

Gender, Sex and Sexuality: Education and Socialization Paths. Introduction to the Special Section

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Let's take a look at some news from national and international daily newspapers.

The Guardian published an article entitled Covid has intensified gender inequalities, global study finds¹, reporting several studies conducted to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and which, in unison, considered that the pandemic had cancelled all the progress and achievements made in recent decades in the field of gender equality. In another article published by The Guardian, Disaster patriarchy: how the pandemic has unleashed a war on women² reports on the profound and bitter reflections of V (formerly Eve Ensler), founder of V-Day, the transnational movement against violence towards women, according to which the pandemic has caused a global explosion of violence towards both cisgender or gender-diverse women, along with a significant and tough attack on the rights that women have conquered over time.

From an article published in The Moscow Times, Russian Church Leader Appears to Blame Gay Pride Parades for Ukraine War³, we learn that, for the patriarch of Russia's Orthodox Church, Kirill, the war against Ukraine is a war against the liberal values of the West, and above all against the gay pride parades, as these 'are designed to demonstrate that sin is one variation of human behavior'. During the pandemic, the world's LGBTQ population had already been deemed the scapegoat by Catholic (the US cardinal Ray-

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/02/covid-intensified-existing-gender-inequalities-global-study-finds>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/jun/01/disaster-patriarchy-how-the-pandemic-has-unleashed-a-war-on-women>

³ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/07/russian-church-leader-appears-to-blame-gay-pride-parades-for-ukraine-war-a76803>

mond Burke and the Mexican bishop Ramón Castro), evangelist (the pastor Ralph Drollinger), Jewish (the rabbi Meir Mazuz) and Muslim authorities (the Iraqi Shiite Muqtada-al-Sadr)⁴. According to these religious figures, Covid-19 is the divine punishment thrown at the LGBTQ community as a result of their abominable and unnatural sexual practices, the pride parades, the legalization of same-sex marriage and the assertion of gender identities other than the natural male or female. Without even mentioning any divine intervention against those with a sexual orientation other than hetero, we may simply read some data obtained by a survey conducted by Istat-Unar (the Italian Anti-Racial Discrimination Office) to learn that non-heterosexuals are already ‘punished’ – so to speak – in the work environment for their sexual orientation.⁵ One LGBT person out of five states that they have experienced a hostile climate or an aggression at work. In addition, 38.2% of those in same-sex marriages interviewed stated that they had suffered at least one episode of discrimination also outside of their working environment for reasons linked to their sexual orientation.

In October 2020, in a high school in Padua, a sixteen-year-old student, standing in the elections for the school representatives, asked that his new male name appear on the school’s electoral sheets in place of the name he had when he was female. The head of the school, however, refused the request, stating that the sheets had already been printed⁶. At school, everyone knew ‘Luca’ even when he was still ‘Paola’, but for all his classmates he was simply Luca, a boy like all the others. Again in the school field, in various high schools in Milan neutral toilets have been opened in addition to the male and female ones, and a regulation of ‘career alias’ has been adopted as an alternative and temporary bureaucratic profile. In place of the given name, the profile indicates the name adopted by the student during the female-to-male or male-to-female transition, so that the student can be called by the name they have chosen⁷. In Bologna, towards the end of 2021, the first gymnastics course for transsexuals in Italy and in Europe was inaugurated⁸. The initiative is open not only to transsexuals but all binary, non-binary identities and anyone who does not feel at ease with their own

⁴ See the interesting and ironic analysis by Hernández-Vargas (2020).

⁵ https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/03/24/news/istat_per_una_persona_su_5_lomo_sessualita_causa_svantaggi_lavorativi-342647541/

⁶ https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/10/23/news/la_battaglia_di_luca_non_mi_sento_piu_paola_ma_il_preside_non_ci_sta_-271650866/

⁷ https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/22_marzo_12/scuole-milano-bagni-neutri-alias-registro-elettronico-rispettare-l-orientamento-sessuale-studenti-a2eb9a8c-a1c9-11ec-9a6c-d0d087f8f56a.shtml?refresh_ce

⁸ https://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/02/24/news/bologna_benvenuti_a_queerfit_il_primo_corso_di_ginnastica_per_persone_trans-339029633/

body. The spaces in the gym where the course is held are 'genderless' and an alias is used on the membership card.

One last piece of news. In academic year 2021-2022, aiming to demolish sexist stereotypes, the University of Bari decided to economically support female students enrolling in technical and scientific degree programs, by reducing the registration fees. The decision taken by the university aims to combat the gender gap, encouraging women to specialize in learning fields in which, for cultural and social reasons, there is a very small female presence. The 'Lega' party senator Simone Pillon commented the university's initiative in a post: "it is natural for males to be more enthusiastic about technical subjects, such as mining engineering, while females are more inclined for subjects in the care field, such as midwifery. But Gender enthusiasts don't like this, and they think that there MUST be 50% of women in the mines and 50% of men in childcare"⁹. Personally, I doubt that the aim of the Rector of the University of Bari was to impose 'quotas for women' in the mines or 'quotas for men' in maternity wards or infant schools.

In my opinion, this short, superficial and partial reading of newspaper articles demonstrates something very simple, almost banal, but not for this reason any less important. Every day, we read about events that, directly or indirectly, concern not only the identities of others linked to gender, sex and sexual orientation but also our representations, or definitions, of what gender, sex and sexual orientation are. And, even before this, our identity that has been forged as a male or female or something else, cisgender or not, straight or queer or something else.

But let's go back to the last point, Pillon's post. There are two implicit issues: if there is, or isn't a (phantomatic) essence of (natural) gender identity, and the attempt, by a certain cultural position, as Massimo Prearo states (2020), to make 'gender ideology' coincide with 'gender theory'. Reading gender through the lens of essentialism prevents us from seeing that the gender gap between degrees, for example, is caused by deep-rooted social and cultural mechanisms, in collective and individual consciences, and not by a female nature that is less inclined to or skilled in scientific subjects compared to a male nature (Colombo, 2003; Ghigi, 2020).

The contributions in this special section of the Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, while starting from different perspectives and approaches and tackling different phenomena share a kind of almost ontological assumption: gender identity, and the practices adopted in order to be what we want to be (that gender, that sexual orientation, that sex) are the result of a constant process of reflection on individual agency. The structure, a set

⁹ <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/per-pillon-le-donne-sono-per-natura-piu-portate-per-laccudimento-i-maschi-per-le-materie-tecniche/>

of constraints and resources, is activated and mediated by the agency of an individual seeking to develop their own projects in relation to who they want to be in the various contexts they live in.

The first essay in the section, written by Marco Bacio and Cirus Rinaldi, *Becoming male sex workers, doing masculinities. Socio-sexual interactions and gender production in men selling sex to men in Italy and Sweden*, analyzes a phenomenon that, although far from new in the history of humanity, has been little studied – male sex work. Bacio and Rinaldi draw our attention to how curious it is that the sex worker stereotype is inevitably linked to the female prostitute. This however means that the practice of the sex worker is one that, in its essence, is considered as naturally female. As regards the male sex worker, on the other hand, the two authors dispute, this is assumed to be specifically a job for gays. Following John H. Gagnon and William Simon's perspective of sexual scripts, and thanks to a well-structured empirical research conducted on a large, non-representative sample of male sex workers, Bacio and Rinaldi, on the other hand, succeed in underlining the symbolic translation process through which, doing sex work, doing masculinity is achieved by the males. Going beyond pre-constituted forms of masculinity and femininity in male sex work and sex among gays, Bacio and Rinaldi outline complex symbolic interactions of male sex workers through which, reworking different dichotomies (masculinity/femininity, heterosexual/homosexual, top/bottom, etc.), they develop their own personal identities.

The second article also uses Gagnon and Simon's theory of sexual scripts. In fact, through this, Luca Guizzardi, in his article "*Gender is the mood you feel yourself; you can feel male or female, a little bit male a little bit female, or neither*". *Youths' sexual scripts and (personal) gender identity*, tries to highlight some processes linked to gender identity and sexuality among young people. In particular, the author investigates some personal and interpersonal scripts of young people interviewed through which they form their own identity linked to their sex, gender and sexual orientation. Their gender identity, as Guizzardi outlines, is the result of a profound and continuing reflexive interior conversation through which the young men and women rework their 'personal' – that is to say 'natural' – male or female 'nature' in the light of their more fundamental concern about who they want to be.

In her article, Beatrice Gusmano offers a profound and original reflection on a phenomenon that has been long ignored, but, in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, has become urgent – bonds of care, mutual support and reciprocal solidarity of the LGTBQ population. The article, *For a politics of complicity. Networks of care and friendship beyond heteronormativity* sets out to analyze how LGTBQ partners, parents and friends establish rela-

tionships of deep care and material support which fall outside the boxes of traditional institutionalized relationships. Through the study of some life cases investigated and a significant baggage of theoretical studies conducted in the wake of feminist ethics, Gusmano describes an original politics of complicity. This politics of complicity is not set within personal choice or individual satisfaction, but is rather an authentic way of life, and one whose purpose of building a different social solidarity from the conventional one (heteronormativity, mono-normativity and mono-maternalism) makes it a political prerogative.

The penultimate article brings us back to the LGBTQ world and, more specifically, to same-sex parent families. *When Italian same-sex parent families go to school: fears, challenges and coping strategies*, by Urban Nothdurfter and Salvatore Monaco, makes us think about a common, everyday occurrence: children going to school. If the family is a family that does not match the hetero-normative model, i.e., it is a same-sex parent family, we have to investigate how this normal passage in the life of all families is experienced by families who do not fully enjoy the social inclusion and recognition that others do. Thanks to the stories and experiences told by forty same-sex parent families, the two authors focus especially on the practices adopted by these families for making themselves visible and working for their legitimation and social recognition in school environments.

The article *Students, parents and school-choices. Gendered trajectories in the Italian education system* by Luca Salmieri closes this special section. In this wise and stimulating contribution, reconstructing complete school trajectories (from infant school to high school and perhaps on to university) of two imaginary students, Ada and Lorenzo, Salmieri underlines the gender gap and the significant gender differences within the Italian school system. Gender stereotypes are still active and widespread – this is the main conclusion reached by Salmieri – indeed school successes or failures, the choice of possible study paths and, above all, the perception of their own abilities and aspirations, are strongly bound by unfounded assumptions on specious innate characteristics of being male or female.

I would like to end this short presentation with sincere thanks to the authors and editors for this stimulating cooperation.

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