'The School Must Not Be Partisan!' Mobilising against 'Gender Ideology' in Italian Schools

Paolo Gusmeroli[a], **Luca Trappolin**[a]

a) Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology,
University of Padua

Abstract: Over the past decade, the protest against so-called 'gender ideology' in Italian schools has witnessed widespread and pervasive mobilisations. Prompted by the directives of anti-gender organisations, grassroots networks activated at the local level have opposed educational programmes related to gender equality, sexuality and the prevention of discrimination against LGBT+ individuals. Through qualitative interviews with Catholic mothers and teachers who participated in the anti-gender conferences in 2015, we adopted a micro-level perspective to interpret their narratives as strategies aimed at defending their ethical and heteronormative educational competence against emerging norms of sexual democracy. The analysis shows how these women position themselves and construct their opposition to gender ideology as a means of asserting social and cultural legitimacy against the perceived risk of symbolic marginalisation in the field of education.

Keywords: field of education, qualitative interviews, Italy, anti-gender mobilisations

It has only been a decade since campaigns against 'gender theory/ideology' (or simply 'gender') became visible in the Italian public sphere (Trappolin 2022). In this time, a network of Italian neo-conservative and Catholic organisations have successfully positioned 'gender theory' as a public issue (Prearo 2017) and actively campaigned against civil unions, same-sex marriage, laws aimed at criminalising homo-transphobia, and educational programmes that they accuse of promoting a pro-gender agenda in schools (Gusmeroli, Trappolin 2021).

This sustained mobilisation has yielded remarkable results. As an example, the law on civil unions that passed in 2016 did not take into consideration the parenthood

aspirations of same-sex partners or the parental role actually performed by partners cohabiting with legal mothers/fathers of the same sex. At the same time, the Italian penal code still lacks explicit provisions against homo-transphobic crimes, and the implementation of gender-sensitive school projects remains highly contested. Even more noteworthy is the fact that the fight against 'gender ideology/theory' has gained popularity in the national debate and has been incorporated into the electoral platforms of far-right parties such as Lega (League) and Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), which emerged victorious in the Italian national elections in 2022. Consequently, politicians strongly associated with anti-gender organisations now occupy key institutional positions.

In recent times, also in Italy, 'the politicization of gender by conservative forces' (Cabral Grinspan et al. 2023: 4) has intersected with the activism of 'gender-critical' feminists who question the institutionalisation of transgender rights and epistemologies (cf. Sullivan 2020; Hines 2020; Cabral Grinspan et al. 2023). This happened between 2020 and 2021, when the public debate on the so-called Zan Bill, a law proposal against 'discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity' (rejected in 2021), led to unexpected convergences between conservatives and some feminist representatives (Gusmeroli 2024). Although in the Italian case religious networks and institutions play a crucial role, this 'new' configuration of the public debate has made it too complex for it to be reduced to a conflict that fits into the traditional opposition between progressives and conservatives.

Given this background, the primary objective of this article is to enhance comprehension of how 'anti-genderism' can be locally appropriated by different groups activated within and beyond Catholic religious circles. The case study we focus on pertains to a protest to prevent gender ideology from entering Italian schools in 2015. The protest targeted new legislation promoted by a centre-left government (the Buona Scuola [Good School] law 107) that was accused of facilitating the adoption of 'pro-gender' initiatives linked to gender and sexual education (Gusmeroli, Trappolin 2021). Programmes aimed at preventing discrimination, bullying, and violence based on sexual orientation and gender stereotypes were also targeted and systematically accused of pursuing hidden goals in line with gender ideology. Different from past mobilisations in defence of (Catholic) private schools (Avanza, Della Sudda 2017), this protest was directed at public schools. The mobilisation, driven by anti-gender organisations, contributed to establishing and reinforcing surveillance by teachers and parents of 'threatening' school programmes and activities, as shown by the regularly updated dossier published by the anti-gender NGO Pro Vita & Famiglia on its blog.[1]

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[1] Pro Vita & Famiglia (Pro Life & Family) is one of the largest and most active Italian anti-gender organisations. Its blog advertises that 'Pro Vita & Famiglia continuously receives reports of projects

In the next sections, after introducing the theoretical framework and methodology, we present our analysis, which is divided into two parts. The first part examines how mothers and teachers in our sample appropriated and negotiated the anti-gender discourse they were exposed to by attending conferences on the topic. In the second section, we explore how opposition to 'gender' is explained in relation to the defence of their role as competent carers and educators.

Theoretical framework

Various political and sociological scholars have acknowledged the ability of the discourse against gender ideology to extend beyond its religious origins. For example, it has been remarked that in many national contexts, the opposition to gender has been 'freely deployed by various political actors, from social movements to political parties' (Kóvats 2022: 111). Moreover, it has been argued that opposition to gender now serves as a 'symbolic glue' (Kóvats, Põim 2015), bringing together various conservative groups, associations, and political parties (Corredor 2019; Kuhar, Paternotte 2017). As a consequence, anti-gender politics has become particularly conspicuous within neo-nationalist, populist, and authoritarian agendas (Paternotte, Kuhar 2018; Graff, Korolczuk 2022; for the Italian case, see Bellè et al. 2016; Righetti 2016; Bellè, Poggio 2018; Garbagnoli, Prearo 2018).

In this sense, opposition to 'gender ideology' has been interpreted as a (imagined) 'reactionary response to neoliberalism' (Graff, Korolczuk 2022) that is often articulated within an anti-system populist and authoritarian framework (Svetonova 2022). Analysis of the relationship between anti-gender discourses and mobilisation strategies has also highlighted how malleable this 'reactionary rhetorical dispositive' (Garbagnoli 2016) can be. It has been described as an 'empty signifier' (Korolczuk, Graff 2018: 797) employed by different actors to channel personal fears and anxieties into political action without the need for internal coherence (Butler 2024).

In the Italian case, analysis of the spread of anti-gender discourses has paid significant attention to the renewal of Catholic political activism. For instance, Anna Lavizzari and Massimo Prearo (2019) have highlighted the capacity of anti-gender protests to provide a political voice that allows the re-composition of Catholic political projects in a complex post-secular society. This interpretation situates the anti-gender 'moment' within a long and well-established tradition of Catholic activism against gender/sexual equality and reproductive rights (Avanza, Della Sudda 2017). Similarly, an analysis by Elisa Bellè and Barbara Poggio (2018) showed how organisations such

inspired by gender theory applied in Italian schools of all levels'. See https://www.provitaefamiglia.it/blog/progetti-gender-nelle-scuole-ecco-il-dossier [accessed on 15 June 2023].

as Pro Vita & Famiglia and La Manif Pour Tous Italia strongly promoted the idea of a silent majority sharing Catholic morality on the subject of gender and sexuality, which is threatened by international networks of radical feminism and LGBT+ activism. Other streams of literature focusing on how the anti-gender discourse is exploited within the right-wing populist agenda have detected new frames related to the defence of Italian identity against the pressures of multiculturalism and globalisation (Garbagnoli, Prearo 2018; Pavan 2019; Donà 2020).

The variety of meanings assigned to gender by its opponents must be explored to reveal how symbolic and political struggles cannot be reduced to competing arguments about what sex and gender are or should be. In this sense, the malleability of the anti-gender rhetoric is echoed in research that has applied ethnographic and qualitative methods to study anti-gender activism and politics, revealing a relative variety of postures and competing ideas about what can and cannot be considered 'genderism'.

From this perspective, scholars have considered how anti-gender stances can be appropriated for different stakes by different groups (Massei 2017; Geva 2019; Möser et al. 2022). The micro-level and 'bottom-up' perspective has allowed to consider many nuances within the local production of activism. For example, through an ethnographic observation of Italian Family Day in 2015, Massimo Prearo (2017: 17) revealed the role of religious networks and shared symbolic codes within a mobilisation officially presented as 'non-confessional and apolitical' by its leaders. Martina Avanza (2020), investigating pro-life Italian associations, discovered a stark gendered division of labour between the political level (typically framed as 'masculine') and caring daily practices (typically framed as 'feminine'), which was also reflected in different ethical stances. A French study on Catholic and Muslim activists engaged against the teaching of 'gender theory' at school identified distinct motivations between the two groups, primarily shaped by contrasting experiences and relationships with the educational institution (Massei 2017). In another study, Dori Geva (2019: 398) considered how particular forms of protest carried out by La Manif Pour Tous in France could be interpreted as a struggle for social distinction conducted by 'highly educated Catholics', who 'cannot convert their moral knowledge into cultural capital'.

Our analysis follows the path traced by Dori Geva, investigating how a sample of anti-gender mothers and teachers, endowed with recognised social capital at the local level, represent their positioning in a changing educational field in reference to a (imagined) new standard of sexual democracy (Fassin 2012). We adopt the methodological imperative of constructing social space as a structure of distinct positions, wherein strategies are shaped by a struggle for and the possession of particular forms of 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu 1991). In other words, we aim to consider the struggle related to norms and values but also the antagonism between social groups that

is reflected in the same struggle (Bourdieu 1994). Following this perspective, the analysis does not reduce ethical stances to concealed interests or ideological 'false consciousness' (see also Sayer 2005; Pellandini-Simányi 2014). Instead, adopting a gaze 'from below', anti-gender teachers and parents are not treated as cultural (and religious) dopes manipulated by anti-gender leaders or organisations (although the narratives collected clearly resonate with the official scripts promoted in conferences), but as social actors engaged in cultural and social struggles with relevant stakes.

Methodological notes

Our analysis draws on 17 semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers who attended anti-gender conferences in 2015 in a rural area of central Italy (Gusmeroli, Trappolin 2021). All interviewees were women aged between 30 and 50 who declared themselves to be locally engaged in preventing the entry into schools of what they deem pro-gender initiatives. The sample was constructed using a snowball strategy. Interviewees were intercepted among the audience at anti-gender conferences held at the time (May and June 2015) in the same area. This recruitment strategy resulted in a sample with a clear gender bias, which mirrored the prevalence of women in parents' informal groups and among the teachers involved in that particular context (although men were also present). The respondents presented themselves as mothers with young children (5) or as teachers working in primary schools or kindergartens (9). In three cases, the interviewees held both roles (parent and teacher).

The choice to focus on the audience of the conferences instead of the official representatives of the mobilisation (anti-gender speakers, experts, etc.) was motivated by two main factors. The first reason is related to opportunity: refusals – or limited access to the field of investigation – are well documented in studies on conservative groups and leaders (Avanza 2015; Lavizzari 2019). The second motivation is linked to our attempt to investigate anti-gender mobilisation 'from below'. This was lacking in most of the available literature at that time, at least in the Italian context.

The semi-structured interviews focused on two main topics: the definition of the problem linked to mobilisation against 'gender ideology' and the representation of workable solutions to the problems outlined. Although most interviewees identified as Catholic, they could not be considered a uniform group. Most respondents also declared their lack of affiliation with Catholic pro-life associations, right-wing parties, and organisations that were fuelling the protest at the time, even if they were shown to be connected to the local Catholic parishes and parents' and teachers' networks linked to local school activities. Despite the different positioning, which

was also reflected in how the anti-gender speakers at the conferences were evaluated, all except one declared that they were engaged in monitoring schools to prevent the entry of what they believe to be pro-gender activities. The information collected does not allow us to fully reconstruct individual trajectories and positioning in terms of social class and political preferences. Despite the limited and problematic access to the field, the narratives we collected allow us to consider how the views of teachers and mothers are given political and social relevance.

For ethical reasons, the names of the interviewees used in the text are fictional and all details related to individual identities have been omitted. Informed consent was obtained before beginning the interviews.

The interviews were fully audio-recorded and transcribed and subsequently subjected to a thematic analysis inspired by the critical discourse approach (Fairclough 2003). The analysis was conducted using qualitative coding software (RQDA).

Engaging in the fight against 'gender ideology'

In this section, we provide a synthesis of the reception of the anti-gender rhetoric and alarms by mothers and teachers that we intercepted. To summarise the appropriation of the anti-gender content by our sample of mothers and teachers, we focus on three dimensions: the role of moral panic, the content of the protest and the strategies for preventing pro-gender initiatives from entering schools.

As mentioned, the relevance of moral panic, or 'sex panics'[2] (Herdt 2009), in sparking anti-gender protests has been analysed extensively in the literature (for the Italian case, see Bellè, Poggio 2018). In our case study, when accounting for their mobilisation, most respondents recalled how they came into contact with news and alarms related to the victimisation, early sexualisation, or even abuse of young children. Recurrent arguments were made about school initiatives – some invented, others mischievously reinterpreted – in which children were told 'they could choose to become men or women' without correspondence to their sex. None of the episodes recalled occurred in the local context. Some respondents mentioned activities in which children were asked to 'wear the opposite-sex clothes to let them experience what it feels like', meaning that the initiative, with the excuse of promoting gender equality, was intended to actively queer children's gender identities. Others referred to initiatives of sexual and affective education aimed at 'making children explore their bodies' by

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[2] Alessandro Dal Lago (1999: 35) claimed that 'There should be no doubt about the moral character (in sociological terms) of fears' (authors' translation). In this sense, we assume that social fears – even when clearly fed by urban legends or slanderous inventions – mirror deeply-rooted social feelings and should be investigated as such.

'touching each other' in kindergarten. Recalling a document of the WHO, some respondents even mentioned the risk of having masturbation classes in primary schools or earlier. Carolina (mother of two) told a typical story, explaining how she learned about the threat of gender ideology:

> *I learned about this 'gender' from a flyer, which I received at home. Perhaps it was a little too alarmist, but it immediately drew my attention to strange things. Like, there was talk of sex explained to children, even in kindergarten, and even masturbation. All things a bit… that a parent, when they read them, panics and says, 'Oh god, what's going on!?'*

In our respondents' narratives, the typical demonisation of the enemy promoted by anti-gender organisations and leaders also emerged, although in varying degrees and tones. There was also widespread distrust of the actors accused of promoting gender ideology, primarily defined as LGBT+ associations, gay lobbies, or powerful transnational institutions (such as the EU and the WHO), as mentioned in the following quotes:

> *It is not yet clear what they want to do. The only clear thing is that they want this ideology to enter – because it is an ideology! – into schools. To ensure that everyone accept as normal something that is not normal.* (Enrica, mother)

> *There are lobbies and there are economic interests that, probably, I cannot even fully understand because they are well beyond my knowledge.* (Debora, mother)

The attempt of state institutions to institutionalise LGBT+ rights was assumed by some – according to remarks in rather different contexts – as proof of its complicity with an 'orchestrated "gender ideological" conspiracy' (Linander et al. 2022). The threat was regularly referred to as overwhelming and powerful social forces promoting a totalitarian project.

Despite the recurrent information that caused a moral panic to spread, we discovered a rather unexpected variety of perspectives when it came to rationalising fears and worries about gender ideology. For example, respondents themselves tended to distinguish 'conspiracy' scripts – refused by some – from what they assumed to be more 'moderate' and rational arguments (Gusmeroli, Trappolin 2021). Some respondents explicitly debunked 'fake news' or distanced themselves from anti-gender speakers. Sara (teacher and mother), for example, described her positioning within the protest, distinguishing herself from both ultra-religious and LGBT+ associations, which she described as opposing radicalisms:

They [anti-gender activists] are obsessed with religion, they make prayer groups, so they are angry about the family, and they all went to Rome [to attend Family Day]. Do you think that their ostentation is better than that of those attending Gay Pride? They are just the same, in the end.

However, in most cases, this kind of 'critical' posture did not result in the rejection of the gender issue or the dismissal of its relevance. Even without resorting to conspiracy theories, there was extensive agreement about the idea that new sexual and gender norms, deemed dis-embedded from the local context could enter schools and promote a 'gone-too-far' or 'perverted' sexual modernisation. In this sense, moral panic proved to be successful, at least, in capturing attention, establishing this as an issue, and eliciting a sense of responsibility on the grounds of a caring ethos (the duty of parents/teachers to be informed about this potential threat).

It is noteworthy that, especially when compared to anti-gender messages circulating online or in social networks, the discourse of the anti-gender leaders that the respondents had heard at conferences was perceived as professional and well informed. In this respect, the information was considered relevant even by respondents who strongly debunked the conspiracy scripts or who took a critical distance from the radical conservatism of the same anti-gender organisations. Most importantly, anti-gender speakers were perceived as not motivated by religious or political goals and as providing 'scientific' explanations about *what* gender ideology is and *why* it is dangerous. In other words, they were assumed to be reliable sources of knowledge on little-known topics related to gender and sexual epistemologies (explained and simplified in their own terms).

Respondents described the cornerstones of what was assumed to be a threatening 'gender theory' or 'ideology' in light of the anti-gender conference they had just attended. Consistent with the existing literature, we detected three main topics of the protest[3]. The first depicts 'gender ideology' as a pedagogical programme aimed at actively overcoming the binarism of gender identities, pursued by explicitly teaching children that gender identity can be 'freely chosen'. The second frame, still relating to gender as an educational approach, revolves around the early sexualisation of children through games and activities that expose them to dangerous manipulations by educators. In the third frame, gender ideology takes on the meaning of a cultur-

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[3] Although clearly resonating with our comments about the sparking of moral panic, the three topics recalled here cannot be wholly superimposed onto them. Moral panic exploits immediate fear and worries more directly, whereas here we refer to the broader normative conflicts on which the anti-gender crusade is constructed. However, respondents often mix reactions to myths – such as those related to masturbation classes in kindergarten – with opposition to the changing social norms related to the family, gender, and sexuality.

al and political weapon that threatens the legitimate definitions of a 'natural' family and parenthood, for example, by redefining their vocabularies (e.g. 'mum' and 'dad' become 'parent 1' and 'parent 2'). In the radical version of this last frame, even simply acknowledging the existence of different family forms was considered the legitimisation of 'deviance'.

The reception of the anti-gender call for action by our sample of respondents was evident in the strategies that they nominated to defend the legitimate division of educational labour between school and family in the domain of sexual and gender education. The basic and shared demand, as also identified in research in other European countries, is that on these topics the family must take precedence over the school (see Kuhar 2015). Moreover, both the teachers and the parents in our case study, in conformity with the messages disseminated by anti-gender organisations and leaders, stressed the importance of monitoring what goes on at school and converged in two widely shared pragmatic demands: (i) there should be more information about school activities relating to sex issues and (ii) parents should be given the choice to grant or withhold their informed consent for their children to participate in these activities.

In other words, mothers defended their right to provide what they considered a good and desirable sexual education against unwanted emancipatory pressures attributed to pro-gender educational ideologies. Teachers cited the principle of 'freedom of education guaranteed by the Constitution' and claimed the right to object to the obligation 'to teach gender ideology'.

In recent years, the application of these strategies – often presented in the media as the spontaneous, non-political, and a-confessional protest of worried parents and teachers – has proven to be effective in preventing activities aimed at opposing discrimination, bullying, and violence based on sexual orientation and gender stereotypes – especially when organised by feminist and LGBT+ associations – from entering Italian schools (Trappolin, Gusmeroli 2023).

Resisting educational and ethical *déclassement*

So far, we have discussed how the scripts and claims of anti-gender organisations and leaders have been received, and relatively negotiated, by a sample of engaged mothers and teachers. Now, we focus on how the mothers' and teachers' opposition to gender is narratively related to how they situate themselves in a space of social positions.[4] In other words, we consider their anti-gender stances as forms of 'social

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[4] In another paper (Gusmeroli, Trappolin 2021), we considered how the practice of anti-gender surveillance is paired with a different and relational positioning. For example, women who claimed a

distinction' (Bourdieu 1979; see Geva 2019) played in the educational field, where ethical stances are relevant stakes for defining which social norms are legitimate (or not) and who is entitled to determine the meaning attached to standards of education.

To begin, we examine how the respondents defined the political and cultural space in which the issue of gender entered the local context. Despite the patronage of religious parishes and local public institutions governed by right or centre-right mayors, the issue of gender was barely perceived as driven by far-right or extremist forces. When respondents mentioned local actors, they never explicitly referred to political parties, revealing a possible and implicit distinction between official politics (perceived as remote from the local context) and the pragmatic daily politics, embedded in the parents' and Catholic social networks (cf. Gusmeroli, Trappolin 2021). In this regard, it is noteworthy that the respondents converged in describing their town and local areas as a traditional and (mainly) Catholic community where pro-gender initiatives were hardly considered a concrete threat. Consistent with this, LGBT+ people and organisations, as well as same-sex families, were not perceived as being part of the local social landscape. References to contexts where gender ideology was deemed to be at work often depicted a recurring opposition between the urban and 'hypermodernity' on one side (with references to big Italian cities or to countries such as Germany, the UK, and the US) and laidback rural authenticity on the other. The self-representation of interviewees as 'common and deserving' people is, in this light, not just a rhetorical strategy consistent with a populist outlook but also a relevant form of (Catholic) 'social distinction' that is played out in a concrete social space.

It is within this representation of the local social and cultural space that mothers and teachers combine stances that could be labelled as extremist and ultra-conservative with ideas of (Catholic) moderation and educational competence. As noted above, it is not just the legitimacy of a political 'opinion' that is at stake here but the respondents' sense of their own position (as 'good' parents and teachers). As Enrica stated, 'Now we are all homophobic and racist, but does that seem likely to you?' Many respondents aligned with this representation and stressed their intention to reject and overturn the ethical and political stigma associated, for instance, with the concept of homophobia. Their opposition to gender allowed them to restate their social and cultural legitimacy in the face of the perceived threat of their symbolic marginalisation.

'moderate' standpoint distinguished themselves from other 'radicalised' parents and refused to adopt conspiracy scripts, extreme populist tones, or a paranoid belief about a gender dictatorship. The focus on this positioning allowed us to detect even some ironic dynamics, for example, when 'anti-gender' teachers talked about their efforts to convince worried and hostile parents that gender was not a concrete threat, at least in their school.

The rhetorical, and sometimes ironic, use of the term 'bigot/bigotry' is a good example of the contradictory relationship between a claimed moral/ethical distinction and its positioning on the side of pre-modernity and extremism defined by the liberal standards of sexual democracy. On the one hand, these terms (bigot/bigotry) are used to signal different positionings within the same space of anti-gender activism. Sara (teacher), for example, distanced herself from 'closed-minded and bigoted Catholics', including some 'anti-gender' parents and leaders recalling, however, the need 'to be careful when you discuss these topics' (gender and sexuality). Another relevant point relates to the refusal to equate 'Catholic' with 'bigot' when it comes to sexual rights and gender equality. In this sense, the stances expressed by an allegedly progressive pope (Francis) against gender ideology (see Case 2016) were cited to highlight the moderateness of their own stance.

In other cases, the label 'bigot' was ironically and polemically self-attributed to indicate the hostility of liberal-progressive elites towards the 'common' people or entire cultures. The revaluation of the term was even more evident when respondents strongly distanced themselves from the political values, actors, and meanings that they saw as governing the relevant processes of (in their eyes 'imposed') social and cultural change. Their own stigmatisation (as bigots) was therefore implicitly reinterpreted as a kind of symbolic violence imposed on them by left-liberal standards. For example, this narrative strategy was adopted to describe the posture of a whole country (Italy) resisting the process of sexual modernisation. Deborah (mother) stated:

I hope that in Italy, we will never reach this stupidity (…). Because we are in Europe, and we are in an open world where, therefore, sooner or later, bigoted Italy will also have to adjust…

In resisting or appropriating allegations of bigotry, anti-gender mothers and teachers also implicitly revealed how reflexivity ('We know we are perceived as bigots, but…') could provide their political stances with a new legitimacy in the market of opinions, which they could achieve by stressing their cultural stigmatisation in the enemy's eyes.

Another relevant narrative script adopted to legitimise anti-gender claims at a daily and pragmatic level was the rejection of assumedly unworthy political knowledge on gender and sexuality. Generally, the respondents showed little familiarity with the vocabulary related to sexuality and gender identities. Among others, Barbara claimed that she knew that 'there are three genders: man, woman and homosexual'. Natalia claimed that the acronym LGBT summarises 'the four main genders'. In other cases, interviewees recalled the presence of different 'communities of interpretations' supporting opposite views on these topics. For example, Sonia said:

Whether it's true or not, I don't know! Here, there's a frightening confusion. A colleague went to a meeting of feminists, and all of them were in favour of this 'gender'. Conversely, if you listen to Catholics, they explain it in a different way.

The conspicuous refusal to engage with 'confusing' topics and ideas did not just reveal a lack of knowledge about the issue of gender. Pro-gender knowledge was in fact also accused of being the cause of social suffering. The primary concern did not appear to be solely about recognising the potential misguidedness of abstract pro-gender knowledge but was also about how this knowledge, considered to be 'irresponsibly' disseminated by 'open-minded' (meaning liberal and progressive) groups (see Geva 2019), can serve as a tangible source of social distress. Lucia (mother of two) argued:

When I'm three years old, I want the red car. I don't want to know if I'm a boy or a girl, I couldn't care less. I have a penis, alright, one day you'll tell me what it's for, but you don't tell me beforehand because it'll create never-ending trauma.

Anti-gender stances were often referred to as pragmatic and down-to-earth concerns rather than political and/or philosophical arguments (dismissed by many as too abstract and inconclusive). The down-to-earth narrative was also represented as a form of anti-intellectualism opposed to a (perceived) dystopian hypermodernity – considered exogenous. A sort of ethical distinction was constructed by comparing simplicity to the manufactured and the natural to the over-culturalised in a worldview in which sexual modernisation is seen mainly as a source of social distress. This way, spontaneity and naturalness were set in opposition to the notion of a (pro-gender) agenda aimed at indoctrinating children, thrusting them into a 'disturbing' sexualised world. Debora (mother of two) asserted:

I want my child to grow up peacefully. Beyond the myriads of problems and stressful situations that society imposes on our children today, where they constantly feel the pressure to excel in everything and chase after everything. I don't want to add yet another doubt, yet another worry, yet another form of stress regarding their sexual identity.

Children, in this view, have a right to live in an enchanted world free from 'troubling and harmful' knowledge (as same-gender attraction and transgenderism are constructed as equally disturbing and harmful). Interestingly, some respondents directed this same attitude (of wanting children to be free from harmful knowledge) against the conservative-oriented sexual education 'of the past'. This was the case of

Sara, a teacher who adhered to anti-gender surveillance, and positioned herself as a moderate and a 'progressive'. As a child, she received sexual education from a nun. She remembered how 'hallucinatory' this experience was, as the nun 'showed us jars containing aborted foetuses' and 'a video on the abortion technique'. Nowadays, she considered gender to be a similar threat. The 'refusal to know' about gender and sexualities was justified with arguments about the ethical and moral imperatives of care, leaving aside religious arguments.

Against this background, suffering, trauma, confusion, and even the alleged abuse of children that the respondents assumed to be the outcomes of pro-gender activities were invoked to downplay (or even deny) the effects of heteronormative and cis-normative cultures. Unsurprisingly, many respondents denounced what they called the excessive attention given to LGBT people, portrayed as 'screaming minorities' monopolising public attention and the political debate and creating a distraction from real problems, and now accused of wanting to bring their 'troubling' knowledge into schools. As Natalie (teacher) said, 'There's always a minority group that is shouting, and they know how to shout'. Or, as Debora (mother of two) put it, 'Why should I educate 99% of the boys for the 1% minority [gay people] that have this problem?'

Some respondents – particularly those who distanced themselves from the anti-gender extremism linked to far-right radicalism – wanted to harmonise a heteronormative view with adhesion to a pluralist ethos – for example, by stressing their 'tolerance' and stating their (limited[5]) support for LGBT+ rights:

I put myself in the shoes of those who belong to a minority. Being perceived in a certain way, being classified in a certain way, not having rights when you feel normal, like others. That's not an easy life. (Giorgia, teacher)

We don't have to tell children how they have to play, especially at this age. If a boy wants to play with dolls, no one will tell him, 'No, you can't play with dolls because you're a boy!' (Ilenia, teacher)

Sometimes I think of a child abandoned in an orphanage where no one loves him. The idea of leaving him there and not giving him to two mothers, parent 1 and parent 2, or two fathers. I don't conscientiously find it right! (Sara, teacher and mother)

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[5] Their limitation can be observed in two main directions: as limits imposed on the recognition of same-sex parenting; and as the configuration of LGBT+ rights, expressed as a respect for individuality, an issue that should be confined to the world of adults.

If one day my son tells me that he is gay, he is free to love whoever he wants, I think there's no problem. (Barbara, mother)

Teachers, in particular, referred to anti-discrimination programmes as a taken-for-granted part of their work and a relevant part of their educational competence. They also recalled their longstanding educational engagement to promote respect for pluralism in public schools. Respect for the 'person', whatever their 'difference' (they repeatedly mentioned disabled, gay, and black people) was recurrent. For some, the limits of pluralism were established with respect to traditions and therefore through the assumed legitimacy of culturally embedded values and beliefs. As Natalia said:

School is secular and should teach everything, but up to a certain point! It is true that it is secular, but if I have Muslims in my class, this does not mean I have to pray like Muslims. We are still a Catholic country, where all religions are taught at school, but Catholicism is practised.

In this respect, teachers described how they guaranteed a 'neutral' (meaning, non-partisan) education for their pupils (not only in gender and sexuality issues) as a form of tolerance towards various 'minorities', without questioning traditional and hegemonic habits. At the same time, they tended to distinguish their openness to 'pluralism' from the threat posed by gender ideology.

The school must not be partisan. It must be able to make the child understand that diversity is not scary, that diversity must in any case be accepted, be it about gender, culture, or religion. Then, we must be cautious about these projects on affective-emotional education, or on bullying, feminicide, respect, disability. (Sara, teacher)

I have to educate my children to have respect. If they see two mums and two dads bringing up a child as if they were a traditional family and my children ask me 'Why?', I will explain it to them, and I'll try to make them understand that it's something that can happen, and that even if it's different from their family, there's nothing wrong with them believing that it's right. But gender ideology is different from this. (Federica, teacher and mother)

This kind of narrative, in which pluralism is defined by accepting an unquestioned cultural hegemony (also in terms of sexuality, gender and family), can easily translate into a narrative that we propose labelling 'reverse pluralism'. This is a call for pluralism issued from a dominant standpoint, *as if* occupying a dominated position. As

Olga (teacher) said, 'It will turn out that those like us, who are married and have children, are the ones who will be marginalised'. Using these words, she described how 'normal' families might transition from a position of 'tolerant hegemony' to that of a 'tolerated minority'.

The respondents' assumption of a self-victimising posture seems to reflect the gap between the perceived legitimacy of their social position (as citizens and families) and their potential stigmatisation within the field of sexual democracy (as bigots, homophobes, pre-modernists, and so on). This rhetoric is relatively consistent with the co-option of an anti-colonial frame within anti-gender stances reported by some scholars (see Graff 2016; Korolczuc, Graff 2018; Krizsán, Siim 2018), later defined as 'reverse anti-colonialism' (Roth, Sauer 2022).

But the ideals of pluralism were also reframed through pragmatic worries situated in everyday situations. In this regard, teachers often referred to the exhausting mediation work they do with parents from different social and cultural backgrounds. As Sara (teacher) described:

There are families that are more open-minded and others that are more bigoted. But you can't blame them for it; after all, each of us has a story behind us. If that family is bigoted, I can't do much as a teacher.

Abstract arguments and educational orientations were therefore translated into everyday struggles to maintain the trust and consent of parents. Selective condescension in the face of parents' diverse cultural orientations was evident in the widespread choice – by school directors and teachers – to avoid 'divisive' pedagogical programmes (Guerrini 2018). In this sense, an analysis of the capacity of specific social groups (and not others) to define what topics are 'divisive' would reveal how social influence within the school field, and within a community, is asymmetrically distributed.

Conclusion

Anti-gender activism, in Italy as elsewhere, has been interpreted as the result of a protracted process through which a neo-conservative (and Catholic) front has adopted new vocabularies and strategies to oppose gender and sexual equality policies and rights (Paternotte, Kuhar 2018), producing dramatic outcomes. In a relatively short period of time, neo-populist political forces and some Catholic elements (linked to pro-life associations) have been able to create relevant consent against 'genderism' and to re-establish their political agenda against LGBT+ rights and gender equality on new bases. More importantly, they have been able to get their issues, and their representatives, into mainstream politics and to mobilise a broader audience.

Against this background, after examining the reception and negotiation of the anti-gender discourse by a sample of 'worried' mothers and teachers, we focused on how they use anti-gender arguments to legitimise their own social and educational positions. The interviews clearly showed how anti-gender stances were related to the fear of being symbolically and culturally marginalised and of a shift in their position from that of a 'tolerant hegemony' to that of a 'tolerated minority'. We have considered how they resist this imagined *déclassement*, and how anti-gender rhetoric can be adopted to restate their positioning within the field of education. For example, the anti-gender political 'trademark' is selectively assumed to reverse the stigma of 'bigotry' and 'radicalism' – the latter being projected, instead, onto pro-gender actors – and to claim the right to determine the limits of pluralism from a conservative standpoint and also through what we have called 'reverse pluralism'.

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Paolo Gusmeroli is a research fellow and lecturer in family sociology at the University of Padua. He has conducted research on the transformations of family practices, gender-based violence, and phenomena related to anti-LGBTQI+ violence and discrimination.
ORCID: 0000-0002-6687-5956. Contact e-mail: paolo.gusmeroli@unipd.it.

Luca Trappolin is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Padua. For several years he has worked on gender and sexuality studies. He is the author of several papers on the social construction of homosexuality and homophobia. ORCID: 0000-0003-3860-219X. Contact e-mail: luca.trappolin@unipd.it.