



On the historical roots of women's empowerment across Italian provinces: religion or family culture?



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ABSTRACT

Why do women's economic decision-making and political empowerment vary so widely? What are the main potential determinants of such variations? Over a cross-section of Italian provincial data, we analyze the association between two specific facets of women's empowerment, the percentage of women holding office in local political bodies and the percentage of women in high-ranking jobs, and the religious and cultural conditions which facilitate or hinder women's inclusion. Our hypothesis is that culture, in particular those values embodied by religious culture, plays a central role in shaping norms and beliefs about the role and involvement of women in society. Moreover we suggest that these cultural norms are inherited from the past and therefore have a high degree of inertia. Both OLS and IV results indicate that our measures of women's empowerment are strongly associated with religious culture, as proxied by religious marriages. These results are robust and consistent across specifications.

Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior,[...] they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored.
(Titus 2:3-5)

1. Introduction

In the last two decades gender equality has made tremendous progress around the world both in developing and developed countries. However, notwithstanding the gender gap is slowly closing, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2015), no country in the world has fully reached equality between men and women in all dimensions: wide gender gaps still persist even in the most advanced countries, and are particularly stagnating in the economic participation and political empowerment dimensions. Yet the factors of such under-representation and therefore the obstacles to effective empowerment of women remain puzzling in the literature and not fully understood.

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determinants of such a variation? In order to answer to these questions, this paper attempts at investigating women's under-representation in politics and leadership over a cross-section of Italian provincial data and it focuses on the association between two specific facets of women's empowerment, the percentage of women holding office in local political bodies¹ and the percentage of women in high-ranking jobs, and the religious and cultural conditions which facilitate or hinder women's inclusion.

Indeed, as highlighted by [Bozzano \(2014\)](#) making use of a newly constructed index,² within the Italian boundaries the degree of gender equality is highly heterogeneous across regions and sizeable gender gaps are still impressive. Despite a rising trend in women's labour market participation, women still find it difficult to breach the glass ceiling³ in managerial ranks and in the political arena. The literature on this debated topic has proposed several explanations, going from institutional, political, and cultural factors to more strictly economic and societal ones as limiting women's opportunities and abilities to effectively participate in decision-making and leadership.

Our conjecture is that culture, in particular those values embodied in religious culture, continues to exert a central impact in shaping social norms and beliefs about the appropriate role of women at home, in the workforce, and in the society at large.

Hence, in our analysis we focus on the specific cultural and social norms on gender attached to religion, in the Italian case the Catholic Church. We employ a measure of society's religious culture, where the intensity of Catholicism is given by the share of religious marriages over the total number of marriages: in our argument a higher degree of religiosity captured by the share of religious marriages is associated with a more conservative perception of women's traditional position within the family and in society at large and thus with lower degrees of feminization in politics and high-ranking jobs.

The link between religion and women's empowerment is not new in the economic literature: however despite the richness of this growing field, most of the contributions are cross-country studies and mainly focused on female labour force participation and employment (i.e. [Fortin, 2005](#); [Seguino, 2011](#); [Pastore and Tenaglia, 2013](#); and [Fischer and Pastore, 2015](#), among others), and there are only a small number of single-country analyses (among others [Lehrer, 1995](#), for USA; [Heineck, 2004](#), for Germany; and [Maneschiöld and Haraldsson, 2007](#), for Sweden).

This essay intends to contribute to the current debate in several ways. First, while the existing literature has mainly investigated the determinants of female education, women's labour force participation, motherhood, and fertility,⁴ few papers have so far dealt with women's numerical representation in politics and in high-ranking jobs.⁵

Second, the analysis is conducted at the local level and within a single country. We are not aware of any previous study on the effect of religion on women's empowerment in politics and leadership across Italian provinces and most important, focusing on a single country reduces the omitted variable problem commonly found in cross-country analyses on the same topic.

Third, although we recognize that to disentangle different cultural elements is an arduous task, we explicitly propose to distinguish between two alternative channels, religious and family culture, by including them simultaneously into the analysis. We acknowledge in fact that these two dimensions are not mutually exclusive: however we argue that religion is the primary explanation and major perpetrating force of the differences in gender attitudes whereas family culture, broadly defined as a traditional family structure and values, plays a secondary role being itself influenced by religious norms. Finally, we suggest that gender norms are inherited from the past and have a high degree of inertia through time and religious culture is an important channel through which past gender culture still plays a role in shaping current female political and economic decision-making empowerment in Italy.

We adopt the following strategy to substantiate our results. First, we explore the role of religious culture on women's empowerment distinguishing it from the effect of family structure and controlling for current female education, wealth, and geography. Then we expand our analysis exploring some alternative measures of family-related culture and we run a set of alternative specifications in order to assess the robustness of our findings. Third, we evaluate the relevance of religious culture as a channel of transmission of past gender culture through an instrumental variable approach and we discuss the validity of our instruments.

Our main finding is that across Italian provinces our proxy for religious culture is consistently significant and robust in determining women's empowerment in both the political and leadership dimensions, even when we control for a broad set of covariates or alternative measures of the tested channels. Finally, family culture turns to be relevant mainly for the share of women in high-ranking jobs partly confirming our prior of the primary role of religious culture over other factors, at least in the political dimension.

The paper proceeds as follows. In [Section 2](#) we review the position of the Catholic Church towards women's involvement in public life and gender roles. [Section 3](#) provides a brief overview of the relevant literature. In [Section 4](#) we describe the data as well as some stylized facts and then in [Section 5](#) we present our empirical strategy and put forth some relevant correlations. [Section 6](#) proposes a

¹ Also called “descriptive or numerical representation” in the political science literature.

² [Bozzano \(2014\)](#) builds the Italian Gender Gap Index for Italian regions applying the methodology elaborated by the WEF's Gender Gap index. The GGI ranks countries according to fourteen indicators in four main areas giving a score between 0 (perfect inequality) and 1 (perfect equality). The index considers four key dimensions: health and survival, educational attainment, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment. In 2015, according to the WEF's Gender Gap index, Italy for example is ranked 41st, well behind almost all developed countries and even many developing ones, i.e. Nicaragua (12th), Mozambique (27th), or Burundi (23rdth).

³ The phenomenon of glass ceiling is the concentration of higher responsibility positions in the hands of men and the under-representation of women at the top level of both public administrations and private firms.

⁴ See [Goldin \(1990, 2006\)](#) for a treatment of the issue of empowerment of U.S. women from an economic history perspective. For the role of technology on gender empowerment see [Goldin and Katz \(2002\)](#) and [Greenwood et al. \(2005\)](#).

⁵ [Alesina et al. \(2013\)](#) are an exception because in their analysis on the role of the plough in determining gender attitudes today they employ as dependent variables the female labour force participation as well as the share of women in national politics and the share of firms with female owners or managers.

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