CHAPTER 10

GENDER MATTERS IN GENDER DIFFERENCE PERCEPTIONS

The Case of University of Rome Tor Vergata

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Diversity as Strategic Opportunity, pages 171–193

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates students' perceptions and awareness of gender disparity in academia and the labor market, based on a survey administered to a sample of students in the Faculty of Economics at a big University in the Center of Italy. The questionnaire aimed at detecting potentially different perceptions of men and women regarding gender differences by considering both their actual experiences as students and their expectations about labor market conditions. The questions of the survey were the result of the joint work of a group of students and instructors that discussed gender issues together and shared individual perceptions of disparity experienced at different steps of their academic life. A brief description of the genesis of the focus group serves as a foundation for describing the structure and the questions of the survey and for explaining the rationale behind them. Then, the main results of the survey are discussed, highlighting the most significant differences in perceptions of gender issues for male and female students.

Gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender violence are still too recurrent phenomena in any institution or organization. Universities, like any other social system, suffer from discrimination and stereotyped dynamics related to gender issues at any level. Sometimes the analysis of specific cases allows us to shed light on broader issues: e.g., looking at universities as one social environment in which educational, occupational, and cultural processes mix up can offer new insights into how gender schemes are perceived, produced, and reproduced in social organizations.

The latest available data show that in Italy, female students represent 56.3% of students, 56.9% of graduates, and 48% of the doctorates, in line with the European average. The distribution of the student population concerning the study area differentiated by gender shows the typical horizontal segregation, which sees women prevailing in the humanities and men in the Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, or STEM (report MUR 2022). Despite no relevant differences are observed in graduation rate, time, and performance, one year after graduation, ceteris paribus, men are 17.8% more likely to be employed than women, and they receive an average of 89€ net more per month (report Almalaurea, 2022). Overall, these data reveal a demeaning picture that, on the one hand, shows the persistence of solid cultural stereotypes that influence the choice of study path and job opportunities, and on the other hand, it asks to be still profoundly understood: where are the barriers still? As Miller et al. (2015) observed, despite their educational role, universities reproduce gender schemes and reinforce stereotypes while exposing students to gender segregation. Moreover, the low level of structural pressures and the higher job opportunities given by tertiary education allow gender schemes, transmitted by social interactions, to be reproduced undisturbed. Considering that inequalities have deep cultural roots, we wonder how and to what extent these inequalities

are perceived by students. Gender disparities are often invisible. or made invisible, so many people struggle to recognize or accept them.

In the following section, we summarize some of the most relevant contributions on these issues and argue that it is necessary to further investigate people's perceptions and consciousness of the gender gap inside academia, especially within the student population. This work aims at providing a contribution in this direction. In order to do so, we examine responses to a questionnaire administered to a sample of students enrolled in the Faculty of Economics at a big University in the Center of Italy and developed in a focus group including both students and instructors ~~at the same University Faculty~~. The experience of the focus group and the questionnaire design are explained in the third section, while the main findings are presented in the fourth one. Finally, last section concludes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the relevance of the issue, perceptions of gender disparities among university students have yet to be examined in depth. There is, however, growing interest in the subject since differences in students' perceptions shape the scientific culture in universities and affect educational choices, which in turn affects the attitudes to gender roles of future workers and determines the different treatment of women and men in the labor market (Pla-Julián and Díez, 2019).

Concerning educational choices, recent studies show that despite improvements in women's representation in higher education, horizontal gender segregation in subject choices and fields of study persists. Women continue to be overrepresented in social sciences and the humanities and underrepresented in STEM fields like engineering and ICT. This segregation in educational choices is considered critical in explaining gender inequalities in earnings, career opportunities and access to leadership positions. Indeed, labor market prospects are less favorable regarding employment rates, risks of overeducation and wages for graduates in humanities and social sciences compared to graduates from STEM fields (Barone and Ortiz, 2011; Núñez and Livanos 2010). Bertrand (2018), for instance, finds that the potential gender gap in education-based earnings for women born in 1985 is still relevant (about 6% for expected average earnings and 10% for expected ninetieth percentile earnings), even though it has decreased compared to the one experienced by women born in 1950 (14 and 22%, respectively). The underrepresentation of women in STEM disciplines is a matter of concern because STEM occupations provide higher wages and are characterized by particularly small gender differences in earnings. Goldin (2014), using data from the 2009-2011 American Community

Survey and considering full-time salaries for the top occupations (ranked by male incomes), finds that technology and science occupations have the lowest gender pay gap and that, in some of these occupations, women have even higher average earnings than men.

Some studies have tried to understand the mechanisms behind gender segregation in higher education, a phenomenon which reflects cultural forces and the tendency to conform to gender stereotypes (Barone, 2011). Previous contributions generally agree in explaining the segregation in education choices with the persistence of gender essentialism, i.e., the belief that men's and women's capacities and interests are profoundly different (Levanon and Grusky, 2016). Even though the actual average performance of men and women in math and science do not significantly explain gender segregation (Morgan et al., 2013), perceived differences in skills and outcomes continue to have a significant impact (Correll, 2004). Perceptions about gendered preferences, especially those related to the different orientations of men and women for career opportunities versus family duties, are often considered possible explanations for different educational choices (Ceci and Williams, 2010), even though the empirical evidence provides mixed results on the impact of these perceptions. For instance, Barone and Assirelli (2020), using data from a sample of Italian high school students interviewed during their last year of high school and at the beginning of their first year at the university, find that preferences for career prospects reduce the probability of choosing humanities and social sciences as fields of study, but in the same way for both genders. On the contrary, the authors find that expressive preferences for school subjects and specific occupations, i.e., preferences which reflect the emotional value assigned to specific fields of study and professions independently from their potential economic value, contribute significantly to explaining why women enroll more in the humanities and social sciences than men. Other studies show that these gendered preferences reflect not only psychological but also cultural factors that perpetuate gender inequality: boys and girls are often encouraged to follow different educational pathways by "significant" adults, like teachers, parents, and school counsellors, whose influence reflects stereotypes about gendered talents and the desire to conform to the reference group (Gabay-Egozi et al., 2015; Zafar, 2013).

Another strand of literature which is relevant to our work is the one investigating students' perceptions of discrimination and stereotypes at the university and in the workplace. Steele et al. (2002) examine, for instance, the perceptions of undergraduate female students at a U.S. university in male-dominated academic fields, such as math and science, finding that, in these fields, women report higher levels of discrimination than women in female-dominated fields (like social science and humanities) and men in both male and female-dominated areas. Similarly, female students in traditionally male domains are more likely to feel threatened by the gender stereotype that

"women are not as capable as men" and to consider changing their study area as a result. According to Schmitt et al. (2002), perceptions of discrimination against one's gender tend to adversely affect the psychological well-being of female undergraduate students but not men. Along the same line, Sipe et al. (2009) investigate students' perceptions of the gender discrimination they could experience after their studies in the workplace. In a survey administered in 2006 in a public U.S. university, they find that overall students do not perceive gender discrimination as a problem both for their and for women's careers. In particular, around 90% of all students do not think they would experience gender-specific barriers in terms of advancement opportunities, networking, mentoring and wage. Similar perceptions are also reported concerning opportunities for women in the workplace. On the other hand, female students are more likely to anticipate gender discrimination, both for them and for women in general, than male students. For instance, half of the female students anticipate that women may experience a gender bias at work, against only one-third of the male students. In a follow-up paper which extends the data collection period to 2013, the authors find increased students' awareness and concerns about gender discrimination both against women and men. However, results still confirm high percentages of students that do not correctly anticipate the risk of being personally discriminated against (Sipe et al., 2016).

THE WORKING GROUP EXPERIENCE AND THE GENESIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The idea of investigating perceptions of gender inequality among the student population arose after a seminar held on March 6th, 2019, at the Library of the Faculty of Economics, University of Rome Tor Vergata. As suggested by the title, "Gender (UN)balances" ("(S)bilanci di genere" in the Italian version), the seminar aimed at identifying the main issues and limits of gender-sensitive reporting in universities, with a specific focus on the university which hosted the event. Thanks to the interventions of some female professors, who presented their personal experiences of gender discrimination in academia, the seminar highlighted the existence of significant gender disparities at the university, especially with regards to academic and employment segregation, as well as to the glass ceiling. Educational segregation indicates the perception that certain subjects are more "feminine" (e.g., humanities, psychology), while others are more "masculine" (e.g., engineering): students might thus tend to choose their academic path based on such perceptions, following the internalized prejudice that only specific subjects are suitable for, or aligned with, their gender. Another point raised referred to the glass ceiling: despite girls

graduate more (and faster) than boys, and despite more women apply for PhDs and hold junior researcher positions than men, the role of full professor is largely reserved to men.

At the end of the event, the two moderators, who are also authors of this chapter, launched an open call to the audience to involve interested students to further investigate gender issues within the university. A working group was thus formed, composed of three associate professors and one post-doc fellow (the authors of this chapter) and four students (Ilaria Romani, Sara Scollo, Noemi Viggiano, and Chiara Zangrilli), enrolled in courses of economics, finance, and banking. Despite the call was open to all students and professors, without gender limitations, all working group members ended up being women, most of whom engaged in improving gender equality at different levels, and some even active within feminist organizations.

The group worked together, cooperatively and horizontally, without distinctions due to the different roles. Professors supported students' ideas and suggestions, providing materials and methods to carry out the research. The general objective was to create a network, an alliance of women, all at the same level, to investigate perceptions of gender equality, or inequality, among the student population.

Several meetings were held between March and November 2019. At first, the group discussed issues that emerged during the seminar and the personal experiences both inside and outside the university, concluding that gender inequalities were routine rather than episodic accidents. Group members also used emails to stay in touch, follow up on specific issues and circulate papers and information.

Then, the group decided to look up similar projects that were carried out in other universities and to develop a survey to investigate students' perceptions. Again, the survey was designed jointly by instructors and students, whereby the contribution of the latter was essential to obtain questions that were easy to understand and likely to be answered by the respondents. Specifically, the continuous and meticulous confrontation between all the working group members was aimed at choosing, on the one hand, the questions dealing with the issues that could be among the most sensible for the student community and, on the other, at avoiding excessively long or pedantic questions that could divert the attention of the students.

Once the survey was finalized, the professors contacted several administrative offices at the university (such as the office of the Central Committee for equal opportunities, CUG, in charge of ensuring gender equality) to inform about the initiative and obtain their support in spreading the survey to the broadest possible population.

The group also decided to have two versions of the survey, one physical and one online (through Google Forms, both in Italian and English), in order to reach a broader audience and facilitate distribution.

The physical questionnaire was distributed, at the beginning of the lectures, in four classes on November 25th (International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) and 26th, 2019. The selected population included first and second-year bachelor students, thus representing a sufficiently broad group of students. After briefly explaining the overall project, a professor and a student of the working group together administered the survey in each class.

On November 28th, 2019, the Library of the Faculty of Economics sent out a newsletter with the links to the Italian and English versions of the survey, accompanied by a brief presentation of the working group and the project, encouraging students to participate. Most responses were received within the first four days, although the links remained active for one month, until December 27th, 2019.

Participation in the survey was incentivized by the possibility of receiving a gadget, consisting of a highlighter or pen holder: for surveys completed in presence, gadgets were given at the end of the survey; for those who participated online, specific meetings were set where participants could receive their gadget upon showing a screenshot indicating survey completion. In both instances, gadgets were given out by students in the working group.

Once the survey was conducted, the group met again in January 2020 to decide how to create a database that could be used to investigate the results and carry out further research. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown slowed the activities down and made it more complicated to keep up with the project. Finally, one student member of the working group (Ilaria Romani) decided to dedicate her graduate thesis to the project, completing data analysis and interpreting the survey results.

Overall, the experience has been very enriching for all group members, both students and professors, had something to learn from others. Working with other women to study a current issue that affected everyone's life directly was quite empowering. Moreover, the results that were firstly presented in the master's degree thesis of Ilaria Romani, were also presented in an international conference in 2022 (Gender R-Evolutions, held in Trento, Italy), spreading the word to a broader academic community.

SURVEY DESCRIPTION

The survey was organized into four different sections, namely:

1. Perception of gender gaps at the university (9 multiple-choice questions)
2. Perception of gender gaps in the job market (7 multiple-choice questions)

3. Knowledge of gender gaps and roles of institutions (4 multiple-choice questions)
4. Demographics (5 multiple-choice + 3 open questions)

The survey was designed to commit to two specific principles: to have wording as inclusive as possible and to avoid any possible conditioning in the answers. For instance, all multiple-choice questions included the alternative "I don't know" and "Refusal" among the possible answers, in order to guarantee that the respondents felt free while answering and that the survey captured answers and opinions really meant by the respondents. Besides, the section on demographic characteristics was on purpose positioned at the end of the questionnaire to avoid any type of conditioning of the answers during the survey completion.

A more detailed description of each section and the rationale behind each question are described in what follows.

Perception of Gender Gaps at the University of Rome Tor Vergata

The first three questions of this first section aimed at capturing the students' perception of potential differences between males and females along several dimensions: (a) students' final marks for the exams, (b) students' time to accomplish the final graduation, and (c) professors' teaching abilities. The set of possible answers included parity and disparity between genders, specifying in the latter case the direction of the difference, i.e., whether women on average get higher marks/graduate sooner/teach better than men, or the other way around. With reference to students' final marks, the answer "It depends on the exam" was also included to capture the perception that students might have different innate abilities and propensities depending on their gender.

The fourth and fifth questions aimed at capturing the diffusion of another deeply-rooted stereotype, which leads to horizontal segregation, i.e., women are less able to successfully engage in STEM than men. This view has been reproduced within the field of Economics by exploiting the traditional dichotomy between the subfields of Management, whose more qualitative approach is typically considered "easier" and hence more adapt to women, and the one of Economics, which instead relies more on quantitative methods and is thus considered more appropriate for men.

A related stereotype, i.e., that male students typically succeed because of their (innate) talent while female students succeed because of their dedication (to the study), is the object of another set of questions. In the first question, the students faced a hypothetical situation: they are informed that a male

student, Pierre, got the maximum score on an exam. They were then asked to indicate which, according to them, was the main factor that led Pierre to that result, by choosing between three options: (a) Pierre studied hard and was strongly committed, (b) Pierre is smart and brilliant, with an innate aptitude for that exam, (c) I don't know. Then, the same question, with the same alternative answers, was repeated referring to a female student, Marie (the students were named after Pierre and Marie Curie, Nobel prizes in Physics in 1903 for their pioneering research on radioactivity). The idea is that differences in the answers referring to Pierre or Marie provided by male and female students can be reconducted to traditional stereotypes about the different innate abilities and attitudes in how they approach their studies and exams.

The last two questions aimed at capturing students' perceptions of potential gender differences in terms of motivations behind the choice of the academic curriculum and career opportunities. As for the former, the students were asked to select which aspects, among the following, were considered by males and females when choosing the program to enroll in: (a) career opportunities, (b) wage, (c) work–life balance opportunities, and (d) personal attitudes (regardless of job opportunities). The answers to this question allow to test whether the presumption that men are slanted towards career opportunities and good earning potential while women are more concerned about work–life balance and personal attitudes is actually there and, if so, whether it is equally widespread among male and female students. Besides, a significantly higher share of (both males and females) students indicating work–life balance for women would confirm the assumption that unpaid domestic work and care services are perceived to be primarily in charge of women.

Finally, the students were asked whether in the private sector men and women have the same career opportunities or not, and—if not—which among the two has the better opportunities in order to evaluate the actual awareness of students about the remarkably different opportunities and career paths that men and women often face once on the job market.

Perceptions of Gender Gaps in the Job Market

This second section was designed to evaluate the students' perception of gender differences in the job market in Italy and if and how these perceptions change once suitable data on the phenomena are provided.

Specifically, the first three questions asked the respondent to provide his/her opinion about potential differences among men and women in terms of: (a) working conditions one year after graduation; (b) salary conditions (conditional on having the same job), and; (c) achieving managerial positions (conditional on having the same degree of education). In all cases, the

possible answers included a gender gap in favor of men (men having more chances of working/higher salaries/higher chances of being managers than women), the other way around (women having more options of working/higher salaries/higher chances of being managers than men), or parity.

The same issues were investigated in the following four questions. In this case, however, respondents were preliminarily provided with official data strictly related to the questions. Specifically, before asking students about the presence of gender inequality, they were informed that in 2018 men had an 8.2 percentage-point higher probability of working one year after graduation than women. Then, the same question was asked after specifying that the 8.2 percentage-points gap was observed despite males and females achieved graduation at the same time and with the same average final mark. In the first two questions, official data were taken from Almalaurea, a consortium of Italian universities gathering data on Italian graduates. In the other two cases, data were from Eurostat, which currently reports an average gender pay gap of around 20%, and a remarkable glass ceiling, as only 29% of managers working in Italy are women.

Exploring if and how the awareness of gender differences changes in the light of these data, also across the gender of the respondents, might be of interest as it sheds some light on the actual receptiveness of—thus giving useful targeting suggestions on—the potential recipients of awareness campaigns.

Awareness of Gender Gaps and Roles of Institutions

Whilst the first two sections focused on the perception of gender gaps during the university period and on the job market respectively, the third one focused more on actual awareness of gender gaps and on the actual and potential role of the institutions that might deal with them, both in the context of the university and nationwide.

Specifically, in the first two questions, the respondents were asked if they are informed of the existence of two important committees that are present in (any Italian) university, namely the Central Committee for equal opportunities and the Joint Committee of students and professors (in Italian, Comitato Unico di Garanzia or CUG, and Commissione Paritetica, respectively), and whether they know their aims and functions. As briefly already explained, the CUG ensures the protection and promotion of individual dignity and of the rights to equal opportunities, non-discrimination, well-being, health, and safety of all people at the university, staff, and students. Individuating and removing any form of direct and indirect discrimination, including gender discrimination, is one of its declared objectives. The Joint Committee of students and professors is composed of four professors and four students who jointly monitor the quality of the curricula offered by the different degree courses to guarantee the implementation of good

practices in the teaching activities and solve potential disputes. The two survey questions allowed to estimate the share of students aware of the existence in the academic environment of institutions they can speak to in order to signal and remove any kind of discrimination related to their sexual identity or orientation, religion, or ethnicity.

The third question of this section focused on the concept of "equal opportunities." This is a comprehensive notion, set off in the Italian Constitution, indicating the condition in which individuals face no discrimination, for any reason whatsoever, in all possible aspects of life, political, social, economic etc. Despite its wideness, this concept is often identified with (and hence reduced to) the abolition of any form of gender discrimination.

Respondents were thus asked to indicate which, among the following, describes the concept of "equal opportunity" at best: i) a condition in which each person, regardless of gender, nationality, religion, political viewpoint, and sexual preferences, has the same life perspective and opportunities; ii) a condition in which men and women work under the same rules, earn the same salary for the same job, and have the same career opportunities; iii) a condition in which no type of discrimination exists (besides, as usual, the choice "I don't know" as well). Hence, the most comprehensive definition was coupled with two other possibilities: one restricting this condition to the abolition of any form of gender difference (i.e., of one single type of discrimination) on the job market (i.e., in one single aspect of life), and one referring to an utterly undetailed condition. The former definition has been chosen to investigate whether, also among students, this concept is indeed typically interpreted in a quite lessened way. The latter definition has been intentionally left extremely vague to assess students' propensity to think deeper about equal opportunities.

The last question of this section aims at assessing the actual knowledge of students about the gender gap in Italy, whether they are aware of the situation or whether they underestimate it. The question refers to the Global Gender Gap Report, published yearly by the World Economic Forum, which evaluates about 150 countries based on several indicators of gender gaps in the economy, politics, education, and health. These indicators are then summarized into a final index, which ranges between 0, i.e., total gender disparity, and 1, i.e., total gender parity, and allows for a final rank. Respondents were asked to indicate their opinion about the position of Italy in this ranking, whether they think Italy is among the best 50 countries, the worst 50 countries, somewhere in the middle, or "I don't know." Answers allow us to have an idea of the distribution of students in terms of their overestimation, underestimation, or awareness of gender issues in Italy. In the 2018 Global Gender Gap Report, the most recent one at the time the survey was administered, Italy ranked as the 70th country (with a final index of 0.706) out of the 149 considered, i.e., in the middle of the distribution.

Demographics

The latter section aimed at collecting information about the demographics of the respondents. Specifically, respondents were asked to provide information on their gender, year and course of enrollment, and nationality as well as the year of birth and educational level of (both) parents.

The gender of the respondent is among the covariates of most interest, as the sensibility to the gender gaps, and hence the distribution of the answers to some of the questions in the survey, is expected to be remarkably different between male and female students. The year and course of enrolment are helpful to control how much the students are "experienced" with the academic environment, and if perceptions and awareness change according to how students self-select in one field or another, whilst nationality has been asked, taking advantage of the large international environment of the Faculty of Economics at the university of Rome Tor Vergata, to account for the potentially relevant role of different cultural backgrounds. The birth year and education level of both parents has also been solicited. In doing so, the wording has intentionally avoided the canonical use of terms like "Father" and "Mother," leaving the respondents free to indicate the gender of Parent 1 and Parent 2. This with the twofold aim of being as inclusive as possible, allowing for the possibility that students might have grown up with same-sex couples of parents and of studying the diffusion of the bias according to which the male parent typically comes first. Besides, the answers to this question were of high interest as the level of education of the parents, along with the potential inequality between the two, act as a proxy of the cultural context and family models within which students grow up, which are expected to sensibly affect their sensibility and awareness of gender-related issues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section briefly summarizes the main evidence drawn from the survey, starting from the demographics of the respondents and then moving to their perception of gender differences at the university and in the labor market.

Demographics

The questionnaire was completed by 814 individuals, 216 of whom in presence and 598 via the web. Among the latter, 434 were completed in Italian and 164 in English. The online questionnaire was distributed through the library's Faculty mailing list which counted, at the time of the questionnaire administration, roughly 5800 addresses, leading to a response rate

of around 14% (or 19,4% if one considers only the 4196 students actually enrolled at the time the questionnaire was administered).

Table 10.1 summarizes the distribution of the answers in terms of administration and language of the survey, as well as of gender, course, year,

TABLE 10.1 Demographic Characteristics, Overall and by Gender of the Respondent

	Full Sample		Males		Female	
Variable	Absolute frequency	Share	Absolute frequency	Share	Absolute frequency	Share
Language						
Italian	650	79.85%	292	80.66%	328	78.66%
English	164	20.15%	70	19.34%	89	21.34%
Administered						
Online	**598**	**73.46%**	**237**	**65.47%**	**346**	**82.97%**
In person	**216**	**26.54%**	**125**	**34.53%**	**71**	**17.03%**
Gender						
Male	362	45.08%	362	100.00%	—	—
Female	417	51.93%	—	—	417	100.00%
No Answer	35	4.33%	—	—	—	—
Course						
Under-grad	484	59.46%	228	62.98%	240	57.55%
Post-grad	242	29.73%	100	27.62%	135	32.37%
PhD	8	0.98%	5	1.38%	3	0.72%
No answer	80	9.83%	29	8.01%	39	9.35%
Year						
1	323	40.07%	161	44.60%	156	37.50%
2	231	28.66%	97	26.87%	124	29.81%
3	88	10.92%	36	9.97%	50	12.02%
4	57	7.07%	28	7.76%	29	6.97%
5	107	13.28%	39	10.80%	57	13.70%
Graduate Parent						
No	401	53.89%	171	51.81%	222	57.00%
Yes	343	46.11%	159	48.19%	168	43.00%
Nationality						
Italian	598	86.04%	265	85.48%	310	86.11%
Non-Italian	97	13.96%	45	14.52%	50	13.89%

Note: The table reports the distribution of the demographic characteristics, over the full sample and by gender of the respondent. In bold, the variables for which the difference between the responses given by males and females is statistically significant.

nationality, and parents' demographics of the respondents, both overall and by gender of the respondent.

While the share of men is higher among the respondents in class, the digital answers are mainly provided by women (statistically significant difference). Most students are Italian, are currently enrolled in an undergraduate course, and only half of them has at least one parent with a university degree. Along none of these demographics though a statistical difference is observed between male and female respondents, meaning that our sample is in this respect gender-balanced.

Perception of Gender Gaps at the University

Table 10.2 reports the distributions of the answers to the questions on the perception of gender differences, again over the entire sample and by gender of the respondent. No statistically significant difference between gender is observed with respect to the graduation time of the students or the teaching abilities of the teacher, while the picture changes when it comes to the exams' final marks. In that respect, about half of the sample perceive no difference between girls and boys, while 21% of the students perceive an advantage for the girls. and another 17% believe that it depends on the topic of the course. Besides, these perceptions are not equally engrained among students: the first is more widespread among male (27.6% against 15.1%), while the latter among female (13.3% against 20.1%).

Two other typical stereotypes are confirmed: on the one hand, that the predisposition towards some disciplines depends on the gender of the student, and, on the other, that males typically succeed because they are brilliant while females succeed because they study hard. Moreover, the perception of the different career opportunities is significantly more widespread among female students than among their male counterparts.

Finally, Figure 10.1 shows the deeply rooted perception that the motivations behind the choice of a certain study path are remarkably different depending on the student's gender: men choose having their career opportunities and salary in mind, while women do so mostly focusing on work–life balance (differences are statistically significant except for "personal attitudes and passions").

Perceptions of Gender Gaps in the Job Market

Figure 10.2 shows that in all the questions about differences in job conditions and opportunities, female perceive significantly more than male students the disparities in terms of lower chances of getting a job (panel A),

TABLE 10.2 Perception of Gender Differences, Overall and by Gender of the Respondents

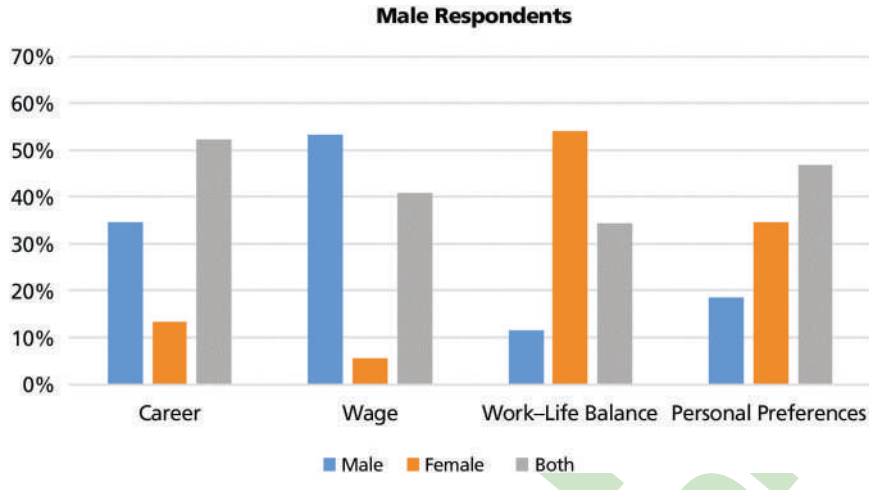
Variable	Full Sample		Males		Female	
	Absolute frequency	Share	Absolute frequency	Share	Absolute frequency	Share
Mark						
Women higher	**170**	**20.88%**	**100**	**27.62%**	**63**	**15.11%**
Men higher	**29**	**3.56%**	**14**	**3.87%**	**15**	**3.60%**
No difference	**362**	**44.47%**	**149**	**41.16%**	**196**	**47.00%**
It depends on the exam	**135**	**16.58%**	**48**	**13.26%**	**84**	**20.14%**
I don't know	**118**	**14.50%**	**51**	**14.09%**	**59**	**14.15%**
Graduation time						
Women sooner	186	22.85%	78	21.55%	101	24.22%
Men sooner	40	4.91%	17	4.70%	23	5.52%
No difference	438	53.81%	213	58.84%	211	50.60%
I don't know	150	18.43%	54	14.92%	82	19.66%
Teachers						
Male better	120	14.76%	61	16.90%	52	12.47%
Female better	68	8.36%	28	7.76%	38	9.11%
No difference	568	69.86%	246	68.14%	300	71.94%
I don't know	57	7.01%	26	7.20%	27	6.47%
Aptitude towards Management						
Women better	**89**	**11.03%**	**22**	**6.11%**	**65**	**15.70%**
Men better	**96**	**11.90%**	**58**	**16.11%**	**29**	**7.00%**
No difference	**468**	**57.99%**	**206**	**57.22%**	**248**	**59.90%**
I don't know	**154**	**19.08%**	**74**	**20.56%**	**72**	**17.39%**

(continued)

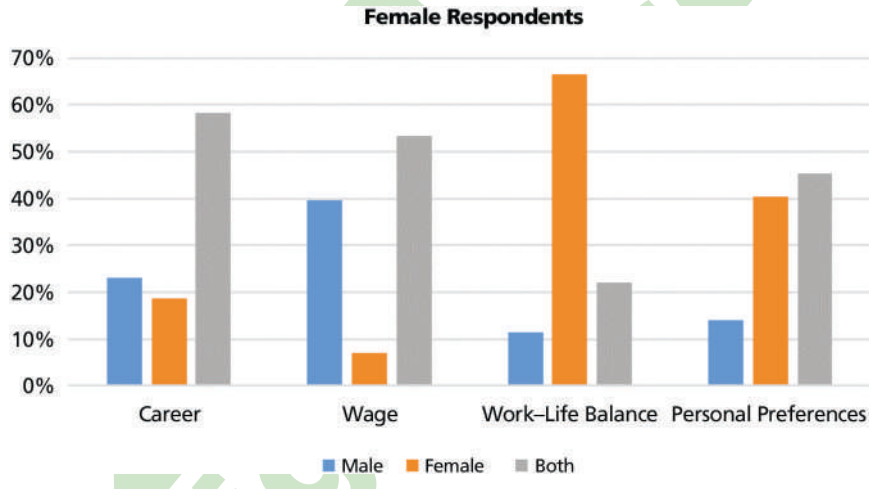
TABLE 10.2 Perception of Gender Differences, Overall and by Gender of the Respondents (cont.)

Variable	Full Sample		Males		Female	
	Absolute frequency	Share	Absolute frequency	Share	Absolute frequency	Share
Aptitude towards Economics						
Women better	**44**	**5.41%**	**15**	**4.14%**	**28**	**6.71%**
Men better	**143**	**17.57%**	**62**	**17.13%**	**73**	**17.51%**
No difference	**431**	**52.95%**	**188**	**51.93%**	**227**	**54.44%**
I don't know	**196**	**24.08%**	**97**	**26.80%**	**89**	**21.34%**
Pierre						
Study hard and very committed	**664**	**81.67%**	**289**	**80.06%**	**347**	**83.21%**
Had good aptitude	**93**	**11.44%**	**37**	**10.25%**	**53**	**12.71%**
I don't know	**56**	**6.89%**	**35**	**9.70%**	**17**	**4.08%**
Marie						
Study hard and very committed	**683**	**84.01%**	**297**	**82.27%**	**359**	**86.09%**
Had good aptitude	**67**	**8.24%**	**23**	**6.37%**	**40**	**9.59%**
I don't know	**63**	**7.75%**	**41**	**11.36%**	**18**	**4.32%**
Opportunities on the private sector						
Men better opportunities	**459**	**56.60%**	**164**	**45.56%**	**281**	**67.55%**
Women better opportunities	**36**	**4.44%**	**20**	**5.56%**	**14**	**3.37%**
No difference	**245**	**30.21%**	**140**	**38.89%**	**95**	**22.84%**
I don't know	**71**	**8.75%**	**36**	**10.00%**	**26**	**6.25%**

Note: The table reports the number of observations and the relative share of the respondents by the answers given to the questions on perception, over the entire sample and by gender of the respondent. In bold, the variables where the difference between the responses given by males and females are statistically significant.



(a)



(b)

Figure 10.1 Motivations considered when choosing the University program to enroll.

of lower salary (panel B) and of lower chances of accessing management roles (panel C).

This significant difference persists even when the respondents are provided with specific data on gender gaps from Almalaurea and Eurostat, whereby again female students show greater awareness and sensitivity to the data, while male students typically underestimate the issue of different gender opportunities in the workplace, see Figure 10.3.

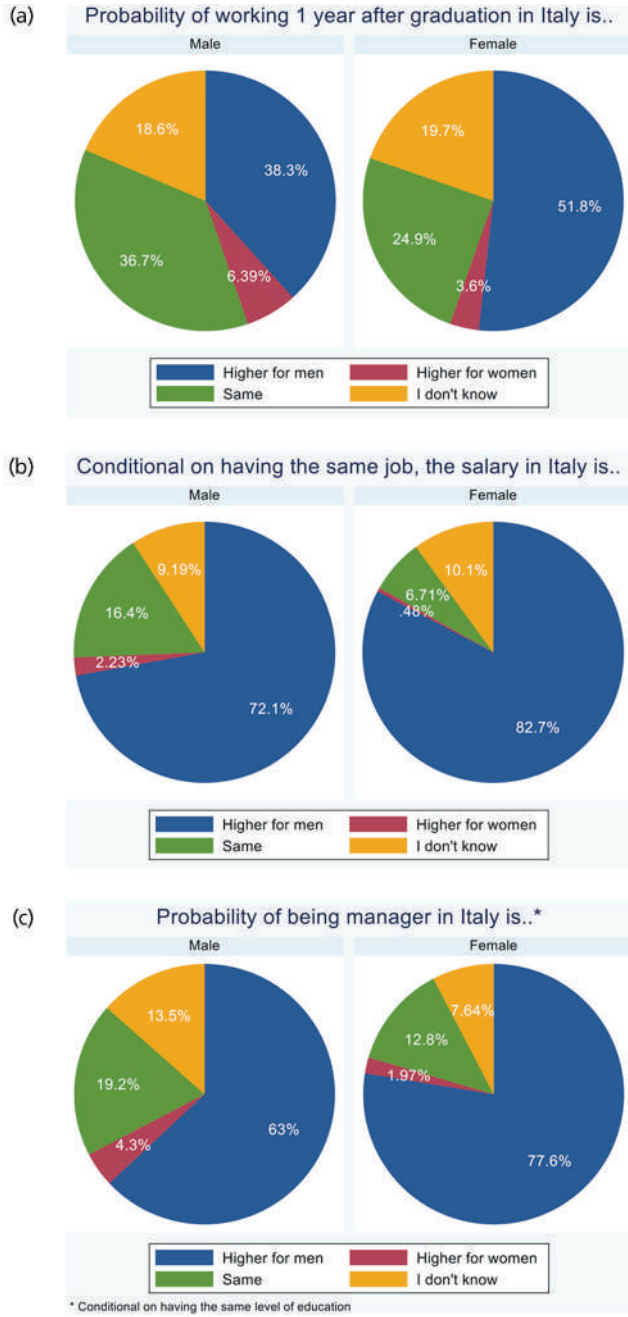


Figure 10.2 Perceptions of gender differences in the labor market.

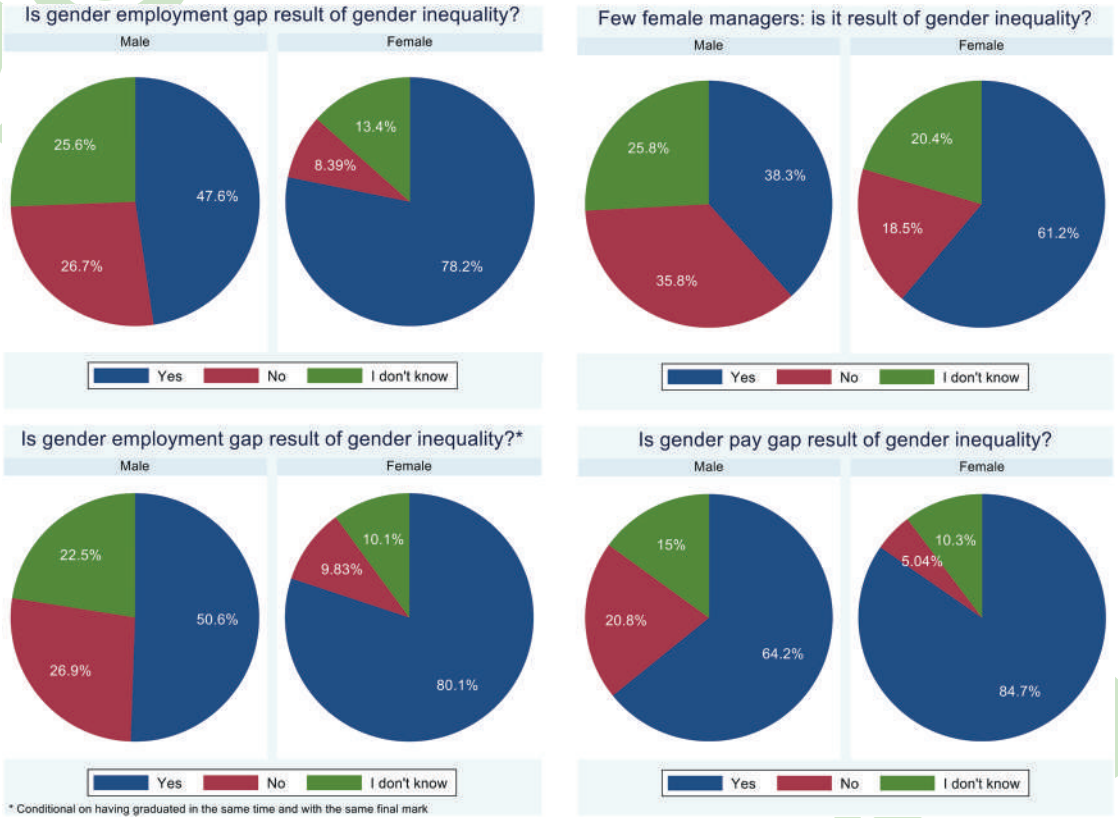


Figure 10.3 Perceptions of labor market gender gaps, after information provision.

Awareness of Gender Gaps and the Role of Institutions

Most of the respondents, in this case without significant distinctions between genders, know neither the existence of CUG and Commissione Paritetica, the two institutional bodies devoted to guaranteeing equal opportunity and participation in academia, nor their goals and functioning (92,5% and 83.8% for the two committees, respectively, as shown in panel A of Figure 10.4). The awareness slightly increases with students' seniority, probably thanks to the longer stay within the University, but remains quite low even among PhD students, suggesting the need to spread information about the central roles of these boards, their role and activities throughout the student community.

Similarly, panel B of Figure 10.4 shows that less than half of students, again with no significant difference between males and females, is able to

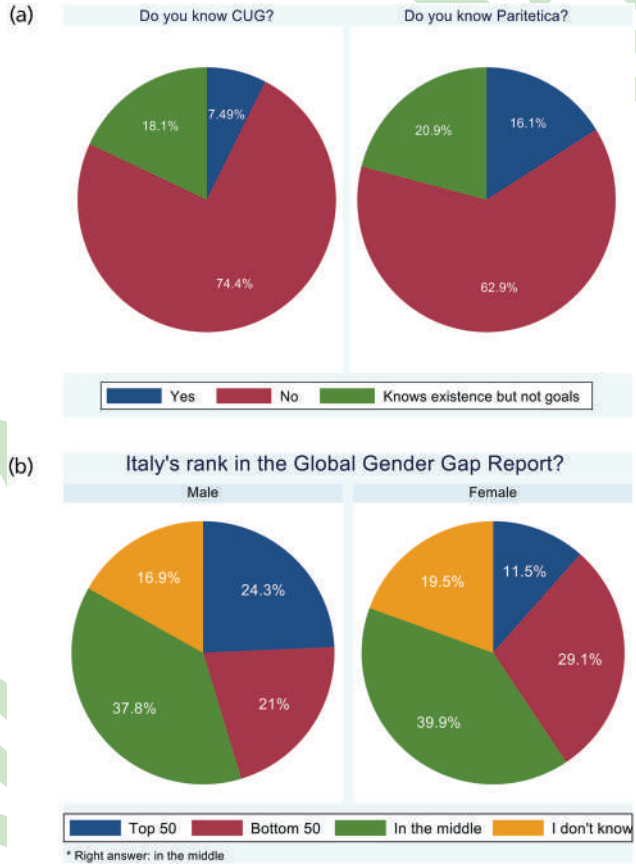


Figure 10.4 Knowledge of CUG and Paritetica and of Global Gender Gap Report Italy's rank.

collocate Italy in its right ranking according to the Global Gender Gap Report (GGR).

CONCLUSION

The activities of the focus group and the survey presented in this chapter allowed to unveil the perceptions of gender issues in a university environment, with a specific focus on the student's population. This is still quite an unexplored issue, especially in Italian academia, despite gender gaps are observed at different levels. While gender disparities have now been explored with reference to the access to the academic career and promotions of professors (Filandri and Pasqua, 2021), perceptions and experiences of gender discrimination among students have not been studied yet. Our study is a first step in filling this gap in the literature.

The results of the survey administered to the students of the Faculty of Economics of a large Italian University are in line with what reported in the literature (e.g., by Sipe et al., 2009, or Sipe et al., 2016) and show that both male and female students tend to underestimate the existence of gender disparities, even though female students tend to perceive and recognize gender imbalances more than their male counterparts, even when they receive specific information about the data related to gender disparities. On the other hand, and again in line with what reported in previous studies (see e.g., Schmitt et al., 2002), female students are aware of their gender membership and of their limitations in their employment opportunities. There remains a strong polarization in what many perceive as innate differences, i.e., in the determining factors of the choice of study path; such a finding confirms that among young adults and adolescents, a conventional family arrangement (a husband working full time and a wife staying home with children) remains the most desired and expected (Dernberger and Pepin 2020). Finally, a high percentage of students, no matter the gender, ignore the existence of the CUG, the only institutional body within universities in charge of ensuring equal opportunities.

Our findings suggest that while working to contrast gender discrimination in any form and to un-build gender stereotypes, we should also take care of enhancing students' awareness about these issues through specific actions since the very beginning of their stay in the university environment.

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