



The Education of Gender The Gender of Education Sociological Research in Italy

Maddalena Colombo
Luca Salmieri

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***Gender Differences in Tertiary
Educational Attainment and the
Intergenerational Transmission
of Cultural Capital in Italy***

Luca Salmieri and Orazio Giancola

INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise in women's educational attainment is one of the most striking trends in statistics on education. Women's educational attainment has been increasing steadily in many industrialized countries since the Second World War and is now greater than that of men. Nowadays, women constitute a substantial majority of graduates in secondary and tertiary education in most EU countries. Considering recent trends in international data, it seems likely that female dominance in tertiary education may become even stronger in the decades to come (Roser, Ortiz-Ospina, 2016).

Women's extraordinary educational advancements appears to be the realization of what was once considered utopian, namely equality of access and treatment among girls and boys in all tracks and fields of education. To understand the factors enabling this shift we must briefly outline the historical evolution of the attributes of public education systems. Indeed, such systems have been designed and developed over the course of the XX and XXI centuries, an era in which states increasingly intervened in a universalist manner through the expansion of citizenship, civil rights and access to welfare and education. However universalist they were, yet, school systems throughout Europe have long been designed on the rationale of dividing pupils by social classes and gender, obliging families to send their children to separate educational institutions according to specific social and educational stratifications and gendered ethics.

In general, the most prestigious and elite of these institutions – the *Gymnasium* in Germany and *Lycée* in France, for example – were not open to girls until the end of the 19th century. Likewise, British public schools were mostly restricted to male students from the upper or middle classes (Goodman, Martin, 2004). The post-1944 British Education Act granted all children up to the age of fifteen the right to free

secondary education. Still, the modern secondary education program for girls was heavily domestically oriented and centred on the humanities, with only scant doses of science and technology. The English *Board of Education* persisted in denying coeducation for longer on the belief that mixed classrooms would have had a detrimental effect on boys (Spencer, 2005). Girls' secondary education in the UK was maintained predominantly as a single-sex institution until comprehensive schools became the rule during the Seventies. It was not until 1965 that the Labour government slowly began conducting a tour of local school authorities to collect suggestions and proposals for systemic reform with the aim of making plans to abolish the old, snobbish and divisive system. The tripartite system introduced in 1947 and based on dividing students among grammar, secondary modern and secondary technical schools was thus replaced by a standalone comprehensive school (Salmieri, 2018).

In France, effective education for girls did not emerge until the end of the XIX century (Mavrinrac, 1997; Rogers, 2005). During the inter-war period, feminists, Catholics, and educators debated the virtues or dangers of coeducation, taking a stand in opposition to Pius XI and his hostility towards the "coeducation of the sexes" as asserted in his encyclical *Divini illius magistri* of 1929 (Offen, 2000). In 1924, the so-called *Bérard Law* extended the secondary public program for French girls aged 5 to 6 and introduced an optional program allowing girls to prepare for the *baccalauréat* (Offen, 1983). By 1930 the educational program specifically targeting girls had virtually disappeared even while separate girls' institutions flourished. In this period, the concept of separate but equal schooling was satisfactory for many French educators and especially school administrators, these latter invested in defending the traditional learning landscape. After the Second World War when democratization was proclaimed if much more reluctant rationale behind French institutional reform, the newly established common secondary school for pupils aged 6 to 15, with a single college after primary school, was made coeducational. The decision determining this shift towards coeducation had no feminist connotations; rather, it was argued that the growth of collateral secondary education for girls would «serve families in their immediate neighbourhood or in the best conditions of pedagogical approaches». In 1963, the new secondary schools were coeducational from the outset and the decrees implementing the 11 July 1975 *Haby Law* were extended to also cover coeducation in secondary schools. As a result, more girls than boys earned the *baccalauréat* in 1971. Feminist voices were decisive in asserting women's potential impact in civil society depended on their having an education that equalled, if not surpassed, that of men (Rogers, 2016).

In Germany, a transformation carried out from 1910 to 1938 reorganized the tracks of secondary education into a tripartite structure. After a compulsory 4-year public primary school (*grundschule*) legislated in 1919, pupils were sent to one of three types of secondary education: the *volksschule* did not grant much in the way of career opportunities, while the *gymnasium* and *oberschule* gave greater access to the upper echelons of academia. After 1935, the need for full

employment and increasing demand for university graduates led German women to enrol in university (Jaraus, 1984). Even so, there continued to be ideological discrimination against women wishing to attend *Abitur* preparation and university programs. Once the Nazis took power, the *gymnasium* was closed to females and the *oberschule* was the only remaining means for young women to prepare for the *Abitur*.

Directly after 1860s unification, Italian girls were still excluded from knowledge-based and liberal professions because women's national citizenship was only theoretical, not substantive. In practice they were prevented from practicing or occupying regulated professions and middle-class women were trapped at home. The new-born secular Italian state had no concern for the formal, long-term education of women. There were various "educational institutes for girls", but almost all of them were religious in both scope and governance and rarely shifted from the holy triad of "prayer, catechism, and domestic tasks" seen as the proper purview of women. A few local municipalities in North-Central Italy made attempts to promote girls' colleges in the form of 3-year schools called *scuole femminili superiori* (Soldani, 2010; Dei, 1987). Coeducation had never been established as a principle; it was practised in exceptional cases or tolerated as transitory but had no explicit legal standing in Italy. The Fascist regime made educational reforms focused on secondary education to the detriment of girls' rights: the *Gentile Reform* (1923) of the entire Italian school system erected both formal and informal barriers to education for the lower classes and those living furthest from big cities. Not only did it considerably increase schooling costs, including tuition fees, it also introduced a legal veto on girl's enrolment in various types of school, with the sole exception of complementary schooling based on an endless series of courses designed merely to ensure minimum literacy. Generally speaking, the only girls who continued studying past primary school in this period were from higher social classes than boys. As Giovanni Gentile had previously insisted in 1918, women «do not and never will possess either that bold originality of thought or that resolute spiritual vigor which form the superior intellectual and moral forces of humanity and must be the cornerstones of any school shaping the superior spirit of the country» (Gentile, 1918: 8). It was not until after the Second World War that Italian women were able to gain more access to secondary schools and universities, alongside small reforms in both secondary and tertiary education.

Having shown that equal access to all levels and types of education was the result of many decades of slow and hard-fought transformations, in the following sections we intend to highlight how female educational attainment in Italy has taken place while maintaining the influence of family and social origins almost completely unaltered, especially in terms of social inequalities measured via cultural capital. At the same time, however, we intend to stress out that the Italian growth and overtaking of female educational attainments has been more intense than the structural barriers posed by social inequalities at the origins. Furthermore, we aim to emphasize that the advancement of Italian women in secondary and tertiary education probably occurred

in a context in which the demand for education influenced and shaped the provision of education, guiding the reforms of openness and democratization rather than being at the opposite a mere set of consequences of changes in the educational system.

1. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of our analysis, aimed at estimating the variation over time of the distribution of educational achievement of Italian men and women by identifying the weight of the ascriptive variables, we used data collected by the European Social Survey (ESS). The European Social Survey has carried out an extensive research survey since 2001, replicated in Europe every two years, designed to detect stability and changes in European societies, the transformations of living conditions, as well as the evolution of values and opinions of European citizens in a cross-national and diachronic perspective. Coherently to the needs of our study, we selected variables of ascriptive type i.e. gender of the respondents, their mothers and fathers' educational achievements and their cohort of birth. We run those independent variables on one variable of acquisitive type which is the highest level of education achieved by respondents.

Given the level of disaggregation of the analyses, we then performed a "merging operation", combining data from 2016 and 2018 waves to increase the population under investigation and thus maximize the sample statistical reliance. Data have been statistically weighed according to ESS protocols and using the proper "weight variables" included in the original datasets. Ascriptive and acquisitive variables have been duly recoded to make sure of reaching internal harmonization and balancing in distributions. Then, the educational achievements of the respondents' mothers and fathers as well as respondents themselves were then grouped into three: "Less than secondary education", "Upper secondary education", "Tertiary education". Age cohorts have been recoded into six groups i.e. respondents born "before 1940", "from 1941 to 1950", "1951 to 1960", "1961 to 1970", "1971 to 1980", and "1981 to 1988". We adopted this recodification approach to conduct a diachronic and descriptive analyses aimed at tracing historical trends over time in the educational achievements of respondents' fathers and mothers as well as respondents themselves (Figures 1 and 4). Age groups were then re-merged to be used effectively in the regression models we carried out: we thus used respondents born "before 1950" as the reference category and respondents born "between 1951 and 1960", "1961-1970", "1971-1980" "1981-1988" as the opposite category.

Multiple binomial logistic regression models were then performed. A preliminary model estimates the probability of attaining a tertiary educational degree according to gender, age group and the educational level of the respondents' mothers and fathers (Table 1). Subsequently,

the same model was replicated for the male and female population to analyse similarities and differences in the explanatory patterns (Table 2). A third regression model splits the independent variable “age” into two macro age groups, i.e. respondents born before 1961 and respondents born during the period from 1961 to 1988. The goal of this analysis is to compare explanatory structures across the two age groups and to highlight continuity and change in the extent to which independent variables are likely to affect respondents’ ability to earn a degree in tertiary education.

Finally, to further interpret the mechanisms at play in the outcomes of previous models, an association index was created by combining the educational levels of respondents’ mothers and fathers. This index essentially renders visible the distribution of cases among parents who are homogamous or heterogamous in terms of cultural capital: homogamous when both father and mother earned a tertiary degree, secondary school degree or educational attainment lower than secondary school; heterogamous when their educational attainments differ. We then used the index to analyse the trend in the share of respondents who attained a university degree in relation to their parents’ upper, medium or lower educational homogamy (Figures 7 and 8).

2. GENDER GAPS IN THE ITALIAN EVOLUTION OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

While the first quarter of the nineteenth century represented a moment of intense educational ferment for middle-class girls, the third period of widespread change occurred after the Second World War when the demand for secondary education spread all over Europe, albeit to different degrees. Women were beginning to establish a growing presence in secondary education. This development was largely eclipsed by the global democratization of education involving the middle and even lower classes. In France, for instance, most secondary girls’ schools disappeared in favour of coeducation (Lelièvre, Lelièvre, 1991). More radical changes occurred at the secondary level: school systems were subjected to massive restructuring to meet families’ demands for education no longer divided so deeply on the basis of social class (Baudelot, Establet, 1992).

In Italy, more than 220,000 students enrolled in university courses for the 1951-52 academic year. In 1967, with universities even more crowded than before, the first instances of revolt erupted with students occupying the classrooms and halls of the Catholic University of Milan. The demonstrations, fuelled by practical considerations, broke out in opposition to a tuition increase passed that year. By 1968, a new political and cultural movement had been born. It expanded to involve many state universities in Italian cities and secondary schools as well. Of the protesters’ demands, one key point was a fierce critique of the old student representational bodies. Most importantly, students

demanded more democratic relations in cultural institutions, easier access to knowledge and a series of larger cultural and societal shifts outside the scope of the educational system (Meyer et al., 1992; Colarusso, Giancola, 2020). Under the pressure of the student movement, Italian Law 11 December 1969 legalised universal access to universities by eliminating the limits imposed by the old Gentile system. Before 1969, students' access to university had been conditioned by the type of secondary school they attended: only applicants with a *liceo classico* degree could access all the departments, while students from the *liceo scientifico* could enrol in many courses but not literature or philosophy (these were considered the most elitist fields of studies, in keeping with the Italian classical tradition deeply rooted in Benedetto Croce's idealistic philosophy). Several secondary schools tracks enabled students to enrol only in specific academic courses, the former being preparatory to the latter: for instance, someone with a diploma in accounting could study only economics at university while technical diplomas granted access only to academic courses in industrial engineering, and so on. The *Codignola Law* of 11 December 1969 put an end to the previous early tracking system and made enrolment in any university course possible with any kind of diploma earned at the completion of five years of secondary school education.

Another important reform had been reshaping the school system since 1962. In previous years, students had two tracks for accessing further education after primary school: one was aimed at inserting the graduate into the industrial or commercial job market as soon as possible (with female students expecting to be secretaries at best), while the other provided the kind of comprehensive education enabling students to continue on to secondary schools. In 1962, law 1859 merged the two systems into a single three-year course. The resulting unified and compulsory *scuola media* gave access to all higher courses, from *liceo classico* to professional and technical schools. Schools for vocational training were abolished.

The Seventies, with their spread of feminist values marked an extraordinary turning point in women's emancipation, especially for the youngest generations. A deep cultural revolution pushed more and more Italian girls to invest in education as a way of gaining competitive advantage in the labour market – where they would otherwise be segregated into low-paying, low-skilled jobs – and to achieve autonomy, economic independence, and social self-reliance. An astonishing and rapid surge in the demand for tertiary education took place during the Seventies when Italian universities changed from «elite to mass institutions», as the American scholar Martin Trow (1974) predicted. According to Trow's formulation, the elitist model in which only 15% of the youth population studied at university was mainly aimed at moulding the minds and characters of the leading class; the contrasting massified model, he argued, would turn tertiary education into a tool for training students for a wide range of technical and economic roles in the period's expanding industrial societies. Trow predicted that the supply of higher education would drive demand for it: the growing need for professionalization stemming from the complexity and specialization of the modern economy would be a priority for

any modern country wishing to advance its industrial and scientific power. In the Italian case, however, student demand for tertiary education has been the effective driving force behind its provision. This was especially true of the increasing demand for university decentralization in the Eighties, when a growing number of students from peripheral regions put pressure on metropolitan universities and persuaded national governments to invest in establishing new campuses to meet mounting needs. In relation to this point, it should be noted that leaving family homes at an early age to relocate to a different region so as to continue their studies at university became a well-established pattern of female emancipation for many girls from Italy's rural south (Piccone Stella, 1979).

Around the end of the Seventies, the enrolment rate in Italian tertiary education, calculated as the ratio between the number of registered students and the total of nineteen-year-olds completing secondary education, had reached approximately 25%. This expansion consolidated during the Eighties as well – albeit with some setbacks – and had a positive effect on the educational attainment of the Italian population, increasing it considerably. Further reforms were passed, including one giving universities organizational, financial, and didactic autonomy from the Ministry of Education. In the 1991-92 academic year, registration at Italian universities reached a peak of approximately 1,500,000.

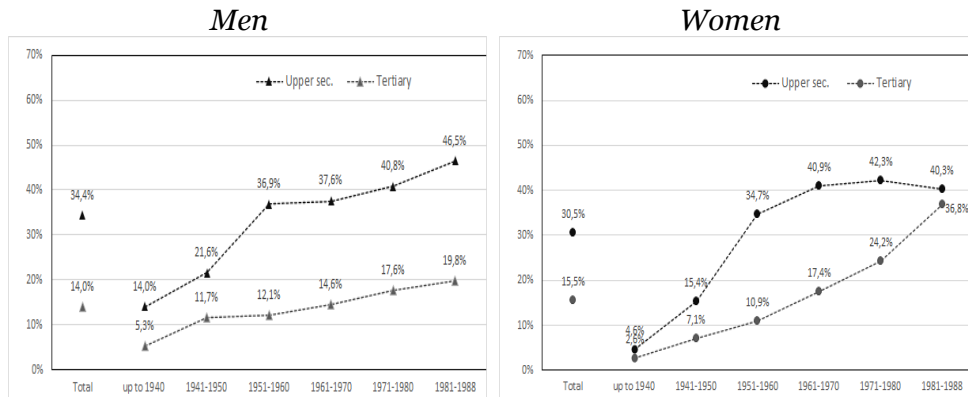
Towards the end of the Nineties, previous reforms gave impetus to the transformation of the university by reshaping degree programmes and introducing the “short degree” formula (3 years, i.e. bachelor's degree) which was preparatory to the successive degree (2 years, i.e. master's). This reform aimed to guarantee each individual university the freedom to develop degree programs calibrated to students' educational choices, including in relation to specific, local, labour market needs. Expanding enrolment in tertiary education and the corresponding proliferation of programmes and courses, the implementation of the “Bologna process” and through it the establishment of a «European higher education space» (Van der Wende, 2000) paved the way for further reforms and interventions, some of them overlapping. Meanwhile, the share of nineteen-year-old students completing upper secondary school steadily increased from 38% in 1980 to more than 70% in 1998, fuelling a parallel increase in tertiary education enrolment rates (Benadusi, Giancola, 2015). Trends in the rate of both secondary school graduation and registration at tertiary educational institutions went hand in hand until the end of the 1990s. At that point, however, the former continued to rise while the latter grew by just 5 percentage points. The process of expanding the university for the masses had nearly reached saturation.

From the 2000s to today, Italian universities have undergone a process of radical change, first with the *Moratti* reform and then with the *Gelmini* reform. Since that time, the number of university students has begun to decline, apparently mainly because of the increase in registration fees, living costs and disillusionment about labour market employability. From 2005 to 2015, university fees rose by 60% and

enrolment dropped mainly among students from technical and professional secondary schools (Contini, Salza, 2020).

Several Italian sociological studies have found that, from the Seventies to the new century, the increase in secondary and tertiary enrolment also included rising university enrolment on the part of students from the lower social classes (Recchi, 2007; Ballarino et al., 2009; Ballarino, Panichella, 2016; Cattaneo et al., 2017). However, this expansion in tertiary educational expectations was part and parcel of the so-called inflation of educational credentials and does not conceal the fact that class inequalities are once again evident when considering rates of completion (Ballarino et al., 2009; Bernardi, Ballarino, 2014; Barone et al. 2018. Ultimately, the tangible and profound revolution in absolute educational mobility outlined here concerns gender rather than class-based equalities. It is the female population as a whole that has made great strides in terms of absolute improvement in educational attainment.

FIGURE 1. Educational attainment of Italian men and women according to birth cohort



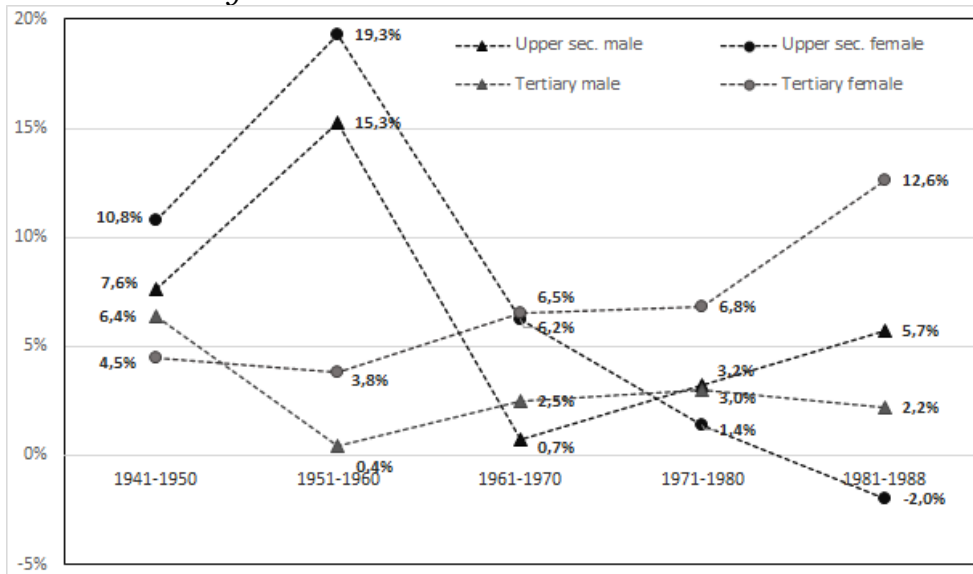
Sources: processing of ESS data

The Italian population born before 1940 was deeply divided into two separate fields of cultural attainment: 14% of men earned an upper secondary degree and 5.3% a tertiary degree, while only 4.6% and 2.6% of women, respectively, attained the same educational levels. Among the generations born after 1940, however, there was a gradual but robust growth in male and female attainment thanks to reforms and expansions in the right to study. Reforms and policies were aimed at facilitating access to education for the middle and lower classes, as the main goal was to strengthen the educational base for the country's pursuit of industrialization. Nevertheless and surprisingly, it was the female population that took the most advantage of new educational opportunities arising from the larger process of education democratization. Among the population born from 1940 to 1950, the share of men attaining upper secondary and tertiary education rose to 21.6% and 11.7%, respectively, and the share of women to 15.4% and 7.1%. This can be seen as a very remarkable increase in female mobility if contextualised in relation to the historical period.

If we examine changes in the distribution of educational achievement among birth cohorts according to gender, we note that while the

male trend shows a steady and parallel linear increase in both upper secondary and tertiary degrees, the female trend is differentiated between the former and the latter: the share of women attaining upper secondary degrees increased marginally while the share of women attaining tertiary degrees increased exponentially, causing a slight decrease in female upper secondary degrees from the 1971-1980s to the next generation. Therefore, among individuals born during the Eighties (1981-1988), more than one in every three women earned a tertiary degree while only one in every five men did.

FIGURE 2. Variation in the educational attainment of Italian men and women according to birth cohort



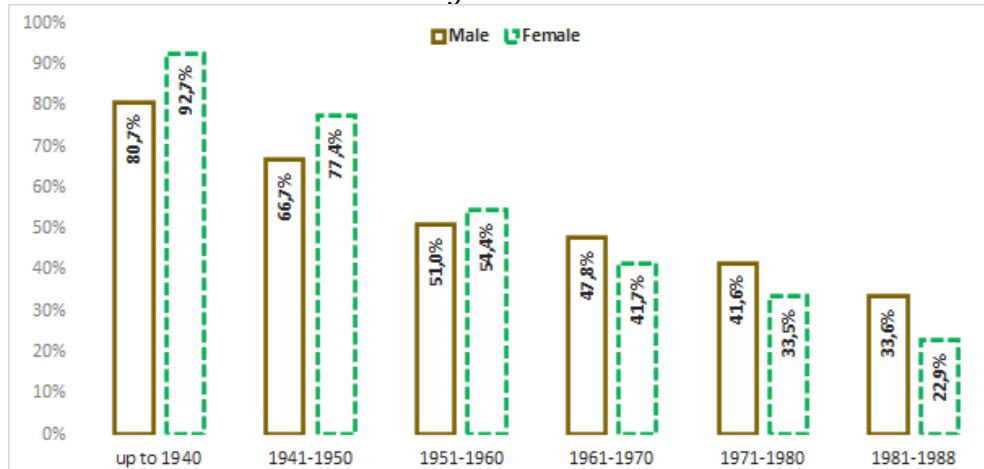
Sources: processing of ESS data

If we consider Italians born before 1940 as a starting point for comparison, both men and women born in the Forties underwent a normal increase in educational attainment (+10.8% and 7.6% of upper secondary graduated women and men and +4.5% and +6.4% of tertiary graduated women and men). Afterward, however, male and female tendencies display different directions and degrees of intensity: the growth of the share of women attaining tertiary education is constant and exponential, from +3.8% for those born in the Fifties to +6.5% for those born in the Sixties +6.8% for those born in the Seventies, up to the marked educational boom of +12.6% for those born in the Eighties. The share of men earning a university degree also increases from one generational cohort to the next, but less intensely: it is only +0.4% for those born in the Fifties, +2.5% for those born in the Sixties, and +3.2% and +2.2% for those born in the Seventies and Eighties respectively.

To better understand the increasing of the female investment in education during the second half of the last century, we can consider the shares of those who stopped studying after primary or lower secondary education. Of individuals born before 1940, a massive share of women, 92.7%, had completed only primary or lower secondary schooling. Among women born during the Seventies this share had dropped by

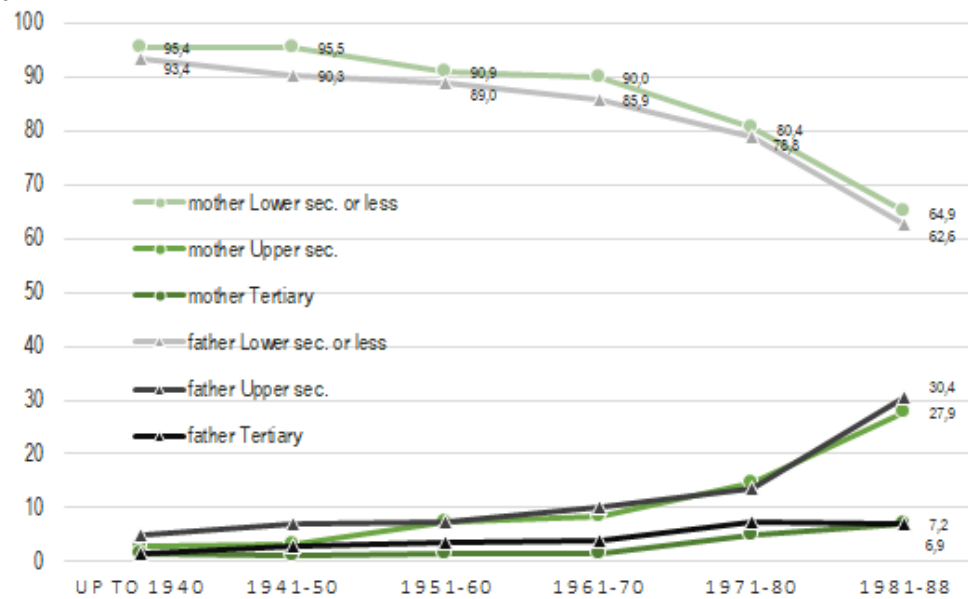
more than half (41.7%) and among women born during the Eighties had almost halved again (22.9%).

FIGURE 3. Share of Italian men and women attaining lower secondary or lesser educational levels according to birth cohort



Sources: processing of ESS data

FIGURE 4. Educational levels of fathers and mothers of Italians born before 1988



Sources: processing of ESS data

Finally, there have been variations over time in the educational levels of the parents of Italians born in the six cohorts we examined. The decreasing trend is very similar for fathers and mothers with lower educational attainment: from 93.4% of fathers and 95.4% of mothers in the population born before 1940 to 62.6 and 64.9%, respectively, in the population born between 1981 and 1988.

Although we found a very similar distribution of education levels for mothers and fathers in the population under consideration, significant gender differences stand out in the educational levels achieved by their

children. Our hypothesis is that cultural homogeneity in marriages is at play. In love, birds of a feather flock together; that is to say, partners forming a conjugal union and procreating usually have equal levels of education. Considering the population born after 1951, the probability of completing tertiary-level education is highest among the youngest birth cohort (1981-1980) and the segment of individuals whose fathers have tertiary degrees. However, the likelihood of obtaining a university degree is even greater, more than twice as high, when the individual's mother has a tertiary degree as well. The main change took place between the 1951-1960 cohort and the following ones: the population born from 1961 to 1970 had easier access to university following the 1969 reform. After this point, the likelihood of attaining a tertiary educational degree increased from one birth cohort to the next in a steady but marginal way. Furthermore, women's high investment and drive in pursuing tertiary education becomes crystal clear if we note that they are 1.2 times more likely than men to earn a university degree. However, graduating from university is also heavily influenced by family origins. As Table 1 shows, having a graduate father increases one's chances of obtaining a degree by about 6.1 percentage points and, more significantly, having a graduate mother boosts the probability by 9.2%.

TABLE 1. *Likelihood of graduation on the part of the Italian population according to birth cohort, father's education, mother's education, and gender*

	B	S.E.	Sign.	Exp(B)
Age group=1951-1960	,465	,125	,000	1,592
Age group =1961-1970	,881	,112	,000	2,413
Age group =1971-1980	,910	,114	,000	2,484
Age group =1981-1988	,939	,126	,000	2,556
Edu_father= Upper secondary	,815	,099	,000	2,259
Edu_father=Tertiary	1,820	,150	,000	6,174
Edu_mother=Upper secondary	1,114	,105	,000	3,047
Edu_mother=Tertiary	2,219	,179	,000	9,202
Gender=Female	,218	,070	,002	1,243
Constant	-3,002	,099	,000	,050

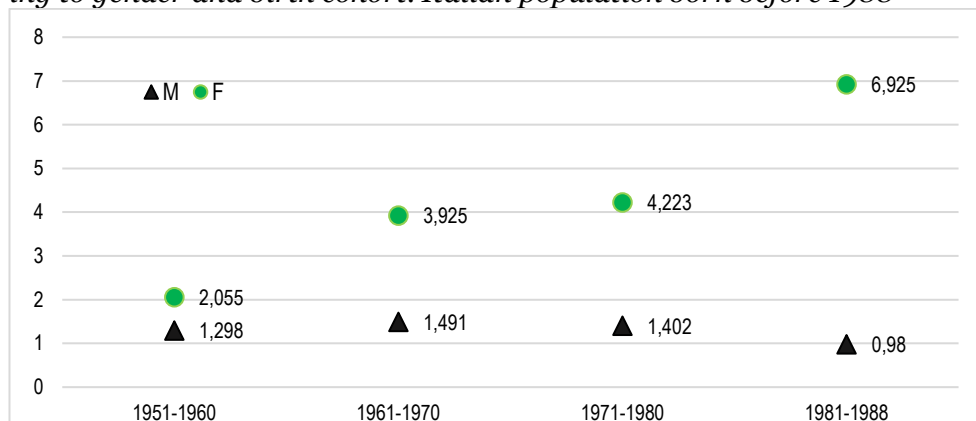
Sources: processing of ESS data

These findings suggest three crucial points for our analyses: *i)* family cultural capital is a gamechanger in shaping individuals' opportunities to successfully complete tertiary education: parents with the highest educational attainment are able to transfer various kinds of social and educational skills that may facilitate children's progress through primary, secondary and tertiary education and to motivate them to earn at least the same degrees as their parents; *ii)* female cultural capital has a stronger predictive force, as we detected a sort of virtuous circle linking mothers' higher education to that of their daughters over decades of historical development *iii)* finally, the higher likelihood of earning a tertiary degree is nevertheless greater among females than males.

If we look at the likelihood of attaining a degree in tertiary education according to gender over time (Table 2), there is once again an astonishingly surge on the female side: while men's likelihood of attaining

the highest degrees increases steadily from one birth cohort to the next – except for the boom during the Fifties and Sixties’ birth cohorts – women’s likelihood almost doubles from one birth cohort to the next. The likelihood for women is 2,055 points among the oldest age group (birth cohort 1951-1960); it jumps up to 3,925 points among the 1961-1970 birth cohort, to 4,223 points among the next birth cohort and as high as 6,295 among the latest birth cohort.

FIGURE 5. Odds ratio of achieving a tertiary educational degree according to gender and birth cohort. Italian population born before 1988



Sources: processing of ESS data

TABLE 2. Likelihood of graduation on the part of the Italian population according to birth cohort, father’s education, mother’s education, and gender

	B	S.E.	Sign.	Exp(B)	
Men	Age group=1951-1960	,261	,170	,125	1,298
	Age group =1961-1970	,399	,155	,010	1,491
	Age group =1971-1980	,338	,161	,035	1,402
	Age group =1981-1988	-,020	,181	,910	,980
	Edu_father= Upper secondary	,802	,142	,000	2,231
	Edu_father=Tertiary	2,103	,208	,000	8,192
	Edu_mother=Upper secondary	1,160	,148	,000	3,190
	Edu_mother=Tertiary	2,250	,271	,000	9,492
	Constant	-2,558	,119	,000	,077
Women	Age group=1951-1960	,720	,189	,000	2,055
	Age group =1961-1970	1,367	,167	,000	3,925
	Age group =1971-1980	1,441	,169	,000	4,223
	Age group =1981-1988	1,935	,185	,000	6,925
	Edu_father= Upper secondary	,901	,144	,000	2,461
	Edu_father=Tertiary	1,543	,223	,000	4,678
	Edu_mother=Upper secondary	1,138	,154	,000	3,119
	Edu_mother=Tertiary	2,375	,249	,000	10,746
	Constant	-3,264	,142	,000	,038

Sources: processing of ESS data

As a son, having a father with a tertiary education means 8,192 points more likelihood of earning a university degree, while having a mother with a tertiary education entails an even higher probability: 9,492 points. Once again, the cultural capital inherited via a mother’s educational skills plays a crucial role for both sons and daughters, but especially for the latter. As a daughter, having a father with a tertiary education implies a 4,678-point increase in the likelihood of obtaining

a university degree, but having a mother with a tertiary education entails the highest chances: 10,746 points.

In order to understand the growing effect of cultural capital inherited from parents, we compared two wider age groups: populations born before and after 1960 (Table 3).

TABLE 3. *Likelihood of graduation on the part of the Italian population according to birth cohort, father's education, mother's education, and gender. Split models for overall population, population born before, and population born after 1960.*

	B	S.E.	Sign.	Exp(B)	
Overall population	Edu_father= Upper secondary	,879	,099	,000	2,409
	Edu_father=Tertiary	1,807	,148	,000	6,094
	Edu_mother=Upper secondary	1,265	,102	,000	3,543
	Edu_mother=Tertiary	2,314	,177	,000	10,118
	Gender=Female	,176	,070	,000	1,192
	Constant	-2,375	,057	,000	,093
1960 and before	B	S.E.	Sign.	Exp(B)	
	Edu_father= Upper secondary	1,451	,199	,000	4,269
	Edu_father=Tertiary	1,903	,271	,000	6,703
	Edu_mother=Upper secondary	1,595	,227	,000	4,930
	Edu_mother=Tertiary	1,681	,332	,000	5,371
	Gender=Female	-,508	,131	,000	,601
Constant	-2,576	,094	,000	,076	
1961 - 1988	B	S.E.	Sign.	Exp(B)	
	Edu_father= Upper secondary	,619	,114	,000	1,857
	Edu_father=Tertiary	1,801	,185	,000	6,055
	Edu_mother=Upper secondary	1,057	,116	,000	2,879
	Edu_mother=Tertiary	2,444	,218	,000	11,517
	Gender=Female	,521	,085	,000	1,684
Constant	,619	,114	,000	1,857	

Sources: processing of ESS data

The female population born in the most recent period – from 1961 to 1988 – has an almost three times better chance of obtaining a university degree compared to the female population born before 1960, while for the male population the increase is only 2 percentage points (Figure 6).

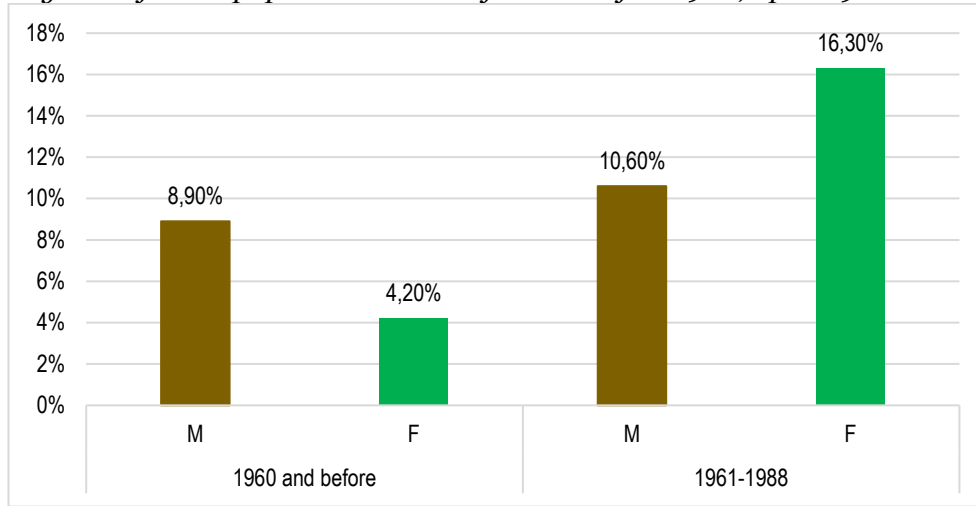
Furthermore, regardless of gender, having a mother with a university degree grants almost double the likelihood of attaining a university degree if the person in question was born from 1961 to 1988 instead of earlier.

Nonetheless, the cultural mobility of the female population seems to have been stronger than the effect of cultural origins: if we consider exclusively daughters and sons whose mothers attained lower secondary educational levels at best, we find out that only 4.2% of daughters born before 1960 succeeded in achieving tertiary education, but the share rises to 16.3% for those ones born during the 1961-1988 period. Men display a similar pattern, except that the male increase is far less significant: from 8.9 to 10.6%.

Finally, we analysed the effect of both parents' educational attainments on children's educational achievements, specifically assessing the share of children who completed tertiary education. We considered

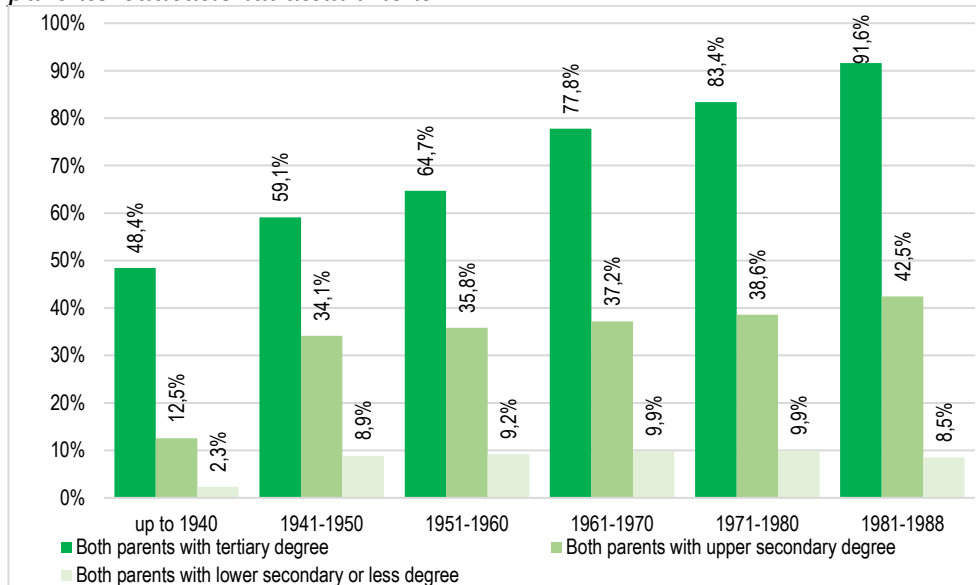
parents' educational attainments by including only cases in which both parents attained the same educational level: tertiary degree, upper secondary degree, or lower secondary (or lesser) degree. This sub-group accounts for 87% of the sample, meaning that marriage social homogeneity in terms of educational level has been a marked attribute of the majority of the Italian population over the second half of the XX century.

FIGURE 6. Odds ratio of achieving a tertiary education degree according to gender for the population born before and after 1960, up to 1988



Sources: processing of ESS data

FIGURE 7. Male population achieving tertiary degree, by birth cohort and parents' educational attainment

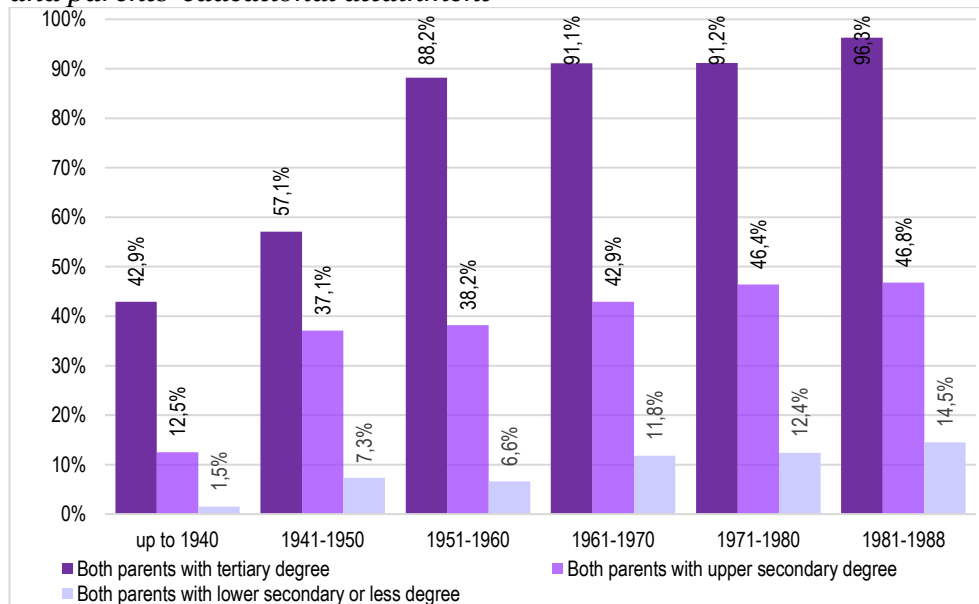


Sources: processing of ESS data

Comparing the data illustrated in Figures 7 and 8, it can be seen that only 1.5% of the oldest birth cohort daughters whose parents had low educational levels were able to attain a tertiary education, while the youngest birth cohort daughters whose parents also had low educational levels were able to obtain a tertiary education in 14.5% of the

cases. This remarkable increase has no equal among male birth cohorts. As a matter of fact, the sons of low-educated parents attained tertiary degrees in 2.5% of cases in the oldest birth cohort (twice the share of daughters), but in only 8.5% of cases in the youngest birth cohort (6 percentage point less than daughters). This gender gap in favour of girls means that girls' investment in higher education has gradually become more relevant and successful than that of boys, even among families in the lower educational ranks.

FIGURE 8. *Female population achieving tertiary degree, by birth cohort and parents' educational attainment*



Sources: processing of ESS data

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have briefly outlined the main historical steps in the dismantling of gender barriers to accessing different levels of education in the main European countries and Italy more specifically. We have also highlighted the way Italian women came to outnumber men in the total share of university enrollees and, more importantly, the total share of graduates. The trends we have mapped here mark the unfolding of a silent revolution in trajectories of cultural mobility, driving women of the younger generation to invest more in education than do men. In our opinion, this key fact signals women's vigorous advancement in the fields of scientific knowledge and advanced education; on the other hand, it also reveals the difficulties and discrimination women still face in the labour market, where it is instead men who continue to be unfairly advantaged.

However, the outcomes of our analysis focus mainly on the issue of transmitting cultural capital and reproducing inequalities of origin

from a gender perspective. Indeed, we have shown that: *i*) over time, female investment in higher education has become a reference model for middle and lower-class families as well, influencing the provision of tertiary education in a broader context of educational expansion: the female population took advantage of new opportunities generated as part of a larger process of democratization; *ii*) beginning with those born in the Eighties, women overtake men to such an extent that various Italian faculties and university degree programmes have ended up being feminized, while others, traditionally the domains of prestigious training for men, are beginning to display an increasingly balanced gender mix. This phenomenon is much more evident for girls from families with high and medium educational levels; *iii*) likewise, as it becomes ever more common for fathers and mothers alike to hold university degrees, a new mechanism of cultural capital transmission through the matrilineal line becomes quite widespread, so much so that the probability of sons and daughters graduating depends more and more on their mothers' educational qualifications rather than those of their fathers; *iv*) finally, for the last few generations, the further we move down the hierarchical scale of parents' educational attainment, the more likely it is that sons not daughters will fail to enrol in university. This facet of the overall story speaks to concerns about the male disinvestment in higher education that distinguishes the Italian case.

Although it is not the focus of our analysis, these research results can be supplemented by a significant observation. Considering the dramatic increase in girls' educational attainment as soon as they were granted better access to secondary and higher education, we face a paradox that deserves more attention than ever on the part of the social sciences: the widening gap between women's educational and degree attainment rates and their rates of employment. Although this gap varies from one country to the next, it constitutes a cornerstone of inequality in all western labour markets. Gender inequalities in the labour market persist despite women's better performance in tertiary education, on average. Rising female employment rates have narrowed the gender gap in the labour market but they have not dissolved other basic gender disparities. Inequalities stemming from type of contract, career opportunities and duration of periods of unemployment are still clearly evident in all European countries. Women from the youngest generations work under fixed-term contracts and in part-time jobs more often than their male peers. Girls are much less likely than boys to secure a job matching their field of educational specialisation or to pursue a career granting them access to high-level positions in the professional hierarchy. Women tend to aspire to high-skilled professions more than men, but they still have more difficulty than men in realizing their aspirations. Among graduates, employment rates in all European countries display this gender gap, with women continuing to be at a disadvantage in employment rates and with overeducation impacting more female workers than male ones.

We should then shift our attention from the thesis that education offers a rational and automatic return in terms of labour market

advantage, careers and earnings and look instead at the discrepancies between female expectations and labour market dynamics.

In summary, gender inequalities have been dismantled only in education and not in the labour market (or the political realm). Labour markets, by definition, are systems producing and reproducing inequalities by their very nature. They are not modifiable. They cannot be regulated, or only partially so. Especially in private companies and small and medium enterprises, principles and norms of equality cannot transform the rationale and mechanisms by which a semi-skilled man is preferred over a highly qualified woman. Here, regulations can address and stop evident forms of discrimination, but they are ineffective against more subtle processes of discrimination. While rules, regulatory norms and substantial policies in post-compulsory education systems apply to everyone and generally tend to treat men and women equally or even support female empowerment, the expectations of job applicants often clash with those of recruiters and employers and must be channelled into a limited array of options, defined and controlled by companies, firms and enterprises.

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