

Perilous Journeys. Professionals Belonging to Minoritised Groups in Contemporary Italian Cinema and TV*

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The debate on gender equality and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in the creative industries has intensified worldwide, yet progress remains slow, often resulting in "precarious diversity". This article presents the findings of E|Quality (2024–26), an interdisciplinary project by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and Università di Bologna that uses a multi-level, mixed-methods approach to examine exclusionary dynamics in Italian cinema and television across three dimensions: off-screen (labour structures), on-screen (representation) and in-front-of-screen (audience reception). A review of 219 regional funding calls (2017–25) shows that 77% include DEI criteria, yet these typically address few variables – mainly age and binary gender – and favour punitive over rewarding models. Among the top 95 Italian production companies, only 31% have documented DEI procedures, mostly driven by international groups rather than by cultural change within independent firms. A longitudinal analysis of 12,820 television episodes (2000–23) shows a persistent gender gap: women account for only a third of the workforce, work 12% fewer episodes than men, and remain underrepresented in creative "above-the-line" roles, which grow harder to access as their prestige increases, owing to informal recruitment networks and precarious work arrangements. Automated speech recognition confirms genre-specific dynamics on screen: female speaking time reaches 61% in comedy but drops to 5% in crime and drama, and female leads do not guarantee parity. Exclusionary tendencies thus operate at systemic, narrative and organisational levels. Moving beyond performative "DEI-washing" requires structural changes that embed gender equality within the industry's creative and organisational fabric.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI); Italian audiovisual industry; gender inequality; media production studies; television representation.

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Introduction

The debate about gender equality in the cultural and creative industries, especially in the screen sectors, has intensified considerably in recent years (Edmond, 2023). This development has prompted new research yielding a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data and information in nature. Several critical issues have emerged in how the gender gap and broader forms of segregation within screen industries are studied, particularly regarding data quality, methodologies and the extent to which research can trigger, drive and support change (Lee, 2025).

As is widely acknowledged, analyses of exclusion mechanisms – especially those affecting women working in cinema, television and media – are hampered by the fragility of the data, due mainly to difficulties in moving beyond a binary approach (Lorber, 2021) toward an intersectional perspective (Antoci, 2024). Many studies and reports fail to measure gender subjectivities beyond the binary opposition of male vs female, or they combine data on females with those on other subjectivities (Le Lab Femmes de Cinéma, 2025). Applying an intersectional approach is proving an ongoing challenge, especially in recognising crucial subjective dimensions such as social-class origin (Jones, Dadlani & Verhoeven, 2024).

Methodologically, recent years have seen a growing focus on quantitative measures through data-driven approaches (Fanchi, Tarantino & Barotsi, 2023), which risks overshadowing or diverting attention from the individual and their experiences (Eikhof, 2023). It would therefore be beneficial to return to mixed methods combining qualitative and quantitative strategies (Jansson, Papadopoulou, Stigsdotter & Wallenberg, 2021). Furthermore, there is a pressing need to structure research across multiple levels. The complex interplay of the macro and micro factors – structural and individual, global and local – that contribute to persistent exclusion can only be satisfactorily investigated with multi-level study designs (Kerrigan, Liddy & O'Brien, 2023; Loist et al., 2024). Such approaches provide a thorough understanding of the processes involved while enhancing the analysis of each one. For example, research into careers and professional networks becomes more insightful when additional variables are considered, revealing the multiplicity of conditions and actors that facilitate or hinder ongoing employment, opportunities for growth, and professional recognition (Dadlani et al., 2024). This broader, more detailed approach deepens our understanding of the underlying dynamics of social and professional exclusion, influences narrative forms and media imaginaries, and supports the development of strategies to dismantle these patterns. It can also shed light on why progress in closing the gender gap remains glacial or sometimes ineffective (Lee, 2025; Milner & Gregory, 2022).

Despite increased awareness and numerous initiatives, the pace of change has been slow, leading to a “precarious diversity” (Gray, 2016, p. 248). For example, increasing the number of production professionals from historically marginalised groups does not necessarily foster genuine equality (Jansson et al., 2021), nor does it eradicate prejudices (Lee, 2025). Even more insidiously, the growing public focus on the issue – amplified by academic research (Newsinger, Kennedy & Aust, 2024) – may contribute to what Edmond describes as “endurable and enduring” inequalities (Edmond, 2023, p. 429), thereby

justifying superficial measures and performative “washing”. Examining policies and practices aimed at promoting DEI in production companies is key to understanding their limited impact. Often, actions and policies seemingly designed to improve workforce diversity and on-screen inclusion appear superficial and ineffective at transforming power relations, as research on production policies across various national contexts shows (Calderón-Sandoval, Medina-Bravo & Sánchez-Espinosa, 2025). The project *E|Quality. Strategies for Meaningful Inclusion in Italian Cinema and Television* operates within this framework, contributing effectively to measuring and understanding the reasons for the persistent inequalities in Italian cinema and audiovisual media and to supporting efforts to address and overcome them.

The E|Quality Project: the Methodological Framework

The *E|Quality* project is a programme of research that was funded by the Italian Ministry of Universities and Research and carried out by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and Università degli Studi di Bologna. The aims were to assess whether and how Italy’s cinema and audiovisual-media sectors and their products currently promote DEI and to develop tools to monitor and improve it, giving voice to HEGs. The project was based on three premises: (i) segregation and discrimination dynamics involve multiple aspects of individuals (age, gender, biological sex, ethnicity, economic status, vulnerabilities such as physical or cognitive disabilities, etc.); (ii) social inequalities affect numerous areas of life (family, health, interpersonal relationships, educational and career opportunities, etc.); and (iii) discrimination and social injustice are amplified according to the mechanisms described by intersectional theory (Collins, 2015; Antoci, 2025). The successful measurement and promotion of DEI values in screen industries and in audiovisual and cinema productions and experiences therefore required a multi-level approach with a structured programme of actions (Eikhof, 2023).

The *E|Quality* project considered *three analytical and operational levels*: on-screen, off-screen and in-front-of-screen. The *off-screen* level concerned labour structures, hiring practices and career trajectories of professionals in contemporary Italian cinema and television. The *on-screen* level addressed issues of representation, narrative visibility and the distribution of roles within audiovisual texts. And the *in-front-of-screen* level examined reception processes and psychosocial effects among viewers, especially as regards HEG characters and HEG audiences.

The project focused on four potential key factors: gender, age, nationality and disability. The presence or absence of inequalities and discrimination was investigated thus: for gender, systematically and cross-sectionally across all the research actions into which the project was structured; for age, nationality, and disability in relation to specific objectives and actions.

The research actions that used quantitative methodologies investigated gender in an exclusively binary manner. This is a well-known and -discussed critical issue with

quantitative surveys (Eikhof et al., 2019), accepted insofar as it allows some dimensions of the gender gap to be measured (Lorber, 2021), although supplementary qualitative methodologies are also required (Jansson et al, 2021).

Hence, to investigate the processes of inclusion (vs segregation), the project combined quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single analytical framework. The quantitative component relied on the construction, normalisation and longitudinal examination of large datasets derived from film- and television-production records. These data made it possible to analyse workforce composition, employment continuity and professional mobility across extended timespans. We used statistical modelling and network analyses to illuminate relations among professionals, to map access conditions to creative positions, and to observe recurrent constraints affecting career progression. Inequality could thus be examined as a dynamic, intersectional process that develops over time. Qualitative methods complemented this analysis through semi-structured interviews and dialogue with social, political and industry actors. These approaches documented professional experiences, perceived barriers and adaptive strategies that could not be understood solely from numerical data, highlighting the persistence of forces resistant to change, such as those operating in informal cultures at audiovisual and film companies (Lee, 2025).

Comprising five areas (with milestones) and thirteen research actions, the project was carried out by an interdisciplinary team of scholars specialising in statistics, social psychology, computer science, organisations and work, cultural and communication studies, and cinema and audiovisual media.

Specifically, the first area entailed an analysis of the workforce in Italian film and television productions or co-productions from 2000 to 2023 (2024)¹. The aim was to count the professionals from HEGs in screen industries over time, focusing on film productions (6,763 works with 109,405 professional roles, filled by 43,893 individual professionals), Italian television series (12,820 episodes and 524,406 professional credits), and the crews of works supported by initiatives to involve more professionals from HEGs, particularly those with a migrant background². The data were collected from various sources³ and then cross-referenced with a wide range of other information, such as the genres and formats of works, production companies, production costs, distribution deals, box office figures, and other data on the social impact achieved. The aim was to develop a multidimensional database to capture deeper and more complex and nuanced connections among the factors influencing DEI parameters (Dadlani et al., 2024) and to provide a firm basis for subsequent analysis and future investigations⁴. The analyses highlighted the persistence of exclusionary practices based on gender, age and nationality. This trend exhibits different forms and severities depending, for instance, on the department in question: the gender gap is most pronounced in roles such as director of photography or music director, both in films (Gender Balance in Italian Film Crews, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025) and in television productions (Iapalucci, Cattani & Pescatore, 2026) but is not significantly affected by initiatives targeted at supporting inclusion in Italian screen companies, confirming the findings from other European research (Nwonka, 2021).

The second area of study *analysed careers* using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Career breaks, exits and average durations were all noted. Perceptions of the factors that make women's and men's career paths complex and non-linear were explored through in-depth interviews. The analysis of career breaks and durations revealed the fragility of jobs in the sector (Morgan & Nelligan, 2015); it also reinforced the outcomes of other European studies, notably the greater impact of parental and caregiving responsibilities on female workers (Percival, 2020) and the tendency of these women to view their work–life balance challenges as caused by personal failings rather than a systemic lack of support (Berridge, 2022). The interviews also emphasised a professional culture where total dedication is expected and a blurring of lines between work and personal life – especially among freelancers – confirming observations in other Italian contexts (Eikhof, 2017).

The third research area scrutinised measures and policies aimed at making cinema and audiovisual media more inclusive in Italy. A systematic review was performed of documents produced by the main stakeholders in the regulatory and operational framework: the Italian state, the regions (Regions and autonomous provinces), and the leading production companies. It also categorised the identified targets and parameters, noting the prevalence of superficial and largely ineffective evaluation and intervention models.

The fourth area of investigation examined the on-screen level, assessing *narrative inclusivity* by automatically detecting individuals from HEGs in the footage. The research also analysed how HEG individuals see themselves represented, their viewing experiences and their satisfaction with media narratives. We interviewed representatives from 22 associations of people with sensory and cognitive disabilities – covering neurodivergence, sensory disabilities, physical and motor impairments, psychological and mental-health conditions, and cognitive and intellectual disabilities.

The fifth and final area of the project involved *developing guidelines and tools* to improve inclusivity in cinema and audiovisual media, so that well-intentioned policies produce tangible, appreciable results. The ultimate aim has been to establish specific standards of analysis and intervention and to provide effective tools that can target the deep structures responsible for inequality and exclusion in cinema and media (Nwonka, 2021).

These factors affect access to jobs in the film and audiovisual industries, influence the narratives that cinema and audiovisual works can produce, and shape how the works reach audiences – playing a vital role in challenging gender stereotypes and other social and cultural biases.

The results of four actions to investigate key aspects of the gender-imbalance processes in Italian cinema and audiovisual media are discussed in the dedicated sections below:

- regional and local policies supporting gender balance and inclusion in film and audiovisual productions;
- formal and informal criteria used by the leading Italian production companies to promote diversity, pluralism and inclusion;
- the involvement of female professionals in various departments in Italian television series production and the growth trends over time;

- female characters' speaking time and narrative visibility across a sample of Italian TV series.

The data presented in these sections should be considered within the overall research framework described above. Together with the collected databases, they are openly available and designed to support re-use in other studies⁵. *E|Quality* aligns with the principles of transparency in data construction, consistency in the definition of indicators, and potential longitudinal replication. The project is also sensitive to historically specific labour arrangements and culturally embedded professional norms influencing the Italian audiovisual sector. In current debates within media-industry studies, intersectional research and cultural policy, this approach positions *E|Quality* in a space where measurement and interpretation are closely linked. From this perspective, the methodological structure outlined here functions not as a self-contained framework but as the analytical basis for the empirical investigations that follow. The examination of career dynamics and the analysis of the institutionalisation of DEI practices in audiovisual production can thus be read as two complementary perspectives emerging from the same evidentiary architecture. The subsequent sections then explore how structural inequalities and organisational responses manifest within specific professional and policy contexts.

The Regional Funding Landscape and DEI Integration (2017–25)

The first institutional arena where these dynamics become observable is in the funding policies for the screen industry in the Italian regions. Between 2017 and 2025, this funding landscape saw a gradual yet uneven application of DEI principles. This shift reflects the adoption of broader national and European socio-political frameworks, such as the European Social Dialogue Committee in the audiovisual sector⁶, as well as the need to tackle past exclusionary work practices, especially those affecting women and minority groups (Akser, 2021). A pivotal development in this period was the enactment of Law no. 220/2016, *Regulation of the cinema and audiovisual sector*, mandating equal-employment opportunities and non-discrimination in the industry. Additional measures, such as the *gender equity certification* introduced by Law 162/2021, incentivise employers to take effective action on gender pay gaps, career advancement and maternity protections.

A systematic review of 219 funding calls from 21 regional film commissions⁷ revealed significant variability in the use of DEI criteria: regions such as Piedmont (n=46), Sardinia (n=35), and Emilia-Romagna (n=26) are the most active, while Lombardy (n=3) and Tuscany (n=5) lag behind. Italy's regional funding schemes require film and TV companies to guarantee equal-employment opportunities and support gender equality through the above government policies and certifications. Schemes receiving European Union funding must also comply with Regulation (EU) No. 1303/2013, which promotes gender equity and diversity and mandates measures to prevent discrimination based on age, sex, sexual orientation, race, religion or disability.

Table 1 – Positive and negative regulatory provision in regional audiovisual-funding calls (2017–25)

Region	No. Funding Calls	No. FC with positive regulatory provisions	% FC with positive regulatory provisions	No. FC with negative regulatory provisions	% FC with negative regulatory provisions
<i>Abruzzo</i>	5	0	0.00%	1	20.00%
<i>Alto Adige</i>	4	3	75.00%	3	75.00%
<i>Basilicata</i>	3	2	66.67%	3	100.00%
<i>Calabria</i>	12	8	66.67%	12	100.00%
<i>Campania</i>	10	9	90.00%	10	100.00%
<i>Emilia-Romagna</i>	26	14	53.85%	26	100.00%
<i>Friuli-Venezia Giulia</i>	5	0	0.00%	3	60.00%
<i>Lazio</i>	15	15	100.00%	5	33.33%
<i>Liguria</i>	8	8	100.00%	8	100.00%
<i>Lombardy</i>	3	2	66.67%	3	100.00%
<i>Marche</i>	8	6	75.00%	3	37.50%
<i>Molise</i>	1	1	100.00%	1	100.00%
<i>Piedmont</i>	46	46	100.00%	45	97.83%
<i>Puglia</i>	10	10	100.00%	8	80.00%
<i>Sardinia</i>	35	22	62.86%	33	94.29%
<i>Sicily</i>	7	7	100.00%	7	100.00%
<i>Trentino</i>	1	1	100.00%	1	100.00%
<i>Tuscany</i>	5	4	80.00%	5	100.00%
<i>Umbria</i>	3	3	100.00%	1	33.33%
<i>Valle d'Aosta</i>	5	2	40.00%	5	100.00%
<i>Veneto</i>	7	6	85.71%	6	85.71%
Total	219	169	77.16%	189	86.30%

Table 1 highlights the uneven adoption of DEI-related regulatory provision across Italian regional funding calls. Overall, 77.16% of the calls included positive regulatory provisions, such as incentives or evaluation criteria promoting diversity and gender equality. In comparison, 86.30% contained negative provisions, typically expressed as exclusion clauses that proscribe projects that promote hate speech, violence or discrimination. But the distribution of these measures varied significantly across regions. In some – notably Piedmont, Puglia, Liguria and Sicily – DEI considerations were integrated systematically within their funding schemes; in others, including Abruzzo and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, adoption of these criteria was much more limited. The predominance of negative measures suggests that many regional policies still approach DEI primarily through preventive regulatory frameworks aimed at excluding discriminatory content, rather than through proactive strategies designed to foster structural inclusion within the audiovisual workforce.

Gender budgeting, defined as “gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process” (Council of Europe, 2005, p. 10), has emerged as the principal DEI strategy within this heterogeneous funding environment. Around a quarter of funding calls (n=56) incorporated gender-responsive incentives,

awarding additional points or reserved access to projects with gender-balanced crews or female leads in key creative roles. Although much later than other European countries with screen industries comparable to Italy, the first Italian regions to include DEI criteria in local audiovisual policies were Campania and Puglia in 2019; they have progressively implemented measures to support the inclusion of women in film and audiovisual-production initiatives. However, the implementation of gender-budgeting strategies varies considerably across different regions and timeframes. Gender-budgeting criteria have become increasingly sophisticated, requiring certification of women's participation in decision-making roles and excluding feminised assistant positions from calculations of gender-majority status. This novel approach addresses long-established biases that relegate women to subordinate roles, ensuring genuine female leadership rather than symbolic representation, by shifting the focus from individual inclusion to the transformation of organisational practices and power structures (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

The linguistic aspect of inclusive Film Commission policy development also poses significant challenges, as the binary-gendered Italian language complicates the creation of fully gender-neutral documentation. Some funding calls sporadically use dual-gender suffixes (e.g. *produttore/produttrice*) to acknowledge female professionals explicitly. Although inconsistent and sometimes linguistically cumbersome, these efforts indicate a nascent sensitivity to the symbolic importance of language in influencing perceptions of authorship and leadership in the audiovisual sector.

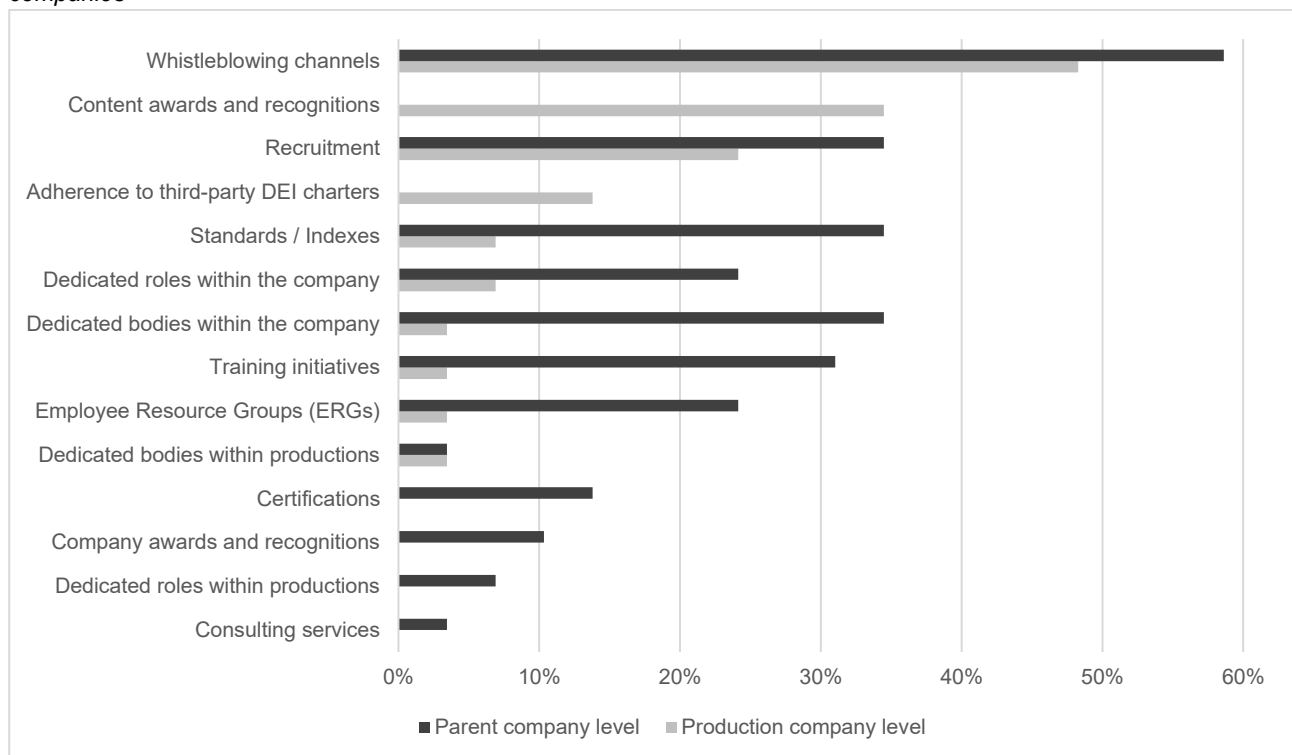
Beyond gender, there are major gaps in the approaches to other protected categories from race and disability to ethnicity and sexual orientation. Regional schemes generally debar projects promoting hatred, violence or racial discrimination but lack proactive measures to foster inclusion of marginalised groups. This differs from models in other countries, such as the UK's BBC Elevate programme⁸, which explicitly targets intersectional inclusion and challenges ableism and binary gender frameworks. The absence of such mechanisms in Italy's regional funding calls represents a critical policy oversight limiting the transformative potential of DEI initiatives.

DEI Institutionalisation in Italian Audiovisual-Production Companies

While regional funding mechanisms reveal an evolving yet uneven policy-level engagement with DEI principles, their actual effectiveness ultimately depends on how such principles are internalised within the organisational structures of audiovisual-production firms. An analysis of 158 DEI-related documents from the top 95 such companies in Italy active between 2017 and 2024 – those whose projects achieved the highest social impact, measured through a weighted index combining box office sales and producers' percentage ownership of each project – shows an extremely limited institutionalisation of DEI principles at local level. Multiple DEI perspectives were considered across three operational areas: promotional (public communications and initiatives), organisational (policy adoption) and production (implementation of actions).

The sector relies mainly on internal-governance tools – such as codes of ethics, whistleblowing channels and the *Organisation, Management and Control Model* under Legislative Decree 231/2001 – rather than proactive guidelines on production, representation or accessibility. Only 31% of firms have adopted at least one DEI-related policy, and 69% of them are part of corporate groups – suggesting, in line with recent findings (Ntantamis & Zhou, 2025), that DEI formalisation is influenced by company size and internationalisation. The promotion of DEI values is largely driven by corporate groups, which publish dedicated DEI webpages and implement initiatives and communications aimed at the public, partly because of investor scrutiny and international-market pressures. Independent companies, which make up most of the sector, often lack transparency and formal public commitment to DEI.

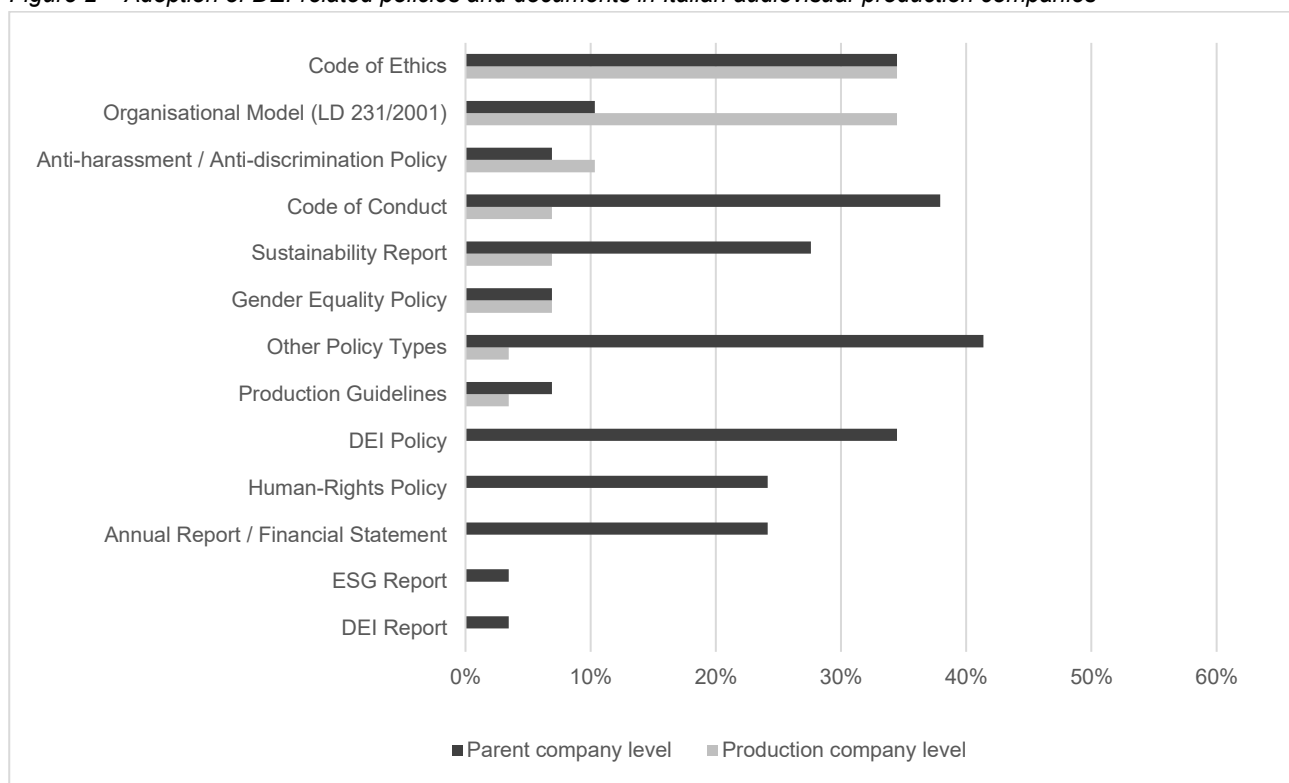
Figure 1 – Adoption of DEI governance measures and organisational practices in Italian audiovisual-production companies



DEI initiatives in Italy's audiovisual sector (Fig. 1) appear largely compliance-driven rather than genuinely transformative. Whistleblowing mechanisms introduced to meet European regulatory requirements represent the most widespread form of action. Inclusive recruitment policies and adherence to external diversity charters remain marginal, the greatest take-up being among production companies. Corporate groups have comparatively more structured governance frameworks (Fig. 2), yet DEI is still primarily framed as a regulatory obligation, with limited impact on production practices or narrative content. A clear structural polarisation emerges: independent companies tend to adopt defensive, minimal compliance strategies aimed at legal-risk mitigation, constrained by funding instability, tight production schedules, and weak organisational infrastructures, whereas corporate groups integrate DEI

into broader strategic frameworks shaped by the latest management approaches. This transnational reliance on global corporate logics appears to be the driver for DEI progress in Italy, potentially obscuring forms of marginalisation that are “inherently national” and require “interventions [that] are also nationally specific” (Jenner, 2024, p. 1476). Against this backdrop, moving beyond mere compliance requires a shift toward a cultural and productive paradigm that embeds DEI within creative, organisational and narrative practices. Such a shift would entail threefold change: broadening the focus beyond gender to include age, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation; developing inclusive policies attentive to Italy’s linguistic and cultural specificities; and strengthening the organisational capacity of independent companies to engage more meaningfully with DEI. One pivotal arena where these tensions become visible is the organisation of audiovisual-production labour.

Figure 2 – Adoption of DEI-related policies and documents in Italian audiovisual-production companies



Off-Screen Hierarchies: Structural Mechanisms of Gender Inequality in Italian Television-Production Crews

Although labour organisation is a fundamental factor in industry inequalities, gender dynamics within Italian audiovisual crews remain largely understudied, especially in television. TV production offers valuable opportunities for analysing gender dynamics. The sustained longitudinal nature of series products, the continuity of cast and crew across multiple episodes and seasons, and the more stable labour patterns compared to film

production make it possible to observe employment trajectories more systematically over time.

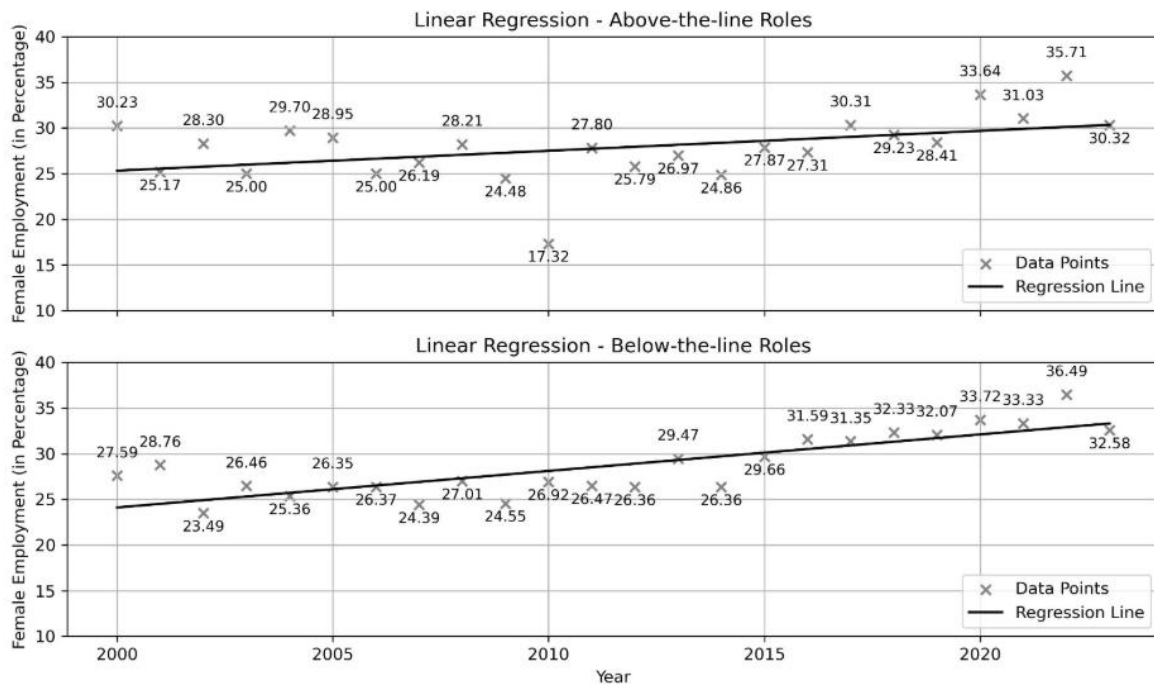
To address this significant research gap, we undertook three actions, as outlined above. The first was to examine the gender gap among women involved in making Italian films between 2000 and 2024; the second analysed the gender gap in Italian television series productions; the third investigated the gender composition of works specifically dedicated to promoting professionals from HEGs, revealing persistent dynamics that exclude those who are not from the majority white group.

This section of the article presents the results of the second analysis. Drawing on data from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) – fully reported in Iapalucci, Cattani & Pescatore (2026) – the study covers 12,820 episodes and 524,406 professional credits. Female participation and employment trajectories were examined across all professional roles: cast members; above-the-line positions including directors, producers and writers; and below-the-line technical roles. Temporal patterns and employment trends across the full period were also probed to identify any significant shifts in gender composition and participation; linear-regression analysis was used to ensure the robustness of the conclusions⁹.

The results reveal stark and persistent patterns that fundamentally challenge prevailing narratives about the creative and cultural industries as inherently progressive, egalitarian spaces (Gill, 2002; Graham & Gandini, 2017). Women constitute about a third of the total workforce in a 1:2 ratio with men that remained remarkably stable throughout the period studied, with only marginal fluctuations in individual years – despite ongoing policy discussions and industry awareness initiatives. This finding is in line with the figures from previous quantitative studies on gender inequalities in both Italian and international audiovisual contexts (Fanchi, Tarantino & Barotsi, 2023; Rocchi, Cattani & Pescatore, 2023). Beyond this numerical underrepresentation, women worked an average of 12% fewer episodes than men (18.87 vs 21.45 episodes), indicating not merely an underrepresentation in raw headcount but systematically fewer working opportunities and reduced continuity across seasons.

When examining employment growth trajectories over time, female participation increased by only 0.17% annually across all roles combined – an extremely marginal trend that masks critical and theoretically significant differences by occupational hierarchy and professional category. Technical positions classed as below-the-line evinced comparatively faster growth at 0.40% per year – a figure that, while higher than above-the-line roles (0.22%, Fig. 3), remains negligible nonetheless. This differential-growth pattern is particularly revealing and theoretically important: statistical analysis shows a change over time of only 18.6% in female employment in creative positions compared to 66.5% in technical ones. This striking disparity suggests that creative occupations are subject to fundamentally different exclusionary mechanisms that remain stubbornly resistant to the passage of time and to policy interventions, legislative initiatives and external pressures for inclusion and diversification.

Figure 3 – Trends in the employment of women in Italian television series productions (2000–23), in above-the-line and below-the-line roles



Comparative analysis of Italy's labour market, based on Eurostat data, reveals that Italian TV series production lags well behind the overall Italian economy, where women comprised 43% of the workforce in 2022. The observed patterns reflect deeper structural mechanisms of social closure (Mackert, 2025), operating through informal networks, project-based hiring practices and personalised gatekeeping arrangements. These historically coded masculine practices reinforce rather than relieve gender segregation as roles gain prestige, creative autonomy and economic value. The data suggest that cultural and creative industries are not immune to systemic labour-market inequalities but rather exemplify and intensify how insecure work arrangements and the idealisation of creative autonomy function as exclusionary mechanisms, concentrated in decision-making positions of authority and influence.

The paradoxical finding that professionalisation coincides with increased exclusion is particularly significant. For as positions become professionalised, formalised and higher-paid – typically with increased accessibility and standardised entry pathways – they paradoxically become harder for women to access, contrary to what conventional narratives of industrial modernisation and institutional development might suggest. This is no mere glass-ceiling problem; rather, it reflects how stratification systems embedded in organisational practices and labour-market structures perpetuate gender inequality over time.

Female underrepresentation in the sector cannot therefore be attributed to sector-specific barriers alone: it stems from broader organised exclusionary practices. The precariousness of creative work – with freelancing, short-term contracts, great variability of hours, and a dependence on informal personal networks for access to opportunities – creates working

conditions that disproportionately disadvantage women, who must navigate not only professional obstacles but also societal expectations about care work, family responsibilities and unpaid domestic labour (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013). These structural features contribute to what scholars term “short careers” or “early exits” from the field, as women quit television production at higher rates than men. Access to opportunities depends heavily on being embedded in professional networks where decision-makers operate – networks that have traditionally been male-dominated and resistant to meaningful diversification (Lutter, 2015). The finding that increased female employment over the twenty-three-year period stems primarily from below-the-line positions indicates that the growth has been in areas of lower prestige, autonomy and decision-making power rather than in roles where women gain meaningful influence and the ability to shape industry trends.

The research thus shows that, despite policy interventions like Law 220/2016, Italian TV production operates through labour-market mechanisms that systematically reproduce gender hierarchies over time. So, data collection and awareness raising, while necessary first steps toward equity, remain insufficient without comprehensive structural changes to how cultural work is organised, compensated, contracted and accessed. The methodological limitations of this data set and the analytical approach – including coverage biases and the binary treatment of gender – are discussed in detail in Iapalucci, Cattani & Pescatore (2026).

Gender Representation and Beyond: Speaking Time, Narrative Genre and Female Visibility in Italian Television Drama

Beyond studying DEI policies and audiovisual crews, *E|Quality* also investigated on-screen gender representation in contemporary Italian media production. Whereas women’s presence has become an increasingly important analytical focus in media studies and cultural scholarship, the precise mechanisms by which narrative formulaic patterns (expressed through genres and structural cast arrangements) translate into measurable female character visibility have remained underexamined.

Recent international scholarship confirms persistent and pronounced female marginalisation across audiovisual-media production. Lauzen (2024) reported that actresses credited in speaking roles declined from 37% to 35% in major Hollywood films between 2022 and 2023, demonstrating stagnation despite policy attention, while Doukhan, Poels, Rezgui & Carrive (2018) showed major gender disparities in speaking time across French television and radio, suggesting systemic industry-wide patterns.

Building incrementally on our earlier exploratory work (Cattani & Innocenti, 2024), we measured women’s representation through female speaking time, investigating whether it functions as a characteristic and systematic feature of narrative genres and whether structural cast-composition variables moderate or override genre-typical patterns of gender inequality.

To conduct the analysis, we drew on a corpus of 455 episodes from 15 Italian television series produced between 2008 and 2023. The data set's scope, in terms of the timespan and number of episodes, is more limited compared to the crew analysis because of the computational costs involved. Although it represents a convenient sample, our corpus was constructed primarily to capture heterogeneous production contexts representative of contemporary Italian television. It incorporates productions across many different broadcast platforms and distribution models (generalist broadcast TV, premium cable TV and streaming platforms), an array of narrative genres (comedy, crime, drama and teen drama) and a variety of series formats (including limited miniseries, long-running productions and four female-led shows); see Table 2 for details.

The corpus was analysed using an automated speech-recognition model with gender-classification capabilities: *SpeechSegmenter* (Doukhan et al, 2018b).¹⁰ Besides exploring descriptive data on the percentages of speaking time for female characters – excluding music, silence and noise – across the corpus (see Table 2 for the series averages), we also processed predictive data using decision-tree machine-learning algorithms (Murthy, 1998; Cattani & Innocenti, 2024). Decision trees were used to enable systematic identification of hierarchical decision rules and thresholds governing speaking time allocation based on (i) the four series genres considered and (ii) cast composition (female- or male-led) as predictor variables. The decision trees subdivide episodes into groups with distinct predicted outcomes, illuminating how production structures and genre-based narrative formulas shape concrete opportunities for female character visibility.

Table 2 – TV series corpus and average female speaking time by series (as a percentage)

TV Series	Narrative Genre	No. Episodes	Female-led	Female Speaking Time (%)
<i>Che Dio ci aiuti</i> (RAI, 2011–)	Comedy	132	Yes	61.47%
<i>Gomorra</i> (Sky, 2014–21)	Drama	58	No	15.58%
<i>I delitti del Bar Lume</i> (Sky, 2013–)	Crime	21	No	25.68%
<i>Imma Tataranni – Sostituto Procuratore</i> (RAI, 2019–)	Crime	18	Yes	47.26%
<i>L'Amica Geniale</i> (RAI-HBO, 2018–24)	Drama	24	Yes	56.45%
<i>La compagnia del Cigno</i> (RAI, 2019–21)	Teen drama	24	No	41.21%
<i>Made In Italy</i> (Amazon Prime Video, 2019)	Comedy	8	Yes	56.45%
<i>Mare Fuori</i> (RAI, 2020–)	Teen drama	36	No	30.40%
<i>Nero Wolfe</i> (RAI, 2012)	Crime	8	No	16.48%
<i>Rocco Schiavone</i> (RAI, 2016–)	Crime	20	No	12.64%
<i>Romanzo Criminale</i> (Sky, 2008–10)	Drama	22	No	4.94%
<i>Suburra</i> (Netflix, 2017–20)	Drama	24	No	21.41%
<i>The Young Pope</i> (Sky-HBO-Canal+, 2016)	Drama	10	No	14.27%
<i>Tutto Può Succedere</i> (RAI, 2015–18)	Comedy	42	No	44.52%
<i>We Are Who We Are</i> (Sky-HBO, 2020)	Teen drama	8	No	44.78%
Total		455		

The descriptive data reveal different systematic patterns for different genres. Comedy series consistently have the highest female speaking time percentages, from 44% to 61%.

The crime genre shows extreme gender marginalisation, corroborating previous research (Re & Spalletta, 2023), with female characters occupying an eighth to a quarter of all speaking time, except in female-led series. While dramas exhibit similar or worse marginalisation patterns to crime series – with as little as 5% female speaking time in *Romanzo Criminale* – the picture is less pronounced with teen dramas, at 30–45%. Significantly, the balance is not clear cut even for female-led series: *Imma Tataranni* reaches 47.26%; *L'Amica Geniale*, 56.45%; *Made in Italy*, 56.45%. Female lead characters do not therefore automatically assure women the majority of the speaking time.

In the predictive analysis, cast composition emerged as the primary decision criterion at the root node of the decision tree. The four female-led series (see Table 2) showed distinctly higher predicted female dialogue percentages. For non-female-led series, narrative genre functioned as the primary subdivision criterion, generating three distinct outcome nodes: the drama and crime genres predicted 16% female speaking time; teen drama predicted 36%; and comedy, 44%. The model explained 50% of the variation in speaking time, indicating that genre and cast composition are substantively important factors. The substantial residual complexity still requires additional explanatory variables, including the production budget, the gender composition of the creative team, and the production scope (national vs international co-production).

Overall, the results affirm that narrative genres function as formulaic systems with distinct gender dynamics: comedy is structurally the most accommodating to female dialogue, while crime and dramas are much more resistant. These genre effects, however, prove neither deterministic nor immutable. While full gender parity in speech distribution remains elusive within traditional genre structures, these findings demonstrate that deliberate narrative centring of female characters can substantially override genre-typical patterns. This result invites future research to examine additional factors shaping women's presence beyond genre and cast composition.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The Italian screen industry is marked by exclusionary factors operating across many dimensions that have created a system whose deep disparities show only faint signs of improvement.

The analysis of regional measures aimed at countering segregation reveals a growing focus on DEI values. Most measures implemented by regional authorities to support cinema and the audiovisual sectors include criteria that reward or penalise according to DEI principles. However, closer inspection of these authorities' published documentation reveals regulatory weaknesses due to the targets' and standards' limited scope and the only partial effectiveness of the measures. Most regions assess productions' inclusivity against a very narrow range of variables, focused usually on the age and gender of the professionals involved. Often, only the main departments – directing, production, screenwriting, etc. – are taken into consideration. There is also a tendency toward measures that penalise and

restrict rather than those that encourage and reward. This severely limits the impact of actions in support of inclusion, reducing their ability to address the root causes of exclusion, often amounting to little more than tokenistic window dressing.

The situation is even worse as regards the policies enacted by film and audiovisual-production companies. Specific measures to reduce disparities, whether based on age/gender or aimed at containing exclusionary dynamics, are sporadic. Where they do exist, they are almost always implemented at corporate level, while concrete practices to promote inclusion in production initiatives remain rare: for example, there is generally no documented policy for dispute resolution. Moreover, these measures tend to be generic; references to a firm's commitment to combating discrimination are mainly to be found in anti-corruption reporting, which are mandatory for companies seeking public funding, but they do not indicate a genuine attention to DEI. Corporate reports laced with only vague mentions of equity and inclusivity further confirm this analysis.

The weakness of the regulatory framework seems paradoxical given the limited capacity of Italy's film and audiovisual sectors to include HEGs, on or off screen.

Studies of crews on drama series from 2000 to 2023 show that a large gender gap persists across above-the-line and below-the-line professions. This gap varies in nature and severity depending on the role and department; notably, it tends to widen with seniority and is most marked in music direction and cinematography. The data also reveal another important point: the slowness of progress in addressing the gender gap. This is undoubtedly due to the fragility of the actions taken and the superficiality of the interventions (and commitments), which fail to translate declarations of principle into concrete steps. It also reflects the particular working conditions on cultural and creative projects, including a near-total absence of worker-protection safeguards.

The exclusionary dynamics operating behind the scenes and at system level also influence narratives and imaginaries. As an example, the share of speaking time for female characters in a sample of TV series reveals a male dominance in certain contexts. A number of critical issues discussed in European and international debates apply in the Italian case as well. First, the limited effectiveness of the current tools stems from an incomplete understanding of the dynamics of exclusion and segregation in this sector, resulting in targets, standards and measures that are too broad or inspired by other social, economic and media contexts to be effective in Italy. Second, an exclusionary culture in screen-production companies continues to exist in routines and discourses, resulting in superficial attempts or half-hearted efforts to improve. Ironically, this culture is also reinforced by policymakers' preference for penalising extreme cases rather than fostering a natural process of change. Transformation thus remains slow and arduous, mainly (almost solely) focusing on increasing the headcount of minority professionals employed but without addressing the deeper structural causes of exclusion.

A perilous journey still awaits, but preparations have begun to be made.

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Notes

¹ The dataset on workers involved in films, which are works declared for the purpose of accessing state aid as primarily intended for release in cinemas, covers the period 2000–24; the dataset on television dramas spans the years 2000–23.

² Good examples in Italy include the *MigrArti* Cinema programme, promoted by the Italian Ministry of Culture to support audiovisual projects addressing migration and cultural diversity, and the *Premio Mutti – AMM* (Archive of migrant memory), an initiative championing filmmakers with a migrant background and projects that explore migration and transcultural experiences.

³ For the methodological framework underlying the corpus construction, see Fanchi, Tarantino & Barotsi (2023), Iapalucci & Pescatore (2025). The census of Italian film and audiovisual works (productions and co-productions) cross-referenced the following sources: the *Database Nulla Osta* (2000–21) (<https://cinema.cultura.gov.it/database-nulla-osta-film/>), which include all works for which Ministry of Culture clearance for distribution in Italy was requested, superseded from 3 November 2021 by the *Database Classificazione Opere* (<https://cinema.cultura.gov.it/database-nuova-classificazione/>), a list of the works for which classification is required before distribution, in order to protect minors; the *Registro Pubblico delle Opere Cinematografiche e Audiovisive* (<https://cinema.cultura.gov.it/cosa-facciamo/attivita-amministrative/registro-pubblico-delle-opere-cinematografiche-e-audiovisive/>), formerly the *Pubblico Registro Cinematografico*, which has catalogued Italian-made films and subsequently audiovisual works since 1938; the *Italia Taglia* dataset (1913–2000) (<https://www.italiataglia.it/>), a digital archive of cinema censorship created by Bologna film library (Cineteca Bologna) from the working papers of censorship committees meeting at the Ministry of Culture. Information on production professionals and crews was obtained by querying the following three datasets: *IMDb* (<https://www.imdb.com/it/>), *Film Italia* (<https://filmitalia.org/>) and *Cinemaitaliano.info* (<https://www.cinemaitaliano.info/>). To achieve the specific project objectives, these sources were cross-referenced with other databases and digital resources, including: *LUMIERE* (<https://lumiere.obs.coe.int/>), *LUMIERE VOD* (<https://lumierevod.obs.coe.int/>) and the *Database Opere* at the Italian Ministry of Culture (<https://cinema.cultura.gov.it/database-opere/>) (last accessed: 23/01/2026).

⁴ The data collected by the E|Quality project and discussed in this essay are available as open data in FAIR mode. See: Fanchi, Moccia, & Giaculli, 2026; Giaculli, Moccia, & Fanchi, 2026; Mereu Keating, Moccia, & Fanchi, 2026; Iapalucci & Pescatore, 2025b.

⁵ Soon to be published at www.centric.unicatt.it

⁶ www.equalitydiversityinavsector.eu (last accessed: 23/01/2026)

⁷ For further data and analysis on this topic, please refer to Carla Mereu Keating's 'F-author policies? DEI principles and criteria in regional funding for film and audiovisual production (2017–25)', accepted by the journal *L'avventura. International Journal of Italian Film and Media Landscapes*, and under review at the time of writing this essay.

⁸ www.bbc.com/creativitydiversity/elevate/

⁹ The trends relating to above- and below-the-line professionals were determined using a bivariate regression, elaborated by the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method.

¹⁰ Available at: <https://github.com/ina-foss/inaSpeechSegmenter> (last accessed: 23/01/2026)