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Nothing changed, but nothing was the same again: On the 80th anniversary of Italian women's suffrage

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a historical and critical analysis of Italian women's achievement of suffrage. It argues that the War of Resistance, with voluntary enlistment and several thousand women participating, was instrumental in the provisional government's practically uncontroversial decision to institute women's suffrage in 1945. However, so much ease did not determine as much ease in favouring and even accepting the effects of that revolutionary right, as can be seen from the challenging achievements of Italian women in civil, social, and political rights.

RIASSUNTO

L'articolo offre un'analisi del raggiungimento del suffragio da parte delle donne italiane. Sostiene che la guerra di Resistenza, con l'arruolamento volontario e la partecipazione diretta e indiretta di migliaia di donne, fu determinante nella decisione praticamente incontestata del governo provvisorio di istituire il suffragio femminile nel 1945. Tuttavia, tanta facilità non determinò altrettanta facilità nel favorire e persino accettare gli effetti di quel diritto rivoluzionario, come si può vedere dalle difficili conquiste delle donne italiane in materia di diritti civili, sociali e politici.

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PAROLE CHIAVE suffragio femminile; disuguaglianza di genere; diritto politico come 'merito sociale'; servire la nazione; la guerra partigiana; Assemblea costituente; Unione Europea

The right to vote 'is the right that makes possible that each person is treated as a person, not a non-human or a thing.' (Anna Maria Mozzoni 1881)

Foreigner compatriots

The exclusion of women from the demos is one of the scandals of human history and Western history in particular, all the more so because it was consciously theorized and furthered in the age of rights and when consent became the fountain of political legitimacy. For a long time, citizenship seemed adaptable only to men because, as a French anti-

suffragist wrote in 1793, 'a man is a male-only occasionally, but a woman is a female in all moments of her life' (Scott 1989, 20). This 'scandal' is rooted in the nation state and the construction of citizenship as an abstract, universal identity as all concrete individuals could personate it, regardless of social specificity. Women were 'citizens' as 'subjects' of their legal nation and yet were like foreigners. They were even at a lower level of non-nationals because they were deemed part of the nation in all respects. No other reason justified their political subjection except their sex; hence, they were declared natural foreigners or foreigners in a way that no law would have the power to reverse. 'All states regard their citizens as bound to them by obligations of loyalty and service', wrote Rogers Brubaker, 'even when they do not routinely demand service or invoke loyalty' (1992, 32). Women were requested to serve and be loyal to their nation out of their 'natural' disposition, asking for nothing in return. Their duty to obey only without also ruling, to paraphrase Aristotle, was deemed a mark of their very existence. Political rights were alien to them.

The despotic domination of women has been global and has an international history, although its length, degree, and duration varied nationally. The history of Italian women's political exclusion is among the longest in Europe, and its resiliency had deep roots in a popular culture that had mixed aspects of classical and religious tradition. Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, was one of the most beloved republican myths, unifying the secular and Catholic belief that women's essential vocation of motherhood was their true glory, their way of contributing to the common good.

To understand the Italian case in both women's exclusion and women's struggle for emancipation would require a much more scrupulous analysis and historical reconstruction of the movements, the political ideas, and the social and economic conditions of women and men, in addition to their cultural and religious beliefs.¹ Starting from the law recognizing women's suffrage in 1945 involves a fatal simplification as it isolates an event to extoll its importance. However, in this case, separating the emancipation decision and giving it primacy is a legitimate move because suffrage is a claim unlike any other, not an issue that can receive different evaluations depending on how we reconstruct its history. We can emphasize some factors and neglect others, but the total of our reconstruction would not change the fact that suffrage is just and sacrosanct in and of itself, and its absence is unjust; it is a scandal. The right to vote is thus not an isolated event. It is paradigmatic of a political history that has it as its goal and starting point. Suffrage is the mother of all forms of emancipation; as far as Italy is concerned, it is the most radical perspective to read its political and cultural history.

With a snap of the fingers

The 'decreto luogotenenziale' n. 23 of February 1, 1945 ('Estensione alle donne del diritto di voto') 'extended' to Italian women the right to vote that Italian men already enjoyed (at least they had enjoyed before the advent of fascism). The way such a revolutionary decision was made was striking: Italian women became full citizens in a surreal climate of serenity, expedited process, and a unanimous vote without discussion. A letter from Palmiro Togliatti to Alcide De Gasperi on January 20 to solicit the decision by the Government and a phone call by De Gasperi to Prime Minister Ivanoe Bonomi to invite him to proceed quickly on this issue were enough moves to include the decree on women's suffrage in the agenda of the government's meeting scheduled for January 31. The decree on women's suffrage was the last of several items the government had planned to discuss that day and passed without objection: it stated the right to vote (with no direct reference to eligibility) to all twenty-one-year-old Italian women, except registered prostitutes (Spinoso 2005).² The exclusion of prostitutes was to be overcome ten years later, along with the abolition of brothels and of the police registration of prostitutes (Legge Merlini n. 75 of February 20, 1958). Women's right to vote, with the explicit specification that they could be candidates for elections at 25, was the object of another 'decreto' n. 74 of March 10, 1946, which completed the previous one and had women complete political emancipation.

The immediate effects of that breaking-through decision were essentially three: in 1945, 14 women were appointed members of the Consulta (the non-elected Parliament composed of representatives of Comitato Nazionale di Liberazione (C.N.L.) parties with the task of regulating the transition toward the election of a Constituent Assembly); in the administrative elections held in spring 1946, three women were elected in the municipal council of two cities (Forlì and Padua); and, finally, in the institutional referendum of June 2, 1946, which sanctioned the birth of the Republic, 226 women were included as candidates in the party lists and twenty-one of them were elected members of the Constituent Assembly (over 556 male deputies), which replaced the Consulta and wrote and approved the Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana. The Italian Republic had its Founding Mothers: nine communists, nine democratic Christians, two socialists, and one from the movement Uomo Qualunque. They played a seminal role in drafting some key articles of the Constitution (on family, maternity, labour rights, and equal opportunity). They directly influenced the drafting of Articles 2 and 3, the core articles of the Italian Constitution.

The history of democratic Italy started and developed with women as citizens. Formally, Italian democracy was born democratic and through democratic means (election of the Constituent Assembly with universal

suffrage). Almost a century of humiliating denials, ignored petitions, motions rejected by courts, and disparaging comments on women's immodest desire for power, on the futility of their suffrage (as fathers and husbands would represent them egregiously), and, in fact, its danger (they would duplicate the vote of their masters because of their incapacity to form an autonomous will)³ – all of that seemed vanished with a snap of the fingers. Of course, the reality was more complicated, and as the very (women) protagonists would soon observe, 'nothing changed', in fact. The opinions concerning their supposed natural place in the family did not vanish in 1945/46 – we could hear in 2016 those old refrains when a pregnant woman competed in Rome's Mayoral elections or in 2014 when Federica Mogherini was appointed High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs of the European Union. Could a pregnant woman and then a mother take care of the public good of her city; could a woman lead a European strategic office?⁴ However, it is a fact that in 1945, these embedded prejudices did not have enough force to block political inclusion. Something had happened that made discriminatory opinions, if not vanish away, undoubtedly unable to determine that political decision. In 1945, the conviction was unanimous among men that women had 'deserved' suffrage as never before and that their contribution to the War of Liberation from Nazi fascism could not simply be ignored.

Before 1945

Serving in a war was crucial in decreeing women's emancipation in 1945. But why so? After all, that was not the first time women had contributed to a war. What made that 'service' different from the previous ones?

In 1912, in the aftermath of the conquest of Libya, on the occasion of the extension of suffrage to a large portion of Italian male subjects, women also claimed they deserved political recognition since many of them had volunteered in the Red Cross and left for Africa to assist and cure their colonizer compatriots. However, their request was ignored (Prime Minister, the liberal Giovanni Giolitti declared that 'concession of suffrage was premature'), and they got only some promises that sooner or later they would be allowed to vote in administrative elections, as Giolitti suggested.

In 1918, when all adult men achieved the right to vote, women claimed once again to deserve political inclusion because of their role as auxiliaries to Italian soldiers in the Great War: they had replaced men in factories and agriculture, fought against hunger and misery at home, volunteered in the Red Cross and taken fully care of their families. This was not only an Italian story. Women's sacrifice had been in all countries, as also President Woodrow Wilson recognized on September 30, 1918, in a 15-minute address to the U.S. Senate: 'We have made partners of the women in this war', he said, 'Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil, and not to

a partnership of privilege and right?' In Italy, their 'merit' was not even considered meritorious enough. Italian women came very close to emancipation with the 1919 'Legge Sacchi', which extended to 'all citizens' the same political rights; however, anticipated elections blocked the Senate's decision.⁵

The acceleration of suffragism within the Italian Parliament between 1912 and 1919 was made possible thanks to an important movement of opinion that had started in the 1880s to denounce some existing laws, for instance, the law stating the 'protection of women' in the workplace place, which Italian feminists saw as a strategy for either excluding them from labour or subjecting them to an additional regime of patriarchal control within the factory by the boss and the male workers. Meanwhile, the struggle for suffrage took vigor throughout Europe. The Alliance for Women Suffrage, born in Berlin in 1904, had an Italian branch (Consiglio delle Donne Italiane) chaired by Anna Maria Mozzoni, whose meeting in Rome sanctioned the official beginning of the political campaign for suffrage (Cova 2022). The Consiglio supported the first law proposal on suffrage to be debated in the Parliament (named out of Roberto Mirabelli, from the radical left, who advanced it). The proposal was aborted but succeeded in shaking political parties and revealing their inner ambiguity, which clashed against the decline of their radical hostility to some form of women's inclusion, as with the 1911 law conceding women's elections in school councils. Although not yet determinant, women's contribution to the colonization war in Libya and the World War One war was essential to change parties' opinions.

As said, the liberal party led by Giolitti became supportive of women's rights in administrative elections (until then, the party was not unanimous on this issue, and only a few liberals were publicly in favour of women's inclusion).⁶ As to the Socialist Party, it was until 1912 critical and sceptical – its national leaders did not trust Italian women's political 'maturity' because of their loyalty to the Church, which was then profoundly opposed to the secular state and the socialist ideology; thus, on the occasion of the above mentioned Mirabelli's proposal, the socialists were of no help as the public dispute opposing Anna Kulisciov to her companion Filippo Turati showed (Rossi Doria 1986, 1996).⁷

As for the parties recently born, the Popular, the Communist, and the Fascist seemed all well-disposed toward women's suffrage. However, their position was shaky, essentially ambiguous and opportunistic. The Popular Party led by Luigi Sturzo shared on this issue the position of the Church, which since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) had denounced the exploitation of women and children per effect of the new industrial regime. The Church involved women in a rich panoply of solidarity and charity initiatives, which inspired the birth of the Unione Donne Cattoliche, which was more attentive to social issues than citizenship and political inclusion. The Unione petitioned, for instance, in favour of protective legislation to mitigate the

'necessary evil' of women's extra-family labour by prioritizing homeworking (which would soon reveal its nefarious nature as a new form of servitude). At any rate, although Sturzo sided with women's suffrage, he and his party were more interested in social assistance than voting power.

As for the Communist Party, its deputies, led by Antonio Gramsci, voted in favour of the extension of suffrage in 1919. However, they deemed the right to vote a bourgeois right and the struggle for suffrage a second best compared to the socialist revolution. In a seminal article published in 1977, historian Franca Pieroni Bortolotti analysed the missing feminism in Gramsci's thought, still 'too little cosmopolitan' to understand fully the global struggles for emancipation and women's in particular. For sure, in his acute analysis of Americanism in his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci did not recognize the 'subversive' element of U.S. feminism, nor had he grasped the 'subversive' potential of Italian women's pacifism in 1917, a movement that did not give birth to a Peace Corp like in Great Britain although contributed in expanding the political influence of socialist ideas in Italian public opinion (Bortolotti 1987).

As to the Fascist Party, its opportunism made it oppose the 1919 law proposal on suffrage in order not to align with the parties of the establishment and to relaunch the suffrage issue soon under its banners. Among the women who sided with the Fascist Party, a divide emerged that mimicked the dual position held on this issue by Benito Mussolini: some were for suffrage, but some were in favour of a national sanctification of their domestic role. The feminization of social functions became fascism's goal: creating role models like school teachers and nurses – jobs that mimicked family caregiving and served to reinforce women's exclusive domestic role. In all that, suffrage was irrelevant (and very soon a burden to get rid of). 'We should credit Italian women for not being obsessed with casting a ballot every four years', commented Mussolini in 1925 (Odorisio and Turi 1986, 140). The divide within the Fascist party was to be resolved in 1925: on November 25, a law was passed that recognized women's right to vote in local elections; one month later, another law was approved that abolished elected administrative organs and instituted the *podestà*, a local kind of plenipotentiary ruler nominated by the Central Government. The exclusion of women from political life became the fascist model that established the exclusion of all Italian citizens from participation in the free vote.

The inauguration of the Fascist regime coincided with a campaign in favour of fertility and a sharp gender division of social roles. However, in its attempt to create a totalized society under the dictate of the ethical state, the Fascist regime contributed to de-naturalizing the entire universe of women's functions. Family and maternity were declared vocations to the nation that the state had to protect; women's 'natural' functions were ideologized so that, while reclaiming a one-dimensional conception of women (made of

both sensual and reproductive potentials), the regime politicized their family and reproductive function (Odorisio and Turi 1986, 143–147). Moreover, the regime entrenched in the law of the state what already existed in Italy's social imaginary: the idea of a trade-off between protection by the state and service to the nation. Complete dedication to children and husbands and fate to domestic life (not by choice but by nature) were the price women had to pay to receive welfare assistance from the state for being Italian (De Grazia 1993).

Deserving rights

Italy's unification did not gain Italian women's liberty. For some of them, the year 1861 marked a regress in terms of rights. In Lombardy, Veneto, and Tuscany, some women had started enjoying the right to vote in administrative elections in the late 1840s, along with the right to administer their property.⁸ By the end of the eighteenth century, Lombardy was leading the politics of modernization in the peninsula, at least regarding the literacy of women from the higher classes. In a letter to his daughter Teresa in 1777, the philosopher Pietro Verri stimulated her to cultivate 'the habit of reading' as a duty and an interest (Verri 1973, 181–182).

With the extension of the Statuto Albertino (the Constitution of the Savoy Kingdom) to the entire peninsula, all Italian subjects were equalized to the status of Savoy subjects (in Piedmont, Liguria, and Sardinia), which meant that adult women and men in several cases, lost the rights they enjoyed in their regions of residence. The new kingdom of Italy needed to block any nostalgia for old local attachments and autonomy, which led its political leaders to portray women's rights as claims to old privileges. Thus, the rhetoric of motherhood and family care gained new momentum and became the backbone of the ethos of the 'new' Italy, a move supported, of course, by the Church, which regarded the 'politicization of women' and right-based individualism as demonic innovations, as noted in Modernity's 'Syllabus of Errors' (1864) (Soldani 2007, 63–68).

Few data may give us a sense of women's public status: in 1871, over a population of 25 million Italians, only 530,000 were electors. Although the new political vocabulary used the word 'citizen', this word was applied to a country of 'subjects', as only 1.98 per cent enjoyed voting rights. Women made up 98 per cent of the 'subjects'. However, the unification became the starting point of their struggle for political autonomy. To begin with, the rule of law induced public officers and judges to guard against their cultural prejudices when making decisions, and women learned to make use of loopholes and legal devices, to practice 'negative liberty' and interpret the silence of the law as an open door to free choice.⁹ Finally, the parliamentary system familiarized men and women with the practice of petitions and the

role of social movements, clubs, and the press to challenge and shape public opinion. Women became political actors well before they achieved suffrage.

Just after the unification, a group of women from Lombardy sent a petition to the low Chamber to vindicate the right to vote they had enjoyed in their region before the unification. They asked for the right to vote for all adult Italians, women and men. Their petition interpreted correctly the meaning of suffrage, its independence from social merit, which was the leading argument of the first generation of Italian suffragists, a tiny radical elite represented by Anna Maria Mozzoni, a democrat who translated J.S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) into Italian in 1870 and sent important petitions to Parliament in 1877 and 1906.

Mozzoni interpreted suffrage as a right to self-government, an individual political right equal to men and women. Similar to Mozzoni's was the background of the first suffragist man, Salvatore Morelli, a republican deputy from Naples who drafted in 1867 the first proposal on women suffrage (in a moving letter to J.S. Mill, Morelli wrote that while Mill succeeded in having his proposal voted on – receiving 76 votes – his petition did not even reach the floor for discussion) (Urbinati 1990, 229–230; Conti Odorisio 1990). Mozzoni and the small group of women who animated the otherwise submissive civic culture in post-unified Italy could kindle public opinion in the last decades of the nineteenth century through civil associations, workshops, leagues, and street demonstrations. The birth of the Socialist Party in 1892 helped make the 'women question' a national question, no longer the radical claim of some extravagant women. A sign of some success was the new electoral law of 1888, which, although it denied women suffrage, in associating men's voting right to literacy, offered school teachers (most of them women) the chance to play an important public role in advancing citizenship (even if only for men) (Soldani 2007, 70–71).

However, the radical argument associating suffrage with individual rights did not gain significant support in pre-democratic Italy, not even among women. This argument gave way to the more successful idea of social merit, which became a strategy the second generation of feminists used, who dropped the individualistic and egalitarian approach of Mozzoni and linked women's political inclusion to their contribution to life and the values of the Nation. This nationalist position would attract a large portion of the population, secular and, above all, religious (the Catholics were meanwhile entering public life and gradually overcoming the *non-expedit* ordered by the Pope in 1868). Teresa Labriola was among the leading scholars of that non-egalitarian generation of nationalist women. She sketched an early version of the idea of gender diversity when she claimed suffrage was the reward for women's service to the nation as mothers and wives. Inclusion in the demos would ennoble their gender's social specificity and feminize the nation (Tesoro 1995). Labriola's arguments were meant not to de-sexuate women

in an attempt to emancipate them from cultural biases; they did not mean to question women's public roles. They meant to make women's domestic and caregiver vocation a social function fully recognized through suffrage perhaps (although not necessarily) and free from naturalism.

Italian women (along with the French, almost the last in Europe to become full citizens) seemed incapable of escaping the role that religion and tradition ascribed to them as ancillaries to men, even when exceptional circumstances, like a war, had called upon them to play public roles. The argument of 'social merit' faulted them. Indeed, women's commitment to solidarity and care in times of war would not make them 'deserve' equal political power and dignity since those functions were an extension of the caring nature that identified them. Hence, since the nation was conceived like an enlarged family, women were doomed to play the subaltern functions they were already playing at home. The 'religion' worshiping the nation, republican or nationalist, was of no help to them.¹⁰

Within the ideology of the nation-state, compulsory military service (not simply voluntary enrollment in a republican militia) and industrial work were the two essential services to the nation that inclusion in the demos could reward. T.H. Marshall argued in 1950 that 'basic human equality' is 'associated with full membership to the community', which combines certain rights and certain obligations (Marshall 1950, 8). Yet it became soon clear that this idea, which could emancipate men, would not emancipate women because was embedded in a political and moral philosophy that situated men in the *polis* and women in the *oikos*, not out of their respective choice but of their natural disposition. Dissociating voting from service to the nation would be the best move thus, but it failed to conquer the opinion of most Italian women and men. Linking suffrage to some unique qualities, potentials, or social functions appeared to be a more gradual approach, better fitting to a patriarchal society. However, it did not deliver what it promised.

Dying for the nation in a state vacuum

Regardless of the ideological success of the link between nationhood and motherhood, deeply rooted in the republican and nationalist tradition of the nineteenth century, women would not simply deserve equal political recognition by claiming to be children of the same mother nation and discharging their obligations. As George W. Hegel explained in *The Philosophy of Rights*, in modern nation-states, dying for the nation was not an issue of free choice or personal decision. Instead, it descended from an unquestionable decision by the sovereign commanding its subjects to be ready to give their life when and if needed. To be enrolled in the army (to be called to arm) was the mark of political belonging in a conception of the state as a legal space inhabited by subjects endowed with qualities

and proficiencies needed for fighting in a war, not assisting the wounded, supporting the fighters or substituting for men in civilian labours and economic production. War, Sibilla Aleramo wrote during the First World War, is not a women's creature, and the 'beautiful death' (*la bella morte*) of the hero is not for them (Aleramo 1911).

Given this concept of the state and the duty to serve in the war, we can understand why Italian women were considered ready for citizenship in 1945 and why they obtained the right to vote so quickly and almost without debate. The concept of the right to vote (based on the desert and duties to the nation) had not changed, but women were recognized as deserving of maximum political rights, having shown that they could die in the field like men. The Second World War was the crowning achievement of an ideology that saw rights as goods to be earned. No CLN leader or party dared to oppose what has come to be known as the Togliatti-De Gasperi Decree. Why? The novelty was that women played a direct role as fighters and participants in the Resistance.

So, it is not the 'war' itself that we need to think about to explain the Italian government's quick decision on women's suffrage. Instead, it is the nature of the war in which women served. Women did not fight in a regular war and were not soldiers of the Italian state, which was dissolved when they became partisans. Women entered the most masculine sphere of life (war and combat) when the state (the same state that had permanently excluded them from citizenship) had practically ceased to exist. This was a happy coincidence and an extraordinary accident that made women citizens.

The War of Resistance was a unique kind of war. As a non-regular war, it lived on the voluntary contribution of those who decided to fight, and its success depended greatly on the number of partisans enrolled. Women chose to fight. Their decision reversed the logic of a regular war and compulsory army. The partisan brigades were part of a clandestine movement that led to the decision to start a war against both the fascist militants in the *Repubblica di Salò* and their German allies. It was a voluntary war that marked the birth of Italian democracy and women's citizenship. This coexistence signified a radical change in Italian political history and life, a change in the concept of participation, not only because it made possible the birth of Italy's new institutional order (on June 2, 1946, Italian citizens voted in a referendum to decide whether they wanted a monarchy or a republic), but also because it created the conditions for the redefinition of the demos and political equality.

The War of Resistance changed politics well beyond the intention of those who participated in it. It erased previous orders (Fascist and monarchical). It made a new political beginning possible, in which many had participated voluntarily, without asking for permission or being 'called upon' by the state to serve. On the other hand, women combatants in the *Resistenza* changed the character of the *Resistenza* because they made visible with their presence

the anti-egalitarian sentiments and behaviours of their male companions, which persisted nonetheless and would persist after the war.

Officially recognized women partisans were 35,000, of whom 512 played the high role of 'war commissary'; 2,750 of them were either executed or died in concentration camps, under torture, and on the field.¹¹ However, the numbers involved in guerrilla warfare are challenging to assess. Arrigo Boldrini, a leader of the Resistenza, suggested that the proportion between the irregular army and the supporting population could be as high as one to twelve and even fifteen (doubling the proportion in the case of a regular army). The number of people and women involved in the War of Liberation was thus higher than what the official figures reveal. Moreover, the war's meaning and symbolic impact were disproportionately deeper than the relatively small number of men and women it involved directly. As Miriam Mafai argued early on, the voluntary nature of the War of Liberation had an extraordinary psychological and moral impact on Italian women. Regardless of the official rhetoric according to which women fought for their families and children (a rhetoric that persisted throughout the Resistance and after it, and which was perhaps one of the reasons for women's choice to fight), in the young women's decision to enter the clandestine war, there was also a lively sense of individual liberty and liberation from patriarchal relations. There was the desire to 'imitate men' – fighting like men and living in the hide like and with men: it was, for many women (most of them very young), an opportunity to gain freedom from home, from family duties, and domestic hierarchies.

Not only solidarity and the ethic of care, as the Leftist parties' rhetoric liked to stress during and after the Second World War was over, to find some feminine quality in their women companions and, above all, to tame their thirst for liberty, but also the desire to emancipate themselves from a patriarchal society, to leave home, and to obey as men obeyed – to obey captains, not fathers and husbands. Aristotle teaches us that citizens' freedom shows itself in making decisions (laws) and obeying (as equal citizens). However, despite participating in the Resistenza as equals, women were rarely allowed to obey like their male companions. The several stories told by the participants and collected after the war show that almost all the domestic hierarchies reproduced in the brigades: 'Also in the Garibaldi brigades [the communist one] women served to do laundry, fix clothes, and at the most were commanded to be a taffeta.'¹² Moreover, most women were denied full recognition for their heroism, as when allowed to join the parades with the victorious partisans, they were not allowed to march along with them on the streets during Liberation Day. The partisans believed that by minimizing and even hiding their relationships with their female comrades-in-arms, they could protect the ethical dignity and moral authority of their role and of the Resistance war itself. No official role as soldiers would give them honour, only their behaviour. In Italy, traditions and customs had not changed, and

honour was not associated with promiscuity between the sexes on the battlefield or in hiding. As irregulars, the partisans had to win the respect of the civilian population, and they found it much easier to parade without appearing with women as comrades-in-arms. As to women fighters, these were not considered honourable and, in any case, were not role models for civilian women; they were often seen as prostitutes, and the sacrifice they made out of their free will earned them a low reputation and even the stigma of immorality. Thus, while 'many of them had participated in the Resistance, very few gained recognition' for their accomplishments.¹³

Nativity and concealment

But despite everything, the Resistance stamped a radical change in Italian society. Mafai wrote that liberation from fascism also meant women's liberation in their social relations, a condition that made them assertive: War of Resistance also meant that. Women's presence in factories, their participation in the early political strikes against the regime in the summer of 1943, and their enrolment in the War of Resistance in the following months overturned ancestral beliefs about their physical and political capacities. Those events allowed them to become direct protagonists of their emancipation, which did not need to be proved with many arguments or go through a trial of public justification. It was women's *free choice* to participate in the mobilization against fascism and the clandestine war that had the power to defeat the argument of merit (although it did not give women full moral dignity as moral persons, as we saw). Women made significant contributions to their country, not as auxiliaries but as equal.

Directness in self-determination marked an important change in a moral environment that had not changed much. Women's choices had unintended consequences: aside from dissociating rights from social merit, those choices marked the beginning of Italian democracy and immediately made the contradiction between the proclamation of rights and the nation's traditional mentality visible. The end of the war and the need for a quick return to normality revealed in reverse the revolutionary implication of women's direct participation in making Italian democracy, not only because of the new claims women advanced on parity in the workplace and social security provisions. Moreover, male and female relations in the private sphere started being questioned. Very telling was, in this sense, a controversy that occurred on these issues within the Socialist Party already in 1945 and that revealed the unthinkable potential of liberty. Umberto Calosso, a Fabian kind of socialist, libertarian, and anti-conformist, edited, among others, a column in the PSI weekly for women, *Lettera alla donna*, in which he mocked incessantly traditional customs, like the macho myth of the Italian men or the servile mentality of women who 'supinely accept to be tyrannized by their husbands and by

their children'. His satire provoked a reaction of disgust among the socialist women, who would later confess their fear of freedom: 'We were not prepared to understand him' (Mafai 1979, 166–167).

The premonition of the impact of individual rights on mores and subjective morality seemed to frighten men and women alike. It is impossible to ascribe planning intention to collective events. However, it is a historical fact that a politics of concealment inaugurated the return to normality in the form of a representation of the Resistance as a parenthesis, a heroic event that resembled a myth, a monument of the new civic religion of the Republic, was meant to depoliticize and strip off of the Resistance's emancipatory implications. We may thus say that if before 1943–1944, women's participation in a war was a desideratum, after that date, it was a reality to be minimized in scope through an interpretation that concealed what the War of Resistance had been brought to the surface.

The Cold War would aggravate that dissonance between rights proclamation and lifestyle because the Manichean ideology dividing the left and the democratic Christians also passed through a radical normalization of political culture. To the left, women acquired essentially the identity of workers (inside and outside families); to the Catholics, they reconfirmed their domesticity. The dual destiny of men and women was repropounded, but within a political condition that had, however, universal suffrage. It became a rhetorical weapon in a new war that, if successful, would narrow (as it did in actuality) the potentials contained in the Constitution and procrastinate the enjoyment of civil rights. Recalling the sentence of the Corte di Cassazione n.2150 of 1955 might be helpful: 'A husband does not abuse his marital *potestas* when he prohibits his wife from exercising a professional activity that impedes her to assisting her husband and her children in the case the financial condition of the breadwinner does not need it.' The year of women's first participation in the vote, 1946, ushered in a new historical process, far from linear and harmonious, toward equal democracy, a process that passed through a predictable contestation of an ascriptive and prescriptive gender dualism and the construction of a public space shared by both genders and open to their individual and responsible contribution (Franco 2011, 135–150).

The gender question

Almost ignored by the press, the swift decision on women's suffrage in 1945 sanctioned publicly the split and tension between the politics of rights and the traditional opinion on gender roles. An early instance of that tension emerged in the Constituent Assembly, in which women, although members of different parties, tended to converge on issues directly involving gender roles in the family and the workplace. These two domains have been deemed, as we saw, mutually excluding. The long history of the relationship between

public/private was to be reexamined, as it were, in the light of the two pivotal articles on equality, Art. 2 and Art. 3. Women played an important role in the constitutional debates on those rights and the rights more directly related to parity among wife and husband in the administration of property and the responsibility toward children, and to parity in competition for public jobs, salary and the provisions for social security and health.

The debates in the Constituent Assembly on the definition of ‘family as founded on marriage’ showed women divided on the proposal not to cancel any reference to the ‘indissolubility’ of marriage – an issue that had met with women’s strong opposition on the occasion of the first public discussion on divorce, before fascism (Seymour 2006, chaps 4–5). Divorce would indeed become a watershed issue in Italian democracy; but that would happen when women would perceive their interests secure under the regime of rights and the government of the law – a change in their opinion from opposition to support to the right regulating divorce (1970–1974) marked the most revolutionary change in Italian society. That change started in the Constituent Assembly, where the turning point decision was made by the democratic Christian women when they decided to drop their hostility against the proposal of erasing the term ‘indissolubility’. That decision opened *de facto* the door to the future law regularizing divorce.¹⁴

Equally important was women’s role in the constitutional debate over the definition of maternity (Art. 31) when all of them together opposed the proposal to add the adjective ‘essential’ to it, a linguistic expediency that, if successful, would reintroduce a naturalistic vision of gender identity and name in the Constitution the sphere in which only women would belong, with a clear limitation of the equality clause. The consequence of that victory on ‘parity’ was enormous and would show its revolutionary implications in the years to come. For instance, in 1977, when a law on ‘parity of treatment between men and women on issue of labor’ was approved that abolished residues of discrimination still existing in the civil code inherited by the liberal and the Fascist previous regimes; a decision to be completed by another law extending maternity leave to fathers, thus equalizing family’s roles in relation to social obligations and exonerations.¹⁵ Coming closer to our time, the shortcomings of legal statutes meet with persistent attempts to neutralize parity and propose restrictive interpretations of the Constitution. To give a few examples, Italy has a National Code of Equal Opportunities and laws implementing Directives of the EU on equal opportunities and equal treatment in matters of employment. Both direct and indirect discrimination are defined and prohibited. Legal support for women (and other minorities) who are discriminated against is provided by a network of Equality Advisors. However, it took decades to legally cancel the practice of ‘*dimissioni in bianco*’ (i.e. employers’ practice of hiring young women conditional on signing an

undated letter of resignation to be used to justify dismissal in case of pregnancy).¹⁶ Another case is a family law that recognizes perfect equality between men and women and gives the same rights to children born inside and outside the marriage. Yet, the Italian legislation has to adopt (in 2016) the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights on the right of the mother to give her family name (instead of the father's family name) to her children (European Parliament 2016).¹⁷

Women members of the Constituent Assembly were aware of the revolutionary implications of including the family in the Constitution, although they faced enormous opposition from men.¹⁸ In recollecting the debates in the Assembly, the representative for the Democratic Christian party, Maria Federici, wrote: 'We had vivid the impression that men had not liberated themselves from the complex mistrust in women's faculties, that some of the most mortifying and old prejudices remained at the bottom of their conscience, also of the most enlightened of them' (Federici 1969, 201). Conscious of the egalitarian impact of civil rights, Federici, said in September 1946 that 'along with the family constituted according to the law, it is possible to envisage the formation of irregular nucleuses that do not however have social and juridical guarantees'; thus the Constituents, she added, should be able to anticipate that 'provisions of social assistance and rights have to be recognized equally to both forms' of family (Bonacchi and Groppi 1993; Gaiotti de Biase 2007; Loretoni 2011). The principle of parity, as applicable to different types of unions, has thus a long history. Indeed, it dates back to the Constituent Assembly. However, it materialized beginning in the late 1970s, with the new family law (1975), the abolition of the law that treated men and women differently in case of adultery, the law that regulated abortion (1978, to be confirmed by referendum in 1981) and finally the law recognizing 'civil unions' aside marriage, which was approved in 2016 under the pressure of the EU.

The debates in the Constituent Assembly sparked beyond its walls, inspiring many public initiatives and seminars by women's organizations on the implications of parity on issues like adultery and prostitution, issues directly related to free choice, the place of women in private and public relations, and finally to women's autonomy over their body. From 1955 to 1958, three important decisions were made: the abolition of brothels (which was the result of women's determination and the first time they organized a united lobby), the law allowing women to sit in popular juries and be magistrates in tribunals for minors; a decision by the Corte di Cassazione that took away from husbands the power to punish their wives. The latter decision would find completion in some ensuing choices: in 1963, women were finally guaranteed parity of access to all public posts (also magistracy), and a law was approved that disclaimed marriage as a justification for firing women from jobs. In 1981, an old law was abolished that justified honour killing ('delitto d'onore') and recognized a woman's betrayal as an attenuating circumstance in which the husband killed the wife and her lover.

This evolution of legislation between the 1960s and 1980s brings us back to the Constitution, mainly three articles that directly reflect the contribution of women to Italian democracy and paved the way toward a parity democracy. Art. 27, second comma on spouses' parity in marriage ('Marriage is based on the moral and legal equality of the spouses within the limits laid down by law to guarantee the unity of the family'); Art. 37, first comma on women's juridical equality in the working places ('Working women are entitled to equal rights and, for comparable jobs, equal pay as men. Working conditions must allow women to fulfill their essential role in the family and ensure appropriate protection for the mother and child'), Art. 51 on equal access to public careers ('Any citizen of either sex is eligible for public offices and elected positions on equal terms, according to the conditions established by law').

Nothing changed ... yet nothing would be the same

To many women who had fought in the War of Resistance, the conquest of their political autonomy appeared soon to be primarily a formal status, toothless and futile, a weak power. 'We did not get nothing; parity is only on paper; it is more a figure of speech than a real condition', declared one of them in 1947.¹⁹ Legal innovation on parity issues was slow and occurred in a social tension and discontent climate. The law that institutes equal opportunity and fulfills Art. 3 of the Constitution was approved only in 1984. Italy is one of the six countries that founded the European Union that underwent extraordinary economic and social changes in the first two decades after the Second World War. However, not much was done in the so-called 'Thirty Glorious' to enforce the constitutional principles and dismantle patriarchal relations inside and outside the family.

As anticipated, a turning point of cultural changes occurred in the 1970s, first with the law regulating divorce and then with the new legislation on family relations and finally on abortion. Civil and social movements were the main protagonists of that cultural revolution. Women challenged state institutions, legal practices, and political party leadership, which were somehow forced to accept the input coming from civil society and feminist movements in order not to lose their electoral support. The referendum on divorce was the first genuinely democratic victory, resulting from a political process involving representative institutions and the citizens, particularly women, who were the direct protagonists in opinion and decision-making.

The slow motion of the decision-making system, which still is preponderantly masculine, was to be challenged by outside state institutions and the official politics by feminist movements and political associations in civil society, thus proving that the presence of women within elected organs is important, not because elected women would have an irresistible power to advance legislation friendly to them, but certainly because women outside

the institutions would have a stronger voice and bring issues of equal consideration to the political arena. The scanty presence of women in representative institutions is one of those heavy issues that seem never ready to give away to a public space that is genuinely open to all citizens, men and women. This recalcitrant reality builds on at least two related conceptions: that the public space is essentially fit for men and that the women's acquisition of suffrage is enough conquest that should not change the fact that women lack the requisites to a whole political career. The equal right to vote and to be elected, proclaimed in 1946, translated into electoral systems, particularly after the partial dropping of proportional representation in 1994, fully or mostly attentive to making room for men. The surreal debates in the Parliament in 2003 on the positive actions to be taken to promote women's presence in elected institutions in which some representatives ridiculed women's ambition for a political career revealed a backlash in the conception of democratic equality. In this regard, the story of the approval of Art. 51 of the Constitution and its ensuing changes deserve some mention.

The original text approved in 1947 recites: 'Any citizen of either sex is eligible for public offices and elected positions on equal terms, according to the conditions established by law.' This text was the outcome of a confrontation against the proposal to specify in the law that eligibility would be 'in conformity to their [women's] attitudes and faculties', a caveat whose goal was, Federici declared, to 'limit women's possibility to compete for public offices and elected posts' (Franco 2011, 144). In 2004, Art. 51 went through a revision to include an explicit reference to positive initiatives the Republic had to take to promote parity as both Art. 3, second comma and the Treaty of the European Union recommended (Montecchi 2003). Art. 51 was revised with the following comma: 'To this end, the Republic shall adopt specific measures to promote equal opportunities between women and men.'

This important revision had relevant implications as it inspired the enrichment of another constitutional article on regional and local elections and the law regulating the elections of the European Parliament, which claims that 'none of the two sexes can be represented by several candidates exceeding two-thirds of the total number'. That law came, however, with no sanctions and remained simply a proclamation of good intention because the Constitutional Court blocked a law instituting a 'quota'. An attempt by Parliament to perfect that law, according to the French model of *parité*, failed because of a party block by male representatives, some of whom declared that the new Art. 51 of the Constitution was purely abstract and useless because 'it is hard to find women truly competent' or competent like men anyway. Thus, we can return to the 2003 Parliament debate in which the male representatives declared that women's claims for political equality in representative institutions were 'ridiculous' because competing for the vote required

qualities that women rarely possessed. As vulgar as they were, those views confirmed the lingering scepticism women showed as soon as the war ended toward the power of suffrage, a decision that, while revolutionary, would not change things.

Thus, once suffrage was won, it became clear that the right to vote did not necessarily imply that women had a voice strong enough to be heard; the right to vote and representation are not the same and are not merely formal matters. Power relations, well entrenched in society, condition the way equal rights are felt, conceived, applied, and implemented. In this sense, a 'women's bloc' that is a critical mass of women in parliament is an essential strategy, regardless of the concrete decisions women would make.

Nonetheless, to paraphrase Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, concluding that the radical change of 1945/1946 was a cunning strategy for keeping old things unchanged would be wrong. This would mean agreeing on the futility of suffrage and, concerning Italy, to advance a wrong depiction of the Italian democratic society. It is undoubtedly true that the dual destiny of genders rooted within Catholic popular culture has shown extraordinary resilience, even if we consider the decline of the Church's influence on Italians' customs (Marzano 2010). The domestic and sexual roles that still represent Italian women prominently (as seen during Silvio Berlusconi's government) indicate that it takes time for the culture of rights to become common sense, and, more importantly, having more women in politics is essential. Nineteenth-century suffragists had seen the positive side of the disjunction between political will and traditional opinions, reading it as evidence that political inclusion matters, regardless of the specific outcomes. It matters because it gives women a voice against the authority of traditional opinions and brings to the public issues and arguments that traditionalists would like to keep private. In the 1830s, J.S. Mill's father, James Mill, claimed that politics is, after all, an issue of influence, and influence can also be exercised indirectly. Thus, women and young people can content themselves with being represented by their adult husbands and fathers.²⁰ To rebuff that *surrogacy argument*, the young J.S. Mill went back to the classical democratic claim formulated by Solon: it is because individuals are all different (and also unequal) that legal and political equality is needed in order for their liberty to be secure and not subjected to the discretionary decision of the strongest. Nomos, not tradition or social status, give diverse individuals a chance to have an equal voice and power without renouncing their specific diversity.

Notes

1. The literature on this issue is vast, I simply mention De Giorgio (1992); Bravo et al. (2001) and Lorettoni (2011).
2. The decree followed only two weeks after the appeal was released by the interparty Comitato pro-voto. On the claim by the interparty Committee published on January 15 (Marchetti et al. 1986, 10).
3. This was the opinion of socialists like Treves, Turati and Andriulli in 1908 (Odorisio and Turi 1986, 80).
4. For an analysis of the juridical arguments for women's incapacity to play public roles, see Martone (1996).
5. In 1912, suffrage was extended to male citizens above the age of 30, with literacy restrictions; by the end of 1918, all restrictions were abolished, and all male citizens who served in the army and were at least twenty-one-years-old could vote (Romanelli 1995).
6. The Mayor of Florence, then a member of the Parliament and the Government, Ubaldino Peruzzi, was, along with his wife, one of the first moderate political leaders to support women's cause. In his home in Florence, his wife, Emilia Peruzzi, held a salon of discussion involving intellectuals and politicians, and after the publication of Mill's *The Subjection of Women* she organized a true survey among her guests (Vilfredo Pareto among them) (Urbinati 1988).
7. Anna Kulisciov had reason to quarrel with her husband, Filippo Turati, the leader of the Socialists, as she believed that only political inclusion would offer women the chance to become autonomous in their moral and political opinions. Radicals were not very supportive either: Anna Marchesini in an article published in Piero Gobetti's *Energie Nuove* wrote that although many women had contributed to the war, their support to the national cause was 'pretasca' so that allowing them to vote would be risky (Pieroni Bortolotti 1974).
8. In the Lombardo-Veneto, which had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, wealthy women who administered their property either because widows or singles had the right to express their electoral preference at local elections through a tutor (indirect voting) while in some Lombardy's towns, they could also be elected. In Tuscany, which was ruled by the Grand Duke of Lorraine, since 1849, women had enjoyed administrative suffrage through a tutor and from 1850 by means of a ballot to be sent in a sealed envelope. If we consider that in none of these three regions, there was universal suffrage, we can say that women had a political role and enjoyed a political privilege.
9. The *Petizione delle donne Italiane* (1906) vindicated civil and social equality and chose to follow the road of gradual inclusion by appealing to the existing laws; the petition was endorsed by the Appellate Court of Ancona but rejected by the High Court of the Crown whose decision closed the doors that the silence of the law had left open. On the importance of this petition and the court battle (Severini and Lacchè 2004, 65–151).
10. Even if Giuseppe Mazzini was an egalitarian and included women's suffrage in the Constitution of the Roman Republic, he contributed in writing in 1849.
11. This means that after the war, 35,000 women filled out the form provided by the state. Yet historians acknowledged that many of them did not register (Mafai 1979, 69).
12. From an oral story told by a partisan woman, Elsa Oliva (Odorisio and Turi 1986, 158).

13. From an oral story told by Anna Cinanni (Odorisio and Turi 1986, 160).
14. The issue of divorce seemed to be too radical in 1946–1947, both for Catholics and not Catholics (Mafai 1979, 127–129).
15. In fact, the history of social legislation in democratic Italy has been like the history of an unsolvable contraposition between two approaches: family as a natural community and family as a social construction (thus between human rights interpreted by Thomists and by liberal) (Saraceno 2012).
16. But the European Parliament noted in 2019 that despite legislation, the practice of ‘blank resignation letters’ (*dimissioni in bianco*), or the custom of employers of making the hiring of young women conditional to signing an undated letter of resignation to be used to justify dismissal in case of pregnancy persists (European Parliament 2014, 141).
17. On social policies and their impact on family and fertility (Boeri et al. 2005, Part II).
18. The feeling of confronting a ‘thick wall of masochismo’ was an immediate perception observed one of the Constituents (Saba et al. 1996, 30).
19. From an oral story told by Elena Rustichelli (Odorisio and Turi 1986, 160).
20. A sociological analysis on who’s influencing whom in family and on the discrepancy between empirical studies and ideological disposition on the power of influence exercised by husbands over wives (Zincone 1985, 190–192).

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