



Doing gender in death care: How women are finding their place in Italian funeral directing services

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Abstract

Gendered norms in society can strongly influence the presence of men or women in professional contexts. This study examined the perceptions of 13 women working in the funeral directing services in order to better understand how they perform gender roles to play in a field that has long been considered male-dominated. The findings suggest that women face many challenges to play a professional role in funeral directing and that they rely on their ability to perform care work to be recognized as better professionals. The issue of physical strength—a characteristic element of funeral work—seems to be an issue that still arouses contrasting positions among women. Another finding was that women also perform gender roles through their professional appearance, which they recognize as an important aspect of their professionalism. This work brings new insight into this specific and under-researched area and provides new understanding on how women use gender performativity to achieve professionalism in the death care; in particular, it shows that women do gender in different ways to achieve the same entitlement to be good funeral professionals as men.

KEYWORDS

death care work, doing gender, funeral directing

1 | INTRODUCTION

The paper presents a qualitative research aimed at exploring the ways in which women working in funeral directing services perform gender roles in order to find a place in a still male-dominated professional world, such as the Italian one, and gendered logics underlying female segregation in this profession. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on how women navigate a work environment where there is a numerical dominance of men and a strong culture of masculinity (see Hatmaker, 2013; Johansson et al., 2019; Khilji & Pumroy, 2019; Pruitt, 2018).

The entry of women into typically male-dominated professions is a phenomenon that has occupied researchers for several years. The main objective of this line of research is to understand the situation of women in work environments where there is a numerical dominance of men and a strong culture of masculinity, and to observe the advantages and disadvantages that the presence of women entails, as well as possible discrimination in terms of career opportunities (glass ceiling) or horizontal segregation.

The occupational contexts examined so far cover a variety of occupational fields, including aviation (Davey & Davidson, 2000), IT (Michie & Nelson, 2006), police officers (Dodge et al., 2011), prison guards (Britton, 1999), academics (Filandri & Pasqua, 2021), medical professions (Ainsworth & Flanagan, 2020; Irvine & Vermilya, 2010), construction (Aboagye-Nimo et al., 2019; Fielden et al., 2000; Naoum et al., 2020), and agriculture and forestry (Fremstad & Paul, 2020; Johansson et al., 2019).

The barriers faced by women who want to enter traditionally male sectors are related to the greater ease with which men are accepted. Women have to work harder than their male counterparts to prove that they are competent “even if they are female” (Johansson et al., 2019) and yet have fewer career opportunities than the latter (Barreto et al., 2017). It has been shown that women employed in traditionally male sectors are discriminated against and have lower economic incomes than men (Cassell, 1996; Fremstad & Paul, 2020; Webster et al., 2016), are underrepresented in leadership positions, and few of them are able to pursue private practice (Boniol et al., 2019). They are seen as tokens in these professions and therefore marginalized, but some of them have managed to recognize and acknowledge the importance of traditionally feminine values such as caring and cooperation and use them to combat the masculinity they encounter in their work environment (Shisler & Sbicca, 2019).

Gender research in organizational studies often uses the concept of “doing gender”, which states that gender is something that is done, that does not exist a priori, but is created in a particular social situation (West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to West and Zimmerman (1987), gender is “a routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment” (p. 126) that is rooted in everyday interaction. Gender is therefore not an individual characteristic, but a process that we perform every day and in every social situation (Linstead & Pullen, 2006). More specifically, the process of doing gender is defined as “the activities of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 20). According to Poggio (2006), recognizing that gender is a process means that it is redefined and negotiated in everyday practice, leaving behind the essentialist view of individual male and female traits.

The entry of women into traditionally male occupational fields is an interesting area of research, as they have to overcome gendered boundaries (Deutsch, 2007; Kelan, 2010). Death care work is an interesting field for the study of gendered processes, as women perform traditionally male tasks (such as dirty work or lifting bodies and coffins). In recent years, researchers have begun to investigate the changes in the funeral industry with regard to the role of women. Several factors appear to have contributed to the entry of women into the profession. For example, the use of technology has led to ergonomically designed carts that make it easier to move and lift coffins. Death care work also became less “dirty”, with the introduction of refrigeration of bodies, the high number of cremations (requiring less labor at the cemetery and less weight for transport), and the transfer of bodies from the place of death to assigned structures, namely funeral homes (Pringle & Alley, 1995). Another aspect is the increased sensitivity to bereavement, that is, a professional approach based more on caring (Donley, 2019; Pringle & Alley, 1995). Although these factors are paving the way for women in the profession, women are still struggling for professional

recognition. According to a recent study by Pruitt (2018), female funeral directors who were confronted with a strict male culture confronted the gendered rules that define them as unsuitable to work in funeral directing and emphasized that they can perform the same tasks as men; yet these same women recognized some gender differences, such as being compassionate and gentle, which identified them as better professionals than men.

In order to analyze in depth the phenomenon of gender processes in a male-dominated field, the research project consisted of a qualitative study aimed at collecting the perceptions of women employed in funeral services on how they perform gender roles in their field of work. It will be shown that women working in Northern Italian death care define their professionalism doing gender in different ways.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, for a better understanding of this professional field, it describes what characterizes the Italian context in comparison to other international realities. Secondly, a historical excursus is also presented to see how the relationship to care work related to death has changed in Western societies and how this has influenced the assignment of gendered roles and tasks related to funeral work. Thirdly, the methodology used to conduct the study is presented. Fourthly, the key findings of the research are highlighted. It then discusses the findings in the light of theory and previous literature and provides some implications for future research.

1.1 | The Italian funeral services context

In Italy, the main national regulation for the funeral sector is the “Mortuary Police Regulations” (D.P.R. no. 285/1990), which sets out the criteria to be followed for everything that is essentially part of the process from death to burial (i.e., body transport, post-mortem diagnostic examinations, autopsy and treatment of the corpse, provisions for cemetery services, mortuaries, etc.).

While in the United States the role of the embalmer is clearly defined and also recognized at the level of specific training (Cathles et al., 2010), in Italy, as in other countries (Davidsson Bremborg, 2006; Pringle & Alley, 1995), embalming procedures are rarely used, except as a precautionary measure in cases where the preservation of the corpse is seriously compromised. Normally, in these situations, only the injection of formalin-based preservatives (D.P.R. No. 285/1990) is practiced, the so-called “sanitary and hygienic treatment”. Tanatopraxis and tanatoesthetic procedures are also procedures that belong more to international contexts. The role of the funeral director is to take care of the transfer and arrangement of the body and to organize the funeral ceremony (SEFIT, 2008). On average, around 3 days pass between the time of death and the funeral. The bureaucratic and the organizational part must therefore be dealt with quickly and efficiently. In some cases, the time is extended, for example, if the body has to be autopsied or transferred to another country. The roles at the front and back door can be described as follows: the first involves dealing with the bereaved to purchase the service and organize the ceremony; the second involves accommodating and transferring the body and managing the paperwork/accounting.

In contrast to other international realities, funeral homes in Italy have emerged with some delay and have only begun to grow in number in recent years. Some of them are “ceremony rooms”/chapels—a structure that offers some services and a farewell hall/chapel—while others are funeral homes, that is, completely autonomous in terms of the services offered. The slow development of this type of reality is also partly due to the local culture, where it is customary for the deceased to be mourned at home or in hospital mortuaries. The idea of the loved one being taken to another, new, and unknown facility is difficult to accept. The most traditional Italian reality is not made up of funeral homes, but of small local establishments, the funeral service agencies (in Italian “onoranze funebri” or “pompe funebri”), which can provide services more or less independently. In other words, some have the staff responsible for the dressing and transfer of the body, the means of transport (hearse) and the staff responsible for the organization of the funeral ceremony; others (the majority) deal exclusively with the sale of funeral services to the bereaved/clients and the organization of the ceremony, leaving the other services, such as, the rental of the

hearse, the staff for dressing and transport, the delivery of the coffins, the furnishing of the burial chamber, and third party service providers (called “Centri Servizi”). This leads to a rather fragmented situation in terms of the tasks that can be carried out by different professionals depending on the reality. Therefore, it can (often) happen that the funeral director who sells the service and organizes the funeral ceremony and the professionals who take care of the dressing of the body and its transport do not belong to the same working reality.

Although the activity is still heavily carried out by men (97% men, in 2018, according to ISTAT), in recent years we are seeing a slow growth in the presence of women both in the funeral directing and among funeral service providers (the latter only since 2016).

Traditionally, the funeral directing in Italy was always associated with the presence of men. The fact that funeral work, that is, the preparation of the body of the deceased and the management of contact with bereaved family members, is considered “male” work and is remarkable, especially given the role that women have always played in the Italian context in working with death. In the past, when hospitalization was not as common as it is today, death took place at home and women played an active role in the management of death rituals. This is partly due to the cultural context of a country strongly rooted in the Christian religion. The preparation of the body was seen as a labor of “care” for which women, who were more pious and devoted, were considered more suitable to respect the sacredness of the body and present it in a dignified manner for the funeral ceremony.

1.2 | Gender, death, and care work

Western societies have undergone significant changes in the last century. The demographic situation has changed with the emergence of large urban settlements and the gradual abandonment of small communities and rural areas. Since the 1930s, we have gradually witnessed the development of the phenomenon of medicalization of life and hospitalization: today “we are born in hospital and die in hospital”. In the past, only the poor died in hospitals, everyone else preferred to die in their own homes. The proliferation of hospitals has begun to hide any unpleasant image associated with death and has put Western societies in a situation that Ariès called “forbidden death” (Ariès, 1974). The same premises for which the bodies of the deceased are destined are still kept in the basement to hide them from the public and—at the same time—to conceal what is partly seen as a failure of the health care system (Carden, 2001). These historical changes in contemporary Western society have led to changes within the family, both at the level of structures and relationships. On a social level, rituals now play a lesser role than in the past, and the social and collective dimension is less important, especially in large urban centers, to the detriment of the sense of protection and social security that the old communities guaranteed. As a result of the lack of participation in the extended group, death is now a more difficult experience to bear (Boschetti, 2003). In the past, death mainly took place in the home, and friends and relatives accompanied the dying in the last moments before death and supported the family during the illness and grieving process (Ariès, 1974). The care of the dying and the body of the deceased was entrusted to families and the community—especially women—while today hospitals and funeral homes take care of this (Arfini et al., 2022).

Social change has led to the emergence of professionals who are entrusted with tasks that were previously carried out by the community: these professionals are now tasked with accompanying the family in the difficult decision-making process following the death of a loved one and acting as a point of contact in the dramatic moment in which the bereaved find themselves (Arfini et al., 2022). But how has the work of caring for the dead developed and changed over time in relation to gender?

Historically, the task of caring for the body of the deceased was entrusted exclusively to women (Mulkay, 1993; Pringle & Alley, 1995; Trompette & Lemonnier, 2009). The female presence in the funeral services changed toward the end of the 19th century when women were denied their professionalism in caring for the deceased in order to justify the entry of men into the profession (Rundblad, 1995). According to a study by Rundblad (1995), until 150 years ago, it was women who cared for the deceased because the social context supported some stereotypical

characteristics, namely that women had more intuition, emotions, and a natural predisposition to care. Caring for the deceased was seen as an extension of nursing the sick, so these very qualities of caring that were considered innate to women made them particularly suited to this role. From a religious perspective, women were also, stereotypically, considered to be more devoted than men, so they seemed better suited to carry out a “sacred” work such as caring for the body of a deceased. The women who carried out the work of washing and dressing the corpse were called “shrouding women” (Rundblad, 1995; Torres, 1983): the man—“undertaker”—had only the task of taking the measurements of the deceased and supplying the coffin (Cahill, 1995).

In Rundblad's (1995) documentary reconstruction, it is interesting to note that in the 1800s the removal of corpses—still considered hard labor at the time—was considered a job that could be done by women.

Another important point the author makes is that the skills of these women were not so taken for granted: they were actually learned in the field and passed down from their grandmothers and mothers (Rundblad, 1995). They had to know the effects of decomposition of various diseases, they had to be able to prepare the remains of those who had been disfigured, for example, they had to know the climatic conditions and how different temperatures and degrees of humidity affected the body (Rundblad, 1995).

When caring for the deceased became a business, women lost their responsibility, which was taken over by men (Pringle & Alley, 1995; Rundblad, 1995). This role change was supported by the introduction of new techniques such as embalming—which was considered scientific and therefore not suitable for women—and the idea that the funeral profession required qualities that women could not possess, such as courage (Rundblad, 1995). Over time, the only women in the funeral services were the wives of the impresarios, and their duties were limited to answering the telephone, keeping the books, and maintaining the decorations (Pringle & Alley, 1995). As a result, the profession of funeral director was seen by society as “masculine”, with male professions considered to be more product-orientated, while female professions are caring or relationship-orientated (Couch & Sigler, 2001).

In recent years, researchers have begun to analyze the changes in the funeral industry with regard to the role of women. The (re)entry of women into the funeral industry has been favored by several factors. According to Pringle & Alley (Pringle & Alley, 1995), the restructuring of the industry, labor, and technological processes has helped to make the work easier, for example, through ergonomically designed carts that facilitate the moving and lifting of coffins. With the introduction of refrigeration of bodies, the high number of cremations (requiring less labor in the cemetery and less weight to transport) and the transfer of bodies from the place of death to assigned structures—funeral homes—funeral work has also become less dirty over time (Pringle & Alley, 1995). Women are also seen as part of the new image that the funeral industry is trying to project. White Lady Funerals in Australia, for example, point to an alternative image of women compared to the traditional male image: White Ladies cultivate an ultra-feminine image, are warm and friendly, work in an aesthetically pleasing environment rather than a gloomy office, and pride themselves on their attention to detail (Pringle & Alley, 1995). Among the measures being taken to remove the stigma of the funeral profession is that the presence of a woman can help to emphasize the caring component of the services and enable clients to choose female staff to provide the service (Carden, 2001).

Another aspect that has facilitated the re-entry of women is a greater sensitivity to bereavement, a more caring approach (Donley, 2019; Pringle & Alley, 1995). Nowadays, the funeral profession falls within the range of professions defined at the relational level as “helping professions”, in which the operator supports people in difficulty by providing emotional care (Bordone & Di Dio, 2003; Messina, 2004).

Following the studies that look at gender issues in professions traditionally dominated by one gender, this study contributes to the understanding of the ways in which women in Italian funeral services perform gender roles to support their professionalism. Death care is a particularly interesting field for the study of gender performativity as it is an under-researched, male-dominated professional field. Furthermore, this is the first study to be conducted at a national level and one of the few in Europe.

2 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to explore the experiences of women in the funeral directing to understand how they perform gender roles to support their professionalism in an occupational field where male culture dominates. This methodological approach was considered most appropriate as it allows the meanings people give to their experiences to be brought to light (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

2.1 | Participants and procedure

The study included a convenient sample of women working in the funeral directing services. The register of funeral agencies in the provincial capital and some neighboring municipalities was used to identify potential participants. Initial contact was made by telephone during which the project was explained, questions were answered, and the willingness to participate in the study was inquired about. Thirteen women, nine funeral directors, and four funeral services supplier company workers (see Table 1) agreed to take part in the study.

The sample is not very large, but is consistent with the gender distribution in this profession. The average age was 42.23 years (DS 14.76; range 25–74 years), the average length of service in the funeral industry was 12.69 years (DS 11.79; range 2–32 years), 61.5% of the participants were 1st generation, 23.1% 2nd generation, and 15.4% 3rd generation in the funeral business. Most of the respondents (77%) entered the funeral industry as a second career. With one exception, an employee, all funeral directors were business owners or business partners.

A total of 10 sessions, 9 interviews (range 58–153 min), and 1 focus group (94 min) were conducted. The interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace (at the funeral agencies premises) in the afternoon hours, which were indicated by them as the most suitable, as most of the operational work related to funeral ceremonies takes place in the morning. The focus group with the funeral service staff took place in the premises of the Department of Psychology where the researchers work at the end of the staff's shift (late afternoon). The sessions were conducted by two female researchers, alternating between one as interviewer and one as observer.

TABLE 1 Participants' description.

Name/code	Age	Role	Job tenure in funeral industry	Working generation	Former experience	Session
Rachele	28 yrs	Business owner (<i>funeral directing</i>)	2 yrs	2nd	2nd career	Interview
Astrid	51 yrs	Business owner (<i>funeral directing</i>)	32 yrs	2nd	1st career	Interview
Olga	74 yrs	Business owner (<i>funeral directing</i>)	23 yrs	1st	2nd career	Interview
Giada	58 yrs	Business owner (<i>funeral directing</i>)	25 yrs	1st	2nd career	Interview
Celeste	44 yrs	Business associate (<i>funeral directing</i>)	8 yrs	1st	2nd career	Interview
Nicole	30 yrs	Employee (<i>funeral directing</i>)	2 yrs	3rd	2nd career	Interview
Sofia	51 yrs	Business associate (<i>funeral directing</i>)	25 yrs	1st	2nd career	Interview
Iris	38 yrs	Business associate (<i>funeral directing</i>)	8 yrs	2nd	1st career	Interview
Monia	47 yrs	Business associate (<i>funeral directing</i>)	28 yrs	3rd	1st career	Interview
Stella	25 yrs	Employee (<i>funeral services</i>)	2 yrs	1st	2nd career	Focus group
Ginevra	49 yrs	Employee (<i>funeral services</i>)	4 yrs	1st	2nd career	Focus group
Greta	26 yrs	Employee (<i>funeral services</i>)	2 yrs	1st	2nd career	Focus group
Viola	28 yrs	Employee (<i>funeral services</i>)	4 yrs	1st	2nd career	Focus group

The study is in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. The participants were first informed about the general aims of the study in a telephone conversation. Once the date of the interview/focus group was set, the researchers explained in detail the objectives of the study, clarified any doubts and illustrated the processing of the data collected. All workers involved signed a privacy consent form.

The sessions were audio-recorded—after signing the privacy consent form—and later transcribed in full; the personal data were anonymized and the sessions were coded with alphanumeric abbreviations. In the following, the participants are presented with fictitious names and their occupation with acronyms (fd = funeral director; fde = funeral directing employee; fsw = funeral service worker).

Conducting this study was an important experience as it allowed, on the one hand, to give voice to so long neglected professionals and, on the other hand, to confront the researchers with their own experiences of gender stereotypes in the workplace culture (i.e., in the academic context). To address the issue of reflexivity (Berger, 2015), the researchers completed an ethnographic log after each session, which was organized into observational, linguistic, and emotional notes. Writing down these notes helped the researchers to become more self-aware and address any emotions that arose during the sessions, as well as potentially their own biases. Reflexive practices are indeed important for qualitative research as they allow for a higher degree of trustworthiness of the data and findings.

2.2 | Data collection

The interviews and the focus group were semi-structured. Initially, there were some open-ended questions to put the interviewees at ease and gather information about their career, such as “Can you tell us about your career and how (and when) you got into the funeral industry?”, and then more specific aspects of the business were explored with questions such as “Could you describe a typical working day for you?” and “How are the activities divided amongst the staff?”. Later, more specific questions were asked to understand the perception of the presence of women in the funeral industry, such as “What do you think about the gender balance in your professional sector?”, “What do you think this gender difference in the industry is due to?” and also “Do you think there are differences between men and women in this professional sector?” and, if so, “what are they?” At the end of each session, space was left for participants to add further information/opinions.

The approach used is “subtle realism” (Hammersley, 1992), which recognizes that the researchers may be influenced to some extent by their own cultural beliefs when reading the data collected. Nevertheless, this approach assumes that reality and phenomena can be knowable through a rigorous research approach.

The interviews and the focus group were conducted by women, as previously mentioned. This particularity of the setting, that is, the fact that women researchers interviewed women workers face to face, may have encouraged the participants to respond more openly to the questions. This facilitation may also have been enhanced by the fact that the researchers knew from their own experience how gender processes operate in the workplace culture (i.e., in the academic context).

2.3 | Data analysis

The model of analysis chosen was grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2006), a thematic analysis approach based on coding the emerging data as it is collected. Charmaz's approach assumes that the data and theories are constructed by the researchers as they interact with the field and the participants in the study. From the beginning, the researchers applied open codes to the fragments of the transcripts. Then, focus coding was used, that is, more selective and conceptual codes (Charmaz, 2006). This coding process made it possible to examine participants' experiences and feelings and the meaning they gave to them. To follow, tentative themes for the most significant

codes were outlined. Data collection continued until the researchers found no new information that contributed to the theoretical perspective. In the final step, after all interviews had been collected, transcribed and coded, accuracy and consistency were checked again.

3 | FINDINGS

Four themes emerged from the analysis, which are explained in more detail below. The first theme collects the participants' narratives of the difficulties and challenges they had to overcome in order to demonstrate their professionalism in a field where men have long been considered more appropriate. The second theme relates to the ways in which women define their professionalism, drawing on their better skills in performing care work. The third theme looks at the extent to which strength—a topic that has long been debated in the field—can also be seen as an advantage for them. The fourth theme looks at the way in which they perform their role, also creating a “professional” look.

Theme 1 *Performing the Professional Role*

Funeral work is described as a traditionally “male field”: although there is a growing presence of women, especially at the clerical level, there are still few female business owners. The assignment of tasks related to the activity of funeral directing services is due to characteristics considered “innate” or “typical” for one gender and not for the other: women have always been entrusted with secretarial tasks, while men have instead taken on commercial work. Under these circumstances, it was difficult for women to find room for their actual skills in this field. Astrid, a funeral director, tried for a while to play the role that her father, a business owner, had “chosen” for her, until she managed to take on tasks that were more “her thing”.

[...] I was the female daughter and had to do the accounting and the son had to do the commercial work instead [...] but I'm not made to stay in the office, i.e. I'm not messy, I used to do accountancy but that was something I didn't like. Instead, I'd rather go to the families, even if they are in tears, even if there are sad moments, but I feel more alive! [she laughs] [...] I'd rather go to get a funeral. I know it's crazy because then you see the funeral, you see the dead people... But I'd rather do that [she smiles] than sit behind a desk, it really is a disposition to, how you're made. There are people who just sit there for eight hours and record stuff, they're the happiest people in the world, not me (Astrid – fd).

Nevertheless, her socialization with her new tasks was not easy, as she goes on to explain:

[...] I started going to get funerals, obviously we were a couple of women, then I was 23-24-25, now I don't know how old I was, because I started doing it when I was 19... so, I had problems because at the beginning they opened the door, they saw you and once a gentleman said to me «...but are you alone?» as if to say... [I replied] «...yes»; another one thought I was an estate agent and showed me the whole house and I said «look, I came for the funeral» – «ah, for the funeral...», they were all expecting a man and instead this little girl came... another time someone said to me «you know» – in regional dialect – «when they sent you, I said ooh, Virgin Mary, who sent [name of funeral agency] here!» [...] So the effect was that they said, «who sent me the little girl here...», you know? Then I know the work, the problems too, so [...] even when I was young, I knew how to do my job, but the effect was that they always expected a man – and maybe at a certain age – not the little girl who came there... (Astrid – fd).

Pringle and Alley (1995) have also shown that it is more difficult for women, for example, to set up their own business in the industry or even to find employment, and that women sometimes have to offer higher standards of service than men in order to be accepted.

For women, as we have seen, it is a challenge to prove their skills in a professional field that is recognized by the same society as that of men. This condition becomes even more pressing and anxiety-provoking when we consider the field in which they work, that is, a field in which it is not possible to make a mistake. The funeral service must indeed be impeccable, because it is “unique” and unrepeatable: any mistake (however small, e.g., arranging flowers other than those agreed) would ruin the memory of the bereaved. Being a woman in this environment attracts the public gaze, which makes the need to play their professionalism in an “impeccable” way even more compelling. Viola, a funeral service worker, explains this clearly:

The service itself [made me anxious] to make things perfect because we are women, we are looked at even more, they look at you from head to toe, they look at all the movements we make (Viola – fsw).

Despite the objective difficulty of their work, the women interviewed reported several episodes in which they proved to be more than up to their task, from managing funerals of important people where the media were also present, to dealing with unforeseen last-minute difficulties that could have jeopardized the success of the funeral. This becomes even more important when we consider that there is no specialized training for this job: there is only training on the job. Although some participants could count on the support of their families (in the case of family businesses), for other women, on the job training was a more difficult process in a context where they did not have the opportunity to develop their professional skills, as some funeral service workers indicated:

...the work of any funeral service provider, things that were very hidden from us, in inverted commas, because there were some who... seemed to be jealous of their work, they didn't want to teach us anything... it's not the first funeral service provider we've worked for... even to see how to prepare a coffin, just to know, no, «when you are done with the funeral service, go home», not once did they teach us anything new (Stella – fsw).

This issue also emerged in Donley's (2019) study, which found that socialization into the profession is easier for men than for women, who must instead rely on willing mentors to acquire skills on the spot.

Always being available was reported as an intrinsic characteristic of this professional activity (Thompson, 1991). This implies an important effort to maintain a balance between work and personal life. In the funeral directing, especially for business owners/partners, part-time work is still difficult to realize, as in other countries (Pringle & Alley, 1995). In this context, Astrid recounted how she worked until the day before the birth of her son and went back to work shortly afterward because she had to take care of important funeral services. When funeral service workers describe their typical working day, they report that they get up around 4:00 a.m. and get home around 6:30–7:00 p.m., emphasizing that it is very difficult to have time for their private and social life.

Theme 2 Touch

As we have seen, women have long played a fundamental role in the care associated with death throughout history. Not only in caring for the body of the deceased, but also in caring for the bereaved. Several aspects can be attributed to this ability, such as the capacity for compassion, sensitivity and the ability to recognize—if not anticipate—the needs of the suffering person. Women are thought to be more capable of emotional labor than men (Donley & Baird, 2017) and this predisposition makes them better suited to front room work (dealing with families, organizing the ceremony, etc.) (Cathles et al., 2010). Men are described as colder and, if sensitive, always less than women anyway. This perception is quite common in research on professions relating to caring, such as funeral

directing (Carden, 2001; Donley & Baird, 2017; Pringle & Alley, 1995), but not only (Ainsworth & Flanagan, 2020; Johansson et al., 2019). The interviews have shown that women working in funeral directing services are more proficient in these skills than men.

We have the idea that when the female sex does it, even when the family is in a moment of suffering, the approach to the family is different because we, the women, have a different kind of touch than a man who maybe... he may have the same kind of touch as a woman, but he turns out to be a bit colder, a bit quicker when it comes to giving guidance to the family, because the family definitely needs to do certain things as well. So the female approach, in our opinion, softens the family's sense of pain a bit (Nicole - fde).

Qualities such as kindness, sweetness and, more generally, "touch" are highly valued by users, who recognize a greater capacity of being in contact in women who take care of their funeral services. In fact, women tend to pay more attention to details and small gestures. An example of this is the description of the way in which the funeral service staff carry out the lifting of the coffin:

one thing we like to do is to carry [the coffin] on shoulder, that makes us happy with the service we do, because it seems that you want to bring respect or give that something more with the care with which we lift it [the coffin], with which we lean it on the shoulder, with which we lower it, very slowly, all done very, very slowly, very perfectly, the family notices this kind of thing. Often the men - not all of them - do it like a kind of unloading a barrel, they take it [the coffin] and «yeah, come on...» (Stella - fsw).

However, sometimes their empathetic and compassionate way of performing their job can be a double-edged sword. Workers reported that they can be touched by particularly deep emotional moments at work and that they see this as unprofessional behavior. This perception is interesting, as it does not match the views of the bereaved. Helping a mother choose a coffin—as a mother—can be a very difficult task to carry out in a detached way, and a compassionate attitude can actually be helpful for the bereaved as she can feel "seen" and understood in her deep suffering. This seems to be something of a contradiction related to the male rooted belief that professionalism is necessarily associated with a detached attitude.

Theme 3 Strength

Physical strength is a topic that has long been discussed in the field of funeral work. In fact, physical strength is considered a "typical" characteristic of men, which is why, according to this view, the tasks that require it should be carried out by men. During the interviews, different points of view emerged on this topic, particularly in relation to the lifting of coffins. For some participants, women are not suitable to lift the coffins because of their considerable weight, which is sometimes increased by the zinc inside. In addition, the structural conditions of some houses would make moving the coffin even more difficult: in some houses, the entrance is on the balcony, a circumstance that does not allow the help of trolleys. In the case of particularly heavy bodies that require a particularly large coffin, it can also be difficult for men to transport the coffin, so that a team change is necessary halfway up the stairs. According to this perspective, women are seen as more "delicate" in a sector that still requires heavy "manual" tasks. Compared to the fact that there are women who actually perform these tasks that require physical strength, these participants define them as "sturdy" and "masculine".

Emphasizing women's delicacy is one of the ways in which funeral directors reaffirm traditional expectations about the limits of women's physical strength. In this vein, they also argue that a woman's appearance must be "delicate" and feminine, and not masculine, as they believe is the case with pallbearers. Men are therefore

considered necessary for the profession because they are physically stronger and more suitable in the practice of mortuary science and embalming (Donley & Baird, 2017).

Other participants, especially funeral service workers who do physical labour every day, see things differently. They proudly declared that they could lift such weights like men and emphasised that the coffins, which were too heavy, could not be lifted by men either:

We have reached the «plus four», with a maximum of two hundred and fifty kilos, no more, the normal for us, i.e. a normal body, exceeds one hundred and fifty! (Stella – fsw).

Yes, an exaggerated plus size is not done by men either! (Stella – fsw).

These women have fought hard to earn a place as pallbearers in this exclusively male sector, proving that they are just as capable as men. Above all, they have failed to fulfill the expectations of women who cannot lift heavy loads and have put themselves on the same level as their male colleagues.

Theme 4 *Appearance*

Our interviewees explained that it is obligatory to make a “good impression” in the funeral field, which requires a sober (and elegant) appearance, that is, a “professional look”. Other studies have shown, for example, that women in funeral services chose a lighter and different image than their male colleagues: they dressed in white to emphasize the “purity of women” and their “fitness to manage the corpse without the risk of pollution” (Pringle & Alley, 1995, p. 117). According to our participants, instead, a particular appearance seems to be necessary for the performance of funeral work. Rachele, a funeral director, states:

I have my uniform: I have my black trousers, low heels, a shirt or a blouse, for us women it's a bit different, then I have my jacket... [...] always black, pearl necklace and I do an updo to pull my hair back, elegant; the make-up of course, like today, there is no such thing [she laughs], I never wear make-up, maybe something slightly pink, but not even that, I'm very simple [...] (Rachele – fd).

The choice of “suitable” clothing to carry out this work is dictated by being in line with the clothing of male colleagues, that is, a dark blue outfit or gray jacket and trousers. By adapting to this sober look, the women also give up performing gender through emphasizing their femininity. Indeed, it seems that female colleagues who tend to deviate from a sober style are viewed negatively:

[...] But when you go to the cemetery, there are some of my colleagues that I sometimes look at and say, «What courage! Blessed you with that courage!» with the summer dress with the thin shoulder straps and the sandals, I don't go to the funeral like that, because, in my opinion, you have to dress a certain way at ceremonies [...] I honestly do not show up with a summer dress and I do not present myself with an updo [...] (Astrid – fd).

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is one of the few in Europe—and the first in Italy—to investigate the female presence in the funeral directing services, a professional field long considered masculine, and brings new insights into this specific and under-researched area. Furthermore, the qualitative approach used allowed for a deeper analysis of the

participants' experiences and therefore a better understanding of these experiences through the meanings of the participants themselves.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on how women navigate work environments where there is a numerical dominance of men and a strong culture of masculinity (see Hatmaker, 2013; Johansson et al., 2019; Khilji & Pumroy, 2019; Pruitt, 2018). Our findings could be helpful in providing new insights into how women perform gender roles in similar professional contexts, that is, with strongly gendered masculine culture, such as aviation, IT, police officers, prison officers, academics, medical professions, the construction sector, agriculture, and forestry (see Aboagye-Nimo et al., 2019; Ainsworth & Flanagan, 2020; Britton, 1999; Davey & Davidson, 2000; Dodge et al., 2011; Fielden et al., 2000; Filandri & Pasqua, 2021; Fremstad & Paul, 2020; Irvine & Vermilya, 2010; Johansson et al., 2019; Michie & Nelson, 2006; Naoum et al., 2020).

Our research has produced some interesting findings. It turned out that women are entering a professional terrain that is paved with gendered barriers created by a male-dominated culture. In order to create a space for their own professionalism in the funeral-directing sector, they had to deal with many challenging situations. Through the lens of gender performativity, we saw how women "do gender" in different ways to overcome these barriers and become "good funeral directors", redefining and negotiating gender in everyday practice (Poggio, 2006).

Firstly, we have seen that women can perform the tasks of funeral directing just as well as men, as already stated in the study by Pruitt (2018). By moving away from established roles such as clerical or secretarial duties, women pushed themselves into roles more suited to their skills, showing that they were also able to manage the contact with bereaved families and sale of funeral services and became business owners. These findings are also consistent with previous research where the distribution of tasks depended on different strategies (Davidsson Bremborg, 2006). In particular, moving away from fixed roles dictated by gender norms is one of the ways in which gender can be performed differently (Linstead & Pullen, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

They have also shown that they are able to cope with the major challenges of their job, such as the long working hours (Thompson, 1991) and the difficult work–life balance; part-time work is still difficult to realize, as in other countries (Pringle & Alley, 1995). The interviewees also pointed to the watchful—and judgmental—eyes of society that are always on them. They pointed out that tokenism (Zimmer, 1988)—that is, women's experience occupational and behavioral responses to those experiences in terms of their numerical proportion—puts more pressure on them to fulfill their tasks and how feel they have more to prove because "they are women" (Donley, 2019; Shisler & Sbicca, 2019).

In addition, we have observed how they also perform gender roles in order to be better professionals than men. By relying on the skills of compassion and sensitivity, they define themselves as better suited to take care of the relationship with the bereaved. This gender performance fits with the new direction that the funeral profession has taken, namely to become more similar to the "helping professions", that is where the worker supports people in difficulty by providing emotional care (Bordone & Di Dio, 2003; Messina, 2004). It has also been shown in other international studies that the presence of women can help to emphasize the caring component of funeral work and enable clients to choose female staff to provide the service (Carden, 2001; Donley and Baird, 2017; Pringle & Alley, 1995). This focus on sensitivity as a professional resource for women has also been emphasized in other male-dominated professions (Ainsworth & Flanagan, 2020; Johansson et al., 2019).

The issue of physical strength remains a topic for debate. While tasks that require physical exertion are considered by some women to be "manly tasks" that women should not perform, other women go beyond this gendered stereotypical view and have proven that they can work just as well as men in this field. When lifting coffins, for example, they show how they can overcome the barriers erected by men to support that being a pallbearer is a man's job. In doing so, they even run the risk of being seen as "less feminine" by the other women. This issue has also been observed in an international context (Pringle & Alley, 1995). Viewing physical strength as a persistent gender difference is a theme that is consistent with previous studies (Donley & Baird, 2017). It is worth noting that funeral directors nowadays in Italy—but not only there (Donley & Baird, 2017; Pringle & Alley, 1995)—are increasingly

tending to use trolleys on which the coffin can be wheeled, so the issue of physical strength required to carry the coffin may be correspondingly weakening.

Finally, we have seen that their appearance during service is an important aspect of their professionalism. As the eyes of society are always on them, women also fulfill their role in an aesthetically pleasing way with a simple and elegant outfit. This issue of performance in relation to professional appearance was also highlighted in another study, which emphasized that women in funeral directing adopt instead an ultra-feminine image in order to also redefine the image of the funeral industry and reduce the stigma associated with death work (Pringle & Alley, 1995).

Italy is a country where male culture is pervasive in many work environments, but the growing presence of women could pave the way for the reshaping of funeral work. Funeral directing services are a good field to explore these issues, precisely because of the growing number of women and because of the specificities of the profession, which involves heavy physical and “dirty” tasks. This slow feminization could bring further (and new) gender dynamics to light as the confrontation between men and women increases.

The aim of this research project was to investigate in depth the progressive entry of women into the Italian funeral-directing context, and to explore how these women perform gender roles to find their place in a working culture that is still heavily dominated by men.

Drawing on from gender performativity as a theoretical framework that considers gender not as an innate characteristic but as a social construction that is done by subjects (West & Zimmerman, 1987), we then examined the death care and explained what features characterize the Italian funeral context. To better understand how the role of women in the context of working with death has changed over time, a historical excursus was also undertaken. Women, who were the main actors in the care of the corpse and the bereaved, were sidelined and labeled as unsuitable for the dirty and hard work of dealing with death.

In a qualitative study, we collected the experiences of women employed in the Italian funerary sector through semi-structured interviews and identified four main themes from the analysis. The first relates to the challenges women have had to face in order to fulfill a professional role in a male-dominated field of work. The second explains how women rely on their ability to perform care work in order to be recognized as better professionals. The third theme looks at how women view the issue of physical strength in funeral work. The final theme looks at how performativity is also linked to professional appearance, another important component of the work.

This work brings new insights into this specific and under-researched area and provides new insights into how women use gender performativity to acquire professionalism in death care.

Future research could focus on capturing the lived experiences of these professionals to better understand the underlying, or hidden, dynamics they deal with on a daily basis. Moreover, researchers could immerse themselves in ethnographic experiences that allow them to see “with their own eyes” the challenges that these professionals deal with on a daily basis.

Following on from this field of research on gender-segregated professions, it would be worthwhile for researchers to also focus on other male-dominated death care occupations such as gravediggers, stonemasons, or morticians to broaden this field of enquiry.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data from study one and study two are available on request. The data are not publicly available due to the Italian legislation on privacy.

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