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Beyond the Pink Label: Italy's Certification of Gender Equality for Organisational Change through Management Commitment and Employee Engagement

Maria Cristina Degoli *

Abstract: Gender equality is a global goal, especially in Italy, where cultural traditions often clash with modern values. Despite legal protections for women, achieving true equity requires significant effort. This paper introduces Italy's Certification of Gender Equality (Certificazione della parità di genere), aimed at reducing the gender gap and promoting growth in companies. The study reviews the certification process and its business benefits, then analyses data on certified Italian companies to assess its impact on gender equality and the role of collective bargaining in enhancing women's workforce participation. The paper concludes by evaluating whether the certification can foster a more equitable working environment in Italy.

* Researcher at the University of Milan (Italy). Email address: mariacristina.degoli@unimi.it. This paper was conducted as part of the MUSA – Multilayered Urban Sustainability Action – project, funded by the European Union under NextGenerationEU, within the framework of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment Line 1.5: Strengthening of research structures and the creation of R&D “innovation ecosystems”, and the establishment of “territorial leaders in R&D”. This paper also constitutes an expanded version of the one presented at the XXIV ISLSSL World Congress “The Quest for Labour Rights and Social Justice”, which took place from 17 to 20 September 2024 in Rome.

Keywords: *Gender equality; gender gap; women's workforce participation.*

1. Introduction

The opening line of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 states, “The promotion of equality between women and men is a fundamental task for the European Union in all its activities, as required by the Treaties”¹. This implies that every Member State must contribute to the implementation of gender equality in business, politics, and society, as it represents a core value of the EU, a fundamental right, and a key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. From a financial perspective, research has shown that a more inclusive environment creates the ideal conditions for an innovative, competitive, and thriving European economy².

At the national level, Italy has drawn inspiration from the European policy strategy to develop its own Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2026³. This long-term strategic framework establishes core values, outlines policy directions, and sets the ultimate goal of achieving gender equality. The strategy is the result of an extensive and participatory process involving public administrations, social partners, and key civil society organisations. It identifies five priority areas—Employment, Income, Skills, Time, and Power—each supported by measurable objectives and targets to be achieved by 2026.

To meet these targets, the Italian government adopted the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*PNRR – Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*) in 2021, marking the beginning of a new era in legislative gender equality strategy. Among the seven missions outlined in the Next Generation EU framework, Mission 5, “Cohesion and Inclusion,” aims to strengthen anti-discrimination tools and promote work-life balance

¹ COM(2020)152 final, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions «A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025»*, Brussels, 5 March 2020, p. 1.

² By 2050, improving gender equality would lead to an increase in the EU's GDP per capital by 6.1% to 9.6%, which amounts to €1.95 to 3.15 trillion: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/economic-and-financial-affairs/economic-benefits-gender-equality>. See COM(2020)152 final, *cit.*

³ The document outlines five key areas for action: gender equality as a shared responsibility in shaping the future; work as a new, inclusive paradigm for women; science as the driving force behind a new Renaissance; solidarity as a means of investing in the empowerment of all; and communication, through both language and imagery, as a catalyst for change. See: <https://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/it/politiche-attivitaa/parita-di-genere-ed-empowerment-femminile/strategia-nazionale-per-la-parita-di-genere-2021-2026/>

actions, alongside a new approach to address the gender gap through transparency and accountability in corporate human resources policies⁴.

This paper introduces a new tool – the Certification of Gender Equality (*Certificazione della parità di genere*) – designed to reduce gaps in key areas of women’s professional growth and wage transparency, by supporting and incentivising companies at a national level. The ultimate goal is to establish a fairer labour market by narrowing the gender gap and fostering growth opportunities within participating companies. This certification represents a cultural shift, encouraging companies to adopt best practices to better support their work environment. As such, it necessitates the implementation of actions to strengthen equal pay for equal work, gender management policies, and a comprehensive work-life balance ethos.

The study on the Gender Equality Certification will proceed in two interconnected stages. First, the paper addresses the legislative framework and existing literature on the topic, providing a thorough description of the gender equality tool and highlighting its business benefits. Second, the paper examines quantitative data on the number of companies that have obtained the Gender Equality Certification to date. This phase of the research will allow the author to map the tool’s dissemination within the Italian business landscape and assess its impact on promoting gender equality in the workforce.

In conclusion, the paper evaluates whether this innovative tool can contribute to fostering a fairer world of work. If so, the Gender Equality Certification can be seen as a result of various forms and degrees of social dialogue. By promoting gender equality at the company level, the certification directly contributes to transforming the labour market into a more inclusive one.

2. The Certification of Gender Equality: Definition and Mechanism

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*PNRR – Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*), under its Mission No. 5, titled “Inclusion and Cohesion”, includes the adoption and implementation of a national system to certify gender equality in both public and private companies. The aim is to encourage the implementation of internal policies to close

⁴ L. Zappalà, *La parità di genere al tempo del PNRR: tra trasparenza, certificazione e misure premiali*, in *Lavoro Diritti Europa*, 2022, 3, 2-14 ss.; D. Gottardi, *Recovery Plan e lavoro femminile*, in *Diritti Lavori Mercati*, 2021, 2, 261-269 ss.; M. Peruzzi, *Differenziali di genere e trasparenza retributiva, tra reporting aziendale e certificazione di parità*, in *Giornale di diritto del lavoro e relazioni industriali*, 169, 2021, 1, 143-147.

the gender gap across all areas, such as employment, pay, and management⁵.

Prior to the introduction of the Certification of Gender Equality⁶ into the Code of Equal Opportunities (*Codice delle Pari Opportunità*)⁷, the Italian legislator had already established equal treatment legislation to combat structural gender inequalities based on traditional gender roles in the labour market. One such previous attempt was the ‘pink label’⁸ (*bollino rosa*), designed to promote corporate social responsibility. Unfortunately, it did not yield the expected results. As stated by the European Commission in its Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, it is time “to give a new impetus to gender equality”⁹.

In response to this call, the new Article 46-bis of the Code of Equal Opportunities establishes that the Certification of Gender Equality would be implemented from 1st January 2022. This tool aims to demonstrate the policies and concrete actions adopted by employers to reduce gender gaps in career opportunities, promote equal pay, ensure equal jobs, and manage gender differences, including maternity protection. The Certification of Gender Equality is a flexible instrument, offering the opportunity to assess its impact and evaluate the outcomes and consequences of its implementation over time.

⁵ See National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR – *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*), #Nextgenerationitalia, Mission 5, 201-223, <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>.

⁶ For more information about the Certification of Gender Equality, see F. Guarriello, *Mercato e valori nel contrasto al gender pay gap: trasparenza, informazione, certificazione*, in *Rivista giuridica del lavoro e della sicurezza sociale*, 2024, 3, 397-416; S. Borelli, *La certificazione di parità e la standardizzazione delle fonti del diritto del lavoro*, in *Diritto e Società*, 2024, 1-2, 349-360; Casano L., *Certificazione della parità di genere e trasparenza: riflessioni a margine della prima attuazione del sistema*, in *Equal Rivista di Diritto Antidiscriminatorio*, 2024, 2, 161-177; R. Torelli, *Il sistema di certificazione della parità di genere: tra cultura della parità e privatizzazione delle regole*, in S. Renga (edited by) *Lungo la strada della conciliazione, spunti per il dibattito*, 2023, Giappichelli, Torino, 131-159; A. Casadei, *Certificare la parità di genere stimola l’empowerment femminile e porta benefici fiscali alle aziende*, in *Amministrazione e finanza*, 2023, 1, 25-28; P. Cerullo, *La certificazione della parità di genere: volano per i diritti e per il business. Come ottenerla e conservarla*, in *Lavoro Diritti Europa*, 2023, 1, 2-9; M. Lambrou, *Certificazione della parità di genere*, in *Diritto e pratica del lavoro*, 2022, 2, 94-98; M. Scofferi, A. Consiglio, *Parità di genere: i nuovi strumenti contro il gender pay gap*, in *Guida al Lavoro*, 2022, 27, 3-7.

⁷ See article 4, Law no. 162/2021 which modified Legislative decree no. 198/2006, also known as Code of Equal Opportunities (*Codice delle pari opportunità*), by adding article 46-bis entitled «Certification of Gender Equality».

⁸ See Law no. 215/1998.

⁹ See COM(2020)152 final, *cit.*, p. 2.

The process of obtaining the Certification of Gender Equality is voluntary for both the private and public sectors; any business organisation, regardless of size and legal status, may request it. Once a company obtains the Certification, it remains valid for three years but is subject to annual review by certification bodies registered with ACCREDIA¹⁰. The minimum requirements for certification were established by the Ministry Decree of 29th April 2022, which superseded the Reference Practice (PdR) UNI/PdR 125:2022¹¹ of 16th March, outlining the guidelines for the gender management system. The PdR sets out the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) used by certification bodies¹² to evaluate the minimum criteria required for accreditation. The PdR focuses on three indices: (i) equal career opportunities and equal pay; (ii) parenting and work-life balance policies; and (iii) management policies for business processes. In other words, the PdR is based on a threefold perspective, assessing a company's maturity in gender equality policies through six indicators: 1. Culture and Strategy; 2. Governance; 3. Human Resources Processes; 4. Career Opportunities and Women's Inclusion in the Company; 5. Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value; 6. Parenting Policies and Work-Life Balance Policies. Each indicator is assigned a weighted score, depending on company size, to track progress over time. A series of KPIs has been identified for each assessment area to monitor the company's progress annually, with the final audit occurring at the end of the second year. A minimum score of 60% in all areas is required to obtain the Certification. Companies may address any low-scoring areas before the final evaluation. From the legislator's perspective, the Certification of Gender Equality represents the culmination of a systemic journey towards a true cultural

¹⁰ The Certification bodies operate on UNI/PdR 125:2022 and they are accredited on the requirements of Regulation (EC) No. 765/2008.

¹¹ For clarity, it should be noted that the Reference Practice (PdR) UNI/PdR 125:2022 is not a national law. Rather, it is a document published by UNI – *Ente Italiano di Normazione* (Italian Standardization Body) – that outlines the standards, technical requirements, and functional elements for the Certification of Gender Equality. The Reference Practice is adopted solely at the national level and is a deliverable of European standardisation, as stipulated by EU Regulation No. 125/2012. In other words, these documents introduce technical specifications that are developed under the supervision of UNI. The Reference Practices remain valid for five years after publication, which represents the maximum period during which they can be transformed into a normative document.

¹² In Italy, the Certification bodies are the only ones recognised by ACCREDIA – <https://www.accredia.it/> – the Italian Institution which is in charge of identifying the new certification bodies for UNI/PdR 125:2022.

change within corporate organisations, and by extension, in society, to achieve permanent gender equality.

Companies that achieve certification are rewarded with several benefits¹³. Firstly, they are awarded points to access European funding¹⁴ and participate in public tenders¹⁵. Secondly, companies receive a 30% reduction in the bank guarantee required to attend public tenders¹⁶. Finally, private sector employers may be exempt from paying 1% of their national insurance contributions (i.e., social contributions), up to a maximum of €50,000 per year¹⁷.

Embarking on the journey to obtain the Certification of Gender Equality means that a company must promote organisational transparency. Companies seeking certification must adopt a comprehensive gender

¹³ Pursuant to Law No. 234 of 30 December 2021, the legislator allocated significant financial resources to enhance women's participation in the labour market, including the development of procedures enabling public and private enterprises to obtain gender equality certification (see Article 1, Paragraph 138, Law No. 234/2021).

¹⁴ According to Article 5, Paragraph 3, Law No. 162/2021, private companies holding gender equality certification as of 31 December of the year preceding the reference period are awarded a preferential score when their project proposals are evaluated by authorities responsible for administering national and regional European funds. This preferential score is granted with the aim of providing state aid to co-finance eligible investments. In compliance with European Union law and the principles of equal treatment, non-discrimination, transparency, and proportionality, contracting authorities must specify in procurement notices, calls for proposals, or invitations for the acquisition of services, supplies, works, and infrastructure projects the preferential criteria applied in bid evaluations, contingent on a company's possession of gender equality certification as of the reference date. In other words, the Certification of Gender Equality grants additional points to project proposals seeking co-financing for previous investments.

¹⁵ See Article 95, Paragraph 13, Legislative Decree No. 50/2016. In accordance with European Union law and the principles of equal treatment, non-discrimination, transparency, and proportionality, contracting authorities are required to specify in procurement notices, calls for proposals, or invitations the preferential scoring awarded to bids for goods, works, or services that have a lower impact on health and the environment. This includes products sourced from short supply chains or zero-kilometre sources, as well as the implementation of policies promoting gender equality, evidenced by the possession of gender equality certification. Furthermore, with the introduction of the new Public Contracts Code (Legislative Decree No. 36/2023) and in compliance with the provisions of Decree-Law No. 51/2023 on Urgent Measures Concerning the Administration of Public Entities, contracting authorities are now obligated to award a higher score in their procurement notices to companies holding gender equality certification.

¹⁶ See article 95, paragraph 7, Legislative Decree no. 50/2016.

¹⁷ Concerning the social contribution exemption described above, the legislator made it permanent following the inter-ministerial decree 20.10.2022 published on the 28.11.2022. See *Circolare* INPS no. 137, 27.12.2022.

equality policy alongside their management system. To achieve this, companies must appoint a Steering Committee¹⁸ (*Comitato Guida*) responsible for creating a strategic plan and implementing the necessary actions. A formal document¹⁹ will be drafted and published on the company's website.

Additionally, the company is responsible for informing staff about the new corporate culture, focusing on better implementing gender equality, and providing training to employees on their commitment to eliminating gender stereotypes and promoting diversity and inclusion. The company must also review its management and organisational models to ensure they meet the qualitative and quantitative requirements of the Certification. Furthermore, companies are required to appoint a contact person who workers can approach – even anonymously – to report and address gender discrimination issues. This person is also involved in evaluating the implementation of new diversity and inclusion policies to assess their impact on the company's environment. Finally, the Steering Committee is responsible for ongoing evaluations of the company to assess progress and the possibility of obtaining the Certification of Gender Equality.

Regarding the scope of the certification system, guidelines state that the Certification of Gender Equality should apply to the company as a whole, considering all its sites, subsidiaries, and secondary offices to assess the corporate organisational process. However, the guidelines also allow for the possibility of granting a holdings' certificate for companies with more than one legal entity. This option requires a centralised company structure that oversees and monitors gender equality compliance across the entire group.

¹⁸ See *Prassi di riferimento* (Reference Practice) UNI/PdR 125:2022, Guidelines on the management system for gender equality, which provides the adoption of specific KPIs (Key Performance Indicator) relating to gender equality policies in organizations, paragraph 3, «*Termini e Condizioni*», 3.6, p. 12.

¹⁹ The Steering Committee prepares a strategic plan that outlines clear, measurable, achievable, and realistic objectives aligned with the gender equality policy. These objectives are assigned to individual managers for implementation. Furthermore, the document details the strategies adopted by the company to achieve the desired outcomes, along with the allocated budget.

3. Key Performance Indicators

The guiding principle behind the Reference Practice and, by extension, the entire system of gender equality certification, is the belief that “to achieve a real paradigm shift on gender equality, it is necessary that its principles, along with respect for any diversity, be integrated into the corporate objectives”²⁰. Therefore, the starting point for the evaluation is not merely the current state of the company but also its historical context, which significantly impacts the granting of the business certification. In other words, in addition to the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that a company must implement prior to evaluation, past actions—such as violations of parental rights or opposition to parental leave requests—will certainly complicate a company’s chances of successfully achieving the Certification of Gender Equality.

Literature on the subject asserts that the structure of values outlined in the Reference Practice UNI/PdR 125:2022 highlights “critical aspects of corporate behaviour towards women’s work”²¹. In the Italian business environment, particular attention should be given to the well-known gender pay gap²², as well as the biases inherent in the traditionally patriarchal culture that still persists in the country. Despite the legislative framework designed to protect both maternity and paternity leave, companies tend to associate their duties and business costs with women when it comes to parenthood. As a result, being a mother often becomes a disadvantage in the recruitment process. Statistical data on discrimination reveal that companies attribute a greater responsibility for family care to mothers than to fathers. Businesses are more likely to hire or promote men over women due to this perceived lack of responsibility.

²⁰ F. Lamberti, *I Key Performance Indicators della certificazione della parità di genere. Una lettura critica*, in *federalismi.it*, 19 aprile 2023, p. 216.

²¹ See UNI/PdR 125:2022, p. 10. F. Lamberti, *op. cit.*

²² See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 0.3. «*Obiettivi e strumenti*». The Ministerial Working Group asserts that the economic salary differences between men and women cannot be fully explained by physical characteristics or individual choices made by women. The gender pay gap results from a corporate culture that fails to value gender equality and does not penalise negative practices. As highlighted in existing literature, Eurostat statistics position Italy among the countries with a gender pay gap of 5%, compared to the European average of 13%. However, more detailed analyses reveal a larger gap, amounting to 11% in hourly wages, with an even more significant disparity in annual earnings. This broader gap is attributed to various factors, including job classification levels, horizontal and vertical segregation, the number of hours worked, overtime, and other wage supplements linked to working hours, all of which disproportionately disadvantage women. F. Guarriello, *op. cit.*

Consequently, this behavioural model is subconsciously replicated in family life, where women are more focused on family care rather than their careers, leaving men to succeed professionally.

The Reference Practice highlights that hiring processes are not neutral. Indeed, a selection committee composed solely of men is likely to fail to assess a woman's work performance or skills fairly. Conversely, a committee comprising both men and women will be more accurate and efficient in selecting candidates purely on merit²³.

With this premise in mind, the Reference Practice UNI/PdR 125:2022 establishes its company evaluation criteria through specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) linked to the six areas that characterise an inclusive business organisation respecting gender equality. To evaluate the effectiveness of actions taken towards acquiring the Certification of Gender Equality, the criteria must be “accessible, appropriate, and comparable, able to drive change and represent the continuous improvement undertaken by the organisation”²⁴.

As outlined above²⁵, the six areas are: Culture and Strategy; Governance; Human Resource Processes; Career Opportunities, along with women's inclusion in the company; Equal Pay for Equal Work²⁶; and Parenting Policies and Work-Life Balance Policies. For each Evaluation Area, specific KPIs have been established to measure the organisation's maturity level through annual monitoring and biannual verification. This process provides evidence of improvements resulting from various implemented interventions or activated remediation plans.

²³ Organisational positive action plans also contribute to this goal. For instance, in public employment, to promote the inclusion of women in sectors and professional levels where they are underrepresented, positive action plans support gender rebalancing in activities and hierarchical positions where a gap of at least two-thirds is observed. This is achieved through a legal preference granted to female candidates, provided they have equivalent qualifications and professional preparation to their male counterparts. If a male candidate is selected, a specific and adequate justification is required. F. Guarriello, *op. cit.*

²⁴ See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5. «Indicatori di performance (KPI) per le organizzazioni», p. 16.

²⁵ See § 2.

²⁶ Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 strengthens the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms. D. IZZI, *Alla ricerca dell'effettiva parità di retribuzione tra uomini e donne: la direttiva Ue 2023/970 come punto di svolta?*, in *Rivista giuridica del lavoro e della previdenza sociale*, 2024, 2, I, p. 301-320; M.L. Vallauri, *Direttiva (Ue) 2023/970: una nuova strategia per la parità retributiva*, in *Lavori Diritti Europa*, 2023, 2, p. 2-6.

The Culture and Strategy area contains seven KPIs²⁷. This section evaluates the alignment of the organisation's principles and objectives concerning inclusion, gender equality, and attention to gender diversity. Its overall vision, mission, and values define the work environment. The impact of these policies is worth 15% of the final score.

The Governance area contains five KPIs²⁸. This domain assesses the maturity of the organisation's governance model in establishing effective organisational controls, ensuring minority gender representation in management and control bodies, and implementing processes to identify and address any instances of non-inclusion. The impact of these policies is worth 15% of the final score.

²⁷ The KPIs are as follows: 1. Formalisation and implementation of a strategic plan to promote and support the development of an inclusive work environment, ensuring that company values align with an inclusive culture (20 points). 2. Establishment of internal procedures that enable employees to express their opinions and provide suggestions for organisational changes, including the option to do so anonymously, while fostering open dialogue and constructive feedback (10 points). 3. Implementation of internal communication and awareness initiatives that promote behaviours and language supporting an inclusive and gender-diverse work environment (20 points). 4. Implementation of policies that ensure equal gender representation among speakers at round tables, events, conferences, and other gatherings, including scientific ones (10 points). 5. Implementation of training initiatives over the past two years at all organisational levels, including top management, focusing on the value of gender diversity, the impact of stereotypes, and addressing unconscious biases (10 points). 6. Implementation of initiatives in the past year to analyse employees' perceptions of equal opportunities within the organisation (20 points). 7. Over the past two years, implementation of initiatives aimed at promoting equal opportunities beyond the organisation, including communication efforts and engagement with various stakeholders on issues of inclusion, gender equality, and integration (10 points). See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5.2. «*Area cultura e strategia*», p. 18 ss.

²⁸ The KPIs are as follows: 1. Establishment within the organisation's governance structure of a dedicated body (such as a committee, unit, function, or organisational role) responsible for managing and monitoring matters related to inclusion, gender equality, and integration (25 points); 2. Implementation of processes to identify, investigate, and address any form of non-inclusiveness within the organisation (25 points); 3. Allocation of a dedicated organisational budget to support activities promoting inclusion, gender equality, and integration (15 points); 4. Establishment of gender equality objectives that are assigned to top management and other leaders, with their performance being evaluated against these goals (15 points); 5. Inclusion of members of the underrepresented gender in the organisation's administrative and control bodies (20 points). See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5.3. «*Area Governance*», p. 20 ss.

The Human Resource Process area, with its six KPIs²⁹, focuses on assessing the maturity of key HR processes across various stages of an employee's lifecycle within the organisation, ensuring they are grounded in the principles of inclusion and respect for diversity. The impact of these policies is worth 10% of the final score.

The Career Opportunities, along with Women's Inclusion in the Company area, evaluates the maturity of organisations regarding gender-neutral access to internal career development and growth opportunities, including mechanisms to accelerate such advancement. This area consists of seven KPIs³⁰, and the impact of these policies is worth 20% of the final score.

²⁹ The KPIs are as follows: 1. Establishment of human resource management and development processes that promote inclusion, gender equality, and integration, including practices such as equitable recruitment, inclusive contract terms, unbiased onboarding, and fair performance evaluations (25 points); 2. Implementation of mechanisms to analyse turnover rates with a focus on gender (15 points); 3. Implementation of policies that ensure equitable and inclusive participation in training and development programmes, including leadership courses, with representation from all genders (15 points); 4. Establishment of internal mobility and succession policies for managerial positions that align with the principles of an inclusive organisation and uphold gender equality (20 points); 5. Implementation of mechanisms to ensure workplace protection and maintain equal pay levels following maternity leave (15 points); 6. Presence of designated company representatives and established practices to safeguard the work environment, specifically addressing incidents of harassment or bullying (10 points). See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5.4. *«Area processi HR»*, p. 22.

³⁰ The KPIs are as follows: 1. Percentage of women within the organisation relative to the total workforce. Please note that this KPI applies only to companies with a workforce of a maximum of 49 employees (25 points); 2. Percentage of women in the organisation relative to the total workforce, compared to industry benchmarks. Please note that this KPI applies only to companies with a workforce ranging between 50–250 employees or more (25 points); 3. Percentage of women in the organisation with managerial qualifications, including those in family businesses who hold managerial roles representing ownership. Please note that this KPI applies only to companies with a workforce of a maximum of 49 employees (25 points); 4. Percentage of women in the organisation with managerial qualifications, excluding women who are part of the ownership in family businesses. Please note that this KPI applies only to companies with a workforce ranging between 50–250 employees or more (25 points); 5. Percentage of women in the organisation who are responsible for one or more organisational units, compared to the total reference population (20 points); 6. Percentage of women in the direct reporting line to the top executives of the organisation (20 points); 7. Percentage of women in the organisation who are responsible for managing an expenditure or investment budget (10 points). See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5.5. *«Area opportunità di crescita ed inclusione delle donne in azienda»*, p. 23 ss.

The Equal Pay for Equal Work area specifies three KPIs³¹, which collectively account for 20% of the total score. This section examines the organisation's maturity in addressing the pay gap within a comprehensive total rewards framework, including both monetary compensation and non-monetary benefits such as welfare and well-being systems.

Finally, the Parenting Policies and Work-Life Balance Policies area contains a total of five KPIs³². This area assesses the maturity of organisations in implementing policies that support parenthood in various forms and adopt procedures that facilitate and support employees with preschool-aged children. The impact of these policies is worth 20% of the final score.

The KPIs themselves are divided into two categories: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative KPIs are measured in terms of presence or absence—essentially, the evaluation committee checks whether the KPIs are in place. The quantitative KPIs, on the other hand, are measured using a percentage in relation to a company value or a national average reference value based on ISTAT³³ indices or the type of economic activity.

³¹ The KPIs are: 1. Percentage of salary disparity between genders for the same classification level and with equivalent skills (40 points); 2. Percentage of promotions awarded to women on an annual basis (30 points); 3. Percentage of women receiving variable remuneration, ensuring fairness by transparently communicating the procedures and criteria used in determining variable pay to both male and female employees (30 points). See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5.6. «Area equità remunerativa per genere», p. 25 ss.

³² The KPIs are as follows: 1. Availability of services to support employees returning from maternity or paternity leave, such as back-to-work procedures, coaching, temporary and reversible part-time options, remote work arrangements, tailored welfare plans, and on-site childcare facilities (20 points); 2. Presence of policies beyond the collective bargaining agreement (CCNL) dedicated to protecting maternity and paternity, as well as services designed to support the balance between personal and professional life. This includes extended paternity leave, back-to-work procedures, coaching, reversible part-time options, remote work arrangements, customised welfare plans, on-site childcare facilities, and voluntary engagement programmes during maternity leave (35 points); 3. Presence of policies that sustain benefits and initiatives enhancing the experience of parenthood as an opportunity for skill development that benefits both the individual and the organisation. These policies should also safeguard the employee-company relationship before, during, and after maternity or paternity leave (25 points); 4. Ratio of actual male beneficiaries to the total number of eligible employees for compulsory paternity leave within the first twelve years of the child's life (20 points); 5. Ratio of the average number of days of compulsory paternity leave taken to the total number of days legally provided (10 points). See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5.7. «Area tutela della genitorialità e conciliazione vita-lavoro», p. 27 ss.

³³ The acronym ISTAT stands for National Institute of Statistics (*Istituto Nazionale di Statistica*).

Each KPI is assigned a score, which is weighted according to the reference area (e.g., Culture and Strategy; Governance; Human Resource Processes, etc.).

Additionally, the KPIs are tailored to the size of the business. The Reference Practice UNI/PdR 125:2022 identifies four clusters³⁴. The target safeguards related to diversity are defined based on the company's classification within one of the four clusters, ensuring alignment with the organisation's size and specific needs. Simplifications are provided for organisations in bands 1 (micro-organisations) and 2 (small organisations), while all indicators are applied to organisations in bands 3 (medium organisations) and 4 (large organisations).

In conclusion, a minimum overall score of 60% is required to obtain certification. For companies with multiple sites across the national territory, the evaluation is "flexible" and considers the specific characteristics of the gender equality management system designed and implemented by the organisation. If the KPIs are controlled by the Holding, they will be evaluated at the corporate level. However, if the KPIs are specific to each local entity, they must be verified individually for each entity. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that the KPIs across all six areas have been implemented by all legal entities listed in the UNI/PdR 125:2022 certificate. For multi-site companies composed of different legal entities, each entity must individually achieve a minimum score of 60% for the Holding to receive certification.

4. Does the Certification System Work? An Overview of the Mid-term Results

The Certification of Gender Equality aims to be pivotal in embedding gender equality as a strategic component within companies, striving for a sustainable and lasting change over time. Moving beyond theoretical discussions, does the Certification of Gender Equality genuinely produce tangible results?

³⁴ The clusters represent differing business sizes based on the number of employees. Group 1, micro-organisations/business, 1-9 employees; Group 2, small-organisations/business, 10-49 employees; Group 3, medium-organisations/business, 50-249 employees; Group 4, large-organisations/business, more than 250 employees. See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 5.1. «Generalità», p. 16 ss.

To address this question, the paper presents quantitative data collected by ACCREDIA³⁵ – the Italian Accreditation Body – alongside insights from its representatives and Ms. Sonia Alvisi³⁶, *Consigliera di Parità* (Counsellor for Gender Equity) of the Emilia Romagna Region, Italy. Given their central roles in the implementation and oversight of the Gender Equality Certification system, the data analysis incorporates both the perspectives of ACCREDIA representatives and the Counsellor of Gender Equity.

To provide a clearer understanding of the Certification's impact on the Italian business sector, let us first examine some key figures. Since the introduction of the Certification of Gender Equality, the number of certified sites³⁷ has reached 12,005³⁸; 11,461 at the national level and 544 abroad. At the national level, the highest concentration of certified sites is located in the northern regions of Italy, with a total of 6,132 certified sites³⁹:

³⁵ I would like to personally thank Mr Alessandro Nisi – *Relazioni esterne e studi statistici* –, Sara Vitali – *Referente Sistema gestione e Funzionamento Tecnico, Dipartimento Certificazione e Ispezione* – and Ing. Irene Uccello – *Funzionario tecnico ispettrice, Dipartimento Certificazione e Ispezione* – for their very interesting insights into the Certification of Gender Equality.

³⁶ I would like to personally thank Mrs Sonia Alvisi and Mr Francesco Raimondo for their time and kind cooperation in answering questions on the Certification of Gender Equality's results and process.

³⁷ According to ACCREDIA, when speaking of certified companies, we must refer to them as «*siti certificati*» (i.e. certified sites).

³⁸ Database ACCREDIA, https://services.accredia.it/ppsearch/accredia_stats_reserved_2.jsp?ID_LINK=1755&ar ea=310, April 2024.

³⁹ The Italian Central regions follow with no. 2.396 certified sites, 2.144 in the South and a total of 789 certified sites in the Islands.

Table 1. Number of certified sites per region at national level, and abroad⁴⁰

Regione	UNI/PdR 125
Abruzzo	233
Basilicata	114
Calabria	171
Campania	891
Emilia-Romagna	1255
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	246
Lazio	1401
Liguria	267
Lombardia	2322
Marche	272
Molise	47
Piemonte	733
Provincia autonoma di Bolzano/Bozen	71
Provincia autonoma di Trento	126
Puglia	688
Sardegna	232
Sicilia	557
Toscana	602
Umbria	121
Valle d'Aosta/Vall?e d'Aoste	15
Veneto	1097
Totale ITALIA	11461
<i>ESTERO</i>	544
TOTALE	12005

⁴⁰ Table elaborated by ACCREDIA in April 2024; disaggregated data are available in ACCREDIA's database through this link: www.accredia.it/banche-dati.

Table 2. The first ten Certification schemes ranked by number of certified sites⁴¹

Schema di certificazione	Numero siti certificati
UNI EN ISO 9001	129.157
UNI EN ISO 14001	39.244
UNI ISO 45001	35.261
UNI/PdR 125	12.005
UNI CEI ISO/IEC 27001	5.720
UNI ISO 37001	5.486
UNI CEI EN ISO 13485	4.433
UNI CEI EN ISO 50001	4.207
FSSC 22000	3.446
UNI EN ISO 22000	3.356

Running through the numbers, a comparison of the situation in April 2024 with that of April 2023⁴² reveals the significant impact of the Certification of Gender Equality on the business sector. April 2024 shows a 31-fold increase in the number of certified sites compared to the previous twelve months. However, this increase is somewhat artificial, as the Certification of Gender Equality for companies was only recently introduced. It will take a few more years to gather more accurate data and identify a reliable pattern.

Furthermore, currently, data on certified sites can only be analysed in aggregate form. This means it is not possible to distinguish the number of certified sites based on specific criteria such as company size, KPIs, or business sector. This limitation raises several research questions regarding company trends, such as which KPIs are most commonly implemented to achieve certification and which companies or sectors are leading in adopting these practices. According to ACCREDIA representatives, this information will eventually be collected and processed by SOGEI through a web portal, which is still under development. The portal, intended for the Department of Equal Opportunity under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (*Dipartimento Pari Opportunità, Presidenza del Consiglio dei*

⁴¹ Table elaborated by ACCREDIA in April 2024; disaggregated data are available in ACCREDIA's database through this link: www.accredia.it/banche-dati.

⁴² Setting ACCREDIA criteria's database to April 2023, it shows a total number of 1.367 of certificated sites.

Ministri), will allow accredited bodies to directly update the system with all relevant information regarding the Certification of Gender Equality in real-time.

Additionally, according to ACCREDIA representatives, when examining companies' applications for the Certification of Gender Equality, areas four and five—namely, opportunities for women's career advancement and inclusion within the company, and gender pay equity—are the least frequently implemented. This suggests that these are the most challenging policy areas to address. As mentioned earlier, companies must achieve a minimum overall score of 60% to obtain certification. Consequently, opting to avoid the most difficult policies could be a strategy for achieving the Certification of Gender Equality, along with the associated economic benefits, without engaging in substantial change regarding gender equality. This outcome does not represent a win-win situation for either companies or society. However, as ACCREDIA representatives have correctly pointed out, while a definitive answer is not yet available, it will soon be forthcoming. The Certification of Gender Equality is valid for three years, after which companies must undergo an audit by the monitoring group to renew their certification. The renewal reflects the company's current status, providing a basis for evaluating progress since the previous certification period. Therefore, a lack of improvement in areas such as opportunities for women's career advancement, inclusion within the company, or gender pay equity would indicate that these companies were focused solely on economic rewards.

Regarding the economic incentives provided to companies to encourage the Certification of Gender Equality, ACCREDIA representatives and the Counsellor for Gender Equality of Emilia Romagna Region provided two distinct types of feedback. On the one hand, ACCREDIA representatives highlighted the importance of these incentives, noting that companies often value not only economic benefits but also the recognition of their efforts. On the other hand, the Counsellor for Gender Equality expressed doubts about whether companies are genuinely interested in pursuing the certification process. Her comments on the matter are informed by her role as an expert in gender equality within the monitoring group. She observed that, when interviewed about the analysis of incidents or the risk of gender equality rights violations, as well as the countermeasures adopted, employers often overlook the possibility of unspoken complaints, thus presenting a situation that appears to require no further action.

Although the Reference Practice UNI/PdR 125:2022⁴³ provides a detailed list of actions to prevent all forms of physical, verbal, and digital abuse, including harassment, the Counsellor noted that this risk is not included in the risk assessment document (*Documento di Valutazione dei Rischi – DVR*)⁴⁴. This observation supports her interpretation of employers' behaviour.

Finally, when discussing the role of gender equality in negotiating gender promotion, the Counsellor of Gender Equality recalled what Ms. Fiorani – Head of Women and Gender Policies Coordination at CISL Emilia-Romagna – presented in February 2024 at the Conference on the Biennial Reports and Gender Certification. Ms. Fiorani pointed out that “KPIs have been identified without trade union consultation; furthermore, there is no role designated for company representatives in the certification procedure or in drafting the strategic plan”.

Their involvement, therefore, is limited to post-implementation oversight and control. In effect, instead of playing an explicit and recognised role, collective bargaining is sidelined in negotiations aimed at promoting the active participation of women within companies. In conclusion, given that the changes required by the Gender Equality Certification System necessitate an internal approach to be effective and sustainable, this absence of involvement could have significant (negative) consequences for the practical implementation of gender equality policies within companies.

⁴³ See UNI/PdR 125:2022, paragraph 6.3.2.6. «Attività di prevenzione di ogni forma di abuso fisico, verbale, digitale (molestia) sui luoghi di lavoro» (Activities aimed at preventing all forms of physical, verbal, and digital abuse (including harassment) in the workplace). The Reference Practice foresees that «the company must: a) Identify the risk of any form of physical, verbal, or digital abuse (including harassment) in the context of Health and Safety at Work; b) Develop a plan for the prevention and management of workplace harassment; c) Provide regular, targeted training at all levels on zero tolerance for any form of violence against employees, including all forms of sexual harassment; d) Establish a methodology for anonymous reporting of such incidents to protect employees who come forward; e) Plan and implement employee surveys to investigate whether they have personally experienced any behaviours, either internally or while working externally, that caused discomfort or disturbance, such as sexist attitudes or lack of respect; f) Evaluate work environments from this perspective as well; g) conduct a risk assessment and analysis of reported adverse events; h) Maintain constant vigilance over the language used, promoting awareness of communication that is both respectful and neutral», p. 32.

⁴⁴ The «*Documento di Valutazione dei Rischi – DVR*» is required for the employer to assess all risks faced by employees working within the company. See Legislative Decree no. 81/2008.

5. Conclusions

The Certification of Gender Equality has the potential to serve as a transformative tool in reshaping corporate behaviour and, by extension, society as a whole, addressing gender equality issues in a permanent and meaningful manner. Implementing a neutral hiring process, along with policies that support work-life balance and family care in its broader sense, is not only essential for business but also for overall societal well-being. In our view, gender equality should not be perceived merely as an issue requiring isolated investments and actions, but as an opportunity for meaningful cultural change. Therefore, its architecture, along with the concepts and rules guiding its mission, is well-designed⁴⁵. However, rules alone are insufficient. Without genuine commitment to promoting cultural change and moving beyond past practices, this opportunity will ultimately be missed.

Although the data analysed thus far are partial, combined with insights gathered from interviews with ACCREDIA representatives and the Counsellor of Gender Equality, it appears that the Certification of Gender Equality tool is moving in the right direction. The increasing number of companies engaged in the certification process indicates that more employers are embracing the transformation into safer, more inclusive working environments.

Is this solely the result of economic incentives? Perhaps, but it is a risk worth taking in order to drive positive change. We would concur with ACCREDIA representatives in asserting that companies view economic incentives more as a recognition of their commitment to addressing gender discrimination, rather than as financial rewards. However, the transparency regime for certification, mandated by law, should be enhanced to enable more effective monitoring of compliance with the required minimum standards. After all, public funds are being used to incentivise companies to obtain the Certification. As noted in the literature, “the risk of pink-washing or gender-washing looms large in a privatised and self-referential system”⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ The introduction and success of the certification process have been recognized as an Italian best practice in the latest *Report on Gender Equality in the EU*, prepared by the European Institute for Gender Equality; European Commission, *Report on Gender Equality in the EU*, 2024, Brussels, 14 May 2024.

⁴⁶ Guarriello F., *op. cit.*, p. 412.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the assessment of KPIs is conducted through a checklist of qualitative indicators addressing the presence or absence of a specific criterion, alongside a percentage value for quantitative indicators. Concerns and uncertainties arise regarding the verification of qualitative requirements, which is based solely on ticking a box to indicate a positive or negative response to specific criteria. This approach fails to provide any measurement of the actual extent to which the policy is implemented within the company.

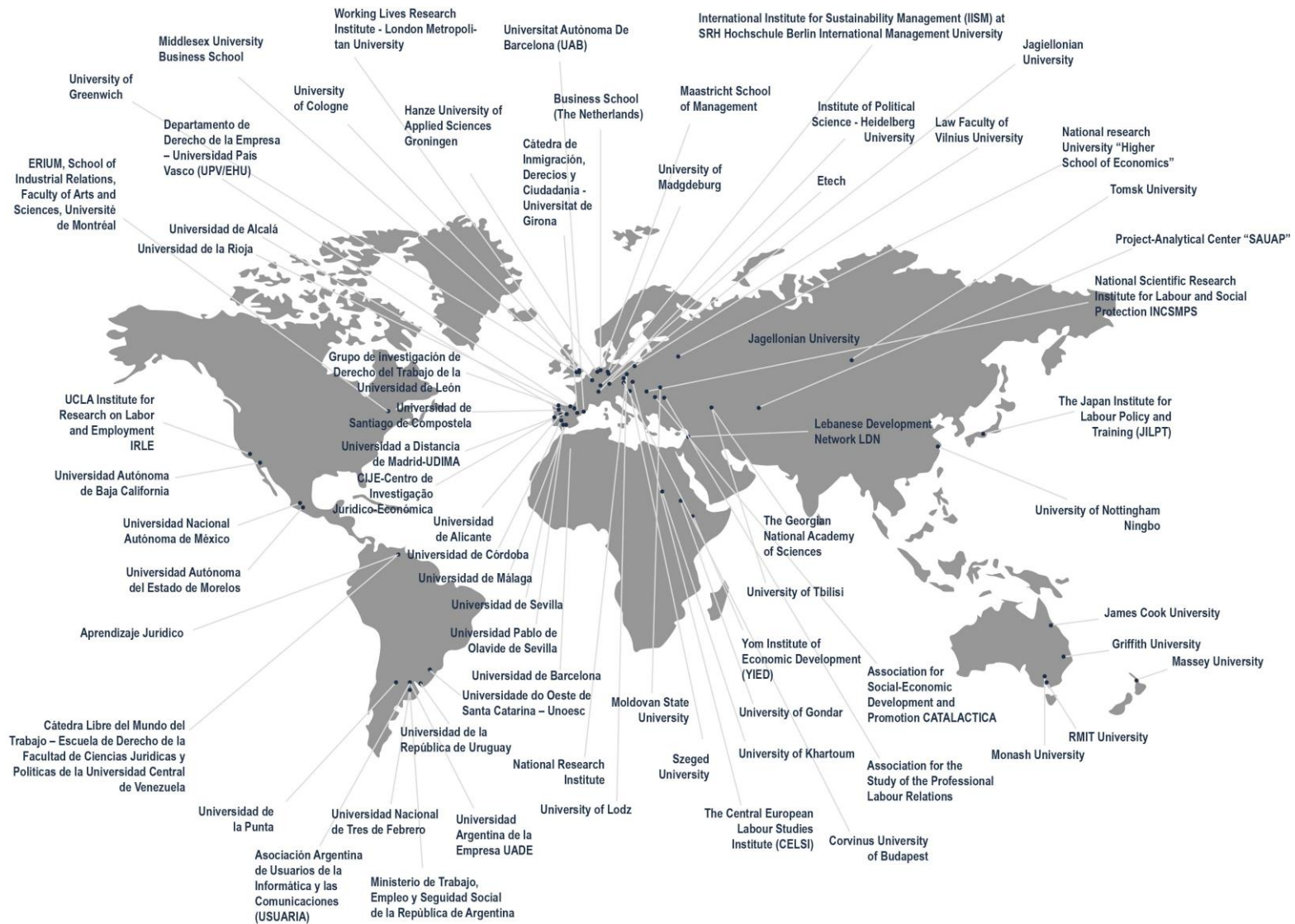
While awaiting more comprehensive data, we can suggest several improvements to enhance the efficiency of the certification system.

In our view, the primary gap lies in the insufficient involvement of collective bargaining in negotiations aimed at promoting active female participation within companies. As highlighted by CISL representative Ms. Fiorani during her presentation at the “Biennial Report Conference and Gender Certification: Data on Gender Equality in Emilia-Romagna”⁴⁷ in 2024, the exclusion of trade unions from the process of identifying KPIs and shaping the overall certification system has been a significant oversight. Trade union representatives at the company level are invaluable assets for employers, offering realistic insights into which policies should be implemented and helping to assess workplace risks. Furthermore, their cooperation would enhance social dialogue as a vehicle for advancing gender equality within companies and contribute to transforming the labour market into a more inclusive environment.

In conclusion, the Certification of Gender Equality, on its own, is insufficient to achieve sustainable and lasting change without the active involvement of all relevant parties. Given the economic investments allocated for this purpose, we hope that collective bargaining will play a more prominent role in the certification process in the future. We believe that robust social dialogue is key to improving the Italian business landscape and advancing gender equality in the workforce.

⁴⁷ Convegno Rapporti biennali e certificazione di genere: i dati sulla parità in ER, 23 febbraio 2024.

ADAPT International Network



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