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ESA Research Network 33 - Women's and Gender Studies
Mid-term Conference

Gender Equality and Institutions

The images reported on the front page reproduce "Cuman Sybil",
as painted by Michelangelo (1500), Raffaello (1500),
Dominichino (1616-17), Guercino (1650).

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Dipartimento di Scienze politiche
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Although institutions vary within and across cultures, and are constantly evolving and changing, they are embedded in relational hierarchies of gender, class, ethnicity, age and other critical fault lines, which define identities and distributive power – both symbolically and materially.
These institutional rules operate in social and organizational contexts. They are often below the surface, but are nevertheless interwoven into the hierarchies, practices and beliefs which give form to social actions and structures.
Among others, four main interrelated factors contribute in maintaining gender inequality at the institutional level:

- **Lack of political access**: power structures hide the fact that institutions are gendered at very deep levels. Although women's perspectives and interests do succeed in being brought as such to the table (in the shape of, for example, women's representatives, quota regulations, anti-discrimination laws etc.) institutions often are resistant to change because, on the level of micro-politics, institutional stakeholders defend established domains and structured "games" tend to reproduce established power positions and relationships.

- **Lack of appropriate accountability systems**: organizational resources are steered toward quantitative targets that are often only distantly related to the goal of gender equality.

- **Socio-cultural systems**: social norms, social attitudes and meanings embedded in the regulatory domains through which gender identity is produced and instantiated in everyday life are variously intertwined with class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, education, nation to produce a 'matrix of domination' in which each cell represents a unique position.

- **Symbolic representations**: the binary codes through which experience becomes meaningful are mutually supporting each other, so that the categorical oppositions between culture and nature, production and reproduction, work and care, rationality and emotion, masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, public and private sphere, white and black, human and non-human, mind and body, innovation and tradition, science and humanities, and so on
– with the former terms valued over the latter ones – all contribute to enforce and legitimate inequality and to reproduce hierarchies in gendered institutional structures, notwithstanding the insurgence of hybrids that are continuously challenging their consistency.

- Recent decades have seen the development of a variety of enforcing mechanisms – including quotas, equality legislation, gender mainstreaming, diversity management, gender and participatory budgeting and the establishment of women's policy agencies – aimed at promoting gender equality in state institutions, government policy, international non governmental agencies, business companies and other organizations.

- In women's and gender studies, gender mainstreaming has become a particularly contested concept, generating a variety of productive tensions in theory and practice.

Debates involve different visions of gender equality (sameness, difference and transformation), intersectionality and the relation between expertise and democratization. Intersectional perspectives, in turn, link with research on comparative, global, (neo-)imperialist, postcolonial and transnational relations. To account adequately for complexity, at the theoretical and empirical level, makes it possible to learn from the experiences of the multiply marginalized – that are otherwise overlooked or obscured - taking responsibility for one's location; acknowledging implication in the very structures and relations of inequality that one might be engaged in unmaking; admitting accountability for the consequences of research; exercising constant vigilance over one's research practices.

With respect to the ongoing change of gender relations in the public as well as in the private sphere, to the dynamics of individualization and to processes of differentiation among females and males, the question of gender equality and institutions proves to be multi-dimensional and to be intertwined with multiple subjectivities.

Recently, a growing number of men complain of institutional inequalities to the disadvantage of males, referring to the poorer health status of men, the worse school performance of boys, discrimination of fathers in custody battles etc., and they name these disadvantages as gendered inequalities. However these complaints might be assessed their existence indicates that the question of gender equality and institutions is no more discussed only as a women's topic and that men tend to become active stakeholders in the field of gender politics.

From a (gender-) sociological perspective it is interesting to ask for the (different) agency of women and men in struggles for gender equality. Further, individualization and differentiation require not to treat women and men as uniform groups; instead it must be asked how institutionalized gender (in-)equality is unequally distributed among women and among men, according to class, occupational status, ethnicity, migration, family involvement etc.

Sociological theory and research continuously face the challenge to bring back the power dimension within the analysis of institutional and organizational contexts, accounting for the complex multidimensionality of subjectivity and social stratification and the consequences of its mis-specification; but different theoretical perspectives in sociology are looking at institutions with different analytical and conceptual instruments – including different conceptions of social action and structure. We would like this variety to be represented within our Conference.