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The Contrasting Image of Italian Women Under Fascism in the 1930's

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Chapter 1

The Italian Condition Prior to 1919

Women are angels or demons,
born to take care of the household,
bear children, and to make cuckolds.

Benito Mussolini

In this chapter, I will examine Italy in the period before 1919 in order to understand the context into which Fascism was born. I will analyze the political, social and economic condition that existed in the Italian peninsula between the beginning of the Twentieth century and World War One, and try to explain why Fascism became so popular in so little time, and why it was able to establish such a long-term dictatorship.

Italian Fascism was an antidemocratic and antisocialist movement that developed in Italy at the end of World War I, more precisely on March 23, 1919 when Benito Mussolini founded his new organization called *Fasci di Combattimento* in Piazza San Sepolcro in the city of Milan. This organization, whose members were known as Fascists, was at first a paramilitary organization based on squad violence (*squadrismo*) and male camaraderie, both of which essentially acted as the police. The two organizations slowly disappeared after 1925, once the Fascist Party officially became a dictatorship, although they still maintained power in some of the major Italian cities.[11]

> The term 'fascism' orginated with Mussolini in 1919. As a mass movement, fascism first emerged out of, and as a reaction against, the wave of proletarian revolutions sweeping Europe after the turmoil of the First World War, a period of acute social crisis. However, as a form of political behavior and ideology,

[11] See Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991,) 19-21.

> fascism is not just a phenomenon of historical interest restricted to Italy or even to the range of regimes that emerged in inter-war Europe.[12]

The *Fasci di Combattimento* then became a political party in 1921 with the name of *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF, Fascist National Party), and subsequently a dictatorship in 1925, remaining under the power of Benito Mussolini until 1943, when his dictatorship collapsed.[13] As Lasansky explains,

> The new regime quickly gained the support of the industrial working classes, the middle class, landowners, and business through political rhetoric that promised social reform, political power of the people, and a new form of aggressive nationalism. They established a corporate economy that united workers and business leaders within a system of intense productivity. By 1926 Mussolini had transformed the government into a totalitarian state. He gained control of the press, abolished the Parliament, and eliminated competing political parties. While the Italian monarchy survived during this rule, its power was greatly diminished.[14]

There are many aspects of Fascism that characterized not solely the Italian movement, but to some extent all the fascist movements across Europe and the world. Perhaps the fundamental idea behind Fascism was that of being "revolutionary," meaning a break with the past, and the creation of something new that Italy had ever experienced before. And under many aspects (positive or negative) Fascism was precisely that. The term "revolutionary" can be interpreted as a revolution "against modern society, with its connotations of industrialism, individualism and bourgeois values; or, alternatively, as a

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[12] Ian McDonald, "Political Somatic: Fascism, Physical Culture and Sporting Body," in *Physical Culture, Power and the Body*, eds., Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky (London and New York: Routledge, 2007,) 54. The word "fascism" came from the ancient Latin term *fascio littorio*, which was a symbol or the power held by the magistrates in Ancient Rome, and was represented with a bundle of oak rods tied together, with an ax placed either in the middle or on the side of the bundle. See Enciclopedia Treccani <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/fascismo/>.

[13] See Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 5th ed. (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 207-215; see also Enciclopedia Treccani, <http://www.treccani.it/Portale/elements/categoriesItems.jsp?pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Enciclopedia_online/F/ENCICLOPEDIA_UNIVERSALE_3_VOLUMI_VOL2_01 1977.xml>; S. J. Woolf, "Italy", in Fascism in Europe, ed. S. J. Woolf (London – New York: Methuen, 1981), 39-63.

[14] D. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004,) 1.

technocratic, modernizing credo."[15] Also, the Fascist party was the first party to include the masses, the populace, which up to that moment in history had constantly been excluded.

> It was Mussolini and the Fascist ideologists who first invented the word "totalitarian" in 1923 to describe the state of Fascist Italy: unlike the state in the democracies and all previous regimes, the Fascist state was totalitarian because it demanded the total commitment and devotion of all its citizens, but in a number of ways it was milder than Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia or the royal despotism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[16]

The integration of the population, and its approval, represented one of the main points of Fascist ideology because it was precisely from such large masses of people that its consent was generated. For this reason Mussolini wanted to incorporate the working class into its structure, not because it believed in equal rights for all, but because it believed in numbers. During a speech given at Milan, on December 6, 1922, before the workmen of the iron foundries, Mussolini stated:

> Sometimes, when I was a boy, I helped my father in his hard and humble work, and now I have the infinitely harder task of bending souls. At twenty I worked with my hands – I repeat, with my hands – first as a mason's lad and afterwards as a mason. And I do not tell you this in order to arouse your sympathy, but to show you how impossible it is for me to be against the working class.[17]

The need for consent and mass participation that Fascism tried to elicit was in part a consequence of the years of the so-called *biennio rosso* (the two red years), between 1919 and 1920, during which socialism was growing strong as an opposition to the liberal government by creating its own "state within the state." These years were not solely years of strikes and protests; they were also years when socialism started spreading its roots in the northern regions of Italy, creating

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[15] Stuart J. Woolf, ed., *Fascism in Europe* (London & New York: Methuen, 1981,) 3.

[16] Jasper Ridley, *Mussolini: A Biography*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997,) 201; see also Adrian Lyttleton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1973.)

[17] Benito Mussolini, "My Father Was a Blacksmith and I Have Worked With Him; He Bent Iron, but I Have the Harder Task of Bending Souls", in *Mussolini as Revealed in His Political Speeches (November 1914 – August 1923,)* edited by Barone Bernardo Quaranta di San Severino (New York: Howard Fertig, 1976,) 80.

a web of organizations and associations that brought together part of the population. The Socialist Party itself accepted members outside of the industrial proletariat, creating a strong network of workers who did not identify themselves with the liberal state, and who were trying to find their place in society. Precisely because of the large numbers of members and supporters, the Socialist Party and its organizations were able to develop and thrive during the 'red years,' creating a strong and valid alternative to the liberal government. De Grazia states that:

> Individually the [socialist] circles had thus achieved a remarkable degree of autonomy by the "red years," and not only because of their basic self-sufficiency. In a very real way, they had remained outside of an admittedly still very inefficient bourgeois state, escaping attempts by the central government to control their conducts by refusing, as required by national law, to register their statutes with the public authority.[18]

This microcosm described by De Grazia is precisely what fascist *squadristi* dedicated their first years of violence to. Although Mussolini understood that consent was at the base of a strong country and united population, he also could not accept that such consent and unity was coming from socialist organizations, which could have become strong enough to get in the way of his desire to rule. The only way to dismantle such a network was by physically destroying it, which is what happened between the end of 1920 and throughout 1921; "by the end of 1921 the much-feared socialist state within the state lay in ruins."[19] Women also played a role during these years, both in the organizations themselves, and in the rural and urban unrest that was taking place during the time. They took direct part in occupations and strikes, and most of them were involved in food protests. However, their role was a lot more marginalized when compared to the wartime situation.[20]

Fascism's view on women and the family varied when compared to

[18] Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 9.
[19] Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 10.
[20] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 60.

the liberal years, although it remains very intriguing and somewhat puzzling because of the internal contradictions it presented. Although a "revolutionary" movement, Fascism still maintained strong and traditional beliefs, especially with regard to the role that women played within their families and society. While attempting to modernize Italian society, Italian culture and Italian fashion, Mussolini also wanted women to remain in the traditional role of mother and wife, central to the nuclear Italian family. Because of the internal contradictions of this political and social movement, one of the main problems in analyzing Fascism is its interpretation. In fact, as Stuart J. Woolf points out,

> Interpretations on Italian fascism are conditioned by the particular visual angle adopted, by concentrating on the fascist movement or alternatively on the fullblown [*sic*] regime. For a long time the dominant interest in the origins of fascism led to extremely superficial interpretations of the regime. The contrast between the ideology, style and actions of the early movement, with the vitality and apparent modernity of its approach, and the bureaucratic, heavy-handed compromises and almost caricatural [*sic*] rhetoric of the regime easily lead to contradictory interpretations either of a right-wing revolutionary potential, or of the irrelevance of an early ideology.[21]

A crucial aspect to understanding Fascism is, without a doubt, the historical, social and economic conditions of Italy at the end of World War I. Though one of the victors of the First World War, Italy did not attain all of its war aims. In fact Italians commonly refer to the victory as a *vittoria mutilata* (mutilated victory) because of the territories Italy did not get at the Paris Peace Conference, and because of the challenging economic and social consequences that derived from it.[22] The country was on its knees, with a high unemployment rate and a weak industry; the great

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[21] Suart J. Woolf, ed., *Fascism in Europe,* 40-41; on the interpretations of Fascism see also Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1975.)

[22] See Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 5th ed., 205-7. For more information about the mutilated victory, and the view that many Italians had on such an event, see also Benito Mussolini, "The Tasks of Fascismo", in *Mussolini as Revealed in His Political Speeches (November 1914 – August 1923,)* edited by Barone Bernardo Quaranta di San Severino, 108-120.

differences between the North and the South still existed, since the northern part of the Peninsula was slowly moving towards a more industrialized economy, while the southern part still remained tied to the aristocratic and feudal system. Socially, the consequences were even worse because the *vittoria mutilata* generated a sense of unrest and distrust among the Italian population, not only toward the Italian Liberal government of the time, but also towards the stronger European countries who had rejected the Italian claims at the Paris Peace Conference.[23]

Regional differences, political conflict, economic strife, and feelings of national inferiority were nothing new in the Italian nation's very short history. They began during the *Risorgimento* (resurgence), a period during which Italy was being unified under a new king issued from the House of Savoy, and during which the Bourbon family was being expelled from the Southern regions of the country. As Irma Taddia states:

> A major source of instability and social conflict was the great discrepancy between the north and the south of Italy, with the north deeply marked by the experience of Napoleon's political and administrative unification and the

[23] The Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919 by the four winning nations of World War One: the United States, France, Great Britain and Italy, with their respective representatives being President Wilson, and prime ministers Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando. This peace treaty with Germany was meant to cripple and destroy the Prussian Empire, and leave the country in a weak condition. To try and guard Europe from another World War, President Wilson created the famous Fourteen Points, where he enumerated Germany's responsibilities towards the other European countries involved in the war, and the new geographical setting which was going to take place after the destruction of the four European empires. Two of these points, numbers IX and X, specifically addressed the Italian situation, stating that "A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality" and that "The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development." Many Italian nationalists, including the *irredentists*, were strongly against these two points, which impeded Italian cities such as Zara and Fiume, and Italian territories, such as Dalmatia, to become a part of the Italian nation. The loss of these territories is what Italians refer to as 'mutilated victory' because Italy was not granted what it had been promised during the conflict. See Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 5th ed., 153-4, 167-69, 186-88; see also Woodrow Wilson, 'President Wilson's Fourteen Points', < http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/President_Wilson's_Fourteen_Points>.

> south still immersed in the relatively backward Bourbon tradition. All of these features made the process of transition to statehood and nationhood particularly uneasy, and dramatically emphasized the social, economic and cultural differences within Italy that lead to a highly unbalanced society.[24]

The Sicilian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, brilliantly explained the southern Italians' attitude during the *Risorgimento* in his masterpiece *The Leopard*. The southerners, he explained, were never going to change their way of life and their way of thinking because they felt as if they were a completely different population from those of the North. Expelling one royal family to bring along another one was not going to change the Italian state of affairs, and it was certainly not going to make the Italian Peninsula a more unified country. He marvelously explains this thought through the words of Prince Salina, one of the main characters of the novel. The prince explains,

> Through a very long hegemony of rulers who did not share our religion, who did not speak our language, we Sicilians have been accustomed to being extremely stubborn. If we did not behave like that we would have never survived the byzantine tax collectors, the Berber emirs, and the Spanish viceroys. Now things can't be changed; we are the way we are. You [Chevalley] will understand only after you spend a year with us. In Sicily it doesn't matter whether you do right or wrong; the sin which we Sicilians never forgive is simply that of 'doing.' We are old, Chevalley, very old. It has been at least twenty-five centuries that we have been carrying around on our shoulders the weight of diverse and magnificent civilizations, all of which came from outside already finished and perfected, none which blossomed from ourselves, none which we began; we are white just as you are, Chevalley, as white as the Queen of England; despite that, we have been a colony for the past twenty-five hundred years. (…) The violence of our landscape, the cruelty of our climate, the constant tensions that exists, these monuments of the past, marvelous but incomprehensible because we did not construct them, and which exist around us as mute ghosts; all of these rulers that came bearing weapons from all over, which immediately took their fill, soon became hated and were always misunderstood, and who expressed themselves through works of art that we find enigmatic, and taking our money which was then spent elsewhere. All these things forged our personality, which remains so conditioned by external fatalities, as well as from a terrifying insularity of soul.[25]

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[24] Irma Taddia, "Italy: The Last Empire," in *The Age of Empires*, ed. Robert Aldrich (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2007), 254; see also Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 5th ed., 65-6.

[25] Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1958,) 161-4.

This sense of unrest, which was embedded in the southern region because of the reasons so perfectly described by Tomasi di Lampedusa, and which was amplified prior to and during the conflict, is what generated the irredentist movement, a group of men and women who wanted to fight for Italy's colonial rights and take back the lands which had been subtracted from Italy's victory. Irredentism, as Choate explains, was the national redemption of ethnic minorities abroad because not all Italians had been united within the borders of the Kingdom of Italy.[26] During World War I, the main focus was on the cities of Fiume, Trento and Trieste which were considered Italian, inhabited by an Italian population, and yet under the power of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

A desire for colonies often went hand-in-hand with irredentism and nationalism. The country's colonial history had never been brilliant. In the late nineteenth century Italy was surrounded by nations that were expanding their colonial possessions in Africa and Asia, and by countries such as Spain, Portugal and Great Britain which had a long colonial and imperialist history that went back several centuries. As the Germans claimed "their place in the sun", Italy felt the same need. Moreover, the country was facing an emigration problem. Millions of Italians were packing up their belonging and emigrating to North and South America where more opportunities could be found. As Choate states,

> Though one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, Italy lagged behind its neighbors in economic productivity and development. Italian laborers had long traveled for temporary work to neighboring regions within

[26] Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5. For more information about Italian colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth century, see also Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism*; Robert Aldrich, ed., 254-277; Mark Choate, ibid, 57-71.

> Italy and to Austria-Hungary, Germany, Switzerland and France. But under the pressure of industrialization and changing markets, transoceanic emigration became more attractive and more necessary. Italian workers could double or triple their wages by working abroad."[27]

Indeed between 1878 and 1881 the number of Italians emigrating to the United States doubled from twenty to forty thousand; the numbers doubled again in 1886, in 1891 and in 1904, with peaks in 1906 and 1913 when almost half a million people left Italy.[28]

The Italian diaspora was one of the main reasons which led the Italian prime ministers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century to colonize lands that could accommodate the emigrating population. Moreover, Italy already had a colonial history in Africa that went back to Roman times. The idea of a strong revival of the Roman Empire was used both by Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, a *Risorgimento* hero, and subsequently by Benito Mussolini in attempt to back Italy's need for colonial expansion and conquest. Choate writes that

> The vision of a reborn Roman empire in Africa promised power and influence for "Greater Italy," and was the basis of Italy's African empire in the nineteenth century. Its principal architect was Prime minister Francesco Crispi, who in 1890 pioneered state-sponsored settler colonialism in East Africa along the Red Sea, with emigration as his justification."[29]

In March 1896 the Italian troops were brutally defeated in Adwa, Ethiopia, by the troops of the Ethiopian emperor Menelik II, which caused the loss not solely of men, but also of many military and economic resources.[30] The situation had improved slightly between 1911 and 1913 with the colonization of Libya during Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti's government, a colonization which had made possible Italian expansion,

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[27] Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad*, 3, n.5.
[28] Mark I Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad*, 4, n.6.
[29] Ibid, 7.
[30] Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 5th ed., 13, 66-70.

but had not brought the economic benefits for which Italy had hoped.

World War I had brought about an even more challenging economic situation, and a desire among the Italian population to change Italy's political façade and to create something new. Up until the world conflict Italy's political life had been a complex one, with a governing oligarchy (whose members all belonged to the higher social classes), a weak monarchy, and an insignificant percentage of a politically active population. Up until 1886 only 2.1 percent of the population voted in national elections, with the numbers going up to 23.9 percent in the 1913 elections. [31] These small numbers were due in part to the fact that the majority of Italians were illiterate – 11 percent of the population in the north, and 90 percent in the south,[32] but also because of the difficult relationship existing between the Catholic Church and the new Italian government. In fact, on September 10, 1874 the Holy See had promulgated the *Non Expedit* decree, through which it banned all Catholic men from voting in national elections. The decree was overlooked during the 1904 elections, and completely eliminated in 1914 by Pope Benedict XV.[33] Women were not considered citizens, and therefore had no say in the country's political outcomes. In fact, according to the Pisanelli Code[34], "women were denied suffrage rights and were banned from holding any type of public

[31] See <http://cronologia.leonardo.it/elezio1.htm>.

[32] Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 5th ed., 69.

[33] See <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xv/biography/documents/hf_ben-xv_bio_20060214_biography_it.html>; < http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20000903_tommaso-reggio_en.html>.

[34] The Pisanelli Code was the new civil code which was introduced by the new Liberal state in 1865, after the unification of the country, and was very similar to the Napoleonic Code, which existed prior to unification. See Enciclopedia Treccani, http://www.treccani.it/Portale/sito/scuola/in_aula/storia/codice_napoleonico/bartoloni.html>.

office."[35] During the Socialist and Fascist years as well women were never granted the suffrage and political power they were promised. Socialism was more concerned with class issues, rather than gender, and Fascism, although promising female suffrage during its first years, quickly revoked the promise after 1925, when the dictatorship was established, and when Fascism created the title of *podestà* in all Italian cities.[36]

With the rise to power of Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, the economic, political and social situation in the peninsula improved, although Italy was not able to become a major European power. Giolitti tried to minimize the chasm that existed between North and South, and tried to support the Italian industrial revolution, which was taking place during the years of his first mandate, between 1903 and 1905. One of his main accomplishments was to promote male suffrage for educated men over thirty years of age (all of whom had to have completed military service), although leaving out women, who would not gain the right to vote until June 2, 1946.

Due to the world conflict, the gender situation in Italy had undergone changes as well. In fact, though most middle-class women had been confined to their homes in the past, the years between 1915 and 1918 were years when women finally stepped into the working sector because
their husbands, fathers and brothers were fighting at the front. Italy, just as every other country involved in the conflict, was forced to hire women to keep the industries alive and to support the country's economy. Lower class women had long been exposed to laboring situations, prior to the conflict as well, because of their dire economic conditions and their need to support their

[35] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 7.
[36] See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 27, 37-40, 60.

their families. In fact, the wages earned by men were oftentimes not enough to support the household expenses, and the children's needs. Women's jobs, however, had never been the same of those of men, being considered unequal both because of their lesser importance and because of their lesser wages. According to Anna Kuliscioff's research, at the end of the nineteenth century no matter what the job was, women were always paid much less than men, with wages ranging from a half to a third of male salaries. For instance, a male hemp spinner was paid 3.20 lira, while a woman was paid only 1.05.[37]

Oftentimes lower-class women worked as maids, wet-nurses, laundresses and seamstresses if they lived in the cities, or they helped their family in the fields if they lived in the countryside. With the development of an Italian industrial sector, however, many women and young girls were employed in industries instead of men, mainly for two reasons: they were easier to control and their wages could be significantly lower.[38] Among educated women only a few decided that they were willing to work, "making their mark in the public sphere in professions like teaching, writing and medicine."[39] Although many governments were resistant to opening secondary education to women, believing that certain studies and trades were solely for men, by the turn of the century many aristocratic women were attending universities, studying law and medicine together with their male peers.[40] Many women no longer wanted to – or could not afford to be - segregated to the

[37] Anna Kuliscioff, "The Monopoly of Man", 1890.
[38] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18.
[39] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 4.
[40] Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 5th ed., 27-8.

domestic area, and therefore started working to become independent. As Anna Kuliscioff explains in her speech titled "The Monopoly of Man":

> The always growing female desire to become economically independent is a phenomenon typical of recent times; in fact, modern life pushes women to work, either because of economic necessity – as it happens in the majority of working classes and middle classes -, and for moral reasons in the small minority of privileged classes. Even the dominant-class woman is no longer satisfied with being a flower, an angel or the docile companion and slave of a man; she wants to cooperate with him in the social work, and represent a social value.[41]

Primary teaching was probably the most common female occupation, which was considered a priority by the Liberal state. Women were seen as the front-line troops of the government's program to forge national identity, bringing national culture and language to the masses. Italian primary teaching became quite feminized with, by 1901, 35,344 women teachers in the public sector alone.[42] The practice of medicine and law, however, was not as open to the female gender. Female doctors did exist, although in very low percentages when compared to males, and they were likely confined to the gynecologic and pediatric sectors; female law students had a much tougher time being accepted by the surrounding educated population for a series of reasons. The Civil Code of the Kingdom of Italy [43], in fact, denied women the right to hold

[41] This speech (probably her most famous and important one) was given by Anna Kuliscioff in 1890, and it spoke about the history of women over time, and the monopoly that men have on the female sex, a monopoly that, according to Kuliscioff herself, should cease to exist because in modern societies men and women should be seen as equal. [Il desiderio sempre più manifesto della donna di rendersi economicamente indipendente è un fenomeno particolare dei tempi recenti; poiché la vita moderna spinge dovunque la donna al lavoro, per necessità economica nella grande maggioranza delle classi lavoratrici e delle classi medie, e per ragioni morali nella piccola minoranza delle classi privilegiate. Imperocchè anche la donna delle classi dominanti non si contenta più d'essere un fiore, un angelo, un oggetto d'arte o la docile compagna e serva dell'uomo, ma reclama di cooperare con lui al lavoro sociale e rappresentare anch'essa un valore sociale.]

[42] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 22.

[43] The first Civil Code of the Kingdom of Italy was issued in 1865, following the unification of the Peninsula. Previous to this Code, the single kingdoms and regions had their own laws and civil codes which existed autonomously from one another. The Civil Code of the Kingdom of Italy remained active until 1942, when the new and present Italian Civil Code was issued.

public office, although many times this law was overlooked depending on the specific situation. As Perry Willson states:

> Many argued that practicing law was a form of public office and therefore closed to women. Some simply called the idea 'ridiculous' or 'strange' or raised the question of 'women's nature', their 'intellectual inferiority' and the 'needs of the family'. More extravagantly, some invoked women's 'strange and bizarre clothing' or warned that judges would be distracted from their work by attractive female lawyers.[44]

Whatever the chosen path was, it certainly was not an easy one for women at the time, but it was a first step in the direction of emancipation and equal rights – at least for upper-class women.

Unfortunately, the levels of illiteracy among Italians at the beginning of the twentieth century were very high, in particular among girls who oftentimes were held back from schooling. The public education system in Italy was founded in 1859 with the Casati Law[45], which aimed at educating the younger generations at least through elementary school, teaching the young Italian boys and girls how to read and write.

Although the number of illiterate girls remained higher than that of illiterate boys, the numbers significantly dropped between the second part Of the 1800's and the beginning years of World War I. Willson explains that:

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[44] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 21; see also F. Tacchi, 'Donne e avvocatura. Dall'età liberale ad oggi', in *Rassegna Forense*, 35 (2002): 461-99.

[45] The Casati Law was passed in 1859, when the Italian Peninsula was being unified under the power of the Savoy family, and it remained the governing law on education until 1923, when the educational system was once again modified by Giovanni Gentile, during the Fascist dictatorship. As Jasper Ridley states, "The greatest importance was placed on education, and the indoctrination of the youth. This was particularly important in a country where every child was indoctrinated in Catholic Christianity from the every earliest age. Mussolini's first Minister of Education was the philosopher Professor Gentile; and although Gentile resigned from the government in protest after the murder of Matteotti, he was persuaded to rejoin the Fascist hierarchy, although not as a minister, when the repercussions of the murder had died down," ibid., 206. For more information about the Casati Law, its creation and duration, see the online Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/179408/education/47668/Other-European-countries?anchor=ref303293>.

> According to official statistics, in 1861, 72 per cent of men and 84 per cent of women had been illiterate. By 1901, the numbers were 42.5 per cent and 54.4 per cent respectively. The continuing gender disparity was partly because girls were more likely to be denied schooling, as their 'need' for education was considered less important. Some parents, moreover, kept daughters at home because of fears of their morality. Military service was also a factor as conscripts (all males of course) were taught to read.[46]

The poorer families many times could not afford to send their children to school because they would have lost a helping hand in the fields, or an additional source of income. This condition continued long after the First World War, as we can learn from two personal interviews with Sara and Silia Vignoli. Both these women were born in Fiesole (a small town in the province of Florence) from a poor family in 1924 and 1933 respectively. The four children (Sara, Silia, and two brothers) were schooled publicly through the age of ten, but had to quit for economic reasons because the father alone could not support them – he being the only one that worked. The two girls began working as apprentices in a seamstress's shop at the age of ten in order to become independent workers as they learned the trade. Sara's and Silia's mother, Albina Vignoli, a woman who was born in 1893, however, could not consider herself as fortunate as her children. She, in fact, was illiterate up until her first son, Sergio, attended elementary school in 1927, and learned how to read and write with him as he was completing his schoolwork.[47]

A third path to which many women resorted was prostitution, an occupation which was openly criticized by the Catholic Church and the Italian government, but which at the same time was tolerated as a necessary occupation to satisfy the male desire, and to avoid other women being raped. As Gibson states,

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[46] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 15-16.

[47] Sara Vignoli, Personal Interview, Jan. 4, 2010; Silia Vignoli, Personal Interview, Jan. 4, 2010.

> Promiscuous and usually single, the prostitute came to be viewed in the nineteenth century as not only morally, but also biologically deviant. Ironically, many of the [people] who eulogized marriage also confirmed the need for prostitution in order to satisfy the male sexual drive, which was also "natural" and frustrated by the passionlessness [*sic*] of marriage.[48]

Unlike the present day, prostitution was controlled and regulated by the state. The state licensed the *case di tolleranza* (brothels) and registered the prostitutes that worked in them; they were all subject to biweekly medical controls to avoid venereal diseases, and were forced to undergo treatment for these diseases, known as *sifilicomi.* The interesting aspects about these check-ups were that only prostitutes were forced to be visited by doctors, while their clients were not. Towards the beginning of the 1900's, the regulations regarding prostitution became a little weaker, although brothels still needed to be registered, police check-ups were still in order, and medical inspections were still possible. More lenient rules lead to a large number of unregistered prostitutes; in fact, if at the beginning of the twentieth century only between 5,500 and 6,500 prostitutes were registered, there are sources that state that the real amount was at least double. Many of these women who sold their bodies for male pleasure worked part-time, combining prostitution with other daily occupations.[49]

Prostitution was one of the main issues that worried the Italian feminist groups of pre-War Italy. Prostitution, in fact, was seen as humiliating for women both morally and physically; what most feminists argued for was a restraint of male desire as opposed to forcing prostitutes to undergo medical

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[48] Cited in Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860-1915*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 22, n. 29.

[49] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 19-20, 41; on feminist associations that aimed at combating prostitution and eliminating it see also M. Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy, 1860-1915*, 2nd ed.; R. Marcelli, *L'indegnà schiavitù. Anna Maria Mozzoni e la lotta contro la prostituzione di stato*, p. 65.

visits. The sale of sex, however, was not the only issue that Italian feminists were concerned with; others were legal equality, paternity searches, and equal pay, which were just a few of the important points that were discussed at the first meeting of the *Lega Promotrice degli Interessi Femminili* (League for the Promotion of Women's Interests), founded in December 1880.[50] Although this association, and the various associations that formed all over the Italian peninsula during the subsequent years did not have the strength and magnitude of the feminist waves of the 1970's and 1980's, it still represented a break from the past and a desire, among the middle and upper class female population, to change women's social and political condition. Their main concerns regarded women's education and the reformation of the Civil Code, which, according to them, was antiquated and misogynist. Nevertheless, although breaking away from tradition and advocating a change for the female sex, most feminists still believed that a woman's role was to be a good wife and mother, and that ultimately the home was meant to be the hearth. The strongest limitation of the *Lega Promotrice degli Interessi Femminili* was that it was not interested in making every woman's life equal to that of men, but only the lives of women that belonged to the upper and middle classes. In fact, all the feminist associations that formed in Italy were mainly made up of women who were educated, who were able to speak and write properly, and who had time to dedicate to the feminist cause. Certainly lower class

[50] On the importance and explanation of the formation of the Lega Promotrice degli Interessi Femminili see Annarita Buttafuoco, *Questioni di cittadinanza: donne e diritti sociali nell'Italia liberale* (Siena: Protagon, 1997.)

women, who worked ten hours per day, and who had a family to take care of could not find the time to dedicate to feminist organizations.

One of the most important people who fought for women's rights was Anna Kuliscioff,[51] a Russian immigrant who also became one of Italy's first female doctors. Her position in Italian politics was somewhat contradictory because she never joined a female organization, yet she was one of the strongest promoters of female rights. She worked very closely with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which, however, did not always agree with her requests for female emancipation, female working rights and the female vote. Many members of the party - including Filippo Turati himself, who was Kuliscioff's companion, proceeded to gradually isolate her and exclude her from party decisions, until her death in 1925. Kuliscioff played an important role in the promulgation of the 1902 law which regulated women's and children's working conditions, and which "banned women from certain dirty jobs and night work, restricted them to a ten-hour working day and introduced (unpaid) maternity leave for 28

[51] Anna Kuliscioff was born in Russia in 1854, and was one of the most important feminists between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. She was forced to flee Russia in 1877 because of her anarchic political views, and spent time initially in Switzerland, and subsequently in Italy, where she completed her medical degree, and became one of Italy's first female doctors. In Italy she met Filippo Turati, leader of the Italian socialist party (PSI), and with whom she became sentimentally involved. Kuliscioff also became an active member of the PSI, although her feminist views, and the importance she gave to female emancipation and female rights ended up isolating her within the party itself. She died in Milan in 1925. See Paolo Pillitteri, *Anna Kuliscioff: una biografia politica*, (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 1986); Jane Slaughter and Robert Kern, *European Women on the Left*, (Westport – London: Greenwoor Press, 1981); Tommaso Detti, "Anna Kuliscioff, Filippo Turati e la tradizione socialista", *Studi Storici*, year 18, no. 1 (1977); Enciclopedia Treccani, <http://www.treccani.it/Portale/elements/categoriesItems.jsp?pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Enciclopedia_online/K/BIOGRAFIE_-_EDICOLA_K_136951.xml>.

days after the birth (although this could sometimes be relaxed after 14 days.)"[52]

What women had to fight against was not solely tradition, but also the new ideas that were developing in Italy and in Europe in the early twentieth century. As Willson explains:

> Many (…) men shared the ideological preconception of other males of their day about gender roles, such as the belief that inequality was necessary to marriage to avoid strife. New ideas were influential too including positivist arguments about women's supposedly smaller brains and biological inferiority. Some argued that it was the exploitative nature of capitalism that forced women to work, unnaturally, outside their rightful place at home.[53]

Many intellectuals felt a strong misogynistic feeling as well. For instance, the *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909, published for the first time in the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, expressed its dissent for the feminist movements stating: "We want to destroy museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism

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[52] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 30. See also C. Ficola, "Legislazione sociale e tutela della maternità nell'era giolittiana", in M. L. Betri and A. Gigli Marchietti, eds., *Salute e classi lavoratrici in Italia dell'Unità al fascismo* (Milan: Angeli, 1982).

[53] Perry Willson, Women in Twentieth Century Italy, 28. The theories on the inferiority of women were very strong and very popular at the time of the first-wave of feminism. Most of these theories stated that the inferiority of women had to do with their biological formation, ranging from the size of their brains, to the strength of their bodies. Women, therefore, were seen as lesser then men, no longer from a religious point of view, but from a biological one. On March 3, 1870, the magazine "La Plebe" published the following statement: "Nature, in fact, created women as sick creatures, irritable, and more capable of imagination and enthusiasm rather than reason and common sense. The development of the brain, which is quicker than that of men, stops at an earlier stage in women; this interruption takes place precisely in the moment when adolescence, in all its strength, is completely abandoned to the stimuli of passion. Sentiments are the most important aspect in the female life; they are the ones that trace their way in society, in love, in affection, and confidence." (my translation) [La natura, infatti, ha prodotto la donna semi-ammalata, essenzialmente nervosa, più capace di immaginazione e di entusiasmo, che di ragione e di criterio. Lo sviluppo del cervello, più rapido che nell'uomo, s'arresta più presto nella donna, e proprio nel momento in cui l'adolescenza in tutta la sua forza è intieramente abbandonata agli stimoli delle passione. I sentimenti affettivi tengono essi soli la più gran parte nella vita della donna; sono essi che le tracciano la via in società, via d'amore, di affezione, di confidenza.] See Cesare Lombroso, *La donna criminale* (Milan: Hoepli, 1895); *La donna delinquente* (Milan: Hoepli, 1927); on female inferiority according to Positivism see Nicola Abbagliano and Giovanni Fornero, *Itinerari di Filosofia. Protagonisti, testi, temi e laboratori (3)*, vol. 2 (Torino: Paravia Editori, 2003); <http://www.pbmstoria.it/unita/bimdonne/tema1/tema1_7fr.php>. ; Claudio Giovannini, "L'emancipazione della donna nell'Italia postunitaria: una questione borghese?", Studi storici, vol. 23 no. 2 (1982), 355-381.

and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice." Marinetti, the founder of the Futurist movement, also states in the *Manifesto* that "we want to glorify war the only hygiene of the world; militarism; patriotism; the destructive actions of libertarians; the wonderful ideas for which we die; our disdain for women."[54]

With the explosion of World War One the situation for women changed partially because many women had been asked to support their country and their men by taking over what had previously been considered male jobs, and helping Italy win the conflict. Women were asked to abandon their occupations as wet-nurses, seamstresses, and maids, in order to populate the warfare industries, which, together with the textile industries were the two main producers of goods during the conflict. These changes in gender roles, however, were limited because only a few of them were able to survive the war, unlike what many feminists had hoped for. As Perry Willson explains, "In Italy, some, albeit fairly limited, change brought by World War One did outlive the ending of hostilities and there were opportunities to prove their worth in both paid employment and voluntary work. But lasting change was limited."[55] With the end of the conflict and the disastrous situation which Italy had to face, women were asked to return to the hearth to help their husbands and repopulate the country.

According to Françoise Thébaud, the female emancipation that

[54] "Nous voulon démolir les musées, les bibliothèques, combattre le moralisme, le féminisme, et toutes les lâchtés opportunistes et utilitaires."; "Nous voulon glorifier la guerre – seule hygiène du monde, - le militarisme, le patriotisme, le géste destructeur des anarchistes, les belles Idées qui tuent, et le mépris de la femme." Filippo T. Marinetti, "Manifeste du Futurisme," *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909.

[55] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 43.

many thought had generated from the war was nothing but an illusion, since the war actually blocked the feminist movements that were getting stronger all over Europe prior to the conflict. With the end of World War One, women were sent back to the place where most men believed they belonged: the home. Thébaud explains:

> War was a parenthesis before a return to normality, a theatre of shadows where women took up primary roles only apparently. On the contrary, war might have paralyzed the emancipation movement which was taking place all over Europe at the beginning of the XX century, and which was represented by an economically and sexually independent *New Woman*, and by a strong, egalitarian and full of initiative feminist movement. It gave strength back to the male identity, which had suffered a crisis at the eve of the conflict, and it put women back into their role of prolific mothers, housewives – in the best of cases freed by the new and modern techniques of housekeeping, and of subdued and admiring wives.[56]

Through these words it is possible to understand how contradictory the female situation in Italy was at the end of the Great War. Women felt differently than they had in the past because they got to experience freedom and emancipation – although only temporary - unlike anything they had ever experienced; they had been able to care for their homes and for their children without male help; they felt like a change was in order. On the other side of the coin, however, were the Italian government and the Catholic Church. The government was the same Liberal one that had been in power before the conflict; the same government which had never really taken the female question into consideration because it had never considered women equal to men. The

[56] Françoise Thébaud, "La Grande Guerra: età della donna o trionfo della differenza sessuale?", in *Storia delle donne. Il Novecento*, eds., George Duby and Michelle Perrot (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2007,) 27, n.13. [La guerra: una parentesi prima di un ritorno alla normalità, un teatro di ombre in cui le donne solo apparentemente hanno assunto ruoli primari. Anzi, al contrario, la guerra avrebbe bloccato il movimento di emancipazione che andava prendendo forma in tutta Europa agli inizi del XX secolo, e che era rappresentato da una *New Woman* indipendente economicamente e sessualmente e da un potente movimento femminista egualitario e fervido di iniziative. Restituendo sicurezza all'identità maschile in crisi alla vigilia del conflitto, rimettendo le donne al loro posto di madri prolifiche, di donne di casa, nel migliore dei casi liberate attraverso la gestione domestica moderna, e di spose sottomesse e ammiranti.]

Catholic Church, although disagreeing with many political views of the ruling party, supported the idea that women belonged in their homes, and that allowing women to work outside their homes had negative consequences because it ruined the peace and unity of the family.

It was the political instability and the social mobility that developed prior to the war, and continued evolving after it was over, what gave Fascism the opportunity to grow into a dictatorship. A very important aspect of this development was also the birth of a middle class, which in Italy had not existed because of the lack of an industrial revolution before the end of the nineteenth century. Fascism, although in a controversial way and oftentimes illegally, tried to face these problems and tried to bring the country on the same level as other European powers such as Great Britain and France. Especially regarding the importance of women and their role within society, Fascism showed a controversial attitude which to this day is still complicated to understand and to explain.

Although being a Socialist at first, and not a convinced Catholic, Mussolini understood that the Catholic Church played too important a role in Italy for it to be excluded or ignored, and, most importantly, the Church was too powerful to have as an enemy. To put an end to the tumultuous relationship that existed between Church and State, the dictator and Cardinal Pietro Gasparri signed the famous Lateran Pacts on February 11, 1929.[56] The dictator himself, after the Pacts were signed, said: "The Vatican City, small in territory, vast in spirit – and Rome, monarchial and Fascist – always growing as heart and soul of a large and victorious Nation, are now close, after reciprocal acknowledgments, in an attitude of true friendship."[57]

Although helping to bridge the chasm that had existed in the past, Mussolini had no intention of giving up his power in Italy, and still considered himself the righteous and only ruler of the country. Catholicism and the Catholic Church were present, and were to be respected, but in the dictator's mind, they were never to surpass Fascism itself. Mussolini explained that "the Fascist States fully states its ethical nature: it is Catholic, but it is Fascist; exclusively, essentially, and above all, Fascist. It has been integrated within Catholicism, and we openly acknowledge it, but let no one think,

[56] The Lateran Pacts consisted of three main parts: the *Trattato* (Treaty) between Church and State, through which the State recognized the sovereignty and independence of the Catholic Church, and which allowed the creation of the Vatican City; the *Concordato* (Concordat) which delineated the civil and religious relations between Church and State in Italy; the *Convenzione Finanziaria* (Financial Convention) through which the State reimbursed the Church everything that had been taken from it (such as lands and property) after 1871. See <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/archivio/documents/rc_seg-st_19290211_patti-lateranensi_it.html>.

[57] Benito Mussolini, *Accordi del Laterano*, preface. [La Città del Vaticano minima nel territorio, vasta nello spirito – e Roma monarchia e fascista – sempre più grande come cuore e anima di una grande e vittoriosa Nazione, stanno ora vicine, dopo I reciproci riconoscimenti, in atteggiamento di leale amicizia.]

philosophically or metaphysically, to change reality."[58] Despite being an important part of Italian culture and of the Italian nation, the Church was not going to overstep the regime.

What the Fascist regime and the Catholic Church did share was their view on women. In both cases women were seen as inferior beings who did not have, nor should have, the same rights as men. The 1930s were the years during which the regime became more autarchic and conservative (with a strong dictatorial power on Mussolini's side, which led to less freedom and independence for the masses,) partially because of this new relationship with the Catholic Church. That decade also strengthened the misogynist aspect of the regime, starting with the strong link created with the Catholic Church, which at the time was firmly convinced that women should stay home, bear children and take care of their families.[59] As Perry Willson explains, "according to the Church, women were biologically inferior to men and the two sexes should remain in 'separate spheres' of activity. Good Catholic women were to stay at home devoting themselves to motherhood, and work

[58] Benito Mussolini, *Accordi del Laterano*, 105-6. [Lo stato fascista rivendica in pieno il suo carattere di eticità: è Cattolico, ma è Fascista, anzi soprattutto, esclusivamente, essenzialmente fascista. Il Cattolicesimo lo integra, e noi lo dichiariamo apertamente, ma nessuno pensi, sotto la specie filosofica o metafisica, di cambiarci le carte in tavola.]

[59] The Catholic view of the time was expressed in detail in the December 31, 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, written by Pope Pius XI. This encyclical, which condemns the sexual mores of the time and praises holy matrimony, recalls a previous encyclical, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, written by Pope Leo XIII on February 10, 1880. Point 32 from *Casti Connubii* is a direct quotation from point 8 of the encyclical *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, which states that: "Il marito è il principe della famiglia e il capo della moglie; la quale pertanto, perché è carne della carne di lui ed ossa delle sue ossa, deve essere soggetta ed obbediente al marito non come schiava, ma come compagna; cioè in tal modo che la sua soggezione non sia disgiunta dal decoro né dalla dignità. In esso, poi, che governa ed in lei che ubbedisce, rendendo entrambi immagine uno di Cristo, l'altro della Chiesa, la carità divina deve essere la perpetua moderatrice dei loro doveri." See Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii_it.html, and Leo XIII, *Aracnum Divinae Sapientiae*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_10021880_arcanum_sp.html.

outside the home was frowned upon."[60] It appears that Mussolini shared the Catholic Church's view, one that today would be considered a distorted view of women in many developed societies; it also appears that he truly did believe that the female gender was an inferior species.[61] The dictator himself once said that "women are angels or demons, born to take care of the household, bear children, and to make cuckolds,"[62] which clearly underlines his thoughts regarding the opposite sex.

However, at this time the main Fascist female organizations were also created, and they gave women the chance of participating in the social life of the country, and feeling as an active part of the Italian population. The importance that the Fascist regime gave to outdoor activities and youth groups automatically created a different sphere for young women to participate in. These new fascist women were not going to be isolated from society; they were going to engage in new activities, meet new people, and experience a different lifestyle from that of their mothers.[63] In fact, "if the Catholic morale contributed to the strengthening of a traditional attitude and behavior, the radio, cinema, shopping centers, the feminist press, and magazines, all fueled 'new individual and group forms of expression, new life styles, and new ways of using the available income.'"[64] This dichotomy represents one of the many

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[60] Perry Willson, *The Clockwork Factory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 4.

[61] Alexander de Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism," 955.

[62] See Antonio Spinosa, *I figli del duce* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1983), 18. [Le donne sono angeli o demoni, nate per badare alla casa, mettere al mondo dei figli, e portare le corna.]

[63] Giovanni De Luna, *Donne in oggetto* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995), 30.

[64] Cited in Giovanni De Luna, *Donne in oggetto*, 29. [Ma se la morale cattolica contribuì a rafforzare atteggiamenti e comportamenti tradizionali, la radio, il cinema, i grandi magazzini, la stampa femminile, i rotocalchi alimentarono "nuove forme di espressione individuali e di gruppo, nuovi stili di vita e nuove modalità di impiego del reddito disponibile.]

contrasts that existed within the regime. On one hand the young fascist girls were given the chance to experience "freedom" from their families and from their oftentimes tedious lives; on the other hand, however, they were expected by the regime to be the perfect mothers and wives, a role model not only for the other women in Italy, but also as an image of the strong, united Italian families that relied on the feminine figure.

The regime did not allow the female gender to have the political, social and economic rights of men. However, although Mussolini's thoughts and the Church's did coincide to some extent, the reasoning behind Fascist and Catholic views of women was completely different. If on the one hand the dictator supported the idea of 'prolific mothers' and a larger Italian population, on the other hand the Catholic Church wanted to "preserve the 'virtue' and 'respectability' of women who might be tainted by contact with the outside world."[65] For instance the regime, despite heavily controlling prostitution after 1923, did not outlaw it; Fascism saw it as necessary for men to enjoy what their wives oftentimes were incapable of giving them, while the Church saw it as a necessary evil permitted in order to help quench male desire, and to stop young and honest women from being assaulted, or worse, raped. Mussolini also believed that women should fulfill their role as wives and mothers because they were the ones who gave birth to children. The regime, in fact, wanted more births because that would allow it to have a larger number of soldiers for the Italian army and for the regime's dreams of expansion. The Catholic Church, instead, simply wanted a larger Catholic population, and was not, in theory, interested in procreation for military purposes.

[65] Perry Willson, *The Clockwork Factory*, 4.

The image of a prolific mother was fundamental for the Fascist regime because it implied that the country was growing in numbers and strength. In fact, Mussolini was aiming at increasing Italy's population by twenty million people (from forty to sixty million) through his demographic campaign.[66] For this reason Mussolini created so many mother-child associations during the Fascist years, and established prizes for highly prolific mothers. For instance, in 1933 the *Giornata della madre e del fanciullo* (Mother and child day) was established, and celebrated on December 24 to recall the birth of Jesus and the importance of the Virgin Mary as a mother. Although a Mother's Day already existed as a Catholic celebration, Fascism augmented its importance and made sure that the whole Italian population participated in its celebration. Mothers who had seven or more living children, and who took good care of them, received money compensations.[67] Despite giving prizes to some mothers, however, the regime left many other families with little help and little economic compensation, which oftentimes resulted in a poor upbringing of the children because of the lack of funds and of time on the mother's side.

The main issues that led to the 1927 demographic campaign were not solely the small size of the Italian population at the time, but also the new Darwinian theories of the survival of the fittest that were spreading across Europe, and which Mussolini took to its extremes, thinking it to be vital for Italy to have a strong and large population. The First World War and the Spanish Influenza epidemic had caused a frightful number of deaths across the continent, which lowered the numbers even more. Lastly, the large number of

[66] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 42-51; see also Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 64-8.

[67] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 71-3.

emigrants also did not help increase the Italian population.[68] Precisely for this reason, "the situation was portrayed as a national emergency by the Fascists, who vigorously attempted to stem the tide of population change. Mussolini exhorted Italian women to have many babies so that the Italian population would grow from its level of about 40 million to 60 million by the middle of the century."[69] The demographic campaign began in 1927, and it probably represented one of the most idealistic plans of the regime. Numbers were fundamental for a country to grow strong and be respected, and Mussolini realized that Italy in its present condition was never going to be able to stand up to Germany and Great Britain. During his Ascension Day Speech in May 1927, the Duce himself said:

> What are 40 million Italian compared with 90 million Germans and 200 million Slavs… or 46 million Englishmen and 450 million in the Colonies?' The 'battle for births' was closely linked to imperialism, for it was supposed both to create cannon-fodder for the army as well as explain why Italy need an empire – to create living space for the expanding population.[70]

Mussolini had an expansionist plan in mind, and he understood that his country was in desperate need of more births. For this reason he denounced birth control and made it illegal.

Birth control and abortion were made illegal by the regime with the Public Security Laws of 6 November 1926, and subsequently with the Rocco Code of 1930[71]. The regime condemned any kind of contraceptive, including

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[68] See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 64.

[69] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 64.

[70] Benito Mussolini, "Ascension Day Speech," see <cronologia.leonardo.it/storia/al1927v.htm>.

[71] The Rocco Code was written by Minister Alfredo Rocco (1875-1935), a fervent nationalist, who was one of the first to join the Fascist movement and then the party. His initial career was that of a law professor, until he entered the political world and became at first a deputy, then the president of the Camera (House of Representatives,) and lastly Minister of *Grazia e Giustizia* (Grace and Justice.) During his years in this position he elaborated the Working Charter, he played a central role in the

condoms, female birth control, and the technique of the *coitus interruptus*. Female contraception was not the only illegality regarding the control of births. The regime imposed even stricter bans on abortion and any kind of sexual education for girls, who reached the marrying stage completely unprepared for what awaited them. Moreover, sex before marriage and sex as pleasure was seen as a sin by the Catholic Church, so most devout women did not engage in sexual relations, or did not gain a sexual education for fear of religious repercussions. "The Church's position," explains de Grazia, "actively propagated by the clergy, the diocesan press, and the Catholic laity certainly contributed to the blackout on sex information."[72] A peasant woman from Piedmont declared: "Sex was sin… We grew up knowing nothing about sex, or with the wrong information… Yes, we saw the animals, but we didn't understand… I was so unprepared for marriage… I didn't dare get undressed… I felt no attraction, nothing… I couldn't, I couldn't… He went after other women. I couldn't blame him."[73] Moreover, traditionally young boys were to have sexual relations before marriage, which normally took place with prostitutes; another option was that of frank talks with older and more

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treaty with the Holy See, and he published the new Penal Code, which took his name (and which was substituted in 1989 by the Vassalli Code.) The Code was no longer used after the fall of Fascism, but some of its decrees continued to be enforced even after the end of the regime. See Treccani Encyclopedia <http://www.treccani.it/Portale/elements/categoriesItems.jsp?pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Enciclopedia_online/R/BIOGRAFIE_-_EDICOLA_R_156094.xml>; the anti-contraception Fascist legislation was eliminated only in 1971, a year during which many other laws were created to help and protect women, both in the family and in the work place. See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 159.

[72] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 56.

[73] N. Revelli, *L'anello forte. La donna: storie di una vita contadina* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985,) 58-60.

experienced men. Women, on the other hand, were kept away from anything that was sex related either by their parents or tutors.[74]

Abortion was perhaps the most illegal type of birth control. Many times women resorted to abortion because they could not afford another mouth to feed, or simply because they did not want another child. Most illegal abortions were carried out by midwives (an occupation that was still very prominent during the years of the regime, since many women still gave birth to children in their own homes,)[75] although considerably risking their freedom, since imprisonment or *confino politico* (internal exile for political dissidents) was the established punishment.[76] The sole case in which abortion was permitted by the State was if the pregnancy endangered the mother's life, at which point, under the right circumstances, an abortion could be effected (although going against the Catholic ideal.)[77] The main problem was that such abortions were not carried out in perfectly hygienic conditions, and were therefore dangerous for the mothers who suffered them. In her interview, Silia Vignoli declared that in 1938 at the age of forty-five, her mother had to get an abortion because at that advanced age her life could have been put in danger by childbirth. This abortion, however, was conducted in front of a group of

[74] See Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 56.

[75] For instance, a midwife remembers: "They would call a vet for a cow, because a cow was important. Not for a wife, because they could get another one and she'd bring a dowry too. No, no, for the vet they found the money, not for the doctor." See L. Lanzaro, *Il mestiere prezioso. Le ostetriche raccontano* (Turin: Forma, 1985,) 26.

[76] See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 67.

[77] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 66. See also V. de Grazia, ibid., 50-51; for policies on abortion see P. Willson, *Clockwork Factory: Women and Work in Fascist Italy*, 176-7, and 176-8 for information on contraception; F. Gilbert and D. C. Large, *The European Era: 1890 to the Present*, 223.

doctors with the so called *cucchiaio d'oro* (golden spoon), with which the main gynecologist scraped the whole uterus to complete the operation.[78]

Social relationships were controlled by the State as well, or at least that's the mindset that the regime worked with. The dictatorship did not actually control the private aspects of marriage or courtship, but it did control the public and social aspects of it. For instance, to create more marriages (and therefore more children,) the age of consent was lowered for both sexes, as well as the age at which people could marry; a bachelor's tax was imposed on single men between the age of 25 and 65; and oftentimes homosexuals were sent to *confino*, away from society.[79] Divorce was certainly not an option, as both the regime and the Catholic Church condemned it openly – although for different reasons. There had been an agreement between the Fascist regime and the Catholic Church on the topic of divorce, which became an actual article in the Lateran Pacts. Article 44 stated that: "In any disposition regarding marriage, the State commits to leaving unchanged the indissolubility principle."[80] However, article 587 of the Penal Code did allow the *delitto d'onore* (crime of honor), meaning the assassination of any person who threatened the honor of a family. The article stated:

> Whoever provokes the death of the spouse, of the daughter or sister, if caught in the illegitimate carnal relationship, and determined by the state of wrath generated by the offense to the family honor, is punished with imprisonment from three to seven years. The same punishment is given to the person who, under the same

[78] Silia Vignoli. Personal Interview. January 4, 2010.

[79] See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 65.

[80] *Lateran Pacts*, 11 February, 1929, art. 44. [In qualsiasi disposizione concernente il matrimonio, lo Stato si impegna a mantenere illeso il principio dell'indissolubilità.] See <http://www.storicamente.org/07_dossier/famiglia/famiglia_costituzione_italiana_link17.htm>. Divorce will be legalized in Italy only in 1970, after a national referendum.

circumstances, provokes the death of the person who is found in an illegitimate carnal relation with the spouse, daughter or sister.[81]

The *delitto d'onore* was especially common in the South of Italy, as the famous movie *Divorce, Italian Style*[82] brilliantly shows.

The movie is set in an imaginary city in Sicily, Aspromonte. The main character is Baron Ferdinando Cefalù (Marcello Mastroianni), called Fefé, who is married to Rosaria (Daniela Rocca), nor longer young, nor pretty, who is madly in love with her husband. Fefé, however, falls in love with his sixteen year old cousin, Angela (a young Stefania Sandrelli), but aside from the fact that she is his first cousin, Fefé also has no way to obtain a divorce from his wife since at the time the movie was made, divorce still did not exist in Italy. For this reason Fefé resorts to the common *delitto d'onore*, still common in the 1960's, and particularly common in the regions of the South. In order for the *delitto d'onore* to take place, Fefé's wife needs to be caught in the act of adultery, and it is for this reason that Fefé himself tries to set the wife up with Carmelo Pantané, one of Rosalia's old admirers who was thought to have died during World War II, and who himself is married to another woman. When Rosalia and Carmelo are conveniently found together, they are both killed. Carmelo by his wife (because, although uncommon, women as well could kill their husbands to save the honor of their family,) while Rosalia is murdered by

[81] Rocco Code, 1927, art 587. [Chiunque cagiona la morte del coniuge, della figlia o della sorella, nell'atto in cui ne scopre la illegittima relazione carnale e nello stato d'ira determinato dall'offesa recata all'onor suo o della famiglia, è punito con la reclusione da tre a sette anni. Alla stessa pena soggiace chi, nelle dette circostanze, cagiona la morte della persona che sia in illegittima relazione carnale col coniuge, con la figlia o con la sorella.] The *delitto d'onore* was abolished in 1981 with law 442, after the approval of divorce in 1970 and abortion in 1978.

[82] *Divorzio all'italiana*, Dir. Pietro Germi, Perf. Marcello Mastroianni, Stefania Sandrelli and Daniela Rocca, Lux Film, 1961. See <http://www.italica.rai.it/cinema/commedia/divorzio.htm>.

Fefè, who, after a shortened sentence, is now free to go off and marry his young cousin, Angela.

Although famous as a black comedy, Pietro Germi's movie intended to depict a backward society under an ironic light, stressing how easy it was to kill an adulterous spouse because of article 587 of the Penal Code, and what small punishment the assassin received. Despite the fact that in the movie Carmelo's wife also takes charge of the situation and kills her husband to defend her family honor, it certainly was more common for men to kill their wives because their actions were the ones "staining" the family honor. Men, in fact, oftentimes cheated on their wives, and were not punished for their actions. Through *Divorce, Italian Style,* viewers of the time could see how undeveloped some aspects of Italian culture truly were, and how much had remained unvaried from the Fascist period. This movie, in fact, was produced in 1961, almost twenty years after the fall of Fascism; however, it perfectly depicts a certain type of society that existed prior to, and during, Fascism, and which still continued to exist after the fall of the regime. The Catholic Church did not allow divorce because it considered it a sin (an idea which was backed by every government up until 1970,) yet the assassination of the spouse in order to protect the honor of the family was not only permitted, but barely punished.

An interesting aspect of the condition of women under Fascism was the contrast existing between how the regime wanted women to appear, and what they were like in reality. All female organizations were supposed to appear as "liberating" and "modern," although the regime itself was promoting a very

anti-modern and traditional view of women. Their roles as wives and mothers, and the misogynistic attitude that still existed among many intellectuals, not to speak of the dictator himself, were examples of the kind of traditionalism that the regime wanted to keep alive, while the image of the *nuova italiana*, or the "New Italian Woman," which Mussolini used as a propaganda weapon in order to canvas consent, was to be the more modern appearance of the dictatorship towards women. To these aspects we can also add the new image of the so called *donna crisi*, or "crisis woman," which was used by Fascism in juxtaposition to the image of the *donna madre*. In fact, if on the one hand the *donna crisi* was slim, sterile, urbanized, cosmopolitan and dressed according to current fashion, the *donna madre* was the exact opposite; she was the typical rural mother, with wide hips and large breasts, simple, not beautiful, who dedicated her life to family.[83] As De Grazia explains,

> These contrasting figures, because they bore on class-based fertility differentials and social inequalities could not but resonate among women. Middle-class women saw numerous children as an embarrassment: they further confirmed the otherness and bestiality of the lower orders. (…) At the same time, women of the working class, though they desired to control their fertility, regarded large families as an element of their class's strength.[84]

Women themselves had different views about family and children depending on their class status, and on their economic conditions. The female gender was certainly exalted by Fascist propaganda because women were seen as mothers of soldiers, and, perhaps more importantly, mothers of the fatherland. The Church as well approved of Fascist ideology, because Catholics also believed that women's place was at home with their husband and children.

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[83] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Italian Women*, 73, 212-13.
[84] See Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Rules Women*, 73, n. 82.

Precisely because of the necessity for higher numbers of births, Mussolini used the image of the *donna crisi* as a model to avoid because it went against what Fascism was preaching. The *donna crisi,* which was associated with the new image of the Italian *maschietta*, in many ways resembled the new generation of young girls all across Europe and the United States, such as the French *garçonne*, the American flapper and the British bachelor girl. Most of these girls belonged to the middle and upper classes, were educated, wore their hair short (from which the word *maschietta* derives, meaning tomboy), and conducted a freer life-style when compared to the girls belonging to the rural and working classes.[85] These were the years during which new generations wanted to break away from the conservative restrictions and prohibitions of the Victorian Era, with its strict moral codes, and live a freer life-style. As historian Alan Brinkley explains,

> To the consternation of many long-time women reformers and progressive suffragists, some women concluded that in the New Era it was no longer necessary to maintain a rigid, Victorian female "respectability." They could smoke, drink, dance, wear seductive clothes and makeup, and attend lively parties. Those assumptions were reflected in the emergence of the "flapper" – the modern woman whose liberated lifestyle found expression in dress, hair-style, speech and behavior. The flapper lifestyle had a particular impact on lower-middle-class and working-class single women, who were filling new jobs in industries and the service sector. At night, such women flocked to clubs and dance halls in search of excitement and companionship. Many more affluent women soon began to copy the "flapper" style.[86]

Although the preceding citation refers to the condition of young women then coming of age in the United States, the desire to break away from the past was not something that solely characterized Americans. With more moderation – due to lesser economic possibilities, and to the strong and moral

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[85] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 118-123. On the "new woman" across Europe see also Perry Willson, ibid., 68; Kevin Passmore, ed., 235.

[86] Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People, vol. 2: from 1865, 5th ed*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008,) 639.

presence of the Catholic Church - it could also be applied to the Italian *maschietta* as well.

In many countries the younger generation of girls certainly had more freedom when compared to their mothers; they also had the chance to study and possibly to create a good life for themselves, without being haunted by economic distress. Elsa Herrmann, a German feminist during the 1920s and 1930s, clearly states this in her 1929 article titled "This Is the New Woman," where she explains the differences between the woman of yesterday and today. Herrmann does not demean the work of women in the past; she recognizes that they did not have other choices, and respects their work as wives and mothers. However, the author also states that women of the present do have a second choice, and that they can break away from their chains and become independent. She states that: "she [today's woman] refuses to be regarded as a physically weak being in need of assistance – the role the woman of yesterday continues to adopt artificially – and therefore no longer lives by means supplied to her from elsewhere, whether income from her parents or her husband."[87] In Italy the regime frowned upon this new generation of girls since it wanted to protect the image of women as angels of the household surrounded by their hard working husband and many healthy children.

De Grazia writes about this contrast and introduces the greater problem that lies at the bottom of women's condition in Italy during the dictatorship: The contradiction between traditional and modern, old and new, was embedded in Fascism. The author states:

[87] Elsa Herrmann, "This Is the New Woman," in *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women's History*, ed. Lisa Di Caprio and Merry E. Wiesner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001,) 456.

> Mussolini's regime stood for returning women to home and hearth, restoring patriarchal authority, and confining female destiny to bearing babies. To be sure, these constraints were not as overtly violent as other state actions in peacetime, including stifling political freedoms and smashing the free trade unions, not to mention the persecution of Italian Jews in the wake of the racial laws of November 1938. It was indeed the apparent normalness of the constraints on women that made them all the more mystifying, insidious, and demeaning. At the same time, the fascist dictatorship celebrated the *Nuova italiana*, or "New Italian Woman." Fascism stood just as visibly for the camaraderie of volunteer organizations and for recognizing rights and duties of women in a strong national state. (…) From the start, then, this book tells of the deep conflict within the fascist state between the demands of modernity and the desire to reimpose [*sic*] traditional authority.[88]

De Grazia correctly identifies the stark contrast between the "demands of modernity" and the "traditional authority" that women confronted during the Fascist dictatorship.

For most of its existence, the Fascist regime had been trying to pull Italy out of its backwardness in order to reach the level of other European powers such as Great Britain and Germany. However, in many ways, the Italian dictator remained anchored in the traditions and values of the past. For instance, there existed a very strong collision between the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. On one hand Mussolini wanted to improve Italy's condition as a European economic power; on the other he was strongly opposed to urbanization and preached to the masses that they must return to the countryside, where the most virtuous values were to be found. During the agricultural crisis many rural women either emigrated to developing countries, or moved to the developing cities to try to find better working and living conditions (although the regime had imposed restrictions on internal migration,) but they were not always successful. Urbanized women were oftentimes seen as morally corrupt, since the more traditional moral values had been lost to modernity and simplicity. One of these aspects was abortion,

[88] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 1-2.

which increased during the Fascist years, although abortion itself had been outlawed by the regime. As De Grazia explains,

> As abortion increased, society's perception of it seemed to change. In prewar Italy, it had been considered a bourgeoisie vice; the lower orders, meaning the city poor, were said to resort to infanticide or to abandoning their unwanted babies. Now it became a widespread working-class practice.[89]

Women who lived in the expanding cities could no longer afford to have large families, both from an economic point of view, and also from a time management one. Since women had to work full-time jobs, and still be expected to fulfill their role as wives and mothers, they could not also have a large family to look after at all times. Upper and middle class families did not think it was appropriate to have many children, while lower class families living in the cities simply could not afford it. This was one of the main reasons for which abortion became so common among lower-class working women. Another characteristic of urbanized women was that they became alien and indecipherable to traditional Italian men. The "new woman" had an attitude and a lifestyle that was very different from that of traditional women, and most of them were not willing to spend their lives in their homes looking after their family without any sort of personal gratification. As one scholar explains,

> The behavior of urban Italian women was at least as alien and indecipherable to rural and especially southern Italian men as the behavior of American women was to foreign visitors. In any case, the reactions were not much different: to exalt the figure of the "traditional women," to denigrate but secretly desire emancipated females, and to envy as well as malign the well-to-do and politically powerful males who possessed them, but who seemed unable to control them.[90]

Despite the desire of freedom and change from the conditions of the past, marriage was still every girl's dream (even the younger generation's,) since spinsters were derided and enjoyed very little personal freedom.

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[89] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 58.
[90] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 210.

According to Willson, "Family code was not substantially altered. Although a new version of the Civil Code was issued in 1942 it contained no particularly significant innovations in regards to the position of women."[91]

The paradox that existed with regard to the condition of the female gender was not solely internal to the regime, but it characterized women's attitudes toward themselves as well. Although many Italian young women were striving to emulate their American, French and British counterparts, they were doing it in a country which was not yet ready for such an evolution. The Italian female gender was striving to be modern, but it had not yet experienced the changes and evolution experienced by other countries during those same years. For instance, although in 1920 the Socialist Party had requested the freedom to divorce that strongly been rejected by the Catholics, and it was completely eliminated when Mussolini signed the Lateran Pacts. Divorce in Italy became possible only in 1970, while in the United States divorce already existed in some states as early as 1880. "The divorce rate rose rapidly [in the United States], from one divorce every twenty-one marriages in 1880 to one in nine by 1916; women initiated most of them."[92]

What Mussolini tried to do, according to de Grazia, was "establish more control over female bodies, especially female reproductive functions, at the same time that it sought to rehabilitate older patriarchal notions of family

[91] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 77. The modern Italian Civil Code was issued on March 16, 1942, and although changes and modernizations have been made regarding a number of its articles, the backbone of the Code is still the same today. It is composed of six books, one of which deals with general legal disposition, and another one with the consequences of actions. See <http://www.jus.unitn.it/cardozo/obiter_dictum/codciv/Codciv.htm>.

[92] Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation*, 561.

and paternal authority."[93] The fascist state's aim was to be omniscient by having complete control over the nation's public and private life. According to Willson:

> Pro-natalist legislation was also introduced to encourage women to dedicate their lives to motherhood. This was done mainly through the promotion of early marriage and the outlawing of abortion, contraception, and even contraceptive information. Early marriage was fostered by a tax on bachelors and the introduction of some other (fairly limited) incentives such as employment preference systems and cheap housing for married men. Other provisions gradually introduced included special benefits for large families, marriage loans, and family allowances.[94]

As much as the family was cherished and glorified, the state always aspired to have complete control over it. A great example that comes to mind when speaking of control of the private sphere, is the movie *A Special Day* (1977), starring Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni. This movie is able to express in great detail the ways in which the typical Italian family was maneuvered by Fascism to increase consent, while illustrating what a mother's true role was supposed to be during these dictatorial years. One of the most famous scenes in the movie takes place when Antonietta (Sophia Loren) shows Gabriele (Marcello Mastroianni) a picture of the Duce which she has created as a mosaic made out of buttons. She hung the picture in the kitchen, one of the central areas in an Italian house, so that the Duce could be admired by every member of the family. Although without any apparent importance, this representation of Mussolini is nevertheless central to the sense of invasion of the private space by the regime. Not only is Antonietta's family Fascist (so much so that everyone, except Antonietta, participates in the *sabato fascista,*) but the Duce is also constantly present in their home, looking over them every

[93] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women,* 9.

[94] Perry Willson, The Clockwork Factory, 3. See also n. 5 for more detailed information on the tax for bachelors introduced in 1926 by the regime.

hour of the day. Through this image, the director Ettore Scola wanted to give the idea that the regime was omnipresent not only in the Italian public sphere, but also in the private one. True, the dictatorship did not always succeed in this attempt because tightly knitted Italian families often managed to preserve their intimacy; but it certainly did try to intrude into their private zone to control it. Luisa Passerini expresses a similar sentiment when describing young girls' public lives, claiming that:

> There existed an invasion of the private sphere through public power, which not only implied the estrangement, or at least a conflict with respect to family values (the new Italian women of political and sportive demonstrations would not always meet the approval of their father and brothers, nor of their mother if she was a devout catholic.) It also implied that women allowed the State to take control over their reproductive ability. This action underlined as never before the public function of mothers, although in a distorted way and against women's will.[95]

Fascist ideology did not limit itself solely to young girls and to women who approved of the regime. It also kept a close eye on women who were thought to belong to anti-fascist groups or organizations. Although there were not as many anti-fascist women as there were anti-fascist men, the regime tried to control all types of dissent towards the dictatorship. The main difference between the sexes was that men were kept closely under control and were seen as independent figures, while women were simply associated to men, but were not given the same importance as them. As Brunella Manotti explains in her essay on anti-fascist women in the province of Parma,

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[95] Luisa Passerini, "Donne, consumo e cultura di massa," in *Storia delle donne: il Novecento*, eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2007), 382. [Si aveva un'invasione del potere pubblico all'interno della sfera privata, che implicava per le donne non solo l'allontanamento o almeno il conflitto rispetto ai vincoli familiari (la nuova italiana delle manifestazioni politiche e sportive non incontrava sempre l'approvazione di padre e fratelli, e neanche della madre, se devota cattolica). Implicava anche il mettere la propria capacità riproduttiva a disposizione dello Stato, che evidenziava come mai prima la funzione pubblica delle madri, sia pure in modo distorto e contro le resistenze delle donne.]

> (…) many women remained entangled in the ties of repression. Not only that, but we have not been given the files of many women; their lives are lost among the papers concerning their husbands, sons, fiancés, fathers and brothers, with whom they shared the weight of the persecutions and privations that characterized the long years of the clandestine male militancy.[96]

Although not considered as dangerous or important as men, subversive women were strongly criticized by the regime because they embodied the exact opposite characteristics of what the "good" new Fascist Italian woman should have represented. Anti-fascist women were oftentimes independent; they worked for their families and supported them because their husbands, fathers and brothers were either imprisoned or killed by Fascist repression. Moreover, when filing the police reports, officers made sure to underline the traits that according to them differentiated "normal" women from subversive ones.[97]

Many of the organizations against the regime were based in private homes, either in the *salotti* (living-rooms)[98] of anti-fascist intellectuals, or in the more simple homes of poorer people. The subversive women that Mariotti speaks about belonged mostly to peasant families, who had reared their

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[96]Brunella Manotti, "Un universo sommerso. Frammenti di vita di "sovversive" parmensi," in *Nella rete del regime: Gli antifascisti del Parmense nelle carte di polizia (1922-1943)*, ed. Massimo Giuffredi (Rome: Carocci editore, 2004), 136. [(…) numerose donne di Parma rimasero impigliate nelle maglie della repressione. Non solo, ma di molte figure femminili non ci viene restituito nemmeno il fascicolo, le loro vite si perdono tra le carte di mariti, figli, fidanzati, padri e fratelli, con i quali esse condivisero il peso delle persecuzioni e delle privazioni che caratterizzarono i lunghi anni della militanza maschile clandestina.]

[97] See Brunella Manotti, "Un universo sommerso. Frammenti di vita di "sovversive" parmensi," in *Nella rete del regime: Gli antifascisti del Parmense nelle carte di polizia (1922-1943)*, ed. Massimo Giuffredi, 137, n. 6-8.

[98] In her semi-autobiographical novel, *Family Sayings*, Natalia Ginzburg dwells on the childhood years she spent with her family in Turin, and although she remembers many positive events, she also recalls the years of Fascism, which she directly experienced both before and after she became old enough to understand what was taking place around her, and after gaining that consciousness as well. One of her memories deals with the *salotti* of that time, where men would meet to speak about politics and literature, and where many important decisions were made. See Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Sayings*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1963.)

children in anti-fascist beliefs, teaching their girls the trades that at the time were fundamental for women – mainly how to cook, sew and to be a good housewife. It is not by chance that most of the women that were arrested for being against the regime were either housewives or seamstresses, since none of them got the chance to study past elementary school and therefore were not able to find a stable job. Moreover, since the regime in general (and many individual men, in particular) strongly opposed the presence of women in the work place, women were constantly confined to their homes, while at the same time the regime did not give up on trying to take control over the family circumstances.[99] In many cases it was shameful for men to have their wives work, because it implicitly meant that they, as men, were not able to provide for their families. Leaving aside that the Fascist years were economically tough, women who worked were either seen as not proper, or were thought to come from families that could not attend to their needs. However, many women who came from anti-fascist families were forced to work to help their parents and their husbands, and perhaps this freedom is exactly what pushed them in the direction of anti-fascism. Many women were also a part of the Italian *Resistenza* (the resistance movement) towards the end of World War II, although their names and their contributions are oftentimes forgotten, or simply associated with those of their male counterparts.

It is a difficult task to explain the exact role played by women during the *Ventennio*, both from a passive and an active point of view. The regime certainly had a close-minded and conservative view of the female sex, and

[99] Brunetta Manotti, "Un universo sommerso. Frammenti di vita di "sovversive" parmensi," 139.

although it tried to impose its ideology on the entire female population, as explained in this chapter, it was not always successful. That explains the many contradictions within the regime regarding its attitude towards women. If on the one hand Fascism expected women to behave in a certain way, and created laws to assure that its ideology was enforced, on the other hand many women continued to live their lives as they had prior to the establishment of the dictatorship, or even were exposed by historical circumstances to some of the selfsame conditions of modern life the regime was trying to hide from them.

The impossibility of becoming an all-encompassing dictatorship was mainly due to two reasons: the fact that politically Italy was a constitutional monarchy,[104] and therefore the presence of the King could not be ignored; and because of the fundamental presence of the Catholic Church, which had existed in Italy for centuries and had always conflicted with the State.Before the rise of Fascism the Catholic Church ran most of the social activities for the population; the Liberal government, in fact, was very distant and was not able to relate and adapt to the growing middle classes. The state, moreover, did not engage with the populace, leaving the majority of Catholics to the organizations created and supported by the Church, and those who were not religious to their jobs and family. For many catholic women these organizations represented a moment of freedom from the monotony and boredom that characterized their days. Also, these groups were the sole ones that allowed women to engage in outdoor activities, something which could be considered leisure time.

Fascism wanted the existing situation of apathy to change; it wanted to "make the masses adhere to the state," [105] and it understood that the only way for this adhesion to take place was through mass organization and consent. The type of organization that the regime had in mind did not solely involve

[104] The Constitutional Monarchy is a system of government in which a monarch shares power with a constitutionally organized government. The monarch may be the de facto head of state or a purely ceremonial leader. The constitution allocates the rest of the government's power to the legislature and judiciary (in some cases, even to executive.) In Italy, the monarchy went from being absolute to being constitutional in 1848 with King Carlo Alberto, when the Constitution of the Kingdom of Sardinia became known as the *Statuto Albertino*. In 1861 this same *Statuto* became the new constitution of the Kingdom of Italy, and remained active in power until 1946 when Italy became a republic. See Paolo Colombo, *Storia costituzionale della monarchia italiana* (Bari-Roma: Editori Laterza, 2001); Online Britannica Encyclopedia, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/689632/constitutional-monarchy>.

[105] See Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 6.

women, or workers, or the youth; it tried to capture the entire Italian population, leading it to believe through propaganda, associations and economic development that Fascism was what the country needed. As De Grazia states,

> Organizing thus became central to the fascists' effort to build consent: organizing to build an institutional base and to compensate for abysmally low levels of consumption; organizing to discipline the recalcitrant and rouse the apathetic; organizing to prevent the accumulation of power in the fascists' own hands, sometime menacing trade union federations; organizing, in sum, to mediate the sharp class conflicts and ideological divisions of Italy as it emerged into the era of rationalized industry, with all of the contradictions of its part-feudal, part-small entrepreneurial, part-monopoly capitalist base.[106]

What the Fascist regime tried to create during the 1920's and the 1930's were organizations for all women that were a part of Italian society, starting with the youngest girls and moving on to adult women. The regime tried to incorporate all social classes, ranging from the upper and wealthier classes, to the blue-collar workers, all the way to the peasants. However, there are contradictory views on why Fascism created these organizations. The stronger opponents believe that the sole reason for the regime to create such encompassing organizations was to have a complete control over the Italian public sphere; others, instead, think that Fascism did want to create something different from the past, and really did want women – at least to an extent - to leave their homes and engage in group and outdoor activities. What most views agree on is that the regime wanted to give birth to Fascist – and no longer Catholic organizations; these new groups were to be overseen by the state, sometimes by Mussolini himself, and no longer by the Catholic Church.

Since women were excluded from the political sphere, and oftentimes from the social sphere as well, Mussolini understood that to gain a complete and strong support from the Italian population he would have needed to also

[106] Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 5.

encompass women, and to give them several good reasons to support the regime. Although the dictator could not – nor did he want to change the class structure or gender roles within society, he did not want women to feel left out, but rather that they would consider themselves to be an important part of the expanding Italian nation. Fascism introduced novelty and innovation, especially for Italian women, and that helps explain in part the type of response it got.

Scholars of totalitarian dictatorships often focus exclusively on brutality and oppression, while ignoring the question of why such a dictatorship attracted support for so long. Fascism existed for twenty years. Although Fascism had from the start a significant number of opponents, it also had vast support, ranging from enthusiastic participation to passive consent. As eminent historian Renzo De Felice explained in an interview to Michael Leeden, the greater consent at first came from the rising middle class, who had come back from the war and wanted their social, political and economic conditions to improve from what it had been during the Liberal period. Fascism was perfectly able to take this mood and turn it into strong consent during the first years of the dictatorship. The middle class thought that thanks to Fascism they could acquire political and social power in society, a kind of power that up to that time had not existed for them.[107] Though not from the beginning, aristocrats and conservatives also ended up approving of the rising regime. In fact, as Lisa Di Caprio and Merry Wiesner explain:

[107] Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul Fascismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1975,) 31-2. [Fu la prima guerra mondiale che mobilitò tutta una parte della società italiana, restata sino allora in disparte. E questa parte, mobilitata per la guerra, epperò esclusa dal potere effettivo, dalla partecipazione, tende poi, attraverso il fascismo, a rivendicare, ad acquistare una sua funzione. (…) E' esattamente questo ceto medio che si rifà al fascismo per acquistare quel potere che gli era stato negato fino ad allora, che vuole un ruolo tra la borghesia e il proletariato.]

> Conservative elites in both Germany and Italy were at first suspicious and wary of these right wing movements because they condemned the existing political system as corrupt and ineffectual. (…) Fascist movements gained political power in Italy and Germany not only on the basis of popular support and electoral strength, but also because of the political decisions made by these elites. In 1922, King Victor Emmanuel III appointed Mussolini prime minister in response to his march on Rome (…)[108]

The first women who supported Fascism were educated women from middle class families who approved of the regime. This group at first was relatively small and included some conservative aristocrats, middle-class housewives, and school teachers, all of whom saw Fascism as a break away from the past.[109] Because of their social condition they were privileged by the dictatorship and possessed more freedom than working women; they therefore transmitted an image of the regime that did not reflect the condition of women from the lower classes, a disparity that the regime tried to eliminate by creating organizations for lower-class women as well. The positive image of Fascism was mainly transmitted through the support that aristocratic women gave to the Fascist associations that the regime was creating during that period. Although it would be erroneous to think that the dictatorship completely changed women's roles in society, granting them freedom and emancipation, it is true nonetheless that Mussolini's regime brought about change.

In fact, prior to Fascism, and during its rule, young middle-class girls had been under their father's control until they married, at which point they would automatically fall under the husband's tutelage. As Victoria de Grazia explains,

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[108] Lisa Di Caprio and Merry E. Wiesner, *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women's History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001,) 494.

[109] Passamore, Kevin (ed.), *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe 1919-45* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003,) 24.

> Women were excluded from the majority of judicial and commercial activities without the consent of their husbands. They could not act as tutors towards their children, and were also excluded from the "family councils," which up to 1942, had the power to dispose of the family patrimony; the inheritance and dowries in case of the father's death or incapacity.[110]

However, the regime also introduced certain changes, which many women viewed as progress or liberation. What changed was their life in society. Up to that time young girls and young women were not given the chance to spend time with other girls their age, nor were they given the chance to meet outsiders, since their social condition did not allow them to work outside their home. The dictatorship enabled girls to take part in activities that up to that time had not existed. Other factors, such as the development of the tertiary sector, contributed to a growing set of opportunities for women to experience life outside the home. Most middle class women who had attended school during the preceding years, and therefore were more educated than the rural residents, worked at white-collar jobs. Their activities gave them a sense of independence and a break from the more traditional past.[111]

With the advance of Fascism, the regime established many female organizations with the precise aim of bringing together girls of the same age group. The important aspect of these groups was that, although still maintaining a clear separation between rich and poor, they were not limited to

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[110] "Le donne erano escluse dalla maggior parte degli atti giuridici e commerciali in assenza del consenso dei propri mariti, dalla possibilità di agire come tutori nei confronti dei figli, e persino dai "consigli familiari" che fino al 1942 ebbero il potere di disporre del patrimonio di famiglia, delle eredità e delle assegnazioni dotali in caso di morte o incapacità del padre." See Victoria de Grazia, "Il patriarcato fascista," in *Storia delle donne. Il Novecento*, eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2007,) 147.

[111] The tertiary sector was a relatively new sector in Italian economy. In fact, it started developing in the period between the two wars, but did not become strong and efficient until after the economic crisis of 1929. In fact, when the crisis hit Italy (as most other European countries,) the regime began hiring people on a massive scale in order to offset the crisis. The majority of people were hired precisely in the tertiary sector, although their salaries had to be reduced in order to avoid useless state expenses. See de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981,) 129, 272-3 n. 5, n. 6; see also Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 73.

the wealthier classes, but tried to encompass all levels. Some examples of these groups were the *Piccole Italiane* (for girls aged eight to twelve) and *Giovani Italiane* (for girls aged thirteen to eighteen); the *Giovani Fasciste* (aged nineteen and twenty); the *Massaie Rurali* (the Rural Housewives, often women that did not live in the cities, but in the small communes that spouted in the outskirts of the city, and sometimes also wealthier women who belonged to landowning families); perhaps most important of all, the *Fasci Femminili* (Female Fasci, a group made up of women who were considered to be highly moral, who strongly supported Fascism, and who had already turned twenty-one years of age.)[112]

After 1929, however, all these groups were placed under the control of the Ministry of Education, which stipulated that these organizations were to become part of the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIF – Italian Youth of the Lictors). New female groups were formed: the *Giovani Fasciste* for girls aged eighteen to twenty-one; the *Giovani Italiane* for ages fifteen to seventeen; the *Piccole italiane* for girls aged eight to fourteen; and lastly the *Figlie della*

[112] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 119. See also Alexander de Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism," 961. See also Marina Addis Saba, *Gioventù italiana del littorio,* for more information about how Fascism influenced young Italians through schooling and extracurricular activities. Although today there are different opinions on how much the schooling system actually did help fascism, Addis Saba explains that "Fascism, just like every other regime, although with particular care and skilled craftiness, took care of the education of the youth. In this way Fascism was manifesting its totalitarian vocation, by trusting it in the hands of the school system in its various levels, and particularly influencing the party's youth organizations which developed and expanded through extracurricular institutions. These institutions are to be considered the true school system of the regime; a system that better than anything else attracted and persuaded the youth to the fascist deal." (my translation) [Il fascismo infatti come ogni regime, ma con cura particolare e con consumata scaltrezza, si occupò dell'educazione della gioventù, manifestando intera la propria vocazione totalitaria proprio in quest'opera, che fu affidata alla scuola nei suoi vari ordini, e prevalentemente alle organizzazioni giovanili del partito le quali si articolarono e si diffusero attraverso tutta una serie di istituzioni parascolastiche che costituirono in fondo la vera scuola del regime, quella che più e meglio dell'altra attirò e persuase i ragazzi all'ideale del fascio.], 55-6.

Lupa (Daughters of the She-Wolf in reference to the mythical she suckled Romulus and Remus) for six and seven year olds.[113]

Initially the female Fascists groups were very small because women were not accustomed to forming part of Italy's political life, but after the founding meeting in Piazza San Sepolcro on March 23, 1919, the numbers quickly rose. Many of the women who belonged to the first *Gruppi Femminili* (Women-only groups, which then became known as the FF, *Fasci Femminili*) were also strong supporters of the irredentist movement which was growing after the war, and were either unmarried, widowed, or had children who had already grown up and left home. Certainly there were also women who simply had been convinced by the Fascist ideology, and therefore approved of it. As Angela Maria Guerra states, "That's when I became a Fascist. Being a Fascist in 1920-21-22 meant loving order, justice, respect. It meant respect for crucifixes in schools, respect for symbols of the Nation, respect for property and the family."[114] During the first years of Fascism the attitude towards women and towards female suffrage was not as misogynous as it would become later, so much that in his earlier program Mussolini actually promised women the right to vote (although the only type of vote that was ever granted to women during Fascism was that of local elections, and it was completely eliminated in 1926 when the regime began centrally appointing the fascist *podestà* as the chief authority in Italy's thousand communes.)[115] In fact, during

[113] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 91-2.
[114] Cited in Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 83, n.14.
[115] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 84. See also M. Bigaran, "Il voto delle donne in Italia dal 1912 al fascismo, *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 16 (1987): 240-265.

a speech delivered at Padua on June 2, 1923, at the first Women's Fascist Conference, this is what the Duce said:

> Fascisti do not belong to the multitude of fops and sceptics *[sic]* who mean to belittle the social and political importance of woman. What does the vote matter? You will have it! But even when women did not vote and did not wish to vote, in time past as in time present, woman had always a predominant influence in shaping the destiny of humanity. Thus the women of Fascismo, who bravely wear the glorious "black shirt," and gather round our standards, are destined to write a splendid page in history, to help, with sacrifice and deeds, Italian Fascismo.[116]

With the strengthening of the dictatorship, the FF slowly lost the independence of the earlier years, becoming more subordinate to male officials, as it was increasingly incorporated into the administrative structure of the regime. In fact, with the search for consent and the desire to reach out to all Italians, the FF became a very important tool. However, within the longer historical context, male control over the FF was hardly a step backward for women. After all, the PNF had become the first Italian party to have a significant number of female members. Every political party which had existed prior to Fascism had always excluded females from the party itself and from any type of active participation. As Willson states, "for all its rhetoric about 'exemplary wives and mothers', with this attempt to recruit million of women, the regime did something quite new. Women were now asked to actively demonstrate their support for Fascism and play a role in forging the 'consensus' the regime desired. This means, essentially, welfare work."[117] Welfare work was precisely one of the most important novelties in Italian society because the state, for the first time, was trying to reach out to all levels of society to create a strong and a unified Italian nation. The state did not only

[116] Benito Mussolini, "In Time Past s in Time Present, Woman Had Always a Predominant Influence in Shaping the Destinies of Humanity", in *Mussolini as Revealed in His Political Speeches (November 1914 – August 1923,)* edited by Barone Bernardo Quaranta di San Severino, 286.

[117] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 86.

want to help women in need by providing welfare; it also wanted to involve wealthier women in the distribution of such assistance. Fascism developed precisely as the party of the growing middle class, which had become much larger and much needier since the end of the First World War.

Middle-class women were the main components of Fascist groups during the 1920's and at the beginning of the 1930's, before the section for peasant women and working-class women was created. The role and the duties that came along with being an active part of these groups, and the enthusiasm that most women put into their activities was admirable, mostly because the FF received very little funding. Most of the money was raised either through lotteries, or through the donations of rich families who believed in the cause the women were working for. With the passage of time, although not becoming a richer association, the FF certainly became more sophisticated and branched out more. In fact, once again Mussolini and the Party Secretary, Achille Starace,[118] while still keeping in place all the negative traits that characterized the Fascist dictatorship, demonstrated to be innovative and expressed their desire of breaking away from the past by creating two new sections of the FF, called *Massaie Rurali* and SOLD.

The regime founded the *massaie rurali* organization in 1933 as a way to include rural women in Fascist activities; in fact, up to that point most rural women did not take part in politics or societal events because of their

[118] Achille Starace was born in Gallipoli in 1889. He was a *bersagliere* (Italian infantry soldier recognizable by the plumed hat) during his younger years; he fought in World War One and then became loyal to Fascism. He covered the role of vice-secretary of the PNF before becoming its Secretary between 1931 and 1939. He was one of Mussolini's most important collaborators, and played a fundamental role in the *fascistizzazione* of Italian society. He was killed by the partisans in 1945. See Enciclopedia Treccani <http://www.treccani.it/Portale/elements/categoriesItems.jsp?pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Enciclopedia_online/S/BIOGRAFIE_-_EDICOLA_S_161986.xml>.

condition as members of the lower classes.[119] The *massaie rurali* was probably the most prominent of all female organizations, since at the time of the collapse of the Fascist dictatorship in 1943, the association could count about three million women. This organization provided women with courses on "house science, hygiene and child care" to improve their lives as mothers, as well the lives of their children. Also, this group of women mobilized heavily during Italy's autarkic period in order to support the Italian economy.[120] As Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi explains,

> Enrollment of new members became a priority; peasant women were seen as potential carriers of political messages that would reach the most remote areas, thus contributing to the forging of nation-building sentiments among the rural masses. During Achille Starace's tenure as party secretary, the group's main purpose indeed moved from farm training to propaganda. Publications produced for the Massaie Rurali [sic] circulated the regime's political ideas and called on the women to be patriotic while supporting the regime's various campaigns of ruralization [sic], autarchy and fecundity.[121]

Although being so numerous and so important, however, the *massaie rurali* were never able to gain the political importance that the women of the *Fasci Femminili* had reached, and this mainly due to the social class to which they belonged. Despite this exclusion, however, it is undeniable that the *massaie rurali* was the largest Italian female organization, a fact which

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[119] Renzo de Felice explains that one of Fascism's most important aspects is that it tried to include all levels of society (unlike anything that had ever happened before), and have the masses participate actively. Mussolini wanted to create something new and different for the Italian people, something through which he could include (and control) the entire population. "This is precisely where *transformismo* and *giolittismo* failed. They struggled along, absorbing the higher levels of society without being able to encompass those masses that at one point had been acknowledged precisely by those upperclasses." ["Proprio qui sta il fallimento del transformismo e del giolittismo; in questo vivacchiare, assorbendo i vertici senza avere la capacità di integrare nello stato le masse che un tempo in quei vertici erano riconosciute".] See Renzo de Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo*, 45.

[120] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 88-9. See also de Grazia, ibid, 99, 108-9, 176. On the *massaie rurali* see also Perry Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie rurali Section of the PNF* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.)

[121] Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, "Reviewd Work: Perry Willson, Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 78, no.3. (Sep. 2006), 745-746. JSTOR.

automatically has led posterity to question whether all those women truly believed in Fascism and its ideals, or if they joined the organization for more practical reasons. Often, opportunism, economic needs, or the need to find employment, prompted women to become a part of the *Massaie Rurali* and SOLD *Sezione Operaie e Lavoranti a Domicilio* (Section for Female Laborers and Home-workers.)[122] As one peasant woman from Emilia-Romagna stated: "I'll get myself a rural Housewife card, just as I'd have the communist one if they gave me something to eat."[123] Certainly the strongest believers in Fascism were the women of the FF who had been the first to create and join female associations, and were also the group who controlled all the fascist female branches.

A similar feelings to that of the Emilian peasant woman existed all over the Peninsula. Women often decided to join the Fascist organizations either because they saw those organizations as the only possibility for having access to free activities during the daytime, or because they did not have a choice. In the 1930s, when the regime became more autarchic, those who willingly chose to oppose it and to not participate in its activities were denied all its privileges. For instance, when the *tessera fascista* (Fascist card) came into existence in 1921, all those who did not possess it were excluded from politics and from society, often even were denied jobs. Moreover, since it cost two Lira to obtain the card, the regime made a profit by imposing it. The 1933

[122] SOLD was an organization created in 1937 (based on the large consent and popularity which the *massaie rurali* organization had encountered) for working women who lived in the city. The majority of them were factory workers, but it also included a number of domestic servants. All these women were given the chance to engage in sports activities and outings, and were also taught the same basic principles that were taught to the rural housewives as well, mainly regarding hygiene, house science and childcare. See P. Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 88-9; V. de Grazia, ibid., 176-7.

[123] Perry, Willson. *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali Section of the PNF*, 190; see also Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 89-90.

card had the following oath printed on it: "I swear to obey the Duce's orders without question, and to serve with all my strength, and, if necessary, my blood, the cause of the Fascist Revolution."[124]

It would be as much a mistake to think that every woman who joined was a true Fascist, as to think the opposite. Certainly there were people who joined in order to support their family and to keep away from any kind of trouble caused by the regime itself. Cases of *confino politico* (political confinement,) amounting to exile in far away, small towns in Italy, were not uncommon during the Fascist years, and became the lot of those who openly opposed the dictatorship.[125] Fear of such exile was one of the main reasons why Fascist opponents (or even people without a political agenda) decided to join the party and its various organizations. Women were included in these groups; many women acquired the Fascist card and became active members of various associations, but their adherence was far from meaning that they were truly happy with the innovations introduced by the regime. Lower-class women, who had to fight against poverty and were constantly struggling to keep their families above water, found Fascist organizations – such as ONMI – helpful, but still their root problems remained unsolved.

One of the regime's greatest downfalls, was the wage cuts it was forced to apply all over the country. These wage cuts were partly due to the economic recession which already existed prior to Fascism, but more importantly, they

[124]See "Le tessere del P.N.F.", <http://www.littorio.com/pnf/tesserepartito-i.htm>. [Giuro di eseguire senza discutere gli ordini del Duce e di servire con tutte le mie forze e se è necessario col mio sangue, la causa della Rivoluzione Fascista]

[125] One of the most known cases of *confino politico* was that of Carlo Levi, a Jewish Italian writer who was sent to Lucania during the years of Fascism, and who wrote the renown novel *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, where he depicted the social and political life of the town, while at the same time describing the feelings he felt during his confinement.

were also a result of the large expenses undertaken by the government in order to modernize the country and prepare for the future colonial expansion. The employments open to women diminished as the regime got stronger, both because the dictatorship wanted men to control the family and the workplace, and because it believed that working women increased the chances of not creating a family, or of not expanding already existing families. "In 1934, for example, Mussolini argued that work was potentially dangerous for women and might make them sterile, whereas for men it was a source of 'great physical and moral virility.'"[126] Despite these thoughts, many women were forced to work for economic reasons, either to contribute to their husband's salary, to support their children if they were widowed, or support their elderly parents. The regime did understand that all of these were dire conditions, and often did allow women to work, although it made the employment of women more costly, it excluded women from certain types of jobs and strengthened the differences between the gender roles in the workplace.[127] This bigot attitude towards women led many of them to protest openly against the laws of the time. One wrote:

> Losing our jobs we shall also lose those necessities of life which enable us to raise our children. Did we err in legalizing a sacred tie and showing ourselves obedient to your directives Duce, by procreating and preparing for the nation new young reserves?[128]

Most women needed to work, and therefore the Fascist legislations that reduced employment opportunities and the wage cuts, oftentimes affected women negatively because they had no other sources of income. This is one reason why prostitution continued to be so prominent during the years of the

[126] Cited in Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 71, n. 34.
[127] See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 74.
[128] Cited in Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 73.

dictatorship, although controls in brothels, and medical controls for prostitutes had been strengthened already starting in 1923.[129] This is also why many women were unsatisfied with what the regime had to offer them, and did not find the feminine organizations as helpful as one might think – although they had to join them in order not to be completely excluded from society.

Fascist organizations wanted to provide leisure time and unity among Italian women. For this reason it tried to create an association for all levels of society. A similar organization to the *Massaie Rurali*, but which involved female workers, instead of rural housewives, was SOLD. This organization also aimed at encompassing the lower social classes in a demographically and economically growing society. Fascist women's organizations thus reached out to women who had been traditionally excluded from the political and social life of the nation under the previous Liberal regime. According to De Grazia, "[All of these associations] were truly mass organizations, not only because of their several million members, but because they intentionally grouped people by sex, by social classes, by age, and by activity to prevent any autonomous expression of class identity or class alliance."[130] In fact, the FF was one of the most prominent organizations ever created by Fascism, not solely because of the impact it had on Italian society, but also because of the large number of women it recruited. Willson says,

> In 1929, FF membership was already about 100,000 and by 1940 this had soared to around 750,000, and to over a million in 1942. Even larger numbers joined the Rural Housewives section: its membership grew from 225,094 in 1935, to 895,514 in 1937, nearly 1.5 million in 1939 and over 2.5 million by later 1942, making it one of the largest of all the Fascist mass organizations

[129] See S. Bellassi, *La legge del desiderio. Il progetto Merlin e l'Italia degli anni cinquanta* (Rome: Carocci, 2006); see also Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 76.

[130] Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 16.

> overall. Even the latecomer SOLD had signed up an impressive 1,514,860 by July 1942.[131]

Other organizations in which women could take part were the GUF (*Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* - Fascist University Groups). These groups were the means through which the party penetrated the youth in the universities, and tried to control and educate the new working and ruling class.[132] These associations were open mainly to men (since men attended university in higher numbers than women), so the few women that did participate in them had to fight for their positions and their membership. In fact, the GUF did not start off as a co-ed organization; space for women was added towards the end of the 1920's by Giurati[133], the secretary of the Fascist Party, to include a broader segment of society since the number of females attending university was steadily growing. De Grand explains,

> There was also a continued increase in university enrolment for both sexes, but in the case of women the gains were striking: from 3.9 per cent of the university population in 1911-12 to 17.4 per cent in 1935-6 to 29.9 per cent in the last year of the regime, 1943-3. (…) In the law faculties there were 405 female students in a total of 9,987. In political science 41 out of 982 students were women. 343 women were enrolled in medical faculties, while in pharmacy slightly less than half the students were women (1,076 of 2,492). Women were better represented in the faculty of philosophy and letters where 1,828 female students were enrolled out of 2,783.[134]

Precisely because during the years of Fascism women were becoming more and more present in Italian universities, the regime felt an urgent need to

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[131] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 89.

[132] Benedetta Garzanelli, "Un aspetto della politica totalitaria del PNF: i gruppi universitari fascisti," *Studi Storici*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1997), 1121; see also Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1991,) 114-7.

[133] Giovanni Giurati was born in Venice in 1876. He fought during the First World War, and joined the irredentist movement along with D'Annunzio once the war ended. In 1921 he became a Fascist, and led one of the fascist troops during the March on Rome. He then became Secretary of the PNF between 1930-31. Giurati died in Rome in 1970. See Enciclopedia Treccani <http://www.treccani.it/Portale/elements/categoriesItems.jsp?pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Enciclopedia_online/G/BIOGRAFIE_-_EDICOLA_G_029499.xml>.

[134] Alexander De Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism", 960; on the education that women could achieve, and on the limits of such education, see Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 69-71.

control this population by creating Fascist university organizations in which women were allowed to participate. During the 1930's the number of women who attended university almost tripled from 5,987 in 1929-30 to 18,174 in 1939-40, although dropout rates were still quite high.[135] In these associations the *gufine* (the name used to indicate the women of the GUF,) besides being active participants, were mainly involved in courses on childcare, as well as being active members of the FF.[136]

Many middle-class women were also part of philanthropic associations which helped poor families, while at the same time they tried to educate those same families on how to raise children in a healthier way. Philanthropic associations existed prior to Fascism, mainly through the Catholic Church which had created a large network of female organizations for that purpose.[137] However, those that developed during Fascism were mass organizations because Mussolini wanted to involve (and control) the entire Italian population and thus create a sense of national unity. These organizations were very useful both for the women who were being helped, and for those who were helping them. The majority of these women, in fact, were being considered for the first time as belonging to something other than their family. According to de Grazia, Italian women did not believe that they could reach independence and the right to vote, or obtain a stable job by being politically active. Instead, they thought that they could gain the rights which they had long been seeking through their activities in philanthropic

[135] Cited in Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 71, n. 32.

[136] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 93; for a complete history on the GUF, their formation, evolution and ending, see Benedetta Garzanelli, "Un aspetto della politica totalitaria del PNF: i gruppi universitari fascisti," 1121-1161;

[137] Alexander de Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism", 948.

organizations.[138] In fact, although the right to vote and the right to earn equal pay had been an issue for a number of women before Fascism, Italy had not experienced the same female emancipation as the United States and Great Britain during those same years. Many Italian women did not see the right to vote and a steady job as a pressing issue, and felt instead that their active participation in state organizations granted them the freedom they were seeking.

The most important Fascist organization dedicated to the care of children and to the education of their mothers was ONMI (*Opera Nazionale Maternità ed Infanzia*, National Organization for Maternity and Infancy)[139], founded on December 10, 1925 with the support of a large part of the Italian pre-Fascist political parties, mainly the Catholics, the Liberals and the Nationalists, who at the time still played a role in Italian politics.[140] Fascism created this association in order to help children and mothers in need of assistance (with the exception of single mothers.) Assistance was not solely economic in nature; oftentimes the women who volunteered in this organization would pay home visits and actually teach mothers better and more sanitary ways to take care of their children. As De Grand states, "this organization worked to create public health programs, distribute milk, care for small children, and in general reduce infant mortality which was the real cause of low birth rate."[141] Some scholars, such as Perry Willson, view these visits as controlling and perhaps unnecessary, and view the entire organization as

[138] Victoria de Grazia, "Il patriarcato fascista," in *Storia delle donne: il Novecento*, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, eds., (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2007).
[139] See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 68, n.18; see also Victoria de Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, 7-8, 62-9, 110.
[140] Victoria de Grazia, "*Il patriarcato fascista*", 155.
[141] Alexander De Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism," 962, n.77.

ineffective because of the lack of funds, because many women were no longer continued to receive help once their children were weaned, and because although the rates of infant mortality did drop, they did not do so any quicker than in the previous decades.[142] Although ONMI might not have been the perfect organization that Mussolini was hoping for, it truly did represent a break with the past, something that no women in Italy had experienced before, a type of help, assistance and maternal welfare that had not existed prior to the unification of the country, nor during the period of Liberal government.

This organization not only helped poor mothers in need of assistance. Perhaps in a minor way, it also helped higher class women feel like a part of the country they lived in, it made them feel useful and no longer confined to the rooms of their homes. ONMI, in fact, is a perfect example of how upper-class Italian women volunteered in philanthropic associations, because although the government had founded ONMI, it was actual women who ran it and who dedicated their spare time and their knowledge to bring help to other women who were less well-off. Many women who were part of the *Fasci Femminili* were also volunteered in ONMI, and although they supported female independence and desired more rights for women, "when ONMI was founded, some felt that at last things for which they had long campaigned were being granted."[143]

Italy was a country with one of the highest infant mortality rates in all of Europe, ranging from 166.5 deaths for every 1000 lives in 1902, to 98.7 deaths in 1934. In other European countries the rates were significantly lower. For instance, in 1938 Holland only had 36 deaths for every 1000, compared

[142] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 68-9.
[143] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 85.

to Italy's 106.2.[144] Fascism wanted to drastically reduce these rates to create a larger, and therefore stronger, nation. This is the reason why it dedicated so much of its time and money to educate mothers and improve the health of their babies, or to promote actions such as the elimination in 1923 of the ruota (wheel), through which unmarried mothers who bore children could anonymously abandon their babies and have someone else – usually nuns or monks – take care of them. With the outlawing of this procedure, the regime improved the already existing maternal hospitals (where single mothers could give birth to their children and could receive subsidies if they agreed to nurse their babies), and it helped lower the percentages of infant mortality, since many of the children that were abandoned in the ruota eventually died either of cold or diseases.[145]

Scholars such as De Grazia have a different view on ONMI and on what it did for the Italian population. ONMI certainly had its less practical aspects, but in the whole it introduced a whole new way of child-caring which did teach poor mothers about hygiene, nursing and medication. Not only did it help mothers; it mostly helped children, especially newborns. De Grazia states,

> ONMI cast an even wider net on infant care. By 1940, it oversaw a network of 9,617 institutions, especially 167 built centers, or case della madre e del bambino [mother and children homes]. It also sponsored fifty-nine "travelling chairs of child-care (cattedre ambulanti di puericultura), each of which visited about twenty towns a week. Their services were available to all and in regions such as Tuscany and Julian Venetia as much as 15 percent of the population obtained assistance. (…) In the name of a modern infant-care culture, it promoted breastfeeding. But it also boosted the use of infant formula, by distributing free samples of Nestlé's powdered-milk product Nestogen, as well as cleansers, medicines, and baby food.[146]

[144] Alexander de Grand, "Women Under Italian Fascism", 962. On the conditions of mothers and children before the advent of Fascism, see Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 13.

[145] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 68-9.

[146] Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 64-5.

Although infant mortality still existed, in many cases it was due to the horrible living, medical and hygienic conditions of the poorer classes in the countryside, but also in the city. Parents were too busy to keep a close eye on their children, and thus created solid bases for a healthy future, and this is precisely where ONMI stepped in, trying to drastically improve the situation. This association created a sense of security for mothers and women of the time because they began to experience a change from the conditions of the liberal period that had preceded Fascism. For the first time, the lower classes were being taken into consideration, and although many people might have disapproved of Fascism, they could find no fault with the improvements that the regime was bringing to their homes and families. The liberal years had been a time in which women had been completely excluded from society or from any type of national organization (with the exception of associations created and controlled by the Catholic Church, or CRI (*Croce Rossa Italiana*, Red Italian Cross), which was founded in 1864, and gradually involved women, especially during the First World War.)[147] Fascism, whatever its aims, was slowly changing this situation by creating groups and organizations that involved women from all levels of society. This alone was a true step forward for Italian women.

As they reminisced, Sara and Silia Vignoli perfectly expressed the strong consent that they had felt towards the Fascist regime. The most interesting aspect, however, is that they both came from a Socialist family that did not approve of Fascism; the father, Pietro Vignoli, was objective when

[147] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 49-52 for CRI, and 80-81 for Catholic women organizations.

looking at the dictatorship, meaning that he did not completely disapprove of Fascism, and was able to admit when the dictatorship did something useful for the people; the mother, Albina Vignoli, was more radically antifascist, especially during the 1930's, because according to her two daughters, she never saw any type of improvement brought about by Fascism and its actions. Both Silia and Sara remember the Fascist years, and neither seems to have a completely negative vision of it. When asked if they, as young woman, had felt limited by Fascism and its laws, they both responded that they had not. Certainly they realized that as young girls they were expected to obey what their parents told them, but they never felt oppressed or subservient to the males of their family. Their mother's condition, however, was a bit different because, although having complete control of the "material" aspect of the home, she was obliged to consult her husband on any economic matter. As Sara Vignoli remembers,

> Her role [the mother's] was marginal because the head of the family was father. Mother had to ask his permission for anything regarding expenses. She was supposed to take care of the material aspect of the house, and to take care of us children, but my brothers almost had more power than she did when father was away. [148]

Their mother's condition, and their father's power, closely resembles the situation that existed in rural families at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the *capoccia* (most powerful male in a peasant household) and the *reggitrice* (most powerful woman in a peasant household).[149] Most intriguingly, the Vignoli sisters recalled that their mother's position within the

[148] "Il suo ruolo [della madre] era marginale perché il capo famiglia era il babbo. La mamma doveva chiedere permesso per tutto quello che riguardava le spese. Lei doveva occuparsi della casa in quanto ambiente fisico, ma i miei fratelli comandavano quasi più dei lei quando il babbo non c'era." Sara Vignoli. Personal Interview. January 4, 2010.

[149] The *capoccia* in large rural families was usually the oldest male that had complete power over the whole family, and was in charge of their well-being. The *capoccia* was the husband of the *reggitrice*, who controlled and was in charge of the work done by women in the family. See P. Willson, ibid., 9, 191n.; de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 84.

household did not change drastically before, during, or after Fascism. With the rise to power of Mussolini nothing changed in the Vignoli family, at least with respect to the relationship between husband and wife. What did change was the help that the mother received from the government. Albina Vignoli was a direct recipient of the prizes given out by ONMI to mothers who took outstanding care of their children. She received it on December 24, 1934 for her third-born child, Sorrento, and he diploma stated: "Merit certificate given from ONMI to the mother Albina Vignoli for the good upbringing of her children. Rome, LI 24 Dicember XIII."[150] No matter how antifascist Albina Vignoli could have been, she approved of this specific organization because it truly helped mothers in need like herself.

The memories of these two women are a key point in understanding the impact that an organization such as ONMI had on the Italian population, especially on the women. When Fascism came into power, in fact, few women had strong political views, or strong beliefs one way or another, and therefore, if on the one hand they might not have expressed the immediate support for the regime, on the other they were a massive population that could be molded – precisely through such associations – and made to embrace Fascist views and strongly support the regime. This, however, does not necessarily imply that all Fascist organizations were inefficient or had no real benefit for women. ONMI, ONB (*Opera Nazionale Balilla,* National Balilla Organization), or OND (*Opera Nazionale del Dopolavoro,* National After-work Organization) are all examples of associations that, though controlled by the regime, truly

[150] Sara Vignoli, and Silia Vignoli. Personal Interview. January 4, 2010. The certificate stated: "Diplma di benemerenza conferito dall'ONMI alla mamma Albina Vignoli per il buon allevamento della prole. Roma, LI 24 dicembre XIII."

did bring some improvement to the lives of many Italians. Certainly the same cannot be said about all female fascist organizations, because in many cases the hard work that women put into these associations was not acknowledged, and many of the promises that made (such as higher funds to be expected from the government, or women being granted the right to vote,) were not kept. Without a doubt, however, the Fascist regime brought about innovations for women through all these organizations. This mean not just leaving behind the past, but also taking steps forwards into a better future.

develop and grow in importance, where the more modern innovations could be found, and where the largest amount of people could be reached. In fact, following the First World War, large numbers of people began migrating from the countryside to the nearby cities in search of jobs and a better life, and many – in particular women found employment in the industries that were born during the conflict. It was precisely towards these people that propaganda was directed, at first in smaller dosages, but growing steadily throughout the years. For instance, the major ideological "battles" fought by Fascism were all publicized through a fervid and well thought-out propaganda, through images and videos that could immediately reach the heart and mind of many Italians. One of the most important 'battles' was that of the Quota 90, which began in 1925 and aimed at strengthening the Italian currency of the time – the Lira – by bringing to bring down to 90 Lira to one British Pound, in an effort to develop the ravaged Italian economy. A second important "battle" was that of Wheat, which became a fundamental issue in the regime's political agenda starting in 1926. This aimed at regenerating the Italian primary sector which had been devastated by the world conflict.[154]

[154] See Samuele Tieghi, "Fascismo e battaglia del grano: precedenti politici ed economici", <http://www.storiain.net/arret/num100/artic5.asp>; according to Karen Pinkus, the depression that hit a large part of the more developed countries after the fall of Wall Street did not devastate Italy because the country was already coping with its own depression which had begun after the war, and which Mussolini was trying to bring to an end with his "battles" for the stabilization of the Lira and the regeneration of the primary sector - two of the most important economic decisions that regime made during its twenty years of power. However, there were also negative views on such 'battles', not necessarily because of their aims, but because of their outcomes. As Karen Pinkus adds: "As more than one historian has noted, this campaign, begun in 1925, did not strive to improve the economic standing of individual farmers, whether in the organized North or in the impoverished South, as much as it sought to solidify the power of the rural bourgeoisie. (…) Fascist agricultural policy ended up devastating the land, severely reducing animal husbandry, and favoring the landowner over the peasant laborer. The battle did little to improve technology or to introduce more effective methods of crop rotations, which would have benefited the South in particular." See Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regime*, 83, 118.

Initially propaganda was mostly visual so that it could reach out to all levels of society, including less educated Italians. Slowly, however, the regime began to control all kinds of propaganda resources, from cinema to art, from literature to newspapers, from fashion to architecture, making sure that the right message was transmitted to the people. Under Fascism, most of public life revolved around public spectacles such as parades, rallies and the famous *sabato fascista* (Fascist Saturday); also, a second important type of 'spectacle' was the new architecture introduced by Mussolini into the major Italian cities.[155] Many important buildings were erected during the Fascist *ventennio*, most of which still stand today. Silia Vignoli still remembers such constructions as something innovative and important because they not only improved the aspect of cities, but also made them more accessible. For instance, Florence's modernization took place mostly during the 1930s, when buildings such as the main stadium and the central train station were constructed.[156] Propaganda, in whatever form it presents itself, was central to the regime's aims. Whether it be billboards on the main roads in a large city, or documentaries created and produced by the Istituto Luce[157], or speeches given by Mussolini which most people listened to on the radio,

[155] Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1991,) 120-21.

[156] Silia Vignoli, Personal Interview, January 4, 2010.

[157] The Istituto Luce was born in Italy in 1924, and its aim was to produce and distribute Italian films all over the world. It was born as a Fascist organization, controlled by the Duce as strong propaganda device to celebrate Fascism throughout Italy and to show its power to the world. The Istituto Luce still exists today, and preserves one of the largest collections of photos, videos and movies from 1924 up to present time. See <http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/>. Cannistaro writes, "Sometime after being recognized officially by the regime, the Istituto Luce was placed under complete control of the government. In November 1925 a law transformed the Istituto into a state organization in charge of spreading popular culture and basic education through cinema." [Qualche tempo dopo aver ricevuto il riconoscimento ufficiale del regime, l'Istituto Luce fu posto sotto il

completo controllo governativo. Nel novembre 1925 un decreto legge lo trasformava in un ente di stato incaricato di fare, attraverso il cinema, opera di diffusione della cultura popolare e dell'istruzione di base.] See Philip Cannistaro, *La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media* (Rome-Bari: Laterza e figli, 1975,) 276-7.

or even the erection of important buildings, propaganda reached every niche of Italian life. According to Cannistaro, "the importance that the Istituto Luce held for Italian propaganda is well known, it being the only organ in charge and capable of producing documentaries on current events and propaganda."[158] Fascism needed popular consent, and propaganda was one of the main ways to produce it. For this reason, Mussolini invested much time and effort in creating a Fascist organism that could control all aspects of propaganda (including the censoring of that which went against Fascism.) As Scudiero states,

> For this reason the *Ufficio Stampa della Presidenza del Consiglio* (Council Presidency's Press Agency) was first born, and then became the *Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e Propaganda* (1932) (State Undersecretary for Press and Propaganda), subsequently the *Ministero per la Stampa e Propaganda* (1935) (Ministry of Press and Propaganda), and then re-baptized after a couple months as *Ministero della Cultura* (Ministry of Culture), oftentimes abbreviated in "Min.Cul.Pop.".[159]

This shows the importance given by the regime to propaganda, and the evolution of the complex organisms it created in order to make sure that the Fascist message arrived everywhere. Certainly one of the most important inventions that helped strongly support the dictatorship was the recent invention of the radio, which at first was considered a luxury for many people, but then slowly became more and more popular in Italian homes. According to

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completo controllo governativo. Nel novembre 1925 un decreto legge lo trasformava in un ente di stato incaricato di fare, attraverso il cinema, opera di diffusione della cultura popolare e dell'istruzione di base.] See Philip Cannistaro, *La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media* (Rome-Bari: Laterza e figli, 1975,) 276-7.

[158] Philip Cannistaro, *La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media* (Rome-Bari: Laterza e Figli, 1975), 480, [L'importanza che l'Istituto Luce riveste ai fini della propaganda italiana è ben nota, trattandosi dell'unico Ente incaricato e capace di produrre documentari di attualità e propaganda].

[159] Massimo Cirulli and Maurizio Scudiero, eds., *L'arte per il consenso* (New York: Publicity & Print Press, 2001,) 8. [A tale scopo sorse dapprima l'*Ufficio Stampa della Presidenza del Consiglio* che in seguito divenne il *Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e Propaganda* (1932) e quindi elevato a *Ministero per la Stampa e Propaganda* (1935), a sua volta, dopo qualche mese, ribattezzato in *Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, spesso abbreviato "Min.Cul.Pop."]; see also Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy*, 121; Philip Cannistaro, La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media, 101-172.

Scudiero, in 1932 the number of radios per family in Italy was 305,000, reaching 530,000 only three years later, and one million in 1938. The number of people listening to the radio was at least five times larger than the actual number of radio devices because of the large number of members in most Italian families, and also because of the possibility to listen to the Duce's speeches in public places such as cafes, barber shops, or during the *dopolavoro* (after-work) hours.[160] By looking at these numbers we understand how important the radio became for communication, and what an extensive use the regime made of it. Through this invention, in fact, Mussolini not only reached out to massive numbers of people in the public sphere; he also was present to them in the private sphere of their homes, where Italians often listened to the Duce's discourses. Therefore, the use of propaganda devices was not solely to gain public consent, but to try and gain control over the private lives of Italians.

Mussolini understood that active, positive and popular approval was not going to be earned through violence and coercion; that the regime needed some other way to generate the support it needed. Italians needed to support Fascism not because it was imposed on them, but because they whole-heartedly wanted to do so. Thompson explains,

> That gradual change of emphasis from coercion to acceptance to positive, active and even enthusiastic support for Fascism depended, in part, of course, on tangible, material improvements in standard of living but also, to a very large degree, on the ability of the regime to persuade the great mass of the population that it was better off under Fascism and that material, moral and spiritual progress would henceforth be a constant and continuing feature of all aspects of Italian life. In that noticeable material improvements affected the lives of only a minority of Italians throughout the *ventennio*, it can be argued that the function of propaganda and 'education' must have been at

[160] Cited in Massimo Cirulli and Maurizio Scudiero, eds., *L'arte per il consenso*, 10, n.7. For greater detail about the role played by Fascist propaganda see also Edward R. Tannenbaum, *L'esperienza fascista. Cultura e società in Italia dal 1922 al 1945* (Milan: Mursia, 1974.)

> least as important as coercion in the maintenance of the regime in power for so long.[161]

Of course Fascism used violence and coercion to force people into listening to the Duce's speeches, or in order to make them believe in Fascist values, but it is undeniable that propaganda (under which one may include education) played a fundamental role in the regime's strategy, because it was really through propaganda that Mussolini could convince people about the efficacy of what he preached.

Among the main recipients of fascist propaganda were, without a doubt, women, since they were the ones who spent the longest time at home and who took care of the house and of the children. The regime created audiovisual propaganda aimed mainly at the Italian male population (such as the need to militarily expand the fascist regime.) Nonetheless, women were also heavily targeted by Fascist propaganda because they were the ones who would make the final decisions about buying goods for the home. As Pinkus points out,

> A thrifty housewife was a model citizen, and women were particularly subject to restrictions on the consumption end of the economic quotation. While negating the female's place in the national scheme of production, manufacturers began to realize that women were in practice often responsible for making decisions about consumption. (…) Home economics is also a way for women to exercise their own control, even if this sense is ultimately illusory, a kind of false consciousness of the mechanisms of capitalism."[162]

Although women had a certain control over their home environment (mainly economically,) Fascist propaganda wanted them to believe that they had attained to larger freedoms (political, for instance.) Managing part of the money and buying goods for the home gave women a different power than what they had in the past, and made them feel important not only to their

[161] Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy*, 98.
[162] Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*, 85-86.

family but also to society, because in their role as consumers they also contributed to the Italian economy.[163] This feeling was common mostly among peasant women, who up until that time had been excluded from society, but who slowly became a part of it as well.

Through films, billboards, art and the radio, Mussolini stressed women's social roles as mothers and "angels of the hearth." The Italian need for a strong, healthy and united population was shown to be in their hands because they had the power to give birth to large numbers of children. The use of women's bodies for propagandistic purposes became therefore very common during the Fascist years. In fact, through the female body the regime could express itself in many ways, and convey important messages to the rest of the Italian population. It is not by chance that women's bodies were used to represent the motherland for which soldiers had to fight; that they represented the beauty and tranquility of the home to which soldiers wanted to return; that they stood for future because of their ability to give birth. Women's bodies, as much as men's, were aused by the regime to praise the fertility of Italian soil, as well as to express the need for taking advantage of such a favorable characteristic. Pinkus explains that,

> Agrarian bodies exhibit solidity and mass. Many of the posters figure children against the background of wheat fasci, the young bodies soft and plump, not stiffened like the phallic soldier. The grain campaign specifically marked this style as appropriate for the peasant class, just as it marked the reduced, geometrical bodies as appropriate for an urban population. In the "battle of grain," the body is never shown toiling, but simply brimming forth with fertility. An equation is made between the fertility of the peasant body and the earth itself: sheaves of wheat blossom forth from a woman's lap; an enormous ear of corn juts forth from a man's crotch; bodies embrace the earth and glow from the nurturing sun.[164]

[163] Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*, 86.
[164] Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*, 117.

The use of this type of propaganda served Fascism in two separate ways: on one hand it stressed the need for an 'agrarian revolution' and of a regeneration of the Italian economy, while on the other hand it underlined the necessity for the Italian population to grow, and grow strong, by pointing out the fertility of the Italian people.

After 1927, when the demographic campaign took off, women began to be exalted as mothers and saviors of the nation, without whom the fascist regime could never expand and reach the glory that the Roman Empire had once held in its hands. As Mussolini himself said, "The destiny of nations is tied to their demographic power."[165] The need for stronger and healthier children was at the base of the numerous organizations that helped the mothers and their children, such as ONMI and ONB. Through these associations Mussolini wanted to guarantee security for mothers and their newly-born, and ultimately to bring down the rate of infant mortality. In fact it was not because of the numbers of adult deaths, nor because of the war that the Italian population was not growing, but because of the high rate of infant mortality, and conversely, the lower birth rates of the nation. Therefore, the regime used speeches, films, and images of propaganda to stress the strong relationship existing between mothers and children. Children were important because they represented the future of the country, only slightly higher than mothers in the regime's view.

The development of a new youth was central to the regime's goals. Mothers were important because they were the ones who gave birth to

[165] Benito Mussolini, "Discorso dell'Ascensione", 26 May 1927. <http://cronologia.leonardo.it/storia/a1927v.htm>. [Il destino delle nazione è legato alla loro potenza demografica]; see also Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 65.

children; propaganda and education were important because they were the ones that formed them. As Mussolini himself explained,

> The whole country had to become a great school for perpetual political education which would make the Italians into complete fascists, new men, changing their habits, their way of life, their mentality, their character and, finally, their physical makeup. It would no longer be a question of grumbling against the sceptical [*sic*], mandolin-playing Italians, but rather of creating a new kind of man who was tough, strong, strong-willed, a fighter, a latter day legionary of Cesar for whom nothing was impossible.[166]

It was through this new youth that Fascism would grow and expand, and bring back the glory of the Roman Empire that the dictatorship was trying to emulate.

This was the reason why the regime gave so much importance to the colonial expansion in Africa, striving to obtain much better results than those achieved by Francesco Crispi in 1896 or Giovanni Giolitti in 1911. Mussolini understood that a strong country had to also be a colonial power; Italy needed to compete with the other European powers and demonstrate that it, too, was worthy of being feared by others. The invasion of Ethiopia took place in 1935, and it became a colony on May 5, 1936 when the Italian troops lead by General Badoglio, invaded the capital Addis Ababa.[167] However, the Italian campaign in support for Mussolini's maneuver, but, most importantly, the buildup of the army, began prior to the actual invasion of the African country. The regime was aware that it needed support from the lower echelons of society; the whole of the Italian population had to support this decision; families needed to believe that Italy, too, could become a colonial power. For

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[166] Cited in Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy*, 99, n. 2.

[167] See Felix Gilbert & David Clay Large, *The European Era: 1890 to the Present, 5th* ed., 273-4; on the role that women played during this conflict, see Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 77-78, 279-280; Victoria De Grazia, The Culture of Consent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981,) 169; Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 75.

this reason the regime established the famous *giornata della fede* (day of faith) on December 18, 1935, during which all Italian women were asked to donate their wedding rings for the colonial cause, in exchange for tin substitutes.[168] The large majority of women followed the action of Queen Elena (who was the first to donate her ring,) including Rachele Mussolini, Mussolini's wife, who donated the ring that the dictator himself had given her. The total of gold collected was 2,262 kilograms, which was all used to serve the Ethiopian cause. However, this eventful day was in contradiction to the Fascist ideology. De Grazia explains that the women's sacrificial action rendered unclear whether they were supposed to be primarily devoted to their husbands, children, and home, or to the Duce and the regime.[169] As Mussolini himself stated, "war is the most important thing in a man's life, as maternity is in a woman's,"[170] a statement which underlined the importance given by the Duce both to war and to maternity, seeing the two as two fundamental pillars of a great nation.

Once again women were being called to help the regime. These women were not just playing the passive role of mothers and wives who sent their men off to war; they were asked to play an active role through the donation of their

[168] The expression *giornata della fede* can be translated in two different ways. In fact, although the word "fede" in Italian means "faith", the name is also used to refer to a wedding ring. Therefore, it is interesting to see how the regime chose this word specifically and played with this dual meaning to represent both the actual wedding ring that was being donated, and the faith that Italian women should have in their country. Silia Vignoli's testimony becomes intriguing in this context: she explained that her mother-in-law was one of the women who donated their rings on this occasion, and when asked if she ever got it back, she answered that she did get a ring back, but that it was not the original one, and that, macabre as it may seem, there was some other man's name engraved on it. Silia Vignoli, Personal Interview, January 4, 2010; see also Petra Terhoeven, *Oro alla patria. Donne, guerra e propaganda nella giornata di Fede fascista* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006)

[169] Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 78; see also Luigi Salvatorelli and Giovanni Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel periodo fascista*, new ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1964); Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, 58.

[170] Cited in Laura Fermi, *Mussolini* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961,) 401.

rings. A massive amount of propaganda supported and stressed the importance of the African campaign, not just in order to generate support for the invasion (which many people, including fascists, disapproved of,) but also to bring together two worlds that were completely different from each other. Italians at the time were not used to living with other cultures; Italy was not a country where foreigners immigrated to and there had been no slaves importated from African or Asian countries. As Pinkus states,

> In the struggle to create a "colonial will" in a putatively nonracist (or better, a diffident) society, the regime waged its most massive official propaganda campaign based on several familiar themes: the economic benefits of territorial expansion in Africa (and later, when sanctions were imposed by the League of Nations, economic autarchy); cultivation of raw materials necessary for Italian industry; national prestige; and demography (Italians in search of work would move to AOI rather than emigrating elsewhere).[171]

Although Mussolini had no intention of making these two worlds equal by giving Ethiopians the same rights as Italians, he did intend to Italianize the African colonies by introducing the Italian language (which is still spoken today in some regions of Ethiopia,) by introducing Italian culture, and by making Ethiopia a land to which Italians could have chosen to emigrate. Instead of South America, Mussolini wanted Italians to move to their own lands, and AOI would have represented a valid option after its conquest. However, although Italians were not an openly racist population because of the lack of encounters between Italians and African cultures, the regime did establish clear distinctions between white and black people. With Italy as an empire, the white race was supposed to be protected, and this is why "in 1937, Mussolini signed a law prohibiting "madamism", that is, a paraconjugal relation between Italians and natives. At the same time, however, Italian-run

[171] Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*, 24. AOI was the acronym used when speaking about Africa Orientale Italiana, Oriental Italian Africa.

brothels continued to enjoy a brisk business in Africa."[172] The next year, in 1938, the Grand Council of Fascism outlawed marriages between natives and Italians. Futurists such as Marinetti took great interest in the colonial expansion, but he also made a clear distinction between the black male and the black female. He stated that "If the African male is made into a futurist, the female is represented as repugnant and vilified, (…) [because] these African female bodies with their breasts "hanging to their waists" stand in opposition to all that the futurists found heroic in the male."[173]

Cinema was also a strong medium of propaganda. During the Fascist years the Istituto Luce made many movies, which after 1925 fell under the regime's control, most of them revolving around the strength of the Fascist regime and the need for Italy to grow demographically, economically and culturally. What Mussolini wanted to do was to promote Italy on a massive scale, filming not only everyday events (which most people were already accustomed to,) but also giving Italians an idea of how life was in the remote regions of the North and in the South, and, perhaps most importantly, celebrating its own reforms. As Brunetta writes,

> From the beginning of the 1930's to the end of the regime, the common ground for Italian cinema, whether it be fascist or anti-fascist, was the need to focus attention on Italy which had been absent on the big screen up until then. Starting with *Sole* and up until 1943, a heterogeneous group of directors and screenwriters felt the need to deal with Italian reality by promoting monumental places – but also unknown landscapes of the North and the South - for their characters. They were able, in many cases, to unite in a very pertinent and realistic way the characters' experiences with the environment.[174]

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[172] Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*, 38.
[173] Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*, 40.
[174] Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2009,) vi. [Dai primi anni Trenta alla caduta del regime la parola d'ordine per il cinema italiano, comune a tutte le voci fasciste e anti-fasciste, è dato dall'invito ad aprire gli occhi sull'Italia finora assente sullo schermo. A partire da *Sole* e fino al 1943 un gruppo eterogeneo di registi e sceneggiatori avverte l'esigenza di affrontare la realtà italiana promuovendo a protagonisti

Unfortunately many of these movies are either lost, destroyed, or have been damaged with the passage of time. However, the movies that have remained in good conditions are very important sources to understand how the regime modified the media in order to promote its ideals and to attract larger sectors of the population. Despite there not being many movies on the female condition, a few of the movies produced during the Fascist years do give the viewers a sense of how some women lived or their role during that period. A couple of examples from the Fascist years are *Sole*[175] and *1860*[176], filmed respectively in 1929 and 1934. Both of these movies, although strongly supporting the regime and its actions, also presented female characters who did not play the role of protagonists, but did represented how true Fascist Italian women should act in order to support their country and its regime.

The main problem with cinema propaganda was that the regime did not have complete control of all the movies being produced during those years. The Istituto Luce certainly played a large and important role in the creation of movies which supported the regime and its actions, but not all movies that were shown in Italy during the 1930's had been filmed by the Istituto Luce. Moreover, these were the years during which Hollywood was expanding both in the United States and abroad, creating the image of a new, modern woman that did not meet the Fascist ideal. Therefore, although movies were important means for the Fascist dictatorship to get its message out to the people, it is also difficult to consider them actual propaganda because of the impossibility for the regime

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luoghi monumentali, ma anche paesaggi sconosciuti del Nord e del Sud, riuscendo in molti casi a fondere in modo verosimile e pertinente la vicenda dei personaggi con l'ambiente.]

[175] *Sole*, dir. Alessandro Blasetti, (Rome: Istituto Luce, 1929); see also Gianfranco Gori, *Alessandro Blasetti* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1984).

[176] *1860*, dir. Alessandro Blasetti, (Rome: Istituto Luce, 1934); see also "Italica," *Rai International*, <http://www.italica.rai.it/cinema/film/1860.htm>.

to keep them completely under control.

Fascism not only wanted women to be influenced by Fascist propaganda; it also wanted them to represent Italy and the growing relevance of the country by leaving their mark in other European countries, and having other civilizations acknowledge Italy's presence and importance. One of the ways in which the regime expressed this desire was through Italian fashion and the Italian fashion industry. Although fashion in Italy was changing and adapting to the practicalities of the modern era, the regime created specific uniforms for all members of Fascist organizations or groups. Since the Renaissance, Italian fashion had represented one of the main sources of national income and pride, when all European courts wore Italian clothing and bought Italian fabrics. Books such as *Il Cortegiano* by Baldassarre Castiglione[177] were re-edited at this time and translated into many different languages in order to spread the influence of Italian fashion abroad. The Fascist regime understood that the history of Italian fashion could be used to its advantage, not solely in order to provide an additional source of income for the Italian economy, but also to reaffirm the Italian primacy in the fashion industry. According to Paulicelli, "fashion has been one of the privileged vehicles with which Italy has sought to create, promote and define a national identity for itself. The national role to which fashion has been recruited is

[177] Baldassarre Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, 1528. Baldassarre Castiglione was an Italian nobleman at the court of Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga in Urbino. The book is divided into four books, three of which explain how to become the perfect courtier, while the fourth explains how to become the perfect lady. See Encyclopedia Treccani, <http://www.treccani.it/Portale/elements/categoriesItems.jsp?pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Enciclopedia_online/C/BIOGRAFIE_-_EDICOLA_C_114534.xml>.

particularly visible in the years of the fascist regime […],"[178] a time during which fashion truly became a state affair. For this reason ENM (*Ente Nazionale della Moda*, National Fashion Board)[179] was created in October 1935, and it was put in charge of helping create a national identity. A year later, in 1936, the *Dizionario Italiano della Moda* (Italian Fashion Dictionary) was created to eliminate any kind of foreign fashion terminology from the Italian vocabulary. Fashion had to become exclusively Italian.

From the *Piccole Italiane* to the *Massaie Rurali*, women, as much as men, had to wear their uniforms during public celebrations and events.This served to create a sense of unity among people. There were many different uniforms which were designed and approved by the ENM, ranging from the more traditional outfits, to the more modern styles. The regime wanted to preserve and celebrate tradition and simplicity, but at the same time also wished to present Italy with a touch of modernity. As Paulicelli states, "according to fascist regulations, the women from the countryside, the *massaie rurali* were encouraged to wear their local costume in order to highlight the nation's rich and diversified traditions as well as to display the beautiful embroidery that the same women who were wearing it had created."[180] Women were to be traditional and modern at the same time, which most definitely represented one of the biggest contradictions in Fascist history. As Willson explains, "the regime, despite its totalitarian pretensions, did not have a monopoly on ideas about women. Throughout the *ventennio* there were,

[178] Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism*, (Oxford – New York: Berg, 2004,) 2; see also Sofia Gnoli, *La Donna, l'Eleganza, il Fascismo: La moda italiana dalle origini all'Ente Nazionale della Moda*, (Catania: Edizioni del Prisma, 2000).

[179] See Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 77.

[180] Cited in Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism*, 19, n. 3.

instead, a series of competing discourses about gender, some reinforcing, other contradicting or more subtly challenging, the regime's official ideology."[181] Fascism was against the image of the *donna crisi*, a derogatory term used to describe the new, modern woman that was becoming so popular in Europe, but at the same time it also wanted women to embody modernity, though without taking it to extremes. Mussolini wanted to create a sense of unity among Italians – even if at times running into contradictions, to have people forget their economic differences, and to help them focus on what the regime thought to be of real importance: solidarity and strength.

Such was the method used by Fascism throughout its years of power. It tried to create a fascist style wherever it laid its hands, whether it be in movies, in architecture or in fashion, and although today many of the fascist "innovations" have been lost or destroyed, during the *ventennio*, the fascist style was very prominent and appreciated by a large part of the population. During Fascist parades, or the *sabato fascista*, everyone was required to wear their uniform as a sign of participation and support for the regime. Sara Vignoli, for instance, was a *giovane italiana*, and she remembers having to wear a little black uniform composed of a black skirt, black stockings, a white blouse, and the Fascist pin that everyone possessed. Although not remembering much about the actual processions, Sara vividly remembers how nice and tidy everyone looked, and how fun those afternoons were.[182]

A visual example of the type of clothing that boys and girls were supposed to wear during Fascist parades can be found in Ettore Scola's movie,

[181] Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 64.
[182] Sara Vignoli, *Personal Interview*, 4 January 2010.

A Special Day,[183] starring Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni. Although not filmed during the Fascist years, the movie does a very good job at representing the life of many families during the time of the dictatorship, stressing on one hand the excitement that took over people during the Saturday parades, and on the other the sad and empty lives of women who were forced to take care of their children, their husband and their home. Although *A Special Day* cannot be understood as a Fascist representation of the times, it does show what a Fascist parade would have looked like, and what the life of a typical Italian mother would have been. It also does a fabulous job of representing the importance of Fascist parades at the time, and the energy that everyone put into them to make them appear jolly and festive. Fascism, in fact, did not want its people to remain locked up in their homes; it wanted the Italian population to fill the streets, happily support the regime, and to take part in the Fascist celebrations which were to be seen as a moments of relaxation and happiness. All this stresses the importance that propaganda had at the time, and the role that propaganda played during the twenty years of power. Architecture, fashion, the radio, movies, all of these were supposed to capture the Italians' attention and to force them to appreciate Fascism, and ultimately to support it. The regime wanted men, and especially women, to believe that giving birth to more babies in order to feed a larger army was what Italy needed, and on that need it based the role of women; it wanted Italy to become established as a European power by creating a national identity and a sense of *italianità* which had been lacking in the previous years.

[183] *A Special Day*, dir. Ettore Scola, (Carlo Ponti, 1977).

In conclusion, Fascism used propaganda to extremes. At times the regime was more subtle and transmitted messages without clearly stating them; at other times it was much more open with its ideals in order to make sure that the entire Italian population would get the message. Either way, the regime was capable of attracting a massive amount of people precisely through the use of propaganda. Although it may not have been as developed, as modern and as extreme as the propaganda in Nazi Germany, which was masterminded by Paul Joseph Goebbles[184], one cannot consider Fascist propaganda in Italy a failure. In particular, it had an impact on women, who up to that moment had been excluded from society, and who had not been able to participate in many organizations.

[184] Paul Joseph Goebbles was born in 1897 in Rheydt, Germany, and died in 1945 in Berlin. He became part of the Nazi party in 1922, and was nominated minister for Propaganda in 1933. Goebbles was in charge of all cultural and social events that took place in Germany during the Nazi years. He was also one of the main promoters of the Nazi myths about the Arian race and the inferior races. He was nominated by Adolf Hitler as his successor, but he killed himself and his family shortly after learning about Hitler's death. See *Treccani Encyclopedia*, <http://www.treccani.it/Portale/elements/categoriesItems.jsp?pathFile=/sites/default/BancaDati/Enciclopedia_online/G/BIOGRAFIE_-_EDICOLA_G_029729.xml>.

> charge, to all children in the Fascist youth movement. A doctor examined every child and decided whether a holiday in the clean air of the mountains, or one at the seaside, would be better for his health. (…) Nothing like this had been done for the children before Mussolini, and the holiday camps did not survive his downfall and death.[186]

Organizations such as ONMI, the *Fasci Femminili*, and the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* were important innovations within Italian society because for the first time it was the government, and not the Catholic Church, that helped people who in need of assistance. Although focusing on women, the regime controlled the entire Italian population, paying particular attention to working men and children, who represented the new generations of the regime. ONMI, for instance, was an organization created for both mothers and their children, since it rewarded mothers who took good care of their babies, and taught many of them how to be more hygienic and safe. Mussolini's aim, in fact, was to increase the Italian population by twenty million people (meaning to bring the numbers from forty million to sixty million by the 1950s,) as he felt that a major power needed to have a numerous and strong population. ONMI is a clear example of how Mussolini's actions were moved by ulterior motives – in this case that of increasing the population in order to support colonial expansion – while seeming to generously bring innovations into these women's lives. Infant mortality in Italy did drop during the demographic campaign which began in 1927, but whether this drop was actually due to the regime's actions is not clear.

One of the great contradictions of the Fascist regime regarding women (so that it ultimately caused its failure to exert the expected control over the population,) was expressed in the totally contrasting idea of the *madre*

[186] Jasper Ridley, *Mussolini: A Biography*, 211.

prolifica vs. the *donna crisi*. If on the one hand Mussolini wanted Italian women to become more modern (the reason why he had created the image of the New Italian Woman,) on the other hand he did not want Italian women to abandon their traditional morals and views on life and family. Women were supposed to be modern, yet they were also supposed to remain the angels of the hearth, working for their family without asking for, or expecting, anything in return. The incapability to stop the rise of the Italian *maschietta,* shows how impossible it was for the regime to try to control every type of opposition. This is one reason why propaganda became so important. Through propaganda, which the regime did control, the Duce was able to spread his message, and give specific messages to his people. Posters, speeches, advertisement became fundamental to Mussolini's intentions because through them he was able to reach out to the majority of Italians, obtaining their attention and their approval. Through propaganda, all levels all levels of society were involved, and not just the wealthier and more educated ones, precisely because messages were not transmitted through books or articles, but through visual cues, which everyone could understand. Although cinema and fashion became two industries most heavily subsidized by the government, it is difficult to consider them a true form of propaganda, since in reality they were not completely controlled by the regime (in spite of the strong censorship exercised during all those years.)With the influence of American cinema, and the new fashion styles coming from Great Britain and the United States, the Fascist regime had to struggle to keep its ideals alive; it had to fight against those external sources (American movies and fashion) that could attract young

women and turn them away from all the dictatorship was preaching.

It is an intriguing task to analyze the Fascist *ventennio* and to try to understand what it lacked as it attempted to gain complete control over the Italian population, and Italian women in particular. Why was the dictatorship ultimately not able to force its way into the Italian families? Why did many Italian women ultimately embrace the "negative" modernity and new tendencies that were making their way through Europe, although Mussolini was completely against them? A lot of time, effort and money was dedicated to propaganda in order to promote the ideals of mother and wife as a good Fascist woman (an image that was to be projected not solely for the sake of husbands and children, but particularly for the good of the fatherland.) However, despite all these efforts, strong anti-fascist networks developed between the end of the 1920's and during the 1930's – considered as the autarchic period – , and women were a strong part of these networks. Whether or not these women were recognized as actively subversive by the regime or by posterity, the fact is that they did exist, and that they played a fundamental role both during the years of the dictatorship and of the Resistance. As much as the regime tried to oppress the female sex, to confine it to the home and to the controlled circles of Fascist organizations, women were nevertheless too important a part of society, they were the pillars of Italian households, and they also had a voice, even if that voice was not loudly heard.