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December 6, 2008

World

In Italy, Feminism Out, Women As Sex Symbols In

by Sylvia Poggioli

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Giuseppe Cacace

Some charge Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi with the emphasis on, and prevalence of, women in advertising and television. AFP/Getty Images

Morning Edition, December 3, 2008 · Americans and northern Europeans visiting Italy often comment on the sheer quantity of exposed female flesh in advertising and on TV shows.

That exposure is inversely proportional to the presence of women in the labor force, in management and in politics.

Feminists place a lot of the blame for the commercial use of the female body at the door of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

A recent popular TV show was a contest for two showgirl slots on a top satirical program. More than 5,000 women applied, and the prime requisites were perfect bodies and the ability to dance on tabletops.

Both on public television and on networks owned by Berlusconi, who also is a media tycoon, scantily dressed women can be seen — but rarely heard — on all types of programs, from quizzes to political talk shows.

Showgirl As Role Model

Opinion polls indicate that the showgirl is the No. 1 role model for young Italian women, including 21-year-old student Livia Colarietti.

"If I were a little thinner, I would have joined the contest to become a showgirl," Colarietti says. "I enjoy those shows. I really like to watch them."

One very successful showgirl is Mara Carfagna, who left an uncertain singing career for politics. Berlusconi chose her for the slot of minister of equal opportunity — and both denied media reports that they were having an affair.

Satirist Sabina Guzzanti has publicly scorned the former topless calendar girl.

"I took strong position because it is absolutely a scandal," Guzzanti says. "Here we have more a pinup exactly than a showgirl, someone showing her body, and she became minister of equal opportunities."

Veteran feminist Grazia Francescato concedes that Carfagna is winning with her ways.

"We have gone from equal opportunities to equal opportunism," Francescato says. "You try to be very appealing to the other sex, especially to very powerful men. "I am very, very disappointed by women."

Feminists were powerful in the 1970s, winning universal health care and legalization of divorce and abortion, but then there was a backlash.

Sexism In Italy

Today, Italy has the lowest percentage of working women in Europe. Only 2 percent of top management positions are held by women — that's even behind Kuwait — and only 17 percent of the members of parliament are women — less than in Rwanda and Burundi.

Television has become women's prime showcase.

"To sell your body for a calendar, for a career, is not considered now so bad for many young women," says social scientist Elisa Manna, who has studied this issue's impact on Italian society. "This kind of attitude is connected to television, because they have this kind of model in every hour of the day."

With remote in hand, a viewer can zap from game shows with giggling girls in bikinis to prime-time anchorwomen with plunging necklines. All of this sexiness on television began with the birth of Berlusconi's networks in the 1980s.

The 72-year-old prime minister speaks openly about sex. He recently bragged, "I sleep for three hours, and still have enough energy to make love for another three."

Female Solidarity Out Of Fashion

The Berlusconi TV model is widely seen as having shaped Italy's contemporary society, and journalist Lilli Gruber says feminism and solidarity among women are out of fashion.

A former TV anchorwoman who resigned from public television in protest over Berlusconi's control of the media, Gruber says most women appear unwilling or unable to assert themselves and too weak to fight.

"To fight back against growing sexism, growing violence against women and domestic violence especially, fight back all these politicians who don't move an inch in order to allow women to be in charge and take on responsibilities," Gruber says.

She points out, however, that the majority of Italians now studying in universities are women — a generation that she believes won't be passive and might even succeed in breaking down Italy's old-boy network.

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[G R \(12qwer345643\)](#) wrote:

These postings have really bought to light some of the deep divisions in what justifies "equality" between the genders. And it also shows the variety of opinions out there about what is just and fair for each gender, and who is responsible for what is perceived as an unfairness.

There is a universal biological truth that can't be argued away- Men are more attracted to beautiful women than ugly ones. Pretty girls have more chance of higher sales than ugly ones. Men and women want different things. If a women see's unfairness in not being given adequate child care, health services, pregnancy leave, harassment laws etc then I see unfairness in drafting only males to serve in the military and/or not being properly compensated for doing dangerous jobs.

Recent First

Bottom line- we can't make life fair for everybody.

December 5, 2008 5:49:46 PM JST

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[Phyllis Jeden \(TiredLawStudent\)](#) wrote:

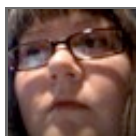
I am in the middle of studying for law school exams. I wanted to address the inconsistencies in arguments and applaud the wonderful and well thought out comments. However, I have no time. But after reading Barbara G's comment I had to address just one thing. Barbara said she thinks a lot of the discussion on discrimination is due to women's insecurities. The reason that you think this Barbara, is because it is true. When women are targeted with these images, the point is to make them insecure! That's how you get them to buy into whatever you are selling. Its marketing, and we can't fault women for being affected by it, if it didn't work than people wouldn't spend so much on advertising. Barbara, this issue is more widespread than you may realize.

<http://www.apa.org/releases/sexualization.html> You should check out that link from the psychologists, they realize how pervasive this is. Also Barbara, when you complain about women not having enough pay or sufficient child care services, you have to understand that this is part of the result of objectification. No matter the minority, when you objectify (make less than human) it is easier to treat that minority as less than human. Not caring about issues like women balancing work and family is a direct result of women being treated (willingly or not) like objects and not people. By the way, to respond to another comment, if feminism (which would be better termed "humanism" if that term wasn't already taken..) was taken seriously it would make men human too. Humans should be allowed to nurture, cry or be vulnerable in general without having to feel like they are not a "man" if they do. And men shouldn't be in such a rush to be happily judged as people who use a part of their anatomy other than their brain when thinking. This is an insult to men (and little boys) as much as it is to women (and little girls).

December 5, 2008 1:54:11 PM JST

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[Sally Griffin \(auntiecoagulant\)](#) wrote:

Uh, yeah J Markz, men have absolutely no responsibility in sexualizing women or creating the beauty standards. Women just like to look sexy, starving themselves, getting drastic surgeries etc. to please themselves and other women.

What kills me is all the whining and complaining men do when women speak up for themselves or try to empower themselves. It doesn't mean, at least to me, that women want force men down, it just means we realize we're going in the wrong direction. Is it so wrong for women to want something beyond childbirth, modeling, "entertaining" or pulling up her shirt on camera? When we see career choices dwindling for women and we say something about it, why does it result in such angry backlash from men? They seem to be overly defensive.

December 5, 2008 12:19:45 PM JST

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[J Markz \(Macharino\)](#) wrote:

Before you feminist women become too smug and self-righteous: Let me remind you of the path American young women have taken in the past decade. According to the Rand study, over a million teens each year get pregnant in the U.S., the highest of all industrialized nations. The link is again being made between teen pregnancy and TV. The amount of sexual content viewed on American television has doubled in the last decade. And young women's idols are the like of Madonna, Britney and Christina. Italians may be heading in the direction that Americans have headed for a long time.

December 5, 2008 3:49:28 AM JST

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[barbara grigoletto \(barbara g\)](#) wrote:

Also, let me introduce you to Emma Marcegaglia, the President of the Confederation of Italian Industry. She has been elected by a STANDING OVATION by the Confederation.

She is also a beautiful woman but I don't think that's the reason why she's been elected.

If you'd like to read more:

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2008/06/articles/ito>

December 5, 2008 3:39:45 AM JST

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