

GENDER ASYMMETRIES IN RESEARCH CENTERS: ADDRESSING *GENDER FATIGUE* AND PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY PLANS

by Arianna Santero*

Abstract

Gender Equality Plans have become increasingly important in both public and private work organizations. This paper aims to identify the challenges, limitations, and opportunities of implementing Gender Equality Plans in research centers in Italy. This will be achieved through a literature review, as well as by identifying successful strategies employed by innovative organizations through stakeholder perspectives. Among the best practices, in particular for promoting work-life balance, the article highlights the use of quali-quantitative tools to identify gender intersectional disparities, participatory training methods, and the negotiation of shared, context-specific goals and actions with a phased approach to incentive identification. Finally, measures encouraging substantive equality will be discussed.

Keywords

Gender Equality Plans, Research centers, Gender fatigue, PNRR The National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Gender Certification.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Several studies highlight the persistence of gender asymmetries in public and private research centers across Europe and Italy (EC, 2021; 2023). These asymmetries encompass processes of vertical and horizontal segregation, gaps in remuneration and productivity enhancement, and motherhood penalties (Naldini and Poggio, 2023; Agodi, Lauria, Picardi, 2021; Anzivino and Dordoni, 2021; Sciannamblo and Viteritti, 2021; Picardi, 2020). This underscores the importance of implementing measures to bridge these gaps (Filandri, Pasqua, Priori, 2023). Additionally, the higher incidence of precarious contracts and the abandonment of highly skilled careers by women in science (Carriero and Naldini, 2022; Murgia and Poggio, 2019; UNESCO, 2015), asymmetries in power and leadership (Colella, Gianturco, Nocenzi, 2017), and the “glass ceiling” phenomenon (Santero, Bertolini, Piga, 2023; Cannito, Naldini, Santero, 2023) have been documented.

Italy, with a female employment rate of around 50 percent in 2023, has experienced a comparatively low average participation of women in the labor market for years (OECD, 2023). Despite improvements since the approval of the Golfo-Mosca Law (EC, 2022), women remain underrepresented in top positions within companies and research centers, and they are subjected to a “double standard” (Gaiaschi, 2022). Gender segregation between sectors and functions persists (Semenza, Boccardo and Sarti, 2021), leading to disparities in employment continuity, salary and career advancement (Solera, 2009).

During the pandemic, these inequalities became more pronounced globally, especially in certain contexts and social groups (Braunstein, 2021; Mooi-Reci and Risman, 2021; Remery et. al. 2022). This phenomenon, referred to in the literature as 'shecession,' has also impacted the research and innovation sectors in several countries (Yerkes et al., 2020; OECD, 2021), including Italy (Carreri and Dordoni, 2020; Addabbo et al., 2022; Ghislieri et al. 2022; Carreri, Naldini, Tuselli, 2023).

Through the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* PNRR - within the *Next Generation EU program* - the Italian government has promulgated The National Strategy for Gender Equality (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2021; General Accounting Office of the State, 2021), starting with the *European Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025*. These strategies are the development of previous European policies, which, since the 1990s, have contributed to the establishment of the *gender mainstreaming* approach (Corsi and Samek Lodovici, 2010),

integrating the gender dimension into decision-making processes and research content (EC, 2024).

In this context, Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in public and private work organizations have gained increasing relevance across Europe. GEPs are a set of strategic goals and interventions designed to promote gender equality within a specific organization. They may have a legal basis defined by national or regional laws, or may be based on collective agreements at the national, local or labor organization level. In their most effective forms, GEPs also include a set of indicators to measure their impact and effectiveness over specific time periods. These indicators should help to understand both the formal and informal modes of organizational functioning, allowing for the development of strategic actions aimed at achieving gender equality. Thus, a GEP is not merely a matter of adhering to general principles that include gender alongside other aspects (e.g., fostering diversity or reducing discrimination); rather, it focuses on implementing specific organizational changes that promote gender equality (Sansonetti et al., 2017).

Several EU countries have made GEPs or Positive Action Plans mandatory for public administrations through national laws, and in some cases, for companies with a certain number of employees as well. This has created incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises that adopt them (Sansonetti et al., 2017). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has provided operational tools and definitions for implementing Gender Equity Plans¹. As of 2022, the European Commission has determined that GEPs are a requirement for research centers wishing to participate in the Horizon funding program (as outlined in the document *New ERA for Research and Innovation and the new Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*). Moreover, public funds have supported various research and action programs (such as MINDtheGEPs, GE Academy, #ACTonGender) that focus on gender asymmetries and GEPs in research centers and universities (Clavero and Galligan, 2021; Ní Laoire et al., 2021).

In Italy, the debate has also been endorsed by networks of private companies such as Fondazione Bellisario, Valore D, Parks - Liberi e Uguali. Several studies conducted in Italy have highlighted the importance of corporate practices and cultures for advancing gender equality. This line of research on organizational diversity has led to significant proposals, not only for the implementation of new corporate welfare initiatives (Poggio, 2009; Poggio, Murgia, De Bon, 2010) but

¹ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/what-gender-equality-plan-gep>

also for utilizing existing national welfare measures to support work-life balance (Musumeci and Santero, 2018; Bertolini and Poggio, 2022).

However, studies on the implementation and impact of GEPs in research centers are still limited (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark, 2016; Sansonetti et al., 2017; Cois, Naldini, Solera, 2023; Cannito, Poggio, Tuselli, 2023). The institutionalization of GEPs has not always led to substantive changes in organizational cultures across all intervention areas. There is a risk that the transformative mandate of GEPs may be diminished in the translation of plans into actions (Picardi, Addabbo, Cois, 2023).

This topic is of particular interest in Italy, as it explores whether and how the National Recovery Plan (PNRR) can promote substantive gender equality in the labor market, especially given the recent approval of the implementing decrees for the Certification of Gender Equality for Businesses. These decrees provide indicators and incentives for actions that promote equality, which align, in part, with the lines of action outlined in GEPs.

The article aims to identify the main challenges of implementing the GEPs in Europe, the factors that can foster their implementation, and the limitations and potential that emerge in the Italian context. This contribution is based on a review of studies and an exploration of various gender equality initiatives promoted by private and public research centers and universities in Italy. This was conducted through the examination of documents related to the realized actions and 10 interviews with individuals involved in the enactment of GEPs². Particular attention will be paid to measures that promote the reconciliation of paid work and the rest of life, across the dimensions identified as strategic by the PNRR: work, income, skills, time, and power (Colella and Gianturco, 2023).

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH: GENDER PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The article is based on the *gendered organization* approach, which posits that inequalities persist in workplaces because gender is embedded in

² The qualitative interviews and the examined documents focused on the implementation of GEPs and Positive Actions in Italy and in international projects, including for companies such as the Valore D network, as well as for universities and research centers, the CNR, University of Cagliari, University Federico II of Naples, University of Trento, University of Turin, Collegio Carlo Alberto, and the Fondazione Museo delle Antichità Egizie di Torino. Reflections emerged among participants in the MINDtheGEP project training on gender equality, in which I took part in Vigo in June 2022, have been included.

organizations (Acker, 1990; 1992). This theory directs attention to the specific social norms underlying the gendered nature of workplaces and organizational culture, understood as the set of assumptions and beliefs shared by members of an organization that operates unconsciously, defining an organization's view of itself and its environment in a taken-for-granted manner (Schein, 1997). It encompasses pervasive images, symbols, and ideologies related to femininity and masculinity that shape the division of labor, organizational logic, workplace interactions, and ideal worker models. Additionally, it includes unconscious gender biases—unintentional and automatic gender-based mental associations derived from traditions, norms, values, or experiences. In particular, “second-generation gender biases” (Ibarra et al., 2013) have replaced overt discrimination with subtler and less visible forms of bias in male-dominated contexts (Özdemir and Albayrak, 2015). Moreover, as studies on scientific work show, work organizations are a crucial level for the reproduction of gender inequalities, particularly concerning work climate and the establishment of evaluation procedures and criteria (Nielsen, Bloch, Schieinger, 2018). Since the principle of meritocracy assumes the gender neutrality of hiring, retention and promotion procedures, merit has, in fact, become an institutional principle than underpins much resistance to change in a more equitable direction (Clavero and Galligan, 2020).

One of the advantages of this theoretical perspective is that it enables the investigation of organizational change processes toward gender equality stimulated by GEPs within an institutionalized setting. In particular, it allows for the distinction between change processes (both formal and informal) that are more or less institutionalized, and therefore more or less sustainable for that company or organization (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark, 2016). Furthermore, the contribution of the intersectional perspective highlights that gender processes in organizations do not develop in isolation; instead, they must be understood in conjunction with other factors involving social class, skin color, religion, and other forms of inequality (Acker, 2012; Di Stasio and Larsen, 2020; Galante and Santero, 2021).

This theoretical approach is particularly interesting in the context of institutional strategies for gender equality adopted in Italy and Europe. Indeed, the focus of this approach is on the organizations, rather than just on women: it calls for the transformation of organizational cultures, not merely policies or structures at the individual, local or national level. While implying systemic, integrated and long-term approaches, this framework recognizes that each organization has a unique history, culture, and internal mode of operation. Therefore, priorities for

delineating interventions must be defined based on context-specific data (Solera et al., 2023). This so-called “organizational turn” (Moen, 2015) appears effective in understanding why some equality initiatives succeed while others do not (Kalev et al., 2006; Wynn and Correll, 2018). Indeed, the underlying assumption of GEP is that the benefits of reducing of gender gaps in work organizations through the implementation of equality action plans emerge not only at the levels of productivity and managerial performance but also in the sphere of innovation in organizational cultures and practices, with benefits extending beyond the individual firm (Acker, 1992; Picardi, 2020). Indeed, the gender *innovation* approach (Schiebinger, 2008; EC, 2020) highlights the potential of the gender perspective to innovate knowledge, products, and both technological and social models (Tagliacozzo and Di Tullio, 2021). Furthermore, feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of focusing on reproductive labor and caregiving to identify work models, such as *dual earner-dual carer* (Gornick and Meyers, 2003) that are sustainable from the perspective of welfare and rights. This involve a broader redefinition of gender relations - across generations and among individuals, the market, and the state - to allow for a more equitable distribution of resources and to ensure the well-being of both individuals and organizations. Additionally, other contributions highlight the resistance and obstacles to the implementation of GEPs, underscoring the need to consider the material, cultural, and institutional dimensions of gender asymmetries (Kelan, 2009; Benschop and van den Brink, 2014).

We then continue our analysis of the challenges in implementing GEPs in Europe, the factors that can promote them, and the limitations and potential that arise in Italy concerning PNRR and Gender Certification, based on available studies and interviews with entities implementing GEPs.

3. GEP IMPLEMENTATION STUDIES AND EXPERIENCES

3.1 *Four challenges in the implementation of GEPs*

A primary challenge emerging from the literature is *gender fatigue* and resistance (Tildesley, Lombardo, Verge, 2022; Tildesley, 2023). This phenomenon occurs in the context of “post-feminist sensibilities” (Gill, 2016; Gill, Kelan, Scharff, 2017). Gender fatigue refers to the belief that gender equality has already been achieved and that no further initiatives are needed to enhance it (Acker, 1990; Kelan, 2009; Ainsworth, Knox, O'Flynn, 2010; Van den Brink and Stobbe, 2014; Williamson, 2020;

Colley et al., 2021). There is evidence of “defensive institutional work,” wherein organizational actors resist the implementation of gender equity measures in their research centers by intentionally employing discursive strategies that legitimize initiatives without concrete expected outcomes and with indefinite timelines for implementation (Luyckx et al., 2020). Moreover, some studies have highlighted how gender bias can undermine the effectiveness of training, mentoring, and networking initiatives (Benschop et al., 2015; Williamson and Foley, 2018). Other research has focused on the impact of initiatives promoted by organizational leaders and has indicated that resistance from the managerial component can diminish the impact of equality actions (Benschop and van den Brink, 2014; Colley et al., 2020). Indeed, multivariate analyses have shown that individuals in leadership positions tend to have a more positive perception of gender equality in their organizations compared to lower-level staff, and male leaders in particular are more likely to defend the status quo. This calls into question the effectiveness of change strategies that rely on leadership and organizational approaches that view senior leaders as effective change agents for gender equality (Cortis, Foley, Williamson, 2021).

Connected to the first challenge, a second challenge identified by previous studies highlights the importance of articulating *shared goals*. These goals include not only the improvement of productivity but also the welfare of staff and gender equity, extending beyond individual companies, institutions, or universities. In particular, some scholars argue that a gendered approach to the content of scientific knowledge and research work should contribute to enhancing not just its managerial aspects, but more importantly, the quality of the knowledge produced and its application in a democratic context (Khaler, 2018). Some analyses indicate that considering the adoption of gender equality measures from the perspective of business returns facilitates companies' engagement in such measures. However, conflicts of interest and power relations within this framework can complicate matters and negatively affect the outcomes of the actions taken (Johansson and Ringblom, 2017).

Interconnected with the previous challenges, a third challenge concerns the *process of institutionalizing* GEPs. Translating national (or international) directives into local organizational contexts may be guided by differing principles, which can be either more conservative or more transformative (Peterson and Jordansson, 2022). The implementation of GEPs depends not only on how the overall program is understood, but also on how the individual actions envisioned are institutionalized and made sustainable within the organization. Actions that consider the

gender dimension in the content of research and teaching, for example, may lose effectiveness in the process of translating directives into organizational actions if they are not sufficiently institutionalized (Picardi, Addabbo, Cois, 2023). Lower levels of institutionalization can lead to a failure to fully achieve the formally intended goals; however, even in these cases, benefits related to equal opportunity may still be realized (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark, 2016).

Last but not least, a fourth challenge concerns the *impact evaluation* of GEPs. Research on the implementation of GEPs in organizations faces several difficulties due to the lack of data on gender disparities at national and comparative levels, as well as between organizations. Additionally, most GEPs vary significantly in terms of content and implementation modalities. Moreover, multiple factors intervene and mediate the effects of the introduced measures, making counterfactual analyses inapplicable (Sansonetti et al., 2017). As a result, the available studies are predominantly case studies that focus on the processes of resistance and the factors favoring the adoption of GEPs.

3.2 *Factors favoring the implementation of GEPs*

Based on the evidence gathered from implementing actors in Italy, several factors influence the adoption and impact of GEPs. Some of these factors are related to the *exogenous* context in which the organization operates, such as the completeness of the legal and policy framework and the presence of well-equipped support structures. On the other hand, *internal* factors include the presence of formal and substantive support and commitment from top management, a combination of a top-down approach (where GEPs are defined by the top management of research and corporate centers) and a bottom-up approach (which involves participatory methods engaging staff across different levels and functions), the involvement of community members, adequate funding, and the ability to identify and manage resistance. The interplay of international pressures, such as the mandatory GEPs required for applying for Horizon 2020 program funds, along with internal motivations - including staff and student mobilizations in some countries - has further reinforced the adoption of GEPs (Linková et al., 2023).

Specific factors are identified at different stages of implementation. Regarding the first step of GEP initiation, interviews conducted for this article revealed that *identifying key contextual aspects*, the organizational components necessary for implementation, and potential allies - based on their level of influence and resistance to gender equality - is crucial.

Additionally, securing *economic resources* is critical to fund not only individual actions but also to support the staff involved in data collection for the GEP, the definition of actions, and subsequent implementation and monitoring. To define and implement the planned actions, the interviews indicate that it is also essential to build a *support network* locally among organizations and research centers, as well as nationally and internationally. Furthermore, clarifying and *legitimizing the mandate* of each person and institution involved in the network is necessary for implementing specific actions.

At the data collection and monitoring stage, the drivers for GEP implementation specifically involve identifying all types of data that may be relevant to the particular organizational context. This includes data that define the legislative and policy framework, employing appropriate sources of information and survey techniques to reconstruct the functioning of institutional and organizational barriers to career development and decision-making. The principle of ‘no data, no problem, no policy’ must be overcome (Solera et al., 2023). Indicators that are generally considered include gender inequality in leadership (e.g., the composition of apex bodies and recruitment and career progression committees), gender analysis of research and institutional communications, and any measures to promote gender equality. Data related to recruitment and career progression should include information on the gender balance of staff across different roles and functions, promotion rates, and salary discrepancies. Regarding work-life balance, indicators should also consider existing practices, national and local support measures, as well as organizational and informal expectations. All staff positions should be involved through objectives, targets, and indicators of ongoing progress, which need to be monitored regularly. Quantitative data can be supplemented with qualitative data on the equity measures implemented and the perceptions of male and female employees through the use of various qualitative-quantitative techniques.

At the stage of defining the actions to be included in GEPs, it is essential to identify *objectives that are realistic* and appropriate to the context for both *the short and long term*, as well as *monitoring* periods through indicators. The necessary resources must be identified, and the set of responsibilities should be clearly defined. It is important to *build alliances* (Verge, 2021), among staff and with stakeholders at different levels, clarifying the benefits and sustainability aspects so that new practices can be integrated into the normal organizational routine.

Particularly for the promoting work-life balance, the construction and integration of qualitative and quantitative tools for detecting gender

asymmetries, the use of *participatory training methods*, and the identification of shared, context-specific goals and actions through a phased, incentive-linked approach are useful. International research also emphasizes the importance of the participatory approach in the design and monitoring of GEPs (Sangiuliano and Cortesi, 2019). During the implementation phase, it is important to hold regular meetings with those involved in implementing the planned measures, as well as to maintain visibility to the GEP.

4. LIMITS AND POTENTIALS OF GEPs, PNRR AND GENDER CERTIFICATION.

The main limitations to the implementation of GEPs, as identified in interviews with key informants, include a lack of leadership support, insufficient funding, inadequate resources, a lack of institutionalization and authority within the organization, resistance at intermediate and bureaucratic levels, and highly competitive organizational cultures that perceive GEPs as counter-normative rather than as valuable contributions to the effective promotion of merit.

In distinguishing between evaluation and monitoring - actions that can both be undertaken inside or outside the organization - it is important to recognize that the effectiveness of such actions enhanced when they are coherent and well-integrated with the GEP. This integration should be guided by indicators, targets, and follow-up tools that have been established in collaboration with the working group involved in the GEP's implementation and with support of gender expertise. The potential of a GEP lies in its nature as a continuous process that must be sustained over time. While nonlinear progress may occur, once concluded, subsequent initiatives can build on existing resources with reduced effort and expense. This approach strengthens integration among action lines, increases visibility, and fosters both internal and external support. To enhance these aspects, it is effective to communicate the organization's commitment to gender equality and progress achieved to staff, stakeholders and in the community.

From the studies considered in this review and interviews with implementers, the issue of *organizational sustainability*, closely linked to that of the substantive effectiveness of GEPs, emerges as crucial in a context of increasing pressure for their implementation. Promoting sustainability means focusing on processes, not just outcomes; it also involves ensuring *accountability* and valuing work-life balance and well-being, rather than solely concentrating on productivity spillovers in

economic terms. Future directions for the implementation of GEPs in Italian companies and work organizations, therefore, require the critical development of an intersectional approach that considers other intersecting social categories related to gender, such as disability and nationality, as well as engaging more organizations and institutions within a more comparatively harmonious framework.

So, can PNRR investments be a good opportunity to make GEPs more widespread and effective? In the PNRR, the social inclusion investment axis prioritizes gender equality, along with the protection and empowerment of young people and the bridging of territorial gaps. Each of the missions under which the PNRR is organized contains interventions aimed at directly or indirectly promoting women's participation in the labor market. With specific reference to increasing the presence of women in the labor market and achieving a higher level of well-being and quality of working conditions, the mission "cohesion and inclusion" has two strategic objectives: the enhancement of women's entrepreneurship and the establishment of a national certification system for gender equality. Regarding the GEPs, the primary goal is the establishment of a national gender equality certification system to support and encourage enterprises to adopt appropriate policies aimed at reducing the gender gap in specific areas that impact the quality of work³. In fact, the underlying idea of the investment is to create a monitoring system for the status and working conditions of both men and women in workplace, aiming to involve enterprises of all sizes. By December 2026, at least 800 small and medium-sized enterprises should be certified, and 1,000 companies should receive the necessary facilities. Article 47 of Decree-Law No. 77/2021 (converted by Law No. 108 of July 29, 2021) stipulates that the corporate gender parity ratio is a necessary condition for companies with more than 50 employees (previously 100) to apply for participation or to submit bids in public tenders that utilize funds derived from PNRR and PNC resources.

From the perspective of *detecting and monitoring gender*, this intervention is crucial to collect data at the micro (firm) level, based on nationally established indicators and modalities. One of the main

³ Law No. 162 of December 5, 2021, amending the Equal Opportunity Code, established in 1991 and already reformed in 2006 by Legislative Decree 198 of 2006, introduced gender equality certification by adding Article 46a to the Equal Opportunity Code. Minimum parameters for achieving certification, methods of acquiring and monitoring data transmitted by employers and made available by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy; methods of involving company trade union representatives and equal opportunity counselors; and forms of publicizing the certification are established by the subsequent Ministerial Decree of July 1, 2022.

limitations in assessing the effectiveness of GEPs (and subsequently improving them) as we have seen, is the lack of comparable data. Therefore, this aspect is of great interest. In this context, alongside the data required for the report, the possibility of reflecting on case-specific processes, and not just outcome, remains an important aspect that should be preserved.

Another aspect of great interest concerns the *incentives* for companies that adopt measures for gender equality and provide reports to monitor gender metrics. The investment will enable the establishment of a nationwide reward framework during the planned experimental period leading up to 2026, complementing the existing opportunities available through private initiatives. Companies that obtain certification for gender equality will be entitled to a contribution exemption, capped at 1 percent and up to a maximum of 50,000 euros annually for each company. Additionally, they will be eligible for bonus points when participating in European, national, and regional calls for funding (along with the opportunity to enhance their image, well-being, and productivity within the company). Law No. 234 of December 30, 2021, known as the Budget Law for 2022, increased the allocation for the Fund for the Support of Gender Pay Equality (which was already established at the Ministry of Labor by the Budget Law of 2021). It allocated resources that can be used for companies to obtain certification and an additional fund for training activities related to obtaining certification. Additionally, two special exemptions were established from a contribution perspective: one (at a rate of 100 percent) for the hiring of female workers during the two-year period of 2021-2022, and one, on an experimental basis for 2022, for employed mothers in the private sector (at a rate of 50 percent), starting from the date of their return to work after taking mandatory maternity leave.

The investment may also *influence the content* of GEPs and the language used to define them, as the implementing decree published in the Official Gazette specifies indicators (key actions) and minimum thresholds for obtaining Equality Certification based on the number of employees in companies. Promoting a *common language* can serve as a foundation for exchanging and disseminating good practices, as well as fostering gender-inclusive and equitable corporate cultures. However, this may not fully align with the GEP Guidelines for universities and research centers seeking to access European funds such as Horizon 2020. The challenge will be to uphold the principles of *participatory methods* in order to implement sustainable and substantively effective measures centered around shared goals in companies and research centers, beyond merely achieving the required scores.

As an example, it suffices to say that Article 47 of Decree 77/2021 stipulates that public and private companies receiving PNRR and PNC funds are required to hire 30 percent women when executing contracts. However, the guidelines allow the single contracting authority to waive this 30 percent requirement for reasons related to the production sector. This aspect does not contribute to countering horizontal segregation processes, as it does not provide incentives to implement corrective measures in sectors that remain male-dominated, and it may lead to gender parity certificates for companies that, despite failing to meet the 30 percent hiring quota, achieve the established parameters. Additionally, the percentages of underrepresented gender staff to be hired to obtain the certification are calculated by sector. Therefore, for companies and entities in sectors where women make up the majority of average employees - which significantly contributes to driving women's employment participation in Italy, as well as in other countries - it becomes challenging to meet the indicators required for certification. Furthermore, as the literature review presented in the first part of the article shows, the indicator on the proportion of women in total staff, by itself, is insufficient to address asymmetries in the functioning of research organizations.

The investments from the PNRR help highlight, for the first time, the need for a national system that, as the Plan states, “accompanies and incentivizes enterprises to adopt appropriate policies to reduce the gender gap in all the most critical areas.” Different actors working on equal gender opportunities in the labor market - such as social partners, equality counselors, and companies - will need to engage in dialogue and take on new roles and responsibilities. The effectiveness of the initiative will depend on whether they can collaborate consciously and utilize the appropriate resources to fulfill their functions to the best of their ability. The new legislative framework established by Article 47 of Legislative Decree 77/2021 and Article 4 of Law 162/2021 alters and enhances the functions of equality counselors, who are part of the technical committee responsible for providing companies with the gender certificate. These counselors must receive the staff report, under penalty of nullity, for companies to participate in public tenders conducted by public and private entities with at least 50 employees (as mandated by the PNRR and the National Plan for Complementary Investment). To effectively fulfill their roles, some observers suggest that the institution of the equality counselor should be reorganized at the local level, with a complementary group to support (not substitute for) the regional counselor and ensure access to updated information on companies (Stumpo, 2022).

Certification legislation in Italy is very recent (the implementing decree setting minimum criteria for obtaining it was published on July 1, 2022⁴), so it is not yet possible to estimate how many companies will apply for it and adopt inclusive practices. During the experimental phase scheduled from April 2022 to April 2026, certification will be facilitated for medium, small, and micro-sized companies, supported by accompanying services and assistance. This *support system* will be crucial for the effective implementation of measures that align with the goals of the PNRR, addressing all the most critical areas: equal pay for equal work, opportunities for growth within the company, management of differences, and maternity protection.

The literature review revealed a crucial interplay between care responsibilities and paid work in the research and innovation sector. Attempts to improve work-life balance through *flexible work* arrangements have yielded surprisingly ambivalent results, especially concerning gender. The notion that the disadvantage faced by mothers arises directly from motherhood, or worse, 'from children,' rather than from organizational cultures and the gender dynamics within them, is evident through various gaps, negatively affecting female workers who have children, as well as fathers who are more involved in childcare, also within research institutions (Cannito and Santero, 2024). The fact that Law No. 275 of 2021 also addresses this important issue by classifying certain behaviors as "indirect" discrimination (i.e., behaviors that may seem neutral but can disadvantage workers with strong care responsibilities, more often women in certain contexts) is significant. This includes modifications to working conditions and hours that may disproportionately affect individuals based on gender and family responsibilities, limiting opportunities for participation in company or research center activities and decision-making. Moreover, while *corporate welfare* is crucial, as we have seen, both in defining family resources and enhancing organizational cultures, it *must be integrated with broader national and local measures*. In Italy, there are still persistent gaps that cannot be filled solely by corporate policies. These include provisions for paternity leave and services for children under the age of 3, as well as limited coverage for school-age children beyond regular school hours, which are significantly shorter than parents' working hours.

⁴ DM of the Presidency of the Council-Department for Family and Equal Opportunity defining which values to refer to in order to obtain certification: the reference practice UNI 125 of 2022 is adopted for this purpose, which came into force on March 16, 2022 in accordance with UNI CEI EN ISO/IEC 17021-1.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The article reconstructs the theoretical and empirical debate surrounding the implementation of Gender Equality Plans in research centers, institutions, and private companies across Europe. It identifies four main interrelated challenges: gender fatigue, institutionalization, goal identification, and impact evaluation. Furthermore, the article outlines the limitations and potential of these plans, along with the key factors influencing their adoption and implementation in organizations, with a particular focus on the context of Italy. This focus is based on the identification of good practices in innovative organizations, particularly concerning the phases of detecting and monitoring gender (Gender Audit), increasing gender awareness (training), and promoting well-being (designing innovative solutions). The article distinguishes between exogenous factors (external to the organization) and endogenous factors (internal) and highlights their impact on both the initiation and execution of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs).

In particular, among the potentials for promoting work-life balance, the article focuses on the development and integration of qualitative and quantitative tools for detecting gender asymmetries, the use of participatory methods for training, and the identification of shared, context-specific goals and actions using a phased, incentive-linked approach. The literature review and interviews with implementing actors facilitated the systematization of reflections on GEP implementation in Italy. Additionally, it provided an interpretive framework for the opportunities presented by the National Recovery Plan (PNRR), particularly regarding the establishment of a national system for Certification of Gender Equality in private companies. This was achieved through a critical discussion of various conceptual and operational tools that can be referenced. The analysis reveals the impossibility of obtaining a list of practices suitable for all research center. Instead, it highlights the need for case-specific interventions that begin with an analysis of organizational processes, which should be shared and negotiated according to the characteristics of different work organizations. Only in this way does it seem possible to move beyond a mere bureaucratic approach aimed at obtaining incentives, or avoiding sanctions, and to address the challenge of gender fatigue. This approach can foster organizational changes that promote gender equality and the well-being of both male and female employees, extending beyond individual research centers.

From a feminist perspective, the new focus on gender equality in

corporate governance and public research centers is both an expression and a key process in the transformation of states and societies within the context of global competition and restructuring (Prügl and True, 2014). By adopting a perspective centered on women's substantive rights, and taking an intersectional approach that considers memberships in other social categories—such as those related to occupational sector, career level, contract precarity, national context or country of origin, as well as age, family status, or health conditions—these reflections lead to further questions. What motivates research centers, universities, companies, and their public partners in their efforts to promote gender equality today, and how does this fit into the existing power relations and asymmetries between research centers and territories? How legitimate are the actions taken? Additionally, how effective and sustainable are these actions for the organizations implementing them and for those working within those organizations?

Although transparency is encouraged by the requirement that public and private research centers measure and report on progress in implementing GEPs, effective public involvement and accountability need not be included in this reporting. Community involvement and engagement are left to individual entities. Companies and research centers may choose different approaches to social responsibility. In addition, individuals working in various organizations will experience different rights and resources regarding gender equity. The discussion in this article suggests a possible reciprocal influence between research centers and the communities in which they are embedded, with research centers advocating for gender equity on the one hand, and communities shaping the priorities of engagement in GEPs and social responsibility activities of research centers on the other. Partnership agreements, along with opportunities for substantive discussions between research institutions and communities, can serve as key entry points for future studies of how GEPs enable women to have a voice and a participatory role in these processes and how organizational change fostered by GEPs can be inclusive, transparent, reflective, sustainable, and effective.

NOTE

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