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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Italian Women Rise Up

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Milan

MANY outside Italy seem to assume that Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi gets away with his sexist behavior because Italian men condone it and the women at least tolerate it. But this is no longer true. Today there are two Italys: one Italy has soaked up Mr. Berlusconi's ideology either out of self-interest or an inability to resist his enormous powers of persuasion; the other is fighting back.

It's about time. Mr. Berlusconi's behavior has been outrageous. When a female student asked him for advice about her financial troubles, he suggested that she marry a man who was rich like his son. (Mr. Berlusconi claimed he was joking.) He has bragged about the beauty of his party's female parliamentary candidates, and raised eyebrows by putting former starlets into the government. He designated a former model with whom he had publicly flirted to be Minister of Equal Opportunities. This spring, his wife accused him of cavorting with young women and declared that she wanted a divorce.

Why have Italians put up with all this? Compared to those in other European countries, conservative ideas in Italy die hard, in part because of our famously patriarchal culture but also because of the huge influence of the Roman Catholic Church, whose political and social interference in public affairs seems to have become even stronger since Mr. Berlusconi first became prime minister in 1994. (The church, for example, has threatened to excommunicate doctors who prescribe the abortion pill as well as patients who use it.)

Furthermore, Italy's glass ceiling has proved to be more resistant than it is elsewhere in Europe. Italy ranks 67th out of 130 countries considered in a recent report of the World Economic Forum on the Global Gender Gap Index, ranking lower than Uganda, Namibia, Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, just under half of Italy's women have jobs, compared with an average of nearly two out of three. At the same time, Italian men have 80 more minutes of leisure time per day — the greatest difference in the 18 countries compared. This is probably explained by the additional time that women devote to unpaid work, like cleaning the house. It is no surprise, then, that many Italian women are unwilling to take on an additional burden of raising children. As a result, the country has an extraordinarily low birthrate.

The Italian media only exacerbate this bleak reality by presenting a picture of women that is incomprehensible to the rest of Europe. Private TV channels have started to broadcast images of women who are typically lightly dressed and silent beauties serving as decoration while older, fully dressed men are running the show. (It is worth noting here that Mr. Berlusconi owns the leading private television networks.)

The impact of years of brainwashing is plain to see: recent research demonstrated that the most popular

ambition among female teenagers is to become a *velina* (basically a showgirl). Young women and girls are consistently taught that their bodies, rather than their abilities and their knowledge, are the key to success. At the same time, the sexism portrayed on TV reinforces chauvinistic ideas among the culturally weakest parts of the population. Researchers who study female body objectification need only look to Italy to witness the sad consequences of this phenomenon.

The portrayals of women bring to mind darker moments in our country's past. During Italy's Fascist era in the first half of the 20th century, there was no shortage of derogatory images of people from its colonies in Africa. Women were portrayed as sexual objects and the men as barbarian enemies. In recent years, as immigrants have been flocking to Italy, these kinds of crude stereotypes have been coming back. To give just one example: The leader of the Northern League Party, Umberto Bossi, has called immigrants "bingo bongos." These attitudes in part reflect the feelings of economic and social insecurity that have only deepened over the past decade or so. The responses to this, namely sexism and racism, are just two sides of the same coin.

These days, however, there are signs of change. Italians are denouncing Mr. Berlusconi's sexist behavior through various strategies: by bringing their grievances to the European Court of Human Rights and by making a documentary about the objectification of the female body like "Il Corpo delle Donne" by Lorella Zanardo.

In June shortly before the G-8 meeting in L'Aquila, a small group of Italian academic women, including me, invited the first ladies of the participating countries to boycott the event as a sign of protest. In just a few days, 15,000 women and men signed our petition to get the first ladies to boycott. Obviously, the main aim was not to persuade the first ladies to modify their travel plans, but to speak out against Mr. Berlusconi's sexist behavior.

Today those who dissent have a hard time gaining visibility. The aforementioned appeal to the first ladies, for instance, got great attention from the international news media, but not much ink was spilled by national papers on this issue, and radio and television were generally silent.

Despite these obstacles, it feels as if Mr. Berlusconi has gone too far, and the recent sexual scandals are chipping away at his popularity. Just look at the polls. Traditionally, women, together with low-income and older people, have been great supporters of Mr. Berlusconi, presumably because they tend to watch his television channels. Although Mr. Berlusconi still enjoyed considerable support at the time of this year's European elections, recent scandals brought his approval ratings to below 50 percent, with a notable drop in approval among women.

The willingness to speak up and to mobilize that is spreading among us is well summarized in a letter that an Italian woman recently sent to the newspaper L'Unità: "I am ready. Just decide: the place, the day and the hour. I am ready to rally."

But what can Italian women actually do? An important step is to make dissent known, a difficult task considering that true free speech is largely limited to only a few independent newspapers and, importantly, the Internet. We need to start working on a systematic documentation of incidents of discrimination against women.

We also need better organization. Existing groups that would be the most naturally engaged in the emerging

dissent (like the opposition Democratic Party, which seems distracted by internal fights) have not been sensitive to the many signs from below. Women will need to exert greater pressure on the opposition parties to represent their demands.

But first of all, dissenting women (and men) must speak up with greater confidence. Our country, long defined by its old-fashioned attitudes toward women, is finally ready to rally.

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