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La domanda di donna: Feminism and Fascism in Mussolini's Italy

As one would expect from an irrational system of politics and philosophy, Italian fascism's answer to the "woman question"--how women should be integrated into society--was full of contradictions that both helped and hindered Italian recognition of women's value. Though women were pushed more and more into the public sphere as men left for the army and the entire notion of a sphere untouched by the government began to dissolve, the cultural attitude toward the separation of masculinity and femininity strengthened, forcing women to face societal scrutiny while also juggling their own needs and desires as mothers, daughters, and, most importantly, humans. The contradictory nature of the fascist expectations of women yielded contradictory results; by law, women lost momentum they had gained towards equality, but by sheer necessity, women gained some power culturally, if not politically, that they were not supposed to.

Though autonomy for Italian women was to become increasingly inaccessible as fascism took hold, the cultural attitude towards women was far from perfect leading up to the fascist takeover of Italy in the early 20th century. The general trend for several decades prior to Mussolini was to decrease women's activity in the workforce, for fear of women not only forsaking their household duties but more primarily encroaching on opportunities that men should have first claim to. In 1881, 40.1% of the female population of Italy was employed, but by 1931, in the middle of the fascist era, only 18.5% of the female population was employed; "the economy simply did not absorb them" due to a combination of job shortages and the cultural

hostility towards letting women work.[1] Having only unified in 1861, modern Italy has often been behind some of its European neighbors in many facets of progress, from democracticism to industrialization, particularly in the South. Since universal suffrage for *males* was only introduced in 1919, women were far from the priority for most of those in power in the early 20th century.[2] Women who actually did manage to find jobs in Italy were routinely ousted by men, particularly male veterans of war who Italians seemed to agree deserved the positions more than the most qualified woman could.[3]

Despite this--and perhaps precisely because of this--some feminist movements demanding political and economic equality did exist in the years leading up to Mussolini's rise to power. Due to the increasing demand for women in the workforce during World War I, the Sacchi Law of 1919 was passed to enforce legal equality between the sexes for most civil service, in spite of relentless cultural misgivings (which did make their way into this law through the fine print specifications that women could not hold high positions in bureaucracy or the military).[4] Though, as we know, this did not pan out effectively *after* the war, as most political organizations stringently defended veterans' right to work more than women's, the fact that this law was on the books at all seemed to be a step in the right direction. In fact, not long before the fascist takeover, concession of women's suffrage was begrudgingly "seen as inevitable" by most Italians, so the majority of political movements and institutions created subgroups specifically for women in an attempt to acknowledge their potential power, if not value.[5] Possibly surprising

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[1] De Grand, Alexander. "Women under Italian Fascism." *The Historical Journal,* 19, no. 4 (December 1976): 947-68. Accessed November 11, 2018. JSTOR. Page 948.
[2] Mancini, Susanna. "From the Struggle for Suffrage to the Construction of a Fragile Gender Citizenship: Italy 1861-2009." In *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe: Voting to Become Citizens*, 373-88. Brill, 2012. Page 373.
[3] De Grand, Page 949.
[4] Gori, Gigliola. *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women and Strong Mothers*. London: Routledge, 2016. Accessed November 14, 2018. Google Books. Chapter 2.
[5] De Grand. Page 951.

to modern audiences which combine religiosity with extreme conservatism, women's movements were mostly propelled by the Catholic Church, an incredibly influential institution throughout all of Italy, being the home of the Vatican; the Church created the "most extensive network of associations for women."[6] Sadly, this tentative welcome of women by groups such as the Church may have inadvertently sabotaged women's voices in other groups. No single major political party collectively and proudly backed women's fight for suffrage--even the parties we may expect to. For instance, even the Italian Socialist Party, though aware of the injustice of the disparity between men and women, was reticent to throw support of any magnitude behind the vote, fearful that women, if given the vote, would automatically side with the Church and interfere with Socialist agendas. Moreover, they often thought that the fight for women's rights would distract from more important matters; "The Italian left-wing forces, while supportive of working women's rights, were reluctant to engage in the struggle for women's suffrage, which they viewed as a threat to the class struggle." (In fairness, members of the Socialist Party did eventually attempt to push the vote for women through by House, likely aggrieved by their own contradictions and spurred on by influential female members of the party, but they only did so only in 1920, right before Mussolini came to power, so that particular attempt never came to fruition.)[7] Women's suffrage was simply not a priority for any significant party, no matter how progressive they seemed. Men in power did not want to risk fixing their other problems by expressing support for something as risky as equality for women--despite the fact that "the vote was the *single* issue binding *women* of *all* political tendencies."[8] Granted, women were absolutely necessary tools for society, and even opponents of feminism would have had trouble

[6] De Grand. Page 948.
[7] Mancini. Pages 376-380.
[8] De Grand. Page 953, my emphasis.

denying that due to the widely accepted necessity of the mother figure, but people who had any power were still too frightened of the repercussions of supporting women to help women.

Once fascism began to rise, however, the state of women politically and culturally became even more convoluted. The already present clash between what Italians wanted and what they needed only strengthened under fascist reign and especially during World War II. Though the government increasingly stressed the importance and power of masculinity so men would be encouraged in war, it also required that women enter the workforce to make up for the sudden absence of men--and yet fascist systems seemed to require the subordination and disempowerment of all, particularly women who did not have the same mental or physical capacity as their superiors, men. A good fascist woman must work to help the country, but she could not do *too* much. As historian Gigliola Gori describes it, women were "expected to embody different models of femininity, derived from a policy that sought to combine aspirations for modernity, secularisation and imperialism with aspirations to safeguard traditionalism, religion and stability."[9] One very clear example of the incessant back and forth between ideals regarding women's political place in fascist society is Benito Mussolini himself. He could not seem to decide where he stood--or rather where he felt he should be *seen* as standing--on the issue of women's rights. He supported a 1923 international convention on women's rights and "spoke favorably about women's suffrage to improve his reputation abroad," but then also is reported as having said "if I were to give women the vote, people would laugh me to scorn."[10] Even so, he pushed through a law granting "the right to vote in administrative elections" to some women, though these were limited to "mothers or widows of soldiers who had died in the Great

[9] Gori.Chapter 3.
[10] Koonz, Claudia. "The 'Woman Question' in Authoritarian Regimes." In *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 463-91. 1977. Page 467-468.

War, well-deserving female citizens or holders of decorations."[11] This demonstrates how "good" women were rewarded for their service in the private sphere by tentatively welcoming them into the very public sphere they were not supposed to engage in, based on cultural understandings of a woman's place and even her mental capabilities. Politics were not the only field in which women received mixed signals regarding their value, however; education also produced some contradictory results. Mussolini's minister of education Giovanni Gentile explicitly remarked that "women do not have, nor will they ever have, either the moral or mental vigor" to be educated, and particularly to teach, and he accordingly made attempts to bar women from higher education (though none officially went through).[12] However, in actuality, women's participation in university rose significantly under fascist rule; only 3.9% of women were enrolled in university in 1911, but by the end of the fascist regime, 1942, nearly 30% of women were enrolled. Despite verbal fascist discrimination, the fact of the matter was that there were more women in the population than men during the war, which allowed many women to find their place in universities.[13] Regarding women's employment, just as with its predecessor, World War II thrust many women into industrial employment and away from the agricultural occupations that Italian culture thought they were fit for. This particularly elucidates the contradiction in fascist society. Historian Paul Coroner takes an in depth look particularly into women's move from agriculture, which fascist forces approved of for women's work, to more industrialized occupations, which opposed fascist ideals of femininity;

> [Italian] families depended on female employment in manufacturing, and found ways--even in times of crisis--of perpetuating that employment. Over the years this process produced attitudes which were diametrically opposed to a limitation of the role of the woman . . . No doubt women suffered from many aspects of fascist legislation

[11] Mancini. Page 380.
[12] De Grand. Page 953-967.
[13] De Grand. Page 959-60.

> concerning wages, political rights, etc., but it seems that . . . the effort to erode the position of women within society and to re-establish male, conservative and traditional norms, which fascism proposed, contrasted with forces which were--in the end--much stronger than those the regime could muster.[14]

Despite all these statistics demonstrating that women more or less ignored the cultural demands of fascism and appeared to do what they felt was necessary for themselves and society, it was not always so easy to do so, and certainly was not easy to do with any sort of public attention. Many women simply attempted to adopt a bizarre and seemingly contradictory combination of fascism and feminism in an attempt to gain some independence for themselves, if not for women as a whole. Efforts to combine the stringent nationalism of fascist society with female empowerment lead to the concept of "national feminism," described as "many educated and ambitious women [adapting] to the *status quo* in the hope that they might win a measure of autonomy within their own same-sex cultural, philanthropic, and social sphere."[15] In most cases, these women who claimed to appreciate both fascism and feminism explained their own value by stressing the societal importance of maternalistic and other stereotypically feminine qualities. Though this sacrificed the message that women were equal to men in ability, some women felt this tactic was the only option. A female-run Genoan paper, *La chiosa*, clearly illustrates how women strove to combine the two ideologies and how this often inevitably failed. The paper's point of view, as developed by its director Elsa Goss, demonstrated an acceptance of fascist stress on family, but "[refused] to see this as an exclusive function of women." Moreover, the paper suggested that Italian women did not really care about political equality, but were more focused on "economic parity." Sadly, even this was too radical for public Italian consumption,

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[14] Coroner, Paul. "Women in Fascist Italy; Changing Family Roles in the Transition from an Agricultural to an Industrial Society." *European History Quarterly,* 23: 51-68. Accessed November 12, 2018. JSTOR. Page 64.
[15] Koonz. Page 468.

and societal pressures led to *La chiosa* moving from a political paper to a fashion magazine in 1927.[16] Women at this time, it seems, had an easier time just doing what they had to--as seen in their employment and education--than attempting to convince others that they should be allowed to.

All this being said, a certain semblance of equality was indeed reached in 1926 when Mussolini "abolished elections altogether."[17] In the chaos of putting Italy back together after the fall of Mussolini and the destruction of WWII, women's suffrage was finally pushed through in 1945 without much debate (since the shambles of the government did not even have an elected parliament at the time--only a Prime Minister).[18] For the confusion women's rights had caused since Italy had unified less than a century earlier, this peaceful granting of rights went through with surprisingly little trouble. It is worth note, however, that suffrage did not alleviate all women's problems; even if they had the right to be politically involved, society was still far from welcoming them, and in some cases even still is--as of 2018, the highest percentage that women in the Italian parliament have ever held is 34%, which it is today.[19] Women all over the western world still get mixed messages about what behavior is or is not appropriate, but fortunately for the modern world, even when the government is explicitly condemning women's empowerment as it was in fascist Italy, women have found ways to work around the discrimination.

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[16] De Grand. Page 955-956.
[17] Mancini. Page 380.
[18] Mancini. Page 382.
[19] "Italy's New Parliament Is Younger, More Diverse and More Female." The Local. March 21, 2018. Accessed November 15, 2018. https://www.thelocal.it/20180321/italy-new-parliament.

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