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Gender-Sensitive Learning Communities: A Case Study

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Abstract. This article presents a case study of the course “The Third Sector Facing Gender Issues”, conducted between 2023 and 2025 as part of FQTS, a training project for leaders and volunteers in the Third Sector of Southern Italy. The course is analyzed as an experiment in a gender-sensitive learning community: an educational space involving both women and men, aimed at promoting a transformation of gender cultures within organizational cultures, power dynamics and society at large. The theoretical references include the concept of ‘community’ as interpreted by Bauman in relation to that of organization, and pedagogy as a tool for individual and social emancipation, as proposed by hooks. The study highlights how the course enabled the emergence of certain issues that participants – especially women – found difficult to address within their organizations. The investigation was carried out through two main actions: fostering public dialogues among participants during various in-person meetings across different cities, which were treated as a qualitative corpus and subjected to thematic analysis; and conducting interviews with key informants. This article focuses on the results of the first action, which brought to light the prejudices and silent resistances that oppose gender equality, as well as various elements useful for planning future training activities.

Keywords: community, gender gap, organizational cultures, Third Sector, critical pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents a case study of the course “Third Sector Facing Gender Issues” (TSFGI) developed and implemented within the broader framework of the FQTS¹ project, an initiative that since 2007 has provided training for leaders, professionals and volunteers operating in the Third Sector in Southern Italy. The course is examined as an emblematic example of a gender-sensitive learning community, designed to foster awareness, critical

¹ FQTS is the acronym for the Italian expression “Formazione Quadri del Terzo Settore”, which means “Training of Third Sector Leaders”.

reflection and organizational transformation regarding gender issues within civil society.

Founded in 2007 and promoted by the Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore² and CSVnet³, with the support of the Fondazione Con il Sud⁴, the FQTS initiative has emerged as one of the most extensive and influential training programs for Third Sector professionals and volunteers in Italy (Peruzzi and Lombardi, 2018a, 2018b). Its objectives include strengthening organizational capacities, enhancing civic leadership and fostering a culture of democratic participation and social innovation across the southern regions of the country. Over the past fifteen years, FQTS has involved more than 4,000 organizations, delivering upwards of 10,000 hours of training and engaging over 30,000 individuals⁵.

While one of the distinctive features of the FQTS project has always been its strong connection to the territory – offering training tailored to the specific needs of local contexts, particularly in Southern Italy – since 2021 this objective has been explicitly redefined around a central concept: that of community. In fact, the community dimension becomes the pivot of the project: it is the ideal that must inspire the transformation of the territories, and at the same time the practice in which all the project actors are called upon to organize and coordinate. As can be read in the opening pages of the 2021-2024 Executive Project document,

The relational, political, organizational training commitment of the FQTS project is developed within the community dimension. A “community” understood as a multiform

network of relations between people, organizations and institutions. A dynamic and inclusive community, transforming and in permanent transformation, not closed within rigid and impenetrable geographical boundaries but full of relational, economic, social possibilities, aimed at change, possibilities and why not also positive and innovative imagination directed at the personal and collective wellbeing of people⁶.

To try to meet the “new didactic complexity” of the project, different types of field and online classrooms are integrated, and subject areas are renewed. The latest editions of the project are structured along 13 thematic axes, each addressing a key area of intervention within the Third Sector – ranging from welfare systems and governance to ecological transitions and gender equality. Since 2023, then, one of these axes has been dedicated specifically to gender issues, through the course “Third Sector Facing Gender Issues”, made in collaboration with Sapienza University of Rome. This course was conceived as a response to a social issue that is now unavoidable in Italy, and that even the Third Sector is beginning to perceive as critical: gender inequalities, and especially the gender gap in top positions.

The country’s backwardness is attested by various international rankings (e.g., World Economic Forum 2024; World Bank 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). On the other hand, there is a lack of censuses and detailed monitoring in national institutions, but a serious contradiction is now also evident in the Third Sector, as well as in other national institutions: while women constitute the majority of the volunteers and the workforce and often play central roles in service delivery, they remain underrepresented in strategic decision-making and leadership positions (EIGE 2024; ISTAT 2021).

The training program TSFGI thus seeks to interrogate and challenge the structural, cultural and symbolic mechanisms that sustain this inequality. The pedagogical model that inspired these classrooms, obviously re-adapted to the context of the project, is the one narrated by hooks (1994).

This article is a study of the first two editions of the TSFGI course, interpreted, as mentioned above, as an emblematic case of gender-sensitive learning community.

The aim of the study was to identify the perceptions and reactions of the men and women involved in the project, in order to provide new insights for scientific and public debate on training policies for gender equal-

² The National Forum of the Third Sector is the main unified representative body of the Italian Third Sector. Established in 1997, it is a non-profit body, made up of several national associations. Formally, it is a social partner recognized by the Government. In 2024, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies confirmed the Forum as the most representative Third Sector association in the country in terms of member organizations. It acts as the coordinator and political representative of the Italian non-profit world.

³ CSVnet is the National Coordination of Volunteer Support Centers, the network that brings together 49 Volunteer Support Centers (CSV) throughout the country. The CSVs were established in 1991 by the Law on Volunteering (and confirmed in 2016 by the Reform of the Third Sector), to organize, manage and provide technical, training and information support services to Italian voluntary associations, and to promote the presence of volunteers and the culture of volunteering in all Third Sector entities and society.

⁴ Fondazione con il Sud is a non-profit organization set up in 2006 by the alliance between foundations of banking origin and the world of the Third Sector, to promote the social infrastructure of Southern Italy, by financing projects on social cohesion paths and good networking practices.

⁵ All the data on the FQTS project and the TSFGI course referred to in this paper were kindly made available by the National Forum of the Third Sector, which organized a monitoring and evaluation system, also for formal certification purposes, of all the courses and activities implemented by FQTS.

⁶ Access to the unpublished document was granted exclusively for research and project purposes.

ity, as well as food for thought and stimulus for change for Third Sector organizations.

The research was carried out through the thematic analysis of various empirical materials produced and collected by the authors during the course: in particular, transcripts of public dialogues, stimulated and recorded during 8 training events, attended by over 400 people; and transcripts of interviews with privileged witnesses.

The results illustrate and comment on the most original themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the first part of the corpus, relating to the participants' voices during the training experience.

The next section is dedicated to reconstructing the theoretical framework in which the definition of gender-sensitive community is situated. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the characteristics of the object of analysis and the research method, and then the main results that emerged from the study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF GENDER CHANGE

This paper takes as its object of study the TSFGI course, identified as an exemplary case of gender-sensitive learning communities, that is as an educational context where gender is not only a subject of instruction, but a lens through which social structures, power relations and collective identities are critically re-examined.

To explore this phenomenon theoretically, we draw primarily from the sociological reflections of Bauman on the concept of "community" and from hooks' writings on critical pedagogy and the classroom as a space for collective empowerment and social change.

It is important to note that this decision stems not only from the aspiration to establish robust theoretical underpinnings for this study, but also from the recognition that empirical analyses of educational pathways leading to women's empowerment, particularly in Western countries, are conspicuously absent from the sociological literature. The limited case studies that are available in Italy pertain to preschool and primary education (for a review, see Scarcelli and Selmi 2025), and there is a paucity of examples involving adults (Peruzzi, Bernardini and Lombardi 2022), with the consequence that interventions often risk sounding somewhat ideological. For this reason, we have elected to examine two authors who are capable of providing background elements.

In classical sociology, "community" has long been positioned in opposition to "society", often evoking images of organic, cohesive bonds and shared values. Over

time, the concept has become overloaded with meanings and has been the subject of various theorizations. For the purposes of our discourse, we will refer, as we said, to Bauman's perspective, which has provided a critical examination of it that is as concise as it is effective.

For Bauman, the concept of "community" must be placed in relation to that of "organization". He defines community and organization as opposite poles of a continuum along which all human aggregates can be positioned. Whereas organizations are functional assemblages oriented towards clearly defined goals, which hold their members together through instrumental rationality and formalized procedures, communities, by contrast, are grounded in affect, tradition and a sense of existential rootedness (Bauman 2000: 69-75). Obviously, the continuum is an ideal analytical tool: in reality, every human group can see elements of both structure and sentiment, formality and spontaneity combined, and its position towards one pole or the other depends on the type of interaction that prevails among its members.

What makes Bauman's theory particularly interesting for our purposes is his reframing of community as both a nostalgic ideal and a mobilizing metaphor. He emphasises that the notion of community often invokes a sense of natural belonging – an imagined unity that is spiritual, bodily and affective. As he notes, the term itself shares etymological roots with "communication", connoting communion and cohesion. But, as the German sociologist rightly points out, this unity is frequently aspirational rather than descriptive; community, he argues, functions as a "postulate of desire" (Bauman 2000: 71) – an ideal invoked to produce emotional resonance and political alignment. In this sense, it can serve as a powerful "mobilisation device" (*Ibidem*), persuading individuals that they share a common destiny and that their interests are best pursued collectively.

Within this framework, the TSFGI course – beyond the declarations of intent by the promoters, which we read above – seems to be characterised by several elements that refer to the community aspect. While it is true that the participants represent the associations in which they operate, it should be noted that they join the project on a voluntary basis: therefore, the projects they develop are not limited to their own organisations, but aim to become a resource for a wider context: the local area and, indeed, the community. In other words, the participants were involved as subjects within a broader, common project of transformation. The training environment invited them to move beyond their organisational roles, to reflect on deeply embedded cultural norms and to experiment with new modes of collective identification and action. In essence, to make community.

This pedagogical configuration resonates strongly with hooks' conception of the "classroom" as a space of possibility. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) insists that education must not be confined to the transmission of knowledge, but must engage students as whole persons – bodies, minds and histories. For hooks, the classroom is inherently political: a site where identities are negotiated, hierarchies contested, and social imaginaries reshaped. She argues that narrative and self-disclosure – what she calls "confessional narratives" – can be powerful tools for deconstructing hegemonic assumptions, especially in relation to gender, race and class (hooks, 1994: 9). These narratives reveal the illusion of shared origin and perspective, allowing difference to become a generative rather than divisive force. hooks also foreground the classroom as a "community of learners" – a space where all voices are recognized and valued, and where emotional safety enables risk-taking and growth. This emphasis on mutual recognition and dialogical learning aligns closely with the mission of the TSFGI training and dialogical aims.

In both Bauman's and hooks' accounts, community is not a static entity but a "project" – something constructed, contested and continuously reimagined by learning processes. In the context of gender training, this means confronting not only external inequalities, but internal resistances, ambivalences and contradictions, because sexism is a deep and widespread cultural background, especially in southern Italian societies (Cavagnoli and Dragotto 2021; Peruzzi, Bernardini and Lombardi 2022), and no one, men and women, of all backgrounds and ages, is immune to harmful stereotypes.

hooks warns, for instance, that feminist politics in educational settings may provoke discomfort or fear – not only among men, but also among women, who may worry about how such engagement will affect their relationships with fathers, sons or partners. Similarly, participants may enter the space with differing levels of awareness, or with entrenched beliefs about gender roles that resist easy transformation.

Despite these challenges, the classroom remains, in hooks' words, a «location of possibility» (hooks 1994: 10) – a space where pain can be acknowledged, privilege confronted and new ways of being envisioned. This is particularly vital in the Southern Italian context of our research, which is characterized by what Antonucci, Sorice and Volterrani (2024) describe as "liminal communities" – spaces caught between tradition and transformation, where cultural change is ongoing but contested. Within such liminal terrains, educational initiatives like TSFGI can function as prefigurative spaces – not yet

fully emancipatory, but fertile ground for planting the seeds of change.

3. OBJECT OF STUDY, GOALS AND METHODS: A RESEARCH ON GENDER-SENSITIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Between 2023 and 2025, the object of our study, the course TSFGI, has reached over 450 participants across 6 regions – Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily⁷.

In each event, the training followed a bifocal structure: a first segment dedicated to theoretical framing, led by the authors, and a second part centered on public participatory dialogues. The latter provided the primary source of data for this study. While participant numbers varied slightly across events, all forums shared the same goal: to create a public space for critical reflection on gender within organizations and society, mediated by collective dialogue. We refer to these diverse but structurally comparable moments as "public dialogues" insofar as they represent spaces of interaction, open confrontation and shared meaning-making (van der Velden, 2004).

The authors consider it important to note that the participation of both men (28%) and women (72%) was a very relevant fact, given the almost always mono-colored (women only) nature of the courses dedicated to women empowerment. The participants were selected by the Third Sector associations (mostly voluntary and social promotion associations, but also cooperatives and foundations), based on the organizations' sensitivity to the topic and the interest of the participants. To some extent, all participants therefore had a political mandate from the associations to explore the topic and then report back within the associations.

As FQTS was a training project created for the organizations' executives, the classrooms, as well as those of almost all the other courses in the edition, were mostly (at least 80%) made up of adult and senior women. From an organizational point of view, the TSFGI course unfolds across multiple formats, included in regional and interregional training events.

Based on the theoretical references we have just outlined, we can identify the course TSFGI as an exemplary case of a gender-sensitive learning community.

TSFGI is a 'community' in the sense that: both members of associations (volunteers, operators, man-

⁷ Precisely, for the regional events of 2023: Bari (April 1st); Palermo (April 22nd); Cosenza (May 5th); Potenza (June 10th); Avellino (July 7th); Nuoro (November 18th). For the interregional events of 2024: Cosenza (September 20th-22nd); Palermo (December 6th-8th).

agers) and representatives of institutions and committed citizens take part in the learning process; all participants share a sense of belonging, both to their own associations and to the Third Sector, and more generally to the territory of Southern Italy; the classrooms are experiences of dialogue and confrontation in which the experiences of people, associations, institutions are interwoven; the community builds its own history through the training course, in the sense that the experiences of the classrooms are recalled and interwoven over time, with regional and national level associations signaling guests and experiences for subsequent meetings, and interregional meetings creating further opportunities for exchange.

In particular, TSFGI is a 'learning' community because: the main activities consist of classroom experiences; the primary objective is to trigger processes of change, through participation, growth of awareness and skills, and the critical method; the desired change is that which starts from individuals and spreads to associations (of the Third Sector in the first place, but also to institutions) and to territories.

Finally, TSFGI is a 'gender-sensitive' learning community because: one of its distinguishing features is the mixed classrooms of female and male participants, whereas we know that women empowerment courses are generally attended almost exclusively by women; its main objective is to produce innovation and change in gender cultures and dynamics (of the associations involved, but especially in the lives of the participants and on the territories), in order to solve discrimination and imbalances, first and foremost between men and women.

The objectives of our study are as follows:

a) to identify emergent and underexplored themes related to gender and organizational culture that arise from women-men interaction in dialogical learning contexts, with the aim of enriching public debate, and informing future gender policies.

b) to analyze communicative strategies employed by both men and women when addressing gender-related issues, particularly in group and public settings and to understand how these strategies could inform the design of future training initiatives.

c) to extract actionable insights for Third Sector organizations, and more generally of all organizations acting in the name of the public interest, that may inform their internal development, culture or policy orientation.

These objectives were pursued through the thematic analysis (Guest *et al.* 2012; Saldaña 2016) of two corpora:

(a) dialogical and discursive materials collected from training events, containing the interventions of women and men who participated in the learning community.

b) a series of interviews with privileged witnesses (women leaders of organizations), identified during the two years of work, thanks to the meetings and networking activities of the learning community⁸.

For reasons of space and time, in this article we will focus only on the analysis of the data that emerged from the first corpus. It consists of a total of 8 full transcripts, comprising 6 public dialogues from the 2023 Regional Events and the two 2024 Interregional Events. As said, approximately 450⁹ participants were involved in the training activities (28% men – 72% women). Most participants (80%) were aged 40 or above, with the highest representation from the 50-54 years age group (16%), followed closely by participants in the 55-59 years range (14%) and the 40-44 years category (13%). This demographic composition highlights a strong representation of individuals in mid-to-later stages of their life paths and careers, which is relevant for understanding the perspectives and experiences shared during the forums.

All dialogues were fully transcribed and analyzed using a coding strategy inspired by the framework of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This process involved highlighting recurring themes and concepts, emotionally charged narratives and significant expressions. The emphasis was on preserving the richness of participants' language and allowing themes to emerge organically from the data, without imposing predefined categories. Particular attention was paid to the linguistic registers used by men and women, as well as to the moments of alignment or tension in their perspectives on gender, leadership and organizational life.

For the identification of the most relevant topics, we relied on 3 criteria of significance: The first was novelty – themes that introduced unexpected or under-discussed dimensions of the gender question, compared to what is known in the literature. The second was diffusion – topics that were widely shared or frequently mentioned across different events and territorial contexts. The third was divisiveness – issues that generated conflict, ambivalence, or clearly differentiated perspectives between male and female participants. This third criterion allowed the study to highlight the plural and sometimes opposition-

⁸ The interviewees (10 in total) were selected based on a minimum number of years of experience (at least 4) in top-level or leadership positions, as well as the territorial scope of their organization's activities, with preference given to those operating at the national level. All interviewees were over 40 years old.

⁹ While this reflects the number of attendees recorded, the number of voices represented during the public dialogues does not necessarily correspond to this same count.

al ways in which gender is understood, negotiated, and enacted in civic spaces. In any case, the aim was always to bring to light the issues that offered insight into collective representations of gender, perceived inequalities and potential strategies for change. While the coding was conducted manually, the researchers maintained analytic memos to ensure transparency and consistency.

Throughout the work of surveying and categorizing the topics, as the method of understanding sociology teaches, the researchers endeavored to reconstruct the point of view of the participants in the community learning activities, and to reconstruct the meanings that men and women in training attributed to the experiences narrated, the judgements made, the power dynamics in the associations, in particular the causes of gender inequalities and the undervaluation of women's roles.

Finally, a brief note to conclude the methodological explanation. It seems appropriate to specify that the two authors both participated throughout the entire series of events, in the roles of lecturers of the introductory seminar part and as stimulator-regulators of the public dialogues. In all the meetings, discussions arose spontaneously in the classroom after the author had presented data on the gender gap at international level and on the presence of women in top positions in Italian organizations. Obviously, the roles played during the public dialogues was deliberately minimal in terms of direct intervention; our primary task was to facilitate the flow of conversation, using the relaunch technique when necessary, ensure that the core focus of the discussion was maintained, and avoid cases of talk over. In any case, the continuous presence enabled us to contextualize the voices of the transcripts, which might otherwise have sounded very fragmentary, and to reconstruct the intentions and meanings of the interventions, as understanding sociology teaches.

4. RESULTS: EMERGENT THEMES FROM PUBLIC DIALOGUES

The following section analyzes the most significant themes that emerged from the public dialogues. For reasons of space, we have chosen to focus only on a few themes that emerged from the analysis, and always linked to the male-female relationship, but this paper does not exhaust the restitution of the reflections suggested by the corpus.

The presentation of the themes was organized in 3 parts: first, the themes considered most significant by the women participating in the course; then, the themes that emerged as characterizing the male positions; finally, in

the third subsection, always in response to the first objective of the analysis, the differences between male and female perspectives on various recurring themes were summarised, drawing on the fact that the dialogues were fuelled by the comparison between men and women.

4.1. Women's Issues: Strategic Practices and Cultural Repositioning

Women participants in the public dialogues brought forward a complex articulation of critique, aspiration, and pedagogical strategy. Their contributions were marked not only by a heightened awareness of structural exclusion but by a creative effort to reshape gender discourse and practice from within civic and educational spaces. Rather than positioning themselves solely as victims of inequality, many women articulated proposals for cultural change and emphasized the value of personal and professional experiences as tools for collective empowerment. This aligns with Fraser's (2013) claim that emancipatory movements today must blend recognition and redistribution, working simultaneously on symbolic and material fronts.

The themes we have selected as particularly significant from the female perspectives are the following.

We called the first 'glass ceiling awareness: between presence and exclusion'. Despite their numerical majority in many Third Sector organizations (ISTAT, 2021), women consistently highlighted their exclusion from positions of executive power. This issue – often assumed as a starting point in the training sessions, where quantitative data were presented to illustrate gender disparities in Italy – was not only confirmed but deeply internalized in participants' reflections. The persistent absence of women from decision-making roles touches the core of gender imbalance in organizational hierarchies. This phenomenon is commonly described as the "glass ceiling": an invisible yet persistent barrier that prevents women from reaching top leadership positions, despite having the qualifications and numbers to do so. The term captures the contradiction between formal inclusion and actual exclusion, between visibility and powerlessness (Eagly and Carli 2007; Cotter *et al.* 2001). From the very beginning, the formation acknowledged this gap as a structural issue. Yet what stood out was the extensive awareness among participants: the theme resonated powerfully, not because it was new, but because women explicitly said that the course was one of the few occasions where one could explicitly talk about this. As one woman put it, «We're the majority, but the key decisions still come from above, and it's usually not us». This aligns with Acker's (1990) theory of "gendered organiza-

tions”, in which workplace structures invisibly reproduce inequality through implicit norms and assumptions. It also reflects Bourdieu’s (2001) concept of “symbolic capital”: even where formal access is granted, women often lack legitimacy in leadership roles. What emerged is not simply a problem of underrepresentation, but of structural exclusion deeply rooted in organizational cultures.

The second selected theme is ‘denunciation of the old language of organizations’. Numerous women denounced the outdated, stereotypical, and often exclusionary language still widely used in both Third Sector organizations and public institutions. While the testimonies did not always differentiate clearly between these two domains, revealing what could be called “a widespread unease” with discursive practices that are perceived as lagging behind a society in transformation. The main target of critique was the persistence of a rigid binary framework. Participants highlighted how language remains anchored in masculine-default forms (e.g., the systematic use of the masculine plural to refer to mixed-gender groups) and binary oppositions such as male/female or man/woman – distinctions that were often intuitively questioned but not always conceptually clarified. This confusion may underscore a cultural lag in organizational environments, where gender issues are increasingly perceived as relevant but still insufficiently understood. The reflection of one participant – «Language creates reality, and ours is still too binary to be truly inclusive» – captures a widespread sentiment: that without a linguistic shift, inclusive practices risk remaining superficial. Some women with specific activist backgrounds¹⁰ pointed to the importance of considering not only gender, but also disability and migration status in organizational discourse. In a few cases – especially among younger participants – there emerged calls to refine language further, embracing vocabulary attentive to queer and non-binary identities. However, these voices were often isolated and revealed a deeper generational gap: younger people appeared more fluent in contemporary gender discourse, while older participants seemed largely unprepared to engage with such complexity.

Another thread of the discussion was identified in the formula ‘pedagogical innovation as a transformative strategy.’ A strong current among participant women proposed the use of imaginative pedagogy – emotional storytelling, experiential learning and art-based practices – as key vehicles for fostering social change. This orientation often stemmed from the practical experience that several organizations had accumulated while

conducting gender awareness events in local schools, to engage younger generations in inclusive dialogue. What we observe here is twofold. First, there is the ongoing societal transformation towards gender equality – many of these actions are part of this broader shift. Second, specific pedagogical strategies – those that engage emotions, creativity and interactivity – are particularly effective in making such change more accessible and impactful. This reflects hooks’ (1994) pedagogical framework, which positions education as a practice of freedom. Interventions such as school workshops and film screenings were not framed as peripheral but as central to reshaping social imaginaries. For instance, a participant recounted how «showing “The Danish Girl” changed the way students looked at gender overnight». These initiatives aim not only to inform but to cultivate empathy, emotional literacy and intersubjective awareness – elements often overlooked in traditional civic education. The relevance of this issue is particularly salient in the context of the FQTS structure, which draws upon the network (both horizontal and vertical) of numerous associations, and could implement novel training cascade experiences across various territories, thereby engendering long-term change processes.

‘Embodied experience’ as pedagogical capital’ is the fourth theme we propose from the women’s side. Several women emphasized the value of their personal experiences – particularly as mothers, educators or members of marginalized communities – as tools for advocacy. This aligns with standpoint theory (Harding 1991), which argues that marginalized perspectives generate unique epistemic insights. For instance, one participant explained how narrating her own gender transition helped create an environment of trust among adolescents: «Telling my story helped others open up. Suddenly, we weren’t just talking about gender, we were living it together». In this sense, embodiment becomes both a source of knowledge and a pedagogical strategy, validating lived experience as a site of social learning.

4.2. Men’s Issues: Cultural Distance, Ambivalence and Reframing of Inequality

Male contributions, while less frequent and at times less reflective, provided critical insights into how gender discourse is received, negotiated or resisted by men. Their narratives revealed ambivalence: a mixture of awareness of structural inequalities and discomfort with gender-sensitive reforms. Unlike the narratives from women, which emphasized agency and proposals, men often focused on perceived constraints, loss or competitive disadvantage.

¹⁰ Typically, these were women who had previously received gender-focused training or had led inclusive education programs in schools through the organizations they operate in.

The first theme is ‘traditional gender culture as a normative frame’. Men participants often referred to gender roles in normative terms, suggesting a deep internalization of culturally prescribed binaries. Professions and roles were frequently described in gendered ways, without critical reflection – for instance, one man stated, «I’ve never seen a woman cobbler». Such statements illustrate what Connell (2005) defines as “hegemonic masculinity”: a dominant and idealized form of masculinity that legitimizes the subordination of women and marginalizes other forms of masculinity. These perspectives also echo Ridgeway’s (2009) notion of the “frame of expectation” – a set of culturally shared mental shortcuts and narratives that guide how people unconsciously assess competence, authority and suitability in gendered terms. In this framework, women occupying positions of leadership, technical skill, or authority often appear as ‘exceptions’, whereas men are presumed to naturally belong. The effect is not necessarily overt exclusion, but a subtler, routine reproduction of inequality through everyday perceptions and assumptions. This normative frame seemed to form the prevailing cultural background of many men who participated in the training sessions. Its traditional and rigid nature stood in stark contrast to the more critical and transformative perspectives often voiced by women. Notably, these representations were not only individual opinions but often echoed within organizational discourses. In many cases, men participating as representatives of Third Sector organizations reproduced these views during public dialogues, especially when reflecting on their workplace cultures and leadership dynamics. This suggests that such gendered assumptions are not only personally held but embedded within the institutional environments of the organizations involved.

‘The family as cultural regulator’ is another label well representing recurrent men’s voices. Unlike women, who often emphasized institutional asymmetries in discussing gender issues, men frequently identified the family as the primary force enforcing what they described as ‘proper’ gender norms – norms which, in their narratives, clearly aligned with traditional gender cultures. The family was portrayed as a mechanism of social conformity and pressure: «If you do that, I’ll disown you», shared one man participant, reflecting the emotional and symbolic weight of familial approval in shaping gender expression. This perspective aligns with West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of “doing gender”, where gender is understood not as a fixed trait but as a set of practices continuously performed and reinforced through social accountability. Although this theory was formulated nearly four decades ago, the dynamics

it describes remain highly relevant today: familial and domestic contexts continue to function as powerful spaces where traditional masculinity is both reproduced and policed. In the accounts collected during the training, the family often emerged as a site where deviation from gender norms was met with sanction rather than support, especially for men.

‘Denial of inequality’ is another theme that emerged on the men’s side. Some men not only appeared unwilling to acknowledge the discrimination of women, but even reversed the perspective by claiming that in certain spheres women today have an advantage over men. The participants aligned with this position are objectively few, but their perspective is in our opinion very interesting because it brings to light the resistance that attempts at social change face. The authors’ impression is that such resistance is generally acted upon in a subterranean and silent manner, because in an era when the discourse on women’s empowerment has become mainstream, expressing such positions can be difficult. Some male expressed the view that women were now advantaged in certain spheres – a discourse reminiscent of the “male victim” rhetoric observed in parts of contemporary public debate (Kimmel 2013). Statements such as «They privilege women now» or «It’s almost harder for us» reflect a sense of status threat, wherein equality measures are interpreted as favoritism. This perception mirrors what McRobbie (2009) describes as post-feminist backlash: a narrative that portrays feminism as overachieved and unjustly benefiting women at men’s expense.

Finally, ‘geographic distance as a strategy of displacement’. Men frequently cited Northern Italy as a space of progress, contrasting it with the stagnation of their own territories. «In the North, gender equality is taken more seriously», one noted. In our opinion, his externalization of responsibility functions as a rhetorical displacement that absolves local actors of agency. Such symbolic geographies are often deployed to construct a dichotomy between modernity and tradition, enabling resistance to change through the logic of “not here, not yet” (Adam 2024).

4.3. Women and Men Facing Gender Issues: Thematic Convergence and Gendered Divergences

On many issues in the corpus, the positions of men and women revealed different perspectives. Schematically, we can say that women framed gender equity as a collective, pedagogical and transformative endeavor, whereas men more often adopted a reactive, displaced or ambiguous stance. This divergence underscores the importance of dialogical processes that do not merely

Table 1. Comparative Thematic Axes: Gendered Perspectives from Public Dialogues.

Thematic Issues	Perspectives from Women	Perspectives from Men	Novelty	Diffusion	Divisiveness
Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes	Push for deconstruction of binary categories; Inclusive childhood education	Gender roles taken as normative and unchallenged (e.g., male-coded jobs)	✓	✓	✓
The Role of Institutions in Gender-Sensitive Social Change	Family less central as barrier; Emphasis on institutional change	Family viewed as primary enforcer of gender conformity		✓	✓
Leadership and Representation	Gender gap (despite women are the majority in the workforce)	Rarely addressed; Symbolic authority not problematized	✓	✓	✓
Educational Strategies	Advocacy for emotional storytelling, inclusive pedagogy, intersectional tools	Focus on logistical constraints (lack of trainers) rather than content transformation	✓	✓	
Women's Role in Gender-Sensitive Social Change	Women as a discriminated category, and as possible advocates, educators and innovators	Women as a discriminated category, but also as new privileged group			✓
Geographic Narratives	National or global framing of change	Regional framing of immobility/change (North/modernity <i>versus</i> South/tradition, geographic displacement of responsibility)		✓	✓
Emotional Expression	Emotionally rich, embodied narratives tied to identity and pedagogy	Emotion expressed through generalized suffering or symbolic "sacrifice"	✓		
Language	Strong attention to a gender-sensitive and inclusive language	Language issues rarely problematized, often underestimated	✓	✓	✓

Source: Antinelli & Peruzzi 2025 (authors' elaboration).

include voices but cultivate shared epistemologies of change (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Below is a comparative table summarizing key thematic differences and their analytical value.

The comparative perspective of our analysis, even if carried out in the form of a simple juxtaposition of themes, reveals with immediate evidence the existence of fractures in the perceptions and representations that men and women have of the gender order, and of the prospects for change.

These fractures reveal the persistence of binary logics and cultures. Moreover, they explicitly evoke Raewyn Connell's concept of the "arena" (1995), understood as an area of tensions and confrontation of positions, which is one of the most powerful images introduced in literature to describe the relationship between men and women in society.

The criteria of novelty, diffusion and divisiveness further allow for the strategic identification of themes most relevant to designing inclusive policies and interventions. While some issues (e.g., leadership gaps, binary norms) were widely diffused and divisive, others (e.g., imaginative pedagogy) represented original contribu-

tions capable of reshaping the conceptual terrain of education on gender issues.

In conclusion, these dialogues underscored that gender cultures are not merely a matter of identity or representation, but also of narrative agency. As women advanced grounded proposals for equity rooted in affective, relational and pedagogical labor, male narratives frequently revealed structural distance, emotional constraint and discursive ambivalence. Bridging these asymmetries will require not only more inclusive participation, but deeper engagement with how different gendered experiences construct divergent realities, responsibilities and pathways for change. Obviously, this awareness has interesting implications for the design of future women empowerment policies, first and foremost on an educational level.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has explored the potential of gender-sensitive learning communities to act as transformative educational environments within the Italian Third Sector and society. The course TSFGI, implemented under

the FQTS project, has demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory pedagogies in generating critical reflection, raising awareness and catalyzing organizational and social change around gender equity and inclusion.

The findings affirm that the participatory model adopted has effectively surfaced tensions, cultural resistances and possibilities for transformation. This confirms that the learning community, especially when designed with a gender-sensitive lens, is not merely a space for knowledge transfer but a crucible for beginning to reimagine social relations. The co-presence of men and women, rarely encountered in similar training contexts, further enriched the dialogues, allowing the emergence of contrasting worldviews, shared concerns and intergenerational gaps. For reasons of space, the results presented here are limited to issues that most directly concern gender relations; however, it is important to emphasise that tensions also exist around LGBTQ+ issues.

The Third Sector appears as a uniquely fertile terrain for such experimentation. As a liminal space operating between the public and private spheres, and oriented toward social innovation, it provides a critical site for prefigurative practices.

Notably, regional dynamics and territorial inequalities – especially those linked to Southern Italy – were not strongly brought up in the dialogues. Participants often framed gender issues as national or even universal challenges, potentially flattening important differences in cultural context and policy landscape. Although a full impact evaluation exceeds the scope of this article, early indicators suggest that a process of change has been initiated. These include internal requests for continued training on gender issues within participating organizations, new collaborations with academic institutions and replication of the training format by other associations. Such developments point to a consolidation of gender-sensitive networks, as well as to a growing recognition of the need for cultural innovation in civic education.

However, this study has some limitations. The predominantly female and senior demographic of the participants may have skewed the representation of perspectives, particularly those of younger participants or men. Furthermore, the social desirability bias inherent in public dialogues may have constrained the expression of other dissenting or controversial views.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs, exploring intra-organizational dynamics and integrating intersectional analyses that consider class, nationality and geography alongside gender, to fill a gap that, as has been said, is serious in the literature.

In this direction, we are currently working on the development of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) tailored specifically for Third Sector organizations, co-designed in collaboration with the organizations themselves. In particular, a deeper investigation into the silences around internal inequality within Third Sector organizations could yield valuable insights into the barriers to institutional change. Additionally, studying the processes through which dialogical training translates into organizational practices would enrich our understanding of how learning communities function as engines of democratic transformation.

In conclusion, the TSFGI case demonstrates that gender-sensitive learning communities can serve not only as educational interventions but as cultural laboratories – spaces where civic actors rehearse and reimagine the norms, narratives and relationships that structure collective life. Their potential lies not simply in the content they convey but in the participatory processes they enact, which, if adequately supported, can lead to more inclusive, reflexive and equitable social institutions.

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