Gender equity policies and practices: The experience of eight organizations in northeastern Italy

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Abstract

This study examines gender equity and diversity management practices within organizations in the province of Vicenza, addressing a critical gap in Italian DM research, which remains underdeveloped and predominantly focused on gender. Drawing on social constructionism, critical feminism, and Mintzberg's organizational typologies, the research investigates how local cultures, structural configurations, and power dynamics shape the implementation of gender equity initiatives. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study analyzes semi-structured interviews with leaders and HR personnel across eight organizations, complemented by narrative inquiry and qualitative content analysis. Findings reveal a persistent disconnect between formal commitments to equity and the lived realities of organizational processes. Meritocratic discourse often masks entrenched inequality regimes, including gender pay gaps, vertical segregation, limited paternal leave uptake, and welfare policies that reinforce traditional caregiving roles. The study underscores the need for intersectional auditing, redistributive care policies, and participatory narrative practices to foster transformative, context-sensitive gender equity strategies.

Keywords: Organizational policies, Organizational practices, Gender equity, Diversity management, Case study.

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Introduction

Diversity Management (DM) has emerged as an increasingly important area of research within organizational studies, particularly considering global shifts toward more inclusive workplaces (Olsen and Martins, 2012). Despite this relevance, much of the academic focus remains concentrated in the United States, limiting comparative and contextual perspectives (Jonsen et al., 2011). DM broadly refers to human resource strategies that address the complexities arising from workplace heterogeneity – spanning dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, age, and ability (Ferrara, 2019). The aim is to cultivate inclusive environments where individual differences are not only respected but leveraged for improved organizational outcomes (Buemi et al., 2015; Ravazzani et al., 2021).

In Italy, DM research remains underdeveloped, and its practical implementation in organizations lags behind many European counterparts (Colella & Di Lorenzo, 2023). When adopted, DM initiatives tend to focus predominantly on gender, particularly women's workforce participation. The Italian approach to DM often reflects a tension between external compliance and internal voluntarism, driven more by reputational concerns and legal obligations than by genuine commitment to inclusion (Ravazzani, 2016). Measures such as flexible work arrangements and parental leave are generally considered core components of DM (Santoni & Crespi, 2022), yet their adoption has not fully addressed persistent gender disparities in the workplace.

Despite advances such as the gender quota law (Law 120/2011) and the Gender Equality Certification (Laws 162/2021 and 234/2021), gender-based discrimination and structural inequality persist across Italian organizations (Cavalieri & De Giorgi, 2025).

The most recent evidence underscores the magnitude of these challenges: women in Italy – despite being more educated than men (ISTAT & CNEL, 2025) – continue to experience significantly lower employment rates compared to the European average, with the female employment rate standing at 52.5% as of Q4 2024, compared to 76.0% for men, representing a gender gap of approximately 19.5 percentage points that is nearly double the EU average (ISTAT, 2025; Paggetti, 2025). Beyond employment access, women face disproportionately higher levels of involuntary part-time work, with 49.2% of employed women working part-time compared to only 27.3% of men, and persistent underrepresentation in leadership and executive positions, where women comprise only 18% of executive-level managers (Paggetti, 2025). This employment disadvantage is further exacerbated by caregiving responsibilities: women remain disproportionately burdened with unpaid domestic work and face a significant "child penalty" whereby the employment rate of mothers in

couples (aged 25-64) is 57.2%, almost 30 percentage points lower than that of fathers in couples (86.3%) (ISTAT & CNEL, 2025). After maternity leave, 16% of women exit the workforce compared to only 2.8% of men, a disparity that reflects the gendered division of labor and family responsibilities (Paggetti, 2025).

These national trends underline the importance of considering local and organizational contexts when assessing DM strategies (Jonsen et al., 2011; Poggio et al., 2010). The province of Vicenza presents a compelling case study due to its significant economic vitality and notable industrial diversity, characterized by a predominant small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) structure with well-established industrial districts spanning jewelry, textiles, tanning, ceramics, furniture, electronics, and marble extraction (Camera di Commercio Vicenza, 2024). Research into diversity management practices in Veneto reveals that 70% of analyzed companies do not employ gender-neutral recruitment procedures, with 80% similarly lacking gender-neutral performance evaluation processes, suggesting substantial resistance to formalized diversity management approaches, particularly in the metalworking sector (Riva & Benfatto, 2024). Additionally, 61% of companies do not offer support services for parenthood, and 80% report not conducting any specific training on gender, diversity, and inclusion issues, indicating that diversity management awareness remains primarily theoretical rather than operationalized (Riva & Benfatto, 2024).

This research aims to provide a context-specific analysis of DM practices in Vicenza, contributing to a deeper understanding of how local organizational cultures, leadership, and structural factors influence the implementation and success of gender equity initiatives. By focusing on localized dynamics, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature and promote more effective, tailored approaches to diversity and inclusion within Italian organizations.

Theoretical Background

This research is grounded in the theoretical lenses of social constructionism and critical feminism, which together provide a multidimensional framework for understanding gender equity and diversity management in organizational contexts. Constructionism, rooted in constructivist theory, holds that reality is not objective but socially constructed and contextually situated. Spector and Kitsuse (2017) argue that social problems do not exist independently of interpretation; rather, they emerge through the discursive practices and interactions of social actors. A central element of this approach is "claims-making," the process through which certain phenomena are defined and

presented as societal issues requiring attention. As Miller and Holstein (1989) explain, this perspective investigates how moral and reformist discourse contributes to the reshaping of institutional contexts and power structures.

Aligned with this, Papert's (1980; 1986) work on constructivist learning contributes an educational dimension to constructionism, emphasizing the role of active, experiential, and culturally resonant learning. He posits that knowledge is most effectively constructed when it engages with prior experience, personal meaning, and social relevance. This recursive process of learning, further developed by Harel and Papert (1991), privileges agency, interpretation, and contextual problem-solving over rote instruction. Within this framework, learning becomes a co-constructed, adaptive, and empowering process. The public, too, plays an active role in the construction of social meaning; as Nichols (2003) contends, audiences are co-producers of social discourse, shaping and negotiating meaning in everyday interactions.

This research extends these principles to the narratives of women in the Vicenza area, using them as vehicles for understanding organizational inequalities and responses to gender diversity. The integration of critical feminist theory enhances this constructionist approach by explicitly interrogating the gendered power dynamics embedded within organizations. Critical feminism, as articulated by Bierema (2017), critiques the patriarchal foundations of organizational development and the structural biases that limit women's career advancement. Rather than focusing on individualistic fixes – such as increasing women's self-confidence – critical feminism urges structural reform and consciousness-raising to dismantle systemic inequality (Bierema et al., 2022).

Core to this approach is the concept of privilege and power, which critical feminism aims to expose and challenge. It promotes a vision of social transformation through collective action, solidarity, and intersectional analysis (hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2008). It stresses the importance of addressing overlapping dimensions of identity – such as gender, race, class, and sexuality – that shape women's experiences in the workplace. Feminist theorists including Butler (1990), Mohanty (1984), and Davis (1981) call for greater inclusion and representation within feminist movements themselves, warning against replicating exclusionary structures. Through this lens, organizations are sites of both domination and potential resistance, where agency and critical reflection can lead to structural change (Ahmed, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000).

Complementing these theoretical foundations, Mintzberg's (1981) organizational typologies offer insight into how organizational form influences decision-making, communication flow, and the allocation of authority. Mintzberg identifies five key organizational configurations: the simple

structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisionalized form, and adhocracy. For instance, smaller organizations (simple structures) may be more flexible and responsive to change but lack the formalized policies seen in larger bureaucracies. Conversely, professional bureaucracies – such as educational institutions – might possess established diversity policies but be slow to implement change due to entrenched norms. Adhocracies, characterized by innovation and decentralization, may offer the greatest potential for transformative gender policies, as they encourage experimentation and participatory practices.

By integrating Mintzberg's structural insights with the critical feminist and constructionist lenses, this study acknowledges that gender equity initiatives are not only shaped by cultural narratives and power dynamics but are also conditioned by the organizational architecture itself. Understanding these multiple, intersecting dimensions is essential to developing context-sensitive strategies for advancing gender equity in Italian organizations.

Methodology

This research adopts a case study methodology, which allows for an in-depth examination of bounded systems within specific spatial, temporal, and contextual dimensions (Yin, 2018). The study focuses on identifying organizational models, policies, and practices aimed at promoting gender equality within a range of businesses located in the Vicenza region. These include manufacturing and service companies, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and tertiary-sector cooperative enterprises.

The methodological approach is grounded in narrative inquiry, a qualitative research method that seeks to explore human experiences through the analysis of personal narratives (Chase, 2018). This method is particularly suitable for understanding the lived experiences of individuals within organizations by collecting and interpreting stories, interviews, field notes, and other narrative forms (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). According to Chase (2005), narrative inquiry helps to interpret actions and events through the lens of individual storytelling. Moreover, it can serve both professional development and social change objectives (Goodson & Gill, 2011; Wells, 2011), especially by foregrounding marginalized narratives and examining how institutional structures shape and regulate these narratives (Andrews et al., 2013).

The research is guided by two primary questions:

• What is the perceived level of organizational equity in processes and relationships among employees of manufacturing, service, commercial, tourism, tertiary, cooperative, and artisan firms in Vicenza?

- What policies, models, and organizational practices are employed by these companies to promote gender equity?

Semi-structured interviews (Trinchero, 2002) were conducted with HR managers, directors, and organizational leaders to identify gender equity policies, models, and practices. Out of 20 companies initially contacted with the support of the lead project organization, only eight agreed to participate. The sampling strategy, though based on convenience, reflects the broader composition of the Vicenza business landscape, where commerce and tourism lead (28.5%), followed by artisanal and transport (24.7%), business services (17.5%), industry (13.7%), agriculture (8.6%), and other sectors (7%) (Camera di Commercio Vicenza, 2024). The following table (Table 1) adds details of the organizations involved and the profiles interviewed.

Table 1- Sector, business focus and participants involved per organization

Organization	Sector	Business Focus	Participants (gender)
Arcoprofil Srl	Manufacturing	Metalworking products	HR Manager (f)
ARES LINE SPA	Manufacturing	Seating design and production	Product and System Certification Manager(f)
IPAB Centro Servizi Sociali Villa Serena	Tertiary/Services	Residential services for elderly	Psychologist (f), Executive Secretary (f), Socio-health Area Manager (f)
DENTAL ART SPA	Manufacturing	Dental and household supplies	HR-Manager (f), CEO (m)
Baxi	Manufacturing	Heating and air conditioning systems	HR Business Partner Manager (f)
Enersys	Services/Manufacturing	Electronic products	HR Business Partner (f)
Taka Srl	Manufacturing	Industrial adhesives and chemicals	Legal HR Compliance Manager (f)
Kolver Srl	Manufacturing	Electric screwdrivers	Commercial/ Administrative Employee (f)

Interviews explored organizational features -including model (Mintzberg, 1981), climate (Murayama, & Elliot, 2012), and power decentralization (Filippi et al., 2023)- and diversity management position, made up of organizational

openness to change, symptoms of diversity-related problems, diffusion of inclusive language (Di Fabio, 2016; Harris et al., 2007), feminization rate, gender wage differential, gender segregation index (Poggio et al., 2010). Policies and practices to foster gender equality were scrutinized as well: policies and processes of the organization (Gay, 2013; Poggio et al.,2010), corporate welfare processes (Razetti, & Santoni, 2019; Income Tax Consolidation Act) and employment welfare processes (Razetti, & Santoni, 2019; Law 81/2017; Consolidated Maternity/Paternity Act).

Additionally, a validated employee survey was proposed, exploring areas such as motivation, job satisfaction, empowerment, burnout, work-life fit, gender roles, inclusive language, and perceived power decentralization.

Participants were also invited to digital storytelling workshops (Simsek, 2012) to reflect gender dynamics within their organizations. These workshops aimed to both document and inspire the continuation of effective gender equity practices. Finally, qualitative content analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti 23. The coding structure was determined by creating analysis categories based on existing literature and specific research questions (Schreier, 2013). These categories were divided into main categories and subcategories that mirrored the thematic areas of the interviews presented above. After trial coding, categories with discrepancies or overlaps were reviewed and adjusted to improve the coding structure. New categories were implemented to accommodate unexpected and emerging information.

Findings and Discussion

The empirical evidence provided insights into both the advancements made toward inclusivity and the enduring challenges obstructing full gender equity in these diverse organizational contexts.

Across sectors, most respondents reported a general perception of fairness and inclusivity in daily professional interactions and organizational culture. In many cases, recruitment and career progression were guided by meritocratic principles that formally eschewed gender, age, and ethnic considerations, prioritizing individual competencies and objective performance indicators. This meritocratic discourse, while appearing equitable, often functioned as a rhetorical device that masked underlying inequalities, consistent with Acker's (2006) concept of "inequality regimes" – organizational processes that perpetuate inequality while ostensibly operating under neutral frameworks. As we move from smaller to larger companies, we transition from simple structures to models with professional bureaucracy or divisional structures. Several organizations, particularly in the cooperative and social enterprise sector,

championed participatory governance models. These institutions favored horizontal communication and inclusive decision-making, which were viewed by the interviewees as enhancing workplace cohesion, creativity, and employee well-being.

Nonetheless, deeper analysis revealed that such surface-level inclusivity was insufficient to dismantle long-standing gender hierarchies. A recurrent theme in the data was the pervasive underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, even in organizations with a predominantly female workforce, as proved by Silvia

> In a company where 92% of the workforce is female, the board of directors is made up of five members, four of whom are male, including the chairman. The vice-chair is the only woman on the board. [..] There is a very strong male presence in top positions, and I feel very angry because there is still a difference in mentality when it comes to assigning top positions to women. And a significant difference in salary historically.

Even at companies where women make up less than half of the total workforce and are usually hired as office workers, there are no female managers and only one or none on the board of directors (Elena, Ketty and Francesca). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) highlights the persistence of "hegemonic masculinity" within institutional cultures, which continues to valorize male leadership even in contexts that appear demographically skewed in favor of women.

Another critical finding was the existence of a gender pay gap, particularly in senior and executive roles. Despite frequent declarations of parity in pay structures, a closer examination of salary data revealed that women in equivalent roles frequently earned less than their male colleagues. According to Silvia, gender discrimination also occurs in terms of pay because part of executives' salaries is decided by the board of directors. This was particularly pronounced in hierarchical organizations, where informal negotiation mechanisms and discretionary bonuses often favored men. This mirrors broader international findings (OECD, 2021), which show that gender pay disparities remain endemic, especially in top positions, due to opaque evaluation criteria and gendered assumptions about leadership and value.

Furthermore, many organizations lacked a robust analytical framework for assessing internal gender equity. Only a minority conducted gender-based audits or disaggregated their data by gender, contractual type, or hierarchical level. The absence of systematic diagnostics has rendered gender inequalities largely invisible within strategic planning processes. This approach often stemmed from a belief that, in the absence of overt conflict or complaints, no corrective action was necessary – a dynamic aligning with the idea of

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"inequality denial" and narrative silencing (Mumby, 1998). In this context, Acker's (2006) theory of inequality regimes is particularly salient, as it suggests that unchallenged routines and cultural narratives are instrumental in reproducing gender hierarchies.

In the few companies that shared this data, the gender pay gap, or the average difference between the hourly wages earned by men and women expressed as a percentage, is -24% for women and +11.5% for men in Marta's company, -34% for women and -22% for female workers in Ketty's company. In addition, in Mariangela's company, almost half of the women are employed part-time. These findings are consistent with the overall national trend. Narrative inquiry further revealed how gender dynamics were discursively constructed within organizational settings. Interviews showed that the man interviewed recounted his career paths as logical and linear, reinforcing dominant "heroic" leadership narratives, whereas women tended to describe their advancement as circumstantial or due to "luck" (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007; Poggio, 2018). This divergence in career storytelling contributes to the reproduction of what Riessman (2008) refers to as "discursive hegemony," where dominant narratives normalize male authority and marginalize alternative trajectories. Such narrative asymmetries underscore how organizational storytelling is both a product and producer of structural inequalities.

Structural factors also played a pivotal role in shaping the lived experiences of equity. While cooperative and smaller firms often adopted flat governance models that promoted participation and inclusive communication, these structures did not necessarily challenge deeper gender norms. For instance, caregiving responsibilities remained overwhelmingly feminized, with welfare policies typically designed to reduce women's working hours or workloads to accommodate domestic obligations.

> Upon returning from maternity leave, some colleagues were granted part-time work for a period. One of them had twins. Until the children turned three, she only worked in the mornings (Francesca).
> Some time ago, we implemented a six-hour shift for the production department, ending at 2 p.m. This line was made up entirely of women, who were able to leave at 2 p.m. and take care of their families in the afternoon (Chiara).

Although well-intentioned, these policies reinforced traditional gender roles and failed to address the root cause of imbalance – namely, the unequal distribution of care labor (Lewis and Humbert, 2010).

The low uptake of paternity leaves further reinforced this pattern, as men were less likely to engage in caregiving, leaving women to shoulder a disproportionate burden.

Following reports of incidents of gender-based verbal harassment, most of the organizations report having implemented training and informational campaigns aimed at promoting the use of inclusive language.

Some organizations, particularly in the social enterprise and public sectors, introduced innovative welfare collaborations aimed at supporting female employees. Examples included the provision of free menstrual products and discounted care technologies like Seremy, as well as well-being initiatives focused on emotional health, financial education, and caregiving support. These measures, while responsive to women's needs, often remained ad hoc and lacked integration into broader equity strategies (ILO, 2022). More formalized practices, such as objective-based performance evaluations, were also noted for their potential to mitigate subjective bias. However, these were rarely accompanied by gender-sensitive performance metrics.

Programs designed to support women's participation in male-dominated sectors were also present, particularly those aimed at promoting access to STEM careers and supporting requalification pathways for women re-entering the workforce. While these initiatives were viewed positively, they risked reinforcing a deficit model of gender equity – that is, framing the problem as women's lack of skills rather than addressing systemic barriers. Ahmed (2017) warns against such "diversity alibis," where organizations showcase targeted interventions without transforming underlying power structures. Similarly, Crenshaw (1989) highlights the importance of intersectional analysis in recognizing how such initiatives may fail to serve the most marginalized subgroups, such as women of color or those on precarious contracts.

The UNI/PdR 125:2022 Gender Equality Certification was another focal point. Although it offered a standardized framework for evaluating and promoting gender equity, its uptake remained limited. The disjunction between procedural compliance and cultural transformation was evident here. Damaschin (2023) emphasizes that organizational change cannot be reduced to checklist approaches; rather, it requires deep engagement with normative frameworks and relational dynamics.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the application of social constructionist and feminist organizational theories. The performative nature of equity – how organizations present themselves as equitable without substantively addressing inequalities – mirrors Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity. Moreover, Gergen's (2015) theory of social constructionism suggests that equity is not a fixed state but an ongoing negotiation of meaning through interaction. As such, seemingly neutral practices, such as performance evaluations or hiring processes, may in fact reproduce dominant gender norms through embedded assumptions and micro-interactions (Garfinkel, 1967).

To transform these dynamics, a multidimensional strategy is required. First, implementing intersectional auditing protocols is essential. Disaggregated data collection and participatory analysis – wherein employees contribute to identifying and interpreting equity metrics – can make hidden disparities visible (Poggio, 2018; Acker, 2006). Second, care-related welfare policies must move from an accommodation model to one of redistribution. For instance, peer-to-peer care networks, cross-sector childcare cooperatives, and flexible, outcome-based work arrangements could help dismantle the gendered division of labor (Esin & Squire, 2020; ILO, 2022). Finally, narrative interventions, such as facilitated "story circles" and equity workshops, could foster critical reflection on dominant narratives and cultivate alternative discourses that validate diverse professional journeys (Bamberg, 2012; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007).

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Directions

This study has revealed that while organizations in Vicenza are increasingly engaging with the principles of gender equity and diversity management, a significant gap persists between formal intentions and tangible, systemic transformation. The data suggest that larger companies, such as Enersys, Baxi, and Taka, have made progress through structured policies, including flexible work arrangements, mentoring programs, and leadership development for women. These findings align with existing literature that supports the positive effects of such initiatives on female representation and organizational innovation (Romano & Petruccioli, 2020; Vieira, 2022). Conversely, small and medium-sized enterprises often exhibit less structured approaches, relying heavily on informal workplace culture rather than on institutionalized diversity strategies, consistent with observations that SMEs frequently lack the resources to implement effective equity policies (Greco, 2023; Galdiero et al., 2024).

However, the journey toward organizational equity is challenged by several structural and cultural obstacles. Notably, persistent gender pay gaps and vertical and horizontal segregation limit women's access to leadership and reinforce traditional gender roles, particularly regarding caregiving responsibilities. Even where flexible arrangements exist, such as part-time work or tailored shifts, these are still disproportionately framed around women's caregiving roles. In contrast, men's uptake of parental leave remains minimal, underlining a gendered division of labor that diversity management alone cannot fully rectify. These findings suggest that procedural neutrality is insufficient; what is needed is a cultural reconfiguration that challenges the entrenched norms about gender and work.

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Despite some promising developments, particularly in larger enterprises, the research identified critical challenges and limitations that impact both the implementation of gender equity practices and the capacity of academic inquiry to fully assess them. A central methodological limitation was the forced abandonment of the originally planned survey due to the concurrent deployment of multiple surveys within the same regional project framework. Overlapping research initiatives in some companies may have caused survey fatigue or diminished the perceived relevance of this study.

Another significant challenge lays in the engagement of local organizations. Despite numerous email follow-ups and outreach through collaborative networks, participation remained limited. Organizations were often hesitant to share sensitive internal information, particularly related to organizational charts and diversity metrics such as age, ethnicity, and gender. Moreover, companies showed minimal interest in disseminating employee surveys or participating in digital storytelling workshops. None of the organizations agreed to take part in the DSWs, which curtailed the study's ability to gather firsthand, participatory narratives from employees. This lack of engagement restricted the analysis to management perspectives – primarily those of HR personnel, CEOs, and department heads – thereby omitting crucial voices from other organizational levels. This limitation suggests broader cultural resistance to transparency and inclusive practices. The reluctance to embrace participatory methodologies like DSWs may be attributed to organizational inertia, lack of awareness, or time constraints. However, it also reflects a possible underestimation of the value that employee narratives can add to equity-oriented change processes.

The findings also point toward several future directions for research. One important avenue is the need to investigate more deeply the differentiated impacts of diversity management practices across organizational sizes and sectors. For example, while large companies may adopt formalized diversity tools, such as the UNI/PdR 125:2022 gender equality certification, questions remain about the actual efficacy and long-term sustainability of such certifications in reshaping workplace culture. Research could explore whether these certifications lead to lasting improvements in gender equity, particularly in terms of career progression, pay parity, and employee retention (Hunegnaw Kebede, 2017; AGN, 2024).

Moreover, future studies should delve into the specific barriers that hinder the adoption of diversity and inclusion policies in SMEs. These might include financial constraints, limited managerial expertise, or a narrow understanding of diversity beyond gender. Gaining insight into these barriers would enable researchers and policymakers to design tailored support mechanisms that address the unique contexts of SMEs, thereby fostering more inclusive organizational ecosystems.

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Another promising direction is the longitudinal analysis of how diversity management strategies evolve and impact organizational dynamics over time. While this study provides a snapshot, a longitudinal approach would offer a richer understanding of the cultural shifts, resistances, and breakthroughs that characterize organizational change. This would be particularly relevant in evaluating the effectiveness of mentoring programs, flexible work policies, and inclusive leadership training initiatives.

Finally, the study underscores the need for multi-perspective, participatory research methodologies that include employee voices at all levels. Future research should aim to create safe, engaging, and low-barrier spaces for workers to share their lived experiences, potentially through anonymized interviews, participatory workshops, or creative methods like storytelling. These narratives can provide critical insights into the subtle dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that are often invisible in top-down assessments.

In conclusion, while progress is evident in certain segments of Vicenza's organizational landscape, particularly among larger firms, meaningful gender equity remains a distant goal. Structural challenges, limited data access, and organizational resistance to participatory practices all constrain the depth and scope of both change and research. Yet, these challenges also illuminate future pathways – toward more inclusive methodologies, stronger institutional accountability, and a broader cultural transformation that reimagines how gender, work, and equity are understood and enacted.

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