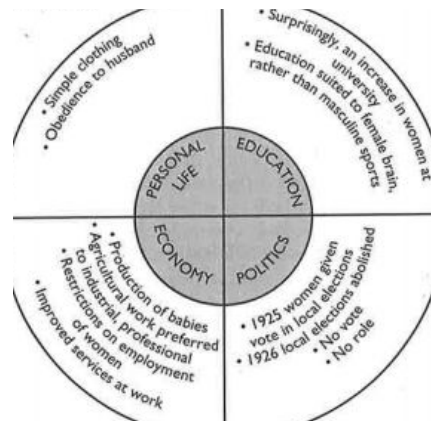


Women in Fascist Italy

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Various statements from the 1930s

- *Women must obey...In our state, she does not count*
- *Intellectual women are a monstrosity*
- *Higher education for women should just cover what the female brain can cope with, i.e. household management*
- *Childbearing is women's natural and fundamental mission in life*
- *Women should be exemplary wives and mother, guardians of the hearth, and subject to the legitimate authority of the husband*
- *(Women's work) distracts from reproduction, if it does not directly impede it, and foments independence and the accompanying physical-moral styles contrary to giving birth.*

Ideology

- Mussolini aimed to promote the concept of family and motherhood in girls
 - *"Women's place, in the present as in the past, is in the home."*
 - *"War is to man what motherhood is to a woman."*
 - Ban of abortion rights and contraception → encouraged women to stay at home and raise children
 - Abortion laws were liberalized in **1978**
 - Divorce was only legalized in **1970**
 - Rape victims were expected to marry their rapists (until the 1970s)
 - If a man who raped a woman married his victim, even if she was a minor, any sexual offense would lapse
 - Family honor was a central aspect of Italian culture

*“He who causes the death of a spouse, daughter, or sister upon discovering her in illegitimate carnal relations and in the heat of passion caused by the **offense to his honor or that of his family** will be sentenced to three to seven years. The same sentence shall apply to whom, in the above circumstances, causes the death of the person involved in illegitimate carnal relations with his spouse, daughter, or sister.”*

- Mussolini wanted a larger population for reasons of national power, more soldiers to fight his wars and more Italians to populate his expanding empire.
- **Fasci Femminili**
 - The National Fascist Party’s women’s organization
 - ‘Women’s Leagues’
 - Carried out welfare activities
- The **Massaie Rurali** helped rural women by instructing them on farming techniques, childcare, and craft manufacturing.
 - The Fascist Party’s section for peasant women
- View on female sports:
 - It could promote health, vigor, discipline and national pride
 - Was believed to distract women from their main job of child production, encourage lesbianism and female liberation
 - Mussolini feared female involvement in sports (riding, skiing, cycling) because it was believed they caused infertility
- Both state and Church blamed the declining birth rate on female vanity, individualism, pleasure-seeking, godlessness, and a corrupting desire to be modern.

Laws and Policies

- Women were given the right to vote in local elections **1925**, but these elections were abolished the following year.
- From the **mid-1920s**, women were excluded from certain teaching jobs
- Women’s employment was restricted after **1927**
 - Mainly affected women in “unnatural occupations”
 - Teachers, office workers, and professionals
- **1932** - contraception, sterilization, and abortion were banned
- The state granted loans to couples, and mothers with a large number of children received medals.
- Laws passed in **1933** and **1938** that restricted the number of women in the workforce in all Italian companies.
 - **1933** - A decree imposed a limit of 10% on state jobs for women

- **1938** - This extended to many private firms (but it was reversed during the war).
 - **1938** - A Turinese spinster wrote to Mussolini in October protesting and said that if she were to lose her job her parents and nephews which she supported would have to depend on government welfare. *This shows the effect the limit of women in the workforce had on other parts of society.*
- Only middle-class women were allowed to work
- **The Battle for Births** aimed to increase the Italian population from 40 to 60 million by **1950** and had support from the Catholic Church
 - Catholic Church considered women as rightfully preoccupied with procreation (reproduction)
 - One of four economic battles that took place in Fascist Italy
 - Aimed to make the country more self-sufficient by introducing a number of measures to encourage reproduction
 - The others include the **Battle for Grain**, the **Battle for the Lira**, and the **Battle for Land**
- Women were excluded from the most prestigious positions in secondary schools
 - More taught math and science instead of Latin, Italian, history, and philosophy
- Women's traditional importance in agriculture was not challenged by the Fascists and they had to accept that millions worked in factories
 - Laws were passed that protected women at work so that they could combine it with raising children

Politics

- Women could not hold important positions within the **PNF**
- Some women set up female fascist groups and their secretary Elisa Rizzioli tried to extend their influence but was blocked.
 - **Fasci Femminili's** main task was to spread socially reactionary policies under the slogan "Women into the home"
- Women served on committees of **OMNI** (Opera Nazionale ed Maternità ed Infanzia)
 - Founded in **1925**
 - An organization that helped mothers in need
 - Specialized in the physical and moral improvement of the Italian race
 - Accepted children up to three years old as well as mothers who provided assistance to staff
 - They were encouraged to do charity work and run classes of home economics for women workers
- Politically mobilizing women was believed to distract them from their primary role in the home.
- Women donated their wedding rings which were exchanged for tin bands when they participated in a campaign against the **League of Nations sanctions (1935)**.

- Women were encouraged to participate in politics as long as they did not campaign for their own policies.
- There was only one woman in the **Council of Corporations** - from the **Midwives Corporation**.
- In **1935** *Massaie Rurali*, an organization for peasant women and in **1938** *The Section for Factory and Home Workers (SOLD)* were established
 - Thus, **despite encouraging women to take on a more traditional role**, the Fascists, in order to control all groups of the society, **still involved women in wider affairs and organizations**

Education

- Education for women was seen as training to stay at home, to be effective housekeepers and mothers.
- Lack of job opportunities → increase in women at university (6% of students in **1914** - 15% in **1938**)

Personal Life

- ❖ Simple clothing
- ❖ Obedience to the husband
- ❖ Well rounded and sturdy, rather than thin and elegant
- ❖ State criticized cosmetics, high heels, trousers for women
- ❖ Flat shoes, long sleeves, Italian-produced simple clothes (no foreign fashion)



Reality

- Men were paid low wages which forced women to work in the informal market to support their families.
- They were underpaid and not protected by work legislation
- In the lower class, girls were not allowed to go beyond 3rd grade
- Despite the **National Committee for Cleaning Up Fashion**' campaigns against indecent and scandalous clothing, many Italians went to cinemas where they could catch glimpses of American actresses' breasts.
- Thousands of women were scantily dressed when performing in athletic parades.
- **1937** - Official survey 1000 Roman girls (mainly professional classes) aged 14-18:
 - "Extraordinary vague" ideas about having families
 - Babies were seen as burdensome

- One or two children were seen as best
- Studied in order to qualify for a job
- Housework was seen as tedious
- Did not expect husbands to support them
- Most were uninterested in traditionally female handicrafts such as knitting or sewing
 - The favorite pastime was movies and many went to the cinemas at least once a week
 - Especially liked reading romance and adventure novels
- Dancing was preferred over singing and painting
- The company of peers of the same age was preferred to that of younger brothers/sisters
- Self-confidence was valued
- Would rather command than obey

Historiography

A.J. Gregor

- 'Fascist anti-feminism was not particularly successful and/or may have been pursued with any special application. In any event, Fascist anti-feminism was, at best, a **subsidiary concern** of Fascist social policy and made its appearance largely as a consequence of concerns with a declining birth rate and rising unemployment.'

De Grazia

- 'The mass organizations of women ultimately reflected unresolved tensions within the dictatorship over how to define women in the Italian state.'

P. Wilson

- The fascist rhetoric and legislation were not successful in reversing the trend of female emancipation. The patterns of industrialization, commercialization, and urbanization had more power to shape female experiences than Fascist ideology and policy.

Key points: A Summary

1. Mussolini had traditional attitudes to the role of women, many of which he shared with the church.
2. Broader social changes were challenging such ideas.
3. Mussolini believed women should stay at home and concentrate on child rearing.
4. The Fascists launched a Battle for Births and encouraged women to have babies through pressure and incentives.

5. The birth rate continued to decline and the regime did not reach its target of 60 million.
6. The Fascists discriminated against women in education and in “unnatural” occupations.
7. The Fascists provided a range of welfare facilities for women.
8. Women were expected to maintain a traditional and unglamorous lifestyle, but the growth of mass culture broadened their horizons.
9. Women were not given the vote, but they were encouraged to join Fascist women’s organizations.
10. They mainly failed to implant their reactionary views in many women.