The Youth Generation's Lens: Exploring Gender Issues in Italian Networks of Public Debates on the European Union[1]

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Abstract. The paper aims to analyse if gender equality is a relevant issue for young Italians involved in European networks of debates, enhanced by social media, and committed in participatory practices to mobilise others to raise awareness towards European integration, policies and values. An exploratory qualitative research was carried out in the light of the 2024 European election, using in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between March and May 2024. Some interesting results emerge. Young activists recognise gender equality as value and a human right at the core of the EU democracy and they perceive efforts to address gender equality as a challenge essential for shaping an European society characterised by social justice, inclusivity and human dignity. Nevertheless, the interviewees show a pragmatic stance, evaluating the importance for tackling gender disparities but questioning the effectiveness of the European strategies, in particular their ability to effectively influence national-level decision-making. Some limitations should be noted, in particular further research should explore the relationship between political perspective, education and values orientations.

Keywords: youth participation, gender equality, european public sphere, hybrid media ecosystem.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is a cornerstone in the ongoing process of European integration. Equality between men and women was stated into the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and affirmed as a common value in the Lisbon Treaty. In the EU treaties and policies, gender equality is also considered a condition for the achievement of the objectives of growth, employment and social cohesion. The relevance is also evident in prioritising gender mainstreaming, since 1994, as an approach which demands gender equality as a perspective to consider within all areas of the EU policy making. Addressing gender disparities requires tackling both economic inequalities and cultural biases, achieving social justice and cohesion, necessitating comprehen-

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sive reforms that span multiple sectors at transnational and national level (Fraser 1999). The commitment of the EU to gender equality is part of a broader effort to foster a socially just and inclusive society that values diversity, indeed Gender Equality Plan 2020-25 includes intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) as a cross-cutting principle.

By focusing on gender equality, the EU not only addresses disparities, but also contributes to the shaping of a European society that respects and integrates various cultural perspectives. In this light, gender equality is a central right, value and aim involved in the social construction of European integration, challenging and transforming the patriarchal norms that permeate various aspects of society, including economic and cultural domains. We assume gender equality a central feature in shaping an European collective identity, considered as a "project identity" evolving through a process, continually transformed by ongoing institutional and societal changes (Castells 1997; 2018). According to Castells, "project identities" are defined by their aim to effect societal transformation by introducing new sets of values. These identities emerge when specific social actors build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, in doing so, advocate the transformation of overall social structure. It is also a communicative construction, indeed, the communication processes allow the sharing of meanings and the shaping of a symbolic common space (Barisione and Michailidou 2017; Hepp *et al.* 2016). Using this concept, we consider European identity and women's identity in relation to their shared inclination to promote a comprehensive transformation of society (Parito 2016).

The support for gender equality in the EU institutional discourse, thus, assumes particular significance intersecting with the question of the type of society being built, it fuels public debate and sustains the shaping of the European public spheres, as emerging through process which people debate controversial issues (Risse 2011, Belluati and Marini 2019, Trenz 2023). In the public debate that involves national political-institutional actors, legacy media and social media platforms, citizens and civil society organisations, we assume, on the one hand, that European institutions prioritising gender issues, have a relevant and proactive role, on the other hand, that young people are significant agents in the European public sphere reshaped through discursive and horizontal processes encouraged by digital media (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022).

Although the achievement of equality between women and men is one of the main objectives of the "paper EU" (Giddens 2014), the actual development in practices of the declared principles is a complex process with differences among the member states. In Italy there are still considerable weaknesses. The 2024 Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum) shows that Europe continues to lead, with 7 of the top 10 positions held by countries from this region, including Spain (10th), a country culturally similar to Italy. Instead, Italy has worsened its position with a slowdown in the reduction of the gender gap. Italy has achieved an 87th out of 146 countries globally, while it was ranked 79th the previous year. In Europe, Italy is ranked 37th out of 40, followed by Hungary, the Czech Republic and Turkey. This placement highlights significant room for improvement, particularly in economic participation and political empowerment in which Italy loses score. Participation of women in the labour market and leadership roles remains limited, reflecting a significant gender gap, despite notable progress in educational attainment.

Even if the Global Gender Gap Report shows that the speed of progress is insufficient and highlights that further efforts are crucial to avoid the rollback of hard-earned progress, gender equality is a central element within the "silent revolutions" bringing a gradual rise of post-materialist values prioritising individual free choices and self expression, tolerance of diverse lifestyles, gender fluid identities and other aspects regarding the recognition and respect for diversity. Nevertheless, this process prompted a cultural backlash that emphasises supposed traditional moral beliefs and fixed social identities founded on faith, family, and nation-state, animating a public debate in which a cultural divide emerges (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

It is interesting to highlight that the cultural divide is also a generational divide (*Ibidem*). European society has shifted in a socially liberal direction, with younger and university educated people being far more open-minded than older and less educated groups on a wide range of issues (e.g. same-sex marriage, abortion). So, when the advance of liberal values is arrested, it triggers widespread protests and mobilised resistance, especially among the younger people and women (Heaney 2018).

The new generations are leading actors in a reconfiguration of social practices across borders, which is a central piece of a broader 'reinvention of the social' (Pirni and Raffini 2022). In this process, the mediatisation of society has a relevant role, indeed, the experience of the young people are socially constructed, supported and solicited by social media, in a mediated environment that is included in everyday interaction (Parito, Pérez-Calle and D'Ambrosi 2022).

In this context, the article explores whether gender equality is perceived as a right, a value and a goal to be achieved to shape the European society for young Italians involved in formal or informal participatory practices

and communication flows of debate regarding European integration. It will explore how these young activists – involved in European networks of debate, enhanced by social media and engaged in collective actions to mobilise others to raise awareness towards European policies and rights – interpret the effectiveness of European policies on gender issues. Section 2 will introduce the concept of gender, alongside various socio-demographic factors related to sexism; section 3 will discuss the notion of gender equality as both a fundamental value and right in the context of European integration; section 4 highlights the characteristics of younger Europeans. Finally, the design of our exploratory research will be presented, followed by an analysis of the key findings.

2. SEXISM, AGE, AND IDEOLOGY

The distinction between *gender* and *sex* was introduced during the 1970s, deeply rooted in *women's studies* and emerging from feminist theories (Baccolini 2005). Scholars sought to differentiate between the biological aspects of sex and the social and cultural constructions of gender, which encompass the roles, behaviours, and identities assigned to individuals based on their sex (Rubin 1975; West and Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1994). This conceptual separation was crucial in highlighting how societal norms and expectations shape experiences and opportunities differently for men and women (Butler 1990). Gender differences, therefore, are not something natural but are actually the result of conditions imposed from the outside, shaped by societal norms and authority (Oakley 1972; Connell 2006). Gender is often associated with stereotypical and rigid expectations that dictate how women and men should ideally behave, as well as which activities are deemed appropriate based on their gender. Such gender-based inequalities perpetuate sexism, systemic biases and hinder progress towards gender equality in broader societal contexts.

Traditionally, sexism assumes that women are inferior to men. This can result in discrimination, in the limitation of opportunities or rights, or unfair and unequal treatment based on gender (Doob 2015; Manne 2017). The concept of *ambivalent sexism* (Glick and Fiske 1996) highlights that sexism is a multidimensional construct that manifests itself not only in the form of hatred or hostility towards women, but also in more subtle and seemingly positive but equally harmful forms. Based on these premises, researchers have distinguished between *hostile sexism* and *benevolent sexism*. The first, which is immediately recognisable, manifests itself through discrimination in the workplace, sexual harassment and physical or verbal violence. Benevolent sexism manifests itself through attitudes or beliefs that appear to be positive and empowering towards women. For example, a common form of benevolent sexism is the belief that women are naturally more nurturing and empathetic than men. This can lead to dynamics where women are expected to take on caregiving roles, such as mediating conflicts, offering emotional support, or handling administrative tasks, even when these responsibilities are not part of their job. However, these attitudes tend to place women in a position of inferiority or dependence compared to men. In this way, it contributes to reinforcing gender inequality. It is also important to note that women themselves can exhibit – usually benevolent – sexism, both towards themselves and towards other women. Indeed, the internalisation of traditional gender roles and stereotypes can lead women to adopt attitudes that aim to devalue women and emphasise stereotypical aspects of femininity (Hammond, Sibley and Overall 2014).

Research exploring the relationship between sexism and age remains relatively scarce, and it has traditionally been assumed that young people are less likely to exhibit sexism (Fitzpatrick Bettencourt, Vacha-Haase and Byrne 2011). A study (Hammond *et al.* 2018) focused on the increase and decrease of both benevolent and hostile sexism across the age span of men and women, found that men tend to show strong hostile sexism in adolescence, which tends to decrease as they become young adults – probably due to the need to achieve satisfaction in romantic relationships. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, seems to remain constant in men as they grow older. For women, however, benevolent sexism is stronger during adolescence and mid-adulthood.

Sexism appears to be closely linked to conservative views of society, often intertwined with religious beliefs, family influences and political orientations (Van Assche, Koç and Roets 2019; Schäfer 2021). This interrelationship illustrates that sexism is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of a complex system of ideologies and social structures that support and perpetuate it. Far-right political movements (Llanera 2023) emerge as vehicles for conservative visions that emphasise male superiority and female subordination. Through rhetoric that exalts traditional and hierarchical societal values, these movements fuel and perpetuate sexist attitudes, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities. This intersection between sexism, social conservatism and extremist politics reflects a complex dynamic that goes beyond individual everyday interactions.

Another aspect that has been studied in relation to different levels of sexism is education. It appears that individuals with lower levels of education may be

more exposed to both benevolent and hostile sexism. This phenomenon could be partly attributed to a lack of exposure to academic contexts that promote critical awareness and broader reflection on social issues (Hellmer, Stenson and Jylhä 2018).

Finally, what has been termed modern sexism appears to be prevalent among contemporary young men (Off, Charron and Alexander 2022), and is based on three fundamental assumptions: denial of discrimination; negative attitudes towards requests for equality; resentment towards perceived preferential treatment of women (Godbole, Malvar and Valian 2019). Based on the belief that gender equality has been achieved in all areas – and sometimes overstated to favour women over men – this form of sexism tends to trivialise current gender issues, seeing them as a form of victimisation by women themselves. Off et al. (2022) have shown, through research conducted in 27 European countries, that many young men perceive advances in the rights of women as a threat, especially in places where there is high unemployment and consequent mistrust of institutions. Increasing competitiveness between men and women could therefore also be the result of an uncertain view of the future that fuels intolerance and declining solidarity. This could reflect a subtle but insidious form of discrimination that often manifests itself as resistance to efforts to achieve gender equality. In particular, it seems that some young men fear that extending rights and opportunities to women will come at the expense of their own privileges, leading to a backlash against progressive gender policies (Ruthig et al. 2017).

3. EUROPEAN UNION POLICIES ON GENDER EQUALITY

Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law are values and rights at the core of European integration. A key aspect of the commitment of the EU to these principles is its active role in promoting gender equality as a cross-cutting priority regarding social, economic, and cultural development. By ensuring that gender equality policies are not only established but also effectively implemented across its Member States, the EU aims to achieve a coherent and unified framework. This approach is crucial for influencing and connecting governance at the EU, national, and regional levels, ensuring consistency and progress in the pursuit of gender equality (Ahrens 2023). This commitment is enshrined in the Treaties of Rome and further strengthened in the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The achievement of gender equality involves three dimensions: equal treatment focuses on the principle of equal rights and it is implemented through legal measures that ensure everyone is treated the same regardless of gender; equal opportunities, on the other hand, acknowledges differences between genders and seeks to address these through policies such as positive action or affirmative measures, aiming to create fair conditions for all; equal impact, which operates primarily through gender mainstreaming, aims to achieve equitable outcomes by integrating gender considerations into all policy and decision-making processes (Jacquot 2023). Over the years, EU policies have evolved to better encompass these results, leading to the development of new instruments. Gender mainstreaming, as a transversal approach, challenges the traditional focus of gender equality policies, which were primarily limited to employment and occupational issues. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) supports the EU institutions and governmental bodies in integrating a gender perspective into their work. EIGE provides insights on the relevance of gender in a variety of policy areas, suggests practical actions for EU and local institutions, helps to improve individual competences to mainstream gender throughout the different stages of the process of policy, programme, and project development and implementation. The EIGE platform accelerates the integration of gender equality into diverse areas as a routine part of administrative processes, rather than an exceptional or strictly legislative effort (D'Ambrosi et al. 2024; Schmidt 2005; Jacquot 2023). The inclusion of intersectionality as a cross-cutting principle, for the first time in the Gender Equality Plan 2020-25, is a further effort to address the multiple and intersecting forms of deprivation, disadvantage, and discrimination that interact with gender inequality.

However, the rise of political movements and parties promoting a more conservative agenda, and in some cases openly opposing gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, has exposed a growing resistance to these values, challenging the role of the EU as a defender of human rights and democratic freedoms (Köttig, Bitzan and Pető 2017; Roggeband and Krizsán 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2020; Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2022). During the 2019 and 2024 European elections, the rhetoric of certain political parties focused on opposing what they labelled as "gender ideology," a term used to criticise policies and legislation aimed at promoting gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights. This marked a significant shift in the European political landscape, where issues like feminism, marriage equality, transgender rights, and anti-discrimination measures became cen-

tral, yet often polarising topics of debate. The opposition to gender equality was particularly pronounced in Member States where governments and parties explicitly rejected EU directives on civil rights, arguing that such policies threaten national traditions and family values (Galpin and Trenz 2019; Macaluso 2020). This rejection has fueled a broader public debate about what it truly means to be part of a united Europe and which values should be considered fundamental and non-negotiable. In this context, the EU faces a significant challenge: how to maintain cohesion among its member states in the face of increasingly divergent opinions on these crucial issues. On one hand, the EU continues to actively promote policies aimed at eliminating gender disparities and protecting civil rights; on the other hand, it must contend with a growing resistance that often manifests in national laws and policies that directly contradict European objectives.

4. YOUNG EUROPEANS

Young people born from the 1990s onwards, have experienced processes of transnationalisation in the face of growing European policies. They are European native and immersed in a Europeanised society; their daily life is intertwined with the values and principles that the EU stands for, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Indeed, they are far more likely to support liberal and post-materialistic values (Norris and Inglehart 2019). We assume they are fundamental to the shaping of a European identity, thanks to their ability to make their voices heard through the creation of social movements and associations, which can contribute to the maintenance of democracy and the assertion of social rights (Verderame and Benocci 2021; Della Porta 2022). If the literature shows contrasting trends regarding youth participation, distinguishing between institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms, and also highlighting forms of isolation and passivity, it is among the youth that new practices of participation emerge, grounded in the connection between personal experience and universally significant issues (Pitti 2022; Raffini 2024). In this way, young Europeans are a driving force in the building of the European public sphere.

Education plays a significant role in shaping the perspectives of these young Europeans. With access to higher education and opportunities for exchange programs across EU Member States, they are exposed to different ideas and cultures from an early age (Van Mol 2019). This exposure fosters an open-mindedness and tolerance that transcends national boundaries, leading to a more transnational worldview. Moreover, young Europeans are often at the forefront of social and political movements, championing causes such as environmental sustainability (Della Porta and Portos 2023), LGBTQ+ rights (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Baker 2017), and inclusivity (D'Agostino 2023). Their activism reflects a deep-seated belief in the power of collective action to effect meaningful change, echoing the spirit of solidarity that underpins the European project (Zamponi and Bosi 2018; Della Porta 2022).

Despite their progressive attitudes and values, and the spread of a generational cleavage, young Europeans are not immune to the challenges of the cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Schäfer 2022). The rise of populist movements and nationalist sentiments in some parts of Europe poses a threat to the values of openness and cooperation that they hold dear. In addition, economic insecurity and social inequalities continue to affect young people, fuelling discontent and disillusionment with traditional political institutions (Cabezas 2022). One field in which these tensions are particularly pronounced is around gender issues. While young Europeans overwhelmingly support the principle of gender equality, there is growing concern about the emergence of "modern sexism" (Off, Charron and Alexander 2022). Young citizens are increasingly recognised by the EU institutions as a key demographic group to invest in through its policies. They have grown up in the EU already established, which is the contest of their everyday life. Interestingly, compared to older generations, they tend to have a more transnational outlook, often viewing themselves as European citizens despite their nationhood (Lauterbach and De Vries 2021). This mindset is largely shaped by their upbringing in a barriers-free world, where travelling, studying, and living across EU borders is commonplace (Bettin Lattes and Bontempi 2008; Recchi 2013). The increased practices of spatial mobility, facilitated by low-cost airlines, as well as the interconnection of social practices detached from physical space enabled by digital media (van Dijck et al. 2018; Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2020), intertwine with a series of Europeanization mechanisms, such as Schengen, the Euro, and incentives for intra-European mobility in education, work, and volunteering. This represents a significant reconfiguration of social practices 'beyond borders', constituting a central piece in a broader 'reinvention of the social', with new generations seen as potential key actors (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022; Pirni and Raffini 2022).

Focusing on Italy, Flash Eurobarometer 545 (2024), on youth and democracy, offers insights into the attitudes and behaviours of young Italian citizens on a

number of issues, including their expectations from the EU. Italian youth have clear expectations from the EU, with the top three being the preservation of peace and international security (33%), the fight against poverty and social inequalities (32%), and the promotion of human rights, democracy, and common European values (28%). In terms of civic engagement, 52% of young Italians have taken action to change society in the past year. The most common areas of activism were human rights (40%), climate change and environmental protection (38%), and health and well-being (35%). Interestingly, activism around equal rights regardless of gender, race, or sexuality was notably lower in Italy (23%) compared to the EU average.

5. AIM AND STUDY DESIGN

Within the framework outlined above, this study explores the point of view of young Italians involved in formal or informal groups that uphold communication flows of debate and participatory practices regarding European integration. The aim is to analyse how these activists, involved in European networks of debate enhanced by social media and engaged in collective activities to mobilise others to raise awareness towards European policies, values and rights, perceive the significance of gender related issues in shaping European society and the effectiveness of European institutions in achieving this goal.

Previous research (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022) suggests that young people, mainly the most educated, are relevant agents in articulated networks of participation facilitated by social media. They mix different kinds of initiatives, going through those solicited by the European institutions with formal organisations, but also interpreting them with independent meanings or activating distinctive autonomous plans. In particular, the project together.eu, a pan-European community promoted by the European Parliament after the 2019 European elections, as an extension of the #thistimeimvoting campaign, activated participatory practices among young citizens, according to spontaneous trajectories and outcomes not necessarily predefined from above. These young activists often debate on the EU related issues regarding current affairs they consider relevant in the daily life of the citizens, and also on values, rights and social problems, considered as fundamental for shaping European integration and the context of their transnational way of life. An interesting point to remark, is the pragmatism and realism among the young people involved in these networks: they go through different kinds of opportunities – institutional, personal and informal, face-to-face relationships and mediated by the social networks. So the institutions are not the main driver of the participation but a functional instrument for sustaining autonomous ways of engagement.

The 2024 European Elections were a relevant event for investigating how the young Italians involved in this kind of network of debates and practices mobilised others in order to raise awareness towards EU policies and to promote electoral participation. The hypothesis we investigate is that gender equality is a sensitive issue, as a symbol of the values and rights at the centre of the conflict over the meaning of the EU. In particular, some research questions arise:

RQ1: Gender has been included in debates and events run by young activists?
RQ2: How do young people perceive the role of the European institutions in addressing gender issues and promoting youth participation in these practices?

Qualitative research was carried out using in-depth semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The interviews were conducted between March and May 2024, both in person and via video conferencing platforms.

The interviewees are 18 Italian activists (11 males and 6 females) of youth organisations, both with formalised structure or spontaneous groups. The Italian community of the project together.eu was a starting point: first, the Italian organisations listed as partners in the website were selected, then a snowball sampling was adopted. Indeed, the together.eu website includes formal and institutionalised organisations, but the young volunteers are often involved in multiple initiatives, and we were able to identify a wide array of non-formalized participation initiatives that are equally active and interesting (Pitti, Mengilli and Walther 2023).

The roles of the interviewees within the associations are very different: presidents, founders, co-founders, communication managers and active members. All participants are aged between 18 and 35. Their educational backgrounds are largely homogeneous; in fact, they are all university graduates or about to graduate, apart from one participant who was employed in a family business. As previous studies have shown (Parito, Pérez-Calle and D'Ambrosi 2022; Parito, Raffini and D'Ambrosi 2025), the academic background of the young adults involved in these associations is not very diversified, ranging from law, political science, communications to business studies, with only one respondent holding an engineering degree. Politically, most of the young people interviewed identified with left-wing or centre-left parties, even if

they declared dissatisfaction with their programmes. Interestingly, the researchers encountered considerable difficulty in finding young individuals who aligned with the right-wing. In the end, we managed to interview only two participants who openly identified as right-wing. The challenge was not just about locating right-leaning youth within informal groups, but more about finding individuals interested in EU policies. In fact, both right-wing interviewees expressed a noticeable lack of interest in European matters, stating that their focus was primarily on national politics.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews underscore a complex landscape where the young activists recognize the relevance of the gender issue, and the potential of the EU to drive gender equality. At the same time, interviewees recognise the cultural, political, and institutional constraints. The need for pragmatic, non-ideological approaches, combined with stronger enforcement of the EU values and regulations, emerges as a common thread in addressing these challenges. Based on these assumptions, some key themes and insights can be identified:

a) Political, ideological and generational divide: the interviewees perceive a clear divide in how young people with different political backgrounds evaluate gender issues; the awareness regarding a difference with older generations also emerges.

b) Role of the European Union: the EU is seen as "home"[2] that should enforce its core values, including gender equality. However, scepticism emerges about its effectiveness, particularly in influencing member states with more conservative views. This is a wider question concerning the institutional reform to make the EU stronger and equipped to tackle the challenges, indeed it is difficult to implement a comprehensive gender policy across the Union. Suggestions include stricter enforcement of gender equality directives and the imposition of penalties on non-compliant member states.

c) Activism, education and awareness: The interviewees perceive a growing mobilisation among young people regarding gender issues. This is seen as a positive trend, but they recognise that more needs to be done to translate activism into concrete policy changes. The interviewees stress the importance of education and awareness campaigns to foster a deep-

er understanding and commitment to gender equality among young people.

A prominent aspect of the political divide is the way gender equality is prioritised by young people with different political affiliations. The interviewees clearly report this perception, and the accounts of the two right-leaning activists compared with the others confirm these divergences. Activists who identify with centre-left or left-wing ideologies see gender equality as a fundamental issue that should be at the forefront of political discussions. They argue that the EU has a crucial role in enforcing gender equality as a core value. This perspective is rooted in the belief that gender equality is not just a social issue, but a fundamental human right that underpin democratic societies. Gender equality intersects with broader themes of social justice, inclusivity and human dignity which are central tenets of these ideologies. One interviewee observes:

People under the age of 35, especially my peers, feel this struggle a lot. But it depends a lot on how much you feel it, also depending on your political affiliation. I notice that maybe if you are a young man and you feel more right-wing, you see it as something you can do without, I don't say without, but... maybe they are conservative and they don't care, whereas maybe people like me, who also feel more centre-left, I think these are fundamental struggles [...] This is an issue that should be universal, without having to ideologise too much and then risk a conflict of factions, because when there is a fight between the right and the left, nothing happens on these issues. (Andrea B.)

Conversely, it seems that young people with right-wing affiliations view gender equality as less urgent than other issues. They believe significant progress has already been made towards gender equality, making further action unnecessary (Dietze and Roth 2020). The remaining gender differences are considered either minimal or natural, based on differences in individual choices and competencies rather than systemic bias. It is a belief rooted in the notion that meritocracy should prevail and the positions of power and influence should be awarded on the basis of individual competence and qualifications rather than gender. This view is closely related to our research question, which explores how gender issues have been meaningfully incorporated into events or projects organised by pro-European networks. It is also closely related to discussions concerning *all-male panels*, often referred to as *manels* (Clayton O'Brien and Piscopo 2019) at conferences and events. While most of interviewees who identified themselves as centre-left or left-wing emphasise they pay attention to the selection of speakers, striving to maintain a balanced representation of men and women, those who identify as

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[2] A lot of the interviewees explicitly state "EU is home" and they identify themselves first as European and then as Italian.

right-wing expressed a different view. The latter argue that the panel composition at their events reflects the most qualified people for, rather than any form of gender bias. This stance contrasts with the practices promoted by EU calls, which require ensuring balanced gender representation.

But I think the best way to fight this kind of problem is to really evaluate it 100%. For example, we have had conferences with only women and conferences with only men. Let's say that. I think you don't just need to go and see whether someone is male or female, you really need to go and see what their skills are. (Aurelio B.)

The interviewees also perceive a generational divide which affects the effectiveness of EU gender policies (Bristow 2021). The generational divide manifests in differing levels of support for gender equality initiatives, with young people generally advocating for more comprehensive and intersectional approaches to gender issues. These approaches not only address traditional inequalities but also tackle new and emerging forms of discrimination that are increasingly apparent in society. Older generations, by contrast, often exhibit a more conservative stance, grounded in traditional views of gender roles and scepticism towards what they perceive as an overreach of gender policies (Sosa 2021; Farahat and Leijten 2022). One interviewee highlighted this issue:

The whole value dimension around us is a construction that happens over time. So there are some things that we all agree on, and there are others that we did not agree on so much. Gender is a generational issue, and I see that in our youth section this idea is much more present than in the main section attended by senior members. In addition, the institutions are not neutral, and this is a kind of awareness that can certainly be very, very valuable. (Giorgia S.)

The generational divide plays a significant role in the European discourse on gender issues (e.g. abortion rights, gender pay gap, domestic violence, work-life balance etc.), particularly in how gender policies are viewed and implemented. Interviews suggest that younger generations are generally more supportive towards progressive and inclusive approaches, seeing them as essential for ensuring equality and upholding human rights. On the other hand, older generations tend to be less enthusiastic about these changes. This reluctance is often shaped by cultural, religious, or conservative political values (Van Assche, Koç and Roets 2019; Schäfer 2021). There is a concern that highly ideological and generational approaches can polarise debates and hinder the practical implementation of gender equality. Indeed, some activists' express scepticism towards some gender-

focused policies perceived as driven more by ideology than by pragmatic needs.

The division also expresses the way national governments respond to EU gender equality directives. Despite the EU actively pushes for policies to implement the rights of the women and promote gender equality, the extent to which these policies are adopted varies widely among Member States, highlighting a disparity in commitment to these issues across Europe. The EU can give directives to the Member States, but it is not really able to require them to adopt specific measures (Banjac 2017).

The problem is that I think Europe is not as strong as it wants to be. That is, it exists, it has a lot of important things that it is doing, but it does not have the authority because it does not exist in the same way as the United States. (Elena S.)

The European Union, as we know, takes some of the sovereignty away from the individual states, but in the end it is the individual state that has the final decision on certain issues. So in the end the decision remains with the sovereign state. So if we take the case of Italy as an example, unfortunately I think there is still a very strong cultural problem, so although the EU is a very good example – both as institutions per se, and as institutional figures like Ursula von der Leyen and Roberta Metsola, who are very strong female figures – Italy as a nation needs to do more. (Eleonora S.)

The flexibility afforded to Member States in implementing EU directives can lead to varying experiences across different countries, shaping how young people perceive the effectiveness of EU policies in promoting gender equality.

The aim of the young people involved in these communities of participation can thus be defined as an effort to foster social development through collaboration between different kinds of actors. Through ludic, recreational, artistic, and educational activities (Milan 2019), the young activists promote participation grounded in a thorough understanding of the EU and its policies, which they acquired through both formal and informal practices (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022).

The interviewees underline a relevant educational gap. They recognise a significant lack in both affective education and civic education in Italy, which makes it difficult for young people to fully understand what the EU is, how it functions, and what areas it governs. Affective education plays a crucial role in shaping the awareness and sensitivity of individuals towards gender issues. By fostering emotional intelligence, empathy and critical thinking, it helps individuals to recognise and challenge gender stereotypes, power dynamics and inequalities. A well-rounded affective education encourages open dis-

cussions about identity, relationships and social norms, ultimately promoting greater engagement in gender-related debates and advocacy.

As one interviewee said:

When we talk about gender, we also need to talk about generations. Our generation is different – we are part of a group where gender differences are becoming less pronounced. But there's a significant gap between us and the older generations. I believe that Europe needs to address both fronts simultaneously, showing that gender issues are far less prominent for us. For instance, when I talk to 16- or 17-year-olds about sexual orientation, it's completely normal for them to discuss these topics, even topics like sexology. They need affective education, because they are often left to navigate these themes alone. This is why I think we need to push for a major effort, even at the European level, to talk about emotions and relationships. The focus is often on gender differences, while the gap between generations is overlooked. We need a political awareness campaign that highlights generational coexistence, giving equal weight to both gender and generational issues. I always say we should go into classrooms and ask the younger generation what they think – they have so much to teach us. (Simone R.)

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This exploratory study suggests that in the communication flows of European public debate and participatory practices, where young people are key actors, gender issues receive significant attention. In any case, it should be noted that the interviewees have specific characteristics: not only do they have a high level of education, but they also study in specific disciplinary fields (political and social sciences, economics and humanities).

It is noteworthy that most of the interviewees are male, yet no difference emerges compared to females in the perception of relevance. Young activists recognise gender equality as value and a human right at the core of the EU democracy. They perceive efforts to address gender equality as a challenge essential for shaping a society characterised by social justice, inclusivity and human dignity. This is not an idealistic outlook, the EU and its policies are considered in a pragmatic manner, evaluating the importance for tackling gender disparities but questioning the effectiveness of the adopted strategies, in particular their ability to effectively influence national-level decision-making.

The interviewees recognise a cultural divide between generations, with the older people perceived weakly equipped to understand the younger way of thinking and living. Another perceived divide is ideological, between young people aligning with the political right or left. We have to remark that the interviews were conducted in the lead-up to the European elections, while the translational public debate was focused on the possibility that right-wing and far-right parties could gain support both in Italy and in many other member states. In the Italian public debate, the main parties of the center-right governing coalition display all the main attributes of the radical right, namely nativism/ethnonationalism, sovereignism, authoritarianism, Euroscepticism, and populism (Bressanelli and Candia 2023) and they opened a conflict, amplified by social media, around values such as gender equalities and human rights that are fundamental values of the EU. So, we can argue the involvement of left-leaning young activists to counteract this trend. However, our analysis did not find a debate between activists of differing orientations, as we had expected. Instead, we observed a lack of interest from right-leaning youth in participating in a transnational debate or engaging with European issues in general.

Some limitations of this explorative research should be noted. The interviewees have a higher education level with a specific academic background mostly in political and social science. Broadly, the most educated young people are involved in the networks of participation analysed. The activists recognise this educational divide, highlighting the need for enforced and more suitable educational activities for the younger people. Further research should explore the link between political orientation, education and values stance, to provide additional understanding of the attitudes of young people towards the UE and the implementation of gender issues.

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