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The Gender Grading Gap in Italy: Heterogeneity, Trajectories, and Consequences from Large-Scale Population Student Data

Girls, historically disadvantaged, outperform boys in education across most OECD countries, despite persistent gender gaps in STEM and labour markets. While boys outperform girls in standardised math assessments, girls consistently receive higher grades across subjects. This paradox has sparked growing interest in the Gender Grading Gap (GGG), defined as the advantage girls receive in teacher-assigned grades compared to boys with similar performance on external assessments. The GGG has been mainly attributed to gender differences in classroom behaviour and teachers' implicit stereotypes. This study investigates four dimensions of the GGG not fully addressed in the literature: (1) variation across school subjects, (2) the role of school/classroom context and peer composition, (3) temporal dynamics over the school career, and (4) consequences for student performance. First, we provide a systematic, theory-driven analysis of the GGG in literacy (Italian) and numeracy (Math). Second, we examine contextual moderators—such as classroom gender balance, socioeconomic composition, and migrant background—highlighting how peer effects may influence behaviour, performance norms, and grading criteria in gendered ways. We also test whether grading practices reflect compensatory/reinforcing preferences by classroom-level gender gaps in standardised tests. Third, we assess trends in the GGG across grades and cohorts. Fourth, we explore whether early exposure to gendered grading patterns predicts later performance. This study utilises INVALSI population data, encompassing over 7 million students (grades 2, 5, and 8) across 371,423 classrooms from 2012 to 2019. Longitudinal analysis follows the 2012 grade 2 cohort through grades 5 (2015) and 8 (2018). Estimation is performed separately by subject and grade at the classroom level, allowing analysis of grading heterogeneity and moderation by class gender, ESCS, and migration composition. The study finds that the GGG is larger in mathematics, shaped by classroom context, and predicts better outcomes for girls, highlighting the long-term impact of subjective grading on gender inequality.

Keywords/Topics

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