

Gender Equality, Equity, and Equal Opportunities



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1 Understanding Gender Equality

The history of equality is part of our existence. It constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of democracy and is a principle expressed in all great international declarations. However, its meaning is not obvious. Equality is not a natural entity but a generic concept that needs to be specified to have meaning (Bobbio, 1977). If the adjective ‘equal’ indicates an entity with the same characteristics as another entity, we first need to clarify what/who and for which aspect equality operates (Olivetti, 2007). For example, we are familiar with the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Men and [Male] Citizens. It is considered one of the greatest recognitions of human freedom and dignity, and is the source of inspiration for numerous constitutional charters. However, the Declaration was only addressed and formulated by men and male citizens. Two years later, Olympe de Gouges published the Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizens to claim legal and judicial equality for women by extending the principles of the French Revolution to them as well. In response, women’s associations and their newspapers were banned, and Olympe de Gouges was guillotined—‘for forgetting the virtues befitting her sex and meddling in the affairs of the Republic’. This clarification allows us to point out that the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens is still considered one of the milestones in the history of the recognition of rights, effectively excluding half of the population: women.

This book elaborates on the issue of measuring equality between men and women. However, this is insufficient. The principle of equality described above considers two entities to be equal, which in this case are not; any two different people are inevitably different.

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In its evolution, the concept of equality led to the distinction between ‘formal’ and ‘substantive’ equality. The former refers to equality under the law: the most widespread legal principle in constitutions and necessary to guarantee the impartiality of the law both in content and application for both those who govern and those who are governed. Thus, the more that laws are general, abstract, and applicable only for the future, and for an indefinite number of times, the higher the chances of guaranteeing equality (Olivetti, 2007). However, as history shows, equal treatment is not sufficient to achieve full equality when there is basic discrimination between the subjects considered. To remedy *de facto* inequalities, we need to promote forms of substantive equality: laws capable of challenging the principle of formal equality to protect people who are physically, culturally, socially, and economically disadvantaged or underrepresented in certain areas. Interventions considered ‘special’ targeting only a small group of people, but never arbitrary due to the principle of reasonableness. A ‘reasonable inequality’ derives from and preserves the very principle of equality (Olivetti, 2007). In short, formal equality imposes equal treatment, while substantive equality provides and allows for a redistribution of resources to counteract *de facto* inequalities. Both are necessary to achieve equality between individuals with different entities and living conditions.

Similarly, the simplest definition of inequality is ‘differences among people in their command over social and economic resources’, but, to be useful, we must go further and specify inequality: (a) of what, (b) among whom, and (c) how it is summarised (Osberg, 2001). When we talk about inequality (or equality), we risk involving the value system by establishing which differences between people are more important. However, in this book, to measure these phenomena, we are not interested in establishing what is more or less important; rather, we are interested in highlighting what inequality persists and characterises issues of fact between women and men.

We commonly define the issue of equality between men and women as *gender*¹ equality and refer to a state in which access to rights or opportunities is not affected by gender. A social condition in which women and men share equal rights (formal equality) and a balance of power, status, opportunities, and rewards (substantive equality). Gender equality can be broadly operationalised by men and women having (1) equitable access and use of resources; (2) equitable participation in

¹First used in 1955 by psychologist and sexologist John Money, the term ‘gender’ identifies the social construction of biological sex. The male and female stereotypes represent the general consensus on the roles assigned to men and women, the patterns of our masculinity and femininity. However, this distinction did not have much relevance until the 1970s, when gender was reinterpreted by feminist scholars as not only a social but also a political construction of gendered roles. According to anthropologist Rubin (1975), the ‘sex/gender system’ is held responsible for the exploitation of women because it underpins the sexual division of labour, where women are assigned to reproduction while men are assigned to production. Gender status persists over time because the difference of gendered bodies is linked to representations that differentiate duties, pleasures, roles, expectations, constraints, and opportunities (Volpato, 2013; Priulla, 2016). Aspects also supported by everyday experience in which men enjoy more resources and power than women (Ridgeway, 2011).

relationships, the household, the community, and political arenas; and (3) safety or freedom from violence (Rolleri, 2012: 4).

Alongside the concept of gender equality, we frequently find the concept of equal opportunities; breaking down barriers to achieving substantive equality is often tantamount to creating opportunities where they are lacking. While it is true that the removal of barriers applies to all forms of discrimination (e.g. sex, race, religion, political opinion), the concept of equal opportunities is usually associated with fighting gender discrimination.

In antithesis, by gender inequality, we refer to a social status in which people's rights, responsibilities, and opportunities are determined by whether they are born male or female (Slade, 2008). Thus, to speak of 'gender' is, above all, to name the asymmetry between women and men which is present at all levels and at all times in social life. For many, gender inequality belongs more to the past or to very different cultural systems, distant from the Western ones. On the contrary, the world is deeply divided and organised by gender to limit the potential of women in particular, but also of men, to contribute to their full potential. Certainly, forms of discrimination against women and girls have decreased, but many continue to deprive them of their basic rights and opportunities. Even when women obtain significant rights, a long historical tradition prevents their concrete expression. These limitations are the result of several intricately connected, historical, and culturally specific processes (Berreman, 2001; Slade, 2008; Grown, 2008; Ridgeway, 2011) in which biological sex is the category of difference described at birth. We now know that the variability of individual differences cannot simply be categorised into the psychological traits of male and female groups. Empirically, we can detect more differences between two people of the same gender than between men and women taken as a whole. However, thinking in categorical terms minimises within-category differences and maximises between-category differences (Volpato, 2013). Moreover, this is further reinforced by everyday life which consolidates aspects of cultural genesis to the point of appearing natural. We learn unconsciously in the first years of life through gender rules and divisions. Years in which learning is a central aspect of existence and the demands for adaptation to imposed models are stronger than at any other age of life: behaviour considered appropriate to sex is encouraged, others repressed. Later, once this happens, moving away and disregarding social expectations and pressures will cost and hurt everyone in personal terms (Priulla, 2016).

Certainly, women and men are not entirely passive subjects who are unable to recognise the patterns imposed by society and distance themselves from them. However, being aware of gender constructions allows us to acquire greater knowledge and critical capacity about our choices, as well as reminding us that they can never be decontextualised from the social structure in which they were made. This is because we make choices and exercise individuality within the limits and constraints imposed by personal circumstances, the structural distribution of rules, norms, resources, and the inequalities of power and privilege they generate (Folbre, 1994; Kabeer, 2016). Of course, not all women are subject to the same degree of discrimination, and some are better able to identify and cope with it than others, but this does not mean that they are not all included in it.

As with the analysis of the relationship between sex and gender, feminist² thought has produced numerous insights and critical analyses on the issue of equality. In fact, the inclusion of women as equals in patriarchal societies through the recognition of equal capacities between men and women has involved adapting the latter to the male model in force (Lonzi, 1974). Men and women are not equal, although we recognise that many of the differences between them are merely a consequence of the cultural processes in their societies. However, this difference should not involve a value judgement, but rather a social structure that allows both to interact as equals (Fraser & Honneth, 2007), respecting and valuing differences. While the male gender enjoys far greater privileges than the female gender, it finds itself caught up with expectations and pressures that do not always allow for the expression of individuality. For example, the containment of emotions often demanded by the male gender may lead to an inability to identify, describe, and feel certain emotions, such as fear, empathy, and tenderness (Volpato, 2013). Adolescents will have to acquire the rough manners required for the toughness of adulthood, and their entire existence will be punctuated by tests of masculinity aimed at confirming their membership in the male group (Priulla, 2016). Men are encouraged to control their feelings to be less vulnerable and maintain their position of dominance (Volpato, 2013). Therefore, equal opportunities for all means creating a society based on the concepts of equality and difference simultaneously. The two concepts do not contradict each other because, at the opposite of equality, there is inequality, while at the opposite of difference, there is assimilation. The principle of equality in totality (formal and substantial) generates and restores justice. Differences are recognised as inherent in human existence, and equal opportunities enable it to be respected. Therefore, equal opportunities become necessary for the full development of all human beings, for the realisation of a just society, and for the challenge of our time.

Another important clarification concerns the link between the concepts of modernisation and development and the concept of women's empowerment. According to Walby (2020), modernisation does not necessarily mean reduced gender inequality, and the same applies to development (Duflo, 2012). Certainly, these can play an important role in reducing inequalities; gender equality improves when poverty decreases (Duflo, 2012). However, this was insufficient. Walby (2020) distinguished between domestic and public gender regimes and, within the public, between the

²Feminism is a movement advocating for women's social, political, legal, and economic rights equal to those of men. From its inception, feminism did not aim at political power or the economic system, but fought against inequality, aiming to challenge the exercise of power with which men want to direct women's conduct. To speak of feminism in the singular is also misleading, as it risks making what is in fact a panorama of varied, heterogeneous, and sometimes even opposing thoughts appear as a single one. However, the basic principles of all feminisms, albeit in different ways and with different analyses, are the fight against patriarchy and the realisation of a world in which women are considered equal to men. In the 1980s, feminist thoughts and analyses gave rise to gender studies, a strand of interdisciplinary studies that placed gender representations and gender identity as central categories of analysis.

neoliberal and social democratic forms of regimes.³ Moreover, she pointed out the existence of an important division between them. However, according to her, ‘the patriarchal strategy of the exclusion of women under private patriarchy was transformed into the segregation and subordination of women in the public sphere. This transformation includes the socialisation of domestic labour, the increased representation of women in the polity, the individualisation of intimacy, and the state regulation of domestic violence’ (Walby, 2020: 417). Thus, domestic forms of exclusion and power continue to be practised in public life. In view of this, the author concludes that ‘the depth of gendered democracy and the strength of feminism and its alliances are key to the outcome of the trajectory of change in modernity and capitalism’ (Walby, 2020: 428).

Likewise, according to some studies, when we consider economic development as a sufficient condition for women’s advancement, we risk overestimating what women can do in a world characterised by de facto discrimination, gender bias, and structural barriers to their capabilities (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Duflo, 2012). If we recognise gender inequality as a structural condition, we understand that it is not possible to rely on the capacities of individuals alone. In contrast, we need to consider the distribution and redistribution of resources, which involves institutions, governments, and society as a whole (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). We need to reverse the order of reasoning: gender equality is a prerequisite for achieving real and sustainable development, not the other way around (Duflo, 2012; Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Kabeer, 2016).

2 Gender Capability Approach

While mentioning the topic of development and capabilities, we consider it useful to elaborate on the functioning and capabilities approach first pioneered by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1988, 1992) and later explored from a gender perspective by feminist philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2001). In the context of development economics, this approach provides a relevant framework in which to conceptualise and assess phenomena such as poverty, inequality, and well-being. The main feature of this approach is the focus on what people are actually able to do and be, that is, on their capabilities. According to Sen, the goals of well-being, justice, and development should be conceptualised in terms of people’s functioning capacities: their actual opportunities to undertake the actions and activities they want to engage in to be who they want to be. According to Sen, only when we possess the opportunities (capacities) to lead the kind of life we prefer do we really have a choice: fasting decided upon despite having access to food is a choice; fasting related to lack of food is not. Thus, we see the list of capabilities as a long list of functioning opportunities that are always right to possess, regardless of what we choose to

³For a more detailed analysis, please see: Walby (1990, 2020).

do. After all, living a life in which we have not used all opportunities present does not see us as harmed by the possibility of choosing a life in which we would have used them instead (Nussbaum, 2001).

The capability approach distinguishes between means, understood as goods and services, and functions and capabilities. Furthermore, it considers that the relationship between these is influenced by three groups of factors: personal (e.g. physical condition, gender, intelligence, etc.), social (e.g. public policies, gender roles, etc.), and environmental (e.g. climate, geographical location, etc.) factors. They all influence how people can convert the characteristics of 'means' into 'functioning'. A personal factor, such as a physical disability, for example, could make the means-bicycle unnecessary to enable functional mobility. Similarly, if a person does not have a physical disability but lives in a country where women are prohibited from cycling (social factor), the bicycle is unlikely to be capable of enabling mobility for a woman. Alternatively, if a person does not have a physical disability, lives in a country where cycling is not forbidden, but there are no paved roads (environmental factors), bicycles will still not be able to provide mobility. Thus, although we know what assets a person owns or can use, we do not have sufficient information to know what functions they can achieve. To understand this, we need other information about the person and the circumstances in which they live. Thus, in the assessment of capabilities, all circumstances that influence people's choices become relevant (Robeyns, 2005). In this regard, both Sen (1990) and Nussbaum (2001) focus on the social norms and traditions that shape women's preferences and influence their choices and aspirations. The capability approach urges us to examine real lives in material and social contexts. 'Is X satisfied?' or 'How many resources do X control?' are not fundamental questions. We need to ask, 'What X is capable of doing and being?' Besides investigating whether a person is satisfied with doing what he/she does, it is necessary to understand what he/she does and what he/she could do, that is, what opportunities and freedoms that person has. Similarly, in addition to being interested in what resources surround X, we also need to understand how these come into action, enabling X to act (Nussbaum, 2001).

Similarly, Sen's work on the capability approach is closer to economic reasoning and akin to quantitative measurements, whereas Nussbaum's work is more in line with humanities. Nussbaum's work focuses more on understanding people's hopes, desires, aspirations, motivations, and decisions, with particular attention to the status of women (Robeyns, 2005). The author uses the capability approach based on the basic assumption that no country in the world treats women as well as men. She argues that international policy and economic thinking should also be attentive to gender-specific issues to adequately address issues such as poverty and development. Attention to capabilities is closely linked to attention to human equality. According to Nussbaum (2001), discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, nationality, caste, or ethnicity is considered a failure of the ability to associate. For her, freedom is not only a matter of possessing fundamental rights but also requires the conditions to exercise them. If circumstances also influence people's inner lives (what they hope for, what they love, what they fear, etc.) as well as their external choices, a person can be considered satisfied with their condition for many reasons

other than the concrete presence of well-being. Frequent examples include habit or adaptation: our vision is adapted to the only life we have the real possibility of living. This adaptation has a greater impact on women's life choices than men because of the greater disadvantage and powerlessness they experience in everyday life. Women often do not invest enough in human capital and make bad decisions because they have been led to believe that they cannot do things that others (men) can do. In other words, disadvantaged groups internalise their status and make choices that perpetuate it (Nussbaum, 2001).

Moreover, according to Nussbaum (2001), in the assessment of capabilities, they are all important and have different qualities. For example, the absence of political freedom cannot be compensated for by high economic growth. However, at the same time, all capabilities are interrelated; schooling affects work, which affects the family, and so on. The author identifies three types of capacity: fundamental (or basic), internal, and combined. Basic capabilities consist of individuals' innate equipment. Internal capacities consist of the stages of development of the person sufficient to perform the required functions (e.g. learning to speak, play, love). Finally, combined capacities refer to internal capacities combined with external conditions that are suitable for exercising a function. The latter applies to all faculties that, once developed, require other capacities to function. For example, in a totalitarian regime, people have an internal capacity but not the combined capacity to express their thoughts (Nussbaum, 2001).

Sen's and Nussbaum's approaches are closely related in many respects and at the same time differ on some issues.⁴ However, despite the different categories and terminologies, both believe that the focus, especially on policy choices, should be on combined capabilities. Once again, they stress the importance of the context of people's lives: legal norms, but also and above all norms of education, customs, morals, and religion, have a huge impact on the opportunities of individuals.

3 Feminist Contribution on Equality Issue

To summarise the contribution of feminism to the equality issue, we refer to the four conventional waves.⁵

The first wave, so-called 'feminism of equality', began in the nineteenth century with the women's suffrage movements and remained predominant until the end of the Second World War (Gilmore, 2007). This movement demanded equal treatment of women and men and set itself the goal of opening up existing social structures to

⁴For a more detailed analysis, please see Robeyns (2005).

⁵To speak of 'waves' of feminism is to simplify the heterogeneity of feminist thought. Over time, feminist analyses have overlapped and integrated, making an absolute division between a before and an after impossible. However, such a schematisation helps us to synthesise concepts and highlight the strands of thought that have stood out more than others in different historical periods.

women as well. According to feminists of this wave, since men and women are born equal, they deserve the same rights. Historically, we have been in a period of struggle for universal suffrage and more general formal equality.

The second wave began in the 1960s with women's liberation movements (Gilmore, 2007). This historical period saw the emergence of first 'feminism of difference' in Europe and then 'cultural feminism' in the United States. According to this movement, conforming to the male model, women would reproduce their subordination. This strand of thought intended to denounce the systematic oppression of women by the patriarchal regime and affirm 'sexual difference' (Irigaray, 1974; Melandri, 2012). Thus, the aim was to build a new politics and society based on differences, and to give space to women's voices.

The third wave of feminism occurred in the early 1990s and is the one in which the greatest heterogeneity of feminist approaches developed. According to Evans (2015), the confusion surrounding what constitutes third-wave feminism is in some ways its defining characteristic. If the first wave focused more on women's rights (formal equality), the third wave was born with the intention of fighting and confronting the issues that arose and developed during those years. The category 'woman' and the 'man-woman' differences are no longer the only ones at the centre of the debate and subjectivities that had previously remained on the margins emerge (e.g. black women, migrant women, queer subjectivities, etc.). During the third wave, postmodern feminism, transfeminism, ecofeminism, and cyber-feminism developed. In addition, the peculiar claims of black feminism, Indian feminism, and lesbianism have taken place.

Within this enormous variety of 'situated' reflections, we go into more detail about two approaches: the so-called 'postmodern feminism' and the intersectional feminism.

Postmodern feminism integrates both postmodern and post-structuralist theories. This approach differs significantly from its predecessors in that it considers gender as well as gender as a social construct. According to Butler (2002), even material things such as the body are subject to processes of social construction. Thus, even sex is neither natural nor completely determined and definable (Frug, 2014). Sex is a tool that does not fully determine what can be done. Therefore, if individuals can constitute multiple, overlapping, intersecting, and contradictory identities, there is no single solution to approach/solve the problem of women's oppression. According to the critique of postmodern feminist theories, such approaches deconstruct and highlight the limitations of previous approaches but do not propose any alternative ways of action.

According to Crenshaw (2013), reflections made up to that point by Western feminism were exclusively about white women without considering aspects relevant to other women. According to Crenshaw (2013), black women were excluded from both feminist and anti-racist discourses because they did not consider the experience of the interaction of gender and race discrimination. This experience is larger and more complex than the mere sum of experiences of sexism and racism. With the same principle, in addition to gender and race, intersectionality reminds us of considering all other categories of discrimination: ethnic, sexual, and class.

After 2010, some began to speak of a fourth wave of feminism, currently underway. A shift enabled by the Internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the Internet to both discuss and activate (Munro, 2013). Feminism is considered even more inclusive than its predecessor, as it is open to men for the first time.

4 The International Framework

Without claiming it to be exhaustive, we summarise the evolution of the concept of gender equality in the international context.⁶

The principle of equal rights between men and women was first enshrined in 1945 with the establishment of the United Nations (UN).⁷ Subsequently, several instruments were developed with the intention of abolishing gender inequalities.⁸ However, this has not been sufficient to ensure equality between men and women.

In 1975, the United Nations celebrated International Women's Day for the first time. The aim was to highlight the persistence of discrimination against women in most parts of the world and to promote increased efforts to achieve equality between women and men. In the same year, the United Nations convened the first International Women's Conference, which was attended by 131 states and 4000 NGO representatives.

However, in 1979, with the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),⁹ the first real watershed emerged. More than 40 years later, this convention remained the most important international legally binding instrument for women's rights. It covers all forms of discrimination against women, promotes special measures to ensure their full development and advancement, and guarantees the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with men. It defines discrimination against women as 'any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the

⁶For more on the work of the United Nations for the advancement of women from 1945 to 1996, please see: United Nations, *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women 1945–1996*, New York, United Nations Department of Public Information, 1996.

⁷Charter of the United Nations signed on 26 June 1945, in San Francisco, and entered into force on 24 October 1945

⁸To name a few: the creation of the Sub-Commission on the Status of Women at the UN (February 1946); the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (adopted in March 1953); Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (adopted in November 1967); etc.

⁹CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and is often described as an international law on women's rights.

political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field' (Art.1). According to CEDAW, approving laws is not enough; governments must ensure the effective exercise of these rights by women. In the preamble, it states the need for a change in the traditional roles of men and women, in society and in the family, to achieve perfect equality between men and women. Finally, it sets up a Committee of Experts to monitor the implementation of the Convention and the actual situation of women in all signatory countries. Even today, the Committee regularly draws general recommendations, but is tailored to each country, with the aim of promoting the development of the principles of CEDAW. Thus, by ratifying the Convention, states commit themselves to eliminating all discrimination practiced by individuals, bodies, and organisations by creating appropriate measures to ensure the full development of women.

Another important step was the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993,¹⁰ where women's rights were identified as an indivisible part of universal human rights. A few years later, in 1995, during the Fourth World Conference on Women, another important document, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, was drafted.¹¹ In addition to reaffirming the importance of gender equality as an integral part of social justice and human rights, the platform identified 12 critical areas¹² and subsequent strategic objectives to empower women and eliminate the discrimination they face. The conference also elaborated on the concept of gender mainstreaming, first introduced 10 years earlier at the third World Conference on Women.

Gender mainstreaming is defined as:

the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programs, in all areas and levels. It is a strategy for making women's and men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.¹³

Its principles include paying attention to gender differences in all aspects of life; the responsibility at the highest levels of the system to translate gender mainstreaming into practice and to monitor its results; the need to make every effort to broaden women's participation at all levels of decision-making; and the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming through concrete actions, mechanisms, and processes in all areas of the United Nations system. According to these

¹⁰From 14 to 25 June 1993, the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights was held in Vienna. At its conclusion, the representatives of 171 States unanimously adopted a Declaration and Programme of Action for the promotion and protection of human rights in the world.

¹¹From 4 to 15 September 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, at the end of which two documents were approved: the Declaration and the Platform for Action.

¹²The twelve critical areas are women and poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanism, human rights, media, environment, and the girl child.

¹³Ecosoc Agreed Conclusion 1997/2

principles, gender mainstreaming on the political agenda is neither a substitute for the need for targeted and specific policies and programs for women nor for positive legislation towards them. Finally, they emphasise the need for clear political will and the allocation of adequate human and financial resources to translate the concept into practice. In short, gender mainstreaming is the process of putting equal opportunities at the centre of the political agenda, from local to international.

Even the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has highlighted the desire to offer new forms of protection and greater attention to women's human rights, recognising the need to look at the problem of discrimination on the basis of sex as an essential moment for the fulfilment of individual and collective rights; the sexual dimension has been recognised as fundamental in the processes of conceptualisation, implementation, and evaluation of human rights policies and for the choice of objectives and priorities to be followed at the international level (Degani, 2001). No longer protection policies in a defensive sense that see women as subjects to be protected, but actions to recognise and enhance the specificity of which both genders are bearers (Biemmi, 2014).

While the concept of gender equality was strongly associated with the concept of human rights in the 1990s, a further evolution in the 2000s saw gender equality being linked to the concept of development. According to the UN Millennium Declaration, promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women are effective tools to fight poverty, hunger, and disease, and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.¹⁴ The World Economic Forum (WEF) considers gender inequality a relevant aspect in preventing men and women from realising their full potential (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005).

In 2010, given the persistence of gender inequality in the world, the UN General Assembly created UN Women, a specific body with the task of addressing challenges such as gender equality and women's empowerment. In 2015, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also included among its 17 goals 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'.¹⁵ Therefore, we note the clear affirmation of the need to build a society in which women and men work together to achieve a world in which all can enjoy equality, equity, development, and peace. Indeed, within the framework of UN gender mainstreaming, there is a plan to adopt women's perspectives in international peacekeeping and security operations. Thus, the possibility of participating on an equal basis in all peace process operations becomes an integral part of the principle of equality between men and women.

Reducing the focus from the international to the European context, we notice as in recent years the European Union has also reaffirmed the need to address gender equality. For example, every year since 2014, the European Commission has published a report which monitors the state of equality between women and men by examining certain macro-areas. It is also noteworthy that the Council of Europe

¹⁴A/RES/55/2

¹⁵For more on Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, please see: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

adopted its first international legal instrument to prevent and combat sexism and its manifestations.¹⁶ According to the report, gender equality is fundamental to the protection of human rights, functioning of democracy, and good governance. Thus, in 2019, the Council of Europe also defined sexism for the first time: ‘sexism is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which leads to discrimination and prevents the full advancement of women in society’.

Sadly, the latest European report is far from encouraging. This report is the first of the new Strategy for Gender Equality 2020–2025. It sets out the EU’s achievements and gives inspiring examples from the Member States and EU-funded projects for each of the strategy’s five key areas: being free from violence and stereotypes; thriving in a gender equal economy; leading equally throughout society; gender mainstreaming and funding; and promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment across the world.¹⁷ According to the Report, most indicators of gender equality have levelled out for several years, and where progress has been made, it has been quite slow. Progress in gender equality in decision-making has been stalled. Moreover, gender gaps in employment, remuneration, and unpaid care persist. Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to end gender-based violence. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women’s lives and exacerbated existing inequalities between women and men in almost all areas of life, both in Europe and beyond. There is ample evidence that the hard-won achievements of past years have been ‘rolled back’. Many stakeholders are concerned that it will take years or even decades to overcome the setbacks of gender equality caused by the pandemic.

While the importance of achieving gender equality is constantly reiterated by international institutions, the efforts made to date are still insufficient. Moreover, all studies agree that no country in the world has achieved equality between women and men (UN, 2021; WEF, 2021).

5 The Cross-Cutting Nature of the Gender Issue

How do countless forms of gender discrimination arise, and are they reinforced? Based on the functioning of the human mind, there are operations of simplification, generalisation, and abstraction which enable both learning and the organisation of experience. Thus, stereotypes¹⁸ are naturally utilised by our cognitive processes.

¹⁶CM/Rec(2019)

¹⁷For the latest report published in 2021, please see 2021 report on gender equality in the EU, European Commission.

¹⁸The term stereotype refers to a simplified and schematic representation of things, people, groups, places, etc., based on a generalisation that is independent of direct observation of individual cases and even precedes it (Cosenza, 2016).

Psychology and social sciences have investigated the role played by stereotypes in the relations between groups of people. They stated that the stereotype consists of a rigid and simplified set of characteristics that the members of one social group attribute to another social group, without further investigation, critical reasoning, or empirical verification. Moreover, this group is considered a unique set with no exceptions (Cosenza, 2016). ‘Women are more sensitive than men’, or ‘men are less inclined to care than women’, are gender stereotypes. As natural processes of our mind, stereotypes are necessary cognitions that cannot be eliminated. However, we must point out that stereotypes are not necessarily negative, and to avoid making them, we must be careful not to attribute any value judgement to simplifications. When this does not happen, stereotypes become the cognitive core of prejudices which, in contrast, always attribute judgements and evaluations. These judgements precede experience and observation (Mazzara, 1997). ‘Because women are more sensitive, they are better caregivers than men’ is a prejudice. Thus, laden with often negative meanings, prejudices are able to guide society’s actions and behaviour, turning into discrimination. The prejudice ‘women are better caregivers than men’ becomes the basis for the widespread belief that women are better suited than men to caring professions and that, as a result, most of these professions are actually performed by women (Cosenza, 2016).

Recognising the link between stereotypes and discrimination allows us to better understand how discrimination can lurk everywhere, in every aspect of life, and be repeated over time with extreme ease. Language can therefore exist and become a privileged vehicle for the affirmation and reiteration of discriminatory cultural codes. Warning: sexism does not reside in the language itself but in the way we use it. The relationship between thought and word means that language has the intrinsic property of conditioning the way we think and the process of constructing reality. Therefore, we are wary of those who consider the issue of using a non-sexist language to be a non-priority and of little importance.

Looking at the transversal nature of gender discrimination, we proceed in macro-areas. These correspond to the domains of the Gender Equality Index (GEI) used in the following sections: work, money, time, power, knowledge, health, and violence.

5.1 Work

Work is the social arena in which decisions about the distribution of material resources are made, and through which individuals have access to positions of authority and power (Ridgeway, 1992). Thus, by the term ‘work’ we generally mean paid activity performed outside the home, in the productive or public sphere. By contrast, domestic and care work is not considered part of the economy and has become invisible in global accounting systems (Slade, 2008). Instead, if we wanted to, we could calculate its economic value using the ‘non-expenditure’ method: how much would we spend if we had to hire one person to do all the domestic and care work we need? By referring to the market prices of the same services, we can

calculate the amount. However, we choose not to do so, continuing to leave domestic and care work out of the labour market.

Over the years, women have increasingly entered the world of paid work, yet the system of gender inequality has reshaped itself so that it has managed to persist (Balbo, 2008; Ridgeway, 2011). According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, the Economic Participation and Opportunity constitute the second-largest gender gap among the four components of the index. Only 58.3% of this gap has been closed so far. ‘Globally, considering population-weighted averages, almost 80% of men aged 15–64 are in the labour force versus only 52.6% of women of the same age group’ (WEF, 2021: 13). Moreover, in Europe, we find lower levels of employment and higher levels of underemployment for women (EIGE, 2021). Thus, women encounter discrimination in employment even before they enter it: they are less employed, have fewer opportunities, and have higher rates of unemployment and nonparticipation in employment. The labour market is certainly influenced by the economic-productive system, supply, and demand; however, gender norms and stereotypes are key pillars of gender inequalities in the world of work (EIGE, 2021). In many countries, the dimension of work is still closely linked to the male universe; societies stigmatise a man who does not work, while they are not at all surprised if a woman does not work. On the contrary, for women, work appears more as an option, a right that is not yet fully recognised and on which there are doubts and reservations. The expected social role of adult men is that of workers, whereas the role of women is more related to the family context. Many societies are more likely to disapprove of women with young children who work than women without children who do not work. Moreover, domestic and care work performed by women is a crucial resource, even in the welfare models of developed economies. The main example is the family welfare system in Mediterranean Europe (Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal), which is characterised by a limited supply of public care services and attribution of responsibilities to the family, precisely because of the low participation of women in the labour market (Liebfried, 1992; Millar & Warman, 1996). Not by chance, the role of housewives arose with industrial capitalism, complementing the model of men who were exclusively dedicated to paid work. Men’s high productivity was also guaranteed by the absence of tasks outside paid work. This asymmetry has left deep traces in the organisation of today’s societies, in some more than in others, despite social changes. In Europe, one of the main barriers to women’s equal participation in the labour force is the unequal distribution of care, family, and other household tasks (EIGE, 2020), which is far from new. Balbo spoke of a double presence as early as 1978. According to her, women are absent or present, and in what ways in the labour market remain conditioned by the extent and quality of their family work. Women experience a life of ‘dual presence’ within a social system organised in such a way as to make full use of women’s labour potential at some stages of their lives, their potential to perform for their families at others, and the possibility of using a combination of both at yet another stage. However, no man has experienced anything comparable (Balbo, 2008).

In addition, when women manage to overcome the barriers to accessing work, they experience discrimination which negatively affects their quality of work

(Richardt, 2008; Slade, 2008; Ridgeway, 2011). One of the discriminations women face in employment is ‘horizontal segregation’. This social phenomenon leads to the concentration of women in some specific sectors of economic activity and in a limited number of professions. Social stereotypes and organisational rigidities produce both forms of exclusion in the labour supply and condition women’s preferences in their occupational choices. Many female-dominated occupations correspond to traditional care roles, such as teachers, nurses, secretaries, and domestic workers. Moreover, these occupations have generally less advantageous characteristics than male-dominated ones: low job profiles, low pay, and few career opportunities. We also find this trend in Europe (EIGE, 2019).

An additional challenge is the gender gap in senior and managerial positions in the private and public sectors. ‘Vertical segregation’ (commonly known as ‘glass ceiling’) refers to all the barriers that prevent women from accessing the highest levels of the corporate hierarchy. Obstacles fought by law but were hard to die for. Even in developed economies, there are no professional areas in which the top positions are equally distributed between women and men. For instance, in the United States, women are in just 42% in senior and managerial positions; in Sweden, 40%; in the United Kingdom, 36.8%; in France, 34.6%; in Germany, 29%; in Italy and the Netherlands, 27%; in Korea, 15.6%; and in Japan, 14.7% (WEF, 2021).

In Europe, motherhood still conflicts with careers in an obvious manner. The gap between women and men in couples with children highlights how unpaid care duties remain a major obstacle for women taking on paid jobs (EIGE, 2021). Having children for a woman increases both the likelihood of working part-time rather than full-time, and the likelihood of not working at all. Maternity is seen as an obstacle to professional engagement as it entails care duties that make mobility and career development more problematic. In contrast, fatherhood does not seem to conflict with career advancement; the largest gender gap in full-time equivalent employment in 2019 was among couples with children, with 62% of women, compared with 89% of men, in this family grouping working full time (EIGE, 2021). In many countries, the absence of services to reconcile productive and care work hinders women’s return to the labour market after having children. Similarly, when family resources are insufficient to meet the cost of childcare or babysitting, women give up or reduce their work commitments. In literature, we find the concept of ‘opportunity costs’: if women have to bear costs equal to or higher than the wages they receive to carry out a job, the ‘opportunity cost’ of their employment is so high that it is not worthwhile or not worthwhile at all to start or continue working (Pruna, 2007). Not by chance, European countries with more female employment and a higher fertility rate have invested more in work-life balance policies (e.g. Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands). Moreover, very short working hours can lead to lower wages and limit career opportunities. Thus, the world of work provides men with much higher-earning opportunities than women do.

Aspects not investigated at the international and European levels in the best-known indices, but interesting in our opinion, are those of under- and over-education, mobbing, work-related stress, and sexual harassment in the workplace. According to an analysis of over- and under-education in Italy, it is mainly men who

have a more qualified occupation in relation to their level of education, while it is mainly women, young, and university graduates, who are more likely to have jobs that require lower education than they have (Alaimo et al., 2019). In Italy, women are most affected by mobbing, work-related stress, and sexual harassment in the workplace (Pruna, 2007). Another aspect revealed by the in-depth study of the Italian context concerns the influence of the ‘territory’ variable on gender inequality. International documents often refer to the differences between rural and metropolitan contexts. However, it might also be useful to consider other aspects, for example, in Italy, for a woman being born and living in a northern rather than a southern region means having very different opportunities and conditions for participation in the labour market (Alaimo & Nanni, 2018a; Alaimo et al., 2019).

All of this shows that women’s propensity to participate in the labour market is not sufficient to guarantee their participation. This participation is also enormously correlated with the propensity that society has towards women’s work. Moreover, we can say that it is not sufficient to investigate the general presence of women in the labour market to assess the state of the art in this dimension, let alone its possible changes. In contrast, more detailed analyses which also consider the quality of the work itself are needed.

Unfortunately, gender gaps in both labour participation and income are likely to increase after the COVID-19 crisis. As reported, the disproportionate burden of household and care responsibilities was already an important driver of these gaps even before the pandemic. Data analysis reveals that school closures during the pandemic have been one of the main causes for women to reduce working hours and labour participation, as childcare responsibilities still fall predominantly on them (WEF, 2021). Studies also show particularly high burnout levels among female healthcare workers with children younger than 12 years, who are struggling to manage the dual burden of increased workload and more care duties (Duarte et al., 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis is distinctive in its gendered impact across the employment sectors. As women are over-represented among ‘essential’ workers (the health and care sectors, victim support services, education, and food retail), they were among the most exposed to COVID-19 and experienced higher levels of work-related stress and emotional exhaustion (Barello et al., 2020).

Work is also closely linked to other areas. Work enables individuals’ economic independence and has a cascading impact on the remaining aspects of life. The presence of women in the labour market influences the market itself but also changes the welfare system, family structures, parental relations, traditional roles, and demographic trends. Thus, greater gender equality in the labour market also leads to greater equality in politics, economic and social organisation, society, and family.

5.2 *Money*

When we talk about money and gender discrimination, we immediately refer to the pay gap: for the same job, position, and working hours, men’s wages are on average

higher than those of women (WEF, 2021; EIGE, 2021). According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, estimated earned income is at parity only in a handful of developing countries, while among advanced economies, the best-performing country, Sweden, still has an approximately 18% gap between the incomes of men and women. Although the right to equal pay for equal work or work of equal value has been a cornerstone of EU treaties for more than 60 years, and despite a wealth of policies to redress gender inequality of income, on average, women still earn less than men. According to Eurostat, in the EU in 2019, gross hourly earnings for women were, on average, 14% lower than for men (EIGE, 2021). This gap can only be explained, to a small extent, by personal and/or workplace differences. Most of this difference is evidence of discrimination: different economic treatments between two individuals of equal productivity but of different genders.

Some scholars explore the phenomenon of the ‘feminisation of poverty’,¹⁹ arguing that even a condition such as poverty presents inequalities to the detriment of women. Europe is seriously concerned about this phenomenon: lone mothers earn less than lone fathers, but the highest income gap is between single women and single men, with women earning less than men. Women are more likely to be in unpaid, low-paid, or temporary jobs than men. In addition, income inequality increases throughout life, and women receive lower pensions than men do. Known as the gender pension gap, this phenomenon has multiple causes, such as fewer years of employment due to the motherhood penalty, job segregation, differences in pension systems, and work intensity and pay over a lifetime (EIGE, 2015). If pensions are the most important source of income for older people, the gender pension gap results in a higher risk of poverty for pension-age women. Moreover, single women of old age cannot rely on survivor pensions or the income of a partner (EIGE, 2021).

5.3 *Time*

We can also reflect on the differences in leisure time between men and women. When work inside and outside the family is added, women have less free time than men do. This inequality emerges both in adult couples with an unequal distribution of family burdens, and among young people with daughters who participate more in domestic work than sons (Del Boca et al., 2012). The amount of time spent in paid

¹⁹The ‘feminisation of poverty’ was first coined in the 1970s, but did not make its major breakthrough into the development lexicon until the mid-1990s. A critical catalyst was the Fourth UN Conference on Women in 1995 when eradicating the ‘persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women’ was adopted as one of the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (Chant, 2008). According to Williams and Lee-Smith (2000: 1), ‘The feminisation of poverty is more than a slogan: it is a marching call that impels us to question our assumptions about poverty itself by examining how it is caused, manifested and reduced, and to do this from a gender perspective’.

work, rest and recreation, or caring for others has knock-on effects on many other aspects of a person's life, including health, as already mentioned (EIGE, 2021). In the 1970s, women in all Western countries reported higher levels of subjective well-being than did men. Subsequently, we witnessed a progressive decline in female happiness to the point where men reported higher subjective well-being, an apparent paradox considering the progressive emancipation of women. However, the increase in the total volume of work to be done outside and inside the home has led to deterioration in their well-being (Krueger, 2007). By contrast, men have benefited most from women's entry into the world of work. They have benefited from the improvement in the family's economic conditions due to their partner's income, and they have only slightly increased the amount of time devoted to domestic and care tasks without compromising their leisure time (Del Boca et al., 2012).

5.4 Power

By power or political empowerment, as this area is also often called, we mean equal representation in decision-making structures and the ability of women and men to influence decision-making. Most political systems in the world possess de jure equality, yet women's political participation varies from country to country (Richardt, 2008) and they are never equally represented. Men control access to resources, dominate senior global and national positions (international organisations, governments, and private companies), and are key players in the social, economic, and political choices of countries, possessing greater status and power than women (Richardt, 2008; Slade, 2008; Best & Luvender, 2015). Not surprisingly, according to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, the area where gender gaps remain the widest is power/political empowerment, and even the best performing country, Iceland, still has to close 24% of this gap. Of the 35,500 parliament seats across the 156 countries covered by the Global Gender Gap index, only 26.1% of them are held by women. Women are similarly under-represented in ministerial positions: only 22.6% of the over 3400 ministers worldwide are women. Looking at the highest political position in a country, very few women have served as heads of state in the last 50 years. In 81 of the 156 countries assessed in the report, there has never been a woman in this position, including countries considered relatively progressive with respect to gender equality, such as Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United States (WEF, 2021). The European context also reveals its criticalities in the area of political participation: women account for only one in three members of EU national parliaments. They remain substantially underrepresented in corporate boardrooms (30% in 2021). Moreover, in large companies, fewer than one in 10 board presidents or CEOs are women. Thus, despite women's growing involvement in research funding, media content, and sports policies, their opportunities to influence decisions in these sectors remain limited (EIGE, 2021).

In addition to numerical inequality, women experience vertical and horizontal segregation in political participation, as in the labour market. When women reach

senior positions, they often administer more traditionally to women. These differences constitute elements of inequality and discrimination. In a fully-fledged democracy, all citizens have the same opportunity to vote, be elected, and participate in the decision-making process. On the contrary, a predominantly male-dominated polity decides on a lack of women's perspective, way of thinking, and discussion.

According to Norris (2005), there are three main strategies to facilitate equal political representation: rhetorical, equal opportunity, and positive action policies. Rhetorical strategies are merely symbolic and generally refer to the signing of international conventions on gender equality and equal opportunity. Equal opportunity policies are more concrete and include real initiatives to promote equality between men and women in the political sphere. Positive action policies seem to be the most significant in terms of results and are divided into three categories: (A) quotas of seats reserved for women established by electoral law, (B) quotas of women established by law in the candidate lists of all political parties, and (C) gender quotas decided autonomously by individual parties.

The area of political representation is also strongly connected to others. Equality between men and women in the political sphere feeds on and supports equality in the economic, social, and family spheres, and vice versa. Not surprisingly, women participate more in political life in countries with more developed family policies (Donà, 2006). Moreover, political representation and general access to decision-making are increasingly included among the social determinants of health (SDH) (Bhui, 2018; McCartney et al., 2021). Alternatively, it is a health policy determinant (Ottersen et al., 2014). According to the 2020 WHO report, the gap in life expectancy is related to the degree of political equity, and the benefit is greater for men (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2020). In addition, according to Van de Velde et al. (2013), a high degree of gender equality at the macro level, especially with more women in political decision-making, is associated with lower levels of depression in both women and men.

In the EU strategy on gender equality 2020–2025, gender balance in decision-making is one of the three main pillars, emphasising the importance of having women in leadership positions in all political, economic, and social areas (EC, 2020). In addition, in this area, regulatory reforms are indispensable for the development of new gender sensitivity, but unfortunately, they are not sufficient. Formal changes are not enough if they are not accompanied by cultural and substantive changes in society.

5.5 *Knowledge*

Knowledge or education, as this area is also often called the sector, is the most effective tool for implementing gender equality in the context of social, political, and working life. According to the Beijing Platform, non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys, a perspective capable of creating more equal relations between women and men, focusing on both genders and breaking down their current

crystallisation. Rigidity can inhibit personal aspirations.²⁰ In addition to stressing the importance of gender equality in these areas, the platform specifies the areas of action to achieve it. It is necessary to ensure equal access to education, eliminate illiteracy among women, improve women's access to vocational training, scientific and technical education, and lifelong learning, implement non-discriminatory education and training systems, provide resources to change the education system, and promote lifelong learning of women and girls.²¹

According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, the gender gaps in knowledge and education are nearly closed. In Educational Attainment, 121 countries out of 156 considered have closed at least 95% of their gender gaps. Of these, more than one-third of the sample (64 countries) had already achieved at least 99.5% gender parity. The trend is also reversed in some cases; on average, there is virtual parity in secondary education, and women actually exceed men in tertiary education attainment. In 2018, 40.6% of women and 35.6% of men in the world were enrolled in tertiary education, a sign that women are pursuing education as a channel for advancement (WEF, 2021). However, tracking the gender gap in education in developed economies through access indicators alone is misleading in terms of results. In such cases, a more detailed analysis allows us to detect the persistence of any gender gap. Here is an example; according to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, Italy has achieved 99.9% parity in education. However, according to more structured studies in the specific Italian context, the modernisation of female education is far from complete (Alaimo et al., 2019). The main problem is the so-called 'educational segregation'. This segregation consists of a sexist subdivision inherent in the school system, which leads students of both sexes to be channelled into traditionally masculine courses and the others into traditionally feminine courses. In Italy, for example, there are no formal gender-specific barriers to entry into the different fields of education, yet self-segregation persists that limits individual interests, especially those of women, within the fields considered most suitable for their gender. Thus, we find almost entirely female and male curricula. This aspect is already present in secondary education and further exacerbated in tertiary education and subsequent careers. The divide is clear between the humanities, considered to be a female domain, and the technical-scientific domain, attended largely by boys (Alaimo et al., 2019). This trend was also observed in the rest of the European countries (EIGE, 2021). Moreover, according to the latest European report, this segregation does not improve: the previously upward trend in the proportion of men studying the humanities has plateaued, as has an upward trend in the proportion of women studying engineering, science, technology, and mathematics (EIGE, 2021). Obviously, the phenomenon of educational segregation affects both genders; however, it is more discriminatory for women since the faculties traditionally associated with them are the most penalised in the labour market in terms of employment opportunities and salaries.

²⁰Objective B. Education and training of women, point 96—Beijing Platform for Action, 1995

²¹Strategic Objectives B.1 to B.6—Beijing Platform for Action, 1995

In addition, according to several Italian studies, educational qualifications affect the fate of women more than that of men. Tertiary education for women increases their opportunities to enter, stay, and achieve the highest qualifications in the labour market. In contrast, the lack of adequate educational credentials penalises women more than men (Pruna, 2007; Zajczyk et al. 2011; Del Boca et al., 2012). Similarly, the advantages linked to the social class to which they belong have a greater centrality for the female gender than for the male gender because it can facilitate overcoming the prejudices that penalise them (Zajczyk et al., 2011). Empirical evidence shows that education also impacts health by influencing behaviour, including the use of preventive health services (OECD, 2006). Furthermore, according to the WHO, educational policies have the potential to substantially improve health (WHO, 2015).

6 Health and Gender-Specific Medicine

For a long time, the theme of health has focused on access to food and healthcare, reproductive facilities, and safety, more generally on the integrity of the person (Richardt, 2008). In the 2000s, there was an increased focus on reproductive health (Slade, 2008). However, considering indicators such as the integrity of the person, access to food, and healthcare puts the developed economies in a good position, as we can imagine. Not surprisingly, according to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, health and survival are the second-best sub-indexes in terms of progress towards gender parity globally. Moreover, ‘countries’ performances are significantly more concentrated; scores vary among a concentrated set of values between just 93% and 98%. The fact that populous countries such as India and China perform below average contributes to reducing the global average result²² (WEF, 2021: 11). Thus, this analysis shows that a majority of countries perform well, with an apparent unsatisfactory global average result only because of a few, albeit numerous, countries in the world. However, if we look further into the area of health by considering indicators of greater well-being, the picture becomes more complex. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021), significant gender inequalities persist in the health domain, including major disparities in life expectancy and

²²In this case, ‘The main driver of cross-country variation is the skewed sex ratio at birth. In China, there are 0.88 female births for every male birth; in Azerbaijan and Vietnam, 89%; in Armenia, 90%; in India, 91%; and in Pakistan, 92%, lower than a natural and biological relatively constant ratio of about 94%. These ratios can be attributed to the norms of son preference and gender-biased prenatal sex-selective practices. China and India together account for about 90%-95% of the estimated 1.2 million to 1.5 million missing female births annually worldwide due to gender-biased prenatal sex selective practices. Further, China, India, and Pakistan register excess female mortality rates (below age 5) related to neglect and gender-biased postnatal sex selection practices. The estimated number of ‘missing women’ was 142.6 million in 2020, twice as much as in 1970, when the number of missing women was estimated at 61 million’ (WEF, 2021: 13).

self-assessed health status. There are also major gender differences in health-related behaviours. Men tend to engage more in risky behaviours, such as smoking and excessive drinking. They are less involved in healthy activities, including physical activity and eating fruits and vegetables. In fact, in its analyses, the EIGE considers not only access to health services and health status, but also health behaviour, mental health, and disability. The results show that the largest gender inequalities are found in health behaviours, confirming that gender norms and relations affect health behaviours (EIGE, 2021).

The idea that sex may influence health is a relatively recent concept. Medicine has historically maintained an androcentric bias, and attention to women's health has focused solely on aspects related to reproduction. For a long time, for example, medicine has dealt with the prevention and treatment of diseases through the study of male-only cases, and the results of these studies have been carried over to the female population. Except for specific female pathologies related to the breast, genital apparatus, and reproductive capacity, medicine has taken the male experience as the general rule, underestimating female peculiarities (Dubini, 2016). Thus, in this context, the concept of gender medicine has created a space. It was born with the aim of limiting inequalities of study, attention, and treatment between men and women. It also aims to recognise and value their differences to guarantee the best care for all. According to gender medicine, the differences between the sexes in terms of health are not only and exclusively related to biological characteristics, but also to social, cultural, and relational characteristics that determine different responses to diseases. Gender medicine advocates taking care of the person in a way that considers all the differences, whether they are anatomophysiological, biological-functional, psychological, social, and cultural. As already mentioned, all areas of an individual's life are connected, and to consider gender in the area of health means to consider the evaluation of the living conditions and economic and social roles of men and women. For instance, the burden of unpaid care is increasingly being regarded as a determinant of health. Work–life conflicts affect mental health, and where policies exist to ease the burden of care on women, we find lower levels of gender inequality in health (Palència et al., 2017). Considering all this, the less advantageous conditions in which women live compared to men are inevitably reflected in their health conditions, which are empirically poorer due to fewer resources, less employment, more workload, and more violence on the part of men (Dubini, 2016). The burden of unpaid care is increasingly being regarded as a determinant of health.

Since 2000, the need to examine health from a more comprehensive perspective has been endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO includes gender medicine in the Equity Act, which states that the principle of equality does not only concern access to care for women and men but also the adequacy and appropriateness of care with respect to gender. In 2002, the Department of Gender and Women's Health (GWH) was established, a watershed initiative in which the WHO recognised sex (its biological aspect) and gender (its sociocultural aspect) as both important determinants of women's and men's health and illness. Thus, according to WHO, roles, responsibilities, social positions, and access to resources influence health and well-being. Therefore, any health program must consider these

factors. In contrast, with a neutral, non-gender-oriented approach, health policy is methodologically incorrect and discriminatory; if men and women fall ill differently, different treatments must be designed and implemented.

Still, on the subject of health, another consideration to be debunked concerns life expectancy. According to estimates, women tend to live longer than men do globally (WEF, 2021). This is even considered as a ‘positive note’ in the survey on gender inequality (WEF, 2021: 13). However, does this data really tell us something positive? According to an Italian study, women live longer than men, but their life expectancy in good health is lower (Alaimo & Nanni, 2018b). Although women have fewer risk-taking behaviours, they fall ill more often, especially for chronic diseases, use health services more often, consume more drugs, especially antidepressants, and often suffer from gender-based violence. Therefore, considering the indicator of life expectancy can tell us little about people’s health. On the contrary, healthy life expectancy focuses on a specific issue and, not surprisingly, sees women in a gap position. Other studies on self-reported health²³ confirm this gap: women tend to report worse health than men (Boerma et al., 2016; Nesson & Robinson, 2019). In Europe, 66% of women and 71% of men perceive their health as good or very good. Moreover, among adolescents, this gap is more pronounced, with 30% of girls and 39% of boys rating their health as excellent (EIGE, 2021).

Considering the issue of women’s health, we also encounter the phenomenon of male- and gender-based violence against women. A violation of women’s human rights, which affects their lives, causes trauma, illness, and death.

7 Male Violence Against Women

Gender-based violence refers to violence that women suffer because they are women. In the vast majority of cases, the perpetrator is a man; however, there are situations in which violence against women is perpetrated by other subjectivities, including women.²⁴ Male violence against women is an expression of historical inequality between the sexes and can only be understood and combined on the basis of its ineliminable specificity. It is a crime endemic to all societies, regardless of class, culture, religion, education level, income, age group, or ethnicity. Violence against women is one of the biggest public health problems worldwide, and an epidemiological reality through a series of structural and institutional conditions affects the mortality, morbidity, and quality of life of women, representing the root of many chronic diseases, obstetric complications, and psychiatric disorders (Dubini,

²³Self-reported health is a person’s subjective evaluation of their current health status (Lorem et al., 2017).

²⁴We can also consider gender-based violence as violence that a woman exerts on her partner in lesbian relationships. Even a female couple can reproduce an asymmetrical division of roles in which one is subordinate to the other.

2016). According to the 2014 Global Status Report on Violence Prevention,²⁵ one in five women worldwide reported having been sexually abused as a child, while one in three women had been a victim of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in her lifetime. Violence against women and girls acts both directly by promoting chronic diseases and premature death, and indirectly, other major causes of death (heart disease, stroke, cancer, and HIV/AIDS) are the result of adopting risky behaviours (smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, risky sex) in an attempt to cope with the psychological impact of violence (WHO, 2014).

The historical definition of gender-based violence is contained in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women²⁶:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (Art.1)

Thus, in 1993, for the first time, violence against women was internationally recognised as a manifestation of historical inequality in power relations between men and women. This inequality has resulted in the domination of one over the other, the discrimination of women, and their impediment to progress. At this point, gender-based violence moves from the private dimension of crime to the public dimension of human rights violations.

The manifestations of violence against women are innumerable; some are better known and/or more easily identifiable, while others are less so. However, each violent act can be traced to one of four types of violence if experienced by adult women or five (the same plus one) if children are subjected to violence. Physical violence is the easiest to recognise. It includes any act intended to hurt or frighten the victim and cause injury, in most cases. Sexual violence includes all the unwanted acts in the sphere of sexuality. They can be sexual acts, as well as physical, verbal, and visual. Such acts are violence when they are experienced by the woman as a threat, attack, humiliation, or loss of control in intimate contact. They can be imposed by force or obtained through the fear of future repercussions and/or psychological conditioning. Economic violence includes all attitudes implemented with the aim of preventing economic independence of the partner. Although it is common, it remains poorly understood. It includes, for example, actions aimed at preventing the seeking or keeping of work, economic commitments obtained by deception, deprivation or control of salary, and family expenses. Psychological violence includes all verbal and non-verbal attitudes (e.g. persistent communicative closure) that are intimidating, threatening, harassing, denigrating, etc. When we consider children to all these, we add 'witnessed violence'. The latter refers to seeing, hearing, or perceiving a parent perpetrating violence against another. This

²⁵The global status report on violence prevention 2014 reflects data from 133 countries. It is the first report of its kind to assess national efforts to address interpersonal violence: child maltreatment, youth violence, intimate partner and sexual violence, and elder abuse.

²⁶UN, 1993—Declaration on the elimination of violence against women (No. 48/104), New York

form of violence is almost unknown to outsiders but has the same impact on children as direct violence.

Almost 20 years after the 1993 UN Declaration, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence,²⁷ commonly referred to as the Istanbul Convention, was approved in 2011. An internationally binding normative instrument for those who sign it, in which we find the most recent definition of gender-based violence:

Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (Art.3/a)

New in the Convention affirms the principle of liberty—that is, the right of women to live free from violence.

In summary, male and gender-based violence against women is a structural, cultural, and transversal phenomenon. It is structural because it is gender-based, cultural because it reflects and reinforces the roles that society assigns to men and women according to their sex, and transversal because it affects every country, ethnicity, age, religion, educational qualification, social class, and so on.

8 What if There Were Others?

This is still not enough to highlight all aspects of life in which gender inequalities and discrimination can occur. For instance, gender roles and prejudices also impact sports; women worldwide have fewer opportunities than men. There are few sports in which women can become professionals, and when they can, the number of positions is limited and the pay is significantly lower. According to Kosofsky (1993), this inequality is linked to social reasons and not differences in athletic ability due to biological differences.

Gender stereotypes impact children by changing their perceptions of themselves and their expectations, interests, and dreams. According to Bian et al. (2017), this occurred from the age of six. Six-year-old girls are less likely than their male peers to believe that members of their gender are ‘really/really smart’, so much so that they give way to their peers, moving away from activities and games deemed appropriate for ‘really/really smart’ children. According to a study, common stereotypes associate high-level intellectual abilities (brilliance, genius, etc.) with men more than with women, discouraging the latter from pursuing many prestigious careers (Bian et al., 2017). The gap that separates girls from their potential, negatively impacting their dreams as early as 6 years of age, has been called ‘the dream gap’ by one of the

²⁷EC, 2011—Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210), Istanbul

world's largest toy companies. Again, the issue of representativeness is important: from an early age, children are asked what they would like to be when they grow up and build up an idea in their imagination, dreaming of what they would like to become. Thus, existing models can identify with a difference in their ability to imagine themselves in a certain role rather than another. According to a recent study, story-based interventions may be sufficient to challenge young girls' negative stereotypes of female intellectual abilities (Buckley et al., 2021).

9 Final Considerations

When looking at gender inequality and the tools for its measurement, we often find the term 'gender gap', which refers to systematic differences in the outcomes of men and women on a variety of issues, ranging from economic opportunity and participation, political empowerment, and education to health and well-being (Richardt, 2008). This definition makes it possible to identify the four dimensions classically considered when measuring the gender gap: education, economics, politics, and health. However, as mentioned, a division of domains has been chosen in this text in line with the focus chosen by the EGEI surveys. Based on this choice, the economic dimension is divided into work, money, and time. In addition, the dimensions of violence are introduced. Health and, albeit under different names, politics and education remain unchanged.

The choice of domains and indicators cannot be separated by a careful consideration of the reference context. Indeed, if inequality affects or affects every aspect of life, different contexts may require different reflections. For instance, if we want to measure gender equality on the African continent, it is important to note the difference between men and women with respect to attainment of the primary school-leaving certificate. This is because many girls do not have access to schooling in many African countries. In contrast, in Western countries, where there is compulsory schooling, we can ignore the indicator relating to the attainment of the primary school-leaving certificate, while it is relevant to focus on the division of study fields with respect to the sexes (science for men, humanities for women). Similarly, if we want to measure gender equality in China, it is important to be able to identify the phenomenon of 'selective abortions', a phenomenon caused by the one-child policy that has been in force in China for several years. In contrast, referring to the European context, this aspect is irrelevant. It is important to investigate whether inequality exists with respect to healthy life expectancy as an important goal of our societies.

Approaching the measurement of gender equality by reflecting on the context allows us to point out any gaps in the availability of data and the consequent limitations of such a survey as well as perhaps promoting its collection. Subsequently, the resulting survey allows us to highlight the phenomenon, understand its evolution or involution over time, and structure intervention policies targeted to the

specificity of the framework. The latter aspects promote social justice, democracy, growth, well-being, and competitiveness in a given country.

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