - Farmers and specialised labour in agriculture, forestry, livestock, fisheries and hunting	86	14	72
31 - Technical professions in the sciences, engineering and manufacturing	85.6	14.4	71.2
12 - Businessmen, administrators and directors of large companies	85.4	14.6	70.8
84 - Unqualified trades in manufacturing, mineral extraction and construction	83.5	16.5	67
22 - Engineers, architects and assimilated professions	81.3	18.7	62.6
21 - Specialists in mathematical, computer, chemical, physical and natural sciences	76.6	23.4	53.2
13 - Businessmen and directors of small companies	76	24	52
83 - Unqualified professions in agriculture, gardening, livestock, forestry and fisheries	73.4	26.6	46.8
63 - Craftsmen and specialised labour in precision mechanical engineering, the artistic professions, printed and assimilated occupations	71.4	28.6	42.8
72 - Semi-qualified operators of fixed machinery for series production and assembly line workers	67.6	32.4	35.2
73 - Operators of fixed machinery in agriculture and the food industry	63.2	36.8	26.4
65 - Craftsmen and specialised processing labour in the food, wood, fabrics, clothing and leather industries and entertainments	61.1	38.9	22.2
11 - Members of legislative and governing bodies, managers and directors in the public authorities, judiciary, health services, education and research and in the organisation of national and supranational interests	60.7	39.3	21.4
24 - Specialist health professionals	57.3	42.7	14.6
81 - Unqualified professions in trade and services	56.7	43.3	13.4

Source: Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Finance

Table 5 considers the profession of greatest significance in relation to occupational gender disparity. It confirms the existence of a strong segregation in industry, agriculture and armed forces. It is interesting to see that, above all as a result of educational segregation, technical professions in the sciences, engineering and manufacturing have a disparity rate of more than 70%: specialist professions in the mathematical, computer, chemical, physical and natural sciences exceed 50%, while engineers, architects and assimilated professions reach 62.6%. Finally, the data on business and small and large companies is significant: the disparity rate for businessmen and small company directors is 52%, while for directors of large companies it

reaches 70.8%, with the result that 85% of business people and company directors are men, with only 15% being women.

A final point to bear in mind is the gender pay gap, i.e. the difference in men and women's salaries, calculated based on a mean hourly rate. The mean gender pay gap in the European Union varies from 16 to 17%. Italy has one of the lowest pay gaps in Europe, at around 6%, while countries like Germany, Austria and Hungary reach 20%.

Education is key in eradicating gender stereotypes that lead to horizontal and vertical gender segregation and gender inequalities across all spheres of social life. In the course of efforts to mainstream gender equality in education, the role that both teachers and teaching material play in terms of perpetuating stereotypical gender behaviours and expectations both in and outside the classroom.

Teachers consistently indicate differing expectations from girls and boys. For example, they consider girls to be quiet, and therefore often dismiss girls' disruptive behaviour in class, rarely choosing to reprimand them. On the contrary, boys tend to be considered "trouble-makers" in class, and are therefore more often reprimanded and punished more strictly.

Outside the curriculum, girls are usually assigned "easy" chores, duties that involve cleaning or decorating a room, or caring for guests at a school event. By contrast, boys are assigned duties that involve moving objects (regardless of weight/size) and chores or jobs that must do with construction, repair or the use of technology. Teachers believe that boys' performances reflect their intelligence, while girls' performances are the result of their diligence and efforts. Stereotypical assumptions about boys and girls are also dominant among students as well. Students often feel pressure to conform to gender norms to avoid negative reactions from peers (EIGE, 2016).

As discussed, gender segregation in the workforce is a result of educational and consequently, professional choices. These choices are shaped by many factors, including the environment in schools, teachers, peers, school curricula and the way the information about fields and occupations is presented to boys and girls (Gasperoni, Trentini, 2005).



## Research methodology

In order to identify those attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender stereotypes in school we will be using mixed qualitative methods: focus groups with teachers and students, classroom observation, review and analysis of *curricula* and textbooks.

The sample of the project are students aged 13-16 years, teachers and guidance tutors who work in public schools. While selecting the sample, we tried to obtain as a good spread as possible, as this tends to eliminate bias and provides richer data than in the case of one-dimensional data being used if we target one region or one age etc.

### Non-participatory observation

We used non-participatory observation in schools to explore the ways in which gender stereotypes are embedded in the school environment. We wanted to discover first-hand the ways in which gender stereotypes are reinforced or challenged in schools during teaching hours and school breaks. Gender stereotypes might have been routine to students and educators, which would therefore preclude them from being able to identify or discuss those aspects of their behaviour.

### Sample recruitment of participants

In order to have access to participants we used “snowball method” with key persons and teachers that already worked with us in the past: they brought us in touch with headmasters/headmistresses of the schools. Headmasters/headmistresses suggested classes we could attend based on our selection criteria and kept us in touch with the responsible teachers.

The observers were experienced social researchers; they adhered to the below rules:

- Remain silent; avoid any intervention or interaction with students or staff.
- Maintain confidentiality and avoid discussion with others on what has been observed.
- Maintain impartiality.
- Record what is happening in an objective, factual, impartial way and without including any personal judgement. Record things as they are.

Observations:

- 4 sessions x 3 classes – School “Graziosi” in the city of Savignano sul Panaro (Modena)
- 4 sessions x 5 classes – School “Ferraris” in the city of Modena
- Total hours of observation: 32 hours

### Focus group

Focus groups with teachers and students are used to identify attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender stereotypes and influence career choices.

### Sample recruitment of participants

Students’ focus group members were identified by the observer of the research from schools where observations were taking place (aged 13-16 years old). The teachers were recruited through their school and following the permission of the school’s management. We conducted 4 focus groups: 2 focus groups with 16 students and 2 focus groups with 14 teachers. In the Italian school system, there isn’t the role of the career counsellor. The educational/career guidance is coordinated and organized by a guidance tutor (which is a teacher and not a professional counsellor). Focus groups will be conducted through the

implementation of a semi-structured discussion guide. The focus groups data will be analysed with qualitative content analysis.

### **Review of textbooks**

Teaching materials are very important, as they set the content of teaching. For the desk research, we focused on textbooks potentially containing stereotypical portrayals of women and men. The purpose of the curricula analysis is to explore the role of school curricula and text books in perpetuating or undermining gender stereotypes in the behaviour, attitudes and expectations of boys and girls.

#### Textbook samples

For the analysis were chosen one humanities and one science text book and examined its images and contents to determine whether they reinforce or challenge male/female gender stereotypes.

Selected books:

- Humanities book (history): Gianfranco Bresich, Cinzia Fiorio, *Scoprire la storia*, Roma, De Agostini, 2010
- Science book (science): Gianfranco Bo, Silvia Dequino, *Natura avventura. Il corpo umano*, Milano, Pearson Italia, 2014.

## **Research ethics and confidentiality**

### **Protection of anonymity and confidentiality of research participants.**

All necessary permissions and authorizations were secured by the relevant authorities for access to the schools where the research was implemented, in accordance to the national and EU legislation of each partner country. All project outputs ensured the anonymity of the project participants. For school observations, specifically, national research teams obtained clearance from the CNR - Council of National Research. The real names of focus group interviewees were excluded from public documents; pseudonyms were used instead. All personal data collected from the participants was stored securely by the partner organizations. The voice recordings were saved on the personal computers of the relevant researchers and secured with a password.

### **Consent by the participants.**

Informed consent forms were signed by the research participants following a clear presentation of the project, focus group aims and topics to be discussed. Consent from schools and education authorities was requested and confirmed. Focus group interviewees had the right to withdraw consent from participating in the research at any time. No sensitive personal data were collected or reported in the research.

## Research data

### a. Ideas, examples and stories that perpetuate gender stereotypes in general

In the classes under observation, the boys and girls were clearly grouped by gender: boys with boys and girls with girls. In all eight classes, there was an evident tendency for students to sit with others of their own sex when moving to a new classroom, for instance to the computer or art class. The students generally interacted with others of their own sex - some of them exclusively: this was seen in all observed classes. Interactions between boys and girls were rare, except for obligatory interactions at the teacher's instruction (pair or group work, for instance); we rarely saw any verbal contact between them, except for some teasing - which never turned into genuine gender discrimination. We met with around thirty teachers (the majority of whom by far were women). Very few of them were aware of gender issues, either as a matter for discussion or a challenge. The issue of gender was never raised during lessons, neither by the girls and boys, nor by the teachers. The teachers had a respectful and non-discriminatory attitude to their students: no evident episodes of discrimination were ever observed. This does not mean that there were no situations in which the students expressed their disappointment over what they considered to be unfair decisions by their teachers. There were two very significant moments:

During a series of blackboard exercises (in a humanities lesson), girls were always chosen by the (female) teacher. One of the girls pointed this out. The teacher heard her out, but did not explain or give any reason for her choices.

In another class, the teacher reprimanded a group of boys who were not paying enough attention to the lesson. One of the boys said: "why do you always reprimand the boys? The girls chatter just as much!". In this case too, the teacher gave no response and simply continued with the lesson.

There are, thus, situations in which gender stereotypes are transmitted by the teachers: girls are better in the humanities, and boys must be scolded for failing to pay attention and making noise. It is significant that the boys and girls consider themselves to be stereotyped by the teachers and feel that their behaviour is unfair. On the other hand, the teachers were not able to respond to the questions raised by their students. On two other occasions, stereotypical generalisation came up:

"Girls and boys, have you finished? Especially the boys, because the girls have definitely got it!".

"She should reprimand you because you're behaving like a baby". Said by the teacher to a boy, as if the girl in question should treat him like she was his mother.

In both cases, there is the concept that the girls are better behaved, that they understand more quickly, while the boys need more time. Furthermore, it's up to the girls to reprimand badly behaved students: this seems to be a clear reference to the responsibility of the mother in educating her children. Finally, all teachers used the neutral masculine pronoun; when the entire class was being addressed, they used the word "guys" (ragazzi/boys in Italian). The masculine gender is thus used to refer to the class and reprimand boys and girls alike. This is more evident in classes in the province of Modena, while there is greater attention to the use of language in schools in the city of Modena.

The relationships between students of the two sexes are good and mutually respectful, especially because they tend to keep to their separate circles (either boys or girls). Indeed, many interactions between boys and girls are episodes of teasing or mocking, but never in a sexist way.

There is thus no explicit perception of gender issues among the boys and girls. It does not emerge either as an incentive to the promotion of equality, nor as a discriminatory factor. However, situations characterised by gender stereotyping are not completely absent. These emerge most clearly and explicitly during the physical education lessons:

When teams are chosen for volleyball, two boys always make themselves the captains (without discussion), but the first ones they choose, on both sides, are always girls. However, it is the boys who decide who plays with whom. When they make mistakes, the boys laugh. When the girls make mistakes, they apologise.

In another occasion, once more in the gym, a girl was supposed to get into the game, but a boy stepped in front of her; she complained about it, but went back in the queue behind her friends without challenging him. Another girl tried to defend her: "it's not fair, it's her turn. What if I did that to you?". But the boy still took her turn.

During games of dodge ball, the girls always kept close together and never played a leading role or threw the ball; when they did, the boys complained that they didn't throw it hard enough.

This clearly supports the idea that the boys are physically stronger, more suited to sports and better at them; while the girls are excluded and set aside - or even reprimanded for not throwing hard enough - i.e. not being as strong as the boys.

In class, the boys and girls related to each other mainly in group or pair work. Pairs of just girls or boys tend to cooperate and work together well, assigning each other tasks and doing their homework together. In mixed pairs, however, the boy generally takes control, while the girl is expected to do the actual work.

In the textbooks' analysis, however, some stereotypes and generalizations clearly emerge. The scientific book (science) contains images which portray both men and women doing sports. However, the women are shown participating in "typically feminine" sports such as dance, gymnastics and volleyball, while the men are engaged in "typically masculine" sports such as gym, football and athletics. Or, all great scientific discoveries considered in the book were made by men. No discoveries or inventions made by women are included. In the humanities one (history), the images in the book portray more men than women. In most cases, they are praying, working or fighting. History is narrated from a male point of view only, since it considers history to be a matter of politics and war. It rarely speaks of women, when it does so, the women in question are queens and saints. In such cases, the text is not accompanied by images. There are very few images of women: they are always shown accompanied by men or working in an indoors domestic context. The absence/erasure of women from the programmes of the various subjects is not even conceptualised. The need for a revision of school curricula both in individual subjects (rethinking the literary and artistic canon, questioning our historical memory and reformulating scientific paradigms) and across the board is not taken into consideration. To raise the issue of the absence of women is to change the entire interpretational framework.

In the focus group, it emerges that, according to the teachers, the students are little aware of these issues and only when made to reflect do they perceive existing discrimination and inequality.

**Italian1, woman:** [...] I don't believe they are particularly aware, unless about things [...] which they have never thought much about, they experience them as natural, so they're not aware that there are still differences or equal opportunities, but if you work on the subject a bit, every so often, they say that they have noticed certain things, but only if you guide the

discussion and reflect on the matter with them, then certain things emerge, but a general awareness at that age, they don't have it...

**Italian2, woman:** Yes, they've probably never thought about it, they see the advertising, on TV as well, and there's so much material in this regard... they simply see it as publicity for a product which you buy and you enjoy, but they're not yet able to deal with the issues, but if you guide them, then sure they do, for instance I have discussed publicity with them and afterwards lots of them say "sure, in that one it's always the mother who makes breakfast, but when I think about it, my father makes breakfast at home," so things like that, which they experience in very concrete terms, but they need some one to encourage them...

**Mathematics1, woman:** Well, in my opinion yes, because we work on it, for the last four or five years, they know that there are differences, they know they must be respected, what a stereotype is, sure, we certainly take it into account.

**French, man:** but not only the projects... as soon as we see an episode, we explain and get the kids to think about it.

**English, woman:** that's right, we see something that's not right and stop the students, we ask why did it happen, do you know that... etc. We make them think about it.

**Mathematics1, woman:** Yes, they don't manage to do so alone... I see even in the workshop... they reproduce stereotypes: boys on one side, girls on the other... if you leave them alone they get lost, if you guide them in their thinking they get it, they say "yeah that's true", "that's how it is"; they argue with what you say or want to transmit to them, but there's no doubt if you let them act and think alone they still don't get it... not yet... I always tell them to wait another two or three years and won't see things in the same way.

**Technical1, man:** Yes, they see things and tell you about them, for instance today one of my classes told me that a female teacher assigned to the roles of guides for emergency response and, I believe randomly, chose two boys at the front and two boys at the back of the class, and they asked how come all boys and not a boy and a girl. This really struck me.

According to the teachers, the students have difficulty understanding certain phenomena, because they don't have the tools and keys to comprehending them. But if the teachers help them, they completely understand the logic of certain concepts and can discuss gender issues critically. The teachers agree that when episodes of discrimination occur, they always try to draw the students' attention to them and have them think about and discuss the situation.

**Italian1, woman:** [...] I feel that the girls study harder... but it's an impression, I have no data... they're often better... many girls, not all of them, care more about being good... I believe it's due to needing more to be accepted, but I'm not sure, it's something I've been seeing recently, while the boys don't study so hard, they don't feel the need to be the best in class, even when they're actually very good...

**Italian2, woman:** ...I don't think it's about being boys or girls...

**Mathematics, man:** but what are we surprised about... that's just the way things go... in a peer group, depending on whether a person is more fragile, the more fragile they are, the more they behave in a stereotype manner, from how they dress to what they buy, the experiences they have, then there are boys who don't need to be accepted and are more eccentric, out of the norm...

Both boys and girls adopt traditional gender roles when they have less strength of character to behave in a non-conformist manner. By asking the boys and girls how they would describe first themselves and then the opposite sex, they all agreed: girls see themselves and are seen as being calmer, quieter and more determined; while boys see themselves, and are seen as being wilder, stronger and more aggressive. We asked if boys and girls behave differently, everyone answered in the affirmative. We asked them why this is so and above all, how one learns to behave in a certain way; the answers to this question were quite different.

**Michele:** we teach ourselves...

**Roberta:** yes, ourselves. Maybe an adult will advise you or show you the way, but then you decide what to do...

**Alessandro:** In my opinion, everyone should behave exactly as they want to...

**Eleonora:** It's stereotypes that make you behave in a certain way. For me, everyone should be free to behave as they wish, so long as they respect others.

Contradictory elements emerge from the overview of their answers. Although they are aware that social stereotypes have a normative effect and instruct us "how to be", they all stubbornly affirm their own freedom of choice and autonomy. They all say that everyone is free to be him/herself and behave as he/she wishes, while acknowledging that their actions are conditioned by expectations which they end up conforming to, often to be accepted and not thought ill of by others.

**Sara:** I think we change our character to fit in.

**Laura:** I mean... you tend to do things...

**Luca:** no, it depends on the person, not whether you're male or female...

**Eleonora:** You see everyone behaving in a certain way and you end up following their lead...

**Alessandro:** Sure, it's expected that girls are calmer or boys play football, but I think if a woman wants to play football there's no reason why not, I always ask girls if they want to play, I see no reason why being a girl means they shouldn't...

**Alessandro:** Having to be the strongest... or exclude others to be stronger...

**Emanuele:** I don't like this whole business of colours... for instance, my group of friends each chose their favourite colour and I said red and violet and they all laughed at me... I told them why I like them, and it's not true at all that boys shouldn't like colours like violet and pink...

**Maela:** I didn't like it that time a teacher asked us which sports we do and I said parkour and he looked at me sideways and asked me if I was telling the truth... he didn't believe me and asked me if I really did it... when a boy said so he didn't disbelieve him... it gave me a bad feeling... just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I can't do certain sports...

The boys and girls all declared that they are free to follow their personal preferences, although they know that it is difficult to make choices which are unusual or go against the grain (just as the boy who had the courage to say that he liked violet and red was laughed at by his male friends). They also say that in some cases, these gender prejudices can result in real situations of discrimination.

**Maela:** yes, it happened even in primary school that the boys kept us out of games because we couldn't do them...

**Paolo:** Like dodge ball... the girls are always the last to be chosen, or they never throw the ball... they don't join in...

**Maela:** If we don't join in it's because you never pass us the ball. We want to play. So if you keep us out, we sit down and talk among ourselves.

**Eugenio:** OK, but you could insist that you want to play...

**Maela:** We tell the teacher but he doesn't do anything.

**Emanuele:** If you girls have to tell us you want to play or take the ball and so on... don't ask, just do it!

**Alessandro:** But it's not so easy...

It is in sports and the physical education classes that the boys and girls best recognise and unveil the persistence of gender stereotypes. For example, the girls say that being always excluded from games based on physical strength, because they are not considered strong enough, can be depressing. The boys confirm their belief that everyone can play as they wish, and say that the girls should insist more if they don't want to be excluded.

These situations and examples brought up by the students also bring out the behaviour and attitudes of the teachers:

**MODERATOR:** Do the teachers behave differently with the boys and the girls?

**Maela:** no, but sometimes they reprimand only the boys.

**Eugenio:** That's true, the girls never get scolded.

**Eugenio:** but in gym class, I don't understand why when they give you marks, they first have the girls do the test and then the boys... and even though I can do anything a girl can do, I get 8 she gets 10... I don't understand it....

**Eleonora:** Because girls have different bodies... for instance the medicine ball is hard for us...

**Sara:** well some teachers, when they must choose between a boy and a girl, they chose the girl...they trust us more...

**Roberta:** well if they must choose between calmer people and less well behaved people, of course they choose the calmer ones... but that's all it is, not whether you're a boy or a girl...

**Caterina:** they generally choose the girls, because of their character...

**Michele:** I don't agree, but if it's true then that's favouritism...

**Caterina:** when they need someone to go and get something, the teachers choose girls...

**Roberta:** it depends on the teacher, but if that's how it is...

The information from the students confirms that they are treated largely equally by the teachers, at least formally, but in everyday practice it turns out that they are not uninvolved in perpetuating gender models in their conduct, their language and relationships with the boys and girls: for instance, finding it strange that a girl would enjoy parkour because girls are supposed to be calmer and more tranquil, characteristics which also mean that she would be chosen for tasks which require a greater level of trust.

When we moved on from school, which the students regard as egalitarian in terms of their choices, to gender roles in the family and work, the boys and girls respond with greater facility and certainty, and acknowledge the stereotypes that dominate reality, resulting from the persistent divergences between the two sexes in reproductive work and outside the home:

**MODERATOR: What are the most common stereotypes?**

**Luca:** in the past, women had no rights... whereas men could do whatever they wanted...

**Sara:** what I dislike is that these things from the past are still around today...

**Luca:** yeah, women stay at home and cook, while men work and bring home the money...

**Roberta:** women are better at studying; men are better at manual labour...

**Maela:** sure... mum at home and dad at work...

**Eleonora:** Like I said, it's strange to see a girl scientist...

**Paolo:** But even in pay... we're treated differently...

**Alessandro:** I've read about that... but it's not fair, if you do the same work, why should you be paid differently...

We then asked them why this inequality exists:

**MODERATOR: Why?**

**Michele:** preferences...

**Caterina:** character...

**Sara:** your parents...

**Luca:** your idols...

**Roberta:** external factors...

**Sara:** the people around you...

**Luca:** men and women have different preferences...

**Laura:** I think the parents were influenced in their turn... and so on...

**Alessandro:** it's not fair...

**Paolo:** everyone should be able to do what they want...

**Eleonora:** the girls always go to school with the girls and the boys with the boys, it's obvious that these things happen, they're just unfair stereotypes.

The confusion among their observations makes it clear that they do not clearly recognize the stereotypes characteristic of gender roles: on the one hand, their reason rejects stereotypes and sexism; on the other, they are conditioned by them, consider them natural, and perpetuate them. This makes it clear how important it is to denaturalize and deconstruct established, rigid, anachronistic models of gender.

## b. “Good practices” Ideas, examples and stories that challenge gender stereotypes

In classes observed at the end of the school year (May 2017), the grouping by gender was less rigid than at the start of the year (October 2017). In these classes, the division was probably made by the boys and girls themselves during the first days of school, while the first classes under observation, at the end of the year, had been organised by the teachers during the year.

The issue of gender did not emerge in the observed lessons, except for one time. In a history lesson, when the French Revolution and the concept of human rights was being discussed, the teacher (woman) said:

“The Declaration of Independence states a number of rights: the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This was the first time they had been set down in writing, and they were inspired by Illuminist thought. But were these rights universal in practice? For slaves, there were no such rights. They were not all equal. Slaves were not considered to be men in the full meaning of the word. The ideal man was white, rich and European. Neither were women included in the ideal of man in the fullest sense. Nor were the Jews. This happens historically from time to time, that some men are considered less men than others. Despite the importance of this declaration of rights, the expression "all men" referred only to some men, and more to men than women. For example: having a certain degree of liberty also means having liberty in work, but this was not equal to men and women.”

This was a positive episode since it brought out the issue of gender citizenship and the exclusion of women from public and political life. Furthermore, it was the sole occasion in which the deletion of women from "History with a capital H", which continues to focus on the heroic military exploits of valorous men, was discussed. Political history remains the macro-narration underlying the teaching of history in secondary schools, and is thus the maximal locus of the exclusion of women.

Here another episode where a PE teacher challenge gender stereotypes:

During the gym lesson, the teacher told the students to form pairs - they all formed boy/boy or girl/girl pairs. The teacher insisted: “make pairs of girls with boys, come on!”

In the textbooks’ analysis, on the other hand, elements that challenge gender stereotypes rarely emerge, but they are not entirely absent. For example, in the scientific book contains more images and photos of girls than boys. When the book talks about anorexia, it shows both a sad-looking boy. The image of the anorexic boy confirms that the illness is not a purely female problem. In the history book, there is card about *Florence Nightingale*: although it refers to assistance and care, an entire section is devoted to one of the founders of the nursing profession.

In the teachers’ focus group, it emerges that students are little aware of gender issues and only when made to reflect do they perceive existing discrimination and inequality.

Here, two examples:

**Italian2, woman:** [...] for instance I have discussed publicity with them and afterwards lots of them say "sure, in that one it's always the mother who makes breakfast, but when I think about it, my father makes breakfast at home," so things like that, which they experience in very concrete terms, but they need some on to encourage them...

**Mathematics, man:** I take care about the examples I give them... this year we did a project where the boys had to cook... the boys took part without hesitation or complaint. Only sometimes, when a girl stands up for her identity, we try to discuss it... guided, of course, and try to get to some non-dogmatic conclusions, but an open discussion... But when we are teaching science and must talk about equipment, we see the differences there... but in terms of absolute equality of behaviour, this year the students did a project about affectivity and explored the issue a bit...



According to the teachers, the students have difficulty understanding certain phenomena, because they don't have the tools and keys to comprehending them. But if the teachers help them, they completely understand the logic of certain concepts and can discuss gender issues critically. The teachers agree that when episodes of discrimination occur, they always try to draw the student's attention to them and have them think about and discuss the situation.

The issue of education about differences is another subject of the discussion which emerged as significant in all the teachers' observations, who acknowledged the importance of valuing and respecting differences, not in the interests of identity or identification, but of respect for diversity.

**PhysicalEducation1, man:** sure, the boys should understand that there are difference, but they are to be seen as positive.

**Mathematics1, woman:** that's right, there are differences, we are different physically, in our anatomy, anyone can see it, but it's up to us to transmit the message that this is not a problem, but rather a positive value.

**French, man:** I agree, there are differences, but they shouldn't lead to a diversity of opportunity. Everyone should have the ability to have the same things and opportunities, regardless of sex.

**Mathematics2, woman:** Everyone should start at the same starting blocks. That's why, in my opinion, there should be a genuine meritocracy... not affirmative action for women... this affirmative action nonsense makes me mad. Because it means that...

**French, man:** that you're a minority in need of protection.

**Matematica2, woman:** exactly, but it's not true. Give us the same opportunities as men from the start, and you'll see that there's no need for reserving space for women.

Valuing the differences, capacities and competencies of everyone means that every has the same opportunities and potentials. It's important to value differences if we are to create a profound change in our society. And it's through this change that we can know ourselves, others and the world around us and do it in a gender identity diverse manner.

**PhysicalEducation1, man:** Yes, I believe that we must work on giving value to the competencies of the kids and their relations. That's the only way to change things, by changing the way we see, think and judge things.

**Mathematics2, woman:** we must work on giving value to their competencies and capacities and make them see that it doesn't matter which school you go to... if that's the one you want to go to, do so.

The boys and girls all declared that they are free to follow their personal preferences, although they know that it is difficult to make choices which are unusual or go against the grain (just as the boy who had the courage to say that he liked violet and red was laughed at by his male friends).

**Luca:** no, it depends on the person, not whether you're male or female...

**Alessandro:** Sure, it's expected that girls are calmer or boys play football, but I think if a woman wants to play football there's no reason why not, I always ask girls if they want to play, I see no reason why being a girl means they shouldn't...

**Alessandro:** It's always like that... I really can't stand it...

**Eleonora:** Like, I really like technology... they did a coding project for girls and I was the only one from my class... I don't understand why so few girls like science... I like them a lot, but I know it's difficult because of stereotypes...

**Vanessa:** I agree, I mean I like cars and I'm a girl!

### c. Factors that affect educational/career choices

In the focus group, students identify the factors that influence study and work choices, when we asked them "what can be done, then, to overcome these stereotypes and expectations, starting from school and decisions in education?", the answers covered a variety of options.

**Alessandro:** Help people who are in difficulty.

**Eleonora:** Make young people understand that they can do anything...

**Maela:** Our parents...

**Emanuele:** School too, if they always tell you you can do everything and you believe then, you can do what you want to.

**Caterina:** it's the parents in my opinion...

**Sara:** your friends...

**Roberta:** the people around you...

**Luca:** talking about your problems...

**Laura:** sure, try to understand what you want to do... hear what others have to say; but then it's still you who has to make a decision...

**Luca:** you have to listen and then make you own choice, I agree...

**Roberta:** what you hear them say... if someone obliges me to do something I don't want to do, then you're obliged to go ahead...

**Giorgio:** keep to your basic ideas...

**Roberta:** listen to advice, and especially criticism if it's constructive...

The boys and girls all agree that it's important that parents, family and friends support them in making the independent decisions they all want to make. It's essential that they do what they want to do, what they feel they're best at. They're convinced that the final decision lies with them; advice is valuable so long as it doesn't become limiting. Fundamentally, they are not aware that they are involved in the problem and its solution; they believe they are immune from conditioning precisely because it is "invisible".

The focus group then discussed the heart of the issue: school guidance and the reason why students choose particular directions of study. The discussion is mostly limited to acknowledging the current situation - i.e. the existence of a considerable amount of gender segregation - without deeply analysing the reasons for these choices.

**MODERATOR: What are the expectations that affect the choices of boys and girls?**

**English, woman:** just think of secondary schools... like technical industrial schools ... boys, humanities... girls.

**Mathematics, man:** in mathematics, it's really strange, because girls are potentially just as good as boys but there are fewer women maths graduates... I often talk about this and tell the girls that there are opportunities for them as well and that maths is for them too... it isn't a male preserve...

**Italian1, woman:** in engineering too, there aren't many girls, i think...

**Art, woman:** my niece is studying engineering - 5 girls out of 50 students...

It's clear to everyone that it is the persistence of deeply rooted gender stereotypes that affects the choices made by young people. Gender stereotypes which transmit an image of men and women following different career paths because of their "natural" attitudes and inclinations, which are not always - or by everyone - recognised as being learned and hence culturally originated. They find it hard to acknowledge that even the persons who guide the decisions of young people (like the family and school) are themselves unconscious bearers and hence transmitters of these stereotypes, preferring to blame society itself.

**Italian1, woman:** why these ideas are still around... they're not transmitted by school, but exist in society, I really don't think that school transmits these ideas at all...

**Art, woman:** because it hands down the idea that men work or do particular types of work, while women stay at home or teach...

**Music, man:** there are female doctors after all...

**Italian1, woman:** medicine is very feminine... there's also the aspect of care for people which is certainly seen as very feminine...

**Mathematics, man:** it is culturally associated with women...

**Music, man:** medicine and nursing are areas women want to work in... there are very few in mechanical engineering... I don't think they're even interested in it...

**Educator, man:** it's natural....

**Technical, man:** absolutely right

**Italian1, woman:** it's a cultural issue...

**Music, man:** it's a matter of society, no doubt... but for me, there's also the issue of propensity and personal interest... many women don't go into certain types of work...

**Italian1, woman:** well in my opinion it's not a matter of personal propensity... it comes from society...

**Arte, woman:** yes, it's a cultural thing...

Even though they all agree on the importance of the role played by teachers in promoting gender equality, the teachers themselves remain victims of the same stereotypes and clichés: for instance, can girls who choose a scientific or technological area adapt to a completely masculine workplace? Once they've finished their studies, will they have the same job opportunities as their male contemporaries?

**Italian1, woman:** teachers can also have an influence... we almost never advise a girl to go to a technical industrial school... but not because of the type of school... because of the environment that's there now... I don't know if we've done it often...

**Italian2, woman:** technical, sure, but she must choose what type of school...

**Italian1, woman:** accounting, or feminine technical at most... i.e. company secretary... us too... due to the type of environment... mainly masculine... boys who don't want to...

**Italian2, woman:** if they exclude certain school because they're masculine, they're not very aware when they do so, they try not to think about it...

**Italian1, woman:** well they feel attracted to other areas... I'm not saying all girls do this, and all boys do that...

**Italian2, woman:** this awareness is lacking in middle school...

**Italian1, woman:** the girls tend to go for humanities and boys for sciences, although we give them a variety of tests in guidance activities. Interests and attitudes... I guide the girls towards humanities and literature and the boys towards sciences and mathematics, but I don't say: OK, you're a girl and you have to do this or that...

**Mathematics1, man:** but because when they enter the workplace, they'll have so many difficulties...

**English, woman:** sure, just imagine if I said to a girl, do you want to be an aerospace engineer? Go ahead! What then? You're a woman in a class full of men, who do you think they'll choose for a job? A man. And you'll be underpaid and so on and so on... if you know that's how it's going to be, you don't even register, you just choose something else...

Just as the teachers insist that the students' decisions do not depend on the fact that a given school is "for girls" or "for boys" - and hence more in line with their gender - but on their individual propensity for a given subject or area, they do not consider the lack of neutrality that underlies the inclination or propensity itself. In other words, the teachers themselves do not reflect deeply on the extent to which choosing a subject depends on gender-based attitudes and competencies, and on a deeply rooted divergence (or complementariness) of the sexes which distinguishes between the male (rational, wilful, competitive, inventive) and female (emotional, altruistic, relational, welcoming), so that certain choices are not even taken into consideration by the person in question, even though equal opportunities are guaranteed at the formal level.

The role of the family, on the other hand, is identified in later discussion by the teachers as central in the students' choice of school and subjects, and they underline how cultural and family prejudices determine the acceptability (or otherwise) of choices which do not conform with gender-related social norms.

**MODERATOR: What role does the family play in all of this?**

**Italian2, woman:** oh family is so important...

**Mathematics, man:** if you ask teachers... it's always the family's fault...

**Italian1, woman:** the family is very important... the fear of them going off far from home [...] yes, the families determine so much... not all of them though...

**Mathematics, man:** we do a lot of guidance during the second and third year, guidance fairs... with schools from the whole area... we visit schools... then the kids choose the school in the context of the family... it's rare that they make their choice based on what the school says...

**French, man:** once I had a boy who was very good at languages and I suggested linguistic high school...but it wasn't possible, the parents didn't want him to because they were mostly women....

**English, woman:** oh, yes, the family plays a big part...

**French, man:** very often, you have to work more with the family and parents than with the boy or girl themselves. Because they're the point of reference, and at the end of the day the kids make their decisions in the family setting.

In the end, the role of the school itself is the last thing discussed. The teachers take different positions: a first point of view is that stereotypes and prejudices are not present at school, and that it is therefore not the job of school to take action to overcome them.

**MODERATOR: What can schools do?**

**Italian1, woman:** at school, teachers have long overcome these problems, I've never heard a teacher say "you're a girl and so you can't do this subject" for instance... There's no difference in the way we treat them at school. We're all equal, there's no difference between us.

**Italian2, woman:** it's society, not school [...]

**Italian1, woman:** there's equality at school, it's outside school that it's absent.

**French, man:** school does not reproduce these stereotypes, but I'd say that they are reproduced at school.

This point of view is very common, since Italian school is mostly female: gender inequality is not seen to be a problem demanding a solution.

There's therefore no need to look for a solution at school, because equality is already present at school. The problem is imputed to society, and must be solved in that context.

The second - less popular - point of view is that school has a central role to play in overcoming gender stereotypes. School must therefore be aware of these differences and guide the boys and girls in developing and acquiring the tools required to think and evaluate reality in a critical, aware and respectful manner.

**PhysicalEducation1, man:** yes, I believe it's important to do projects, but more is needed... The kids have to learn to think critically. And school is where they can do so.

**French, man:** We can go on making them discuss things, think about them, do projects... [...] we have to trigger small processes, small mechanisms in them that lead them to question the reality they find around them every day...

## Recommendations

The analysis of the class observations, the students' and teachers' focus group and the Italian literature on school and gender indicates that the issue of educational segregation has rarely been the subject of systematic study (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2016). Educational segregation is mainly monitored statistically and quantitatively, by extrapolating data from wider investigations of our school and university system. Existing studies also stand out for another particular feature: they focus on female educational segregation, and completely ignore the male side of the issue. From this one can deduce that it is deemed socially problematic that girls avoid technical and scientific studies, but the fact that boys, on the other hand, form a tiny minority in studies leading to careers in education and health services is not considered worthy of interest.

It is not surprising, then, that if we look at young people of both sexes who make choices about their education which are unconventional from the point of view of gender, and who thus violate the norm of educational segregation, we encounter different responses to the male and female cases. A boy who decides to register for a first-degree course in Childhood studies, Education, Nursing or Social services is not only preparing himself for a career in what is generally considered a "feminine" profession, but is also likely to suffer in terms of social prestige and pay. A choice of this type is therefore strongly stigmatised since it is potentially disqualifying for a boy, who could study much more prestigious subjects leading to a "better" career. In the case of girls, the situation is exactly the opposite: should a girl decide to register for a course in Engineering or Computer science, she is preparing herself for a career which enjoys considerable social prestige. Entrance into such masculine environments is thus a matter of upward mobility in terms of gender.

The problem is the hierarchy, the social assignment of different values to the competencies and practices associated with the two sexes. While we do not wish to ignore the importance of a match between education and professional career (the educational qualifications most in demand by the market, which favour stable employment, are indeed technical and scientific), the central issue is another: who decides that it is socially more important to be an engineer than a teacher? Is it really possible that caring for old people, the ill and children requires less or less complex competencies than work in technical and scientific fields? Didactic experiences for girls such as the "digital summer camps" are very valuable, it is absolutely essential that women have access to scientific and technological careers, but we must also understand why boys are discouraged from working in professions in education and care. But the fact is that national strategies are in place to combat the gender stereotypes which so strongly condition the education of males.

The linearity of the growth of women's engagement in study (women's registrations at university have overtaken those of men; they also have better school and academic results) and the increasing feminisation of the teaching profession can lead us to consider that school is a "safe place" in relation to gender discrimination. The fact is that female discrimination and disadvantage is greatly underestimated and poorly visible, since women, in their roles as both students and teachers, are very present at school: school, we are continually told, is "in the hands of women". About women teachers, the data speak clearly: Italy counts as one of the European countries with the highest level of feminisation of the teaching profession.

There is an illusory sense of equality: the conviction that discrimination and disparities in power and opportunities have been overcome. Boys and girls also believe that they are free to make their choices spontaneously and of their own accord. This leads them to minimise or deny existing disparities, in the conviction that only merit and individual competencies count, and that gender is of no import.

For this reason, institutional strategies intended to assure gender equality in professions and education based on standards and support for women's careers will remain inadequate in the absence of a more

profound transformation of social gender stereotypes, the assignment of roles, and female and male attitudes.

The role of schools, and work in schools, are thus of the first importance. It is at school, first and foremost, that the issue is to be confronted. For decades now, school has included education guidance among its many functions, with activities to enable boys and girls to know themselves (their potential, abilities and interests) and take considered decisions; guidance also has the objective of making students aware of what education and the work market in Italy have to offer them. Teachers are required to rethink the entire guidance process in terms of gender. They can no longer consider it to be gender neutral.

As shown by *Linee Guida Nazionali (art. 1 comma 16 L. 107/2015) "Educare al rispetto: per la parità tra i sessi, la prevenzione della violenza di genere e di tutte le forme di discriminazione"* (i.e. the *National Guidelines "Educating respect: for gender equality, prevention of gender violence and all forms of discrimination"*), it is necessary to provide schools with information and tools to connect education and information through actions that provide knowledge and act on everyday experiences of boys and girls. Among the goals:

- promoting an education of differences, equality and reciprocal respect using new methodologies that favour the development of critical thinking in elementary school and through workshops and projects for middle and secondary schools, encouraging a discussion around social and cultural stereotypes and unwritten social rules and expectations;
- integrating topics such as valorisation of differences, gender equality and deconstruction of stereotypes in *curricula*, educational programmes and school activities;
- revising textbooks critically, introducing gender perspective.

Therefore, the creation of *gender-sensitive* guidance strategies, based on recognizing one's own competence and personal abilities, and on the evaluation of difference as a positive resource, becomes important, to begin a deconstruction of social expectations, gender stereotypes and prejudices both in education and career choices. For example, introducing summer camps for girls to encourage them to take interest in STEM fields and summer camps for boys for them to approach caregiving and people – oriented contexts, and showing teenagers accounts of young adults who have made non-traditional choices for both men and women: a female engineer or scientist, or a male kindergarten teacher or nurse that talk about the reasons and thought process behind their choices. For this, it's important to think about a guidance that pays attention to employment opportunities, focusing mostly on the highest market demands. the local context and its potential in the labour market.

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**Association for Gender Equality and Liberty (Sibiu, Romania)**

Sito web: [www.aleg-romania.eu](http://www.aleg-romania.eu)



**Women's Issues Information Centre (Vilnius, Lithuania)**

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