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Gender in Youth Participation: Practices and Cultures

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1. GENDER (IN)VISIBILITIES IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND YOUTH STUDIES

The phenomenon of youth participation has come to occupy a central place in contemporary sociological, political and cultural inquiry. In both scholarly and policy discourses, youth are frequently portrayed as pivotal agents of democratic renewal, social innovation, and cultural transformation. However, this pervasive focus has frequently entailed an unmarked and ostensibly neutral subject – “the youth” – whose identity remains implicitly male, heteronormative, cisgendered, and often white (Corrigan 1979; Willis 1979). Consequently, youth studies have exhibited a form of gender-blindness, either overlooking the role of gender altogether or addressing it narrowly through the lens of young women’s experiences, often without intersectional or relational depth.

Gender-blindness has for long characterised also studies on youth participation, where the recognition of gender as a key axis of stratification has emerged only recently. In this regard, feminist sociologists have demonstrated that participatory opportunities are not evenly distributed and that young people’s capacity to “take part” is deeply gendered (Skelton 2001; McRobbie 2009; Pitti *et al.* 2024). Sociology and political science have contributed to our understanding of the institutional and discursive frameworks that shape youth engagement by asking how gendered norms and power relations inform political behaviour and representation (Celis and Lovenduski 2018). Meanwhile, cultural studies provide insight into the symbolic, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of youth participation, highlighting how young people construct, perform, and contest gender identities through activism, subcultures, digital practices, and everyday life (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Nayak and Kehily 2006).

In this light, participation emerges as a gendered process. Civic spaces, activist collectives, educational forums, and online platforms all carry embedded expectations around expression, leadership, and legitimacy – expectations that privilege certain gender performances while marginalizing others. In general, young women and queer youth frequently report experiences of silencing and tokenization in both institutionalised and non-institutionalised settings (Taft 2011; Lopez-Fogues and Melis Cin 2017), but the concept of masculinity

is not monolithic and young men as well encounter divergent pressures to adhere to prevailing gender norms, with some gravitating towards illiberal or anti-gender movements as a means of reclaiming a perceived lost status (Connell 2005; Kováts and Põim 2015). These dynamics are not incidental but constitutive of how youth participation is structured, experienced, and evaluated.

The way participatory practices are shaped by unequal access to recognition, space, and legitimacy is highlighted in two studies on Young People and the Struggle for Participation (Walther *et al.* 2020) and Youth Participation and Learning (Bečević and Andersson 2022). While not always explicitly centred on gender, both works expose how formal structures like youth councils often marginalise non-normative forms of expression – such as emotional, embodied, or dissenting voices – frequently associated with young women, queer youth, or racialized masculinities (Pais 2022; Percy-Smith *et al.* 2020). Informal spaces, such as activist groups or sub-cultural practices (Mengilli *et al.* 2020; Pitti *et al.* 2024), reveal alternative modes of gendered participation, though these too reproduce hierarchies.

These examples underscore the importance of considering epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) as central to youth participation. Participation is not only stratified by social location but also regulated by normative expectations that determine whose voices are recognised as legitimate. For a significant proportion of young individuals who happen to be at the nexus of multiple marginalisations, the act of participating becomes a strenuous endeavor to attain epistemic legitimacy, which implies not only being present but also being recognised as credible knowers. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in contexts where young people are expected to adhere to prevailing norms of rationality, civility, or coherence to be heard. The recognition of this epistemic injustice necessitates a shift in focus from questions of inclusion alone to the broader political dynamics of knowledge, intelligibility, and recognition.

Intersectionality is indispensable for the comprehension of these complex realities. As argued by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), gender cannot be comprehended in isolation from other axes of social differentiation. Racialized youth, those from working-class backgrounds, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those without documentation encounter distinct barriers and possibilities within participatory fields. Their experiences frequently diverge from dominant narratives and are at risk of exclusion from frameworks that treat youth engagement as a universal good. An intersectional approach demands the interrogation of whose participation is recognised and on what terms.

2. AGE-BLINDNESS IN FEMINIST AND GENDER STUDIES

Feminist and gender studies have long been at the forefront of analysing power, identity, and social justice. However, one significant blind spot within these fields have for long been characterised by a lack of attention to age as a critical category of analysis. In relation to the topic of this special issue, this phenomenon, often referred to as age-blindness (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Sandberg and Marshall 2017), limits our understanding of gendered experiences across the life course and obscures the ways in which generational positioning shapes feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, identity formation, and political objectives. Moreover, age-blindness diminishes attention to intergenerational dynamics and generational change, aspects that are fundamental to the sustainability and evolution of these activist spaces (Krekula 2007).

One of the main consequences of age-blindness in gender studies is the tendency to present feminist and LGBTQ+ movements as homogeneous entities, overlooking the ways in which age structures political priorities and activist strategies. For instance, youth-led feminist and queer activism often prioritizes digital mobilization, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), and fluid identity politics, whereas older generations may emphasize institutional engagement (Fraser 1997). Without an age-conscious perspective, analyses risk flattening these distinctions, leading to an incomplete portrayal of activist landscapes and of the tensions existing within it. Research by Harris (2004) highlights how young feminists often navigate between online activism and street protests, crafting new modes of engagement that differ from older feminists' practices. Similarly, Ghaziani *et al.* (2016) explores how contemporary LGBTQ+ youth activism embraces a more expansive understanding of gender and sexuality compared to previous generations.

Furthermore, the lack of attention to age dynamics within feminist and LGBTQ+ movements obscures crucial tensions and solidarities between generations. Generational shifts influence debates on strategy, inclusivity, and historical memory, shaping how movements evolve over time. The feminist movement, for example, has seen frictions between older and younger activists regarding approaches to gender identity, sex work, and reproductive rights (Rottenberg 2018; Arruzza *et al.* 2019). Generational tensions within feminism are evident in debates over the #MeToo movement, where some older feminists critique aspects of the campaign as overly punitive, while younger activists emphasize the necessity of radical accountability (Mendes *et al.* 2018). Similarly, within LGBTQ+ activism, generational differences affect the

prioritization of issues such as marriage equality versus anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles (Gould 2009). Studies by Weston (1998) and Halberstam (2005) illustrate how queer activism has historically been shaped by generational shifts in priorities, from the AIDS crisis to contemporary trans rights struggles.

Age-blindness also affects policy and institutional recognition of activism. Research shows that older feminist activists often find themselves marginalized in contemporary movement spaces, despite their historical contributions (McIntosh Sundstrom and McMahan 2024). Conversely, young activists may struggle for legitimacy within institutionalized feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations that prioritize hierarchical leadership structures over horizontal, digital-driven forms of activism (Stoltz et al. 2020). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering intergenerational solidarity and ensuring that feminist and LGBTQ+ civic and political spaces remain inclusive across different life stages.

Incorporating an age-sensitive framework can thus deepen the analysis of contemporary activism, shedding light on the ways age intersects with other social categories to shape participation, goals, and intra-movement relations. Theoretical frameworks such as life-course perspectives (Elder 1994) and feminist aging studies (Calasanti 2004) can offer valuable insights into how activists' experiences and priorities shift over time. Methodological approaches that account for generational perspectives, such as ethnographic studies of activist communities (Rupp and Taylor 2011) and oral histories that capture activist trajectories over time (Enke 2007), are essential. Intersectional frameworks that integrate age alongside gender, race, and class (McCall 2005) can further enhance our understanding of these dynamics. Without such considerations, the field risks reinforcing a partial and ahistorical view of gender-based participation.

3. EXPLORING GENDER IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

This thematic issue of *Società Mutamento Politica* addresses critical gaps in scholarship on youth participation through a twofold approach. First, the contributions in this special issue place gender – and its intersections with class, race, and sexuality – at the center of the analysis of youth engagement. Drawing from sociology, political and educational science, and cultural studies, this issue explores how gender functions as a structuring force in youth participation, shaping how young people become political subjects, express agency, and negotiate visibility and recognition. It examines the ways in which gendered power relations influence political socializa-

tion, shape access to activist spaces, and determine the legitimacy of youth voices in public debates. Second, this special issue foregrounds age as a critical, yet often overlooked, factor in gender-based participation. By emphasizing age as an analytical category, this issue seeks to foster a more comprehensive understanding of participation as a dynamic, multi-generational process shaped by evolving political, social, and cultural conditions. It challenges the persistent tendency to frame youth activism as a homogeneous or transitory phenomenon, instead illustrating how generational position intersects with gender to influence strategies of mobilisation, the articulation of political demands, and the sustainability of activist participation over time.

The objective of this issue is not merely to document exclusion or critique existing scholarship, but to propose an alternative framework for understanding the intersection of age and gender in the context of youth participation. The articles included in this collection employ diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, yet they share a common commitment to interrogating the gendered logics that underpin youth engagement and challenging the age-blindness that has long characterized studies on gender-based participation. By bringing attention to the generational and gendered dynamics at play in a variety of participatory settings, this issue contributes to a more nuanced and inclusive analysis of youth participation.

Rossella Ghigi, Martina Rolandi and Dario Tuorto's article considers feminism and LGBTQ+ rights within Catholic scout youth movements, exploring how young members navigate identities amid anti-gender propaganda. It highlights the growing acceptance of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights among younger generations, particularly women, despite religious constraints. In doing so, it investigates the tensions between tradition and progressive values in youth organizations contributing to broader debates on gender and sexuality in faith-based communities.

The article authored by Lidia Lo Schiavo and Paola Rebughini draws on qualitative interviews and ethnographic research to explore how gender identity shapes youth activism in Italy, especially in the post-pandemic context. The authors discuss how the pandemic intensified the integration of care, inclusion, and gender issues into youth mobilizations. Focusing on mutual care as a key participatory value, the article traces the legacy of feminisms in contemporary youth activism.

In their analysis, Marie-Anaïs Le Breton, Thelma Beaulieu, Maxime Lecoq, Patricia Loncle, Maryam Mahamat and Matthieu Rault explore the emergence of gender as a salient concern within the context of local youth policies in France, drawing upon the insights

derived from the RAJE project. Involving youth, professionals, and policymakers, the study explores how gender emerges on local policy agendas. While gender was not initially central to the discourse, it surfaced through the everyday practices of youth workers and local dynamics. The article highlights the discrepancy between the formal agendas of institutions and the experiences of individuals, advocating for a more deliberate integration of gender-related considerations within the frameworks of youth policy.

Sina-Mareen Köhler and Anna Lena Winkler focus on the ways in which 12-to-16-year-olds engage with gender-related topics in their peer interactions in- and outside school. Drawing on longitudinal data and a broad concept of participation, they emphasise the need for empirical research beyond formal political contexts. The findings show how young people assert and defend gender-related claims central to their social participation, with peer support playing a vital role in navigating gender struggles. Ultimately, the article illustrates how peer groups offer emotional and discursive support as adolescents explore their gender identities across different settings.

Simona Guglielmi, Veronica Riniolo, Nicola Maggini, Marta Visioli and Alice Sanarico examine how gender socialisation and ethnic background shape the political engagement of young people in Italy. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the study explores how intersecting inequalities affect access to political spaces, particularly for young women with migrant backgrounds. The findings illuminate the manner in which gendered norms, perceived self-efficacy, and systemic exclusion contribute to the marginalisation of these individuals, as well as young women's alternative political practices challenging the prevailing barriers.

Stefania Leone and Andrea Orio's article investigates how young women in rural Southern Italy navigate gender norms in conservative, often change-resistant communities. Drawing on interviews and case studies of youth associations, it highlights both the constraints of entrenched gender roles and the emergence of participatory practices that challenge them. These initiatives create spaces where new, more inclusive social models can take shape and participation becomes a key driver of both personal and collective change. Through an intersectional lens, the study shows how gender, place, and culture intersect in shaping youth experiences and transformative potentials.

The article authored by Mariaeugenia Parito e Fabrizia Pasciuto examines gender issues in Italian public debates on the European Union, emphasizing gender equality as a core EU value. It explores how gender mainstreaming has shaped policies and public discourse,

highlighting economic and cultural challenges. Through analysis of youth networks and debates, it investigates how young people engage with gender issues in EU policy making. The study underscores the role of youth in promoting gender justice and advocating for inclusive reforms within European institutions.

Michel Sterbini Perticarà's article investigates how young trans* and non-binary individuals in Italy confront everyday and structural discrimination through activism. Challenging the constraints of the gender binary, the article shows how they cultivate networks of care and resistance in both digital and physical spaces. Through interviews and desk analysis, the study reveals how these practices reclaim autonomy, counter isolation, and promote mutual aid. In this light, activism emerges not just as protest, but as a vital practice of collective care and social transformation.

Patrick Leinhos' article explores the impact of queer volunteering on the biographies of young adults in Germany. The study examines how engagement in queer activism influences identity, agency, and self-understanding. Queer spaces are shown to support reflection on personal experiences of marginalisation and negotiating belonging beyond hetero and cis-normative norms. The study emphasises that queer volunteering fosters biographical work, offering young people resources to process difference, claim visibility, and participate in the reshaping of social norms.

The special issue concludes with an interview with Judith Bessant, Professor at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, a prominent scholar in youth activism research. Known for her advocacy in youth studies and social justice, Bessant's work critically examines inequalities in youth participation. The interview explores her thoughts on the role of gender in shaping the dynamics of youth activism and participatory practices.

All together, the articles presented in this special issue show how gender intervenes in shaping a variety of different forms of participation, including both institutionalised and non-institutionalised spaces and practices of engagement. The aim is to promote a more integrated and reflexive field of youth studies by showing that gender is not a subsidiary or specialized concern but a fundamental dimension of youth subjectivity, agency, and political life. Rather than treating gender or age as isolated variables, the contributions in this issue demonstrate that a comprehensive analysis of gender-age dynamics is essential for understanding the contemporary landscapes of youth participation. It is our hope that these contributions not only enrich academic debates but also resonate with broader struggles for recognition, equity, and transformation among young people themselves.

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