

Who cares about care? For a gendered reflection on research topics in the humanities and social sciences

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Abstract

Studying the gender gap in academia means analyzing dynamics such as pay gap, glass ceiling, work-life balance challenges, gender-based violence, academic housework. This paper wants to add a different perspective by focusing on the gendered nature of research topics within the social sciences and humanities (SSH), particularly in relation to “care” topics and approaches. This study was born from an autoethnographic observation based on first-hand experience in the fields of geography and sociology, that inspired us to further investigate this matter, supplemented by two case studies: the AESOP Sustainable Food Planning conference and the Association of Italian Geographers. Through quantitative analysis of five AESOP conference editions and A.Ge.I working group participants, the study examines gender representation in leadership roles and research topics. Findings reveal that while women dominate in terms of participation at conferences, their presence sharply declines in hierarchically higher positions. In A.Ge.I groups, women predominantly engage with what we call “care-related topics”, highlighting a stronger gendered pattern in “feminized” disciplines compared to male-dominated ones. Despite numerical parity in participation, male coordinators outnumber female ones. This research seeks to provoke a broader debate about the academic community’s evaluation of gendered research topics. It questions the relevance and dignity assigned to topics traditionally viewed as feminine and challenges the biases influencing who raises these questions and who dismisses them.

Keywords: Care, academia, gender gap, social sciences, humanities.

1. Introduction

Brussels, June 2024. I walk into the plenary session room of the Sustainable Food Planning (SFP) conference of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), take a quick look around, and instinctively reach for my phone. “*Once again, we’re almost all women*”, I text Francesca.

Dublin, August 2024. I walk into the session *Gender and Geography: Rethinking Cities as Spaces of Care*, during the International Geographical Congress in Dublin. The session was chaired by women and featured nine presentations, all delivered by women. I took out my phone and texted Chiara: “I’m thinking of you, all speakers are women”. Chiara replied almost immediately: “We should start collecting this data systematically... not just us, but the conferences themselves should”.

It has become a familiar gesture, almost automatic, a way of naming something we now expect to see. Yet it was not always so clear. Everything began on a bench, under the Sardinian sun, during a summer school. Sitting side by side, eating a *seadas* between sessions, we found ourselves voicing - perhaps for the first time - impressions that had long remained unspoken. We talked about conferences and workshops, especially those that set up spaces for creative methods, emotions, positionality, and reflexivity, and about how, again and again, the people occupying those spaces were overwhelmingly women¹. What initially felt like a fleeting intuition lingered. It resurfaced in other rooms, in other cities, and in our readings, slowly demanding to be taken seriously.

From that moment on, our gaze began to change. We had both individually realized that the authors we cited most and the scholars we encountered at relevant conferences were mostly women. By thus placing our attention on the bodies and subjectivities behind the words, we realized that this embodied knowledge had relevance. We then started from our first-hand experience in the spaces of geographic and sociological disciplines and began to train our gaze, becoming increasingly aware of this situation and finding in our WhatsApp chat a space to share and discuss our experiences (Bayfield et al., 2020). Short notes, screenshots of conference programs, ironic comments such as “*there’s a man this time!*” or “*all women here too*”. That chat became a shared observational space, where lived experiences accumulated and began to form a more coherent picture.

As these exchanges multiplied, we realized that what we were perceiving could not be reduced to coincidence or individual trajectories. Experiences we had initially considered as marginal or anecdotal started to align. One of us recalled a PhD project presentation, during the first year of doctoral studies, in which a male full professor questioned the relevance of focusing on gender rather than on other variables. Years later, during an early-career scholars’ workshop, a (female) professor in the audience pointed out - by simply inviting everyone to look around - that almost only women were present in that session, which explicitly addressed gender. Similar moments echoed elsewhere. These scenes, repeated across contexts, gradually shifted our understanding: what we were

¹ Throughout the paper, we use the term “women” to refer to “people socialized as women” for reasons of space.

experiencing was not merely personal, but indicative of broader, gendered dynamics within specific academic fields.

2. Gender, academia, care

Studying the gender gap in academia often means analyzing and problematizing different types of discrimination. It means wondering how inequalities are produced and reproduced at various career levels, as academia is a workplace that is affected by the same gender discriminations as other working contexts: the wage disparity for equal tasks and the disparity between female and male presence in hierarchically higher roles. These phenomena are also known as the “leaky pipeline” and/or the “glass door” - women are more likely to leave an academic career and less likely to obtain a tenured position -, and as the “glass ceiling” - women are less likely to achieve a full professorship - (Cois et al., 2023; Meschitti & Marini, 2022). We also encounter cases of gender-based violence, especially expressed as “sexist hostility” (Llorens et al., 2021), and the feminized problem of work-life balance, especially for women who have care responsibilities (Smith, 2012), with a focus on issues closely related to the so-called motherhood penalty, and how this affects careers in as yet under-investigated but deeply problematic ways that contribute to the normalization of the idea that “work” does not include caring duties and rights, that is, work which is implicitly “masculine” (Albanese et al., 2024; Cox et al., 2024; Huopainen & Satama, 2019; Manzi et al., 2024; Picardi, 2019).

A brief contextualization of Italian and European data on gender representation in academia feels necessary. In the SheFigures Index² - which draws on a range of indicators across six key dimensions: pipeline segregation, research sectors, career progression, decision-making, research participation, and the incorporation of a gender dimension in research and innovation content - EU member states have scores between 60 and 88, with 100 representing full gender equality. As mentioned, a strong disparity is detected when considering the broad field of study, with STEM disciplines still seeing much fewer female doctoral graduates than male (Chapter 2, SheFigures website). Yet, another point of concern is the strong decline of female presence the higher we climb the career ladder: across all fields of research, women represent 54.4% of Bachelor’s level students, yet they only account for 33% of what the SheFigures report defines “Grade A: the single highest grade / post at which research is normally conducted” (Chapter 6, SheFigures website). Italy performs slightly better than the EU average in most indicators - for example, it is second overall for research participation and ninth overall for segregation in the pipeline - yet in the indicator about gender representation in “Grade A” positions, it performs worse than the EU average, with a percentage of 27% of female representation in such positions - which still represents an increase from the 21% of 2013 (SheFigures 2024, Italy

² Data for this paragraph is by Eurostat and was retrieved from <https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/knowledge-publications-tools-and-data/interactive-reports/she-figures-2024#chapters> (December 15th, 2025).

fiche)³. As for the disciplines of sociology and geography that are chosen as case studies in this paper, according to data from the Italian Ministry of University and Research⁴, general gender representation including professionals from all career stages is quite balanced: for geography, the data shows 172 female professionals and 178 male professionals, while for sociology it shows 211 females and 239 males. This balance is lost when considering only full professors (which we compare to what Eurostat data calls “Grade A” positions): for geography, 44 are female and 65 are male, for sociology 33 are female and 74 are male.

If we begin to bring the lens of care into this discussion, we can observe how these dimensions intersect in distinct ways. On the one hand, in relation to how we inhabit academia: from care work within academic institutions, to how we think about transforming academia itself. Care shapes the ways we engage with academic spaces and attempt to change them. On the other hand, in relation to research, both in terms of the topics pursued and the stance or posture adopted in pursuing them. The former can be observed, for example, in academic housework, which is a widespread and still underestimated form of discrimination: women tend to be more involved in teaching than men (Winslow, 2010), and they spend more time on student support and management tasks that offer fewer career rewards. This work requires a large investment of time and energy, but remains unrecognized because in academic evaluation criteria, “excellence” in research is measured predominantly in terms of scientific output over teaching (Addabbo et al., 2022; Ashencaen Crabtree & Shiel, 2019; Cois et al., 2023; Conesa Carpintero, 2022; Heijstra et al., 2017; Lombardo et al., 2024).

However, if we look at research choices, the focus of the reflection seems to be mostly on the representation of people socialized as women within STEM disciplines (Beroíza-Valenzuela & Salas-Guzmán, 2024; Patterson et al., 2020), while the same cannot be said regarding SSH (social sciences and humanities) disciplines, as if the presence of more women in these areas meant that gender-related issues are not encountered. In SSH, although less obvious at first glance, discrimination exists, too (Albanese et al., 2024). In fact, the mere presence of women does not mean equality (as in the “add women and stir” approach, Datzberger & Le Mat, 2018; Noddings, 2001). It is insufficient to assess the presence and number of women; rather, it is important to ask what positions they hold, what kind of work and research they do, by what methods, and how that research is judged and valued (Llorens et al., 2021).

This approach aims not so much at changing the numbers, but rather at transforming the very way in which research is done, and knowledge produced, by introducing a gender perspective into and onto scientific research (Picardi, 2019). The aim is to fix the institution and to fix the knowledge. It means de-individualizing causes and responses,

³ The fiche dedicated to Italy can be found at this link <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/rtd/shefigures/2024/files/shefigures2024fiche-it.pdf> and was accessed on December 15th, 2025.

⁴ The data was retrieved from the website CercaUniversità (mur.gov.it) on December 15th, 2025 through the “advanced research” tool. First, overall representation for the disciplines of “general sociology” and “geography” was downloaded in the form of an Excel table, which included all professionals at all career levels for these disciplines, with data about their gender. Then, the same data was downloaded but only for full professors.

looking at them from a structural perspective, and it requires a change in the cultures and practices of how science is embodied and produced, how excellence is defined - for example, the publish or perish logic (Llorens et al., 2021) -, how recruitment and career progression are determined and workloads distributed, and how “care” is practiced and studied and by whom, to better understand “harmful academic structures and the possibilities of unsettling them” (Manzi et al., 2024).

In addition, those who oversee introducing this kind of change, of questioning, of proposing new logics, of “fixing” academia, are, for the most part, women (see, among many Cois et al., 2023; Conesa Carpintero, 2022; Cox et al., 2024).

Fixing academia is a practice of care. And practicing care should include fixing academia. In the opening of her book *Who Cares? How to reshape a democratic politics* (2015, p. 1), Joan Tronto says:

Usually, we think of the worlds of care and of politics as far apart. This is partly because we wrongly think that care is all about compassion and kindness, and that politics is all about one-upmanship [...]. These two worlds are deeply intertwined, and even more so in a democracy. Only at the expense of our democracy do we underestimate their interdependence. And we need to rethink this relationship if democracy is to continue.

As with democracy, this also applies to academia. Who cares in academia? And who cares about care? Care is a broad and polysemous term that can be interpreted as invisibilized labor (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016), as a logic of human and more-than-human relationships (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017), as an ethical posture, but also as a responsibility - collective or individual (Bates et al., 2016; Krzywoszynska, 2019; Lawson, 2007; The Care collective, 2020; Thelen, 2015; Till, 2012; Tronto, 2020; Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Williams & Sharp, 2023). Therefore, it is a central concept in different fields and disciplines and can figure both as a research topic and as an approach, a posture that informs methodology and research design.

In both cases, it is a feminist and political concept, and literature on care is strongly feminized (it is sufficient to notice the gender of the authors mentioned above, which was not a purposeful selection of women-led studies, but rather a selection of relevant studies on the topic, that happen to be mostly authored by women) and therefore a strongly feminized research topic and practice.

For all these reasons and in light of existing literature on the gender gap in academia, the specific form of gender gap we want to focus on is related to genderized research topics (and practices) in SSH. Indeed, we asked ourselves not only what gender issues exist in contexts where women are present equally or more than men - SSH vs. STEM -, but also what happens within specific research topics that women are more involved in, precisely to show how even numerical dominance can be problematic on multiple levels.

Indeed, the starting hypothesis is that, in addition to doing most of the caring work in academic jobs, occupying more precarious and poorly paid positions than their male colleagues, and being underrepresented in STEM fields, women are also often

disproportionately present in research fields involving the topic of “care”, declined in different senses, or stemming from a “caring” posture.

In this sense, we want to explicitly address how we define “care” in this context. We do not refer to care only as in care work/labor, nor as only in care-related jobs (and related disciplines, such as social work studies). Indeed, Barone (2011) already identified and analyzed a gender divide in academia between “care” and “technological” disciplines, but in this case, he explicitly referred to what types of job such disciplines usually lead to, and whether these were “symbolically similar to women’s traditional domestic roles” (p. 173). While surely this more literal understanding of care is not excluded, we use the word “care” in a strategic and provocative way. It is an overarching umbrella term that includes its most literal interpretations as well as postures and approaches that could be defined as “caring”. To be sure, we mean approaches and postures that explicitly recognize the interdependence between humans, and between humans and non-humans, as well as the collective responsibility to “care” for our world and repair its issues so that everyone can live in it as well as possible (Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Williams & Sharp, 2023). Such a conception of care reaches beyond what is usually defined as strictly “care-related” (such as care work or care jobs), and allows to include research topics and approaches that have a transformative ethos towards more just societies and are based on a relational social ontology, namely an understanding of the world in terms of the connections that bind us together (Lawson, 2007). Our use of the word “care” is thus both strategic - to overwhelmingly include a series of topics that we believe are somehow connected by a similar caring and transformative posture - and perhaps provocative, as a concept that is being strongly revived in academia, and at times even tokenized in neoliberal academic settings (Vázquez, 2025).

Through our case studies, we show that while women are highly present in these fields of research, this numerical overrepresentation does not translate into visibility or recognition in top academic roles. We examine gender representation both in leadership positions and in research topics, bringing together analyses of the gender gap in senior roles and in academic housework, with particular attention to who mobilizes care as both a research topic and an epistemic posture within the social sciences and humanities.

The purpose of the contribution, though, is not to draw general and broadly valid conclusions on “who cares about care” throughout academia, but to start a discussion from two relevant, albeit specific, case studies and from observations drawn from our first-hand participation in these fields of research. We wish, through them, to open a debate with the entire academic community, inviting its members to apply a similar lens to their own specific field and context, and thus solidify and amplify the conviction that gender differences in academia must be addressed also within the fields themselves and in the perspectives adopted to investigate them, rather than only in the division between STEM and non-STEM disciplines (Barone, 2011) or between the most top and precarious positions. What dignity and relevance are we, as a scientific community, inclined to assign to topics potentially connoted as feminine or masculine according to traditional gender roles? Also, who tends to ask these questions (thus taking responsibility for them) and who, instead, tends to downplay them and why?

Our paper aims to analyze how the characteristics stereotypically associated with the female gender seem to have spillovers in the choices of research topics in two specific case studies, but also to initiate a broader reflection on the possibility that topics related to “care” are understood as “feminine” and possibly devalued or considered less prestigious. In the next paragraph, we present the research method and our positionality. It is followed by a section on the results obtained from the analysis of the two case studies. Finally, we discuss the limitations to underline criticalities we encountered, and the conclusion paragraph initiates a reasoning that, we hope, will be welcomed by the scientific community and made more lively and complete by other scholars.

3. Methodology and positionality

This research was inspired by autoethnographic observations, as presented in the introduction. Autoethnography was already employed several times as a practice if not explicitly feminist, at least useful to explore women’s experience (Crawley, 2012; Deschner et al., 2020; Kępa, 2019; Manzi et al., 2024; Tarisayi, 2023; Visse & Niemeijer, 2016). Starting from our individual experiences, we detected some gender differences, and we decided to try to understand how they can be traced to systemic dynamics.

We are both Italian doctoral students working in Italian universities, precarious research workers in a national context increasingly devalued and underfunded (ADI, 2024). We are white cisgender women in our late 20s or early 30s, born and raised in central and northern Italy.

The desire to pursue this study stemmed from our meeting and the exchange we had regarding our research topics. One of us then proposed to write something together, with the very purpose of opening the discussion to the broader academic community by suggesting the adoption of this kind of gaze in more spaces. Collective writing was another way to continue questioning, to keep the focus high - a feminist practice (Bain et al., 2025). In this sense, we do not refer in general to co-authorship - which is clearly present in all fields of academia without it representing a feminist posture in all cases - but rather to a writing practice that started as a conversation to exchange feelings related to our own experience in our academic fields, and only later became a structured paper. We thus understand co-authoring as a resistant caring practice that foregrounds relationality, mutual support, and shared responsibility. In light of our experiences and our personal conversations about them, we then asked ourselves how we wanted to approach the question.

We decided to analyze gender representation in contexts that were close to our experience and could represent our fields well due to their relevance, paying attention in both cases not only to the total representation from a purely quantitative point of view, but also and especially to the distribution between roles of different prestige. The reasons for the choice of case studies are twofold. Firstly, we believe these are good representations of our respective research fields, as said previously. Secondly, they provide us with quantifiable data that, otherwise, could only be collected first-hand

through a much longer, time- and resource-costly research project that we could not afford to embark on at the moment of our conversations. Certainly, national and even local-level data (such as university-level) on gender representation exists, but these are often not topic-specific (at most, discipline-specific by using data from single departments, which however hides individual topics, methods, approaches...).

The chosen cases are the AESOP Sustainable Food Planning Conference and the thematic groups of the Association of Italian Geographers (A.Ge.I.). For both, we analyze participation by gender (while being aware of the critical issues associated with such an analysis, that we address later).

Regarding the AESOP Conference, the programs of the last five editions were quantitatively analyzed to assess participation by gender and role. Using the same method, the scholars participating in the 32 thematic groups of A.Ge.I. were analyzed. The specific methodology for the study of each case is explained in more detail in the relevant paragraphs.

We realize that comparing a conference to working groups, in different disciplinary contexts, one at the European level and the others at the Italian level, may raise some concerns. We chose to proceed like this because our aim, far from being an exhaustive analysis of gender differentiation in SSH research topics, is to focus on very different specific cases to show how this kind of gender differentiation can be found in diverse disciplines and contexts, and how we can identify it and recognize it in a variety of guises. In fact, the analysis of two cases does not aim at a mirrored comparison, rather we hope that focusing on two different situations will incentivize other scholars to investigate and recognize similar dynamics in their disciplines and in other contexts (workshops, departments, research groups, conferences, writing retreats...) to collectively create not a homogeneous map of this kind of genderization in academia, but rather a mosaic of experiences.

4. Findings

4.1 AESOP Sustainable Food Planning Conference

The AESOP Sustainable Food Planning (SFP) conference stems from the subgroup dedicated to food planning of the Association of European Schools of Planning and lists alternative food networks, food governance, and food justice among its main areas of research, in addition to food planning. This list and the conference programs used for the analysis come from the official AESOP SFP website (https://aesopsfp.wordpress.com/about_spf/), except for the program from Madrid which was retrieved with a specific search on Google, since it is not available on the website. These are perspectives on food systems that are less dedicated to food as a concrete object of study in itself (as can be said of fields such as nutritional and agricultural sciences, etc.), but rather dedicated to human practices, rights, supply chain sustainability initiatives, and overall visions of the food system with the aim of making it more environmentally but also socially sustainable. The dimension of

care - toward communities but also the Earth and more-than-human others - related to similar practices was already highlighted by some studies, albeit very recent (Corubolo & Meroni, 2023; Facchini et al., 2024; Toldo, 2017; Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2020; Williams & Sharp, 2023). More specifically, care perspectives have been increasingly applied to the field of food systems transformation, on the one hand by scholars recognizing that policies and practices aimed at creating more environmentally and socially sustainable food systems represent acts of care towards communities and territories (Beacham, 2018; Williams & Sharp, 2023). For example, studies in the US and Sweden have found that some farmers - mainly women - apply “care” ethics to their activities, by focusing on the nourishing potential of their yield for the communities, rather than on its potential for them to make a living (Jarosz, 2011; Pettersson & Tillmar, 2022), while community kitchens in various European cities have been found to not only address food insecurity, but also represent “collective care” infrastructures that work “against current urban conditions characterised by displacement, ‘care-lessness,’ precarisation, and individualisation” (Abram et al., 2025, p. 1). On the other hand, care as a posture, as an approach, as an ethic or an ontology to start from, with the aim of identifying what challenges exist in food systems and what directions should be taken to address them, is increasingly used, either explicitly (e.g. Beacham, 2018; Bergonzini & Di Masso Tarditti, 2026; Jarosz, 2000) or through other perspectives that we believe fit within the understanding of “care” that we previously explained. For example, the aforementioned citations represent studies that investigate how care ethics inform urban food systems transformation initiatives (e.g. urban gardens, initiatives to tackle food insecurity and food waste...) - and include commentaries on how such ethics are gendered. But while not explicitly claiming to stem from a care perspective, other studies exist that, in our view, still imply a care/caring stance. For example, studies on food justice, food democracy and power dynamics in the food system are ultimately recognizing the interdependence of actors and juxtaposition of collective and individual responsibilities that is also at the basis of the relational social ontology on which a feminist care ethics is based (Lawson, 2007). Another example can be found in agroecological perspectives, which are not always explicitly connected to care, yet they criticize dominant practices and power structures in global food systems that have degraded ecosystems and disempowered local communities, with an aim of transformation that could easily be traced to care ethics, including feminist care ethics (Trevilla Espinal et al., 2021).

In June 2024, I attended the 11th AESOP SFP conference, held between Brussels and Ghent, Belgium. The program included several panels, workshops, and a fieldtrip. My attendance was an opportunity to observe who is currently contributing to this field of research, and one of the most obvious conclusions was that it is a predominantly female field. It was in this context that I decided to propose to Francesca to take our informal conversations to a more structural level and embark on the writing of a paper. I therefore decided to take notes on the audience and the people who served as chairs of the sessions I attended, as well as of the fieldtrip, during which one comment seemed particularly relevant: at roll call, one (female) participant wondered aloud, “Where are the boys?”.

Evidently, I could only measure participation in the panels I attended. Therefore, I decided to complement this by analyzing the conference program: although I could not

rely on it to analyze the panels' audience, it was still a good source as it includes names and surnames of all authors, divided between speakers and chairs. In addition, the list of scientific committee participants is available, and keynote presentations are highlighted. Finally, to check that this edition of the conference was not an exception, the same analysis was done on the programs of the four previous conferences: Almere 2022, Madrid 2019, Coventry 2017, and Turin 2015.

4.1.1 Brussels and Ghent 2024

I was physically present at this edition, so it is the one analyzed in most detail. The title was "Building Movement, Achieving Transformation," and some questions posed to the academic community in the call for abstracts were: How can sustainable food planning become more embedded into socially innovative and transformative movements? How can we strategically support the multiple communities imagining alternative futures? How can we mobilize around the sustainable transformation of food systems? Regarding the sessions I attended in person, participation was as follows (Tab. 1):

Table 1. Participation by gender in a selection of parallel sessions, AESOP SFP 2024 Conference

Session name	Chair	Participants*	Tot. M	M%	Tot. F	F%
Intersectionality and Food Justice	1F	17	3	17.7%	14	82.3%
Urban Experimentation	1F, 1M	21	5	23.8%	16	76.2%
Strategies for Movement Building	1M	17	4	23.5%	13	76.5%
Peri-urban Dynamics	1F	20	3	15%	17	85%
Co-creative Session: Topic on Food Justice	1M	9	3	33.3%	6	66.7%
Fieldtrip to Brussels Peri-urban Food Production Initiatives	/	31	4	12.9%	27	87.1%

*Participants are defined as all persons present, without distinguishing between speaker, chair or attendees.
Author's elaboration on personally collected data.

Of course, my personal choice of sessions to attend may in itself represent a bias. However, these numbers are still consistent with overall representation in the conference program (Tab. 3). In addition, all analyzed cases found a higher female presence, often more than double than male, not reflected, however, in the chair figures, whose gender representation is balanced. This balance is found at what can be considered the hierarchically higher positions of the conference (Tab. 2), namely the scientific and organizing committee and keynote speakers. Upon email consultation with a member of the AESOP SFP Steering Committee who organized the 2024 Conference, it was confirmed that attention was paid to ensure equal gender representation in these roles.

Table 2. Participation by gender in the organizing and scientific committee and among keynote speakers, AESOP SFP 2024 Conference

	M	M%	F	F%	Tot.
Organizing committee	3	50%	3	50%	6
Scientific committee	7	41.2%	10	58.8%	17
Keynote speakers	5	55.6%	4	44.4%	9

Author's elaboration on data from the conference program.

Finally, Table 3 represents overall gender representation in the conference program. The calculation was done by counting speakers (both keynote and parallel session speakers) from the entire program, thus including any absent people who still figured in the program and being careful not to count multiple times if the same person was mentioned in multiple sessions. The calculation certainly has limitations: first, gender was assumed from the first name on the program and, if in doubt, by searching for the person online to derive it from any academic profiles or biographies. Also, the program includes short autobiographies written by speakers themselves, in English, so in some but not all of them, it was possible to check the chosen pronoun (he/she, her/his, no instances of they/them). Second, this is a calculation based on a written program and not related to actual conference attendance data: it is indeed common for multi-authored papers to only be presented by one person. However, the fact that these scholars authored a paper can still be considered relevant in providing an overview of the human composition of the research field under consideration, regardless of actual attendance. Moreover, female participation is not only slightly higher, but reaches nearly 80 percent of the total, so it can be argued that even with some mistakes in the calculations, the picture drawn of this research area in Europe, as of 2024, is decidedly more female.

Table 3. Gender representation within the AESOP SFP 2024 Conference program

	M	M%	F	F%	Tot.
Conference program	39	21.1%	146	78.9%	185

Author's elaboration on data from the conference program.

4.1.2 Almere 2022

The 10th AESOP SFP Conference was held in 2022 in Almere, titled “Feeding the melting pot: agroecological urbanism for inclusive and sustainable food practices.” In this case, the calculation regarding participation was done only on the program, as I was not present.

Table 4 shows that, again, among the hierarchically higher roles such as keynote speakers and organizing and scientific committee, no substantial differences between male and female presence can be observed.

Table 4. Gender representation in organizing and scientific committee and keynote speakers, AESOP SFP 2022 Conference

	M	F	Tot.
Keynote speakers	1	1	2
Organizing committee	4	1	5
Scientific committee	3	8	11
Chair of AESOP SFP group	0	1	1
Tot.	8	11	18*

*One keynote speaker was also part of the organizing committee, so she was counted only once for the total. Author's elaboration on data from the conference program.

The difference increases by introducing into the calculation the people who appear in the program as parallel sessions speakers (Tab. 5): in this case, female participation accounts for 59.1 percent of the total. This is a clear majority, but slimmer than observed in the 2024 edition, which, however, also had a higher overall participation (185 versus 110).

Table 5. Gender representation within the AESOP SFP 2022 Conference program

	M	M%	F	F%	Tot.
Conference program	45	40.9%	65	59.1%	110

Author's elaboration on data from the conference program.

4.1.3 Madrid 2019

The ninth edition of the conference was held in Madrid in 2019. It was titled “Agroecological transitions confronting climate breakdown: Food planning for the post-carbon city.” In Table 6, as for the previous cases, data about general participation by gender is provided, as well as gender representation in what we consider hierarchically

higher positions. In this case, such positions include keynote speakers, organizing committee members (in the program, a local committee and a PhD workshop committee are listed - we considered both), scientific committee members, as well as speakers of the final roundtable and lecturers for the PhD workshop. Again, if one person covered different roles - e.g. presented more than one contribution or presented as a speaker in a session and was part of the organizing committee, etc. - they were counted once. Participants include authors of posters for the poster sessions. As for previous cases, it is not guaranteed that all authors of all contributions and posters were physically present in Madrid, yet we believe their authorship means they were active in this research field at the time of the conference, thus still representing a solid base to formulate insights on gender representation of the field. Interestingly, this conference is the only case where a non-binary person seems to be represented⁵.

Table 6. Gender representation in keynote speakers, organizing and scientific committee, and among general conference participants, AESOP SFP 2019 Conference

	M	M%	F	F%	N/B	N/B %	Tot
Keynote speakers, organizing and scientific committee	19	63.3%	11	36.7%	0	/	30
Conference program	36	37.9%	58	61.1%	1	1%	95

Author's elaboration on data from the conference's program.

4.1.4 Coventry 2017

The title of the eighth edition of the conference, held in Coventry in 2017, was "Re-imagining sustainable food planning, building resourcefulness: Food movements, insurgent planning and heterodox economics." Here, the preponderance of women within the program returns quite strongly (though not to the levels of 2024) and interestingly, it is also found among the "top roles" (Tab. 7).

⁵ While it is not explicitly declared in the conference program, upon searching for participants on Google Scholar to try to confirm their gender, it was found that one of them had added the pronouns "they/them" to their profile, thus we assume this is the preferred gender of the participant.

Table 7. Gender representation in the program and among keynote speakers, and organizing and scientific committee, AESOP SFP 2017 Conference

	M	M%	F	F%	Tot.
Keynote speakers, organizing and scientific committee	8	25.8%	23	74.2%	31
Conference program	31	33%	63	67%	94

Author's elaboration on data from the conference program.

4.1.5 Turin 2015

The seventh edition of the conference, held in Turin in 2015, is the last to be considered in this analysis and presents some interesting characteristics that introduce new elements of complexity. In fact, this edition is the only one where male representation surpasses female representation, both in “top roles” and among general participation (Table 8). However, the percentages are not as strikingly large as in 2024 and 2017 for female representation.

Table 8. Gender representation in the program and among the scientific committee, organizing committee, and keynote speakers, AESOP SFP 2015 Conference

	M	M%	F	F%	Tot.
Keynote speakers, organizing and scientific committee	26	67%	13	33%	39
Conference program	67*	57.3%	50*	42.7%	117 (120)

*The sum of 67 and 50 is 117, but the total number of individuals listed in the program is 120. Three individuals were listed only by their last name, making it impossible to determine their gender even by searching for their contributions on Google Scholar, as more scholars with the same surname appeared. Percentages are therefore calculated based on 117. Author's elaboration on data from the conference program.

A first element of complexity lies in the absence, in a few cases, of the first name of some speakers. This raises methodological and ethical questions worth exploring, discussed further in the section on limitations. Secondly, it is interesting to note Turin's conference title and its context. This edition was called “Localizing Urban Food Strategies: Farming Cities and Performing Rurality” and took place during EXPO Milan 2015, whose slogan was “Feeding the Planet”. The title refers to topics closely aligned with agricultural and rural

sciences, and the parallel sessions included topics such as labor markets and private entrepreneurship. As mentioned earlier, these fields tend to be less commonly addressed in the conference's usual programs.

Furthermore, a list of sponsors was published only for this edition, including public institutions and the local chamber of commerce (http://www.aesoptorino2015.it/conference_2015/patronage), whose representatives also participated in the conference. While it cannot be definitively stated that the higher male participation was due to the themes addressed and the involvement of more commercial and political entities without a deeper qualitative analysis, it is noteworthy that this is the only edition to exhibit this type of gender representation.

4.1.6 Conclusions on the AESOP SFP case and open questions

Analyzing gender representation in the programs of the AESOP SFP Conference across its last five editions reveals a marked predominance of women in the field of food sustainability. However, this trend is not observed in the Turin edition, which focused on agrarian and rural issues. Moreover, even though female representation reaches peaks of nearly 80% in 2024, when considering only the top roles gender representation is generally balanced. This reflects broader discussions on gender discrimination in academia, but it becomes even more significant in a field so clearly dominated by women. At the same time, as said, it was confirmed that at least in the 2024 edition, attention was paid to guarantee that these top roles were gender equal. It would be interesting to further investigate whether the same attention was paid in the previous conferences, but also to broaden the study to other contexts (such as publications, full professorships in relevant institutions...) to assess what happens in top roles of this field of research when specific attention to gender equality is lacking.

A progressive increase in gender imbalance is also noted, peaking in the 2024 conference. This may indicate that an increasing number of young academics entering the field are women, though it was not possible in this case to verify the career stages of participants.

Several questions remain unanswered, and we want to offer them for discussion to the academic community. Specifically, a further qualitative analysis of the sessions and disciplinary areas by topic would be desirable to test the hypothesis we formulated regarding the Turin edition, but also a qualitative account of career stages of participating scholars. Additionally, a discussion on best practices to highlight women's contributions and their predominance in certain fields is necessary. This must avoid the risk of diminishing the relevance of a field through its feminization, while simultaneously resisting the reinforcement of a binary perspective on gender. Finally, the issue of using first names and pronouns remains an open and sensitive topic.

4.2 The Association of Italian Geographers (A.Ge.I.)

When my co-author shared her interest in studying the AESOP conferences, I initially considered doing something similar. Then, I thought it would be interesting to investigate the Italian case, providing both a European perspective and one situated in the academic context of the country where we conduct research, in terms of affiliation and fieldwork.

I decided to focus on the field of geography by examining the main research themes within the Association of Italian Geographers (A.Ge.I.) and their relation to gender and care.

The A.Ge.I., ‘Associazione dei Geografi Italiani’ (Association of Italian Geographers)⁶, formerly known as the Italian Geographers Committee (until 1977), aims to coordinate and organize geographical research, especially at the national level.

Even the association’s name could spark discussion, as it does not address the fact that ‘geografi’ (geographers) in Italian is a gendered masculine term.

The A.Ge.I. currently has a female president, Elena Dell’Agnese - the first woman to hold this position. However, its history of leadership roles is imbalanced. The composition of the governing council has progressively moved toward greater gender parity, although male members remain dominant. In 1990, there were 12 men and only 3 women. By 2009, the council included 6 women and 13 men. In 2021, the number of women rose to 7 out of 19 members (Albanese et al., 2024).

Within the A.Ge.I., there are 32 working groups dedicated to specific themes. My work focused on analyzing the gender composition of these groups, not only in terms of who occupies coordination roles from a gender perspective but also to understand whether there are any thematic or research trends related to gender and care.

As of August 2024, the total number of participants in the working groups (Table 9) was 526, including 258 men and 268 women. On average, each woman participates in 1.92 groups, while each man participates in 1.87 groups. Women are therefore slightly more numerous than men and tend to participate in slightly more groups.

Table 9. Participation in A.Ge.I.’s working groups by gender and coordination role

	M	F	Tot.
Participants	258	268	526
Total of participants per groups	484	514	998
Number of groups attended (per person)	1.88	1.92	
Group coordinators	25	12	37

Author’s elaboration on data from A.Ge.I.’s website.

From this apparent numerical parity, it becomes evident that female coordinators or co-coordinators account for only 12 positions compared to 25 male coordinators or co-

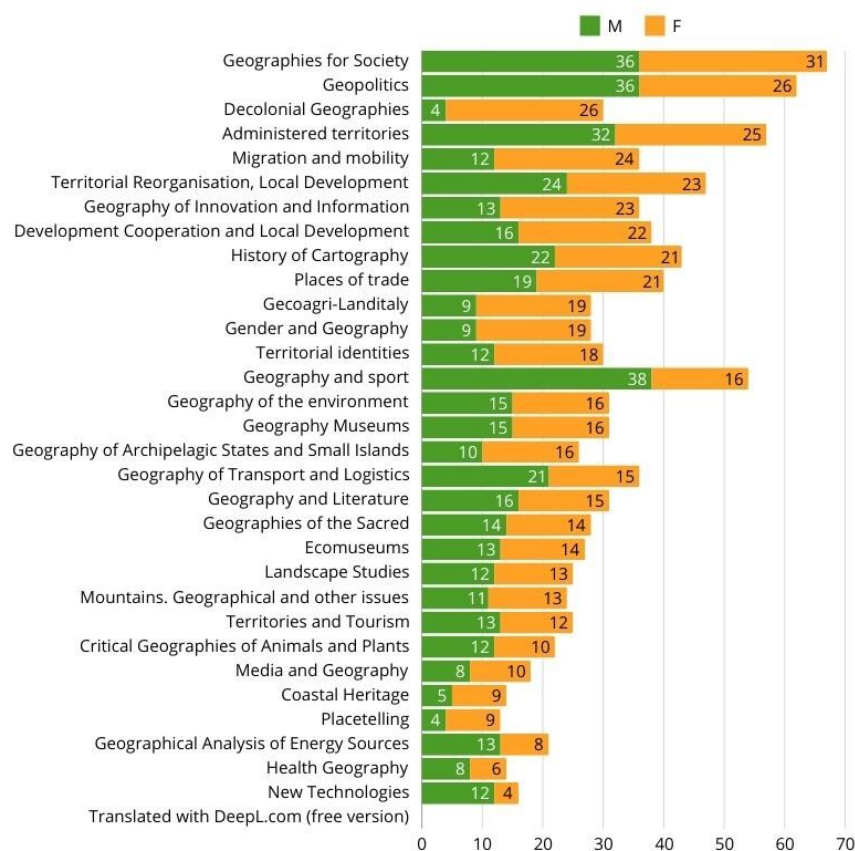
⁶ All data presented here are sourced from the AGEI website <https://www.ageiweb.it/>.

coordinators. This demonstrates a well-established trend: the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles.

Investigating the relationship between gender and the topics addressed by the working groups (Fig. 1) reveals significant trends. Among men, higher participation is observed in groups focused on Geography and sports, Geopolitics, Geography for society, Administrative territories and territorial reorganization, Historical cartography, and Transportation and logistics. Conversely, men are less represented in groups addressing Decolonial geographies, Place-telling, Coastal heritage, Health geography, Gender and Geography, and GeoAgri-LandItaly.

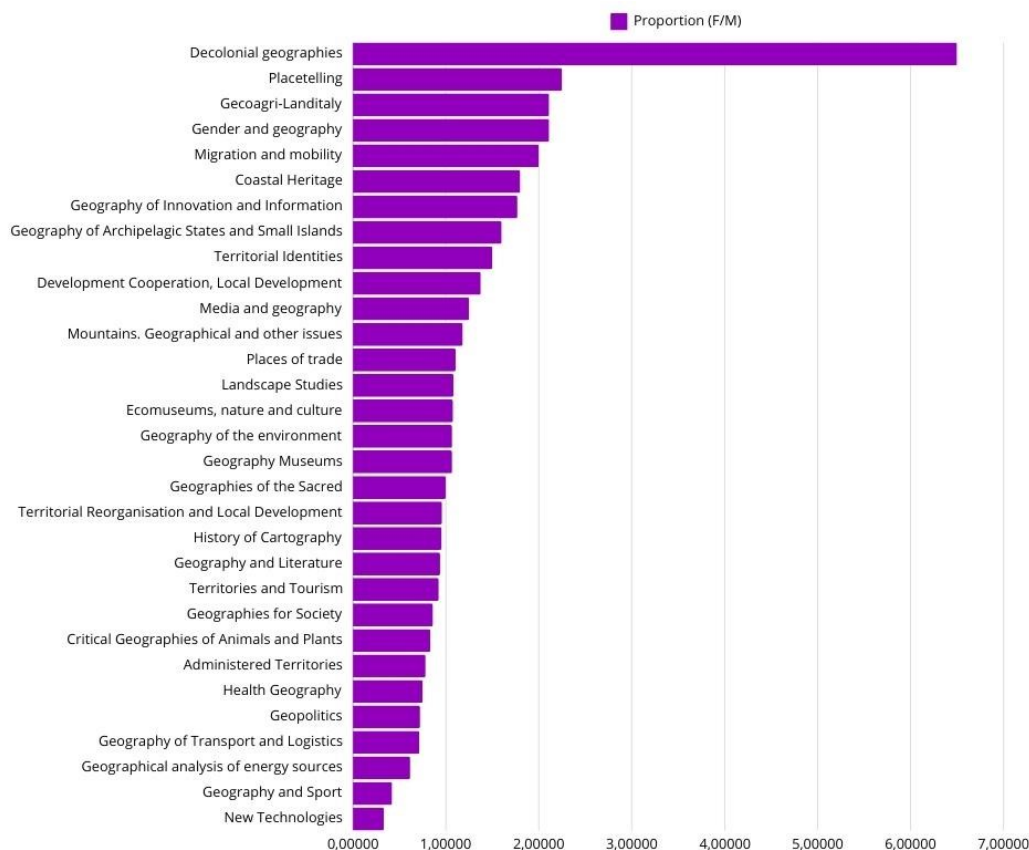
For women, notable representation is seen in groups such as Geography for society, Geopolitics, Decolonial geographies, Administrative territories, and Migrations and mobility, whereas their participation is lower in New technologies, Energy sources, and Place-telling.

Figure 1. Male and female representation in the A.Ge.I.'s working groups as of 2024
(Author's elaboration)



These data, while not immediately revealing on their own, yield interesting insights when analyzed proportionally (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Proportion of female over male representation in A.Ge.I.'s working groups as of 2024
(Author's elaboration)



This chart helps in understanding proportionality. The groups that exhibit a good gender balance, regardless of the absolute number of participants, include Landscape studies, Ecomuseums, nature, and culture, Environmental geography, Geography museums, Sacred geographies, Territorial reorganization and local development, History of cartography, Geography and literature, Territories and tourism, and Geography for society.

Analyzing groups with the greatest gender disparities, we find that male-dominated groups (proportionally) are: Geography and sports, where men outnumber women three to one; New technologies for knowledge and Territorial management, with more than twice as many men as women; Geography of transportation and logistics and Geographic analysis of energy sources, where men outnumber women by approximately 1.5 to one.

In contrast, female-dominated groups (proportionally) are: Decolonial geographies, with six times as many women as men; Place-telling, Gender and geography, GeoAgri-LandItaly, and Migrations and mobility, where women outnumber men by more than two to one. The most female-dominated groups include themes tied to gender geography, feminist geography, decolonial studies, migration, and agrifood systems, all fields in which care is a main topic and practice. Conversely, male disengagement with these topics

appears more pronounced than female disengagement with traditionally male-dominated subjects.

This resonates with Barone's (2011) observation that academia is often divided along lines of "care" and "technological" disciplines, even within the discipline itself - a gendered distinction in which men are overrepresented in fields such as sports, infrastructure, and emerging technologies, while women dominate areas like gender studies, migration, and other socially-oriented fields. Yet beyond these literal associations, the defining feature of these research areas lies in their posture: a deliberate, reflective, and relational mode of inquiry that situates knowledge production within ethical, political, and social responsibilities.

A closer look at the web pages of research groups, particularly those focused on gender and decolonial studies, makes clear that these groups actively engage with questions of power asymmetries, positionality, reflexivity, the sharing of knowledge and practices, and the pluriverse of social realities. For example, the decolonial group emphasizes the need to critically examine how colonial legacies continue to structure power relations across gender, race, ethnicity, and other forms of social differentiation, while promoting methodological approaches that are multiscalar, multidisciplinary, and attentive to situated knowledge. Similarly, gender-focused geographies foreground lived experiences, intersectional oppressions, and the deconstruction of normalized hierarchies in both public and private spaces.

In the gender and geography group, for instance, there is explicit attention to teaching and pedagogy, approached as a valuable space of reflection rather than relegated to invisible academic housework. This underscores a broader commitment to valuing all forms of labor and knowledge production, including relational and educational work often overlooked in academia.

Both groups not only produce scholarship but also cultivate practices of reflexivity, shared agency, and public engagement, embedding a caring and socially transformative ethos into their work. This approach aligns with our conceptualization of "care" in the theoretical framework of this study, understood as a term encompassing research postures that recognize the interdependence of humans and non-humans, and the collective responsibility to sustain more just and livable worlds.

In this sense, the transformative and caring ethos is not merely an incidental feature of the topics studied - it is central to the epistemic stance of the researchers themselves.

4.2.1 Conclusions on A.Ge.I. working groups and open questions

Analyzing participation in A.Ge.I. working groups highlights alignment with broader academic discussions on gender discrimination and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

The most compelling result is the different ways men and women engage with topics that might be considered feminized. Notably, women in male-dominated groups typically represent at least one-third of participants, whereas men in female-dominated groups can account for as little as one-seventh of participants. This disparity suggests, provocatively,

that it is more acceptable (and desirable) for women to "do manly things" than for men to "do womanly things" (Pesciarelli et al., 2019).

As Chiara heard during her conference fieldtrip, the question "Where are the boys?" re-emerges here. Male-dominated fields are perceived as prestigious and valued, while feminized fields are seen as less important. This devaluation leads to low male participation. Academia's established hierarchy privileges masculine-coded disciplines, subordinating and devaluing other research areas, methodologies and postures along with those who engage in them. In Italy, the majority of the scientific community continues to be traditional and gender studies remained marginalized and mainly pursued by women. Gender geography has been perceived all too often as a geography about women, done by women, something treated with arrogance or irony, or simply viewed as valueless (Schmidt di Friedberg & Pecorelli, 2019).

Consequently, feminized fields are devalued by traditional academia. These areas - care, gender geography, feminist and decolonial studies, and agrifood systems - offer alternative approaches to fixing research emphasizing reflexivity, collaboration, and attention to power dynamics, and to fixing academia itself.

In this research, some questions remain unanswered. Most significantly, how accurately does desk research reflect actual participation and contribution to the working groups? Incorporating qualitative methods to examine differences in participation practices would be valuable. We discuss this and other limits in the dedicated section.

5. Limits

Before proceeding to the conclusions, it is important to highlight several limitations - both ethical and practical - that this work encountered.

First, considering that one objective of this article is to encourage the academic community to replicate similar studies in other fields, thereby enriching the understanding of the feminization of care-related themes, it is necessary to underline the practical limitations of the applied methodology.

Regarding the A.Ge.I groups, as noted earlier, we do not know if, to what extent, and how individuals participate in and contribute to the activities of the working groups. Therefore, a qualitative investigation would be desirable.

For the AESOP SFP Conference, one limitation was the lack of perfect methods to measure gender representation. In the absence of explicit declarations of one's gender or pronouns, it becomes necessary to rely on first names, which are not always reliable, for example due to the existence of names that are socially accepted as both masculine and feminine and of unfamiliar names that are difficult to assign to a gender, or simply because first names are not always provided.

At the same time, even the presence of first names cannot guarantee absolute certainty about a person's gender. This leads to ethical considerations. Is it correct to assume a person's gender based on their name (or appearance, as in the limited case of panel attendance observed at the SFP Conference) when no autobiography or pronoun

declaration is provided? Similarly, we must wonder whether attempting to mainstream the practice of requesting pronoun declarations is an appropriate solution. While the intention would be to respect everyone's gender identity and make visible the gender diversity animating academia, we must remember that gender identity is a sensitive topic. Discussing it should not be mandatory, as this practice risks becoming intrusive, potentially resulting in forced outing (see also the concept of "paradox of visibility," Van Den Brink & Stobbe, 2009).

Nevertheless, we continue to believe that making the strong gendering of academia visible is essential. It is, therefore, crucial to explore non-intrusive ways to achieve this goal.

Additionally, and partially connected to what we just discussed, we recognize that we reduced the concept of gender to a binary opposition. We wish to emphasize that this does not reflect our understanding of the category of gender but is a consequence of the data available to us. This is a generalized issue: not only was it challenging for us to assign gender categories based on program or working group data, but quantitative research almost always relies on databases that permit only binary analyses grounded in the biological dimension of gender. As a result, reports and evaluations frequently present this significant limitation (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

Finally, we acknowledge and stress the absence of an intersectional perspective (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). This study focuses solely on gender, even though dynamics related to class, race, and other axes of discrimination are also observable. These dimensions should be investigated in an integrated manner to provide a more detailed and nuanced picture. These axes of discrimination are even more invisible, harder to identify, and more challenging to access, making them perhaps even more critical to explore.

6. Conclusions

So, who cares about care? Is care "a women's issue"? Our answer is no: there are no essentialist assignments of certain issues, themes, or attitudes based on biological sex or gender. But at the same time, yes: care is a highly feminized theme.

Care is not a theme, a type of work, an approach or a relational logic that is essentially or biologically assigned to women. However, based on this preliminary analysis, care emerges as a strongly feminized theme and practice. In this tension, some questions take root that we wish to offer as the conclusions of this work.

In general, the initial hypothesis is confirmed, at least regarding the specific contexts examined through the case studies. Namely, researchers who engage with care (in a broad sense) are predominantly women. As seen with gender representation in the A.Ge.I.'s groups, men's interest in care-related (and thus feminized) research topics is significantly lower than women's interest in masculinized topics. Furthermore, adopting a feminist lens, such data suggest that masculinized themes, if not hegemonic, seem more

recognized and valued, while feminized themes are discredited and devalued - even within the SSH, not only in comparisons between SSH and STEM.

Moreover, internal power disparities are perpetuated. This is evident in the number of male coordinators of working groups in the case of A.Ge.I and male organizers and keynote speakers in the case of AESOP SFP - contexts that, at first glance, appear equitable or even skewed toward strong female participation, yet at the "higher levels," they become masculinized. Indeed, our case studies demonstrate that care-related topics and approaches (understood in the broad sense that we explained at the beginning) are overall strongly feminized, yet such feminization is lost in the positions that are hierarchically higher. This resonates with European and Italian data on career advancement in all disciplines, both SSH and STEM, including specific data from Italian sociology and geography.

Additionally, invisible labor - typically performed by those in lower hierarchical positions, who are more often women - remains hidden. This aligns with what was already discussed in the first paragraph: an internal class disparity intersects the gender gap in academia, dictated by occupying positions of varying prestige and job security.

However, in connection to the issue of class, it must again be emphasized that this study lacks an intersectional and decolonial perspective that integrates reflections on gender with those on other axes of discrimination.

We believe that the research interests of scholars reflect the interests of and in society, especially in geography and the social sciences. Analyzing the interests of scholars from a gender perspective helps us to highlight how social issues are gendered, and so is the attention that is dedicated to them. Considering recent developments in Europe, with for example the phenomenon of the "modern gender gap" (Dassonneville, 2021; Kedar et al., 2024), another intersectional aspect that is very important to analyze is age, especially when we ask questions about the future, both for academia and for the political scenario. Future research pursuing these directions is desirable.

Another hope, more strictly related to academia and methodologies to critically analyze it, is to collectively reflect on non-intrusive practices that facilitate the coexistence of differences, making gender diversity in various academic disciplines increasingly visible and measurable. The lens we adopted for this work should be collectively improved and become more widespread.

Finally, our inquiry leads us to seek solutions that break the vicious cycle by letting both care-related themes and feminized themes - which often overlap, as seen - be valued on par with others. Yet, we do not wish for this recognition to depend on male participation, as this would perpetuate the idea that male approval is necessary for a subject to be deemed worthy of consideration. Conversely, we indeed hope these spaces will be frequented by male scholars - not to gain validation, but to demonstrate that care-related themes are not inherently gendered. Instead, they concern everyone and would benefit from enriched perspectives, granting them full dignity and cross-disciplinary recognition throughout academia.

Far from offering answers, our intent was to share questions and, above all, to continue adopting a careful stance: to wear a lens that is sensitive to gender-based discrimination and to share our situated, gendered story.

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