



GENDER EQUALITY STANDARDS: EVIDENCE FROM FIRST ADOPTERS ITALIAN SMALL FIRMS

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Abstract

Purpose. The study aims to investigate the characteristics of the first Italian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that adopted the gender equality certification (UNI/PdR 125:2022). It seeks to identify which types of companies are early adopters and what organisational or managerial features influenced their decision.

Design/methodology/approach. This paper focuses on 21 certified companies and adopts an explorative–qualitative descriptive analysis based on a combination of primary survey data and secondary data sources. The available company information was interpreted aiming at reconstructing the context and identifying emerging patterns among early adopters of gender equality certification.

Findings. The findings suggest that public procurement incentives are a stronger motivator for certification adoption than tax incentives. Certified firms tend to be innovative, export-oriented, and male-dominated in leadership and workforce. However, there is concern that some companies may adopt the certification superficially, without truly implementing gender equality principles. The study underscores the importance of monitoring certification effectiveness and ensuring its integration into company practices, beyond simply using it to gain competitive advantage in public tenders.

Practical implications. The findings highlight the need for a dual policy approach. In the short term, public procurement strongly drives certification uptake but risks encouraging symbolic adoption, making monitoring, audits, and reconfirmation essential. In the long term, lasting change requires embedding gender equality into SMEs' strategies and practices, supported by training, awareness, and best-practice sharing. Tax incentives play a weaker role initially but may matter over time. A combined strategy of coercive, normative, and mimetic measures can strengthen the credibility of UNI/PdR 125:2022 and foster systemic change in Italian SMEs.

Originality of the study. This is among the first empirical studies on the initial adopters of Italy's national gender equality certification. It provides a detailed profile of these firms and integrates institutional theory by examining coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures behind adoption. By focusing on early adopters, the study contributes to the literature on corporate social responsibility and gender equality standards, highlighting both opportunities and risks related to voluntary certification schemes in SMEs.

1. Introduction

Gender Equality (GE) plays a pivotal role in global sustainable development; however, significant gender gaps persist in labour market outcomes. Gender income inequality remains high despite a slow global decline (WTO, 2024). Women are underrepresented in high-wage jobs and overrepresented in low-paid and precarious employment (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2019; Piketty, 2018), and they face greater barriers in access to finance and career advancement (OECD, 2023; Mattei et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these disparities, disproportionately affecting female workers (Edwards, 2020; Floris and Atzori, 2024).

In Italy, recent evidence confirms the persistence of gender inequalities despite improvements in educational attainment. Data from AlmaLaurea (2025) show that women now outperform men in terms of graduation rates and average final grades, including in STEM disciplines. Nevertheless, these educational advantages do not translate into equal labour market outcomes. Women continue to experience lower employment rates, more precarious contracts, and a persistent gender pay gap, which widens significantly in the presence of children. These patterns highlight the structural nature of gender inequality and the difficulty of addressing it solely through educational progress.

In response to these challenges, European and national institutions have introduced regulatory and policy tools aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace. European countries are required to implement EU Directive 2023/970 on pay transparency by June 2026, reinforcing reporting and disclosure obligations for firms. In Italy, the gender pay gap remains a critical issue, as highlighted by INPS (2024a), due to persistent occupational segregation, unequal career progression, and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities.

Within this policy framework, the Italian government introduced a national gender equality certification system (UNI/PdR 125:2022) in 2022. The certification, included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, aims to encourage companies to adopt structured policies to reduce gender gaps in areas such as career opportunities, equal pay, work-life balance, governance, and maternity protection. Although voluntary, the certification is supported by tax incentives and, more importantly, by advantages in public procurement procedures, where certified firms receive higher scores in tenders. UNI/PdR 125:2022 provides guidelines and key performance indicators to assess the effectiveness of gender equality policies over time. As of March 2025, more than 6,800 companies in Italy have obtained the certification.

Despite its growing diffusion, UNI/PdR 125:2022 is a very recent measure, and little is known about how firms perceive and approach this cer-

tification, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs play a crucial role in the Italian economy but are often characterised by limited resources, strong entrepreneurial influence, and lower formalisation of management practices. These features may affect both the motivations for adoption and the depth of implementation of gender equality standards.

For these reasons, this paper addresses the following research question: *What are the main peculiarities of the first mover SMEs that have opted for gender equality certification?* The study aims to characterise early adopters in terms of sectoral affiliation, innovation and sustainability orientation, governance structures, and organisational features, contributing to the emerging literature on gender equality standards and voluntary certification schemes in SMEs.

2. Literature review

The paper draws on institutional theory, which has been widely used to study the adoption and diffusion of organisational practices (Yang *et al.*, 2021; Kostova and Roth, 2002; Naciti *et al.*, 2022). The social context in which firms operate influences companies' behaviour and supports the adoption of similar practices and becomes isomorphic with each other (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change: coercive isomorphism, where external factors (e.g. laws, regulation, supplier relationships) force organisations to adopt particular structures and procedures; normative isomorphism (where organisations adopt the structures and procedures of dominant professions or professional bodies); and mimetic isomorphism (where organisations emulate other organisations). First, coercive isomorphism is the result of formal or informal pressure from other organisations. Second, normative isomorphism stems mainly from formal education (i.e. universities) and interaction with professional associations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Aerts *et al.*, 2006). Third, mimetic isomorphism results from the tendency of organisations to model other organisations in response to uncertainty (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

Although institutional factors drive the adoption decision, some organisations may have a better fit with certain practices than others (Yang *et al.*, 2021). First movers adopt management practices because they respond to normative pressures (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Normative pressures force organisations to behave according to societal norms, beliefs and values (Schaefer, 2007). They may lead firms to adopt GE certification as necessary to enhance the firm's reputation in the market (Prajogo *et al.*, 2012).

In Italy, concerning the formal pressure, we need to take into consideration the Public Contract Code 2023, which contains the final go-ahead for

the certification of gender equality (and not self-declaration as foreseen in the first version of the Contracts Code) in order to obtain the highest score in calls for tenders, notices, and invitations. In order to promote equality between men and women, the contracting authorities shall indicate, in the contract announcements and invitations, the higher score to be given to companies for the adoption of policies aimed at achieving equality between men and women, as evidenced by the possession of the GE certification (*Article 46-bis of the Code of Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, Legislative Decree no. 198/2006: as of 1 January 2022, the gender equality certification is established to certify the policies and concrete measures adopted by employers to reduce the gender gap in terms of growth opportunities in the company, equal pay for equal work, gender equality management policies and maternity protection*).

Late adopters, in contrast, are more characterised by coercive and mimetic motivations (Iatridis *et al.*, 2016). They are more likely to apply the practice symbolically or superficially, without integrating the standard's requirements into their operations (Naveh and Marcus, 2004).

Corporate GE standards and certifications are strongly related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Velasco-Balmaseda *et al.*, 2024). However, in the abundant literature on CSR and corporate certifications and standards, the primary attention was devoted to those related to the environment, quality assurance, and supply chains. GE certifications and standards are relatively recent and few in number, and there is very little research on this topic (Tzanakou *et al.*, 2021).

Velasco-Balmaseda *et al.* (2024) is an exception. They investigated these tools internationally and mapped 36 initiatives worldwide. Results highlight that the main driver of GE standards is the improvement of corporate reputation. Thus, the authors highlighted a "superficial and symbolic" use of the GE concept (Velasco-Balmaseda *et al.*, 2024). Sincere business interest in gender issues seems to be lacking, and the use of GE standards appears to be primarily instrumental for different goals.

While the WTO (2022) highlighted the potential role of these tools in advancing women's economic empowerment and conditions, several authors questioned the effectiveness of GE certifications and standards in removing gender inequalities (Mallado *et al.*, 2017).

At the same time, stakeholder theory provides an important complementary perspective. According to stakeholder theory, organisations aim to generate multiple benefits for diverse stakeholders, such as employees, governments, shareholders, suppliers, and civil society, whose support is essential for legitimacy and long-term survival (Freeman *et al.*, 2010). This theory expands the institutional view by showing how stakeholder expectations directly shape corporate adoption of certifications and sustainability-related practices (Jones *et al.*, 2018).

Building on this, research distinguishes between primary stakeholders

(customers, suppliers, employees, and shareholders) and secondary stakeholders (governments, regulators, NGOs, and pressure groups) (D'Souza et al., 2022). Primary stakeholders exert transactional pressures, often leading firms to adopt proactive strategies to maintain trust and continuity in essential relationships. For example, customer or investor demands for diversity and inclusion can push firms to adopt certification as a visible signal of responsible governance. Secondary stakeholders exert institutional and reputational pressures, which may generate more reactive strategies, for instance, compliance with public procurement requirements or responding to NGO campaigns against gender bias.

Stakeholder pressures can therefore be multi-dimensional: normative (linked to professional values and social norms), coercive (linked to regulation and public policy), or instrumental (linked to reputational and market-related goals). In practice, these pressures interact, reinforcing each other and shaping whether adoption of certifications is substantive or symbolic. Certifications become more than compliance tools: they serve as mechanisms for firms to demonstrate accountability, meet stakeholder expectations, safeguard legitimacy, and enhance their reputational capital in the eyes of regulators, employees, customers, and wider society (Pereira et al., 2023).

SMEs are strongly linked to the figure of the entrepreneur or sole administrator or CEO. His or her values influence individual and collective behaviour, helping to determine the objectives to be pursued, the choices to be made, and the actions to be taken. When these values, which belong to the individual's personal sphere and are therefore defined as personal or company values, are translated into objectives, choices, and behaviours that find accomplishment in the company system, they acquire relevance in the economic sphere (Vergara, 1986). The entrepreneur's values, understood as the key actor of the company, must be considered among the main factors that determine the company's strategic choices (Marchini, 2000). Previous social science research has identified significant age differences in people's attitudes, values, intentions, and behaviours (Brieger *et al.*, 2021). Younger people are mainly looking for social acceptance, while middle-aged people focus on personal growth (Ebner et al., 2006), and older adults show higher levels of social care (Carstensen, 2006; Roberts *et al.*, 2006). Younger and older entrepreneurs are more oriented to social value through their companies, while middle-aged entrepreneurs are relatively more economically oriented (Brieger *et al.*, 2021). Entrepreneurs' willingness to contribute to social value through their entrepreneurial activities should depend on the life stage. Consequently, the age of entrepreneurs could influence the propensity to engage in social issues.

Therefore, while institutional theory explains how pressures encourage adoption, stakeholder theory highlights the centrality of stakeholders' expectations and legitimacy concerns in shaping the depth and sincerity

of adoption. We therefore argue that the effectiveness of GE certifications depends not only on regulatory and institutional drivers but also on companies' perceptions of stakeholder expectations and the alignment with entrepreneurs' values. Yet, empirical evidence on these dynamics remains scarce. For these reasons, we focus on first adopters of GE certification, considering several characteristics of companies and entrepreneurs to predict the propensity for GE certification.

3. Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project to investigate the drivers, barriers, and perceived benefits of GE certification one year after the introduction of UNI-PdR 125/2022. It takes advantage of a survey of small and medium-sized Italian enterprises operating in six sectors (according to the national classification of economic activities ATECO): 13. Manufacture of textiles; 14. Manufacture of wearing apparel; 15. Manufacture of leather and related products; 29. Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers; 62. Computer programming, consultancy, and related activities; 69. Legal and accounting activities. In order to compare sectors with different organisational contexts in terms of gender, manufacturing and services sectors with a female or male-dominated workforce were selected. In Italy, women are more concentrated in the service sector and remain underrepresented in manufacturing (INPS, 2024b). The total population of SMEs corresponds to 7,546 enterprises. A structured questionnaire was designed to explore company and respondent profiles, the level of knowledge of gender equality standards, and the motivations leading Italian companies to seek certification, as well as the main perceived benefits and barriers. The survey was carried out by CAWI and CATI in December 2023. A total of 866 companies participated, yielding a response rate of 11.5%. Among them, only 21 companies (2.42% of sample) reported having obtained gender equality certification.

The focus of this paper is on these 21 certified companies. Based on an explorative-qualitative approach we conducted a descriptive analysis combining primary data obtained through our survey and secondary data.

We collected the information from an existing Italian database, while some survey data – originating from our questionnaire – were used only marginally and for descriptive purposes. Particularly, we gathered information on export, innovation, web presence, SDGs, and participation in public tenders through the Atoka database (by SpazioDati S.r.L., controlled by CervedGroup), which is a reliable and widely recognized database containing both financial and non-financial information on Italian companies. The survey data was only used to obtain structural information – i.e., the

industry affiliation, the total number of employees and their distribution by gender – which provide a basic description of the companies analysed. The available company information (profiles, descriptions, indicators) was used to reconstructing the sectoral context and identifying emerging patterns in the phenomenon studied. This approach allowed us to reconstructing and interpret the phenomena, highlighting patterns and insights, offering preliminary evidence also to inform future empirical research.

4. Findings

In this section, we try to build a profile of these early adopters by highlighting some interesting characteristics of GE-certified companies.

Of the 21 GE-certified companies, 16 are in the computer programming and consultancy sector, 2 are in the manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers, 1 is in the manufacture of wearing apparel, 1 is in the manufacture of leather and related products, and 1 is in the legal and accounting sector (Table 1). This distribution highlights a strong concentration of certified firms in the computer programming and consultancy sector.

Table 1 The sectoral distribution of the companies

SECTORS	GE-Certified SMEs
13. Textile manufacturing	0
14. Manufacture of wearing apparel	1
15. Manufacture of leather and related products	1
29. Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers	2
62. Computer programming, consultancy, and related activities	16
69. Legal and accounting activities	1
TOTAL	21

Source: Survey.

The average innovation score of the 21 GE-certified companies is 92.2. They are exporting companies, with an average export score of 73.6. The average SDG propensity score is 63, indicating a good interest in sustainability issues. The Social Score and Web Centricity Score are lower, at 55.6 and 40.9, respectively, suggesting that companies pay little attention to these issues (Table 2).

Table.2 Export, Innovation, Social, Web, and SDG score

	Export score	Innovation score	Social score	Web centrality score	SDG propensity score
N	19	21	16	21	21
Missing	2	0	5	0	0
Mean	73.6	92.2	55.6	40.9	63.0
Median	74	99	75.0	38	64
Standard deviation	26.5	12.0	39.5	34.6	12.6
Minimum	25	52	2	0	34
Maximum	100	100	100	98	88

Source: Atoka-Cerved Database.

The average age of the 21 companies is 23.8 years. The minimum age is 7 years and the maximum is 49 years. The average age of company representatives is 53.1 years, ranging from 43 to 68 years. Company representatives are predominantly male, with an average of 5.43, compared with an average of 2.18 female representatives (Table 3).

Table.3 Corporate age and representatives

	Corporate age	Average age corporate representatives	Male representatives	Female representatives
N	21	21	21	11
Missing	0	0	0	10
Mean	23.8	53.1	5.43	2.18
Median	20	53	4	2
Standard deviation	12.0	6.21	4.21	1.40
Minimum	7	43	1	1
Maximum	49	68	14	5

Source: Atoka-Cerved Database.

The certified companies have an average of 80.4 employees, with a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 286. They are, therefore, small and medium-sized enterprises. The average number of men is 53, and the average number of women is 22.2 (Table 4).

Table.4 Number and gender of employees

	Number of Employees	Male Employees	Female Employees
N	21	21	21
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	80.4	53.0	22.2
Median	54	36	15
Standard deviation	69.9	48.4	19.3
Minimum	12	6	1
Maximum	286	167	70

Source: Survey.

In terms of company size, the average turnover is 10,966 million euros, with a minimum of 1,332 million euros and a maximum of 34,389 million euros. Turnover per employee as a productivity index averages 219,614 euros, EBITDA/sales averages 11.9%, equity averages 692,905 euros, and total assets average 17,211 million euros (Table 5).

Table.5 Corporate size of certified companies

	Revenues	Sales by employee	Equity	Ebitda/Sales	Assets
N	21	21	21	21	21
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1.10e+7	219614	692905	0.119	1.72e+7
Median	9114000	93667	100000	0.0736	8940000
Standard deviation	9.23e+6	311762	1.16e+6	0.0912	2.20e+7
Minimum	1332000	48693	10000	-0.00839	842000
Maximum	34389000	1.44e+6	4092000	0.305	97081000

Source: Atoka-Cerved Database.

The certified companies are mainly involved in SDG Goals: 5 Gender Equality, 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities, 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

In addition, the GE-certified companies are characterized by several other certifications (Legality rating: by the article 5-ter of Decree-Law No. 1/2012 to promote the introduction of ethical principles in corporate behaviour; SA 8000 – Social accountability standard; ISO 9001 – Quality management systems; ISO 14001 – Environmental management systems; ISO 27001 – Information security management system; ISO 27017 – Secu-

urity standard developed for cloud service providers and users; ISO 27018 – Standard about data privacy in cloud environments; ISO 37001 – Anti-bribery management systems; ISO 45001 - Occupational health and safety management systems – Requirements with guidance for use) (Table 6).

Table.6 SDG Goals and Certifications

ID	SDG Goals	Other Certifications
1	5,8	ISO 27001; ISO 9001
2	5	n.a.
3	3,6,8,9,11,12,13,14,15,16	ISO 45001; ISO 14001
4	3,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	Legality rating; SA8000; ISO 37001; ISO 27001; ISO 45001; ISO 14001; ISO 9001
5	5	ISO 9001
6	n.a.	ISO 9001
7	5	ISO 27001; ISO 9001
8	3,5,6,9,12,13,14,15	UNI 14001:2015
9	5,8,11,16	Legality Rating
10	3,4,5,7,8,9,10,12,16	n.a.
11	3,5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14-15-16	Legality Rating; ISO 9001; ISO 14001; ISO 27001
12	5	ISO 27001; ISO 9001
13	n.a.	n.a.
14	5,8,11,16	Legality Rating; ISO 9001
15	5,8,10,11,16	Legality Rating; SA 8000
16	n.a.	n.a.
17	n.a.	n.a.
18	n.a.	Legality Rating; ISO 9001
19	3,5,6,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16	Legality Rating; ISO 9001; ISO 14001; ISO 27001; ISO 27017; ISO 27018
20	5,8,11,16	Legality Rating
21	5,8,9,10,11,12,16	Legality Rating; ISO 27018; ISO 27017; ISO 9001; ISO 27001

Source: Atoka-Cerved Database.

Table 7 is devoted to the involvement of enterprises in public tenders. The relevance of public procurement in 2021-2024 is high or maximum for seven companies, irrelevant for twelve companies and zero for only one company.

However, the number of contracts awarded in 2016-2025 is very heterogeneous, ranging from a minimum of 3 contracts to a maximum of 3,800 (not including ID 16, which does not participate in public tenders). Moreo-

ver, the average value of the contracts (in thousands of euros) ranges from a minimum of 1,1 thousand euros to a maximum of 23,400 thousand euros.

Finally, most businesses are male-dominated. Only one company is female-dominated, which belongs to the computer programming and consultancy sector (Nace 62).

Table.7 Public procurement relevance and male or female-dominated

ID	Public procurement relevance (2021-2024)	Contracts awarded in the decade 2016-2025	Average contract (thousand euro)	NACE code	Male or female dominated
1	irrelevant	3800	271.2	62.01	Male
2	irrelevant	3	35.3	69.20	Male
3	irrelevant	126	2,700	62.01	Male
4	max	83	2,300	14.1	Male
5	irrelevant	14	5.5	62.02	Female
6	irrelevant	14	3.9	29.32	Male
7	high	292	45.2	62.02	Male
8	high	506	6.7	62.09	Male
9	high	362	37	29.20	Male
10	low	11	57.6	62.01	Male
11	irrelevant	17	683	62.01	Male
12	max	1000	4.4	62.01	Male
13	irrelevant	4	1.1	62.02	Male
14	irrelevant	16	8	62.02	Male
15	max	189	23,400	62.01	Male
16	null	0	0	15.20	Male
17	max	15	2,400	62.02	Male
18	irrelevant	127	17.3	62.01	Male
19	irrelevant	330	43.6	62.01	Male
20	irrelevant	11	6.3	62.01	Male
21	irrelevant	215	1,100	62.02	Male

Source: Atoka-Cerved Database.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Answering our research question, “*What are the main peculiarities of the first mover SMEs that have opted for gender equality certification?*”, the findings allow us to trace a clear and coherent profile of the first SMEs adopting gender equality certification in Italy. These early adopters are predominantly knowledge-intensive, service-oriented firms, with a strong concentration in the computer programming and consultancy sector. This sectoral focus suggests that early adoption is facilitated by exposure to formalized management systems, regulatory environments, and public procurement procedures, which reduce organizational barriers to certification.

From a strategic and organizational perspective, first adopters are highly innovative and outward-oriented firms, as indicated by very high innovation scores and strong export performance. They also display a moderate but consistent sensitivity to sustainability issues, particularly those aligned with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). At the same time, relatively low social and web centrality scores suggest that sustainability and gender-related commitments are not strongly communicated to internal or external stakeholders, pointing to a more managerial or compliance-oriented framing of certification.

In terms of organizational demographics, certified firms are established SMEs, with an average age of nearly 24 years, led by middle-aged company representatives (around 53 years old). Leadership and workforce structures are predominantly male-dominated, with only one female-dominated firm in the entire sample. This persistent gender imbalance highlights a potential misalignment between the formal adoption of gender equality standards and existing governance and employment structures.

From an economic standpoint, early adopters are financially viable firms with sufficient resources to absorb the costs associated with certification, monitoring, and compliance. However, the marked heterogeneity in turnover, productivity, and profitability indicates that certification is not limited to top-performing firms, but rather to organizations that possess adequate administrative capacity and strategic incentives. The frequent presence of multiple other certifications (e.g., ISO standards, SA8000, and the Legality Rating) further suggests that early adopters are firms already accustomed to compliance-driven practices and standardized management systems, pointing to a path-dependent adoption process.

Finally, involvement in public procurement emerges as a defining feature of first adopters. Although the intensity of participation varies considerably across firms, nearly all certified companies have engaged with public tenders over time. Public procurement relevance, both in terms of

contract numbers and contract values, appears to be a key contextual factor shaping adoption decisions. Importantly, firms benefiting from procurement-related incentives remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, indicating that certification uptake does not automatically translate into changes in internal gender composition.

The existing literature highlights that first movers adopt management practices because they respond to normative pressures (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Normative pressures force organisations to behave according to societal norms, beliefs, and values (Schaefer, 2007). They may lead firms to adopt GE certification to improve their reputation (Prajogo *et al.*, 2012).

Nevertheless, the examined companies adopted a voluntary standard, incentivised by the Italian Government through tax and public procurement incentives. All certified companies, except one, are involved with public tenders, even if to a different degree, in the past years. Thus, the public procurement code would affect the choice to obtain the GE certification. Furthermore, the certified companies have middle-aged representatives, who, according to the existing literature, tend to focus on personal development and are more economically oriented (Brieger *et al.*, 2021; Ebner *et al.*, 2006).

Thus, coercive isomorphism would result from formal pressure through the law (the public procurement code and not the UNI/PdR 125/2022, which is voluntary). The formal pressure exerted by the Public Procurement Code, which awards points for gender equality certification, seems to impact the decision-making process in Italian SMEs significantly. Compliance with the Public Procurement Code is not only a question of complying with the law, but above all, it is a question of the possibility of winning the public tender, which means winning the contract and the associated turnover. Therefore, it is a question of competitiveness and survival for the company to access the public procurement market.

The public procurement incentive seems to work much more than the tax incentive. The problem is related to applying the GE standard, as the practice could be applied symbolically or superficially without integrating the standard's requirements into their operations (Naveh and Marcus, 2004).

This study contributes to the academic debate on gender equality certification in SMEs by extending the application of institutional and stakeholder theories to a novel and underexplored domain. First, the findings show how coercive pressures, particularly those linked to the Public Procurement Code, act as the most effective triggers for early adoption of the UNI/PdR 125:2022 certification. This highlights that, in the SME context, compliance with external regulations and incentives is often a matter of competitiveness and survival rather than a voluntary alignment with social values (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; INPS, 2024a). Theoretically, this supports the idea that coercive isomorphism may dominate in contexts

where certification is directly tied to market access, thereby enriching institutional theory with evidence from small firm settings (Yang et al., 2021; Kostova and Roth, 2002).

Second, the evidence of limited influence from tax incentives and the prevalence of male-dominated leadership structures raises questions about the symbolic versus substantive adoption of gender equality standards. This resonates with the literature on ceremonial compliance (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Naveh and Marcus, 2004) and suggests that certifications can become decoupled from actual organisational practices if monitoring mechanisms are weak. Our findings therefore contribute to the institutional theory debate by showing how symbolic adoption risks are particularly salient in SMEs, where resources and managerial attention are constrained (Velasco-Balmaseda et al., 2024).

Third, by integrating stakeholder theory, this study illustrates how primary stakeholders (employees, customers, investors) and secondary stakeholders (government, NGOs, regulators) exert distinct but complementary pressures that interact with institutional drivers (Freeman et al., 2010; D'Souza et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2018). Specifically, findings suggest that secondary stakeholders, particularly public authorities acting through the Public Procurement Code, play a dominant role in triggering adoption. Nearly all certified firms are involved in public tenders, and the relevance of procurement incentives clearly outweighs other motivations. This indicates that stakeholder pressure is primarily coercive and institutional, rather than relational, reinforcing the central role of government and regulators as key secondary stakeholders shaping certification choices. In contrast, pressures from primary stakeholders appear comparatively weak in the observed sample. The limited attention to social communication and web centrality, together with the persistence of male-dominated leadership and workforce structures, suggests that certification is not predominantly driven by internal employee demands or market-based expectations for diversity and inclusion. Rather than responding to bottom-up stakeholder engagement, firms seem to adopt certification mainly as a strategic response to external incentives linked to competitiveness and access to public contracts.

Within this context, the role of the entrepreneur in SMEs becomes critical in mediating stakeholder pressures. The prevalence of middle-aged, predominantly male business leaders helps explain why certification is often pursued reactively, as a compliance-oriented strategy, rather than proactively as part of a broader social or ethical mission. Entrepreneurial values and life-stage orientations influence whether stakeholder expectations are internalized or treated instrumentally, thereby shaping the depth of certification implementation. Moreover, this study highlights an asymmetry between strong secondary stakeholder pressures and weak pri-

mary stakeholder engagement. In doing so, it strengthens the integration of stakeholder theory with institutional theory. The findings demonstrate that, in SMEs, stakeholder influence is filtered through institutional mechanisms and entrepreneurial discretion, linking micro-level managerial values with macro-level regulatory and stakeholder forces. This contributes to the literature by showing that, when applied to certification adoption, stakeholder theory must account not only for who the stakeholders are, but also for which stakeholder pressures effectively materialize in practice and under what institutional conditions.

Finally, our findings advance the debate on gender equality certification specifically by profiling the first adopters as innovative, export-oriented SMEs that are nonetheless male-dominated and motivated primarily by procurement advantages. This suggests that certifications risk reinforcing existing gender imbalances if not accompanied by deeper organisational and cultural change. Theoretically, this calls for a refinement of current models of certification adoption by explicitly incorporating the paradox of symbolic adoption: certifications may signal legitimacy to external audiences while leaving internal power structures largely unchanged (Mallado et al., 2017; Tzanakou et al., 2021).

From a policy perspective, our findings highlight the need to adopt a more nuanced approach that distinguishes between short-term incentives and long-term cultural transformations. In the short term, public procurement emerges as a powerful coercive mechanism to stimulate certification uptake. Yet, its effectiveness risks being undermined if gender equality certification is adopted merely as a symbolic strategy to secure tender advantages. These findings have policy implications, highlighting the need to monitor the initial adoption of GE certification and enforce triennial reconfirmation to assess the effectiveness of the incentive. To further prevent “pink-washing” or the instrumental use of certification, concrete monitoring mechanisms, such as independent audits, mandatory progress reports, and systematic follow-up assessments, should be institutionalized to ensure that certification translates into substantive organisational change rather than ceremonial compliance. In the longer term, however, the challenge lies in fostering a cultural reorientation within SMEs, where gender equality principles are internalized into managerial values, strategic priorities, and everyday practices. This requires complementary measures that go beyond procurement incentives, including sector-specific training programs, awareness-raising initiatives, and the dissemination of best practices through industry associations and professional networks. Moreover, our evidence suggests that tax incentives do not appear to exert a strong influence in the initial phase of adoption, and their effects may only materialize over time, as normative and mimetic pressures progressively persuade potential late adopters. By combining coercive instruments with normative

and mimetic levers, policymakers can mitigate the risk of superficial compliance while fostering a gradual cultural shift towards genuine internalization of gender equality principles. Such a dual-track strategy not only enhances the credibility and legitimacy of the UNI/PdR 125:2022 certification but also contributes to embedding gender equality into the broader organisational field, paving the way for systemic change in the Italian SME landscape.

Our study has certain limitations, which at the same time point to promising directions and developments for future research.

First, the main limitation concerns the limited number of companies, that is 21 cases, and the predominance of the computer programming and consultancy sector. While this sample allows us to provide in-depth descriptive evidence, it inevitably constrains the generalizability of the findings and increases the risk that results may be influenced by sectoral peculiarities. Specifically, the predominance of firms operating in the IT industry may lead to a sectoral bias, since the dynamics of certification in this field might not fully reflect those of other industries. Future research relying on larger and more diversified samples would be necessary to validate and extend the insights emerging from this exploratory investigation. At the same time, the concentration of certified firms in the IT sector provides useful insights into how certification develops in highly dynamic industries, which may serve as a precursor for its diffusion into other sectors, a direction that future research could explore further. Furthermore, while we believe this study provides a valuable and original contribution by offering one of the first empirical insights into the early adopters of GE standards in Italy, future studies could expand the sample size and move beyond descriptive approach by exploring correlations and regression models. This would allow for the identification of potential predictors of GE certification and a deeper investigation of cause-effect relationships. Second, the present study relies on data collected at a single point in time, which does not allow us to capture the evolution of GE certification adoption. Future research steps may involve a longitudinal analysis to assess the evolution of GE certification adoption over time. In particular, conducting in-depth interviews could help to explore motivations and obstacles influencing adoption, as well as to identify potential differences across sectors (manufacturing, trade, and services) and geographical locations. Moreover, future studies could also investigate the actual effectiveness of GE certification instruments over time, by examining whether and to what extent they produce the intended outcomes. In this regard, involving employees directly would provide valuable insights into how the certification process is perceived internally and how it affects organisational practices, culture, and behaviors.

Overall, while this study highlights that public procurement incentives

represent a stronger driver of GE certification than tax benefits, it also raises concerns about the risk of superficial adoption. These findings call for future longitudinal research to assess the actual effectiveness of certification tools and to capture employees' lived experiences, thereby ensuring that certification translates into genuine organisational change rather than remaining a symbolic instrument for competitive advantage in public tenders.

Another critical aspect deserving further reflection concerns the male-dominated profile of most certified firms in our sample. While these companies have formally adopted the UNI/PdR 125:2022 certification, their ownership and managerial structures often remain predominantly male. This raises important questions about the extent to which certification translates into substantive organisational or cultural change, as opposed to serving a more symbolic or compliance-driven function. The risk is that gender equality certification may reinforce existing power structures if not accompanied by deeper, more transformative practices.

Future research should investigate how gender dynamics within certified firms evolve over time and whether the certification process itself fosters more inclusive leadership and decision-making structures. In particular, future studies could adopt a qualitative research design based on in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs, managers, and key organizational actors. Such an approach would allow scholars to explore in greater detail why firms decided to pursue gender equality certification, the nature and intensity of stakeholder pressures they faced, and whether these pressures originated primarily from institutional actors, such as public authorities and regulators, or from internal and market-based stakeholders. Moreover, qualitative evidence could help uncover the main motivations underlying certification adoption, as well as the perceived benefits and challenges encountered during and after the certification process, thereby providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the drivers and consequences of gender equality certification in SMEs.

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