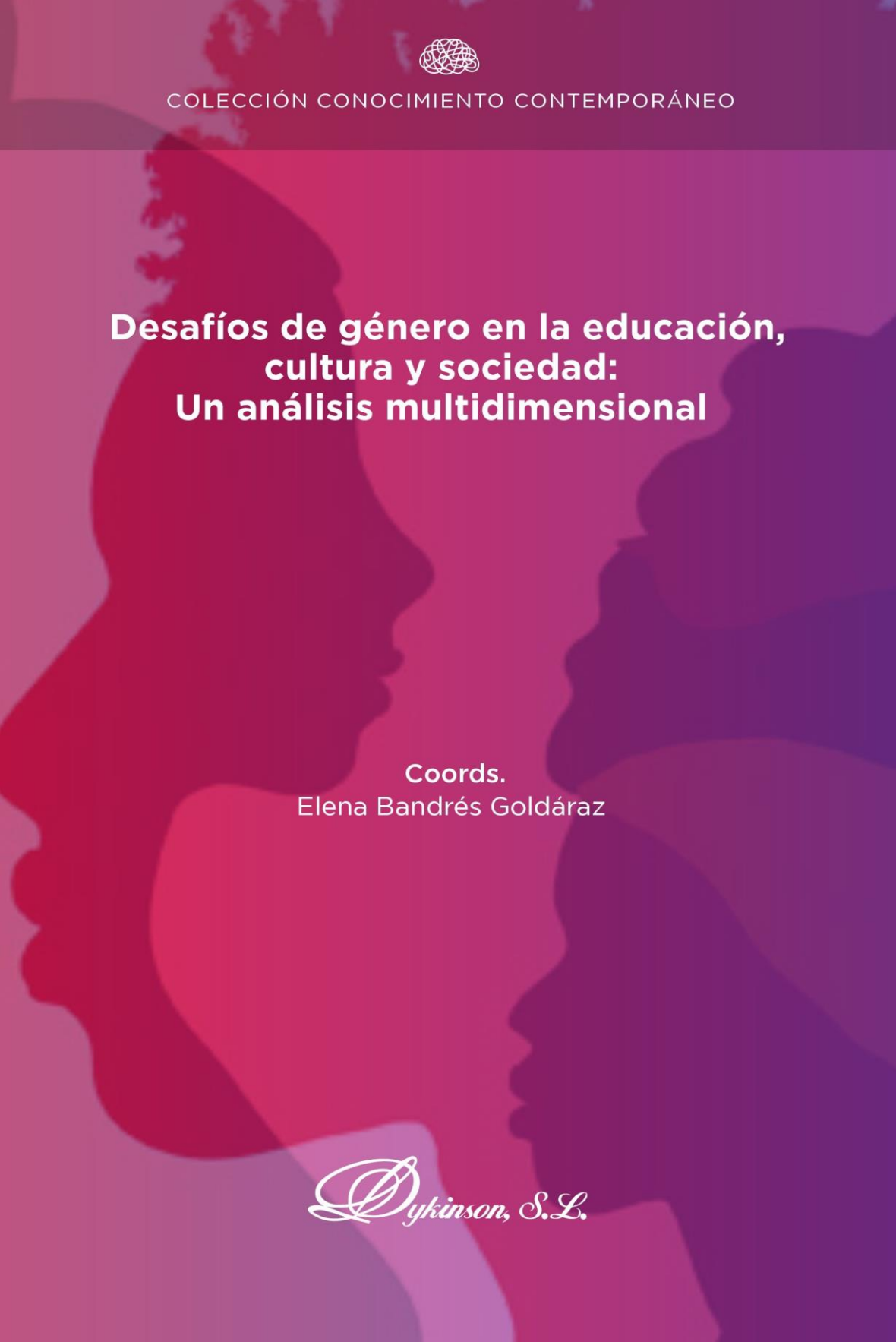

COLECCIÓN CONOCIMIENTO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Desafíos de género en la educación, cultura y sociedad: Un análisis multidimensional

Coords.
Elena Bandrés Goldáraz

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REACHING A SENIOR POSITION IN ICT: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS BY COMPANIES TO PROMOTE EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of gender imbalance in the high-tech sector, particularly in the field of information and communication technology (ICT), has been extensively analysed in the literature. At international and national level, its causes and consequences have been analysed in detail from various perspectives. Numerous programmes and initiatives implemented by the EU, national strategies and high-tech companies have attempted to promote effective measures to tackle this problem.

The number of jobs in this sector has increased rapidly over the last decades and the continuous increase in demand for qualified ICT professionals confirms the sector as a source of employment. However, the number of qualified female ICT professionals remains low and their potential to reach leadership positions in high-tech companies does not match that of their male counterparts. Recent Eurostat data show that, in 2021, there were 2.79 million employed persons with an ICT education, 3.3% more than in 2020. While men represented 84.1% (2.35 million) of the EU's total workforce with an ICT educational background, an increase of 1.3% from the previous year (2.20 million in 2020), while the number of women in employment with an ICT education declined: women represented only 15.9% (442 800) of the ICT workforce compared with 17.2% (463.800) in 2020.

Europe is facing an unprecedented shortage of ICT professionals, with 55% of EU companies having difficulties recruiting ICT specialists in 2019. Reaching 20 million employed ICT specialists in the EU by 2030 is therefore among the targets of the EU's Digital Decade programme.[129] One of its aims is to increase the participation of women, as only 19.1% of ICT specialists were women in 2021.[130]

This study contributes to the application of the Feminist Institutionalism (FI) perspective to study medium and large ICT enterprises and ICT departments of large companies. by analysing the viewpoints of those who hold positions of power, such as heads of HR departments or diversity and inclusion offices, in relation to gender issues in career progression and strategies addressing gender equality and diversity in the sector.

In the following sections, we first provide a brief theoretical background to this topic, based on FI theory. We then explain the methodology for the research activities and interviews. We continue by describing the findings and discussing the results. We conclude by pointing out the limitations of the study and suggesting directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first studies dealing with the role of women in technology date from the late 1970s, shortly after the first analyses of the role of women in science (Harding, 1986). Today, gender in scientific research and technology development continues to be scrutinised, with the concept of gender being expanded to include diversity and inclusion. This expansion has been aided by interaction with postcolonial and postgender perspectives, which have broadened the scope of analysis to include new participants (Horwath et al., 2014).

[129] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en

[130] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=ICT_specialists_in_employment

Research indicates a trend: there is a loss of women working in the ICT sector across the career pipeline, leading to their underrepresentation in senior professional roles in high-tech companies (Irvin et al., 2016; Klawe et al., 2009). Moreover, there is a limited number of women with ICT-related degrees (Gorbacheva et al., 2019). Recent research suggests that women's ability to move into ICT leadership positions is steadily increasing, although some factors such as the industry's gender make-up and company revenues, continue to hinder their progression (Johnson et al., 2020). Pink washing often takes place as an add-on to the usual programmes and services rather than as a central element of the organisation's mission to support women and non-binary femmes (Orser et al., 2019).

The path toward gender equality in career development can be analysed at individual, organisational and systemic level (Ceci & Williams, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2015, 2019; Risman & Davis, 2013). In this paper, we rely on FI theory to focus on the organisational level, which is often addressed in research through a focus on institutions, particularly on the formal and informal gendered institutional rules, practices and discourses that dictate the "rules of the game" of organisations. While FI was initially conceived in studies focused on conventional political settings, more recent FI-informed research has focused on other sectors, such as the construction industry (Galea et al., 2015, 2020), peacekeeping (Holmes, 2020), and higher education (Clavero & Galligan, 2020; O'Connor & White, 2021; Verge et al., 2018). Here we apply it to the ICT sector.

For FI, institutions are forms of social organisations formed by both formal and informal gendered institutional rules (Krook & Mackay, 2011). These rules "prescribe (as well as proscribe) 'acceptable' masculine and feminine forms of behavior, rules, and values for men and women within institutions" (Chappell, 2006, p. 226), establishing a "gendered logic of appropriateness". Formal institutional rules refer to explicit regulations, policies, and laws established within institutions. These rules are visible, codified, and typically represent the structural framework guiding an organisation's operations. On the other hand, informal institutional rules are implicit, unwritten norms, practices, and

cultures that shape behaviour and decision-making within institutions. They often stem from historical, social, and cultural contexts, influencing how formal rules are interpreted and applied. For example, informal rules relate to the dominance of a culture which emphasises spending unlimited hours at work, maintaining meeting schedules in formats that incompatible for those with caring responsibilities (Simpson, 1998; Watts, 2007), or using digital technologies to become visible at the real or imagined organisational centre, the "fear of exile" (Hafermalz, 2020).

Gender norms vary across time, cultures and types of organisations (Mackay et al., 2010). FI acknowledges these variations and how interpersonal daily interactions create gendered patterns of hierarchies and inclusion/exclusion mechanisms that tend to privilege men over women and other marginalised groups. This is notably evident in the sectoral segregation through mechanisms that maintain a gendered division of labour, where specific skills or competences are assigned to certain genders, creating a supposed "natural" aptitude for particular roles. It is also evident in how men often dominate higher positions within sectors due to entrenched power structures and biases, perpetuating the gender gap. As Mackay and colleagues (2009) suggest, "seemingly neutral institutional processes and practices are, in fact, embedded in norms and cognitive frames, and in wider cultural contexts" (p. 254). This prevailing system not only restricts women's access to senior positions but also reinforces stereotypes about gender roles, shaping recruitment practices and organisational cultures.

Feminist institutionalists explore both formal and informal rules to understand how gendered expectations manifest within institutional frameworks. Moreover, they consider how formal and informal rules interact with each other, (re)producing or challenging prevailing gender norms and power structures (Krook & Mackay, 2011). As Lowndes states, "institutions work through three modes of constraint – rules, practices and narratives. The real agenda for institutionalism is to better understand how these distinctive modes of constraint interrelate in practice, and to establish what this means for ongoing processes of institutional change and prospects for institutional resistance and reform"

(2013, p. 50). In brief, FI-informed works are not only interested in revealing the gendered nature of institutions but also in understanding the mechanisms of institutional continuity and change.

Previous research has indicated the entrenched nature of gendered norms within institutional and broader societal constructs, leading to resistance in their transformation, even in the face of evolving social, political and economic contexts (Mackay et al., 2010). As Beyeler and Annesley (2011) stress, "even if some formal rules are radically changed, the outcome will not necessarily be as radical, since many other – formal and often informal – rules still persist" (p. 81). Nevertheless, this tendency towards stability does not suggest that institutions are not passive to change; gender norms are dynamic and subject to evolution, allowing for shifts in what is deemed socially and institutionally acceptable over time (Chappell, 2006). This dynamism, in turn, presents opportunities for change-oriented initiatives to promote gradual, incremental changes, progressively influencing the institutional landscape towards greater transformation (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay et al., 2010).

With a focus on understanding how institutional design can effectively contribute to promote gender equality, Lowndes and Roberts (2013), "robustness" and "revisability", to value what constitutes a "good" – or good enough – process of planned institutional design and change. Robustness refers to the capacity continuing policy strength and resistance to change over time. It is operationalised through a clarity of values underpinning policy design, and the nature and effectiveness of policy enforcement, usually through sanctions. A good fit between values and enforcement helps policies to "stick" and shapes organisational logics in order to achieve design objectives (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Revisability, in turn, is defined as the capacity for policy amendment or alteration (Lowndes & Wilson, 2003). This necessity may emerge when a policy fails to achieve its stated objective. Revisability may be enacted through flexibility, adapting policy learning over time, and variability, accepting and implementing different policy design variants in different locations.

In any organisation, certain individual actors – often those occupying positions of power – hold the capacity to create formal rules and influence informal norms governing interactions and behaviours (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). The active engagement of these influential actors is undeniably crucial for the success of gender reform initiatives. Yet, whether because of a lack of awareness about gender issues, insufficient gender competence, or deliberate resistance to change, transformative policies are often perceived by managers as burdensome, giving rise to a phenomenon known as red tape (Roth & Sonnert, 2011). In this context, rules and procedures providing for gender equality and diversity are seen as regulatory burdens lacking efficacy, fostering a preference for anti-bureaucratic organisational structures can inadvertently perpetuate gender inequalities. Against this background, it becomes crucial to investigate to what extent formal and informal rules and procedures for structural change and respective gender equality initiatives are perceived by managers in the ICT private sector.

3. METHODOLOGY

The results presented in this article are part of a broader research agenda on gender-specific career trajectories. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving desk research and empirical data collection through semi-structured interviews with individuals in senior positions (hereafter referred to as "interviewees") in ICT enterprises and ICT departments of high-tech companies in Italy. To validate the data and capture different dimensions of the same topics, a variety of data was used: academic literature, reports and studies by the EU and private companies, the websites of the interviewees' organisations, public interviews with the interviewees themselves (videos on websites; interviews on blogs and electronic versions of newspapers and magazines).

The aim of the study is not to generalise the results, but to select people who could provide valuable insights into the research topic and contribute new ideas and perspectives. For this reason, participants were selected using a non-probability sampling technique, the snowball system (Uprichard, 2013). A total of 40 organisations in the ICT sector or with

an ICT industry or department were contacted and resulted in 31 interviews with 18 men and 13 women working in senior positions, as CEOs, human resources, and equality, diversity and inclusion managers.

Secondary data collection and analysis began in September 2018 and the semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2018 and January 2022, with a break of several months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews lasted an average of one hour. The recorded interviews were then transcribed, anonymised and coded. Participants were assigned a unique code based on the number of the interview, the type of company – LE for large companies (more than 250 employees) and ME for medium-sized companies (50 to 249 employees) – and the gender indicated. All participants reported being male or female and all interviewees were Italian. The interviews were conducted in Italian and the translation into English of the extracts mentioned in the article was done by the authors.

The analytical framework was based on the constructivist approach of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Mills et al., 2006), which includes constant comparative analysis as a method of qualitative data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Large grounded theory projects usually aim to develop a theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990), but their procedures and techniques can provide a useful framework for smaller studies; the aim is not to develop a theory but to learn more about a particular topic. This is precisely the case of this work: our intention is to explore in depth the current visions of people in senior positions in the organisations contacted. Therefore, the small number of interviewees is considered sufficient to gain an insight.

4. FINDINGS

Before delving into the detailed analysis, it is relevant to mention some recurring aspects that emerged in all the interviewees. Firstly, their individual careers were visible and publicised on platforms like LinkedIn and social media channels, particularly for those with more prominent names. Secondly, the interviewees have highly mobile careers: when requested to recommend other potential interviewees in other

companies in Italy, many suggested individuals working abroad. Moreover, during the course of this study, five interviewees changed organisation either before or after the interview, while in three instances, interviews could not take place due to the interviewee relocating to a different country between the scheduling and the actual interview. These trends reflect data on the high employee turnover in high-tech and ICT enterprises – the largest in any business sector at a rate of 13.2%.[131]

When it concerns gender equality, all the interviewees demonstrated a keen awareness of the gender imbalance within their respective organisations, and none of them undermined or undervalued the issue.

> Organisations are male dominated, that's a fact; 95% of CEOs in Italy are men. So, it takes real commitment to achieve a balanced approach to diversity. Companies must rethink their normal behaviours: from leadership styles to co-opting mechanisms, and so on. (23_M_LE)

Interviewees consistently highlighted external factors contributing to this gender disparity, including legislation influence, insights from international reports, lessons, both positive and negative, drawn from experiences in other companies, mainly in the United States, in addition to other external causes such as family, the education system, and societal norms at large.

In addition to cultural aspects and the type of society in which a company operates, formal regulation – legislation – stood out as the foremost factor influencing the pathway to equality. In all the companies, the legislation related to work-life balance is respected, and some add benefits to favour those working in managerial positions having young children, or offer more flexibility than required formally by law. Moreover, interviewees cited the *Golfo-Mosca* law (L. 120/2011), which addresses gender parity in boardrooms and corporate governance bodies of listed enterprises and State-controlled companies, as a driver of significant progress in terms of getting women on Italian corporate boards:

> National culture is stronger than company culture. Even in multinationals with the same culture and policies, when it comes to gender equality

[131] Turnover rates are drawn from LinkedIn's member data: https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/trends-and-research/2018/the-3-industries-with-the-highest-turnover-rates

> there are substantial differences between countries. In a male-dominated culture, women struggle to emerge and obtain a place on the board. Politics might help speed up the process of gender parity. In Italy, the Golfo-Mosca law on women's quotas has helped many outstanding women obtain a place on the board, thereby promoting a culture of diversity. New regulations on integrated reports have also helped, requiring listed enterprises to include policies and strategies for sustainability and diversity in their budget reporting. What would help is an advertising campaign explaining that GDP performance is directly related to the development of women's employment. (3_F_LE)

All the interviewees refer to research reports or successful experience in the sector, in particular the McKinsey and Microsoft periodic reports, as well as the Airbnb case, which launched a rehabilitation tour campaign in 2017 to change the company's image when stories of people being denied rentals because of their skin colour went viral in 2015.

> Reasons for promoting women's careers derive primarily from specific studies, particularly the McKinsey report, which found that companies with a gender-balanced leadership perform better than comparable businesses managed predominantly by men. (12_F_LE)

Having the same external source of data on the sector is important, as the transfer of winning strategies among organisations is a common and praised strategy. This interviewee compares her previous and current working experience:

> Parity has not yet been achieved in my current company, although meaningful progress has been made. In a company like ours which is much younger and much less mature in many ways, we are learning from more mature organisations as their methodologies can be successful. (3_F_LE)

Interviewees working for companies with commercial relations with the US underline the differences they perceive regarding equality and diversity:

> In the States there is greater diversity in business than in Italy, and we know that diversity can create tensions and contrasts between different cultures and viewpoints. Greater diversity comes with tensions that can make internal working relations more aggressive, not officially perhaps, but they are real. Our uniformity creates a more comfortable environment where there are fewer contrasts. Of course, this results in products that are much less likely to reflect our customers' diversity. (8_F_ME)

The reasons mentioned for difficulties in achieving gender balance in the field and, as a consequence, in the career progression often point to external factors: insufficient STEM graduates; men's preferences for prestigious company locations; societal expectations that women prioritise home responsibilities once they have children; schools' inadequacy in encouraging girls to pursue careers in science; the maintenance of a patriarchal society; and family pressure towards marriage and children for women. Mention is also made of women's failures – what they do or fail to do – while behaviour influencing men's careers is hardly ever referred to. This confirms a prevailing perception where "gender" is frequently equated with "women", even among experts.

4.1 Regular strategies: Unconscious bias training and mentorship tactics

As the official statements, specialist magazine articles, TV interviews, websites, and the interviews collected in the research process indicate, all the companies contacted have introduced a range of policy initiatives aimed at improving gender equality. They focus on facilitating the career progression of all staff, often addressing the gender imbalance across different organisational levels, sometimes irrespective of gender but focused on diversity. However, the interviewees share also specific visions of men's and women's attitudes and roles in companies. Change is promoted, driven by an internal company's vision but also by external forces, in particular the market.

Two strategies are often mentioned: training on unconscious bias and mentoring programmes. All the interviewees who have organised or taken part in unconscious bias courses describe them as positive, and some interviewees recognise that there is much more at stake:

> It's more than unconscious bias. Male managers will say it sooner or later. To begin with they say "that's not true, we do promote women of merit", but the statistics contradict them. It's impossible to think that there aren't any women of merit; companies are full of qualified, competent women who don't progress in their careers. I think that many men feel threatened; it's a conscious bias, because women who are aware of themselves and their professional value scare many men. (24_M_LE_IT)

Mentoring is not often mentioned as a formal strategy in medium enterprises. In the context of large companies, in turn, some female interviewees talk extremely positively about the mentors who have helped them. They confirm the importance of having access to and support from those who are comfortable with the "rules of the game" of institutions:

> I've always had at least one mentor wherever I've worked, men who have seen my potential and have helped me understand how "things are done" at the company. It might have been the same if they were women, I can't really say. I try and do the same thing now; I look out for young, talented women who have recently joined us, and I give them support beyond the women's groups the company organises. (15_F_LE_IT)

4.2. Perceptions of change

The perception of change is clear: ICT is a young sector compared to others, and one in which the speed of research and innovation processes can be frantic. Some elements also favour the transformative speed in relation to the promotion of gender equality, embedded in the vision and mission of the companies, sponsored actively by the interviewees.

Strategies and policies evolve over time, and those who have had an international career seem to best placed to describe this evolution and its benefits:

> I think the effort that companies like mine and others have taken have shifted over time from one that is focused almost exclusively on acquisition and retention, to one which is more focused on behaviour, focused on practices such as micro aggression, building awareness and raising consciousness of bias, and using thousands of platforms to elevate the conversation beyond one that was just driven by numerical evaluation into one that is much more focused on experience. I also see these organisations striving to almost attempt formulaically to keep the pipeline of talent search and talent acquisition disproportionately balanced in favour of women at the entry-level, knowing as we do that women tend to leave the workforce overtime and at higher levels of organization. (7_F_LE).

The perception of change is in any case influenced by the personal lenses through which the interviewees observe the behaviours:

> I think definitely there have been changes in the last few years (…) being a bit more proactive in getting women included. I notice there's more women coming in, and from that there is more, [pause] they are

> working hard for each other, so making sure that they get their voices heard, or even just making sure they are including themselves. Not that men weren't doing that either, but there is a bit more specific action from women pushing other women forward whereas men tend to be more than, just open to everybody. (4_M_LE)

External markets are also a driving force for change. In both large and medium enterprises, the corporate view does take account of market needs: this, along with market competition, is a driving force for promoting gender equality in business. Fortunately, both these factors are moving in a positive direction for women's careers:

> The market is bringing about sweeping changes too: 80% of purchasing and investment decisions are now taken or influenced by women. Only by balancing the number of men and women on management teams can we produce strategies and policies oriented to these diverse markets. Companies who have been developing female talents for years now have women in decision-making roles who prefer to do business with the same gender. That's why it's essential to have more women at all levels. (12_F_LE)

4.3. Gender equality is matched by diversity

References to diversity as a complementary strategy to gender equality are made spontaneously by the majority of the interviewees, particularly regarding sexual orientation and ethnicity. None of them refer to intersectionality; they all talk in a polarised manner about "women" and "men" without mentioning, for example, the greater difficulties experienced, for instance, by women from ethnic and racial minorities. However, problems may emerge in medium companies relating to employee numbers:

> In medium enterprises, diversity is seen as a value, but practical experience adds a note of caution: I have managed to get some men to work well with a female boss, but it's not that easy. So, in a small company like mine, this impacts the quality of work and the general mood; it isn't possible to be 100% open in a small company. You can't, unfortunately, because you risk damaging the overall performance. (8_F_ME)

4.4. Stereotypical vision of women

When interviewees talk about work-life balance, they focus on women and care responsibilities towards children, elderly or disabled family

members. The theme of informal interactions comes up often in the interviews, and there are clear examples of polarisation. Formal company programmes and schemes aimed at promoting women's careers do not distinguish between women, at least not in the interviewees' words. Women are grouped together in descriptions of their perceived "shared characteristics", primarily maternity and family commitments. Maternity is always seen in a polarised way, either as an event that might obstruct a woman's career, or as a source of new energies and resources that might be invigorating. In both cases, the view is stereotypical.

> Maternity is a wonderful exercise in leadership. In my view, women returning from maternity leave are enriched, stronger, and they've grown and developed as people. We've promoted a woman who was on maternity leave, and in the past year we've hired three women who were about to go on maternity leave. They were amazed: "Are you sure you want to hire me? I'll be going on maternity leave in 4 months." We replied, "Yes, we're sure because we want you to have a career here, not just stay with us for a year or two." (23_M_LE_IT).

5. DISCUSSION

The main limitations of the research are two. First, the relatively small sample size constrained the achievement of saturation, thereby restricting the generalisability of the findings. This is an overarching limitation of conducting qualitative research with small samples. Second, the diversity of strategies for promoting gender equality and diversity adopted by medium and large enterprises, influenced by the varying sizes of their workforce, poses an additional challenge.

These limitations are compensated, in part, by the quick turnover of those in senior positions, as it is common for them to change jobs every five to six years or even less, thereby transferring and adapting formal strategies and influencing informal ones. Consequently, the research arguably provides at least some indication of what might be happening in other companies.

The analysis of the data collected has shown, on the one hand, the robustness of formal policies, especially those that comply with legislation. On the other hand, it has revealed gaps in revisability, i.e., the

ability to change policies or informal rules and strategies, in several companies. Policy initiatives to improve gender equality focus on facilitating career progression for all employees. However, as the analysis of primary and secondary data shows, the combination of local, national and international policies, the diversity of gender cultures in multinational companies and the personal views of change agents on "gender" can hinder actual progress.

The formal company policies and procedures described consider potential gender-specific consequences. Care is taken to avoid informal recruitment and promotion practises carried out by operational managers based on unclear priorities. Policies underpinned by legislation and company values are robust and therefore effectively enforced. All interviewees emphasise that the companies they work for apply the law conscientiously. The less positive aspect of this compliance is that where there is no formal legislation, policies become more blurred. The example of the Italian law (Golfo Mosca law), which provides for quotas only for listed companies, shows that despite the advantages it brings, it is not adopted by companies that are not legally obliged to do so. Robustness is therefore primarily favoured by the reference to legislation that standardises strategies for enterprises.

The companies have also developed informal policies, often adapted from previous work experiences of the interviewees in other enterprises or from female managers who have themselves experienced the difficulties of work-life balance or prejudice even from their privileged position. These measures are flexible in their application and can therefore be revised. In contrast to the findings of an analysis of the construction sector through the lens of FI (Galea et al., 2015), which revealed an inconsistency between regulations and corporate values, the interviewees credited external regulations, leadership and business pressures for driving efforts to achieve greater gender equality as well as corporate values.

However, when the focus is on workforce 'diversity' and claims that company policy transcends gender and provides customised solutions, it is unclear whether and how treatment favours career progression. Formal policy can be limited to work-life balance and offering more

flexibility. Only a clear coalition among employees and voluntary disclosure of agreed benefits and flexibility can transform informal practises into an open policy that is known to the entire workforce and effective in bringing about long-term change in organisational culture.

The interviewees, all in powerful positions in their companies, base their decisions on data: they know percentages and figures by heart, and quote them often to support their statements. But they are also influenced by their professional experience, personal perceptions, values and biases. Unconscious bias is often mentioned, but none of the interviewees raises the topic of potential unconscious biases in how they consider femininity and masculinity. The "male advantage" (Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Murray, 2014) is mentioned when referring to men's lack of awareness. Some of the male interviewees reflected on their own or other men's experiences in relation to gendered work practices or societal influences and gender biases, both described as a "given" that must be dealt with, rather than one requiring specific policies.

From an FI perspective, gender "not only operates at the level of the subjective/interpersonal (through which humans identify themselves and organize their relations with others); but is also a feature of institutions and social structures, and a part of the symbolic realm of meaning-making, within which individual actors are 'nested'." (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 580; see also Mackay, 2014). Almost all the interviewees refer to the societal and cultural environments surrounding the companies they have been working for. These symbolic realms are powerful and influence not only those who make decisions, but also those who apply for jobs and promotions, as well as their families and friends. This informal network, invisible but real, shapes everyone's gendered visions and behaviours. However, in general, a clear disparity between men's and women's perceptions of the barriers and causes of gender inequality in ICT enterprises does not emerge, as it has done in other research (Galea & Gaweda, 2018).In some cases, the interviewees are influenced by personal views of gender equality: some have a polarised idea of men/women, and they assign traditional roles and behaviours that must be balanced for successful teamwork. Women are seen as an added value since they tone down the debate, manage clients well and help

make the company image more positive: this may favour women's careers in certain cases, but it hinders the structural change capable of recognising and accepting the undoing of gender stereotypical roles (Deutsch, 2007). In this way, the *status quo* often remains untouched, leaving the individual to acquire personal and professional strategies that might help them navigate the organisation, with policies not always being transparent and formalised (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Individuals devise rules, and these rules govern how they interact and behave (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004): if the individuals have an essentialist vision of gender, the rules they devise will be imbued with essentialism. O'Connor (2019) has observed that the lack of gender awareness among management staff at Irish Universities might explain the slow pace of change in the gender profile of their professors. Our interviewees, all working in senior positions, are well aware of the importance of promoting gender equality and are well informed of the existing strategies to addressing the issue.

Enforcement, necessary to toughen the policies, is rather strong. Contrary to what has emerged from previous research in other sectors (Galea & Gaweda, 2018), rewards for progressing toward gender equality objectives contribute to the effectiveness of the policies aiming at a better gender equality (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). The interviewees describe both formal and informal gender equality initiatives that are communicated to employees formally and officially, a strong sign of robustness. Communication is shared at all levels, not only among sub-groups or during events limited to higher-ranking employees. If good policy design is an "ongoing commitment to enforce rules, models of practices and rehearsed stories" (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013, p. 171), technology-related enterprises appear committed to persevering with their efforts. They are stimulated both by internal forces and their clients' desire to see that their stated values are respected by the companies that work for them.

The interviewees are aware, for instance, of potential backlashes on social media, with the potential for damage that is complex to resolve. Pink and/or rainbow capitalism incorporate gender and diversity in the market, and these companies are paying attention to specific needs to widen their markets. In theory, these strategies benefit both the

company and their clients, counteracting stereotypes and giving visibility to marginalised or excluded groups. At the same time, companies are careful to avoid accusations of pink and rainbow washing (Orser et al., 2019). Their clients – other businesses and individuals – realise when they are instrumentalising gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, limiting themselves to superficial action that does not go any deeper. Having a multi-gender and multi-ethnic workforce helps enterprises avoid running into difficulties along the way. However, it is obvious that variety itself will not guarantee anything unless different career pathways and involving people who can speak "on behalf of" others in decision-making processes become constant practices. Without inclusivity, equality is not sustainable in the long term.

Revisability, as conceptualized by Lowndes and Wilson (2003) manifests through policy flexibility and adaptability. Interviewees detail both internal and external strategies aimed at adjusting internal policies. Global initiatives and international reports shape these adaptations, emphasizing individual needs and accommodating family situations through increased flexibility, such as remote working opportunities.

The interviews predominantly focus on higher positions, valuing talent and competencies crucial for companies. Retaining excellent staff is a concern, with gender imbalances attributed partly to academia and familial stereotypes, hindering women's entry and advancement in the ICT sector. Efforts to rebalance gender ratios face complexities; altering percentages appears biased against men, and current unbalanced pools of senior managers limit changes in representation.

The selection for promotions considers competence and task neutrality, yet questions persist about the influence of diverse perspectives on company products. Technologies are often viewed as "neutral", overlooking ongoing discussions in the media, such as biased facial recognition systems. While diversity (both in staff and clientele) is acknowledged, interviewees seldom address the impact of a more diverse workforce by gender, ethnicity, and age on the final product. Consequently, revisability struggles to address these underlying, unnoticed issues.

Overall, despite efforts to introduce discrimination-sensitive approaches, these initiatives have yet to shift the staff composition significantly. Scholars like Goodin (1996) and Lowndes & Robert (2013) highlight the complexity inherent in institutional design and implementation processes. Our findings reveal the pivotal role of informal norms in shaping visible regulatory frameworks. However, interviewees predominantly fixate on complying with legislation, emphasizing work-life balance and flexibility as paramount for women and their families. Many interviewees, including women, still perceive the existing gender norms favourably, often rooted in essentialist viewpoints.

There seem to be a lack of discourse among interviewees regarding potential biases in new products and services, except when seen as a strategy to cater to a diverse clientele, reinforcing the *status quo*. While outright gender discrimination is rejected, interviewees frequently endorse gender biases and stereotypes, particularly those associated with maternity, as beneficial to women's lives. These biases persist within both formal and informal rules, intensifying the challenge of achieving substantial change (Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In the ICT sector, gender inequality in male-dominated organisations persists because of the deeply ingrained stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity that shape these organisations. Companies prioritise issues such as work-life balance and flexibility, often going beyond legal requirements, which particularly benefits certain intangible attributes in ICT professions. However, this narrow focus limits efforts to address gendered organisational structures, as initiatives are often geared towards “fixing the women” rather than tackling structural issues.

From an FI perspective, change does not occur in a linear, abrupt manner. Instead, it emerges as a gradual amalgamation of small wins that influence change in both formal and informal institutional norms, eventually yielding more profound and transformative outcomes in the long haul (Mackay et al., 2010). In this context, favourable legislation on parental leave and gender quotas can indeed push towards more gender-

equal environments. In the ICT sector, they create a cycle of internal and external forces, which is reinforced by the mobility of managers in different enterprises and has an impact beyond national borders. Large and medium-sized companies in a global market endeavour to avoid gender imbalance for image reasons. Informal rules, even if less clearly defined, favour those who know how to recognise and circumvent "the rules of the game". Individual solutions favour those who are skilled in personal negotiations, which are often influenced by informal rules. Mentors, who are often male, play an important role. They provide support based on their familiarity with informal rules and often represent the predominant gender in the organisation.

Further research directions emerge from this study. This research focuses on the implementation of FI theory to study the ICT sector. Exploring leaders' perceptions of the link between informal and formal rules, practices and narratives is a valuable start. However, the focus on managerial positions limits a comprehensive investigation of how formal and informal aspects affect employees at different organisational levels. In further research, interviews may thus focus on employees at different organisational levels to enable a cross-comparison.

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