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Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg & Valeria Pecorelli

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## Gender and geography in Italy

Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg<sup>a</sup> and Valeria Pecorelli<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Scienze umane per la formazione R. Massa, Università degli Studi di Milano – Bicocca, Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo, Milan, Italy; <sup>b</sup>Dipartimento di Diritto, economia e culture, DiDEC Università degli Studi dell'Insubria – Como, Chiostro di S. Abbondio, Como, Italy

### ABSTRACT

This article attempts to provide a picture of Italian gender geography in order to better understand the discipline's key achievements and development. Rooted in a lively tradition of feminism stretching back to the 1970s, Italian gender geography has faced cultural and academic resistance while achieving a number of milestones. There is still much to be done if the multifaceted theme of gender is to be fully engaged by Italian geography. However, seminars, national and international congresses on gender geography themes, and the dialectic encounter with international gender geography have stimulated the domestic debate since the new millennium. Italian gender geographic voices may be self-perceived as limited and isolated but are continuously engaged in the struggle to overcome the many structural and cultural constraints imposed by Italian society and academia. This article tries to review Italian gender geography's history to look forward and encourage new agendas and projects within a larger academic audience.

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## Introduction

In Italy, the term 'gender' has recently become the object of considerable media attention and public debate, particularly in the context of a hotly disputed law on same-sex civil unions and rainbow family rights that was passed in 2017 (Gazzetta Ufficiale 2017). Thanks to the debate surrounding the civil unions legislation, the word gender was – finally – criticized, flaunted, defended, condemned, demonized, and idealized by both civil society and politics with a capital P (Mouffe 2011), in what might be defined as a 'historic' year for Italian society. Despite a lively tradition of Italian feminism stretching back to the 1970s, gender discrimination is still a fact: Italy sits at the bottom of the Western European ranking (only Cyprus and Malta occupy lower positions) for performance on the Global Gender Gap (GGG) index

**CONTACT** Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg  [marcella.schmidt@unimib.it](mailto:marcella.schmidt@unimib.it)  Scienze umane per la formazione R. Massa, Università degli Studi di Milano – Bicocca, Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo, 1 - 20126, Milan, Italy

(WEF 2017). The official figures show that femicide remains a tragic daily reality in Italy. Over the past 5 years, there have been 774 cases of women being murdered, an average of about 150 per year (ISTAT 2017). One Italian woman out of three aged 16–70 years (32% of the women in this age range) has been physically or sexually assaulted during her lifetime (ISTAT 2018). More recently, women's rights have come under attack from a wave of increasingly conservative political proposals and policies with the effect of limiting access to contraception, abortion, and the morning-after pill (De Zordo 2016). Furthermore, about 70% of Italian gynecologists are conscientious objectors, making access to voluntary abortion or emergency contraception more difficult for Italian women (Minerva 2015; Bo et al. 2015).

As women living and working in this complex environment, we warmly welcomed the invitation to write a report on the history of Italian gender geography. It has given us the opportunity to reflect on the discipline's key achievements and development over time, and to surmise what concerns may keep gender geography alive and flourishing going forward, while – hopefully – contributing to the social debate, within a social and political system that is currently attacking a set of rights that most of us had previously come to take for granted. As we outline in the following sections, gender geography has still not been recognized as an independent and authoritative area of study in Italian universities. Gender and feminist issues mostly emerge from a complex patchwork of isolated studies and voices, especially since the start of the new millennium, which has seen an increase in published work in the fields of gender relations, the production of space, masculinities studies, and queer theory. Over the past two decades, Italian gender geography has drawn on an international theoretical apparatus informed by post-colonialist theories, post-gender studies, and postmodern feminism. A number of Italian scholars have embraced these perspectives and have contributed to Italian gender geography via publications, research articles, seminars, and participation in national and international conferences. Nonetheless, most of this work has been produced for Italian-language scientific journals, which has very much confined the discussion to the national level: to date, Italian contributions to the wider international debate have been perceived as limited.

The task of providing a coherent overview of the different voices animating Italian gender geography has been challenging for us as authors. For this reason, we have chosen to chronologically arrange the following sections. Our primary purpose is to sketch for non-European and non-Italian readers a broad but – hopefully – informative picture of the main themes and figures in Italian gender geography. A second aim is to generate ideas and suggest new lines of inquiry for a research agenda that might be pursued by Italian scholars in collaboration with fellow academics from other countries. The

remainder of the report is divided into four main sections. The first looks at the relations between geography and feminism, tracing the research paths of geographers who early incorporated a gender perspective into their inquiry. Indeed, since the late 1960s, Italian geography has been responsive to the lively and entangled political context, displaying increasing awareness of the gender gap and different forms of gender inequality. The second section outlines the uneven process by which Italian gender geography has slowly but surely won increased recognition over the past two decades. While in North America and in other European countries, gender geography has inspired a larger body of publications and research, in Italy, despite the efforts of individual scholars, geography has assimilated the feminist lesson to a very limited degree (Minca 1995). Nonetheless, in the new millennium, gender geography studies – though conducted by a small number of scholars who are sometimes treated with prejudice, distrust, and irony within the Italian academy – have made significant headway. The third section examines developments in gender geography, overviewing cultural initiatives, seminars, and national and international congresses on gender geography themes, and the dialectic encounter with international gender geography. We especially focus on LGBT themes and the multiple perspectives on this area of inquiry developed by younger Italian scholars. The fourth and final section summarizes the main insights from the previous sections and offers some concluding remarks.

### A promising beginning

In Italy, gender geography has its roots in Italian feminism, which has had a key, albeit not yet highly visible, impact on the recent history of the country's leading institutions. Feminism originated in the cultural realm of the Italian Left and the related political movements of the 1970s. In July 1970, for example, the *Manifesto di rivolta femminile* [Manifesto of Feminist Revolt] posted on the walls of Rome and Milan famously declared that feminism was the political dawn of historical criticism of the family and society (dell'Agnese, Minca, Schmidt di Friedberg 2019). Civil right campaigns for the modernization of Italian legislation on divorce, abortion, family law and equal employment conditions were accompanied by an equally productive and lively intellectual energy directed to investigating an unexplored, unconventional, and hitherto masculinist field. The role of the feminist movement and its added value in academia and the institutions of the state is still a matter of debate (Dell'Abate Celebi 2009; Pravadelli 2010; Saraceno 2010). 'Holding only feminists accountable for the lack of institutionalization [...] overrates the real impact of the feminist movement on Italian academia, and at the same time veils and fails to disclose the internal power fight in universities

and disciplines for the institutionalization and recognition of women's studies as an autonomous field of study' (Magaraggia and Leone 2010, 426).

With the discipline of geography, gender as an analytical topic had roots in a small number of scientific articles from the late 1960s focused on the labour market and women's education: 'Under scrutiny were ... the basis for radical change in the economy, the local community, and Italian society. ... Awareness of a "difference" between genders – which also had to be taken on board by geographers describing the spatial actions of a human group – was attained in the second half of the 1970s' (Cortesi 2006:18–19). In geography, gender and the role of women were publicly discussed for the first time at an international seminar on population geography 'The Role of Women in Territorial Organization: Italian Case Studies', coordinated by Gisella Cortesi in Cagliari (1982). The idea behind the seminar and Cortesi's agenda was to incorporate a gender perspective into the field of population geography, while committing to change and justice. Over the following years, a gender perspective was gradually adopted across a range of studies concerning: the labour market (Gentileschi 1983; Cortesi and Marengo 1991); interruption of pregnancy, local inequalities and the migration process (Cortesi, Ghilardi, and Marengo 1999; Marengo 1995, 1997; Cortesi and Gentileschi 1996; Miani Uluhogian 1993); and the geography of history and travel (1995). Finally, in 2000, the theme of gender was the focus of a dedicated session at the National Geographical Congress for the first time, at a moment when interest in gender themes was latent or non-existent.

Within this milieu, it is clear that the early 1990s represented a major turning point: Italian gender geographers began to take an interest in the international gender debate. Initially, this interest was boosted by the translation into Italian of 'An Introduction to Feminist Geography by the Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG' under the title 'Geografia e genere' ['Geography and Gender'] and the editorship of Gabriella Arena (1990). Later, Italian geographers were warmly welcomed by Janice Monk, Maria Dolores Garcia-Ramon and the IGU Study Group – later to become the IGU Commission on gender and geography – and encouraged to actively join in the debate while participating at international events on the topic of gender. This essentially removed Italian gender geography from its isolated situation and marked the beginning of a long-lasting collaborative relationship. Gisella Cortesi was a member of the IGU Commission from 1996 to 2004, and Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg from 2012 to 2016. This collaboration produced the working paper *Women in the Italian Workplace: Evolution and Role* (Cortesi, Ghilardi, and Marengo 1999), the revised version of which was presented at the IGU Congress in Washington the following year (Cortesi, Ghilardi, and Marengo 1999). Thanks to these fruitful relationships and contacts with the international gender geography academic community in

general, the IGU Commission on Gender and Geography organized the International Seminar 'Gendered cities: identities, activities, networks. A life-course approach' in Rome in May 2003. This seminar addressed the gendered nature of identities, activities, and networks in cities, focusing on different stages of the life course. The proceedings were edited by two Italian geographers Gisella Cortesi and Flavia Cristaldi, together with Joos Droogleever Fortuijn (2006).

### **Italian geography and gender in the new millennium: an uneven trajectory**

Despite these advances, Rondinone laments the 'meagre numbers of gender geographers in Italy' (Rondinone 2003, 69) at the beginning of the new millennium, given that, internationally, geographers had already begun to recognize that human geography was 'incomplete without considering gender' (Longhurst 2002, 549). According to Minca (1995), in his country report on Italian cultural geography: 'Also missing from the Italian cultural geographic agenda is any recognition of many of the key concerns of feminist geography [...], the geographies of sexuality, [...]: all themes that form a central part of cultural geography in the North American and other European academic contexts' (Minca 1995, 936). In Italy, the majority of the scientific community continued to be traditional and gender studies remained marginalized and mainly pursued by women. Gender geography has been perceived all too often as a geography about women, done by women. According to Rossi (2011), the Italian geography community has sometimes treated gender studies with arrogance or irony, or simply viewed them as without value. As a result, new lines of inquiry have been slow to take off and relatively rare, in comparison to other countries and to the international research scene which has now wholly assimilated the 'feminist lesson' from earlier decades (dell'Agnese, Minca, and Schmidt di Friedberg 2019). In addition, it should be noted that there has been – and is – widespread cultural resistance to the adoption of non-gender-biased disciplinary language. This takes two forms: first, most of the Italian scientific community still do not distinguish between 'gender' and 'women', but use these terms synonymously; second, there is a need to deconstruct gender stereotypes, which are still enrooted in contemporary Italian academia and in the collective imagination (for example, it is not rare to find seminars, workshops or articles that use the terms 'man' or 'mankind' to refer to human beings or humankind).

This difficult cultural and academic context notwithstanding, Italian gender geography has recorded significant achievements in the new millennium. The first of these was the founding, in 2005, of the national Gender Geography Group within the Association of Italian Geographers (AGel), the

organization that represents the voice of Italian geographers and publishes their studies in its journal *Geotema*. Thus, the year 2005 marked the official entry of gender geography into an institutional context and recognition of its status by mainstream Italian geography (Cortesi 2009). The Geography and Gender Group was initially coordinated by Gisella Cortesi, later by Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg, and since 2018 by Giulia de Spuches. Since its founding, the group has striven to generate new research perspectives shaped by gender and to attract younger scholars, both men and women, to join diverse fields of geographical research, via publications, congresses, workshops and fieldwork. Its efforts have included the publication of the working paper 'Places and Gender Identities' ('Luoghi e identità di genere') in *Geotema* (2009). Women have remained the leading research theme, but many recent articles by Italian scholars have drawn on critical approaches and addressed new themes such as gender and nation, representations of gender in school textbooks, gender and media, gender and urban spaces, and queer identities.

In 2007, the book, *Italian Style Masculinity (Mascolinità all'italiana)*, edited by dell'Agnese and Ruspini, paved the way for a new field of research, namely men studies and masculinities. This interdisciplinary work presented critical insights into discourses and representations of masculinity in Italy. It was listed among the Honoured Publications of the Women Specialty Group at the AAG Annual Meeting in Boston, 2008. In 2009, in another volume edited by dell'Agnese, a chapter entitled Gender (Borghi and dell'Agnese 2009) drew upon Doreen Massey's work to explore how gender influences the production of space and how gender and space are each deeply implicated in the construction of the other (Dell'Agnese 2009). In the same year, Rachele Borghi and Antonella Rondinone edited *Gender Geographies (Geografie di genere)*, a volume whose purpose was to deconstruct the stereotype of gender geography as a women-only discipline, while expanding academic knowledge on queer studies in the Italian context. This work resonated with the recent international debate around heteronormativity and dominant discourses. It served as 'an anthology to introduce the reader (especially university students) to epistemological and methodological issues raised in the past few decades by the gender approach to geography' (Borghi and Rondinone 2009, 7).

While Italian gender geography has remained receptive to continuous stimuli and new cultural challenges coming from abroad, it has also had to deal with the prejudices and indifference of tradition, 'old school' Italian geographers. Another problem is the current brain drain that has taken many valuable younger scholars abroad (Morano Foadi 2006). In addition to these two issues, there are other obstacles, such as the need to participate in leading international research projects to attract funding, the status of

English as the international language of academia, the lack of national research grants and investment, the scarcity of fixed academic positions, all factors that discourage younger scholars from choosing careers in feminist geography or gender geography.

### LGBT themes explored by Italian geographers

Italian gender geography has slowly but continuously assimilated the internationally shared understanding that: 'feminist geographers ... have drawn on a number of theoretical positions in an attempt to understand subjects as complex and multifaceted rather than adhering to feminism as a single theoretical orthodoxy' (Longhurst 2002, 546). In 2010, the 'Spaces of Difference' conference organized by Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg and Rachele Borghi at the University of Milan Bicocca launched a debate on spatial heteronormativity and on the relationship between queer theory and geography among international scholars. This represented a key milestone for Italian geography, which for the first time took the lead in organizing an international conference dedicated to the geography of sexuality. The conference proceedings were published in the *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* in 2011 and edited by Rachele Borghi and Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg. In particular, Rachele Borghi explored the concept of heteronormativity and performative space, as well as other perspectives of sexual geography such as LGBTQ performances. Borghi and De Spuches (2012) published an article in Italian entitled 'The veiled city: reflections on the spatialization of heteronormativity' ('La città velata: riflessioni sulla spazializzazione dell'eteronormatività') on urban heteronormativity.

A further achievement of Italian geography in the domain of sexualities was the hosting in Rome of the III European Geographies of Sexualities Conference on sexualities, media and (urban) spaces in 2015. The sessions explored a wide range of topics such as how the relationship between media and sexualities can reshape 'cityness' and the rural/urban divide; the use of technologies and social media by subjectivities (e.g. lesbian, gay, transsexual) in diverse places and times; the spatialities of the (sexual) encounters created by media and technologies; sexualized online communities; the 'digital divide' in both the Global North and Global South, along multiple axes of inclusion and exclusion (e.g. age, class, education, geographical area); the appropriation and use of ICT and social media by sex workers; and queer politics and online activism – new forms, possibilities, and limits; online performances and queer art.

Also in 2015, Marina Marengo organized an international gender geography seminar entitled 'Perspectives on Gender' at the Arezzo campus of the University of Siena. This university offers a master's in women's history



through its Department of Education Sciences, Humanities and Intercultural Communication, and was therefore well set up to approach the theme of gender from an interdisciplinary perspective and to use the seminar to raise the visibility of the multiple perspectives from which gender and geography have been critically explored in Italy. The seminar, which also received the support of the Associazione dei geografi Italiani's (A.Ge.I) 'Geography and Gender' Research Group and was enriched by the contributions of scholars from other countries, provided an opportunity for scientific exchange on a broad range of 'gender' perspectives and topics and a means of keeping the Italian academic community abreast of developments in gender geography, as well as new research perspectives and strands of inquiry. The research articles presented at the seminar were published in a second special issue of *Geotema* on the theme of gender (Schmidt di Friedberg, Marengo, and Pecorelli 2017) with a view to engaging an even wider audience insights into the interconnections between body and space, increasing awareness of spaces of difference and how we look at them, transcending the male to female, heterosexual gaze. The works collected in this volume reflected highly diverse and multifaceted research interests, united by the attempt to bring a gender perspective to bear on geography topics.

Most recently, a group of early career scholars inspired by the academic environment and events just described have contributed to the discussion on LGBT issues from a variety of different angles. Cesare Di Feliceantonio explored LGBT activism and urban space from a queer geographies perspective (Di Feliceantonio 2014, 2017). During the same period, Andrea Soggiu (2016) conducted his doctoral research on an LGBT district in the city of Milan, while a year later, Valeria Pecorelli (2017) published work on digital geographies of fathering, including in LGBT families.

Finally, at the XXXII National Geographic Congress held in Rome in 2017, gender-related studies were presented during the session entitled 'Narrating the body/narrated body. Itineraries of gender geography among revolutions and reforms' ('Narrare il corpo/il corpo narrato. Itinerari di geografie di genere tra rivoluzione e riforme') chaired by Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg, Giulia de Spuches, and Valeria Pecorelli. Both the two Rome conferences and the second special issue on gender published by *Geotema* have provided the Italian geography community with new insightful perspectives in the realm of gender geography. Despite the difficult social context in Italy and the marginal interest in gender in Italian universities, geography has played an active role in disseminating research findings from transdisciplinary studies on gender, and more specifically on LGBT issues, thus contributing to the struggle to establish gender geography as an independent and authoritative area of study. It is positive that despite financial constraints and scarce employment opportunities, there are still early career geographers who have

recently published work in areas that intersect with gender geography, such as the production of space, masculinities, and queer theory.

### **Conclusion: looking back to look forward**

There is still much to be done if the multifaceted theme of gender is to be fully engaged by Italian geography, in theoretical, empirical and practical terms. Yet we need to remember and publicly acknowledge that a great deal has already been achieved. Italian gender geography voices are alive and continuously engaged in the struggle to overcome the many structural and cultural constraints imposed by Italian society and academia. Although the perceptions of some Italian geographers working on gender topics – as we have had occasion to note during email exchanges or informal conversations at national academic gatherings – is that we are ‘isolated, constrained, underpaid, underestimated’, we hope in this report to have brought to light a long, slow, but rich succession of significant achievements. These have included the first promising steps in the early 1970s, Italian scholars’ encounter with the international debate in the 1990s, the institutionalization of the gender geography group within Associazione dei Geografi Italiani with the participation of younger scholars – both men and women – and the organization of international conferences and seminars that either included gender sessions or focused entirely on gender issues. All these milestones should be celebrated and encourage us to renew our enthusiasm for and commitment to gender geography. In light of the state of the art that we have outlined here, we believe it is time for Italian gender geographers to come together to discuss and decide on possible future steps towards revitalizing the field of gender studies in Italian academia.

Italy is going through a time of great and dramatic change involving the human, non-human, political, social, economic, and ethical spheres, as well as questioning of the country’s relationship with Europe and the very values of democracy and equality. We are witnessing the re-emergence of wars of religion, the proliferation of refugee camps, increased violence towards women and children, racism, hate speech, and discrimination. It is crucial for geography to seek out new theoretical and practical instruments for dealing with these changes. For all these reasons, we strongly commit as geographers to developing awareness of these problems in academia, through our teaching, research work, and publication of our findings. We also renew our invitation to Italian geographers to engage with the theme of gender from a more inclusive perspective, even simply beginning by adopting more inclusive language. Gender geography and feminist geography can offer useful tools and powerful channels for tackling contemporary problems. We must continue to look forward and maintain our efforts to enhance the world we

live in or, as suggested by Angela Davis on a recent visit to Rome, we must 'try to imagine a different world'.

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## Notes on contributors

**Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg** is Professor of Geography at the 'Riccardo Massa' Department of Human Sciences and Education at the University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy. Her research interests include gender geography, cultural geography, island studies, and the history of geographical thought. She is Chair of the IGU Commission on the History of Geography and member of the Editorial Board of ACME.

**Valeria Pecorelli** was awarded a Ph.D. in Geography at Loughborough University, UK, in 2012. Her research and lecturing interests focus on developing critical theoretical and methodological approaches to political, gender and cultural geography. She is the coordinator of communication for the Italian gender geography group-AGEI.

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