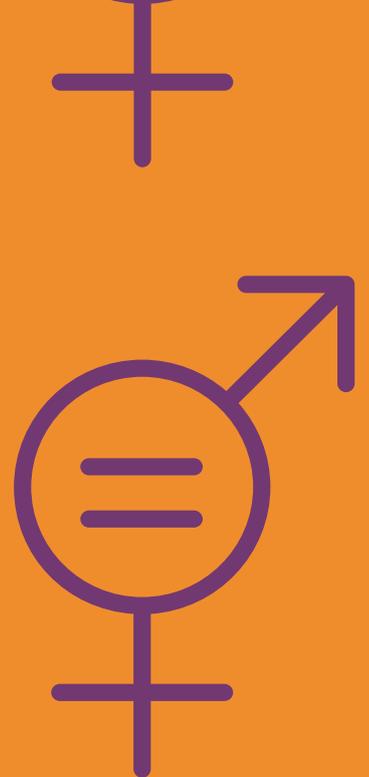
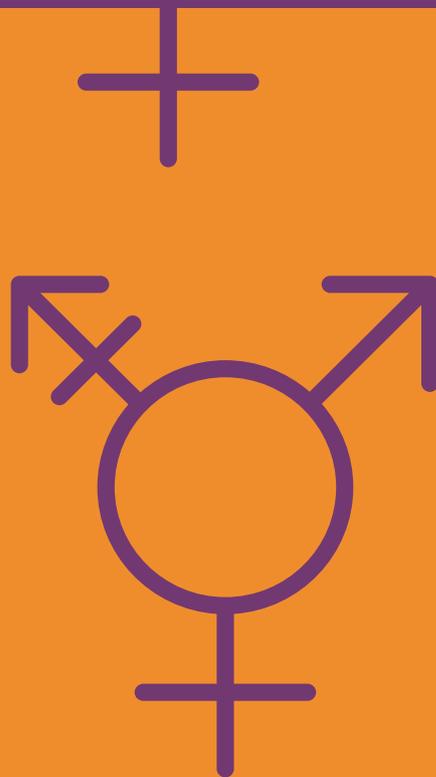
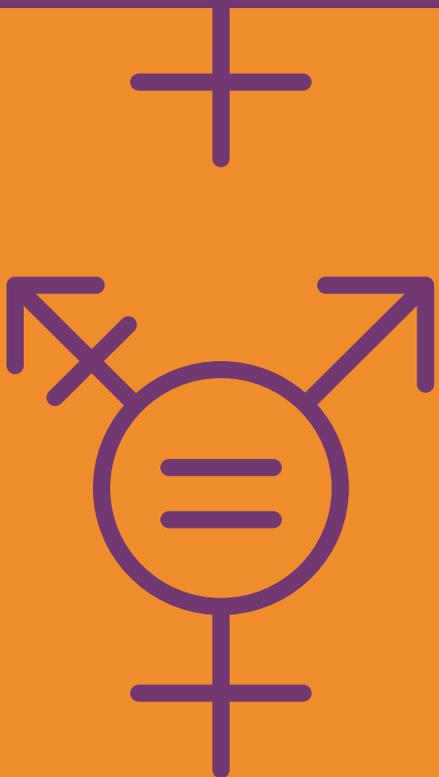


Costanza Hermanin and Marina Rallo  
February 2026

# Gender Equality in Italy

*State of a backlash and action proposals*



## Imprint

### **Publisher**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.  
Godesberger Allee 149  
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pertext, Berlin | www.pertext.de

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February 2026

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# Contents

1. Introduction: problem statement .....	3
2. Recent developments and critical challenges .....	9
Undermining LGBTQI+ rights and the surge of “anti-gender politics” .....	9
From Giulia Cecchettin to ‘Not All Men,: Italy’s struggle with gender violence and patriarchy denial .....	9
The untapped potential of Gender Budgeting .....	10
3. Civil society’s support for gender equality and its weaknesses .....	12
4. Proposal for progressive pro-equality actions .....	14
1. Tackle anti-gender backlash,enhancing awareness of gender equality issues in political representation .....	14
2. Strengthen cohesion among civil society organisations working on gender equality .....	15
3. Challenge gender bias and stereotyping in politics, media, and the justice system .....	15
4. Support gender equality through a gender-sensitive economic approach .....	15
5. Conclusions .....	17
References .....	18

# 1.

## Introduction: problem statement

For a number of years, Italy has been scoring very poorly in most binary gender (men/women) equality indices. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report highlights a concerning regression for Italy: from the 63rd position in both 2021 and 2022, Italy fell to 85th out of 148 countries in 2025. At the European level, Italy is the country with the **lowest active participation rate** of women in employment and the highest gap between men's and women's **labour participation rates** (EUROSTAT 2024, CNEL-ISTAT 2025).

Overall, the **European Gender Equality Index (2024) ranks Italy as the worst performer in the EU for gender equality in the workplace.** The most comforting gender wage gap score attributed by EUROSTAT 2024 to Italy has been criticised for being calculated on partial indicators and inaccurate data. Besides equality between men and women, Italy has been one of the last countries in Europe to grant some **rights to same-sex couples**, such as the possibility to enter a civil partnership, which was established only in 2016.

Civil partnerships, however, are all but equivalent to marriage. First, they can only be concluded by same-sex partners, a feature which is highly debatable in legal terms. Second, although civil partnerships grant rights in terms of economic and civil rights (e.g. the possibility to make decisions for the health of the partner), they do not attribute any family rights to the same-sex partner who is not the biological parent of children. The non-biological parent cannot even adopt their partner's children. Although some municipalities have engaged in registering the children of same-sex couples as offspring of the non-biological parent, ever since the last government took office, it announced that it would adopt legislative instruments to curtail this practice.

Among this, the Parliament adopted a very peculiar piece of legislation in the fall of 2024, banning gestational surrogacy as a "universal crime", i.e. a crime which can be prosecuted even if committed abroad. This is coherent with the stance of the leading radical right-wing party in government, Fratelli d'Italia, whose members openly contrast what they call "gender ideology", i.e. the possibility of self-defining one's own gender and sexual orientation. "Gender ideology" is also at the centre of the **anti-woke** campaign championed by the right and taken up by parts of the left and the liberals.

**Gender-based violence** is another issue of concern. On the one side, legislation listing homophobia as an aggravating circumstance for hate crimes and gender-based violence has not been adopted so far. On the other hand, the thorough legislative framework existing for violence against women and domestic violence has not proven effective in reducing the number of femicides and other forms of violence. A scattered implementation and a widespread sexist culture contribute to explaining this phenomenon.

All of this – alongside growing "antiwoke" campaigns spreading in national media, the **structural weaknesses of and conflict among domestic NGOs** working on gender equality, and limited data availability – justifies giving enhanced attention to gender equality in Italy and extending it from a binary conception of gender to other forms of gender identification, sexual orientation and to intersections of people at risk of enhanced discrimination.

Finally, there is a crucial **gap in data about non-binary people and LGBTQI+** people, for instance, as concerns their political participation, and data to monitor inequalities at the intersections of different characteristics that enhance the likelihood of discrimination, e.g. Muslim and older women, young Roma, etc. This curtails the possibility of analysing and addressing structural inequalities where targeted intervention is most necessary.

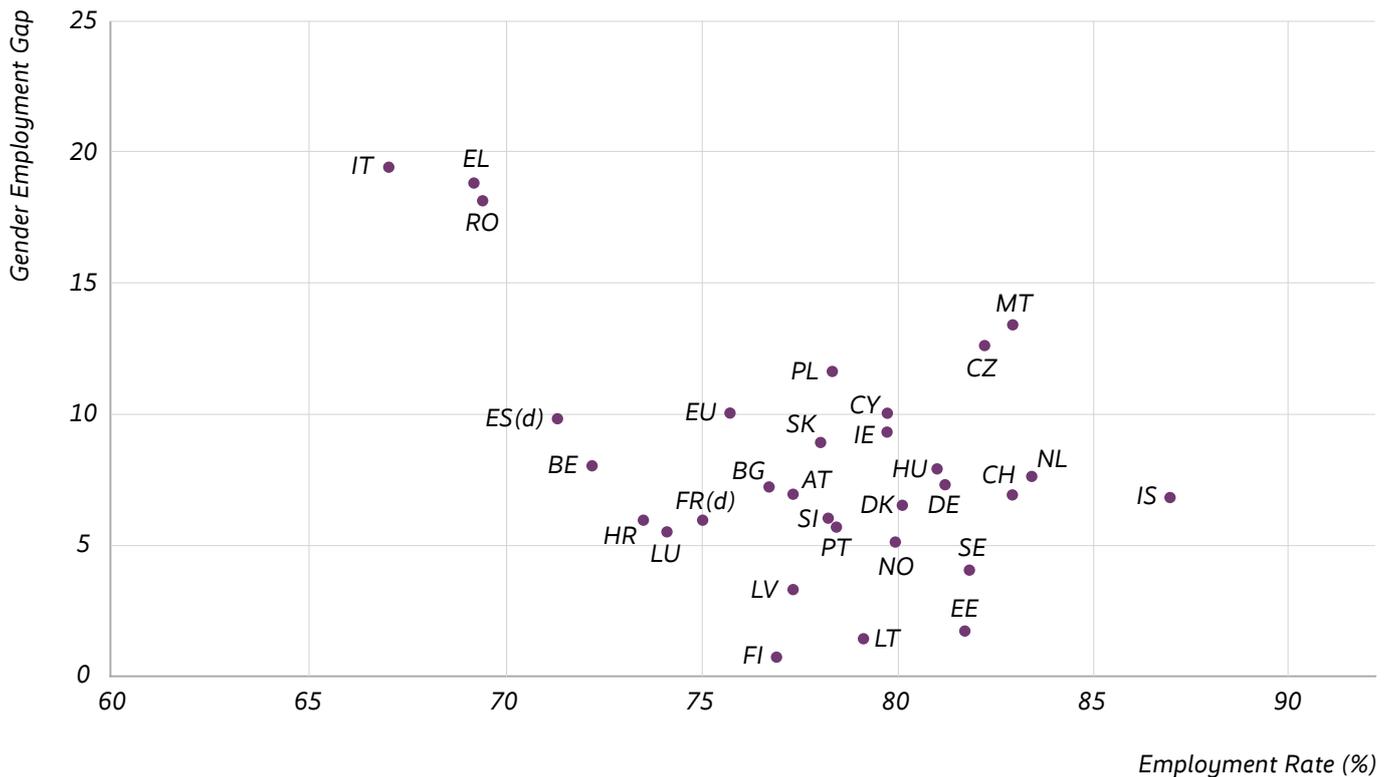
### Historical and legislative background. Juridical milestones and systemic inequalities.

Against the backdrop of a traditionally male-dominated culture, Italy, like other European countries, made significant strides toward gender equality in the 1970s. Key milestones included the legalisation of **divorce** and **abortion**, and granting married **parents equal rights** in decisions concerning their children. However, the underlying patriarchal framework persisted in certain legal provisions. For example, until 1981, men who married the women they had raped could escape criminal charges, and until 1996, rape was classified as an offence against public morals rather than a crime against the individual.

\* In this paper, we will use the term "equality" to refer to a concept of substantive equality, or equity, in which different situations are treated differently according to the needs of each person pursuant to Article 3.2 of the Italian Constitution, with the aim of dismantling historical and structural gender inequalities.

## Employment rate and gender employment gap (2024)

Figure 1



Source: Employment rate and gender employment gap, 2024. Eurostat (lfsi\_emp a)

In matters of **reproductive rights and sex education**, political parties across the spectrum have historically aligned closely with the Catholic Church’s stance. While the legal right to abortion was established, conscientious objection is also permitted, allowing most gynaecologists to refuse to perform the procedure. As a result, many women still face barriers, often having to travel to other regions to access abortion services (Medici del Mondo Italia, 2024). A 2001 law further imposed strict limitations on access to medically assisted procreation techniques like IVF, even for married heterosexual couples. Many of these restrictions were lifted only through strategic litigation.

Reflecting its adherence to the “traditional family model,” Italy mandates a compulsory maternity leave of 5 months for mothers. Only in 2022 did the country introduce a compulsory period of **paternity leave** of 10 days, the minimum required by EU law. For the sake of comparison, Spain has gradually introduced a paternity leave of 19 weeks, six of which are compulsory. The uptake of paternity leave by Italian fathers over the last few years has been very limited, i.e., one in two fathers, with only a slight increase after introducing the mandatory requirement. Only 20 per cent of all parental leave days granted within the first 12 years of age of a child are taken by fathers (4E Parent Project 2023). These data are important given the thesis, shared by most academics and analysts, that the “**child penalty**” is the main factor explaining Italy’s dire situation regarding

women’s employment and economic empowerment (Nannicini & Minello 2024, Saraceno 2023).

*“In the South, where childcare services are less available, fewer than one in four mothers work. The unpaid domestic and care work performed by Italian women is estimated to be the highest in Europe, with a gap of more than 3 hours per day vis-à-vis men.”*

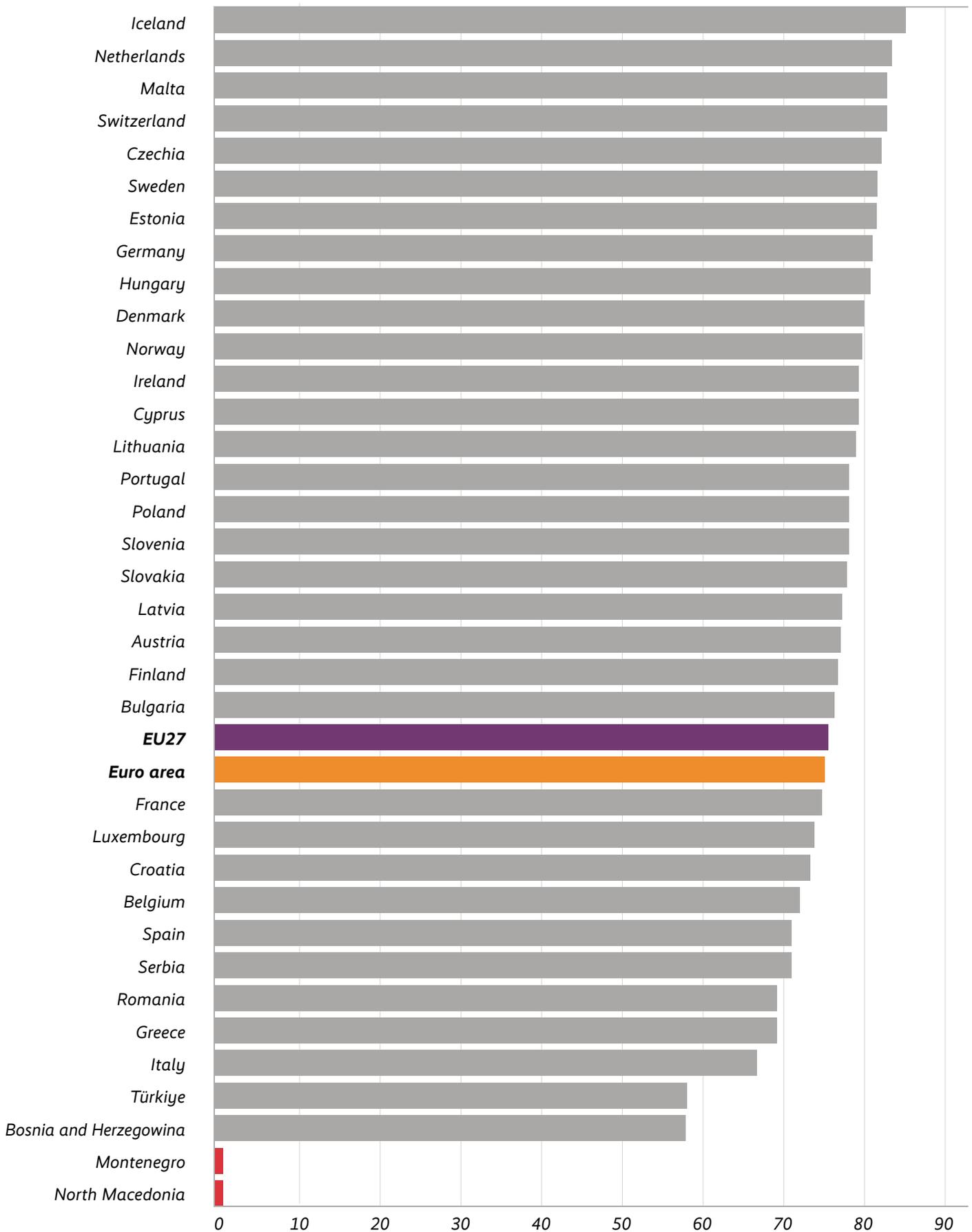
EIGE 2024, INAPP 2022.

Four in ten Italian women do not hold an individual bank account (Global Thinking Foundation 2023). All these factors taken together help explain the significant imbalance in both labour participation and employment rates [Figures 1 and 2].

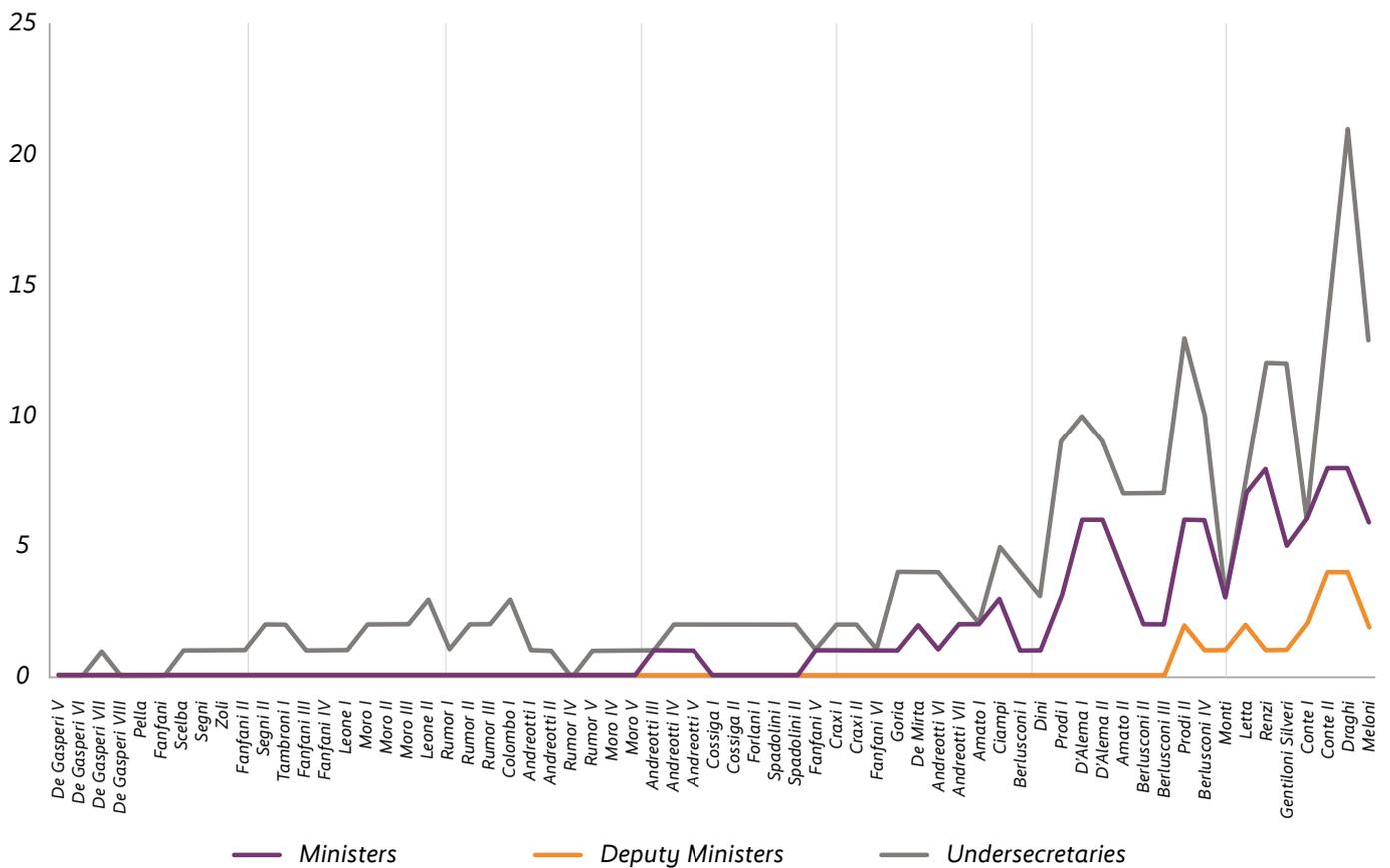
Beyond the stickiness of traditional family roles, many attribute the slow cultural evolution on gender issues to Silvio Berlusconi’s 30-year (1993–2023) dominance in Italian politics. His overtly sexist attitudes and control over a vast media empire are often cited as **barriers to women’s emancipation from sexualised roles and the broader acceptance of LGBTQI+ rights** (Buonanno & Faccioli 2023; Zanardo 2009). These cultural dynamics are frequently invoked to explain the stark differences in gender attitudes and institutional support for equality between Italy and Spain—two Mediterranean countries that are otherwise culturally similar (Corradi & Donato 2024, Lombardo & Bustelo, 2012).

## Employment 2024 (percentage of total population)

Figure 2



Source: Employment and activity by sex and age – annual data. Eurostat.



**Achieving equality in decision making: positive actions in political representation and corporate boards**

Surprisingly, Italy has been a European pioneer regarding **positive action measures for women**. The first laws to enhance **political representation**, introduced between 1993 and 1995, preceded similar initiatives in other EU countries. However, these laws were later invalidated by the Constitutional Court, which adhered to a “formal equality” perspective. Following constitutional reforms in 2001 and 2003 that incorporated “substantive equality” principles, the Parliament reinstated legislated quotas for nearly all levels of political representation. Additionally, since 1999, the Parliament has implemented “gendered finance obligations” for political parties—an almost unique measure in Europe—requiring parties to allocate a portion of their funding to initiatives promoting women’s political participation (Feo & Piccio 2020, Senato della Repubblica 2024).

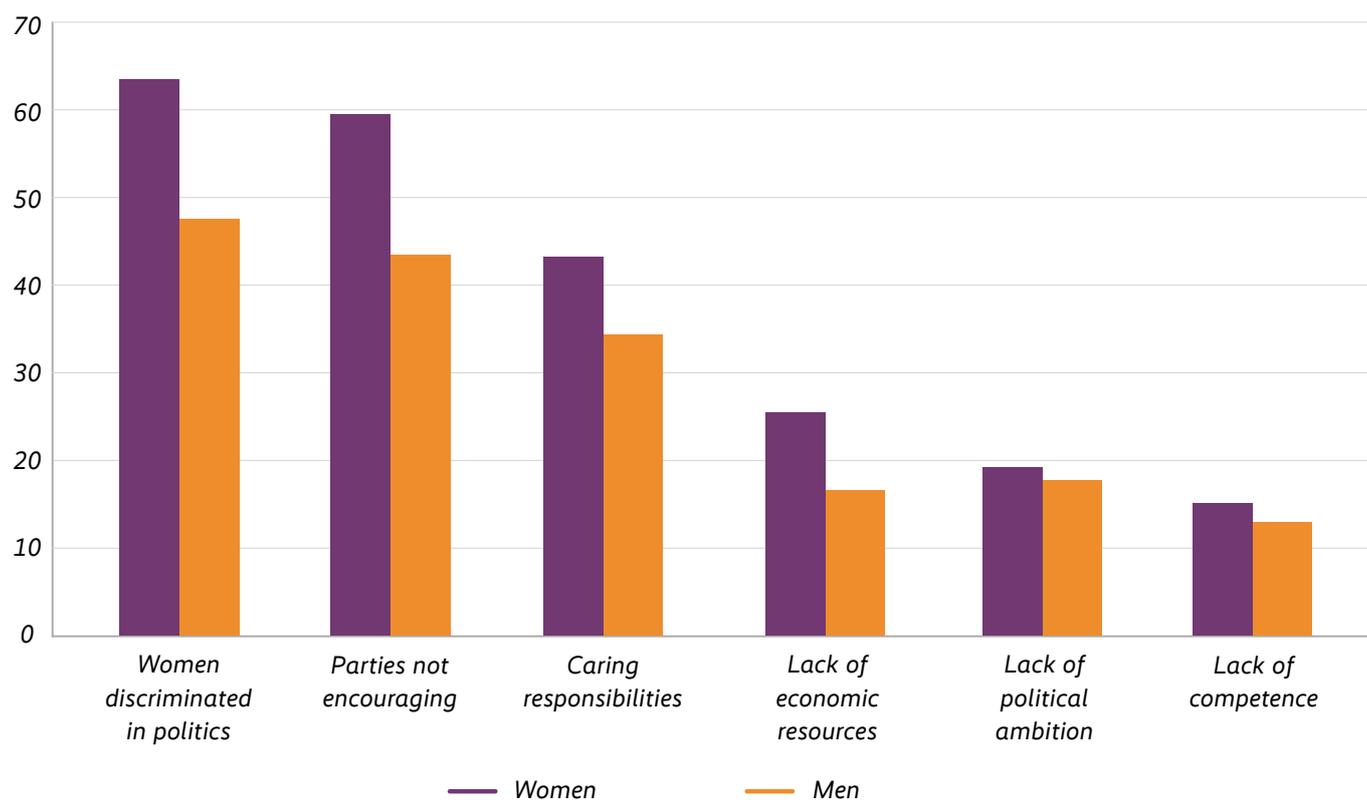
Despite a steady increase in the number of women in legislatures, local government, and predominantly junior national government roles, it was only in 2022–2023 that two women achieved significant milestones: Giorgia Meloni became the President of the Council of Ministers and leader of the main governing party, while Elly Schlein assumed leadership of the primary opposition party. Yet, in 2025, only two in 20 Italian regions have a female Presi-

dent, and the percentage of female mayors is only slightly above 15 per cent. Qualitative research conducted on the general public and, separately, on female and male politicians identified sexist discrimination in politics as the first cause of women’s limited active political involvement (Hermanin et al. 2022) [Figures 3 and 4].

Also, regarding **corporate governance**, the Golfo-Mosca Law of 2011 required that publicly listed companies and state-owned enterprises allocate at least 30 per cent of executive board seats (later increased to 40 per cent) to women. Ever since its introduction, female representation on boards has risen from seven per cent in 2010 to over 36 per cent by 2021 (Banca d’Italia et al. 2021). The 2023 Budget Law extended the Golfo-Mosca law’s ten-year sunset clause and the quota obligation to cover state-owned enterprises and public administrations. Almost at the same time, in the domain of **public finance**, laws and bylaws introducing the “gender certification system” have established targets for companies on criteria like equal pay, female leadership, work-life balance, and anti-harassment policies to enjoy favourable treatment in public tenders.

Whereas these legislative obligations mark important steps forward, practical implementation is all but linear. In the summer of 2024, for instance, *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* (CDP) – a state-controlled financial institution with a mission to support Italy’s economic development – faced criti-

## Percentage of respondents who consider these hurdles very important for women's political careers



Source: Hermanin et al. 2022 CAWI, 1003 interviewed

cism over its proposed board renewal, which included only 3 women out of 9 members. To resolve the issue without removing male nominees, CDP expanded the board to 11 members, allowing the inclusion of five women and restoring compliance. The case sparked debate on political interference and gender equality in public appointments.

Over the past decade, Italy has also taken important steps to address the pressing issue of violence against women through the *Codice Rosso Law of 2019*. This legislation was introduced to counter the rise in domestic and gender-based violence (**domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking, and female genital mutilation**), aiming to protect victims more effectively, ensure that cases are handled swiftly and decisively, and enforce tougher penalties for perpetrators. On paper, the law made it easier for victims to obtain protective measures like restraining orders, but its implementation has faced obstacles, slowing down investigations and prosecutions despite the law's fast-track mandate. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) had already criticised Italy's response in some landmark cases, such as *Talpis v. Italy* (2017), where the court condemned the State for inadequate police and judicial protection in repeated violence, leading to tragic consequences. The continuing high rate of femicides and other crimes against women in recent years seems to show that legislative progress has not been sufficient to curb the phenomenon.



## 2.

# Recent developments and critical challenges

### Undermining LGBTQI+ rights and the surge of “anti-gender politics”<sup>1</sup>

Even before the radical right-wing party *Fratelli d'Italia* won the 2022 elections, a significant setback for equality policies in Italy was the **failure of the Zan Bill**. This legislative proposal aimed to **criminalise violence and hate speech against LGBTQI+ individuals** but faced strong opposition from the Catholic Church, religious groups, and right-wing parties, which criticised its emphasis on gender identity (Feo 2023).

Since Giorgia Meloni's government came to power, LGBTQI+ rights have been actively undermined. One of the government's first actions was to announce that **civil registrars should stop registering the children of same-sex couples**, effectively limiting the recognition of parental rights to the biological parent in such families. In response, local administrations that had previously recognised both parents were pressured to halt this practice due to directives from the central government and fear of interventions by public prosecutors. This policy has left many families in legal limbo, drawing widespread criticism from LGBTQI+ activists, who have denounced the move as discriminatory (Eurochild 2023).

The situation has been further exacerbated by a 2024 law that criminalises **surrogacy** as a “universal crime,” allowing prosecution even for cases occurring outside Italy's jurisdiction. This law disproportionately impacts same-sex couples, who remain barred from accessing IVF or adopting children. Surveys reveal that a majority of LGBTQI+ individuals in Italy feel that violence against them has increased, with rising reports of hate crimes and discrimination contributing to a climate of fear within the community (FRA 2024).

More broadly, the **anti-gender movement** has gained significant momentum in Italian politics, particularly among right-wing parties, which have increasingly adopted anti-gender rhetoric to appeal to conservative voters. Recently, this movement has resisted initiatives such as the introduction of “**emotional education**” in schools, arguing that it could promote “gender ideology,” a term used pejoratively to describe a vague set of beliefs and policies that conservatives oppose, particularly those related to reproduc-

tive rights, LGBTQI+, and feminist movements. It has also opposed the “**alias career**” policy, which allows individuals undergoing gender transitions to use chosen names in academic and professional contexts, and the establishment of **gender studies** programs in Italian universities.

Since 2024, “Pro-life” movements have found political support to access counselling centres for abortion decisions, with the Italian Senate granting them the right to do so via a decree otherwise dedicated to the Italian National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (Medici del Mondo Italia, 2024). Pro-Life NGOs also promoted a bill inspired by “fetal heartbeat” laws in the US, which would oblige doctors to make women hear their fetal heartbeat before performing an abortion.

### From Giulia Cecchettin to ‘Not All Men,: Italy's struggle with gender violence and patriarchy denial

**Gender-based violence against women and girls** is another pressing concern, with data showing that a woman is killed approximately every three days, mainly in the context of domestic or intimate partner violence (ISTAT 2024).

2025 data show a very slight overall decrease in intentional homicides and female victims compared to the previous year. However, the number of women killed by partners or ex-partners remains essentially unchanged, confirming that male violence against women continues to be concentrated mainly within the family and intimate relationships. A national outcry was sparked following the murder of young student Giulia Cecchettin by her “middle-class” partner in autumn 2023. This event, which received extensive media coverage, led to a strong societal reaction against domestic violence, culminating in a demonstration that brought nearly half a million people to the streets of Rome. However, similar to the response following the global spread of the #MeToo movement in 2017-2018, the national reaction to the heightened attention on sexist violence has been met with fierce resistance (Hermanin & Serughetti, 2020). In particular, the widespread response to Cecchettin's femicide was followed by the “**not all men**” uproar, a phrase used to deflect attention from the broader societal issues

<sup>1</sup> We use the acronym LGBTQI+ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender-transsexual, queer and intersex people and the sign ‘+’ to indicate all those subjectivities that recognise themselves in something other than the categories indicated in the acronym.

of patriarchy and male violence by emphasising that not all men engage in such behaviours.

In line with this trend, on the first anniversary of Cecchetti's death, Italy's incumbent Minister of Education stated that in Italy, "**patriarchy** is dead," attributing the rise in violence against women to illegal immigration, an affirmation which is not supported by crime statistics. He suggested that gender-based violence should be addressed through this lens rather than focusing on patriarchy, a view later echoed by President Giorgia Meloni and other far-right European politicians. Incidentally, the idea that "autochthonous" European women are the primary victims of sexual violence by foreign men is a central tenet of the "Great Replacement Theory," widely endorsed by European and US radical-right parties. This conspiracy theory posits that indigenous white populations are being demographically and culturally replaced by non-white individuals, primarily from Muslim-majority countries, due to immigration and declining birth rates.

In line with a 'protective' approach towards women, in 2025, the Parliament passed a law introducing 'femicide' as a new criminal offence punishable by life imprisonment. The new offence introduced into the Criminal Code classifies the killing of a woman as a separate offence when the act is motivated by hatred, by hatred and/or discrimination, abuse of power or dynamics of control, possession or domination exercised based on gender.

The law aims to address the criminological urgency of gender-based killings, defining femicide as a murder committed to discriminate against a woman, to suppress her rights or freedoms, or to silence her personal expression. While this legislative move acknowledges the gravity and specificity of such violence, placing Italy among the few countries which recognise femicide, the country's track record of hardening criminal penalties without reaching substantive policy outcomes speaks for itself.

The law alone cannot dismantle the root causes of femicide. A crucial yet persistently overlooked dimension is prevention, for instance, via proactive outreach to people who may do harm or not report it. That gender-based violence is not a women's issue, but a societal emergency that demands shared responsibility, is widely acknowledged. In this context, the work of the Giulia Cecchetti Foundation, along with that of other NGOs promoting emotional and relationship education starting as early as preschool, is commendable yet very contested by reactionary forces. Aiming to shift the educational paradigm toward empathy, emotional literacy, and accountability by actively involving boys and men—often excluded from these conversations—has been finally recognised as crucial to tackle and transform the cultural roots of gender violence. Yet, the political will to support any public policy in the field is lacking, and the bill proposed in 2022 (C.2782) by the right-wing majority is all but ambitious in its scope.

"**Gender-sensitive language**" has also been at the heart of a heated cultural debate in recent times, frequently framed in the "gender ideology" obsession. In Italian, nouns, pronouns, and adjectives have traditionally been declined in the masculine form, both to lend more "authority" to certain names (e.g., segretario [secretary], maestro [master] vs segretaria [assistant], maestra [primary school teacher]) and, in the plural, to signify groups that include both males and females (maschile sovraesteso). There is also no grammatical neuter gender, a gap that has been addressed—both for non-binary gender and to avoid the overextended use of the masculine—through the use of special characters such as the schwa (ə) or the asterisk (\*). The distinct use of masculine and feminine endings to address a mixed audience, or the use of feminine forms for professions, is not yet widely common. The use of schwa (ə) or the asterisk (\*) has been vocally contested for the difficulty of pronouncing them orally, or because they are inaccessible for people with a specific disability and, most importantly, because they would be signs of the spreading "gender culture".

"Inclusive" language, i.e. with words having feminine endings or avoiding the declination of words in m/f words, has been integrated into some institutional and legislative frameworks. However, practices remain uneven across institutions, and adherence to these principles often lacks enforceability (Rallo 2022).

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni opposes any linguistic evolution that acknowledges the plurality of the population in terms of gender. She continues to use the masculine form "*Il Presidente*" rather than the feminine "*La Presidente*" (with the feminine article). This choice reflects a broader cultural resistance, even among left-wing intellectuals, to adopting feminine titles. While some critics argue these preferences reflect personal agency, others view them as a step back from normalising gender-sensitive language.

Opponents of inclusive language, which include many public figures, also among liberals and the left, often claim it may limit freedom of expression, complicate communication, or place excessive emphasis on form over substance (Cavagnoli & Mori 2019). Against this trend, ever since 2022, Italy's most authoritative Encyclopedia, the *Treccani*, has listed all nouns and adjectives in both the masculine and feminine forms, with feminine forms coming first since they end in -a.

## The untapped potential of Gender Budgeting

Gender budgeting refers to introducing a gender perspective in financial management, i.e. mainstreaming gender in the entire budgeting process. This is distinct from presenting or adding separate budget lines for women or gender equality more broadly, and involves a detailed analysis of expenditures (and revenues), by budget lines to detect effective and potential impacts on gender equality. Many

Italian local authorities and universities have had experiences with gender budgeting since the early 2000s, and, in 2016, Italy joined the limited number of EU countries with

a legislative obligation to assess their state budget from a gender perspective. Ever since, the General Accounting Department of the Ministry of Finance has been tasked with preparing a gender balance sheet assessing the likely impact of public expenditure on men and women, where financial commitments are assessed considering gender disaggregated data on public policies and intersecting factors such as time and unpaid work, among others. A “Gender balance sheet” (Bilancio di Genere) has thereafter documented, ex-post, which expenditures from the previous budget year had a potential effect on gender equality.

As part of Italy’s post-COVID National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), in 2022, “Reform 1.13” introduced a further requirement for the State administration to assess public spending from a gender perspective, this time preliminarily (ex ante). Starting with the 2024 Budget Law, therefore, the Italian government must submit to Parliament an informational document highlighting if planned expenditures have the potential to promote, hinder or have no effect on gender equality, using a reclassification methodology inspired by enhanced gender impact assessment principles (Servizio Studi Senato della Repubblica et al. 2024).

This reform enhances the public finance framework by integrating ex ante gender assessment into the budgeting process, complementing the ex post gender-reporting mechanism established in 2016. This virtuous national gender budgeting practice is also found at local and regional levels, yet its implementation is geographically scattered, inconsistent in time, and depends fundamentally on the will of specific policymakers.

*In the present context of open political conflict against anything “gender-related”, the fact that gender budgeting has a rather technocratic and low-profile flavour is a safeguard against partisan attacks.*

Yet, a consequence of this is that the data generated by these efforts gets little prominence in the definition of public policies at all levels, and steps cannot be taken to expand data collection, for instance, on intersecting dimensions of inequality or non-binary data.

### 3.

## Civil society's support for gender equality and its weaknesses

The Italian **feminist movement** has been a driving force in advocating for women's rights since the 1970s. Feminist organisations have played a crucial role in the progress of policy enhancing women's rights. Yet, their frequent alignment with broader leftist agendas, including on internal politics and foreign policy issues, has made them a favourite target for right-wing propaganda. This alleged partisanship, together with the cultural and religious landscape already described, has weakened even some of their past transversally supported campaigns, e.g. on the right to abortion. In addition, the **fragmentation** in small NGOs and **internal divisions**, particularly on **transgender rights**, **sex work** and **surrogacy**, has further hindered their impact.

On the one hand, some feminist groups have been particularly critical of the inclusion of transgender women in certain feminist spaces, fearing it may dilute the focus on cisgender women's issues. On the other hand, some feminist groups find in LGBTQI+ organisations allies worthy of inclusion in advocacy campaigns and fully support the call for legal recognition, anti-discrimination protections, and accessible affirmative healthcare for transgender individuals. Opposition to surrogacy within feminist circles has focused on ethical concerns, including the commodification of women's bodies and the potential exploitation of economically vulnerable women. Traditional feminist perspectives often view surrogacy as a violation of women's bodily autonomy, while more progressive factions argue for its regulation as a means of supporting diverse family structures without exploitation. These critiques align with broader debates in Europe about the moral and legal implications of surrogacy, further complicating the public discourse in Italy.

Anti-equality advocates in the radical right have mastered the art of making the most of this type of divisions to advance reactionary agendas, especially but not exclusively on reproductive rights, and well beyond Italy (see, in the UK, developments around the *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* Supreme court ruling on transgender rights of April 2025).

*This fragmentation risks creating silos, duplicating efforts, and limiting the potential for long-term influence. While plurality is a democratic asset, it becomes a liability when it prevents meaningful collaboration.*

Italy's **LGBTQI+ civil society** organisations have historically been marginalised, but they have gained prominence in

recent decades, particularly through advocacy for legal recognition of same-sex couples and broader protections against discrimination. However, contentious issues like surrogacy have divided the LGBTQI+ community *itself*, becoming a flashpoint.

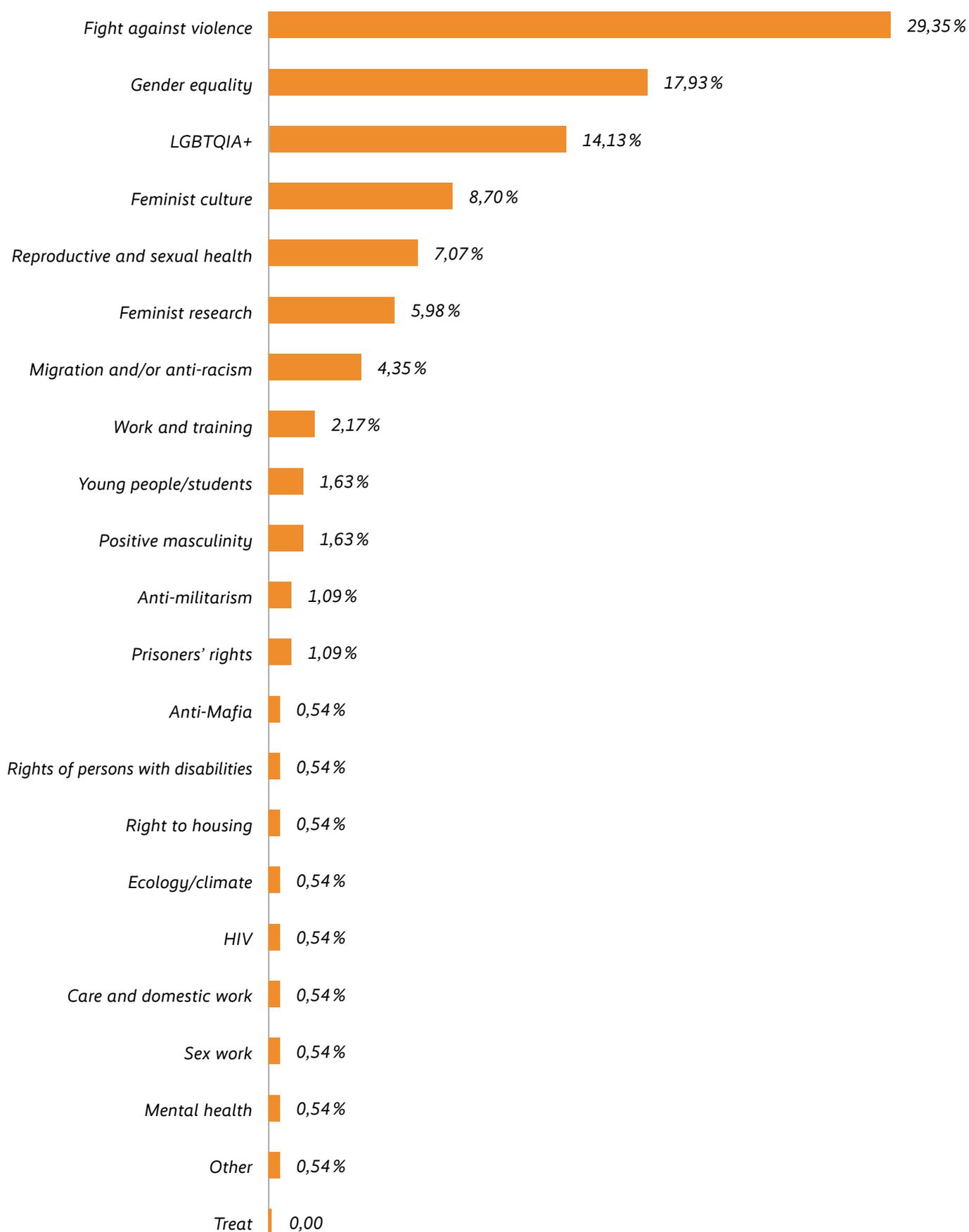
The contentious nature of these debates is further intensified by Italy's current political landscape. With the rise of right-wing parties and their influence on public discourse, civil society organisations advocating for gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights face increasing pushback. The Catholic Church continues to play a significant role in shaping public opinion, particularly on issues like same-sex marriage, gender identity, and surrogacy. This conservative influence has made it difficult for progressive NGOs to push for comprehensive legal reforms and obtain funding.

Beyond these unfruitful divisions, the number of civil society contributions to the CEDAW monitoring exercise 2024 (DiRe 2024), confirms that one topic that rallies most feminist and pro-equality groups together is violence against women and girls. Regarding the focus area of pro-equality NGOs, combating gender-based violence is, in fact, the predominant focus, with slightly more than half of organisations identifying this as their primary mission according to a 2023 report by Semia, Italy's newly established feminist fund (Semia, 2023). Promoting gender equality is the second most common mission of organisations, followed by advocacy for LGBTQI+ rights. Other focus areas include "feminist culture", reproductive and sexual health, and feminist research [Figure 5].

While these figures demonstrate a commitment to diverse social issues, they also reveal significant gaps in addressing systemic inequalities. For instance, women's work and care responsibilities—particularly domestic work—are not prioritised. However, the findings highlight an increasing embrace of intersectionality within the movement, as organisations also address themes like climate change, the rights of people with disabilities, sexual health, and mental health. The structural weaknesses lie especially in the feminist NGOs' reliance on public and project funding and the absence of core funding based on their main mission.

One, and perhaps the most, consensual moment for civil society organisations working on gender equality issues is that of the PRIDE marches, taking place each summer across Italian cities. The PRIDE movement promotes a large spectrum of instances, making most organisations more easily comfortable with its format.

## Primary social mission



Source: Semia (2023), p. 37

## 4.

# Proposal for progressive pro-equality actions

The right-wing parties in government in Italy have not taken a stance against formal equality between men and women, for instance, in the workplace, or downplayed violence against women. Yet, the rest of their political agenda, including, although more discreetly, on the right to abortion, goes openly against gender equality per se: first, against the idea that gender inequalities are determined by societal factors, and second that equality has to be pursued in its substantial form, as equality of opportunities and outcomes. Progressive actors need to counter anti-equality political entrepreneurs, on the one hand, and structural barriers to gender equality, on the other, starting from addressing their own bias awareness, data gaps, and organisational weaknesses.

Based on this analysis, we address a set of action proposals focusing on **four priority areas and four strategic orientations**. The latter include data and research-based advocacy, addressing divergence of views among pro-equality NGOs via joint initiatives and coalition building, enhancing fundraising capacity to strengthen civil society, and implementation of focused initiatives.

### 1. Tackle anti-gender backlash, enhancing awareness of gender equality issues in political representation

**Investing in collective, coordinated political responses** is critical to effectively counter the growing influence of far-right ideologies, particularly those targeting equality and freedoms (e.g. reproductive freedoms and gender-affirming practices) on our plural, liberal-democratic foundations. The first bulwark against democratic backsliding must be **political**. Especially in Italy, where political polarisation and media sensationalism often dominate the narrative, **it is crucial to model a different way of doing politics: one that represents a plural democracy, including under-represented groups of individuals, listens without giving ground to hate, and responds firmly without becoming divisive and leaning into right wing, anti-woke propaganda**. Progressive actors in politics, academia, and civil society must therefore develop strategies to protect democracy, the rule of law, and human rights by tackling anti-gender and anti-equality backlash and promoting gender-equal political representation.

Actions should include:

→ Analysing the **network of actors involved in promoting anti-gender equality and “anti-woke” campaigns**,

mapping domestic and international relations to highlight strategies and explain influence (on the model of EPF 2025). In parallel, studying the weaknesses of even some of the least controversial pro-equality campaigns, e.g. that supporting reproductive rights (pro-abortion, medically assisted reproduction, single parents and homosexual couples’ adoption, sex education); validating and/or re-collect data indicating societal support for reproductive rights.

→ Promoting an in-depth, data-based reflection, together with academic experts, on the **divides** that have clearly emerged among progressives about what the radical right has defined as **“wokeness”**. It is urgent to apprise why the radical right propaganda against “wokeness” has been so effective as to affect the progressives’ convictions on the need to support gender equality, decolonising approaches, climate awareness and the human rights of migrants.

→ **Promoting data collection on gender discrimination in political participation** for women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, filling data gaps and informing policy recommendations on **how to make party environments more conducive to plurality of representation**.

→ **Developing party and policymakers’ trainings for plural leadership and gender-sensitive governance**, implementing curricula focused on unconscious bias recognition, inclusive policymaking, and the definition and promotion of pro-equality narratives that enhance rather than hinder (as it is currently assumed), political capital (on the model of the National Democratic Institute’s 2020 Men, Power and Politics Program Guidance or the European University Institute’s Inclusive Leadership Initiative). **Place equality back, with unyielding support, at the centre of progressive political narratives and policy initiatives**.

→ **Structure transnational political narratives, and shared political agendas across countries**, mirroring the effective practices of the extreme right. Progressive forces in Italy often remain isolated from European and global networks, despite sharing common values and objectives. Joint narrative building efforts can also be built drawing upon existing toolkits, like FES’ 2025 Let Empathy Drive Your Dialogue, offering practical tools to respond to Far Right arguments in public debates, the media, and daily life, especially around gender, migration, identity, and welfare is crucial.

## 2. Strengthen cohesion among civil society organisations working on gender equality

Fostering dialogue and overcoming internal divisions is the first priority to be pursued among CSOs. Internal conflicts among feminist, LGBTQI+, and transgender rights organisations have hindered the collective impact of civil society, especially at such a time of strong reaction by the radical right. To address this, the contribution of philanthropic and pro-right private sponsors, and NGO crowdfunding should support neutral facilitation and dialogue spaces, drawing on shared experiences and avoiding fragmentation. Encouraging strategic collaboration rather than competition among associations, through shared campaigns, communication strategies, and legal advocacy, aims not to homogenise perspectives, but to converge around a shared understanding of gender equality as a core liberal-democratic value.

- Dedicated workshops should bring together **NGOs, researchers, pro-rights media, social media professionals, progressive business** (e.g., those advocating for paid paternity leave), and keen political actors to address underrepresentation, anti-gender policies, and shared advocacy strategies.
- **Transnational dialogue and knowledge exchange should be increased.** For instance, pro-equality progressive actors from Spain and France can share successful strategies on paid paternity leave and abortion rights advocacy. The UK Women's Budget Group can offer insights on using gender-disaggregated data from a civil society standpoint to critique and improve state policy on revenue collection and spending processes to foster gender equality.
- **Building issue-based coalitions** can be a further tactic to achieve strategy cohesion among rights groups, i.e. on gender-based violence and emotional/relationship education. This can be supported via the dissemination of impact research and building alliances with academics, and organising training or boot camps where NGOs and researchers co-develop action proposals. Strengthening civil society's outreach and visibility through targeted donor and scientists' engagement should include moments linking donors and organisations by thematic focus. **Existing opportunities, such as the upcoming EuroPride 2027 in Turin, must be leveraged to build momentum for pro-equality advocates.**

## 3. Challenge gender bias and stereotyping in politics, media, and the justice system

The use of (at least binary) gender sensitive and respectful language and imagery is widespread across other European countries (e.g. Germany, France, Spain), including among conservative leaders and media, and in documents by court and public administrations. This use has become affirmed

despite many Latin and Germanic idioms having a tradition to standardise masculine forms, and such progress must be stressed and relied on to counter the backlash against the language recognition of gender diversity and a avoidance of gender stereotyping and sexualisation.

- **Promoting inclusive language.** Partner with cultural and linguistic authorities (e.g., Treccani, Accademia della Crusca, Feltrinelli, universities, mainstream media) to strengthen the existing movement affirming the practice of using a language reflecting gender pluralism. Supporting the development of generative AI-powered tools that detect and analyse gender bias in political, legal, and media language is another possible way forward: it demands consistent investments and should probably be pursued via CSR or pro-bono schemes involving equality-keen businesses.
- **Addressing secondary victimisation.** Gender-based violence survivors in Italy often face retraumatisation in court and the media. Court practices often retraumatise victims through invasive questioning, lack of trauma-informed approaches, and insufficient protection of their dignity and rights. The European Court of Human Rights has explicitly condemned Italy in such cases, notably in *J.L. v. Italy* (2021), where judges used moralising and stereotypical language during a sexual violence trial, and in *P.P. v. Italy* (2025), which addressed the authorities' failure to act promptly and effectively in a case of domestic violence. We call for trauma-informed, rights-based training and advocacy for reforms.
- **Challenging media stereotypes to prevent trivialisation.** Equally urgent is the need to revise media practices that continue to reflect the legacy of "Berlusconismo"—a period marked by the trivialisation of women's experiences and the normalisation of sexist stereotypes. Media narratives must shift towards responsible, gender-sensitive reporting that upholds the dignity of survivors and actively counters cultural norms that perpetuate violence and discrimination.
- **Mainstreaming thorough emotional education.** Preventive education targeting especially boys and young men and raising awareness of gender violence in all its forms (including emotional harm) among all the youth must become a priority. Emotional literacy, empathy, and accountability should be integrated into school programs and NGO curricula.

## 4. Support gender equality through a gender-sensitive economic approach

Where further national reform proves slow and gender budgeting at the national level may come under the scrutiny of conservatives, existing good practices at the local level should be scaled and replicated. Local experiences can serve as replicable models for wider implementation. The

virtuous impact of gender budgeting has been widely demonstrated by academic and international organisations' studies. Academia (Adabbo et al. 2022) and civil society can mobilise in support of this approach. The 2020 *Giusto Mezzo* campaign, led by a coalition of women's organisations and experts during the Next Generation EU negotiations, demonstrated the potential of public pressure to steer economic planning towards gender equity.

- Enhancing data quality and accountability. **Although Italy has increased its use of gender indicators (183 in 2023, up from 39 in 2016), significant data gaps persist.** While institutions like INPS and ISTAT have begun to provide more detailed and disaggregated data, the key challenge now is to ensure that these data are recognised and correctly interpreted by international bodies such as Eurostat, which currently underestimate Italy's gender pay gap due to methodological issues.
- Seizing the momentum of recent legislative developments. The implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive and Italy's Gribaudo Law on Equal Pay (162/2021) offer a unique opportunity to build a cross-party coalition to tackle wage inequality. Given that pay equity has gained recognition across the political spectrum—including in conservative and right-wing narratives—this is an area where targeted direct advocacy at the national level can produce concrete, bipartisan outcomes. A coalition of institutions, political actors, and civil society should be convened to monitor, implement, and strengthen these instruments over the coming years.

# 5.

## Conclusions

The regression of the debate on gender equality in Italy is partially attributable to domestic factors, such as the presence of a right-wing government, the influence of a conservative Catholic tradition, and a persistently sexist culture resisting progress. This resistance includes areas with widespread public support, such as combating gender-based violence, safeguarding reproductive rights, and addressing gender stereotypes. However, this regression also reflects Italy's vulnerability, as a G7 nation and EU member state, to transnational disinformation campaigns originating from countries like Russia and the United States. Open criticism of the so-called "gender ideology" is often intertwined with reactions against perceived instances of "cancel culture," purportedly driven by a "woke" elite, or with conspiracy theories such as the "Great Ethnic Replacement Plan," which have accompanied anti-migrant measures in many EU countries.

The limited presence of LGBTQI+ individuals and women in senior levels of political representation contributes to the lack of focus on countering anti-gender campaigns, even among progressive groups. Indeed, "descriptive representation" (i.e., the political presence of underrepresented groups) is essential to fostering "substantive representation" and generating the political will to address issues that disproportionately affect these groups via public policy.

We have proposed a series of initiatives to **promote gender-sensitive policymaking, enhance plural representation, and raise awareness about Italy's regressive situation** in this domain. If best practices—such as training programs for policymakers—are developed within this framework, they could also have broader European relevance and be replicated at the EU level or in other countries.

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## **Gender Equality in Italy: State of a backlash and action proposal**

This paper proposes an action agenda for gender equality in Italy, grounded in empirical evidence and comparative analysis. The proposed measures aim to strengthen political representation and plural leadership through data, training, and strategies to counter anti-gender narratives; to coordinate civil society by promoting stable coalitions, shared campaigns, and structured spaces for cooperation; to tackle gender stereotypes and biases by addressing language, media, judicial practices, and secondary victimization; and to integrate a gender perspective into economic policies by reinforcing gender budgeting, improving data quality, and monitoring pay equality.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

➤ [fes.de](https://fes.de)