

FIGHTING GENDER INEQUALITIES: ISTAT'S EXPERIENCE¹

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Abstract. Istat has long demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the issue of gender equality and promoted, in a pioneering way, the conduction of surveys, studies and research aimed at a greater knowledge and dissemination of data on gender equality, useful for guiding policies to promote equality. As of 2024, the Institute has a Gender Equality Plan covering for 2024-2026 and a Gender Budget 2022. Their introduction, in the more general set of planning and reporting tools adopted by the Institute, is in accordance with the Horizon Europe strategy, which considers Gender Equality Plans a tool recognized and supported by the European Commission for gender rebalancing among the staff of research institutions and by the Fourth Conference World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995, and later in the EU context with the European Parliament resolution of July 3, 2003, which identify the construction of public budgets according to the gender perspective as a functional action for the dissemination of greater accountability and commitment of administrations to equality. Finally, an additional tool aimed at reducing inequality should be mentioned: the Plan of Positive Actions drafted by the Comitato Unico di Garanzia which constitutes, as of the 2022 edition, an integral part of the Integrated Plan of Activities and Organization.

1. Istat and gender inequalities

Istat's commitment to contrasting gender inequality has very deep roots and has been evident especially through the production of gender statistics related to all major socio-economic phenomena.

Convinced that reducing gender inequality requires data that adequately orient policy makers, Istat has, over the years, not only ensured the gender disaggregation of all the most relevant information, but has also enriched the range of official statistics with the production of data related to areas and phenomena in which inequalities are more deeply rooted or manifest themselves in a more obvious way. Just to name the most recent examples, think of statistics on issues such as

¹ This article is the joint work of the authors, however paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 are written by Sara Demofonti, paragraphs 2.1, 2.2 and 5 by Simona Pace, paragraph 4 is written by Sabrina Pifferi.

employment discrimination against LGBT+ people², violence against women³, discrimination⁴, and women entrepreneurs⁵.

Statistical data, those collected, processed, analyzed and disseminated by Istat, that describe Italy as a country in which women are on average better educated than men and more unlikely to drop out of school, but they still register very low employment rates and when they do participate in the world of work they are protagonists of more discontinuous careers with lower salaries because of the fewer opportunities to access high-level positions⁶. A country, Italy again, which, according to the Global Gender Report 2024⁷, ranks 87th, among the 146 countries analysed, for gender differences.

Istat's commitment was also made evident at the international level through its contribution to the drafting of guidelines on the measurement of violence against women or on classifications on the time use, or even for the definition of a Minimum set of gender indicators agreed by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2013 and then continued through the provision of useful indicators from the perspective of sustainable development to measure the achievement of Goal 5 of Agenda 2030, concerning precisely gender equality.

Alongside the production of gender statistics, Istat has recently devoted itself to the definition of other tools that also contribute to the reduction of gender inequality such as the Gender Equality Plan (GEP), the Positive Action Plan and the Gender Budgeting.

2. Gender Equality Plan

Istat's Gender Equality Plan (GEP), the first edition of which covering the three-year period 2024-2026 was approved by the Istat Council in March 2024, is part of the more general set of planning tools adopted by the Institute and is in line with the European Union's strategy for gender equality⁸, which fulfils the von der Leyen Commission's commitment to a Union of Equality. The strategy set the strategic

² <https://www.istat.it/produzione-editoriale/discriminazioni-lavorative-nei-confronti-delle-persone-lgbt-e-le-diversity-policy/>

³ <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/le-case-rifugio-e-le-strutture-residenziali-non-specializzate-per-le-vittime-di-violenza-anno-2022/> , <https://www.istat.it/tag/genere/>

⁴ <https://www.istat.it/produzione-editoriale/indagine-sulle-discriminazioni-dalla-rilevazione-2011-alla-sperimentazione-2022/>

⁵ <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/donne-imprenditrici-piu-giovani-e-piu-istruite/>

⁶ https://www.istat.it/it/files/2017/10/A-Audizione-parit%C3%A0-di-genere-25-ottobre_definitivo.pdf

⁷ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152>

goals and actions needed to produce significant progress by 2025 towards a gender-equal Europe, and guidelines for drafting the Plans were issued in September 2021.

The European Commission has also ruled that European public institutions that want to access funding from the Horizon Europe and PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) programmes must have a GEP.

This document, which therefore fits into the context described so far, also represents a form of performance implementation, for the purposes of optimising the productivity of public work and the efficiency and transparency of Public Administrations.

The method adopted at Istat for drafting the GEP, after an initial phase of analysis of the peculiarities of the organisational context, made it possible to outline the areas of intervention. In the planning phase, the objectives to be achieved and the actions and measures to be adopted were established, as well as the indicators necessary to monitor the progress of the actions envisaged in the Plan, the time frames for their implementation and the assignment of the responsibilities.

A number of concrete measures were then defined aimed at promoting a culture of equality and inclusion in respect of diversity and in the constant fight against all forms of discrimination determined by age, gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, religion, political position, disability conditions, through actions and tools capable of enhancing differences. It is on the basis of these coordinates that the in-depth studies in the document, drawn up by reading and analysing the available data, have been based. In particular, account was taken of the results of the survey on agile work in the public administration promoted by Politecnico di Milano and of the results of a survey conducted within the Institute and completed by more than half of Istat staff in March 2022. The information reported in Istat's main strategic planning documents, as well as in the Positive Action Plan and the Annual Report drawn up by the Comitato Unico di Garanzia was analysed. In addition, the first results concerning smart working that emerged from the survey on organisational wellbeing and the phenomenon of mobbing were used, as well as those concerning the home-work mobility habits of Istat employees. Finally, use was made of the knowledge offered by the personnel information internal system for a number of specific analyses on the behaviour and habits of internal staff in terms of attendance/absence, working hours, use of leave/permissions and other work-life balance tools.

2.1 The structure of GEP

The document, which is the result of collegial work within a dedicated interdepartmental working group, is structured in the following thematic areas:

Table 1 – *Gender equality plan's areas*

Thematic area	Description
1. Work-life balance and inclusive corporate culture	Refers to creating an environment that supports employees in balancing their professional and personal lives, while fostering a culture of gender equality
2. Gender equality in leadership and organisational decision-making processes	This area focuses on ensuring equal representation of all genders in leadership positions and decision-making processes. It includes strategies to promote women's advancement to senior roles, setting targets for gender balance in committees and boards, and implementing transparent promotion processes.
3. Gender equality in recruitment processes and career advancement	This area refers to hiring, promoting, and developing employees. It involves implementing gender-neutral job descriptions equal pay policies, and mentoring programs to support career advancement for underrepresented genders.
4. Inclusion of gender issues within research and training programmes	This area aims to incorporate gender perspectives into academic curricula and research methodologies. It includes promoting gender-related studies, ensuring gender balance in research teams, and considering gender aspects in research design and analysis.
5. Measures against gender-based violence in the workplace	This theme focuses on preventing and addressing all forms of gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace or academic environment. It involves creating clear policies, establishing reporting mechanisms, providing support for victims, and conducting awareness training.

The document provides, for each thematic area, the presentation of the context of reference and followed by a list of objectives to be achieved and concrete actions to be implemented in order to promote the culture of equality and inclusion. In addition, it identifies the institutional and operational responsible persons, the timeframe for the implementation of the actions and the result indicators. It concludes with a chapter dedicated to the impact assessment of the plan, in which the areas and methods for the verification and monitoring of the measures implemented are described.

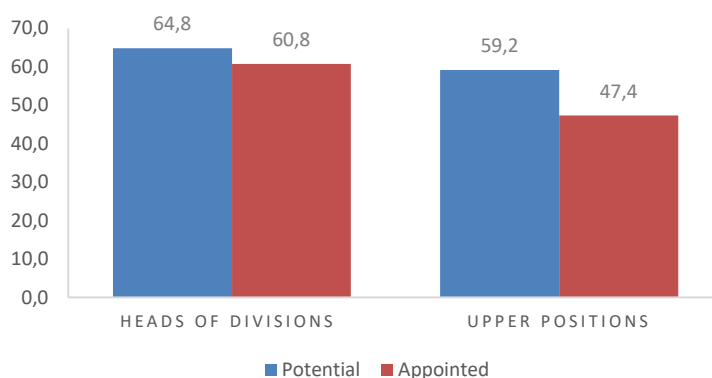
2.2 Gender equality in leadership and decision-making within the organisation

In order to conduct an initial assessment of the issue of gender equality in leadership and decision-making processes at our institute, the positions of President, General Manager, Head of Department, Director and Head of Division as at July 2024 were considered. The institute can demonstrate a significantly high proportion

of female employees (approximately 60%, rising to almost 66% when researchers and technologists are included). However, an analysis of leadership positions reveals a different picture (figure 1). Female heads of divisions account for 60.8%, compared to 64.8% of women at the first and second professional level (i.e. the levels that can apply for the position of head of division).

Furthermore, the situation is even more disadvantageous for women regarding to the upper positions (directors, heads of department and general manager), where women account for only 47.4% of the total, compared to 59.2% of the potential eligible candidates. Additionally, throughout the history of the Institute, no female president has ever been appointed.

Figure 1 – Heads of divisions and upper positions (percentage of female- potential and appointed).



Source: Istat, Our elaborations on Personnel Information System

The following table 2 summarises the objectives and hypothesised actions. They represent a tangible pathway to promote gender equality and create the conditions to remove a series of cultural and psychological barriers that still hinder gender balance.

The first objective aims to build a stable infrastructure to support the study and monitoring of gender issues. This will be achieved through the establishment of an observatory on gender equality, which will ensure a consistent examination of issues pertaining to the Gender Equality Plan within the Institute and externally with other stakeholders in the research community.

Furthermore, a roadmap will be established to facilitate the attainment of certification by an accredited certifying body (UNI/PdR 125:2022). In addition to enhancing the Institute's reputational image, gender equality certification will facilitate access to bonuses for organisations participating in Italian and European calls for proposals.

Table 2 – Objectives and actions.

Objective	Action
1. Strengthen governance on gender equality in leadership and normative compliance	Establish an interdepartmental Committee Implement the Gender Equality Management System, according to the UNI PdR 125:2022 practice, for its subsequent certification
2. Building a gender-sensitive information framework on upper positions and decision-making bodies	Building a database on the composition of governing bodies Analysis of gender gaps in top positions and decision-making bodies Annual reporting of leadership data
3. Enhancement of gender diversity in organisational culture and practices	Designing internal mentoring paths Organisation of thematic events and inter-institutional round tables for persons with organisational/management responsibilities and the entire staff for sharing the culture of gender leadership

The information on top positions used for context analyses is generally lacking and is partly dispersed in different systems. It is therefore necessary to collect and integrate data concerning the composition of the Institute's governing bodies, management positions and other roles of responsibility within its committees and bodies. The second objective aims at building a database where this information are collected from a gender perspective and stored. This database is based on the principles of re-use of available information and reconstructs historical data series, thereby ensuring the availability of constantly updated data.

This approach will facilitate the development of targeted indicators and the production of regular reports on gender balance in leadership and decision-making processes. These reports will enable the assessment of the impact of current actions and the identification of further interventions aimed at reducing gender inequalities.

The third objective is concerned with the enhancement of gender diversity in organisational culture and practices. For instance, mentoring programmes will be introduced to facilitate career progression, events designed to enhance staff awareness of gender equality concerns in decision-making and management processes, and the creation of Working Groups dedicated to specific topics on gender leadership culture.

3. Positive Action Plan

Another important tool useful to contrast gender inequality, which Istat has had for some time, drafted by the Comitato Unico di Garanzia and from 2021, in compliance with current legislation, becoming an integral part of the Institute's Integrated Plan of Activities and Organisation⁹, is the Positive Action Plan.

The document is divided into four areas of intervention as follows:

- organisational wellbeing;
- inclusion, work participation and combating phenomena of discrimination and mobbing;
- communication, training and professional development;
- reconciliation of work and life times.

The Plan, to which we refer you for further details, envisages ten actions to be implemented over the three-year reference period 2024-2026.

4. Gender budgeting

Gender budgeting is a useful tool for suggesting objectives and actions, and for ensuring that financial resources are distributed in a way that supports the goals of the gender plan. It analyses and evaluates, with a gender perspective, the administration's political choices and economic-financial commitments. Despite the presence of gender budgeting experiments at the national level as early as 1980s, five years after the Beijing Conference, the United Nations General Assembly, through an analysis of national reports on the implementation of the platform, found that there had not been significant progress in terms of women's empowerment. Therefore, it officially recognizes gender budgeting as a useful tool to combat inequalities: *"73 (b) Incorporate a gender perspective into the design, development, adoption and execution of all budgetary processes, as appropriate, in order to promote equitable, effective and appropriate resource allocation and establish adequate budgetary allocations to support gender equality and development programmes that enhance women's empowerment and develop the necessary analytical and methodological tools and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation"*¹⁰.

Gender budgeting's implementation at the state level integrates gender issues into government policies, develops greater institutional accountability and a tangible

⁹ <https://www.istat.it/storage/trasparenza/06-performance/piao-2024-2026/PIAO%202024-2026.pdf> . See pages 53-56

¹⁰ November 16, 2000. S-23/3. Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Available online: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/ress233e.pdf>

commitment of governments towards gender equality through targeted allocation of financial resources. Budget is not gender-neutral: decisions on revenues and expenditures have different impacts on men and women, ignoring these differences constitutes a *gender blindness* (Elson, 1999). The budget is a tool reflecting the existing distribution of power in society. Gender budgeting is a practice that aims to reduce gender inequalities, assess how public policies affect women and men differently. It helps governments understand and address the different ways their decisions impact people based on their gender, especially when adopting a multidimensional perspective that takes into account both monetary and non-monetary aspects of well-being (Guerra and Romano, 2020). Australia was the first country that introduced gender budgeting at the national level, in the early 1980s. The Australian experience allowed for the development of greater awareness of the impacts that gender had on the state budget and its monetary policies, and a greater responsibility of the government with respect to the commitments made to ensure gender equality (Sharp and Broomhill 2002). Later, other countries have promoted and used this tool: South Africa, Canada, Great Britain, France, Israel, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Within the European Union, economic needs drove reflection on gender. The European single market, with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, puts the issue of equal pay at the center. Over the years, measures extended and intensified, with the aim of promoting social change and bridging inequalities. Several resolutions (2003, 2019, and 2021) mark the path towards the European Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025, presented in 2020. The strategy contains actions to achieve traditional objectives in terms of gender balance, including the integration of the gender dimension into the entire framework. To counter the multiple dimensions of discrimination against women, which the pandemic has helped to highlight, the Government announced in the PNRR the adoption of a National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2026. Its objective is to achieve, by 2026, a five-point increase in the Gender Equality Index ranking. The Strategy outlines individual measures, including crosscutting ones that the Government must implement to achieve the objectives. Among the measures are the promotion of gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, and the enhancement of official statistics.

In Italy, state level gender budgeting arrives after years of experimentation at local and regional levels. Starting from 2001, some regions and local entities, implementing the guidelines that emerged during the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, initiated experiments on gender budgeting in the absence of a national coordinating regulatory framework (Guerra and Romano 2020). The first regional experience with gender budgeting occurred in 2001 with the Emilia Romagna region, followed by the municipality and province of Modena. From 2002 to 2018, there was an increase in the production of gender budgets at the territorial

level, but also at the university level with the publication in 2019 of the Guidelines of the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) for drafting gender budgets¹¹.

With the 2016 financial year, the reform of the State Budget¹² aims to make public policies related to gender more transparent and to assess the different impact that budget policy has on women and men, starting from the assumption that women and men experience different economic situations, have distinct individual needs, and use services differently. The State's Gender Budget, produced at the end of the fiscal year, in addition to highlighting the financial commitment in terms of resources aimed at reducing gender gaps, also provides updates on the characteristics of the reference population through the analysis of a data set of gender disaggregated indicators. Through this tool, it is possible to compare actual results with initial forecasts, offering a basis for analyzing organizational dynamics and management choices, as well as providing elements to understand the social and economic impact of implemented policies.

Gender Equality Plans cannot reach their full potential if they are not implemented in parallel with gender budgeting which incorporates a gender perspective at all levels of the budget process in order to promote gender equality (Addabbo, Badalassi and Canali, 2021).

It is important applying gender perspective to every phase of the performance cycle of Public Administrations. The Annual Performance Report's guidelines, issued by the Department of Public Function in November 2018¹³, requires that the gender balance be included to highlight the different impact of administrative policies on gender diversity. A gender perspective, within the performance cycle, is therefore an analytical process developed in close connection with the PdG. It increases in attention and interest in issues of gender equality (Addabbo, Badalassi and Canali, 2021). The Directive no. 2 of 2019¹⁴, provides that administrations annually submit to the Comitato Unico di Garanzia (CUG) a quantitative and qualitative analysis of personnel, salaries and actions carried out, with a distinction by gender. These reports must include the analysis of personnel by gender, the indication of average salaries broken down by gender, the description of the actions implemented and planned, and the gender budget of the administration.

¹¹ Guidelines for Gender Budgeting in Italian Universities, 2019. Available online:

https://www2.crui.it/crui/Linee_Guida_Bilancio_di_Genere_negli_Atenei_italiani.pdf

¹² Legislative Decree, May 12, 2016, n. 90. Completion of the reform of the structure of the State budget, implementing article 38-septies

¹³ Guidelines for drafting the annual performance report, Public Function, 2018. Available online: https://performance.gov.it/system/files/LineeGuidaeRifNorm/LG-Relazione_28_novembre_2018_.pdf

¹⁴ Directive 2, 2019. Measures to promote equal opportunities and strengthen the role of the Single Guarantee Committees in public administrations. Available online: https://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/sites/funzionepubblica.gov.it/files/Direttiva_n_2.pdf

In 2022 financial year, Istat adopted State Gender Budget's structure as model. Two factors guided the choice: to produce an exclusively financial document that did not overlap with other documents, the desire to provide insight into the gender-related financial situation specific to public research bodies. In his, first gender budget, Istat chooses the expenses to be analyzed both by strategic motivations that determined their relevance and by the availability of accounting data.

Istat analysed the guidelines of Circular No. 22 of 2023¹⁵, which provides detailed guidance for classifying expenses from a gender perspective. It divided expenses into categories:

- Direct to reduce gender inequalities: relating to measures directly at reducing gender inequalities or promoting equal opportunities;
- Gender-sensitive: relating to measures that have or could have an impact, even indirect, on inequalities between men and women;
- Gender-neutral: relating to measures that have no direct or indirect impacts on gender;
- Expenses to be further investigated: due to some of their characteristics, they should fall outside the perimeter of neutral expenses and,

Regarding expenses aimed at reducing gender inequality, Istat examined the Institute's activities that promote equal opportunities through statistical production. Specifically, it focused on surveys that generate gender-related indicators, providing valuable information for policymakers. This approach helps in the understanding that statistical knowledge is more than just a neutral measurement tool; it serves as a powerful instrument for interpreting and transforming social realities. (Desrosières, 1998). Data collection and analysis practices contribute to reproducing or modifying existing social structures. The costs' analysis, associated with statistical surveys, reveals the social investment in the production of gender-sensitive knowledge. (Giddens, 1984). In the category of expenses aimed at reducing gender inequalities, Istat includes also Communication activities, reviewing gender-related work in this area. The goal is to quantify these communication expenses more precisely in future versions of the gender budget. Istat, through its communication practices, not only communicates statistical information but also actively contributes to the construction of social reality and the formation of public discourse on gender inequality. This function aligns with the concept of defining the situation, according to which the social perception of a phenomenon influences subsequent actions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Istat included expenses from institutional collaborations in costs' analysis, started gathering information on these expenses and plan to analyse them more thoroughly using accounting data in future gender budget reports.

¹⁵ Circular 22, May 16, 2023, Gender budget. Guidelines and launch of activities relating to the 2022 general state statement. Available online: https://www.rgs.mef.gov.it/VERSIONI/circolari/2023/circolare_n_22_2023/

In this context, Istat acts as a key player with valuable resources in two areas: data and the technical expertise to process this data. Our partnerships with both public and private organizations demonstrate how we produce knowledge. These collaborations are interdisciplinary and focus on addressing real-world social issues. By producing statistical knowledge on gender issues, it is going beyond traditional institutional limits. It is building collaboration networks that reflect how complex today social challenges are.

For gender sensitive expenses, Istat considered training and skills development activities because are essential for staff requalification and are an organizational investment. Another gender-sensitive data point relates to expenses for personnel traveling on behalf of the Institute in Italy or abroad. Gender analyses were conducted both from a financial point of view and in descriptive terms of the missions themselves (duration, destination, type). The expenses incurred for social-assistance contributions paid to employees were also considered gender-sensitive. The system of welfare benefits was interpreted as an example of corporate welfare that fits into the broader social exchange between the institution and its employees.

5. Conclusions

The path to reducing gender inequality is long and winding. It consists of the many individual and collective actions to be taken in pursuit of equality. The role of public institutions is crucial to support this process and contribute to achieving the desired goals.

The approach taken by ISTAT to address gender inequality is based on two main pillars: the production of data and the development of working tools. With regard to the latter, the definition of a plan for gender equality is one concrete and important step. The evaluation of its results is a complex process that requires the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as the involvement of women and all organisational components that are affected by the actions identified or that are called upon to implement them. It should be noted that, at Istat, this is an ongoing process, and the results obtained will be used to implement improvements to existing policies and the design of new targeted interventions.

At the same time, the stakeholders will be able to rely on the vast wealth of data collected to gain a better understanding of the areas where gender differences are most likely to lurk and to guide decision-makers in the design of appropriate gender policies.

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