Spaces of female 'agency' and emerging patterns of intersectional inequality: gender, class and partnership status in academic capitalism

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Title:
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Abstract
University systems have undergone profound changes based on cost-efficiency and performance-based evaluation practices paralleled by an increase in precarity. Without denying the downsides, of the advent of academic capitalism for women, this contribution invites readers to shift the attention to at least two new, under-explored aspects. On the one hand, it sheds light on the "opportunities" that market-based university transformations offer to women. On the other, it focuses on increasing precarity and its effects in terms of inequalities among women, based on social class and partnership status. On the first front, it suggests that new "spaces of female agency" are emerging through the growing market of individual early-career competitive research funding. Such opportunities – which do not come without costs – may offset existing hierarchies that have traditionally disadvantaged women. I have called this phenomenon "the golden goose effect". On the second front, it challenges the idea – by looking at the intersection of gender, class, and partnership status – that female early-career researchers drop-out more than men, as opting out depends on economic resources (from the family of origin and/or the chosen family), the non-academic labor market structure and gender regimes. Moreover, by focusing on the role of the chosen family in shaping career opportunities, new research avenues are suggested. These should bring into the analysis the obstacles faced by single women and women in same-sex couples. Against a rich body of literature highlighting the negative implications of market-based university transformations for women, this contribution invites to look at the "opportunities" that these transformations entail – as well as the new forms of power hierarchies they reproduce among women themselves.

Structured abstract
Purpose. This contribution invites readers to shift the attention from the effects that academic capitalism has on gender inequalities towards new, under-explored, gendered aspects. More specifically, it investigates the opportunities that market-based university transformations offer to women as well as the new forms of power hierarchies that they reproduce among women themselves.
Design/methodology/approach. For this purpose, twenty-three interviews with academics who work or have worked in a life-science department of a large Italian university have been analyzed by adopting an intersectional approach aimed at seizing the junctures between gender, class and partnership status.
Findings. This paper sheds light on three specific aspects. First, it suggests that new opportunities for women - related to the emerging managerial academic culture – are arising, and these are likely to offset existing gender asymmetries. These opportunities – which do not come without costs – are related to the growing importance of individual, competitive-based research funding. I have named this phenomenon "the golden goose effect". Second, it highlights the effects of the increasing precarization of academic work in terms of inequalities among women, based on social class and partnership status. In this vein, it challenges the idea that women drop-out more than men, as opting out depends on the intersection between a) economic resources (from the family of origin and/or the chosen family), b) non-academic labor market opportunities and c) gender regimes. Thirdly, by focusing on the role of the chosen family in shaping career opportunities, new research venues are suggested, which should bring into the analysis single women and women in same-sex couples.
Practical implications. The benefits related to early-career individual grants could be reinforced, on the one hand, by incentivizing universities that recruit early-career grantees with further public resources and, on the other and, by promoting women-specific funding schemes (or by reserving part of the budget of existing early career grants to women). Such excellence-driven policies should be always balanced by DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) and work-life balance policies. At the same

time, actions aimed at reducing work precarity in academia are needed, including increasing public resources to higher-education institutions.
Originality/value. Without denying the downsides, widely identified by a rich literature, of the advent of academic capitalism for women, this paper draws the attention on two under-explored aspects, namely the spaces of gender "equality" within the new academia and the new patterns of privilege. In this respect, it suggests that women's "amelioration" of opportunities comes along with persisting inequalities among women themselves.

Keywords (6 max)
Gender and academia, academic capitalism, neoliberal academia, academic precarity, intersectional inequalities, social inequalities.

Introduction

In the last decades, academia across Europe has undergone profound transformations inspired by market-driven principles with the double aim of increasing efficiency and reducing the costs of tertiary education institutions. As for the first aspect, increasing efficiency, a new organizational culture based on the "meritocratic ideal" (Barone, 2012), has emerged, emphasizing – and promoting – individual productivity and entrepreneurship. As for the second aspect, reducing the costs, cuts to public funding for higher education, taking place within the frame of a more general restructuring of national welfare systems, have reduced the number of stable positions and increased precarity (Le Feuvre et al. 2020) while progressively opening up the doors to new research funders, including private (Krüger et al., 2018). Sometimes framed in terms of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter and Leslie, 1999; Ferree and Zippel, 2015), and others in terms of "neoliberal academia" (Connell, 2019; Morley, 2003; Riegraf and Weber, 2017), these changes have also concerned Italian universities: since the mid-2000s, academic organizations have experienced the rise of new managerial practices aimed at more efficiently allocating scarcer governmental funding to higher performing university departments. At the same time, job instability has increased due to, on the one hand, the precarisation of assistant professor contracts following the 2010 University reform (Law n. 240/2010) and, on the other, cuts in turn-over, which have made it more difficult for early career researchers to obtain a tenured position (Bozzon et al., 2017, Picardi, 2019).

In my previous works on the gender implications of market-based transformations of Italian academia, I argue that such implications are complex and show both negative and positive implications for female academics.

With respect to the rise of the new managerial culture, its downsides for women are known: indeed, by overlooking the (often hidden) structure of opportunities at the base of "individual merit" (Scully 1997; Nielsen, 2016; Rottenberg 2018; Gaiaschi forthcoming), this culture favors a standard of excellence based on a masculine mode of work (Deem, 2009; Thornton, 2013; Lund, 2015). However, it is undeniable that the new managerial culture has opened up opportunities for women through the increasing emphasis on entrepreneurship, that is the capacity to secure funds for research. I have called this opportunity "the golden goose effect", meaning, with this term, the benefits – in terms of access to tenure track positions and promotion – that some women have obtained after winning an individual grant, despite lacking a mentor or being unprotected (Gaiaschi, 2023).

With respect to increasing job precarity, an analysis of recruitment and employment trends over time suggests that, since the 2010 university reform, women have been less likely —compared to men— to be appointed as assistant professors, and more specifically, as tenure-track assistant professors (Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020; Gaiaschi 2022). At the same time, the capacity to endure long periods of job instability – which is an essential prerequisite to obtain a tenured position - is not the same for all women. This last aspect has been overlooked so far and calls for an intersectional approach in the analysis of the effects of academic market-based transformations on academics.

Faced with a wide existing literature emphasizing the downsides of academic capitalism for female academics, this contribution invites readers to shift attention to at least two new, under-explored, aspects. On the one hand, it sheds light on the *opportunities* that market-based university transformations offer to women. On the other, it focuses on new forms of inequalities *among women* themselves.

In order to do so, twenty-three interviews conducted with faculty, post-docs and former researchers working in a life-science department of a large university in Northern Italy between 2018 and 2019 have been analyzed. These interviews were the object of my previous and current works on the topic (Gaiaschi, 2023 and forthcoming). In those contributions, the phenomenon of the "golden goose effect" was identified as a new space of female "opportunities". For this paper, these same interviews were re-analyzed through the analytical lenses of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). This choice has helped shed light on the junctions between gender, class and partnership status while paving the way for new research avenues which could eventually add the dimension of sexual orientation in the analysis.

Gender, intersectionality and academic capitalism: a theoretical background

Market-based university changes have been the object of a significant body of literature known as the Critical University Studies. According to many of its scholars, these transformations have led to negative consequences for the academic system, both with respect to knowledge production, and with respect to those who produce knowledge, academics themselves (Pellegrino, 2018; Connell, 2019). That is, "academic capitalism" (Slaughter and Leslie 1999; Ferree and Zippel 2015) risks leading to a fragmentation of knowledge due to the increasing pressure on researchers who are pushed to publish "more" at the expense of quality (Pellegrino, 2018). At the same time, work precarity in the early stages of academic careers is increasing, driven by cuts in public resources for research (Bozzon et al., 2017; De Angelis and Grüning, 2020). Both aspects - the culture of hyper-productivity and growing job instability - have negative consequences in terms of academics' psycho-physical well-being (Gill, 2013; Angharad and Robinson 2020).

Within this debate, a large strand of literature has focused on the implications that these changes have on women's careers (among others: Morley, 2003; Riegraf et al., 2010; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2011, 2012; Thornton, 2013; Ferree and Zippel, 2015; Lund, 2015). Many of these works agree on the fact that the alliance between neoliberalism and the "meritocratic ideal" (Barone, 2012; Nielsen, 2016) in academia– and thus the idea that free markets and deregulation are meritocratic – risks increasing existing gender inequalities as it sees the position of traditionally marginalized groups, including women, as the result of their lack of commitment and productivity (Scully, 1997; Fraser, 2022). By doing so, such a vision overlooks the fact that excellence, a leitmotif of the meritocratic ideal, is not only the result of talent and hard work but also of opportunities that are not the same for everyone and which – due to the persistence of female obstacles in organizations – tend to "accumulate" more quickly for men (Zuckerman, 1977). At the same time, neoliberal university policies foster precarious employment, including post-doc positions and contract professors, disproportionately impacting women over men.

Against this background, two aspects seem to remain under-investigated. The former concerns the opportunities – and not only the disadvantages – that such changes entail for women. The latter concerns the different effects that these changes have among women themselves, based on their different characteristics such as class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual identity and so on.

On the first front, the study of Myra Marx Ferree and Katherine Zippel (2017) goes against the grain by providing a less clear-cut evaluation on the gender implications of academic capitalism. While taking a critical stance both toward market-based transformations of academia and the old liberal university model, they recall how this latter was not very inclusive of women, due to old-boy networks and affiliation logics (Ferree and Zippel, 2015). In the same vein, in my recent works I have shed light on the spaces of female "agency" that the conflict between the old – cooptation-based – and the

new – "meritocratic" – system opens up, especially through the leverage of early-career individual grants which help to offset affiliation practices (Gaiaschi 2023 and forthcoming).

On the second front, some recent contributions have explicitly adopted intersectionality to interrogate how academic systems reproduce inequalities affecting not only gender but also other social categories (Moore et al. 2010; Armstrong & Jovanovic, 2015; Kachchaf et al., 2015; Nichols and Stahl, 2019; Davis et al., 2022; Rosa, 2024; Sim and Bierema, 2023). First introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in the field of legal studies, the theory of intersectionality highlights how social categories—such as gender, race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability and so on—intersect to shape experiences of privilege or oppression. It challenges the idea that these identities exist in isolation while suggesting that individuals face compounded inequalities that cannot be fully understood through single-axis analyses of race or gender alone. While Crenshaw is credited with popularizing the term intersectionality, the core ideas of the theory were developed by other scholars and activists who came before her. Key thinkers of the Black and Afro-Latin American feminist movements like bell hooks (1981) and Lélia Gonzalez (1988) had laid foundational groundwork for the theory of intersectionality, emphasizing how systems of oppression are inseparable and must be understood in relation to one another. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2019) further expanded on these ideas, articulating the concept of a "matrix of domination" to describe these interlocking systems. Building on this, Acker (2006) introduced the concept of "inequality regimes" in the studies of work organizations, to show how workplace structures (e.g., hierarchies, segregation) produce intersectional inequalities.

This systemic approach has since informed research on inequalities in academia as well: within this debate, much attention has been given to the intersection between gender and race (Harris and Patton, 2019; Nichols and Stahl, 2019) with a specific focus, in North America but also in the UK, on black women and women of color (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Stockfelt, 2018)[i]. More recent studies have looked at the experiences of lesbians and transgender female faculty by challenging heteronormative and binary structures in academia (Reinert and Yakaboski, 2017; Cirico, 2025). Others have adopted a decolonialist perspective by giving voice, for example, to Latin-American academics' feminist practices (Vera Colina, 2025). Further works have focused on academic capitalism and precarity through intersectional lenses (see on this point Sim and Bierema 2023's review on 22 articles on the topic) thus adding further value to the Critical University Studies. Despite the increasing interest in the multiple layers of oppression in academia, much remains to be explored: out of the 50 papers on intersectional inequalities in higher education summarized through a systematic literature review by Nichols and Stahl (2019), less than ten concern the faculty, the rest being focused on students and other professionals. In the same article, the two authors conclude that "there is a considerable work to be done to actively address the workings of intersecting systems of inequity impacting on participation and outcomes of students and faculty" (Nichols and Stahl, 2019, p. 1). This paper aims to fill this gap by focusing on the intersection between gender, class and partnership status while laying the groundwork for future lines of research including sexual orientation in the analysis.

What has emerged so far: the "golden goose effect" and the spaces of female agency.

With 89 universities — including 61 public, 20 private, and 8 "special university institutes"— and around 70,000 academics (from post-docs to full professors)[ii], Italy has not remained unaffected by the wave of market-based transformations that has swept through international university systems. On one hand, the progressive introduction of evaluation systems for individuals and organizations – including, but not limited to, the "Research Quality Assessment" (in Italian Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca or VQR)[iii]– has promoted a new managerial culture based on high scientific productivity and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, job precariousness has increased (Bozzon et al., 2017, Picardi, 2019) partly due to the 2007-2017 turnover cuts – which have led to a general decrease of (stable) entry-level positions – and partly due to the 2010 university reform (also known as the Gelmini reform, law n. 240/2010), which replaced the old open-ended contract for assistant professor

(also called RU or "ricercatore unico", in English: researcher) with two fixed-term contracts: one senior and tenure-track (also called "RTDb" or "ricercatore a tempo determinato di tipo B", in English: short-term assistant professor of B type) and the other junior (also called RTDa or "ricercatore a tempo di determinato di tipo A", in English: short-term assistant professor of A type). The first contract has a duration of three years and, after an evaluation from the department and only if the candidate has obtained the "National Scientific Qualification"[iv], it is converted into an associate professor's position. The second contract has a duration of three years, renewable for an additional two years. Unlike the RTDb, once ended, the RTDa does not result in the automatic creation of a permanent contract. More recently, the 2022 university reform (law n. 79/2022) has continued along the path of the previous reform by replacing the two types of assistant professor contracts with a single – short-term – position, that of "tenure-track" assistant professor.

In some of my recent research, I have sought to identify the gender implications of these recent transformations. On the one hand, the analysis of recruitment and employment trends over time suggests greater setbacks for women, compared to men, in the likelihood of becoming assistant professor and more specifically tenure-track assistant professors (Gaiaschi and Musumeci, 2020). At the same time, the same new managerial culture appears to offer opportunities. In this regard, the "golden goose effect" represents an emblematic case (Gaiaschi, 2023). With this term, I have indicated the benefits that some women receive after winning an individual European grant. Indeed, access to this type of funding – an expression of the market turn of university systems – allows them, depending on seniority, either not to leave academia, and so obtaining a tenured position, or to accelerate their career progression, obtaining a promotion.

The case of early-career individual funding is particularly interesting. Junior researchers can compete for two specific individual grants, namely the Marie Sklodowska-Curie and the ERC (European Research Council) Starting Grant. Both reflect the logic of the European Research Area, a policy framework aimed at promoting a single, borderless, market for research based on excellence. The first grant is open to post-docs, the second either to post-docs or assistant professors who have ended the PhD no more than seven years before they send the application. Of the two grants, only the second one automatically guarantees a position in Italy as associate professor. As for the first one, many universities offer a position of tenured assistant professor to those who have obtained the "Global" line (meaning two years abroad outside Europe and one year back to a European institution). For those who have obtained a "European" line (meaning two years in a European country), no automatic recruitment is envisaged. However, having obtained this type of grant remains a highly valued criterion in public selections. In summary, what these funding instruments – which are emblematic of the "new" academia – offer is an alternative to the "old", liberal, model based on affiliation and favoritism. In a system in which working under the shadow of a full professor has been, and still is, of foremost importance in order to obtain a tenured position, the competitive "market" of European individual grants allows access to the profession even without the "protection" of a mentor. This holds true for men and women but – given the persistence of gender dynamics within academic organizations – may acquire a gendered dimension. Indeed, it is well known that women are less likely to have a mentor early in their career phases (Picardi and Agodi, 2020). Also, due to greater isolation within organizations (Britton et al., 2012), they tend to collaborate with their peers. Men, on the other hand, build more vertical networks which lead to greater opportunities (Milem et al., 2001). All in all, women seem to benefit from existing hierarchies to a lesser extent than men. As a consequence, they may be more likely than men to take advantage of these new opportunities. Data on applicants of the Marie Curie and ERC grants over the 2007-2020 years, provided by the European Commission, indicate a process of strong feminization for both awards thus suggesting an increasing recourse of this type of instrument by women (Gaiaschi, forthcoming).

Face to a rich amount of literature which has emphasized the negative consequences of university transformations for women, focusing on the golden goose effect allows to shed light on the spaces of female agency and the *conditions* underneath. However, benefiting from the new academia has its costs. A first condition relates to women's (higher) efforts: given persisting gender inequalities

practices in organizations, the opportunity represented by individual early career grants risks to be an obligation for women rather than an opportunity if they want to survive in the pipeline. As such, university transformations risk creating new forms of gender segregation based on a "double standard" (Gaiaschi, 2022), with women "condemned to be excellent", expected to follow an external, "meritocratic", career path (with all that it entails in terms of higher productivity and self-selection) and men benefiting from the old – cooptation-based – model (Gaiaschi, forthcoming). A second condition relates to women's reshaping of maternity choices and desires, including postponing maternity, having fewer children than desired, shortening maternity leave as much as possible, or even not having children in order to follow such "excellence" criteria of hyper-productivity, which also include forced mobility (in the case of the Marie Curie fellowships most especially). These "work-life balance strategies", paralleled by the possibility of outsourcing care and domestic work, allow women to reduce the maternity penalty (Gaiaschi, 2023). A third condition relates to women's possibility of benefiting of an economic support allowing to bear long periods of work instability, a circumstance which is not the same for all women as it depends both on the family of origin and on the chosen family. This paper focuses specifically on this last aspect.

Methodology.

For the purpose of this study, 23 semi-structured interviews conducted from March 2018 to March 2019 with fourteen women and nine men who work or have worked in a life-science department of a large Northen Italian University have been analyzed. The interviews concerned five full professors, four associates, eight assistant professors (two RU, three RTDb and three RTDa), three post-docs and three former precarious researchers who have left their academic careers, including a (female) lab technician working in the department. Out of the 23 interviewees, nineteen had a cohabiting partner or spouse, three were divorced (all of them women, one of whom had remarried), and four (three women and one men) were single.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which served as a starting framework while allowing space for participants' narratives[v]. The aim was to explore how institutional changes (macro level) influence organizational practices (meso level) and individual career trajectories (micro level). To investigate the relationship between these three levels, an ethnographic perspective was adopted in order to capture the often conflicting interactions between individuals and social structures, bringing to light existing power relations and spaces for agency (Cardano, 2003). Although a full-fledged organizational ethnography was not conducted, most of the interviews (seventeen out of twenty-three) were conducted within the department itself—a choice that enabled me to immerse myself as much as possible in the organization. This was facilitated by numerous "off-the-record" conversations held alongside the interviews, as well as spontaneous guided tours of the laboratories that took place at the end of two particularly successful interviews at the initiative of the interviewees.

It is important to bear in mind that the data were collected as part of a broader qualitative study on gender inequalities in neoliberal academia with the aim of shedding light on the features of the "ideal academic" and their implications for women in times of increasing precarity (Gaiaschi, 2023 and forthcoming). Consequently, the empirical material was not gathered with this paper's central issue in mind, and I do not claim representativeness. Instead, I re-analyze the data by adopting an intersectional approach to explore processes of inequality based on gender, class, and partnership status. I acknowledge the limited sample size and do not aim for theoretical saturation. Instead, I approach this paper from the perspective of trying to understand an empirical puzzle emerging from this dataset.

The Atlas.ti software was used to code, compare, and conceptualize the collected material which amounted to approximately thirty-three hours of recording. A qualitative content analysis was conducted following the coding procedures suggested by Strauss and Corbin (2008) within the framework of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An initial coding phase was carried out to map concepts and properties. The initial codes were then repeatedly grouped, allowing for the

identification and characterization of the main themes at progressively more abstract and comprehensive levels. In order to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, the interview excerpts will be reported using fictitious names.

From gender to intersectionality: looking at within-women inequalities.

By applying an intersectional perspective to academic work and, most especially, to precarious academic work, this study aims to shed light on the disadvantages individuals face based on their social identifiers. These will include not only traditional identity markers such as gender, social class and – at least in the form of a potential research path – sexual orientation, but also a less-explored, at least in classic intersectionality theory *à la Crenshaw*, contextual factor: partnership status, that is, whether someone is single or partnered. These intersectional lenses are embedded within an approach that is not only organizational—one that highlights the connection between workplace dynamics and inequality—but also structural, as it considers the broader labor market, including the relationship between the academic and non-academic job sectors. This dual lens aims to shed light on the links between the broader occupational segregation and inequality.

Academic precarity and social class.

One of the important conditions at the base of the possibility of accessing the academic profession is the capacity to endure long periods of job insecurity before obtaining a tenured position. Job insecurity can be considered both in its objective dimension, as contract instability, and in its subjective dimension (De Witte and Näswall, 2003; Bozzon et al., 2017), as feeling under pressure both in the professional sphere and in private life.

In this respect, post-docs and assistant professors describe the access to a stable position as a "restless race" to achieve a good CV, a "fight" for survival, constantly looking for funds. "Distress", "uncertainty", "pressure" are the feelings endured by many early-career researchers who have experienced the growing instability of the profession. However, the experience of being precarious seems to vary according to different socio-economic backgrounds. Enduring long periods of job insecurity is easier if you do not have to pay a rent, or a mortgage, and so if you can economically rely on your parents or on the partner. Interestingly, many interviewees have mentioned the importance of having an apartment that they didn't have to pay for (because it belonged to the family's property) in a city, the one in which the interviewees were conducted, characterized by high costs of living.

The awareness of having an economic condition that makes it possible to face contract interruptions is common among most of the interviewees of all generations, proof that access to the profession has always been exclusive. Angela – a female 55 years-old pre-reform assistant professor – recalls how her mentor used to say that "to do research, either you had to come from a rich family or you had to contract a good marriage". According to her professor, "these were the conditions under which you could afford the luxury [of doing research]". However, in her view, the situation today is worse than in the past because of increasing precarity:

> *When I look back, I realize that I actually had a stable position when I was very young. At the time, it didn't feel that young but in reality, I was. Now, people who are around 40 find themselves without even a prospect of something more… stable (…). At some point, I experienced dramatic situations as a mentor…people who didn't have the financial means… they had that spark, but not the economic conditions. And for them, it was difficult to face crossroads where you have to make a choice, but you don't have a social safety net. Without a safety net, you either can afford it, or you give up (…). For example, I had a student who won a PhD position without scholarship. He was an orphan. How could I tell him to accept the scholarship in the hope to win an external grant…How could I? From this point of view, I realize that it's a prerequisite to have a family that is supportive of the idea*

> *of… being able to afford the luxury of not having money as the primary goal to achieve* (Angela RU, woman, 55 years old).

A post-doc fellowship pays around 1400-1500 euros if funded by university funds and can reach around 1800/2000 euros if it's project-based. Such a low salary, coupled with contract interruptions, is a luxury that researchers with good socio-economic conditions can afford more easily than their colleagues without the same family net. Talking about the possibility of having to deal with gaps between contracts, Francesca, who has been a post-doc for four years now, explains:

> *I'm telling you, obviously I have some savings, some money put aside, and my family… I come from a good family, I can't say I've always had to live on a tight budget, I'm being honest, I can't say that… personally, I'm doing fine (…), of course if I had been someone studying here in [city in which the University is located, ed.] , with a rent to pay, living alone, on a PhD student's salary… damn, if you don't pay me for a month, that's 700 euro gone just like that* (Francesca, post-doc, woman, 37 years old).

Francesca lives in a house owned by her parents, with no rent nor mortgage. And she's fully aware that, if necessary, she can rely on her family net:

> *I mean, my dad was the kind of person who'd say: as long as you're living here with us, I'll help you in every way I can, but just know that the moment you step outside the gate, it's your life. Yes. But he's also the kind of person that, if I went to him and said: look, I need help because I'm struggling here, do you think you could… well, like all parents — if they can, and even if they can't — they'll help you somehow* (Francesca, post-doc, woman, 37 years old).

In her opinion, being aware of this possibility has had a positive impact on her career choices. Like her, Giovanna has "always known" she could count on her parents:

> *I've always supported myself, I've always worked, even during university, but I've always known that… all things considered (…) Yes… I knew that even if I had gone a whole year without work… I could have asked [my parents] for help (…) And since I don't have a mortgage to pay, I've been able to take some risks… which, in the end, always worked out for me… risks that maybe others couldn't afford to take (…). Because the problem with this kind of career is precarity — many of my colleagues, really talented and promising, at some point gave up, because getting a six-month contract with a very low salary… if you know you can't count on anyone… at some point…*(Giovanna, woman, RTDa, 39 years old).

Having the possibility to rely on the family net certainly applies both to men and women and it's not relevant when the point is to measure gender differences. At the same time, it suggests that not all women (as not all men) have the same economic possibilities. From this perspective, it sheds light on persisting asymmetries *among* women based on their social class.

Men's opting out more? Looking at the intersection between gender and class.

If social class matters equally for both men and women, when it comes to the need to contract, citing Angela's mentor, a "good marriage", gender differences still emerge – though in a quite unexpected way – due to the intersection of social and gender dynamics. To the explicit question of whether she sees any gender difference in the way precarity is experienced, Angela answers:

> *More for men. Because, in my opinion, a man who does this job and doesn't reach the peak of his career, who doesn't become full professor, he's considered a loser. And from a salary perspective… well, a bit he is. An assistant or associate professor's salary… well, as a second income it's fine, but if it's the only income, it's tough (…). Things are changing, but in people's minds, it's the man in a couple who should have the higher salary* (Angela, RU, woman, 55 years old).

For men, the "male-breadwinner" ideal – and thus the need to reach economic stability and a higher salary – may accelerate the decision to opt out in a field, that of the life-sciences, with good non-academic opportunities. These include research institutes and the pharma or biotech industry, two relatively lively and remunerative sectors, especially in the region where the interviews were conducted. It's the case of Marco, a former researcher who moved to the private sector after getting married with his wife:

> *The only reason I moved to the business sector was because I was looking for economic stability. I just got married and I had to buy a house and I needed money. I was looking for a higher salary since in the academic sector…you know….in the past (…). I spent a couple of months without a contract so I didn't receive any pay* (Marco, former precarious researcher, man, 44 years old).

However prestigious, academic work may not be attractive for men – at least in different-sex couples – compared to many non-academic life-science professions, where the working conditions are better and pay is higher (Glover 2005; Bataille et al. 2017). In the words of Lorenzo, a former precarious researcher who also now works in the private sector:

> *So… it's not… let's say… some men… given the very traditional gender roles in our country, especially for men in heterosexual couples… one of the drivers that push them to leave more precarious paths is the feeling of being obligated to start a family. Paradoxically, precarity is more tolerated by women, because women are socially allowed to be the second income, to have a weaker salary…* (Lorenzo, former precarious researcher, man, 35 years old).

Because of the persistence of gender inequalities in the labor market, in the form of gender occupational segregation and pay gap, female academics in different-sex couples are more likely to have a partner who has a more stable and better paid position compared to their male colleagues who have a female partner who is likely to be the second earner of the couple. A circumstance that, coupled with traditional expectations on the (higher) "acceptability", for women, to be the second earners, may paradoxically lead to a stronger female "resilience" to precarity in academia. Out of the fourteen women interviewed, five could count on the fact that their (male) partner had or could have (in case of contract interruptions) supported them economically. It is the case of Veronica, a senior assistant professor with a husband working in the high-tech industry:

> *[My husband, ed.] works in [name of the tech company] with an open-ended contract and a good salary […]. Before he worked for [name of the previous tech company]. He changes a lot but having studied business and administration it easy in that world to change company. He is constantly being contacted.* (Veronica, RTDb, woman, 41 years old).

In her view, having a husband in a more stable work situation "helped" her not only to navigate the postdoctoral years but also to have two children while still in a precarious position, knowing that in the event her contract wasn't renewed, she could "certainly" rely on his support. Her words resonate

with those of Alice, now a lab technician with eleven years of precarious work behind her. When recalling the post-doc years, she says:

> *Then I got married. My husband had a good job, and I didn't feel like packing up and leaving. Probably, if I had had a different personal life, I could have gone abroad and made a different choice. But… neither my husband nor I… felt like leaving. He had a good position, and his job… it's a stable, good job, so it didn't make sense for him to sacrifice it for mine, which, in reality, wasn't stable at all. So, in the end, to keep doing this job, the only option was to endure and accept what was offered to me* (Alice, former precarious researcher, woman, 46 years old).

To the explicit question whether having a husband with a stable position has helped her to remain in academia:

> *Well, certainly yes. Probably, if it hadn't been that way and I had more pressure from an economic point of view, I probably would have had to make a different choice. Definitely* (Alice, former precarious researcher, woman, 46 years old).

In the same vein, Valentina, another senior assistant professor, clarifies:

> *If you have a husband or partner with a stable job who is able to support the family, it's easier to move forward. The man wouldn't do it (...).. If you have the stability of a husband with a permanent job and a good salary, you can afford to... to be a little more precarious, so to speak* (Valentina, RTDb, woman, 44 years old).

These considerations align with the results of an earlier study undertaken by Pierre Bataille and colleagues (2017), which challenges the idea that women "opt out" more than men and suggests the need, when analyzing academic attrition, to take into consideration different aspects, including the non-academic market and the broader gender regimes, and not only the academic career structure (with its growing precarity). Expanding on this idea, these findings suggest the importance to look at 1) the characteristics of the non-academic labour market and the opportunities it offers *in the area* (the private market may be appealing in Northern Italy but not, for example, in the South, where unemployment is higher, the cost of living is lower and, as a consequence, public employment, including academic, is considered more valuable); 2) the scientific field, as non-academic opportunities in the life sciences, for example, are certainly higher than those in the humanities or social sciences; 3) the gender normative regime, with its expectations on the gender roles in different-sex couples and, as a consequence: 4) the partnership status – whether the woman is single or partnered – as well as the partner's gender – in order to investigate differences between same-sex and different-sex couples. The following sub-section is dedicated to this last point.

Future research venues: from single women to women in same-sex couples.

The previous sub-section has shed light on the unexpected gender differences that precarity entails when considering different-sex couples. However, not all women have a partner and, more specifically, not all have a male partner. Single women cannot rely on a double-income household. As such, they do not have the same capacity to endure precarity compared to women in couples, unless they have a family safety net. In the words of Veronica, who was able to face contract interruptions and a low salary thanks to her husband's better work situation:

> *The life of the researcher is difficult, even because of the mortgage (...). If I had been alone, I would have been forced either to go back* [to her town, ed.] *or to find something else in a private company. Or to change occupation. Because you can't*

> *live in [city in which the University is located, ed] with a post-doc fellowship of 1,400 euro. And so, it's not possible* (Veronica, RTDb, woman, 41 years old).

Similar considerations could be true for women in same-sex couples: due to the positioning of men and women in the labour market, where men typically hold more stable and better paid position than women, having a *male* partner is – on average – more "beneficial" than having a *female* partner. On this point, further research is needed which would allow to dig into the precarity-related obstacles experienced not only by single women but also by women in same-sex couples.

Class, partnership status and sexual orientation may have effects on maternity desires and choices as well. Eleven out of the fourteen women interviewed have children. Given that the years of precarity often coincide with those of reproduction, many women – seven out of the fourteen interviewed – had their first child when they still had a non-stable contract, a choice that is (likely to be) "more" feasible with a partner and, more specifically, with a male partner, as long as he is more likely to have a higher salary than a female partner. There is nothing original in stating that having children is (statistically) easier for women in a different-sex couple than for single women or women in a same-sex couple, both for biological and social reasons. This is even more true in Italy where, contrary to many other European states, single women and women in same-sex couples are forbidden to access to assisted reproductive technologies. As a consequence, if they want to have children, they are obliged to rely on private clinics abroad, something that not everybody can afford given the extremely high costs that such a choice entails. What is (more) original is to bring attention to the intersections between reproductive rights and work precarity: having children without contract stability is challenging for all women but it may be *more* challenging for single women and women in same-sex couples. From this point of view, the academic sector looks like an ideal future research field to explore, given the extremely high levels of precarity coupled with the low levels of social mobility that it entails. Further research is needed on this point as well.

Discussion and conclusion.

Asserting that academic capitalism – and its policies based on excellence – increase inequalities between female and male academics is too simplistic. Indeed, market-based University transformations have complex effects on women. Without denying the downsides for women of the advent of market-based university transformations (see among others: Deem, 2009; Lund, 2015; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2011, 2012; Murgia and Poggio, 2019, Gaiaschi and Musumeci, 2020), this contribution sheds light on three unexplored aspects: 1) it highlights the benefits of obtaining an individual early-career grant for women as it offsets existing (gender-unequal) asymmetries, 2) it challenges the idea that women drop-out more than men as opting out depends on many different factors, including, but not limited to, the non-academic labor market opportunities in the field; 3) it invites to look at the *new* forms of inequalities within academia based on class, partnership status and – eventually – sexual orientation. More specifically, rather than focusing on persisting gender asymmetries, this work has brought attention – by adopting an intersectional approach – to inequalities among women themselves.

Focusing on the first point, the advent of a new career model based on hyper-productivity, mobility and entrepreneurship represents an alternative to the old career trajectory based on affiliation and favoritism. As such, it offers a new possibility that some women may benefit from. The "golden goose effect" – that is the possibility to survive the pipeline after winning a prestigious individual early-career grant – is a tangible example (Gaiaschi, 2023) that offsets existing hierarchies with their internal queues of recruitment and promotion. The point is the costs that such "space of agency" entails for women, both in terms of double standards – with women "compelled to be excellent" in order to remain in academia (Gaiaschi, forthcoming) – and in terms of maternity choices, including reshaping their own maternity desires. All of this makes these opportunities highly problematic pointing toward a sort of "negative emancipation", so to speak, which is made possible by women's

self-selection and work-life balance strategies, rather than by a systemic transformation of higher-education organizations towards better gender equality.

This last consideration aligns with the second above-mentioned point concerning women's attrition. In this respect, this research challenges the traditional idea that women leave academia more frequently than men: much depends on the scientific field, and so on non-academic labor market opportunities, as well as on gender regimes and partnership status. In the life sciences, men may leave academia to a greater extent than women in favor of higher-paying occupations in the private sector due to the need of being the "breadwinner" - and first salary - of the couple. Women, on the contrary, can – paradoxically – afford to endure precarity, both because they are socially "allowed" to be the second (and unstable) salary of the couple and because they are more likely – at least in different-sex couples – to have a (male) partner who has a more stable and better paid position than they have. However, this "opportunity" should not be taken as a form of female agency nor as an improvement in terms of gender equality, for at least two reasons. First, it is anything but emancipatory to say that women's higher capacity to cope with work precarity depends on the better financial situation of their (male) partner—a circumstance that leaves female academics potentially subject to the couple's dynamics. Second, such advancement is taking place in a profession characterized by poor (and worsening) working conditions, which men — for these very reasons — are increasingly leaving. On this point, studies on occupational segregation have brought to light the phenomenon of the so-called "male flight" (Wright & Jacobs, 1994), that is the exit of men from low paid and unsecure sectors/occupations/jobs in favor of better paid and more secure sectors/occupations/jobs. Examples have been tracked in former Soviet countries – which have witnessed a strong feminization of the (poorly paid) public research sector during the 90's (Glover, 2005; Etzkowitz et al., 2008) – and in the Swiss academia, where the already mentioned study of Bataille and colleagues (2017) finds that female and male post-docs are dropping out in similar proportions. Without delving into the debate over whether it is feminization that leads to the decline in a profession's status (and pay), or whether feminization occurs only after that decline has already taken place (Reskin, 1993; Cohen, Huffman, 2003) – the case presented in this paper cautiously suggests that the strong feminization of the Italian life sciences (Gaiaschi and Musumeci, 2020) may partly be due to men opting out more than women because of the bad work conditions academia offers compared to other sectors. If this is the case, it should not be mistaken for a decrease of gender inequalities. To test this hypothesis, a statistical analysis of attrition by gender and scientific field on the Italian early-career academic population is needed.

After clarifying how complex is the relation between academic precarity and gender inequalities, this work invites to focus – and here we come to the third point – on inequalities among women. Indeed, the capacity to endure precarity varies among female academics as this can partly depends on their parents or partner. That is, class differences on the one hand and differences in the partnership status among women on the other matter. With respect to the second of the two points, differences in partnership status, the argument according to which women – because of gender expectations in the couple – are more likely to endure precarity because they can rely on the more stable and better paid occupation of their partner refers to women in couples and, more specifically, in different-sex couples. This means that not only single women but also women in same-sex couples do not benefit of the same (however problematic, as discussed earlier, in terms of persisting gender inequalities within the household) "opportunity". On this last aspect, the empirical material available does not allow to come to fast conclusions. Rather, it offers a hypothesis to investigate further. This could be done by means of a mix-method approach based on survey data, which would allow to check for socio-economic condition, partnership status and sexual orientation, paralleled by a qualitative in-depth investigation aimed at collecting single women and women in same-sex couples' biographical experiences.

All in all, this research sheds light on the complexity of the gender implications of market-based university transformations. A lot has been said on the risks that these transformations entail in terms of equality between men and women. This contribution has wished to add some new hints to the debate by drawing the attention on the spaces of gender "equality" within the new academia as well

as on the new patterns of privilege. In this respect, this research suggests that women's "amelioration" of opportunities come along with persisting inequalities among women themselves.

Such findings carry some policy implications. Today, the golden goose effect – that is the possibility to be recruited after winning a prestigious, individual, early-career grant – is an opportunity that depends on the initiative of single Universities. However, it should be systematically incentivized for example by providing universities that decide to recruit grantees with additional ministerial funding. Such a policy could be extended not only to the principal investigators of European early-career grants (MSCA and ERC) but also to those researchers who have obtained a national or local funding. Moreover, the European Commission should promote specific grants to incentivize women's career or, alternatively, reserve a part of the budget of existing early career grants (e.g. the ERC starting grant) for women. On this point, an interesting example to draw inspiration from is the SNSF Professorial Fellowships in Switzerland. Furthermore, these excellence-driven policies should be always balanced by DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) and work-life balance policies. Today, organizations applying for any European funding scheme (including organizations hosting an early-career grantee) are required to have a gender equality plan. This has certainly been a positive action which could be further reinforced by, for example, adopting policies of evaluation of the implementation of the plan while further promoting the inclusion, among the beneficiaries, of other traditionally marginalized subjects. At the same time, actions aimed at reducing work precarity should be promoted, allocating more resources to higher education institutions.

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Endnotes

[i] Also worth mentioning are the studies that have recently highlighted the challenges faced by minority groups beyond gender, withouth explicitly adopting an intersectional lens, such as the studies on working-class academics (Crew, 2021; Morley, 2021) and LGBTQIA+ faculty (Cech & Waidzunas, 2021; Hassler et al., 2024).

[ii] Information available here: https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/le-universita, updated in January 2025 (retrieved on July 14th, 2025).

[iii] The Research Quality Assessement evaluates the quality of research outputs provided by professors in each university, and it is conducted every four years, since 2011, by the National Agency of Evaluation of Universities and Research (in Italian "Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione dell'Università e della Ricerca" or ANVUR), which grants part of the ordinary annual governmental funding to high-score universities on the basis of their performance.

[iv] Based on standard metrics of individual performance, it's a qualification introduced by the 240/2010 University Reform that academics need to hold when applying for the positions of associate or full professor, resulting from a national evaluation process managed by the Ministry of University and Research. Holding the qualification for associate professor is mandatory in order to participate to a public selection for that specific position. However, it represents—if not a formal requirement (when explicitly included in the call)—certainly an informal one, necessary to obtain a position as senior assistant professor as well. The reason lies on the fact that—after the end of the contract and an evaluation of the department— the senior assistant professor becomes an associate professor without going through a recruitment process. The promotion is quasi-automatic as the real selection in the Italian academic system occurs at the previous phase, that is in the transition to the senior assistant professor position.

[v] The interview was structured into several different parts, each of them focusing on a specific aspect: the structure of the organization (for those interviewees who also played a role as key players in light of their institutional roles within the department, that is, the five full professors, including the director of the department); individual career trajectory; working time; the organization of tasks (research, teaching, and service); doing research (internationalization, publications and grants); precarity and precariousness (especially for early-career researchers); formal and informal criteria for recruitment and for promotion (particularly for associate and full professors); organizational culture (informal structure, climate, and relationships with colleagues); mentorship (being a mentor and having a mentor); women and science; family background; work-life balance; exiting and working outside academia.