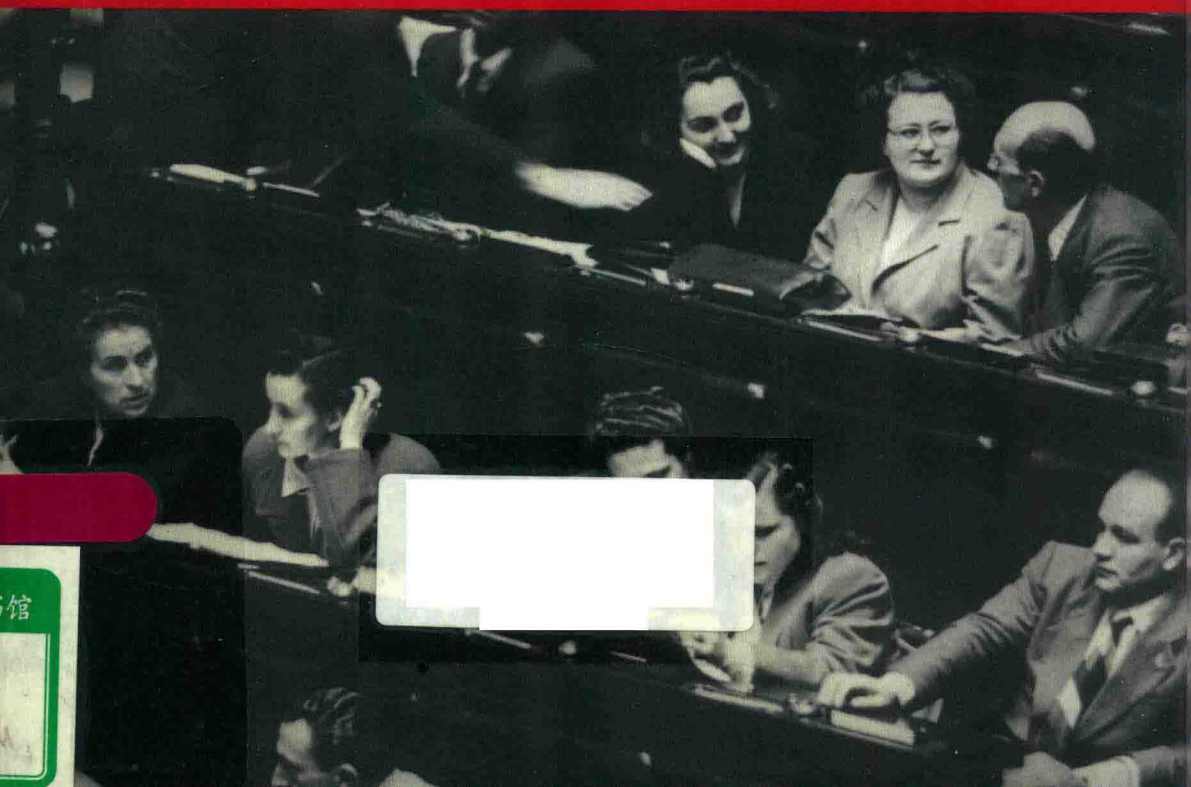




# The Lost Wave

WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY  
IN POSTWAR ITALY

MOLLY TAMBOR



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# The Lost Wave

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- AC: *Azione Cattolica*, Catholic Action
- ACLI: *Associazione cattolica di lavoratori italiani*, Catholic Association of Italian Workers (the labor union organized to compete with the Left's unions)
- CGIL: *Confederazione Generale Italiano di Lavoro*, the biggest national labor union
- CIDD: *Centro Italiano di Difesa della Donna*, Italian Center for Women's Defense (founded in 1950, an organization to support the Merlin Law through aid to ex-prostitutes)
- CIF: *Centro Italiano Femminile*, Italian Women's Center (a federation of Catholic women's associations)
- CLN: *Comitati di Liberazione Nazionale*, National Liberation Committees (the governing coalition of Resistance groups); the CLNAI (AI stands for *Alta Italia*) were the committees in northern Italy when the country was split by the Nazi occupation during World War II
- CSIL: *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori*, Catholic trade union created in 1948 after union split
- DC: *Democrazia Cristiana*, Christian Democrat Party
- FIOT: *Federazione Italiana di Operai Tessili*, Italian Textile Workers' Union
- GDD: *Gruppi di difesa della donna*, Women's Defense Groups (multi-party Resistance organization for women)
- GF: *Gioventù femminile*, Female Youth (one of many specialized sections of Catholic Action)
- MSI: *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, Italian Social Movement, right-wing party with many ex- and neo-Fascist members
- P d'A: *Partito d'Azione*, Action Party
- PCI: *Partito Comunista Italiano*, Italian Communist Party
- PLI: *Partito Liberale Italiano*, Italian Liberal Party
- PNM: *Partito Nazionale Monarchico*, National Monarchical Party
- PRI: *Partito Repubblicano Italiano*, Italian Republican Party
- PSI: *Partito Socialista Italiano*, Italian Socialist Party
- UDI: *Unione donne italiane*, Union of Italian Women (a Leftist women's association, counterpart to CIF, technically autonomous but in fact Communist-led in 1940s and 1950s)
- UIL: *Unione Italiana del Lavoro*, social-democratic union founded in 1950 after union split

# The Lost Wave



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# Introduction

## *Women, the Bulwark of Democracy*

Around four o'clock on the afternoon of Monday, October 1, 1945, a visitor to Rome passing the Palazzo Venezia could note that the light symbolically left burning in Mussolini's office throughout his two-decade regime was now quite dark. Instead, only steps away along the Via del Corso, the members of the *Consulta* (Consultative Assembly) were coming to order with a great bustle and brightness, beginning only the sixth day of democratic self-government in Italy in more than twenty years. The *Consulta* had the task of acting as Italy's legislature until a new constitution could be written and formal elections held. As its 447 members took their seats in Palazzo Montecitorio, the light might have seemed to shine especially brilliantly on just five faces in that sea of hundreds as the speaker announced, "Counselor Angela Maria Guidi Cingolani has requested to speak. You have the floor." One of those five faces, the only female ones in the chamber, now held everyone's attention. Guidi Cingolani rose and became the first woman ever to speak in an Italian legislative session.

In response to the loud and prolonged applause greeting her, she began: "Colleagues, I hear in your applause a salute for the first woman to speak in this chamber. Not a personal applause for me, but as a representative of all Italian women who now, for the first time, participate in the political life of our country." As she spoke, she outlined the long story of women's battle for rights, but concluded that perhaps it was best that women should begin their contribution at this "tragic" moment Italy had to overcome. Women had learned to conquer pain and suffering through

long experience and were now “proud to stand in the front lines of the struggle to resurrect” Italy. She went on, “Don’t be afraid that women’s contribution will be a return to a matriarchy, if such a thing ever existed. We know better than to aspire to that; but even if we did, we certainly couldn’t do any worse than you men have done!”<sup>1</sup> There was laughter, and more applause. But something very serious had just occurred. With this inaugural sentiment Guidi Cingolani ushered in the Lost Wave; a movement for women’s equality that justified itself by the entire society’s need to be redeemed and protected from the threats men had unleashed in the form of war, totalitarianism, and anti-democratic agitation. In a moment when Italian aggression and nationalism were discredited as Fascist and even the non-Fascist political classes seemed weak, less than manly, and unable to govern, these women activists pushing for a new presence and equality of women in the public sphere paradoxically appeared more serious, patriotic, and committed to democratic antifascism than their political forbears. Above all they appeared to promote the proper reconstruction of the gender roles that constituted not only the return to normality of individual families, but the family of the nation and of the new model of interdependent Western nations.

What were the origins of this wave of women’s activism? In the 1920s and 1930s many Europeans seemed to want nothing more than a strong patriarch. In the grip of the trauma caused by the Great War, the precarious economy and chronic mass unemployment of the Depression, and the inefficient and ineffective politics of new Parliaments in the nations drawn onto the map by the Treaty of Versailles, Europeans felt lost and uncertain. For Italians, it was all too easy to be seduced by Benito Mussolini’s claim that democracy had become a deserted temple and that the future would be won by Fascism. Italians, he argued, needed a decisive man to take charge, a virile and charismatic leader who could restore stability, prosperity, and not least, the proper hierarchy between men and women in a world turned upside down. Mussolini was a master of the photo opportunity in which, shirtless and glistening with manly sweat, he reaped grain and basked in the admiration of wholesome and fecund young peasant women.

Hitler, Stalin, and even Marshal Pétain shared this strategy of linking the call for national renewal to reinvigorated masculinity and properly controlled feminine domesticity and fertility. In France propaganda

satirized young independent working girls in the figure of the dangerously androgynous “garçonne,” while Italian Fascists inveighed against the “crisis woman” with her cigarettes and nylon stockings as an example of sterile and neurotic individualism brought on by pernicious foreign influence. The pronatalist, right-wing interwar ideal of the family removed the woman from waged work, blocked her participation in politics, denied her access to birth control, abortion, and higher education, and placed her firmly in the role of housewife and prolific childbearer. The disappointed and bitter men who called the Treaty of Versailles a “stab in the back” or Italy’s part in the peace process a “mutilated victory” also donned their brown shirts and black shirts in an effort to restore their masculinity and reclaim their positions as family wage earners, virile fathers, and undisputed masters of the hearth and home.<sup>2</sup>

Among the many causes of the rise of Fascism it is surely important that this war between the sexes—or war against women—raged so powerfully in the interwar years; it also appears not at all coincidental that Fascism jealously defended a threatened masculine primacy while portraying democracy as effeminate.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, democracy *was* feminized, but not in the way Mussolini said. Rather, in the aftermath of World War II’s destruction and Fascism’s fall, democracy would be reborn and enhanced thanks to women who fought in the Resistance, and, once victory was achieved, fought again to attain the right to vote and wield political power. The women whose stories are told in this book claimed that female heroism and sacrifice had defeated Fascism and saved democracy. And, in some unexpected and counterintuitive ways, they were right.

Raised and educated in the two decades Italy was under Fascist rule, the first female members of the Italian Parliament secured the vote for women, ran for and won national political office for the first time, helped write the nation’s new constitution, steered the party system towards a politics of mass consensus that courted women voters, and passed more than eleven major laws guaranteeing women’s equal rights in the two decades following the regime’s fall. They were a group of women who were both exceptional individuals and the products of their environment, who sometimes fearlessly called for radical change and sometimes accepted old conventions about women’s roles and identity seemingly without question. The paradoxes surrounding their story extend even to their personal

biographies. To take three examples, Teresa Noce, despite the fact that she identified herself as “ugly, poor, and communist,” happened to be one of the most successful politicians in postwar Italy. Lina Merlin was a veteran socialist with a magically captivating voice who championed a law that laid bare all the public’s worst fears about prostitution and disease. Maria Cocco humbly insisted she was merely called to serve in the Christian Democrats’ anti-communist crusade, yet passed a law in cooperation with her Marxist sisters that cleared the way for the most ambitious women’s rise to power in the Italian state. The change they fomented created Italy as the democratic republic it is today, paradoxes and all.

*The Lost Wave* also tells the story of another woman: the symbolic woman who had achieved equal rights of citizenship. She would not be exceptional like the first forty-five female members of Parliament, but would be quite ordinary, a model of femininity accepted by all. She would be a mother, a worker, a member of political associations and trade unions. She would be a participant in building a new democracy and reconstructing a dynamic economy and society. She would have dignity and individuality, but she would also be the moral pillar of a stable, happy family and the anchor of a productive community. This was the constitutional woman that the first forty-five worked to create as an image that could gain mass consensus in Italian and international politics. She was the cumulative and aspirational product of the legislation written and passed during more than fifteen years of activism by the very real women who entered government after the end of Fascism and World War II.

Although Constitutional Woman never had a name, she played a role akin to that of France’s Marianne. She was meant to be not only an encouragement to Italian women to assert their rights, but also a patriotic, even nationalist symbol of the female citizen and of democracy that both men and women could support. The women politicians used various models of femininity in Italian postwar and Cold War culture to forge a legislative path toward achieving the rights of such a woman. Mining existing tropes of femininity such as the Resistance heroine, the working mother, the sacrificial Catholic, and the nationalist “mamma Italiana,” they searched for social consensus for women’s equality that could reach across religious, ideological, and gender divides. Although those gaps proved more resilient than they had imagined, their effort nonetheless illuminates important

aspects of the period and answers vital questions about twentieth-century feminism and its legacy. Through the dual lenses of their self-fashioning as Parliament members and the passage of specific new laws regarding women's rights, women politicians navigated gendered political identity as they picked and chose among competing models of femininity in Cold War Italy. In so doing, this book argues, they forged a political legacy that in turn affected the rights and opportunities of all Italian women.

The work done by this cohort represents one of the key moments in the definition of modern citizenship and reveals how crucial the spoken and unspoken ideas men and women held about manliness and womanliness were to shaping the category of citizen in postwar democracy. The challenges of Italy's transition to a peacetime, consumerist pro-American democratic society were understood by contemporaries in highly gendered terms.<sup>4</sup> The aspects of past gender roles that female lawmakers embraced, the shameful sexual politics they rejected, and the image of the Constitutional Woman they aspired to create reveal the issues at stake in reconstructing Italian government after Fascism and a devastating war and in the context of the developing Cold War.

So why isn't the story of these women better known? How did they become a "lost" wave of feminism? Postwar European history has been so focused on the dominance of the international diplomacy of the Cold War that it has often overshadowed the domestic politics in Europe.<sup>5</sup> The influence and urgency of the United States' and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union's interests and their ability to throw their weight around financially and militarily are frequently seen as posing severe constraints on local politicians. This book avoids portraying Italy as completely dominated by foreign relations or as cunningly exploiting American aid for domestic agendas unrelated to the struggle against communism. Rather than relying on communism and anticommunism as opposing binaries in all political situations, it instead highlights a complex "*intreccio*" or intertwining of foreign and domestic politics. Italy's role was unique in that it stood as a frontier between East and West, North and South, and had historically served as a laboratory for political experimentation given all its "cleavages" along socio-economic, geographic, and religious—and gender—lines.<sup>6</sup> To convey how these transitions occurred on the ground, *The Lost Wave* focuses on the personal formation and political belief systems,

tragedies and triumphs of particular individuals whose stories enrich our understanding of this moment of complex historical change. But this book also contextualizes these women's lives and political achievements in an examination of how political and social power was structured and restructured along gendered lines in this period. Women both influenced and were influenced by political discourse in this period; their gender was central to others' redefinition of democracy in Italy, and they themselves were protagonists in that process.

Democracies are built locally, by the formation of citizenries. Any abstract consideration of national politics leaves the impression that citizens were gender neutral. Amidst this, the women of Italy's Lost Wave have not received attention, other than perhaps a footnote on Italy's backwardness in not awarding women the suffrage until after World War II. In this case, though, the relative lateness of women's achievement of political rights in Italy—1945 as opposed to 1918 in Britain or 1920 in the United States—paradoxically highlights the problem of gender for the building of a democratic citizenry. Italian women had not been backward and unchanging compared to their Anglo-American counterparts; like them, they had organized as feminists throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and like them, they had participated in the larger trends of expanding education and employment for women. Further, they had experimented with the ideology of Fascism and had spearheaded the civil resistance during World War II by which Italians reclaimed sovereignty from the Nazi-Fascists and then from the Allied occupation. This was far from a static conservation of old-fashioned gender roles; it was a conflict-ridden, extremely fluid, and innovative transformation.

Women activists understood that making citizens in a new democracy required careful, assiduous work at the grassroots level as well as leadership of institutions. They formed nationwide women's organizations, a movement known as women's associationism. They flowed into political parties, boosting their membership and their representative power in government. And a smaller core of them became candidates and elected officials at every level of the state, rebuilding city councils, schools, and infrastructure, framing a new law of the land in the Constitutional Assembly, and helping to convert the pre-Fascist Parliament of clubbily elite old men into a radically mixed space in terms of gender, age, and class.



In the process of legislating and campaigning for women's rights they also created crucial new links between the mass of ordinary voters (the majority of whom were now women) and the hierarchies of the political parties and government (which were bastions of masculine power). These ties were the foundation of the new mass parties, notably the Christian Democrats and the Italian Communist Party, an enlargement of political participation that may be the single most crucial innovation of postwar politics. Women leaders and voters and their issues therefore shaped the newly forming postwar state so powerfully that it can be characterized as a feminization of democracy in the postwar era, or, to use the argument they sometimes did, of women and their model of active citizenship as the "bulwark of democracy" against either a return to fascism or the worst excesses of the Cold War.<sup>7</sup>

## Gender and Citizenship

This book's story brings together constitutional history, the history of Italian society and politics, the history of women in Italy, and the history of feminism and women's rights. Beginning with Simonetta Piccone Stella's groundbreaking work *La prima generazione*, which discussed growing up in the 1950s as an experience of instability and bewildering new opportunities and roles for both sexes, rather than the stereotypical quiet if oppressive long snooze before the youth revolution of 1968, more and more scholars have been taking on the challenge of reexamining the postwar period through a lens of change, reopening to the world, and social and economic upheaval.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars have used women's and gender history to clarify, on the one hand, the narrative of how a progressive trend in legislating women's rights was common to European nations, both East and West; and on the other, how the economic and industrial drive to reconstruct and then surpass prewar levels of prosperity dramatically changed both standards and styles of living, in a story that puts women at the center of new kinds of growth in service and information economies and in new practices of consumption.<sup>9</sup>

Above all, *The Lost Wave* aims to interpret the history of citizenship in postwar Italy as gender history. Scholarly investigation of key historical



concepts like citizenship, the public sphere, the welfare state, and political representation has highlighted the ways that a gender history approach reveals the discourses of gender and the sexual order that underpinned the making of these political and social institutions in different ways across time and space. It has also, importantly, asserted that these institutions and discourses are shaped as individuals have mediated and articulated them, while debating and struggling over the conflicts that arose as they changed.<sup>10</sup>

While I use both, I have tried to be careful about distinguishing between the categories of women and gender, since even when the women of the Lost Wave were not fully successful in their attempts to achieve women's equality, the widespread sense of challenges to the gender order motivated the legislative intervention and political mobilization of both men and women. Nor should the use of the categories of women or feminism suggest that all women share the same subjectivities, political motives, or locations in hierarchies of power. In addition, gender as a way of understanding difference and signifying power strongly shapes the kinds of choices people make and the way they award their political allegiance, even when there are no women present. Finally, gender as a category of analysis highlights how historical subjects made decisions and understood their own identities in specific contexts, allowing for a better mapping of changes in political power and social difference over time. In this way, gender history is for this book a particular approach to women in history, asking about their experiences and their own subjectivities. It is also a particular approach to the history of politics, asking about how gender difference shaped and was shaped by rights, laws, parties, and state institutions.<sup>11</sup>

In tune with gender's illustration of power and difference, gendered histories of citizenship treat citizenship not merely as the condition of belonging to a state, particularly a nation-state, but as a practice and as a set of rights and obligations.<sup>12</sup> These rights and obligations are not fixed or unchanging; both citizen and those excluded from citizenship define it by a series of participatory claims. Citizenship is a set of legal prescriptions, but also a number of historically specific experiences and identities. It is by definition an ongoing arena for struggle, debate, redefinition, and new inclusions and exclusions. In some moments, such as the period of