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Build(h)ers. Complex gender relations and women's career choices in the Italian construction industry

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You are seen. You are heard. You are valued. You are loved.

The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be,
rather than recognizing how we are.
Imagine how much happier we would be,
how much freer to be our true individual selves,
if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Introduction

Women account for generally less than 10% of the workforce employed in the building industry in most countries of the world, which makes it one of most male-intensive industries – usually together with logistics and transportation. Of these women, only a small percentage is employed as craft and trades workers or is among the higher management and entrepreneurial roles on sites and in the industry. Yet, in Italy, their perspectives have been neglected, while focus was mostly put on the analysis of female-intensive industries. Therefore, the aim of this work is threefold. First, to provide an overview of the state of the occupational trends and career choices of women working in the Italian construction industry. Then, to understand their narratives on the industry itself, on the challenges experienced (if any), and on their career progression. Finally, by highlighting the mechanisms fostering the (in)direct exclusion of women from the industry, throughout the work a critical reflection is put forward on the impact of hegemonic masculinity in on- and off-sites gender relations, to promote the active participation of men in the implementation of new equity policies.

The Italian construction industry

Construction sites are almost everywhere around us. In big cities and small towns, in metropolitan areas and rural countryside, anyone of us has walked by a scaffolding whose purpose was to either build something new or renovate and restore something that was already there, most likely associated with the cultural heritage of our countries and nations. As craft and trades workers, technicians, professionals, and entrepreneurs of the building industries all over the world «construct, repair and maintain the physical infrastructure of our society, [and also] work in the most private spaces of our homes and workplaces» (Thiel, 2012, p.1), we entrust their knowledge and expertise with our lives, in the absolute certainty that their products will be safely constructed and suitable for our productive and reproductive lives within their walls.

Beside their ubiquitous nature, construction sites – and the industry in general – are primarily filled with male workers, professional, and entrepreneurs, making it one of the most male-intensive industry in many countries of the world. Over the years, scholars showed interest in individual, sectorial, national, and international analysis having as "objects" of their studies the male workers of the industry. In particular, Italian scholars dealt with the problematic tendency of the building industry to rely on migrant (often irregular) workforce and on the role of informal networks in supporting the reproduction and diffusion of undeclared working practices. Phenomena such as the impact and illegal activities of organized crime in the subcontracting chain, bogus or false self-employment, undeclared work, and the "posting" of workers kept alive the interest on the industry, but it only focused on the experiences of the male (majoritarian) workforce[1].

However, if we take a closer look at the occupational trends of the Italian construction industry, we see also that women's presence within it has been relatively stable over the last thirty years. With growing numbers of women enrolling in STEM disciplines[2] and potentially approaching the industry in the upcoming years, notwithstanding years of regulations and policies promoting gender equity, women still remain one of the most relevant minorities in the building industry – an industry which continues to heavily rely on a workforce made of men, independently from their country of origin. It is for this reason that, although it has been extensively written internationally and in Italy on the construction industry, the female component of its workforce has seldomly been under the spotlight over the course of the last twenty years. When this happened – mostly in Anglo-Saxon countries – research has focused on the socio-cultural and economic barriers faced by women entering and establishing a career in the industry, together with the role of workplace culture in (re)producing (in)direct mechanisms of exclusion. Recently, some scholars have also reflected on the role of informal institutions in obstructing gender equity notwithstanding the adoption of specific regulations and public policies directed at promoting equity within the building industry[3].

[1] Cfr., among others: Fellini, Ferro and Fullin (2007); Zucchetti (2008); Negrelli (2009); Ales and Faioli (2009); Paccagnella (2009); Perrotta (2011); Chignola and Sacchetto (2017); Dimitriadis (2018; 2022).

[2] Almalaurea's latest report on graduates' employment status is available at: https://www.almalaurea.it/occupazione_rapporto2021.pdf (Accessed: 30 September 2022)

[3] Some of the most significant contribution on these topics are, among other: Agapiou (2002); Clarke et al. (2005); Dainty and Lingard (2006); Watts (2007; 2009; 2012); Clarke and Gribling (2008); Worrall et al. (2010); Wright (2016); Onyebeke et al. (2016); Afolabi et al. (2019); Galea et al. (2020).

Therefore, studying the occupational trends and career choices of women in the Italian construction industry has a twofold purpose. On the one hand, to understand which factors shape women's occupational trends and career progression in a male-intensive industry. In doing so, we will see that the women in the industry (who make up about the 7% of the workforce) tend to be highly educated professionals or highly qualified and skilled workers entering the industry after undergoing tertiary education. It is for this reason that it is fundamental to rely not only on the theoretical contributions from economic sociology and labour studies – e.g., on gender segregation or self-employment and entrepreneurship in the labour market – but also to bring into the analysis contributions from organizational and management studies – especially those interested in the various styles and characteristics of leaderships.

On the other hand, however, the study of women's work in the building sector allows to investigate the dynamics and relations taking place on- and off-sites to expose their gendered nature due to the higher frequency and visibility of behaviours and attitudes fostering the reproduction of gender discriminatory practices, which (in)directly exclude women form joining the industry. As harassment and sexism are considered to be typical routines and expressions of camaraderie on sites, both men and women are unlikely to perceive them as problematic; nevertheless, their common and ubiquitous nature makes them much easier to see to the "outside eye" – and findings which are proved to be true here can be easily compared with those obtained from research focusing on other economic sectors, making them more easily generalizable.

Through the lenses of gender studies and intersectionality

The research conducted for this dissertation differs from previous ones as it relies on a definition of gender as a non-binary[4] cultural construct, dialogically and culturally

[4] Even though in our society gender is socially constructed on the basis of sexual dimorphism, the theoretical approach promoted in this dissertation wanted to be inclusive towards all of those subjectivities who do not identify themselves within the traditional labels of "male" and "female". This approach was especially embraced because of the possibility of interviewing non-binary people for the purposes of this study. Even after the withdrawal of these interviewees, I think that to promote this approach is fundamental to allow the possibility for findings to go beyond those provided by biological determinism, in order to understand to what extent results that appear to hold true for the male and female

(re)produced within the relations and interactions taking place among people. Even though not directly undergoing an analysis exclusively on entrepreneurship, to follow the approach proposed by Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2005) appears to be useful also when discussing the career choices and progression of women in the construction industry. In fact, the terms "entrepreneur-mentality" – or even "professional-mentality", for our purposes – will be conceived as a cultural construct, an ensemble of beliefs, values, and symbols leading to the creation of a specific subject – the (male) entrepreneur and/or the (male) professional. This step is pivotal to bring the relational dimension of gender back into the analysis, to make masculinity visible again and propose a critical reflection on the mainstream (gendered) narratives on gender role and expectations.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach was perceived as best suited to investigate the multifaceted realities encountered in construction sites and the building industry in general. The preferred methodological tool to collect data was represented by semi-structured interviews especially with women, but also with few men working in the Italian building industry – although also casual, unstructured conversations were relied upon during experiences of participant observations. These tools were rooted in the constructivist perspective, which postulates the impossibility of obtaining an objective understanding of reality. Since our knowledge is embedded in and shaped by our subjective experience of the world around us, researchers cannot be considered isolated observers.

Reflexivity is, therefore, fundamental when adopting an intersectional approach to research (Crenshaw, 1989, 1994), as it helps understanding that even in similar circumstances, diametrically opposite meanings can be attributed to the same event, object, or subject, according to the diverse background, perspective and interpretations of the ones involved in the research process – the interviewee and the interviewer alike. Starting from women's perspective and comparing it with men's experiences – whenever possible – we will see how, even though sexism is for the greatest part perpetrated (in)directly by men against women, also women are at risk of reproducing and reinforcing the dominant, stereotypical, and discriminatory narrative in the attempt of "fitting in".

constructs are actually capable of holding true also when non-binary people are involved in the research process.

By adopting a gender studies and intersectional approach and relying on a definition of gender as a cultural construct to study women's experiences in the building industry, the aim is to open the way to bring back men into the discourse, as well as their involvement in a critical reflection on "masculinity". Analysing gender dynamics between men and women in the building industry allows to set the grounds for raising awareness on the relational nature of gender and the role of men and masculinity in promoting change and achieve equity, not only in this specific sector, but in the whole economy and society. Finally, exposing the relational nature of gender opens the way to studies focusing on the experiences of disabled people and people belonging to the LGBT+ community, who are still today particularly marginalized not only in the building industry, but in the overall labour market.

Overview

In chapter I, we will go through the theoretical motivations to adopt a gender studies and intersectional approach to the analysis of the Italian construction industry. After discussing the main strands of literature concerned with the study of women in the labour market and in leadership positions, I will discuss the importance of integrating intersectionality into the analysis, as multiple social locations are capable of shaping and impacting gender relations.

Chapter II will discuss the epistemology behind the choice of the constructivist and qualitative method for conducting the research, together with the tools and techniques on which I relied to carry out the empirical research. Semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and sampling will be discussed with the issues concerning access to the fields, interviews availability and participation. The ethic and limitations of this approach will be presented, rooting it in the reflexivity of the researcher.

Chapters III, IV and V will cover the results of the three main macro-areas of the empirical research for this dissertation, based on the data collected during the fieldwork and through constant reference to the literature available in various and different fields of study.

In chapter III, the focus will be on the socio-cultural and economic barriers and challenges to entrance and retainment as reported by women working in the Italian construction industry. Relying on interviews excerpt, I will discuss how socio-cultural barriers are the most acknowledged ones by both men and women in the industry, but also how some narratives foster the reproduction of peculiar gender stereotypes.

Chapter IV will look at women's overall career path, focusing on the motivations to enter and drop out of the industry, as well as the influence exerted on women's decision by internal and external factors – such as subjective aspirations and passions, role models, or income.

Finally, chapter V will deal with women's coping strategies to overcome the socio-cultural barriers faced during their everyday working life. From this, a reflection on the (contradictory) endorsement of feminist beliefs will be put forward, while also analysing the role of men in the promotion of gender equity in the industry.

After some concluding remarks, the dissertation ends with a methodological appendix in which a more detailed description of the interviewees' profiles and the research activities of participant observation can be found.

Chapter I

A gender approach to the study of women's careers in the Italian construction industry

Using a "spiral method of knowledge" (Bolen, 1989)[5], this chapter tackles the main strands of literature that until today dealt with women's work, especially reflecting on their implications for an analysis of the construction industry. Starting from the development of women's and gender studies in the social sciences, we will also focus on the main contributions derived from organizational and management studies. By highlighting the highs and lows of previous research, I will show why it is important to adopt a research approach that relies on intersectionality and on the definition of gender as a non-binary cultural construct to investigate the state of women's occupation in the (Italian) construction industry.

The starting point of the research, then, acknowledges the role played by hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) in the definition of both femininity and other – "lesser" – forms of masculinities: as men, women, and non-binary people are created and reproduced within the dialogical relations taking place between individuals, all of them are also controlled and inscribed in the definitions and norms created by gender differences. These theoretical premises suggest the existence of a complex discourse on women's occupational trends in the Italian construction industry, on the challenges faced while entering and attempting to establish their career in it, as well as on the individual coping strategies and (institutional) solutions adopted to promote gender equity in the industry.

Similar considerations must have as their corner stone the idea that gender, careerism, and/or professionalism are cultural phenomena and archetypes of social action, which foster institutionalized beliefs and symbols that are culturally produced and

[5] Bolen (1989) uses the metaphor of the "spiral" to propose a parallel between the ancient Greek gods and archetypical forms of masculinities, showing the impact that religion, and hence culture, has in shaping men's every day's lives, attitudes, and behaviours. She writes (p. 44): «Like a musical composition or a poem, the spiral form means that a thematic chord or theme runs through each different movement, each turn expands and simultaneously deepens the meaning of the god-archetype for the reader. Each time around, the same god is reintroduced, and with each repetition, the image of the god becomes more fleshed out, seen in more dimensions».

reproduced (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005). When masculinity is left out of the analysis, when it is made invisible, the male model becomes the norm and its values are presented as universal, genderless, parameters for action – the consequences of which are directly and indirectly experienced by women and non-binary people during their everyday life as they attempt at conforming to an allegedly neutral standard.

1.1. "Doing gender" in the social sciences

Notwithstanding years of academic (feminist) research and public debate on the issue, the term «gender» is often misused or confused with the term «sex» in its day-to-day usage. As Nicholson (1996) explains, this confusion arises from the fact that over the years the term «gender» has been used with at least two different meanings. In the 1960s, feminists started using the term in opposition to «sex» and defined it as a social construction, against biologically given traits. In doing so, they understood that to rely on the sexes to highlight the differences between males and females would have meant to sustain the claims of biological theories and, hence, the reproduction of sexism; consequently, these differences would have been immutable and unbridgeable, as they rooted on such a profound biological basis that did not leave any prospect for change.

Afterwards, around the late '60s and the early '70s, feminists started to consider and recognize that some of those differences between the sexes were not biologically given, nor were their direct consequence: in these years, then, «sex» laid the foundation for the elaboration of the concept of «gender» and both of them became flanked and complementary to one another, to indicate the social constructions distinguishing the male «body» from the female one. «Gender» was then chiefly used as a binary concept able to bring together the way in which people self-represent and present themselves to others as well as the way in which others perceive them. In this dialogical and relational exchange, there is a need for a constant negotiation of meanings, schemas, and behaviours of what is to be considered masculine or feminine, as they are often times opposed and considered as mutually exclusive categories.

However, the relational dimension of gender (identity and expression), as well as the impact of culture in shaping it, is perceived as pivotal and complex especially when we recognize and make room for the possibility of a non-binary definition of gender

(Matsuno and Budge, 2017)[6]. In fact, «to accept the *null hypothesis* that "there is no essential, naturally prescribed gender binary, but that there are only different cultural constructions of gender"»[7] (Amelina and Lutz, 2019, p.3) lays the foundation for embracing a broader understanding of gender and abandoning its classic, dyadic definition. This theoretical predisposition sustains the researcher in the attempt of putting the emphasis on «showing what gender does and how gender is done in practice» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, p.33). To do so means to promote a reflection

> on the "doing of gender" (as a social and discursive practice) and on the formation of en-gendered subjectivities, thus questioning the rigidity of categories which create two and only two types of human character. Both gender and entrepreneurship will be analysed as social practices, starting from the assumption that women cannot be studied in isolation from men, and bearing in mind that not only women are gendered. The equations 'sex = gender' and 'gender = women' are not only misconceptions (…) Rather, they are an ideological operation which allows gender studies to avoid calling the gender relation into question. In this manner, masculinity is made invisible, removed from critical reflection; it continues to be the prime term, the one in relation to which the other is defined by default.
>
> (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, p.33)

Being one of the most recent works conducted in the Italian panorama on women entrepreneurs adopting a gender perspective, I will rely on the quick but exhaustive description provided by Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005) to identify the two main epistemological approaches in the social sciences that keep masculinity out of the equation and help making it invisible.

First, we encounter is the sociobiological approach. Scholars supporting this perspective sustain that biology determines the differences between the male and the

[6] As anticipated in the Introduction, even though the interviewees self-identified as either female or male, I had the necessity of adopting this broader definition of gender due to the possibility of meeting non-binary people working in construction. Even if they ended up withdrawing their participation, this approach constituted the basis of the definitions and methods used for the research. However, due to the absence of non-binary interviewees, the analysis will proceed following the more traditional dichotomy, distinguishing between male and female experiences of the industry.

[7] The phrase within quotation marks comes from Hagemann-White, C. (1984) *Sozialisation: Weiblich—männlich?*, Opladen: Leske+Budrich, p. 230, and was found in Amelina and Lutz (2019, p. 3) translated by Helma Lutz; emphasis in original.

female specimen. Therefore, the two genders are «objectively» and «naturally» diverse, as they represent the ending result of the evolution process undergone by the human race in its strive to survive. Complementarily, the broader society can only acknowledge the existence of such (biologically given) differences and adapt to them along the script provided by Darwinian evolutionism – e.g., organizing itself by taking advantage of the (natural) aggressivity of the male (Morris, 2004 and 2012; Goldberg, 1993).

Exalting the male/female dichotomy, the sociobiological approach tends to ignore the continuities between the two sexes, drawing the attention to their differences to pursue a normative intent: since there exist only two body types and one of them is the male one, there can only exist one type of masculinity. As a consequence, not only the female body is "sexualized" or described by difference with regards to some of its characteristics when compared to the male one (de Beauvoir, 1949; Morris, 2004), but also any other form of masculinity is then "lacking" or "disturbed", as they diverge from the naturally hegemonic (heterosexual) one (Burrell and Hearn, 1989). Unsurprisingly, the prevalent terminology is hence borrowed from the natural sciences and evolutionist theories as it serves to depict the human male specimen as «'predators' who 'fought' to 'conquer' and fulfil their 'destinies'» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, p.43). However, scholars here do not take into consideration the potential of relations in the construction of a gender identity; moreover, as they believe the male/female dyad to be mutually exclusive alternatives of belonging, scholars also sustain that change and multiplicity are not only unthinkable, but also practically impossible.

Somewhat contextually, there emerged an approach based on role's theories and rooted in the assumption that people's behaviours follow socially determined scripts: on this social stage, belonging to one or the other sex make one of such scripts (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985) and people learn, are socialized to, and internalize various social roles thanks to the mediating efforts of institutions such as the family, the school, and the peer group (Parsons and Bales, 1956). During their life course, people learn to adapt their behaviours within the relations taking place with the others surrounding them, to conform to others' expectations, and hence to interpret a role.

Scholars supporting this approach conceptualize the human body through a terminology that relies on «metaphors, but they tended to be ones taken from art rather than engineering: the body was a 'canvas' to be painted upon, or a 'surface' to be

imprinted [with social symbolism], or a 'landscape' to be drawn (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985)» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, p.44). It is important to underline that, even though the role's approach brought culture and its influence under the spotlight, scholars were still confining the potential for individuals' action to the classical (biological) distinction between male and female, neglecting their embeddedness in social relations while giving for granted those dimensions in which masculinity is subject (power, autonomy, and hegemony). Male or female were the two a-priori alternatives for social roles to be chosen and performed by individuals during their life arches; as a consequence, those who were not able to conform to neither of them would have been defined as "deviant" – just as much as the sociobiological approach would have done.

There was another approach, however, to the study of masculinity that emerged in the mid-1980s from the encounter of post-structuralism and reflections of scholars[8] who aimed at bringing back masculinity as the pivotal focus of their analysis. Here, the pair sex/gender was «interpreted as a social construct, as well as a representation, which confers significance (identity, status, prestige) on individuals in a given society and founds a historical system of domination» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, p.40). This view opens the way to, and intrinsically postulates, the fragmentation of the very idea of masculinity, as Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) suggest that

> Two aspects of its organization have been the foci of research in the past decade: the division of labor and the structure of power. (The latter is what Millett originally called "sexual politics,"[9] and is the more precise referent of the concept "patriarchy.") To these we must add the structure of cathexis, the social organization of sexuality and attraction – which as the history of homosexuality demonstrates is fully as social as the structures of work and power.
>
> (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985, p.590).

[8] Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) reprise Rubin's (1975) definition of 'the sex/gender system'; insights reflecting on the gay liberation movement were derived from Mieli (1980), Fernbach (1981) and Bray (1982). Other early critical studies on gender and masculinity reported are: Tolson (1977); Kessler and McKenna (1978); Plummer (1981); Cockburn (1983). More recently, on men, masculinities, organizations, leadership and business management cfr. Collinson and Hearn (1994, 1996), Connell (1995), Hearn (1992, 1996, 2014), Hearn and Collinson (1998, 2017).

[9] K. Millett, Sexual Politics (New York: Doubleday, 1970), as cited by Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985).

Within these structures, diverse masculinities are now allowed to develop according to the times, spaces, and relations created with other dimensions of a person's social life (Aaltio-Marjosola and Mills, 2002); as they arise, these various masculinities are both depending on and complicit to what was later called the *hegemonic* one (Connell, 2005)[10]. This is the only approach that can be actually defined as "gendered", as it interprets masculinity as a relational category, and whose main areas of interest for its researchers were brought together by Hearn (1992), namely: the state; the labour market and the workplace; the family. The state was seen and described as a patriarchal institution promoting and fostering a dichotomous organization of people's social life as founded on the dyad public/male and private/female. Consequently, the labour market and the workplace were conceptualized as "male" territories through the institutionalization of the dichotomy production/male and reproduction/female. Finally, the family is another patriarchal institution which draws from the previous dichotomies (private and reproductive) to anchor its roles repartition onto the same dyadic logic, enhancing the differences between the sexes by defining autonomy as a male characteristic and dependence as a female one.

1.2. Gender, organizations, and the alleged neutrality of the (self-)entrepreneur

Even though the first feminist reflections begun to see the light in the 1960s, it was not until the mid-1980s that gender studies started dealing with organizational and entrepreneurial theories. Up to that moment, the figures of "the leader", "the manager", or "the (self-)entrepreneur" have predominantly been spoken of, and associated with, masculine pronouns; only when discussing female-intensive sectors of the economy there appeared to be the possibility of declining these roles by relying *also* on feminine pronouns. This heirloom is still self-evident today in languages with grammatical gender, as they strongly rely on the contrast between masculine and feminine names to identify persons, things or – as in our case – professions and their workers (see Monaci, 1997).

[10] Among the scholars that relied on hegemonic masculinity to study men and masculinities are: Reskin (1988); Messner (1992); Collinson and Hearn (1994, 1996); Horrocks (1994); Harlow, Hearn and Parkin (1995); Barrett (1996); Kimmel (1996); Jacques (1997); McKay (1997); Kerfoot and Whitehead (1998).

If up the 1980s the issue of women's absence from top managerial positions was not perceived as a relevant argument for discussion, in these years it is finally problematized and included within the broader public, social, and political debate. As Adler and Izraeli (1988) were among the firsts to notice, this was chiefly the consequence of a number of reasons: i) women's increasing participation in the labour market after World War II, which influenced – and was influenced by – the expansion of the service, public, and non-profit sectors (Davidson and Burke, 2011); ii) the declining rates of skilled male workforce due to the lower fertility rates in most developed countries; iii) the globalization of contemporary economy markets and increasing competitiveness levels, which culminated in the so-called *war for talent* (Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod, 2001); iv) women's growing demands for access to growing managerial positions, which in turn became associated with increasing investments on their part on education and training, culminating in university's participation rates equal or even higher that men (Davidson and Burke, 2011) but also in changes in the structure of families, organizations, and the broader society (Shriver, 2009).

Three are the main approaches for doing research on organizations and management from a gender studies perspective: i) the «women-in-management», ii) the critical-radical feminism, and iii) the postmodern and intersectional feminism. All of them are firmly anchored in some of the most famous feminist theorizations and draw directly from contributions coming from the liberal, psychoanalytical, radical, and socialist perspectives. Their aim is to help us reflect on the sexual segregation of the labour market, on the role of power and culture in the (re)production of this phenomenon, and on the importance of understanding how people's different social locations may interact with all of the above, contributing to the definition of different experiences of the same workplace according to the group under scrutiny.

1.2.1. Bringing women under the spotlight: the «women-in-management» (WIM) approach

The most famous and established approach to gender research within organizations and management directly draws from the theoretical contributions offered

by the liberal and psychoanalytical traditions of the feminist debate. WIM scholars rely on the well-known liberal nexus between rationality and individualism to sustain that the final goals of policies and organizational praxes should be the organizations' efficiency as well as equity between the two genders[11].

One of the main achievements of this approach was to quantitatively document women's presence within organizations, in order to show the persisting presence of sexual discrimination and segregation. At the beginning of the 1990s, these efforts showed three main tendencies: if on the one hand women's presence in top managerial positions was extremely low when compared to men's, on the other hand, the higher the hierarchical level considered the lower was the actual number of women employed. Moreover, notwithstanding the existence and strengthening of measures against gender-based discriminations, women faced a series of socio-cultural and psychological barriers that were concretely able to affect and constrain their access to high-ranked (and highly paid) managerial positions (Terborg, 1977; Billing and Alvesson, 1993; Powell, 1993/2019; Calás and Smirchich, 1996; Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005).

Beside this predominantly quantitative approach, there was an interest among early WIM scholars in understanding the psycho-social and sociological causes, mechanisms, and outcomes of sexual segregation, so to provide guidelines and strategies for intervention aimed at reducing both gender discrimination and sexual segregation (Monaci 1997). In other words, two were the main objects of study: the global relations system between men and women in contemporary working environments; and women's roles and leadership styles when holding managerial positions and responsibilities (Monaci, 1997, p. 49).

1.2.1.1. The sexual segregation of the labour market

One of the main contributions deriving from this strand of research sets the grounds to reflect on the fact that the labour market in general, and organizations in

[11] We have to wait until the advent of postmodern feminism and intersectionality to allow for the possibility of multiple types of femininity and masculinity to co-exist along with the traditional, hegemonic ones. Postmodern intersectional scholars and what will be known as "queer studies" revolved to the analysis of queer, non-binary people, in an attempt at freeing them from being defined by default or as "deviant" when compared to the hegemonic male and female.

particular, are places in which gender differences are constructed and maintained. Rooted in the division between the public and productive duties (prerogative of the male) *versus* the private and reproductive ones (prerogative of the female), sexual segregation was initially defined as «the concentration of women and men in different jobs that are predominantly of a single sex» (Reskin and Hartmann, 1986, p. 1). A few years later, this phenomenon started to be mostly referred to as functional segregation or *horizontal sexual segregation* and was easily described by recurring to the metaphor of the *glass walls* (Morrison, White and Van Velsor, 1992; Mattis, 2004; Nasser 2018).

When dealing with men and women's uneven distribution in the labour market, however, one of the most famous metaphors was created by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986), who took the phrase "*glass ceiling"* and used it in a *Wall Street Journal*'s article to describe the invisible barrier standing in between women and the achievement of executive positions within American corporations. Afterwards, this metaphor was widely employed by the academic literature as a representation of the so-called *vertical sexual segregation* and the gender gap in both pay and promotions (Kanter, 1977; Guy, 1994; Ryan and Haslam, 2005, 2007; Carli and Eagly, 2016).

Subsequently, other metaphors, however, were brought under the spotlight to represent peculiar dynamics experienced by women in the labour market, always as a result of gender discrimination. The first one in chronological order was the *glass escalator* (Williams, 1992; Maume, 1999; Ryan and Haslam, 2007), used to represent men's rapid climb through the organizational ranks of female-dominated jobs. More recently, instead, scholars proved that women can – and do – reach and secure for themselves leadership positions, breaking through the glass ceilings and walls; nevertheless, sometimes such positions seem to bring women on the edge of a *glass cliff* (Ryan and Haslam, 2005), as they tend to be more frequently associated with challenging organizational circumstances and greater risk of failure. When failure happens, women tend to be the only ones to take the blame and criticism, bearing the consequences of the (already compromised) corporate failure on their shoulders. Likewise, when they succeed in saving the organization there is still a tendency to silently remove them from the management of the organization, rather than praising them for their accomplishment (Ashby, Ryan and Haslam, 2007; Bruckmüller and Branscombe, 2010).

Not opposed to the "glass" metaphors and more as a complement to them, in 1994 Catherine White Berheide coined the metaphor of the *sticky floors* to describe the obstacles faced by women at the beginning of their career in state and local government, showing that they tended to remain in low-status and low-paid positions (Harlan and Berheide, 1994). The reach of this metaphor was then widened as various sociologists started using it to include other kinds of work into the analysis and to refer to discriminatory practices that aimed at slowing down women's career progression – e.g., by placing them in underpaid, dead-end jobs, lacking flexibility (Carli and Eagly, 2007, 2016).

All of these metaphors are extremely useful to help identify, visualize, and ease the comprehension of the main obstacles faced by women within organizations, which may in turn promote change in both attitudes and – eventually – society (Landau, Meier and Keefer, 2010). Nonetheless, what the presented metaphors lack is the ability to represent the far more nuanced and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by women entering and wanting to build a career within the labour market, as well as the fact that these challenges are not impossible to overcome. On the one side, the use of escalators, walls, cliffs, and ceilings made of glass promote the idea that – due to their invisibility – nobody is aware of the existence of such barriers until it is too late, i.e., until women bump into them and cannot advance in their careers, thus never opening opportunities for other women to follow (Carli and Eagly, 2016). On the other side, the *sticky floors* metaphor taken by itself conveys the idea of a somehow weaker obstacle to women's career progression and easier freedom of movement in their attempt to leave the bottom of the hierarchy and aim for its top rankings. Yet, the simple fact that we witness the existence of (few) women leaders shows us that these glass barriers can be shattered and that these women have managed to find a way to free themselves even from the sticky floors that tried to hold them back.

Despite this, equality is far from being achieved and, as it remains a fundamental long-term goal, we must acknowledge the fact that – particularly on their path towards leading roles – women must overcome obstructions that most men simply do not meet. At the same time, however, we cannot underestimate that nowadays women can also count on opportunities to succeed where previously there were none. Sprouting from

these considerations, Carli and Eagly (2007, 2016) proposed to move from the aforementioned metaphors to the one of the *labyrinth*, intended as

> a formation with multiple paths, some of which lead to the centre, where leadership resides. Some paths to leadership are more direct than others and some paths lead nowhere or are dead ends. Finding a successful route to the centre is thus not guaranteed and requires persistence and effort. Unlike the glass ceiling and the sticky floor, the image of a labyrinth provides a more subtle and complex metaphor. The labyrinth does not focus on obstacles that women face either very early in their careers or very late. Instead, the labyrinth implies that women face challenges throughout their careers, from the moment they began to chart a course to leadership until they reach their goal.
>
> (Carli and Eagly, 2016, p. 521)

The metaphor of the *labyrinth*, then, suggests that the higher rankings of the hierarchy are not impossible to reach, even though navigating through it and reaching its centre – where *latu sensu* leadership is placed – requires a considerable effort. If men can walk the *road* to success, women must face a more complicated path and deal with greater probabilities of failure. It could be interesting, in my opinion, to depict this labyrinth as made of *tinted glass and sticky floors.* Whereas tinted glasses allow for women to be aware of the overall structure of the labyrinth – i.e., the challenges they may face in career progression – they can also rely on its transparency to see the promised prize at its centre as well as other women's strategies to reach it.

On the positive side, this opportunity would allow for elder, experienced women to represent a role model for new generations while, at the same time, making it possible for younger women to be aware of innovative ways to free themselves from the ever-present sticky floors. However, as it is practically transparent, the labyrinth presents some downsides, among which the first is the risk of an exacerbation of the competition amid women. As they navigate their way through the labour market and towards top-managerial roles, women are (made) aware that only few of them will be able to reach such positions[12] – and even fewer when male-intensive industries are considered. If the

[12] To some extent, mostly due to the selection mechanism put in place by professions and also the risks associated with entrepreneurship, also men are made aware that not all of them will be able to reach top

patriarchy wants to keep women subjugated without constantly revolving to the use of violence, it needs to convince them that «women are women's worst enemies» – i.e., that any woman would gain far more by herself than by working together with other women. As Kanter (1977) shows, the existence of few "token" women, particularly in male-dominated industries, encourages competition with other women, isolates them from their own kind, and makes them overcompensate their achievements with either iper-performativity and overachievement or by hiding their successes.

In this sense, the question of whether the simple growth of women's presence in male-dominated activities would be able to promote a progressive reduction in gender discrimination in the labour market or promote new differences is still somewhat open. On the one side, some early scholars maintained that, since where there is a balanced composition of the workforce by sex we also witness a lower degree of horizontal and vertical segregation, women's growing presence in activities that have been male's prerogative should promote a decrease in sex segregation (Saraceno, 1992). On the other side, however, scholars highlighted the persistence of discriminations based on gender and reflected on «systematic selectivity» (Abburrà, 1992, p.31): according to this, a distinction should not be made in terms of higher-ranking (male) against lower-ranking (female) professions, but between activities and professions that are capable of accommodating and attracting women – e.g., allowing for more flexibility – against those which simply cannot or do not attract female workers *per se*, rather than explicitly reject them.

These second strand of theories, however, seem to present a fallacy when they assume that women are the only ones "naturally" interested in flexible working conditions. These assumptions are still rooted in the patriarchal division of labour, according to which women are the ones demanded to find a balance between their working and private lives – i.e., to rely on flexible working arrangements in order to also care for their household. If it is certainly true that "selectivity" – i.e., people's preferences towards a certain occupation rather than the other – should be taken into consideration, it

ranking positions. Nevertheless, the substantial difference is in the path undertaken: Carli and Eagly (2016), for example, speak of men as able to *walk the road* to success. Compared to the *labyrinth* metaphor used for women's experiences, to rely on the *road* indicate the relative absence of obstacles on men's path towards top management due to a number of reasons that will be debated at length in the next chapter, such as women's necessity to conform to "universal" (masculine) standards of good business, and informal networks and "homosocial selection" (Kanter, 1977).

should be also true that we cannot exclude from the analysis the role of culture and socialization when such preferences are expressed.

Therefore, we have to take into consideration that it is the interiorization of gender stereotypes that allows the (re)production of the uneven distribution of men and women in the labour market, as well as their concentration in peculiar areas of interests, activities, offices, and sectors. Gender stereotypes, on the one hand, shape women's preferences and inclinations towards female-intensive industries to the point that, for example, women entrepreneurs are hugely present in the care services and the clothing and retail industries – segments considered less prestigious, less economically remunerative, with less power and authority involved, or simply "more suitable" for a woman. Yet, it is the higher success rate of these activities that promotes sexual segregation, functioning as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton, 1948) as it provides concrete proofs for women's entrepreneurial aspirations to succeed *especially* when they conform to the traditional division of labour.

Walking us thought the evolution of management theories, Kanter (1977) reflects on how the figure of the manager is still capable of excluding women from positions of power, even though it has undergone some significant changes across time. The passage from the scientific management to the human relations theory did not challenge neither the image of the rational manager nor the concepts of managerial authority and managerial rationality: in fact, the idea conveyed was still that while managers based their actions on a logic of efficiency, workers acted on an "irrational" basis and according to the logic of sentiment[13]. Moving from the "machine" to the "family" metaphor, organizations still required a rational head at their top which, therefore, should have been imbued with a «masculine ethic», as it

> elevates the traits assumed to belong to some men to necessities for effective management: a tough-minded approach to problems; analytic abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interests of task accomplishment; and a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision-making. These characteristics supposedly belonged to men; but then, practically all

[13] Cfr. as quoted by Kanter (1997): Dickinson and Roethlisberger (1940) and Warner and Low (1947).

> managers were men from the beginning. However, when women tried to enter management jobs, the "masculine ethic" was invoked as an exclusionary principle.
>
> (Kanter, 1977, p.22-23)

Even though "feminized" elements were added to the "masculine ethic", women in management were mostly associated with people-handling tasks, as their presence have always been directed towards the "emotional" end of management – thus excluding them from power positions, since they represented the antithesis of the rational manager. As Kanter highlights, and as the studies on the construction industry confirm, the women who were able to fit in as managers and get at the higher positions of the hierarchy within the organization «were the ones who could demonstrate the ability to "think like a man"» (Kanter, 1977, p.25).

1.2.1.2. Gender differences in management and leadership

This branch of WIM research paid particular attention to exposing the differences between men and women's approaches to both management and leadership by identifying four main areas of divergence. In the first place, researchers who concentrated on motivations and personality traits found ambivalent results and tended to state that neither men nor women showed significant differences with regards to these aspects. When relevant variances were measured, they often dealt with the intensity of women's motivations (Chusmir and Parker, 1984), which appeared to be higher than men's: scholars, hence, sustained that this result was mostly due to the barriers faced by women in entrance and retainment, but also to different personal and external expectations[14].

Secondly, three dimensions of leadership (task-oriented, interpersonal, and democratic/autocratic) were identified when studying the efficacy of managerial action. While small behavioural and psychosocial differences seemed to make women propend towards a more interpersonally oriented kind of leadership, men seemed to be more task-oriented. Major differences, however, were registered between the two sexes when

[14] Chusmir and Parker (1984) speak of the "super-women syndrome" when discussing the fact that working men are not expected by the broader society to actively perform other social roles beside their full-time job; women on the other hand, are required to cope with their multiple roles successfully – i.e., at least as workers, wives, mothers, and housewives (Hall, 1972).

considering the democratic/autocratic dyad: women, in fact, seem to propend towards a more democratic approach than men and are more likely to obtain greater results in female-intensive organizations; at the same time, men are more likely to embrace an autocratic leadership style and to be particularly successful within male-intensive workplaces.

Third, strictly connected with leadership styles and personality traits, researchers showed that women tend to be evaluated more negatively than men when they adopt an autocratic leadership style, hold a traditionally male role, and are evaluated by men. At the same time, instead, they obtain evaluations similar to men when are evaluated by women, adopt a democratic and interpersonal leadership style, and hold a role that is not directly linked with a typically male occupation.

Finally, scholars approaching the study of values and commitment to the workplace showed that, even though there seemed to be no relevant differences in terms of commitment between man and women, its degree was more likely associated with personal and situational factors, such as being married or having children (Chusmir, 1982). For example, it may be useful to consider that within top management the number of women with children was reported to be drastically lower than that of men with children. The situation, in this respect and in our country, has not changed much: lamenting the lack of data and studies on women managers in Italy, Minello (2022) reports in her most recent work that while women holding managerial positions within private enterprises are about 28%, only slightly more than half of them has at least one child – a tendency that is diametrically opposed to that of men in managerial positions, which is promoted by a sort of positive discrimination associated with the so called *myth of fatherhood*[15].

[15] Minello (2022) sustains that while we can clearly witness the negative consequences of the *myth of motherhood* on women's working life – such as the tendency to juggle between the work and private life to manage the care and nurturing duties associated with childrearing and the household, when not exiting the labour market at once – also men are the objects of a positive discrimination perpetrated by the employers due to their role as fathers. On them falls the positive stigma associated with the breadwinner of the household, expecting higher productivity rates due to the necessity of providing for their family. So, when for a mother the career track is slowed down by the social expectations linked to her new role as a mother, shifting her priorities from work to the family, for the father the birth of a new child is more likely associated with an easier progression along the "social ladder" and the career track.

As we may anticipate from this brief summary, since the mid-1980s WIM scholars also brought under the spotlight the "alleged" neutrality of (self-) entrepreneurship, sustaining that the higher representation of men among top managerial positions might not necessarily mean that a more "masculine" approach to leadership is the only viable option, nor the more efficient. In this sense, the vast majority of WIM scholars focused on the existence of a *feminine leadership* (Loden, 1985; Grant, 1988; Rosener, 1990) and presented it as a style defined by women's caring and nurturing abilities, which encourages positive interactions with subordinates through communication and cooperation, enhances other's self-worth, and is democratic in its tendency to share power and information.

This approach, however, was later criticized (see Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Appelbaum, Audet and Miller, 2003) mostly because, it emphasises the differences between a feminine *versus* a masculine type of leadership, promoting a static view of female nature (and men alike). Moreover, whereas other strands of WIM literature sustain men and women leaders do not differ in terms of effectiveness (recently: Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and Woehr, 2014), this approach tends to crystallize and reinforce gender stereotypes, deriving men's and women's traits from the patriarchal division of labour and, therefore, reproducing the traditional dyadic narrative on their attitudes and behaviours as naturally and biologically given. As it offers a standard for being a female manager, it may represent a positive model as well as a constraint to women's possibilities, by designing for them a managerial position revolving around emotional labour. Finally, this approach discusses the feminine and masculine leadership styles as incompatible with one another, corroborated by the fact that when women tend to "act like men" the ending result is that «they are considered to be less than women» (Appelbaum, Audet and Miller, 2003, p. 49) and neglecting the fact that men are likely to adopt "feminine" behaviours that proved to be successful.

In this scenario, then, especially interesting is Sargent's (1979) attempt to promote the adoption of an "androgynous" style of leadership, as she considered it capable of incorporating aspects of both the masculine and feminine styles – and their stereotypical, dyadic characteristics – to encourage women's inclusion in top managerial positions. This suggestion was later caught by McGregor and Tweed (2001), who confirmed the emergence of a certain degree of support to this leadership style in their research on a

manufacture facility in New Zealand. More recently, Powell, Butterfield, and Jiang (2021) surveyed undergraduate business students and part-time MBA students over five decades and corroborated that, over time, the descriptions of the "good-manager" displayed an increasing prominence of traditionally feminine traits and a decreasing emphasis on the more masculine ones. These trends, the authors claim, converge in the definition of a good manager's androgynous description, as a person that displays a balance of both traits, masculine and feminine.

The possibility for the existence of the "androgynous" option, however, remains secluded unless we are ready to rely on "feminine leadership" as a *critical concept.* This solution, in fact, allows us to discuss how incorporating traits of female leadership into the more traditional and masculine one

> would contribute to the de-masculinization of leadership, not necessarily meaning a feminization of it, but loosening up management being culturally connected to men and, in particular, masculine men and given a masculine meaning.
>
> (Billing and Alvesson, 2000, p. 155)

In conclusion, the overall main contribution put forward by WIM scholars is the proposition of two models for concrete action. On the one side, we find the supporters of the equity principle, whose measures for intervention aim at reducing the entry barriers and mechanisms that foster the reproduction of labour market's sexual segregation and segmentation by promoting equal opportunity of access in the workplace, as well as equal pay. On the other side, we find those supporting the diversity principle: according to these scholars, women and men bring different assets and skills to the labour market, which can be seen either as *complementary* (Adler, 1986) or *non-equivalent* (the "feminine leadership" stream of literature) to one another. Beside the hybrid and mediating attempt represented by the androgynous leadership style, the main weakness in this stream of literature is that it does not recognize or acknowledge the impact of structural variables (such as power, culture, and relations), which will represent instead the focus of the subsequent and more recent approaches to gender studies – the critical-radical and the postmodern feminism.

1.2.2. The emerging role of power and culture in the critical-radical approach

Reprising the previous theorizations of radical (Harding, 1986) and socialist feminists (Ehrenreich, 1976/2018), the main contribution of critical-radical scholars is to highlight that contemporary discussion fails to acknowledge the mutual intertwining of the public sphere with the private one. Never being truly separate from one another, gender relations take place in, shape, and are shaped by this ever-present interconnection. Therefore, gender stereotypes represent both the basis and the product of organizations' rules and praxes: as they are capable of contaminating rules and procedures assumed to be "neutral", it is through the routinization of such processes that they are re-produced within the organization alongside the broader society (Collinson, Knights and Collinson, 1990). Trans-institutional models of discrimination and inequity are hence exposed as is the "pretended neutrality" of organizations procedures (e.g., recruiting and promotions), as they re-produce and amplify sexual discrimination, segregation, and segmentation in the labour market.

Scholars' attention is drawn to the role of both power and culture in the production and reproduction of gender discrimination though the adoption of the first intersectional categories (Haraway, 2006; Gordon, 2013, 2016). Starting from the assumption that in any relation there is a negotiation of power between the parties involved, *hegemonic masculinity* is ultimately described

> as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.
>
> (Connell, 2005, p. 77)

As especially postmodern feminists will prove later on, the role of language has always been vital to discern and differentiate between the two genders; at the same time, however, it represents a definitory process which reflects a power relation between them. Especially if we embrace an intersectional and non-binary definition of gender, we can

agree with Simone de Bouvoir (1949) when she noticed that the dyadic relation between male and female is also a hierarchical one: introducing us to the notion of "second sex", de Bouvoir explained how the male has been (and still is) defined in positive terms as the One, while the female has been (and still is) defined by default, as the non-One or the Other. In this scenario, the culture, religion, values, beliefs, and ideologies shared by society in general, and organizations in particular, legitimize such differences. Expectations about people's actions are inscribed within the schemata provided by the peculiar socio-cultural context in which people live and act. As these schemata allows for the attribution of a personal identity to others, making it easier for us to understand (and anticipate) other's (expected) behaviours, at the same time they limit and control other's possibilities for choices and actions (Schutz, 1944; Goffman, 1963; Berger and Luckmann, 1969).

Studies dealing with organizational cultures, for example, reflected on the "gender maintenance" conducts (Spencer and Podmore, 1987; Williams, 1989) or the different languages, rituals, and material objects of both male and female work groups (Weston, 1998). Here, men's practices of gender "exposition" are discussed as allowing them to affirm and reinforce their belonging not only to the male category, but most importantly to the hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Results show that unbridgeable boundaries are built between men and women that end up not only in the active exclusion of women form certain working environments because "unsuitable" or "out of place", but also in the creation of a hostile working environment which is capable of worsening the conditions of women (but also men) who do not conform to the expectations of traditionally established gender roles (Thacker and Gohmann, 1993; Vance et al., 2004).

1.2.3. Postmodern feminism accounting for intersectionality

Something was still missing, however, from the critical-radical approach and became more evident at the beginning of the 1990s. Rooting in a post-structuralist philosophical approach and actively drawing from contributions of scholars such as Foucault, Derrida, and Elias, postmodern scholars question the ideas commonly shared about the existence of: i) a natural order of things; ii) an utterly objective truth or

knowledge; iii) a stable and coherent human subject; iv) rationality; and v) language as a neutral vehicle. The very idea of *object, subject*, and *sign* are now put under scrutiny, as well as the classical understanding of knowledge and of the scientific research process (Monaci, 1997, pp. 31-32). Gender relations cannot be isolated anymore from the complexity of the everyday, contemporary relations system: gender relations are continuously produced and reproduced insofar they are social exchanges and power relations.

Henceforth, it is fundamental to acknowledge that both men *and* women (*and* non-binary people), are created and reproduced within these interactions. All of them are controlled and inscribed in the definitions and norms created by gender differences. As we anticipated above in the first paragraph, postmodern scholars engage in a debate sustaining that «[t]he equations 'sex = gender' and 'gender = women' are […] misconceptions» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, p. 33) whose only purpose is to render masculinity invisible. At the same time, scholars began to sustain the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to research, which paved the road for postcolonialism to become a central part in the discussions concerning gender relations (Calás and Smirchich, 1996). In fact,

> The idea of "intersectionality" seeks to capture both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination. It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, economic disadvantages and other discriminatory systems contribute to create layers of inequality that structure the relative positions of women and men, races and other groups. Moreover, it addresses the way that specific acts and policies create burdens that flow along these intersecting axes contributing actively to create a dynamic of disempowerment.
>
> (United Nations Gender and racial discrimination: Report of the Expert Group Meeting, 2000, p.10)

Brought under the spotlight by the African American civil rights movement, the debate on intersectionality usually entails the combined analysis of at least gender, class, and race (Davis, 1981; Collins, 1986, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989, 1994). Adopting an intersectional approach to research allows to avoid essentialist solutions to the definition

of a person's social identity, offering one based on the simultaneous positioning of multiple identities (Colombo and Rebughini, 2012; Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012). At the same time, it provides scholars with a more complex description of the phenomena under scrutiny, as it enables to keep together the individual level of analysis on discrimination with the structural and institutional context – a context that is not only physically given, but also located in time. In this respect, borrowing from Acker's (2006a, 2006b) theorizations of inequality regimes in organizations, Table 1.1 provides an overview of the main axes along which any intersectional analysis can unfold.

Table 1.1 - Bipolar axes of difference (Amelina and Lutz, 2019, p.11)

Categories	*Fundamental dualism*	
	Dominating	*Dominated*
Gender	**Male**	**Female/transgender**
Sexuality	**Heterosexuality**	**Homosexual/lesbian/ bisexual**
Ethnicity/race	**Dominant group**	**Ethnicized/Racialized minorities**
National belonging	Those who do belong	Those who do not belong
Religion	Secular	Religious
Language	Dominant	Inferior position
Differences referred to as "culture"	Civilized	Uncivilized
Class/social status	**High/established**	**Low/not established**
	Rich/wealthy	Poor
Health/Disability	**No disabilities/healthy (no special needs)**	**With disabilities/ill (with special needs)**
Generation/age	**Adults**	**Children**
	Young people	**The elderly**
Space	**National**	**Transnational**
Sedentariness/origin	Sedentary (ancestral)	Nomadic (immigrated)
North-South/West-East	The West	The rest
State of societal development	Modern (progressive) (developed)	Traditional (backward) (underdeveloped)

Even though all of the people I interviewed for this dissertation were Italian, white, heterosexual, women and men – and at a first glance there could be no need to adopt an intersectional approach – using this critical framework allow to capture details of relations dynamics that would have otherwise gone unnoticed, such as the relevance of the class and age axes at the intersection with gender.

> Intersectionality increases analytical sophistication and offers theoretical explanations of the ways in which heterogeneous members of specific groups (such as women) might experience the workplace differently (as leaders, board members, line managers, construction workers, or IT engineers, for example) depending on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or class, and other social locations.
>
> (Atewologun, 2018, p.3)

It is for this reason that, when the data or the observed situations will allow, a reflection on individuals' positionality will be put forward: bringing and keeping intersectionality's framework and approach throughout the research process allows to show clearly «the arithmetic of the various forces – the offsetting, ameliorating, intensifying, accumulating, or deepening effects within the operations of power in the person and in the institutions of the society» (McIntosh, 2012, p. 198). These reflections, however, would not be the same without making reference to Acker's (2006a; 2006b) pivotal theorization of inequality regimes in employment and organizational research. Sustaining that inequality regimes can be found in any organization as they represent «loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations» (Acker 2006b, p.443), Acker shows their everchanging and fluid nature and saliently links organizational inequalities to the ones existing in the broader society, culture, politics, and history (Healy et al., 2018). In the author's opinion, six are the principal components of inequality regimes that can be found to various extent within organizations, i.e.:

> the bases of inequality, the shape and degree of inequality, organizing processes that create and recreate inequalities, the invisibility of inequalities, the legitimacy of inequalities, and the controls and compliance that prevent protest against inequalities
>
> (Acker, 2006b, pp. 444–454)

As other scholars showed in previous works (Cfr. Healy, 2011; Healy et al. 2018), we will see how these dimensions are also present and impossible to overlook when debating about women experiences in the (Italian) construction industry. Relying on Acker's theoretical framework, as well as on more recent contributions reflecting on

masculinity (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018), we will understand how the discriminations and inequalities that can be found in this (or in any other) case study – i.e., at the micro level of analysis – are nothing less than the reflection of the discriminations and inequalities present at the macro level. As far as both structural and individual processes shape gendered relations and hierarchies, it will become clear how individual solutions and strategies to counterbalance gender discrimination and inequity represent only half of the solution if not integrated with structural intervention and policies aiming at a broader cultural and societal change.

The aim is then twofold: to provide a description of women's occupational trends in the construction industry that will be able to promote social justice and equity not only in this sector, but in the economy as a whole. To this end, intersectionality is essential, as it allows scholars to reach a more detailed and nuanced description of individuals and the relations they are embedded in, while keeping together the micro and the macro levels in the analysis.

1.3. 'Doing gender' to study women's careers in the construction industry

Overall, women's and gender studies scholars provided interesting insights on how the increasing number of women entering the labour market shapes – and is shaped by – the relations dynamics existing within it. As women reportedly experience more socio-cultural and economic barriers to enter and establish a career in the labour market in general, this holds especially true when male-intensive industries are taken into consideration due to the phenomenon known as horizontal sexual segmentation. Besides, we have to acknowledge the steady decrease in the number of women holding top managerial or entrepreneurial positions through what we called vertical sexual segregation. It is especially with reference to this latter phenomenon that, from the mid-1980s, scholars started noticing that figures such as "the leader", "the manager", "the professional" or "the entrepreneur" have always been described recurring to the traits and characteristics pertaining to the hegemonic masculinity. Far from being "neutral" entities, when research on *female* leaders and managers, or *female* professionals and entrepreneurs was carried out, the discourse mostly highlighted the differences between the female and

the male models. To acknowledge the validity of these shifting perspectives and the fact that language itself is not neutral allow to reflect on how masculinity is capable of staying hidden while shaping not only the relations dynamics taking place around us (and hence in the labour market), but also the labour market itself, its dynamics, and the career progression within it.

In this sense, Collinson and Hearn (1994, 1996) identified five rhetorics in both management and organizations corresponding to just as many types of masculinities. *Authoritarianism* is an aggressive expression of masculinity directed at those individuals or groups who do not comply with its requests, which are therefore dismissed as "weak" and subordinate. *Paternalism*, instead, is relied upon by those men who emphasise the moral and protective nature of their authority: in this case, hostility will be directed only towards people who do not conform to traditionally defined gender roles. If «women are treated as too 'delicate' and 'precious' to be involved in the so-called harsh world of business […] men are expected to behave in accordance with 'gentlemanly principles'» (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, p. 14). In regards with these first two forms of masculinity, we will see in the results chapters how women working in the construction industry are especially expected by fellow male workers to comply to the traditional gender roles. One of the ways in which this is made evident is men's reliance on paternalistic attentions, attitudes, and behaviours towards women that have been labelled as *benevolent sexism* (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Barreto and Ellemers, 2005a; Kelly, 2009; Connelly and Heesacker, 2012; Jones et al., 2014; Stedham and Wieland, 2017). On the contrary, when women defy such expectations, they risk becoming targets of *hostile sexism* practices and behaviours, which can render the working environment particularly unpleasant and stressful (Thacker and Gohmann, 1993; Vance et al., 2004).

Third, *Informalism* refers to the informal relationships that develop between men in the workplace, which usually transcend the boundaries of the single organization and are, at the same time, capable of (in)directly reproducing masculinity and excluding women as they «concentrate on humour, sport, cars, sex, women, and drinking alcohol» (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, p. 14). In this sense, for example, women in the industry report on being (in)directly excluded from informal gatherings occurring after works mostly because of the arguments debated or due to the need to allocate time differently than their male counterparts to account for their responsibility towards the majority of

household and childrearing duties (on construction industry: Watts, 2009; Caven et al., 2016).

Fourth, is the narrative surrounding *entrepreneurialism* and describing it as a competitive approach that values rationality and efficiency: even though some of the attributes it used to derive from "bourgeois masculinity" have been discarded, the remaining and desired ones are «coded masculine in gender ideology, and in cold fact the people who fulfil these functions overwhelmingly are men» (Connell, 2005, p. 255). Finally, *careerism* is another outcome of the heightened competitivity experienced by men within organizations in their attempt at "making their way up on the ladder" and towards the top positions of the hierarchy. This typically takes the form of long working hours, presenteeism, and disposition towards travelling (or even moving the whole household) according to the organization's needs. The implicit understanding behind it is that men's ultimate goal should be to consolidate a stable masculine identity corresponding to «the figure of the 'head of household', both at home and at work» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, p. 58).

Suspending for a moment the discourse on entrepreneurialism and careerism, we can clearly see from the few examples put forward concerning the construction industry that the rhetorics identified by Collinson and Hearn emerge at the intersection between gender and social class. Here, the labour market represents the main ground on which they are revealed and reproduced first and foremost through the relations between "working-class" and "middle-class" masculinities. As productive work became a determining aspect of a (male) person's social life (Connell, 1987; Hearn & Morgan, 1990; Collinson, 1992), it is in predominantly male industries that we can see how these two types of masculinities develop both in a complementary and antagonistic way. Moreover, it is through this ambivalent interplay of accordance and contrast that relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination are recognized to different kinds of masculinities (Connell, 2005, pp. 36-37).

For example, Collinson's (1988) study of an all-male shop-floor workforce was among the first to highlight how workers expressed their masculinities through vulgar and sexual banter about women, while trying to maximize their own profit to provide for their family. While conforming to the shared idea of the "alpha male", the heterosexual

male *breadwinner* of the household, workers defined themselves not only as superior to women in the social roles' hierarchy, but also as stronger and "more masculine" (hence, superior) to white-collar workers – who were instead perceived and described as too well-mannered and lacking physical strength (Morgan, 1992). Therefore, attributes such as physical strength, endurance, a certain amount of insensitivity, toughness, and group solidarity concur in the making, performance, and reproduction of working-class masculinity as similar to *and* different from middle-class masculinity.

As Connell (1995/2020) recalls, this was the result of a survival mechanism adopted as a reaction to exploitative class relations and associated with the changing economic reality deriving from the growth of the higher education system and the increasing importance of credentialism. At the same time, however, it became necessary for working-class masculinity to assert its superiority not only over middle-class masculinity, but also over women: it is for this reason that the manual work associated with Collinson's all-male shop-floor – but also other industries, such as mines, construction sites, *et cetera* – started to be described in paternalistic terms as "unsuited for women" and mostly because of its heaviness, dirtiness, and dangerousness – and vigorously opposed to the "delicate" and "gentle" womanly nature. Two seem to be the main results of this narrative: first, even though manual work is not necessarily destructive in itself, «it is done in a destructive way under economic pressure and management control» (Connell, 2005, p. 36). Secondly, women were and still tend to be excluded (either directly or indirectly) from such "manly" occupations, unless they are willing to face a great deal of resistance. This usually takes the form of those socio-cultural and economic barriers that WIM scholars were the firsts to identify and that (re)produce the horizontal and vertical sexual segregation in the general labour market. And while the "selection process" already begins when entering the education system, with women undergoing STEM studies in drastically lower numbers than men, this continues on when they enter the labour market: especially in male-dominated fields, discriminatory recruitment practices, sexist banters, harassment, and difficult access to credit represent only a few of the obstacles along women's career paths that render navigating the *labyrinth* more time and energy consuming.

To reprise and conclude with the discourse on careerism and entrepreneurialism (Collinson and Hearn, 1994 and 1996), it was during the mid-1980s that Anglo-Saxon

scholars' attention was drawn to the topics of their career progression and entrepreneurial choices, while already since the 1970s they have been interested in the dynamics of women's work. This was mostly the result of women's growing presence within the labour market, which then altered its core characteristics to lay the foundation of the cultural and structural change that we are still witnessing: far from reaching gender equity, women's presence grew and was able to outnumber men in some economic activities, fostering a radical change not only in the composition of the workforce, but also in the family organization and structure.

In Italy, instead, at the beginning of the 1980s it became evident that the legislative and cultural innovations propelled by the feminist movements were capable of encouraging women's presence among the productive workforce – an experience that rapidly was understood to be neither transient in nature nor limited to the younger strata of the population. Researcher, then, started accounting for a steady growth in the number of women both entering the labour market at an elder age and reaching higher levels of education. Also in this context, then, women began to spread across all economic sectors and started entering almost every professional occupation available, even those that had previously been employing exclusively men (Franchi, 1992, 1994). Nevertheless, it wasn't until the beginning of the 1990s that Italian scholars seemed to be interested enough about the phenomenon of female career and entrepreneurial choices[16]. With particular reference to women entrepreneurs, in their reviews of the major studies dealing with the issue, Magatti, Monaci and Ruggerone, (2000), Monaci (2001), and Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005) convene that two were the main motivations for this delayed interest on the part of Italian scholars. If structurally there were few women holding entrepreneurial roles until the 1980s, culturally the 'gender' category was ever so cautiously adopted by the mainstream social sciences to carry out their analysis:

> Therefore, it does not seem inappropriate to sustain that up to the recent past within researchers' agenda, as well as social and economic policies operators', the analysis

[16] On women's career in male dominated industries or gender in organizations: Gherardi (1994, 1996), Gherardi and Poggio (2001); Poggio (2009).
On women entrepreneurs: Franchi (1992, 1994); Magatti, Monaci and Ruggerone (2000); Bassoli and Caldaro (2003); Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005); Gherardi (2008); Gherardi (2015).

> of the female entrepreneurial role did not receive autonomous and recognized space, substantially fluctuating between two extremes: to be considered as a delimited, when not negligible, part of the broader issue of entrepreneurship; or to be included, but rarely scrutinized, within the studies dedicated to female working conditions, within which the experiences of women committed to a plurality of roles (in the family, in the labour market, within a peculiar occupation) have been generally interpreted moving from the «urgency» to grasp the mechanisms of the sexual division of labour and promote equal opportunities within the contexts of dependent work.
>
> (Monaci, 2001, p. 360)[17]

When scholars eventually approached the phenomenon of female career and their entrepreneurial choices, they mainly attempted to answer different research questions according to their field of study. Whereas sociology was more interested in understanding the factors impacting on women's decisions to pursue especially the entrepreneurial action and the barriers faced, in an attempt at highlighting the similarities and differences with respect to men; practitioners and professionals of the institutions involved in social and economic policies were particularly interested in acknowledging the barriers to female entrepreneurship in order to promote strategies to counteract and, eventually, remove them. Psychology was instead more concerned with women's motivations and values throughout their career arches, as well as the role played by social expectations and perceptions on their behaviours. Finally, management and organization studies were mostly concerned with the codification of emerging styles of leadership and management in contrast with the traditional (masculine) ones. (Monaci, 2001).

[17] My translation of the following text: «*Pertanto, non pare fuori luogo affermare che fino al passato recente nell'agenda dei ricercatori, e degli stessi operatori della politica sociale ed economica, l'analisi del ruolo imprenditoriale femminile non disponesse di un proprio spazio autonomo e riconosciuto, oscillando sostanzialmente tra due estremi: il venire considerata una parte circoscritta, se non trascurabile, della più vasta problematica dell'imprenditorialità; oppure il venire ricompresa, ma raramente approfondita, nel filone di studi dedicato alla condizione del lavoro femminile, nel quale le esperienze delle donne impegnate in una pluralità di ruoli (in famiglia, nel mercato del lavoro, all'interno di una specifica occupazione) sono state generalmente interpretate a partire dall'«urgenza» di cogliere i meccanismi di divisione sessuale del lavoro e di promuovere le pari opportunità nei contesti di lavoro dipendente.*»

If Monaci (2001) laid the foundation for an extensive and critical approach to the debate on female entrepreneurs, a few years later Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005) built on Monaci's contribution and were able to summarize the main thematic areas of such research, as well as the main explanations offered for the issues discussed each time. Moreover, due to their reliance on a postmodern gender approach to entrepreneurship, the authors engaged in a deconstructive process of the narratives and discourses presented by previous scholars: by doing this, they highlighted the gender sub-text that each stream of research was more or less voluntarily carrying, showing the limitations of previous approaches, as they ignored the weight of the relational dimension and creation of gender and entrepreneurship for their analysis.

Table 1.2 - A deconstructive gaze at business economics literature on women entrepreneurs. (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, pp.25-26)

Thematic areas	Explanations offered	Gender sub-text
Breeding grounds	i) It is the sector [tertiary] of which they have most knowledge and experience. ii) Women frequently lack specific technical skills.	i) Female entrepreneurs as constructing ghettos within entrepreneurship. ii) Skills as extension of what has been naturally learnt through gender socialization. iii) Sectors easier to enter and which therefore have little value.
Pattern of female entrepreneurship	i) The 'aimless' young woman. ii) The 'success-oriented' young woman. iii) The 'strongly success-oriented' woman. iv) The 'dualist' v) The 'return worker' vi) The 'traditionalist'. vii) The 'radical'.	Patterns of female entrepreneurship are depicted as reflecting the reproductive life-cycle: interruptions, discontinuities in the business field, ways to plan the future which do not distinguish between business plans and personal plans. The 'radicals' are the only exception.
The barriers against female entrepreneurship	i) The socio-cultural status of women. ii) Access to information and assistance. iii) Access to capital.	Women's 'lacking' in: i) status; ii) networks; iii) credibility.
The motivations of women entrepreneurs	The entry of women into entrepreneurship seem to be a complex mix of constraints and opportunities, of external	This discourse has constructed the female as resource, and 'discovers' the female abilities which make other economic

Thematic areas	Explanations offered	Gender sub-text
	coercions and subjective aspirations.	strategies possib le within those spaces, and which justifies the existence of niches.
The enterprise culture of women entrepreneurs	Firms set up and run by women tend: i) to display distinctive features of the entrepreneurial logic of strategic planning and performance assessment; ii) to have informal structures of work organization and coordination styles based largely on direct relations and the affective involvement of employees.	While the view of entrepreneurship as 'gender-neutral' gave rise to a prescriptive literature which urged women to 'masculinize' themselves, the discovery of 'good female' experience has produced a gendering programme which prescribes 'femalization' at all costs.

Throughout this dissertation we will see how, rather than being separated, these thematic areas are necessarily interconnected, so that it is unthinkable to engage in a discussion that solely focuses on the barriers faced by women in the Italian construction industry without acknowledging the latent "gender sub-text" deriving from other streams of research. If up to this moment we usually discussed about leaders of managers according to the various interests of previous literature, we can clearly see the direct associations that can be drawn with the careers of both professionals and entrepreneurs, as they often deal with the management of both human and economic resources on the one hand, and organizational tasks on the other (Monaci, 2001). For this work, I intend to adopt the definition of «entrepreneur-mentality» proposed by Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005, p.11) and extend its reach to also cover professional work:

> The term 'entrepreneur-mentality' [or professional-mentality] signals the existence of a discourse on the art of being an entrepreneur [or a professional] and the nature of entrepreneurial [professional] practice. Entrepreneur-mentality [or professional-mentality] is constructed through the discursive practices of entrepreneurs, the media that represent their achievements, and the scientific texts that expound theories of entrepreneurship [professionalism], and in its turn becomes the pot and constraint for entrepreneurial [professional] action and discourse.

To adopt a gender approach to the study of entrepreneur- and professional-mentality in the Italian construction industry means that the starting point for this research must be the very need of considering all of these terms – gender *and* careerism *and* entrepreneurship *and* professionalism – as cultural phenomena and archetypes of social action fostering institutionalized beliefs and symbols that are culturally produced and reproduced (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005). Otherwise, if we approach the study of women's work and careers, especially as professionals and entrepreneurs, without questioning the gendered structure of professions and entrepreneurship themselves, we legitimize the gender blindness that allowed for the invisibility of masculinity to persist over time. When this happens, when masculinity is overlooked and made invisible, the professional or entrepreneurial male model is actually considered the norm and its values are presented as universal – apparently genderless – parameters for action. The ending result is one where, while women and non-binary people aspiring to become professionals and entrepreneurs are compelled to adhere to a system of values that proclaims itself to be gender neutral, men are instead simply required to adhere to the values system proposed by professional and entrepreneurial masculinity (Connell, 2005).

The main difference between previous research and the one presented here, then, lies on its attempt at investigating the Italian construction industry through the means provided by gender studies and intersectionality. Being one of the most male-intensive industry in the country, masculinity is at the same time invisible and visible, openly enacted and reproduced by actors on sites but never mentioned by previous studies dealing with the industry. In the enduring contraposition between working-class and middle-class men, we will see how middle-class women entering the industry can actually destabilize and even subvert the gender relations associated with intricate class dynamics. In addition to this, we will see that the passing of time and the ageing process is approached differently by men and women, as

> working men's bodily capacities *are* their economic asset […] But this asset changes. Industrial labour under the regime of profit uses up the workers' bodies, through fatigue, injury and mechanical wear and tear. The decline of strength, threatening loss of income or the job itself, can be offset by the growth of skill – up to a point.

> […] Where work is altered by deskilling and casualization, working-class men are increasingly defined as possessing force alone. […] Middle-class men, conversely, are increasingly defined as the bearers of skill.
>
> (Connell, 2005, pp.55).

By reflecting on men and women's diverse experiences, and mostly on the narratives sustaining them, we will see how social praxes and discourses help to frame people into a binary (gendered) system which is meaningful only if we account for the reciprocity of relations. Adopting a gender approach to the study of women's careers (also as professionals and entrepreneurs) in the construction industry means to reflect on the fact that careers in general have been historically and culturally created as a form of masculinity. Reprising Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005) on entrepreneurship and joining it with the considerations emerging from Collinson and Hearn's (1994, 1996) studies on masculinity in organizations and management, we can therefore sustain that if, on the one hand and «[a]s a discoursive practice, entrepreneurship produces its own subject: *entrepreneur* and not *entrepreneuse*» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, pp. 31), the same holds true, on the other hand, also when careerism and professionalism are considered. As the main subjects of these practices are males and the female ones are represented and described by default as the Other, entrepreneurialism, careerism, and professionalism are all forms of masculinity, cultural barriers and techniques of power created and used by a peculiar group in a society «against other forms of masculinity and against entrepreneurial [or professional] activity by women» (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005, pp. 32).

1.4. Building industry, building masculinity: characteristics of women in a male-intensive industry

Studies concerning the experiences of female construction workers and professionals have been increasingly emerging in various countries around the globe[18]

[18] *In Europe*. On the UK: Gale (1994); Dainty, Bagilhole and Neale (2000); Worral et al. (2010); Fernando and Amaratunga (2012); Wright (2013, 2016). On Spain: Infante-Perea, Román-Onsalo and Navarro Astor

especially over the last decade. Most of them analyse the barriers faced to enter the industry and during career progression, as well as the difficulties encountered when balancing their working and private lives, due to the widespread stereotypes about expected gender roles and women's "unsuitability" to work in the industry. Few of them evaluate the strategies adopted by women to navigate the labyrinth, or the corporate and national solutions available to address these barriers – such as mentoring programmes, policies fostering gender equity in the industry, and so forth.

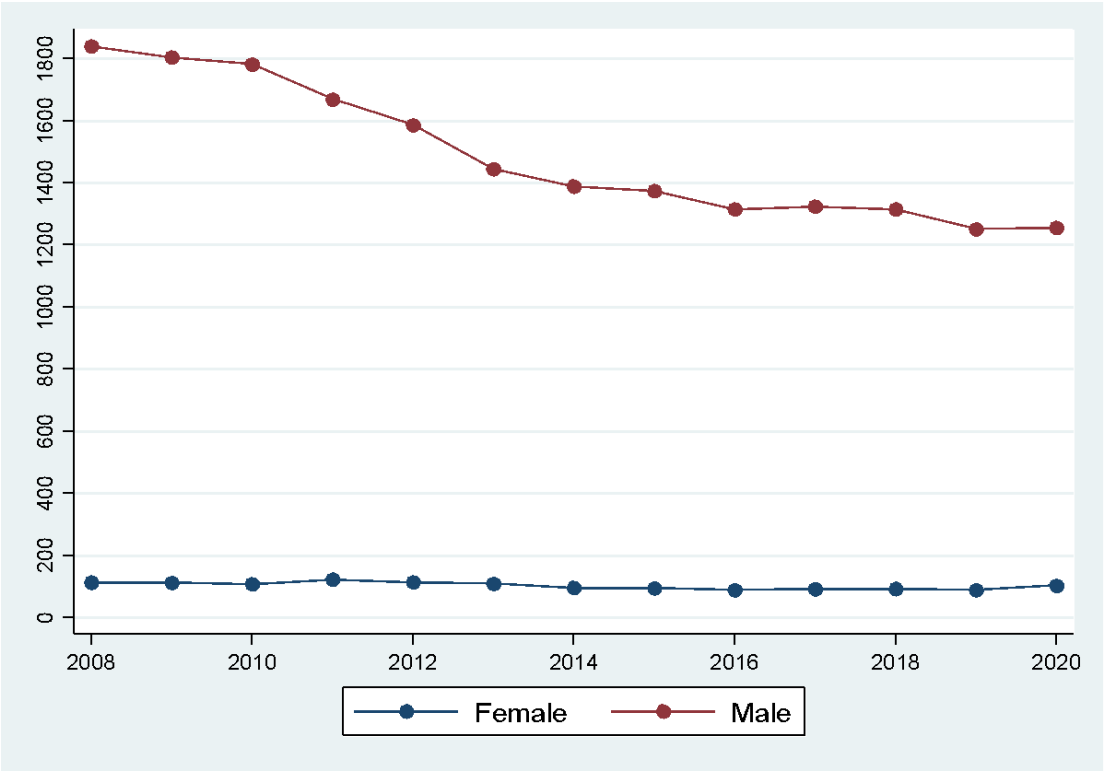
In Italy, instead, to the researcher's knowledge no such research has yet been conducted. The main motivations could be the sum of those presented above by Monaci (2001, p. 36) concerning the lack of studies on women entrepreneurs: as official statistics report that the majority of women in the construction industry can be found among clerical support workers, we can consider that the complications associated to their commitment to multiple roles have already been debated at lengths. For the other workforce components, such as professionals and entrepreneurs, we can easily reach the same conclusions from studies regarding other economic sectors. Finally, in an industry where the largest share of the workforce is employed to work on sites, women's residual presence in such contexts – e.g., as restorers – can easily go unnoticed.

Nevertheless, Italy shows some interesting trends with respect to its female workforce that should not be underestimated. As previous scholars explained, the Italian building industry has witnessed a steady growth, starting from the mid-1990s and up to the recent European Great Recession, to the point that the late 1990s and the very beginning of the 21st century have frequently been referred to as its «golden age» (Zucchetti, 2008; Paccagnella, 2009). The prosperity of these years corresponded to a huge increment in the male workforce, which reached its highest peak in 2008. With the

(2015, 2018). For a comparison between the UK, France, and Spain: Caven, Navarro-Astor and Diop (2016).
In the US. Malone and Issa (2013); Morello, Issa and Franz (2018); Lekchiri and Kamm (2020); Norberg and Johansson (2021).
In Latin America. Arango Gaviria (2006); Barreto, U. et al. (2017)
In Africa. English and Le Jeune (2012); Haupt and Fester (2012); Bowen, Edwards and Lingard (2013); Haupt and Ndimande (2019); Cheng and Yang (2021).
In Asia. Hossain and Kusakabe (2005); Barnabas, Anbarasu and Clifford (2009); Baruah (2010); Choudhury (2013); Tijani, Osei-Kyei and Feng (2020).
In Australia and New Zeland. Lingard, H. (2003); Lingard and Lin (2004); Bastalich (2007); Lingard and Francis (2008); Wilkinson (2008); Galea et al. (2015); Bryce, Far and Gardner (2019); George and Loosemore (2019).

advent of the economic crisis, and recently due to the pandemic, the industry faced a terrible loss in terms of workforce that still has to settle. According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), while in 2008 the building sector accounted for about 8,5% of the workforce of the Italian economy, in 2020 this data decreased to represent less than 6%, which corresponded to a loss of 584.6 thousand of (mostly male) workers[19].

Figure 1.3 - Employment trend, by gender, of the workforce in the Italian construction industry. Years: 2008-2020.



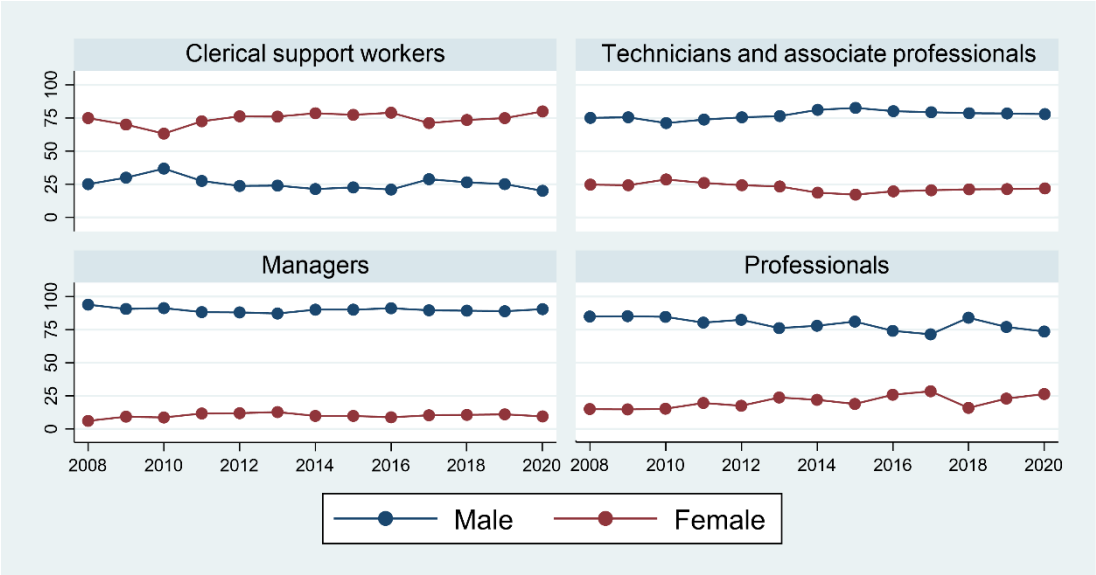
Source: Labour Force Survey

Over the last thirty years, women's presence in the Italian building industry registered an overall increasing rate of employment, starting from a 4,8% in 1992 and recently settling at about 7,5% in 2020. Yet, this ascending trend seems to depend on three main tendencies. First of all, women have always exceeded men among clerical

[19] Recent estimates seem to point towards an increasing workforce available in the industry due to the implementation of fiscal incentives. Some data can be found in the report from Centro Studi CNI (2021) or are available at: https://www.cisl.it/notizie/notizie110% (Accessed 30 September 2022). For a critical take on the fiscal incentives, see https://www.lavoce.info/archives/91831/un-superbonus-distorsivo-e-poco-sostenibile/ (Accessed: 30 September 2022).

occupations, where it is easier to be employed with open-ended contracts; besides, even within these occupations, men experienced an overall loss of employment over the years while women's have been more stable and positive. Secondly, even if with its highs and lows and a more irregular trend than in other occupations, the numbers of women professionals have been slightly increasing over the last twelve years, while men have been experiencing a slight, more constant, decline since 2008. Finally, even though about 24 thousand female jobs were lost between 2011 and 2016, the overall sharper loss of male jobs results in a higher rate of employment for female workers over the last few years.

Figure 1.4 - Occupational trends, by gender, of Clerical support workers, Technicians and associate professionals, Managers, and Professionals in the Italian construction industry. Years: 2008-2020.



Source: Labour Force Survey

Alongside the expected polarizations of the male and female components of the workforce, previous research shows that women approaching and subsequently entering the industry are well-educated. According to Almalaurea[20], Italian women are more likely

[20] Established in 1994, supported and funded by companies, Universities, and by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR), *Almalaurea* is an interuniversity consortium who regularly surveys students' profile and employment status after 1, 3 and 5 years of their graduation. Generally representing about 90% of Italian graduates, the latest report on graduates' employment status is available at:

than men to enrol and graduate from courses related to archaeology, restoration and cultural heritage, and architecture; the opposite trend is, instead, registered when engineering is considered. To verify these trends through reliable sectoral data is a hard task: beside LFS survey data, each profession has its own statistics and some of them are gathered more reliably than others. For example, the data from the Architects' Council of Europe (ACE) appear to confirm that over the last decade in Italy the building industry witnessed a growing presence of female practitioners, rising from 30% in 2010 to 44% in 2020[21]. Beside these more structured results, however, we find more outdated statistics such as those provided by the Italian National Archaeologists Association (ANA), which conducted a census on more than 800 of its members and found out that 70% of them were female – the survey dates back to 2011[22]. In the field of engineering, instead, we can rely on the recent report published by the National Engineers Council (CNI), reporting an increase in the numbers of both women among engineer graduates and, consequently, joining the relative professional bodies: these percentages, however, are still the lowest ones among the professions considered here, even though women's presence grew over the last decade, moving from about 10% in 2012 to about 16% in 2021[23].

Across all the considered fields of study, even though women tend to graduate earlier and with higher scores than men, five years after graduation they still exhibit higher unemployment rates, along with lower employment rates and lower average net salary per month. Both men and women with an architectural and/or engineering background are more prone to start working in constructions than archaeologists, who instead seem to be much more present in the service sector. Nevertheless, men seem to join the industry quicker and at an overall higher rate than women.

Unsurprisingly, among craft and trade workers, women are extremely scarce. The data provided by the LFS is confirmed by the Report Formedil/CNCPT (2019) concerning

https://www.almalaurea.it/sites/almalaurea.it/files/docs/universita/occupazione/occupazione19/almalaurea_occupazione_rapporto2021.pdf (Accessed: 30 September 2022).

[21] https://aceobservatory.com/A_Gender.aspx?Y=2020&c=Italy&l=EN (Accessed: 30 September 2022)

[22] https://www.archeologi.org/professione/censimento (Accessed: 30 September 2022).

[23] Dipartimento Centro Studi Fondazione Consiglio Nazionale degli Ingegneri (2021). *L'universo femminile nell'ingegneria italiana e una riflessione sulla questione di genere*, Novembre 2021. Available at: https://www.cni.it/images/News/2021/report_laureate_in_ingegneria_2021_1.pdf (Accessed: 30 September 2022)

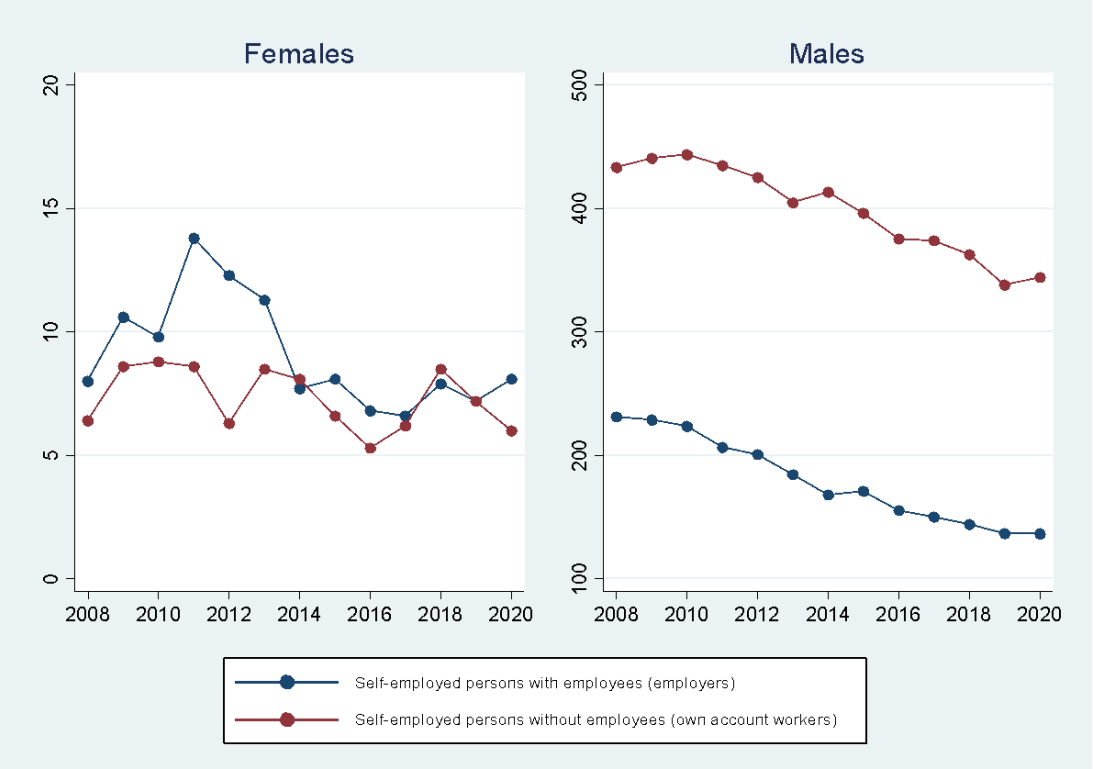
the industry's training activities in Italy: even though women's incidence on the number of apprentices has risen from 4,9% to 6,4% in the years 2009-2018 (probably due to the same reasons for the increasing employment rate), their presence as technicians is almost double that as construction workers.

Women's underrepresentation in professional schools (De Fabrizio and Rispoli, 2019) along with the lack of training courses provided by the industry's bilateral bodies on subjects such as restoration and renovation (Report Formedil/CNCPT, 2019), can help to explain why most women pursue careers as professionals, who can later hold also technical positions and roles on sites – e.g., as health and safety executives, project managers, or work supervisors. Nevertheless, even when women are interested in approaching site-related occupations, they are likely to undergo tertiary education before enrolling in high qualification courses. On the one side, however, this path delays their training «on the job» (Doeringer and Piore, 1971/2020), which is instead very common among men due to the different "academic" background and the industry's widespread reliance on informal relations to cut the costs associated with hiring and training (Negrelli, 2009; Ambrosini, 2011; Thiel, 2012; Chignola and Sacchetto, 2017). On the other, however, they are more likely to enter the industry as highly skilled and qualified workers or as professionals. In this sense, for example, a quick reference to the three main collective agreements considered can be made to underline the differences – especially in earnings – that this diverse entrance in the industry entails. When I refer to women as highly skilled workers, I mean that even though the builders' collective agreement recently (March 2022) granted a minimum wage increase for the industry workers, level I "generic builders" earn about 950,00 € per month; instead, class D restorers "generic operators" are granted a minimum wage of about 1450,00 € – which correspond to the salary of a level V builder's minimum wage. Even though classified backwards when compared to builder's earning tables (with level I being the highest and level V the lowest), also level IV professionals earn about 1400,00€ under the 2017 collective agreement relative to technical professional studios.

Finally, beside this rough idea of employees' minimum earnings in the industry (all maximum earning are instead of about 2000,00 – 2500,00 €), we have to account for the high rates of (sometimes bogus) self-employment in the industry. In 2020, 36,4% of the industry's workforce was self-employed and, among these, women accounted for less

than 3%. Curiously enough, though, while men show a stronger propensity towards solo-entrepreneurship, self-employed women tend to have employees and to work less on their own account.

Table 1.5 - Self-employment trends, by gender, of self-employed persons with and without employees in the Italian construction industry. Years: 2008-2020.



Source: Labour Force Survey.

1.5. Conclusions: why should we care about build(h)ers?

In this chapter we retraced the main passages of previous research streams concerning the discussion on women's work and 'professional-mentality'. Adopting an intersectional approach and a constructivist definition of gender, we saw that even though the overall Italian building industry has found ways to be object of conspicuous research during the last 30 years, the same cannot be said for the women working in the industry.

By reflecting on women's occupational trends in this male dominated field, on the challenges faced while entering and attempting at establishing a career, as well as on the

individual coping strategies and institutional solutions adopted to promote gender equity in the industry, the main aim of this research is to raise awareness on the state and characteristics of a minority of the sector's workforce which has gone under-noticed – if not neglected – by Italian scholars until today.

The overarching aim of this research is to open the way for more detailed descriptions of an industry that still relies mostly on a male and able-bodied workforce, directly and indirectly excluding not only female and non-binary workers, but also disabled people due to its working pace and rhythm, alongside its tendency to rely on brutal, physical strength and to use up its workers' bodies (Donaldson, 1991). Through a critical analysis of the narratives and discourses in the industry, we will uncover the mechanisms and rhetorics that directly and indirectly try to exclude women from sites and the more "material" occupations. Specifically, we will see how women' narratives at times dismantle the distinctive gender segregation and discrimination of the industry, while at other times concur in reinforcing and reproducing the *status quo*.

Finally, as the issue of gender equity remains a long-term goal of this research, we will also reflect on the importance of implementing policies and measures that target men and the industry's culture, without forgetting that a cultural change in the industry should be also accompanied by a broader, societal change about gender roles and expectations. Gender equity, and equity in general, cannot be reached unless society as a whole is guided in a re-definition process, and men (and women) are made aware of their active role within the gender relation system.

Chapter II

Research methodology

This chapter presents the reflections that guided the methodological choices made to conduct the research leading to the present dissertation, as well as its epistemological basis. It explains the reasons for choosing a qualitative approach and how it appeared especially appropriate to collect and analyse the experiences of (mainly women) workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs working in the Italian construction industry. I will describe how respondents were recruited and the procedures for sampling, collecting, and analysing data from the fieldwork. Finally, a further aim of this chapter is to ponder on the challenges I faced while gaining access to and conducting research in the field. Considering my role as a researcher, the limitations of this type of research and how I tried to overcome them, along with the ethical issues related to respondents' participation and data gathering can contribute to make the research process more transparent, enhancing its reliability and replicability.

2.1. Research approach

Each time new research begins, scholars take time to pause and reflect on the issues studied, on the ideas and theories that can become the launching pad for their research activities. When formalizing my research questions, I was aware that my curiosity tended towards the investigation of the characteristics, challenges, and possible solutions to gender discrimination in the construction industry – and I wanted to do so by starting from women's perspective. In order to conduct such research, I needed to acknowledge that the way in which my future interviewees see the world influences the way in which they interpret events and happenings in their everyday life. The constructionist theoretical approach (Berger and Luckman, 1969) postulates that, if it is true that different people see and interpret the world in different ways, according to their experiences and beliefs, then it must follow that it is impossible to obtain an objective understanding of reality. Hence, our knowledge will be subjective and «embedded in a

complex and changing reality from which it cannot be reasonably abstracted» (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p.15), shaped by how people interact and transform the world around them, by the meanings and values they assign to events, objects, and other subjects. Hence, according to the circumstances, we may even find that opposite meanings and values are assigned to the same event, object, or subject, due to the diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and interpretations of those involved in the research process.

Embracing the constructivist philosophy allows to understand that everyone may use a different set of lenses to interpret the surrounding world and they can be easily taken for granted not only by the interviewees themselves, but also by researchers (Schütz, 1944, 1966). Researchers, in fact, are not isolated observers: as a result of being part of a certain context or culture, they hold complex hierarchies of implicit premises that might remain implicit (Sclavi, 2003, p.31). Once we acknowledge such risks, this approach becomes one of the main arrows to the researcher's bow, allowing to reach a greater depth and intensity of understanding of the diverse standpoints of all the actors involved in the (re)production of a gendered construction industry – and society. This is the main reason for which I choose to divert from views that either see respondents as passive vessels of answers or claim for the existence of a one and only, immutable, objective reality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Carter and Bolden, 2012; Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

> «We should ask: "Objectively" in which sense, from which point of view? (…) Now we know that the observer's perspective cannot be dismissed, as well as his cultural context of origin. The adequate answer must be formulated not in terms of "it is this", but in terms of various possibilities and their transformations».
>
> (Sclavi, 2003, p. 74)[24].

It is the vast array of possibilities given by differences and similarities across personal recounts of life experiences that foster the progress of this research. Therefore,

[24] My translation form Sclavi M., (2003). *Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili. Come si esce dalle cornici di cui siamo parte*. Mondadori, Milano. *«Dovremmo chiedere: "Oggettivamente" in che senso, da quale punto di vista? (...) Adesso sappiamo che la prospettiva dell'osservatore non è eliminabile, così come non è eliminabile il suo contesto culturale di origine. Una risposta adeguata va formulata non in termini di "è questo", ma in termini di varie possibilità e delle loro trasformazioni»*.

I will show how it is impossible to begin with these premises and not attempt at bringing together the three purposes of social research – exploration, description, and explanation (Babbie, 2011) – when the drive of the present study is not only to understand the gendered nature of work and power relations dynamics amid workers and professionals revolving around building sites, but also to identify and describe the factors influencing these processes with an intersectional approach. Even though in the international panorama the phenomenon of female occupation in constructions is not a brand-new topic, this seems to be the case for the Italian context, where not even sociologists appeared to be interested enough in the women of the industry – independently from their role or function. It is for this reason that the present study adopted an exploratory approach (Stebbins, 2001; Babbie, 2011), to shed a light on women's presence in the industry as workers and professionals, as well as on their experiences and perspectives on the gendered relations dynamics occurring both on- and off-sites. A descriptive approach (Thomas and Hodges, 2010; Khan, 2014) is used to present the challenges faced every day throughout their career, but also the strategies put in place to overcome them. To describe with great details the traits characterizing this phenomenon helps fostering knowledge by bringing the Italian case under the spotlight and raising it to the same level of discussion and relevance of other countries around the world. Moreover, to analyze women's career progression through an in-depth description of the factors enhancing or hindering it allows to evaluate the extent to which possible solutions discussed or implemented abroad may be helpful in promoting women's entry and retainment also within the Italian construction industry.

These things considered, I shaped the research process to account for a pluralist perspective on the subjective experiences of the actors on the scene (Goffman, 1956; Serpa and Ferreira, 2019) to reveal and highlight the interactions between all the dimensions of analysis – at the micro, meso, and macro level – and the intersectionality of gender especially with age and class – but also ethnicity and sexuality, where the gathered data made it possible. Since individual experiences do not exist in a *vacuum* but are embedded in a given socio-political, economic, and cultural context, there is a need to account for the heterogeneity and the social complexity represented by the issues at stake as well as the construction industry in itself. To this end, it is essential to establish and foster a dialog not only among interviewees – taking into consideration also the male

point of view, as we will discuss in paragraph 2.3 – but also among diverse disciplines relevant for the analysis. Therefore, it is fundamental to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, as different branches of knowledge have contributed in different times to shed light on the different dimensions of the same social phenomenon. In this work, contributions from feminist perspectives are considered as we discuss women's *double presence* (Balbo, 1978 and 1991) in the labour market and the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to study the gendered power dynamics in one of the most male-dominated industry in our country, but also around the world. Law studies are taken into consideration when debating States' intervention through the adoption of hard and soft laws that foster equity in the industry, or to consider the intricate set of norms concerning the health and safety of workers, maternity and paternity leaves, or the peculiar situation of self-employed *vis-à-vis* employed workers and professionals. Historical and socio-political sciences allow us to grasp the evolution of constructions not only from its economic standpoint, but also to locate it within a peculiar socio-political context: this permits to account for the role of cultural expectations about work and gender that so evidently shape (and are shaped by) power, employment, and personal relations at various level of the hierarchy, both vertically and horizontally, on- and off-site.

A qualitative approach seemed better suited to sustain the challenges represented by such a complex and multifaceted reality, as well as by a research design whose first aim is to understand and describe the state of the women's workforce within the Italian construction industry. While approaching this economic sector, we must acknowledge the relevance of statistical data available, but also that these should be considered more in terms of providing a general picture rather than an accurate depiction of its reality (Lillie and Greer, 2007). Constructions sites have been defined as a "lively" reality: «[a]re five people working there today? Tomorrow there'll be five different people»[25]. Even though things may be a little different when considering entrepreneurs and professionals in general and female workers in particular, high rates of turnover and informality directly affect the reliability of official statistics as do the high levels of irregularity and the extremely elevated incidence of small and micro firms. Moreover, it does not seem to exist a complete dataset that accounts for not only entrepreneurs or professionals, but also

[25] Interview 1, trade unionist (M).

that collects these data with a gender approach. Nevertheless, the available statistical data were not completely ignored when developing this study and were used to provide an overview of the Italian construction industry, which then laid the foundation for the subsequent qualitative inquiry.

Finally, being women's occupations in the Italian construction industry a novel "field" in the national academic literature, a more "immersive" and qualitative approach was necessary to understand which could be the sociologically relevant argumentations for developing further discussion and even more quantitatively structured analysis. For example, further studies could rely on this work to deepen the analysis of the Italian context by reflecting on a better operationalization of some of the concepts emerging in this research and through a precise mapping of female workforce in the industry, a survey could be implemented to verify the same and/or different research questions, which could be resulting in conclusions more easily generalizable to the whole Italian population.

2.2. Interviews construction

Over the years and particularly in the so-called *interview society* (Atkinson and Silverman 1997), many researchers relied on interviews to collect personal accounts on relevant social facts. Researchers, hence, shaped various definitions for what is to be intended as "interview" as well as for its analysis, according to the evolving sensibility on this tool's usage. While some defined it merely as a form of conversation (Burgess, 1982, 1984; Lofland & Loafland, 1995), in their seminal book *Methods of Social Study*, Sidney and Beatrice Webb gave one of the most famous and concise definition of qualitative interviews as being «conversation[s] with a purpose» (Webb and Webb, 1932, p.130). There is a difference, however, between casual conversations and proper, semi- or un-structured interviews. Rubin and Rubin (2012) sustain casual conversations are best suited for two particular occasions: the first scenario is represented by the cases in which interviewer and interviewee already know each other – as they previously discussed about the research topic – and clarifications are needed. The second one is when the research involves a period of participant observation – i.e., when formulating major, complicated, or sensitive questions may be inappropriate.

Instead, semi-structured and un-structured interviews are conversations that have been scheduled for research purposes. During the encounter, both the researcher and the participant take their time to discuss (with a more or less structured guideline) the research topics. It is for this reason that the role of the interviewee and that of the interviewer are equally important and must be reflected upon (Legard et al., 2003; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The interviewing process, in fact, cannot be limited to be a mere «neutral exchange of asking question and getting answers» (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p.696) and the interviewer cannot be considered solely as the "miner" that «digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a [passive] subject's pure experiences» (Kvale, 1996, p.3). The constructivist philosophy provides a pair of glasses through which we can recognize that the interview constitutes an interactive micro-situation embedded in common sense thinking, as it takes place in a peculiar sociocultural context. Therefore, the knowledge resulting from an interview is always a social production and it is forged by the two active parties of the discourse process, the interviewer *and* the interviewee alike (Schütz 1962, 1964, 1966; Cicourel, 1964; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Borer and Fontana, 2012).

With such premises, the preferred method of inquiry was represented by semi-structured interviews carried out with women and men working *latu sensu* within the construction industry. The interview guide was constructed to cover interviewees' career trajectories and stories, from entry to the present situation; attention was then paid to the gendered dimension of experiences of discrimination and work-life balance issues. I started conducting interviews with women, as their perspective represented the main focus of the present study. Even though this might have been sufficient in a gender study perspective, I also conducted interviews with men holding more or less the same occupational positions to account for a whole gender perspective on the same issues, while also strengthening the results on gender discrimination and sexism in the industry. Starting from women's perspective and confronting it with men's experiences allowed me to confirm that even though gender discrimination is for the greatest part fostered by men against women, also women risk to reproduce and reinforce such stereotypical and discriminatory practices in an attempt to "fit in" and accommodate the dominant (heteronormative, and masculine) culture (Messerschmidt, 2018). Moreover, there seems to emerge the existence of a hierarchy of professions, as some of them appear to hold higher reputation and respect than others: generally speaking, high-rank figures and their

directives are less questioned than the low-rank ones. When this hierarchy intersects with gender, we will see how feminised professions are more likely to be at its bottom; in addiction to this, we will witness women having a harder time at being recognized as professionals when compared to men, independently from their actual profession.

Semi-structured interviews were combined with un-structured and casual conversations carried out during brief episodes of participant observation (Madison, 2011) on sites with professionals. On the one side, this rapid or quasi-ethnographic approach (Isaacs, 2013; Galea et al., 2014; Loosemore et al., 2015) allowed me to triangulate some of the data collected during the interviews with my direct experience of the sites. On the other side, the flexibility granted by these tools (Babbie, 2011; Asselin, 2003; Rubin and Rubin, 2012), through the possibility of constantly adapting and modifying the interview guideline to fit the concrete situations and the natural evolution of discourse, allowed to reach a greater depth of analysis on the current state of female occupation in the Italian construction industry while also remaining open to new issues to be debated.

After a review of the literature, I developed a semi-structured interview guideline to investigate three major issues concerning the Italian construction industry. The first objective was an attempt at grasping the current state of women's occupation in the Italian construction industry. This was achieved through questions aimed at describing workers' and professionals' employment and working conditions (in terms of performed tasks and working hours) related to on- and off-site activities but also the main risks for health and safety associated with on-site work as well as risk factors associated with the professions and entrepreneurship. The second objective was to investigate the challenges and obstacles faced by women in their everyday work in constructions. By confronting their experiences with those of their male counterparts, questions on the motives to enter and establish a career in the industry were asked. Along with a description of the factors influencing work-life balance, a "picture" of women's work environment and relations was taken, and experiences of discrimination based on gender were explicitly debated. The third objective was to analyse the strategies adopted by women to counteract direct and indirect episodes of sexism and gender discrimination, as well as to discuss the possible solutions to promote gender equity in the industry. Already in the first interviews, it started to emerge the peculiar role of sites' formal hierarchies as a support mechanism

for women, when their decisions and capabilities were questioned by workers or colleagues. I started by asking questions on the role of formal hierarchies on- and off-site as well as on the possible existence of collateral, informal hierarchies.

Table 2.1 - Research objectives and related interviews focus.

Research objective	**Interviews focus**
Understand the current state of women's occupation in the Italian construction industry.	Description of: ● Professionals' average hours worked, tasks performed, and employment and working conditions with regards to on- and off-sites activities and practices; ● Risk factors pertaining to the professions/entrepreneurship but also to health and safety, particularly when working on sites;
Investigate the women's main motives and challenges to enter and establish a career within the Italian construction industry.	Description of: ● Main motivations to join a profession, internal and external role models' influence; ● Perceived troubles during university years and first working experiences; ● Perceived troubles and obstacles to career development and progression; ● Work environment and relations; ● Factors influencing work-life balance ● Direct or indirect experience of gender discrimination;
Investigate women's strategies against direct or indirect gender discrimination and solutions to promote gender equity within the Italian construction industry	Description of: ● Individual strategies to cope with direct and indirect gender discrimination in the Italian construction industry; ● Solutions to be implemented in Italy to foster gender equity in constructions.

2.3. The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on research questions, sampling strategies, methodology, and interviews

Before the pandemic, this project's aim was to understand to what extent and the ways in which (in)formal relations among actors interacting on sites for inspections were able to foster compliance and laws' implementation. I started my work by conducting

preliminary interviews with different key informants and stakeholders – such as trade and employers' unionists, labour inspectorate, police, and health officials – to gain an understanding of the sector's dynamics and its main risks and sanctions for non-compliance. Access to the field was asked and almost granted: some local realities had already agreed to a period of participant observation and the local penal and labour courts were about to grant the possibility to access public records of trials. Notwithstanding this, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ministerial measures to fight its spreading since March 2020 halted my research by making it impossible for me to carry out the work as planned. Even though I was able to revise the project so that it might have been still possible to carry it out through interviews' triangulation, for almost six months it was practically impossible to contact and conduct interviews with the already-known key informants and stakeholders due to the unprecedented amount of work and issues to deal with because of the pandemic.

At the end of 2020 I was finally able to start again the interviewing process helped by the employers' association, who mediated the organization of an interview with one of its main members. The person I met was Interview 16, a woman at the head of a local, solid, and well-structured construction firm, who was also the director of the youth members of the same association. During our conversation on my previous research interests some new arguments were debated concerning the role and presence of young women in the industry. It was mostly her "dismissive" and "minimizing" attitude towards gender discrimination and sexism in construction that motivated the radical change of my research questions, interview guide, and sample to the one I am presenting here and in the final dissertation of my doctoral experience.

Given the extremely peculiar circumstances of these years associated with the new health and safety measures, starting with Interview 16 I tried to rely for the most part on *face-to-face* interactions, conducting interviews via various online platforms; when this was not possible or the interviewees were not comfortable with this option, the interview took place on the phone. The new objective of my work became to gain an understanding of the current state of women's occupations in the construction industry as well as the challenges faced in terms of everyday exposure to gender discriminatory practices, the strategies and solutions put in place and demanded by women to foster gender equity in the industry.

The best way to reach a relevant number of interviewees in an extremely limited amount of time was to mostly rely on a snowball sampling technique (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Corbetta, 2003) while also proceeding independently to contact construction workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs. To do so, I relied on social media's public profiles (Instagram) or pages (Facebook) gathering people according to their work/profession; moreover, I also checked for publicly available contacts displayed on the webpages of various professionals' associations in every Italian region. Each time a new (potential) participant was identified, either through snowball sampling or these various independent initiatives, an e-mail was sent out to present myself and the research project while also requesting to take part to an online or phone interview. When (potential) participants answered and asked for more details on their participation to the project or granting their availability, any question asked about the project and the methods of data collection, analysis, and usage was answered, as well as further information on anonymity and privacy were provided by sharing an informed consent form approved by the ethical committee of the Università degli Studi di Milano. Notwithstanding the recourse to snowball sampling technique, I tried to maintain a certain degree of control over the main characteristics of participants, trying to account for a wide variety of expertise from workers and professionals holding different roles and functions while also trying to touch as many Italian regions as possible. It is for these reasons that the main criterion for exclusion was not to reply to the email presenting the study or not finalizing the interview.

I conducted interviews with 32 women (7 entrepreneurs; 6 restorers; 5 architects, of which 1 bricklayer, 1 plasterer, 1 drop out; 4 trade unionists previously employed in the industry to various extent; 3 directors of bilateral bodies and category associations; 3 engineers; 2 archaeologists; 1 anthropologist; 1 administrative staff) and 4 men (3 archaeologists, 1 civil engineer). Most of the interviewees (21) worked in Italy's Northern regions; some others (11) worked in the Central regions, while only 4 respondents worked in Naples (2) and Cagliari (2). The interviews were mostly clustered in Milan and its province (12), Rome (8) and Emilia-Romagna (6) due to the snowball sampling technique, as people were more prone to reach out to personal contacts or working

colleagues and to act as mediators, promoting participation in the study[26]. All of my interviewees were Italian, Caucasian, middle- or upper-class people who defined themselves as either male or female who usually spoke in binary terms about gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, I was unable to reach people with a migrant background or with a different race or ethnicity. This could be due to a variety of reasons, especially when we consider that almost half of the workforce in the Italian construction industry is made up by migrant workers. First of all, dealing with women in the construction industry, we already anticipated that even when considering on-site jobs, we usually deal with highly qualified and skilled workers such as restorers and archaeologists while most of the migrant workforce is relied upon to carry out the lowest qualified and less skilled of jobs. Since the main criterion for selection was that men and women should have had more or less the same profession/occupation, this could have contributed to the exclusion of a great deal of migrant respondents from the study. Secondly, concerning women in particular, their number is already so low that to intercept and interview women with a migratory background would have become even more complicated: although I have no doubts about their existence, I could not find any in the webpages I navigated and the interviewees I met reported about not knowing any[27].

> I spoke about this difficulty with a dear friend of mine, who is Italian, holds a MA in architecture, but has a visible Peruvian ancestry. I asked her about her university colleagues, whether she could recall any of them being "visibly" of foreign origin. She answered that to her knowledge (meaning, at least in the courses she undertook) she was the only one with a South American background and could not recall any other foreign student that was non-white. This enhanced her feelings of loneliness and underrepresentation, which contributed to her graduating in architecture but actually working as a freelance journalist.
>
> Fieldnotes. February 3rd, 2021.
> Dinner with friends.

[26] See the methodological appendix for a detailed description of the interviewees' relevant characteristics, such as: gender, age, city of work, field of study, profession, relatives in constructions, and family status.
[27] About this difficulty t

As we can understand from this excerpt, throughout the fieldwork I kept a diary in which I registered notable events and pieces of unstructured interviews and casual conversations happening while carrying out participant observations on-site, as well as personal reflections triggered by these events or by discussions happening online among professionals on topics relevant for my research (Emerson et al., 2011; Madison, 2011; Sclavi, 2003). Three women in my sample were particularly active on Instagram; so, I followed their public profiles with a twofold goal: on the one side, these women used their profiles to show the *behind the scenes* of the professions, to promote their activity, and to try acquiring new clients. On the other side, they sometimes engage in a counter-stereotypical debate on the construction industry, often questioning its discriminatory practices based on gender but also the more controversial aspects of work organization and production. Independently from who is starting the discussion, when this happens women usually engage with other Italian (women) professionals by reciprocally tagging themselves in their own Instagram stories[28]. Since all the profiles tagged in such stories are public, these interactions were noted and taken into consideration within the field diary.

2.4. Data analysis and coding process

Interviews were tape-recorded[29] and lasted between a minimum of 30 minutes and a maximum of almost 3 hours; the average duration was of about 1 hour and a half. In general, men were less talkative and more concise than women, resulting in shorter interviews for an average duration of less than 1 hour. The recordings were transcribed verbatim in the original language in which they were taken – i.e., Italian – and include respondents' emotional reactions through hesitations, pauses, and relevant gestures of non-verbal communication. Only the sections quoted in this dissertation have been translated into English.

[28]I will present some of the discussions resulted from these interactions in the fifth chapter, when I will analyse the interviewees' feminist discourse and activism.

[29] Only 7 interviews (from 27 to 34) were not recorded. With respondents' consent, the available transcriptions consist in the notes I wrote down on my laptop during the interview.

I then proceeded by conducting a qualitative content analysis, which is a «research approach for the description and interpretation of textual data using the systematic process of coding (…) [and whose] final product (…) is the identification of categories, themes and patterns» (Assarroudi et al., 2018, p.43). Researchers may approach qualitative content analysis differently, but usually rely on categories emerging both inductively from the data collected and deductively from the theory (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2004, 2014; Vaismoradi et al., 2013 and 2016). In this integrated approach – that I also adopted – researchers start by identifying the main categories coming from a review of the literature but also allow for them to "naturally" emerge from the data gathered. This possibility for a constant dialogue with the literature produces an iterative process that permits to overcome the limitations of each individual approach and results in a more detailed picture of the phenomena under study.

For this work, I started coding while the transcription process took place. After each interview, in my field diary I jotted down the preliminary codes and I highlighted the passages in each text that represented «"codable moments" worthy of attention» (Saldaña, 2009, p.16; Boyatzis, 1998). In the following chapters illustrating the main results of the analysis, some of these quotes will be used as examples and pieces of evidence to sustain my argument and theory (Booth et al., 2003; Erickson, 1986; Layder, 1998; Lofland et al., 1971). Afterwards, I carried out the first round of coding by identifying recurring or emerging themes and discourses relevant to the analysis; then, I proceeded to a subsequent re-coding process, in order to refine codes' definitions and provide a better and richer description of their observable and latent meanings, as well as their interactions. Even though I started to code the data manually, I also relied on NVivo to organize my analysis: this happened mostly when I ended the data collection – i.e., when saturation of information was achieved – and before closing the coding process.

Notwithstanding all the expedients adopted to ensure stronger reliability, I must acknowledge the fact that the coding process is a strictly personal decision-making process which is also closely dependent on the goals of the present research. In other words, this means that the codes I identified and used for this analysis are not the only possible ones and others may reflect distinct sensibilities and purposes of research. Finally, it is important to emphasize that codes are never truly separate from one another,

as they often intersect and interact with each other: it is by paying attention and analyzing these reciprocal influences that we can provide a greater and deeper understanding of the topics under scrutiny.

Table 2.2. Code names and description. Codes in bold represent the starting macro areas of analysis drawn from literature review and their sub-categories. Codes In italics represent new emerging codes

Code Name	Code Description
Motives	Descriptions of motivations to join the profession and/or the construction industry in general, as well as to start own studio/firm
Passion/Merit	Detects any reference made to the idea of "work as a passion" or to passion as a motivation to join and remain in the industry, but also to its ambivalent nature as a factor able to hinder work-life balance. It is often paired with discourses reminiscent of the rhetoric of merit, as the necessity to show commitment through presenteeism while *working one's way up the ladder*
Role models	Detects any reference made by interviewees to internal or external role models' influences or interference in pursuing a career in the industry, as well as in career progression and entrepreneurial choice
Father/Partner	Detects influence of fathers (or other male family members) and male partners working in constructions on women's decision to enter, establish a career and return to the industry after maternity.
High school/University	Detects references to interviewees' educational experiences, in terms of relations with peers and teachers/professors
Entry	Description of interviewees' first working experiences during university and after graduation, together with working conditions and environment
Recruitment	Description of recruitment practices adopted mostly by firms and studios, but also by professionals looking for freelance collaborators. When available, it also comprises respondents' recruitment process' direct experiences – as employees or employers.
Ideal type	Description of respondents' ideal characteristics that a worker, professional, or entrepreneur in the industry (or in general) should own.
Work	Description of main tasks currently performed by workers, professionals, or entrepreneurs during a typical working day, together with current working conditions and environment
Challenges	Description of main problems faced because of work and gender to enter and establish a career in constructions, as well as during everyday work.

Code Name	Code Description
Relations	Describes the factors affecting (vertical and horizontal) interactions and conflicts with other people working in constructions, as well as the characteristics deemed appropriate to manage them
Conflicts	Describes the main motives for conflicts among people working in the industry
Hierarchy	Description of the role and importance of formal hierarchy on- and off- site to manage relations and conflicts. Also detects discourses on the existence of an informal hierarchy of professions on site, according to credibility and prestige.
Compentencies	Detects examples and discourses about women's necessity to prove their compentencies and preparations more frequently when compared to men in the same situation.
Ageing	Detects discourses on how age impacts professionals' credibility in general, and women in particular
Risk – industry	Description of the main risks for health and safety when working on- and off-sites as perceived by interviewees
PPE	Comprises discourses on adequately fitting Personal Protective Equipment as well as easiness of retrieval and purchase
Dress-code	Description of preferred working clothes for activities on- and off-site (beside PPE), as well as motivations for such choices. Detects an informally shared dress-code for women's professionals.
Risk – profession	Description of the main risks associated with professions as perceived by interviewees.
Grey	Detects discourses on irregular working conditions, usually related with presenteeism or overtime work and bogus self-employment
Black	Detects discourses on working conditions where there is no formal contract of employment. Usually related to meritocracy and risk-industry
Salary	Detects discourses on income
Career	Detects the main factors favouring or hindering career development and progression
Reputation	Describes the role of informal networks and *word of mouth* in recruitment and promotions, but also in acquiring clients
Work-life balance	Description of the main factors favouring or hindering the balance between interviewees' private and working lives
Presenteeism	Detects references to business trips, but also to the long working hour culture and its direct association with competence.
Maternity	Describes discourses on maternity as a challenge to women's return to the industry and, hence, to their career
Gender Discrimination	Describes examples or discourses about discrimination on the basis of both gender and sexuality.

Code Name	Code Description
Biology	Detects discourses in which men's and women's characteristics are directly compared.
Materiality	Detects counter-stereotypical discourses on working practices and the production process in the industry
Harassment	Comprises concrete examples or references to episodes of sexual harassment perpetrated by men towards women
Sexism	Comprises concrete examples or references to men behaviours towards women that make women feel "unsuited" for working in the industry. These behaviours are less severe than sexual harassment and may not be recognized by men as sexism. Moreover, they may directly/indirectly exclude women (e.g., from important informal meetings or promotions) and be presented with a hostile/benevolent attitude.
Feminism	Describes more or less structured or activist discourses on feminism in constructions. It also comprises an emerging dichotomy between women's perceived uselessness of a "feminist agenda" in the industry and their projected image as feminist role models
Entrepreneurship	Detects discourses on the highs and lows of being an entrepreneur.
Creative	Women starting own firm/studio also as a career advancement
Innovation	Women starting own firm/studio exploiting niches in the production process and office work, or innovative technologies and green materials.
Traditional	Women inheriting family firm/studio, independently from bringing changes to its organization or structure
Strategies	Comprises all the individual coping strategies put in place by men and women to cope with work-life balance, and particularly by women to also cope with gender discrimination.
Laugh/Ignore	Coping strategy adopted by women to cope with sexism. According to the situation, women report on ignoring sexist comments or behaviours or making jokes and laughing about them.
No children	Detects discourses on uncertainty of having children to pursue a career in the industry.
Family	Role of family as a support network throughout workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs' career, as well as able to promote or hinder women's return to previous occupation after maternity leave
Solutions	Detects structural solutions proposed by women on policies and measures to be adopted at the national and industrial level to promote gender equity in the industry
Image	Comprises discourses on the necessity to review the widespread idea of work in the industry as heavy, dangerous, and not suited for women.

Code Name	Code Description
Culture	Comprises discourse on the widespread cultural bias shared by men and women that reproduces the traditional image of the industry and its gendered relations

2.5. Reflections on positionality and limitations of the research

At this point, it is important to discuss two aspects of the research process, which are particularly relevant when people are directly involved in a qualitative study: the positionality of the researcher and the limitations of the research. As I anticipated, according to the constructionist paradigm researchers cannot be considered "neutral" individuals who are completely objective and exempt from sharing the same reality of the researched. Researchers are never truly objective, as their "glasses" and interests guide their interpretation of any event of the everyday life. For this reason, when encountering an interviewee, when presenting their research to them, when asking question and listening to the answers provided, researchers must be ready to acknowledge their positionality and power within the interview relation, as these determine the respondent's elaboration of meanings attributed to their experiences (Asselin, 2003; Mullings, 1999).

In this light, being a white, Italian, middle-class woman clearly impacted on my ability to reach respondents while also shaping how interviews unfolded. On the one side, women were easier to approach and more willing to talk about their personal experiences: only few of them provided very clear-cut and short answers while most of them engaged in detailed recounts of events and happenings. For example, after the initial diffidence or reluctance to describe examples of sexism, trust was easier to build as female respondents recognized in me a fellow woman, a "sister" (Oakeley, 2016), who shared to some extent a common understanding about (and potentially even directly experienced) similar episodes to the ones they were recounting (Davault, 1990). These women had the chance of almost giving for granted my empathy and sympathy towards their perspective in the very same way as «everyday language seems to be able to talk about women as a collective in some sense, even though women's experiences vary considerably by class, race, sexuality, age or society» (Young, 1994, p.722-723).

On the other side, however, male workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs were a more difficult population to gain access to precisely because of the attributes that granted me a privileged access to women.

> «*Let me tell you it will be far more difficult to reach men for this* [research project]. *First of all, the topic… You can't just ask men about women's challenges or problems in constructions: they either rarely see them* [women] *or are unaware of the issue* [gender discrimination and sexism]. *They just don't think about it! Moreover… and maybe this should actually be the first point, but I'll let you decide on whether to put it according to your experience. Men are naturally more… diffident? I'd say… than women to take part in these kinds of things. Pardon the language, but women in a sense are "more approachable" than men in general… imagine for an interview or research*!»
>
> Trade unionist (M).
>
> Fieldnotes. November 09th, 2021.

In order to try and work around these impasses, the research was presented to male respondents as a general investigation on experiences of career progression of workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs within the construction industry. Notwithstanding this re-framing, when questions were asked on the division of reproductive labor or on their female colleagues' experiences, men's answers tended to be either shorter and trenchant («*I don't know, I've never thought about that*.») or longer but more hesitant, with phrases being more intricate than beforehand.

Linked to this discourse is my perception that mostly men, but also women, changed their language register during the interviews because of my persona. For example, this always happened when discussing toilets presence on site: irrespectively of gender, respondents that brought up reflections on toilets presence/absence on sites and on the appropriateness of having a unique toilet for both genders always approached the argument by excusing themselves for the language they were going to use, or for the unpleasant imagery that the discussion was going to raise. Moreover, some women also tended to edulcorate examples of sexism by using long periphrasis rather than say a single

"bad word"; once they were asked if they felt like providing concrete examples of similar situations, they tended to ditch this longer way of exposing and often reported the direct sexist phrases, banters, and comments received. On the contrary, men were generally more parsimonious with examples and when more sensitive topic were touched upon, they tended to be more hesitant and to rely on circumlocution – i.e., a terminology that I perceived as a "softer" version of the actual term that could have been used.

Another aspect of my positionality that I reflected upon was participants' perception of me as an outsider. Anytime I reached out to a new potential interviewee, I always presented myself as a sociologist: even though I gained a little bit of familiarity with the sector's terminology, dynamics, and legislations to the point that I was sometimes able to use them to my advantage during interviews, I was mostly considered an outsider as I was not a STEM professional. In my opinion, this brought about a twofold result that is also intertwined with the power dynamics within the social interaction of the interview process (Naples, 2017). On the one side, participants had the chance to take their time to explain in details peculiar aspects of their career path and work, as well as their personal experiences. Asking participants to present themselves as they deemed fit at the beginning of the interview usually allowed them to feel more in charge of the direction of the interview while also creating a comfortable environment. Furthermore, constantly changing and adapting the interview guide to respondents' stories through active listening (Lillrank, 2012; Talmage, 2012) allowed me to predispose a convivial situation in which the interview could take place safely and interviewees' perspective resulted enhanced – to the point that few of them were surprised that I was «still listening to [their] ravings»[30]. On the other side, my naïve ignorance on many aspects of respondents' concrete working practices or personal experiences allowed me to ask a lot of clarifications and probing questions, almost without the fear of resulting "annoying".

Being an outsider, however, not always felt an advantage. I mostly reflected about this while I was reaching out to, and then interviewing, male respondents. Since being a woman advantaged me in speaking to fellow women and it seemed to hinder my interviews with men, I asked myself if being an insider could have helped my cause. However, there is no easy nor direct answer to this question, as researchers always

[30] Interview 19, architect and entrepreneur (F). Similar comments were made mostly by women, but also a few men like Interview 55.

struggle to find a balance between the highs and lows of being an insider/outsider (Acker, 2001; Naples, 2013). Researchers, for example, may wrongly assume respondents' knowledge according to their perceived characteristics and identity, with the result of fostering their own exclusion from gaining access to important information.

> [T]o acquire information that faithfully represents the real world, researchers must often seek, what I will refer to as *positional spaces*, that is, areas where the situated knowledges of both parties in the interview encounter, engender a level of trust and co-operation. These positional spaces, however, are often transitory and cannot be reduced to the familiar boundaries of insider/outsider privilege based on visible attributes such as race, gender, ethnicity or class.
>
> (Mullings 1999: 340).

Every time researchers choose a social phenomenon for their studies, it is necessary that they carefully reflect on how their identity, interests, and beliefs may affect the results gathered in the field, particularly when adopting a phenomenological approach for data production. Positionality as a «unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identifiers» (Mullings, 1999, p.337) is not immutable or static. The relevance of any of such personal traits and identifiers varies according to the times and places in which the researcher finds themselves to be and can be constantly negotiated (Acker, 2001; Naples, 2013). These attributes may also deeply affect how data are collected and analysed, as well as how the research is actually carried out or the preferred tools to rely on. It follows that researchers must always take into consideration the fact that their positionality interacts with the one held by their research subjects. It is this interaction that shapes the interview relationships in a bi-directional way: not only the perception of participants' positionality shapes and defines the attitudes and behaviours of the researcher towards them, as the opposite is also true.

Consequently, I need to acknowledge one last reflection concerning positionality. As Thiel (2012) pointed out, builders' working culture is embedded in a form of physical masculinity representing a collective value system, which is shared not only by construction workers, but also by the professionals, entrepreneurs, inspectors, and all of

the actors revolving around constructions' sites or the industry in general. In such a male-dominated context, presenting my project to women who shared most of the characteristics I also hold (being white, Italians, and middle- or upper-class) may have eased their willingness to take part in the study. It is for this reason that I must take into consideration the fact that what will be discussed here in terms of experienced sexism, discrimination, and challenges might present itself in a different nature if the intersection lines of race and ethnicity, class, and sexuality were to be taken sistematically into consideration. Future studies should consider including these other lines of intersectionality when approaching any research in the construction industry, as well as a non-binary definition of gender.

Beside the limitations posed by positionality, the present work may have other shortcomings due to the small amount of time that I was able to dedicate to it due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though I tried my best to provide high-quality data and analysis, reliability and validity are of course the main issues associated with the use of content analysis. As I already stated above concerning reliability, anyone willing to undergo the coding process using the categories I defined should be able to get to the same results I will present in the following chapters. As far as results' validity and generalizability are concerned, I would say that these should not be taken lightheartedly as certain and definite but should be evaluated in the light of the constant dialogue and comparison made between respondent's words and subjective experiences on the one hand, and the already established academic literature on the other. Even though the main objective of this dissertation was (and is) to bring under the spotlight women's experiences of gender discrimination in the Italian construction industry, in the upcoming chapters I will show multiple times how experiences, perceptions, and narratives reported by my interviewees are able not only to overcome the boundaries set by the construction industry, but also by peculiar fields of study.

Adopting a sociological approach, I will show how most experiences, discourses, and narratives transcend a unique industry and can be widely applied to other male-dominated economic sectors – if not the economy as a whole. I will also show how bringing together different fields of studies (e.g., sociology of professions, economic sociology, medical studies…) through the lenses provided by feminist theories allows to reach a greater understanding of the sector's – and the economy's – gendered dynamics.

The purpose of bringing women working in the Italian building industry under the spotlight is then twofold: on the one side, in this peculiar environment, women have long gone unnoticed by scholars dealing with the construction industry or any male-dominated economic sector, but also by those studying professions and entrepreneurship. On the other side, by bringing back women on the stage I aim at promoting dialogue on policies and changes that consists not only in enhancing equity/equality/fairness between women and men in this industry but, eventually, in the Italian economy.

Chapter III

The impact of socio-cultural challenges and barriers on women's experiences in the Italian construction industry: exposing the gendered narrative

In this chapter, we will discuss the main socio-cultural challenges and barriers that women participating in this research reported facing throughout their career as workers, professionals, or entrepreneurs in the Italian building industry, from their entry to the present day. Starting by highlighting some of the peculiar characteristics and narratives concerning the "material" nature of most jobs in the building industry, we will see how these dynamics transcend the single occupation or role held by women – as all of them recall having experienced somewhat similar discriminatory episodes during their everyday life in constructions. Moreover, the experiences reported here seem to be in line with what emerges from the international literature, the specificities of the industry and the professions considered allow us to transcend not only the boundaries of the single role or occupation held by women, or the industry, but also the national boundaries of the Italian context.

Throughout the chapter, however, we will expose the *gender sub-text* (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2005) transpiring from the interviews conducted for the present dissertation to reflect on how the interiorization of gender stereotypes – by both men *and* women – sometimes result in conflicting narratives and essentialist solutions to the issues at stakes.

Drawing directly from respondents' experiences and concrete examples, we will reflect on how the pivotal importance of physical strength and the subtlety of *benevolent sexism* (Glick and Fiske, 1996) are able to foster the reproduction of gender discrimination and the idea of women's overall "unsuitability" for working in the industry by, at the same time, promoting, for the men in the industry, conformism to a peculiar kind of masculinity – i.e., *paternalism* (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996). This seem to be particularly true when we look at the narratives concerning the characteristics and traits that make the "good restorer". Therefore, throughout the chapter we will see how the

production and reproduction of stereotyped gender roles and expectations concern femininity *but also* masculinity, as they are the result of a binary, dialogical exchange taking place within the relations among the actors on the scene during the day.

We will discuss and reflect on the role of bodies in women's (in)visibility in the industry. Notwithstanding women's attempt at being invisible – e.g., by conforming to a perceived "more masculine" dress code in order to "fit in" and avoid being the targets of discriminatory practices and attitudes – their presence in the industry seldomly goes unnoticed, to the point that we can discuss women's actual invisibility only when analysing their difficulties in retrieving adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). We will see how, in their attempt to "fit in", conflicting narratives emerge on the appropriate dress code to be adopted by women in construction. Even though these narratives have the main purpose of normalizing women's presence in the industry – making them invisible – women in particular attempt to do so by sustaining the necessity of adopting a "more masculine" style. This, however, creates antagonism[31] towards those women who are perceived as not willing to put aside their femininity, who are then blamed for the widespread sexism experienced by all women in the industry.

In conclusion, we will have the chance to reflect on the intersectionality of gender, age, and class – and sexuality, where possible. We will witness how these characteristics impact and shape people's credibility, reputation, work-life balance, and experience of parenthood (read: maternity). After almost forty years from the first studies on women in management, women still tend to be the "disadvantaged" minority not only in the Italian construction industry or in all of the male-intensive industries in most countries of the globe, but in the global labour market[32], as they experience the cultural weight of the interplay of all of the mentioned lines of intersection at the same time.

[31] Kanter (1977) reflected on how the presence of "token" women in male-dominated industries encourages competition with other women, the final result of this exacerbated competition being their isolation from their own kind.

[32] As discussed in the theoretical chapter, contributions from other countries concerning women's experiences in the construction industry will be brought together in the discussion of this and the following chapters to corroborate the results of the field research conducted in Italy. The main contributions will come from Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK, Australia, and the US. Nevertheless, studies on women in the construction industries in few African, Asian, and European countries will be also taken into consideration to show that the experiences of women in constructions transcend the boundaries dictated by national borders. Moreover, contributions will be considered dealing with other male-intensive industries but also with female-intensive industries, to show how expectations posed on women concerning their multiple roles (Hall, 1972) do not pertain only to the construction industry but are widespread in the global economy.

3.1. «*Do it like a dude*»[33]: building masculinity through "materiality" and physical strength

One of the most recurring statements during the interviews I conducted dealt with the workforce composition: if reaching female entrepreneurs was difficult because of their objective scarcity when compared to male entrepreneurs in this sector, having the chance to meet and interview a tradeswoman was defined as «utopian». Even though expressed with ever diverse phrasing, the conveyed idea was always the same: tradeswomen simply do not exist in the Italian construction industry. Or at least, so it seemed to the vast majority of respondents.

Can anyone remember the last time they saw a woman showing up to their front door when in need of a plumber, an electrician, a bricklayer, or a painter? The fact that personally I could not, should not mean that such instances do not exist. Nevertheless, when asking around whether respondents could recall having met or knowing women working in the industry's craft and trades, almost all of them simply answered that they did not recall meeting any. Those few who were less dismissive on the subject and more willing to elaborate on it, remained dubious about the presence of tradeswomen in the Italian industry and attributed their scarcity to a cultural bias (spread across genders) that makes work on sites "unsuited" for women because of the dirtiness, heaviness, and dangerousness of most of its practices.

> *«Tradeswomen? Do they even exist* [she laughs and shakes her head]*? Have you actually found any of them?»*
>
> «Not yet. That's why I'm asking [I smile back]. Hard task?»
>
> *«I think it is practically impossible! Constructions' site work is not made for women! They cannot lift the same weights – and it is not because they are not strong enough!*

[33] This is the title of a song released by UK songwriter Jessie J in November 2010. In an interview with Global Grind she explained: «*'The deeper meaning is that everyone is equal.* (…) *I can be who I wanna be and stand on my own two feet and not feel like I can't because you're making me feel like I can't. But at the same time, it's a parody of the typical male that exists today»*.

But because they physically, and by the law, can and should lift lower weights than males.»

Interview 16, civil engineer and entrepreneur (F).

«Yes, I have a lot of female colleagues and they work on site as me but… tradeswomen… I do not recall. There is much more work to do, it's basically weight-lifting all day long and [he shakes his head]*… and there is also the camaraderie that sometimes is heavy too… Well, maybe there are some, but I've never met them».*

Interview 55, archaeologist (M).

Three interviewees even stressed the difference between the Italian context and those in which female presence in the building industry – also as on-site workers – is less of an issue, such as in Great Britain, Germany, or the Scandinavian countries.

«There's this friend of mine – she's also an architect, but she was sick of our working conditions here, dropped everything and went to open her own studio in Berlin. There I know she's worked with an all-female electricians' company [she laughs and claps her hands once in astonishment]*! Sounds crazy, doesn't it* [shakes her head, still laughing]*?»*

Interview 32, self-employed architect (F).

Finally, only one person underlined another facet of this issue, namely defining my questions on the presence of tradeswomen as «*silly*». She is a surveyor I met during an experience of participant observation on a site I had the chance to visit in February 2021, in Lodi. I was accompanying C., a female engineer, to carry out an inspection and we began to chat informally as they knew each other: C. presented me and summarized my research as dealing with female occupation in the construction industry and joked about the possibility of her, G., being a potential interviewee as a female surveyor on site. Even though G. dismissed this possibility – she did not see herself as a suitable candidate for the interview due to her shyness – we had the chance to exchange a couple of words while

we were walking through the site, and I took the opportunity to ask whether she ever met a tradeswoman.

G. recalled that she only knew a woman that became the director of an electrician firm, as she inherited it from her father: therefore, she was just an entrepreneur who seldomly ventured on sites, her only duties being more of an administrative nature – such as managing the business or getting and retaining new clients. Whether she knew any tradeswomen working on sites was, in her opinion, a «*false problem*»:

> *«If I may, I find this is a silly question and I personally don't think that anyone can answer differently! Women do not work on sites, women are not electricians, nor plumbers or bricklayers* [she chuckles and shakes her head]*! Painters, maybe?! It's not the kind of work… on the one hand, even if tomorrow a girl shows up on-site asking to become a – let's say, plumber apprentice? She wouldn't be taken seriously* [she laughs]*! But this is a false problem, indeed, because they just don't show up for such works!»*
>
> Fieldnotes. February 25th, 2021.
> Construction site in Lodi, surveyor (F).

The elephant is in the room and the truth about women's presence/absence in the industry as craft and trades workers is finally for everyone to see – there is not even the need to ask the question. The *real* problem is not why women can hardly be found working on sites, but rather: would they do that? As Aburrà (1992) spoke about «systematic selectivity» referring to activities and professions that are capable of accommodating and attracting women more than others, *what if* women simply do not want or are not attracted to craft and trades works?

Truth is that a certain degree of "selectivity" should always be taken into consideration – e.g., we will see in the next chapter how, through the "rhetoric of passion", people are actively encouraged to express and follow their preferences towards certain occupations or professions in order to pursue the career "they love". Still, the real question should not be "would women consider working as craft and trades workers", but rather: *why would women not consider working as craft and trades workers as viable*

employment options? This very same question, however, can be also posed about men in female-intensive professions – and we will reprise and develop the argument in chapter V, when discussing the feminist narratives concerning "selectivity".

In the meantime, let us remember that surveyor G. actually gave us her answer to the question, by saying that «*even if a girl shows up on-site asking to become a – let's say, plumber apprentice? She wouldn't be taken seriously*». The overall main reason for this, and in general for tradeswomen absence from sites – or at least the more frequently mentioned by men and women alike – concerns the physical strength required to carry out most of the tasks of site-related jobs. But beside this being a requirement which women and men can meet differently, due to their innate biological differences, the hidden assumption behind such discourses is that skills in general can be represented as an extension of what has been "naturally" given to men and women – and, as we saw in the theoretical chapter, nature, and biology clearly attributed physical strength exclusively to the male specimen.

> «*I once met a female welder, but it's too heavy as a job – sincerely, it's too heavy! And there are also limitations according to the law on such physical differences* (…) *it's a handicap, but they're recognized, and real. If I have to carry out a heavy job, I'd prefer a man because I can "charge him more", as they say around here – no? They're constructions jobs, jobs where you use your arms rather than your head*».
>
> *Interview 21, civil and architectural engineer (F)*

The main consequence of this narrative is to reinforce and reproduce the idea that women are (in)directly excluded from these jobs, as they prove once again to be "naturally unsuited" to carry out the more "material", manual occupations of the industry due to their fragile and delicate, feminine nature. And as the only available option left is to rely on physical strength, men's conformity to the diktats of the hegemonic masculinity is defined by the use of their mere force while their bodies are used up «through fatigue, injury and mechanical wear and tear» (Connell, 2005, p. 55).

Notwithstanding the general scepticism, however, I was able to meet two female bricklayers by word of mouth and a little bit of sheer luck. The existence of Interview

20's small firm was presented to me by Interview 19, who remembered reading an article about crude earth and green materials in architecture featuring a brief description of Interview 20's activities. It was then Interview 20 who mentioned to me the existence of Interview 36, as she engaged in one of the seminars that Interview 20 organized about crude earth. Both of them, however, spoke of each other as being the only other bricklayers they knew of in the industry.

> «Why is it so [that few women are in the craft and trades], do you think?»
>
> «*Because we* [women] *usually do not think we can do it. Working in construction is… construction is a men's world and it's not like… it's messy, it's dirty, it's both extremely hot and extremely cold… it's dangerous if not done properly but… I mean, it's great if you're asking to me* [she laughs]*! But yes, it's also tiring and heavy, but… you know? I do it anyway because I wouldn't like it if it was easier* [she emphasises the underlined words]…»
>
> Interview 36, bricklayer (F)

Even though the question remains partially unanswered in the words of Interview 36 – only grasping a bit of reference to the implication of the socialization process as traditionally discerning between the two (biologically given) genders what is appropriate for men and what is appropriate for women to aspire to – scholars dealt intensively, also in the construction industry. Beside works dealing with the "leaky pipeline" of women in STEM subjects and occupations, recent systematic reviews dealing directly with the construction industry aimed at answering the broader question on which barriers and challenges are faced by women entering and establishing a career in the industry (Navarro-Astor, Román-Onsalo and Infante-Perea, 2017; Barreto et al., 2017). With this respect, Barreto and her colleagues (2017) went the extra mile: after having identified 20 variables that could have answered the question, they surveyed Peruvian man and women working in the industry to identify the latent factors able to group these barriers. Running a PCA analysis they identified five: 1) male-oriented labour market; 2) detrimental issues for being a woman; 3) harsh working conditions; 4) unfavourable perception of the industry; 5) high competitiveness (Barreto et al., 2017, p. 6). In describing these factors,

a clearcut distinction between what we can call «gender-related issues» and «industry-related issues» appear to emerge, as the first two categories are the only ones explicitly dealing with topics like work-life balance, lack of provisions for career breaks or childcare programs and the other (in)visible barriers faced by women – such as overt and covert sexism, sexual harassment, the presence of a "masculine culture", and the lack of career opportunities. Factors 3, 4, and 5, instead, deal with industry characteristics and seem to be uncorrelated with gender when, e.g., the "bad image" of the industry is described as due to jobs that are «by nature» unsafe, competitive, conflictual, stressful, and demanding, or characterized by a long working hour culture (overwork and presenteism) and frequent travels.

Definitely all of these factors combine together to inhibit women's entrance in the industry, but what Barreto and colleagues seem to omit – and that should already be clear but will be hopefully even clearer thanks to the paragraphs and chapters to come – is that what we called «industry-related issues» are *never* actually neutral. Therefore, they cannot be discussed as separate from a reflection on gendered power relations, hierarchies, and masculinity in the construction industry. As we already saw in the theoretical chapter, the theorizations of Acker (2006a; 2006b) on inequality regimes in employment and organizations, as well as other contributions from WIM scholars, and especially post-modernist feminists, build up to prove that nothing is ever truly neutral. As language is not believe anymore to be a neutral vessel of meanings and as concepts such "entrepreneur-mentality" directly entail the existence of the entrepreneur (*not the entrepreneuse*), we cannot ignore that widespread gendered beliefs and values shared by the broader society and its culture (or politics and history, as Acker puts it) can actually be found within organizations and the workplace. It is their institutionalization and structural, systemic nature that allows for such inequalities to also be present with organizations, contributing to the existence of gendered workplaces.

Later on I will deal with the strategies that can be put in place to overcome these barriers and counterbalance gender discrimination in the industry, even to the point of promoting equity. We will see how some of the physical problems, especially those concerning the "lack" of strength, can be worked around through the words of Interview 20 and Interview 36, who are among the ones most willing to challenge the traditional ways of production in order to accommodate for a stronger presence of women in the

industry. We will also discuss how the interconnection of the individual and structural level of analysis cannot be forgotten, due to what was just exposed in these pages.

But first, let us stick with the description of the Italian construction industry, its challenges and barriers a little longer. Interestingly enough, in fact, whenever respondents cared to elaborate more while answering my questions about women's presence/absence among crafts and trades, they frequently sustained that if I was really interested in speaking to women concretely working on sites I should have revolved to restorers – and that is exactly what I did.

3.1.1. What room for "femininity" in craft and trades? The case of restorers

What has been exposed up to this point seems to hold even when we consider the narratives on restoration and renovation workers: in this case, we are faced with a great deal of women employed to work on sites, especially as restorers. The dominant discourses tend to romanticize these people as being able – due to their passion and patience – to restore the beauty of the ancient times and to artistically blend it with the modern tastes of clients. It should not come as a surprise, then, that this niche seems to make construction work almost "naturally" suitable for women's presence.

While sustaining such claims, interviewees draw directly from the pool of stereotyped feminine qualities to identify the ones that make a "good restorer": in this scenario, female restorers are depicted as being more able – in comparison to men in general and in construction in particular – to pay attention to details and to be more precise: this is usually linked to their more sentimental, caring, and nurturing nature, which are both innate and developed through their ability to "give life" and their responsibilities in childrearing and managing the household.

> *«… because we care, we pay attention to detail, we care about our work – for example, by keeping the environment cleaner than the men I work with… I think it is part both of our nature, to care for the others and things, and of how society always saw us as the ones responsible for the care of elders and children…»*

Interview 38, self-employed architect and plasterer (F)

«I've worked with both men and women restorers. And by men I also mean homosexual ones – they're somewhat present within the restoration niches, as you can imagine…»

«Are they? This is actually the first time someone brings this up…»

«Yes, yes, they are. Because of course… Well, I had my share of trouble with them, but the point I intended to make is another one. Women are predominant in this kind of work, and they make the best restorers. Maybe because we always had to stay at home and care about others, like the elders, and the children, and the household… Female restorers pay attention, they put a lot of passion in their work and care about both the process and the results… basically, they think before doing stuff – not at all like the men!»

Interview 31, restorer (F).

Overall, the restoration and renovation niche is usually referred to as entirely made up of women because of their natural inclination towards care, beauty, patience, and sentimentality – but, as we just saw, this is reductive as it leaves out the experiences of men in these occupations.

«If you want to speak with women who actually work on sites, you can only talk to restorers. They're basically the only female <u>workers</u> [she stresses the latter word, in opposition to professionals] *that you'll find there – trust me.»*

«Why is it so, in your opinion?»

«Because we are sentimental, we care, and we pay attention to details. Men… they don't like this kind of stuff and are more like… how can I put it? It's bad but, they usually are like… all muscles, no heart – you know?»

Interview 34, restorer (F)

Even though it may certainly be the case that most female restorers share these caring and nurturing characteristics, what should we say about men working as restorers? Are they not as sentimental, caring, and patient as their female colleagues? Although it could be a coincidence, the extract above from Interview 31 appear to assume an interesting connotation, in the light of this question, as it is one of only two cases in which homosexuality is brough into the discourse. Since the «[p]atriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity. […] If someone is attracted to the masculine, then that person must be feminine – if not in the body, then somehow in the mind» (Connell, 2005, p.143) it feels somehow "appropriate" to open to the possibility of homosexual men to be employed in the industry as far as restoration is discussed – but not when "more masculine" craft and trades work are considered. Moreover, non-restorer-respondents showed a tendency to forget (or ignore?) the fact that this work is not less heavy, dirty, or dangerous than that of the "mainstream" construction worker.

> *«Our main problems are that of the construction industry, basically. We always work on scaffoldings – so they must be perfectly assembled to avoid the risk of falling. Then we deal with chemical reagents – that's why they* [women] *need to tell me when they're pregnant even before they tell their partner! It's crude, but I don't care about their partner, I only care about their lives and what happens to them on site. Dust – dust is the worse, of course! It gets in everywhere and in everything – even when you wear the specific mask! Then we lift weights, we usually carry buckets of water up and down the scaffoldings, and we hold these insane positions all day* [she laughs and shakes her head]*! Obviously, you've never painted an intricate baroque fresco on a ceiling* [she poses with her right hand towards the ceiling and arches her back backwards looking up, then at me]. *Imagine what it feels like being like this not for a minute, not an hour or a day, but for weeks… Being a restorer is painful! People seem to forget that too easily* [she stresses the words underlined].*»*
>
> Interview 37, proprietor of a restoration firm (F).

Female restorers particularly stressed this point: within the broad construction industry, their niche and their interventions – they say – are usually perceived as a useless waste of time by construction firms due to the more time-consuming procedures involving

Sovrintendenza's[34] interferences into the building and restoration processes. In this, we will see later on, they share the same destiny as archaeologists and anthropologists – other two of the more female-intensive professions to be found on sites. When this is the dominant discourse, however, it becomes easy to forget that this work is usually carried out on scaffoldings while exposing workers to a great amount of dust, to the daily use of chemical reagents (which require peculiar PPEs), and to extremely uncomfortable positions held for long-hours – e.g., the renovation process of «an intricate baroque fresco on a ceiling». All of these elements do not seem to be any less "material" than the mainstream construction work, especially as they are just as much capable of compromising workers' health and safety when underestimated.

3.1.2. «We can't say anything anymore». The destabilizing presence of women on sites

Even though legislative action has been pursued to try and tackle sexism and discrimination based on gender, they are still reported as the foremost barrier or challenge to the entrance and retainment of women in this industry (among others: Denissen, 2010; Navarro-Astor, Román-Onsalo and Infante-Perea, 2017; Galea et al. 2020). While sexism is traditionally described as an overt and hostile behaviour harmful to women, scholars (and women themselves) stressed the importance of accounting for a seemingly positive form of the phenomenon, which is also more subtle and hence dangerous when not correctly acknowledged.

The so-called *benevolent sexism* roots in the paternalistic beliefs that men should revere and protect women (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Kelly, 2009; Grubb and Turner, 2012): men and women endorsing it foster the assumption that men should take care of women as far as their sensitive, kind, and weak nature causes them to be incapable of providing for themselves. With such premises, both agents and targets of benevolent sexism can have a hard time in recognizing and naming a wide array of behaviours as acts of sexism

[34] In Italy, the Sovrintendenza is a supervisory authority of the Ministry of Culture that manages, maintains, and enhances the value of Italy's cultural heritage, particularly archaeological, historical-artistical, and monumental goods owned by Italian municipalities.

because of their subtlety and internalized positive valence – as they tend to reward traditionally feminine and innocent behaviours (Connelly and Heesacker, 2012; Barreto and Ellemers, 2005).

The boundaries between benevolent and hostile sexism, however, are not so sharply defined and one can without too much effort give way to the other. This particularly occurs when women affirm their confidence, strength, and competence in taking care of themselves: such women are usually disparaged and loathed, as they try to subvert traditional gender roles and expectations, challenging men's power and status as the breadwinner of the household (Stedham and Wieland, 2017).

In this sense, what emerges from the interviews conducted for this research are a plethora of "caring" behaviours adopted by male workers to protect the frail nature of women, such as offerings to carry weights in the place of their female colleagues or showing approval and complimenting women for their work. Apart from giving concrete examples of such behaviours, few interviewees reported that they could be easily spotted because men would never adopt them towards fellow (male) workers on site.

> *«… they did an inspection* [on site] *and I suffer from a very strong vertigo, so I don't get on rooftops…»*
>
> *«Wow!»*
>
> *«Yep, another feminine weakness I shouldn't allow myself* [she smiles and shrugs her shoulders slightly]… *so, I sent up one of my employees and… anyway, while we were signing they told me: "Ah, so the firm is actually yours?" – Yep – "What a bless they've given you the firm!"* [She goes quiet for a couple of seconds, then smiles] … *I think this is a very unfortunate phrase to say (…) when I experience episodes like this one, I recognize them as blatant sexism only after I ask myself: would he ever say that to a man? And, usually, the answer is no – of course not* [she laughs]!*»*
>
> Interview 19, architect and entrepreneur (F).

Studying the US construction industry and the ways in which women construction workers manage their gender identities within it, Denissen (2010) emphasizes that episodes of benevolent sexism contribute to the production of a dual outcome. On the one

side, these conducts reinforce the idea that, since women on sites need men's help to successfully carry out their work, they are not suited for these kinds of jobs – unless, as we anticipated, its prevailing qualities pertain to the same sphere of what is associated with the stereotyped feminine nature. This way of thinking, shared across genders, allows for women to be both actively and passively excluded from the industry: as women tend to passively underestimate their potential, they may tend to discard the construction industry as "unsuited" for them to concretely pursue a working career. Moreover, even when they manage to enter the industry, they risk either being pushed towards the parts of the production process depicted as "more feminine" or opting out of the industry due to the harsher challenges and cultural barriers they have to overcome to establish a career when compared to a "more feminine" industry[35].

> «*It's difficult to imagine ourselves as women on sites! Mostly because it is a very masculine context in which the stereotype is sometimes true – you know? The raw bricklayer, that can only count on his physical strength, and curses, and has nothing to talk about.* (…) *It's funny to see the changing dynamics when <u>I'm</u> on-site* [she slows down and emphasizes the underlined word]*! From a "male locker-room" mentality, in which the only things they say… I overhear them sometimes, and to break the ice they make sexist, racist jokes… my presence inhibits them a little from engaging in such comments, or to excuse themselves when they do – and that makes me* [she burst into laughs]… *For example, they say: "A*s" and right after that: "Oh, sorry! I shouldn't have said that!" – and I'm like: I'm a woman, but I'm not 5 years old! You can say "a*s" in front of me without apologizing for having said so!*»
>
> Interview 20, entrepreneur and bricklayer (F).

On the other side, repeated episodes of benevolent sexism reinforce and sustain the depiction of construction work as male territory, as the toughness of the work in manual

[35] Of course, sexism is not the only factor at play when we discuss the active and passive exclusion of women from the construction industry. Other important factors will be discussed later on in this chapter, namely: the long hour working culture, the possibility of having to commute for work, maternity leave, and the need to deal with caring responsibilities within the family. We will see how challenging it can be to try and separate the diverse factors and try to acknowledge their direct consequences on the life and careers of women: they are intrinsically intertwined and mutually influenced by each other, conveying the complexity of the status of women's occupation in male-dominated industries.

labours is one of the methods used by workers to demonstrate their masculinity (Donaldson, 1991; Connell, 2005). More or less overt sexual harassment, banters, and the so-called *locker-room culture* (Bagilhole, Dainty and Neale, 2002; Afolabi et al., 2019) have the important functions of confirming the dominant heterosexual masculinity present on site while, at the same time, portraying women as intruders.

> *«Well, consider that, normally, a man's approach is different than a woman's. And, on the other side, there's also a different answer coming from the people on site (…) there's always the playboy who: "How beautiful are you today, dottore'*[36]*! Let me buy you a coffee, dottore'! Let's go out for lunch, dottore'!"* [he laughs] *I think that's part of the game – notwithstanding what they can say now about "catcalling"* [he shrugs his shoulders].*»*
>
> Interview 53, archaeologist (M).

These dynamics create a vicious cycle where women remaining in the industry may end up tolerating and endorsing sexism as a strategy for their "survival"; the main side effect of this, is a reinforcement in the perception of constructions as a masculine space, in which women have to either adapt or leave (Galea et al. 2020).

3.2. «Dress for the job you have, not the one you want». "One-size-fits-all" PPE and the (perilous) nature of sites

When we speak about the reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity on sites, we cannot avoid discussing the role played by bodies in this scenario. As masculinity is thought to be inherent and to express something about the male body, the same can be said about femininity (Connell, 2005). Relying on «dextrous strength, embodied skills and handicraft production» (Thiel, 2012, p.108), builders use their bodies to negotiate their working lives, as their bodily capacities represent the economic assets and the "capital" that can be sold on the labour market (Bourdieu, 1986; Donaldson, 1991;

[36] Dialectal, shorter version of "dottoressa", which literally should be translated as "female doctor".

Wacquant, 1995; Thiel, 2012). This emphasis on the mere force of workers' bodies serves as a mean for the affirmation of men's superiority over women and for the differentiation between working-class masculinity and middle-class masculinity – the latter being perceived, as we saw, as "less masculine" due to its lack of physical strength and higher levels of education (Collinson, 1988; Morgan, 1992; Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2005).

One of the main issues having men and women bodies at its centre is the discussion about "what to wear to work" – both on- and off-sites – and the adequacy of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) adopted by women working in constructions. This industry is indeed one of the most dangerous – its working injuries and deaths rates being among the top three[37] in the Italian economy. In this scenario, all female respondents find themselves particularly exposed to risks given the «struggle[s]» faced to retrieve adequately fitting PPE.

> *«[The retrieval of PPE] is actually a great issue* [she laughs]*! I had huge troubles! I had to wait two months to get a pair of anti-hardship shoes because I couldn't find my size at the local construction warehouse (…) First they got me a pair that was not… it clearly didn't fit! And then I had to wait – I don't know, like three more weeks?! To get a new pair… You see? I basically had to be on-site for a couple of months without anti-hardship shoes! (…) In the meanwhile, I worked with trekking boots – and fortunately, nothing happened as I was on… "easy" – so to say – sites. (…) But gloves! Gloves were also an odyssey, for me! (…) I finally found a pair that fits; however, they're not waterproof – or at least they are half waterproof (…) So if I need to cut tiles, for example, the cutter uses water and my hands are continuously exposed to the water flow… and, of course, I do not want to use the tile cutter without gloves!»*
>
> Interview 24, architect and bricklayer (F).

[37] According to the Italian *National Institute* for Insurance against Accidents at Work (INAIL) in 2019, the highest rate of complaints for injuries on the job was registered among the wholesale and retail trade repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (9,04%), followed by construction (8,18%) and transportation and storage (8,04%).

On the one side, women state they usually have to settle for equipment that does not fit properly or is too loose for their bodies – the main reason for this being the fact that working apparel and tools are designed to fit the average *man*, not the average *woman.* On the other, they must go at great lengths to get what most (but not all) of their male counterparts may effortlessly find in every local construction warehouse. Of course, women specify, the advent of online shopping eased the situation, allowing for quicker retrieval of fitting working apparel; but still it is somewhat surprising that this issue continues to be reported by Italian female professionals notwithstanding their overall constant presence in the industry during the last thirty years.

> *«One does not usually think about this, because men… but gloves and shoes are almost impossible to find – in real life. Of course, there is the internet, and I managed to understand shoe sizes and buy them there… but especially at the beginning, I wanted to try them on, see if and how they fit… and it was always a struggle!»*
>
> Interview 22, civil engineer (F)

Curiously enough, this issue seems to be quite uncommon among the international literature on women in constructions, the few direct accounts of it being that of Onyebeke et al. (2016), Oo and Lim (2020), and Smallwood and Haupt (2009). Usually, it is "hard sciences" articles and scholars that mostly seem to have undergone research concerning, e.g.: the ergonomics of working tools in constructions and the repercussions on (mostly male, but sometimes also female) workers' health of incorrectly designed working tools, inadequate weight-lifting praxes, lack of fitting PPEs and sanitary facilities on sites (Welch, Goldenhar and Hunting, 2000).

In "social sciences" articles directly concerned with the challenges and barriers to women's entrance and retention in the industry, and particularly when tradeswomen are interviewed, issues with locating, retrieving, and loosely fitting PPE rarely rise to be the centre of the attention – notwithstanding the crucial implications for safety. This may be related to the slightly higher rates registered for female workers' presence in constructions in countries such as the UK, the US, and Australia. In 2019, for example,

the female employment rates within the UK constructions reached 12,5%[38] of the workforce in the industry; in Australia and the US, this data settles at about 11%[39] and 10,3% respectively[40]. The comparatively higher rates of female employment in the building industry in these Anglo-Saxon countries corresponds to a more diffused presence of tradeswomen on sites: this, together with the fact that it is from these countries that the vast majority of the literature on women in constructions comes from, may represent one of the reasons behind the scarce and outdated discussion of PPE adequacy in the foreign literature regarding women in constructions.

To underline the importance of unfitting working apparel, however, we can draw from other areas of research, most notably the academic literature on sporting cultures. Here, scholars are dealing with some specificities of the sportswomen's apparel: not only contrasting male and female athletic attire (Gregg, Taylor and Hardin, 2021) but also providing insights on the "one-size fits all" myth when dealing with the all-female issue of plus-size exercise apparel (Hauff and Greenleaf, 2021).

For example, Gregg, Taylor and Hardin (2021) while studying the attire of the Ladies Professional Golf Association, exposed the "female athlete paradox": while «[w]estern society emphasizes the importance of a feminine appearance and demeanour, (…) characteristics of successful athletes often oppose these feminine characteristics in favour of more masculine ones» (Gregg, Taylor and Hardin, 2021, p.218). As masculinity is contrasted to femininity, we witness the creation of a hierarchy in which masculinity and men are placed over femininity and women. This creates and reproduces a dichotomy that constricts a person to be either masculine or feminine, «suggesting women should always be feminine and men should always be masculine» (Gregg, Taylor and Hardin, 2021, p.219).

It is almost self-evident that this paradox can be easily transposed within the construction industry, as the characteristics of the successful (read: productive)

[38] More recent data reported by Irvine et al. (2002) account for women's presence in the UK construction industry as currently representing the 15% of its workforce.

[39] Data concerning 2019 are taken from https://www.womenbuildingaustralia.com.au/ (Accessed: 30 September 2022). More recent data from the ABS Labour Survey show that in 2021 the employment rate for female workers in Australian's construction industry raised to 13,4%. Available at https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/industries/construction (Accessed: 30 September 2022).

[40] The latest official data on the US female composition of the workforce concern 2019 and can be found at: https://www.bls.gov/reports/womens-databook/2020 (Accessed: 30 September 2022)

construction worker are perceived as pertaining to the masculine sphere and, thus, are diametrically opposed to the feminine ones. Such a hierarchy puts men over women as best suited to carry out construction work while women report on their tendency to keep at bay (or even repress) their "more feminine side" in order to avoid sexual harassment or banters while trying to "fit in". More frequently when on-sites but also off-sites – e.g., during official work meetings – women discuss avoiding wearing what has been defined as «eye-catching make-up or attire», such as «bold» red lipsticks, tinted nails, and «revealing» dresses, as these features are perceived as having an impact on women's projected image and their credibility as professionals and entrepreneurs.

> *«The main vanity that I have are my nails* [she laughs]*! You'll think I'm just vain, but I really love having my nails done at the saloon, both aesthetically and for the time I dedicate myself in my spare time. And unfortunately, I can never colour my nails other than some light shade of pink, usually something very natural and neutral – you know? Otherwise, they* [the men on site] *would say that I spend too much time on this feminine stuff instead of working…»*
>
> Interview 22, civil engineer (F)

> *«I have to admit that lately, I have started using make-up again. I used to go on sites without any make-up on, with large and comfortable working clothes… Once I went on-site with my make-up on and everyone was like… staring at me – you know? So, I started wondering: why did I never wear make-up on sites? Is it because I feel like they* [the men on sites] *would think I'm not competent enough? Just because I spend 15 minutes – or even an hour! – in the morning to put my eyeliner on… caring about this stuff doesn't make me less competent!»*
>
> Interview 19, architect and entrepreneur (F)

Comments on the appropriate "dress code" frequently resulted in defying the "one-size-fits-all" myth highlighting the fact that the needs of women's bodies are somewhat different from those of men. However, when asking what women consider appropriate to go to work, the answers provided showed a multifaceted nature: women were not only

challenging the male/female dichotomy – as we just discussed – but also creating a new one pertaining exclusively to the female universe. If dealing with exercise apparel, Hauff and Greenleaf (2021) demonstrated that discrimination could be also fostered within the female universe simply by relying on weight bias and thus distinguishing between standard-sized and plus-sized women, the discourses reported by interviewees in this dissertation tended to divide women in constructions according to their "dress code".

3.2.1. When femininity "stands out": the impact of (unwritten) dress codes on women's reputation and credibility

The first unwritten dress code that we encounter in the construction industry can be defined as *strait-laced style* – i.e., a more practical way of dressing, according to the situations. On sites, this mostly means wearing adequate PPEs (anti-hardship shoes, high-visibility jackets, and hard hats at a minimum); «comfortable clothing» that is not too large; and very light or no make-up. In the case of office work, instead, it means wearing «comfortable suits» (particularly during formal meetings and events) as well as shoes with wide and short heels. Even though make-up off-site was less of an issue to de debated upon, still it should look very natural and not «eye-catching».

When asked for clarification on what they meant by «comfortable clothing» or «comfortable suits», women showed a general preference toward trousers. This was because, they said, during a day in which they were supposed to stay at the office it could easily happen that their presence would be suddenly necessary on-site *«and you can't go on-sites with high heels and short skirts»* (Interview 41, self-employed engineer). This is also reflected in the description of «comfortable clothing» on sites: one should prefer any kind of already worn trousers or sports attire, (t-)shirts or blouses, and coats – according to the season.

«… [w]hen you go on sites you have to be comfortable.»

«What do you mean by that? Can you give examples?»

«Well. A good pair of runners – but only if you forgot your anti-hardship shoes and you're in a hurry before the office; usually I go for either old jeans and t-shirts or a tracksuit. An easy-to-wash coat, of course, during winter… The only thing that matters is that they should be comfortable and old enough to not care if you scrape them somewhere – like on any kind of exposed wires or materials…»

Interview 35, civil engineer and safety inspector (F).

At the other end of the dress code's spectrum, we find a more *provocative style*, guilty of being too feminine in a world dominated by men and what is deemed appropriate to not attract their gaze. Women that fall within this category, usually wear suits with skirts or succinct dresses, «inappropriate» shoes with heels even on sites, bold and seductive make-up such as red (or strong) lipstick, tinted nails, and a «full-face»[41]. Reference to such women is usually made negatively, revealing the internalized systems of gender relations that bring women to conform to the male gaze and blame other women for adopting what is perceived as a deviant behaviour that will be counterproductive for the normalization of women's presence in constructions.
By adopting such a provocative style, women say it is easier that male employees, colleagues, and clients will engage in sexist banters and comments that otherwise could have been avoided: this would also affect in a detrimental way the perceived competence of fellow (and more strait-laced) female workers.

«You can't go on-site with high heels and a short skirt [she laughs]*! It's both unpractical and dangerous! And what happens if you have to climb up on a ladder? All the men will be looking at you and say: "Hey, y'all! Have a look at that!" – and usually some really unpleasant comments or jokes on your private, sexual life would follow…»*

Interview 22, civil engineer (F).

While recurring to the provocative dress code, women's bodies tend to be extremely visible as their unconcealed and intensified femininity can stand out in a male-dominated

[41] Opposed to a "light makeup", a "full-face" requires a routine that takes more time and effort to complete, usually far more than 30 minutes.

industry; by adopting the strait-laced style, instead, we witness an attempt at blending in, at hiding women bodies. By conforming to a more masculine dress code (e.g., to prefer trousers rather than skirts), women seem to attempt at making their bodies invisible to the male gaze, involuntarily blaming themselves – instead of their male colleagues – for the sexist banters and comments received at work. In the end, however, it is clear that notwithstanding the dress code adopted, women are always exposed to the sexualizing male gaze, even when they adopt a strait-laced, "masculine", wardrobe.

> *«I don't see any differences in how we* [he and his female colleagues] *dress to go to work. We all usually opt for PPE, particularly when there's a risk for excavations to be done – I always have anti-hardship shoes in the back of my car, for any occurrence… Surely, workers make more… may have something to say on my* [female] *colleagues' appearances rather than mine… but I'm also way worse to look at, in comparison to them!»*
>
> Interview 54, civil engineer (M)

It is not what is worn, but who wears it that makes the difference. Notwithstanding their attempts at making themselves invisible, at blending in, women are never truly invisible to the male gaze. In these relations we witness the weight of sexuality and the importance of heteronormativity in the definition of the construction workers' masculinity. In these scenario and accounts, however, we can also witness the intersectionality of class, as reports of banters or sexually explicit comments have been mostly reported – from both men and women – to be made by working-class men, the craft and traders working in construction site. Even though the construction process and the display of working-class masculinity can be more evident or more explicit, however, it does not mean that middle-class masculinity does not engage in such praxes.

Beside the fact that particularly female professionals and entrepreneurs seem to try to conform to the unwritten dress code of the industry – hence, male professionals and entrepreneurs are more or less consciously taken as a reference – no one of us in our everyday life is really exempt from assuming the identity of a person we encounter by giving just one look to them, or their outfit. We rely every day on these kinds of

stereotyping processes to simplify our lives, but we often forget that the intersectionality of the lines of gender, class, and sexuality can be easily misread or misunderstood, to the point that we may end up attributing people an identity that not necessarily corresponds to their own self. Thought-provoking, in this sense, is the recount of Interviewee 34, a self-employed architect speaking of her «most traumatic» experience, which took place during her first «real job» after her master's degree.

> *«Maybe you can't see me well enough through the webcam… but do you see how I dress? And how do I look?* [She wears a shirt under a pullover and a pair of jeans, has a blonde pixie cut and round-shaped glasses made of thin metal. She doesn't seem to be wearing any makeup or jewellery] *I always go to work like this, you know? I really embrace this more… androgynous… and comfortable style…* (…) *I saw that they* [owners of the studio] *were asking my* [female] *colleagues out for a coffee or a cocktail – you know? Those jerkish proposals such as: "Oh, we should drink something together after work"* [she blinks]… *but nobody was proposing that sort of stuff to me. Then I thought… I think they thought I was a lesbian? – well, I'm quite sure of it actually.* (…) *I had to confess I had a child and… and they were like* [she assumes an inquisitory look]*: "How do you have a child"? And I was like: "You know, the bees, the nectar…" they thought I adopted him, and* [she laughs] *I said: "No, I got it the 'good old way' and just got myself a husband!"* (...) *After that, of course they started making sexist comments to me too… ah! And once, after "coming out" – if I may say so – my boss even patted me on the a*s!* [she stressed the underlined words]»
>
> Interview 44, self-employed architect (F).

This example clearly shows the importance of bringing intersectionality into the analysis. Wright (2011) reflected on the possibility that lesbians experience an "advantage" in male-dominated industries such as transport and constructions: in her interviews, she found that sometimes being open about the personal sexual orientation may help lesbians to avoid «some of the unwanted sexual attention suffered by heterosexual women» (Wright, 2011, p. 697). This seems to hold also in the case of Interview 34, but in reverse: until she did not disclose her heterosexuality, and her bosses and co-workers assumed her homosexuality, she experienced no sexual harassment.

The story of Interview 44 guides us through a twofold reflection. On the one side, even though the main narrative is one associated with the more spontaneous camaraderie and "simplicity" (read: not well-educated) of craft and tradesmen, we clearly see that sexual banters and harassment are not a prerogative of working-class masculinity. Independently of their educational level, men engage in such practices to show and demonstrate their conformity to the hegemonic, heteronormative, masculinity while also re-establishing their superiority and power over women in the gender relations. On the other side, if we reflect on the experience of Interview 44 in the light of results from Wright (2011), women and their bodies seem to be never truly invisible in the workplace, independently from their sexual orientation and the dress code adopted.

3.2.2. (In)Visible women, (in)visible bodies?

Notwithstanding the impossibility of negating their existence in flesh and bones in the industry, women seem to become invisible when we discuss the lack of properly fitting PPEs and the nature of sites as "unsuited" for their presence. Most of the respondents reflected on the fact that it is not only the work in itself that can be considered "unsuited" for a woman, but also the actual working environment. Sites are not designed to accommodate the presence of female workers: for example, usually, women report having to share toilets (which usually are in a dreadful and unsanitary state) and changing rooms with male workers.

> *«I didn't want to be explicit, but you're a woman and you can understand what a f*cking hell can be to use site toilets when you're on your period. If there even is a site toilet…* [she stresses the underlined words]»
>
> Interview 32, archaeologist (F)

> «*I think the main issue for my female colleagues is the absence of toilets on sites. Most of the times, I found myself working on site that had no toilets…*»
>
> «And how do you all handle these situations?»
>
> *«Personally, I don't care much* [he shrugs his shoulder]. A*nd, unfortunately, there's not much that can be done: either you adapt or you hope there's a bar or a restaurant*

nearby. Things get even worse when there's the night shift – everything is closed at night, you know?»

Interview 51, archaeologist (M)

Even though most of them tend to criticise this lack of attention towards women, they also tend to attribute these shortcomings to the scarce space available on sites to provide separate toilets and changing rooms. However, if this may be understandable when coming from those women that seldomly go on sites or at least spend less time there on a daily basis, it is somehow puzzling when heard from restorers: not even female restorers seem to complain much about the lack of spaces on sites and usually rely on innovative strategies to overcome such issues.

«Do you change on-site?»

«*Absolutely not! Where would I do that* [she laughs]*? When I leave home, I'm already dressed up for work and when I'm done, I go back home to shower, change… and so on. Men, on the other hand… they leave the site looking completely different!* [She laughs and take a few seconds while looking at me, it feels like she is considering whether to tell me something or not] *Well, you've seen where I work, uh? There is this guy… unfortunately, you've not met him, but trust me: he always arrives and leaves super-clean, hair perfectly combed and neat, shirt, elegant shoes… I always look like a mess* [she laughs]*!*»

Interview 39, restorer (F).

The (in)visibility of women in constructions is a theme that will be recurring in the following paragraphs, as it was and will be the case for sexism. Both issues bring women's bodies under scrutiny because either they are put under the spotlight and openly, directly criticized as "not belonging", or their existences and needs are overlooked and ignored because they "should not belong". Even though this may seem more evident on sites, similar dynamics occur when the work moves within the office's walls. Time and space affect women and their embodied presence in the industry in different ways and yet, anyway, the outcomes seem to be strikingly the same: the under-evaluation and

under-representation of women, particularly among on-site workers, but also within the higher positions in the construction industry.

3.3. «Who do you think you are?». Women managing their presumed lack of credibility

As mentioned in the methodological chapter, the women I had the chance to interview are all professionals (surveyors, architects, engineers, archaeologists, and restorers) and, on top of that, a few of them are also entrepreneurs. All the female entrepreneurs I interviewed got a master's degree directly related either to the construction industry – such as architecture and environmental or civil engineering – or to the economic management of firms and businesses; one interviewee, after 20 years in the industry, decided to spend part of her "spare" time to get a degree in sociology of territory.

Respondents sustain that this may not be the case among male entrepreneurs: few interviewees discussed how some renowned colleagues of theirs did not need to engage in tertiary education. In some cases, they compensated this absence with years of practical experience, before inheriting or starting their own firm; in other cases, independently from their formal level of education, men step into the family business and almost naturally find themselves at the highest rank of the hierarchy. Nevertheless, women underlined, these statements are particularly true for *old* entrepreneurial realities: nowadays, this tendency is lessened as fellow young male entrepreneurs are more prone to engage in tertiary education – for at least obtaining a bachelor's degree either in the fields of construction or finance[42].

[42]To become a professional, instead, people are required to formally obtain a either bachelor or master's degree; then, only after passing the qualification's exam one can join the preferred professional order. To do so, one must pay a quota for the renewal of the subscription and a regional tax, yearly. According to the degree possessed, one can be either a "junior" or "senior" professional figure: this epithet is not linked to the age of the professional, but to the competencies and activities that they can carry out. If we take architects as an example, a "junior" figure must carry out activities dealing with «*simple civil constructions* [where simpre does not only refer to the construction technique or the construction in itself, but also to the whole project] *with standardized technologies*» (CNAPPC, Circolare n.21, 7 marzo 2013). In addition to these competencies, the senior architect can adopt non-standardized technologies for planning and

In both scenarios, however, men's entry into the industry is almost never opposed by the family, while learning and training processes are carried out simultaneously or almost exclusively «on the job» (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). Conversely, women's decision to join the industry is usually discouraged by their fathers, which reveal themselves as ambivalent figures even in the case of family-led businesses.

> *«Sometimes it just goes like this: if you're a man, and your father owns a firm in the industry, you don't even need to study to guide it! You can easily count on the good name of your father's, and nobody questions you – unless you do a terrible, terrible job! Because the firm is passed down from father to son and that is how it should be* [she laughs]*! But when the business is passed down from father to daughter… that's another kettle of fish! I mean… that's unnatural!* [she laughs and I smile too] *Something must have gone wrong – you know?*»
>
> «Is that really so?»
>
> *«In this industry, my dear, women are never up to their family… to their father's name easily. We have to earn it, we have to prove it – and not just once, but like* <u>*every day*</u> [she slows down and emphasizes the underlined word]*! They* [men] *may be making deals speaking about soccer and cars; I have to be updated on the latest regulations and ready to quote them by memory, if needed. At every meeting, at every event. I can never be wrong and always must be at the top of my game.*»
>
> Interview 45, entrepreneur (F)

Moreover, if women are willing to overcome this first barrier, their learning process seem to take place in two subsequent steps: at the university first, and then it is followed by the training process, which takes place both within offices/studios and – eventually – on sites (Caven, 2016; Perrenoud et al., 2020).

> «*When you're done with the university, you know – at least, I didn't know how to do* <u>*anything*</u> [she stresses the underlined words]*! You learn stuff* <u>*on the field*</u> [she stresses

designing complex civil, industrial, and restricted buildings (such as monuments and those with a cultural and historical heritage).

the underlined words]*! And particularly if you're a woman and you go on sites, they look at you as if you're some sort of – "Highlander"*[43]*, as if you're* [she laughs]*... well, the world of sites is a very, very, very, masculine and peculiar world... you have to be extremely cautious* [she slows down and emphasizes the underlined words], *because you learn the site only by being on-site.*»

Interview 16, civil engineer and entrepreneur (F)

Women's different and longer learning and training processes result in them assuming higher hierarchical positions on sites when compared to male workers – if nothing else, due to their membership within a professional order. The women we find on sites usually fulfil also technical roles, such as site surveyors, project designers and managers, or health and safety managers – when, of course, not entrepreneurs. But as the literature on the *labyrinth* showed us, these higher hierarchical roles do not come without issues.

3.3.1.«We've always done it this way». Ageing as key for women's credibility, reputation, and experience of sexism

A major topic raised when discussing how much concrete experience is necessary to efficiently carry out a job concerns the amount of time dedicated by workers throughout their life to develop the necessary skills for mastering a task. This amount of time is directly linked with the age of the worker – and ageing in a sector like the building industry is definitely a sensitive topic. If male site-workers are somewhat scared of it because, as they get older, their strength and bodily capacities lessen and they risk being left out of the labour market (Donaldson, 1991; Connell, 2005), women appear to embrace the passing of time and rely on it to strengthen their authority and efficacy at work – both on- and off-site.

[43] The reference is to the 1986 fantasy-action movie *Highlander*, directed by Russell Mulcahy and known for its famous tagline «*There can be only one*».

The discourse about the passing of time was unambiguous, but a distinction between younger and older female practitioners must be made. Overall, women reported a tendency to be taken less seriously than their male colleagues: this appear to be especially true when they are (or were) young, even though they share the same age or role, as women reportedly see their orders and directions questioned – when not completely unattended – more frequently than their male counterparts, their competencies and level of knowledge of the subject at stake being repeatedly tested and discussed, even before buyers and suppliers.

> *«The world of constructions is blatant photography of that. With all due respect to my male colleagues of equal level, I am paid less and hold a lower position in terms of power – for sure! This is very sad, I don't know how else to put it. But I am constantly called "madam" while the men are "surveyors". And that is a diploma, not even a university degree! Still, he's a surveyor and I'm only a "madam" – never a "doctor"*[44]*...»*
>
> Interview 24, administrative personnel (F).

> *«From a woman's point of view, maybe they had to put more effort – than me, definitely! – in those critical situations where it was necessary that workers on-site followed the directions of those who were there to coordinate the production.* (…) *I recognized, sometimes, this diff-... well, not difficulties, but definitely more effort. Besides being a man or a woman, one must be sure of oneself – it's sort of an "animal thing"* [he mimics quotation marks]. *In that very moment when your interlocutor understands that is standing in front of a knowledgeable person, he takes a step back... they* [construction workers] *tend to mislead you, to make you doubt of your own preparation. If they get to that result, it's over! It's the life on sites – as they told me when I was studying* (…) *it is very much of a physical job, besides being also a psychological one: you can never withdraw. Take a position and keep it.»*

[44] In Italy, the term "doctor" is used to address in a formal manner anyone who got either a BA or MA in any field of study – not only medicine related ones – and is not related to the completion of a doctoral programme. In this sense, Interview 24 laments the overall lack of formality towards her, as her academic background goes frequently unnoticed, and she is not addressed through her title but only by her first name or a generic "madam".

Interview 54, archaeologist (M).

The excerpt of Interview 54 shows that also the men I met were aware of the efforts women make to have their authority respected at work, particularly on-sites. Notwithstanding this, it also highlights the importance of the intersection between gender and age when we discuss credibility: before specifying that the attitudes of construction workers tend to equally mislead men and women professionals, Interview 54 acknowledges that his fellow female colleagues have a harder time in making their directives heard «*than* [h]*e, definitely*». Moreover, we have seen and will deal with it later on in the last chapter on results, that some professions seem to hold higher consideration than others: we already anticipated that restorers, archaeologists, and anthropologists are usually perceived as "time wasters" by mainstream building firms due to the fact that their interventions on sites have a tendency to slow down the production process. We can add here that when such self-reflections are put forward by interviewees, most of the time they compare themselves to engineers, who are instead perceived as the more respected professionals on sites.

Beside this informal hierarchy of professions, to show that gender is still the main variable to influence the outcome of the analysis, here follow an extract of Interview 22, a civil engineer, who relies on an «easy example» to explain what is expected from women professionals.

> *«Being a woman is always an obstacle. Let me rely on this easy example. I'm married to an engineer – so my husband is also an engineer. My husband is older than me and he got his degree after me. So, generally speaking, one should think: "He's less capable, he was not as good". The woman started three years later and still, she got her degree two years before him – she should be the more capable one. And yet if I, a woman, stand side by side to my husband while speaking with a client, the client – maybe it has to do with mentality… by the client will inevitably listen and talk to the male engineer. And the male engineer is not more attentive towards his female colleague: she wanted equity, and he takes the benefits without giving them back… what am I trying to say? If I want to continue in this profession I must be more prepared. More prepared than a man would be, as even opening the discussion with*

the client is easier for the man and trickier for the woman. You need to be more careful. So, I have to be more prepared, always up to date and keep track of updates (…) *I must be always ready, updated on new regulations and educate myself through innovative training courses. I cannot waste time in frivolousness. This is the burden that I, a woman, have to bear if I want to be considered as a man.»*

Interview 22, civil engineer (F).

As transpires from this example, women that have been in the industry longer sustain such feelings and experiences by remembering that it was the same for them at the beginning of their career, during the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, they were «whiteflies, the *avant-garde* of today's women in construction», the first capable and willing enough to navigate through the *labyrinth* and eventually reach the leadership roles placed at its centre. These women established their position through the years, always having to confront men that were both older and part of the industry for longer than them. Forty years ago, being a young woman in the industry meant to be relegated to an eternal secondary position because, even though highly educated, women did not possess direct experiences in the field. The absence of such practical skill was (and still is) deemed inexcusable and hence able to invalidate the theoretical knowledge held by women in the construction industry, its praxes, and works. This was (and is) sufficient to discredit their professional figure as not holding enough competencies or skills to carry out their job without the approval of the men in the industry. For this attitude to change, women must age to that point where they can finally claim for themselves that aura of mastery of the profession that was previously unavailable for them.

After more than forty years in the industry, Interview 45, an entrepreneur, says that she had to reach «*50 or so years of age*» to feel that her top managerial position was not challenged anymore by her employees or fellow male entrepreneur, as her name in the region was well-established as a severe, rigorous, and respectable (woman) entrepreneur in the industry.

«I always speak of many years ago… what you girls have today, for us it was a constant struggle! For example, a random supplier would come to the office and say:

"Yep, we make the deal, we discuss it, we need this and that… but I don't want to speak – isn't there your father, or your husband?" (…) *Then the years pass, you gain credibility, they* [men in the industry] *get to know you, and you become a little less insecure.* (…) *Credibility has its limitations because you're young, in* <u>this</u> *industry* [she emphasizes the underlined word]*, you're still unsure, and the others perceive you as: "What does she thinks, or knows, or"…* [she shakes her head] *Then, instead, with resolution and willingness to establish yourself – and a little bit of stubbornness, unfortunately… this is an industry in which you can't give up, you have to* [she slowly knocks three times with her knuckles on the table, as a sign of stubbornness and perseverance]*… you get it, right?»*

Interview 45, entrepreneur (F).

This is not the only account of the sort. Women often report feeling the need to project an image of austerity, severity, and rigour in order to be trusted at the head of their firm or as professionals. Even though during the interviews they praised the neutrality of the "professional-mentality" and sustained that there exists some characteristics that makes a "good professional" or a "good entrepreneur" that are independent from gender, this alleged neutrality clashes with recounts of episodes in which women almost "forced" themselves to adopt harsher behaviours, or met *«not difficulties, but definitely* [had to put] *more effort»* than their male counterparts in order to make their voices heard or their authority recognised.

«They [the men on a site] *would even take my grandmother into their complaints and demolish the reputation of whole generations… I had the floor undone and re-done four times. The fourth time, they stopped questioning what I was saying and talking behind my back to sustain that I was wrong – because I took the stand, I knew I was right, and I wanted them and the buyer to understand… I was very young back then and, probably, didn't think too much about the consequences of my actions. It could have been dangerous to act like that.»*

Interview 30, civil engineer (F)

This embitterment of their character, the frequent stress on the necessity to be perseverant and stubborn enough to remain in the industry notwithstanding the barriers and challenges faced will be further analysed in the next chapter, when we discuss the motivations for staying and for dropping out. However, even though between the lines and never explicitly mentioned by older women in particular except for Interview 45, ageing seems to be embraced by women because along with a stronger credibility and reputation there seem to coexist diminishing levels of sexism.

> *«Well, one thing I think it's true. With time, you get stronger, you create your networks of trusted colleagues – sometimes friends – and you can start keeping the clients that you like, the ones that bring you other clients because they trust you. And, eventually, most of the weird looks, of the mean comments... they simply fade. Because of your reputation, because of your perseverance. Because after 50 or so years in the industry, you didn't give up and they finally understood that – even though they didn't and still don't want you here – you had the final word, and you're not going anywhere.»*
>
> Interview 45, entrepreneur (F).

Interview 45 describes the decreasing sexist banters, comments, and glances as the ultimate act of recognition of her merits and her ability to persevere in the industry by the men within it – who had no other option left than to make room for and accommodate to her presence, since she was not leaving. On the one side, however, as she speaks of sexist attitudes and behaviours "fading" over time, I am prone to assume that they do not completely cease to exist. And while a person's character may certainly contribute to this end, on the other hand the vision proposed by Interview 45 appears to somehow discredit the women who left the industry as "not being perseverant or stubborn or strong enough", thus reproducing the mainstream narrative of them as fragile and sensitive beings not truly suited for the industry. Interestingly enough, this excerpt from Interview 45 seems to rely on the evolutionist rhetoric about the "survival of the fittest", something that – in my opinion – draws a direct link to the "animal thing" mentioned few pages above by Interview 54. And this rhetoric – as that on war – is frequently relied upon by hegemonic

masculinity to affirm its superiority on both, femininity and other ("lesser") forms of masculinity

Beside this, it is in the peculiar cases of entrepreneurs that women felt upon them not only the burden of their young age but also that of the name of the firm – usually belonging to their father[45] and, in a couple of cases, even to their great-grandfather. I am tempted to assume that such pressure can be experienced also by professionals taking over or inheriting the family studio, even though none of my interviewees was a representation of this eventuality.

One living example of this experience is Interview 16, a 35-year-old female civil engineer and entrepreneur, whose family firm was founded at the beginning of the 20th century by her great-grandfather. The firm was then handed over from father to son until she and her brother (37-year-old and same education) recently inherited it due to the sudden and unexpected death of her father.

> *«Well, look: I've felt a little discriminated against because… yes, maybe because I'm a woman* [she slightly nods], *but above all, I felt it when I started working, because… I lead a family firm. My father was well-known and so: "She'll be the daughter of -. She'll be there only because of that and doesn't know sh*t"* [she laughs, I smile sympathetically]. *First and foremost. This, regardless of being a man or a woman – it sets the ground! Then, if you're a woman, even more.* (…) *Do you know when someone is "the son of"? Maybe I was… surely, I was lucky not to build something completely from zero, but having a family business is an honour and also a duty, as it is always a responsibility to carry on* [she emphasizes the underlined word].*»*
>
> Interview 16, entrepreneur and engineer (F)

Women are always the daughters, sisters, wives, mothers… of somebody else, not only in the construction industry but in everyday life as well. They are valued and allowed to belong in the industry as long as they are related to someone – a man – that can vouch

[45] The importance of the figure of the father will be recurring later in this chapter and is particularly linked to the motivations to enter the construction industry, alongside the role of the family and external role models.

for them asserting that their level of knowledge, skills, and competencies is adequate to carry out the job in the appropriate manner – as a man would (Kanter, 1977). This seems particularly true when we draw from the concrete experiences of women reporting on fellow male colleagues constantly validating their work.

> *«Once, a male bricklayer told me: "Oh, you're good with the trowel"! But would you ever say that to a 30-year-old man "you're good with the trowel"? Of course not* [she laughs]*! Well, unfortunately, it is my f*cking job to be good with the trowel* [she laughs and emphasizes the word underlined]*!»*
>
> Interview 20, entrepreneur and bricklayer (F).

By estimating women's work, men may succeed in subverting the formal hierarchy at play, as they judge women's work as able to reach their (higher?) level of competence. As a consequence, this behaviour belittles women and confines them in a secondary (lower) position, as they are deemed not competent or capable enough (Caven, 2016; Worrall et al., 2010).

3.3.2. «Can I talk to the boss, now?». Women as "non-standard" professionals and entrepreneurs

The result of such discourses on gender, ageing, and competencies is that we can witness the widespread struggle in recognizing women as bosses, as people able to be in charge of the situation or of the firm, and as holding the necessary competencies and skills to do the work satisfactorily. Both on- and off-sites, women professionals and entrepreneurs tend to be misperceived as secretaries, administrative and clerical personnel far more frequently than their male counterparts. Recounts of such episodes abound in the memories of the interviewees, but it was also easily verified during my experiences of participant observations: unlike men – women professionals are usually referred to by using their first name, sometimes as "misses" or "madams" (particularly if their presence is new on-site), and rarely through their professional qualification.

I was accompanying Interviewee 35 on sites: C. is a female civil engineer working for ESEM-CPT[46]. During our visit to a site in Lodi, she dedicated a lot of time to explain to the owner – of both the site and the construction firm – how to properly assemble a safe scaffolding, since their new one was missing a piece which would have performed as an additional barrier preventing the risk of falling. While the owner sustained that this was a new version of the scaffolding and that the piece was not so important anymore, C. explained patiently that this could not have been possible due to safety regulation: she listened carefully to the objections moved and her answers were always on point, sustained by the information available on the instruction booklet and showing another scaffolding on site, which had the missing piece correctly built. Left without arguments at disposal, the owner admitted the oversight and thanked C. for the help and explanations provided, and promptly sent off a worker to buy the missing piece.

Here follows what the man (bricklayer and owner of the firm working on-site) said to me about the discussion I just witnessed:

«Do you see how it works in constructions, Eleonora? C. here is always so kind and gentle, and she always provides useful suggestions for improving the safety of our sites. The surveyor there [refers to the (male) surveyor of the site, who left a couple of minutes before]*... he's a "know-it-all" kind of dude, and he only cares about the money. When I see C. on site I'm so happy! She's like a beautiful, kind, and gentle flower… and I want to be at my best to impress her* [he laughs slightly, while I nod and smile and C. smiles softly].*»*

Fieldnotes. February 23rd, 2021.

Unfortunately, I did not have the chance to venture on sites with entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, interview results seem to be pointing towards two main outcomes: on the one side, top-down relations may be easier to manage within the power dynamics entailed by the relationship employer-employees. On the other, however, when women deal horizontally with "peer" – e.g., suppliers or other professionals and entrepreneur in the

[46] Joint body concerned with the training and safety of workers.

industry – have a harder time at being perceived as professionals and entrepreneurs themselves.

> *«No, honestly, I never noticed. But then, when I personally show up on sites, they* [employees] *know that something huge happened or is about to happen very soon. Like a huge inspection coming up, or some big trouble with suppliers and materials, or with the site itself… or in case I have to reprimand or fire someone. Let's say that, when I'm around, they mostly worry about the last two of the list!* [she laughs and stresses the underlined words]»
>
> Interview 33, entrepreneur (F).

> *«Once, during a survey, there were me,* [her business partner's name], *the architect, and the bricklayer. We* [she and her business partner] *arrived on site for the first time with the architect and he presented us – no? – saying: "They're the ones doing the plasters", and the bricklayer looked at me and said: "You're the architect wife, arent' you?" – No, I'm the one who'll do the plasters. And he looked at the architect and went on: "She's your wife, right? She's just making fun of me!" – No, I'm sorry but I'm not the wife of anyone, I said* [she laughs; I smile and nodd]*! But, you know, it's episodes like this that make you understand it's not… normal… to see a woman on a site.»*
>
> Interview 20, entrepreneur and bricklayer (F)

Credibility and trust are not easily placed upon women, as they are still not perceived as being the "standard". Being still considered as a "masculine world", women are not immediately perceived as belonging within it unless they are *wives* or *secretaries*, women whose "only job" is to support and ease the work of male entrepreneurs and professionals. (Kanter 1977).

3.4. Women as jugglers: the struggles of work-life balance

We already had a glimpse regarding the importance of time in the building industry. On the one side, the different times of production entailed by traditional construction process as opposed to the much slower ones of restoration and archaeology. On the other, time is intended in the broader sense of the passing of days, months, and years – i.e., the process of ageing. There is a third way, however, to discuss about time in the industry and it deals with the necessity to decide how to deploy the hours we have at our disposal during the day. But how do we do that? The simple answer would be some we dedicate to work and some we keep for ourselves. But is it easy to draw a line between these two spheres?

Scholars showed us that our private and work lives are more interconnected than we would like to think, so much that the myth of their complete separation has been dismissed since the very beginning of the 21st century, particularly due to the ambivalent advent of technology (Bulger et al., 2007; Clark, 2000, 2001; Duxbury and Smart, 2011; Nam, 2014). Of particular interest is the reflection brought about by Jacobs and Gerson (2001): they highlighted that the topic of work-life balance has re-emerged as critical, not because of the number of hours worked *per se*, but because we witnessed a shift from the male-breadwinner households to the dual-earner couples and single-parent ones, in which both men and women are working the same amount of hours at the same time.

While dealing with this topic, I should make clear that all the women I interviewed were either single earners or part of dual-earner couple households and that all of them rejected the more "traditional" way of managing work-life balance – i.e., none of them was ever willing to withdraw from work and pursue a single-income family of the male-breadwinner type. Nevertheless, differences in focus and commitment to family issues between the partners sometimes emerged from the words of the interviewees: women clearly are still those responsible for most (when not all) of the reproductive and care work (among others: Galea et al. 2020) and they tend to report frequent complications linked to the balancing of working and private lives – as the first one usually can invade and overwhelm the second one.

«It's difficult, you know? To draw a neat line between the two, I mean. I had to make adjustments through the years, because when you're your own employer… things just are not so easy to allocate. Problems may arise even when you're on vacation… and then, what do you do?»

Interview 42, self-employed architect (F).

When women speak about time management, what transpires is the frustration of having to assign priorities and choose between work and family more frequently than their male partners and colleagues. When this does not happen, when women recount sharing housework and caring duties with their partner, they underline the fact that this cannot be taken for granted, that they are «lucky» to have someone by their side to «share the burden».

Couples and single people without children (8 and 7, respectively) discussed the possibility for them – and their partner, when present – of focusing completely on the advancement of their career while reflecting on how having a child may have an impact. Most of the time, «maternity represents a burden» in a working environment both male-dominated and highly competitive as the construction industry. Scholars dealing with this sector also show that usually there are only two choices available for women to take: either pursuing motherhood – at the risk of jeopardizing their career and constantly juggling between their career and family – or not (Barreto et al., 2017; Bryce, Far and Gardner, 2019; Perrenoud, Bigelow and Perkins, 2020). But can we really call them "choices" when women talk about maternity as a burden and complain about the lack of support both from their partners and the broader society for their working and life choices?

As Dainty and Lingard (2006, p.17) summarized, the main factor impacting women's attraction and retention especially in the construction industry is the lack of «supportive work practices, structures, and cultures». Scholars over the last twenty years pinpointed a few elements that can influence women's decisions regarding the allocation of time between their private and work spheres. Besides the already discussed sexist attitudes diffused within a male-intensive environment, travel and long working hours often get in the way of women's time management to the point that they – together with

maternity – can be counted among the main reasons for leaving the industry (Lingard and Francis 2008; Lingard and Lin 2004; Menches and Abraham 2007; English and Le Jeune 2021).

In the following sections we will enter a discourse on professionalism where it may seem that gender is less important as a variable in the analysis of men's and women's experiences – this is never the case. As we made clear in the theoretical chapter, "professional-mentality" – just as much as "entrepreneur-mentality" – is an intrinsically gendered archetype of social action, an institutionalized ensemble of values, beliefs and symbols which are culturally produced and reproduced (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2005). Therefore, we must keep in mind that the subject is never neutral and career patterns are predicated on a "male" model of continuity and commitment. Therefore, women are expected to conform to these "masculine" norms when pursuing their careers (Walters, 1987) without failing, at the same time, to meet their "feminine" obligations as mothers, wives, and housewives – other than workers (Hall, 1972).

In particular, Spencer and Podmore (1987) were among the first to ascribe the discrimination experienced by women professionals in male-dominated industries to various factors. The authors, for example, thought that, in order to pursue a career, it is necessary to have a «support system», which is mainly represented by a senior figure. Women usually lack "mentorship" because of their more "recent" entry in the professions when compared to men, but also because of the small amount of time available for them to build on – and benefit from – informal networks available in the workplace. We may add, however, that given the higher expectations posed on women concerning their reproductive duties and caring responsibilities, they often need to rely on another kind of «support system» – usually her family or the one of the partner – to have a chance at pursuing a career, while men are easily dispensed from such errands.

Moreover, and most importantly, there appear to exist an antagonistic relation between two different set of stereotypes: on the one hand, we may find those related to the "nature" of professions, which are hence required to be held by aspiring professionals – e.g., competitiveness, determination, total dedication. Opposed to them, instead, we find the characteristics "naturally" belonging to women – such as sensitiveness, emotional instability, indecisiveness – which render them "unsuitable" for concretely pursuing

professional and managerial roles[47]. So, even though at a first glance we may not see any substantial differences in the experiences recounted by men and women in the next sections, we should try to not forget that similar experiences bear different meanings, as the expectations posed on men are diametrically opposed to those posed on women.

3.4.1. «It's not a job, it's a passion». Presenteeism as a sign of dedication and competence

As anticipated, one of the main characteristics of the industry is the long hours working culture and this seems to hold true for in the recounts of both entrepreneurs and professionals. Young professionals reported that staying late for work is a normal praxis, particularly at the beginning of the career: showing up for work on time (or early) and staying beyond the official working hours (when a contract is present, which cannot be taken for granted) – independently of projects' deadlines – is perceived by employers not only as a sign of dedication to both work and the profession but also as directly reflecting one's competencies.

> *«My first working experience is basically a joke, no one believes it can actually be like this – the problem is: it was! I clearly remember going to the office at 7:30 am and leaving at 01:30 am* [of the night after] *because of a deadline. What a fool I was!* [she laughs] *However, this was not limited to meet upcoming deadlines, but it was… the average! People would stay until late just because they wanted the boss to see them… they think – and I was taught to think – that staying late equals being more competent in your work… Bullsh*t, I say! If you know how to do your job you do not need to work overtime – unless you have huge deadlines ahead.»*
>
> Interview 41, architect (F).

[47] Research discussing women's "illogical" entrepreneurial choices should come to mind, like Watkins and Watkins (1984) as well as those on *feminine leadership* as opposed to a *masculine* one (Loden, 1985; Grant, 1988; Rosener, 1990). Also, Kanter (1977) and Collinson and Hearn (1996) reflected extensively on how management's "masculine ethic" has been able to exclude women from position of "rational" power within organization by directing them towards the "emotional" end of management.

This strict connection between presenteeism and competence is clearly associated with the idea that pursuing a professional career requires total dedication and commitment, «the "all-or-nothing" notion (…) which women find (or are assumed to find) difficult to adhere» (Spencer and Podmore, 1987, p.2).

What emerges from the interviews is a subjective experience of the working times, but most importantly of the meanings attributed to them. All of the interviewees recalled that during some of their working experiences they met people able to «let the pen drop» exactly at the end of the last working hour, never leaving work a minute later than what they were supposed to. This behaviour was admired to a certain extent as it showed a degree of carelessness that the interviewees say they did not possess; however, it was mostly a source of complaints, as much as staying late just to show the boss that they cared about the projects, the clients, and eventually the organization.

> *«Of course, there are those people that… you know, when the time strikes, they let their pen drop, take their coats and say: "See you at 09:00" – and they mean that. They just do the bare minimum and leave all the work to us – the lucky bast*rds that remain at the office to meet the deadline…»*
>
> Interview 43, self-employed architect (F).

Moreover, professionals reported a tendency from the studios they were employed to define organizations as a «working family»: this was primarily done in an attempt to exert more control over the employees and to further increase their disposition to embrace the long working hours culture, as the work dimension eventually collapsed into family obligations (Sturges, 2013).

> *«I remember her coming to me and confiding me her personal stuff…»*
>
> «Like what, if I may.»
>
> *«I don't know* [she shrugs her shoulders]*... for example, once she was complaining about something that her child did at school… I listened – of*

course, I had to! And she was always like: "Remember that you too can share such issues here, 'cos we're like a big family"… but I never did that. I mean: I work for you, I'm not your best friend or anything. Why would I do that?»

Interview 41, architect (F).

Nevertheless, the most recurring argument for embracing the long hour working culture – even when self-employed – was intertwined with the definition of work as a passion. This was always the case: men and women reported that the main difficulty linked to keeping their working life separate from their private one was the fact that they were so passionate about their job that their work and private lives became almost integrated and inseparable (Sturge, 2013; Warhust, Eikhof and Haunschild, 2008).

«I have to be honest: I can't really say where one ends and the other begins because… well, since I'm passionate about architecture… like these days [she picks up a book and quickly shows it to the camera: I can't pick up the name]*... I'm reading a book on this famous Spanish architect – you'll think I'm crazy and be like: "Who the hell is that one?"* [she laughs]*... but I'm planning a trip there – to Spain, I mean… if Covid allows – and I'd really like to see his works with my own eyes.»*

Interview 42, self-employed restorer (F)

Professionals often recalled their first working experiences: they say they tended to work more than they do at present, staying at work even for 14 hours consecutively, particularly when a project's deadline was approaching. The long hour working culture, however, is embraced even when they revolve to self-employment or entrepreneurship: in these cases, they can circumscribe their working hours to the standard 8-9 hours per day unless problems arise or deadlines approach.

What changes the most in the passage to (self-)entrepreneurship, however, is the motivation presented for such long working hours: respondents tend to say that, working for themselves, they can manage differently both time and work schedules. Even if they

have to stay at the office until late, they do so with a different awareness: when a problem arises, it is their own choice and responsibility to deal with it as they deem appropriate, and it is in their interest to get rid of it in the shortest amount of time possible.

> *«When I worked for* [name of studio of architects], *problems typically arose when it was time to leave the office* (…) *Yes, I still work 9 and even 10 hours a day – if necessary. Now, however, I'm free to decide if the problem that shows up at 6 pm must be solved immediately – and so I have to stay late at the office – or if I can postpone it to be the first thing in the morning.»*
>
> Interview 43, self-employed architect (F).

All of the interviewees sustained, even if with diverse wording, that to work 9-10 hours per day, and at least from Monday to Friday, is «the average». It is something that professionals and entrepreneurs must do – not just because «everyone does it», but because that is what makes a "good entrepreneur" or a "good professional". If they care enough about their studio or firm, it is impossible to work less than 9-10 hours a day – since studios and firms are operative for 8 of those hours and the other 1 or 2 are necessary «to keep things going».

> *«I think a good entrepreneur knows that if you want to do this job you have to work far more than the others. It comes with a lot of responsibilities, and you just can't be the one that leaves early. But this is true for men and women alike. Entrepreneurs can't work less than 9 or 10 hours a day – and if they do… I mean, there must be something wrong* [she laughs]*!»*
>
> Interview 33, entrepreneur (F).

After hearing statements like this over and over, they won me over and I got convinced of their point of view: as (self-)entrepreneurs, especially when you have employees working for you, you need to put a little bit more effort than the others to make

sure that the machine is well-oiled – or the family is coherent enough – so that everything goes on smoothly. I am convinced that women are no different than men in their attitudes toward (self-)entrepreneurship as well as in their commitment to the well-being of their "creature", of their "child".

This would be wonderful, but we also should forget that women have to put in more effort than men to make their presence known and valid in the industry, or to make their voices heard – as we saw in the previous paragraphs. Moreover, we will see shortly when dealing with maternity (or in the next chapter when scrutinizing the main motivations for women to drop out of the industry) that not even the expectations on the reproductive work are "neutral". We will see how the unequal demands made to women and men, when it comes to take care of the reproductive work, are one of the main causes of women's "illogical" career paths (Watkins and Watkins, 1984). Let us remember that *careerism*, one of the five masculinities available within organizations according to Collinson and Hearn (1994, 1996), typically takes the form of long working hours, presenteeism, and disposition towards travelling (or commuting) according to the organization's needs.

> *«That's why I asked you to postpone the interview. Unexpectedly, I needed to go to this site we have in Amalfi and a colleague was supposed to come with me, but her child… It gets difficult when you have children to do this business-trips – you know? Even if it takes only one day… So I went alone and now I'm coming back to Naples, that's why I called you* [she laugh]!»
>
> «I'm glad to keep you company during your trip back [I smile]!»
>
> *«Yes, exactly! We're supposed to talk about this, right? Today I woke up at dawn, got in the car, and was on-site by 8 am… now it's 6 pm and I just got in the car to head back home… You know what? I just remembered that I need to do the laundry, once I'm home – but can you imagine me doing that at 11pm after a day like this?* [she laughs] *Absolutely not, I just tell you in case there were any doubts about it* [we both laughs]*! It's* <u>*so tiring*</u> *– you know? – to do all this back and forth, back and forth, from sites… and only because men can't solve their problems by themselves!»*
>
> Interview 43, self-employed architect (F).

Few interviewees spoke about having to commute for work: when this happens, when the firm they work for (or own) acquires sites in cities and regions of Italy different from the one they live in, women need to take into consideration also the time to visit such sites in the organisation of their agenda. As we saw in the extract from Interview 43, having a child – or other caring responsibilities – can inhibit women's ability to partake in such activities, which can in turn decrease their opportunity for promotions and, as a result, slow down their career progression (Caven, Navarro-Astor and Diop, 2016).

3.4.2. «*I don't know how she does it*»[48]. From flexibility to maternity as cross-sectoral "burdens"

It would not be easy to discuss issues of presenteeism and work-life balance without taking into consideration the reproductive labour that still, in 2022 and the majority of cases, continues to fall upon women's shoulders. Especially when discussing flexibility provisions, we see that in the vast majority of cases we do so only when speaking about the female workforce, as we give for granted that they will be the one in need of more "spare time" to carry out care and reproductive duties. Statistics tells us that, in the overall labour market, women are the ones that are more frequently employed with part-time contracts and that especially after maternity they often find themselves returning to forced part-time occupations even where previously employed full-time. Flexibility, however, is almost never discussed or proposed for men – and the interviewees I met seem to make no exception. Flexibility, in fact, is explicitly mentioned only in the terms allowed by self-employment – i.e., concerning the somewhat freer management in the decisions about one's own times or places to work – or when directly related to maternity leaves.

Interestingly enough, paternity leave was never discussed. It might have been due to the short amount of time fathers are required by the law to spend with their children as

[48] This is the title of a 2011 American comedy movie based on the homonymous novel written by Allison Pearson in 2002. It follows the happenings of a career woman who struggles in an attempt to make enough time for both her work and family lives.

opposed to maternity leave[49], but this is also due to the widespread male-breadwinner household's assumptions that women are the ones responsible for taking care of both the children (or elders, when present) and the household; men, instead, are the ones adventuring outside to work and provide for the family's necessities. As we shift towards double-earners couples and single-parent households, however, these assumptions must be challenged and eventually changed, for women to concretely access equity within the labour market and the broader society.

> «*And then there is the great maternity issue – and I'm not even a mother! But when you do this kind of job, which is very physical, and as a self-employed or an entrepreneur… it's complicated* (…) *when you rely on your body to work – think also about classical dancers… what do they do when they're pregnant? It's their own f*cking business – that's what happens* [she smirks and shrugs her shoulder]!»
>
> Interview 20, entrepreneur and bricklayer (F)

Maternity, then, continues to present itself as a highly sensitive topic. One of the most diffused (sexist) beliefs in the industry is that women will leave work indefinitely because of maternity: in such a scenario, their employment represents a huge risk for the entrepreneur – usually a man, even though this belief is to some extent widespread also among some of the women I met – as they cannot count on their absolute commitment to and unquestioned presence at work.

[49] The Italian law dated June 28th, 2021, n.92, and its subsequent modification up to the last one produced by the law December 31st, 2020, n. 178, define the fruition of compulsory and optional paternity leaves.
While maternity leaves cover a period of roughly 5 months (2 before and 3 after childbirth) for women workers, working fathers have the right to the same amount of time of paternity leave (independently from the working condition of the mother) if: the mother is dead or severely infirm; the mother abandons the child, or the child is given in custody exclusively to the father; the mother (completely or partially) renounces to her maternity leave in case of adoption or foster care.
If women workers do not renounce to their maternity leave, working fathers are entitled to up to 10 days of compulsory – non-continuous – paternity leave which must be used within the first 5 months of the life (or admittance in the family or in Italy in the event of national and international adoption respectively) of the child. Working fathers are also entitled to one day of optional paternity leave, but this must be agreed with the mother of the child, who can decide to not benefit from a day of her maternity leave.
The thing that must be noted about the Italian legislation is that when we speak of «women workers» we mean subordinate work. Self-employed women are, instead, entitled to the same amount of time of maternity leave, but may have a harder time getting the correspondent compensation due to peculiar tax prerequisites – and may even end up excluded from benefitting from such compensation.

«Of course, it is something that you have to take into consideration when hiring. I recently recruited a lot of young women among the administrative staff. They are more or less of the same age. What if they go on maternity together – or few months apart? I have to consider this possibility, and I have to make adjustments to allow them to. Men are far more… stable, in a way… that's the way it is, either we like it or not.»

Interview 46, director of category association (F).

Some interviewees have children (15), others still don't, and few of them are unsure about having them due to the efforts required by establishing a career as a professional/entrepreneur in the industry. Nevertheless, some interviewees highlighted that the greatest problem of motherhood is linked to unfair maternity and paternity regulations in the country, lack of social services or public nursery schools that can meet the necessities of new mothers. Moreover, maternity does not seem to represent an issue for the stability of the workforce *per se*: adjustments can be made, and women do not have to completely exit the labour market for the entirety of their maternity leave. New working arrangements can be provided, for example, thanks to the implementation of remote working opportunities and temporarily moving women on more office-based duties.

«Why, of course, it is something that you have to take into consideration – that one day your [female] *employees may want a child and benefit from their maternity leaves. But I have to admit that I found out that re-scheduling competencies is helpful: now more than ever before, I can allow my employees to work from home and they can manage their time how they deem appropriate… (…) for example, F. recently switched to this remote modality. I know that she has to bring her child to school at 9 am and that after 5 pm it will be a rough afternoon for her… but she told me: "Don't worry, I'll make time for work after he's gone to bed" and, honestly, I don't care about how she organizes her working schedule if deadlines are met…»*

Interview 37, owner of a restoration firm (F).

Sometimes, however, being pregnant is a risk factor that cannot be underestimated: this is true, as we saw, for restorers who work chiefly on sites and daily deal with chemical components and reagents. Due to the higher risks to which they are exposed during their everyday working conditions, female restorers are compelled to report on their pregnancy as soon as they find out in order to immediately stop working on-site.

When we discuss work-life balance it is almost impossible, as women, not to discuss issues related to maternity. So, for example, when asked about her ability to establish a work-life balance, Interviewee 19 answered by bringing the presence/absence of children under the spotlight.

> «*In my opinion, sometimes it may be difficult, but I don't have a family at the moment – and by family, I mean children. I have a very elastic life – that of a young couple. We're both 30* [both architects], *and we're not planning to have children any time soon, but… I think I live in a happy oasis because my work-life choice is based and is compatible with my family-life choices* (…) *I know other women who have children and, even from the outside, I see great struggles in them…*»
>
> Interview 19, architect and entrepreneur (F).

Therefore, to start a family is not a choice that can be taken light-heartedly. Even though almost everyone did not recall particular inquiring being made during job interviews on family intentions, Interviewee 44 recalls that the first job she had after graduating was for a studio in Naples that would not hire women with children.

> «[name of the child] *was barely two and I needed a job, but had no experience whatsoever… so my friend – she was already working for the studio… and she told me that they were looking for an architect, that she could have vouched for me… but the problem was – and she was <u>this</u> honest with me – that they didn't want a woman with children* [she smirks]. *Because of "<u>commitment issues</u>", they said* [she shakes her head]. *"You can't even think about mentioning him during the interview, if you want the job" – she told me.* [she stressed the underlined words]»

Interviewee 44, self-employed architect.

However, even when such personal questions are not made during interviews, women report that it is their families support that allows them to continue working in the industry, particularly when children are involved. Parents, in particular, often represent the strongest support network women professionals and entrepreneurs can count on to share the responsibilities coming with motherhood to go back to work as soon as possible after giving birth. Partners, instead, are ambivalent figures: some women call themselves «lucky» as they were blessed with someone willing to share part of the domestic and family duties with them – I will elaborate on the discourses revolving around "luck" in the next chapter, but here we can see a brief example.

> *«Well, yes: my husband is the one that does the cooking* [she laughs] *and mainly for two reasons: first of all, I'm not good at it, so if he wants to eat* [she laughs and I do to]*... and second of all, he really likes cooking.* (…) *Most of my friends, they always tell me: "You're so lucky to have him helping you at home or cooking for you…", and I know I am – it's unusual, and cannot be taken for granted…*»
>
> Interview 40, entrepreneur (F).

> *«The thing is he* [her husband] *doesn't do anything. Just to give you an example, I had to hire a babysitter to help me with the kid* [10-year-old boy] *and he said: "This is on you, if you don't take the child to school, you are responsible for who does it". And I had to pay her with* <u>*my own*</u> *salary, he didn't chip in* [she stresses the underlined words]*!*»
>
> Interviewee 44, self-employed architect (F).

When the support of a partner (or the family in general) is not available or is not enough, women need to rely on external help – such as babysitters and cleaners. Most of the time, the burden of the identification, choice, and payment of such figures is demanded of women themselves, as if they need to make amend for their career choices, while men are simply relieved from taking care of such burdens.

3.5. Conclusions. On the importance of a gender approach to the study of women's presence in male-intensive industries

In this chapter, we saw how women' experiences of the main challenges and barriers of the Italian construction industry overlaps with those emerging from the international literature. The discourses and examples drawn from everyday life on- and off-sites confirm that the first and foremost challenge is the ubiquitous sexism, which in both its benevolent and hostile forms is an ever-present occurrence permeating every aspect of men and women's workplaces. We also saw how the relational dimension of gender dynamics has a double purpose: on the one hand, it constantly reaffirms the hegemonic (heteronormative) masculinity especially through paternalism, careerism, and entrepreneurialism (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996); on the other, it (in)directly excludes women from the industry because of their "natural unsuitability" – unless they revert to more "feminine" jobs and skills.

Especially intriguing, in this sense, appears to be the discussion on restoration as a niche of production in the building sector in which women can find a place to be working on sites. When compared to the often mentioned (and allegedly neutral) "bad image" of the industry (e.g., Barreto et. al, 2017), that undergone by restoration – and partially even by archaeology and anthropology – appears to be a process of "romanticization". Highlighting its suitability for women in the light of the expectations associated with traditionally defined gender roles, the men and women of the industry unanimously describe restoration as women's "natural domain" due to women's innate (read: biological) predisposition towards nurturing and caring behaviours, zealous precision and attention to details in their attempt at restoring and preserving the beauty of the nation's cultural heritage. This romanticised depiction of restoration and renovation work seem to be working on two-layered levels of analysis. On the first one, while it allows for the presence of women in this peculiar and more "feminine" niche, it seem to be doing so while excluding "real men" from it. Reinforcing and (re)producing the mainstream narrative on the dyadic definition of gender roles and expectations, if women are "naturally suited" for restoration, "real men" are not. If they are, they must be

"lacking" something – i.e., masculinity. It is for this reason, I believe, that when discussing the composition of the workforce in the industry, restoration was the only occasion in which interviewees spontaneously allowed for the presence of homosexual men to be mentioned as part of the workforce[50]. The second layer of analysis, however, appears to be linked to the fact that all of those characteristics that are described as "intrinsic" and "natural" features of construction work and which contribute to the "bad image" of the industry (e.g., the dirtiness, dangerousness and heaviness of site jobs) can be easily forgotten when discussing restoration and renovation working practices – the major risk of it being the underestimation of the dangers and hazards to which these workers are exposed.

Even though women in constructions tend to be highly educated, skilled and trained workers and professional and thus among the higher ranks of the site hierarchy, they reportedly experience the weight of a widespread cultural bias that approaches them with a "double standard". This can be seen not only in the undervaluation of the risks they are exposed to while working on sites, but also in men's continuous doubting of their capabilities and knowledge of the industry's praxes of production, as well as in their attempts at validating women's work – attempts that appear to try and subverting the formal site hierarchy in order to re-establishing the otherwise challenged power dynamics between the two genders.

The embodiment of gender differences, as well as the risks associated with the romanticization of restoration, opens the way for a discussion on the appropriate dress code for work as well as on the difficulties connected to the retrieval of adequately fitting working apparel and PPEs. Easily the most striking difference with the international literature about women in the building industry is that the discussion on PPEs can be found only in hard sciences articles – and only few of them are concerned with women's experiences or health and safety repercussions. This may be due to the lower rate of female tradeswomen in the Italian context when compared to other, more studied, Anglo-Saxon realities, such as the UK, the US and Australia. Even though the complexity of the retrieval, particularly, of adequate PPEs has been eased by the advent of online shopping, it seems important to stress the point and raise awareness for suppliers to increase the

[50] The reference is to the interview excerpt by Interview 31 discussed above, at p. 79.

products available on the market and break what has been called a «vicious cycle»: it is true that, compared to men, few women are working in constructions and this calls for suppliers to produce fewer PPEs following their requests – as the costs of production would be higher when compared to its benefits. However, notwithstanding women's constant presence and demands in the industry during the last thirty years, adequate PPEs are still difficult to find at local construction warehouses.

In the international literature concerning the construction industry, however, no mention is found with regard to the existence of an unwritten "dress code" as explicitly discussed by women in this study in their attempt at "blending in". This seem to be one of the most interesting results emerging – alongside the iper-stressed "materiality" of manual jobs. The spontaneous definition of what is appropriate for a woman to wear on-site or off-site shows some interesting dynamics within the women's sample that are clearly due to the internalization of the rhetoric on the "male gaze". The result is that the blame for men's sexist and paternalistic attitudes and behaviours is misplaced and put on those women who are not willing to abandon their femininity in order to "fit in" a "more masculine" style of dressing – also fostering women's isolation from their own kind (Kanter, 1997).

We also saw that class and age often interact with gender to make women's experiences of the industry more complex and articulated. Class is an interesting key of lecture when analysing the interactions especially between women professionals or entrepreneurs and the predominantly male workforce of the industry. As formal education is often perceived as "not being enough" since it is not accompanied by practical experience working on site, women – and especially young women – have a harder time when compared to their male counterpart to have their orders and authority recognized either employees or peers, as they are more frequently perceived lacking credibility and competencies. The passing of time and ageing *per se*, therefore, are embraced by women because it allows them to establish a solid reputation by repeatedly proving their worth and capability. Moreover, older respondents in particular report decreasing sexist attitudes and behaviours towards them, as the men of the industry "surrender" to their willingness to stay in the industry.

Finally, dealing with issues of work-life balance and maternity, we overcome the boundaries set by the borders of the national, Italian, context to discuss questions that concern women in the global economy. We will see more in depth in the next chapter the ambivalent role of fathers and male partners, either supporting and opening the way for their daughters and partners to enter and establish a career in the industry or trying to discourage such choices – e.g., simply by not sharing the division of domestic and childrearing responsibilities.

All the interviewees were aware, to various extent, of what it meant to be a woman in a "man's world". Nevertheless, we were able to identify and deconstruct the *gender sub-text* present in some of their narratives – even female's ones. This particularly supports the necessity of relying on an intersectional approach and on a definition of gender as a cultural construct to carry out research in the construction industry – as well as in male-intensive industry, and the economy as a whole. If we lose sight of the interdependence of people's social locations (Atewologun, 2018), or of the fact that they are culturally defined, we simultaneously lose sight of the complexity and multidimensionality of social relations. The micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis are always interdependent and to focus on one should not mean to forget the role played by the others – e.g., providing the context for action.

To enter, navigate, survive, and establish a career in the industry, men and women adopt different strategies and face different obstacles that shapes their paths differently; nevertheless, in the next chapter we will see how "passion" seem to be the common denominator of their experiences as professionals and (self-)entrepreneurs. By focusing mainly on women's career path and contrasting it to men's, we will challenge the main narratives on passion and merit to discuss the factors impacting women's decisions to pursue a career or "drop out" of the industry.

Chapter IV

Women's narratives on career, drop out and the entrepreneurial choice

In this chapter, I will develop the analysis on the discourses surrounding women's career progression in the construction industry. It will be done by taking into consideration accounts from women with various years of experience and diverse expertise in the field and by focusing the analysis on the main turning points in their educational and working lives. These are represented by the choice of the university, the first working experiences after it, and finally the entrepreneurial choice – when present. We will witness how the influence of both internal and external role models may accompany women's drive and motivations, with passion playing a prominent role while salary is infrequently touched upon.

We have already seen the main challenges and barriers faced by women throughout their career, and we have to keep in mind that they play an important role at every crossroads. We will see that women actually enter the *labyrinth* during their younger years, when they are still children fascinated by the industry: every time they make a move towards it (e.g., by asking to go on sites, showing interest towards maths and art classes), their families, relatives, external role models, and peers may facilitate their progression in the direction of the labyrinth's centre or hinder it by making their way longer and harsher.

At each turn, the potential for women's opting out is relatively high: only one woman openly spoke about considering it (and eventually did it) while some of the other interviewees reported about acquaintances and colleagues' experiences and their motivations for opting out. We will reflect on how both the "natural" characteristics of the industry and the work organization favour the decisions to drop out, persevere, or start one's own activity. In doing so, I will also draw the attention to overlapping and diverging experiences as presented by women and their male counterparts. This is meant to show the intersection between gender and career advancement in a male-dominated industry,

and how it is able to influence the entrepreneurial decisions of women determined to remain within it.

The chapter will end by proposing a reflection on the cross-generational perspective on women's experiences in the industry – along with their similarities and differences. Even though reliable longitudinal data are not available to carry out this kind of analysis, I will discuss it starting from women's perception of changes through the years, particularly focusing on what emerges when these questions are posed to interviewees with diverse years of experience in the industry.

4.1. Entering the *labyrinth*. Motivations to join the industry

We already had the chance to see that all the interviewees underwent tertiary education, most commonly in fields of study related to the construction industry: architecture (8), civil engineering (5), fine arts or restoration (5), archaeology (3), interior design (1), urban planning (1). Only four interviewees graduated in different fields of study, namely: business management, pedagogy, biology, and urban sociology (after years in the industry).

When asked about their educational background, and particularly when and how they decided to join the industry, respondents tend to refer that a huge role in the decision-making process was played by their passion for subjects such as math and art; history, instead, is primarily mentioned by archaeologists. Most notably when neither parents nor other relatives were employed in the industry, men and women report that their interest and curiosity developed during the years of middle and high school, and they represented the main motivation for choosing an educational path that eventually led them to work in the construction industry.

> *«Choosing the university was actually really… for me, it was… natural, in a way. During high school, I really loved math and art classes. So, the question was: what could I possibly do that would include both? See, architecture felt like the only*

available – natural – choice to make [she smirks]*! And even today, even with all of its undeniable downsides… It still feels like the best choice I could have ever done*».

Interview 42, architect and self-employed restorer (F).

«I guess it was because I really liked history classes, speaking about ancient cultures, their art and crafts… Besides, I am also a little bit disillusioned about the future. The present is… well, now – so we can't do much about it. But history is always there and – I know it may sound paradoxical! – but I think we can always learn something new from the past. Maybe that's why I like to… yeah, to indulge in it [he smiles].»

Interview 51, archaeologist (M).

According to the literature, however, there could be other factors favouring entrance to the industry, namely: internal role models, such as fathers or other male relatives already engaged in the industry – either as builders or professionals and entrepreneurs; external role models, such as teachers and professors, peers, or professional figures working in the industry who are not part of the family of origin; salary and opportunities for establishing a career.

4.1.1. Internal role models: the ambivalent role of fathers and other male relatives already working in the industry

Internal role models have been acknowledged as having a huge impact only in five cases. Here, interviewees referred about having their families (most likely, their fathers or another male figure) engaged to various extent within the construction industry – ranging from being employed as builders to owning a highly-structured family firm funded by the interviewee's great-grandfather in the 1920s. Interestingly enough, fathers' reactions to their daughter's interest towards their work and the industry also ranges from being warmly welcoming and encouraging to being openly opposed and dismissed as a temporary fascination.

At the most positive end of the *spectrum,* we find the fathers of Interview 16 and Interview 19, who are depicted as extremely supportive figures, confident that their daughters have what it takes to join the industry and the family business.

«*Since when I was two or three years old, my father used to bring me on sites and call me "my little engineer" – so, in a way, he already set the path for me to follow. Growing up, I went to liceo classico and he still brought me to office meetings, to inspections… I always felt the industry as something that was close and interesting to me. Then, the time to choose the university came and I'll tell you a funny anecdote. In that occasion, my father said: "See, you can be whatever you want in your life. But know that whatever you choose that's not engineering, it will be a belittling choice"* [she laughs]. *He was cunning! It could have been… it felt not as an imposition, but it was a clever way to put it, knowing that I could have the necessary competitive attitude… to push me to become an engineer*».

Interview 16, civil engineer and entrepreneur (F).

Fieldnotes, April 15th, 2020. Public speech during an event on women's presence and contribution within Lombardy's construction industry.

«I remember telling him: "We can do way more than this, but we have to do things <u>my way</u>" (…) *"Okay, so you do it" – he said, and even today I think he still doesn't get everything I do* [she smiles and shakes her head] (…) *but still he says: "I don't get what you're doing, but it's working. So, keep doing it. You're doing great". Recently, he even said that we need to raise the budget for the things I do, which is* [mimics an explosion with her hands near the head] *mind-blowing, I'd say! I have to admit that I don't know if I'd be able to do the same, even with <u>my own</u> children!»*

Interview 19, architect and entrepreneur (F).

While the majority of respondents may position themselves in an intermediate stance along the *continuum,* with their parents and family sponsoring their aspirations or at least not hampering them, Interview 36 and Interview 46 open the road towards the negative end of the *spectrum*. They, in fact, underwent tertiary education in architecture and in urban planning respectively, notwithstanding their fathers' scepticism and

disapproval; their open opposition was overcome thanks both to their own «stubbornness» and the mediating interventions of their mothers, who were more prone to let their daughters «follow their heart».

This, however, was not the case for Interview 33, the most negative experience among our cases. During a preliminary phone call, she explained to me that the construction firm she leads today as CEO was founded by her father and her uncle. Notwithstanding her fascination to the industry and continuous requests to follow them on site and at the office since she was a child, they always considered the industry to be «inappropriate for their little girl». Both of them actively encouraged her to give up on her «temporary infatuation» by openly opposing her demands to enrol in either architecture or engineering, until she eventually settled for a humanistic approach to public management. After graduation, her request to join the firm was still firmly opposed: her father and uncle forced her to gain working experience in another, «more suitable» field first, in order to evaluate whether she had what it takes to then work at the family firm.

> After graduation, Interview 33 worked a couple of years as a publicist – she didn't really like that job but did it anyway to appease the demands of her father and uncle. Then, five years ago, she asked again to join the firm:
>
> «*<u>That</u> was what I wanted to do, so I faced them. I always did what they asked and yet I was denied the only thing that I actually wanted. Why? Because I was – I <u>am</u> a woman* [her voice crackles a little, she seems to get a little emotional but carries on without pausing]. *Well, eventually, they gave up* (…) *beside my father having me, my uncle only had two other daughters, with whom I now lead the firm. I think… It's awful to say this, but I think they eventually came to realize that none of them had a <u>son</u> and still <u>we</u>… <u>three</u> <u>girls</u>* [she smirks]*! We were interested in continuing the family business – even though we weren't born <u>that</u> way* [she emphasised the underlined words].»
>
> Interview 33, entrepreneur (F).

The experiences recounted draw attention to the cultural bias affecting the industry and concerning gender. Although most of the men and women interviewed dismissed the discourse on the family of origin reporting overall supportive parents, even the women who were "facilitated" into the industry by their fathers experienced higher levels of bias towards them throughout their career. Moreover, to find these extremely positive or negative instances only in women's recounts appears to confirm that the family of origin – and male figures in particular – have an impact in either favouring or hindering women's approach to the industry, as they represent the first challenge to be overcome to enter the *labyrinth*. These first experiences of approval or refusal of their presence in the industry start to shape their identities, forging their characters and, in the majority of cases, their determination to succeed, to challenge the stereotypes and dismantle them – voluntary or involuntary paving the way for others to follow. Finally, although men can also experience approval or refusal for joining the industry, it seems likely that men can more easily win their parents' approval when compared to female respondents, mostly due to the beliefs associated with (wo)men's (un)suitability for the industry.

4.1.2. Self-made professionals, or the un-acknowledgement of external role models' influence

Not many gave credit to external figures in either strengthening their interests and paving the way for their actual success in remaining in the industry or not. When they did, respondents recounted mostly of teachers and professors who shared a common love for the subjects of interests all along the education process (Interviews 30, 38, 39, 43, 51, and 53). These figures were taken as examples, even if no direct questions were asked about their profession, career, or the respondent's future possibilities.

> «*There was this professor of history of art, during high school… she was so interesting to listen to, she described everything in such a way that you couldn't help but be mesmerized by the frescos and stuccos of <u>that</u> building, or the colours of <u>that</u> other painting… I also liked math and she* [the history of art professor] *was an*

architect too, you know [she laughs]*? So, I think that it was also her way of putting things, her passion, who motivated me in choosing architecture*».

Interview 38, self-employed architect and plasterer (F).

Only Interview 46 actually gave credit to a couple of professors that she called her "mentors" during the university years, as well as to a couple of female colleagues that were «brave enough to believe in [her] and helped along the way in any association [she] worked». With this only exception, all of the other interviewees glided through the university years, not delving too much into the details of their recollections about the relationships with both peers and professors. This may be a sign of one of the recurring arguments made evident mostly by women professional in the industry – i.e., loneliness. Differently from men, this is something that all women seem to have experienced at some point in their career, even if at different stages according to different recounts. Sometimes it is due simply to the overwhelming presence of male colleagues both at the university and at work; sometimes it is heightened and even amplified by the encountering of other women who disattend the widespread (biased) expectations on "women's solidarity".

«I don't have many problems working with men. They're easy to understand, they're simpler – but don't get me wrong. By "simpler" I mean that if the bricklayer has something going on with you, you know it because he simply tells you. Women, on the other hand… My worst experiences have been with [female] administrative staff, for example. You ask for their help and expect a little bit of sensitiveness – of solidarity, even! – and they show none».

Interview 34, self-employed restorer (F).

The generalization made by Interview 34 on some women that, in her experience, failed to fulfil their obligations towards female solidarity allows for an interesting reflection that applies not only to the construction industry but to the broader society. Combining the theories of Kanter (1977) on tokenism and Epstein (1980), women in male-dominated industries are particularly under scrutiny because of their visibility: when they contravene to embody the expected feminine virtues of being compassionate,

nurturing and service oriented, their conducts result in harsher judgements and are easily generalized to represent all the women of the industry (Webber and Giuffe, 2019). The rhetoric of *women's solidarity* is, in fact, often relied upon to sustain a clear enunciation: that women should be sympathetic towards other women just because they share the same gender. This, however, should not coincide with the blind endorsement of other women's behaviours or demands; in other words, it should not mean that two women must always think alike and hence support each other in every situation. Rather, women's solidarity means that every woman should support another woman any time she is victim of sexism and patronizing behaviours, even though on a daily basis their values, interests, or opinions diverge. A true example of this can be found in the account of Interview 46, as she recalls an episode that took place right after the birth of her son.

> *«When I came back* [from maternity leave], *the economic director – who was a man – needed to find the new area manager. The human resources manager, at the time, was a woman. She made all her calculations, evaluated all the possible candidates, and saw me fit for the job. But my director said: "No, absolutely. This one just gave birth and all she wants to do is to be a mother. She doesn't care about it at all". At that point she* [the human resources manager], *on her own initiative and even though she was hierarchically below all the directors… she called me and said: "Here, they tell me this. Do you really want to be a full-time mother and don't care at all about this opportunity?" So, I said: "Well, nobody presented this opportunity to me, but I am interested!"».*
>
> Interview 46, director of a employers' association (F).

These experiences (or their absence) seem to support the depiction of the construction industry as a highly competitive environment. Competitiveness is not only linked directly to work relations on sites and the broader construction industry, but it is already present during the years of tertiary education. When asked what suggestions they would give to "newbies" on their field of expertise, respondents always suggested to put competition aside and build strong relations with their peers, who will likely be future colleagues.

«You know, it actually happens to me that newbies come and ask my opinion on why they should be an archaeologist [he laughs] (…) *The first thing I always say is I love it and wouldn't change it for anything. But that aside, I think the most important thing is they… even at the university, they should not engage in competitions with colleagues and cooperate more with one another. That's how it should be at least, 'cause if you don't talk to anyone, you don't know anything. You can understand how counterproductive that could be, given that a great deal of our work is due to word of mouth…»*

Interview 53, archaeologist (M).

All respondents agreed on the fact that informal networks and particularly *word-of-mouth* are the best ways to expand the list of possible clients, suppliers, and collaborators. We will discuss later in this chapter the details about the importance of being part of a network, as they represent a fundamental instrument that can either jeopardize or help establishing a solid reputation and career in the industry, but also present an ambivalent nature when we bring into the analysis the gender variable.

4.1.3. Does money actually buy happiness? The narratives on earnings.

If up to this point few interviewees referred on their family of origin and even less on influential external role models, no one considered expectations on future incomes to be a relevant factor to be taken into consideration when choosing the university and actually starting a career in the industry. This is not so surprising if we remember analyses such as that of Friedman and Kuznets (1945) on professionals' incomes, which already showed that young people ponder many factors besides expected earnings, among which can be considered: the kind of work that each career offers as well as the satisfactions and sacrifices tied to it. More recently, and particularly with regard to drivers towards entrepreneurship, Franchi (1992) highlighted that women – but also men, particularly when part of a profession, I would add – earnings and profits are seen not as economic objective, but as a confirmation of their professionality.

«*I speak for me, of course, but I think income can't be the main motivation to join the industry and do this work. You don't do architecture because of how much it pays out; it is something you do for passion. After all, there is only one Renzo Piano!*»

Interview 42, architect and self-employed restorer (F).

I will address later the risks associated with statement like this one, when we will discuss the problematic endorsement of the rhetoric of passion and meritocracy, as this may foster and perpetrate grey (or even black) working conditions and labour exploitation in the construction industry in general – not only for tradesmen on-site, but also professionals off-site. Here, it is worth noting that income was spontaneously discussed by respondents only when it assumed a positive nature. This particularly happens when a certain degree of financial stability was achieved by respondents; still, the discourse on salary appears to hold a marginal relevance when compared to the overall improvements realized both in the professional and personal lives.

«*I quit just before the pandemic started and I and my family… I think we all thought I was going insane* [she laughs]*!* (…) *It was a big leap of faith; I couldn't be sure that… I also said to* [Interview 44] *and* [a male colleague of them both] *that they should have waited to quit because… what if I failed? I didn't want them to risk losing everything! But the clients I made while at the studio followed me, and work kept coming; they* [Interview 44 and their male colleague] *joined, and now, well* [she smiles, leans against her chair, releases a profound sigh, and lets the tension go]… *I finally am in charge of my own time, of my own work. I want to leave at 3pm? I can. I have a medical appointment; I don't have to ask permission to go. Even the salary now is more stable – and a little bit higher, even* [she laughs]*! So, yeah* [she nods and pauses for a few seconds]. *Am I stressed by deadlines approaching? I think I always will be 'cause that's who I am. But the approach… the mentality behind it all… it <u>feels</u> completely different now* [she stresses the underlined word].»

Interview 43, architect (F).

I must clarify: I never directly initiated discussions on salary. Respondents engaged on (mostly negative) reflections about it when asked about the problems faced during their everyday work in the construction industry. Answering to this question, interviewees underlined the uncertainty of incomes – particularly at the beginning of the career and, in general, as self-employed workers – as one of the chief problems of both constructions and the professions they belong to. For example, entrepreneurs mention problems linked to (labour and materials') costs, access to credit when starting their activity, and speak of payments as being the main arguments for controversies with clients and suppliers; on a smaller scale, self-employed people refer on the need to engage in debt recovery practices throughout their career after concluding their jobs.

«*This still happens sometimes. Some clients are just like that: you need to call them every day, engage in every debt recovery tactic available, until you eventually chase them down and get your damn money… It could be worse, of course – they could have simply disappeared without paying* [he laughs]*! All I'm saying is that still you could have spent that time differently, you know? Without worrying about the uncertainty of that one income that may be important to close the month all-right, for example.*»

Interview 51, archaeologist (M).

«*Sometimes they* [clients] *say they just <u>forgot</u> – you know, <u>they're</u> so busy working and making money they <u>accidentally</u> forgot to pay you for <u>your</u> work… Like, could I be <u>that</u> forgetful and not submit the project in due time* [she laughs]*? And they even act kind of annoyed by your demands when it's like the tenth time you call to get the money… There was this guy, one time* [she laughs and shakes her head]. *He was all like: "It seems to me that I'm the one actually working between the two of us, since you've enough spare time to call me and ask about your payment <u>again</u>"* [she stresses the underlined word]…»

Interview 30, civil engineer (F).

There was another time in which discussion on salary was actually spontaneously triggered. During our interview, I had the chance to ask Interview 49 her opinion on why her profession – archaeology – seemed to be one of the few (along with restoration) in which women are present in higher numbers than men. What follow is her response to the question:

> «*I think mostly it is because it's underpaid. You know, there are people that say women do only certain kinds of work, like teachers, secretaries, clerics… because we are "born to care", that's what we are allowed to do. The most recurring argument I can associate with both restoration and archaeology – that women are good at paying attention and care about details, and beautiful things like frescos, or any stupid shard of ancient pottery that one may find on any site. We are women and that's what we do: we care about stuff even when is worthless for everyone else* [she laughs]*! Hence, the second argument: by doing this, we halt the work of others, we make firms and clients waste their time and money instead of allowing them to continue working* [she shakes her head]. *But beside that, professions in general allowed women among their ranks only recently… and still, women's professions or professionals tend to be lower paid than men – just think about the gender pay gap! And we* [women] *are always considered less credible than them* [men] – *you must have got it by now* [she smiles]*! Maybe that could be a way to attract more men into archaeology: higher wages and more credibility to the figure on site and in society in general. Same for restorers.*»
>
> Interview 49, trade unionist and ex-archaeologist (F).

Reflecting on the words of Interview 49, it is fascinating to see how the theme of credibility emerges in relation not only to gender, but also to salary and the professions. Is it certain professions that are underestimated as a whole (regardless of gender) or is it only women's credibility at stake (independently from their profession)? I think that both seem to hold true – to a certain extent at least.

As we will discuss further below and in the next chapter, we are starting to get a glimpse of the fact that – particularly on site – there seem to coexist two hierarchies: a formal one, defined by the officially attributed roles and responsibility; and an informal

one, directly linked to the perceived credibility and reputation of professionals and professions as a whole. We will see that, according to respondents, some professions appear to be more desirable and are more respected than others, both by professionals themselves and the broader society. Notwithstanding this, it is remarkable to note that claims about credibility emerge from women's reports independently from their profession – e.g., even when they are at the top of the formal hierarchy – and can be perceived (if not by women themselves, at least by us) as part of a gendered power dynamic. Instead, when men report on experiencing credibility issues, they tie them to the lack of recognition and respect held by their profession. Nevertheless, some men even recognize that their female counterparts tend to experience these situations in harsher ways or more frequently than they do.

> «*The problem, in my opinion, is that archaeologists are perceived as the ones that halt the working schedule of the site because of things that have been buried for centuries – so why should we care today, no?* (…) *When people argue with my decisions saying I lack compentencies and I'm wasting their time… the "unpleasant" ones, I even tell them to go f*ck themselves* [he laughs]*! A few days ago, I was talking about this with a* [female] *colleague of mine, we share the same site lately and… well, sometimes, in these cases… I <u>can see</u> that she has a harder time than me in answering back to people and to get her decisions unchallenged. I can say to people that they should go f*ck themselves, but… I mean, can she?*»
>
> Interview 55, archaeologist (M).

Joining the reflections sprouting from the extracts of Interview 49 and Interview 55, the idea of using salary only as an instrument or a resource to raise a profession's prestige and, consequently, making it more attractive for men seems to be a deleterious argument for both women and men. On the one hand, the main (hidden) assumption behind this is the idea that women might benefit from higher wages only if they do not engage in female-dominated professions. Still, we can easily verify that the gender pay gap has not vanished in thin air during the last few years and that such wages differences are also a clear product of the vertical and horizontal segregations experienced by women

who opt for a career in the construction industry[51]. On the other hand, even though the literature may report men as generally more interested in the economic dimension of their future occupation, we should ask ourselves to what extent the construction of masculinity actually influences such results. As gender stereotypes prescribe and contrast characteristics considered to be *feminine* against those considered *masculine*, men are still expected to be the actual *breadwinners* of the household. Hence, when it is the very idea of hegemonic masculinity that prescribes men to be more interested in the economic aspects of life because they are the ones who are expected to provide for the household, how can we uncritically believe that results from the pre-existing literature are not biased by the widespread representation of what masculinity is or should be? How can we believe that the tendencies shown by men (and women) when such questions are posed are not influenced by centuries of internalize beliefs about masculinity (and femininity)?

Even though I am accounting for a certain degree of desirability bias when analysing respondents' answers in general and particularly on this issue, in the interviews I conducted, neither men nor women appeared to take into consideration future income before starting their university experience. This impression seems to be enhanced by the overall negative discourses presented and revolving around earnings, but also by the fact that the first and foremost motivation reported by all respondents to take up their career had to do with *passion*.

4.1.4. The *rhetoric of passion* and the (ir)relevance of earnings: labour exploitation and meritocracy in disguise.

Even though respondents may be unaware of this, negative discourses on salary seem to be deeply intertwined with what I refer to as the *rhetoric of passion.* As

[51] Let me remind what we discussed when presenting the peculiar situation of women in constructions. According to Jobpricing's *Gender Gap Report* (2021), the Italian building industry is one of two economic sectors that are reported to have a negative gender pay gap (-14,2). This value, which indicates that in the industry women actually are paid more than men, has to be read in the light of the workforce composition of the industry: construction workers are mostly men while administrative and clerical staff are mostly made up by women. Since administrative and clerical staff on average earn more than construction workers and construction workers account for the vast majority of the industry's workforce, few women appear to earn more than men because they take on more remunerative occupations.

interviewees themselves state, men and women *choose* to join a profession because of their *passion* – whatever form it may takes. At every turn of the *labyrinth*, every role model they meet reinforces the idea that any difficulty can be overcome with the right amount of *commitment*, which chiefly takes the forms of «hard work» and presenteeism. When both conditions are met, it can be read as a sign of *dedication* – to the studio/firm and the profession *in primis*, and then to clients. If men and women have enough passion, show enough commitment, and are dedicated enough, they will eventually succeed in «working their way up the ladder», establishing a career in the industry and, subsequently, even reaching the top ranks in the chosen profession. When these are the premises, there is no room left for debate about wages and incomes, whether this is about their concrete amount or their (un)certainty: a true professional should be only driven by their *passion*, not by vile *money*.

This seems to hold particularly true when we add a piece to the puzzle and see what respondents define as «hard work». I already discussed in the previous chapter how presenteeism functions: especially at the beginning of their career, professionals prove their commitment to employers (and peers) by embracing the long hour working culture. Being the first to arrive at the office in the morning and the last to leave it in the evening, independently from the approaching of a project's deadline, is depicted by respondents as a tendency which is informally shared and learnt among young professionals simply by watching and conforming to colleagues' behaviour – when not directly demanded by chiefs. This means that while restorers and builders are likely to work within the given and formal times of sites, self-employed professionals easily incur in overtime working. By *hard work*, however, professionals describe their tendency to embrace not only the values of presenteeism and overtime schedules but doing so independently from the signing of a formal working contract. All professionals recalled that their first working experiences were underpaid, at best, when not performed without the existence of a formal contract of employment.

> «*This was like the biggest studio of architects in Naples – they had something like 40 employees… When I started there, I had no contract* <u>*at all*</u>*. That's how it works if you want to be an architect and start working right after the university* [she stresses the underlined word].»

Interview 43, architect (F).

«*They* [proprietors of the studio] *said I didn't have the experience to get paid as I just came out of the university. "If you really care – they said – you should work your way up the ladder, just like everyone else did".*»

Interview 54, engineer (M).

The «*this is how it works*» or «*we've always done it this way*» rationale is a recurring topic – we also encountered it in the previous chapter. On the one side, it shows a hint of deterministic resignation among respondents, as *newbies* have always known they must endure whatever it takes to work their way up the ladder. On the other side, we are clearly faced with the fact that not even professions widely considered as prestigious – i.e., engineering and architecture – are immune to black working conditions and, hence, labour exploitation. These extracts show how vital it is to acknowledge the pervasiveness of such phenomena in order to overcome the widespread tendency to discuss them only when they assume their most severe form and become almost self-evident. Even though through the years the academic literature seems to have covered a wide range of economic sectors[52], we often read and discuss about labour exploitation forgetting to deliver a simple message: that it is actually a *continuum*, starting from its *less severe* ("grey-ish") working conditions and ending in its *most severe* forms that may even involve human trafficking and migrants' smuggling. However, labour exploitation does not always occur in its extreme and most severe representations and, as respondents clearly stated, both grey and black working conditions and practices are not confined to the «lively reality» of sites but are also diffused within professions.

Faced with this evidence, we cannot postpone discussing the fact that labour exploitation may assume various degrees of severity, according to the peculiar situation under scrutiny. If we fail to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of this reality and if our

[52] Cfr. among others for the Italian context. The most diffuse ones concern agriculture (Chiaromonte 2018; Faleri 2021, 2019; Pugliese 2015; Ragusa 2011) and domestic work (Borelli 2021; Brunazzo 2018; Palumbo 2016). Then we can isolate a couple of works pertaining to turism and hospitality (Iannuzzi and Sacchetto 2020, 2016) and a few works on various economic sectors, such as constructions, logistics and transportations (Bruscaglioni 2017; Cillo and Perocco 2016; Dolente 2010; Sacchetto 2009).

focus is only on its *most severe* forms, we let the *less severe* ones prosper in the shadows, hidden by a biased working culture (often times shared by both, employers and employees) according to which black working conditions are to be preferred in order to cut the costs of labour and "trick" the State to make more profit. Moreover, we need to acknowledge the fact that labour exploitation in the professions may be enhanced by relying on the instrumental use of false self-employment, but also of the *rhetoric of passion*, whose roots seem to run so deep that even at the university the ground is set so that students' expectations cannot be any different from the ones proposed by the dominant narrative.

> *«I still remember the first lesson at the university* [she laughs]. *There was this… well, she's an authority in the archaeological field, and the first thing that she said to the overcrowded room was: "The first thing you need to know to be an archaeologist is that you can be an archaeologist only if you're wealthy." Today, after almost 15 years in the field I can say it's still true, unfortunately: you can't work as an archaeologist only for the money. It does not make you rich and sometimes, especially at the beginning, it doesn't even pay the bills – if it pays at all.»*
>
> Interview 49, trade unionist and ex-archaeologist (F).

What emerges as the *rhetoric of passion* in the interviewees' words seem to have two main functions. On the one hand, while passion is actually the driving force that brings (and should bring) individuals towards a certain job or profession, it is (in)directly and instrumentally used to set their expectations towards experiencing less severe forms of labour exploitation. On the other side, the *rhetoric of passion* seems to be an instrument on which professions rely to select their members: in this sense, we can define it as being the *rhetoric of meritocracy* in disguise. Drawing from Littler's (2013 and 2017) work, we can count at least four problems arising from the very idea of meritocracy in the construction industry and the professions, linked to the mainstream discourse on passion. Far from engaging in a discussion on singular or multiple talents and intelligences, the first arising issue is that meritocracy endorses competitiveness as well as hierarchical and linear systems, in which not everyone can "rise" and someone must be left behind. Here, we can easily locate the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion adopted by the

professions while their aspiring members «work [their] way up the ladder», as well as the (in)direct sense of competitiveness that seems to permeate the professions since the university years.

> Meritocracy offers a 'ladder' system of social mobility, promoting a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimises inequality and damages community 'by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other'.
>
> Littler (2013, p.54)

In addition to this, we have to keep in mind that competition does not necessarily takes the form of a ladder. Rather, it takes the more complex form of a *labyrinth* in which women seem to navigate more tortuously than men. Here, every step is actually a turn among tinted glass walls that allows for peers to clearly see the prize at its centre and be aware of a wide range of behaviours adopted by others to reach it: if on the one side, this visibility offers "mentoring" possibilities, on the other fosters competition and a sense of inadequacy in those left behind.

Secondly, meritocracy not only endorses competitiveness *within* a profession, but even *between* professions: this favours the development of a hierarchical ranking of both professions and status. Deepening the analysis on individual strategies and solutions to the challenges posed by the industry, I will show in the next chapter how a(n) (in)formal ranking of professionals clearly emerges from the words of the interviewees. Here, we can anticipate that restorers and archaeologist acknowledge their feelings of representing the lower ranking figures on-sites along what we can call a *scale of credibility*: they do so by comparing themselves and their level of authority chiefly to that exerted by architects and engineers.

The third problem on which Littler (2013) reflects deals with the validation of upper-middle class (read: *the professions'*) values as being the norm to aspire to: the only movement possible on the ladder (or through the *labyrinth*) is hence upward (or towards the *labyrinth*'s centre), both in terms of finance and class advancement. However, that this material improvement does not necessarily coincide with «a "better"

or “happier” culture» (Littler, 2013, p.55) is shown by the negative, dominant discourse revolving around income and presenteeism in the professions of the construction industry. Even though I already stated it, what stroke me was the fact that only when asked about the downsides of the industry and/or the professions interviewees actually spoke about salary while only in a couple of cases the argument was brought up independently by respondents and in a positive light. The women discussing income positively also seemed to embrace a “better” and “happier” culture because they started their own business, directly smashing the challenges and barriers posed by the *labyrinth* and taking a risky “shortcut” (entrepreneurship) to reach its prize at the core.

Finally, meritocracy is an ideological myth that serves to obscure economic and social inequalities while playing an important role in hindering social (and gender) equality. As I already had the chance to discuss in the methodological section of this thesis, I cannot deny that all the men and women I interviewed are white, Italians, and belonging at least to the middle-class. Even in this scenario, however, we cannot avoid thinking about the mechanisms that are put in place by professions to keep at bay the increasing numbers of educated people that try to join them. Relying on the rhetoric of passion and meritocracy allows for a system to exist based on self-interest and permanent competition that is able to (in)directly exclude those that are not willing to comply with its values and principles (Hickman, 2009; Littler, 2013). Those who can endure (grey or even black) working conditions harshened by presenteeism, overtime schedules, and heavy workloads, embracing the professions’ values, are allowed to be part of them and can actually start to establish and consolidate their career in the industry. On the contrary, those who are not willing to comply with such a system may either drop out or start their own business – if they have the means to do it and are willing to embrace the risks associated with entrepreneurship.

4.2. Navigating the *labyrinth*. Reputation, informal networks, and opportunities for career progression.

Notwithstanding the complexities met during the first working experiences, interviewees discussed being willing to endure harsh working conditions and

environments because of the necessity of «establishing [their] name» in the industry. Workers and professions associated with constructions seem to rely principally on *word-of-mouth* to acquire new clients and jobs, so much that informal relations and practices seem to come in handy in the Italian context not only for the well-documented recruitment of builders – who usually show up directly on site when searching for employment – but also for restorers and professionals.

«*Well yes! Builders don't go giving curricula around – they simply show up on site and present themselves. And maybe yesterday one of the crew quit, so they just tell him to come there tomorrow and work for the day. If he knows what he does, he's in*.»

«And if he doesn't?»

«*If the need's on both sides, he'll learn*.»

Interview 3, trade unionist (M)

« […] *you can send out curricula, but there are few restoration firms and sometimes they just don't need new personnel. (…) people send their CV because they're solid and work is not an issue with them. When you're self-employed, instead, you're always looking out for a new site to grab or a new client to acquire… and it can be exhausting, 'cause you also have to hold on tight to the clients you already have…*»

Interview 39, restorer (F).

Only big or medium, more structured, firms seem to rely on more formal selection procedures for their personnel, from builders to administrative and technical staff. They usually advertise vacancies online or via recruitment agencies, proceed to review the curricula of potential employees or freelance collaborators and finally conduct formal interviews with the candidates who seem to be more suitable to fill the vacancy.

«*I'm currently looking for someone to fill a vacancy. However, independently from what I look for, I usually advertise the position on a couple of websites; then I*

evaluate all the CV and call the ones that seem fit for the job. During the interview, if they can easily contemplate the idea that I am the firm – without overreacting – they're on the right path to be hired [she stresses the underlined words].»

Interview 19, entrepreneur and architect (F).

Even in such formal and structured instances, however, informal relations and word-of-mouth are widely acknowledged by professionals and entrepreneurs as the greatest mean to widen their network of both clients and collaborators. In addition to these, employees in particular rely on them to gain access to information and jobs able to enhance their career progression avoiding the risks associated with self-employment.

In the literature on constructions, however, there seems to emerge a difference in how men and women build and nurture such relations and men are reportedly benefitting more than women from engaging in this kind of relations. The latter, instead, tend to be excluded (either directly or indirectly) mostly because of the arguments debated – e.g., sport, sex, or sexist banters – or due to the need to allocate time differently than their male counterparts – e.g., by carrying out house chores (Caven et al., 2016; Watts, 2009). This differentiation seems to hold also for the Italian context, as men and women address informal networks in slightly different manners. Women appear to try and confine such relations within the boundaries of their working life, engaging in after work aperitifs or dinners seldomly if compared to their male counterparts. Even though gender expectations on family and household caring duties and responsibilities make up for the vast majority of responses given for avoiding engaging in informal gatherings, this does not appear to be exclusively the case, as women occasionally reported on the need to make some time to take care of themselves. This happens independently from their marital status and in a wide variety of manners, such as: staying at home watching movies or reading books; going to the gym; or going out with friends – who not necessarily are also colleagues.

«*Sometimes I went out with them* [colleagues] *after work… usually with the ladies – and not so often, by the way. I don't know… Sometimes I'd rather go home and relax on the sofa while binge-watching the tv or go out with some friends…* [she stresses

the word underlined, almost opposing the concepts of "friends" and "colleagues". Then she pauses for a couple of seconds] *I mean – when the work is done, it's done! When I went out with my* [female] *colleagues… most of the times we kept talking about work and the men… well, they speak about stuff I don't care much about* (…) *sport and girls, most of the times.*»

Interview 30, civil engineer (F)

I would like to take the extract reporting the considerations made by Interview 30 and compare it with the following one by Interview 54 – also an engineer – who engaged in a discussion on after-work aperitifs a little bit longer than other male respondents.

«Yeah, it happens sometimes. It's nice to go and grab an aperitif after a long day at work!»

«What do you usually talk about?»

«Well, sometimes it's work – particularly if there are any problems going on or things to complain about [he laughs]*! But this usually doesn't stay up for too long. Personally, I speak about everything, but mostly sport such as soccer, basketball, Formula1… sometimes it's… families, girlfriends and the like… you know, "sentimental issues"* [he smirks]*... and sometimes it's just some silly thing that happened on site, or a silly joke* [he shrugs his shoulder]*...»*

«And is it an all-men thing or…?»

«No! Our female colleagues join us too, but yeah… I have to admit that it doesn't happen much often, anyway. There are few of them where I work at the moment and now one of them recently had a child, so [he shrugs his shoulders]*...»*

Interview 54, engineer (M).

If direct exclusion takes place every time women are openly cut out from office meetings, informal gatherings, or else by their male colleagues who actively discriminate them, from these two extracts emerges preponderantly the indirect dimension of these excluding practices. Indirect exclusion is frequently mentioned by the literature as being

primarily experienced by women in the construction industry anytime they are not directly excluded by meetings or events and still they are not part of them. Here, we can see that it seems to take two shapes: on the one side, women like Interview 30 may willingly opt out from after-work informal gatherings because they do not enjoy the company, or the argument discussed. On the other, however, men like Interview 54 do not seem to actually interrogate themselves on the causes that keep their female colleagues from participating, almost giving for granted that the presumed motivations for their absence can be conflated towards their reproductive role and the necessity to care for their children – or family and household, something that men do not seem to be asked (or expected) to do anyway.

In general, even though some women did not refrain from participating in any informal gathering available – from afterwork aperitifs and dinners with colleagues, firms, and clients, to lunch breaks with builders and other figures on sites – men seemed to be more casual about their participation and all of them tended to join any occasion in a very light-hearted manner.

> «*Yes, it happens that I have lunch with them* [builders] *on site. My female colleagues, instead, they usually leave and go out to eat something and then come back when the work resumes* (…) *It's not a female-friendly environment, I would say. They… We sometimes speak about things that they don't care about and if a good-looking woman passes by, they certainly do not refrain from making… inappropriate* [he sighs] *comments on her demeanour. Sometimes this even happens when they* [female colleagues] *are present* [he shrugs his shoulders].»
>
> Interview 53, archaeologist (M).

> «*Those* [on-site lunch breaks] *are the things I miss the most, you know.* (…) *And it was nice to see that my presence, after the initial diffidence, was greeted with enthusiasm to the point that when the break was approaching, they were like: "You're staying for lunch, doctor, aren't you?"* [she laughs]. *But don't think that my presence… sweetened?... their discourses* [she laughs]*! They're* [builders] *like a bunch of mothers-in-law, very much into gossiping! They have something to say*

about <u>anyone</u> passing by the site: this means girls, of course… but also the old man with his hat tilted in a strange and funny way [she stresses the underlined word].»

Interview 49, trade unionist and ex-archaeologist (F).

Every time women join any kind of informal gatherings, they seem to reflect on their participation and the meanings associated with it differently than their male counterparts. Women try to confine meetings, events, and gatherings that relate to work to the official working hours in one way or another, in order to make time both for themselves and for domestic chores after the work is done. Moreover, from their recounts, men are always present to any of the occasions mentioned and avoided by women for whatever reason. Correspondingly, men refer of being more casual about their presence to any kind of informal gatherings and do not seem to particularly ponder over the motives behind women's (recurring) absence, nor the fact that they may have a role in provoking (and hence changing) it.

One of the main motivations for this stronger attempt made by women in trying to confine meetings and events to formal working hours can be that they experience work time differently in qualitative terms and ascribe diverse subjective meanings to it when compared to men (Sturges, 2013; Tietze and Musson, 2002). For example, in her work on young professionals' experience of long work hours, Sturges (2013) compares the experiences of men and women working in the UK construction industry and finds that their different tendency to experience long work hours as enjoyment (men) and conscientiousness (women)

> may reflect the domestic inequality that exists between the sexes even before they have children (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010), which means that women have more responsibilities in the home to fulfil than men. Moreover, women may be more conscious of ties with 'real' family and friends and therefore less inclined than their male colleagues to view work as a surrogate family experience or source of social entertainment and support (Dahlen et al., 2008).
>
> Sturges (2013, p. 356).

There seem to exist at least one other option for these different behaviours, even if it does not emerge directly from any of the interviews. Still, given the peculiar industry we are discussing and the predominant culture that is shared not only by sites workers, but in any working environment revolving around it and the broader society alike, I think we should account for at least three possible scenarios for women's absence from informal gatherings, as they all may affect their access to relevant informal networks. In the first one, women make more efforts than men to distinguish between their work and private lives. Secondly, women's success in becoming "one of the lads" (Thiel, 2012) allows them to join informal gatherings more easily than other female colleagues. Finally, women may perceive informal gathering as unsafe places for their presence, mostly due to the widespread sexual harassment experienced every day.

4.2.1. Women and the ambivalent nature of informal networks.

In the first scenario, women professionals actually try harder than their male counterparts to keep separate their working and private lives, even if this means opting out of social events and independently from their ability to gain access to such informal networks. This mostly happens, as we saw, either because women prefer to dedicate their spare time to themselves while dealing with non-work-related activities, or because they actually need that time to perform additional care and reproductive work within the household.

The second possibility is offered to the women who were able to overcome the challenges posed by the *labyrinth*, which made them "suited" for working in the industry. Hence, their presence is allowed both on sites and at informal gatherings due to the fact that these women meet certain characteristics that allow them to «fit in». They do not need to completely conform to the predominant culture of the industry – they may even challenge and embrace it at the same time, continuously balancing and juggling between different stereotypes on femininity and masculinity. For example, even though they may be rigorous during working hours, «*they ask things kindly*»; their demands «a*re not impossible to meet*»; they do not act in an «*irrational or hysterical and crazy*» way. At

the same time, during breaks they are «*easy-going*», able to «*laugh it off*», and maybe even interested in the «*manly discourses*».

The third scenario, as I was anticipating, was not actually debated by respondents. Still, I think we must acknowledge one in which women avoid informal gatherings because of the (in)direct harassment they experience during their everyday work – a hypothesis not unknown to the literature (Bagilhole et al., 2002). In the previous chapter we read the experience of Interview 44, a self-employed architect, who reported on the constant sexual proposals made by her male superiors to her fellow female colleagues and which she avoided until she was believed a lesbian – but hers is not the only example.

> «*I was at home with my husband and child and the phone rang. It was a man I was helping with his pay slips, and I thought he wanted news on the counting. He asked me if we could have spoken about it over dinner* [she laughs softly]. *"Well, I don't think my husband would be pleased about it!" – I answered* [she laughs].»
>
> Interview 23, trade unionist (F).

Recounts similar to the experience of Interview 23 can be found in most of the interviews made with women professionals, and they embrace a wide degree of sexual harassment – spanning from «heavy comments» made by builders or even fellow professionals towards them (e.g., on their outfit) to ambiguous invites for lunches and dinners, or even to groping and proposes for afterwork sexual encounters.

Since women need to constantly guard themselves from undesired and unsolicited attentions by their male counterparts independently from their extractions – e.g., builders, suppliers, clients, fellow professionals – it is also possible that informal gatherings after work are avoided by women not only because of their personal need to make room for their private lives, nor because of the potential lack of interest in the male discourses – as one might imagine and as I presented above, there are women who reported enjoying such discourses and events. Beside these reasons, we need to make room for the possibility that women abstain from participating to informal gatherings (more or less consciously) due to their everyday exposure to harassment, as the risk of it may actually increase during such occasions.

Whether this is true or false for our respondents in particular it is impossible to say, since they never directly addressed the issue. Still, it brings under the spotlight an interesting reflection: on the one side, networks have been reported as fundamental for establishing a reputation in the industry by all of the interviewees, men and women alike. On the other hand, however, we have to take into consideration the possibility that informal networks in particular may not be perceived as "safe spaces" especially by women, due to the everyday (in)direct harassments they are exposed to. This may also play an important role in women's decision to opt out from participating in such networks, bringing about diverse consequences in their career development – if not by completely hindering it, at least by making it more intricate to navigate the *labyrinth*.

4.3. Exiting the *labyrinth*. Drop out *versus* the entrepreneurial choice.

At this point, the women and men who made it so far have different options to pursue their career. The first one is what interviewees defined as the «safest option», i.e., to be regularly employed with an open-ended contract. Unfortunately, however, this option is rarely available to both of them, as even structured studios and firms tend to hire professionals as freelance consultants and occasional collaborators, depending on the projects they work on. Beside the people that may be employed as administrative or clerical staff in firms or bilateral bodies, only three respondents were open-endedly employed by restoration firms while the others were either self-employed or entrepreneurs.

Even though the vast majority of people I spoke to persevered and continued to make their way through the *labyrinth* to pursue their career in constructions, respondents frequently referred of knowing of people who «happened to abandon it». In general, people who definitely exit the industry are reported by respondents to do so because of burnout or the inability to fit back in the industry after maternity leave. In both cases, dropouts seem to revert to different kinds of occupations, but the most referred one is as high school teachers or tour operator's guides.

Especially when dealing with the entrepreneurial choice, we will see that I did not encounter women who were actually able to return to the industry after a shorter or longer

pause due to maternity. Few respondents acknowledge their existence, but also stress the challenges they had to face to come back to their previous occupation as «clients do not wait». Nevertheless, none of these *returners* seemed to have opted to start their own activity in the industry. This option seems more suited to young women who are particularly attached to the industry, the idea of entrepreneurship, but also have the economic and psychological means to embrace the risks associated with becoming «their own bosses» and following the path laid in front of them by the possibilities of entrepreneurship.

4.3.1. «*To be or not to be*»[53]? Career calling and the (unspoken) risk of burnout

As we saw, respondents were overall satisfied with their occupation and career when I talked to them, to the point that when asked to provide any piece of advice for potential *newbies* they all stated they love their job (notwithstanding the discussed downsides) and that they «wouldn't change it for anything in the world». Throughout their words, and even if filtered through the lenses of the rhetoric of passion, we may even say these respondents felt and approached their professions and jobs as answering a «career calling» (Bellah et al., 1996; Dobrow et al., 2015; Elangovan et al., 2010; Hall and Chandler, 2005). Beside family support and other individual characteristics, we have to take into consideration that both career calling and organizational support may be important moderating factors for burnout when considering abandoning the construction industry (Wu et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2018).

With such premises, it caught me by surprise that one respondent openly discussed the possibility of abandoning the profession during our meeting: Interview 41 is a young architect and she thought I reached out to her because I knew she was pondering this option. We met via Zoom in March 2021 and beside working for a studio in Milan three days per week she was also rounding up working as a substitute teacher.

[53] William Shakespeare's, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1.

«*I'm considering leaving this job… like, for real (…) architecture as a whole* [she takes a moment before continuing]*… I thought that was why you wanted to interview me, I thought* [name of her friend] *told you I was considering leaving construction once and for all.* (…) *It's the piling up of all of these things* [previous negative working experiences, environments, and sexism]. *And we have to add to this the anxiety caused by precarious working conditions; the fact that you never earn enough, and you dig your way out of the poverty threshold – but sometimes you're paid even less than a cashier*[54]*… which is crazy. What else?* [She takes a couple of seconds] *Well, I hate this thing that you keep doing this job – which is not physically demanding as that of a cashier, of course – but you keep doing it, and you endure all of these hardships only for a matter of status, only because so you're an "architect". This is crazy! This sector – as well as many within it – goes on due to the status attached to it, when actually we're doing a job that can be objectively useless or even dangerous for the broader society! Think about the fake-green or those who do not even try to be green at all… This is what's begun to suffocate me. Anxiety; various things piling up; being unable to ideologically bear how this system works anymore; the economic question…*»

Interview 41, ex-architect (F).

In this extract, Interview 41 mentions a bunch of reasons she is considering in order to make up her mind and decide on whether to quit the profession. The first ones, to which she refers only indirectly, are the obstacles encountered during her previous working experience that built up and provided a strong enough foundation for the option of leaving the industry to become a viable alternative to persevering. Previously in our interview, in fact, she recalled her first working experience: it took place for a studio in a city near Naples, without a formal contract of employment and under the supervision of a male architect. Then, she moved to Milan and started working at a studio directed by a female architect until few months after the interview took place; while still working there, in fact, she participated to the open competitive tender to become a full-time high school teacher.

[54] With this example, Interview 41 refers to the possibility of being underpaid, especially at the beginning at the carrier or whenever being employed without a formal contract.

Even though she describes the passage from Naples to Milan as an overall improvement in her working career and experience, she actually describes passing from a paternalistic to a maternalistic approach to work relations. Both bosses, in fact, traced back any argument or discussion to the idea of running their business «as a family». But this is a dangerous narrative for workers to embrace, as it puts a lot of pressure onto them to not only carry out their work, but to do so with a great deal of commitment – eventually creating the fertile humus that endorses, sustains, and reproduces the long hour working culture. Moreover, while during her first working experience the male boss engaged in the «usual patronizing behaviours», the female one tended to bring the "workplace as family" narrative to its extreme. For example, while her male boss tended to engage in *mansplaining*[55], the female one used to recount happenings of her private life providing extremely detailed descriptions to employees and almost demanded that they did the same with her whenever they had a problem, «*as one would with a friend, a sister or – even better – a mother.* [The boss] *always says things like: "You're all my children"*»[56].

From the extract above we witness how work's material and immaterial aspects have a direct impact on workers' physical and mental well-being and how even the moderating role of career calling cannot stand alone against all the other variables of the equation. When asked for a piece of advice to a *newbie* Interview 41 answered:

> *«I'm still sure architecture is the job I was meant to do, and I'll surely regret it if I quit* [she sighs]*. But I'm tired of having to constantly struggle for decent contracts, and earnings, and to deal with anxiety, and everything else. The system needs to be changed and I alone cannot change the system… and definitely, it will not change by itself overnight. I am considering quitting only for my own sake, for my own peace of mind. If I do it, I will regret it. But I also know I can't go on like this: my friends and family are affected by my… anxiety… my personal life is affected by it… I don't' think I'm willing to stand for it anymore.»*

[55] By *mansplaining* I refer to situations in which a man explains something to a woman in a condescending or patronizing manner. Interview 41 reported that her male boss continuously interrupted her and paraphrased what she said – e.g., about a working procedure to follow. He, then would have framed what she said as «poorly stated» and proceeded to provide her with a "better" description or explanation of the discussed argument.

[56] Cfr. full quote at p. 110

Interview 41, ex-architect (F).

In these words, we see the conflict that grips Interview 41: even though she wants to be an architect with all of her heart, she needs to consider stepping away from this career because of the impact it has on her psychological well-being. Studies show that construction' professionals are particularly prone to experience burnout because of the long hours working culture, work overloads, precarious working conditions, and stressful environments, heightened by the necessity to manage times, costs, and relations with clients (Lingard, 2003; Loosemore et al., 2003). In this scenario, scholars suggest that women may deal with higher levels of work-related stress and burnout when compared to men: this is usually explained as a consequence of the higher demands posed on women and higher levels of dissatisfaction toward their career progression (Bastalich et al., 2007; Dainty et al., 1999; Dainty and Lingard, 2006; Murat et al., 2019). Even today, in fact, women are the ones who find it more challenging to try and balance their *double presence* (Balbo, 1970) and who are constantly exposed to a working culture that is imbued with machismo and heteronormativity, encompasses sexism and sexual harassment, and questions women's preparation and knowledge more frequently than their male counterparts.

If we already discussed another material component of burnout when we discussed the apparent irrelevance of salary, it is interesting to note that among the immaterial concerns Interview 41 places also what she perceives to be the widespread motivations to hold on to the industry and the profession. People – she says – are willing to endure all of the hardships we described only to be recognized and identified as an "architect", only because of the social status associated with the profession(s). Even though the argument made by Interview 41 only refers to architects, I feel that it can actually comprise all of the professions – in the industry and in general. Reprising the dispute on meritocracy, I would say that gaining a certain degree of social recognition because of one's status as a professional is the aspect of meritocracy that anyone may be willing to talk about. On the other (darker) side of the coin, is the unspoken discussion about "failure". When the only movement allowed by the rhetoric of meritocracy is upward, what happens when someone descends the ladder? As Hickman (2009) puts forward, if we define ourselves (and are socially recognized by) the place we hold on to

the ladder; if it is the success in our workplaces that defines our worth as individuals; when "failure" occurs, when someone completes tertiary education in a certain field of study but then changes job or quits, it is the person's sense of self-worth that is at risk. It does not matter that this may happen because not everyone is capable of acquiring the traits rewarded by the labour market; it does not matter if this happens because of inequity of access or personal beliefs and values. It does not matter because progress is linear and there is only one destination available: «the achievement of employment success, money and associated social status» (Hickman 2009, p. 6).

4.3.2. Gratitude and guilt. Maternity as the main (spoken) motivation to drop out

What follows from the previous reflections is that only maternity seems to be a viable excuse to abandon construction industry's professions without any retaliation. If Interview 41 is the only interviewee who actually spoke of taking into consideration the possibility of quitting her job as an architect because of burnout, most of the other respondents referred about knowing people that abandoned the industry to take up different careers. Interestingly enough, when such examples were made, the people mentioned were always women who got pregnant and tried to start a family.

> «*Undoubtedly, and particularly if you work as self-employed, a lot of female colleagues abandoned mainly when they became mothers. I have no children, but a lot of female colleagues abandoned because when you stay out of the game for a long time… it's just more difficult to come back. Men undoubtedly have an advantage in this regard. Also, to be on site while seven-months pregnant it is not something that you'd suggest… even from a sanitary standpoint and beside the effort to stand on your feet all day while exposed to the elements, rain, sun… moreover, sites are very dusty and noisy… Women… women who want children are not supported, undoubtedly.* (…) *Only few of them were actually able to get back to work, with much effort, as archaeologists. But those who didn't make it… a few took the licence as tour guides – and with the covid pandemic* [she shakes her head]*... most of them turned to teaching, because they're public employees, with a lot of time*

at their disposal… and others I think are currently employed as substitute teachers [she emphasizes the underlined words].»

Interview 52, archaeologist (F).

«*In our current society, for a man it is easier, paradoxically… for a male archaeologist… to marry, have children, and get back to work as an archaeologist. For a female archaeologist it is much more difficult because there are changes that are physical but also in the routine that… do not allow you to work in a tranquil way anymore. In this sense, we're a little behind about… equity… in my opinion… in the requests made to workers to carry out some kind of work, some kind of professions.* (…) *Then, there are great examples of women that got both, a career and a family… and others that just didn't.*»

Interview 55, archaeologist (M).

Even though many architects and engineers made similar examples, I decided to pick these quotes from Interview 52 and 55 prominently because they are both archaeologists, a profession in which about the 70% of the workforce is actually made up of women. Two things are then quite remarkable. First of all, even in one of the female-dominated professions of the construction industry women tend to find it more difficult than men to return to their previous occupation after taking a maternity leave. We already saw that maternity is mostly felt and described by women as a burden, and if the concrete example posed by Interview 46[57] when discussing women's solidarity was not enough to sustain such claim, we must remember that studies on the construction industry present us with more qualitative and quantitative evidence on women having a hard time in returning to work after pregnancy, as it negatively impacts their career opportunity for progress and promotion (Barreto et al., 2017; Bryce et al., 2019; Watts, 2012).

Beside this narrow reflection concerning construction comes the second thing I find amusing, that is Interview 55's *lapsus* at the beginning of the quote, when he starts by saying «*for a man*» and then corrects himself to say, «*for a male archaeologist*». As any *lapsus*, this makes sense to a certain extent: I asked about – and we were discussing

[57] Full quote on the experience of Interview 46 at p. 129.

– his profession and the experiences of some of his female colleagues. In this light, for him there was no need to broaden the discussion to encompass other akin construction' professions nor the society as a whole. However, scholars showed us that in almost every field or industry, even the female-dominated ones, women find it difficult to return to their previous occupation after their maternity leave. Studies like the one of Huston and Marks (2003), for example, illustrate that generally female employees find it difficult to return to full-time positions after their first pregnancy. Moreover, some of their respondents used to work as full-timers and were able to return to the same occupation only as part-timers: these women perceived such reintegration as a downgrading in their career experience and were more dissatisfied with their coming back when compared to the (fewer) ones who returned as full-timers. As many studies on women's jagged career and the mentioned experience of Interview 46 exemplifies, women are still more expected than their male counterparts to withdraw from their full-time occupation or to rely on part-time solutions in order to manage and primarily take care of their new-born children. As one may imagine, men sustain such gendered view of family responsibilities more frequently than women.

> «*It's complicated for a woman to return to work – independently from archaeology – after a pregnancy. For us "boys" it's definitely easier, we do not breastfeed nor handle the first months of the child… so, it is easier that I return to work rather then her. Because I cannot breastfeed him* [he raises his shoulders]*. We're breastfeeding him* [their new-born child]*, you know. When you give them dried milk, then it's another thing.*»
>
> Interview 51, archaeologist (M).

Keeping up with this argument on breastfeeding, even though the first modern breast pump has been patented in the second half of the 19th century and its improved mechanical version followed at the beginning of the 1920s, methods to support women in this regard are almost 2500 years old. As an example, Obladen (2012) retraced the evolution of breast pumps as well as their forms and materials while pointing out two things: in the first place, for many decades of the 20th century this technology remained hospital-based; secondly, the patenting process at the beginning of the 20th century took

place along with an increased «erotization of the female breasts, especially in the United States» (Obladen, 2012, p. 672). This becomes almost self-evident when the main motivation offered by a man, Hugh B. Cunningam, to patent his "Nursing Attachment" (1910) was «to avoid unpleasant and embarrassing situations in which mothers are sometimes placed in public spaces by the necessary exposure of the breasts in sucking the child»[58]. A bit more than a century later, the current discussion on breastfeeding in public and at the workplace is still struggling to distinguish a simple nurturing act from its sexualized implications. As Saha (2002) sustained twenty years ago, even today the easiest way to solve this discussion remains to hide breasts from the public discussion rather than «to struggle with attempts at desexualization for the express purpose of making breastfeeding acceptable to society» (Saha, 2002, p. 70).

Women's feelings towards maternity are definitely more multifaceted. As we saw, some of them are either single (7) or in a relationship (8) but without children; some are married with children (15); while only three of them are (or are getting) divorced – of these, two have children. Independently from their marital status, all of them recognize that to be a mother while also being a worker, professional, or entrepreneur in the construction industry is something that cannot be unplanned. While conversating on the issue, most of them even recognized this to be a widespread complication impacting on women's career paths not only in the construction industry but also in many other sectors of the economy – if not all of them. To decide whether to start a family, in fact, is something women appear to not go through light-heartedly, as I anticipated in the previous chapter. Accurate calculations are accounted for particularly when women are self-employed, as they risk being excluded from maternity leave compensation. Until recently, self-employed women had to make sure that at least three months of contributions have been deposited within the year before the beginning of the period eligible for maternity compensation[59]. But beside such economic worries, women share also very practical concerns about their career perspectives, deeply intertwined with the

[58] Cunningham, H. B. (1910). *Nursing attachment*. United States Patent Office, pat. n. 949414.

[59] The adoption of the law-decree, nr. 101, dated September 3rd, 2019, modified the contributory prerequisite by lowering it to one month of contributions within the year before the beginning of the period eligible for maternity compensation. It came into effect on September 5th, 2019, and hence it was applicable for maternity periods starting on that day or successively. It is still too early to discuss the effects of this disposition, but certainly it seems to represent an opportunity for self-employed women to benefit from maternity protections easily (and with less concerns) than before.

times of production of the industry and the peculiar structure of their reputation, strongly based on *word-of-mouth.*

> «*To work alone is not convenient at all. A setback can happen to me at any time – and when you're self-employed, your setbacks aren't provided for by anybody but you. Especially when we're women and we would love to have a child… pragmatically speaking, if you don't have a group, you can't have one because clients. Won't. Wait!* [she stresses the underlined words]»
>
> Fieldnotes. December 18th, 2021.
> *Instagram* stories of V., self-employed architect (F).

Behind the sentiment of clients' unwillingness to wait for women's return after pregnancy, lies the non-neutral origin of professions or entrepreneurship. Borrowing a reasoning put forward, among others, by Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005) while analysing the narratives of various women entrepreneur, here men clearly seem to interpret women's professionalism as "lacking" when compared to the standard or "normal" one – i.e., as performed by men. Still, I think we should ask ourselves what kind of men set the ground for the "normal" way to intend professionalism or entrepreneurship? These are the men who are expected to provide for the economic sustenance of their family; the ones who should not complain about long-distance business trips; the ones who do not need to leave their jobs for five months because of paternity; just as they do not need to leave early from work and skip informal afterwork gatherings because they are not expected to care for their households and children as much as their wives do. From these statements emerges a clear representation of masculinity, the hegemonic and machist one, which pervades the construction industry and society in general – and I will reprise its negative consequences on both men and women at the end of the paragraph.

Coming to women with children, and again independently form their marital status, they discuss two aspects of their experiences with maternity leave and motherhood in general. First, all of them stated that if they were able to return to their previous occupation and to achieve both a family and a career in the industry is because of a shared

project with their partner, who is usually a fellow professional involved in the industry. This common project and understanding of the requests and difficulties of the profession is able to bring about a somewhat «fairer» and «more equal» division of the reproductive work, allowing women to return to work earlier (if not with less troubles). Independently of the fact that male partners were asked and agreed upon sharing house and care works or spontaneously proposed to do so, most of these women refer of people (mostly other women) telling them they «have been lucky to find such a caring partner», that they «should be grateful for their [partner's] help with the children, or in the house». This is the second arrow to the hegemonic masculinity's bow: women are expected to be responsible for carrying out all of the reproductive works to the point that men should be thanked when they perform (some of) them. In these cases, not only they are depicted as the breadwinners of the household but are also praised as they possess rather uncommon abilities for their specimen – the ones necessary for *helping* in the house and care work.

The last aspect deeply intertwines with the one just presented. It concerns women's profound sense of guilt when returning to work. Most of the mothers I interviewed expressed deep, ambivalent feelings towards their experiences of motherhood. On the one side, in fact, it was supposed to be «the best moment of their lives», the one they were «actually born for»; on the other, however, while none of them regretted having one or more children, most of them apologized for the feelings they have been experiencing from its beginning and up to the date of the interview.

> «*It's painful to say, but I am the classic "weekend mother". It hurts not to be there, to rely on my parents to take him* [10 years old child] *from school or to bring him to swimming classes when my husband is also busy… and only because a work meeting lasted longer than it should have! It hurts because everyone thinks you're… everyone thinks you're a* <u>bad mother</u> *because of the time you spend at work. They don't say it, but it's in the way they look… and talk to you… Sometimes other mothers are the worst. They're like: "Oh, you don't know that? Well, of course you don't! You weren't here, your mother – his grandmother was"…* [she pauses for a few seconds and seems to be close to tears]. *I know I am* <u>not the best</u> *of mothers. But I also know that it would be* <u>way</u> *worse if I didn't work. I'd be unhappy and he would definitely be unhappy too – that's something I* <u>can't</u> *allow. That's why when I'm home – and*

mostly on weekends – I completely devote my time and myself to him. Because it's not the quantity, but the quality of the time we spend together that is important. Because he must know that I love him with all my heart and that, when I'm with him, he's the only thing that matters [she pauses a couple of seconds, I nod silently]. *And I'm so grateful that also my husband and our parents are understanding and are teaching him that, even though I'm not home as much as some of his friends' mothers, it is not because I don't love him* [she dries a couple of tears and takes a deep breath]. *You see… nobody speaks… well, men* [she smiles softly] *are a different thing, they don't have the same expectations, no? But a lot of women I know feel the same way. A lot of us feel inadequate both as mothers and as workers – because when your child is sick, but you just can't stay home… well, your mind is in a completely different place – and it's hard to be a weekend mom… But it should be – and it is, I'm sure of that! It is just as hard to be a weekend dad. But men are not allowed to understand it – aren't they* [she chuckles softly]?»

Interview 27, executive director of a bilateral centre
for training and safety in constructions (F)

The long extract from Interview 27 is the one that encompasses and brings together the only common (and gendered) reasoning standing behind this paragraph and the anticipated negative consequences of hegemonic masculinity. These are mostly linked to the *gratitude-guilt pair*. Every time gratitude is shown, guilt is also present – and vice versa. When praises are to be made, they are voiced by women and address the male partner or the husband, as he *helps* his female partner or wife in her domestic and caring duties; at the same time, however, that woman is blamed, as she is contravening the gender expectations. This limited vision, however, does not account for the possibility of men actually enjoying house chores, or caring responsibilities; it is the very same argument at the base of the praises and recognition of male workers in female-dominated professions (Budig, 2012). When guilt is made evident, instead, it is always directed towards women, independently from the ones lending the accusations. Among the people I met, it was only women who reported of being – either directly or indirectly – accused of not behaving «as a good mother would have» and of experiencing the «heaviness» of the role expectations traditionally associated with their gender. Men did not report such

feelings; in few cases, however, they discussed starting to refuse long-distance business trips in favour to staying closer to their family.

Things seem to be (ever so slowly) changing, as we will discuss in the last paragraph of this chapter. Still, I am once again confronted with the striking importance of this work as a mean to underline the vitality of bringing intersectionality and a gender approach to the analysis of professions and the construction industry. If women are more penalized than men in the labour market in general, and in the construction industry in particular, it is because of the cultural bias on gender that still today weights on the people working in the industry. If the distortions and negative consequences of hegemonic masculinity are somewhat easier to spot by observing women, it would be foolish to ignore that men are also wrapped up in these modes of thinking. The main problem for men, however, is that hegemonic masculinity's discourse (on feminism and women's rights) has biased them long enough and to the point that they are still unable to envision an alternative scenario that does not solely coincide with the improvement of women's conditions, but also with their own.

4.3.3. Entrepreneurs by necessity or by choice? Women's perspective on the entrepreneurial opportunity

According to Franchi (1992), the main difference between the entrepreneurial ideal types characterized by the traits of *evolution* and *creation* is that, while in the first case the passage from employee work to proprietorship represents a more or less natural progress motivated by the need for self-affirmation and for personal professionality to be recognized, creators instead actively choose self-employment to express a desire for autonomy and independence from the established hierarchies and careers offered by employee work. In the construction industry, however, pure employment is tricky to find, as the ones clearly covered by subordinate contracts of employment are typically administrative and clerical staff hired by medium and highly structured firms or the bilateral bodies of the industry to deal with its bureaucratic procedures (e.g., to open and close sites, to take part in public tenders, to organize training courses). Professionals, instead, can be (and are) frequently employed as freelancers even at the very beginning

of their career, to the point that self-employment is not an actual choice they make when starting to work in the industry.

> «*Then, after graduating, I found my first work and it was for the architects' studio I was mentioning beforehand.*»
>
> «And what was it like? This first working experience, I mean.»
>
> «*Neither good nor bad, you know* [she chuckles]*! After the university I didn't know where to begin but I needed to get a VAT number and do all of… all of this incredible stuff that no one prepares you for at the university!* (…) *I was never an employee in the true sense of the word – as a public worker, for example. As I was saying, the first thing you have to do after graduating is get yourself a VAT number. Because that's how it works, because you can count on your fingers the number of those actually employing architects and engineers and… it's not worth it – and that's why on papers we're all freelancers.*»
>
> Interview 30, civil engineer (F).

If self-employment is often a necessity rather than an actual career choice, it may be more complex to actually distinguish between pure and false self-employment, which therefore is present not only among site workers, but also within the professions (Jorens, 2008; Thörnquist, 2013; Wickam and Bobek, 2016; Williams et al., 2020).

Beside this, however, women express a wide range of dispositions towards the entrepreneurial turn, even though they seem to share the overall same discourses and narratives on the topic. As all of them are prone to perceive entrepreneurship as the more or less natural and subsequent step in the career progression, few of them were not interested in the possibility. Those who were, showed two main tendencies: on the one hand, they we "naturally" drawn to ownership due to the existence of a family business which they were interested in continuing and which also allowed them to familiarize with the industry since they were children. On the other hand, some women understood that they could have had a higher chance at succeeding in the building industry if they relied on a different approach to the industry than most competitors – that is by taking advantage

of niches of production and innovative, green technologies, which are experiencing a growing demand on the client/supplier side.

During my interviews I did not encounter women who can fall within this ideal type in its most diffused depiction – i.e., women who start their autonomous activities in an attempt at *returning* to the employment left because of maternity leave and after having carried out childrearing duties. I have no reason to doubt of their existence, particularly when professional studios are taken into consideration rather than construction firms. However, the interviews I conducted lead me to assume that the most common entrepreneurial path among women of the building industry involves gaining a certain amount of experience – either through dependent or autonomous work, or in the family firm – before opening (or inheriting) an activity to which they can "easily" return after maternity.

Women who "fail" in following this path seem to experience greater difficulties to return after maternity and, as we saw, often revert to different occupation in the services sector, chiefly as teachers or tour operators. Women who follow this ideal path, instead, are (self-)entrepreneurs in charge of a working environment that can be more flexible and able to accommodate their families' needs, maternity, and even childrearing duties. They never completely leave the labour market as they delegate most of the daily tasks to partners or employees and freelancers, while never actually losing their grip on the more important responsibilities and chores, or on the overall management of their realities.

This evidence is fundamental to overturn the canonical depiction of female entrepreneurship ideal types. The dominant gender narrative represents women as untrustworthy entrepreneurs due to their expected tendency as "working mothers" to prioritize family duties, while men and "working fathers" are left out of the analysis unless the intergenerational transmission of enterprises is at stake (Cockburn, 1991; Langford et al., 1995; Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005; Watts, 2009).

Among these entrepreneurial experiences, however, we find some of the more *radical* experiences of the whole sample. For example, Interview 37 started a restoration firm because she struggled to see her professionality recognized in the industry and wanted to employ women «*to allow them to take a break from insecure incomes and working conditions, while also sparing them the classic challenges that* [she herself]

encountered while working for other firms, or as self-employed». Interview 20, instead, started her firm because, after discovering crude earth and straw constructions, she wanted to be able to build her own houses with these materials. She was well-aware of the fact that no existing construction firm would have had her as a site employee and, moreover, she did not want to be «*used and consumed as men are, bringing around 25 kilos bags of cement at once when you can move them in two rounds, for half of the weight*». With their experiences, these women face some of the obstacles that gender discrimination in the industry poses on women's career path and are able to enhance and ease their (and others') progression through the *labyrinth* while trying to counteract the challenges posed by constructions' masculine culture and ways of production (Donaldson, 1991; Connell, 2005).

Beside these examples, respondents appear extremely aware that their logics of action propose a fluid interconnection between their public and private lives due to the higher efforts required to them (rather than their male counterparts) to mediate between the expectations set by their belonging to the "female" gender and the ones set by their embracing of the (neutral) professional- or entrepreneur-mentality. As a consequence, most respondents are actively involved in public discussions, seminars, and events aimed at raising awareness on career opportunities available for women in the industry, as well as in promoting a change in the image of the industry – even when the pretended neutrality of entrepreneur-mentality is not fully acknowledged and when their feminist positioning is more than controversial (we will see it in the next chapter).

4.4. Conclusions: on the lack of generational differences

As we saw in the methodological chapter, the women I met were mostly younger than 45 years old and the number of interviewees decreased as age began to increase, to the point that only 5 respondents were older than 55. With more than 35 years of experience and a secured reputation in the industry, all of them are still actively involved in the construction industry and take part in territorial and national entrepreneurial associations, trade unions, and professional orders.

Starting from their point of view on the industry, while conversating about their experiences, all of them compared the difficulties faced by women in the '70s and '80s with the ones of younger women in the field.

> *«I always speak about so many years ago… but what you girls have today, for us it was a constant struggle* [she laughs]*!* (…) *There are these sorts of… cultural heritages… that today are more likely… they've not been overcome <u>at all</u>! But they're becoming thinner and thinner* (…) *And I would like that today's girls do not start again from the stone age! What's done it's done, but we need to understand that a lot has been already done! A lot has been achieved in few years! Let's start from what we have and let's try not to feel sorry or self-pity for ourselves… because, in the end, we must earn this equity by… showing our abilities and our determination* [she stresses the underlined words]*!»*
>
> Interview 45, entrepreneur (F, 65-67 y.o.)

The one and only point on which the older interviewees agree is that the growing number of women among professionals and entrepreneurs makes it somewhat easier for young girls to navigate the industry than it was for them, more than 35 years ago. In fact, from their words emerges a higher level of awareness towards that feeling of loneliness we introduced above: older women usually report that their university years were characterised by a «solitary path, in which the companions encountered were always of the opposite sex», a feeling that was present even when speaking about their working experiences. On this point, even younger women agree but they do not make direct reference to the past: they tend to say that due to the growing number and presence of women on sites, it will be easier for the future generations of women to be accepted and to establish their career in the industry than it was for them.

Interestingly enough, while older women were more prone to present their argument confronting their past with the present situation of female occupation in the industry, younger women tended to confront their present with the future and only in few cases a direct reference to the past was made. When this happened, usually it was to express a contrast between the old and the new generations. For example, there is a

passage in Interview 19's discourse in which she discusses the intersection of gender and age in the peculiar experience of young women entrepreneurs suffering (in)direct accusations of nepotism as they are «the daughters of… obviously a man». While presenting her reflection, Interview 19 describes the previous generations of female entrepreneurs using a harsh tone, comparing what she assumed was a tendency to stay away from sites to favour more administrative and managerial roles.

In this light, the young women I met seem to represent generations that may be more prone to defy gender stereotypes by being more present on sites, both as professionals and entrepreneurs with technical competencies and responsibilities, but also as workers (and Interview 20 is the most impressive case). Still there are cases, such as Interview 40, in which women prefer to leave the technical aspects of the work to the husband or the male in order to care more about the administrative and design ones.

The other two instances in which direct reference to the past was made, was to criticize the newly graduated students currently trying to enter the industry. This discourse is usually combined with criticism towards the university system and a perceived decline in the preparation it offers to newly graduated students on the more practical aspects of the job. For example, archaeologists remembered participating in more archaeological site experiences during university years than newly graduated students do, and the decrease in these activities directly affects the confidence and independence of young apprenticeships.

To the question what has changed for women across the years, unfortunately the only answer we can give is: not much. As we saw, women were and still are perceived as being unsuitable for working on site in particular, but also in the industry as a whole: as they represent only 7% of the workforce. This sector of the economy hence seem to remain a male prerogative. All the women, independently from their age and career path, report having experienced the same barriers and challenges. They all agreed on the importance of personal attributes such as determination, independence, and stubbornness, to survive in the industry and to consolidate their reputation, as respect only comes with age and constant demonstration of competence. They also agree on the fact that the growing number of women, particularly on sites, will eventually ease the situation for younger generations to come.

What most women also share is a tendency to be concerned with the widespread culture of the industry, biased not only by gender stereotypes but also by an idea of work and its procedures that affects all the workforce. In the words of people with up to 45 years of experience in the industry, what strongly emerges is the apparent unwillingness of the industry (and mostly the men making it) to rethink its modes of production not only to include women, but also to prevent the wear out of men's bodies. In the next chapter we will see what strategies and solutions are put in place by the interviewees to promote change in the industry.

CHAPTER V

«*We can(’t) do this on our own*».
(Contradictory) feminist narratives behind individual strategies and solutions to socio-cultural challenges

In previous chapters we anticipated some of the themes that will be presented here. After having described the main socio-cultural barriers experienced by women in the Italian construction industry throughout their careers, from entry and including either drop out or the entrepreneurial choice, we will discuss the main individual strategies and solutions available to counteract the detrimental impact of gender discrimination.

Starting from a consideration on how (in)formal site hierarchies can represent both a supporting and a hindering mechanism for women in the industry, we will see that women turn to formal hierarchies as instruments capable of offering protection against sexism and discrimination. At the same time, however, the existence of an informal site hierarchy and of structural, internalized gender discrimination practices compromise their formal authority and credibility, in what seems to be an attempt at subverting the “unusual” power relation.

Therefore, we will reflect on the main tactics adopted by women whenever their compentencies, knowledge, and credibility are challenged alongside their “suitability” for working in the industry. In doing so, we will try to deconstruct the different narratives shaping male and female coping strategies. In particular, by starting from a reflection on the ambivalent assumption that depicts women in male-intensive industries as “feminist ideal types”, we will see how contradictory can be the narrative(s) proposed by the women I interviewed on feminism and its beliefs. By reflecting on the distance between the social representation of these women as feminist and their own self-representation, we will witness how feminism is often times perceived as a double-edged sword, if not something to reject in order to more easily “fit in” into the industry. Gender-blindness will be discussed along with the detrimental results fostered by exacerbated competition among “token” women: both phenomena, in fact, are extremely problematic as they are capable of undermining the spreading and consolidation of a counter-stereotypical narrative.

Finally, by analysing the experiences and discourses of women openly defining themselves as feminist, we will see how the interiorization of the mainstream narrative on gender roles and relations (re)produces assumption on women's "lack" of credibility, authority, and status but never questions men's role and responsibilities for this outcome of gender relations. Notwithstanding the formal, institutional changes promoted not only at the national, but also at the European and international levels, the main problem of gender equity policies is that they are usually "made for women" and tend to leave men out of the equation. Therefore, we will propose the importance of a critical reflection on men and the construction of masculinity not only to remove gender discrimination (from the building industry, the overall economy, and society), but also to promote a different approach to work and production. We will do so by showing the concrete implication that such critical deconstruction and reconstruction process can make, for example, in terms of construction workers' health and safety.

5.1. (In)Formal hierarchies at work. Supporting or hindering mechanisms for women's inclusion in the industry?

As we anticipated in the previous empirical chapters, most respondents stressed the pivotal importance of relying on the site hierarchy to manage relations in general and conflicts in particular. As it determines the boundaries of each person's technical and professional competencies, the existence of a formal site hierarchy helps identify the tasks and responsibilities (including criminal liability) held by each person on the site, while also preventing and constraining episodes of "insubordination" through the exercise of the powers directly associated with one's hierarchical positioning.

> *«It is fundamental, fundamental. Because at every step, at every moment of the production process you need to know… well, the client or the entrepreneur needs to know exactly who's responsible for that error – when an error occurs.* (…) *I never discuss about PPEs, for example… if there's a safety coordinator, I ask him: "Is there something I should do?" and I don't say "Look – that one does not have anti-hardship shoes…" It's not my job. I can complain with the safety coordinator when*

I go up on a scaffold and fall down – then, yes, I call him and say: "Hey, on your scaffoldings I'm not safe, do something". I call him and the entrepreneur, but I say nothing to the workers.»

Interview 22, civil engineer (F).

«Hierarchy, on sites, is fundamental. When people overstep… there's always someone that questions your decisions, because we halt and delay the working schedule – and they just wanna go home [he laughs softly and slightly raises his shoulders]*. "C'mon, doctor, it's nothing! Let's keep digging!" – they say. So, you have to make clear… you have to make them understand that… no, you're not going to keep digging until I say so…* [he stresses the underlined words]*»*

Interview 55, archaeologist (M).

"Insubordination" seems to be a rather common issue in the industry. By this term I refer to episodes similar to the ones presented in the above interview extracts: construction workers appear to adopt intentionally challenging behaviours and attitudes toward professionals, either by openly questioning and defying their directions or by making them doubt their own preparation. We saw how Interview 54 defined this behaviours as being almost an «animal thing», able to go beyond gender dynamics in order to equally and indiscriminately target men and women. Even though this seems to hold true, it is only to some extent: as these tricky behaviours are discussed, they seem to be mostly related to the age of professionals and to the professions themselves – but we cannot underestimate the transversal relevance of gender in the relation dynamics.

The first cause for these acts of insubordination, then, seems to be the age of the persons involved in the confrontation. Insofar they seem to be more frequent and intense when professionals are the beginning of their careers, professional's younger age and (academic) knowledge is directly confronted with workers' older age and (practical) experience in the industry – resulting in the so-called "*we have always done it this way*" mentality. At the early stages of their career, young professionals with less «on the job» training and experience (Doeringer and Piore, 1971) may be more easily influenced or

misled by industry's veterans, as they seem to experience a gap between what they learnt at the university and what is pragmatically required on sites.

> *«It is much more difficult at the beginning, because… after graduation you just… The university prepares you, but only to a certain extent. When you are actually on site, it is completely different. Even when you practice in excavations sites during the university years… it is always a more "protected" environment – I don't know how to else to put it. You share the site with other people in your field, and they are more… aware?... of who you are and why you're there.»*
>
> Interview 56, anthropologist (F).

> *«It seems like the university does not really prepare you for what comes after. Youngsters nowadays are far more insecure than we were* [he is 37 years old], *and this is extremely counterproductive… It is almost like they* [builders] *can feel your insecurities and try to test you, to see if you're ready, if you know what you're talking about… if they can trust you, in a way.»*
>
> Interview 54, civil engineer (M).

It seems that, especially when men are involved or discuss the subject, we can trace back in their recounts the conflictual relation between working-class and middle-class masculinities (Connell, 2005). In an attempt at reaffirming the hegemony of one or the other, male professionals seem to rely on the antagonistic narrative "us *versus* them" to define their bourgeois masculinity as hegemonic by (re)presenting themselves as more educated and, hence, less violent – i.e., paternalistic rather than authoritarian (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996) – in the way they approach (gender) relations on sites.

Moreover, from the recount of Interview 54, when age is one of the main variables for the analysis, it seems that such challenging episodes assume almost a ritualistic nature. Recalling the dynamics of many other types of "rites of passage", newcomers are tested on their pragmatic preparation on constructions but, at the same time, their suitability for working in the industry is assessed. When the newcomer passes the examination, a trustful relation can be built, and enough respect is gained by the new professional to join the

industry and the site peacefully and without further major oppositions. When this does not happen, however,

> *«sites become boring and rigid workplaces: relations are tense, every word is measured, and conflict can arise over anything. There… It's no more fun to work under such circumstances.»*
>
> Interview 55, archaeologist (M).

Emerging from the interviews, however, it seems that also professions themselves – but most importantly attitudes towards them and their (perceived) prestige – should be taken into consideration when reflecting on the causes for builders' acts of "insubordination".

> *«Just think that usually when they* [builders] *speak about me… I'm not even an archaeologist! I'm "the one from the fine arts"* [he laughs and shakes his head]*! They just don't understand why… I mean, the problem, in my opinion, is that archaeologists are perceived as the ones that halt the working schedule of the site because of things that have been buried for centuries – so why should we care today, no?»*
>
> Interview 55, archaeologist (M).

> *«Our times don't coincide with the industry's. Our work sometimes takes more time and patience and… and you have to intervene on sites because of restrictions on cultural heritage, and construction firms don't want you to interfere with their schedule. <u>You waste their time</u> by imposing them longer working times because there are… f*cking restrictions on that building! It would be much easier for them if they could just… demolish and re-build everything! They – constructions' firms and men alike – just can't get over the fact that they can't always do as they please* [she laughs]*! Does it come as a surprise, then, that if I show up on site and halt their works because they're doing things <u>obviously</u> wrong, because they are going through a renovation procedure <u>without</u> a restoration firm on site or without having*

employed <u>any</u> restorer in their construction firm… does it surprise you that they'd rather see me dead than listen and comply to my directions? Have you got any idea of how much does it cost to do these kinds of things <u>the right way</u> [she laughs and shakes her head]*? Well, <u>they do</u> – and that's why they try to avoid involving us in their projects…»*

Interview 31, restorer for Sovrintendenza (F).

From the experiences of Interview 55 and Interview 31 we can see that, according to them, the main causes reported as impacting on their lack of authority on site is associated with the widespread idea that some professions (and, hence, their professionals) interfere with the never-resting production schedule of the industry: as a consequence, they are blamed for increasing the times and costs (not only of labour, but also materials and administrative procedures) of production.

In this sense, especially archaeologists and restorers reported that, notwithstanding their usually higher hierarchical positions[60], they easily felt underestimated, their directives being more frequently questioned than those of other professionals present on site – such as engineers and architects, respectively reported as the highest and the second highest more unopposed authorities on sites.

«*… basically, it goes something like this: the <u>client</u> can be a little bit of a pain in the a*s. If it is the construction firm itself, then, of course, they're also the first and foremost authority on site.* (…) *private clients, unless they're in the business, they want to have the last word on things – like materials, times, costs, and stuff – but*

[60] Restorers in particular can both be found at the highest ranks of the hierarchy and at the lowest. In the first case, they are employed directly by Sovrintendenza to hold roles concerning the operations management, as they superintend the directions of the restoration or renovation phase of a construction project. On the other end of the spectrum, however, there are restoration firms and restorers that actually carry out the renovation procedures which are employed by construction firms or clients due to their specialization in the field.
As Interview 37, owner of a restoration firm (F), puts it: *«There is a strong hierarchy on sites, as we work with restricted cultural goods, so there's a big hierarchy between Sovrintendenza, operations managers, architects, clients… (…) we represent the lowest step of the ladder and we need to execute what we've been told, while still remembering our compentencies. So, if we believe that something is not effective, we need to make it known by following the correct procedures – because we are the firm executing that particular work, and to manage the overall operation is not our duty! If we want to suggest something, it must be done by respecting this hierarchy, that should be undoubtedly evident in order to provide an order and organization to the work.»*

they usually speak through someone else… So, beside firms, the most unopposed ones are the engineers. They usually are the site and project directors… they projected the whole thing, so workers must listen to them because this is structurally important – you know? Then, architects. Then again, foremen… and there's a different one for any step of production – you know? The electricians', the carpenters', the concreters'… even they are less contested than we [archaeologists] *are…*»

«And do you think that…»

«*Oh, no! Wait! I have to correct myself!* (…) *First, there are male engineers and the male architects! First always comes the man* [she laughs and shakes her head]*! It does not matter – our profession? It does not really matter. Of course, when women are engineers, they are listened to before or more easily than me… but always after the men.*»

Interview 50, archaeologist (F).

From the recollection of Interview 50, however, we clearly witness how things get easily more complicated at the intersection with gender. We already anticipated that women overall report having a harder time in making their voices heard notwithstanding their higher position within the formal site hierarchy. In this extract culture and power prove to be once again reciprocally intertwined in the production and reproduction of gender discrimination.

On the one side, formal hierarchies are instruments on which women strongly rely to make their voices heard; nevertheless, it seems that the effectiveness of the formal power they hold as a result of their higher rank is affected and lessened by the widespread cultural bias shaping gender relations in the industry. At the same time, it seems that not only an informal hierarchy on site is emerging according to the prestige of the professions involved, but that this is strongly influenced by gender.

As Interview 50 shows, but it implicitly seems to emerge from various respondent's recount in this study, the higher ranks of authority within the informal site

hierarchy are detained by man in male-intensive professions. Supported by Almalaurea[61] data, given that graduates from the civil engineering are still overwhelmingly males and join in high numbers the industry, it appears plausible to conclude that male engineers can (re)present the most respected professionals on sites, followed by male architects[62]. Then, considering the struggles reported and acknowledged by both men and women in constructions, along the spectrum of professionals' authority (and according to the role held on the formal hierarchy) it seems that men in female-dominated professions and women in male-dominated ones may be somewhat equivalent; lastly, we have women in female-dominated professions, such as archaeology and restoration.

As age and professions meet gender, the display and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (either working-class or bourgeois) requires for women's power and authority to be more frequently challenged than men's, in an attempt at guaranteeing the «dominant position of men and the subordination of women» (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Therefore, the "trust" mentioned by Interview 54 above is much less likely granted to women, as they continue to be perceived as "unsuited" for constructions, unless they can «demonstrate the ability to "think like a man"» (Kanter, 1977, p.25).

> *«If it happens that a woman is more relaxed, willing to joke or laugh… and is not scared to say a curse word, then she's more "flexible". If it happens that women are more rigid… I've seen that in those cases, the men on sites are more rigid towards them.»*
>
> Interview 53, archaeologist (M).

The reflection put forward by Interview 53 opens the discussion on individual strategies to manage relations on sites. Keeping in mind the intertwined nature of age, profession, and gender in the definition of an informal site hierarchy alongside the formal

[61] Almalaurea's latest report on graduates' employment status is available at: https://www.almalaurea.it/occupazione_rapporto2021.pdf (Accessed: 30 September 2022).

[62] Even though men's presence has been decreasing since 2010 while women's has increasing (both among graduates and in the industry), Almalaurea's data show that those joining constructions are still predominantly men. Data from the Architects Council of Europe (ACE) Observatory show that still in 2020 slightly more than half of the architects in the Italian industry are men. Available at https://aceobservatory.com/Italy (Accessed: 30 September 2022).

one, we will now proceed to examine how men and women react to those situations in which conflict arises on sites both concerning the production process and the authority of their own figures.

5.2. Women's strategies and narratives to counteract socio-cultural challenges and establish a career in the industry

If there is something on which all interviewees agree is that sites are lively, ever-changing, and challenging realities. Problems and conflicts may arise at any time and over any issue, from delays in materials' supply and in the construction process due to bad weather conditions, to the relations among the people on site for a variety of reasons. Overall, professionals seem to manage and solve such situations by trying to contain and tone down tensions occurring among the people involved in the discussion. Men and women alike appear to favour a dialogical, "diplomatic approach" to the resolution of any conflict that may arise on sites, independently of their motivations.

However, when disputes pertain to one's role, professionality, or authority – e.g., when professionals' directions are openly questioned or defied – even though the overall tactics to manage these conflictual relations remain "diplomatic", interviews reveal the existence of one, neat difference in men and women's approaches.

> *«Well, first of all, I tell them they can f*ck off [he laughs]. Sorry for the plain terminology…»*
>
> «Really?»
>
> *«Well, yeah. I mean, it happens frequently.»*
>
> «They question you?»
>
> «*And me answering them to f*uck off* [he laughs and I do too]*! It's the immediate reaction – you know? You're halting the production and… then I try to calm down and to firmly explain why I'm right and that… the point is: even though they may not like my directions, still it is what they're supposed to do. End of the story.»*
>
> Interview 53, archaeologist (M).

*When people argue with my decisions saying I lack compentencies and I'm wasting their time… the "unpleasant" ones, I even tell them to go f*ck themselves* [he laughs]*! A few days ago, I was talking about this with a* [female] *colleague of mine, we share the same site lately and… well, sometimes, in these cases… I* <u>*can see*</u> *that she has a harder time than me in answering back to people and to get her decisions unchallenged. I can say to people that they should go f*ck themselves, but… I mean, can she?*»[63]

Interview 55, archaeologist (M).

Independently of the people involved in the discussion, their role, the overall situation, and the environment, when their decisions or directives are openly opposed, all the men I interviewed expressed a tendency to directly call out on those contesting their authorities. Men seem to perceive this as the quicker, probably more efficient, way to re-establish the challenged formal site hierarchy and, consequently, their higher role and associated decisional power.

As different masculinities confront themselves and try to prove their hegemony over the other, the internalized stereotypes and assumptions on gender relations lead men to doubt that such a straightforward approach could be successfully relied upon by women. We already saw how – according to men – women who want to "fit in" should be «*more relaxed, willing to joke or laugh* […] *not scared to say a curse word*» and how those who do not embrace such behaviour or attitude risk being labelled as «*rigid*». Remarkably, women themselves seem to overall convene with such gendered assumptions when, in their responses to conflictual relations on sites, report having to choose carefully whether and how they should react. The main purposes remain the twofold containment of the possible escalation of the conflict and, at the same time, the preservation and confirmation of their role and authority.

[63] This quote has been partially used before to sustain the acknowledgement from male professionals of the more intense struggles experienced by women in having their authority and status recognized on site. Due to the scarcity of male respondents, it is re-used here in his entirety to show the different reactions of men and women to similar events and circumstances.

Since each situation may require a different approach, according to the people involved and the environmental conditions in which the conflict takes place, women explain that the decision to react to provocations should not be taken light-heartedly and two main approaches seem to emerge as prominent from their recounts: to «laugh it off» or to «let it go».

5.2.1. From «the silence treatment» to «laughing it off»: the *continuum* of women's coping strategies

We already had the chance in the previous empirical chapters to witness some of these dynamics, attitudes, and behaviours – the reactions to which will be discussed here – mostly when speaking of the differences between *benevolent* and *hostile* sexism and their impact on women's everyday working life – in constructions and in general. Nonetheless, before delving into the analysis of the concrete tactics adopted by women to counteract sexism, harassment, and other socio-cultural challenges in the industry, we should take a moment to describe to which behaviours women's coping strategies are most likely to be directed at, together with their main features. In this respect, presenting the experiences of a female engineer working on British construction sites, Baghilhole, Dainty and Neale (2002) relied on the engineer's field diary to describe the existence of three types of sexual harassment to which women are frequently exposed when working in the construction industry – and in male-dominated environments in general:

> The first category relates to verbal requests for sexual intimacy. This includes sexual bribery (with an associated threat or promise of a reward or consequence), sexual advances, relational advances (repetitive advances for a social relationship) and subtle pressure (in which the goal of sexual intimacy is ambiguous). The second category accounts for verbal comments, which can include personal remarks and jokes, subjective objectification (such as rumours and remarks about a woman) and sexual categorical remarks. Finally, the third classification relates to non-verbal displays. These can include sexual assault, sexual touching, sexual posturing (such as violations of personal space) and the use of sexual materials.

(Baghilhole, Dainty and Neale, 2002, p.425)

This categorization seems to hold true for the Italian construction industry. When asked in which way they usually react to conflictual situations in general, and to sexism and harassment in particular, women were unanimous in claiming the overall impossibility of entirely discerning the one from the other. As they mostly reported having experienced episodes of «verbal requests for sexual intimacy» and other «verbal comments» (Baghilhole, Dainty and Neale, 2002), they emphasised how these accompany most of their everyday interactions with the men on sites – the conflictual and the non-conflictual ones alike.

It becomes interesting, then, to try to understand how the way in which women manage relations on sites changes over time.

> «*And so, I had almost any possible reaction on site with… starting from the ones who wanted to help me because I'm a "woman"* (…) *at the beginning, in front of these acts of kindness, all I saw was a discriminatory practice, so I didn't take them well… I used to refuse such acts of kindness.* (…) *then I started taking it with irony, instead! So, whenever I was confronted with a kindness, I laughed about it and took advantage of it! Someone says: "Do you want me to carry the bucket for you?" "Yes, yes, please go on!"* [she laughs] *If I don't do it today, I have to do it tomorrow – so at least for today I don't have to carry it!* [we both laugh] *But then it also happened… In Veneto, as I was telling you, one of the bricklayers didn't speak to me at all. He never spoke to me, and he was talking only to my partner* [a man]. *In that case, I didn't do nothing.* (…) *when you're faced with this kind of people, it's a waste of your time! So, I never even try to establish a connection with this kind of people. I simply let go. On the contrary, sometimes* (…) *I gave him* [a plumber] *the feminist sermon* (…) *only because it amused me!* [we both laugh] *It depends also on my mood, whether I intervene to stress these behaviours.*»
>
> Interview 20, entrepreneur and bricklayer (F).

The passing of time and ageing, once again, prove to be important variables in the evolution of women's coping strategies. Since the beginning of their career, female respondents chiefly report their tendency to either ignore sexism and harassment or laugh and joke about them. By doing so, they attempt at minimizing their relevance and impact not only on their (challenged) formal power within the relation, but also on their sense of themselves. Of course, these are not the only two solutions available as women rely on a wide range of behaviours according to a variety of internal and external inputs, resulting in slightly different (and more or less tranchant) responses each time.

Yet, what is noteworthy to reflect upon is how even when adopting entirely different behaviours – the «silence treatment» on the one hand and the «laugh it off»[64] on the other – women incur the risk of reaching the same result. By ignoring or ironically dismissing an act of sexual harassment, they indirectly indulge in and support the re-production of such practices. In both cases, this happens due to the lack of (in)formal "sanctions" towards what may be individually and subjectively perceived as a negative experience (Watts, 2007a). As harassment and sexism are considered typical routines and expressions of jovial camaraderie on sites, both men and women are less likely to perceive them as problematic. Moreover, women in particular show a propensity to censor themselves, to repress their feelings and negate the detrimental nature of their own subjective experiences, in an attempt at both "fitting in" and not offering any more cues for worsening the already-tense interaction.

When harassment and sexism are ignored, dismissed, or minimized, they thrive due to their "invisible" nature, which is instead confronted – as we saw – with the high visibility of women on sites. Rather than being perceived as respectable authority figures, women frequently become "objects" and «embodied "spectacles"» (Watts, 2007a, p. 304) for the male gaze and their "unwanted attentions". However, as such camaraderie behaviours do not "count" (Emerson, 1969), the main consequence of the absence of

[64] "Having a laugh" or being able to take a joke is described by Coates (2003) and Hay (2000) – and also reportedly said by male respondents in this study – as a pivotal feature of the male identity. Women, in general, seem to rely on humour in a less comfortable way and mostly do so in order to "fit in" more easily than when adopting trenchant or silent responses. Nevertheless, once this behaviour is endorsed by women with either of their response, it becomes much more difficult to eradicate it from the site routines to substitute it with other conducts (Swiss, 2004).

(in)formal reprimands[65] is that women will tend to (more or less consciously) "put the blame" for such conducts not on the harasser, but on themselves for being their targets. As Watts (2007a, p. 304) effectively summarizes:

> Both denying and refusing to name this behaviour [sexual harassment] on the part of women forms part of their motivation to 'fit in' to the existing site culture (Greed, 2001); it also removes any imperative for challenge or formal complaint thus leaving intact their 'nominal' position as 'one of the lads' (Evetts, 1996)[66].

Overall, the main difference between men and women can be summarized by highlighting the fact that men show a tendency to adopt "impulsive" and straightforward reactions any time their authority is challenged on sites. On the other hand, women may appear to do the same – as some of them say they usually «*must be always ready, always have a short, quick response to put them* [workers and men in general] *back to where they belong*»[67] – but actually seem to take their time to quickly assess the overall situation before deciding whether to respond and how to do it «appropriately». When asked about what an "appropriate" reaction could be like, women were not capable of providing a unique answer, highlighting the importance of personal characteristics (both of the woman and the other people involved) and the environment in which the event takes place. Even though there seems to not exist a singular, common strategy on which they can rely as men do, women mostly focused on the purpose that such a response should have: as it tries to de-escalate the interaction's conflictual nature, it should also re-affirm the "suitability" of women's presence within the realities of sites.

[65] It is of pivotal importance that we avoid the much easier discourse associated with "blaming the victims" (and hence women) for their choice to avoid direct confrontation on matters related to sexual harassment. For this reason, with the expression *(in)formal reprimands* I mean that we must reflect on how important it is that reprimands are explicitly made not only by the women targeted by such behaviours, but by men witnessing them as well. Moreover, such reprimands should not only be expected to be formally implemented through the mechanism of the formal site hierarchy (e.g., warning letters), but should also be informally sanctioned within the group of peers to which the harasser belongs.

[66] Greed (2001) and Evetts (1996) as cited by Watts (2007a).

[67] Interview 34, restorer (F).

… truth be told, you can ignore them, try to laugh about it, or yell against them that they should not say stuff like that… that they should not care about how you "manage your private life" if you're giving them directions on how to – I don't know – build a wall! But then who cares? You're a woman, hence, whatever you… however you react… you simply should not be there [she raises her shoulders]. *(…) Well, by that* ["manage your private life"] *I mean… once they told me… pardon me if I say swear words…* [she takes a short pause and inhales deeply] *they told me: "What do you know, you wh*re? Go back to give blowjobs – that's what you can do best"* [her voice trembles and she makes a long pause. She reprises before I can ask her if she is all-right and want to take a pause from the interview] *First of all, it is none of your business – if I'm actually a wh*re or not, I mean. But then, even if I were, what the hell has my private, sexual life, to do with me giving you directions on how to execute your job? How come being a wh*re in my spare time is… incompatible?… with being an architect?*

Interview 30, civil engineer (F)

Through the various experiences reported by the women I interviewed, two things emerged clearly. In the first place, that there is a *continuum* in their strategies that moves «from avoidance tactics, to adaptation, to accommodation, to pressure to perform better, to blaming herself, to anger, and finally to resignation» (Baghilhole, Dainty and Neale, 2002, p. 426). As the quotes from this paragraph particularly show, women deal with all these feelings and, even though they try to rationalize and minimize their impact on their lives and personalities, it is renown that such feelings and experiences contribute to the creation of a negative (or even hostile) working environment (Thacker and Gohmann, 1993; Vance et al., 2004). In fact, they represent some of the main causes for women's higher levels of stress, loss of self-confidence and motivation, burn out, and even drop out of the building industry (Knapp and Kustis, 1996; Watts, 2007a). This is mainly due to the fact that, as the last quote from Interview 30 shows, in general terms, women seem to perceive their responses to sexual harassment as self-defeating, «a 'no-win situation', where regardless of how women try to cope, their responses are then criticised and used to legitimise the persistence of sexual harassment» (Baghilhole, Dainty and Neale, 2002, p. 427).

«He was insisting on asking if I was married… or in a relationship in general, to be honest. "Do you have a boyfriend, a lover, a husband"… and so on. And while doing so he was not… you know, he was not actually working like… it was taking him far more time than it should have to… "If you'd be concerned about that floor half as much as you seem to be concerned about me having an active sexual life with someone else other than you… then this would have been completed by yesterday! [she laughs]"»

«[I laugh too] And what did he do?»

«He laughed and took it! I mean, there's not much he could have done. Everyone was… But what made my day was that his colleague laughed so hard! [she laughs again] *He even backed me up saying something about the fact that he never gets laid anyway…»*

Interview 34, restorer (F)

This quote serves as a hook to discuss the second emerging phenomenon, that is the use of humour, irony, and sarcasm as a resistance mechanism or as an instrument to convey a counter-stereotypical arguments via their answer (Watts, 2007b; Case and Lippard, 2009; Wieslander, 2021). In this case, however we witness the possible (unintended and invisible) backlashes of women's humour on site. Interview 34 described herself as a cheerful person, always ready to talk about anything on site and not particularly interested in keeping her private life «secret». Moreover, even if by reading the extract one can perceive a sort of harsh tone in Interview 34 "tranchant" response to the continuous requests on her sentimental and relationships status, the situation pictured was a jovial and relaxed one, where everybody was «*carelessly joking on everybody's private lives*». What is interesting to notice is that Interview 34's response was a clever way to make known and re-establish her decisional power over her own sexual and private life, to the point that the others on site did not perceive it as a reprimand. However, while demolishing a gender stereotype by explicitly discussing her sexual independence, the support she received from the other man on site (who «*backed* [her] *up saying something about the fact that he never gets laid anyway*») may repropose and reinforce the stereotypical idea of masculinity as defined through a definition of sexuality «conceived as possession

of a woman's body primarily through intercourse» (Bertone and Ferrero Camoletto, 2009, p.381; Flood, 2008).

Beside this case, there was the experience of an architect, F., I casually met once while out on a dinner with family friends. When she found out the topic of my research, she denied she could be a good subject for the interview: «*I'm not a serious person at all! I rely on humour and sarcasm way too much*», she stated. And it was true: even throughout our dinner she always had a caustic comment that was able to make the whole table laugh. Nevertheless, we had the chance to chat a little and she told me that she specifically uses this trait of her personality on sites to floor male workers by challenging their idea of what a woman should or should not do or talk about. The following is an extract from our casual conversation, which took place just after dinner, preceded by a little bit of context on her story, to help us locate the gag.

> F. is a self-employed architect, who is also married and mother of two boys, both of them less than 10 years old. I asked her whether she could give an example of her "counter-stereotypical" humour at work; so, she recalled one time she was arriving on a site in Rome to check on works' advancements. The site was inside a «*beautiful historical building, one of those with frescos on the ceilings*»; here, workers from a local construction firm were renovating the heating system while the restoration of the painted ceiling was taking place.
>
> *«There were like three of them* [builders] *'round the corner eating and looking at one girl* [restorer] *working on a scaffolding. They were making jokes quietly between them… which is rather unusual I would say – for them to be quietly murmuring I mean, of course! They didn't hear me coming, so I said "Ah, this almost feels like home: one girl does all the work while the boys stare and do absolutely nothing – and they say constructions is not made for girls!"»*
>
> Fieldnotes. July 13th, 2021.
> Dinner with family friends, self-employed architect (F).

Even though sometimes the so-called "feminist humour" can be perceived as «male-disparaging» (Stillion and White, 1987, p. 230) by men and women more traditionally oriented, by openly joking about their private and sexual lives, their (actual

or stereotypical) family dynamics, and by relying on clichés about traditional gender roles and men in particular, women like F. constantly reaffirm their entitlement to talk about such topics and to do so as *they* deem appropriate. By being in charge of and proposing their personal take on such "controversial" topics, these women challenge the patriarchal narrative and «symbolically redefine gender roles, attitudes, and stereotypes» (Case and Lippard, 2009, p. 240). Such behaviour may not lead to a direct, tangible change in the widespread sexist attitudes of the industry, but at least clearly shows that women can rely on humour, sarcasm, and irony as instruments of resistance – other than simple coping mechanisms.

5.2.2. Should we all be feminists?[68] Women's gender-blindess in the name of the "universal" standards of good business

Examining the relevance of instrumentally relying on "feminist humour" to convey counter-stereotypical narratives on otherwise traditional gender roles represents the perfect hook to debate the extent to which the feminist discourse and ideals are shared among women in the industry. Scholars emphasized the contradictory nature of their perceptions of gender and of their self-perception as women in the industry. In fact, research particularly focused on those instances in which women expressed overall "gender-blindness" (Lewis, 2006) or even hostile feelings towards being represented and perceived as a feminist, as it is believed to be counterproductive with respect to their affirmation in a male-intensive environment (Greed, 2000; Agapiou, 2002; Caven, Navarro-Astor and Diop, 2005, 2012; Watts, 2007a; Matthewson, 2012; Naoum et al, 2020).

In the Italian construction industry, however, the women I met can be located along a *continuum* according to the various degrees in which they perceive and (re)present themselves as feminist – i.e., according to the level of gender-blindness that transpired during their interviews. On the one end we can find gender-blind women, who firmly

[68] The title of this paragraphs brings the famous speech and booklet by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, entitled *We should all be feminists*, and poses it as a question.

reject being identified with feminist beliefs and argumentations; on the other, we have those openly sharing and talking about their feminist beliefs while trying to actively promote their principles and values (such as gender equity) every day – at work and on social-media. As usual, between the two extremes we may find intermediate possibilities associated with behaviours, attitudes, and discourses (in)directly expressing women's propensity towards either the more positive or the more negative end of the *spectrum*. As we will see, such reactions appear to be linked to women's more or less explicit positioning and awareness towards the relevance of gender for the analysis and their embracement or rejection of feminist values.

It is intriguing, then, to notice that women – and particularly entrepreneurs – appear to be generally depicted and perceived (by the media and the broader society) in fairly different, but still very much stereotyped, ways. Studies like Achtenhagen and Welter (2011) and Ruth Eikhof, Summers, and Carter (2013) show a tendency towards the selection and promotion of those activities that can be managed from home, in the mediatic representation of female entrepreneurs, In addition to this, female entrepreneurs are usually pictured against men and in an old-fashioned manner, by building on traditional gender roles and expectations – i.e. by recurring to stereotyped metaphors and by describing «a woman as characterized by her good looks, her nice clothing and implicitly her ability to combine sex appeal with serious business, whilst her husband is described through war-like metaphors communicating an image of him being a tough fighter» (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011, p.776-777). This seem to be also confirmed by the work of Connell (1995/2020), later reprised by Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2005) when they sustain that the figure of the "entrepreneur" represents the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity:

> The reference, however, is not to the Schumpeterian 'innovator', but to the Spanish 'conquistadores' and the 'frontiersmen' of the West. […] Also modern economic rhetoric, for that matter, often described entrepreneurship as an activity geared to the 'discovery of new lands' and undertaken by (male) 'explorers' […] The assumption underlying such assertions is that individuals have a neutral tendency to be competitive, as well as the (physical) ability to work constantly and be geographically mobile (Fournier and Grey, 1999). It is a discursive practice which

> tends to marginalize those men who do not fit the construct, or those (historically women) who are unable to take part because they are engaged in domestic activities. Taken for granted is a sharp distinction between home and work, with value set on the unique and rational nature of work, while the emotional component necessary to manage interpersonal relations is ignored.
>
> (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2005, pp.58-59).

Although in the international literature attempts at analysing the mediatic representations of female entrepreneurs seem to be extremely limited, to the researcher's knowledge, in Italy, no such research has been conducted. From a rapid, unstructured check on the representation of women's experiences in the construction industry in Italian newspapers', it appears that even when such articles praise women (and particularly entrepreneurs) as the epitome and the true embodiment of the ideal typical feminist, they do so by relying on a mainstream, sexist narrative. Particularly when dealing with the construction industry[69], Italian newspapers seem to depict women stressing the importance of details stereotypically associated with "femininity". The accent is then frequently posed on women's contribution to the industry through their "female skills and attitudes", their ability to balance their reproductive and productive roles, while also finding the time to give the industry a "pink" touch (be it the helmet, the shoelaces, or any working tool). The ending result seems to be to have women whose personal plans profoundly intersects with their business plans.

[69] Here we may find a few examples of newspapers' narratives on women working in the Italian construction industry. Although further, more structured research is needed to sustain such claims, we can see that in the following articles there is a tendency to represent women in constructions by highlighting their femininity.
Following a chronological order, the first article proposed (Lafleur, 2016) gathers few women holding top hierarchical positions in the Italian construction industry. The interviewed women are depicted as "courageous captains", but the narrative presented throughout the article sustains and reproduces the differences in "feminine" and "masculine" leadership styles.
The second one (Bovenzi, 2020) is about a construction firm that has been nationally awarded as the one with the highest amount of women employed within it. Throughout the article, however, women are described as having «pink shoelaces» or «work-coveralls – maybe with few little bows».
Last year, two articles have been published which are only a moth apart one from the other. The first one is Brunetto (2021) and describes the restoration works undergone by the Palermo Cathedral in which a group of young female restorers are described as just "girls" in charge of "renovating the look" of the historical building. Finally, Capozucca (2021) even though it relies on a sexist framework for the presentation of the news (e.g., by using the first names of the women interviewed for the title of the article), is the only one that is capable of conveying a slightly counter-stereotypical narrative on the experiences of two women working as acrobatic construction workers.

Leaving aside the mediatic representation of women in constructions, however, we revolve to the self-perceptions held by women themselves. One of the most exemplificatory contribution in terms of "gender-blind" arguments comes from Interview 16: the following is an extract of a podcast in which she and the host debated on whether female role models are still necessary – not only in the construction industry, but in general.

> «(…) *even though I work in a masculine sector, I am by no means a strong feminist. I think, on the contrary, that by demonstrating one's skills, commitment, and determination, it is possible to achieve results without the need for an number of seats fixed by right. Because the real- the real goal is to develop, to bring out the reciprocal peculiarities of each sex - because we are different and, in this way, we can truly achieve the greatest results. Surely, women should be put in adequate conditions to be able to achieve this goal. But how do you get the right conditions? Often it takes great commitment, great endurance, and never having the fear or… the anxiety of failing. So, preparation is really important, and then even more preparation – because there is a little bit of prejudice, I have noticed it also within my sector. But, in my opinion, we must really look for… some situations, to play them down and move forward with determination.* (…) *try to demonstrate things this way, because only by fighting on feminism, it is my opinion, there is almost the risk of obtaining the opposite result, that seats are given precisely because you have to give them, because there is the obligation of having a woman – without having her there for her real competence and ability* [she stresses the underlined words].»
>
> Interview 16, civil engineer and entrepreneur (F).
> Fieldnotes, June 26th, 2021. Podcast episode with Interview 16.

Throughout the podcast's episode, and even during our interview, Interview 16 repeatedly refused to acknowledge the gendered nature of entrepreneurship. Because of her strong reliance on the rhetoric of passion, merit, and professionalism, she is openly against women's quota and any other active policy promoting diversity and inclusiveness. By emphasising the importance of merit and dismissing that of gender means to minimize the impact of the barriers and challenges faced by women in their attempts at entering and

establishing a career in constructions. Besides reproducing and reinforcing a vision of gender as not embedded, not only in the industry, but also in entrepreneurship and the economy as a whole, this narrative «creates divisions between those women who have 'made it' (or think they can make it) in the 'neutral' (masculine) system and those women who have not, or do not appear to abide by this system's demands» (Lewis, 2006, p.458).

This position, of course, was held not only by Interview 16 – as other female respondents minimized the importance of gender in shaping their working experiences and career achievements. In other cases, the issue was dismissed by simply highlighting the fact that women are more diffused in the industry today than they were twenty, or forty years ago. But this argument can be easily circumvented by simply stating that today women represent more than half of the Italian population and yet the gender pay gap and the sexual segregation and segmentation of the labour market are far from being overcome, together with sexism, sexual harassment, and the phenomena of violence against women.

Moreover, the final result of contradictory statements such as the one provided by Interview 16 is the paradoxical demonstration of the gendered nature not only of the working relations in the construction industry, but also of professionalism and entrepreneurship – all due to the lack of acknowledgement of gender as a central variable to assess women's performance in the industry.

5.2.3. «*Women-eat-women*». The detrimental role of competition among "token" women

Before moving to the positive end of the *spectrum* and consider the strategies and reflections proposed by women that see themselves as feminists, I will present here the impressions derived from those instances in which women engaged in antagonistic comparisons with other women. We somehow anticipated this discourse in chapter III when dealing with unwritten, shared beliefs about the "appropriate" dress code to wear in the workplace – either on- or off-site – but also in chapter IV when digressing about widespread beliefs on the lack of women solidarity.

As we already saw with Kanter's (1977) contribution to the study of "token" women in male-intensive industries, but also with Epstein (1980) and Webber and Giuffe (2019), the exacerbated competition – not only with men, but especially with other women – is reported to emphasize their isolation and sense of loneliness. Since they are extremely visible, each action or behaviour is easily put under scrutiny and, according to Kanter, this usually leads women to either hiding their success or trying to overcompensate for it. But when this does not happen, women are perceived as contravening their expected (gendered) "nature" of compassionate, nurturing, and service-oriented specimen and their "unnatural" conducts are more harshly judged as dangerous and treacherous for womanhood as a whole.

The reasoning at the base of this process of exclusion and isolation seems to be the other side of the coin of the process that allowed me to easily establish sympathetic relationships with female interviewees. As I mentioned in the methodological chapter, sympathy was (often times) explicitly founded on our common belonging to the same gender. Rhetorical questions like «*you're also a woman, you can understand – right?*»; and affirmations like «*you're also a woman, you can imagine how it feels*» or «*we're women: we all have to deal with the period once a month*» or again «*this* [catcalling] *happens to us pretty much every day*». These wordings and phrasings are clearly used to find confirmation of that intrinsic belief that we, *as women*, share a common and mutual understanding of the fact that similar events and episodes (e.g. sexual harassment) happen in our lives as well as in the lives of other fellow women (Davault, 1990). The women I met, but also women in general, tended to assume empathy towards them will always be granted by fellow female in the name of that "sisterhood" (Oakeley, 2016), of that "women solidarity" that we, as women, are expected to share for each other – independently of any other intervening factor.

Instead, true women solidarity is found in those women who – like Interview 37 – start their activities with the clear purpose of helping other women overcome some of the barriers and challenges they would otherwise face when navigating the labyrinth of the labour market, especially in a male-intensive industry. Women solidarity can also be found in the story of Interview 46, when the HR manager offered her a promotion from which she would have otherwise been excluded because of motherhood and the associated, expected changes in her priority rankings.

Nevertheless, women solidarity seemed to be generally understood by interviewees as the endorsement of any action or request as long as it is made by another women. In constructions, women are expected – especially by other women – to behave according to their caring and sensitive "nature", while also conforming to the "universal" ideals and standards of good business. This becomes evident in the necessity, for women, of finding a balance not only between their private and working lives, but also in the amount of "femininity" that they can show and display in the workplace. Here, the importance of the unspoken dress-code to which women are implicitly requested to conform – by men and other women in the industry – is one of such examples. By differentiating between what we called a "strait-laced" *versus* a "provocative" dressing style, women create divisions among them by reproducing the dominant narrative that represents women's bodies as "objects of desire" for the male gaze.

By not conforming to the "universal" practicality of the strait-laced dress code, these women make their presence – on-sites but also off-sites – extremely evident and known, to the point that any form of sexual harassment addressing them is directly associated to their clothing choices. The mechanism leading people to see the causal nexus between the way in which women are dressed (at work) and the fact that they might be the target of sexual harassment is the exact same mechanism used to blame rape victims because of the way they were dressed (anywhere) when they were sexually assaulted. In both cases, the blame is much more easily put on the women, rather than the men perpetuating either sexual harassment or assault. By not hiding their femininity, these women are blamed because they were not capable of becoming invisible to the male gaze.

Beside (re)producing the mechanism fostering the reification of women and their bodies, these assumptions are clearly falsified by the fact that any woman I interviewed experienced some sort of sexual harassment – also the ones adopting the strait-laced dressing style. It is this incontrovertible fact, this common experience among women that proves that sexual harassment is actually associated with the interiorized ways in which men are expected to act within certain contexts, with the construction of the hegemonic masculinity and its display, for others to be recognized as actually hegemonic. Even though it may be heightened by certain factors – such as women's different dress codes, peer-group dynamics, or plain misogyny – and, to the researcher's knowledge, studies explicitly dealing with motivations for sexual harassment among men in the construction

industry are lacking, similar conclusions have been proposed by Walton and Pedersen (2021) in their recent work on catcalling's motivations[70]:

> […] while catcalling behaviour is deliberately motivated by misogynistic ideologies in some men, the majority do not intend to cause harm or negative psychological outcomes. At the same time, we demonstrated that men who catcall have scored higher on measures of hostile sexism, traditionally conservative masculinity, social dominance orientation, and tolerance of sexual harassment than men who do not. Thus, while most catcallers claim no desire to demean or harm women, their attitudes and behaviours are in tension with their stated aims.
>
> (Walton and Pedersen, 2021, p.13)

Notwithstanding this, we all are – men, women, and non-binary people alike – the result of centuries of (re)produced, and hence internalized, stereotypical beliefs, values, and symbols on what it means to be part of the "female" rather than the "male" specimen. This implicit, shared, sexist, understanding of gender relations appear to be the main motivation behind women's conflict with other women on what it is "appropriate" to wear on site and on why it should be so. When these distorted (gendered) expectations are not met, expressions like "*women are women's worst enemies*" are reported and believed to be true by female respondents, fostering the antagonistic relation and competition exacerbating the very same feeling of isolation and loneliness from which we started.

> The patriarchy exercises its force at all of its levels, but only in the lowest ones its force takes the shape of violence. In the other stages it manifests itself as flattery, paternalism, twisted narration, false offer for protection, recognition of some personal value (never of the whole, however) and above all with the illusion of being able to accomplish more by themselves than in alliance with other women. It is essential, in male chauvinistic systems, that women believe other women to be their

[70] *Not all men* engage in sexual harassment, and even when some of them do it may not be for different motivations or expected results. Walton and Pedersen (2021) offer a solid and well summarized literature review, while research results are drawn from a survey administered to 258 male and heterosexual university students.

> own worst enemies, unconsciously becoming complicit with the system that in the end oppresses them all.
>
> (Murgia, 2021, p.60)[71]

In the light of this, it becomes quite (un)surprising to hear some discourses on maternity and flexibility, particularly as they came from female managers and *strictu sensu* entrepreneurs. To briefly discuss the narratives associated with these two, here we reprise the quote from Interview 46 mentioned in chapter III:

> *«Of course, it is something that you have to take into consideration when hiring. I recently recruited a lot of young women among the administrative staff. They are more or less of the same age. What if they go on maternity together – or few months apart? I have to consider this possibility, and I have to make adjustments to allow them to. Men are far more… stable, in a way… that's the way it is, either we like it or not.»*
>
> Interview 46, director of employer association (F).

Women are expected to eventually become mothers. The foresight of this "disruption" in their working career is perceived as able to undermine their commitment and dedication to the organization, representing a risk for the manager/entrepreneur – independently of their gender. The belief – spread among male and female managers/entrepreneurs – is that women will leave work indeterminately due to the reallocation of their devotion, from their work to the new-born child and the related childrearing duties.

This understanding of maternity (and hence flexibility) will remain true until we look at the other side of the coin by asking ourselves: why men's "stability", reliability,

[71] My rendition of the following Italian text: «Il patriarcato esercita la forza a tutti i suoi livelli, ma solo in quello più basso la forza prende la forma della violenza. Negli altri stadi si manifesta come lusinga, paternalismo, narrazione falsata, finta offerta di protezione, riconoscimento di qualche valore personale (mai di tutto, però) e soprattutto con l'illusione di poter comunque ottenere di più da sole che in alleanza con altre donne. Per questo è essenziale, nei sistemi maschilisti, che le donne credano che le loro peggiori nemiche siano proprio le altre donne, diventando inconsapevolmente complici del sistema che alla fine le opprime tutte.»

and commitment to work and the organization are never questioned? Because they are not expected to become fathers and, if they do, they are not expected to take care of their children in the same way a woman is expected to do. Men are expected to care for their children by staying outside in the public sphere, working overtime, and being the breadwinners of the household. All of this can be achieved by showing commitment towards the industry or the organization, and only secondarily to their family.

This is why assumptions of «systematic selectivity» (Abburrà, 1992) concur in describing careerism, professionalism, and entrepreneurialism – particularly in male dominated professions – as not attractive to women, to the extent that they are incapable of accommodating their requests for flexibility. The tendency to overtime work and presenteeism, to be available for business trips, or to move if and as required by the organization are behaviours expected from a man, but not from a woman. This becomes almost self-evident when we consider that, according to the LFS, the vast majority of men working in the Italian construction industry are employed full-time whereas women are more equally distributed between the part-time and full-time options. In 2020, for example, only the 53% of women in constructions worked full-time, while the same data among men reached 95%.

We already saw how women cope with the situations described up to this moment: in most of the cases, when dealing directly with sexual harassment, they try to minimize and downplay its importance, either by laughing at it or ignoring it. When maternity enters the picture, women mostly refer to supportive family network and parents willing to "lessen the burden"; otherwise, dropping out of the industry after maternity or choosing not to have children seem also to be pretty frequent among women – even in female-intensive professions as archaeology and restoration.

What is overwhelmingly evident up to this moment is that men are never challenged in their understanding and assumptions about (gender) relation dynamics or role expectations. Internalized schemes of behaviours together with the invisibility of some conducts, appear to lead women to question themselves and the (negative) feelings associated to episodes of sexual harassment or discrimination rather than acknowledging the validity of their negative personal experiences and men's responsibilities for it. On the other side, due to the same processes of masculinity's construction, most men assume

their behaviours and conducts to be "normal", and appear to be unaware of the gendered nature of relations, just as much as they are about what is to be considered as sexual harassment or the impact this might have on their targets.

5.2.4. «*I was not a feminist when I started*». Women's *feminist agenda* for normalizing their presence in the industry

As the discussion about women's coping strategies at the beginning of this chapter shows, they clearly depends on women's personality traits and the concrete situation. Moving towards the positive end of the *spectrum* on the women's self-perception as feminists, we find respondent with growing levels of awareness and willingness to acknowledge the role of gender in the creation not only of a gendered industry, but also economy and society. Even if every woman I interviewed had reverted to «the silent treatment» or the «laugh it off» approaches during their career to quickly dismiss and avoid potentially conflictual situations, the women who were more familiar with feminist discourses and perspectives proved to be particularly aware of their gendered presence. This appeared to be related to the adoption of tranchant responses more frequently than other respondents, used as a "quick" solution to reaffirm their authority whenever it was challenged.

> *«I select my clients and suppliers as I do with my employees: if when I interview them, or deal with them, they cannot conceive the idea of a women entrepreneur in the building industry – that is, of me being in charge – then we can't work together. And I'm not even sorry about it, anymore.»*
>
> Interviewee 19, entrepreneur and architect (F).

Curiously enough, almost every woman in this end of the *spectrum* stated at some point during our interview that they did not undergo a career in construction to pursue and advance any sort of *feminist agenda*. 11 women out of the 32 I interviewed used statements like «*I was not born a feminist*», «*I was not a feminist when I started working*»

in the industry, as an architect, as an engineer, or «*I may not be a true feminist, but…*». The following extract is the most condensed reflection on why V., a female architect, consider herself to be a feminist: it comes from her Instagram stories, and she wrote the following text[72] after a negative experience she had in the morning during a site inspection – even though she did not give details on the actual episode triggering the discussion.

> «*And by the way I'm a feminist because I can't stand that in life it is essential to be determined like me to be respected, especially if you are a woman. You always have to prove that you are up to date and that's not good. You must be free and above all be free to be yourself. Even a little more fragile. And anyway some are so bad-mannered that they don't pay any attention to the person that's before them. Surely if they find a male engineer in his fifties they will certainly think about it a few more moments before acting like little bullies. When things like these happen to me I always think if I were the fussiest male engineer that I know and with whom I collaborated at the beginning and I wonder – would've they done the same with him? If the answer is no then you have to hit hard.* […] *If I'm practically certain that they'd have never done it to him then I feel free to get angry. A male colleague even wrote to me and I believe that it happens also to them. But what I want to stress is how we women react to this thing. We are raised with the idea that we have to be obedient, that if we answer back we are bitter… while a men affirming his personality is decisive. All these stories to say that I get angry, with freedom. Above all if you judge me based on factors like "young", woman or other only-external parameters. So if you bad-mannered person think I am bitter it's your problem, not mine.*»
>
> Fieldnotes, February 10th, 2022.
> Instagram stories of V., self-employed architect (F)

What is particularly striking about this extract is that V. states that if she «*feel*[s] *free to get angry*» only when she is «*practically certain that they'd have never done it to him*». Women sometimes expressed a propensity towards refraining themselves and their

[72] This is the transcription of 8 Instagram stories written directly by V. – I translated the stories' content in English for the purposes of this thesis, but I did not change the original punctuation.

reactions, a behaviour – V. states, and we saw it previously – which is most likely associated with women's socialization process and years of stereotypes' interiorization about gender roles and the associated, appropriate behaviours women are supposed to hold to conform to them. As V. recalls, women are most likely than men to feel or think they are not allowed to "get angry". This assumption seems to be associated with the fact that, when they do, they are usually portrayed as «*too rigorous*», «*bitter*», or even «*crazy and hysterical*».

As emerging from this extract, we also saw that even men sometimes struggle in having their authority recognized, especially by construction workers. Beside the traditional conflicts arising with regards to the higher costs deriving from the necessity of conciliating the pressuring times of production with the slower times of preservation and restoration, or with following health and safety regulations, what appears to be at stake is a clash between practical, «on the job» knowledge related to direct experience in the building industry *versus* the more academic and theoretical preparation held by professionals in general – independently from their gender, at least to a certain extent. In this "clash of classes" we see also the ever-present clash of masculinities and their antagonistic/complementary relation. Nevertheless, gender cannot be left out of the analysis as, at the intersection of the "clash of classes", women have to struggle more intensely than men to re-affirm their authority and credibility when challenged.

Confirmed by this reflection and by previous descriptions of the socio-cultural barriers faced by women in the industry (also acknowledged by some men, at least to some extent) is that women do not ontologically "lack" in status, credibility, and authority when compared to men. Thanks to the mechanisms put in place by professions to select their members and the rising importance of credentialism, on a theoretical level, women *formally* hold the same credentials, and hence competencies and status, of their male colleagues; nevertheless, it is *practically* harder for them to have their status (and its associated credibility and authority) recognized.

This reflects in the fact that one of the most reported motivations to start their own activities was to overcome some of the prejudices and the challenges faced during their previous employment relations. Tired of being and feeling discriminated against when promotions were on the table, tired of the workplace sexist and bullying culture, women

leave their dependent working positions or “false” self-employment collaborations and move towards “pure” self-employment or entrepreneurship. To do so, however, they need to be willing and capable of affording the (mostly economic and financial) risks associated with becoming their own and/or someone else’s boss.

In this respect, the most emblematic case is that of Interview 20, the only female bricklayer I had the chance to meet. After getting a M.A. in architecture, she discovered the potential of crude earth architecture; so, she decided she wanted to be able to build her own projects and houses with her own hands and materials.

> *«… we started the business because we wanted to build houses with straw, but if someone had hired me as a builder’s employee... that is, as an employee straw-builder, I’d have accepted to become a dependent worker! The thing is that there was no such space, there was no such possibility. So, if I wanted to build and become a bricklayer, I had to open my own firm.»*
>
> Interviewee 20, entrepreneur and bricklayer (F)

The point made by Interview 20 takes us back to the questions that triggered this research in the first place: is it actually women that choose not to work in constructions as craft and trades workers, or is it the building industry that (in)directly excludes them? Some women are not, and never will be, attracted by working in constructions, independently from the policy strategies adopted to attract them to the industry. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the role played by the mainstream narratives and discourses on gender and role expectations in the definition of personal preferences and job opportunities, as in other male-dominated sectors and occupations. Moreover, throughout this work we adopted the “doing gender” approach, which led us to sustain that ‘sex ≠

gender' and 'gender ≠ women'. Whenever we debate about gender solely in terms of women's experiences, we hinder the recognition of the relational nature of this concept and thus render masculinity invisible to critical reflection (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2005, p.33).

For these reasons, the very same argument about "selectivity" should be made once again also about men who refrain from considering female-intensive industries – such as aestheticians[73] – as suitable career opportunities. The question we posed in chapter III about women, then becomes: *why do men not consider working in female-intensive industries as viable employment alternative?* The answer to both versions of this question appears to be the same: until we will not propose a critical reflection on masculinity, on its construction as a cultural phenomenon bearing beliefs and symbols that are institutionalized and culturally (re)produced – in the same way that femininity and gender do – we will leave out of the gender equation a fundamental actor of gender relations: men.

As we criticized women's studies for their lack of interest in the male component of the gender relations dynamics, here we criticize the (sectoral and national) policies and strategies that refuse to undergo a critical process of reflection, deconstruction, and revision of masculinity, actively leaving men out of policies aimed at promoting gender equity – not only in the construction industry, but in the overall economy and society. We may understand in pragmatical terms the importance of re-thinking masculinity when we read the following extract from Interview 20:

> *«Now let me ask you a question: why do I… or you, or anyone else… have to break my back to carry 25 kilos of concrete on a single trip? When I can… just carry it in two trips? I'll answer for you, don't worry* [she laughs]*! It is because it takes more time – and in the construction industry…* [she laughs slightly] *and everywhere else, actually!* [brief pause] *Time. Is. Money.* [she shrugs her shoulder and makes another

[73] Data from the US show the exact inverse proportion of men and women found in the construction industry. While in 2019 women in constructions account for about 10% of the workforce, as aestheticians in 2021 they were almost 88% https://www.zippia.com/licensed-esthetician-jobs/demographics/#gender-statistics

brief pause] *The more time you use to carry 25 kilos of concrete from one place to the other, the more money you lose.* [She shakes her head] *I don't care! I am not willing to let the industry break me!* [she smiles and makes a brief pause] *To break me – and for what? Mere profits* [she stressed the underline words].»

Interviewee 20, entrepreneur and bricklayer (F)

The one suggested here is a huge, structural, "revolution" that may seem limited to the construction industry, when actually it is not. Although it may be more evident when considering heavy, dangerous, dirty (manual) jobs, the tendency to overtime work, inflexible working conditions associated with high work intensity and time pressure seem to be a generalized drift of the contemporary, capitalist economy. We are faced here, however, with the relevance of "outdated" contributions, such as Donaldson (1991) and Connell (2005), when they maintain that though manual work is not necessarily destructive in itself, «it is done in a destructive way under economic pressure and management control» (Connell, 2005, p. 36).

In a subsequent passage, Interview 20 affirms: «*unless such changes are seriously undergone, not only in constructions but in the overall society, women will never be able to feel like they really belong in a construction site*». This reflection does not concern only women, but men alike – as this whole work wanted to underline. "Such changes" – the revision of the production process, the re-thinking of gender relations, roles, and policies – should be adopted not only to favour women's entrance and retainment in the industry, but also to increase and promote health and safety in the industry. As studies shows that men tend to adopt more unsafe behaviours while working on sites (among others: Schneider, 2001; Iacuone, 2005; Stergiou-Kita et al., 2016), they seem to do so for two main reasons: on the one hand, to accommodate the time pressure and demands for "quick" production. On the other, more latent hand, however, by adopting such carefree behaviours based on physical strength, resistance, and toughness, men exhibit the performativity of their masculinities – a trait that is fundamental in the process of construction and (re)production of narratives, attitudes, and behaviours. Just as much as women are thought to be gentle and caring, men are thought to be "tough" and to use their bodies to carry out heavy and dangerous works. The ending result of this display of

masculine prowess, however, appears to be the over-usage of their bodily capacities and a higher risk for their own health and safety in the short and long run.

5.3. Conclusions: what room for (social) change?

In this chapter we analysed the main strategies and narratives put in place by women working in the Italian construction industry to cope mainly with its socio-cultural challenges. Starting from the emerging theme of the existence of a parallel, informal hierarchy of professions revolving around building sites, we saw how it appears to negatively affect women's authority, status, and credibility in the industry when compared to their male counterparts. Even though male professionals report experiencing the same dynamics and seeing their authority challenged on site as female colleagues do, they also acknowledge – at least to a certain extent – that women visibly put more effort in the process leading to the re-establishment and re-affirmation of their authority on sites. While formal hierarchies may represent a "refuge" for women to have their authority acknowledged or to seek reprimands towards sexual harassment, they seem to be located at the bottom of the informal site hierarchy, independently of their profession.

As harassment and sexism are considered to be typical routines and expressions of jovial camaraderie on sites, both men and women are unlikely to perceive them as problematic. It is also for this reason that the two coping strategies most frequently adopted by women are to either laugh about or ignore such episodes. Although women tend to experience sexual harassment in a negative way, these strategies are often times relied upon to minimize and downplay the importance of these practices in their everyday life. Nevertheless, by avoiding or ironically dismissing them, women in particular repress the relevance of their negative, subjective, personal perceptions in an attempt at both "fitting in" and not offering any more cues for worsening the already tense or unpleasant interaction. Moreover, the lack of (in)formal "sanctions" (from both men and women) allows for the reproduction and reinforcement of the "invisible" nature of sexism and sexual harassment through the indirect support offered to the mainstream narratives on gender roles and expectations, fostering the (in)direct exclusion of women from the industry.

Interestingly, women's strategies appeared to be intertwined with their self-perception and positioning with respect to the feminist ideals and beliefs. In an industry where successful women tend to be portrayed by media and perceived by the broader society as the epitome of "feminist ideal types", we see that women's actual lack of endorsement of the feminist narrative risks of being controversial and even potentially counterproductive with respect to the achievement of equity goals. This is particularly so when women refuse to be identified as feminists and downplay the relevance of gender by instead emphasising the importance of merit and dedication as important variables to overcome the barriers and challenges faced while establishing a career in constructions. However, this narrative – as the one on the "appropriate" dress code or women solidarity – serve the purpose of reproducing the mainstream gendered discourse and create «divisions between those women who have 'made it' (or think they can make it) in the 'neutral' (masculine) system and those women who have not, or do not appear to abide by this system's demands» (Lewis, 2006, p.458).

Instead, those openly describing themselves as feminist tend to adopt strategies which are more trenchant and intolerant towards sexism and sexual harassment episodes and to be actively engaged in the promotion of the feminist perspective (e.g., via Instagram). Among these women we find those who rely on entrepreneurship to overcome the barriers and challenges faced during their entry and stay in the in the industry. Women's high qualifications and entrepreneurial actions show that they do not ontologically "lack" in status and authority when compared to men; nevertheless, it appears to be so due to the fact that their status and authority are more frequently challenged than men's, and more intense efforts are required to them to re-establish their credibility on- and off-sites.

At the intersection between the "clash of classes", we see that gender plays an important role in the capacity of managing conflictual relations and dynamics. Reflecting on women's conditions we also proposed the importance of critically reflecting on the construction process of the masculinities present on sites as being the true premise for the adoption of gender equity policies in the industry, the economy, and the overall society. In fact, notwithstanding years of debate on these topics, there is still need for a serious, structured, systemic intervention, whose aim should be to promote gender equity by including men in this process.

Scholars dealing with the construction industry internationally acknowledge the importance of building a counter-stereotypical culture that allows women to see STE(A)M subjects and careers as within their reach. This could be done – they say – by exposing young girls to counter-stereotypical role models, not sanctioning counter-stereotypical behaviours, rewarding their successes in STE(A)M subjects, and encouraging girls not to be ashamed, when errors are made during the learning process. Moreover, mentorship programmes are also promoted, in which female professionals already working in the industry can raise awareness with respect to both the challenges to face and the strategies to overcome them.

However, it seems that in most of these studies, the burden is on women to convince other women to join the industry. Men, instead, are left out of the scene, excluded from undergoing a process of critical revision, deconstruction, and re-construction of "masculinity", as they become the passive spectators of policies that aim at promoting gender equity by addressing only half of the problem. Therefore, it is fundamental that the suggestions made for increasing the attractiveness of the construction industry for women are accompanied by programmes addressing young boys and men. If we want the chance for new policies addressing equity to be really effective not only in the building industry, but in the overall economy, they should be designed to cover a long-term period, aiming at a massive cultural change in the whole society. By targeting only female audiences, in fact, the existing stereotypes are perpetrated and reinforced, as the transpiring message "blames" women for their situation, while it does not hold men accountable (and responsible) for their acts of discriminations. As long as men are not actively targeted and involved in the *ad hoc* policies and regulations aimed at promoting gender equity, as long as they do not realize the relational nature of gender discrimination practices and their responsibilities for their reproduction, there will be no actual room for change.

In this process of change, however, individuals should not be the only level of analysis. In the international literature and most evidently in the Italian context, scholars do not appear to have paid enough attention to structural solutions or policies to be implemented at the industry level. Professional orders, employer associations, and trade unions are rarely analysed in relation to the promotion of gender equity policies in the construction industry to the point that it is not clear if they have been ignored because

they did not take part in any of these or simply because research on the topic is generally lacking. Further research is therefore needed, particularly in the Italian context, to understand if meso-policies or initiatives targeting gender equity actually exist and whether they proved to be effective.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this dissertation was to provide an overview of the state of women's occupational trends and entrepreneurial choices in the Italian building industry through the lenses offered by gender studies and intersectionality. To do so, women workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs were interviewed, and a semi-structured guideline was designed to cover three main areas of interest. The first one concerned women's employment and working conditions (in terms of performed tasks, working hours, and hazards) associated to both on- and off-site activities, together with the risks deriving from being professionals and/or entrepreneurs. The second area of interest covered the motivations to join the industry together with the challenges and obstacles women perceived they had to face during their everyday working activities and while pursuing their careers. Finally, the strategies adopted by women to counteract direct and indirect episodes of sexism, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination were discussed together with the possible solutions to promote gender equity in the industry.

The data gathered through semi-structured interviews, experiences of participant observations, and digital ethnography on social media platforms – especially Instagram – was analysed though the lenses provided by gender studies and intersectionality. To rely on Acker's (2006b) conceptualization of inequality regimes in organizations while adopting the concepts of gender and "professional-mentality" as cultural constructs allowed to examine and expose the mechanisms, rhetorics, and narratives used by hegemonic masculinity to shape the understanding of "women's place" in the industry that would have otherwise remained hidden.

Women's occupational trends in the Italian construction industry

The statistical representation of the Italian building industry emerging from the data gathered by the LFS showed that women have been a more or less stable presence over the last thirty years, notwithstanding the impact of the European Great Recession and, in 2020, their presence settled to represent about the 7,5% of the sector's workforce.

Although we register an unsurprising polarization in the composition of the workforce, female professionals have been slightly increasing over the last twelve years, whereas their male counterparts have been experiencing a slight and constant decline. With only 0,5% women in the industry present among craft and trades workers, these data clearly provide a picture of an industry that has been, still is, and is likely to be for the foreseeable future dominated by an overwhelming presence of male workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs.

Italian women entering the building industry appear to be for the most part well-educated – a data that is in line with previous international research. Women's underrepresentation in professional schools (De Fabrizio and Rispoli, 2019) along with the lack of training courses provided by the industry's bilateral bodies on highly feminized subjects such as restoration and renovation (Report Formedil/CNCPT, 2019) appear as two of the motivations leading most women to pursue tertiary education before entering the industry, opening the way to careers as professionals or highly skilled and qualified workers. Women are present in high number and are likely to exceed men in fields of studies like architecture, fine arts, and archaeology, whereas engineering keeps registering a stronger presence of male students and graduates. Independently from the field of study, women tend to graduate earlier than their male counterparts and with higher marks; nevertheless, *ceteribus paribus,* when women enter the industry, they do it later, in lower numbers, and tend to perceive a lower net income per month than men.

Missing PPEs and distorted perception of dangerousness

Three seem to be the main and interrelated sector-specific findings, mostly concerning the health and safety of women during site-related activities. The first immediate concern is directly linked to the perilous underestimation of the heaviness, dirtiness, and dangerousness of women's occupations on sites, as we find that women report difficulties in the retrieval of PPEs adequate for their bodies. Differing from the "average men" on which clothing and safety apparel are measured, women report struggling to find items (e.g., gloves, work cloths, anti-hardship shoes) they are supposed to use every day as highly qualified workers trying to move around sites safely. Moreover,

sites seem to be generally "unsuited" to accommodate women's presence: according to the space available, when toilets or locker rooms are present – which cannot be taken for granted – they are usually shared by all the workers revolving around the site. This may lead to unhealthy conditions, to the point that women usually report relying on the sanitary services of nearby bars and restaurants – when present or open.

Discussion on this topic provided the corner stone for examining the theme of the (in)visibility of women working in the industry. Provided that women appear to be exposed to the same hazards as their male counterparts, their needs for joining the industry in a healthy and safe manner seem to go unnoticed by clients in the organization of sites and by suppliers in the uneasy retrieval of adequate PPEs – reinforcing the idea of women's "unsuitability" for working in the industry though (in)direct mechanisms of exclusions. However, when conjugated with women's tendency to be highly visible on sites (e.g., as targets of sexual harassment), the issue of the (in)visibility of women's bodies in constructions becomes central for their (in)direct exclusion from the industry – either because they can be directly criticized for "not belonging", or their existences and needs are overlooked and ignored because they "should not belong".

The "romanticization" of femininity

When we think of the construction industry, the academic literature that tried to unveil the barriers and challenges associated to the lack of women within it tended to do so by more or less explicitly distinguishing between what I will call "gender-related issues" and "industry-related issues". While among the firsts can be comprehended all of those topics associated with the direct experiences of women in the industry – e.g., Barreto et al. (2017) spoke about «masculine culture» and «detrimental issues for being a woman» – it is among the latter that we are supposed to allocate all of those topics related to the "nature" of the industry itself. According to Barreto and colleagues, but also others before them[74], it is among "industry-related issues" that we can enumerate things

[74] I am relying on the work of Barreto et al. (2017) because they found 20 variables as a result of a systematic review corresponding to the barriers and challenges faced by women throughout their career in the construction industry. Even though other authors relied on the same (or different) method to reach more or less the same answer – the number of variables identified changing according to the study and the research

such as jobs that (especially on sites) are «by nature» unsafe, dangerous, and dirty, but also competitive, demanding, and drenched in the long working hour culture. It is therefore the ecology of the construction industry that actively contributes to its widespread "unfavourable image", a feature that the industry needs to change if it aims at attracting and retaining more women among its ranks.

Surprisingly enough, however, exceptions to the rule of women's "natural unsuitability" to work in the industry seem to exist as I was able to find instances in which women are actually allowed (and even praised) to work on sites. Especially when discussing the presence of restorers, but sometimes even of archaeologists or anthropologists, interviewees agreed on the fact that women's overwhelming presence in these occupations is easily understandable due to their natural, feminine, inclinations towards sentimental, caring, and nurturing behaviours, along with greater precision and attention to details – a pool of characteristics that are both innate and further developed through their ability to "give life". Notwithstanding the "natural" dirtiness, dangerousness, and heaviness of site-related jobs, the overall masculine and «unfavourable perception of the industry» appear to be easily counterbalanced by the romanticization of the restoration process – and therefore its workers.

According to te data I gathered, the "romanticization" of restoration is nothing less than a romanticization of femininity, which serves two main purposes. First, as restoration is interpreted and described as capable of restoring the beauty of ancient times, sometimes artistically blending it with the modern tastes of clients, the main purpose of this (gendered) narrative is revealed in the subordination of women's "suitability" to work in the industry to their conformity to the traditionally defined gender roles and expectations. As women's presence is allowed on site, it is so due to their fragile, sentimental, and artistic "nature" – a nature that should be "protected" by the men on sites, who use to engage in patronizing and paternalistic behaviours, which frequently take the form of benevolent sexism. However, beside confining women into "feminine" niches of production, the emphasis put by this narrative on the "feminine" and "artistic" dimensions of the work may lead to the perilous underestimation (or neglection) of the

question or interests of scholars – Barreto and her colleagues were the first to rely on a PCA analysis to identify the underlying factors able to group together the 20 barriers and challenges identified according to five categories: i) masculine culture; ii) detrimental issues for being a woman; iii) harsh working conditions; iv) unfavourable perception of the industry; v) high competitiveness.

dangers and hazards to which restoration workers are exposed, just as their fellow site workers and independently from their gender.

The second, hidden, purpose of this narrative is to re-establish the hegemonic position of the heteronormative masculinity not only with respect to women, but also to other ("deviant" and "lesser") forms of masculinities. It is in this scenario that one interviewee though it was possible to open to the possible presence of homosexual men in the industry by implying that they are somewhat more diffused in restoration than in other compartments of production. Being the only instance in which this theme was debates, it may also function as an example of the fact that not only men rely on and promote the (re)production of hegemonic masculinity's values and narratives to legitimate their overwhelming presence in the industry, but also "minorities" risk embracing and (re)producing them to legitimate their presence and persistence in the industry – sometimes in the difficult attempt at finding a balance between conforming to and disrupting traditional gender roles and expectations.

(In)Formal hierarchies at work and the importance of ageing

Findings about the "romanticization" experienced by some professions and their professionals open the discussion about the existence of an informal site hierarchy – parallel to the formal one, but where the intersection of gender and class are displayed even more evidently. Even though it is renown that hierarchies are gendered (Acker, 2006b), in this instance we saw that site relations and dynamics can be re-shaped according to: i) the prestige of professions; ii) the age and iii) the gender of professionals. At the top of this informal hierarchy, then, we generally find men in male-dominated professions (engineers over architects) followed by men in female-dominated professions (e.g., archaeologists). Even though men are overall less contested than women since the very beginning of their career, even for them ageing helps in strengthening their authority and reputation.

After these two categories we find women in male-dominated professions, usually due to the higher, formal hierarchical role on site when compared to women in female-intensive professions, who can be found at the bottom of the informal hierarchy. Independently from their concrete occupations and age, women struggle more than their male counterparts to have their authority, status, and credibility recognized not because they ontologically "lack" it, but because they practically find it harder to be respected on site. In this light, women reported more frequently than men their reliance of ageing and having a solid reputation in the industry in order to have their authority "less" challenged.

Moreover, with the passing of time few women also reported receiving less sexualized comments or not experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace anymore. This is often attributed to their improved credibility and authority, established through the years of career in the industry, in a couple of occasion it was linked to men's "resignation" to women's character and persistence. Even this narrative, however, if at first sight appears to be empowering for women, it actually hides two facets of the same coin – i.e., hegemonic masculinity: on the one hand, and with respect to the male-female relations, as Naomi Wolf (1991) put it, «[a]geing in women is "unbeautiful" since women grow more powerful with time». On the other, and relations among women, this focus on perseverance seems capable of (even if involuntarily) blaming those who do not succeed in entering or those abandoning the industry, because they were "not strong" or "not persistent enough". Fostering divisions among women, even this facet reinforces the narrative of hegemonic masculinity claiming women as overall "unsited" for the industry, unless they are able to "fit in" – either as feminine workers confined in feminine niches of production or as "one of the guys".

Socio-cultural barriers, coping strategies, and the impact of gender-blindness on women's (in)visibility

The experiences women report of the main challenges and barriers faced while entering and establishing a career in the Italian construction industry appear to converge with the ones emerging from the international literature – at least to a certain extent. Examples drawn from everyday life on- and off-sites confirm that the first and foremost

challenge women perceive when dealing with working relations on- and off-sites is the widespread sexual harassment and cultural bias on their "unsuitability" for the industry – unless they revolve to more "feminine" occupations, such as restoration or clerical work. Women in the industry – but not only – are met with a "double standard": even though formally they hold the same (or higher) status, authority, and credibility as their male counterparts, women report experiencing difficulties in terms of balancing their work and private lives, as well as in affirming their authority on sites notwithstanding the usually higher (formal) hierarchical position. In this scenario, the passing of time appears to affect women and their embodied presence in the industry differently than men: ageing, in particular, is perceived by women (more than men) as instrumental to gain respect and credibility.

Different and more predominant when compared to the international literature seems to be the emerging discussion on women's (in)visibility. As complex narratives on what is "appropriate" to wear on- and off-sites arise from the interviews, as we saw. Women's bodies seem to be invisible only when difficulties in the retrieval of adequately fitting PPEs was the object of discussion. On the one side, the existence of an unspoken ("masculine") dress-code to which women are implicitly requested to conform in order to "fit in" – by men and other women in the industry – appears to negate the "neutral" nature of professions as well as entrepreneurship. On the other, it appears to create unnecessary divisions among women: as non-conformity to the informally agreed dress code is used to blame women for attracting the male gaze and their "unwanted attentions", the dominant narrative representing women's bodies as "objects of desire" and «embodied "spectacles"» (Watts, 2007, p.304) is reproduced and never really questioned.

Divisions among women are also fostered by gender-blindess (Lewis, 2006) and distorted expectations on women solidarity. By sustaining the existence of "universal" standards of good business – or "entrepreneur-mentality" (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005), some women appear to be "blinded" by the importance of other variables, such as merit, dedication, and experience, and dismiss the relevance of gender in the definition of the challenges and barriers faced by women in the industry. Besides reproducing and reinforcing a vision of gender as not embedded not only in constructions, but also in entrepreneurship, the professions, and the economy as a whole, this narrative «creates divisions between those women who have 'made it' (or think they can make it) in the

'neutral' (masculine) system and those women who have not, or do not appear to abide by this system's demands» (Lewis, 2006, p.458). Moreover, when this combines with unrealistic expectations on women solidarity, women appear to experience feelings of loneliness and isolations.

At every turn of the *labyrinth*, the potential for opting out is relatively high. Only one interviewee abandoned the industry after we met, and it was likely due to various reasons (e.g., sexual harassment, economic insecurity, precarity) which eventually led to burn out. Beside this, the main reported motivation for women dropping out of the industry is maternity. As in other economic sectors and even in more female-intensive occupations in the building industry and the economy, women find it difficult to return to their previous occupation for various reasons. Among the most relevant is that they need to reconcile their "double presence" (Balbo, 1978), balancing reproductive work and productive work in an economy, when the same expectations are not posed on men, and in an industry where times and clients demands are particularly pressuring.

These are some of the motivations that, beside leading to the abandonment of the industry, still make women speak of maternity as a "burden" to be carefully planned and hopefully shared with (elder) parents and their family network. In fact, women are still expected to leave work indefinitely because of maternity, representing a risk for their employers – male or female – in terms of commitment to the organization. The sexist belief behind this assumption is that, with maternity, women will change the object of their dedication, from the organization to the family. Such assumptions, however, are never placed on their male counterparts, which are not expected to become fathers or – even if they do – they are not expected to equally take care or share the childrearing duties.

Finally, coming to individual coping strategies, they appear to change according to the level of gender-blindness expressed by interviewees. Women who openly rejected to be identified as feminists were the ones more prone to minimize the importance of socio-cultural barriers and the relevance of gender in their everyday relations by either «laughing off» or ignoring situations in which they were either the target of sexual harassment or their authority and status were questioned. It is in their words and their narratives that we see how the dominant symbolic order can be reinforced not only by the

storytelling of the men but also by that of the women working in the industry (Murgia and Poggio, 2009). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p.840-841) put it:

> It is difficult to see how the concept of hegemony would be relevant if the only characteristics of the dominant group were violence, aggression, self-centeredness. Such characteristics may mean dominant but hardly would constitute hegemony – an idea that embeds certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern groups.

Women's narratives, however, do not always embrace and sustain the mainstream view on gender roles and expectations. The few who defined themselves as feminists were more prone to rely on trenchant comments and responses in similar occasions, but also to use feminist humour (Stillion and White, 1987) to "educate" male perpetrators of sexual harassment and have their authority recognized (if questioned). These women are also more prone to actively engage in social media activities – especially via Instagram stories and posts – to share the backstage preparation of their professions (e.g., showing details of particular sites during surveys, sharing the steps undertaken to restore an antique floor), but also to raise awareness on gender discrimination and other related issues. It is especially in their experiences that we can see the alternative practices available to promote change in the people and the industry around them, notwithstanding the resistances opposed by the environment.

Limitations and suggestions for further research: on the gendered nature of "industry-related issues"

The main limitations of the present study are undeniably associated with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the research project and the fieldwork. The recent and fortunate turn of event that allowed me to revert to these issues and carry out the research presented here were nevertheless met with extreme time pressure and tight interviewees availability. Moreover, only four men agreed to be part of this project

notwithstanding the efforts made by the researcher to reach them. This is likely to be associated with a variety of reasons, among which: i) the nature of the topic of the research (women's occupational trends and experiences in constructions), even though it was later presented in "neutral" terms as research on careers of the industry's workers; ii) men's lower interest in participating in similar kind of projects; iii) the (female) gender of the researcher. Future research should take into consideration the possibility of involving in the research process interviewers of different genders.

Moreover, further research is needed to cover the entrepreneurial and professional experiences of women in male-dominated professions in the Italian economy. Future research can focus on women's presence in the traditional and new social media, on their interest in activism and related practices, and on their strategic use of social media to seek customers. In addition to this, research is needed in terms of soft and hard laws' impact on gender equity in the industry, both at the macro- and meso-level of analysis. In particular, the engagement of professional orders, trade unions, and firms in promoting gender equity can be investigated, as well as the existence of specific regulation concerning equity not only in the economy, but specifically in the construction industry.

Coming to a conclusion, however, I would like to stress one final point raised by the overall research results I gathered with regard to what I just defined as "industry-related issues" – i.e., those attributes that in the literature are often referred to as being part of the "nature" of the industry. During the review of the literature and especially during the interviews and the research on the field I conducted, it became quite clear that there is no such thing as an exclusively (read: "neutral") industry-related issue. This becomes apparent already when we see how the "unfavourable image of the industry" is shrewdly counterbalanced by the "romanticization" of restoration and its associated traditional feminine qualities. In addition to this, however, it is by borrowing the concept of "entrepreneur-mentality" from Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2005) and adapting it to that of "professional-mentality" to analyse the experiences of women in the construction industry that we can understand how they both bring together the symbols, narratives, and images concerning entrepreneurship or professionalism while producing their own subjects - the entrepreneur, not the *entrepreneuse*; the *male* professional, not the *female* one.

Even though scholars debated at length on how the labour market is far from being thought to accommodate women's presence without giving for granted their multiple subjectivities as mothers, wives, and (maybe) workers, vast part of the literature on women in construction still seems to rely on an outdated distinction between factors hindering women's presence in the industry as directly associated with gender or with a more "neutral" stance. Nevertheless, according to post-modernism nothing is truly neutral and what we may be tempted to define as being the inherent "nature" of the industry is instead the reflection of the capitalist production system – a system that is renown to rely on the division of labour between the male (productive) and the female (reproductive) specimen.

Within this division, we keep together two axes of analyses: the one concerning manual work and the one concerning the professions or entrepreneurship in the industry. On the one hand, in fact, it is especially manual work that is done in a way that is unsuited for women, as «it is done in a destructive way under economic pressure and management control» (Connell, 2005, p. 36; Donaldson, 1991) and, even though it is not necessarily destructive in itself, it ends up consuming the (male) workers' bodies. On the other hand, the industry and the professions with their demanding, competitive, and stressing jobs based on presenteeism and the long working hours culture, do not make room for women's demands for flexibility and fairness (e.g., in career progression). In the relational nature of gender relations, however, we must add another layer to this widespread interpretation, as most literature underestimate the reach of such claims for the male components of the industry's workforce. In the first case, to rethink the ways of production with the aim of accommodating for women's presence within on-site jobs may even have a positive impact on men's health and safety. In the second one, claiming for flexible arrangements only to accommodate for women's attempts at balancing their private and working lives (often in the name of gender equity) not only entails the (re)production of the mainstream narrative on the expectations associated with the traditional female roles (e.g., as wives and mothers, as the *angel in the house*) but also with the traditional male one of the *breadwinner* – a man who is still not expected to share the caring duties and to work, instead, to economically provide for the sustenance of the household.

Things are ever-so-slightly moving in this sense, and a holistic and long-term vision is needed to bring about changes that should undeniably happen within the construction industry, but also in the broader labour market and the overall society, its culture, and its politics – paraphrasing Joan Acker's contribution. To develop such an approach, there is the need to come to the deep realization that if nothing is truly neutral, it must follow that everything is gendered. And if everything is gendered, first we must accept that a dyadic definition of this concept may not be adequate anymore; subsequently, we must acknowledge that some genders have been privileged by the current system and some have not. Once we have repeated this way of reasoning not only with gender, but also with other social categories such as class, race, age, ability… and after we open ourselves to see that peculiar intersections of these aspects have worked together to facilitate or to hinder some people's opportunities, only then it will be possible to move forward and towards a more inclusive and equal society, capable of gaining its strength from the understanding, recognition, and acknowledgement of the similarities and differences between people's experiences.

This is why I think is fundamental that researchers adopt from now on a non-binary, intersectional, and relational approach to the study of gender. A clear example of this is that, when the aim is promoting new gender equity policies or programs, it is pivotal to remember that men are also part of *any* gender relation. As long as the erroneous assumption that "gender = women" persists, men will not be held responsible for their (more or less conscious) role in fostering and reproducing the mainstream gendered narratives. In order to avoid doing so, however, a critical reflection, deconstruction, and re-construction of their internalized assumptions on hegemonic masculinity is needed. It is for these reasons that men should be involved in research, programs, and policies about gender equity as fundamental actors capable of facilitating social change.

Methodological Appendix

In the following pages are reported two tables developed during the conduction of the field research.

The first one presents the main characteristics of the people I interviewed for this research, according to gender, age, city of work, fields of study, profession, partner/parents in constructions, and family status.

The second one, instead, presents some of the experiences of (non) participant observations carried out and provides a brief description of the activities observed. Due to the health and safety measures implemented for the pandemic, most of the observations were performed online. This, in particular, is not an exhaustive list of the observations carried out, but it recalls the most exemplificatory ones.

Table 3 Characteristics of the sample.

Interview	Gender	Age	City of work	Field of study	Profession	Parents or partner in constructions	Family status
16	F	37	Milan	Civil engineering	Entrepreneur	Family firm founder by grandfather; father was a civil engineer	Divorced, no children
19	F	30	Milan	Architecture	Architect and entrepreneur	Father was a builder and owner of a small firm; partner is architect	Partner, no children
20	F	35	Perugia	Interior design	Entrepreneur and bricklayer	No parents or partner in constructions	Single, no children
22	F	50	Cagliari	Civil engineering	Proprietor of engineering studio with husband	No parents in constructions; partner engineer	Married, no children
23	F	57	Milan	X	Trade unionist, ex-administrative staff at constructions' school	X	Married, one child

Interview	Gender	Age	City of work	Field of study	Profession	Parents or partner in constructions	Family status
24	F	44	Bologna	Pedagogy	Administrative staff at constructions' school	X	X
26	F	60-65	Rieti	Surveyor certification and civil engineering	Surveyor and director of a women's professional order association	X	Married, at least one child
27*[75]	F	45	Milan	Architecture	Director of bilateral body of construction education and safety	X	Married, one child
29*	F	52	Rome	X	Trade unionist	X	X
30*	F	45	Cagliari	Civil engineering	Proprietor of engineering studio with husband	No parents in constructions; husband civil engineer	Married, one child
31*	F	56-60	Ferrara	High qualification course in restoration	Restorer employed by Soprintendenza	No parents or partner in constructions	Single, no children
32*	F	40	Milan	X	Trade unionist, ex-administrative staff	Father was construction worker	X
33*	F	55	Milan	Business and firm management	Entrepreneur	Family firm founded by father and uncle; partner works for firm as technical figure; children may not be interested in the industry	Married with children
34*	F	40	Ferrara	High qualification course in restoration	Restorer employed by Soprintendenza	X	X
35	F	48	Lodi	Civil engineering	Safety expert for bilateral body	X	Married, one child
36	F	28	Brescia	Architecture	Bricklayer	Father is construction worker and owns a sole proprietorship firm.	Single, no children

[75] Interviews from 27 to 34 were not recorded. The transcriptions available consist in the notes I had the chance to write down on my laptop during the interview, with the consent of interviewees.

Interview	Gender	Age	City of work	Field of study	Profession	Parents or partner in constructions	Family status
37	F	50	Bologna	Humanities and archaeology	Entrepreneur, proprietor of a restoration firm, employees Interviews **47** and **48**	No parents or partner in constructions	Married, one child
38	F	43	Verona	Architecture	Self-employed architect and plasterer	X	X
39	F	29	Lodi	Fine arts and high qualification course in restoration	Employed restorer; *possible drop out*	No parents in construction; partner is son of current employer	Partner, no children
40	F	46	Biella	Architecture	Entrepreneur	No parents in construction; partner is firm's co-founder	Partner, one child
41	F	33	Milan	Architecture	*Drop out*	No parents or partner in constructions	Partner, no children
42	F	32	Turin	Architecture and high qualification course in restoration	Self-employed restorer	Father was in restoration	Single, no children
43	F	34	Naples	Architecture	Self-employed architect with own studio, in partnership with interview **44**	X	X
44	F	35	Naples	Architecture	Self-employed architect, partner in studio of interview **43**	X	Divorcing, one child
45	F	65-67	Terni	Accounting certification and, recently, Sociology of territory	Entrepreneur	No parents in constructions; husband was surveyor who proposed to start a firm together	Married, with children: 1 M joined the firm; 1 F did not
46	F	65-67	Milan	Urban planning	Director of a constructions' category association	Father was artificer; ex-husband owns construction firm	Divorced, one child who works at father's firm
47	F	37	Bologna	Fine arts and high qualification	Restorer employed by the	X	Married, one child

Interview	Gender	Age	City of work	Field of study	Profession	Parents or partner in constructions	Family status
				course in restoration	firm owned by Interview **37**		
48	F	36	Bologna	Fine arts and high qualification course in restoration	Restorer employed by the firm owned by Interview **37**	X	Married, one child
49	F	41	Rome	Humanities and archaeology	Trade unionist, ex-archaeologist	No parents or partner in constructions	Single, no children
50	F	36	Rome	Humanities and archaeology	Archaeologist	No parents in construction; partner is archaeologist	Partner, no children
51	M	46	Milan	Humanities and archaeology	Archaeologist	No parents in construction; partner is archaeologist	Partner, at least one child
52	F	45	Rome	Humanities and archaeology	Archaeologist	No parents or partner in Constructions	Partner, no children
53	M	42	Rome	Humanities and archaeology	Archaeologist	No parents or partner in constructions	Married, no children
54	M	34	Rome	Civil engineering	Civil engineer	No parents or partner in constructions	Married, one child
55	M	37	Rome	Humanities and archaeology	Archaeologist	No parents or partner in constructions	Single, no children
56	F	39	Rome	Maths, physics, and biology	Anthropologist	No parents or partner in constructions	Single, no children

Table 4. Observations

Date	Place	Event	Description
25.01.2021	Online	Instagram stories Interview 19	Interview 19 recounts a recent experience of a university professor criticizing and ridiculing an interview of her, where she was presenting her firm.
15.02.2021	Milan	Buy PPEs to do participant observation on site	I went to buy PPEs to go on sites and my presence in the constructions' warehouse was acknowledged from the moment I walked through the door. I took the chance to casually interact with few of the people present.
23.02.2021	Lodi	On-sites visits with C., engineer and safety expert for a bilateral body	C. showed me to three different construction sites (big, small, and restoration), where I had the chance to interact with few of the people present (like a female surveyor, named F.) and to meet Interview 29.
09.04.2021	Online	Instagram stories Interview 42	Interview 42 engages with the Italian newspaper LaRepubblica on the stereotyped representation of female restorers used in a recently published article concerning the renovation of Palermo's cathedral. https://palermo.repubblica.it/leragazze
09-10.04.2021	Online	Instagram stories of: ● V., self-employed architect and owner of a studio (F).	Reprise the discussion started by Interview 42 and support her claims on the necessity to change the narration on women in construction in the media
15.04.2021	Online	Roundtable	Roundtable held online and organized by a bilater body in Milan concerning the role of women in the local construction industry. During the event, a lot of women discussed their experiences, health and safety measure, and the role of technological change and innovation in the local construction industry.
06.05.2021	Online	Instagram Stories Interview 42	Interview 42 recounts that day, during a site inspection for a restoration project, she engaged in a discussion with the clients as they were minimizing the importance of the unauthorized development of a cabin present within the structure's courtyard.
26.06.2021	Online	Spotify Podcast, with Interview 16 as guest	Interview 16 is the guest of a podcast about gender diversity and inclusion. The episode lasts less than 30 minutes and discusses whether role models are actually important – not only in constructions, but in general terms.
28.07.2021	Online	Instagram Stories of: ● V., self-employed architect and owner of a studio (F); ● S., interior designer, co-founder of an	In her Instagram stories, V. reposts her Facebook Status in which she discusses the fact that the architects' professional orders complaints more about the "feminine" version of the profession, rather worrying about more serious issues such as the exploitation of graduates entering the profession and clients' continuous requests for lower prices. Later that day, S. joins the discussion by supporting V. on the argument about the "cost" of professionals.

		interior design studio (F)	
20.08.2021	Online	Instagram Stories Interview 42	Interview 42 writes on a series of stories how she approached the industry, which were the main difficulties faced and what she likes the most about it.
04.09.2021	Online	Interview 42 post on Instagram	Interview 42 posts a photo of herself on site. The visual is from above and shows only her legs, while seated on the edge of a hatch on top of a scaffolding with her legs dangling. The caption starts with: "My favourite perspective." and follows a reflection on her sense of freedom while being on the higher scaffoldings of the sites
19.09.2021	Online	Instagram Stories of V., architect (F)	V. shares via Instagram stories (and subsequently a post) the stereotyped representations of men and women in a few images and descriptions of a renown manual of architecture, and engages with Hoepli to ask for a new, "updated" version as soon as possible.
18-21.12.2021	Online	Instagram stories of ● V., self-employed architect and owner of a studio (F); ● M., self-employed architect (F); ● M.A., employed architect (F); ● P., self-employed architect	V. e G. wrote a post on Instagram on the available paths for architects after graduation, distinguishing between freelance *versus* dependent work. After its publication, a debate via Instagram stories followed on the highs and lows of being an (in)dependent worker. The discussions mostly revolved around the characteristics necessary to be self-employed, and the importance of investing in the new generations (avoiding labour exploitation). The discussion ended with V. sustaining the overall disadvantage experienced by women, due to both gender expectations and maternity.
14.01.2022	Online	Instagram stories of Interview 19	Through her stories, Interview 19 shows the progress of a construction site and explains the future steps to be undertaken. In particular, she shows the map and plans for the new kitchen of the apartment – which will be delivered soon.
11.02.2022	Online	Interview 42 post on Instagram	Interview 42 posts a picture of herself on an indoor scaffolding: her hands dirty with paint and cement cover her face. The caption describes how, when she first went on site with her father was perceived as "the daughter of" and recalls the main teachings learned by her father while she was a "little girl" on site.
08.03.2022	Online	Interview 20 reel on Instagram	In a reel on her Instagram feed, Interview 20 she lightly demolishes a wall with a mattock. The caption is a reflection about performativity on site as associated to counteract gender expectations about women's presence in the industry.
25.03.2022	Online	Interview 20 reel on Instagram	In a reel on her Instagram feed, Interview 20 presents the main steps to build a wall with crude earth

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