

*Women in Italy suffer disproportionate unemployment, discriminatory work practices and demeaning public stereotyping. Sylvia Arthur argues that a country at the heart of Europe should practice the values Europe preaches.*

This International Women's Day spare a thought for the women of Italy. With a gender inequality gap worse than that of Kazakhstan, Italian women are amongst the most downtrodden in Europe. The facts speak for themselves. With a female unemployment rate approaching 50%, women who do work are paid almost 17% less than their male colleagues, an indicator of their perceived value in the employment market. One woman in four leaves her job after maternity and for every 100 children only 10 find a place in daycare, with fewer than five in 100 in a public nursery. The political and academic spheres aren't much better either. Women professors are half as likely as their male colleagues to get a tenure at an Italian university, and Italian women are 50% less likely than their male counterparts to become legislators, managers and entrepreneurs. Women represent only 21% of government ministers, and less than 20% of deputies in parliament. 55% of Italian parliamentarians are over the age of 50 although this demographic only represents 17% of the population. Just last month a new draft bill to introduce quotas ensuring representation of women on company boards looked set to fall by the wayside as parliament and business seek numerous amendments delaying the bill's passage. Given all this, perhaps it's not surprising that Italy has one of the lowest birth rates in Europe as women are faced with the stark choice between having children or having a career. But how have things got so bad for a country renowned for the dynamism of its feminism movement? Feminism freed Italian women in theory in the sixties but, in practice, twenty-first century culture has overturned its hard won gains.

Leadership is one problem. Silvio Berlusconi is the laughing stock of European politics. From his infamous bunga-bunga parties, at which the 74 year old premier is allegedly surrounded by a bevy of underage beauties young enough to be his granddaughters, to his puerile television shows which churn out image after image of scantily-clad women as showgirls, the Italian prime minister's penchant for sleaze is beyond a joke. None of this would matter if he weren't leader of a senior European government, a member of the G8. But his grotesque sideshow has become the main attraction diverting attention from more pressing issues, like the declining Italian economy and women are bearing the brunt of its stagnation. The women of Italy are indeed a long-suffering people but Berlusconi, however culpable, isn't the only one to blame.

Thankfully, Italian women aren't taking this assault on their dignity lying down. They're organising and fighting back. The twin evils of sexism and machismo have fomented a generation of young Italians used to being under the thumb of a seemingly immortal male gerontocracy. An estimated one million people took to the streets in Italy and around the world to protest against the depiction of women on Italian television, catalysed by the indictment of Berlusconi on charges of sex with an underage girl and abuse of power. But this was just the biggest manifestation of a growing anger that's been simmering for some time. "This demonstration is not something that happened out of the blue. There is a movement. Perhaps it's not as strong as in the past but women are formulating and coming together," says Lucia, a twenty-something professional who took part in the Brussels protest on 13 February.

Lorella Zanardo's provocative 2009 documentary [Il Corpo Delle Donne](#) served as a wakeup call to Italians, the vast majority of whom rely on Berlusconi's channels as their main source of information. The thirty minute film shows footage from quiz shows and game shows, talk shows and variety shows which reveal the depths to which the role and status of women have sunk in the public psyche. When seen side by side, the footage is a damning indictment of a schizophrenic culture in which the church plays a central role but the society has become infected by a moral disease dubbed by some as 'berlusconism'.

"It's very difficult for a non-Italian person to understand why, despite all that is happening, Berlusconi still has so much consensus," says Chiara, who recently joined a political group for the first time as a result of her disgust at the depiction of women. "But, really, you have to think that people can only form an opinion or develop an idea through information and if you have most of the media controlled by the prime minister, what kind of information can be passed through and what kind of idea can people develop?"

That's why it's very difficult for somebody who lives in Italy and watches his television to realise what is really happening and how the image of Italy is being damaged."

The great tragedy is that four of the most intelligent, articulate women I now know are Italians who felt forced to leave the country because of this very real lack of opportunity for women - in career, in relationships and in society in general. And they are not alone. Thousands of young people like Chiara, Rosalba, Lucia and Oriana leave Italy every year in search of better economic opportunities than the ones at home. The good thing is that, having seen and experienced life on the outside, they want to share their knowledge with their people back home and effect change the best way they know how. "We still exercise our political rights because we return to Italy to vote," says Rosalba, an intern in Brussels from Puglia. "We feel indebted to our country because it gave us a good public education and now we have to go abroad to get a good job. We talk to friends and other young people in Italy and let them know that things can be different. This is a start."

Fortunately, because they're realists, they're under no illusions that this will be an easy process. Although they're politically active, and are members of *Fabbrica*, a network of think tanks working to develop a new vocabulary for Italian politics none of them see a life in politics as a future possibility.

"The reason why we maybe always felt that politics was a field that is so out of reach is because you're so discouraged by the things that happen that you don't think it could be something related to you," Lucia says before offering a caveat: "Of course, I don't know what may happen in the future. If you get passionate about things and if there is opportunity, it may be possible but I've never thought about it."

Oriana is equally reticent about entering the political spotlight but she, like the others, is committed to working for the good of her country from the sidelines. "This is something relatively new for me, being part of the *Fabbrica*, but what I try to do in my little sphere is to talk about things now that I'm more aware of what's going on and I can compare it with the international situation. I try to bring another vision of that to people who are close to me and say: *Wake up! We have something to do here.*"

Indeed we must. A country at the heart of Europe, as Italy is, should practice its values as well as preach them. By talking about how un-European Italian gender relations are, and exposing the extent to which they are predicated on power and privilege, can we help the women of Italy achieve full equality.

© Sylvia Arthur, 2011.