Investigating the Glass Ceiling in Italian Academia. Women's Strategies and Barriers to Career Advancement

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Abstract

The underrepresentation of women in academia at the top levels, the so-called "glass ceiling phenomenon", is still an issue also in Italian universities. Women, in fact, remain significantly underrepresented especially in full professorships and leadership positions, with only slightly changes over the years. Using 46 semi-structured interviews with 31 female associate professors and 15 female members of the departmental governance working in 4 Italian universities, the article explores this phenomenon looking at two aspects. On one side, it explores the barriers to access to full professorships and managerial positions in Italian academy, in particular the motherhood penalty, the gendered allocations of activities and the gendered construction of leadership. On the other, the essay looks at the individual strategies implemented by women to overcome or to cope with them. The analysis shows the interdependence between structural and cultural barriers and the alleged individual self-selective strategies of women.

Keywords: Glass ceiling; career advancement; leadership positions; Italian academia; academic work.

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1 Introduction

The under-representation of women in academia at the top levels — the so-called "glass ceiling phenomenon" — has long attracted scholars' interest. Previous research has usually framed the problem as caused by either structural and cultural barriers, which may result in overt gender discrimination, unconscious gender bias, gender bias in evaluation processes, gendered models of work (see for example Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Lund, 2015), or by individual factors, namely women's self-selective mechanisms, the gender gap in scientific productivity, or women's low levels of self-esteem (see, for example, Bosak & Sczesny, 2008; Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Mairesse & Pezzoni, 2015).

Despite the progress that has been made in recent years and the increasing attention paid to gender issues in Europe — for instance with the *Lisbon Agenda* and the creation of the *European Research Area* in 2000 — achieving gender equality in workplaces and professions, including academia, is still a major challenge. Women, in fact, are still significantly underrepresented not only in early career stages but also and especially in full professorships and leadership positions. The *She Figures* report (European Commission, 2021) shows that the gender gap in various academic positions, though slightly declining, has remained substantial over time. In Italy, for instance, women accounted for 23.7% of full professors in 2018, and for only 25.4% of heads of institutions in the higher education sector in 2019 (European Commission, 2021). The under-representation of women among full professorships is found in all disciplines, but it is particularly marked in physics, industrial and information engineering, and medicine, which partly mirrors what can be seen at graduate level.

Within this scenario, academia in Italy, as in the rest of the world, has been experiencing the so-called "neo-liberal turn", whose growing emphasis on productivity, competition, and economic cutbacks has increased job insecurity and reduced the number of permanent teaching staff. Although some believe that this shift has resulted in greater adherence to the principles of gender equity and gender mainstreaming, the emerging organizational models — based on individualization, competition, and complete devotion to work and a heavy work/life trade-off — seem to perpetuate gender inequalities (Ferree & Zippel, 2015).

In order to better understand the mechanisms underlying the reproduction of gender inequalities in Italian academia, this paper focuses on the main barriers (or obstacles) to accessing full professorships and managerial positions in Italian academia, and on the individual strategies employed by women to cope with, overcome, or resist these barriers and to reconcile work with other spheres of life. Drawing on Hochschild's (1989) study, we define strategies as *action plans* that individuals develop to cope with the gap between values/desires and their practices, mediating between different needs and expectations within institutional and cultural contexts that are binding for individuals.

Two main research questions are addressed in the paper: 1. What are the gendered processes which may explain the development of vertical segregation processes in Italian academia? 2. What are the strategies enacted by women to break through or to cope with the glass ceiling?

The Italian case is particularly interesting because, except for some recent research (Murgia & Poggio, 2018; Naldini & Poggio, 2023), it is still understudied. Moreover, as the neoliberal agenda in academia assigns growing importance to accountability processes, more and more Italian universities are adopting tools for evaluating and monitoring progress in achieving gender equity and to counter vertical gender segregation. Indeed, several instruments have been implemented (Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), Positive Action Plans (PAPs), Gender Budgeting, Committees for Equal Opportunities (CUG)) with the objective, among others, of increasing

the percentage of female full professors, which is monitored by means of the "Glass Ceiling Index". However, these changes have often been implemented without thorough knowledge of the mechanisms and the elements underlying (vertical) segregation in Italian universities and on the assumption that inequalities (and their solutions) mainly lie in individual factors.

The essay is organized into three main sections. The first one (Section 2) illustrates the main available explanations for the glass ceiling phenomenon. Section 3 illustrates the qualitative data and the main features of the context in which the research reported by the paper was undertaken. Section 4 is entirely devoted to presenting the research findings, and it is divided into two sub-sections concerning barriers and strategies respectively.

2   Theoretical Background

The available studies aimed at explaining the persistence of vertical gender segregation processes in academia — glass ceiling included — have focused on two main opposing causal hypotheses: discriminations and preferences (Carriero & Naldini, 2022). According to the discrimination hypothesis, vertical segregation persists because of the unequal treatment of men and women in recruitment and promotion. As regards glass ceiling effects in particular, gender discriminations are supposed to be not simply present in levels of career advancement, but to be more intense at higher ones, and especially harsh in the case of female candidates for the higher career positions and roles (for full professorships and leadership positions). The discrimination hypothesis, based on international research on unconscious bias (see Pollard-Sacks, 1999; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), has also been supported by studies in Italy on female researchers' performance and biased evaluations, resulting in a gendered division of academic work (Goastellec & Vaira, 2017), differences in career times (Anzivino & Vaira, 2018), a gender gap in research evaluation (Jappelli et al., 2017) and asymmetries in career advancements that are not explained by gender differences in productivity (Filandri & Pasqua, 2021). Moreover, the culturally dominant paradigm of the successful professional career, as derived from historically situated closure strategies developed by class-privileged males in Western societies (Witz, 1990), tends to reproduce also in academia gender processes in evaluation criteria on scientific "excellence" (Addis & Villa, 2003; Addis, 2008; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). The Institutional Ethnography Study developed by Lund (2015), for example, showed that evaluation practices can be rooted in standardized quality criteria that define "the ideal academic" as a particular form of global masculinity. This ideal worker in academia (Thornton, 2013), shaped by ideology on presenteeism and careerism, is implicitly "masculine" (Blair-Loy, 2003; Brumley, 2014). Moreover, Van den Brink and Benschop (2012, p. 2) argued that "excellence" has become the "holy grail" in academia's emerging culture of managerialism: the idea that merit can be objectively measured by means of standardized criteria may make gender discrimination (and also inequalities among women) less visible (Gaiaschi, 2021). However, another theoretical approach to the origin of gender discrimination focuses on institutional barriers faced by female workers in male-dominated workplaces — as in the case of the study by Doherty and Manfredi (2006) on women's progression to senior positions. In addition, gender biases appear to be at work in the perceived importance of the various components of academic work (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), since women tend to be more involved than men in teaching and in student tutoring; yet in evaluation criteria "excellence" in research (i.e., number of publications) takes precedence over teaching in all scientific fields (Gadforth & Kerr, 2009).

In contrast, the preferences (or self-selection) hypothesis is based on the idea that men and women have divergent life priorities, attitudes, or personality traits, that produce and repro-

duce vertical segregation. Research on preferences argues that women, in comparison to men, tend to prioritize care and family responsibilities over work commitments or career advancement (Hyde, 2005; Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Pautasso, 2015). Moreover, according to the theory of gendered personality traits, women may have lower self-confidence, may be less competitive, and may also exhibit lower levels of risk appetite (Azmat & Petrongolo, 2014). Bosak and Sczesny (2008) in particular claim that women see themselves as less suitable for higher ranks because of an inherent notion that associates masculine characteristics with leadership. Moreover, female researchers are said to behave differently from men, since certain self-selecting processes may produce different choices in terms of research field, time allocation between work and family, and between teaching and research. As a result of such (individual) self-selection, female researchers also tend to record lower productivity than their male colleagues (Abramo & D'Angelo, 2015; Mairesse & Pezzoni, 2015).

However, several studies have shown that discriminations and preferences are mutually reinforcing processes that are often difficult to distinguish empirically (Correll, 2004; Kaiser, 2014; Gaiaschi, 2022). Indeed, extra-academia contextual factors (structural, institutional and cultural) may contribute to reinforcing gender asymmetries in individuals' behaviors not ascribable to "women's free choices". In particular, it is claimed that they are due to gendered norms concerning paid work and care responsibilities, and to the institutional reinforcement of these prevalent norms. In an institutional context that assumes an ideal of the academic worker based on presenteeism and careerism, care responsibilities and career breaks for family reasons (i.e., pregnancy and maternity leave or childcare) have a role in reducing the time available to women for research and networking. Consequently, female researchers suffer from inequalities in the allocation of family responsibilities. Not surprisingly, studies on the "motherhood penalty" have found that women with young children are less productive in terms of publications, but not in terms of research quality or impact (Lawson et al., 2021). These inequalities are further reinforced by weak and biased efforts for work/family reconciliation, which do not support women's dual role as academics and caregivers (and this, we can argue, also applies to male researchers with care responsibilities), by the lack of sufficient childcare facilities and working-time flexibility measures, and by policies which emphasize mothers' roles over the fathers' (Lewis, 2006; Solera, 2009; Naldini & Saraceno, 2011; Le Feuvre, 2009; Bozzon et al., 2017). Finally, women whose potential for a scientific career has been recognized by external award-giving committees are less impacted by the gendered effect of motherhood and its asymmetrical distribution of childcare responsibilities (Lutter & Schröder, 2019).

The novelty of this essay is that it integrates the empirical findings of discrimination and preferences studies with the results of studies on cumulative disadvantages and discrimination, so called "feedback effects" — that is the re-modulation of preferences and choices (Oaxaca, 1973; Blau & Kahn, 2016) — by investigating not only the barriers to career advancement that women face, but also the career strategies enacted by women in academia to overcome gender barriers or reduce costs (Collins et al., 1998; Coate et al., 2015; Fontanari et al., 2019). Starting from Correll's (2004) provocative work with the eloquent title *Constraints into Preferences*, in this article we adopt the perspective according to which discrimination and preferences are interdependent. According to this constructivist perspective, and consistently with the *theories of cumulative disadvantages*, women tend to underestimate their skills and competences due to the context in which they first study and then work (Olsen & Walby, 2004). Furthermore, fully adopting the idea of academia as consisting of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990) successfully employed in several studies conducted in the Italian academic context, we consider universities to be places where power asymmetries are reproduced, which, in turn, contributes

to shaping women's performance (Murgia & Poggio, 2018; Picardi, 2020; Sciannamblo & Viteritti, 2021), alongside the homosocial nature of research networks ("old boys networks") that reduces women's predisposition to apply for opportunities of career progression towards full professor positions (Santero et al., 2023).

Focusing on preference adjustment mechanisms, constructivist studies have shown that women suffer systematic disadvantages: for instance, the so-called "double standard" (Foschi, 2000), which refers to the fact that if a woman in academia is to be considered excellent and deserving of promotion, she must work harder than male colleagues, and institutional sexism in work organizations (Greenfield, 2002). These forms of discrimination reduce women's motivation, professional self-esteem and propensity to negotiate in their work organizations (Kaiser, 2014). In other words, discriminations have, in gendered organizations, feedback effects on individual traits; and data on individual characteristics also provide information on the effect of discriminations (Gaiaschi, 2022).

These studies avoid the "blaming the victim effect" that studies that look at the side of the job offer could have (Correll, 2004), and they attempt to gain a better understanding not only of how contextual constraints shape individual choices and careers, but also of the creative and negotiating possibilities put in place by women who try to break through the glass ceiling.

3   Context and Methodology

Since the mid-2000s, amid increasing financial cuts, Italy has progressively introduced reforms inspired by the New Public Management paradigm. These measures, culminating in the so-called "Gelmini reform" (L. 240/2010), have aimed to increase the competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency of the university system. The Gelmini reform also reshaped the early stages of academic careers (non-tenured and tenured researcher) and introduced the *Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (ASN) (National Scientific Qualification), a national accreditation, related to productive performance, to be obtained to apply for permanent positions of Full and Associate Professor in Italian university competitions (Capano, 2015; Regini, 2014; Marini & Meschitti, 2018). Obtaining the ASN, however, is only a prerequisite for obtaining posts as an AP (Associate Professor) or FP (Full Professor), for which one competes locally, since resources are negotiated and allocated for promotion or recruitment in a specific scientific-disciplinary area.

In parallel to this reform, severe cuts in the public funding of universities have reduced resources not only for research but also for the hiring of new staff, thereby limiting turnover and reducing the opportunities of recruitment and advancement in university careers (Guarascio et al., 2023). These changes have had profound effects on Italian academia in terms of both increasing precarity at the early career stage and of pushing academics towards hyper-productivity, competition and entrepreneurship. Although the introduction of objective evaluation criteria in an initial phase of implementation of the University Reform seems to have decreased some of the systematic disadvantages for women, and although measures to support equality have been promoted in several universities, as mentioned in the Introduction, gender bias in evaluation and asymmetries in career advancement persist (Naldini & Poggio, 2023), and they are particularly evident in the limited presence of female full professors (European Commission, 2021).

In this context, we decided to study how vertical segregation is (re)produced in Italian academia by focusing on the advancement from the position of associate professor to that of full professor, and in particular, on the one hand, on the gendered barriers women have to face

and their relation with "self-selective" mechanisms, and on the other, on women's strategies to overcome or to cope with them.

The research reported in this paper was based on 46 semi-structured online interviews with 31 female associate professors and 15 female members of department governance teams (14 full professors and 1 associate professor), sampled from STEM (Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics) and SSH (Social Sciences and Humanities) departments, in four different Italian universities (2 in the North and 2 in the South, 2 large and 2 small universities). As regards the associate professors, we selected their permanent job position in order to explore preferences and strategies to become full professors, if present: that is, according to quantitative data, the career level in the Italian academic system most interesting to study glass ceiling phenomena. This choice entailed that the sample included only women who had managed to overcome all previous obstacles in their career, and our analysis focused on their perspectives. The interviews yielded rich information, both retrospectively on their work trajectories, and prospectively on their plans and expectations about further advancements. The sample purposely included participants with careers heterogeneous in terms of speed in reaching the position of associate professor and fragmentation or continuity of progressions (between the ages of 40 and 62), period and institutional context in which they had achieved their previous career advancements, and family conditions with and without children (19 and 12 participants, respectively). As regards key informants in the governance teams, we interviewed female professors with different levels of professional "seniority" (years of experience in their role) in both SSH and STEM departments. All participants had Italian citizenship, as did the majority of the full and associate professors in the departments involved.

The interviews were conducted in 2020-2021, during the pandemic crisis, and they were part of the first national mixed-methods research project on gender inequalities in Italian academia, namely "GEA – Gendering Academia", funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (see Naldini & Poggio, 2023 for more details).[1] The topics of the interviews included socio-demographic information, the history of the individual work career, work activities and hours, reconciliation between academic work and the rest of life, the climate and culture of the work organization, the criteria adopted in the work environment to evaluate excellence and access to leadership, career progression expectations, well-being in the department, gender-based violence at work, models of excellence and leadership, and indications of the interviewee about policies for gender equality. The interviews with members of governance teams also included questions on the definition and implementation of processes and criteria for recruitment and career advancements.

All participants were anonymized, and a unique code was defined for each interview. The code indicated, in order: pseudonym, age, the department's main research area (STEM or SSH) and position (AP for associate professor and FP for full professor) of the interviewees. For governance's key informants, we used the term "*Commissaria*" to denote members of evaluation committees or (vice-)directors of departments, their research area and their role (AP or FP).

All the interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and content analysis was performed using the *Atlas.ti* software, focusing on processes of vertical segregation and women's strategies to continue their careers.

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1. "GEA – *Gendering Academia*" is a 4-year Italian National Research project funded by MIUR (the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research), Principal Investigator Manuela Naldini (University of Turin). The research team consisted of four units (University of Turin, University of Trento, University of Sassari, and University of Palermo). For more information see http://www.pringea.it.

4   Results

This section focuses, on the one hand, on the main vertical segregation barriers (motherhood penalty, academic housework, and the "ideal of leader") in Italian academia as identified by the women interviewed, and, on the other hand, on the main strategies employed by these women to "survive", navigate, or cope with those barriers.

4.1   Barriers to women's careers: is it really a matter of choice?

A first barrier to women's advancement in academic careers is related to a process which has been labeled the "motherhood penalty" (see Baker, 2012; Lutter & Schröder, 2019), and subsequently investigated as hypervisibility of motherhood discrimination (Zippel, 2017; Gaiaschi, 2021). Pregnancy and child-rearing continue to be, according to the interviewees, the main obstacles to female academic careers, because they force academic women to interrupt their work and to reduce their productivity. Francesca, 50 years old with two children aged 17 and 16, talked about motherhood as a career blocker because she considered visibility in the department and making herself available to be very important:

> Definitely, the fact that I chose to have children interrupted the progression, in the sense that obviously if you choose to have children and care for them, at least for the first few months of their lives, those are periods when you can't assume high-profile responsibilities. So that clearly interrupts, let's say, the chain, I don't know how to put it, the progression (Francesca, 50, STEM, AP).

This phenomenon is so widespread that some scholars have also spoken of the "specter of motherhood" to indicate the anticipatory expectation that even non-parents have in terms of the negative impact of parenthood on women's careers (Thébaud & Taylor, 2021). The hyper-visibilization of motherhood is accompanied by its "naturalization", which renders invisible the institutional and cultural processes, and even the individual (and/or co-parenting) choices, that reproduce these gender asymmetries in the transition to parenthood. In the words of Karen, it is as if they are unchangeable givens:

> The gender issue is not man-woman, in my opinion, because I've known single women who don't have any kind of family commitment, or who have a partner but don't have children, also very determined, who've spent two years writing like crazy and they've built amazing careers. It's the children that change things for you, in my opinion. Because if you have a child you can't spend the day writing. So, it's not so much the gender, it is the family (Karen, 46, SSH, AP).

The idea prevalent among the advanced career women interviewed — as well as among women at other career levels (see Naldini et al., 2023) — was that there are self-selection mechanisms in action. Hence the main reasons for gender disparity were ascribed to women's choices regarding a family, as exemplified by the words of this female full professor in the governance of a STEM department:

> I wouldn't ascribe them [the gender imbalances in the university at various career levels] to the department, you know. I look at two women who could have carried on over the years, because they had the capacity: one chose to leave and have three children. She followed her husband to Austria, and she is happily taking care

of her three children. The other — who in my opinion is the best person I have worked with so far, considering both men and women — -rather than an academic career, said "I don't want to lead the life you've had, I'm going to work in industry" (*Commissaria* 4, STEM, FP).

A difference between STEM and SSH disciplines also emerges from this last quote, not so much in terms of the motherhood penalty, but in terms of the options available in private non-academic work organizations for researchers in STEM (and rarely found in our interviews in SSH departments) if it is felt that a university career does not meet the expectations of a life able to hold work and private/family life together.

Indeed, the hyper-visibilization of motherhood and its naturalization tend to make invisible the presence of other processes of production and reproduction of gender asymmetries in universities that do not have only to do with motherhood but also with the division of work among academics and some processes usually ascribed to "self-selective mechanisms", while they are both extremely gendered. Among academic activities, research work is usually the most rewarding in terms of promotion, and since excellence and merit are mainly measured in terms of publications (and citations in the case of STEM disciplines) (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012) and women are generally more involved in teaching, female career advancement is usually slower, and women are less likely to be considered outstanding in research. Moreover, women tend to be more involved in "service classes" (i.e., classes for other departments). Such courses not only determine a teaching overload, because they are often part of the most crowded degree program curricula. They also make it impossible to establish a "long-term" relationship with students or to recruit graduate and PhD students that could form a research group and therefore engage in large-scale experiments or research.

> The "service courses" engage you more than, in our case, the course that you have on your degree program in [name of the discipline] because you deal with fewer students. It would be better to rotate, I mean, taking turns, with each of us doing these kinds of classes, so that everyone has a heavier teaching load sometimes. [...] It takes up a lot of time and you don't get anything out of it because in the service class your relationship with the students ends when you finish the class, complete the exams (Lia, 53, STEM, AP).

> Last year, I did 168 hours of teaching. It's especially challenging in terms of students, number of students, because I have very large courses [...]. I am very dedicated to teaching [...] because it's something that I think is very important, so from that point of view maybe my research suffers a little bit (Elisa, 42, STEM, AP).

In regard to the unequal distribution of workloads between female and male colleagues, another obstacle to women's career advancement has to do with so-called "academic housework" (Heijstra et al., 2017). Especially in Italian academia, characterized by a huge amount of administrative work and a lack of support, women are overburdened by bureaucracy more often than their male colleagues. Moreover, it still happens that some senior male full professors are convinced that these tasks should and can be delegated to junior female associate or assistant professors.

> At the beginning, the university was for many years in the hands of the male gender. The professors were all men and the full professor who is currently in our department belongs to that generation. [...] The man is helped with his career, the

> woman is kept in a junior role because that way the professor can make her do things, teach classes for him. He can ask her to do work that ought to be done by a secretary. And since secretaries don't exist in the university, at least in Italy [...], especially with some professors of a certain age, who are now the most powerful ones and who pull the strings, these dynamics are still visible (Stella, 48, SSH, AP).

The under-representation of women in the higher positions in the academic hierarchy, and especially in leadership positions, is often also attributed to "individual self-selection" mechanisms and to women's lower self-confidence. Added to these, in the case of STEM disciplines, is the fact that there are few female students and female scholars in these areas. This is confirmed by the words of Pia, who underlined that women tend to apply less for prestigious and managerial positions and to show lower self-esteem than many male colleagues. However, it also emerges from her words that there are some structural barriers that induce this (apparent) self-selective mechanism linked to the gender composition of some environments, especially when they are completely male dominated. In this sense, self-selective mechanisms can be interpreted as combining women's socially constructed image of being less suitable for management positions with a culturally induced low self-esteem in male-dominated work contexts.

> I'm going to become the national coordinator of the experiment [...] [and out of] twenty or twenty-one national coordinators — I could be wrong by a few units — so far there have been only three women [...]. There is a training phase [...] and I was invited to speak to this committee a few months ago, [...]. Out of ten people who spoke in two days I was the only woman [...]. Certainly, there are some inescapable aspects, especially the part of the children, which is still disproportionate managed [by women] and also care of the elderly [...]. However, in my opinion, there is also a need for greater self-esteem in later stages. To compete for the post of national coordinator, I spent more than one night thinking a lot about it, about everything, about all the possible aspects imaginable, about whether my skills were enough, etc. etc. etc. I am quite sure that my male colleagues, the ones I know well, I am not saying that they would not have thought about it, but they certainly spent less time doing so. In some ways, I think we are still barriers to ourselves (Pia, 48, STEM, AP).

The gendered aspect of workplaces and the greater difficulty for women to gain recognition as excellent also tend to reproduce the gender system, namely the survival of masculinized "old boys networks", hindering change in academia. Indeed, a structure where the old "co-optation" is fueled by the "new", allegedly gender-neutral, meritocratic ideology driven by discretionary *ad usum* practices and still characterized by an over-representation of men in strategic positions, most often disfavors the female component of the academic body in selection/promotion procedures. The numerical imbalance between men and women within the pool from which to draw, especially in the STEMs, and the localism of recruitment and career advancements (i.e. the common practice of hiring/promoting candidates from within the department) are, in fact, the perfect pretext for the gendered structure to reproduce itself (Anzivino et al., 2023). This practice, moreover, is assisted by the Italian funding system, which does not encourage but instead often hinders the promotion of external candidates, favoring a gendered homophily.

> The democratic principle is the basis of how the Italian university is organized, this is true. So there are, let's say, all the problems related to so-called consensus

> building and the selection of the so-called governance of the departments and the
> university that is tied to this principle, which does not guarantee — at least the way
> it has been developed — any protection for minorities. This is my biggest concern.
> So, leadership basically emerges from consensus and this then has a whole series of
> consequences on the selection of researchers, professors, on career progressions, in
> managing or political academic roles (Rita, 42, SSH, AP).

This reproduction of the gendered character of leadership and managing positions also passes through the (gendered) expectations connected to these roles. First, there is an implicit assumption that leaders are men, but also that men are leaders. Indeed, on the one hand, since female leaders are so rare, it is hard to imagine this position being held by a woman, a fact that encourages the self-selective mechanisms mentioned above, but also the discouraging mechanism that hinders women from standing as candidates. On the other hand, it is assumed that men are more suited for leadership and, even if more women entered into these roles, they would be expected to enact a model implicitly gendered as male.

> There is still a bit of a silencing problem. What do I mean by silencing? I mean
> that there is still the expectation that certain roles pertain to men and therefore
> that certain characteristics that we see in the leadership figure are expected to be
> possessed by a man. However, in my opinion, it seems to me that there is a gradual
> process, whereby those same leadership characteristics that the person who holds a
> leadership role must have, are today also being required of women (Francesca, 48,
> SSH, AP).

The alleged less suitability of women is linked to gender stereotypes that also produce discrimination against the few women that have managed to reach top positions. For example, Iole stated that women are more often segregated in roles, such as the coordinator of degree courses, which are not political positions but, instead, more administrative roles connected to teaching, which reinforces the segregation in academic work mentioned above.

> [Leaders] are all men, basically, indeed uniquely men. The only role held by a
> woman was the coordinator of degree courses. This is a role considered suitable
> for a woman because she has to manage teaching duties. It is a more feminine
> role. She does not take political decisions because she does not manage funding,
> resources, positions. She just has to work a lot to manage teaching classes (Iole, 59,
> STEM, AP).

Moreover, leadership roles require a total commitment which is considered incompatible with women's role as caregivers. The motherhood penalty is thus crystallized as an obstacle to reaching a top position and to holding it in a proper way. In addition, since work-life balance is not contemplated for leaders, women who are also mothers or caregivers of the elderly are supposed to find individual solutions, sacrificing other work activities or their private life.

As Lena points out in the extract below, women are also more often discredited through microaggressions that take the form of their reduction to sexual objects; of gossip about their alleged sexual/romantic relationships with powerful men that have enabled them to reach the position; of accusations that they lack independence, on the assumption that they are manipulated or hetero directed, again, by men.

> We had a female Head of department, and the usual cliché came out, with some people saying "well, she is also a beautiful woman, young as well" and other platitudes about the woman having reached the position not thanks to her capacities but thanks to other "concessions" (Lena, 51, SSH, AP).

This quotation is important also because it sheds light on gender-based violence and especially on sexual harassment against women in universities. In particular, our data made clear how microaggressions of this kind — mostly verbal but not only — are normalized and tolerated in Italian academia, to the point that they emerged only when a direct question was put to our interviewees. Therefore, harassment is, at the same time, a consequence of a hierarchical masculine organization and gendered apical roles (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020), and a factor contributing to vertical segregation.

Finally, our data also evidence the existence of the so-called "glass cliff" (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). This metaphor refers to the fact that women's positions of leadership are more often associated with a greater risk of failure because as soon as a controversial issue arises, it is delegated to them. Therefore, not only are women overburdened with situations difficult to manage but they also risk making mistakes more than their male counterparts, or they create tensions that end up by reinforcing the stereotype of the lesser suitability of women for leadership roles.

> Speaking about a procedure of a colleague who had to be evaluated, at the end of his contract as a tenured researcher, to become an associate professor, where the candidate did not receive much support from some colleagues who thought he was not good enough, I was told: "since this is a shitty situation, you will deal with it!". So, since I did not want to be responsible, I invited as members of the commission two male full professors from other universities very respected at a national level […]. Well, when there is a complex situation, there's a certain predilection to let me handle it (*Commissaria* 1, SSH, FP).

This quotation is interesting because it illustrates the strategies that women enact to protect themselves (in this case by involving well-known male colleagues in handling a difficult situation), to try to advance in their career, and sometimes to cope with their "failure" to overcome these obstacles.

4.2   Strategies

In the previous subsection we saw that one of the main barriers — or at least one of those most recognized — to women's career advancement is motherhood and holding together academic work and other spheres of life. Since the specter of motherhood (Thébaud & Taylor, 2021) is so present among female scholars, they adopt several different strategies in their life courses to try to overcome it. Even if in some cases they expressly choose to remain childless in order to avoid putting their career at risk (De Paola et al., 2022; Tattarini et al., 2022), the most common (time) strategy is the postponement of motherhood until a permanent position is reached, although this sometimes results in involuntary childlessness (Hughes, 2021; De Paola et al., 2022).

> I have a child, I had him very late in life because I previously devoted my life to research. So I had a child when I was 43 (Carla, 55, STEM, AP).

> It is biology… I must be honest, from this point of view if tomorrow I miraculously got pregnant, [pregnancy] would certainly become the priority. So I did not make

any sacrifices because of work. I was not lucky, let's put it this way (Pia, 48, STEM, AP).

For the same reasons, many mothers in academia tend to adopt other time strategies, reducing maternity leave to the minimum and not taking additional parental leave even if they are breastfeeding.

> To become a mother, I waited until I got a permanent post [...]. So I waited. My first daughter was born in '92, I had good pregnancies, so I used to go to the laboratory to write papers. I never stopped. In 1995 I had my second pregnancy, and I took only the mandatory maternity leave, three months after giving birth [...], I breastfed for ten months the first time and six months the second (Sandy, 62, STEM, AP).

Though respondents recognized that the motherhood penalty slowed career advancement, it was rarely questioned or considered illegitimate. In the organizational cultures predominant in academia, these inequalities seem to be accepted as facts of life, as structural constraints that do not depend on the universities and can be overcome only through personal effort and sacrifice.

However, the fact that the interviewees with children said that they never interrupted academic work during pregnancy and the postnatal period, is linked to the unconditional worker model that dominates in academia and that, for some women, is reinforced by the so-called "double standard" in evaluation of women's research. This is, of course, a paradoxical strategy, because, as we saw above, the ideal worker model is precisely one of the obstacles to women's careers — but sometimes complying with this model is the only way to get promoted.

> I put a lot of effort into getting the confirmation, because I was writing my second book and [...] in 2012 the first national ASN came out and, also on the recommendation of my mentor, I chose to make an effort, which cost me a lot in terms of health. But I finished that book with which I presented myself and thanks to which, I think, I managed to obtain the ASN [...]. However, until 2016 I devoted my life to my career, period (Aurora, 43, SSH, AP).

> I don't think the academic career was the obstacle, I think I am the obstacle [...]: if someone decides to go to the United States and live abroad for a long time, this clearly means a life change. Then if someone works as hard as I have done, it is difficult to interface with people who do not lead the same life as you. But these are choices, so I think one can choose (Bea, 44, STEM, AP).

These findings are consistent with those of previous studies on the operation of a widespread mechanism known as the "passion trap" (Armano & Murgia, 2013; Busso & Rivetti, 2014), which results in dynamics of self-exploitation and "voluntary" submission, on the one hand, and the acceptance of discrimination as part of society, on the other. Female respondents who had children in the early stages of their academic career explained that they had encountered additional career difficulties (i.e., penalties) because of the precarious nature of their job contracts, which were not always renewed or confirmed soon after maternity. As Karen told us, they struggled to continue working at the university, which they saw as their vocation:

> When my daughter was born, I had no contract of any kind for two years and, on the one hand, I was expected to keep in contact with the university/ [ironic sigh], on the other, I was living a totally different life and could not count on any [income]. However, even in the most discouraging moments, when I was thinking "This is unbearable", I never changed my mind because I knew that this [work] was the thing that made me happy (Karen, 46, SSH, AP).

Conversely, there were respondents who had decided to give up on some central experiences for their career advancements or to career advancements tout court, in some cases for the good of their family, in others because of the backlashes they had experienced for having a fast career, and in yet others because of the difficulties experienced in becoming an associate professor. The first case is exemplified by Pia, who says she passed up an opportunity to go to the United States in order to stay with her former partner and missed this experience — considered very important in her research field — for the good of her relationship.

> What I did was decide not to go to the United States because… I wanted to keep my former relationship alive. It didn't work. But to be honest, I did… I mean, it was my choice, it was my choice, but it changed several [things]… it's like the movie "Sliding Doors", I mean, if I had gone, maybe other things would have happened, but not necessarily better things (Pia, 48, STEM, AP).

The second case is exemplified by Bea, who became associate professor for her merits before other male colleagues, which caused several problems and protests. Even if, after the promotion, she acquired the qualification to become a full professor, at the moment of the interview, she claimed that she did not want to become a full professor unless her department forced her to do so, because this position involves too many management activities while she is totally devoted to research and lab work.

> I qualified for a full professorship right after that [promotion], but I don't think I will apply, at least in the near future, because I don't want to become a full professor, it's a terrible life. So, unless they force me, I won't do it. On the one hand, a full professorship is important […], you're able to decide on what research is done, on activities in the department […], but when you are young…it's a job that involves too much bureaucracy, too much management. I would go back to being an assistant professor, I'd go back and get another PhD if I could (Bea, 44, STEM, AP).

Tania, finally, had relinquished the possibility of career advancement because she was very tired after having a slow career, even if she felt qualified to become a full professor, and also her colleagues recognized in her the ability to occupy this position. Her story is particularly interesting because she had always been involved in academic political matters and had also held some important positions in both the departmental and university governance, so she possessed all the requirements to become a full professor. However, paradoxically, precisely this huge engagement in academic life, combined with a long wait to become an associate professor, discouraged her from applying for a full professorship.

> There are people who tell me "You have to become a full professor because in this way you could do other things, you have the ability", and so on. But I don't know,

> I'm a little tired, because the path has been long. [...] I'm tired because, come on, I'm 56 now! I've done everything always with a delay, always trudging along (Tania, 56, STEM, AP).

Concerning the barrier derived from the gendered division of academic duties, women try to keep up on research, devoting their studies to female-dominated fields in order to create a space for themselves to emerge, or doing research in male-dominated fields but pursuing innovative and less central research topics. For example, in the STEM sectors, a strategy adopted by women was to focus on interdisciplinary or applied research. Initially given little value in terms of career and funding, in more recent times this stream of research has become more rewarding and recognized, and also established, thanks to their work also. As regards PAs in SSHs, similar professional choices can be found in research careers concentrated on geographical areas, languages, cultures or socio-economic topics initially considered less central in the Italian academic debate, and then, also due to geopolitical and global social changes, increasingly important and recognized also in terms of academic careers.

In this way, women have tried to compensate for the disadvantages that come with the huge amount of teaching activities by creating fields of research regulated by different rules that may make them still recognizable as scientists. Moreover, the fact that they have not been completely included in mainstream research groups, has enabled them to identify innovative research themes and approaches. These results are consistent with those of other studies on the creative potential of women in specific disciplinary areas (Villa, 2021). Finally, as regards leadership positions, women — as we saw in the previous paragraph — tend to avoid competing for them, reinforcing the self-selective stereotype. When they reach these positions, instead, they adopt two opposite strategies to "survive". In some cases, they adopt an intrinsically masculinized managerial style, reproducing the gendered model of the leader that dominates in contemporary academia.

> Sometimes they [female leaders] show these attitudes that, again, are very aggressive, very masculine, sometimes even more discriminatory towards women and more sexist than those enacted by the average of men (Lena, 51, SSH, AP).

In other cases, instead, women enact a different model of leadership which some interviewees defined as more cooperative and sometimes even "caring" in terms of workstyle, because they brought their experience as women, usually in charge of family duties, to their work in governance. This, of course, could have a positive impact on women's involvement in leadership and in changing the gendered character of these roles.

> In my opinion, having a certain role in society, a role of care and attention towards the family — still a gendered element that belongs to women, we cannot deny it — [...] affects how relationships are managed. It is a more personal way to exercise an institutional role that has always been a prerogative of men, and of men of a certain age who keep their distance from their subordinates. So, yes, this is a positive characteristic of female leadership (*Commissaria* 1, SSH, FP).

It is important to mention these two different strategies enacted by women leaders because they relate in two very different ways with vertical segregation in apical positions. On the one hand, adopting a "masculine" style of leadership may protect from delegitimation and could be considered a form of "undoing gender", even if it reinforces the stereotyped gendered leadership models and may discourage more women from trying to reach these positions. On the

other hand, adopting a "feminine" style may reinforce the naturalization of motherhood, resulting in an increase of administrative and relational work, which, as we have already pointed out, is problematic. Therefore, while providing an alternative model of leadership may encourage women to apply for leadership roles, it also risks becoming a form of "doing gender" and of reproducing a stereotyped model of femininity, considered unsuitable for leadership roles.

5   Conclusions

Our analysis has shown how vertical segregation processes are at work in gendered organizational contexts like universities. The findings provide an understanding of how women academics working in different scientific fields (STEM and SSH), departments and universities in Italy represent and experience not only barriers to work career advancement but also the individual (work and family) strategies employed to cope with, overcome, or resist those barriers.

Three main barriers to women's advancement career have been identified in Italian academia by this study. The first is related to maternity, a life course event which has different gender implications for women and men and easily translates into the "motherhood penalty", within a context strongly based on the unconditional male worker, where family policies remain underdeveloped, and the normative model of parenthood is strongly mother-centered. The second obstacle women have to deal with has been identified by this study as the persistence of "academic housework", that is, the uneven allocation of research and teaching duties and of governance roles in departments — which are still gendered and stratified in both STEM and SSH areas.

The third barrier has to be seen in relation to the difficulty of women in achieving governance positions and/or leadership roles. Barriers that women try to overcome within a gendered organization like academia are due to the "old boys networks", which are especially strong in the case of STEM disciplines, where also the structural obstacle of numbers has not been tackled: the paucity of female students and female scholars makes it impossible for science women to break through the glass ceiling.

These findings highlight how these processes are largely taken for granted by women professors and very often ascribed to women's "choices". However, individual self-selection processes are closely intertwined with gendered cultural and institutional barriers and opportunities. For example, even though it is widely recognized that work-family balance burdens fall mostly on women, most of our female interviewees took a very individualistic approach which underestimated the role of structural constraints and of the gendered organizational context. On the other hand, the interviewees described their own careers as marked by microaggressions, delegitimation of their work, slow career advancement, sometimes hesitation to apply or compete for full professorships and for governance/leadership roles. Nevertheless, they tended to present this as their own "choice". Indeed, when interviewees expressed a weak desire for promotion — and this was not always the case — work career progression to a full professorship was not considered desirable, not only because of the previous delegitimizing processes, but in some cases apparently also because of their preference for specific academic activities, relating in particular to their view of research as a vocation and the pleasure they got from discovery (especially in the STEM area). These aspects rely on and reinforce the representation of science and research as gender neutral, and they consequently increase individuals' propensity to blame themselves and look for individual strategies.

The originality of this study is therefore that it has adopted a perspective according to which discrimination and preferences are interdependent. It has done so by investigating not only the

barriers to career advancement that women face, but also the career strategies implemented by women in academia to overcome gender barriers or reduce costs.

The empirical results show that the interviewees enacted several strategies of individual resistance, as part of wider coping strategies to overcome gender barriers, but also individual strategies of success even if they were sometimes based on individual self-empowerment actions. A first common strategy used by women to overcome barriers is the postponement of motherhood. A second recurrent strategy adopted by academic mothers to resist barriers to academic advancement has been the one — very costly in the Italian cultural and institutional context — of reducing maternity leave, and sometimes even to avoid work interruption around maternity. Starting from a broad concept of "strategies" *à la* Hochschild, one interesting empirical finding might be related to a further strategy. We may call it a "third work-life balance strategy", which we have identified among those interviewees who, when faced by several work career barriers, chose a diverse path, a sort of different "life strategy", not a "winner model of the academic" but an interesting life survival strategy. It was represented by those interviewees who had decided (or had been constrained?) to give up on some experiences central for their work career advancement, in some cases for the good of their family, when the intertwining of work and family careers proved too intricate. A diverse "life strategy" is also that of those women who were already associate professors, who had decided to give up the prospect of work career advancement in itself by not applying for scientific qualifications or not participating in competitions. In some cases, the strategies enacted took the form of the slow academic progress and the postponement of, or withdrawal from, reaching a full professorship which contribute to worsening gender inequalities in academia.

The lesser propensity to seek full professorships, to compete, or to invest in activities considered more remunerative for career advancement did not reflect less involvement in or dedication to the quality of research and teaching. Indeed, in some cases the opposite seemed to be the case. These findings evidence the shortcomings of the evaluation processes that use academic productivity as a proxy for "merit" and "excellence", since they tend to reinforce the neoliberal unconditional worker model and also to exacerbate the asymmetries between mainstream research areas and other female-dominated or less gendered ones, as well as between competitive work styles and cooperative ones. Finally, the emphasis on individual "choices" and merit tend to cause interventions of a more structural nature ("fix institutions") to be perceived as unnecessary. Therefore, policies and measures that are only meant to "fix women" by empowering them miss the effect of structural and cultural constraints on individual preferences, so that they blame women and reinforce vertical segregation.

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