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Burial of aborted fetuses causes outrage in Italy

Women take legal action over fetus graves marked with mothers' names in so-called Fields of Angels.

By Hannah Roberts

POLITICO (15.10.2020) - <https://politi.co/2HitsR9> - At the Prima Porta cemetery, hundreds of white wooden crosses mark the burial plots of aborted fetuses. On each cross is written the name of the woman who terminated the pregnancy.

Until recently, the existence of the cemetery was unknown to many of the women, who say they consented neither to a burial nor to being named. Now that they do know, more than 100 have come together to pursue legal action demanding those responsible be identified.

In Italy, where women still struggle to access abortion four decades after legislation permitting the procedure was passed, the discovery of the burial site has resulted in an outcry. It has also focused attention on dozens of similar sites across Italy — known as "Fields of Angels" and created with the involvement of anti-abortion, ultra-conservative associations.

For opponents, such burial grounds stigmatize abortion and undermine the legitimate choices of women at a time when conservative groups globally are attempting to push back reproductive rights won decades ago.

The Prima Porta site stands out because it names the women.

Its existence came to light earlier this month after Marta Loi made inquiries about what happened to her fetus. Writing on Facebook, she described the "anger and anguish" at discovering a burial plot with her name on it, and that "without my consent, others have buried my child with a cross, a Christian symbol, which does not belong to me."

Silvana Agatone, president and founder of LAIGA, the Italian association for doctors who carry out abortions, told POLITICO that the burials were "the most serious violation of privacy. Many women do not tell relatives or friends about the procedure."

"It is a way of punishing the women by creating a sense of guilt," she said. "To have a tomb with your name on implies that you are as good as dead."

Monica Cirinnà, a senator in the Italian parliament, told POLITICO: "Every woman who terminates a pregnancy has the right to choose if and how to bury the fetus and according to which ritual. These are deeply personal decisions that cannot be brought into question."

The issue is a reminder of the global pushback against women's rights, Cirinnà said. "Even today, women's bodies are battlefields. Attacks on women's freedom, regarding the choice to become or not to become mothers, are now coming from everywhere, continuously undermined by small, silent but insidious procedures like this one."

Medical objections

Although abortion has been legal in Italy since 1978, it has been fiercely opposed from the start by an alliance of religious and political conservatives. There are similar situations in many other countries, but campaigners say the extent to which the Catholic Church remains embedded in Italian institutions means it has been particularly effective in frustrating the implementation of abortion rights.

The majority of doctors qualified to carry out an abortion refuse to do so on ethical grounds — that's an average of 69 percent across the country, rising to 80 percent in the south, according to the health ministry. That means access is limited and delays common.

Junior doctors often fear their career will be damaged if they don't join the ranks of objectors, and department heads refuse to hire non-objectors, said Agatone.

The rise among Italian doctors of conscientious objectors does not constitute a problem, according to the health ministry, because the number of abortions is falling while the number of objectors remains stable.

Elisa Ercoli, president of *Differenza Donna*, an advocacy group representing 130 of the *Prima Porta* women, said the *Fields of Angels* "are emblematic of the obstacles to women exercising their right to an abortion in Italy."

"The level of objectors is so high that the health care guaranteed by law is not accessible," she said.

Most of the women, Ercoli added, had degrading experiences in hospital, with some medical staff refusing to help them even though they were in pain: "These women feel betrayed by the state. There was a total violation of their legal rights and privacy."

According to a 1990 law, women can request the aborted fetus and bury it within 24 hours. But if they don't, the local health service is responsible for arranging transport and burial. Over the past two decades, Catholic associations have increasingly stepped in, relieving the local health authority of the cost and trouble of burying aborted fetuses.

The most prominent group doing this, *Difendere la vita con Maria*, has 3,000 members and says it has carried out over 200,000 burials. It solicits donations for funding on its website, which says: "For only €20 you can bear the cost of burying an unborn child."

Spokesman Stefano di Battista said the group does not work in Rome at present. But in the cities that it does work, it collects the fetuses, usually once a month, from the hospitals with which it has agreements, before burying them after a short ceremony. The group never identifies the women, he said, adding: "Anonymity is a guiding principle for us. We do not do this practice to battle against abortion rights. We are not interested in

crusades. We believe it is at the basis of civilization to bury with dignity and piety the children that never came into the world."

Church ties to the right

Catholic associations might be responsible for the Fields of Angels, but they wouldn't have been able to proceed without political sympathizers at regional and national levels.

In 2007 in Lombardy, a center-right/conservative administration introduced new regulations stipulating that all fetuses had to be buried in specific areas within cemeteries. Le Marche and Campania have approved similar laws.

Last year, an attempt to introduce similar legislation by the hard-right Brothers of Italy party in Lazio was defeated. The liberal Italian Radicals party condemned it as "psychological violence against women."

"It is in [the political right's] nature to try to bring back a patriarchal culture, before women's liberation," said Ercoli. "But it is not just about political parties, it is a larger cultural discussion. Since 1978 women have been fighting to try to win the actual implementation of the rules."

It is not clear who bears responsibility for the naming of the women at the Prima Porta cemetery. The section where the fetuses are buried contains only those aborted after the 20th week of gestation, when the procedure is permitted only on health grounds, according to Agatone.

The hospital involved, San Camillo, said responsibility for transport management and burial lies with Ama, a company that manages cemeteries on behalf of the city of Rome. Ama said in a statement that it had no contact with patients and followed the rules of the health system.

Italy's privacy watchdog has opened an investigation into the burials, and Health Minister Roberto Speranza has been called to speak about the case in parliament.

Politicians on the left are pushing for a change in the law. A group of leftist councilors in the Lazio region proposed a new regional law on transport and burial of fetuses, with clear consent required from the woman. The current law is too ambiguous, said Councilor Marta Bonafoni: "It must not leave any space for doubt or uncertainty."

But for some, the cemetery case has merely highlighted the need for more general reform. The obstacles to abortion have been tolerated because it is a woman's problem, said Ercoli. "After 40 years the struggle is not over. We must be alert and we must be united."

Italy's 'boys' club' politics shuts women out of coronavirus debate

POLITICO asks six women from across sectors what they would do differently.

By Greta Privitera

POLITICO (18.05.2020) - <https://politi.co/3cZBDwG> - Women are overwhelmingly on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic. And yet, in Italy, when it comes to engineering an exit from lockdown, they've had a hard time getting heard.

Women make up two-thirds of Italy's health workers, 80 percent of cashiers in supermarkets, 90 percent of home care workers and nearly 82 percent of teachers. But very few have a seat at the table where key decisions are being made about the policies to navigate the country's reopening.

Italy is still in the hands of a "boys' club," Emma Bonino, one of 16 senators who filed a motion calling for the government to increase female representation in its working groups, told POLITICO. "Men pass power from hand to hand in a closed circle."

Following a month of protests and public outcry — including the social media campaign "Dateci Voce" (Give us voice) — Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte appeared to take the criticism to heart and pushed for more women to be appointed to the expert groups advising the government.

Five new women will join the Vittorio Colao task force charged with designing Italy's roadmap out of the crisis. The previously all-male scientific committee managing the emergency response will see six female experts join its ranks.

Is it too little, too late? As Italy comes out from under lockdown, POLITICO asked women from across sectors what they would do differently if they were involved in designing the government's deconfinement strategy.

* * *

Orna Serio, middle school teacher, Milan

Before February 23, Orna Serio had never heard of Zoom. When Italy's schools closed, she had to reinvent how she did her job — one she's done for 30 years.

To her, a major blind spot of the current recovery plan is the uncertainty surrounding kids' futures. Despite teachers' best efforts, their education has been seriously interrupted.

Serio, who is a mother of three, knows how difficult it can be to keep up with kids' school work. She sees the effort that her students' families are putting in from behind the screen, but worries that it's not a long-term solution.

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at particular risk of getting lost in the system, according to Serio, and the government should be looking at how to get them the proper tools.

"It takes even more funding to provide families in need with computers and tablets to follow lessons online," she said. "Despite initial aid, many students have been left out."

The government also needs to more clearly understand the link between the reopening of schools for kids and the ability of their parents to get back to work, according to Serio.

Italy's education minister has suggested schools could reopen again in September, with a mix of in-person classes and online learning. But the lack of clarity on what the new arrangement will look like has left many parents wondering how they will go back to work if their kids aren't in school all day.

In many families, deprived by the coronavirus of being able to rely on grandparents, the burden of child care will fall to women, who are still most often the primary caregivers in Italy, exacerbating existing inequalities.

"I understand the difficulties of having to manage a historical moment like this, but it seems like we are being driven with one eye shut, with no long-term project in sight," Serio said. "At some point you have to choose a path."

Giovanna Iannantuoni, dean of Università Bicocca, Milan

Giovanna Iannantuoni, one of only five female university deans in Italy, knows exactly what she would have said, had she been asked to contribute to the debate.

"I would have recommended using the university laboratories to do mass swab testing and make serological kits for the population, because testing is essential," she said. "Our laboratories were never called on."

Now that tests are more widely available, Università Bicocca is the first university in Italy to test all of its employees — more than 2,000 people.

"I went out of my way to start 'Phase Two' by making those who work with me safe," said Iannantuoni. "A woman's approach? Well, I'm proud of it. It's a way of taking care of our community and [protecting] others from unnecessary risks."

Excluding women from discussions on how to move the country out of lockdown — and what life will look like on the other side — makes no sense, said Iannantuoni, who said she hopes politicians will put the well-being of citizens at the center of the debate.

"Starting at my university, I would like to build workplaces with flexible policies, capable of reconciling working life with private life," she said.

"We need to rethink the social model in which we live," she added. "It takes courage to unhinge cultural assumptions, and courage is often a woman's virtue."

Emanuela Girardi, founder of the nonprofit Pop AI, Turin

Emanuela Girardi became one of the main promoters of the "Dateci Voce" initiative when she realized the government would not notice the absence of women's perspectives unless it was confronted with its own biases.

"It all started in a chat with some girlfriends," said Girardi, an artificial intelligence expert who is also a mother of three. "After the announcement of the task force dedicated to rethinking the future of Italy, for the umpteenth time in this emergency it was clear to us that our politicians do not consider women."

A major issue that has been ignored, she said, is the fact that Italy has one of the lowest rates of female employment in Europe — 50 percent. That means that, under the government's new measures, 72 percent of the approximately 4 million people returning to work in this next phase of lockdown are men.

"They can go back to work because at home they have a wife, a partner, that takes care of the children," said Girardi.

Italy needs to be making it possible for women to work outside the home, she said. Those in power have to understand that "gender equality makes sense, it increases the GDP of the country and contributes to the development of the economy."

To advance that goal, the government should also introduce legislation to ensure gender balance in institutions and expert groups that design legislation, said Girardi, who is a member of the ministry of economic development's expert group on artificial intelligence.

Although she has "always been against 'pink quotas,'" Girardi said she now thinks they may be the only way to make tangible progress in a "male system" and make sure women are heard.

Paola Pedrini, general practitioner, Bergamo

Although Paola Pedrini represents family doctors in the region of Lombardy — the most severely affected by the outbreak — the government didn't seem particularly interested in her insight on the situation, she said.

"Nobody ever called me from the government to ask me for information, only the mayor of Milan, Beppe Sala, did once," said Pedrini, the Italian Federation of General Practitioners' sole female regional director among 19 men.

She said she would have pushed the issue of lacking personal protective equipment in hospitals, advised against clogging emergency rooms and emphasized the need for more "at home" diagnostic tools. Having a team of people equipped to carry out tests outside hospitals and advise people on self-isolating would undoubtedly have saved lives, she added.

Instead of listening to doctors, the government "listened to the entrepreneurs," who resisted turning cities like Bergamo into "red zones," she said.

If she was involved in current discussions, she would advise against moving into the next phase of lockdown at all.

"We are not able to immediately isolate a suspected case and that person's close contacts, because testing is only done at the hospital," she said. "General practitioners also still lack protective equipment, which as of now is still being procured by donations."

Pedrini also said she wished the government understood the importance of giving people clear information.

When the number of hospital cases appeared to have decreased, the government called it good news, ignoring the fact that the numbers had fallen because hospitals were full and they no longer took in patients — meaning COVID-19 sufferers were left at home, sometimes in critical condition.

"Even now, the situation that is communicated is not realistic. Those who have mild symptoms and stay at home are not calculated in the numbers, so we do not yet have a reliable figure," she cautioned. "I would have advised that letting people know how things really are was important to earn people's trust."

Stefania, cashier, Milan

Since the emergency began, Stefania, who works at the checkout of a supermarket in Milan, has hardly taken off her blue uniform.

"It's better now, but in the beginning it was hell," she said. "We were without masks or visors. People were storming supermarkets, and no one sanitized the spaces."

She wants the government to pay greater attention to essential workers like her and her husband, who also works in a supermarket. Essential workers, she said, should be given the right protective equipment and be systematically tested if they're expected to keep working while others self-isolate.

The government's failure to do so puts people like Stefania "in a risky position, both for ourselves and our families," she said.

Stefania, who asked to remain anonymous because she is afraid of losing her job, also stressed the need for more support for families like hers who are struggling to find child care solutions while they work.

The government's "babysitter bonus" — a monthly €600 check given to each family — is helpful, but not nearly enough, she said. On days when she and her husband had to work long shifts, they had to pay a neighbor to look after their 7-year-old son for 12 hours.

She also wishes she could spend more time with her son, and help him with his homework, without sacrificing the income they need. "I feel guilty, but we need the €1,000 I earn a month, otherwise we would not be able to pay the rent, the expenses, and everything else."

Her family is only getting by thanks to the help of the people around her, she said. "I, as a woman and a mother, feel abandoned by the state."

Laura Boldrini, senator, Rome

For Laura Boldrini, the epidemic has highlighted an unbearable situation: Fifty-one percent of the population is still excluded from the political debate.

In the midst of an epidemic, that means that discussions over how to handle the emergency and what comes next are inevitably skewed according to what men consider important, making these plans less effective than they could be.

Boldrini, who is one of the senators to have called for more female involvement in lockdown discussions, is tired of hearing stories of women who have been forced to give up their jobs or whose partners don't help with child care, she said.

She is worried that failing to address the specific challenges women are facing during the pandemic will exacerbate current inequalities. "We must stem the damage so it does not become an accepted construct," she said.

She wants politicians involved in the current discussions to consider this an opportunity to build "a more contemporary and just society" — one where child care can be shared equally between women and men and families are supported by generous welfare programs that free both parents up to work.

"These are structural changes that start from politics," she said. With only men at the top, though, there's a real possibility that the government's new measures set society back, she added. "We cannot miss this opportunity."

Too 'ugly' to be raped — Italy's top court opens probe into sentence

By Cristina Abellan Matamoros

EuroNews (15.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Uye4lz> - Italy's top court has opened a probe into a sentence by an Ancona appeals court that found the victim in a rape case was "too ugly to be raped," according to Italian news agency ANSA.

The sentence, which was issued by three female judges, said the rape of a 22-year-old Peruvian woman by two men was not "credible" because of her "masculine appearance".

The men were convicted in 2016 by a court of first instance for the attack, which took place in 2015.

The victim's name was not made public under Italian law.

According to Italian media, the judges made their decision based on a photograph of the woman and because one of the defendants registered her number on his mobile phone under the name "Viking".

The Supreme Court of Cassation cancelled this sentence and ordered a new appeals trial. The case will be reheard by a court in Perugia.

Cinzia Molinaro, the lawyer of the victim, told Euronews her client was back in Peru because of the "isolation" that ensued following the first trial.

"After her alleged abusers were acquitted in the appeals trial, the situation got even worse. The (victim's) mother had to leave Ancona because of the shame she felt and went back to Peru," the lawyer said.

The Peruvian woman's mother had since returned to Italy but had moved away from Ancona, she added.

It came after an Italian man's sentence was halved earlier this month when a Bologna appeals court ruled that he murdered his girlfriend in a "passionate rage".

Both of these cases sparked anger among women's' groups who called for better legislation to protect women from violence.

Sicilian police charge five men over trafficking of women in Ragusa

Romanian men taken into custody after raids targeting criminal exploitation and forced prostitution on farms

The Guardian (07.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2kVuswg> - Sicilian police have charged five Romanian men with human trafficking after a series of police raids targeted the criminal exploitation and forced prostitution of workers in farms across the Ragusa region.

Police said the arrests have exposed an organised inter-EU human trafficking operation between Romania and Sicily that is forcing men and women to live in conditions of modern slavery in one of Italy's largest vegetable producing regions.

The arrests follow an investigation by the Observer last year into the widespread forced labour and sexual exploitation of Romanian women employed as seasonal farm workers in Ragusa.

After a series of raids on farms across the region, Antonino Ciavola, chief of police in Ragusa, said he was shocked by the conditions in which dozens of workers – including a number of Romanian women – were being forced to live and work.

Ciavola said: “This is a first for Italy. We found that women are being recruited in Romania and promised good job opportunities in Sicily. But they all ended up being slaves”.

Police said they found women living in dilapidated houses who were given rotten food to eat, beaten, made to work without pay and forced into prostitution with locals. A number of children were with them. If they refused to work or tried to leave they faced extreme violence.

“It’s hard to imagine that a human being is capable of doing this to another,” said Ciavola. .

The five men arrested were charged with human trafficking, labour exploitation and exploitation of prostitution.

“We have been surveilling these men since last year, for about seven months. We wiretapped their conversations, we were assisted by some victims who were brave enough to collaborate. [During the course of the investigation] we discovered a world where men and women are treated like animals.”

In March last year, the Observer revealed that up to 5,000 Romanian women working on farms in Ragusa were facing conditions of forced labour and severe labour exploitation. The women said in interviews that they had been subject to routine sexual assault and forced to work 12-hour days in extreme heat with no water. They also complained of non-payment of wages and being forced to live in degrading and unsanitary conditions in isolated outbuildings.

Ciavola credited the Observer investigation with kick-starting police inquiries into the abuse of Romanian women in Sicily. He said that police in Sicily have arrested more than 15 men and investigated a further 40 over the past 12 months as they step up their attempts to tackle widespread criminal exploitation on the island.

“I want to publicly thank the Guardian,” he said. “This operation is the result of your investigation”.

“We want to stop this,” Ciavola added. “We want to end the exploitation. We need to free these women”.