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“We Are Not Ready”: Awareness, Challenges, and Transformations in Gender Education

Giuseppina Cersosimo, Lucia Landolfi

Abstract: This study explores the transformative role of families in addressing and educating regarding gender differences and sexual orientations. Through qualitative research involving 32 families across Italy, the research examines parents' awareness and challenges in navigating traditional and emerging gender norms within a contemporary society. Using creative digital diaries from children and interviews with parents, the study highlights the generational and cultural gaps that shape perceptions and practices around gender roles, identity, and equality. Key findings reveal that while parents recognize the importance of fostering inclusive and egalitarian attitudes, many feel unprepared to address these changes effectively. The recurring sentiment, “We are not ready”, underscores a collective need for rethinking educational approaches within families and institutions to better support younger generations in a fluid and technologically interconnected world. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the need for a systemic rethinking of family dynamics and educational models to address entrenched gender biases. By integrating gender education into family and institutional practices, families can be empowered to foster resilience, equality, and mutual understanding. This approach repositions families as active agents of a cultural transformation, capable of shaping more inclusive and equitable intergenerational relationships.

Keywords: socialization, languages, trust, agency

Introduction: gender as a concept open to further investigation

The use of the term gender was first introduced in 1955 by sexologist John Money to explain the relationship between biological and cultural influences on male and female identities (Delamont, 1994). The term gender emerged in the 1960s within North American feminism thinking as a way to conceptualize the social nature of distinctions based on sex (Rubin, 1975; Melosh, 1993). Rejecting biological determinism, gender came to represent the cultural interpretation of bodies, that is, a field of cultural possibilities regarding sexual difference, as well as the interpretation, appropriation, and materialization of these possibilities (Butler, 1990). Gayle Rubin described gender as the set of processes, adaptations, behaviors, and relationships through which each society transforms biological sexuality into a product of human activity, organizing the division of labor between men and women, thereby creating gender (Rubin, 1975). Like many other aspects of an individual's social identity, gender was characterized for centuries by fixed ideals and roles. The social order of gender was rigidly codified, with social norms that could not be transgressed without facing severe sanctions. Nowadays, both gender identities and ideals, as well as the social order of gender, have become much more complex. Gender identity refers to one's self-perception, i.e., whether one identifies as male or female; gender ideals pertain to cultural expectations about male and female behavior; gender roles are associated with the outcomes of the sexual division of labor, rights, responsibilities, and inequalities; and finally, gender relations refer to the web of power relations that animate various notions of femininity and masculinity.

More than sixty years after the term gender was introduced as an analytical category, it is appropriate to reflect on what gender studies have become. One might expect that the key concept would become more defined and clearer over time, yet gender has in fact become a more elusive category (Scott, 2013). Nonetheless, despite these complexities, we can no longer reduce gender issues to mere natural sex differences, which historically have generated disparities in the division of labor, access to the public and intellectual spheres, as well as discrimination and disadvantages for women. Every way of thinking, behaving, and acting, both within the family and beyond, has been shaped by a male-centered worldview: the strength of an identity, not so much in itself but in relation to the other becomes a manifestation of domination, authority, and power, if not outright control. Deconstructing this mechanism of dominance is the path through which women can liberate themselves from this ancient reality. The sexual division of labor and the separation between productive and reproductive spheres, between male and female roles, also result in different temporal

experiences, influencing how men and women perceive and live their daily lives. Men and women live and experience daily life differently, following specific trajectories and fitting into differentiated temporal structures, responding in distinct ways to diverse social expectations depending on the variety of situations and social-historical systems. However, the traditional gender division that confined women to the private sphere and men to the public one still holds significant importance. Despite the increasing participation of women in paid activities, particularly in sectors traditionally dominated by men, they are still not exempt from the *representation work* of their own gender. This phenomenon allows us to reflect on the fact that gender is like a specter: it is present in all interactions, even when it is not directly invoked (Ridgeway, 2011). Consequently, gender performances are an inevitable social process in which everyone is continuously engaged, presenting gender as a routine, methodical, and recurring outcome, “carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Thus, gender is not merely a role but rather a configuration of practices performed within social interactions (Rossi, 2012; Cannito, Falzea & Torrioni, 2022). The everyday interactions that accompany an infant from the cradle through the phases of growth are those that should begin to shape a different world for future generations. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states, “A world of men and women who are happier and truer to themselves. Here’s where to start: we must change what we teach our daughters. And we must also change what we teach our sons” (2015, p. 20).

Research design

Rationale

Generational, gender, territorial differences, and specificities related to identity and the passage of time have often been overlooked in favor of standardized, faster, and seemingly exhaustive evaluations and representations, which in reality often turn out to be superficial or even dismissive of particular realities. Today, we are faced with a universe marked by complex fluidity (Fisher & Strauss, 1978), where the loss of traditions and the transformation of roles lead to a blending of the real and the virtual. We are member of a fluid, technological, fragmented society that is increasingly intertwined with the non-human, requiring constant adjustments and progressive education in tolerance, acceptance, and understanding, beyond all stereotypes of diversity, recognizing and respecting those who are different from us by choice, orientation, feeling, opposition, submission, and control. This call for change must first and foremost be internalized and embraced

by adults, enabling them to reform outdated practices and traditional educational models. It is crucial to recognize that for younger generations, their construction of subjectivities, individualities, and differences is shaped by various factors such as the pervasive anxiety of contemporary life, uncertainties about their existential trajectories, unspoken yet profound concerns about the future, as well as crises within their symbolic universes (Berger & Luckman, 1967), relational discontinuities, and the crisis of increasingly rarefied and unsatisfactory relationships with socialization institutions, all influence the construction of their respective subjectivities, individualities, and differences.

Research questions

As Sandra Harding (1986) reminds us, the end of androcentrism does not signify the end of causes and analysis that still need to be studied, just as the idea of the end of patriarchy, which aims to modify the symbolic order, does not equate to solving the issues related to gender and sexuality. Indeed, the assumptions of this research centre on how gender and sexual differences have progressively become a pivotal framework for proposing perspectives, programs, and actions aimed at fostering a more egalitarian society that recognizes and embraces the *other* and diverse forms of identity that, for the majority, exist outside conventional norms, entrenched role divisions, and established relational dynamics.

In today's fluid and fragmented world, where traditional norms dissolve, roles transform, and the real intertwines with the virtual, individuals must continuously adapt within an increasingly technological and interconnected society. Against this backdrop, this research explores several pivotal questions: how valid is Dewey's assertion that education is a continuous reorganization of past experiences in light of present realities, aimed at developing the ability to navigate and manage future challenges (Dewey, 1967, p. 21)? Are families equipping younger generations to foster relationships that are as egalitarian and inclusive as possible? Finally, can the process of deconstructing a binary gender model - long solidified and universally accepted - find its starting point within the family institution?

Research methodology

The research adopted a qualitative approach based on analytical and explanatory methods, emphasizing an in-depth understanding of phenomena, their complexity, details, and context. The researcher actively engaged in elucidating the research process (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Conducting interviews within a direct content analysis framework allowed for deeper insights and richer data collection derived from participants' experiences and perspectives. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) note "The advantage [...] is gaining direct information from study participants without imposing pre-

conceived categories or theoretical perspectives [...]. Knowledge generated from her content analysis is based on participants' unique perspectives and grounded in the actual data" (pp. 1279-80).

Data collection spanned from June 2021 to July 2022. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: being parents of at least two children of different sexes aged between 9 and 17 years and demonstrating an interest in topics related to the education of gender and sexual differences.

Interviews were conducted in mutually agreed-upon locations, either in person where feasible or remotely. Each interview lasted between 60 and 100 minutes. At the beginning of each session, the study's objectives, ethical guidelines, and privacy policies were explained to participants. Full anonymity was ensured, along with the right to skip questions or withdraw from the session. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Through snowball sampling - using offline word-of-mouth and online platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook - have been recruited. Initially, 47 families were identified, but 15 later declined participation due to time constraints or a better understanding of the study's requirements. Ultimately, 32 families took part in the study: 10 from Northern Italy, 10 from Central Italy, and 12 from Southern Italy. The regional distribution was as follows: Northern Italy included 3 families each from Emilia Romagna and Lombardy, 2 from Veneto, and 2 from Friuli Venezia Giulia. Central Italy comprised 4 families from Lazio, 3 from Tuscany, and 3 from Marche. Southern Italy and the islands included 4 families from Campania, 2 from Calabria, 3 from Sicily, and 3 from Puglia. Hence, the study involved a total of 63 parents (31 males and 32 females) and 72 children (34 boys and 38 girls) aged 9 to 17 who contributed to the creation of digital diaries. Therefore, research tools included digital creative diaries created by minors and interviews conducted with parents to explore their knowledge of the multi-dimensional aspects of gender differences.

The interviews with parents aimed to capture their understanding of four main dimensions: biological sex, gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. These dimensions were further subdivided into key areas: Social context of socialization, Interpersonal relationships between socialized individuals and socialization agents, social identity of the socializer, social identity of the socialized, Sites of social construction of gender differences and sexual orientations.

The research began by collecting these initial elements, followed by engaging participants through interviews with adults and collecting creative digital diaries from the 72 children. Each diary documented a typical day in their lives, including, if desired, photos or images. Parental consent was obtained, and diaries were distributed via email. Despite their traditional

name, digital diaries have evolved through technology into a modern tool for real-time ethnography. They allow participants to document their lived experiences synchronously or asynchronously in their own environments, described through their words and perspectives.

Each participant received a clear and detailed explanation of the study's objectives and purposes. The interview guide was designed around pertinent themes such as understanding one's children, role divisions, the complexity and fluidity of contemporary society, school and peer groups, generational conflicts, and diversity. At the end of each interview, participants were asked for their impressions of the creative digital diaries created by their children and answered three open-ended questions about:

- Potential relationships and interactions with individuals addressing sexism and gender disparities,
- Activities aimed at sensitizing younger generations to gender differences,
- Institutions that should be involved or organized to promote gender difference awareness.

The analysis was structured around two main objectives: first, to extract key terms recurring within participants' narratives; second, to identify codes, subcategories, and overarching categories related to the knowledge of gender differences. Furthermore, in order to analyse the interview data, a text mining analysis was conducted using the software R, which resulted in the creation of a term matrix to identify key themes and patterns within the data.

Results. Findings from interview coding

Knowing your children

Parents often believe that, having once been children themselves, they inherently know and can anticipate their children's needs and behaviors. However, many are surprised by their children's characteristics. For instance, some mothers noted that their daughters were more capable when they didn't have brothers and this observation suggests that even in families with parents possessing high cultural capital, traditional expectations have not significantly changed over time.

This is particularly evident in the digital creative diaries, where children describe what their parents expect of them. For daughters, there is still an emphasis on proper manners, speaking without using coarse language, and cultivating interests in art, theatre, and literature, while for sons, there is encouragement to pursue sports, develop autonomy and strength, avoid

showing weakness, and excel in STEM subjects. When parents discover a trait in their child that deviates from these expectations, they often express surprise and attribute these qualities to a female relative within the family.

Sometimes I feel like I don't know my daughters as well as I thought... They surprise me with their skills, knowledge, and practical problem-solving abilities. I think that being two girls has made them more independent than if they had had a brother. (N1_F_50_U)¹

During COVID-19, I was surprised by my eldest son's sensitivity: he volunteered. A calling to help others that I've always seen in my sister. You never stop learning from your children. (N2_M_54_U)

Since my husband and I separated, I moved back in with my parents [...]. I have to say, my mom and dad are a model of mutual respect, and my son has lost much of his aggression toward his sister and me, even at school with his female classmates. The father's male model was one of 'women are objects' [...] He didn't know any other way. (C3_F_51_U)

When you think you know them, that's exactly when you're wrong. I have three kids, including one daughter. Who would have expected her to be stronger than her brothers, quicker, and more independent? Sometimes, jokingly, I tell my wife that our daughter was born a girl but perhaps should have been the 'male' of the family. (C5_M_56_D)

I realized I didn't know my daughter when one day she said, 'Mom, I met someone who is non-binary, and I like them so much'. It required tolerance and calm from me because my first reaction was anger. (C10_F_51_U)

I believe that nowadays, young people are all somewhat dependent on social media; therefore, these platforms serve as their educational models, familiar with their emotions and experiences. (N10_F_49_U)

Division of roles

The traditional gender-based division of roles emerges prominently in the families interviewed. Women are often described as less autonomous, less adaptable, and less capable of handling manual tasks, whereas men are portrayed as more independent and decisive. However, there are instances where fathers of only daughters admit that being in the minority in their

¹ Each excerpt is attributed to an interviewee, ensuring anonymity. However, the identifiers are presented in the following order within parentheses: (regional area with interviewee number_gender_age_educational qualification).

^A brief legend is provided as follows: regional area: N=North, C=Center, S=South; gender: F=female, M=male; educational qualification: D=high school diploma, U=University degree, (both bachelor's degree and master's degree).

families has led them to rethink traditional roles in household tasks. Similarly, fathers of only sons acknowledge that their wives have taught their sons to share responsibilities in maintaining the household. Despite these shifts, mothers and fathers still point out that language often carries a disparaging connotation for women in leadership or power positions, for example, the distinction between director and directress in Italian is perceived to carry different implications, as highlighted in an interview excerpt.

I have two daughters, aged 14 and 17 and they are already encountering the problems that are often discussed, but as a manager, even though I have a wife and two daughters, I believe that this alone is not enough to change the dynamics of how men and women relate to each other in the world. In this, language helps to keep men and women separated. I have the feeling that saying 'director' and 'directress' has a different effect, directress almost makes one think of a school principal. (C1_M_54_U)

What can I say? Women are more accustomed to setbacks, so we adapt to doing everything, from household chores to outside work and, if necessary, even small maintenance tasks. (S11_F_51_D)

To me, my three children are equal, but I've noticed my daughter is more fragile. The boys are stronger and more independent. (N9_M_53_U)

My son and I play football, he's passionate about it and plays for the junior soccer team. With my daughter, I go out and take her shopping... you know, girls are more focused on clothing and maintaining their figure... (C10_M_53_U)

I don't agree, my son is as attentive to clothing as his sisters, and one of my daughters plays amateur basketball, but does she play however [reaction to the statement that women focus on form, men on substance]. (C10_F_49_D)

My wife is fantastic, she has raised our three children the same way. The oldest will turn 18 in a few months, and he already has a girlfriend who always says when she comes over: 'Ma'am, I wish I could have a son as sweet and sensitive as XXX. He is like a gentleman from another time, always so kind to the girls'. At home, when his sister helps mom with the chores, if he's finished his homework, he says to her: 'Come on, let me help you'. (S11_M_57_U)

Virtual and real societies

Today, social interaction, more than ever facilitated through interactive artifacts, is primarily an intersubjective experience, where services are assigned meaning based on the individual experiences of users. These individuals undergo a process of role-taking as social actors, framing situations

based on the value of interactions, which mediate the ongoing negotiation of symbolic values among participants. This entire process is supported by a technological infrastructure that enables the representation of interpersonal connections, through which participants can produce and consume social objects, as well as contribute to the shared process of prosumption. Gottschalk notes: “If experiments in the manipulation of mass emotional contagion are symptomatic of the future, this new mode of interaction requires sustained critical attention and intervention” (2015, p.20), especially from families, who often, due to limited familiarity with social media and social networks, may fail to understand their children’s behavior and uncover aspects of their lives that they do not comprehend in reality. It would be a mistake - frequently made when embracing the future uncritically, without reflecting on the changing conditions of life and communication in the present - not to consider the full implications of these ongoing transformations. While it is certainly necessary to continue viewing shared languages as a relational form through which individuals collectively construct their existence, it is equally important to reflect on the processes of interaction carried out by way of media tools, which increasingly serve as individuals’ sole companions. In this solitude, the communicative process has rarely been imagined as the central instrument it has now become, sometimes even taking on an almost personified role.

For parents, lack of access to technology, or even simple non-engagement with it, has created a new barrier to understanding contemporary languages, rendering them ill-equipped to navigate beyond traditional relational dynamics. This total or partial estrangement from these socializing mechanisms creates new forms of exclusion, stemming from unfamiliarity, lack of access, and difficulties in using the digital sphere rendering such individuals “marginal men” (Park, 1928).

Words like *violence*, *trust*, *tolerance*, *equality*, and *assertiveness* provide additional context for analysis. In this sense, it could be argued that during interviews, participants explored ways to deepen their understanding of the perspectives and relational, communicative, and virtual forms unknown to their generation, particularly through the younger generation’s digital creative diaries. Conversely, it could also be said that certain forms of conflict and violence related to the division of roles have affected family well-being and this has led participants to use terms such as *tolerance*, *anxiety*, *assertiveness*, *relationality*, and *resilience* to describe their experiences.

My son was raised with the idea that one should not be overbearing and should always be polite, especially with girls. At school, he was bullied for this and even called a ‘sissy.’ One day he came home from school and told me that even the teacher had said he had the characteristics of someone who is gender-fluid. Naturally, before coming home, he had

already looked it up, or at least thought he understood it since he has a phone at the age of 12. (C9_F_49_U)

Imagine my husband's and my shock when our 13-year-old son told us at dinner that he wanted to have breasts. We asked why he thought that, and he replied that it was to help his mom in the house since there were three boys and only one girl. We later discovered the source of this influence and sought a therapist. (S2_F_47_U)

With today's fluidity and technological push, it's hard to even think about educating children about gender differences without taking into account the knowledge they already have. They approach technology and the internet more autonomously than we do. (N5_F_51_U)

My daughter wasn't an introverted girl, but at some point, she became one. We couldn't understand why until we realized that a male friend of hers was being abusive towards her on her profile, calling her derogatory names and tarnishing her reputation among her friends. Unfortunately, these social networks make them dependent, they are the real magnet for boys and girls when it comes to their social interactions. (N9_M_52_D)

School and peer groups

Adults consider school and the peer group as places where the education and formation of identities hold significant weight. School and friends represent the locus of social construction of gender differences and sexual orientations, where they are thought and acted upon. A new sense of belonging emerges, where attitudes and approaches are formed that contribute to fuelling, modifying, and evolving the ways in which socialization occurs, generating an inevitable cultural gap between parents and children.

Boys and girls are equal, but not too much, the boys in my home are less accommodating towards their sister. The two boys, however, are quite complicit with each other... I believe my husband taught them this as he often jokes with us. (N10_F_50_U)

My daughter and my son, although they are twins, have different groups of friends at school. We have wanted them to be placed in separate classes since elementary school. This allowed us to see how they differ in how they relate to others, to the opposite sex, and even to those who seem distant from their own behavior. (C3_M_49_U)

My son has a schoolmate who behaves violently. I often tell him not to act that way as well. Unfortunately, peer models have a significant influence because, at home, he sometimes displays domineering and overbearing behavior towards his sister. (C8_F_55_D)

Generational conflicts and diversity in gender and sexual orientation education

Antonio Gramsci, in his writings from 1910-1926, addressed the “youth issue” arguing that young people exist in a state of permanent rebellion, a rebellion that affects families who are unable to contain or meet the new needs of youth, thus exacerbating distances and conflicts without resolving emerging issues in the education of the younger generation. Generational conflicts and differences can be interpreted within the framework of a contemporary fluid and liquid society (Fisher & Strauss, 1978; Bauman, 2000), which dismantles traditional certainties, projects individuals into uncertainty, and compels adaptation to the dominant group’s attitudes. In such a fluid and liquid society, interpersonal relationships between the socialized and the agents of socialization produce a new, disconcerting sensation: intergenerational disorientation, namely a conflict that continues generation after generation in an apparently endless spiral. A spiral in which parents are often in contradiction over the models to adopt in educating their children: should they follow traditional or contemporary models? Should they educate on gender differences or transcend them? Should they highlight disparities in access to power or deny them? And so on, as reflected in the words of the interviewees below.

I’m sure if my daughter had received a more traditional education, she wouldn’t have the sexual identity problems she has today. I disagree with educating about gender; I think it causes harm. (N1_F_48_D)

We aren’t ready; we weren’t taught to respect others or their feelings, and the lack of perspectives on changes leads to a lack of capacity to transfer new models for educating boys and girls today. (S5_F_56_D)

We are often in conflict about how to educate our children. They already think they’re adults and try to prove it to us (as a couple) through behavior sometimes incomprehensible to me (as a mother) regarding how they dress and who they hang out with. I think the generational conflict is due to the fact that we’re not ready; we need to be educated to recognize that we are different and that they can’t be like us in being men, women, or both. (C3_M_55_D)

Men and women still don’t have equal power in the family or outside it... I see that my little girl’s difficulties are not the same as her brother’s. We adults need to start with ourselves, learning what our families didn’t teach us about the differences in roles and sexual orientations (N7_M_51_D)

Even today, the conflict between boys and girls is about power in leadership positions. Adult society is not ready for equality. (S6_F_45_U)

To avoid a generalized identity crisis between educators and the educated, it is necessary to channel conflict and diversity into a training framework focused on reorganizing and reprogramming relationships along the lines of cohabitation, co-responsibility, and coexistence. In other words, generational conflict and divergence must be framed within an intergenerational co-education over time.

Results. Findings from text mining

To proceed with the textual analysis of the stories, each interview transcript was first copied from the respective interview file and then exported to Microsoft Word to remove any unnecessary spaces. After processing in Word, the texts were imported into Excel, where two matrices were created with two main columns: column A contained the interviewees, while column B featured the corresponding indicative texts from the interviews. During the operationalization phase, it was necessary to perform simple normalization of the corpus, which involved removing special characters and symbols such as commas, slashes, and exclamation marks. The next step was to eliminate any remaining spaces before converting the text to lowercase. Additionally, it was decided to merge a recurring phrase into a single word: “Nonsiamopronti” (“Wearenotready” in English). Moreover, the next step involved removing stopwords, the most common words in a language that carry little value in terms of acquiring useful information, for example, “la”, “del”, “con”, “un”, etc. (the, of, with, a, in English). After cleaning the texts, a document-term matrix was created, to display the frequency of words in a tabular format. Textual statistics fundamentally rely on word frequencies and co-occurrences since by identifying word occurrences, it becomes possible to pinpoint popular topics or relevant themes.

The terms extracted from the analysis provide deeper insights into knowledge related to educating about gender differences and sexual orientations, as well as the challenges families face regarding these topics. As observed in Table 1, the two main occurrences for interviewees from the North, Center, and South regions are the terms *Nonsiamopronti* (*wearenotready* in English) (119 and 82) and *linguaggi* (*languages* in English). This suggests that respondents associate education about gender differences with a sense of unpreparedness and this perception of unpreparedness stems from their belonging to Generation X, which differs significantly from their children’s Generation Z (also referred to as Generation C for “connected”) in terms of symbolic order and the binary division of roles.

Table 1. Term matrix by geographical area consisting of the top 20 words by frequency of occurrence.

NORTH		CENTER		SOUTH	
WORD	FREQ.	WORD	FREQ.	WORD	FREQ.
Weareno-tready	39	Weareno-tready	37	Weareno-tready	43
Languages	26	Languages	25	Languages	31
Roles	26	Roles	25	Roles	27
Trust	19	Trust	18	Trust	19
Education	19	Education	17	Education	18
Violence	10	Violence	9	Violence	10
Technology	10	Technology	9	Technology	10
Autonomy	9	Autonomy	9	Autonomy	10
Power	9	Power	8	Power	9
School	10	School	8	School	8
Fluidity	9	Fluidity	7	Fluidity	7
Sexism	8	Sexism	7	Sexism	7
Generations	8	Generations	6	Generations	7
Equality	7	Equality	6	Equality	7
Work	7	Work	6	Work	7
Embodiment	7	Embodiment	5	Embodiment	6
Misogyny	7	Misogyny	5	Misogyny	6
Stereotypes	7	Stereotypes	5	Stereotypes	5
Socialdependent	7	Socialdependent	4	Socialdependent	5
Nonbinary	3	Nonbinary	1	Nonbinary	1

Their upbringing did not teach them how to overcome disparities or navigate access to power in social roles between men and women. Even less so were they taught tolerance and acceptance of new, diverse forms of sexual orientation and conflicts between gender ideals and sexual identity. The table below shows the relatively small variation in the occurrence of terms used by respondents from the North, Center, and South. In the North, the term *wearenotready* occurred 39 times, followed by *languages* with 26 occurrences. In the Center, *wearenotready* occurred 37 times, followed by *languages* with 25. In the South, *wearenotready* occurred 43 times, followed by *languages* with 31. It is worth noting that the number of respondents from the South were 23. The occurrence of these terms in the interviews could be explained by the perception among respondents that educating about gender differences has had a significant impact on their lives and those of their children. To provide a more detailed understanding, here are excerpts from testimonies containing the analyzed terms.

We aren't ready; we weren't taught to respect others or their feelings, and the lack of perspectives on changes leads to a lack of capacity to transfer new models for educating boys and girls today. (S5_F_56_D)

We are often in conflict about how to educate our children. They already think they're adults and try to prove it to us (as a couple) through behavior sometimes incomprehensible to me (as a mother) regarding how they dress and who they hang out with. I think the generational conflict is due to the fact that we're not ready; we need to be educated to recognize that we are different and that they can't be like us in being men, women, or both. (C3_M_55_D)

I have a family with three children, all of whom were educated the same way, to make their beds, clean up their rooms, help around the house... well, two are fine, the other, my husband says, took after me. I think we are not ready for the change that is happening to transfer tolerant and welcoming models. (N2_F_52_U)

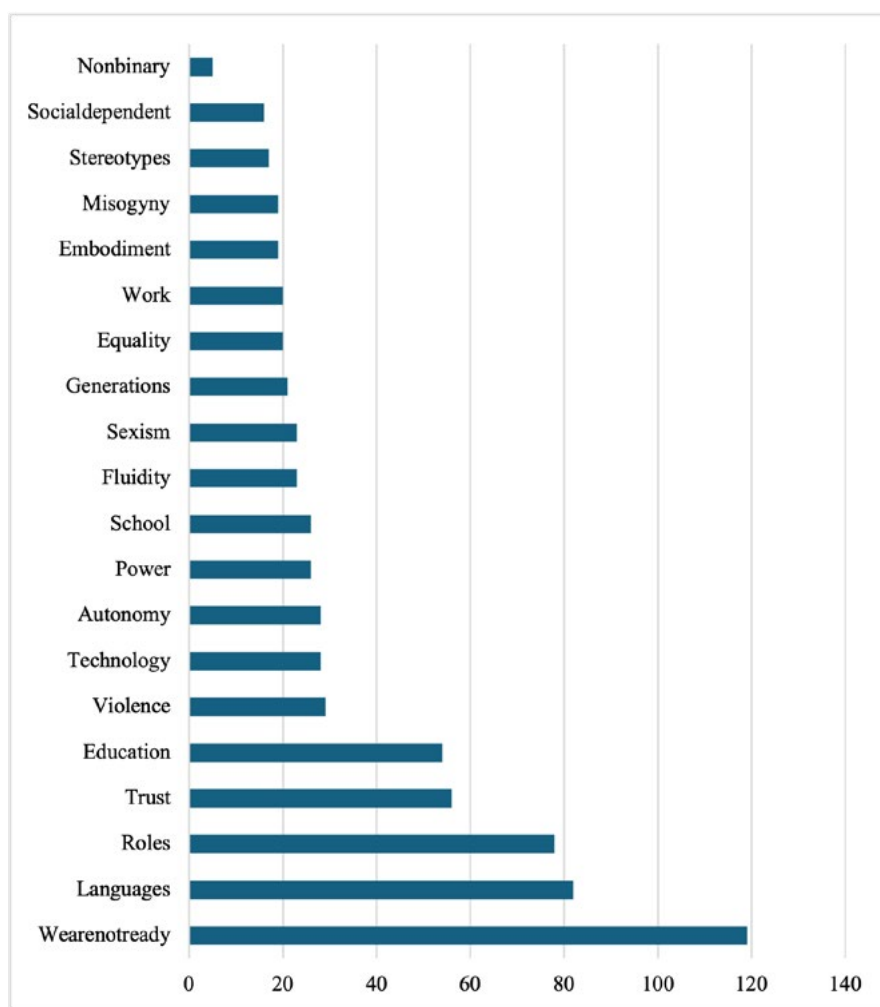
Men and women still don't have equal power in the family or outside it... I see that my little girl's difficulties are not the same as her brother's. We adults need to start with ourselves, learning what our families didn't teach us about the differences in roles and sexual orientations (N7_M_51_D)

I have two daughters, aged 14 and 17 and they are already encountering the problems that are often discussed, but as a manager, even though I have a wife and two daughters, I believe that this alone is not enough to change the dynamics of how men and women relate to each other in the world. In this, language helps to keep men and women separated. I have

the feeling that saying 'director' and 'directress' has a different effect, directress almost makes one think of a school principal. (C1_M_54_U)

After constructing the Terms x Documents matrix, the data was visualized graphically. A bar chart was generated, with terms displayed on the y-axis and their respective frequencies on the x-axis.

Graph 1. Most frequent words in the interviews



The words most frequently associated (in absolute terms) with open-ended responses to the three questions are as follows:

Possible relationships and interactions with individuals interested in reducing sexism and educating about gender differences:

- With young people (21)

- With other families (19)
- With schools (17)
- With institutions dedicated to sexism prevention (16)
- With companies (16)
- With public administrations (8)

Activities organized for gender difference awareness interventions:

- Awareness campaigns (15)
- Conferences on violence against women and International Women's Day (March 8) (39)
- No specific activities recalled (17)

Institutions perceived as potential collaborators:

- Schools (63)
- Companies (46)
- Universities (31)
- Municipal governments (28)
- The Church (26)
- Associations (9)

Final integrated results in categories

Through the coding, classification, and synthesis of the interviews during the final phase of the research, three categories emerged related to promoting education about gender differences and sexual orientations within families. The goal is to foster new languages capable of enabling assertive changes in the traditional symbolic order. This is essential for recognizing gender differences in education at schools, workplaces, and in couple relationships, while emphasizing the urgency of educational interventions aimed at promoting and developing gender education among and for adults (see Table 2).

The use of creative digital diaries provided by younger participants (particularly those aged 14-17, amounting to 37 diaries) revealed that the multidimensional approach adopted highlighted previously unknown and unconsidered aspects of their children. A joint analysis of these creative digital diaries uncovered five significant themes:

- a. Discomfort expressed prior to the interview,
- b. Support felt during the interview,
- c. Creativity and sharing fostered through the narratives written by their children,
- d. New perspectives on social issues gained through their children, and
- e. The need to educate oneself and others about gender differences and emerging orientations.

Our study demonstrated that introducing gender education for families through institutions such as schools, universities, churches, and public administration (workplaces) could enhance their knowledge and approach to-

ward various aspects of gender equality and related behavior. Such social and mental shifts within families could then extend to schools, spanning across their lives and those of their children, with careful consideration of potential adverse consequences, including the restrictive traditional practices around gender that lead to repression, violence, vulnerability, fragility, distress, and denial of identity. Simultaneously, adopting educational approaches rooted in positive feelings and emotions such as solidarity, trust, and security within families and peer groups would necessitate rethinking and designing targeted policies. These policies should aim to improve interventions that reshape behavior, cultures, and communal beliefs to address gender education challenges effectively.

Table 2. Codes, subcategories and categories related to gender difference education.

CODES	Subcategories	Categories
Recognizing the impact of ongoing social changes on children Recognizing the male-female interaction Recognizing the difficulties of parenting Recognizing the generational differences in socialization Recognizing the unpreparedness for change	Educating children beyond traditional values Educating and modelling the mother-father relationship to prevent children from perceiving disparities Educating adults about the fluid and changing languages of their children Educating oneself to recognize the signals of children in constructing gender differences Educating to new models of parenting: "The world has changed"	Education
Sharing experiences/knowledge between generations Sharing decisions Sharing and exchanging roles	Identity Parenthood Friendship Roles	Trust
The important role of adults in socializing gender differences and preventing discrimination	Example, using a common code to transmit the value and respect of gender differences	Languages

Discussion and conclusion

This study, which highlights the role of families as privileged witnesses in research, also demonstrates how participation improves understanding and relationships within families. However, it mainly suggests the mechanisms by which attitudinal changes fail to occur in families' willingness to educate on gender differences. This often stems from the inability to comprehend and support the evolving attitudes of younger generations. Nevertheless, the recurring expression "*We are not ready*" reveals adults' awareness that education is a continuous reorganization of past experiences in light of the

present, fostering the knowledge needed to navigate changes in educating their children about gender and sexual education.

In a society characterized by the hectic organization of time and space, families struggle to educate their children in relationships that are as equal and inclusive as possible. This challenge arises from individuals' inability to keep pace with all the rhythms and models such as the division of labor, roles within the family (remembering that staying in a family is often not a choice), and gender differences.

Principles of freedom, personal autonomy, equity, and equality remain perilously tied to ideals of complementarity within the private sphere. The idea that women's lives should naturally and obligatorily be devoted to caring for their families and partners legitimized boundless practices of self-sacrifice and submission that such a destiny entailed.

However, this has been increasingly challenged by the transformation of fundamental rights. Initially founded on the idea of equality irrespective of individual differences (sex, race, language, religion, social status, etc.), these rights now increasingly recognize individual differences, "in the name of the right to specific treatment corresponding to the original differences between the holders...leading to the proliferation of fundamental subjective rights that gain recognition...the right to identity" (Ferrari, 1997, p.16). Thus, cultural issues resurface robustly, as the violation and subordination of the female body, once explicitly sanctioned by legal norms, cultures, and social practices, remain implicitly reinforced by the dominant culture's sexism.

It is evident that even legal societies are not immune to cultural legacies and their resulting social relations. The challenge lies in ensuring that women are not considered holders of rights and duties different from those of men; otherwise, there is a risk of perpetuating a male-centric, unisex perspective. If gender equality is achieved, it is precisely because of these differences, and it is crucial to reflect on this. A careful reflection on this is required to avoid a tendency toward a male-centered monocultural horizon, which has long been the standard for interpretation and regulation. If legislators alone address issues related to women, such protection risks reiterating differences and unsurprisingly, the duality of sexes is affirmed through the symbolic recognition of female difference (Criaco, 2008, p.146). Additionally, this carries risks, including the inability to begin, even within families, the deconstruction of a binary gender model that is deeply entrenched and universally accepted.

Therefore, raising awareness of gender education should be seen as a step toward completing the journey of citizenship rights, requiring a consistent commitment from women and men of all ages and generations. This endeavor must be pursued on multiple levels, engaging processes such as socialization, the construction of sexual identities, cultural and educational

development, legal frameworks and their implementation, professions and institutions, the organization of work, and family life. In other words, all social institutions must contribute to shaping gender identity and sexual orientation in a society that is increasingly complex, culturally diverse, and constantly changing (Corbisiero & Nocenzi, 2022; Corbisiero & Monaco, 2024).

The principle that should guide and inform our efforts is education in emotions, respect for others, and an appreciation of diversity since we are who we are thanks to others and our relationships with them. Identity is a social construction, and we build ourselves through our interactions with others, drawing strength from the diversity they represent for us. Families, therefore, in educating their children, could themselves be educated in gender equality. Education is a reciprocal process, not a one-way street, unfolding within families in subdimensions where: socialization begins; interpersonal relationships between socialized individuals and socializing agents take root; the social identity of both socializers and the socialized is developed; and, finally, gender differences and sexual orientations are socially constructed.

Consideration must be given to the reflective and transformative journey women have undertaken in recent decades toward self-determination, building complex identities, and reconciling market logic with the logic of reciprocity. “From socio-individual self-analysis and self-observation, which become increasingly necessary, on the one hand the biographical compulsion to narrate arise (and produce unity), and on the other hand, the infinite multiplicities and fragmentations of personal life... This opens a perspective (or a socially binding narrative space) that expands life beyond regional and national boundaries and, ultimately, toward a global dimension” (Beck, 2008, p.48).

The process of starting from oneself, experienced by many women over recent decades as an inseparable unity of body, culture, and social practice, should be transferred to younger generations, including their children, and shared with men. This enables the discovery of new identities, codes of communication, and forms of self-realization that avoid imposing logics of domination. This process must begin particularly with young people, both men and women, who, more than gender and sexual education, need education in citizenship and respect for diversity. With the influence that the environment exerts on young individuals, it is necessary to transform vague moral impressions into distinct and precise notions (Durkheim, 1912), attributing different interpretative possibilities to social facts. In this way, education, if capable of forming free citizens, can guide individuals toward independently orienting their freedom and making them truly free (Nussbaum, 2012; 2014).

Finally, as noted by our interviewees, well-being extends beyond access to material resources or services. It encompasses opportunities for socio-re-

lational goods, including interpersonal relationships, and the ability to pursue life projects that individuals have reason to value, grounded in their unique attributes. Hence, there is a call for a new opportunity, starting with education on gender and sexual differences within families, aimed at promoting well-being and growth and this effort should focus on evaluating and pursuing actively political alternatives that improve the development of both individuals and their children.

In conclusion, the pivotal role of agency that families play in transmitting the value of diversity through gender and sexual orientation education is evident, and this process is fundamentally important as it seeks to foster change and transformation rooted in shared values and objectives.

Limitations and future directions of the research

The study's limitations can be attributed to various factors, including the small number of families followed during the period from June 2021 to July 2022. Educational interventions should always be multifactorial (addressing various awareness factors) and multisectoral (involving not only families but also schools, communities, and associated institutions). Although the study aimed to involve more families, some declined participation, as it was deemed too late for certain participants to discuss these topics, given their knowledge on the subject was already well-established. Consequently, some families that had initially consented to participate later became unavailable.

This study could be rethought and redesigned to include a follow-up period in which the group's experiences can be observed, explained, and interpreted through a life-course approach.

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