

(De)constructing gender related stereotypes in young generations in times of populisms.

A case study

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Introduction

Starting from a survey made in class during an University Course on Gender Policies and Welfare state in the EU, the objective of this research is to verify the hypothesis that, even the smallest and subtlest exposure to a specific set of information on a specific and -at the same time- controversial topic (in this case on gender equality) can have an impact on students' thinking about their stereotypical believes, and that this small and short exposure is eventually capable to start a process of deconstruction of their prejudicial frames related to gender roles in public spaces, accumulated in years of socialization not attentive to gender differences. My contribution presents the results of a survey I run at the University of Padua in 2018 at the Department of Political Science, involving the students of the Gender Policies and Welfare state in the EU master degree course which I usually teach, fully attended by 30 to 40 people¹ from all over the world, 60% women, from 22 to 25 years of age, with different background, different experiences and different ethnic origins. In times in which the impact of the populist discourses is particularly visible on society, due to the frequent open attacks to the gender related knowledge at all stages of the education process (in terms of boycotting academic seminars and projects, eliminating courses, withdrawing books from libraries and bookshops, etc), it is of crucial importance to show how teaching in a gender perspective can be relevant in shaking the way of thinking of the students, giving them the chance to wide their way of reading and understanding the context and the environment of their daily life.

¹ Among the 61 enrolled there were more or less 40 attending students (which means that they attended in class more than 70% of the 65 hours) and the rest non attending. Attending a course is not compulsory in most of the courses in Humanities the Italian Universities and students can take the final examination as well.

The target of the survey was to raise students' awareness and make them reflect upon the importance of implementing even the slightest type of action, in order to contribute to foster gender equality issues in their public and private relationships, as well as in the working environment they are about to enter after graduation, or in general in their future life outside university.

The background

As the most relevant scholars of the functioning of the human mind and thought say - William James to name but one- there are categories of classification of reality - and its interactions - fixed and transported in our ordinary vocabulary whose initial stratification goes back to the phase of 'common sense' (Bowers, Skrupskelis 1983). They reveal an uncritical adoption of single fixed fragments of the structure of reality. Because of our disposition, which in a practical sense is always primarily concerned with the surrounding natural and social environment, we are inclined to use our sensations, albeit numerous and varied, as handholds that allow us to recognize the objects we encounter and plan strategies of action. Only in the second instance do we reflect on sensations, while by habit we classify as identical all those similar sensations that help us to discriminate certain aspects of the same object. That is to say, it is easier for the human being to reason by stereotypes, by fixed images, rather than leaving the doors open to change (Bella 2016). In other terms, as a consequence of this attitude, it becomes increasingly more difficult for us to break our habits, our convictions and attitudes as well as to change the most characteristic traits of our character. But with the level of knowledge we have today and according to the scientific research concerning how one's personality develops related to age, place and cultural stimuli, it has been established that it is true that our brain starts to become

more “rigid” by a certain age, nevertheless it has been clarified first that, when the brain is young and not yet fully formed, there’s a lot of flexibility and plasticity in it (the latter explains for example why children learn so quickly and efficiently), and secondly that, even after the threshold of 25-30 years of age, from a neurological point of view it is still important to constantly create the condition for new pathways to start and for the production of new stimuli, in order to tickle and try to break apart the rigid neural patterns already present in our brain (Ancona, Backman, Bresman 2008). And interestingly, as argued by other scholars, we are naturally predisposed to develop a certain amount of neural pathways and the more we use them over the years the more they become stuck and deeply embedded, moving on more profound and deeper layers of our brain. So, by the time we get to the age of 25, we have a variety of existing pathways on which our brain relies on and it is quite a challenge to act on them and break their rigidity. Difficult but not impossible: if it is true that, beyond a certain threshold, we’ll never change as quickly and easily as we once could, we can nevertheless rely on the fact that it is possible, throughout our life, to keep the brain agile and able to choose new paths (Ancona, Backman, Isaacs 2019).

But how this can happen in practice? Do we need some sort of trauma/shock in order to change? As stated in a recent study (Swart, Chisholm, Brown 2015) it is not a matter of “trauma”, but a matter of environment: the most important thing to consider in order to make the “change” happen in our way of thinking is building the right environment, which is generally represented by the other people around us, by the relationships we are able to establish (Ancona, Backman, Isaacs 2019).

So what the small experiment I’m going to illustrate in the following pages want to demonstrate is that, with the creation of a welcoming environment -a multicultural and strongly

varied group of (inter)national students, each having a very different background and types of basic level degrees- the knowledge transfer is possible and changes are ultimately tangible.

The hypothesis is that, if in the short lapse time of an university class (in the specific case a 65 hour/ 8 week course), students are exposed to different sets of small pieces of knowledge on gender issues capable of making them aware of their stereotypical thinking, they might have the chance to broaden or even change their perspective and use this new knowledge as a snowball in the time after, in order to reflect on their role in society, within their family, in the community they belong to, and even to widen their research topics. In order to better understand the sense of this research, it is maybe necessary to make a little premise: in the Italian social and cultural environment dealing with gender issues is quite problematic, especially from the linguistic point of view.

It is in fact important to notice that in the Italian language the word *gender* has several slippery translations, and it can easily be confused with *gender* (the feminine grammatical case) and thus lead to overlapping the meaning of *gender* (the social construction), in this way confusing the cases in which *gender* means just the biological *sex* with the cases in which *gender* means the social construction of the differences among sexes. This cultural misunderstanding leads to the need of continuous explanations while speaking, to the need of repetition of concepts and of an almost extenuating clarification of the contexts in which the word *gender* is inserted (Stella, Saraceno 1996). I myself, even in front of a not all-Italian audience, feel the need to continuously explain that *gender* does not have the same meaning as *women*, that *gender policies* are not policies for women only and that *gender equality* has nothing to do with *quotas*. Speaking from an Italian context, I feel these explanations deeply necessary, in order to put all the students in the same starting conditions as regard both to the concepts they are exposed to during the

course and as regard to the survey they are asked to participate at the end of the class after 65 hours of exposure to gender related issues.

The main idea that led me to the decision to run a survey among the students about the topics of the course is that, if it is possible to verify that even a slight change has actually occurred in the way of reasoning of a 23-25 year young adult -which means a person with a high level of education, with a shaped personality, convictions and believes that are already rooted and solid- this might be extremely relevant for the policy makers, in order to understand how crucial is anticipating the spreading of the gender equality awareness in the education process, steadily including it in children's scholar programs - since kindergarten- getting in this way the chance to ensure them more open mindedness and the capacity to detect discriminations in the generations to come.

The context

Gender Policies is not a very common course topic in the Italian Academia, for at least three different reasons. The first is that, in Italy, there is very little recognition of the category of 'gender' from the perspectives of both political science and political history (Stabili 2015). The second is that the cultural translation in the Italian context of the word gender is, in most cases, distorted, as it tends to be superimposed on the biological category of female sex. Therefore, as a category of socio-political analysis, the gender perspective appears to be greatly weakened. Today, while normally taken into account when discussing topics such as violence or migration, there is still a persisting mistrust of gender as a category of analysis and, unfortunately, there is no evolution underway to change this way of thinking. There is also a third, more practical

reason why gender is not considered, which is that gender is not a real subject to teach, but it is rather a perspective, a point of view, a cross-cutting category (Scott 1986).

Therefore, teaching in/with a gender perspective, is more like using a particular type of glasses to look around: through the lens of gender students are asked to take a deeper look at the reality around them, at the society they are living in and – possibly- reconsider some of their own beliefs and understandings. The aim is to make them aware – for example- of hidden differences in accessing rights (through a gender perspective I see *this*, without this perspective I see *that*) and aware of the fact that, in a high percentage of the cases, the gap between this and that is an issue of discrimination. Since there are no specific and institutionalized degree courses dedicated to gender in the Italian academic system, students who decide to attend a class like Gender Policies may come from very different backgrounds, such as human rights or political science; many of them also from economics, science, medicine, urban planning, or law. And not only there is a variety in their previous knowledges but also in their country of origin: from Europe to North and South America, from Africa to Balkan and Asian countries. During the course we start discussing basic concepts like sex, gender, gendering, gender system (patriarchy), power, homophobia, violence – in terms of effectiveness (translation into policies and practices) at international, national and local levels. We introduce concepts like heteronormativity and intersectionality, addressing the importance of using a gender perspective in decision-making. In this scenario, students are asked to get a closer look at the institutional value of the gender awareness and at the importance that European institutions put in bringing up the issues related to equality. According to the Council of Europe (CCRE), awareness-raising in gender related issues is becoming strategic and, therefore, the Council stimulates cooperation with various organizations and agencies showing how existing values as well as the societal norms are able to

influence our notion of reality and how gender related stereotypes can support certain mechanisms (re)producing inequality. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is another European institution whose activities has been considered during the course, in order to provide the information concerning how stereotypes may affect certain aspects of our society and the students have been accustomed with the various instruments of analysis provided and tested by the institution: systems of indicators, indexes, reports.

In order to increase the personal sensitivity of the students in a non-prescriptive way, the lessons are not organized as traditional lectures. The presence of foreign students and, therefore, the necessity to use English instead of Italian as vehicular language, is a great opportunity to use different sources and methods, to review the structure of the course, framing each lesson as a sort of interactive workshop, where it is easier to discuss, to share knowledge and exchange views depending on the interests and the personal sensibility of the participants, without imposing my personal orientation, or taking for granted a common frame. At the end of the course students are asked to prepare not only a term paper, but also a short lesson for their colleagues on the topic they have chosen for the essay. To foster their curiosity, guest lecturers are often invited to present researches, books and papers; specific seminars on 'how to write a good final dissertation' with the support of librarians from the faculty and experts on digital resources are organized and students have the chance to attend seminars and activities organized by the University Center for Gender Studies on topics of their interest. Moreover, through a digital platform, documents and sources of various type are at their disposal during the entire length of the course, including reports from meetings and conferences, videos, courses and conferences given in other institutions around the world, research reports and working papers and everything related to the topic of gender equality.

The bias

The question of gender biases in classrooms and thus in the knowledge-transfer process in co-educational institutions, has been researched by Abrahams and Sommerkorn (1996), at the University of Hamburg. In their research, the two scholars address the problem of gender awareness in teachers' behavior, in classroom dynamics and in curricular materials. The importance of this information for this paper relies on the need to implement gender mainstreaming not only in our European institutions, but also in other layers of society, such as the education system, university included, because they are fundamental part of it and responsible for the society that we are.

One of the most important findings regarding gender equality and stereotypical thinking in education that Abrahams and Sommerkorn mention in their study is that girls' performance in mathematics and in many other scientific issues declines after puberty (Abrahams, Sommerkorn 1996). It is most likely that gender-related factors contribute to this phenomenon because adolescence is a crucial period for the development of the sex-identity for both boys and girls (Leccardi 1988). Moreover, there seems to be a continuing discrepancy between our cultural image of femininity and the achievements women have reached in general: there is a controlled achievement orientation in male gendered subjects that girls most often feel inappropriate to partake in. This dynamic doesn't change unless there is special encouragement in schools, universities and in the educational system, by both teachers and families (Lehmann, Bos 1995). It is clear from the words of the authors that promoting gender awareness in the classroom requires consciousness – raising at different institutional levels as well as amongst different groups of educators. The ideal combination which would have the most efficient impact consist

of an institutional intersection between school, college and adult education. Lehmann and Bos also state that within the institution of the school, gender awareness needs to be promoted amongst a variety of different groups: the pupils themselves within the classroom, the teachers altogether, the school administrators, the parents, the school board and the educational policy makers and eventually also student –teachers. This conclusion shows very strong structural resemblances with the way in which the European Union, the national and the local governments should and could build their action toward institutional change and in support of equality at all level: from any perspective we look at it, it remains mostly a matter of knowledge, education and training.

The context

As usual, during the course of Gender Policies the students are exposed to a series of concepts that are partly new to them, and partly able to challenge their deepest and culturally rooted beliefs. In 2018, quite at the end of a very dense 65 hour course, I decided to try something I've never tried before and not previously announced to the students: I prepared for them a questionnaire. I submitted it to all the 61 students enrolled (about 40 of them permanently attending, the others only occasionally or not attending at all) because I was wondering the usefulness of a path on gender issues like the one I've been proposing so far in my classes. In the questionnaire the students were exposed to different types of information sets, regarding gender related stereotypical thinking, in order to make them reflect on how much they were actually aware of their conditioned mind regarding these issues. The general assumption was that, as students and young adults, they were generally aware, but not fully informed enough

about the use of –for example- a gender sensitive language, about its impact in the perception of gender roles in public and private spaces; about civil, political and social rights, not always including both women and men; about the misuse of definitions, policies and practices that by consequence produce discrimination, and so on. This made me reflect more on how this information could have an impact on the students: do they all realize -and eventually accept- that maybe they are not informed enough and they are not completely aware of their own stereotypical thinking? Are they open or already immune to change?

During the course I was also wondering whether the students, after some time spent in building a basic common lexicon, feel the need to reflect on their own conviction and on how the situation on gender policies might be –for example- in their home country. If gender stereotypical thinking is provoked both by evident and apparently hidden stimuli, such as language in the media and in the legislation, political figures, representations of women and men in school programs and books, movies, video whatsoever, how sure can we be that they are truly aware about the stereotypical patterns they use about gender? Every single day they are literally bombarded by a huge amount of information: do they have the time to distinguish what type of message is the one they are dealing with and if it might contain or not a biased representation of sexes?

At the very end of the course (the last hour of the last lesson) I've chosen to present the results of the analysis of their answers. Although at the beginning the purpose of the survey was for me to understand if the topics proposed during the course were well assimilated and able to produce some reflection in the students, after analyzing their answers, I thought it would be useful for them to know the result and the conclusions I had reached. For this reason I decided to make them participate in the final restitution of the results, not in a classic scientific report form,

but using their own words and phrases, in order to attract their attention on their vocabulary and push them to reflect more on the words they have chosen and on certain nuances of the process of learning, trying to spark their interest in some deeper individual paths, in the direction of recognizing biases and stereotypical characteristics in their own behavior and in their way of expressing concepts.

The method

This paragraph is dedicated to the explanation of the methodology with which I run the survey among the students. I decided to take the class as a whole as my point of reference, mostly because during the lessons a lot of different materials have been presented to the students who, besides the chance to follow the lesson in presence, had also the chance to get extra information through the university digital platform (Moodle), where a lot of documents, media of various type, papers, interviews and several different type of articles, together with a partial recording of the lessons- were uploaded. Thus, we could state that all students have been exposed to a certain amount of information related to gender. The material has been divided into four different categories: A) politics, B) education, C) legislation, D) institutions. In the survey, these categories have taken the role of indicators, because during the class they were often considered as possible “influencers” on students’ gender stereotypical thinking. Each category corresponds to a set of five punctual questions/statements in the survey, in order to measure the students’ awareness about the influence these categories may have in their life and thinking about gender issues.

For example: Q12: “I was already aware of the different language usage for women in legislation”. The purpose of a question like this is to measure the students’ awareness concerning

legislation. However, it can measure also their knowledge on the fact that, in the process of law making women are often not included, accordingly to the law-making process nor are they included in the outcome. The same method has been applied to the remaining other categories. In most of these sections there are two out of five questions that slightly measure the same element, yet it has been asked in different manners, in order to verify the consistency in the answers given by the respondents.

Before starting the experiment, the original hypothesis was that, since most of the students were not aware of the subtlety and pervasiveness of their gender stereotypical thinking, even a brief exposure to a set of concepts related to a difficult and thorny topic such as gender, could have produced some reaction in them. This deduction has been made observing the students' answers and interventions during the course and listening to their reflections afterwards. This could have merely been an impression, however it initially seemed a solid hypothesis to me, which I did not expect to get rejected by the actual results of the questionnaire.

Due to various elements, the number of respondents was slightly lower than expected: the students who were attending the whole course were 45, but only 15 of them (12 women and 3 men) decided to partake in the survey. This is something to observe and take into consideration in the experiment as a whole, since in order to understand the reasons for these low numbers, we must consider the possibility that the non-answering students might have looked at the survey with a social bias, feeling embarrassment for maybe not filling in the sociably accepted answer. I tend to put less importance in the latter, since the lessons were given in a very open, friendly context, where there was room for debate, for different opinion, no matter how contrasting they might have been, and this make the chance that there would be any kind of embarrassment look

very slim. However it is important to mention it as a possible bias factor. In favor of the reliability of the results, it should be taken into consideration also the fact that about 40% of the participants indicated the course as highly satisfactory and about 53% stated the classes were satisfactory, and finally about 6 % remained neutral. These numbers seem to indicate an overall contentment about the classes they partook in, and thus can contribute to bias less the results.

The results

Before taking into consideration the survey and analyzing the data collected, it is important to remember that the premise of the research and the decision of running a survey among the students was to consider two different dimensions of the problem – both the personal one of the individual students and the more general one of the environment in which they are socialized. In other terms: A) whether exposure to small sets of gender-related information could have any influence on their ingrained and stereotypical beliefs on this issue, accumulated in years of socialization not attentive to gender differences; B) if, with the creation of a welcoming environment -a multicultural and strongly varied group of (inter)national students, each having a very different background and types of basic level degrees- the knowledge transfer is possible and changes are ultimately tangible.

The questions in the survey were presented to the students in a list from 1 to 20, one after the other in random order, not grouped by category.

Table 1 – The Survey: categories and responses

| questions | Category | answers | | | | | check |
|-----------|---------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|-------|
| | | strongly agree | agree | neutral | disagree | strongly disagree | |
| q1 | Political | 3 | 8 | 4 | | | 15 |
| q2 | Educational | 6 | 9 | | | | 15 |
| q3 | Educational | 3 | 9 | 3 | | | 15 |
| q4 | Educational | 3 | 9 | 1 | 2 | | 15 |
| q5 | Educational | 1 | | | 11 | 3 | 15 |
| q6 | Educational | | | 1 | 3 | 11 | 15 |
| q7 | Political | 1 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 15 |
| q8 | Political | | 2 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 15 |
| q9 | Political | 3 | 9 | 1 | 2 | | 15 |
| q10 | Political | 4 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 15 |
| q11 | Legal | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 15 |
| q12 | Legal | | 10 | | 5 | | 15 |
| q13 | Legal | | 2 | 1 | 8 | 4 | 15 |
| q14 | Legal | | 4 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 15 |
| q15 | Legal | 9 | 5 | | | 1 | 15 |
| q16 | Institutional | 2 | 8 | 3 | 2 | | 15 |
| q17 | Institutional | 1 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 15 |
| q18 | Institutional | | | 3 | 9 | 3 | 15 |
| q19 | Institutional | 8 | 5 | 2 | | | 15 |
| q20 | Institutional | | | | 3 | 12 | 15 |

For the purpose of the analysis, I have grouped the answers by category, in order to make the interpretation of the results as clear as possible, as shown in Table 1. In fact, a closer look at the results per category, shows that under the label of “Political” (Table 2) – where the aim of the questions was to measure how the students feel /think politics have an impact on them- the respondents state with 60% that specific policies to encourage and support the presence of women in politics are needed, indicating that they have the knowledge that women are underrepresented in politics in their country of origin. To measure this question well, I had it followed by the question whether men could also be able to represent women, an issue that was very much discussed and debated in class. Taking into consideration that interestingly, 40%

stated that men can easily represent women as well, and 26% even strongly agreed to this statement. So perhaps, we could carefully conclude that the participants are aware of the gender inequity that is happening in their countries, and the course helped reflecting on this more, since it is also believed that men could represent women well. These remain for now assumptions that could be researched further on and lead to interesting results. Another observation on the political category is that about 40% remains neutral on the question as if they were aware that media coverage of national politics impacted their way of thinking. This is interesting, because it is strongly related to previous questions, were students accept there is difference because they feel the need for stricter policy in politics, mostly for women to give them equal chances.

Table 2 – Questions about Politics

| List of questions about Politics | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. I follow politics often so I understand how gender impacts our society. | 3 | 8 | 4 | | |
| 7. I don't think the media coverage of national politics impacts my way of thinking. | 1 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| 8. I don't think politics shape our thinking related to gender. | | 2 | 2 | 5 | 6 |
| 9. I think we need a stricter policy on equal number of female politicians. | 3 | 9 | 1 | 2 | |
| 10. I think men can also represent women in an inclusive way in politics. | 4 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 2 |

In the category “Education” (Table 3) the aim was to measure the awareness of gender stereotypes that might have been passed on through education. The latter has been interpreted in the broader sense, in contexts and occasions of socialization - at home, in the community where they live, among friends or at University- and that’s why some questions may seem out of place: the point is that they can be very helpful to measure common sense. And actually, this part of the survey has come up with very interesting outcomes: 60% of the student participants agree that stereotypes are stronger than law and institutions, meaning they put high importance in this concept and its possible impact on society and also meaning that perhaps institutions are not “everything” and don’t decide the whole dynamics in our society, not even the most important ones. Moreover, about 73 % of the participants agree that their culture contribute to gender stereotypical thinking. Since culture is mainly a process of socialization, we could state carefully that change (and maybe more than we’d ever thought) is to come from another dimension, namely society and communities, not merely institutions.

Table 3 Questions about Education

| List of questions about Education | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 2. Stereotypes are stronger than laws and institutions. | 6 | 9 | | | |
| 3. Goods are freer than people to travel across the world. | 3 | 9 | 3 | | |
| 4. We often don’t realize we act in a discriminating way towards our environment but it is mostly a very unconscious thing and I know that <u>now</u> . | 3 | 9 | 1 | 2 | |
| 5. People don’t change | 1 | | | 11 | 3 |
| 6. I don’t think that my culture supports | | | 1 | 3 | 11 |

| | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| gender stereotypical thinking in any way. | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|

Do we have to shift our focus more and invest in activism and gathering the civil society actively as once before? The two most reflexive questions are Q4 & Q5, 6: they state whether it is possible for people (not taking in consideration their age and so on) to change. Whereas another question states that we often don't realize we act in a rather discriminating way towards our environment. To my surprise 73% of the participants agree that people can really change and about 20% strongly disagrees to that. My hypothesis was that only about 40 percent would state that people can change, just because of the impression certain groups of students gave during the lessons. An impressive 60% agrees that we don't realize when we discriminate but that they do know now they could be the one doing that. And a staggering 20% strongly agrees to this. This could mean that 80% of the students that did the survey have had the courage to be reflexive and think about their own role in gender stereotypical thinking and discriminating.

The category "Legislation" (Table 4) has a set of questions aimed at measuring how much the students claim to know about themselves being aware of the gender discrimination that is or has been formalized in laws.

Table 4 Questions about Legislation

| List of questions about Legislation | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 11. I already knew most of the history regarding women's rights before taking this course. | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 1 |
| 12. I was already aware of the different language usage for women in legislation. | | 10 | | 5 | |
| 13. I don't think laws shape our gender | | 2 | 1 | 8 | 4 |

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| stereotypical thinking. | | | | | |
| 14. I don't think that changing the legislation & laws will create a gender aware society. | | 4 | 1 | 6 | 4 |
| 15. We need inclusive legislation, but not only for women. | 9 | 5 | | | 1 |

This helped me understand whether students identify themselves as people knowing most of these elements before taking the course or not. An interesting 47% agree on not knowing the entire history of the women's rights and the feminists' movements. However, about 67% states to be aware of the different language usage for women in legislation. This was very surprising, first of all these two questions followed onto one another and second of all I was referring to the fact that women were considered A-level citizens, so to speak, much later on in legislation, and still there are problematic issues about this. My original hypothesis, before even thinking about starting the experiment, was that some students must have been in shock for not realizing that even words, language and vocabulary influence the roles of gender and the impact this has on gender stereotypical thinking. The question that follows in the survey however has been answered with a disagreement of 53 % and therefore stating that students do think that laws and legislation influence our thinking. So, this confirms perhaps the level of awareness these students already had before taking part in the course. In conclusion to this category about 40% agrees that changing the way women are described in the legislation, will create a more gender aware society. In addition to this, 26% strongly disagree and another 26% strongly agrees to this, meaning that most of the students feel that change doesn't only come from an institutional level, but however they won't deny the possible impact it could have on society and gender awareness without excluding other dimensions that are minimum as important and needed for change.

In the category “Institutions” (Table 5) the questions try to measure to what extent the students put importance in the institutions as possible actors who can help stimulate change in raising gender awareness and gender stereotypical thinking.

Table 5 Questions about Institutions

| List of questions about Institutions | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 16. Institutions are the example of our society. | 2 | 8 | 3 | 2 | |
| 17. I don't think institutions matter, it's the people of our society that need to change. | 1 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 |
| 18. International organizations are more important for stimulating our gender awareness, local institutions matter less. | | | 3 | 9 | 3 |
| 19. I think schools are the most important tool for stimulating gender perception and more gender equality. | 8 | 5 | 2 | | |
| 20. I don't think university courses are useful to create awareness. | | | | 3 | 12 |

From all those students who participated in the survey, about 53% agrees that institutions function as an example in our society (Q16). The question that followed the one above, was meant as a control statement which said: “I don't think institutions matter, it's the people of our society that need to change”. Here, we can notice a doubt coming from the respondents. A

number of 33% remained neutral towards this question, whereas 27% strongly disagreed, meaning that they believe not only people should change but also institutions who might have a leading role in our society. Moreover, about 13% agreed to this statement, added with another 6% whom strongly agreed to this. Following my hypothesis and the previous question, my expectations were quite different. However, this gave me the opportunity to put a nuance to the answers. Further on, in the survey, related to this topic, 60% disagreed to the statement that international organizations are more important for stimulating our gender awareness than local institutions. This clearly states the knowledge and opinion that students believe that change should come through various dimensions and levels of society. Social institutions such as school and universities could play an important role as well. The importance of potential impact education might have on people and thus also on the society as a whole has been tackled several times during the course. To state the latter with numbers, about 53% strongly agreed that schools are the most important tool to help create gender awareness. In addition to this 33% agreed to this statement as well, meaning that we'd have a total of 86% of the students that acknowledge the importance of education, thus also realizing the importance of their own education trajectory and hopefully also the importance of one gender class they followed during their study trajectory in Italy.

Final considerations

Although it is of clear evidence that even the slightest change induced in a stereotyped and rigid frame with respect to gender issues, is of enormous importance and helps to produce a society more attentive to differences, it is true that in the policy making system – specifically in the Italian one- this type of topic has been receiving far too few attention so far. And yet, the

attitude of looking at reality and at their daily life in all its complexity, shouldn't be too difficult to develop in an environment in which students are actually, if not really interested, at least trained to be aware of the fact that a "gender-issue" -somewhere and somehow- not only exists, but do concerns them a lot and in-deep. But what if the students simply remain blind, what if they are not aware of concepts or even of words like gender equality and/or sex based discriminations? And what if they live in an environment in which the plain meaning of the word gender is misunderstood or at most wrongly translated with women's things only and then rejected?

What the results of the survey have put into evidence, in my opinion, is that, although most part of the students involved in the course have maybe had a previous contact, or thoughts or reasoning about gender, or they have at least an interest in understanding more about a topic highly involved in our daily lives, the course -as a community of practices made up of people from all over the world, with different backgrounds and different sensitivities to the issues at stake- has given them a sort of free extra space to think about, a further possibility to look at their daily actions with a much closer look and focus on the role that gender stereotypical thinking plays on their own lives. I can say this because most of the students indicated to have learned something new during the course compared to their previous background, and they also indicated to have had more reflexive thoughts on certain aspects of their lives regarding politics, education, legislation and institutions *after* the attendance of the course. The reason for me to choose these categories in the survey was due not only because of their relevance in the public policy-making discourse, but also because of their diversity: legislation and institutions tend often to be far away from our domestic environment and daily-life experience, therefore I'd expected more neutral answers or divided answers in these sections. On the other hand, there was a considerable

amount of recognition about the fact that education can be a crucial issue. The students who participated in this survey also acknowledged the importance of the university as a place where they can be exposed to new perspectives of knowledge, new and different ways of interpreting reality: the issue of the crisis of the forms of citizenship and of the political representation of leadership is the focus of the current political debate to which the students have been introduced -in a way or in another- during the courses, and therefore pushed to rethink the past as well as the present and maybe also to redesign the forecasts for their future. So why don't we (as part of the civil society) push for more knowledge about gender equality and gender issues in general? It is a pity to know that it is an advantage and a return on investment to live in a more inclusive society and then to give so little importance to the only perspective that can really lead to this result. It is about taking responsibility and having the courage to reformulate certain categories of values: the gender perspective should be considered as 'expert knowledge' to be taken seriously into account inside and outside academia. Recognizing the importance of the presence and the action of women in the public sphere –not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of thoughts, opinions, expertise – is a matter of justice: this is the type of 'cultural work' that academic institutions should provide to students and to the whole society, and it is what a democracy should adopt as a target priority to achieve.

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