

# The role of gender and education in early labor market careers: Long-term trends in Italy

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Paolo Barbieri ([paolo.barbieri@unitn.it](mailto:paolo.barbieri@unitn.it))

Giorgio Cutuli ([g.cutuli@unitn.it](mailto:g.cutuli@unitn.it))

Michele Lugo ([michele.lugo@unitn.it](mailto:michele.lugo@unitn.it))

Stefani Scherer ([stefani.scherer@unitn.it](mailto:stefani.scherer@unitn.it))

This work describes gender inequalities in early labor market careers and their changes over time while focusing particularly on the role of education. We first look at the horizontal dimension of gender inequalities that is represented by the different allocation of men and women across occupational sectors. Subsequently, we analyze two dimensions of vertical inequalities: the existence of a gender gap in the first job's prestige and the presence of gender differences in exposure to precarious work arrangements at labor market entry. More specifically, four research questions have been addressed.

The first concerns the existence of gross horizontal differences and vertical gender inequalities. With regard to the allocation of men and women to occupational sectors, we find that, not surprisingly, men are more prone to enter production-related occupations and women more service-related ones. There is little change over cohorts except a more pronounced tertiarization process among women. The combination of the increased female labor supply on the one side and the distribution of female and male first jobs among occupations across cohorts on the other side has led to a substantial stability in gender-occupational segregation over time. With respect to vertical inequalities, the empirical evidence on gender inequalities shows a seemingly puzzling result with female labor market entrants simultaneously having a modest prestige advantage but a significant employment security penalty compared to their male counterparts.

This brings us to the second question focusing on trends over time in the gender inequality dimensions. Women's prestige advantage and security gap are not observable in a static perspective alone; they are the result of long-term processes. As a matter of fact, one could sketch the situation in terms of a gendered prestige–security trade-off that has been taking place over the last decades in the Italian labor market.

The relative position of women in terms of occupational standing does indeed seem to have improved slightly over time, even though at the expense of (or accompanied by) a relative increase in exposure to precariousness that is especially evident in the younger cohorts. With respect to precariousness, we document how a common trend of increased instability has been accompanied by a marked decline in access to stable job positions for women, and this has led to a widening gender gap in occupational insecurity.

The third question deals with the role of education in accounting for gender-based vertical inequalities. Regression models confirm that, after controlling for educational attainment, male and female first job prestige scores do not differ significantly, even though a trend toward a worsening in women's relative outcomes emerges over time. This result may be due to the faster educational expansion for women that has led to a decrease in their labor market rewards. Moreover, the female prestige penalty seems to be concentrated on low educated and (even more so) on tertiary educated women. We argue that this can be explained by a positive self-selection of women in the labor market and women's particular difficulties in accessing higher level positions (the well-known glass-ceiling effect). Individual education does not seem to play any role in reducing the gender security gap, because highly educated women face even higher risks when entering the labor market through insecure positions.

The fourth question concerns the interrelation between horizontal and vertical inequalities in shaping gender differences at labor market entry. We find that the allocation of men and women across occupational sectors and market segments combined with education explains the relative female advantage in prestige scores. However, net of education, women's initial advantage turns into a minor

disadvantage for the younger cohorts. Women's first jobs tend to be concentrated in sectors with relatively higher levels of prestige, such as business and social services, even though positions held by women within each sector are generally characterized by lower levels of prestige. Focusing on employment insecurity, we find persistent vertical inequalities even after controlling for relevant individual and job type characteristics, with women suffering a security gap compared to their male counterparts. Women's higher risks of entering the labor market through unstable employment can be attributed to neither their individual endowments nor their overrepresentation in sectors and labor market segments that are particularly over-exposed to contractual contingency.

In conclusion, we can offer two considerations with respect to the long-term role of education in relation to prestige inequalities and the exposure to precariousness for the male and female workforce in the present Italian labor market. The relatively strong expansion of female educational attainment has improved the relative position of women in terms of average occupational prestige. Nonetheless, the subsequent educational inflation of the last decades has progressively eroded the returns to education especially for (highly educated) women, and this has upset the initial advantage of women in younger cohorts. On top of this, especially tertiary education comes with higher risks of entering unstable employment. Therefore, education has no role in reducing the gender security gap in the exposure to precariousness. Indeed, it even seems to strengthen it further – a mechanism that seems specific to the Italian occupational (as well as productive) structure and the institutional configuration of the labor market.

