

## Women public prosecutors working in the antimafia sector. Challenges within a high demand context

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### Abstract

This article explores the gendered dynamics shaping the professional trajectories of women Public Prosecutors in Italy's antimafia sector - a domain marked by institutional prestige, high workload intensity, and protective constraints. Drawing on gender-disaggregated statistics from the *Consiglio superiore della magistratura* and qualitative interviews with eleven women magistrates across generations and offices, the study starts by tracing the historical background of women's admission to the Italian judiciary and by revealing persistent patterns of vertical and horizontal segregation - despite the feminization process undertaken by the profession in the last three decades. It, then, discusses women's engagement in the antimafia sector, namely in the Public Prosecutors offices dealing specifically with organized crime - including *Direzioni Distrettuali Antimafia* (DDA), at local level, and *Direzione Nazionale Antimafia e Antiterrorismo* (DNNA), at central level. Finally, the article focuses on the process of professionalisation of women Antimafia Public Prosecutors and the implications of some specific characteristics of the job - for example, having protection - on their everyday life.

**Keywords:** women, antimafia, public prosecutors, professionalism, double presence.

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## Introduction

In Italy, women gained access to the magistracy only in 1963 - nearly two decades after universal suffrage was recognized - despite Article 48 of the Constitution guaranteeing equal access to public office. Since the first recruitment exams held in 1965, in which women constituted a mere 6 percent of successful candidates, their representation has steadily risen. By 2024, female magistrates comprised 56.2 percent of the judiciary, marking a striking process of feminization. Yet beneath these quantitative gains lie enduring patterns of horizontal and vertical segregation that shape both the distribution of women across judicial sectors and their access to leadership roles.

This article combines statistical data drawn from the *Consiglio Superiore della Magistratura* (CSM) - the High Council of the Judiciary which operates as the judiciary's self-governing body - <sup>1</sup> with qualitative interviews conducted with eleven women magistrates - spanning different generations and offices - to explore the professional life of women in the magistrature. In particular, it focuses on anti-mafia sector, where high prestige and institutional visibility coexist with intense workload demands, protective measures, and a private life constrained by security protocols. These factors, often rendered invisible in conventional accounts, emerge clearly when our methodological lens focuses on lived experience and narrative meaning-making (Gluck & Patai, 1991). Interviews with women magistrates were encounters conducted following the methodological suggestions given by Douglas Ezzy according to whom: "Good interviews are not dominated by either the voice of the interviewer or the agendas of the interviewee. Rather, they feel like communion, where the tension between the research question and the experience of the interviewee is explored" (Ezzy, 2010, p. 164).

This article begins with a paragraph outlining the historical and constitutional background of women's admission to the Italian judiciary and presenting key gender-disaggregated statistics on magistrates' representation. The second paragraph briefly describes the Prosecutors offices dealing specifically with organized crime - including *Direzioni Distrettuali Antimafia* (DDA), at local level, and *Direzione Nazionale Antimafia e Antiterrorismo* (DNNA), at central level -, and discusses the presence of women. The third paragraph is dedicated to the process of professionalisation of women working in the DDA and the implications of some specific characteristics of the job - for example, having protection - on their everyday life. This analysis is framed within the enduring model of double presence elaborated by sociologist Laura Balbo (Balbo, 1978).

<sup>1</sup> Its institutional composition is established under Article 104 of the Italian Constitution, comprising three ex officio members and twenty-seven elected members.

## The feminization of the magistrature

In Italy, women gained formal access to judicial office in 1963—nearly two decades after the recognition of women's suffrage rights.<sup>2</sup> Until then, they could not participate in the public exam required to become a magistrate, even though article 48 of Italian Constitution stated that “all citizens of both sexes have equal access to elected offices from public offices in accordance with the requirements established by law”.

In 1947, the Constituent Assembly<sup>3</sup> took up the issue concerning the “entry of women into the judiciary”, and Members of Parliament (MPs) dealt with it during the debates concerning the structure to be given to the judiciary in the Republican state. The theme was introduced thanks to an amendment calling for “women have the right of access to all orders and ranks of the judiciary” presented by two women MPs, Teresa Mattei and Maria Maddalena Rossi.

The discussion was characterized by stereotypes about women who were not considered able to hold the role of judge due to supposed emotional, irrational and instable qualities of their “nature”. Biological reasons were at the core of many arguments of the Assembly’s male members who stood against women’s entry in this profession. In his speech MP Bettoli, for example, stated:

*[...] the problem of women in the administration of justice must also be solved on the basis of the ontological characteristics of being a man or a woman, because the problem of the administration of justice is a rational problem, it is a common logical problem that must be set up and solved, and it is solved in terms of strong emotionality, if not even of that purely superficial emotion that is characteristic of the female gender. (Canosa, 1978, p.37)*

A few male members were more openminded, and yet they sustained that women could be part of the judiciary only in given courts, considered more suited to their characteristics, for example the Juvenile Court. MP Giovanni Leone clearly stated that the distinction between men and women ought to be reflected in the functions they were allowed to perform. To understand the root of certain biases, widespread still today, it is worthwhile to quote part of his statement:

*with regard to the problem of admission to the judiciary, I believe that only in certain limited judicial functions can women be introduced; that is, in those functions in which women can participate with profit for society and for the administration of justice, because of the qualities deriving from their femininity and sensitivity. I am referring (...) to those proceedings in which judgment is required regardless of*

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<sup>2</sup>Law No. 66 of 1963 regulated the admission of women to all public offices and posts, including the judiciary.

<sup>3</sup> The Constituent Assembly was a special, unicameral legislative body elected on 2 June 1946 with the sole mandate of drafting and approving the Constitution of the new Italian Republic that came into effect on 1 January 1948.

*requirements that are not strictly legal, such as the juvenile court, which is the most suitable forum for the participation of women! But the highest judiciaries, where it is necessary to resist and react to the excess of sentimental contributions, where it is necessary instead to distil the maximum of technicality, I think that woman should not be admitted; because only men can have that degree of balance and preparation necessary for such functions (Ivi., p. 38).*

Even those men who supported women's entry into the judiciary revealed a misogynistic bias by expressing the expectation that only a few women would ultimately become judges (Ivi., p. 40). MP Conti in a lengthy speech at one point says: "Women will be able to enter the judiciary, but they will not enter it: that is my belief". According to him, after entering the judiciary "they will see that being a judge means having many worries and that exercising its functions is not easy, and for others tranquilizing at certain periods of their lives precisely" (Ivi. p. 41).

This prediction has not come true. Since the first exams in 1965 - in which women accounted for 6% of those admitted - their number has constantly increased,<sup>4</sup> so much so that in the late 1980s female candidates exceeded their male counterparts. From the late 1990s this trend became stable, and eventually, since 2015 more female than male magistrates have been in service. More precisely, in 2024, the number was 4,071, accounting for 56.2% of the total. This data shows quite clearly that the profession has undergone a process of feminization.<sup>5</sup>

Despite of this tendency, sex typing job segregation both horizontal and vertical has characterized judiciary organization. The former involves the division of labour across different fields, while the latter concerns the smaller number of women in leadership positions. According to the most recent data, the number of men in leading positions is larger than the number of women. According to the most up-to-date statistics, there remains a significant disparity in gender representation within leadership roles: the presence of men in high-ranking positions continues to surpass that of women, highlighting an enduring imbalance.

In March 2024, a total of 392 magistrates held senior positions, with a gender distribution that remains uneven. More specifically, nearly 71% of those in leadership roles were men, meaning that close to three out of four magistrates in such positions were male. However, the gender balance was more equitable regarding semi-directive roles: in this category, nearly five out of ten magistrates performing these functions were women (46% of the total 681). More specifically, in judicial offices, the percentage of women holding senior positions increased to 33.2% (compared to 34% the previous year). However, the situation differs in prosecutorial offices, where the proportion declined from 23% to 22% over the past year.

<sup>4</sup> Consiglio Superiore della Magistratura, Ufficio statistico, *Distribuzione per genere del personale di magistratura*, marzo 2024, [www.csm.it/statistiche](http://www.csm.it/statistiche).

<sup>5</sup> On the female presence in Italian magistrature see Tacchi (2009), D'Amico, Leonardi, Siccardi (2017), D'Amico (2020).

Similar trends apply to semi-directive roles. Women accounted for approximately 51% of such positions in judicial offices (compared to 48.7% the previous year), whereas in prosecutorial offices, the percentage was significantly lower, dropping to around 27% (down from approximately 33% the previous year).

In 2024, women occupied 34 percent of senior positions in the Supreme Court (18 women versus 35 men), up from 29.5 percent a year earlier. At the Court of Appeal, however, female representation fell to roughly 17 percent, down from 32 percent in March 2023. In Surveillance Courts, women held 61 percent of senior posts (compared with 65.4 percent the previous year), and in Juvenile Courts they occupied 58 percent (up from 50 percent). Conversely, in ordinary Courts only 23.4 percent of senior roles were held by women, a slight decline from 25.7 percent in March 2023.

Within prosecutorial offices, the Juvenile Prosecutor's Office, not surprisingly, showed the strongest gender balance, with women covering 69.6 percent of leadership roles—an increase on the roughly 60 percent seen the previous year. By contrast, female representation remained low in the General Prosecutor's Offices (approximately 10.5 percent) and in the Prosecutor's Offices at the Tribunal (about 15 percent), compared with 12.5 percent and 17 percent, respectively, in 2023. At the General Prosecutor's Office of the Supreme Court, the number of women in senior positions remains unchanged at one. Even in relation to semi-directive positions, there is a difference between judicial offices and prosecutorial offices in terms of gender balance. In judicial offices, female magistrates hold between 50% and 52% of these roles; while in prosecutorial offices, the percentages are approximately 25% at the second-instance level and 26.2% at the first-instance level.

In order to properly read the data concerning vertical segregation, it is essential to know the mechanisms of career progression within the Italian ordinary judiciary, which involves a sequence of structured phases. Initial recruitment is conducted via a public examination. Upon successful completion of the selection process, candidates undergo a compulsory training period (“*uditoreato*”), after which they receive their first appointment as an ordinary magistrate—serving either as a single judge or a deputy public prosecutor. The higher they rank in the public examination, the greater the freedom they have to select the location in which to begin their careers. Their successive career progression is largely automatic. Advancement in rank, such as promotion from the court of first instance to the court of appeal, is primarily determined by seniority, assuming the absence of any adverse evaluations. Contrary to other sectors, this is quite an opportunity for women.<sup>6</sup> However, we must consider that access to semi-directive or directive

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, unlike other prestigious professions, women are paid like men, since they are appointed within the framework of public employment legislation. This gives them protection against gender disparities in remuneration.

positions - the most prestigious and authoritative positions - requires participation in a competitive procedure, contingent upon the attainment of the prerequisite. The former requires five years of effective judicial service, while directive appointments necessitate at least 8-9 years of total service and a minimum of two years in a semi-directive role (this may vary depending on the specific function). The selections, managed by the CSM, are publicly called, and candidates may submit their applications along with a dossier attesting to their qualifications (including service reports, scholarly contributions, and evidence of professional development). The selection process is managed by the CSM. The procedure should always ensure transparency, impartiality, and alignment with constitutional principles, safeguarding the independence of the judiciary and ensuring meritocratic access to higher judicial offices (Pellegrini, 2013). According to Dallara and Catino (2021), the way the CSM manages judicial careers can be read as the outcome of a tension between formally codified rules and what they call a “real governance” shaped, at least in part, by extralegal practices associated with internal factions within the National Magistrates’ Association (ANM). The *Testo Unico sulla dirigenza giudiziaria* - adopted in the wake of the Castelli-Mastella reform (2006-2007) - formally introduced merit-based criteria for leadership appointments, yet its high level of bureaucratic complexity may have generated implementation gaps. Dallara and Catino suggest that these gaps have sometimes been filled by factional dynamics within the ANM, through informal alliances and reciprocal understandings that, in their view, can influence how the CSM concretely decides on appointments and promotions.

In this interpretive framework, the real governance of careers would be characterised by electoral lists organised by the main ANM factions, which structure candidacies and voting strategies for CSM elections; informal negotiations and exchanges that may steer appointments, transfers and promotions; and a decision-making logic where factional solidarity can, at times, appear more effective than formal procedures in offering speed and predictability to those involved. Within this perspective, the constitutional freedom of association risks being perceived less as a right than as a *de facto* expectation, a resource that can be strategically mobilised to avoid obstacles to career advancement. Guarnieri has described this dynamic as a “voluntary but non-spontaneous affiliation that determines the fate of each magistrate: those without factional connections will be less protected than others” (2008, p. 21).

It is important, however, to stress that factional pluralism is important, as underlined by many authors. Internal groups function are pivotal channels for ideological diversity and cultural debate within the judiciary. From this angle, the core problem would not be the existence of factions per se, but rather the behaviour of certain magistrates, who may be inclined to vote in CSM elections primarily on the basis of self-protection (Pellegrini 2013, pp. 129-130).

In conclusion, given that advancing to semi-directorate and directorate positions requires participation in a distinct competitive procedure managed by the CSM, candidates for these

positions not only have to build a valid curriculum, but also, they have to expand their social capital, which is important for sponsoring their own candidatures. Thus, associative life might become crucial for their careers.

Some of the interviewees think that the glass ceiling faced by women in the judiciary is a structural fact linked to women's lack of time to participate in the associative life of a magistrate, that would help to increase their possibilities of career advancement. In other words, they seem to have less opportunities to engage in networking, in order to advance their careers. In one interviewee's words:

*If individuals wish to defer pursuing apex-level positions, they must nonetheless follow a structured progression through various offices – often within professional associations or other representative bodies – since these roles ultimately confer formal credentials. Moreover, men frequently enjoy greater temporal flexibility to pursue this path, whereas women magistrates – who cannot entirely divest themselves of familial obligations – face a more complex balancing act and therefore may have fewer opportunities to stand for associative leadership roles.*

Other interviewees are more optimistic, thinking that an increase in women holding semi-directive and directive positions is just a matter of time. They sustain that women were latecomers and therefore there are still not sufficient women who have gained reached enough seniority to obtain leading positions.

Women's horizontal segregation<sup>7</sup> - in the view of most of interviewed Prosecutors - is due to the fact that women themselves request positions in sectors traditionally considered more suited for women, since they facilitate balancing professional responsibilities with domestic life. In other words, certain sectors of the judiciary are perceived to make professional life compatible with family commitments.

Most of the interviewees underlined that this segregation has increasingly reduced. While at the beginning, women used to request positions in sectors considered more suited to women, i.e. sectors linked to caring and involving minors or the family, nowadays women prove to be interested even in sectors traditionally associated to men, such as economic crime and organized crime, as we will analyse in the next paragraph.

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<sup>7</sup> There are no studies investigating the reasons behind women's horizontal segregation in the judiciary, while work about sex segregation in traditionally male jobs abound. For example, in the medical sector see Gaiaschi (2022); Carbone, Dagnes (2025); Carbone, D., Dagnes, J., Antinori, A., & Radin, A. (2024); Pelley, E., & Carnes, M. (2020).

## Antimafia procurement offices. Still a male world?

The *Direzione nazionale antimafia* office was established in 1991<sup>8</sup> with the aim of nationally coordinating the investigations of mafia-type organized crime, and also - since 2015 - terrorism (since then the name has changed: DNAA).<sup>9</sup>

The DNAA is made up of the National Antimafia Prosecutor (*Procuratore Nazionale Antimafia*) and 20 Deputy National Antimafia Prosecutors (*Sostituti procuratori nazionali*). It coordinates the investigations conducted by the District Anti-Mafia Directorates (DDAs) on mafia-related crimes.<sup>10</sup> The rationale behind the coordination of this system is the need to make knowledge circulate among all offices involved and connect the DDAs in order to facilitate communications and to discover elements (actors, crime or places) they may have in common, in order to better reconstruct criminal networks.

As explained by the actual National Antimafia Prosecutor, Giovanni Melillo:

*The original idea - although it may seem simple at first glance - is, in reality, anything but simple. Complex phenomena such as mafia, organized crime, and terrorism require equally sophisticated knowledge and an interdisciplinary approach. This necessity is even more evident in the realm of money laundering, as it demands an understanding of markets, enterprises, financial systems, and business organization techniques. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond the individual dimension of judicial work, necessitating institutional structures that can ensure information sharing, coordination, and strategic planning.*<sup>11</sup>

The DDAA's activities focus on matters that are strictly linked to organized crime and terrorism, including camorra, 'ndrangheta, drug trafficking; human trafficking; money laundering; public procurement; asset prevention measures; eco-mafias; trademark counterfeiting; suspicious financial transactions; foreign criminal organizations.<sup>12</sup>

National Deputy Prosecutors have various functions, including carrying out coordination activities at each DDA, which they visit periodically to monitor the progress of ongoing investigations and transmit relevant information at the central level (DNAA); providing opinions in cases defined by statutory provisions, with particular attention to collaborators with justice, the application of Article 41-bis of the Penitentiary Act (pertaining to a restrictive prison regime), and

<sup>8</sup> Decreto-legge 20 novembre 1991, n. 367,[1] convertito con modificazioni dalla legge 20 gennaio 1992, n. 8,[2].

<sup>9</sup> Decreto legge 18 febbraio 2015, n.7, convertito con modificazioni dalla Legge 17 aprile 2015, n. 43.

<sup>10</sup> At the local level, the *Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia* (DDA) operates within the Public Prosecutors Offices located in the seats of the 26 Courts of Appeal.

<sup>11</sup> Online lecture given during the postgraduate course “Antiriciclaggio, trasparenza e criminalità organizzata” at University of Milan, 13 May 2025.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/page/it/direzione\\_nazionale\\_antimafia\\_e\\_antiterrorismo](https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/page/it/direzione_nazionale_antimafia_e_antiterrorismo)

granting legal aid to defendants accused of mafia-related offenses who lack sufficient financial resources; overseeing the matters of interest assigned to them, gathering the necessary information either directly or through collaboration with law enforcement agencies or other institutions operating within the same domain. The outcomes of these activities are presented during monthly plenary sessions of the DNAA, and, when appropriate, shared with the DDAs to initiate targeted investigations. They also manage international judicial cooperation with authorities in countries deemed particularly sensitive in relation to organized crime and terrorism, in accordance with individual mandates conferred by the National Antimafia Prosecutor. Finally, they are responsible for the systematic entry of procedural documentation from the DDAs into the National Judicial Database.

Positions in DNAA and DDAs are highly requested, and therefore there is strong competition to gain them. Not surprisingly, this characteristic makes the sector traditionally male.

According to Judge of Supreme Court Paola Di Nicola Travaglini, antimafia and antiterrorism is a sector that, generally speaking, favour magistrates' careers. It is a sort of positive circle, since working in the antimafia makes your reputation increase, bringing the chance to participate in significant initiatives, including academic ones, with a positive impact on your CV and thus your future career.

*And I say this very clearly—not power in the basic sense, but in the sense of institutional recognizability. If you are in the DDA or in the DNAA, you are called upon to give presentations, you are called upon to engage with academia, you are called upon to participate in international contexts. At that point, you fly, you fly, you fly. It is an absolute springboard for a career, and no one goes back. I've never seen anyone—no one—who moved on from organized crime to do something else. Absolutely not, absolutely not.<sup>13</sup>*

Antimafia is a demanding sector also because the law enforcement agents working in this area are highly valuable and their professionalism is remarkable, as underlined by Di Nicola Travaglini: “A high-quality sector from every point of view, especially regarding training the judicial police, and then the lawyers, the resources - all highly prepared -with strong media visibility”. She defines entering the DDA as “the crowning achievement of one's career”. She sustains that given that women are usually excluded from places of power and decision making, they are excluded from the DNAA and DDA, which are places of privilege and power. She added: “Full stop”.

Positions within the DNAA generally presuppose that the candidate has acquired extensive experience through many years of work in the DDA. Although the number of women in the DDAs is

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Judge of Supreme Court, Paola Di Nicola Travaglini, Rome, 16 May 2025.

increasing,<sup>14</sup> the number of women in DNAA is still quite low (19% in 2025). Also, it is interesting to note that no women have requested the position of National Antimafia Prosecutor so far. In other words, there have never been any women's applications for this prestigious position.

According to interviewees, there are not many women in the antimafia sector for two reasons. The first is related to a process of "self-segregation". Women themselves do not request positions in antimafia offices, because the work is particularly demanding - in Prosecutor Canepa's words: "When you do maxi-trials, you live in the hearing"<sup>15</sup>, and less compatible with the domestic sphere compared to other sectors. Paola Di Nicola Travaglini, who had pursued her career in the judicial sector, not in the investigative one, explained to me that even if she liked very much the antimafia sector - she knew the environment because her father was an antimafia magistrate - she did not choose it, because she intended to have children. In her words:

*Yes, consciously I found myself facing the alternative between dealing with organized crime - and it's a sector where either you're involved in it, or you're out - so I had this option, or having a life. And I must say, I chose to have a life. I chose to have a life because I was young, because in my mind I thought: I will do it, one must also offer, let's say, a justification - I will do it when I have the cultural tools, as well as professional ones.*<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, according to interviewees impression, women would not be so welcome because they might be committed in caregiving at home. In the opinion of Di Nicola Travaglini:

*It is, in any case, a particularly male-dominated field; it remains difficult, partly because one tends to work even more than in other contexts. Therefore, there's undoubtedly a challenge for women to venture into this area—perhaps because they're not allowed to, as it's assumed they might eventually face pregnancies and similar situations".*<sup>17</sup>

This is not an isolate opinion, yet it is shared by other interviewees.

<sup>14</sup> This data is based on interviews. There are no official statistics on the number of prosecutors working in Italy's Anti-Mafia District Directorates (DDAs), because DDAs are internal work teams within each Public Prosecutor's Office. Since their composition depends on each office's organization and can change over time, a single official nationwide figure is not available.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Antimafia Public Prosecutor Anna Canepa, Genoa, 28 March 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Judge of Supreme Court Paola Di Nicola Travaglini, Rome, 15 May 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

## **Towards Antimafia professionalism. The role of mentorships and experiences in under-resources judicial offices**

The process of professional development in the anti-mafia sector, as described by the women interviewed, typically begins at the office where they spent time as an *uditore* - a stage of mentored judicial training involving structured sessions alongside senior magistrates - or, subsequently, at the location of their first official assignment. It is important to note that this stage is preceded by a choice made by each magistrate among a range of available positions, the number and nature of which are determined by their ranking in the national exam results.

When asked to reflect on the motivations that led them to pursue a career in anti-mafia prosecution, the interviewees often thought back to the initial stages of their careers. Their narratives reveal a recurring motivational pattern shaped primarily by two factors: an encounter with one or more senior magistrates who were experts in organized crime and who fostered an interest in this subject, and/or a need to take the initiative as a result of working in peripheral or disadvantaged offices, often characterized by limited resources and significant logistical and professional challenges.

Encountering individuals who contributed not only to their technical and human growth, but more importantly to their understanding of the mafia phenomenon and their determination to combat it, was a formative experience shared both by women who entered the judiciary in the late 1980s and early 1990s and those who joined later, when the DDAs had already been operational for over a decade.

Senior magistrates engaged in anti-mafia prosecutions conveyed to the interviewees not only codified legal knowledge but also the capacity to interpret lived social and criminal contexts and the unwritten mafia code—an ability deemed indispensable for the effective application of legal norms in anti-mafia investigations. Several interviewees reported that their initial career experiences, under the mentorship of senior magistrates—where female mentors increasingly feature in the narratives of second-generation prosecutors, in contrast to the exclusively male role models cited by the first generation—led them to develop a deep passion for anti-mafia work. They uniformly employ the Italian term “*appassionarsi*” to describe this fervour. This commitment arose not only from the intellectual complexity and intrinsic interest of the cases, but also from a clear acknowledgement of the seriousness of mafia-association offences, both in terms of their broader societal impact and their consequences for individuals living under mafia influence.

One particularly emblematic case that illustrates the generative potential of mentorship in the early stages of a judicial career was given by judge Alessandra Camassa. A native of Trapani, she carried out her judicial apprenticeship in the office of Marsala in 1989, where the head prosecutor

at the time was Paolo Borsellino. This encounter undoubtedly left a profound and enduring mark on her professional life. The deep respect she still holds for this anti-mafia magistrate was very evident during the interview: Camassa consistently referred to him formally, using both his first and last name - *Dott. Paolo Borsellino* -, despite the close and profoundly human relationship they had developed. She remembered: "My first experience in Marsala was not only formative, but also extraordinarily significant on a human level".

At that time, in the late 1980s, the DNAA and DDAs had not yet been established, and as a result, some of the most complex and significant mafia-related cases were handled locally. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Judge Paolo Borsellino had conducted in-depth investigations into the mafia clans operating in the region. This investigative groundwork created a unique learning environment for the young magistrates who worked alongside him—including Alessandra Camassa. Her close professional ties to Borsellino enabled her to acquire a deep and detailed understanding of mafia dynamics, going far beyond what was typically accessible to magistrates at that stage in their careers.

The practical experience she gained during that period became a form of professional capital that would prove invaluable in her subsequent judicial assignments. It not only shaped her expertise in anti-mafia prosecution, but also reinforced her long-term vocational commitment to combating organized crime.

This magistrate describes Borsellino as a man having deeply traditional values, very devoted to his family, exceptionally warm and affectionate. His approach to leadership was not solely institutional; he also embodied the qualities of a father figure to his young deputy prosecutors. This combination created a powerful sense of camaraderie—not only for her, but for all her colleagues: "We were all very young, all very committed, and deeply affected by the fact that he was so enthusiastic."<sup>18</sup>

Borsellino's guidance proved fundamental in managing the testimony of Rita Atria, a young woman from a mafia-affiliated family —herself not involved in any crimes—who began cooperating with the State after her brother was killed in a mafia feud that had engulfed their hometown of Partanna, in the province of Trapani.

*I remember that, despite our initial hesitation due to her young age, once it became clear that she was unequivocally committed to collaborating with the justice system, he gave me enormous courage. He said: 'Go, stay close to her, try to understand her'.*

The experience of collecting Rita Atria's testimony was undoubtedly a moment of profound professional and emotional growth—especially in light of the tragic conclusion of her story: Atria

<sup>18</sup> Online interview with President of Trapani Court Alessandra Camassa, 7 June 2025.

took her own life just one week after the bombing that killed Borsellino, on July 19, 1992. That year, 1992, was a pivotal moment in the collective memory of anti-mafia magistrates—a motivational turning point. For all of them, it marked an irreversible fracture and a renewed sense of purpose. As Alessandra Camassa recalls:

*For me, it was a moment of disorientation. I had lost not only a significant point of reference, but also a human presence. When you spend four intense years working closely with someone in such a challenging environment, that person inevitably becomes someone you care for - not just a colleague, but someone you love in the true sense of the word. You've seen them laugh, cry, worry about trials, and even be anxious because their child had an exam that day. You've seen them in the ordinary rhythms of life, and when they're gone, you miss them like you would a family member or a dear friend.*

She explained me:

*That sense of loss was not mine alone - it was collective. It was shared by the carabinieri, by the police, and by society at large. No one could have imagined it would come to this. We were all overwhelmed. Society itself felt adrift. Among us young magistrates, and more broadly throughout the country, there was a profound confusion of emotions and interactions.*

This sense of collective trauma was echoed by Prosecutor Franca Imbergamo, as well as Prosecutor Anna Canepa, who while vividly recalling the moment she was reached by the news, commented: “That was the sensation—it felt like a war. The assassination of Borsellino struck even harder than that of Falcone. We were devastated.” And significantly, she added: “So I went back to work like crazy”.<sup>19</sup> For Prosecutor Alessandra Dolci, too, 1992 was a moment of renewed, intensified motivation.

For those who entered the judiciary since 2010, Borsellino and Falcone’s legacy, while revered, does not represent the same *existential milestone* it did for those who entered the judiciary in the late 1980s. Still, for these more recent colleagues, the “imprinting” provided by their first professional experiences - especially during the *uditore* phase or their first appointments - remains decisive, as for the senior colleagues. Working alongside highly competent and charismatic professionals in mafia trials stimulated their desire to deepen their understanding of the subject.

One illustrative example is the testimony of Prosecutor Annamaria Frustaci, who, despite achieving a high ranking in the national exam, chose to return to her native Calabria - where she had perceived the presence of 'ndrangheta clans since childhood:

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<sup>19</sup>Interview with Public Prosecutor Anna Canepa, Genoa, 28 March 2025.

*There are places where the mafia is part of the social fabric. In Calabria, even if no one talks about it at home, you feel it at school, in daily interactions. You sense the culture of silence (omertà), or the kind of respect that certain individuals command in the workplace or in everyday relationships. There are mechanisms of injustice - small and large - that become part of the landscape.<sup>20</sup>*

Her aspiration to become a magistrate was sparked during a school event in which she heard magistrate Gherardo Colombo speak. In the early 1990s, Colombo personified the judiciary's anti-corruption mission during the *Mani Pulite* ("Clean Hands") investigation into political bribery and systemic corruption.

Frustaci's professional biography began with her first position in Reggio Calabria, in 2012. She recalls her assignment as a stroke of luck, as she found herself working in an office that included some of the leading figures of anti-mafia prosecution in Italy. As she puts it, they were "monuments of the anti-mafia effort". During the interview, she listed several magistrates then serving as deputy prosecutors in Reggio Calabria, describing them as "the most important magistrates of that moment in history," bringing together a wide range of regional expertise - from Palermo, Naples, and Calabria itself - representing all major Italian regions where mafia activity has historically taken root. She adds emphatically: "For me, it was a training ground—a real *palestra*".

Although it is not possible here to examine in detail the mentor-mentee relationships between junior magistrates and their more senior "points of reference", it is important to note that both she and colleagues, such as Prosecutor Sara Amerio, also assigned to Reggio Calabria in 2012, emphasized how these seasoned magistrates - despite their high profiles and intense workloads - were remarkably generous with their time, and committed to transmitting their knowledge through both examples and explanations.

Interestingly, the special relationship between young women magistrates and their mentors might be read within critical pedagogical perspectives that view professional development as a dialogic and situated practice rather than a linear accumulation of abstract knowledge (Eraut, 2000). In particular, this intergenerational exchange cultivates judicial reflexivity and ethical discernment, nurturing an interpretive habitus that is sensitive to the human dimensions of justice (Bourdieu, 1986). Single professional figures embody mentorship.

Moreover, following hermeneutic theories of the encounter as an experience bringing rupture and growth at the same time (Gadamer, 1975), mentorship becomes a deeply relational space where novice magistrates not only acquire technical expertise, but also a deeply tacit ethical sensitiveness and reflexivity (Schön, 1983) leading to profound antimafia engagement, leading them to carry out their everyday job-related activities within a vocational frame. This attitude is

<sup>20</sup>Online interview with Public Prosecutor Annamaria Frustaci, 4 April 2025.

more easily understand when we consider that the antimafia sector poses many challenges especially for women, as we will explore in the next paragraph.

The second factor previously discussed—being called upon to manage highly demanding judicial responsibilities in peripheral or under-resourced jurisdictions with a significant mafia presence—emerged in many of the interviews as a catalyst for professional acceleration. For numerous magistrates, early immersion in such contexts not only expedited the consolidation of their legal competence but also ignited a long-term commitment to anti-mafia prosecution, ultimately leading many to actively seek transfers to the DNAA.

The experience of Anna Canepa, now Deputy Prosecutor at the DNAA, is particularly illustrative in this respect. Having passed the national judiciary examination in 1989 and completed her period as an *uditore* in her city of origin, she was assigned to a small town in Sicily in the midst of an ongoing mafia war. Talking about the institutional precariousness and the emotional and organizational weight of her early work, she explained to me that

what initially appears as a logistical or structural challenge—namely, working in remote and vulnerable judicial outposts - can, under certain conditions, serve as a vocational stimulus.<sup>21</sup> The sense of mission that first takes shape in these early stages tends to solidify over time, especially as magistrates progress toward more specialized assignments within the DDA and, in some cases, ascend to national positions within the DNAA. This trajectory, however, is rarely linear or devoid of personal costs. As emphasized across all interviews, these career paths are particularly demanding for women, often entailing significant sacrifices in the private sphere. Yet, these challenges are consistently counterbalanced by deep professional satisfaction and a rich sense of personal and relational growth—dimensions we will examine more fully in the following section.

Canepa's account further highlights the extraordinary nature of being a young magistrate tasked with managing on-call shifts in a jurisdiction where homicide was the most frequent offense. Similar reflections were shared by other colleagues, for whom learning the profession in contexts saturated with organized criminal violence represented not merely an obstacle but a condition for *exponential professional development*. Recalling the early 1990s, Canepa speaks of the immense effort required to restructure a small public prosecutor's office in Sicily that lacked the material resources required to adequately confront the prevailing crisis of legality and the high levels of mafia-related violence within the local context.

This pattern is not limited to the first generation of women antimafia magistrates. Comparable experiences are also reported among younger cohorts of interviewees. In this regard, the statements made by Ida Teresi, currently also serving as Deputy Prosecutor at the DNAA, reflects

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Public Prosecutor Anna Canepa, Genoa, 28 March 2025.

the persistence of these processes of vocational intensification—rooted in early exposure to structurally weak but symbolically dense territories of justice.

During the interview, she remembered the period in which she started her first appointment with great enthusiasm. She entered the judiciary in July 1998 and, following an eighteen-month judicial apprenticeship, began her appointment at the Prosecutor's Office in Nola in May 2000. As she told me, at that time the newly established office was under considerable operational strain, managing an extensive dossier across a jurisdiction of some 600,000-700,000 inhabitants and confronting both street-level offences and complex economic and organized crime.

With other young colleagues, mainly female, she reorganized the office. The chief prosecutor granted her significant autonomy: each procedural innovation she proposed was routinely transformed into an internal directive once its conceptual merits were demonstrated. Through her central role in reshaping the Nola office's organizational framework, she developed what she regards as a formative phase of her professional trajectory. She remained in Nola until 2010, dedicating a decade to demanding yet deeply fulfilling prosecutorial work that realized her longstanding vocational aspirations.

In her words:

*In a way, I helped to shape the office from the ground up—it was a foundational experience. Those ten years were hard - extremely demanding in terms of workload - but from a professional standpoint, I must say I was happy. I was doing the work I loved.<sup>22</sup>*

This testimony captures a recurring theme in the career paths of many anti-mafia magistrates: the early consolidation of a vocational commitment forged through intense exposure to environments marked by institutional fragility and elevated criminal risk. The sense of professional purpose that takes shape during these formative years is often reinforced over time through the decision to specialize in anti-mafia prosecution, first through assignments in the *Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia* (DDA), and for some, later on, through appointments to the *Direzione Nazionale Antimafia e Antiterrorismo* (DNAA).

These career paths are highly demanding—particularly for women—and entail significant personal sacrifices, especially in relation to family life and work-life balance. However, as consistently affirmed across all interviews, such sacrifices are offset by a deep sense of professional fulfilment and meaningful forms of personal and relational enrichment. These dimensions—both affective and ethical—emerge as central to the narratives of the magistrates interviewed and will be explored in further detail in the following section.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Public Prosecutor Ida Teresi, Rome, 15 May 2025.

## Anti-mafia Prosecutors' work life. Challenging the "double presence"

When Italy's district anti-mafia offices were first established, applying for a position in one of these units as a woman was widely regarded as a bold, if not reckless, move. At the time, female magistrates who were considered eligible for such roles were typically senior in age and experience, often without children or family responsibilities. One female magistrate recalled how, when she submitted her application to the anti-mafia division shortly after giving birth, her colleagues and superiors alike questioned her judgment. She was told—affectionately yet patronizingly, as she put it—by her own chief prosecutor that she was “crazy” for even considering it. “Are you mad? You’re going to destroy your family,” he warned. “You’ll ruin your life. You’ll be separated from your daughter, and she’ll never forgive you.”

What struck her most, however, was that this kind of warning was not made to a male colleague who applied at the same time. He was a father of four and also served as a representative in one of the main departments of the National Association of Magistrates. No similar doubts about his ability to balance personal and professional responsibilities were expressed.

While the scenario has undoubtedly changed—women now apply for and obtain positions in anti-mafia offices in greater numbers—gendered expectations persist. According to statements gathered from several female prosecutors, implicit biases remain particularly acute when women are mothers. One interviewee, herself a mother of two, described how the suspicion lingers that motherhood might compromise a magistrate’s long-term work performance. The prevailing concern is not only that women may be absent during maternity leave, but that they may become less professionally available in the long run.

Indeed, the majority of women interviewed for this study did not have children. In some cases, this emerged as a deliberate choice, shaped by the demands of the profession and the personal risks it entails—including threats to physical safety. For those who did choose to have children, reconciling motherhood with professional responsibilities was a great challenge. One magistrate put it poignantly: “I was constantly doing somersaults, trying to fulfil all my duties. I’ve always tried to do my best, both as a mother and as a prosecutor.”<sup>23</sup> This statement encapsulates the broader tension women working in this sector may experience: the pressure to embody professional excellence without sacrificing maternal responsibility.

The concept of *double presence* theorized by Laura Balbo (1978)—the simultaneous engagement of women in both paid professional labour and unpaid domestic or emotional work—proves crucial for understanding this specific tension. Their professional paths are shaped not only by formal institutional constraints but also by social expectations regarding care, availability, and emotional

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

resilience. This dual positioning impacts motivation in unique ways, where persistence, moral commitment, and resilience become key resources for navigating an environment structured by implicit masculine norms (Schultz & Shaw, 2013; Smart, 1992).

Integrating Balbo's concept into our analysis allows us to highlight how institutional structures and informal expectations intersect with personal life, shaping the strategies of negotiation, resilience, and sometimes resistance that women magistrates deploy. By bringing double presence into dialogue with feminist oral-history methods (Howe, 2012), we foreground the dual-burden dynamics that remain invisible in official records yet crucially inform women's careers within the judiciary.

While reflecting on the challenge of reconciling professional duties with private life, one magistrate became visibly emotional as she described viewing her daughter's first steps via a video message sent by her babysitter. That fleeting, mediated moment of maternal intimacy—from miles away and outside the courtroom—powerfully underscores the emotional dislocation implicit in balancing high-stakes legal responsibilities with motherhood. She further alluded, without disclosing sensitive personal details, to the considerable physical sacrifices imposed by her pregnancy—sacrifices that highlight the embodied burdens borne by women in the judiciary. Such testimonies reveal how institutional demands and gendered expectations converge to generate both emotional and corporeal labour that often remains unseen in formal assessments of judicial performance.

In addition, when considering the life of women working in the antimafia sector we need to remember that most of them live under protection. The issues raised by bodyguards and their everyday implications constantly appeared in my conversations with the interviewees. It is not possible to mention all of the interesting reflections shared with me. Here I recall Prosecutor Frustaci, who tried to find a balance between advantages and drawbacks:

*Its impact is undeniable: it functions primarily as a protective mechanism, allowing us to navigate daily life with a sense of security and continuity. Far from being an encumbrance, its purpose is to enable the preservation of ordinary routines, ideally without necessitating substantial adjustments to personal habits. However, for those engaged in this profession—characterized by an inherently reserved private life—the implications are more nuanced. This job inevitably complicates the simple logistics of spontaneous leisure, such as organizing a weekend walk or attending a social event. As a result, many prefer to retreat inward, cultivating their lives within an extremely restricted circle of close relationships and private, intimate spaces. This tendency reflects a strategic withdrawal, wherein privacy becomes both a shield and a deliberate lifestyle choice under the weight of professional exposure and societal expectations (...).<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Online interview with Public Prosecutor Annamaria Frustaci, 4 April 2025.

I will conclude this paragraph by quoting the words of Prosecutor Manzini, who significantly underlined the impact of having protection on her relationship with her daughter:

*In 1999, I had a three-year-old daughter. This proved to be one of the most difficult periods of my life, precisely because the demands of my professional role imposed constraints inseparable from my circumstances at home. Consequently, my relationship with her was marked by meticulous scheduling and stringent boundaries. As my daughter herself has often reproached me - and with good reason - we never once took a leisurely walk together or went shopping for a pair of trousers. Such seemingly mundane experiences were made impossible by the nature of my judicial obligations.<sup>25</sup>*

### Final remarks

This study has shed light on the complex interplay between formal equality measures and informal gendered practices within the Italian judiciary. Despite the remarkable feminization of the magistracy—with women now comprising the majority of ordinary magistrates –, they continue to encounter both horizontal segregation, whereby they remain disproportionately represented in ‘feminized’ sectors and underrepresented in areas such as economic and organized-crime prosecution, and vertical segregation, as shown by the persistent male predominance in leadership roles. These patterns signal that quantitative gains in access must be complemented by qualitative transformations in workplace culture and career-governance norms.

Our analysis suggested that mentorship and early career assignments in under-resourced or remote jurisdictions has serve as powerful catalysts for vocational anti-mafia commitment and professional competence. And yet, these experiences also intensify the embodied and emotional burdens borne by women magistrates, who navigate the dual responsibilities of high-pressure judicial work and caregiving obligations—the “double presence” that shapes both their strategies for resilience and the limits of their career paths. In the anti-mafia sector, these tensions are further compounded by protective regimes and a private life under security protocols, which constrain everyday social interactions and amplify work-life reconciliation challenges.

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<sup>25</sup> Online interview with Public Prosecutor Marisa Manzini, 7 April 2025.

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