LATENT STEREOTYPES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: TEACHERS' STRATEGIES TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN SICILIAN SCHOOLS[1]

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Abstract. "La Femme naît libre et demeure égale à l'Homme en droits ...". Olympe de Gouges' declaration was the first document advocating legal equality for women. It opposed the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which granted rights only to men, excluding women from political participation, property ownership, and professional opportunities. In 1793, de Gouges was executed by guillotine, accused of "forgetting the virtues of her sex" and interfering in politics. Robespierre later banned women's associations, closing their clubs and newspapers. As she was led to execution, de Gouges allegedly said: "Women have the right to mount the scaffold; they must also have the right to mount the rostrum." Over two centuries later, gender stereotypes persist. Like a time machine, they replicate past accusations and consequences. Gender-based biases continue to shape education, professional advancement, and social dynamics. This study examines how teachers in Sicily address gender discrimination in schools. A CAWI survey conducted by Telefono Arcobaleno Onlus gathers data on how teachers detect pupil distress and intervene in cases of bias and inequality. Schools play a key role, educators observe the formation of stereotypes at an early stage and can act to counter discrimination. The findings aim to improve intervention strategies, provide practical tools for teachers, and reinforce education's role in protecting children from gender discrimination.

1. Introduction

The *Telefono Arcobaleno* association is an international organization dedicated to the protection of children and adolescents. Certain initiatives have been structured into distinct annual programs, reflecting the evolving needs of the region. Within this framework, the survey *"Teachers Facing Students"*, is presented. This investigative study – a collaborative product of specialists from Telefono Arcobaleno, senior researchers from the National Institute of Statistics, and academics in socio-economic and statistical fields – targets teachers in kindergarten, primary, and middle schools. Its primary objective is to ascertain the capacity of

[1] Even if the article is the joint responsibility of the authors, the following individual contributions can be distinguished: paragraph 1 is attributable to Verrecchia; paragraph 2 is attributable to Carra; paragraph 3 is attributable to Corso; paragraph 4 is attributable to Sorba (up to Table1 included) and Chiodini (after Table 1) and paragraph 5 is attributable to Ballabio (up to Table 3 included) and Quartarone (after Table 3).

Sicilian teachers to observe, interpret, and respond promptly to signs of distress manifested by their students, thereby ensuring their protection. Specifically, the study aims to meticulously analyse the perspectives, experiences, and intervention strategies for child protection adopted by Sicilian educators concerning child abuse, bullying and cyberbullying, and gender stereotypes. The present study focuses exclusively on the section related to gender stereotypes.

2. About stereotypes

In 1791, in the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen, Olympe de Gouges asserted the equality between men and women. This resulted in her demise: she was guillotined in 1793 for having "forgotten the virtues of her sex." This is just one example of how powerful stereotypes can be in influencing the recognition of rights and freedoms.

Gender stereotypes—sets of conventional patterns of behavior and attitudes, based on simplistic and preconceived ideas—pervade society, producing concrete effects at both the micro and macro levels (Ellemers, 2018), and have extremely deep roots (Carra *et al*., 2025). They are so deeply embedded in history that they have become an "invisible" barrier and a "presupposition," capable of powerfully conditioning even the orientation and, consequently, the legal apparatus of societies, to the point of "legitimizing violence" against women. They are rooted in a long history of inequalities in which men and women have received different forms of recognition in terms of freedom, citizenship, and rights (Scott, 1986).

Gender stereotypes constitute the cultural humus that contributes to fueling and even justifying violence against women, from its most overt forms to the more subtle and symbolic ones. Italian court cases provide significant examples, such as the 1978 rape trial in which the defense attempted to blame the victim for her behavior (RAI, 1979), demonstrating the persistence of secondary victimization (Romito, 2005). At the legislative level, the concept of femicide has made explicit the connection between discrimination and lethal violence against women (Russell & Radford, 1992), but the path toward full recognition remains long.

The effects of stereotypes unfold across the entire life course: from educational and occupational inequalities (Charles & Bradley, 2009; Blau & Kahn, 2017), to underrepresentation in decision-making roles (Paxton *et al.,* 2007), and to the persistent unequal distribution of care work (Hook, 2010). Schools represent one of the most fertile grounds for the reproduction of stereotypes and, beginning especially in the 1980s, numerous studies and research projects began to address the issue of gender in education, contributing to raising public awareness of the impact of stereotypes in the educational field and their consequences in the world of work (see, for example, Acker, 1995; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007).

Despite the different approaches that can be taken to addressing gender issues in school, the conclusion remains the same: "*teaching is imbued with gender*" (Sabbe and Aelterman, 2007), and power dynamics, stereotypes, and inequalities can profoundly affect the educational paths of girls and boys (Carlana, 2018).

In fact, education is a vehicle through which gender stereotypes tend to produce and reproduce "*a sexual division of labour whereby women are locked into low paid*" positions (Acker, 1995)— a condition that, in its most severe forms, can lead to what is defined as "economic violence", a form of abuse in which control over financial resources is used as a means of exercising power and control within a relationship (Di Bella, 2023), a form of violence explicitly recognized by the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the so-called "Istanbul Convention"), adopted by the Council of Europe in May 2011 (Council of Europe, 2011).

To simplify, one of the chains linking the effect of gender stereotypes in schools to economic inequalities shaped by gender starts with teachers—especially mathematics teachers—who hold stronger "implicit" stereotypes about the belief that math is more difficult for girls. These have a significantly negative impact on girls (Carlana, 2018), who tend to achieve lower results in the subject and to self-select for "less demanding" high schools (Carlana, 2018).

Even though women may also "outperform" men in tertiary education, they remain a minority in the most lucrative fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Acker, 1995; Carlana, 2018), and thus end up being "underrepresented", especially in the most profitable sectors (Carlana, 2018).

Ultimately, since performance in mathematics is considered "a good predictor of readiness for STEM universities" (Carlana, 2018), it follows that results in this subject can be seen as "predictors" of future employment in the highest-paying sectors.

3. The contents of the survey

A subtle thread connects the enduring persistence of gender stereotypes over time, the emergence of gender-based violence and its legitimization in relationships, as well as the importance of preventing it from the earliest stages of schooling through comprehensive information and training programs aimed at teachers and students at all educational levels. In this direction, the Istanbul Convention actively encourages member states to include specific curricula on gender equality in school programs, addressed both to school staff and students, thereby constituting a crucial tool for preventing discrimination and gender-based violence.

Teachers, in fact, observe dynamics related to gender stereotypes already during the early stages of identity formation. Consequently, schools represent not only a

privileged context of observation but also an environment with strong transformative potential and, therefore, considerable preventive capacity.

It is within this framework that the research project "Teachers Facing Students", promoted by Telefono Arcobaleno and specifically focused on the school environment, is situated. The association has consistently supported the search for solutions to the complex challenges affecting minors and, for years, has maintained a close relationship with educational institutions, recognizing them as crucial settings for the early detection of signs of distress. Consequently, schools are regarded as fundamental actors in the prevention and counteraction of the various forms of violence that can hinder the healthy development of children and adolescents.

Within the survey, gender stereotypes and gender discrimination emerge as foundational themes and constitute the central focus of the present work. The section dedicated to gender stereotypes pursues a dual objective: on the one hand, to detect their possible prevalence among students from the observational perspective of teachers; and on the other hand, to gather respondents' views on the contexts and channels of learning (e.g., family, school, sport, culture, religion) through which minors internalize such stereotypes. In addition, the analysis investigates the possible repercussions of stereotypes on educational and professional pathways, on identity and self-esteem, as well as on the propensity to legitimize violent behaviors in peer interactions, and it also seeks to identify the intervention measures implemented within schools to prevent and combat gender discrimination.

Based on the analysis of the collected data, the paper pursues two main descriptive objectives: first, to understand whether and to what extent gender stereotypes are already widespread among students in the early grades of schooling, in which contexts they are learned, and how they are addressed within the school environment; second, to assess whether the ability to detect them varies according to teachers' characteristics, that is, whether sensitivity to the issue is evenly distributed or instead influenced by the observers' own cognitive frameworks, with particular attention to the dimension of gender.

This survey was conducted on an experimental basis and recorded a relatively low response rate. A broader-scale implementation is planned with the aim of increasing participation. Despite the limited response rate, calibration strategies were applied, allowing for the identification of relevant tendencies and indicative patterns. Nevertheless, given the low response rate, the resulting sample should be regarded as self-selected. It therefore offers only a blurred snapshot of reality—yet still a valuable one—of a phenomenon that is inherently difficult to capture, both because of its highly sensitive nature and because it concerns minors who can hardly be interviewed directly. It is likely that those teachers who chose to respond were particularly sensitive to the topic; however, this very aspect strengthens some of the

findings, such as the recurrent association of stereotypical characteristics with female and male pupils.

4. Data Collection Instrument, Sample, and Calibration Procedures

The survey was preceded by a pre-test phase, the objective of which was to verify the effectiveness and adequacy of the questionnaire in the field (Istat, 1989). In this phase, an initial prototype of the instrument was submitted, involving a selected sample of teachers, sector experts, and methodology specialists. The selection of participants was designed to ensure a diverse range of perspectives, thereby enabling a comprehensive evaluation of the instrument. The primary objective of the pre-test was to evaluate the quality of the questionnaire prior to its large-scale distribution.

The questionnaire, administered through the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) technique", is systematically structured to elicit responses derived from both personal reflection and direct professional experience. Teachers are instructed to base their responses on their professional experience spanning the preceding five years. There are preliminary questions designed to ascertain the respondent's professional profile and contextual information. Specifically, information is solicited regarding the province and affiliated educational institution, school level, age, gender, academic qualifications, subject taught, length of service, and professional role. The concluding questions of the questionnaire aim to determine whether educational institutions benefit from the professional contributions of qualified and specialized personnel (e.g., psychologists, psychotherapists, pedagogists) and whether established operational protocols exist for preventing and managing the emergence of violence and bullying in adult-minor relationships or among peers. They are asked whether they deem specialized training beneficial for augmenting their competencies in the thematic areas of interest.

The target population for this survey comprised the teaching personnel of primary, and lower secondary educational institutions within the Sicily Region. To facilitate data collection, invitations to participate were disseminated to the school principals of all eligible institutions across the region, collectively representing over 700 entities, approximately 60,000 teaching professionals, and 430,000 enrolled students (Table 1).

Table 1 − *Overall population (values in thousands).*

	Students	Teachers	Of which females	Of which support	Of which < 45 years old
Kindergarten	96	11	11	3	2
Elementary school	202	27	26	9	6
Middle school	133	21	16	6	6
Total	430	60	53	17	14

Despite the provision of three separate reminders during the period under review (April-June 2025), it had to be accepted that the response rate among teaching staff would only be comparable to that of self-selected sample surveys. In fact, despiste the school response rate was 6,7% the teachers response rate was 0.8%.

It is well known that the more sensitive the topics under investigation, as in this case, the more one must take into account the self-selection of respondents, which, from a purely statistical point of view, means that the results cannot be considered representative of the entire teaching population, but only of those members of the target population who decided to participate in the survey. Nevertheless, as with other surveys on sensitive issues, they are so useful in terms of information that they are also conducted by official statistics agencies. One example is the survey on LGBT+ (Istat, 2023).

In the practice of statistical institutes, when calibration is possible using known population totals even with low response rates, references are made to models that implicitly conform to the simple random sample, having a theoretical basis according to which the relative errors of absolute frequency estimates are a decreasing function of the values of the estimates themselves, as in the case of the Survey on Gender Role Stereotypes (ISTAT, 2018). In this survey, ISTAT reports non-sampling errors as errors due to non-response, with self-selection problems that also seem to derive from design factors, considering the sample representative. According to this second perspective, the calculation of the error (Corbetta, 1999, p. 318) is given by[2]

$$e = z \sqrt{\frac{pq}{n-1}} \sqrt{1 - \frac{n}{N}}.$$

In any case, to mitigate the distorting effects of self-selection, statistical calibration was implemented, based on known totals relating to the proportional distribution of teaching staff by school level and on socio-demographic variables such as gender (Table 2). The "sample weight" column demonstrates the relative weight of the stratum (by gender and school level) of respondents in comparison to the same stratum total of the population. The final column displays the relative weight of the respondent, which is defined as a measurement of the influence that each individual respondent's response exerts on the stratum total.

In addition, considering the suboptimal response rate and problems related to self-selection, it was deemed useful to adopt a 'cautious calibration' approach that uses the minimum value between the observed and the weighted data for the dissemination of results for polarising response modalities. This allow preventing

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[2] Where z, with a confidence level of 95%, is equal to 1.96, n respondents, N target population, n/N is the sampling fraction, p is the proportion in the sample (e.g. favourable over total units), q = 1-p.

sensationalist perspectives. In the tables presented in the following paragraph, only the precautionary calibrated values will be reported.

Table 2 – *Weight Distribution of the sample and the population.*

	Gender	Sample weight (%)	Population weight (%)	Respondent unit weighting
Kindergarten	Female	14.50	18.48	160
	Male	0.63	0.27	53
Elementary school	Female	36.76	43.51	148
	Male	0.21	2.28	1358
Middle school	Female	41.18	26.38	80
	Male	6.72	9.08	169
Total		100.00	100.00	

5. Preliminary results

It should be noted that the section of the questionnaire concerning stereotypes was submitted only to primary and secondary school teachers.

The initial findings (Table 3, 4 and 5) indicate that teachers actively engage with the topic of gender stereotypes and discrimination, and that, in some cases, they also address it at an experiential level.

The level of schooling appears to be a significant factor. Middle schools report the highest engagement (69.9%), followed by primary schools (43.3%). This trend suggests that such issues become more apparent—or are more readily perceived— as students grow older. Many teachers, when asked to report how frequently certain forms of gender discrimination occur among their students, occasionally observe difficulties faced by female students in assuming leadership roles or in non-conforming to gender stereotypes. At the same time, many teachers more frequently encounter situations in which male students are victims of gender stereotypes and discrimination, particularly when they feel negatively judged for engaging in behaviours traditionally considered "feminine".

Moreover, male students are often described as consistently exhibiting adherence to stereotyped gender norms in peer relationships. Several teachers even report instances in which male students appear to feel entitled to judge their female peers based on physical appearance or, in some cases, to engage in aggressive or demeaning behaviour towards them. This occurs even though schools—albeit with some difficulty—make efforts to provide opportunities for reflection and implement educational activities aimed at combating gender discrimination. According to teachers, gender stereotypes are predominantly transmitted within the family, as well as through online content and broader cultural references. Although the school environment is considered influential, not all teachers regard it as a context that could actively contribute to the transmission of gender stereotypes. There is broad awareness among teachers that gender stereotypes influence fundamental aspects of individuals' lives and relationships, particularly during the developmental years. According to the data, teachers believe that such stereotypes affect self-esteem (88.9%), expectations regarding the roles that males and females are expected to fulfil (82.2%), and even the willingness to tolerate or legitimise violence (73.3%).

Table 3 – *Experience of the topic, learning context, opinions on effects, interventions, and training needs by educator's gender (Percentages of affirmative responses).*

	Total	Female	Male
Experience of the topic	48.9	46.0	61.1
Primary school	43.3	-	-
Lower secondary school	69.9	-	-
Internalization of stereotypes:			
within the family	90.0	90.4	84.8
in the school context	62.7	61.5	63.6
in the sports context	66.3	66.3	66.8
within cultures	75.9	76.5	66.7
within religions	60.4	64.5	35.0
through the internet and social media	85.8	86.3	78.8
Stereotypes can:			
influence the choice of studies and careers	75.5	74.4	78.8
affect identity and self-esteem	88.9	92.0	69.9
determine expectations regarding male and female roles	82.2	86.2	57.4
lead to the legitimization of violent behaviors	73.4	75.6	59.9
Implementation of interventions	75.6	77.0	67.4
Interventions carried out:			
meetings with families	81.9	84.6	64.9
discussions among teachers and the Headmaster	85.8	85.1	87.9
reflection activities with individual students	86.4	89.1	69.9
educational activities – whole class group	85.0	88.3	64.9
Presence of a psychologist	38.2	37.3	41.7
Presence of an intervention protocol:	32.1	30.6	38.9
Need for training	90.1	91.1	77.8

Table 4 – *Educators' experience of stereotypes, discrimination and behaviors considered legitimate (Percentage of responses "Often").*

	Total	Female	Male
Observed stereotypes and discrimination:			
difficulty with girls' leadership	11.7	11.2	15.0
girls conforming to stereotypes	23.5	24.0	15.2
boys conforming to stereotypes	34.4	34.0	27.3
perception of negative judgment of boys showing "feminine" behaviors	42.3	42.2	42.5
Behaviors considered legitimate by students towards females:			
aggressive behaviors	3.7	3.9	2.5
judging based on physical appearance	13.4	13.6	12.5

Table 5 – *Students' characteristics, school-life difficulties and importance of physical appearance (Percentage of responses "Equally in both genders").*

	Total	Female	Male
Students' characteristics:			
jealousy	43.1	44.0	33.3
strength	28.2	30.3	12.1
sensitivity	54.2	56.7	36.4
gruffness	55.4	55.8	51.5
kindness	61.8	62.0	60.0
generosity	77.5	79.3	65.0
superficiality	63.9	65.0	57.5
empathy	60.4	63.1	51.5
tendency to dominate	51.7	52.3	48.3
School-life difficulties	94.9	94.8	95.0
Importance of physical appearance	47.5	47.2	51.5

This latter, particularly alarming data suggests a widespread perception that stereotypes are not merely abstract social constructs, but rather phenomena with tangible and potentially harmful consequences. When asked which characteristics are most frequently associated with students by gender, many teachers provided responses largely free of rigid or exclusive attributions. Nevertheless, a portion of teachers continued to associate specific traits with one gender over another: i. female students are associated with jealousy, empathy, kindness, and sensitivity; ii. male students are associated with strength, tendency to overpower, superficiality, and grumpiness. These representations, even when unintended, may contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Such stereotypes can influence the developmental, educational, and relational trajectories of children and adolescents. These findings underscore the need to establish structured opportunities for reflection, as well as targeted training on the subject. Teachers, for their part, express a strong demand for such training. While they are acutely aware of their responsibilities, they frequently report lacking the tools necessary to respond

effectively. They also call for the implementation of clear protocols and the support of specialised professionals—such as psychologists and pedagogists—who are stable, accessible, and well-integrated into the school system. With regard to intervention strategies addressing incidents of gender discrimination in schools, teachers generally report implementing targeted actions, despite the absence of formal operational protocols. These actions typically involve all key actors engaged in such dynamics. Priority is given to reflective interventions targeting the student responsible for the discriminatory behaviour, alongside educational initiatives directed at the wider class group. Similarly, considerable importance is attributed to internal discussions among colleagues and with the school principal, as well as to maintaining open dialogue with the families of those involved. Furthermore, the survey reveals, alongside elements of awareness, significant cultural and structural challenges that may undermine the school context's ability to effectively safeguard minors. The analysis of teachers' responses highlights a widespread awareness of the existence and effects of gender stereotypes, with a general tendency toward shared views between women and men. However, some significant differences emerge: female teachers demonstrate greater consistency, confidence, and sensitivity in recognizing the contexts and consequences of stereotypes, while male colleagues more frequently express uncertainty or hesitation. The main domains in which stereotypes are perceived as being learned (family, school, sport, media, religion) reveal greater firmness in the responses of women. Similarly, the consequences of stereotypes—on identity, self-esteem, educational choices, and even the legitimization of violence—are acknowledged more decisively by female teachers. In observing school dynamics as well, women appear more attentive to forms of discrimination and stereotypical behaviors among female and male pupils, whereas men seem more uncertain and, at times, less inclined to recognize them. Nevertheless, both genders show a good level of engagement in educational and preventive actions, with established practices such as internal discussions among colleagues and individual educational interventions.

6. Conclusions

When considered as a whole, the questionnaire presents a multifaceted and detailed depiction of the school experience, highlighting both the awareness and the practical challenges that teachers encounter in addressing situations of student distress. Its purpose extends beyond the mere collection of data, serving also as a stimulus for professional reflection, collective awareness, and the orientation of training and institutional interventions. Although this study does not provide a definitive conclusion, it advocates for the construction of an educational environment equipped to detect and respond to signs of distress. The establishment of alliances, the allocation of resources, and the existence of a shared educational

vision are identified as essential components. Teachers are responsible for observation, listening, and the protection of their students. However, they cannot fulfil this role in isolation. A support system is therefore required to provide training, resources, and ongoing guidance. The data highlight a teaching staff that is aware yet often isolated in dealing with complex issues. The school represents a privileged vantage point for observing signs of student distress; however, there is a need for more operational tools, ongoing training, and stronger partnerships with families and local services. Building on this foundation, it is possible to design concrete interventions to protect minors and to strengthen the educational role of the school as a space for protection and prevention. The survey reveals a school system that is sensitive, yet still insufficiently equipped at both cultural and organisational levels. Resistance to intervention, stereotyped representations internalised by teachers themselves, and a widespread culture of minimisation or self-limitation in assuming educational responsibility, render systemic intervention necessary. It is essential to reinforce the training of teachers on relational, legal, and psychological dynamics; to ensure the presence of qualified professionals (such as psychologists, educators, and mediators); and, above all, to foster a shared school culture that transcends the perception of these matters as being outside one's professional remit.

Acknowledgements

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